

Alright Jack

John Jack was highly regarded as a farmer because he didn't paint his gateposts white, like the Pitt St. farmers do, and he rang his Bank Manager from time to time. His gaunt figure and slow speech belied a physical strength and a sharpness of mind which ensured that his farming had always kept up with the times.

Together with his wife, he ran a hundred dairy cows, a couple of dozen calves, one horse (or perhaps two, if you counted old Frank), a score or more of fowls and a lean, blue dog. Some said that his wife ran all these together with him.

It was a hectic life, actually, with all those cows to milk twice every day, the Government not allowing dirt in the milk, the price of everything going up, and so many mouths to be fed. But John Jack was not a worrier - far from it. The farm was quite remote and, though he was not really unsociable, he rarely met with visitors or passers-by. His worn-out, mismatched, working clothes drew no smart remarks out here.

He was somewhat surprised, therefore, when a shiny new car with an even shinier man in a bright blue suit and tie came rollicking along the dirt track which led to his farm. There had been a lot of rain (which means mud on a dairy farm) and, at that moment, John was surveying the mud by the cowshed trying to gauge whether it would be deeper than the top of his gumboots or not. The car drove right up to the farmer.

The newcomer switched on his smile as he switched off his car. With a wary look at the lean, blue dog, he eased himself out of the seat.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Nice drop of rain?" His smile outdid even the dog. "John Strainhardt's my name," he said with a slight whistle, "and I think I've brought you some very good news."

"My name's Jack," the farmer replied.

"Well, g'day Jack," said the smiler, quickly adjusting his voice to a more rustic tone.

"John Jack," said the farmer.

"Oh! Well, ah, Mr Jack, I'm very pleased to know you."

"It's alright. You can call me Jack."

"Well, thanks Jack."

"Most people just call me John."

"Aha! (slight pause) That's my name, too. Good old-fashioned name, don't you think, John?" The visitor took a deliberate pause to get things back under control while the farmer looked at the mud and then at the sky.

They made a nicely contrasting pair, standing there with the fowls and a few of the calves, like one china and one terracotta figure, placed amongst a miniature farm set. The farmer's reddish hair was streaked with black grease and his chin bore a multi-coloured, bristly growth. The visitor's hair was silver streaked with God-knows-what. The farmer was looking from his gumboots to the mud and back again as the newcomer's mouth clicked into action once more.

"You're probably wondering why I've called in. It's to do with home computers, actually. You know, the little keyboards you have in your home next to the TV. We market the very newest type of PC – stands for personal computer. With a flourish, the salesman produced a large coloured brochure from under his arm rather like a magician produces a rabbit.

"Now I realise that a man in your position will probably know something about personal computers," the smiler said without a trace of conviction.

"Yeah," the farmer replied, still surveying the ground.

The salesman moved closer and got his spiel smoothly into top gear. He began to explain how it was that everyone was now compelled to have a computer - something to do with the Industrial revolution, the French revolution and, now, the computer revolution. Furthermore, there were so many things that this computer could do. So many that he hardly knew where to begin. He would pick something at random which would be applicable to Mr Jack's, er, John's, er, business.

As he prattled, a curious thing was happening. The salesman was trying to maintain eye contact with John Jack, but the farmer kept looking over the speaker's shoulder. The salesman tried even harder to get the full attention of John's eyes. At this stage, however, John reached down to one side and picked up a stick while still facing the salesman, who was now flapping his brochure. A moment later, as the spruiker made one final effort to get his message through, John went WHACK! with the stick on the ground just behind him.

The salesman jumped into the air, then recoiled, spring-like, when he saw the long, black snake which the farmer had killed with the stick.

"He was crawlin' up behind you," the farmer explained. A score of fowls pecked unconcernedly at the ground nearby. They scattered as the farmer threw the dead snake in their direction.

"What was that you were sayin' about the computer?"

It was a little while before the travelling salesman regained his composure and could summon his smile once again.

The greatest advantage of this personal computer, the salesman explained, was that you could do so many new things that you wouldn't have been able to do before. John felt that he had enough things to do as it was, but that was by the by. It was the kind of things you could do which made it so mind-boggling. The fact was that you couldn't even think what they were until you bought a computer and started doing them. A leading magazine had described personal computers as the greatest time wasters, (oops) I mean time savers, ever invented. The smiler was still a little shaken.

In response to the farmer's slightly quizzical look, the inexperienced computer salesman brought forth his examples of what the remarkable new toy could do. He mentioned quickly that it couldn't really do anything on its own, of course, but, once you got hold of all the right software, the possibilities were unbelievable.

There were multi-coloured graphics - you could draw pictures of, well, aliens or monsters, in seventeen different colours; there was polyphonic sound - you could turn your typewriter keyboard into a harpsicord with several octaves under one finger. All this could be programmed and randomised so that you wouldn't have the faintest idea what pictures the computer was going to draw or which music it was going to play.

The farmer's looks of mild astonishment encouraged the salesman to play his trump card. In a lowered voice he said, "The real breakthrough for a person like yourself will be the way this computer can organise all your most important farm records." He took a triumphant step forward, narrowly missing some cow manure.

"What records?" the farmer replied.

"Arrh . . . you know . . ." The smiler stammered, momentarily lost for words. Then he recovered himself. "For example," he said. "How many livestock do you have on your farm at the present time?"

"That depends on whether you count old Frank or not."

"Old Frank. Who is he?"

"Well, when my grandfather had this place, he had a big horse and he died - the horse that is. And the grandfather, come to think of it - and we had him stuffed. The horse, I mean.

"I don't think that's relevant," the salesman interrupted, adjusting his patience booster. "I mean records of production costs, sales, er . . ., births, deaths and marriages. Oh, what am I saying?"

"Well, I mostly give the figures to the wife," said John Jack with the assurance of many years of successful farming behind him.

John (The Smiler) Strainhardt, successful city businessman just trying to branch out a little, felt that he was running out of gas. He decided that a dramatic, practical demonstration was needed as a last resort. Wondering if some calves standing on the other side of the shed might be of assistance, he started to walk, with a forced determination, around the concrete edge of the cowyard. In one corner, where it was lower, the heavy rain had created a flood so that the concrete floor and the quagmire merged into one.

At the lowest point of the cowyard there was a manure pump which took away the cowdung from a large round pit. John Jack's pit had no lid and was now concealed by the surface water from the rain. It was a trap he had never really intended to set.

"Watch out," the farmer warned, but not quite soon enough.

Striding through the very shallow water, the smiler was unaware of the trap until he was suddenly in it, sinking rapidly right up to his neck in cow manure sludge. His shrill scream as he went down disturbed the calves and even a horse at quite a distance.

"Get out of that." John shouted at the lean, blue dog which was now yapping at the smiler's hair in the excitement. "Get out of that, you good-for-nothin' mutt!"

"I can't," spluttered the salesman who was now jammed in first gear with a very wet distributor as well.

Mirth and consternation alternated on the farmer's face. He moved slightly more quickly than usual to haul out the hapless visitor.

"Thank you, thank you, Mr Jack. Just help me, please, to my car."

Not wanting his visitor to leave in such a state, John Jack turned the high-pressure hose on the sad-looking salesman and blasted most of the manure away. Then he helped him to his feet again and into the clean, shiny car.

"Interesting about that computer," the farmer said. "What sort is it, did you say?"

Meekly, the ex-smiler replied, "It's a Peach."

"Well, isn't that a coincidence. I was just goin' to tell you. We've got one of those ourselves."

"You have," croaked the once-shiny man with the black and silver hair.

"Yeah, my word we have. The wife uses it to do the accounts, write letters and that. It's very handy, too, just like you said."

As the traveller drove out the farm gate with its plain brown posts, his head was just beginning to mesh with his body again. The blue dog gave up yapping at the wheels of his car and turned its well-satisfied body for home.

There was an enormous, stuffed horse which he hadn't noticed before standing by the road. My God, it's old Frank, he realised. Beneath the horse a sign said: Riding Lessons - \$10 an hour.

The salesman kept thinking as he drove away: the trouble with farmers is they don't realise what it is they don't know.

"Decent chap, that," thought Mr Jack aloud, "but he still has a fair bit to learn."

Lloyd Fell c. 1985
