

EXTRACT

**THE TALE OF  
BROTHER TOBIAS**  
LEONARD BIBBY

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*The Tale of Brother Tobias* is set in a mission run by a German religious order in the remote northwest of Australia circa 1943.

*Characters:*

Brother Tobias, an unassuming man of practical thoughts and actions

Sister Paul, young Australian Sister, the passionate idealist

Sister Brian, older Irish Sister, a stricture, who has humour to her grace

Bishop Rubrick, a broad politician of the Lord

Father Durst, doubting administrator, really a scholar

Brother Nix, handsome and severe and solitary and clipped, but true

Father Basil, bursar of the mission

Mary, sceptical guardian of church even though kept down by it

Sally, unofficial community announcer of wonders and calamities

Otticus, fancy and farsight fetched up in a dour world

Ledg, a kid more keen on learning by doing

Captain Dakington, desk soldier, civil servant risen in war  
Constable Nailor

*Scenes:*

Act 1

1. Bishop's tiny palace, Rumble Bay mission, a sturdy hovel

2. Mary's mission house, Rumble Bay, even smaller

3. Ballypanic Police Station

4. The mission forge

5. The Tamarind Tree

6. The mission forge

7. Mission church interior, Rumble Bay (more imaginary than anything)

Act 2

8. The mission forge

9. Mission church interior, Rumble Bay (imaginary etc)

10. Mary's mission house

11. Bishop's palace

12. The mission forge.

13. Garden of the paperbark "convent"

14. The Bishop's palace.

15. Ballypanic Police Station

16. Mary's mission house

17. Sacristy (could be the Bishop's palace).
18. A corner in Cowra Internment Camp
19. The Tamarind Tree.

*ACT ONE*

Scene 1: Bishop's tiny bush palace.

*Bishop Rubrick, Fathers Durst and Basil, Brother Nix sit with Sisters Paul and Brian in the background. The mood is sombre. All the men are neatly dressed except that they have no shoes.*

DURST        We don't see you so often, Wilhelm.

RUBRICK     A Bishop of the Kimberley is butter on a large slice of country – spread very thin.

BASIL        Like our finances.

RUBRICK     Just as well we have you as Bursar, Basil, to order a fine coffee from the South, by some miracle of the budget. My compliments.

NIX          We grow a fine coffee.

RUBRICK     Then you have my admiration.

DURST       Well, Butter Bishop, are you staying long, or melting away soon?

RUBRICK    In the town they are so taken up with this war and all the committees it seems to require, that I can be away just one night. How I wish it was longer. The bed here knows me. So do the walls, that stone on stone we laid, that mortar, pink from the scarlet sand, and the very plaster we pounded, the lime from shells, remember? What an inspiration Old Felix was, "I will bring you shell, Father!" And he turned up with a cartload, white as snow... I could not believe it, so I said to him, where did you get that blazing lot from? And he took me to the Point when the tide was far out, and showed me the bank... so wide and so deep it seemed to stretch to the horizon, these bleached remains of the once living and all of the one kind, delicate and white, a murex I believe, tinkling under my feet as I walked so that I felt as though it was a trespass, upon the purest remains of the past...

DURST        You didn't come here to reminisce, and if a day is all you have with us there isn't time for tinkling shells.

RUBRICK    But I often think of this room, where we began our long love affair with the land of so many languages. Such a pitiful structure, considering the task it has performed. How is your creed in Partitja coming along Nix?

NIX         As fast as building a dictionary will permit, in pronunciations I am up to three versions of T, one sounding as we speak it, one aspirated and one

more like D... it still puzzles me how the inflexions work and the cases are delightfully complex, but this one must expect, flexibility in that most portable of artefacts, the spoken tongue.

RUBRICK And we thought to bring civilization...

DURST For heaven's sake, let's get down to business.

RUBRICK I need all of you here, it's important.

DURST This is all of us, practically.

RUBRICK But where is Francis and his guitar? I was hoping to hear a Gulyul song!

DURST Yes, well I've had to spread him as far as Lultarina where I hope he's replacing the paperbark on the chapel with sheet iron. Sisters Ellen and Robert are visiting the elderly sick in the beach encampment, and don't ask about Burkhart, he's teaching ploughing at the rice plot, twenty miles away. Let's hope it yields well, or our belts in December will be cinched up tighter than the wimple cuts into Mother Superior chin.

BRIAN You stay off my chin.

RUBRICK     Mother's an example in many things, let's hope not that, for the sake of Toby's belly. Where is he, by the way?

DURST        As if a blacksmith can make a contribution to policy matters.

RUBRICK     I think he might be able to hammer out an opinion or two.

PAUL         He makes a good axle.

NIX          And a good racket, dinging away at six in the morning.

PAUL         Just because you'd rather sleep in at that hour.

BASIL        No, pray is what we do at that hour, preferably without interruption – from your chickens!

BRIAN        Their eggs ensure light sponge, which I notice you all appreciate!

*Durst and others are in the middle of bites of cake.*

RUBRICK     Fellows fellows, do not let the squabbling of the world make fretful waves among you, even here in our peaceful mission. We must maintain an air of calm, although we do not feel it; what is unavoidable is that whatever we do is an example to the people, and now it is more critical than ever. That is the peculiar position of our

vocation, so get used to being paragons of forbearance and good sense, while the world boils with indulgent extremes of cunning and violence. Ah. The man of iron allows us his presence.

*They all look at Tobias, who enters barefoot in homespun trousers and a Russian style smock tied with rope around a big belly. He is their standing joke, though enjoyed (mostly) with restraint. He is holding an object like a very flat jaffle iron. He nearly trips over, causing Brian and Nix to snigger.*

Sister Paul reaches out to help him but he steers clear of her.

TOBIAS      Careful, it is hot. Straight from the fire you see. The hinge gave me some trouble. It has to be firm, for compression of the leaves, so. One side will take a teaspoonful of light batter, then press together swiftly, so, into the fire..

*Sister Paul quite rapturously beams.*

Tobias      ...before it can spill, for a moment only, you open, so -

He opens the host maker and nothing comes out.

DORST      (Mocking.) Presto.

Tobias, embarrassed, shakes the implement. A wafer thin host falls.

PAUL        A host.

RUBRICK    And so we have a host maker...

BRIAN       All that remains is to bless it.

*They are impressed, especially Sister Paul, less so Durst.  
Paul claps.*

PAUL        Wonderful, Tobias. So efficient...an instrument...

*Sister Brian gives her a reprimanding glance and she  
blushes.*

Durst       Put it down then, along with your arse.

Rubrick    Thankyou Tobias, another useful object.

*Tobias in some embarrassment has difficulty deciding where  
to put the host maker, stumbles again, and finally sits  
with it, and occasionally fiddles with the hinge.*

Rubrick    Now, we are all here, who can be here. Prepare  
yourself, sisters and brothers, I have an  
announcement to make. Where do I begin? Bluntly  
or gently! All announcements have their potential  
to surprise, delight or trouble us...

Brain       You are spreading the suspense thick with your  
slice of news.

Rubrick    Our Order is sending us two trucks.

*They stare in blank astonishment.*

Rubrick    Two large diesel trucks.

Tobias     Trucks, for us?

Nix         But they never send us trucks.

Basil             Let alone diesels.

Rubrick    I suspect our Order has been taken over by the government.

*Consternation in the room but also fatalism, as if this might have been expected.*

Paul         So it's the government sending the trucks?

Tobias     Diesel, yah.

Brian             Very generous of them, but which government?

Durst       Not the Australian government. All they can spare is two shillings per child.

PAUL       Per week.

Brian       For which we are eternally grateful. Think what you'd do without it.

Rubrick     That Government, Sister Brian.

Brian       Oh, that Government.

Rubrick     Yes, and they want something in return.

Durst       What?

Rubrick     Information.

*They all look at one another again. Rubrick passes the emblazoned letter around, and it proceeds to each of them, being studied or glanced at with some distaste and dread.*

Durst       Impossible. In the first place what can we tell them? Rainfall figures? That's rather easy over the last sixth months – zero. Soon we get the lot and the road is a quagmire! There are fewer kangaroos this year, and fifteen baptisms since April?

Paul        And we have opened a health clinic, without medicine.

Brian       We do have medicine...

Paul        Mercurochrome and aspirin – and bandage rollers! It's a sheet supplies the bandages.

Tobias      I could do with more steel. Haha.

Durst       Shutup, Toby. This is deeper than you understand.

*Durst is the last to get the letter, seizing it from Tobias, who is ponderously deciphering.*

Nix            They might want to know the condition of the roads, and the military traffic on them.

Paul           We are being drawn into evil designs. We are being drawn into the war.

Brian          There is a war, nothing can change that.

Durst          And wars have magnetic attraction.

Rubrick       Even from so far away it seems to have a cauterising effect on conviviality here. I was hoping we might agree about what to do...

Basil          Refuse the trucks, and the information.

Tobias        Not the trucks – by golly stoker.

*Durst quietly returns the letter to Rubrick.*

Rubrick       We cannot refuse the trucks, they are already here. It seems our irresistible benefactors thought about that possibility in advance.  
(*Reading.*) Two, Mercedes, diesel, one five-ton, one two-ton, consignment Port of Broome, delivery, to Rumble Bay Mission. They were landed a week ago, and have already no doubt attracted



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