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## Bullfry changes rooms

By Lee Aitken (illustrated by Poulos QC)

'No, no, no Bob – the mirror on the ceiling has to go!' (What use to him now was a mirrored ceiling in chambers? Much better, if so inclined, always to pay cash, and say your name is 'Hardinge Giffard').

'And where will you put your skull?'

'I think on top of the fireplace, above the Madame Recamier. I like it to look back at me and let me know what it is thinking – a little like the 'Lord of the Flies' – and don't forget Bob, that its former occupant while still with us was one of the greatest jurists in the Commercial List, as well as one of its most malevolent. Let us strive for an impression of genial squalor'.

He thought back to another celebrated time (commemorated in an after-dinner speech by a senior jurist) when the chambers of a pre-eminent advocate had been sold on a walk-in walk-out basis. There, the cheap vinyl chairs had been covered in the congealed sweat of 'nervous litigants and incompetent solicitors who had ventured in for advice.' Jackson QC had taken the room and said to the clerk, 'Bill, these chairs have to go – whatever you get above \$50 for them, you can keep'. And Bill, did get rid of them – he sold them as a job lot to a feared Commercial Division judge for \$75 who was 'quite happy with them'.

He had always liked his old chambers. Three quick steps and he was into the lift and heading to the duty judge. It had been all he could do (given the GFC) to persuade his cautious lender to advance the readies for the extra shares this new extravagance required. And was it really worth it? Did solicitors care where a conference was held? A lot of the newer chambers were in

large commercial buildings where the rack rent was extraordinary and there was no capital gain – was it useful to have a view of the Harbour, rather than a dead pigeon at the bottom of the light well? As a matter of 'branding', no doubt, it was nice to be in Megalopolitan Bank Tower with other Titans of industry, and the larger firms of solicitors. But what sort of goodwill did Bullfry inspire? Was it not Lord Macnaghten who has spoken evocatively of 'cats, dogs, and rats' in terms of goodwill; with Bullfry's client base it was regrettably a little more Kiplingesque, in terms of animal metaphor – more 'as the dog returns to its vomit, and the sow returns to her mire'.

But the division in types of chambers presaged the various Ages of Man at the modern bar – first the reader's room on a bespoke floor; then the Annexe where you were fattened up while waiting for a dead man's shoes, then into a 'broom closet' (700 shares), then something larger, and finally a 'double' with a mirrored ceiling – and then – back to the annexe as the practice died and one decided to take some capital gain out of the building before it collapsed in rubble around one's ears. Finally, the ultimate indignity – as a 'floater' in the annexe, coming in without hope, or expectation, of any brief, day after day – all the old instructing solicitors long since retired, with the second Mrs Bullfry's adjuration ringing each morning in your ears – 'I didn't marry you for lunch, Jack'. Perhaps, at the very end, a small 'mediation' practice assisting the larger banks to avoid the consequences of too much 'asset lending'.

He looked sadly at the back of the door where the name plates of former occupants had been proudly assembled – the dead are many at the Sydney Bar – the patinaed plaques took him back to a golden age when school fees were tax deductible and an accountant with a 'dry Slutzkin', or infra-structure bond, always to hand, solicitors would only brief when money was held in trust, and the Bar Common Room was athrong as a long Friday lunch turned into night, and Tony brought forth yet another bottle of red from his cellar.

Was he too old? The floor's new 'business consultant' had urged him recently to 'get something on the website and update your CV'. He had long ago noticed that there was a direct inverse correlation between the forensic experience of the writer, and the length of any *curriculum vitae*. Ms Blatly (his favourite junior, both in and out of court) had in a playful mood suggested to him that he should titivate his one line entry (which merely recorded when he had commenced practice).

Some of the younger members of the floor (usually with two or three lines of post-nomial initials to their credit) had a CV which naively recorded every matter in which they had thus far appeared: e.g. 'Ex parte before Jitton FM (unled)' but that seemed to be taking things too far.

And he had stoutly resisted any attempt to add a photograph to the site – the ravages of nearly sixty Australian summers on top of too much adolescent testosterone had left him with a puce, and pock-marked visage which an unkind admirer had once likened to the sunny side of the gibbous moon.



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Besides, what would an accurate character assessment on the website record?

‘You wouldn’t need me if it wasn’t very difficult; usually polite to a recalcitrant appellate court; best to be instructed before lunch; cash preferred, but any form of portable property considered’.

Anybody who had already instructed him knew what to expect. It was impossible over a sufficiently long period of time at the bar to conceal one’s true character from either colleagues, or the court, since the daily strain of the business provided ample scope for each and every flaw and foible

to be magnificently exposed.

Like *Lear’s Kent* (although he was long past forty-eight) he had always landed in trouble because of his candour. He thought back to a recent encounter. He had had the misfortune to run across a former bitter opponent, lately elevated to a lesser court, who was taking himself even more seriously (if that were possible) now he was on the bench than he had while at the bar, where he had only ever acted for secured lenders – a gloss on the cab rank rule which Bullfry had never quite understood.

‘Ah, Bullfry, I had to defend you recently with respect to certain

rumours regarding your unusual personal life. And I hear that you have been saying nasty things about me behind my back’.

‘As to the second matter, judge, it would be more accurate to say that I simply join in the general laughter whenever your name is mentioned. And as to the first, please to remember that in my case the ‘rumours’ are always TRUE!’

How long before his own name joined the plaques on the back of the door? Would the skull be appropriate for Ms Blatly as part of her paraphernalia?