

[BY APPOINTMENT TO "HIS MAJESTY"]

A ROYAL BLESSING

by L. N. BRIGGS

When the British came to Australia it would seem that they caused considerable disruption to the old established form of truly socialistic government by which the Aboriginal Tribes were ruled.

If my information is correct, the first tribal "Kings" were created by the British colonial authorities who just could not comprehend a nation without a monarch. And so it came to be that outstanding elders of various aboriginal communities were "crowned" as Kings of their Tribes.

The "Coronation" ceremony was quite different to that of any other nation in that instead of a crown being placed on the head of the new monarch, a huge, inscribed brass plate was ceremoniously hung by a chain from his neck so that it rested on his tummy. I have never yet learned why they "crowned" his tummy rather than his head, but I suppose it has some special significance.

I don't know whether the aboriginal community ever objected to the introduction of monarchs into their national and social structure, but it is certain that there was no objection on the part of the monarchs themselves. So popular did the idea become that even today every now and then a self-created "King" turns up. He is usually very old and much respected by his people who accept him with good humour.

On a recent visit to the Bega district I had the honour of meeting one of these latter-day monarchs of whom I had heard a great deal.

King Billy, of the House of Hammond, was giving audience to his subjects as he sat majestically on an oil drum throne in a beautiful and typical Australian bush setting.

His face was old and wrinkled, but his eyes were bright with the wisdom of age—King Billy claims to be over 100 years old—and they twinkled with the wit and mischief retained from his youth.

I approached the "throne" with due respect and introduced myself to His Majesty.

"Your Majesty, King Billy, I presume," I said, as I took the proffered royal hand.

"That's right, mister," he said, "You've heard about me? Everybody down this way knows King Billy. My photographs hang in some of the best homes in Bega. Over a hundred years old I am."

"Your Majesty," I said, "I also would like your photograph to hang on my wall, if you would allow me."

"Well, get out your camera," he commanded.

I produced my two cameras and went to work. When I had finished, I thanked him and started to take my leave.

However, it appears that no visitor to King Billy is allowed to leave the royal court without paying tribute.

"Now, wait a minute, young fellow," he commanded. "You don't get away without paying me something."

"For what do I have to pay you, Your Majesty?" I asked.

"For the pictures of course," he replied. "You will get much money for my pictures."

"Already your pictures will cost me much money to produce and put on a large screen for many people to see what a great and wonderful man is King Billy, but I shall receive nothing for it," I argued.

Suddenly his Majesty switched from commerce to history. Pointing his boney old finger straight at me he bellowed, "Your great-grandfather took my land and dug all the gold out of it. I have nothing left. You must pay something. I have to buy tobacco."

"But, how can these things be, Your Majesty?" I asked. "At the time your land was being taken and its gold being extracted, my great-grandfather was being chased by red indians on the other side of the world; and I have had to pay much money for a wee bit of rocky land which contained no gold and would not provide food for one wombat."

Then I remembered how another traveller got himself out of a similar jam a couple of thousand years ago.

"Your Majesty," I said. "Gold and silver have I none, but, of such as I have I give unto you." And pulled a sizeable package of tobacco from my pocket and placed it in the royal palm.

"How can I smoke this without a pipe?" the King protested.

This was a knotty problem for me. I thought lovingly of the sweet and mellow pipe in my coat pocket hated to part with it, although a tooth had penetrated the stem at one point. However, I was dealing with Royal and there was some honour attached to it. I held out the pipe to His Majesty and the warmth of his royal smile approval made up for my great loss.

On parting, he took my hand in his and gave me a royal blessing. "From now on I shall call you 'uncle' he announced, for all within hearing to hear.

Proudly I strutted away. Apart from honorary relationship to royalty, I could now claim to be Photographer By Appointment to His Majesty.