

*Three Gentlemen to the  
Front (1915)  
by Sumner Locke*



The Story:

Three gentlemen off for a sporting holiday are ashamed to find themselves in a world of women, as every man in the region has enlisted.

Despite their desperate attempts to follow through with their planned itinerary, the inversion of expected gender roles proves too confronting for them.

*About the Story ...*

Locke is rarely interested in either exclusively female or exclusively male experiences of the war: while she splits her war romances between male and female perspectives, they tend to occupy the space where the 'front' and the 'home front' collide (most often manifesting as marriage conflict). But this story is something of an exception: a story with a strong and varied cast of women that concentrates heavily on the ways in which women's roles at home were affected by such a wholesale absence of men from their communities as they had never seen

before.

The up-country train had been wriggling like a little brown snake for an hour or two through dense upheavals of rocky land, running in and out of wondrous tunnels cut by keen first-class surveyors, and dancing along past miniature lakes between the hills, skimming a way through shadow and sunshine almost as if vitally alive.

The men sitting in the ease and comforts of the only first-class carriage on the train had been taking observations of the land for quite an hour, and enthusing largely about the exquisite scenery of a special corner of Australia, presumably not known to many tourists.

“What gets me,” said Banker, adjusting his knee suspended so that it did not drag while he put his feet up on the seat opposite, “is that this place is no more known. I only happened on it accident, last year, while I was taking a complete rest after the office.”

“Complete rest,” laughed a second man throwing out nearly the whole of a cigarette and taking a cigar case from his pocket, “what constitutes a complete rest, Banker, for you?”

Banker slipped his feet to the ground and sat up.

“For goodness sake, Milton, don’t rub it in. You are as persistent as the people in town, who will continually ask me, at least once a day, why I have not gone to the front? A man of my business can’t keep things level, especially when he has three sisters and a mother to take out to dances, and the rotten round of the social game, unless he takes a holiday every now and then.”

“For my part,” said the third gentleman whose name was Burden, and who looked every inch chronically crushed with city exigencies and who was nearly asleep in the left-hand corner of the carriage. “I think it is rotten the way girls turn on that perpetual tap about every man going to the front. If I’d only had the chance, now —”

Milton, who was still out for fun, began to tease again.

“We might all of us have gone if we had given up our annual holiday ... and ...”

Young Banker, who had started the excursion, interrupted furiously.

“That has nothing to do with it at all, Milton. Speaking personally, I would never dream of remaining behind if my people would let me go ... but when you are tied as a sort of family ligature round the neck of things that will go to pieces if you break away ... what are you to do? The girls and the mater could never stick things without me ...”

“I thought that your sisters were engaged, and that there was every reasonable hope of your mother

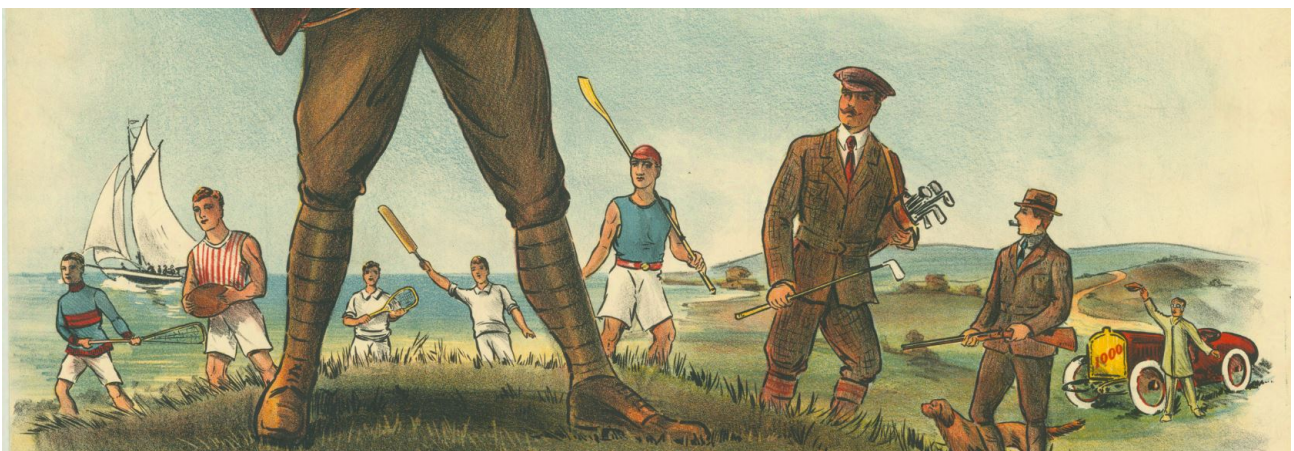
taking a trip to her people in Ireland presently,” came from Milton, who really was blaming Banker behind it all.

This brought a sudden upheaval of a heavy body from the left hand corner of the carriage.

*“That doesn't loose me from the present position,” snapped Banker. “Look at Burden there – he's only got a wife to think about, and not even one child.”*

“Oh, shut up, you two,” said Burden, yawning. “I'm sick of this business about going to the front. When I have had my holiday I might think about signing on. I don't fancy that rotten swamp Broadmeadows all the same. Winnie wants me to go, of course, as any good girl would; but she's not too strong after that affair when the kiddie died, and I have had it put to me a bit too often that I am neglecting her far too much, as it is, by just taking a cricket trip or a shooting holiday. If there was any chance of my getting a commission now ...”

*Milton still smiled from his corner and the train ran on and scrambled up the last long hill that led to the terminus.*



Banker, who had not yet recovered from the onslaught on him, took fresh observations.

“This place is going to be ripping,” he said. “Three weeks will about put me right to go back to the office grind again. I say, Milton, about that contract in advertising you took on, is there any chance of your breaking it?”

“Not the least, dear boy. If there was ...”

“You'd go to the front,” came as a sniper's bullet from Burden, who had nearly gone to sleep in the corner again.

Milton reached for his hat and suitcase.

"If those bally fellows in the Q.S.P. firm would only let me off, I would go like a shot. You see they say that they cannot get another man in Australia who can fill it."

Banker and Burden exchanged looks. "Same here," said Burden. "If there was another fellow who could fulfil my contract and look after my little delicate wife I might have a chance to pot a few Germs."

"And so might I," broke out Banker. "But I bet a few dollars that there could never be found a man to take my place, shop, mater, sisters, and all. Here's the station, boys, and, by gum! there is the coach. Fancy them having sent a man to meet us."

But Banker had made a slight error. The hotel, general store and post office of Paradise Lakes had not sent a man to meet them. When they arrived off the platform they found a little insignificant woman sitting in the driver's seat behind a spanking pair of draught horses that looked as heavy as the hills dotted about.

"Three gentlemen for Router's," said the female whip. "Please get up, we have a long road before the dark, and since the war the roads have not been mended, and there is all manner of danger if the horses get out of hand on the long hill."

Banker smiled as he clambered up. Milton deliberately took the box seat with the fair little driver, and Burden yawned in the beautiful clear air and was too tired to speak.

A journey like that was one to be remembered. Milton learned a few things on the road. One was to sit back tight on the seat and grip with both hands going down a ruddy hill. Another was that a lady does not descend to drink, but rather to water her horses, at the half-way stopping place.

During the period of the first refreshment halt, Burden woke up considerably.

"By Jove, that little thing is a corker with those horses," he said as the woman behind the rough bar-counter handed him his little "switch" of soda that accompanied his whisky.

"Meaning Mrs Webber," said the bar-tender. "Why, yes, she can drive all right: but she never took on the horses till her man went to the front."

Banker nearly dropped his glass. He looked around him. "Did she learn all that and get her grip since war began?" he said quickly. The woman nodded and went to serve a teamster who had come in from the back road.

*"By Jove," he went on, looking right into Milton's eyes. "I must tell my sisters that."*

"They always wanted to do things, and I never thought it was right ... it seemed so out of place for a woman ..."

Milton was also thinking about those big draught horses straining in the collars up the long hill and about the small hands of Mrs Webber as she gripped with forced strength during a dangerous descent in the hills.

The hotel, general store and Post Office which was the only accommodation provided in Paradise Lakes, spun into view towards the deepening of the night. The three men alighted and began to lift their wraps, suit-cases and shooting gear from the vehicle. Immediately two stalwart women appeared like mushrooms in their path.

“Rooms six, seven and eight,” said a heavy feminine voice.

“Mary, take that little gent’s over-coat ... he’ll be tired to death after his journey ... this way, gents ...”

In the confusion of dogs, potted ferns and kerosene tins that seemed to sprout in the vicinity of the back door the three men scarcely knew which way she meant. But a small child with a mop of scrawny curls and a man’s hat on, and her mother’s skirt, immediately adjusted things.

“I’ll show you with lanthorn,” she said. “Mind the door ... it’s a bit low for your heads.”

Milton exploded immediately he had got inside his room. He laughed as if he would break his clothes. Banker called through the light wooden partition separating the two rooms. “What’s the joke? I never enjoyed things so much in my life ...”

“Tell you later ... perhaps tomorrow,” said Milton, and started to look for his hair brushes, etc.

During the first meal that night, served by the stalwart woman and punctuated by incidentals of quick “waiting” from the small girl in the man’s hat, the three holiday-seekers began to make plans for the next day

“I think we might as well take the shooting that Banker found last year down by the back-water,” said Milton.

Burden looked about him. “Yes ... if we can get a man to accompany us and carry the tucker and things.”

“Of course,” said Banker. “We could never find the way without a man ... last year I had a ripping time and ...”

They applied to the head-woman for a hamper to be ready at ten o'clock the next morning, and a man to accompany the guns. She promised that everything would be ready at the precise minute. And sure as the daylight when they appeared dressed in shoot-knickers at breakfast, they saw the hamper carried out to the trap that was to drive them part of way. Milton was beginning to grow incoherent with surplus joy at each turn, and Burden had become quite an expert in accepting things he scarcely understood. Banker was most of the time busy arranging the outings.

When they left the breakfast table on the first morning they found the trap standing hitched to the little horse ready to accompany them. Banker spread himself out a bit importantly and asked where the "man" was he had engaged to take them on the shoot.

*A strapping girl of about sixteen,  
in a short skirt, and leggings, at  
once came through the back  
door.*



"I suppose you will take the river first," she said. "More chance of birds there ... then we can go along to the chain of lakes in the evening."

The three men gasped, but it would have been rude to have questioned the company of such an escort, and again Milton took first place and sat near her as she started them down the first easy track.

The way was easy enough to the river, and again the three men learned many things. One was that a corduroy bridge over a mill creek can be mended just as well by a woman as a man. Banker fairly burst his confidence strings when he saw a girl, scarcely grown, plying a crosscut saw with a sun-browned woman at the side of the road.

They called out jovially to the men something about it being a "great day for a picnic." Milton was too upset with hysterical laughter to reply, but Banker made an attempt to say something in accord with their reception.

"Oh, it's not exactly a picnic," he called out as the escort slowed down the horse. "We are out for some shooting."

The woman managing the crosscut saw nodded. "So is my man and my boy Tom," she said. "Shooting Turks in the Dardanelles — hope you have a good day."

For some reason or other they did not have a good day. Banker said it was "that blessed girl about that stopped the birds from rising," though as a matter of fact the escort had remained in cover doing a bit of a mend to the harness, which had come to bits on a nasty little track, stump-hidden beneath the velvet grass. Milton knew that the escort had nothing to do with it, because he had stopped with her to learn how to temporarily mend a break in a reliable bit of harness. He had learned other things, too.

*"No," she said, in answer to his query; "she had never accompanied a shooting expedition before — only since her brother Bill had gone to the front. No, she didn't like, it very much — but then neither did Bill like killing — Turks."*

There was a sudden sensation of things not being quite right on the way home, and Banker said a few bad words under his breath as they put down two rabbits and a crow (shot by accident) on the bricks before the kitchen door. The rabbits were given to the dogs as a banquet, and the crow had to be buried that night to stop the flies and vermin coming about.

"Hope you fellows like it," said the leader of the party. "Mind you, last year there was a crowd up, and, of course, you could get a man to do things for you. By the way, Milton, did you ever see such a lot of women in one square mile?"

"Oh, yes," said Milton, holding himself in a bit; "I have — in a church."

"Oh, but it is their duty to go to church." Banker had a few ideas under the surface about the women of Paradise Lakes that were very nearly sending out torpedoes of wrath for some reason or other.

However he went on with arrangements.

"There is nothing in shooting unless we can get a man, not a woman, to take us out. Suppose we hit up some other kind of sport. Say a cattle muster. I will find out if they have such things here, and we'll get out into a good position and see things for ourselves."

And sure as the day after came through the chinks of the weatherboard rooms, the three men did see things for themselves. They were mounted on horseback and were cautioned by the hotel proprietress to go to a certain spot in a belt of scrub away down on the flats where the mob of young bullocks would be passing sometime that day. Banker breathed like a man for the first time; Milton was regretting the absence of the shooting escort, who had taught him quite a few useful things; and Burden sat a bit forward expecting his horse to "jump the moon" the first moment of the approach.

And when the mob came, bellowing and uprooting the mud-clogs and bristling with fury to the very halt

they had taken up, the horses did take fright; and as Burden had expected his horse very nearly tried to jump the sun as well as the moon and the stars and the whole beautiful firmament of constellations. When the mob had passed and somebody had caught his horse, and brought it to a stand; and when someone else had picked Banker out of the scrub a few yards off and explained things to Milton, who had stopped laughing for once, it appeared "that the mob often went crazy at such a season; and that since the men went to the front the brutes had got so used to the tender handling of the wives and sweethearts of the community that even the sight of a man watching proceedings was enough to make them charge the enemy or what they supposed was the enemy, since the men had gone away."

This was the story as Milton had told it, and it took Banker three days of reading in the hammock in a deserted spot by the parrot-cage, to get things adjusted in his mind. He said that if the drovers had been the same as last year there would have been no need for their horses to bolt. Milton made it right by suggesting they come back and try Paradise Lakes after the war, and this settled peace with the leader once more.

Then something more gentle in exercise came as a sedative, and a Saturday night's spree.

The residents of Paradise Lakes gave a dance in the Sunday School Hall. It was not really the Sunday School Hall, but it had to be called by that name since pastimes and pleasure took turn with stern, unrelenting business among the feminine section of the place.

The three men, of course, got into boating flannels and went along to the fun. Of course it was fun. Banker agreed afterwards, but if those girls had only given them the chance to ask for their programmes before they had applied themselves, it might have been different. The shooting-escort had taken Milton off first go, much to his delight, and she had stuck to him all the evening and had insisted on him remaining in the impromptu conservatory (really the anteroom for hymn books and coffee cups when out of service), quite an hour, during which time no one had even requested Banker or Burden to do a thing. The women of Paradise Lakes had found a tremendous enjoyment in entertaining themselves, by some taking the male position in the Lancers, and others turning into girls again at will. And Banker had to admit afterwards that when a little girl deliberately invited him to the 'killing-gallows' the next morning, to watch her 'kill a beast,' he felt that his holiday was really doing him 'no good whatever' and that he thought they would cut it down to two weeks instead of three.

During this time they got pretty slack for something of real masculine interest and began daily exercises of 'jiu-jitsu' and Sandow and other heavy exploits.

It was while showing some splendid muscles and a good deal of sidework in heart-palpitations that Banker, one night, turned right round like the proverbial grub. He was showing the others how to throw a man or a beast when the man or the beast has the best advantage. He was illustrating the thing a bit widely on Burden, who looked as washed out as a shirt after a day's rain in the winter, and while



explaining the special movements of feet and knee muscles, in a kind of “trip-up” to bring the finish, the shooting-escort, and another woman a bit more hefty and firm of mouth, came out and listened. The shooting-escort suggested that they arrange a kind of stadium in the woolshed a few miles across the flats and that they pick somebody to meet Banker the following Saturday night. The boys were delighted and more than ever plucked up at the idea that at last they would have a chance of some real masculine play with a real masculine being. Things pretty well fermented about Friday, and to make the thing a proper “go” they put on door-keepers to take door-money, which was to be handed to the Belgian Fund as a present from Paradise Lakes.

Banker practised every day with Milton, Burden and the hitching post at the front verandah. He even enraged the dogs and got a few nasty teeth scratches in the calves, which to him were an incentive to goad him into stronger measures.

The shoot escort was running the show, and she promised Banker that it would be something in trousers to meet him even if they had to steal a “sundowner” off the road. And though the wool shed was filled with every sample of female possible at the minute of “ringing in,” up there came the dilapidated “tramp,” a bit shorter and more scraggy than Banker, but as keen of eye as Jack Johnson when spurred to the proper bite.

The wrestling was weak at the beginning, but it warmed up with the shouting of the inmates of the wool shed. Small boys added to it, but the noise was nothing to what happened when the “tramp” actually threw Banker over his shoulder and through the ropes. Banker landed near Milton, who picked him up right end and replaced him on the steps to the platform; and it was then that he turned completely and stared. In the amazement of the uproar, with every woman, girl-child, old man and boy calling out and cheering, Banker, with a nasty sensation of having left out something in the “jiu-jitsu” that must have been over the leaf when he learned it, again stared, and then Milton took him to bed, and Burden went with him.

*“I knew,” he kept saying, all the time Milton was holding a cold bandage to his head.  
“I knew it was a woman all the time, and that’s why I had to let her get me — oh,  
dash, get me some brandy will you? I knew it was a woman from the start.”*



It was in the train homeward that things came to a complete and different finish. Even Banker himself had not expected it. The shooting escort had some business in town and decided to accompany them. Milton liked it, and was wondering if he could also make it his business, when she said smartly, "I'm going to organise a school of instruction for women, fencing, wrestling, shooting, riding, camp cooking, walking, discipline — you see there is really nothing a man can do that a woman can't, nowadays; and as it is war time." Banker looked aghast.

"You are not thinking of organising a regiment of women to fight," he said harshly,

The shooting escort opened wide eyes upon him.

"Why not — we are just as capable as some men who would never stick it as long as we might."

Milton grew flushed and Banker scarlet.

"I never heard of such a thing," flashed Burden, and Banker praised him mentally for his bravery.

"I don't mind betting," said the girl, "that I, for instance, could manage a gun or a horse under fire better than you could." She was looking right at Banker.

He said nothing, and went crimson to pale white. The manhood that had been stirred at that meeting of muscular strength had started to course through his veins as never before:

"And I don't mind betting I could sleep easier in a mud ditch than you could on a barn floor, under cover," she said, addressing Burden, who sat up suddenly as if he was going to hit somebody.

"And —" she took Milton softly, but drove her point home. "I don't mind betting you that I would never let any man, woman or child, law, contract or promise, make me stay behind if I felt it my first duty to go

out and fight for the honor and rights of my country.”

*It was as well for the three holiday makers that the journey ended that day. And it was well for Australia that those three men had gone out and learned the truth from somebody else, for that very week Banker, Burden and Milton signed on, wives, sisters or contract notwithstanding, and the shooting escort went to see them off as they carried their haversacks and change of clothes to the Broadmeadows camp.*



*Next story: 'Mobilising Johnny'*

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