



## THE STEEL BAND

Keith Smith

There was nothing pleasant about Plaisance Place.

First it was a road that wound tortuously past houses that looked as though they would fall down at the merest wind.

Then, without warning, Plaisance Place petered out into a narrow dirt track. When it rained it became a slush of red mud. On dry days there was red dust everywhere.

Still Plaisance Place was the shortest way to St. Phillip's School and Andrew went that way every morning. He was always late and barely made it in time for the school bell. He would dash down Plaisance Place, the red dust or mud, depending on the season, clinging to his sneakers.

In Plaisance Place there was a large Tamarind tree and under this tree a group of young men spent their day trying to get musical notes from old oil pans. They made a lot of noise.

The group of men under the tree drew Andrew like a magnet. At recess, the midday break, and when

school ended for the day, he would dash across to the red ring of earth under the Tamarind tree to look at what the men were doing.

Andrew never knew what they thought of his presence. They certainly seemed to take no notice of him.

There was Spree and Batsasby and Fisheye, Bull Pancup and Bulldog and they spent hours beating a tuneless rhythm on the pans. Sometimes they were joined by the butchers from the nearby Abbatoir. The butchers were never without their knives and the tins in which they collected ends of meat and entrails for making black pudding. Sometimes the butchers beat their knives against the tins to add to the din in Plaisance Place.

In time Andrew got to know the pan players well. Spree seemed to be the boss. A glass of mauby and sweetbread at his side he would be there day after day over his pan, pounding and pounding as if his very life depended on it.

One day Bull Pancup became Andrew's special friend and it all started when Andrew saw Bull bathing.

It was midday and Bull was waiting by the stand-pipe for the women to finish filling their buckets. After they had left Bull rolled a wooden tub from a nearby yard and filled it with water.

Bull lifted it, muscles bulging, and heaved its contents over his body. He soaped himself and then repeated the feat, lifting the heavy wooden tub and emptying the water over himself. Even Spree stopped concentrating on the pan to look at Bull, so great was his strength.

Bull was not aware of the admiring audience until Andrew said:

“Mister, do that again!”

Bull obliged, heaving the heavy tub over his head for a third time.

From then on Andrew was Bull's friend and when Andrew joined the men under the tree Bull would give him a playful pinch.

The men continued to ignore Andrew and even Bull, after his initial greeting, would soon become absorbed in the pan pounding. Andrew could not stay long anyway. He had to be home at a certain time, and to tell his mother he was late because he was watching men pound old oil pans would have fetched him a beating.

Andrew was under the Tamarind tree the day there was nearly a fight, and it was his friend Bull who started it.

Over the months Andrew had seen the way the men worked together, forming a deep friendship. Gradually they had formed themselves into what they called a steelband. With the pans hanging around their necks they worked hour after hour, punching out a few notes until the oil pans could give out the tune of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

One evening Bull Pancup asked Spree to lend him his pan for the night.

“Okay,” said Spree, “but listen well, Bull. If anything happen to that pan, if one little note get damage, is trouble for you.”

Bull, the strong man who could lift a heavy barrel of water, was stronger than Spree, but when angry Spree was a fighter. Andrew was sure of this from the way he looked when he got angry.

Anyway Bull borrowed Spree's pan.

It was midday the next day and Andrew was under the Tamarind tree when Bull came up Plaisance Place, swinging Spree's pan.

Without a word he handed it over to Spree who at once began to examine it to make sure there was no damage.

A second later Spree was shouting to the heavens:

"Look what this man do wid mih pan!"

He yelled and swore and cursed and all the residents of Plaisance Place came running out into the street.

"Today! Today!!" he shouted, "Ah go make ah jail. Somebody give mih ah knife!"

The butchers, attracted by the noise, came out of the Abbatoir, but hid their knives at Spree's anger.

Bull, strong man that he was, was terrified.

"It ain't my fault!" he pleaded.

"Well, who fault it is?" shouted Spree.

In a way what had happened to Spree's pan was not Bull's fault.

In the excitement of playing the pan, Bull had forgotten his own powerful strength. The result was that the notes that Spree had taken such care to pound outwards were now pounded inwards—and from the way Spree was behaving it seemed that he was determined to pound in Bull's head in the same way.

Four men tried to restrain Spree but this only served to increase his anger.

“Wait until I finish wid Bull!” he said, “And then all yuh look out.”

The men released Spree.

“To think,” Spree yelled, “to think how hard ah man work on these pans. To think how much work to get them in de right shape and now look what dis man do with dem!”

Spree sprang towards Bull. But instead of grabbing Bull and beating him to a pulp as everyone expected, Spree reached for his stick and started to beat the pan in a hysterical rage.

“All yuh hear . . . !” He stopped in mid sentence.

For something strange had happened to his pan. Instead of the distorted sound he expected, a most melodic sound was coming from it.

The scowl left Spree's face and he gazed at the pan amazed.

But there was no mistake. The notes now coming from the pan were clearer, sweeter than any they had been able to get before.

The pan, with the notes pounded inwards was giving a clearer, sweeter tune than when the notes had been pounded outwards.

Quite by chance Bull had stumbled on what they had all been searching for day after day. He stood speechless.

Years later when Andrew had left St. Phillip and the steelband had become a great musical invention, he was able to tell his friends how the first steelband was made. Many did not believe him. Perhaps you do not either. Ask Spree.