

The Projectionist

At the end of 1897, Marius Sestier—an official agent for the Lumière brothers and their cinematographe invention—visited the outback mining settlement of Black Hill. His buggy came upon the town at dusk, just as the saltbush and rosewoods darkened against the red clay. It was December of the great drought and all the way from Sydney Marius had seen rawboned cattle shambling through dry creek beds, or sheep—their ribcages thrown into relief—cudding on thistle and canegrass. As he looked at the ramshackle arrangement of the town, the procession of tin sheds and lean-tos, he knew his mission was also a penance. Auguste Lumière had sent him a note in Sydney that read, simply: *Go to the end of the Earth and show invention to locals. Report back.* Marius knew that his nearly-botched filming of the 1896 Melbourne Cup had made its way back to Paris and that this was his punishment—an exile among the sun-burnt and provincial, screening a reel of Paris factory sack races and scenes from the fish markets of Marseille to coal miners and their soot-faced progeny.

As he rode into the town, the memory of Paris—the opalescent Seine, the yellow aura of the gas lamps, the smell of wood smoke from the garrets and taverns—rushed at him with the liquidity of a dream. Marius stared out his carriage window, O-mouthed and appalled, at the tinsed squalor of Black Hill. He was certain that there was no place more miserable on the planet. It smelled of pitch and coal smoke. The town's only street was run-through with a baked, red fissure that snaked its way between the shanties. The buggy stopped and Marius descended onto the hard clay road, relieved that dusk had taken a notch off the heat. The driver went off in search of water for his horses, leaving Marius standing in front of the town's only public bar—*Taggart's Tank House*. It was a low-set affair, windows sawed through plank-board walls, and

no doors to speak of. The general commotion of men drinking sputtered out into the falling dark. Marius put his English dictionary in his pocket, plucked up his courage, and walked into the bar.

The rabbleroising, which had consisted of men drinking ale from tea mugs and betting on the outcome of a man throwing spoons at a rooster in a corner, came to an abrupt silence. Eddie Taggert, the publican—a big-jowled man in gingham-patched trousers—dropped a bottle of scotch when he saw the Frenchman. Marius stood there in the dingy light of the bar, dressed in his houndstooth suit, stovepipe hat, and silk cravat, his face plaintive and his mouth open in thirst.

“You’re gonna pay for that, lovelace,” said Eddie to the stranger.

Marius, unsure of what the publican meant, removed his hat and said, “I am looking for a room. Is there an inn?”

This brought a chorus of laughter from the stock-stilled men. The rooster ran through the middle of the bar, now that the spoon throwing had ceased, and went out into the night.

“Course there’s an inn,” said Eddie. “Just toddle off to the *Cock and Arms* down the corner and ask for the viceroy suite.”

This brought another round of laughter from the men. One of them—Baxter Harrison—who was in charge of explosives at the mine, sidled up to Marius and said, “Where you from, cove?”

“Paris,” said Marius.

He said it nasally, without the S, and made it sound like an exotic bird.

“I have come to show some animated pictures. We are calling them films,” Marius added.

Baxter, who tightened detonation screws with a watchmaker's resolve, flung his arm around Marius's shoulder and said, "Somebody buy Napoleon a pint, because he's brought us somethin' extra special. Me brother in Sydney says they got a parlour on Pitt Street what shows a James Corbett boxing match and a lynching for a penny. Hell," he said, dragging Marius to the counter, "I'll buy him a beer meself."

Eddie, still sour over his dropped whiskey bottle, poured the Frenchman a beer with a three-inch head.

"You'll need a rope to get down that shaft," said Baxter, pointing to Marius's mug of beer.

Marius penetrated the foam and felt a swallow of warm, amber beer fill his mouth. It was bitter and he tried his best to appear grateful. He knew if he asked for a glass of burgundy the men might string him up. So he sat there and made broken conversation with Baxter, referring to his dictionary to explain that Edison's Kinetoscope—the trend on Pitt Street—was quite separate from the Lumière brothers' invention. "My equipment is both camera and projector," Marius said. "It carries thirty-nine minutes of life spooled inside itself."

"I know men at the mine who have less life spooled inside than that, Napoleon," said Baxter, holding his empty mug up for a refill.

"Where would be a good place to have a showing?" Marius asked.

"First crow you go sees Bob Patchet. He's the mine boss and the mayor for practical purposes. The company owns this town, see?"

"I understand," said Marius, nodding rapidly. He wondered whether *first crow* was a term of endearment.

"Not sure what kind of reception you'll get, though," said Baxter.

“Why?”

“Whole mine’s out on strike. We ain’t left the bar for a week and not a trolley o’ rock or slag has come out of the shaft in the meantime. Bobbie Patchet’s yabbering like a madman he’s so miffed.”

Marius nodded again and made a note to look up the verb *yabber* and the adjective *miffed* as soon as he could.

Marius slept on a canvas cot at the back of the mining store. He woke amid sacks of flour and tins of matches and jam, not fully remembering where he was or how he’d gotten here. He walked out the back door and looked for an outhouse. When he found none, he urinated against a stringy-bark, glancing this side and that to make sure this activity went unseen. In front of him stretched an apple-tree flat—the trees stunted and fruitless—and an expanse of corrugated, ochre earth. He could also see, about half a mile away, the slagheap from the mine. In the morning pall it resembled a black serpent, sleeping and half-uncoiled.

Marius returned inside and took inventory of his equipment. The cinematographe was housed inside a wooden carry-case and the reels of film were wound inside metal canisters. He checked the lenses of the projector-camera and ensured that the emulsion had not baked away from the reels. Each day of his journey from Sydney, he had wrapped the canisters in wet muslin to keep them cool. Part of his mission was also to film the local inhabitants and send the celluloid back to Paris. Already he could see Auguste and Louis Lumière delighting their Bohemian and bourgeois friends in the basement of the Grand Café on Boulevard des Capucines. Men in nankeen suits, owl-faced poets with amber-tipped pipes, would lean in while a tableau of this alien outpost flickered onto a whitewashed screen. Afterwards, there would be a lively

debate, over blackcurrant brandy and custard, about whether science and art had reached the colonies, about whether the wiry coal miners knew that oxygen had been discovered and named, or whether they knew a sonnet from a plug of tobacco.

Marius wiped himself with his kerchief and went out into the store proper. He was only marginally surprised to find that Eddy Taggart also served as the daytime storekeeper.

“Good morning,” Marius said.

Eddy nodded, a cup of steaming tea between his hands.

“Where will I find the boss of the mine?” Marius asked.

Eddy blew across the top of his mug and, without looking up, said, “Look for the only house in town.”

Marius thanked Eddy and walked out the front door. Outside, Black Hill was a litter of drunken, sleeping men. A pair of stocking feet protruded from beneath a water trough. A man was slumped, his hat over his eyes, against an iron bark. Marius walked down the street, keeping to the right of the enormous fissure. The dozen sheds and lean-tos came to an abrupt end.

Beyond lay a swath of thistle and dead wattle and then a solitary house off by itself, raised on stilts and verandah-ed on all sides. There was a fence around it with palings white and shoulder-high. Marius walked across the scraggly field and opened the front gate. Immediately, a couple of dogs set to barking and a tall man appeared on the front stoop.

“They’ll take a leg each if you don’t mind,” the man called.

“I’m here to see Mr. Patchet,” Marius said.

“On what account?” the man asked.

The dogs—a pair of yellowish bush-mongrels—were bounding across the patch of dirt that served as a yard. Marius stepped back and closed the gate, cutting off their approach. The

dogs leapt and barked. The man descended the stairs from the house and put on a hat en route to the gate. He stood, squinting into the early morning light, and assessed Marius from head to foot.

“Mother and Joseph, what have they sent me now? Look, there’s no work here for your likes. We don’t employ clerks—it’s strictly diggers. And none of that if this bloody strike keeps up.”

“I am not here for a job,” Marius said.

“What then?”

“I have been sent here by Messieurs Lumière, the inventors of the cinematographe. They wish me to show some animated pictures here.”

Bob Patchet, an old London boy, had not seen a man like Marius for many years. He squinted into the sun, wiped his hands down his front, and took the fellow in slowly. The waistcoat, the fob chain, the china-bone hands—Marius was an apparition of misplaced elegance, standing there all fine and slender, like a dandy gone bush. It annoyed Bob to be reminded of far-off civilization, to remember that somewhere there were tailors and hatters, men with monocles.

“Not interested,” Bob said.

The dogs were still clamoring against the fence palings.

“But I have come all the way from Sydney, and before that from Paris,” said Marius.

“Well I’ve come from London. Glad you could drop in.” Bob Patchet said something low and meaningless to the dogs then turned for the house. The dogs followed.

Marius called after him. “I have already spoken to some of the men and they are quite eager to see my show.”

Bob stopped a few feet from the verandah and turned slowly, all shoulders, like a man with a neck injury.

“What did you say?” he called.

“I have spoken with the men and they like the idea.”

Bob nodded and allowed himself to turn fully to face the Frenchman. He had no real idea what a cinematographe was, nor did he care, but suddenly it seemed this continental twit had something the men wanted. The way to break a strike was to curry favour, always had been. It didn't matter whether it was tobacco, rum, or whores—you broke their solidarity by changing the terms. They asked for better wages and instead you gave them an afternoon off and all they remembered, in years to come, was that you were fair and willing to listen. Bob Patchet took a step towards the gate.

“Why don't you come up to the house,” he said.

Marius looked at the dogs.

“It's safe now. They see that I've asked you inside.”

Marius opened the gate and walked up onto the verandah. The dogs sniffed him but did not make a sound.

“I'll have my wife fetch us some tea,” Bob said. “Have a seat.”

Marius sat out on an old church pew that rested against the wall of the house. Above the picket fence he could see Black Hill, silhouetted by early morning light and flanked on two sides by dead trees. The box-pines and mulgas—names he'd learned from the carriage driver—were bare and otherworldly, stark as crosses in a campaign field. Marius could not imagine that any decent man's wife would live in such a place. But he'd seen some bush-women on his journey out here, the sturdy and plain wives of drovers and boundary riders, their faces ruddy as winter

apples, their lips thin with complaint, a rant in the back of their eyes. He imagined Bob's wife a *Dot* or a *Maggie*, a hardened import from Liverpool or Sussex.

Bob Patchet appeared on the verandah with a pipe in one hand.

"Tea will be a jiffy," he said, sitting down beside Marius.

Marius looked at Bob sidelong. He wore dun-colored trousers, a Crimean shirt, a cabbage-tree hat. Only his boots—hand-seamed and from abroad—betrayed his position of power.

"How's about you tell me about your little magic show?" Bob said.

"It is not magic. I will show some moving pictures that appear just like they are from real life. I would also like to make some pictures of the town and the miners going to work."

"If they ever return to the mine."

"Yes."

"What kind of pictures do you already have?"

"There is variety. I have a portion of some sack races in Paris and the fish markets from Marseille."

"The men won't come to see cod and herring, old mate," said Bob, lighting his pipe.

"I also have Negro minstrels dancing on a London street and last year's Melbourne Cup."

Bob Patchet stopped sucking on his pipe and held a pull of smoke in his mouth. He exhaled slowly, nodding. "Now, now, I 'aven't seen old London town since I was a boy. And the men will leave the pub if they can watch the Melbourne Cup. That's good. You've done very well, son."

"Thank you, sir," said Marius.

"How's it work? What makes it run?"

“There is a lamp and a hand-crank.”

“So you could do it just about anywhere?”

“Oh, yes. It is very versatile.”

Bob Patchet’s wife came out with their tea at this moment. She was on the young side of her twenties, had her caramel hair pulled back, and wore a white sun-frock that exposed a riverbed of faint, blue veins around her neck. Her skin was pale, somehow untouched by the harshness of the bush. She moved across the verandah, lightly, as if on the balls of her feet. Marius looked at her and could feel his jaw loosen.

“This is my wife, Elizabeth,” Bob said.

Marius stood and offered a regency bow. “A pleasure. I am Marius Sestier.”

“Where’s this one from?” asked Elizabeth.

“France,” said Bob. He did not like the connotation of the word *Paris*. “Thank you, love,” Bob said, dismissing his wife.

Elizabeth set the tea tray down between the men and walked for the door.

From the side of his mouth Bob said, “Poor devil lacks for female company. Joe Banville’s widow up and died about a year ago. Now Liz is stuck here with the men and the dogs. Isn’t that right, Liz?”

Elizabeth shrugged and put her hands behind her back. It was clear she knew of her feminine power—she carried it simply, like a ball of wax in her apron pocket.

By the door, she faced the men and said, “Stuck in the middle of nowhere, that’s right.” Suddenly she turned and went inside, leaving Marius with the image of an organdy bow coming loose in her hair.

Marius swallowed hard and looked off at the plains and ridges blued by distance. Elizabeth had loosed something in him and he doubted whether he could remember a word of English. She had rendered something that only made sense in French. Bob Patchet picked up his teacup and took a sip, his eyes on his boots. Marius did likewise. Finally, he cobbled together an English sentence.

“I can be ready for tomorrow. In which building would you like me to have my showing, Mister Patchet?”

“No building, son,” Bob said, pointing to the black slag heap off to the west, “We’re going to show the streets of London and the Melbourne cup down a bloody mine shaft.”

Bob Patchet had Eddie Taggart close the pub the next day and padlock a stretch of fencing across the doorway. Handbills, glued to wall and post, announced that an afternoon of entertainment was being provided for the men, courtesy of the mining company. The words *Melbourne Cup* and *London Minstrels* were emblazoned on red scrollwork that Elizabeth Patchet was especially proud of. At 3 o’clock, about eighty men gathered in front of the pub, vented briefly about its closure, and debated whether the handbills were a deft ploy on the part of the bosses. Baxter Harrison—blearing through a noontime hangover—said that watching the Melbourne Cup did not bind them to anything.

“They get under your skin this way,” one of the young lads called.

“Union says not to go in the mines,” called another.

“Suit yourself,” said Baxter. “Anyone interested in a little canter round the racetrack follow me. I ain’t goin’ to work in the mine. Union says nothing about pictures in the mine pit.” He put his hat on and began walking in the direction of the mine. Some of the men followed in

twos and threes until the middle was gone from the crowd. When Baxter got to the mouth of the mine he turned to see every man, down to the last digger, crossing the scorched earth behind him.

Marius had set up the cinematographe on top of an oil barrel and hung his canvas screen from a high-walled section of rock. Bob Patchet had led him by lantern-light into the first dark turn of the drift mine, into a place where the narrow tunnel opened into a cavernous space about a hundred feet across. This was an area for storage and where the men could lunch without leaving the shaft. Marius stood tending the projector as the men entered in dribs and drabs. Baxter gave him a smile and tipped his hat.

“Reckon I’ll get me a front-rower,” said Baxter. He went and sat on the bare rock floor, some twenty feet from the screen.

The men filed in and sat in rows next to and behind Baxter. There was some joking and shoving, but mostly the men were stilled to silence, waiting for this spectacle to unfold in a place of backache and toil. Marius waited for Bob Patchet to return with his wife. He looked around the coal-dug anteroom and watched the men’s shadows swim through the meager light of the lanterns. Suddenly, he smelled verbena and lemon and turned to see Bob and Elizabeth Patchet standing in the mouth of the tunnel, high-backed and dressed for church. Sensing a new presence, the eighty men turned and were struck by the sight of Elizabeth—shawled and black-shoed—entering their chamber. Almost in unison, they removed their hats.

“You can start the projector,” said Bob to Marius.

Marius asked those near the walls to extinguish the lanterns. There was a brief and utter darkness in which the only thing that seemed to exist was the high-blown smell of Bob Patchet’s wife. Nobody spoke. Marius lit the projector lantern and turned the hand-crank. Pales of soft,

bluish light threw themselves against the screen. An image—something amorphous and russet—jittered then subsided then rose again. It was a cornice, then a window, then the revealed façade of a London bank. There was a crowd lining the street and the day was bleak—a cloth of weather hung low and pale over the rooftops. People emerged in the sepia montage—young girls in scarves, freckle-faced lads craning for a view. “Piccadilly,” a miner yelled from the front. Into the scene came a marching band, negroes pumping trombones and flinging batons in the air. The batons spun into slow whorls, disappeared from frame, then dropped back and were caught by gloved hands. Some of the men began clapping and bouncing as they sat. The band marched directly towards the men, the bass drummer out in front, head-bobbing in his ornamental parade hat. When the band captain was so close they could see the hairs of his moustache, the formation moved swiftly by, now seen from the side. A general volley of cheering erupted among the men. Baxter Harrison threw his hat into the air. Marius exchanged a nod with Bob Patchet, who stood with his wife against a wall at the back. Elizabeth looked out at the screen, transfixed, her head cocked as if listening to a far-off voice.

The marching band petered out and, for several seconds, scratched panels of brown and black flickered on the screen. Then, suddenly, there was a field of green at high-noon, women standing under strange hats, men in woolen suits looking out from a grandstand with opera glasses—the Melbourne Cup. Baxter Harrison whistled and cheered when he saw the saddling paddock—the thoroughbreds lined out high and proud, nostrils flared, ears back, nervous and skittish before the race. A chestnut mare, seventeen hands in stature, stood close with her flanks dazzled by November sunshine. Then came a procession of people onto the screen, individual personalities amid the sea of well-dressed racegoers: the Victorian Governor in a double-breasted, Lord Brassy in tails, Lady someone-or-other in a merino gown. They gestured, moved

their lips, animated and silent as a dumb show. Several of the men booed and yelled “On with the bloody race” and, as if the reel of film could hear, the horses lined up. The jockeys, dressed in silks and caps, their ends off the saddles, leaned forward, noses to the mane. The race began with a torrent of hooves and silk ebbing forward, but the details were vague and abstracted. The race, Marius saw now, had registered in the hand-propelled celluloid as a general sea of motion, a torrent of horses with an occasional cap or forelock made crystalline. Then came the error that had besmirched his reputation in Paris. Midway through the race, a woman’s hat—topped by an ostrich feather—blocked the view of the camera. Marius had known he could not move the camera mid-race so he yelled at the woman to move. But the roar of the crowd was such that she could not hear. She was no more than three feet in front. Marius cringed as on-screen, his hand, pale and ghostly, reached out and touched the woman on the shoulder. She looked back, her face aghast beneath her epic sunhat. His hand made an emphatic gesture, like a sideways goodbye. She took off her hat and shifted from view. The miners found this hilariously funny and even the surly publican bounced with delight. Marius looked over his shoulder and saw Elizabeth in giggles, a hand covering her mouth. There was a moment of hapless eye contact between them, her eyes finding his in the blue-lit gloaming.

The race came to an end, Newhaven first past the post. There were some general scenes of celebration—the weighing of the cup, the winning horse being led before the grandstand. Marius switched off the projector, knowing that the sack races and fish markets could not compete with the Melbourne Cup and the London minstrels. The mine gallery was snuffed to black and the men grumbled at the screen going dark. Bob Patchet lit his lantern and several men stood and did likewise. Bob cleared his throat and spoke to the men: “I know we’ve had our differences, fellahs. But I make the commitment to having entertainment like this brought into

the town if youse return to the mine. The company's goin' broke and then we'll all be hoofin' it back to the grimy cities. That's all I have to say. I know the union's gotta vote." With that he took Elizabeth by the arm and led her from the mineshaft. For the count of five the men sat in silence. Then a voice came through the half-light—"Who won the race anyway?" Then, a chorus of disgusted knowledge replied, "Newhaven!"

The next day, Marius woke early and prepared the cinematagraphe for filming. He had visions of the empty street and, if the men returned to work, a file of men trudging across the burnt landscape in their dungarees. But just as he was preparing to venture out with his tripod, Bob and Elizabeth Patchet appeared at the back of the store.

"The men say they're not going back to work," Bob said, his face grim.

"I see," said Marius.

"So I think you'd better leave. Things will get ugly now. Troopers will come in and evict the bastards and we'll bring in men who want an honest day's work."

"Oh," said Marius, unsure of why he was being confided in. "I would still like to make some pictures if that is alright."

Bob looked down at his shoes and Elizabeth looked at her hands. "That's why we're here," Bob said.

There was a brief pause.

"I don't understand," said Marius.

Bob Patchet looked at his wife and said, "Elizabeth here would like to be made into pictures. Wouldn't you, love?"

Elizabeth stared at the floorboards, her face flushed.

“I’m prepared to pay twenty quid,” Bob said, thrusting some money in front of him.

Marius felt his throat go dry and found himself looking at the hem of Elizabeth’s white sundress. He could imagine her muslin dress like a screen, the blue flicker of a film caught in its camber. He began three sentences and finished none of them: “But...If...There is.” Then he low-toned “Alors” and finally sputtered, “It will need to be sent away for developing and I am supposed to capture the town.”

“Forty quid, then,” Bob said flatly.

Elizabeth looked up from the floor now and cut her dark eyes at Marius. “I don’t care if I see it,” she said. “I just want to be on the screen.”

Marius and Bob both looked at her at the same instant. There was something martyred in her voice, as if she wanted to be rid of the penance of beauty. Then, in a flash, she reversed this maudlin notion by saying, “I want to be captured out among the wild sage and the sugarwoods.”

Bob Patchet, as if to excuse his wife’s lapse into botany, said, “Elizabeth knows about plants.”

Marius nodded, raised his eyebrows, and blew some air between his lips. He felt a little dumbstruck by the idea, by the power of Elizabeth’s figure, by the riverbed of veins at her neck. Perhaps, if she were daring, he would be permitted to film her with her hair down.

“I will do it,” Marius said.

“Good boy,” said Bob.

“I’m going to be famous,” said Elizabeth, clapping her hands.

“Will you send the film back to Paris?” Bob asked.

“Yes,” said Marius. But he could already see the Lumière brothers and their owl-faced protégés scowling at the screen, incredulous that Marius had braved the furious deep of the

Pacific, tracked across the dead heart of Australia, for images of a mine boss's wife. It was true that she was beautiful, but so was the baker's daughter on rue St. Germaine, or the chiffonier's wife near the Tuileries, girls with that kind of beauty that made its way into a working-class family like an embezzled diamond once every five generations. Marius knew, looking at Elizabeth's delicate mouth and the porcelain rim of her teeth, that the reel would lose him his job. He would be forced to make his own films and buy his own cinematographe. Somehow, far off, he could see a new life forming back in Paris.

He loaded the celluloid into the camera-projector and collected his tripod.

They went outside into the brightening morning. Bob and Elizabeth led him behind a ridge where the apple-flats gave onto a field of wild herbs.

"Water table levels off here," said Bob. "This is where the dingoes come to drink at night."

Marius set up his camera on the tripod. "Why don't you walk out into the field," he said to Elizabeth.

She did so, looking back for a long moment at Bob, as if this was the furthest she had ever ventured from his side. Marius began to turn the hand-crank. Through the aperture he saw her dress catch briefly in the breeze. A galah shrieked and landed on a dead tree.

"She might never come back," said Bob Patchet, absently from behind. Then, "What do you see?"

"I see a woman standing in a field," said Marius.

"Right, then," Bob said, falling into a moment of consideration.

Marius straightened behind the camera. The two men looked on as Elizabeth, the sun silhouetting her frame through the muslin dress, walked among the wild hops and saffron thistle.

Neither of them spoke. The slow, mechanical sound of the hand-crank filled the air. Suddenly, Bob and Marius heard a noise from behind and they turned to see the miners—all eighty of them—standing in stifled awe up on the ridge. There was a long, awkward moment that passed between Bob and the men. The men took off their hats, a little guiltily—sinners now in church. Elizabeth moved oblivious through the desert bloom.

“Do you want me to stop?” Marius asked Bob.

“No,” said Bob. “Keep turning that crank and let ‘em watch. Call it a farewell present.”

Marius put his eye down to the camera and continued turning the handle. He looked out at the sea of red earth and the white-frosted woman caught in its vastness. Everything was stilled by the act of watching. The men stood motionless on the ridge, waiting to breathe. There was only the sound of the camera—the celluloid clicking along the gears, frame by frame, spooling the present into the past.