

# When Your Pants Begin to Go

Words by  
Henry Lawson 1892

Suitable for a 3-part choir, small ensemble or as a solo piece.

Music by  
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Henry Lawson's poem, *When Your Pants Begin to Go*, is a mixture of pathos and dark humour. It reflects Lawson's unhappy financial circumstances in that he was most certainly very well acquainted with poverty and despair.

In the Victorian age it was not polite for a gentleman to make reference to the garments that clothed the lower limbs, especially if there was a growing transparency indicating that one's trousers needed a patch. Lawson's poem describes this situation with a quiet but real anxiety conveyed within the poetic eloquence of the words.

The long phrases of this poem/song require good breathing techniques. Use the surprise breath i.e. a quick silent intake of air as if you have just meet a friend unexpectedly when you need a top-up breath. Stretch the vowel sounds and enunciate all consonants more clearly than in everyday speech. Try solo, duet, trio and quartet sectional singing to add tonal colour and contrasting sound textures.

Singers may like to wear items of old clothing to add visual impact and feel more keenly the quiet desperation Lawson's words convey.

This song can be *a capella* or accompanied. An accompanist is welcome to create a different intro and accompaniment.

At a story-telling tempo; not too fast

*f*

When you wear a cloud - y coll - ar and a  
You are none the less a her - o if you  
Though the pres - ent and the fu - ture may be  
Broth - er mine and of mis-for - tunetimes are

*f*

This system contains the first five measures of the song. It features a vocal line in 4/4 time and a piano accompaniment. The piano part begins with a series of chords in the right hand and a simple bass line in the left hand. The vocal line starts with a rest for four measures, then enters with a melody. The lyrics are aligned with the vocal line.

5

*mf*

shirt that is - n't white, And you can - not sleep for think - ing how you'll reach to-morr - ow night, You may  
el - e - vate your chin, When you feel the pave - ment wear - ing through the leath - er, sock and skin; You are  
an - y - thing but bright, It is best to tell the fell - ows that are get - ting on al - right. And a  
hard, but do not fret, Keep your cour - age up and strugg - le, and we'll laugh at these things yet. Though there

*mf*

This system contains measures 5 through 7. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady harmonic support. The vocal line has a more active melody. The lyrics continue across the three lines.

8

*mp*

be a man of sorr - ow and on speak - ing terms with Care, But as yet you're un - ac - quaint - ed with the  
rath - er more her - o - ic than are ord - in - ar - y folk, If you scorn to fish for pit - y un - der  
man pre - fers to say it, 'tis a man - ly lie to tell, For the folks may be per - sua - ded that you're  
is no corn in E - gypt, sure - ly Af - ri - ca has some, Keep your smile in work - ing or - der for the

*mp*

This system contains measures 8 through 10. The piano accompaniment features a more complex harmonic texture. The vocal line has a descending melodic line. The lyrics conclude the poem.

11 *rall.* *a tempo* *mf* *f*

Dem - on of Des - pair; For I'd rath - er think that noth - ing heaps the troub - le on your mind, Like the  
cov - er of a joke: You will face the doubt - ful glan - ces of the peop - le that you know; But of  
do - ing ver - y well; But it's hard to be a her - o, and it's hard to wear a grin, When your  
bet - ter days to come! We shall of - ten laugh to - geth - er at the hard times that we know, And get

14 *Slower, with much feeling* *mp*

know - ledge that your trous - ers bad - ly need a patch be - hind. I have  
course, you're bound to face them when your pants be - gin to go. If, when  
most im - por - tant gar - ment is in pla - ces ver - y thin. Get some  
meas - ured by the tai - lor when our pants be - gin to go. Now the

16

not - iced when mis - for - tune strikes the her - o of the play, That his  
flush, you took your pleas - ures, failed to make a god of Pelf, Some will  
sym - path - y and com - fort from the chum who knows you best, That your  
la - dy of re - fine - ment in the lap of com - forts rocked, Chanc - ing

*The word Pelf comes from the Anglo-French word pelfre meaning money, often stolen or gained by dishonest means. The similar English word pilfer means to steal*

18

clothes are worn and tatt - ered in a most un - like - ly way. And the  
say that for your troub - les you can on - ly thank your - self. Some will  
sor - rows won't run o - ver in the pre - sence of the rest; There's a  
on these rug - ged ver - ses will pre - tend that she is shocked. Leave her

gods ap - plaud and cheer him while he whines and loafs a - round. But they  
 swear you'll die a beg - gar, but you on - ly laugh at that. While your  
 chum that you can go to when you feel in - clined to whine. He'll de -  
 to her smell - ing bot - tle 'tis the wealth - y who de - cide. That the

*p*

nev - er seem to not - ice that his pants are most - ly sound; Yet of  
 gar - ments hang to - geth - er and you wear a de - cent hat; You may  
 clare your coat is ti - dy, and he'll say, "Just look at mine!" Though you  
 world should hide its patch - es 'neath the cru - el cloak of pride; And I

*sf*

course he could not help it, for our mirth would mock his care, If the  
 laugh at their pre - dic - tions while your soles are wear - ing through, But a  
 may be patched all o - ver he will say it does - n't show, And he'll  
 think there's some - thing no - ble, and I'll swear there's noth - ing low; In the

*pp* *mp*

*pp* *mp*

*last verse, pause on rest then accelerando to finish*

ceil - ing of his trou - sers showed the patch - es of re - pair.  
 man's an aw - ful co - ward when his pants are go - ing too!  
 swear it can't be no - ticed when your pants be - gin to go.  
 pride of Hum - an Nat - ure when its pants be - gin to go.

*ff*

## Biographical notes about Henry Lawson

Henry Lawson (1867-1922) was the son of Niels Hertzberg Larsen, a Norwegian miner, and Louisa Albury, a young Australian woman. Niels met Louisa on the NSW goldfields. She was the second of twelve children and had left home aged 13. Neils Larson married Louisa when she was 18 and he was 32.

Henry was the eldest child of the marriage, and it was soon after his birth that Larson was Anglicised to Lawson. He suffered a serious ear infection when he was 8 and was totally deaf at age 14, causing him to be much bullied at school.

Mr Kevan, a Master at Lawson's Mudgee school, introduced Henry to poetry and the classics, leading to his main avenue of education in his silent world.

At age 20 Henry underwent surgery to have his hearing restored, but the operation was unsuccessful.

At one time Henry was unofficially engaged to the poet and story writer Mary Gilmore, later Dame Mary Gilmore, but because of his frequent absences, the relationship faded. Mary Gilmore is pictured on both the 1993 and 2017 A\$10 banknotes. Henry Lawson is depicted on the 1966 A\$10 banknote, the first issue in decimal currency.

If you visit the Sydney Art Gallery or website, look for the Lawson portrait painted by artist John Longstaff in 1900. Bronze statue monuments, artworks and carvings of Henry Lawson are in pride of place in Sydney, Grenfell NSW and Canberra. His well-worn handmade pen is in the National Library.

Research 'postage stamps Henry Lawson' to see further tributes to this famous Australian.

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