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IN THE FAR NORTH

From "The Tapu Of Banderah and Other Stories"

By Louis Becke

C. Arthur Pearson Ltd.

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*"Out on the wastes of the Never Never—
That's where the dead men lie!
There where the heat-waves dance for ever—
That's where the dead men lie!"
(Barcroft Boake,
in the Sydney Bulletin.)*

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I

Jack Harrington, nominal owner of Tinandra Downs cattle station on the Gilbert River in the far north of North Queensland, was riding slowly over his run, when, as the fierce rays of a blazing sun, set in a sky of brass, smote upon his head and shoulders and his labouring stock-horse plodded wearily homewards over the spongy, sandy soil, the lines of Barcroft Boake came to his mind, and, after he had repeated them mentally, he cursed aloud.

"That's where the dead men lie! Poor Boake must have thought of this God-forsaken part of an utterly God-forsaken country, I think, when he wrote 'Out where the Dead Men Lie.' For I believe that God Almighty has forgotten it! Oh for rain, rain, rain! Rain to send the Gilbert down in a howling yellow flood, and turn this blarsted spinifex waste of scorching sand and desolation into green grass—and save me and the youngsters from giving it best, and going under altogether.... Boake knew this cursed country well.... I wonder if he ever 'owned' a station—one with a raging drought, a thundering mortgage, and a worrying and greedy bank sooling him on to commit suicide, or else provide rain as side issues.... I don't suppose he had a wife and children to leave to the mercy of the Australian Pastoralists' Bank. D—n and curse the Australian Pastoralists' Bank, and the drought, and this scorching sand and hateful spinifex—and God help the poor cattle!"

He drew rein almost under the shade of a clump of stunted sandalwood, which had, in good seasons, been a favourite mustering camp, and looked about him, and then he passed his hand over his eyes to shut out for a few moments the melancholy spectacle before him.

I have said that he pulled up "almost" under shelter; further he could not advance, for the hard, parched ground immediately under the shade of the sandalwoods was thickly covered by the stiffened sun-dried carcasses of some hundreds of dead cattle, which, having become too weak to leave the sheltering trees in search of food and water had lain down and died. Beyond, scattered singly and about in twos and threes, were the remains of scores of other wretched beasts, which, unable to drag themselves either to the sandy river-bed or to the scanty shade of the stunted timber, had perished where they fell.

With a heavy sigh Harrington dismounted, took off his water-bag from the saddle, and pouring a little water into his hat, gave his horse a drink. Then he drank a few mouthfuls himself, filled and lit his pipe, and sat down, to rest awhile until the sun had lost its fierce intensity—and think.

And he thought despairingly of the black prospect which for the past six or seven months had tormented him by day, and haunted him at night, broken now and then with a gleam of hope when the pitiless blue of the sky changed to grey, and rain seemed near, only to be followed by renewed and bitter disappointment.

"It cannot last much longer," he thought; "even if rain came within a week the rest of the poor brutes left alive will be too weak to recover—and there's not hands enough on the station to cut leaves for them. Even the blacks have cleared out lower down the river... found a good water-hole I daresay, and, like wise niggers, are camping there. Why doesn't Providence give a poor honest bullock as much show for his life in a drought as a damned, filthy blackfellow! Instead of hoofs—in this part of the country at any rate—cattle ought to have feet like a bandicoot, then the poor beasts could worry along by digging waterholes in the river bed."

Then, sick at heart as he was, a faint smile flitted over his sun-bronzed face at the fancy.

An hour passed, and Harrington, with another weary sigh, rose and saddled his horse—one of the few now remaining to him and able to carry a rider. Five miles away from the sandalwood camp was another and larger patch of timber—tall, slender brigalows, which grew on the edge of a dried-up swamp, once the haunt and breeding place of countless thousands of wild duck, teal, and geese. This was another of the mustering camps on Tinandra, and as it lay on his way home, he decided to go there and see if any of the "Big Swamp" cattle were still alive. As he rode slowly over towards the fringe of timber, the westering sun turned from a dazzling, blinding gold to a gradually deepening red; and his sweating horse gave a snort of satisfaction as the soft, spongy, and sandy spinifex country was left behind, and the creature's hoofs struck upon the hard sun-baked plain of yellow earth which lay between the two camps. Looking down at the great, widely spreading cracks in the hungry soil, the result of a seven-months' continuous drought, Harrington almost unconsciously bent his head and thought that surely God would send rain. He was not a religious man in the conventional sense—he had never been inside a church in his life—but the memory of his dead mother's belief in God's mercy and goodness was still strong within him.

The brigalow scrub was about half a mile in length, and stood between the swamp and the high river bank. At the dried-up bed of the swamp itself he did not care to look a second time; its once reedy margin was now a sight of horror, for many hundreds of cattle had been bogged there long months before, as they had striven to get further out to the centre where there was yet left a little water, saved from evaporation by the broad leaves of the blue water-lilies.

Skirting the inner edge of the scrub till he reached its centre, he looked carefully among the timber, but not a beast was to be seen; then dismounting he led his horse through, came out upon the river bank, and looked across the wide expanse of almost burning sand which stretched from bank to bank, unbroken in its desolation except by a few ti-trees whose roots, deep down, kept them alive.

"Bob, old fellow," he said to his horse, "we've another ten miles to go, and there's no use in killing ourselves. I think that we can put in half an hour digging sand, and manage to raise a drink down there in the river bed."

Still leading the animal, which seemed to know his master's intention, Harrington walked down the sloping bank, his long riding-boots sinking deeply into the fine, sandy soil, and Bob pricked up his ears and gave a true stock-horse sigh of weariness and anticipation combined.

On the opposite side of the river bed and close under the bank were growing two or three heavy ti-trees,

and here, just as the sun had set, he halted, again unsaddled, and after lighting a fire, began to scoop out a hole with his quart pot in between the roots of the trees. For some minutes he worked on with energy, then he stopped and listened, and Bob, too, turned his head inquiringly, for he also had heard the sound—it was only the cry of a beast, but it seemed so near that Harrington ceased his digging and stood up to look.

Not a hundred yards distant he saw, by the light of the now brightly blazing fire, four gaunt steers and a skeleton heifer, staggering and swaying over the river sand towards him in their weakness and agony of hunger and thirst. The poor creatures had seen the man and the horse! As they toiled towards the light of the fire, a dreadful, wheezing moan came from the parched throat of the leading steer as it laboured pantingly over to something human—something it associated with water, and grass, and life, and presently the wretched animal, with one last effort, fell in its tracks almost at Harrington's feet. It lay there quiet enough for a minute or two, with lean, outstretched neck and one horn buried in the sand, its fast glazing eye turned to the man, and seeming to say, "Give me water or death."

Harrington, wrought up and excited to the last pitch, flung himself upon his knees, and placed his cheek against that of the dying steer, and a sob burst from his bosom.

"O God, if there is a God! have mercy upon these Thy dumb creatures who suffer such agony."

He stepped up to his horse, took his revolver out of the pouch, and then a merciful bullet ended the sufferings of the thirst-stricken animal at his feet.

"Steady, Bob, old man! Steady there!" he said brokenly, "I may have to do the same to you before long." And then, tearing off a long piece of dried ti-tree bark from one of the trees, he thrust it into the fire. Then, with the blazing torch in his left hand, and his pistol in his right, he tramped over the sand to the remaining cattle, and shot them dead one by one.

Then back to his digging again. A drink of thick, muddy water for his horse, and then with a dull sense of misery in his heart he led Bob up the bank and began the last stage of his ride home—home to his anaemic, complaining, shallow-brained wife and the weakly children who, instead of being the consolation of his life in his misfortunes, were an added and ever-present source of misery and despair.

II

A few years before, Harrington had bought Tinandra Downs, and had stocked the run with three thousand head of store cattle; for half of which number he had paid, the remainder he had bought on long terms from a neighbouring squatter—a man who knew his sterling merits, and was confident that he (Harrington) would make Tinandra one of the best cattle stations in the far north. Fortune had smiled upon him from the first; for within two years came the discovery of the famous Palmer River goldfields, only a few hundred miles distant, and cattle and station properties doubled in value, for in less than half a year there were six thousand diggers on the field, and more came pouring in from the southern colonies by every steamer to Cooktown. New townships sprang suddenly into existence, provisions of all kinds brought an enormous price, and Harrington cleared off his debt to his squatter friend almost ere he could realise having done so, and that he had several thousands of pounds to the good as well. And his good luck stuck to him, for it was attended by careful management, and every mob of fat cattle he despatched to the goldfield instead of sending them on a three-hundred league journey to Brisbane, meant another couple of thousand sovereigns.

Then he began to improve the head station—and to think of Myra, a girl whom he had once met in Sydney, and who sent him newspapers, and, once or twice, at long intervals, had written him letters. He had answered these letters with a secret hope that, if all went well with him, he would take another trip to Sydney, and then—well, he could at least ask her. If she said no, why, who was there to chaff him? He was not a communicative man, had very few intimate men friends, and the few women whom he knew were not the sort he could possibly talk to about a lady. Both his parents had died before he was ten years of age, leaving him utterly alone in the world. Born in a bush town, in the interior of New South Wales, he had turned to the bush and to the wide, open, grassy plains, as an infant would have turned to its mother in its distress; and the bush and the plains and the grey mountain ranges had taken him to their bosoms; and the silent, reserved boy became the resolute, hardy bushman, stock-rider, and then miner—a man fit and ready to meet the emergencies of his rough life. Of the outside world he was as ignorant as a child, as indeed were most of the men with whom for many years he had associated. But there was nothing despicable in his ignorance; and when as time went on, and his improved circumstances threw him in contact with men and women of refinement and culture, he was quick to take advantage of such opportunities; but the honest, simple nature of the man always remained the same.

Before he was thirty, Harrington was known as one of the most experienced and fortunate over-lander drovers in Australia, and he became as familiar with the long and lonely stock-route from the stations on the Gulf of Carpentaria to Sydney and Melbourne, in his many journeys, as if it were a main road in an English county.

At the conclusion of one of these tedious drives of seven months' duration, the brown-faced, quiet drover was asked by an acquaintance with whom he had business transactions, to spend the evening with him at his house. He went, and there met Myra Lyndon. He was attracted by her bright manner and smiling face, and when she questioned him about his life in the Far North, his adventures among the blacks, and the many perils of a drover's existence, he thought her the fairest and sweetest woman in the world. And Miss Myra Lyndon encouraged him in his admiration. Not that she cared for him in the least. She had not reached eight-and-twenty years of age to throw herself away on a man who had no other ambition than to become a squatter and live amongst a lot of "horrid bellowing cattle." But he was nice to talk to, though terribly stupid about some things, and so she did not mind writing to him once or twice—it would reward him for the horse

he had one day sent to her father with a lamely worded note, saying that it was one of a mob he had just bought at the saleyards, and as he had no use for a lady's hack, he thought that perhaps Miss Lyndon would be so kind as to accept it. Mr. Lyndon smiled as he read the note, he knew that drovers did not usually buy ladies' hacks; but being a man harassed to death with an expensive family, he was not disposed to discourage Harrington's attentions to Myra; though, having a conscience, he felt that Jack Harrington was too good a man for such a useless, empty-brained, and selfish creature as his eldest daughter.

So Harrington went back to his "bellowing bullocks," and then, having saved enough money, bought the very run he had so often wished he could buy; and "Jack" Harrington, the overlander, became "Mr." John Harrington, the pastoralist and owner of Tinandra Downs, and then the vision of Myra Lyndon's face came to him very often—now that he was so prosperous.

One day he told his overseer that he was going to Sydney for a trip, and being a man of action, packed his valise, mounted his horse, and rode off on his journey of five hundred miles to the nearest seaport where he could take passage for Sydney.

For the first week or so after his arrival in the city, he "mooned" about doing nothing, and trying to pluck up courage enough to go to Myra Lyndon to ask her to be his wife. He had called several times upon her father and discussed business matters with him; but beyond inquiring after "Mrs. Lyndon and the Misses Lyndon," had said nothing further, and in a nervous, shamefaced manner had each time accepted Mr. Lyndon's invitation to "come and see the girls before he went back to the North," but had not had the courage to go. Next week, or the week after that, would do, he thought. If she said "No," he wouldn't feel it so much—once he was on his way North again in the old *Florence Irving*; he would put it off till just as he was ready to start. Then if she said "Yes," he would stay in Sydney as long as his love wished—a month—aye, six months, so long as she came back with him to Tinandra Downs. And Myra Lyndon, who knew from her father that her "bullock-driver admirer," as she had mockingly called him to her friends, was in Sydney, waited for him impatiently. A systematic course of jilting and being jilted had made her feel anxious as to her future, and gall and wormwood had come to her now that her two younger sisters had married before her, and left her, as her somewhat acidulous-tongued mother said, "the Lyndon family wallflower." She meant to marry him, spend a year or so among the "beastly bellowing cattle," and then return to Sydney, where as Mrs. Harrington, the wealthy squatter's wife, she could enjoy herself thoroughly, snub some of the women she hated, and flirt with some of the men she liked.

Late one night, Harrington, sauntering from the theatre to his hotel, met, to his intense astonishment, a man he knew—had known years before when he (Harrington) was a drover and the other man—Walters—was a mounted trooper in the Queensland police.

They shook hands warmly, and then Walters said, "Come along with me, Jack, to the Water Police Station; we can have a yarn there.... Oh, yes, I'm a Sydney man now—a full-fledged inspector of police... tell you all about it by and by. But, push along, old man. One of my men has just told me that a woman who jumped off the Circular Quay and tried to drown herself, is lying at the station, and is not expected to pull through. Hallo! here's a cab! Jump in, Jack; there's some whisky in the sergeant's room, and after I've seen the cadaver—if she has cadavered—we'll have a right down good yarn."

The cab rattled through the now almost deserted street, and in a few minutes Harrington and his friend alighted at a small stone building overlooking the waters of Sydney Harbour. A water-policeman, who stood at the door under the big gas-lamp, saluted the inspector and then showed Harrington into the sergeant's room.

Ten minutes passed, and then Walters, accompanied by a big, stout, red-faced man, came in.

"Ha, here you are, old man. Jack, Dr. Parsons—the man who does the resuscitating and such silly business of this institution; Parsons, my old friend, Jack Harrington. Sergeant, where is that whisky?"

"Is the woman dead, doctor?" asked Harrington presently, as the sergeant's wife brought in a bottle of whisky and some glasses.

"No," replied the police doctor slowly, as he poured some whisky into his glass, "she is not dead; but she may not live much longer—a day or so perhaps. It all depends. Shock to the system."

"One of the usual sort, Parsons, I suppose?" inquired Walters—"left the baby on the wharf, with a written request for some 'kind Christian to love it,' eh?"

The fat doctor grunted. "You're a beast, Walters. There's no baby in the case. Here, give me ten shillings—you'll spend more than that in drinks before you go to bed to-night. This girl *isn't* one of the usual sort. She's a lady—and she's been starving. So ante-up, you ex-nigger-shooting Queensland policeman; and I'll add another half-sov. Then perhaps your friend will give me something for her. And I'm not going to send her off to the hospital. I'm going to take her to some people I know, and ask them to keep her for a few days until she gets round."

Harrington put his hand in his pocket, and then in a nervous, diffident way, looking first at Walters and then at the doctor, put five sovereigns on the table.

"I'm pretty flush now, you know.... I'm not a plunger, but I shall be glad, doctor, if you will take that and give it to her.... I was almost starving myself once—*you* know, Walters, when I got the sack from the 'Morning Star' Mine for plugging the English manager when he called me a 'damned colonial lout.'"

The fat-faced doctor looked steadily at him for a moment or two. Then he reached out his hand.

"You're a good fellow, Mr. Harrington. I'll take a sovereign or two. Come in here with me."

Harrington followed him into an adjoining room, where, upon a wicker-work couch was reclining the figure of a young girl. Standing beside her was the police-sergeant's wife, who, as soon as the two men came in, quietly drew aside.

"Now, here I am back again, my dear child," said the doctor good-humouredly, "and here is a very old friend of mine, Mr. Jack Harrington; and we have come to cheer you up and tell you that you have two or three good friends. And we won't let any women or parsons come to you and worry you, and tell you that you have been a wicked girl, and ought to have thrown yourself upon God's mercy and all that sort of thing. So just drink that coffee, and then by and by we will take you to some people I know well, and you shall come and tell us in a day or two how sorry you are for being so foolish."

The girl's dark hazel eyes looked steadily at them both; then she put out a thin white hand.

"You are very kind to me. I know it was very wicked to try and kill myself, but I was so lonely, and... and I had not eaten anything since Wednesday... and I wanted to die." Then she covered her face and sobbed softly, whilst the doctor patted her on the shoulder and said—

"Don't worry, little girl; you are in good hands now. Never mind Mrs. Thornton and her un-kindness. You are better away from her—isn't she, Mr. Harrington?"

Mr. Harrington, knowing nothing about Mrs. Thornton, promptly said "Oh, most certainly," and the girl's eyes met his for a second, and a faint smile flushed upon her pale lips. The tall, bearded, and brown-faced man's face seemed so full of pity.

"Now you must go to sleep for an hour or two," said the doctor imperatively; "so now then, little girl, 'seepy-by, beddy-bo.' That's what *my* mother used to say to me."

Harrington followed the doctor out into the sergeant's room, where Inspector Walters, with his heels upon the table, was falling asleep.

"Sit down a moment, Mr. Harrington," said Dr. Parsons, taking up a book which the sergeant had left upon the table; "this is a sad case. Here is a girl, Nellie Alleyne, age 19, nursery governess to Mrs. Lavery-Thornton, of Waverly, jumped into the water off the Quay; rescued by Water-police Constables Casey and Boyce."

Harrington nodded.

"This girl has told me her story. She is alone and friendless in Sydney. She came out to Australia when she was seventeen, got a billet with this Mrs. Lavery-Thornton—who seems to be a perfect brute of a woman—suffered a two years' martyrdom, and then was dismissed from her situation with the large sum of twenty-two shillings in her pocket. Tried to get another such position, but people wouldn't take her without a recommendation from her last place. The Thornton woman wouldn't give her one; said she was too independent. High-spirited girl with twenty-two shillings between her and starvation, wanders about from one registry office to another for a couple of weeks, living in a room in a Miller's Point slum; money all gone; pestered by brutes in the usual way, jumps into the water to end her miseries. Rough, isn't it?"

Harrington nodded. "Poor thing! I should like you, Dr. Parsons, to—to let her know that she *has* friends. Will you let me help. Fifty pounds or a hundred pounds won't hurt me... and I've been stone-broke myself. But a man can always peg along in the bush; and it's an awful thing for a child like that to be adrift in a big city."

The kind-hearted police doctor looked steadily into Harrington's face for a moment, then he said quietly—

"An awful thing indeed. But there are some good men in the world, Mr. Harrington, who are able and willing to save pure souls from destruction. You are one of them. Tom Walters and myself are both hard-up devils—we see a lot of misery, but can do nothing to alleviate it; a few shillings is all we can give."

Harrington rose, and his sun-tanned face flushed as he drew out his cheque-book. "I never try to shove myself in, in such matters as these, doctor, but I should feel pleased if you will let me help."

Then he wrote out a cheque for fifty pounds, pushed it over to the doctor, said he thought it was getting late, and that he had better get back to his hotel.

Dr. Parsons gave the sleeping inspector a shake, and in a few words told him what Harrington had done.

"You're a dashed fool, old man," said Walters sleepily to Harrington; "most likely she'll blue your fifty quid, and then blackmail—"

The doctor's hand descended upon the inspector's shoulder. "Shut up, you beastly old wretch—do you think *all* women are alike. Come, now, let us have another nip and get away. Mr. Harrington is tired. Sergeant!"

The sergeant came to the door.

"Thompson, take good care of that young *lady*. We happen to know her. If she awakes before eight o'clock in the morning, tell her that she is to stay with your wife till I come to see her at nine o'clock. Any effects, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," and the sergeant took out his note-book, "seven pawn tickets, five pennies, and a New Testament with 'Nellie Alleyne' written inside."

"Here, give me those tickets, I'll take care of them; and Thompson, if the newspaper fellows come here to-night, say that the young lady fell over the wharf accidentally, and has gone home to her friends. See?"

"I see, sir," said Thompson, as the good-hearted doctor slipped half a sovereign into his hand.

Then the three men stepped out into the street and strolled up to the Royal Hotel, and sat down in the smoking-room, which was filled with a noisy crowd, some of whom soon saw Walters and called him away, leaving the doctor and Harrington by themselves.

"Better take this back, Mr. Harrington," and Dr. Parsons handed him his cheque. "Two or three pounds will be quite enough for the poor girl."

"Not I," said Harrington with a smile, "fifty pounds won't ruin me, as I said—and it may mean a lot to her, poor child. And I feel glad that I can help some one... some one who is all right, you know. Now I must be off. Good night, doctor."

Parsons looked at the tall manly figure as he pushed his way through the noisy crowd in the smoking-room,

and then at the cheque in his hand. "Well, there's a good fellow. Single man, I'll bet; else he wouldn't be so good to a poor little devil of a stranded girl. Didn't even ask her name. May the Lord send him a good wife."

The Lord did not send Harrington a good wife; for the very next day he called upon Mrs. Lyndon, and Mrs. Lyndon took good care that he should be left alone with Myra; and Myra smiled so sweetly at him, when with outstretched hands she came into the drawing-room, that he fatuously believed she loved him. And she of course, when he asked her to be his wife, hid her face on his shoulder, and said she could not understand why he could love *her*. Why, she was quite an old maid! Amy and Gwen were ever so much prettier than she, and she was sure that both Gwen and Amy, even though they were now both married, would feel jealous when they knew that big, handsome Jack Harrington had asked her to be his wife; and so on and so forth, as only the skilled woman of thirty, whose hopes of marriage are slipping by, knows how to talk and lie to an "eligible" man unused to women's ways. And Harrington kissed Myra's somewhat thin lips, and said—and believed—that he was the happiest man in Australia. Then Mrs. Lyndon came in, and, in the manner of mothers who are bursting with joy at getting rid of a daughter whose matrimonial prospects are looking gloomy, metaphorically fell upon Harrington's neck and wept down his back, and said he was robbing her of her dearest treasure, &c., &c. Harrington, knowing nothing of conventional women's ways, believed her, and married, for him, the most unsuitable woman in the world.

A week or so after his marriage he received a letter from Dr. Parsons enclosing the cheque he had given him for Nellie Alleyne:—

"Dear Harrington,—Girl won't take the cheque. Has a billet—cashier in a restaurant. Says she is writing to you. She's true gold. You ought to marry her and take her away with you to your outlandish parts. Would ask her to marry me—if I could keep her; but she wouldn't have me whilst you are about. Always glad to see you at my diggings; whisky and soda and such, and a hearty welcome."

And by the same post came a letter from the girl herself—a letter that, simply worded as it was, sent an honest glow through his heart:—

*"Dear Mr. Harrington,—I shall never, never forget your kindness to me; as long as I live I shall never forget Dr. Parsons tells me that you live in Queensland—more than a thousand miles from Sydney, and that you are going away soon. Please will you let me call on you before you go away? I shall be so unhappy if I do not see you again, because in a letter I cannot tell you how I thank you, how deeply grateful I am to you for your goodness and generosity to me.
Yours very sincerely,*

"Helen Alleyne."

Harrington showed the letter to Myra, who bubbled over with pretty expressions of sympathy and wrote and asked her to call. Nellie did call, and the result of her visit was that when Harrington took his newly married wife to Tinandra Downs, she went with her as companion. And from the day that she entered the door of his house, Helen Alleyne had proved herself to be, as Dr. Parsons had said, "true gold." As the first bright years of prosperity vanished, and the drought and financial worries all but crushed Harrington under the weight of his misfortunes, and his complaining, irritable wife rendered his existence at home almost unbearable, her brave spirit kept his from sinking under the incessant strain of his anxieties. Mrs. Harrington, after her third child was born, had given up even the semblance of attending to the children, and left them to Nellie and the servants. She was doing quite enough, she once told her husband bitterly, in staying with him at such a horrible place in such a horrible country. But she nevertheless always went away to the sea-coast during the hottest months, and succeeded in having a considerable amount of enjoyment, leaving the children and Jack and Miss Alleyne to swelter through the summer at Tinandra Downs as best they could.

IV

It was nearly midnight as Harrington took down the slip-rails and led his horse through the paddock up to the house, which, except for a dimly burning lamp in the dining-room, was in darkness. The atmosphere was close and sultry, and the perspiration ran down his skin in streams as he gave his horse to the head-stockman, who was sitting on the verandah awaiting him.

"Terrible night, sir, but I'm thinking if it keeps on like this for another hour or two we'll get a big thunderstorm. 'Sugar-bag'" (one of the black boys) "was here just now and says that the ant-heaps about are covered with ants—that's a sure sign, sir."

"God send it so, Banks! If no rain comes within two days, you'll have to start away for Cleveland Bay with Mrs. Harrington and Miss Alleyne and the children. We must find horses somehow to take them there."

Before Banks led the horse away for a drink, he stopped.

"Miss Alleyne went to Canton Reef, sir, this morning with little Sandy. She ought to have been here before dark, but I expect the horses knocked up. There's a couple of cows with young calves there, so Sandy says, and Miss Alleyne said she would try and bring them in if I would let her take Sandy. We've had no milk, sir, for the children since Tuesday, and Miss Alleyne said that you would be vexed. I would have gone myself, sir, but I couldn't well leave, and I know Miss Alleyne will manage—it's only fifteen miles, and Sandy says that the two cows and calves are pretty fat and can travel; there's a bit of feed at those waterholes about the Canton. Most likely she and the little black boy have yarded the cows at the Seven-mile Hut and are camping there for the night. But I'll start off now, sir. I've got Peter the Pig already saddled."

"Yes, yes, Banks, certainly. Why didn't you start long ago?"

"Mrs. Harrington said I must wait for you, sir," the man answered somewhat sullenly.

Harrington nodded. "Hurry up, Banks; but here, take a glass of grog first."

He watched the stockman disappear down the dusty track to the slip-rails, then he went inside, and sitting down at the table buried his face in his hands. Then, booted and dusty, and tired in mind and body, he slept.

An hour had passed, and no sound disturbed the hot oppressive silence of the night but the heavy breathing of the wearied man. Then through his dreamless slumber came the murmur of voices, and presently three figures walked quickly up from the milking-yard towards the house.

"He's asleep, miss," whispered Banks, "he's dog tired But the news you have got for him will put fresh life into him. Now just you go to him, miss, and tell him, and then as soon as I have given them cows a drink, I'll bring you in some tea. Sandy, you little black devil, light a fire in the kitchen and don't make a noise, or I'll tan your hide, honest."

For a minute or so the girl stood in the doorway of the dining-room, holding a heavy saddle-pouch, in her hand, her frame trembling with emotion and physical exhaustion; and trying to speak. As soon as she could speak, she walked over to the sleeping man and touched him on the shoulder He awoke with a start just as she sank on her knees, and leaning her elbows on a chair beside him, burst into a fit of hysterical weeping. He waited for her to recover herself.

"Oh, I am so glad, so glad, Mr. Harrington! Now you need not give up Tinandra... and the drought doesn't matter... and oh, I thank God for His goodness that He has let me help you at last!" She broke off with a choking sob, and then, with streaming eyes, placed her hand in his.

Harrington lifted her up and placed her on a couch. "Lie there, Miss Alleyne. I will call Mrs. Harrington —"

She put out her hand beseechingly. "Please *don't*, Mr. Harrington. She is not at all strong, and I think I made her very angry this morning by going away to look for the milkers... But look, Mr. Harrington, look inside the saddle pouch." Then she sat up, and her eyes burnt with feverish expectation, "Quick, quick, please," and then she began to laugh wildly, but clenching her hands tightly together she overcame her hysteria, and attempted to speak calmly.

"I shall be better in a minute... empty it out on the table, please... Banks says it is another outcrop of the old Canton Reef."

Harrington picked up the saddle-pouch, and putting it on the table, turned up the lamp, and unfastened the straps; it was filled with pieces of rough weather-worn quartz thickly impregnated with gold. The largest piece contained more gold than quartz, and an involuntary cry of astonishment and admiration burst from his lips as he held it to the light.

Nellie's eyes sparkled with joy. "Isn't it lovely! I can't talk, my lips are so dry."

Harrington dashed outside to the verandah filled a glass from the canvas water-bag hanging from a beam overhead, and gave it to the exhausted girl.

"Now don't you attempt to speak for five minutes."

"No, I won't," she said, with a faint smile, as she drank off the cold water—and then at once began to tell him of her discovery.

"Sandy and I found the two cows and calves a mile this side of the Canton Reef in a gully, but before we could head them off they had got away into the ironbark ridges. Sandy told me to wait, and galloped after them. I followed him to the top of the first ridge, and then pulled up, and there, right under my horse's feet I saw a small 'blow' of quartz sticking up out of the baked ground, and I saw the gold in it quite plainly. Of course I was wildly excited, and jumped off. The stone was quite loose and crumbly, and I actually pulled some pieces away with my hands, and when I saw the thick yellow gold running all through it I sat down and cried. Then I became so frightened that Sandy might not find me again, for it would be dark in another hour, and so I ran up and down along the ridge, listening for the sound of his stockwhip. And then I went back towards the outcrop of the reef again, and half-way down I picked up that big lump—it was half buried in the ground... And oh, Mr. Harrington, all that ridge is covered with it... I could have brought away as much again, but Sandy had no saddle-pouch... and I was dying to come home and tell you."

She breathed pantingly for a few minutes.

"It was nearly dark when Sandy came back. He had run the cattle on to a camp about three miles away... I don't know which pleased me most, to get the cows so that poor Mable and Harry can have some milk in the morning, or the gold... Banks met us half-way from the Seven-mile Hut, and took me off my horse and put me in front of him."

Banks came to the door, carrying a tray with a cup of tea and some food. "Here ye are, Miss Alleyne; ye're a born stockman, an' a prospector, an'—God bless you, miss, *you've brought the rain as well.*"

For as the rough, hairy-faced stockman began to speak, a low rumbling sound of thunder smote the silence of the night, followed by a loud appalling clap, and then another, and another, and presently a cooling blast of wind came through the open door, and stirred and shook the Venetian blinds hanging outside. Banks almost dropped the tea-tray, and then darting outside, dashed his cabbage-tree hat on the ground, and began to dance as the first heavy drops of the coming deluge fell upon his head.

In less than ten minutes, Harrington, with silent joy in his heart, was standing at the doorway, watching the descending torrents of rain—that rain which to his bushman's heart meant more than all the gold which lay beneath the earth. He had, as it first began to fall, rushed into his wife's bedroom, and kissed her and the terrified children.

"The rain has come, Myra, thank God," he said, and then he added quietly, "I have more good news for you in the morning."

Mrs. Harrington said she was quite aware of the rain having come—the disgusting noise of the thunder had made the children scream. Had Miss Alleyne come back? And brought the cows? His other good news could

keep till the morning.

Harrington turned away from her with a feeling of dulled resentment. *He* knew what the girl had suffered, and his wife's heartlessness cut him to the quick.

As he stood watching Banks and the black boys filling every available tank and cask on the station from the downpour off the roof, Nellie rose from the couch on which she had been lying, and touched his arm timidly.

"Don't you believe in God's goodness *now*, Mr. Harrington? See, He has sent the rain, and He has granted my daily prayer to Him that I, too, might help you. And Banks says that this is not a passing thunderstorm, but that the drought has broken up altogether—for see, the wind is from the south."

Harrington raised her hand to his lips. "I have always tried to believe in God and in His mercy, Miss Alleyne."

"Not always, Mr. Harrington," she said softly. "Don't you remember when all the Big Swamp! mob were bogged and dying, that you said that if He would not hear the moans and see the agonies of the beasts He had created, that He would not listen to the prayers of human beings who were not suffering as they suffered? And to-day, as Sandy and I rode along to the Canton Reef, I prayed again and again, and always when I passed a dying beast I said, '*O God! have mercy upon these Thy dumb creatures who suffer much agony!*'"

Harrington's chest heaved. "And I prayed as you prayed, Miss Alleyne; but I said, 'O God! if there is a God.'"

She put out her hand to him and her dark eyes filled with tears. "He has answered our prayers.... And now, good night... I wish I could go out into the rain; I feel I could dance for joy.... Mr. Harrington, *do* let me go to the Canton Reef with you to-morrow. Everything will be all right to-morrow, won't it? But there, how thoughtless I am.... I am going to milk those two cunning cows till they are dry; poor little Harry does so want some fresh milk. Good night, Mr. Harrington; I shall sleep happily to-night—everything will be all right to-morrow."

At breakfast-time next morning the rain was still falling steadily, and Mrs. Harrington decided to join her husband at the morning meal.

Harrington rode up to the door and smiled brightly at his wife. "Waiting for me, dear? I won't be long. The river is running now, Myra—running after two years! I'm off to Miss Alleyne's reef as soon as I've had a bit of tucker. Where is she?"

"In bed, I presume," said Mrs. Harrington acidulously. "She might have remembered that I was very much upset last night by that horrible thunder, and have risen earlier and attended to the children."

A look of intense disgust came over her husband's face.

"Myra, the girl was done-up, dead beat! Won't you go and see if she is able to get up?"

Mrs. Harrington rose stiffly. "Oh, certainly, if you wish it. But I think it is a great mistake. She really ought to have considered the children, and——"

The head stockman's wife met her at the door, and looking past her mistress, spoke to Harrington in terrified tones——

"Miss Alleyne is dead, sir!"

Harrington sprang from his chair. "Dead, Mrs. Banks!"

"Yes, sir. I was only just in time. She on'y sez, 'Tell Mr. Harrington that I am so glad that everythink will be all right now.' An' then she smiled, sir, and sez as I was to kiss Master Harry and Miss Mabel for her, as she was agoin'. And then she sez, 'Isn't God good to send the rain, Mrs. Banks? Everything will be all right now for poor Mr. Harrington—rain and gold.' Then she just laid quiet for a minute, an' when I looked at her face again, I saw she was dead."

A year later, Jack Harrington, again one of the wealthiest cattle men in North Queensland, and the owner of one of the richest gold mines in the colony, was riding home to his station. Behind him he heard the clatter and clash of the twenty-stamper battery that on the "Canton Ridge" was pounding him in so many thousands of pounds a month; before him lay the sweeping grassy downs and thickly timbered creeks of a now smiling country. His wife and children had long before returned to the cooler South, and in his heart was a great loneliness. Not, perhaps, for them, but because of the memory of the girl whose prayer to the Almighty had been answered, and who was resting on the bank of the Gilbert under the shade of a big Leichhardt tree.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE FAR NORTH ***

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