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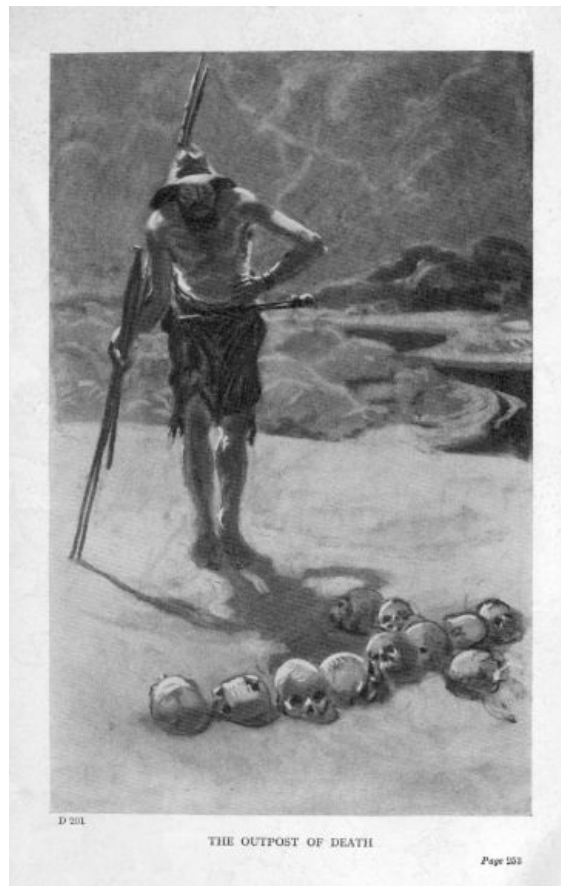
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**THE OUTPOST OF DEATH** *Page 253*

## IN THE MUSGRAVE RANGES

BY

**JIM BUSHMAN**

Author of "The Golden Valley" &c.

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[Transcriber's Note: "Jim Bushman" is a pseudonym of Conrad H. Sayce.]

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# IN THE MUSGRAVE RANGES

## CHAPTER I

### A Tornado

Towards the end of a long hot day, a shabby mixed train stopped at one of the most wonderful townships in the world, Hergott Springs, the first of the great cattle-trucking depots of Central Australia. It was dark, but a hurricane lantern, swung under a veranda, showed that the men who were waiting for the train were not ordinary men. They were men of the desert. Most of them were tall, thin, weather-beaten Australians, in shirt sleeves and strong trousers worn smooth inside the leg with much riding. A few Afghans were there too, big, dignified, and silent, with white turbans above their black faces; while a little distance away was a crowd of aboriginal men and women, yabbering excitedly and laughing together because the fortnightly train had at last come in. The same crowd would watch it start out in the morning on the last stage of its long journey to Oodnadatta, the railway terminus and the metropolis of Central Australia.

There were very few passengers on the train, and all of them seemed known to everybody and were greeted with hearty handshakes and loud rough words of welcome back to the North. Two passengers, however, did not get out of the carriage for a time, being unwilling to face that crowd of absolute strangers. They were Saxon Stobart and Rodger Vaughan, boys of about fifteen, who were on their way to Oodnadatta. It was their first sight of the back country.

Presently a big man with only one eye climbed back into the carriage where they were sitting. "Here, don't you lads want a feed?" he asked. "You won't get it here, you know."

"We don't know where to go," said one of them. "We thought we'd wait a bit."

"Don't you do too much waiting in this part of the country," said the man kindly. "You just hop in and get your cut. See? You'll get left if you don't. Now, get hold of your things and come along. I'll fix you up."

The result of the stranger's kindness was that the two boys shared a room with him at the only hotel in the place, and had a hearty meal in a room full of men in shirt sleeves, who shouted to one another and laughed in the most friendly manner.

After tea the two friends went out into the sandy street to stretch their legs after the long day's railway ride, before going to bed. It was so dark that they couldn't see anything at first, and nearly ran into a knot of men who were standing and smoking. They recognized the voice of one of them as that of the man who had taken them over to the hotel. They knew him only as Peter, a name which his companions called him.

"I never saw it look so bad," he was saying. "Just look at the moon, too."

"How far away d'you reckon it is?" asked another man. "It's a long way yet, I reckon. You can't hear any thunder. I wonder if it's coming this way."

Vaughan nudged his companion. "What are they talking about, Sax?" he asked.

Stobart pointed north into the darkness. Overhead, and nearly to the horizon, the sky was a mass of stars, but just on the northern horizon was a patch where no stars were to be seen. As their eyes became accustomed to the night, they saw that this patch looked as if it was alive with flashing, coiling, darting red things. It was like a mass of snakes squirming in agony, and now and again a clear white jet of light came out of the darkness, as if one of them was spitting venom at the sky. In reality, the boys were looking at one of those terrible electric storms which tear across Central Australia after a severe drought, and the lurid colours were caused by lightning flashing inside a very thick cloud.

But no interest was strong enough to overcome the healthy weariness of the boys, and they

went to bed soon afterwards and fell asleep almost at once.

Saxon Stobart was the son of a famous drover who took huge mobs of cattle across the centre of the continent, and who was noted for his pluck and endurance, and for his skill as a bushman, which enabled him to travel through parts of the country where very few white men have ever been. His son had many of the qualities of mind and body which had made his father such a fine man. He was tall and thin, but was as active as a cat and stronger than most boys of his size and age. His friend Vaughan was a different-looking boy altogether. He was short and thick-set. Although Vaughan was not fat, he was so solidly built that his nickname "Boof" suited him very well indeed. His father used to own Langdale Station, a big sheep run in the Western District, but a series of bad droughts had forced him to sell the place.

The two boys had been great friends at school, and when Drover Stobart wrote to his son: "Come on up to Oodnadatta for a bit of a holiday before settling down, and bring your mate along with you", they both accepted the invitation with enthusiasm.

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The boys were suddenly roused from sound sleep about three o'clock next morning by someone in the room shouting at them; "Hi, there! Hi! Get up, it's coming. Get up quick."

The next instant the bedclothes were jerked back and a man was pulling them roughly to their feet. It was all so sudden and unexpected that each boy thought that he was dreaming; but as the man shook and punched them into activity, they became aware of a terrifying noise coming at them across the desert through the black darkness of the night. The air vibrated with a tremendous booming which affected their ears like the deep notes of a huge organ, and the loudest shout was only just heard.

"It's me. It's Peter," said a voice at their side.

"Come for your lives. The tornado's right on top of us."

He caught each boy firmly by the wrist and dragged them, dressed only in pyjamas just as they had tumbled out of bed, out of the room, down the corridor, and out at the back of the hotel. Everything was in confusion. They bumped into people and upset chairs and things in their mad rush. Now and again Peter's voice rose above the din, shouting, "The tank! The tank!" but nobody paid any attention, even if they heard the voice of a man above that other and more dreadful voice which was coming nearer and nearer and striking terror into the hearts even of the brave dwellers in the desert.

The shock of the night air did more than anything else fully to arouse the boys. It was like a dash of cold water, and though Peter still kept a tight grip of them, they ran along level with him of their own accord. Out into the yard they dashed, round one or two corners, over a fence at the back of an outhouse, and suddenly the man stopped dead and began pulling at something on the ground. It was a grating with a big iron handle. It stuck. The approaching tornado roared with anger while the man put out all his great strength. The booming sound rose to a shriek of triumph, as if the storm actually saw that these escaping human beings were delivered into its power. But Peter's muscles were like steel and leather. He strained till the veins stood out on his forehead like rope. At last the thing loosened and came up, and the bushman sprawled on his back. But he was on his feet again instantly. Speech would have been no good, so he gripped Vaughan by the collar of his pyjamas and swung him into the hole in the ground, and only waited long enough for the boy to find a foothold before he did the same with Stobart. Then he scrambled down himself. They were in a big cement rain-water tank built in the ground at the back of the hotel. There was no water in it.

Nobody spoke. Nobody *could* speak. The air was so packed full of sound that it seemed as if it could not possibly hold one sound more. It was like the booming of a thousand great guns at the same time; the shock, the recoil, and the rush of air across the entrance to the tank was as if artillery practice on an immense scale were going on. There was a screaming sound as if shells were hurtling through space. Now the pitch blackness of the night was a solid mass; then it was red and livid like a recent bruise; and then again, with a crackle like the discharge of a Maxim, vivid flashes of white fire split the air. Thunder rolled continuously and lightning played without stopping, in a way which is seen and heard only on a battle-field or during a tornado in the desert. It sounded as if the pent-up fury of a thousand years had suddenly been let loose upon that little collection of houses on the vast barren plain.

Down in the tank it was as dark as a tomb. The boys were close to one another, crouched against the wall, unable to move through sheer amazement. Peter stood up and looked out through the entrance, expecting every moment to hear the sound of houses being torn up from their foundations and flung down again many yards distant, mere heaps of splintered wood and twisted iron, with perhaps mangled human corpses in the wreckage. But such a sound did not come.

The tornado lasted about three minutes—that was all—and then it passed, and all those tremendous sounds became muffled in the distance as it retreated.

Gradually the stunned senses of the boys began to recover, and they heard Peter speaking. "It missed us," he was saying. "It came pretty close, though. I thought the hotel was gone for a

cert." Then he struck a match and held it to his pipe. The little light flared up steadily and showed two boys in pyjamas, the smooth cement walls of the tank, and the bushman in his shirt and trousers, but without his boots. It showed also a cat which had died a long time ago, and which had been dried up by the great heat. The sight of the squashed cat was so funny, down in the tank, that the boys started to laugh. It was a relief to do so after the strain of the last few minutes.

"We'd better get out of this," said Peter, throwing the match at the cat and starting to climb up an iron ladder. "Were you lads much scared?"

It was so evident that they had been very much scared that their emphatic denial of it made them all laugh again. "I tell you, I was," confessed the bushman. "I reckoned the whole town was going to glory. It would have, too, if the wind had struck it. The thing must have turned off before it got here."

Such tornadoes as the one described occur in Central Australia just before the breaking up of long droughts. Sometimes they are mere harmless willy-willies, which have not enough power to blow a man off his horse, but now and again a bigger one comes along, which travels at thirty or forty miles an hour at the centre and sweeps everything before it. These tornadoes may not be more than a quarter of a mile across, and look from the distance like huge brown waterspouts coiling up into the air till they are lost in the clear blue of the sky. Sometimes the whirling column of sand leaves the ground for a time and goes on spinning away high over the heads of everything, but it usually comes down again and goes on tearing across the country. The Central Australian tornado must not be confused with the tropical typhoon or cyclone, which is sometimes three or four hundred miles across.

Peter was right about the tornado turning off before it reached Hergott Springs. It came across the country from the Musgrave Ranges in the north-west till it reached the Dingo Creek. Here it turned and followed the dry depression, wrecked the Dingo Creek railway bridge, leaving it a mass of twisted iron and hanging sleepers, and then tore on down the line, doing a great deal of damage and making straight for the helpless township.

There is a very deep and wide cutting about a mile north of Hergott Springs, and the fury of the wind that night completely filled it up with sand from bank to bank. This undoubtedly saved the town, for, after this exhibition of its power, the tornado turned slightly to the east, and missed the houses entirely. The fringe of it, however, touched the end of the station yard, where the great water-tank stood. The wind caught this tremendous weight, lifted it from the platform, and threw it fifty yards, while the steel pillars of the stand were twisted together as if they had been cotton. A tool-shed which used to stand near the tank was moved bodily, and no trace of it was ever found. No doubt it was buried deep in one of the many sandhills which these terrific winds leave behind them.

## CHAPTER II

### Camels

It was not till next morning that the boys saw that the tornado had completely upset their plans. During the few terrible minutes of the storm, and for an hour afterwards, till sleep finally claimed them again, excitement drove all thoughts of the future clean away. But when they awoke late next morning, and looked out at the sky, which was blue and without a cloud, and across the sandy street at the collection of iron station buildings and the train by which they had arrived and which still stood waiting, and saw, beyond and around everything, the tremendous stretches of yellow sand already blazing in the heat, the affairs of the night seemed only a dream.

The reality of things was suddenly brought home to them when Peter came into the room with a cheery, "Good morning! How're you getting on?"

Both boys were feeling fine and said so, and then their friend told them: "You'd better hurry on a bit. The train starts back for town in about an hour."

Sax was using the towel at the time, and when he heard what Peter said, he stopped rubbing his face and looked at him in surprise.

"Back to town!" he exclaimed. "But we don't want to go back to town. We're going on to Oodnadatta."

"Going on to Oodnadatta, are you?" asked Peter, with a smile. "And how are you going to get there?"

"Why, by train, of course," broke in Vaughan. Then suddenly the events of the night appeared

to him in a new light. "That is—of course—if it's running," he stammered.

"It's not running," said Peter. "And you take it from me, it won't run for a month or two. The tornado smashed the Dingo Creek bridge and tore up the line this side of it, too. Besides, the Long Cutting's full of sand. It'll take them a couple of weeks to clean that out."

The boys were too much amazed to speak. They looked at one another in blank dismay. They were indeed in a fix. Drove Stobart waiting for them in Oodnadatta, and here they were in Hergott Springs, and no chance of getting out of it for a month or two. Whatever were they to do?

Their bushman friend did not leave them long in uncertainty. He was a simple-hearted kindly man, and he could see by the boys' faces what they were thinking about. So he interrupted their gloomy thoughts by suggesting:

"See here. I don't know who you lads are, and you don't know much about me. But I've got to get to Oodnadatta some way or another. There's a plant of horses and niggers waiting for me up there. I'll fix up something. Would you care to come along with me?"

The boys' faces instantly showed their eager pleasure, and the man did not need their words of thanks to assure him that he was doing them a good turn.

"Thanks *awfully!*" they exclaimed. "Thank you *very* much, Mr.—"

"My name's Peter," said the man. "And there's no 'Mister' about me. What shall I call you two?"

"This is Vaughan," said Stobart, pointing to his friend. "My name's Stobart."

"Stobart! Stobart!" said Peter in surprise. "Anything to do with Boss Stobart?"

Sax had never heard his father's nickname, so he answered in a puzzled tone, "Boss Stobart?"

"Yes, bless you. Boss Stobart. And a fine man too. The best drover that ever crossed a horse in this country. Don't I know it too? We punched cattle together for ten years, did the Boss and me."

Sax's face beamed with delight. "That's my father," he said proudly.

Peter's big hand shot out in greeting. "So you're Boss Stobart's son, are you? Well, well, you seem a fine lad, and you've sure got a fine father." He also shook hands with Vaughan, and added: "So we're to be mates, are we? You leave things to me. I'll let you know about it when I've fixed things up."

Peter was busy all morning and the boys had time to look around the township. It seemed very small to them in comparison with the vast plains which stretched away on all sides of it. They felt sure that if once they got away out of sight of the scattered houses, they would never be able to find them again, for Hergott Springs is only a very tiny spot on the face of the desert. They watched the train go back the way it had come the day before, and then walked up to the end of the station yard to see the wrecked water-tank. Flocks of goats wandered about the township, picking up and eating bits of rubbish, just like stray dogs. They found that this was why the mutton they had eaten for tea and breakfast was so tough; for, because sheep cannot thrive in that part of the country, goats are kept and killed for meat.

Camels interested them very much. These tall, awkward, smelly, grey beasts stalked along with such dignity that it was almost impossible to believe them capable of the hard work they do. Through following a string of camels, tied together from nose-line to tail, the boys came to a collection of buildings outside the town proper. This was Afghan Town, where the black-skinned camel-drivers lived. They watched some camels kneeling down in the sand and being loaded with bags of flour and sugar, chests of tea, and cases of jam and tinned meat. These bulky packages were roped to the saddle till it appeared as if the poor beast underneath would never be able to get up. But, one after the other, they stood up when the time came, and stalked away, swaying gently from side to side as they pad-padded silently across the soft sand.

Suddenly the boys were startled by a most terrifying sound a little distance away. It was a bubbling roar, such as a bullock would make if he tried to bellow when he was drowning. They looked in the direction it came: from, and saw a big bull camel, blowing its bladder out of its mouth and lashing with its tail. They went over and found the animal standing in a little paddock fenced with strong stakes. The boys had never seen such a tremendous camel before. Its body and fore legs were thick and heavy, but its hind legs were trim and shapely, and reminded them of the hind-quarters of a greyhound. Its neck was broad and flat, and looked very strong, while its head, with the bloodshot eyes and the horrid red bladder hanging from the mouth, was not nice to see. It stood there with its fore feet fastened together by a chain, its hind ones spread wide apart, twitching its tail about, and roaring with a rumbling gurgle, either in rage or challenge. It was a sight to strike terror into anybody's heart.

Presently two Afghans came up and began to talk in English. "Ah!" said one, a little man, dressed in the blouse and baggy pantaloons of his native country, his face looking very cruel.

"Ah! That's old Abul, is it? I've not seen him for ten years. He used to try and play tricks with me, did Abul, but I taught him his lessons; didn't I, Abul? I taught him not to play with *me*." He laughed at the remembrance of the cruelties he had practised on that camel ten years ago.

"He's a good camel," replied the other man. "He belongs to me. He's a very good camel. He doesn't want to be beaten. He works well. I can do anything I like with him." He began to climb over the fence, but the first speaker stopped him.

"What are you going to do?" he asked excitedly. "You must not go in there. He is a bad camel, I tell you. Abul is not safe. I know him. I was his master ten years ago."

"I'm only going to take off his hobbles," said the other man.

"Well, do not go in like that. I used to throw a rope and tie him up before I went near him. He is a bad camel, I tell you. But *I* taught him his lessons." He laughed again, and Sax shuddered as he looked at the man's cruel face.

But the present owner was not afraid. He had been kind to Abul. He went up to the great grey beast and stood beside it, looking very small indeed. The camel could have killed the man without any difficulty whatever, but, instead of that, it bent its head and looked at him and allowed its master to rub it between the ears.

The Afghan outside the fence was very excited. He muttered to himself, and now and again shouted to his fellow-countryman: "Look out! Look out, I tell you! That is only his way. It is all his bluff. Oh, he is a very bad camel! Look out, I tell you!"

The man inside the paddock took no notice of these warnings, for they were quite unnecessary. He stooped down and unfastened the hobbles from the animal's fore feet, and stood up again with them in his hand, and walked towards the fence where his companion was standing. The camel stalked after him.

Then an absolutely unexpected thing happened. When Abul was about ten yards from the fence, he made a sudden rush and grabbed his former owner by the coat. It was all so quick that no one knew what had occurred till they saw the huge camel walking round his enclosure with the screaming man dangling from his mouth. The old camel was going to have his revenge. He remembered his tormentor of ten years ago, and was going to kill him.

Suddenly there came a sound of tearing cloth. The coat had torn. The man sprawled on the ground for a moment, and then scrambled to his feet. He made a dash for the fence, but the camel was too quick for him. The terrified Afghan started to run and, as there was no way of escape, he had to run round and round the paddock with the camel at his heels. For a moment or two there was silence. The spectators were too much amazed to speak, and the unfortunate man himself was using all his breath in his effort to evade his pursuer. Abul could easily have caught him, but it looked as if the animal wanted to play with the cruel man, for he kept just behind him, whereas, if he had stretched out his neck, he could have grabbed him at any time.

A crowd of Afghans and aboriginals were quickly drawn to the spot, but they were far too excited to think of doing anything to help. The man was doomed. The death would be a cruel one, but the man had deserved it. Sax, however, was a clear-headed boy, and though the whole affair was more terrifying to him than to the others, because he was not used to camels, a plan at once suggested itself to him.

The proper entrance to the paddock was a strong iron gate. Shouting out for Vaughan to follow him, Sax ran to the gate. The Afghan had now run three times round the little paddock, and as he came round the fourth time, nearly exhausted, the boy called out to him. Just as the running man drew level with the gate Sax swung it open. The man fell through it and lay gasping on the sand, but the camel shot past it before it saw that it had lost its prey. The boys slammed the gate shut again. Abul turned and glared at them. It was about to break down the fence, which it could easily have done, when other camel-men arrived on the scene, and drove it back with sticks and savage dogs.

When they arrived back at the hotel for dinner, they found that Peter was looking for them. "Where've you been all the morning?" he asked.

The boys told him about their wanderings around the town, and about the bull camel which had nearly killed the Afghan.

"That must be Sultan Khan," said Peter. "I heard last night that he had come back into the country. The police kicked him out ten years ago for being cruel to his camels. It's a pity the bull didn't get him."

Sax looked crestfallen. It was not nice to hear that the man whom he had just saved from a most terrible death would have been better left to die. But Peter reassured him at once.

"Of course I don't mean that really," he said. "You did fine. It's what any decent white man would have tried to do. But I suppose you're dead scared of camels now."

The man went on to explain that he had arranged to travel north with a string of camels which was leaving the township the same afternoon. They would go as far as Dingo Creek and wait there for the train which was being sent down from Oodnadatta. "That's the best arrangement I can make," said Peter. "If you'd care to come along, now's your chance. You won't have much to do with camels, anyway. But don't mind saying if you'd rather not."

Both boys protested that they weren't a bit scared of camels and that they were anxious to go right away; so, after dinner, they got their belongings together and followed Peter to the outskirts of the town. Here they found a line of fifty camels kneeling in the sand ready to start.

Most of them were heavily loaded with stores for Oodnadatta which had come up on the same train as the boys had travelled by. More than a score of men had helped to unload the trucks that morning, and to arrange the bags and cases and bales ready for being roped to the camel-saddles. The boys were very much amused by the antics of three or four calf-camels. They looked like big lambs on stilts, except that their necks were longer. They frisked about and did not seem at all afraid; but when Vaughan tried to stroke one of them, it bumped into him and knocked him over, which made everybody laugh.

The man in charge of the camels was not an Afghan; he was an Indian named Becker Singh, a big, handsome, intelligent man, and he wore the same rough sort of clothes and hat as any Australian in the back country. He showed Peter the two camels he had chosen for the boys, and, after testing them himself, the bushman showed his two friends how to arrange their blankets on the iron framework of the saddle in order to make a comfortable seat, how to mount, and the easiest way to sit.

"Don't you try to do anything," he told them. "Just get your feet into the stirrups and sit loosely."

This was good advice and saved the boys the usual discomfort which comes to those who ride a camel for the first time. They had no need to guide their camels, for all the animals were tied one behind the other. When everything was ready, Becker walked slowly down the long line, giving a final inspection to each of his charges, then whistled in a peculiar way.

All the camels stood up at once. To the boys, this was the most uncomfortable part of their experience, for a camel has four distinct movements in getting up or down, and, unless the rider is used to them, they are rather startling. But once their mounts were really up, the rest was plain sailing. They swayed gently forward and back with each stride of the camel and enjoyed the motion very much, and could see over the country from their high position much better than they could from horseback or on foot.

The three days' journey to the Dingo Creek Bridge was accomplished without any accident, though the new method of travel and the new country passed through were full of interest to the two boys. Each evening the long line of stately animals was coiled round in a big circle at the camping-place, and the camels were made to kneel down while their loads were unroped and their saddles taken off. Then the black boys who were helping Decker Singh hobbled the camels and drove them off to pick up what food they could find during the night. In the morning the same boys brought them in and made them kneel in the right places to be loaded again for the day.

To have their meals and to sleep near the packs was a novelty which the boys very much enjoyed. The blazing fire with the billies catching the flame, the meal of bread and meat, the hour or two afterwards when they lolled on the sand while Peter smoked and told yarns, and then the cool quiet night with the myriad stars above them; these things made the boys forget the little discomforts they were bound to encounter.

On the second day, towards the middle of the afternoon, a black dot appeared on the horizon, growing bigger and bigger as they approached it. The sun beat down on the bare plains and made the whole landscape quiver with heat, so that things in the distance looked blurred and it was impossible to tell what they were. In this instance the object proved to be a group of date-palms growing round a pool made by a bore-pipe. On all sides of this little oasis stretched the barren desert, and it was quite easy to believe that no man had been able to live in that part of the country before this bore had been put down.

Peter told them that the pipe went straight down into the earth for several thousand feet. Water was struck suddenly. One day, when the men were boring as usual, a noise came up the pipe like sea waves in a blow-hole of rock, a sort of gurgling roar accompanied by a rush of air. Then a column of water, as thick as a man's leg and as strong as a bar of iron, shot up straight into the air and turned over at the top like a gigantic umbrella. The water struck the bore staging with such tremendous force that it smashed a hole clean through a two-inch board as if a shell had crashed into it, and it wrenched the other boards from their supports and flung them for a hundred yards, just a useless mass of splintered wood. The man who was on the platform at the time heard the water coming and jumped for his life. He was not a moment too soon. If he had hesitated, he would have been blown to pieces. The flow is not so strong nowadays, but it still reaches the top of the pipe and flows over, and enables men and cattle to live in a country which used to be a waterless desert.



A quarter of a mile north of the date-palms was a sand-hill with what appeared like a few bushes on it. Sax was looking at this hill when he saw a coil of smoke rising up out of one of the bushes. He was so surprised that he called his friend's attention to it.

"I say, Boof," he exclaimed. "'D'you see that smoke over there? There must be a camp or something."

Peter heard the remark and laughed. "D'you know what that is?" he asked.

"Why, bushes, of course," replied Sax.

"And what d'you reckon it is?" asked Peter again, turning to Vaughan.

Young Vaughan looked intently at the sand-hill where the smoke was coming from. He heard a dog bark, and then thought he saw a little black human figure crawl out of one of the bushes, followed by another and bigger figure. It was all so far away that he wasn't sure that he had seen correctly, so he answered with hesitation; "It looks as if there were people in those bushes. They don't live there, do they, Peter?"

"They're not bushes," explained the man. "They're what we call 'wurlies'. They're sort of little huts the blacks live in. You'll see quite enough of them before you've been in this country long, I promise you."

The boys wanted to go over at once and see, so Peter good-naturedly went with them.

The wurlies were made from branches pulled from the ragged trees which grew around, and stuck in the sand with their tops brought together. This framework was covered with bits of old bag or blanket. The whole thing was the shape of a pudding-basin turned upside down, and was not more than three feet high in the middle or four feet wide at the bottom.

"Do they really live in there?" asked Sax.

"Sure thing," said Peter. "They crawl in through that hole and curl themselves up like dogs."

As he finished speaking, a shaggy head appeared at one of the holes. The hair was stuck together in greasy plaits and hung down to the man's shoulders. He looked up at the visitors, half in and half out of the wurley, and on his hands and knees just like an animal. His face and body were black and very dirty, and his head and chest were so thickly covered with hair that the only features which stood out from the matted tangle were a pair of very bright eyes and a flat, shining nose.

Peter said something which the lads did not understand, and the man came out and stood upright. He was quite naked and very thin. His legs seemed to be the same thickness all the way up, and his knees looked like big swollen knuckles. But his whole appearance gave the impression that he could move very quickly if he wanted to, with the graceful speed of a greyhound. The woman and child whom Vaughan had seen from the distance had run away like startled rabbits as the white men came up, and the camp of six or seven wurlies seemed deserted except for this one miserable specimen of humanity. Bits of clothing, tins, pieces of decaying food, and all sorts of dirt were strewn around the camp and gave out such an unpleasant smell that the boys turned away in disgust.

"What's the matter?" asked Peter.

"How horribly dirty he is," said Vaughan. "Aren't some of them clean?"

"Oh yes," replied Peter. "Most boys who work on stations are made to use soap. That's because they work with white men, or with decent chaps like Becker Singh. His boys aren't bad. But you leave them alone for a week, and they'll be just as bad as that old buck there. Don't you ever forget—" he added earnestly, "don't you ever forget that that's the real nigger you've just seen. And don't you have too much to do with them."

"There's not much fear of that," said Sax.

"Well, don't you forget it, that's all," repeated Peter. "Many a good lad has gone to the dogs through having too much to do with niggers."

They reached the Dingo Creek on the morning of the fourth day. The bridge was a complete wreck. It was almost impossible to believe that wind could have done so much damage. The whole thing had been lifted off the stanchions, twisted as easily as if it had been a ribbon of paper, and then thrown down into the soft sand of the creek bed. The steel stanchions leaned this way and that; one of them had been torn up from its concrete foundation, and another had been screwed about till it looked like a gigantic corkscrew. The bridge must have been caught by the very centre of the tornado.

The camels did not stop at the creek. They travelled on for a couple of miles to where a railway engine and a few trucks were waiting. These had been sent down from Oodnadatta with a break-down gang of men, and were returning next day. Peter decided to stay and help Becker with the camels as far as Oodnadatta, but, at his advice, the two boys went on by train, and so it

came about that they completed their broken journey in the same way in which it had begun.

### CHAPTER III

#### A Message from the Unknown

The sun had set several hours ago when the train finally pulled up at Oodnadatta station. A hurricane-lantern hung under a veranda, and showed a crowd of about twenty men, women, and children with eager faces, ready to welcome anyone who had completed the interrupted journey. But the two boys were the only passengers. They stood on the platform of the carriage and looked at the crowd. It was seven years since Sax had seen his father, but he felt sure he would recognize him instantly; and, besides, it was such a rare thing for two strange lads to come up on the Far North train, that if anyone had been there to meet them, he would have had no trouble in picking them out.

But no one came forward. In vain did the drover's son compare the picture of his father which he had in his mind, with one after the other of the men under the veranda. Men, tall, thin, and bearded there certainly were, and more than one had that stamp of the desert on his face, which never wears off.

"Can't you see him, Sax?" asked his companion anxiously.

"Not yet. He's somewhere at the back, most likely. We'll wait a tick and see."

So they waited, and in those minutes the lads felt more lonely than they had ever done in their lives before. The thought would insist on presenting itself:

"Suppose he doesn't come! What then?" The nearest person they really knew was five days away. In front of them was a little crowd of people who knew each other well, but who had never seen the boys before, and all around was the vast unsympathetic silence of the desert which came in and oppressed the boys even in the dark.

Presently a man in badly creased white trousers and very thin shirt, open all the way down, came past. He stopped and looked up at the boys. "Waiting for somebody?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes, we are," said Sax, who was usually the spokesman of the pair when strangers were concerned. "Can you tell me, please, if Mr. Stobart is about?"

"Stobart? If it's Boss Stobart you're waiting for, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"Why?" Both boys uttered the word of dismay at the same time.

"Well, you see," went on the man, "we expected him the day before yesterday. He's never late, so I wired up the road. I'm his agent, you know. They haven't heard of him south of Horseshoe Bend."

"What! Is he lost, then?" asked Sax in an incredulous voice. His hero, his father, lost? Impossible!

"Bless you, no. He's never lost. He must have taken a fresh track at the Bend, that's all. Feed and water and that sort of thing. By the way, who are you?"

"I'm his son," said Sax, simply and proudly, "and this is my friend. Father said he'd meet this train."

"His son, are you? Oh, well, you may depend upon it, he's not far away if he said he'd meet you. But he didn't come in to-day. I know that for a cert. You'd better come over to the hotel and let me fix you up for the night. My name's Archer—Joe Archer. I've got a store here and manage your father's business at this end."

The kind-hearted storekeeper handed the boys over to the care of the hotel-keeper's wife, who soon set a meal of boiled goat and potatoes before them. Their intense disappointment at not meeting Mr. Stobart had not lessened their appetites, and they assured one another that they would see him in a few days, probably on the very next morning.

After their tea they went straight to their room, a little box of a place with a window looking out over a yard where a horse was standing perfectly still and breathing heavily, fast asleep. The friends talked for a time and then blew out the candle.

Scarcely had they done so, when they heard a tapping on the window. They took no notice. It came again. Tap—tap—tap. It could not possibly have been an accident.

"What's that, Sax?" whispered Vaughan.

"Blest if I know," answered his companion from the other bed. "Shall I light the candle again?"

"Let's wait a bit and see," suggested Boof.

The taps came again, this time louder, and were followed by a cough.

Sax struck a match. His hand shook so much that he could hardly light the candle, but whether it was from fear or from excitement cannot be told. The light flared up, went down again, and then burned bright and steady.

Suddenly a man's head and shoulders appeared at the window. It was a nigger. For a moment both lads stared at the apparition with startled eyes. But the man did not do anything. He was just waiting till their surprise died down. His face was not at all as forbidding as the one they had seen at Coward Springs. He was wearing an old felt hat and a dirty shirt, and though he had hair all over his face, there was something about him which proclaimed him to be a young man.

After a few moments of absolute stillness and silence, they saw the hair on his face move, and a row of beautiful white teeth showed in a most engaging smile. Then came the words: "Which one Stobart?"

The lads had never heard an aboriginal speak before. The sound was guttural, but there was no mistaking the words: "Which one Stobart?"

Sax started forward and the black seemed to scrutinize his features intently. "You Stobart?" he asked.

"Yes. My name's Stobart," answered Sax. "What d'you want?"

The black fellow smiled again, groped in his shirt, and pulled out a dirty piece of folded paper. He held it in his hand and again looked at the lad as if to make quite sure he was not being deceived.

"Boss Stobart, him say, you walk longa Oodnadatta. You find um my son. You give 'im paper yabber. Him good fella, Boss Stobart, so I go. My name Yarloo."

The words came slowly, as if the man were repeating something he had said over and over in his mind. But the words were quite distinct.

He handed the "paper yabber" to Sax, and disappeared. The two friends came close together round the candle and looked at the paper which had come to them from the unknown by such a strange hand. For a few moments Sax was too excited to open it. What was the news it contained? Good or bad? It was not addressed, or, if it ever had been, the handling to which it had been subjected had worn any writing completely off the outside.

At last the lad opened it. It was a sheet torn from a common note-book ruled with lines and columns for figures, the sort of thing on which a rough man would keep his rough accounts. It contained writing in pencil by a hand which Sax at once recognized as his father's; but it was uneven as if it had been written in the dark. The words were:

"In difficulties. Musgrave Ranges. Tell Oodnadatta trooper, but *no one else*." (These last three words were underlined several times.) "He'll understand. Boy quite reliable. Don't worry. Get a job somewhere. "STOBART."

The friends read it to themselves, and then Sax read it out loud.

"'In difficulties'," said Vaughan. "What does that mean?"

"Blest if I know. With the cattle, I expect. I wonder where the Musgrave Ranges are."

"But why does he say 'tell the trooper and no one else'?" asked Vaughan again. "Yet he wouldn't say 'don't worry' if anything was up, would he?"

"Oh, nothing's really up," said Sax with conviction. "He means he's a bit late, that's all. P'raps the trooper's expecting him or something. Of course he wouldn't want anybody else to know. You see, he's got a name here," said the lad proudly. "They call him Boss Stobart. Even the nigger did that."

"But he'll be a long time, Sax. He won't be in for a week or so at any rate, or else he wouldn't tell us to get a job, would he?"

The boys discussed the news from every possible point of view, and finally arrived at the conclusion that the famous drover had been forced out of the route he had intended to travel by difficulties with feed and water, and that he might be very late arriving at his destination. That he

would finally arrive, they never doubted for a moment. With this assurance, they once more blew out the light, and it was not long before they were both fast asleep.

If they could have known the terrible danger which Drover Stobart was in at that very time, it is certain that sleep would have been impossible to them. He was as near death, a hideous death, as any man can possibly be who lives to tell the tale.

## CHAPTER IV

### Wild Cattle

The boys woke late on their first morning in the Far North. Sax's thoughts immediately turned to his father's letter. He groped under his pillow and pulled it out and read it again:

"In difficulties. Musgrave Ranges. Tell Oodnadatta trooper, but *no one else*. He'll understand. Boy quite reliable. Don't worry. Get a job somewhere.

"STOBART."

It was a characteristic note, for the drover never wrote long letters, but the shakiness of the writing, and the mysterious way in which it had been delivered, gave Sax a feeling of great uneasiness. If, as Joe Archer the storekeeper had suggested, Stobart had been forced to take a westerly track from Horseshoe Bend in order to find water and feed for the cattle, he could easily have sent word to Oodnadatta by the ordinary camel mail which passed the Bend once a month.

Sax looked up and saw that his friend was awake. "What d'you reckon we ought to do, Boofy?" he asked, getting out of bed.

Vaughan took the letter and read it before replying. "It says 'Tell Oodnadatta trooper'," he remarked. "I reckon we ought to do that first, Sax, don't you?"

When breakfast was over, the boys asked the way to the trooper's house, and were told that Sergeant Scott had gone away after some blacks who had been spearing cattle. No one had any idea when he was likely to return. "You see—" said the man who was telling them about it, "you see, he may get the niggers easy and bring them in at once. Or they may clear out and make him chase them for days and days. He'll get them in the end, though, you bet. Old Scotty's not the one to be beaten by niggers."

The boys sat down outside the trooper's house on a little hill and looked over the desolate landscape. They seemed to be baulked at every turn.

Presently, away above the northern rim of the land appeared a little brown stain. It caught the eye because the horizon had no cloud on it or anything to break the clear line except that patch of brown.

Sax was idly watching it, wondering what in the world he could do to help his father, when the cloud seemed to get bigger and clearer. "Look, Boof," he said. "D'you see that thing over there? It looks like a cloud, but it's brown."

He pointed it out to his friend and they watched it together. It was certainly getting bigger. "Looks like dust," said Vaughan.

"But whatever could be kicking up all that dust?" asked Sax. "It's coming this way. Look, it's covering those trees over there now."

The cloud of dust got bigger and of a more distinct brown. Objects such as trees, which at one time stood out in front of it, were hidden one after another, till it spread out like heavy brown smoke from a damp fire. The air was very clear and still. All at once Sax gripped his friend's arm. He had heard a sound—a sound which was like his own native tongue to the drover's son—the crack of a stock-whip.

"I'm sure I heard a whip," he exclaimed excitedly. "I'm dead sure I did. Hark!"

Both boys sprang to their feet and listened intently. From out that advancing mass of brown dust sounds could be heard. At first they were just a confused murmur, a sort of deep grumbling very far away; but now and again came a sharper sound, half like the crack of a pistol and half like two flat boards being banged together.

"Yes. I'm sure of it. I'm sure of it. It's whips. I bet you it's whips. And that dust is kicked up by cattle. I *know* it is. Oh, Boofy, Boofy! P'raps it's my father."

"Let's go and meet him," suggested Vaughan, and the boy would have started out right away to meet the cattle if his friend had not prevented him. Sax had never seen a mob of bush cattle, at least not that he could remember, though his father had often carried him on the pommel of his saddle when he was a tiny baby. But he knew instinctively that it would be dangerous to face wild cattle on foot.

"Let's wait and see what happens," he said. "They won't be long."

The noise had now increased to the continuous rumbling bellow of a great mob of restless cattle. Already the shouts of men could be heard, and the cracks of whips came very sharp and clear. Dim forms could be seen for a moment now and again on the outskirts of the cloud of dust, as mounted men wheeled here and there and everywhere in their efforts to keep the cattle together. The animals had never seen a town before, and were frightened at the glitter of iron roofs in the sun.

Suddenly a figure on a horse shot out in front and cantered ahead. The boys became tense with excitement. Was it Mr. Stobart? At first they could not distinguish him except that he rode a grey horse and sat it with the perfect ease of a Central Australian. The animal did not want to leave its companions and started to "play up". But nothing it could do made any difference to the superb rider; he just sat as if he were part of the horse, as if he were indeed its brain, forcing it to obey his will. When he came past the little hill where the lads were standing he was about a hundred yards away from them, and they could see him clearly.

"Is it, Sax?" asked Vaughan excitedly. "Is it your pater?"

The drover's son shook his head. "No chance," he said sadly. "My father's taller than that man. But can't he just ride, Boof?"

The rider had by this time reached a set of troughs which spread out on the ground and were filled by a bore about half a mile behind the town. He dismounted, had a good look round to see that everything was right, and then started to ride back again. But instead of going straight back to the cattle, he rode up to the boys.

"Good-day," he said, reining in his horse. "Come out to see the cattle?"

"Yes," replied Sax. "And we were wondering whether Boss Stobart"—he said the name proudly—"whether Boss Stobart was with them."

The man shook his head. "No. Didn't he come in a week ago? He started ahead of me. These are T.D.3 cattle."

The lads showed their disappointment on their faces, but of course the drover did not understand the reason for it. "If it's fun you're after seeing, you'll get as much with my mob as you would with the Boss's," he said with a very slight Irish brogue. "They're sure as wild as bally mosquitoes. But look, you're a bit too close here. Get back a bit, and when they've had a drink, go over to the troughs. You'll likely see a bit of fun at the yards."

The lads did as he told them. They climbed on the roof of an old shed where they were well out of the way, and could get a good view of the cattle as they came in to water. They expected the whole mob to file past at once, but that was not what happened. As soon as the drover returned, the cattle were rounded up in a hollow between two sand-hills. For a time the dust increased to such an extent that nothing could be seen; but by the shouting and whip-cracking it was evident that the men were having trouble.

Then a little mob of about a hundred were cut out from the others and driven towards the water. A white man rode in front and two black boys rode behind. To Stobart and Vaughan it looked as if the men were taking far more care than was necessary, for they shepherded the cattle every inch of the way. The cattle smelt the water from the distance, and wanted to rush straight to it, but they were turned again and again, and allowed to advance only at a slow pace. They had been ten weeks on the road, and were so nervous at approaching the buildings of the little town, that the least thing would make them rush away in all directions. Once they started, nothing could stop them, and the result of all those weeks of constant care might go for nothing. So the stockmen took no chances.

The cattle watered quietly, and when they had had enough, they were taken a little distance away and left in charge of the two black boys. Then the white man returned and cut off another hundred, and watered them in the same way, till every one in the huge mob of wild cattle had had a drink without being disturbed.

Then came what the drover had called "a bit of fun". The cattle were slowly moved towards the great trucking-yards.

"Let's go over to the troughs as he said," suggested Vaughan. "It's lots nearer than this." So the two friends took up their position behind the big tank into which the water from the bore

poured before it flowed into the troughs.

The Oodnadatta trucking-yards are made of iron rails set in concrete and are capable of holding more than a thousand head of stock. Once the cattle are in, nothing matters, for the yards are strong enough to hold elephants. But the job is to get them in.

Inch by inch the grumbling mass of irritable beasts was urged forward by the white drover and his boys. It was a ticklish job, and the whips were kept quiet at first, except to flick up one or another which tried to poke out of the mob. All went well till the leading cattle came to the wing of the yard. Those iron rails frightened them. They had only seen a yard once before in their lives, and the rails of that one were made of wood.

"Steady, boys! Steady!" called the drover. "Keep 'em quiet a bit."

For a minute or two the stockmen sat back on their horses and did not urge the cattle forward, but let them get used to their new surroundings. The animals went up to the rails and smelt them, bellowing with surprise.

"Now, slowly, boys! Slowly!"

Very gradually the horsemen moved forward. To a new chum this care seemed very unnecessary. The gate was straight ahead. Why not force the animals through, and get the job over? But a thousand cattle cannot be forced by five men, as the boys were soon to see.

The leading cattle were now right up to the gate, and the others were slowly crowding on behind, till they were jammed in the wings. If only one or two would go through the rest would follow easily. But the leading bullock struck a tin buried in the sand. Instantly the great beast's head was raised and he sent out a roaring bellow. Those behind him crowded on, but he would not pass that tin. It was lying on top of the sand now. He tried to back away from it, and in doing so struck his foot against it again.

Bellow followed bellow. He set his feet firmly in the sand and would not budge. Down went his head, and he tossed clouds of sand into the air.

"Let 'em have it. Let 'em have it," shouted the drover. "Force 'em up there. Force 'em up." He stood in his stirrups and plied his whip, cracking it back and front, and shouting at the top of his voice. The blacks did the same, till it seemed as if they would force the cattle into the yard by sheer energy.

But no. The leading bullock stood firm. Something had to give way. No single animal could withstand the pressure of all the others from behind. The bullock lifted his head high and shook his mighty horns, and, with a roar which drowned all sounds of shouting, he turned along the side of the wing and charged. Nothing could stop him. Others followed till the cattle were going round and round like water in a whirlpool. What cattlemen most fear had happened: a ring. Not a single beast went through the gate. They passed it, at first slowly, then faster and faster, till they were galloping round and round like clumsy circus horses.

The drover tried to break the ring. He cut off a few cattle at the back of the mob and forced them against the tide. He succeeded for a moment, and the black stockmen cut off others and brought them in. For a few seconds it was like two huge waves meeting. The cattle jammed in the centre, and some were actually lifted from their feet. Then the wave broke.

A charging mass of maddened cattle rushed away from the yards, screaming with terror, heads down and stiffened tails high in the air. Nothing could stand against them. It was death to attempt to check the terrible charge. The mounted men galloped for safety to the sides. One, however, was too slow. He had just gained the edge of the mob when a young steer dashed into his horse. Both were going so fast that they came down together. Fortunately the boy was thrown clear and was not hurt. The steer rolled over and over and then picked itself up and joined the rush. The riderless horse galloped towards the troughs.

## CHAPTER V

### Riding Tests

During the exciting scenes at the yards, Sax and Vaughan had come out from the shelter of the tank, wholly absorbed in the wild life they were now witnessing for the first time. With the keen delight which every healthy-minded boy has in adventure, they followed every twist and turn, wishing with all their hearts that they were in the thick of it and not mere lookers-on.

When the cattle broke, the drover dashed out on their side of the mob and waved a warning to them. His mouth framed words, and though his voice was drowned in the tremendous

hullabulloo, the boys knew he was shouting: "Back! Back! Back for your lives!"

So they raced for the tank and crouched behind it as the storm of cattle went sweeping past.

The riderless horse galloped up to the troughs and stooped its head to drink. The bridle-rein trailed on the ground. Sax looked around the tank and saw it very near his hand. He gave a quick glance at the saddle and saw that all the gear was right, and then quietly stretched out his arm and caught the rein. He gripped it firmly but did not pull. The noise of stampeding cattle was so great that the horse did not notice the movement near him till the boy slowly rose from the ground.

Then the horse lifted its head and gave a snort of alarm. But in a moment Sax had jerked the reins over its head, and in another moment was on its back. Before he was well seated, the frightened animal reared, squealing and pawing the air with its fore hoofs. But Sax was lean and very supple. He clung on, drove his feet home in the stirrups, and when the horse came down and started to buck and twist and arch and side-spring, he had a seat from which it would have taken a very good animal to shake him. It was all over in less than a minute, and then the horse saw its companions flying over the plains in a cloud of dust, gave a whinny, and started after them at top speed.

Vaughan was left with feelings which were almost equally divided between pride in his friend's achievement and envy that the adventure had not fallen to his lot.

Sax caught up with the drover and rode neck and neck with him on the wing of the cattle for some time before the man turned his head. When he did so, he was very surprised.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he shouted, almost breathless at the rate they were going. "Can you ride?"

"No," bawled Sax exultantly; "but I'm learning."

"Well, don't try and learn too much first go," came back the warning. "There's ticklish work ahead. You watch me." And they settled down again to give all their attention to the work in hand.

About five miles west of the town is a narrow but close belt of timber, mostly gnarled mulga and gidgee, with here and there a sprawling stunted creek gum. The cattle were making for this shelter. But already the tremendous pace was beginning to tell. The bellowing had ceased and the mob was stringing out, the stragglers no longer being able to gallop, but lumbering along at a clumsy trot.

To Sax's surprise, a black stockman, riding in the rear of the mob, kept these stragglers at the top of their pace. The drover gradually forged ahead on the wing and the boy with him, till they were level with the leaders. Then, little by little, they worked nearer and nearer to the galloping beasts, using their whips freely and trying by every possible means to turn the line away from the belt of timber. They succeeded. From west the cattle turned to south, getting more and more tired at every stride, then east, then north, and finally they were brought up by rounding on themselves and turning in and in till they were thoroughly exhausted and only too willing to pull up.

Sax's whole body was one big ache. It was his first ride on a bush horse, which he found very different from the thoroughbreds he had known. Every movement of the horse, now that the excitement was over, was agony to him, but he sat in the saddle without flinching. Not for the world would he have betrayed himself.

"What do we do now?" he asked the drover.

The man laughed. He admired the boy's pluck, and his keen eyes noticed the signs of discomfort which Sax could not possibly hide. "Do?" he asked. "Why? Haven't you done enough for a bit?"

"Oh, I'm all right," said Sax. "I like it."

"Wish I did," growled the other. "I'll just begin to like it when it's all over, and these beggars are in the yard."

The mounted men rode slowly to and fro around the cattle for an hour or two. Some of them got over their fright sufficiently to lie down, others stood about in groups and nosed one another and murmured quietly. About noon the drover whistled to his boys, and a move was made towards the yards. This time they were not rushed forward in a mob. A few of the quietest were cut off and driven in first. They went through the gates without any trouble. Then a few more, followed by others till the thousand cattle were safely behind the great gates.

"Now we'll have a drink of tea, and then we'll truck them," said the drover, dismounting from his horse and taking off the saddle. He turned to the black boys. "Take um your horses little yard belonga Mr. Archer," he said, pointing towards the town. "Give um plenty tucker, water. Come back quick-fella! Which way Yarloo sit down?"

At the name Yarloo, Sax looked up quickly. Surely that was the name given by the messenger who handed Boss Stobart's note to the boy in the middle of the night. The blacks laughed at the drover's question, and one of them pointed towards the troughs. "Him tummel aller same kangaroo," he said, with a grin, making movements with his body like a man being flung off a horse. "Him come down cropper, I think," and he rubbed the back of his head and made grimaces which caused the others to laugh heartily. A black-fellow is always highly amused at an accident.

Two figures were coming over from the troughs. Sax recognized one as Vaughan. The other was limping slightly. It was Yarloo, the boy who had been thrown from his horse. He had got a job with the drover the morning after the delivery of his midnight message to Saxon Stobart, and, because he was a stranger, his fellow stockmen took a great delight in limping about and imitating him.

"So that's how you got your ride," said the drover. "How did you catch the horse?"

Sax told him, and the drover remarked: "I'm glad you did. Nothing stirs things up so much as a saddled horse with nobody on him. You and your mate had better have a drink of tea with me. By the way, what do they call you?"

"That chap's name's Vaughan," answered Sax. "Mine's Stobart."

"What? Stobart? Same name as Boss Stobart?"

"Yes. He's my father."

For a moment the drover looked at the boy with keen eyes from which nothing could be hidden. They were light-grey eyes, set well apart, and absolutely fearless. He caught and held Sax's glance and seemed to be reading the boy's character. He evidently approved of what he saw, for he held out his hand, which Stobart took at once.

"So you're Boss Stobart's son," he said. "I'm sure glad to meet you. My name's Darby. Mick Darby. Me and your father were mates for close on ten years. You came up to meet him, did you?"

Sax told him a little about the school, and how he and Vaughan had come up to Oodnadatta expecting to meet the drover, and how disappointed they were. He did not mention the mysterious message; but when Mick Darby asked what the boys intended doing, Sax answered promptly that they were looking for a job, as Boss Stobart had sent a note advising them to do this.

"He's likely changed his plans," said Darby, "and can't come down for a bit. What sort of a job d'you want?"

By this time Vaughan had come up, and the three whites were sitting near an open pack-bag, eating damper and salt meat, and drinking tea from the drover's quart-pot. To his question as to what sort of job they wanted, there seemed but one reply. Sax's mouth was full at the time, so Vaughan answered:

"This sort, of course."

Mick smiled at the boy's enthusiasm, and asked: "Can you ride too?" The word "too" pleased Sax immensely, but it stirred his friend to answer, somewhat boastfully:

"I can ride as well as he can—can't I, Sax?"

"You're better than I am," said Sax generously. "He is indeed, Mr. Darby."

"Well, we'll see. I shan't be starting back till the day after to-morrow. What d'you say to a riding test?" he asked, laughing.

The boys were willing to agree to anything, especially as the station to which Mick was returning was out towards the Musgrave Ranges. "It's sure a rough place," said Mick, when he had agreed to take the boys. "It's out on the edge of cattle country, the Musgraves west of us, and niggers—bad niggers, too. You'll wish you'd never come." He looked at the eager faces of the two lads and his own suffused with thoughts of the days when he was their age. He remembered all the hard years between, the trips on which he had only just come through alive, the terrors of thirst, the slow torment of being out of tucker, the scraps with blacks, the dreary homeless monotony of the desert, and he said earnestly: "I'm not urging you to come, mind. I know what you're in for; you don't. But if you want to be men, now's your chance."

Vaughan's riding test next day was a severe one. "It's not that I want to make a fool of you," explained Mick, as they lead the horses out of Archer's yard. "But there's not a properly quiet horse in my plant. It's no good your getting your swag ready if you can't ride. What d'you feel like?"

Vaughan said he was feeling fine; but if the truth must be told, his pulses were beating unusually fast as he looked at the bush horses and realized that he was soon to be on top of one of them. The party consisted of the drover, the white boys, and one or two black stockmen, and



when they came to a broad expanse of soft sand, Mick said they needn't go any farther.

Vaughan rode three horses. The first was a bay mare, of medium height, short in the back, and with a long rein. "You'll find her a bit tricky to mount," said Mick. The animal stood as quiet as a mouse while Vaughan caught her and put the saddle on, but as soon as he tossed the reins over her head, she backed away and started to prance round excitedly. The boy found it impossible to get his foot in the stirrup; as soon as he touched the metal, the mare jumped back. Mick Darby stood by and said nothing, but he interfered when Sax wanted to go and help his friend. "Let him do it on his own," he said. "He won't always have you with him."

Instead of quietening down, when the mare found she could bluff the lad she pranced about more than ever, and Vaughan saw that, unless he could surprise the animal for a moment, he would have no chance of mounting. So he kept the reins over her head and started to pat the lovely neck and shoulders. He slowly worked round till he was on the off side—a side from which, normally, no one ever mounts a horse—and let his hand run down the shoulder till it touched the stirrup. The mare stood quite still.

Still patting the animal, Vaughan shortened the rein, and quietly lifted his right foot. As soon as it was in the stirrup, he sprang, and before the surprised horse could recover from its astonishment, he was in the saddle, having mounted from the wrong side.

The blacks shouted their praise, but Vaughan listened only for the drover's voice. Mick laughed heartily. "Good boy! Good boy!" he said. "You bluffed her all right. Get off, and I'll show you how to do it on the near side."

The mare was quite quiet when once the rider was seated, and Vaughan had no difficulty in riding her round or in dismounting. Mick shortened the rein for mounting, and just as the mare began to turn away, as she had done with Vaughan, he took off his hat and put it under the cheek-strap of the bridle, thus blinding the horse on the near side. She stood quite still, and the drover got on and off several times without any difficulty. Then Vaughan tried it in the same way, and found he could do anything with the mare if only he blindfolded the near-side eye when he was mounting.

"She's a good little mare to ride, and as game as a pebble," said Mick, when the saddle had been taken off her. "I'll let you have her if you promise to treat her well."

The next horse was a big raking bay, high in the shoulder, too long and badly coupled in the back, and of a very awkward appearance. Vaughan saddled him up and mounted. The horse stood stock still. Vaughan then shook the reins and it moved on for a few paces, but as soon as the reins were slacked again, it stopped. The boy became impatient. Nothing is so annoying to ride as a lazy horse. So he shortened the rein. As soon as he did so, the big animal started to move forward, and it got faster and rasher as its rider put pressure on the reins. It had an awkward habit of thrusting its long lean head straight out, so Vaughan pulled hard. But the harder the boy pulled the faster the horse moved. And it *could* move. Vaughan had never had such an uncomfortable few minutes in his life. Every part of the horse seemed to be moving by itself, and jerking him in all directions. He couldn't possibly sit in the saddle. He let the stirrups take all his weight and just hung on. The horse was bolting.

Vaughan did not lose his head. After trying to pull up the runaway by sheer force, he realized that he was only wasting his strength, and making it go faster. By the time he found this out, he was a mile away from the others, enveloped in a cloud of dust, and racing as hard as the horse could set foot to the ground. He slackened the reins a little. Instantly the pace slackened too. He took off more pressure still and the horse was soon cantering at a medium speed. Vaughan had found out the secret. He turned his horse's head towards home, and made it do just anything he wanted by simply increasing or decreasing the force with which he held the reins. The horse had a most delightful canter, like a big rocking-horse, and Vaughan rode up to his companions feeling very pleased with himself.

"What d'you think of it?" asked Mick.

"Fine!" replied the lad. "Fine! But he shook me up before I found it out."

"Found what out?" asked the drover.

Vaughan told him, and the man smiled approval. "Good!" he commented. "Remember, these horses up here are all different, and you've got to find them out. Perhaps you've been used to riding properly trained ones. We don't do any of that up here in the bush. Would you like to try another?"

Vaughan was sore and tired, but he answered eagerly that he was ready for a dozen more.

"I'll only give you one," said Mick, beckoning to one of the black boys. "Take him pretty carefully."

The black stockman caught and saddled a chestnut gelding. Compared with the thoroughbreds of Langdale Station, the horse was heavily built, but it had beautifully made shoulders and back. The rump was coupled to the saddle of the back without the slightest dip,

and the curve rose over a pair of high shoulder-blades and up to a deep and shapely neck. The legs, however, were thick, and seemed to be out of proportion with the rest of the body.

Vaughan mounted, or rather he tried to mount. If he had known more about horses he would have noticed the nervous head and eyes, and would have taken precautions accordingly. But he just flung the reins over its head, put his foot in the stirrup, and—found himself sprawling in the sand. He did not let go of the reins. The drover noticed this, and knew, because of it, that the boy had the instincts of a horseman. Sax ran forward, but Mick stopped him. "He's all right," he said. "Let him alone."

Vaughan picked himself up and approached the horse, cautiously, but without fear. He put the reins quietly over its head, shortened the near side one and took a good handful of mane, and put his foot in the stirrup.

"Don't rush it! Don't rush it!" shouted Mick. "You're dealing with a nervous horse. Take your time. Don't be afraid. He's got no vice."

Vaughan gradually pressed his weight in the stirrup and rose slowly into the saddle. The horse stood quite still and trembled. The boy realized that something was going to happen and settled himself firmly. It was well he did so. Without any warning, the horse's back arched like a bent bow, and all four feet came off the ground. It was an extraordinary experience for Vaughan—everything sloping away from him. Then the back straightened suddenly and the hoofs struck the ground with such impact that, if the boy had not been very firmly in the stirrups, he would have been tossed in the air like a stone from a catapult.

After that, Vaughan had a few of the busiest moments of his life. Up in the air—in front and behind and all together—pitching this way and that; rooting, jumping, bucking, doing everything except rolling on the ground, the screaming horse tried to get rid of its rider.

Vaughan did not know what he was doing. Sheer pluck, and the supple strength of his young body, brought him through a test where more experienced riders would have failed. He did the right things without knowing why. He leaned forward over the neck of the rearing horse; he lay back when its heels were lashing the air; he balanced himself, as he had often done on a horizontal bar at school, when the arched back of the horse quivered under him high off the ground; and he stood in his stirrups to save his body from the shock of those four heavy feet striking the ground at once. He did all these things instinctively, though he had never been on a bucking horse before.

He was far too excited to be afraid. His determination saw him through, and at last the quivering horse and the breathless boy came to a standstill. Then, with a shrill whinny, the horse did its final worst. It braced its hind legs well apart and tossed its chest high in the air. Up and up rose the head and shoulders, while the fore feet pawed the air; up and up, till horse and rider hung for a moment in the balance—a horse on two legs, standing erect with a white boy clinging to its back. They swayed for a moment; for two; for three. Then over they came. With a violent jerk of its head, the horse fell over backwards.

A shout of consternation went up. Vaughan's position was one of greatest peril. But the boy's dancing blood had given his mind a lightning grip of the situation, and as the horse fell, he kicked his feet free from the stirrups, and flung himself clear. He was not a moment too soon. With a crash which shook the ground, the heavy horse came down, and would have mangled to a lifeless pulp anyone who had been under it. But Vaughan was safe. He lay for a minute, gasping, then stood up and faced the drover. The rein was still in his hand, though the force of the fall had torn the strong leather strap from the bridle.

## CHAPTER VI

### Smoke Signals

Travelling across country in Central Australia is usually very monotonous. The same routine is gone through day after day, and there is not even the relief of meeting new faces, for one's companions are often the only human beings met with during the whole of a trip of many weeks.

For the first few days of journeying towards the Musgraves, young Stobart and Vaughan found everything new and intensely interesting. At piccaninny daylight—which is the bush term for the rising of the morning star—Mick Darby turned over on his swag and sat up, and called out "Daylight! Daylight!"

The drover was so punctual with this call that it seemed to the boys as if he must have been awake for hours, watching for the star to rise blood-red above the eastern horizon. But years of bush travel, of watching restless cattle, and of sleeping under the threat of danger from prowling

blacks had made the man respond immediately to any noise or unusual sight. There was no period of stretching or yawning. Mick was asleep one instant, and fully awake the next and shouting "Daylight". The black boys were also light sleepers, trained out of their native laziness by association with alert whites. There was Yarloo, who had come in from the west with Boss Stobart's message and had joined the white man's plant at once; and Ranui, a tall fine man from North Queensland, who showed both in his build and name a trace of Malay blood; and Ted and Teedee, two boys who had been with Mick since they were "little fellas".

As soon as the morning call sounded, the black stockmen rolled out of their camp-sheets, picked up their bridles, and went off in the grey light on the tracks of the hobbled horses. Their skill in tracking was a constant source of wonder to the boys. The type of country didn't seem to matter at all; soft sand or hard stony tableland was all the same to them; they tracked the wandering horses with as much careless certainty as if they could actually see them, though on some nights they had strayed, in search of feed, several miles away from camp.

When the black boys had gone, Sax and Vaughan collected wood for the morning fire, raked last night's ashes together, and made a blaze. Then they filled the seven quart-pots with water and set them near the flame to boil for breakfast.

The drover was always busy in the early hours. There was probably a piece of horse-gear to mend, a broken or faulty girth, the stuffing of a saddle which had become lumpy, or a buckle which had torn away. When these were all in order, there was the everlasting "damper" to make. Vaughan volunteered to become assistant cook if Mick would give him lessons in the great bush art of damper-making.

"You'd better start on Johnny-cakes," said the drover. "The mixture's just the same, but if you make a mess you won't spoil a whole damper. You watch me to-day. You can try your hand to-morrow, if you like."

It was still an hour or so before sunrise when the white boys had their first lesson in bush cookery. Mick went over to one of the packs and pulled out a seventy-pound bag of flour about half full. He untied the mouth of the bag and took out a tin of baking-powder. Then he spread a folded sack on the sand, and piled on it about five double handfuls of flour, mixing a lidful of baking-powder with it. He gave this a good stir round, dry as it was, and then made a hollow in the middle and poured in water in which a little salt had been dissolved. The proper mixing of the dough only came by experience, Mick told them; as dry as possible and yet damp enough to stick together. The work was done quickly but thoroughly.

"If you wanted it for a damper," explained Mick, giving the dough a final roll, "you'd put the whole lot in together. But I'll show you Johnny-cakes first; they're easier and don't take so long."

He divided the dough into little pieces and rolled each out in his hands till it was the size and shape of an ordinary bun. He arranged these on the bag and pulled it near the fire. "I always let the things rise for a couple of minutes," he said. "Some chaps don't, but I always do."

Then he prepared the fire for cooking. Every fragment of blazing wood was put on one side, and a heap of soft glowing ashes left. With a curved stick, this pile was scooped about till it was like a very big saucer, all glowing hot and yet not actually burning. On this warm bed the Johnny-cakes were dropped, leaving a space between each so that they wouldn't run together. When all the white balls of dough were in place, Mick flicked some of the ashes from the edge of the hollow on to them, gradually increasing the amount till the cakes were covered right over and the whole affair was a mound of grey with no sign of the cooking cakes.

"How long before they're done?" asked Vaughan.

"Depends," answered Mick. "Depends on the size of them and the heat of the fire. I don't like the fire too hot. We'll have a look at these in about a quarter of an hour."

At the end of that time the top of the pile of ashes had begun to crack here and there with the upward pressure of the rising Johnny-cakes. Mick scooped one of them out from the edge. It was brown and hard on the outside, with a most appetizing smell, and a soft ring round it where the top had pulled away, just like the top on a loaf of bread. To the boy's surprise, the cakes were quite clean, and a few flicks with a wisp of leaves left them as free from sand or ashes as if they had been baked in an oven. Mick tapped the cake with his knuckles. "Another couple of minutes won't hurt," he said.

Presently the distant sound of a jangling stock-bell was heard, and a few minutes later the horses came into camp, lead by an old black mare who carried a bell, and driven by the four black boys riding bareback. Everything was bustle for a few minutes. The horses were again hobbled to prevent them from straying, and then the men all settled down to breakfast. Vaughan usually took charge of the tea. Directly a quart-pot came to the boil, he tipped in some sugar and a pinch of tea, and moved the pot away from the fire. Sax superintended the tucker—a slab of damper, or a Johnny-cake, and a chunk of salt meat for each man. These are the bush rations year in and year out: meat, damper, and tea. Breakfast was eaten quickly, and then the pack-bags were weighted evenly and fastened up, horses caught and saddled, a final look given round the camp to see that nothing was left behind, and the three white men set out in a certain direction

with no track and with no guidance of any kind except that of the sun, followed at once by the plant of horses driven by the blacks.

All day they rode, silent for the most part, but occasionally Mick would answer a question as to a tree, a strange track, or a feature on the horizon. No other living thing was seen hour after hour, save a solitary eagle high in the air, a few lizards darting about the clumps of porcupine grass, and ants and flies. These latter pests are the curse of the back country. The weather was hot. That day and on several others one hundred and thirty degrees was reached, and even that temperature was exceeded now and then over sandhills and plains which quivered in the heat. But the boys would not have minded the heat if the flies had only left them alone. Long before dawn, before even the morning star had risen, flies buzzed around them, making life well-nigh unbearable.

A halt was made about noon for dinner, the packs and saddles taken off the horses for an hour, and then the journey was resumed, each man riding a fresh horse, for no one rides the same horse all day in Central Australia, if he can possibly help it.

Evening camp was usually made near a water-hole or native well, but sometimes the horses had to go as long as two days without a drink. They were unsaddled and hobbled out, and allowed to roam about all night and pick up scanty bits of food. It amazed the white boys to see what very little herbage of any kind there was for an animal to live on. No grass; just a dry uninviting bush here and there, growing up out of loose barren sand, with, at long intervals, a clump of twisted mulga trees. Yet the horses "did" well, and certainly the thousand T.D.3 bullocks which had come down from the territory looked none the worse for their trip over country just as barren as the boys were now camped on.

After tea was the time the two white boys enjoyed most, for Mick would light his pipe then, prop himself up against his swag, and, with a quart-pot of tea by his side, tell them yarns about the back country. Many of these narratives included Boss Stobart, for he and Mick had gone about together a great deal, and had established overland droving records which are still unbeaten. He told of drought and flood, of thirst and hunger, of cattle rushes and disease, of mining camps, of Afghans and their camels, of Chinamen and opium, of grog shanties, of troopers, of wild blacks and still wilder whites, until his listeners' minds flamed at the thought that they, even they, were in the country where such adventures had taken place—and perhaps some day would be met with by themselves. And at night, when they lay out on their swags under the cool sky, which looked so much farther away than it did in cities, and heard the high quavering hunting-call of the dingo, their thoughts would go, not towards the scenes where they had spent their boyhood, but onwards into the unknown.

One day, when the routine of "the road" had gone on for more than a fortnight, they were crossing a broad expanse of hard stony country, shut in on the north by dense mulga scrub, when Sax noticed a thin column of smoke rising from the trees a few miles away. He could hardly believe his eyes, and when he looked again it was no longer coming up from the trees, but was rising up and up and fading away against the flawless blue of the sky. He was about to call Vaughan's attention to it when his horse stumbled and nearly fell. Next time he looked to the north the smoke was again rising from the trees, and then again it was cut off, and floated away and was lost.

His curiosity was thoroughly roused. "Mick!" he shouted, for by this time the boys had dropped the "Mr." when speaking to their drover friend. "Mick! Is that *smoke* over there in the trees?"

"Sure it's smoke," he answered. "And so's that ahead there." He pointed across the plain, where the heat was dancing, to a little hill. It must have been eight miles away, and from it rose a thin coil of smoke. At first Sax thought it was merely the effect of the sun causing everything in the distance to quiver and take on fantastic shapes, but he trusted the bushman's eyes, and at last convinced himself that it was indeed smoke.

"Then somebody must be camped there," said Vaughan.

"Is it a station, Mick, or just chaps travelling like ourselves?" asked Sax.

"It's niggers, lad. They're signalling to one another."

The columns of smoke were at once invested with a new interest to the two boys. Natives were near them, unseen, sending messages to other natives at a distance. The simplicity of this bush telegraphy was fascinating.

"What are they saying, Mick, d'you know?" asked Vaughan eagerly.

"This lot," said the drover, "is telling that other lot over there that we're coming. So many white men, so many blacks, and so many horses. We're getting into nigger country now."

"Will we see them?" asked the boys.

"No chance in life," replied the drover. "These niggers are wild and scared to death of white men. They're different from the camp blacks who hang round stations. They'll likely be station

blacks themselves some day, for the wild nigger's dying out. But just now, they keep away and live their own lives. We call them warraguls."

## CHAPTER VII

### Stealthy Foes

Next morning, when the horses came in, two were missing. "Which way them two horses sit down?" Mick asked one of the boys. "What for you no bring um in?"

"Him dead," was the answer.

"Dead!" exclaimed the drover. "How dead?"

"Him speared," explained Yarloo.

"Which way? You show um me." The drover saddled his horse and went away with Yarloo, while the two white boys gave the other stockmen their breakfast, wondering what had taken Mick off in such a hurry.

Mick Darby found the two dead horses. By their tracks they had evidently strayed away from the others, and by other tracks it was clear that blacks had crept upon them in the dim light of dawn and had speared them, for the bodies were still warm. Mick always carried a bottle of strychnine about with him, and at every camp he poisoned little bits of meat and left them behind to kill the dingoes which abound in cattle country. He looked at the two horses—fine, stanch animals, both of them—and his heart became hot with anger. He put his hand to his belt and fingered the poison pouch. It was a great temptation. If the blacks had speared the horses for food, here was a chance for revenge. If he poisoned the carcass and killed the blacks, would it not be a terrible warning to the others?

But it was only for a second that the ghastly thought attracted him. He was a true white man and would not stoop to any hidden revenge. It is a white man's way to face his enemy in the open and under the sun, not to kill him by putting strychnine in his food. So Mick turned away and rode back to camp, and did not tell the boys what danger they were in.

Next day smoke signals were all around them and very close. It gave the boys a feeling that keen black eyes were peering at them from every bit of cover, and that lithe forms were slinking noiselessly from tree to tree, never turning a stone or breaking a twig to disturb the silence of the desert.

That evening they unpacked and unsaddled the horses early, and tied them up till after tea. Then Mick rode away with them himself, hobbled them on an open patch of dry bush, and prepared to watch throughout the night. He knew the native method of attack: a little, then a little more. If two horses had been killed last night, three or four might be speared this night. To lose their horses would leave the party at the mercy, not only of the blacks, but also of a more terrible enemy still—thirst. So the brave bushman was going to take no risks.

The spot he had chosen was a little plain covered with dry buck-bush and surrounded on all sides with mulga scrub. There was plenty of feed to keep the horses quiet all night, but Mick was obliged to ride round them again and again and turn them back from the scrub. He was perfectly sure that wild natives were in ambush behind the trees, and that the first animal who wandered within range of a spear-cast would become a victim. The moon was half-full in a cloudless sky, and the drover had no difficulty in seeing, but, after an hour or two, he had the greatest difficulty in the world to keep awake. The night was warm and still and drowsy, and the day had been one of constant tension, and as the drover sat with cocked rifle and with the horse's bridle looped over his arm, he must have nodded once or twice through sheer weariness.

Suddenly he heard a stone move on another stone. He was fully awake and alert instantly. The horses were still in the middle of the plain, quietly feeding, but one or two of them were looking at an old tree stump in the curious meditative way which resting animals have of looking at things which are of no particular interest.

All at once Mick Darby sprang to his feet. He had never seen that tree stump before. For several hours he had looked at that little plain in the moonlight, and every bush was pictured on his memory. He was absolutely sure that old tree had not been there when he started to nod with weariness. Then, how had it come? Trees do not grow from the ground, become old, and die and lose most of their branches in less than an hour of a summer's night.

Mick put his cocked rifle to his shoulder, trained the sights on the tree stump, and walked slowly towards it. The thing was about a hundred and fifty yards away when he started. He had

covered a third of the distance when the tree suddenly disappeared. Remarkable as it may appear, it is a fact. One moment he saw the thick twisted trunk of a mulga tree with a few broken branches, standing out on an otherwise treeless plain; the next it had gone completely. But, instead of the tree, three wriggling black forms glided between the bushes with the stealth of snakes, making for their lives towards the scrub. They were three warragul blacks, who had crept out into the plain and had used this wonderful but quite common method of concealment.

Mick fired into the air to frighten them and any of their companions who might be lurking near. When the report had died away, the darkness under the trees became full of little sounds like the patter of rain on leaves, or like sheep passing over soft sand; a scarcely perceptible sound, yet one which told of black savages creeping for safety into the depths of the scrub.

The shot woke the two boys. They turned to one another for an explanation and saw that Mick had not returned. His swag still lay where it had been tossed off the horse. They got up from their blankets and began fastening their boots. They saw Yarloo sitting up on the other side of the fire and called him to them. Yarloo always camped away from the other black boys, for he was a member of a different tribe.

"What was that shot, Yarloo?" asked Sax.

"Me can't know um," replied the boy. "Boss, him no come back. P'raps him bin shoot, eh?"

"Which way did he go?" asked Sax again. "It sounded quite close."

"Me find um all right."

"I vote we go too," said Vaughan.

Yarloo looked at him for a moment in hesitation; then he pointed to the other blacks and said: "No two fella white man go. No leave um camp quite 'lone. See?"

"He's right, Boof," said Sax. "You go with Yarloo. I'll stay," and as his friend and the black boy disappeared in the darkness, he heaped wood on the fire and blew it into a blaze.

Yarloo tracked Mick Darby with absolute certainty and found him within half a mile of the camp. The drover was surprised to see the white boy, and at once made use of Yarloo to put the horses together in a bunch and hold them for a time. He told Vaughan what had happened, for it was no good trying to keep the secret any longer. "We lost two horses last night," he said. "I told you they'd cleared out. But it wasn't that. The niggers had speared them."

"Then that's what the smoke signals meant?" asked Vaughan.

"Yes. I wasn't sure at first whether it was hunger or devilment, so I watched. They tried to get in amongst the horses again to-night."

"Did you hit anyone?" asked Vaughan.

"No. I didn't try. I fired into the air to scare them."

By this time Yarloo had walked round the horses, turning them towards the middle of the plain, and was squatting down on his haunches, watching.

"That's a real good sort of a nigger," said Mick. "He's got more sense than most of them. Seems to have taken to you boys. I wonder why."

"He used to work for Sax's father," explained Vaughan. "I thought you knew."

"I see. That explains it. Hi! Yarloo!" he called, and when the boy came up: "You go back longa camp. Watch till piccaninny daylight. No shut um eye, mind."

Yarloo grinned his understanding of the order and disappeared. Then the seasoned bushman and the new-chum white boy kept watch, turn and turn about till dawn. At least, that was the arrangement, but Vaughan found that the drover fell so soundly asleep, and seemed to be so very tired, that he did not wake him till the morning star was well above the trees and had turned from fierce red to clear pale silver in a sky which was rapidly becoming lighter.

## CHAPTER VIII

### First Sight of the Musgraves

Next day Mick Darby rode with cocked rifle in the lead of the plant. The white boys were not with him. They rode twenty or thirty yards in the rear of the mounted blacks, ready to give

instant alarm of any danger. But for nearly a week nothing unusual happened. A few smoke signals were seen, but were so far away that they seemed to indicate that the wild blacks had taken warning and were retiring to their bush fastnesses, having been convinced that it was beyond their power to trick a watchful white man.

Night after night the horses were hobbled on the best feed that could be found, and were watched from sunset till dawn. The white boys took their turn at this work, at first together, but, as night followed night, and there was no sign of the blacks, Mick allowed them to take their watches alone. This experience did more than any other to impress them with Central Australia: its silence, its absolute loneliness, its vastness and the puny insignificance of man, who dared to pit his power against it.

As hour after hour went by, and Sax or Vaughan rode round the horses or squatted on the ground with the quietly breathing saddle-horse standing near, these lads were slowly but surely changed from school-boys to men. They felt that they were face to face with the power of untamed nature—the desert and the savage inhabitants of it—and that even they were units in an army of progress which was conquering that nature and making it minister to the needs of civilized man. Of course, these were not their actual thoughts, but that was certainly the general effect which night-watching had upon them.

Six days went by in this way and it appeared as if all danger was past. The party had been making towards a low range of hills on the western horizon, and on the seventh day the plant passed up a little valley and halted on the top for midday camp.

Through the clean sun-filled air of Central Australia the view was so clear that all sense of distance was lost, and objects many days away seemed no farther off than a few hours' ride. The character of the country was the same as that which they had travelled over since leaving Oodnadatta: masses of scanty mulga scrub standing out dark on a landscape of vast bare plains or rolling sand-hills. Far away, a pale-blue silhouette against the bright north-west sky, was a range of high mountains.

"Those are the Musgraves," said Mick, in answer to a question. "That's where those niggers come from who speared my two horses."

"Are the niggers very wild?" asked Sax, thinking of his father.

"They're the last that really are wild in this part of the country," answered the drover. "The rest have either come in and made camps near stations, or cleared right out into West Australia."

"Are there many of them?" asked Vaughan.

"Nobody really knows," replied Mick. "The Musgraves is a big slice of country, as you can see, and it stretches back for a couple of hundred miles north. They say there's plenty of water and game in those mountains. Chaps used to go there after gold, but so few of them came back that they chucked it and left the place alone. The Musgraves have got a bad name."

Mick Darby did not know that everything he said had a very personal application to one at least of his companions. The words of his father's note kept ringing in Sax's ears: "In difficulties. Musgrave Ranges. In difficulties. Musgrave Ranges," and his vivid imagination filled all sorts of details into the drover's bare statements about the dangers of the place. He noticed Yarloo looking intently at the distant peaks, and when he caught the boy's eye, a significant glance passed between them. They were both thinking of the lonely white man.

But imaginary dangers soon gave place to present interests. The saddle of the hills where they were camped was the eastern boundary of Sidcotinga Station, the run on which Mick was going to take up the duties of head stockman, and the boys were keen to note every landmark which he pointed out.

"How big is it, Mick?" asked Vaughan.

"Between six and seven thousand square miles."

"Miles! You mean acres, don't you, Mick?"

"Acres be blowed! No, miles. This isn't a cocky farmer's cow-paddock."

The extent of country amazed the boys. They were standing on a pretty high hill and could see over a vast scope of country, but Mick told them that a certain landmark near the head station was not even in sight, and that the run stretched on beyond that again for miles and miles.

"But how ever do you know when you've gone off the run?" asked Sax. "Is it fenced?"

Mick Darby laughed heartily. "Fenced!" he exclaimed. "Fenced! Oh my hat! No, lad, there's not a fence between here and glory, except round a little bit of a paddock where they keep the working horses over night. Why, d'you know that to fence Sidcotinga Station you'd need nearly four hundred miles of fencing? There's no timber for the posts in this part of the country, and as

for wire— No, they don't use fences in Central Australia."

This was such a new point of view to the boys, that during the afternoon's ride they asked innumerable questions of their kind-hearted friend. They heard that cattle are kept on any particular run because of the impossibility of their wandering more than a certain distance away from their water-hole. In fact, a run is made up of permanent waters and the area of country around them. There may be any amount of good feed on other parts of the run, but unless it is within reach of water it is absolutely useless.

The only chance that cattle have of straying is after rain, which falls very, very seldom in Central Australia. When it does fall, the stock wander off to new feeding-grounds, and may become stranded when the surface waters dry up. The stockmen are very busy at such times, tracking up cattle and bringing them back to their accustomed haunts.

All this and much more the boys learnt as they rode along, and although it seemed so new to them, there was a splendid sense that they were in it all, and that soon they would know these things from actual experience.

An experience of Central Australian life which might have ended fatally was to come to them sooner than they expected. Seeing that they were now on Sidcotinga Station country, and that they had not been molested for six days, Mick decided to let the horses go without being watched that night, taking the precaution of tying up his own saddle-horse in case of need.

Next morning all the boys had run away except Yarloo. He went out with a bridle at dawn and returned with the news that every one of the horses had been speared.

## CHAPTER IX

### Disaster

Breakfast was being prepared in camp when Yarloo brought in the terrible news. Mick Darby was greasing a couple of pack-girths, Vaughan was mixing a damper, and Sax was attending to the seven quart-pots near the fire and laying out the tucker on a clean bag. When Yarloo came in with his bridle in his hand, he did not say anything for a minute or two, but went over to the fire. He did not always go after the horses in the morning, for he was very useful at mending harness and doing odd jobs with the gear; therefore no one was surprised to see him back before the others. Presently Mick brought the two girths over to be warmed, so that the grease would sink right into the leather. He looked across the fire at Yarloo and saw an expression on the boy's face such as he had never seen there before. The native looked terribly scared. Mick had no idea what had upset the boy, and thought the fright was probably due to one of the many superstitions which are always liable to crop up. But he liked Yarloo, and asked him kindly: "What name, Yarloo? You see um Kadaitcha (avenging spirit), eh?"

The boy shook his head and fingered the bridle nervously.

"Which way Ranui, Ted, Teedee?" asked Mick again, noticing that the other boys had not come up and that it was getting near sunrise.

"Gone," said Yarloo.

It was not what was said so much as the tone of the boy's voice which made Mick look with sudden earnestness into Yarloo's face, and ask quickly: "Gone! What name you yabber gone? (What makes you say they've gone?)"

"Me think those three fella no come back," explained the boy. "Me track um up long way. They walk, walk. Oh my word, plenty walk." He pointed towards the distant mountains, and continued: "Me think they walk longa Musgraves."

Yarloo pronounced the word "Musgraves" in a tone of fear. It was a word to strike terror to the heart; a word which at once called to mind everything which was bad and treacherous and cruel about natives; a word which told of the last great stronghold of the blacks which white men had tried and tried again to take from them but without success. Sax and Vaughan looked at one another when the dreaded word "Musgraves" caught their ear. Yarloo saw their glance, and repeated, in a hopeless voice: "Me think they walk longa Musgraves."

"What time they go?" asked Mick, thinking that Yarloo must have made a mistake. "What time they start walk?"

The boy pointed to the western horizon and then shut his eyes, meaning that the others had started out directly it was dark after sunset last night. "Me see um track other black fella," he said. "Ranui, Ted, Teedee, they join those other black fella. Go 'way Go right 'way. Me think they



no come back."

Suddenly the meaning of it all flashed into Mick's mind. "And the horses?" he asked eagerly. "What name the horses?"

Yarloo did not answer.

Mick sprang across the fire and seized the startled boy by the arm and shook him in his eagerness to hear all that had happened during that fatal night. "You yabber quickfella! quickfella! (You tell me quickly!)" he shouted. "What name horses?"

"Them bin speared."

"Speared!" The word came from Mick's lips with a yell of horror. "Speared!"

"Yah. Alabout. (All of them.)"

Mick sprang towards his own saddle-horse, which had been tied up all night. He unhitched it and was across its back before the white boys had had time to realize the meaning of the terrible news. "Show me!" he shouted, and he and Yarloo disappeared at once on the track of the horses.

The boy's report was only too true. The Musgrave blacks, who had not molested them for six nights, had done the most dastardly thing possible under the circumstances. They had stolen forward that night and speared every one of the hobbled horses. They evidently did not want food, for, as Mick and Yarloo went from one dead body to another, they saw that not a single piece of meat had been cut off. It was hate and not hunger which had actuated the deed. The poor faithful workers, some of whom had been the drover's companions for several years, were cold and stiff, showing that they must have been killed early the night before.

The tracks of bare native feet made it clear that, after completing their acts of cold-blooded murder—for it was nothing less—the warragul blacks had crept towards the drover's camp. They had approached it on the black boys' side of the fire and had thus missed seeing Mick's saddle-horse, which was tied to a tree near its master. The rest of the story was easy to read. The wild blacks had enticed the camp boys away, and Ranui, Ted, and Teedee had left everything behind them and had fled with the horse-killers through the night in the direction of the ill-famed Musgrave Ranges.

Mick's boys had actually taken no part in the killing; that was one thing in their favour. Another satisfaction, which stood out like a dull gleam of light in the grim dark tragedy, was that now there were three fewer men to share their limited supply of water. But the greatest good of all, in fact the only real ray of hope, was the fact that one horse was still left, Mick's stanch gelding, Ajax. If the drover had not fastened him up the evening before, and he had shared the fate of his companions, the outlook for the four men would have been black indeed. It was far blacker than they at first thought it to be, for one important thing was not found out till later, and when it was it took the bravest of brave hearts to stand up against such dire disaster. The marauders had taken all the water-canteens except one which had evidently escaped their notice by being near Mick's head. It contained a little over three gallons!

Eighty miles from water, in the heart of the sandy scrub-covered desert in blazing summer weather, with only a canteen half-full of water to serve four men!

It is under such circumstances as these that manhood is put to the test. All four men rose to the occasion. Sax and Vaughan, though still lads as regards their age, were in reality men. Nothing but the unconquerable spirit of man can survive in the battle against grim nature in the Central Australian desert, and these two, who had but a short time before been sitting in the classroom of a city school, had faced difficulties and had won through, by sheer pluck and resolution, and had therefore earned the right to be called men.

Yarloo showed his faithfulness on this occasion when it would have been so much easier for him to run away. Because he always slept some distance away from the other boys, he had not known of their silent departure in the night, but once he saw the terrible difficulties in which the little party had been placed, it would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to clear out and leave the three whites to their fate. He could even have stolen the horse in order to make his escape absolutely sure. He was a native, and could live and travel through the desert scrub day after day when a white man would certainly perish. He had been born and brought up to such a life, and when he threw in his lot with the three stranded white men, he was, in reality, jeopardizing his own chances of coming through the adventure alive. He chose to be faithful to his companions rather than make sure of his own safety.

Yarloo was a good boy and had therefore always been treated well by white men. He had not had many masters, and one of them stood out above all others in his primitive mind. He had been Boss Stobart's boy for years, and though he might work for other white men now and again—as in this case he was working for Mick—he remained at heart faithful to one man, first and last, and that man was Boss Stobart. Therefore it was probably not only Yarloo's naturally fine spirit which prompted him to stick to his companions when they were in trouble, but also the fact that one of them was the son of his real Boss. He felt that Sax was definitely in his own personal charge, and, though his simple mind did not know how it could possibly be brought about, he felt that some

day he would be the means of reuniting father and son.

Mick Darby also proved himself equal to the occasion. In fact the sheer manhood of him rose supreme above every difficulty and triumphed over one disaster after another. There are some men whose stories are far greater than their actual achievements, and at times, when the drover had been telling yarns to the boys after sunset, they had wondered whether these things could possibly be true. It was not that they doubted their friend's veracity, but the country, the men, and therefore the happenings were so strange to the lads that they seemed to have an existence only in books and not to be possible in real life. But now Mick showed the stuff he was made of. When he had found out all there was to learn, about what the blacks had done, and exactly what position the party was left in, he stopped thinking about that part of the question and set his mind to solve the problem of the immediate future.

The first necessity was breakfast, and they ate heartily and drank sparingly, but enough to quench their thirst. Then Mick beckoned to Yarloo to sit down near him, handed his plug to the boy, and when he had broken off a pipeful, he jammed his own black brier to the brim and started to smoke. When he started to speak, he did so equally to all three men, black and white alike. Yarloo had definitely and of his own free will chosen to share whatever fate was in store for them, and had earned the right to be included in everything which they did. The boy did not presume on this unusual act of the white man; it is only a weak-spirited man who presumes.

"I reckon we're eighty miles from Sidcotinga Station. You think it, Yarloo?" asked Mick, turning to the boy.

The native faced in the direction of the station and considered, counting on his fingers. "Yah," he said at length. "Yah. Me think it two day ride, boss."

"Two days with a fresh horse, you mean," commented Mick. "Ajax hasn't had a drink for a whole day, remember.... That last water-hole's dry, and the one back of that's nearly a hundred miles from here.... So it must be Sidcotinga.... Let's see. We've got two and a half gallons of water, haven't we?"

The boys confirmed this estimate, and he went on:

"We needn't worry about tucker. We've got mobs of flour and sugar.... The question is: who's to ride ahead for water and horses. You lads don't know the way, so it's either Yarloo or me.... Yarloo's lighter on a horse than I am.... But he couldn't do as much as I could when he got there, supposing they were all out on the run.... Still, I could write a note to the cook, couldn't I?" He paused, considering, drawing in great breaths of smoke and puffing it out again on the still hot air till his head was surrounded by a cloud.

Yarloo was drawing blackfellow diagrams in the sand with a little stick, and looked as though he had made up his mind. So he had, but he waited for the white man to ask him for his opinion before giving it.

"What you think, Yarloo?" asked Mick, after a time. "You think it me or you ride Ajax longa Sidcotinga, bring um back water, horses, eh?"

Yarloo did not hesitate for a moment. "You ride, boss," he said decidedly. "You ride. Me stay here."

The tone surprised Mick, and he looked up quickly. "What name? (Why?)" he asked.

"White man drink more water nor black fella," he explained. "S'pose me stay, me drink little, little drop. Me think you drink big mob." He hesitated and dug the little stick into the ground with an embarrassed air. The boy had evidently got another reason, and his listeners wanted to hear it. He looked at Mick as if he didn't know whether he ought to say it or not, and then he blurted out: "You good white man all right, boss. You know um bush more better not big mob white men. (You know the bush better than most white men.) Yarloo know um bush much more better nor you, boss. Me bin grow up little piccaninny longa bush.... S'pose—s'pose you no come back.... S'pose you fall off horse.... S'pose you die, p'raps me find um water." He paused again, but it was clear that he had not finished.

"Good, Yarloo," said Mick encouragingly. "Go ahead."

"One time me work longa Boss Stobart," said the boy slowly and hesitatingly. "Him altogether good boss. Him plenty good quite. That one white boy," he pointed to Sax, "that one white boy, him belonga my old boss. Him belonga Boss Stobart.... Me stay, Misser Darby? You let Yarloo stay, eh?" The request was made in a voice of entreaty, as if the faithful native was asking a very great favour.

Mick at once complied with hearty good will. "Of course you stay, Yarloo. You stay all right. You look after white boy real good." Yarloo's face lit up with satisfaction and his expression assured the drover that the white boys would be perfectly safe in his hands.

Soon after coming to this decision, Mick Darby set out on Ajax for Sidcotinga Station. He knew that he would strike no water before reaching the homestead well, and that it was not at all

certain whether the already thirsty horse could travel those eighty desert miles without a drink. He did not tell the boys of his fear, but started away with a cheery good-bye, carrying only a quart-pot of water for himself as well as a little damper and dried meat.

Fortune favoured the brave man. On the very first night, after he had travelled his tired horse on past sunset as long as he dared, he found a big patch of parakelia. This extraordinary plant sends up thick moisture-filled leaves in the middle of the most arid desert. The juice, which can be easily squeezed from parakelia leaves, tastes bitter and is not at all pleasant, but it has saved the life of many a bold adventurer in Central Australia. Stock can live on it for weeks at a time without a drink of water, and once Ajax got a mouthful of these cool succulent leaves, he did not move more than a few yards all night, but satisfied his thirst and hunger and then lay down.

Mick Darby watched all night. He was taking no more chances. No doubt he fell asleep from time to time, but at the slightest movement anywhere near, he was instantly and fully awake. Next day he rode a thoroughly rested horse and reached Sidcotinga Station the same night, after having covered sixty-three miles. Such a distance would not be at all unusual in good country, but in the desert, with the sun blazing down out of a cloudless sky on mile after mile of soft sand, it was a ride which none but the best of horses and the hardiest of men could have accomplished.

The drover had advised the boys to stay just where they were till he returned, and not exhaust themselves by walking. Yarloo therefore built them a rough sun-shelter of mulga boughs and they rested under this all day, doing nothing which would create thirst. In spite of every care, however, their mouths were clammy and their throats calling out for water long before sunset. Once a real thirst is created, it takes more water to quench it than it does to keep the thirst away, so they each had a drink at tea-time and felt all the better for it.

Soon after tea, Yarloo, who had gone away, came in with a bundle of sticks. "Whatever's that for?" asked Sax. Neither of the boys had got into the way of addressing the natives in broken English. "You're surely not going to make a fire, are you?"

Yarloo had to think for a minute or two before he understood what the white boy had said, and then he nodded his head. "Yah," he replied. "Me make um fire. S'pose um bad black-fella come up."

"But how about us?" objected Vaughan. "We'll be roasted alive."

The native did not catch the meaning of this remark, but he answered the question which Vaughan had in his mind. "By'm bye when it cool," Yarloo pointed to the sky, "we walk little bit."

"But Mick told us to stay here," said Vaughan again.

"Me think bad black-fella come up to-night," explained Yarloo, with great patience. "S'pose him see um fire, him think: 'White man sleep'. Then him creep up, spear-um, spear-um. S'pose we light fire then walk, bad black-fella throw um spear, no good, no good at all. White man go 'way." Yarloo grinned both at the thought of the safety of the party and of the discomfiture of the blacks.

The lads saw the force of Yarloo's argument. A big fire was lit, as if in preparation for spending the night, and then the three men took the precious water, a little tucker, and as few personal belongings as possible, and set out in the direction of Sidcotinga Station, lead by the unerring instinct of their black companion. It was well that they did so. During the hours of moonlight, a small band of Musgrave niggers crept round the camp and remained in hiding. But directly the moon set, they advanced towards the dying fire, with spears poised and boomerangs ready for instant and deadly use. What would have happened if any hated white man had been asleep in that camp can be better imagined than described. No one would have been left alive. But, finding their prey had escaped, the would-be murderers vented their rage upon the saddles and pack-bags, tore them to shreds and threw them into the flames, and scattered into the fire as much of the provisions as was left after they had gorged themselves. They did not attempt to follow the three white men in the dark, and next day the little marauding band went after their fellows and joined them on the way to the Musgrave Ranges. All except one, and we will hear more of him later.

## CHAPTER X

### A Sandstorm

By Yarloo's faithfulness and forethought the little party had escaped death at the hands of wild savages, but a more deadly peril was waiting for them. It is one thing to fight with a human enemy, but quite another to fight with one which is not human. The lads were soon to see that the most terrible disasters of the desert are caused, not by wild and fiendishly cruel natives who follow silently day after day and then wreak their hatred on the traveller in the most unexpected

way, but by grim Nature herself. Nature was their greatest, their most merciless, their most unconquerable enemy. They were soon to have an illustration of her power.

On the night when their camp was raided, the three men walked till the moon set and then lay down to sleep. They did not light a fire for fear of showing the blacks where they were, but just scooped hollows in the warm sand and stretched themselves out with a camp-sheet as their only bed-clothes, for they had left everything else behind them. The white boys were soon asleep, but Yarloo kept himself awake all night to watch. It was one of the hardest things the boy had ever done, for he was very tired and the heavy warm night made him drowsy. His simple mind fixed itself on one thing with all the determination of his nature; he had one purpose and one purpose only in life just then, and that was to preserve Boss Stobart's son from death, and he kept himself awake by sheer will-power. But when the morning star rose above the eastern horizon, red and throbbing, the tired-out black-fellow knew that his weary watch was over. He flopped down on the sand and was instantly asleep.

The close night was followed by a sultry dawn. Instead of the sparkingly clear pale sky in the east which usually heralds the rising of the sun, a dull haze made everything appear heavy and listless. The air was warm and still, but not light and dry as it generally is in the desert, and it was so heavy that every breath was an effort, and the slightest movement caused perspiration to break out all over the body.

The boys woke up with a most uncomfortable feeling of oppression. They were hot and thirsty, yet they dared not touch the canteen of water. Although the sun had not risen, the heat seemed to be greater than they had ever known it before in the open air, and they lay and fanned their faces and fought the flies which were swarming around them.

When the sun rose, it showed a few little white clouds like puffs of steam, low down in the northern sky, and hiding the distant Musgrave Ranges from view. The sight of clouds is so unusual in Central Australia that the boys remarked about it to one another, and were amazed to see the difference which occurred in less than half an hour. The clouds had indeed risen and increased greatly during that short time. Instead of a few separate clouds, a big solid bank was now spreading all over the horizon, and huge pillars of white were stretching out from the main mass, far up into the sky.

Yarloo slept late, but when he woke up, he too stood and watched the rising clouds. He evidently did not like the look of things, for he shook his head, and, in reply to a question from Sax, replied:

"Me no like it. Me think it storm come up."

To the hot and thirsty white boys the word "storm" had only one meaning, and they uttered it together: "Rain!"

Yarloo smiled. "Neh," he replied. "Rain no come up. Me think it wind. P'raps sand. Me no like it." He set about building a little fire for breakfast, and though his companions were not in the least bit hungry, they followed his example and ate some damper and dried meat. Each man was allowed half a quart-pot of tea. Sax and Vaughan drank theirs with the meal, but Yarloo took a few sips and then put his quart-pot away in a safe place.

There was nothing to do all morning. Yarloo again made a little sun-shelter, but this became unnecessary after about ten o'clock, because by that time the rising clouds had covered the face of the sun. With every succeeding hour the oppressive heat seemed to get more and more unbearable. There was not a breath of wind. It was as if a lot of thick blankets were slowly smothering every living creature on the earth. The clouds were no longer white, except at the front edges and in places where a few great puffs bulged out. The rest was grey, getting darker and darker till it was near the horizon, and then it turned to brown. This brown looked like a huge curtain hung from the sky and trailing over the earth. Now and again it was lit up by flashes of lurid red, for all the world as if a furnace were roaring behind that curtain.

The air was absolutely still, deathlike still, and a sound which was exactly like the roaring of a furnace came out of the north, with an occasional louder boom when the pent-up fury of the storm burst through the brown cloud. In reality, the sound was made by millions of particles of sand being hurtled through the air by an electric storm.

The sound came nearer. The clouds were completely overhead now, from north to south, from east to west. There was not a patch of blue to be seen. The panting earth waited in abject fear. A puff of wind came, hot and stifling, as if an oven door had suddenly been opened. It passed over the mulgas, making them sigh and moan, and then was gone again, leaving the same breathless stillness. Another puff, this time cool and fresh. It also passed away and left the men with dread in their hearts—the dread of an unknown, unseen foe.

The storm was very near. Sax was watching it so intently that he jumped round suddenly when Yarloo touched him on the arm. The black-fellow was pointing to the canteen. "Drink, little drop," he said, and pointed to the approaching curtain of brown sand. He evidently meant that the boys would be better able to stand against the storm if they had a drink beforehand, so Sax motioned to Vaughan and poured a little water out into the two pannikins. Neither of them spoke.

They were overawed by the might, the majesty, the mystery of Nature.

Vaughan drank his water and lay down under the shelter. Sax did not screw the top on the canteen for a moment, intending to pour a few drops back again when he had finished. He held his hand over the hole in the canteen and started to drink from his pannikin.

Suddenly the storm burst on them. Sax heard a terrific rushing sound and looked round quickly. He was at once blinded as completely as if an actual thick brown curtain had been blown around his head. At the same time, some tremendous force caught him, nearly lifted him off the ground, and threw him down sprawling on the sand several yards away. The pannikin was wrenched from his hand, and the canteen—what of the canteen?

Sax lay stunned for a moment, and then his first and only thought was the canteen. He tried to crawl, but every effort on his part only gave the enormous pressure of wind opportunity to drive him back, for as soon as he lifted his head, it was caught and twisted as if some soft strangling folds of cloth were being pulled around it from behind.

The light of the sun was blotted out completely, and it was as dark as a starless midnight. A screaming sound filled the boy's ears: the yelling of the storm, the laughter of the furies, the shrill shouts of fiends. He had to shield his mouth in order to breathe, and even then a fine dust choked his throat, and he would have coughed and vomited up his very life if he had not turned his back to the storm. Enormous quantities of sand were crowding the gale.

Have you ever stood under a waterfall and let a solid column of water fall on you from a height? You can stand there only for a moment, because the power of even a liquid is greater than the strength of man. But here, in the desert, three exhausted men were fighting for their lives with sand; sand, as solid as it could possibly be without being actually fixed; sand, as hard as it could possibly be, and yet be driven by the wind. The electric gale of wind had scooped the surface off a thousand miles of desert, and was flinging it at three puny human beings.

It was impossible to face the onslaught. Sax turned against the storm and tried to crawl backwards. At all costs he must find the canteen. He had no thought but this: the canteen! the canteen! Three lives depended on those drops of precious liquid. Were they safe? He crawled backwards inch by inch. But he had lost all sense of direction. The stinging, stifling sand, the shrill-screaming wind, the pitch-black whirling darkness; how could a man possibly tell where he was going?

Stobart's senses were all numb with the buffeting of the storm, but he suddenly felt that one of his legs was being held. He tried to kick free but was pulled backwards, and then something flapped and covered him. There was instant peace. He had found a shelter. Outside this unknown something which covered him the gale raged past in impotent fury. He was safe. An arm gripped his body and held him close.

The sudden reaction from fighting for his life to this secure peace was too much for the overwrought boy. He did not bother to find out who or what had saved him; he sank down, down, down into unconsciousness, and as the peaceful darkness closed over his mind, he muttered the words: "Canteen, canteen, canteen."

No one heard. No one could possibly hear in such a storm, not even the man who was holding him so closely. It was Yarloo. The boy had found his master's son, and had covered his head with a coat, and was now holding the unconscious form in his arms, while Sax drew long, unhindered breaths.

The storm passed. It had come upon them suddenly, and it went away in the same manner. There was very little lessening of its fury to tell of the approaching end, but the air grew lighter all at once, the sounds got fainter quickly, and there was now no longer any stinging sand. The brown curtain passed on, trailing its fringe over the desert, and the back of it could be seen as distinctly as the front had been a short half-hour before.

A short half-hour before? Yes. The sandstorm had lasted barely thirty minutes. It was so local, that Mick, riding along towards Sidcotinga Station only forty miles away, knew nothing about it. Such tremendous fury as these electric storms display is possible only when they concentrate their power on a very small area. This one had probably swept across a thousand miles of desert, and might go on for a thousand more before it spent itself. It had come across the great tableland behind the Musgrave Ranges, had been brought to a narrow point down one of the gorges in the mountains, and had hurled itself at the three defenceless men. It was a messenger of death from the Musgrave Ranges, the mysterious, dreaded, fascinating Musgrave Ranges.

The air behind the storm was cool and bright and clean. Not a spot of rain had fallen, but there was the same new-washed freshness about everything which comes after a sudden summer shower. The blue of the sky seemed clearer and more flawless than it had ever seemed before, in contrast with the depressing sultriness of the morning, and even the sun, shining down without the thinnest veil to lessen its fiery strength, seemed to look with a less unfriendly eye than usual.

And what did it see? Vaughan had been under the sun-shelter when the storm broke. The first gust had blown the flimsy structure down flat, and the weight of sand, which poured immediately on to it, prevented it from being blown away. The frightened white boy had been pinned under

the fallen boughs and had been unable to get free while the storm lasted. It had been a fortunate accident for him, for he was compelled to lie still, in perfect safety, while the gale surged over him, instead of trying, as his friend Sax had done, to match his puny strength against it.

Poor Sax had been absolutely winded. In his anxiety to find the canteen, he had exhausted his strength in fighting the storm, and had no power left to breathe in such a stifling atmosphere. He might easily have been choked if Yarloo had not found him.

The native was desert born and bred, and knew how to act in every contingency that could possibly occur in the bush. He had seen Sax blown down with the first effort of the storm, and though he himself could neither see nor hear, because of the sand and wind, he had gradually forced his way towards his master's son, with a sure instinct which did not stop to wonder what he was doing or why he was doing it. He had found him at last, and had held his unconscious body tight, shielding it with his coat and with his own body till the gale should pass over.

A few minutes afterwards, while Vaughan was fighting his way out of the broken-down sun-shelter, and Yarloo was bending over the still body of the other white boy, Sax opened his eyes.

"The canteen," he mumbled. "The canteen."

His friends thought that he wanted a drink, and Vaughan looked round for the canteen. It was nowhere to be seen. Sax was not really hurt, and his anxiety restored him to full consciousness in a minute or two. He sat up and watched Vaughan hunting round for their most precious possession, the canteen. At last he staggered to his feet, tottered about for a step or two because his head was so dizzy, and then began to help in the search. He did not dare to tell the others what he feared, but when he finally stumbled against it, half buried in the sand about twenty yards away from camp, he found that the worst had happened.

The canteen was empty.

Sax had not screwed down the metal cap when the water-carrier had been caught by the wind and hurled along the ground. For several minutes its own smoothness had kept it moving, and had prevented it from lodging against anything and being buried, but each roll and jolt had spilt some of the water, till finally every drop had been wasted on the parched sand. Then, when all the harm which was possible had been done, the useless thing had jammed up against a dead mulga root and had been slowly covered with sand.

When the truth fully dawned upon them, the two boys sat down on the ground and stared hopelessly in front of them. Although they had been in the North only for a brief period, they knew that they were face to face with one of the most terrible things which could have happened to them in the desert. A man can go without food for several days, but water is an absolute daily necessity. The sandstorm had left the white boys weak, and as they had already stinted themselves of water for the last day and a half, they were in no condition to meet this new calamity.

Gradually the sun exerted its old sway over the earth, and the boys were obliged to seek some shade. They helped Yarloo rebuild the old shelter, and sat down under it, with their only possessions—one pannikin, one badly torn camp-sheet, and an empty canteen. Everything else had been blown away or absolutely spoilt.

Towards the middle of the afternoon, when, nearly sixty miles to the west of them, Mick was drawing near Sidcotinga Station, Yarloo went out from the shelter for a few minutes. He had been very thoughtful for the last hour, and had evidently just made up his mind on some important matter. When he returned he was carrying his quart-pot, which was a little more than a quarter full of tea. The boy had jammed the pannikin lid on tight that morning and had hidden it in the sand, and the storm had not done it any harm. He showed the tea to his companions, but did not give the pot into their eager hands till he had explained what he intended to do.

"Me go 'way," he said.

The white boys did not pay any attention to this remark. Here was something to drink, and they were parched with thirst.

"Me go 'way," repeated Yarloo. "Me come back by'm bye.... P'raps me find um water ... p'raps me find um parakelia."

His companions did not reply. What did it matter? Why this "perhaps, perhaps" when here was the certainty of at least a mouthful of tea for each? But Yarloo waited for a moment or two, and then went on patiently:

"Me come back to-morrow 'bout same time.... White boy stay here ... no go 'way. No go 'way, mind.... Sax," he said timidly, using the name for the first time, "Sax, you no go 'way, eh?"

"No. No. Of course we won't go away, Yarloo," was the impatient answer. "But how long are you going to keep hold of that quart-pot?"

"Me come back to-morrow 'bout same time," said Yarloo slowly. "S'pose me give it quart-pot,

you no drink um till to-morrow sunrise? ... to-morrow sunrise, eh?"

His meaning was perfectly clear. He was going to leave them the tea on condition that they didn't touch it till sunrise next day. The boys became angry at what they considered a foolish idea.

"What's the good of that to us?" asked Vaughan hastily.

"Yes," agreed Sax. "Whatever's the good of such a fool idea? ... Besides, you've got no right to tell us when we're to have a drink and when we're not to have a drink. I'm thirsty. I'm going to have my share now.... Here, Yarloo, give me that quart-pot."

He held out his hand, but Yarloo stepped back. "Quart-pot belonga me," he said quietly.

The boy's statement was undoubtedly true. The tea was his, saved from his fair breakfast allowance, and, if he was good enough to part with it for the sake of the white boys, surely he had a right to dictate his own terms. Sax and Vaughan at once saw their mistake and began to feel a little foolish because of the attitude they had tried to take up. Yarloo was evidently in grim earnest, for he repeated his former question:

"S'pose me gib it quart-pot, you no drink um till to-morrow sunrise, eh?"

"All right, Yarloo," agreed Sax. "We'll not drink it till sunrise to-morrow.... But, look here," he exclaimed suddenly, realizing for the first time the tremendous sacrifice the black-fellow was making. "Look here! We mustn't take your tea. It's yours, Yarloo. Yours," he repeated, in order to make his meaning clear.

But Yarloo had already begun to scrape a hole in the sand. When it was deep enough, he put the precious quart-pot into it so that it could not be spilt. "You belonga Boss Stobart," he said slowly. "Boss Stobart good fella longa me."

He stood up when he had finished and looked at the two boys. "Goo-bye," he said, and was turning to go, when something prompted Sax to hold out his hand. Yarloo took it instantly and then shook Vaughan's hand also,<sup>[1]</sup> and, in another minute, he was almost out of sight amongst the ragged scrub.

[1] Blacks do not shake hands when they are in their wild state, but they quickly pick up the habit from the white man.

## CHAPTER XI

### Thirst

Sax and Vaughan were very thirsty. For several days they had been compelled to drink sparingly, and for the last two they had taken only enough liquid to keep them just alive. They were now entirely without drink of any kind save for that little drop of tea in a dirty and battered quart-pot, half buried in the sand. Is it any wonder that their longing eyes and thoughts were almost constantly fixed on the pot, which they had promised not to touch till sunrise next day.

While Yarloo had been with them, the white boys had kept up a good appearance of courage, and had pretended that they were not so thirsty as they really were, for no man likes to give in before a member of an inferior race; but when Yarloo went away it became harder and harder for them to keep up their pluck. For thirst is the most terrible of all forms of torture. The pain comes on slowly but surely, and increases till it seems impossible that the human body can stand any more. Yet the body is such a marvellous thing that it does stand even the terrible pain of thirst, till it gets beyond endurance and the man goes mad. The thirst which kills men in the desert is not the same as being thirsty. Down-country, it is quite pleasant to be thirsty, for it makes a drink taste so nice; but desert thirst—or "perishing", as it is called—is caused by the drying up of the moisture of the body till the organs inside actually cease to work, and the blood clogs in the arteries because it is not liquid enough.

It was such terrible thirst that Sax and Vaughan were experiencing. In appearance, Sax was of slighter build than his thick-set friend, Boof, but the drover's son had inherited from his father a natural toughness and an ability to endure privation and hardship which Vaughan, although he was quite as plucky, did not possess. It happened, therefore, that though Sax was just able to keep control of himself throughout the terrible night which followed Yarloo's departure, Vaughan lost consciousness and became delirious about half an hour before sunset.

The first signs which he gave that he was not in his right senses were when he began to undress. Sax was feeling so desperately ill himself that he did not pay much attention to what his friend was doing till he saw him throw his shirt outside, and then start to pull off his trousers. The poor lad's tongue was swollen in his mouth and was starting to stick out from between his teeth. He got his trousers off, and began fumbling at his boots, but was so weak that he couldn't untie the knots. His eyes had a peculiar look in them, something like those of a man who walks in his sleep, and when his friend spoke to him he took absolutely no notice at all.

Both lads had been lying stretched out on the sand all the afternoon, too exhausted to do anything, but, seeing his companion behaving in such a strange way, Sax tried to sit up. But he could not do it at first. As soon as he lifted himself, sharp pains stabbed him in the back and stomach, and his head throbbed so violently that he nearly fainted. He tried again and again, very gradually, till he was able to sit up at last. Vaughan had managed to drag one boot off by this time, and was feverishly busy with the other; the rest of his body was naked. Sax called out again, but the effort at sitting up had so much exhausted the little strength which remained, that his voice was so weak he hardly heard it himself. Stobart didn't understand the serious state his friend was in, but he knew that something must be done at once, and as there was nobody to do it but himself, he prepared for a supreme effort.

After several unsuccessful attempts, he managed to stand up, and when the dizziness in his head had died down a little, he tottered over towards Vaughan. He touched him on the arm. Vaughan took no notice, but wrenched at the second boot, pulling it off at last, and scrambling to his feet like a drunken man. He seemed to have far more strength than Sax had, but when he started to stagger out from under the bough-shelter, his friend suddenly remembered a yarn which Mick had told them one night, about a perishing man who pulled off all his clothes and walked away into the scrub to die a most terrible death. Sax was afraid that his companion was going to do the same thing, and that he wouldn't have the strength to prevent him.

Sax had to put his feet down very carefully or he would have fallen through sheer weakness, but he caught hold of Vaughan and clung to him. This forced the delirious lad to look at his companion, but there was no spark of intelligence in his eyes; he did not recognize who it was; he only felt something holding him back from what he had determined to do. With extraordinary strength, considering his condition, he shook himself free, and started to walk away. Sax fell, but as he did so he stretched out his hands. They touched the other's bare legs. Sax clutched the legs and hung on with all his power, and Vaughan tripped and came down with a crash.

The sun sank below the horizon and left two perishing white boys panting in the sand in the fading light.

Sax remembered nothing more for several hours. When he came to himself again he was alone. His fall had rendered him unconscious for a moment, and this state had been immediately followed by a deep sleep. The night was cool, and though his thirst was still raging, it did not seem so bad as it had done under the blazing sun; his sleep also had refreshed him. On Central Australian nights it is never too dark to see the objects around, for the light of the stars comes through the clear dry air of the desert more brilliantly than it does in any other part of the world. Consequently it needed only a hurried glance to tell Sax that Vaughan was not in the camp. His clothes were still lying where he had thrown them, and the boy soon found the tracks of bare feet leading away from the camp into the scrub.

Vaughan had gone away to die.

Sax listened. The absolute stillness of death was around him on all sides. Not a leaf moved on any of the scraggy mulgas standing near. Even the star in the deep, deep blue of the night sky seemed to stare down at him with unblinking eyes. What did they care for one white boy dying in delirium in the desert, and another white boy who had to keep tight hold of his mind to save it from slipping out of his control, and who would also die of thirst, if not to-day, then surely to-morrow? There is nothing so unpitying, so absolutely unconcerned, as the desert is to a perishing man.

Sax was a boy of unusual courage. He was the son of a pioneer, a member of that race of men who have opened up the centre of the Australian continent, and have laid the foundations of the future Australian nation. Though he had been reared in the comfort of cities, the cattle-plains, the scrub, and the desert were his true home, and he now showed the stuff he was made of by determining to follow after his friend. He did not stop to wonder what he would do when he found him; he only knew that he could not bear to leave him out there to die without making an effort to save him.

Suddenly he remembered the quart-pot and its precious contents. He had made up his mind to find Vaughan before he remembered the tea, and now this sudden glad thought seemed to confirm his decision, and filled him with hope. He would have something to give to the perishing lad when he found him. Sax could hardly walk. The whole middle part of his body felt as if it was dried up, and when he moved, such terrible pains shot through him that he could hardly keep from crying out; but he set his teeth and went over to the quart-pot and dug it out.

Only those who have actually been in the same circumstances as Sax was that night can have any idea of the temptation it was for him to drink some of that tea. The very sound of it swishing



about inside the smoke-blackened pot nearly drove him mad with thirst. He dared not open the lid and look in, for, after all, he was so frantically thirsty that the sight of the liquid might make him forget everything but his own desire for it. Never again in his life was he to be called upon to exercise such supreme self-control as he was that night.

Clutching the precious quart-pot to his breast, he staggered off into the night, very slowly because of his weakness, and very slowly also because it was hard for him to read the tracks in the dim light.

Less than half an hour after Sax left the camp to search for his dying friend, a black form stole silently through the scrub and paused within sight of the bough-shelter. If anybody had been lying there awake, he would not have known how near a fellow human being was to him, for the native was absolutely motionless, even to the eyelids. The only part of hint which moved was the chest, which was so thickly covered with black hair that its slow rising and falling could not possibly have attracted attention at night. Even if any man who might have been in the shelter had turned and looked straight at the black-fellow, he would not have distinguished him from the trees, for, with that wonderful power of imitation known only to the scrub natives of Australia, the man was standing in such a way that he looked very much like an old dead mulga stump.

But nobody was in the bough-shelter, and when the man had made quite sure of this, he stepped out from his hiding. He was quite naked, and carried a couple of long spears with stone heads, a woomera (spear-thrower), a spiked boomerang, and a wooden shield. His long hair was plastered up into a bunch at the back, and was kept in place by rings of rope made of his mother's hair. He stood for a moment and looked intently at the shelter, then he stooped and examined the marks in the sand, following them this way and that till he knew as much about the tragedy as if he had actually watched it happen. He was particularly interested in Yarloo's tracks, and finally stuck a spear into the middle of one of them and laid his other weapons beside it.

Having rid himself of all encumbrances, he set out on the tracks of the two white boys. But what a difference between his methods and theirs! Instead of the hesitating scrutiny of each footprint which Sax had been obliged to make, the native walked quickly with his eyes several yards ahead and did not pause once, though the star-light was dim and treacherous.

He did not have far to go. The burst of strength which delirium had given to Vaughan had not lasted for more than three-quarters of a mile, and he had then fallen at the foot of a dead mulga. Sax had come up on him there, a pitiful object whom the desert was claiming as its own, his naked body showing up plainly in the dark. He had forced the tea, all of it, upon the unconscious lad, with no perceptible result, for most of it had been spilt because Vaughan's tongue was too swollen to allow any but a few drops to go down his throat.

It was absolutely certain that, before another sunset, two corpses would have been lying in the desert scrub if the wild black had not found the boys when he did. Sax was still conscious, but was too far gone to take any interest even in such an unusual sight as the sudden appearance of a strange naked black-fellow. Death was claiming him, anyhow; it did not matter much to him whether it came by a spear-thrust or by the more lingering method of thirst.

The savage stooped down and looked intently into the face of first one boy and then the other. He happened to look at Vaughan first and grunted his disapproval, but a close scrutiny of Sax's features seemed to yield him great satisfaction, for he drew himself up straight, and, with a broad grin of delight, pronounced a word which caught the boy's dulling ear:

"Bor—s Stoo—bar," he said, in long-drawn tones. "Bor—s Stoo—bar."

A familiar sound will penetrate to an intelligence which has become too dull to perceive through sight or touch, and Sax heard this word and looked up, thinking that his imagination must be playing him a trick. The man was encouraged to try again, this time adding to the name of the drover the single word "Musgrave ". It was a word he had evidently used before, for it was pronounced quite clearly.

"Bor—s Stoo—bar.... Mus—grave."

The strange coupling of his father's name with that of the mysterious range of mountains roused sufficient interest in Sax to make him wish to reply. He tried to speak, but couldn't. His tongue was too swollen and his throat too dry. The native watched him, and the boy felt that the man was friendly, for he continued to stretch out his black arm towards the distant ranges. Finding that he could not make any sound, Sax waited till the man again said the words, "Bor—s Stoo—bar," and then he pointed to himself several times and nodded, and then waved his hand to the Musgraves. The native grinned his understanding and again looked very closely into the white boy's face. Sax did not know if he was like his father or not, but felt that a great deal depended on whether the black stranger decided that he was indeed the son of the famous Boss Stobart.

The man was quite satisfied at last. He first of all held his left hand close to Sax's face; it had been terribly mutilated, and the two middle fingers were missing. The native evidently wished to impress that crippled hand on the boy's memory, for he put it on his hairy chest and then in front of Sax's face again and again. He did not say anything, for his knowledge of English was

apparently limited to the name of the drover and the name of the mountain range. In spite of his exhausted condition, Sax could not help remembering that black left hand, and he had reason to recall it in future days under the most exciting circumstances. Then the man lifted Vaughan's limp body on his shoulders and walked away back to the shelter. Stobart was not left alone for long, before he also was carried back to camp.

By this time the sun was just showing over the eastern rim of the land, and the few trees were casting long shadows on the sand. The native gathered up Vaughan's clothes, but did not know how to put them on the lad; so he covered him over with them. He had been careful not to leave the quart-pot behind, and as soon as the boys were safely under the shelter again, the man took the quart-pot and started off.

He was evidently going for water. In a few minutes, however, he came running back to camp at top speed. He was very excited and only stayed long enough to put the quart-pot down on the ground, before he grabbed his weapons and disappeared into the scrub in the opposite direction, running as hard as he could, yet making no more noise than a cat.

He had not returned the quart-pot exactly as he had found it. When he took it away, it was empty, but now it contained a sprig of sharply-pointed leaves.

Yarloo came on the scene almost as soon as the other black was out of sight, and was probably the cause of the first man's sudden disappearance, Yarloo was carrying a small bunch of parakelia leaves. The first things he noticed were the new tracks, and he stopped dead. From where he stood, he could not see into the bough-shelter, and so he waited for a couple of minutes to see if the man who had made the tracks was anywhere about. There was absolute silence; the only things which moved were the shadows, which got shorter very very slowly as the sun rose. With minute care Yarloo examined the marks of the stranger. At first he was upset to find from the tracks that the man was a wild Musgrave black, but as soon as he came to the place where the warragul had set up his spear, he smiled and felt no more anxiety, for it is a sign of perfect goodwill towards a man to dig a spear in his track. (To find a spear or a boomerang on your track means that the owner of them likes you so well that he gives you his weapons, because there is no need for him to carry them when he meets you.)

As soon as Yarloo knew that the stranger native was friendly, he went over to the shelter. The two white boys were lying on their backs in the sand, one of them unconscious and gasping, with his tongue swollen so much that it was too big for his mouth; the other gasping also, but still in possession of his senses. Sax's eyes opened, and a glimmer of intelligence showed in them, but he couldn't speak, and was too weak to move. Yarloo looked down at them, but particularly at Sax, the son of his master. Then his glance wandered to the quart-pot, and suddenly everything else was forgotten.

No prospector who has toiled for years without any luck, and then comes upon a nugget of gold quite unexpectedly, could have been more glad than Yarloo was at sight of that little sprig of leaves. He took it up and looked at it with huge satisfaction. The stem was woody and each leaf was grey, narrow, and not more than half an inch long. The peculiarity about them was, however, that each little leaf ended in a spike. The black-fellow felt the spikes and grinned to feel the pricks of pain, for the leaves had only recently been pulled from the tree. Then he dropped his handful of parakelia and grabbed the quart-pot and started to run, tracking the other native to find the tree from which that sprig of leaves had been picked.

On the discovery of that tree rested the salvation of the white boys' lives. It was the famous needle-bush.

## **CHAPTER XII**

### **The Rescue**

Yarloo followed the Musgrave native's tracks for about half a mile in a nearly south direction, and then came upon a stony plain with a few large bushes growing at one end of it. He gave a yell of delight. They were needle-bushes. The party was saved. Here was water, stored by nature right in the middle of an arid desert.

The trees were all about five or six feet high, though some were much bushier than others. Yarloo chose one which was very wide-spreading, and began piling dry bark and twigs and anything which would burn quickly and easily, right in the middle of the tree, all among the branches. He went on till the needle-bush was carrying as big a load as it possibly could.

Then he made fire. He pulled two pieces of wood out of his hair; one was the size of a man's palm, a flat piece of soft bean-wood with a little hollow in the middle of it; the other was a stick about as thick as a pencil but nearly twice as long, of hard mulga wood. He squatted down and

set the soft piece on the ground and held it in place with his toes, and teased out a few pieces of very dry bark till they were like tinder, and put it near the hollow. Then he took the long piece of mulga and twirled it with his two hands in the hollow. He did this faster than any white man could possibly twirl it, and in a couple of minutes a coil of smoke came up from the pile of bark. Yarloo blew this into a flame and made a little fire. When it was burning well, he threw the blazing sticks into the needle-bush. There was a crackling sound for a moment or two and then a roar, as the flames licked up the dry fuel, till in a very short time the needle-bush was a blazing bonfire.

The black-fellow waited till the flames had died down, and then started to dig around the roots a few feet away from the tree. He was so skilful at this that he soon exposed the main roots. Then he chopped off one or two of them and set the pieces upright in the quart-pot. A thin dark liquid began to drain out of the roots and collect in the pot till it was half-full. Yarloo took a drink and chopped up some more roots, and when the quart-pot was full he returned to camp.

It needed great care and patience to minister to the perishing white boys, and not many natives would have done what Yarloo did for Sax and Vaughan during that blazing day. He made trip after trip to the stony plain where the needle-bushes were growing, and, with the water obtained in this way, he gradually revived his two friends. Sax was his first care, and after he had softened the boy's tongue so that drops of liquid could trickle down his throat, the drover's son quickly revived sufficiently to help Yarloo with the more serious case of Vaughan. The powers of recovery which a healthy lad possesses are wonderful, and before nightfall both lads were sitting up under the shelter, with their thirst quite quenched, and actually feeling hungry.

Yarloo went away for the last time to get another quart-pot of water from the needle-bushes. To do this, he had to fire another tree. It was about half an hour after sunset and nearly dark, and the bonfire lit up the plain and could be seen for miles.

Mick Darby saw it as he rode along at the end of a very tiring day. When he had reached Sidcotinga Station, late the evening before, the yards had been full of working horses ready to set out on a big cattle-muster the next morning. He could not have struck a more favourable time. Before he went to bed that night, he and the manager drafted off a plant of six good horses, stocked a set of pack-gear with cooked tucker, and filled two big canteens with water all ready for an early start the following day. Mick could easily have slept late the next morning, but when he woke up, as he always did, at the rising of the morning star, he did not turn over and go to sleep again, but roused himself, had a drink of tea and a chunk of bread and meat, and started out back on his tracks, accompanied by a station black-boy whom the Sidcotinga manager had lent him. The horses were fresh; they had just come in from a six months' spell and would be turned out again directly they returned. So Mick did not hesitate to ride hard. He rode to such good purpose that he did not expect to pull up till he had reached the camp where he had left the boys, and was riding along, with seven miles still to go, when he saw the blazing needle-bush.

He loosened his revolver and rode over at once to investigate. It was fortunate that he did so, for he would have reached the old camp and found it, not only deserted, but also wrecked, with torn gear and evidences of wanton destruction all over the place. He would naturally have thought that his former companions had either been killed or carried off, and as the sandstorm had covered up all tracks, he would not have known which way to follow them.

Yarloo was squatting down, watching the roots drain the precious liquid into the quart-pot, when he heard the sound of hobble-rings striking one another as they hung from the neck of a horse. Then a hoof struck a stone. Such sounds in the desert meant one thing and one thing only, white men. Yarloo stood up and gave the call: "Ca—a—a—w—ay!" (not coo-ee, as is usually supposed).

It was answered by a white man's voice out of the gathering darkness: "Hul—lo—uh!"

In a few minutes Mick Darby rode up. He saw Yarloo, and the smouldering needle-bush, and knew that something was wrong.

"What name?" he asked.

"White boy close up finish," replied Yarloo, still taking care of the quart-pot of dark water.

"Close up finish?" echoed Mick in surprise. "What name you no sit down longa that camp same as me yabber (as I told you)?"

Yarloo tried to explain, but his vocabulary of white man's words was too small. He broke off at last and said: "White boy, they yabber (they'll tell you)."

"But white boy close up finish," objected the drover.

"No finish now," grinned Yarloo, pointing to the other burnt needle-bushes near. "No finish now. Him good fella now, quite."

This relieved Mick's mind greatly, and he set off at once, guided by Yarloo, to the bough-shelter where Sax and Vaughan were sitting. It was a very happy reunion. The boys were still weak, but the thirst, which would have killed them if the stranger black-fellow had not put that

sprig of needle-bush in the quart-pot, was quite gone. They were very hungry. A fire was soon lit, and neither of the lads had ever enjoyed a meal so much as they did that one. The food was plain, though much better than what they had been having for the past weeks. The bread had been made with yeast, which makes it far nicer than baking-powder damper, and the Sidcotinga cook had included a few currant buns with the tucker. The story of their adventures was told at length and gone over more than once, for each boy supplied what the other did not remember, and there had been many hours during which Vaughan's memory had recorded nothing.

One thing, however, remained a secret. Only Sax knew about it, and he obeyed his father's injunction not to tell anybody of his whereabouts. He did not tell Mick that the strange nigger who had saved their lives had mentioned the name Boss Stobart.

Yarloo came in for his share of praise, and richly did he deserve it. The black-boy sat down with the white men after tea and listened to what was said without making any remarks, and with a stolid expression. But when, just before they all turned in for the night, Mick handed him a new pipe, a box of matches, and—greatest luxury of all—a tin of cut-up tobacco, he beamed all over his honest black face and grunted his supreme satisfaction with the gift. He did not think that he had done anything heroic; he had acted so towards the white boys because a certain white man had treated him well in the past, but these simple signs of Mick's approval made him the happiest black-fellow in all Central Australia.

## CHAPTER XIII

### Sidcotinga Station

The morning after Mick Darby had returned to them with water and food, both Sax and Vaughan felt so much better that they wanted to set out for Sidcotinga Station right away. But the drover would not hear of such a thing. He knew, better than the boys did, that it would be some time before even their strong young bodies recovered from the "perish", and they all stayed where they were for three full days, and made themselves comfortable by building a more substantial shelter from sun and wind. They could have stayed longer if they had wanted to do so, for Dan Collins, the Sidcotinga manager, had told Mick of a well not more than six miles away to the north, and the black boys drove the horses there every day and also renewed the supply of water in the canteens. It was evidently from this well that the fierce Musgrave niggers who had attacked them had obtained water.

On the fourth morning the horses were brought in early, and the party set out west after breakfast, on its interrupted journey, travelling by easy stages, and taking three days over a distance which Mick had accomplished in one.

The cook was the only white man on the station when they reached Sidcotinga, and he made them welcome with the genuine rough hospitality for which the back country is famous. The resources of a desert cattle-station are very limited, but everything which was possible was done for the two white boys, and they spent a very restful and enjoyable week and a half, loafing round the homestead. It was not much of a place to look at, but Sax and his friend thought it was wonderful. They had travelled across the desert for a month in order to reach that little collection of buildings, and during that time they had not seen a fence or a roof of any kind, and the only sign of civilization had been an artesian bore two days out from Oodnadatta. Though the iron sheds and strong bough-shelters which comprised the homestead were very rough, there was a workmanlike air about the place which seemed to say that white men had taken possession of the wilderness and meant to stay there.

There was an iron hut divided into two rooms where the manager and the white stockman lived. Such a building as this is known throughout the length and breadth of Australia's cattle-country as "Government House". A few yards away was the "cook-house", also made of iron, where meals for the white men were served. Then there was a store, in which enough personal and station requirements were stocked to last at least a year, for the string of camels, which came out from the head of the railway with loading for Sidcotinga Station, only came once in every twelve months and was sometimes late. The horse-gear room was a fascinating place to these two lovers of horses, and though it was rather empty when they reached the station, because every available man was out mustering on the run, they found enough in it to interest them for many hours. The blacksmith's shop also came in for its share of attention, the more so perhaps because neither of the lads knew anything about blacksmith's work. Dan Collins, the manager, prided himself on his blacksmith's shop, and rightly so, for there was no metal work—other than actual castings—which he could not manage to make or repair for station use.

Dominating the homestead, by reason of its height, was a large iron wind-mill mounted on a tall stand, with a huge water-tank raised on a staging near it. The mill pumped water from a hundred-foot well into this tank, which supplied, not only the cattle-troughs, but also the

dwelling, for there were taps outside Government House, the cook-house, and the blacksmith's shop—a very unusual convenience on such an outlying station.

It was not the buildings, however, which interested the boys most; it was the stock-yards. The whole station seemed to centre in these yards, and indeed they were of chief importance, and were the real reason for everything else being there. At first the mass of yards, races, pounds, wings, and gates seemed just like a maze to the new-chums, but they were soon to learn how perfectly everything about that rough strong stock-yard was arranged for the quick handling of cattle.

One morning, a couple of days after their arrival at Sidcotinga Station, the white boys were sitting in the sand with their backs against the wall of the horse-gear room, which threw a narrow patch of shade over them, when Yarloo came up. They had been so interested in all the novel sights and sounds around them since coming to the station, that they had almost forgotten the faithful black-fellow; but they looked up now with pleasure, and greeted him with a friendly "Hullo, Yarloo!"

"Goo-day," he said, with a grin of delight at being noticed; but he at once became serious, and continued, speaking especially to Sax: "Me go 'way.... Me come back by'm by."

"Going away?" asked Sax. "Whatever for?"

"Me walk longa Musgraves.... Me come back by'm by," he repeated.

"But what'll Mick say?" asked Vaughan.

"Mick good fella," said the native simply. "Him real good fella, quite.... Him only little time boss longa me. Boss alday longa me (my real boss) sit down over dere," he pointed to the Musgrave Range. "Me yabber Boss Stobart." He said the name with pride.

"I'll go with you," said Sax, starting up as if he meant to set out immediately. "I'll go with you to find my father."

"By'm by," replied Yarloo. "White boy come by'm by. No come now. S'pose white boy come now, Boss Stobart, rouse like blazes (would be very angry). White boy sit down little time. Me come back by'm by."

"Well, at any rate, I'll send Father a note," said Sax, and he ran to Government House to get a pencil and some paper. He found an old diary, and tore a sheet out of it and wrote: "We're at Sidcotinga Station. I wanted to come out to you, but Yarloo would not let me. Tell him that we may come out. Love from Sax."

He ran back to the horse-gear room, but Yarloo had gone. The boy had evidently not understood what Sax meant and had already started out for the Musgrave Ranges. It was a great disappointment to the boys not to be allowed to go straight away and find the white drover, yet they had already experienced enough, both of the hatred of the Musgrave tribes and of the power of the desert, to convince them that they had better take the advice of those who knew the conditions so much better than they did. They talked a lot about the ranges which appeared to be so near, seen through the clear dry air, and they went over and over again the message which they had received in Oodnadatta from Boss Stobart, trying to find an explanation for the mystery.

"In difficulties. Musgrave Ranges. Tell Oodnadatta trooper, but *no one else*. He'll understand. Boy quite reliable. Don't worry. Get a job somewhere. "STOBART."

Sax and Vaughan had been at Sidcotinga for eleven days, and were not only feeling recovered from their "perish", but were also beginning to wish that they had something to do, when the musterers returned one afternoon with well over a thousand head of cattle. It was a still day, and Sax had climbed up the mill tower, and was sitting on the platform near the big wind-wheel, looking over the barren landscape, when he saw what looked like a brown stain on the southern sky near the horizon. He remembered having seen something similar to that at Oodnadatta, and he knew at once that it was caused by a big moving mob of stock. Vaughan was near the troughs, vainly trying to entice a galah (a cockatoo with rose-coloured breast and grey wings and back) to eat bread out of his hand, when Sax startled both him and the bird by shouting: "They're coming, Boof! They're coming!"

Vaughan looked up and saw that his venturesome friend had climbed even higher than the platform, and was standing right on top of the main casting, and was waving his arms towards the south.

"They're coming, Boof!" he shouted again. "It's cattle." To Vaughan's relief—for Sax had got used to doing things on the mill which Vaughan was too scared even to attempt—his friend began climbing down, but he went so fast that his neck and limbs were in danger every moment. When he reached the ground, he ran off to Government House to find Mick, who was lying on his back

reading a three-months old copy of *Pals*.

The boys expected their drover friend to be as excited as they were, but he had seen cattle yarded so many hundreds of times that he took things very coolly. He first made sure that the troughs were full of water, and that the valves were working properly, and then fixed the stock-yard gates ready for receiving the cattle.

The cloud of dust came nearer, and the lowing of cattle and the cracking of whips could soon be heard, and the voices of men rose above the din. From out of the dust a few leading cattle appeared, then others and others still, till the astonished white boys saw a bigger mob of cattle than they had ever seen before. Sax was on the platform of the mill again, and Vaughan was about half-way up, so they both got a good view of what was going on below them.

The thirsty animals smelt the water and tried to rush, but well-mounted black boys wheeled here, there, and everywhere, checking the restless cattle, and allowing them to come on slowly without any chance of a break. The big voice of a white man on a black horse in the rear was heard from time to time giving orders which were at once obeyed. Presently the four long lines of troughing were hidden from sight by drinking cattle, and the sucking of their lips, the gushing of water through the valves, and the grumbling of the tired animals all blended together, and seemed to be part of the dust which rose from the trampling feet and settled on everything till men and stock were alike brown.

Mick Darby was keeping the trough-valves at full pressure, and the manager rode over to him. The white boys followed the mounted man with their eyes. This was to be their boss; that is, if he would take them. They were evidently the subject of conversation, for Mick pointed up at the mill, and Dan Collins looked up also. They could not see his face, and he made no sign, but went off again to keep the waiting cattle rounded up.

It takes a long time to water a thousand head of cattle, and by the time the Sidcotinga troughs were full, with no cattle drinking at them, the sun had just set. Gradually the animals were worked away from the water towards the wing of the yard. Probably both Sax and his friend were hoping that there would be a break, for there is nothing more exciting to watch—or to be in—than a cattle-rush; but these men were on their own country, and at their own stock-yards. They eased the big mob of animals slowly up to the yards, then sat back and let them have a spell, just holding them within the compass of the wings. The leading bullocks nosed the stock-yard rails, went up to the gates and smelt the air, gave one or two inquiring bellows, and then walked through. Finding space on the other side of the gates, they went right into the yards. Others followed, till soon the whole mob was filing through the gates. Then came the shouting of men, the racket of stock-whips, the prancing of horses, and the protesting roar of cattle, as they were jammed up tight. At last the gates were swung to and fastened with a chain.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A Mad Bull

The Sidcotinga stock-yards presented a very lively scene next morning. Sax and Vaughan were there with the rest, heartily glad to have something to do. Mick Darby had introduced his young friends to the manager the night before, and to their earnest request that he would "take them on at the station" he had replied: "We'll talk about that to-morrow night. There's a long day in the yards between now and then. We'll see how you shape." Dan Collins looked at them very sternly when he was speaking. He had been on cattle-stations all his life, and was used to judging men by what they could do and not by what they could say. He liked both the appearance of the boys and the report which Mick had given of how they had "shaped" on the way out, but his weather-beaten face did not relax at all, and the boys thought he was a hard man. They were wrong, however. Dan Collins was a strong man, and through dealing for many years with blacks, he had come to hide his thoughts behind an unyielding expression of face, though many a man knew how kind a heart beat in his big rough body.

So the boys were on their mettle. There were no other white men in the yard except Mick and the manager; the rest were blacks.

An hour or two before dawn, as soon as it was light enough to distinguish one beast from another, all hands went down to the yards for drafting. Sax and Vaughan were each given a gate to open and shut when their particular call came, and they found that it needed every bit of their attention to do even this simple job well. By the time breakfast was announced by the cook, who summoned all hands to the meal by beating the back of a frying-pan with a wooden spoon, the thousand cattle had been divided into three lots: about a hundred and twenty cleanskins (unbranded cattle), over a hundred three-year-old bullocks which would soon be ready to send to town, and the rest, which were to be allowed to go bush again.

Breakfast and "Smoke-o" were got over quickly, and everybody was again at the yards as soon as possible. A fire was lit outside the rails, and a half-dozen T.D.3 brands, and as many number brands, were put in the blaze to get hot. Green-hide ropes were coiled ready and knives sharpened. The cleanskins were attended to first. Most of them were about a year old and could be scruffed, which means that one or another of the black-fellows would watch his opportunity, catch the calf, and throw it on the ground with a dexterous twist. As soon as it was down, he would hook one of its front legs behind its horns and hold it there till the brand was applied. Sometimes four calves were being scruffed at the same time, and the work went on very quickly. Blacks always work well in a yard. Not only is there the personal and sometimes risky struggle with the animals, which appeals strongly to their savage minds, but the emulation amongst themselves, each being very anxious to do better than his fellows. There is usually a good deal of laughter and joking talk in a stock-yard, and a good deal of hard, strenuous, skilful work as well.

The two white boys kept out of the way while scruffing was going on. They would only have been a hindrance, so they sat together on the stock-yard fence and looked on, never missing a twist or a turn, and learning, learning, learning all the time.

At last all young calves had been branded and had rejoined their mothers. There still remained about thirty unbranded steers which were too big to scruff. One or two of them were nearly four years old, wild creatures which had refused to be mustered year after year until now. The ropes were brought into use for these cattle. The big cleanskins were driven out of the branding yard into an adjoining one, and admitted back again one by one. As soon as a beast rushed through the gate a green-hide lasso was thrown. The loop fell over its horns or neck. Four or five strong niggers were holding the end of the lasso outside the yard, and they pulled the captured animal up to the rails. Front and back leg ropes were flung on and hitched round posts, and the beast fell helplessly in the sand. After a couple had been done in this way, Dan Collins signalled to the white boys to lend a hand. Their job sounded simple, but it needed all their strength and watchfulness to do it properly. If they failed at any point, the prostrate animal would be free, and the work would have to be done all over again.

The cleanskin was lassoed and pulled to the rails, the leg ropes were fixed and hitched, and then the front rope was handed to Sax and the back one to Vaughan. They had to hang on and keep the ropes tight; that was all, but only those who have worked in stock-yards, hour after hour, know how difficult such an apparently simple task really is.

The work went on. The hard green-hide ropes blistered the unaccustomed hands of the new-chum white boys, but they set their teeth and held on. Beast after beast fell with a bellowing roar, the red-hot T.D.3 was pressed on its near-side shoulder till the mark was seared right into the skin, so that it could never wear out. Then the ropes were pulled off and the dazed animal scrambled to its feet and was hustled out of the yard, while another one was being caught and thrown.

A big roan-coloured steer was being saved till last. He was a fully matured animal, very powerful and wild. His bellow had been heard all night, and he had been more difficult to draft than any other animal in the yards. Everybody was looking forward to dealing with this fellow; it would be a good finish to a good run of work.

He came through the gate with a rush. Mick Darby had the lasso this time, and flung it faultlessly over the animal's horns. There was a shout of excitement and the blacks outside the rails pulled for all they were worth. But no power of man could make such a creature stir unless it wanted to. It braced its fore legs and stood immovable, then shook its mighty head till the lasso twanged like a fiddle-string, but did not give an inch. Finally the steer caught sight of its tormentors outside the yard, and rushed. At once the rope became slack and the watchful men pulled it tight again, and soon the great beast was jammed up against the fence, using all its strength to try and break the green-hide rope. But the lasso was made out of the hide of a bull and could have held any steer that was ever calved. Leg ropes were thrown, hitched, and drawn tight, and the steer fell, roaring and plunging for a moment, and then lying still, but never relaxing the tremendous strain for a moment.

Dan Collins was branding, and called out: "Brand-o!" The red-hot iron was handed through the rails and pressed on the quivering shoulder.

Now came the great test. Pain added the final ounce to the steer's strength. He struggled. The front leg rope broke. Through being constantly hitched round a rough post it had become a little bit frayed, and this final strain was too much for it. It snapped and sprang apart like a collapsed spring. The chest of the steer was now free, but the head rope still held it down. The knowledge that it had broken one of its bonds gave the animal heart, and it lifted its curl-crowned head. The lasso quivered and stretched, quivered and stretched. There was a crack! Had that bull-hide rope broken? No. Another crack. One of the steer's horns broke off at the skull. With an agonized bellow it slipped the stump of a horn through the loop and rose to its fore feet, free except for the back leg rope which Vaughan was holding. All the animal's strength, raised to its highest pitch by the pain of the broken horn, was centred in its captive hind leg. Vaughan held on manfully, but the rope was gradually pulled through his hands, tearing the skin till he could not possibly hold it any longer. With a roar, the steer rose from the ground; but just as it struggled to its feet, Vaughan seized the rope again and twisted it round his wrist.

A yard is no place for a man when an infuriated bull is raging around it. Everybody leapt for the rails except Sax. Was there not some way of helping his friend? The steer saw him and charged. Round the yard once, twice, it rushed, Vaughan dragging along at the back, and hindering it so that he undoubtedly saved his friend from a very nasty accident. Round the yard the third time. Sax was too dazed to leap for the rails, and the animal was too close for him to climb them.

Everybody had been so intent on the sudden turn which events had taken that they had not noticed an almost naked black-fellow who had left the lasso and had climbed quickly along the top of the rails. He was a stranger, and had come in that morning and had taken a hand at the yards like any other black would do, hoping for a feed and a stick of tobacco. But now he seemed to be full of energy and courage. When everybody else was gasping with astonishment, he lay on the top rail as flat as a lizard.

Sax came round the third time, and the shaggy head of the steer was lowering for a toss, when the native's black arm reached down suddenly and grabbed the white boy by the belt and swung him clear off his feet. He was not a second too soon. The steer charged by, and Sax was safe. The stranger native had put out so much of his strength that he could not recover himself, and he overbalanced, still keeping hold of the white boy, and rescuer and rescued toppled over backwards into the other yard. Sax was winded and the black-fellow was the first to get up. He scrambled to his feet and walked away, not only from the yards, but away from the station altogether, as if he did not want to be recognized. But as he was getting between two rails, he put his left hand on one of them, and Sax saw that the two middle fingers were missing. It was the same black who had brought the sprig of needle-bush.

Excitement was by no means over in the branding-yard. The infuriated bull, cheated of one victim, now turned its attention to Vaughan. It wheeled quickly, and in so doing twisted the rope, which Vaughan was still holding, round the boy's body. He could not escape. He was at the mercy of a wild steer.

The sudden and unexpected rescue of Saxon Stobart had roused the white men, so that when the bull turned on its helpless victim, they were ready. But what could they do? What could a mere man possibly do against a full-grown steer? It would take too long to set the boy free, for the hard unyielding rope was hitched tight round him. There was only one thing to do, and Dan Collins did it.

He waited till the bull had gathered itself for a final rush, and, when it had actually started to charge, he dropped to the ground like a flash. In a fraction of a second his powerful right arm went out, and he gripped the nostrils of the bull, pressing his thumb and forefinger home as far as he could. Then he twisted, suddenly and unexpectedly.

It was not a matter of strength, but of knack. The power of the onrushing bull actually supplied all the strength which was necessary. Dan Collins twisted. The animal's wrinkled neck turned. It could not help turning, for the pain at its nostrils was unbearable. The near-side leg gave under it. Something had to give under the strain. The fingers still kept their grip, and the great beast crashed down with such a thud that the ground seemed to shake.<sup>[1]</sup>

Every man jumped from the rails and was on the prostrate animal at once, holding it down till the white boy, who had been in such terrible danger, was set free.

That night the manager gave his verdict about the two boys. "You'll do," he said. "I'll take you on. Mick, you'd better take them out on the run with you. I want you to go north in a couple of days. And for goodness sake teach them that there are some things which even *they* cannot do." He did not mean this unkindly, for he had taken a fancy to the boys, but he saw that they would need to be restrained a great deal before they could become really first-class stock-men.

[1] The author has seen quite a small man throw a full-sized bull in this way on a Central Australian cattle-station.

## CHAPTER XV

### A Night Alarm

It can well be imagined that both lads fell asleep quickly and soundly that night after their first day in the yards. Sidcotinga Government House had a veranda on one side of it, and they spread their swags under it just outside Mick's room, as there was no place for them inside,



especially in summer.

In the middle of the night a man crept round the corner of the veranda as silently as a black shadow. He paused near the boys, and stooped down and looked into their faces. The lads were sound asleep and did not stir. After a moment's scrutiny the native put his hand on Sax's shoulder and shook it. The tired boy only gave a restless murmur, so the man shook him harder. He opened his eyes at last and realized that somebody was bending over him, but he was so sleepy that he did not call out.

As soon as he saw that Sax was awake, the native held up his left hand, so that the white boy could see it outlined against the pale night sky. The two middle fingers were missing. It was the man who had already done him more than one good turn.

Stobart sat up, prepared for anything which this black-fellow—who knew the father, and seemed so devoted to the son—might suggest. The man pointed down across the trampled sand towards the cattle-troughs. He did it again and again, making little runs in that direction and coming back at once, like a dog who wants its master to go in a certain direction.

"All right, I'll come," whispered Sax at last, forgetting that the man probably could not understand him. Sax had intended to go alone, but when he stood up, Vaughan opened his eyes and asked sleepily: "What's all the row about?"

"No row at all," whispered his companion. "That is, unless you make it. There's something wrong somewhere and I'm going to have a look."

"So am I," responded Vaughan quickly, for the chance of an adventure drove all sleep away from him. "So am I. You bet your life."

The silent native led the way, armed with a boomerang and a shield, creeping from the shelter of one building to that of another, till they were close to the troughs. The man held up his finger and listened. There was a sound of running water. Sax recognized it as the ball-valves of the troughs. There were four of them. Suddenly the thought struck him: Why were they running? From where the three men were standing the dark lines of the troughs could be seen even at night, against the light-coloured sand, and it was clear that no stock were drinking there. But if the valves were running it showed that the troughs were empty, and the water must be flowing away somewhere. It must be wasting.

The importance of water in the desert had already impressed itself upon the white boys, and as soon as they realized that precious water was running away in the sand, they rushed out from behind the shelter towards the troughs. The armed native went with them.

There should have been a plug at the end of each trough. Somebody had pulled these plugs out, and the water was gushing a full stream through the four ball-valves and was running to waste over the sand. This had apparently not been going on for more than five or ten minutes, but it was absolutely necessary to stop the waste; for if once the overhead tank was drained dry, and if there was no wind to work the mill for a day or two, Sidcottinga Station would be entirely without water.

The boys did not stop to wonder who had done this dastardly deed, but went to jam the plugs back again into their holes. But the plugs could not be found. Something must be done immediately. It would waste precious time to run back to the station and hunt round for something to make plugs out of, so they started to fill the ends of the troughs with sand and clay, scooping it up with their hands and ramming it tight till one after another of the leakages was stopped.

When they were occupied with the fourth, and had nearly made a tight job of it, Sax looked around for the native who had told them that something was wrong. The man was standing a couple of yards away with his shield raised. He looked for all the world as if he was defending them from some attack. And so he was. Scarcely had Sax begun to work again, scooping more sand and clay and plastering it smooth and firm, when he heard the click of wood against wood, and a spear stuck into the ground just behind him. Another followed and another with hardly any pause between. The native still maintained his attitude of tense watchfulness. He had already turned three messengers of death off with his shield, and was waiting for more. None came.

He backed slowly towards the boys, still facing in the direction from which the spears had come. Presently he turned quickly and pointed to Government House, and then took up the same position of attention. His meaning was quite clear. He wanted one of the boys to go up to Government House and give the alarm.

Vaughan instantly jumped to his feet and ran, leaving Sax to finish the work at the troughs, guarded by the faithful nigger. In an incredibly short time Dan Collins and Mick Darby came running down, armed with rifles and revolvers. When the stranger black-fellow saw them he disappeared. No one saw him go, and indeed it would have been dangerous for him if they had; for when two white men with loaded weapons are looking for a chance to shoot a nigger, they are as likely to shoot a friend as a foe. The night seemed to swallow him up, and the white men and Vaughan, who followed hard after them, found Sax alone. Even the three spears had been taken away.

Tracks of naked feet all around the troughs showed that a couple of Musgrave blacks had wilfully pulled the plugs out of the water troughs, knowing that this was one of the ways in which they could do most harm to the hated white man. If the native with the mutilated hand had not given the alarm, Sidcotinga Station would have been right out of water by the morning. No one knew who this friendly black-fellow was. Sax told the others that it was the same man who had put the sprig of needle-bush in the quart-pot, and who had also saved him from the bull a few hours before, but he did not explain how he knew this.

"Seems to have taken a fancy to you, whoever he is," remarked Dan Collins. "I wonder why."

Sax knew why, but he seemed to feel the influence of his father coming from the Musgraves, not far away, telling him to keep the matter secret.

The lads went back to bed, and the two white men kept watch at the troughs till daylight. But the blacks gave no sign of their presence. They had evidently been scared away.

## CHAPTER XVI

### Mustering

If the boys expected that the night alarm would be the chief subject of conversation next day they were quite mistaken, for the matter was hardly referred to at all. Sidcotinga was as far away from civilization as could possibly be, and its position under the dreaded and mysterious Musgrave Ranges made it the object of repeated attacks by little bands of warragul blacks. Consequently the manager was quite used to turning out in the middle of the night to guard one portion or another of the station property, and the mere pulling out of the plugs from the watering-troughs was forgotten almost as soon as the affair was over.

Important business was afoot—the chief business of a cattle-station—mustering. Station blacks were sent out early in the morning after working-horses; packs, saddles, canteens, hobbles, and horse-gear generally were carefully overhauled by Mick, and tucker-bags were filled with flour, sugar, tea, dried salt meat, and a tin or two of jam. Before sunset everything was ready for an early start next day, for about fifty working-horses had been brought in, out of which number Mick and the manager chose thirty for the mustering plant.

Dan Collins had sent four station boys to round up the horses: Calcoo, whose real name went into about ten syllables and was quite impossible for a white man to pronounce; Uncle, a thoroughly reliable black-fellow, who was somewhat older than the others; Fiddle-Head, so called because of his long thin face; and Jack Johnson, a native of splendid physique from one of the great rivers which flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Another black stockman had stayed behind to help Mick Darby and the white boys with the packs. His name was Poona, and he understood station ways better than the others, because Dan Collins had taken him in hand when he was a piccaninny, and taught him to be very useful.

Just before dinner, when Mick was busy mending a pack-bag and Sax and Vaughan were having their first lesson in making waxed thread for sewing leather, Poona came up to the drover with another black-fellow. His companion was naked except for a rope of hair tied round his waist from which a small apron hung down. Sax looked up and recognized him immediately; it was the native with the mutilated hand who had been such a good friend to the white boy. Stobart was about to call out, when the man put his finger on his thick black lips and pointed to the Musgraves. He did this three times, and shook his head so earnestly that Sax knew that, for some reason or another, the black did not want to be recognized.

Mick Darby finished a row of stitching and then paid attention to the two men who were standing so silently in front of him, waiting the pleasure of the white man. He knew Poona, but the presence of the other native needed explaining. "What name, Poona?" he asked.

"You want um 'nother boy go mustering?" asked Poona, pointing to his companion.

Mick looked at the naked man for a moment, and then asked: "Is he any good?"

"Yah. Him bin good fella," replied Poona eagerly. "Him bin ride like blazes. Him work one time longa Eridunda," mentioning a famous station farther north. This was not true. The warragul black had never worked on a station in his life and knew very little of the ways of white men. He was a Musgrave nigger who had recently come down from the Ranges. Mick wanted as many helpers as he could get, for the muster was to be a big one, and he engaged the newcomer without further inquiries.

"All right," he said. "What's his name?"

Poona grinned and pronounced a name which he knew was quite impossible for a white man's tongue to manage. Everybody laughed, including the newcomer, who put up his mutilated hand to cover his grinning mouth. Mick noticed the deformity at once. The man's hand, with its three fingers set wide apart, from which long hard nails stuck out, resembled the claw of some bird, so the drover turned to the white boys and said: "What d'you think of that for a name? They've nearly all got names like that. We'll shorten this one down a bit and call him 'Eagle'. Look at his hand." He turned to Poona. "We call that one black-fella Eagle. See? His hand aller same eagle's hand. Take um round Boss Collins. P'raps him give it trouser, shirt, tobac."

In a few minutes the warragul black, duly enrolled as a stockman of Sidcotinga Station, was strutting about in front of a group of native women, dressed in a pair of khaki trousers and a striped store shirt, and was puffing at a new clay pipe. The novelty of his occupation and attire made up for their discomfort, and he would probably have been willing to force his broad feet into boots if they had been given to him, although he had never worn clothes in his life before, and must have found that they hindered his movements at every stride.

Next morning, although it was summer and the sun rose very early, the men had breakfast by the light of a hurricane-lantern, and the mustering plant was all ready to start out before dawn. There were Mick, the two white boys, six niggers, eight packed horses and the rest spares, making thirty in all. The white boys were naturally interested in the horses they were to ride. Sax had a grey mare named Fair Steel to ride in the mornings, and Ginger, a gelding, for the afternoons. Vaughan's two were both geldings: Boxer, a brown, and Don Juan, a tall black. All four horses were well-bred and thoroughly suitable for the month's hard work which lay ahead of them.

The plant made straight for the Musgraves. It was a brilliantly clear day, and when the sun rose the range of mountains ahead of them seemed to be only a day's ride away. But at the end of the second day, when the packs were pulled off near a water-hole, the Musgraves did not look to be any nearer. Mick and the white boys rode in the lead all day, and the plant, driven by the black-boys, followed behind; this is the method of travel all over Central and North Australia.

On the morning of the third day they started to muster. All around the water-hole were the recent tracks of hundreds of cattle, and the day's work consisted of riding out on these tracks till the limit was reached beyond which no cattle had gone from that particular water. Then the stockmen rode in, gathering cattle as they came. The party split up into three in order to muster the district thoroughly, and before sunset a mob of over four hundred cattle was bellowing round the water-hole. The nearest stock-yard was two days away, so the cattle had to be watched that night. Sax and Vaughan had done some night watching on the way from Oodnadatta to Sidcotinga, when wild blacks had been about, but a few tired, broken-in horses were very easy to watch in comparison with a mob of nearly half a thousand wild desert cattle.

The usual precautions were taken. The men made their camp on the slope of a little clay-pan out of sight of the water-hole, so that their movements in the night would not startle the cattle. All fires were put out before dark, and no man was allowed to shake his camp-sheet or make any sudden noise. Watches were arranged so that two stockmen were riding round the cattle all night long.

The moon was full enough to vaguely light the scene, which was very typical of Central Australia and could not possibly be met with in any other part of the world. Mick and Vaughan took first watch and Sax and Poona took the second. When Sax came off watch, and was riding up the little hill, looking forward to rolling himself up in his blankets, the sound of singing made him turn and look back. It was a wonderful sight which met his gaze, and those who have once seen a similar one are never really satisfied in any other place. The water looked flat like a mirror, and one or two cattle stood knee-deep in the edges of it. All around, just a vague black mass from which a warm mist of breath and hot bodies was rising, were the cattle, mostly lying down and contentedly chewing the cud, while a few wandered slowly about looking for one another and quietly murmuring. One of the black-boys, whose turn at watching had just come, was already riding round with one leg cocked lazily over the pommel of the saddle, and chanting a coroboree dirge, both to let the cattle know that he was about and because he was happy.

The other boy was waiting for Sax's horse. Sax dismounted and noticed that the man standing near him was Eagle. The native grinned as he climbed awkwardly on the horse, for he was not used to riding, and, as he moved off, he pointed with his mutilated hand in the direction of the Musgrave Ranges and uttered the words: "Bor—s Stoo—bar."

Sax sat down for a moment. These words reminded him that indeed this was his home, the land of his father, the place where perhaps he had been actually born. The magic of the desert night bewitched him; the half-moon, the few stars in the pale sky, the sense of limitless space across the sand, the water-hole and the camped cattle, the quavering voice of the chanting nigger which was now joined by another voice, wilder and more exultant—these things and the consciousness that his father was somewhere near, guarded by these mysterious desert forces and desert men—thrilled him, and when he stood up again and walked over to his swag, he knew in a way that he had never known before that the blood of the North was in his veins, and that he was the descendant of a race of heroes—the Australian bushmen.

The cattle were quiet all night. Mick was an old stockman and had given strict orders to his

boys not to hurry the cattle, so that they arrived at the water-hole almost in the same mood as they would have done if they had come for a drink of their own accord. They were on their own country also, and there was not a strange stick or stone or tree to frighten them. Cattle very seldom rush at night when they are on their own feeding-grounds, and though Mick took no chances, and double-watched them all night, he did not expect anything unpleasant to happen. "It's better to be sure than sorry," he told the boys at breakfast.

Immediately the meal was over they started to "handle the cattle". That was Mick's way of expressing it, and, indeed, at one part of the proceedings the cattle were actually "handled". But before they reached that stage many things had to be done. Each man was mounted on the best horse possible, and the party rode down the hill to the water-hole, spreading out like a fan, and slowly working the cattle away from the water till they were on an open plain about a quarter of a mile away.

Now came one of the most difficult things that a stockman ever has to do. It is called "cutting out". Man and horse have to be of the very best to perform this feat properly or else the whole operation results in confusion. Mick was mustering the north of Sidcotinga run in order to brand all cleanskins, and there were probably not more than a hundred unbranded cattle in that mob of nearly half a thousand. Most of these were calves which were still running with their mothers, though there was a sprinkling of larger stock which had been missed the year before. The first job was to separate the cows and calves and other cleanskins from the main herd, thus dividing it into two mobs.

The mounted stockmen put the cattle together tightly and held them. Mick was riding a bright chestnut gelding with high wither and an intelligent head, whose name was Hermes and who was reputed to be a famous camp-horse.<sup>[1]</sup> Signalling to his boys to be ready, Mick rode straight into the mob of cattle. Almost at once he saw an unbranded steer and pointed his whip towards it. The horse did the rest. With wonderful skill, Hermes worked alongside the steer, shouldered it to the outside of the mob, and cut it out from the other cattle. Immediately two other stockmen came in behind it and drove it a few hundred yards away, where it was kept by three mounted boys who had been detailed for the purpose. It is far easier to keep a hundred cattle in one place than it is to do the same to a single beast, but Mick and Hermes were now cutting out cleanskins one after another without any pause, thus increasing the second mob very quickly. It is a splendid sight to see cattle being cut out by a good man on a good horse. The man needs to have a quick eye and never to hesitate once, for he is right in the midst of several hundred wild cattle who are afraid of him, and are ready to wreak their vengeance on him at the first opportunity. He must be a faultless rider, for a camphorse can turn right round at full gallop in its own length, and woe to the man who loses his seat at that time. He is amongst the feet and horns of desert cattle. Mick never made a mistake. He took the matter as quietly as it could possibly be done, and gradually worked the clean-skins out and made up the other mob.

When a thing is done well it looks easy to a spectator, and the white boys thought that this work of cutting out, which they had heard so much talk about, was a very simple matter indeed. Mick saw them edging nearer and nearer, and knew that they were very keen to try their hands, so he shouted out: "Have a shot at working on the face of the camp."<sup>[2]</sup> "Be steady, though," he warned them. "It's not as easy as it looks."

They soon found out that the drover was right. Their horses knew far more about the matter than they did, but the men on their backs were clumsy, and started to pull them this way and that, till the horses got worried, and didn't know what to do. Mick brought a young steer out to the edge of the mob where the boys were standing, and shouted: "Here you are. Come in behind me."

Their horses started to do the right thing, which is to come in between the steer and the mob, but Sax rode straight at the beast, drove it towards Vaughan, who tried to turn his horse suddenly and only made matters worse, for the steer galloped back into the mob. Mick swore and cut it out again, and drove it several yards out from the other cattle and gave it a parting cut with his stock-whip. Sax and Vaughan galloped after it. It dodged and tried to get back, but, more by luck than good management, the boys kept it out in the open. At last they got it on the run towards the second mob and were feeling very pleased with their success, when it suddenly turned.

Sax was in the lead. His horse was an old stock-horse, and as soon as the beast turned, it turned too, quickly, and in its own length. But the boy on the horse's back did not turn! Sax had been going for all he was worth, standing up in the stirrups and leaning forward excitedly, when, all of a sudden, the horse under him jerked round on its fore feet. Sax went straight on over the animal's head and came to the ground all in a heap, while the horse galloped on for a few yards and then stopped and looked round at its fallen rider. Vaughan did not fare quite so badly. His horse did not turn at full gallop. It propped and then turned. When it propped, it flung Vaughan forward. He clutched the horse's neck to save himself from coming off, and when the horse turned he hung on still tighter.

The steer got away easily and was making back to the mob when Uncle and Fiddle-head came to the rescue. Everybody laughed at the two white boys, but they took the fun in good part and learnt their first important lesson in handling cattle: it's never so easy that it doesn't need care.

[1] A camp-horse is a horse which has been especially trained for cutting out cattle on a cattle-camp.

[2] Working on the face of the camp means taking cattle which have been cut out from the man who is doing this particular job, and driving them away to the second mob.

## CHAPTER XVII

### The Branded Warragul

By noon the cattle were in two mobs, clean-skins and branded. Leaving the clean-skins in charge of three boys, with instructions to keep them from straying, Mick and the other stockmen drove the branded cattle right away and let them go, and then rode back to camp for dinner. A fire was lit, the nine quart-pots put in the blaze, the damper and bag of meat brought out, and soon everybody was munching the hard tucker with a relish which can be gained only by a vigorous life in the open air. As soon as three of the black-boys had finished, they were sent out to relieve the ones who were watching the cattle, and at the end of the hour's middle-day "camp", everybody was ready for the branding.

There were one or two trees on the plain, and a suitable one was chosen with a strong bough about five feet from the ground. A pile of wood was collected and a fire lit and the brands made red-hot. Green-hide ropes were uncoiled to get the kinks out and coiled again ready for instant use, and every horseman saw to the tightness of his saddle-girth. Mick stood near the tree waiting to brand and cut, and with him were Fiddle-head and Jack Johnson for the front and back leg ropes, and Eagle to keep the brands hot and hand them when required. Poona and Uncle were each armed with a long pliant bull-hide lasso, and the two white boys and Calcoo rode round the cattle, keeping them well bunched up.

Mick looked round to see that every man was in his place, gave his knife an extra rub or two on his boot, and then shouted: "Right-o!"

Poona and Uncle rode forward at once to different ends of the mob. Each of them singled out a cleanskin, and almost at the same time two lassoes whirled through the air. The thin bull-hides uncoiled and uncoiled as they sped over the heads of the cattle, and the loops kept wide open and fell around the necks of the chosen victims. Both horses propped immediately, and the lasso-men sat back to take the strain. It came, but the horses knew their work and lay back, almost sitting on their tails, till the bucking, bellowing animals on the end of the ropes ceased their first efforts to escape. Then, bit by bit, as carefully as an angler plays a game fish, the beasts were drawn out of the mob, while Sax, Vaughan, and Calcoo kept the others from breaking away.

There is always keen rivalry between lasso-men as to who pulls his beast up to the fire first. Poona won this time, for the young bull on the end of Uncle's rope lay down and had to be dragged by main force, just as if it had been a bag of flour. When Poona reached the fire, Mick jerked the lasso over the outstanding bough in order to keep the clean-skin from running round. Meanwhile Fiddle-head and Jack Johnson were on the alert with their ropes, and in a few seconds they had flung them on and had drawn the loops tight, and pulled the animal down and held it. Mick at once loosened the lasso and Poona went back to the mob to rope another. "Brand-o!" was called, Eagle handed up a T.D.3 and a number brand, the head-stockman pressed these on to the near-side shoulder of the prostrate beast, and with a shout of "Let her go!" the leg ropes were taken off, and the dazed animal staggered to its feet and rejoined its companions. By this time Uncle had pulled his animal up near the tree, and as soon as it was branded, Poona had caught his second. And so the work went on without interruption, everybody working as hard as he could.

After about an hour Uncle threw his lasso and missed. The beast he was after was a three-year-old red bull with wide horns which he kept on tossing angrily. The animal saw the green-hide coming and ducked its head, and the whirling rope fell and flicked it in the eye. It was not Uncle's fault that he had missed, but it was a failure all the same, and nobody likes to come off second best when it is a case of such keen rivalry. He looked round and saw that his ill-luck had been observed by all his companions, for there was a lull in the work just at that time, and all hands were watching. The black-boy was on his mettle to redeem his reputation, and his blood was up to perform a feat which he had learnt on a northern cattle-station, but which had never been seen on Sidcotinga. The lasso had flicked the bull in the eye. With a roar of pain, it lifted its great horns and shook them and rushed out of the mob. Sax wheeled to turn it back, but Uncle signed to him to leave it alone. When the wild red bull was clear of the mob, the black stockman coiled the lasso on his left arm and made after it.

Everybody expected him to fling the lasso, but instead of doing that, he galloped up on the near-side of the animal and kept level with its rump for a yard or two. It was on the tip of Mick's tongue to shout out and tell the boy not to "play the fool", when Uncle leaned over with his hand spread out wide. Suddenly he grabbed the galloping bull's tail near the root and gave it a dexterous twist. Over went the animal. It crashed to the ground and threw up a cloud of dust. Uncle flung himself instantly off his horse and held the fallen beast for a moment, while he slipped the noose of the lasso over its head. Then he remounted and lay back to take the strain. It was all done so quickly that the red bull was on its feet again and was tugging at the rope before anybody realized what the stockman had done. He could have easily lassoed the escaping beast in the ordinary way, but his blood was up and he did this wonderful feat just to show his companions that though he had missed once with the lasso, he could do things with cattle which they had never thought of.

Eagle's first experience of cattle-branding was the recent day in the Sidcotinga yards when he had saved Sax from the horns of the infuriated bull, and the present work was so entirely new to him that he was very clumsy. Mick did not take this into consideration. Cattle were being dragged up to the tree one after another, and the brands had to be hot when he called out for them. That was the only thing Mick cared about just then. It is not at all an easy job to keep six pairs of brands red-hot in a fire of very fiercely burning wood on a blazing day in the desert with a north wind blowing. Everybody tries to avoid being made brand-man, for it is hard hot work with no praise and plenty of blame.

Poor Eagle made one or two mistakes, was sworn at, and became flustered and made more and worse mistakes, till Mick began to lose patience. The boy was really doing his best, and he had even taken off his much-prized trousers and shirt in order not to be hindered by them. But somehow he didn't get on at all well; the brands were either not hot enough, or he hadn't succeeded in keeping the handles cool, or he was short of wood, or an extra strong gust of wind had blown his fire nearly all away.

At last Mick got angry. "You useless smut!" he shouted, when Eagle handed him a couple of brands which were not hot enough. "You useless smut! I thought you said you'd worked on Eridunda. What work did you do there? Kitchen jin?"<sup>[1]</sup>

Eagle did not understand what Mick said, but he saw that the white man was angry, so he hurried back to the fire and took out two other brands, hoping that these would please the drover. They were absolutely red-hot. Mick caught hold of them, but dropped them with a yell. Eagle had forgotten to pile sand over the handles to keep them cool, and had allowed the heat to run up the whole length of the shaft.

Mick dropped the brands and vented his rage on the luckless Eagle. The native was a big powerful man, but Mick took him by surprise. With a sudden twist the white man sent him sprawling on the ground, and, before he had a chance to get up again, was holding the black down with a wrestling grip he had learnt when he was a lad. He grabbed his hat with his free hand and reached for the red-hot branding-iron. He pressed the fiery T.D.3 into the flank of the naked black-fellow. The man yelled and squirmed with pain, but his captor held him tight. It was a cruel thing to do, but Mick's Irish temper had got the better of him, and he held the brand on the flesh till it had burnt a mark which would never come off.

Then he released his grip and stood up. Instantly the tortured black sprang to his feet and reached for a stick. But before his hand could close on it a shot rang out, and Eagle jumped back as if he had been mortally wounded. The man was unharmed, however, for Mick had only fired into the air as a warning, but he now covered the native with his automatic pistol. The warragul knew enough about white men to understand that sudden death could spit out of that little barrel which Mick held in his hand, and if there had been any doubt in his mind as to what he ought to do, it was dispelled by the shouts of warning of the other blacks.

Looking at Mick with fierce hatred, he backed slowly step by step till he was about fifty yards away, when he turned and ran for his life. Mick fired a parting shot after him, but it was not necessary. The branded black-fellow did not stop till he was out of sight over the first sand-hill.

The work of branding was quietly resumed after this interruption, but the spirit of laughter and good-natured rivalry had gone. The blacks were nervous and the white boys were frankly scared at the unexpected turn of events, and even Mick himself, after a few minutes had passed, was sorry for what he had done. But he worked every man in the plant to the full limit of his powers, never once easing the strain, for any sign of relenting would have been misunderstood by the natives, who think that a white man's kindness is the same as weakness, for they respect one thing and one thing only, and that is power. In this they are not unlike white men.

[1] It is a great insult to a native to suggest that he is a woman or that he does woman's work.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### Revenge

Just before sunset, after a long and tiring day's work, the last of the clean-skins was branded, and staggered to its feet and made off to rejoin the other cattle. Mick wiped his knife on his trousers and then used it to cut up a fill of tobacco. Sax had taken over the management of the brands after the adventure with Eagle, and was very glad to pull the irons out of the fire and let them cool in the sand. In fact, everybody was pleased to "knock off", both because they were thoroughly tired, and more especially because Mick's cruelty to the warragul had caused an unpleasant feeling to take the place of the former spirit of hearty good fellowship.

The men let the cattle go and rode dejectedly back to camp, and even Mick's efforts to start a conversation with his two white companions was not a great success. A fire was lit, the quart-pots were boiled and "tea-ed", and the damper and meat served out all round, and soon afterwards the stockmen unrolled their swags and lay down for the night.

Sax could not sleep. He turned over on one side and then on another, but did not seem able to find a comfortable position. During the excitement of his fall from the horse in the morning he had not noticed any injuries, but now, when he wanted to forget everything and go to sleep, he felt a large bruise on his hip and a sore place on each shoulder. The moon shone in his face and kept him awake, and he lay on his swag in a very unhappy frame of mind.

Mick's behaviour to Eagle worried him. His body was too tired and sore to rest, but his mind was unusually active, and kept on turning over and over the incidents of the day, and especially the short struggle between the white man and the warragul native.

Sax had been on the other side of the mob of cattle when the incident had occurred, but he had seen enough to make him very angry at the injustice. Eagle had proved himself to be Sax's friend on three occasions, and the lad consequently took the present matter to heart. He quite forgot that Mick did not know who Eagle was, and merely thought him to be a more than ordinarily useless black-fellow. Sax had found out to his cost what an exceedingly unpleasant task it is to keep brands hot on a blazing north-wind summer's day in the Australian desert.

The tired lad's indignant thoughts became confused as sleep gradually claimed him, and at last his aching body was at rest, though his mind still kept active and started to build dreams. Just after midnight, when everything was still, and the last of the cattle had ceased to splash in the water-hole and had gone out on one or another of the long cattle-pads which stretched away into the silent desert, when the half-moon looked down on the motionless and soundless world, a dark face peeped over the top of the sandhill above the sleeping stockmen. The man's naked body lay flat as a snake on the sand and wriggled forward with movements like the waving of a shadow on a wall, till the native could gain a clear view of the place where his unconscious enemy lay.

It was Eagle.

He had come to kill.

The T.D.3 brand, which still throbbed on his flank, was to him a mark of shame, and he knew only one way of washing that shame away—with the life-blood of the man who had put it there.

Slowly he raised his head and looked, remaining for a minute or two without any sign of life at all, not even the blinking of an eyelid. If everybody on the camp had been awake and had chanced to look that way, they would not have been able to distinguish the black-fellow's head from the scraggy bushes which grew here and there on the sand-hill. But all the men were asleep, and after Eagle had noted carefully where Mick was lying, he ducked down again behind the sand-hill and worked his way round till he was directly above the sleeping white man.

Just to one side of Mick's swag was a row of pack-saddles and bags, and leaning against one of the saddles was the axe which had been used to chop wood for the branding fire that afternoon. In fact Eagle had been the one who had chiefly used it. He was now going to use that axe again, but for a purpose more dear to his savage heart than cutting dead branches: he was going to cut the live body of a hated white man, and cut it again and again till no semblance of humanity remained.

He crept forward down the slope inch by inch. No snake in the grass is more silent and no fox is more stealthily alert than a black-fellow creeping on an enemy. The body is held tense for instant action, and the limbs move slowly and are put forward just a little bit at a time with that slinking movement which is known only to beasts of prey and to savage men. He reached the packs at last and lay down flat, not moving for fully five minutes. Gradually a black hand stretched out and a supple arm glided silently over the sand.

He grasped the axe. He did not drag it. Even that slight noise might spoil the night's work. He lifted and rose gently on his knees and one hand, and held the axe close to his body with the other.



Eagle is six yards from Mick. The critical time has come. No one can see him move, for he changes his position such a little and such a little more that he is in a new place without seeming to have left the old one. His actions are as imperceptible as those of water. Five yards. Four and a half. Four. Nearer and nearer. Three. Two. Surely he will strike now! He is on hands and knees. He waits for a moment or two and then straightens his body, pulls up one knee, and poises the axe behind him. He is like a spring. In another second the terrible tension will be relaxed and that supple black body will launch itself at the sleeping man. The axe will split the skull in two from forehead to chin, and not a sound will tell that the forces of the desert have claimed another invader as their victim.

The silence of the night is shattered by a shot. The poised axe falls to the ground. The crouching native springs into the air with a yell and puts a broken finger in his mouth. There is a mighty shout, and Mick hurls himself at his would-be murderer. A blow under the chin which would have felled a bull sends the black-fellow spinning to the ground several yards away. The white man follows like an incarnate fury and grapples at his enemy's throat. A terrible struggle ensues. Over and over they roll. Now the black is on top, now the white, but Mick never relaxes his hold on the man's throat. Gradually the native's struggles weaken. The white stockman digs deeper with his thumbs into the neck of the gasping man and waits the inevitable end. Finally all resistance ceases. The black body grows limp and the head falls back.

The green-hide ropes are lying near. Mick reaches for them and binds his captive more securely than any clean-skin cattle have ever been bound. Then he looks up and meets the startled gaze of Sax and Vaughan.

## CHAPTER XIX

### Chivalry in the Desert

Mick had expected to be attacked. He had worked with natives for thirty years and had had many narrow escapes for his life, and had come to anticipate danger and thus avoid it. When Eagle's head had poked up over the opposite sandhill, Mick had been lying in that half-sleep which cattle-men get used to and from which they are instantly awakened by the slightest unusual sight or sound. He had seen the native and had known from experience exactly what the man would do. With nearly closed eyes he had followed the stealthy movements of the man down to the packs, had seen him take the axe, and had waited till the very last moment with pistol-barrel pointing through a fold in the camp-sheet. Then he had fired at the hand which was grasping the axe.

At the sound of the shot the two white boys had been startled awake, but they had been so heavily asleep before, that it took them a moment or two to realize what was happening. By that time it was all over, and when they arrived on the scene, Mick was giving the last hitch to the bull-hide rope. In answer to their eager questions, the stockman told the lads of his adventure. It seemed terrible to them that Mick had been so near death, and they wondered at his letting the native get so near. But the white man treated the matter lightly, and all three of them stood round the bound native and watched him slowly recover consciousness.

The five black-boys were standing in a group on the other side of the smouldering fire, not knowing whether the white man's anger would vent itself on them, but they were reassured when he called out to them, pointing to the bound man: "This one, Eagle. Him try to kill white man. No good at all. Silly fella quite. You all good fella. You go back longa swag. You lie down. You all good fella."

Eagle's eyelids fluttered and then opened, and he looked up into the face of Sax. The light of the moon was strong enough to show the boy what intense appeal there was in the captive's eyes. The man evidently thought that he was going to be killed. He looked beseechingly at Sax and then rolled his eyes to the north, towards the Musgraves, and muttered the syllables: "Stoo-bar."

The sound drew Mick's attention to him. "So yer've recovered, have yer?" he asked, stooping down to pick up a quart-pot of water. "P'raps that'll help yer." He dashed the cold water into the man's face. It certainly brought him round to complete consciousness, and the dark eyes no longer looked appealingly at Sax, but gazed with hatred at his tormentor.

"Yer don't like having a decent brand on yer hide, don't yer?" sneered Mick. "Like me to take it off, would yer? Well, I'll have a try."

The white boys had no idea what the drover intended to do, and stood back when he asked them to do so. He rolled the helpless man over till his flank was uppermost and showed the recent brand-mark T.D.3. The brand was outlined with thick burns which stood up from the black flesh. Mick went over to his swag for his whip. It was long and supple, made of plaited kangaroo-hide, and ended in a well-rounded lash. He drew it once or twice through his fingers and then



cracked it in the air. The sound was like the sudden banging together of two flat wooden boards. Mick stood back from the prostrate native and measured the distance with his eye.

"Don't like to be branded, don't yer?" he asked. "Well, I'll take it off for yer."

He drew back the whip and swung it forward. There was a yell of pain from Eagle. The lash had bitten right in the middle of the brand. The whip fell again and again, each time unerringly.

Sax sprang forward. He acted on the spur of the moment. With clenched fists and blazing eyes he stood between the drover and the bound man. For a moment there was silence except for the moaning of the tortured man. Mick looked at Sax and said, with a cruel smile: "Well, and who told you to interfere?"

"But, Mick," gasped the lad, surprised at his own audacity, but determined to see the matter through—"but, Mick, you can't do it. He's tied up."

"Can't do it, indeed!" shouted Mick. "Can't do it! That nigger wanted to kill me, he did. Look out. I'm going to chop that brand out of his side with this whip."

The thong whistled through the air over the drover's head and came forward. But Sax stood his ground. The falling whip coiled round his legs and jerked him off his feet, sending him backwards over the body of the bound native. Mick laughed and raised the whip again; but before it came down, the lad was on his feet and had cleared Eagle's body at a bound. The lash caught Sax's right leg. It slashed through the thin cloth of the trousers and left a bleeding cut from ankle to knee. The boy did not cry out. He grabbed at the whip and missed it, but before it could be raised again, Vaughan rushed forward and caught it. He twisted the plaited hide round his wrist and hung on. Sax joined him immediately, but they tried in vain to wrench the handle out of the infuriated man's hand. The unequal tussle was soon over. Mick was a big heavy man, and the lads were light and were not used to matching their strength against the endurance of a man. First one and then the other was thrown back. They came on again, however, till, with a sudden jerk, Mick flung the whip away from him, and faced them with his bare hands.

Sax and his friend were breathless. They stood panting beside the native on the ground, and looked at the drover.

"You young whipper-snappers!" he shouted, advancing with threatening gestures. "You young whipper-snappers! I'll teach you to mind your own business. Get out of my way."

But the exhausted boys stood firm. At all costs they meant to protect the bound man from the drover's anger. Mick hesitated for a moment. He looked at the lads who were so new to the back country and who had played the game so well. They seemed so young and small to him just then. Because of his man's strength he could easily have killed them both, but their very weakness made their obstinate resistance and pluck seem all the greater. His anger began to die slowly, and his clenched fists fell to his sides and opened. "I can thrash that nigger in the morning," he said to himself. And then his real manhood, which anger had hidden for a time, asserted itself, and he felt ashamed. "After all," he thought again, "a chap shouldn't hit a man when he's down, nigger or no nigger."

Finally he spoke aloud. "All right, you boys. I won't touch him to-night. Leave him where he is till morning. I'm going back to bed."

## CHAPTER XX

### The Bull-roarer

In half an hour the camp was asleep again. Men like Mick, who live in the desert and who are constantly facing death in many forms, dismiss an adventure from their minds as soon as it has happened. The black stockmen were pretty much like animals, scared out of their wits one minute and forgetting all about it the next. Sax and Vaughan were sure that the drover would keep his word, and were so utterly tired out when they lay down again on their swags, that, in spite of what had just happened, they fell asleep at once. In fact, Sax did not bother to wipe the blood off his leg where the whip had cut it.

All the men were soon asleep except one. Eagle, the bound and tortured warragul, was wide awake. For the first time in his life he was helpless. Those supple limbs of his had never been bound before, and he tugged and tugged to be free till he cut his skin against the hard, unyielding bull-hide ropes. It was no good. Mick was too old a cattle-man to leave a rope so that it could be loosened by pulling. The black tried to twist his body till he could touch the green-hide with his teeth and gnaw it through, but he was bound too tightly to allow him to do this. Finally a he lay still with the fear of a captured animal in his heart, and bitter hatred against the man who

had brought him to this condition.

Suddenly he heard a dry stick crackle. He was lying with his face uphill, away from the fire, but at the sound he turned over and looked toward the few smouldering embers of the camp-fire. Instantly hope blazed up in his heart. He was saved! In his previous struggles he had been reckless, not caring how much noise he made, but with the return of hope came cunning and stealth. For a few minutes after hearing that welcome crackle of fire, he lay still and gazed at the thin smoke which coiled lazily up in one or two spirals from a glowing wood-coal here and there. Then he began to move forward. His limbs were bound so tightly that they had no power of separate movement, but he succeeded in twisting his body in such a way that, very slowly and with an expenditure of great energy, he managed to get nearer and nearer the fire. It took the bound man two hours to cover a distance of three yards. Once the mind of a savage is made up to do a thing, time is of no object at all. An eye-blink, the hours between sunrise and sunset, a moon, or a season, it doesn't matter. He will persist in his intention though he die with the thing unfinished. It is civilization which breeds impatience.

At last Eagle was up against the fire. His hands were bound behind him. For a minute or two he looked intently at the grey ashes in which a few little red-hot embers were glowing, till he decided on one which was larger and hotter than any of the others. Then he deliberately rolled over till his bound wrists were right in the ashes. There is no pain worse than burning. A man will draw his hand away from fire at all costs. Several parts of the man's body were actually in the fire, but he endured it all and steeled himself to fight back the greater agony which throbbed at his wrists. The fire touched the green-hide and singed the white bull hair, giving off a pungent smell. Eagle sniffed it greedily. It helped him to bear the terrible pain, for it was a proof that the fire was doing its work.

It is impossible to tell how long that wild man endured such fearful torture for freedom's sake. Agony is not measured by the clock. His eyelids were shut tight, his teeth were clenched, his breath came in deep gasps, and every nerve and sinew in his body seemed to be quivering. He would rather die than call out, yet the effort to keep back the yells of pain was almost worse than death. In spite of what it must have cost him, he kept up a constant strain with his arms. The smell of burning became stronger, but who could say whether it was the burning of the skin of a bull or of the skin of a man?

At last he realized, through the torture which was clouding his mind, that the strain was relaxing. He put forth a mighty effort. His body could stand it no longer, and gathered all its forces for one last bid for freedom. A green-hide strand parted. Another loosened itself. A third uncoiled from his burnt wrist.

His hands were free!

Cunning is as natural to a savage as breathing. With the freeing of his hands it would have been natural for the man to jerk himself out of the fire, struggle out of his bonds, and make a dash for liberty. But no. Eagle had a superstitious fear of white men. He must do nothing to arouse the suspicions of his enemy. Almost as slowly as he had approached the fire, he now wormed his way from it till he was out of reach of its heat, and then lay still, his body racked with the pain of being burnt and bound. Gradually he reached down with his burned hands and loosened the rope which fettered his legs. It took some time, for he had almost lost the use of his hands, and the rope was very stiff and tightly drawn. But patience and perseverance triumphed, and at last the man was free.

His next moves were the most risky of all. Eagle was convinced that Mick was possessed of supernatural powers, for how else could he have seen the black-fellow and fired at him when he was fast asleep? Consequently it was with a caution which was the outcome of deadly fear that he began to crawl. He dared not take too long, for the short summer night was nearly over, and the white stockman would certainly awake at the rising of the morning star. But Mick was soundly asleep this time, and did not notice the black form which went slowly round the fire and then started up the hill near the white boys.

When Eagle came opposite to Sax he stopped. This boy was not a devil like the other white man. He had saved him from the torture of the whip. He was the son of Boss Stobart and was therefore to be guarded from all danger. A black remembers cruelty and will avenge it; he also remembers kindness and will pay it back if he possibly can. But what could a naked savage, fleeing for his life, do to show his gratitude to the son of Boss Stobart?

Eagle put his poor mutilated hand up to his mass of tangled hair and pulled out a piece of wood with a string attached to it. The object was about five inches long, thin and flat, and tapered to a point at each end, something like a thick cigar except that it was not round. Both sides were marked with straight lines cut across the breadth of the wood and with circles inside one another, all filled in with a mixture of grease and red ochre. At one end was a hole through which passed a string made of native women's hair. The thing was a luringa—a bull-roarer—a sacred charm, the most precious object which Eagle could possibly give to his white friend. With this luringa the white boy could travel unharmed amongst the most savage tribes of the desert, and could even enter the wildest of the Musgrave fastnesses and return, a thing which no white man had ever yet done.

Eagle looked long at the piece of wood and muttered certain words over it, and then unfastened the hair string and put it round the neck of the sleeping boy. He had no fear of any evil power which Sax might possess, and when the lad stirred uneasily, the black-fellow went on with his work till he had tied the string quite securely.

A flap of Sax's camp-sheet was spread out on the sand, and when Eagle had finished with the luringa, he spread out his mutilated hand on the piece of white canvas and made an imprint. His hand was all covered with blood and ashes, and the mark of the two fingers and the projecting thumb was left very plainly on the camp-sheet.

When Eagle was quite satisfied that Sax would know who had hung that strange symbol round his neck, he crawled on up the hill, disappeared on the other side, and fled for his life.

## CHAPTER XXI

### Horseshoe Bend

In order fully to understand the position in which Sax and his friend were soon to be placed, it is necessary to go back several weeks and find out what had happened to the famous Boss Stobart.

Joe Archer, the storekeeper at Oodnadatta who had been so kind to the boys, had told them that the drover had not been heard of since he had called in at Horseshoe Bend. It is possible to connect up with the Overland Telegraph Line at Horseshoe Bend, and Stobart had taken advantage of this opportunity of getting into touch with Oodnadatta.

Boss Stobart, with a thousand Queensland cattle, reached the Finke about midday. The Finke is a wide river of soft white sand, bordered on each side by gnarled and ancient gum trees. Not once in the memory of white man had the Finke carried water from its source in the Macdonnell Ranges to its mouth in the great dry salt Lake Eyre, and the trees which mark its course, and can be seen from many, many miles away scattered about the landscape, gain their nourishment from a water-supply fifty or sixty feet below the arid surface.

The drover saw the cattle safely over the dry creek, put them on camp in a clay-pen surrounded by sandhills, and then rode up to the little group of rough buildings which, because the Finke makes an almost complete turn on itself just there, goes by the name of Horseshoe Bend. The Horseshoe Bend licensed store is a low iron building ornamented on two sides by a broad veranda. Clustered at the back are a hut of split box logs thatched with cane, an iron-roofed cellar, and a few primitive outbuildings. These, with a large set of yards and troughs for watering cattle, make what is not only the homestead of a six-thousand-square-mile cattle station, but also an important depot on the Great North Stock Route, a postal and telegraph station, and the residence—when he is not away on the run—of a justice of the peace. In a cramped and dusty office, where, amid the buzzing of innumerable flies, while the temperature climbs above 110° F. every day for five months in the year, the news of Europe and Asia can be heard tick-tacked in code by inserting a little plug. The reports of a war in India, of an active volcano in South America, or of a cricket match in England could be heard at Horseshoe Bend in the centre of the Australian desert before people in Melbourne knew anything about it. The only thing necessary is to insert a little metal plug and make the current run through the recorder.

But the plug hangs idle on its nail; the recorder is covered with dust; no one bothers about either Europe or Asia. What chiefly concerns the few white men who are able to live in Central Australia are the price of stock, the best place to find a little dried grass or bush, and water. Always water, water, water—everything else is of secondary importance—cattle-feed and water.

The conversation between Stobart and the man behind the bar was all about the needs and the ways of stock. The drover hitched his horse to a veranda-post and walked into the dark drinking-room stiffly, for he had been in the saddle since three o'clock that morning, and had done some hard riding after restless cattle.

"Good-day," said Stobart.

"Good-day," replied Tom Gibbon. "Travelling?"

"Yes. Cattle. How's the water down the road?"

The man consulted a paper nailed on a board. It contained the names of all the water-holes from Alice Springs to Oodnadatta. He began to read, running his finger below the words and pronouncing them slowly: "Yellow—dry. Sugar-Loaf—dry. Anvil Soak—dry. One Tree Well—only enough for a plant; makes very slow. Simpson's Hole—dry. In fact the whole lot are dry till you get as far as the Stevenson Bore. You're right after that. How many've you got?"

"A thousand."

"Holy sailor! You'll never get through. Bob Hennessy was the last man down with cattle. He got as far as the Crown and had to leave them on a well there. They were as poor as wood. No stock passed this way for three months."

Boss Stobart had been a drover in Central Australia for thirty years, and the names of the water-holes which Tom Gibbon had read out were very familiar to him. Tom, however, was new to the country and did not know who his visitor was. Stobart did not show any surprise at the state of the country to the south of him, but merely remarked casually: "Oh, well, I'll have to go round then. I'm a good month ahead of time."

The barman did not know what going round meant, but had no wish to display an ignorance which was really quite evident to the drover, so he asked: "What'll you drink?"

"Got any sarsaparilla?"

Tom Gibbon laughed. It seemed a good joke to him that a bushman should ask for a teetotal drink. "Yes, any amount of it," he answered. "'Johnny Walker', 'Watson's No. 10', 'King George'—any brand you like."

"I said sarsaparilla, not whisky," said Stobart.

The laugh died out on Tom Gibbon's face. "D'you mean it?" he asked.

"Why, yes. What d'you think I'd ask for it for if I didn't want it?"

The sarsaparilla bottle was taken down from the shelf and put on the counter, together with a glass and a water-bag. "Have one with me?" invited the drover.

"No, thanks," replied the other. "I don't care for that stuff. A man needs something with a nip to it in this country."

Stobart poured out his drink and watered it. "Does he?" he asked quietly. "When you've been in this country as long as I have, you'll know what's good for you."

When his visitor had gone, Tom Gibbon asked a black-fellow who the man was that preferred sarsaparilla to whisky. He got rather a shock when the native told him that the man was not a namby-pamby new-chum as he had suspected, but was one whose name and deeds were known and talked about from one end of the country to the other.

"That one?" exclaimed the black-fellow in surprise.

"You no bin know um that one, eh? Him Boss Stobart. Big fella drover. Him bin walk about this country since me little fella. Him big fella drover all right, altogether, quite."

The "big fella" drover rode over to the cattle and, instead of starting them due south along the Great North Stock Route, he gave them a drink at Horseshoe Bend troughs and then set out west. For several days he and his black-boys travelled the mob through country which he knew well, and he managed to find enough dry grass and bush to keep the animals in fair condition, and enough water to give them a drink every other day.

He was making towards the Musgrave Ranges, knowing that the great mass of high country which loomed on the western horizon day after day was sure to have water-holes and gullies full of cattle-feed along the base of it. One day he watered the cattle at a little water-hole surrounded by box trees, under a low stony rise, and put them on camp in the open and arranged the watches. It was still an hour before sunset when Boss Stobart, after giving the cattle a final inspection, was riding back to camp to make a damper and cook a bucket of meat, when he was startled by seeing a boot track. They were in totally uninhabited country, and the sight was just as startling as a naked black-fellow in the middle of Sydney in the busy part of the day would be.

He followed it for a yard or two. The footprints turned outwards. A white man had made those tracks. They were only about a day old. What was a white man on foot doing in such a place? The drover stopped and looked back. The line of tracks was crooked and seemed as if a staggering man had made it, but the general direction was from the north. Stobart rode on slowly and thoughtfully. The wandering tracks led to a little clump of mulga trees about a couple of hundred yards away from the water-hole.

Suddenly the old stock-horse which the man was riding drew back and snorted with alarm. Something was moving in those trees. Stobart urged the horse on. Just at the edge of the clump of scraggy timber the animal shied again. A man's shirt was lying on the ground. Trousers and boots were a little distance away, and then an old battered felt hat was found upturned in the sand. Finally the horse became so much afraid that Stobart was obliged to dismount and tie it to a tree while he followed the tracks on foot. He had only a little farther to go before he too saw what his horse had already seen—a naked white man staggering round and round in a small clearing among the trees.

The man took no notice when Stobart appeared. He was quite unconscious. The drover

shouted, but there was no more response than if the desert silence had remained unbroken. By the tracks of his shuffling bare feet he must have been drawing that terrible circle for several hours, while the pitiless sun beat down on his unprotected head. His tongue lolled out of his mouth and was dark-coloured and swollen, his head jerked forward loosely with each stride, and his tottering legs were bent almost double at the knees. If he sank just a little lower, his hanging hands would touch the ground, and he would crawl over the burning sand like any other dying beast, round and round, round and round, for nothing but utter exhaustion would stop that parade of death.

Boss Stobart stood directly in the path of the shambling figure. It came on unheeding, with glazed eyes and spent senses, and bumped into the drover as if the hour had been pitch-dark midnight instead of a summer afternoon. Stobart caught it before it fell, and laid the limp body down very gently and looked into the man's face. He uttered an exclamation of amazement. It was Patrick Dorrity, a man whom he had seen only a few months before, cooking on Tumurti Station.

Pat Dorrity and Stobart were old friends. Pat had a fondness for a spree and had consequently never risen above the level of a casual station cook, wandering about in this capacity over the huge area of the north, where his friend the drover, who did not have the same weakness, had gone on earning the confidence and respect of every stock-owner in the country, till he was now a shareholder in more than one prosperous station property.

But bushman friendships are not based on bank balances, and the two had remained good friends. As a proof of this, the last time they had met, Pat had told the drover about a gold-mine he knew of in the Musgrave Ranges. At first Stobart laughed at the old Irishman, for there were as many reputed gold-mines in the Musgraves as there were men who had gone after them and not come back. But gradually Pat had won him over, for in the veins of every bushman runs enough gambler's blood to make the sporting risk of a gold-mine very alluring. The two men wrote to Sergeant Scott, of Oodnadatta, who was a great friend of both of them, and arranged that they would start out for the Musgraves as soon as Stobart had delivered the cattle.

Since coming to this decision, the care of a thousand bush cattle had taken up so much of Boss Stobart's attention that he had none to give to the proposed trip, and he was, therefore, all the more amazed to come across one of the partners in the venture in such a pitiable plight.

The man was perishing. Water in abundance was only two hundred yards away, yet here he was dying of thirst. Such is the irony of the desert.

Pat Dorrity's horse had been abandoned ten miles back, and the tottering man had walked on, till, when he had managed to stagger to the top of the last sandhill, and had seen two clumps of timber, one of box and one of mulga, his senses had played him false and he had gone to the mulgas.

Stobart did not stop to wonder how his old friend had come to such a pass. He needed water. Everything else must wait. The strong man lifted the weak one and walked away to his horse, leading it to the camp near the water-hole. At the sight of that little pool of muddy liquid, the closing eyes of the perishing man opened and his weak body struggled to be free; his mouth tried to shape sounds but could not do so, for his tongue was swollen and his throat dry.

The drover was too old a bushman to allow the perishing man to have all the water he wished for. Gradually the swelling of the tongue was reduced, then the parched throat was relieved by dribblets of water, and even then, when Pat Dorrity could have swallowed, he was only allowed to take a sip at a time, or he would have vomited so badly that some internal rupture would have resulted.

Before Boss Stobart went on watch that night, his old friend was sleeping peacefully, with his thirst quenched, and having had a small meal of soaked damper also.

## CHAPTER XXII

### Facing Death

Boss Stobart could not afford to spend more than one day at the water-hole where he had found his friend Patrick Dorrity, because the water was practically a thin solution of mud, and the feed was soon eaten out within a radius of a few miles. There was really no need for delay, for the old station cook recovered quickly, and "dodging along" behind cattle, as it is called, is not hard work for a man who has nothing to do. The recuperative powers of the Australian bushman are wonderful. It is only men of the toughest fibre and the stoutest heart who can live in the central deserts, and when one of these is overtaken by sickness or disaster, he never stops fighting, and wins through in the shortest possible time. There comes a day, however, when it is not possible to

win through, and the brave man dies fighting, and the sand gradually covers up the body of yet another pioneer.

Dorrity was what is called a "hatter". He had lived for long periods in the north absolutely alone; at other times his only companions had been blacks. Too much of this sort of life is not good for a man. Moreover, the deadly monotony of Pat's life was broken at long intervals by the most violent sprees, when he drank steadily for three weeks on end, finishing the bout by several days of delirium tremens. None but the strongest constitution could stand such treatment time after time, and though the Irishman's tough body had not yet shown any signs of breaking up under the strain, his mind was liable to fits of moodiness which amounted almost to madness. Such a man is not rare in Central Australia, and he goes by the name of "hatter".

After Boss Stobart's last visit to Tumurti Station, when Pat and he had arranged for the trip to the Musgraves in search of gold, the old cook had been attacked by fits of moodiness which he could not shake off. He could not rid his mind of the thought that his friend the drover was going to defraud him of his share in the gold-mine. He blamed himself for telling anybody about it, and at last worked himself up into such a state that he set out, alone except for an old horse, to go to the Musgrave Ranges. The men on Tumurti Station were used to Pat's sudden comings and goings, and took them as a matter of course and did not inquire what he intended to do. He would not have told them if they had asked, for his feeble mind was set on reaching the supposed mine before the men whom he thought were going to rob him of it.

It was some weeks after he had started out from Tumurti with the old horse that Boss Stobart had found him perishing in a clump of mulgas. When he recovered, under the drover's kind and wise treatment the hatter mood had left him for a time.

The party travelled on slowly from the Box water-hole for several days, still keeping the high mass of the Musgrave Ranges in front of them, till at last they came into country which Boss Stobart did not know. The mountains sent out spurs far into the plains, and when the drover, who was riding a mile or two ahead of the cattle, came upon a rocky water-hole in a valley tolerably covered with low bushes, he decided to camp there for a day or two and explore the surrounding district to find the best route to take with the cattle.

It was early in the afternoon when the lowing mob came up to the water; so when they had had a drink, Stobart gave directions to his black-boys and rode off, leaving Pat Dorritty to look after the camp. He took with him a boy named Yarloo. This boy was a Musgrave black whom Stobart had picked up on one of his droving trips years before and had kept ever since. The native was devoted to the white man, and Stobart had responded to this faithfulness in such a way that Yarloo would have willingly given his life for his hero. The boy's services at this time were invaluable, for the party had now reached the country in which he had been born. Before many days his services were to prove more valuable still, and his devotion was to be put to a very great test.

The two men rode up the gully to the top, crossed over the spur, dipped down into a larger gully, and struck out south-west for a plain stretching towards Oodnadatta which Yarloo remembered, where there were one or two good water-holes and plenty of cattle-feed for many days. Darkness came on before they had completed their investigations, and as there was no need to get back to camp that night, they hobbled their horses on a patch of dry grass and lay down, each man pillowing his head on his upturned saddle.

Next morning they reached the plain, found it to be all that could be expected considering the drought-stricken state of the country, and then turned their horses' heads towards camp.

They had not gone more than half-way when they saw that something was wrong, for they came across one or two of the cattle which they had been driving. The animals had evidently been badly scared, for they galloped away as soon as they caught sight of the two horsemen. It took some time to round them up, and by that time others were in sight and others still. Boss Stobart always selected good black stockmen and trusted them, and he knew that something quite out of the ordinary had happened to scatter the cattle in this way, and that it was not due to any carelessness on the boys' part. At last he came upon a bullock which was tottering along, hardly able to keep on its feet. It tried to dash away when it saw the mounted men, but the effort was too much for it. It fell over, tried to get up but couldn't, and lay in the sand, panting and moaning with pain.

The point of a spear was sticking in its side just behind the shoulder-blade.

Yarloo pulled it out and looked at it. The shaft, which had broken off about a foot from the end was made of lance-wood. The head of the spear was broad and flat, and was made of red mulga, a hard, tough, poisonous wood. It was bound to the shaft with kangaroo sinews and spinifex gum in such a way that the black-boy had no hesitation in pointing to the mountain range to the left of them. "Musgrave black-fella," he said. "Me know um this one."

Stobart left the cattle which they had collected in charge of Yarloo and galloped ahead. He met other cattle, dead or dying, but was not prepared for what he saw when he topped the rise just above the water-hole where the camp had been.

A crowd of about fifty blacks squatted round a fire. Their naked bodies were smeared with red ochre and clay in fantastic designs, and many of them had feathers or grass or the claws of large birds in their bunched-up hair. Great bleeding chunks of meat and entrails were smoking and sizzling in the fire, and all around them were the carcasses of dead cattle. It seemed incredible that fifty men armed only with boomerangs and wooden spears should have been able to commit such a slaughter. The white man took all this in at a glance, and then his face hardened and he knew that he was nearer death than he had ever been before, for a little distance away were the bodies of six clothed black-boys and a white man, laid out in a row. The sun beat down pitilessly on that terrible scene, but not one of the seven put his hand up to drive away the flies or to protect his head from the glare. They were dead!

The feasting natives saw him at once and rose to their feet with a yell. Stobart did not ride away. Such an act of fear would have made his death sure, and probably more hideous than it would be if he faced those shouting, dancing, gesticulating fiends.

He took a fresh grip of the reins and urged his unwilling horse to go down the hill to meet the blacks. This act of courageous audacity checked them for a moment. They collected in a bunch and yabbered excitedly. Stobart understood several aboriginal languages, but this one was wild and harsh and quiet strange to him.

Sitting firmly but easily in the saddle, the white man rode quietly up to the savages. When he was only a horse's length away, he drew rein and looked at them. Several of the men stepped back, flung their spear-arms behind their heads, fastened the woomeras, and prepared to throw. But the long quivering shafts never left their hands. One or two jumped out from the crowd and swayed back their supple black bodies to give additional force to a boomerang. But the heavy curved weapon never started on its death-dealing course. Here and there a man sprang up in the air and waved his spears wildly over his head, and shouted words of hatred towards the white man and of encouragement to his companions. But the result of it all was nothing worse than threatening and noise.

Stobart sat and looked at them. He was a famous horse-breaker and a noted man with cattle, and had found, in dealing both with animals and with men, the power which his eye possessed. It was the focusing-point of all the force and personality of a remarkable man.

But who can quell and keep on quelling the passions of fifty savages who have tasted blood? One man broke the spell of the drover's steady glance. He jumped to one side and hurled a boomerang. Stobart dodged. It passed him and whizzed on, turning and turning for nearly two hundred yards, so great had been the force behind it. The man had put so much energy into the throw that his body was jerked forward till he was standing beside the horseman.

A great shout went up when the weapon left the hand of the black-fellow, but it was cut off suddenly to amazed silence when the boomerang passed on and left the white unharmed. This man must be a devil. At once every spear was raised, poised in the woomera, and directed, not at the white man, but at the native who had dared to pit his strength against a supernatural power. Stobart understood the situation immediately, and so did the unfortunate black, who hunched his shoulders ready for death.

Suddenly one of those reckless impulses came to the drover which come only to great men, and which are often the turning-points of their lives. He jabbed spurs into his horse's flanks and wheeled it like a flash between the cringing native and his would-be murderers. At the same time he raised his hand and shouted:

"Stop!"

Not one of them had ever heard the word before, but they understood what it meant by the white man's tone and gesture of command. They instantly obeyed. Before the sound of Stobart's voice had come back in echo from the mountains, every spear was lowered.

The white man backed his horse and looked down at the native whose life he had saved. The man was grovelling in the sand in abject fear and gratitude. Stobart motioned to him to get up and return to the others. He did so, and as he slunk away, the drover noticed that the middle two fingers of his left hand were missing.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A Friend and a Foe

Boss Stobart had had too much experience with blacks to think that he was safe. He had escaped instant death and seemed to have gained some sort of control over those savage minds, but he knew that at any time the long quivering spears, which had just been lowered at his

command, might be hurled at him and bury their poisonous heads in his body. So he continued to sit on his horse and look steadily at the naked savages.

When they had got over their surprise, both at the white man having power to turn aside a boomerang—as they thought—and at his saving the life of his enemy, they began to yabber and gesticulate. They pointed to the seven dead men and then at Stobart with fear in their faces; they looked round at the slaughtered cattle and wondered what revenge this supernatural man would take; the sound and smell of cooking meat grew very tantalizing, but they did not dare to continue the feast till the white man made some sign of anger or pleasure.

The drover did not turn his head. There were those in the crowd who had not come under the spell of his authority, and he knew it; therefore he kept on facing them. He looked steadily at one man in particular; a tall, well-proportioned native with a commanding head and features. Through the septum of the man's nose a little bundle of thin bones had been thrust, and this, together with a particular design painted on his chest, proclaimed him to be a man of power, the doctor of the tribe. He regarded Stobart with a scowl of hatred, and went about amongst his companions telling them that there was no difference between this white man and other men of his colour, and that he would be as easy to kill as the poor sick Irishman who was now lying so quietly in the sand. The natives, however, did not know what to do. Stobart's life hung by a thread.

This state of uncertainty was suddenly cut short by a native appearing on the top of the hill immediately behind Stobart. He had been running and had hardly breath enough to shout the news to the men below. He had seen Yarloo and the little mob of cattle. Most of the blacks at once ran up the hill and looked back in the direction where he was pointing. The native doctor and the man with the mutilated left hand were amongst those who stayed near the fire, and Stobart felt sure that the man whom he had saved was there on purpose to see that his rescuer came to no harm.

After a great deal of noise and waving of arms and stamping of feet, the party on the hill disappeared down the other side, and presently some cattle came straggling over the top and ran down to the water-hole for a drink. Yarloo followed, escorted by the blacks who had gone out to meet him. He had evidently established friendly relations with his fellow-tribesmen, for they were all laughing and talking excitedly, and already one or two of them were adorned with articles of Yarloo's clothing which he had given them. The much-envied recipients of these gifts were probably relations or members of the same totem, and the wise boy had made the most of his opportunities for showing goodwill, for his master's sake.

Yarloo was evidently very much relieved to find Boss Stobart safe. He went up to the drover and showed so plainly that the white man was his honoured friend, that the other natives at once changed their attitude, and gave every sign of favour to the man whom they had so recently wanted to kill.

Stobart was invited to join the feast. His own tucker-packs had not been interfered with, for the blacks had started to cut up and eat meat as soon as the slaughter was over; so to the only item on the primitive menu he added a few tins of jam and treacle, a bottle or two of tomato sauce, and all the damper which was left. Afterwards, when all had gorged themselves to their fullest capacity, he handed round small plugs of tobacco, which the men accepted eagerly and started to chew at once. The doctor kept aloof from these proceedings and would not touch the white man's food or tobacco, so Stobart gave the man whom he had rescued from death a double share, and thereby cemented a friendship which he thought might be useful in the future.

Feasting went on into the night and did not stop till the morning star was rising. Everybody crawled under bushes and stunted trees and went to sleep. Now was Stobart's chance. He signed to Yarloo. The faithful boy had not followed his natural desires to eat as fully as his fellow-tribesmen had done, but had kept himself ready for any emergency which might occur.

"We go 'way now, Yarloo, I think," whispered Stobart. "Which way horses go?"

The boy pointed in a certain direction. "Me go find um nantu (horses), boss," he said. "Me tie um up 'nother side sand-hill. By'm-by sun come up, black-fella sleep, aller same dead; sleep like blazes. You bring um two fella saddle 'nother side sand-hill. Little bit tucker. We clear out. Me know um this country." He looked round at the naked blacks, all smeared with blood and grease and dirt, and snoring in profound sleep, and laughed quietly. "Silly fella," he remarked. "All about sleep long time. My word, too much long time."

Soon afterwards Yarloo went off on the tracks of the horses, which he had had the forethought to hobble before letting them go the previous afternoon, and when Stobart was quite sure that everybody was soundly sleeping, he went over to the packs, stuffed his pockets with tucker, and carried his own and Yarloo's saddles out of sight over the sand-hill. He returned for his rifle and water-bag, for he did not know whether their lives might not depend on one or the other of these. He did not dare to stay away too long from the sleeping blacks, for fear that one of them should wake and notice that he had gone, so he returned and lay down under a tree and waited for Yarloo.

It was nearly noon when the boy returned, and the expression on his face clearly indicated



disaster.

"Nantu dead," he announced sorrowfully.

"Dead?" exclaimed Stobart. "What, all of them?"

"Yah. All about."

The drover was too much amazed to ask any more questions for a time. The blacks had certainly made a thorough work of their first slaughter, but surely they had not killed the two horses which had been let go since friendly relations were established. He looked so perplexed that the boy started to explain.

"Nantu killed aller same cattle," he said.

"Yes, but what about Billy and Ginger?" asked the white man. (These were the horses Stobart and Yarloo had ridden the previous day.)

"Dead," said Yarloo emphatically. "Me bin see um."

"How? Speared?" asked Stobart.

The native looked round stealthily as if afraid of being heard. Then he lowered his voice and whispered: "Neh. Nantu no bin speared. Throat bin cut this way." He poked his finger into his neck at the side of the gullet and made a cutting movement.

There was only one man in the tribe who would have done the killing in that way, and Stobart asked: "Doctor-man, eh?"

Yarloo looked again. The drover had never seen the boy look so startled. Then he pointed to his nose and indicated the decoration of the native doctor, and to his chest and drew the distinguishing marks of his calling, and nodded. He did not dare to speak. The man with the bunch of bones stuck through his nose, the man who had tried his best to stir up his companions to kill Stobart and had persistently repulsed all overtures of friendship, this man had tracked up the two horses in the night and had cut their throats. The white man was his enemy; he must not be allowed to escape, for he would sooner or later be put to death. Stobart knew that he had a powerful foe.

The drover had succeeded in making a friend of the man with the mutilated left hand, but had not been able to overcome the hatred of the most influential man in the tribe.

The upshot of the adventure was that Boss Stobart was forced to accompany the tribe of Musgrave warraguls back to their mountain fastnesses. In the ranges he found fertile valleys watered with permanent springs, game and birds in abundance, and many indications of the gold which so many daring prospectors had sought for at the price of their lives.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A Prisoner

The famous drover was a prisoner. He was free to come and go when and where he liked, but he soon found that he was being closely watched, and that, until he was quite certain of success, any attempt to escape would be worse than useless. It would result in his death.

At first Stobart couldn't understand what they wanted to keep him for, and why they didn't kill him right away, but after a time he found out that Yarloo had told them so many wonderful things about his "white boss", that his captors' opinion as to his supernatural powers was confirmed. In his zeal to save his master's life, the faithful boy had gone a little too far, for the warragul tribe decided that they must keep such a marvellous man with them at all costs, and that his presence would be sure to bring them plenty of the good things of life—water, tucker, and healthy children.

As soon as possible without arousing suspicion, Stobart sent Yarloo to Oodnadatta with a note for Sax, hoping that Sergeant Scott would be able to send out a rescue party at once. But, as we have seen, the trooper was away from home and nobody knew when he would be back again.

The camp where the drover was obliged to live consisted of thirty or forty wurlies on the side of a little hill above a spring. The dwellings were temporary and primitive, as blacks' dwellings are: branches stuck into the ground and drawn together at the top to make a shape like an inverted bowl. Stobart could have had one of these, but as the former occupant had not left it as clean as a white man likes his home to be, he chose a small cave a few yards above the camp.

This gave him the considerable advantage of being away from the dogs and smell which are inseparable from a blacks' camp.

A bushmen always makes the best of a bad job, and Stobart did not see why he should not have as good a time as he possibly could while waiting for the chance to escape. He never for one moment doubted that his adventure would end successfully, and his chief sorrow was for the loss of the cattle. In the thirty years during which he had driven stock from one end of Central Australia to the other, he had never had one real disaster. Of course there had been small losses, sometimes because of drought, once by flood, and once also because of a band of marauding blacks which he had succeeded in driving off before they had done much damage; but he had never failed to deliver his charges at their destination better in condition and in greater numbers than could be expected under the circumstances. It speaks well for the man's stern sense of duty that, though he was a captive in a camp of the wildest savages in Australia, and liable to death at any time, he worried, not about his own safety, but about the lost cattle.

He became proficient with both boomerang and spear, and could soon knock over a rock wallaby or a cockatoo as neatly as any man in the tribe, and, because of his greater strength, he was more than a match for the natives at any kind of sport. He had been a good tracker for many years, but he now found that he had much to learn from these natives, who for generation after generation had hunted for their food by tracking it. Sometimes he was away from camp for days together with a hunting expedition, and in this way he became perfectly familiar with the lay of the country. By his constant association with the warraguls, he picked up a good deal of their speech, and was soon able to carry on conversations with them, supplying anything he did not know by gestures, which are the same all over the world.

After several weeks had gone by in this way, and he had made no attempt to escape, he started to go hunting with only a few natives instead of with a big party. The man with the mutilated left hand was always one of these, and Stobart gradually made his companions fewer and fewer, till it became quite the recognized thing for him to go off with only this one native. The man's name was a long one, and Stobart shortened it to Coiloo. At first his companion, though he very much appreciated the honour of being with his hero, was shy, and did no more than fulfil the white man's wishes faithfully and well. But Stobart had learnt how to win the confidence of blacks, and before long the man had ceased to fear his master—for so he considered the man who had saved him from death—and was devoted to him with all his heart.

Soon after this Coiloo told Stobart about the expedition which was about to set out against Mick's party travelling to Sidcotinga Station. With the wonderful power which the blacks possess of conveying information over tremendous distances by means of smoke signals, the tribes in the Musgrave Ranges knew all about Mick Darby and his companions, and Stobart was very much concerned when he heard that two white boys were of the number. He knew at once who they were. Not twice in a man's lifetime do boys, fresh from a city school, travel up into Central Australia and leave the few little centres of civilization which are there, and strike out west into the desert; so the drover was certain that one of those white boys was his son.

He spent a whole day describing the boy to Coiloo. He only had an old photograph to guide him, and even this had been left behind in the packs near the fatal water-hole; but the father had so often pictured his son in his own mind, that the description which he gave again and again to the warragul was so good that the man had no difficulty in recognizing Sax when he saw him. Then Stobart told Coiloo to join the marauding-party and to see that the boys came to no harm. The result of the native's faithfulness is already known.

When Coiloo had gone, Stobart frequently went out alone. He was such a successful hunter, and was so willing to add the result of his prowess to the general food-supply of the camp, that nobody objected to his solitary expeditions. But Stobart had a more important reason for his wanderings than bringing home dead game. He was looking forward to the day when everything would be ready for a successful escape from the Musgrave Ranges, and he was determined to take away with him something more than his bare life: he meant to take the secret of the Musgrave gold.

At first, when he started to go out alone, he always returned at night, but gradually he accustomed the camp to his absence for longer periods, till he was able at last to carry out his investigations unhindered. He found many traces of gold, but as he had no tools, and did not want to arouse any suspicions as to the real object of his journeys, he was not able to tell whether the traces lead to any larger deposits. There were little gullies which ran water in times of storm, where specks of the glittering metal could easily be seen in the sand; and quartz boulders stained with what looked like rust, here and there on a scrub-covered hill-side; and little cracks in the sheer face of a cliff where veins of dirty red ran about like the marks in marble. The Ranges were evidently a very rich "prospect", and it was no wonder that white men had braved the desert and the men who lived there, for the lure of gold is the strongest of all, and men die willingly in answering its call.

## The Outpost of Death

One day Stobart set out in a new direction. His only articles of dress were a pair of trousers, so ragged and torn that they did not reach below his knees, and an old felt hat. His shirt had been torn up into strips to bandage his bleeding feet before they had become accustomed to walking without boots. He carried two spears, a woomera, and a boomerang, while an appliance for making fire hung at his belt.

He walked till it was nearly dark that day, then made a fire near a rock-hole, cooked and ate a lizard, and went to sleep. When he awoke the sun had not yet risen. The surrounding mountains were clearly outlined against the pale early morning sky, and when the white man had stooped to drink and had made up the fire, he sat down and looked idly around him, waiting for it to be light enough for him to hunt for his breakfast.

It was a strange position for a white man to be in, and if Stobart had not had a stout heart he would have given way to despair, and either "gone bush" entirely, as some white men have done, and become a full member of the warragul tribe, or he would have committed suicide. But Boss Stobart did not give up hope. The unaccustomed food was beginning to tell upon his superb health and strength, and as he sat by the little flame which seemed to get fainter and fainter as daylight increased, he knew that he could not afford to put off his bid for freedom much longer.

All at once his listless gaze was arrested. He leaned forward eagerly and stared at one of the rocky peaks. From where he was sitting, its outline against the light eastern sky looked exactly like the nose of a man lying down. It was so perfectly clear that Stobart laughed. But he was not laughing at its striking resemblance to a man's nose; certain words of the old Irishman who had been murdered by the blacks came to him. Pat Dorrity had talked in his sleep a great deal the first night after the drover had saved him from perishing. The man was feverish, and the sentences had been jumbled up and meaningless at the time, but Stobart's memory now recalled certain words which he had scarcely noticed at the time.

"Man's nose. Man's nose," the old fellow had muttered. "Man's nose seen looking east. Waterhole on other side. Look out! Look out!" Then he had become very excited, and such words as blacks and spears and gold and skulls had been mixed up in hopeless confusion.

The peak which Stobart was now looking at was certainly exactly like a man's nose, and he was also looking east. One direction was as good as another to him that morning, and, as his curiosity was aroused, he forgot about his breakfast and began to climb the hill-side towards the rocky top. Before he was half-way up the sun shone over the rim of the mountains, and he was very hot and thirsty when he finally reached the mass of rock on the summit. He looked down on the other side for the expected water-hole, but the valley was covered with dense scrub, and he saw nothing to give him hope of a drink. However, the ranges were so well watered that he started at once to go down the hill, hoping to find a spring or rock-hole somewhere in the valley.

He was disappointed for some time. The trees thinned as he reached the bottom of the hill and gave place to a broad stretch of sand. This surface showed no sign of water whatever, which was strange, for there had been several storms in the hills since Stobart had been taken prisoner, and the steep rocky slopes of the valley would certainly run off most of the rain which fell upon them. The drover had come across instances of the same thing in the Macdonnel Ranges, away to the north, and he knew that the rain soaked in at the extreme edges of the valley and ran away in a stream many feet below the surface, and never disturbed the sand on top. There is usually a water-hole at the head of such a valley as this, and Stobart was on his way up to look for it, when he received such a shock that he dropped his weapons and stood staring at the sand, his mouth and eyes wide open with amazement. He did not believe his sight. He rubbed his hand over his eyes and looked away, but when his gaze came back again, there was the same sign in the sand.

The tracks of a shod horse!

It was impossible to tell how old the marks were. There were only three or four of them, and they ran up a little strip of clay which the wind had blown clear of sand. They had evidently been made when the clay was soft during rain, and the imprints had been baked hard by the sun and would remain clear for a very long time.

Stobart gazed with utter astonishment at those few prints of a shod horse. They meant one thing, one thing supremely, a white man—a gold prospector most likely, one of the dauntless pioneers who had crossed the desert and had not returned.

The tracks led up the valley. Stobart picked up his weapons and hurried on. Soon he came to a natural embankment of sand which stretched across from one rocky slope to another. He climbed it. The other side was clear of timber. A glint of water caught his eye. The sun had just penetrated the cool shade of that silent place and was striking keen light from a water-hole at the foot of a boulder-strewn knoll right in the middle of the valley.

The white man's thirst was now so great that he was about to start running down to the water which lay so invitingly some twenty yards away, when something white caught his eye.

It looked like the Southern Cross worked out in perfectly white stones on the surface of the sand near the water-hole. Stobart did not run. An uncanny feeling came over him. Those hoof-marks, and now this design—surely the thing must be the work of man.

Suddenly he stumbled. His bare feet caught in something and he tripped. He looked down at his toe. It was cut and bleeding slightly. He went back to find the thing which had tripped him.

It was the blade of a shovel!

One edge was sticking up. With shaking hands Stobart pulled it out of the sand. It came away easily, for the handle was burnt. He groped about near it and uncovered, one after another, a gold-washing dish, a pick-head, a couple of wedges, and a hammer. The sand had drifted over them and made a mound. Then he laid bare a truly gruesome sight—charred embers of wood and half-burnt human bones.

Stobart did not disturb the sand any more. He knew now why the gold prospectors, who had penetrated into the Musgrave fastnesses in search of the wealth which was reputed to be there, had never returned. Would *he* ever return, he wondered. The place was haunted by the spirits of the murdered dead, and was guarded by black devils in human form. Even now one of them might be watching him, waiting an opportunity of adding his bones to the collection which the sand had covered up.

He rose to his feet. He was thirsty, and the sight he had just seen made him want to soak his whole body in the cool clean water of the pool. He laughed harshly. What were all these fancies which were coming into his head? He would not give way to them. This life in a blacks' camp was upsetting his nerves. What were a few dead men after all? He had seen plenty of them. *He* was alive and would soon escape from this outpost of death. He laughed again. The rocky walls sent back an echo of his laugh. It sounded like an evil spirit mocking him. He walked a few paces, till he was near those white things which had been laid out so carefully in the design of the Southern Cross. He looked at them. He looked again, astonished beyond measure. Yes! No! Yes, they were!

They were human skulls—white men's skulls!

Stobart staggered away. He lay down on the edge of the water. He needed its cool touch to save him from madness. He drank deep, deep satisfying draughts. He bathed his head and face and plunged his arms in it, splashing the life-giving drops over his naked chest. The sense of horror gradually began to leave him, and he realized that he had reached the object of his search. He had found the Musgrave gold-mine. From where he lay he looked up at the boulder-strewn knoll behind the water-hole. Even at the distance of several yards he could see that every boulder was more richly studded with the precious metal than any he had ever seen. It did not surprise him. The events of the last hour had robbed him of the power to be surprised. He just looked up at all that wealth and knew it was his—his, if only he could take it away.

He turned his head and looked at the skulls. Each bleached remains of what had once been the head of a courageous man was looking at him out of empty eye-sockets. The jaws had been propped open and seemed to be laughing with ghastly dead mirth into the face of the living man. Stobart's imagination began to play tricks with him, for when he turned his eyes away, the glances of the skulls seemed to turn also.

He plunged his head once more into water and leaned over till his chest and arms were covered. His hands groped about in the cool sand, and when he pulled them out again they were full of wet sand. The sun's rays caught it and struck a thousand flashes from the grains. They looked unusually yellow and bright. Stobart turned the sand over and let it run between his fingers. It was like grains of sunlight. He thought that his overwrought nerves were deceiving him, and picked up another handful. It behaved exactly in the same way. It glinted and flashed yellow in a way that no sand could ever do. All at once it dawned upon him. This was no trick of sunlight on wet sand. This was no make-believe of tired nerves.

The sand of that water-hole was gold!

The white man stood up. He had no tools with which to work at the boulders for specimens to take away with him when he escaped. But here was gold, some of which could easily be hidden on his person to prove, to anybody who might doubt his story, that he alone of all men had solved the mystery of the Musgraves and had returned again to the haunts of men of his own colour. He stooped to gather another handful, and as he did so something whirled through the air and fell in the water in front of him. He jumped back quickly. The water was clear, for the grains of golden sand had settled and left no mud.

It was an old horseshoe! Surely the place was bewitched. He looked round, wondering what next would happen. Suddenly another horseshoe came from a clump of low bushes nearly a hundred yards up the gully. Stobart saw it coming and dodged it. It fell at his feet and he picked it up. He was a good tracker and knew it at once. That shoe had made one of the tracks which he had seen in the clay. There was no doubt about it.

The sense of a supernatural foe, which was making a coward of the brave white man, left him all at once. Evil spirits do not play with old rusty metal. A human arm must have thrown that horseshoe. He had seen the second one leave the bushes where the man was in ambush. Now

was the time for action. Grasping a boomerang he ran at full speed up the valley. He reached the bushes. Nobody was there. But, leading to and from the hiding-place, were the recent tracks of a man's bare feet. Stobart recognized them at once. The warragul doctor had thrown those horseshoes.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### Arrkroo, the Hater

The native doctor fled, like the evil black spirit that he was, up the valley. Although an old man, he was still in the prime of his strength, and he knew the path to and from the Pool of Skulls so well, that he had the advantage over Stobart, who had never been there before. For the first few yards the marks of his naked feet were clearly seen, and the white man ran swiftly, but the tracks soon became confused in a mass of loose stones which had fallen from the cliffs, and were finally lost altogether on the rocky sides of the valley, till Stobart could not possibly tell which way his enemy had gone. He had heard no sound and seen no sign of the running man, yet he knew that he was close upon him when he was forced to give up the chase, and, as if to confirm this opinion, when Stobart finally stood still and looked at the great boulders above him, hoping to see a black human form flit from one to another, a stone came out of the silence, hurled with deadly force and aim. Years of danger with wild cattle had made the drover's actions as quick as lightning. The stone was totally unexpected, but he jerked his head aside just in time. Instead of striking him in the face, it caught the brim of his hat and sent the old felt spinning from his head. He jumped back, picked it up, and crouched behind a rock.

Absolute silence reigned. The sun was very near its zenith, but in that deep valley the air was still cool. Across the clear flawless blue sky sailed an eagle on wide-spread motionless wings, wheeling round and round in slow circles, wondering when another human victim would be provided for him down there beside the water-hole.

After a time Stobart went back to the place of horror, with its charred bones, its terrible design in skulls, and its golden-sanded pool. He knew what fear natives have of dead bodies, and that there was only one man in all the Musgrave tribes who would dare to play such a gruesome trick with the remains of his enemies, and that man was the native doctor—Arrkroo, the Hater. Even he, powerful and feared though he was, dared not actually kill Stobart. The other natives would track their white hero and would soon know everything that had happened, and Arrkroo was afraid of what they might do to him. The Hater did not mind so long as Stobart merely hunted and behaved like a native, but when he started to wander around alone and search for signs of the glittering yellow metal, Arrkroo became alarmed, and, though the white man did not know it, his enemy had followed and watched him closely for weeks.

Arrkroo understood that if once the secret of the ranges was known beyond the desert, many white men would come with weapons which make a noise like thunder in the hills and which kill a long way off. They would drive out the natives who owned the mountain fastnesses, for, thought the doctor, what does a white man care so long as he can put that heavy yellow sand in little bags and take it away?

So, for the safety of his people, as well as because he was jealous of Stobart's power, the Hater was determined that the white man should die.

Stobart stood by the pool and looked at the golden sand. He was more than ever determined to escape, and now he wanted to take away with him just enough of that precious metal to prove to others that his story was true. He wanted so many men to believe him that there would be such a rush to the Musgraves that they would escape, by sheer force of numbers, from the terrible fate of the lonely prospectors.

But how could he take that golden sand away? His only garment was a tattered pair of trousers with the pockets torn out, and a belt at which hung his fire-sticks, and where he still kept his old black pipe, though it had been cold and empty for many weeks. He could not possibly tear his trousers to make a bag, for there was not a single piece of good cloth left; his hat was no good for the purpose. But his pipe—ah! that was the thing!

He scraped his pipe clean and then jammed the bowl full of fine gold. To make sure that the gold was pure, he panned it off in the old rusty dish which he had unearthed near the half-burnt bones. When he had filled the pipe nearly to the top, he daubed it over with stiff clay so that none of the sand could fall out. Then he picked up his weapons and started back for the camp.

A surprise was waiting for him. The marauding band, which had gone out against Mick Darby's party, had returned. They were in high spirits and reported that they had killed all the horses of the plant, and that a white man and two white boys had been left to perish. Stobart did not hear the whole story at once, for, as soon as he walked into camp, the excitement died down,

and nobody cared to tell this white man that three other white men had just met the most lingering of all deaths in the desert scrub. But blacks are like children and cannot keep a secret, and Stobart soon knew all that he wanted to know.

The light of his life went out. The drover was devoted to his son. He was one of those splendid men who do things as well as they possibly can in order to satisfy their own stanch sense of honour; but there can be no doubt that one of the main springs of Boss Stobart's life was the thought that he would one day share it with his son. And now Sax was dead! Just when he had found the object of his search, just when the time of his escape had almost come and he was only waiting for the return of the faithful Yarloo, just when hope was highest, these fiends had killed his son.

He looked round at their savage black faces. He caught sight of Arrkroo, the man who hated him. He saw the naked women and children, he noticed the dogs and the filth on all sides, and his hand tightened on the huge boomerang which he held. Why shouldn't he rush in amongst these men and deal out death, right, left, in front, behind. His anger was rising to madness. He felt that he could overcome the whole tribe of them. And if he failed, what matter? At least he would have had his revenge.

He dropped his spears and got ready. A fire was burning in front of him. With a few lighted sticks he could set the camp ablaze. He imagined the wurlies roaring up to heaven, while he, a captive white man, mad with rage, ran shouting through the crowd, dealing out death with every blow of his boomerang.

Not one of the natives suspected what he was going to do. He had already chosen a suitable blazing stick, and was stooping to pick it out of the fire, when he heard Coiloo's name mentioned. He waited for a moment and listened. The men were saying that Coiloo had not come back. Nobody seemed to know what had become of him, and it struck Stobart as strange that Yarloo was not referred to as being one of the party, till he remembered that the boy would be riding a horse and would therefore leave no tracks which his fellow-tribesmen could recognize.

This moment of thought saved the drover from an act of madness which would certainly have ended in his death. Stobart trusted Yarloo implicitly, and also felt sure that Coiloo was doing his best to carry out the white man's wishes. Therefore he knew that it would be foolish to vent his rage at this particular time, and perhaps spoil what the two faithful natives were doing for him. So he picked up his weapons again, took his share of the horse-flesh, and went up to his cave.

He was very down-hearted. He was a man of action, and here he was, impelled to wait while others did things for him which he knew nothing about. He was very tired, but could not sleep because of his restless thoughts, so he went outside his cave after cooking and eating his dinner, and started to walk about in the cool evening air. He walked as silently as a native, and presently heard the sound of a voice chanting quietly and earnestly in the native tongue. He crept nearer. A man was crouching down on all four like an animal, swaying his body and muttering. Stobart was standing up and could not see who it was, so he stooped down till the man's body and head were silhouetted against the sky. It was Arrkroo, the Hater.

Inch by inch Stobart worked his way nearer, till he heard the words and saw what the native doctor was doing. There was a small pointed bone, called an irna, about eight inches long, sticking upright in the sand. At one end was a knob of hardened gum from spinifex grass, and a long string made of the hair of a lubra was attached to it. The man was stooping over the irna and muttering:

"Okinchincha quin appani ilchi ilchi-a." (May your head and throat be split open.)

He said this three times, moved the irna to a new place, and then began a new curse:

"Purtulinga apina-a intaapa inkirilia quin appani intarpakala-a." (May your backbone be split open and your ribs torn asunder.)

This went on for some time and then Arrkroo got up and walked away, leaving the irna in the ground. Next night he would return for it, and whoever the man pointed that bone at would most certainly die. Natives do not think that any man dies from a natural cause; it is always a case of magic, and if a big strong healthy black-fellow happens to be "boned" by his enemy in the proper way, he gets weaker and weaker, either with or without some special disease, till at last he dies. He always dies.

Arrkroo was afraid to kill Stobart openly, therefore he had prepared powerful magic and was going to "bone" him. Stobart guessed this, and took the chance of showing his power over the native doctor. He caught hold of the irna by the string, pulled it out of the sand, and walked back to the camp with it.

The men were all feasting round the fire. Arrkroo was amongst them, eating sparingly, as is the habit with the native doctors, and no doubt thinking what he was going to do to-morrow when he boned the hated white man. Everybody looked up when Stobart came into the firelight. One or two of the men saw the irna and called out, and at once the whole tribe was on its feet in alarm. Arrkroo saw it also and shook with fear. The white man was indeed a devil, for how else could he have found a little bone stuck in the sand on a dark night? In an instant the fire was deserted.

The frightened natives crouched behind wurlies and breakwinds, dreading least the white man should point that deadly bone at them. But Stobart swung it by its hair string till it was over the hottest part of the fire and then let it drop. The string frizzled instantly, the knob of spinifex melted and flared up, and the bone was soon reduced to white powder.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### The Dance of Death

Arrkroo, the Hater, had failed again. Stobart had openly triumphed over him by burning his deadly irna. The native feared this white man, but hated him more than he feared him, and was more than ever resolved to bring about his death.

Several days later, an old man of the tribe, named Wuntoo, became ill. Blacks have a great respect for age, and the sickness of Wuntoo caused great sorrow. A solemn gathering of all the men was called. Arrkroo was there and so was Stobart, for the white captive did not want to arouse suspicion or unfriendly feelings by staying away. The sickness of Wuntoo was, of course, attributed to magic; some enemy of the old man had boned him. It was, therefore, the duty of the gathering to find out and to punish the man who had done this, whether he was a member of their own tribe or whether he lived several hundred miles away.

Arrkroo was the only man present who really knew what ailed Wuntoo, for he himself had put poison in the old man's food—the juice of a narrow-leafed vine which grew only in the Valley of the Skulls. He had used this same poison to kill every prospector who had found the golden-sanded pool. After a lot of talk, which got more and more excited and incoherent as the meeting went on, Stobart volunteered to go and see the sick man. He knew that the natives would only sing over the invalid, or give him sand to eat, or practise a repulsive and harmful magic upon him, and he thought that perhaps some simple treatment might make him right again. Stobart had gained influence over the minds of the tribesmen, and was allowed to go. This was just what Arrkroo had hoped for.

Next day Wuntoo was worse, due to another dose of the poison which the crafty Arrkroo had administered. A second meeting was called. The old man was dying. Arrkroo arrived with freshly painted body and new feathers in his hair, and addressed the men with all the powers at his command. He felt that, if he failed to defeat the white man this time, his authority in the tribe would be gone for ever. He danced before his listeners, lifting his striped legs high, and swaying his body this way and that till the designs in white and red hypnotized the natives and held them spell-bound.

Even Stobart felt the evil power of the man. When he had got their minds under his control, he chanted to them of the great days of the Alcheringa when they were a powerful fair-skinned race of giants, and had everything that their hearts could desire. He went on to tell of one misfortune after another which had befallen them: their bodies had grown small, their skins black, and droughts had changed the earth from a garden into a desert. The warraguls listened, swaying their bodies as Arrkroo swayed his, and breaking out at times in wild shouts of agreement. Arrkroo was an orator in his primitive way, and he now had his audience completely at his command. He could do what he liked with it.

He began to talk of white men: of the way in which they had invaded the country and driven the natives back and back till now a mere handful of them survived in such places as the Musgrave Ranges. But the hated white men were never satisfied. They wanted the Musgraves too. They wanted the gold which was there. Everybody present knew the fate of the white prospectors, and that if once the secret was known, such a rush would set in that the warraguls would be driven out of this, their last great stronghold.

Arrkroo turned towards Stobart. Every man in the gathering looked at him also. "See," shouted the Hater in the native tongue. "See. White man. He find gold. His tracks all around Pool of Skulls. He want run away. He come back soon. Nintha (one), thama (two), urapitcha (three), therankathera (four)—many, many more. Kill black-fellow. Kill black-fellow. Kill black-fellow."

He stopped speaking and stretched out his painted arm towards the drover. The warraguls leapt to their feet, their eyes blazing, and their bodies ready to spring upon the white man. Stobart got up from the ground very slowly and faced his enemies, staring steadily at them. His hour had come. He would face death without flinching.

The blacks paused. Arrkroo feared that even now the white man would escape by the tremendous power of his dauntless eye. So he started to speak again, very excitedly.

"He bone Wuntoo. He burn bone, make death sure. You all see him burn bone. He go in last night, make him worse. You see him go in last night. Wuntoo die. You all die. You all die. You all

die."

He had succeeded. A roar of fear and hatred went up from the assembly. Every man goaded his neighbour to be the first to spring upon the defenceless captive. Arrkroo's heart was glad. He started to dance again, but this time it was the Dance of Death. Stobart knew that he was a doomed man, but not a muscle of his face altered. The crowd of frenzied warraguls, eager to pull him limb from limb, leaned forward, but he still held them with his fearless eye. How long would it last?

Arrkroo danced nearer and nearer. When one of those whirling arms of his touched the victim, the spell would be broken, and Boss Stobart, the bravest drover of Central Australia, would go down before the onslaught of a hundred yelling fiends.

Arrkroo's spinning and swaying body came nearer and nearer. There was tense stillness. Men held their breath. Stobart faced the future as he had always faced every difficulty—with clear open-eyed courage. Arrkroo's hand passed his face so closely that he felt the wind of it. The next time it would touch him.

Stobart did not move, but every muscle of his powerful body gathered itself for the supremest effort of his life. The head of the Hater swayed towards him, back, and then forward again. Then Stobart acted! Like a flash his fist shot out. His body was like a spring suddenly released. The weight of every ounce of him, the force of every nerve and sinew, and all the gathered knowledge of years went into that terrific blow. It caught Arrkroo on the point of the chin. There was a sickening click. The man's head went back like the lid of a box. He fell to the ground, quivered for a moment, and then lay still.

It all happened in the time taken to blink twice.

The crowd surged back. A gasp of astonishment went up. In a couple of seconds Stobart was alone with his fallen enemy. The man was gasping. If Stobart had not been weakened by the life and food of the blacks' camp, that blow would have killed Arrkroo, although the neck of a native is as strong as the neck of a bull. The drover stood looking down at the grotesquely painted figure huddled up on the ground at his feet. It began to twitch. The eyes rolled round and then fixed their gaze on Stobart. Strength returned quickly to the native and he staggered to his feet. For a moment he faced the white man, swaying unsteadily, then he turned and went away to his wurley, leaving the drover victor on the field where he had so nearly met his death.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### Conclusion

That night Yarloo returned to camp. The sky was so thickly covered with stars that it looked as if powdered silver had been dusted over a tremendous and very dark blue dome. Stobart was fast asleep at the entrance to his cave when Yarloo crept up noiselessly and touched him. He was awake and alert in a moment. The boy's head showed up dark against the stars and the white man recognized him at once.

"Me come back, Misser Stobart," whispered Yarloo.

"Good boy," replied the drover. "Good boy. Does the camp know you're here?"

"Neh. Me come longa you first time. They all about sleep."

Then Yarloo told all that he had done since he went away. Stobart was overjoyed to hear that his son was safe, and hope, which had burnt down very low recently, once more flamed up brightly in his heart. Yarloo had hurried out from Sidcotinga Station, and was too exhausted to undertake the return trip immediately or they would have escaped that very night. They decided to wait for a day or two.

In this they made a great mistake. If Stobart had disappeared that night, while every native in the camp was overawed by his victory over the powerful Arrkroo, he would probably have got clean away, but as it was, he found himself more of a prisoner than ever next morning. Yarloo's return aroused suspicion. Every native in the tribe was afraid of the white man and nobody dared to kill him. Yet they were all perfectly convinced that he was the cause of Wuntoo's illness. If Wuntoo died without the others taking full vengeance on the one who had bewitched him, the old man's spirit would haunt the camp and bring terrible disaster upon it. Therefore, if Wuntoo died, Stobart must die too. So the white man was kept a close prisoner, and was even obliged to keep inside his cave. No one had sufficient courage to harm him, though all their former admiration for him was turned to fear and hatred; but, by sheer force of numbers, they made it impossible for him to escape.



One night Wuntoo was evidently dying. All the men of the tribe who were not actually guarding the prisoner were sitting in a circle with the women, making noisy lamentation. They beat their naked thighs with their open palms, and mournful chants rose from low weird mutterings to high shrill screams as they tried to frighten the evil spirits out of the dying man. A big fire was blazing and sending sparks and smoke high into the darkness, and lightening up the excited faces of the men and women all around.

Suddenly in the middle of the wildest demonstration of grief Coiloo appeared—Coiloo, whom Stobart had saved from death, and whom Mick had treated with such cruelty. He was in a shocking state. The brand-marks had started to fester, and there were burns all over his body. He had come at a critical time. The wailing warraguls looked at his wounds and their excitement got more and more intense. They vowed terrible vengeance against the white man who had done this; against all white men; against Stobart who was at their mercy. If Coiloo himself had not prevented them they would have rushed off immediately to the cave and carried out their designs while the heat of the moment gave them courage. He craftily pointed out that it was far better to kill the white man to appease the spirit of the dead Wuntoo than to kill him before the old man died. The savages listened, hesitated, and then agreed, and returned to the interrupted ceremony of mourning. And all this time the emaciated figure of Wuntoo lay out flat on the sand, lit weirdly by the leaping flames, his chest rising and falling with great effort, and his eyes rolling round with pain.

In the middle of all this excitement Yarloo escaped. He realized that he could do no good for his master by staying in the blacks' camp; so when he gathered from the excited shouts that three white men and some horses were camped out on the plains not far away, he slipped out in the darkness and made the fastest journey of his life. He arrived at Mick's camp in the early morning of the next day, just as the working horses were being driven in. He told his tale. Mick and the boys listened attentively. The drover had trusted Yarloo from the very first day he had engaged him, and he had never had cause to regret it. So, after making sure of all the necessary facts of the case, he responded to the boy's appeal for help immediately and fully.

He cut two thick slabs of damper, put a chunk of meat between them, and handed it to Yarloo. "Here, get that inside you, me son," he said heartily. "Eat all you want. There's lots more where that came from." The whites had already had their breakfast, and Mick at once set about packing the gear, muttering: "If I don't let daylight through half a dozen of those devils, I'll call meself a Chow, I will, straight. Now, you boys, look alive," he shouted to the blacks who were crowding round Yarloo. "You can yabber all you want when we've rounded up that tribe of black cleanskins."

The native stockmen laughed. Everybody was eager for the task. The boys were all from a sand-hill tribe who bitterly hated the wild warraguls from the mountains, and they were overjoyed at the thought of fighting on the same side as white men. Sax and Vaughan were more serious but none the less eager, especially Sax, who would have willingly gone out alone against the whole tribe, if only it would have been a help to his father.

They did not take the whole plant with them. Each man of the advance party had two good saddle-horses; there was one all ready saddled and bridled for Boss Stobart; and a swift pack-horse, lightly loaded, carried all the tucker and water they would need. There were Mick and the two white boys, Yarloo, Poona, Calcoo, and Jack Johnson, all mounted on the best horses in the plant. They had only two firearms for all the party: Mick's rifle which he carried, and his revolver, which he gave to Vaughan. Their chief weapon was "bluff", for a party of seven could do nothing against nearly a hundred armed natives, except surprise them long enough to let their prisoner escape.

They rode hard till about two o'clock, stopped and took a hunk of damper and meat each and a drink of water, and then put their saddles on fresh horses and pushed on. The sun was still an hour high when they came to a thick clump of timber at the entrance to a gully running, up into the mountains. Yarloo, who was the real leader of the party, advised that the horses be left here. The camp was not far off, and the approach to it was quite free from any cover for a mounted man. So they hitched their horses to separate trees in such a way that they could be unfastened in the shortest possible time.

They walked stealthily through the timber to the side of the valley, where they began to crawl from boulder to boulder. It was slow work. They dared not wait till dark. Each moment might decide the fate of the man they had come to rescue. For half a mile they approached the camp in this way, noiselessly, and completely hidden by the rocks. They saw no sign of natives.

All at once a thin, high, quavering sound rose just ahead of them. Others joined it like a pack of dingoes howling in the night. Then the note trembled and came down, getting louder as it descended the scale till it was a deep muttering of great anguish. It started again and again. Every native of the little party shivered. It was a death-wail.

Yarloo turned to Mick, and said hoarsely: "Old man bin die. We hurry, I think."

The rescuers sprang to their feet and ran, stooping low and keeping out of sight. They need not have taken these precautions. Every warragul of the tribe was engaged at the camp, where death-wails rose and fell.

Suddenly a Musgrave native confronted the rescue party. He lifted his left hand and signed to them to stop. There were only two fingers and a thumb on that hand. It was Coiloo. He was armed with spears and boomerangs and a shield. Mick raised his rifle, but Yarloo leaped in front of it. A shot at this time would warn the camp and spoil any chance of success. It was more important to rescue Stobart than to settle a private quarrel.

Coiloo cast a look of deadly hatred towards Mick. He longed to hurl one of these slender spears of his at his enemy, and bury the poisonous head deep in the white man's heart. But he too had a more important task to perform just then. He grabbed Sax by the wrist and sprang up the valley with incredible swiftness. The startled white boy was carried along and quickly outdistanced the others. Coiloo gave no explanation of his strange behaviour. He must reach the blacks' camp as soon as possible. The wailing became louder and louder, and presently Sax heard a sound which gave such fleetness to his limbs that his wiry companion could hardly keep up with him. It was a booming voice which rose above the turmoil of native cries like a strong swimmer battling with the waves.

It was a white man's voice.

Sax recognized it as his father's.

Suddenly the camp burst into view. The lad would have dashed across the open space at once, but Coiloo pulled him behind a rock. A terrible tragedy was about to be enacted in front of that cluster of sordid wurlies. The dead body of Wuntoo lay out naked on the sand. At the head of it stood Stobart, bound hand and foot, and clad in nothing but his tattered trousers. He was about to die. He knew it well, but held his head proudly and looked round at the yelling fiends with great scorn. From time to time his strong voice boomed defiance at his enemies. All around, dancing in almost delirious excitement, were the warragul men, while an outer ring was formed by the women, who kept time with their hands to the chanting which was gradually working their men up to a state of frenzy. Chief figure of all was Arrkroo, once more restored to authority, and about to have his revenge upon his rival. He strode up and down in front of the victim, armed with a huge carved and painted club.

Sax struggled in Coiloo's detaining grasp. He was but a lad, and the odds were a hundred savages against one white boy, but he wanted to leap across the intervening space and stand beside his father. Coiloo's hand was at Sax's neck. He unfastened the string of the luringa and stood up, still hidden from sight. Slowly he whirled the thin slab of wood round his head, hitting it on the ground once or twice to make it spin. The thing gave out a droning sound. The crowd of yelling fiends around the corpse became suddenly quiet. The droning increased to a loud humming. Every eye was turned.

Coiloo handed the luringa to Sax and disappeared. The boy had seen the effect of the peculiar note which the whirling luringa made. He stepped out into the open, swinging the strangely carved fillet of wood round and round his head. The sound grew louder and louder. It seemed impossible that such a small thing should make so far-carrying a sound. The dancing men stood petrified. The women leaped to their feet and became motionless. Arrkroo stopped with up-lifted club. Stobart stood amazed. Sax walked forward slowly.

The tension increased. He was twenty yards from them—fifteen—ten. A movement of horror ran through the crowd. Before he had gone two paces more a shout went up in a hundred terror-stricken voices:

"The voice of Tumana! It is the voice of Tumana!"<sup>[1]</sup>

Sax kept on. Suddenly the tension broke. Like dead leaves before a gale, the natives scattered and fled. Stobart, Sax, Arrkroo, and the corpse of Wuntoo were left alone.

Arrkroo feared the bull-roarer, which spoke with the dreaded voice of Tumana, as much as anyone. Yet he stood his ground with uplifted club. The helpless white man was within easy reach. Arrkroo would not miss his vengeance this third time. He would strike his enemy dead even though it was his last act, for no one can do such a thing when Tumana is speaking without terrible consequences. The sound of the bull-roarer went on. Arrkroo swayed back to gain force for a smashing blow. Then he uttered a wild shout of triumph and jerked his black painted body forward. The club swung—

A shot rang out. The club dropped from the murdering warragul's nerveless hand. It missed Stobart's head by a fraction of an inch. Sax picked it up and rushed forward. But death had already come. Arrkroo's tall figure tottered for a moment, then crumpled up and fell to the ground. Mick immediately dashed across the open space, followed by Yarloo and the three other boys. Coiloo was nowhere to be seen.

Two slashes of a sharp knife cut the hair rope which bound the captive white man and he was free. There was no time for thanks or congratulations. Sax had stopped swinging the luringa; the voice of Tumana had ceased. Already the natives were reassembling, and it was only a matter of moments before they would swarm down on the rescue party, outnumbering it by fifteen to one. A flight of spears fell from the rocks above, doing no harm, but warning the white men of their terrible danger.

They dashed down the valley towards the clump of timber where the saddle-horses had been tied. At one place the track narrowed as it passed between two great masses of rock. Mick was in the rear with the rifle. As he passed this spot, a spear came out from behind one of the boulders. He was not expecting an ambush, and the spear struck his shoulder, entering the top of the lungs and breaking off. He dropped the rifle. As it left his hand he must have pulled the trigger, for there was a report. Sax was running just in front of Mick. He heard the report, looked round, and saw the stockman stagger. He dashed back. His act saved Mick's life, for, as the white boy stooped to pick up the rifle, he saw Coiloo standing behind the rock with another spear ready to throw. Sax jumped in front of his friend and the native paused. Mick was badly wounded, but when he too saw the ambushed nigger, he pulled himself together and dashed ahead after his companions. Sax was now carrying the rifle and he kept in the rear of the party, and prevented Coiloo from throwing that second spear.

Fierce shouting at the camp urged them to their greatest efforts. The Musgrave blacks had got over their scare. They found Arrkroo's dead body lying beside the corpse of Wuntoo. They thirsted for revenge and started in pursuit, not a hundred yards behind the escaping white men.

Stobart and his friends reached the clump of timber. Sax looked back. The pursuit had been checked for a few moments. Coiloo was standing in the narrow gap, holding it against a hundred of his fellow tribesmen. Spears whizzed around him on all sides, but for a time he dexterously escaped death. At last one struck him and he fell, but not before his purpose was accomplished. He had attempted to revenge himself on Mick, and, failing this, he held up the chase long enough to give Stobart, the man who had saved his life, a good chance of escaping.

His gallant death was not in vain. Before the Musgrave blacks reached the trees the rescue party was galloping across the plains. Mick's wound was troublesome for several days, but the man's perfect health stood him in good stead. One night in camp he was bewailing the fact that they had not been able to make a stand against the blacks, but had been forced to beat an ignominious retreat. "I'd like to go back and have a real good scrap," he said.

Boss Stobart looked at him with a peculiar smile for a moment or two, and then took an old black pipe from his belt. It was smeared with clay. Mick and the two white boys looked on with great curiosity. The drover made a little hole in the clay and poured out a few grains of golden sand into his palm.

"Look at this," he said, holding out his hand to Mick. "If you'd care to go back to the Musgrave Ranges with me for some more of this stuff, I can promise you as many scraps with the niggers as you want."

The gold was handed round. "I'm with you," said Mick. "I'm with you, Boss Stobart, whether its gold or niggers you're after."

"And so am I if you'll let me," said Vaughan. "I want to buy back my father's sheep station."

Sax said nothing. He was content to be with his father, and knew that he was sure to be included in any expedition which his father undertook; but no thought of the future could rob him of the supreme joy of knowing that he had been instrumental in saving his father from death in the Musgrave Ranges.

[1] Australian blacks believe that the sound made by the *luringa*, or bull-roarer, is the voice of a strong spirit named Tumana.

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