

WHICH LOVETH BEST.

Man hath a sturdy and heroic soul. He can go forth to war and victory. His master tears can smother sighs and groans. And, without terror, as a martyr die.

THE AUSTRALIAN'S STORY

I had just finished reading for the twentieth time my last letter from home when a sudden growl from Bouncer, our station dog, brought me back from the dream into which I was beginning to fall and made me drop my letter, look hastily round and then walk to the door of the hut.

For a month at least Long Peter and I had shared the work and the danger between us, he, as the most experienced, going out with the sheep, while I kept the hut, cooked the food and attended to the various duties.

On this particular day I had been feeling an amount of listless weariness which I could scarcely understand myself. But the fact was that nervous depression so overpowered me that when Bouncer rose up from my feet with a growl I started as though some terrible danger was close at hand.

Bouncer had risen to his feet and was listening intently. Again he growled; no, not growled, but whined impatiently, and trotted to the door. Then I knew that whoever might be approaching was no enemy, but a friend. Yet who could it be? Long Peter and his sheep were not due yet for nearly an hour, and I need scarcely say that afternoon visitors were scarce at Long Ridge.

Even as Mr. Ashby spoke we could recognize the bleating of the flock, and could dimly see the white fleeces of the sheep as they emerged from the somber shadows of the trees. "Aye, there they come," said the master, in a relieved tone of voice; "and now, after a few words with Peter, I can mount and be on. I ought to be at home before it is quite dark, Jem," he added impressively, "I came today to warn you and Peter that there are blacks in the neighborhood. They have been lurking round the home station for several days, and they mean mischief, too, for their women are not with them. I would have sent Sam and Jerry here to help you and Peter, but it is impossible now to do so. My wife and children must be protected, and we need all the hands we have. I hope your guns are in good order. Do you want powder or lead?"

Mr. Ashby did not seem to observe my embarrassment, for he was standing at the door impatiently waiting for Peter. He had, however, heard my words, for he replied immediately: "Don't put off anything till tomorrow, Jem. Fetch the mold and get the bullets run at once; then go to the water hole and fetch up as many bucketsful as you can stow away in the hut."

We looked at the man inquiringly; his face was pale but resolute looking, and his voice sank to a whisper as he added: "After seeing the spear wound in the sheep I looked about me pretty sharp you may be sure, but I saw nothing till I was clear of the timber, then I sighted one of the blacks wriggling through the grass like a snake. I would have fired at him but I saw another, then another, and I thought it best to return and warn Jem. They did not guess that I had seen them or I would have had a spear through my back. As it is I expect they will attack us tonight."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when a spear whizzed through the open doorway and quivered in the wooden slabs behind. Had my two companions been as inexperienced as I was all would now have been confusion and dismay, but both the master and Long Peter were old colonists, and had had more than one brush with the natives. They were both as cool as possible.

"Bar the door, Jem," said the shepherd, "and hand me the powder flask and bullets. Here, Bouncer, keep to heel, good dog."

With a feeling more akin to agony than I had ever known before, I handed the powder flask to my fellow servant, at the same time telling him that I had forgotten all about the bullets, and that only half a dozen remained on hand.

He just gave me one glance, partly indignation, partly pity. "Then we are all up a tree," he said. "However, let us do our best; two bullets to each of us, Jem, and we'll stand by each other." The good old fellow! I saw by his face that he felt for me in the agony of remorse I was enduring, and did not mean to make it worse for me by his reproaches. Yet Long Peter had a wife at home among the heather mountains, and a daughter, a curl of whose golden hair I had often seen in his pocketbook. Ah, Long Peter could not afford to die yet!

Meanwhile Mr. Ashby was coolly reconnoitering through the loopholes; he had let down the window, and was preparing for action as calmly as the shepherd. We had handed him his two bullets, but he pushed them back; he had a few of his own. "Take them, take them," he whispered; "you will need them all." And truly we did. By this time the moon had risen, its light gradually growing on the landscape till we could see the outlines of the trees, and could see the long grass waving white in the ghostly shadows, but all was silent—nothing but the hoarse cry of some night bird broke on the stillness around. Oh, how long was it to last, this dreadful silence and inaction? For myself I must confess that every pulse in my body was beating like a sledge hammer, every nerve quivering till I could scarcely hold my rifle. But the master and Peter, they knelt as quietly as though no danger was to be apprehended, their barrels pointed through the loopholes, while they closely watched for any movement outside.

But there was none. The sheep were camping quietly round the hurdles, the night wind swept with a mournful sound through the dark trees, causing the spectral tracery of the branches to dance in the moonlight on the grass, but that was all. Still the terrible silence. But suddenly there was a change, three or four of the sheep rose, looked all round, stamped with their feet and huddled close together. Something had alarmed them, some sight or sound as yet unrevealed to our blunter faculties. Bouncer rose to his feet, too, whining uneasily.

"Down, dog, down!" whispered Peter, breaking the silence for the first time, and the docile animal once more sank to the ground. The next moment a loud report rang out into a thousand echoes. Peter had fired the first shot, a shrill death scream following it, while we could dimly see the dark figure of a man who leaped from his ambush and fell like a clod to the ground. "Now, master," cried Long Peter, while rapidly reloading his gun, "fire away, but aim to the right, sir, aim to the right. I can see the cursed creatures gathering there in numbers." Mr. Ashby obeyed the directions given him by his servant, for in truth Long Peter had a fuller view than any of us of what was going on outside. "There, you are all right!" he added exultantly, as both Mr. Ashby's gun and mine were fired at the same moment. "You have each fixed your man, and the others are drawing off for a little. But mark my words, sir," he added, "though they are mortally afraid of our guns, they'll find out soon enough that our ammunition is running short, then they will fire the hut and we are done for. Sir, I mean to get Bouncer to help us." "The dog?" asked Mr. Ashby, inquiringly. "I don't understand. What can he do? They will certainly kill him if you let him out!" "So they will, if they can catch him," replied the shepherd composedly; "but we must take our chance of that, sir. If you will write a line to the Head Station, telling them what a fix we are in, I reckon that my dog will carry the letter there in less time than a thoroughbred horse could do it. I have taught him, sir, to fetch and carry, little thinking that at some time our lives might depend upon him doing it. Please write the letter, sir."

see that his heart was full. Ah, his dear young wife, his blue eyed little ones! Would he ever see them more?

There was certainly no time to lose. I could see the dark figures of the natives dodging round the hut, evidently thinking that since we had ceased firing our ammunition must be totally expended; but it was not so, we had each of us one bullet left, but only one, which we were keeping for emergencies, or for final scrimmage. Meanwhile Long Peter had pulled away a half rotten slab from behind his bunk, thus making a hole sufficiently large for Bouncer to creep through. He then fastened the letter securely to his collar, the noble animal giving now and then a suppressed whine and trembling from head to foot with anxiety. He had smelt at Jerry's waistcoat, and quite understood what was expected of him. I could not bear to look at Long Peter at this moment, his features were working with emotion, and I could have sworn that there were tears in his eyes; but he said nothing. Everything being now ready he led Bouncer to the hole, held his muzzle for a moment pressed hard between his hands, while he gazed into the creature's expressive eyes. "Now go, good dog," he whispered; and squeezing himself through the hole Bouncer sped away on noiseless feet.

We listened intently for a few minutes; oh, how we listened! our faces blanched and our limbs trembling. Had Bouncer escaped away on his weighty errand without being discovered? Alas, no! a sudden wild jabbering rose on the night air, a rush of many feet, and the next instant we detected a yelp of pain. "They have surely speared him!" whispered Mr. Ashby.

But Long Peter turned on him almost in anger. "No, no, sir," he said; "he is just scratched. He'll do it yet, I know he will!" "He must be quick then," replied the master, "for those cursed savages have struck a light somehow; they mean to burn us out, look!"

Our eyes were now intently watching the movements of the black fellows from the loopholes, and we had not watched long till we saw a flaming brand whizzing through the air till it fell upon the stringy bark roof above our heads. Another and another immediately followed, still it did not seem to us that any of them had taken effect.

"Carry up a bucket of water through the trap door and pour it over the roof," whispered the master to me, "but take care of yourself; don't let them see you." I did as I was directed, and thoroughly drenched the roof, but while thus engaged I heard a shout from below. It was Mr. Ashby's voice.

"Come down, Jem; come quickly," he cried, and I rattled down the ladder with a sinking heart. Long Peter lay on the floor of the hut, white and gasping; a spear had entered one of the loopholes and pinned him through the thigh. In response to my groan of utter dismay the good fellow struggled into a sitting posture. "Never mind me, Jem," he said; "fight it out to the last. Take my gun, there is one charge in it yet; but first drag me into that corner."

I obeyed in silence, handed him a pannikin of cold tea, and then took my place by Mr. Ashby's side. "Look out," he whispered. "I mean to fire at their ringleader—that man with the blazing log in his hand—I fear he has already fired the roof. I hear it crackling; but it scarcely matters now, the end is not far off. We are doomed." As he spoke these despairing words Mr. Ashby fired, his bullet bringing down the man aimed at, who, with a wild screech, fell to the ground. There was a pause of consternation after this, and a hurried talk among the savages outside; then, with wild yells, the whole force of the besiegers rushed on our little garrison. A moment's surging round the door, then it gave way with a crash, Mr. Ashby's gun swinging on the crowd of savages with terrific force, felling two of them like oxen. I can scarcely describe what followed. There was a wild struggle with our guns and our fists; then two black fellows forced me to the ground; one was shortening my grasp of my spear to drive it through my body, when he suddenly fell on the top of me dead, felled by the butt end of Mr. Ashby's gun. But I knew little more. Dimly I seemed to hear a loud hurrah from outside, followed by the cracking of rifles; then every sound died away into utter silence.

"Well, I declare, you have had a bit of a scrimmage, and here's poor Jem about done for!" It was the voice of Jerry, who was dragging away the dead body of my assailant from off my chest. "No, I am not dead," I said, feebly enough, "not even wounded, though half choked with blood that is not my own. Where is the master? and, oh, go and look after Long Peter! He is terribly hurt, I know." "The other chaps are attending to him," said Jerry, "and as for the master he says he is all right; he won't own to a single scratch. He is a game one, he is. We'll have you all carried to the Head Station afore breakfast time, see if we don't. But you should have seen that dog of Peter's. Why, his feet was all skinned and raw, and he had an ugly spear wound in the shoulder, so that the letter was covered with blood. We could scarcely make it out, but we guessed quick enough that there was something amiss, and came away at once. We were just in time, Jem, my boy." "Didn't I tell ye as Bouncer would do it?" cried Long Peter, in rather a weak and quavering voice. "Poor old chap," he added tenderly, as the faithful brute limped across the hut at the sound of the shepherd's voice and crept close to his side. "You and me will never part, Bouncer, never, as long as we live." And they never did part till seven years later, when, in extreme old age, Bouncer died and was buried in a grave dug for him by Long Peter himself. "Ah," he said, when the ceremony was over, "why do them faithful brutes die so soon? I'll never see his like again; he was as wise as any Christian, and a deal more faithful than many."—New York World.

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