

THEY THAT SIT IN DARKNESS
 BY JOHN MACKIE
 AUTHOR OF "THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND" AND "SINNER'S TRAMP"



"You've been lying, you've been lying, you've been lying," he said, his face ashen as he stared at the man who had just spoken. "You've been lying, you've been lying, you've been lying." ...

The tropical day had begun. I lit a pipe and was about to go down to the creek to fill the bottle when a horseman galloped up. "Good morning, mate!" he said cheerily, with an unmistakable Scotch accent. Then, observing the dead bodies lying on the ground, he pulled up to a queer look on his face and gave a low, prolonged groan. "What's happened here?"

"I've had a good sleep!" he said. "After the usual wash—when there was water enough to have one—we had the never varying breakfast, which was barely finished when crack, crack, and with a jingle and a rattle up came a covered wagon with six horses dragging it. A couple of men rode alongside, while two black boys, in blue serges and white slouch hats, came behind, driving some spare horses. They drove off the track and cut away among the trees, drawing up about a couple of hundred yards or so from our camp."

A few hundred yards behind came the squatter and his daughter. I could see that the horses which they rode were vastly superior to those which I used in the gulf, albeit some of the gulf horses showed a breeding that made the inquiring mind speculate as to how they came into the hands of the men who ostentatiously owned them. The pair halted for a minute or two. The squatter rode over to us by himself, the girl going on to the camp.

"Hedrick Mackenzie of Tarragon was a man who might be a few years over 50, of middle height, with clearly cut features, brown gray eyes, grizzled hair and beard—altogether a smart, kindly looking gentleman. He had been a long time in the colonies and had done well. He had lately taken up land in the northern territory, and was back about a year, now on his way out to fix on a site for a head station."

He rode up and addressed himself to Jack. "Somehow they always had a trick of addressing Jack first." "Good morning," he said gravely, jumping off his horse. "Gordon, my man, told me of the sad affair that occurred last night. If you'll allow me to assist you, we may be able to give you very material assistance. I'll send over a couple of my men. Ah, here comes a woman with the necessary article, and as the soil is muddy I don't think we'll have much difficulty in digging a grave. Have you found anything on the body that will lead to its identification? Perhaps a few notes with his description might be of use when reporting the matter to the police. I believe the police have come to the Macarthur river, which can't be more than 120 miles from here at the farthest." He spoke in a quiet, unobtrusive, businesslike way.

"Perhaps, sir," I said, "you're a P. in Queensland if not in the northern territory; so, if you wouldn't mind assisting us and witnessing the inventory of the dead man's property, we would be greatly obliged to you. My name is Parker, and my mate's is Tyndall. Perhaps you'd better take down our names."

He had taken from a light gray khar-koose coat a notebook and pencil to make matters. "As you wish," he replied. "My name's Mackenzie, Tarragon is the name of my station on the Burdekin."

Then we lifted the blanket from off the corpse. Perhaps I never saw a more peaceful look upon the face of any one who had died by violence than I saw on the face of this man. Whatever may have been his restless passions once upon a time they had now forsaken the clay, and there was no expression there save that of the pristine innocence of the child. I had seen the same look on Jack's face when he was asleep. He had been, as the squatter said, looking dead on his face, a handsome fellow. Then we examined his possessions.

In the small pouch attached to his belt we found a plain silver watch, and in his trousers pocket some silver, and two 25 notes in an old purse. The squatter unrolled a small parcel wrapped in oil-cloth and looked at pocket of letters, then he read the address on one or two of the envelopes and seemed surprised; then he examined the correspondence. His face was a study now; the deepest concern and astonishment were depicted there. I heard Jack ejaculate hoarsely: "Well!" but his face was averted. Then the squatter, in an quiet but somewhat formal way, said:

denly what a strange spice of mockery there was in this burial after all. If I were not dreaming the night before—and I was half inclined to think I had been, or that it was some trick of the brain arising from the fever—I had seen Jack take from this man what simply obliterated his identity and left him with that which gave him a false one. He was being buried under the name of a man who at that moment was settling at his burial. For I could not but suppose that my mate Jack was the same John Farquharson to whom the letters which the squatter had taken from the corpse had been addressed, and who for some reason or other wished to be forgotten by the world. He had seized upon the present opportunity of accomplishing his purpose to be considered as dead. The name which I had known him under, that of Jack Tyndall, was, of course, a false one. Still I could not be angry with Jack. "Speak of a man you find him" is not only a charitable but a just maxim. I had never met with a more straightforward or a more unselfish man.

The elder of the two women was now crying silently. One could not but observe them. The younger of the two had placed her arm round the other's waist and held one of her hands as if to comfort her, although her own eyes were undoubtedly dimmed. It was evident she was averse to betraying her feelings. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust"—And in a few minutes all was over.

The women went back to their camp, and the squatter, with his own hands, cut four strong posts and placed them at the corners of the newly made grave. He also cut on the bark of the tree the name "J. Farquharson," and the date, "July, 1885." "I'll get an iron plate made in Sydney and have it set up to be placed over the grave," he said.

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