

THEY THAT SIT IN DARKNESS
 STORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NEVER NEVER
 BY JOHN MACKIE
 AUTHOR OF "THE DEVILS PLAYGROUND AND
 "SINNERS TWIN"
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Continued from first page.

I'll give you both work at 25. I'd a week when you get to the station and until you think it's time to start for Kimberley; so if, as you may find out before then, the rush has proved a "duffer" you'll be money in pocket and want to remain and help to form the station—I'll only stop for a month or so—you can do so.

I thanked him, promising to arrange the matter with Jack. I knew he held out this offer to us with the best of motives and not because he may have wished to secure labor. He informed me that in half an hour's time they would strike camp and push on. Anyhow we would see him on Skeleton Creek that night. Travelers generally camped in close proximity to each other, being afraid of the blacks for fear of being attacked by the blacks.

"Look here, Dick," said Jack. "I think it's time to tell you something, and may as well tell you it now as later on. Dick, before I met you I got into a considerable bit of trouble—that's to say, was seen in previous bad company and under circumstances which would naturally make the police jump at strange conclusions. I need hardly ask you to believe me—"

"Jack," I protested. "I'll punch your head for you in another minute!"

"All right, old chap, you can—afterward." The ghost of a smile lit up his face for the moment, and he went on again as if there had been no interruption. "I've a very strong suspicion that there's a warrant out for my arrest. In fact, it was the knowledge of this that hastened me to make up my mind when you asked me to go with you to Western Australia. You've only known me by the name of Tyndal. I suspect the police have another one for me, but from motives of prudence I think it will be better to stick to my present name. If the police have one for the MacArthur—I heard they were coming—they may be in a position to make it awkward for me, so you're liable to be seriously inconvenienced at any time through keeping my company. Now, Dick, all you've got to say is that you want to go with Mackenzie and I'll go right on. You can make any excuse for me you like. I'll 'pan out' somehow. Now, speak out. I shan't be offended whatever you do. And, look here, I'll leave you the gray as a keepsake, old chap."

"Jack, you cowardly brute! You know I haven't strength left to punch your head. As for the police, hang them!"

I was disappointed in Jack, but undoubtedly my reference to the police was mist and unneeded for.

On reaching Skeleton Creek, which was a series of water holes in a deep, thickly wooded hollow, we pulled off the track and pitched our camp. Just before sunset, when I was brushing the sides of a damper, Mackenzie's party rattled up. Within a hundred yards of us they pitched their camp. I took a big dose of quinine and turned in soon after supper. Jack had insisted on this. On coming into camp he had produced a small pot of extract of meat and made some of it ready for me. I did not know till long afterward that at Turn-off lagoon store he had come away without getting some much needed articles of clothing in order that he might purchase several little luxuries for my all-around condition. "You've got to fortify yourself, old chap," he remarked. "Tomorrow's Sunday, and as it's one of your bad days I think we'd better camp here. Apart from the Fourth Commandment, Dick, I'm Scotch enough to know the value of one day's rest in a desert venture to us, and we don't lose by it. Our cattle are always in better condition and get through more work in the long run than those who keep traveling right on."

I a little later placed my bedding under a shady ironbark tree, the morpheus' chant and the croon of the possums blended with other strange sounds, and I fell asleep.

Next morning, after breakfast, I heard the jangling of bells and the drumming of hoofs as Mackenzie's black boys brought up the horses. I allowed a few minutes to elapse before going over to find whether or not they had fetched up with them. On reaching the spot where the boys had rounded them up I found Jack and Norah Mackenzie already there. The latter had just said something to my mate that had evidently startled him; for when he saw me he left her and came toward me.

"Your gray's not in the mob," he said. "I made sure he was—must go and do a little horse hunting. I wonder where he could have strayed to anyhow!"

"No, Dick, you won't!" I was moving toward my horse. "You stop where you are. I'm going."

Norah Mackenzie went over to pat one of the horses, and Jack, taking the bridle out of my hand, walked off to catch the roan. Before doing so he said to me in an aside which I considered just a little too audible: "Look out for that girl, old chap. She has either got the power of second sight or she is a expert in disguise." I watched him ride off. Jack, as usual, was doing the lion's share of the work!

The sober expression on my face as I thought of these things probably attracted Norah Mackenzie's attention as she moved away; anyhow she stopped and spoke.

sorts of people come out here, and so to study dialects there is no place like the colanets. In Inverness they speak the English language in its best and purest form. I've no intention of paying you a compliment; indeed it was more difficult for me to tell where you came from than for you to suppress that lecture on your mind when I killed the snake yesterday."

"You can have it now, if you like," I hastened to say.

"Some other time," she cried in alarm. "Just now you'd better come over and talk to my father; he will be glad to see some one."

I walked toward the camp with her, wondering not a little at the likeness of her perceptive faculties. What a pretty picture this daughter of the bush made, dressed as she was now, in her simple but daintily made walking dress of some light material. There was the delicate bloom of health in her clear skin and its luster in her eyes. There was no question about her face being a striking one; it was calculated to rivet the attention of the beholder at first sight, for there was more in it than mere physical beauty—there was that higher attractiveness which men call individuality or character—and yet, despite her many strange and unconventional ways, no one could say she lacked that greatest charm of all—womanliness. But still, as yet, I frankly confess, I could not imperfectly understand her. She was already interesting me in a way that I hardly cared to admit to myself.

Just before we reached the squatter's camp she pointed out Savile, the cook.

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"Toys!" I stared at the son of Anak. "Yes, toys; he spends heaps of money in sending to Melbourne and Sydney for all sorts of 'Yankee notions,' paper snakes that fly, talking dolls—and things. You mustn't laugh at him, you know."

"Not if I can help it. Tell me of another weakness." I had an uneasy impression that she was making fun of me.

"You mustn't call them weaknesses—so many of us are built that way. Let's call them partialities. I've got ever so many. Well, Savile's second biggest one's his dog, Samson, and of course, he thinks there's not another like it in Australia. I know myself there isn't. You'll enjoy the pool, however, when he tells you how it killed the rat at Charters Towers. The place doesn't signify—it's always shifting about, like the story. But you're bound to love Savile. I do, ever so much."

I came to the conclusion that I also would take to Savile. Apart from recommendations of a like nature, I always, upon principle, cultivate a friendly relationship with cooks.

We found the squatter seated close to the wagon; one of the sides of the tarpaulin had been lifted up and pitched like the roof of a veranda, so he sat in the shade.

"I've brought you some one to talk to, dad," exclaimed the girl. "I must go and see Elsie. She went off toward her tent, which, by the sides gathered up, was covered with long low boughs, so as to keep the occupants cool.

"Good morning, Parker," said the squatter cheerily. "I'm glad you're not traveling today." He motioned me to sit down beside him.

I talked with him about an hour and found him well informed. He was precise in his ways, but the innate kindness of the man robbed his speech of any suggestion of pedantry. He was in the middle of an argument when his daughter came out of her tent looking amused.

"Ho, dad!" she cried.

The squatter started and looked apprehensive, as if he had been caught in the act of exploiting some unorthodox doctrine. "Well, my dear?" he stammered.

"Why didn't you put up a notice in the morning that you were going to lecture? Then we'd all have had a chance of attending. You are unkind, daddy, dear."

"Really, my dear?"

canvas water bag I walked down and along the creek bottom, then struck out from it into the bush again, taking no note of where I wandered and cutting loose. I threw myself down somewhere. For some time I fancied myself alone in the arctic regions, lying on a field of ice, with nothing to cover me, and freezing to death.

CHAPTER IV
ORDER EXPERIENCES

In the period of delirium which followed I experienced some curious delusions. So powerfully did they impress me at the time that even now I can recall them distinctly.

When I became alive to the present, it was only to be conscious of suffering—a of a sore, wearied body stretched on the rack of a fierce fever and consumed by a burning thirst. My canvas water bag was empty, but there was not strength enough left in me to go and fill it again. As for the blacks who prowled about in that dangerous country, they hardly gave me a thought. But the snake that was forever poisoning itself above me as if to strike filled me with a terror which in vain I struggled against.

There was a mocking assumption of superior wisdom or cunning in its look. Would the old never come? In my horror to break the spell I cried aloud:

"All right, Mr. Parker. Why don't you know me? You look as if you'd seen a snake or a black fellow! What do you take me for?"

"I believe you are something uncanny," I gasped.

The glittering eyes of the serpent had changed into the calm, dark eyes of the squatter's daughter, and her soft, clear voice—it was one of her great charms—came from the place where the snake had hissed.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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