

THEY THAT SIT IN DARKNESS

A STORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NEVER-NEVER
BY JOHN MACKIE
AUTHOR OF "THE DEVILS PLAYGROUND" AND
"SINNERS' TWIN"

Continued from first page.

tured girl, received the overture of this scamp at first with a coolness which only served to heighten his regard for her, and made him go more eagerly to work. His manner when he came in contact with her was respectful and propriety itself. Altogether his behavior and general bearing seemed altered for the better. At last he began to tolerate his worthless company, and it was plainly evident, to see in him what no others could see—attributes which he did not possess, even betraying a certain amount of gratification when in his company.

"That's a cold blooded villain, take my word for it," said Jack to me one day. "And some harm will come of his being here yet. He's a schemer, and how any girl can like that crocodile's smile of his gets over me. I wonder how poor Saville takes it. I thought he would cut up rough seeing we all supposed him to be rather sweet upon Elsie. But either he doesn't care or he's a much deeper man than we take him for, despite his faith in Hanson and weakness for paper snakes."

"I never did think Saville was a fool," I replied. "However, I believe with you that Saville's worth a dozen such chaps as Daly. It's a pity Elsie doesn't seem to see it, though. At first it appeared to me she humored Saville and his follies, but now she laughs at him openly. I suppose time will show which is to prove the better man of the two."

Perhaps the few weeks that followed were among some of the happiest ones we spent, for we were busy from morning till sundown. We put up a large stockyard with a "V," a branding, a killing yard, and also some outhouses. Jack staid with the cattle; Chilcot and I assisted the squatter and some of the others to put up a rough but comfortable house, somewhat apart from the other buildings and overlooking the lagoon. Chilcot was a native born Australian, and as I have said before, a quiet, gentlemanly, smart fellow, and like all Australians, a hard worker. When evening came and the cattle had been yarded—for we still kept them well in hand—we generally found our way over to the squatter's house, for MacKenzie was a quiet, reserved, and at times, and as he had known Chilcot's people down south, he was glad to have it in his power to show him some attention. As for Jack and myself, he insisted, with that genuine wholeheartedness of his, that we should always join the party, private of which in our uneventful existence I was only too glad to avail myself.

And it had come to this after all, that I, who had been in my old country palmy days a man about town and versed in the ways of the world, had gone carelessly on with a false sense of security and allowed my interest to be awakened for this beautiful and uncommon type of womanhood, until it had depended into admiration, then, then that which made me her very slave. That I, a penniless rolling stone, with only my birth and education to recommend me, should think of aspiring to the hand of MacKenzie of Tarrazone's daughter, who would yet be a great heiress, was too presumptuous a contingency to be entertained.

And now, beginning to get my eyes opened to the true state of affairs, I was not a little alarmed at the probable ending of my day dreams, and I was considerable trouble for myself in the future unless I could reason myself into a more sensible state of mind. I would endeavor to see her in another light, would note her crudities of manner and, if possible, detect in her want of conventionalism and impetuosity only the fickleness of a shallow mind. To run away would be to confess my weakness; surely it was possible to cure myself of this folly. But like many more I reckoned without my host. As for the author of all this mischief, her manner toward me had never changed. Perhaps she was now a little less impulsive and a little more womanly, but she was still the strange and unconventional creature I had seen and a snake with a stock with me, and I knew that when he had interfered with her chances of so doing.

Still many were the pleasant evenings we spent together. As for Daly, with his handsome, cold blooded and supercilious face, all this probably suited his purpose, for he became positively civil to Jack and me, seeing it was the maid and not the mistress that had captivated his fancy. He seemed content to overlook the fact that we were welcome guests, while he knew he might not enter, but still I knew that with his naturally ambitious views and aspirations it gave him some little thought now and again. I knew that though he had taken a violent fancy to the fair, blue eyed, comely Elsie Gordon, the position she occupied as a dependent was not quite to his liking. It was perhaps this that always took him over toward the squatter's house when there were but few present to see him. He seldom by any chance went boldly up in the light of day as any honest suitor would have done. It was strange to see the struggle between false pride and natural sentiment in this scamp. As for Elsie, I would see that her eyes were blind to Daly's real self. But it was Saville who came in for the natural overflow of Daly's mean nature, for he no sooner found out the cook's weakness for the person he had honored with his addresses than he seized every opportunity of turning his barbed shafts into open ridicule. I never met with a man who could keep his temper under such peculiarly trying circumstances as well as Saville, only at times he would flush slightly under some particularly pointed remark of Daly's and look at him steadily with those wondering, patient eyes of his. I knew that Saville, who, like most men of great bodily strength, possessed one of the best tempers, was trying to bear with this man. I feared that some day Daly would go too far, and there would be trouble in the camp.

About this time we began to see the signal fires of the blacks among the ranges. MacKenzie had given strict orders not to interfere with them so long as they did not stampede and meddle with the cattle.

At last the longed for mail carrier returned. There were two letters for me, one of them registered. This was from my mother's lawyer and conveyed the glad tidings that a cousin of my father's, the fact of whose existence I had long since forgotten, had after paying some few small legacies to his more immediate relations, made me his residuary legatee, and the property would produce about £1,500 a year.

Fifteen hundred a year! A minute and a half ago a penniless bushman, now a man of independent means!

And she, whom only a few hours before I had been striving to banish from my thoughts, telling herself in a spirit which was false to my own convictions that I was simply the victim of a passing infatuation, could I not approach her as a suitor now? If I were not from a monetary point of view a match for her, still was I not her equal by birth, and, I trust, those attributes which give to one the dignity of a gentleman?

The other letter was from my mother. It begged of me to come home now that I had sufficient for all my needs. All came as to my future worldly welfare were removed. But was I going back to civilization again? I need hardly have asked myself that question. No, if I had been left the wealth of the Rothschilds, I would have continued as I was—getting my weekly wage and working for it too. If I told any one in camp of my altered prospects, the fact of my remaining under such circumstances might appear significant. By a gentleman's declaration I might also ruin my chance of winning the one girl in the world who now seemed to me worth winning. I also felt that if I



"Well, Dick, I need hardly ask if you've had good news?"

were to gain her love it must be by my own individuality. Norah MacKenzie was not one who would be swayed much by worldly considerations. I did not know as yet how I stood with her. She had never by word or sign given me the slightest clue to this secret. If I accomplished the end on which my heart was set, how pleasant it would be to tell her that I was no pauper, but a man of fair means. These bright thoughts must have shrouded upon my face, for Jack, as he passed just then, looked keenly at me and remarked:

"Well, Dick, I need hardly ask if you've had good news?"

"Yes, good news, Jack."

"Parker," said the squatter, coming up just then, "you're just the man I'm looking for. Have you had a kettled of news? Good news, I hope? That's right. Well, what I wanted to tell you is this: There's a 60 ton ketch coming up the MacArthur river with iron, wire and general stores for the station, so I want you to look after the cargo. You'll go with a couple of saville, eight horses in each. I'm afraid, Saville, you'll have to go, too, for you're the only one who has ever been through this country before. Besides, as luck will have it, I've got to make a little excursion southward myself to meet a party of surveyors traveling overland from South Australia so's to find out exactly where my country is. I'm going to take Chilcot and another man with me. We can keep the cattle alone the gap now that we're in the fence across. I hear the police magistrate and his wife have arrived at the MacArthur river, so I think I'll just send in my daughter and Elsie to wait with her till I get back. When the steamer comes round, it can take us all away. It was a very foolish thing of me to take her into this country at all. It is impossible to take her with me now. It goes against my grain to leave her, but I can't help it."

"I would go myself, but must make an early start tomorrow morning. Saville, you've been 16 years with me, and I never once found you wanting when duty was to be done. I'll see you before you leave."

CHAPTER VIII AN UNLucky INCIDENT.

It did not take Jack and me long to complete our personal preparations for the MacArthur river trip. We helped the teamsters to look over the harness, grease the wagons, weigh out some rations, and on the following morning shortly after daybreak we were steering north again down the track. Saville was in the lead; Norah MacKenzie, with Elsie and Gordon, rode behind him, while Snowball and another black fellow brought up the rear of the cavalcade, which included a few spare horses. The squatter had started out that morning to a certain point where he expected to meet the surveyors. I felt sorry for him as I caught sight of his anxious face when he bade his daughter goodbye. Jack and I rode our own horses, and Daly rode with one of the teamsters in the front wagon.

It was a glorious morning, and as a faint breeze was blowing not unpleasantly warm. It was toward the end of August now. The cool weather—such as it was—would be over before another month had passed.

I rode on until my horse was abreast of Norah MacKenzie's.

"By the way, Miss MacKenzie," I asked, "what'll you do if the police magistrate's wife has not come round with her husband to the MacArthur river?" It was a question that was causing me some anxiety just then.

"Why, I'll take the place of the poor man's wife," she answered, trying to look as if she really meant it when she saw the look of horror come into Elsie Gordon's face.

"But soberly speaking," she continued after a pause, "I do hope the good lady has staid behind at Port Darwin. I don't know why I couldn't have remained at the station until my father came back, but he wished me to leave, and of course he always does know best. However, if she has not arrived I'll go back again with you to the station and wait until he comes. I was sorry to leave; it is such a beautiful place, and I so wished that we might have been able to explore those great cliffs which father said were like Sydney heads. I'll tell you what—if we have to go back to the station, we'll make up a party and go there. It's such a pity that my father had to go away on that trip."

Then, it is to be feared, I betrayed myself just a little, for I said something about hoping that the worthy police magistrate's wife had changed her mind about coming to the gulf. Whether or not the quick witted girl interpreted

aright the unalloyed earnestness that marked the expression of the wish, it was impossible to tell. As it was, she changed the subject by remarking that she was glad I had received good news on the previous day. She was sorry Mr. Tyndall had not got any, for that was hard to hear, despite what they said about "no news being good news."

We talked about many things, and I discovered that despite what she had said about books her knowledge regarding them was by no means inconsiderable, only, her practical knowledge of the life around us made her infinitely more interesting than any book. I realized what a miserable fund of so called knowledge a university man possessed concerning natural history compared to a bush bred girl who had not only read, but was naturally observant. She showed me sensitive plants that curled up and writhed as if in agony at the slightest touch, like living things, and flowers that at noonday folded their petals close, so as to protect themselves from the vertical rays of the sun. Not only that, but she named and classified them, showing how they were the survivors of a still more wonderful type of Australian flora.

Despite a false alarm of blacks on the second night out, caused by the horses stampeding into the camp, we reached the MacArthur river in three days without mishap. We camped at the crossing about two miles above the township. Gordon forded the river and rode into it. He had asked Jack to accompany him, but the latter made some excuse, and one of the men went instead. They came back by moonlight. I did not turn in for the night until they came back.

"The de'il's in that MacArthur, I believe," said Gordon to me as I fetched him a pair of hobbles. "The government cutter has come round from Port Darwin, but no police magistrate's wife, and I don't wonder that any decent woman should refuse to live in a place like that. But the boat's in the river; we can land up in the morning, and then take the women folk back again."

It was news for which it was worth having waited up. In my satisfaction I told Gordon not to bother about his horse, but to throw some fresh tea into the billy that had just started to boil.

The new township of Booroolooloo, as Gordon told me, had earned a most enviable notoriety.

Sleep was somewhat fickle in her ministrations that night. Jack and I pitched our mosquito curtains within a few yards of one another, where we could see Daly's gleaming white in the moonlight some 60 yards or so off, alongside a little patch of golden wattie. It might have been any other night, and the night too to think some of the horse bells were ringing. Getting up I cried to Daly and went over in his direction. It was always wise to make your presence known if you stirred about after nightfall, for more than one man had been shot in mistake for a predatory black fellow through neglecting this precaution. As Daly did not answer, I concluded he must be asleep.

As the ketch lay some miles farther down the river, we decided to go to it at once, but remain on the same side—the eastern—as we were at present, because this would save the additional trouble of "double banking" at the crossing. We were soon traveling again, and passed on the opposite side of the river the little township of the MacArthur. I saw a collection of half a dozen little galvanized iron huts, nestled amid a wealth of great, spreading, shady trees and cypress palms—a lovely little spot truly to have such an unenviable reputation. Then the river widened and flowed still and deep in many places. We saw alligators, like huge logs, lying motionless, basking on the sloping bank, but on our approach they would slide off into the water and swim away. I had heard their peculiar bellows the night before and wondered as to its origin. We crashed through a strip of scrub and through a meadow of cane grass that rose high above our heads as we sat in the saddle. Then we came to a lovely, high bank, on which grew some giant gum trees, and underneath in the stream lay the ketch.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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April 1, 1909
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