No Sunlight Singing

Joe Walker

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This great Australia that our fathers won
In proud defiance of a thousand fates!
This ocean-garden sacred to the sun!
This land of home! This land where men are mates!
Drink to your native ranges and your plains,
Men with the sunlight singing in your veins!

The Toast of Honour
BARTLETT ADAMSON

Book One

1

BLOODSHOT and red-rimmed, like the eyes of its victims, the sun glowered red through a dust and heat haze as it dipped to the distant line of scrub—the inevitable horizon on the great plains of the Northern Territory. Harsh outlines softened a little by this rosy glow, the homestead buildings of Melville Downs Station sprawled untidily on the plain, two or three hundred yards from the outer bank of a creek.

Opposite the homestead, and taking advantage of landfalls, gullies, and any other natural aid, a track wound up from the creek bed. Still below the level of the plain, the track levelled off briefly as it turned from one gully to another. In this hollow, pulverized by years of wind and rain, and countless wheels and hoofs, several inches of dusty sand covered the track.

With the dust clinging to moist skins, their only clothing, three little girls squatted in the cutting toiling furiously, building not castles but stockyards.

Two of the girls, about seven and six years old, were black beneath the dust, and lean as whippets. The older one sat back on her heels at last, with her head on one side. 'Ah, dat do. Now chay I ride lead an' ring dem in.'

'Oh, no,' protested the third girl, of an age maybe midway between the others, but much more sturdily built, and with a

skin that was only brown. 'You always ride lead. Say I do it this time. Say you ride tail.'

'No fear,' shouted the older girl. 'Chay you ride tail. Chay I ride lead. You no wheel 'em like me.' With this she jumped to her feet and did a few darting leaps, to show how she would wheel the cattle.

The youngest had been struggling to get a word in. Now she almost shrieked: 'What 'bout me? Chay me ride for one time.'

The oldest dropped down in the dust again. 'You no ride. Chay you black gin. You light fire. Get irons hot.'

'If I ride tail, then say I'm the boss,' the brown girl said with an air of triumph. 'I'll tell you what to do.'

'Oh,' wailed the young one in the middle of this, 'me neber ride. Me allus black gin.'

Suddenly two horsemen cantered round the bend, only two or three yards from the girls, who had been so engrossed in their argument that they had not noticed the approaching hoofbeats, muffled as they were by the inches of dust.

Three half-wild creatures jumped simultaneously. The two black girls scattered like rabbits over one bank of the cutting, as the two horses shied towards the other.

The brown girl, slower, owing to being heavier and less afraid, was just scrambling to the top as the riders steadied their horses. From one came an oath, and the snapping lash of a stock-whip which bit into the child's buttock and almost literally lifted her screaming over the top.

'How's that for a snapshot, Peter, eh? I bet she won't sit down for a week. That'll teach the black bastards to make my horse shy.'

'Yeh, Dick, you certainly chopped her. It was a pretty smart shot, considering,' Peter said admiringly. 'You probably took flesh as well as skin. But . . .' He hesitated a while, and then went on. 'I'm not so sure it was a good idea.'

'What d'you mean?' Dick swivelled in the saddle to look searchingly at the other man. 'You don't mean to tell me a man ain't allowed to clip a black around here? One of the reasons I come here was that I heard the old man was a good man with the blacks. The last place I was at the boss was even payin' 'em wages. An' he screamed if you touched one—make you sick.'

'Oh, the old man's all right. Nobody can teach him much about handling a black, but this is different.'

By this time the two men had reached the homestead buildings. They dismounted and started to unsaddle. Peter, a stocky, homely faced man of about thirty-five, turned towards the manager's house. 'You must have seen the tasty brown piece that works up there. Yeh, see there, near the washing in the yard.'

Dick, a lanky, sun-dried fifty-odd, peered over his horse. 'Oh, yeh, I've seen her.'

'Well, she's the old man's pet stud, and that brat you chopped is hers. Now, he don't care what you do to a black, normally, as long as you leave 'em fit for work, but nobody can interfere with his studs. Of course you've got an excuse, seeing you've only been here a few days, but if you take my tip you'll get in first and tell him how it happened.'

'Um, yes, I might do that. I ain't too proud to admit when I've made a mistake, and it's only natural a man don't want nobody interfering with his stud.'

Meantime, the sobbing child had run along the bank of the creek to where, shielded from the sight of the homestead by the stockyard and some stunted scrub, lay the homes of the native workers.

From the steep rise of the creek bank the ground fanned out in a slight hollow. The scanty, grey-green foliage of the mean scrub that ringed the hollow and speckled its surface was all but hidden by a coating of dust: a fine, flour-like dust

that deeply carpeted the hollow and spurted up eagerly at the least movement, to hang motionless in the breathless air, unable to rise more and unwilling to fall back. In the background a cloud of dust lay low over the stockyard and rolled lazily out to either side.

Close to the shallow banks of the hollow, more for moral support than for practical physical shelter, cringed the squalid dwellings of the black people. One home stood humbly erect to claim the title of hut, while a few crouched, well enough clad in bark and brush to warrant the name of mia-mia. For the rest there could be no name—a couple of rust-perforated curved sheets from a derelict galvanized-iron water-tank, similarly conditioned straight iron leaning against a bush, and even a couple of old bags spread over a low-lying branch of a bush. Such were the homes of the natives. At this hour the camp was almost deserted, but in the open space smouldering fires were being coaxed into life by a couple of old lubras who squatted on their heels in the dust, scrawny shanks showing like the big-knuckled fleshless legs of cranes.

The girl ran to the hut and clung to a grey-haired, wizened black woman who held her and tried to comfort her as she sobbed, 'Mummy, Mummy, I want Mummy.'

'Now, Mary, you can't go to Mummy. She up at the house and you know you can't go there. Show me what wrong.'

She whistled when she saw the deep weal that stretched right across one buttock and touched the other. 'How that happen? I got some stuff take the soreness out. Lie down a minute.'

From a corner was produced a tin containing a weird-looking, evil-smelling mixture. As she knelt beside the child and dabbed some on the sore, a gasp and cry, and then gradual abatement of the sobbing, testified to its effect. Soon Mary told her story; how she had played with Liz and Jenny, and how the white men had come and whipped her for nothing.

'That is not nothing, child. To get in the way of a white man is to seek trouble. I tell you again, as I tell you many times—keep away from where a white man is or where he may be.'

The hut was about six feet by eight, crudely made with a framework of bush timber fastened together, here with a bit of wire, there with string; and in a few places even nails had been used. Odd pieces of rusty iron formed the roof, which seemed likely to turn a fair part of any rain that might fall. The sides were covered with old bags, a bit too decrepit to be really effective. The earthen floor showed signs of the slops and spillings of years. In the two far corners of the hut lay small heaps of bags and old blankets. To the right of the doorway two forked sticks driven into the ground held a piece of packing-case to form a table; a little, old meat-safe swung from a rafter. On the table were two battered tin plates, two cracked and handleless cups, two empty jam-tins, and a kitchen knife without a handle, while near the door stood a blackened billy-can and a kerosene-tin full of water. A bundle of spears tucked in the rafters was the only other furnishing.

Mary, having got over the shock of her hurt, began to think of her stomach. 'Betty, when's Johnny coming with the meat? He's killing tonight, isn't he?'

'Don't ask me,' said Betty. 'Look yourself. If the others come with meat, you know Johnny must be finished killing and will soon be here. Wipe your face. You don't want the men to know you cried just because you got whipped.'

A grimy hand wiped a grimy face and Mary started to run outside. Started, but stopped when the first quick step brought urgent reminder of her injury. From there she moved slowly and with care. 'Oh, Betty, all the people are coming back. There's Johnny coming too. I'll go meet him and see what he has for me.'

All the camp was abuzz with excitement. This was the big night, when there was enough meat for everyone. Of course,

they got issues at other times, but never enough to go round. Occasionally some of the men would bring in a kangaroo, snake, or lizard, but the night a bullock was killed was the only time of plenty. The offal and scraps were theirs and Johnny usually managed to get more than that for the camp, as the white butcher was generally too lazy even to supervise the kill properly.

So now as they streamed along, thin black legs poking through ragged skirts or trousers, a piece of liver or lights or a bunch of guts was swinging from everyone's hand.

Johnny, the one-time great hunter, now had only the substitute pleasure of filching from the white man a little more meat to share with the camp. He came along behind the rest, a greying, gnarled, and knotty black Hercules. But, up close, it could be seen that the smoky eyes stared vacantly under battered brows.

Mary forgot her sore after a time and ran the last few yards to Johnny. When she reached him she turned shyly to walk close by his side. Johnny's huge hand reached out to touch her hair tenderly. Gruffly, ashamed of showing affection, he said: 'Here, child, a piece of kidney. You can eat it now, I have more to cook.' Gravely she accepted the usual titbit, and gravely thanked him. Then she relaxed and chewed ravenously.

Paddy overtook them before they reached the hut. Young, his complexion showed signs of some white ancestry, but his features and lithe, sinewy frame were unmistakably of the black race. He looked down at his stepdaughter. 'What happened? You limp.'

Mary hung her head and mumbled through a mouthful of raw kidney. 'I got in the way of the white man.' She turned her rump briefly to the men.

A long-drawn 'Oh!' from both.

Then Paddy demanded, 'Which white man?'

'The new one.'

The men looked at each other. Johnny's eyes had lost their vacant expression; they glared, and his face was contorted. Paddy laid his hand on the other's arm. 'It's no use, there's nothing you can do.' Gradually, like a lamp fading when the oil is spent, the light in his eyes died. He was once again the broken man.

By the time they reached their hut, a dozen little fires were burning throughout the camp, with the lubras squatting over them and the children hovering close. Johnny and Paddy dropped down on their haunches by the hut while Betty took the meat to cook. Not much time was wasted in cooking. A woman would squat down at a fire, put a piece of meat on a couple of green sticks over the coals, singe it a bit, turn it, to singe the other side, then it was ready for eating. Meat was too scarce for much of it to be wasted in the fire, and tonight everyone was too hungry to wait long. Some of the families still clung to old practices; the men ate first and the women and children had to wait and get what was left, but most of the people had dropped this along with other tribal customs, and they ate together like the whites.

Polly arrived as Betty was coming back to the hut with a plateful of meat. Neat and tidy in a clean, summerweight dress that clung tightly, emphasizing full breasts and well-rounded hips and legs, she looked out of place in this squalid camp. Twenty-one years of age, she had the brown complexion of the half-caste. In her oval face, with its straight nose and lovely brown eyes, the only legacy of her mother's people was a slight prominence of the cheekbones and fullness of the nostrils.

Polly handed Betty a newspaper-wrapped parcel. 'Here's some old damper and scones. I'll change this dress so's not to get it dirty. I don't have to go back tonight; the Pig is going out. I think I can hear the car now.'

She hurried into the hut, to reappear a minute later, more in keeping with the surroundings. Her hair was tousled, and

she wore an old dress so shapeless as to disguise her form, but so torn as to reveal most of it whenever she moved. Mary was swept up into her arms with an 'Oh, darling, I've missed you.' But as her arm went around the child an ear-piercing yell nearly made Polly drop her.

'What's wrong, what did I do?' she said as she lowered the child to the ground.

Sobbing bitterly, Mary turned round and showed her injury. Polly fell on her knees and hugged her. Looking up at the others, she demanded, her eyes almost sending out sparks, 'Who did this?'

Betty laid the damper on the other plate, and put it and the meat near the men where they squatted by the wall. Taking a piece herself, she munched as she told what she knew of the incident.

Polly flared up. 'That trash! I'll fix him. Smires may be a pig but he'll still do some things for me. Oh, honey, fancy doing that to you!'

The two men said nothing but chewed away steadily. Betty ate on for a while till Mary quieted down and pushed away from her mother to get something to eat. Then: 'Maybe you better not ask too much of your Mr. Smires. Soon he not want you, anyway. You better coax him for a time if you want the extra food for your Mary.'

'What do you mean?' snapped Polly. 'The big Pig not want me? I can handle him.'

'Yes,' said Betty, 'he want you now, but soon your belly—pouf.' She made a circular movement with her hand. 'You think he want you then?'

Polly, silent for a while, muttered: 'Always the same. They do what they like. Why do we let them?'

Neither of the men gave a sign of having heard, but Betty answered. 'Nothing can be done. There are too many white

men. You can't kill them all. This might be good for Mary. Teach her to keep away from whites.'

By the time the meal was finished the short tropical dusk was turning to darkness, a silvery darkness lit by a full moon. The magic of the moonlight transformed the squalid, dusty, fly-haunted camp into an almost romantic-looking collection of rustic dwellings nestling among the bushes. Under the influence of full stomachs and the protective darkness the people themselves were transformed. Those who, in the last hour of daylight, were hungry, suppressed members of a subject race living fearfully in the shadow of white domination, became now, in the first hour of darkness, the happy, carefree, laughing and chattering people they were born to be.

Johnny and Betty went over to the outskirts of the camp to talk to some new arrivals, a couple of families who had come from up north in Johnny's country. As usual he wanted to question them about the track, the water-holes, and the game, always with the vague unformulated hope that some day he might travel that track again.

Paddy went over to where the flare of a fire showed five people squatting in a circle. From time to time they bent forward simultaneously in earnest contemplation, while behind them others gathered, peering intently over their shoulders. Of the inner devotees, all black as night, two men and a woman were youngish, about the age of Paddy, and the other two were old, toothless crones.

At a closer view the mystery of the concentration was solved. A tattered, frayed, and greasy pack of cards was being dealt out in hands of five. One of the old crones looked up. 'Ho, Paddy, set in. We wan'um new blood, suck 'im dry!'

As everyone looked up and grinned, Paddy waved a hand and squatted down where room was made for him, between the two old women. 'Here's what you bin wan'um,' he said,

laughing and holding out a plug of nicki-nicki. 'I bin wake-up alonga you, Maggie.'

Wearing a filthy and tattered remnant of a dress, Maggie, an animated black skeleton, could be any age from seventy upwards. But her eyes, although watery and red-rimmed, had a lively and impudent glint.

The game was played to the accompaniment of a medley of lively chattering. Their own native tongue was used much of the time, but some were station-born and not too glib in this, so, for the purpose of the game, pidgin had to be used.

'No kangaroo this time, Paddy?' asked the dealer. 'Pick'um up cards, Maggie, we bin play'um poker. You bin bust'um pipe d'reckly, push'um baccy like that.'

'Gimme t'ree ace.'

'Gimme big pair, make'um full.'

'No t'anks,' said Maggie, 'got'um full-hand now.'

'Three,' said Paddy. 'Saw plenty kangaroo near forty-mile water-hole—poor though. But white man keep too busy, no time to get any.'

Three hands went in the discard, but betting became brisk over the other three. Soon there was half a stick of nicki-nicki, a knife with half a blade, some tea wrapped in newspaper, sundry odds and ends, and even some coins in the centre. Finally came the showdown; the young lubra had two pair, but the dealer topped her with kings-up, and reached out for the centre.

'Here,' screeched Maggie, 'me got Lord Nelson.'

'Lord Nelson!' said the young lubra. 'What'n hell Lord Nelson?' 'See,' squawked Maggie, as she threw down three aces. 'T'ree ones: one eye, one arm, one—heh! heh!'

The peace of the night was suddenly rent, and the laughing and chattering of the card players drowned by an argument from the bottom end of the camp. A man's voice thick with liquor: '. . . time to come home. Where my tea?'

A woman's voice in shrill reply. 'I just finished work up at the house, while you rotten with metho.'

'You just finish work? You get food for white man. What 'bout food for me, your husban'? I teach you who boss.'

Then came a hubbub—the sound of blows, shrieks, and wailings.

After the first shock everyone in the camp carried on and pretended not to notice anything. All but Maggie who, in the way of old hags of all colours the world over, had to have her say. 'Tommy get the metho; Annie get the whacko; heh! heh!'

The play seesawed, luck favouring first one and then another, but even if anyone had a bad trot and went broke it made no difference. The others would always chip in and stake the loser to a new start. They played hard and keenly, but it was more for the sake of the game than for profit.

Obviously a newcomer to the game, the young lubra was having beginner's luck. She beat Paddy when he held a full hand. 'Cri', I think you bin chased by Chinaman,' he said.

'You no see her little piccaninny,' chortled Maggie. 'I t'ink she bloody well bin caught.'

This unexpected night off was a great treat for Polly. Most of the time she hardly saw Mary except in bed. Under the gimlet eye of the hatchet-faced housekeeper, Mrs. Conley, the ordinary work at the homestead was a solid grind. From daylight till after the white folk had finished dinner at night Polly and a couple of other coloured girls were kept so hard at it that they could rarely find time to sneak down to the camp to see how the children were getting on.

Besides this, almost every night Smires kept Polly back. Some nights she would satisfy him and get away by eleven or twelve o'clock. Other nights, when he was drinking or just in a sadistic mood, she would limp away, sore and bruised, in the early hours of the morning, to try to get an hour or two's sleep before going back to work. What made her maddest of all was

that even if he didn't want her he would keep her hanging about for hours before telling her to go.

The best time for her was during her monthly period. It was almost like a holiday for her. One of her great problems now was how to keep from him the knowledge that her periods no longer occurred.

Polly was a product of a home that was a little strange even by Territory standards. Her father had been an English aristocrat, and her mother a plain and simple black woman—this was not very unusual, but her father's conduct of the family affairs was distinctly out of the ordinary.

Having drifted into the Territory, and set up house out in the scrub with his woman, he had ceased to take interest in anything except the education of his daughter. On his periodical trips to town to draw his remittance and buy stores, he acted quite normally. He invariably went on a bender that lasted until he had to strap up his stores against the next remittance, but he would not take any grog home with him, or allow anyone else to take any into the camp.

Polly being the only child who survived the frequent confinements of her mother, who died while she was quite young, her father's efforts were all devoted to one task—the education of his daughter. He refused to let her learn anything from the blacks, and worked persistently to give her just such an education as he himself had had.

His persistence was rewarded; the net result being that the girl spoke with a cultured English accent.

Then he passed on, to the lamentation of all who knew him—'He wasn't a bad poor bastard. Fill 'em up again, barman!'—leaving Polly, not his remittance, as that died with him, but with the priceless asset to a coloured girl in a tough country—a cultured English accent.

The conversation in this household was a strange mixture. Johnny and Betty preferred to speak in their own language. Paddy was more at home with pidgin English, having been

born and bred in the cattle country, but he could talk with Johnny and Betty in their language. Polly spoke little but English though she could understand what the others were saying. Mary, whose father had been a white miner, had learnt English from her mother, the language of the blacks from Betty and pidgin from all about her.

As Polly led Mary into the hut and started to spread a blanket on the floor, Mary hugged her round the legs. 'Mummy, I don't have to go to bed, do I? I want to talk to you.'

'No, dear,' replied Polly, 'but it would be better to lie down and rest, wouldn't it? I'm tired!'

'Ooh, yes, lie down together and talk.' Then, as they snuggled down on the blanket: 'Mummy, why do you have to stay out so late at night? When Paddy's here it's not good, but when he's away I get frightened.'

'But, dear, you have Betty and Johnny.'

'Mummy, Johnny frightens me. He shouts in his sleep and swings about and groans awfully.'

'You know, dear, that Johnny won't hurt you. He has terrible pains; when he's awake he won't let anyone know, but when he's asleep he can't help groaning. The white men hurt him badly years ago.'

'Mmmmm; it's all right when you're here or when it's light, but in the dark and when I'm alone it's different.'

'Yes, dear, I know I leave you alone an awful lot, and I'm sorry, but I can't help it. You see, up at the house they stay up late, Mr. Smires, Mrs. Conley, and the others. Mummy has to stay to get them food, clean up, and so on.'

'Mummy, why does Betty always tell me to keep away from white men?'

'You know what happened today. You're always likely to get hurt near a white man.'

'But Liz goes up to see some of the white men and she gets lots of nice things.'

'She gets lots of nasty things too. Many a time she gets a smack in the ear, and d'you remember the time the stranger's dog went for her, and all the white men just cheered and laughed as she raced home with the dog snapping at her? The dog didn't bite her, but the men wouldn't have cared if it had. What Betty says is right. "You'll get hurt if you go near white men." '

Polly was about to continue when an interruption came. There was a whisper at the door. 'Are you there, Polly?'

Polly got up and went to the door. 'Hello, Annie, what's wrong?'

'You hear the row. Tommy on the metho again. He make a stock-whip for the head-stockman, Al. Al promise him ten shillings. He work long, long time making it good. Then Al give him no money, give him metho. Look at me.'

'Oh, your face, it's all cut and swollen. I'll get some of Betty's salve.'

'My body too cut and swollen, but that nothing. Look at the dress, my house dress. I didn't have time to change.'

Annie was a comely woman in the early twenties, darker than Polly and of a native cast of features. Now her face was bruised all down one side, with a cut over the cheekbone, and her dress hung loose from a tear stretching from the neck to the waist.

'How I wear this tomorrow? You know Mrs. Conley tell me if I come in a torn or dirty dress again she put me out of the house. Oh, Polly, I can't lose that job. Jenny and Liz don't get enough to eat now. How I feed them if I leave the house?'

'Don't worry,' said Polly. 'Pull your dress down and show me your bruises and I'll rub some of this on. It will take the soreness out. I have a second dress up at the house, it's fairly clean. We'll go up early in the morning and you can put it on before Mrs. Conley sees you.

'Now you'd better take that one off and leave it here till

Tommy gets right again. We'll probably be able to sew it up in the daylight.'

Annie did as suggested, and soon she was sneaking quietly back home, eased in mind and soothed in body.

2

Daylight was failing and the heat of the day wilted under the onslaught of a cool night breeze. Returning from the store, tobacco supplies replenished, Peter and Dick shivered as they turned a corner and the wind searched keenly through thin shirts.

'Feels like winter coming up,' said Dick with an exaggerated shiver. 'S'pose you get it pretty sharp here.'

'Too right,' agreed Peter. 'It gets bitter at nights. There's nothing to break the wind. An' it won't be long now.'

Whitewashed, the four huts stood out stark against the gathering gloom. The two men stopped at the first hut where Sam, the gardener-butcher, sat on the doorstep. A pudding-faced hulk of a man, his knees only just showed in front of his stomach and the massive shoulders spread from jamb to jamb of the doorway.

'You've capped the lot now, Sam,' said Peter. 'Where in the name of God did you get that beast you killed tonight? I reckon shammy leather's tender after that steak.'

'Tell the boss that,' grunted Sam. 'I killed that big stag he's been at me to kill for six months.'

'That's a bit rough, ain't it? Feeding us a thing like that.'

'Well, you know what he is. He'd have me kill old bulls or anything for youse blokes. But it wasn't only because of him naggin', there wasn't anything any better. He did have a bit o' meat on him, even if it was tough. None o' the others had anything on 'em at all. Things is getting bad.

'But youse blokes should know more about that than me.' Sam tilted his head as far as his thick neck would allow. 'Youse a been checkin' up for days now, haven't yez?'

Peter was carefully emptying tobacco from a tin he had just opened into a rubber pouch. 'Oh, yeah,' he admitted, 'we gotta give it to you. There's not much killers about. We never seen much beef, did we, Dick?'

Dick's long form folded up as he squatted on his heels. 'Beef, did you say? We never seen nothin' fit for boilin' down even. This country's worse than I expected. It's worse'n over west.'

He blew out a stream of smoke and studied the end of his cigarette thoughtfully. 'You know,' he said slowly, 'things is so bad I can't see why th' old man put me on. You'd expect him to be thinkin' o' puttin' men off.'

Peter's feet shuffled in the dust, and his shoulders moved uncomfortably. 'Oh, well,' he muttered, 'I s'pose he thinks things might break.'

Sam looked up and down the yard and then leaned forward. 'Look, mate, I'll give yer the drum,' he said, lowering his voice impressively, 'don't expect nothin' at this place. Most managers'd give yer the drum if they didn't have much. They'd say it might pay yer to look further. But th' old man'd use yer up if he on'y had a week's work. Mind you, I ain't said nothin'. ' His voice now sounded anxious, as if he was afraid he had said too much. 'Yer know yer own bizness best, but I just thought

—if yer thought there might be somethin' somewheres else. . .'

Dick waved his hand, smoke trailing from his fingers. 'Don't worry, I didn't expect much from this place. All the same,' he hastened to add, 'I appreciate you givin' me the tip. An' you needn't worry, I won't say nothin'. 'S a matter o' fact it suits me. I gotter put in a few weeks, an' I didn't want to go to a good place to spoil it for after.'

Peter's face showed his relief at not being drawn in to give an opinion about the job. He, too, folded down on to his heels, to keep himself in the conversation.

Dick threw his butt away and reached for more makings. 'Yer see, I gotter wait for me mate,' he went on. 'In a month or so's time he's gonner snatch it, an' we're off up to Darwin for a holiday. If I go on me own I don't get past the first pub—hundred to one. If I'd 'a' went on past here I'd 'a' landed in the pub at Holborn Waters, an' I'd 'a' still been there when me purse cut out. But him—Sam they call him, like you, Sam, on'y he's long an' thin. Yer might 'a' struck him, he useter do a lot o' drovin'. '

Both men nodded their heads.

'Well,' said Dick, 'if yer know him yer know how solid he is. Obstinate? jeez!' He shook his head in admiration. 'Obstinate as Hell, he is. Well, he says we're goin' to Darwin, an' if he says it, we're goin' to Darwin. That's if I keep out of a pub till then. That's why that blue I had nearly gummed it up. I was real arsy to pick up a job here.'

Peter turned to Sam. 'You see, Sam, Dick had a blue with the boss at the last place in '36 about handlin' blacks. He was tellin' me—an' he says how's this boss? Eh, how is he, Sam? How about tellin' him how you an' the boss broke that Johnny in? That's a good story, but you can tell it better'n me.'

Sam's eyes gleamed dully, and suety cheeks creased in a grin, as he laboriously stretched out his legs. 'Aw, yeah, it's not

a bad yarn,' he said. 'I s'pose I should know it best, seein' I was there.'

Looking leaner in contrast with Sam's unwieldly bulk, the stockmen shuffled back to prop themselves against the wall of the hut as the hoarse, wheezy voice launched into the story.

'You seen that big black that works for me, I s'pose, that Johnny?'

Dick nodded. 'Yeh, I know the one you mean.'

'Well, he come here ten year ago, I s'pose, straight from the bush. I remember the copper at Holborn Waters sent him out with two more. Th' other couple was stockmen but I reckon the copper must've just sent this one for a joke, just to give us some fun. He must've known that a full-grown bush black don't break in to station work too easy. Anyway, he went all right for a while. Jeez, he could track.' Sam shook his head in admiration. 'He was a bobby dazzler. Some o' th' other blacks from up his way reckoned he had a rep a mile wide.

'But one night he went a-missing. We'd all the blacks out looking for tracks but they couldn't find none. Smires give a couple of 'em a lacing, reckoned they wasn't trying.' His eyes nearly disappeared in a huge grin. 'Turned out it wasn't their fault. The dumb-bell had headed straight back for Holborn Waters. O' course, nobody'd looked on that track.

'First thing we know, Smires gets word from the copper he has him. He's got clear away, done just on two hundred miles in two days, then, innocent as you like, he walks up to the copper of all men. So Smires gets me an' we set off in the ute to collect him.'

The huge body leaned forward and Sam's voice had a note of admiration. 'He was a good man with blacks, that copper. I've heard some good tales about him.'

'Yeh,' broke in Peter, 'I knew him. He was good, all right.'

'Anyway,' Sam went on, 'we get out an' the copper sez:

“Well, Mr. Smires, I got your man. He should be softened up a bit by now.”

‘ “Why,” sez Smires, “did you do him over?” ’

‘ “Oh, no,” the copper sez, “I just laced him over the head with the chain to teach him manners, but I left him for you. But he hasn’t had a drink since he got here, and God knows how long before that. So that should bring him back to the field a bit. Bring him out,” he yells to the trackers.

‘They bring him out, sulky-looking as you please. He didn’t have the leg-irons on, just a chain from the cuffs. I go to grab him and away he goes. Or woulda went only the chain wraps round my leg. He hit so hard we both come down and that damned chain ringbarked my leg.’ Sam rubbed his leg thoughtfully. ‘Peeled the skin off right round, it did. Well, we all piled on to him, and I believe he’d ’a’ beat us then, only I sunk the knee into him. He went down and I ground the knee in a couple times more for my sore shin.

‘The copper wants to lend us the bracelets, but Smires laughs. “I know a better trick than that,” he sez. So the copper takes the bracelets off and we tie a couple o’ lengths o’ cord, one on each wrist. Then we throw him in the ute, drag his arms out tight each side, and tie the cords down the side of the ute.’

‘How’s that, Dick?’ Peter put in with an admiring laugh. ‘Good idea, eh?’

‘Yeah,’ grunted Sam. ‘There never was nobody could teach Smires much. “There,” he sez, “that’ll hold the bastard.” So we knock off a couple of bottles the copper had, and set sail. An’ did we go. On the rough patches we only touched the ground every ten yards or so. If it’d been a white man in the back, his arms woulda been pulled out at the roots.

‘When we get here Smires gets a stock-whip and we untie the cords. Smires takes one and I take hold the other.

‘ “Now, you bastard, we’ll see how good you are,” sez the

boss, and he gives him a lash with the whip. D'you know, that black was still having a go. He jumped out of the truck straight at Smires. But when he's in the air I give a jerk on my rope and he lands flat on his face, and I jump on the back of his neck.

' "Drag him over here, Sam, and we'll string him up," sez the boss.

'So we drag him to that open shed, threw the ropes over the rafters, and hoist him up. We heaved him up till his toes was just touching the ground and then Smires into him with the double of the stock-whip. He was a strong man in them days, Smires, and when he stopped his eyes was popping out and he was trembling.

'The black's face was all swelled up, but you could still see his eyes and they was still glaring red.

'That's what had Smires in. It had him nearly crying; the black wasn't broken.

' "I can't hurt him, Sam," he gasps. "Get me a pair of hobbles."

'So I get him a pair of hobbles and he into the black with the chain. He belted him with that till he couldn't raise his arm.

'Now the black's face was as red as his eyes had been, and so swollen you couldn't see his eyes any more.

'Smires couldn't speak; he moaned. "That'll hold him. Cut him down."

'So I cuts the ropes and let him drop.' Sam paused and blinked at the others. 'D'you know, I looked round as I walked away, and he was on his feet.'

'Oh, you can't hurt the bastards,' said Dick. 'That's a beaut, that way of tying 'em in a truck. I never heard of that one before.'

'It fixed Johnny,' said Sam. 'He never tried to run away no more. But he's never been much good since. Oh, I have him in

the navvy gang with th' old gins. He's all right for that, but he don't seem all there at times.'

'Punch-drunk,' put in Peter, 'like a pug.'

'Yeh, I s'pose that's it. But what I was going to say, besides him there's no other black has tried to run away from here since that day. It put the fear of God into the lot of 'em.'

'You gotta be on top of 'em,' said Dick. 'Right on top of 'em all the time.'

He stood up and stretched and Peter followed suit. 'Yes,' he said, shaking his shoulders, 'it's getting too cold out here. It's about time we made a move.'

By now the night had fallen, but the full moon, peering over the homestead roof, lit the yard with an eerie radiance.

'Ah, here's Carl coming now,' said Peter. 'That pump must've been hard to fix this time. Well, Carl,' he added, 'you do knock off work sometime.'

'That ploody pump! I fix it one of those days,' exploded Carl. A tall Norwegian, his blond hair shone silver in the moonlight.

'Well, what are we doing? Are we going to have a game of five hundred tonight?' asked Peter.

'I'll be in it,' said Dick.

'Me too,' said Sam.

'I be in anything,' added Carl.

'O.K. Then come on, into our hut. Are you coming, Cec?' he called to a thin, gangling youth who was hanging back shyly.

As they all trooped into the hut, it looked as if the sides would have to go. There didn't seem to be room for much more than the two untidy camp-beds.

'Hold everything,' called Peter. 'Let's get the lamp lit first.' Two smoky hurricane lanterns soon cast a murky light on the scene. 'Ah, that's better. Now let's get the mosquito nets

fastened back out the road. And pull that box into the middle before you all sit down.'

Peter and Dick dropped on to the beds. 'Here, Sam,' said Peter, 'you sit on my bed. Me'n Carl'll play you and Dick. I reckon we can do you tonight.'

Sam lowered himself carefully on to the bed, which complained vigorously, but bore up under the strain.

Carl sat down alongside Dick. 'You'd better watch for a bit,' Peter said to the youth. 'Sit down on Dick's bed, mine's carrying overweight already with Sam on it.'

'That's all right,' answered the youth. 'I have a mag to read.' He was of that strange breed, the jackeroo.

'Oh, before we start,' said Peter. 'I got a letter about young Eric. You know I wrote to a mate of mine in Darwin to look him up. Well, he found him in hospital, and he's likely to be there a while. They don't think there's anything worse than concussion wrong with his head, but his collar-bone's broken, and his right arm; and of course, he's got a few yards of bruises and skin off. The mate says he's going on fairly well, and he's keeping him supplied with weed, but he thinks he's doing a fair bit of worrying about his folks.'

Carl paused in the act of putting the makings together and waved the cigarette-paper vigorously. 'That goot. That ploody goot. I ban think he finish when I see him. By Yesus, he was ploody crook. But what wrong his folks?'

Before he answered Peter groped under the bed and produced an empty tobacco tin. He opened it up and put the two pieces out on the box. 'Here,' he said, 'put your butts and matches in there. You get throwing 'em about and the mosquito nets suffer. Mine's got enough holes in it now.' He went on. 'About Eric's folks, I know what the trouble there is. He's only got a mother an' a sister. The mother has a few bob, a pension or something, that's enough to keep her. But the sister's goin' to college, and though she's got a scholarship she still needs some money. Eric, of course, didn't get much here

—twenty-five bob a week or something—but he used to send nearly the lot home, and it just managed to keep 'em going.'

Peter paused and looked keenly at the others. 'I think we should sling in to help. It's a tough world for a woman and a girl to face, and Eric's a very decent kid. I'll put in a quid, anyway.'

'Ya,' said Carl, nodding his head vigorously. 'My ploody oath, I put in quid.'

'Yeh,' grunted Sam, as he gingerly eased his bulk to a better position on the end of the bed, 'put me down for a quid.'

Dick looked round at the others and spread his hands slightly. 'Well, I don't mind puttin' in, but what's the strong of it? Who's Eric an' what happened to him?'

'Of course,' replied Peter, 'it was before you came here. Well, Eric was a jackeroo here, been here a year or more, a good kid too, he was picking it up fast. About a fortnight ago we was shifting some cattle from round the seventeen-mile bore. It's about the only bit of decent feed left, and we was clearing everything off it so's we could put the breeders on. We was ridin' along spread out when I hears a yell and looks over, there's Eric on the ground and hanging by the leg from the stirrup. His horse had shied or tripped, and dumped him. When I looked he was just breakin' into a gallop and heading for a patch of scrub. You know that scrub just north of the bore, it's not very big but it's thick and rough. I was too far away to do anything in time, and I thought, "Jeez, he'll be bashed to pieces."

He looked across at Dick, who was lolling sideways to avoid the folds of the mosquito net. 'You know where I mean?' He waved his cigarette. 'You was out there th' other day.'

Dick nodded. 'Yeh, I got a good idea.'

'Well, I'm racing across,' continued Peter, 'when all of a sudden I see a streak coming up behind Eric's horse. It's this

black Paddy, at a mad gallop. He couldn't get him before he reached the scrub, but he was right on his tail, and he never slackened pace. When I get there he has the two horses and he's kneeling down alongside Eric. I'll guarantee they weren't much more'n thirty yards inside the scrub.'

Peter's voice had a note of awe in it. 'It's the greatest bit of riding I ever seen or heard tell of. Eric was lucky the black was there. Nobody else could have done it.'

Cecil piped up. 'But I can't see what's so wonderful about galloping after a horse and stopping it.'

The stockman looked at the youth pityingly. 'Well, young feller, you try gallopin' through scrub some day. Then try racing alongside another horse that hasn't got a rider and is picking a track for itself. Then go and try it where this happened. I followed the tracks in. In one place they go between two solid little trees where you'd think there's hardly room at all for a rider. I reckon the black must have been under his horse's belly. Every time I'm near there I go and have another look. I'll bet you can't find another man in Australia to ride through there at full gallop, and I'll throw the "Man from Snowy River" in. Anyway, to get back to Eric. He was out to it and in a pretty bad way. We got the boss to bring him in here and get on to the flying doctor by the pedal wireless. He flew in and picked him up.'

'Well,' said Dick, 'if it's good enough for you blokes to put in, I'll be in it, but I've got no cash. I'll have to get on to the boss. Anyway, I suppose he'll be putting in too, won't he?'

Carl and Peter looked at each other and grinned, and even Sam's fat face creased a little. 'Oh, yeah!' he grunted.

'You're an optimist,' laughed Peter, 'if you think either Smires or the firm'll put in. You know how tough these English meat kings are, and Smires himself is about the lousiest bastard this side of the black stump. But we'll have to get him to send a cheque for the total. None of us has any cash.'

He started to check on his fingers. 'Oh, yes, and Al, the head stockman, he'll be in it, and Basil, and I think we'll get something off the babbler.'

'I'll give you a pound,' chimed in Cecil.

'You can't afford a quid,' said Peter. 'Give us a half a note; that'll do you.'

'But what about Paddy, the black fellow?' asked Cecil. 'If he did such a marvellous thing, he should be entitled to something.'

Peter snorted. 'Him, he's a black. You can't spoil 'em. He did all right. I told him he'd done a good job and gave him a stick of nicki-nicki. Sam here gave him a good hunk of beef, didn't you, Sam!'

'Yes,' said Sam. 'I give him enough to feed him and his gin for a week.'

'By the way, Dick, did you see Smires about the brat you clipped?' asked Peter.

'No. I went up to the house, but he was just getting ready to go out, so I didn't bother. I seen the half-caste piece—what a slasher! It looks as though the old man might have done a bit of good. I'll bet there's more in her guts than went in through her mouth.'

'So I reckon,' said Sam. 'She'll soon be going walkabout.'

'What d'you mean?' asked Dick.

'Smires will soon chase her,' replied Sam.

'It's a fad of Smires,' explained Peter. 'Every time he gets one in the family way he chases 'em off the station before they drop the brat. Nobody knows why for certain, but some reckon he don't want his own kids running round the place. That don't seem right to me.' He shook his head. 'I think he's afraid it mightn't be his own kid. Sam says that years ago he had a half-caste stud who dropped a piccaninny a bit early, when he was away. As soon as he come back and seen it, he told her to stamp on it, which she did, but it was too late.

Everybody knew that a black had beaten him to it. The kid was black as night. Ever since then, he won't allow any of his studs to drop one here, they've got to get out.'

'By Yimmy,' said Carl. 'I wish the old man turn her over to me. Them breasts, them legs, ooh she's goot. She's more like girls back home, plenty padding. These gins like rakes—all bones.'

'Well, for mine,' said Dick, 'anybody can have the whites, or the half-castes either for that matter. The blacks'll do me. With these white sheilas you never know where you are. You might muck around all night, just about blowin' a gasket, and then end up gettin' scrubbed. With a gin you can bowl her over any time you want, any way you like.

'Some o' these creamy bitches,' continued Dick, 'put on airs as if they was white.'

Chuckles and guffaws from the rest.

'It's right. When I was at Inkaba twelve months ago I struck one. She lobbed there from a mission. Well, all the rest of them was pretty well fixed at the time and I was short, so I lumbered her off to the hut. I just go to roll her over on the bed, and, Christ, she went off like a cracker. Put on an act like Greta Garbo.'

Amid loud guffaws, 'What'd you do?'

'I was so dumbfounded I just gaped. She was only a bit of a kid, too, you know. "Who the hell do you think you are?" I says. "Ginger Rogers?" Well, I mucked round with her for a while, then I go to roll her over again, and she makes a break for the door. I grab her by the scruff of the neck and throw her over the bed. "There," I says, "if you don't like lying on your back, try lying on your belly for a while," and I into her with a bit of bamboo I had handy. She had a nice fat, mission-fed arse too, and did I corrugate it! By the time I finished, she was glad to roll over.'

'Well,' chuckled Sam, 'what's wrong with that? You reckoned half-castes was no good.'

'Yeah, she was all right—for once. But every time she seen me after that she off like a rock wallaby. I like a nice peaceful gin that I can liven up with a shot of metho or a lacing occasionally. What d'you say, Peter

'Yes, the blacks'll do me. I'm a believer in the metho. If they won't move with a charge of metho in 'em, they're dead.'

'What about this game,' asked Carl. 'We gonna play?'

'Oh, I suppose we might as well have a game. You run 'em, Carl,' said Peter.

'How come you leave Blackwood, Dick?' asked Sam. 'Didn't you say the other day that he paid a quid a week better than here? Oh, all right, I'll say six hearts.'

'Yes, I did—seven diamonds—nearly everything's better there. Accommodation's better, food's better, wages is better. No, no more, I pass. There's just one thing wrong with it, the blacks. Old White says, "They must be treated like human beings." How's that? They get the same food as the whites, and he gives 'em five bob a week each—in cash. Well, I ask you, how d'you think they'd be? Cheeky! Jesus, they talk back to you. One of 'em give me some lip, a bit of a kid about eighteen. I had a bridle in my hand at the time, so I just swung it bit-end first and downed him like a tack. The old man and me just ran at one another. I still don't know whether I snatched it or got sacked. No, I'll say nothing this time. But I was glad to get away from there. It's time to get out when the blacks are petted like that.'

'I'll say,' grunted Sam. 'What's the feed like over that way? Did you say it was as dry as here?'

'Well—nearly the same. I believe it's pretty well the same all over the Territory. There not only won't be any cattle goin' out this year, but there won't be any left for next year if it

keeps on like it has been. Oh, all right, I'll attend to the game. Me'n Sam don't need to concentrate much to beat youse two.'

3

On an evening in late August a sense of oppression lay heavily, with an almost physical and palpable weight, on the people of Melville Downs, white and black alike. The drought, now in its eighteenth month, was draining the life even out of the trees.

Many other catastrophes can be equally devastating, fire and flood for example. But they strike speedily, keep the victims busy fighting for life and property, and as speedily pass. Drought creeps up insidiously, slowly, but more relentlessly and ruthlessly efficient, while the victims can only watch and wait.

After so many weary months it was the accepted mode of thought to think in terms of—what more is dead? Everything was dying—cattle, horses, wild creatures. All grass and herbage long gone, and even spinifex, saltbush, scrub, and trees were listless, colourless, and almost lifeless. The only things that showed a profit in these hard times were the goannas and the crows. These scavengers waxed fat as the bank-books of lawyers and undertakers.

Now, in the cool of the evening, the burning desolation of sun-filled daylight hours left its impression so deeply etched

on the mind that it could be felt as unmistakably as the Braille word by the fingers of a blind man.

Away from the noises of the homestead, the ears would ache seeking the relief of some sound. At night on the wide plains there is little enough noise in good seasons, but there is some. The movements of animals feeding, or seeking their prey, the cry of birds, chirping of crickets, or croaking of frogs, all to some degree contribute to the song of life. But, now, to speak of the silence of the grave was grim fact, not a figure of speech.

In the natives' camp there was none of the relaxation that often came in the evenings of earlier days. There was no gathering together even to talk, the blacks huddled morosely in nothing bigger than family groups. Many had already stretched out, in an endeavour to lose the eternal nagging of over-nourished worries and under-nourished stomachs. From here and there came, intermittently, the whimper of hungry children in restless sleep.

Johnny and Paddy, sitting without a word, gazed fixedly at the last barely glowing embers of a tiny fire.

Polly and Betty squatted by the hut. 'I can't stand this much longer,' said Polly. 'If the Pig is going to send me walkabout, why doesn't he do it! I am getting heavier and the track is getting drier. I should have gone long ago.'

'Smires maybe send Paddy. You can't go alone,' replied Betty.

'You know he won't send Paddy, his best stockman. I shall have to go alone, sooner or later. The only reason I don't go is because the police will ask before they give me tucker, "Why did you leave your last job?" If I tell them Smires said "Go" they are satisfied. I shall go to Darwin. They tell me coloured people get paid wages there, sometimes as much as ten shillings a week. I must give Mary a chance. Here there is nothing. Since I finished at the house we do not get enough to eat, and now they have chopped the ration everybody starves.'

'It be all right,' said Betty, 'if Johnny keep some of what he gets extra, instead of being big and giving it to all.'

'Oh, well, I don't suppose you can blame him. He can't shake off the old tribal teaching, that whatever is won must be shared with the tribe.'

'It is not much use blaming him. I been nagging him about it for ten years, and you can see how much difference it made. In the tribes it all right, everybody does it and all sink or swim together. But here we live under the whites and our own people have learned white tricks. We not yet bad as the whites, we do help one another, but only Johnny is fool enough to share everything with everybody.'

'I was talking to Maggie today,' said Polly. 'She says I needn't worry about leaving here alone. According to her nearly the whole camp will be going very soon.'

'What Maggie say not be far wrong. I wondered why so many been kept so long. Other dry times there been many more sent away. Boss keeps black people here when times are good and food and water is plenty. He likes to send them walkabout when waters are dry and game all gone.'

The wide verandah at the homestead, unlit save for the pale yellow glow from an oil lamp in the room beyond, gave an illusion of coolness. As Al, the head stockman, and Basil, the storekeeper, stepped up on the verandah they had eyes only for the huge figure sprawling in a cane chair. They searched Smires' face anxiously for an inkling of what was in store, but might as well have saved themselves the trouble. In the dim light the pale eyes stared out from the sagging flesh with as much expression and feeling as the eyes of a dead fish.

A burnt-up, wizened little man with bandy legs, Al contrasted sharply with the tall, youngish, and fresh-complexioned Basil. At a wave from Smires the two sat down and waited for him to speak. Smires lit a cigarette and took a draw or two. Then: 'I have some instructions from head office.

They're drastic but there's no arguing against them. I got on to Darwin and the orders came from further up.

'Two more whites are to go right away, and all the blacks, bar three families. That is, we can keep three stockmen and three or four gins.

'What it amounts to is that they've decided to cut out all but the most essential expenditure, and just sit back till the drought breaks. I've argued with them that something can be done to keep cattle going even now, and that if we get heavy rain at the break of the drought many hands'll be needed to save stock from drowning and bogging. They say that if the cattle are going to die it's not worth spending money on wages to look after them. If and when the drought breaks, we can take on hands again. Little they know or care about the trouble we're going to be in, trying to get a decent staff together again. The whites'll have to be Peter and Sam, seeing all the new ones have already gone.'

'I suppose,' answered Al, 'that Peter is one logical pick, but you can't very well sack Sam and keep Carl on, can you? Old Sam has been here longer than half the trees near the creek. He's sort of part of the place.'

Smires straightened up in his chair and the huge face loomed like a grotesque mask in the half-light. 'Sam may be part of the place, but Carl's the one we couldn't replace. It was the greatest fluke in the world getting a mechanic and handyman like him. Sam's getting on in years, too.'

'That's what I was thinking,' said Al. 'Sam's getting on and he wouldn't find it easy to get a job, where Carl would be right anywhere.'

'Nonsense!' snorted Smires. 'This firm isn't a benevolent society, and I'm paid to get results. Sam'll be all right. Anyway, he's going. Now, the idea with the blacks is that they'll mainly be looking after the bores. There's only the two where we'll need to keep the pumps going. One thing we've got to do is find out how many cattle are left. There's a brainstorm from

headquarters. They want to know immediately how many head we've got left. The way they talk you'd think you could just run 'em through a race and tally 'em off like counting quids in a bank. Anyway, we've got to give an answer. The only thing I can see for it is for you to take a couple of blacks and make a rough tally. If you take Paddy and Tommy, you'll get a good idea. There's three horses been getting a bit of feed. They'll carry you around as long as you take it steady.'

'But three of us can't round up even what's left now to count 'em,' protested Al.

Smires bounced in his chair. 'God, man, don't be crazy. I don't want you rounding anything up. I don't want the cattle to even see you. If they see you they'll try to run and that means knock about a month's condition off themselves. You can check on what comes in to water. There's only three places to worry about, the two bores and the Big Hole. The blacks'll give you a good idea from the tracks without ever seeing the cattle. You have to give them a figure, but near enough's good enough. It's got to be done this week because you won't have Paddy next week.'

Al stared. 'Don't tell me you're sending him out, one of the best hands with stock in the north, and the best horseman outside of a Wild West book?'

Smires nodded his head. 'Yes, I'm sending him out. Well, I've got to send Polly and it's not much use keeping him. One thing, he's a bit sulky ever since that Dick gave him a belting, and if we keep him here without Polly he's going to be worse. Of course, we could always knock it out of him, but at a time like this it's not worth worrying about. Besides, I'll have a leg-rope on him. He won't stay away from the cattle country long. Once he comes near one of our stations or drovers they'll know to send him back here. He's too well known. You'll see, I'll get him back soon's the drought breaks.'

'Well, who're you keeping then? Tommy?'

'Yes, Tommy. He's a good hand with stock and knows how

to work a pump. He's right, long as he's off the metho. Besides, Annie's useful to me as a standby and she's got a couple of young 'uns there'll soon be ready for the knife. You can keep your gin. Her boy's pretty good at running a pump. And then we'll keep old Jimmy's lot. With a couple of young gins and a couple of near-grown boys, his is a handy family.'

'When are you sending them?' asked Basil.

'Tomorrow. That's what I want you for. All except Paddy and Polly and Johnny and his gin and the others I mentioned go tomorrow.' Smires leaned forward and wagged his finger impressively at Basil, who shifted uneasily on his chair. 'Now, you can go down with Al first thing in the morning and tell 'em to get going. Make sure they get going smartly, we don't want 'em hanging round. But see they don't take anything with 'em. They might have billies or water-bags or things. Some of 'em'll probably claim they have credit owing. Just chase 'em and tell 'em they owe the firm money.'

'What about rations?' asked Basil. 'Will I give them some tucker?'

'Give 'em nothing. They've been sitting on their arses living on the fat of the land.'

Basil hesitated and blushed a little. 'I was thinking that there's still a lot of that weevily flour left and we're not going to have many blacks left here to clean it up.'

'Oh, well, if you want to be big-hearted you can give 'em a handful of that apiece. But the main thing is chase 'em smartly. Once you tell 'em, get 'em moving, and keep 'em moving. Now, Basil, just watch how it's done. Your old man was one of the hardest managers the company ever had, and one of the best men with blacks—that's how he got on so well. When he sent you here he told me to line you up as you were inclined to be soft. Since you've been here I've kept an eye on you, though I haven't said much. From what I've seen, you're more than inclined to be soft, you *are* soft. Remember, it don't

pay dividends—especially in this game and with this firm. Just watch Al tomorrow.'

Next morning, as the first rays of the sun struck through the leaves of the surrounding scrub, at one stroke dispelling the cool of the spring night and presaging another burning day to come, a knot of blacks clustered near Al and Basil. They muttered and gesticulated, glancing anxiously around as if seeking comfort and support.

'What are they saying?' asked Basil. 'I can't follow them at all.'

'Oh, they're all in strife,' replied Al. 'Some of 'em say they got old 'uns that can't walk far, one has a gin that's just dropped a piccaninny, another has one that's just going to drop one. As if I don't know that. That's the only reason they're still here. They all complain it's too late to start now the sun's well up!'

'Is that right?'

'Of course it's right. Anybody that's going anywhere should be halfway there by this time o' day. But the old man's too shrewd to warn 'em beforehand and have 'em thieving round the place.' He turned to the natives. 'Come on, get moving. Missa Smires say go. You no gone two-t'ree minute, Missa Smires he come. Then you go so fast you meet yourself coming back.' To a woman murmuring anxiously and holding a tiny wrinkled speck of life: 'You wait. Missa Smires p'raps he screw it neck, you no more have worry.'

At the dread name of Smires, the blacks cast quick glances up at the house and started for their camps to gather their meagre belongings. Soon they were assembled in family lots, five of them. Basil went round giving each lot a paper bag full of weevily flour. These were received with a mixture of doubt and eagerness, as if need were tempered with fear of a catch in it.

Al checked them over to see what they were carrying. The

first one was easy; just a young fellow and a lubra, no family, but by the look of the lubra the family could start any day. Their outfit was simple, an old bag over the lubra's shoulder and a fruit-tin billy full of water. Jeez,' remarked Al, 'you certainly got all your load in the one place. Right, get moving!'

Next came the family with the lubra with the tiny baby. A sturdy middle-aged man with a couple of spears was followed by a lubra with a bundle of old blankets and sundry tins; then came the woman with the baby and a couple of youngsters beside her. On the other side of them was a gangling youth of about fourteen, and behind tottered an incredibly thin and twisted old woman.

'Well,' said Al, 'you've got the young and the old all right. I'd like to lay a shade of odds Granma doesn't last more'n a hundred miles. Hi, you,' to the youth. 'What you got there? Drop that water-bag!'

The man turned back. 'No, no!' he protested. 'Bag mine, long time me have 'im.'

'Long time you have him, eh? Well, long time now you no have him. Come on, gib it here!'

'But how we carry water?'

'How you carry water? How do I care? Get a good gutsful before you start. What, d'you want me to drive a water-waggon along for you, or maybe an ice-cream cart? Get moving before I do me block.'

'But isn't that being a bit hard?' said Basil. 'Surely they need a water-bag?'

'Water-bag! How do you think they got round this country before the whites came? I can just imagine what the old man'd say if he saw 'em walking away with a water-bag.'

While this was going on, old Maggie, who was with the last family, was talking to Polly. Polly was pressing her to take a lump of cooked goanna and a bit of nicki-nicki. 'Go on, take it. We'll be all right, but you won't get much on that track.'

'No, but I not need much. How long you think I last? First long stretch between water, pouf, out goes Maggie. Oh, all right, I take it. Now listen, I got news for you. Smires got job for Paddy, then you all go, Johnny and Betty too. Mebbe four-five days.'

'Oh,' gasped Polly. 'You sure?'

'Sure I sure. You be ready. Put water-bag out in scrub. Not like us, no water, no tucker, nothing. Well, I gotta go. I glad I not die in this stinking hole, anyway.' And she turned and cocked a snook at the house as she trudged away, to follow the long thin line of figures padding softly forward into the dust and haze of this parched land.

Al turned away. 'Well, young feller, you can go and write them off your books. In fact, I think you'd be pretty safe in writing a lot of 'em off any books. If I'm any judge, there's a feed or two there for the crows.'

Then, raising his voice: 'Hi! Tommy, Paddy.' And as these two came forward: 'You two fella get'm three fella horses longa paddock and gib'm feed chaff. 'Safternoon long mebbe ten-twelve mile you camp, then come piccaninny daylight you bin go bore. I bin come longa ute bring feed and tucker. Mind you go slow, you no more hurry horses been orright.'

Midday saw the family gathered for a feast, a hash concocted with a tin of bully-beef and flour that had been issued to Paddy for his trip. All looked elated. Drought-devastated country could not daunt them when there was a chance to leave Melville Downs. Johnny's face was transfigured, he was hardly recognizable. Seeing this, Betty said: 'Johnny better stay away from house. Anybody can see something wrong.'

'Yes,' said Polly, 'we all must be careful. It is hard to believe Smires will let us go, but it would be terrible if he changed his mind. We must decide which way to go so that we can be ready when Paddy comes back. Are we going to Holborn Waters, the way the others went?'

Everybody looked at Johnny. 'That way better,' he said, pointing north-east with his chin. 'Many tell me that track; I know it well. Not much water, but shorter, more tucker.'

'Yes,' said Paddy, 'I think so. Stock route to Holborn Waters got more water but no tucker. It no further this way to Margaret and there two sure waters, might be more. If we go to Holborn Waters we still got as far to go to Margaret.'

'We let these people know which way we go?' asked Polly.

'No, no,' replied Johnny. 'We go same way as others one day. We get water, then go that-a-way,' again prodding to the north with his upraised chin. 'Then two-three days to water. I go out one night hide tin, water-bag. When we come, we carry plenty water go two-three days. Orright for us, but what about Mary? She walk that far? She got plenty too much white in her.'

Polly bridled at this. 'Mary will do it all right. Her father was tough—tough as a black man; he was a miner.'

'Don't worry,' soothed Paddy. 'We make it. There a big billy with a lid Polly got long time ago. I hid it with water-bag. You get Johnny and take hide on track.' He whispered to Johnny, giving directions. Even when they were out in the open, well away from prying eyes and ears, this secret was too big to be spoken out loud.

'Yes,' said Johnny. 'I got good butcher's knife hid long, long time. I get him too.'

As the men settled down to plan the preparations for the trek, the women started to plan the future. 'Where you go?' asked Betty. 'Me and Johnny go back to the tribe. You come with us?'

'No,' answered Polly. 'We go to Darwin, I hope. They tell me that even coloured people can get enough to eat in Darwin.'

'But you still be ordered about by white people, and how you have anything where there so many whites? Where there

only one or two whites they take everything and we get nothing, so how you live when they as many as kangaroos after rain?'

'They tell me there are men, government men like police, who give the coloured people food.'

Betty tossed her head and sneered. 'If they like poliss you know what you get, a kick and tell you "Get back to work!" Come with us to our own people where you only starve when there nothing in the land to eat. Keep away from the whites!'

Polly threw her hands out. 'But you can't keep away from the whites. Wherever you go they will come and take the best. For me I do not care, I would go to your people. I too hate the whites now, although my father was a white man and a good one, and my husband was good to me until he left us. But I must think of Mary. As Johnny just said, she is nearly all white. How would she live with your people? By the time she is grown up the white men will have cattle and mines on your tribal grounds, and your people will be forced to labour for them for nothing as we do, or will be pushed into the waterless lands.

'You say, "Keep away from the whites." You might as well say, "Keep away from the drought," or, "Keep away from the mosquitoes." For the young people the only chance is to live near the whites and learn their ways. I want Mary to learn to be like them, to kick and push, not like us to be kicked and pushed.'

'Will Paddy go to Darwin?' asked Betty.

'I'm not sure,' replied Polly, 'but I may leave him if he will not.'

'Why you not go to Darwin that time you come here with Paddy?'

'That was two years ago. I was young and didn't know much. At Margaret that time Paddy was a big man, he was the best horseman. He won the races and rode the horse nobody

else could ride. I did not know that here he was nothing to the white man. When I was at home my father was boss and my mother and I were guarded from other men. With my husband at the mine, other men sometimes would cast eyes at me, but I was for him alone. I did not know that a black man cannot keep his wife if a white man wants her. Do you think I would have come here if I had known of Smires? One reason I may yet go with you is so that I can choke the child when it comes.'

'Oh, well,' sighed Betty. 'You may be right, but we can decide when we get to Margaret.'

'Yes,' said Polly, 'we've got to get there yet. I think I'll get Mary and go for a walk down the creek bed. We shall need a bit of exercise before we start on a trip like that.'

'Don't go too far,' cautioned Betty. 'When you not eating much you soon get weak.'

'We'll be all right. It will do us good. Anyway, we will stick to the creek bed and we might find a few grubs in the trees or something.'

She called to Mary and they set off together for the creek, the mother still moving lithely and gracefully and the girl leaner in body, and more mature in face, having aged a year or two in appearance during the past few months.

4

Came the day when Maggie's prophecy was fulfilled and

another thin ragged file headed west from Melville Downs. Already well clear of the tree-tops, a merciless sun blazed venomously from a sullen sky. The half-dead leaves hung listless and motionless, save where suddenly a willy-willy curved from the plain into a bunch of trees, whipping them into brief but frantic motion. Behind the slow-moving little column the dust swirled languidly and settled back gently, as if each grain were seeking to return to the very spot it had just left.

At the head of the file Johnny thrust forward eagerly, unable to restrain himself, in spite of repeated efforts, to the pace of the others. His spears, his face, even his body seemed to quiver and point like a game dog.

Not having any weapons, Paddy came next, travelling light. Betty trudged along carrying most of their gear in spite of Polly's protests. The load didn't amount to much anyway, the heaviest item being an old tin that held a couple of gallons of water. Once out of sight of the homestead, Paddy settled all arguments by taking the water-tin himself.

Mary, coming last with her mother, was scolded by Polly for doing a hop and skip and darting away from the track to investigate something or other. 'Come back here and walk as we do. We have far to go and you have no strength to waste. Watch Betty and copy her steps.' Indeed, twenty miles to water, with the sun well up, was a long step for a first day.

All trudged ahead strongly. The past few days had worked wonders for them. The thought of leaving Melville Downs had given each of them a new interest in life. In addition, they had been eating well and exercising. Johnny had found a bullock that had been dead only a short time, and although it had little on it but skin and bone there had been enough to keep them chewing. A hunk of what most resembled flesh had been boiled up, and Johnny had taken it out and buried it near the first water along with their chief treasures, the billy-can, water-bag, and butcher's knife.

Johnny kept them going well until midday. Then they squatted in the meagre shade of a patch of grey-looking mulga, had a drink of water, and chewed the last ragged remnants of meat. Before the sun was far past the vertical, they were off again. Though it meant walking through some of the worst of the heat they had to camp down early, for it was necessary to have a long sleep before they set out—hours before daylight—on a stage that might take three days to water. As they trooped up to a clump of bushes near a tank the sun was just setting. Polly and Mary were beginning to wilt, but if the others felt any ill-effects they did not show it.

There was a big tank, a row of troughs, and a little hut. It was a government bore on the stock route. During the droving season a man would be there to keep the water flowing, but now it had been long deserted. However, there was still water in the tank.

Johnny produced his treasures, but the hunk of meat was stinking and almost green. Betty put it on to boil in the old tin. Mixing up the parcel of weevily flour with a little water she made johnny-cakes which she dropped into the ashes to cook. The meat came out little, if any, less rank than it went in. 'What you think, Betty?' asked Johnny. 'Polly and Mary can eat this? Polly not too good,' patting his stomach, 'and Mary too much white. White people weak stomachs.'

'I dunno,' said Betty, 'we have tin of meat,' pointing to a small tin of bully beef. 'What you think, Polly?'

'No,' said Polly, 'we can't open the tin. It has to do us for three days. I will eat some meat. I am strong. I don't know about Mary but she has eaten nearly everything with Lizzie. She had better try it. She can't walk three days on a bit of johnny-cake.'

Johnny cut off a lump from the better end and passed it across. Polly tried a bit and then gave some to Mary. 'Here, try this.'

'I can eat that, Mummy,' piped up Mary. 'With Lizzie I have

often eaten worse than that. Lizzie used to say I couldn't eat something because I was white and weak, but I did eat it just to show her.'

So, as darkness began to fall, the little party squatted down and devoured this rotten, tainted meat.

In the cool of the early hours, by the light of the waning moon, dim figures could be seen rising like wraiths from among the bushes. A toss backward of the head and a shake of the hips completed the toilet. Each had a long drink, the water-tins and bag were filled, and everything was ready.

Without a word, Johnny, Paddy, and Betty picked up the gear, and silently five bare-footed figures padded out on to the plain lying stark and silvery in the moonlight.

Silently and steadily they moved forward while the light faded as the moon dipped and sank, so that for a time it was difficult to avoid the spiny stumps of spinifex that cropped up here and there. Soon, to the right of them, a faint glimmer appeared on the horizon. This gradually spread until the sky was filled with light and the earth was revealed again in all its tragic barren monotony; the plain stretching forward, not bare and level as far as the eye can reach, as is the great plain of Queensland, but slightly rolling and for the most part studded with grey spears of spinifex and drooping, almost lifeless scrub, so stunted as to be hardly worthy of the name.

Now the cool night breeze died and the miserable plant life shrank into immobility as if cowering and tensing itself for the first impact of the sun's renewed assault. The travellers seemed to quicken their steps under a futile impulse to flee from this monster coming up on their flank. There he came, shining red through the haze, threatening to consume all life.

Soon after sun-up, Johnny waved them to the ground. 'Little bit spell then we do another two-three hours.'

As they squatted behind a tiny bush Mary said, 'Mummy, I want a drink.' Polly looked at Johnny.

'Give her a mouthful, you have one,' he said. 'Out of the water-bag. Must use it first, it wastes.'

A few minutes later he rose to his feet and, as the others followed his example, strode forward once more. Now the sun was up and overtaking them, moving across their track as if to bar their advance. The heat and hours of walking had taken the spring from their legs but still they went steadily on.

Well before midday they found a couple of slightly larger bushes and dropped down to rest. For some time Polly had been finding her heavy body a tremendous load, and Mary had been clinging more and more to her skirt. Johnny had not looked back and Polly had been wondering how long she could resist the urge to call out. Apparently Johnny knew by instinct, for he called a halt just as she had finally decided she could not carry on.

A drink of water and a nibble of Johnny-cake, and they all stretched out in the little more than imaginary shade to try to doze through the hours of fiercest heat, and forget aching limbs and parched throats.

In the afternoon, as soon as the sun had dipped appreciably towards the west, the march was continued. At first it was a relief to be moving after the hours of restless inaction, the twisting and wriggling to try to keep a few half-dried leaves between them and the sun, with craving stomachs and kiln-dry lips only tormented by occasional sips of precious water. But, mercifully, the sun was not now shining directly in their faces, and as time went on it slipped further and further behind them. For Polly and Mary, at least, the morning's fatigue soon reasserted itself, and it became a matter of the will to force first one leg forward, then the other.

An hour or so later, Polly and Mary were dropping back in spite of all their efforts. Mary, who had whimpered a little occasionally, earlier in the day, now had a set look on her face that made her look years older. She struggled on manfully but she couldn't help dragging her feet a little and stumbling

occasionally. Betty turned back to them. 'Don't think it be long now. I feel ready to drop, but we can't stop, can we? Hang on to me, little one, I give you a pull.' The two found new strength. Betty's giving Mary a tow was a real help to both her and Polly.

Soon after sundown they suddenly came upon a hollow, perhaps half an acre in extent, where the little trees and bushes scattered about had a green look in comparison with all the rest. Obviously, water would lie here after heavy rains. Johnny and Paddy put down their loads under a tree and waited for the others. They looked searchingly at Polly and Mary but all they said was, 'Wait here, we have a look.'

Betty lit a fire and all three stretched out. Just as dusk was turning to full darkness the men returned. Each had a handful of grubs as a result of the night's hunting. These were shared out, the biggest shares going to Polly and Mary, and devoured eagerly. Then the tin of bully-beef was opened and a mouthful or two of this with a bit of Johnny-cake completed the feed.

'You bin this way before, Paddy,' said Johnny. 'How far you reckon?'

'Long time since,' replied Paddy, 'but I think mebbeso halfway to the bore.'

'Ooh,' said Polly, 'then we get there tomorrow.'

'No fear,' answered Paddy, 'you no walk as far tomorrow as today. Besides, some ground rougher. Might be could get there midday next day. What you say, Johnny?'

'Might be,' agreed Johnny. 'Polly and Mary doing good, but tough tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow we pass Old Man Water-hole,' said Paddy. 'Few miles from our track. I go over there, might be get something. No water now, but could be something.'

'Better I go,' said Johnny.

'Why, you think I no can see?' demanded Paddy.

'Oh, you see orright, but can you smell where nobody can see? You always bin chase cows when I bin hunt. No can hunt when riding horses.'

Paddy looked disgruntled but accepted defeat.

The first stage of the next day's travelling was much like the previous one, except that the accumulated effects of two days' walking with shortage of food and water made themselves felt, and walking was more of an effort. Mary, being young, had picked up marvellously and was strong and lively, but because of her youth her stomach was most vociferous. She was given the last piece of leathery johnny-cake to chew as she walked, but it was a poor substitute for food. Polly was stiff and sore and had to drive herself all the way. Chiefly on her account, the midday stop was made earlier than on the previous day, with a much shorter distance covered.

After a short rest, Johnny said, 'I go now, see you tonight.'

Paddy gave him instructions as to how to find the water-hole.

Then, as he was leaving: 'What about water? You take some?'

'No, I no need, I have a drink.' He took a mouthful of water and away he went. With no appearance of hurrying he disappeared from view as if by magic.

Late in the afternoon the predictions of tough going were proven correct. Patches of loose stones and strips of stony outcropping had to be crossed. Not great hazards in themselves but they immeasurably increased the labour for tired legs. Where, before, feet could be half dragged, just scuffling over the ground, now they had to be lifted and placed carefully to avoid bruising.

After a couple of miles of this, Mary was about done. Though not whimpering, she gave an involuntary sob at intervals as she staggered on. Paddy stopped, gave what he

was carrying to Betty and hoisted Mary up on his back. 'Not much more stone,' he said. 'Must get across it tonight.'

The next hour was a nightmare of effort, but just as the sun was dipping to the horizon they crossed a stony ridge and found themselves on an open plain. Paddy pointed to a clump of trees about half a mile away. 'There we stop.' With a final drive they made the trees and dropped to the ground.

After a while Betty got up and started to light a fire. 'Better be ready cook something when Johnny come.'

'Not much chance he will bring anything,' said Polly.

'He will. He better, we got nothing, no tucker, nothing much water, one drink tonight, one tomorrow tha's all.' She had no sooner spoken than there was Johnny, a big grin on his face and two big frogs and a medium-sized snake in his hands. 'How you get them?' was the chorus.

'Bin dig 'em out,' he replied. 'These two,' indicating the frogs, 'bin full water. Me squeeze 'em, have good drink.'

Betty grabbed them and dumped them in the fire. They had hardly started to sizzle before they were out again and chopped up with Johnny's big knife. One piece he put aside for Mary in the morning.

After the meal they discussed the next day's walk. From what Paddy remembered, it seemed likely that it was now about fifteen miles to the bore. Johnny wanted to go ahead, get water, and bring it back to meet them. The others dissuaded him. They had been told that the man in charge of the bore was 'troppo' and crooked on blacks and just as likely to shoot them as not. They pointed out that a single black man prowling around the bore would occasion more suspicion than a party, and so there was less chance of trouble if they all went together.

Before they started next morning the water was shared out, a little drink each. Johnny and Paddy just wet their

mouths and saved a drop for Mary and Polly to drink later on, and Mary had her bit of frog to chew as she walked.

Getting off to an early start, they counted on reaching the bore at about the time they would normally take their midday spell. But they had reckoned without knowing the track. At sun-up they were congratulating themselves on having made good time when suddenly they struck some sand-hill country. After the long dry spell the sand was like flour, they sank into it up to the ankles at every step. It lasted for a mile, and by the time they were across it they had lost an hour and nearly all their strength.

Mary was in fairly good condition. Her youth gave her wonderful powers of recuperation after each day's labour and her lightness had given her an advantage in the sand. Polly, however, suffered badly on the heavy track and the party was forced to rest a while to allow her to pick up a bit. From there on there were many stops, but only brief ones. It was no use sitting down when their bodies were crying out for water.

Up to the present, Polly and Mary had ended the day's travel in an agonizing battle between willpower and aching, straining muscles, but now there was no battle, because there was no longer any conscious willpower, no longer any feeling in their straining muscles. All feeling was submerged in a consuming thirst. Only instinct kept them moving, instinct to follow those three wiry black figures plodding endlessly, automatically, and, apparently, tirelessly forward.

An outside observer would have noticed that all was not well even with these three. Polly followed Paddy, hanging on to the waistband of his trousers. As her weight shifted from time to time, Paddy's feet stumbled and shifted uncertainly. Even Mary's weight, hanging to a corner of her tattered skirt, caused Betty to waver occasionally. Johnny, the iron man, who had walked further and eaten and drunk much less than any of them, walked without a falter, his eyes, nose, and ears questing; only his mouth, swollen and cracked, and a grey

pinched look around the nostrils, indicated the strain he was under. Suddenly he stood still, his head raised and body tensed; twitching nostrils indicated which of his senses was being concentrated. 'Water,' he croaked.

At this magic word, everyone showed signs of life and peered eagerly forward. But there was nothing to see. They were threading their way through sparse mulga scrub and vision was limited to a few yards. But they didn't doubt Johnny and their faith gave them renewed energy.

Soon they burst through the last of the scrub and there before them lay an open plain. It was roughly circular and about half a mile in diameter. And, a magic sight, over at the far edge of the plain stood a huge galvanized iron tank and a set of troughs. Around them were scattered a few head of cattle.

After two attempts Paddy managed a word of advice. 'We bin have to go round not to fright the cattle.' He waved to the scrub on the eastern side of the plain. This added torture was accepted without a murmur. All knew that the white man's cattle must not be disturbed.

Half the distance had been covered when, from the scrub in front of them, an apparition materialized. It was an incredibly tall, thin, gangling figure topped by a glaring red face, with red-rimmed bloodshot eyes, which was eclipsed by a tousled mop of long, flaming red hair. Khaki trousers, encrusted with several months' accumulation of grease and dirt, covered the bony legs almost to the dirty bare ankles which disappeared into a broken-down pair of 'laughing-side' riding boots. A streaky, sweat-marked, once-khaki shirt completed the figure's attire, its jagged frayed edges at the shoulders indicating that it had once possessed sleeves. The long skinny arms were red and freckled, save where suppurating scabs adorned numerous festering sores of the 'barcoo rot' type.

He waved his arms, brandishing a rifle. 'That's far enew. Hauld it!'

Paddy struggled and croaked : 'Only want water. Come round this way not frighten cattle.'

'Weel Ah ken that, an' weel it is for you, or this [patting the rifle] wad be speakin' to ye, no' me. Noo bide whaur ye're at an' dinna frighten yon coos.'

'But,' stammered Paddy, 'we need water. Long time no drink.'

'Aboot sundown all the coos'll shift an' ye can get water. Till then ye'll wait. Yer black heathen carcasses'll no dee for water afore then, but,' waving his arms for emphasis, 'they will if ye come closer.'

'But the child,' croaked Polly pointing to Mary, 'she must have water.' Mary's little face was grey, her swollen tongue protruding from swollen lips.

The monstrous head swivelled round on a neck like that of a half-roasted turkey, and the red-rimmed eyes seemed to glow redder still. 'Yon spawn o' the de'il, sign o' a white man's degr-radation, t'wad be weel if ye baith should perish ere yer evil bodies drag more men doon to the depths.' Then he swivelled his gun across the line of them. 'Sundown, nae sooner. An' dinna come near ma camp, ye band o' thieves an' harlots, or ye'll feed the craws.' And he backed out of sight into the scrub.

As soon as he was out of sight, Johnny dropped his spears and took a billy-can. To Paddy he said, 'I go to water,' waving his arm indicating a huge circle. 'You follow red man, give sign when he not watch water.' Johnny glided away and Paddy moved slowly along the edge of the scrub, keeping in view of the red one, but as far away as possible, while still watching him and the water-troughs.

Polly was watching Paddy settle down on his stomach behind a miserable clump of saltbush that still paraded a few

dried stalks but scarcely a leaf. Her hand loosely held Mary's arm. Had she been looking she would have seen a change coming over the girl's face. Mary's face was still grey and her lips swollen over a swollen tongue. But now her red-rimmed eyes, as they stared at those water-troughs across the narrow plain, took on a wild, almost animal expression. Her nose twitched as if it were smelling water. As her neck craned forward, the bulbous lips fluttered and reached for water. Suddenly she made a weird sound, half-cry, half-moan, and started forward.

At that noise Polly turned sharply and her hand involuntarily tightened on Mary's arm. But, before she could stop the girl, she had staggered a few steps forward herself, nearly to the edge of the scrub. Polly tried to say they must wait, that Johnny was getting water, but the only sounds she made were broken croaks, like those of a frog that is beaten with a stick.

The croaks brought Betty to her aid, and it was as well. For now Mary twisted and strove with the fearful strength of one in a fit, and the two of them found it almost impossible to hold her with gentle force. Their hearts ached at the thought of the precious reserve of her strength being wasted, and at the dreadful fear that she might even throw away the ultimate ounce.

For now Mary was beyond the mere torment of a burning thirst, she was driven by the instinct of self-preservation which no agony can touch nor danger daunt. The two women were nearly as far gone. Not the threat of the red one's bullets would have kept them from water. Only Johnny's command, 'You wait . . . I go to water.'

Soon Mary's struggles lessened. Still she was tense and twitching, and reaching ever forward.

Taking advantage of the lull, the women tried to see what Paddy and Johnny were doing, but now neither was visible. Over to the right of the water-tank, however, they could see a

little galvanized iron hut nestling under a tree, and alongside it the figure of the red one standing on guard, the rifle held in the crook of his arm.

Crouching behind a bush, Paddy watched him as well as a spot beyond the water-troughs, where a deliberate movement had shown Johnny to be. Paddy's fears were that Johnny might grow impatient if the red one stayed on, and try a dash across the several yards of open space separating him from the troughs.

Time was dragging on, the sun still shone fiercely, and was drawing the last drops of moisture from their tortured systems. Suddenly Mary made a break. She didn't get completely free of the clutching arms of Betty and Polly, but she was out on the plain before they stopped her. All three of them were briefly clear of the trees before Mary was dragged back into shelter. This rash action proved to be their salvation. The red one, seeing some movement, without knowing what it was, started towards them, turning a blind side to the troughs.

Probably anticipating Paddy's signal, Johnny slid over to the troughs, filled his billy, and was back in the scrub, nearly fast enough to be an optical illusion. Paddy skirmished back to the women and helped them move Mary further back into the trees. His repeated 'Johnny come with water' seemed to have an effect, and Mary subsided into uneasy stillness.

At last Johnny arrived, and they had to hold on grimly while he moistened the child's lips and tongue, and then gradually eased a trickle of the warm and mineralized water down her throat. But soon all had had a little and settled down to a slow recovery as the billy was passed round.

Soon afterwards Johnny took his spears and prepared to leave again. He pointed to the north, to where the gaunt branches of a tree showed above the scrub. 'Sundown you go round,' waving his arm wide. 'I meet you there.'

True to his word he was there—with a huge goanna, fat as

a whale from gorging on dead cattle. What a feed they had that night! They decided to move a bit further north and camp for a day or two until they were well rested, as they could get plenty of water at night and Johnny was sure they could get plenty of tucker.

5

Two days they rested and ate, then they moved on again. The going was fairly easy, the longest stretch between waters being a day and a half. But it was fortunate they had eaten up well at the bore and carried a good supply of tucker with them as they found little on the way. The last stretch into Margaret was a tough one. It was a long day's walk and all they had between them to eat was a couple of tiny lizards. So it was a tired and hungry band that came to the outskirts of the town as the sun went down.

It was a sun-baked, discouraged-looking town, with wide dusty streets, a scattering of low-built, blistering, weather-board houses and a few dusty trees. As they came in sight of the town, they hesitated before stepping warily across twin ribbons of steel that stretched across one end of it, shining bright and mysterious in the last rays of sunlight. Flanked by huts and sheds and a little railway station, the gleaming lines twinkled away to where a dark line of foliage crossed them at the far end of the town. Trees and bushes, some with only the tops poking above ground level, marked the line of the river

bed. At the junction of the rails and the river, standing out stark against the fiery skyline, a huge red water-tank provided a striking landmark for the town and a blatant reason for its existence.

Glancing along the street fronting the railway line, the eye of a weary white traveller would have lit up at the sight of the false fronts betokening hotels and stores. To this small band, the depressed little township represented a huge stronghold of an enemy people. Treating it as such, they skirted it widely and warily on the side opposite the river, which they aimed to reach a mile or so higher up. Now as they trudged through the powdery dust their throats burned more fiercely, but legs gained new strength from anticipation of water and rest.

As the daylight faded, they dipped over the river bank and, as at the wave of a magic wand, entered another world. Behind them the thirst and atmosphere of death and desolation; here was the scent of water and green, growing things.

A hollow in the river bank was walled and roofed with bushes and trees, while the dull gleam of water showed faintly below. The greenery was not the stunted scrub of the dry lands, with hardly two leaves to rub together, but massive, full-foliaged trees that sprang from below and bent solicitously over, so that anyone on the ledge gazed intimately into the cool recesses of their upper branches.

Cosily built with bits of this and that, some old iron, some bags and sheets of bark, a mia-mia hugged the bank. In front of it squatted a middle-aged black man and two lubras, one fairly old, the other much younger. Three or four mongrel dogs raced out yapping to greet the newcomers, and five or six children jumped up and clustered together shyly.

The man looked up, assessed the arrivals, and waved his hand to the fire. 'Sit.' Then, to the lubras, 'Bring water!'

When all had had a drink, he said, 'You come long way, which way?'

Paddy pointed with his chin. 'That-a-way, Melville Downs.' 'Ooh, tough track. Bad time go walkabout.'

'No can help, boss say go.'

A shake of the head. 'Aah. You no got tucker?'

'No,' said Paddy, 'mebbeso get some in town.'

'You got plenty money? No? You get nothing in this town. Get put in gaol, mebbe. Nancy, get tucker.'

The young lubra got up. 'But what—' she began.

'Shut up, you talk too much, get'm tucker.' Then, as some of the visitors started to protest: 'We got plenty tucker. You no get nothing tonight, mebbeso you get some tomorra.'

Nancy arrived with a half kerosene tin holding a modest portion of watery stew. This she placed before the visitors to whom she gave a tin pannikin and a spoon. Then she went away and came back with a piece of stale loaf. Everybody was silent as the tin was being passed around, the kids in the background craning forward to see their breakfast disappearing. At last all was cleaned up, and the children relaxed and crept into the mia-mia, no doubt to dream of fat stewpots.

Save for the fitful light of the tiny camp-fire, the hollow was now in pitch darkness; not the oppressive all-enveloping gloom of a closed room, but the velvety soft, caressing darkness of outdoors, relieved at the edges by the phosphorescent glow of tropical starlight that softly bathed the outside world.

As they all squatted down around the fire and silence reigned for a moment, the only sound was the buzzing of mosquitoes. In the flickering light of the minute flames the middle-aged man and woman showed as typical natives of the north, with spindly limbs and wide, coal-black faces, broad, mobile lips, and soft brown eyes, normally sorrowful but capable of changing in an instant to gleaming mirth.

Nancy's face, shining black but straight of feature, her

slightly frizzy hair and compact frame all spoke of an ancestor from north of the mainland. It was hard to judge her dominant mood as her face was seldom still, and her eyes gleamed and sparkled as fast as a signaller's light.

As everybody settled down, the man said, 'Sorry no gottem baccy, bin forgettem.'

Nancy jumped up. 'Ah,' she said triumphantly, 'me gottem.' From a capacious pocket in her tattered dress she produced a tin half-full of cigarette-butts and a piece of newspaper. Johnny and Paddy declined, but Betty joined her hosts in rolling a fumigator. Soon the four of them were blowing smoke and flames like miniature dragons.

'Where you go?' asked the host, Bobby.

'Back to our people,' said Johnny. He twisted his head and jutted his chin out towards the north. 'You know the track? Any water?' he asked.

Bobby spat at the fire and shook his head. 'I not know. Long time I been here. But people say it not bad that way as way you come.'

Polly blinked as the smoke stung her eyes. She was sitting on the smoky side of the fire to keep the mosquitoes away from Mary. The child was coiled up, already sound asleep, her head on her mother's lap.

'Where you bin go?' Nancy asked her, hastily dropping the last bit of her cigarette as the paper smouldered back to her fingers. 'You bin go longs Johnny?'

'I don't know. I want to stay near the whites,' said Polly, 'so Mary can learn their ways. I had thought that we might get work here or in Darwin. Do you know if there is any chance?'

Nancy shook her head. 'Dunno about Darwin, some people tell us it no good, some people say orright. But here not much damn' good.'

'But you get work here?'

Nancy laughed mirthlessly. 'We get work orright but

nothing money catch'm,' she said. 'Me work for woman got board'n house, feeds white men. Me all time wash'm cloes, wash'm dishes, wash'm pots, wash'm floors. Get'm bita tucker, bita ole cloes, nothing catch'm money. Missus say she pay Gubmint.' She spat.

'But if she pays Government, it's for you,' protested Polly. 'The money is still yours.'

'Might be she pay Gubmint, might be not, but me no catch'm.' Nancy threw out her hands. 'How you get money from Gubmint? Some people try, ask polissman. He say: "You got tucker, got cloes, what you want money? Gubmint look after money. You get'm you spend'm." '

In the dim light Polly stared thoughtfully into the fire. 'How about Bobby, does he get money?'

'You bin talk Bobby. Hi, Bobby, Polly bin talk'm your job, you get'm plenty money?'

Bobby looked round. 'Me got job orright, plenty money. Ten bob a week.'

'Ten bob a week?'

'Yeh, ten bob a week once a month. Nebber he give me money, though. He bin say: "Now, Bobby, you bin get baccy, get flour, get tea, get taties. You nothing get money, you owe me money." '

He waved his arms. 'All a time he talk: "Bobby, you bring bag flour this genmun. Bobby, you stack them tins. Bobby, you no bin finish clean that yard." Then he talk white man: "These blacks no good. Must watch'em alla time." ' He relaxed again and shook his head thoughtfully.

Nancy slapped at the back of her neck.

'Polly talks can she get job so little girl learn to be like white people.'

'Might be get job, might be not,' said Bobby. 'Must talk pollissman.'

The older woman spoke up for the first time. 'More better go mishun. Plenty tucker, plenty school.'

'Ooh, yes,' said Nancy. 'Mishun up Kuralla in Johnny's country. We there two-t'ree-five year ago. Good—plenty tucker. Might be we go back but too much kids, all time more kids.'

'What do you do at mission?' asked Polly.

'Work little bit,' said Bobby. 'Nothing much work, not bad as other white folk. Plenty too much sing an' pray.'

'Sing and pray,' asked Paddy. 'What that?'

Nancy jumped up, held her arm out as if holding a book, turned her eyes up with a soulful look, and worked her mouth vigorously. Then she fell on her knees, took up an attitude of devotion, and jabbered some gibberish. Everybody laughed; even Johnny gave a grin.

Bobby laughed and clapped his thigh. 'Thasall. Plenty pray, then Jesusman say you goodfella. Allasame white man in sky when you all finish up.'

'What work do they do?' asked Polly.

'Oh,' said Nancy, 'bit clean up, wash'm cloes, work garden, hunt, fish, plenty make'm toys for white people, wood, shell things. Don't have to work too much hard but muss pray plenty. You wan'um girl learn white people stuff, that's place. Can learn read, write, play music-box' (here she waved her arms as if tapping Piano keys), 'everything. Some coloured kids there talk allasame like you. Me thought you bin mishun.'

'No,' answered Polly, 'my father taught me. He taught me to read their Bible, too, their holy book.'

'Oho,' said Nancy, rolling her eyes and pursing her mouth. 'You talk Jesusman Bible-talk and pray plenty, he never let you go. You go Kuralla, better than this.'

'What do you think, Paddy?' asked Polly.

'Can try,' replied Paddy. 'If it no good can go on with Johnny.'

'You come with us then,' said Betty. 'Good, we go soon, but tomorrow must get tucker. We get any from polissman, Bobby?'

'Might be something. You all go tomorra early. Might be give some rashuns.'

'Me no go near pollissman,' said Johnny, with great feeling. 'No good, that fella. Go up river hunt somethings.'

'All right, the rest of us can go,' said Polly. 'We go very early, is that best, Bobby? What do we do? Go up to his house and ask for food, do we?'

'No, no.' Bobby shook his head violently. 'You bin ask him he reckon you proper cheeky fella. He got long yard, you sit down longa bottom near shed. He bin talk alonga you what you want d'reckly, might be two-t'ree hour. You go after sun-come-up.

He turned to Johnny. 'You go up river, Johnny. Might be find kangaroo. No feed anywhere, some proper cheeky fella come in eat white man's farm.'

So, all plans being made, they retired for the night. The travellers stretched out under a tree. Bobby and his women crawled into the mia-mia where grunting and stirrings proclaimed that children were being moved over to make room. Soon the only sound was a plop in the pool below them, or the rustling of leaves as some night creature moved about.

Next morning close on sun-up, as Betty had just got the billy and a tin of water boiling, and the others were turning over ready to get up, Johnny staggered into camp bending under the load of a huge kangaroo. Two or three old scars showed where white man's bullets had failed to stop it.

Johnny recounted with great glee how it had been so busy

watching a white man's house as it cropped his grass that it had failed to see the black shadow moving up on the other side. Then, when he had thrown a stone to disturb it, it had hopped towards him and met its death as it paused at the fence.

Bobby's children's eyes nearly popped out of their heads as they watched big lumps of meat going into the stewpot. Some time later their stomachs were popping out even further, as they crammed the tough, half-raw meat down their throats.

Paddy, Betty, Polly, and Mary squatted down at the bottom end of the policeman's yard under a big old pepper tree and watched the first signs of movement up at the house.

The policeman came out on the back verandah and had a wash and a white woman and coloured girl dodged in and out on a variety of errands. Then all was quiet for a time, no doubt as they were having breakfast. Two black trackers in old khaki pants and shirts lounged about near the back verandah waiting for their tucker. As the coloured girl came out and handed them each a tin dish, the policeman came out and spoke briefly to them. He was spruced up now, with a broad-brimmed hat, clean khaki shirt, and pants. When he left them he walked down the yard past the pepper trees, glancing at the people squatting there but saying nothing. Then he went out of the side gate and away down the street.

Some time later one of the trackers came over to the little group. 'Where you fella from? What you want?'

Paddy started to explain they came from Melville Downs, were passing through and had no tucker, when the tracker broke in brusquely:

'Me know you now. You all same Paddy ride races las' year. Might be you run away Melville Downs.'

'No,' protested Paddy, 'no run away. Mis' Smires send walkabout. We want rashun.'

'Me tinket Mis Smires no more send you walkabout you all same run away,' said the tracker with a knowing look.

'How we run away with women and kid?' asked Paddy. 'No can run, no can hide.'

'Orright, might be boss he talk you,' and he went back up the yard to start polishing saddles and bridles.

About mid-morning the policeman came back and passed them again without even glancing at them. He spoke to the tracker and then passed on into the house. Soon they saw him sitting in the shady side of the verandah having a cup of tea.

By this time Mary was getting fidgety. 'Mummy, I want a drink of water. Mummy, can I go and play?'

Polly found it hard to keep her quiet, especially as she herself was getting restless and wanting to relieve herself. But the others remained unmoved and apparently immovable, so she forced herself to do the same.

At last, about half an hour later, the policeman came out again and this time he came directly to them. As they jumped to their feet, he looked them over. Then: 'Where you fella bin walkabout? What you bin wan'em?'

Tall and thin he stood, with a sagging waistline held in check by a heavy belt. Cold eyes shifted ceaselessly under the broad brim of his hat and his cheeks were flabby under a decaying coat of tan.

Paddy told his story briefly.

In a tone of indifference the policeman replied: 'Might be you bin tell true, might be you bin runaway. Mebbe I bin put you longa gaol till Mis' Smires bin talk me.'

Polly butted in desperately. 'But you can't do that. We did not run away. Mr. Smires sent us away.'

The policeman turned on her savagely. 'You bin talk me no can do, me bin show you where cheeky gins go!' Then to himself with a chuckle: 'Oho, so that's it. Now I remember—

the "gin with the Oxford accent", Smires' pet stud. So that's why he sent them. Still the same Smires!'

Then, sharply to them: 'Orright, might be you bin tell true. But Gubmint no more bin gib tucker you fella go walkabout. You bin keep go, no more hang around this fella town. Me bin see you in town, in gaol you go, quick time.'

As they moved off to the gate he stroked his chin. 'Might be funny, give 'em some tucker, then tell Smires I gave special rations for his son and heir, he, he!

'Hi, you, wait! Hi, Jacky!' He strode up the yard to meet the tracker who ran up at his call.

Soon the tracker came and gave them a parcel wrapped in much-used dirty brown paper. When they got down the road a bit they examined their treasure. It was four or five pounds of weevily flour and a couple of pounds of iron-hard blue boiler peas, all lumped in together.

Back at the camp they found it deserted save for the older lubra who squatted in the shade of a tree. Johnny no doubt was away hunting. Squeals and laughter from the bed of the river told of the happy children at their play, and Mary ran down to join them.

Soon they came racing past the camp, Mary in the lead, not a shred of clothing on any of them, their skins glistening from a dip in the pool. Mary was tall for her age, and slim. The march through the desert had taken every ounce of superfluous flesh off her and she was as graceful, fit, and tough as a Melbourne Cup horse. Her body glowed golden-brown where her scanty dress had protected it, but arms, legs, and face were burnt nearly black.

Seeing the children, Polly decided to follow their example. 'I'm going down for a dip, I'll wash this dress too. Are you coming, Paddy, Betty?'

'Not me,' said Betty. 'Me sleep.'

'Orright, me come,' answered Paddy. 'Not much washing,' glancing down at his ragged shorts with a smile.

The water was shallow and warm and after the first kick and splash and scrubbing they found a sandy patch and lay in the water, soaking and dozing. Polly rolled over and clung to Paddy. 'Oh, Paddy, how happy we could be if we could live like this.'

'Yes,' replied Paddy, 'no shadow of white man.'

'I know, you want to go with Johnny and Betty. But let us try the mission first. If they are like the rest of the whites we'll go bush, to Johnny.'

She rolled over and clasped her stomach. 'Oh, Paddy, I hope it's your baby. I think I'll kill it if it's like Smires.'

Paddy laid his hand on hers. 'We find home—somewhere.'

Bobby came home for dinner but Nancy did not; dinner-time was a busy time on her job. Johnny no doubt was too busy looking for tomorrow's dinner. After a good feed of kangaroo-meat that was now boiled down to a stage where it could be chewed, everyone lazed around for a while, enjoying the shade of trees with an abundance of foliage.

Polly, in her station house-dress, crumpled but moderately clean, looked a different person from the one who had stumbled into camp the night before. She must have felt different too, for suddenly she sat up. 'Paddy, couldn't we go into town and have a look at the shops?'

'You heard what pollissman said,' replied Paddy. ' "I catch you in town, I put you in gaol!" '

Her face clouded over. 'Oh, yes, I heard.'

Bobby came to the rescue. 'Might be you go town af'noon proper hot fella, pollissman be 'sleep or drink beer, he no see.' Polly's eyes shone. 'Oh, Paddy, could we do that?'

'Orright. Bobby say orright.'

To avoid the street where the police station was they

skirted the town as they had done coming in, but this time kept close to the houses on what was no doubt a 'street' on the town plan. They strolled along the dusty deserted track, Paddy with an air of nonchalance as one who knew all about towns. Polly was frankly envious of the people who lived in these little weatherboard cottages, and of the faded house-dresses on the few weatherworn women they saw.

As they came to the corner of the town's main street, across the road and the railway line they saw the loco shed. Here an engine was being fired up ready for a run. This black monster spitting steam and smoke fascinated Mary. 'Oh, Mummy, can we go nearer?'

With many a backward and sideways glance they crossed the road and edged over towards the railway line, at any moment expecting a roar: 'Get away from there, you black bastards.' The cleaner who was getting up steam saw them, and with a wide grin pulled the stopcock. There was a terrific roar of steam and before the sightseers had time to draw a breath they were back on the main street again.

Then came the great thrill—'the shop'. It was a little general store, just like any other country store, with shirts and saddles, sweets and stockings, cigarettes, and cinnamon, and flies and dust over all. The three stood by the kerb, drinking it all in. Gradually, inch by inch, they crept nearer until their noses were rubbing against the glass.

Steps along the footpath made them jump back to the kerb. They huddled together as they saw a peaked cap, not knowing whether it was some kind of policeman. The loco driver, with his black box slung from his shoulder, was going over to the engine to get ready to take the train out. As he came level with them he saw Mary peeping shyly out between Polly and Paddy. 'You little beauty,' he said, and stopped and fumbled in his pocket. He produced a threepence and held it out to Mary. 'Here y'are. Get'm lolly.'

But Mary hugged close to her mother, only her wide eyes

peering around the skirt. The locoman gave the threepence to Polly. 'Get'm lolly,' and to himself as he walked on: 'Bonny kid, bonny kid.'

Polly stood as if petrified, her arm still held out, fingers gingerly holding the coin as if it might go off.

'Well,' said Paddy, 'go on, get'm lolly.'

'Oh, no, no,' stammered Polly, 'I couldn't. You get it.'

'Orright, I bin get'm.'

Paddy took the threepence and marched boldly into the store, but his bravado deserted him at the door and he sidled furtively in and stood shyly back as far as he could from the counter. The storekeeper turned. 'What you bin wan'em?' he barked.

Paddy jumped, then held out the threepence, pointed to the window, to Mary, and finally got out, 'Lolly, me want lolly.'

The storekeeper grunted, and picked out a fly-specked penny candy bar. He handed it to Paddy and grabbed the threepence. 'Right,' he said.

Paddy hurried out, holding out his prize in triumph. Mary took the lolly gingerly and didn't know what to do with it. But when Polly showed her she lost no time, and sucked away in ecstasy.

A few yards further on they came to a sudden stop. This was the cross street that led to the police station. They hummed and haaed, wondering whether to risk it. Finally they hurried across, and found rich reward for their daring. In this block were two hotels, a post office, and another store, while across the road was the railway station. Having looked their fill, they came at last to the corner where the town petered out, about a hundred yards from the river.

At this moment there was a screech and a roar and the weekly train thundered across the bridge over the river.

At the shuddering rumble of the steel bridge under the pounding wheels, Polly and Paddy shrank a little as they

huddled close, and Mary grasped her mother's skirt. Then the engine came in sight, threading its way through the steel girders, and blowing steam from every joint as the driver eased off for the run into the station. Polly and Paddy relaxed a little. They had seen a train before; but Mary's arms were tight round Polly's legs and her eyes popped at this hissing monster.

As the engine cleared the bridge and rocked along towards them it gave a piercing and prolonged whistle to let everyone in town know the train was in. The three sightseers pressed close together, and nearly choked as hearts and stomachs and huge gasps of air met in their throats.

The fireman, lounging slack-limbed now that the main part of his work was over, face gleaming with sweat between the streaks of coal dust, saw them huddled together and grinned and waved. Mary's eyes popped even further at the amazing sight of a man riding the great beast. Now the rest of the train rolled by: trucks, vans, an empty cattle truck, and, bringing up the rear, a dilapidated carriage and a guard's van. The three of them stood with mouths and eyes open until this startling phenomenon squeaked and thudded to a stop at the station.

Suddenly Paddy noticed the policeman hurrying across the road towards the station. 'Quick, let's go!'

They scurried back out of sight and then leisurely strolled home along the bank of the river.

Polly touched Paddy's arm; her eyes were misted with happiness.

'Wouldn't it be wonderful if it could be like this all the time!' she sighed.

To put the final touch to this marvellous day Johnny arrived back, glowing with triumph, with a good feed of fish. A dozen or so there were, small but succulent, almost too good to be true for people who had not tasted fish for years.

When they had eaten they put some aside for Nancy, who had still not arrived. Polly asked Bobby if it was usual for her to work so late. He brushed the question aside with, 'Might be she work.'

The children all went to bed and the adults squatted round the fire, going over again all the events of the day. Nobody wanted to broach the question of leaving. Finally Betty said, 'We ready for go in morning?'

Everybody looked blank and when Johnny said, 'Mebbe get some tucker for track tomorra,' a sigh of relief went up.

Polly rushed in. 'Oh, yes, and another day will be good for Mary. It's better if we get everything ready tomorrow and then we can make an early start.'

Johnny said, 'Too far, too rough up river, mus' go that-a-way.' Again the chin jutted to the north. 'Say not bad track, bit water, bit tucker.' They fell to discussing the track. Bobby knew it but had not been over it recently, and all the others excepting Paddy had been through the country before.

Late in the evening Nancy stumbled into the camp. Her eyes were glazed and her hair flying in all directions; when she spoke her voice was a bit thick and uncertain. She flopped down by the fire. 'These white fella no damn' good. One fella gimme two bob but other fella on'y have bottle-plonk. Allus same, no wanna give money, jus' grog. Still,' brightening up and licking her lips, 'good plonk. Mos' on'y have metho.' As everyone was silent she burst out: 'You t'ink I like do dis? Mus' get coupla bob somewhere.'

Betty and Polly protested that they didn't think anything against her. Somewhat mollified, she went on to explain again. 'Mus' get money. Nebber get 'nough tucker for kids. Sometimes all right, just get coupla bob, all finish. But some fella say, "Orright gibbit two bob," then all finish gib nothing. Sometime knock me down. What I do? All place same.'

She lapsed into silence and sat brooding. Polly jumped up and got her fish, and told her about life with Smires. Soon she

was smiling again and regaling them with stories of her adventures with drunks.

Nancy suddenly remembered that she had scored a plug of nicki-nicki. So everyone lit up and soon mosquitoes for twenty yards around were flying for shelter.

The next day was, if anything, better than the first. Paddy was like a dog with two tails because Johnny took him with him when he went hunting. Nancy took the day off and she and Polly played with the kids. Betty and the other woman sat and smoked. They all did just what they wanted to do, except poor Bobby, who struggled manfully to work.

6

Next morning the party got off to an early start. It was more like the fading of darkness than the flush of daylight when they crossed the river bed, now dry as a bone. As they climbed the slope on the other side and turned over the rim of the bank, the younger ones could not resist a longing glance behind.

This departure was different from others they had made. It had the flavour of leaving after a holiday, parting from friends after having a happy time. But to counteract any feeling of sadness they had physical well-being after rest and food, and the urge to press on to a definite goal, now seeming to be well within reach.

Leaving the river bank and striking out a little east of

north, the country changed immediately to the dry parched earth they knew so well. The only difference now was that it was not so flat as the great plain. Ridges and hollows occurred fairly frequently and the scrub was bigger. The bushes were strong and healthy looking, though grey and dry, and medium-sized trees were plentiful. Though these things made for variety and relief to the eyes, travelling was made more difficult and progress slower.

By late afternoon all remnants of holiday spirit had worn off, and it was back to the solid plugging over harsh and inhospitable ground under the burning ordeal of a relentless sun. At last, just as the sun was dipping into the trees, they reached the first objective, a deep and rocky creek bed. Bent trees and debris scattered high on the banks bore witness to the mass of water that poured down the narrow chasm at times.

Johnny led the way along the bed to where the walls rose so steeply as to be almost cliffs, enclosing a deep and narrow hole. Instead of water the bottom was covered with a seamed and cracked coating of dry mud. In the middle were the skin and bones of a bullock which had struggled into the mud in search of water, but had been unequal to the task of getting out.

Johnny and Paddy were not dismayed by the fact that there was no water in sight. They had been expecting this, although the water-hole had earned a reputation for permanency. What did worry them a little was the dryness of the bottom. They selected two stakes from among the driftwood, sharpened their points with the butcher's knife, and started to dig. They dug in separate places, well apart but in the deepest portion of the hole. It did not take them long to get through the mud, which was only the last flood's load of silt, then they were into the true sandy bottom, where they hoped to find water. The sand flew out in continuous showers. Eighteen inches, and still it was dry. Another foot and they were on solid bottom, and the sand was moist, but only moist. Paddy looked into

Johnny's hole and Johnny looked into Paddy's, then they solemnly shook their heads and turned away.

Where there should have been a seepage of water, so that sheets of bark would be necessary around the hole to keep the sand from caving in, now there was only a slight creeping of moisture from firm walls of damp sand. Betty had been squatting by a fire with a billy of water waiting for instructions whether to boil up some of the tough kangaroo meat.

'No more water,' Johnny said. 'One little drink tonight.'

The situation had become grim. Although they had carried a good supply of water from the river, it was small now because they had used it freely, counting on getting some in this creek which had never been dried out in the memory of man.

'It will take us more than a day to the spring,' said Polly. 'Nearly two,' said Johnny. 'Bad track.'

'I wonder if anyone is working the mine where I used to live. That is several miles this side of the spring.'

'Not much good, anyway,' grunted Betty. 'Not get much from white man.'

Midday the next day but one found them, with their tongues sticking to the roofs of their mouths, picking their way through loose boulders on the side of a rocky hill. The heat of the sun beating back from the bare rocks made it like a furnace. They turned the shoulder of a rocky outcrop, and there was a strange sight—car tracks.

Took,' cried Polly, somebody is at the mine. Let us go in. It is only about half a mile.'

The others looked at one another and then turned on to the track without wasting words, but obviously without wasting any hope either. The track wound a tortuous way through rocks, gradually working upwards. Suddenly it

levelled off and they were in a narrow break in the chain of hills.

Ahead of them they could see a crude bush humpy nestling into the side of the hill. As they came closer, they could see a hole in the side of the hill. From this hole two lengths of narrow iron rail led to a hollow in the ground where there were signs of fresh dirt having been tipped on top of dirt which looked as if it had lain there for years.

As Harry Holman and Reg Wilson came out of the tunnel and blinked in the blazing sunlight the warm breeze felt cool and refreshing to their steaming skins. Wearing only boots and tattered, dirty shorts, their nuggety, hard-muscled bodies were covered with dirt, save where rivulets of sweat had cut channels through the grime.

Harry stirred the ashes of the camp-fire with his boot, and dropped some dried pandanus leaves and a handful of twigs on the coals beneath. 'She's getting hot in the end o' that drive now,' he said.

Reg straightened up with the billy in his hand, then bent again to hang it over the fire. 'Are you tellin' me?' he asked with a note of sarcasm. 'A man won't be able to throw a shadder soon.' He sat down on a log and stared glumly into the fire, while Harry threw down a bag on the stony ground and stretched out full length on it.

The tunnel they had just left was driven into the steep north side of a cleft in the low range of barren stony hills that stretched away to the north and south of them. A crude but roomy hut with iron roof, and bark and hessian sides, snuggled up against the side of the hill. Alongside it stood a little old motor-truck of ancient vintage and doubtful parentage. The main parts were there; it had an engine and four wheels. It even had most of the bonnet and two front mudguards, but, no cabin or shelter of any kind over the driving-seat. Two forty-four-gallon petrol-drums on the flat-

topped body were obviously water-tanks, judging from the bags covering them and the baling tin alongside them.

'Seems to me we're wastin' our time,' said Reg. 'I think Jack Smith knew it was cut out, that's why he left.'

'But I tell you he didn't,' replied Harry. 'He went 'cause he got a telegram saying his old man was dying. He told me the last time I seen him, an' that wasn't long before he left, that he was on to a new leader that was better than the old one. It's only a matter of us finding it. Anyway, you can see for yourself that there's plenty of ore left in the old stope, so you can't say he'd cut it out.'

Reg leaned forward and poked the fire. 'Yeah, well, it still might pay us better to get out what's there instead of keeping lookin' for something that probably isn't there.'

Harry propped himself up on an elbow. 'It's no use going over all that again. You know how far we'd have to cart the ore to get it crushed. It was different for him. When the Golden Gate was going he only had to cart it a few miles to their battery. Anyway, we've decided to give it a go to the end of this week and then we've got to go to town in any case. What's left o' the kangaroo and the bit o' tinned stuff'll just keep us going till then.'

He dropped back and stared up into the leaves above him. 'If we haven't got on to anything good by then I think I'll go on up to Darwin and get a job for a few months to get a few quid. According to that bloke we saw a few weeks ago there's a lot o' work about with this defence programme. If a man works for a few months and keeps off the grog, he'll have enough to get a supply o' tucker and sit down here a while and give it a good go. Might get a couple o' blacks after the drought breaks.'

'I don't think I'll be comin' back if there's any work in Darwin,' said Reg with a twisted grin. 'It seems like a blue duck to me. What I can't get over, if it's so good, why hasn't Smithy come back to it?'

'You don't know Smithy like I do. He never goes back to

anything. It's a wonder he went back to his old man. We don't know; there might've been some money in it. Nobody knew anything about him 'cept that he came from Melbourne, didn't even know his name. I'll bet it's not Smith.'

Reg scooped up a few twigs and bits of bark and spread them around the billy. 'Smithy had a gin here, didn't he, when he was workin' here?'

Harry's eyes glistened and his voice had a wistful tone. 'He had a creamy,' he said, 'a slasher too by all accounts. But I never saw her. I never come down here. I'd a show on the Finniss at the time, and only used to meet him in town occasionally. 'Course, he never took her to town, but by the way he talked she was a bit of all right, not too old, about fifteen or so. This place'd do me, too, if there was a few gins about. I could go for Dog-Face Maggie right now.

'Well, you can have both the place and the gins, Harry. Darwin'll do me if there's any jobs there.' Reg got the tea tin and threw a handful of tea in the billy. 'What're we goin' to do, have a bit o' tucker?' he asked. 'Now the billy's boiled it'd be just as easy to have a bite and get it over with.'

'O.K. with me,' said Harry, climbing to his feet. 'Open a tin o' meat, I s'pose! Yes, that'd be best, an' I'll put the kangaroo on to boil for tea.' He turned and grinned at Reg. 'How'd you like to be downin' a bottle o' beer an' then sittin' down to a feed in the Chinaman's?'

'Yeah,' answered Reg, smacking his lips. 'A bowl o' long soup at Fong Kee's, then fish an' eggs. Oh, skip it! You know I can't for the life o' me see what you blokes get out o' this kind o' life.' He followed Harry up to the hut and set the billy down on a table under a bough shed.

'Don't worry,' said Harry, throwing down the tin-opener and tipping the meat out on to a tin plate. 'I like the town, too. But even if you can earn money you've still got to keep it. I can't when I'm near a pub. Oh, I can settle down for a while if I really want something; like I was saying—a few months to

get a few quid to go out prospecting again—but not to get a roll.'

It was comparatively cool in the bough shed that was built like an arch over the entrance to the hut. Years-old twigs, bare of leaves, hung down here and there just clearing the men's heads, but fresh branches had been thrown on top to fill the gaps. The sun's rays were cheated by the thick canopy of leaves, but any errant breeze could find its way through.

At a packing-case table Harry and Reg sat down on up-ended boxes to the meal of half-warm, greasy meat and a lump of dry damper. They chewed steadily and in silence for a while, washing down the unappetizing food with gulps of strong black tea. Then, between bites, Harry went on: 'When me an' Smithy was in the Tennants we was doin' all right. We had a good show. But we never got a cracker out of it. It all went in grog.' He ruminated and grinned to himself. Jeez, she was a wild town, that.' His grin spread. 'We ended up by selling the show in the pub one day for a tenner an' this old bus. I believe the bloke that bought it got a thousand out of it.'

'Reach us the tin o' cocky's joy.' Reg took the tin of syrup and spread some on the last bit of damper. 'Yes, but what gets me,' he mumbled through a mouthful, 'this prospectin's just gamblin' —but it's doin' it the hard way. If you're lucky you might crack it, but if you're not you can live on Johnny-cake an' kangaroo all your life an' still be no forrader. I like gamblin', but I like to do it the easy way. If you're lucky you can get all you need off the Chinamen in Cavenagh Street. A nice game of fan-tan or pi-ku's the shot. You only want a bit.'

Harry wiped his hand across his mouth, then rubbed his hands on his shorts and rolled a cigarette. 'All right, Reg, you stop in Cavenagh Street and I'll come back here. We'll both wind up the same in the long run, I s'pose.'

He lit his smoke and stretched his legs out. 'You know, I been thinking, we been doing the wrong thing slaving away in there, cross-cutting here and driving there. Smithy was on to

gold. So it's only a matter of using the old nut and working out how he camouflaged it when he left. Now when I get back here I'll get some blacks, must have a gin at least. Then I can settle down peaceful and work things out 'stead o' rushing in bullheaded. You know the beauty o' this show, if you could get on to gold, it's so easy to work. No shaft sinking and straining your guts pulling it to the surface. just drive in an' pull it out the tunnel.'

Reg drained the last of the tea into his pannikin. 'Talking about blacks, it'd be a black's life here all right. Might as well be out on the Nullarbor.'

Harry jumped to his feet and went to the door of the shed. 'Well, I'll be damned, talk of the devil, look what's here.'

Twenty yards or so from the camp, the party halted. Paddy picked up the water-tin and walked up close to Harry and Reg. He hesitated, awaiting an invitation to speak.

'Wan'em water, eh?' said Harry. 'Cert'nly look as if you could do with some. How's that tin near you, Reg, any in it? Nothing much, eh? S'pose I better get some.'

He took the tin over to the old truck, ladled out a couple of gallons and brought it back. Then he tipped it into Paddy's tin. 'Here, this should soak your hides a bit.'

As Paddy dished out the water, Harry studied them and remarked to Reg: 'They cert'nly needed that, must've had a long dry stage. Wonder what'n hell they're doing walkabout at a time like this for? Looks as if we're going to get rid o' that kangaroo without any trouble.'

'The kangaroo?' said Reg. 'But we need that to keep us goin' to the end of the week.'

'Oh, well, what's the difference, now or the end of the week? You don't care how soon you leave, an' I'm easy. Anyway, you can't leave folks starve even if they are blacks. Hi, c'm here.'

At his call the party shuffled up a bit closer, eyeing the

white man warily. Mary clung to her mother and sheltered behind her. Polly glanced around curiously, recognizing familiar objects.

'Why you fella bin walkabout this fella time? No more water, no more feed, nothing?' asked Harry.

'We fella bin work longs Melville Downs,' said Paddy. 'No more water, no more feed, white fella boss say, "Go!" '

'Melville Downs, that's a fair walk these times. How's their rotten form?' Harry said to Reg. 'These big cattle stations keep the blacks when times are good and chase 'em when there's a drought on. Prob'ly done the same with the whites. God, they're tough—the biggest menace in the Territory.' He turned to Paddy again. 'You bin got'm tucker?'

Paddy shook his head and spread his hands out. 'No more catch'm.'

Harry started to get up. 'Gib you bit.'

Reg said: 'I'll get it. It's a pleasure to see it go!'

He went over to a hessian meat-safe hanging at the back of the bough shed and brought back half a skinny kangaroo. He handed it to Betty, who held out eager hands. 'Here you are. I'll settle for steak and eggs.'

'Which way you bin walkabout,' asked Harry, 'that-a-way?' He pointed his chin to the north.

'That-a-way,' agreed Paddy. 'Longa mishun.'

'Might be something there,' Harry went on. 'You go tree-four days come stashun, you bin ask tucker. Him good fella boss. Him gib tucker.'

He turned to Reg. 'That's old Watson. Don't know him, do you? A good bloke. I worked for him once, building some huts. He won't see anybody go short, white or black.'

Polly plucked up courage to ask, 'Do you know Jack Smith, mister?'

Harry jumped. 'I know Jack Smith. Who're you, with a voice like that?'

'I am Jack Smith's wife. I used to live here with him.'

'Well, I'll be damned. But Smithy's wife? That's stretching it a bit. Don't tell me he married you—in a church?'

'No church, but my father said we were married and Jack agreed.'

'Mm, like that. Then whose is the little girl, Smithy's?'

'Yes, she is Jack Smith's daughter. But tell me where he is. How do you come to have his mine?'

'Bonny little kid, too.' Harry bent down and snapped his fingers. 'Come on, come talk to me. No? Oh, well, you might be a good judge.'

He stood up and turned back to Polly. 'Where is Jack Smith? Well, he might be anywhere. I wish I knew. As far as this place goes, it's mine unless he comes back. I used to be his partner. But listen.' His voice became eager. 'You should know where he found gold. Just before he left he got on to some good stuff, but I can't find it. You should know about it. Didn't he tell you when he was leaving!'

Polly shook her head. 'He told me nothing about it. He said there was gold there, but it was no use to me because the first white man who came along would take the mine off me, and so it was better to leave it. He went in such a hurry.'

Harry grimaced. 'Yeah, he went in a hurry all right. I can see why he wouldn't tell you, you couldn't have held it. Oh, well, go and have some tucker, I'll see you later. Over there, under the trees, you can camp. Sing out to me if you want more water.'

As the people walked away, he turned and sat down. 'You can see now, Reg, what a good thing Smithy was on. She's getting on now, must be over twenty, and she's all blown out, and gaunt from walking, but she's still a good line. How would

she be when Smithy first had her, about fifteen? Oh boy! Anyway, she'll still do me. I'll be at her tonight.'

'You're a beauty!' Reg gasped. 'A few minutes ago you were talkin' about how knocked up they were, now you're goin' to bowl her over.'

'Oh, that's nothing to these,' said Harry airily. 'Give 'em a drink and a feed and a bit of a rest and they're as good as new.' 'Well, what about the kitty?'

Harry's rugged face twisted in a grin. 'You don't think I'd let that stop me, do you? S'matter of fact I think I'll get her up here this afternoon. Even if she don't know where Smithy got gold she might know whereabouts he was working the last part o' the time. It'd make a big difference if we even knew whether he was working on top o' the hill or inside the mine. I might be able to kid 'em to come back here when the drought breaks.'

Harry gave a hitch to his shorts and tightened the belt as he came out of the hut and walked over to the trees. In the shade he stretched and patted his flat stomach where the muscles showed ridged and hard. 'Jeez, I needed that,' he said. Polly followed him out of the hut and stood hesitating by the bough shed. Harry beckoned to her. 'Come over here an' sit in the shade and cool off a bit.' He flopped on the ground and patted a spot near him. 'Here y'are, park the body.' Polly obediently walked over and sat down cross-legged.

Harry turned where he lolled, half-lying on the ground. His hand reached out and fondled the soft warmth of the inside of Polly's thigh.

'Christ, just imagine that bastard Smithy runnin' away from you—an' a gold mine—an' not givin' me the drum.'

His work-calloused hand was rough as a rasp and Polly winced and shifted ground. 'Are you coming back here?' she asked.

'My oath,' Harry said vehemently. 'Now you've shown me

where Smithy was workin' I'll be back here all right. Six months, yeah, six months'll do. I can get enough in six months to get some tucker an' gear. Then I'll be back. What about you? You folks comin' back this way?' He looked up into her face and his voice sounded earnest. 'You know, you'd allus be right with me. This show'll come good an' I'll need some help.'

Polly shook her head slowly. 'I don't think we'll be coming back here. But,' she added softly, 'I like you, and if we were back this way I'd look for you.'

She squeezed her legs together to hold his hand still. 'I want my little girl to learn to be like the whites. That's why we're going up to the mission. That's the best thing to do, isn't it?' She leaned forward eagerly.

Harry shook his head thoughtfully. 'It won't do no harm, I s'pose. She'll get a bit o' education there. But the trouble is when it's finished they'll just send her out to a station an' she'll be no better off.' He slapped vigorously at his leg and scratched and wriggled. 'Bloody ants, bastards. Jeez, they bite!' He scrambled over Polly's legs and sprawled out again.

'But there must be some way for coloured people to improve themselves.' Polly's voice was anxious. 'I've heard there are a lot in Darwin who live like whites.'

'Yeh, but that's Darwin.' Harry waved his hand. 'That's not on the stations. They's a good few in Darwin is declared not abos accordin' to the act. They do all right. I've worked with 'em. They get full wages 'n everything. But you got to get away from Native Affairs. Long as you're under them you're an abo.'

Polly's face was twisted with anxiety and her fingers plucked nervously at the hairs on Harry's chest. 'But if a girl was educated like a white girl, couldn't she get to live like one?'

Harry waved vaguely. 'Don't think it'd make any difference. Don't think the's any way a girl can get declared not an abo 'cept by marrying somebody. You see,' he went on slowly as he

began to roll a cigarette, 'the's not that many gets out. Just an odd one now an' again. Say an abo gets a job for hisself at award wages, on a shit cart, say. He carries on spite o' Native Affairs, but he's still under 'em. If he wants to start a bank account, say—he can't do it on'y under Native Affairs' name.'

He turned over on his back and blew a stream of smoke at the flies hovering round his head. 'Well, this might go on for years. Then all on a sudden, nobody knows why nor when, somebody gets a brainstorm, an' there's a notice in the *Gazette* saying so-and-so's no longer an abo. Then he's right, 'cept he's s'posed to carry a paper to say so if some phizgig wants to see it. But,' he added, shaking his head, 'I don't know the's any way a lubra can do anythin' like that.' He dropped his cigarette-butt on a trail of ants and grinned at the scurrying and rushing and scouting around it caused. Then he turned over on his side to face Polly. One hand felt Polly's legs and the other reached up to her shoulders to pull her down.

'Not yet.' Polly twisted away. 'Tell me first how my girl can get to be like a white.'

'I tole you,' Harry protested. 'Marry a white man. She might do all right if she married a half-caste who was declared not an abo, but the surest way is marry a white man.'

'But then,' Polly pressed further, 'is there no more trouble? Can coloured people live with the whites?'

'Pooh, nobody cares in Darwin,' Harry declared. 'The's black, white, brown, and brindle, an' it don't matter long as they're not abos. See, once they're not under Native Affairs they're as good as th' other coloured folks—the Chinese, Malays, T-Islanders, Yankee niggers, Japs, or any of 'em. 'Course, some o' the shitheads might look down their noses, but they do that at any worker, anyway.

'See,' he went on to explain, 'if a half-caste girl marries a white, she's set, she's free o' Native Affairs. Don't matter who it is—could be Windmill Scotty or Bob the Dog. She don't even have to live with him. Take Julie now, she married Lofty

Barmer and now she's just like a white woman—sleeps with anybody, an' drinks in the pubs—anything at all.'

He swarmed over her, pressing her to the ground just as Reg sang out, 'Give's a hand here, Harry.'

'Half a mo', Reg. Be right with you.'

7

A blood-red sun was dipping into clouds banked low on the horizon as Johnny led the way over a ridge into a deep hollow, where luxuriantly foliaged tropical trees, upward-twisting tendrils of vines and downward-searching threads of banyan roots, spear-like reeds, and stumpy pandanus palms formed a miniature jungle. The atmosphere was sultry and oppressive as lightning played fantastically and incessantly among the distant clouds. The travellers walked wearily after three days of tough going. Sufficient food they had had, mainly lizard, but barely sufficient water, and that carried all the way from the spring, a hole in the rocks where a tiny stream of clear water bubbled up from some subterranean source.

Now, as they pressed eagerly into the wall of greenery, they were met by an all-pervading stench of decaying flesh.

A few yards brought sight of their goal, an expanse of mud in the middle of which was a small patch of thin mud, or thick water covered with scum. In it on the near side of the pool lay the remains of a beast in the last stages of decomposition. As they drew closer, the buzzing of blow-flies filled the air, and a

slithering and scurrying told where goannas were leaving their evening meal.

A little further over, the great gaunt body of a roan bullock with baldy head and crumpled horn lay on its belly in the mud. The neck was twisted over to lie flat on the mud, and a horribly staring red eye socket showed where the crows had been at work. Johnny waded over to him, felt the body, then pricked it with the knife. 'Him warm, but dead,'he said.

'Ooh,' chorused the women, 'kidney, liver, heart.'

Johnny looked at Paddy. The latter hesitated. 'Not good,' he said, 'but if him dead what can white man say?'

Johnny pricked the bullock again, then made a deep cut and started to excavate. There was no movement from the beast, but from the knife-cut thick dark blood oozed slowly. 'Him only just dead orright,' said Paddy.

Loaded with offal and a tinful of soupy water, they moved back from the 'jungle', away from the mosquitoes, and settled down to have a real feast.

The Wodalla Station homestead lay quiet as if dozing under the late afternoon sun, as the travellers skirted around it looking for the blacks' camp. The house itself was a low, sprawling, weatherboard structure, showing signs of many extensions on a humble beginning. In front of the house two well-grown palm trees gave an air of permanence, while, down the sides, vines and shrubs offered pleasant relief to the eyes and at least an illusion of coolness. At the rear the outbuildings, well built and tidy-looking, sheltered behind a clump of eucalypts. Further back still stood the stockyards and here the party came to a halt, wondering where to go next as there were still no signs of a camp of blacks.

Just then Paddy saw a native coming out of one of the bunch of huts nearest to them, so went over to speak to him. He was an elderly man, nearly white-haired, thin and wizened of feature, and with skeleton-like arms and legs appearing

from khaki shirt and shorts. 'Where bin blackfella camp?' asked Paddy.

'We bin lib here,' said the old man, waving his arm with a grand air to the nearby huts.

'Pretty flash orright,' said Paddy. 'Mus' be good boss.'

'Him good fella boss, plenty. Him bin pay wages. Some ten bob a week.' He looked at Paddy defiantly as if expecting this staggering statement to be challenged.

However, Paddy accepted it, as a minor miracle, yet possible. The old man went on more apologetically. 'But him no let any udders in huts. Him say "make'm dirty might be". You know some people's dirty fella orright. Not like you,' he added hastily. 'So you camp by trees.' He indicated a little patch of scrub over from the stockyard. 'Plenty water near stockyard.'

Paddy turned to go. 'Wait a minnit. You bin see store dere.' Paddy looked where indicated and nodded. 'You bin go dere after sun go down you bin get tucker, baccy too. Oh, dis good place orright.'

Under the influence of this clean place the folks all had a good wash when they found the tap at the stockyard. Mary just got down under the tap and had a real sluice. Then they went up and squatted at the side of the store, waiting for something to happen. The old fellow came over and sat down by them to have a gossip. As the sun went down some riders came in, three whites and two blacks. They unsaddled and let their horses go, and two of the white men squatted down on their heels by the door of the store.

Soon a stout, elderly man came hurrying, fat red face gleaming with sweat, wheezing like a punctured bellows. He opened the door and proceeded to attend to the wants of the two stockmen, tobacco or whatever it was. A few minutes later he came out and looked the party over. He said: 'You wan'em tucker? Come here.' As they stood bashfully back from the door, he handed them a generous issue of flour, a bag of the

inevitable blue boiler peas, sugar, and even tea and a couple of sticks of nicki-nicki.

The big man noticed Mary peeping out from behind her mother. 'Ha, little one, come out here, what you hiding for?' Polly pulled her out to the front. 'Oho,' he said, 'a little beauty, eh. just wait till I see what I can find for you!' He went back inside and after a few minutes reappeared, red in the face and streaming with sweat, but holding aloft in triumph a bag of hard-boiled lollies. 'There you are, little one. I knew I had something somewhere.'

'Say thank you, Mary,' Polly prompted.

Mary took the bag timidly and turned her head away as she whispered, 'Thank you.'

Just then another man bustled up, a little, spare-built man, with iron-grey hair and skin brown and wrinkled as the arm of an old leather chair. A stern expression was offset by twinkling eyes. 'Oh, Tom, I want to see you about those accounts,' he said as he stopped at the door. He looked at the people as they moved back, then hard at Paddy. Stepping over towards him he stroked his chin, evidently thinking hard. 'You,' he said to Paddy, 'you bin ride at Margaret. Yes, I remember you bin ride for, lemme see now —Melville Downs, was it?'

Paddy nodded.

'Why you bin leab there?'

'Missa Smires bin tell, no more work, cattle bin die, you all bin go.'

'That's how it is, eh? Where you bin walkabout now?'

'We bin go longs mishun,' Paddy said.

'Ummm, you bin like job here?'

Paddy's face lit up, he nodded without a word.

'Well, him no good here now, not like Melville Downs, but too much dry. You like go longa mishun, come back here

when rain him come. I gib job, ten bob a week. You like? O.K. ?'

Paddy at last managed to stammer, 'I come.'

'Good. Splinter,' to the old native, 'you bin take'm longa butcher, get'm meat.' He swung away briskly and hurried back to the store.

In camp that night the usually quiet Paddy was full of excitement, could talk of nothing but a job at Wodalla. 'Ten bob a week, pound in two weeks—oh, plenty money. You'm Mary get flash clo'es, like white women.'

'Yes, Paddy,' Polly broke in quietly. 'But we might not come back here.'

Paddy floundered, aghast. 'But you not come with me? You want to leave me?'

'No, Paddy, I don't want to leave you, but I want Mary to be educated like a white girl. I only said we might not come back here. If there is a good chance for Mary at the mission I want her to stay. If it is no good we will go with you wherever you go. It is not far to the mission, we might be able to see you often.'

'Mebbe,' said Paddy hopefully, 'we could leave Mary at mishun and come here.'

'We'll wait till we see what it is like. I don't want to leave you, Paddy.' She laid her hand on his arm. 'But I do want Mary to have a chance.'

A shady corner behind the L-shaped store was the favourite place for the men of Wodalla to wait for the tucker bell. From this corner the drooping leaves of a pepper tree rebuffed the sun's rays all day, and now, when the setting sun was low enough to search under the tree, it was blocked by the store itself.

Tonight five men awaited the call to eat. Two of them perched on knotty outcroppings of the tree-trunk. The other

three, scorning such aids to comfort, squatted on their heels. Four of them looked like ordinary station hands, in shirts, trousers, and riding boots, but the fifth was dressed for carpentering, in overalls and sandshoes.

A nuggety-built man was this one, and he answered to the name Nugget when someone used it. He had the highest seat, and he used his position to advantage as he leaned over the others, laying down the law in the most popular Australian pastime—arguing about races.

'He was a moral beat las' Sat'day. Wasn't he?' A big wag of the finger this time. 'Y'all heard the race same's I did. He couldn't 'a' got beat on'y they pocketed him. Oh, how good will he be for next week!'

A little wizened-up old chap, who was so bow-legged he could hardly get his feet back close enough to squat on them, piped up. 'How d'yer know somp'n won't happen again? A couple of 'em pro'bly held him in a purpose. I seen plenty of it when I was ridin'. '

Nugget winked at the others. 'No, Pop? How could they? Didn't you useter ride straight across country in your day?'

Pop, who looked as if he might have been round and about in time to ride The Barb, was spluttering and trying to get set to answer this outrage when an interruption came. Two riders cantered up and jumped off their horses at the tree. Everyone looked up in surprise, thinking they must be strangers. Then the surprise continued because it was two of their own men who had ridden up there, instead of going down to unsaddle and get ready for tea. One, a youngish chap, tall and thin as a whiplash, burst out: 'Yer know that baldy-faced roan youse were talkin' about last night, the one we useter use as a marker for the mob over by the twenty mile? Well, Jim an' me found him, didn't we, Jim?'

Jim was also lanky, but not so young, probably in the thirties. 'Yeh, Larry, we found him all right. He'd got bogged

in the water-hole. Poor bastard, the crows had been at him, the goannas had been at him—an' the blacks.'

'The blacks?'

'Yeh,' shouted Larry excitedly, 'the black bastards had cut him open before he was dead. They must 'a' done. Yer couldn't see much for where the goannas had been gnawin' about, but I seen a streak o' blood runnin' down his side from a cut in his back, so he couldn't 'a' been dead. We seen the tracks, didn't we, Jim? Blacks all right, an' they headed this way. Yer know there's on'y been one team a blacks here in weeks, that lot last night.'

'We can get 'em,' said Jim. 'There's water at the twelve mile an' no more for miles. They won't a went past there tonight. I say teach 'em a lesson. Even the old man can't cop this.'

Two of the stockmen jumped to their feet. 'That's an idea.' 'Be a bit o' fun.'

The third one shook his head slowly. 'Wouldn't be in it,' he said, 'less I knew somp'n more about it, anyway.'

Pop twisted and spat behind him. 'Don't panic,' he said when he turned back. 'I ain't arguin' the black bastards might need it, but yer know what th' old man'll say.'

Nugget butted in. 'What're you screamin' about, anyway? It's the blacks' own country, ain't it? Why shouldn't they have a feed?' He looked hard at Jim, a sneer on his lips. 'You'd be a per-tickler bright spark to be tellin' us anythin'. How'd you know what they done less they told yer?'

Jim flushed and started to yell something. It was easy to see there was a ready-made quarrel between these two. But just then the 'old man' came over, attracted by the noise. 'What's all the excitement, boys?'

Larry rushed through the story again, stammering a little with excitement. 'We think we should go out an' do 'em over. We can't let 'em get away with this. An' after that the cheeky

bastards have the nerve to come here for a hand-out. When'll we go, now or first thing tomorrow?'

'Neither,' said the boss. 'There'll be no doing over.'

'But we can't let 'em get away with it,' Jim protested. 'They cut 'im open alive. Hangin's too good for 'em.'

'Just do 'em a bit then,' someone else suggested.

'No. I'm the boss.' The little man drew himself up and his face set grimly. 'I keep telling you, there'll be no manhandling of blacks. And, anyway, I think there's some mistake. They didn't seem a bad mob to me. Anyway, forget it. It's my bullock and I'll do the worrying.' With this he turned and walked away.

'Can you beat that?' asked Jim. 'We allus knew he was soft, but that takes the biscuit.'

Larry's face assumed a cunning look, and he screwed his face up in an exaggerated wink. 'Ain't we goin' out tomorrer in a general direction that might include that track, Jim? Mebbe we might see our friends, an' mebbe a touch of the stock-whip might send 'em off in a hurry without us havin' to touch their precious black hides. What do you think, Jim?'

Jim looked his admiration. 'There's no doubt about you. You know all the answers. But we'll have to get crackin' before daylight. It'll be worth it, though. It'll be a pleasure, in fact.'

Pop looked up at them and said: 'You take my tip. Now the old man's said his say, you ferget it. An' don't try him out to see how soft he is.'

Nugget stood up and stretched. 'Jim don't try anybody out to see how soft they are. Do yer, Jim? 'Less it's a poor harmless boong—or a gin—that'd be more his weight.'

Jim flushed but made no move. 'P'raps you'd like to help yer friends the boongs,' he sneered. 'Mebbe tell the boss what we said.'

Nugget moved slowly forward. 'I can't see these boongs needin' any help again' youse,' he said. 'Youse two'd never even

find 'em. But,' and here he pushed his face right up to Jim's, 'since when have I needed the boss t'help me handle you?'

Larry grabbed Jim's arm and spun him round without much effort. 'Come on, the bell'll be goin' any minute.'

As the first rays of the sun peeped through the trees the party strode forward strongly, with the knowledge of several miles of the day's walk already behind them, and only a few days to the mission station.

Everybody was busy with his or her private thoughts. Johnny and Betty were on top of the world. Once they left the others at the mission they would be entering their own country, and could expect to find traces of their own people at any time. Johnny was already in imagination out on the track of game, where game was plentiful and no one to hinder him. Betty could see herself gossiping with the women, with plenty of hard work to do, but free from the shadow of the whites.

Paddy had only one cloud on his mind, the thought that Polly might leave him, but this was only a hazy cloud. He didn't really think he would lose her. For the rest he could only foresee pure joy. Born and bred in the cattle country, he loved the life and the work. To think of living and working on a station where his work would be appreciated was to anticipate achievement of his lifetime's ambition.

Mary didn't know what was ahead and, child-like, didn't much care, content to know there was something new and good. Polly had told her of water stretching further than she could see, lovely clean sand to play in, and plenty of other children to play with, delicious fruits, and other foods she had never heard of, that she could eat whenever she wanted. But chiefly there was one solid fact she could grasp and appreciate, soon there would be an end to this seemingly endless walking.

Polly alone was ridden with doubts and foreboding. Her physical condition perhaps had much to do with it. The child

was lying heavy within her, adding to bodily and mental stress. There was little chance now that it would be born before they reached the mission and once there she would not be free to choose whether it should live or die. Mary was enough responsibility without being saddled with a brat she might hate.

She could not accept, as did the others, a simple rosy view of the immediate future and let that suffice. Her brain insisted on trying to look further ahead, and she could not find any long-term solution to her worries. Chiefly, of course, she thought of Mary, and she could not convince herself that a mission education would be sufficient training for success in the hard white world outside.

They were passing through red-soil country, fairly heavily timbered. As they came out on to a small bare plain they heard hoofbeats behind them. Having received friendly treatment from the whites they had just left, they were not immediately anxious.

Suddenly, with pounding hoofs, shouts, oaths, and cracking stock-whips, two riders burst out on to the plain and swooped down on them.

'Git movin', you black bastards!'

'Into 'em, Jim.'

'S-s-s . . . take that!'

The coloured people burst into frantic movement as the stock-whips hissed and cracked among them. Betty grabbed Mary and rushed for the nearest trees on her left, while Polly dived for the trees behind and to the right.

Johnny and Paddy ran straight ahead to draw the enemy from the women. As they raced across the plain the horses kept pace behind and the whips lashed furiously.

'That'll teach yer, black mongrels. S-s-s . . . Cop that, an' that!'

When they reached the trees on the far side of the plain

Paddy and Johnny split up. Still keeping in the same general direction they dodged now from tree to tree. Their pursuers found it hard now to score many hits, but they kept on for about a mile. Finally they stopped and swung round. 'That should hold 'em for a while, Larry. I'll bet they'll be careful round here in future.'

'I'll say, an' they won't sleep too easy for a week or two. But gor, can they run, eh? I copped that young 'un a beauty and, Christ, did he move! Yer'd 'a' thought he was takin' off to fly.'

'I wonder where their gins got to? They could do with a touch up. They're cheekier'n the bucks half the time.'

'Oh, they've gone to earth like rabbits by now. We can't stop to look for 'em. We'll have to get back to what we're s'posed to be doing or we'll have the old man on our necks. It'll be me an' you for the track if he finds out what we've done.'

'Look, Jim, quick, there's one!'

Polly, thinking the coast was clear, had picked this unfortunate time to walk out into a little clearing. Larry spurred his horse into a gallop and swung between her and the trees as she rushed back for shelter. Polly turned about and started back across the clearing, a hundred yards or so. The whip seared hotly across her shoulders and she spurted madly, running blindly, her only thought the need to reach the trees. Larry cantered behind, not attempting to hit her, but his whip snapping viciously all about her. As she neared the trees her foot hit a log and she fell and lay still. Larry pulled his horse to a halt and flicked the heaving body with the whip. It jerked convulsively and then clung closer to the earth.

As Larry cantered up to Jim he roared with laughter. 'Did yer see her belly? Jeez, I nearly died.' As they rode away the sound of his laughter echoed faintly.

The others had heard the whip and soon gathered round.

Betty turned Polly over, felt her body, listened to her sobbing breathing. 'Carry under tree. No can go on. Mus' camp.'

They carried her under the tree and tore down some leaves and twigs to make a bed. As the sun got higher and poured through the scanty foliage, Paddy cut down some light branches and made a rough shelter.

Polly was in a semi-coma most of the time, seeming to be unconscious of her surroundings. Only occasionally she would call for Mary and hold her hand for up to half an hour at a stretch. Mostly she was content to hold the hand quietly, without even opening her eyes. But now and again, briefly and spasmodically, she would squeeze it fiercely as if afraid of losing it, till Mary was forced to cry out with pain.

At intervals the pains would come upon her, and as her body heaved and twisted, in between moans that came half-smothered between clenched teeth, she would yell incoherent abuse. Always the same—curses on the whites—any white and every white.

As the afternoon wore on, heavy clouds started to bank up, and the furnace heat turned to the heat of a Turkish bath. Sweat trickled off everyone in tiny rivulets, but from Polly's tortured body it poured in streams. Gradually at first and then with increasing speed the clouds gathered, until, as the lightning played ceaselessly among them, there seemed to be endless layers of cloud with the lowest almost resting on the tree-tops.

Betty went out to where the men sat, glum and silent. 'Get'm bark?' she asked.

They jumped up and went to work. The bark was hard to strip as the sap was not rising, but finally they got enough to make a lean-to all round the tree. By this time it was just on sundown and already dusk. The air was so saturated with water that breathing was difficult. As the storm worked up to a climax, Polly's pains increased in violence. Poor Mary sat with tears streaming down her face, almost petrified with fear.

Betty would have liked to send her out, but as soon as she made a move Polly would cry out for her.

The storm broke with a shattering peal of thunder and a torrential downpour of rain. As if at the sound of a starting-gun, Polly heaved and groaned in the supreme effort of labour. Betty knelt over her and pressed fiercely on her body. Daylight was gone now, and the eerie light of almost continuous lightning flashes was the only illumination in this scene of travail.

The flimsy strips of bark, on which sheets of water hissed and thudded, were only inches from Betty's head as she crouched low over Polly. Soon the water started to drip through the chinks in the bark and to pour down the trunk of the tree, and Betty knelt in a pool that rose steadily up the slightly higher ground where Polly lay.

In the far corner, near Polly's head, Mary crouched with her hands over her eyes, moaning in unison with her mother. On the other side of the tree the men squatted mute and uneasy.

At last it was over and Betty held a tiny bundle in her hands, but only for a minute. 'Dead,' she said laconically, and dumped it behind her, then returned to her task of trying to help Polly. Now, the muddy water she knelt in was stained with blood. All around was a sea of water, and it lapped up through their shelter until it reached Polly's back. Still the rain poured down, though now the first grand fury of the storm was spent.

'Paddy,' called Betty sharply, 'get leaves, plenty leaves. Polly in water.'

Paddy and Johnny stumbled out into the waste of waters. Soon they were back with armfuls of twigs which they stuffed in under Polly as Betty raised her up. The leaves were sopping wet, but at least they held her above the flood.

The fever was mounting and Polly was raging hot and constantly calling for water. Betty simply reached outside and

scooped some up in a tin. Betty called Mary to her, and they both crouched by the patient trying to shield her from the drips of water, and to keep her body heat in now that the outside temperature was falling rapidly.

For hours Betty kept her vigil, cramped and cold, as Polly tossed and turned, muttering incessantly, and Mary slumped in an awkward, uneasy doze. By the early hours of the morning the rain had fallen to a steady drizzle, and the flood had abated leaving only scum and mud, and Polly had quietened to a feverish sleep.

Suddenly her voice, quiet but urgent, shocked them all awake. 'Betty, Paddy, Mary!'

'Yes, Polly,' said Betty. 'What you want?'

'Are you there, Paddy?'

Paddy slithered around the tree. 'Yes, I here.'

'Oh, Mummy,' cried Mary.

'Listen to me, I haven't much time,' the voice waxed strong and bitter. 'You know I hate the whites. If I could kill them all by raising my hand I would raise it—but I can't. I know now my father was right when he told me: "Keep away from the blacks, they are doomed. If you mix with them you will go down with them." That is why he would not let me learn to speak my mother's language. He said that coloured people who even talk to blacks will never be accepted by the whites. He sent me off with a white man, but he died without making sure I was properly married and I knew no different.'

The voice faded away for a minute, then came back clearly again. 'Harry, the miner, told me what must be done. If a coloured girl marries a white man, properly, according to their law, she has a chance to become equal to them—the lowest of them, a thief or a drunk, he said, is better than any coloured person in their law.

'So Paddy and Betty, I want you to take Mary to the mission and leave her there. Never go near her again.'

'Oh, Mummy,' wailed Mary.

'Quiet, child, you must listen to me. You must learn everything you can about whites, and when you grow up try to get to Darwin and marry a white man. You will be lovely, Mary, and they will burn for you, but not many will marry you. But you must get one to marry you, even if it is the worst.'

The voice got lower and wandered off. ' "Keep away from the blacks," he said, "they are lovable and kind and brave, but the whites have broken them and will wipe them out." '

'Mary, oh, Mary, let me see you. Paddy, make a light, make a light. I must see her—oh, Mary, my darling.'

Paddy groped in his wet shirt and pulled out a parcel of damp rag, he fumbled in the dark but finally got out a box with a few precious matches.

A sobbing whisper, 'Make a light, make a light.'

The first match hissed, spluttered and died. The second did not even hiss. The third lit shakily, then flared up.

Mary was clasped to her mother's breast, but Polly's eyes were closed and her breast was still.

Book Two

1

UP FROM the tepid waters of the northern sea sprang three dusky maids, and sped across the burning sand. One, lovely as a vision of eternal youth, ran fleetly as the Goddess of the Chase, with smooth limbs and jutting breasts, little, if any, darker than the first Diana, who no doubt was olive-complexioned. But the others, ebony black and lithe as greyhounds, ran easily ahead, as if they had been Diana's hunting dogs.

The first two skimmed over the top of a sand dune and dived under the shade of a ti-tree. But Diana threw herself face down in the sand on the seaward side of the dune. As she hit the burning sand, she writhed violently until the top sand was pushed aside and young breasts and thighs nestled on the cooler layer below. Then she lay still, hands clasped below her forehead.

One of the girls in the shade gasped: 'Phew, it's hot! T'ink the swim make you hotter.'

Then she looked round. 'Where's Mary?'

Her mate giggled. 'She bin gettem suntan, Sally. Hab a look.' Sally jumped up. 'What, day like today? Mary, you bin go prop'ly crazy?'

'No,' the other put in, laughing. 'She not crazy, she in love. She get brown so she be like Jimmy. She burn with love an' burn for love.'

Sally giggled at this and clasped her friend to her. They rolled over and over in the sand, laughing helplessly. Mary tensed and wriggled a bit but pretended not to hear. Suddenly Sally pulled herself together and got serious. 'What you try to do, Mary? Get us all in trouble? Down here nobody can see us, but out dere dey see you for miles. What you t'ink Quivers do to us if she catch us swimming away from our own pool, an' with no clo'es on?'

Mary looked up at this and said with scorn: 'Can you imagine old Quivers waddling about in this sun? She'll be gasping on the verandah.'

'Yes, but what if Lucy see us an' tell her? You know Meg say she saw Lucy lookin' out the window when we leave, an' you know Lucy'd walk miles to get us in bad.'

'Oh, all right,' Mary grumbled, getting up and coming into the shade with the others. 'But I think you're making a song about nothing. And I did so want to get a bit brown today. It's not what you think, either,' as the others started to giggle again. 'I just want to be brown all over, instead of having brown neck and arms and a pasty colour all the rest of me. Go on, giggle,' as the titters continued. 'It's all right for you two, the sun can't make any difference to you. But look at my arms and legs, and with old Quivers making us wear dresses all the time I can't get a chance to get in the sun.'

Mary looked disparagingly down at her creamy skin as her hands softly caressed it, brushing off the sand that clung to it. As the fierce sun stabbed through every chink in the twisted ti-tree's tattered shield, one fiery lance glanced off from the mass of glossy black hair that tumbled luxuriantly to her shoulders. Below this shining helmet the solemn brown eyes looked comically tragic in the delicately oval face.

Under the drowsy compulsion of the blanket of heat and

the somnolent melody of lethargic waters listlessly curling on the beach below, the other girls stretched sensuously on the warm sand.

Spreadeagled, and slightly arched over a hummock, Meg's slight frame looked fragile as if blown in black glass. Her puckish little face lolled backwards, mischievous eyes veiled against the probing barbs of sunlight. Built on a similar scale, but more generously, Sally hugged deeply into the sand, her broad placid face cradled on her arms. The sand that had stuck to their wet skins, now dry, glistened startlingly white against the black.

Without bothering to move, Sally mumbled into her arms: 'Still t'ink you crazy, but what 'bout that patch 'tween the trees? Plenty sun dere.'

As Mary walked over to the sunny patch, Sally half-opened her eyes to watch. 'Fancy you bin worry 'bout looks, you more lubly than princesses in story books.'

'But Jimmy—'

'Oh, oh, Jimmy, eh?' chorused the other two.

'All right, you want to be clever, you don't want to listen.'

'No, no, we listen, not noder word.'

'Well, Jimmy always says I am too white, I should marry a white man, as my mother ordered. He always brings up that old tale.'

'But it right, it not a tale,' said Sally. 'Ebberbody know that.'

'Even if it's not a tale, it doesn't matter. Where would I get a white man? Anyway, I don't want a white man, I want Jimmy.'

'Well, you no' get Jimmy,' stated Meg flatly, turning over on her stomach to join in the talk. 'Jimmy too good, he go for Jesus-man prop'ly. Besides, if Jimmy wannem, Mum Quivers she no wannem, she no let 'em.'

'Just imagine you talking, Sally,' said Mary. 'You speak of

nobody but Tommy, your Tommy. You love him, you want to marry him, and at the same time you sneak off at night with Sammy. I saw you the other night. And you, Meg, you play around with anybody at all.'

'Oh, yes,' admitted Sally calmly, 'me bin sneak out with Sammy orright, but that bizness.'

'Business!' gasped Mary.

'Yes, you know I want marry my Tommy, he want marry me. But old Quivers she say no, we too young. All right, s'pose me bin get in fambly way. What she say den? "Oh, you mus' marry right away, who did this? Oh! Oh!" So longtime we bin try, me'n Tommy, to get baby. Long time we bin try, but no catch'em. So we think somebody wrong, if it's me—nothing can do, but if it's Tommy—can fix. So me try somebody else. If Sammy get me in fambly way, she's right, I marry Tommy.'

'Oh, but, Sally, how could you?' said Mary in horror. 'You marry Tommy but have somebody else's baby.'

Sally looked sulky. 'Well, why not, what diffrunce? Me'n Tommy don't care. If we had people it diffrunt, dese things be fixed. But me'n Tommy we got nobody, on'y Mum Quivers. She don't worry 'bout us an' me'n Tommy don't care, so there y'are. You see there mebbe not much time. Me sixteen now, so any day Missus might send me to a job, and Tommy, s'pose they send him to job? How we be s'pose we go to jobs mebbe hunnerds miles between? How we ever see one anoder! Mebbe never.'

'But they're not likely to send Tommy to a job. They're short of men and Tommy is so good with the pump and everything. Charlie couldn't spare him.'

'Mebbe Charlie not spare him, but Quivers not fussy. S'pose one of her fav'rite station men, a big boss, come and say he want good boy. You t'ink Quivers worry about Charlie—she gib him Tommy, orright. On'y reason I not go yet 'cos I work too bad. But s'pose somebody Missus don't like ask for girl,

she send me. No, we want get married, then they can't send us to diffrunt places.'

'I dunno,' said Meg, 'you wanna get away from dis place, but you no wanna go to a job. S'pose you marry Tommy, what you do? Go walkabout? That no good. No, I say go to a job, that's best way. Then mebbe some day get to Darwin. That's place, plenty people, plenty things, even see movin' picshers.' Meg's eyes shone at thought of these thrills.

'You know Lola that came back from leper island—she tell me. She say leper island prop'ly no good, but Darwin good place. She can't go there or they put her on island, but good for anybody else.'

'Oh, yes,' said Sally, 'that good idea orright—get job—go to Darwin. Jus' like that. How you think you get away from the job? You go to station you stuck there jus' like this, on'y worse, mebbe, an' more work.'

'I dunno how,' said Meg stubbornly, 'but some people do it. If they can, I can. There bin men about, an' where there men a girl has chance to get somet'ing.'

'By the way, Meg,' asked Mary, 'why don't they send Lola and the others to the leper island? A white man came here not long ago looking for lepers and I heard Quivers tell him she didn't know of any.'

'I dunno. Lola say she told to hide when any strange whites come. She say the missus ask her when she come back if the bosses on the island tell her any church stuff, an' when Lola say yes, missus was plenty mad. Lola thinks they have diffrunt god on the island and the missus' god doesn't want any of us to go there.'

Mary shook her head in puzzlement. 'That's funny, they always say the whites only have one god. But I suppose it's all right if Lola doesn't like the place anyway. I think we shall have to go soon. Do you think we could risk another swim?'

'Oh!' The others jumped up. 'Look at the sun. No, no more swim, no more time, let's run.'

The girls dressed in record time. Their wardrobe consisted of old-fashioned capacious bloomers and Mother Hubbard-type dresses. These they grabbed up, and jumped and wriggled into as they were running along the beach.

After jog-trotting half a mile or so they turned inland on to a track that climbed up a low, but steep and scrub-crowned hill. As they struggled over the top of this they made a bee-line for the bushes, for there before them, shimmering in the heat haze, were the buildings of Kuralla Mission.

With iron skillion roofs and white-washed hessian walls standing out stark and glaring against the lush green of the wet season, a scattering of various-sized huts squatted low along the hillside. Beyond them, puny against a giant banyan tree, a modest timber-built bungalow perched on high stilts, and alongside it a box-like building was distinguished by a little cross.

The girls hurried forward, making for the workshop, a long low shed right in the middle of the huts. Just as they reached the first of the buildings, Sally hissed: 'Hold it. Here comes the Quiver.'

'See,' said Meg, 'in a minitt she be behind our hut. Then if we race like mad mebbe we bin make it 'fore she comes round this end. Ready—set—go!'

The speedy black girls had just whizzed into the shed and Mary was skidding around the corner, when a booming voice stopped her dead in her tracks. 'Well, my girl, and where have you been?'

A glance at the lady who spoke left no doubt as to her identity, or the aptness of the name Quiver. Mrs. Quivesey was tall and broad, but more than anything else she was deep; two axe handles across the back, and almost as far from front to back. As she walked she quivered, and as she talked she quivered. As she grew angry, which was often, she quivered

still more, until her voice quivered as it boomed, and to hapless underlings it seemed as if the very air quivered, so that they stood paralysed as rabbits before a snake.

Thus Mary stood, head hanging and fingers twining nervously.

'Well,' repeated Mrs. Quivesey, with more boom and more quiver, 'where have you been so late this afternoon?'

'Please, ma'am,' said Mary in a voice that echoed the quiver but not the boom, 'I went for a walk and forgot the time.'

'Oh, and I don't suppose your walk took you to the beach and that led you to a swim? Now don't lie to me, girl. I can see the sand in your hair. Now, tell me, didn't those two good-for-nothings Sally and Meg go with you?'

'No—o, ma'am,' protested Mary, trying hard to be definite, 'I went on my own.'

'Well, we shall soon find out the truth of that. Come inside.' Mary dutifully followed the huge hulk, like a gazelle timidly tripping along in the wake of a hippopotamus.

Inside, the shed was truly a hive of industry under the spur of that voice. Tortoiseshell was being cut and polished into trinkets, grass and cane were being woven into mats, fans, curtains—all the little tasks missions find for idle hands to do. A dozen girls were there, ages ranging from about twelve to twenty, and not one nose a hair's breadth from the proverbial grindstone.

'Lucy,' boomed the voice, 'come here.'

'Yes, ma'am,' and Lucy sidled forward.

Thin as a rake, and as black as anyone there, she had an aquiline cast of feature which suggested that perhaps an Afghan camel driver might have interjected himself into her ancestry at some stage.

'Now tell me, Lucy,' came the boom, 'when did Sally and Meg come in?'

'Oh, ma'am,' said a placating whine, 'they came in jus' a minute 'fore you did.'

'Thank you, that will do. You can go back to your work.' Mrs. Quivesey half-turned to where Sally and Meg were pretending to work.

'Now, Sally and Meg, seeing that you go swimming when you should be working, and on the beach where you are not allowed to swim, you will do two hours' sewing after tea each night for a week.'

'Oh,' came a low murmur, 'we'll mis the wyluss.'

The huge red face turned a shade redder if possible. 'Yes, you will indeed miss the radio. And if I hear another word out of you, you will miss more than that. Now, Mary, since you not only go swimming, but also tell lies, you will sew every night for two weeks.'

'Oh,' came a sigh from nearly everyone.

Mr. Quivesey had an old short-wave receiving set, and Mr. Quivesey was an amiable man. So he had long ago drifted into the habit of taking his set out on to the back verandah and playing it for an hour or so after tea to his charges.

The coloured boys and girls gathered under the banyan tree and listened with rapt attention to these voices from the outside world.

Sometimes he would get Darwin, sometimes Brisbane. Sometimes Victoria was best; but often reception would be so bad that he could hardly get anything. As it became worse the audience would grow more tense, and Mr. Quivesey could see the eyes glowing at him from the gloom under the tree. Juggling with the controls he could almost feel these eyes were hypnotizing him, willing him to produce the goods.

Mrs. Quivesey naturally had never approved of this session, but she had learned to value it for its disciplinary

powers. The greatest weapon to her hand was the threat to keep the youngsters away from 'the wyluss'.

There were usually between a dozen and twenty girls and a half a dozen to a dozen boys in the care of the mission. Some were just left there by their parents, but mostly they were orphans. Orphans were never scarce in this land where the white man's diseases were rife and white man's hospitals non-existent.

The difference in the number of girls and boys was partly due to the fact that people were more loath to part with boys, but chiefly it resulted from the relative frailty of boy babies.

The only whites at the mission were Mr. and Mrs. Quivesey. He was a big man physically, bigger even than his spouse, at least sideways and upwards if not fore and aft. Being amiable by nature, he was no match for her and had long since given up trying to pit himself against her.

Once he had had his way with her, and prevailed upon her to do something she did not want to do. That was when, as a young preacher in a country town in Victoria, and she a nurse, he had volunteered to fill a vacancy in the mission at Kuralla. She had argued bitterly, but had finally consented to try it. Now, twenty years later, she would not even let him go south for a holiday.

The young Mrs. Quivesey had soon found that mission life was her role. She, as the martyr, had had Quivesey on the wrong leg from the start and in no time had established herself as monarch of all she surveyed. Besides the thrill of authority, there was the deep satisfaction of reading, in the church's magazine, glowing accounts of the heroism and fortitude of the Quiveseys—a never-ending serial story of their battle against incredible hardships, of their triumphs, and of the periodical tally of souls saved.

Even when the Japs had bombed Darwin and invasion seemed imminent, Mrs. Quivesey had fiercely refused to budge, when the authorities had advised them to evacuate.

What was the risk of danger, compared to the probability that she might not get her husband back here again if he once went south? As it turned out, the war had passed them by, and all they saw of it was a couple of unidentified planes. So Mrs. Quivesey was even more of a heroine.

They had indeed had a harder battle to live, as no luggers were putting in with supplies, but this battle had been fought successfully with Mrs. Quivesey's fortitude and determination, and the hard work of her subjects.

Had Mrs. Quivesey been blessed or cursed with imagination, she might well have been classed as a heroine for living at Kuralla.

To one side of the mission lay that desolate and deserted sea, the Gulf of Carpentaria. Around it on the other side and to the north brooded the rugged and desolate land of Arnhem —Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve, by the grace of the white men reserved as a dying ground for the black man, until such time as all the blacks were dead, or the whites could find some use for it.

To anyone coming from inland, through country which, while not desert, was certainly semi-arid and inhospitable, Kuralla did indeed seem an oasis. The first sight that met the eye on crossing the creek bed was the mission garden. Patches of vegetables were interspersed with papaw and banana trees, and the whole was flanked by huge overgrown mango trees.

The mission lay on the side of a low hill that separated it from the sea, and here and there could be seen the waving tops of palm trees. A picturesque and efficient backdrop to the scene was the mighty, far-spreading banyan tree.

The luxury of a fresh-water creek on one side in addition to the sea on the other was due to the river which sprang from the hills not far to the west, and ran almost straight towards the coast as far as Kuralla. Here, meeting the hills, it turned north and wandered for several miles before finding its way to the sea. At this time, the tail-end of the wet season, it was still

running strongly and could well be called a river, but for most of the year it was just a trickle linking a chain of pools.

Mr. Quivesey's duties were chiefly the conduct of church services and school in the mornings for the children.

He had gained tolerance since the days when he promised fire and brimstone to backsliders in Victoria, so his sermons were now delivered amiably as to wayward children. But though the north had taught him tolerance he had learned little else, only to be unsure. His religion was still confused by a rigmarole of split-personalities and dominated by the theme of blood sacrifice. Mr. Quivesey's coloured congregations accepted his words with politeness, but with incomprehension at least equal to that accorded by his earlier white flock.

In the school he taught the children stories from the Bible and to count and read a little. With exceptional pupils like Mary, he was prepared to take more pains. Mary had come to him with a good grounding in English and he had taught her a lot, and encouraged her to read, and lent her books. In addition he had taught her to play the old harmonium, so that now she played the music for the hymns and he was free to attend to his preaching.

The general work of the mission, such as looking after the stock (they had a few head of cattle and a mob of goats), the garden, and repairs to the buildings were all in charge of Charlie, a coloured man. Besides seeing to all these jobs and running the pump to pump water to the garden, Charlie taught the young men to do them too; so that boys from the mission were in great demand on the stations within a few hundred miles, especially as pumpies.

Mrs. Quivesey saw to it that the girls learned to do all classes of housework, cleaning, cooking, and sewing; besides making the trinkets that were sent out for sale. So, too, her girls were in demand on the stations for domestic work. Theoretically, too, Mrs. Quivesey ministered to the sick and

injured but in practice most of any ministering was done by old black Millie, the cook.

If any really serious cases came along, particulars were sent out on the pedal wireless to Darwin, and the flying doctor came to pick them up. But such cases were rare; the bush natives would rather die in their own country than be taken to Darwin, an alien place, to die.

There were usually a couple of families of coloured people who were regular enough workers in the community to be allotted huts to live in. Besides these there were two or three families of regular casuals, who were around the mission for a fair part of the year, but periodically would 'go walkabout'. These camped down by the creek when they were in residence.

Even the regulars would sometimes go walkabout. One time a family of regulars shot through just when there was work to be done. When they came back in a couple of months' time they calmly moved into their hut as if nothing had happened.

Mr. Quivesey called the man to him and gave him a good lecture on Christian duty.

The man looked a bit sullen and offended. 'Me good Chisthun,' he protested, 'you bin tellem plenty time 'bout Jesus, how him bin t'row him hammer and saw down and go walkabout allatime.'

The nomads who just drifted in and out soon found out the drill: to get on the ration strength they had to attend church. Simply enough in theory but at times a bit complicated in practice.

To attend church they must have clothes, the rules of the mission were emphatic on that point. A lot of the wanderers did not come up to specification, as dilly-bags were definitely not recognized as clothes for sacred occasions. They had, therefore, the problem of establishing themselves as genuine

cases in order to borrow clothes to attend church so that they could get some tucker.

2

The long hut that was a dormitory for the girls was in darkness, save for the dim light of a hurricane lantern down at one end. The faint light showed Mary, Sally, and Meg, modestly attired in bloomers, all sprawling on the one bed.

Outside the circle of light, deeper shadows showed where the other girls twisted and turned on the two rows of moist beds. They streamed with sweat as they waited for the time when the night air would eventually cool down this greenhouse atmosphere, superheated by the long hours of blazing sunlight on the low iron roof.

In conspiratorial whispers the three girls plotted dark deeds. 'What we bin do to Lucy?' 'Can't let her get away with this.' 'Mus' do something.'

'What can we do?' said Mary. 'I can't think of anything. Ever since the last time we put bull-ants in her bed she shakes out everything every night. She won't let us get near her tucker, and she won't go in the swimming-hole while we are there. The only time we get a chance to get at her is in the workshop, and we can't do much there for fear of getting everyone into trouble. There must be something, but I don't know what.'

'I dunno,' said Sally. 'What about the brains of the fambly! Come on, Meg, give us an idea.'

'Brains,' snorted Meg. 'Ise s'posed to be dunce. You two s'posed to be the brains. But I fink I might hab someting. About dese bull-ants. We all know Lucy got a cheap Japanese bladder, she get up ebbery night, sometime two times. S'pose we keep bull-ants in tins, dey get nice an' hungry, den when Lucy get up we tip ants in her bed. She not look dis time, jus' roll in in dark. Den noder night we wait till she get up second time an' put ants in. Soon she be shaking de bed alla time, she nebber know where she is.'

'Oh, you darling.' The other girls hugged Meg and clasped each other's mouths to try to stifle the laughter.

'Oh, can't you three shut up and get to bed?' came the whining voice of Lucy. 'It's way after lights out.'

'You shut up, Miss Bigmouth, we bin work late, we hab time to get to bed.'

'We shall hab to take turns keepin' awake till Lucy gets up, but we mus' get the ants first. Tonight soon's eberybody asleep I go out see Jacky. I tell him what we want. He get plenty bull-ants.'

Meg's voice was impressively lowered. 'Now, lissen, tonight Jacky bin bring some good bananas. You know the kind Quiver allus keeps for theyselves. I plant dem'—here she went into details —'you, Sally, come out after me and plant dem in here where Lucy can't see dem.'

Sally looked lost. 'I get dem orright, but how I plant dem where Lucy not see dem?'

'You on'y got to hide dem tonight,' said Meg impatiently. 'Tomorrow, soon's Lucy go up to the house to get th' instrucshuns, we gib some to eberybody and dey soon finish. Now, we better get to bed, I want to go soon.'

'Meg,' said Mary, 'will you ask Jacky to tell Jimmy to meet me tomorrow night?'

'I tell him orright, but why you not tell Jimmy youself?'

Mary blushed a little. 'I never see him except at meal-times and it's so hard when Quiver might be about. Jimmy is so afraid of her.'

'I tell Jacky, but what I tell him?'

'Just say to meet me at the usual time and place.'

'Okie, g'night.'

Up at the mission house that night Mr. and Mrs. Quivesey were holding a consultation, the usual one-way consultation.

The air in the house was hot and sultry, but whatever the climatic conditions Mr. Quivesey always felt it hot and sultry when his wife called him to her in her 'consulting' voice.

Tonight, when the call had boomed forth, Mr. Quivesey had been ensconced with a book in his favourite position on the back verandah, in the lee of the mighty banyan.

Unwillingly abandoning his peaceful pursuits, Mr. Quivesey sank down on to a chair at the imperious wave of his wife's hand, still trying hastily and with all his usual futility to beat the ploughshare of his mind into a sword and shield.

That gentle lady lost no time in springing to the attack, leaving him vainly waving his ploughshare against the impact of her heavy artillery.

'Those three girls have been causing trouble again. We shall have to get rid of them.'

'What three girls?' Mr. Quivesey made a brave pretence of honest enquiry.

'What three girls?' Mrs. Quivesey barked. 'As if you didn't know. Mary and Sally and Meg, of course. It's no good. They will have to go.'

Mr. Quivesey waved his hand weakly, and his voice was weak as he tried to protest. 'But, m'dear, Sally and Mary want to stay. Why not just send Meg out to a job? I think she is the

ringleader. If she were gone the others would be quite all right.'

'Ringleader fiddlesticks.' Mrs. Quivesey snorted and the higher chins quivered. 'She's the youngest of the three. If the others didn't want to do anything she couldn't make them. How am I ever going to train the younger girls when the older ones are carrying on like this?'

'Oh, I do not think they are so bad; just full of high spirits,' Mr. Quivesey protested. He leaned forward on his chair and his voice took on an earnest, almost a pleading note. 'Tommy will be hurt if Sally goes. They are really in love with each other. He is always asking me when can they get married.'

'Huh, in love you say.' Her mouth twisted in a sneer. 'These coloured girls don't know the meaning of the word, they'll chase after anything in trousers. I have it on very good authority that this so devoted Sally is sneaking out with somebody else right now. I don't know which one, I wish I did. She will definitely have to go.'

'It will make a difference to Tommy. His heart will not be in his work.'

'Bosh,' she sneered again. 'He'll forget her in five minutes.'

'But Mary, she is such a good girl.' Mr. Quivesey looked helplessly across at that domineering figure and his voice stumbled a little. 'You yourself have always said what a good worker she is, and so intelligent. She is such a help to me in the church. I do not know how I could carry on without her. And you practically promised that she and Jimmy could get married in a year or two's time.'

All the chins quivered now and Mrs. Quivesey's booming voice vibrated as if her throat were corrugated deeply inside as well as out. 'Don't misquote me. I said in three years' time, if they were still of the same mind, and if they behaved themselves. But she is not behaving herself.

'As far as the church is concerned, you managed for many

years to play and also conduct the services. I fail to see why you can't do it again. And here let me say'—and the quivers began in real earnest, the multiple chins quivering like the gills of a fish newly thrown on the shore, and the huge bosom quivering until it seemed impossible for any man-made material to contain it—'I very much doubt if the church is your chief concern in this case. I have seen you watching the girl when you thought I was not looking, and—'

'Stop, stop!' Mr. Quivesey was stung into making a vehement interruption. 'I will not listen to these vile insinuations. Every time one of our girls grows up you make similar allegations. You know in your heart they are not true. I will not have it.'

'Very well, you will not have it. But I will not allow this girl to remain here. That is that. The wet is nearly over now and we shall have some enquiries for domestic help as soon as the roads are passable. They shall all go.'

The tryst of Mary and Jimmy was kept on the verge of a tropical fairyland. A wedge-shaped piece had broken from the hill, leaving a cleft rising steeply from the beach to the top. The lovers climbed over the edge on to a ledge below, just wide enough for two to stretch out on. Here they were cut off from the prosaic world. The only sound was the gentle lap-lap of the tide below. The only sight was out to sea between graceful palms. A half-moon was rising, spreading its radiance across the shimmering waters.

Moonlight on tropical waters, viewed from a ship or from a beach, is like the heaven promised to churchgoers—an impossibly brilliant and infinite vista through endless monotony. But moonlight on tropical waters through the fronds of palms—that is the glittering path to the paradise of the Muslims, or to fairyland.

Under its spell a poetic soul can be bound for hours, and

even ordinary mortals for a space become oblivious of sandflies and mosquitoes.

Jimmy and Mary, however, by not looking at the moon, remained immune from its spell.

Jimmy, awkward and ill-at-ease, wriggled back as far as the cliff would allow, but Mary pressed herself against him. 'Oh, Jimmy, tell me you love me. Why do you dodge me all the time? I can't bear it. Don't you love me any more?'

The supple body seemed to envelop him and burning breasts and thighs began to melt him as moist eyes sought for his and trembling lips begged. 'Look at me, Jimmy, don't look away all the time. Say you love me just a little.'

He squeezed her with awkward violence and kissed her with youthful brutality, crushing her lips against her teeth.

'You know I do. I've told you plenty of times.'

Then her lips were on his, smothering anything else he might have wanted to say. For a time Jimmy relaxed and they were lovers again, as they had been months ago before the shadow of Mrs. Quivesey's threats had been laid on them. All too soon, though, the lovers' curse—tomorrow—was on them again.

Jimmy gave her a push. 'Leave me alone. Let's talk things over. I can't think with you rolling on top of me.'

Mary rolled back half an inch, leaving one arm across his chest, and one leg across his, burning its message into him.

'All right, I won't touch you, if you'll tell me what we're going to do. Did you see Mum Quiver like you promised?'

'Well, not exactly.' Jimmy coughed and spluttered. 'You see, I went to speak to her and she turned and looked at me. You know how Mrs. Quivesey looks, and, well, I sort of couldn't speak. But I spoke to Mr. Quivesey.'

'Oh, but, Jimmy, you know Quiver is the only one can do anything. You said yourself it's no use asking Mr. Quivesey. But what did he say?'

'Oh, he didn't say much. He didn't seem to want to talk about it. But he did say that you were spoiling things by getting into trouble. What have you done, Mary? Surely you know Mrs. Quivesey won't have anyone making trouble about the place. You should know better than that.'

'All I did was go for a swim. You know how crook it is when the river's flooding; can't have a swim, just a wash with a tinful of muddy water. So we went down to the sea for a swim. It would have been all right only we forgot the time and came back late. Anyway, what's so bad about having a swim?'

'You know it's against the rules. You can't go against the rules. You can't blame Mrs. Quivesey for being mad about it.'

'But what's going to happen? Are they going to let me stay here? The cook said a funny thing to me today. She said: "Ah, you won't be here long, you bin too pretty. On'y gels like Lucy bin stop here." What did she mean? D'you think they will send me to a job?'

'I don't know. From the way Mr. Quivesey sounded today I wouldn't be surprised.'

She seized him fiercely. 'Oh, but, Jimmy, you wouldn't let them send me away from you? Tell me you wouldn't.'

He squirmed uneasily. 'What could I do?'

'Oh, Jimmy, let's go away together. I'd be happy anywhere with you.'

'Go away! Run away and go bush, go walkabout like the blacks, you mean?' He pushed her away and jumped to his feet.

His voice shook. 'You don't know what you're talking about. I was ten when I came here and I was on the stations and walkabout with my mother and a black fellow she lived with. Kicked about by white men, and white men giving her, my mother, metho, and sleeping with her. And on the track living on goanna and often nothing. No, not again.'

She clung to him. 'But with us it would be different. You wouldn't let me go, would you, dear?'

'I can't help it. I don't want to leave here. Here you can eat and they treat you well. Mr. Quivesey says if I work hard and study I might be a preacher like him. You had a chance. Mrs. Quivesey said if you behaved yourself you could stay. Now you get in trouble and want to blame me.'

Mary tried to cling to him but he pushed her off and jumped up off the ledge.

'Let's get back before I get into trouble, too.'

'Now, Mary, tell us what the trouble. You bin get around all day like a dog wid a porcupine in him throat.'

The three girls had just flopped on the bed after finishing the night's sewing. Sally and Meg turned sympathetically to Mary, who had a faraway look in her eyes and a deep droop to her lip.

'You jus' as well tell all about it, Mary,' said Sally. 'D'you have a row with Jimmy?'

'Oh, no,' said Mary, trying to look as if she didn't care. 'It's just that it's all over, that's all.'

'What you mean? You didn't have a row, but it all over. What happened!'

'Oh, well, it looks as if I have to go and Jimmy is going to stay—so . . .' She waved her hands and tried to look brave, but her lips trembled a bit.

'Ooh, you bin told you gotta go?'

'No, nobody told me straight out, but Jimmy had a talk to Mr. Quivesey, and—oh, one thing and another. I'm sure I'm going to be sent to a job. And Jimmy's right, there's nothing we can do about it. He can't afford to leave here. He has a chance here he wouldn't have anywhere else. I wouldn't let him ruin it, even if he wanted to.'

'D'you ask him to run away with you?'

'No, no, I just mentioned it, that's all. But I wasn't thinking. You couldn't expect Jimmy to run away, it wouldn't be right.'

'But if you go away and Jimmy stays here, you mebbe not bin see him again, ever,' said Sally solemnly. 'That what I 'fraid of with Tommy.'

'I know, I know,' sobbed Mary, and buried her face in the pillow. 'But what can I do? What can I do!'

After a while Meg said quietly: 'You might's well face it, Mary. You gotta forget Jimmy and look for youself. Get away from here, an' keep movin' till you gets some place. This place, poo! Might's well be dead as stuck here.'

Mary got up, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. 'I think you're right, Meg. We should try to get to Darwin. There's nothing in the bush, is there?'

'No, might's well be black gin if you gonna stop in bush,' said Meg, with airy disregard for her own ebony skin. 'Sally, you better be in it, too. Oh, yes, Mary, what about Sally? You hear anyt'ing 'bout Sally? F'you is in bad with Quiver, mebbe Sally an' me are, too.'

'No, I didn't hear anything about Sally except that Quiver is mad about us going for a swim. She reckons we set a bad example to the young girls. But, of course, she's been mad plenty of times before, so it probably means nothing. No, I wouldn't worry, Sally. I think she's specially mad at me this time.'

Mary paused and thought for a minute. 'By the way, Meg, I've been thinking today, I'd like to hear about Darwin. Do you think I could have a talk to your friend Lola?'

Meg shrugged her shoulders. 'Why not? She there alla time. But you don't want Quiver to see you. It all right for me, I take her tucker down seein' she not allowed in camp, but nobody else s'posed go there.'

'Why is that, Meg? I always thought nobody could go near

a leper. But if you go why can't anyone else? Is it really dangerous?'

The little shoulders shrugged again, and Meg sounded indifferent. 'Well, I go 'cos somebody got to do it, an' Lola was friend of my mother. They say f'you don't touch 'em it all right. I dunno. I's bit worried 'bout Lola when I go. Y'see, her feet's startin' to get bad an' nobody else here likes goin' near her. Still, I s'pose somebody put tucker out somewhere an' she come an' get it like they do in Bible.'

Mary shook her head doubtfully. 'You would think it would be better for her in Darwin with the other lepers where she would be looked after?'

'You tell her.' Meg's voice was scornful. 'She bin there. She say anything better than leper island. F'you want see her an' you not scared, meet me behind kitchen after dinner when Mum'll be snorin'. I take you down then. I gotta take some bananas down Jacky got for me. Can't take 'em down with her reg'lar tucker 'cos Mum would see. But you hear more about leper island than about Darwin.'

'Oh, I would like to hear about the leper island.'

'You hear all right. She not see much of Darwin, but she see too much or plenty leper island.'

3

It was easy to see that Meg had often taken things to Lola that were not for Mrs. Quivesey's eyes. When they left the kitchen,

Meg, swinging a bunch of bananas, walked jauntily along, not even looking back, in a direction right away from where Mary knew the track to Lola's ran. Looking nervously over her shoulder, Mary saw that the kitchen was between them and the house. Behind a little patch of scrub Meg turned sharp to the left. They soon passed this and were in the open again and Mary twisted sharply to look for the house, but now the banyan tree hid it from view. From there on it was plain sailing.

Lola's hut was in the scrub between the sea and the river, nearly a mile from the mission. As they came to it, Mary saw that it was a tiny little hut knocked together from rusty iron. It was built under a shady tree and appeared to depend a good bit on the tree for support.

'You there, Lola?' Meg called out.

Mary had steeled herself, not knowing what to expect, but she couldn't help a shiver as the woman limped out into the sunlight. Her grey, scaly face seemed as if it was cracking in two as she tried to smile at Meg. As she reached out a thin arm for the bananas Mary noticed that two or three fingers had joints missing.

Meg didn't put the bananas on the ground as Mary expected. She just held them out, and it was Mary, not Meg, who winced as those hands clutched the bananas.

'My friend Mary, Lola,' said Meg; 'she want you tell her 'bout Darwin.'

'You know I not bin see much Darwin,' said Lola in a dry husky voice that somehow seemed to match her skin. I just bin see when we go t'rough to leper island, but plenty big, plenty houses, ooh'—and she spread her arms wide.

Mary cleared her throat and started squeakily: 'How did you get there? Were you near Darwin when you—when the—' She faltered.

'No, no, I bin longa bush, thataway.' She jutted her chin vaguely in the direction of Arnhem Land.

'Oh, then did the flying doctor take you to Darwin?'

Lola's face cracked in a grin, and she grunted: 'Ugh, flyin' doctor! No, polissman he take.

'We camp over dere,' again the chin waved, 'one, two, t'ree —oh, many people. One time polissman two black tracker he come. Polissman he look everybody den he talk my husband. "You leper," he say, "you come longa us." My husban' not unnerstand, he look me an' I tell. He not wanna go but polissman an' tracker put chain on him, to ring round him neck. Den they get 'nother woman, leper pretty bad this one, an' put chain on her, same chain, to her neck.'

Lola squatted down by the hut and her eyes looked beyond Mary as she went on. 'Then polissman talk me. He say, "You wife this man?" I say, "Yes." He say: "You better come longa us. You pro'bly leper too." I say: "No, no, not me. Others can see, but me all right, skin soft, everyt'ing." He talk tracker. "Put 'em chain longa her." So me get chain too an' off we go.' Her eyes were expressionless, but she shook her head a little sadly at the memory of that long-gone day.

'But how did you go?' asked Mary.

Lola sounded surprised at the question. 'We walk. Polissman an' tracker ride horse.'

'But you couldn't walk far with chains on,' gasped Mary.

'Oh, him orright,' said Lola unconcernedly. 'My husban' he leper orright but not bad, an' me orright, but other woman bit hard for her. We walk days an' days, nearly one moon. Den come longa iron road him call relway. Here we camp two, t'ree days. Then come terain-whoo. Dey put us in little hut with iron sticks cross window an'—whoo—off we go.'

Lola held her head up and looked at Mary. 'Dat when we see Darwin, from terain. Houses an' houses, miles of houses. When we get dere dey tek us down to sea, put us on boat, on

island, an' no more bin see Darwin.' She dropped her head and lapsed into silence.

'Oh,' Mary protested, 'but Meg said you knew about moving pictures and things.'

The gaunt, grey figure was motionless save for one finger tracing patterns on the ground. At Mary's question her head shifted a little, but the dry toneless voice forced itself through motionless lips.

'Oh, yes, me bin know orright. Other people on island from Darwin, they bin talk. Picshers orright, men ride horses go bang bang, other men go dead. Den bang bang, more go dead. Allatime ride horses, go bang bang.'

'And do all the coloured people go to see the pictures?' Mary asked eagerly.

'Yes, allatime go they bin talk me, ebery week.'

'Does somebody show the pictures for anybody?' queried Mary in a puzzled voice. 'Like Mr. Quivesey with the wireless?'

'No, no.' Lola waved her hand and explained carefully. 'They gib money—like white people. In Darwin they bin work, get money. Plenty money they talk me—fi' bob week.' Her voice died away, and Lola sat brooding, dreaming no doubt of what might have been.

Mary broke in gently. 'Meg says you didn't like the island. What was wrong with it?'

Lola straightened up and shuddered. 'Too much hot. On'y little bit ground.' She waved her hand in a circle. 'Water all round, when water go down, mud all round.' She motioned to the little clearing, lightly dappled with sun through the heavy foliage. 'No trees like this—nothing.'

'But weren't there doctors there?' Mary asked. 'If you didn't have leprosy they should have sent you away.'

'Dere no doctors,' said Lola with a shake of the head. 'On'y two-t'ree women in big white clo'es come over their head. Doctor come sometime, mebbe two-t'ree moon. Him jus'

look, then talk longa white women an' off he go. Firs' time he look me he say: "You sleep longa this man, prob'ly catchem. Now you here you better stay." Soon I prop'ly leper, anyhow.'

Mary looked stunned. 'But didn't they cure anyone? Didn't some people get well?'

Lola lifted her shoulders. 'Nobody neber go 'way. One white man they talk got orright, but I never see.'

'But you would be better there with someone to look after you.'

The grey face twisted hideously and the dry voice was bitter. 'Nobody look after nobody. De lepers do de work. Tucker orright but not good as dis. Huts like dis, some like your hut, but hot, no trees, not'ing.'

'Then how did you get away?' asked Mary wonderingly.

'One time airyplane he come, boom, bang, an' all a big boats go burn an' go down in water. We t'ink we go dead prop'ly, ooh, big noise. Den white men he come with boat an' tek us over the water. Den dey say: "Go bush or you go for dead." Lotta people not go far. My husban' he too sick, he stay dere. I find noder people walkabout dis way so I come back. Longtime walk, many moons.'

'But what—'

Look, Mary, we stop here we bin sewing next two year. We gotta go, Lola, see you tea-time. Come on, quick.'

'It must be terrible here for Lola, she must be very lonely,' said Mary as they hurried back to the kitchen. 'I should like to come and see her sometimes when we could have more time to talk.'

' 'F you want you can go any afternoon while Quiver out of sight,' replied Meg. 'Some afternoons I go like today, but not allatime. When I not go, you could go. Lola like it orright. She not see much people.'

'Does anyone else visit her besides you?' asked Mary. 'Does Quiver go to see how she is?'

'Quiver—not likely. But Mr. Quivesey some time he go. He read Bible and tell her how Jesus touched lepers an' fixed 'em up. That not much help for Lola, seein' Jesus dead for long time, but still it pass the time. F'you really want go, see me after dinner an' I tell you if I go or not.'

'I can see the girls going across to the shop. We shall be just in time.'

'Jus' as well. We in plenty trouble already.'

The wet was over now and the creek back to normal. Placid pools dotted its course, and only logs and other debris jammed behind trees high up on the bank showed where the sullen torrent had lately raged.

The girls' pool rang with laughter and shrieks as the youngsters had a final spurt of fun before racing up for tea. Suddenly all noise stopped as if by magic, and all ears pricked for a strange sound—the cough and splutter of a motor engine.

There was a mad rush up the bank to where bushes and trees on a bend sheltered their pool from the next stretch of the creek. By peering through the bushes they could see up past the garden to the big bend of the creek. On a rough track round this bend laboured a dilapidated old truck on its way to the mission.

'Ooh, motor, what it doin' here?'

All the younger girls chattered, querying and guessing about this strange sight. The older girls had fallen strangely quiet. They knew it almost certainly meant a job for someone. Somebody would soon be saying good-bye to Kuralla Mission.

'I t'ink we go to tea,' said Meg.

'Yes, we'd better,' said Mary.

Sally said nothing, her face had a strained look. She just followed the others as if in a trance. As they walked towards the kitchen they saw the truck pulled up at the mission house

and a wizened pair of white folks talking to Mr. and Mrs. Quivesey on the verandah.

'I bet it be a girl dey want,' said Meg. 'An' dere be plenty work on dat job.'

'I think I have seen them here before,' said Mary. 'Was it last year or the year before? Do you remember who Lily went with?'

'I 'member,' said Sally in a husky voice. 'It them orright, an' man who came here after told Millie, the cook, that Lily get beat pretty often.'

'Yes, now I remember,' said Mary. 'And when the cook told Mrs. Quivesey she just said, "Pooh, you can't believe these blacks' tales; and if it's right, no doubt Lily deserved it." '

There was no circle of light in the girls' hut tonight, only the pale rays of the moon filtered through the opened shutters to soften the gloom.

Mary and Meg talked softly. 'Sally bin too long now, mus' be away from house.'

'Yes, she must have gone to see Tommy. If Quiver told her she has to go, she would want to see Tommy right away. Poor Sally, it's not fair. Here comes somebody now.'

The soft slither of bare feet and Sally dropped on the bed, a picture of despair. Her hair was tangled and her eyes swollen from weeping.

'Well, I gotta go,' she said bitterly. 'Jus' when I thought everything fix.'

'What you mean, "everything fix" ?'

'I t'ink I gonna have a baby.'

'Oh, Sally, and you never told us.'

'Well, I not know for sure. I miss one month, but I not want tell anyone till I sure. Now it too late.'

'What do you mean, too late? It's just in time.'

'How I make Mum Quiver believe? Nothing show.' Sally patted her stomach. 'S'pose I tell her. She know I not want go, so she jus' say I a liar. It jus' spoil everything. Tommy an' me we t'ink we go bush, but now no can do. Tommy say we prob'ly starve. We not know bush. Jus' like white people. Might be orright before, but not if I in fambly way. An' if dis woman beat Lily she beat me plenty. Lily better worker 'an me. I forget things too much, drop things too much.' Sally drooped even further, till her chin was nearly on her knees.

Mary put her arm round Sally's shoulder and tried to console her.

Then Meg hissed: 'Don't say anyt'ing loud. Jus' lissen to me. I got an idea. In the morning you an' me bin go to Mum Quiver. You say you in fambly way, you bin miss two month, no good say one month. I say yes, that right, I know—'

'But,' Sally interrupted, 'she no' believe you any more 'an me.'

'Shurrup, an' wait till I finish. You bin say it to Quivers—but you bin say it in front of noder woman. Now it don't matter whether Quiver believes or not, or whether noder woman believes or not. She want somebody for work, she don't want girl havin' baby. So she say, "No, I won't take her." An' there y'are. Quiver mus' send somebody else.'

Sally's face lit up, then dropped again. 'No good. Who she send if she not send me? One of you. This place no good. I can't let you take a bad job for me.'

Mary broke in. 'Meg's right, Sally. If this other woman hears you might be going to have a baby she won't run the risk of taking you. Then before Quiver gets another chance to send you away your baby should be showing. Even if it turns out to be a mistake you're still gaining time. I think if you don't go she'll send me. I'm the oldest and I know she's mad at me. So don't worry at letting me go. I'm big enough to look after myself. Besides, I'm not going to have a baby. You can't risk going to a place like that. Anything might happen.'

'I t'ink you both wrong,' said Meg. 'I sure she bin send me, 'specially if I bin go with you an' tell her what she think lies. An' if I go, how it hurt me? I goin' to run away, anyway, so I might's well run from a bad place as a good one. 'Sides, dese people got small place an' Millie tell me small place better to run away from than big station.'

'How do you mean?' asked Mary.

'Well, dere not many people. Some time eberybody 'cept missus be away. You gone 'fore dey get back. I t'ink dis be good chance for me.'

'I don't know about that. But I don't think you will go. I think it will be me,' said Mary. 'But, anyway, Sally, you can see that we don't mind. You mustn't go. Think of the baby —and Tommy. You know, this might be your big chance. If you marry Tommy they'll probably let both of you stay. Charlie is often sick now and Tommy will most likely get his job.'

Sally was crying now. She put her arms round the other two, 'Oh, you too good, you too good.'

'Well,' said Meg, 'now that fix. When you s'posed go?'

'After brekfus', right away.'

'Good, I go wid you. I bet you I go tomorrow.'

Through the still night came the boom and hiss of the incoming tide. To Mary, turning restlessly on her bed, it was the familiar background music, only half-consciously heard, that emphasized the security and stability of life at Kuralla, the only life she knew. This life seemed most appealing now she was afraid she might have to leave it for the terrifying unknown.

As her body turned restlessly, her mind also turned restlessly over the story the black man had told Millie, the cook, about these people who wanted a girl, and about Lily who had gone with them before. The man didn't speak much

English but the cook had talked with him in his own language, and she was sure he spoke the truth.

With his woman and two children the man had come to these people's station hungry, at a time when a drought was on the land. They gave him no food, but promised him a beating if he was not gone by the next day.

Lily, who spoke a little of his language, had sneaked down to his camp with some food in the afternoon, when she thought the woman was asleep. She told him quickly that she was badly treated, poorly fed, and beaten for anything or nothing. She asked him, if he was ever near Kuralla, to tell the people so that they would not send any other girls there.

The woman must have seen her leave the house, for she had suddenly rushed on them, grabbed hold of Lily, and abused her for stealing food for black thieves. Then she had started to lash Lily with a short piece of greenhide rope. Lily struggled to get away, but the woman's screams brought the husband, and he held Lily while the woman flayed her with the rope.

Then the man had got his horse, gun, and stock-whip and whipped the family off the place, threatening to shoot them all the time.

So the black man had come a hundred miles out of his way to tell the people at the mission. Mr. Quivesey had been horrified and said they should never let anyone go to this place again.

But Mrs. Quivesey had laughed at him. How could you take the word of a black against white people? If you did believe this story, Lily had been beaten for stealing food, which was what she deserved. In any case the Government had men going round all the time to look after the natives, and she had no doubt they would see that all employers treated them well.

Mary squirmed and shuddered at the thought of the greenhide rope burning her back, and the endless misery of a

life where you had no friends, but only work and hunger and the threat of the rope. There was no end to it as far as she knew, no way of getting away from such a place, unless you died or ran away. For a lone girl the bush might be worse than the greenhide rope.

As Mary turned again and her rickety bed squeaked and groaned, she heard an answering squeak from the bed next to hers. Meg, too, was turning restlessly.

Meg had said she was certain to be sent, especially if she went up with Sally. Mary's heart lifted a little. Perhaps Meg was right. And if Meg went it wouldn't matter so much, because she had always planned to run away from any station she was sent to.

Then Mary's heart turned over and her eyes filled with tears. Imagine Meg, so young, so gay, being half-starved and ill-treated by a vicious woman. Meg—so willing at work, eager to help anyone—being driven with a greenhide rope. Little Meg who was so brave, who scrounged forbidden fruit for all of them, who worked and schemed all the time to get delicacies for Lola—and then refused to put them on the ground as ordinary people did for lepers, but stood unflinching and handed them direct into those frightening hands.

Impulsively, Mary stretched out and reached in the dark, feeling for Meg. She grasped an arm and hissed in a stage whisper, 'Meg, are you awake?' She could feel Meg turn towards her. 'I can't let you go up with Sally. Meg, I'll go myself.'

Meg whispered huskily, as if something were sticking in her throat. 'Don' be silly, I told you I goin'. An' don' talk so loud. You want Lucy hear?'

'Well, all right, I won't talk. But I will go up. If you go I'll go with you.'

Mary felt Meg's hand squeeze hers. They said no more, but lay still, holding hands. Somehow it seemed easier to be

taking a chance together, even if only one could win. The dull roar of the surf was now a lullaby. Soon the girls fell into youthful slumber which even fears of a greenhide rope could not disturb.

Next morning the old truck coughed and spluttered and Meg waved gaily from the back of it.

Quiver had stamped inside. All the girls were wiping their eyes and waving alternately.

Suddenly, way down the track, a lone figure appeared, to wait for the truck to pass.

Meg looked round and then called urgently, 'You look after Lola, Mary?'

'Yes, Meg, don't worry.'

A crescendo of coughs and splutters, and the truck bounced away.

4

Until Meg was gone none of the girls had realized how big a part she had played in putting a spark of life into the monotonous routine of the mission. But now something gay and vital was missing from their lives and all were, at least vaguely, conscious of it.

No, not quite all. Mrs. Quivesey heaved a sigh of relief that a nuisance had gone, someone who could never be completely

held in subjection. And Lucy was overjoyed. She had never been in doubt as to who was the leader among her tormentors.

Sally and Mary felt lost and aimless, like ships without rudders. But Sally had her ever-growing anxiety about her future to keep her mind occupied.

Mary soon found she had plenty to keep her busy now she had to look after Lola, on top of her ordinary work and playing the harmonium at church services and Sunday school.

After dinner she went along to see Millie, to find out what she had to do for the leper. The cook was fat and round and jolly. No one had any idea what her age was, but everyone knew it must be considerable, as she had been cook before the Quiveseys came. But her age seemed of little importance since, at least as far as anyone could see, it made no difference to her. She was just as fat, round, and jolly, sharp with her tongue and fast with her work as she had been ten years ago, or twenty.

The cook enjoyed one distinction. She was the only person on the mission who had no fear of Mrs. Quivesey. That gentle lady had long ago fought a battle for supremacy and been glad to accept a draw. Since then the position had been one of armed truce.

Mary stopped at the kitchen door and tentatively poked her head in, as all people of good sense do at a kitchen door, to accord such high office the reverence it deserves and await an invitation to enter.

'Ho ho!' said the cook. 'Come in, dearie. Dey tell me you gonna tak' de tucker to Lola.'

'Yes, Millie. I promised Meg I would look after Lola.'

'Ho ho! So you bin promise Meg. But did you bin ask Mrs. Quivesey?'

'Oh, no, I didn't think. Should I go and ask her?'

'You should, but you won't.' Millie laughed a deep rolling

laugh. 'I bin fix. Missus she say, "Millie, who we bin get carry tucker longa Lola?" I say, "Little Mary she bin tek de job." Missus she bin quiver like you gels call it. "An' pray who tell Mary she do de job?" I say: "Nobody bin tell Mary. Meg bin ask her." "Oh, did she?" says Missus. "Well, I bin say who do job, not Meg." She bin prop'ly mad, but I fix. "Oh, orright," I say, "you get somebody else do de job. Mebbe you get Lucy, she not frighten', oh, no?" Ho ho! De missus she shake like she gonna bust. Den she t'row her nose in de air an' off she go.' Cook pointed at Mary.

'Dat noder black mark for you, dearie. I don' git black marks, I all black.'

'Oh, dear, I never thought,' gasped Mary. 'Still, I don't suppose it makes much difference to me now.'

'Not a bit, dearie. Mek no diffrunce how you try keep sweet longa missus. 'Less you crawl and tell tales like Lucy an' Jim.'

'Well, we won't worry about it,' said Mary, trying to sound brave. 'Tell me, how many times a day do I have to go to Lola?'

'You on'y have to tek down dinner.'

'But what about breakfast and tea?'

The cook waved her hand. 'Oh, you tek stuff now and she cook herself. But Meg plenty time go down in afternoon when she bin get some extra. An' sometime she go down tea-time, carry somet'ing Lola like speshul.'

'Oh,' said Mary eagerly, 'I would like to take down anything anytime I could. But I wouldn't know how to get things like Meg did,' she added doubtfully.

'Don' you worry 'bout dat, dearie. F'you wanna tek stuff down, I get it for you an' tell you when it here. See dat box?'

Millie pointed to a big box outside the kitchen door. 'Dat where I keep empty bags. An' dat where we put stuff for Lola, unner de bags. When de boys get somet'ing good from de garden dey put it in dere. When I say "She right" you know somet'ing dere. Den when you get chance you grab, an' off you

go. But you wanna be careful not touch Lola or anyt'ing belongs her. Dis leprosy no good. Neber bring back anyt'ing. We send de tucker down in paper or old tins she can t'row away.'

'How does she get water?' asked Mary. 'Does someone carry it for her?'

'No, she go to de creek herself. It don' matter 'cos she down de creek.'

'Oh, but aren't her feet bad?'

The cook shook her head slowly. 'Dey not too bad, yet. Mebbe soon—I dunno. Anyway, you better be go now. Here de tucker. An' 'member—be careful. Oh, yes, f'you like I got somet'ing for de box s'afternoon. You wanna tek it?'

'Oh, good. I'll get it when I come back.'

All the way down to Lola's hut Mary was feeling happy that she was doing an important job that no one else wanted to do.

As she got closer, however, a worry that had been small began to gain strength.

Could she in decency put the things down for Lola to pick up, or should she do as Meg had done, hold them out for Lola to take? If she should do this, could she do it? Would her nerves stand it as those awful hands approached hers? As she drew near the hut, sweat dripped off her that could not be due to the heat of the sun, and her arms felt as if they would be incapable of moving forward to lift the parcels.

Lola soon settled the question for her. She was waiting outside, sitting on a box near the hut, and another box was placed a few yards in front of her.

'You bin put de tucker on dat box,' she called out to Mary. 'Don' you come near me. Meg she don' tek no notice a' me, she too bull-headed, but she should 'a' bin do dat allatime. Don' you be silly like her.'

Mary needed no second bidding. She felt so weak with

relief that she could hardly hold the food until she reached the box.

'It's terrible Meg having to leave us like that, isn't it?' Mary said as soon as she caught her breath.

'We bin miss her orright, but it good for her. She die to get away an' she tell me it a good job.'

Mary didn't say anything about the job. 'When did she see you? I wondered how you came to be there to see her off,' she asked.

'Oh, she come down dis morning. She run allaway down.'

'Phew,' said Mary. 'She must have run all the way back too. I don't know how she found time.'

'Oh,' said Lola confidently, 'she won' leave 'thout tell me g'by.'

'Well, I'll leave you to have dinner now. I have to come back again later.'

Now, relieved of the worry about Lola, Mary's mind turned to Meg. What a wonderful girl she was! She had had only about half an hour to get ready to go and yet she had run all that way, to say good-bye to Lola.

From Meg, her brain, weary of going in circles with questions that had no answers, switched to Jimmy. What a difference between them! Jimmy had only thought of his own troubles. She couldn't blame him for refusing to run away with her. Her own good sense told her that would have been a foolish thing to do. But the way he had done it! He hadn't argued about what was good for Mary, only what was good for Jimmy.

Suddenly she remembered something that had passed unnoticed at the time. Millie had started to name Jimmy with Lucy as a crawler and tale-teller; had started, and then stopped when she realized who was listening. And the cook wouldn't say, or even think, such a thing about anyone if she hadn't something solid to go on. Oh, how terrible!

Then another thought struck her, and she shivered under the blazing sun. If Mary thought that, then all the girls and boys thought so too. And all the time Mary had been prattling about her Jimmy, everyone was thinking that about him.

Suddenly a great problem of the past was cleared up. That was why, all the time she was going with Jimmy, the girls had seemed to be shunning her. She would come up to them as they were talking away about something and they would immediately stop, and then obviously and awkwardly change the subject. Mary had been hurt and bewildered, but now she understood. They were afraid to talk in front of her because she would pass it on to Jimmy. Or—she felt as if a cold and clammy hand touched her—had they thought she was the same?

But no, it couldn't be that. For the last few weeks they had taken her into their confidence about everything. So it could only be that they were afraid of what she would tell Jimmy. But she would have to make sure. She must ask Sally tonight.

Only two girls sat together tonight, their arms round each other. Mary was saying: 'It's no use, Sally. You'll have to stop worrying about it. You know Meg wouldn't want it. She wanted to go, and you couldn't possibly go, so that's that. As far as she's concerned, although she's so young, I think she's much better able to take care of herself than either of us.'

There was silence for a time; then Mary spoke again. 'Now, listen, Sally. I must know something and I want you to tell me the truth, however bad it is. Do you think Jimmy tells tales to Quiver? Millie said something about it today.'

'Oh,' gasped Sally. 'W-e-ll, yes, I t'ink so. Everybody t'ink so. De boys say dey sure, dey know for certain.'

'Well, tell me, did any of you ever think I did?'

'Oh, no, no, don't be silly. We know you wouldn't.'

'I'm glad of that, but a little while ago you all used to seem so strange to me. I couldn't understand it.'

'That when you bin go out longs Jimmy. We 'fraid what you say to him. We try let you know we don't like him, but you so mad about him you take no notice. We not bin game to say right out what we t'ink.'

'Oh, I'm so glad. I used to think all kinds of things. But you needn't worry about Jimmy any more. I've finished with him. You know, I think I'll be like Meg. I'll be glad to get away from here now.'

Mary's call came a month later. The noise of a car broke in on the hubbub as the girls and boys were having tea. Everybody downed tools and rushed to peep out, in time to see a smart-looking utility pull up at the mission house. The man and woman who stepped out were spic and span, all in white; the man in a drill suit and the woman in a linen dress. This impressed the onlookers, but not half as much as did the sight of Mrs. Quivesey nearly falling down the verandah steps in her hurry to greet the visitors. This stamped them as being very important.

As the youngsters settled down to eat again, speculation ran wild on the visitors and their business here. Millie caught Mary's eye and beckoned her over. 'This bin job for you,' she said, nodding towards the house.

'Oh,' said Mary, 'are you sure? How do you know?'

'I know de people. Dey sebrul times bin here. Las' time, 'bout two year ago, dey took Rita, 'member?'

'Oh, yes, I remember. But how do you know they will take me this time?'

"Cos dey on'y want de best. Gel gotta be smart in looks as well as work for dis job. Missus tell me der place so flash de gels gotta get dressed up to do de work. Dey talk missus on de pedal wyluss an' on'y come if she say she got good gel.'

'Ooh, I hope they want me then,' Mary said eagerly. 'I would like to go to a big flash place.'

'Uhuh, might be orright, I dunno. Big flash place tek lotta work to keep clean. But mebbe not much diffrunce. Any job dere be plenty work. Dey don' come here for coloured gels jus' 'cos dey likes dem. You better finish your tea now, 'cos missus might be send for you any minit.'

Millie was soon proved to be right. Lucy's thin face appeared in the doorway and her thin voice squeaked, 'Mary, Missus Quivesey wants you, quick.'

Mary was all excitement as she hurried up to the house. All the tales that were told of the strife coloured girls met with on station jobs made any of them a bit doubtful of leaving the mission. But this job sounded so different, as if everything would be so proper and orderly. By the time she reached the steps to the verandah she was worrying, not at the thought of going, but from fear that something might go wrong and she might not get the job.

Mrs. Quivesey was waiting for her on the verandah, and started to harangue her in a sibilant whisper before Mary was off the top step. Though temporarily removed from the influence of her visitors, Mrs. Quivesey's manner still exuded oiliness, as a roast of fat pork drips grease for some time after being taken out of the oven. In sympathy with her manner, the blubbery face glistened greasily in the dim light.

Being somewhat distrait with worry, Mary couldn't absorb all the breathless whisper. '. . . lady . . . asked . . . good girl . . . her house. . . . Honour . . . Kuralla . . . good patron . . . expect you to work hard, be . . . a credit . . . wonderful opportunity . . . learn to work . . . best of homes. . . .' A pause for breath.

Then she continued more slowly and emphatically. 'You will be paid the full rate for an experienced woman—seven shillings and sixpence a week.' She paused to let the full significance of this statement sink in. 'This is a chance few girls can ever get, and I hope you will be properly grateful.'

Here Mrs. Quivesey approached her usual manner. 'Now, I'll take you in so that the lady can have a look at you.

Remember your manners, and only speak when you're spoken to. And when you're asked a question, just answer the question, don't talk about other things. Hold yourself straight, don't slouch. That's better. Now follow me, and remember what I have told you.'

In the main room of the house, simply furnished with a table and a few cane chairs, sat the visitors. Mary's first timid glance, as she followed Mrs. Quivesey in, took in the fact that the lady was sitting upright in the centre of the room, while behind her, over near the wall, the man lolled back in a low lounge chair.

'Mrs. Foster,' said Mrs. Quivesey in an ingratiating tone, 'this is Mary, the girl I spoke to you about. I am sure you will find her quite satisfactory.'

As Mary bobbed in the manner approved before superiors, and stood with downcast eyes, she did not need the admonition of Mrs. Quivesey to keep her silent and respectful. Conscious of her bare feet and shapeless cotton dress, she felt mean and humble in the presence of this cold magnificence.

With Mrs. Foster the *motif* was coolness. A well-preserved thirty-five or so, she was good-looking in a cold and distant way, and though now coolly clad in white from head to toe, with the only touch of colour an ice-blue silk kerchief loosely knotted round her throat, she gave the impression that she would still look cold even if swathed in heavy furs.

Had Mary been looking she would have seen a marked difference in Mr. Foster. On her entry, his lassitude disappeared.

After a cold appraisal, which would have sent hot flushes over Mary had she not been intently studying the floor, Mrs. Foster said, 'Mm, yes, well grown, might look quite neat if properly dressed.'

Then, to Mrs. Quivesey, 'You say this girl is a good worker, but is she properly disciplined?'

'Oh, Mrs. Foster,' Mrs. Quivesey smirked, 'you know my girls are all well disciplined.'

'I know that the last one I took from here was not too particular where she put her fingers. Here, girl, look up at me!' Mary raised her eyes. 'Do you ever feel tempted to take things that are not yours?'

Mary flushed now and a look of horror came into her face. She shook her head violently. 'Oh, no!'

'Well, I have just been telling Mrs. Quivesey that I caught the last girl I took from here opening a drawer in my private desk. I turned her over to the police to go to gaol. I want you to understand thoroughly what will happen to you if any similar temptation should come to you.'

'Oh,' murmured Mary, 'I couldn't.'

'May be you could not. But just see to it that you do not. Now I want you to understand that if you come with me you will be well fed, well dressed, and well paid, and in return I shall expect you to be willing to work. The work will not be hard, but it must be done properly, and you may be called upon to work long hours sometimes. Do you understand?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Now, let me hear you say something. You must be able to speak English. I will not tolerate pidgin in my house. Go on, say something. Say you can speak English or something.'

'I can speak English fairly well, ma'am, and I think you will find me a good worker.'

'Mm, that will do. Well, Mrs. Quivesey, we will take this girl. We shall be leaving—when?' She turned to her husband.

He stood up, a tall slim man in his forties, a good-looking but rather weak face seeming intensely brown against the white of his shirt and suit.

'Oh, I'm not fussy. Nine o'clock would suit me. We'll only go as far as Wodalla for lunch, shall we?'

'Right. You will have the girl ready then, Mrs. Quivesey? She can go now.'

Mary left the house with her head in a whirl. She was still prepared to accept Mrs. Quivesey's word that this was a great opportunity for her, but the overpowering Mrs. Foster had left her with a feeling of numbness, and a doubt as to whether she would be able to measure up to that lady's strict standards.

So she headed for the kitchen to see if she could unburden herself to Millie, and perhaps get a bit of advice. As she looked in at the kitchen door she saw that the cook was just poking about getting things ready for the morning, while two of the girls were finishing the washing-up.

'Ah, there you are, dearie, come on in. I just bin wonderin' how you got on. No, not now,' as Mary started to speak. 'Wait a minit. We bin jus' 'bout finish, an' den we sit down longs my hut an' you tell all about it.'

A few minutes later, finished for the night, Millie took a hurricane lamp and led the way to her hut, only a few yards away. She pointed to a box as she sank down on the bed. 'You sit on de box, dearie. Dis bed got 'nough with me. Jus' as well I stopped growin', ain't it?'

The little camp-bed certainly had ' 'nough'. As Mary lay back it was nearly hidden from sight. 'Fear I's gettin' old, dearie. Me feets get very tired. 'Course, dey's gotta fair load to carry. Now, tell us what go on. D'you get de big job?'

'Oh, yes, I'm to leave in the morning.'

'Good, or is it good? What you t'ink of it?'

'Well, I don't know quite what to think of it. Mrs. Quivesey says it's a wonderful opportunity, a good job, and a chance to learn. I suppose it is, but the white lady—Mrs. Foster they call her—seems a bit hard, makes you wonder if you could please her.'

'How she look? She bin hold her head up an' look down her nose?'

'Oh, no, she looks straight at you, too straight. Her eyes are so hard and cold. She makes you feel like shivering.'

'An' what de job, dey bin tell you 'bout it?'

'Oh, yes, the job sounds all right. She says the work isn't hard, but it is long hours. And everything must be done properly, but she doesn't need to tell you that, you only have to look at her to know that. Really, it seems the kind of job I would like. I wouldn't expect not to have to work.'

'No, you need'n' worry 'bout that, any job you go. Dey don' come all dis way to git coloured gels for ornymint. Dey don' go to mission jus' to git gels who chrischuns, know all 'bout Jesus. Dey's no Jesus on de stations. Dey want mission gels 'cos dey is been learnt to work.'

'Anyway, there's not much use in worrying about it because I have to go,' said Mary with a shrug. She thought for a minute. 'What about Lola now? I can't think of anyone to ask to look after her. I can't ask Sally now she's sure she's going to have a baby.'

'Don' you worry 'bout Lola.' Millie waved her hand. 'I fix dat. I get somebody orright. You's got 'nough to worry 'bout looking after you'self, now you bin goin' on de stations. I bin on de stations myself 'fore I come here, an' I know. Mos'ly de white women bin make you work all de day, an' de white men wants you work half de night.'

Mary looked startled. 'Oh, but I don't think this place would be like that. This Mrs. Foster would be too strict.'

'I dunno. I never bin see no place like dat.'

'But surely all the coloured girls don't have to sleep with white men?'

'No, not all mebbe.' Millie turned her head to look round her huge bosom, and her face had a wide grin. 'Some too ugly, nobody want. But it hard for good-looking gel like you. De white men bin want you an' de white women bin crooked on you. Mos' places de women won' have any gel like you. 'Cos all

de white women is sure deir husban's is chase de coloured gels. Like Mr. Quivesey. You know an' I know dat he don' chase de gels—he might like to, but he don'—but missus she sure he do.'

Mary's mouth dropped open with horror. 'Oh, Millie, surely that's not true. Mrs. Quivesey wouldn't think that.'

'Oh, no!' scoffed the cook. 'You should see de missus when she watch Quivesey, when he watch you. 'Course, he get dat look in him eye, but he on'y dream.'

She turned back to look at the roof. 'Well, anyway, dat's how de women are, an' you get nothin' from dem. Some o' de men's not too bad, you got a chance to get somet'ing.'

'Oh, but I've been worried about that. I don't mind work, but I don't much fancy being played about with by white men. One good thing about this job, I thought, it wouldn't be like that.'

'Might be, might be not. But I don' think it much to worry 'bout. An' f'you gits caught s'not much use worryin'. It on'y natcheral. But de main thing is don' be too easy. Be hard an' git somet'ing for you'self. Might be a better job, or better tucker, but allus try to git somet'ing. It on'y chance you got.'

Mary sighed and shook her head sadly. Then she stood up. 'Oh, well, I'd better go, and let you get some sleep. I'll remember what you told me. Good night.'

'G'night, dearie. An' 'member, you's pretty enough to do good for you'self, but you mus' be hard.'

Everybody had come out to see Mary off, but there was not the same tension as when Meg left. All knew that Mary was going to a flash job and so was to be envied rather than pitied.

When she walked over to put her tiny bundle in the ute, the others hung well back. They were overawed by the obvious superiority of these two whites.

Mr. Quivesey was hovering round with a harassed

expression on his face. 'Good-bye, Mary,' he said as she climbed into the back of the utility. 'Be a good girl. We wish you luck. We shall miss you very much.'

'Thank you, Mr. Quivesey,' replied Mary with a somewhat tremulous smile. 'I'm sure I shall miss you and the harmonium. You have been so kind.'

Between trying to register disapproval of Mr. Quivesey, and fawning upon Mrs. Foster with an expression like a stricken cod, Mrs. Quivesey's quivers were very much in evidence.

Mr. Foster arranged things to make a seat for Mary. 'Here you are, sit up the front here near the cabin, not at the back, it's too rough there. And remember to hang on when we get going, there are a lot of bumps.'

Mrs. Foster's eyes looked cold as an icicle twinkling in the early morning sun. 'David,' she snapped, 'shall we go now?'

'Oh, yes, certainly,' he replied.

With a lift of his hand to Mr. Quivesey, a frigid nod to Mrs. Quivesey from Mrs. Foster, and a tearful smile and a wave from Mary, the ute leaped forward and they were gone.

5

No one could say the road was rough. There was no road, not even what could be called a track; just a passable way through obstacles.

The country showed a bitter face, an old face seamed and scarred by youthful excesses. The countless wrinkles of harsh, stony hills and hollows were lightly veiled in grey, the hard greeny-grey of spinifex and scanty-leafed, gnarled and twisted scrub.

As the driver edged his way along the hollows, dodging boulders and logs, with the car occasionally sidling down into a gully to buck its way over the further bank, Mary shuddered to think she had once suggested going walkabout through this country. She realized this must form part of her earliest recollections dimmed through time but renewed in nightmares—endless walking, with tired legs, sore feet, and burning throat.

Soon they began to strike patches of more open red-soil country where the ute could run along easily. After a couple of hours this red-soil country started to predominate and, except for patches of thick scrub and some sharp gullies, the going was fairly good.

About noon they passed the spot where Mary's mother had died, but it awoke no memories. Half an hour or so later they pulled up at Wodalla Station. The little store was directly facing Mary. Now her memory stirred—that lovely bag of lollies.

Mr. and Mrs. Foster got out of the ute and Mr. Foster said, 'You can get out now, we'll be staying for lunch.'

A little grey-haired lady called out from the verandah: 'Oh, you're back, eh? Come on in, lunch will soon be ready. Oh, you got your girl.'

She bustled out and smiled at Mary. 'Look, you go along the side of the house there. You'll see a gate at the back, just go through there and up to the kitchen, the cook will fix you up.'

When they left, an hour and a half later, Mary's spirits had soared to the skies. The coloured cook and the other girls had

all seemed so happy. Life on the stations could not be so bad after all.

From here on there was a well-defined track which was rough enough in places, but permitted a good speed. The bouncing of the truck, and the sun and dust, soon became matters of importance. Mary found herself gripping the sides tightly to prevent herself from being thrown about and to take some of the strain off her seat. The dust swirling in at the back burned her eyes and throat and gave her a raging thirst. So, when the truck pulled up after four hours' straight running, Mary was mighty glad to be at Malcolm Downs, and just then she didn't care whether it was good, bad, or indifferent.

Mary jumped to the ground and stood wavering a little on unsteady legs, blinking her eyes to shake off the blurring caused by sun and dust. Her first impression was of a huge house walled with fire, as the glass louvers reflected the rays of the lowering sun. She had only time for the one impression, for, immediately, a little coloured woman neatly dressed in white bounced out and bobbed in front of Mrs. Foster. Mary was intrigued by this woman's face, as it was the colour of the ordinary half aboriginal, but with strange features, little straight nose and slanting eyes.

'Yes, Mrs. Lowe, here is the new girl—er—Mary, I think she is called. You can show her to her quarters. Send Anna in. We will have a cup of tea at once.'

The little woman bobbed again, turned to Mary, waved her hand, and said, 'Come with me.' Then she swung round and went so fast that by the time Mary had picked up her bundle she had to run to catch up. And then she had to break into a jog-trot occasionally to keep on the woman's heels. They did not go through the house, but round it to the back verandah, which they reached up a short flight of steps, as the house was on stumps, about three feet off the ground. To the left of them, as they mounted the steps, was what was obviously the

kitchen, partly on the verandah and partly jutting out from it, with the chimney at the far end. This arrangement made it seem as though the kitchen had been stuck on to the house as an afterthought, instead of, as was the case, being deliberately placed there to keep the heat of the stove as far from the house as possible.

To the right, the verandah was partitioned off in little cubicles. At one of these Mrs. Lowe stopped. The door was open and Mary could see two beds, which took up most of the space. Mrs. Lowe pointed to one of these. 'That will be your bed, the other one is Anna's. Now, you can't be seen in the house in those clothes.' She wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'After dinner I'll get you the clothes you will wear while you are here. But for the moment I'll show you where you can have a shower and then you can help the cook until dinner-time. Oh, there you are, Anna,' in a tone of voice as if she had been searching for months. 'Tell the cook to make tea immediately and you run in and see Mrs. Foster; she is waiting for you.'

Mary turned to see a slim, good-looking coloured girl of about twenty, dressed in a pale green cotton dress. At Mrs. Lowe's orders, she turned quickly and grabbed a little white cap and apron from where they were hanging on a cupboard door. She hurried off, putting on the cap and apron as she went.

'The shower is down here,' and the little woman raced off down the verandah, past the kitchen. When Mary got there she saw a little shower recess between the kitchen wall and the corner of the house. It had unlined galvanized-iron walls, zinc-covered floor, and a shower rose as sole furnishing.

'Now, come with me to see the cook and then you can have your shower.'

The cook was tall, thin, and nearly black, with a plain, almost ugly face, made comely by perpetually twinkling eyes.

'Bessie, this is Mary, the new girl. She will not be working with you, of course, but I am busy now. So when she has her

wash you can find her something to do until dinner-time. Right?' And away she went.

Bessie pulled a face. 'Pooh, she gallop about make everybody think she do all the work. Sit down, child, and I'll get you a cup of tea in a minute soon as this fixed.'

She saw Mary's eyes on the sparkling silver teapot and fine china cups and saucers she was arranging on a tray. 'Flash, eh? This flash place—too flash, make too much work.'

And, as Anna now came in for the tray, 'Oh, Anna, this Mary, your new offsider.' Anna looked hard but said nothing. 'You coming back for a cup o' tea?' asked Bessie.

'If I can get away,' Anna flung over her shoulder as she hurried out.

'Nice girl, Anna, when she not sulking. She sulk a bit now, but she soon get over it. But that Mrs. Lowe—she bit black, bit white, and bit Jap, an' she got the bad of all three. It not too bad when the missus away, but when they both here nobody can do anything right. You got one on you, then you got t'other on you, and then you got both together.'

Mary looked a bit dazed.

'Don't worry, child. Take no notice o' me, I talk all the time. Here's your cup o' tea, that'll make you feel better. Then, when you had your shower, you can sit down an' talk to me. You can keep hold of a knife, then you peeling spuds if anybody come in. You won't have another cup? All right, then, have your shower. Have you got a towel?'

Yes, Mary had a towel. Indeed, it was the greater part of her luggage. 'Well, off you go, then. Come back here when you're finished, but don't hurry.'

When Mary went back to the kitchen she was feeling much better after the cup of tea and a wash, but she was sorely conscious of her Mother Hubbard here where everybody was so neat. Even the cook had on a dress like Anna's, faded but clean. She was relieved to see that Anna was not in the

kitchen. Instead there were two bright-looking girls; one was small, slight, and dark, while the other one was much more sturdily built and had a brown complexion.

'Oh, Mary, these my two girls. This little one here, she the oldest, 'bout seventeen. We call her Whip, short for whipper-snapper. This big one, she not sixteen yet, but she a tough one. We call her Judy, short for Judy 'Scariot, 'cos she sell you for two bob.'

The two girls grinned widely but said nothing. Probably they knew from experience that they didn't have a chance of getting a word in when their mother was in full swing.

'We live 'long there, near you an' Anna,' continued Bessie.

'My husban' dead long time. Horse fell on him. Here you are. Sit down there near these spuds. Hold the knife, but don't peel any spuds 'less somebody comes in. Now tell me all about yourself. I s'pose you came from Kuralla Mission, did you? We get . . .'

After dinner Mary was helping with the washing-up when Mrs. Lowe called her out. The little woman led the way to a small room just inside the house. She unlocked the door and Mary saw that the walls were lined with shelves stacked with linen, sheets, tea towels, towels, and other household goods. On one shelf were pale green cotton dresses like those the girls wore.

Mrs. Lowe sorted out two dresses and held them up against Mary. 'Yes, they'll do. Now these dresses will be yours and you must always have them clean and tidy. Now the way we work it is this. Before dinner, ready for the evening's work, setting tables, waiting on table, and so on, you put on a clean dress. Next morning you wear this dress for the scrubbing and polishing and other cleaning. Then after lunch, when you have a couple of hours' break, you wash that dress and hang it out to dry. When you start work again you wear the other clean dress. Then after dinner when the work is finished you

iron the first dress so that it is ready for the following afternoon. You understand that?' Mary nodded.

Mrs. Lowe went to another shelf. 'Here are two caps and aprons. These you wear and keep clean on the same system as the dresses. You understand? Now we provide you with the cap and the apron, but the dresses are yours. They are booked against your wages. You understand? You pay for them with your wages.'

'Yes, I understand. I pay for the dresses.'

'Yes, that's it. Now here are some underclothes. Do you want to buy some of these?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mary eagerly. 'I'd love to have some of those.'

'Well, I'll let you have one set now. Later, when you have some credit, you can get more. Understand? When your wages have paid for these you can get more.'

'Yes, I understand that.'

'Good. Then in the morning you start work with Anna. She'll show you what to do if I'm not there.'

'Come on, time to get up,' came Bessie's voice softly, and Mary, all keyed up for the new job, was out of bed before she had finished speaking. She had finished dressing in the half-light of dawn before Anna got out of bed and switched the light on. The electric light from the station's own plant was a new experience for Mary, and she had not yet got used to treating switches with familiarity.

When she had washed, Mary waited for Anna to lead the way. She was too shy to ask questions of the girl who was taking care to show she was not friendly. The kitchen was the first port of call. Bessie's 'Good morning' drew a reply from Mary and a grunt from Anna.

Bessie pointed to a kerosene-tin standing on the stove. 'Your water's hot, and here's a cup o' tea ready. You can make time for that.'

'Have to hurry,' grunted Anna, 'the Jap will be on the job this morning.'

Between gulps of tea Anna divided the hot water into two buckets, and produced cloths and scrubbing-brushes. As they went out she picked two brooms out of a corner and handed one to Mary, then they went into the house. They put the buckets down in a huge room which must have taken up about a third of the house. It had a highly polished floor and was sparsely furnished with tubular chrome-steel chairs and tables. In one corner stood a piano, and near it a wireless set. Anna had begun to feel she must speak when Mrs. Lowe darted in and saved her. Without a word of greeting, Mrs. Lowe started Mary on the day's work.

'This floor has to be scrubbed today but first you can do the dining-room while Anna does this room over here. What you have to do is sweep the room out first. Then you go over it and wash any dirty spots. You don't wash all over the floor today, but be careful to find and properly clean any dirty marks. Then you come out here and together you and Anna sweep and thoroughly scrub all this floor. By the time you have finished that, the dining-room floor will be dry enough to polish and you polish it before breakfast. Polishing this floor can be left till after breakfast. Now you have to be thorough and quick. Naturally the sooner you get the work done the better for yourself and the others, but remember that Mr. and Mrs. Foster are asleep so you must work quietly. Watch you don't bump the furniture or rattle the bucket. I think that's all for now.'

Poor Mary worked feverishly, with a constant nightmare fear of knocking the bucket or bumping the table or making some such shattering noise. At first she could see no dirty marks, then she found one that might be called dirty. This led to others of varying degrees and the problem was where to draw the line. By the time she was finished she was dripping with sweat and the floor was spotted like a leopard.

When she went into the big room she was mortified to see that Anna had scrubbed a big section of it. Anna said nothing but looked at her with what seemed to be a mixture of scorn and triumph. Mary got down on her knees, determined to show she could work, but no matter how hard she worked Anna's scrubbed patch grew faster than hers. By the time the floor was finished she was aching physically and mentally.

'I'm sorry I'm so slow, Anna,' she murmured. Anna looked as if she were on the point of relenting, but she just grunted and went out, to return in a minute with two sets of polishing gear. Before Mary had half-finished polishing the dining-room, Anna was in to set the table for breakfast. This finished, the girls went to the kitchen to snatch a hasty breakfast themselves. Before Anna had properly finished, she had to jump up to take in the white folks' meal. Mary made to get up too, but Bessie waved her down.

'Nothing you can do, Mary. Soon you go with Anna do the bedrooms, but now you might's well have another cup.'

It continued all day, making beds, dusting, sweeping, or polishing. Mary was all the time straining to keep up, but always lagging.

Soon after breakfast, Mrs. Lowe called her away from where she was working, cleaning a bedroom. 'Come with me, Mary. Yes, leave that for now. You can come back to it later.'

She led the way into the dining-room. 'Now, Mary, have a look at this floor. See there,' she pointed to a spot on the floor, 'The polish has hardly been rubbed up at all. And here, see'—Mary squinted sideways to get the reflection of the light on the floor, but could see no difference—'it looks as if hardly any polish has been used at all. Now we make allowances for you, as no doubt any kind of slipshod work is good enough at the mission, but here we insist that the work be done thoroughly. We don't expect you to be as quick as Anna for a start, but we do expect you to do the work properly. Now get

your cloths and polish and go over the whole floor again. Make sure this time that you don't miss any of it.'

Mary nodded dumbly and hurried away for the polish. It hurt her to be told her work was so bad, but to be accused of skimping it when she had tried so hard—oh, she thought, how cruel!

The crowning indignity came late in the morning when Mary was polishing the furniture in the dining-room. Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Lowe walked in. 'Mm,' said Mrs. Foster, 'this floor is very patchy today, Mrs. Lowe. Get the girl to give it a good rub up, will you!'

Mary was near to tears as she started once again on that hateful floor.

During the afternoon she managed to catch Bessie alone in the kitchen and told her woeful tale. 'I tried so hard, Bessie,' she ended, 'but it's no use.'

'Don't be silly,' said Bessie. 'Every new job hard for anybody. You got get used to it, learn the tricks. My girls go on that job some time when they short of a girl and first they always tired and mad. To do a job fast you got to learn how little to do and the easy way to do it. Besides, the mood Anna is in, she'd be going fast to show you up. Take no notice of it. Anna should show you how to do things 'stead of being such a pig.'

'That's the chief thing worrying me, Bessie. What have I done wrong that Anna is so sore at me?'

'You done nothing, child. It's just that she's jealous. I won't tell you anything about it. Best is you ask her. Wait till you in your room tonight an' ask her what she crooked for. If she start to talk she get it off her chest, an' then she be all right. She's nice girl, Anna.'

Mary peeled off her cap, apron, and housedress and hung them on nails hammered into the joists of the partition. In her newly acquired plain cotton slip she looked very young,

like a schoolgirl. Then with a sigh she sank on to her bed. Sank is the right word, but it was not the kind of luxurious sinking that takes the recliner softly into the depths of a downy mattress.

This sinking was a slow lowering of the body over the frame of the bed, to come to rest several inches lower on the hammock-shaped wire mattress, which sullenly squeaked to announce that thus far had it stretched but would go no further; from now on all the give and take would have to be provided by the body of the sleeper. Mary's bed, like Anna's, was of the wooden-framed type with folding legs, and a sagging wire mattress with a stout wooden cross-piece at the spot where the sleeper's shoulder blades occur.

Inhospitable the bed might be, but Mary was so worn out that all her body desired was to be allowed to fall asleep at once. She forced herself to stay awake and covertly studied her room-mate. She didn't have far to look. Her bed was hard up against one galvanized-iron partition wall, Anna's was touching the other one and there was a space of about two feet between the two. No ceiling hid the iron roof, and, for the other two walls, iron surrounded, on the one side, the doorway, and on the other an unglazed, shuttered window.

The only furnishing, other than the beds, was a cupboard formed by two boxes standing one on the other, between the beds and under the window. In these boxes were a few odds and ends, the only noteworthy item being a pair of shoes. These were plain and serviceable enough as women's shoes go, but to Mary who had never worn any, nor seen any except on white folks' feet, they seemed very high class indeed.

From the shoes her gaze turned to Anna, with a mixture of hope and fear. Anna, also clad in a slip, was lying as straight on her back as the bed would allow, her face still sullen and her gaze on the roof. Mary gulped and swallowed and made two attempts before she managed to murmur: 'Anna, can't we be friends? What have I done wrong?'

Anna sat up with a jerk. 'Be friends! What have you done wrong? You only come here to take my man, that's all. An' you say be friends. What you think I am?'

'But I didn't come here to take your man. I don't even know him. I don't want any man.'

'You don't want any man? But that not matter. He want you. That's trouble.'

Mary was sitting up, looking wide-eyed at Anna. 'But who is your man? I don't know any man here.'

'Mr. Foster, of course. He my man, but he go for any new girl that come.'

Mary gasped. 'Mr. Foster! Oh, but, Anna, that's ridiculous. He's never even looked at me. And I'm sure I don't want him to. And what about Mrs. Foster? Don't tell me she'll let him play around with anybody.'

Anna nodded her head knowingly. 'He look at you, all right. I seen him. But if I didn't see him I still know what happen. It always happen. An', as for Mrs. Foster, pooh, she don't care what he does when she not here, an' she often away. Then he play.'

'You mean that when Mrs. Foster goes away he'll take me? But I don't want him. I don't want anything like that.'

Anna looked curiously at Mary and saw her agitation. Her face softened and she said: 'Well, don't get all worried about it. I know I can't blame you, anyhow, but I get mad an' worried an' I can't help it. You see, I been his girl two years now, but when some fresh girl come here he always try them out. He come back to me after, but I worry 'cos sometime he might not. I getting old now an' he might stick with a younger girl.'

'Oh, but, Anna,' said Mary in an amazed tone, 'you don't look much older than me, and so smart. I don't see how any man wouldn't want you, at least before me.'

'Look, I show you,' said Anna, jumping to her feet and pulling off her slip. She pivoted slowly, the light gleaming on

her slim brown body, and the smooth swell of her hips tapering gracefully down to neat calves and ankles.

'Well, what's wrong with that?' asked Mary. 'You look beautiful to me.'

'You stand up too an' strip off, then you see.'

Mary did as required. Then looked down at herself and over at Anna. 'I suppose I'm a bit lighter colour than you. Is that what you mean?'

'No, no,' said Anna scornfully, 'Mr. Foster don't care about colour, an' he say he don't care much about face, he got his eye on the figure. See your breasts. They point straight out. If a man there it look like they reach out, try to get to him. Now, see mine. They start to sag. That the trouble.'

'Oh, Anna,' said Mary blushing, 'you say terrible things. But I can't understand how a man is going to worry about a little thing like that.'

'Sometime when he in the mood Mr. Foster have you walk about an' then stan' like this, or this.' Anna struck a few poses. 'He say he like to watch the female form an' his artistic eye can't stand any fault. Last time I with him he say, "Anna, in bed your line is colossal, but out of bed I fear your line is slipping." An' he pointed to my breasts.'

Mary shuddered. 'Oh, Anna, you frighten me—parading around naked in front of a man—oh, that would be worse than being in bed with him. I don't think I could stand it.' She peered searchingly at Anna. 'Are you really serious? If you are I think I'll have to run away.'

Anna dropped back on the bed and looked pityingly at the other girl. 'I serious all right, but what so bad about being naked when the weather warm? In a few weeks it winter an' we get cold nights, then you want clo'es, but not like this. As for talk of run away, that stupid. Where you run to? There's no place for a hundred miles. An' what you say you run away from?'

She paused for a moment, but Mary had no reply. Anna waved her hand. 'There, you see, nothing you can say. If you got to another station they only send you back. Even if you got to town the policeman bring you back, 'cos they say you run away from work. An' if you wander around you meet some other man. He treat you a dam' sight worse than Mr. Foster.'

At this thought Anna grew indignant. She said severely: 'I think you're crazy to talk like that. Mr. Foster's a nice man. He's good man to make love with. An' how's that hurt you? It do you good.'

Mary was looking dazed and doubtful, and Anna's voice softened. 'Anyway, she might be here a long time yet. You got plenty time to worry. An' don't let anybody hear you talk about running away. They wouldn't like that. An' don't ever let Mrs. Foster hear any word about what he does when she away. She know it all right, but if anybody say a word she'll go raving mad.'

Mary looked a bit better, but her voice was tremulous. 'Oh, I won't say anything. And if there's time to wait, something might happen.'

It was a different job altogether, with Anna friendly. As they went down on their knees next morning to start scrubbing, Mary's spirits sank at the thought of yesterday's heartbreak. But Anna whispered: 'You scrub too much. just wipe it with the wet cloth, that take the dirt. If you scrub you take all polish, everything.'

'Oh, but Mrs. Lowe told me you must scrub hard.'

'Mrs. Lowe boss, an' boss like to see you work hard. If she come you use brush, but not hard. It too hard to polish after. There nothing need scrubbing, that all bull. After they have party you got to scrub though. Beer an' plonk spilt everywhere; it take some getting off.'

As the days went by Mary improved, and she soon could get through her share of the work. Still she had to keep

hurrying, and could find no time for spells. She noticed too that even Anna didn't have much time to spare. She mentioned it to her one day.

'Oh, yes,' Anna replied , 'they keep us moving all right. But you haven't seen it when dust-storms blow. Then you really flat out, like lizards drinking. Mrs. Foster'll have you dusting all day. She crazy to have things clean. Fancy try to keep a place big as this clean in a dust-storm. Thank God she goes away. It's lot easier when she's away. The Jap's bad enough, but the two of 'em —ugh!'

'Does Mrs. Foster stay away long?' asked Mary.

'Oh, you never know. She might be away a month, or three months. Last year she away six month.'

Mary didn't ask Anna again about Mr. Foster and his lovemaking. It seemed so unlikely in a place like this, she wondered if Anna hadn't been exaggerating or maybe having a joke with her. She tried to keep half an eye on Mr. Foster and thought she could see a gleam in his eye at times, but thought this was probably imagination.

If Anna had told the truth she would soon have to make a decision on a question that had bothered her for a long time —what to do if a man forced himself on her. According to the talk at the mission, backed up by what Anna said, it was ordinary practice for white men to use coloured girls as they liked. Mary had always thought this was probably exaggerated, but there must be some truth in it. Her instinct was to fight against anything like that, partly because she had been taught it was not right, but mainly because she revolted at the thought of someone she didn't like crawling over her.

But the question was, how much risk and trouble was she prepared to face to try to keep untouched, and could she possibly win? Everybody seemed agreed that she couldn't and that it wasn't worth trying. If that was right, then Millie the cook's advice was good—to play it hard and try to get

something for yourself. All Mary's thoughts seemed able to do were to go round and round.

6

One evening Mr. and Mrs. Foster went out in the car. What a relief! Work was finished by six o'clock with no whites to feed. After the luxury of a good, long, leisurely meal they relaxed for the evening. Bessie produced an old gramophone and Whip and Judy played it and danced on the verandah. Bessie came into the girls' room and settled down for a gossip.

Bessie and Anna, but mostly Bessie, talked of this one and that one, until they came round to Rita.

Mary butted in. 'Tell me what happened to Rita? Mrs. Foster said she had caught her stealing and she had gone to gaol. Is that right?'

Bessie and Anna laughed. 'She never steal nothing,' Bessie said. 'Might be she go to gaol. I dunno. But Mrs. Foster got police, an' they took her away.'

'But if she wasn't stealing, why did the police take her?'

'Oh, Mrs. Foster told police she caught Rita stealing. That why they took her. Rita wasn't stealing but she do something worse far's Mrs. Foster concerned—she looking for the missus's love-letters. Two, three, times Rita found the drawer not locked when she do the bedroom while the folks have breakfas', an' she read some letters.' She laughed again. 'Rita could read good, an' she could remember. She used to tell us

what in the letters—good, eh, Anna? You be surprised the stuff her boy friend write Mrs. Foster, eh, Anna, wouldn't she?'

'I say she be surprise', ' chuckled Anna. ' 'Magine that woman, look like she freezing, or freeze you, anyway, an' she called "honey bunch", an' "light o' my life", an' "dear heart" an', oh, everything.'

'Yes,' added Bessie, 'an' he can't live without her, "the days seem so long"—ooh, she must burn when she get going. You see,' she said to Mary, 'Mrs. Foster got a man in Adelaide. That why she away so often. She don't go live with him all the time 'cos he got a wife, too. So Mr. and Mrs. Foster they live here so good an' proper. Then she go to her boy friend for couple months, an' while she away he play up here.'

'That was a terrible thing for Rita to do,' said Mary, 'to read Mrs. Foster's letters like that.'

'It terrible all right,' chuckled Bessie. 'Terrible for Rita; she got caught. But you should heard her telling us. Oh, you'd laugh. Before that we didn't know why the missus away so long. Nobody'd ever think she could be lover like that. Why, even when she first come here, when they first married, she always look cold, never like lover.

'Hey, Judy,' as the girls whirled along past the door, 'can't you play something else? You wear out that "Lily of Lagoon". '

Whip and Judy came to the doorway. 'We try to learn shottish,' said Judy. 'Whip reckon she know but I don't think it right. What about you show us, Anna?'

Anna started to say no, but the two young faces looked so wistful, the brown eyes mournful, and pleading as only brown eyes can.

'All right,' said Anna resignedly, 'but just once. I too tired to play with you kids.'

As she went out and the 'Lily of Laguna' blared forth again Bessie explained to Mary: 'You see the boss show Anna how to

dance. Some time when he get half-drunk he like to dance, so he learn Anna.'

'Then it's right,' asked Mary, her face clouding over. 'When Mrs. Foster goes away Mr. Foster plays with the coloured girls?'

'Oh, yes,' said Bessie. 'Why, you think somebody tell lies?'

'Oh, no, but I wondered if Anna was having a joke with me because I'm from the mission and know nothing.'

'He play all right! You soon find out when she go away. He be after you quick smart. Won't he, Anna?' as she came back panting and threw herself on the bed.

'What that?' Anna asked.

'I just tell Mary the boss soon be have her when he on his own again.'

'Too right, he will. An' she crooked on it. Now you can understand I be crooked 'cos I want him and he want her. But why she crooked? She even talk about run away.'

'Oh, you wouldn't, would you, Mary?' exclaimed Bessie with great concern in her voice. 'Don't ever do anything silly like that, child. You run away from man an' what you find—other men who treat you worse, an' if you don't find other men you die of thirst.'

'Yes, but what can I do?' asked Mary, her voice a bit tremulous. 'I don't want men like that. I want to get married properly. My mother when she died left word that I was to learn to be like the whites and to marry a white man. I don't mind that so much, to marry one, but I don't want this kind of thing.'

'Well, you might marry a white man easy enough if you get to Darwin. I don't think it much good in this country, but in Darwin must be easy 'cos Mrs. Lowe married one there one time. If she can get one you should be able to. But this other bizness. I don't see how you can help it, or how it hurt you.

After all, if you want catch a white man you want some practice.'

'Oh, you all say it won't hurt me, but it's not good, is it? You wouldn't want your girls doing it, would you, Bessie?'

'Whip an' Judy?' Bessie's face creased into a wide grin. 'They never tell me nothing, but I think they both try it already. I don't mind that much, but I tell them if they want marry a man, take up with one man for good, to be careful an' let me know. I tried it twice an' it no good. First time I was young an' silly. I have Whip an' carrying Judy an' he wants to go walkabout. I say no, how can I go? So he gives me a belting. I still won't go so he's going to belt me some more an' then the boss, this Mr. Foster's father, he chase him. Then longtime after, about ten year ago, a man comes here, a nice sort of man, an' I take up with him. But he starts to go for the plonk an' the metho, whenever he gets a chance. It killed him in the finish—'

'Oh,' Mary interrupted, 'but didn't you tell me a horse killed him?'

'The horse an' the metho together,' Bessie explained. 'You see there was a horse here nobody can ride. He was six year old when they rounded him up an' tried to break him in. They called him Bombo, 'cos if you get on him he throw you. You never been on the bombo, Mary? You ask Anna, she been on it.'

'I'll say,' said Anna emphatically. 'Bombo is plonk, you know, Mary. I been on it, an' it throw me every time.'

'So did this Bombo,' continued Bessie. 'He threw everybody, me too.'

'Oh, Bessie,' said Mary, 'surely you don't ride buckjumpers?'

'I don't now, but when I was young I was pretty good, wasn't I, Anna?'

'Yes,' said Anna. 'They tell me there never any man but one round this part of the world could beat Bessie on a rough 'un.'

'An' that one was this bloke I telling you about. Paddy was his name. One time the boss offered ten pound for any man that could beat me, but nobody ever got the ten quid. Anyway, I have the kids an' give the game away, mostly. But when this Bombo's got everybody beat I get cheeky—I'll have a go. He never threw me—I jump off, an' damn' glad I was to get off in one piece. He's fast as a cat, but strong—God, he crack you like a whip. I only stayed 'bout three bucks an' it felt like I's being torn apart.'

Bessie felt her stomach. 'I still not sure everything in its right place. But when this Paddy come here he say he can ride, so they put him on Bombo. He was right—he can ride. He rode Bombo to a standstill. That's why I go for Paddy, I s'pose. An' the boss sooled me on. He says, "Oh, Bessie, you have a kid by this Paddy an' we have the best horseman in the world."

'Anyway, like I say, this Paddy starts to go for the plonk or the metho or anything he can get. So one day, one Sunday afternoon, I hears a hullabooloo—I was in the huts down the paddock then —an' I go out to see if Paddy's mixed up in it 'cos he's been missing all day. Now what's happened, only I don't know, is a couple of the white men has had a bet whether Paddy can ride Bombo drunk. So they've been pouring metho into him all morning; an' now they've got Bombo saddled, an' to make sure of a good show they've put a big burr under the saddle.

'When I come out I see 'em all clustered round Bombo, who's standing quiet enough 'cos he's got a bag over his eyes. Then I see 'em hoisting Paddy up an' I start to run. I yell out "Not in the paddock, Paddy, take him in the stockyard," 'cos even Paddy's never ridden Bombo in the open paddock, he's not even properly mouthed. Then I see Paddy's so drunk there's a bloke holding him in the saddle an' I yell louder. But

a white man grabs me an' says: "Leave him alone, you black bitch. I got a quid on this."

'Paddy heard me though, an' he straightened himself up. "Sheesh ri, lerrergo." And the blokes pulled the bag off Bombo's eyes an' let him go. An' did he go! The first jump Paddy's head flopped back, an' when Bombo hit the ground his head snapped forward so you expected to see it fly off. That jar must've nearly broke his neck, but it wakened him up. Bombo nearly turned himself inside out. He'd never bucked like this before. But o' course, he'd never had a burr under the saddle before. But Paddy hung to him.'

Bessie's face gleamed and her eyes sparkled. 'Paddy stayed with him. You couldn't say he rode him flash, but he hung to him. An' he had him beat.'

Bessie shrilled triumphantly: 'Bombo's head came up. He'd had it.'

Her voice dropped. 'But then he reared. By then he was too far away to see just what happened. Whether it was the burr, or Paddy gouged him with the hooks—anyway, he reared, half-spun round, an' crashed on his back. That's where the metho came in. If Paddy had 'a' been sober he'd left him an' jumped clear. But he was so drunk he could only hang on. When I got there he's stretched across a log an' nearly in two pieces. That was the end of my second husban' !'

'Oh, that was terrible,' Mary cried. 'But why didn't the boss stop it?'

'Oh, the boss was away. An' did he go mad when he got back the next day. He's not only lost his horsebreaker, but he didn't have a new one to come out of me. He start to go crook on me. He say, "You too slow, Bessie, we not get the champion." ' Bessie shook her head. 'You see, he's not wake up to what he's lost. But I tell him. I say to him, "It no difference if I have one here"—an' I pat my belly—"or if you breed for hundred years. You not get the champeen. You lost the

champeen yesterday." ' Bessie's eyes had a faraway look as she finished softly, 'That boy, he could ride.'

Then she grinned. 'They tried out the girls later, but they done no good. Whip can ride a bit, but she's too light, not strong enough.

'An' Judy ride like a bag o' spuds. 'Course, I think she's too cunning to try. Now I think we talked enough, Anna's nearly asleep an' everything's quiet, so I s'pose the kids are down at the stockmen's huts.'

'There's a thing has me puzzled, Bessie,' Mary butted in. 'You and Anna told me none of us was allowed away from the house, we couldn't mix with any of the other people on the station. Yet the girls slip away pretty often.'

Bessie grinned a shrewd grin. 'But we're different, Mary,' she said. 'You see,' she went on, 'this Mr. Foster an' me we grew up together. I teach him to ride. . . .' Thinking she read a question in Mary's eyes, she added: 'No, on'y horses, he never ride me. You see, for one thing I'se too old, 'bout as old as him. Still, we're good friends. An' he's known the kids all their lives —for that matter he might not be too sure they're not related. They can do a lot of things he wouldn't let nobody else do. Both the missus an' Mr. Foster don't want you girls mixing with the rest o' the hands on the station.' She leered at Mary. 'The same whyfor, but different becoses. But where she's on us, too, he's a bit easy—see?'

Bessie reached over and touched Anna on the shoulder. 'You wake up for a cup o' tea, Anna?'

'Oh, yes.' Anna blinked and stretched and then heaved herself up. 'I love a cup of tea when they're away and you can take your time and make toast.'

'How is it,' asked Mary as they walked along to the kitchen, 'that Mrs. Lowe allows all this noise and the sup of tea and so on?'

'It's just on these one nights,' replied Anna. 'If the missus

away for long, Mrs. Lowe try to keep everything just's if she here. But for one night like this I think she just go to her room an' sleep like dead.'

'She dream of her white man,' chuckled Bessie. 'Like he was 'fore he drank himself to death when he found what he'd married, I 'specs.'

When they opened up the door of the stove they found lovely big coals, for Bessie, like a good campaigner, had put on a couple of big lumps of wood after tea. Bessie carefully poked some kindling wood over the top of the coals to boil the kettle without disturbing them. As the kettle was just on the boil it didn't take long to start singing. While Bessie made the tea, Anna was toasting the bread, and Mary getting out the cups and milk and sugar.

'Ah, this good,' said Anna, luxuriously sipping the tea and munching a huge slice of toast. 'It good as being white people. As if we own the place.'

'Just for tonight,' added Mary. 'I suppose we enjoy it better than the whites. You've been here so long, Bessie, you must feel as if you should own it at times. How long have you been here?'

'All my life I been here,' replied Bessie. 'I born on this station.'

'You should know your way about then. Have these people owned it all the time?'

'The old man, Mr. Foster's father, he was boss right up to. . . How long you been here, Anna?'

'Two'n' a half years.'

'Then he been dead 'bout four years, an' the missus has been here about five. He was hard man, the old boss, but not bad to work for. He's the one gave me this name. Black Bess, he used to call me. Many a night we played together. He used to say: "You're not bad, Black Bess. I could ride to York on you

any time." I don't know what he meant, but that's what he used to say.

'His wife, this David's mother, she's dead long time. Things used to be fairly easy in the house here, but it altered quick when the old man died an' this Mrs. Foster took over. For one thing she got rid of the old housekeeper and brought in this Jap. Then she must have the house altered an' everything she did seemed to make more work. Them floors, f'rinstance, they used to be plain wood. 'Course, they had to be washed reg'lar, but that's nothing. She must have all the floors stained an' polished an' you know what work they are now. Then she has glass louvers put in all along the front verandah. God, about half a mile of glass louvers to clean, I don't know how you girls put up with it.

'Pity this bloke wasn't a bit more like his father, but he too weak. No, don't touch the cups an' things, Anna. No work tonight, plenty time tomorrow. They prob'ly won't be back till late tomorrow, we hope.'

'Good night, Bessie, thanks for the supper.'

'S'nothing, call again some time, g'night.'

Then came the day. During breakfast Anna announced, 'She's off today, the boss going run her into town s'afternoon.'

'The missus? chorused Whip and Judy. 'Hooray, that the stuff. How long she go for?'

'Dunno,' said Anna as she set off out again with the white folks' breakfast.

'Nobody said, mebbe nobody knows.'

Bessie noticed Mary's worried look. 'You needn't worry yet, Mary. He not be back tonight.'

The atmosphere was sultry that night in the girls' cubicle. Mary was nervous and tense and Anna was back in her black mood again. Mary was glad when Bessie dropped in.

'Hey, you two.' She wasted no time on finesse. 'What's

wrong? You both look s'if you got indigeshun. An' all you worry about's one man, one gets him t'other wants him. Anna, you silly, you know he soon want you again.'

Anna just tossed her head and held her tragic pose.

Bessie went on with a chuckle, 'Nice fresh young girl like Mary, she soon get fixed up with piccaninny.'

Mary's face took on a look of horror. 'Oh, no, not that!'

Anna couldn't keep her face straight now. She chuckled. 'Why, Mary, you think the end of the world come?'

Mary couldn't speak. She hid her face in her hands and her shoulders shook with sobs.

The other two, at once contrite, hovered about her. Bessie put her arm round Mary. 'We only joking, Mary, don't take notice of us.'

As the sobs subsided Bessie said, 'Come on, look up, child, and I talk to you serious.'

Mary straightened up, wiping the backs of her hands across her tear-dimmed eyes.

'Now lissen to me,' Bessie went on. 'You know that likely to happen to any girl any time. But if it happen here it might be just what you want. You know what they do if any girl in the house get in fam'ly way?'

Mary shook her head.

'Soon as the missus get on to it she send them right off to Darwin, so they be right away from here, where nobody know or care where they come from. They tell me even coloured girls well looked after in Darwin, they have hospital an' everything. An' when it finished, you in Darwin where you want to be to find your white husban'. How's that, eh?'

Some of the gloom had gone from Mary's face. 'Yes, but I'd have the child.'

'What that? That nothing. You can give it to mission. When you not married they prob'ly give it to mission anyhow.

I dunno. Anyway, it not stop you get married. It only easy way I know to get to Darwin. What you think, Anna?'

'Yes, if you want to get to Darwin, it good way all right. An' the boss pretty good bull.'

'I'll say,' grinned Bessie. 'He fix everybody. How many go away since you been here?'

'Two go away. An' then there's me.'

Morbid curiosity was too much for Mary. 'What happened to you, Anna, you didn't go?'

'No,' answered Anna. 'I didn't go 'cos I wanted to stay, but I get in family way, all right. It just happen to be last year when the missus away long time. I desperate so I let Bessie here fix me.'

'An' I good doctor, eh?' said Bessie with a huge grin.

'You good butcher. God, what a butcher! Whatever you do, Mary, never let Bessie near you. I nearly die. If I want to stop here ten times as much as I do, I wouldn't be game to let her have another go at me. Only good thing might be I think she make such a mess that I never be able to have a kid.'

7

The sun was dipping through a haze towards the trees over beyond the stockyards, and as Anna and Mary sat on the back verandah steps the red glare lit up two faces deep in thought. Anna leaned back against the verandah post staring morosely into the distance. Mary, hunched up, with arms round her legs and chin resting on her knees, rocked steadily back and forth.

With Mr. Foster settling down to drink, and Mrs. Lowe hovering round him, they had no work to do, but each felt too restless to take advantage of this unusual holiday.

Came the sound of a motor, droning up and then stopping near the house. Bessie poked her head out of the kitchen. 'Quick, Anna, see who that. Might be somebody for dinner.'

Anna jumped down the steps, ran to the corner of the house, and peered through the fence, Mary behind her trying to see over her head.

A utility truck was standing facing them up near the front corner of the house. As they got there, a big white man was turning away from the truck and walking towards the front of the house. As he disappeared from sight Anna turned and walked back to the kitchen, plucking at her lip and muttering to herself.

Suddenly inspiration came. 'I got it, Bessie. You 'member long time ago man come, an' Mr. Foster tell me gov'ment man look after coloured people? Well, that the man come now.'

'Oh, well, that all right,' said Bessie with relief. 'Mr. Foster not likely worry much 'bout dinner for him. I frightened I have to start cooking. Now I can sit down again.' And she promptly did that.

'What do you mean, Anna?' asked Mary eagerly. 'How does this man look after coloured people?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Anna slowly. 'Mr. Foster just say to me, "That big man was here, Anna, you know, he's the guardian of all coloured people." I say, "What this guardeen bizness?" An' he say: "His job is to go round the country and see that all coloured people and blacks are well looked after. He's paid by the Government. You see how lucky you are, Anna," says Mr. Foster. An' that's all I know.'

'Well then,' said Mary, her face lighting up, 'I should be able to see him and tell him my troubles, and find out what I should do. What do you think, Bessie?'

'I dunno,' answered Bessie doubtfully. 'He a white man, I dunno if he talk to you or not. I never see no gov'ment men looking after me. But you won't be able to talk him tonight. Mebbe you can try tomorrow.'

Mary's face fell, then brightened again. 'Oh, that will be all right. I just thought. If this man's a government man Mr. Foster won't be wanting any of us tonight. Isn't that right?'

The other two shook their heads uncertainly. 'I dunno 'bout that,' said Bessie.

But Anna started to brighten up. 'You might be right, Mary. If you are, we can go to bed early. We won't have to wait up.'

'I think you two better get out,' said Bessie. 'Mrs. Lowe be here any minit to say what they want to eat.'

The library was now lightly veiled in a haze of tobacco smoke. The conversation of the two men had warmed up under the spur of alcohol.

'Oh, Bob, you're a beaut.' Dave Foster rolled around and slapped the arm of his easy-chair as he roared with laughter. 'I was praying for someone to come along today to keep me company. Thank God it was you.'

Bob lolled in an armchair on the other side of a little table, a big, youngish chap running to flesh, but of an athletic type so that he bulged everywhere, in the right places as well as the wrong ones. Now his face twisted in a grin. 'Well, that's not bad,' he said. 'You must be a pretty good prayer if you can pray God into finding me. I thought He'd deserted me years ago.'

Dave rang for Mrs. Lowe to bring in some more beer and a snack, and for a time the talk died down to a fitful murmur. But Dave stirred things up by saying: 'This job of yours with Native Affairs would be a fair old bludge, wouldn't it? You chaps can do just about what you like, can't you?'

Bob's face lost its usual grin. 'Oh, yes, of course,' he snapped. 'It's the fashion to talk like that about government jobs, especially a job like ours. What you mean is that we don't do our jobs.'

'Oh, no,' Dave protested. 'Don't take offence when I didn't mean any. Let's drop the matter.'

'I'm not taking any offence, but I'll answer you just the same.' Bob leaned forward in his chair and wagged his finger for emphasis. 'Take this place of yours, for instance. We know that you give your natives a fair go, but I still check up on your books and report on what goes on, don't I?'

'Yes, that's right,' agreed Dave.

'And, by that same token, I've always done the right thing by you, always given you a hand when I could to get a boy for you or anything else you wanted, haven't I?'

'Of course, of course. But you're getting me wrong. I didn't mean anything against you. In fact, I didn't mean anything at all very seriously. But if you want a specific instance'—Dave hesitated a bit at 'specific instance' and then slid through it like a steeple-chaser crashing through the top of a brush fence —'I'll give you one. You chaps check up on me and other station owners who are doing the right thing, as you say, but what about the others who are not? Like this Stanton over here.'

He waved his arm vaguely in the direction where, sixty miles or so away, lay the homestead of his next-door neighbour.

Bob laughed. 'That's where the shoe pinches. You're crooked on Stanton and want to see him hurt. That's all right, I'm crooked on him too, but what can I do? Listen to this. When I first came on patrol I found what Stanton's form was with the natives, and, I don't mind admitting it, I was shocked. So I wrote in a blistering report—and a superior who was kind to inexperience lost the report and gave me a gentle hint that such things get nobody anywhere. I was advised of the crucial point, which is that the logical end of such an affair is the cancellation of the man's licence to employ natives. Which means putting the man out of business, and that is not done. Also, of course, you are up against the fact that the word of blacks will not stand against a white's. So now I do precisely the same with Stanton as I do with you. I visit the station and I make a report. But the hardest work I do is going there and having him sneer at me.'

'Of course, you're right.' Dave nodded in agreement. 'You can't take the blacks away from a cattleman. Although, sometimes, I think I'd like to see him chased out. You should see what he does to me and his other neighbours. I reckon he brands more of other people's stock than he does of his own.'

Bob butted in. 'I heard a good one about him from the publican at Margaret. His story is that Stanton was telling a bloke he had branded 1998 calves. "But," says the bloke, "I thought you said you only had 1000 cows?" "So I did," says Stanton, "but I've culled them two out an' fed 'em to the boongs." "Which two?" asks the bloke. "The two that never had twins," says Stanton.'

'That's him,' cried Dave. 'All the cheek in the world. But we can never fit him. It always boils down to the evidence of blacks. Still, it will be a bad day for the Territory when any amount of blacks will be believed against a white man.

However, let us drink. Here,' he said as he passed over a bottle, 'pour yourself one, I'm getting worn out with work.' After a pause he went on. 'I've been wondering what're your thoughts on the colour question—female—to do or not to do, as it were?'

Bob put on a thoughtful look. 'Well,' he said with deliberation, 'I'm not exactly a gin-burglar, you know. I have to be persuaded. But then,' and his face split in a wide grin, 'if there's anything any good about I'm awfully easy persuaded.'

Dave relaxed again. 'I thought it would be all right, but you can never be sure.'

Bob shrugged. 'Oh, well, it's hard to be righteous about it when it's the custom. Anyway, as far as anybody knows, the Government's policy for aboriginals is still to breed out the colour. So, as a faithful servant, who am I to refuse duty and miss out on a chance of breeding out a bit of colour? You've heard what the police sergeant's wife said to the constable's wife?'

Dave shook his head.

'It was when they heard that their husbands were coming back from a patrol in Arnhem Land. The sergeant's wife said to the constable's wife, "Oh, well, now I suppose you and me'll have to take up the black gins' burden." '

Dave nearly choked on cigarette smoke. Finally he managed to splutter, 'Oh, what you do to me!' When he had recovered he said: 'What say we try a bit of persuasion, since you need persuading? I have a couple of housemaids who could liven up a bronze statue.'

'That sounds good to me. From what I remember of your housemaids they are rather choice.'

'I have one you won't have seen. She's brand new. I haven't seen much of her myself yet, just waiting a chance. She's something out of the box. Just like you read about in South Sea Island romances.'

Dave's voice became earnest and impressive. 'She has nearly perfect features, just a touch of colour, and from what you can see of it in a dress, a gorgeous chassis. I tell you I first saw her in a Mother Hubbard and she looked lovely in that. That takes doing.'

'I'll say it does. So you picked up your houri at a mission?'

'Yes, at Kuralla. You should call in there some time. Then there's Anna. You most likely saw her. She's luscious—and lusty. She's been my pet for two years, but I'll lend her to you for the night. She might be a bit sulky at first—but she'll be all right.'

'Here,' put in Bob hastily, 'I don't want to get involved in any family arguments. Peace at any price is my motto.'

'Don't panic.' Dave airily waved away the other's protests. 'Anna will be good. She's well trained. She'll probably be extra good s'a matter of fact. She'll have to go for you in a big way to show me she doesn't care. But, oh, that other one! I've been dying to get at her.'

'Tell me,' asked Bob, 'how do you get on with your new ones? Do you still hold strictly to your policy of no force?'

'Oh, yes, I wouldn't force them. But of course, they don't know that. And I jolly them along a bit, you know. Nothing crude. But I usually prime them a bit first. You see this.' He walked over to the cabinet and came back with a bottle. 'This is the stuff—cheap cocktail—it works wonders. But you've no doubt tried it on girls down south. It's nice and sweet, they lap it up like lolly water. And it works like dynamite; a drop of this and they're all over you.'

'Hold it,' cried Bob, 'hold it. You're getting me all steamed up.'

'O.K.,' said Dave, pressing the bell, 'let action be the word.' Mrs. Lowe materialized again, face impassive but eyes sulky looking.

'Oh, Mrs. Lowe, will you bring our friend another bottle of

beer! And tell Anna and Mary to come here. Then you may retire, I shan't be wanting you again.'

8

Anna and Mary, having had their tea and toast, were just getting ready for bed when Mrs. Lowe's shrill voice startled them.

'Anna and Mary, Mr. Foster wants you at once, in the library.'

Anna spat viciously. 'Anna and Mary,' she snapped. 'That means he have you and I have to go with other man.' Her eyes blazed and she muttered foul things.

Mary wailed, 'Oh, Anna, what will I do?'

Anna glared. 'What the use arguin'? Do like I do. There'll be grog there. Get stuck into it and get half-drunk. Then you don't care what happen.'

She flounced out of the door and along the verandah, Mary forlornly tagging along behind.

'Ah, ah, there you are, girls,' said Dave brightly. 'Will you go over and talk to Mr. Lott, Anna? Mary, come and sit here.' He patted the broad arm of his chair. 'Come on, child, I won't hurt you,' as Mary hesitated. She perched gingerly on the arm of the chair.

'Here you are. Drink this,' said Dave coaxingly, holding out a tumblerful of cocktail. Mary took it miserably and dutifully

tried a sip. She was surprised to find that it tasted quite nice, sweet and fruity. Keeping her eye on Anna she saw her gulp down her glassful and hold out the glass for more.

Mary tipped her glass up and took a big swallow. She gasped but could feel a pleasant glow as the liquid ran down her throat. 'Come on, child, drink it up,' came the persuasive voice of Dave. 'It'll do you good.'

Mary took a deep breath and finished the glass, which Dave promptly seized and filled up.

'Now, take it easy, Mary; you'll soon be all right.'

The glow spread all over her now; her body felt light as air. This is good, she thought, and drank thirstily. Looking over to see how Anna was getting on, Mary was startled to see only two bare legs waving over the arm of the chair. The rest of Anna was hidden by the big shoulders of Bob as he bent over her and kissed her fiercely. A minute or so later, Anna twisted and kicked and struggled to her feet. She wriggled her hips to shake her dress down and flung her hair back off her face.

'Phew,' she gasped, 'you too fast for me. I need a drink to catch up.'

She poured herself a glassful of cocktail and turned towards Dave.

'This bottle finish. We die of thirst, me an' Mary.'

Dave leaned forward and peered round Mary. 'That didn't last you long. Look in the cabinet, there is more there. But take it steady. If you keep up this pace you'll soon be flat on your back.' Anna giggled as she went to the cabinet. She turned and stubbed her thumb towards Bob. 'That where he want me—flat on my back!'

'Yes,' retorted Bob, 'but not too flat. I want you down, but not out.'

'How you go, Mary?' Anna asked, as she slit the cap off the new bottle. 'You still look sad. Come on, drink that up an' have another.'

Mary emptied the glass and stood up to give it to Anna. She felt the glow through her head now, and wavered a little as she stood up.

'Whoa,' said Anna, grinning an ear-splitting grin. 'You doing all right. How you feel?'

'I feel wonderful,' said Mary, waving her arms. 'Just like a bird.'

'Well, little birdie, have a little drink an' perch on that chair again before you start fly.'

Mary sat down again, but now she relaxed and leaned against the back of the chair, one leg propping her up, the other stretched out along the chair-arm.

Gentle fingers sent a thrill through her as they ran lightly up her arm. She turned and looked at Dave. He has a nice kind face, she thought, I was silly to worry.

Bob stood up and squeezed Anna to him. Then he turned to propel her towards the door. Anna twisted away from him and grabbed for the bottle. With this cradled in her arm she snuggled up to him and they walked slowly out of the room.

Mary curled up convulsively as soft fingers ran electrically along her outstretched leg. Gentle hands drew her forward to slide into the chair. She squirmed and tensed as urgent hands slid under her dress. Her breasts ached as they were pressed fiercely against Dave's chest. Her eyes closed, and her breath came short.

The progress of the scrubbing next morning was spasmodic. Mrs. Lowe hovered close. Both her actions and expressions left no one in any doubt that she was on the warpath. She walked, or half-trotted, with her own peculiar scurrying motion, backwards and forwards, in and out of the neighbouring rooms. The girls' strokes were in harmony with her movements, slowing down as she walked away, and speeding up as she turned back again.

Mary had difficulty in concentrating as her thoughts kept wandering, trying to sort out her impressions of the night before. She felt amazingly happy, but vaguely guilty and puzzled. Guilty because she was happy, and had a distinct but hazy impression that she had enjoyed herself at the party; puzzled because she felt so well, and had an idea that after a night of what she supposed was debauch, she should be worn out and washed up—should indeed feel as Anna looked.

Mary had no clear recollection of going to her own bed, but she had been there for some time before getting up. Anna, however, had fumbled her way in just before Bessie had come to call them. Having had a more hectic night, in more ways than one, and being more temperamental by nature, Anna showed some effects. As she bent over her work she had shaken a fringe of hair down over her forehead, so that she could watch Mrs. Lowe without seeming to do so. In the shadowy light thus thrown on her face, her normal bronze complexion had a slight tinge of green, and her smoky eyes were bloodshot.

In answer to Mary's bright smile and brisk 'Good morning,' as Anna had struggled out of bed, she had grunted, and scowled ferociously. But this morning Anna's scowl had bounced off Mary's good humour without even denting it. Relief at being released from the tensions and fears of the past days and months, and at finding the appointed road not so unpleasant after all, had made her spirits soar irrepressibly.

Seizing the opportunity when Mrs. Lowe was in the dining-room, and, from the noises she made, up at the far end, Anna whispered: 'The Jap allus mad as hell mornings like this. Watch yourself an' only say, "Yes, ma'am, no, ma'am", then she got nothing on us.'

The noises in the dining-room died out, and Anna rushed to finish. 'I got to get somethin' when she goes out. If she start come back, you drop brush.'

At last Mrs. Lowe did go out, and her footsteps passed out

of hearing. Anna sprinted across and into the library. She was hardly in there before Mary heard Mrs. Lowe's footsteps. Mary dropped her scrubbing-brush, and frightened herself with the sudden clatter. Anna flew in, and slid backwards on her knees the last couple of yards, coming to rest in a scrubbing position, and with her body covering the bucket, as she smoothly slid a bottle into the soapy water.

This masterly exhibition had Mary so goggle-eyed with amazement that she had not picked up her brush and started work before Mrs. Lowe burst in.

'You stupid girl,' that lady scowled, 'do you want to wake everybody in the house! Get on with your work, and don't make so much noise.'

'Yes, ma'am,' murmured Mary meekly. 'Sorry, ma'am.'

Anna scowled up through the fringe of hair for a few minutes, and then decided on a bold stroke. Grabbing the bucket, she hurried out in the direction of the kitchen, calling out as she went, 'I see if Bessie got that hot water yet.'

Mrs. Lowe was so taken by surprise her mouth was still open, trying to form a shrill recall, after Anna had disappeared from sight. She glowered but said nothing when Anna returned and started to wield her brush vigorously.

A little later Mary was astounded to hear Anna humming a tune as she worked. Evidently she had found a potent medicine.

The two girls, Whip and Judy, rolled through the kitchen door, rocking with laughter. Each had an arm about the other, and the second hand firmly planted across her sister's mouth. So they rock-'n'-rolled along the verandah—an uneven progress full of jerkings and writhings, punctuated by coughing, grunting, and spitting, and an occasional long-drawn sob for breath.

On her way to the kitchen for breakfast, Mary stopped to watch this performance. Coming up to her the girls were

starting to gain some control; but suddenly they looked up and saw her. As if at a signal, the girls threw up their hands and drew long, almost shrieking breaths of air; then turned, leapt headlong from the verandah, and skeltered madly towards the outhouses, strange bubbling noises coming from them as they ran.

A little frown appeared between Mary's brows, and spread rapidly across her face as she hurried to the kitchen. Coming to the doorway, she heard a sudden scurrying noise, an urgent, breathless kind of noise that stopped as suddenly as it began, leaving in its place an urgent, unbreathing kind of silence. When she opened the fly-wire door Bessie was facing her, diligently studying some slices of toast. Bessie was strategically placed so as almost to obscure Anna, whose back, as she bent over the wood-box, was as eloquent of diligence as Bessie's face.

Bessie sneaked an oblique glance at the newcomer, and the look of earnest endeavour faded from her face like a misty breath from a warm mirror. 'O-oh,' she said, 'it only Mary. You hurry like that,' she continued, 'an' we think it the Jap.'

She sat down on a stool by the stove and went on with the toast-making. On a plate were several slices of bread that had been crisping on top of the stove. Now she was giving them a turn in front of the bare coals, to colour them up and make them look like toast.

Anna straightened up, put a hand on her midriff and gave an exaggerated gasp. 'Don' do that, Mary. I die of heart failure.' She bent over the wood-box, and came up holding a wine bottle aloft in triumph. She plonked the bottle down and perched herself on a corner of the table, skirt pulled up her thigh, and leg swinging.

'Have a shot o' this, Mary,' said Anna, waving her hand in the grand manner. 'Do you good. Me'n Bessie, we been done good.'

Mary's frown was still in evidence. 'Never mind about that,'

she snapped. 'What have you been telling the girls about me? They nearly choked when they saw me just now.'

Bessie swung round and looked searchingly at Mary, astonished to hear that shy girl speaking in such a forceful tone of voice. Then she hurried to reply before Anna had a chance. 'Now, now, Mary, don' get mad for nothing. Anna tell the kids about herself till they nearly in 'sterics. We have to send them away, or they laugh and bring the Jap. All she say about you was about the dickie bird. That finish them off.'

Bessie's face split in a terrific grin. 'You wanna hear about Anna an' the big boy? Tell her, Anna. Tell her how tired he is.'

Anna raised her hands. 'This big boy,' she told Mary earnestly, 'he go all night. He's randy as a scrub-bull. But here.' She held the bottle up to the light, showing it to be about a quarter full, and then pushed it towards Mary. 'Here, get some o' this into you. This spark you up.'

Mary protested that she didn't need a drink, didn't even want one just then. But as she spoke she was looking round. 'What you look for?' demanded Anna. 'You wanna glass? Pooh!' She waved her hand. 'Glasses. F'we have glasses an' things about, how you think we hide them if the Jap come? Here, take a swig out the bottle. Be a man.'

Still protesting weakly, Mary lifted the bottle and took a drink. Her eyes popped and she coughed and spluttered, but that didn't stop her from taking a good big swallow.

Anna's eyes popped, too. 'Well, I must say you pretty good for a learner, 'specially seein' you don' wanna learn, an' don' like the stuff.'

'Sh,' said Bessie. 'Shut up, you two. Here, sit down, Mary, an' have your brekfuss.'

Mary sat down to a plateful of juicy steak and leathery toast. As she munched, she mumbled: 'How d'you manage to get on to the wine? Surely Mr. Foster didn't give it to you, did he?'

Toasting finished, Bessie was bustling about, collecting breakfast dishes. 'Oh, well, sometimes I get some—here or there'—vaguely. 'You know I been about here a long time. I know a few tricks. But sometimes like this, when Mr. Foster has a party we plant a bottle for the morning. Mebbe he knows, but don't say anything. Any other time, though, he be on us like a ton of rocks. An' he back up the Jap if she catch us. We gotta be careful.'

She turned and looked Anna up and down. 'You straighten your skirt an' comb your hair. You look as if your big boy been rollin' you. Mebbe you better let Mary take the brekfuss in.'

Anna stiffened and flared up at this, but she had sense enough to touch herself up as advised. Within minutes she was reaching for the tray, with hardly a sign to show she was at all different from normal.

Bessie, shrewd judge, appraised her. 'O.K.—not too bad. Remember, keep your eyes half-shut an' your mouth proper shut—an' don' breathe on anybody. Then nobody'll know you're any sillier than usual.'

Without thinking much about it, Mary had expected some kind of change in relations between herself and Mr. Foster. But, at least in the daytime, there was no alteration at all. In the evenings, however, she was called on to play companion to the master, and listen to the wireless, or play the gramophone for him, in addition to more serious pastimes.

Soon, to her great relief, Anna was called back into the game. Until then her moods made life almost unbearable. Now she bloomed again, and took over most of the love-making.

Mary now had more time to listen to the radio and read magazines and papers. She entertained Mr. Foster in a different way—by her naive comments on stories, plays, and events as she read and heard of them. He never tired of

leading her on, but, besides poking fun at her, he would often explain things to her.

His explanations could hardly be classed as examples of painstaking accuracy, but they helped Mary to conceive ideas, even if some of the ideas were a little bit distorted.

So Mary's education progressed rapidly, especially in the development of a worldly outlook. She learned to think for herself, not taking for granted too much of what people said.

The biggest steps she made were in the art of playing on other people's moods to suit herself. Anna's tempestuous nature and quick-changing humours forced her to be crafty, and she quickly learned ways of teasing or soothing Anna as the occasion demanded. She found, too, that Mr. Foster's amiable disposition made him open to influence in little matters, though he had a stubborn enough streak when it came to a question of bolstering up his own selfishness or laziness.

Book Three

1

'JEEZ, look at that creamy over there.' Bud Baker put down his saw, and brushed his fingers across his eyebrows to throw off the sweat trickling into his eyes, as he walked over to the side of the half-finished house to get a better view. A nuggety man in his late twenties, the back of his khaki overalls showed a dark wet patch, surrounded by the salt tide-marks left by other days of toil in Darwin's steamy wet season. Eyes a shade too prominent, and mouth a bit slack, marred even features now mottled by the sun, border-line areas of peeling skin separating patches of brown from patches of red.

The house they were working on, a framework with a roof, stood in a clearing in the spear grass that was already level with the three-foot fence separating them from the next-door garden, and before the wet was over would be up eight or ten feet. In this élite suburb of Myilly Point most of the householders kept the grass under control, native labour being cheap, but even here it covered every vacant space.

Leaning on the corner of the building, Bud peered intently over the grass into the backyard of the house next door.

'Hey, Les,' he called to his mate, who was still busy sawing up boards. 'Come here an' have a gander at this an' tell me if it's jonnick, or if I'm seeing things.'

'Seeing things,' said Les, as he walked over to join Bud, 'you're allus seeing things. What are you on to now!'

He gave a low whistle. 'I'll say you're seeing things. So'm I. Choice—extra choice. Wonder where she sprang from? A man'd crawl over broken bottles to get at her.'

The object of all this praise continued undisturbed with her job of hanging out the washing. It was Mary, more mature now and more beautiful. Her skin, after months of little sun, was not much darker than a white brunette's. Black, glossy hair hung in natural waves down to her shoulder-blades. A thin cotton dress, made for someone smaller, stretched tightly across opulent curves as she alternately bent to the basket and reached up to the line.

'I'm going over to have a word with her,' said Bud, slipping the strap of his nail-bag over his head.

'You wanna watch yourself, mate,' cautioned Les. 'Remember, you're in Darwin now, not W.A. It's dynamite if you're caught playing with abos in this town.'

'But she's not an abo. There's dozens of half-caste pieces in town not as white as her.'

'Colour's nothing to go by. They can be any colour but they're still abos if they're under the Department. None o' these dames has anything but abos doing housework. They won't pay wages to get anybody else. Anyway, they can't shoot you for talking to her as long as it's daylight. But, like I said, just watch your step.'

Mary straightened up from the clothes-basket and turned round, a man's shirt hanging over her arm, as a low whistle came from near the garden fence. 'Hey, Mary, what name belongs you?'

She smiled a dazzling smile. 'How clever of you to guess. My name is Mary. What's yours?'

Bud's mottled face turned deep red all over. 'Jeez,' he

muttered, 'She speaks English. It's my mate's fault,' he blurted out. 'He reckoned you was an abo.'

Mary smiled sweetly. 'Your mate is a good judge,' she said. 'I am an aboriginal.'

Bud gasped, then leaning further forward over the fence he said earnestly: 'Look, I only wanted to be friends. I know I put my foot in it. Say, what you doin' tonight?'

'Tonight,' said Mary, turning to hang the shirt on the line, 'tonight I shall be safely shut up in the compound.'

'W-what?' stuttered Bud. 'You mean you—you really are an abo?'

Mary turned to face him again. 'Of course,' she replied. 'I told you before.'

'But the way you look, the way you talk—'

'I'm afraid that has nothing to do with it,' said Mary, fastening the last shirt out. 'I'm still an abo, as you put it. Now I'm afraid I must leave you. Your boss mightn't mind you wasting time, but I don't think mine is so easy. I only started work this morning, so I must be careful.'

With that she picked up the basket and hurried back to the house. Bud watched her, fascinated, till she passed from sight. Then he went back to his job.

'Gor,' he told his mate, 'she looks like a film star, an' talks better'n me or you, but she's an abo all right. Or so she says, anyway.'

'Yeah,' grunted Les. 'Well, what did I tell yer?

'Now look,' he said, straightening up and laying down his saw, 'you grab an armful of these floorboards an' spread 'em out inside. We'll get stuck into 'em together to get a stretch nailed down before the boss arrives. He must be due any time now, an' we want to make a bit of a show.'

The two worked busily for a time, laying floorboards,

levering them tight, and nailing them down. Then, as they paused for a breather, Bud returned to his favourite subject.

'Say, Les, what's the drill with these halfies? Back in the West you never see that many, but if you can lumber 'em off it's O.K. Here some seem to be O.K. an' some's not. That dance I went to th'other night. There was all colours there—black, white, brown, and brindle. I never lumbered none, I never tried, but I see blokes whizzin 'em off, an' it didn't seem to make no difference what colour they was. Yet you say lay off 'em.'

'Yeah, well, it's like I said. Some's classed as abos an' some's not. Now there's lots of all breeds, like you seen at the dance, that lives like whites an' gets paid the same. They join the union an' get award wages. There's still some differences in these. F'rinstance some can drink in a pub an' some can't. Far as I can make out they have to be declared O.K. by Native Affairs. But what makes the difference, God only knows. They might have to sling to some head.'

Les paused to get his pipe drawing. 'Trouble with this weed in the damp it gets so damn' wet you can't get it to draw.'

Then he went on: 'But any o' these can do pretty well what they like. An' as far as the sheilas goes, you can throw a leg over 'em if they'll let you. But with the abos it's a bird of a different feather. If you get caught throwin' a leg over one o' them they'll hit you with the book. Six moons in Fanny Bay first up. An' they only need to find you with one after dark, you don't need to be doin' anything to get a sixer—'

'But I still can't understand,' Bud interrupted. 'I hear all these old hands talking about gin rorting, as if it's the national sport in the Territory.'

'So it is,' said Les between puffs. He was working his face like a bellows, trying to get forced draught on his damp tobacco. 'But that's outside the town area. You can't touch 'em in the town. 'Course, there's plenty of it goes on, but you need

to be careful. That's what I said to you. You need to know what you're doing.'

Bud stood up and stretched, ready to start work again. 'How do you tell which is abos then?'

Les knocked his pipe out. 'Well, the girls is mostly on housework, like this one.' He nodded over to the house next door. 'As a rule they don't wear shoes, that's a fairly good sign, but not certain. Mostly they live in the compound, only come in in the daytime to work. But that's not certain, because a boss can get a permit from the Department to have a servant sleep in the house. It's like picking under-age girls, there mightn't be much difference in 'em, but you're wrong if you don't see it.'

Mary's becoming pregnant and being sent to Darwin had all happened much as Bessie and Anna had predicted, so that it had seemed to everyone to be just normal routine. Even Mrs. Foster had accepted the situation calmly, and without bothering to pretend indignation.

In the face of this phlegmatic public opinion, Mary had found difficulty in fostering her own feelings of crisis and drama. But the excitement of the trip to Darwin buoyed her up, and largely counteracted the slump in her emotions.

However, the atmosphere of the aboriginal compound near Darwin had soon stifled any pleasurable excitement and left her a prey to her previously suppressed fears and worries, besides providing her with some new ones.

Her first weeks there had been something of a nightmare, one that was still capable of bringing a shudder to her if she paused to think of it. The collection of old army huts scattered through the scrub—with the ground inches thick in dust most of the time, and ankle deep in water and mud whenever the torrential rains of the wet poured down—was uninviting enough. For Mary, young and shy, and painfully conscious of her swelling waistline, it was a tremendous

ordeal to face a huge, strange community. Mr. Robinson, the Superintendent of the compound, had done nothing to reassure her. A stern man, he disapproved, and took some pains to show his disapproval, of coloured girls in Mary's condition. Brusquely he had indicated a spot she could make her home, and promptly left her to it.

Used to hard beds, Mary had been little dismayed to find that here were no beds, but only a blanket or sack on the concrete floor. What had shaken her was the discovery that the little heaps of bedding on either side of her were the homes of families, and that family life with all its intimacies was here conducted in public.

Then had come her first job in town. Desperate for some relief from the life in the compound, despite her condition, she had pleaded for a job. Somewhat grudgingly, Mr. Robinson had found one for her, a temporary job with a woman who was going to have a baby herself.

The first morning the job was a pleasure; Mary was glad to be occupied, and away from the dreary camp, and the woman was pleasant. When she found that Mary was well brought up and well educated she treated her almost as an equal, and soon they were exchanging confidences about pregnancies.

The first mealtime, however, had brought an episode that was far from pleasant. At dinner-time the husband had come home from work, and for a time Mary could hear the sounds of crockery and cutlery clinking. Then came the woman's voice, 'Mary, bring Jacky's plate here for his dinner.'

Jacky, the coloured boy who did the work about the garden, chopped wood, and ran messages, was hovering close to the verandah. Mary hurried over and took the tin dish and pannikin he held out to her. As she carried them to the kitchen she noticed they were dirty, obviously only having been rinsed under the tap.

The woman handed the dish to her husband. He scraped the scraps off the plates into it, added a couple of ragged ends

of meat, and garnished it with a spoonful of blancmange. The wife slapped a lump of bread and jam on top. Then she rinsed the teapot out into the pannikin and dashed in some sugar and powdered milk. She smiled graciously as she handed the tins to Mary. 'Here you are, will you give them to Jacky?'

Mary's knees were weak as she walked across the verandah, and she felt as if she was suffocating—Jacky was one of her people; and he was fed like a dog—how horrible! God, was she to be offered a dishful of scraps?

She wavered on the edge of the verandah, ashamed to hand the food to Jacky. He soon solved the problem by jumping up the steps and grabbing the dishes, with a grin on his face.

As Mary turned back she heard an argument going on in the kitchen. 'But that's how they like it,' the man's voice was saying, 'all in together.'

'But you can't give her food like that. She's been well brought up.'

'Well, all right. I don't care. Give her some bread and jam. That's what they like, something sweet. But cut a good thick slice. That's what they like.'

To Mary's relief, however, the woman had ignored her husband's advice, and had continued to treat her like a human being.

So the job had been a good one, and had lasted right up to the time of the birth of her baby.

The baby, a beautiful girl, had managed a punctual and business-like entrance into the world. Mary was lucky to have the assistance of Susie, a woman who had had a few children herself (and was soon to have another one) and who was a willing and capable midwife.

Having successfully negotiated this obstacle, Mary was soon confronted with a bigger one—how to get a job now she had the baby to look after, or how to get the essential things

for the baby without the money a job would bring. The days dragged into weeks, and the weeks dragged seemingly endlessly into months, while Mary was driven nearly mad with frustration.

Then Susie came to the rescue. She was nursing her latest baby now, and had more milk than the baby could cope with, so she told Mary. So she offered to care for Polly, Mary's baby, during the day, if Mary could find work.

Naturally Mary had jumped at the opportunity, and rushed to seek a job. This time she had not had long to wait, as Mr. Robinson now knew that he could recommend her as a good and capable worker, and he had on his list a householder who was especially influential, and especially hard to please.

It was a great relief to Mary to be away from the compound for a few hours a day, and a great load off her mind now that she would have a few shillings to buy things for Polly. She was disappointed that she was only to get ten shillings a week. Some of the girls talked of earning fifteen or twenty shillings, and Mary had built up hopes of a job like that, although she had realized that probably the girls were just talking big. Still, she was earning money.

The fact that the work was fairly hard, that Mrs. Allsop kept at her all day, did not worry Mary at all. The hours were short and the job seemed easy compared to the one at Malcolm Downs. One disappointment was that Mrs. Allsop did not give her some clothes. Lots of the other girls seemed to get plenty of dresses given to them. Dresses that were old and worn for whites, but still good for the girls. Mary was desperately in need of a dress. She only had one that was fit to go out in, and it was so tight that she was afraid it would burst every time she bent down. She could only keep on hoping that Mrs. Allsop would do something before the dress finally fell to pieces.

Every day Bud would have a few words with her, if it was

only a yell, as she walked past on some errand. Mary enjoyed the feeling that she had some little connection with someone in the outside world, even if most of his sallies were a bit crude. Under the eagle eye of Mrs. Allsop, she rarely got a chance to say much to him.

One day, though, Mrs. Allsop had to go to town. The list of jobs she left behind defeated its own purpose; it was so long that Mary decided she couldn't possibly do everything in time, so a moment here or there made no difference.

She was hanging out a few things on the line when Bud hailed. There was a long empty line stretching right up to the house, but of course there was a better breeze down this end of the yard. 'Hi ya, gorgeous, what's cookin'?'

Mary looked over her shoulder and showed a dazzling set of teeth in a broad smile. 'I don't know, I can smell something burning. It wouldn't be you, would it?'

Bud squinted down at his shoulder and grinned ruefully. 'All right, rub it in. I was silly enough to take notice o' that mate o' mine. He's allus tellin me "Get into singlet an' shorts." So I did. So here I am, burnt to a frazzle.'

'Don't you have any sun where you come from?'

'In the West! No sun! Lissen! The West has the best climate in Australia, but it's not like this where you're fryin' or boilin' all the time.'

'Well, why did you come here if the West is so much better?'

'More dough, gorgeous, more dough. I used to work for this bloke down in the West. He sent down for me. I'm doin' all right. An' if I'd 'a' known what luscious things was about here I'd 'a' came up long ago.'

Mary half-turned from the last towel she was pegging. 'What are you talking about?'

'What am I talkin' about? Bud leered. 'You, gorgeous, you. You know when you stretch up to that line with the sun

behind you, you have me pawin' at the ground. You know that dress is pretty thin.'

Mary blushed a bit and moved away from the line of the sun. 'Haven't you anything better to do than stare at me?'

'Better, I'll say I know something better.' Bud leaned over the fence. 'Come here till I get a grip on you. I'll show you somethin' better. Anyway, where's old Horseface today? She's keepin' mighty quiet.'

'Oh, she's gone to town.'

'Gone to town? W-e-ll, here's where we go to town.' Bud threw a leg over the fence.

'Hold it. Don't come over,' Mary cried, getting ready to run. 'If you come over the fence I'll go, and that's the last you'll see of me.'

He settled back, half on the fence, half on the ground. 'Jeez,' he grumbled, 'you're hard. You're stingier with it than—' he stopped short.

She flared: 'Go on, why don't you say it? Than a white girl, you mean.'

Bud looked uncomfortable. 'You keep harpin' on it 'cos I made a mistake the first day. But how can I get any forrarder if I can't get near you? I don't care about you bein' coloured.'

Mary was mollified. 'Oh, well, we'll let it go. But I still think you expect me to be easy because I'm coloured.'

'Lissen,' Bud protested, 'I tell you it makes no difference to me what colour you are. You look gorgeous to me.'

Mary smiled and blew him a kiss from a safe distance. 'You know I rather like you, but whatever I might want to do, I'm not free. And I can't afford to run any risks. So,' she picked up her basket, 'I'd better go before the strain gets too much for you.'

Bud groaned, 'Christ, you're hard.'

2

There was a buzz of excitement in the camp, little knots of people dressed in their best, laughing and chattering, and others darting about getting ready to go. It was Wednesday night and the picture trucks were due any minute. There was an air of carnival on figures dimly lit by the last rosy glow from the west.

Polly was asleep and all the work finished, but Mary couldn't rest. With two full weeks' work behind her she had money in her pocket. The urge grew on her, she hadn't been to the pictures for months.

As she heard the big trucks grinding on the gravel at the gate Mary could stand it no longer. Surely one shilling wouldn't hurt anyone. She raced over to Susie. 'Oh, could I leave Polly with you? I'd like to go to the pictures.'

'Yes, child, 'course you can. She be right longs me. You have good time.' Susie jumped to her feet and went to meet Mary as she ran back with the baby. 'Off you go quick 'fore the truck go. I fix baby.'

As Mary sprinted across the flat one truck was going out of the gate and the other one just starting to move. Her heart sank, but the boys and girls on the truck saw her. Such a chorus of yells and shrieks went up, the driver stopped dead. He didn't know whether he'd run over somebody, or what had happened. Half a dozen hands reached down and Mary nearly flew over the high sides of the truck.

They were so tightly packed there was hardly standing room, but who cared. This was picture night—the great event of the week. So they laughed and squealed and waved and cooeed to any passers-by. For Mary it was the event of

months, and any faint remnant of worry about robbing Polly of a shilling was drowned in a rising tide of excitement.

They roared along through the humid night. Past the railway loco sheds and the Parap Hotel. What a squealing and a gasping as they swayed and lurched round the two right-angled bends over the railway line! Then a long straight run that ended as they soared over the Daly Street Bridge, where to those in the middle of the truck, who could see nothing on either side, they seemed to be flying through the air. Up Smith Street the tyres hissed in water lying on the road, and the sky was heavy with promise of more to come.

A swerve and splash as the near-side wheels ploughed into the stream coursing down the gutter, and with a flourish the truck pulled up—at the pictures. The laughing, giggling load spilled on to the footpath and streamed down the lane alongside the theatre.

Against the gloom of the surrounding black tropic night the heart of Darwin seemed gay and brightly lit, as street lights and lights from the theatre, cafés, and milk bars were doubled by reflections in the wet road. The multi-complexioned people on the footpath gave an impression of haste and urgency strange to lethargic Darwin as they hurried, with an occasional eye cocked to the foreboding sky, to attain their several goals before the next shower.

One lone figure, more in step with the usual Darwin tempo, swayed slightly on feet wide-planted on the footpath in front of the hotel opposite. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two tall men in khaki. With instant and obvious concentration he straightened up and gazed anxiously at the sky. Clearly his sole purpose in being there was to find out what the weather portended. The policemen hesitated, looked him up and down, then shrugged and continued on into the bar. The drunk watched them out of sight, then he swung round, beat an erratic course across the street, and sought sanctuary in the picture show. By now the brief busy

period was over and the street deserted, as sounds of action echoed from the theatre.

From the street entrance a gallery extended over about half the theatre. In the gallery and the seats below it, the first- and second-class patrons had their places. Tonight only a scattering of people braved the damp seats in the open, to glean what fresh air there was in the steamy atmosphere.

But right up at the front sat the aboriginals, nearly close enough to touch the horses as the goodies and baddies galloped backwards and forwards in endless pursuit.

Suddenly, without any fuss or bother, down came the rain, a torrential downpour that nearly smothered the voices from the picture. There was a quick scramble further back, as those who were in the open scuttled back for shelter. The third-class patrons, having no shelter to seek, did what people do in North Queensland when it rains—they got wet.

After a few minutes the rain stopped as suddenly as it had started. Then the coloured folks could sit and steam, with a great squelching sound when anyone shifted on a seat. Mary worried a bit about how her dress was going to look tomorrow, but brushed the thought aside to concentrate on the screen.

At half-time the side door was opened and everybody went out into the lane. Some of those who had money followed the lane as far as Cavenagh Street to buy ice-cream or lemonade. But most of them, like Mary, just stood about and talked.

Under some trees opposite the end of the theatre stood an insanitary convenience. Mary waited shyly till the people were drifting back into the theatre and then went down there. As she came out again, a figure lurched round the tree and bumped into her. Mary tried to get away, but the man hung on to her arm to hold himself up. He straightened himself up, and in the dim light from a distant lamp Mary saw it was Bud Baker. His bloodshot eyes were nearly popping out of his head

and his bottom lip was sagging. At the same time, he recognized her.

'Why, shtrike me dead, s'my lil' Mary. Here, givesh kish.'

With a sudden heave he swung her round behind the tree and wrapped his arms about her, nearly dragging her down with his sagging weight. 'Givesh kish,' he mumbled, trying to find her lips.

Mary was badly frightened; she struggled desperately to get away. 'You fool,' she hissed, 'let me go!' In her anxiety her voice rose high and sharp. 'Oh, Bud, you fool, let me go!'

A heavy hand grasped Bud and spun him into the open. Two big policemen stood there. 'Is he annoying you, miss?' one of them asked. Then, as Mary stepped into the light, flushed red as a beet, eyes miserable and downcast: 'God, she's an abo. Oh, you'll come with us, me lad.'

The policeman took a better grip on Bud, who was trying to pull away. 'Lemme go, lemme go,' he howled, and started to twist and turn. The second policeman jumped in, grabbed Bud's arm, and twisted it up his back. Bud nearly doubled up. 'Oh,' he moaned, 'you'll break my arm.'

The policeman gave another twist, then slackened off. 'O.K., then, mebbe you'll stand still now.'

Bud's face was white. He was a lot more sober now. 'Look,' he said in a placating voice, 'you got nothin' on me. I done nothin'. '

The first policeman sneered. 'Oh, no, you've done nothing. Only in company of an aboriginal woman between the hours of sunset and sunrise. That's nothing, is it?' He laughed a very unpleasant laugh. 'It'll hold you for a while. Now, mind your P's and Q's, and come quiet or you'll get something else.'

The second policeman said: 'What about her? We taking her?' The other thought for a minute. 'No, we won't bother. We can always get her if we want her.'

He turned to Mary, who was standing twisting her fingers, a picture of abject misery. 'What name belongs you?'

Mary murmured, 'Mary.'

'Well, Mary, you bin gettem longa picshers quick smart. Tomorrow you bin stopem longa compound, savee?'

His eyes and voice snarled at her. Mary shrank back and nodded her head weakly. 'Go on—get!' he snapped, and she turned and ran.

The screen was a blur for the rest of the show. Mary neither saw nor heard what was going on. She was numb with despair. She had heard other girls talking about how serious it was to be caught with a white man, and she didn't know what would happen to her. It might be gaol or anything. Just as she was feeling more hopeful for the future!

As Mary made her way with dragging feet across the yard of the compound, she felt numb from long-sustained tension. It was eleven o'clock when the summons had come to her to report to the Superintendent's office, and she had been in a sweat of fear and anxiety since early morning.

Soon after breakfast Mary had been called before Mr. Robinson. He had told her that a phone message from the police had informed him of her escapade the previous night, and that she was to be ready to go to court at any time. For half an hour he had lectured her and left her feeling helpless and hopeless to await a summons to go to court. Mr. Robinson had received word soon after that the case was not to be heard that day, but hadn't bothered to tell Mary, so she had stewed all morning.

A strange white man, tall and thin, with a long sorrowful face, was sitting in the office as Mary nervously hesitated on the doorstep. 'Come in, girl, come in,' called Mr. Robinson. 'Well, here she is, Mr. Dewey,' he said to the other man. 'I'll leave you to talk to her. You'll have no trouble. She speaks good English.' He turned to Mary as he was leaving. 'Mr.

Dewey wants to speak to you about Baker, the man you were with last night. Don't forget what I told you this morning,' and with a warning frown he left the room.

The tall, thin man raised himself to his feet slowly. When he was fully extended he seemed to tower a couple of feet over Mary. Not having the least idea what to expect, she looked up at him a trifle nervously, despite the feeling that had been growing on her all morning that things had reached the stage where it was no use worrying any more. However, all he did was to pull a chair up close to his, and motion her to sit down in it.

'Come on,' he said, in a dry husky voice that somehow matched a face so thin it seemed to be dehydrated. 'Come on,' he repeated, 'sit down. I won't hurt you. I only want to be able to talk to you without everyone hearing.'

Mary perched on the extreme edge of the chair, her face tightly composed. 'Good,' said Mr. Dewey, with an attempted smile that only served to deepen the wrinkles and accentuate the mournful expression of his face. 'Now, I believe you know Bud Baker.'

Mary nodded, and then, clearing her throat, managed to blurt out: 'What does this mean? That there's no court case on today?'

The tall man inclined his head. 'That's right. The case is not on until tomorrow. Why, didn't they tell you?'

'Oh,' Mary gasped, 'and I was so worried.'

'Well, you've got another day to worry about it. But meanwhile I have some questions I want to ask you on behalf of Mr. Bud Baker.

'I am a lawyer,' he began. Then, thinking Mary did not understand, he added: 'That is, I speak for people in the courts. Mr. Baker has asked me to speak for him. I thought he was a fool, just throwing money away, because he was certain

to go to gaol anyway. But since I have seen you I am not so sure. He might be right.'

Leaning forward a little, he went on to explain. 'It was his idea for me to see you. He thinks he can claim that he mistook you for an ordinary free citizen, since you look so well and speak so well. This, besides the fact that he has only been a few weeks in the Territory, should be enough to justify a mistake. The only catch is that you know him. But if you would say in court that you had never seen him before there might be a chance for him.'

The expression on Mary's face was not very encouraging. Mr. Dewey must have seen this for he hurried on. 'You see, this is very serious for Baker. He is likely to get six months' gaol unless you help him. Since you are not up on any charge it can't make any difference to you. He thought that even if you were a little annoyed with him for molesting you, you wouldn't want him to do six months when you could so easily prevent it.'

He paused, but Mary said nothing, so he went on to explain. 'You would not have to say much in court. Just answer a couple of simple questions. Baker told me to tell you that he is sorry for what he did. It was only because he was drunk. And he told me to tell you that he would give you a present if you did the right thing.' He paused again, then asked, 'Do you understand what I am saying?'

Mary's eyes burned hotly and her mouth twisted as she bitterly echoed: 'Do I understand? Yes, Mr. Dewey, I understand. Your Mr. Baker wants me to tell lies to keep him out of gaol. It's terrible—he will go to gaol for six months, and all he did was maul an abo. And he will give me a present—what more could an abo want?'

She paused, then raced on: 'And it won't make any difference to me. Oh, no. Do you know what happens to abo girls who get mixed up in troubles like that, Mr. Dewey? I do, I was told by Mr. Robinson this morning. They are sent to

outlying settlements, like Delissaville or even further. And they might never get back here again. Do you know what that means to me? Here, I had faint hopes that some day I might raise myself up to be a human being instead of just an abo. If I get sent to an outback settlement, I am an abo for life—a light-coloured gin. In a few years I could count on having a tribe of various-coloured piccaninnies. I have a white baby now, and she would be brought up as an abo too.'

Mary's voice was husky with emotion. 'That is all the difference it means to me to be mauled by a drunken white man, Mr. Dewey.'

His voice was a little more husky too. 'Oh, but I had no idea—' he began.

'It doesn't matter,' Mary interrupted, more calmly. 'Mr. Baker was too drunk to remember, no doubt, but I said to him very clearly, "You fool, Bud, let me go," just as the police arrived, so the police know he knew me before.

'They told all this to Mr. Robinson. That's why he attacked me this morning.' Her voice was bitter again. 'He said I must have encouraged Baker. And although the police told him what I said, and I told him what had happened, he just wiped that off. "You encourage these men and tease them, and then scream when you get caught," he told me. "You coloured girls are all the same." But, as far as Baker is concerned, Mr. Robinson said that although he sympathized with him a bit, the Department would press the case against him. The Department is being blamed for that kind of thing happening all the time, but it's not often the white men get caught. So they want to make an example of somebody. So that's the position for Baker, Mr. Dewey.'

Mr. Dewey stood up and stretched his long length. 'Well, it seems I have been wasting my time,' he said, turning round to look for his hat. 'I told Baker it would be a waste of time and money when he first spoke to me about it.'

He came back, twirling his white panama in his hand and

stood drooping over Mary. 'I really only agreed to take the case because he pleaded so hard. He is desperately afraid of going to gaol. So, if you are worried about the business, at least you can be sure he is sweating too.'

Mary too stood up, and looked at the lawyer. 'He is afraid of gaol?' she asked.

'I never saw a man more afraid,' said Mr. Dewey with a little laugh. 'You'd think six months in Fanny Bay was the end of the world.'

Mary looked down at her hands, her voice sounded brittle as if it were being forced through a constricted throat. 'There is still one thing Baker could do to help himself.'

The panama hat stopped twirling. 'Oh,' asked Mr. Dewey, 'and what is that?'

Mary jerked her head up and looked full at him, her face set, but a light in her eyes more of anguish than defiance. 'He could claim he wanted to marry me.' Having got the worst out, she went on more easily. 'You know the Department likes to have white men marry coloured girls? You *do* know? It is right, isn't it?' she broke off anxiously.

The long face wavered slightly in a half-nod. 'It seems so, at times,' he replied. 'But any white man wanting to marry a native girl must apply to the Department for permission before he can be in her company.'

Mary went on hurriedly: 'Yes, but Bud could say he had only just decided and asked me, but that he hadn't had time to ask the Department, when he met me by accident and made the mistake. I could say the same.' Her voice was eager now. 'The man who speaks in court for the Department might believe us and be friendly. I know it is not Mr. Robinson, because he told me he doesn't go to court. And if he were friendly, the judge might be so too.' She stopped and looked up anxiously at the tall man.

'Yes,' he replied slowly. 'Such a plea might have an effect.

Of course,' he warned, 'I have no idea whether Mr. Baker would be prepared to go so far to try to avoid gaol. But if he were, a lot would depend on you.' He looked searchingly into the moist eyes upturned to his. 'Could you tell a lie—and stick to it if you were cross-questioned! You know, a lot of coloured people can't.'

'I have learned a lot from white people in the past year or two,' Mary replied bitterly. 'I think I can tell a lie. You see,' she added, 'I would be taking a big risk. If Bud Baker should try this and fail, he loses nothing. He only goes to Fanny Bay just the same. But for me, if I try and fail, it is the finish. I am in Mr. Robinson's hands, and he will be sure I have tried to put something over him. I shall be sent to the furthest settlement he knows of—and my sentence will be for life—yes, I think I could tell a lie.'

She stood there pathetically proud and defiant, her eyes smouldering, her threadbare dress all crumpled from last night's rain, save where it was stretched tightly across her hips and heaving breasts. The brilliant sunlight streaming in through the open door at her side brought out the lights in her glossy black hair, and made the smooth skin of her arm and face glow golden. The lawyer was reminded of a picture he had seen of a Christian girl waiting for Nero's lions. She is really lovely, he thought, with an unaccustomed catch in his throat.

'Yes, Mary, I think you could,' he murmured. She noticed that he used her name for the first time.

He continued: 'All I can do is tell Baker of your ideas, and perhaps assure him that it would give him a definite chance. I might say that, although in general I am not in favour of mixed marriages, in this case, if young Baker won you, I think he need never be ashamed of his wife.'

He raised his hand. 'See that,' he said. 'If we go on with this, I will raise my hand like that when I see you at the court. So you will know what to say.'

He looked at his watch. 'Phew, I'd better call Robinson and tell him a story or he will be grilling you all day to find out what kept us so long. It was only by a personal favour that he allowed me to speak to you at all. You'd better go now before he comes, and I'll have a talk to him.'

Mary had stumbled across the yard on her way to the office because her brain was numb and dazed. As she went back she stumbled again, but this time it was because her brain was literally seething. Oh, to be out of here, and free—but wasn't it foolish to run such a risk? It wasn't likely that Baker would consider marrying her, but—but . . .

3

The utility truck was of the thoughtless modern type, smooth steel sides with no footholds. Thankful that the driver had not left his seat, Mary pulled her precious, delicate dress to her waist to clamber aboard.

That dress had caused her many anxious moments the previous afternoon—trying to wash it clean without rubbing holes in the tender fabric—hanging it out wet to avoid wrinkles, keeping close watch on a threatening sky—then, when it was safely dry at last, carefully stitching sprung seams and weak places. Now, to save the dress, she stood in the truck, precariously clinging to the smooth cabin as they raced into town. She could not help looking down, though every glance at the dress deepened her feeling of depression.

An imposing structure with columns and arches was the, vague idea of a court she had gained from books and papers. Inside was a huge room with bewigged judges and men of law, and crowds of people. A shabby, barefoot creature could well quail at the thought.

The utility sped through the town and slid to a halt before an undistinguished-looking, boxlike timber building before Mary's thoughts came back to earth. Still preoccupied, Mary pulled the skirt up her shapely thighs to vault out of the truck, and didn't even notice the long low whistle from the driver. That cheeky-looking youth waved to the front of the building. 'You wait there,' he said. He smacked his lips as he watched her walk across to the court.

A narrow verandah or porch didn't prevent the morning sun from beating fiercely on the front of the court. A steamy heat arose from the waist-high grass all round as the night's rain was thirstily sucked up into the cloudless sky. Over the road, an island of shade in a sea of sun-swept grass, a rambling old house was nearly hidden from sight by gross bottle trees, graceful palms, and a deep mound of bougainvillaea-covered trellis.

A thumping and scraping, as of chairs and tables being moved about, was all Mary could hear from the court. The driver left the door of the utility open as he sat on the seat. Mary could feel his eyes on her but when she turned to him and frowned he only grinned and winked.

This small annoyance was soon brushed aside. A car pulled up, and Mary's heart beat faster as she saw the long thin form of Mr. Dewey unfolding itself from behind the steering wheel. With her eyes focussed on him, she hardly recognized the nuggety form of Bud Baker as he walked round the car and joined the lawyer. Like him, Bud wore a white drill suit, but where Mr. Dewey's whites clung to him as if they belonged, Bud and his suit looked strained and awkward as if theirs was a very recent acquaintance.

Mr. Dewey gave no sign he even noted Mary's presence as they walked to the door of the courthouse. Her heart gradually slowed down, her feelings were so mixed she didn't know whether she was relieved or despondent.

At the door Mr. Dewey turned, smiled, and raised his hand. Mary's heart stopped, then, as she drew a gasping breath, burst into a mad gallop. She stood transfixed, eyes glued to the doorway. As her heart slowed down her brain began to race.

'Are you Mary?' A voice at her shoulder, and she spun round as if shot. The short, chubby man looked even chubbier in white shorts and long stockings, like a fat overgrown schoolboy. But there was nothing boyish about the balding brow he mopped as he fanned himself with a panama.

Mary swallowed hard. 'Yes, I'm Mary.'

'Right, then you just wait here and you'll be called if we need you. But I don't suppose we shall.' He turned to the driver of the utility, who was standing now, leaning on the car door. 'You can go now, Mark. I'll run her back to the compound. I have to go out there.'

'O.K., Mr. Slater!'

Mr. Slater hurried into court.

A scraping of feet inside, and a voice intoning words Mary couldn't catch. A man came out and stood by the door. A small, dapper man this, his double-breasted navy blue would have branded him an alien, but for the deep creases that shouted of long months in a suitcase. Mary thought he too must be waiting to be called.

A variety of voices now. Then a loud voice and heavy feet coming towards the door, 'Calling Stanley Adams—calling Stanley Adams—calling Stanley Adams.' Before the last words were out the man by the door had stubbed his cigarette and gone into the court. More voices, but not for long, soon there was a scraping and shuffling. Then out came Stanley Adams,

looking tiny alongside a giant with widespread nose and crinkly ears.

'You got off light at a spin.'

'Jeez, I'll say. Lucky you come along. I was gone a million till you . . .'

The voices died away in the direction of the nearest hotel.

Voices again. Mary was feeling numb, wondering if she would be able to think, let alone speak. Then at last the heavy feet and the loud voice, 'Calling aboriginal Mary—calling aboriginal Mary—calling aboriginal Mary.'

Mary was stunned. She had never had her position in life so crudely driven home. Not a human being—but aboriginal Mary—and so proclaimed to all the world.

The policeman was outside the door, beckoning her in, while she was still standing motionless from the shock. Then the reaction set in and it was just what she needed. A flood of resentment swept over her. Her eyes glowed and she swept to the door, shoulders back and chin out.

'Cheeky fella' she would have been labelled if she had gone down the court like that. But at the door the chill atmosphere of the room and years of training bade her be subdued. So she walked smoothly down the little court, bare feet whispering on the boards, her eyes still burning with resentment, but becomingly veiled with long downcast lashes.

There was no chill in the physical atmosphere; rather the lifeless humidity of a deserted hothouse, where no plants pour out the scent of their luxurious growth. But the spiritual chill of all police courts was there. In these places there is no background of human emotion, for there are no human beings to generate emotion—the benches are bare.

The chill of indifference touched Mary as she walked between rows of empty benches. Ahead of her, Mr. Dewey, a burly police sergeant, and Mr. Slater sat slumped in

uncomfortable lassitude. Above and beyond them, the clerk of courts scribbled diligently, while over all a shiny bald pate pored over documents. This was the last incongruous touch. Expecting to see a huge wig presiding, she was repelled yet fascinated to see instead a skull so absolutely devoid of wig. Glancing sideways, Mary noticed staring eyes in a white face anxiously following her. There was no cheek in Bud Baker today.

In her preoccupation with the glistening skull, Mary nearly walked into the dais. A sharp hiss broke the spell, and she turned to see the policeman beckoning her to a box identical with the one Bud was grasping with nervous hands. As Mary stepped into the box, before she had time to look round, the little bird-like clerk was holding out a Bible and jabbering, '. . . swear to tell the truth . . .'

'Just a minute,' came a quiet deep voice from the Bench.

From a more level footing, Mary, not so dazzled by the shiny pate, saw a heavy-jowled face with calm eyes deep-set beside a ponderous nose. 'Do you understand the taking of the oath?'

Mary nodded, cleared her throat, and said, 'Y-yes, sir.'

'Good, carry on,' said the magistrate. The little man jabbered—then, 'Say "I do." '

'I do,' echoed Mary, with a twinge of conscience as she raised the Bible.

But the conscience was smothered and buried deep as Mr. Dewey's first words brought back the memory of that shameful cry—'aboriginal Mary'.

As the little man stepped back, Mr. Dewey was on his feet. 'Your name is Mary? You are an aboriginal?'

Mary answered automatically—then her brain cleared and she was no longer afraid of these white men, only fiercely determined to reach their level. When Mr. Dewey asked, 'Do

you know the defendant, Henry Baker!' she had to keep her voice low to answer quietly.

'Will you tell the court in your own words what your relations have been with Henry Baker, that is, what has happened between you? Take your time, and don't be nervous.' As he spoke his eyes were warning and his slow voice soothing her.

She made an appealing picture as she told her story, an innocent child of nature in her poor little dress, her voice soft but clear, and her solemn brown eyes staring straight ahead, except when she turned an occasional sideways glance through long lashes in the direction of the magistrate.

She told how she had gone to work for Mrs. Allsop. How Mr. Baker had come running over to talk to her the very first day. How he had run to the fence after that, every time she was in the yard. Mostly they had not had much time together, but on occasion, when Mrs. Allsop was busy somewhere else, they had had long talks. How he had asked her all about herself, and told her about Western Australia, and said that in W.A. he would be able to take her out. Finally, he had surprised her by asking her to marry him. She had thought he was joking, trying to play a cruel joke on her. She turned a sorrowful glance on the magistrate. Because she was an aboriginal she had thought he couldn't be serious. But he had at last convinced her. She had said yes, she would, if he got permission from the Department of Native Affairs. He had promised to see the Department right away, on the very next day.

Then had come that terrible night when she had gone to the pictures for the first time in months. 'I walked out of the building and in the shadow of the big tree bumped into Mr. Baker. When he recognized me, he grabbed me and tried to kiss me. I tried to pull away and to tell him that it was the wrong thing. But before I could make him understand, the police came and took hold of him.'

She turned a pitiful look on the magistrate and then back to Mr. Dewey. That gentleman sat down now and the magistrate spoke. 'Do you wish to ask the witness any questions, Sergeant?'

The sergeant did. He rose ponderously to his feet. 'You say you were going back to the pictures, and you had just met the defendant when the police arrived. But the constables say that all the people had gone back into the pictures.'

Mary looked sorrowfully at the magistrate. 'There were so many people, and I felt so strange. I waited only for them to leave so I could go in the place.'

The policeman sat down. 'That's all, Your Worship.'

The magistrate sat up straight. 'There's one thing I want to get clear.' To Mary: 'You have said that this young man asked you to marry him and you said yes. Now do you still wish to marry him?'

'Oh, yes,' replied Mary.

'Good. Now you can sit down.'

The policeman pointed to the benches in the body of the court and Mary tiptoed out and sat down, tensed to hear the verdict.

It was to the Native Affairs man the magistrate turned next. 'Mr. Slater, you have heard the evidence given by the defendant and this witness, that they wish to get married. I may say that I was most impressed by the girl Mary. Now can you tell me what would be the attitude of your Department to this proposed marriage?'

Mr. Slater rose to his feet, his fat face gleaming with perspiration. 'I am afraid, Your Worship, I can't commit the Department when an application has not been received. Each application must be dealt with on its merits. But,' and he gave an oily smirk, 'I think I can assure the court that such an application would be very favourably received.'

The huge shining dome leant forward again. 'Well, Mr.

Dewey, I have no alternative but to find your client guilty, but I propose to suspend sentence on his entering into a bond to be of good behaviour for two years, and on condition that, subject to the consent of the Department of Native Affairs, he marry the girl Mary within one month.' He looked questioningly at Mr. Dewey.

That gentleman climbed to his feet. 'Thank you, Your Worship. I will arrange for the bond.'

'Henry Baker,' intoned the magistrate. 'I find you guilty as charged, and hereby sentence you to six months' imprisonment . . . .'

The court was filled with whispering. Mr. Dewey whispering to Bud Baker, the sergeant whispering to Mr. Slater, the clerk of courts whispering to the magistrate. Mary wondered what was going on. The clerk motioned to the sergeant, the sergeant to the policeman, and the policeman hurried round the Bench and through a door at the back.

Pound of booted feet and slither of bare feet—and the stage is set, a tableau of the races, white and black. From the dock, a black man now faces the court of the whites.

A broad, rugged black head on broad, rugged shoulders. From the tousled hair over the left ear a red, raised weal stretches to the corner of the eye. The opposite prominent cheekbone swells to part close the eye, while from a cut on the under side new-clotted blood smears the grizzled cheek. Dried blood and dirt stains the faded khaki shirt that strains over the knotty shoulders.

The body is immobile but the eyes, sullen and wary, turn back and forth—as once a bear chained in the pit, ears torn and snout bleeding, might warily face a ring of mastiffs. On with the baiting.

'Aboriginal Sam charged . . . found on the night . . . prohibited place . . . town of Darwin . . . resisting arrest,' the clerk droned on, while Mary watched those eyes.

'Does the defendant understand English?'

'No, Your Worship.'

'How do you plead, Mr. Slater?'

'Guilty, Your Worship,' from the table, not the dock.

'May it please the court, the facts are these.' The burly sergeant on his feet now. 'At 8.30 p.m. on the night of — Sam, being an aboriginal within the meaning of the Ordinance, was found by Constables Davis and Loxwood in a prohibited place, to wit, the corner of Mitchell and Knuckey Streets in the town of Darwin. When asked did he have a permit, and warned that he would be arrested, the defendant tried to run away and considerable force was necessary to arrest him and bring him to the lock-up. During the struggle Constable Davis' shirt was torn.'

'Yes. Mr. Slater?'

The sergeant sat down and the chubby Mr. Slater half-rose, his hands on the table propping him as he leaned forward. 'I am informed, Your Worship, that the defendant understands he is not allowed in the town; but his lubra works in the town and lives at the house of her employer. It is believed he has visited her before; although this is the first time he has been apprehended.'

His defence concluded, Mr. Slater relaxed and let himself fall back.

Mary felt a lump in her throat as she watched those eyes. 'Thirty days on each count, sentences to be concurrent.' And the bear was led from the pit.

Mary was left with the haunting memory of uncomprehending, sullen and wary eyes set in a scarred and swollen black face.

4

Mary relaxed. The blanket spread on the bare concrete was hardly the last word in comfort, but to stretch out on it in the early afternoon, with no thought of impending work, was slothful ease for Mary. The air hung heavy with the presage of the last of the rains; a lone cloud moved slowly, like a water-logged hulk dragging reluctantly with the current. Such light breeze as stirred could hardly reach ground level through the enveloping shroud of scrub and ten-foot grass. Lying in line with the open door to catch any breath of air that might stir, Mary enjoyed the titillation of the drops of sweat trickling over her bare skin; and Polly alongside her, full fed, slept regardless.

After three weeks of suspense and anxiety, everything was fixed. Nothing remained to be done. Tomorrow morning she would put on the new dress—Mary's eyes turned to it, where it hung on the wall in isolated splendour—pick up Polly, and walk, or limp, in those awkward new shoes, out of the compound and out of this life for ever. By this time tomorrow she would be a free citizen, married to a white man. She looked again at the dress and the shoes to gain reassurance; at the shoes especially. Glistening instruments of torture they might be, but they were a token, a symbol of a social standard.

From the clothes her thoughts went back with a shudder to the dreadful day when she had met Rosie, Bud's sister-in-law, to buy the outfit. Mary had approached her with shy hopefulness of a welcome, but Rosie, a buxom blonde, had received her with a bare tolerance, and cold blue eyes that spoke eloquently of contempt. (Naturally Mary thought this contempt was for her as a coloured girl. It was not till much later she found that Rosie's attitude was chiefly based on the

belief that Bud had been trapped against his will by a clever trick. Like most men, Bud could not admit that he had any desire to get married, he must claim he had been caught; and, of course, he had evidence to back his claim.)

Mary had plumbed the depths of humiliation that day. Tagging along, her bare feet and pitiful dress shrieking of the compound, behind the smartly dressed Rosie, she had died a thousand deaths as they pushed into the busy, glittering store. To the disdainful shop girl, Rosie's manner had plainly said 'it doesn't matter what you show her, anything's too good.' Mary hadn't cared much either about the dress and the other things, but she was afraid of the shoes and couldn't summon up courage to ask for others. So she had been stuck with a pair of high-heeled patent-leather abortions.

But Polly. . . . Mary smiled tenderly and turned over to gaze lovingly on the sleeping baby. Polly had won Rosie where she had failed miserably. On Bud's instructions, a couple of days after the shopping excursion, she had gone to visit Rosie at her home. Having no one to leave her with that day, in fear and trembling she had taken Polly along with her. It turned out that Rosie was a child lover with none of her own. The little mite, so pink and beautiful, had captivated her immediately.

They were going to live with Rosie and her husband, Bud's brother Mark, and life wouldn't be worth living with Rosie as an enemy. Now, and Mary glowed inwardly, it would be heaven. Rosie and Mark lived in an old army hut down by the sea. A section partitioned off would be a bedroom for Bud and Mary, with a stove in a lean-to outside. They would share the big centre section of the hut as a living-room with Rosie and Mark. Mary's spirits soared as she thought what a lovely home she could make of it—that she would sleep again with the sound of the surf in her ears. She hadn't met Mark, but Rosie had told her he was just an older edition of Bud, and, like him, easy-going when sober, but a bit hard to handle when

drunk. Mary was sure it didn't matter, Rosie was so obviously the boss, and Rosie loved Polly.

Mary squirmed on her hard bed, and the sweat seemed to trickle faster at the memory of that awful moment when she had told Bud about Polly. For nearly two weeks after the court case they had waited for a permit from the Department. Bud had grown increasingly impatient for her, and she had suffered doubts as to whether he was trying to get a permit, whether the Department was going to refuse, whether this, whether that . . . But she had refused to run any risks by giving way to Bud, and she hadn't been game to tell him about Polly.

At last they lay together on the still-warm sand, the official sanction for their being in company reposing in the pocket of Bud's trousers higher up the beach. It was a tranquil night; a vaporous sky lightly veiled a too-luminous moon, and a languorous tide barely murmured as it curtsied and withdrew from an indifferent shore. The tranquillity of the night had no influence on Bud; he was a wild lover and rough.

When the first violence of their mating storm was passed, and Bud lay, breathing deeply, beside her, Mary told him of her daughter. For a second Bud lay motionless, but it was the quiet of a volcano gathering its forces. Suddenly he sat up and 'blew his top'. Bloody bitch taking him on—playing innocent—all these weeks leading him on—never a word—what did she take him for—buggared if he was going to keep somebody else's bastard—leave her in the camp—give her to a mission.

The vision had come to Mary of herself choosing between buying her freedom at Polly's expense or staying with her in the compound. Frantically she had clung to Bud, till the eloquence of her soft body had time to dim his protests; she had moulded herself to him so that every part of him could feel the thrill of warm, quivering flesh. When his muscles tensed and his voice had faltered into silence, Mary had murmured to him between kisses, her vibrant limbs

maintaining a relentlessly enticing pressure. He had never thought her innocent, had he? It was only that he was offended by not being told. How could she have told him, called out across the paddock from the clothes-line, or across the court? How would one little baby hurt him? Soon she hoped to have one of his. How could Bud argue or resist when burning flesh called to burning flesh, and he was seized with a paroxysm of straining lust? Weakly he lay and weakly forgave when frenzied efforts had brought fulfilment, but Mary could not feel secure until Polly had won Rosie. But now all was safe, the wedding was tomorrow, and the only condition Bud had imposed was that from then on she break all ties with aboriginal people; she was not even to speak with one again. This condition she had readily accepted, having no friends to renounce. Susie was her only near friend and Susie understood; Susie, gentle soul, expected nothing and demanded nothing from life.

Emerging from her reverie, Mary's mind gradually began to accept a picture her eyes had been futilely relaying for some minutes. Framed in the open doorway and brilliantly lit by the blazing sun, a little group of people stood restlessly still in the centre of the white-hot yard. Mr. Robinson was there, his lean figure bent aggressively forward. Even at that distance Mary could see, or imagine, the domineering glint in his eye. Mutely accepting his tirade, a coloured man and woman sagged in a mile-weary droop, dirty feet scuffling in the burning dust. The man, tall and bony, in filthy, ragged shirt and trousers, fawned on Mr. Robinson, his loose lips obscenely curled in a placating smirk. The woman, face obscured by the bundle on her shoulder, wilted a dutiful pace behind her lord and master. Her dirt-stiffened dress hung in straight folds, showing no sign of a human form beneath, till pipe-stem legs emerged, grey with the dust of the track.

Of a sudden Mr. Robinson swung round and pointed, no doubt telling them where to camp. Mary stiffened, and her

head lifted from the floor, as the pair turned to follow the direction of the pointing finger. It was on the little black woman, with the bundle on her shoulder and blackened billy dangling from a spidery thin arm, that Mary's eyes were focussed. As the couple started to move on a line to take them past her hut, Mary gasped, swung to her feet and darted to the door, where she peered round the jamb, screening her nakedness behind the wall.

For a moment she hung there, then swiftly turned to grab her old dress and wriggle her lush curves into it, tight as a second skin. The little figure padding mechanically across the yard jerked to a stop, then slowly turned as Mary ran out calling: 'Meg! Meg!'

Meg it was, pathetically thin, her face aged and drawn, dirty and weary; but her eyes, though blood-veined and red-rimmed, managed a hint of a smile as Mary ran up to her.

'Hullo, Mary,' she croaked, then turned so that her bundle foiled Mary's attempt to embrace her. 'I gotta keep goin', ' she flung over her shoulder to where Mary stood, a pained and puzzled look on her face. Meg nodded to the gaunt figure ahead of her. 'Can't stop now, but see you later. Where you camp?'

Mary pointed. 'There, the far end of that hut. But how long'll you be? I'll boil the billy.'

Meg was already trudging on. 'Might be half an hour,' she said. Mary walked slowly back to her hut, sorrowful eyes turning to follow her friend. Once there she got busy out at the back, lighting a little fire of twigs and putting a jam-tin billy on to boil. Back in the hut she peeked at Polly to make sure she was all right, then reached up to a ledge over the window. A sigh of relief as she peered into a tin and saw a pinch of dusty tea-leaves. Another grope and she brought down a dusty tin of bully beef. How lucky that she had saved this emergency meal so long!

For what seemed hours, but was probably less than the

half-hour, she squatted in the shade alongside the hut, occasionally tending the fire to keep the billy near the boil.

Meg walked a little more briskly, and forced a smile on her tired face as she came up to the fire. But as Mary again tried to give her a hug she twisted away. 'Leave me alone,' she muttered.

Eyes clouded and face flushed, Mary bent over the fire. 'You'd like some tea? 'Fraid I've no sugar or milk.'

Eager to get over the awkward moment, Meg exclaimed, 'Oh, any way, Mary, I dyin' for a drink.'

'We'll stay out here so we won't waken the baby,' said Mary as she carried the tea into the shade of the hut and put it down alongside a cracked and handleless cup.

'Oh,' gasped Meg. 'You got a baby?'

'My word,' smiled Mary. 'Have a look at her.' And she ducked under the shutter that was propped out on a long stick.

'Oh, Mary, she lubly,' cried Meg. She clung to the window-ledge and craned eagerly forward. 'You bin busy since you left Kuralla,' she added as she at last turned away and squatted on the dusty ground.

'No, Mary, don' open that for me,' as she saw Mary hacking away at the bully-beef tin with a handleless knife and a big stone. 'Keep it. Might be you need it some time.'

Trying to keep her fingers out of danger as she hammered at the knife blade with the rock, Mary was too busy to talk until the top of the tin was bruised off. 'There you are,' she said with some triumph, proffering the greasy mess. 'That should keep you going until tea-time. And don't worry about me. I won't need it.'

She put the jagged tin in front of Meg, then turned away with tears in her eyes as she saw Meg feverishly scooping the meat out with clawlike fingers, and gulping it down like a starving dog.

What a terrible change in Meg! she thought. What must she have gone through to bring her to this! Her cheekbones stuck out of a pinched and haggard face, and her arms and legs were only skin and bone. Worst of all, she was dirty. Here, Mary thought, was the reason Meg had turned away when she had tried to kiss her. Meg, who had always been so spotlessly clean, would be ashamed to have a friend touch her when she was dirty. Dirty she was. Not just dirty from today's walking, but with dirt engrained in her skin as if she hadn't washed for a week, and filthy matted hair. Mary knew she couldn't have been on a dry track, because it was only the end of the wet season, so whichever way she had come there must have been plenty of water.

'Tell me 'bout your baby.' Meg's voice broke in on her thoughts, and Mary turned round with a start, guiltily wondering if Meg had been reading her expression. If she had, Meg didn't show it. She sat there, bony legs tucked under her, sipping tea, the meat tin over by the wall polished so that the inside shone. Some of the strain had gone from her face, and Mary thought she could soon look young again if she had plenty to eat.

Starting with the baby, Mary was soon telling all her story, and got so engrossed in it that she was going into ecstasies about tomorrow, and the great party they were going to have tomorrow night—how many people—how much drink—how much food! She broke off in confusion as she realized what she was doing.

'I'm sorry, Meg,' she stammered. 'I wasn't thinking.'

Meg sighed. The still, rapt expression faded from her face, and the faraway look from her eyes. 'Don' say you sorry. I glad, glad somebody bin lucky—somebody lucky,' she echoed almost in a whisper.

'Tell me, Meg,' asked Mary hesitantly. 'That man. Is he your husband?'

Meg spat fiercely on the ground. 'I his woman,' she said bitterly. 'At any rate, till I get away from him.'

She saw the look on Mary's face. 'I know you think he no good. Well, he bad. He worse thing there is. But I din' know, anyway I got no choice when I get away from that job.'

Mary asked gently: 'Was that job bad, Meg? Was it as bad as we thought?'

Meg's eyes were fixed on the ground, her voice low and spiritless. 'Dunno what you thought, but it worse than anything I thought. But I bin help make it bad. I young an' silly an' don' know a black, like a dog, gotta crawl on your belly. Then I try run away an' get caught an' that make it worse. But then come some good luck.' Meg brightened up at the memory.

'A white man stop near the station an' start pull his truck to pieces. It old truck, an' he on'y worker, not station boss. Day'n half he work an' I see he got truck all together again. That night I desperate an' I creep down to try talk to him. He orright, after while he lie quiet an' lissen my story.

'Then he say: "Yeh, I allus knew this Corley (that's boss) is mean, but I never knew until now how real tough he is. You know, I bin here day'n' half an' the bastard never asks me if I want a hand, or if I need tucker. Jeez, you'd think we was in the city, not the Territory."

'I say, "How I get away from here?"

'He quiet for minute; then, "You know you have to look for you'self somewhere if you go away?"

'I say, "Anythin' better'n this."

'He say: "Might be right. Well, if you like, I take you to Margaret."

'Oh, Mary,' Meg cried. 'I nearly die when he say that. I nearly choke. "Oh," I gasp. "We go now?"

' "No bloody fear we don't," says Harry (that his name). "Not with my lights. We go in daylight."

‘ “Oh, then I can’t go. Boss stop me.”

‘Harry laughs an’ hold up his fist, in moonlight it look like coconut. “Yeh, you think so?” he say.

‘ “But if I go he get pollis,” I say.

‘ “That’ll be the day,” he say. “Corley’s on’y worry is that the cops might come for him. He got little block o’ land an’ sneaks few calves from big stations. All big station owners an’ cops crooked on him.”

‘Then I think another thing. “Oh, Harry, he allus got gun.”

‘ “Yeh, I notice he’s never far from that rifle of his. But don’t worry about that. He’d shoot a black orright, but it’s diffrunt when he’s on to a white an’ so got a chance o’ gettin’ hung for it. Lissen, you ferget Corley. I’ll fix him.”

‘ “It sound too good to be true,” I whisper, “but how I get away from house?”

‘ “You got anythin’ up there?”

‘ “No, I got nothin’ .”

‘ “Well, stay here then. Yeh, that’s right, closer. I’ll go up in the mornin’ an’ tell ’em I’m takin’ you. I don’t want ’em to think you’re runnin’ away. It might give ’em ideas.” ’

Meg paused, and Mary asked excitedly, ‘Oh, Meg, and did it really happen like that?’

Meg’s eyes shone. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘just like he say. He just tell Corley an’ away we go. Oh, I had wunnerful two days with Harry, Mary. It wunnerful to be with somebody who good as anybody else. You feel so safe. Make sure of your white man, Mary.’ Her voice was almost fierce. ‘Hook him proper.’

Then more calmly she continued: ‘You know what Harry do in Margaret? ’Cos I in rags he buy me a dress. Then he say: “Well, kid, that’s about all I can do for you. You’re on your own now.” He say he can’t keep me ’cos he gotta work in town an’ there’s too many laws an’ too many cops in town. An’ it not

safe for me alone 'cos Corley might find me. On'y thing is to move somewhere. I say I allus want go to Darwin.

'So he give me some tucker. Then he point north an' say: "There she is, kid, an open road. An' it's not that far. But, come to think of it, it's not that bloody close either when you're on the hoof. Anyway, good luck."

'Oh, Mary, I think mebbe I never be so sorry to leave anybody.

'So I loose an' ready to go to Darwin like I allus wanted.' Meg's voice was bitter as she said this, and her thin body rocked back and forward as she continued. 'But I gotta be with somebody. If girl on her own, polliss pick her up smartly. So this Jimmy (that's what they call this animal), he the on'y one coming this way, so I hook on to him.

'I soon find why he take me. We come to camp of white men working on road. We sit down till they finish tucker. Then Jimmy he go over an' talk. He come back with tucker but don' give me any. He say, "White man there he bin wannem you." I not move, so he jump up, grab a stick an' go to bash me, so I quick go to white man. This go on allatime. Men on railway, men on roads anywhere there any men he take me. I don' get no money, don' get much tucker. He take the money an' buy plonk or metho mostly metho. Soon I on it when I get chance.'

'Oh, Meg,' wailed Mary, 'how horrible. But won't metho hurt you?'

'I dunno.' Meg's smoky eyes smouldered now and her voice had an edge on it. 'What you can do? You walk all day with no tucker or not much, then you wait till white men finish eat an' you gotta have 'em roll on you. They don' say, "Here, have a feed first," but they do bring out metho an' say, "Have a charge o' this." One night, I pretty crook I say to one man, "I die for tucker." He give me metho an' tell me: "I no' want you alive tomorrow. I want you alive tonight." 'Course, they pay Jimmy, it not their fault I get nothing.'

Meg paused and shook her head solemnly. 'It all crook,' she went on, 'but worse is we get no place. Long's Jimmy can fin' men who want me, so's he can get grog, he don' care which way we go. But,' she said with a touch of triumph, 'I fin' a way to trick him. I hear men say sometime, "One thing, she's clean." 'Course they talk about a black like a dog, they don' care if you hear—an' I pleased—huh.' She gave a scornful laugh. 'But soon I get too tired. I don' bother about wash, on'y if it easy. Then sometime men say, "Phew, she stink," an' if they have me once they don' want me again. So I get my big idea—I don' wash at all, no more. Soon I greasy like this'—she gestured down at herself—'an' nobody much have me at all.

'Jimmy mad as hell, but he don' know what wrong. He so dirty he don' know no difference. So he start to hurry to Darwin where he think he get grog, an' here we are.'

Mary's face was streaked with tears. 'Oh, Meg, it's all so horrible. What can you do? Can't you get away from him?'

'I couldn't on the track. Nobody else take me. Jimmy's bad man, everybody 'fraid of him. But here I think I lose him. I think he soon be in gaol. He can't keep away from the grog. This boss man here knows him. He tell him when we come: "You watch yourself. One little trouble in camp an' you gone. I sent you out before an' I send you further next time, if you not go to gaol." Jimmy 'fraid o' this boss orright, but he still go to town's soon's we get here.'

'But that might be a long time,' said Mary woefully. 'Oh, there must be some way. I wish I could do something.'

'Don' be silly,' answered Meg. 'You got to look for yourself an' the baby.'

'Oh, the baby,' cried Mary, jumping to her feet. 'I'd better see if she's all right.'

A peep through the window, and Mary was back again. 'She's all right,' she said.

Both sat silent for a while, staring at the barren ground as if for inspiration.

'I don't know what you can do,' said Mary at last, shaking her head despairingly. 'It's no use you getting a job. He'll take your money if you earn any.'

'Aw, forget him,' said Meg. 'Tell me 'bout the town an' the picshers.' She leaned forward eagerly. 'Tell me 'bout the picshers. I wait years for see them.'

'Oh, yes, that's what I can do.' Mary's face brightened up. 'I can take you to the pictures. This is the night. Oh, isn't that lucky? And I have a few shillings.'

'Ooh, could we?' Years seemed to fall from Meg. But then she slumped again. 'But you shouldn't go. Won't your man want you?'

'No, no,' crowed Mary. 'He's drinking with his friends tonight. I'm absolutely free. That's if I find somebody to look after Polly.'

'It's no good,' moaned Meg. 'I can't go like this.' She pointed to herself in disgust.

'I'll fix that too. I've got a dress that's better than the one I wear, but it's too small for me. But it would be all right for you.'

Mary looked at the shadow of the hut. 'It's getting late. The mob will be home from work soon.' She jumped up. 'I'll get the dress and a towel—you can keep both, I won't need them again—there's a shower over past that hut.' She pointed. 'And when you get clean you'll feel better. Then we can have a talk till tea-time. And the baby will be awake, you can have a talk to my fine daughter—then we can eat, then we'll go to the pictures.'

Mary beamed and ran inside without waiting for an answer.

When Meg came back the camp was alive with talk and

laughter. The trucks had emptied their loads and everybody was happy. The sun was getting low and the worst fierce heat of the day was gone. Tonight they had to clean up, and get ready for the pictures.

Mary jumped up from where she had been sitting waiting, and her eyes lit up as she saw Meg. The soap and water had worked miracles. From a distance she looked like a carefree girl again. There was a spring in her step and her teeth were gleaming in a wide grin. Although too big for her the dress hung softly, and flowed easily about her as she walked. As she came closer the hollows in her cheeks became apparent, but could not compete with the wide grin and the sparkling eyes.

'Oh, you look lovely, Meg,' cried Mary, and ran to meet her with outstretched arms.

The sparkle died in Meg's eyes, the grin changed to a frown, and she side-stepped the welcoming arms.

Mary faltered to a stop, bewildered and hurt.

Meg saw the look on Mary's face and her own showed indecision and doubt. She chewed her bottom lip for a few seconds before making a decision. Then she glanced quickly all round and moved close to Mary to say in a low, husky voice: 'You allatime want grab me. I don' mean to tell you this, but 'pears I gotta. You mus' keep away from me. I got the leprosy.'

'O-o-oh.' Mary shuddered as if she had been struck, and her eyes seemed to glaze over as the colour drained from her cheeks. This time Meg had to stop herself as she automatically jumped forward to hold Mary, but she did stop herself, and then stepped back a pace.

'No, no, no,' stammered Mary, 'not that, Meg. Don't say you've got that. You can't tell, can you? It might be a mistake, mightn't it?'

Meg shook her head solemnly. 'I 'fraid I not make mistake. But don' take on so, Mary. I thought you gonna faint. You

white as ghost. An' please don' sing out 'bout it. I don' want everybody know.'

Some of the colour had returned to Mary's face, but her eyes were wet and her mouth drooped and trembled. 'But it can't be true, Meg. Not that on top of everything else. Are you sure of it? How d'you tell?'

'See here.' Meg touched her forehead. 'You can't see much, mebbe bit of line, but I feel it. The skin get dry an' hard. Lola tell me how it start.'

'But then,' Mary burst in eagerly, just remembering to keep her voice low, 'if it's only just starting, the doctors will be able to cure it.'

'I not go near any doctor,' said Meg bitterly. 'You hear what Lola say 'bout leper island. I not goin' get myself stuck there. I better dead. That why I tell you keep quiet, I not goin' tell you even, 'cos I know you on'y worry, but you keep try touch me. You got the baby now, you got chance to be like white folk. You don' want run any risk. Remember 'f I go with you tonight, you keep you' hands to you'self.'

'But is it touching that gives it to you?' asked Mary. 'You didn't touch Lola, did you?'

'Yes, 'course I did,' said Meg. 'My mother used feed her, 'fore she die, and when I'se little kid I used grab Lola sometime. 'Course I dunno how you get it, but you allus s'posed not touch lepers.'

'Oh, there's Polly. I'll have to go and feed her. Come in, Meg, and see her.'

'No fear, I won' go in there.'

'But, Meg, it's not going to be dangerous just to be in the hut.'

'I don' care.' The little face was set firmly. 'I'se not goin' inside. But I like to see her.' Her voice was wistful. 'You couldn't bring her out here, I s'pose?'

'Of course, I'll get something to sit on.' Mary ran inside

and came back in a minute with a box which she put down in the shade, and then hurried away to get Polly, who was howling in earnest now.

Polly was quiet, nuzzling up against Mary's breast, trying to get through the cloth, as they came back.

'O-o-h,' breathed Meg, and her arms went out involuntarily. Then with a shamefaced look she thrust them behind her back. 'Oh, Mary, isn't she a darlin' !'

Mary's face glowed with pride as she sat down on the box and pulled her dress open. 'I hope she doesn't take too long, and doesn't get a lot of wind. It must be nearly tea-time.' Then her face clouded over, she felt ashamed of herself for being so happy.

'Oh, Meg,' she cried, 'it's not fair. I have so much—and you —'

'Don' worry 'bout me,' said Meg bravely. 'I jus' wanna see Darwin an' the picshers. Then I go bush. I not stay till somebody see what wrong and get me put on island.'

'When did you first think you had this—this—' Mary stumbled over the dreadful word. 'This leprosy?'

'On'y few weeks ago. I feel funny for long time, but never think. Then it suddenly strike me. Oh—I nearly die. But then I think, when I on the way to Darwin, I might's well see it 'fore I go bush.'

'But don't you think, Meg.' Mary's voice was earnest and pleading, 'don't you think it would be better to try to get cured? It's terrible to think of you out in the bush just slowly —oh—' She shuddered to a stop.

'What the use arguin', Mary? I tol' you I not goin' to be stuck on that island for life. Lola say nobody never get cured, on'y one white man. She might be wrong. I lissen to people while I here, and if I hear of people get cured mebbe I try. But I 'specs to be goin' bush 'fore long.'

'Isn't it dangerous? Won't you—won't other people be touching you?'

'I keep away from other girls much's I can. An' I don' want any man touch me. If they do, it their fault, I can't be worry.' A vicious look came on Meg's face. 'As for that animal Jimmy, if he got it, it the best thing can happen. I nearly think I should stay with him longer to try make sure he get it.' She lapsed into silence, her pinched little face sullen and brooding.

She looked so fragile and tiny, Mary thought, everybody should be protecting her. She bent over the baby to hide her tears.

Only as the trucks braked off the road, and rocked and bumped over the gutter and through the gate of the compound, did the thrill and excitement of the night's excursion die, and give way to sober thoughts of tomorrow.

Everything had been perfect, even the weather. Though clouds had drifted over a couple of times, so low that they appeared to brush the screen, they had laboured heavily on to drop their burden directly into the sea. When rain threatens, fine weather is an exciting gift to those sitting in an open-air picture show.

Mary had thrilled and shrilled as never before at the antics on the screen. With the two of them to supplement each other's emotions, excitement had piled on excitement until they were shrieking and gasping. The show had been ideal, the wildest of all Wild Westerns where every gun fired fifty shots without reloading, every horse galloped fifty miles without turning a hair, and the hero and heroine fell fifty times into the traps of the villains without receiving a scratch.

At half-time they had adventured down the ill-lit lane to Cavenagh Street, Mary keeping a fearful eye on trees and bushes, in case any drunken white man should stagger out to trap her again. From the Chinese schoolgirl in the little shop Mary had bought two ice-creams, then with the air of a

connoisseur had introduced Meg to the delights of the frozen sweet.

The second half of the show, with the delirious comedy of cartoon creatures, followed by the hair-raising adventures of a wild man swinging through the trees to wrestle with jungle beasts, provided them with material for excited chatter until they reached the compound again.

But as they clambered off the truck, and the other happy people scattered to their camps, the shadow of tomorrow crept over them and they moved slowly and silently through the black night.

For Meg the brief holiday was over and the future stretched ahead sordid and cruel, with no ray of hope to lighten the way, nor any friendly hand to hold hers when she should grow frightened and weary.

The pleasurable thrill, strongly mixed with apprehension though it might be, with which Mary had looked forward to her new life, was now smothered by her fears for Meg. It seemed cruel and heartless to leave Meg alone to face life with that terrible Jimmy, and over and beyond all that the creeping terror of the still more terrible disease.

Harrowed by her thoughts, it was Mary who first broke the silence. 'Oh, Meg, what can we do? It seems wrong for me to leave you like this. What can we do!'

They came to a standstill by the door of Mary's hut, their faces lit by the pale reflected glow of a light inside the hut. 'What can we do?' echoed Meg, her face looking old and drawn in the half-light. 'What can anybody do? Nothin'. There nothin' to worry about. Soon's I get rid o' this big bludger everythin' be orright.'

'Well, what about him tonight?' asked Mary, her voice taut with strain. 'Won't he be crooked on you tonight? You'd better sleep with me.'

'Don' be silly,' said Meg sharply. 'I tol' you I not go in your

hut. Anyway, I not worry tonight, he be out to it by now. You keep nag, nag, nag. You don't have to worry 'bout me.'

'Sorry, Meg,' murmured Mary, with a catch in her voice. 'I was only trying to help. I just feel that I should be able to help somehow. Isn't there anything I can do?'

Meg's eyes glistened palely in the wan light. She made as if to speak, her lips moved, but no words came, then she got out hesitatingly, 'Mary, there one thing I like.'

'Yes, Meg,' Mary burst in eagerly. 'What is it? Oh, tell me. What can I do?'

'Well.' The low voice stopped and started again. 'You talk about big party your place and plenty grog.' She hesitated, then rushed on. 'I on'y think mebbe you could get me some plonk. You know,' she hurried to explain, 'jus' somethin' left nobody want. Then I feel I celebrate same as you.'

Meg's eyes looked big and pathetic as they searched Mary's face and saw the hesitancy there. 'Oh, don' bother,' she added hastily. 'I on'y thought.'

'No, no,' said Mary hastily. 'I was only wondering how.' Her mind raced; surely she could manage a little thing like that for Meg? 'Yes, I'll get you something, but how will I . . .' She hesitated again. 'You see, I can't come down here.'

'Oh, don' worry 'bout that,' Meg put in eagerly, her tongue running avidly over her lips. 'F'you can get it, I get it off you. You say this road go down to where you live. I go down near there the next morning an' wait.' She looked anxiously at Mary. 'I not want you do anything wrong.'

'Oh, I'll get you some plonk,' said Mary, more bravely than she felt.

'Well, I just sit in the bush near the road,' said Meg. 'You come any time, you jus' leave the bottle in the grass. You don' go near me, I see you an' I get it. That orright?'

'Yes, that should be easy,' answered Mary, her eyes moist as

they dwelt on the peaked little face. 'Oh, Meg, what can we do?'

'You don' worry,' said Meg with a grin. 'You jus' 'member I wait on the road. Now better say g'night an' good luck. I prob'ly can't get here in the morning.'

Mary involuntarily raised her arms, but Meg waved her away. 'Good luck,' she said, and turned slowly away.

5

By ten o'clock the Bakers' party was in full swing, the last stragglers had arrived and found a niche for themselves in the crowded room and the spirit of celebration was being imbibed in real earnest.

The unloveliness of the ex-army hut was all too apparent, despite the few curtains camouflaging the walls, a makeshift ceiling hiding most of the black-iron roof, and scattered grass mats softening the appearance of the concrete floor. But few workers in Darwin had any other kind of accommodation, and fewer still had anything better.

A score or so of people sat, or perched, round the room: on a couple of old settees, a few odd chairs, a few boxes converted into stools or chairs and on others, naked, unashamed, unconverted, but nonetheless seats for the night. The women in featherweight dresses and the men mostly in shirts and long trousers (partly a concession to convention, and partly to

the mosquitoes) had one thing in common, they all looked flushed and sweaty.

Over a table in the centre of the room, half-covered with bottles—whisky, gin, brandy, rum, port, sherry, and villainous-looking cocktail—leaned Bud. Bud, flushed and sweating, was pouring beer into glasses while Rosie stood by, evidently remonstrating. Under the table, surrounded by empty bottles, a washtub showed a few bottle-necks peeping out of a mound of straw and broken ice.

Les jumped up and came over to the table. 'Rosie's right, Bud. Y'should be entertainin' the guests. Give's a song or a speech.'

'Too right,' came the chorus. 'Give's a song. No, speech—speech.'

As Bud turned to face the crowd, Les edged in behind him and grabbed a bottle.

'Phew,' sighed Rosie, mopping her brow. 'About time somebody took over. Look at the mess.' She pointed to the table, swimming with beer. 'He wouldn't let me do it. Hang there now. Don't let him back.'

'I won't,' said Les with determination. 'There's not enough beer to waste. An' you go easy, Rosie. Don't push beer on anybody. Let 'em drink wine or spirits if they will. There's not much beer for us that likes it, without pushin' it on them that don't appreciate it.'

Bud's face glowed. He didn't exactly waver on his feet, but sort of quivered, as if he might easily waver. He held up his hands. 'Lissen, I can't make a shpeech.'

'Speech, speech!' they called.

Then a male voice, 'The bride, where's the bride?'

The chorus echoed the cry: 'Yes, the bride. Where's the bride?' Bud peered round. 'Yeah, where are yer? C'mon, Mary. C'mon here.'

From a dim corner, behind a group of people, Mary rose to

her feet and hesitated. The calls doubled and she threaded her way to Bud's side.

Her golden skin had a deep rose tint from excitement and embarrassment and her eyes glistened beneath long lashes. The dress, though not close-fitting, was soft enough to cling to her magnificent figure as she walked. A trifle gaudy, through no choice of hers, its flamboyant colours gave a touch of barbaric splendour to her exotic beauty, which was crowned by a multi-coloured silk kerchief loosely knotted in her mass of glossy black hair.

Bud's eyes glowed through the beer haze and he reached out to pull her to him. 'Here y'are,' he cried. 'Y'want a speech. Well, take a look. Y'can see what I got. Did all ri' for meself, eh?'

While the mob roared, Bud gave her a kiss that was both loud and long. At last Mary managed to pull away. 'Oh, Bud, not here,' she pleaded, face burning like fire.

'O.K.,' Bud shouted, 'everybody drink up. Here, Mary, I'll get you one.' He picked up a tumbler and started to get a bottle of beer. 'Oh, no, you won't drink beer.' He put down the beer, grabbed a bottle of whisky, and filled her glass as if it was beer. 'Right now. Bottoms up!'

Mary stood demurely while they drank and knocked holes in the smoke-cloud with 'For They are Jolly Good Fellows'. Then she sneaked quietly back to her corner.

Overflowing a chair that creaked constantly in protest, a fat, red-faced woman streamed with sweat as she sipped a glass of port. Mary pulled a wry face. 'Here y'are, dear. Sit down here again,' and the fat woman patted a box alongside her.

'Not just now,' said Mary, 'I'll have to see how the baby is.' She went on through the door into their own room. Putting down her glass, still nearly full of whisky, Mary peered through the mosquito net round a little cot to see how Polly was getting on. All night the baby had been tossing and

turning and whimpering. She had seemed flushed and hot and Mary was greatly worried, as this was the first time she had ever had anything wrong with her. This time Polly appeared to be rather quieter, and at least no hotter, so Mary turned away a bit reassured.

As her eyes fell on the whisky, an idea came to her. Amid all the excitement and worry she had still found time to think of Meg and her bottle of drink, but couldn't find a way to get any. She had hoped that some would be left in their room, but it had all been put in the big room and she could think of no way of getting a bottle. If she waited till after the party there might be none left, or so little that if any was taken it would be noticed. But this big glass of whisky suggested a solution. There were empty bottles here, left from Bud's drinking in the afternoon. If she poured the whisky into one of them it would be a good start. She would only have to get two or three glasses more during the evening and the bottle would be nearly full.

Picking up a bottle, Mary peered fearfully round the door and then tipped the whisky into it and hid it under Polly's cot. Another glance through the net, then she went out to sit down by the fat woman.

'Ah, there you are,' exclaimed that lady in a deep, throaty voice. 'An' how's baby now? Pore little thing. So damned hot, it is.'

'Oh, she seems a bit better, Mrs. Harris, thanks. I suppose I'm worrying about nothing.'

'Yes, I s'pose. But we all do that. Anyway, I'm glad to hear she's looking all right, you can't never be too careful, 'specially this weather. But don't call me missus, Mary.' The powder, carelessly slapped over florid cheeks, showed caked and streaked with sweat as she bent earnestly over Mary. 'Everybody calls me Mabel. An' remember, we've gotta be friends, now we live so close. Come on, let's hear you say it.'

Hugging her knees as she squatted on the low box, Mary

rocked back to look up into the beaming, friendly face, 'All right—Mabel,' she said with a shy smile. 'You know how much I want to be friends, but it's all strange to me.'

'Don't worry, honey.' Mabel reached down to pat Mary's hand. 'We're all easy-goin' round here. Before you know it you'll be one of the mob.'

Meeting the guests as they arrived, Mary had caught glimpses of wariness in the eyes of the women, and felt the calculation behind the smiles. She had also felt the penetration in the stares of the men. Being keyed up with expectation of hostility she had not connected the former with the latter, but had accepted as fact her fancy that all the women despised her as an upstart from the compound.

Disconsolate and lonely, Mary had stood about, hoping that she would be drawn into some of the work of entertaining the people. Being half-drunk, Bud had been obsessed with the obligation to get his guests into a similar state as soon as possible. And Rosie had been too busy keeping an eye on Bud, and carrying drinks, to coach a new chum.

In this mood of depression Mary had reacted eagerly to the beaming face and offers of friendship of Mrs. Harris. She was their next-door neighbour so they must be friends, Mrs. Harris had told her, and if ever she needed any help Mary was urged to tell Mrs. Harris. So Mary had clung to this haven of a friendly smile, and the seclusion from stares afforded by close-packed bodies on a settee in front of her.

For her part, Mrs. Harris was delighted to have secured that rare treasure—a willing, attentive, and totally unspoiled listener.

Hearing the statement that she would soon be one of the mob, Mary looked a little doubtful. 'But don't they look down on me as an aborigin—?' she started to ask.

Mrs. Harris waved a hand vigorously. 'Don't talk like that,'

she cried. 'There's two coloured families in our camp already, and they're right with everybody.'

'I thought everybody stared so hard at me,' Mary murmured. 'Especially the women seemed fierce.'

Mrs. Harris smacked her thigh and chuckled. 'I'll say they would. And because the men stared so hard an' wasn't fierce, the women stared so fierce. S'ony natcherl, honey. See how all the men flock round that Daisy?' She nodded to where a knot of men almost obscured the siren in the beachdress. 'That's what I mean. That's how they'd be with you f'you give 'em half a chance. An' o' course the women don't like it—but they get over it. For mine it suits me down to the ground. See my husband there? There he is right in the middle. Well, he's allus like that. He hangs round a bit o' leg like a blowfly round cabbage water, can't help hisself. But do I scream?' She turned to Mary with a wide grin. ' 'Course I do. I give him hell. But it does us both good. I let off steam and he's easy to handle for a week after.'

Bud weaved through the throng, a bottle in each hand. Evidently Rosie and Les were still shepherding the beer, but Bud had whisky in one hand and wine in the other. 'Where'sh your glasses now? Hold 'em out.'

'Well, well, here'sh me old pal Mabel. And her glash empty, dyin' o' starvation.'

'Don't worry about me starving, Bud,' said Mabel, as she took back her full glass. 'If it had been empty long I'd 'a' been screamin'. Anyway, I've got your wife here to look after me.'

'What—' Bud peered across her. 'So that'sh where you are. I thought you must o' shot through. Here, give'sh your glass. You gotta shing too.'

'Oh, no, Bud,' Mary gasped. 'I couldn't. I don't know any songs.' Her face was horror-stricken.

'That'sh nothin'. ' Bud gave her a brimming glass and airily waved the bottle. 'You shing with me. I don't know any shongs

either, so we'll make a good pair. You be ready soon's Bert's done.'

'Oh, Mabel,' wailed Mary, 'I couldn't stand out there and sing. And I really don't know any songs.'

'Don't be silly,' said Mabel. 'You only sing with Bud. It's a bit o' fruit. I never heard him try more'n one song. That's "Waltzin' Matilda". You must know the words o' that.'

Mary was forced to admit she knew some of the words. 'Well, there you are,' exclaimed Mabel. 'You sing what you know and pretend to sing the rest. You needn't worry, with Bud goin' to town they wouldn't hear you, anyway. The main thing is to get out in front. You do that and you'll soon be one o' the mob.'

The hum of conversation died as Bud called for silence. Soon eyes were misting over and heads nodding and drooling with sentiment as, in a pleasant tenor voice, Bert sang the old songs of Ireland and Scotland. Drunks everywhere favour songs of exile, and in Darwin they all fancy themselves as exiles, so the ballads worked like fruit saline on the springs of emotion.

Stirred from a beery doze, Mark, Bud's brother, swayed and jerked in time to the song, with moist eyes and working mouth.

As Bert sang himself out and retired to soak up more liquid inspiration, Bud dragged Mary out of the corner. 'Ladeez an' Gen'emen,' he announced, leaning on Mary, one arm round her, fondling, 'you are now to be entertained by a duet from Mr. an' Mrs. Baker. Ah, ha,' as a long, slim youth dragged a mouth organ out of his pocket and stood up. 'Now we'll give you the worksh. "Waltzin' Matilda", Tommy.'

Tommy and Mary had trouble to keep pace as he 'waltzed Matilda' with gusto. Mary found she needn't have worried about how she could sing. Her sweet low voice could not compete with Bud's as he attacked with vim and vigour, having little consideration for the tune and none at all for the

words. Others started to come in, and soon 'Matilda' was shaking the roof.

Flushed with success, Bud let go of Mary to use both hands in conducting community singing, and she soon drifted back to her corner. Before long the singing languished and Tommy was left playing quietly to one group, as the others split into knots of ardent gossipers.

Carrying round the supper Mary at last began to feel friendliness about her. As nothing wins the hearts of party-goers like efficient service with food, she soon piled up stacks of good will. Retiring again to her corner by Mrs. Harris, Mary felt the inner glow of the outsider who has arrived.

By the early hours the party was beginning to break up. All community effort was abandoned and little knots of people stood about arguing and nagging, trying to goad themselves to the supreme effort of taking their leave.

Mark was completely dead to the world and Rosie was showing some effects. Bud was still on his feet, but hanging heavily, on the ever more frequent occasions he groped around Mary. Though she had been very careful and had saved what she could for Meg's bottle, Mary herself was feeling dazed. It was with a curious feeling of detachment, and through an alcoholic mist, that she watched what was going on about her.

Her drink-dulled conscience came to life—she must see how Polly was, and fill up Meg's bottle. 'Whash wrong now?' mumbled Bud, as she twisted away from him and picked up her half-filled glass. 'You allush goin' shomeplace.'

'I have to see how Polly is,' said Mary with the painstaking diction of one unsure, 'you know she's been ill tonight.'

He leaned on the table and muttered unintelligibly as she left him and went into the other room. She sighed with relief as she groped under the net and felt Polly cool and quiet. She

could relax now. It didn't even matter if she was a bit squiffy if she didn't have to worry about the baby.

The bottle was almost full, she found, when she pulled it from under the cot. This drop would fill it right up. She bent over it, straining to pour carefully.

'Wha' the 'ell's thish?'

The glass crashed to the floor and the bottle was clutched nervously to her as Mary spun round. Bud stood just inside the door, swaying a little on wide-set feet, face screwed in an agony of concentration.

'Wha' you doin'? Fillin' a bottle, eh? Who for?'

Mary stood ashen-faced and trembling; she couldn't say a word, just clutched the bottle to her side.

Bud moved slowly forward. 'Who'sh it for? Who'sh it for! Shpeak up!' His voice gradually rose and then burst into a hoarse scream, and his face contorted with rage as a thought struck him.

'For your black friends, eh? For a dirty big black boong! My grog!'

His hand swooped for the bottle and hurled it through the window to crash like a bomb on rocks outside.

As his hand came back he swung it backhanded at Mary's face. She instinctively ducked and missed the full force of the blow, but it knocked her off balance and she sprawled in the corner by the head of the bed.

By this time Rosie and a couple of others were in the room, and the rest were packed around the doorway, peering in.

Mary lay stretched out on the floor in her first party dress, back half-propped against the leg of the bed, face ghastly white save for angry finger-marks, and eyes filled with hopeless misery. A minute before she had been on the pinnacle of hope, looking out over the promised land as an equal of the whites; now she was cast down in the slough of despair, once more a despised outcast. To treble her misery

she had nothing to say in her own defence, could raise no indignation to bolster her courage.

Bud lashed his anger to greater strength.

'A black boong. Pinching my grog for a dirty black boong!' He aimed a kick at the prostrate form and Rosie and others grabbed him and pulled him back.

'Leave her alone now. That won't do you any good,' said Rosie.

He turned to the onlookers, his eyes filled with tears and his mouth contorted grotesquely. 'Look what she's done to me. I pick her up from the gutter an' the first thing she does is pinch grog for the blacks.' Between sobs he went on: 'They were right when they said you can't raise a half-caste, they'll allus slip back to the blacks. Ooh.'

'Take him outside, and all of you go too,' Rosie ordered. 'We don't want to stop in here.'

She turned to Mary, her eyes cold and voice contemptuous. 'Well, you might as well get up, or are you going to stop there?'

Mary climbed slowly to her feet and stood with body slumped and head bowed. 'My girl friend is very sick,' she muttered. 'What could I do?' She looked up at Rosie, a plea in her eyes.

'You made your choice,' said Rosie, her lips set sternly. 'You wanted to be with the whites—to get away from the blacks. You can't have it both ways. I don't know what chance you've still got. But it's still the same choice—the whites or the blacks.' She looked meaningly at the cot. 'What d'you want for her—the whites or the blacks?' With this last shot, Rosie followed the others out.

Mary slumped on the bed and sat, chin in hand, staring at the cot. Was Polly to grow up a white woman—or a white gin?

Oh, Polly, what had she done? Wrecked all their hopes for the future in one short minute?

Rosie's words brought back her vague memories of her mother's death—that terrible night of agony in the rain, her brain numbed with fear and her body numbed with the cold and wet. As a climax to this night of terror she could remember her mother's fierce exhortations, even—aided by the message she had been given later—even the words her mother had desperately tried to burn into her mind. Leave the blacks and cling to the whites. Her mother, dying because of the whites, trying with the last of her strength to save her daughter from a similar fate.

Now, just as the goal was achieved, by one stupid act everything was jeopardized, not only for herself but for little Polly; little Polly, lying there so pink and beautiful. Just then Polly turned over and smiled vaguely in her sleep. Mary groaned and buried her head in her hands. The little mite was smiling her trust that she would be sheltered and guarded. Oh, how could she have failed her?

Into the depths of her misery a thought suddenly pierced like a faint ray of light. Now she was married to a white man. According to what people had told her, that made her the equal of the whites. But—and the ray of hope flickered wildly —what was Polly's position? She must still be dependent on Bud.

But Rosie had spoken as though she still had a choice. If Rosie was open to influence, so would Bud be when he was sober. Her head came up and her fists clenched. Maybe she could still fight her way back. She still had her body to subdue Bud. She must choose, Rosie had said, between the whites and the blacks—but she had already chosen, she had renounced the blacks. All she had to do was to convince the whites.

Mary's body tensed as she thought how she would fight for herself and Polly. Suddenly she winced as if she had been struck. Meg's bottle was gone, and now she wouldn't even be able to go down the road to tell her. She couldn't start a

struggle to convince people she was finished with the blacks by going out to meet one.

She thought of Meg waiting, and of the look on her face when she had so hesitatingly asked for the bottle—avid, yet wistful, trying to conceal her eagerness, but betraying it by the light in her eyes. Meg had nothing, no joy in the present or hope for the future, only the promise of a bottle of drink to help her to forget for a time, and let her feel she was celebrating her friend's success.

Mary could see her squatting in the long grass at the side of the road, waiting for her. As the day wore on, she would still be there in the smothering heat, the dust and the flies, waiting for the friend who might come any minute. Then, in the dusk, walking slowly up the road, with many a glance back in case she had been kept late. A slow trudge from the last friend, a friend who had failed her, to life with that vicious Jimmy, a life of misery under the shadow of leprosy.

Polly stirred in the cot and Mary's heart turned over. Whatever happened she must fight for Polly. Nothing must be allowed to stand in her way; not even poor Meg, waiting down the road.