THEY THAT SIT IN DARKNESS

A STORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NEVER-NEVER

BY JOHN MACKIE

AUTHOR OF "THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND" AND "SINNERS TWAIN"

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"I cleared out from the Cloncurry two days afore Sexton did, but I guessed how as you," looking at Jack, "weren't going with him. I'd no coin, and so the devil hatched a scheme in my head. I hung round that quarter for a day or two and then followed up Sexton. I s'pose it was my game to bail him up; but, as for murder, I meant to draw the line there. I dare say, however, I might have done it if I'd been driven to it. When I came upon him on the night of the eleventh, I found he'd picked up a mate. I s'pose Sexton must have been flashing 'bout his money, for the other chap killed him for it. Then I rode up, and the upshot of it was that we went halves on the dead man's stuff and after a bit cleared out, each on his own hook.

"At first the chap as did it had tried to get the drop on me, but I'd the advantage and held him up. The beggar knew me. It's a mighty queer thing one of us didn't pot t'other. After settling up, this man, whose real name I don't know, sold me a sorrel horse, and I paid him with some of that same blood money; you remember some notes were found on his body." Here Gordon insisted on Daly resting for a few minutes. He did so and then went on again: "One thing I can't see through at all is how you came to find out I'd bought a horse from him and paid him with Queensland bank notes, for I own up it was your knowing this that at the Macarthur racket made me take back what I'd said. It was a facer. How did you get wind of it?"

It was strange to see him exhibit such curiosity on the very threshold of death; he looked hard at me, and I looked at Norah Mackenzie. It was a remarkable sequence of events. I saw the face of the girl pale slightly as she turned to Jack and spoke, as it were, to him. Though it was very evident she was intensely moved by the tragic and solemn nature of the scene, what she had to say was spoken simply and clearly enough. It was to the following effect:

When she had witnessed the sequel of the tragedy on Scrubby creek, she knew there was something wrong, but still felt there was nothing criminal in Jack's conduct. When we were filling in the grave, she had found a small book lying on the ground, buried in the long grass, and, picking it up, took it with her, unthinkingly, to her father's camp. She had opened it there and found written on the fly leaf, "Sold this day to T. Daly one sorrel mare, branded K ⊽ 7 on near side, for £20 in Queensland bank notes." She kept the book for certain reasons it was unnecessary to enter upon. On reaching the Robinson river she saw a mare answering the description referred to and learned that Daly was the owner. She believed that he—Daly—knew something about the murder of Sexton, so that when Jack was before the magistrates at the Macarthur she gave the clew to me so that those whom she felt convinced were innocent in the matter might not suffer. She had felt, and she had not been mistaken, that the only way of clearing up the mystery was by saying little about it. Such things were bound to reveal themselves sooner or later.

Jack, bending over Daly, said:

"Daly, don't you think we might shake hands? You've said there's no blood on them anyhow, and I believe you. For God's sake, let's part friends. I can see now that I was as much to blame as you were, perhaps more, and I made a mistake about you. Shall we call it square between us, Daly?"

Daly nodded his head in assent, and their accounts were squared forever.

But it was poor wounded Gordon who was Daly's best friend just then. He motioned to us to say no more, and taking Daly's hand in his own bent over him, whispering something in his ear.

There came a look on Daly's face that I hope I never shall see again on the face of any one. It spoke of fear and agony, but it passed in another second as he looked entreatingly at Gordon, saying brokenly:

"It's years and years since I tried to, Gordon, but if you will"—

The Scotsman motioned to us again, and then knelt down on the ground beside him. And in the silence that ensued Gordon began that sublimest of prayers, the one that has stood the test of time and shall live when all else perishes. The sick man repeated it in ever weakening words, and so did we all. Then a shudder ran through his frame and with something upon his lips that sounded like the cry of the publican in the temple he was gone.

CHAPTER XVII.

THIS IS A TERRIBLE TEN MINUTES.

Midnight in the cave and two weary men peering over the barricade into the gloom, so as to guard against surprise. Twenty-four hours ago Daly kept watch with me, sitting where Snowball tonight strove with sleep; now his body was lying within a few yards of me under the yellow sand. Still he was richer in knowledge than all the centuries had made any living philosopher, for he knew what lay beyond life's bourn. What was to become of me before 24 hours? I would either, like Daly, have solved the great mystery, or I might be—and it was my cherished hope—on my way to bring help and deliverance to the little camp.

It is indeed a merciful Providence that denies a man prescience in regard to his future.

Jack and Gordon slept in the cave. I had begged them to let me watch alone with one of the boys, and they had granted my request. My idea was to have a "good square think." It might be my last night on earth, and I wanted to make the most of my time.

Half past 12, and the base of the Southern Cross had described a half circle.

"It must be 2 o'clock, Dick. Why on earth didn't you call us at the right time?" It was Jack who spoke.

"Well, I didn't feel like sleeping and thought that I might just as well watch a little longer. Snowball's sound asleep there. I saw him nodding and told him he might drop off. I say, Jack, do you see that sheet lightning away to the south? It's been pretty bad these last few nights. We may expect a lively thunderstorm at any time. Good night, old man!" And I left the terrace.

Sleep, like the angel of death, was asserting its sway over the suffering mortals in the cave and bringing a brief respite of relief to the suffering and weary at heart. The little fire flickered spasmodically, casting grim, misshapen, furtive shadows upon the roof and sides of the cavern. The wounded man stirred and muttered uneasily in his sleep. I entered noiselessly, lay down near the fire and slept.

* * * * * * *

I sprang to my feet to see a woman putting a fresh log on the fire and the yellow dawn light struggling into the cave. I could hear an organ magpie outside among the leaves piping his beautiful song. And now I saw it was Norah Mackenzie who was attending to the fire.

"Good morning! I hope you've slept well?" she inquired of me cheerily.

I looked at her face. It seemed to have grown thinner and paler within the last 24 hours, and it was no wonder. I could see she had not slept, and remarked as much.

I had looked at her eyes secretly for the last time, but could not trust myself to speak, being afraid that they might guess my purpose and prevent me carrying it out. I wanted all my nerve. I penciled a note and gave it to Snowball, having taken that child of the forest into my confidence, and told him that half an hour or so after my departure he must give that note to Jack. It was a very brief one, merely saying that I had gone for help. In case of my not returning within 24 hours they would understand something had happened.

Jack and Savile were still watching at the breastwork, and the others were in the cave, seemingly asleep. I stepped into the crevasse, and Snowball followed. It was neck or nothing now. There was no such thing as drawing back. I took off my boots, tied them round my neck and tightened my belt round my waist. I looked up at the little strip of blue sky which showed between the great rugged walls of rock. They must have been at least 200 feet in height, and I confess for a minute experiencing something akin to terror thinking of what the slightest mistake would mean in my ascent. It would mean a quick, but horrible death. I experienced an almost overmastering desire to look once more upon the woman who had been the cause of my staying in this gulf country and who was now lost to me forever, but the knowledge that it would only serve to unman me overcame the wish. Then, selecting what seemed a suitable place to begin the ascent, I inwardly breathed a short prayer.

"Baal you go, Mista Parker," pleaded poor Snowball. "You tumble down sure. Black fellow no can climb up that one!"

But I had braced my hands behind me on the rocks, and with my feet planted against the opposite wall was already ascending the crevasse. For 30 or 40 feet I raised myself in this fashion, and then came to a little ledge. Snowball was lost sight of now, and the real dangers of the ascent had begun. I crawled up and along the narrow ledge on which there was no room for turning until it stopped abruptly, and the walls of the crevasse came together again. I stood up on the ledge, leaned over until my hands rested against the opposite wall, rested a foot on either wall, and drew my body up. In another instant I was stretched in midair above a horrible yawning abyss. Just for a second or two the strip of yellow sand far beneath gleamed and quivered, and the noise of the falling water inspired me with a sudden terror. Luckily, my boyish proclivities—how they stood me in stead now—had given me a fairly good sailor's head, so that the momentary experience of dizziness soon passed. I looked upward, and raised myself inch by inch and foot by foot. Were these rocks going to rise up on either side of me for ever and ever? My arms were beginning to ache by reason of the continuous strain upon them. If some sort of resting place did not soon present itself, it could not be possible for human endurance to hold out much longer. Then, horror of horrors, the walls of rock began to bear away from one another, and the strain upon me was more than mortal man could endure. It was just a toss up with me then. I must screw my courage up to making some supreme effort or else drop to swift destruction, for I realized the impossibility of descending again—it would take more muscular effort to stay myself descending than it had done to raise me to that height, and I was utterly exhausted.

"God help me!" I cried, and it was the sincerest prayer I ever breathed. Then I remember noticing such trivial things as the widening of the rent across the knee of my left trousers leg; that there was a small flower of a pale blue color which I had never noticed before growing in a cleft of the rock right alongside; that just round the edge of the rock a shaft of sunlight fell, and that there were a good many quartz pebbles studded through the rock. I also began to think that the world was very beautiful and life very sweet. I thought of those in the cave and of those who were dear to me on the other side of the world. Truly there is nothing swifter than thought. In that critical moment I lived a lifetime of normal existence. Moreover, my brain was a sensitized plate that received and recorded the most trivial details around me.

I looked upward and set my teeth, telling myself there must be some resting place within a foot or two, and there was. Another foot higher still and my body was stretched as on a rack. Truly Providence helps those who help themselves. That blessed ledge was reached. I did not hesitate one single instant, but hurled myself on to it with what little strength I had left. I clung to and rolled on to it, then lay on my back for a few moments to rest and regain the use of my limbs. It was as if some one had suddenly snatched me from the jaws of death. But was the danger over yet? Apprehensively I looked around. The face of the cliff was rugged but retreating and was covered with dense, creeping plants. Compared to that which had just been accomplished, what remained to be done seemed mere child's play. I rose from my recumbent position on the ledge and began to ascend again. It was now comparatively easy work. In places I scrambled up without any trouble or raised myself by the ivylike vines that grew against the rocks. And then at last I stood on the summit, where one of the most wonderful panoramas that ever the eye of man looked upon was stretched out before me.

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I took the pocket handkerchief from off my neck, and putting a stone in it sent it flying down in the direction of the crevasse. It was to be a signal to Snowball that I had made the ascent safely and the coast was clear.

The sun had come out strong and the heat was oppressive. I took a southeasterly course. It was comparatively easy traveling, so that my progress was considerable. Still, I noticed that the sky looked threatening away to the south and feared a thunderstorm, as it must necessarily mean delay. I felt as if a new lease of life had been granted me. My spirits rose, and I went almost merrily along. I must have traveled for at least a couple of hours when suddenly there came a check. I had come to a little ironstone ridge, and ascending it to have a look around I saw

I had braced my hands behind me on the rocks.

something that made me draw back in terror and instinctively look for a hiding place.

It was a little above where the river entered into the amphitheaterlike valley, overlooking a narrow gorge, and there, all along the brink, were a great number of savages. There might have been a hundred or more, and they appeared as if waiting patiently for something that was to pass through it underneath them. The situation flashed upon me in a second. The squatter's party had been seen coming, and they were lying in wait to effect a surprise. But the savages had reckoned without their host.

(To be Continued.)

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