

THE ACCIDENT

THIS short story by ANTON VOGT won first prize in the Progressive Publishing Society's short story competition in 1945. It has not previously been published.

WHEN Johnnie's sharp bushman's axe sank into his foot two toes were completely severed. They lay there on the ground like caterpillars that had forgotten how to crawl. But his immediate concern was with the rest of his foot. The blow had fallen sharp and swift, leaving no time for pain. There was only a numbness and the warm feel of blood bathing his foot stickily. Now a hammer was beginning to beat in his brain, and nausea gripped his bowels low down asking him to be sick. But he had been hurt before. As he worked he was conscious of hands damaged, the sawn-off stump of the index finger on the right hand; the left hand with the little finger neatly lopped off by the doctor. The hand had been crushed that time, but had miraculously recovered. The bush brooded and when the time was right struck back. The tall trees stood where the seed fell before man came. But when the axe struck, like Samson they drew down their destroyers. Johnnie, binding his foot firmly with the red kerchief he wore round his neck, said to himself: "The cows'll never get wise to this lot. . ."

[It wasn't until he had made a good job of the bandage that he began to hobble out. He had been ringing trees, working without a mate. He knew that Ben and Sailor were felling; they would be thinking of morning tea. Well, he'd get them the morning off, and nothing lost. He used his axe as a stick, hopping on the sound leg. The foot was starting to throb now and he could feel the strain in his head: a dull hurt, a wound that was not merely physical, himself dying. Panic struck him, all the old fears, blood-poisoning, tetanus, the uncertainty of life and death. The trees loomed up, hating him. From the ground their roots struck upwards, eager to trip or to wound. The damp earth, soggy with long rains, the leaves, rank and half rotten, smelled of death. Involuntarily he shuddered. "I've had enough," he said. "By Christ, I've had enough. After this lot they can keep their bleeding bush." He stumbled painfully, catching the bad foot on a stump. Cursing, he saw the blood splashed with mud, the soggy lump of bandage oozing freely. Well, he had good blood. "Plenty of red corpuscles," the doctor had said: "You'll never die of anaemia anyway." No, by Christ, the bush gave you no chance for that, nor old age either. It got you somehow, some of you or all of you. The bush or the mill: the axe or the saw. Some blokes thought they were smart, but it got them in the end. Or else rheumatism from being wet, with the rain always falling and the sweat, and the wait around for the engine and the cold ride home. "You get a big screw in the bush," they had told him. "A quid a day without overtime. . . ." Yeh;

and you went screwy yourself if you hung around long enough. The hammer in his brain beat more loudly; it beat like the rain on the roof of his shack, insistently, trying to remind him of something he had forgotten, buried deep down somewhere where it was no use looking. As he moved forward he disturbed a branch, weighed down with water. The heavy shower caught him, but he was already wet. Under the hill where the mill houses were it rained every night. The low cloud hung over the bush so that everything was permeated with water, trees and earth and men turned to a wet slime. It made trees grow, Sailor said. But then Sailor was used to water. He wouldn't mind water that way, in oceans; on a windjammer maybe, with the sails spread and the wind whistling and the spray coming salt on the smooth hard deck. In the bush the hollows between roots bogged, furrows were creeks, depressions great pools full of water newts and crawlies. Even when it wasn't raining you got wet through ten minutes after starting, and you stayed that way all day, winter and summer, sweating and freezing. And all the time working heavily, using hands and arms, straining your back and your guts. . . . Well, he'd had his share and he was getting out light.

Coming out on an open patch where the beech had been cleared and the bracken grew tall and thick, he startled a deer. They stood there looking at each other: the man, crippled and without a gun, the deer, half-grown stag, frightened but proud. Then the deer broke and ran. Johnnie cursed his luck. You chased them all day with a gun, and when you went out without one they came walking. Well, one bleeding cow at a time was plenty. Skins were two quid a pop, but your own was worth a darn sight more. You got something even for bits of it. He remembered the story about the bushman who had lost his thumb; according to his cobbler he had cooked it. Said he wanted to see what it was like. . . . They'd argued the toss, whether it made him a cannibal or what. Well, he wasn't trying anything as fancy as that. "Compo" was enough; enough to take him out of the bush and keep him out. Till next time. . . . He hobbled on, more cheerful remembering the man with the thumb. As he made his way towards Ben and Sailor he crossed patches of bush already cut. The remains of the old line were still visible; the sleepers grown soft and almost rotted away, the bits of iron that remained porous with rust. Bracken and blackberry grew heavily, hiding the low ramp. Between the trees the sky was overcast, but to the south it was clear. With luck it would be fine to-morrow. They were in for a change. In the distance he heard an axe bite into wood, and then the answering call from another axe; and now the tattoo sang in



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his head like the rhythm of his pulse, Sailor and Ben keeping time with the loss of his blood, swinging and flinging, easy and sure, but never too sure, with the tall trees waiting to catch them. . . . And then Ben saw him coming and ran forward to meet him.

ALL day long they worked in the bush, always together. It became second sense with them to know what the other was doing. Ben and Sailor, the people would say at the mill; never just Ben or Sailor. Like David and Jonathan. It was safer that way too. It was surprising how often accidents happened through poor combination. People worked in different rhythms, the ebb and flow varied. Put a slow man with a quick man and they'd kill each other. It wasn't that you worked slow or worked fast. It was like two clocks: they'd both do the same speed finally, they'd keep the same time. But the pendulums varied; they varied in length and weight, they had different rhythms. They ticked differently. In the bush you had to synchronise, or else the trees fell on you, or the axe went into you, or else you got knocked up in some other way. If you didn't get knocked up you got on each others nerves, and once you got rattled the bush did the rest. There were too many funerals in the little mill settlements; too many for the population. The bush was always ready to strike back. It wasn't a matter of brains either. There's more than one way of having brains. A man might have it with figures or with language, and still be a dumb cluck with tools, or handling a horse or an engine. Or keeping alive in the bush with the trees after him, waiting for him to make a mistake, waiting for his cobbler to make a mistake, waiting for them to get out of step. . . . And ready to hop in and beat them up with a few thousand feet of timber, with ten tons of wood, with all the malice of centuries. . . .

Ben worked with Sailor and Sailor talked; not always, but always slowly, spacing the flow with grunts as the axe struck. Ben went to work each day like the rest of the men, with his crib and oil-skin, riding out on the engine. The women at the mill could hear the whistle and they'd look out and watch the engine go out, the smoke merging with the low clouds. And then they'd be swallowed up by the bush. Ben's wife hated the mill. She hated the tall trees and the brooding hills and the rain that never stopped falling. But Ben loved the feel of the axe and the smell of the leaves. He loved to startle the red deer. He listened to the birds and knew their song. He loved the feel of the soft grey

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