

## IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

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He struck one and peered round, then pounced triumphantly on an end of candle stuck in an empty bottle. The room was empty, so was the tiny lean-to bedroom beyond. There was little enough sign of human habitation. A rough bunk of sacks in the further room, an old camp oven without a lid and an iron kettle; these were all they found at first; presently they grew bolder and poked into the one cupboard, unearthing a tin which held a loaf of stale bread, some dingy butter, and a packet of tea.

"I'm not standing on ceremony," said David with forced gaiety, "Our host's away. I suggest we help ourselves."

\* \* \*

[HALF-AN-HOUR later, over mugs of strong milkless tea and large slabs of buttered toast, the situation looked less hopeless. The fire, at any rate was cheerful.

"I think the joker's gone for good," suggested Stephen.

"He wouldn't have left his dog chained up. He'll be back presently," said his friend.

"Let's hope not," shuddered Gwen. "He didn't look the hospitable sort. But it's nearly nine o'clock. Don't back-blockers go early to bed? I think he's storm-stayed somewhere."

Judith was looking out of the window. "By the way, the rain's almost stopped, but the place is half under water."

The moon was struggling through the clouds, shining on the puddles, lighting the dead trees and making the bush blacker than ever.

"It's the nastiest place I've ever seen," said Gwen with conviction. "Oh, what's that?"

In the sudden silence a strange and dreadful sound made them catch their breath; it rose from somewhere close at hand to echo hollowly through the silent house and die away again. Even Judith drew a little nearer the others in the dim candle-light and David's laugh was strained as he said, "Nerves, my children, nerves. It's only the dog howling for its master. Girls, it's high time you went to bed."

"Bed?" echoed Gwen, but presently she agreed to lie down with Judith in the bunk and accept as blankets the men's coats, now dried by the fire. They would manage very well in the warm room, they told her, and would serve as a body-guard should their host return.

"But you've got to make that dog stop howling, David," his sister begged. "No one could sleep with that horrible noise going on."

Stephen tried cajolery and then remonstrance, both from the safe distance of the porch. It was no use. The dog only howled the louder. Stoically they decided to ignore it and settled to sleep; for hour-an-hour no one spoke.

Then, "I can't stand this," said Stephen suddenly, "Don't say you girls are sleeping through it?"

"Sleeping?" Gwen's voice was querulous with weariness. "Oh, can't you stop it somehow? What about letting it loose?"

"What about being a hero?" grumbled her brother, but he got up and put on his boots. "Well, I suppose someone must be sacrificed. I expect he's only a

quiet old sheep-dog really. Where are my matches? Why on earth didn't someone bring a torch?"

\* \* \*

BUT when he had splashed his way through the puddles, guided by the fitful moonlight and the persistent howling, he decided that the dog might be gentle enough with its master but that he did not relish the appearance of a stranger in the half-light.

"I won't risk my fingers too near your teeth, old chap," he remarked conversationally. "Best to let the chain go from the other end."

But when he had slipped the chain off its stake, the dog wasted not a moment on its benefactor, it set his nose to the ground and dashed off, splashing madly through mud and water, to be lost presently in the shadows of the bush beyond.

"Gone after his master," he said as he returned to the fire. "It was only thwarted affection."

"Then he's still thwarted," remarked Stephen drily: "Listen to that."

"Hideously clear, the horrible sound shattered the stillness of the night again, howl after howl; the dog sounded like a tormented spirit. David walked irritably to the door, peering out into the uncertain moonlight.

"The dog's a fool. I slipped his chain right off and let him go."

"Slipped it off? That was bright of you. He's probably got it twisted round a tree and is being slowly strangled."

"Don't be an ass. He'll break free in a minute."

They waited hopefully, but the noise went on, louder than ever.

Stephen groaned and reached for his boots. "My turn, I suppose. Now for a little more of the forest primeval."

But David got up too. "Come along. No use trying to settle down."

\* \* \*

THEY splashed resentfully across the neglected yard; only a few yards of clearing separated them from the darkness of the bush reserve. From its shadows came the insistent howling of the dog.

"A cheery business," grumbled Stephen. "Something to be said for the city after all."

They groped their way cautiously forward, hands outstretched to ward off the prickly embraces of the "lawyers," but the bush was fairly clear here; grazing

cattle had eaten off the undergrowth and trampled the smaller trees.

"There he is," said David suddenly. "I heard the leaves rustle."

"Here boy," wooed Stephen optimistically. "Come here. Good dog."

A low growl answered them and he went on impatiently, "Oh, let's get on with it. His chain must be trailing round here somewhere. I'll feel for it. Great Scot, what's that?"

He staggered back, one hand to his mouth. "Lucky I don't sport false teeth. As it is, my only crown is distinctly wobbly."

"What's up now?"

"A damned loose branch took me fair in the mouth. Hang on a minute while I break it off."

A pause while he fumbled in the darkness, then the sound of a breath quickly indrawn and a sharp whispered "Good God!"

The tone and the tense silence that followed it startled his companion and he spoke irritably: "What the hell's the matter? Oh, for goodness sake let's get out of here and back to the fire."

But Stephen was silent for a minute, then, almost in a whisper, he said, "Light a match, David. Quick. There's something here."

Grumbling but uneasy, the other fumbled with his box, a second later a match spluttered, lighting a tiny circle in the dark bush, glinting on the eyes of the dog that glowed weirdly red in the shadows on the pale, strained face of Stephen Bryce gazing upwards—and on something else.

David caught his breath, then an oath of horror and fear escaped him. As he stood gazing with upturned, amazed face, the light flickered and died out and he heard his own voice saying strangely, "But, he's dead."

In the darkness there was again no sound save their quick breathing and the whimper of the dog lurking in the deep shadows beyond. Silently David Armstrong lit another match, but the hand that held it aloft was shaking and his voice, too, shook as he whispered, "Dead, Stephen. Dead, hours ago."

For it was no hanging branch that had struck Stephen in the face; the blow had come from a man's heavy boot and the man was hanging from the branch of a tall, dead tree that glimmered palely above their head — a ghost amongst ghosts.

(To be continued next week)



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