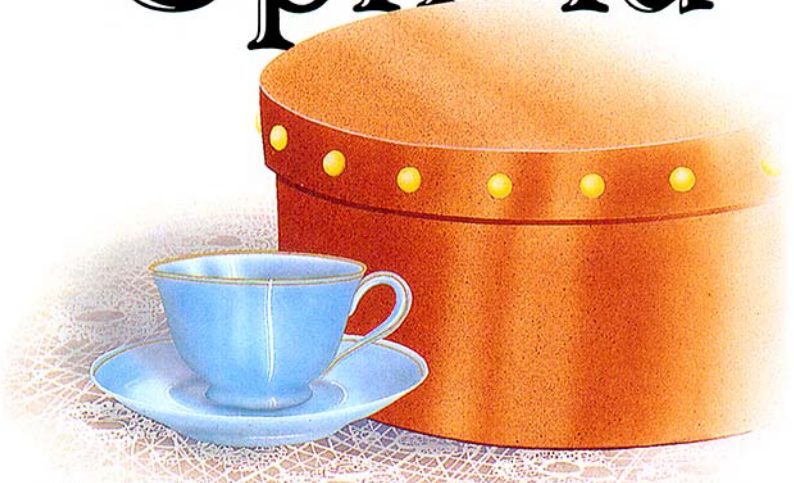
An Inspector Bonaparte Mystery

"Bony — a unique figure among top-flight detectives." BBC

Arthur Upfield



CAKE IN THE HAT BOX

Cake in a Hat Box

Other Titles by Arthur W. Upfield:

1 The Barrakee Mystery
2 The Sands of Windee
3 Wings Above the Diamantina
4 Mr. Jelly's Business
5 Winds of Evil
6 The Bone is Pointed
7 The Mystery of Swordfish Reef
8 Bushranger of the Skies
9 Death of a Swagman
10 The Devil's Steps
11 An Author Bites the Dust
12 The Mountains Have a Secret
13 The Widows of Broome
14 The Bachelors of Broken Hill
15 The New Shoe
16 Venom House
17 Murder Must Wait
18 Death of a Lake
19 The Cake in the Hat Box
20 The Battling Prophet
21 Man of Two Tribes
22 Bony Buys a Woman
23 Bony and the Mouse
24 Bony and the Black Virgin
25 Bony and the Kelly Gang
26 Bony and the White Savage
27 The Will of the Tribe
28 Madman's Bend
29 The Lake Frome Monster

Cake in a Hat Box

ARTHUR UPFIELD

HINKLER BOOK
DISTRIBUTORS PTY LTD

Editorial Note

Part of the appeal of Arthur Upfield's stories lies in their authentic portrayal of many aspects of outback Australian life in the 1930s and through into the 1950s. The dialogue, especially, is a faithful evocation of how people spoke. Hence, these books reflect and depict the attitudes and ways of speech, particularly with regard to Aborigines and to women, which were then commonplace. In reprinting these books the publisher does not endorse the attitudes or opinions they express.

An Angus & Robertson Publication

Angus&Robertson, an imprint of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
25 Ryde Road, Pymble, Sydney, NSW 2073, Australia
31 View Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand

This edition published in 1994 for
Hinkler Book Distributors Pty Ltd
32-34 Graham Road
Highett, Victoria 3190, Australia

ISBN 0 207 18441 0

Cover illustration by Russell Jeffery
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

1 :94

Chapter One

At Agar's Lagoon

SHOULD YOU FLY northward from Perth, fringe the Indian Ocean for fifteen hundred miles, and then turn inland for a further three hundred, you might chance to see Agar's Lagoon. You will recognize Agar's Lagoon if you look down on a tiny settlement completely ringed with broken bottles.

There is no lagoon anywhere near, because the stony creek skirting the township is far too impatient to carry the flood water away from the Kimberley Ranges and empty it into the quenchless sand of the great Inland Desert. The creek is infinitely less romantic than the bottle ring, estimated to total a thousand tons and laid down by a long succession of hotel yardmen who have removed the empties in vehicles ranging from bullock-drays to T-model Fords.

Nothing can be done about it; for, being so far from Perth, it is economically impossible to return the empties. Of necessity the ring must broaden outward, otherwise the hotel, the post office, the police station, a store and ten houses would ultimately lie buried beneath glass.

To Agar's Lagoon had come Detective-Inspector Bonaparte, his journey to his home State from Broome, where he had terminated a homicide investigation, having been interrupted by a faulty plane engine. In this northern corner of a continent where plane schedules are erratic, he had to check in at the ramshackle hotel at a time when the tiny settlement was comparatively dead, even the policeman being absent on a patrol.

The hotel was comparable with the saloons of old America, being a structure of weather-board, iron and *pisé,* an oasis amid the thousands of square miles occupied by a hundred-

odd white cattle- and sheep-men, prospectors, and the inevitable Government servants.

Bony found himself to be the only guest, and the only man about the place to gossip with was the hotel yardman-cum-barman, a wisp of a man recorded officially as John Brown. He was a part of the building, of the hectic scenery, and all knew him as 'Un. Bony was still to learn the genesis of this name, bestowed on Brown during the First World War when he arrived from nowhere wearing a Kaiser Wilhelm moustache in full bloom. The fall of the Kaiser's Germany found the moustache as aggressive as ever, and even when the years bleached it and the beer stained it, the name clung. The Hun, born in Birmingham, degenerated to 'Un, even the local Germans affectionately so calling him.

He squatted this early evening on the hotel veranda beside the solitary chair occupied by Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, unaware of the guest's profession and rank, and his reputation in every police department in the Commonwealth. Along the stony street passed a flock of goats in charge of a small white boy and an aborigine of the same age and size, and beyond the dust-dry creek the setting sun was flailing the armoured tors of Black Range.

"How long I been here?" echoed 'Un. "I came here back in nineteen-fourteen. Same pub. Same police station. Same houses. Two years later me and Paddy the Bastard found the Queen Vic Mine, and we went through three forchunes in three years. All in this pub, too. The year after Paddy died, I sold the mine to a syndicate for a thousand quid."

"Real money, eh?" murmured Bony.

"Too right! Easy come, easy go. Paddy drank hisself to death right on this here veranda. It took the policeman and five men to hold him down."

"A powerful man, indeed."

'Un applied a match to what might be tobacco in the bowl of his broken pipe. Despite the years spent in this undeveloped territory of Australia, the Brummagem accent was strong.

When he chortled the sound was not unlike the frantic calls of the rooster.

"Powerful!" he said. "Why, when I broke me leg out at the Queen Vic, he carried me here, and that's all of nine miles. Why, when he spat at a man, that man went out like a light. Him and Silas Breen got into a argument on what won the Melbun Cup in 1900 and they fought for a week, knocking off only to eat. Hell of a good mate was Paddy. I never had no mate after him. Now, strike me pink! Here's the Breens coming to town."

The lethargy of the settlement was shattered by the noise of a heavy truck bouncing over the rough track. The hens rushed for home in the pepper trees. Two dogs raced neck and neck with the vehicle until it stopped before the hotel steps. Dust was wafted along the veranda front, and when it had passed, Bony saw the rear of an enormous man descending from the truck. He turned slightly, hitching up his gaberdine trousers, and Bony could see his face. It was square and rugged and grim. The thatch of grey hair was unkempt, and the long drooping moustache as aggressive as that which adorned the wizened face of 'Un.

He stood by the truck while another enormous man gingerly clambered down, a man not as tall but as wide and as thick as the first. His hair was barely touched by the years. It was black, as black as the square-cut beard. He nodded curtly when the other spoke to him, and led the way to the veranda to mount stiffly the three wooden steps. His face, where not concealed by the beard, was white, unnaturally so in this land north of Capricorn, and his dark eyes were feverishly brilliant.

"Good day, 'Un!" he said to the yardman.

"Day-ee, Jasper!" replied 'Un. "Day-ee, Silas! How's things?"

"Fair enough," answered the black-bearded man. "Coming in for a snifter?"

Jasper and Silas Breen entered the hotel. 'Un said:

"That's an order. You come, too. Save argument."

"I dislike argument," averred Bony, rising from the chair. "Are there any more like these Breens?"

"Plenty," replied 'Un proudly. "There's Ezra Breen. He's much younger and tougher than these two. Got a temper, has Ezra."

The yardman led the way to the bar. The Breens were breasting it, and Ted Ramsay, the licensee, was asking them to name their poison. He was large and flabby, and destined within six months to be held down until his brain exploded. The oil-lamp suspended from the match-boarded ceiling was already struggling with the waning daylight to penetrate far corners. Behind the counter, the wall shelves were stacked with gaudily labelled spirit bottles, and on the floor were crates of bottled beer, for barrelled beer would not carry this far from Perth.

"None of your pig-swill, Ted," boomed Silas Breen. "Put up your best whisky. Damme, us Breens has bought this pub two hundred times over."

"Four hundred times," amended Ramsay. "You've bought it a hundred times since I've been here."

He placed a bottle of whisky and glasses on the counter, and was adding a jug of water when the elder Breen called in a voice which must have carried through the building:

"What'll you have, Mister?"

"Beer for me, please," replied Bony.

"Same here," piped 'Un. "What's wrong with you, Jasper? You ain't looking so good."

"No. Fell off me horse. Got shook up, that's all. Luck!"

The Breens appeared to occupy half the small bar. Beside them, Bony was a stripling and 'Un a mere straw. They were tremendous, these brothers Breen. From them radiated physical power hinting at no limitations, like that of water spuming through the needle valve of a dam. The thick glasses they held in their sun-blackened, hairy hands were somehow reduced to fragile crystal in the paws of gorillas.

Jasper Breen stood beyond his brother. He leaned more heavily against the bar counter, and the attitude was maintained. Silas stood with his weight squarely on his feet, and now and then he glanced at Jasper, concern in his eyes although his face was unruffled. Jasper's right arm was held against his side with a leather belt.

"Fell off his horse," muttered 'Un. "More likely the horse fell on him."

"Doc in town?" asked Silas of the licensee.

"Yes, but he's inky-poo. Be out to it till morning. You hurt much, Jasper?"

"No. Bit of a strain and a bruise or two. Nuthin' broke."

"Doc Morley ud better be sober be mornin'," Silas threatened with unnecessary vocal strength. "I've a mind to pound him sober right now. You feelin' all right, Jasper, me lad?"

"I'll do," boasted his black-bearded brother. "Come on, Ted. Fill 'em up."

Bony put a pound note on the counter, intending to call for drinks, and 'Un whisked it away and surreptitiously gave it back, whispering:

"I oughter told you. No one ain't allowed to shout when the Breens come to town. The pub's theirs till they leave."

"Fill 'em up, Ted," roared Silas. "What's the matter with you? Tend to business. Gents is perishing."

A man entered the bar. His nose was long and red, and his nondescript hair draggled in wisps across the partially bald head. His shirt and trousers were not those of a bushman.

"Seen you come in, Silas," he said, and coughed. "Day, Jasper! I put your mail and parcels under the seat of your truck. Sign for the registers, please."

Silas squinted at the receipt book, and with slow deliberation wrote his signature, the postmaster at his side looking like the skeleton at the feast.

"What's yours these days, Dave?" asked Jasper, and the postmaster called for rum.

"What's up with you, Jasper?" And again Jasper explained.

"Good luck!" Dave saluted his drink and sighed when the glass hit the counter. "Pity Doctor Morley's on the tank. How's Ezra and Kimberley?"

"Pretty good. On the hoof with cattle for Wyndham. Got away a week late."

"Good beasts?"

"Fairish. Usual four hundred. Policeman in town?"

"No. Down south on patrol." Dave chuckled, and Ramsay said:

"Just as well. Too much haze when everyone's in town at the same time."

Silas scowled. Ted Ramsay hastily turned to his bottles. The long grey moustache sweeping away from the mouth of this elder Breen seemed to quiver. He hitched his trousers although his great waist was belted. To the belt was attached small pouches containing matches, tobacco plug, clasp-knife, and an empty revolver holster, for it is unlawful to bring small arms into the settlements of the North-West.

"Bleedin' corkers, ain't they?" murmured 'Un admiringly. "Me old mate, Paddy the Bastard, was as big as Silas Breen. Fight! That time Paddy and Silas fought for a week, they started in this bar on a Toosdee night, went all round town and ended up again in the bar on the following Mondee morning. And me and Ezra Breen caperin' after them with tucker and whisky to keep 'em going."

"Where was the policeman?" asked the curious Bony, his bright blue eyes filled with laughter.

"The john! Feller be the name of Gartside. What could he do, d'you reckon, with two Irishmen like Silas? Just let 'em alone and go on with his job. Only time he got a bit anxious was when Silas and Paddy was looking like fighting all the way through the police station from the front to the back. Me and Ezra had a hell of a job to steer 'em clear!"

"Who won?"

"Neither. Silas began to laugh on the Mondee morning, and that finished Paddy. You oughta have seen 'em then.

Butcher's shops they was."

Two men entered, and 'Un broke off to greet them. They shouted to the Breens and Jasper roared at the licensee. There was a pile of treasury notes between the brothers. Voices became louder, and Ramsay placed bottles of beer on the counter instead of refilling glasses. The emaciated postmaster gripped a bottle of rum in his left hand and seldom put down the glass held in his right, and whenever Bony took a sip from his glass 'Un hospitably filled it. More men joined the company, and Bony eased on the beer.

Then Silas Breen was yelling for a chair and demanding to know what the hell the place was coming to with no chair for a gent to sit on. 'Un was dispatched for the veranda chair, and great was the struggle to pass it from the door through the crush to where Jasper stood. Silas placed the chair for his brother, and on Jasper's face was anguish as he relaxed into it. That a Breen should be so weak!

Silas handed him his glass, and he raised it high and shouted the usual "Good luck, gents!" The company shouted response. Bony edged nearer to him, and Ted Ramsay sat back on a crate of beer and went to sleep. Someone started to sing, and at once the company roared a ditty detailing the adventures of a lass having long brown hair. And then there arose a yell for 'Un.

'Un clambered to the counter-top, slid round on its liquor-drenched surface and proceeded to serve. Thenceforth, his work was to slip bottles from straw sheaths and set them up, and now and then remove the notes, pushed forward by Silas. He gave no change.

When ordinary men would have fallen senseless, those crowding this small bar were only now warming up to the evening's debauch. The air was padded with tobacco smoke and Bony's ears began to ache from the incessant roar.

In the middle of a verse, Silas looked down at Jasper, bent swiftly over him, brushed the black beard with the back of his hand. With pantherish agility, he straightened and swung

round to the company, and for a second his small blue eyes glittered and his mouth was fashioned in a ferocious snarl. Instantly, the expression vanished and he was calling for more whisky, and cursing 'Un for being so slow.

A man lurched between Bony and the Breens, and when next Bony was able to see them, Silas was again bending over Jasper and doing something with what appeared to be a length of dark-green whipcord. No one watched Silas, save Bony, and he watched 'from the corner of an eye'. The postmaster implored him to take a dash from his rum bottle with his beer. His eyes were standing out like those of a crab. A hairy man of cubic proportions endeavoured to mount the bar counter and was hauled back by another hairy man.

"Come on, Jasper! Your shout!" roared Silas, now with his back to the counter. "Come on, Jasper, ole cock. Never let the Breens down. Gonna shout?"

Jasper Breen was sitting with his head tilted slightly forward. The head nodded in uniformity with the action of Silas Breen's right leg.

"Good ole Jasper," shouted Silas. "Jasper's call, gents."

"Good ole Jasper," echoed the crowd.

Twice more Jasper Breen 'shouted' at the instigation of his brother, and then Silas was saying they were going home and roaring for passage way. Picking up the chair with his brother still in it, he strode to the door, crashing down men unable to flatten themselves against the rear wall or the bar counter. Bony, who was pressed against the wall, saw Jasper's face and saw also the end of the green cord tied to Jasper's beard and which disappeared into the neck of the man's shirt.

Jasper Breen's head lolled. He was decidedly out to it.

Silas, carrying his brother outside, followed by the company, put down the chair beside the truck, then lifted Jasper into the driving cabin and arranged him to lean back in the far corner. He turned the truck on the narrow track, shouting to the uproarious crowd, and with the hooter blaring drove out of town.

Chapter Two

The Road Block

Sam Laidlaw had been driving transports over the Kimberley tracks for five years, and what he could do with fencing wire to effect running repairs to the huge vehicles he commanded would sound unbelievably fantastic to modern garage mechanics. Sam's job was a fantastic one: the tracks were fantastically tortuous, the ranges were fantastic in shape and colouring, and throughout the night the sky was fantastically streaked with shooting stars.

Sam left the seaport of Wyndham on August 16th, his six-wheeler loaded with ten tons of stores for stations south of Agar's Lagoon. For ten miles the track was almost level as it crossed the flats south of Wyndham, a ship sailing on a sea of grass as yellow and as tall as ripe wheat. Thereafter it proceeded up an ever-narrowing valley between flat-topped ranges sparsely covered with stunted scrub and armoured with red and grey granite. The ranges merged into a maze with walls a thousand feet high, and the surface of the track was of loose stone and slate, level at no place for more than ten feet.

Sam's speed at most was twelve miles an hour and gear-changing was a continuous necessity. Narrow, deep, steep-sided creeks yawned like cracks opened by an earthquake, making it appear impossible for a vehicle having the length of Sam's transport ever to cross them. Ridges of bare rock were like monstrous teeth gnashing at the tyres, causing the vehicle to roll and lurch and buck like a ship in a typhoon.

From Wyndham to Agar's Lagoon is about 240 miles, and Sam usually covered this distance in two days.

When day broke on the morning of the 17th, Sam Laidlaw's transport was approximately eighty miles from Wyndham.

Sam had slept in the cabin, and to begin his day he had merely to leave his two blankets, thrust his feet into boots which were never laced, and go to ground to relight his camp fire and boil water for a brew of tea. He was large and fat and hard, and other than the boots he wore only a pair of astonishingly oily shorts. The skin of his arms and torso was the colour of a medlar, and that of his cropped hair and wiry beard akin to gingerbread.

Sam ate standing up, a three-inch sandwich of bread and meat in one paw and the billy-can from which he drank gripped in the other. He stood with his legs wide apart like a colossus frightening the Ogres now slinking into the mountain caverns.

Breakfast finished, he was ready for the day's run, for the oiling and fuelling had been done the night before. He slung the tucker-box on to the loading, jamming it down between bagged flour, tossed the billy-can into the cabin, and swung the starting handle as easily as a woman employs flattery. And whilst the engine was warming, he loaded his pipe with tobacco chipped from a plug the colour of ebony.

Like a slug heaving over a rockery, the six-wheeled transport roared and whined and lurched and bumped southward. The sun was high when from the welter of ridges and peaks ahead there emerged to distinction a mighty tower of red granite, and with the passing of time the nearer hills sank downward to reveal in all its grandeur this dominating northern extremity of Black Range, the southern claws of which threatened Agar's Lagoon.

McDonald's Stand it was called, and the track approached it like a nervous snake, veering slightly towards it and often shying hard away. The truck roared on, Sam sucking at his empty pipe and gripping the wheel with both hands save when the left flashed to the gear stick.

He did not see the cattle. For one thing, he had to keep his gaze on the track, and, for another, the beasts were chameleon against the background of their precise colouring. They were

opened out wide, and fed as they walked. When Sam did see the cattle, he halted the transport and fell to loading his pipe as he watched them.

The horseman on the nearer wing turned back when the cattle had passed the truck. Sam left the cabin and stood in the attitude of legs wide apart so familiar to many. The horseman rode without effort. A second rider left the herd. Sam completed the lighting of his pipe, and turned back to the cabin to procure several letters, and on again confronting the approaching horsemen; the nearer was within twenty yards.

The rider wore a wide-brimmed hat. A tunic shirt of rough material was belted into the top of rough cotton trousers, the bottoms of which were tucked into short leather leggings. The wide leather belt about the waist carried a holster containing a heavy revolver. A gauntleted hand held the reins, and the other a looped stock-whip. A man! Could have been until the distance dwindled to five yards.

Sam smiled broadly and called: "Good day-ee, Kim!"

Candid grey eyes gazed down at him. Off came the hat, and hair the tint of new copper gleamed in the sunlight. The voice was low and strong.

"Good day-ee, Sam! How's things?"

"Pretty good, Kim," replied Sam. "Heard up at Wyndham you was on the road. Usual mob?"

Kimberley Breen nodded. The second horseman arrived. He also greeted the transport driver with a "Good day-ee, Sam!" His eyes flawlessly matched those of the girl, and his voice was strong, vibrant. He came to ground and proceeded to roll a cigarette, the spurs to his boots clinking musically.

Six feet three, and twelve stone weight, dressed and accoutred like the girl, Ezra Breen dwarfed the transport man but was not in turn dwarfed by the girl atop the horse. He accepted the letters, pocketing them without comment, and lit his cigarette before saying:

"Where bound, Sam?"

"Whitchica. How's Silas and Jasper? Ain't seen 'em in months."

"They're all right. Us Breens is always all right."

The eyes were pale grey disks in a face complexioned like Sam's face . . . and chest . . . and legs. The shoulders were wide and the hips deceptively narrow, the long legs filling the trousers as though they were tights. By comparison Sam Laidlaw was a jellyfish.

"Sarah keeping well?" inquired Kimberley Breen, and Sam grinned, saying that his wife was in hospital with a new baby. The information caused her face to soften, and the sun-ruined complexion was banished by a kind of glory.

"I'll go and see her," she cried. "What is it . . . a boy?"

"Baby gal," replied Sam, spitting at and hitting an ant. "Born day 'fore yestiddy. Sarah, she says if it's another boy I can go swim with the crocs in the estuary. Turning out to be a gal, I'm still driving this here truck. When d'you aim to get in, Ezra?"

"Tomorrow week. See any other cattle on the hoof?"

"No . . . not on this track. Masterton's sending in a mob . . . nine hundred, I heard. Well, better get on, I suppose. Aim to reach Whitchica some time tonight."

"See you later."

"You bet."

Ezra Breen swung into his saddle. His sister slipped her leg over her horse's head and put on her man's felt hat. She smiled at Sam before turning her mount towards the distant river of beef. Ezra nodded and did not smile. Throughout the meeting he had not once smiled, and that was no oddity to Sam Laidlaw, who had known the Breens most of his life.

He clambered into the cabin of the transport and drove on up and over and down the succession of minor hillocks.

The basaltic cliffs of McDonald's Stand rose to the sky to dominate Sam's world for a little while. The track to the Breens' station branched away to skirt the western spurs of Black Range, leaving the main track to follow the eastern

flanks all the way to Agar's Lagoon. The Rockies, the Himalayas, the Andes, all are greater than these mountains, but none in all the world resemble them.

The air was dustless, as clear as distilled water. Black Range, now running roughly parallel with the track, might have been a mile to the westward and actually was something like twelve miles. Since leaving Wyndham, Sam had met with no travellers save the Breens. Wild donkeys watched him from the hillsides, and kangaroos languidly removed themselves. The eagles passed him from one to the next while he crawled through their territory, and the turkeys ran away on absurdly stiff legs.

At noon Sam stopped to brew tea and gnaw into bread and meat, and about an hour after that camp fire had been left behind, his little eyes glinted with swift interest. The transport was then crossing the summit of a 'bump', and before he could decide what the object was on the summit of another 'bump' two miles ahead, he was driving down to cross another of the interminable gullies. On his again seeing the object, it was much nearer and recognizable as an American jeep.

It was motionless and facing his way. There was movement about it, chiefly on its canvas top, and he realized it was the vehicle used by Constable Martin Stenhouse, stationed at Agar's Lagoon. Again it vanished as the transport dipped for another gully, and as the engine roared and whined and the transport creaked and complained, Sam cogitated on the motionless police car and decided that the policeman had stopped to shoot a turkey or a kangaroo.

When next he saw the jeep it was just beyond the radiator of the transport as the huge vehicle groaned and belched its way up the stony slope as steep as a house roof. Sam braked to an abrupt halt and switched off the engine. The silence flung itself against the sides of the cabin and bashed his ears, and he sat still to watch an eagle and several crows rise from the canopy of the jeep.

It was the canopy which distinguished this jeep for Sam Laidlaw, for it had been added by the policeman and old Syl Williams the blacksmith at Agar's Lagoon. The sunlight was reflected by the narrow windshield so that Sam could not see into the jeep, but the presence of the birds made him uneasy.

He left the transport and approached the vehicle standing squarely on the narrow track. Not until he came abreast of the compactly sturdy product of a global war was he able to defeat the sun-reflecting windshield, and then saw seated behind the steering-wheel the slumped figure of Constable Stenhouse.

Because Stenhouse might be ill or asleep, he said:

"Good day-ee, Mr Stenhouse!"

The policeman did not move. He was seated with his head bent forward. One hand rested on the steering-wheel, which, because of the left-hand drive, was on the side farthest from Sam, who had stepped to the right. He walked round the back of the jeep and so reached the constable.

"What's wrong?" he asked, and gently shook the motionless figure. "Cripes! Dead as hell!"

He raised the head and noted the wide eyes and the fallen jaw, and gently he permitted the head to regain its former position and stood back to take in the entire picture. That the jeep had been here for some time was proved by the close interest of very wary and wily birds, as well as by the condition of the dead man's face.

There were dark marks under the vehicle, and Sam crouched and determined these marks to be dried blood. He looked into the vehicle and saw that dried blood covered the floor about the dead man's feet.

"Done in . . . looks like," he said, aloud. "By the tracker, too. 'S'ava look."

He rummaged among the gear behind the seat, finding, with the extra tyres and the tool-box, a tucker-box and one swag of blankets. There was no need to investigate the swag, for the outer canvas of the roll was heavily marked with the constable's name.

There should have been a second swag, a much poorer outfit, and Sam removed filled petrol drums and other gear to make sure. The tracker's swag was not there.

"Tracker musta shot you and cleared out," Sam remarked to the corpse. "Mighta been an accident sort of, and the tracker's walked back to Agar's to report. Mighta been that way, but somehow I don't think so. Assumin' you was shot accidental, and the tracker decides to get back to Agar's, he wouldn't have bothered to carry his swag. No fear . . . if I know them blacks. He'd have taken all the cooked food, and got out of most of his clothes and his boots and travelled light."

Sam squatted on his heels and cut tobacco chips. He wished someone would come along and share the responsibility, for something would have to be done about this business, and a feller doesn't want to go and do anything wrong which would make the cops nag at him. This policeman was dead all right, and the blood proved he hadn't died in his sleep or of heart failure. The tracker must have had a lot to do with it.

In the first place, because there was no black tracker's swag in the jeep it didn't prove that there was no tracker. Stenhouse wouldn't be out this far without a tracker, any more than he'd travel around these Kimberleys without a couple or more spare tyres. In the second place, the vanished swag indicated that the black had cleared out, either because he had killed the policeman or because the death of the policeman had frightened hell into him. What remained was a dead man sitting in his jeep, and Sam squatted on his heels and smoked while wondering what to do about it.

This particular 'bump' was ninety-odd miles from Agar's, and on by far the roughest section of the entire trip from Wyndham. Nothing could be done for Constable Stenhouse, but what ought to be done with the body?

Sam knocked the ashes from his pipe, scratched his naked body under the armpits and stood up, having decided to leave Constable Stenhouse in his jeep. He was then confronted with

the task of moving the jeep off the track, for it was not possible to drive his heavy transport past either side of it.

He tried pushing it forward, and, failing to move it, attempted to push it backward. This he did manage to accomplish by exertion of his great strength plus much profanity. When he had cleared the track, the cries of the birds produced a paramount thought, and unrolling the policeman's swag he draped a blanket about the dead man, being then satisfied he could do no more.

Feeling the urge to get away, he swung the crank-handle of his transport and the resultant roar provided distinct comfort. His mind was on that tracker who must have been with Constable Stenhouse, and all about this scene were low trees and tall boulders providing adequate cover for an aborigine armed with a rifle . . . or a long throwing spear.

Chapter Three

Dr Morley Answers a Call

SITUATED SO FAR from the sea, and amid the southern ramparts of the Kimberley Ranges, Agar's Lagoon is blessed by a remarkably good climate throughout the winter months. The long summer is endurable, when the seaports of Broome and Wyndham are blobs of perspiration.

An enthusiastic advocate for the Kimberleys' climate was Dr Morley, who asserted that were it not for the contagious ills of the south, man would live for centuries. There seemed to be authority for his assertion if one could accept his claim to eighty-six years when he did not look a day more than sixty. His body verged on gauntness, but he walked more sprightly than the average youth of today. His brown eyes were clear, and despite his substantial contribution to the bottle ring, his mind was as alert and aggressive as that of a keen business man of forty.

When Bony tapped on the door of his three-roomed shack, Dr Edwin Morley's voice was as strong and gruff as that of an old-time bullock driver:

"Come in and be damned."

Bony opened the fly-netted door and entered a passage illuminated only by the light in a front room. Entering this room, he was astonished to find it carpeted, book-lined, comfortably furnished, and restfully lit by shaded oil-lamps. The long-legged man reclining in an easy chair beside which was a small occasional table bearing whisky decanter, soda siphon and glass, said nothing further in greeting, and Bony, standing just within the doorway, found his eyes held by those light-brown ones. At once he adjusted his approach.

"Forgive my intrusion, sir. I am Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte. You are Doctor Morley?"

"I am. Sit down."

Bony accepted the invitation. With the interest of the expert diagnostician, Dr Morley examined him from his white canvas shoes upwards, passing the creased drill trousers, the silk shirt tucked into them, and steadily noting the colouring of the face and hands and the oddly unusual blue eyes of this half-aborigine.

"I am staying at the hotel," Bony explained. "Half an hour ago a transport driver arrived from Wyndham, and reports that he found Constable Stenhouse dead in his car some ninety miles from here. It's his opinion that the constable was killed by his tracker, who has vanished. I would very much like you to accompany me to the scene of this affair and ascertain how Stenhouse died. I understand you are not in general practice and, therefore, I make the suggestion with some diffidence."

"Bring a glass from the sideboard and help yourself to a snort," ordered Dr Morley, who then gazed at the ceiling as though intensely bored. "It has been in my mind for some time that Stenhouse would be murdered. A good policeman but not a good type. His body, you say, is now in his car on the Wyndham road. H'm! I don't know how come, but I thought he was away down south on the edge of the desert. A Detective-Inspector, you mentioned?"

"Yes, I have that rank. I've contacted the senior police officer at Wyndham, who is better situated to communicate with divisional headquarters at Broome. The Wyndham man says the doctor is in Darwin. Unfortunately, it's impossible to reach the body by plane."

"And the track as rough as the road from Hell," growled the old man. "Worst track in all Australia. The most benighted, undeveloped area in the continent, and the richest in metals, human health and many other resources. Well, I suppose I must look-see over Constable Stenhouse. How d'you propose to make the trip?"

Bony smiled.

"I've commandeered Ramsay's car," he said, adding after a pause: "Through his nominee referred to as 'Un. Laidlaw, the transport driver, will drive the car. They are loading now with petrol and spare tyres."

"Better get a couple of pillows to take the jars," the doctor advised. "And an overcoat if you have one with you. It'll be chilly before dawn. I'll get my bag and one or two items. Once I could rough it. Now I'm soft."

Bony returned to the hotel and procured a bed pillow and raincoat. In the darkness of the street, he found the car and with it Sam and two other men. Dave Bundred, the postmaster, bumped into him, saying:

"Sergeant Booker, at Wyndham, says he'd be glad if you would remain on the scene until Constable Irwin arrives. Irwin left Wyndham before the message was dispatched. He'll have farther to travel, but his section of the road is easier than from this end."

Sam Laidlaw said:

"All set when you are, Inspector."

They had to wait five minutes for the doctor, who arrived with long arms burdened. Bony relieved him of the heavy Gladstone bag, passing it into the car when the doctor had buttressed himself with cushions in the back seat.

"We have a tucker-box, I suppose?" the doctor asked.

"Too right," replied Sam. "She's filled up by 'Un."

"And plenty of tea and sugar and water and petrol?" persisted the doctor.

"And a bottle of rum to go with the tea, Doc," supplemented 'Un.

Sam, still wearing only his greasy shorts, wedged himself behind the wheel and the little yardman sat beside him. Bony settled himself in the back seat, and thus the journey was begun. The headlights cleft the darkness and emphasized the roughness of the alleged street, and immediately Bony was thankful for the doctor's suggestion of pillows, for the vehicle appeared to have no springs.

The pounding went on all night, and when day dawned Bony had 'had' what the maps state is The Great Northern Highway. He was, however, rewarded when the new day was about to be crowned by the sun.

The sky was splashed with eastern purple. To the left, Black Range glowed with blossom-pink luminosity. The purple sky became as rusty iron, and the rust was burnished away to leave it polished silver. The pink of the Range deepened to the red of a robin's breast, and when the sun appeared the luminosity vanished, and the greens and greys emerged.

An hour later, Sam shouted:

"There it is, gents."

As Sam had come to the policeman's jeep, so did Bony and his companion in the car . . . abruptly when the car roared to the top of the 'bump'. Sam stopped the car where he had halted his transport, and several crows cawed their defiance from the stark limbs of a baobab tree.

No one spoke or moved. The jeep, pushed aside by Sam, was angled to the track, and they could see the blanket-shrouded figure behind the wheel. The blanket was grey, and the figure looked as though roughly chiselled from granite. When Bony did speak, his voice was crisp.

"We will make camp and have breakfast. Please keep away from the jeep. We must wait for Constable Irwin. When should he be here, Sam?"

"Barring blow-outs, he oughta be here any time now," replied Sam. "Come on, 'Un, let's make a fire. I got no stomach: only a backbone."

Sam made a fire, and the yardman dragged out the tucker-box. The billy was filled from a drum, and the doctor stood waiting for the water to boil, a tin of coffee in one hand and a bottle of brandy in the other.

Bony circled the jeep, standing forlorn like a good ship aground on a reef. This 'bump', like all the thousands which made up the floor of the comparative valley between the ranges, was sheathed with ironstone flakes and weathered

stones. The Great Northern Highway was merely twin ribbons maintained by the wheels of motor traffic, and between the ribbons, as well as either side, grew spinifex and tussock grass.

Presently the doctor called and Bony joined the group by the fire. Sam poured coffee into an enamel pannikin, and the doctor urged him to help himself to the brandy. 'Un was cooking slabs of steak on the blade of a long-handled shovel.

"Like old times," he said. "Often thought I was getting sick of living at the pub and parking me legs under a table, and now I know I am sick. You oughta have an off-sider, Sam. What about taking me on? I'd be a hell of a good chaperone."

Talking of nothing, they breakfasted with relish, and then smoked while waiting for the policeman from Wyndham. And the dead man waited in his jeep. Bony said:

"You mentioned, Doctor, that you understood Constable Stenhouse had gone south of Agar's Lagoon to the desert country, and we find him dead approximately ninety miles north."

"That's so, Inspector," agreed Dr Morley. "I don't get it. Didn't you hear that Stenhouse had gone south, 'Un?"

"I did. Everyone at Agar's thought Stenhouse had gone south on patrol to Leroy Downs. Jacky Musgrave said so, anyhow. Stenhouse never gave much away. Secretive sort of bloke. You never knew how you was with him."

"Jacky Musgrave! The police tracker?"

"Yes. Been with Stenhouse for nigh on three years," replied 'Un, twirling the points of his upturned moustache. "Good tracker by all accounts, and pretty thick with Stenhouse. Stenhouse could have got him to put it around that he was headed south when he intended heading north. Musta. He's north now, ain't he?"

"How long was he stationed at Agar's Lagoon?" asked Bony.

"Seven years and a bit."

"He was a widower, I believe."

The cheerfulness departed from 'Un. Sam Laidlaw spoke:

"Wife died on him three years back. Doc can tell you about her."

Dr Morley remained taciturn. He was still wearing his overcoat and, squatting on his heels, was apparently entranced by the blue spirals of smoke rising from the camp fire. Again the transport driver spoke:

"Wife got knocked about a bit. She was only two hands high, and couldn't take it. If she'd been my sister, Stenhouse would have been sitting dead in his jeep years ago. Fair's fair, I reckon. A good belting don't do any woman any harm, but no woman is expected to take punches from a bloke like Stenhouse."

Sam picked a live coal from the fire and balanced it on his pipe. Dr Morley helped himself to brandy and added a dash of coffee. 'Un concentrated his gaze on the crow cawing defiance from a wait-a-bit tree. Bony rose and wandered away.

The three men covertly watched this stranger: noting the way he placed his feet, the manner in which he held his head. Observation with them was a habit from which came inductive reasoning.

"Colour in him, for sure," murmured Sam.

"Quarter, I'd say," supplemented the yardman. "Decent sorta bloke, though."

There was a pause in their critical appraisal, terminated by the old doctor.

"He's all there. Entitled to his police rank, for he's learned more than to read and write. The shape of his head and the power of his eyes have brought him a long way. If either of you men have anything to keep under cover, watch your step. You made a bad break, Sam, when you said what you'd have done if Mrs Stenhouse had been your sister."

"Oh! How so?"

"Mrs Stenhouse had a brother, and you remember what happened that day she was buried."

Chapter Four

Bony Takes Charge

BONY'S FIRST IMPRESSION of Senior Constable Irwin was not favourable. It was, however, to be of short duration.

Irwin drove a sturdy utility and, in accordance with practice, his trackers rode on the load behind the cabin. Emerging from the driving seat, he advanced to meet Detective-Inspector Bonaparte, walking stiffly, less from cramp than in recognition of their respective rank.

He was large and loose-limbed, and his feet were turned slightly inward through years in the saddle. Perhaps thirty-five years old, his hair was red, his eyes were blue, and his mouth was wide. Over the mahogany-tinted face was a smile which seemed to be a fixture, and before saying a word he laughed as though the discordant crows were joking about the dead man in the jeep.

Following the mutual introduction, Irwin said:

"We were able to radio-contact headquarters last night, and the Chief suggested that, as you happened to be on the spot, you might like to take charge of this job. Sends his compliments, sir, and says he'll fly a man to Agar's to take over Stenhouse's district."

Bony noticed the absence of humour in the light-blue eyes, and it was then that the first impression vanished.

"Very well, Irwin," he said. "I'll be glad to assist if I might have your co-operation. This case may be a simple one, or it may not. I hope, the latter. Have you breakfasted?"

"Yes. Stopped at daybreak for a feed."

"Then, when you and the trackers have had a spot of coffee, we'll get to work. We have done nothing as yet. Laidlaw covered the body when he passed here yesterday." They

walked to the men about the fire, the two trackers standing by the utility.

The others greeted Irwin easily, yet betrayed knowledge that this large man's jovial front was but a mask. He picked up a used pannikin, filled it with coffee, adding a little of the doctor's brandy.

"Had breakfast, thanks. Hey, Charlie! Larry! Bring over your pannikins."

They came, two ebony-skinned, dark-eyed young men wearing military greatcoats over their ordinary clothes, broad-brimmed military felt hats and heavy military boots. They were intensely proud of this uniform which gained for them great respect from all aborigines. Irwin told them to return to the truck. Bony asked the transport driver to detail everything he did on discovering the dead policeman, and, having heard Sam's story, they pushed the jeep back to its original position by the stones on which the blood had dripped.

"Did you at any time enter the jeep?" Bony asked Sam.

"No, Inspector. I moved the dunnage about at the back to find what was missing, but I did that from the ground."

"You are sure that when pushing the jeep off the track you did not touch the steering-wheel?"

"Yes, I am. The front wheels slewed enough without that."

"And the brakes were not applied?"

"No, they were free enough."

"All right! We'll get the body out for Dr Morley's preliminary examination." Sam removed the blanket, and the doctor and the two policemen studied the position of the dead man and noted the ravages committed by the birds to the face and neck.

"Stenhouse believed in making himself comfortable. Good idea having the seat back built like that," remarked Sam.

"Yah," agreed 'Un. "Old Williams, the blacksmith at Agar's done that for him when he built the canopy."

"Ready, Doctor?"

"Yes, Inspector."

They removed the body and left it with the doctor, who nominated the yardman as his assistant. Sam was asked to boil water, and Bony said to Irwin:

"Although, according to Sam, the tracker's swag is missing, and there's no rifle, indicating that the tracker shot Stenhouse and cleared out, I am not satisfied that Jacky Musgrave killed his boss."

"Nor me," agreed Irwin. "Seems that Jacky Musgrave was extra loyal to Stenhouse, from what I know, and that Stenhouse treated him pretty well. What's the alternative?"

"As yet, I'm not sure. Does the back of the driving seat tell you anything?"

"Yes. The bullet passed through it after passing through the body."

"Let's move the dunnage. I see a tin immediately behind that bullet-hole in the seat back."

Spare tyres and camp equipment were taken out, and Irwin removed the four-gallon tin of oil. Most of the oil had leaked from the hole made in only one side, and it was obvious that the tin had been full when punctured. They poured the remainder of the oil into another tin, and found the bullet, which had been cushioned by the thick oil. The nose was slightly broadened by the impact.

"H'm! Lead bullet. ·44. Should give us the weapon from which it was fired," murmured Bony.

They searched the vehicle and found no rifle. In an attaché-case on the driving-seat was a ·32 automatic and cartridges, documents, and the dead man's official diary. A suitcase contained spare underwear, shoes, shaving tackle and a brush and comb.

"No rifle," said Irwin.

"Mightn't have brought one."

"Unlikely, sir. The tucker-box . . ."

Irwin pounced on the small wooden case, rummaged among the contents and laughed.

"No cooked tucker," he said. "Tracker must have shot him, and cleared out with his swag and the constable's rifle and what cooked tucker there was. It adds up."

Bony was standing back from the front offside wheel.

"If the tracker shot him, he must be familiar with rifles or revolvers," he said. "He could have shot Stenhouse from this point, but there was little margin to miss the windscreen. Ah, Doctor. What's the verdict?"

"Shot through the heart, I think," replied Morley. "Soft-nosed, steel-jacketed bullet from a high-velocity rifle. The bullet passed out through the back, making an exit wound about two inches in diameter. The range, I'd guess, was about twenty-five yards."

Bony beamed, and the doctor's eyes swiftly clouded.

"Most interesting," Bony said, and held out his hand on which rested the bullet taken from the oil tin. "This was not the bullet which killed him?"

"No, definitely not."

"Been dead . . . how long?"

"The day before yesterday at shortest, and at longest the day before that."

"Placing death either on the 15th or the 16th, eh?" Bony paused to light a cigarette. "We haven't found a soft-nosed, steel-jacketed bullet. Look at the seat back, please. The bullet which passed through it was not, you think, the bullet which passed through the body?"

Dr Morley leaned into the vehicle to examine the seat back, and on turning to Bony he shook his head.

"When the bullet emerged from the dead man's back, it was a shapeless metal mass, such a bullet expanding after impact. I'd say that the bullet which passed through the seat back is the one you have in your hand."

"Fired through the seat back before the body was placed there behind the steering-wheel, eh?" Irwin surmised.

"Could you tell us, after our return to Agar's Lagoon, if that blood on the seat and on the ground is human or animal?" asked Bony.

"Yes, I could do that. Shall I take a specimen?"

"If you please. This case is beginning to provide interest. Might I have your cooperation by keeping your findings from the public?"

The doctor's assent was gruffly spoken, and to smooth the umbrage Bony urbanely related how he was once inconvenienced by a doctor innocently mentioning a vital fact to an interested party outside police circles. To Irwin he said:

"Call Laidlaw."

The almost naked transport driver ambled from the fire, where he had been washing his hands after bundling the corpse in blankets and ground-sheet.

"You said, I think, you met no one on your trip from Wyndham to Agar's Lagoon?"

"No one at all," averred Sam. "I seen only the Breens drovin' their cattle to the Meat Works. I passed 'em about twenty miles north of McDonald's Stand."

"How far off the track?"

"Less'n half a mile. Kimberley and Ezra Breen was in charge . . . with four abos."

"Thanks, Sam. When would they have passed here?"

"Wouldn't pass here. Their station's on the far side of this Black Range. They'd hit the Wyndham track north of McDonald's Stand at the end of the Range, and that's fifteen miles away."

"What kind of outfit did they have?"

"Pack-horses and spare hacks."

"Well, that appears to dispose of the Breens. Call 'Un, please." To the yardman Bony said: "Give me your attention, 'Un. You know everyone who passes through Agar's. Who was the last to arrive there from this track?"

"Sam, of course," was the instant response. "Afore Sam, there was a party of Gov'ment photographers. They went on to Darwin."

"When did they arrive at Agar's Lagoon?"

"Last Toosdee. Left again on Wednesdee."

"So that they passed this point some time on Tuesday the 15th. Keep that in mind, please. At what time did they arrive at Agar's Lagoon?"

" 'Bout six."

"Good! Now tell me who was the last to leave Agar's Lagoon to take this track, and when."

'Un took time to answer that one. " 'S'far as I know, it was Mr Alverston and two blacks with him. They left Agar's about seven in the morning in a utility. It was on Toosdee morning. The Gov'ment men said they met him at McDonald's Stand around noon. They boiled the billy and had a bite of scan afore they parted."

"And as far as you know, no one was on this track after Tuesday, exceptin' Sam?"

"That's right, Inspector."

"Very well." Bony noted the sun time. "Fix those two trackers with a meal. I want to put them to work."

The yardman having departed, Bony questioned Sam.

"Tell me about Alverston," he requested, and the transport driver said that Alverston was a station manager, and that after leaving the photographers he would drive a further forty miles towards Wyndham before taking the turn-off to his station, which lay to the north-east.

"Did you see any smoke signals on your own journey south?"

"Yes," replied Sam. "There was smokes far away to the west of Black Range."

"How many?"

"Five in a row. I remember there was three continuous columns and two broken up. Couldn't read 'em, of course."

"That was Tuesday morning . . . not Monday?"

"Tuesday morning, it was. I noticed them smokes before I met the Breens."

"All right, Sam."

The trackers had received their meal and had taken it back to Irwin's utility, and when Bony approached them they stood

expectant, their faces indicative of pleasure as though to receive a great honour. Both appeared absurdly incongruous in their greatcoats and heavy boots. They crouched with Bony as with a stick he sketched on the ground the smoke signals described by Sam. He sought confirmation of his own reading of them.

"These feller smokes," he said, blandly. "What they bin tell you, eh?"

One kicked at a stone and turned as though to admire a view. The other laughed as though to hide embarrassment, and he said:

"P'haps smoke fellers bin tellum policeman him bin shot."

Bony smiled his triumph, and they laughed in unison. Neither had been near the dead Stenhouse. Neither had overheard that Stenhouse had been shot.

Those far-away aborigines living in the very heart of the Kimberley Mountains knew how Constable Stenhouse had died.

Chapter Five

Dead Man's Diary

THE POLICE STATION at Agar's Lagoon had seldom been as busy as on the morning of August 19th. The township was subdued; the pub deserted. The town goats were indifferent, and of them there were a thousand and one.

Inspector Walters, the Senior Police officer in charge of the vast district of the northern third of Western Australia, had arrived from his headquarters at Broome, bringing with him a doctor, and a constable to replace Stenhouse. Walters was wiry and tough, of average height, greying fast, dark of eye and with a back like a drill sergeant's. He sat stiffly upright at the table in the main office, and in clipped words told Irwin and Constable Clifford to sit down. Bony turned from studying a large-scale map of the Kimberleys and took a chair opposite the Senior Officer.

"You have there . . . ?" he asked politely, arranging tobacco and papers on the table.

"The post-mortem report on Constable Stenhouse, signed by Doctors Mitchell and Morley. Want it read?"

"Please."

Inspector Walters cleared his throat like a sergeant-major, took up the papers to avoid having to stoop, and read:

"We found on the left side of the chest, three inches from the mid-sternal line between the fourth and fifth ribs, a wound penetrating into the chest wall and passing through right and left ventricles and left atrium of the heart. Behind the arterial wall a greater destruction of tissues occurred involving the left lung, aorta, the oesophagus, spinal muscles and skin. The bony structures were not damaged. On the back of the body was an irregular exit wound about two inches in

diameter. Death was instantaneous. The injuries as enumerated are consistent with those caused by a ·32 bullet fired from a high-power rifle at a distance of approximately thirty feet."

"In layman's phraseology, the bullet entered the chest, tore the heart to shreds and emerged from the back much enlarged in circumference and much shorter in length," murmured Bony. "Where the body rested against the seat back there is a hole in the leather made by this forty-four lead bullet. This bullet then penetrated a tin of oil. No other bullet was found among the dead man's dunnage."

"A rigged job?" sharply asked Walters.

"To make it appear that Stenhouse was murdered by his tracker, who cleared out with his own swag, the constable's rifle, and all the cooked food. Morley states that the blood on the seat, the floor of the vehicle and the stones beneath is animal blood."

"Damned crude," Walters snapped.

"Very." Bony applied a match to what might be called a cigarette. "And yet . . . revealing. The men who murdered Stenhouse are devoid of imagination, but shrewd. They were foolish only when having to deal with a problem which suddenly confronted them. None but men faced by an exceptional situation demanding urgent action would have made so many mistakes when setting that stage for murder."

"Men! Not one man?" asked Irwin, and Walters nodded approval.

"There were several men. There must have been. It's obvious that Stenhouse and the jeep were moved to the place where Laidlaw found the body. Charlie and Larry failed to back-track the jeep. They failed to find Jacky Musgrave's tracks. The jeep's tracks were obliterated, and the killers knew that the absence of the tracker's prints at the supposed scene of the murder would be in keeping with the set-up, for had he actually killed Stenhouse and cleared out, he wouldn't have left tracks."

"The scene of the crime could be miles away," commented Walters.

"It is, but we'll find it." Bony completed the making of another alleged cigarette. "Medical opinion is that Stenhouse was killed either on the 15th or the 16th, with preference for the first date. Of significance, however, is that on the 15th two parties of travellers passed over that section of the Wyndham Road where Laidlaw found Stenhouse. We know that the party of photographers passed the place last, and that it was about two in the afternoon of the 15th. The stage was set after that time and date, but, in view of the opinion of the two doctors, Stenhouse could have been shot before that time and date.

"I have here the dead man's official diary found in the attaché-case with him. The last entry is dated August 14th and reads: 'Left Red Creek at 7 am and proceeded to Leroy Downs where obtained statement from Mary Jo concerning alleged assault by James Mooney. Proceeded to Richard's Well where arrived at 5.45 pm and invited to stay the night.' According to the diary, therefore, on the morning of August 14th Constable Stenhouse was at Richard's Well, a station homestead approximately sixty miles south of Agar's Lagoon and eighty-odd by road."

"It's on record that he was down there," Walters said. "In accordance with routine, he sent me a telegram on the 12th saying he was going on patrol to Richard's Well and beyond. On the file here is a letter written by the owner of Leroy Downs reporting a complaint made to him by one of his aborigine domestics of an assault on her by an aborigine stockman named Mooney."

"Then it would seem that Stenhouse was killed eighty-odd miles south of Agar's, and his body and jeep taken to a point ninety miles north of Agar's," contributed Clifford.

"Did I not always mistrust the obvious, I would incline to accept that view," Bony said, dryly and without malice. "Since we know that the persons responsible for Stenhouse's death

did set the murder stage we must not confine our view of the stage by the properties of the two bullets, the hole in the seat back, the animal blood, and the absence of the vehicle's tracks, supported by the items indicating that the murder was committed by the tracker. The entry in that diary might be fictitious."

Walters snorted. Irwin grinned and would have chuckled if his superior hadn't been looking at him.

"Show me the diary," commanded the Inspector.

Bony pushed the book across the table, and Walters almost snatched it to read at the page opened for him.

"Same handwriting," Bony pointed out, "as the previous entries." Reluctantly Walters agreed. "Assuming that Stenhouse wrote that information and yet did not travel to the place named on the business stated, would you ultimately learn that the entry was made to cover other activities?"

"No," admitted Walters. "Anyhow, we can easily find out if he did or did not go to Richard's Well. We can contact the people at Richard's Well or those at Leroy Downs by radio."

"And can be sure that the killers of Stenhouse will be sitting at their transceiver," Bony said. "That wouldn't do. I'll go south and see these people. Perhaps you will permit Irwin to accompany me. We must begin by testing the genuineness of that diary entry."

"That seems to be the start."

"And I suggest that Clifford takes Irwin's trackers to the place Stenhouse was found, and gives them more time to prospect for tracks. The jeep would have been driven there from a point across-country."

"Clifford can leave within an hour," assented Walters.

"I suggest, further, that Clifford contacts the Breens who are droving cattle to Wyndham and question them regarding who they saw on the road, other than Laidlaw, and from their aborigines find out what the smoke signals to the west meant on that day they met Laidlaw."

"What's the smoke-signal angle?"

"On the morning Laidlaw met the Breens he saw smoke signals sent up by the blacks far to the west of Black Range. Irwin's trackers, who at that time did not know how Stenhouse had been murdered, told me that the signals might mean that a policeman had been shot. The point is, if that be so, the blacks are likely to know who shot Stenhouse."

"Those far-west blacks are rather illusive," remarked Irwin. "They're not station blacks."

"Aboriginal interest in this murder is almost proved," Bony said. "There is the possibility that the aborigines are not concerned with the death of Stenhouse, the white policeman, but with the death of Jacky Musgrave, the black policeman. To them a policeman's tracker is a policeman.

"I'm not stating where Stenhouse was murdered. I don't know . . . yet. We brought in the steering-wheel of Stenhouse's jeep for finger-printing. Your Sergeant Sawtell could do the testing. The diary and personal possessions will give him Stenhouse's prints. I'm confident that no prints other than those left by Stenhouse and his tracker would be found on the jeep, because adhering to the controls were two long hairs from a goat, indicating that the man who last drove it wore gloves of goat-skin, possibly the skin of the animal killed for its blood.

"As I have said, the people responsible for Stenhouse's death are exceedingly shrewd, and they were exceedingly stupid in the small, the relatively unimportant, points. A killer invariably stamps on his crime his own mental attributes, as you will know."

Clifford, young and keen, asked what was to be done about the jeep, and it was arranged that the local mechanic would accompany him, taking another steering-wheel, and returning with the licensee's car.

"You were doing something to Stenhouse's boots," remarked Irwin.

"I did examine them," Bony returned, and produced an envelope. "I found on the heels what appears to be whitish

clay. The surface of the Kimberleys is reddish. A spectroscope analysis would assist us."

Inspector Walters glanced into the envelope. He inserted the top of a finger, which then withdrawn was smeared by a chalky substance.

"Looks like the mullock dug from a well," he observed.

"It might be," agreed Bony, and added with emphasis: "The same kind of soil is embedded under the dead man's fingernails. He could have stood on the mullock from a well when drawing water for his canteen, but why would he want to burrow among mullock with his hands? Have that analysis done as quickly as possible."

It wasn't so strange that even Walters stood when Bony stood and crossed to the wall map. Irwin pointed out the position of the three homesteads mentioned in the last diary entry, and below them the Musgrave Range down deep in the desert.

"Jacky Musgrave's tribe has often given trouble," he said. "Led by a Chief called Pluto by the whites . . . a cunning fellow. Stenhouse told me he contacted Pluto when he conscripted Jacky for two plugs of tobacco, but no other white man ever saw Pluto, that I know."

"The stations don't extend that far south?"

"No, not by many miles."

The map showed the road to Wyndham running north and skirting Black Range for a third of the distance. At Bony's request, Irwin marked the Wallace homestead situated fifteen miles eastward of the road, and the Breens' station to westward of the northern section of Black Range. These two homesteads were equidistant from the place where the dead policeman was found.

"Thank you," Bony murmured, and then decisively: "Please prepare for the track. You, Clifford, for the north, and you, Irwin, for the south. Days, even hours, will blur those pages of the Book of the Bush we have to read. I'll be ready when you are."

The two men left, and Bony asked Walters for Stenhouse's record.

"He was a good policeman and an exceptional bushman," Walters said. "Privately, I didn't like the man, and I don't think anyone else did. His wife died under circumstances which nearly ended his career, and after that I thought of having him transferred to the city. Would have, but good bushmen are damned rare."

"You are giving Clifford this district?"

"Yes. He'll get along better with the people, but he'll never understand the aborigines like Stenhouse did. Thanks a lot for taking over this job. Think I should ask Perth to contact your department, in Brisbane, and make formal request for your services? Trouble enough in the world without adding to it."

Bony's face broke into a captivating smile.

"It was, I think, Kitchener who said no man is indispensable, and I'm not vain enough to believe I'm indispensable to my department. Half a dozen times I've been sacked for ignoring orders, but they have taken me back. Because I am intelligent? Because I have never failed to finalize an investigation? Oh no! Merely because they know the department is not indispensable to me."

Chapter Six

Tracking Constable Stenhouse

Two o'clock in the afternoon of this late winter's day, and the sun powerful enough to blister skin not customarily exposed, and the exhilarating air so clear as to give the illusion that the ranges were painted on canvas.

Six miles westward of Agar's Lagoon, the utility emerged through the Kimberley Gates to a large expanse of comparatively level country where the aerodrome had been established. Past the aerodrome Irwin had to reduce speed and be wary of sharp if shallow water gutters. Now the ranges crept forward on both sides like the two paws of a bored cat playing with a blouse.

Twenty miles from Agar's Lagoon, Irwin turned off to a track running southward across flats covered with spinifex grass . . . light-green cushions crowded with tall straw-coloured pins.

"It's better going than the track to Wyndham," remarked Bony. "You haven't had to change down for half a mile."

"Won't last long," predicted Irwin. "We've to cross several mountain spurs, but beyond that the country is almost flat and continues so down to the desert."

"Nowhere else have I seen the sky so filled with shooting stars, if I may use the phrase," Bony remarked.

"Big one fell not far off the track we'll be taking."

"I wonder if the meteors are attracted by these Kimberley Ranges. There might be something in the idea that somewhere in them lie huge deposits of radio-active ore." Bony laughed. "Look at that mountain slope. Red rock and soil covered with pale-green spinifex. Reminds me . . . now what does it look like?"

"A woman's over-rouged face partially toned down by a green-spotted veil?"

"Good!" exclaimed Bony. "That's just what it does resemble. And this dry creek we have to cross looks like the Grand Canyon."

Having with exceeding caution manoeuvred the utility down and across the creek bed, and given the engine every ounce of power to climb its far side, Irwin broached a subject which had been in his mind for some time.

"You mentioned this morning that you had felt undercurrents at Agar's. I thought that peculiar because I've felt those submerged influences, too."

Bony was mildly astonished that this large, raw-boned man, who laughed when there was no reason to do so and yet was intelligent, could be sensitive to subversive influences.

"Were you stationed at Agar's at one time?" he asked.

"Yes. Five years ago I worked down here with Stenhouse. Was with him a couple of months, or rather I was stationed at Agar's while he was down in the desert rounding up a gang of sheep killers. I can get along with people as a rule, but I could never get anywhere with the people at Agar's. They seem to be entirely different, cliquish and reserved."

"They're not entirely cut off from civilization, either," observed Bony.

"Oh, no. Since the war there's been quite an increase of road traffic through Agar's from Derby and Broome to Darwin and the Alice."

"More than along the track from Agar's to Wyndham?"

"Much. That track's too tough at the best of times."

They passed out from the claws of a senna-coloured range to enter comparatively flat country supporting robust gums, wattles and edible shrub and grass.

"It would appear that Stenhouse either unearthed unlawful activities, or that he was murdered as the result of a personal feud. Which of these theories do you support?"

"Neither, particularly."

"Well, what unlawful activities could be operating? Is there much cattle thieving?"

"No, very little."

"Mining, then, gold? If gold was being transported over the ranges to a coast inlet and from there to an Asian port, the price would be very much higher. Remember the soil adhering to Stenhouse's boots. I think that soil is from a mine dump. Hallo! A homestead!"

"Red Creek, the first of the homesteads mentioned in the diary."

Dogs raced forward to meet them. Goats grazing along the bank of a wide creek containing a chain of water-holes paused to look at the approaching vehicle. And then the truck was being braked to a halt at a wicket-gate in a brushwood fence surrounding a small and well-conditioned weather-board house. From a near-by outhouse emerged a twin to Irwin.

"Good day-ee. Why, Constable Irwin! Haven't seen you in years."

Inspector Bonaparte was presented to Mr Cummins, the manager of Red Creek Cattle Station, and Mr Cummins, successfully concealing his curiosity, 'ordered' the travellers to:

"Come along in for a cup of tea. Missus will be glad to see you."

Irwin produced a bundle of mail, and Cummins led the way through the gate and along the path composed of the rubble of termite hills, and stalked into the house calling for his wife. After a little delay, Mrs Cummins appeared, tidy and excited.

"Mr Irwin! Whatever are you doing down this way? Sit down, do, and I'll make a pot of tea. Glad to meet you, Inspector Bonaparte. Heard your name on the wireless the other day."

Questions and answers criss-crossed like the nightly display of shooting stars. The welcome was warm and, to Bony, Irwin's standing with these people amply assured. By magic the living-room table was 'set' for afternoon tea of buttered scones and

cake, and it did seem incongruous to interrupt the gaiety with the announcement that Constable Stenhouse had been found shot to death.

Mrs Cummins was obviously shocked. Cummins accepted the news with an abrupt withdrawal. It was as though an opaque curtain fell before his keen grey eyes.

"Well, that's just too dreadful," said Mrs Cummins. "He was here only the other day. Stayed the night."

The cattleman's brows drew close in a frown, and Bony could 'see' his mind at work. He was mentally adding miles, and placing them against the total of days since Stenhouse had left his house for Leroy Station up to the afternoon when his body was found ninety miles north of Agar's Lagoon.

"Did he say where he intended going on leaving here?" Bony asked.

"Yes. Said he thought of running across to Leroy Downs," replied Cummins.

"I see you have a transceiver. Did you mention over the air to Leroy Downs the probability of Stenhouse arriving there?"

Cummins shook his head. His wife said:

"No. Unless you policemen ask us to we never say anything of your movements. That's the rule up here."

"Thank you. Did Stenhouse have his tracker with him?"

"Oh, yes. Jacky Musgrave was with him."

"And Jacky's missing?" Cummins interpolated.

"That's so," replied Irwin. "Any of Jacky's mob working for you?"

"Yes. One. He's away on walkabout."

"I didn't see any aborigines when we arrived," Bony remarked. "None here?"

Cummins nodded and laughed. "Plenty," he replied. "But they all went down the creek aways day before yesterday." What he fancied was in Bony's mind made him ask: "Think that's anything to do with Jacky Musgrave?"

"Possibly. Have you noticed an unusual number of smokes recently?"

"No, haven't seen any."

"There was something that stirred up the blacks, though," said Mrs Cummins.

Irwin glanced at the old pendulum clock on the mantel, and Bony rose to thank their host and hostess and express the hope that he would meet them again. Both escorted them to the utility, and they departed to the accompaniment of hearty farewells, the barking of dogs and the excited crowing of roosters.

"Most of these stations have a transceiver, I suppose?" Bony asked when his fingers were engaged making a cigarette.

"All of 'em," Irwin answered. "The wireless and the aeroplane and the refrigerator have changed life considerably. People can now gossip to their heart's content to their neighbours over forty, sixty, a hundred miles of space."

"They have to keep off the air at certain periods, I understand."

"Yes, for periods which are kept clear for telegrams and the Flying Doctor Service."

"And do you find that the station people do refrain from talking of police movements?"

"Oh yes. They're strongly cooperative there. Same with everything else. Notice Cummins's reaction to the news about Stenhouse?"

"Yes. He was wondering how Stenhouse came to be north of Agar's Lagoon. I received the impression that he didn't like Stenhouse."

"Me, too."

The track ran southward, following an ever-widening valley prodded by the long red fingers of the ranges pointing towards Jacky Musgrave's country. They passed a well from which radiated lines of troughing. Red cattle were drinking, and other cattle were standing in the spinifex and looking exactly like the termite hills. Far to the south-west a low, flat-topped range, isolated and singular on that quarter of flat

country, gleamed opalescent gold under the opalescent blue sky.

"Looks like a range, doesn't it?" remarked Irwin. "That's the wall of the meteor crater. Full mile round, as I said. Steeper than a house roof, and the interior at least three hundred feet below the top of the wall."

"What's down inside, d'you know?"

"Nothing much. Floor's flat, or almost so. Small desert trees growing down there. In the dead centre, a lake forms after a good rain."

"Any official name given to it?" pursued the interested Bony.

"No. People hereabout call it 'The Racecourse'."

"And what's beyond it?"

"Fair country for miles down to the desert. Never been there. Stenhouse went several times. Brought Jacky Musgrave back with him on his first trip." Irwin chuckled. "Seems to me that Stenhouse got on better with the blacks than he did with the whites."

Imperceptibly the track veered to the east, and the watercourses increased in number to reduce speed to ten miles an hour. The range fingers became blunted and still others appeared like headlands defying an ocean.

The sun went down, and the sky darkened to indigo blue above a land of spinifex which whitened to snow towards the desert. It was dark when they reached the homestead of Leroy Downs, to be welcomed again by excited dogs and men who carried lanterns.

"Good night, Mr Lang."

One of the men raised his lantern.

"Damme! It's Constable Irwin. Welcome, welcome! Just in time for dinner. Bob, run and tell Mum Mr Irwin's here with a friend."

"Inspector Bonaparte," Irwin said.

"Welcome to you, Inspector. Come on in. Ah, you didn't forget to bring our mail. Thanks. How's things with you, an' all?"

Bony blinked as he entered the living-room and joyed at the faces smiling at him. Lang himself was short and fat. Mrs Lang was tall and inclined to scragginess. Two young men and two young women accepted him with polite interest and Constable Irwin with unmasked pleasure, and before they could get breath again the cattlemen set up glasses and a bottle of whisky on the table already laid for dinner.

"Mind putting us up for the night, Mrs Lang?" asked Irwin. "Anywhere'll do."

"Of course," answered Mrs Lang. "You're not going on from here tonight, not if we know it. Why, it's years since we saw you. Sit down, Inspector, and make yourself perfectly at home. Why, we haven't had a visitor for weeks."

Bony beamed at her and bowed.

"Your welcome is truly appreciated," he said. "By the way, didn't Constable Stenhouse call on you recently?"

"Constable Stenhouse! No. He hasn't been down this way since last March."

Chapter Seven

The Mulga Wire

In silent agreement with Bony, Irwin made no additional reference to Stenhouse, and both surrendered to the warm hospitality extended to them by this Lang family. Their approach to Bony was restrained only by their inability to sum him up. Irwin was one of themselves. He spoke as they did, thought as they did. Bony's speech was not of their school, and they found difficulty in squaring his personality with his official police status.

After dinner Lang ushered his guests into the sitting-room, which, like the living-room, was plainly but expensively furnished. The usual family photographs decorated the walls, and shelves supported at least a hundred books. Between two curtained windows stood a modern transceiver.

"Heard your name in the local news session the other night, Inspector," Lang said when his guests were seated. "Good job about these murders in Broome being stopped." His large round face broadened into a smile. "Not after another murderer now, by any chance?"

"Yes, we are."

The smile vanished.

Bony related the main facts concerning the death of Constable Stenhouse, and Lang, with his sons, listened without comment.

"The circumstances are peculiar," Bony proceeded. "Stenhouse was supposed to be down this way last Monday. I understand that you wrote to him with reference to an assault on a woman named Mary Jo."

"Yes, I did."

"Constable Stenhouse acknowledged your letter?" Bony asked.

"No, not a word."

"He left Agar's Lagoon on the 12th and stayed that night at Red Creek Station. He left Red Creek the following morning to come here. In his diary he wrote that he called here and took a statement from Mary Jo, then went on to Richard's Well, where he stayed the night of the 13th."

Lang flushed slightly.

"Stenhouse never called here," he asserted. "Hasn't been here since last March. Don't get it."

"D'you think it possible he could have passed through here on his way to Richard's Well without you knowing it?"

"Impossible. There's only the one track. Even if he came through in the middle of the night we'd know, the blacks would know, and the ruddy dogs would have barked the roof off. You said Stenhouse was dead in his jeep. Didn't he have a tracker with him?"

"Jacky Musgrave was with him when he left Agar's Lagoon and when he left Red Creek homestead. Jacky Musgrave has disappeared. His swag wasn't in the jeep, and the constable's rifle is missing."

"Looks like Jacky Musgrave shot him."

"It does, superficially. What we fail to understand is why Stenhouse was ninety miles to the north of Agar's Lagoon when he was supposed to be on patrol duty down this way. He and his tracker certainly did leave Red Creek last Monday, taking the track for Leroy Downs. Could he have turned off anywhere to return to Agar's Lagoon?"

The cattleman pursed his lips. His sons glanced at each other and remained silent.

"There's an old donkey-wagon track. It turns off the present track about a quarter of a mile this side of what we call White Gum Creek. I used to drive a donkey team that way to Agar's Lagoon in the very early days when we took up this country. Haven't used it for years, not since the first war. I

don't think Stenhouse could have got his jeep over it. Do you, Bob?"

"Don't think." Bob completed the manufacture of a creditable cigarette. "We were out there a couple of months back. Still see where Pop shifted rocks to get round bad places with the wagon. No. I don't think even a jeep could be got through to Agar's that way."

The second son drawled: "Still, if Stenhouse did tackle Pop's donkey track, we'd see easily enough soon after the turn-off. Sandy ground all the way to the ranges. I wouldn't say Stenhouse didn't do it. Reckon he'd get anywhere with anything."

"Well, we'll run out to that turn-off and have a look," decided Lang. "If we find the tracks of his jeep, then he did tackle my old wagon trail, and he did have more guts than I've got these days."

"How far would it be to the township by that track?" Bony asked.

"About sixty miles. Used to take me and the donkey wagon a fortnight to do it. It's past eight. The air's free. Shall we contact Richard's Well and find out if Stenhouse got there?"

"Like other parts of the interior, I suppose everyone listens in during free hours," Bony said, smilingly, and the three Langs grinned. "I would like to keep our visit to you from the public ear. We'll leave it until we prospect that turn-off tomorrow." Mrs Lang appeared with her daughters and Bony was instantly on his feet. "Sit here, Mrs Lang. This chair is so comfortable that I have to fight to remain awake."

The women sat, Mrs Lang with obvious relief, the girls primly.

"You're all looking very serious," she exclaimed.

Her husband related the finding of the murdered policeman. The girls, both in their early twenties, uttered cries of horror. Their mother looked grim.

"It's not for us to judge," she said, quietly, "He that raiseth the sword shall die by the sword. His wife was a brave little thing. He broke her heart. We didn't like him, Inspector Bonaparte, but we always welcome everyone."

Bony managed to push the subject into the background and the evening passed pleasantly. The following morning, fortified by the most delicious steak and eggs, he and Irwin set off with Lang in the station utility, the two sons and an aborigine riding at the rear.

"Are there any boys from the Musgrave Range working for you?" Bony asked the cattleman.

"No. Don't care much for 'em. They're too unreliable, too wild. Reckon Stenhouse got the pick of the lot when he chose Jacky Musgrave. He thought a lot of Jacky, and Jacky thought a lot of him. Seems that Stenhouse was sort of unbalanced. What affection he had in his make-up he gave to his pet tracker."

"How old would Jacky be?"

"Difficult to tell the age of some of these blacks. Jacky'd be somewhere about twenty to twenty-five. Short, and ugly as hell. When running wild he'd be as thin as a grass stem. Stenhouse fattened him so's he was wider and thicker than me."

The utility was riding over a sea of spinifex dotted with the red termite hills, and the grass rising from the cushions waved like opening oats in the light wind. Far ahead the gums marking a creek appeared like silver candles burning a green flame. Bony, who sat between Lang and Irwin, said:

"From what you know of the relationship between Jacky Musgrave and Stenhouse, you doubt the tracker shot Stenhouse?"

"I don't think he would. Bob and me were talking about that this morning. My lad knows more about the blacks than I do. When he was a baby he crawled round with aborigine babies, and later on with the young bucks. He's been initiated into the local tribe. Thinks nearer to 'em than I do, or his mother. Bob reckons Jacky was done in when Stenhouse was."

Two minutes later, Lang abruptly reduced speed to three miles an hour, saying:

"It was about here I usta turn off to those ranges. Long time ago that was, and my wagon-tracks won't be seen." He glanced back through the rear window. "The young fellers are standing up looking for where Stenhouse turned off . . . if he did."

"The turn-off having been wiped out by the years since you laid down that wagon track, how, d'you think, did Stenhouse know there was a track across those ranges?" asked Bony.

Lang laughed mirthlessly, and he kept his reply until he stopped the truck.

"Stenhouse knew everything. I told him about it years ago, how me and the wife hitched sixty-two donkeys to our old wagon and drove 'em over them ranges to take up this country, and how we drove 'em in a wagon once a year to Agar's for stores and clothes and a bit of timber and roofing iron. Stenhouse was a king-pin of a bushman, and don't forget he had Jacky with him."

They left the truck and joined the two sons and the aboriginal, a well set-up young fellow called Monty.

"What d'you reckon, boys?" asked Lang while his pipe dangled from his teeth and his hands were employed cutting tobacco chips. He was well beyond sixty, and actually appeared tougher than either of his sons.

"He never turned off anywhere from home to here," Bob stated. "Reckon if Stenhouse wanted to hide his tracks he'd have turned off at the bed of the creek and got Jacky to smooth out the traces for a coupler hundred yards. That's what I'd have done, anyhow."

"All right, we'll try it out," agreed the cattleman. "We'll prospect up the creek away. See that bluish rock standing on yonder slope . . . there between them summits? Well, that usta be our first camp up from this side. My wagon track passes close to that rock. Stenhouse could have turned off anywhere and crossed this spinifex plain to reach that rock. After that

he'd have to keep to my wagon track all the way over. Let's prospect the creek."

The creek was shallow, the bed sandy and approximately fifty yards wide.

Since the last rush of water from the ranges had passed to leave the creek bed smooth, cattle had trampled the coarse sand into confusion. The sand was dry and fairly firm, and at once Bony acknowledged the probability that Stenhouse had driven his light jeep along that dry bed. Monty smiled approval of Bony's powers. Both saw the man-made irregularities which even the tracker had failed to eliminate.

The party set out and, as Bob Lang had deduced, they came abruptly to the tracks of a truck or car along the creek bed.

Half an hour later, the party came to the place where the jeep had been driven from the creek bed and had taken to the plain, headed to that singular bluish rock.

"No need to go farther," Bony said. "The evidence is clear enough. Having crossed the ranges where would he come out?"

"He'd come to a gully which would bring him to the main road about a mile on the aerodrome side of the township," replied the cattleman. "Damned if I get it. If he wanted to get back there why didn't he take the track through Red Creek, the way you came, the way we go to Agar's? I wouldn't take a blitz-buggy across them ranges."

"He certainly had his reasons," Bony pointed out. "By the way, would he have had knowledge of your operations?"

"Meaning?"

"Last night you mentioned that you had dispatched your last mob of fats to Wyndham . . . that is, for this season. Therefore it would be unlikely you would again muster this section of your country for some considerable time."

"That's so."

Joe Lang chipped in:

"Stenhouse would know that having sent away our last mob for this year we'd be taking things kind of easy for awhile, and not likely to be riding this country."

Bob said:

"Seems like Stenhouse took to that old track so's to put the Cumminses wrong, making them think he'd come on to us and would be going home past Richard's Well. He didn't want 'em to know he'd gone back to Agar's."

Irwin chuckled, and there was no harshness in his eyes.

"Told you before, Bob, you'd make a heck of a good policeman."

Bob flushed beneath the tan, grinned at the constable, looked sheepishly at his father and said he wouldn't be happy down in Perth doing recruit training.

They set off back to the truck, and returned to the homestead, where they were met by the two girls and 'ordered' in for lunch. Everyone exhibited disappointment when Bony decided they must leave after lunch, and such was that meal that he felt inclined to stay and sleep throughout the afternoon.

The entire family accompanied them to Irwin's utility, reluctant to let them go. Bony took Bob's arm and led him away.

"Tell me, Bob, have you seen any smokes these last few days?" he asked.

"Yes. Corroboree smokes. The blacks at Red Creek are having a corroboree."

Bony told him of the smokes seen by Laidlaw and interpreted by Charlie, Bob's brown eyes directed to his and Bob's mind working at top. When Bony finished, Bob shook his head, saying:

"I think Charlie made a guess on what you drew for him. Still, I might be wrong. The corroboree at Red Creek might have something to do with Jacky Musgrave. It could work out this way."

Bob squatted on the ground and with a finger drew a map, Bony squatting with him. The map showed the Kimberley

Ranges, and dots represented McDonald's Stand, Red Creek homestead and the place whereon they were. It was done with the facility of a practised hand.

"Those western blacks might know something about the shooting of Stenhouse and what happened to Jack Musgrave. They wouldn't be interested in Stenhouse, but they would be in Jacky, assumin' Jacky was shot too. The signals they sent up would be relayed down to the Musgrave blacks. Assumin' again that this is what those smokes meant, that Jacky was killed with Stenhouse, then it could be that the corroboree now going on at Red Creek is about Jacky. A Musgrave black is working down there with them. There's an old magic man living here. If you'd wait, I'd go and have a chip with him."

"Good! I wish you would."

Bob walked beyond a small gathering of aborigines waiting to watch the departure of the visitors. Bony again squatted and studied the ground map. The party about the utility was engaged with Constable Irwin, who was not unobservant. Ten minutes passed, and young Lang returned.

"The mulga wire is still a mystery to me, Inspector. Could never find out how it's worked. The magic man must be a hundred and he's blind and can't walk. He says that Jacky Musgrave was turned into a horse. Sounds like a fairy-tale, but it's all I could get out of him."

There was no derision in Bob Lang's steady eyes.

Chapter Eight

Progress Reports

The police office at Agar's Lagoon was a depressing place. The walls cried for paint, and the several maps, calendars and pictures of criminals wanted by the police of other States failed to relieve their drab monotony. The large deal table was almost covered with files and record books, and the safe in the corner looked like rusty junk.

Bony had just come in from the hotel, where he had eaten a late dinner, and now, with a pile of his extraordinary cigarettes and matches on a sheaf of documents weighted with ribbon stone, he was prepared to outline his investigation to the man who had need to be a greater administrator than a detective. "It was as well that I went down to the Langs'," he said.

"Going to be difficult . . . this case?" asked Walters, who, as always, sat stiffly erect. Bony smiled and his eyes beamed, and Walters knew how his question was answered.

"The facts from the evidence are these, Walters. We know that Stenhouse left here with his tracker on the afternoon of August 12th. That night he stayed with the Cumminses at Red Creek. So far, it accords with the diary. The next day, August 13th, according to the diary, he left Red Creek, called on the Langs, and stayed the night at Richard's Well homestead . . . which is a false statement. On leaving the Cumminses, he certainly headed for Leroy Downs, but when about ten miles from there, he left the road and returned over the ranges by an old donkey track used by Lang in the early days. We went in on that old track from this side, and found where he and the tracker had camped. I saw the imprints of Stenhouse's boots, and having made imprints of the boots before I left, I cannot be mistaken.

"It's probable that Stenhouse waited until dark on August 13th before coming on to join the road just outside Agar's Lagoon. We can be sure that on August 14th he was somewhere on the Wyndham track."

"He didn't return here that night," growled Walters. "I've questioned everyone here, and no one saw him after he left on the 12th."

"It does seem that that false entry in the diary could mean one of two things," Bony continued. "Stenhouse left Agar's Lagoon with the intention of deceiving everyone concerning an investigation in the opposite direction. Or he could have done what he did to cover some skulduggery of his own. I think the latter. When he left Agar's he made that report to you about the assault on the aborigine at Leroy Downs an excuse to serve his private ends."

"Looks like it," agreed Walters. "No need to make false statements in his diary if he doubled back over that old track on official business. I've been through his records and I found nothing even hinting at an investigation north of Agar's. His papers here contain a copy of the telegram stating his intention to make the patrol down to Leroy Downs to inquire into that assault case. You going north tomorrow?"

"Yes. Can you spare Irwin?"

"As long as you want him. Pick up anything on the tracker, Jacky Musgrave?"

"Nothing of importance. He was pretty thick with Stenhouse, and every report on him is adverse to the theory that he shot Stenhouse. Stenhouse bought him for two plugs of tobacco from the chief of his tribe, one called Pluto, and transformed him from a skinny, semi-starved desert rat to a fat, prosperous and important personage. Know anything about this Pluto?"

"Only from Stenhouse's reports," replied Walters. "Pluto's Mob is the name given to the Musgrave people. Cattlemen along the southern fringe of the Kimberley Ranges have suffered periodical attacks on their cattle, but since Stenhouse made a patrol to the Musgrave Ranges, the trouble ceased. I've

had the idea for some time that Stenhouse adopted unorthodox methods to stop the trouble from that quarter. Effectively, but not to be officially countenanced. Anyway, he achieved results. Someone told me that the only white man other than Stenhouse ever to have seen Pluto is the yardman at the hotel here. What's on your mind?"

"Might be more trouble now that Stenhouse is dead, and his tracker turned into a horse."

Inspector Walters frowned. There are moments when facetiousness isn't permissible.

"I understand that Mrs Stenhouse was one of the Wallaces who live some fifteen miles eastward of the Wyndham track," Bony said. "Stenhouse treated her badly."

"She died three years ago, not three weeks."

"Time sometimes increases the desire for revenge. Opportunity accounts for more revenge killings than planned action. Anyway, I'll look these Wallaces over. Is there anything in Stenhouse's records concerning the movement of cattle to a market point?"

"Yes. I'll dig it up."

Bony studied the file. Walters fell silent.

"The only stations having cattle on the hoof along the Wyndham road on or about August 12th were the Breens, the Mastertons, the Alverys and the Lockeys," Bony said. "The Breens must have got away late, for they were supposed to have left with four hundred head on August 7th."

He rose and crossed to the wall map, which he studied for several minutes.

"It is lawful for stockmen to carry arms, I assume?"

"Up here, yes, but not in a settlement. Parts of these Kimberleys have never yet been explored, and there's plenty of places where runaway cattle can breed. Sometimes a cattle muster will net wild cattle, and the bulls are dangerous, and often of no use as beef. Carrying arms, however, is now more the result of custom than utility. Come down from the days when the blacks up here were savage."

Bony lit yet another cigarette from his dwindling pile. He was dissatisfied with progress and Walters guessed it.

"All Stenhouse's private effects are on the bench behind you," Walters said casually. "Next of kin lives at Elmore, Queensland, There's a bank-book showing a credit of close to five hundred pounds. Straight enough. There is, however, a statement issued by another bank, terminating on June 30th of this year. The statement is under the name of George Marshall. There's no cheque amounts debited, and there's one credit only noted . . . an amount of seven hundred and fifty pounds, paid in cash. The date of the credit coincides with a leave period taken by Stenhouse down in Perth. That bank is bound to have George Marshall's signature, and I'll have the handwriting compared with Stenhouse's first. If it's his account, it would be interesting to know where that seven hundred and fifty cash came from."

"His wife's estate?" probed Bony.

"She left nothing but bits and pieces of jewellery. It's all in that trunk. His gold wrist-watch; a pair of opal cuff-links and an opal tie-pin I'd like to own are there, too."

"Opal!" murmured Bony, with the merest shade of interest. "What colour?"

"Black. First I've ever seen. Come from Lightning Ridge, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that's the only place, I think, where black opal is mined."

Bony crossed to the bench and opened the old-fashioned tin trunk. He brought back a cigar-box and lifted out two gold watches.

"Lady's watch as well as his own, eh? Must have belonged to his wife. Her rings, too, and a pearl necklace. Strange that a man who treated his wife so badly should have retained her jewellery. Here's a locket with a picture of him. Given her, perhaps, when they were sweethearts."

Bony put aside the watches and the locket and necklace, and for half a minute regarded them dreamily. Inspector Wal-

ters was silent. He was feeling a trifle sentimental. . . . From a small case Bony lifted the cuff-links, twin opals set in gold. It was doubtful that they had ever been worn. Audibly, Bony sighed with envy, put them back and snapped shut the box. He regarded for a longer period the truly magnificent tie-pin. Deep in the dark cloud scintillated a sea of emerald, and when he moved the gem lying on the palm of his hand, crimson fire swept across that emerald sea.

"Like you, Walters, I'd like to own a pin like that," he said. "Any idea of its value?"

"No. Might be worth fifty pounds."

"More. Twice that. Just look at it! Ah, Walters, what I could do with a million pounds . . . opals, jade, alabaster, pearls. You can keep all the diamonds."

"A million pounds!" soberly echoed Walters. "I don't want a million pounds. Too much worry spending it, and more worry keeping it. Fifty quid a week for life would do me."

Reverently, Bony placed the tie-pin on its bed of black satin, noting that the jeweller's name on the under lid had, on both boxes, been scratched off. The watches no longer interested him, although he did estimate their current value at about thirty pounds each. Walters watched him putting the items back into the cigar-box, said nothing, watched him replace the box in the tin trunk. On returning to the table, Bony asked was there a metropolitan telephone directory available.

"Nothing like that here," answered Walters. "What the devil use would it be?"

"Might find Pluto's name and address and number. Could ring him and ask for the name and occupation of the gent who turned Jacky Musgrave into a horse."

Walters exploded:

"Damn Jacky Musgrave turned into a horse or a cow or a turtle. What's chewing your shirt-tail? Come on . . . tell."

"Just my sense of humour. I'm going to have a drink and go to bed. Coming?"

"Yes, too damn right I am. Going back to Broome by plane tomorrow, and then you can have this Stenhouse case all to your little self. You're the most aggravating blighter I know, Bony. Telephone directories! Aborigines turned into horses! A million pounds to buy bits of coloured rock! I wouldn't be your boss for a shipload of Scotch."

Bony smiled, and the smile became chuckling laughter. Walters stamped after him to the door, and while waiting for him to lock the building, Bony said:

"My boss knows my methods, Watson!"

Chapter Nine

Wages of Affability

At eight o'clock the next morning, when Irwin left Agar's Lagoon to take Inspector Walters to the aerodrome, the inhabitants were engaged in routine chores. Having given Walters the assurance that the Stenhouse case would be duly completed, Bony lounged on the hotel veranda and smoked his third after-breakfast cigarette.

The bar was open but no one was drinking. Ted Ramsay, the licensee, was in the back yard on routine business. 'Un had hitched four town donkeys to a cart and was loading the empties to be taken to the bottle ring. The storekeeper was sweeping the stones at the front of his shop, and children were milking goats wherever they could be caught.

There was nothing unusual about the weather. The sun shone warmly from the cloud-free sky, and the dust continued to hang in golden veils above the track taken by Irwin's utility. The hens scratched in the road dust, and down on the bed of the creek several aborigines were encamped beside a log from which rose blue smoke.

All was normal and quiet excepting within the hotel kitchen, and when Bony entered he found Mrs Ramsay in a rage, and the girl who waited at table and 'did' the rooms on the verge of tears, and being ordered to 'clear out'. With Mrs Ramsay all was wrong and nothing right, and on being blandly invited to disclose her trouble, she complained that her husband was racing to the grave, the cook was a dirty old soak, the maid was a lazy bitch, and the damned pub simply wouldn't catch fire and burn them all out.

"He's a good cook, I'll say that for 'im, Inspector," vouchsafed Mrs Ramsay, who was washing the breakfast dishes.

"But I gotta watch 'im else he smokes while he cooks and dribbles into things. It's that husband of mine that's the trouble. Not satisfied with getting 'imself drunk, he has to get the cook soaked with him. And now they're both in the back yard doing their morning vomiting act together, and I had to cook the breakfast, and see that Inspector Walters gets off with a good impression of the place. An' the only real help given is by old 'Un. If I had married 'im now . . ."

"We often regret we did not do otherwise when that very otherwise would have done for us," Bony quoted, and took up a drying-cloth.

" 'Un do me in? Not a hope. I can deal with 'im with one 'and," declared Mrs Ramsay, and then permitted astonishment to sweep from her angry soul all that cluttered in this fine morning. "Why, Inspector! You can't dry these things."

"Why not? I won't drop them," Bony said. "I have to wait for Constable Irwin to return from the 'drome, and how better could the time be employed? Besides, Mrs Ramsey, I have to butter you before asking a favour."

"Ho, is that it?" cried Mrs Ramsay, and wiped her button of a nose with the length of her enormous forearm. "Policemen, publicans, rich cattlemen and stiffs off the track, you men are all the same. Put 'em on the table and I'll sort 'em out. The dishes, I mean. Bet you're married, any'ow. I can tell. Well, go on, Inspector. What are you angling for? Not me, I'll warrant."

"First a happy smile." Sniff. Easy laughter. "That's better. Irwin and I have to go out again, and we may be away for several days. If you could let us have bread and cooked meat . . ."

"Is that all? Of course, Mr Bonaparte. What time will you be leaving?"

"Shortly after nine, I hope. You might keep our rooms for us for the time being."

"I will. Keep 'em locked, too." Mrs Ramsay having completed the washing of the utensils and sponged out the sink, wiped her hands on her apron. Bony proceeded with the dry-

ing, and she would have taken the cloth from him. "But I can finish up," she objected.

"I'll manage while you get the bread and meat. . . . How long have you been living here?"

"Too long. Eighteen years too long. Me and Ted have been in this pub five years. We was prospectin' before then. Found the Shootin' Star and made enough out of it to buy in here."

"You would know everyone in this country, then."

"Every man, woman, child and goat," replied Mrs Ramsay, bringing cooked beef from the out-size refrigerator. "People's all right. Work hard. Live hard. Not too many bad eggs. What about those fresh chops for grilling?"

"They look good. Thank you."

"Better take a pound or so of butter, and I'll get you a piece of bacon you can cut into when you want. Which way you going?"

"North," Bony replied, placing the cutlery into the sections of a large shallow tray. "How did you get along with Constable Stenhouse?"

The face which was pleasant when happy became grim.

"Right enough," she said. "He had his meals here . . . after his wife died. Never talked much to no one. Never got over that . . . 'er dying like she did. I seen 'em married. Pair of sweet'earts they was then. Don't know what got into 'im. Wasn't the booze, 'cos he didn't drink." Mrs Ramsay was wrapping a huge slab of fruit cake within a newspaper, and Bony was confident that his dish-drying was paying handsome dividends. "Yes, just like sweet'earts they was once. And then one night he came for me to go over to the station, and Doctor Morley was there.

"Mind you, I don't think they would've saved her even if they could've flown her to Derby. It was December, and the floods. Worst 'wet' we'd had in years. Three planes bogged and not a hope of another coming. Me and Doc Morley bided by her for four days and nights, but she went out. I reckon if it hadn't been for Doc Morley Constable Stenhouse would have

found 'imself in serious trouble. Fine old bloke, Doc Morley, ain't he?"

Bony agreed.

"Poor old Mr Wallace. . . . You be seeing him?"

"Most likely."

"The shock of it give 'im the stroke. Never been the same since. Broke 'im up completely. 'Er too. Poor soul. Well, we all 'as our troubles. Some more than others. If you are meanin' to call on them, don't forget to take their mail. I'll leave the tucker on the bench and you can fetch it when Mr Irwin's back."

"Thank you very much," Bony beamed. "A little buttered, eh?"

"Go along with you, Mr Bonaparte," Mrs Ramsay giggled. "Let me 'ave me dreams."

Bony walked through the building to the front, the air cool and the light poor in this part which was first to be built when materials were confined to mud and stone and roofing-iron at astounding cost. On the way to the post office, he met 'Un and his donkeys returning from the bottle ring, and immediately he stopped to speak to the yardman, the donkeys stopped too.

"Where was your Queen Vic Mine?" asked Bony.

"Where? 'Way over east. Nine mile out," replied 'Un, the memory of it seemingly causing the automatic action of twirling the points of the upturned grey moustache. "She was a great show."

"Did you ever prospect the ranges to southward?"

"Yes. Me and Paddy spent about eighteen months in them ranges. Never did no good. Picked up a floater or two but couldn't locate the reefs. Plenty gold there waiting for someone to get on to it."

"Anyone have any luck?" asked Bony, leaning on the nearside leader of the team.

"Yes. Coupler blokes found half-ounce stuff, but the cost of getting it out to a stamper killed it. Parties still doing a bit of dry-blowing, you know."

"H'm! They tell me that Mr Lang, of Leroy Downs, used to drive a donkey team across there. You know that track?"

'Un chuckled, and the donkey against which Bony was leaning nearly fell down in its sleep.

"Every yard of it. Wouldn't be no track now, of course. All you'd see would be flat marks rounding the slopes. Good bush-man, old man Lang. Had to be to get across them hills."

"No one mining for gold near that track, I suppose?"

"Not that I knows of. Nearest shaft to old man Lang's track would be three miles west. Coupler characters called German Charlie and Tiny Wilson working it."

"How would they get on for water during winter? No creeks running, are there?" pressed Bony.

"Not this time of year. Ruddy torrents in the 'wet'. Them fellers would get water in rock holes and the like."

Bony shifted his weight from the donkey and stepped aside. "No one would sink a well on that track. How did old Lang do for water?"

"Rock holes."

"I'll see you before leaving this morning," Bony said, and proceeded towards the post office. He heard 'Un call to the donkeys. So there was no prospector's shaft, and no well sunk along that old donkey-wagon track at which Constable Stenhouse could have picked up whitish clay on the heels of his boots.

At the post office he found Dave Bundred, the postmaster, who took his poison from the rum bottle.

"Mornin', Inspector! How's things?"

"Could be a lot worse," Bony admitted to this bald, red-nosed, round-shouldered postmaster, meteorologist, Justice of the Peace and Deputy Coroner. "I'm going out again to the scene of the shooting, and will probably call on the Wallaces. I could take their mail."

"Sure. They'll be pleased to get it." Bundred turned to a side bench and proceeded to make up bundles of papers to add to letters and parcels. Bony wrote a telegram to his wife,

saying he hoped to be returning almost at once, and knowing she would accept that with reservation.

"How long have you been at Agar's?" he asked when Bundred dumped the assorted mail matter on the counter.

The watery, pale-blue eyes glinted with faint amusement.

"Thirteen years and a bit," was the reply. "The bit's all right: the years are superfluous. Could have got better offices down south, but I suppose it's the blasted climate that gets you in. Wouldn't be happy down in Perth even as the Postmaster-General. Hate Perth. Too hot in summer and too damned cold in winter."

Bony smiled.

"The bottle ring's grown somewhat since you first came to Agar's?"

"Somewhat! Too true it has. My wife says I've added five thousand empties to that ring. Exaggerates terribly, she does . . . exceptin' about those bottles. There's another five thousand she knows nothing about. You married?"

"Alas!"

"Anyone sighted Jacky Musgrave yet?"

"No . . . not that I know."

"Back home by this time," predicted Bundred. "Them blacks can travel when they want to. Never took to Jacky Musgrave. Too secretive altogether. Stenhouse musta told him to put over that yarn about going south on patrol."

"Most likely," agreed Bony. "Stenhouse had only the one tracker, didn't he?"

"Only Jacky. Wouldn't be bothered with the locals. Reckon he thought the local blacks might tell something about him."

"Much to tell, d'you think?"

The lids blinked down over the watery eyes.

"Might be. Stenhouse changed a lot after his wife died." Bundred lit a cigarette. "Wasn't a bad kind of bloke when he come here in the beginning. Got kind of sour about something. After his wife died he wasn't worth knowing. All right to me. Had to be. Bit of mail for the Breens. You going out that way?"

Bony said he thought the Breens would be too far off the track, and the pale-blue eyes surveyed him with ill-concealed calculation.

"Think we could have a nip before you start?" suggested the postmaster.

"Not for me, thanks," replied the reminiscent Bony. "I have a night out rarely, and haven't recovered yet from that night with the Breens. They can certainly put it away."

"You're telling me. Jasper musta been off colour though, to have passed out like he did. Queer feller, Jasper. Some nights he can down whisky by the gallon. Other times a couple of noggins will rock him." Bundred grinned rather than smiled, revealing teeth badly needing attention. "We had a session one time that lasted two days and three nights. That time Jasper passed out the second day, and they propped him against the bar wall, tied a bit of string to his beard, and jerked the string to make him nod every time his turn came round to shout."

"Did they then insist on paying for the entire company?" asked the amused Bony.

"No, not that time. That musta been three years ago. Matter of fact it was just over three years. We were burying Mrs Stenhouse, and everyone came in for the funeral. Which reminds me, Inspector. You'll find the Wallaces pretty bitter, but they're good folk. The Breens are wild, as you saw for yourself. The Wallaces are more like us."

Bony, loading his arms with mail and parcels, said:

"The cattle industry must have looked up."

"Ezra is the brains out there. Got the idea that the war being over they'd have to organize themselves and make money instead of being satisfied with just enough for tucker and a booze up now and then."

"H'm. Evidently done a good job."

"Evidently," Bundred agreed. "Told me he realized when he was at the war that Kimberley was grown up and ought to have things better than cheap rags to wear and tin pannikins

to eat and drink out of. Fine gal, Kim. Lucky man who gets Kimberley Breen."

"Anyone tried yet?"

"Jack Wallace might know. He'd have to get past Silas and Jasper, then Ezra. There's only one bloke could manage to get past those three."

Bony waited, and then fell for it.

"The President of Ireland. He'd have to be the President of Ireland to be good enough for Kimberley."

"Out of the top drawer, eh?"

Bundred sighed.

"She's got hair that glows like polished copper, and eyes that grow as big as pansies when she looks at you. She looked at me once. Came in for the mail, and afterwards I didn't shave for a fortnight 'cos I couldn't bear to look at myself."

Chapter Ten

'Tricky Characters'

Bony and Constable Irwin were ten miles north of Agar's Lagoon when they met the mechanic returning with Ramsay's car.

"Oughter got back last night," he told them. "Had two blowouts just before dark and camped."

"Fixed the jeep?" Irwin asked.

"Yes. Put another steering-wheel on her."

"What time did you part from Constable Clifford . . . yesterday?" Bony inquired, and the mechanic said that it had been about one o'clock.

Half an hour later Irwin pointed out the turn-off track negotiating Black Range to reach the Breen homestead, and twenty minutes later they came to the branch track to the Wallace homestead. At this point, the Wallace homestead was fifteen miles eastward from Black Range, and because Clifford might pass by on his way back to the settlement when they were visiting the Wallaces, Bony wrote a note and tied it to a stick he thrust into the ground.

The side track wound over low range hills and then followed a narrow and verdant valley where the going was much easier. The homestead could be seen from three miles away, white squares against the foot of a coffee-coloured mountain.

Eventually, dogs came to escort the utility to the main house with its several spindly windmills providing electric light and power. Aboriginal children stood at the entrance to a small shed, and a white man left two others who were helping him with a truck repair job. Then Bony was being introduced to Jack Wallace, a nuggetty man in his early thirties. Flat,

slaty-eyes summed him up and a soft voice acknowledged the introduction. Irwin said:

"Did you hear about Stenhouse, Jack?"

"Yes. Heard about it in last night's news. Had it coming to him. Had lunch yet?"

"Yes, thanks," replied Irwin. Strolling to the house, Bony put a question:

"Sent all your fats to Wyndham this season, Mr Wallace?"

"Oh yes, Inspector. Dispatched the last mob a month ago."

"D'you employ independent drovers?"

"Yes. This year we did."

Mrs Wallace stood on the veranda, a small woman with grey hair and large brown eyes hiding nothing.

"Why, Constable Irwin!" she cried with evident pleasure. "How do you do!"

Stooping to take her hand he told her it was surely but yesterday and not three years, since they had last met. She smiled warmly at Bony, who expressed pleasure at the meeting and said they hadn't forgotten to bring the mail.

"Come along and see Father," she said, her voice bird-like in its clarity. "He's on the other veranda, in the sunshine. Poor dear, he does suffer."

The invalid was reclining in a long wicker-chair, a man having a pointed grey beard and alert grey eyes. His welcome to Irwin was genuine. With Bony he was more reserved, and apologized for not getting up.

"Under the circumstances," Bony said, "I hate to touch on a subject I know will hurt you. We are looking into the death of Constable Stenhouse, and I am really regretful that we're here on duty, as it were, in view of your warm welcome. That we do appreciate."

"I'm sure no one here knows anything about it, Inspector," the elder Wallace returned quickly. "We are not vengeful folk, so don't think we are less pleased to see you. Candidly, we have no sorrow in our hearts that Stenhouse was killed, and we're not so foolish as to condemn all policemen for the

wrongs done our daughter by one. We shall be glad to help, if possible, to clear up the matter. That's so, Jack?"

Jack Wallace agreed with obvious reluctance. Mrs Wallace said something about afternoon tea and withdrew a little hastily. A cow bellowed in the near distance and a lubra's voice drifted round the corner of the house. Ignoring the implication behind the question directed to the son, Bony said suavely:

"We have to tackle these problems with detachment from personal opinions and feelings, Mr Wallace. A man has been murdered, and our task is to locate and apprehend the murderer. Very often our investigation is similar to a jigsaw puzzle, and we find one piece here and another somewhere else. Would you be kind enough to reply to a few questions?"

"As many as you ask, Inspector."

"Thanks. I'll be as brief as possible. Stenhouse was found dead in his jeep on the 17th. We know where he was up to the early morning of the 14th, and we are trying to ascertain what happened between those times. Did he call here?"

"No," replied Wallace senior. "He wouldn't come here."

"Then let us go back to the 14th . . . yesterday week. What station work was going on that day?"

The old man looked at his son. Jack Wallace was cool and steady. He took time before answering.

"Nothing out of the way. A couple of the hands helped me repair the homestead stockyards."

"The 15th?"

"Same thing, and the next day, too."

"What of the following day, the 17th?"

"That day I took three of the men out on a truck to repair the windmill at Deep Well," replied Jack Wallace. "Left about nine and got home about six in the evening. I can account for all my movements."

"Naturally," agreed Bony. "I'm really less interested in your personal movements during this period than by the station work in general as it concerns your men. No one of them reported having seen Jacky Musgrave, I suppose?"

Bony detected the relief this question gave to the elder Wallace.

"Been waiting for you to come round to the tracker," he said. "He musta done it, and he'd take care not to be sighted, even by a station black. He'd be a stranger up in these parts, and our blacks wouldn't have any truck with a wild Musgrave man."

"No, I suppose they wouldn't. This Deep Well . . . what direction does it lie from here?"

"East. Eleven miles east," answered Jack Wallace.

"On that day, can you remember observing any smoke signals? I'd like you to be sure about this."

"No, I didn't notice any smokes. Might have been, of course. So used to seeing smokes that I wouldn't take particular notice of them on any one day."

The invalid picked one of a dozen rolled cigarettes from a small box, and they were made so perfectly that Bony was confident Mrs Wallace was the maker. The son applied the match, and the old man thanked him. The father was more perturbed by this visit than was the son, and Bony wondered to what extent the father could corroborate the son's replies to the interrogation. In view of the invalid's imprisonment, it might well be not at all, and, were that so, Jack Wallace could have been on the Wyndham road when he said he was repairing the stockyards.

"Blacks always sending up smoke signals," the old man said. "Used to wonder what they did it for. More than once I tried to find out what they meant, but nary a black-fellow would explain. I can't see any connexion between the shooting of Stenhouse and smoke signals. If it had been Jacky Musgrave who'd been shot, yes. All the tribes in the country would then work overtime sending up smokes. Anyway, our blacks had nothing to do with the shooting. As Jack said, they were all here in camp at the time it must have been done."

"You won't mind if I talk with them later?"

"Course not, Inspector. You'll find 'em tame enough."

The inevitable afternoon tea arrived on a tray carried by Mrs. Wallace, who wanted to know how Irwin's wife and family were 'coming along'. Bony caught her uneasy glances at her son, and his reading of them was that she, like her husband, was troubled about him. Not a big man, he could be ruthless, or Bony was a novice in estimating character.

Jack Wallace evinced no reluctance in taking Bony to the blacks' camp, a line of tin-and-hessian humpies along the bank of a waterless creek. He called three men, and told Bony their names. That of an elderly, gaunt man was Lofty. The other two were youths, being known as Brownie and Mike.

"You bin see-up Jacky Musgrave?" asked Bony, easily and without authoritative tone.

A flicker deep in black eyes directed beyond the questioner. Low laughter as though the idea was even humorous. A faint hiss of held breathing from Brownie. That was all to indicate the curtain that fell between them and Bony. Knowing that one would have to reply, the elderly man did so.

"No. Jacky Musgrave no time come here."

They were obviously nervous. All the camp would know that Constable Irwin was at the house, and without doubt Wallace would have passed on the news given by the radio that Stenhouse had been found shot dead and his tracker missing. Bony moved so that he could observe Jack Wallace as well, and when he asked his next question he was confident that from Deep Well they could have seen beyond Black Range the signals made by the blacks . . . those same signals noted by Sam Laidlaw.

"You bin go with Mr Wallace to Deep Well . . . fix windmill?"

This one was easy and brought eager affirmation.

"What them smokes bin tell you, eh? You know, wild black feller smokes?"

Puzzlement. Faint distress occasioned by such unfortunate ignorance. The scuffling of bare feet. Lofty, the spokesman appointed by age, said:

"Them wild-feller blacks. No know-um their smokes."

Bony accepted defeat and turned away, Wallace stepping beside him. He walked twenty paces and abruptly spun about and went back to the three men.

"I bin tell you what them smokes say, eh?" he said, and they were caught in the web of his blazing eyes. "Them smokes bin tell-um Jack Musgrave he bin come horse-feller, eh?"

The strain snapped. The curtain was lifted. Heads were shaken, and feet scuffled. Lofty burst out with:

"No fear, boss. Them smokes bin tell-um policeman him bin shot."

"And you no tell-um Mr Wallace?"

"Too right! Brownie, him bin tell-um Jack Boss when we bin fix-um mill."

Bony nodded, turned away to Jack Wallace, who had been waiting for him. When walking to Irwin, who was talking with Mrs Wallace at the utility, he said:

"So you knew of those smokes sent up by those western blacks?"

Wallace did not speak.

"Your men saw them when they were working with you at Deep Well. They told you what they meant."

Wallace stopped and barred Bony's progress. His face was wooden, and his slaty eyes were singularly void of expression.

"So what?" he asked softly. "You've come to the wrong place for help to find who killed Stenhouse."

Chapter Eleven

Irresistible Forces

Constable Clifford, with Irwin's two trackers, was waiting in the jeep at the road junction. Young, dark, physically compact, he was the antithesis of the man who was thoroughly enjoying being Bony's chauffeur. He spoke formally:

"As ordered, sir, I proceeded towards Wyndham after giving the boys every opportunity to back track the jeep and pick up Jacky Musgrave's tracks. They could find nothing, and they're both properly mystified."

"Sidetracks?"

"Examined every one of them between here and forty miles off Wyndham. I went out to see Alverston, and he says he saw nothing of Stenhouse after seeing him at Agar's. He met no one on the road excepting that party of photographers coming south."

"Did he see the Breens?" pressed Bony. "Relax, man."

"Thank you, sir. No, Alverston didn't see the Breens. He worked it out that when he met the photographers, the Breens and their cattle hadn't reached the Wyndham road, and probably had only that morning left their cutting-out camp. We discussed those smokes Sam Laidlaw saw, and because Alverston's homestead is tucked hard against a mountain it wasn't possible for anyone there to have seen them."

To Irwin's growing amazement, Bony persisted in this subject of smoke signals.

"Have you seen any smokes since leaving Agar's?"

Clifford had seen smoke signals early that morning. He was then north of the battlemented terminus of Black Range, called McDonald's Stand. These smokes were far to the west.

"What did the trackers say about them?" Bony asked, and Clifford regarded the two aborigines squatting on their heels beside the jeep. Annoyance flashed into his eyes, and he admitted he had had little experience in handling trackers, and thought his handling of these two had created a sullen obstinacy in them.

"Shall I have a go at them?" suggested Irwin, and Bony asked him to wait.

"Did this reaction occur after you saw the smoke signals this morning?"

"Yes, it began then."

"Well, don't worry about it, Clifford," Bony said easily. "The great brains of Scotland Yard and the Federal Bureau of Investigation would have done no better. We'll return to the Breens. You spoke to them?"

"I did. We caught up with them about forty miles beyond McDonald's Stand. Didn't see them coming back. They must have been past the turn-off to Alverston's. I asked Ezra if he had noticed the smokes, and he said no. I asked him if his riders had read them, and he said he didn't know. He shouted to an old feller to leave the cattle and join us, and the old man shook his head and said, 'Suppose-um corroboree'."

"Ezra didn't see anything of Stenhouse?"

"No. Was certainly surprised to hear about it."

Bony exhaled cigarette smoke and appeared to be intensely absorbed. Clifford, knowing that question and answer is the best means of conveying information, waited. Sitting on the ground, Irwin played five-stones.

"Were you speaking to the girl, Kimberley?" Bony asked.

"Kimberley Breen! There was no woman with the outfit. Saw Jasper Breen. The cattle were only a quarter-mile off the track. And there were four abo riders."

"Jasper didn't leave the cattle?"

"No, sir."

"Had you met the Breens before then?"

"Yes. Saw them several times when I was stationed at Wyndham."

Bony subsided into meditative silence. He rolled a cigarette, and appeared in no haste to strike a match. Clifford, who had been associated with Bony in the investigation into the murders at Broome, wondered what was going on behind the half-closed eyes, but Irwin, to whom time was of no greater importance than it is to the wild aborigines, continued tossing his five stones. When Bony did speak, there were four stones on the back of the constable's hand, and the hand became motionless.

"Sam Laidlaw says he spoke with both Kimberley and Ezra Breen. He said, too, that Kimberley promised to visit his wife when she arrived in Wyndham. Laidlaw said nothing of seeing Jasper Breen. What do you two make of that?"

Irwin said:

"Seems that Jasper caught up with the cattle and took Kimberley's place, she returning home. Six riders with that outfit would be plenty. How were they travelling, Clifford? With cook-truck or pack-horses?"

"Pack-horses."

"All right, Irwin. See what you can do with those trackers," Bony ordered, and the loose-limbed, red-headed bear of a man ambled away. Seeing again the expression of annoyance on the younger man's face, and his own natural reaction to the cause being to encourage, Bony said, gently:

"These aborigines have many traits similar to dogs, Clifford. They're full of knowledge and helpful in their own country, and are nervous and suspicious when away from it. We feed them and clothe them and we bring them to understand enough of our language to communicate. They smoke our tobacco and ride our horses, many of them drive our cars and trucks, and are able to repair windmills and pumps.

"Nevertheless, they retain their tribal customs and cling to inherited instincts and convictions. They are loyal to white men living for a long time in their own locality, and suspicious of all others. It takes years of association and study to reach even the middle of the bridge spanning the gulf between them and us. Be

patient. A thousand years are as nothing in this timeless land, and when the last aboriginal sinks down to die, despite the veneer imposed on him by our civilization, he will be the same man as were his forebears ten thousand years ago. Have you a pistol?"

Clifford mentally blinked. He was young enough to flush, and sensible enough to accept sound advice.

"Thank you, sir. Yes, I've a thirty-two automatic."

"I would like to borrow it. Cartridges?"

"Half a box, sir."

"I would be obliged if you would transfer the weapon and the ammunition to my small suitcase on the seat of the utility . . . without the trackers observing what you are doing."

Clifford departed, and Bony strolled along the track, his hands pressed into the small of his back. He was finding it difficult to accept his own advice given Clifford in view of what he thought might result from those smoke signals. Irwin came to him to report.

"Charlie says that those smokes this morning told him that the Musgrave blacks were coming north into this country. Larry . . . that's the young feller . . . agrees with Charlie that the Musgrave fellers are either bent on finding Jacky or executing their justice on the bloke who killed him."

"How are they taking it . . . Charlie and Larry?"

"All right. But they aren't too easy about it. Reckon the Musgrave blacks won't interfere with the mob up here. All they'll be after is the feller who killed Jacky."

"Meaning the feller who killed Stenhouse, Irwin."

Irwin chuckled.

"Seems we're to have competitors, don't it?"

"Very serious competitors, too. We must work, or they'll beat us to it. Send the trackers back to Agar's with Clifford. Get them going right away."

Irwin left Bony standing and facing Black Range, which he did not see, and when Clifford and the trackers had disappeared down the track, he sat in the utility and waited. He waited for fifteen minutes before Bony joined him.

"Drive slowly to the turn-off," he ordered. "We'll call on the Breens . . . Silas and Kimberley . . . and listen politely to what they have to say, and their stockmen."

Irwin turned the vehicle.

"What are you making of this business?" he asked.

"It would appear that Stenhouse and his jeep were rolled on to a magic carpet and flown through the air to where Laidlaw found him. We have much travelling to do over these extraordinary mountains, and the speed having to be kept down to ten miles an hour causes me to feel like the nightmare victim trying to run in iron boots."

The turn-off track to the Breens' homestead was even worse than the Great Northern Highway. Irwin needed to concentrate on his driving and to employ his strength to fight the rebellious steering-wheel. Black Range advanced and thrust forward great buttresses sheathed in dark-red armour. The westering sun vanished, and presently they were negotiating the slope of a gully which became a gorge, and the surface of the supposed track was bare rock, mostly dull grey, sometimes rich chocolate, sometimes jade green.

Bony gazed downward into this great cleft in the Range. It became no wider the higher they climbed, and the almost perpendicular opposite slope would have defeated a goat. The utility rolled over loose stones, and bucked over miniature ridges, running in low gear, and Bony wasn't liking the experience. He was enormously thankful that the weather was clear and the rock dry to which the tyres could cling.

That men had driven this way half a hundred donkeys harnessed to a loaded wagon seemed utterly impossible. It was still harder to believe that Silas and Jasper had driven over this track in their truck at night. Here and there was the evidence of human labour which had made it possible.

It was six o'clock when the rock wall gave up frustrating the little truck, and the evening sky was draped between pinnacles of red ironstone. The climb became less steep, and with remarkable abruptness they passed over the low rim of a shallow

bowl where grew the singular baobab trees, their excessively gnarled limbs leafless at this time. Within the bowl grew ripening grass, and across it flowed a tiny stream to escape through a cleft in the western edge.

"What d'you say to camping here?" suggested Bony, and Irwin made no attempt to hide his satisfaction. He stopped the vehicle beneath one of the baobabs, then alighted and stretched his arms and grinned, saying:

"It'll be cold, but there's plenty of wood."

They uprooted dead wait-a-bit and mulgas and dragged them close to replenish the camp fire. They brought water from the stream and brewed tea and ate of Mrs Ramsay's provender. And the sun went down behind the lip of the bowl, and wallabies came to feed on the grass and drink at the stream. Apostle birds arrived with a rush of wings to create apparent uproar, but actually voicing their joy in living. They settled into their large nests, as many as could crowding into each, for there are no birds so imbued with the community spirit.

"What lies on the other side?" Bony asked when they had eaten.

"Space," replied Irwin.

They sauntered to the edge of the bowl, and Bony contemplated what was a vision rather than a vista. A wide valley lay between them and a distant purple range . . . the valley an eiderdown of apple-green 'bumps' and the gullies etched in black. Spanning the valley far to the north a ridge of bluish rock was fashioned to the sky-line of a great city of the Orient.

"I camped here about five years ago," Irwin said. "After dawn is when you see the colours. Beyond that line of blue rocks is the Breens' homestead."

"What d'you know about the Breens?" asked Bony, and Irwin gave his peculiar chuckling laugh.

"The sons are a tough lot," he said, faint admiration in his voice. "The old people were even tougher . . . must have been. The old man and Mrs Breen came from Queensland, looking

for land, and why they took up that land instead of going down south, beats me.

"Anyway, they got over this range and down there, and took up a thousand square miles. Starting with nothing exceptin' the donkey wagon, a few cows and a dozen hens. They battled along, some say by stealing a bull and a few more cows, and living on 'roos and the smell of axle-grease.

"They had three sons and the one daughter. There was no flying to hospital for Mrs Breen. Women were tough in those days . . . or passed out. Old Silas died in 1929. Fell ill . . . no doctor . . . no wireless . . . no death certificate . . . a grave marked with a hefty wooden cross. I never met either of the old people, but I'm told that after the old man went out, Mrs Breen bossed the boys as her husband had done . . . with a clenched fist in preference to an open hand. She died in 1934, when the girl was only seven years old, and Kimberley was reared by her three brothers.

"Silas and Jasper had no education, and can only just read and write. Ezra did spend four years at the State School in Broome, and he got Kimberley through the Correspondence Course posted up by the Education Department. Did you happen to meet Father O'Rory?"

"No. Tell me about him."

"Grand old man. Been up here years. He read the service over old Silas and Mrs Breen when they'd been dead a long time, and he christened the kids when he called on his annual tour. Wanted Kimberley sent to a convent to be educated. Fought hard, too. The boys wouldn't stand for it."

"They appear to have prospered," Bony commented.

"Up to a point," agreed Irwin. "Manage to muster four hundred head for the Meat Works every season, but that's a poor effort, for most of their country's good beef land. The Breens live rough, like their parents. Satisfied with little, and yet royalty to themselves. No one like the Breens . . . in their own estimation. Never gave any serious trouble, but we've heard of wild doings now and then."

Irwin fell silent and Bony did not speak. The quilt of the valley was sinking beneath a purple overlay. The sun stood on its edge on a ridge, promised to look at them again, and vanished. The purple darkened to indigo blue, and the summits of the Range about the two men brightened from red to gold, an iridescent gold. The red monoliths and the cross-barrier of rock sank into the blue of the valley, and soon the summits were like carved mahogany pillars supporting a diamond-studded roof.

Two hours later, Bony and Irwin were lying in their blankets either side the fading camp fire. Bony tossed the end of his last cigarette for the day into the embers, and languidly he said:

"A man shot Stenhouse, and, almost certainly, shot Jacky Musgrave, too. Result . . . the white law represented by you and me is set in motion against him. A mighty force, the white law. He was a fool, that man who shot Stenhouse. When he murdered Stenhouse, he had to murder Jacky Musgrave, and then he brought into action against himself a second and even more powerful force . . . the black law. If we don't apprehend the murderer, the representatives of the black law will."

Irwin gazed between the branches of the baobab tree above them, watching the endless procession of shooting stars. Bony murmured:

"Remember that late evening we were travelling to the Langs, and the spinifex grass lying flat and ghostly white towards the desert? I can see passing over that white sheet a dark cloud, coming up from the Musgrave Range and the great desert, swift, silent, irresistible."

Chapter Twelve

Kimberley Breen

The ranges had withheld many things from Kimberley Breen, but they had lavishly bestowed upon her their colours. All that Bony had been told about her hair was fact. Her eyes were large and grey, flecked with blue. Her face was oval and vital with health.

Three naked babies lay on their backs on a blanket spread in the sunlight. They were tiny babies and jet-black. Bead-black eyes were bright, and the soles of the little feet kicking at the sun were almost pink. One gurgled when Kimberley lightly pressed her finger on his tummy. Another industriously sucked her thumb, and the third yawned and resolutely strove to keep his eyes open.

Around Kimberley and the babies stood several lubras, and twice their number of children and dogs. The women were vastly amused at Kimberley's interest in their babies, and some of the younger children were solemnly jealous. They were as free of clothes as the babies; the older children and the women wearing shapeless dresses of coloured cotton.

The Breens' homestead was *pisé*-built and iron-roofed. The walls were a yard thick, and such was its rambling shape it was not easy to estimate the number of rooms. High veranda roofing gave shade from the hot sun and shelter from the torrential summer rain, and upon the bare earth floor stood painted tubs in which grew vigorous ferns. A covered way connected the main house with the kitchen and other buildings, and beyond this covered way a garden extended to a low precipitous cliff of weathered limestone. On the cliff three wind-lites charged batteries to provide light and power. Two windmills beside the near-by creek raised water from an

almost fathomless hole, and tubular piping built the masts for the wireless aerial. It was a picture of permanency and solidity.

Over by the creek a man snouted, and instantly the lubras and the children were tensed and silent. They were like hens made abruptly immobile by the arrival of a noiseless hawk. Then the women sighed, and one cried:

"Car bin come, Missus."

Kimberley rose from the blanket on which she had been kneeling beside the babies, and listened. She could hear nothing beyond the windmills. Then one of the dogs barked, and a score of others were quickly roused to frenzy, and the flock of some two hundred goats grazing on a distant 'bump' abruptly lifted their heads. The aborigine over by the creek had heard the oncoming vehicle seconds before the dogs heard it.

The truck came on. The dogs barked louder. The lubras and the children faded into obscurity, and with them went the babies and the blanket.

Constable Irwin stopped the utility, and slid from it to meet Kimberley, who had walked to the shelter of the front veranda. He slicked his fingers through his fair hair, hitched up his trousers, and laughed into Kimberley's large grey-blue eyes.

"Day-ee, Kim! How's things?"

"So-so, Mr Irwin. What are you doing over this way?"

She saw the second man who remained by the truck, and noted the absence of trackers on the back of it. She smiled up at Irwin and Irwin realized it was indeed a beautiful day and a wonderful country.

"Just touring around, Kim," he said. "You hear about Constable Stenhouse?"

"Yes. On the air last night and this morning. A dreadful thing to have happened. Are you going to stay a bit?"

"Yes . . . like to. I've Inspector Bonaparte with me."

"Inspector Bonaparte!" Kimberley echoed, emphasis on the rank. "Oh! Just look at me! Could he wait . . . while I change?"

"He could, but why change?" Irwin chuckled. "You look good to me, Kim."

She was wearing a faded blue blouse belted into old blue trousers having a darker blue patch on the seat. She backed away to the house entrance, her face flushing, her eyes troubled, and saying:

"Oh, I couldn't meet an Inspector, Mr Irwin, not like this. You take him into the living-room and I'll change and get the girls to make tea. I'll not be long."

Continuing to back to the door and in through the doorway, she disappeared. Irwin heard her calling for Mary and Joan and Martha, and, smiling, he returned to the utility.

"We're invited in for afternoon tea," he said to Bony.

"We shall certainly appreciate that."

Irwin conducted Bony into the house and to a large room which might have been furnished by people now dead two hundred years, that is if one could shut out the modern radio transceiver and the two electrics suspended from the beamed ceiling.

Bony sat on a carved mahogany chair stuffed with horsehair and weighing a hundredweight. In the centre of the room stood a teakwood table capable of seating twenty. On the bare earth floor, composed of termite hills packed to the hardness of cement, were dyed goat-skin rugs. The yawning mouth of a great open fireplace was filled with silver grass, and upon the three-inch-thick mantelshelf stood a Swiss cuckoo clock, several cracked ornaments, and racks of pipes. There were oleographs of Queen Victoria, a cardinal, a child in a tub reaching for a cake of soap, and another of an abbey, as well as two coloured portraits, of a bewhiskered man, appearing uncomfortable in a choker collar and massive cravat, and a woman still beautiful, whom Bony guessed were the original Breens.

The rugged character of those two people was infused into this room. They dominated it and, through it, those who entered. The long horsehair sofa with the curling arms, the remaining chairs, the huge dining-table, belonged to them and

to their era, and the setting made incongruous the sleek black radio panel and the shelf above it supporting a dozen or more expensive volumes.

Irwin was nonchalantly rolling a cigarette when Bony stood up and crossed to look more closely at the transceiver.

"Wonderful invention, Irwin," he said. "No more isolation. No longer the feeling of being banished from the world. An accident, and you contact the base doctor, who tells you what to do, or will fly to attend the patient and, if necessary, fly the patient to hospital."

Among the books about the transceiver was *Chemotherapy* by R. M. Mallory: two volumes of *Across Australia* by Spencer and Gillen: and Harrison's *Chemical Methods in Clinical Medicine*. Bony was astonished by such books in a house like this, occupied by people two of whom had had no education, one a State School education and the fourth member a State Educational Correspondence Course. He took down the volume of chemotherapy. Opening it to see how much it had been read, he found that a ragged hole had been gouged in the centre of the four hundred odd pages. When the covers were closed the hole was large enough to take a pound of rice.

Bony glanced at Irwin, who had picked up a magazine which had lost its covers. He took down another volume, Vol. 1 by Spencer and Gillen, and found, too, a great hole gouged in its pages. The companion volume, and four others, had been similarly desecrated. Bony doubted that the books he opened had ever been studied. They were comparatively new.

Hearing voices beyond the room he replaced the books and resumed his seat. Then, the books forgotten, he was on his feet again making his inimitable bow to Kimberley Breen. Impressions flowed over him like waves of colour; the loveliness of her hair; the sun-ruined complexion; the limpid grey eyes; the roughness of the hand he accepted. He heard her say she seldom received visitors and was glad to receive him and Constable Irwin.

A lubra came in carrying a large tin tray supporting a chipped enamel teapot, an enamel milk jug, and a beaten silver sugar bowl. Placing the tray on the table she withdrew. Kimberley fell upon her knees and dragged two elaborate pigskin hat boxes from beneath the sofa. Saying nothing, she carried one box to the table, raised the lid and took from it the loveliest tea-set Bony had ever beheld. Eggshell-blue and lined with gold, each piece was wrapped in a square of silk, and, like a very proud little girl, Kimberley Breen set cups to saucers and arranged the plates on the table before her guests.

Bony was fascinated by his hostess. It was mid-afternoon, and Kimberley Breen was wearing a bronze velvet ballerina dress, and high-heeled satin shoes encrusted with rhinestones. About her throat was a fine gold chain from which was suspended a huge black opal, a great red flame flickering within a black shadow.

"Two of your brothers, I understand, are taking cattle to Wyndham," Bony remarked, and all she said was:

"Yes, that's right."

She almost ran, such was her nervousness, to a vase on the mantelpiece, from which she took a key. Holding the key between her teeth she carried to the table the second hat box and unlocked it. From the box she lifted a fruit cake still within its baking papers, and snatched up a carving knife having a broken bone handle. From the exquisite china, Bony passed his gaze to the carving knife and the old enamel teapot, and shuddered.

"Have to keep my best cake safe from the girls," Kimberley said, and laughed so bewitchingly that Bony forgot about the teapot. She cut the cake, great slabs of it, and loaded the fragile plates, and, returning the cake to the box, she closed the lid and locked it.

Fantasy! Expensive medical and anthropological books with their innards gouged out! A superb tea-set and a chipped enamel teapot! Velvet and jewels and slabs of cake! A sleek black transceiver and a vast dining-table built with teakwood.

She smiled at them, and was so obviously trying to do the correct thing in entertaining guests. Served by aboriginal women and controlled by men, Kimberley loved beautiful things, bought beautiful things, and knew but little how to use them.

"Who took your place?" gently persisted Bony.

"Jasper. Silas said I was to come home because he had to muster cattle from the Swamp." She smiled again. "That's not a swamp really. It's a long lagoon in a river which overflows into the sea, and the crocodiles there are big and they take the calves and often big cows and steers, too. The black sent word about it, and Silas took some of our boys out to shoot the crocs."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Kimberley. I rather wanted to meet Mr Silas Breen. Will he be away long?"

"I don't know. He left home before I got back."

"When d'you expect your brothers Jasper and Ezra back?"

"In about ten days. Must be back in time to get ready for The Annual."

"The Annual," explained Irwin, "is the yearly picnic races. They're held on a little plain right at the foot of McDonald's Stand. Everyone comes for miles. The Annual lasts a full week. Sam Laidlaw brings ten tons of beer from Wyndham, and then lays the odds on the races . . . horses, donkeys, abos, goannas, dogs and flies."

"And we have a baby show, and the ugliest man competition and fights and target-shooting and everything, Inspector," Kimberley added. "You must come. Will you be there, Mr Irwin? Ezra says we have a steer that'll knock anything."

"H'm! Quite a busy time. I suppose your neighbours help you with the mustering and you help them with theirs?"

"Not often, Inspector. We're able to manage."

"Neighbours! Who are your nearest neighbours?"

"Oh! The Wallaces are our nearest. They live on the east side of Black Range. Poor Mr Wallace is an invalid, you know."

"Yes. We called there yesterday, Miss Breen, and met them all. Jack Wallace, does he often visit you and your brothers?"

"No. Oh, no. We haven't seen Jack Wallace for weeks," replied the girl, her eyes directed to the task of rolling a cigarette.

"I suppose you Breens own a large number of cattle?" questioned Bony, and was informed that they really didn't know how many they owned, as hundreds roamed on the ranges and were very difficult to muster. They generally managed to send four hundred fats to Wyndham Meat Works every year.

"Have you many boys working for you?" pressed Bony.

"About forty, I suppose."

"I'd like to talk with some of the men. Would you mind?"

Kimberley frowned, saying that nearly all the men were away, what with the cattle on the hoof, and the trip to the Swamp. The subject was disturbing her, and Bony wondered. Her cake was something to be remembered, and he drank three cups of tea, the last really for the caress of the delicate china against his lips. Kimberley clapped her hands and there entered the room a young lubra carrying a tin dish of hot water and a drying cloth. She took away the tea 'equipage' and Kimberley removed her platinum wrist-watch and proceeded to wash her blue-gold tea-set.

Bony offered to dry for her but she declined his assistance. Having washed the tea-set, she replaced it in the hat box, and both boxes she pushed beneath the sofa. Finally she swabbed the table and clapped her hands for a lubra to remove the dish.

Then Kimberley sat down and rolled a cigarette, lit it and posed like a little girl consenting to be bored for the sake of convention. So far she had asked only one question, and that, if Irwin would be at The Annual.

"Did you hear on the air that the tracker with Mr Stenhouse is missing?" Bony asked, and again the frown darkened the grey eyes.

She nodded, and when Bony asked if Jacky Musgrave had been seen by the station blacks, vigorously shook her head. Bony was beginning to feel baffled, for he could not decide if this girl was purposely evasive or was mentally dulled by the advent of her unexpected visitors. He asked several innocuous questions and received ready answers, and then rose and thanked his hostess for her hospitality.

"Well, we must get along, Miss Breen. By the way, is that your father and mother?"

"Oh yes, Mr Bonaparte. They're dead now. I never knew my father, and I can only just remember my mother."

"You have, I see, a transceiver, and your mother must have had little compared with what you have. Ah! New books. You read a lot?" Crossing to the shelf he reached out a hand to take one, then Kimberley was at his side, her hand upon his arm, her voice soft and almost pleading.

"Please don't touch, Inspector," she said. "They belong to Ezra, and he wouldn't like anyone to touch his books."

"That being so, Miss Kimberley, I won't," Bony told her, smilingly." I can quite understand your brother's love for books. I've many of my own and I do hate anyone interfering with them. Well, we really must go. Thank you very much."

She shook hands with them, and accompanied them to the utility, and all about them gathered the station aborigines: men, women and children. Bony counted the men and the youths old enough for stock work. He totalled thirty-eight.

Chapter Thirteen

What the Eagles Knew

On leaving the Breen homestead, Irwin was told to drive north, it being Bony's intention to pass round the northern extremity of Black Range and return by the Wyndham road. Neither was inclined to talk, although Irwin was curious as to why Bony had not interrogated the Breens' stockmen.

This track was much easier, and when two miles had been measured they proceeded to cross a series of low ridges separated by wide flats bearing tall sugar grass. The ridges gave place to open country and, when nine miles from the homestead, they came to a large set of stockyards which had been in recent use.

Irwin was invited to sit with Bony on the top rail and admire the Range, which wore with distinction its crown of table-tops and pinnacles of dark-red rock, bared to the clear winter sky and the lightning strokes of summer storms.

"On the far side of the Range would be the place where Stenhouse was found, don't you think?" surmised Bony, and Irwin agreed.

"This, obviously, is the place where the Breens brought their muster to cut out the fats for market. Any name for it?"

"The Nine Mile Yards."

"That operation was delayed a week by something or other, Irwin. They notified Stenhouse they would be leaving on the 7th, and it must have been the 14th or 15th."

"A large bunch of cattle could have broken away from the riders," Irwin pointed out.

"Yes. Anything like that could have happened. Extraordinary girl."

Irwin chuckled. Bony slewed his body to take in all this world of space bounded by the remains of a once high plateau.

"No smokes," he observed. "It's like the hush before the storm. Those blacks at the homestead remind me of chickens clustered about the mother hen when a hawk is approaching. It was why I didn't question them. Yes, an extraordinarily lovely girl in an extraordinary setting."

Irwin offered no comment. This slim, keen-featured, blue-eyed man was foreign to his long experience of those who stem from the aboriginal, and now, after several days of close association with Napoleon Bonaparte, Irwin was beginning to feel conscious of inferiority.

"About forty stockmen are employed by the Breens," Bony said. "That number was given us by Kimberley Breen. She said there were very few about the homestead, four we know being with the cattle, and most of the others being with Silas on a crocodile-shooting expedition. And yet, Irwin, I counted thirty-eight aboriginal men capable of doing stock work. When Kimberley said there were forty working for her brothers, I think she spoke the truth. When she said most of them were away, she lied. You noticed, I'm sure, that wonderful black opal she was wearing?"

"If I had ten like it, I'd retire from the Department and buy a schooner and sail round the world," Irwin declared.

"I'd go after the swordfish," Bony said emphatically. "That opal would seem to have belonged to her mother, for she was wearing an opal when the picture was taken; but on looking closely I discovered that it was a moonstone and someone had darkened it with black crayon and added a smear of crimson. The photograph of Mrs Breen was taken in 1902. It bears that date as well as the photographer's signature. In 1902, Irwin, black opals hadn't been found in Australia and, so far as I know, nowhere else in the world."

Association of ideas produced a suggestion from Irwin.

"Perhaps Kimberley crayoned the moonstone into an opal," he said. "I didn't notice it."

"Perhaps she did," Bony agreed . . . and added, "But why, unless she wanted to share something with the mother she but

faintly remembers? The other picture . . . the picture of Kimberley herself is all wrong. That dress she wore. To me it looked like an evening dress. And that very expensive tea-set kept in an expensive hat box. That wrist-watch, the opal, the dress, the jewelled shoes, those things cost money, Irwin, a lot of money. And the Breens manage to send away only four hundred marketable cattle every year."

"Inherited money from an uncle down in Melbourne, I was told," Irwin said. "As for wearing the wrong dress and the wrong shoes . . . you know more about that than I do . . . well, Kimberley could send down to Perth for the clothes. Probably saw the pictures in catalogues and wanted to be a beautiful lady. She could buy them from her share of the profits on the sale of four hundred fats every year."

Bony nodded. "Well, perhaps she could. I see a faint track running towards the Range. Know where it goes?"

"Yes, to a well hard against the Range itself. They call it Black Well, after the Range. About three miles from here."

Bony regarded the Range With eyes contracted behind narrowed lids. He could see eagles wheeling at a height lower than the summits. There were five of them, and when five are working together they must be prospecting a feast. Having lit a cigarette, Bony dropped from the yard rail and sauntered past the truck to explore the branch track to Black Well. Irwin entered the utility, thoughtful concerning Bony's remarks about Kimberley Breen, her opal, her dress and tea-set. These Breens were certainly not short of money, hadn't been since they had inherited it from the uncle. But had they? Damn it! A policeman oughtn't to accept anything without proof.

Bony returned and took his seat beside Irwin.

"As it's growing late, and there isn't much wood about here, we'll take that track to Black Well and camp there for the night," he said, and Irwin drove the vehicle across the cattle-churned ground to reach the track, saying nothing until they had covered a mile.

"D'you reckon the Musgrave blacks will give trouble up this way?"

"Plenty . . . to the man who killed Jacky Musgrave," Bony replied. "An aborigine must have witnessed the murder of Jacky Musgrave, and passed on the information. If that black hadn't been killed there would have been no signs indicating that his tribal fellows are coming to investigate. Had Jacky killed Stenhouse, not a black fellow in the country would have raised a smoke about it. The fact that the Musgrave blacks are stirred up by the signals relayed to them is to my mind proof that the man who murdered Stenhouse also murdered the tracker. You don't know what the blacks are saying. They are saying that Jacky Musgrave turned into a horse. What d'you make of that?"

"Search me. I do know that the blacks believe when a man dies his spirit enters a tree or a stone near where he dies. You could say that Jacky Musgrave was turned into a stone, or into a tree. But into a horse! Horses don't come into their folklore and beliefs. There weren't any horses until the white man brought them to Australia."

"The logical corollary is that when Jacky Musgrave was killed his spirit entered a horse. The horse, Irwin, probably died long before Jacky Musgrave was killed."

"Probably a thousand dead horses lying around these Kimberleys."

"We should be interested only in dead horses within a day's travel of Stenhouse's abandoned jeep."

Irwin chuckled, and his laughter did not deceive Bony.

"Must be a bit dense," he said. "Suppose we find a dead horse, how are we going to tell the dead horse was once upon a time a black fellow known as Jacky Musgrave?"

"I'll inform you when the time comes . . . if it should."

Black Range rose higher and higher. The track was so faintly marked that Irwin was obliged to drive with care not to lose it. Had it not been recently traversed by a motor vehicle, his difficulties would have been vastly increased when crossing

belts of sugar grass rising level with the cabin top. They passed over a miniature range of rocky splinters protruding above golden sand, and saw ahead the windmill over the well. It was not in action.

Beyond the well, the Range rose sheer from a base of rock rubble for a thousand feet, presenting a massive light-red wall. On the left extremity a great rocky splash of purple streaked with black betrayed the entrance to a gorge or gully. Irwin stopped the truck beside the mill-stand over the low coping of the well, and now the evidence was plain that the mill had not been operated for some considerable time. The drinking troughs extending outward from the squat reservoir tank were dry. There were four vanes missing from the mill itself. And, to clinch all this evidence of disuse, the ground about was clean of cattle tracks.

There was a windlass and chain and bucket over the well and, standing within the legs of the mill, they lowered the bucket, bringing up water, clear and cold.

"We could camp over in that belt of scrub," Irwin said, and, Bony assenting, he brought the water tins from the truck and filled them. They moved the truck to the trees, where lay a plentiful supply of dead wood, and made a fire, the wood being so dry that but little smoke rose after the kindling of leaves and twigs had burned out.

It was then half past six, and whilst Irwin attended to the billy to make the inevitable tea, Bony strolled back to the well, circled it, and continued onwards to a roughly-built shelter roofed with grass laid upon light poles. The site of a fire was near by, and the mound of ash told of many fires having burned there.

These little stories interested Bony . . . automatically and without actual reference to the investigation on hand. The untouched grass about the well and the troughs told him that cattle had not watered there for at least twelve months, and the fire-site near the shelter told him that someone had camped under its grass roof within recent weeks, certainly since the last rain had fallen.

Having always felt the urge to see what lay beyond the mirage, beyond the sand-dune, what invited from beyond the mountain, Bony wanted to see what lay at the extremity of the great rock wall. A crow defied him, and looking upward, he saw, the five eagles still circling and so low that he could distinguish their golden eyes.

Arriving at the end of the rock wall, he found a gully rising steeply into the heart of the range, a gully having a wide mouth leading into a defile between slopes massed with trees and shrubs and spinifex, and floored by the narrow dry bed of a storm-water creek. The creek bed was of coarse grey sand, and should one wish to climb the gully it offered the best pathway.

Bony turned away, not wanting to explore it, yet with interest observing how storm water had rushed out from the gully's mouth to cut a channel yards wide and feet deep in the soft soil of the little plain.

Then he saw the fox. It was coming along the channel towards him, and the reflected colour from the rock wall deepened its golden coat and darkened its white chest and tail tip with a tint of red. The fox came on, not seeing the statue which was a living man. The eagles came lower, and when one swooped, the fox crouched against the bank of the channel. Bony clapped his hands and the fox executed an almost perfect somersault, and fled into the tall grass.

The laughing Bony prospected the water channel to see how many foxes used it to pass from the waving grass belt across the open space to the shelter of the gully, and having proceeded less than a hundred yards he found a dead horse.

Here, then, was the reason for the gathered eagles, here the reason for the visit of the fox. Bony looked down at it and wondered, because the animal had been dead a long time, so long, in fact, that nothing remained but the hide stretched over the top side of the skeleton. The birds and wild dogs had eaten into the belly, like termites working from within, and Bony managed to lift the skeleton, then dropped it and walked back to the temporary camp.

"Every successful investigator owes much to Lady Luck," he told Irwin. "No investigator ever begins to be successful unless driven by curiosity. Luck, curiosity, plus a little inductive reasoning into the behaviour of foxes and eagles, will raise any police recruit to the top of his department. Come with me."

"Found something important?" asked Irwin.

"I think so. First I noted those five eagles, when at the cattle yard. Then I saw this old track had been recently used by a motor vehicle. Then I discovered that although this well hadn't been used for many months, someone had been here and made a fire beside that old shed. There was a fox that ought not to have been abroad so early. And then I found the horse."

"The horse!" echoed Irwin and chuckled. "Not the horse that was once Jacky Musgrave?"

"If an old man, blind and decrepit, tells you that Jacky Musgrave was turned into a horse, you could laugh at him and prove yourself a fool. Only fools laugh at what their puny brains cannot accept, Irwin, and even wise men are too apt to sneer at things they cannot see and touch and measure and weigh.

"How was it that an old and blind aborigine creeping about the blacks' camp down at Leroy Downs, a hundred and fifty miles away, was able to tell Bob Lang that Jacky Musgrave had been turned into a horse? You may answer that, having been informed by smoke signals that something of grave import had occurred, that old and blind semi-savage . . . semi-savage, mind you . . . learned by telepathy that Jacky Musgrave had been turned into a horse. I would accept your answer with neither hilarity nor contempt. Look! Look at Jacky Musgrave turned into a horse."

Swiftly Bony stopped and lifted the foreleg of the dead horse, and beneath the skeleton frame covered with hide lay the body of an aboriginal dressed in army greatcoat and heavy military boots.

Chapter Fourteen

The Possibles

The meteors were making the inanimate stars look silly when Bony and Constable Irwin were seated in the truck, smoking and talking.

"We have now the bodies of two men to occupy our attention," Bony was saying. "We know that when alive both men were in the jeep, and that when murdered the jeep wasn't where we examined it. One body is found on the east side of this Black Range, and the other on the west side, and you estimate the shorter distance between the bodies is approximately four miles.

"Although we didn't examine the body of Jacky Musgrave, we saw enough to assume that he was also killed by a bullet fired from a high-powered rifle. We looked for ground clues about the jeep and along the road, and failed to discover one. Before I found the dead horse, and when you and I went to it, I saw no human tracks, I've seen none about the well. Therefore, there is a lack of ground clues about both bodies."

"What of the truck that came here recently from the cattle yards?" asked Irwin.

"That truck . . . it could have been a car . . . came here prior to the deaths of Stenhouse and his tracker. It stopped at the well and subsequently was driven round it to follow its own tracks back to the yard. It seems certain that one of the Breens came here to inspect the well, or the mill, but that was before the cattle began the trip to Wyndham.

"I'm sure that Jacky Musgrave wasn't shot anywhere in the vicinity of that dead horse. He was brought there from the scene of the double murder, just as Stenhouse and the jeep were brought from that same place."

"That was a neat idea, pushing the body into a dead animal," Irwin said. "Anyone passing would take no notice of the stink, believing it came from the horse."

"I agree . . . a neat idea. It might have fooled even me had not Bob Lang's father-by-initiation presented the idea. I wish I knew the extent of the knowledge of these murders in possession of those Musgrave aborigines."

"Well, they know Jacky was shoved into the carcass of that horse."

"Yes, they know that," agreed Bony. "Someone witnessed that act, but as we can be sure the murder was not committed near the carcass, we may assume that the witness did not actually see the murder committed. He could have watched a man bring the body here. He could have been so far away as not to be able to identify the man."

Bony tossed his cigarette end through the lowered window and reached for his tobacco tin and papers.

"I think we can be confident that he who witnessed Jacky Musgrave being put into the horse, or found him, was one of those Western blacks. He, with others, could have been over this side on walkabout. He would know what tribe Jacky belonged to, and would know Jacky was a police tracker by his boots and clothes. And so he made his way back to his own people to report the matter, and they sent up those smokes which they knew would be relayed to Pluto's Mob, as those Musgraves are called."

"So what?" Irwin said, tersely, when Bony fell silent.

"Although we don't know the extent of the knowledge imparted to Pluto's Mob, we do know the result of the news of this murder," Bony further conceded. "If they know who murdered Jacky, they will hunt him out and even the score, and I shall be annoyed. If they don't know, then they will have to start their investigation with the body of Jacky, as we had to start with the body of Stenhouse."

"Then the game will be afoot."

"Yes, we shall have rivals. We are interested particularly in who murdered Stenhouse. They will be interested only in who killed Jacky Musgrave."

The picture of uncivilized aborigines engaged in a homicide investigation was new to Constable Irwin, but he was not slow to recognize the seriousness of rivalry from this quite unexpected quarter; for his knowledge of the aborigines, especially those not in contact with white folk, was wide enough to include their rigid enforcement of black law.

As did Bony, he did not relish the thought of natives getting ahead in a hunt for the murderer, and for the first time on this tour with Inspector Bonaparte, he became impatient of progress.

"We'll have to pull up our socks," he said, and chuckled, and the placid Bony countered with:

"We can't do anything in the dark. We had to rely on your two trackers, and they are not wholly reliable in view of Jacky Musgrave's murder. Our investigation is not of a murder committed in a city area of a paltry square mile or so. We haven't been called to a house where the walls are bespattered with blood and brains, and the blood-drained corpse lies upon the hearth-rug, the murder weapon near by."

Irwin gazed moodily beyond the windscreen, watched a meteor blaze across the sky and appear to skim over the top of Black Range, and reluctantly agreed that the circumstances were not akin to the picture painted by Bony.

"We'll scout in the morning, Irwin, and try to find how Jacky Musgrave turned into a horse. We must be as patient as Jacky's tribe, and must exercise our minds as they will. If they come here to look around for Jacky, we must hope they won't make the gross mistake of hunting us for murderers."

"Why us?"

"Our boot tracks are well in evidence."

"But," swiftly objected Irwin, "they will know by the age of our tracks that we didn't commit the murder."

It was Bony's turn to chuckle.

"Good for you," he said. "In that little bout, you won. Now I'm for the blankets."

Bony was up and had the billy on the fire when Irwin awoke at daybreak, and these two bushmen said not a word until they had sipped a pint of hot tea and smoked their first cigarette. Hard in the lee of this Black Range, the daylight was slow to come, and it would be three hours before the sun shone on Black Well. It was shining on the windmill when they returned from investigating the country all about the dead horse. Neither had crossed any human tracks. As the murderer must have used the magic carpet to transport the jeep to the place where it was found, so must the magic carpet have been used to transport the body of Jacky Musgrave.

Irwin was disappointed by the absence of results from their walking and searching for evidence to show, at least, from which direction the dead man had been brought to the carcass, and said their search would extend for weeks. He was also puzzled by the expression in Bony's eyes and about his mouth.

"Who are the best trackers in this country?" Bony asked him, and without hesitation he voted for the aborigines.

"Precisely. And no white man can beat the aborigines in obliterating tracks. One: Jacky Musgrave was pushed into the skeleton of a horse by a white man accompanied by blacks who wiped out his tracks. Two: By blacks alone who left no trace of their activity. We have proceeded a step. We know that a white man set the murder stage with Stenhouse's jeep, and we know that he was assisted by aborigines . . . black fellows he knew he could trust with his life. We know now why we have been thwarted so much."

Irwin began to wash the utensils and pack them into the tucker-box. Looking up he said:

"We don't seem able to get our hooks into this case."

"We have begun to do so."

"We have? Damned if I can see it. I can't see why Stenhouse made those false entries in his diary, and I can't even guess at the motive for murdering him . . . excepting hatred

by the Wallaces for what he did to his wife. What were you doing with that bush at the horse carcass?"

"Brushing out our tracks. I don't want Jacky's relations to know we discovered the body."

"You're sure, then, they will come here?"

"Quite sure."

"And you are going to leave the corpse in that horse?"

"Yes . . . despite your very natural official objection to sidestepping a properly conducted post-mortem and a formal inquest. The one post-mortem and the one inquest on the body of Stenhouse will be sufficient. Now we'll get along. Back to the yards and another call on Kimberley Breen."

Irwin's light-blue eyes were almost colourless in the dark tan of his face, the smile mechanical as he lifted the tucker-box into the truck, swung the tins of water up and was ready.

"If we could read the truth in the biographies of great and successful men, Irwin," Bony said, when they were on the move, "we would find one common denominator. Every great figure in history, from Genghis Khan to the Emperor Napoleon and down to the captains of modern industry, habitually used everyone with whom they came in contact. Friend and foe, intellectual and clod, the trusting and the suspicious . . . they used them all. We are not great. We are of those who are used, so let us now and then, in order to maintain our families, use up other people. We will begin with Jacky Musgrave's relations."

Irwin fell into introspective mood and tried to determine when Bony had used him. He was confident he had not been entirely used up by this man whose mind he could not follow, and decided that should he be used up he wouldn't have any violent objection to the experience. This case seemed almost open and shut when he left Wyndham, and he was still easy about it when he had arrived at the dead policeman in the jeep. After that the cogs had slipped, and this damned half-caste had taken him through an ever-deepening fog. The fog was worse after Bony said:

"Don't be downcast. I am decidedly elated."

Irwin drove almost a mile before moodily protesting against the fog, and Bony relented.

"Our investigation has revealed that the man who killed Stenhouse was white. The man who murdered Jacky Musgrave was that same white man. Lack of clues indicate that the aborigines were associated with these two murders. In view of the respective positions of the two bodies, the white murderer, having loyal black associates, can be included in three possibles: Jack Wallace on the far side of this range; one of the Breens on this side; and Alverston who lives north of McDonald's Stand. We will accept the three Breens as one . . . leaving out the girl . . . so that we do have three possibles . . . three men who could have loyal assistance from their stockmen. Have we not progressed?"

"We certainly have," Irwin agreed, and because he was a little sore with himself, he laughed. "I think we could reduce the three possibles by one. Alverston hasn't been managing his place long enough to receive that amount of co-operation from his blacks."

"Conceded, but keep in mind that Alverston, with two aborigines, was travelling home from Agar's Lagoon and met the party of photographers near McDonald's Stand on that day when, in medical opinion, Stenhouse was killed. He could have met Stenhouse, killed both him and his tracker, driven the bodies in the jeep into the scrub, gone on and so met the party from Wyndham. And that night he could have returned with his blacks to arrange the body of Stenhouse in the jeep as we found it. What type of man is Alverston?"

"Decent feller," replied Irwin. "Came from the Territory three years ago. Was managing stations over there for his company. Well read, I should say. Kind of bloke I'd expect to make a better job of rigging a murder scene."

"I agree. I met Alverston at Agar's pub. We'll delete his name, and leave two possibles . . . Wallace and the Breens."

"If Stenhouse was murdered up this way," argued Irwin, "we know his jeep was driven over old man Lang's donkey track, but we don't know who was driving. Old Lang or one of his sons could have made the prints of Stenhouse's boots in that temporary camp."

"That could be so, but the idea is cancelled by the fact that the Langs told us about that track and gave us willing assistance to prove that Stenhouse's jeep had been driven over it. No, Stenhouse wasn't killed down south of Agar's. He was killed within an easy day's travel of where he was found. We'll concentrate on the possibles . . . Jack Wallace and one or more of the Breens."

Chapter Fifteen

Not at Home

On arriving at the Breen homestead Bony crossed to the veranda, which was being swept by a middle-aged lubra. She was large and shapeless, and she should have given him a wide smile, instead of a cool "Good day!" while going on with her sweeping.

"Miss Breen in the house?" Bony asked.

"No fear. Miss Kimberley, she went off after breakfast."

"H'm! When will she be home?"

"Come back! Oh, late. Perhaps sundown. You know Mike's Hollow?"

"No," replied Bony. "How far away is it?"

"Oh, long way." The lubra continued to sweep, and after that one examination of him she had not again looked at him. "Good way. Twenty mile . . . I don't know. Long ride, anyhow."

"All right! You tell Miss Kimberley we called and were sorry she wasn't home. Good day!"

"Good day, Mister!"

Bony returned to the truck.

"Make a dash for the blacks' camp, Irwin. Catch them before they can sneak away."

"Kim Breen not home?"

"I'm not sure. The lubra said she wasn't. We'll try to nail one of the stockmen who can speak reasonable English."

About a dozen men were standing among the creek trees sheltering the iron and bag humpies. There were no women in view, and no children. The men were clothed in all degrees of dress. Some wore shirt and trousers and riding boots; others wore only a shirt and yet others were wearing only trousers.

Irwin and Bony approached them, Irwin chuckling and greeting them easily.

"Good day-ee, you fellers! You all have a spell, eh?"

Two attempted a smile and edged behind the others. One well-built young man, who, in addition to shirt and trousers and felt hat, wore goose-necked spurs to his boots and a neckerchief of bright blue draped *à la cinema,* was obviously ill at ease. He tried to turn in order to hide the heavy revolver in its holster attached to his flashily-adorned belt.

Again Irwin chuckled, and his light-blue eyes were hard. He moved to keep this young fellow full front, and for a long moment gazed at the revolver. Then stepping swiftly forward he glared into the uneasy black eyes, while his left hand abstracted the weapon.

"Who bin told you wear-um revolver feller like white stockman?" Irwin shouted, and then laughed again. Three men moved away, and Irwin ordered them back. They were watching his eyes and didn't laugh. Then they watched his hands break open the weapon and remove the cartridges. "Now then, you feller, what's your name?"

"Patrick O'Grady," came the reply, and Bony found difficulty in suppressing a smile.

"Go on, Patrick O'Grady. What d'you mean by wearing a gun to your belt? Come on . . . give, Mr Patrick O'Grady."

"Found it at the cattle yards," came the reply spoken in excellent English. "Ezra must have left it behind when they started with the cattle."

"What cattle?" barked Irwin.

"Fat cattle for the Meat Works."

"What yards?"

Patrick O'Grady was becoming jittery. He tried to avoid the light-blue eyes. He shuffled and the spurs tinkled.

"The Nine Mile Yards," he said.

"That the yards at the turn-off to Black Well?"

The stockman nodded. Then, as though hoping his status might assist him, he said:

"I'm boss stockman round here."

Bony stepped in, "How long you been working for the Breens?"

"Been here all along. Born here."

"Were you working on the final muster?"

Patrick O'Grady brightened. He was getting away from the revolver.

"That's right. Me and the men were holding the main mob near the yards. Ezra and some of the other boys, and Jasper and Silas, were bringing in the last of the strays."

"What day was that?" pressed Bony, and Patrick readily answered saying it was the preceding Monday week. "Who went with the cattle?"

"Ezra and Kimberley and four of the boys. Jasper and Silas and me went with them to the first camp on. Next morning we left to come home, me and Jasper and Silas."

"What have you been doing since you came home?"

"Spelling."

"Where is Jasper now?"

"With the cattle," Patrick replied. "He left to relieve Kimberley, who wasn't to go farther than Number Four Camp."

"And Silas? He with the cattle too?" pressed Bony, and the answer came back without hesitation:

"No. Silas went out to the Swamp shooting crocodiles."

"Oh. Crocodiles been catching cattle, eh?"

The boss stockman grinned. Now on still safer ground he was easy.

"Too right!"

"How many black fellows did he take with him?"

The black eyes flickered, but the reply came fast enough.

"Three. Old Ned and two young fellers."

"Well, Constable Irwin, we must get on. By the way, Patrick, where is Miss Kimberley today?"

Again the flicker of the eyes, and this time the laugh which conceals so much. Patrick did not know where Kimberley was, but he was quick enough to take the line of least trouble.

"Out riding, I suppose." Turning to the others, he bawled with unnerving abruptness, "Where Miss Kimberley go?"

Arms waved to various compass points. General laughter, questions interchanged, no direct answers. One of them must have gone out that morning for the saddle-horses, brought them to the yard, and someone must have saddled a horse for Kimberley Breen . . . if she had gone out riding. Bony recalled that Kimberley had said Silas had gone off shooting crocodiles and accompanied by most of the boys. The boss stockman had said he had left with three boys, and actually named one. He said, softly, his eyes suddenly blazing at Mr Patrick O'Grady:

"Why were you armed with that revolver?"

The boss stockman was wounded by the reversion to a subject which had been adequately settled, and because he hesitated to reply, Bony shot another question at him:

"When did you see Jacky Musgrave?"

The group became tense. Bony, who was seeking to penetrate the depth of the black eyes he was holding with his own, did not observe the swift immobility, but felt the instant change. This time, he waited for the answer, and, waiting, watched the shutter fall.

"Don't know," replied the boss stockman. "Long time ago."

"Not last week?"

A vigorous shake of the head. Interest maintained in the homestead, the trees, in anything but the blazing blue eyes. A grey-whiskered man rescued the boss stockman.

"Jacky Musgrave him tracker for Mr Stenhouse. Jacky no belong Breen country."

"That's right," agreed Patrick. "Haven't seen Jacky for years. Two years back, anyway. Miss Kimberley says Mr Stenhouse has been shot and Jacky shot him and cleared out to his own country. Jacky's wild black. We're station blacks."

"Well, you had better stay in camp . . . all of you," Bony said, sternly. "You tell Miss Kimberley that Constable Irwin and I called to see her."

"And if I find you wearing a gun again, I'll take you to the Wyndham gaol," added Irwin.

Silent men watched them as they drove away, passing the homestead and proceeding southward. Half a mile from the homestead, the track took the vehicle into concealment behind a long and low ridge of bare rock, and here Bony ordered a stop, and climbed to the summit of the ridge to watch.

The boss stockman was striding to the house, walking with the mincing tread of the man who has lived longer in a saddle than out of it, and he proceeded to the door of the detached kitchen. The lubra who had been sweeping the veranda had disappeared. Minutes passed, when Bony saw her traverse the covered way between kitchen and house. She was in the house for a full minute before leaving it again for the kitchen, and then the boss stockman passed from kitchen to house and stood at the side door talking with someone within.

Jasper was away with the cattle. Silas was away on a crocodile hunt. Ezra was with Jasper. There was no one left with the right to be in the house but Kimberley.

"Kimberley Breen was home, after all," Bony said, when they were on the move. "I didn't see her, but the boss stockman reported at the kitchen and was told to cross to the house."

"Don't understand why she wouldn't see us," Irwin growled. "Don't think much of the entire set-up. That abo was a liar all through. They stiffened into a lot of trees killed by a bush fire when you brought up Jacky Musgrave."

"They know that Jacky Musgrave was shot, and that he was subsequently turned into a horse, and they know that Jacky's tribe is coming to investigate his death. That stockman was armed because they're all afraid of Pluto's Mob. I don't think they will attack the Breens' blacks . . . unless, of course, they find out one or more of them were mixed up in Jacky's murder."

After a long silence, Irwin said:

"The boss stockman being armed, and the rest being uneasy, would seem to point to guilty knowledge, wouldn't it?"

"By no means. They would be frightened by the very presence of those desert blacks, fearing that, given the opportunity, the strangers would capture some of their women. Patrick O'Grady and others are well aware that the wild blacks are better bushmen than they: that, to express a colloquialism, the wild blacks can run rings round them."

"Then what's wrong with the set-up? On the same argument, the blacks over at Wallace's station will also be nervous."

"They are. What is wrong with the place we've just left is Kimberley Breen. She didn't want to see us, and when they heard us coming, she instructed the lubra to tell us she was out. There was no time to give the same instructions to the boss stockman, even had Kimberley calculated we would interview him and his fellows. Even in that there need be no guilty knowledge of Stenhouse and his tracker. D'you know if young Wallace is interested in Kimberley?"

"Couldn't say," replied the frowning Irwin.

"Well, then, do you think we can get back to Agar's tonight?"

"Yes, we could," Irwin said, and Bony noted the reluctance to accept the idea. "Make it a bit late getting there. Have to tackle the other side of the Range after dark."

Bony surrendered.

"I don't fancy slithering and sliding over those rock-bars in the dark," he said. "It was bad enough coming up. We'll camp in that natural bowl on the summit; you know, the place where the baobab trees grow."

They passed cattle in fair condition, and a bull with them was certainly no runt. A small herd of donkeys looked sleek and fat, and in this red land were no luscious green pastures, no lazy water dreaming in the shadows of downcast willows. Irwin suggested lunch, and they halted beside smooth-faced purple rock teeth rising from a sandy floor for a hundred feet,

forming a line for a mile and providing another oddity in a world where uniformity had been banished a million years ago.

"You going to report the finding of the body of Jacky Musgrave?" asked Irwin, who was waiting beside the flame-surrounded tea billy.

"No. I am going to prospect a few leads in Agar's and then we'll hunt for the scene of these two crimes. There must be a figurative road back from an effect to its cause. So far, we have observed effects, meaning two bodies. Neither crime was committed at the place where either body was found, which clearly infers that the scene of the murders is of importance to the murderers. At the scene is the motive. The signpost to the motive is at Agar's Lagoon."

Irwin dropped a handful of tea into the billy and lifted it from the fire. "It's a hell of a large country," he drawled. "A hell of a large country to locate a murder scene when abos obliterate all tracks, and other abos are reluctant to work for us. Supposing we did find where Stenhouse and his tracker were killed, supposing we do find bloodstains on the ground and other evidence, what can we deduce from that? We already have the bodies."

On his knees, Bony was slicing bread on the strip of canvas they used for a table-cloth, and when he had done, he sat on the ground beside the meal.

"Let us assume that these murders were due to opportunity. Visualize the action. Stenhouse in his jeep, with Jacky sitting on the load behind him. They meet someone who accepts the opportunity of paying a score. The score settled, the stage is set to tell the story that Jacky Musgrave killed the policeman, and all ground evidence of the murders is obliterated to give the story support. There is something lacking in that picture. What is lacking is the imprints of the jeep's tyres on the great northern highway to support the story that Jacky killed the policeman, those tracks should have been visible, because Stenhouse was supposed to be going somewhere when Jacky was supposed to have shot him."

"All right, then," argued Irwin. "The jeep must have been taken to the place where it was found . . . on a truck."

"No, to that theory, in view of the absence of tracks about the dead horse."

When the noon camp had been left behind, they continued to talk about the case, Irwin arguing less for the purpose of putting forward an opinion or a theory than for reaching an objective through mental battle. He was handicapped because Bony had said nothing of the book-gouged receptacles, and nothing of several other matters.

The sun was westering when they began to mount the slopes of Black Range, and it was dancing on the summit of the distant ridge when they topped the lip of the bowl in which they had previously camped. Irwin parked the truck at the same place, and Bony made a fire on the white ash of their earlier fire, and took the billies to the little grass-edged stream. On returning, he said to Irwin:

"The wild aborigines are lappers, not drinkers . . . from their cupped hands. At the edges of the stream are faint imprints of several pairs of hands. The imprint of one hand reveals that it was gripping a spear. I think Jacky Musgrave's people have passed on their way to the dead horse."

Chapter Sixteen

Polite Conversation

HAVING SHAVED and trimmed his moustache and added a little grease to its upturned points, 'Un was seated in the hotel veranda chair waiting for the first invitation to a drink before dinner.

The job suited his temperament, and he was now satisfied with a small but regular wage, following the fiery years he had chased Dame Fortune, starved in the chase, accepted her generous gifts, and drunk himself to the grave's very edge . . . to begin the cycle all over again. He took pride in his contribution to the bottle ring round Agar's Lagoon, and, having carted to the ring the empties of the previous day, and having swept the back and front of the premises, cut wood for the kitchen fire, peeled the potatoes and mopped out the bar, he was entitled to his leisure.

The hens were with their lord and master; the town goats were unconcerned; and beyond the post office at the far end of the township an unusual number of aborigines were camped along the bed of a water-gutter.

Several people had come to town that day, and 'Un anticipated a very busy evening behind the bar counter, as Ted Ramsay was already approaching that condition when insensibility overtook him with remarkable acceleration. Then there was Constable Irwin with the half-caste Inspector who had been looking into the Stenhouse shooting, and from the plane which had arrived that morning had come a P.M.G. Inspector, and a Mrs Gray with her two children from Perth.

Yes, life wasn't so bad for 'Un. A little work, a little money, plenty of free beer, and an almost endless procession of guests

who seldom stayed more than one night furnished all he needed to ask.

When Bony appeared from the private entrance, 'Un immediately vacated the chair, smiled at this guest, and said:

"How's things, Inspector?"

"Well, but dry," replied Bony, seating himself. "I'm tired of being jerked about on your splendid highways. Ah! This is good! Think you could bring a couple of beers?"

"Yes, I'll get 'em."

'Un brought the drinks, and sat on the floor with his back to a veranda post. He gave all the local news he considered worthy of telling, and omitted an item which had interested Bony, who observed:

"The blacks appear to be quite numerous."

"Yes, ain't they? Must be going to have a corroboree or something. Poor critters . . . bloody Orstralia ain't done much for 'em. Still, if I don't eat you you eat me, and that's the way of the world all over."

"Yes, there's jungle warfare among the best of us," agreed Bony, producing money and handing his empty glass to the obliging yardman. War! War between the criminal and the policeman, between the boss and the bossed, between men and women who poison with kindness since it is no longer fashionable to slay with weapons or hire assassins. How the little yardman had survived in this land of iron was quite a little mystery in itself, for he was a gentle soul. Returning with the drinks, he resumed his position with his back to the veranda post and winked.

"Place getting quite important. A Police Inspector and a Post Office Inspector staying here at the same time. Dave Bundred'll have to stick his nose into his records for a day or two. Always behind to hell. Be worse, too, if his wife didn't do most of the work." 'Un laughed from somewhere down in his boots. "The monthly rain sheet blew out of the winder once and a goat et it. Terrific to-do. Near the end of the month and it had rained every day. So we played darts and put down the

highest score as the daily points. Record month for rain that was."

"I wonder that Dave Bundred hasn't sought a post office down south," murmured Bony. "The Department doesn't insist on its officers remaining here for years."

"No, it didn't insist, but Dave won't go down south. Nothing to go with. What he don't pour down his neck he sends away to the bookies. The horses have had him in for years. Now me, I never gambled on racing, and not much on cards. But I gambled more'n a bit on meself. Another? Right away."

Having again been attended to by the yardman, Bony tried another question which might lead somewhere:

"Much mail go through Agar's Lagoon?"

"Fair amount," replied 'Un.

"Most of it air-mail, I suppose?"

"All of it. Good deal of freight, as well. Then there's more telegraph work than you'd think. I've often given Mrs Bundred a hand with the mail when Dave's been *non compos,* so I'd know."

"Yes, there must be a great deal of mail orders in a district like this, although the population per square mile would be about decimal nought one. No shops but the general store, no frills for the ladies, serviceable working clothes for the men. Don't think I'd like it much, what with week-old newspapers and no books."

"Oh, I don't know," opposed 'Un. "People up here get plenty of books. Libraries send 'em up. Fair amount come from libraries. I uster pay two quid a quarter for three books a fortnight. Westerns I like best. Zane Grey's always good. He oughta have come out here. He was pretty good at describing deserts and sunsets and things."

"Suppose most of the books sent up are Westerns or mysteries," prompted Bony.

"No. Some people go in for travel books, like the Langs, especially Bob Lang, and one of his sisters is studying handcrafts. The Breens, they don't get many books, but what they

do get is pretty solid. Ezra told me he was studying stock breeding, aiming to improve their cattle."

"Oh! Buy them or obtain them from a library?"

"Library. Great reader, Ezra. Always was ever since he came home from his schoolin' in Broome. The others can't hardly read a paper, 'ceptin' Kimberley."

Bony lit another cigarette, emptied his glass, added another question to his list:

"Where does Ezra get his books, d'you know?"

"Yes, I can tell you that," replied 'Un. "Handled 'em enough, what with entering the parties in the receipt book and the registered dispatch list. Bloke named Solly, stationer, Peppermint Grove, near Perth, sends 'em up for Ezra Breen. Sends up a parcel a month, and Ezra sends down a parcel a month. Did hear . . . can't remember who told me . . . that Solly is a sort of relation to the Breens. Now me, I ain't got no relations, but I had me will made."

"Wise man," Bony smiled.

"Reckon everyone oughta have their will made. I've a bit saved up, and when I kick off I might have a tidy bit of cake in the kip or I may be broke. D'you know who I made me heir?"

"No. Who?"

'Un twirled the points of his white moustache. Slowly a smile stole into his faded grey eyes and removed the emphasis of his long and pointed chin.

"I leave all I possess . . . that's after the bloody Gov'ment takes its whack . . . to old Pluto. He's the chief of them wild blacks on the Musgrave Range. Put me and Paddy the Bastard on to a bit o' gold once, and I haven't forgotten. Fun's going to be when my solicitor starts wanting to pay out to Pluto, or his heirs and assigns. Pluto and his crowd's so wild that he won't be able to get within a million miles of 'em. People reckon I'm the only white man alive, now Stenhouse's dead, who's ever seen Pluto . . . and ever likely to. Think when a bloke's dead he can see what's going on down here?"

"Some authorities say yes and others say no," stalled Bony.

"Well, I hope I can watch the antics of that solicitor tearing all over the country trying to catch up with Pluto and hand him my cake. I told him that Pluto owned the pub here and that the beer is always good. Hi! That's the dinner bell."

Bony was still laughing at 'Un's pictures when he joined Irwin and Clifford at the table reserved for them. Irwin's reaction was a guffaw of laughter. Clifford was more restrained.

"Can't recall where I last heard the word 'cake' applied to money," Bony said.

"Not used nearly as much as it used to be," Irwin told him. "Cake! That word, and when I see cake, will always remind me of Kim Breen taking her cake from that hat box. Gosh! What a place to keep it!"

"And locked up, too."

"Have to lock it up, sir. Those lubras would go around on hands and knees licking cake crumbs off the floor."

"It was certainly delicious. By the way, do you see the post office inspector here?"

Irwin indicated a lean man at an adjacent table. He was as weather-pickled as the constables, differing only from these northern men in the clothes he was wearing.

"The name's Linton," murmured Irwin. "Fred Linton. Good bloke. Done more travelling around than I'll do if I live to be a hundred."

"Do you know him . . . personally?"

"Oh, yes. I know all these Government people. The bloke next to him is the chief telegraph linesman between here and Wyndham. How many telegraph posts d'you reckon there are? He says he's climbed every one of them. There's 4,262, plus ten sixty-five-feet-high towers."

"Must have had a lot of splinters in his hands."

"All iron posts."

"I'd be obliged if you would introduce me to Mr Linton," Bony said, casually. "I see Doctor Morley dining with a lady. What do you know about him, Irwin?"

"Fair amount, I think. Came here long before I was born. Practised here for years, but he couldn't have earned enough to keep himself in grog. People too healthy. Never get sick until they're ready to drop dead."

"Private income?"

The Senior Constable chuckled.

"Must have. Hell of a good doctor, though. Done some astonishing things with accidents . . . amputated legs and arms all on his own, and no one died that I heard."

"Popular?"

"Quickest way to get to a hospital is to say, 'To hell with Doc Morley.' "

The waitress removed plates and served jam roly-poly.

"I wonder . . ." murmured Bony, and said no more until he was drinking his coffee. "Would Doctor Morley be so obliging as to extract bullets and stitch up knife wounds without asking inconvenient questions, d'you think?"

Irwin grinned.

"Been known to."

"H'm! Well, that dinner was a credit to the gentleman who is apt to smoke while he cooks."

Rising together they left the dining-room for the front veranda, and there Bony was introduced to the postal department inspector.

"Glad to meet you," Linton said as though he meant it, and examined Bony with eyes accustomed to probing. Irwin explained that Linton's district covered the entire north of the State.

"Easy compared with what it used to be," admitted Linton, "'ad to travel on horseback. Then motor transport. Now it's air. Just as well. I'm not getting younger."

"Been up here long?"

"Forty years, almost."

"Country appears to have claimed you."

"It has and it hasn't," qualified the postal department inspector. "Family's grown up, and my home is down south.

Young generation won't leave the city. Must have the bright lights . . . the films and dances. I couldn't stay put, not after all these years."

"No, it's good to roam. Couldn't imagine Irwin in a cage, could you?" The Senior Constable chuckled. "By the way, do you happen to know a place called Peppermint Grove?"

"Between Perth and Fremantle. Yes, I know it."

Bony beamed.

"D'you know people there named Solly . . . bookseller?"

"Yes, there's two Sollys, as a matter of fact. Brothers. One has the bookshop and the other's a jeweller."

Again Bony beamed.

Chapter Seventeen

Official Inquiries

On entering the police station, Bony found Constable Clifford making himself *au fait* with the manifold duties of the officer in charge of a truly enormous district. This transfer from headquarters was a step towards promotion, and Clifford was ambitious.

"I want you to lie doggo this evening," Bony told him, gravely. "You're a blot on the landscape, a brake on the wheels of progress. The people are nervous of you, not knowing how you will tick in the place vacated by Stenhouse."

Clifford stood, stiffly.

"Yes, sir."

"The people are so nervous that they won't open up," Bony proceeded. "Should Irwin and I start anything, such as luring the entire population of this glass halo into an uproarious bender, kindly oblige by hearing nothing, saying nothing, doing nothing."

"Yes, sir."

"If by eleven-thirty neither Irwin nor I make an appearance, then conduct a search for us. We may be sleeping on the road, or down in the creek. Put us to bed in Room Nine . . . not in the cell in the back yard."

"Yes, sir."

Then Bony smiled, and Clifford relaxed. They both laughed, and sat down facing each other across the littered table.

"I'm about one per cent serious, Clifford. These people are friendly enough, but they won't talk to us as they do among themselves. In that they are not singular. The crowd in the pub at night when there's no policeman on hand is a different crowd. Irwin, coming from Wyndham, and I, being a stranger,

might be able to make the crowd forget we are policemen . . . on duty. We have to burrow below surfaces. Clear?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Good! I shall not omit to mention you in my report when I finalize this Stenhouse case. Would you grant me a favour?"

"Certainly, sir."

"My Chief Commissioner and my Superintendent, my wife and sons, all call me Bony. All my friends call me Bony. Might I include you among them?"

Clifford flushed with pleasure.

"Why, yes, of course."

"Now don't forget. Look for us at eleven-thirty. Beds in Room Nine."

Bony chuckled and left. He met Irwin crossing from the hotel.

"Listen, Irwin. We must loosen up this crowd and make them give. We'll probably have to spend the gas money and miss out on the rent for a week or two, because it will require money to get men to talk on tiny beers served in whisky glasses at a shilling apiece. I want you to concentrate on Linton, and dig out all he knows about the postmaster, officially and privately, and if you get a line from the postmaster to Stenhouse, follow it up. I'll concentrate on 'Un and Bundred."

Irwin was delighted. "The new boss?" he suggested.

"I requested him to remain inside the police station and see nothing, hear nothing and know nothing. Clifford will rise high." Bony touched the centre button of Irwin's drill tunic. "Aspire to be a Divisional Officer, but never consent to be one. The position is much too cramping."

"I'll be satisfied to be a DI," laughed Irwin.

Bony sought out 'Un, finding him on the drinking side of the counter.

"Do a favour," he said, softly. "The new policeman has a load of work facing him, and will be busy all evening. Constable Irwin and I want to keep him quiet. Could you take over to Constable Clifford a bottle of Scotch?"

"Too right," assented 'Un. "Will one bottle be enough to rock him to sleep?"

"Ought to. I don't think he's a drinking man," Bony said, calmly.

'Un slid under the drop-flap and spoke to Ramsay, who was still on deck, owing likely enough to the presence of his wife, who was assisting him. Ted Ramsay nodded, and 'Un gathered the Scotch and disappeared through the house entrance. The single oil-lamp suspended from the blackened match-boarded ceiling shed its yellow light upon eight of nine men in the bar proper, and three who were drinking at the narrow side-counter serving the parlour. One of these was the postal inspector.

"Hallo, Mr Bonaparte! Have one with me?"

Turning, Bony looked upon the countenance of Dave Bundred.

"Thanks. Beer, please."

Bundred caught the eye of Mrs Ramsay, and she came forward, smiled at Bony, ignored the postmaster and poured the drinks. Having given the customary salutation, Bony asked his fellow toper how his day had gone.

"Not so bad," said Bundred, swallowing his rum. "Department Inspector on the job. Usual routine check. Be here two days."

"Get along all right?"

"Oh yes. Linton isn't a bad sort. Done me a good turn more'n once. Doesn't nose around the office. What kind of a trip did you have?"

Bony lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Not too good," he admitted ruefully. "Seems that Stenhouse was supposed to be down south, and we're unable to find out why he was dead up north of Agar's. I called on Mr and Mrs Wallace and gave them the mail. Very nice people. Same again?"

"Yes, I'll be in it. I like old Wallace. Son's a bit surly. Bitter, that's what Jack Wallace is. Sister, you know, married Stenhouse."

"So I understand. Gave her a bad time, I hear."

"Hell. Funny, isn't it, how one side will give the other plain hell. My missus gives me hell. Stenhouse never had cause to bash his wife. I have cause to bash mine . . . but I don't. Could never understand what came over him. Happy enough when they married. D'you know what? Marriage is the greatest curse that ever hit the human race. Yes, please, Ted. Fill 'em up. As I was saying, marriage is death and damnation. If two parties can't get along, why can't they say so to a Justice of the Peace and get a clearance? Too much interference with liberty, Inspector, that's what. No divorce, yells the parson. Maintenance, howls the State . . . or else." Dave revived. "To hell with the lot of 'em. Cheers, Inspector!"

Bony saw Irwin talking with the postal inspector in the lounge. 'Un reappeared and joined Bony in response to his nod. Bony called for drinks. It would require a bucket of beer to produce a squint, at the nobbier rate. 'Un decided to hasten the squint by the addition of a dash of gin in the beer. A week's rent had already passed across the counter.

"Talkin' about Stenhouse," remarked Bundred, blinking his red-rimmed eyes. " 'Member when he was married?"

"Too right!" answered 'Un, regarding the postmaster reminiscently. "You was best man, Dave, and at the end of the shivoo you was that drunk we parked you in the back of Stenhouse's car, and they didn't wake up to you being there until they was ten miles on the road to Darwin, where they was gonna spend the honeymoon."

"Yes, and what did Stenhouse do?" Dave said, a hint of a snarl in his reedy voice. "Dumped me outer the car and left me to walk back. The bride didn't want that. Said they oughta bring me back in the car, but Stenhouse he laughed and said, 'A dog always finds its way home!' That showed in Stenhouse what came out later. I never could understand why someone didn't shoot him years ago."

"Wouldn't have done you no good," said 'Un. "Anyhow, you got on all right with Stenhouse, didn't you?"

"Yes, after a fashion. Had to get along, what with me being the postmaster, and weather reporter, an' Justice of the Peace and all. Still, Stenhouse was a lousy type. I, for one, Inspector, hope you don't get the bloke what shot him."

"Any chance?" asked the yardman, hopefully.

"Pretty slim, I think," replied Bony, and pushed the empty glasses towards Mrs Ramsay. "No important clues yet. Might take a trip out to see Alverston, and call on the Breens on the way back."

"There's a turn-off at McDonald's Stand. Not much of a track." 'Un raised his glass, and Dave Bundred laughed at nothing and took his up from the counter.

"Could take Alverston's mail, if you like," Bony suggested.

"You could. The Breens', too, if you intend coming back that way," assented the postmaster.

"How do we arrange it if I leave early in the morning?" Bony said. "You won't be up early."

"Depends on what you call early. Get it from the wife. No, that won't do. Get it after chuck-out time. I'll give it out, and you can keep it in your room." Bundred winked. "Look after it, though, won't you? Registered stuff for the Breens."

"That'll be all right. Looks like my turn. Thank you, Mrs Ramsay."

The little bar was filling. Now and then Irwin's laughter dominated the raised voices. Bony caught a glimpse of the postal inspector, who was loosening up. A man started to sing, and was sternly told by several men to 'shut up'. Bony felt eyes directed to him, and recalled investigations when he had worked in the greater freedom of incognito.

For no reason, Bundred drifted away, and 'Un said:

"Decent sort of bloke, old Dave. Hangs on to his job. Even seen him so blind drunk he couldn't read a telegram but could telegraph it without a mistake when I read it out to him."

"And yet he was Stenhouse's best man," Bony remarked when apparently interested in his empty glass.

"Yes, that was seven years ago . . . might be eight almost. The Flying Padre came down from Wyndham. Slap-up do it was. Nice little bride, too. Pretty as a picture." The yardman sighed, and twirled the points of his moustache and straightened himself. "Dave and Stenhouse were fair cobbers then, even if Stenhouse did make him walk ten miles."

"Same again?"

"You bet. Thanks."

"By the way," Bony said, "how do you people get along for cash up here? No bank, is there?"

"Only at the post office. You short of cash? Ramsay'll cash your cheque. So will the storekeeper and the butcher. Nothing but cheques most of the time up here. A bloke comes in, cashes a small one with Ramsay, drinks her up, writes another. Quite easy."

"I'll see Ramsay in the morning. What's your opinion of Jack Wallace?"

"Not much," replied 'Un. "Too gruff. Stenhouse punching his sister about didn't make him that way. He was always like it. Had a go at Stenhouse, you know. Day of the funeral. Baled him up at the graveside with a revolver, but Silas Breen took it off him. Stenhouse was going to charge him, but Ezra quietened him down. Told Stenhouse that if he charged Jack Wallace he'd smash him. Stenhouse was a big fellow." 'Un laughed. "Ezra Breen would have pounded him to pulp with one hand. You seen Ezra?"

Bony shook his head. 'Un called for more drinks. He was now drinking gin, neat. The tip of his nose was scarlet. His washed-out grey eyes tended to concentrate on the nose-tip. The squint was coming, but he could still speak clearly.

"Ezra Breen went to school with Jack Wallace. Jack couldn't fight, but Ezra could fight for both. Still good pals. There's a whisper or two that young Wallace is chasin' Kimberley. You see Kim Breen?"

Bony nodded.

"Beautiful woman, sir," said 'Un. Turning to the bar, he kicked it, spat on the floor and yelled for more drinks. "Come on, Ted. Think 'cos a bloke's old and grey and done for he should perish of thirst?"

Across the bar, Irwin stood at the narrow counter to the lounge, an array of glasses ready to be filled. He winked at Bony, swung about to laugh at Linton and others behind him. The postmaster returned and 'Un yelled for a drink for him . . . rum. For Dave the squint had arrived. Someone began to sing, and this time no one tried to stop it. Others joined in, and the roof shivered and still no one objected. Over in the police station, Constable Clifford poured himself a conservative measure.

"The Breens should be here," Bony said, his voice raised to master the din. "They could buy the pub again."

'Un laughed. The postmaster tripped or something and held to Bony for support.

"More cake'n the King," he shouted. "Tons of it. Cattle . . . that's what it is. Cattle or sumpin. Cat . . . Cattle! Cattle! You ask 'Un."

"Now then, gents! What's it this time?" asked 'Un from beyond the counter. One minute before, Ramsay had been on his feet, serving drinks, talking. Now he was lying under the lounge counter, and laid out with his hands folded. His wife was setting up the drinks for Irwin and his pals, and she paused a moment to back-chat, her left foot on her husband's face. There was now no brake on the wheels of progress of which Bony had complained to Clifford.

The postmaster was becoming most affectionate, the squint pronounced. About their feet the floor was wet with the beer Bony had surreptitiously spilled from his glass. Men lurched against them, and Bundred profusely apologized.

" 'S'll right, Dave," shouted a man seeming four feet high and ten feet wide. "Have one with me. 'Night, Inspector. What's your swill?"

"Meet my frensh, Sid," mumbled Dave.

"Was just saying that the Breens ought to be here," Bony said, and Sid guffawed, flicking a pound note towards 'Un and hitching up his trousers.

"More cake'n the King," mumbled Dave. "Cart loads o' cake. Cattle . . . cattle me behind! You know wha'sh! I know where it comes from. You want t'know? I know. I'm'sh the postmaster, ain't I? Cat . . ."

Through the din and the smoke swept a shrill whistle, and standing just within the street entrance was Constable Clifford, in uniform.

"Time, gents!" shouted 'Un. "Come on now . . . time's up!"

Clifford disappeared. The inebriates proceeded to fall out of the bar on to the pitch-black veranda and down the pitch-black steps to the unmade roadway; Dave Bundred holding tightly to Bony, who had no intention of losing him.

"Gran' night," said Dave. "We on the right track home?"

"Yes, I think so," Bony assured him. "How do we get into your place?"

"Through ruddy door, course. Back door . . . roun' the back. No, not 'round the back. Wake missus. Lemme see." The postmaster struggled with a pocket, pressed a key into Bony's free hand. "Front door. Unlock her. Lamp on counter."

On arriving at the post office, Bony unlocked the door, struck a match and found the hurricane lantern. Dave clung to the counter and Bony closed the door. He squinted at Bony, drew himself up, passed through the raised drop-flap to the much larger section of the office with its mail-sorting benches, bag racks and telegraph instruments.

"All your'sh, Inspector," he whispered. "Help yourself. Don't take the clock. No good, won't go."

"You'll go, you dirty drunken beast," said the infuriated woman standing in the house doorway. "Go on, off to bed with you."

"My wife, Inspector."

"I have met Mrs Bundred," Bony said. "Now you toddle off to bed. Mrs Bundred will, I'm sure, let me have the mail for Alverston and the Breens."

Chapter Eighteen

Most Unethical

Constable Clifford lounged at the table in the police-station office, a cigarette in his mouth, an empty glass beside him, and the bottle sent over by Bony standing on a pile of papers. The tide had ebbed only an inch. Within the building it was very quiet; without, the silent night was disturbed by the raised voices of men. On Irwin coming in, the slightly envious Clifford asked:

"Bony still on his feet?"

"Too true. Took the postmaster home. Phew! That beer would make a cat sick."

"Better try the whisky."

"Thanks. What a man has to do for duty's sake! He's coming now."

They watched the doorway, saw Bony enter. He was carrying a postal mail-bag on his back. Permitting the bag to slip to the floor with a thud, he regarded each with twinkling eyes, sat down and poured himself a drink . . . of soda water.

"Pleasant evening?" he asked Irwin, mildly.

"Very. You have a good time?"

"In spots. What gives?"

"You told me to concentrate on Linton, and especially a lead connecting Bundred with Stenhouse," he said. "A good deal of old stuff comes into the picture again. Two years ago, a bag of registered mail matter was stolen between Agar's Lagoon and Broome. Checking showed it was put on an aircraft here, but the bag wasn't on the plane when it arrived at Broome. Stenhouse investigated, and Linton, whose headquarters are in Broome, flew out to take a hand. They never located that lost mail, and no article of it has subsequently

turned up, so that it can't be proved whether the bag was stolen, or what happened to it."

From Irwin, Bony transferred his gaze to Clifford.

"We investigated at the Broome end," Clifford said. "It was possible for that mail to have been stolen in transit from the post office to the aerodrome, or from the plane at several points at which it touched down between Agar's Lagoon and Broome. As Irwin said, the check points were at both aerodromes. Stenhouse was unable to discover anything at this end."

Irwin took up the story.

"According to Linton, Dave Bundred had on several occasions prior to the disappearance of that mail-bag been reprimanded for slight neglect of duty, due to Bundred being drunk and his wife having to deal with the mail. Linton insists that the lapses from compliance with regulations were not serious, but could have been taken advantage of by a clever thief to steal the bag of registered mail. He could find no dereliction of duty in connection with the actual loss of the bag."

"You state that Stenhouse worked with Linton on that investigation," Bony said. "Did you see his report to Inspector Walters, Clifford?"

"The report stated that Bundred was questioned, and that he gave all possible assistance. It also stated the length of time Bundred had been here, that his background was sound, that his character was good. A good character was also given to the man who contracts to carry mail and passengers between the airport and Agar's Lagoon."

"H'm! Anything more, Irwin?"

"Well, Linton says he's convinced, in view of Bundred's long service, that he's honest enough, and that only of late years has he grown careless. If it wasn't that Agar's post office would be difficult to re-staff, he would have recommended the transfer of Bundred to a southern office where he'd have less responsibility."

"I think a transfer is warranted," observed Bony. "I wonder if it would be possible to obtain quickly a list of the lost items?"

"I asked Linton that, and he said he could supply a copy of the list from his files at Broome."

"Good! When is Linton returning? Did he say?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Get a copy of that list . . . posted in a plain envelope."

Irwin said, "You have any luck?"

"As the children say, I'm getting warm. I've never failed to finalize an investigation, and I shall not fail to prove who killed Constable Stenhouse and Jacky Musgrave. And why? I shall succeed because I have no respect for rules and regulations, and, when engaged on a murder hunt, I have no scruples and no ethics."

"You're telling me," growled Irwin.

"I am reminding you," Bony said, blandly. "Tired yet of gallivanting over the scenery with me, Irwin?"

"No, I'm liking it."

"Then we'll be off again in the morning as soon as you are ready. We'll need plenty of spare supplies, for we have to go on walkabout like Pluto's Mob. Where are you sleeping, Clifford?"

"Here at the station. In the room Stenhouse occupied."

"Then you can take charge of this bag of mail and return it to the postmaster tomorrow. Tell him I had to alter my plans and will not be able to deliver it. You should see that my receipt for the registered stuff is cancelled."

Bony up-ended the bag and emptied the contents on the table. He proceeded to sort it, watched by the now silent men, going through the letters and making two piles of them, then dealing with the packages and parcels. He replaced everything in the bag with the exception of one parcel addressed to Ezra Breen.

"I was happy to learn this evening that many of the younger folk in this great North-West are seeking to elevate their minds by the study of serious literature. In my youth we

wasted vital time reading novels and comics." Bony smiled, and Clifford really did look like the child waiting for the rabbit to emerge from a hat. "Ezra Breen, for one, expends the midnight oil gathering knowledge from medical and anthropological text-books, that he might improve the quality of the beef they send to Wyndham."

"What are you doing?" sharply demanded Irwin.

"Just having a peep into Ezra's latest acquisition."

"But you can't do that, Bony. You can't open other people's mailed parcels. It's registered, too."

Busy with string knots, Bony looked up from his task.

"But I'm not doing any harm, Irwin," he said, disarmingly. "Just want to take a look. Books have always been a weakness with me . . . especially good books. I like the scent of new books, and the feel of fine-quality paper. Just a little peep, and then I'll remake the parcel and no one will ever know."

"It's against regulations," Irwin objected. "If you must examine the contents of that parcel, then the addressee should be present, or we should obtain permission from the PMG."

"Useless . . . both proposals. The addressee would rightfully decline to have his parcel opened by others in his presence, or by himself in the presence of others."

The string was untied, and, deliberately provocative, Bony studiously examined the gummed address label bearing the printed information that the parcel had been dispatched by V. Solly, Bookseller, Peppermint Grove, WA. Despite his protest, Irwin's expression was of intense expectancy. Carefully unfolding the brown wrapping paper, Bony disclosed a new book having dark blue covers and in gilt lettering the title.

"H'm!" murmured Bony. "Useful knowledge on spraying heifers. *Lawton's Gynaecology,* Volume one, Tenth Edition. Brand-new, too. I like the colour of the covers."

Slowly he raised the cover and gently lifted the first few pages. There was disclosed a ragged hole gouged into the centre, and in the hole was a wad of bank-notes. Irwin's breath hissed between his teeth, and Clifford exclaimed:

"What the hell!"

Bony proceeded to count the money with irritating deliberation, and with exasperating silence. Then, with continued deliberation, he replaced the notes, closed the book, and read and re-read the title, as though the damned title would supply the answers to questions seething in the minds of those two policemen.

Chapter Nineteen

Sleuths on the Wing

Since leaving Agar's Lagoon, Bony had been strangely silent, and now he stood surveying Black Range, hands in pockets and shoulders relaxed. Irwin was grilling chops on the blade of the shovel, content with his role, and lazily speculative concerning Bony's next move.

Calling his two trackers from the little fire they had made for themselves, he served them with slabs of bread and underdone chops, and sent them back. Then he announced that lunch was ready, and Bony came to sit beside the canvas-cum-tablecloth, still thoughtful. Not until they had eaten did he speak of this new mission.

"I want you to pay a call on Alverston," he said. "We can exclude him from this case, and therefore use him as we cannot use the Wallaces, the Breens and the Bundreds. When do you think you could reach Alverston's homestead?"

"About four o'clock."

"Then ask Alverston to contact your sergeant on his transceiver and get him to ascertain where Jasper and Ezra Breen are now. They should be approaching Wyndham by this time, if not already there. I want to know if those two Breens are still with the cattle, or if only one is, or if Silas has joined the team. Remembering that the air is free, do you think you could obtain that information without other people knowing it?"

Irwin chuckled.

"Sergeant Booker was an Intelligence bloke during the war, being a cypher expert, and we've been trying to evolve a language cypher instead of one with letters or figures. You know, a sort of jive. Booker got the idea from his school days

when the kids added to words, or inserted into the middle of them a sound like 'arp'. Harpave arpa charpop?"

"And that, translated?"

" 'Have a chop?' I could have contacted the sergeant from Agar's."

"Only transceiver there is that at the post office. Too close to home. Well, then, you raise Booker and obtain that information. Stay the night at Alverston's homestead and return here tomorrow. By the way, you may learn something useful from Alverston—behaviour of his blacks, suspected cattle-duffing, something which might link the Wallaces to Stenhouse, or to the Breens."

"All right! What about you?"

"I am going to poke about the country."

"You'll need to look both ways at once. Better take one of the trackers with you."

"Which is the more reliable?"

Irwin named Charlie, explaining that this was Charlie's country, and that Larry came from the coast. Bony objected to Charlie on the ground that he would have too many tribal relations working for both the Breens and the Wallaces, and decided he would talk to Larry.

"You see, Irwin, the bits and pieces we've collected, added to the geographical points at which the bodies were found, strongly indicate the Wallaces and the Breens, either separately or in collusion. We must find where these murders took place, and I think the scene of the double murder is near where Stenhouse was found or near where we found Jacky Musgrave. Have you any theory to account for those four hundred and fifteen pounds being posted to Ezra Breen inside a book?"

"It might be that the Breens got on to payable gold and are secretly exporting it," replied Irwin. "Silas mightn't have gone off on a croc shoot at what Kimberley called the Swamp. He might have gone farther west to a coastal inlet to meet Chinese or Indonesian smugglers. Looks like that's what Stenhouse was on to."

"I see a grave defect in your theory," Bony argued. "The smugglers would pay cash on delivery for gold taken out by Silas. Why make payment through a bookseller? I'll put another question. Why gouge a hole in a perfectly good book in which to send Ezra a packet of treasury notes? The sender could have posted the money in a stout registered envelope. He could have placed the notes individually between the pages of the book if an ordinary envelope could not be used. There seems little doubt that the Breens are sending to that bookseller something of value to the jeweller partner. It could be gold melted to slugs, and sent down in books once a fortnight, and payment remitted monthly in a similar receptacle."

"If gold, why do that?" Irwin objected. "Gold sent to a jeweller wouldn't bring more than the storekeeper at Agar's would pay for it. Least, I don't think so."

"Doubtless you're right. Let's tackle the trackers."

They crossed to the aborigines and Irwin spoke to them, saying he would like Charlie to go with him and Larry with Bony, and that Bony was his very good friend and brother by initiation as a police-feller. There was no hint of a command, and first one and then the other assented. It was evident that both knew the Musgrave blacks were now in this country, for they were decidedly uneasy. Bony talked to Larry, telling him how valuable he was to the police and that together they would be safe enough, and he emphasized the fact that Pluto's Mob were interested only in the fate of Jacky Musgrave.

On Irwin's departing, leaving tucker sufficient for two days and a blanket apiece, Bony invited Larry to conference. To Larry this was foreign country, and he was now cut off from the white man with whom he had been closely associated for years, and from his own racial companion, and it was essential that he be brought to complete confidence in Bony and himself.

They squatted on a sandy patch, and Bony drew a map showing the Wyndham track skirting Black Range, the place where Stenhouse was found, and the position of the Wallace homestead. Then he led Larry to show the area of country

covered by Charlie and himself in their search for clues. With patience and the expenditure of time, the tracker was presented with several pictures, any one of which could cover the actual scene of the murders. Bony stressed the certainty that the crimes had been committed by a white man assisted by aboriginal stockmen.

Previously, Larry had been sent out to find suspicious tracks, or those of the jeep, and now understanding that all such clues had been obliterated, his mind would seek evidence of the work of obliteration.

Bony chose to search the country between the road and Black Range, and, if not successful, to extend the search across Black Range to Black Well.

The hours passed and miles were covered, and when the sun was westering, and they were deep in the shadow of Black Range, Larry signalled a halt and stood like a colonial soldier at a coronation ceremony. Beside him Bony listened. There was no wind. The scrub trees drowsed in the warm air of lovely evening. All that could be heard was a crow cawing.

Two men had been killed and blood had been shed, and where blood is shed there gather the birds. As a dog will bark joyfully, angrily, mournfully, expectantly, so do the crows betray a mood to those able to hear, and the crow they now heard was angry. The note of anger was not defiant. The bird was not confronted by an enemy or robbed of a morsel by another crow. It was angered by something not understood.

Only men such as these two would have detected the distant bird's mood, and, deciding to investigate, they followed the Range southward to a small forest of trees growing in a dell. At their approach several crows flew from the trees, now cawing with unmistakable anger occasioned by the intrusion.

Larry again listened intently, and his gaze was everywhere. There seemed to be nothing unusual about this bush scene duplicated by a million like it. Larry's wide nostrils were quivering, and Bony waited, recognizing his own inferiority to this semi-wild aborigine.

"Jeep feller him bin here," Larry said, as though his big flat nose registered the fumes of petrol. "That crow feller him bin kickup hell that jeep feller no leave-um tucker."

"Have a look-see," Bony ordered.

They found a low mound covered with stones and leaves, and on a stick being thrust into it and the earth levered upward, it was discovered that the mound was of fire ashes. The ashes had been carefully covered, but the crows knew about it, for the prints of their feet proved that. They also knew of something beneath leaves which had 'drifted' into spaces between stones, and Bony proceeded to dig with his hands, Larry assisting him.

They dug down a little more than a foot and lifted from the shallow grave the carcass of a black goat whose throat had been cut. The animal had been dead about a week. It had not been killed for meat, for the only injury to the carcass, other than the severed throat, was the removal of a strip of hide along its back.

The tracker was not liking this place, and, to maintain his confidence in human agency, Bony asked him how he knew the jeep had been here.

"Smellum tyres," replied Larry.

"Findum tracks," Bony said, and leaving the carcass they proceeded to prospect the ground about . . . until Bony came across the oil patch covered expertly with dry earth and leaves. This last discovery gave Larry great satisfaction, and Bony made a point of congratulating him on his bushcraft . . . which included his remarkable sense of smell.

However, the story was not yet told, the picture not complete. That the dead policeman's jeep had been here was not proven, but that a car or truck had been parked amid these trees was certain, and that a goat had had its throat cut for its blood was permissible assumption. Bony was immensely gratified . . . and tired.

There yet being an hour of daylight, they circled the dell in the hunt for tracks, then walked in a greater circle, and when

on the point of camping for the night, they cut the tracks of men making to cross the Range. He and Larry agreed that the number of the party was five. They were all stockmen, for all wore riding boots, and, from the manner of their stride, one was a white man and four were aborigines. The reading was a commendable feat, the five men having walked in single file, the white man leading.

"We'll camp before it grows dark," Bony said, and they built a fire which gave less smoke than a cigarette, made tea and ate, then smothered the fire and sought a place to sleep at the base of a great boulder providing a roof against the dew.

The night was long and, towards dawn, made cold by a wind from the south. Larry, wearing his military overcoat and the blanket wrapped over that, managed to sleep, fitfully and uneasily. Bony, who had only a blanket for coverage, fared worse, and he sat with his back to the rock and smoked cigarettes until his tongue was a chip.

Having eaten and packed their scanty equipment, they followed the tracks made by the five men, walking in single file, and Larry quite happy that with Bony behind him he was protected from attack, for the wild man loves to set an ambush and permit the quarry to pass through it before throwing his long spear.

Where a naked shoulder of the Range rested on a wide ledge of grey sand, Larry halted. The shoulder extended steeply towards the sky, dull red and smooth save for small patches of rock loosened by the weather. They had reached the ledge by one of three small gullies, and it was clear that the party whose footsteps they were following had taken one of the other gullies when making their descent to the camp where the goat had had its throat cut.

Having come down from the top of the Range, the party had halted on this sandy ledge, and no attempt had been made to smother the evidence that here the men had rested. They had been carrying a burden on two poles, stretcher fashion. The goats had been led by a man who followed the stretcher.

Had his mind not been so crowded, Bony would have been enthralled by the astonishing colours of the unclothed shoulders partially concealed by nets of spinifex. They were now two thousand feet or more above Dead Goat Camp, and the higher summits of the Range appeared to be yet another thousand feet. There were no signs of cattle, and very few of kangaroos. Bird life, excepting the omnipresent eagles, was entirely absent.

When the sun said it was half past ten, Bony decided to halt at the foot of a precipitous cliff of purple ironstone and watch the eagles, for the eagles were now telling the story.

Under normal circumstances, eagles work in their individual areas, singly or in pairs when nesting, and the eagles now seen by the shrewd Larry and the no less perspicacious Bony were drawn into the wide limits of a circle immediately westward. The height maintained by the birds told of their interest in something on the ground . . . and their suspicion of it.

There was no necessity for Bony to urge Larry to still greater caution when they proceeded.

They crossed the bare back of the Range between two mighty red-gold crowns of pillared rock, and, with many halts for Larry to probe ahead, they began the westward descent.

Having crept about the base of a shoulder pimpled by Devil's Marbles, poised to tempt any boy to push them to flight like falling meteors, they came to a cut through the back of a great hump. The cut was level, a hundred yards long, ten feet in width all the way from the floor to the top at seven to eight hundred feet. The light was green, the translucent green of the jungle floor.

The floor was sandy. It was trampled by men's boots, and when Larry saw the imprints of naked feet, he stopped, pointing and saying nothing. Bony smiled, nodded forward, and Larry went on. And at the far end of the gigantic sword-cut, he halted.

"They got-um Jacky Musgrave," he whispered. "They find-um who kill Jacky Musgrave."

Bony edged round the left-hand corner of the cut. A shallow depression of several acres in extent was walled on three sides by iron slopes and on the fourth by space in which lay the Breens' valley. In the centre of the shallow bowl was a platform on poles twelve feet high. Something was lying on the platform, and now and then the wind fluttered the torn cloth of a military greatcoat similar to that worn by Larry.

Chapter Twenty

Different Methods, Same Results

A CROW WAS PERCHED at one corner of the ramshackle platform, only its head moving. Several others were strutting on the ground, not yet daring to intrude beneath the platform. High in the sky sailed the eagles, watchful, cautious, all-seeing. The crows indicated that no human being was near; the eagles were still suspicious.

With a motion of his hand, Bony ordered Larry to follow, and together they approached the platform, keeping to windward. All about it were the imprints of naked feet, and beneath it a disturbed pavement of flat stones.

Down through the ages man has murdered man, and human society from cave dwellers to city inhabitants has banded together in execration of the crime. Modern society fights a killer with scientific aids in the hands of experts, and primitive men still depend on natural phenomena and methods of detection which appear ridiculously chancy. Primitive men must often err, resulting in the innocent being executed; but, strangely enough, the complex machinery of civilized justice, assisted by science, has also been known to execute a man for a crime he did not commit.

When the Musgrave aborigines heard about Jacky Musgrave being murdered and his body pushed into the carcass of a horse, they proceeded to prove who killed him in accordance with rules and rites which, to them, had been proved efficacious for thousands of years.

Having located the dead horse, they had brought the body to this place where they built the rickety platform. They stripped the body of clothes and, placing it on the platform, employed the clothes instead of brushwood to keep the birds from it.

Decomposition being advanced, they had not long to wait to learn who was the killer. Under the platform they built a pavement of flat stones, and on each stone was marked the name of a man who could have killed Jacky Musgrave.

Until the murderer was executed the spirit of the dead man would know no rest within the peace of a boulder, a tree, or a hill built by termites, and it would hover about the body it had inhabited, and blow the drops of grease falling from it to the stone marked with the name of the murderer. Fantastic—or was it?

The south wind had 'pushed' the grease-drops to fall on two stones, and, these having been removed from the pavement, the magic man had crouched over them and proclaimed the names they bore.

Looking upon those two stones, Bony was both pensive and apprehensive. He could not read the marks placed on them by the magic man of the Musgrave tribe, and therefore was unable to take any measures to warn the two objects of their justice. He was at one with the Privy Council and the Supreme Court in that this method of proving who committed a murder is apt to bring about a miscarriage of justice, but he was one up on all learned judges in knowledge of the inevitability of the violent death of the two men whose names were on those stones.

"Which feller these stones say kill Jacky Musgrave?" he asked, and Larry looked everywhere but at the stones and shook his head, evincing dislike of the entire set-up. Superficially, it was a foolish question, for Larry wouldn't know, and it was asked to put the tracker at ease. Bony removed his attention from the stones to the rock cliffs and steep slopes and could see no signs of human watchers. Now that the spirit of Jacky Musgrave had dropped his grease on the stones of his killers, Bony inclined to the belief that the Musgrave men would no longer have any interest in his body.

"You pick-up tracks white feller and goat," he requested Larry, and, with undisguised relief, the aborigine trotted away

to encircle the platform and then wave Bony forward to the rim of the hollow.

Naked feet had left a trail winding downward and Larry pointed out the goat's tracks where that animal had rebelliously pulled to one side. From this point could be seen the Nine Mile Yards down on the comparative plain, and the windmill above Black Well immediately beneath them.

The trail, clear enough for a semi-blind man to follow, skirted the shoulder and twisted across steep watercourses.

To the north was Black Well and beyond it the gutter where lay the dead horse. The blacks had come from that point carrying the body of Jacky Musgrave to the natural bowl high in the Range where they thought they would be undisturbed. On descending again to the plain, they had gone southward keeping in extended order of march.

To the south was situated the homestead owned by the Breens, in direct line distant some ten miles. The Musgrave men might have gone southward intending to visit that homestead and extract from it one or both killers of Jacky in accordance with the names on those two significant stones. That would mean trouble to be met only by Kimberley Breen with the problematical assistance of her stockmen under Patrick O'Grady.

There was still the scene of the murder of Constable Stenhouse and Jacky Musgrave to be located, and only the successful back-tracking of that white man and the four booted aborigines would lead to it.

It was now after three o'clock, and Bony asked Larry to make a smokeless fire and boil water for a brew of tea while he scouted. He found the tracks of the white man and the blacks carrying what he was convinced was the dead policeman.

Refreshed by the hastily eaten meal, Bony and Larry backtracked the five men, walking with extreme circumspection. They had proceeded barely a mile when the trail turned in to the Range where huge slabs of red rock had crashed to the

plain, and on coming to these little mountains they 'edged' their way round, making sure of unobserved movement before leaving the shelter they provided. Thus, eventually, they came to an open space where was a grass-roofed shed similar to that beside Black Well.

A shaft was sunk near by, but not for water. There was a windlass over it, and the bucket attached to the wire rope had been used to bring mullock to the surface, whitish in colour and flaky with gypsum. A heap of mullock containing many square yards proved that the shaft was very deep or drives from it were long. And about the shaft were the imprints of naked feet and the circular holes made by the butt-ends of spears.

They lowered the bucket and Bony estimated the depth to be about forty feet. He examined the mullock, taking up handfuls for close inspection, and could see no trace of gold, which, however, did not prove there was none.

"Stay here, Larry," he said, and proceeded to circle the shaft. On rejoining Larry, he sat on the mullock heap rolling a cigarette, now confident that the body of Stenhouse had been carried away from this place.

He re-examined the site of the fire used for cooking, and turned over the little pile of empty food tins, deciding that the last had been tossed there less than a month before.

Although this mine shaft was on Breens' country it did not follow that the Breens had sunk it, for any man having paid for a Miner's Right may sink a shaft where he will. Its nearness to the homestead almost certainly proved that the Breens knew of the mining being conducted there. To the Breens, therefore, must he apply for further information.

"Musgrave fellers they clear away to Breens' homestead," he told Larry, who nodded instant agreement. "You go back over Range find-um Constable Irwin and Charlie camped near where we find-um Constable Stenhouse?"

With a short laugh Larry assented, and an expression of relief shone for an instant in his eyes. Bony tore a page from a

notebook and wrote Irwin that he was going to Breens' homestead and to come there as quickly as possible. He watched Larry stow the note in the pocket of his greatcoat, and would have suggested that, minus the coat and the boots, travelling would be much easier, had he not been aware of Larry's enormous pride in that uniform.

Larry glanced at the sun, laughed, said he would make it all right, and walked northward, leaving Bony seated on the mullock heap and rolling another cigarette. It was now four o'clock, and it would occupy three hours walking across country to the homestead, which he hoped to reach before dark. Abandoning his equipment, he began the journey.

Half an hour later, he was certain that the wild men had headed for the homestead, intent on ferreting out the men whose marks were on those stones, and equally certain that, as his own mark could not be on either stone, he would be ignored by them unless he interfered.

He came to the road from the cattle yards to the homestead, when the sun was westering and when the birds were flying to and from hidden waters, and he followed the track over the interminable 'bumps' and down and across the endless gullies separating them. Unaccustomed to such exertion, made soft by car and aircraft, he was exceedingly tired, and on arriving at every ridge looked expectantly to see the homestead.

From the summit of one such ridge he saw between it and the next a wide flat covered with ripe sugar grass and pocked with red termite hills. It was a full mile to the next ridge, and he was giving himself a spell when he saw a horseman top it and come galloping down to the flat.

Bony hastened along the track on which were still the imprints of Irwin's truck tyres. The horseman was riding hard. He was crouched low to the animal's withers, and presently it could be seen that he was an aborigine. Distance dwindled, dwindled, till Bony ultimately could see the whites of his eyes and white teeth bared in a fixed grin.

The sunlight gilded the spear as it gilds the thread of a spider's web. The horse faltered. The rider shouted, lifted it on. Behind him appeared a black figure, which froze to immobility for a split second, and then appeared to bow as the spear was launched from the throwing-stick.

Bony stepped into the concealment of the tall grass. He saw the horse again, much nearer. It was foundering, and its rider was shouting frenziedly and frantically trying to lift it up and on. The sunlight made of the spear protruding from its ribs a shimmering bar of gold.

Neighing shrilly, despairingly, it halted, sank to its knees and fell forward. The rider sprang from the saddle and came on running . . . and behind him some twenty naked wild men appeared from the grass and gave chase.

Bony sank into cover, instinctively, overawed by this exhibition of primitive justice, which nothing could divert from its unerring course. The horseman raced past him even as he was about to lead up and confront the pursuers with his automatic pistol, and was gone even as he realized the deadly peril with which he would be confronted had he done so. The fleeing man was the Breens' boss stockman, absurdly named Patrick O'Grady, and the men who appeared to Bony beyond the screen of tall grass were short and lithe, their hair plaited with human grease and skewered with human bones. Their beards were stiff and their teeth were bared, and the muscles of their naked thighs rippled. They passed like wraiths of black smoke, without apparent effort, without apparent limit of endurance.

Patrick O'Grady was handicapped with boots and trousers, a heavy shirt, and soft living. He was just a fat old rabbit being hunted by lean and starving dingoes.

The hunters passed, leaving with Bony the impression of confidence incarnate. He stepped on to the track, and looked back. He saw Patrick O'Grady labouring up the rise to the ridge, watched him disappear beyond it, watched the dark forms 'flow' after him, the sunlight gleaming upon their bodies and their spears as they, too, topped the ridge.

Chapter Twenty-one

Frightened People

Believing that all the Musgrave aborigines who had left their territory to investigate the death of Jacky were in that party which had ambushed the boss stockman, Bony doubted the soundness of his reasoning when, on walking another mile, he saw the imprints of naked feet.

He recalled that on first sighting Patrick O'Grady, the boss stockman was beyond the wild men hidden in the tall grass. O'Grady did not then know they were there, and yet was riding hard as though himself ridden by fear. Now it was plain that O'Grady had passed through one ambush only to fall victim to the second, and that between Bony and the homestead was the first ambush.

He plodded along the twisting track, head up, although his shoulders ached and his thigh muscles were hot wires. He was still confident of being of no concern to the wild men, whose single-track minds were now directed to those they thought had killed their relative. That the boss stockman was one of two men accused by the fall of human grease, and that by now he was dead, Bony was certain. The other had yet to meet his fate, and everything pointed to the belief of the wild men that this other man was at the Breens' homestead.

The sun was atop of Black Range. Two turkeys sailed gracefully to land beyond a patch of grass, and, abruptly changing their intention, they flap-flapped upward and away. Four kangaroos loped across the track much too hurriedly for normal progress to and from water. And in addition to these signs the hair at the back of Bony's head seemed to prickle his scalp, and there was a cold itch between his shoulders as though his very flesh shrieked warning of silent spears in flight.

The track led to the edge of a breakaway to give view of the homestead, winding downward to skirt the low cliff and crossing over level ground to pass round the detached kitchen.

Bony thought the wild men had taken full possession, then quickly realized that the small crowd of aborigines about the kitchen were the station blacks. As he passed by, others appeared from inside the building, and yet more were sitting under the veranda roof of the main house. The camp beside the creek was deserted.

Kimberley Breen appeared at the front door. She was wearing stockman's clothes and a heavy revolver was strapped close to her hip. The evening colours played about her glorious hair as they play at sundown on the feathers of the parakeets, and Bony squared his shoulders and straightened his back.

"I'm bothering you again, Miss Breen!"

"Inspector Bonaparte!" Her voice was low, cool. There was no hint of panic when she added, "I'm glad you've come. We're expecting trouble. Your truck broken down?"

"No. I'm on foot . . . you mentioned trouble!"

Her steady grey eyes examined him, his unshaven face, his dusty clothes, the significant sag of the right-hand pocket.

"Come on in and eat."

He followed her into the house. She shouted to her lubras and they scurried away. She showed him where to wash, and when he entered the living-room, she was pouring tea into one of her valuable cups set beside the meal waiting for him. Opposite him sat Jack Wallace.

Bony calmly met the slate-grey eyes and nodded nonchalantly. He said nothing, waited for Wallace to open up if he cared to. Kimberley said:

"Our abos are terrified, Mr Bonaparte. They say the desert blacks have come for the killer of Jacky Musgrave. I don't understand it, for I'm sure none of our people killed Jacky Musgrave."

"They are quite unpredictable, the wild blacks," Bony sidestepped, and attacked cold beef the like of which is never

purchased at a butcher's shop. "I saw their tracks the other day."

"Where?" asked Wallace, softly and with marked restraint.

"On the Range." To Kimberley, Bony said, "All your brothers still away?"

"Yes. Jasper and Ezra won't be back for several days. Silas will be home any time. I wish Silas would come. You see, our boss stockman has cleared out, and all the others are jittery."

"D'you know why your boss stockman cleared out?"

"No idea. He came home about two o'clock. Put his horse in the yards and shifted his gear to another horse. The others rushed over here saying Pluto's Mob were coming, and now they won't camp in their humpies and want to stay in the kitchen, even in the house. They're all scared stiff."

"H'm! How long have you been here, Mr Wallace?"

"Some time," replied Wallace.

"How long?"

"Early this afternoon, if you must know."

Kimberley frowned. The delightfully soft lines of her mouth and chin vanished and the ruggedness of the mountains took over. A lubra entered carrying a tray on which was an apple pie and a jug of custard. Kimberley rose and switched on the lamp. The lubra removed Bony's plate and set the sweet before him. He waited until she had gone. When he spoke, the voice was cold:

"Cooperation at this time, Mr Wallace, would be diplomatic."

"Course it would," flashed Kimberley. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothin' wrong with me, Kim," replied Wallace, standing. "I'll be starting for home."

"But you said you'd be staying the night because of the blacks being jittery," Kimberley expostulated.

"Better," Bony added. "An hour ago I saw Patrick O'Grady riding hard for the Nine Mile Yards. Then he was off his horse and running . . . with about twenty wild men after him.

They had speared the horse. I saw it done. I didn't see Patrick speared, but I've no doubt he was."

Kimberley shook her head as though her hair was too tight against her temples. The light made it gleam like fine copper wire, and her eyes were apprehensive although her voice remained calm.

"How far from here was that, Inspector?"

"Two miles perhaps. O'Grady ran over a ridge to the north of me. The wild men were running across that ridge when last I saw them. They would either kill him running or catch him for questioning . . . first. The former, I think."

"Why question him?" asked Wallace, thickly.

"On what he knew of the death of Jacky Musgrave. They found Jacky, you know."

"Where?" The dual question was like a bullet.

"In the skeleton of a dead horse."

Wallace sat again.

"You been busy, haven't you?"

Bony nodded, not looking up from rolling a cigarette. Kimberley repeated the question she had asked with Wallace.

"Near Black Well, Miss Breen. Someone must have told the Musgrave blacks where to look, but whoever he was he didn't know or didn't tell who killed Jacky Musgrave. The wild men took the body up into the Range, put it on a high staging and watched the grease fall on the stones beneath. Each stone represented a man suspected of committing the murder, and the grease fell on two stones . . . telling that the men who murdered Stenhouse also killed his tracker."

"Men!" echoed Wallace. "Two men!"

"Two men, Mr Wallace. They have executed their justice on one of the two men . . . Patrick O'Grady. They will now be intent on the other."

"But, Inspector, we know these blacks and their ways, but we can't agree that grease-drops on stones prove who did a murder," objected Kimberley.

"Officially, Miss Breen, I am bound to support your view of wild men's justice. I merely outlined what has happened to Jacky Musgrave's body and to your boss stockman. We must recognize that the wild men became convinced that O'Grady was one of two men involved in the murder of their fellow; that they didn't kill his horse and kill him for the mere thrill of the chase. That O'Grady bolted indicates a guilty conscience, don't you think?"

"Yes, it does. I'd better have all our abos in here tonight."

"And I must be off," Wallace added.

"It will be dark in half an hour," Bony pointed out. "How are you travelling?"

"Utility. Don't worry about me."

"Might be as well to stay till morning."

"Yes, you'd better stay, Jack," added Kimberley.

Wallace stood, his mouth taut, but indecision in his flat grey eyes.

"I'd better get along home," he persisted as though to convince himself. "The old people'll worry if I don't. You'll be all right with the Inspector, Kim."

He moved to the door, looked back, shrugged at what he saw in Kimberley's eyes, and went out. They heard his engine roar to life, and they sat on and listened till the noise surrendered to the claws of approaching night.

"Idiot," Kimberley said. "He's gone towards Nine Mile Yards, and the wild men are between here and the Nine Mile Yards, you said."

"Yes, in two parties," Bony agreed. "Now let us look to ourselves. I suggest that the women and children be brought into the house, and that the men shut themselves into the kitchen. There are heavy shutters to all the windows . . . they could be closed?"

"Yes, I think so. They haven't been moved for years. They haven't had to be . . . not in my lifetime."

At the house end of the covered way to the kitchen, Kimberley clapped her hands. Black humanity poured from the kitchen, flowed towards them, and Kimberley shouted in

their own dialect. Immediately she was understood, women and men shouted at each other. The women came across: old beldames, stout lubras, and slim young girls; youths and children of all ages; and Kimberley shepherded them into her house, where but a selected few had ever before been permitted in domestic service.

Bony crossed to the men gathered about the kitchen. There were now thirty-seven men and eight youths who had been initiated into manhood. He herded them into the kitchen and gave orders to close the heavy shutters to protect the two large windows.

The younger men understood English, and Bony chose a man whose face bore the cicatrice of full initiation. He asked pleasantly:

"What's your name?"

"Blinker."

"Then you come with me, Blinker, and loose all the dogs. You will be all right . . . with me."

Bony produced his pistol and Blinker was instantly assured. Together they walked into the gathering gloom, down to the creek, and loosed all the blacks' mangy dogs, and, proceeding to the sheds, loosed from their kennels half a dozen Queensland heelers. Joying in their freedom, the dogs raced about the homestead, engaged in a general fight, and were left to give warning of marauders.

That the wild men would actually attack the homestead was doubtful, for even those deep in the great southern desert have learned to respect the machinery of white man's law.

Entering the kitchen with Blinker, Bony paused to survey this gathering of aborigines whose lifelong association with white folk had tended to eliminate their bad qualities and improve their good ones. He smiled at them, frankly and laughingly, banishing the natural reserve of people unspoiled; for all these station aborigines are maintained by the homesteads in return for the labour given by the men, and thus have not been debased by money.

"Why you feller bin flighten, eh?" he asked them. "You no bin killum Jacky Musgrave, eh?"

"No fear," replied Blinker.

"You bin know who killum, eh?"

Bony searched their faces and, beyond faces, their hearts. All returned his gaze, and there was no shuffling of feet, no soft laughter to hide embarrassment. An old man who looked to be a hundred and probably was little beyond sixty, had his tongue pierced, proving him to be a magic man. Again Bony smiled at them, and nudged Blinker to follow him outside, there inviting the stockman to sit with him and rest his back against the kitchen wall.

"Why didn't you go to Wyndham with the cattle, Blinker?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Went as far as Camp Four with the cattle and then Jasper caught up with Stan and Frypan and old Stugger, an' they took over from us."

"Oh!" Bony purposely remained silent for a full minute before putting his next question, again casting the baited line.

"Didn't the boss stockman go with you to Camp Four?"

"No. He was out with Jasper when we left the Nine Mile Yards."

"And he wasn't with Jasper and the others when they got to Camp Four?"

"No. He had to stay home for a spell."

"H'm! Now he's cleared right away, they tell me. Never said where he was heading. What time of day was it that Jasper and Frypan and Stan and Stugger took over the cattle?"

"'Bout seven. Cattle was off night camp, any'ow. I was riding on a wing."

"And who told you to come home? Jasper?"

"No. Ezra did. Jasper took over the other wing."

Again Bony deliberately refrained from casting his line until a full minute had passed.

"Anyway, Blinker, you're better off home having a spell. Were you talking to Jasper or the others that morning they took over?"

Blinker laughed, softly, easily.

"No fear," he replied. "Ezra said go home; we come home."

"No argument, eh?" Bony chuckled. "Sure it was Jasper and not Silas you saw that morning?"

Blinker this time laughed heartily.

"Too right," he said. "Silas don't have black whiskers like Jasper."

"Good for you, Blinker. You go inside and tell that magic man I want him."

Chapter Twenty-two

The Machinery of Justice

No interior lighting escaped from the house or the kitchen when Kimberley Breen emerged from the front entrance and accepted the chair Bony placed for her on the veranda. The dogs were silent. At least two were close, for they could be heard scratching at their stick-fast fleas. At a distance a cow bellowed and from distance still greater came the answering bellow of a bull.

"I've put the women and children in two rooms," Kimberley said, and paused as though giving Bony the opportunity to comment. "And I've locked the store-room and the living-room."

"A wise precaution in view of the delicious cake you keep in that hat box under the sofa," Bony said. "I doubt that many southern women could bake a cake like that you gave Constable Irwin and me the other day."

"It's one of my mother's recipes. I've had plenty of time to learn cooking, you know. Jasper's better at it than I am. Several of the lubras are good cooks, too. I taught them. It wasn't easy. Do you know who killed Constable Stenhouse and his tracker?"

"Do you?"

The counter was played softly, robbing it of intended significance, and Bony waited for the next move.

"No, I don't. Wish I did. You coming here with Constable Irwin, and now coming alone, makes me fear . . . for us. You see, us Breens have always been a happy family. We've mostly been content living here among these mountains where we were born, and with aborigines who belong to us as much as the cattle on our country. And now Constable Stenhouse is

killed and you come, and the wild desert men are here, so it seems we're threatened with something we don't understand. Do you know why Constable Stenhouse was shot?"

"No, could you tell me?"

She did not speak again for a long time, and Bony made no effort to urge her. A meteor blazed like a white rocket and he saw her clearly. She was sitting stiffly upright, her hands resting on her knees, and was gazing directly to the front. When she did speak, her voice was low:

"I think I could, but I'm not sure. Bad begets bad. You can see that in cattle sometimes. You can see it in goats, too. Jasper used to tell me that doing something bad never stopped at that. If you do a bad thing, other bad things will come from it."

"Jasper. Is he your favourite brother?"

"They're all my favourites. I never knew Father, and only just remember Mother. Silas was father to me. Very stern and just. Jasper was . . . I don't know, but somehow Jasper seems to have been mother to me. I've always gone to Jasper to learn things. And Ezra . . . Ezra was always big brother to me. I used to fight him, and tease him, and be jealous of him, and he always tried to lord it over me, and make me do my lessons. I think they're the best men on earth."

The slight emphasis on the personal pronoun gave the impression that Bony might not be in agreement, and not wanting to fall into argument so loved by the Irish, he skipped that and came again to her reply to his last question.

"Why, d'you think, was Constable Stenhouse shot?"

"Because he was a bad man, bad all through. I only met his wife twice. The first time was when we were both little girls. The second time was when she was married to him, in at Agar's. Constable Stenhouse came here several times when on patrol. No one liked him. Jack Wallace . . . Jack loved his sister like my brothers love me."

"And is that why you think Constable Stenhouse was shot?"

"Yes."

Bony noted his own reaction to the soft yet decisive affirmative. This woman seated beside him in the dark, male-apparelled and armed, with frightened aborigines huddled in the house behind her, was an exceedingly interesting product of this land of fantasia. Discipline learned from one brother; the facts of life from another brother; elementary education gained through a third brother; and only twice in her life meeting the daughter of their nearest neighbour. Her voice was truly feminine, her enunciation surprisingly good under circumstances and the influence of three bachelor brothers, two of whom he had seen and would not have classified as good companions for a growing girl child.

"Why did Jack Wallace call on you this afternoon?" he asked.

"Came to see Silas. I told him about our abos and he said he'd stay till Silas came home."

"Why? Did he know that the desert blacks were here in the mountains?"

"He said he knew from his own abos there was trouble about."

"And he came over to be sure you were all right?"

"No. He came to see Silas."

Her voice was brittle, and Bony was warned and delayed his probing. The dogs remained quiescent, and the darkness continued to be disturbed by the processional meteors. Presently, he said:

"He did intend to stay, didn't he?"

"Yes. Said he ought to as the boys were away. I told him I could manage our abos, and the wild blacks, too, come to that." Kimberley laughed softly, and in its softness was iron. "Wants me to marry him. I'd sooner marry Bingil."

"The local magic man?"

"Yes. I've told Jack he hasn't a chance. I never told him why."

"He probably knows why, Miss Breen. Actually he was safer going home in his utility than standing by. The wild men are not after him."

"How d'you know?" she asked swiftly.

"I have talked to Bingil, the magic man. Someone reported the murder of Jacky Musgrave to those western blacks who relayed the news south to the Musgrave blacks. Old Bingil got hold of the broad details somehow from one of the men concerned and he sent an uniniated boy to the western blacks to tell them to smoke-signal the news south as he himself couldn't do it without discovery."

"I'll fix that old poisoner," Kimberley declared, adding, "in the morning."

"I've done it for you, Miss Breen. Leave well alone. Bingil acted in accordance with the alleged rights and privileges of the medicine-man. He knows who killed Jacky Musgrave, but neither you nor I or any living person would succeed in extracting the name from him. Remember, his loyalties reach far beyond his own tribal section. And so he reported the death of Jacky Musgrave and did not name the killer, as that would be the business of Jacky's relations to find out."

"Which they've done with their stones under the rotting body?"

"Yes . . . although you and I did agree that their methods are somewhat chancy. Had Jack Wallace's name been on one of their stones, they would have gone over the Range to find him. They would have gone last night."

"Then their second victim must be on this side . . . like O'Grady?"

"I believe so. And yet Jack Wallace could be concerned in some way. Over against the Range not far from Black Well there is a mine shaft. Wallace could have been connected with that shaft. What do you know about it?"

"I know nothing," she said, and his practised ear did not fail to note her alarm. "Prospectors are always sinking trial shafts. Gold mostly. They prospect the creeks, too, for tin and all sorts of things."

"Do they ever come here to buy rations?"

"No. The storekeepers tucker them. We couldn't. Enough bother getting our supplies over the Range as it is."

"You have never been there, never seen that shaft?"

"No."

It was her first lie. He sensed the strain, and her relief when he sheered off the shaft with his next query.

"That day you and Ezra met Sam Laidlaw, what cattle camp did you reach in the evening?"

"Camp Four. The next day Jasper came with Stugger and Frypan and Stan, and told Ezra to send us home."

"And that was the fourth day after leaving the Nine Mile Yards?"

"Yes. First night we camped at Claypan Creek. Next night at the Jump-up. And after that at Camp Four."

"I suppose you all worked on the big muster?"

"Of course. All hands have to do that."

"Where were the fats cut out from the main herd you mustered?"

"At the Nine Mile Yards. Not inside the yards, though. Out on the plain."

"Were all the hands at the cut-out, too?"

"No." Kimberley faltered. "No."

"Who wasn't at the cut-out?"

"Well, Jasper. . . . Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Jasper wasn't at the cut-out, and he wasn't with the cattle until he joined Ezra after you left Camp Four. The boss stockman wasn't there, either . . . at the cut-out. Where were Jasper and the boss stockman when the fats were being cut out from the herd?"

"Away mustering. We only wanted four hundred, and when we had them we started for Wyndham."

"You are quite sure it was Jasper who joined the cattle after Camp Four?"

"Of course I'm sure. You must expect me to know my own brother."

"Yes, naturally, Miss Kimberley. You were speaking to him, I suppose?"

"No. But I haven't to speak to him in order to know him."

"Obviously. Stupid of me. By the position of the Southern Cross it must be well after nine o'clock. Irwin should be here by midnight."

Neither spoke again for the period during which Bony made and smoked a cigarette, and it was he who broke the silence.

"You see, Miss Kimberley, Constable Stenhouse was found dead in his jeep on the far side of Black Range, and now we know that the body of his tracker was hidden beneath the carcass of a dead horse on this side of the Black Range. The wild men came north hunting for the men who killed Jacky Musgrave, and when they drew near this homestead the boss stockman rode away without any explanation. We wonder why, and we think he ran away because of a guilty conscience."

"If he killed Jacky Musgrave, who was with Constable Stenhouse, why ask me all these questions about Jasper and Ezra?"

"Merely to find out just where your boss stockman was at the time both Stenhouse and his tracker were shot to death."

"Then I think you should wait to ask your questions from the boys when they get home. Silas would know about him . . . Pat O'Grady. So would Jasper."

Bony sighed as though trying to be patient. Actually, he was now keenly aware that he wasn't dealing with an unsophisticated miss. Unknowledgeable in many things, this woman beside him could be an inarticulate iceberg or a flaring volcano, when threatened by anything affecting the Breens. That she knew nothing of the death of Jacky Musgrave, or of the death of Constable Stenhouse, he was morally certain, and almost certain that she believed Stenhouse had been murdered by Jack Wallace.

"I'm a little worried about your brothers," he said. "We think the desert blacks are near us to seize and kill the second

man they're after. I repeat: we think they are near. The dogs are quiet, aren't they? Suppose the wild men are not here. Suppose they are making their way northward. Suppose they believe their second victim is one of the men returning with Jasper and Ezra. Suppose they believe that the second man they want is Jasper or Ezra."

Kimberley was silent for minutes before saying grimly:

"If you're not trying to frighten me, then we must warn them. Pat O'Grady might have intended to do that when the wild blacks got him."

"He might have left with that intention." Bony's voice became faintly stern. "For whom would the boss stockman leave the safety of this homestead to warn of danger from the desert blacks?"

"I don't know. Stugger, it might be. Or Frypan," she replied, faintly.

"Or Jasper! No! No, it couldn't be Jasper. What are you saying? Jasper wouldn't have killed Jacky Musgrave. Pat O'Grady wouldn't have ridden north to warn Jasper. Or Ezra. Only to tell them that the wild blacks were after Stugger or Frypan or Stan, or Old Bugle who's doing the horse-tailing."

"Have you any idea where they will be camped tonight? They'll be on the way home now, won't they?"

"Yes. They should be camped at Salt Creek, thirty miles north of Camp Four. That's if the Meat Works took the cattle in without delay."

"You couldn't contact a homestead by transceiver to send them a warning?"

"No. And the damned bloody truck is useless with a broken axle."

Bony heard her abrupt movement, and a streaking meteor was bright enough to reveal her standing form. He remained seated, and soothingly he said:

"Don't worry. Irwin and I will go north early tomorrow. I wonder why Stenhouse was interested in that shaft near Black Well."

The other chair creaked, and he knew Kimberley had sat down again. He could hear her breathing, irregular and restrained. Presently she said, unevenly:

"How d'you know Constable Stenhouse was interested in that shaft you tell of?"

"Because that is where he and Jacky Musgrave were shot."

"But he was shot on the far side of the Range . . . on the Wyndham track."

"He was shot at the shaft near Black Well. His body was carried over the Range by a party of four aborigines led by a white man."

"A white man! Jack Wallace!"

In the dark of the veranda, Bony managed to roll a cigarette, or what served for one. Patiently he waited before striking a match, his confidence in the silent dogs supreme.

"You know, Miss Kimberley, the machinery of justice is a terrible thing," he said, smoothly. "I am part of the machine, like Irwin, as Stenhouse was. Someone commits a crime, and the machine of justice is set in motion. I've been a detective for many years, and I am still appalled by the almost frightening irresistible impetus of the machine once started. In this case, Constable Stenhouse was killed, and his tracker with him, and the machine is put in motion and nothing will stop it until the killers are brought to the bar of justice, or death intervenes. Shooting me won't stop the machine."

He leaned forward and took the revolver from her. And in the darkness he heard her crying quietly. His voice was gentle:

"I know how it is . . . how one does jump to defend those one loves."

Chapter Twenty-three

The Cake in the Hat Box

Following a prolonged interval, Kimberley Breen said, hopefully:

"I don't think those wild blacks are mooning about. The dogs are too quiet."

"It would be unlike them to attack in the dark, even if they did intend to storm the homestead," Bony said in agreement. "Dawn is their customary zero hour. Irwin should be here in an hour or so."

"Where was he camped?"

"On the Wyndham road where Stenhouse was found. He would have to drive south and take the track over the Range from Agar's, would he not?"

"No. The shorter way would be up round McDonald's Stand. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I would, indeed," Bony replied. "Provided it won't be too much trouble."

"It'll be no bother. There's a pressure stove in the living-room. I'll call you when it's ready."

She rose, and he stood with her. She felt the touch of metal against her hand, and he said:

"You may need it, although I think not."

Saying nothing, she accepted the weapon and entered the house. Bony stood lazily leaning against a veranda post, and a dog came to muzzle the cuff of his trousers and whine a greeting. He felt no satisfaction with progress made in this investigation, no elation at approaching its climax, for the thought was clear that this girl whose background was so unusual was going to be badly hurt by events with which she had had no connexion.

These Breens reminded him of the termites who in their mysterious way live in darkness and to themselves, building a castle strong to withstand all enemy attack, and ever ready to die in defence of the community. An attack on one Breen meant an attack on the family, and the failure of a Breen was the failure of the family. And now Kimberley was hastening to defend the breach made in the House of Breen, and she did not know the extent of the damage and danger.

Standing there with the dog lying against a foot, Bony worked to correlate facts with dates and distances between points, having to keep in mind the speed of surface transportation in this chaotic land.

The interview with old medicine-man Bingil would have been exasperating to anyone unaccustomed to aborigines and unfamiliar with mentality which to the white man is seemingly unreachable. The wisp of information Bony did extract from Bingil was a creditable performance, and it would be naive to expect to gain more.

His mind came round again to Jack Wallace, and again he teased the facts into position relative to the important geographical points of this case. The trite phrase "East is east and west is west" bore down heavily when recalling that the Wallaces lived east of Black Range and the Breens westward of it: and, when assessing what, if anything, Jack Wallace had to do with the killing of Stenhouse and his tracker, he had to recognize the acumen of those untamed savages from the far desert.

Their study of the site of the double killing, of the placing of a body under a dead horse, and their singular method of establishing the identity of the murderer, led them to believe that their quarry was on the Breens' side of Black Range.

There could be but two reasons prompting Jack Wallace to leave after learning what had happened to O'Grady. One, he was afraid he might be caught in a siege of the homestead and, two, that he determined to warn the Breens of a threat to them conjointly with himself. The journey north with Irwin in the morning would decide this point.

"I've made the tea. Will you come in?"

The clear and steady voice brought Bony from the mists of speculation, and he followed Kimberley Breen into the living-room, where she bade him be seated at the great table.

"This table wasn't made in a factory," he said. "I've never seen a table like it."

"My father built it when he and my mother had built the house. He could do anything . . . my father."

"In those far-off days people had to be self-reliant to establish themselves in mountains like these. Are your parents buried here?"

"Yes. My father made the coffins for himself and mother out of the same timber he got for this table and other things. I wanted the boys to have headstones properly printed with their names, and Silas said he would order them, but never did. He made new crosses for them when Father O'Rory complained about it." Kimberley smiled faintly. "I could never manage Silas like I could Jasper and Ezra."

Bony left the table and stood before the picture of Mrs Breen, and Kimberley remained silent while he, with deliberation, faced the portrait. Without turning to her, he said:

"Who crayoned the pendant?"

"I did."

"Very well done, too." He faced her. "Exactly like the real one you wore that day Irwin and I called. Did that come from the shaft near Black Well?"

The grey eyes did not waver, but he detected the shutters lowered behind them, and noted the momentary stillness of her hands.

"Of course not. I bought it. I get a share of the cattle money, you know. I sent down to Perth for it. I love opals."

"Of all precious stones, I like them best, Miss Breen. Have you any others like that black one you were wearing?"

"Any others? No, why? Why should you think I have other opals?"

Bony smiled disarmingly, and reminded her she had said she loved opals, not that particular opal she had worn with the ballerina dress, and the swift revelation of uneasiness passed.

"When I was courting my wife to be," he said, "I gave her an opal brooch. Opals were not as expensive as they are now. It's a green opal, and she still has it. Could never afford to buy her another, what with high living costs and income tax."

Kimberley smiled her relief, her unsophistication apparent.

"It's a wicked shame how the Government tax and tax us for everything," she said, the smile gone, swift bitterness in her voice. "Look at all the war taxes still on after years of peace, and people groaning under the weight of 'em. Taxes on clothes. Taxes on trucks. Taxes on petrol . . . on everything."

"Taxes certainly make survival difficult," Bony agreed.

"They do and all, and poor people just struggling along while the Government votes itself more and more wages. Will you have another cup of tea?"

"Thank you."

"Help yourself to cake."

"You cattle people do have the chance to keep something back for yourselves," he murmured, cutting the cake. "The taxes are deducted from my salary before it's paid to me."

"There's not much chance. We depend on the cheque from the Meat Works, and that has to go to the bank at Derby. Is your wife a lady?"

The question tended to throw Bony off balance.

"Not a grand lady," he replied, seriously. "Marie likes to read the best books, and she plays the piano very well. We have three sons. Charles, the eldest, attends the University. He's hoping to become a medico-missionary. I'm sure my wife would join me in giving you a warm welcome to our home should you ever come to Brisbane."

Her pleasure was childlike in its swift expression.

"Would she? Oh, I would like to go to Brisbane and see her and talk about things. Would she take me to the shops?"

"Would she! Why, if you gave her any encouragement, she would spend all day long at the shops."

Kimberley rolled a cigarette and beat him to it with a match. She was very serious when she asked:

"Would your wife . . . does she . . . would she take me to have my hair done properly?"

"She would be very happy to do so. Then there are the theatres and the cinemas. Have you ever been to a cinema?"

Kimberley shook her head. She was seeing visions.

"The actresses . . . in the magazines," she said, almost whispering. "Their wonderful clothes . . . their hair. Jasper used to cut mine . . . with clippers . . . like a man. Ezra didn't like it when I grew up, and they made me wear it long, and I hated having to roll it up. Then Ezra showed me a magazine picture and said that's how my hair ought to be cut, and I let him have a go at it. He made a terrible botch at first. Afterwards he did all right. But I'd love a perm."

"I don't believe a perm would improve it. It's very wonderful as it is," Bony assured her, and she flushed.

"It would so. Would your wife let me stay with her for a little while? I wouldn't like to be all by myself in a city."

"Of course she would. She would be most happy. You see, we have no daughter. I shall ask her to write and invite you."

A smile broke the slightly strained expression, and abruptly she left the table and crossed to a dresser on which was a pile of magazines. She was there for a minute or more, hunting for a particular copy. She returned with it, and, opening it beside him, pointed with a broken-nailed finger to a picture of a famous actress. He nodded gravely when she said she would have her hair done in the same way.

"Does she have a lot of cake?" Kimberley asked.

"Yes. Probably a great deal of . . . er . . . cake. I know very little about ladies' hairdressing, but I think that the really expert stylist studies the subject's face and head shape and colouring, and advises the most suitable hair-do. Anyway . . ."

It sounded as though twenty thousand dogs waited for a signal. The silent world without was shattered to fragments by their frenzied barking. Bony jumped to his feet, and their gaze met as they waited tensely to discern the meaning of the alarm. But there was no menace in the uproar which dwindled as the dogs raced in a pack to the back of the house.

"Constable Irwin coming," Bony decided, and they listened. They heard the sound of the approaching utility above the growing volume of excited voices of the aborigines. Kimberley shouted that it was only the policeman coming, and she ran from the room to reassure them. Bony waited till he could hear her shouting from the side veranda, and then quickly knelt before the sofa and dragged out one of the hat boxes.

The key was in the lock. He lifted the box. It was heavy. He raised the lid. It appeared to be empty. Cake crumbs lay on the brown paper resting at four-fifths down from the top. He lifted out the paper. The light from the suspended lamp fell directly into that hat box.

Bony was looking into a faintly dark cloud in which lived the colours of the setting sun after a day of dust, and the soft sheen of green seen by pearl divers. Opals . . . black opals . . . uncut and unpolished. He lifted out one. It was roughly circular and as large as the palm on which it rested. Imperfect, it could be cut to three magnificent black opals. His hand trembled and a blood-red sun danced at its right edge and green and blue fire ran like streams to the base of his fingers.

Gently he replaced the gem with the others, and swiftly he replaced the brown paper, closed the lid and pushed the hat box under the sofa. For those opals the film actresses would have gladly exchanged her a million dollars. Cake! Cake in a hat box!

Chapter Twenty-four

Fatal Error

THE SUN LEAPT to the summit of Black Range, opened wide his golden cloak and danced a jig. None took notice of him, for Irwin and his trackers were oiling and greasing the truck, and Bony was sauntering about the homestead as though nothing disturbed his meditations. The women were busy at the kitchen preparing breakfast, and Kimberley herself had ridden out for the working hacks and had seen no sign of the Musgrave blacks.

Irwin had contacted his superior officer at Wyndham on Alverston's transceiver, and before leaving next morning his sergeant had reported that the Breens had handed over their cattle to three town men, who were to deliver them to the Meat Works. They should now be well along the track to their homestead.

Irwin had gained a fairly clear picture from Larry of all that had happened throughout the journey with Bony over Black Range, and although impatient to know more about the shaft and the ambushing of Patrick O'Grady, he had refrained from asking questions when firmly told to give the remaining hours to sleep. And he had not met Jack Wallace.

The dogs were still free. Several were interested in the cooking smells from the kitchen. Three accompanied Bony to a near pile of Devil's Marbles, climbing with him to the summit of the topmost and evincing no trace of uneasiness of hidden enemies.

Standing upon the low eminence, Bony could see beyond the ridge at the back of the homestead, and the succession of ridges over which he had walked the previous evening. He could see Black Range sweeping on to the north, its bars and

patches of red and of smoky purple subduing the mottled green and brown valley. And to the west, white-painted posts and a white gate enclosing what was evidently the Breen cemetery.

It was a full half-mile from the house, and Bony reached it by a circuitous route as though arriving there by chance. The enclosure within the netting and barbed wire strung to the white-painted posts was about an acre. In marked contrast with the outside land, which had been eaten bare by goats and horses, the enclosed area was almost massed with native shrubs and grasses, giving the place an appearance of neglect despite the air of an oasis.

On reaching the white picket gate, he noted that recently several men had passed in and out, and he lifted the latch, feeling confident that yet another facet of his theoretical background of crime was to be proved correct.

He was surprised by the number of graves. There were seventeen ranged along one side, and without doubt they contained the bodies of aborigines, for at the head of each stood a bar of ordinary shoeing-iron bearing a number. In the centre of the cemetery stood two massive wooden crosses set in blocks of cement to defeat the termites: and each cross had been hewn from a single tree, smoothed and polished, and stood seven feet from the ground with arms at least three feet wide. Carved into the circular centre of the crosses was the name of the sleeper, and the date of death.

They were true men and women who came out of Ireland and Scotland and England to conquer a new world with little except tireless energy and unfaltering courage. They were generous to their own and rebels against Caesar. What they won, they held, or, losing, won again. They gave to their children their all: their possessions and their spiritual attributes; and left an example of independence today either ignored or scorned by those desiring to lean on the State from the cradle to the grave.

There was a third grave, on the far side of that of Nora Breen. This was a new grave, and no cross was erected at its head, and no data of the person buried. Unlike the older graves marked with pavements of white quartz, this third grave was bereft of even the raised mound of displaced earth. In fact, it appeared that evidence of the grave had been carefully removed, and only a stranger like Bony, who sought for such a grave, would have noticed it by the absence of native shrubs and grasses.

Who had recently been buried there? Silas, according to Kimberley, was now away shooting crocodiles at the Swamp. Ezra and Jasper were now, according to several persons, returning with the droving plant and their aboriginal riders from Wyndham.

In thoughtful mood, Bony returned to the homestead, where he found Irwin breakfasting with Kimberley. He made his apologies to his hostess, saying he had walked farther than intended, and he was informed by Irwin that everything was ready for departure immediately after breakfast. Kimberley agreed with him that the Musgrave men were not in the vicinity of the homestead, and that the nearest they had been to it was at least one mile. Her anxiety had been further allayed by Bony, who had pointed out that the desert blacks would not travel after dark the previous evening, or set out on the next stage of their journey of vengeance till they had been thawed by the sun this same morning.

"I think their interest has shifted from here," he said. "Otherwise they would have revealed their presence, and their intentions, before now. Perhaps you would like to accompany us?"

"D'you think the wild men might try to stop the boys after they leave Wyndham?" asked Kimberley.

"I understand that they handed the cattle over to drovers from Wyndham, and are already well on the way home," Bony said, reassuringly.

Kimberley revealed her astonishment.

"But that couldn't be. They would have let me know from a homestead yesterday at four or this morning when I was on the air at six. How did you know . . . they didn't take the cattle to the Meat Works?"

"Constable Irwin was talking to his sergeant yesterday morning . . . on Mr Alverston's transceiver."

The girl's grey eyes were suddenly small. Her voice was angry.

"Yes, I'll go with you. You're keeping something back. So's Silas and Ezra and Jasper. You all know things I don't know, and I'll go with you and find out for myself. I . . . I've known something was wrong. I've remembered that Ezra wouldn't look at me when he told me I was to come home with Blinker and the others. He looked. . . . Why the hell don't you tell me now? Why don't you say what you think, what you're going to do?"

The grey eyes were flashing. Bony went on eating, and she transferred her furious gaze to Irwin, who became uncomfortable and helplessly regarded Bony. Bony put down his knife and fork and, leaning back in his chair, found and held Kimberley's gaze.

"What I think, Miss Kimberley, must remain my business," he said, firmly. "What I know is little in addition to your own knowledge, and it would be unwise of me to express what I fear when there is no concrete foundation for it. I suggest that you accompany us to meet your brothers, who could greatly assist us in the investigation into the death of Constable Stenhouse. When we all meet, we can discuss many points, and you can tell me of matters concerning which you have been a trifle reticent."

The anger subsided as rapidly as it had risen. Kimberley sat down. She was now coldly on the defensive. For the first time, she was afraid of this slim dark man with the penetrating blue eyes.

"The Breens' business is their own," she said. "You've no right to go prying into it."

"I certainly haven't the right . . . excepting where it might touch on the murder of Constable Stenhouse," Bony returned. "I have no intention of browbeating you, or of demanding information which you don't wish to impart. You have been most kind to Constable Irwin and me, and we do not forget that you are our hostess. When we meet your brothers under the open sky, we'll be able to talk without restraint. Everything will be made plain and we shall, I sincerely hope, remain good friends. Now I think we should go."

With an impatient sideways toss of her head to clear stray hair from her eyes, Kimberley turned and walked with clinking spurs to an old sea-chest looking as though it required two men to lift it. Producing a bunch of keys she unlocked the chest and then crossed to the sofa, taking from under it the two hat boxes and locking them in the chest. Neither man spoke. Bony fancied he witnessed a tiny gleam of triumph in the grey eyes.

Irwin's trackers were waiting by the truck, and the party was delayed five minutes while Kimberley gave orders to her domestic staff and the native stockmen. Irwin explained to Larry and Charlie that the Musgrave blacks might be on the road ahead, and instead of sitting on the loading they rearranged it to permit the blacks to stand and watch above the cabin roof.

The dogs followed for half a mile, and after they dropped back there was silence save for the whine of the engine and the constant changing of gears. Kimberley sat between the two policemen.

They came to the tall-flat of sugar grass, and the eagles and the crows showed where lay the speared horse. The grass could have hidden a battalion, but was empty. The body of the horse, and the grass either side, gave evidence that other than birds had feasted on the carcass.

"Over the next ridge, you reckon?" Irwin said, and Bony agreed that the next ridge was where the hunted boss stockman and hunting wild men had vanished. And on immediately

topping the ridge, other birds revealed the body of Patrick O'Grady.

The back of the blue shirt was blood-stained. The head was smashed. He lay face down in grass several yards off the track.

Bony and Irwin left the truck, the former shouting to his trackers to maintain a sharp look-out, and they covered the body with a tarpaulin and weighted the corners with heavy stones.

After passing the Nine Mile Yards ample proof was given of Constable Irwin's bushmanship, for the track was entirely wiped out by the hooves of cattle. The previous night he must have driven by the stars and instinct. They passed eventually the terminal bluff of Black Range, named McDonald's Stand, and there saw the tracks of Wallace's utility heading for the road to Agar's Lagoon.

"Ezra always said Jack had no guts," Kimberley averred. "Until you came yesterday afternoon, Inspector Bonaparte, he didn't believe the place was in danger. Then when you told us about the desert blacks and Pat O'Grady, he got the wind up and cleared for home and his mother."

"There could have been two spurs jabbing him, Miss Breen. Fear and a guilty conscience."

"We'll soon know. I'll find out."

"Is there the possibility that we may pass your brothers without seeing them?"

"No. They'll keep close to the Wyndham road."

About two o'clock, they came to a creek marked with white gums, and Kimberley said that was Camp Four. Here they stopped to eat the lunch provided by the homestead cook. Following lunch, and two hours' driving, they sighted the string of horses, black on the green-grey summit of a 'bump', and thereafter lost them, saw them, lost them again, till finally Irwin stopped the truck where the animals, loose and pack-horses, were travelling wide of the track. At their rear were six mounted men. One rode to meet them, and one having a black beard stayed on the far wing.

Irwin slid from his seat. Bony alighted and was followed by Kimberley Breen. The man cantering towards them was a part of the animal he rode. His face and forearms were the colour of the range at noontide, and when he pulled his horse to a stand, his eyes were the colour of Scotch granite and as hard. He swung to the ground.

"Good day-ee! 'Day, Kim! Anything wrong?" asked Ezra.

"Plenty. This is Inspector Bonaparte. The wild blacks have speared Pat."

Kimberley stood with her hands pressed to her hips. Her eyes were as hard and her mouth as grim as the mouth and eyes of the young man facing them. Irwin vented his peculiar chuckle, and it passed unnoticed. No one saw the broad grin slowly spread over his face, or how his legs were slightly bent and all of him poised on his toes. The riders and horses were passing by, parallel with the track and a quarter-mile from it. Bony said deliberately:

"We came to warn you that the wild blacks are probably lying in wait to spear your brother Jasper. They are obsessed by the idea that he and your boss stockman were responsible for the death of Jacky Musgrave."

Ezra Breen slowly transferred his scowling gaze from his sister.

"Us Breens can look after ourselves," he said, without heat. "If the wild blacks speared Pat O'Grady, it's up to you policemen to go after them. That's what you're paid for."

The grey eyes and the blue held their gaze without a waver The soiled red kerchief about Ezra's neck enhanced the mahogany-tinted, handsome face, and the short leather gaiters seemed to make his legs much longer than they were. The mild tone of Bony's voice caused Kimberley to flash a glance at him, but Irwin's gaze did not move from Ezra Breen's right hand.

"First things first, Mr Breen. Because the murder of Constable Stenhouse and his tracker come before the killing of your boss stockman, we have first to clear up those murders. I am confident you could assist us, you and Mr Silas Breen."

"All right, if I can I will. Silas isn't here. He's out at the Swamp, s'far as I know."

"Isn't that Mr Silas Breen with the horses?"

"No. Jasper."

"I couldn't possibly be mistaken."

Ezra stepped nearer. Irwin again chuckled. Kimberley stared across the intervening horses at the white man riding on the far side.

"You're not saying I'm a liar, are you?" drawled Ezra, and his hand moved downward to the butt of the holstered revolver. Spurs clinked, and abruptly Ezra's face was hidden by Kimberley's gold hair. Her voice was shrill with fury.

"Ezra Breen, don't you dare touch that gun. Inspector Bonaparte spoke true. You're a liar, Ezra. That's Silas over there. Up to tricks, both of you. Smarties, that's what you are, you and Silas."

Ezra swept her aside as though she were a straw. He took a step forward, and she struck him with her open hand. The blow might have been a fly alighting on his face for all the effect it produced. He had no need to advance further, for he was confronted by Irwin, whose face was expanded by a smile.

"Pipe down, Ezra," Irwin said softly, standing on the balls of his feet and his hands flaccid against his thighs. They were a good match: the one gingery and the other blond.

"I said it was Jasper," Ezra rasped, his lips barely moving.

Irwin chuckled, and his mouth was the only part of him that moved.

"I'll get him," cried Kimberley, and it seemed that she was catapulted to the back of Ezra's horse. Ezra shouted, jumped, was too late to stop her.

Argument was interrupted. The three white men and the two blacks still standing at the back of the utility watched Kimberley Breen racing the horse across the stony country to the widely extended horses and attendant riders. They saw the man on the far side check his mount and sit more uprightly in his saddle, saw his indecision. The girl swept round to the rear

of the aborigine stockmen, rode straight to the white rider, and he raised both hands to the back of his head.

Neither Irwin nor Bony looked at Ezra when he said:

"That's blasted it."

They watched the girl haul back her horse before the white rider. She pointed accusingly at him, kneed her mount to his side, stretched out her hand, received something. For a minute they talked, then came towards the waiting group at a jog-trot as though the man were the prisoner of the woman.

The blackness of the lower extremity of the man's face was gone. He was talking to the girl, and she was riding with her eyes to front. Distance dwindled, and Bony recognized the huge Silas Breen who had carried his brother from the crowded bar in Agar's Lagoon. Distance dwindled still, and he could see the strip of goat's hide Kimberley was carrying. Then he was looking into the menacing blue eyes, and hearing Silas Breen shout that which he least expected:

"Good day-ee!"

Chapter Twenty-five

After Sunset the Sunrise

Contemptuously, the blue eyes passed over the three men, the utility and the trackers beyond them, and returned to Kimberley Breen astride Ezra's horse and holding the strip of goat's hide. Bony said coldly:

"I've been investigating the death of Constable Stenhouse, Mr Breen, and think you may be able to assist me to clear up one or two quite minor points."

"Such as?"

"Why you have been impersonating your brother Jasper."

"Yes . . . why?" cried Kimberley, her voice sharp and resolute.

The big man swung a leg over his horse's head and sat sideways in the saddle.

"That's my business," he said. "Us Breens mind our business, mister, and we don't take interference from anyone. We market our cattle and we looks after our abos, and we owe no man a farthing. If I want to play a little game with Kimberley, making out I'm Jasper, that's my business. Jasper doesn't care. You ask him."

"Your brother Jasper lies buried beside your mother and father."

Not a muscle twitched on the heavy face. The huge hands clasped against the hard stomach remained passive. Kimberley slipped from her horse and ran to Bony and clutched him by the arm. Her voice wailed:

"What's that you said? Tell me!"

"It's true, Miss Breen," Bony told her loudly enough for the others to hear. "Your brother Jasper was shot, and Silas took him to Agar's for surgical attention. Doctor Morley was

drunk, and Jasper died of his wound in the hotel bar. Silas brought home your dead brother and buried him in the cemetery . . . when you were with the cattle."

"It's a lie," roared Silas, and Ezra spoke, softly and yet with a lash.

"Quit, Silas. Get off the bloody horse and take it."

As the big man dropped to the ground, he shouted:

"It's a lie, I tell you. I'm the boss around here." He strode towards Bony. Irwin stepped forward to intercept him, but Ezra was first, and said, like the tail-end of the cry of the whip-bird:

"Quit." The big man glared at Ezra, and wilted. Passing Ezra, he stood before Bony, looking down from his superior height, and now the small blue eyes betrayed entreaty engendered by recognition of defeat.

"What d'you want to know, Inspector?" he asked, making an effort to soften the demand.

"Actually, very little, Mr Breen," Bony replied. "Everything of importance I know already. Shall we discuss these tragedies and try to save something from the wreck caused by an event which perhaps you did little to bring about?"

Silas produced pipe and tobacco, and squatted on his heels. Kimberley was crying and Ezra was stroking her hair and urging her to accept Bony's suggestion. Bony sat on the ground, Irwin beside him.

"I'll tell the story," Bony began. "A few minor points can be confirmed by you, or by reports I shall receive from Perth. The story begins a few years back, when you Breens discovered opal against the foot of Black Range. It was black opal, the queen of opals, and when Ezra returned from the war, one of you journeyed to Perth and contacted a jeweller named Solly, who agreed to buy your opal and to pay for it in cash. You wanted it thus for two reasons: to keep your opal mine secret from prospectors and others who would crowd the field, and also that you might exclude the proceeds from your declaration of income for taxation.

"The arrangement with Solly, the jeweller, was that you would post down to him the opal hidden in books, and the money was posted back to you in the same way.

"In all this there was nothing wrong excepting the evasion of taxation. You began to spend money freely when you went to Agar's Lagoon. Ezra received valuable books from Solly the bookseller, books that were sent by post, and Kimberley made many purchases through the post, including two expensive hat boxes. I mention this because the obvious acquisition of wealth was noticed by many at Agar's Lagoon. To counter curiosity, you put it about that you had inherited money from a relative. That was not so."

Bony waited for protest, and its absence proved his contention.

"Then a bag of registered mail was stolen when in transit from Agar's to Broome, and among the contents was a registered parcel from you to Solly, the bookseller. The theft of the mailbag does not enter the story I am relating excepting that as a result of the theft the knowledge came to Constable Stenhouse of your mining of black opal. Am I not correct?"

Silas moved his gaze from Bony to Ezra, and Ezra nodded. "Yes, we did lose a book containing opal in that robbery."

"Knowing you were mining opal, Stenhouse decided to find the location and help himself, and although I am not clear on this particular point, I put forward the theory of how he found it. He had with him as his official tracker an aborigine who was extremely loyal, and it was Jacky Musgrave who obtained the information from one of your own aborigines, either in personal contact or through others."

"He robbed us," shouted Silas, who seemed unable to speak normally. "He visited the mine and helped himself, the swab. 'Twas last year. We didn't know it was him, then. Didn't know who 'twas till that day Jasper found him down the shaft."

"He chose what he thought was a good opportunity," Bony proceeded. "He knew that you had planned to leave for Wyndham with the cattle on August 7th."

"We were delayed in the general muster," Ezra interjected. "Didn't leave the Nine Mile Yards till the morning of the 15th."

"We know that Stenhouse was on the Wyndham road very early on the morning of the 14th," continued Bony. "Before day broke he had driven his jeep off the track to a clump of scrub hard against Black Range, approximately opposite your opal mine, and he and his tracker crossed the Range at night, and so did not see that the cattle were still held at the Yards. He and Jacky were working at the mine when Jasper Breen and Patrick O'Grady came on them. Jasper, perhaps, told you what happened?"

"Yes," replied Silas. "Stenhouse was down the shaft, Jacky haulin' the mullock. Afore they could get to the shaft, Jacky pulled Stenhouse up on the bucket. Pat stayed with the horses, and Jasper went over to argue it out. Stenhouse shot him with his automatic, and Pat yanked Jasper's rifle from the saddle holster and shot Stenhouse dead. The black tried to get away, and Pat shot him, too. Jasper was pretty crook. So Pat came and got me."

"And you decided that Ezra should leave without the full number of cattle required?"

"That's so," agreed Silas, slowly nodding. "Rode home for the truck, sending Pat back to Jasper. I drove out for Jasper with three blacks we could trust."

"Frypan, Stugger and Stan?"

"That's right. You seem to know most of it."

"Jasper told you he would be all right, and you, assisted by your boss stockman, took the body of Jacky Musgrave and planted it inside the skeleton of a horse," Bony went on. "Your blacks followed and brushed out your tracks going from and returning to the mine. Then you carried the body of Stenhouse over the Range, following Stenhouse's tracks back to his jeep. You had brought a black goat from the homestead, and you took that over the Range, too.

"You killed the goat for its blood, and drove the dead policeman in the jeep to the Wyndham road, keeping to the tracks made by the jeep when Stenhouse drove it from the road. And your aborigines followed all the way and obliterated the tracks. At the road, you staged an act, making it appear that Jacky Musgrave had shot Stenhouse and then cleared out. You made so many mistakes, Mr Breen."

"How so?" shouted Silas, bristling at this threat to his pride.

"Well, to begin with, you must have known that a soft-nosed bullet from a high-powered rifle would make a substantial exit hole in the body, and you fired a forty-four revolver bullet through the back of the seat, making a hole which certainly didn't tally with the hole in the back of the dead man. You did think to clean his revolver, and be sure you left on it none of your prints when you put it in the attaché-case on the seat. You were careful to keep your hands wrapped in pieces of the goat's skin while you drove the jeep, but you left hairs of the goat on the controls.

"Your blacks did an excellent job in obliterating your tracks to and from the dead horse, and to and from where Stenhouse left his jeep, but instead of burying the carcass of the goat you should have taken it back over the Range, and you should have had your blacks obliterate your tracks all the way over. You forgot about the birds."

"The birds!"

"Yes, the birds. The crows and the eagles. They see everything."

Silas swore.

"You Breens could depend with certainty on the loyalty of your station aborigines in any matter involving a white man. In a matter as serious as killing one of their own race, however, their loyalty to you Breens had to take second place. With your wide experience of the aborigines, I feel sure you will understand this and accept it without rancour. Your local medicine-man obtained the details of the double shooting,

probably from Patrick O'Grady, and he sent a message to the western blacks knowing they would smoke-signal the news down to the Musgraves.

"Old Bingil was actually as loyal to you as he was able to be. In his message to the western blacks he did not give details other than the facts concerning Jacky Musgrave. The facts totalled two. One, that Jacky Musgrave had been shot to death. Two, that his body had been pushed under a dead horse lying near Black Well. The smoke signals brought Pluto's Mob up here, and thus Irwin and I had serious rivals.

"The wild men staged the body of Jacky Musgrave, and the grease fell on two stones of many placed beneath it. The grease fell on the stone having O'Grady's mark, and on the stone bearing the mark of Jasper Breen. They ambushed O'Grady. They headed north this morning to ambush Jasper Breen, and you, Silas Breen, were disguised as your brother. However, in order to prevent a second killing, I persuaded Bingil to send a smoke signal to the western blacks, informing them that Jasper Breen was dead."

Bony stood and pointed to the south-west. The others stood to see the disjointed columns of smoke rising high above the mountain ridges and the table-tops. He said gravely:

"As you see, the western blacks are on the air. They are calling off the Musgrave crime investigators and the Musgrave executioners. All of us must surely respect their sagacity."

From gazing at the smoke-signalling, the Breens turned to Bony. Silas glared with savage anger which strangely had nothing of malice. Ezra was subdued by the proof of Bony's intelligence, while his sister . . . according to Irwin . . . was pushed right off centre.

"How did you know Jasper was dead?" Ezra asked.

"I ought not to have been deceived that night in the bar of the hotel," Bony admitted. "I was, however, considering the possibility that something far more tragic than whisky was the cause of Jasper's collapse when, in conversation with 'Un, he told me that on a previous occasion Jasper had succumbed

to whisky and that Silas had tied a cord to his beard to make Jasper nod assent when it was his turn to call for drinks. This, added to the statement of others who had seen Jasper with the cattle, was confusing until I noted that not one of them had spoken to Jasper or had been near him. Then, what I suspected was confirmed by the new grave in the cemetery."

"I had to lie low about Jasper," groaned Silas. "Had to keep it quiet for a long time after the shootin' so there would be no connexion. That's why I wore the false beard, to make people see him alive days and days after. 'Tis a bloody mess and all. Years ago I should've got to that dirty, wife-bashing police—"

"Never look back, Mr Breen, only forward," interposed Bony. "You must accompany us to Agar's Lagoon. There, or at Broome, all the facts have to be placed before Inspector Walters, who will decide what charges to bring against you."

Silas drew himself up and roared:

"Me go to Agar's with you? You tellin' me!"

"I'm telling you," Ezra said, and the big man's jaw dropped. "You are going to Agar's with the Inspector and Irwin. And I'm going with you. We're both going to take it and like it."

"Take it!" shouted Silas. "Course we can take it. Us Breens can take anything. Blast that dirty policeman. He kills a fine woman, and he robs hard-workin' cattlemen, and us gotta take the rap."

"Maybe it won't be quite as bad as you anticipate," Bony told him. "I shall not be against you. Neither will Irwin. As much as justice and the law will permit, we shall be with you."

Suddenly, he was confronted by Kimberley Breen. Her hair was dishevelled. Her eyes were bright within the reddened lids and her cheeks were traced with tears.

"You meant that . . . true? That you'll make it as easy as you can for Silas?"

Slowly Napoleon Bonaparte smiled, and she caught her breath and cried passionately: "Thank you! Us Breens aren't

bad. We've never done anyone a bad turn. Mr Irwin'll tell you that, and Father O'Rory, and everyone."

"Neither Irwin nor I need to be told, Miss Breen. When all this trouble is settled . . . soon, I hope . . . you are going to accept my wife's invitation to stay with us, and allow us to show you the shops and the theatres. I am quite sure that neither Silas nor Ezra will object . . . will you?"

The two men encountered the blue eyes, brilliant and calm. Ezra nodded assent, and Silas swept the long moustache from his mouth, spat, hitched his trousers and shouted that Kimberley deserved a spell, anyway. And Bony said:

"Then let us get along. Doubtless, we can have a meal at the homestead before proceeding to Agar's Lagoon. And I would like to see, with time to admire, that wonderful 'cake' in the hat box."