

A tale of a new world by

— VIVIAN STUART —

THE NEWCOMERS

THE AUSTRALIANS



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The Australians

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Timothy Dawson was in an unwontedly angry mood when he drew rein outside the Taggart cabin. It was the end of June, the weather pleasantly cool, but his rage had simmered to white heat during the sixteen-mile ride from Sydney, and when small Justin ran out eagerly to meet him, he received a cuff for his pains.

Inside the cabin, where they had been eating their noonday meal, Watt Sparrow studied the new arrival's glowering face with mingled apprehension and surprise. Before going out to relieve him of his horse, the little man offered a low voiced warning to Jenny.

'Tim Dawson looks in a right takin', lass ... an' 'e's just sent poor Justin packin' wiv' a flea in 'is ear, which ain't like 'im, is it? Best pour 'im a glass o' spirit an' bide quiet till you c'n find out what's upset 'im'.

Jenny took this sage advice. Watt, as she was well aware, liked Timothy Dawson and seldom, if ever, criticised him. Indeed, she herself came in for caustic comment from Justin's adopted grandfather because of her refusal to 'play her cards right', as he put it. The blame for her unwed state lay at her door, according to Watt, not at Timothy's. She sighed and rose from the table, setting a clay beaker beside a small keg of Jamaica rum as Timothy stumped into the cabin.

'Please help yourself she invited, when he offered only a curt greeting. 'It would seem you need it.'

'By God I do!' He splashed rum into the beaker and gulped it down as if it had been water. 'Yes, by God I do, Jenny! And if I could leave this infernal colony by the next ship to depart these

shores, I would. Unhappily I can't afford to.'

He sounded as angry and resentful as he looked, and Jenny, heedful of Watt's admonition, returned to her seat and waited in silence for him to unburden himself.

The rum keg had been three-quarters full, but he had almost exhausted it before he spoke again. Then, in a choked voice, he burst out, 'The new Governor's been here since last September—over nine months! He promised to restore the civil administration, to curb the trading activities of those confounded rogues of Corps officers, and to see that justice was done to the settlers, did he not? And what, *pray*, has he done? Tell me that!'

Unwisely, Jenny attempted to come to the Governor's defence by reminding him that civilian justices of the peace now administered the law in conjunction with the military. 'And,' she added, 'the Governor has visited all the settlements in person. He—'

'Aye, when he's not chasing after wild cattle and absenting himself for weeks on his "voyages of discovery",' Timothy retorted, unimpressed. He stared moodily into the rum in his beaker. 'Very well, I'll grant you he's a sea officer and maybe the sea is in his blood. Perhaps some of his discoveries may prove of value ... The wild cattle probably will. There may be coal in that river the shipwrecked people from the *Sydney Cove* claim to have found and that young surgeon, Bass, from the *Reliance* may well find a way to cross the Blue Mountains. Plague take it, the Governor himself may cross them, but of what use will any of these discoveries be so long as all profit sticks to the fingers of the Corps officers? And when the Governor, despite all his promises, actively aids men like Macarthur!'

'I don't know,' Jenny confessed. Sensing that he had not yet

revealed the true cause of his rage, she crossed to the fireplace and, taking down the jar of home-grown tobacco, she set it, with his pipe, beside the rum.

‘Are you hoping to soothe me, Jenny?’ he demanded unsmilingly. ‘Well, you will not succeed. I have good reason for my indignation and, by heaven, so have the other settlers who have sweated their guts out here for scant reward!’

Was he—Jenny wondered as, in spite of his protest, he started from force of habit to fill his pipe—was he still indignant because the Governor had ordered the settlers to release some of their convict labourers for the performance of urgent public work? The unloading of ships was a matter of urgency, no one could deny that and so also, in the Governor’s view, was the building of a courthouse and the completion of an enlarged gaol in Sydney Town. The Corps officers, as well as the settlers, had obeyed the Governor’s decree. True, those who held land had contrived to get round the resulting shortage of labour, as she knew from Tom Jardine’s account, by compelling convalescents from the Parramatta Hospital to work on their farms, but that had proved a short expedient. Once Dr. Balmain and Mr. Atkins had got wind of the practice, it had ceased and—

Timothy said harshly, breaking into her train of thought, ‘Three ships have come here this month, Jenny—the *Britannia* and the *Ganges* with convicts from Ireland, and His Majesty’s ship *Reliance* from the Cape. The *Supply* made port a few weeks earlier, in May, having been sent by the Governor to procure cattle in Cape Town. Prices have been favourable there since our troops took it from the Dutch, and the *Reliance* was dispatched on the same errand ... But for whose benefit, do you suppose?’

Jenny eyed him in some bewilderment. ‘Why, if the Governor sent them, I suppose for the public benefit ... to stock the

government farms. I—'

'Oh, no!' Timothy interrupted, putting down his pipe with such violence that the stem snapped. 'For the virtually sole benefit of Captain Macarthur! The *Reliance*'s commander, Captain Waterhouse of the Royal Navy, has delivered a herd of pedigree merino sheep purchased on his behalf from the estate of a certain Colonel Gordon. Sixty of them, including two breeding rams of the highest quality! On the books, of course, he's only written down for twenty, but the rest are in the names of Corps officers—Foveaux, Brace, Cummings. I found that out when I tried to purchase some on my own account.'

'And you obtained none?' Jenny asked, shocked beyond belief by what he had told her. He shook his cropped fair head. 'And the government ... surely some of the stock will go to the government farms?'

'The cattle, yes—twenty-six head of inferior Cape heifers and three bulls. The sheep the *Supply* brought—about a score—were in such a bad state they're only fit for killing as mutton, and they went to the commissariat. The *Supply* had a bad passage and lost half the stock she loaded and'—Timothy shrugged impatiently—'they say she's to be condemned as unseaworthy and her cordage and canvas used for other vessels. So we're left with two ships in government service—the *Reliance* and the *Francis*. With the war in Europe, we're not likely to be sent any more, apart from convict transports and storeships. And those are chartered by Macarthur and his friends for private trade as soon as they're unloaded. Captain Raven's *Britannia* is on permanent charter to the Corps, plying between here and Bengal. Do you wonder I am angry or that I despair of justice being done to the settlers, Jenny?'

'No. No, I do not,' Jenny conceded. But when, she asked herself wryly, had justice ever been done to those who had been

condemned to exile here, whose convict stigma clung to them, even when they had served their sentences and been given emancipation? Timothy, at least, had money with which to purchase imported stock and to buy rum for payment of his labour—the emancipists must barter their crops for everything they needed, accepting the Corps's doubled and tripled prices for all imported goods. And, like herself, if they were unable to make ends meet they had to sell their land and work for the new owner. She was fortunate in having a man of Timothy's calibre as her employer; upright and honest, he had always treated her generously but ... She bit her lower lip, feeling it tremble. For all the years she had toiled in this harsh, inhospitable land, she was not free.

Timothy, his face flushed and his tone still irritable, talked on, but she scarcely heard him. Suddenly, in memory, she was back on the *Charlotte's* deck with Tom and Olywn Jenkins and ... Andrew Hawley. Dear Andrew, so stiff and handsome in his scarlet uniform, walking proudly beside her as he planned the new life they would build for themselves when they reached Botany Bay and she became his wife. They had dreamed of a prosperous farm, a snug house, and children ... above all, children, for whose heritage they would gladly toil.

She had a child, Jenny thought—a fine, well-mannered, affectionate son who was the love of her life, but Justin, too, must bear the stigma of all convict stock. And he, poor lad, had never known and almost certainly never would know his father ... although he could be proud of him. One day, quite soon perhaps, she would tell Justin about his father. Her tension drained from her, and she found herself smiling as she reached this decision. Johnny Butcher—John Broome—was a hero to the convict people of New South Wales because, refusing to yield to its tyranny, he had made an epic voyage to freedom with a skill

and courage few seamen had ever surpassed.

Now, pardoned and restored to the life and the sea that he loved, he was fighting his country's battles in one of His Majesty's ships of war ... Andrew's letter had told her so ... Jenny's eyes misted. That story should be Justin's heritage. He ...

'Captain Collins has thrown up his appointment as Judge Advocate,' Timothy was saying. 'He is taking passage home in the *Britannia* transport, and he will be a great loss. The Governor has appointed Mr. Atkins to succeed him—a good choice, in my view, since he is one of the few to stand up to the Corps officers in general and Macarthur in particular. Mr. Spence is to replace him in the court of Admiralty.'

'Mr. Spence, Tim?' Jenny was all attention. 'Do you mean Mr. Jasper Spence?'

His colour deepened. 'Aye. And that's not all. I saw him last evening at the wharf, and he told me that his daughter is to wed Lieutenant Brace.'

So this, Jenny thought as she vainly sought for words of sympathy, was the real reason for Timothy's loss of temper, although typically he had not admitted that it was so.

'I am sorry, Tim,' she said at last with sincerity. 'For your sake. I know the feelings you entertained for Miss Henrietta and that you hoped—'

Harshly he cut her short. 'I have ceased to hope. Unhappily, though, I borrowed money from Mr. Spence in the belief that I might prevail upon the young lady to wed me, and since such an outcome is now impossible, I must repay my debt to him.'

'Is he insisting that you must?'

'No, he is a good friend—he would never insist,' Timothy denied. 'It is I who am determined that the debt must be paid. I shall sell some of my horses to raise the required sum. Jenny'—he leaned across the scrubbed wooden table, his hand reaching

for hers across it—‘ride out with me to the river pasture and aid me in choosing which animals I can best spare. There’s the young bay stallion, Lucifer, though I am loath to part with him ... He’d command a good price, it’s true, but Sinbad is not getting any younger. Or those two chestnut yearlings I gelded last month, the pair I intended to break to harness and sell as trained carriage horses at the end of the year. But ... oh, the devil, I cannot make up my mind! *Will* you ride out with me?’

‘Now?’ Jenny questioned. ‘Surely there’s no untoward hurry if Mr. Spence isn’t pressing you?’

‘I want the matter settled,’ Timothy said obstinately. ‘It was for that reason I called here, though you might not think it, seeing how long it took me to impart that last bit of information. I ... oh, I’m ashamed I suppose, and I could not bring myself to admit that one of the Corps officers has bested me.’ He squared his broad shoulders and managed a sheepish smile. ‘Can you come now, this afternoon? Nancy Jardine or Watt can give an eye to Justin, can’t they? And there are no mares near to foaling—please help me, Jenny.’

‘Yes, of course I will. But—’ Jenny rose, gesturing to the remnants of the meal on the table. ‘You’ll eat before we set off, won’t you? There’s a fresh bread and cheese or green bacon if you prefer it, and—’

‘I’m not hungry,’ he assured her. ‘I’ll saddle a horse or you while you take leave of Justin. I’m using young Jackie Scrope as a cook now—he can get a meal for us before we ride back.’

He was silent during most of the ride, evidently engrossed by his own unhappy thoughts, and Jenny made no attempt to break the silence. The colony had been for a long time without rain, and the dust their horses raised was thick and choking, discouraging conversation. Most of the land on either side of the road they were following had been cleared and brought

under cultivation, but since the harvest had been gathered in and the new crops—apart from maize—were not yet showing, the fields were deserted, and not until they came in sight of the government stock farm at Toongabbie did they encounter any sign of life.

There two herdsmen, resting in the shade of a clump of silver-trunked gum trees, watched over a motley but healthy looking herd of humped Cape cattle. Pointing proudly to a group of heifers grazing nearby, one of the men, recognising Timothy, observed that the animals' condition had improved.

'Couldn't 'ardly walk when they come ashore from the *Supply*—but you just look at 'em now, Mr. Dawson! Wouldn't know 'em as the self same critters, would you, sir?'

'I would not,' Timothy confessed. 'You've looked after them well, Jem.'

'I'd need to, seein' the price they are,' the convict herdsman said with a shrug. He got to his feet, eyeing Jenny's young mare with knowledgeable eyes. 'Seventy an' eighty pounds an' 'ead, the last lot the *Britannia* brought from Bengal. Leastways, that's what they sold for ... Wouldn't 'ave made a quarter o' that back 'ome. An' a couple o' mares from the Cape—a mite too aged fer breedin' an' not a patch on that one o' yours, ma'am—why, they went for a 'undred apiece!'

After exchanging a wry glance with Jenny, Timothy said flatly, 'Well, I'll be putting some of mine on the market soon, Jem. You want to have a word in your superintendent's ear ... They're good stock. Your grass here is about the best in the area.'

'Aye.' The man called Jem looked as if he wanted to say more on the subject of stock prices, but thinking better of it he kicked at the ground with a booted foot. 'It's good, but we could do wiv' rain ... an' it talks o' rain, I reckon.' He gestured to a bank of heavy black clouds to the south. 'You want ter watch out if

you're 'eading fer the river, Mr. Dawson, 'cause when that lot breaks it'll come down in torrents, an' the ground's too dry an' bone 'ard fer it ter sink in. You could 'ave a flood in your area, like you 'ad last January.'

But when they reached Timothy's holding, it was not a flood they found themselves facing—it was a fire. Jenny was the first to smell it when the buildings were still hidden from them by trees, and at her shocked warning Timothy kicked his horse into a gallop. He did not draw rein until they were at the river's edge, and cursing furiously, he pointed to half a dozen native canoes, whose occupants were paddling furiously toward the opposite bank, about eight hundred yards ahead of them. All were armed with spears and throwing-sticks, and catching sight of the two riders they waved their weapons in defiance.

'Infernal swine of Bediagal!' Timothy exclaimed. 'They've set light to the granary, the devil fly away with them! Fortunately it was all but empty—I sent my maize to Sydney last month in the *Francis*. And four men with it, in obedience to the Governor's decree.' He cursed again, kneeing his horse forward in the direction of the gutted building.

'Then how many have you here?' Jenny asked apprehensively. She caught her breath, glimpsing what looked ominously like a body stretched out by the side of the dwelling house. 'How many men *should* you have, Timothy?'

'Three and young Jackie. But surely those savages wouldn't dare—' Timothy broke off, the ruddy colour draining from his cheeks as he, too, glimpsed the recumbent form. 'Oh, my God! It's Jackie ... Pray heaven they haven't killed the poor little devil!'

But Jackie was dead when they reached him, a spear buried deep in his chest, and Timothy's musket lay loaded but not fired by his side. Jenny dropped to her knees, cradling him in her

arms and vainly calling his name until Timothy pulled her to her feet, with a hoarse, Leave him, Jenny lass—there's nothing you can do for him now.'

'But ...' With tears streaming unchecked, she covered the thin, blood spattered body with her shawl. He was so young, she thought with bitterness ... a waif of the London streets, deported six years ago at the age of perhaps seven or eight, with a life sentence to be served for stealing from a baker's stall. And here, with all odds against him, he had made good, working on Timothy's farm and on her own, acting as messenger boy between them, and lately, because Timothy had a soft spot for him, promoted to cook and granted his ticket of leave, to enable him to earn a modest wage.

Her throat tight, she remounted her mare, and at Timothy's urging, they went in search of the other men. Two, like poor Jackie, had been set on with spears and clubs and brutally hacked to death, their bodies flung beside the burning granary and charred almost beyond recognition by the flames. The third—Davie Leake, the foreman—was missing. His wife, a convict girl who had come to the farm only recently, emerged from the hut in which she had been hiding at the sound of their voices and came sobbing to meet them. She was heavily pregnant and so shocked that her account of what had happened was well nigh unintelligible.

They had been at their midday meal, relaxed and anticipating no trouble, when the natives made their appearance, and although Jackie Scrope had run to the house for the musket, he had been too late.

'First off, I didn't think they meant no harm,' the terrified girl whispered. She clung to Jenny, trembling as she sought to describe the ghastly scene, her voice a thin, broken whisper of sound. 'They asked for food—for maize—and Davie told them

we'd none to spare. Then ... then they must have seen Jackie with the gun, Mr. Dawson. He didn't fire it or threaten them nor nothing, he just stood there. But six or seven of them ran over to the house and before we could lift a finger to—to help him, they speared him. Davie said they'd killed him, and he ... he made me hide, so I didn't see nothing more. But I heard ... I heard the cries, the screams and I ... I was too scared to move. I couldn't, I just stayed where I was. And then I heard you, and—'

'Where is Davie?' Timothy demanded, controlling himself with a visible effort. 'For God's sake, Molly—you must tell us!'

'I ... I don't know.' More frightened than ever by his question, the girl lapsed into a storm of weeping, covering her face with her apron and rocking to and fro in Jenny's arms, beside herself with grief. 'Dead, I shouldn't wonder ... Like Jackie, poor young mortal! What's to become of us, Mr. Dawson? Suppose they come back—oh, God have mercy, suppose they come back? They'll kill us all!'

'Do what you can for her, Jenny.' Timothy tested the priming of the musket he had taken from Jackie Scrope's side and swung himself back into the saddle. 'I'll go and look for Davie. He—' But at that moment, to Jenny's intense relief, Davie himself came stumbling toward them. He was swaying and breathing hard, his shirt torn. As his wife flung herself into his arms, sobbing hysterically, he embraced her, and then, bidding her be silent, he jerked his head in the direction from which he had come.

'Them devils have set fire to the bush, Mr. Dawson,' he gasped. 'Set it alight before they made off in their canoes, the murderin' bastards! An' the wind's changin'—blowin' it this way. Quiet, Molly lass, for the Lord's sake ... I got ter tell Mr. Dawson. You seen what they done, ain't you, sir? To Jackie and—'

'Yes, I saw,' Timothy confirmed grimly.

Davie Leake went on, struggling to regain his breath. The young 'orses in the far paddock ... they'll be cut off. I tried me best ter get to 'em, but ... I was alone an' they was chuckin' spears at me, so I reckoned I'd best seek 'elp. That black fiend they call Pimelwi's leadin' them. 'Twas he started the fire.'

Timothy stared at him for a moment in numb dismay.

Then, recovering himself, he ordered tersely, 'You're right—go to Toongabbie for help, Davie. Saddle one of the workhorses and let the others out. Go on, man! I'll do what I can here. And take your wife with you ... Don't leave her here. You'd better go with them, Jenny, You—'

'No,' Jenny returned. 'It will take two of us to drive those horses out of the far paddock.'

She was on the mare's back urging her into a canter before he could voice any objection. The best of his young stock was there, she recalled, and Timothy had prided himself on the strength and stability of the fence he had built round their pasture, using the stout timber that grew by the river-bank, instead of the brittle gum. The young horses would be caught in a trap if the woods were set alight, unable to reach the river or leap that high, all too solid fence.

And the woods, she realised as the mare gathered speed—the woods *were* alight. The smell of burning still lingered in her nostrils—she had supposed it was coming from the smouldering granary—but it was growing stronger, more pungent, as the flames spread. They had been without rain for so long that the trees and underbrush were tinder dry, needing only a spark to set them ablaze. And the rain clouds—of which the herdsmen at Toongabbie had warned them—though still looming in the sky southward, showed no sign of breaking.

The mare stumbled and Jenny had all she could do to keep the weary animal on her feet, but she did not—dared not—slacken

speed. The wind was not strong but it was enough, blowing from the river and, as Davie Leake had said, in the direction of Timothy's house and farm buildings, bringing the fire with it. His small herd of sheep and the domestic cattle he kept should be safe. Their pasture was on the Toongabbie side of his holding, with several acres of cleared land that would act as a natural firebreak between them and the approaching danger.

She saw Timothy forge ahead of her, choking now as the billowing smoke caught in his throat. He waved to her to halt, shouting that he would go on alone, but she ignored both words and gesture, and indeed, her brain scarcely registered either. But the mare was tiring, stumbling more frequently and frightened too, as the crackling roar of blazing brush and timber grew louder and more alarming. Flames glowed red below the rising smoke; just ahead of her a screeching flock of parakeets took wing, seeking the safety of the upper air, and over to her right, a tall, hollow trunked gum tree became a pillar of fire, its leafy branches disintegrating in the fierce heat. She heard the blood chilling, half human cry of a kangaroo that had failed to make its escape and glimpsed a score or so of others moving at incredible speed as they leaped and bounded over the dusty ground, instinctively making for the river. Their concerted rush and the strange, sobbing sounds they emitted added to the mare's reluctance to go on; she slowed to a walk, and Jenny had finally to slide from her back and lead her, using a strip torn from her skirt to serve as a blindfold.

She lost sight of Timothy but was too anxious to be conscious of fear. The horses were all that mattered, all she permitted herself to think about, and in an echo from the past she recalled the heroic efforts her father had made to save his farm workhorses when Lord Braxton's men had put a torch to the shed that housed them. Those horses had been poor Angus

Taggart's livelihood—just as the young stock in the threatened paddock were Timothy's. If they were lost or injured he would be back where he had started, with five years' hard and dedicated work wasted, his capital gone, and his debt to Jasper Spence unpaid.

The house, the buildings, and the fences could be replaced if they were destroyed—the young horses could not ... The mare, crazed with fear, jerked her head free, and with a wild plunge that knocked Jenny to the ground, the usually docile animal bolted, to be swiftly lost to sight in the eddying smoke. Jenny picked herself up, sick at heart and conscious of pain in her right ankle as she sought to stagger on. The mare would come to no harm—she would gallop away from the fire, like the kangaroos, guided by instinct until she won clear of the danger, but ... She gritted her teeth as the pain bit deeply. Her ankle was badly wrenched if it was not broken, and she was still some distance from the paddock and uncertain of which direction to take in order to find the gate. But the fence was there, she could see it now, solid and unyielding, twenty yards from her ... and suddenly she saw Timothy. He had the gate open and had pulled down the top two bars of the fence on either side of the gate, in order to make an aperture wide enough to let the trapped animals through.

Jenny bit back a sob. She could hear the horses, hear their hoofbeats and their terrified neighing but could not see them. Evidently the poor creatures were panic stricken, galloping this way and that in blind fear. If they were not rounded up and driven through the opening Timothy had managed to make in the fence, they would be destroyed long before the fire reached the fence and destroyed it, too.

She called out to Timothy, but her mouth and throat were too parched and dry for her words to reach him. He turned,

however, and saw her, gestured to the fence and flung himself onto his own horse's back, to vanish a moment later as if he had never been. Jenny limped over to the fence, and clinging to it until she could regain her breath, she struggled desperately to continue the work he had begun. Years of heavy toil in the fields had made her strong, but even so, the task was beyond her, and she had succeeded only in dragging down a small section of the fence when the thunder of approaching hoofbeats warned her that the horses were coming towards it.

Miraculously, it seemed, Timothy had contrived to round them up and set some of them, at least, heading in the right direction. She hobbled clear of the opening and, clinging weakly to a fence post, drew a choking breath of air into her lungs as the forerunners of the herd came tearing past her. In the smoke and dust it was difficult to count them and, amid the noisy pandemonium of shrill whinnying and thudding hoofs, virtually impossible to pick out and identify individual animals. But Jenny saw—or thought she saw—a big black horse with an empty saddle leap over the two remaining fence poles in the gap she had tried to make to the right of the open gate.

It could only be the stallion, Sinbad, since none of the others wore so much as a halter at pasture, and as the realisation sank in, she caught her breath on a sob. If Timothy had been thrown, then ... oh, dear heaven! She would have to go in search of him, she ... The hoofbeats faded at last into the distance, and she started to grope her way blindly towards the onrushing flames, calling out to him in a husky, almost soundless voice.

‘Tim ... where are you? Tim—Tim, are you hurt?’

The crack of a musket shot brought her trembling to a halt. Then, after what seemed to her an eternity, she was able to make out Timothy's tall figure, a dark silhouette against the burning vegetation at his back. His face smoke blackened and

his shirt in ribbons, he lurched toward her like a drunken man, holding himself upright by an immense effort of will. Jenny put an arm about his waist, and together they stumbled back to the gate.

He said hoarsely, 'Lucifer—my young stallion—tried to jump the fence. He broke both forelegs, and I ... I had to shoot him, Tenny. But the rest ... the rest got out, didn't they?'

'Yes, I think so.' Jenny looked up into his ravaged face, sick with pity. 'Tim, Sinbad was with them. At least I think he was, I —'

He nodded. 'I had to let him go while I went to Lucifer. He'll lead the youngsters to safety, and they'll be easier to round up if he's with them. Jenny, it's high time we got away from here ... back to the buildings. We can double up on your mare, and then —'

'The mare's gone too,' Jenny told him unhappily. 'She broke away from me. I ... I'm sorry. She was crazy with fear, I couldn't hold her.'

'Then we'll just have to make it on foot. Come on, dear lass, we'll head for the river. It's nearer, and we'll be safe enough there.' He took her hand, but Jenny had only limped a few paces with him when, with a smothered exclamation, he turned and scooped her up into his arms. 'The devil! Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?'

She was silent, leaning her head back on his shoulder, breathless and spent. Timothy muttered something she did not catch and strode grimly on. He was as exhausted as she and, half blinded by sweat, tripped frequently over the roots and rough tussocks of grass that lay in their way. The area ahead of the fire was devoid of life. The wild denizens of the bush—kangaroos, possums, dingoes, and the like—had long since fled; the horses had vanished, and there was as yet no sign of the

help that Davie Leake had gone to summon. Probably, Jenny thought wearily, it would be well after nightfall before anyone from Toongabbie could reach them, because most would have to come on foot. And the other settlers in the area would see the fire as a threat to their own livestock and property. They would first have to ensure that these were safe, before they could come to Timothy's aid.

She stifled a sigh. The soldiers, of course, would see it as their duty to capture the notorious Pimelwi and wreak vengeance on his tribe. It had been Pimelwi who had speared Governor Phillip and wounded him sorely some years before, and the soldiers had sought him ever since without success. Even Baneelon and Colbee had declared him an enemy and ... Suddenly, unbelievably, Jenny felt a drop of moisture on her cheek. It was followed by another and another, until her whole face was wet, and glancing skyward she saw, with a swift lifting of the spirit, that the lowering grey storm clouds had broken at last.

'Oh, Tim!' she cried. 'Tim, it's *raining*!'

'Raining?' Timothy stopped in his tracks to gaze upward with the same incredulity that she had felt a moment before. Then, with an exultant shout, he lowered her to the ground, still retaining his grasp of her waist and supporting her against him. 'You're right ... praise be to God! This will put paid to the fire if it keeps up! We're saved, Jenny ... By all that's wonderful, we're saved!'

It was as if the heavens had opened in response to prayer. The rain came down in torrents, blotting out the glow of the fire and the surrounding landscape, and for several minutes they stood where they were, letting the cool deluge soak their sweating and exhausted bodies and relieve their thirst.

'It's keeping up,' Timothy said. 'And to some tune. I reckon we

ought to seek shelter, lass.'

There was an odd note of alarm in his voice, and Jenny looked up at him in mute question, recalling the warning the Toongabbie herdsman had offered. Was there, she wondered anxiously, to be a flood in the wake of the fire? Had they escaped from one danger, only to be faced with a second?

But when she put her fear into words, Timothy shook his head. A vivid flash of lightning spread across the darkened sky, and thunder rolled ominously, echoed by the distant mountains.

'We've got to get under cover quickly, Jenny,' he told her. 'There's not time to get back to the farmhouse, but there's a feed store not too far away, and I don't think the fire can have touched it ... Up you come!' Again he picked her up and started to run, ignoring her protests. We'll make more speed this way!

They gained their objective—a wooden shack—five minutes later, to find, as Timothy had hoped, that it was undamaged. He said as he smashed the padlock on the door with his booted foot, 'I've seen these storms before and they seem to be peculiar to the Hawkesbury area. Rain, thunder, and then hail ... with hailstones the size of pigeons' eggs. They don't last very long, but by God, they're violent while they do. There, in you go! And we're just in time, I fancy.'

As if in proof of his assertion the rain ceased, and as Jenny limped painfully into the darkness of the shack, there was a loud tattoo on its roof, sounding for all the world like a hail of musket balls. When Timothy joined her, breathing hard from his exertions, he offered two of the hailstones for her inspection on his extended palm. You see? These can be deuced painful if a storm like this catches you in the open, and they can flatten acres of standing corn in half an hour.'

Another flash of lightning briefly illuminated the interior of

the feedstore, and Jenny, looking about her, identified its contents as barley—perhaps forty or fifty bushels.

‘Surely’—she could not keep the surprise from sounding in her voice—‘you don’t feed this to your horses?’

‘No.’ Timothy’s tired, black-streaked face was lit by an amused smile. ‘They get grass and kaffir corn. This’—he bent to pick up a handful of whiskery grain, his smile widening—‘this is my answer to Macarthur and his fellow rogues. But if I tell you about it, you’ll need to keep a guard on your tongue, my dear lass, for it could get us both into serious trouble.’

Jenny did not pretend to misunderstand him. ‘You mean you have a still?’

She asked the question with some trepidation, shocked by the risk he was taking. Malted grain, distilled into spirit by unskilled hands, produced a potent and even poisonous liquor that could be a threat to health, if not to life itself. A recent public order issued by the Governor prohibited the practice, and penalties for infringements of the order were severe. But Timothy shrugged and retorted confidently that he knew what he was doing.

‘I had my old friend Silas Porter, mate of the *Britannia*, procure the still for me, and Davie Leake used to work for a whiskey distiller. Our liquor is good-quality stuff, and it’s a quarter of the price the infernal Rum Corps demand for theirs. I can keep my workers well satisfied, and when there’s a need for them I can employ seasonal labour. For God’s sake, Jenny, one has to take a few chances in this corrupt place if one is to get on, you know!’

‘I know,’ Jenny conceded uneasily. ‘All the same, Tim—’

He brushed her fears aside. ‘Forget I ever said a word. Now lie down and let me see if I can do something to ease the pain of that ankle of yours, will you please? There’s not much of my

shirt left but maybe just enough to fashion a bandage. Where do you feel the pain? ... Here, is it?’

As gently as a woman he bound up her injured ankle and then, flashing her a mischievous grin, took a flask from his hip pocket and offered it to her. ‘Take a sip of this to ease the pain. Go on, it’s not home made, I promise you. It’s best Cape brandy purchased from Captain Foveaux’s woman, and you deserve it if anyone ever did. You’ve been wonderful, Jenny, and I’m grateful, believe me.’

Jenny swallowed a few mouthfuls. It was heady stuff but effective, and it eased both her pain and her weariness and restored her flagging spirits. Outside the thunder echoed and re-echoed, and the hail continued to beat its loud and alarming tattoo on the shingled roof of the small grain store. Within its cramped interior, however, it was dry and warm. After a while a pleasant lassitude began to steal over her, blotting out her earlier fears.

Timothy lay stretched out beside her in tired contentment, his eyes closed, his fingers gently massaging her injured ankle. In all the years she had known him he had never once attempted to take advantage of her; their relationship had been one of friendship and mutual trust and liking, tempered—for herself, at any rate—by the fact that he was the owner of her land and officially her employer. She felt him move and thought of old Watt Sparrow’s oft-reiterated urging that she should ‘play her cards right,’ aware that, however wise and sensible his advice, she could not take it ... For Tim’s sake and her own.

Besides, there was Henrietta Spence. There had always been Henrietta, like a barrier between them. Although now, if it was true that she intended to marry Lieutenant Brace, the barrier was no longer there ... Jenny, sensing his eyes on her, instinctively drew back.

‘Tim,’ she ventured uneasily. ‘Davie may have got back rom Toongabbie with help. We—’

‘In this?’ He swore softly. ‘For mercy’s sake, woman, they’ll be taking cover, like sensible folk. The storm’s not over yet, not by a long chalk.’

‘Yes, but we—’

Timothy ignored the interruption. He said, uncannily as if he had read her thoughts of a few minutes before, ‘Jenny, why did I not ask you to wed me years ago? I must have been blind! Blind or bewitched. You’re a fine woman, the finest I’ve ever known and the bravest. Out there, facing that bushfire, you never flinched! Anyone else would have run, but you didn’t.’ He reached for her hands, imprisoning them in his own, and exclaimed wryly over their torn and blistered state. He was lying very close to her, his lithe, strong body pressed to hers, his breath warm on her cheek, and for all her stern resolve to control her emotions, Jenny’s heart quickened its beat. It had been a long time since any man had desired her, but she steeled herself not to respond, again drawing away from him.

‘How could I not have seen you for the woman you are?’ Timothy demanded. ‘In all this time!’

The surprise in his voice was hurtful and pride came to her rescue. ‘Because of Miss Spence,’ she said accusingly. ‘You’ve always been in love with her, have you not? And a friend of her father’s. You’ve thought of no one else.’

‘Aye,’ he conceded roughly. ‘But she’s to wed that young blackguard Brace—I told you, she’s made her choice, Jenny. And that leaves me free to make mine. surely?’

‘I suppose so, but I ... Oh, leave me be, Tim, please! You’ll regret this—you must consider your position. And mine.’ She was pleading with him now, suddenly afraid. ‘I’m a convict, and you know what that means here.’

‘Of course I know ... and be damned to it. Do you think I care?’ His arms were about her, his mouth hungrily seeking hers.

‘They would make you care, the respectable ones, the officers ... They always do, Tim,’ Jenny protested. She added defiantly, ‘And I don’t need to marry. Justin and I are well enough as we are. We ...’ A clap of thunder drowned her words. Startled by its proximity, she attempted to get to her feet, but Timothy’s hands restrained her.

‘Aye, there’s Justin ... And there was Justin’s father for you, was there not?’ he challenged. ‘Well, I’d say that makes us even, save that I never laid a finger on the girl I loved. I never so much as kissed her, Jenny, once Brace came on the scene, because she would not have it.’

‘Yes, but you—’

‘I’m a man,’ Timothy said without contrition, ‘and I won’t deny that I’ve taken my pleasure with a few whores in Sydney Town when the chance offered. But I’ve wasted five years ... Years when I moaned around like a dumb love-sick fool, dreaming of what I couldn’t have. Well—that’s over—I mean to start afresh. I want a wife and a family—I want children like Justin to inherit what I’ve sweated to build up here. I want *you*, Jenny ... You and that lad of yours. If you wed me, lass, I swear you’ll not regret it.’

There were no other arguments she could use, Jenny thought—none, that was to say, to which in his present mood he would listen. Again the thunder rolled, and the flash of lightning that followed it lit Timothy’s obstinately set face to an odd radiance as he reached for her and, impatient now, drew her to him.

His lips found hers, his hands caressing her breasts moved skilfully and possessively along the line of her thighs, lifting the torn skirt that had concealed them.

Jenny ceased to struggle against him, yielding with a little sigh

of mingled pain and pleasure to the swift urgency of his lovemaking.

‘We’ll make a good pair, my lovely lass,’ he whispered, his mouth against hers as, at last, passion faded to a warm contentment. ‘And a plague on any respectable folk who dare to say we won’t.’

The respectable folk would include Henrietta, Jenny reflected wryly; Henrietta and her new husband and, in all probability, her father.

‘How much,’ she inquired apprehensively, ‘do you owe Mr. Spence, Tim?’

Timothy swore under his breath. ‘Must you remind me *now* of such matters?’ He put an arm around her, drawing her head onto his shoulder. ‘Sleep, love. Time enough to concern yourself about my debts when we’re both rested.’

‘I’ll rest easier if I know,’ Jenny persisted.

‘You’re acting the wife already,’ he grumbled.

‘No, truly, Tim. You’ve lost Lucifer, and I know what a blow that is, because you would have got a high price for him.’

He sighed. ‘Aye, that I would. Lucifer was an animal of rare quality. But there, it would have vexed me sorely if I’d had to sell him to Foveaux or Macarthur or any of their cronies, so I’m spared that, at least, am I not?’

‘How much,’ Jenny persisted, ‘do you owe Mr. Spence? Please tell me—I’ve a reason for asking.’

He hesitated and then admitted reluctantly, ‘A matter of three hundred and thirty pounds, with the interest.’ It was more, much more than Jenny had anticipated, and she could not restrain a gasp of dismay. Timothy added with a hint of sullenness, ‘The two chestnut geldings will have to go and maybe a couple more ... But I’ll settle it, Jenny, so don’t you fret. I’ve the payment for my maize yet to come and having that still

will be of advantage, believe me. They'll not be able to hold me to ransom by forcing me to take their rum any longer.'

But they would wonder why, Jenny thought, and perhaps, suspecting the reason, make a search ...

'I could buy my land back from you, Tim,' she offered, and then, sensing his displeasure at her well-intentioned suggestion, went on quickly, 'For Justin so that he—'

'When I wed you, Justin will be my responsibility. Jenny, just as you will,' Timothy put in. There was an edge to his voice, and propping himself up on his elbow he peered down at her, endeavouring to search her face in the darkness. 'Do you not trust me to care for you both?'

'Oh, Tim, of course I do!' Jenny was instantly contrite. 'You've never given me cause to do otherwise.'

And he had not, she told herself; he had been a staunch friend and the best of masters, treating Justin with warm affection. Would he be less, would he change if she became his wife? Surely he was not the kind to change . . and Justin was growing up. He would need a father, and his own father would not come back now, after so many years. She thought fleetingly of Johnny Butcher and then sadly, of Andrew, biting back a sigh.

The storm was passing, she realised, and although thunder still muttered in the distance, the hail had ceased its violent pounding on the roof of their shelter. Soon all would be peace ... She smiled, putting out a hand to take Tim's, remembering the joy of their lovemaking with a sudden, swift lurch of the heart.

His brief anger faded. He leaned over to kiss her, and her desire flamed in response to his ...

Help arrived with the dawn. The dead were buried, and with half a dozen of the Toongabbie settlers Timothy set off to round up his horses. A party of soldiers commanded by Lieutenant

Brace crossed the river in a boat owned by the onetime serious sailor, Robert Webb, with orders to exact retribution from the Bediagal Aboriginals, place their chief, Pimelwi, under arrest, and bring him back to Parramatta for punishment.

The military party returned twenty-four hours later, and it was from a shocked Robert Webb that Jenny heard the story of what they had done.

‘It was a bloody massacre,’ he told her grimly. ‘I don’t hold with the natives stealin’ and killin’ and settin’ our crops and our buildings on fire, the Lord knows ... but Brace never gave ’em a chance. True, they flung a few spears at us when we caught up with ’em, but spears are no defence against musket balls and never will be. Brace got his redcoats into cover and then ordered them to open fire.

‘But surely he parleyed with them, Rob?’ Jenny was as shocked as he was. ‘The people who attacked and murdered Tim’s men were from the other side of the river, and Davie said he saw Pimelwi with them. But that doesn’t prove that the natives Mr. Brace fired on were of Pimelwi’s tribe. Did you not have an interpreter with you?’

‘Aye, we had Wurgun,’ the ex-*Sirius* seaman confirmed. He said the natives claimed that the raid on this place was in retaliation for an unprovoked attack made on them ten days ago by some white men south of here. But Brace wouldn’t pay any heed. He reckoned they’d admitted their guilt and that was that. Mind you, Pimelwi was with them, and they’ve taken him to Parramatta with six or seven musket balls in his black hide. About a dozen others were wounded and five killed outright. A victory for the gallant Rum Corps, Jenny!’ He shrugged his disgust. ‘Did Tim Dawson get all his stock back?’

‘Yes,’ Jenny said flatly. ‘He got them back.’

But at how great a cost, she wondered uneasily as Rob took his