

Edward S. Sorenson



*The Squatter
King - A Romance
of Bush Life*

Edward S. Sorenson

The Squatter King - A Romance of Bush Life



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338096319

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I. At Morella.](#)

[CHAPTER II. Over the Hills and Far Away.](#)

[CHAPTER III. Where Once His Father Ruled.](#)

[CHAPTER IV. Head Stockman, Ben Bruce.](#)

[CHAPTER V. A Memorable Midsummer's Day.](#)

[CHAPTER VI. A Child of the Wild.](#)

[CHAPTER VII. When the Frost was on the Grass.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII. The Man who Never Laughed.](#)

[CHAPTER IX. A Taste of the Primitive.](#)

[CHAPTER X. The Dawning of Love.](#)

[CHAPTER XI. The Lure of No Man's Land.](#)

[Chapter XII. The Gulf That Yawned Between.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII. Two Love-Birds in a Tree.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV. A Glimpse Behind the Curtain.](#)

[CHAPTER XV. The Old, Old Story.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI. On the Track of the Explorers.](#)

[CHAPTER XVII. Dick Cranston and Berkley Hart.](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII. The Overseer gets the Sack.](#)

[CHAPTER XIX. In the Towri of the Yanbo Tribe.](#)

[CHAPTER XX. Thorns Among the Roses.](#)

[CHAPTER XXI. Sowing Seeds of Mischief.](#)

[CHAPTER XXII. "Colonial Experience."](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII. Sons of the Open.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV. A Prey to a Thousand Fancies.](#)

[CHAPTER XXV. One Night in Yanbo Hut.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI. A Face in the Scrub.](#)

CHAPTER XXVII. Sad Days of Long Ago.
CHAPTER XXVIII. The Captain Visits Morella.
CHAPTER XXIX. Success and Its Bitter Sweets.
CHAPTER XXX. Unwelcome Visitors.
CHAPTER XXXI. The Tale of his Wild Career.
CHAPTER XXXII. A Time of Shine and Shadow.
CHAPTER XXXIII. News From Wonnaroo.
CHAPTER XXXIV. Along the Homeward Way.
CHAPTER XXXV. An Embarrassing Guest.
CHAPTER XXXVI. The Dead Man Claims His Own.
CHAPTER XXXVII. Return of the Wanderer.
CHAPTER XXXVIII. The Big Man Gets Busy.
CHAPTER XXXIX. On the Rising Road.
CHAPTER XL. The Neglected Partner.
CHAPTER XLI. With the Old Folks at Home.
CHAPTER XLII. Conclusion.
THE END

CHAPTER I.

At Morella.

[Table of Contents](#)

There was nothing very grand about Morella. It was a plain shingle-roofed cottage, half hidden in a cluster of trees and partially covered with vines, that had marked a lonely mailman's stage before the little township of Wonnaroo had come into existence. Yet, looking at it from her seat on a grassy slope at the back, Keira Warri thought there was no place to compare with it on Biroo Creek.

Keira was 18, a pretty girl with a wealth of auburn hair, and—some one had said—the "prettiest eyes in town."

Her brother, a quiet-looking lad of 16, came up the bank with a hoe in his hand, and threw himself down in the shadows near her.

"I'm going to clear out," he said. "I'm doing no good here."

Keira looked at him in surprise, but almost instantly her eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Who hit you, Sid?"

"That," answered the boy, nodding at the needlework in her lap. "You're sewing for Mrs. Joe Steel, aren't you?"

"Yes." She bent over her work, and the smile faded from her face.

"I had a suspicion that it was getting low tide with the mater," said Sid, "but I didn't know till yesterday that you were taking in sewing."

"Why shouldn't I?" asked Keira. "I haven't much else to do."

"Oh, you're not doing it for exercise, or to oblige the old lady at the store. Own up, we're getting among the breakers, aren't we?"

"Worse times might come, Sid," she answered evasively. "And it's good policy to gather fuel while you can keep the pot boiling."

"Not a very heartening job though, keeping it boiling with little sticks." Sid reflected, looking again at the stitching needle as though the thing hurt him. "If it requires that sort of stoking," he continued, "it's time I took a hand."

"Don't you be in a hurry. You've got to go to college —"

"And you're going to stitch, stitch, stitch, to keep me there? Not this chicken."

"Mother wants you to have a profession; failing that, she will get you into a bank, or something of the kind."

"That's no good to me," said Sid. "I'm going into the bush."

"What could you do there? You've had no experience."

"Haven't I? I can ride for one thing," Sid answered.

"Quiet horses," Keira added. "But some horses buck, you know."

"Well, it only wants a little practice to learn to sit them."

"But suppose you get hurt during the practice? Lots of people get killed off horses?"

"I must take my chance like the rest. The best were newchums at the start," Sid reasoned. "Anyhow, I can ride a good deal better than some of the men I've seen knocking about here. I wouldn't get much wages at first, but ever so little would be a help. You'd have one less, to keep too"

"You're a dear good brother, Sid," said Keira, as she bent down and kissed him. "But I don't think mother would let you go on a squattage. She has a horror of such places since poor father's fate."

What that fate was no one had any definite knowledge. At the time Keira referred to he was the owner of Kanillabar, a big cattle run a hundred miles from Wonnaroo. Those were happy days for the Warris. The only thing that was wanting was sufficient water for the stock. The waterholes were few and far between, and in ordinary dry seasons the cattle had to go long distances for a drink. Then a big drought came, and Warri went west in search of country to save his stock from perishing. A stockman named Dick Cranston, and two aborigines went with him. They took a pack-horse and enough provisions for a fortnight.

For a pastoralist in the back parts of Queensland, Warri was a notoriously poor bushman. His sense of locality was so dull that he got lost on his own run. He was a rugged character, with little learning. Though he mixed with the best people in the district, he was unmistakably a misfit in a toney drawing-room. But he was a rough diamond, with apparently plenty of money. His social eminence he owed to this, and to the influence of his wife, who was a woman of education and refinement.

The end of the fortnight did not bring him back; two months passed, and still there came no tidings of the explorers. Then one evening Dick Cranston returned alone. They had reached the bank of a stream called Mingo Creek, Cranston related, when a thunderstorm came on. They hobbled their horses out, and sheltered in the hollow of a

tree, where they placed their saddles and bags. It rained nearly all night, and they slept together among the baggage. In the morning it was found that the horses had crossed the creek, which was then running armpit deep. The blacks refused to go into it, saying that it was a bunyip water. Leaving Cranston making a damper, Warri went across himself; and that was the last that was seen of him.

Heavy rain set in, and it continued all day. The creek rose a banker, and Cranston was unable to cross or track the horse hunter. He searched for days along the bank, living on what he could catch in the bush; for the bags had been plundered during an unsuccessful hunt after the horses. The latter were afterwards picked up, having made back as far as they could get to their old haunts; but no trace could be discovered of the two blacks, whom Cranston said had deserted him by the flooded creek.

After his return to Kanillabar, Cranston managed the squattage for Mrs. Warri. His management very quickly involved her in financial difficulties. She got tired of it all, and at last sold out to Captain Byrne, who had financed her for some time, and retired to the quietude of Morella. At the same time Dick Cranston, to the surprise of everybody, bought the flourishing hotel business in Wonnaroo.

That bit of family history remained ever fresh in the boy's mind; never did he see the sun go down but he saw in fancy a lost white man wandering with the blacks. That far western bush that was still "No Man's Land," or the Never Never, as they termed it in Wonnaroo, called to him in his waking moments, beckoned him in his dreams. In leisure hours he had often loitered at Cranston's hotel, the

"Bushman's Rest," where squatters, stockmen and teamsters gathered when in town. He listened to their quaint yarns with absorbing ears, and heard many a tale of adventure that influenced his young mind. He knew that it was a rough life in the lonely haunts of those men; but that had no weight with him. Riding after cows on the old pony, and watching the drovers crossing below Morella, had given him a strong taste for the work. But he had hopes of being something more than a stockman. In one's teenhood life is full of hopes and promises.

"Perhaps, some day, I'll win back what we've lost," he remarked after a meditative silence.

"With an extra big slice of luck," said the more practical Keira. "You don't know how far out of reach those grapes are. Still I'm glad you're ambitious. It's good to aim always at something higher. But you don't mean to go outback?"

"Yes, I do." He spoke as one whose mind was inexorably set.

"What about your studies?"

"My next course is bullocks and brumbies," Sid declared."

Keira laughed softly. "I'm afraid you're in for a hot lecture," she said. "Mother's been planning your career since you were born. She doesn't know she's got a rebel."

"It's for her sake—and yours—I'm going."

"When?"

"Day after to-morrow."

Keira looked at him sideways with lifted brows.

"What a hurry we're in all at once!" she exclaimed, still treating the matter lightly. Then a thought struck her.

"Who's going with you?"

"Nobody."

"Who's been talking to you about it"

"Nobody," he answered again.

"Well, what put the madcap idea into your head?" asked Keira.

"What's madcap about it?" Sid demanded. "I've never thought of doing anything else," he continued. "I'm not going to be shut up in an office, anyway."

"If mother objects, you won't leave by the window, will you?"

"She won't object if you have a talk with her. You can talk her over if you like."

Keira gathered up her work and rose to her feet.

"Will you tell her after tea?" he insisted.

"All right," said Keira. "But look out for squalls."

After tea Mrs. Joe Steel, the storekeeper's wife, came in, and in five minutes, contrary to Sid's wishes, she knew all about his arrangements. But she helped to soften the mother's disappointment, and to convince her that the open air life, whatever he followed, was better for the boy than being cooped up in a stuffy office.

They talked the matter over for two hours, and while they talked Sid mingled with the town folk, most of whom for nine months in the year could be found out of doors. In midsummer the closer atmosphere of the rooms urged them forth, but they went out just the same when it was necessary to wear great coats, and mufflers round their necks.

There is a glamour, an appealing force, an impelling charm, in the brooding Australian night that attracts alike

the old bachelor from his little slab hut, the staid married folk, the courting couples and romping youngsters from cot and mansion. Even the coldest winter months rarely drive the latter to seek the shelter of the home roof. They will play merrily in the open air as long as that license is given them, and it is "mother" who has to hunt them in. That is one of the features of Australian life—the mothers calling their bairns to roost from street and lawn, from park and paddock. And they know that the field grows nightly wider and more enticing, and proportionately the traditional hearth becomes cheerless; that the life is sweet and bracing, but, it fosters no love for home.

When schooldays are over and the time of parting comes, the boy mounts his horse, or slings the swag across his shoulder, and departs with a light good-bye and a promise to write soon, which he often forgets, hundreds and thousands of miles away through lonely bush; and though the mother watches him go with tear-dimmed eyes, he holds his head erect and whistles cheerily down the track. He leaves his sweetheart in the same way—though with a pain unguessed—for aching months, and even years, till some drover's mob brings him back to her neighbourhood.

It is the outdoor life, the outdoor training in childhood, that makes the Australian a lightsome rover. He can lay him down to sleep where night finds him, and sleep comfortably with only the grassy earth for mattress and the sky for canopy. When a covering is necessary, a tent answers the purpose. To the genial climatic conditions, and the wide sweet forests, must be added the heritage of pioneers, in whom the wanderlust was strong, and whose lives were

spent in lonesome wilds. Naturally the happy Southland has a big floating population to whom the warm earth is bed, the blue sky is roof, and Australia is home; naturally Sid, whose father was a hard-riding squatter of the early School, thought lightly of leaving the comforts of Morella and the few simple pleasures of Wonnaroo for the ruggedness of Fartherout.

CHAPTER II.

Over the Hills and Far Away.

[Table of Contents](#)

As the mist was rising like wreaths of smoke from the grassy flats Sid carried his swag through Wonnaroo and set out on the road to Kanillabar. On the bridge that spanned Birro Creek he paused to take a last look at the yet sleeping houses, and at the old home, which he could just discern through the trees in the distance. Then he crossed over, and as he faced westward the feeling came over him that he had entered a new world—a world where he must think and act for himself.

He had half a crown in his pocket. He had discovered a pound note there while dressing that morning, and had secretly replaced it in his mother's purse. In vain too, they had urged him to take the pony. He thought of Keira tramping after the cows, and of the sulky in which they sometimes enjoyed a drive, and decided against it. He could easily have borrowed a horse and saddle had he wished, but he preferred to be independent. He had often heard his mother say: "I hate borrowing, and I hate lending;" and he had known her, many and many a time, to do without things that she badly wanted rather than borrow from her neighbours.

He was strong and hardy; he had been wood and water joey, gardener and general rouseabout at Morella since he was twelve years old, and one of his pleasures had been to tramp through miles of scrub and forest with a gun; so carrying the swag was no more irksome to him than it was

to the seasoned battler. He was not proud of his position, neither was he ashamed of it; his thoughts were of the future when he was confident of winning to something that would be a salve to the wounded family pride.

He had not covered many miles when he was overtaken by Jake Gowrie, the mailman, who was starting out on his weekly trip to the backblock squattages. To people down east the township of Wonnaroo was far away in the backblocks, but to Jake, who was used to wide spaces, the term meant the outermost fringe of civilisation.

Jake was a tall, slim, wiry-looking man, who sat in his saddle with a slight stoop, and gazed into distances with half-closed eyes. His sunbrowned face was clean shaven, slightly wrinkled, and bore an expression suggestive of happy thoughts. Dressed in strong tweeds made for riding, Crimean shirt and plaited green hide belt, with a knitted pale-blue necktie, loose open grey coat, soft brown felt hat, and light laced boots—such was Jake Gowrie.

"Hulloa!" he said as he drew alongside. "I though I knew the back of you, but the bluey puzzled me. You're startin' on the wallaby pretty young, Sid."

"As well wear out that way as rust out," was Sid's rejoinder.

"Couldn't you raise a horse?"

"We've only got one, and thought he might be wanted at home," Sid answered.

"I could 'ave lent you one if you'd a told me," said Jake. "Where are you bound for?"

"Kanillabar."

"Hm!" said Jake, leaning his hands on the pommel of his saddle. "Ninety-four miles from the sandhill. What do you reckon to do it in?"

"About four days and a half."

"Lemme see! That's twenty-two mile! Good goin' this weather. I used to reckon twenty mile a day a fair average when I was tourin' with Matilda. I remember when I first set out. 'Twas down country, where there's more people to the hundred mile than you find out here. Instead o' campin' where sundown found me the first day, I went on till I came to a house. 'Twas the capital of a small sheep run—Solomon Klinker, sole proprietor, I informed the gentleman, as an excuse for disturbin' his dogs—he 'ad seven of 'em, all barkin' at once—that I was lookin' for a job. 'Lookin' purty late, ain't you?' he says, short an' grumpy. I explained that my knowledge of the local geography was a bit hazy, an' I'd been tryin' to fetch up at a lagoon I'd been misdirected to.

" 'Been meditatn' about supper, haven't you?' he snaps out. I admitted it wouldn't be a bad spec, considerin' the circs. 'Had a nap below the sliprails, didn't you?' he says, in the same gruff manner. 'No, I didn't,' I says. 'Why do you ask me that?' 'Thought you might 'ave overslept your self,' he says. 'You're a bit later than the usual sundowner.' With that he turned sharp round an' walked inside.

"For a few minutes there was a great clatter of table things, an' then he came to th' door again. I was sittin' on the step, havin' a rest. 'Why th' jumpin' fantods don't you come in!' he roared at me. 'Am I layin' the spiflicated table for meself?' I stepped in, an' that old chap treated me like as if I was his own son come back from a shipwreck. He spun

yarns till 3 o'clock in the morning, an' he roused me up for breakfast at 6 o'clock a.m. sharp; an' that day I couldn't tour for shucks. I did only two mile. He was too darned hospitable altogether, was old Solomon Klinker."

He pulled out a stick of black twist as he finished speaking, and bit off a lump.

"Well," he said then, tucking the quid into his check, "I must get a bit farther. You'll be settled down to it when I see you again," he added, starting off. "So long, boy."

"Boy" made his camp-fire at a scrubby gully, a little more than twenty miles from Wonnaroo, and at a spot that had been the scene of a family picnic one merry Christmas time.

The sun was a soft red disc, poised on a hazy hilltop, as he took his towel and soap and went down to a big waterhole for a bath. When he returned with a billy of water he discovered that his rations and tucker had disappeared. There was no one in sight, but across a little patch of sand were the huge imprints of a naked foot.

"A thieving blackfellow!" he ejaculated. "By Christopher! that's hard luck."

It was no use boiling the billy; he had no tea. Neither had he a bite to eat. He had been in good spirits all day, but as the night shut down he felt as lonely and wretched as an outcast. Eighty-eight miles yet to go on an empty stomach was not an encouraging proposition. Still he had no thought of turning back.

Suddenly he brightened. 'Possums were playing about the grass and running up and down the tree-trunks. For, a minute or two he considered how he might catch one. Then he went to the brush on the gully bank, and, striking

matches, searched about until he found a small, tough tree, with a stem the thickness of his finger, that would bend double without breaking. Cutting off a piece a couple of feet long, he tied one end of a bootlace to the top point of it, making the other end into a running loop, which he stiffened by carefully twisting it round a thin stalk of grass. Then with a jack-knife he cut a pole about ten feet long, to which he fastened the pliant stick with his other bootlace, so that, when he presently leaned it against a 'possum tree, the noose hung directly over the pole a little less than midway down. Then he returned to his fire and watched.

By-and-bye a 'possum descended, and taking the pole as the easier course to the ground, was at once caught by the noose, and swung underneath.

An hour later Sid took the blackened carcase from the coals, and with that and a pannikin of cold water he made a hearty meal.

He still had some of it left after an early breakfast, and wrapping it up for lunch, resumed his journey in good heart.

The day was hot, but thick timber checkered the winding track with cooling shade. Great grey kangaroos bounded away from either side, and stopping a short distance off gazed after the traveller. Long strips of curled bark hung down from the coolabahs, beating a tattoo on the trunk to every puff of wind. Crows called familiarly overhead, the squatter pigeons gave sweet greeting from the grass, and anon corollas rose from the ground and flew over him in shrieking flocks.

He was walking along briskly, spite of heat and rugged roads, when suddenly he heard a girl's voice singing behind

a clump of bushes. He paused to listen. "Over the hills and far away" was the burden of her song.

"That's my destination, as far as I know it," thought Sid. "Over the hills and far away!"

As he turned off the road to investigate, the singer emerged from behind the clump. She was a little, bare-legged girl, driving a tandem team of goats attached to a box cart, which she had loaded with wood. Seeing the stranger, she whipped up Billy and Whiskers, and rattled merrily homeward.

Half a mile ahead was a selector's hut, surrounded by a dog-legged fence, through which the little wood-carter disappeared before he reached it.

A woman came to the door, wiping her hands on her apron, and surveyed him curiously as he approached. She was a natty, motherly-looking woman, with a kindly twinkle in her brown eyes.

"Is this the right road to Kanillabar?" Sid inquired.

"Yes, my boy; keep the mailman's track all the way to the Outcamp; then you keep straight ahead," the woman answered, waving her hand in the direction he was going. "You can't miss it, providin' you don't take the road to Goondi, which turns off to the right; or the road to Mooban, which turns off to the left."

"I was afraid I was wrong," he told her. "I didn't know there were any places on the way."

"Oh, this is Tibbinong," she smilingly informed him. "I don't suppose you'll find it on the map yet, as we've only settled here lately. Bill had to have some place for his

bullocks, an' this was convenient for him, an' handy to town for me. Are you going to work at the station?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going out on spec."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, measuring him from head to feet with a compassionate glance.

"Are there any more places on the road?" Sid asked quickly.

"Goondi Outcamp, that's all."

"Anybody living there?"

"Only blacks. Kanillabar and Mooban keep horses there to change with when travellin' to an' fro. Kanillabar is your next. An' if you don't get a job there I don't know how you'll get on, I'm sure. You're heading out for the Never-Never country, my boy. If you're wise, you'll go back the other way."

"No," he said firmly, "I'm going right on."

"That's the spirit, old man!" said a deeper voice from the table inside. "Come an' have some dinner."

The speaker was a robust, black-bearded man in faded blue dungarees and striped shirt. He was a teamster, who carried stores to the far-western homesteads.

"Sit' in, old man," he said genially, and proceeded to carve a hot joint of salt meat. The little singer, who had been peeping round the doorpost, now sat demurely at the bottom end of the long table.

"If you were round this way in a couple of months' time," his wife remarked, as she put down another cup and saucer, "Bill might be able to give you a job with the team. He's spellin' his bullocks now, but he'll be going on the road again about then."

"I hope to have a cheque earned by that time," Sid returned, "if I haven't, I'll be a long way from here."

"Oh, he'll get on all right," said Bill, chuckling confidently. "I'll bet it'll take more than the kick of a mosquito to knock him out, anyway."

When the meal was over, Bill—whose other name was Bunty — gave him further directions as to the road; then, saying that he had to hunt up some bullocks, went off across the paddock with a saddle on his head and bridle in his hand.

Sid was about to pick up his swag when Mrs. Bunty remarked:

"You don't seem to be overloaded with rations, son."

"They're not very heavy," Sid admitted.

"Have you any?"

"N-no!"

"Give me your bags," she said incisively. "The idea of going on a track like that with nothing to eat—"

"I've got no bags—either," Sid reluctantly informed her.

"Well, I declare—here, you sit down there," she commanded, indicating a seat on the verandah. "The spell won't do you any harm."

She bustled inside, and soon he heard the sewing-machine going at a great rate. In half an hour she returned with four little bags well filled. Sid proffered the half-crown in payment, but she waved it away indignantly.

"You keep that in your pocket; you'll want it soon enough, maybe," she told him sympathetically. "We're not that hard up that we're got to take money for a bit of tucker."

She helped him to adjust his load, then shook hands with him and wished him luck. At nightfall he found himself at the side of a reedy waterhole. The sudden loud splashing of ducks swooping down into the water after dark, and the lonesome howls of dingoes in the surrounding bush, impressed that half-way camp in his memory. Lying beside his little blaze, his head pillowed on his boots and spare clothes, he gazed up at the brilliance of stars as drovers, do, unconsciously beginning that education of the bushman that serves as guide and timekeeper by night in strange and trackless regions.

CHAPTER III.

Where Once His Father Ruled.

[Table of Contents](#)

Nothing but the voices of birds and the call of wandering kine enlivened the solitary tramp of the next two days. During that time, in a stretch of forty-five miles, the traveller met nobody, and saw nobody, save a somnolent aboriginal couple at Goondi Outcamp. That depot, half-encircled by a small lagoon, he well remembered. He had camped there with his mother and sister on their way from Kanillabar to their humbler home in Wonnaroo. His mother cried that night, sitting miserably at the tent door, whilst he and Keira sat by the fire, making rainbows with glowing sticks. The recollection momentarily unstiffened the corners of his mouth, and made him blink as if something had got into his eyes. Other landmarks he recalled; other memories brought strange qualms, as he came into more familiar country, whither occasional excursions had brought him for a brief while long ago.

In the afternoon of the fifth day he topped a low sandhill, and saw on a rise on the opposite side of a plain the scattered buildings of Kanillabar. The sight of the roofs was a relief after the weary tramping over stony ridges and stubby flats. Sitting awhile on his swag, he gazed over the broad demesne and the wide wild lands where once his father ruled. And as he sat there his heart grew heavy, and the vista grew weird and grey. He looked upon the great stockyards and pens with strange feelings, in which there was a tinge of sorrow as the grey ghosts of other years, the

dim recollections of his childhood, passed before his mental eye.

The huts and stables stood in line, facing the "big house," store and gardens; between was a broad space, level and green. A score of wide-winged eagles soared gracefully round and round above the homestead, whilst crows fossicked tamely about the sward, and cawed noisily at him from the few big trees and the high cappings as he approached.

Outside the horse-yard, looking through the rails at half a dozen horses, and meditatively stroking his abundant beard, stood Captain Bryne, a well-conditioned man of 50, in a grey alpaca coat and white helmet. Heavy eyebrows, all but meeting, over a red and slightly bulbous nose, gave a somewhat savage aspect to his virile face. Straight in the back as a coolabah, and carrying himself with a natural dignity; he was a man of few words, and as gruff as he was brief.

Alongside, with his elbows squared on a rail, was young Rodney Bryne, the overseer, who was taller and slighter than the captain; his happy face a healthy bronze from his constant outdoor life; and against the stable wall, which formed the top side of the yard, sat a medium-sized man with a short, scraggy moustache, and small grey eyes that were continually blinking and shifting.

Sid dropped his swag against a post, and inquired deferentially if there was any chance of a job thereabouts. The captain measured him with deliberate eyes.

"What sort of a job?" he asked.

"Stockwork," said Sid.

"Can you ride?"

"Yes."

The captain turned to the man who was sitting against the stable.

"Berkley, fetch a bridle and saddle here."

He looked again at Sid, who had suddenly evinced a lively interest in the horses.

He was tired, and had not bargained for a test of his skill straight away. All the same, he did not hesitate, but got into the yard as Berkley brought out the gear.

"Catch that bay horse and get on him," said the captain.

The "bay" was a lengthy, big-boned animal, sleek and handsome from his well-cut head to his vicious-looking heels. Singled off in a corner, he was not hard to catch; neither was he very difficult to saddle, although he showed a timidity, and an inclination to rebel against the tightening of the girths, that was not encouraging.

Leading him into the middle of the yard, Sid screwed down his hat and hitched up his pants in readiness. He would like to have damped the flaps of the saddle, which felt as slippery as glass, and to have mounted outside on the turf; the yard looked as hard as a metalled road. However, he passed the reins at once over the horse's head, the animal crouching and backing as he did so. Mounting was not so easy, the horse watching every movement and sidling away; and as pressure was put on the stirrup he reefed back.

Sid knew enough about horses to know that any dilly-dallying was fatal; if the equine saw that the rider was afraid, he would take advantage of it. To make a good

impression on the mutinous quadruped, he handled him masterfully, and at the earliest opportunity sprang quickly into the saddle.

Hardly had he got his off-stirrup when the bay whipped down his head, and with two terrific bucks and a sharp wheel threw him heavily on to his shoulder. The horse continued to buck for a few seconds longer, then stood in a corner and snorted.

Sid was more chagrined than hurt, and without a word he caught the obstreperous brute and re-mounted. Four quick, powerful bucks, and he was thrown from the saddle as if shot from a catapult. He got up slowly, spitting out dust, and without so much as a glance at the spectators caught the rebel once more, and was about to entertain them further when the captain called out: "Wait a bit."

He stepped into the yard, and walked leisurely across.

"Thought you could ride?" he said, standing beside him.

"I'm not used to rough horses," Sid confessed.

"Dropped you hard, eh?" as Sid's hand went mechanically to a tingling hip.

"Yes—a bit."

"And you'd get on him again?"

"Yes." There was fire in the boy's eyes, and determination in the set of his lips.

"Never mind," said the captain bestowing on him a close, frowning sort of scrutiny, in which there seemed to be a glimmer of satisfaction. "You'd better practice on something quieter first."

He took the reins and handed them to Berkley, remarking as he did so:

"Just as well not to let him think he's master."

"You want me to ride him?" Berkley queried, casting an unfriendly glance at Sid.

"Just as well not to let him think he's master," the captain repeated.

Berkley mounted with evident reluctance. He was an ugly rider, but he could stick; and after a couple of rough turns round the yard the bay desisted, and was let go.

Several stockmen, blacks and whites, now rode into the yard. They smiled on the youthful stranger as they passed, for the dust on his clothes and hat, which he was shamefacedly trying to brush off with his hands, told them what had happened. While they unsaddled their horses the captain, holding on to the half-open gate with one foot resting on the bottom bar, again addressed him.

"Where did you work last?"

"At home; I've just left school."

"Oh!" He shoved the gate open, and stood back, meditating, whilst Berkley drove the horses out. Sid, anxiously waiting for the verdict, shook off the rest of his coating of dust in the interval.

"You can take this chap in hand, Berkley," the captain said, as he turned to leave the yard.

From which Sid understood that he was engaged. It was a rough introduction to Kanillabar, but he was pleased.

CHAPTER IV.

Head Stockman, Ben Bruce.

[Table of Contents](#)

When tea was over in the hut, Sid commenced to fix up a broken bunk for himself by the light of a malodorous slush-lamp. The room, which looked out on the long grey road he had travelled, was walled with rough slabs, between some of which strips of bagging and pieces of paper were stuffed to block the view from adjoining rooms. Its barrenness and ruggedness gave him a twinge of homesickness, for what he had hitherto known was luxurious in comparison. Cobwebs hung from the rafters, and a mosquito-hunting bat fluttered about under the shingle roof. But for the presence of one who had been there long enough to accumulate an unsightly heap of old boots, he might have imagined it to be a long-deserted tenement.

His room-mate was Ben Bruce, the head stockman, who was stretched on his bunk against the opposite wall, smoking a black clay pipe.

Ben was one of those quiet, reclusive men who whet the curiosity of others, and at the same time discourage inquisitiveness. He kept much to himself, and however freely others around him might exchange confidences in camp and yard, he never mentioned anything material concerning his own history. Quiet of speech and manner, more gentlemanly in appearance than the captain, and generally accredited with more learning, he was naturally a considerable mystery to the rank and file. There was no doubt in the minds of all that he was "a bit eccentric."

He was an oldish man, apparently 50, tall and sturdy of figure, with a slight droop in the shoulders. He was carelessly dressed, the loose-fitting shirt and coat appearing as if they had been pitchforked on to the wearer. Despite this there was an unmistakable air of good breeding about him—gentility run to seed.

"I hope my hammering doesn't annoy you," spoke Sid.

"Not at all, lad; you make yourself comfortable. Nobody goes to sleep here that fifteen-two, fifteen-four racket ends in the next room."

"Gambling?"

"For tobacco an' matches."

"You don't play?"

"No, boy; an' if you're wise you'll keep out of it, too."

"I don't smoke," said Sid, "so the stakes would be of no use to me."

"Don't learn, boy; it's a dirty habit," said Ben, puffing great clouds from his black pipe.

When he had made the lower atmosphere insufferable to the mosquitoes, he turned again to the amateur carpenter.

"This your first job?"

"Yes."

"I judged as much, by the look of your hands," said Ben, eyeing the white skin and the well-manicured finger-nails. "The work isn't killing," he went on, "but it's a wearying stretch to sundown for the beginner."

"What time do you start in the morning?" asked Sid, speaking with his mouth full of nails.

"You'll have to be stirring about daylight—to run the horses up, an' then the cows. Are you good at wakin'?"

"Not at that hour, I'm afraid."

"I'll give you a call. Sid's your name, isn't it?"

"Sid Warri."

"Warri'?" said Ben musingly. "That was the name of the woman who was here before the boss's time."

"She's my mother," Sid told him. "We, used to own this place once."

Ben turned sharply on to his elbow. "Used to own the squattage," he repeated; "an' you've come back to it humping your drum!"

Sid nodded.

"Well, well!" with staring, meditative eyes. "What did the captain say?"

"I don't think he knew me; he didn't ask my name."

"I don't suppose it would have made any difference, anyhow. There's no sentiment about the old captain; though, mind you, he isn't a bad boss, take him all round. I've heard some ugly things said of him, but he's always acted straight with me, an' I speak of a man as I find him. He's a rough, hard old nail, there's no two ways about that; but if he sees you've got grit an' go in you, he'll think a lot more of you than if you were merely the son of a duke. By-the-bye, you had a sister?"

"She's living in Wonnaroo with mother."

"Did she ever tell you anything about Berkley Hart?"

"The groom?"

"He's groom, an' something more; he has charge of the home paddocks. You'll be under him for a time."

"I've never heard her speak of him."

"He was a good while with your father," Ben went on, "an' one day your sister caught him helpin' himself to some tobacco in the store. The boss was in the office close by. She ran in an' told him, and, of course, there was a shindy, and Berkley was kicked off the place without his cheque. He never got over that, though he wasn't seen again after the blow-up till the Brynes came here. He turned up then as good as new, an' the captain put him on. He was inquiren' about your people, an' wanted to know if the old chap had been found or anything heard of him. He's a bad lot."

"He ought to be pleased to have me for a rouseabout," Sid observed, with a grim smile at the irony of the situation.

"Oh, that will suit him right down to the ground." said Ben.

Sid drove in a few more nails, shaking and weighing on the creaking thing between times to try the strength of it.

"Whoever left this bit of furniture behind didn't lose much," he remarked as he finished.

"He left everything behind that he owned, the man who used to sleep there," said Ben. "He's sleeping on the sandhill now."

"Dead?"

"Aye; kicked by that bay horse that slung you this afternoon."

"Oh, strike!" cried Sid. "If I'd known that I wouldn't have mended the dashed thing."

"You're not superstitious, are you?"

"No; but I don't like dead men's beds."

"His ghost won't worry you," said Ben. "Poor old Sam Blake! He was a quiet chap, who never made any trouble