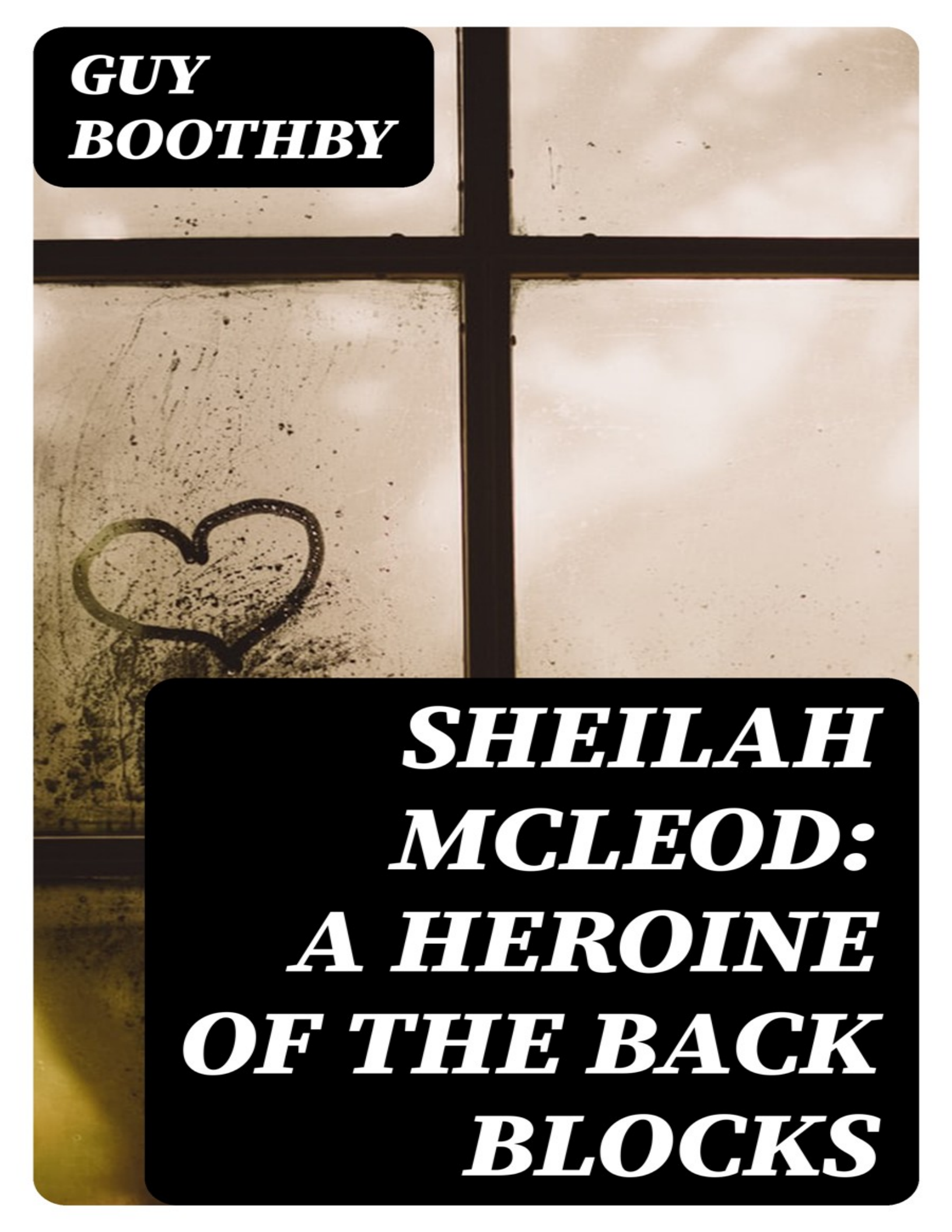


A photograph of a window with a heart drawn on the glass. The window is divided into four panes by a dark frame. The glass is aged and has some dirt or scratches. A heart is drawn on the bottom-left pane. The text "GUY BOOTHBY" is in the top-left corner, and "SHEILAH MCLEOD: A HEROINE OF THE BACK BLOCKS" is in a large black box at the bottom.

**GUY
BOOTHBY**

***SHEILAH
MCLEOD:
A HEROINE
OF THE BACK
BLOCKS***

Guy Boothby

Sheilah McLeod: A Heroine of the Back Blocks

EAN 8596547207870

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Looking back on it now I can recall every circumstance connected with that day just as plainly as if it had all happened but yesterday. In the first place, it was about the middle of the afternoon, and the S.E. trade, which had been blowing lustily since ten o'clock, was beginning to die away according to custom.

There had been a slight shower of rain in the forenoon, and now, standing in the verandah of my station looking across the blue lagoon with its fringe of boiling surf, it was my good fortune not only to have before me one of the finest pictures in the South Pacific, but to be able to distinctly smell the sweet perfume of the frangipani blossom and wild lime in the jungle which clothed the hillside behind me. I walked to one end of the verandah and stood watching a group of native girls making tappa outside the nearest hut—then to the other, and glanced into my overflowing copra shed, and from it at the bare shelves of the big trade room opposite. The one, as I say, was full, the other sadly empty, and for more than a week I had been bitterly lamenting the non-arrival of the company's schooner, which was supposed to visit the island once every six months in order to remove my gains and to supply me with sufficient trade to carry me safely through the next half-year. The schooner was now ten days overdue, and I had made sure she would put in an appearance that morning; but the wind was failing, and it was, therefore, ten chances to one against our seeing her

before the next forenoon. I was more than a little disappointed, if only on the score of the company I should have had, for you must understand that it was nearly six months since I had seen a white face, and even then the face was only that of a missionary. But, in common fairness, I must confess that that missionary was as different to the usual run of his cloth as chalk is to cheese—a good fellow in every way, not a bit bumptious, or la-di-dardy, or fond of coming the Oxford scholar-and-a-gentleman touch, but a real white man from top to toe. And my first meeting with him was as extraordinary as anyone could imagine, or wish for. It's a yarn against myself, but as it shows you what queer beasts we men are, I may as well tell you about it. It happened in this way:—

About ten o'clock one fine spring morning I was coming down the hillside behind my house, and, according to custom, pulled up at the Big Plateau and looked out to sea. To the north and south nothing was in sight, but to the eastward there was a tiny blotch on the horizon which gradually developed into a small fore-and-aft schooner of about fifty tons. When she was level with the island she worked steadily up the reef until she found the passage through the surf; then, having edged her way into the lagoon, came to an anchor opposite my house. Seeing that she was going to send a boat ashore, and suspecting some sort of missionary mischief from the cut of her jib, down I went to the beach and got ready to receive her.

The craft she was sending ashore was a double-ended surf boat, and a well-built one at that, pulled by two Solomon boys, and steered by a white man in a queer kind

of helmet that I believe they call a 'solar topee' in India. The man in the helmet brought her up in first-class style, and was preparing to beach her just in front of where I stood when I held up my hand in warning.

'Who are you, and what do you want here?' I asked, looking him up and down.

'I'm the new missionary at Futuleima,' says he, as bold as brass, 'and as I had a couple of spare days at my disposal I thought I would come across and talk to the people on this island. Have you anything to say against it?'

'Not much,' I answered, feeling my dander rising at the cool way in which he addressed me, 'but what I *do* say I mean.'

'And what is it you mean, my friend?' he asked.

'I mean that you don't set foot ashore if I can prevent it,' I replied. 'You understand me once and for all. I'm the boss of this island, and I'm not going to have any of your nonsense talked to my men. I'm civilising 'em on my own lines, and I won't have you interfering and shoving your nose in where it ain't wanted.'

'I'm afraid you speak your mind with more candour than courtesy,' he said, mopping his forehead with a snow-white pocket-handkerchief which he had taken from his pocket.

'You think so, do you?' I cried. 'Well, you just set as much as your little toe on this beach and you'll see that I mean it!'

'So I'm to choose between fighting you and going away with my errand unaccomplished?' he answered, still as cool as a cucumber. 'Do I take you properly?'

'That is my meaning, and I reckon it's a bigger one than you can digest,' I replied, like the hot-tempered fool I was.

'Let me tell you, you're not the first of your breed that has tasted my fist and gone away with his appetite satisfied.'

'Then since it is to be the Church Militant here on Earth, and there's no other way out of it, I suppose I must agree to your proposal,' he said, after a moment's thought, and forthwith jumped out of the boat on to the beach. 'But let it be somewhere where my boatmen cannot see. I don't know that the example would be altogether beneficial to them.'

As he stood on the beach before me, Heaven knows it was a poor enough figure of a man he made. He was not as big as me by a head and a half; for I stand close on six feet in my socks, and am bigger in the beam than the ordinary run of men; besides which, I am always, of necessity, in the pink of condition. To think, therefore, that such a little whipper-snapper should contemplate fighting me was too absurd. I stood and stared at him.

'You don't mean to say you intend to put your fists up?' I cried, letting him see how astonished I was.

'That I do!' he said, and bidding his men wait for him he led the way up the path to the jungle at the back of the station house. 'Since you deem it necessary that I should introduce myself to you in such a strange fashion, I feel it incumbent upon me to do so. Besides, I want to teach you a lesson you will not forget.' Then, stopping short in his walk, he felt the muscle of my right arm critically and smiled. 'You'll be a man worth fighting,' he said, and continued his walk.

Well, here I was in a mighty curious position, as you will understand. Having seen the plucky way he had jumped ashore and taken me up, right in my teeth, so to speak, I felt

I had made a precious fool of myself in being so ready with my challenge. He was a man and not a monkey, like most of his fraternity, and he might have converted every nigger in the South Pacific for all I should have cared. I wouldn't have stopped a man like him for all the world, for I reckon he wouldn't have taught 'em anything shady for the life of him. But there was no hope for it now, so I walked up the path beside him, as meek as a new-born lamb, till we came to an open patch at the base of a small waterfall.

'This should suit our purpose, I think,' he said, taking off his helmet and coat and placing them beneath a tree. 'If you're quite ready, let us get to business.'

'Hold on,' I cried, 'this won't do. I've changed my mind, and I'm not going to fight you after all! Missionary or no missionary, you're a man, and a proper sort of man too; and what's more, you shall waltz every nigger on this island backwards and forwards in and out of Purgatory as often as you please, for all I'll say you nay.'

'That's very kind of you,' he answered, at the same time looking me in the face in a curious sort of fashion. 'Nevertheless, for the good of your own soul, I intend that you shall fight me, and at once.'

'I won't, and that's the end of it,' I said.

'You will, and immediately,' he answered quietly. Then, walking up to me, he drew back his arm and hit me a blow in the face. For a second I was too much surprised to do anything at all, but, recovering myself, I lifted my fist and drove it home under his jaw. He went down like a ninepin and rolled almost over, but before I could say 'knife' he was up and at me again. After that I didn't stop to consider, but

just let him have it, straight from the shoulder, as fast as he could take it. Take it he did, like a glutton, and asked for more, but it was sickening work for all that, and though I did my best to give him satisfaction, I found I could put no heart in it.

When I had sent him flying head over heels in the grass for the sixth time, and his face was a good deal more like an underdone beefsteak than anything else, I could stand it no longer, and I told him so. But it made no difference; he got on to his feet and ran at me again, this time catching me a good one on the left jaw. In sheer self-defence I had to send him down, though I loathed myself as a beast of the worst kind for doing it. But even then he was not satisfied. Once more he came in at me and once more I had to let him have it. By this time he could hardly see out of his eyes, and his face was streaming with blood.

'That's enough,' I cried, 'I'll have no more of it. I'm a big bully, and you're the best plucked little fellow this side of Kingdom Come! I'll not lay another finger on you, even if you knock me into a jelly trying to make me. Get up and shake hands.'

He got on to his feet and held out his hand.

'All things considered, this is the queerest bit of proselytizing I have ever done,' he said. 'But somehow I think I've taught you a lesson, my friend!'

'You have,' I answered, humbly, 'and one that I'll never forget if I live to be a hundred. I deserve to be kicked.'

'No! You're a man, and a better man, if I'm not mistaken, than you were half-an-hour ago.'

He said no more on the subject then, but went over to the little pool below the waterfall and bathed his face. I can tell you I felt pretty rocky and mean as I watched him. And any man who knows my reputation among the Islands will tell you that's a big admission for Jim Heggargstone to make.

After that he stayed with me until his bruises disappeared; and when he went away I had made a firm friend of him, and told him all the queer story that I have set myself to tell you in this book. Ever since that time he's been one of my staunchest and truest pals on earth, and all I can say is if there's any man has got a word to say against the Rev. William Carson-Otway, he had better not say it in my hearing—that's all.

But in telling you all this I've been wandering off my course, and now I must get back to the afternoon of the day when I was awaiting the arrival of the schooner *Wildfowl* with a cargo of trade from Apia. As I have told you the wind had almost dropped, and for that reason I had given up all hope of seeing anything of her before morning. But, as it happened, I was mistaken, for just about sundown she hove in sight, rounded the bit of headland that sheltered the bay on the eastern side, and, having safely made the passage, brought up in the lagoon. Her arrival put me in the best of spirits, for after all those months spent alone with natives, I was fairly sick for a talk with a white man again. Long before her anchor was down I was on the beach getting my boat into the water, and by the time the rattle of the cable in the hawse-hole had died away, I was alongside and clambering aboard. I shook hands with the skipper, who was standing aft near the deck-house, then glanced at another man

whose back was towards me. By-and-by he swung round and looked me in the face. Then I saw that it was Dan Nicholson of Salfulga Island, on the other side—the biggest blackguard and bully in the Pacific, and I don't care where you look for the next. An ugly smile came over his face as he recognised me, and then he said very politely,—

'And pray how do we find our dear friend, the Rev. James Hegggarstone, to-day?'

'None the better for seeing your face, Dan Nicholson,' I answered sharply. 'And now since you're here I'll give you a bit of advice. Don't you set your foot ashore while this boat's at anchor, or, as sure as you're born, I'll teach you a lesson you'll not forget as long as you live.'

'As you did that poor, soft-headed Futuleima missionary cuss, I suppose,' he answered, turning a bit red and shifting uneasily on his feet. 'Well, having something else on hand just now, I don't think I'll trouble you this time, beloved brother.'

I saw that he had taken the hint, so I could afford to forgive the way he spoke.

After a bit more palaver I got my budget of letters, which I put into my pyjama pocket, and then, accompanied by the skipper and supercargo, went ashore. We strolled up to the station together, and while they sat and smoked in the verandah I hunted up some food and set it before them, with the last two bottles of gin I had in the store. I am a strict teetotaler myself, and have been ever since the events I have set myself to tell you about occurred. It was mainly the drink that did that bit of mischief, and for the same reason—but there, whatever the reasons may have

been, I don't see that I need bother you with them till they come into the story in their proper places. This yarn is not a temperance tract, is it?

While they were at their meal I wandered outside to look through my mail. Two of the letters were from the trading firm I represented at Vakalavi. One was from Otway the missionary, warning me of an intended visit, another was a circular from an Apia storekeeper, enclosing a list of things a man in my situation could never possibly require; but the fifth was altogether different, and brought me up all standing, as the sailors say. With trembling hands, and a face as white as the bit of paper I'm now writing on, I opened it and read it through. Then the whole world seemed suddenly to change for me. The sun of my life came out from behind the cloud that had covered it for so long, and, big, rough man as I was, I leaned my back against the wall behind me, feeling fairly sick with thankfulness. What a moment that was! I could have gone out and shouted my joy aloud to the world. The one thing of all others that I had longed for with my whole heart and soul had come at last.

I remained where I was for a while, thinking and thinking, but at the end of half-an-hour, having got my feelings under some sort of control, I went back to the verandah, where I found my guests smoking their pipes. Then we sat talking of mutual friends and common experiences for something like an hour, myself with a greater happiness in my heart than I had ever felt in my life before.

Living as I had lived for so long, the only white man on the island, with never a chance of hearing from or of my old Australian world, it may not be a matter for surprise that I

had many questions to ask, and much news to hear. Since the schooner had last come my way great changes had occurred in the world, and on each I had to be rightly and exhaustively informed. The skipper and supercargo were both fluent talkers, and only too eager to tell me everything, so I had nothing to do but to lie back in my chair and listen.

Suddenly, in the middle of the narrative, a woman's scream rang out on the night air. Before it had finished I had jumped to my feet and run into the house, to return a moment later with a Winchester and a handful of cartridges.

'For God's sake, man, what are you going to do?' shouted the skipper, seeing the look upon my face, as I opened the magazine of the rifle and jammed the cartridges in.

'I'm going to find out what that scream meant,' I answered, as I turned towards the verandah steps.

'Be careful what you're up to with that rifle,' he said. 'Remember two can play at that game.'

'You bet your life,' I replied, and ran down the steps and along the path towards the bit of jungle on the left of the house.

Out on the open it was all quiet as death, and I knew exactly why. I entered the thicket pretty cautiously, and before I had gone ten yards discovered what I had expected to find there. It was Dan Nicholson sure enough, and one glance showed me that he held in his arms buxom little Faauma, the daughter of Salevao, the head man of the island. By the way he was standing, I could tell that she had been struggling, and, from the tilt of his right arm, I guessed that his fingers were on her throat, and that he was

threatening to choke her if she uttered another sound. I moved out of the undergrowth and took stock of him.

'So this is the way you attend to my instructions, is it, Mr Nicholson?' I said, kicking a bit of dead wood out of the way, and bringing my rifle to the port in case of mischief. 'Look here, I don't want to shoot you on my own grounds, when you're, so to speak, my guest, but, by God, if you don't put those hands of yours up above your head and right-about-face for the beach this very instant, I swear I'll drill you through and through as sure as you're born. You understand me now; I've got nine deaths under my finger, and all of 'em waiting to look into your carcase, so, if you turn round as much as an inch, you're booked for Kingdom Come.'

He never said a word, but dropped the girl right there, and put his hands up as I had ordered him.

'That's right, I said. 'Now march.'

Without a word he turned to the rightabouts and set off through the scrub for the beach. I followed behind him, with the rifle on my arm ready to come to the shoulder at an instant's notice. The surf rolled upon the reef like distant thunder, the stars shone down upon the still lagoon, and through the palm-leaves I could just discern the outline of the schooner.

'Now, sir,' I said, when we arrived at the water's edge, 'I'll have to trouble you to swim out to yonder vessel. Don't say no, or dare to turn round; for if you disobey me, you're dead pig that instant.'

'But I can't swim,' he cried, grinding his teeth so savagely that I could hear him yards away.

'That be hanged for a yarn,' I said quietly. 'You swam well enough the day Big-head Brown fired you off his lugger at Apia. Come, in you go, and no more palaver, or you and I will quarrel.'

'But I shall be eaten by sharks,' he cried, this time meaning what he said very thoroughly.

'And I wish them joy of a dashed poor meal,' I answered. 'Come, in you go!'

With that he began to blubber outright like a great baby, and while he was doing so I couldn't help thinking what a strange situation it was. Picture for yourself two men, with the starlit heavens looking down on them, standing on the edge of a big lagoon, one talking and the other blubbing like a baby that's afraid of the water. I was about tired of it by this time, so I gave him two minutes in which to make up his mind, and promised him, in the event of his not deciding to strike out then, that I'd fire. Consequently he waded in without more ado, and when I had seen him more than half way out to the schooner, I put the rifle under my arm and went back to the house.

My guests had evidently been listening to our conversation, and at the same time amusing themselves with my gin bottles.

'You seem to have turned mighty strait-laced all of a sudden, Mr Heggartstone,' said the skipper, a little coldly as I came up the steps and stood the rifle in a corner.

'You think so, do you?' I answered. 'And why so, pray?'

'It was only a native girl at the best calculation,' said he. 'And, in my opinion, she ought to think herself mighty well

honoured to be taken notice of. She ain't a European queen or an extra special female martyr, is she?'

'I reckon she's a woman, anyhow,' I replied. 'And no Nicholson that ever was born, or any other living man for the matter of that, is big enough to play fast and loose with the women of my island while I'm about! So don't you make any mistake about that, my friend.'

'You seem to think a precious deal more of the sex on your patch than we do down our way,' says he.

'Perhaps so! And what if I do?'

'Nothing, of course, but I don't know that it's a good idea to side with the niggers against white men. That's all,' he continued, looking a trifle foolish, as he saw the way I was staring at him.

'Don't you? Well, when you've had sufficient experience, perhaps you'll think differently. No, sirree, I tell you that the man who says a word against a woman, black or white, in my hearing has to go down, and I don't care who he is.'

'Of course, you've a right to your own opinions,' he answered.

'I have, and what's more, I think I'm big enough to back them!'

The supercargo, all this time, had sat as quiet as a mouse. Now he put his spoke into the conversation.

'I suppose there's a yarn at the back of all this palaver.'

'There is,' I answered, 'and a mighty big one too. What's more, if you like, you shall hear it. And then, when I've done, if it don't make you swear a woman's just the noblest and sweetest work of God's right hand, and that the majority of

men ain't fit to tie her shoe laces, well, then, all I can say is you're not the fellows I take you to be.'

'Give me a light for my pipe,' the skipper said, 'and after that fire away. I like a yarn first-rate. The night's young, this bottle's about half-full, and if it takes till morning, well, you'll find I'm not the chap to grumble.'

I furnished him with a box of matches, and then, seating myself in a long cane chair beside the verandah rails, lit my pipe and began the yarn which constitutes this book.



CHAPTER I OLD BARRANDA ON THE CARGOO RIVER, SOUTH-WESTERN QUEENSLAND

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When first I remember old Barranda Township on the Cargoo River, South-Western Queensland, it was not what it is to-day. There were no grand three-storeyed hotels, with gilded and mirror-hung saloons, and pretty, bright-eyed barmaids, in the main street then; no macadamised roads, no smart villa residences peeping from groves of Moreton Bay fig-trees and stretching for more than a mile out into the country on either side, no gas lamps, no theatre, no School of Arts, no churches or chapels, no Squatters' Club, and, above all, no railway line connecting it with Brisbane and the outer world. No! There were none of these things. The township, however, lay down in the long gully, beside the winding, ugly creek just as it does to-day—but in those days its site was only a clearing out of the primeval bush; the houses were, to use an Irishism, either tents or slab huts; two hotels certainly graced the main street, but they were grog shanties of the most villainous description, and were only patronised by the riffraff of the country side. The only means of communicating with the metropolis was by the bullock waggons that brought up our stores once every six months, or by riding to the nearest township, one hundred and eight miles distant, and taking the coach from there—a long and wearisome journey that few cared to undertake.

One thing has always puzzled me, and that was how it came about that my father ever settled on the Cargoo.

Whatever his reason may have been, however, certain was it that he was one of the earliest to reach the river, a fact which was demonstrated by the significant circumstance that he held possession of the finest site for a house and the pick of all the best country for miles around the township. It was in the earliest days that he made his way out west, and if I have my suspicions of why he came to Australia at all, well, I have always kept them religiously to myself, and intend to go on doing so. But before I say anything about my father, let me tell you what I remember of the old home.

It stood, as I suppose it does to-day, for it is many years since I set eyes on it, on a sort of small tableland or plateau on the hillside, a matter of a hundred yards above the creek, and at just the one spot where it could command a lovely view down the gully and across the roofs of the township towards the distant hills. It was a well-built place of six rooms, constructed of pisa, the only house of that description in the township—and, for that matter, I believe, in the whole district. A broad verandah, covered with the beautiful Wisteria creeper, ran all round it; in front was a large flower garden stretching away to the ford, filled with such plants and shrubs as will grow out in that country; to the right was the horse and cow paddock; and, on the left, the bit of cultivation we always kept going for the summer months, when green food is as valuable as a deposit at the bank. At the rear was another strip of garden with some fine orange and loquat trees, and then, on the other side of the stockyard rails, the thick scrub running up the hillside and extending for miles into the back country. The interior of the house was comfortably furnished, in a style the like of which

I have never seen anywhere else in the Bush. I have a faint recollection of hearing that the greater part of it—the chairs, tables, pictures, bookcases and silver—came out from England the year that I was born, and were part of some property my father had inherited. But how much truth there was in this I cannot say. At anyrate, I can remember those chairs distinctly; they were big and curiously shaped, carved all over with a pattern having fruit in it, and each one had a hand clasping a battle-axe on a lozenge on the back—a crest I suppose it must have been, but whose I never took the trouble to inquire. The thing, however, that struck people most about the rooms was the collection of books—there were books in hundreds, in every available place—on the shelves and in the cupboards, on the tables, on the chairs, and even on the floor. There surely never was such a man for books as my father, and I can see him now, standing before a shelf in the half light of the big dining-room with a volume in his hand, studying it as if he were too much entranced to put it down. He was a tall, thin man, with a pale, thoughtful face, a high forehead, deep-set, curious eyes, that seemed to look you through and through, a big, hooked nose (mine is just like it), a handsome mouth, white teeth, and a heavy, determined-looking chin. He was invariably clean-shaven, well dressed, and so scrupulously neat and natty in his appearance that it seemed hard to imagine he had ever done a stroke of rough work in his life. And yet he could, and did, work harder than most men, but always in the same unostentatious fashion; never saying a word more than was absolutely necessary, but always ready at a moment's notice to pick a quarrel with you, or to say

just the very one thing of all others that would be most calculated to give you pain. He was a strange man, was my father.

Of my mother my recollections are less distinct, which is accounted for by the fact that she died when I was only five years old. Indeed, the only remembrance I have of her at all is of a fragile little woman with a pale, sweet face, bending down to kiss me when I was in bed at night.

Drink and temper were my father's chief failings, but I was nearly eight years old before I really found that out. Even to-day, when I shut my eyes, I can conjure up a picture of him sitting in the dining-room before the table, two large candelabras lighting the room, drinking and reciting to himself, not only in English, but in other outlandish tongues that I can only suppose now must have been Latin and Greek. So he would go on until he staggered to his bed, and yet next morning he would be up and about again before sunrise, a little more taciturn, perhaps, and readier to take offence, but otherwise much the same as ever.

That he had always a rooted dislike to me, I know, and I am equally aware that I detested and feared him more than any other living being. For this reason we seldom met. He took his meals in solitary grandeur in the dark, old dining-room, hung round with the dingy pictures that had come out from England, of men in wigs, knickerbockers and queer, long-tailed coats, while I took mine with the old housekeeper in the kitchen leading off the back verandah. We were a strange household, and before I had turned eight years old—as strong an urchin as ever walked—I had come to the conclusion that we were not too much liked or trusted

by the folk in the township. My father thought them beneath him, and let them see that he did; they called him proud, and hinted that he was even worse than that. Whether he had anything to be proud of is another matter, and one that I cannot decide. You must judge from the following illustration.

It was early in the year before the great flood which did so much damage in those parts, and which is remembered to this day, that news got about that in a few weeks' time the Governor of the colony would be travelling in our district, and would probably pay our township a visit. A committee of the principal folk was immediately chosen to receive him, and big preparations were made to do him honour. As, perhaps, the chief personage in our little community, my father was asked to preside over their deliberations, and for this purpose a deputation waited upon him. They could not possibly, however, have chosen a more unpropitious moment for their call; my father had been drinking all day, and, when they arrived, he burst into one of his fits of anger and drove them from the house, vowing that he would have nothing at all to do with the affair, and that he would show His Excellency the door if he dared to set foot within his grounds. This act of open hostility produced, as may be supposed, a most unfavourable impression, and my father must have seen it, for he even went so far as to write a note of apology to the committee, and to suggest, as his contribution to the general arrangements, that he should take His Excellency in for the night. Considering the kind of hotels our township boasted