BECKE LOUIS

IN THE FAR NORTH

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"Out on the wastes of the Never Never—
That's where the dead men lie!
There where the heat-waves dance for ever—
That's where the dead men lie!"

(Barcroft Boake, in the Sydney Bulletin.)

I

Jack Barrington, nominal owner of Tinandra Downs cattle station on the Gilbert River in the far north of North Queensland, was riding slowly over his run, when, as the fierce rays of a blazing sun, set in a sky of brass, smote upon his head and shoulders and his labouring stock-horse plodded wearily homewards over the spongy, sandy soil, the lines of Barcroft Boake came to his mind, and, after he had repeated them mentally, he cursed aloud.

"*That's where the dead men lie!* Poor Boake must have thought of this God-forsaken part of an utterly God-forsaken country, I think, when he wrote 'Out where the Dead Men Lie.' For I believe that God Almighty has forgotten it! Oh for rain, rain, rain! Rain to send the Gilbert down in a howling yellow flood, and turn this blarsted spinifex waste of scorching sand and desolation into green grass—and save me and the youngsters from giving it best, and going under altogether.... Boake knew this cursed country well.... I wonder if he ever 'owned' a station—one with a raging drought, a thundering mortgage, and a worrying and greedy bank sooling him on to commit suicide, or else provide rain as side issues.... I don't suppose he had a wife and children to leave to the mercy of the Australian Pastoralists' Bank. D–n and curse the Australian Pastoralists' Bank, and the drought, and this scorching sand and hateful spinifex—and God

help the poor cattle!"

He drew rein almost under the shade of a clump of stunted sandalwood, which had, in good seasons, been a favourite mustering camp, and looked about him, and then he passed his hand over his eyes to shut out for a few moments the melancholy spectacle before him.

I have said that he pulled up "almost" under shelter; further he could not advance, for the hard, parched ground immediately under the shade of the sandalwoods was thickly covered by the stiffened sun-dried carcasses of some hundreds of dead cattle, which, having become too weak to leave the sheltering trees in search of food and water had lain down and died. Beyond, scattered singly and about in twos and threes, were the remains of scores of other wretched beasts, which, unable to drag themselves either to the sandy river-bed or to the scanty shade of the stunted timber, had perished where they fell.

With a heavy sigh Harrington dismounted, took off his water-bag from the saddle, and pouring a little water into his hat, gave his horse a drink. Then he drank a few mouthfuls himself, filled and lit his pipe, and sat down, to rest awhile until the sun had lost its fierce intensity—and think.

And he thought despairingly of the black prospect which for the past six or seven months had tormented him by day, and haunted him at night, broken now and then with a gleam of hope when the pitiless blue of the sky changed to grey, and rain seemed near, only to be followed by renewed and bitter

disappointment.

"It cannot last much longer," he thought; "even if rain came within a week the rest of the poor brutes left alive will be too weak to recover—and there's not hands enough on the station to cut leaves for them. Even the blacks have cleared out lower down the river… found a good water-hole I daresay, and, like wise niggers, are camping there. Why doesn't Providence give a poor honest bullock as much show for his life in a drought as a damned, filthy blackfellow! Instead of hoofs—in this part of the country at any rate—cattle ought to have feet like a bandicoot, then the poor beasts could worry along by digging waterholes in the river bed."

Then, sick at heart as he was, a faint smile flitted over his sun-bronzed face at the fancy.

An hour passed, and Harrington, with another weary sigh, rose and saddled his horse—one of the few now remaining to him and able to carry a rider. Five miles away from the sandalwood camp was another and larger patch of timber—tall, slender brigalows, which grew on the edge of a dried-up swamp, once the haunt and breeding place of countless thousands of wild duck, teal, and geese. This was another of the mustering camps on Tinandra, and as it lay on his way home, he decided to go there and see if any of the "Big Swamp" cattle were still alive. As he rode slowly over towards the fringe of timber, the westering sun turned from a dazzling, blinding gold to a gradually deepening red; and his sweating horse gave a snort of satisfaction as the soft, spongy,

and sandy spinifex country was left behind, and the creature's hoofs struck upon the hard sun-baked plain of yellow earth which lay between the two camps. Looking down at the great, widely spreading cracks in the hungry soil, the result of a seven-months' continuous drought, Harrington almost unconsciously bent his head and thought that surely God would send rain. He was not a religious man in the conventional sense—he had never been inside a church in his life—but the memory of his dead mother's belief in God's mercy and goodness was still strong within him.

The brigalow scrub was about half a mile in length, and stood between the swamp and the high river bank. At the dried-up bed of the swamp itself he did not care to look a second time; its once reedy margin was now a sight of horror, for many hundreds of cattle had been bogged there long months before, as they had striven to get further out to the centre where there was yet left a little water, saved from evaporation by the broad leaves of the blue water-lilies.

Skirting the inner edge of the scrub till he reached its centre, he looked carefully among the timber, but not a beast was to be seen; then dismounting he led his horse through, came out upon the river bank, and looked across the wide expanse of almost burning sand which stretched from bank to bank, unbroken in its desolation except by a few ti-trees whose roots, deep down, kept them alive.

"Bob, old fellow," he said to his horse, "we've another ten miles to go, and there's no use in killing ourselves. I think that

we can put in half an hour digging sand, and manage to raise a drink down there in the river bed."

Still leading the animal, which seemed to know his master's intention, Harrington walked down the sloping bank, his long riding-boots sinking deeply into the fine, sandy soil, and Bob pricked up his ears and gave a true stock-horse sigh of weariness and anticipation combined.

On the opposite side of the river bed and close under the bank were growing two or three heavy ti-trees, and here, just as the sun had set, he halted, again unsaddled, and after lighting a fire, began to scoop out a hole with his quart pot in between the roots of the trees. For some minutes he worked on with energy, then he stopped and listened, and Bob, too, turned his head inquiringly, for he also had heard the sound—it was only the cry of a beast, but it seemed so near that Harrington ceased his digging and stood up to look.

Not a hundred yards distant he saw, by the light of the now brightly blazing fire, four gaunt steers and a skeleton heifer, staggering and swaying over the river sand towards him in their weakness and agony of hunger and thirst The poor creatures had seen the man and the horse! As they toiled towards the light of the fire, a dreadful, wheezing moan came from the parched throat of the leading steer as it laboured pantingly over to something human—something it associated with water, and grass, and life, and presently the wretched animal, with one last effort, fell in its tracks almost at Harrington's feet. It lay there quiet enough for a

minute or two, with lean, outstretched neck and one horn buried in the sand, its fast glazing eye turned to the man, and seeming to say, "Give me water or death."

Harrington, wrought up and excited to the last pitch, flung himself upon his knees, and placed his cheek against that of the dying steer, and a sob burst from his bosom.

"O God, if there is a God! have mercy upon these Thy dumb creatures who suffer such agony."

He stepped up to his horse, took his revolver out of the pouch, and then a merciful bullet ended the sufferings of the thirst-stricken animal at his feet.

"Steady, Bob, old man! Steady there!" he said brokenly, "I may have to do the same to you before long." And then, tearing off a long piece of dried ti-tree bark from one of the trees, he thrust it into the fire. Then, with the blazing torch in his left hand, and his pistol in his right, he tramped over the sand to the remaining cattle, and shot them dead one by one.

Then back to his digging again. A drink of thick, muddy water for his horse, and then with a dull sense of misery in his heart he led Bob up the bank and began the last stage of his ride home —home to his anaemic, complaining, shallow-brained wife and the weakly children who, instead of being the consolation of his life in his misfortunes, were an added and ever-present source of misery and despair.

II

A few years before, Harrington had bought Tinandra Downs, and had stocked the run with three thousand head of store cattle; for half of which number he had paid, the remainder he had bought on long terms from a neighbouring squatter—a man who knew his sterling merits, and was confident that he (Harrington) would make Tinandra one of the best cattle stations in the far north. Fortune had smiled upon him from the first; for within two years came the discovery of the famous Palmer River goldfields, only a few hundred miles distant, and cattle and station properties doubled in value, for in less than half a year there were six thousand diggers on the field, and more came pouring in from the southern colonies by every steamer to Cooktown. New townships sprang suddenly into existence, provisions of all kinds brought an enormous price, and Harrington cleared off his debt to his squatter friend almost ere he could realise having done so, and that he had several thousands of pounds to the good as well. And his good luck stuck to him, for it was attended by careful management, and every mob of fat cattle he despatched to the goldfield instead of sending them on a three-hundred league journey to Brisbane, meant another couple of thousand sovereigns.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.