

In The Bush

Soon after my arrival in Australia, I obtained, through the influence of some friends in Melbourne, a berth in the mounted police. The service there differs very much from what it is in other countries, nearly all the members of the corps being well-educated gentlemen, many the younger scions of noble houses, who like the adventurous life they lead.

I was stationed up country, near Ballarat, and the chief duty upon which that branch of the force was engaged, was protecting the squatters from the depredations of bush-rangers.

A rough and often blood-thirsty lot these fellows are. The leader of one of the most powerful gangs was a man named Morgan, a wild and desperate fellow, whose very name was a terror to peaceable settlers.

One spring—spring there, by the way, is about October—we received information at headquarters that the mail had been ‘stuck up’ between Avoca and Mt. Alexander, and that many squatters’ shanties had been despoiled by a large body of mounted bush-rangers, and, from the description given of the leader, little doubt remained but that the gang was comprised of Morgan and his satellites. Our chief detailed off eight of us to scour the country, and, if possible, bring the marauders to justice; and, as a large reward was offered for Morgan—dead or alive—we set out full of zest for the chase. The inspector heading our party was Harry Buller, the second son of an English baronet, a frank, genial, open-hearted fellow, brave as a lion.

It was Sunday evening when we arrived at a little store, kept as a sort of half-way house for journeying diggers, and there we concluded to stop for the night. We picketed our horses in the kraal outside, made a hearty supper, rolled ourselves up in our opossum-rugs, and wearied by our long ride, sank quickly to sleep. In the middle of the night I was aroused by a little aborigine, who had crawled in on his stomach, and attracted my attention by gently squeezing my nose.

“Lags here!” he whispered softly, as I raised my head in astonishment.

I listened attentively for a moment, and then heard a horse whinny outside, and softly afterward a trampling of hoofs. Rolling over and over, I soon gained Buller’s side, awoke him, and put my finger on his lip as a caution to him to be silent.

“The gang are outside, and are probably stealing our horses,” I said in a hushed voice.

He sprang to his feet, and commenced gently arousing our comrades.

“Look to your pistols, boys; come out the front way. Half of us go to the right, half to the left, meet in the rear, and I guess we’ll capture the scoundrels,” he ordered, speaking rapidly, but in a low tone.

Our party separated, as instructed, I following Buller round to the right, our short carbines cocked, and revolvers in our belts ready for immediate use. As we turned the last gable of the

building we came suddenly upon a large body of men, many of whom were mounted, while the rest were busily occupied untethering our horses.

“Stand in the queen’s name, or we fire!” shouted Buller, leaping boldly to the front, and bringing the muzzle of his piece to bear upon a swarthy, rough-bearded man, who was evidently the leader.

Scarcely were the word uttered when a flash came from another direction, and Buller fell dead at my feet with a ball through his brain.

“Quick, men! The guffies are down on us,” yelled a voice in savage fury, and a heavy volley followed his words.

A bullet pierced my shoulder and I fell, but while on the ground I drew my revolver and fired at the leader. His horse swerved just at that moment and received the ball fired at his rider. Cursing with rage, the man strove to free himself from his fallen steed, and I became aware of a sharp conflict being maintained by my comrades and the band of desperadoes, but I was unable to rise, and shortly fainted from loss of blood. When consciousness returned I found myself lying on my back, securely bound, the rest of our party in the same predicament, and our rough foes mounting guard over us.

“So you’ve come to, blast ye! Have ye? Well, I’m glad yer an’t dead yet, for I owe yer one for my horse,” said Morgan—I easily recognized him in the flickering glare of a fire they had lighted—giving me a brutal kick.

They assisted us to our feet, blindfolded our eyes with bandages, and led us by the sides of their horses.

“Yer thought to trap us, did yer? Said Morgan, with an oath. “I guess the boot’s on t’other leg. Yer an’t got long to live; so spit out yer prayers, if yer know any.

“Say, mates, the poor wretches may want to say a prayer or two before they kick off. Let’s hand them over this precipice; not by their necks, though. We’ll fix the thing after a new fashion. Knot the end of each rope, and put it into their hands. When they are tired of holding on, they can just let go, and hurry off to kingdom-come of their own accord.”

This proposition met with unanimous assent, and the fiends chuckled as they hitched the ropes to the end of a fallen tree that hung partly over the chasm. We were still blindfold, and I could only conjecture their movements by their conversation. Then they unbound my arms, placed the knotted end of a rope and my hands, lowered me slowly over the brink and let me swing off in mid-air. They followed the same course with my six companions, and then rode off laughing.

Never shall I forget the agony of the time when all hope seemed for ever fled! It was highly improbable that any assistance could arrive in time to save us, for it is not possible to hang for any length of time with the whole weight of one’s body solely upon the hands. All my past life coursed vividly through my mind; even every little long-forgotten episode of boyhood came

fresh into my recollection. I thought of home, of friends—aye, of one, old fellow, whom you know is very dear to me!—and I prayed earnestly for salvation in the nigh-drawing eternity. Still I held on. The tenacity with which a man, when in awful peril, clings to life is marvelous; and now, or at any other time, I do not believe I could sustain my weight for half as long as I then did. I thought of the yawning chasm beneath me, and in fancy saw cruel rocks hundreds of feet below which would soon receive my mangled carcass.

At last the agony of suspense proved too much for my nerves; I felt my fingers relaxing their hold, and, as the knot slipped from my grasp, I became insensible.

“Bravo! Not dead yet, Charlie!”

My senses returned once more, and opening my eyes, I saw the stalwart form of Will Somers, who had shared a similar fate to mine, bending over me, as he sprinkled my face with ice-cold water.

It was broad daylight. The sun had risen in all his glorious majesty, and leveled his streaming rays full upon us. All our number were standing around, save one, and he lay still upon the grass, a corpse. Morgan and his band, fearing to rise the whole country against themselves by the wholesale butchery of so many of the queen’s officers, had hung us over a bluff about ten feet high, so that, while suspended, at no time had our feet been more than a yard from the ground, but they had rightly conjectured that we should hang on as long as our strength permitted, and so give them ample time to escape. The horrors of his situation had been too much for Morris—; he was but a youngster, and sheer fright had killed him.

We returned to the store-keeper’s, and, after interring poor Buller and Morris in a grove of wattles, started for Ballarat. On our arrival there, I at once tendered my resignation, for my nerves had sustained such a shock that I felt myself to be totally incapacitated for duty. W. A. R.

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