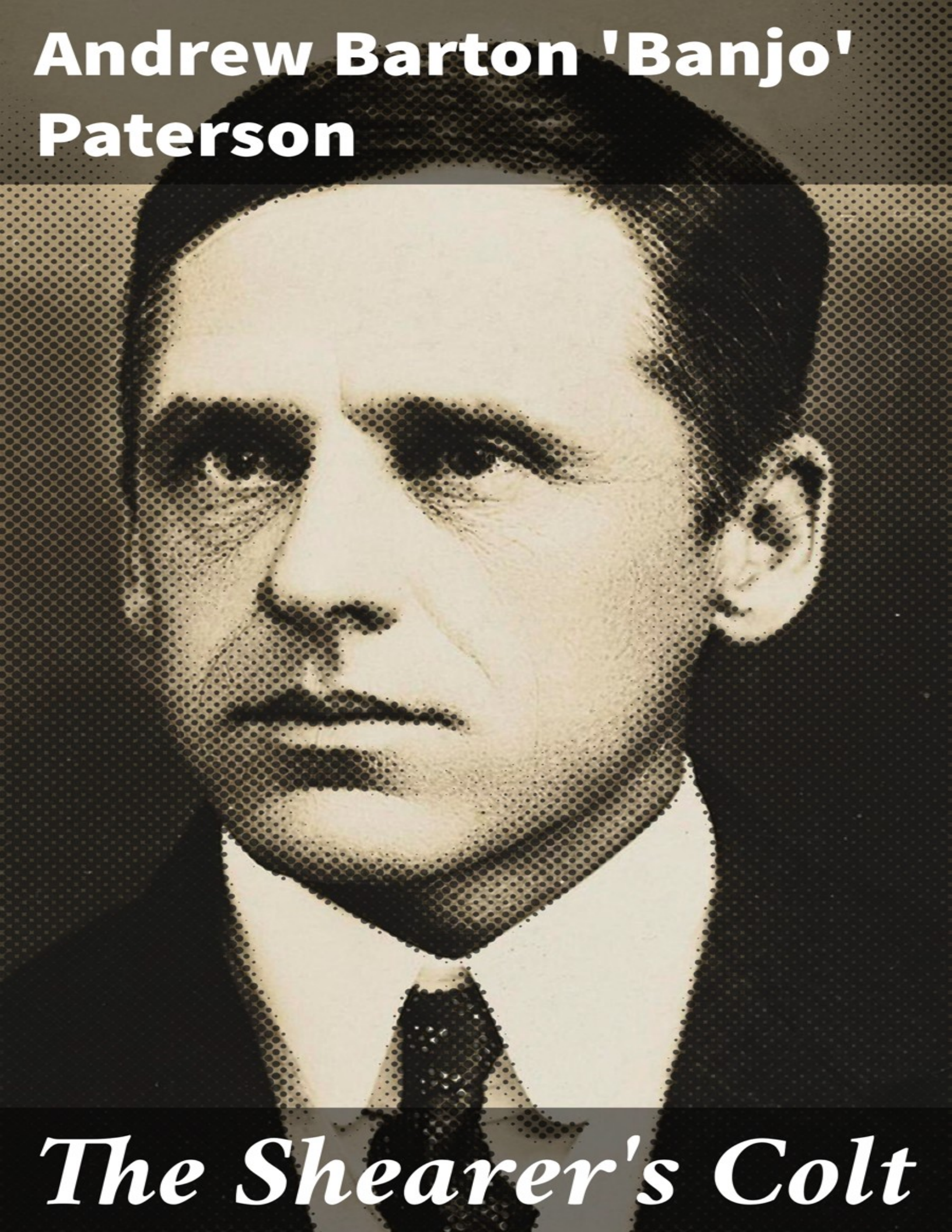
Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson



The Shearer's Colt

Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson

The Shearer's Colt

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338094483

Table of Contents

Part I

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I - An Englishman Abroad

Table of Contents

When Young Hilton Fitzroy, nephew of one earl and second cousin to another, was due to leave school, the family went into conference as to his career. His widowed mother naturally had no doubt that he would make a good Prime Minister; but the young fellow soon showed that he would be very difficult to place. His extraordinary strength, his violent temper and his stubborn refusal to bear himself lowly and reverently towards anybody, all marked him out as a throw-back to some (possibly royal) ancestor who had helped himself to everything in sight in the dim and distant past.

Fitzroy senior had been the younger son of a younger son of a county family, so his widow was left with very little money. In this extremity she was financed by the generosity of the head of the clan, a wealthy peer, who felt it his duty in the patriarchal English fashion to do something for the various scions of the house, even unto the third and fourth generation. Thus it came that young Fitzroy and his mother were allowed to live at one of the shooting-boxes belonging to the family. Here he was entered to hound, horse and gun, and he learnt the unusual accomplishment of catch-as-catch-can wrestling from an old retainer who followed their fortunes to the last. In due time he was sent on to Oxford where he might have laid the foundations of a career as Prime Minister, only that an inherited inability to pass examinations made it apparent that if he lasted even one

year at the University he would put up a remarkably good performance.

However, there are other ways of distinguishing oneself at Oxford than by obtaining a degree with first class honours. Hardly had this youth settled down in residence, than he inveigled a policeman into his rooms, got the policeman drunk and sallied out into the streets arrayed in the policeman's uniform. Wearing these borrowed plumes and knowing exactly where to go, he visited some out-of-bounds places and arrested several wealthy Indian undergraduates; but he did not take any of his captives to the police-station. Instead he accepted large bribes to let them go, and later on refused to give the money back, holding with the Tichborne claimant that those who have money and no brains are meant to provide for those who have brains and no money. Then came boat-race night when it is traditional for the undergraduates to visit London music-halls and to play up until thrown into the street by a specially recruited force of chuckers-out. This is an annual affair, a perfunctory business, usually rather boring to the chuckers-out, who have little difficulty in dealing with half-intoxicated undergraduates. But on this occasion the chief chucker-out handled young Fitzroy with unnecessary roughness, with the result that the chief chucker-out was treated to a lesson in wrestling which sent him flying down a flight of stone steps, with concussion of the brain and an action for damages to follow.

The next thing was a letter from the much worried head of the clan to the boy's mother:

DEAR MARIE,

I am afraid that your boy is too much of a handful for the effete institutions of this country. He belongs in the wide open spaces, where men are men and do not bring actions for damages. I am therefore arranging to send him out to Australia where he will have more scope for the exercise of his peculiar talents. I will put a thousand pounds to his credit and will let him either mak a spune or spoil a horn. Do not think that I am blaming you for the way in which you have brought up this boy. On the contrary I congratulate you on having produced such a type.

Yours to command,

MARR AND ESK

Arrived in Australia, the inhabitants of that country got the thousand pounds away from him in about half no time, and rather than ask for help, the young fellow applied for, and got, a position as probationary trooper in the Queensland Mounted Police. In appearance he was just what certain ladies would call a "nice boy," of dark complexion with violet-blue eyes, high cheek-bones and a firm chin, inherited, it was thought, from the royal ancestor aforesaid. Except for his springy wrestler's walk and the mat of black hair on the backs of his hands, he gave no indication of the strength that enabled him, as a probationary constable, to go single-handed into the haunts of the razor gang and bring out their best man, carrying him in his arms as a shearer carries a sheep.

On the strength of this performance he was selected out of a score of young troopers to go to Barcoo River township to relieve the local trooper who was sick. It was known that

a fairly tough man was needed at Barcoo and Fitzroy appeared to fill the specifications.

So, knowing nothing of the people, nothing of the place, and very little about Australia, he arrived at Barcoo as sole representative of the law on the day of the Barcoo Grand Annual Race-meeting.

It was a broiling day, and the leaves on the bough-and-sapling grandstand were drying to tinder in the sun. A course of a mile and a furlong round had been roughly marked out by stakes on the vast plain; if they had wished to mark out a ten-mile course they could have done it. In front of the grandstand the plain stretched away to infinity; back of it the river spread out into a maze of reed-beds; and in the middle distance on the right was Barcoo River township itself: a public house, a store, a school, a police-station and a blacksmith's shop. One wondered where the horses and the people were to come from.

But they were there all right. Horses whose training consisted mostly in being led round the circuit of these small backblocks meetings had placidly tramped their fifty miles from the last meeting. These were reinforced by a few local animals trained on the stations, and some "take-down" horses owned by shearers who mixed the shearing of sheep with the more exciting task of shearing their fellow creatures. As for the people, some of the big sheds had just cut out and "cheque-proud" shearers were there in scores. Also, every jackeroo, station-hand, prospector, fencer, splitter and contractor in the district had made some excuse or other to get a day off for the races. When a man sees nothing but sky, sheep and saltbush plain for a year at a

time, Barcoo River Races are indeed a Grand Annual meeting.

There are in Australia people who make a good living by classing sheep; an expert in humanity would have had little difficulty in classing that attendance at Barcoo Races. Nobody wore a coat, but there was something about the cut of the pants and the quality of the hat that differentiated the jackeroos (Englishmen getting colonial experience) from the tank-sinkers and fencers. There were the shearers trying to look knowing and raffish, and the racecourse hangers-on trying to look simple and respectable. One man alone might have puzzled an expert. At first glance he was undoubtedly a shearer, for his hands had the gnarled look that comes from handling sheep full of thistles, burrs, and various kinds of thorns. At a second look it would be noticed that he wore a silk shirt, which is only done by jackeroos and very flash shearers. But whatever else he was, this man was certainly not flash. About forty-five years of age, standing quite six feet high, with prominent nose, freckled red face and red hair, his long gaunt arms and huge hands gave the lie to the silk shirt and the pants which, though ready-made, were obviously expensive. Apparently knowing nobody, he looked like a supernumerary who has never spoken a line in his life and suddenly finds himself called upon to take the centre of the stage. As a simpleton he appeared to be in the A1 combing class, so he soon attracted the attention of the vultures who follow races all over the world.

"Who's the bloke with the face and hair like a bushfire? I thought I knew everybody round here, dear boy, but he's a new one on me. He looks like a shearer that's made a

cheque, and it wouldn't be too hard to get it off him. These way-backers will come at anything if you pitch the tale strong enough."

The speaker was Dear Boy Dickson, turf urger, battler and general hanger-on at race-meetings throughout Queensland; and his remarks were addressed to his partner and confederate Spider Ryan. Dear Boy was so-called because he aped the swell and could worm himself into the good hotels where the rich men were to be found, and where he addressed everybody as "Dear Boy," just to put them at their ease while he got their money from them. An Englishman by birth, a fine, personable man, well dressed and well educated, he had been faced all his life by the problem of living like a gentleman without any money. He had managed to solve the problem in his own way, but his operations had more than once brought him within the grip of the law. Finally, he had settled down as adviser of uncanny schemes for getting money from people on racecourses. It was said of him that he could talk a punter off a battleship on to a canvas dinghy in mid-ocean. His mate, Spider Ryan, had less originality and acted as a sort of chorus and backer-up to anything that Dear Boy said.

"I know who the cove is," said Spider; "the boots at the squatters' pub told me about him. His name is Carstairs, and he owns three or four stations away out back somewhere. He used to be a shearer, and so help me goodness, he strikes a gold-mine. Now he's just black with money. If we can get him by the lug he ought to be worth a couple of hundred to us. You go and breast him."

Fully aware that in their line of business a good introduction meant everything, Dear Boy Dickson hung about the vicinity of the red man like a dry-fly fisherman waiting for a trout to rise. Presently the squatter went over and leaned on a rail while he looked at a bay mare tied up in one of the stalls. Dear Boy promptly ranged up alongside him.

"Decent little mare that, dear boy," he said. "Do you know what she is?"

The red man, six feet of muscle and bone, turned his head and regarded his questioner with eyes that had that far-away look which comes from gazing over illimitable plains. So far from resenting the address of a stranger he seemed to be glad to have any one to speak to him.

"She belongs to me," he said. "I bought her to have a bit of fun. She's thoroughbred, but I don't know much about racing myself."

This was just what Dear Boy wanted--a man asking for guidance in the tortuous way of the turf. He at once set to work to establish the attitude of superiority which is essential to all successful battling, whether on the turf, in politics, or on the Stock Exchange. Get 'em down and keep 'em down, is the motto.

"Look here, dear boy," he said, "that's a nice little mare and all that, but my friend and I have one in the next race that'll positively eat her. Ours can't get beaten. We're putting five hundred on it, so we can't give away what it is till we get our money on. When we've finished we'll have the books climbing trees, and you won't be able to get a shilling

on it. You can have a hundred in with us, if you like--but not more, in fact it'll be hard to manage that."

"Listen, dear boy," he went on, "nobody here knows it, but ours won in good open company in Sydney, and it can stop and throw three or four somersaults and still beat this lot. It'll open at about ten to one, for these yokels here don't think anything can beat their local cracks. You can win a thousand pounds as easy as smoking a cigar. I tried this one with a horse I have in the Melbourne Cup, dear boy, and there was nothing between them. Of course, you must keep all this to yourself, and you'll have to give me the hundred now, for I'll shove the money on as soon as the betting opens."

Considering that Dear Boy had no horse at all this was a pretty good effort. Whether or not the squatter would have parted with his hundred pounds will never be known. As Dear Boy bent down to run his hands over the mare's legs in a very professional way, there was a quick step alongside and the mare's trainer appeared on the scene. Pointing to the unsuspecting form of Dear Boy who was still groping about the mare's feet, the trainer said:

"Who's this?"

"That's a gentleman who has a horse in the nest race," said the bushman, "and he doesn't think our mare..."

Just here Dear Boy straightened up and came face to face with the trainer.

"Stone the crows!" said the trainer, "why, it's Dear Boy Dickson! I thought you were in jail! So you have a horse in the next race, have you! Look, Mr Carstairs, if this man was

seen looking at a horse, everybody connected with the horse would get two years."

He might have said a lot more, had not Dear Boy melted away into the crowd without a word. Why waste words? To him this exposure was just an ordinary incident in life, another sprat thrown away without catching any mackerel. Better luck next time!

Leaving now the owner and trainer to discuss the prospects of the little mare, let us follow the adventures of Dear Boy Dickson in his efforts to raise some capital. Meeting Spider, he informed that worthy briefly that there "was nothing doing with the red bloke, his trainer came up and narked the lurk," meaning thereby that their intended victim had been warned of the plot against him. Then they went into a committee of ways and means, for things were really desperate with them. Even that usually reliable harvest, the drunkard crop, seemed likely to fail them; there were too many gleaners at work. As Napoleon might survey a battle-ground, Dear Boy cast his eyes over the paddock enclosure where squatters, shearers, drovers, blackfellows, trainers, and jockeys milled around like cattle on a camp, or stood three deep in front of the two liquor bars under the bough sheds. It had been a good season and there was plenty of money about; the only thing was how to get it.

At last an idea worthy of Napoleon at his best struck this General of the Battling Brigade. He noticed a man come up from the entrance gates bearing a black hand-bag which with considerable ceremony he deposited in the Secretary's office under the bough grandstand. It did not need a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that the bag contained the day's

takings, or so much of them as had been collected up to that time, and the bag might contain anything from a hundred to two hundred pounds. The Secretary's clerk, a callow youth employed in a local stock and station agent's office, dumped the bag under the table and went on with his work of elucidating the writing of the handicapper who had just issued the weights for the next race.

Like lightning the bandit general produced his scheme of operations.

"See here, dear boy," he said, "I've just thought out a lurk, but it'll want three of us. Monkey Brand's here, isn't he, and he's about your weight?"

"What's our weight got to do with it? They wouldn't put a trouser button on any horses with me and Monkey Brand riding them."

"Too right, dear boy, too right they wouldn't. But the whole crowd will rush to look at a fight when they don't have to pay anything, and you and Monkey can both scrap a bit. Now, I want you and Monkey to get up a barney in the bar. You can say he shore at Nocoleche, while the Union was on strike--I believe he did too, but that's neither here nor there--and when you say that, of course he'll *have* to hit you. Then the two of you'll get tearing and grappling each other and they'll roll you into the open, so as you can have it out. Every living soul will run to see the fight, and I'll just nip in and get that bag. Then it'll be me for the reed-beds down there at the back, and a black-tracker couldn't track an elephant in those reed-beds, dear boy. Then you and Monkey can come down to the end of the reed-beds to-night and we'll split up the stuff and scatter three different ways.

If the thing works I'll be down at the end of the reed-beds at eight o'clock to-night."

"You'd better be there, too," said Spider. "If you're not there, it'll be a shame what me and Monkey will do to you when we ketch you."

"I'm aware of that, dear boy, I'm aware of that. No use having money if you don't live to enjoy it. Now, you go and pick up Monkey and get busy."

Shortly afterwards there was a sound of harsh voices in the liquor booth.

"I'll swear you did."

"I'll swear I never."

"I'll swear you did. You shore at Nocoleche while the strike was on. The station cook told me. You shore--scab!"

Biff!

In a second the two active young fellows, snarling with fury, were rolling on the ground grappling at each other's throats. Eager hands rolled them outside, separated them, and seconds sprang up like magic. The cry of "Fight! Fight!" brought all hands on the run. The girls behind the bar left their drinks and the callow youth in the Secretary's shed, having seen nothing exciting for about two years, darted out of his bough shed leaving everything in the place to look after itself. While the excitement was at its height the well-dressed form of Dear Boy Dickson, carrying a light buggy-rug over his arm, slipped into the Secretary's office unnoticed and slipped out again in an instant, carrying the bag under the rug! During that instant he had struck a match and applied it to the tinder-like leaves of the bough shed.

Now the cry of "Fight! Fight!" was drowned in another shout of "Fire! Fire!" as the flames shot with the speed of rockets from one bunch of dry boughs to another. So fast did the fire spread that the people who were watching the fight from the grandstand had to jump out of it to save their lives. There was a wild rush to get the precious racehorses free from their bough-roofed stalls and an equally wild rush to save the kegs of rum and the cases of whisky from destruction. There was such a din that the yells of the Secretary's clerk, "The money's in there, the money's in there, and it's all burnt!" attracted no more attention than the squeakings of a mouse in an artillery bombardment. Before the loss was properly understood Dear Boy Dickson was wading knee-deep in sludge in the centre of the reed-beds and philosophically preparing himself to fight mosquitoes until eight o'clock at night.

There is a sort of spacious freedom of expression about a Queensland crowd that is not found in closely settled communities. There is no mass psychology, so to speak. Widely scattered about on lonely stations or boundary-riders' huts, or on outlying prospecting shows, each man forms his own opinion, particularly in sporting matters. Many of them read nothing but sporting papers, studying the accounts of the races and the fights until they, who have never been within a thousand miles of a big fight, will flatly contradict a man who was at the ringside. Thus it came that after the little affair on Barcoo racecourse, Red Dempsey, the shearer, who had seconded Spider Ryan, nearly came to blows with Bluey Cavanagh, prospector and ex-prize-fighter who had seconded Brand. The point at issue

was whether Brand should have used a half-arm jolt, in the manner of Bob Fitzsimmons, instead of swinging his punches wildly, like an old woman throwing a stone. There was every prospect of another and better fight over this point, until a shearers' cook, who had been hanging about the town waiting for the late sheds to start, put in his oar.

"Fight!" he said, "you don't suppose them two was fightin', do yer? Them's mates, them two. They been knockin' about together for years. Ryan could kill the other bloke in one hit, if he wanted to. Brand's smart on his feet, but he can't hit hard enough to punch his way out of a paper bag. You couldn't kid him even to pretend to fight unless he got something for it. If that bag full of frogskins [pound notes] was burnt in the fire, they'd be some of the iron frame of the bag left, wouldn't there? Let's go and have a look."

Shielding their faces with one hand and wielding long green sticks with the other, the amateur detectives raked busily in the ashes but found no framework. The crowd, watching their efforts and not knowing what it was all about, soon started a story that a man had been burnt in the fire. It was here that Mounted Trooper Fitzroy came into the business.

CHAPTER II - Fitzroy's Mistake

Table of Contents

It is an unwritten law of the outer back that a trooper shall not interfere in a fight, unless there is great disparity between the combatants, or unless they take stirrup-irons to each other. During the fight Fitzroy stalked, lonely as Napoleon on the Rock at St Helena, through the back of the crowd. His revolver made an appreciable bulge on his hip under his tunic, he was fit and well, and he hoped sincerely that he might have to make an arrest. As he stalked along he measured the various shearers and blackfellows with his eye, wondering what sort of a scrap they would put up if he had to arrest them; for this was the first time that he had acted on his own responsibility, and a policeman about to make his first arrest feels all the thrills of a concert singer making his first appearance.

When he was told that a bag of money had been stolen from the Secretary's office and that the place had been set on fire to cover up the theft he produced a note-book and proceeded to make the inquiries laid down in the police manual.

"Have any of you seen any suspicious strangers about the town?" he said.

Considering that the town was practically full of suspicious strangers, this question seemed more worthy of Doctor Watson than of Sherlock Holmes. He would have got enough names to fill his book, if Handkerchief Jones, who claimed to be the flashest man west of the Barcoo River, had not stepped in and taken charge of the proceedings.

Handkerchief Jones had earned his name because of his three guiding principles in life which were: (1) that he always wore a silk handkerchief round his neck, (2) that he always took his boots off to fight, and (3) that he never took his hat off to a lady. A horse-breaker by profession and a great singer, dancer, and playboy at the bush concerts, Handkerchief Jones felt that he had to live up to his reputation for flashness; and he knew that it would add lustre to his name if he could in some way score off this green-horn policeman.

"I seen a bloke," he said, "like a red wallaroo--looks like his head had been raddled. He's the dead ring of that feller that's wanted for the murder of the half-caste down at Leila Springs. I seen him talkin' to Dear Boy Dickson, and that ought to get any one three months, oughtn't it? Wears a barber's delight [silk shirt] and jemimas [elastic-sided boots], but the dressier they are the hotter they are. Look at Dear Boy Dickson. You couldn't get a dressier bloke than him, and look how hot he is! I'd put the word on this red bloke if I was you, trooper. There he is now, down be the fence."

Recalling the various rules laid down for the examination of suspected persons Fitzroy opened up on the red man with question one of the drill-book.

"What is your name?"

Few people are at their best when suddenly confronted by a policeman, but the red man only allowed a sort of Mona Lisa smile to pass across his face, then he drew himself smartly to attention and answered like an automaton.

"Carstairs, Fred Carstairs."

"Where do you live?"

"I live one place and another, anywhere that suits me."

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a bushman, I can do any sort of bush work. I can shear, but I'm not looking for it."

"There is some money supposed to be missing from the Secretary's room. Do you know anything about it?"

"I do not."

"Were you ever at Leila Springs?"

"Yes, I shore there one year."

"Do you remember that a half-caste named Andy was murdered down there?"

"Yes, I was there at the time."

"Do you know a man they call Dear Boy Dickson?"

"I have spoken to him."

"H'm. Well, I'm afraid I will have to detain you for identification. You may be charged in connexion with the disappearance of a lot of money from the race-course."

"But, supposing I'm prepared to deposit some money to show I'm not a crook?"

"How much would you deposit?"

"Would a hundred thousand pounds be any good?"

"Don't be funny! You can tell all that to the magistrate. Come along."

And Trooper Fitzroy had made his first arrest!

As there was no lock-up cell at the little bush police-station, the suspect was accommodated with a stretcher on the veranda. Here he slept very badly, as two hostile drunks were chained to the uprights in the fowl-house, where their roars of defiance kept the fowls and turkeys in a state of

cackle and gobble that would have awakened the seven sleepers of Ephesus.

Next day the wires from Brisbane ran hot with excited messages. There was one from the General Manager of the Empire Pastoral Company protesting against the detention of one of their most valued clients on a ridiculous charge. There was one from the Inspector-General of Police to the local sergeant:

"Tell Fitzroy to apply for discharge, give him month's leave while matter under consideration."

Having passed this message on to the trooper, the sergeant then set to work to find out the whereabouts of Dear Boy Dickson, Spider Ryan and Monkey Brand; but beyond the fact that within the next few weeks each of them sported a new suit of clothes and a gold watch and chain, no clue was ever obtained as to the whereabouts of the missing racecourse money.

By this time the millionaire suspect had been turned loose and was packing his gear in his battered old Ford, meaning to pay a surprise visit to one or two of his stations. He had a long drive in front of him with a lot of gates to open, and it suddenly struck him that for all his money, he was a very lonely man. Besides, he wanted someone to open the gates.

He thought for a while of picking up one of the town boys as a travelling companion and sending the youngster back by the mail-coach when he had done with him. Then he thought what poor company a boy would be, and his mind went back to the trooper who had arrested him. He himself had been one of the under dogs of this world all his life, and

here he had got this young trooper into trouble for want of a word or two. With a queer smile he turned his car and drove down to the police-station.

There he found Fitzroy who was giving his horse a last touch up with a brush.

"Come here, young feller," he said. "I hear they're goin' to give you the sack. Do you want a job?"

"Yes, I'll have to get a job of some sort, but I don't suppose you'd give me one after the way I treated you."

"Oh, I don't know. I like a man with a bit of grit and you done me no harm. You see, all my life I've just been plugging along, no more important than one sheep in a mob. Now I've got money and I want to get something out of it."

He paused here for a while and appeared to have some difficulty in explaining what he wanted. His manner was apologetic rather than patronizing and Fitzroy wondered what was coming next. He felt that he himself could make a first-class success of helping anybody to spend money; so he thought he had better mention the line of life in which he was most likely to shine.

"I'm a Londoner myself," he said, "and I could show you how to spend money in London. I don't know what a man would do with money out here."

"That's just it," said the red man, "I been a battler all me life, poor as a crow, and now I got money I don't know what to do with it. But I'm terrible fond of horses and I thought I'd buy some horses and go in for racin'. I bought that little mare I got here, just to give it a try, but I didn't start her when you ran me in. I been in the shearing-shed and the