

NUGENT'S HUT

"A good man, that Nugent," said the Governor later when we were safely across the river. "We couldn't want better in a place like this."

"I agree, Your Excellency." This was Martin Fowler, who had managed to position himself so that the dust from His Excellency's horse didn't discommode him. "He's keeping the natives in order, that much is obvious. And it is all true what they told us in Adelaide, that he has learnt their language as well as they know it themselves."

"Do you know what worried me, Fowler? The man never properly looked me in the eye. Did you notice that too?"

"I did. Most odd," said Fowler, with a little cough as some dust reached him. "But if I may say so, sir, it is possible that he felt the embarrassment of his position. A mere corporal of police and you the Governor of the colony visiting his post."

"Perhaps, Fowler, perhaps."

They rode in silence for a while.

"We must - remind me when we return to Adelaide - do something about the name of this place. The colony is twelve years old now, and we must think of the future. Surely we can find a name more dignified than Nugent's Hut for this river crossing."

"The name of the native tribe would be appropriate, Your Excellency," replied Fowler, "or perhaps the name they call this place in their own language, if it is not too barbaric."

"Really, Fowler, where is your loyalty? This will be one of the finest river ports in our colony, in time, and you want to call it some primitive name, or leave it named after an Irish corporal of police. Irish, mark you, Fowler."

"Sir, I didn't suggest leaving it Nugent's Hut. I must point out that there is ample precedent for using a native name for a place. There are many such in the colony already."

"There is also ample precedent for recalling that this is a British colony, Fowler, and that we are British subjects governing this place in the name of Her Majesty."

I heard no more of this, as I stopped and tethered my horse for a moment while I broke off a piece of what looked like a polygonum and stowed it with my specimens.

I had noticed something of what the Governor had seen in Francis Nugent, the corporal of police at the river crossing. On our first afternoon there, the Governor was sitting with Nugent outside his hut, asking him all manner of questions about his relations with the native people of the river and the lake shores. I sensed that I was being looked at, and when I glanced up from my sketching of his hut and its environs, it was to see that Nugent had his eyes on me more than on the Governor, to whom he was talking; but when he sensed that I was aware of his

perusal he looked away in another direction.

When I found out later what I now know about Corporal Nugent, I could understand why he was so edgy during the Governor's pedantic catechism of questions. Certainly he kept his eyes on me when he was around the hut, as I sketched the surroundings and collected the specimens of plants to work upon later, making notes about the locations in which I found them and so on.

Somewhere I still have the first pencil sketch of Nugent's Hut; I mean the original, not the romantic version I did much later when my journal was published in London by Smith, Elder and Company. It is in the little notebook I used during that expedition, when I was fortunate enough to be allowed to accompany the Governor on his exploration of the land around the lakes at the river's mouth. The hut was all that the word "hut" means to me, really a quite miserable place for anyone; though perhaps, Nugent being an Irishman, he had been prepared to tolerate more discomfort than an Englishman would have done.

If you have read my journal, you will have seen the picture of the hut. I must be honest enough to say that the sepia plate, fine as it is, for the lithography is of high quality, does not convey what the hut was really like. Perhaps it does it more than justice, for the composition, looking at it now, has more to do with the brooding thickness of the scrub that surrounded the little clearing than with the hut itself. You don't see the spiders that inhabited the walls, or the centipede that visited the Governor's bags.

Though he had been there six years, the only white man for miles, Nugent had done very little to lodge himself as befits a white man in a savage community. He had used saplings for a framework, and then has filled in the interstices with tied bundles of reeds. This he had made partly proof against the wind and the rain by the liberal daubing of mud, of a thick noisome appearance. I don't know how he kept this on the walls, such as they were, in winter, for in the summer when we passed through his post the mud was cracking off in the January heat. I imagine the winter rains would turn his walls to a soupy consistency very quickly. What happened to the roof I dared not think.

The door was a curiosity, for he had made himself a frame, again from saplings, and this he had covered with kangaroo skin.

All was neat and clean inside, which was where the Governor slept, while the rest of the party camped in the clearing. The corporal had ranged around his walls a collection of necessary equipment: his cooking utensils, his firearms, a cutlass. There were also things of curious value that he had collected from the natives, in the way of spears and shields and other things I had not the curiosity to seek the meaning of. Fowler told me of a splintered spear Nugent had shown him, which Nugent claimed he had broken over the head of the native warrior who had tried to use it on him.

There were no beds, but he had some stretchers, amply supplied with opossum-skin rugs, which fortunately we

had no need of, the weather being extremely hot by day and the nights mild. Jim Harry, who looked after our party's horses, told me he had seen strings of these foetid opossum-skins hanging to dry in the trees beyond the hut.

Nugent had few words. He spoke when he was spoken to, offered no comment of his own, and displayed no curiosity at all at our arrival or the purpose of our expedition. He was, altogether, a strange man, tall and lean, with a beard of gingery tint. Fowler had brought the letters for Nugent that had been waiting for him in Adelaide, both of them from Ireland, and Nugent had taken them without thanks and put them in his pocket. I recall my own emotions at the receipt of a letter from home, from my parents and my sister living in Somerset, so far from here. Yet Nugent's letters seemed to mean nothing to him, though somewhere there were kindred or old acquaintance who remembered him enough to write to him. Two days later these letters were still unopened, for I saw them sitting thus on a small shelf in his hut.

Nugent's Hut, I heard the Governor telling Nugent, would become more and more important as settlers came to the district. At the moment, however, it was only a policeman's hut in a clearing with the scrub behind it and a view of the river to the front. Nugent's task was to keep the natives in order, and to keep surveillance of the river crossing in front of him, this being the best place to cross the river in many miles. Indeed, though it was a place little visited by other white men, there were already tracks of bullock carts leading to the spot from both sides of the river, and overlanders and settlers and the occasional escaped villain made their way through there. Nugent had a boat to help travellers, and there were some native canoes which could be used. The latter were mere shells of warped bark with the ends stopped with clay. Most travellers had to swim their horses across, and it took some days to ferry a mob of sheep across, using rafts made on the site.

I had little conversation with Nugent, and indeed little opportunity for it, as he was in constant demand by the Governor, who seemed determined to return to Adelaide with a full command of the lore of the tribes of this region. I did not accompany them on their expedition to the lake, where they visited an encampment of natives, for I wished to complete a number of sketches of trees and shrubs and to put my specimens into some order. So I had a quiet day by myself around Nugent's Hut, busily sketching and wandering through the adjacent scrub.

In the early afternoon of that day, something more than a mile from the hut, I was among a small clump of the pine trees that grow in this colony when I surprised some natives, for I heard a cry in a woman's voice and then some movements that suggested several persons escaping away from me as quickly as possible. I even came across a small shelter of a few boughs and the smoking remains of a cooking fire, which I smothered with some dirt. However, I saw nobody, and when the others returned from the lake, with the Governor scratched and unhappy with the bites of the mosquitoes, and Fowler muddy and miserable, I asked Nugent about the little camp I had found.

"I know the pines, Mr Allen, but there's no one lives there."

When I spelt out again what I had seen, he grunted.

"It might be someone has left the tribe for a while. I'll have a look tomorrow if I have time."

That night, after the Governor had retired to his stretcher in the hut, Fowler and the others sat around the fire talking. Nugent was there, squatting and scowling, or so I imagined, in the dark, for he seemed a man of short temper and little sociability.

"Corporal Nugent," said Fowler, "You've been here for six years now?"

It had the intonation of a question, but Fowler was a man who always had his facts right.

"That's so, Mr Fowler."

"What shall I tell your superiors in Adelaide? Do you wish to be transferred? I am sure that the fine service you have given here will be to your credit if you wish a posting elsewhere."

"I'm content here, sir, and I'll not ask for a change until I stop being content."

Conversation does not get far when that kind of stop is put to an exchange. I had discovered this difficulty with Nugent myself, for when I questioned him on the subject of trees and shrubs, he proved to be either ignorant or indifferent. The only subject on which he would warm was one in which he displayed his knowledge of the customs of the natives. I had never been much interested in that, but I remember the discussion of the mussel shells for the unanswered questions that went with it.

On the banks of the lake, which I had not yet seen, there are many middens of shells, mussel shells, at places where the natives have camped and eaten. These are fresh-water mussels, found in the river, on the wide muddy flats, and also in many of the shallow portions of the lakes. There was also a midden outside Nugent's Hut, the shells bleaching white in the sun, with an aroma and a buzz of flies about it. In shape it was a low cone.

"What are these, corporal?" This was Jim Harry, picking up one of the shells off the heap.

"Mussel shells."

"Are they good to eat?"

"They are, very good."

"They are certainly sharp. I could cut my hand on this edge."

"You could, if you were careless. The natives use them as a knife, and the women cut their hair with them."

Fowler joined the conversation. "I saw many of these middens down at the lake today. How do the natives catch them?"

"Middens is not a word I know, Mr Fowler, but the black women collect them on the mud flats or dive for them in the river. They bring them up in little net bags. On the lake, they build a raft and go out a long way to dive for them."

"I've tasted cockles," said Jim Harry, "but not mussels. I suppose they're much the same. How do you get your supply of them? That's a lot of eating in that pile."

"I've been eating them for five years. That's why the

pile is so big. They're a taste you get used to."

Nugent was busy for a while putting another small branch on the fire, and scraping the coals together. We hadn't needed this fire for warmth, but it had been indispensable for companionship in a dark, remote place such as this.

Because we were moving on early the next day, Fowler and Nugent got to talking of details of the supplies which Nugent needed, while the rest of us bedded down for the night. A little later someone went for a walk in the scrub, and I fell asleep before he returned.

As early as I woke the next morning, Nugent was already up and had the cooking fire going. Soon Jim Harry and the two men of the police escort were busy getting everything packed in the bags ready to be loaded on to the horses when we moved off. The Governor was having a leisurely shave inside; I saw Fowler carrying a steaming mug of water in to him for this purpose. Fowler took advantage of the weeks away from Adelaide to grow an impressive beard, much to the chagrin of the Governor, who would have liked to do likewise but admitted to Fowler that his beard was rather too thin.

So it was that by nine o'clock our party was ready to leave. We mounted our horses and rode down to the crossing place, where Harry took charge of swimming the horses across while the bags were ferried across. Harry and the first string of horses were plunging noisily through the reeds when I looked in my saddlebag waiting in the pile of baggage beside the river. The valuable notebook, with all my jottings about the new specimens I had collected, and my sketches of what we had seen, was missing. I had left it in Nugent's Hut the previous night, after showing His Excellency some sketches of river birds I had done that afternoon.

"It is only half a mile back to the hut," I said. "I'll have plenty of time to walk back there and get it, and can cross over in the last boat."

The Governor nodded assent, and Nugent looked concerned.

"I don't like you to walk back there in this heat, sir. I'll get the notebook for you, if you can tell me where you think you left it."

I had opened my mouth to tell him but my first syllable was cut short by an explosive "Nonsense, Nugent" from the Governor.

"It won't take me long, Your Excellency."

"Nothing of the sort, Nugent. I'm not having any of us set foot in these bark contrivances your black friends here have made, without you here. At least you can make them understand you."

"With that he strode off to inspect a canoe tree, leaving poor Nugent white-faced.

"Leave it for now, sir," said Nugent to me. "You'll be coming back this way and can collect it then."

"I'll need it, corporal, and I'll not be long."

"Sir, please, don't go back. It's not that important, I'm sure." He was by now almost trembling as he made this request.

"I'll not miss your boats, corporal. This will take me ten minutes."

At that he bit his lip and turned his back to busy himself stowing the baggage in the nearest canoe.

I was puffing from the slight uphill walk by the time I got back to the hut. A wind had risen and it was set to be a dusty day. Already the marks of our footprints and of the horses' hooves were disappearing in the clearing as little wisps of sand drifted with the wind and filled the indentations we had left.

When I stepped into the hut, the woman who was in there, her back to the door, fussing at something on the table, turned and said "Nugen'?" in a high little voice that turned to a start of fear when she saw that it was me.

She was a native, not a comely one by any means, and running a little to fat like some of the poor wretches I had seen taking the government handouts in Adelaide. I have never been very good at telling the age of natives, men or women, but imagined this black woman to be in her thirties, which I am told since is a high age with them.

I took her at first to be an intruder out to pillage the hut in its owner's absence, and was about to deal with her accordingly (though I could never bring myself to emulate the legendary Sergeant Mason's feat of running down thieving lubras on his horse; some wild-eyed centaur they must have imagined him to be.) Then I was aware that there were two other beings in the room, both children, and both, I was astonished, not the black of the natives but a light brown colour. The boy was perhaps four years old, certainly no more, and his sister a year younger. Both ran to their mother, but could clutch only figureatively at her skirts, for she wore the accustomed summer garments of her tribe. The children were similarly bare of clothing.

But most curious of all, and most shocking at that moment to me, was the obvious heritage of these children. The nose and mouth of the boy reminded one of Nugent, though the brow and chin were of a native cast. His sister's face had clear European features, without native tracings in it at all, though the colour of her skin spoke of that part of her ancestry.

There was fear in the woman's face, but in the eyes of the children I could see that they regarded my presence as that of an interloper, and I could think of nothing to do but to move around the table to collect my notebook from the shelf on which I could see it lying. As I did so the woman and the children moved quickly around the other side of the table and out the door, and when I went to follow I could see that she had snatched up the girl and was running, with the boy at her heels, into the scrub.

Nugent watched me return to the riverbank, his eyes never quite meeting mine, and so great was his confusion that he managed to drop one of Fowler's bags into the slush that was churned up where the boats were being loaded. I was now aware of the natives - whose canoes these were - looking at us with impassive faces, but observing all that we were doing.

"Did you find it, Mr Allen?" This was the Governor, and the formality of the "Mr Allen" showed that he had overcome some of the nervousness his irritability had earlier displayed, and was now looking for a butt for his irony.

"I found my notebook, Your Excellency, where I thought

it was, and here it is, closed and silent as always. I found the wind in the clearing had begun already to erase our footprints as if none of us had ever been to Nugent's Hut."

"You've a touch of the poet in you this morning, Mr Allen. It must be the north wind, and this heat." With that he stepped delicately into his boat for the crossing.

I had been watching Nugent while I said this to the Governor, and thought I caught a flicker of understanding in his eye, but was by no means certain of this. Accordingly I managed things so that I was the last man on the west bank of the river, with Nugent to take me across.

Nugent rowed, and I sat facing him, both of us silent until we were nearly to the other shore. Twice he made to clear his throat as if to speak, or perhaps it was just the dust in the air and the effort of rowing. So finally I spoke.

"I saw much at your hut, Corporal Nugent, that both you and I would wish I had not seen."

"Did you, sir?"

"What I saw there, corporal, shocked and amazed me. They are your children, of course?"

He was silent, not denying it, with his impassive face glowing from the exertion of rowing, and little drops of perspiration on his ginger beard.

"I find myself at a loss to know what to do about it, for I am aware of the high opinion your colleagues hold of you, and the trust that the colonial authorities put in you for the maintenance of authority and order in this district."

There was no repentance in the man, and no longer any fear. "So I'm told, sir."

Only the sound of water and oars disturbed us for a while. As we neared the shore, I could hear Fowler excitedly prattling of a theory of his, that on the eastern side of the river we should find many new and different species of animals. Jim Harry was getting the horses ready for us to travel on.

Finally, I felt I should speak to Nugent again. "I have thought about what we were discussing, corporal."

"Discussing, sir?"

"I have decided that it would be better if I acted as if I had never had to visit your hut that last time. I will not speak of the matter again."

"Thank you, sir. Be careful as you step out. The mud is slippery here."

Then, as I rejoined my party, Nugent unceremoniously made his farewells and re-crossed the river. We moved on, with the Governor telling Fowler what a good choice Nugent had been for this post and promising himself that he would congratulate the commissioner on the wisdom of the appointment, when we returned to Adelaide.