

THE CAVE SKELETON

by Archibald Meston

One bright summer day in October, 1871, I was out shooting at Cape Pallarenda, a few miles north of Townsville. Starting at daylight I arrived on the summit of the Cape about 9 o'clock, having shot a native companion on the flat and a turkey in a patch of scrub in one of the ravines between the rough granite spurs of the range. Not being quite satisfied with the extent of my ramble, nor the supply of game, I followed the range to where it dipped in the sea, and thence along the beach to the Black River. I crossed at the mouth during a very low tide, keeping a sharp look out for crocodiles. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon I stood on the bank of a saltwater creek, running into Halifax Bay. Not more than thirty yards away a crocodile, about twelve feet long, was lying in the afternoon sun on a small sandspit. When a crocodile is "head or tail on" it is useless firing, as the ball would simply glance off his back or the top of his head. So, in a playful mood, I hailed him with a cheerful — "hello, there, old fellow!" and he turned broadside on in a second to see where the unusual sound came from. The ball struck him in the region of the heart and he threw himself over backwards into the creek and disappeared.

A moment afterwards, a blackfellow appeared from behind a big pandanus on a small sandridge on the other side of the creek, about one hundred yards away. Making a friendly sign, which I returned, he left the tree and walked up to the edge of the creek. Looking cautiously into the water he said "*wanya Tuccanang?*" — where is the crocodile? I replied, "*Tuccanang walgoon*" — crocodile dead!

Before he recovered from his surprise at hearing me reply in his own dialect, I asked where he camped and where the other blacks were situated. He said his own people and some of the Palm Island blacks were hunting half-a-mile away. I walked eight hundred yards up the creek and crossed, he walking parallel on the other side. On joining him, we went towards where

the blacks were hunting. Hearing wild yells and a sound as of a horse galloping, we turned to see a big red and white long-horned bullock come tearing down a small razor-back spur, scattering stones and sticks in all directions, and making a bee line for some remote point in space, with evidently a frenzied desire to arrive there as soon as possible. His course brought him within forty yards of where we were standing. At the moment, I was rather in doubt concerning the number of blacks in the locality, how far they could be trusted. That bullock seemed to offer suddenly a providential solution of a little problem with which I was wrestling, and so he died suddenly in the midst of his mad career. The blacks vanished on hearing the shot, and came up with considerable hesitation, only after my friend had called them three times. They looked at me very suspiciously and were greatly astonished at the dead bullock.

There were sixteen, all strapping active men carrying boomerangs, spears, and small throwing nullas. One had a couple of cel catchers made out of lawyer vine. A familiar sign with the right hand and a friendly sentence placed us all on the best of terms. Then I gravely intimated that the bullock was killed specially as a present for them; that the whole animal was entirely at their disposal, and that nothing would afford me greater pleasure than the bestowal of a similar munificent gift on any future occasion. This impressed my dark friends with an immediate belief that I was not only the owner of that particular bullock, but probably of all the cattle in the Townsville district.

As the bullock was a "scrubber," owned by anybody or nobody, the question of ownership caused me no serious anxiety—under the circumstances! And of course my reputation as a man possessed of countless bullocks and doubtless unlimited power sent me heaven high in the savage estimation, exactly as it would in civilized circles. And the style in which those Myalls proceeded to dissect that bullock with two shear-blade knives and my bowie knife, would have made a city butcher sit down on his block and whistle. Two of the younger men started to make an oven, digging alternately, while two others collected round stones from a watercourse. When I returned from a stroll towards the coast range, the hole was full of hot stones and slabs of liver were grilling on the top. The majority of the blacks were

cooking steaks on forked sticks stuck in front of the fire.

A more contented band of Myalls never assembled on this continent since the landing of Captain Cook. Their appetites, if supplied at schedule prices and Government expense, would have necessitated fresh taxation, and their digestion would have made an emu or an alderman red headed with envy. Then they warbled one or two songs of their native land, and I contributed a very old corroboree from the Tweed River. Had there been a reporter present, he would have stated that "the visitor's song was received with tremendous applause, and vociferously encored." They awoke at intervals during the night, replenished the fire, cooked and ate more beef and relapsed into peaceful slumbers.

One old fellow, with grey hair, remained awake talking to me for a couple of hours. His name was Moonalba, and his wife and all his children were dead. He remembered the shooting of the Palm Island blacks, (tribe of Boorgaman) by the "Will of the Wisp" cutter people in 1843, and related how the news of Kennedy's landing in 1848 came down from the blacks at Cardwell. He actually knew the number of Kennedy's party, and spoke of the horses, the sheep, the drays, and the dogs:— Yarraman, Cargoan, Wheelbarrow, and Ooda. He knew Jimmy Morrill, who was with the Burdekin blacks from 1846 to 1862, and called him Mogoer-Munya, i.e. "cloud man" (man from the clouds.)

Finally, the aged warrior took a couple of woomeras (*wullaburra*) and beat time slowly to a melancholy chant that he called *Boonjilman teerahna* — "old man's song," — and which sounded like the Dead March, from the *Saul* of some aboriginal Handel. What thoughts of the by-gone years were fluttering as vague shadows through that dark brain which had recorded so many terrible scenes? Silently he gazed into the fire, until the expiring flashes of yellow light reflected in his eyes made them look like those of a tiger.

Eastward I saw the outline of Rattlesnake Island, and beyond the gloomy peaks towering from the seagirt Palms. From the beach was heard the "long wash of Australian seas" — doubtless not different from any other seas — and landward,

looming above us, were the black spires and granite domes of the coast range.

And after a brief silence too sacred to be broken, old Moonalba murmured the magic word *boonjoora* (sleep), and folding his arms beneath his head, composed himself, face downwards, for a temporary oblivion from the memories of the past. Then he rose again suddenly to a sitting posture! He had forgotten something!

“Long ago, sixty moons (*bowaree*) (indicated by both hands five or six times) a strange white man had wandered into that region, lived with the blacks for three months, then gone away and died in a cave not a mile from where we were camped.”

This mysterious stranger, “all stern of look and strong of limb,” had excited both fear and respect. He had come there from the direction of Townsville, and three times journeyed to that town, returning on each occasion with his three blacks loaded with ammunition and other things for himself; and knives, tomahawks, blankets, and matches for his native friends. He was a strange man who talked to himself, cared nothing for life or death, read much in one book and wrote much in another, killed everything he fired at, and cured any of the blacks who were sick.

The expressive gestures of the old savage when describing the writing and reading were quite as eloquent as the most lucid description.

Here was an unexpected romance! An unknown white man! a cave! a skeleton! a book! a diary! a revelation! a biography! Heaven alone knew what thrilling tale of love, poetry, revenge, jealousy, adventure and death!

And old Moonalba, his epigastric region crowded with roast liver and imperfectly cleaned bovine innards, relapsed into a Cretan labyrinth of nightmares, out of which no Ariadne except sunrise and a dig in the ribs could ever deliver him; while I discreetly retired for some distance to camp under an old pandanus, to gaze meditatively on “Heaven’s azure roof fretted with golden fires,” the Yamboreega of the Myall poets, and silently sink to a secure repose, over-shadowed by the “vast void Night.”

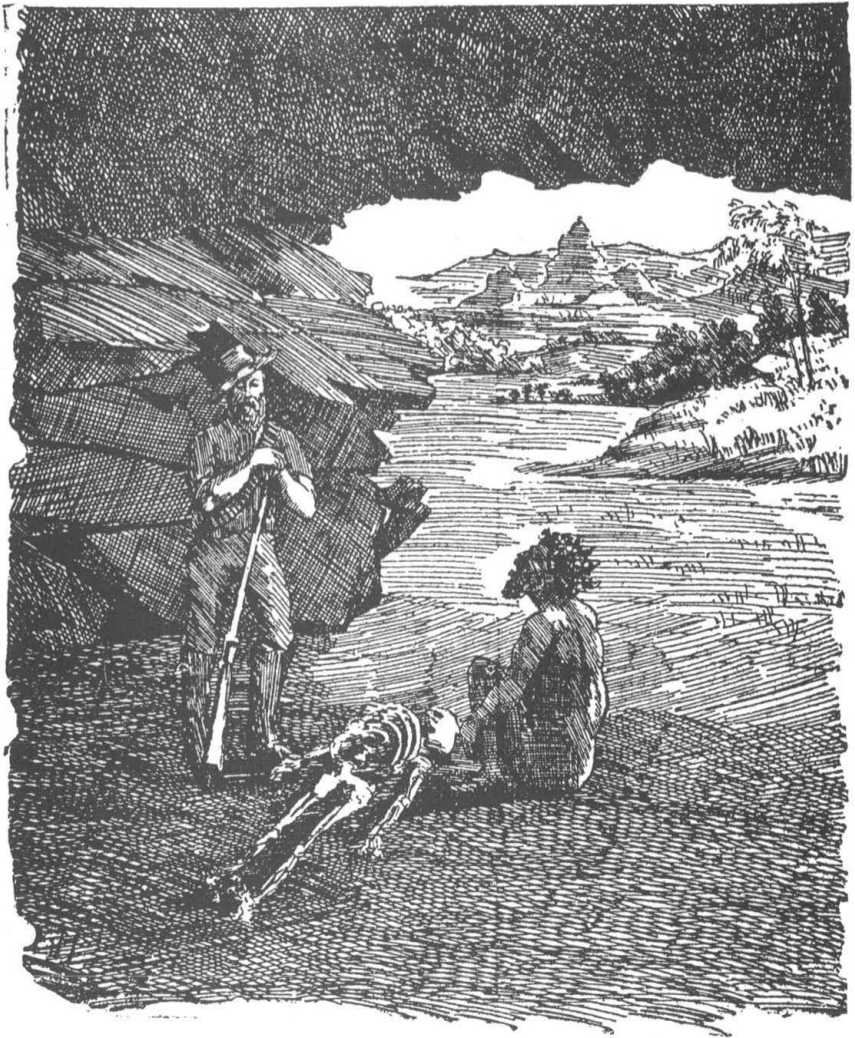
“Morn slowly rolled the clouds away,” – in the usual fashion – and I awoke to find sixteen of the aboriginal aristocracy of this continent in a slumber compared to which that of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus was an ordinary afternoon nap. I had camped about two hundred yards away, and on walking over to the mangled carcass of the bullock I saw the whole party lying round the fire, and apparently strongly disposed to sleep into the middle of next week. I awakened Moonalba, and requested him kindly but firmly to pilot me to the cave where the white man died.

Moonalba was prepared to do anything except that one particular service! Then I quietly, but impressively, called his attention to the shadow of a small bloodwood tree, drew a line in the sand, and told him if he failed to start for the cave before the shadow reached that line, he would be the deadest black-fellow on this side of kingdom come. You cannot discuss a serious subject, and argue the point with a native. Brevity is the soul of eloquence and wit with him. Friendship or enmity, life or death, kind as a woman or cruel as the grave. There is no half-way house. Better not try the experiment! So Moonalba simply requested time to fill his internal vacuum, previous to escorting me to any point of the compass. So patient is quiet resolve, when supported by the latest discovery in scientific firearms.

After “bretkfast” we started up the ravine leaving fifteen coloured gentlemen snoring like that Ossianic hero, Oscar, who could only be awakened by huge boulders rolled against his skull. But after travelling three quarters of a mile, and ascending about three hundred feet, my ancient Palinurus pointed to a cliff-faced granite rock in the eastern front of the range, and intimated his entire willingness to be shot at once, there and then, rather than go a yard further in that direction. This was on Sunday morning about seven o’clock.

He pointed out the cave, told me that everything was there exactly as when the white man died five years ago, and I sat down on a granite rock. I knew the Australian native too well to “argufy.” Therefore I left Moonalba on his granite seat and started for the cave, which was about a hundred feet above my

starting point and commanded a splendid view to the east, looking out on Halifax Bay, the Palm Islands, Magnetic Island, Herald, Acheron Islands, to say nothing of Rabbit Island, the Teegoora or Thunder Island of the natives, where in 1881 I saw



THE OCCUPANT OF THE CAVE.

a couple of big black and white rabbits when on a cruise in the "Maude," a yacht captained by that genial, trustworthy young navigator, Edwin Norris, Junior, now unhappily one of the devil's brigade.

A little climbing brought me to the cave of death. A series of granite steps, cut out by nature only, took me on to a curious ledge about four feet wide leading round to a cave facing towards the south. The site of the cave is easily distinguished from the deck of any coasting steamer between the Townsville jetty and the Palm Islands. I entered that dismal granite ante-chamber of the tomb, where a fellow mortal five years before had looked out for the last time upon the blue immensity of earth and ocean. Above me hung the enormous granite roof. The cave represented the wear and waste of centuries, perhaps of many thousand years. Ledges, a foot or two in width, were around the walls as if fashioned by the hand of man. The only tracks of a living animal were those of the rock wallaby from whose agile feet no spot upon the mountains is ever sacred.

And on the floor of the cave was the skeleton of a human being. Not a bone disturbed. Even the scrub rat had left that spot untouched. The gun, the revolver, the pocket aneroid, the two-edged short stiletto, the silver watch and chain, the waist belt and the buckle, two sovereigns, two half-crowns—all there as on the day their owner departed for the land of shadows.

The reader can imagine my emotions. I went to the mouth of the cave and cooeed for Moonalba. The answering call came with a sharp terminal quaver, which implies that the caller is coming at once. The old native came up the rocks like a wallaby and stood beside me on the ledge. He looked with awe into the dim light of the cave, and told me that the white man was always walking about at night and the gins had seen a woman in a white dress sitting beside him on the rock—even in midday. For that reason no blacks could be induced to go near the place. Then he spoke of the stranger's kindness to his people, and how they loved and trusted him, even while believing from his strange manner that he was mad.

With what intense emotion and keen interest I stood on that granite ledge, and listened to the abrupt and disconnected

but graphic description which that son of primeval nature gave the mysterious man whose fleshless skeleton was lying beside us in the lonely cave! And far away in the eastward, rose the nulla-shaped form of Cootharinga, and the tall ships slept by their anchors on the blue waters of Cleveland Bay. And Moonalba sat down on the rock, and wailed a low sad song for the dead, beating time with both hands on his thighs.

*The sea eagle flies over us,
He looks at the sun and the earth,
At Mameèra and fire-eyed Malòan;
He seeks in the trees on the mountains,
He looks by the rocks and the rivers,
For the brother and friend of Moonalba;
For the friend of the race of Almarra,
The stranger who cometh no more!
Goondawya! (Good-bye)*