

One of our Bush Girls.

FOR THE NORTH QUEENSLAND REGISTER BY E. A. DALY.

She — the owner's daughter — was sitting on the verandah sewing. I was in the office (a little room out on the end of the verandah), writing. I had only arrived at the station the evening before, and knowing the old man well, he would have me remain and give my horses a few days' spell. He and the stockmen were out drafting a mob of cattle, but would be home in the evening.

The Chinaman (cook and gardener) was down in the garden about half-a-mile away. The gang of Kanakas were out in the bush cutting timber. So Nelly and I were absolutely and utterly alone. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and hot, as it generally is at that hour during summer time in North Queensland. That intense silence which reigns in the bush was unbroken by the faintest sound. The young girl bent over her sewing, lost in her own thoughts. I wrote on, till having finished my letter, I turned from the desk and sat gazing through the open doorway, admiring the unconscious Ellen. How pure her white skin seemed, how lovely her long, fair hair, and how sweet and dainty she looked in her light summer dress; and, oh! what a contrast to the dusky damsels, who graced, or disgraced, some of the neighbouring homesteads with their presence.

Nelly was an only child. Her mother had been dead some years, so when the girl returned from school, all the care of the household devolved on her; and well she did her duty. Always up to time to get her father's breakfast, and from then till dinner she flew around with broom and duster, sweeping and cleaning, that which the careless gins, her only maids, had half-done, or neglected to do.

'Twas a pleasure to enter that bush home, everything was so clean and tidy; and bright-eyed Nelly was always so sweet

to look upon, and received you with such open-hearted hospitality that you felt at your ease there in a few minutes.

As I watched her working, I could not help wondering how she could content herself with such a dull existence, but she did not feel the isolation of her life in the least. 'Twas her home; she had spent most of her time there; she adored her father, and all her energies were bent on making him happy and comfortable. Nobody, she said, could cook for or look after him like herself, and she was happy in the thought. She must have been thinking of him then, for a slight smile curled her rosy, and very kissable lips. I smiled in sympathy, and some subtle instinct caused her to look suddenly towards me, and catching my stare of open admiration, she blushed and looked away over the patch of open ground in front of the house. Then her bright eyes dilated, her rosy lips lost their colour, and her face grew white. Her fingers trembled so that as she attempted to resume her sewing she could scarcely hold the needle.

"In the name of goodness," I began. . . .

"Hush," she replied, in a low, warning voice, never lifting her eyes from her work, "there are a lot of arms there in the corner, near the desk. I think they are loaded, but see, make sure, as quietly as you can; the blacks are on us!"

Without a moment's delay I turned, and picking up a rifle, opened the breech and examined it, found it loaded. There were three rifles, a shot gun, and two revolvers, each of which I placed on the table ready to my hand, while she, brave girl, having recovered her first fright, sat there pretending to sew, and seemingly unconscious of the mob of Myalls who were slowly approaching the house. Glancing through the corner of the window I saw a large mob of blackfellows walking towards the garden gate, and holding up their hands in sign of peace, apparently unarmed, but anyone who had lived amongst these Myalls, and "been at the game before," could see by the dust that rose behind them that they were dragging their spears, the heads of which they held between their toes. So they were all armed, and meant mischief too, but were trying to take us unawares.

"Are you ready," said Nelly without lifting her eyes.

“Yes.”

Then she rose, bringing the sewing with her, walked into the office, and shut and bolted the door behind her.

The moment the blacks saw this they seized their spears and came with a rush, thinking she was alone, for they had already killed the Chinaman down in the garden.

“Now,” said Nelly, “you fire and I’ll load, don’t let them get into the garden if you can help it, or we are done for.”

Running the rifle through the open window, I fired, and a warrior dropped. One couldn’t miss at such short distance. Then Nelly put the shot gun into my hand saying, “They are close enough for that now,” and I blazed away both barrels right into the midst of them, and wounded several, though I did not bring down any. Seeing which, and still thinking the girl was by herself, they came on at a run, with wild yells and gestures, leaping in the air, stooping, dodging all they knew to avoid the bullets. Nelly dropped on her knees at the window, not to pray, she wasn’t one of those sort. Everything in its proper time; but to fire as fast as she could pull a big new Colt’s revolver which she held in both hands.

All however, was of no avail, the blacks were too numerous, and too bent on getting this fair white girl into their clutches and robbing the place to be deterred by a few deaths or wounds, and in no time they were around the house like a swarm of ants round a honeycomb.

Seeing a good chance at one of the Myalls I leaned out of the window to get a better aim at him but he was too quick for me, and dropped behind a tree, yelling something to the others which caused them all to run together round the corner of the house where they were safe from our fire, and there hold a hurried consultation, all except my particular blackfellow, who dared not leave the shelter of the tree; but he had evidently warned them that Nelly was not alone; that a white fellow, perhaps more, were in the room with her. Which information put a very dark colour on things in the eyes of the blacks, and, afraid to attack us openly again, they determined to burn us out; therefore while some brought wood others entered the house and began to take everything that pleased them.

We could hear them talking quite plainly, and Nelly, who understood a good deal of their language, told me in a frightened whisper what they were going to do, and exclaimed, clasping her hands on my arm, "Oh, if father and the men would only return."

Then there was a lot of shouting and yelling at the end of the house where we were, and we could smell the smoke as the fire was lit, but could not see anything of what our enemies were doing outside, but we could guess only too well. "When it gets too hot for us," I said, "we must make a rush and try to fight our way out; let me load your revolver."

Nelly was pale, but seemed far more composed than I was, and even then, I could not help saying, as I handed her back the weapon, "what a darling you are."

She took no notice of what I said, but, looking carefully at the revolver, she observed, "Now I'm safe from those brutes at any rate. If all comes to all, I can shoot myself."

I shuddered at the thought, but knew that of two evils she was choosing the least.

"Well," I said, "it's getting terrible, we must go soon, better go while we are fresh and strong for a fight and a run than wait till we are half dead from the heat and smoke."

"I'm ready," she replied. "Poor father! and for the first time tears shone in her eyes.

Then, before it became necessary for us to open the door, there was a volley from the scrub, followed by cries and groans from the heap of blacks around the fire, then a wild rush past our window as each black darted for the shelter of the timber on the other side of the garden.

The Kanakas had come! They had heard the firing, and, as they always took their rifles with them when working out in the bush, they seized their arms, and came running in, arriving before the house had caught fire, and saving us from being forced to leave our shelter and rush to almost certain death. Crying to Nelly to try and put the fire out, I opened the door and joined the Kanakas in their pursuit of the flying blacks. We ran and fired whenever we got a chance, and somehow in the excitement of the chase one of the Kanaka boys and myself

got together after one big Myall, who was making a bee line for the long water hole in the creek. I fired two shots at him, but missed. The Kanaka held his fire and ran for all his worth, because there was a deadly enmity between these two coloured races, and that Kanaka boy would sooner, just then, shoot that blackfellow than win a hundred pounds. On we went till the Myall reached the bank, which was steep, and fully fifteen feet above the water. Throwing his hands up, he took a header and disappeared. We stood there intently watching the surface with our rifles ready. At last the water broke about half way across and just the top of the black's head showed for a moment; long before I could even raise the rifle to my shoulder the Kanaka had taken a snap shot, and a good one, for the black sank to rise no more.

The South Sea Islander smiled proudly and joyfully, and then, saying something which I did not understand, turned and ran back to the house. When I got there, the fire was out, not having done much damage, except blackened the end of the house (a mark which the old squatter would never permit anyone to remove during his lifetime), and Nelly — what a girl she was — no fainting, no hysterics — she was busy (with the assistance of some of the boys) collecting and replacing the things which the blacks had taken outside, but forgot to carry away in the hurry of their departure; and when at sundown the squatter returned, he found me smoking on the verandah, and Nelly laying the table for supper, which she had cooked herself, and he only said in his usual cheery way, "Come, join me in a nip before I have a bath, and then for supper." It was not until we entered the room, and Nelly, turning suddenly, threw herself into his arms and kissed and hugged him, that on inquiring what was the matter with his girl, he learned the whole story, and then he kissed and hugged her; and, oh, my! wouldn't I have liked to follow in his footsteps. I never wanted before to stand in any man's shoes, but I'd willingly have given the two mokes and the turn-out complete for a few minutes in his boots just then. Fancy Nelly's arms around a fellow's neck, and those kisses - but then. . ."

"That way my madness lies."

I remained for a few days -- such delightful days they were -- days to look back upon with pleasure until life and memory perish. How kind, how sweet she was to me, as if I had done something wonderful for her, and she could never repay me for it. Didn't I fall in love with her? You bet! And if I'd been handsome and had ten thousand a year (she was worth every penny of it) I'd have stayed longer and tried my luck, instead of saddling up and riding away (with the faint pressure of her hand still tingling through my being) into the silent bush, with nothing but my own vain regrets for my companions, and bad company they were, too, for many a long and lonely day -- but you know, *Altra cura post equitem sedet*.*

*A different care sits behind the horseman.

