FARREL'S FATE

by George Jackson

It was about 1864 when the first gold rush to the Star took place. Townsville was hardly born then, and Bowen was a pretty young baby, only in swaddling clothes. The latter place, it is true, has not advanced with anything like the leaps and bounds of its sister town, but still Bowen has improved some since '64, when Captain Champion landed a little crowd of diggers from his tiny steamer – all bound for the Star River rush.

On reaching Bowen the diggers discovered that Townsville was the nearest port for the Star, so they proceeded to interview the Captain to ascertain the terms and conditions on which he would be willing to carry them as far as Cleveland Bay.

"Well boys," said Captain Champion, after considering the matter for a few minutes, "if you can muster sixty men at £4 per head, I'll chance the trip as far as Townsville. I shall have to take the whole responsibility on my shoulders. I don't own the steamer. Another thing, if I go as far as Cleveland Bay I shall have to call in at Mackay for firewood on my return trip to Rockhampton."

The "boys" on the deputation evidently thought £4 per head rather stiff for a sea journey from Bowen to Townsville, so they retired to ponder the matter over. Whilst deliberating a well-known Northerner, Billy Buchanan, now deceased, came down to Bowen from the Gulf with a team of six horses.

When Billy found out what the trouble was about he offered to take his team to the Star rush, carrying swags at the rate of £1 per head and supplying tucker on the road at a fair price. This arrangement seemed to suit the diggers, for about twenty men mustered up and signified their willingness to make the agreement with Buchanan. In a couple of days everything was ready for a start. The team was loaded up with the swags, rations, and, of course, grog. In fact, the latter preponderated. There were no roads in those days, still about 10 miles a day were knocked out of the horses. More could have been done,

perhaps, but the teamster had a pretty good thing on, particularly as regards the sale of the grog. Otherwise it would have been Buchanan's interest to push along and deliver the men's swags at their destination.

Every other day a halt would be called, either by the teamster or some of the rowdy characters in the camp, and a high old corroboree would be indulged in – shots sometimes being fired from the revolvers and guns, with which every digger was armed, nobody providentially getting hurt, however.

There was one man in particular who made himself very obnoxious to the sober and respectable members of the expedition. He drank heavily and bullied everybody more or less, from Buchanan himself down to little Joe, a young new chum lad, who had come out to go gold-digging. His name was Farrel. He had been good looking in his time, but debauchery and occasional hard living had turned his complexion to a livid sort of hue, his once large blue eyes to eyes bloodshot and watery, and his hair, that had once been a glossy brown, was now beginning to turn grey, though Farrel was still in the prime of life.

When Farrel chose, in odd moments, he could be as suave and polite as a Chesterfield, but as a rule he didn't like. It was said he had had a long run of bad luck digging, and one or two of the men who had known him a long time made this as an excuse to the others for Farrel's devilish temper and high-handed proceedings.

After a good many weary days' travel – very wearying to the majority of the men who were eager to get to the new rush, and to whom it was a punishment to be compelled to tramp only 10 miles a day – the party of gold-seekers came in sight of J-------n Station. On going up to the rough slab and bark house to see about obtaining a fresh supply of beef it was ascertained that the manager was away on the run. There was nobody about except two new chums.

Farrel was in a particularly bad mood that afternoon. When he, therefore, after overhauling the meathouse, found nothing but some old dried beef hanging up from strips of greenhide he commenced to grumble and curse. Some of the other rowdies, too, were annoyed, appearing to think it a great hard-

ship that in this out of the way spot the station manager had not been able to divine their coming and prepare a choice assortment of fresh meat for their consumption.

Farrel was the first to give vent to his spite by whipping out his sheath knife and cutting through some of the strips of greenhide, thus letting the beef fall to the ground. Then he spurned the pieces with his foot. Some of the other men, emboldened by his actions, tossed other pieces of beef about contemptuously, even shying them at each other in their rough humour.

"How does it taste, chaw-bacon?" queried Farrel, thrusting a piece as he spoke into the mouth of one of the new chums, who stood by with eyes staring and mouth distended.

"Tough, eh? Dry? Salty, too? Never mind, my good clodhopper, come down to our dray and you shall have a glass of whiskey to take the taste of the salt out of your mouth. But, look here, tell your boss when he comes home to have a bullock killed for us tomorrow or I'll serve him as I've done you. Now, so long, my friend, and don't forget or you'll get some more dried raw salt beef down your throat with no whiskey after it, recollect."

This little diversion in the monotony of the journey raised the spirits of the men, and they returned to their dray singing and yelling boisterously.

The next morning Farrel told some of the men to go over to the station for some fresh meat. Their camp was pitched in a little hollow about a quarter of a mile from the station buildings.

"Suppose there ain't any fresh beef for us, Farrel, what then?" queried one of the men.

"Take your b---y firearms and make the d---d jackeroos kill either a bullock or some monkeys. Bail him up. Sing out to me if you crawling hounds can't manage the job."

About seven or eight diggers strolled over to the station. They took the precaution of buckling on their revolvers, perhaps, now they had to face the station manager, wondering how their escapade of the afternoon before would be regarded by the boss.

The diggers found the manager standing in the stockyard,

his back to a tree that had been left growing there for shade for the cattle, his legs carelessly crossed, and a pipe in his mouth. A few head of cattle, amongst them a bullock, were in an adjoining yard.

"You the boss?" asked one of the foremost diggers, who was nearly as great a rowdy as Farrel.

"Yes."

"Why ain't you got that fresh beef ready we ordered yesterday? Here we are a-openin' up diggings and fetchin' people inter the country to buy yer beef an' yer too b—-y lazy to kill a beast for us. What sort of a cove are yer, anyway?"

"You'll soon find out, my good fellow, if you persist in talking like that to me," replied the station manager.

"Come now, no jam. We'll have no talkin' back. Look as nimble as yer can, an' drop that bullock for us in two-twos."

"Yes, look smart," muttered some of the other men, "we ain't had a mouthful of fresh beef since we left Port Denison."

"Well, men," said the manager of the station, "some of your party came up here yesterday and slung a lot of salt beef about, acting, in fact, in a very strange way for men calling themselves diggers. Now I want that beef to be paid for before I supply you with any fresh beef."

"Pay for it be hanged!" yelled the leader, Ryce. "We took none of yer confounded beef away."

"Quite correct," calmly answered the manager, "but it's there in a heap on the floor where you left it, ready for you at any time."

"Oh, come! dry up!" shouted Ryce, now getting furious and starting to unbuckle his revolver.

With a swift motion of his arm, the station manager drew a rifle from behind the tree, and with his finger on the trigger, he quietly pointed it towards Ryce's head.

"Don't!" was all he said, but it was quite enough.

Ryce's fingers stopped fumbling at the revolver pouch. None of the other men made any demonstration towards helping their mate out of his predicament.

Somebody said, "Sing out for Farrel." A shout was given, and in a few moments Farrel was observed approaching from


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where the dray was camped. Still the station manager stood carelessly against the tree, his rifle lowered a little and resting on his left arm. In a minute or two Farrel drew near.

"What the devil's up?" he grumbled. "Are all you coves afraid of a jackaroo?" Then the little cluster of men opened out to let him face the manager.

"B----t you!" muttered Farrel, as he now obtained a full view of the station manager; and then he commenced to rapidly retreat, but with his face to the foe.

"Give him a gun, some of you, and let us fight it out," hissed the manager. "Oh, you cowardly dog, you haven't the pluck of a dingo."

The station manager half raised his rifle to his shoulder as if to fire on the retreating figure, but second thoughts prevailed. He quietly lowered it again, and though the muscles of his face twitched now and then he appeared to be otherwise cool and collected.

The remaining diggers, somewhat disturbed and amazed at this turn things had taken, decided, one by one, that it wasn't much use waiting for fresh meat, as there seemed to be a strong probability that human flesh instead of bullock's or sheep's would be served up by this calm, though apparently bloodthirsty, station manager.

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Farrel during the next two or three days continually wore an uneasy frightened look on his countenance. He seemed on the lookout for something or somebody, and started up with a scowl and pallid face if startled by any of the men. It got whispered about by some of his cronies that he had done the station manager a hurt in times gone by – his wife, daughter, or some female friend being mixed up in it; and consequently Farrel did not care about facing this man in a squabble. Farrel didn't make that open confession that is supposed to be good for the soul. But it was necessary to make some excuse for his sudden retreat, so some hints had to be dropped amongst his friends as to the why and the wherefore.

Fanning Downs, then kept by Miles, was passed, and ultimately the Star River was reached. The rush was pretty well a duffer. The prospectors had just cleared, very likely thinking their necks might be in jeopardy from the angry diggers. There was no water available at the diggings except a drop in a small clay pan – just about enough for the men to make tea of. Buchanan couldn't get enough for his horses to drink. "I'm off to the river," said he; "a horse can't live here."

Seven or eight of the diggers evidently thought if a horse couldn't live, neither could they, so they slung their swags back into the dray and made for the Star, where there was plenty of water for camp purposes. Not that they intended to return. They started back the next morning for Townsville. If the Star rush had been thick with gold, it could have lain there for all these men would have done towards unearthing it. But as it happened, the Star was a duffer. A few ounces were got, but the place wasn't worth calling a diggings. Silver however abounds there in more or less payable quantities, and it may ultimately prove a rich mineral field. But talk on this question is out of place in this narrative.

Amongst the few hands that decided to give the Star rush a trial was Farrel. He went mates with two others. For some weeks he seldom went about prospecting, generally contriving to work along with one or the other of his mates. But in time his caution or dread wore away, though he never went out without his gun or revolver, nor did many others on account of the danger from the blacks, who were not quite so civilised twenty-seven years ago as they are now.

Yet the end came. Farrel was missed by his mates. The first day not much notice was taken, but the second day his mates went out to search for him. After a long search in the vicinity of the country where they knew he had lately been prospecting, his body was discovered, with a rifle bullet embedded in his heart.

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