



The Aussie Crusaders
Joseph Bowes

THE
AUSSIE CRUSADERS

WITH ALLENBY IN PALESTINE

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CHAPTER I

HOW THE AUSSIES FELL INTO THE HANDS OF THE BEDOUINS

“ARE you awake, Major?”

“Sssh!”

The low tones of the speaker, at this sibilant warning, fined down to the barest whisper. Could they have been seen in the enveloping darkness, the persons between whom a whispered dialogue proceeded would have been identified by their uniforms as British soldiers. They were both young men, the younger of the two being little more than a lad. The other was older by some years. The elder was built on a large scale. His frame had height and breadth, but was somewhat lacking in depth, for he was “slab-chested,” and did not carry an ounce of superfluous flesh. But for all that his bones were well covered with masses of muscle and sinew which betokened greater strength and hardihood than would have been suggested by an ampler proportion of flesh and fat. His youthful comrade was undoubtedly a greater favourite of nature. In height and looks he stood in contrast to his companion. Whereas the elder lacked symmetry, the younger was well formed. His handsome yet strong face, broad shoulders, narrow hips, and muscular limbs denoted a combination of body and mind to be seriously reckoned with in any contest either of limb or will. He would be no quitter in any undertaking to which he bent his energies.

The darkness is rapidly dissolving before the advancing dawn, and the twittering birds in the overhead branches proclaim the advent of a new day. The dim outlines of prone figures now become distinct. The soldiers are not free agents. They lie on the earth, tightly

bound; while around them are closely grouped a number of picturesque villains clad in Eastern raiment. One glance at them is sufficient to indicate their type: they are Bedouins. These fellows, about a score in number, thus surrounding their captives, have passed the night in a small oasis. In the first flush of dawn they bestir themselves, and are soon consuming their frugal breakfast, heedless of the hunger and thirst of the prisoners.

While the Bedouins are discussing their scanty meal, let us take a closer view of their victims. While tightly bound they are not gagged, a merciful exemption, and hardly to be expected from villains of the type of their present masters. Judging from their dishevelled appearance they have received a rough handling. Their uniforms are as far from being spick and span as one could well conceive. Their tunics are buttonless: the congenital thieves have seen to that. Their clothes are not only soiled with the accumulated dirt of months, but indelibly stained with blotches of blood which have faded to the colour of a rusty-brown. Their dust-begrimed features are hard-drawn, as though they had passed through a prolonged physical and mental strain which had fixed its character in their faces. Yet for all their dirt, untidiness, body-weariness, and haggard looks, one fails to find any sign of depression about them. There is no such torpor or apathy as fatalism breeds, nor any down-in-the-mouth bearing as a consequence of their extreme hardships and present parlous condition.

The only thing which appears to give them any concern at present is the prospect of food and drink. Otherwise their bearing, as far as can be judged—with the obvious restrictions of their bound limbs—if not defiant, is certainly that of “No surrender.” Body and brain are worn—if marks go for anything—almost to breaking-point, yet the strapped limbs, tensely-drawn features, most of all their bloodshot eyes, are still obedient to their light-hearted spirits.

“Did you get any sleep, Major?”

“As much as the cords and your snores permitted.”

“What? *Me*, snore?”

“Yes, you, you poor innocent. Had to prod you several times. The very camels stopped snarling and listened with astonishment and envy to the variety of your notes.”

“Garn! You will have your joke, Mister Jack.”

“Well, a joke’s a long way better than nothing, and that’s about all we can count upon from this bunch, Judging from appearances. The beggars are wrapping up the little that’s left. How long is it, Jock, since we pulped any food?”

“We’ve swallered nothin’ but powder-smoke an’ desert-dust since afore daylight yesterday, barrin’, o’course, the contents of our waterbottles.”

“True; and the water gave out before midday—at least mine did. Suppose we remind these absent-minded beggars that a swig of well-water and a few crumbs of their unconsumed tucker would not have to be offered more than once?”

Suiting the action to a word, he sang out as lustily as his parched mouth allowed to the men who were now at their camels, preparing for an immediate start.

“Hi, Abdul! Come here! D’y’hear?”

To give effect to his words the younger man, who had been addressed by his companion as Major, wriggled into a sitting position. He addressed the men in Arabic, using the name “Abdul” in the same way that we call every Chinaman “John.” It was not until he had called repeatedly that one of the number deigned to come. But to all requests for food and drink he turned a deaf ear. After bestowing several choice expletives upon the captives, he left them, returning to the group of men who were now ready for the march. It became quite evident to the unfortunate soldiers that they were to be treated as a wholly negligible quantity. The tortures of hunger and thirst, instead of exciting the compassion of their captors, produced contrary feeling. The more the prisoners suffered the greater was their pleasure.

Notwithstanding their fortitude, this callous treatment produced strong feelings in the breasts of the captives. Could words have injured them, these desert aborigines would have had a short shrift. Words, however, break no bones, though they act as a safety-valve to the utterer.

"Might as well save our breath," said the youthful officer to his comrade, who wore a sergeant's chevrons. "Here come two of the beggars to haul us to the camels. They're going to pitch us across the saddles as though we were bundles of hay, and rope us for security. Not a very pleasant picnic before us, eh? Wonder to me they haven't slit our throats. That pleasantry may come later. Anyway, while there's life there's hope. Are we down-hearted?"

The "N—o—o" which came in response to the challenge, if not so cordial in tone as it would have been upon an ordinary occasion, was indicative of the spirit which inspired the young men under the heavy trials to which they were being subjected.

To their great relief, however, the first act of the natives was to cut the thongs which bound their limbs.

"Good enough!" cried the major, as he flung his arms about and stamped his feet to induce circulation. "I'll take back some of the nasty things I said about the beggars."

"If they'll follow this with giving us a good square drink I'll be willing to wipe the slate clean of all ill names."

This conditional promise was fulfilled a few minutes later. When the prisoners had been brought along to the camels, their physical distress became so evident to their captors that, through no spirit of compunction, or pity, but rather from mercenary motives, the sheikh, after a momentary hesitation, ordered their guards to take them to the well near by, where they were quickly doing their best to drain it of the brackish water that it produced. That they did not succeed in so doing must be laid to the sheikh, whose peremptory command to mount was followed by their being dragged from the well and ordered to bestride a camel which had been reserved for them.

The disadvantages of "double-banking" were countervailed by the opportunities that were thus given them to converse. After they had mounted, their arms were tied to the saddle to prevent escape, but their legs were left free.

This was much better than they had hoped for. The comparative freedom of their limbs together with the copious draught of well-water, when compared with their cramped and painful experience of the past night, produced a pleasant sense of exhilaration.

"What made the old general change his mind all of a sudden an' give us a drink, Major?"

"Let us call it humanity, Jock."

"Humanity be blowed! I was watching the old rascal. There's not a spark of humanity in him."

"I'll admit that appearances are against him; but, like the Queensland nut which has a shell of flint to cover the sweetest of kernels, so—"

"So far as that old villain is concerned, I give you my word for it, he's all shell and no kernel at all. Why, when he told his men to take us to the well his eyes were glinting all the time. There's no lovmakin' in this business, you may take your oath on that."

"Well, Sergeant, perhaps you can give the reasons yourself."

"Well, the old rascal, in my opinion, saw that if he didn't give us some little attention he stood to lose by us. It's like a drover who takes along a mob of fats for the market. He'll see to it that the beasts don't die before he delivers 'em, not through any feeling of humanity, but from self-interest. So this dago does without askin' what all your appealin' failed to get, simply because he sees there's a chance of losing the goods unless he looks after 'em a bit."

"Meaning he's going to hold us to ransom, and that his apparent humanity, after all, is only cupidity? Well, I believe you're right. The old chap's on the make. He doesn't want us to die on his hands, anyway."

“It’s a rotten bit of bad luck, isn’t it, sir, to be taken like this at the heel of the hunt, after we’d given the jolly Jackoes such a father of a licking? To be taken while you were lying insensible, an’ I was tryin’ to rouse you! At that very moment, who should appear but this lot of scum, and had me on the broad of my back afore I could say Jack Robinson.”

“It’s bad enough, old fellow, but it might have been much worse. We’re alive, and our limbs are still attached to our bodies, and that’s more than you can say for hundreds of our mates.”

“Right you are, sir! We’re alive and kickin’.”

“Don’t know so much about the kicking, Jock,” replied the major, with a smile. “The last two days took pretty well every ounce of energy out of me. What with the all-night marching and the fighting from dawn to dark, and then being hustled the first half of last night, bound to the back of a draught-camel, doesn’t find one in the best fettle for entering a high-kicking contest for the championship.”

“No, sir, it don’t; but if I was on the ground an’ the ole boss of this tribe stood wid his back towards me, bent forward a bit, I’m game to wager I’d lift him in the air a few yards.”

“If I were a betting man, M’Thirst, I’m certain I wouldn’t bet on the chance, for I’m sure you’d win,” said the officer with a hearty laugh.

“Here, old fellow,” said he a little later, after fumbling in the breast-pocket of his tunic. “If I cannot aid you in carrying out that attractive programme of revenge, I can help you to the enjoyment of the next best thing. Here’s a cig.”

“A fag, sir? Good Christopher! Why, it’s a thousand years since I had one in my lips.”

CHAPTER II

HOW THE PRISONERS FARED ON THE WAY

WHEN the Bedouins broke camp they followed a northerly course, which led them through broken country. High, rocky ridges with intervening declivities surrounded them. As they advanced through this maze they passed patches of green sward, with here and there clusters of wild flowers of brilliant hue. At intervals were stone walls in a dilapidated condition. They also passed some rudely constructed cairns which doubtless, long ago, had been shelters and storehouses. Here also were stone dwellings in a ruinous condition. In addition there were many signs of ancient cultivation. This all pointed to a time when the deserted country sustained a population of farmers, who, with hard toil, won a scanty living from the fertile patches along the wadies. It pointed, in fact, to a time anterior to Arab occupation; for even new-chums, like the two prisoners perched upon the camel's back, would never have associated the ruins of walls, houses, dams, and cairns with the shiftless, lazy nomads of whom their captors were a type. Everything pointed to a thrifty, industrious class who one time won a living by patient endeavour, while on the other hand the present neglected and deserted condition amply justified the common saying that everything goes to ruin in an Arab's hands.

Despite their weariness, the two young men were greatly interested in the character of the country through which they were passing.

“Keep your eyes skinned, Jock. It may help us later on to remember the route which we are now taking.”

Thus the younger of the two, who, in despite of age, was the senior, not only in experience but in authority.

His features and general mien proclaimed a highly-trained intelligence. His eyes were the chief attraction of his face. They were remarkable for depth rather than their size. They held within their keeping all seen things. Not a detail escaped them. Every phase of the landscape was photographed and fixed in his brain by the perfect lenses of his eyes, as they journeyed along the tortuous track. Should the information thus acquired ever be wanted he could draw it from his mental storehouse as easily as unwinding ribbon from a reel.

Major Jack Smith had been one of a band of young Australians who had followed the occupation of kangaroo hunters, making a living out of the scalps and pelts. Being youths of spirit and wit they had humorously christened themselves "The Eureka Amalgamateds." When war broke out and the call to arms was sounded throughout Australia, these young Queenslanders were among the first to enlist, and had the honour of being included in the First Expeditionary Force. They were drafted into the Light Horse, where they early made the acquaintance of Jock M'Thirst, a product of the civilisation of the Far West. Jack had a strong influence over Mac in the first stages of training. The influence was wholly for good, for M'Thirst broke away from certain habits that, without doubt, were detrimental to his character. Smith and his companions did their bit in Gallipoli, winning stripes, honours, and wounds.

After the evacuation they did their full share in the desert campaign, by which, after many months of hardships and any amount of tough fighting, the Turks were driven northward from the Suez Canal to the borders of Palestine. Their last stronghold in the Sinai Peninsula, the well-fortified town of Rafa, had, on the day before the opening of this story, been assaulted by the British, and after a stiff, all-day fight had been captured by desperate assault, and before large bodies of Turks, who were hastening from the Beersheba base to the help of the beleaguered garrison, could effect a junction. It was while

pursuing these same reinforcements, after breaking the head of the column, that Jack Smith and Jock M'Thirst were unfortunate enough to be unhorsed in a melee during a partial rally of the fleeing Turks. Neither of the two men was missed by their comrades, who swept forward on the heels of the hunt. It was while Jock was attending to Jack, who had been stunned in the fall, that a predatory band of Arabs swooped down on them and captured them.

So far the prisoners were in utter ignorance of what their fate was likely to be. The sheikh had neither questioned them nor caused them to be questioned. Seemingly he took no more interest in them than if they were logs of wood. The only thing to be gathered during the morning's ride was that they had crossed the border and were travelling in a north-easterly direction.

"So this is what they call the Holy Land, Mister Jack," exclaimed M'Thirst, shortly after Jack had told him of his conviction.

"Yes, we're right into Palestine, old man. The most historic bit of country on God's earth."

"It may be all you say, but for all that I'm not taken with it, so far, anyhow. There's nothing to blow about the land. Why, one acre of the Darling Downs would grow more than a hundred of this land. It'd take a hundred acres of this stuff to feed a bandicoot."

"Not quite so bad as that, Sergeant. Still, so far, it's barren soil. It'll improve, I dare say, when we get on a bit. Even now it's a jolly sight better than the everlasting sand-dunes of the desert."

"You are right, Major. But where do you think we're going?"

"Well, that's more than I can answer. Only the Bedouins can reveal that secret. I thought early in the day that they'd be heading for Beersheba, but gave up that long ago, for Beersheba lies almost due east from where we were this morning."

As they continued in the same direction hour after

hour, Jack's growing convictions were confirmed. Far from seeking the great Turkish base, his captors were avoiding it.

There could be no denying that the two youths were keenly interested in their fate. Their feelings were rather those of intense curiosity than of fearful apprehension. Jack was firmly convinced in his mind that no immediate harm threatened them; that beyond the discomforts incidental to prisondom they had nothing to fear; and that these conscienceless vagabonds had appraised their lives as something of value and therefore worth preserving.

The party drew rein about noon in a patch of vegetation which grew round an old well. Rapidly dismounting, they made preparation for feeding and siesta under the shade of an ancient tamarisk tree. Having pursued a course of forced travel for about seven hours, they believed themselves to be well beyond the range of pursuit, should the friends of the prisoners follow up with the thought of rescue. With a sense of safety came a relaxation of vigilance. During the ride they had answered the questionings of their captives with scowls and profanity, refusing a word of information, and at the same time promising all kinds of torture. Now they became mild by comparison. The thongs were removed from their hands, and they were allowed to walk about freely within the limits of the patch of vegetation, too tiny to be dignified by the name of oasis.

Their captors unbent so far as to give civil replies to direct questions. The prisoners gained nothing, however, by civility. The answers were characteristically evasive. The Eastern, as is well known to those having anything to do with him, is a past-master in the art of bluffing. For no reason at all oftentimes that one can see, he will weave a web of artful speech calculated to hide the truth. To call him an inveterate liar, as indeed he seems to be from the Western view-point, is to apply a term that is hardly fair to him. At any rate, the charge would sound less harsh and not so much an impeachment of his virtue, were one to

describe it as an innate tendency to obscure the issues. Being a direct descendant of the great Bedouin Patriarch, Ishmael, whose hand was against every man, it is not to be wondered that the Arab has inherited a vast store of desert wisdom in which artful speech finds ample scope.

The prisoners relished the rest and freedom beyond telling. The handful of dried fruit given them scarcely affected the pangs of hunger. But they had been trained in a hard school, and had learned to suffer hunger with the minimum of complaint and a spice of philosophy. For hunger they had the compensation of slaking their thirst at the well with copious supplies of sweet, cool water. Having eaten the dates and drunk to repletion, they lay down on the sward under the grateful shade of the trees and became unconscious immediately to their surroundings. They slept the dreamless sleep of fatigue.

They were roused with difficulty three hours later. The Bedouins were ready for the road. This time their hands were left free, an indication that their masters had little fear of their escape. The rest and sleep had done wonders for them, and as they jogged along in a swinging shuffle at a slower gait than previously, the mercury of their spirits rose steadily. The country, though rough, improved in fertility as they progressed through the late afternoon. The ground rose higher. A watercourse ran along the middle of a wady whose windings they followed for some miles. The banks were covered with a bright green sward. They passed chains of small pools of limpid water in the watercourse. Now and then they pulled up at an old well surrounded by stone troughs, placed there for watering stock.

Wild flowers were an added charm. Many of the varieties were unknown to the Australian lads, but they identified clusters of beautiful irises of varying shades and brilliant patches of scarlet anemones. To the smiling beauty of the lush grass and the flowers—so grateful to eyes that for many weary months had been strained with the merciless glare of desert sands, relieved only by the

dull greens of shrubs—were to be added the flitting forms and songs of birds. Thrushes, doves, and other sweet songsters raised a concord of joyous music as the evening advanced. Once when passing through a field of wheat stubble a covey of quail rose with a whirr. True to his sporting instincts, Jack pointed an invisible gun at the vanishing birds. Hurrah! thought he, there's something in this country after all. I had thought it was peopled only by ragged ruffians and scraggy goats and mangy camels. Partridges, I'll bet a dollar, he added, as a pair of birds rose from their very feet.

But the best thing in the bird line was yet to come. Signs of occupation became more numerous. Patches of cultivation dotted the landscape. Men were working in the fields, and little children peeped shyly but curiously from the doorways of squalid huts. Small flocks of sheep and goats depastured in the gullies and along the banks of the wady. The pious nomads halted at sunset, slid from their mounts to the earth, and, turning their faces to the east, postured themselves in prayer, repeating the formula addressed to the great Allah and His Prophet.

It was while the tribesmen droned their evening orisons that the air suddenly became vibrant with a flute-like yet joyous melody. As the sweet medley continued it increased in volume until it seemed to reach bursting-point, yet the exultant strains abated their sweetness in no wise: not a note of dissonance to jar the keenest sensitiveness. As the sweet concord struck the unaccustomed ears of the soldiers, gone in a flash from their consciousness was the pious whine of the tribesmen, and their souls were bathed in a flood of heavenly melody. Again and again it rose and fell in ordered cadence—the perfect poetry of sound, the faultless notes of sweetest music. Too entranced in the darkening eventide to speak, they became conscious that the ravishing sounds issued from a copse, and were made by a bird.

How long the sweet songster would have continued *his* orisons the enraptured listeners had no chance of

determining, for, suddenly, one of the prone Bedouins rose from his praying attitude to his feet, seized a piece of jagged rock, and threw it with violence into the midst of the thicket, accompanying the act with a coarse malediction. In this way did the service of praise from the copse cease in order that the formal incantations of these pietists might proceed in uninterrupted flow.

"H'm," said Jock, "that's a pity. I suppose they were afraid it would upset their prayer-meeting—though I know which party I'd upset. I've never heard prettier singing than that which came from the throat of that dinky bird since I left Australia. Puts me in mind of a kookaburra."

"A kookaburra? A laughing jackass? Oh, my prophetic ears! Why, you unspeakable juggins, the old jackass is not to be named in the same breath with this chap, save for drawing a contrast in bird notes. Had you compared it with the bell-bird, the coachman, the scrub thrush—but, a kookaburra! Do you know what bird it was which that rascal frightened into silence and flight? I'll bet a guinea it was a nightingale, the species they call a bulbul in the East. 'Kookaburra' say you? My christian aunt!"

"Sorry you take it that way, Major. No offence meant to that lovely little singer, who'd take the bun in any bird-singin' competition, if he chirped up to that form. What I meant was this. For instance, supposing a kookaburra was to start his laughing song out here, unexpected like, when you wasn't thinkin' of birds or anythin' else in particular, I wonder how you'd feel when you heard it!"

"Feel, Jockie, old man? I'd think his strident voice absolutely too heavenly for words. One toot from his windpipe would conjure up the old bush life in all its moods and movements. Oh, there's no doubt Jacky would be a real conjurer. I smell the gum leaves and the wattle fragrance at the very mention of his name. I seem to hear the echoing sound of the axe and the crash of falling trees. There goes a mob of brumbies careering up the valley with waving manes and tails atrail, snorting their defiance to the hunters! And there, too, goes a herd of grey and red

kangaroos. Oh, for my old Winchester! And the homestead, and the stockyard, and the cattle! Can't you see that cunning old magpie perched on the gallows rail? Listen to the flutings of his rich, purple notes. Fit to match even with the bulbul's, aren't they, old—?"

"Stop! stop, Mr. Jack! For God's sake, stop!"

One glance at the distressed look on that hard-featured face was sufficient for instant silence. Unconsciously to himself, Jack's semi-humorous recital had become a bit of realism to his companion, late of Bobnawarra, and had brought on an attack of nostalgia.

CHAPTER III

HOW M'THIRST RECEIVED THE ATTENTIONS OF A BEDOUIN LADY

"WHERE in the mischief have we got to now?" exclaimed M'Thirst half an hour later as the party emerged from the darkness of the night, which had now set in, to the dim light of a settlement or small village. Lights faintly gleamed from open doorways as they shuffled over the cobbles of the narrow street, and the babble of voices saluted their ears.

"This, I suppose, is our destination," replied Jack. "At least I hope so. We've come far enough, to my way of thinking. Every mile in this direction, you know, takes us farther away from our fellows, which of course makes our return an increasingly difficult problem."

"You're right as usual, Major. If this old brute had any go left in him, I'd be for slewing him round and making a dash for it. No need to tell me it would be a mad act. It's a dead cert we'd not have a ghost's show of getting away."

"Wouldn't get fifty yards, old fellow, before we'd be headed. But for all that, we must keep our eyes well skinned for chances. They'll come, never fear."

As the Bedouins passed up the narrow, tortuous street they were kept busy replying to the sharp questions flung at them by the villagers. When, finally, they drew up at the other end of the village, before a cluster of low buildings, they were surrounded by a crowd of curiously excited people, who kept up a ceaseless jabber of inquiry.

Neither the sheikh nor his followers had been disposed to throw any light upon their doings as they passed along the street, but now the villagers were not to be denied. They stood in no awe of the marauders. The women in particular were pertinacious. After striving for a while to

maintain a pose of dignified silence, it broke down before the ceaseless battery of questioning, which now began to be spiced with anger.

So persistent were the villagers, and so closely did they crowd the men, that the latter were unable to perform the duties of unsaddling. The rabble were determined their questions should be fully answered. The old sheikh had intended to describe their doings at a later stage, but now, making a virtue of necessity, after bawling out for silence, he set forth in picturesque speech the magnitude of their undertaking, the fearful perils they had encountered, their prolonged combat with the whole army of terrible Giaours, and the glorious victory achieved after decimating the ranks of the enemy. As an irrefutable proof of their prowess, behold their prisoners, the general and one of his high officers, sole survivors of the mighty host against whom they fought with splendid courage!

This recital, made in the darkness to itching ears, despite its wildly improbable nature, was accepted with loud demonstrations of approval. For well nigh an hour the old chief held forth on the brilliant exploit which he and his followers had so successfully carried out. It was the deed of their lives. Each of his followers was painted as a hero of the rarest kind. Each one had performed a feat—fully described—that would shed a radiance upon him and his children and his children's children for many generations.

In this florid style did the dramatist artfully weave an epic and act it out by speech and gesticulation, in a way that would have won admiration from a professional actor. Reserving his own part in this bloody fray to the last, with calculated art, he now sketched a picture in which he combined the strength of Samson with the valour and generalship of David. He swept his auditors off their feet, so to speak, by the power of his oratory. From the point of view of the stage it was a great success. Tumultuous applause greeted the actor when the series of ascents in his oratory reached the grand climax.

It did not seem at all strange to the listeners that the whole of their surpassing warriors should have returned; that not one of them bore a scratch; and that, beyond the two soldiers still astride the camel, these glorious fellows should have returned after such an encounter with no spoils of victory.

Before the effects of his fanciful and wholly fictitious description had begun to subside, the sheikh ordered the two prisoners to the ground. In obedience to this order the high and mighty Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, and his companion, slid to the ground in an undignified fashion, and were quickly surrounded by the motley mob. The awe of the Bedouins had not survived the recital. Until this, the British troops in general, and the Antipodeans in particular, were monsters of frightful mien, and had figured in many a weird tale. For the most part, they were giant Giaours who rode wild, untamed steeds, performed prodigies in battle, and habitually dined off human flesh. These were the fellows who had thrashed the picked troops of the Sultan; had driven them, pell-mell, across the desert from the Suez Canal to Rafa.

When, however, the villagers saw with their own eyes the two principal heads of the Giaour army, unadorned, pacific-looking, submissive to the slightest behest of the sheikh, of no abnormal size, their appearance was so different from the fire-eating, blood-drinking, gorilla-like specimens of fancy—the Bluebeards of their current tales—that their dread feelings quickly merged into an unconcealed contempt for them. They fearlessly pressed around them as they stood upon the ground, jostled them unceremoniously, pulled savagely at their clothes as if to tear them from their backs, spat in their faces, and, generally speaking, behaved in a fashion which was the reverse of friendly or polite.

The children, no less than the adults, gave expression to feelings of scorn and derision. The little ones, who only last night had been frightened into a nightmare through a recital of the bloody deeds of the men of the befeathered

slouch hats, now, in imitation of their elders, called the captives by foul names. Picking up handfuls of dirt and pebbles, they shot their missiles at short range.

The two youths bore the abuse and mauling good-naturedly for some little while, but at length the limit of endurance was reached. They were in actual danger now from the pebbles and pieces of ragged rock that were being hurled with violence by practised hands. Already they had received some painful bruises. At last, M'Thirst, who had been shielding his face with his hands, as a protection from the pebble shrapnel, dived suddenly into a group of youngsters who formed the battery of assault, seized one of their number, holding him high in air, and, glaring the while in fearful grimace, made as though he would dash him to earth.

In a moment all the fears of the natives returned. A brood of wild-ducklings at the warning note of mother duck that danger is nigh, could not make themselves invisible with greater rapidity than did these Arab youngsters. So unexpected and quick Was Jock's movement, and so nearly did he approach their popular conception of a Giaour in appearance and act, that the crowd of men and women, including the sheikh's immediate followers, shrank back in dismay, uttering vehement appeals to Allah for protection. In less than ten seconds the jostling natives had changed from the offensive to the defensive. Not one of them had at that moment the courage to interfere.

How long this tableau would have held the people back it were hard to say. The picture of the long-limbed Australian, holding the wriggling, shrieking kiddie aloft, magnified itself sevenfold in the uncertain light of a couple of flickering lamps.

The moment of breathless suspense which followed the cries of fright—in anticipation of the act of throwing the child with violence to the earth—was changed into a great sigh of relief when the erstwhile champion of Bobnawarra brought down the child to the level of his

head, bestowed a kiss upon his dirty face, and then placed him gently on the ground. No frightened rabbit ever scuttled more quickly to its warren than he to his mother's arms.

"Well played, Jock, old man! That was an inspiration. It did the trick all right. These good people were getting a bit too sultry. If I know anything about them, they will have learned their lesson."

"Well, we had to do something. It was, as you say, a bit sultry. I've got a lump as big as an emu's egg on my head," exclaimed Mac, with a rueful smile.

What Jack had said was true. The natives saw that they could take no liberties with these men, even though they were prisoners. The mother of the child which had been held aloft in a menacing attitude by Jock, had looked upon her precious one as lost. She instinctively closed her eyes to shut out the awful sight of her mangled darling. Her ears were attuned to receive the shock of the thud when his body struck the earth. But what did this prolonged sigh which rose all around her mean? Why had not the impending blow fallen? What meant these exclamations indicative of relief? Was it really possible—?

While not yet venturing to open her eyes, the distraught woman felt her knees firmly embraced by two small arms, while burrowed into her thighs was the face of a sobbing child. She knew now, in the fraction of a second, what had happened: her boy had been spared, and the next moment he was strained to her bosom. More than that. The revulsion of feeling rising in the mother's breast comprehends the prisoners. Under the influence of the gratitude which welled up in her heart she hastily set down her boy, and running up to the soldiers, who were still standing in the cleared area, she singled out Jock, and fell to the ground at his feet.

To say that Mac was astonished is to describe his sensations feebly. He was not altogether a stranger to the attentions of maidens. He had been classed as a desirable man by the Bobnawarra belles, who were not over-shy in

giving or receiving pledges of affection. But this—! He gazed around in abject embarrassment while the woman grovelled at his feet, and held him round the legs in a firm embrace.

Quick to seize the humour of the situation, Jack broke out in hearty laughter, which became the less restrained as the look of helpless perplexity grew upon the face of his mate.

“For goodness sake, Mister Jack, call this creature off.”

“Handle her gently, Jock,” giggled his companion. “‘Member she’s only a frail wom—!”

“‘Frail,’ be jiggered! I’m fairly hobbled, man. Her arms are as strong as a green-hide lasso. ‘Ere, missus, leave go of me, there’s a good woman. I—I don’t want any thanks. Never meant any harm to the kid. Oh, I say, turn off the tap of your water-tank, will you?”

“Jock, Jock, you’ll be the death of me,” spluttered Jack, as tears of laughter ran down his cheeks. “The lady thinks you’re asking her to hold you tighter and to continue raining.”

Judging from the contortions and loud whinings which came from the prostrate mother, it would seem as if that were the case.

“Well, then, Major, speak to her, will you? You can talk her lingo.”

It was with difficulty that Jack could so far control himself as to speak to the woman. When at length he was able to master his mirth, he yielded to a suggestion from the demon of mischief, turning it to instant account. Stepping forward and bending over the woman, he shook her by the shoulders, speaking to her at the same time in short Arabic sentences. The effect was electrical.

Unloosing her grip of Mac’s feet, she jumped to her own, and flinging her arms upward she closed them around the Westerner’s neck.

This was too much for M’Thirst. Exercising the strength of his strong arms, he tore her hands from their clutch of his neck, and set her on the ground with more



"Ere, missus, leave go of me, there's a good woman."

firmness than tenderness. Before the woman could get over her surprise, Jack had taken her by the hand and led her to the women.

Dropping instantly to the trick which his mate had served him, M'Thirst's anger manifested itself in a sullen silence. It was a shabby trick. So thought Jack, and made instant amends. It was accepted after a short struggle of feeling, and soon the released victim of a woman's gratitude was able to laugh as heartily as his friend at the ludicrous figure which he cut under her close and unwelcome attentions.