

"Excitable people," he murmured. "Excitable people."

It made him happy to see them. God must love those who greet mere absentees with so much ardour. It was as if the boy had come back from the dead.

Mr Neville wondered if, this once, he might get a sensible, explicit answer from a black. He walked down the path and out onto the dusty grass of the mission station.

"Jimmie Blacksmith!" he called. His voice cut the shrilling off. When Jimmie broke off his path and came towards the missionary, his brother Morton staggered about with the hilarity of it. But there was silence. Jimmie's feet could be heard padding the earth in their light economic way.

"Where have you been, Master Blacksmith?"

"Catchin' possums."

Mr Neville flinched. "I can't understand you. Didn't it occur to you you might be needed for higher things? The Easter choir perhaps?"

"How d'yer mean, Mr Neville?"

"You've missed a lot of school."

"Yair, Mr Neville."

"Very well. You must come to my study, please."

In the study, a front sitting-room dignified by desk, an *orbis terrarum*, three shelves of standard evangelical works, Jimmie was caned for truancy. No one resented it. No one had hindered Mungindi elders from gathering to make Jimmie a man. Though they had come from places spread over more than two thousand squares miles to initiate him, it would have seemed no unworthy usage that their new buck should now be lashed on the arse by a Methodist minister. For the truth of Mr Neville and the truth of Emu-Wren ran parallel. Mr Neville had his place, as did the poor-bugger-white-fella-son-of-God-got-nailed.

"Cane teach yer to be good feller now," Wilf stated. "Don't let that stand in yer light."

JIMMIE, who had come home from his years with tribal manhood, began—during years, by his own insight and under the influence—to question its value.

What did Tullam and Mungara stand for? They were beggars puking Hunter River rotgut in the streets of hotel shit-houses. Tribal elders, who counted on their teeth and knew where the soul-stones of each man and how the stones could be distinguished from the wives to white men for a suck from a brandy bottle.

Mr and Mrs Neville spoke to Jimmie of the value of tribal.

"If you could ever find a nice girl off the reservation, your children would only be quarter-caste. Your grandchildren one-eighth caste, scarcely bluish."

Most men who weren't old men had become cynical of the tribal cosmogony, even if they were not headed about it as Jimmie. The very height of the tribe for some was this gulping of cheap white man. That activity itself was a tortured questing for a picture for Mungindi man.

The country police did not take that view.

In the spring of 1894 the Rev. Mr Neville

*Black feller kin eat,
Black feller kin drink.
Black feller can't do both
And drinkin's happier.*

Wongee Tom was sleeping off his happiness but had one eye out for friends, such as Jimmie. His cheeks folded themselves strangely into creases of apparent contentment.

"Hey, yer paley bastard!" he murmured.

"Hey, Wongee Tom."

"Yair, that's who. How's that old sow Dulcie goin'?"

"Dulcie's good. Wilf's drunk." It was a safe enough prediction. "Dottie's good, Mort's bloody good. Are you good?"

"Yair, not workin' much." He chuckled at his own joke. They could get very superior, these travelled blacks who had seen the large towns.

"Are there other Emu-Wren here?" Jimmie asked in Mungindi.

"Emu-Wren?" Wongee Tom mocked. "Bullshit." But he gave in to the old language. "I've come a big walk from Brentwood, walking all the way. Hardly a black man to offer me a roll of his wife. No Emu-Wren. I don't know why I left the plains. The crayfish here are good. Nice red meat."

"You got a job?" Jimmie asked. In English, for in Mungindi there was no word for *job*.

"I catch 'em possums. Sell 'em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much. Wish I had a gun. Whitefeller don't like Wongee hangin' round homestead catchin' possums. *You bugger off, blackie!* Thrippence a skin, that's all."

"Long time since yer skinned yer last possum," Jimmie Blacksmith teased him.

"Like hell, yer paley bastard!" Then Wongee Tom gave in and laughed out his admissions. "Don' know when last one was. Possum meat scrawny, full of bones. Wongee rather pinch bacon."

Both black men sat, watching a farmer's family, who had crossed the pavement to the draper's door.

From within came the gurgle of the store-owner welcoming custom. The mother and three girls passed both black men without a glance. All of these were sucking with a vary-

ing degree of blatancy and a half-pound b was secure in the possession of the old youngest, perhaps four, blue-eyed beneath which was printed *H.M.S. Sugar and Spice* door to look full at Wongee Tom. Alrea knew that she must take whatever chance came to her, since her mother would soon to observe such people only obliquely, in little for one's knowledge.

Wongee smiled at her tolerantly. "Yer twenty years' time, plant them blue eyes

The little girl ducked away from the draper's gloom, where her mother was testing a square of serge.

"Oughtn't say that sort of thing, Wongee name."

H.M.S. Sugar and Spice dashed past the store, the tough square mother bound next shopping task.

"Would you like a white woman, Wongee smith asked Wongee—since Mrs Neville possibility for him.

"Don't seem ter make the cow-cock white woman for 'is wife. Why else he girls? Must be sum'pin to white women

They went on sitting and spoke of Jimmie next saw the family of girls, the a new spirit heater; and her mother, all at the younger ones to partake of the con the big sister carried half open beside the

Jimmie Blacksmith fell in love with the delay. He wanted her homesomeness, the family security; the way she carried and consciously bountiful, the barley-sugar, t

And with love, ambitions! The sort M him to have, landowning ambitions, amb for bonding one's word and sticking to finished.

The girl went by in sturdy clothes brown dust on her strenuously buffed bo

£3 to Jimmie. Jimmie would not take it, but backed away.

"Fair go, boss," he said. "I'm gettin' married."

The man blew tobacco smoke with his bottom lip, up through his tarnished ginger moustache. He picked up three more notes.

"Ten bob a week, boss. Say yer will!"

"Yer fuckin' relatives only drink it."

"No, boss. I'm marryin'. White girl."

"What white girl?"

"Missus Hayes' girl, boss."

"Did yer git her in the family way?"

"What, boss?"

"Yer sow a piccaninny in her?"

"Yair. She's nice girl. Out of a home."

"I wouldn't boast about the white girl if I was you."

He snatched up two more notes, in token of the hopelessness of Jimmie's marriage with the nice girl out of a home, and as if he felt he must choose between paying some debt now rather than later.

"Bugger orf, Jimmie," he said. "While yore lucky."

The Hayeses' maid said she respected him. Helped to it, of course, because she carried his child. She was very young and her legs were freckled.

Yet Jimmie had seen in her a chance of white marriage very soon after their first meeting, or at least very soon after that Sabbath incident on the riverbank. Even then he had observed her. She was very stupid.

For example, Mrs Hayes had shown her—out of Mrs Beeton's illustrated book—how table should be set and how dinner should be served. Yet Gilda was all the time in a panic of forgetting it all. If you spied on the Hayeses' dining-room of an evening you would see Mrs Hayes's vigilance, Mr Hayes's resentment of not serving himself, and you could hear Gilda's hisses and snufflings as she scuttered about the room with tureens and salvers and the potatoes went cold. It was then that you understood her sniff conveyed no shred of superior pride. She had bad sinuses, and a terror of being sent back to the home for the wayward. Nor was she Mrs Healy. But a start had to be made somewhere with white women. And

Jimmie could not help thinking that under coming successes she might be converted Mrs Healy.

Jimmie Blacksmith was to find them a she was to leave the Hayeses' service and job

One month later he was settler with a for a man called Newby who owned 7,000 He could cut wood from the Newbys' pro split-timber one-room home for his bride. F

The fifty-two-year-old farmer, leaning b of his shovel-shaped beard and irony of h eyes, seemed to spend a considerable time the time he sucked a pebble to keep his mo

As if they had all conspired, Mr Newb Lewis—seemed to have made a sport out of v Blacksmith to behave in what he would *character*.

To indicate that he might not, Jimmie open up responsible subjects of conversation

"Lookin' f'ward to federation, boss?"

"I'm not lookin' f'ward or back, Jimmie hurt us farmers. The politicians can do wha do anyhow. When's yer wife comin', Jimmie

"Soon. Don't yer think it'll make the cou Newby would laugh.

"What do yer care if the country's strong

"I'm a patriot, boss." Saying such thing knew whom he was mocking: himself, New

"Yer ought go into politics."

"D'yer reckon, Mr Newby?"

"I seen worse politicians than you, Jim from Mudgee who got sent out of the House a pillar on the very floor of the parliamen the things they done to make sure the rai door. Yer get a town like Walcha—thousan the train go there? No, it goes to a place town, fifteen miles away. Just so some bloo liament don't have to haul his wool any dis They're scandalous, those blokes. Yer woul rascal among 'em, Jimmie. Yer reckon yer

ny as that? It was a natural stone, not man-hauled, lying front had lateral clefts. Scattered around it were bits of small stone that looked as if fashioned with knees what they were, *tjuringa* stones, each capsule of someone's soul, some black man initiated or a hundred years past.

who picnicked here had been thorough. The been fished from the clefted rock in dozens or dredges, small smooth wedges, a few intact, others across the middle, others ground with perverse hammer, irreplaceable pieces. Soft coastal *tjuringa*, as the souls they held, too much yield in them, tight-texture. Far too like the men whose calyx men. Far too like the yielding loose-grained men of the Bridge, Verona, Pibarra, Brentwood.

the history of mean death and just for booze and to the white phallus, gun, and sequestration and use of black squalor, here it was, legible in the of soft stones.

l this, Mort howled from the heart of his own fell down on his knees and elbows. Jimmie d as if from curiosity but with massive secret fear me of the more cleanly broken stones and pieced er, keeping on his face a handyman frown.

in the teacher's eager breath grated like a pump. time, the teacher could be seen heaving some that were meant to fill in the ritual outline.

come easy for him to believe, his mind all cross-ck of air, that if the Taree footballers had not ebrating their skill on the consecrated stones of e, there would have been no killing at the seemed to him almost a principle of law, viable om. He would state it when the Blacksmiths were engaged around, not doing much that was helpful. de came up.

o use," he told McCreadie. "It's bugged an' no was low and their sweat felt cool. As volatile as eved McCreadie.

Dowie and Dud, recovered from that clumsy impasse by the campfire, decided that they might go down to the cool hotels of Taree and, bathed, make decisions there about their future pursuit of the Blacksmiths.

The valley restored Dowie. It was wide and rich and river-dominated. The sun came out of the sea and made a long and profuse haul to the Divide. The river was stippled

"You must leave Mort, Jimmie. You can see that."

"Mort's been in on all I done."

"He wounded a woman, but she's getting better."

"He shot Toban. I need Mort. Mort needs me."

"Would you say so, Jimmie? Would you?"

Mort was at that moment raising a shaft of stone and dismally watching the insects with which he had lain.

"You ought to bugger off, Jimmie, and give him a chance. You ought to leave us."

"Why in hell?"

"The boy isn't really your brother. He's an aborigine, Jimmie. Not like you. There's too much Christian in you, Jimmie, and it'll only bugger him up. Like it's bugged you."

Jimmie should have been angry, but shrugged.

"I'll ask him."

"Don't ask him. He'll stay with you because he's an aborigine, and loyalty's in it," McCreadie shivered from the intensity of debate. "You have to just bugger off. At night." He half turned to look at his brother. Oblivious amongst other men's totem ruins, Mort had his head tilted. It was a wedge-shaped family head, rather lean. Jackie Smolders had had it, Mort had it. Jimmie owned a squarer white face but with a splayed black nose in the midst of it. A dead giveaway. The sort of thing that, Newby had assured him, could never be bred out of his line.

"I'm taking it for granted," McCreadie said, "that you love Mort."

Mr Jimmie Blacksmith said softly, "Ver better wrap yerself in a blanket, mister, and jest shut up."

But of course he knew it was all inspired truth.