

BECKE LOUIS

"FIVE-HEAD" CREEK;
AND FISH DRUGGING IN
THE PACIFIC

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“FIVE-HEAD” CREEK

I

I had ridden all day through an endless vista of ghostly grey gums and ironbarks, when I came in sight of the long wavering line of vivid green foliage which showed me that I had reached my destination—a roughly-built slab hut with a roof of corrugated iron. This place was to be my home for six months, and stood on the bank of Five-Head Creek, twenty-five miles from the rising city of Townsville in North Queensland.

Riding up to the building, I got off my wearied, sweating horse, and, removing the saddle and my blanket and other impediments, led him to the creek to drink, and then hobbled and turned him loose to feed on the soft lush grass and reeds growing along the margin of the water. Then I entered the empty house, made a brief examination of it, and wondered how my mate would like living in such an apparently comfortless abode.

I must mention that I had come from Townsville to take charge of Five-Head Creek cattle run, which had suffered so severely from a terrible drought that it had been temporarily abandoned. We were to look after and repair the fencing, many miles' length of which had been destroyed by fire or succumbed to white ants, to search for and collect the remnant of the cattle that had not perished in the drought, and see after the place generally. My mate was to follow me out in a few days with a dray-load of stores.

I lit a fire, boiled a billy of tea, and ate some cold beef and damper. Then, as the sun dipped below a range of low hills to the westward, I filled my pipe, and, walking down to the bank of the creek, surveyed my environs.

“What a God-forsaken-looking country!” I thought as I gazed around me; and, indeed, the prospect was anything but inviting. On both sides of the creek the soil showed evidences of the severity of the past drought. Great gaping fissures—usun cracks we called them—traversed and zig-zagged the hot, parching ground, on which not a blade of grass was to be seen. Here and there, amid the grey-barked ghostly gums, were oases of green—thickets of stunted sandalwood whose evergreen leaves defied alike the torrid summer heat and the black frosts of winter months; but underneath them lay the shrivelled carcasses and whitening bones of hundreds of cattle which had perished of starvation—too weak even to totter down to die, bogged in the banks of the creek. As I sat and smoked a strong feeling of

depression took possession of me; I already began to hate the place, and regretted I could not withdraw from my engagement.

Yet in less than a week I began to like it, and when I left it I did so with some regret, for I had made friends with sweet Mother Nature, whose loving-kindness is with us always in wild places, though we may not know it at first, and take no heed of her many calls and silent beckonings to us to come and love, and rest and dream, and be content upon her tender, mighty bosom.

My horse, cropping eagerly at the soft grass and salty pigweed, suddenly raised his head and pricked up his ears. He had heard something and was listening, and looking across to the opposite bank I saw a sight that lifted me out of my sudden fit of depression and then filled me with delight.

Two stately emus were walking along in single file, the male bird leading, holding his head erect, and marching like the drum-major of a regiment of Guards. On the margin of the bank they halted and looked at the horse, which now stood facing them; a minute's scrutiny satisfied both parties that there was nothing to fear from each other, and then the great birds walked down the bank to a broad dry patch of bright yellow sand, which stretched halfway across the bed of the creek. Here the male began to scratch, sending up a shower of coarse sand, and quickly swallowing such large pebbles as were revealed, whilst the female squatted beside him and watched his labours with an air of indifference. Her digestive apparatus was, I suppose, in good order, and she did not need three or four pounds' weight of stones

in her gizzard, but she did require a sand bath, for presently she too began to scrape and sway from side to side as she worked a deep hole beneath her body, just as a common hen scrapes and sways and ruffles her feathers in the dry dust of the farmyard. In less than five minutes the huge bird was encompassed in a cloud of flying sand, and working her long neck, great thick legs, and outspread toes exactly as an ordinary fowl. Then, having thoroughly covered herself with sand from beak to tail, she rose, shook herself violently, and stalked away up the bank again, where her companion soon followed her, and I lost sight of the pair as they strode through the thick green of the she-oak trees.

As darkness fell I built up a larger fire and spread my blanket beside it to sleep under the open sky instead of in the deserted house, for the night was soft, warm, and windless. Overhead was a firmament of cloudless blue, with here and there a shining star beginning to show; but away to the south-west a dark line of cloud was rising and spreading, and I felt cheered at the sight, for it was a sign of rain. As I watched it steadily increasing the first voices of the night began to call—a 'possum squealed from the branches of a blue gum in the creek, and was answered by another somewhere near; and then the long, long mournful wail of a curlew cried out from the sunbaked plain beyond. Oh, the unutterable sense of loneliness that at times the long-drawn, penetrating cry of the curlew, resounding through the silence of the night amid the solitude of vast Australian plains, causes the solitary bushman or traveller to feel! I well remember on one

occasion camping on the banks of the Lower Burdekin River, and having my broken slumbers—for I was ill with fever—disturbed by a brace of curlews, which were uttering their depressing cries within a few hundred yards of me, and how I at last became so wrought up and almost frenzied by the persistency of their doleful notes, that I followed them up with a Winchester rifle, mile after mile, wasting my cartridges and exhausting mind and body in the vain attempt to shoot them in the dark. There is to my knowledge nothing so mournful as the call of the curlew, unless it be the moaning cry of a penguin out upon the ocean, when a sea-fog encompasses the ship that lies becalmed. There is something so intensely human about it—as if some lost soul were wailing for mercy and forgiveness.

But on this night the cry of the curlew was pleasing to my ear, for as I lay and watched the rising bank of cloud, I heard others calling from the opposite bank of the creek, and then a parrot screamed shrilly—and I knew that rain was certain. I jumped up, carried my blanket, saddle, and gun into the house, and then went out to collect firewood. My horse, as he heard my footsteps, bounded up, hobbled as he was, from the bed of the creek, and neighed to me in the darkness. He too smelt the coming rain, and was speaking to me out of his gladness of heart. I called back to him, and then set to work and soon collected a number of dry logs, which I carried in to the hut and threw down on the hard earthen floor made of pulverised ant heaps, just as the welcome thunder muttered away off in the distance.

I brought a burning brand from the fire, threw it inside, and then called to my horse. Taking off his hobbles, I slipped the bridle over his head, and brought him in under shelter of the verandah, where he stood quietly, with a full stomach and contented mind, watching the coming storm.

Half an hour later the iron roof of the house was singing a sweet, delightful tune to the heavy down-pouring rain, which, till long past midnight, fell in generous volume, the dry, thirsty soil drinking it in with gladness as it closed up the gaping fissures, and gave hope and vigour and promise of life to the parched and perishing vegetation of the wide plains around.

With supreme satisfaction I sat at the open door, and smoked and watched, with my fire blazing merrily away; then, before it was too late, I stripped off, and went out and let the rain wash off the dust and dirt of a day's journey under a fierce, baking sun. How cool, delightful, and invigorating it felt!

I dried myself with a spare shirt, and then lay down on my blanket beside the fire to listen contentedly to the clamour of the rain upon the roof. About two in the morning the downpour ceased, the sky cleared, and a fair half-moon of silvery brightness shone out above the tops of the white gum forest. Fifty yards or so away, in front of the door, a shallow pool had formed in a depression of the hard, sun-baked soil, and as the soft light of the moon fell upon it there came a whirr of wings as a flock of night-roving, spur-winged plover lit upon its margin. I could have shot half a dozen of them from where I sat, but felt that I could not

lift gun to shoulder and slaughter when there was no need, and their shrill cries, as they ran to and fro, afforded me an infinite pleasure.

I took off my horse's bridle, put his hobbles on again, rubbed my cheek against his warm, moist nose, and left him. An hour before daylight he stepped quietly inside and stood near the fire—the mosquitoes were annoying him, and he had come in to get the benefit of what little smoke was arising from the burning logs.

At dawn, as I lay half-awake, I heard a sound that made me jump to my gun—the soft quacking of wild duck in the creek. Stealing cautiously down through the fringe of she-oaks, I came to a fine broad pool, in the centre of which was a small sandbank, whereon stood a black duck with a brood of seven half-fledged ducklings around her, dabbling merrily amongst the weed and *débris* of the margin. Of course, no one who *thinks*, unless impelled by sheer hunger, would shoot either an incubating or “just familial” duck, and I laid down my gun with an exclamation of disappointment. But I was soon to be rewarded, for a minute or two later five beautiful black and white Burdekin ducks flashed down through the vista of she-oaks, and settled on the water less than thirty yards away from me. They lit so closely together that my first barrel killed two, and my second dropped one of the others as they rose. I waded in and brought them ashore.¹

I wonder how many people know how to cook and eat

¹ The name “Burdekin” has been given to these ducks because they are so common on the river of that name. Their wings are pure white and black.

wild duck as they should be cooked and eaten—when they are plentiful, and when the man who shoots them is, in his way, a gourmet, and is yet living away from civilisation and restaurants? This is *the* way. Pluck the feathers off the breast and body, then cut the breast part out, sprinkle it with salt, impale it upon a stick—if you have a stick or branch of any kind—and hold it over a fire of glowing wood coals. If you have no skewer, then lay the red, luscious-looking flesh upon the coals themselves, and listen to it singing and fizzing, as if it were impatiently crying out to you to take it up and eat it!

When I returned, the sunrays were piercing through the gum-trees and dissipating a thin mist which hung about the green, winding fringe of she-oaks bordering the creek. From the ground, which now felt soft, warm, and springy to my naked foot, there came that sweet earthy smell that arises when the land has lain for long, long months under a sky of brass, and all green things have struggled hard to live. As I drew near the hut I saw that the flock of spur-winged plover were still standing or running about the margin of the newly-formed pool. They took not the slightest notice of my approach, and I was careful not to alarm them, knowing that as long as the water remained they would continue to haunt the vicinity of the pool, and, besides that, I already had three plump ducks, which would last me at least till the following morning.

After breakfast I set out to make a detailed examination of the creek for a distance of three or four miles towards its source.

I was glad to find some very extensive water-holes at intervals of a few hundred yards, then would come a stretch of sand from bank to bank, for owing to the want of rain the water had fallen very low, though it was still flowing by percolation through the sand. Yet, in time of flood, the whole of the flat country was submerged, and some of the large gum-trees growing on the banks held in their forks, thirty-five feet from the ground, great piles of dead wood and tangled debris that had been deposited there in a great flood of two years before.

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