

# The Razor of Pedro Dutel

By Richard Matthews Hallet

At the time the man, Pedro Dutel, discovered that my partner, Frank Hyde, was a competent barber, we were cracking granite on top of a blazing mountain, in whose purple shadow Dutel had built his house, close by the river-bed. I can still feel the cold air of that wide, shining hall of his, the yield of those wicker chairs to my sore ribs; I can still see the great prospect of plain and mountain to the north, as we sat, all three of us, on the veranda. And I can still see my partner, pausing, with the razor held away from the chin of our host, to glance somewhat wistfully at the river.

“You think it will rise?”

“It has a frog in its throat,” murmured Dutel, again submitting his cheek to that resplendent leaf of steel which stroked the skin lightly as a feather fallen from the wings of sleep.

Our boat was moored just around the bend; but although we knew that our host, in this suave opinion of his, had an eye to his shaves, we knew also, that somewhere back among those dim, round-shouldered mountains lay a sack of rain. Yet the river, only half asleep in its bed, enticed, haunted us with its many-voiced dream-tale of the south, lying under twilight haze, like a mistress too languorous to rise, but willing to be won. It lay still, with scarcely a ripple, between its mysteriously figured walls of half-baked clay.

“It is too early to pick grapes there,” Dutel let fall, waving his arm southward.

“I and Dick have got money,” said old Frank. He wiped the razor on a clean towel, and added: “We have heard about a lady a day’s run down the creek. And we are drawn that way. We are ladies’ men.”

At these words our immaculate Dutel came upright in his chair with a light in his dark eyes.

“Ah, you have heard,” he said. “The wife of Amberg. My friends, yes, a devoted lady. But it is a bad family.”

Lying back in his long chair, with eyes half shut again, he burst into the liquid speech characteristic of him. Amberg, he said, was a queer man, certainly a queer man, coming of a bad family, one of these bad families made bad by solitude and hard luck. Mad, poor devils, rather than bad. Their badness had a necessary quality in it, like the inexorable processes of indifferent nature. These people were numbed by their sequestering fate, indifferent to toil, as to the mournful fact of life itself, conducted in the thick of an unforgiving wilderness. They struck as the blind lightning strikes, from the pressure of invisible tormenting forces.

For his part, Pedro Dutel knew nothing authentic of Amberg; and in the bush one never inquired. Never inquired. One assumed, one understood. Nevertheless, it was said that Amberg had brought his wife from the towns, from Melbourne probably, where she had been a bar-maid. He had retreated here to discuss her, like a dog with a bone.

But rumours here were of little account. Men came and went, shadows, lean brown shadows, shepherding spectral sheep, or knocking white bones together to startle rabbits from under cover. They were disappointed men, these selectors; men driven out of the fat, fertile margins by the shouldering in of capital, money from home in vast blocks. They were dour spirits driven to conceal from all but God the exasperating fact of their continuing poverty. Yes, and they cursed God as well, whose awful benediction, cast upon them from the starry softness of those deep

skies, they could neither fathom nor escape. This ironic and velvety splendour could only plunge them deeper into blasphemy.

“They work to no purpose,” said our host Dutel.

Few men, he said, would have, in the face of such incredible obstacles, this dark spirit of patience with the land, this iron courage, standing up unmoved and scornful of results out of a tangle of roots: of roots planted in a baked land fallen into cracks and strewn with bones, with stumps, innumerable stumps. A day’s work to a stump.

Pedro Dutel, over whose dark face had flashed an appearance of grim mirth, warned us that there were stumps now on his own estate, which would account for a dozen bad families. Land-clearing machinery was known to exist, but it was not at the beck of these selectors.

“They worry them out.”

In an interval between these worryings Amberg had brought into this back-block a wife who could be called—yes, a beautiful woman. Mr. Dutel had once been fortified in his own soul by a sight of her at the edge of his estate. A sulky and magnificent figure of a woman, tall as the fabled goose, with a neck as white, after all these suns. A bar-maid, had he said?

He rubbed his hands, as if this description had set her before him in a new light; as if he half wondered why he had sat here all this time, idle, with that neighbour down the river.

But this miracle of a wife had given an odd turn to Amberg’s badness. He was said to be jealous, insanely jealous; and this jealousy had as good as buried her in that solitude. No one would go near the place. Amberg was a very powerful fellow, and people feared some outburst of his jealousy.

Dutel stopped speaking, and in the silence, night fell, swift as a net over the fluttering wings of day. That round fragment of a granite mountain hung over us, like the black bag out of which night had been poured since time began. A servant brought a candle to the elbow of our host, who pouted his lips to the flame, lighting a cigarette.

Yes, there seemed to be no doubt that the man Amberg was jealous of his wife. He had as good as told him, Dutel, to keep away, at the same time that he had accepted a bottle of very good whiskey at his hands.

The eyes of our host beamed. Could we sympathise with her? She was alone, cut off from her kind; destined to confound nobody with a display of that bewildering beauty.

“A beautiful woman is nobody’s possession,” said our host smoothly. “She is reflected into many hearts, as the sun shines on many waters.”

It was beyond analysis; a strange thing. Showing perhaps that to meet with a sane mind the oppressive immensity of all this—here he waved his arm at the bush—the something unmoved, impassive; men must live together, they must run the risk of their wives’ affections being stolen away. That was the price. Of what use the retaining of a wife, however beautiful, at the cost of reason, at the cost of life itself?

“She will kill him ultimately, of course,” said Pedro Dutel.

Our host exerted himself cheerfully in the role of philosopher. His pleasant voice, speaking without rancour, was strangely at odds with the dark magnificence, or even majesty of his face, with its full lips, its bold eyes, in the corners of which seemed to lie shadows of rapacious dreams. In his rumpled suit of yellow linen, he seemed immense of body, as an ape; and his arm hung by his side like an ape’s. When he moved it, as in a gesture, there was an inclusive crook in it; he would hold the hand outstretched, until the smoke from his cigarette settled into a vague spire, a tiny motionless column, delicately tremulous at the top, as if magically issuing into fragrant wreaths, evoked to fall upon the head of this reasonable man with warlike eyes. An

immense chain of wrought gold extended along the hollow under his ribs, a chain of gold glittering in the blue night, like some mute and all-powerful bond between the man and his philosophy. He was rich, so we had heard; this station of his was an experiment, a mere nothing, outlying here as if to give him a chance to air his thoughts. Comfortable people, as old Frank had said, were in a position to say doggoned comfortable things.

Something in all this had silenced even my partner's tongue; but now he said:

"This here Amberg has been breaking stone up there, along with I and Dick. She had all her chanct then."

Dutel's eye flashed a sudden special intelligence at him. Uttering the single word "Yes," he crushed out his cigarette in the candlestick; and stood listening profoundly, as if attuning himself to the night, to the music of the spheres. Yawning, he stretched his thick arms out, perhaps in a prayer for the freedom of the earth. The yellow light of the candle, streaming upward against his swarthy face, which was slightly pitted, gave it the strength of its dark hollows.

"He stopped in here to-night, on the way to his selection," he said slowly after a time. "He has worked enough. I let him have what he wanted."

Dutel spoke contemptuously, as of an animal he had indulged; and shortly after we turned in. We were sleeping in an abandoned dairy; sleeping hard, too, desperately hard, with the ring of that healthy granite in our ears; and our very heart shaken by the repeated impact of mauls, swung in racking half-circles.

In the morning we felt actually sodden; our hands were cracked; the ribs seemed wrenched away from the spine. As it was, we had stayed longer than most navvies would have found it convenient. We were not professional rock-men; and we had had enough.

Dutel, with a regretful sigh, that arched his vast chest, said at breakfast:

"You are going, then?"

"We reckon so."

"And down the river?"

"We will take tea of that lady of yourn."

Dutel hesitated, and suddenly brought out of his pocket a razor, not the one which Frank had used in shaving him. This was a larger blade, held between two slats of yellow ivory, inlaid with silver points. The name of our host was delicately painted in black on, one of these slips of ivory. This instrument had a look at once of murder, antiquity and art.

It is a good piece of steel, but it needs to be honed," he said. "Our friend Amberg has a bluestone which will do the business. I gave it to him, and afterward lost mine."

Looking at us soberly he added in a quiet tone:

"That razor has a history. It has cut many throats. It is yours! I imagine it will sweat blood on warm nights."

As he expected, my partner received this hint with a consummate twinkle of appreciation. Hah. It would sweat blood. He pondered the hideous and pleasing attribute, sitting cross-legged in the boat, which creaked over the imperceptible current. Do you think this propensity of a slip of steel to sweat blood was nothing to a man of imagination? It was in all, I tell you. He believed it. That razor was dear and necessitous to his heart. Its sudden presentation had deflected him from an original intention of steering clear of Amberg's selection altogether. The chance of a bluestone overbore the risk that might be run by breaking the lady's seclusion. Dutel had certainly made us a careful estimate of her. I seemed to see again the dark figure of our host, just as he stood on the bank above us, in loose linen, with a friendly and speculative gleam in his fierce eyes, which possessed, appropriated, whatever they fell on.

Although we were to be a day's journey by the river, it was nevertheless true that the selector Amberg's land adjoined Dutel's estate.

The river ran five miles to the road's one.

Toward night, the river turned, bringing our backs to the sun.

"Another one of them red-roaring oxbows," said my partner. "This here river is limp enough for a stock whip."

The sun was just over the trees, a forest of tea-trees on the left, where we came abreast of Amberg's selection. There was a shack of stringy bark on the river-bank, but seeing a flash of a roof inland, we turned our steps at once that way. It was a sad place, a gloomy prospect for a couple of swagmen. Lying all about on the hot turf were the charred and rifled trunks of ringed gums, yawning, with black mouths, like giant overturned mortars. They were invested with rabbits, and showed here and there, through cracks, tufts of fur.

In the short grass white bones glimmered in links and crosses and odd broken patterns of a past mortality. The bush, crowding this withered patch, shone sallow green, dense and mute. The sun behind us hung over the tea-trees like a hot copper boiler. There was not a sound.

The house was blind-ended, unkempt, smeared with whitewash. Against the rear of it hung, pegged out, the skins of half a dozen black snakes, with beautiful crimson bellies. We eyed our bare feet doubtfully, but turned the corner of the house.

The wife of Amberg, whom the magic of Dutel's tongue had touched already, was on the porch, washing her bare arms in a tin basin. We were at first shocked to see those arms brilliantly sprayed with blood above the elbow, until we saw just beyond her, the bodies of three opened sheep hanging from the roof of the porch by loops of harness. They were like glittering red caverns; her extraordinary brooding face seemed pale as death against them.

She became aware of us as she was drying her arms, and said calmly, without the least start or confusion:

"Are you travelling from Sydney?"

"That same port, ma'am."

We unconsciously drew together in our wonder at the flashing perfection of this creature whom the bush had swallowed up. Not all the cunning of Dutel's tongue could have invested her with half her charm of the wild. There was something dream-like and smooth in her reception of us. In a calm voice she told us there was water in the dam. She would lay out mutton for us. Tea. Did we care for tea?

Her eyes were blue as a tropical sea, a blue too deep for any sun to fade. They swam by us, they were fixed on middle distance, conveying, through their unwinking regard, the terrifying stillness in that woman's soul. For days, for years, it may be, she had given ear to a whole countryside. It seemed to us as if she had confused our voices with the voices of the bush, which had for so long held her in its smothering trap. Was she mad?

If so, she had taken the tone of her unreason from that universal hush, which was like wool in the ears. She gave the whole vicinity, merging as it was in night, a touch of dream, the rare beauty and pathetically fleeting emotion of a dream. She stood before us, half remembered, or like something we had been destined to see. In the limp droop of those magnificent arms, still moist, glowing pink in the face of a ray-less sun, there was something unreserved and abstracted. She was listening, eternally listening. Her very movements were lingering, stealthy, as if ever so light a noise might intercept some scarcely audible message.

She went into the house, gliding like the ghost of some bright substance.

In filling our basin with fresh water from the dam, we stumbled upon a bit of wire fencing, sunk into the ground as the preliminary to a wheat field. There was no wheat, but caught in one of the lower meshes of the wire was a small, grey lizard, dead many moons, its mouth of yellow satin wide open, minutely horrifying.

“King Dick,” said my partner, stopping short, “that little reptile has starved to death. It wedged itself in there and—”

He looked back at that silent house with the three disembowelled sheep hanging from its roof.

“This is a dead-end of a place,” he muttered. “Where is Amberg, I wonder?”

We saw no trace of him; and yet something in her attitude proclaimed his presence, the haunting presence of a fourth person throwing his shadow across that place.

A glance sufficed to reveal that he was not in the house itself. An inner room, not quite dark, contained only a rumpled bed, and a chair on the seat of which was stuck a bit of melted candle. The ceiling over us consisted of two bulging folds of burlap with a black split in the centre, leading into the gloom of rafters.

As with all these back-block hovels, the chimney was the main thing, a huge maw, in whose blackness hung a round kettle by six or seven sooty links. A narrow door stood in the wall to the left of this chimney.

“Have you lived long in these parts, ma’am?” asked Frank. His voice was thick.

“Four years,” she said.

She walked past us to the chimney, and her bare feet made less noise on the red dirt than the feet of the geese.

“Awful quiet,” he rumbled over his mutton. “Awful quiet here.”

“Yes,” she said. She seemed a little fluttered as if meditating some impulsive move from the gloom of the chimney. Her hands were softly crossed at her throat; she swung poised, as if she might have taken flight. And all the time we felt the unconscious power of some other personality lurking in that rapid dusk.

“I and King Dick was working with your husband up at Bald Top,” Frank went on. This forbearance of hers to produce a husband had worked a nameless uneasiness in him. He felt that the presence of this man, even with his explosive instinct of jealousy, would relieve a situation already growing tense.

In answer she only dropped her eyelids, and leaned back against the chimney.

“Has he—has he showed up?” My partner insisted on accounting for this husband.

And these words were sufficient, for she made a gesture toward the shack by the river’s edge, and in a deep ringing tone, which for the first time rendered the music in her voice, she cried:

“He is out there. Drunk.”

That, then, was what he had wanted of Dutel; something with which to combat the solitude, or the tearing insistence of this jealousy, provoked in him simply by the appalling beauty of a woman whom he had dared to put beyond the approaches of men, only to find that she turned a deaf ear to him as well. He may have felt himself the desperate illusoriness of that beauty. She was no more than a rebellious wraith, shimmering in the midst of this forlorn clearing.

“He came back in drink,” she whispered. “Pig.”

“Doggone his measly hide,” said old Frank in hollow tones. “That is no way to treat a lady, ma’am.”

He stood up, scratching his chin.

Suddenly her bosom heaved, she seemed to be let loose in redoubled beauty from that shadowy chimney corner; and her fiery blue eyes were fixed resolutely on my partner’s apprehensive face.

Yes, it was so they had come at him in the past. Her shoulders narrowed until little soft ridges of pliant muscle rose over them at the neck. Her few whispered words hissed in our ears like arrows.

“You have a boat. Take me. Take me away. O, dear God, take me to the town.”

Imperious and adroit, she flung out both arms to my partner as if to melt him within the full circle of them, while she overwhelmed him with the mad urgency of her astonishing eyes. She coaxed him with the sudden unreserve of a child, sinking slowly to her knees, letting fall her head, backward, to display the longest line of her throat.

“The river may rise,” she whispered passionately, “but what of that? I hope he may die in there. He will never know—need never know. Come—be quick.”

She mumbled disjointed words, sobbing, with her arms laid across his knee. She could assume no position that had not a strong beauty, a persuading charm of wildness. Her leg, bare to the knee, lay on the earthen floor in a thick shadow which was rising all round as night fell. Rapt and astonished, we gazed down at her prone body. Our eyes met, for one second. We looked different ways, not able to speak, or even think in terms of solid reason. We stared at that magnificent goose, coming weightily out of the chimney corner. Its undiscerning gravity gave it a singular look of command in the midst of this madness. The pallor of its neck was not more striking than that of hers against the curling tendrils of tawny hair into which the sun, falling through a chink in the western wall of the hut, struck uncertain fire.

We remained as if turned to stone, striving for some adequate sign, some word to utter, strong and yet civil, something that would detach us, once and for all, from this woman. The moment called for discretion, almost for a kind of understanding tenderness. We were wordless men.

Clearing his throat old Frank manages to eject the single word, “Lonesome,” crouching over her, massive and sorrowful. For a moment he looked down in amazement, as if some bright weapon had pierced his heart already. With a vague stroking gesture of his hand toward her hair, he mumbled:

“Turn in. You will feel different about this in the morning.”

“Then you will not take me?” she cried fiercely.

“No, ma’am,” said my partner. He began to be fierce too. An immense resolution was there, in the cant of his nose. He was being asked to run away with another man’s wife and by the wife herself. No, sir, he had a proper regard for property in wives. It was not the same thing, at all, as if he had asked her to run away.

“Nobody will take me,” she said with deep bitterness. “Are you going to leave me? Will you leave me alone here? What is my life to him?”

“You have got a man,” said old Frank dubiously. Men had got drunk in his experience, without parting from their wives.

In this confusion he went fumbling in his pockets, and drew out the razor Pedro Dutel had given him. The last rays of the sun, coming through a knot-hole, sparkled faintly on its silver points, and clearly illuminated the name, Pedro Dutel, which he read intently, holding the razor still. As if meaning to soothe her, he said:

“Now, there is a razor that sweats blood. Yes, ma’am, it has cut so many throats it will sweat blood on warm nights. It was given I and Dick by a duke.”

She leaned forward, half-forgetful of the plea she had been making, her lips parted. And then the red spot of sun fled, and darkness fell, like the black shadow of a squall, blotting out the expression of her face.

“Have you got a bluestone,” he inquired, trying little by little to turn the talk into a safe channel. I heard him lay the razor on the table with a deliberate click, like a signal; and then the dull voice of the girl, which had a peculiar flatness except when she exerted it strongly:

“I will see,” she said.

Old Frank, noiseless in bare feet, joined me in the doorway, and we felt rather than saw her rise from her crouching position, and pass through the door by the chimney. We looked out into the night.

The silence surrounding that unlucky place was so great that you could have heard the stars knocking together in, the sky. Through the door, the trunks of the dead gums rose glimmering, in groups, festooned by tangled ribbons of bark. They made strange shapes of sorrow, like leaning crosses, age-encrusted monoliths. In their scarred and bone-like rounds, they suggested all kinds of livid terrors—terrors of madness. A neighbourhood like that will very quickly take the tinge of a sick brain.

“We will mosey out of here, to-night,” muttered my partner.

There was not a trace of wind or sound. There seemed literally nothing between us and high heaven to dim the burning scrutiny of those southern stars which, little by little, dissolved the brown of dusk into an incredible solution of crystal blue, rayed by fixed lights. The dark line of the bush haunted us. It was as if we had been shut in on some black bottom, alone with one pitiful girl, through whose mad eyes we were receiving this odd distortion of the landscape. We abhorred the earth we stood on, swung there in that illusory cold round of space, so devilishly pierced by sharp stars. I tell you, we were baffled by the wonder of that inconsiderate illumination, which shone over this horror so deadly wide on that deep round of velvet.

We were roused from this ghastly reverie by a creak of the door by the chimney. At the same time we heard the soft thud of that girl’s feet. She dropped something on the now invisible table, panting, and sprang back forcibly.

“Holy Mackinaw,” said Frank.

He took several steps into the room, and banged into the table. As his hand slid across that surface, it touched the razor he had laid there. The blade was open, and he picked it up.

“King Dick,” he whispered, “it’s wet. The doggoned thing is wet!”

He had slapped it against the palm of his hand.

“Light a match,” he said.

I lit one. Under the steadily burning flame, we saw a broad smear of blood across the palm of his hand.

“You’ve cut it,” I said hoarsely.

He plunged his fist in the bucket of water under the table. We lit another match and stared again. There was no sign of a cut.

And then that girl came between us, fierce, hoarse-breathing. Her foot fell on mine, giving me the sense of that solid body, quivering all over from the receding impulse of an abhorrent crime. That warm dusty sole, like living velvet, horrified me, and I thrust her back. Suddenly she laughed, not a laugh that can be talked about, a banshee scream, torn out of her by the powers of black silence, of those twin brooding infinities of sky and bush.

“It—has—sweat—blood,” she stated then. The devil had touched her with his own humour.

For half a second I believe old Frank actually considered the astounding possibility. It had become part of his life to believe that lurid myth. Recovering his reason, he seized the girl by her shoulders and swayed her back and forth.

“What have you done now?” he cried hoarsely. He got no answer; but in struggling she brought down the fishpoles out of their corner. We heard their tips rip across the sagging burlap and immediately there came several distinct, horrible raps on the beaten dirt, the noise of plump things falling.

“Let go!” Her voice was smothered.

Directly, something cold and sinuous touched my ankle in the blackness. That burlap had been alive.

I stood bolt upright, frozen, without words to voice my horror. By the grotesque, statue-like stillness which had overtaken the body of my partner, I knew that one of the coiling things had touched his own flesh as well. He dropped his arms, or rather lowered them with extreme slowness. The faintest blue light possible shone through the door, and after an appalling interval, we crept toward it, sliding our feet forward by inchmeal, never raising them from the dirt.

Standing in the door we looked back, heavily and strangely; and again I tell you that mocking blackness held the twisted shapes of dreams. We heard her breathe, hard and fast, as if she had been running after us, full tilt. We saw her arms held out to us, as if fixed in a despairing appeal.

“You had nested them snakes!” old Frank muttered.

A cold chill swarmed up my spine. Was it so that she had safeguarded her appeal?

Suddenly our one raging desire was to withdraw from that house. That we should drag her to some remote justice of men, dealt her by a fellow whose life had not indurated him to making a choice of evils, this thought never came to us. We were half-glad she had killed that man who had buried her alive. But at the same time—strange fact—the woman had become a virulent poison to us. With a shudder I recalled her warm foot crushed against mine, the hot breath shrieking out of her. She had the self-sufficiency, then, of an ancient fury. We became accessories after the fact, and our one thought was to rid her of the fatal menace of our testimony. Without us nothing would be proved; for months, it might be, nothing would be known. The words of Dutch reverberated in my head; that when they struck, out here, it was like the inexorable process of indifferent nature. Equally with love, or with the softest tenderness, this violent death had the sanction of the stars. What had he called them? The inviolate stars. We found ourselves going toward the river: fast.

Heavy clouds had obscured all stars in the north; rain hung about; and we heard the voice of the river, hoarse, menacing. It was getting ready to clear itself of the frog in its throat.

We spoke no words. Plunging down the bank—a runway of hot slime—we made no question of the profound importance of getting beyond the sphere of that malign beauty, whatever the cost, on the instant. She had shown us, in one fearful glimpse, how the logic of the dead wild ended the combat of souls.

We jumped into the boat, and my partner stroked her into the stream, with a convulsive movement of his arms. When we were well on the current, a faint crackling above caused us to lift our eyes.

“Holy old crow!” he cried despairingly.

That indomitable woman stood there above us, faintly illuminated by the starshine. A rising wind shook her skirts, making the rigid determination of her body more conspicuous. With the strength of a strong man, she had raised on end one of those rifled gum-trees, a leprous trunk with a hideous bell-mouth. She had torn her dress; there was a dark line as of blood, on her bare shoulder, and the arm joining it was white and massive,—the arm of an Amazon, broad with the strain of lifting.

My thick brain began to understand, in flashes of amazed calculation, that she meant to dash us in pieces. We were being whirled by the current directly under that part of the bank where she hung poised. This maenadic spirit, black as an iron maiden, except for a gleam of light on her shoulders, wrestling with that tree trunk like some woman Cyclops, blindly bent on hurling us to destruction. Fascinated, we beheld the tree rise, with her arms solid under it as bars. She would never fail

The boat could not be stopped; its flat bottom took no purchase on the current: but the whole business was over in a second, during which we saw that great tree slide over the clay bank with the sluggish and formidable ease of a ship launching. It fell short by two feet!

We had no time to be grateful for that mercy of chance. We were beset with watery terrors now. The river was suddenly rising in its bed and shrieking, like a man struggling with a nightmare. The stump she had hurled rose after us, gleaming and twirling, its roots rising like Medusa's locks. I heard my partner roar out to me to capture that tree. It was fairly dogging us, rolling over and over, seeming to nose the stern of the boat lovingly. I thrust it ahead. Handing me the paddle, my partner knelt, and lashed the thing to the side, the heavy end projecting, for a ram.

Then we fled on the current, through a night that had no end. We hardly spoke to one another; but with each moment, our satisfaction increased to think of the distance we were putting between us and that uncompromising woman. All or nothing. She had not been grateful to us for simply running away.

When day came we felt we had come into a new land, which had only a soothing ignorance of the night's work. That was like a dream. The razor might have sweat blood, for all we knew now. We were well out of it at least. Miles away. A good thirty miles away, at the rate the current had driven us. The river-bed was already half full, and sending down to us odd lots from the back-country: rabbits, submerged sheep, capsized crows and cockatoos.

All these things we made out through a thick mist, almost a fog, which had blown in from the coast. I speared at them with the paddle, thinking to improve the state of my mind by a little activity of that sort. I was an accessory, you understand; an accessory after the fact.

At length old Frank grunted at me from his position forward, where he had been opening a mess of fresh water clams. In a moment he raised the burlap to let me look, through the cabin.

"King Dick," he said, "they is a tarnation crew of rabbits in that log."

He spoke jocularly; and then, shifting his eyes, fixed them on two dragged tufts of some substance like fur. These tufts protruded through a crack-in our ram, which the continual battering of the night had widened.

"Yes, rabbits," he continued, in a ghastly voice. The impossible twinkle died out of his eye.

"What would you say if we let that log go about its business, partner?"

"Let it go, in God's name."

I could not drag myself from contemplation of those two iron grey tufts. I saw his fingers stumble among the lashings, I caught a glimmer from his sick eyes as they rolled in his head with aversion to that task. His hands hung over the reluctant knots, gleaming.

As he crouched, I made a turn of the river with a broad sweep of the paddle; and at once I had occasion to shout to him:

"Hold on."

Directly in our path, stretching fatally across the narrow waterway was the trunk of a huge gum, thick and straight as the body of a python. The water rushed against it; poured over it. That

log had a look of something alive, stubborn, reptilian. The river here began to run rapidly, as its bed tilted downward. With the momentum gathered by our ram, we surged forward unavoidably.

“Leave it—to take up the shock,” I howled. He desisted doubtfully, watching our terrific advance against that barricading gum. I was just able, by sinking the paddle deep, to maintain a head-on course, the boat shaking like a jelly under the strain.

Old Frank, looking at our ram, said twice, with horrible doubtfulness: “It will split.”

He was undeniably right. When that great bell-mouthed log, rotten through and through, came against the submerged gum, the impact threw us forward on our faces. But nothing could prevent our seeing that log open, like a brand in the heart of a fire, disclosing the body of the man Amberg dressed in black leather, as we had last seen him. He looked like a shrivelled beetle. We had only time to see his eyes, and the two diabolical tufts of his forked beard, when with the evenness of some ceremony, like a baptism, he plunged under the log. It was in vain that we watched for him to reappear.

After a while we became convinced that we had better land. On high ground we stamped our feet, and breathed the gratifying strangeness of that countryside. It was like all we had seen, except that we saw it now subdued or etherealised, softened by this unusual mist. We swung inland like two madmen. Perhaps we fancied we were going to arrange something, to take the edge off the casualness of that death. I think we wanted to make patent and formal acknowledgment to men that, after all, it was a man that had died, whatever his faults. Not a beetle. Not a black beetle.

We took our way over a random scattering of skeletons, ribs, hoofs, dung. The continual glare of these bleached bones, eloquent of death, seemed to work a mocking corruption of our own bodies. We remembered that living hearts had only now hung in those peculiar spaces, had throbbed, stopped, rotted, blown away, while the stars shone—these inviolate stars—and the bush gave no sign. Our lives hung upon a thread, transient as a spark. We breathed thickly; while the spongy ground sent up hot little puffs of dust at our heels.

“There’s a shack,” said my partner.

It loomed close upon us in the mist, a house like all the other houses of the bush. And yet, happening to glance down at the ground, I saw that this was not precisely as other houses. I cried hoarsely to my partner to look down.

We were gaping into the yellow mouth of that dead lizard caught in his wire mesh!

I tell you, I felt then as if we were the centre of a mad vortex, at the place where infinities meet. This recurrence of the lizard was exasperating and fiendishly ill-timed, like the bizarre duplication in the train of nightmares. Choked with a feeling like wrath, as if this dead reptile had contrived to put himself maliciously in my way again, I glared down—and then my partner with a low oath lifted his bare heel and ground that mummified little atom deep into the scaly soil.

“The river’s turned,” he mumbled. “Dratted oxbow.”

We were back again!

As if to force us to look at last into the secret heart of the bush, the river had turned on itself and reconveyed us to that accursed spot.

We stared ahead, and as the mist slowly lifted we saw the house more plainly; and the three gutted sheep, still hanging red and cavernous from the porch.

We came upon the house, rocking from side to side, with discreet and noiseless steps, as if our lives depended upon utter stealth. And as we reached the narrow door at the side of the

chimney—which stood open a little way; we heard a voice speaking in strong and liquid tones. It was Dutel.

When he heard the thud of our bare heels, and saw us standing in the doorway, he looked up pleasantly. Amberg's wife had flung herself across his knees, and with one ape-like arm extended, he toyed with her hair, raising and letting it fall musingly. And in his warlike eyes was reared the full flame of that remote spark which had kindled there as he told us in gentle tones that a beautiful woman belongs to no man. How had he said it? "The sun shines on many waters."

"Ah, gentlemen," he said, still in his pleasant voice, "I see you have returned for your razor."