

THE STORY of the TICKET OF LEAVE MAN

By Luke Thrice

Another story of adroit cunning in the entertaining "Adventures of a Master Rogue," written especially for these pages by Luke Thrice.

"TRANSPORTATION for life," said Laxton, gloomily. "Little chance a lad had in those days."

The master nodded. "Blake, as I said, was on ticket of leave when he tried to hold up a gold delivery single handed. He was recognized, but escaped into the bush, and after months of wandering in the desert won through to Port Darwin and got away from Australia on a trading schooner."

"I met him years afterward in Chicago. He was of an old man, but the sufferings he had endured had broken him. He tried to turn a simple trick in a snk. I was standing by and watching him. So was he bank detective. When Blake made his faltering attempt the detective sprang at him, but I was beforehand. Raising the hue and cry I managed to trip the yursuer and in the excitement the old fellow got clear."

"He was grateful for some reason, and when I found him again he told me about himself. He was full of strange, terrible stories of the convict times, though none was stranger or more terrible than his own experience in the bush. He wandered up through the Northern Territory, through the dust storms and the choking heat, seeking the forgotten ruins of a mining camp, where two former associates of his, Coogin and O'Mara, had hidden themselves with the black boys."

"He finally found his men—in peculiar circumstances."

"Let's have it," said Laxton, as the master paused.

And this was the story told by the master, who had it first from Blake, the ticket of leave man.

Coogin and O'Mara had gone into the brush years before and had never been seen again. Blake had nothing to guide him to their whereabouts but that knowledge and vague rumors picked up from black boys, who directed him to Wooloo. He was on the point of giving up the search for Wooloo time and time again, only to return to it anew when hunger, thirst and the trackers pressed him.

One thing puzzled Blake particularly. The black boys never referred to the two outcasts whom he sought as white men. They were called the lone dwellers, or the strangers, or the men of Wooloo. Apparently the natives had accepted Coogin and O'Mara as of themselves. But Blake's first thought was to find shelter, aid and friends, and he had no doubt that they would welcome him.

Blake had had two hard days of it, and finally, as he hoped, had thrown off pursuit. His garments were in rags. Food or water had not passed his lips for twenty-four hours. Night overtook him on the vast, mournful and desert wastes as he staggered on, exhausted and delirious. Then, somehow, he found himself in a shallow hollow of the plain, surrounded by crumbling skeletons of huts heaped with sand drifts. Floundering on, he caught a sudden, sharp glare of light. It came from the window of a ruined shanty, and, creeping up, he looked through. Unable to move further or cry out for weakness, sprawled on a drifted hummock, he heard and saw what passed within. It was O'Mara's celebration of Coogin's wake.

O'Mara sat by Coogin's body. Three sputtering wicks in cups of fat lit up the one room and flashed on the unwinking eyes of a score of natives, men and women, sitting on their heels about the wall.

O'Mara held a cocoanut shell full of sticky, dark liquor and nodded at Coogin. Beating a maudlin measure he broke hoarsely into song:—

"Fr old Boru is dead an' gone,
No shindy can he make;
We'll brew a smokin' bowl t' him
An' drink ut at his wake."

The line of eyes stared unmoved at the lone roysterer. Wreaths of acrid smoke, through which the light showed red, trailed from the rude lamps. The dead face was flushed as by the blood of life, but lines and sharp, hard shadows gave the lie to the seeming. Outside, as a tangible thing, hung the heavy silence of the desert, with not a whisper to break its weight. The air was stifling hot and filled with the scent of burning fat.

A Tale of Terror.

O'Mara finished his draught and stood bulking huge in the flicker and flare. He unsling a large gourd from a rafter and passed it to the nearest native. Grasping the rough coffin for support, he cleared his throat for speech.

His tongue found the words of earlier days, grown used though it had to the harsh native dialect—and none of those that heard except Blake could understand. But the gourd passed from hand to hand, and in the intervals of waiting each pair of eyes was fixed upon the speaker. To Blake the whole scene was one of those real but distorted visions that come to a man in delirium.

"Friends an' neighbors," began O'Mara, solemnly. "Y'ave been invited this night t' sit by the body of Danny Coogin, an' tis a proper wake we'll give him. Drink hearty."

He arrested the progress of the gourd long enough to fill his cocoanut shell.

"Why," he shouted, suddenly, reeling upright in a swift gust of sudden anger, "why do we call ut Coogin's wake? 'Tis us hns all the wake while Coogin lies with no word fr the lads that pass the bowl. 'Tis us that wakes, an' he sleeps."

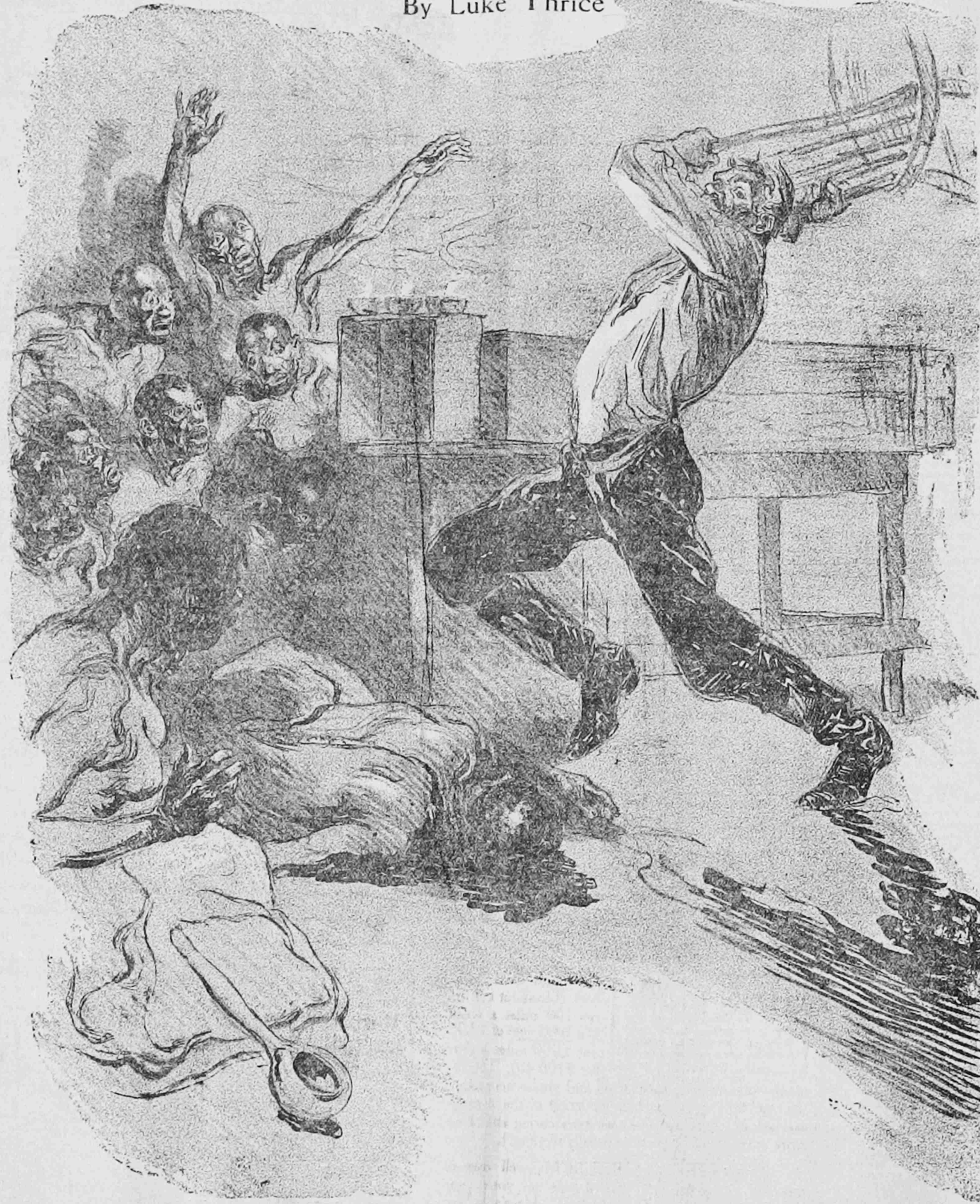
He crumpled into laughter and was shortly in tears.

"Friends an' neighbors," he began again, weaving unsteadily on his feet. "I have known deceased fr many years. We were in the army together, an' in Van Dieman's Land t'gether, an' in this burnin', forsaken hole t'gether. A fine lad was Danny, though something quarrelsome an' over handy with his fists—an' a soaker fr rum."

"Y' ask why did we come t' Wooloo; why did we come t' live in a sand pit, eat y'r dog meat an' drink y'r devil's cocoanut shandygaff? S-h-h-h!" he peered down at Coogin. "Do y' want I should tell, Danny, me buck? Small talkin' y' 'll ever be doin'." "Tis me or none can say the word. Eh, Dan, do y' mind the days? The cat an' the gag an' the irons? So do I, Dan, 'tis well I mind."

His hand shook as he raised his cup. But the need for words, more words, lashed him on. In a more sober flash it reached him that there was none to mark, none to remember. He swept the circle of vacant eyes with cynic sneer. Why should he not tell?

"Danny has passed me the wink, neighbors," he said, after a pause. "An' 'tis like y' should be wantin', 'hear a bit bearin' on the late leadin' citizen of



"Touch him, will ye, ye swine? Touch a white man, y' black impof Satan."

Wooloo. Hey, Bamba, y' wall eyed thafe, hand us that gourd a minute."

"I was drafted in forty-five, was Danny an' me, to a troop comin' out fr Liverpool with a gang of transpirts fr the convict prison at Risdon. Never mind the Colonel's name. If so be Danny falls in with him where he's gone, as is like, 'twill be a rattlin' corner fr a time an' somethin' hotter than ordinary. Danny was never the man t' forget an' always grumblin' he was that his score was still outstandin' with the Colonel. Y' might think different when I tell y' of the payment we made on it." He laughed.

"Well, not t' put a tail onto ut, the Colonel got us be the short hair, damn him! second day out. All fr a fancy we took t' his own private bottle, like any young lads might have done. 'Twas in a rack for-nist his bunk, an' we fished it out as neat as y' please, anglin' over the side be way of his port hole. He was watchin' us all the time, I might explain, an' he waited till we had it fast t' the string."

"Ah, me lads, what's the catch? he asks. An' 'twas the first time we got a look of the yellow grin of him. Fine we come t' know ut after."

In Double Irons.

"We showed him the bottle an' he kept his smile, like the cold blooded baboon he was. Ten hours under guard was maybe what we looked t' get. Ut was the brig we got, with double irons fr the whole four months' trip. Heavy weather we struck, too, an' us locked fast. Never a thought would we have got if the ship had gone. When they lifted us on deck at the end she was comin' into the Derwent, Van Dieman's Land, an' near gone we were with sickness. Us free men, y' mind, neighbors. No convicts, but listed regular with the Queen's shillin'."

"We laid fr the Colonel. 'Twas bitter we were, an' he knew ut, I like t' think. An' in the wrinkled heart of him was the fear of us we put there. But we were sharp, an' he could put no finger to us."

"Weary work we had, standin' guard an' actin' convict keepers at Risdon, an' we come t' hate the Colonel like we loved life. An' we made trouble fr him. There was a mad convict with the strength of ten that nigh got him one time. He was makin' the rounds when the big lad jumped fr him an' he left part of his clothes behind when they pulled him loose. He raised Ned and all tryin' t' find how the convict's irons come t' be tied. He never could learn, but he used t' stand an' watch us, Danny an' me, an' we got the rough of the work after that. An' triple measure of the cat when he wanted amusement or we broke a regulation. Y' can stake ut he was on the spot every time, too, with his yellow grin."

"We was doin' sentry go on the wall another time when we heard a yell fr'm his quarters an' out he come skippin' in his shirt, havin' near got t' bed with a three foot tiger snake. 'Twas a healthy one an' would have snuffed him out in three minutes be the watch. No more did he find how the snake come there in his bed. We could have told, Danny an' me. How we laughed at the face of him, an' swore atop of ut."

"Ut couldn't last. We were livin' on a wearin' stretch. We went crazy mad in the end the way we knew was comin'. 'Twas after thirty strokes apiece fr insubordination, we havin' cursed the weevil bread where he heard us, lurkin' behind the barracks wall t' catch us at plottin'."

"He stood in the court an' watched us get it, stroke he stroke. The lad with the cat couldn't lay on hard enough t' suit, an' 'twas the Colonel himself we could hear pushin' him on an' naggin' him fr a weaklin'."

With a yell in every vein of us an' murder in our hearts we crawled fr'm the court t' the locker room, an' never a word bechme us. Bayonets we grabbed so soon as fingers could crook about the steel, an' back we come. He was standin' there yet with the pasty smile of him an' we rushed him t'gether. But the sap had been whipped fr'm us. I marked him before I went down under a musket butt an' he bore a red stripe on his face t' the grave. Small satisfaction, that, at the time."

"Convicts we were fr'm that hour, not convict keepers. The Colonel ut ut cold t' the Governor. 'Twas fr life without even a hearin'."

The voice trailed off into mutterings. There was a harsh hum of guttural whispering about the wall where the blackboys, enlivened by the drink, spoke among themselves. An occasional glint of eyeballs

turned toward the haggard figure that clutched the coffin edge with weak hands. O'Mara had forgotten Wooloo. He lived for a moment in Risdon prison, through the days of a monstrous past. Blake, outside, had fallen into a stupor, but still watched and listened mechanically.

The Cat Then.

"Six years in hell, neighbors," he resumed suddenly, fortified by another dram from the gourd. "Six years with a thirty pound chain an' a round shot on' each ankle. Months, off an' on, wearin' the crossed irons—a man's hands fast t' his feet an' his body bent like a fish hook."

"Then we got the cat regular. A leather cat, with pills strung on eight ply lash like beads on strings. The one we'd had was a feather t' this. If Danny here, was lyin' naked y'd see him ringed an' scored like a palm tree. An' when a lad screamed with his back like a side of backed beef he got the gag—a steel gag like a bit with a burr that stuck in his tongue at every breath."

"Tough ut was, but tough was we in them days, Danny an' me. We never laid down on ut like most the cattle. We was lookin' fr a chance, an' the first sign we got that a chance was comin' was when Danny found a file smuggled in fr another prisoner one day. But 'twas a queer use he put ut to."

"They struck off our chains of a mornin' not long after that fr prison inspection be some big clergyman or other, fresh fr'm home with a report t' make out on convict treatment. The Governor was comin' with him an' all must be fair an' gentle seemin'."

"Twenty feet ut was t' the gate, no more, an' the gate wide open fr the Governor, with the guards drawin' away t' make room. We was through before a hand was raised. There was a snipe of a lieutenant in the road. He had his sword out, but Danny broke ut like a pipe an' threw the file into the keeper that tried to back up the lieutenant."

"We was away t' the woods on a gallop, with a sleet of bullets whimperin' around us. Danny caught ut in the calf before we reached shelter, but once in the forest we was safe. All that night Danny lumped on me shoulder. We struck fr the back country an' they missed us."

"We got t' Sydney in fifty-one, landin' fr'm a Dutch sealer that picked us up off the north coast, sinkin' in a proa that was shot full of holes be the blacks we'd stole ut fr'm. The first month of the gold rush, ut was, an' all the convicts an' ticket of leave men an' rangers that was loose lookin' fr the metal. Too many of them fr police or troops t' handle that year. We went with the current an' had a neat pile stowed away when Danny got word of the Colonel."

"The yellow sneak got out of Risdon a year after we joined the chain gang. We learned he was doin' commissary in Sydney an' we headed back quick."

"We come upon him leavin' the stores of a twilight,

turned toward the haggard figure that clutched the coffin edge with weak hands. O'Mara had forgotten Wooloo. He lived for a moment in Risdon prison, through the days of a monstrous past. Blake, outside, had fallen into a stupor, but still watched and listened mechanically.

"So here we are, or I am, an' Danny's gone. Drink once more t' Danny, neighbors."

"Fr old Boru is dead an' gone,
No shindy can he make;
We'll brew a smokin' bowl t' him
An' drink ut at his wake."

He stuttered over the last words of the jingle as the liquor in his blood found him and claimed him for its own again. Wrought upon by liquid fire and the wild speech and gestures of the big man by the coffin the blackboys gibbered and laughed among themselves. The gourd passed quickly down the line and avid cries demanded it filled again. The blacks moved about restlessly. Quarrels began among them. O'Mara collapsed into the only chair and sat, blinking and leering.

The Last White Man.

Then a tall native, somewhat more imaginative than the rest, and sensing his fellows' readiness for a game, bethought him of a diversion. He replenished his cup and stepped to the side of the coffin.

Raising Coogin's head with one hand, with the other he offered the drink to the dead lips. A quest of appreciation from his brethren encouraged him. With quick fingers he pried open Coogin's mouth and began to pour in the liquor.

An instant later he was plucked from behind, whirled through the air and dashed senseless to the floor. O'Mara towered above him, the chair aloft in both hands, terrible in his wrath.

"Touch him, will ye, ye swine? Touch a white man, y' black limb of Satan!"

He raged triumphant, threatening the cowering natives in succession and returning to showers blown on the inanimate violator of the dead. The ten black years fell away. O'Mara was once more a white man.

Paralyzed by the suddenness and violence of the attack the blackboys huddled against the wall for a moment. But the blood lust and the drink were in them. O'Mara had crossed the color line. Yelping they drew together near the door and then flung upon him. With winding arms they sought him; with eager, grasping hands they tore at him. He shook them off with full sweeps of his great arms, believing in stark anger, the white, red blood pounding through muscles and brain, lending unknown strength from its latent reserve.

Back they rushed. He bent them from side to side, driving two to the ground with the splintered chair. The black wave swept on again.

He fought hard, with teeth tight set, striking short, grunting blows or circling, battering strokes as he found room for them; twisting from the clawing hands; forcing his way instinctively toward the walls, where he might meet the native volves in front. The frenzy of color hate was in him. His fingers closed on a bare black throat for a second and the flesh tore away beneath them.

The struggling group moved slowly from end to end of the hut like some nameless, hideous polyp in the red muck. The dead man lay unmolested. Blake, outside, was helpless in the impersonal detachment of delirium. The thing passed before him as a dream. On the threshold, with strained, uncomprehending faces, the native women crouched in terror. Again and again the black mass closed in upon the berserk convict, and each time his falling fists and arms beat them back.

A blackboy that had been stunned by a blow from the chair rolled to his knees and watched the struggle a moment. He caught the glint of a knife on the table where the coffin lay. Crawling snakewise in the shadows he rose stealthily and seized the weapon. With bent knees and quivering body he crept about the seething crowd. An opening came; he leapt and struck. The last white man of Wooloo was dead.