

## FLIGHT

Constable John O'Shea was an angry man as he rode away from Movingunda with three little half-caste girls strapped on behind him.

The only three white men on the station had watched, laughing and slinging off as he mounted and set out, a horde of Aboriginal mothers and dogs yelping after him. Most of the native men were out mustering – thank God, O'Shea reflected – or there might have been more trouble.

For miles the women and dogs ran behind him, yelling and screaming; the children yelled and screamed to them. The women fell back at last, but the children kept on snivelling and wailing.

Constable O'Shea was glad to reach the cover of the scrub and follow the track over rough, drought-stricken country to Lorgans:

It was a clear day, cold and sunshiny. From the station tableland, he could see the plains stretching away, grey-blue as the sea in winter, a wedge of hills darker blue against the distant horizon. Near by, the mulga looked dead or dying, although recent rains had left pools beside the track. Fresh green was streaking the red earth near them, making vivid patches against its mail of black iron-stone pebbles.

Constable O'Shea resented having to pick up half-caste girls and send them down to government institutions at the request of the Aborigines Department. He considered it no job for a man who had to maintain the prestige of the force and uphold law and order in an outlying district.

But he had received instructions that three half-caste female children on Movingunda were to be sent down by the train which passed through Lorgans on the eighth of the month. So there was nothing for it but to collect the children, and hand them over to the officer who would be on the train.

A rotten business, it had been, removing the youngsters

from their mothers. What a shrieking and howling, jabbering and imploring, with attempts to hide the children and run away with them into the bush! One of the gins and her terror-stricken kid had climbed a tree near the creek. It was not until after dark he had got that one, when mother and child crept back and were sleeping by the camp-fire.

Constable O'Shea sweated and swore as he thought of it, and the laughing-stock he had been to the white men on Movingunda, not one of whom would lend a hand to help him. He knew better than to try to make them. Murphy kept the fun going, a father of one of the kids - but not game to admit it. You couldn't blame him. There was a penalty, these days, for cohabiting with native women. But Fitz Murphy had been living with a gin for years, and had several children by her, everybody knew.

McEacharn, at least, made his position clear.

"No," he said, "they're not my kids. If they were, you wouldn't get them, O'Shea."

There had been all the writing to do for official purposes also, giving the kids' names, without reference to their parents, black or white - just labels to differentiate them by. Waste of time, O'Shea told himself, since the object of the drive was to separate the children from their Aboriginal parents and environment.

Constable O'Shea was at his wits' end inventing names for half-caste brats. This was not the first lot he had had to register. The name a girl was known by in the camp or on the station might be used, but a surname had to be attached. O'Shea cursed the regulations.

This time he had got the native names of the children - Mynie, Nanja and Coorin. Molly, Polly and Dolly were easier to remember, so he put them down as Molly, Polly and Dolly. But surnames - he racked his brains about surnames for the bunch. A girl's father could not afford to be implicated, although occasionally the name of a station or locality might be adopted with certain satisfaction.

"What does Movingunda mean in the blacks' lingo?" he asked McEacharn.

"Ant-hill."

"That'll do," O'Shea grinned, and wrote *Anthill* beside *Molly*. "How about you chaps," he continued, "any of you willing to lend a kid a name?"

"Not on your life," Murphy blustered.

"Anything you say may be used in evidence against you, eh, Murphy?" O'Shea remarked dryly.

The men guffawed.

"You can name the whole damned lot after me, if you like," McEacharn growled, "though God knows I've left the gins alone."

"Right!"

O'Shea scrawled *McEacharn* for the next child.

"And the youngest?"

Mick Donovan, the old prospector, who had come into the station for stores, chuckled: "She's the one gave you such a run for your money, Sarge."

"Call her Small and be done with it," McEacharn advised.

O'Shea was grateful for the suggestion.

"There," he said, folding up his report and packing it away with a wad of papers in the breast-pocket of his tunic. "This batch will start life as young ladies with real classy names."

The worst of it was, he could not remember which was which, and the kids didn't know which of them was supposed to be Molly, Polly, or Dolly. They would only answer to their native names. But, Hell, a man could not be worried about that! The Department would have to sort them out somehow.

Constable O'Shea's temper did not improve as he rode. His charger, a nervous, powerful brute, took some handling at the best of times, and those three stinking kids on his back irritated him. They didn't weigh much more than a bunch of wild pigeons; but their dangling

legs and bony little behinds chafed and upset Chief. He had tried to shift them, more than once, shying and pig-rooting whenever he got a chance. The kids stuck like leeches, strapped together though they were. The eldest hung on to O'Shea's belt, the rest to her.

It was hot at midday, the sky bare blue overhead and the sunlight dazzling. When he was thirsty himself, O'Shea gave the kids a drink from his water-bag, and a piece of bread and meat from the crib the station cook had put up for him.

The kids were so scared, they stared, goggle-eyed, when he spoke to them. Not a word would they say. There would be another meal to provide, O'Shea realised, so he rationed supplies carefully.

He had not anticipated this picnic. He had expected that McEacharn would make his car available and drive the kids into Lorgans. McEacharn had intimated, with specious regrets, that he could do nothing of the sort. He had an important engagement on Ethel Creek, a hundred miles in the opposite direction, and the station buggy was out on the mustering camp.

Constable O'Shea understood that if the children were to be dispatched by the train in three days' time, he must be responsible for their means of transport himself. There was no other way but to hoist them up behind him. He would have to sleep out for the night, too.

Of course, he could call in at Sandy Gap station and require the manager to put him and his passengers up for the night. But stand another round of laughter and chacking - not if he knew it! It would be awkward, camping by the track, and keeping an eye on the brats. He had no blankets. They would have to sleep by the fire. He had his rain-coat for a ground-sheet and covering, his saddle for pillow.

At sunset, when he lifted the children down from the big, bay horse, he would have liked to unfasten the straps knotted round their waists; but he knew very well what

would happen if they found themselves free. They would be off and away like greased lightning. They knew this country better than he did, young as they were, and would make their way back to Movingunda. Then what sort of a fool would he look, going back after them, with all the business of catching and getting away with them again?

Ordinarily, he would have had his black tracker, Charley Ten, to look after the kids and make the fire; but Charley was giving evidence at a native trial in Meekatharra. There was nothing for it but to keep the kids tied up and make the fire himself.

O'Shea cursed his luck as he hauled a couple of mulga logs together and set them alight. He cursed the hopes of promotion which had brought him to the back-country; cursed Murphy, and every man in the nor'-west, who begot half-castes: cursed McEacharn for making it obvious that he did not intend to facilitate arrangements for removing youngsters from his station: cursed the Protector of Aborigines and the Department for their penurious habit of pushing on to the police in out-of-the-way places, work that should be done by officers of the Aborigines Department: cursed every well-meaning man and woman who believed that the Government ought to "do something" for half-caste girls, without proper consideration of what that "something" ought to be.

The three small girls sat on the ground watching him. Three pairs of beautiful dark eyes followed his every movement, alert and apprehensive. The eldest of the children, he had put down as nine years old, the other two at eight and seven.

Part of Constable O'Shea's grouch, though he would not have admitted it, was due to the way the children looked at him. He could not endure children to look at him as if he were an ogre who might devour them at any moment. A good-looking, kindly young man, he prided himself on carrying out his duties conscientiously but without harshness.

A man had to be considered a good sort to get anywhere in a district like this, where he was the only policeman for nearly a hundred miles in any direction, and had to depend on assistance from station-owners and mine managers in an emergency. This job made him unpopular on the stations and he loathed it. He would rather wade in and clean up a dozen fighting drunks, he said, than go round collecting half-caste girls on behalf of the Aborigines Department. Why didn't the Department do its own dirty work?

O'Shea was disturbed by the thought that it was dirty work he had been forced to take part in. How would any woman like her kids being yanked away from her, knowing quite well the chances were she would never see them again? His own wife, for example?

Constable O'Shea smiled, trying to imagine any man separating his Nancy from her three linty-haired little girls and small son. But after he had fed the Aboriginal children and given them each a drink of water, he took the precaution of tying their hands together with strips of rawhide in case they might try to unfasten the strap round their middles and run away. The children huddled together and fell asleep, wailing a little, but evidently with no hope of escape. Constable O'Shea stretched and dozed uncomfortably on the far side of the fire.

It was evening of the second day when he rode over the ridge by a back track into Lorgans. He had taken care not to arrive until dusk so that no one would see him.

For several years Lorgans had been one of those deserted mining townships, with only the dump and poppet-legs of an old mine, a pub and the ruins of a row of shops to testify to its former prosperity. But the railway still ran about a mile away, and with re-opening of the mine, the township took a new lease of life. Gold was bringing a good price.

Constable O'Shea's appointment followed a rush on the flat below the ridge. New shafts were sunk, shops sprouted

among the ruins. Lorgans acquired a population of three or four hundred in a few months, and O'Shea had brought his wife and family to live in the smart, new police-station put up for him at the entrance to the town.

When he reached the gate of the yard behind his house, O'Shea dismounted, and lifted Mynie, Nanja and Coorin down from his horse. He did not want his wife to see him with those kids stuck up behind, and start laughing, as she surely would. She laughed so easily. Her sense of humour kept her fat and content in this god-forsaken hole, she said; but O'Shea was not going to have her laughing at him if he could help it.

A dog started barking at the sight of him. Mrs O'Shea hurried out of the house as soon as she heard the dog. Her children swarmed about her. A big, fair-haired, youngish woman, she was, Mrs O'Shea, full-bosomed and sonsy. The children were like her, with fair hair and clear rosy skins. All excitement and delight, they ran to meet their father. He swung his son into his arms and the little girls hung on to him.

It was Mrs O'Shea who discovered the three small half-castes, crouched together and staring at her, wide-eyed and woe-begone.

"Oh, Jack," she exclaimed, "the poor little things! What are you going to do with them?"

"What do you think?" O'Shea asked impatiently. "Keep them for pets?"

His daughters guessed just what had happened. They queried maddeningly.

"Did you give them a ride on your horse, Daddy?"

"Why can't we have a ride on your horse, Daddy?"

"Want to sit up behind you on Chief, too, Daddy!"

"Want a ride..."

"Can't I have a ride, too, Daddy?"

The half-castes gazed at these other children with amazement. How was it possible for them to talk to the policeman so cheekily and light-heartedly?

"But you can't keep them tied up like that," protested Mrs O'Shea, still concerned about those wretched little figures.

"They're as wild as birds," Constable O'Shea declared testily. "If I gave them a chance, they'd be off back to Movingunda like a shot. And I wouldn't go through all I have had to, to get them again, for quids!"

He put his son on the ground, and walked over to a shed of corrugated iron with barbed wire across a small, square window, unlocked the door and flung it back.

"Come along, you feller," he called. "Nothing hurt'm. Missus bring'm tucker, d'reckly."

Mynie, Nanja and Coorin moved slowly, reluctantly, towards the door, their eyes searching desperately for some way to save them from that dark shed.

It served as a lock-up, but was rarely used except for an unruly drunk or a native prisoner.

"Don't put them there, Jack," his wife begged. "They'll be scared stiff – and it's freezing cold these nights."

"You can't take them into the house," O'Shea objected.

"What about the room at the end of the verandah?" Mrs O'Shea persisted. "They can't do any harm there. I'll take them along while you feed Chief."

"Have it your own way. They'll have to be scrubbed and disinfected tomorrow."

O'Shea unbuttoned the navy tunic of his uniform, hung it on a post and turned to unsaddle.

"Come on, children," his wife called cheerily to the half-castes. They trailed behind her as she trundled across the yard. Her own offspring followed curiously.

"Go and finish your tea," their mother said. "And Phyll, see that Bobbie doesn't spill his cocoa on the tablecloth."

Constable O'Shea snapped back the surcingle and girths of his saddle, heaved it on to one arm, and the big bay followed him into the stable. He gave his horse a good hard feed, rubbed him down and ran water into

the trough by the stable door before going into the house.

His son was sitting in his high chair, and the three little girls, just about the same age as those half-caste children, chattering gleefully as they finished their meal. Very fresh and pretty they looked, with their hair in neat pig-tails and print aprons over their frocks. Nancy was a wonderful mother; always contrived to have the children looking clean and bonny for the evening meal, and everything bright and pleasant when he came back from one of these long trips across country.

But tonight, as she stood by the fire grilling his steak, Nancy seemed vaguely troubled. Her easy-going, good-natured tolerance of life at Lorgans was overcast.

"I'll be glad when we get a move," she said, putting a large plate of steak, poached eggs and fried potatoes before her husband. "It's getting on my nerves – this kidnapping of children."

"You're not more fed-up with it than I am," O'Shea replied irritably. "If the Department wants me to do this job, they'll have to provide me with a car, or a buggy at least."

"It's a rotten shame, the way these kids are taken from their mothers," Mrs O'Shea exclaimed. "The gins will be trailing in from Movingunda for months to ask me what's happened to the children. And what can I say?"

"Tell them they've gone south to be made into young ladies – like you've done before."

"They don't believe me. You can't lie to an abo. All I know is, they'll never see their children again. The kids won't remember their mothers and the mothers'll lose all trace of them."

"The great idea," O'Shea reminded her, "is that the kids are being saved from leading immoral lives in the native camps."

"That's all very well," his wife cried indignantly. "But how does it work out? The girls learn to read and write, become domestic servants; but more than half of them

lead immoral lives in the towns, just the same. Only it's worse for them down there, because they're among strangers. If a half-caste girl has a baby up here, it's taken as a matter of course. But down south, it's a disgrace. And anyhow, why can't the girls be given a chance to come back, work on the stations - and marry? It's because women are so scarce in the back-country that there are half-castes in the first place."

"It's not my fault." Her husband swung over and sprawled in an easy chair by the fire. He hauled off his riding-boots and stretched his long legs, with thick home-knitted socks pulled up to the end of his breeches.

"You remember Emmalina from Koolija station," continued Mrs O'Shea. "She just sat down by the fence of our yard and wailed for days, after her little girl was sent down. If ever a woman died of a broken heart, she did, Jack."

"For Christ's sake, Nancy," O'Shea protested, "stop fussing about those kids. I've just about had enough of them, and being made to look a fool, hiking across country with the little brutes hanging on to me."

Mynie, Nanja and Coorin, sitting on the floor of the room nearby, heard the talking: heard for the first time something of the fate before them. They listened intently, staring at the square of window, crossed by barbed wire.

Their quick senses, following every sound of movement and voices, constructed vivid pictures of what was happening in the fire-lit kitchen they had glimpsed as they passed along the verandah. They could see Constable O'Shea having his meal and his woman, standing near, talking to him.

When one of the girls asked for more bread and jam, they could hear the mother cutting the bread, and the small boy get a slap for putting his fingers in the jam. He bawled and his father lifted him out of the high chair and took him to sit on his knee by the fire. The little girls clamoured to sit on their father's knee, as well; but he

threatened to send them to bed at once if they did not keep quiet and behave themselves.

When her own family had eaten and was satisfied, Mrs O'Shea announced that she was going to take "those poor little things" something to eat. She turned the key in the lock of the room at the end of the verandah a moment later, and appeared with a plate of bread and jam and mugs of tea on a tray.

Mynie, Nanja and Coorin watched her as she put an enamel mug before each of them and the plate of bread and jam in the middle. No need to share out the portions. They would do that themselves scrupulously, Mrs O'Shea knew.

Each little girl was strapped one to the other. Their wrists were tied together. Mrs O'Shea hovered over them, smiling and motherly, trying to reassure them. She could not bear to see these children so scared and dumb. Such skinny little things, they were, with great brown eyes and curling lashes, blackish-brown tousled hair, and gin-ginas, no more than scraps of faded blue cotton stuff, on their meagre bodies.

The room was a lock-up cell in all but name, kept for more respectable prisoners. There was a chair and table in it and a bed covered with blue-grey blankets. The window had no glass, but was double-crossed with barbed wire.

There was no way the half-castes could get out when the door was locked, Mrs O'Shea told herself. So she took the law into her own hands: knelt down, and with firm white teeth unfastened the leather thongs which bound them: undid the strips of raw-hide biting into those slim brown wrists.

Jack would be furious, she knew, if he found out what she had done. She intended to tie the children up again in the morning, and gambled on no one being the wiser except herself and the children. They could be trusted not to tell.

Anyhow, Mrs O'Shea assured herself, she would not sleep a wink if she thought of those poor little scarecrows sitting there tied up, cold and miserable. She pulled a blanket from the bed and threw it on the floor for them.

"There, now," she said cheerily, "you'll be good girls, won't you? You won't try to run away? The Boss'd kill me if you did."

When she went away, locking the door behind her, Mynie, Nanja and Coorin grabbed the thick slices of bread and jam she had brought them, and guzzled down the warm, sweet tea made with condensed milk.

The room was in darkness, except for that square of starlit sky framed by the window and crossed with barbed wire. When she had eaten her bread and jam and drunk all the tea in her mug, Mynie sidled over to the window.

Stealthily she looked out. Across the yard behind the policeman's house, the stables and the horse-paddock, there was the black wall of the ridge. Mynie could see the track Constable O'Shea had come in by, winding past the mine and the old township until it was swallowed up by a dark mass of trees. One sniff and a quiver of instinctive decision sufficed to inform her companions. The brown eyes communicated, wise and wary.

Leaning against the wall, in the shadow, Mynie began fiddling with the barbed wire. She tried each row where it was held by nails driven into the wooden framework. Her brown fingers curled and twisted, crawled on. It was not until Mynie had tried several rows of wire that she turned to look at Nanja and Coorin with a gleam in her eyes. They crept over, and saw a couple of nails loose in their sockets. The red wood had shrunk, so that the nails could be worked out, and the wire turned back to leave a gap through which a child's body might squeeze.

The three slunk back to their place on the floor and sat watching and waiting. Coorin fell asleep. Her head drooped on Nanja's shoulder; but Nanja and Mynie

listened, tense and alert, to all that was going on in the kitchen.

Mrs O'Shea put the boy to bed. She shoed the little girls off to wash and brush their hair. They didn't want to go to bed. The policeman told them a story about three pigs. Then they kissed him, saying, "Good night, Daddy!" over and over again, and ran away laughing and chattering.

"Don't forget your prayers," Mrs O'Shea called.

One after the other, the little white girls talked as if they were remembering the words of a corroboree song:

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
Look upon a little child;  
Pity my simplicity,  
Suffer me to come to Thee.*

Mrs O'Shea trotted into their bedroom, kissed the girls and put out the light. Then there was the washing up to do. She bustled about, clearing away dishes and chatting to her husband in a brisk, jolly way. He yawned and stretched a good deal.

At last, he exclaimed:

"Cripes, I'm dead tired! How about a bit of shut-eye?"

They went to a room at the front of the house. Mynie and Nanja heard them moving about as they undressed. The bed creaked as they got into it. For a while, the policeman and his wife talked softly together. Now and then Mrs O'Shea's little laugh flew out. Then all was quiet.

Nothing more than the sound of regular breathing vibrated through the thin partitions, the sound of two people sleeping heavily, tranquilly, with an occasional puffing sigh or long-drawn snore.

Mynie and Nanja did not need to talk. They wakened Coorin. She understood immediately why they had done so. One passion dominated all three. They did not know whether to believe the policeman would kill his woman

if he found out she had untied their hands and unfastened the strap. They could not think of that.

Their only instinct was to escape, to make their way back over the hills and plains to the miahhs of their own people. It was rough, strange country they would have to pass through. They were on the far side of the hills which had been the boundary of their world. Those mysterious blue hills where Wonkena said, the gnarlu lived, the gnarlu who came hopping out of the darkness like a frog when there was a corroboree on Movingunda.

They had heard the women singing to scare him away, and seen old Nardadu, herself, stand up and hurl a burning stick at him when he came too near the camp-fire. They were terrified at the thought of having to cross the gnarlu's territory at night; but they were so little and insignificant, Mynie thought, they might find their way back to Movingunda without being noticed. Anyhow their fear had to be overcome if they were not to be taken away, never to see their mothers or the back-country again.

Mynie slid over to the window and worked on the nails. She drew them out. Her eyes searched the yard. There was nothing moving. She turned back the wire where she had untwisted it. The hole in the barbed screen was just big enough for her to squeeze through. Nanja lifted Coorin. Mynie pulled her through and put her on the ground. Nanja stuck and struggled before she joined them.

For a moment they clung to the shadow of the house, afraid to stir in case the dog might fly at them, his barking arouse Constable O'Shea and his woman. Then they crawled under the verandah to the far side. Stepping carefully, they crossed the shingly ground to the road, scarcely stirring a pebble.

Swiftly, silently, on bare hard feet, they streaked along the track to the ridge. In a few minutes the township lay behind. As they climbed the ridge, trees closed round

them; mulga, dark and creaking, whispering with strange voices, thorn-bush and minnereechi casting black shadows, shadows that sprawled and clutched, sliding away with dry cackling laughter.

Nanja and Coorin kept close to Mynie as they went on. All three shrank together when the gaunt arms of a dead tree swayed out towards them. They scudded off through the scrub. The scrub became denser. Writhing shapes peered and leered at them from every bush. Thin, bony fingers grabbed at and scratched their legs, tore their gina-ginas. They ran on, coming at last to a gorge between two great hills.

A pool lay at the bottom of the hills, but Mynie steered away from it, knowing the worst jinkies lurk beside shadowy water. A sinister *wauk, wauk!* came from the pool, and sent them scrambling up the hill. The great weather-beaten rocks were less fearsome than the trees; but they crept from the shadow of one rock to another, stopping with wildly beating hearts to listen and gaze about them before stealing on.

Then the moon rose, a worn silvery plate, thrusting itself up behind the back of the hillside. It had scarcely risen half-way when a squat, unwieldy shape moved across it, hopping and flopping towards them.

It was the gnarlu, Mynie, Nanja and Coorin were sure - the dreaded evil spirit they had seen hopping and flopping, just like that, up to the camp-fire in a corroboree. They did not wait to see whether this gnarlu had the same white markings. There was no Nardadu, now, to scare him away with her fire-stick. Mynie turned and fled, with Nanja and Coorin after her, back along the way they had come, through the gorge and the dark scrub again, coming at last to the track that led to the mines, the township, and the police-station.

The sky was dimming in the false dawn before they got there, slipped under the fence, crossed the shingly ground beside the house and crawled under the verandah

to the further side. The barbed wire gaped over the window, just as they had left it. Mynie squirmed through. Nanja lifted Coorin, then hoisted herself through the window.

When they were sitting huddled up on the floor again, their eyes met and conferred. Without a word spoken, they agreed that their fear of the future was nothing to the terrors they had passed through. It was a comfort even to hear the policeman and his wife sleeping peacefully, with a puffing sigh and a long-drawn snore now and then.

Mynie stole over to the window, found the nails on the ledge where she had left them, fitted them into place and twisted the wire round. That done she went back to Nanja and Coorin, stretched on the floor, and drew the blanket over them.

When Mrs O'Shea brought in some porridge and milk a few hours later, they were still asleep, lying curled up like chrysalides in the dingy blanket.

"That's good girls," she said, gaily. "I knew I could trust you. You feller only little bit blackfeller. Little bit white feller, too."

"Yukki!" Mynie breathed, wondering if that was why they had come back to the white man's house.

Mrs O'Shea found the strap and fastened it round their waists again. Painstakingly, a little apologetically, she knotted the strips of rawhide round their wrists.