

Byng of Ballarat

by Anthony Melville Rud, 1893-1942

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Jack Byng had his choice—torture on a prison ship,
or a struggle for life in the wild Australian bush.

Illustration:

No one was near enough to stop Byng

Chapter I

THE GOLD-BUG.

HARD-HEADED, tight-fisted Thomas Byng, skipper of the Yankee paddle-box steamer NANCY B., died of a minor engine repair while his stout vessel, bound for Melbourne, was becalmed under full sail off the Kermadec Islands. True, Medford rum, the sweltering heat of the South Pacific, the hectoring of a shipload of disgruntled '49ers now bound for the new gold strike at Port William in the Antipodes, were contributing causes. Thomas Byng, however, always had been able to control everything save his twenty-year-old son and his own temper. The engine repair sent the latter out of bounds for good and all. It also was to make Second Mate John Thomas Byng into Jack Byng of Ballarat, freebooter of the bush.

When the NANCY B. was churning westward again, First Mate Thaddeus Moore and Second Mate Jack Byng held down the sixty-three bearded gold-seekers—men who had come too late to California, and who were bitterly determined to get in early at Port William—and in due time brought the ship through Bass Strait and into Port Phillip, which was the bay at the head of which was the infant town of Melbourne. Nine miles across the bay was Port William and the wild new land of promise.

Coming into port, the paddle-box was overtaken and passed by a bright yellow frigate, sight of which sent premonitory shivers down the spines of the-hardest men among passengers and crew. This was a solid teak vessel, copper-riveted and trenailed throughout, built sixty-two years before in 1790, at Moulmein, India. She was that floating horror, the Success, marked with broad arrows from stem to stern, and bearing the legend, CONVICT SHIP, in letters five feet high upon her side.

All unaware, she was making her final trip as a convict transport. When she dropped anchor that afternoon of May 24th, 1852, she would lose warders and crew to the lure of the gold-fields—and stay right there at Port William, becoming a convict hulk like the other notorious "yellow frigates," SCARBOROUGH, HUGOMONT, NEPTUNE, and HERCULES, already riding there at anchor.

The NANCY B. followed into the bay, which was overcrowded now with the strangest, most heterogeneous array of shipping ever to drop anchor in any

hitherto unknown port of the world. Here were sable lorchas from Timor, Dutch galiots from Java, Chinese junks, luggers, tartans, brigs, an enormous war sloop now converted into a floating bank of deposit where miners could leave their pokes of gold, the yellow hulls dismantled of their top hamper, a barkentine from Cape Town, and actually a lateen-sailed xebec from Algiers whose black captain and five members of crew were feasted and presented with gold medals, by Inspector Price of Port William, for their bulldog courage in making the terrific journey.

All over the big harbor, like water-bugs, slid the tiny outrigger proas from the islands. With native crews, these were in great demand for swift transportation between Melbourne and the various points where gold-seekers disembarked on the western side of the bay.

WITH the rasp of rusty anchor chains on the NANCY B., there ensued shouting and riot—and what approached mutiny. The gold-seeker passengers did not wait to be lightered ashore, but hailed passing proas and bargained to be taken away instantly. It seemed to them that one second wasted now might break the golden spell of their fortunes.

Jack Byng had no quarrel with them. He was glad to see the last of them. But other troubles came thick and fast to settle upon his broad but youthful shoulders. One of the first of the crew to go overside into a proa with bag and baggage was the mate, Thaddeus Moore!

This leather-faced Yankee had cherished a grievance. Though paid a double "lay" on each voyage, he never had been allowed to buy in a share of the paddle-box. Now he had determined to woo greater fortune as a gold-seeker. Behind him came an even dozen of the crew.

"Look here, you can't leave me this way!" cried Jack Byng, his face flushing with anger. At the same second he realized that they could—and would. The crew, Yankees all save two "Portygees" from New Bedford, had signed articles for the voyage to San Francisco and the return around the Horn. The two extra journeys to Panama made by Captain Thomas Byng and his long voyage to the Antipodes were extras which had caused grumbling—easily put down when the bucko skipper himself was in charge. Now the law really was with the men. And in addition, one of the deserters actually was Jack Byng's superior in rank! Thad Moore did not have to answer to the lad, except as new owner of the Nancy B.!

"Go to yer cabin! Out of the way!" snarled Thad, showing snags of yellow teeth in a wolfish grin. "I paid off me an' the men yestiddy! Ye've got the ship, an' twelve thousand in good yaller gold—"

That was as far as he got. Jack Byng's mother had been half Spanish, and back of his hazel eyes a lurid temper not yet curbed by age flamed suddenly. Head down, fists flying, he lit into Thad Moore and the nearest three seamen with a savage onslaught.

Moore went down, his hawk nose broken at the bridge by a sledge-hammer right. And two more men fell, half-senseless. But then hoarse shouts of anger arose, and two men grappled with Jack, pinioning his arms. A third seaman in the rear snatched an iron capstan bar and brought it down upon the mat of curly brown hair.

Fortunately an upraised arm took part of the killing force of that blow, else Jack Byng's story would have ended before it had fairly started. But he went down, pole-axed, and a scalp artery spurted red upon the scoured planks of the deck.

That sobered the men. They picked up the unconscious Thad Moore, and then left the Nancy B. for the shore and the gold mines beyond just as swiftly as they could get proas. Left on board the anchored vessel were just Hank, the colored cook, and Peg Peters, a one-legged seaman unfitted for the rigors of a gold rush. These two carried Jack to his bunk.

An hour later, head bandaged and throbbing, he was on his feet again, able to smile a trifle dizzily. He bore no grudge, even against Thad Moore. If the gold strike here really had proved up to half that had been claimed for it, though, getting a crew for the States was going to be harder than needling seeds out of Bar-le-Duc currants.

JACK felt the thrill in the air. He ached to join the gold rush himself. At 'Frisco he almost had done this same thing in defiance of his father, desisting only because he had been promised the first mate's berth on their return to New Bedford. And that berth had meant marriage with his boyhood sweetheart, Letty Hanlon.

"Now I can't ever go," he growled to himself, hazel eyes thoughtful. "I'm over being a boy, for good."

He was thinking of his mother and younger sister back home. The twelve thousand dollars in the strong box below was theirs. The ship was his. He always had respected his father's strength and determination; but Thomas Byng had been too harsh to be mourned. Jack thought of him only when he thought of his worn and tired mother. He would care for her now, marry Letty, and send his sister Alice to a boarding school at Boston...

But a sailor lives by the stars; and what is writ among them for his destiny cannot be altered by pious and dutiful resolutions. By the time Jack Byng might see New Bedford again, Letty Hanlon would be long married, with three husky tow-headed infants of her own. And Jack Byng would not care—then.

Black Hank served him a meal which he washed down with a flagon of Madeira, and felt better. Then he hailed a proa, and got his first flying ride at water level in the outrigger craft, admiring the magnificent physiques of the two Kanakas who sailed the proa skilfully.

Port William, or Williamstown, as it was beginning to be called, was a hodge-podge of tents and log huts. It already boasted three crooked streets paralleling the water front. Thus far Melbourne, grown to a more solid population of six thousand souls, had all the stores; but Port William had enough grog shops and barrel houses for itself and all the mining district. Red light houses, and foul tent structures where opium and hashish were smoked or eaten, made up all the rest; though at the east end of the Bourse, as the water front street was called, a huge, barnlike structure was nearing completion. This would house the Anderson Company, dealers in mining tools and hardware.

Gigantic aborigines—Parrabarras, Aruntas and others of the black tribes—stalked the street, wearing loin cloths and in some cases white stripes uncannily resembling the bones of their own flesh-hidden skeletons. These Stone Age

children had no business in Port William, but they delighted in confusion and noise. Many of them were seven feet in height. They carried obsidian lances, stone-headed waddies, and boomerangs of heavy darrah wood—the same wood with which all London would be paved before another decade was past. Thus far white men had not troubled them greatly. The great expanses of mallee scrub of the interior were mostly unexplored.

Jack was first shocked to the depths of his New England soul, and then thrilled to witness the reckless abandon with which gold was thrown about. Gold was cheap, selling for about twelve dollars and a half a Troy ounce. As long as the alluvial diggings held out from Essenden to the Werribee River, claim owners could get it with less effort than ever had been expended in mining virgin gold. Men fought and died to get or hold claims; but as yet there was no thought of a coming scarcity of the metal itself.

IN the district back of the town there were over two thousand Chinese miners, some Malays, Dutch, Australians from Sydney and Parramatta, Americans, a few English from the islands, and a horde of convicts escaped from Van Diemen's Land. The latter stayed far back in the bush, changing their appearance gradually, and taking new identities, in hope of passing for freemen when their fortunes had been made, and time came to bluey.

Scamps and drifters of the sort called larrikins abounded. Jack Byng tried a number of these, standing treat at the bars, but invariably getting the laugh when he broached the proposal of taking ship with him for the States. What, work for twenty a month—dollars, *not* pounds!

Hell, for taking a turn tending bar here in a pub for twelve hours they could earn three pounds, get all they could carry to drink, and eat the best food in Port William. If a man actually wanted steady work, he could have it shoveling for a claim owner, or possibly sluicing. This paid an ounce a day in red gold dust, with found...

At the end of three days; going back to ship each night, Jack Byng knew himself balked, no matter what he did. No human being not actually wanted by the hangman would ship out of Port William or Melbourne, until the day came that the mines dwindled and ceased to offer, their golden plenty.

The joker in fortune's pack, as far as prospectors were concerned, lay in the price of an outfit for the bush. Most of the food still came from England, though kangaroos and the smaller wallabies abounded. A cartridge for one of the new breech-loading rifles cost about a shilling. A spade brought two ounces of gold. A barrel of coarse flour was worth a small fortune. Many of the crew of the *Nancy B.*, who thought themselves well off with their wages untouched in their dungarees, were appalled to learn that they would have to labor for weeks before they would be able to invest in even the most modest outfit for the bush!

The last afternoon of his search ashore, Jack Byng was forced to surrender. For the time being he could not man his vessel. He was heavy-hearted with thoughts of his mother and sister. His father had shipped home money from San Francisco by a 'round-the-Horner; but what if that ship had been lost? Even at best, the two women would be unable to subsist more than a few months longer. Then that unutterable disgrace in pioneer New England—the workhouse!

Jack made what he thought was the best of it. He sought out Captain Ensley Victor of the war sloop NELSON. He found the captain ashore and drinking heavily with some of his officers, but still able to understand, apparently, and grant Jack the privilege of storing his father's strong box of gold in the floating bank.

What Jack did not suspect was that this British naval captain felt himself degraded forever by this duty of caring for gold in the new settlement, and only when half-seas over with drink could he attain a semblance of his old courtesy. When sober Captain Victor⁽¹⁻¹⁾ was surly, fiendishly cruel, and given to fits of complete forgetfulness of the promises he had given when in his cups.

JACK returned sober-faced, and told Peg Peters of his plans. That evening he would row over to the NELSON with the strong box, so that Peters himself would have no more responsibility than care of the Nancy B. Peters and Black Hank could stay on board, drawing wages, until the time Jack could assemble a crew for the trip home.

Jack himself would have a try at the gold-fields; might as well do that as sit around and bite his finger nails.

"It's fine of ye, lad," nodded Peters. "I'd go along if I had two good legs. But I'll take good care of the ship, rest assured."

"You're a friend, Peters," said Jack quietly, clasping the horny palm of the old foremast hand.

That sunset he went below, opened the strong box, and there verified the fact that Thad Moore had taken to the penny—not without long and painful calculations with a quill, which he left in the box as a receipt—the exact sums due him and the men. As a New Englander with a conscience he would do this, of course, though in a horse trade or in the service of a captain bearing letters of marque, Thad doubtless would follow the code of morals of a Blackbeard.

An hour later, taking only the precaution of thrusting a loaded pistol through his belt, Jack lowered the small dinghy and rowed over the darkening harbor toward the NELSON. The converted sloop was still dark, save for riding lights.

Jack shipped his oars as he came alongside the war vessel. He could hear footsteps on the deck, and the voices of men. A torch flared, flickered, then held steady.

"Ahoy the Nelson!" Jack hailed.

There was something that sounded like a voiced alarm up above, then a cautious voice answered. "Ahoy! Who comes?"

Jack gave his name and his ship, mentioning his conversation with the captain of the NELSON. In a moment a gangway ladder rattled over the waterways, and he gripped the end, fastening it to the dinghy. Then with the heavy treasure box strapped to his shoulders, he seized the ladder and climbed.

The instant he reached the top of his climb, reaching out a leg and arm, he saw that something was wrong. He tried to draw back, but two brawny arms clutched him and dragged him up and over the waterways.

"Look out!" he shouted warning, and drew his pistol. He had glimpsed in the eerie light of that single torch the fact that these men were masked!

He fired, as more masked men came to close upon him. Then for an instant, as one of his captors sagged at the knees, he broke free. But the seventy pounds, of

weight harnessed at his shoulders threw him from balance and he went to his knees.

That second four sweating, muscled sailors leaped upon him, one seizing a hand-grip on his four-inch mat of hair. In a space of seconds then his head was dashed against the planks of the deck, and consciousness left him in a blaze of black stars.

Like wolves these first freebooters of the Victoria bush fell upon his strong box and yelled with maudlin satisfaction as they added it to the treasure looted from the Nelson.

Balked in their search for honest gold, the freebooters had found an easier way.

Chapter II

THE RUSHER.

Article VI:—Two warders with loaded rifles shall be posted either side of the forecastle head, and shall not relax vigilance. If a rusher seeks escape they shall take sure aim and shoot to kill. Howsoever, if a rusher survive, he shall be confined in the cell known as the Tiger's Den.

—Mainmast Regulations, Prison Hulk SUCCESS.

MERCIFULLY enough, Jack Byng knew nothing at all of the grim happenings of the following fortnight; That second battering of his skull had given him a case of concussion which kept him in a deep coma until the doctors, such as they were, despaired.

The authorities, headed by that human horror, Inspector Price of Melbourne, wanted Jack Byng to live. They did not know his name. They thought him one of the freebooters; and from him they expected to torture the names of his associates and accomplices.

Over on the NANCY B. two days and nights passed before the rather dull-witted Peg Peters even heard of the outrage. Then he did not connect Jack with it, deeming that the young mate had gone ashore, outfitted, and hit the new trail through the pillared white-gum forest, to the new gold-fields.

Returning drunk with his equally drunken officers and men, Captain Victor of the bank-sloop found the two watchmen he had left foully murdered. Left there on the deck unconscious—not dead, simply because six of the freebooters had known and liked Jack Byng—the captain found, as he supposed, one of the robber-murderers. Ordering Jack Byng ironed, and then attended by the ship's doctor, was the last half-sane command of the mad captain.

Sobering up enough to realize his own misfeasance and malfeasance in duty, Victor drank again and became wildly crazy. He shot two of his own men, then had gunners take their stations. He made them fire a broadside of round shot into the bush where the freebooters long since had disappeared!

Then, yelling maledictions on fate, Victor ran to his own cabin, swilled down brandy until his hand ceased to shake. Then he bit the muzzle of a pistol and blew out his own brains.

There practically ended Jack Byng's slender chance for freedom and exoneration. The only question in the mind of the notorious tyrant and sadist, Inspector Price, when he came to view the prisoner, was whether or not this unknown man could be brought back to his senses sufficiently to make torture any use.

At the moment, Price was dismantling the transport SUCCESS, and building the famous "black cell" wherein men actually prayed for the gallows as their only hope of mercy and surcease, the awful battle-royal pen known as the Tiger's Den, and installing all the torture devices his inhuman, cold brain could invent.

Twice daily, Price came to visit Jack Byng, who had been transferred to the shore prison hospital. The inspector had sent search parties into the bush, and had done all he could do. The freebooters had escaped, and with them 18,153 ounces of dust and nugget gold, plus £4,200 in currency—plus the \$12,000 in gold belonging to Jack Byng's mother and sister. In all, the loot came to a rough total of about \$260,000 in American money.

But Inspector Price waited with the cold malignity of a trapdoor spider, for the prey within his grasp. The official planned torture for this supposed freebooter which would make the Chinese Death of a Thousand Slices seem only farcical agony. This one would confess and give the names of the others who had got the gold. Oh, yes, he would plead for a chance to tell all!

SO, completely unaware of the grisly fate in store for him, Jack Byng came slowly out of the veiling mists of unconsciousness. He felt no pain, but his mind remained vague. Memory of recent occurrences was blotted out temporarily—perhaps forever. He knew his identity, but was sorely puzzled over the strange faces about him, the leg and arm shackles chained to staples in the wall. He thought he had been with his father, voyaging down to Panama.

The grim-faced doctor understood his condition, having had experience with amnesia resulting from blows on the head in many cases among these rough men. He told Inspector Price that the shock and pain of torture would profit nothing at the time. The patient would die, and probably would recall nothing more.

Inspector Price raged inwardly, but his face showed nothing of his thoughts. It was a peculiarity of this frightful man that because of his benign countenance, and the occasional whims of mercy—usually practiced where mercy was the least deserved—some men refused to believe him worse than just.

Just at this time a miner showed up in Melbourne with a heavy take of gold. He most evidently was a Yankee, and some of the drink dispensers recalled when he had landed—less than three weeks before! When questioned, he told a vague and rambling story of striking it rich, but could give no details. He did not even know the lava-basalt layers, and the "wash-dirt" formation of the diggings.

"That's one of 'em!" said Price to himself, and started working on the fellow, who called himself Helm.

The man had been on the NANCY B., but died under torture three days later, without betraying his confederates.

Price was pale and furious at failure. He set up an "inquisition ring" with himself at the head. Every miner who came in now with a take of gold practically had to account for every grain of it, and its source. There was no way at all, except the practically impassable route northward then eastward through the forbidding mountains to Sydney, that anyone could use to get away from Melbourne. All craft were held in the bay for lack of crews. Price could bide his time—and work upon Jack Byng meanwhile.

He began restrainedly, asking quiet questions regarding Jack's coming to Australia, where he had worked, and what he proposed to do. The youth lying there had a queer sensation. He felt an aura of wickedness about this kind-faced man. Instinct warned Jack to beware. He had emerged from much of the mental daze, but now decided to feign stupidity for a time—until he could smell out the reason for the shackles, at least.

Then, during the second fruitless interview, he saw a queer and terrifying thing. A prison lifer used as a trusty was mopping the corridor outside the cell in which Jack lay. The broken, dejected-looking convict saw Inspector Price—and stood absolutely motionless for a space of seconds. Then his scarred and ravaged face changed little by little into a mask of hatred such as the shackled youth never had seen on man. Through the bars of the door came a skinny arm, ending in a sort of talon—thumb and two fingers only. This human claw moved straight for the back of the unsuspecting Price's neck!

At that second, while Price was asking one of his quiet, probing questions, there came a sound of heavy voices and footsteps in the corridor. Instantly the arm and claw were jerked away, and the trusty resumed his menial labor. Price never suspected how close he had come at the time to a vengeance for his sins—a vengeance which would reach him later.

NEXT night, however, came a revelation. The next cell to Jack's was empty and unlocked. He was awakened in the dim, ghostly light of early morning by a shaking of his shoulder. He started, and might have cried aloud, but a talon of a hand clamped over his mouth.

"Sh-h!" came the almost inaudible warning. "I'm a friend!"

Turning as far as he could, Jack saw a crouching shape beyond the bars. It was the trusty who had been interrupted in his attempt upon the life of the inspector.

In whispering, blood-curdling sentences then the convict told what was in store for Jack Byng, suspected of being a member of the freebooter gang which had robbed the Nelson. The trusty had nothing for or against Jack himself. He was taking this means of balking a man he hated more than any other on earth—the inspector who had tortured him without reason.

Jack gasped at the awfulness of the accusation and the grim fiendishness of the plan to restore him to health and memory—only to torture him to death. He asked a few questions which the trusty answered bitterly. Then the latter thrust a long-handled, heavy-jawed wire cutter through the bars.

"Don't jabber no more! I'll 'oval' your irons. No use tryin' to get away from here; but mo'n likely they'll keep the same irons. They're takin' you to the hell-ship tomorrow..."

Clenching the jaws upon the wrist irons and ankle irons in turn, the unknown friend bore down with all his weight and strength on the lever handles. Each of the circles of iron was bent into an oval. Through these, if the stratagem was not detected, Jack Byng might pull his hands and feet after a few minutes of struggle.

Hope flared above the horror in his heart. Only the parting warning, a repetition of the statement that because of triple doors and many armed sentries it was impossible to escape from this land prison, kept Jack from making the attempt that dawn.

"Nights, they's only two warders with guns on deck on each of the yaller hell-ships. Mebbe you can make it."

With that the trusty made his silent departure. Jack lay sleepless then, fiercely rebelling at this, horrible grotesquerie of fate. He was remembering something about the NANCY B. coming to Australia, but nothing of his mother and sister, nothing of the girl to whom he had plighted troth nearly two years ago. And the fact that he had lost the small fortune which was to support his mother was yet to be remembered.

"I never was a robber, though, damn 'em!" he muttered to himself through taut lips. "I can see that inspector was just waiting, though. I'll fool 'em plenty!"

He was to taste one of the milder forms of torture first. When the following morning the doctor examined him he found the patient in an apparent relapse, dull, stupid, and inclined to go to sleep before finishing a sentence. The medico recommended that treatment on shore be continued; but Inspector Price only snarled beneath his curled mustache. He had waited. A taste of the cat and the sweat-box would bring back memory to this robber. They had proved efficacious with many malingerers in times past.

So Jack was made to get up, strip, and then don the "punishment band"—an iron harness fitting around the chest and over the shoulders, with two rods poking horizontally forward, to which the prisoner's arms were chained. In the course of a short time the arms became numb and excruciatingly painful; but when being taken from one place to another it was hopeless for a convict or other prisoner to attempt escape.

JACK set his jaw, and concentrated upon just one thing—concealing from his jailers the fact that his irons had been ovaled.

These underlings of the prison ship were sullen, bestial men. One of them spat in Jack's face simply because Jack had admitted being American. It was an odd fact, but the horrors of the prison hulks were blamed upon the United States of America. Before 1776, the colonial planters had been forced to purchase white convict labor for their plantations. After independence they all refused, and Britain had to find another outlet for her appalling number of convicts.⁽²⁻²⁾

Jack was taken to the SUCCESS. On the trip, and boarding, he photographed every detail in his mind. The prison hulk was surrounded by a cordon of buoys at a distance of seventy-five yards. Any person coming inside that deadline without first uttering the countersign in a loud voice was liable to sudden death at the hands of the warder guards on deck. These men were skilled shots who prided themselves, not in killing outright, according to regulations, but in maiming

rushers and suspected intruders, so that the refinements of cruelty practiced on board later could provide the entertainment they relished.

When Jack Byng was driven on board the SUCCESS, a horrible stench was in the air, and a moaning sound sent cold chills down his back.

This was a mere nothing, however. A convict had been trussed to the triangle, that sinister object at the moment lying horizontal on the deck. There the wretch had been branded on the forehead with a great M—for "Malefactor." His offense had been throwing his nauseating victuals out of his cell.

Jack was able to see the entire upper deck. The SUCCESS was a small frigate to have earned her reputation. She measured 135 feet in length overall, and 29 feet beam. But under her hatches every cubic inch was utilized. A few cells for favored prisoners measured seven by seven feet. Ordinary cells were seven by four feet. And the punishment cells—!

Pending the attention of Inspector Price, Jack was put in one of these. He kept his original irons and was chained to a knee-high ring in such a fashion that he could neither stand up nor lie down. This "black-hole" cell was two feet eight inches wide, completely lightless, and ventilated only by two slits in iron each about the length and width of a man's index finger. Cases were on record of prisoners being kept in one of these iron coffins for the limit of twenty-eight days; but after this incarceration the convict never again walked upright.

HIS turn for attention on deck came that evening—for at 8 p.m. it was the custom to entertain the crew with the punishments meted out to prisoners, and the torturing of those from whom secrets or confessions were to be extracted.

Three shivering, groaning men were taken from cells at the same time as Jack Byng. To each of the four was attached an "anchor ball"—a seventy-two-pound weight each must lift and carry, or slowly drag along the deck. Because of the chains and this additional weight, the four were brought upward through the forward hatch by a lift that worked by means of a wooden wheel and an endless rope.

Once on the upper deck, they were greeted by bloodthirsty shouts from the assembled men who showered unprintable epithets upon the unfortunate quartet. If it had not been for ropes which held back the audience, there would have been violence.

Jack and the others, bent under weight of the anchor balls and the thirty pounds of chains with which each was encumbered, were forced to sit down under the rail, while a guard with loaded musket paced back and forth ten feet from them.

Twenty feet from where they squatted the three most dreaded implements used on convicts stood together. The yard-arm gallows, the Y-shaped triangle, and the infamous sweat-box. The latter was a cast-iron box opening on hinges, fitted to take a man standing upright. It had a grotesquely hideous face of iron, and suggested arms and legs, being much the same sort of instrument as the medieval Iron Maiden of Nuremberg, lacking only the inner spikes. But the sweat-box was just as lethal, provided more than a short period of torture was intended. A blacksmith's forge and bellows were connected by a hose, so that burning hot gases could be poured in upon the flesh and lungs of the victim confined.

Jack made his decision. The scarred wooden rail was at his back. He hunched about, managing to get the bowed body of one of his fellow prisoners between himself and the stares of the brutalized audience and the armed guard. Then he worked his wrists free of the manacles.

Then came Inspector Price and two burly ruffians, for the first of the victims. Silently the pale, benign-faced fiend placed a hand almost caressingly upon the shoulder of a man—not Jack Byng, however; he, being the most important, would be reserved till last.

The wretch designated, who was to get two hundred strokes of the cat, howled in a sudden frenzy and sought to hurl his chains in the face of the inspector. The anchor ball balked him.

"Fifty additional lashes!" announced Price coldly. The unfortunate was dragged away and lashed to the triangle. Back there Jack Byng Burst into a cold perspiration as he worked savagely at his ankle irons. One leg was free! The other—Two heavy-shouldered seamen, each with a nine-tailed cat, stationed themselves to right and left of the moaning, pleading prisoner at the triangle. Then amid his sharp screams of agony, the blows were laid on methodically, Price, A 2—30 standing back, calling out the number. Back of him waited a physician. According to law, each culprit being punished must be examined after every fifty lashes; the law, however, did not insist that anything be remitted if the victim was found to be in a dying condition...

But this particular man was in luck. At the third stroke, while the brutalized audience licked its lips at sight of the first trickles of blood on the white back, there came a sudden commotion. Jack Byng had leaped to his feet, put one hand on the rail, and vaulted overboard!

For a dumbfounded second there was silence. Somehow this man had rid himself of chains and anchor ball, and was out there swimming for dear life and precious freedom!

"*Get that man! Fire!*" shrieked Price, losing his benign aspect in a second. Here was the prisoner on whom he pinned all hopes for a confession, and a recovery of the treasure from the Nelson, actually in the clear and with a ghost of a chance to escape under cover of night!

There were volleys of oaths, running here and there of heavy feet. Then muskets spat into the darkness, and small arms crashed flatly. But perhaps none of these shots was aimed. At any rate, Jack Byng, swimming under water for the first yards toward the deadline of buoys, had completely disappeared.

Chapter III

IN THE BUSH.

ON the SUCCESS an ever-increasing uproar ensued. Flogging and other entertainments were forgotten. The ship's bell was hammered fast and hard, sounding a warning of attempted escape, over the harbor. On shore the alarm was heard. Torches flared, and armed men came running down to the water front.

Small boats were launched. The calm of early evening lay upon the harbor. This was a handicap to Jack Byng in one way, but a great help in another. If he splashed while swimming they might hear or see him. But anyone who sought him in a boat had to row; and the sodden, unwilling guards shirked real labor of that sort. The chill water cleared Jack's brain. He reached the buoys, passed them, then turned on his side. This long, quiet stroke would take him any distance, though possibly it was not as speedy as the breast stroke favored by sailors.

The NANCY B. lay about half a mile distant, somewhat nearer the foreshore. Jack turned for it. He hoped to get a dinghy, some supplies, other clothing, and firearms before taking to the bush. But this hope was doomed to cruel disappointment. When finally he swam up to the stern of his vessel, he heard two guttural voices above speculating on the reason for the alarm from the SUCCESS. Inspector Price, in making sure none of the freebooters won a way to the sea, had stationed guards on every vessel in the harbor. Jack Byng had to surrender, or take his chance barehanded, in a sodden convict costume, in the inhospitable mallee!

That choice was no choice at all. Turning silently in the water, Jack set his jaw grimly for the long swim to shore.

Nearly an hour later, close to exhaustion because of the weeks in bed, he rose to his feet in the shallows and staggered ashore. The lights of Port William and the flickering torches of the searchers on the bay now were to the north and east. The incessant *ding-ding-ding* of the bell on board the Success came faintly over the still water.

"No time to stop—now!" the fugitive gasped. Pausing to smudge over his footsteps leading from the water, he gained the higher ground, where the pillars of the white gums rose like the façade of some limitless, one-storied Grecian temple.

For minutes then he crouched. Gruff voices had sounded behind him, and a torch swayed along the beach. If they found his track now he would try to sell his life dearly; recapture meant mutilation, hellish torture, and death anyhow.

The voices passed along. Jack was safe in the mallee—safe for just as long as he could exist without approaching other men. But throughout the diggings his description would be broadcast; Inspector Price would put up a munificent reward for his capture. Though Jack Byng did not know it, he was the first convict in three years to escape from the yellow hulks.

Gradually the effects of his long swim began to wear away. His muscles ached with fatigue, but determination kept him forcing a way through the undergrowth until a sort of second strength came to him. He found a rushing stream, foaming over rocks. He flung himself down full length and drank thirstily, then doused his head and arms in the refreshing chill.

HERE was a narrow clearing from which he could read the stars. Setting a course straight for the interior, he plunged on. The shoddy convict trousers already were in tatters from the thorn bush; but they would go in a few days anyhow. He smiled savagely to himself at thought of the giant aborigines he had seen on shore. He would have to live now as they lived, fashion himself weapons, and eat his meat raw. He had heard of the North American Indian way of making fire by rubbing sticks, but put little faith in it.

When another hour of travel in the mallee lay behind him, he crawled into a dense covert of golden wattle, lay down, and was asleep in two minutes. The sun, not to be glimpsed down here below the giants of the forest and the dense underbrush where tree ferns and thorn made a close and confining ceiling only a few feet above a man's head, had been above the horizon for two hours when Jack awoke.

Almost at once a terrorizing thought struck him. The black-trackers! The aborigines of New South Wales, and those imported from Van Diemen's Land, were used in all the convict settlements for tracking down fugitives. These childlike blacks, simple of mind and rarely warlike except when urged by superstition, just the same were supposed to be infallible when once set upon a man's track.

Jack plunged westward, seeking a stream. When he found one he walked in the freezing water a good two miles before daring to emerge and seek food in the forest.

In the little river where he emerged were black obsidian rocks. He hammered these together until he secured two sharp edges which would take some honing and serve a time as improvised knives. Two round pebbles the size of potatoes could be thrown. Jack started after his first meal of freedom, thus equipped; but wasted the stones on wallabies, and had to return for more.

This time he killed a jack rabbit, and then a second one. Grimly ready to forego the daintiness of civilization, he managed to haggle off the skins, and ate his fill. The skins he scraped, though he could not cure them.

Of berries and edible roots Australia has practically nothing. The tree fruits, so plentiful in the north, were lacking here also. Exudations of gum from several species of eucalyptus were pleasant to the taste and served to ward off hunger, though they were not especially nutritious.

Jack spent the whole first day trudging on westward. He found a sapling which would do for a lance shaft; and then as he traveled on toward the setting sun he scraped away at the end. With the last light of evening he chipped a rock into a rude splinter for a head, and bound this tightly with raw rabbit hide. He knew that when this dried it would contract, and bind fast, making a weapon with which he might kill one of the smaller kangaroos—or even a man, if he came against a single enemy.

THE season was growing colder; the winter of the Antipodes was almost at hand. Jack Byng endured shivering nights. Progressing a few miles westward each day, he found game in abundance, and tamer than near the seacoast. But fire was becoming a necessity, both for physical comfort and for the ashes which would allow him to tan the hides of his kills.

He had a bow and a quiver of rude arrows now. But the bowstring frayed and broke after a few shots. It needed careful tanning. He set himself with this bow and string, looping the latter about a pointed stick, to make fire.

Two whole days of striving passed, with only a little smoke and a smolder which he could not blow into flame, before he found some fat punk tinder which was just right. With the fallen, browned leaves of the everlasting evergreens, he at last achieved fire. And then he never traveled so far again, but what he was able to

move the glowing coals, banked in ashes, starting the fire again the moment he halted.

Four weeks from the night of his escape found him clad in half-cured kangaroo hide, carrying bow, arrows in a limp quiver, and a stone hammer not unlike a native waddy. This last was a throwing weapon with which he bowled over a small game, attaining great accuracy. He had seen a native tossing a "jackaroo," or boomerang, and tried to make one. The magic was lacking, however. His scraped elbow of wood curved in the air, but erratically. He gave up the idea of using this weapon, unless he could make friends with some native and learn the trick.

Thus far he had encountered no one. The giant white gums, tallest trees in Australia, had given way to pines and the smaller varieties of mallee. Some rocky open country appeared, though near the streams which he was forced to follow, sub-tropical vegetation remained thick.

Jack's hair and brown beard had grown long. His strength had returned, and even increased beyond the solid muscularity of his shipboard youth. Except for the torment of a vagueness, a sort of curtain in his mind, he would have enjoyed this atavistic experience, conquering the wilderness of a new continent, and wresting from it a good living. Achievement of a sort came each day.

But the fact that vague shapes peopled a part of his mind—phantasms of people he could neither name nor see clearly—worried him. He could not recall why he had come to Australia, where his father had gone, or anything much of his own earlier life. Only San Francisco, the voyages to Panama, and then his experiences after awakening shackled in the shore prison, stood out clearly.

Always happy-go-lucky and headstrong, he hungered now for a comrade. No doubt he would have committed some rash, half-insane action had he remembered everything, and known that in all probability he was losing his boyhood sweetheart forever, and that his own mother and sister would know want because of the trip his father had insisted upon making to Australia.

But he had gone into the primitive; and even the half-seen people of his waking dreams were a great deal like the *bunyips*—monsters of the mallee—imagined by the Stone Age black-fellows.

ONE day he was followed at a distance of twenty paces by what he took to be a dog. It was a dingo. Just for the sake of companionship, the man threw meat to it and tried his best to coax it near.

In vain. The dingo snarled and leaped away each time he tried to approach. It had the treacherous and distrustful mind of a coyote, even though it looked like a dog.

During the weeks of striving for existence and safety from recapture, Jack Byng had decided to build a hut in some sheltered spot. June had gone, and it was the cold season of the Antipodes. He would make headquarters here until warm weather came again. Then he intended to strike north a long distance, finally east again, hoping to reach the new road to the interior, get through the Blue Mountains, and reach Sydney. By that time he probably would be counted dead, and forgotten.

But all unknowing he had approached within a half dozen miles of a new shanty town the name of which was to ring around the world, and thrill men to the marrow just as Dawson City would do in a later generation.

Ballarat! Center of the richest gold strike the world had known since Solomon sent his slaves to the mines of Ophir! A strike of alluvial and hard-rock gold which made Sutter's Mill and all of the Feather River district of California mere Chino diggings!

For building materials the youth could not consider logs, of course. He already had discovered for himself the "wattle-and- daub" method of making a windbreak. So now he located golden wattle, and then a bank of plastic clay, which was plentiful, and began the framework of a conical dwelling—so much like the actual *gunyahs* of the aborigines which he had never glimpsed that there must have been a suggestion somewhere in the materials themselves.

That habitation grew only as far as the framework. When on the third day of the work Jack Byng went down to the clay bank at the river, he was startled to glimpse a shadowy figure drop hastily out of sight in a clump of mournful-looking beef wood just ahead. A man! A thrill of fear and longing swept through the lonely fugitive. Was this an enemy? It looked like an ambush!

"Who are you? I'm a—friend!" he croaked out of vocal cords rusty from disuse. Then he went cautiously forward, hearing no reply. He gripped the shaft of his spear, ready for a hasty throw.

The bush rattled and a thunderous report sounded! A puff of black powder smoke came out of the scrub, and a heavy ball whistled past his left arm, plucking at the hide tunic which he wore.

Jack crouched, gritting his teeth, and sprang forward. Instant battle would suit him. One thrust of his spear—

Then he saw the bandaged, bearded and gory man who had fallen there, face forward—the aiming and the shot of his pistol evidently being his last remnant of strength. Face down, the stranger groaned. A red bubble grew from his beard and burst beside his mouth.

Jack frowned. From the back this looked like an old man. Anyhow, with a single-shot pistol fired he would not be dangerous. Jack took the weapon from the limp fingers and turned over the stranger, who groaned but did not open his eyes.

Then Jack gasped. This was a man he knew full well, old Sails—a sail-maker-carpenter named Getch, from the NANCY B.!

Chapter IV

THE FREEBOOTERS.

GETCH was dying. He had been shot twice. One ball had shattered his jaw, while the other was in his chest. The bloody froth on his lips bespoke a wound for which no rude aid or surgery could serve.

Jack Byng saw that moving him would do no more than hasten the end. With hides, matted below with small branches of pine, the youth made Sails as

comfortable as was possible, then brought cold water in a cup made of a tree-fern leaf. But in spite of gulping, thirstily at the water, the wounded man did no more than mutter wild words about "tons an' tons of it!" and then groaned with his inner agony.

Details of that succeeding forty hours may be omitted—save for the one tremendous thing which affected Jack Byng. Old Getch never did recognize him, except vaguely as a friend of long standing. The sail-maker grew fevered before he came to any sort of consciousness, and talked incessantly, pleading with Jack, whom he called Bully, mistaking him for some early associate, to avenge his murder by freebooters, and save his claim.

"The only log cabin in Ballarat!" was one sentence repeated over and over. Jack gathered that Sails had struck gold, built a log shanty, and then as he was panning or sluicing the golden reward of his search, he had been set upon by a man or band of men, who shot him and seized his cabin claim.

Jack had never heard of Ballarat, but he knew the place could not be more than a mile or two away at most. No human being wounded like Sails could have traveled far in the bush.

"It's yourn! It's yourn! All of it!" yelled the old fellow, stopping to choke on the red foam, then bursting out again. "I give ye the gold! On'y, send some to my ol' wooman. She's pore... New Bedford..."

Sick at heart, Jack Byng suddenly recalled that bent old Mrs. Getch. He had seen her along the shore, dragging the willow basket in which she delivered clothes. She gathered bits of driftwood for her wash-boiler fires...

In that appalling moment, with only that pitiable figure on the beach coming out as clear as a cameo in his mind. Jack Byng suddenly gasped. He *knew* Mrs. Getch, but how? New Bedford... the name rang with familiarity... Ah, God in heaven! Another bent old woman gathering fagots was followed by a girl in her teens, dressed in tatters, and holding a shawl over her head as the fierce and bitter nor'easter tore at her thin legs and body.

Those two were his own mother and sister! Mrs. Getch long had been forced to do this hard work of washing for the sailors; but his own mother?

Clenched fists flung aloft, Jack cried in horror and lack of full understanding. Even as he fought desperately to recreate further details of the picture, the whole thing faded out. He was left with no more than a certainty that Getch's wife was in want, and also Jack's mother and little sister. Funny, he could not even think of their first names...

But just the same, if there was gold here in Australia, if the dying man's story held some grains of truth. Jack Byng was committed to getting that gold, and shipping it, somehow, back to these unfortunates in Massachusetts!

FOR the time being, and during the hours of Getch's passing and shallow burial there in the mallee, Jack wasted no thoughts on how he ever could hope to get gold past Inspector Price, the watchdog of Melbourne and Port William. The one big thing was to find this place called Ballarat, oust the claim-jumpers, and take possession in the name of those needy ones far away!

Leaving Getch, Jack wore the dead man's dungarees and boots, and carried the heavy single-shot pistol, a breech-loading .50 caliber Spencer with ten-inch

smooth-bore barrel—a weapon inaccurate at more than thirty feet, but throwing smashing power into its three-fourths ounce of lead sufficient to stop an old man kangaroo in mid-leap. There were eight brass-and-lead-ball cartridges in a chamois bag, worn now at Jack's belt. He felt that old Sails would have wished him to take these accouterments which would help greatly in the search for the log cabin claim in Ballarat held by those murderous freebooters.

To the north, looking no more than a mile or two distant in the cool, clear air, lay a small mountain, solid green with the unchanging hue of the Australian forest which is almost all evergreen, but with a sloping crown of bald rock. Jack set forth to climb that nubbin of a peak, from which he could survey the country and no doubt sight at least the smokes of Ballarat.

That proved unnecessary. Jack had gone forward no more than half a mile, steadily climbing, though occasionally scrambling down through gulches and dry creek beds where the prickly pear was troublesome, when he halted—half raising his spear, which he still carried, in spite of the more modern weapon at his waistband.

"Coo-o-o-o-e-e-e-e!" It was a weird cry, the hail of the mallee which Jack was hearing for the first time. In this instance it was unromantic enough. A miner whose turn it had been to prepare noon dinner was summoning his partner from the digging. He spat tobacco, and turned back from the door to the smoking pot on the clay hearth of the sod dugout cabin.

This was the outfit farthest south of the "town" of Ballarat, which in that year was spread along nine V-gulches which once had been the beds of streams, in some geologic epoch before the land had risen to its present height.

Ballarat was one month old. Tents, sod dugouts, wattle-and-daub shelters shaped like tepees of the American Indian, and some hurriedly excavated caves in hillsides served for human shelters. There were no stores, only four barrel houses which did business under canvas roofs.

There were no streets, just footpaths over the hills and down the gulches, through the forests and scrub. Few outfits could glimpse any sign of their neighbors, each being dumped wherever the top rubble and dirt above the first basalt layer showed signs of gold. So whatever happened was the concern of each man and his partner. No law, not even that of Port William, had come as yet.

The gold in the dirt was free. That is, it consisted of nuggets, flake and dust gold. All this once had been in quartz, but the quartz had rotted under the action of streams, and the gold had been washed clean. The top layers of dirt paid a man good money to pan—if he could get the water, which had to be brought to the scene from a small stream two miles distant. Or the dirt had to be carried there and sluiced or panned. Many miners used the wasteful dry-panning; but the lower layers—particularly the great "wash-dirt" layer (in some places thirty feet thick) above bedrock—were so rich that it did not really matter. Later comers could make fortunes out of washing the tailings; what did these first lucky ones care?

JACK BYNG climbed in the direction of the voice. He reached a ridge, and down below in the gulch ahead bluish smoke of gumwood filtered up through the scrub. As he looked, farther down the gulch the figure of a man, bareheaded, clad in grimy trousers staggered to the knees, wearing no boots, climbed wearily out

of a black hole from which the ends of a pole ladder projected. The figure, evidently exhausted with toil below ground, came, toward the hidden watcher, then turned in to the cabin or dugout from which the smoke arose.

On impulse Jack Byng scrambled down and followed. He tingled at thought of meeting some of his own kind again—men unwounded, and able to converse with him as equals. Concerning the risk of recapture, he thought little at the time. The venture to which he stood committed was reckless enough to dwarf all other considerations, and the need for success paramount.

The sod-roofed hut, rising only two feet above the ground level, would have been unnoticed by a person fifty yards distant, except for the clay chimney sending up its clouds of gum-wood smoke. Jack grimaced at such a place for men to live—without windows or ventilation save for the open doorway. A stack of wood neatly piled stood on one side, however; and a savory smell of meat stewing with onions was wafted to the newcomer's nostrils. He was suddenly so hungry his voice croaked as he called, "Ahoy the house!" and walked forward slowly toward the dark, burrow-like entrance.

As if by magic a rifle muzzle appeared in the door, slanting upward at his head. From the darkness behind came the grim, suspicious admonition:

"Grab yer ears, stranger! Grab—an' hold 'em! 'Nen come on, but slow an' easy. Stop! What ye want?"

"I'm hungry. Lost my outfit," said Jack, tempering the truth. "I'll work for a meal and a place to sleep."

"Oh, ye will." The suspicion still was heavy in the claim-owner's voice. He apparently turned to address his partner, who appeared as a dim face in the doorway. "Says he's a sundowner, but willin' to shovel for grub. What say, d' we feed 'im?"

The answer was inarticulate but apparently affirmative, for Jack was told to come ahead, still holding the lobes of his ears. He descended into the murk of the cabin, where for a moment he could discern only vague shapes. The hut-dwellers, though, could see perfectly. One of them took his pistol, then searched him for other weapons. They left the clasp knife he had gotten from Sails.

"All right. Put 'em down. Set!" said the man who had spoken. He waved an arm at a shake seat of a log in a corner. Jack sank down.

He was beginning to distinguish details. One of these men was small and wiry, with sandy hair and blue veins knotted at his fleshless temples. The other, the one who had been down in the mine shaft, was coarser; about the same medium height but heavier. Both were in late middle age, and had the sour, suspicious cast of countenance which stamped them either as escaped convicts or new-frees.⁽⁴⁻³⁾

THE thin man with the rifle began a brief interrogation, his voice still edged. "You one of Crosbie's larrikins?" he demanded.

"Never heard of Crosbie," said Jack, shaking his head. "I come lookin' for Ballarat, and lost my swag."

He did not elaborate.

"Well, you're in Ballarat—such as it is," said the thin man. "You can work for us, if you want to. Only, we keep your gun till you're ready to go. 'Member, if you're one of them bushrangers or freebooters, you eat hot lead an' no argyment!"

"Suits me," nodded Jack. "Now—Lord but those onions smell like heaven to me!"

After the hearty but simple meal, washed down by boiled tea, Jack was taken to the shaft. This was only some fifteen feet deep, but the first job of shoring with timbers was half completed. Most of the dirt excavated lay in a big pile at one side, waiting to be washed or carried to the river.

Jack was set to helping the pair below ground. He learned that the thin man was called Billy Dent, while the more silent, stronger fellow was Stan Warshawski, a Pole. The newcomer, who had resolved to work here until he could learn a little of conditions in this gold-field, and more about the freebooters so evidently feared, pitched in and did more than his share of work.

Billy Dent eyed him with an equal mixture of admiration and distrust. Workers were hard to get. If this new man would stick until he earned an outfit, the partnership would benefit by many hundreds of dollars—perhaps thousands, for this claim was extremely promising at the high levels.

Tea and damper, with cold wallaby meat previously roasted in a clay coat in the coals of the hearth, came shortly after sundown. Then Jack Byng began to get restless. The partners heaped fuel on the fire and in spite of the open doorway the sod hut grew unbearably hot. Jack finally had to say he would sleep outside. He had left his skins and spear in a heap back there on the side of the gulch.

Though the partners glanced significantly at one another, they let him go. In the moonlight, they saw him come back and lie down in the shadow of the brush about twenty yards from the hut. In five minutes Jack Byng slept. He was used to this, although the night was chilly. It would take him a long time to get used to stuffy quarters again, even with his prison experience.

The mine partners kept awake as long as they could. Finally, near midnight, Billy Dent crept out noiselessly, rifle in hand. He approached the huddle of hides there in the bush, and was manifestly astonished to find Jack still there, breathing deeply and regularly in unfeigned sleep. He had suspected Jack had been a scout for the bushranger Crosbie, now head of the infamous freebooter band of Ballarat; and that at the first chance Jack had meant to slip away, bearing news of this promising claim.

What Billy Dent and the Pole thought then did not really matter, in view of the grim happening which came at false dawn. Stan Warshawski had drunk too freely at one of the barrel houses one night, boasting of the richness of their claim. And there were men in Ballarat who heard, and whose eyes slitted with covetousness.

Now, keeping to shadow, crossing into the brightness of the westering moon and the vague gray of eastern sky only when just at the side of the sod hut, two crouching figures came. There was a slight sound. A fagot of firewood was dislodged from its pile, and tumbled with a rattling noise.

"Uh! Who's that? You, Jack?" came a sleepy voice from within the hut.

The men outside did not answer, but crept more swiftly toward the doorway.

JACK came to his feet, fairly blasted from sleep by the detonation of heavy pistols. Seizing his lance, he stared toward the sod hut—in time to see

orange fire spurt from the doorway, and two answering fire arrows start from points just three or four yards distant. There came a terrible shriek of agony as Stan Warshawski pitched down, clutching his mid-section and writhing.

The partners were beset by the freebooters they feared! Jack ran to help. He saw just two attackers moving to the door, from which no shots came now. With a terrifying war whoop he sprang at the first, burying the spear deep as the marauder turned to fire in sudden panic at this unexpected reinforcement.

Dropping the haft, which he knew he could not loosen, Jack leaped on toward the second assassin. A pistol blazed almost in his face, one of the new repeating sort which fired six times without reloading. The bullet missed, however, and he struck that intending murderer in a tackle that had all the weight of his rush behind his bunched shoulder.

Crash! The man went down, bowled backward so heavily that his head smashed into the woodpile, half stunning him.

Still his left hand flew to Jack's throat, and he struggled. The youth, seeing in his mind a picture of Sails, butchered for a claim like this and dying in delirium, broke the throat hold and grabbed for the same thing himself.

The robber tried to yell for mercy now, but only choked sounds came forth. Then they too stopped, and there was only the sound of his heavy boot heels drumming on the ground...

"My God, Jack!" said a weak, protesting voice near him. The hand of Billy Dent shook his shoulder. "You can let him alone. He's been dead a long while. Come help me with Stan. I'm afeared he's done for. They pinked me in the shin. One of the bones is busted, I think... but if it hadn't of been fer you..."

With an effort, Jack detached his clamped fingers. These were the first men he ever had killed, and he felt sick when he staggered up to his feet. The first freebooter lay where he had fallen, the rude spear sticking out from his armpit and transfixing his heart. This one and the other stank of rum.

"They're Crosbie's men, all right," said Billy Dent bitterly. "They hole up mostly at a log cabin north of here. Nights they drink, an' anybody goes near there gets shot. They've took to killin' honest men they think maybe have pokes of gold."

Jack Byng's face was white and set as he stared down in pity at the now unconscious and dying partner of Billy Dent.

"Those men in the cabin—they're the devils I came to Ballarat to kill!" he said between set teeth, fingering the six-shooter he had taken from the second freebooter.

Billy Dent protested, anxiously saying that he needed a partner, and that he himself was wounded and would not be able to get around much for several days.

He started to wash and dress his leg, after seeing that nothing could help Warshawski. His voice trembled, and he was near to tears though not from his hurt.

"I won't go till you're all right," promised Jack. Then he suddenly stiffened. From far away, borne on the still air of morning, came the sound of heavy voices raised in song. There was little tune, and the words were indistinguishable, but at this time of night the idea was unmistakable. Men had been drinking all night, and were at the height of their carouse.

"That's them!" said Billy Dent bitterly. "They'll kill you too. Then where in hell 'll I be?"

"They won't!" said Jack Byng harshly, thinking of those women and the girl gathering fagots on the shore. "From now on I'm going to be just too tough to kill!"

Chapter V

THE GOLDEN SCULLION.

THE foray of the two freebooters, however, had been no mere outburst of drunken cupidity and ugliness. Though he was scarcely known by sight to any man save the larrikins and bushrangers of his own band, Warren Crosbie was a cold thinking machine—one which thought always in terms of violence and evil, or he might have been a great man in this colonial empire. With a tremendous fortune already in his hands, he was under the necessity of preventing his men from taking their splits until it would seem honest money gleaned from the rocky soil.

Holding in leash the rascals he had brought together in Ballarat meant keeping them busy. If a few of them each month were exterminated while on this business bent, why, so much the more in shares for those who survived.

So each night when a claim was known to have been producing gold in quantity, masked men raided. Crosbie himself rarely went. And he issued stern instructions that no troublesome survivors were to be left behind, to raise popular indignation after the robbery. As a result Crosbie's cached fortune increased, while the men under him who would share it had diminished to five (now that Black Dog Ramele and Dinger Doane failed unaccountably to return from that easy raid oh Billy Dent and his Polack partner).

Warren Crosbie himself decided to investigate. He went the second morning, in broad daylight; and he gave the warning coo-o-o-ee before he descended to the sod hut where Billy Dent lay smoking comfortably while his brown-bearded friend worked in the shaft.

In the bottom of the gulch a hundred feet below the mine shaft was a mound of new dirt—a mound about six feet in length. The freebooter chief noticed, and his eyes slitted momentarily. But he was smiling, at ease, when he reached the doorway of the sod hut and was bidden to enter by the anxious voice of Billy Dent.

Jack Byng had come up the ladder, stopping just short of the surface to listen, then peering out cautiously before revealing himself. Thoughts of the law were in his mind. The law had treated him scurvily back there at Port William; but in this instance there might have to be some explanation of the death of three men. And his own identity would be revealed thereby in disastrous fashion.

He had his single-shot pistol, preferring a weapon with which he was familiar. The six-shooter revolver might be all right, but he never had fired it. Now, tucking the pistol into his waistband, he climbed out of the shaft and made his way silently toward the side of the dugout into which the visitor had disappeared. And although he strained his ears, when he finally drew close, he heard no

conversation at all. That was an uncanny thing, for Billy Dent was a talkative man.

"I'm Sergeant Armstrong from Melbourne," had been Crosbie's words of greeting a few minutes earlier, when he stopped and entered the dugout. "We've come to bring order to Ballarat; and a report came to me that night before last there was shooting up in this direction. Do you know anything about it? You are Billy Dent, aren't you? Where is your partner?"

Billy Dent put down the revolver he had been clutching, and swung his bandaged leg to the floor. "Oh, it was awful!" he replied, shaking his head, tears coming to his eyes. "They killed Stan—two of Crosbie's gang. We—we got them. They're buried out there."

HE raised a bandanna handkerchief to wipe his eyes; and that second Crosbie leaped. His pistol flew upward, then down in a crushing smash upon the little man's skull. Billy Dent fell back, dead.

"Couldn't leave you around to talk!" gritted the bushranger, wiping his gun and thrusting it back in its holster. Then in silence he frowned about the hut, wondering where these two had cached their gold. Might be in those rusty air-tights on the shelf.

Just as he reached a hand for one of those tins, a shadow darkened the open doorway. Staring in at the quiet figure on the rude bunk, hand on his pistol butt, was a bearded man stained with the soil of the mine shaft.

"What did you do to him?" came the hoarse, ominous query.

Warren Crosbie did not waste words. Whirling, he hurled the heavy tin, which struck the dirt wall, splashing reddish yellow upon the floor and across Jack Byng's bare feet.

At the same time the bushranger went for his gun. It flashed upward in a lightning draw which Jack could not have hoped to equal—save that his own hand gripped the pistol butt when Crosbie declared himself in action.

He yanked the heavy weapon and fired point-blank, perhaps one-fifth of a second before the outlaw's gun jerked convulsively upward, throwing its charge of lead into the sod roof a foot above Jack's head.

From Crosbie's bare throat blood spurted sidewise. He staggered, clutching at the gaping wound in a vain attempt to stem the lifeblood stream. The revolver fell with a clatter against the hardened clay of the hearth. And two seconds later Warren Crosbie, choking, pitched head-first toward the bunk on which lay the body of his victim. Another twenty seconds and he was dead.

Jack had no idea of what he had done. He knew only that he had avenged the senseless murder of his partner, and rightly guessed that this man in the black suit and expensive boots had a close connection with the two masked men who had raided.

A search of the murderer's clothes yielded no money, but one exceedingly interesting packet. In this packet was a rough map of Ballarat, showing about one hundred and sixty claims. Beside twenty-two of these, red crosses had been marked. A red interrogation point was next the southernmost of all the claims—the one Jack realized had belonged to Billy Dent and his partner. So, this man had come to see what had happened to the other two, had he?

"They can tell him—in hell!" grated Jack aloud.

He was looking now at a collection of reward notices, all hand-lettered. These, described wanted men. Some had been taken from Sydney, but most were the work of Inspector Price of Melbourne. There were eighteen notices in all. One of them offered £3000 for the capture dead or alive of the notorious bushranger Crosbie, who was thought to have escaped south to the new diggings in Victoria.

Then Jack Byng grew rigid. Inspector Price had discovered his identity, after all! Here was a terse description, with his full name, John Thomas Byng, and a reward of £2500 offered for his capture! And then the significant words:

"THIS MALEFACTOR MUST BE BROUGHT IN ALIVE!"

THAT tore it forever, Jack swore aloud and reached a hand upward to his head. Red blazes suddenly flashed in his retinas. He leaned against the wall, suddenly sick and weak. Something more terrible than death had happened to him. The veiling mists had been driven from his brain by shock!

He remembered Letty Hanlon, his sweetheart! He remembered his own mother and sister, the death of his father—and now the frill horror of his position, robbed of the money which would have meant safety for his dear ones, robbed of the chance to take his ship, the Nancy B., away from these hell-ports and earn a living for the girl he had hoped to make his wife, burst upon him.

He never could escape save by fleeing farther into the mallee! He never could take back money for poor Mrs. Getch, even.

It was a killer who left the sod hut fifteen minutes later, a harsh-featured avenger who carried a revolver and a pistol, and who was bound straight for the cabin built by Getch, and the murderous bushranger Crosbie, supposed to have headquarters there.

Jack carried about ninety ounces of dust. This he would send to Billy Dent's or Stan Warshawski's people, if he could find out who any of them were—and if he survived. Going on to the gulch shown by the freebooter's map as the place of the log cabin—it was less than a half mile distant—Jack made no real plans beyond the smoke of his guns.

Ballarat lived in terror of these murderers. Very well; if he could capture any of them he would turn them over to the other miners for trial and justice, while he himself disappeared. There was little likelihood of surrender, though.

He came upon the log cabin suddenly. It was a tiny affair, no more than ten by ten feet in size. Smoke was rising from the chimney. For a moment, until he cautiously circled, glimpsing the front and far side, Jack was puzzled to imagine how a freebooter gang could make headquarters in such a cramped dwelling.

Then he understood. On the south side the newcomers had erected a sort of *lanai* on poles—a roof of saplings overlaid with tree fern leaves and then dirt. This offered some protection against rain and sun. It covered the mouth of the mine shaft, and furnished a place where men could play cards, drink and sleep when the weather was fine.

Two bearded fellows, unkempt and dirty, slouched over a rough table covered with a blanket. On this stood a bottle and glasses. They played a game called "Sixty-Six," and growled morosely over the sixes and four-spots used as counters.

Behind them two more men were wrapped in blankets, snoring. All wore pistols or revolvers, and most of them knives in sheaths.

Inside the cabin a fifth member of the band limped about barefooted, getting ready the noon meal. He was a white-faced, forlorn specimen with drooping shoulders, and with one red eye socket from which the orb had been gouged recently. Thaddeus Moore had cast his lot with the freebooters one night when half drunk and resentful of the fact that his thriftily-saved wages did not suffice to outfit him well for a mining venture in the mallee. Twice since then he had tried to break away from Warren Crosbie, and had taken horrible beatings as punishment. The last indignity was making him cook for the outfit. Even at that he had learned to fear the cold-hearted chieftain too greatly to try to break away a third time.

JACK managed to get within twenty feet of the card players. Then he rose to his feet, pistol and revolver couched at his hips, and strode straight to the lanai.

"Stick 'em up! Quick!" he rasped. Oaths of astonishment greeted him. One of the sleepers grunted, and got up to a sitting position. Jack barked a savage command at him. Unwillingly he and the two card players stood up, holding their arms aloft. Jack pardonably missed the fourth man who had been sleeping, and who was screened from his view by the table.

"Which one of you is Crosbie?" came the harsh demand.

"Crosbie?" frowned one of the players, seeming to try to think. "None of us here, pardner. What's the ail of you? Never heard of no Crosbie nohow—oh-h, you mean the bushranger Crosbie?" His red-rimmed eyes stared questioningly at Jack.

"Yes, I mean the murderer Crosbie!" said Jack coldly. "Which one of you—?"

That was as far as he got, for two things happened simultaneously. The fourth man who had been sleeping had awakened to the fact of a hold-up. Lying there, he could see Jack Byng's booted feet and the legs above. He got his revolver, aimed, and pulled trigger three times as fast as he could thumb back the hammer!

The other thing that happened saved Jack's life for the moment. Out of the cabin door, skillet in hand, had come the limping Thad Moore. He saw the stranger with guns, the freebooters with their hands aloft. And he flung the skillet with its hot grease! He feared Crosbie more than he feared any other man, or even the law.

The skillet handle struck Jack a staggering blow on the shoulder. He lurched sidewise and forward. At the same instant two searing burns came—in his upper thigh and higher on his right side! The bushranger on the floor had scored two hits!

The two card players and the other freebooter streaked for their guns, at the same time leaping away from the table. Jack fired down left-handed with the pistol at the man half-raised from his blankets, then swung with his back to the cabin.

Crash! Crash! Crash! he fired thrice, missing the first shot with the strange weapon, then getting hits on both the men who had been playing cards as they themselves fired hurriedly.

There came a screech from Thad Moore. A ricocheting bullet had scoured his scalp, inflicting a painful and bloody but non-dangerous wound. He sat down

suddenly on the ground, half believing his brains were oozing out through his fingers.

Jack flung himself to the ground. He had scarcely felt the scratch wounds. He turned and fired once, missing—but scaring the last of the bushrangers sufficiently so the fellow yelled for mercy and rose to his feet, starting to put up his hands.

Jack could not halt his trigger. He flung a bullet squarely into the pleading man's heart, and the bushranger pitched forward as a tree falls.

That was all—except one factor Jack could not help. One of the two card players had been shot through the right forearm. He was hurt and out of action, but nothing was the matter with his legs. He suddenly got up and darted for the bush. Jack fired, but missed.

The freebooter escaped. He did not stop running until he was far from Ballarat. He never would return. When weeks later he got to Melbourne he would tell a wild and weird story of this bushranger who had killed his partner and driven him from a claim. From his description, compared with the reward posters, Inspector Price would curse and declare this new outlaw to be the man he wanted to lay hands upon, above all others; namely, John Thomas Byng!

WHAT ensued thereafter at the cabin takes, perhaps, an understanding of New England character, if all is to be plain.

Jack was losing blood from four slight wounds, but managed to stagger over to the freebooter sitting on the ground.

"Where is Crosbie? Are *you* Warren Crosbie?" Jack demanded hoarsely. Then something familiar about the long white face, in spite of the empty eye-socket and the streamers of gore from the scalp wound, struck him.

"You! Thad Moore!" he gasped. "Damn you, you're going to die! Say your prayers, if you got any!"

The ex-mate did not flinch. A queer sound of resignation came from his throat. "Jack Byng! Jack Byng!" he said in a wondering, queer monotone. "I—hell, I don't blame ye, lad. Go ahead an' shoot!"

And with that he sighed and collapsed to the ground.

Still savage, but unable to kill a man who did not resist, Jack dragged Thad into the cabin and laid him on one of the bunks. The noon meal for six was smoking on the hearth, and took his attention immediately. Then he washed and bound his own wounds, and put a compress on the jagged tear on Thad's scalp.

The latter woke up, and lay there minutes before he spoke.

"You're a good lad, Jack," he said then weakly. "Better git. Crosbie'll be here soon."

Instantly Jack bristled. "Where'd he go?" he demanded.

The ex-mate told, and Jack realized for the first time that the murderer of Billy Dent, who now lay dead back there in the sod hut, had been the New South Wales bushranger, leader of this freebooter gang!

"Well then, he won't be coming back," said Jack grimly, and told in brief what had happened.

"Oh, glory be!" breathed the ex-mate fervently. He sat up, instantly interested again in living. "I—oh Jack, I been in hell here! He—he was—"

"Looks to me as though you deserved all you got!" said the youth uncompromisingly. "You're not through paying, either!" An idea had come to him in a flash. Here was a possible chance to send money to Mrs. Getch and his own mother!

"Wh-what d'ye mean, lad?" quavered Moore. All the iron and whalebone had been ground out of his spirit.

"I mean that this claim was supposed to be rich. It belonged to old Sails—Getch, you remember. Well, Sails asked me to send some of the gold from this claim back to his wife. She takes in washing there at home. Well, you and I are going to work fast. We'll try to get some gold for Mrs. Getch, and then some to keep my mother and sister from want.

"And then you're going to take it back to them, Thad Moore!"

"You mean—you'd let me—you'd trust me to—" began the broken man in a trembling voice of hope.

"I'll trust you when you swear an oath," said Jack. "There'll be some for you too, I hope. I can't leave; but you'll do what I make you swear, or I'll harry you in hell, Thad Moore!"

THERE was no difficulty about that at all. Thad would have given his one remaining eye for a chance to get out of the Antipodes, even penniless. And he knew something about this "rich claim"—something he started to tell Jack, but then thought better of it. After all, why quarrel with the largesse of the gods?

"Crosbie's made us work this claim some. There's a mort of gold a'ready!" said Thad, indicating a row of biscuit tins.

Jack frowned. "You mean, don't you, that Crosbie put the gold he and his men stole in those tins?" he demanded.

"Lord, no! Crosbie had his own cache for that," responded the ex-mate, telling the truth feverishly—a part of the truth. What he did not ever tell Jack Byng was that the gold dust from the Nelson had been dumped into the wash dirt of the mine excavation, and mixed there with some of the real dirt. "This-here gold come out of Getch's mine!" he concluded. "I'll swear that on my sacred honor!"

Jack was ready enough to believe, particularly as he knew Thad Moore of old as a man who stuck to his pledged word. Like many another New Englander of strict upbringing, he might avoid lies by the narrowest of margins, and purposely; but when pinned down in plain words he told the truth and acted strictly according to the promises he had given.

So when next day Thad said he could travel. Jack burdened him down with all the wrapped gold he could carry in addition to a meager store of provisions, his weapon and ammunition.

"Put on ten pounds more!" bade: Thad stoutly, when he was ready for the trail. Jack did so. That made almost one hundred pounds of the metal—in Melbourne, about \$20,000 worth. Back in America the metal would bring more.

"You will take the identity of Billy Dent," Jack reminded him in parting. "This gold came from your claim, of course. You will take it to New Bedford as soon as you can get away. One-third goes to Mrs. Getch, one-third to my mother, and one-third to yourself. You promise?"

"I swear on my sacred honor!" said Thad Moore,

"Then good-by and God go with you!" said Jack brokenly. "Give my love to mother and sis..." He wrung the hand of the ex-mate, tears in his eyes. He did not have the heart to send any message to Letty Hanlon, but he knew Thad would tell of him if he ever reached home, and the girl would understand.

Thad Moore's brain had been scheming—not to outwit Jack Byng or break any promises, but to add a benefit for himself. The youth's suggestion that he take the identity of Billy Dent, in order to make easier the escape from Melbourne, had given the ex-mate a brilliant idea.

He kept on the trail only a quarter of a mile. Then he swung back over the ridge toward the Dent hut where the stiffened body of Warren Crosbie still lay.

When Thad resumed the trail to Melbourne a half hour later there was a globular object swathed in a black coat which had belonged to Warren Crosbie. And that hideous something inside the coat was a token which could not be denied, when Thad Moore applied for the reward offered for the bushranger, dead or alive...

Three thousand pounds, plus his third share of this gold! Thad Moore grinned in satisfaction. He had not done so badly in the goldfields, after all! Quite a joke on the bushranger, after keeping Thad there a slavey and a scullion,' working where gold was commoner than scouring soap for his pans.

JACK BYNG had sundered ties with the world—he believed. He would have liked to send more gold to his family, but perhaps he could do so later. For now he was an outlaw.

"I don't reckon Ballarat knows about me yet, though," he considered.

"Anyhow, I'm going to dig some of Getch's gold, and cache it away from here. Take a chance nobody comes till I'm through."

Unknown to him, vengeance on the freebooters even then was organized under Inspector Price, and starting the eighty-mile trip from Melbourne. It would be delayed just long enough, for the odd reason that the expedition of police encountered a miner, heavily burdened with gold, who identified himself as Billy Dent.

This miner surprised and shocked the kind-faced fiend of Melbourne by unrolling a package about the size of a bowling ball and exhibiting the head of Warren Crosbie, the bushranger.

There was no doubt of the identification. Price had known Crosbie. So, promising the pseudo-Dent the reward immediately upon his return, Price continued his journey of reprisal against the rest of the freebooters. And secretly he hoped to have a chance at John Thomas Byng, who might have gone to Ballarat.

After burying the dead freebooters. Jack started in to dig in the shaft out there under the lanai. The top dirt did not seem very rich; but he had gone down less than a foot before his spade was grating in coarse yellow stuff which even his ignorance knew to be gold. Why, poor Getch had died with the wealth of a Croesus at his command!

For five straight days, sleeping out in the scrub for fear someone might come seeking vengeance on the freebooters, Jack worked from dawn to dusk. He did not attempt to wash this rich dirt and dust; it did not seem necessary! Instead, he

filled the row of biscuit tins with it, and then put more in the bottom of six burlap bags. All these he carried about a mile south into the scrub, and buried them on a ridge. He had learned that no mining was done except at the bottom of gulches, so this cache likely would remain undisturbed forever, unless he returned to it.

The containers filled with more gold than Jack Byng ever had dreamed of seeing in his whole life, he filled several small hide pouches to hang at his belt. Then, thoughtfully weighing chances, he took weapons and a small pack of the remaining provisions, and slowly made his way toward the larger grouping of smokes which marked the center of the sprawling town of Ballarat.

There was nothing to do in the center except drink, and that Jack refused for the present. He had espied something which made his heart beat faster. There, tied to a gum tree near one of the barrel houses, was a shabby horse, saddled and standing with drooping head.

Jack looked at the animal, then turned abruptly and entered the saloon tent. He found a bearded miner glowering over a drink. He had lost more than a hundred ounces of gold to the freebooter band, and been wounded. Now he had recovered, and had come in to attempt a trade for provisions. But he had found no buyers for his saddle horse.

Jack overheard the bartender speak to the disappointed man, and turned. "I'll give you this—and this—and this—for your horse and saddle as it stands!" he announced, plunking three heavy hide pouches upon the plank bar. The total came to about seventy ounces, an enormous price for the nag.

The bearded grouch straightened. "Podner," he said hoarsely, "you're ownin' a hoss!" He seized the three pouches, and hefted them greedily.

Jack nodded, and left the saloon: On the threshold he stopped. Two hundred yards away was a cavalcade—three horses and a number of armed soldiers or police on foot. And one stare told the wanted man that he had reason to gasp.

In the lead was Inspector Price of Melbourne, mounted on a jaded, dust-covered horse!

Jack held a handkerchief to his face as if he had dust in his eyes. He walked straight to the waiting animal he had purchased, mounted awkwardly, and then rode at a walk out of Balkarat, bound northwestward. His heart was pounding with excitement. He expected any second to have a shouted alarm sound at his back, but none came. He reached the shelter of the mallee, and urged his horse to a racking trot.

Inspector Price and his police went straight to a barrel house for refreshment. It was not until two hours later, when he began inquiries, that he found out the infuriating fact that he had missed the man he wanted most, Jack Byng, by a matter of seconds, right there in the saloon.

Chapter VI

DRIFTWOOD.

*When it is decided to trust a man, he is given additional duties to perform.
Even confirmed rogues come up to scratch in most cases.*

—Meriwether: The Philadelphia Penitentiary (1860).

IT was a noon of late August when the NANCY B. paddled laboriously through Buzzards Bay, and turned her prow in toward Fair Haven and New Bedford. Thad Moore, acting captain, had made a quick trip under difficulties.

His engineer and the members of his crew all were miners who had struck it rich in the Australian goldfields. They had been obstreperous, one of them demanding to be put ashore earlier. But Thad had been adamant.

It was late when they anchored; yet Thad himself hurried preparations for his own trip ashore. Even when he moved as fast as he could, paying off, and leaving the vessel shipshape, however, he was preceded by two rather furtive men. These men also had heavy weights of the yellow dust. They had joined just before Thad set sail—weary weeks after the ex-mate had reached Melbourne. It had taken Price a long time to decide to pay the reward for the death of Warren Crosbie.

But now all was over. One of the furtive men, who had been a sick miner despoiled by the freebooters, and whom Jack Byng had found almost dying in the bush, made inquiry and hastened to the squalid cottage where Mrs. Getch bent over her washboard even this late of a summer evening.

"From your husband, ma'am. He struck it rich an' sent this to you!" said the rough looking stranger, lifting a canvas sack in both hands and plunking it on the ironing board. He seemed oddly embarrassed when the woman, raising hallelujahs, fell upon his neck and kissed him hysterically. He got out of there as soon as he could.

Mrs. Getch had not really realized her tremendous good fortune when there came another knock at the door. In came a red-haired Irishman with a cutty pipe upside down in his wide mouth.

"Mrs. Getch?" he asked. "Well, yer man sent ye a prisint—from the goldfields, where he's a-doin' well!" And with that he hauled a long leather poke like a bologna sausage out from Under his waistcoat, and dumped it on the ironing board, which trembled under the added weight of treasure.

The good woman was so stunned she could only gasp for words when she saw that this too was gold.

And she was still running around in circles, laughing, wiping eyes on her apron, when Thad Moore came. She knew Thad, at least. He lifted her third share of the gold, telling her that it was from her husband.

The ironing board collapsed under that weight; and Mrs. Getch, moaning that she was asleep and dreaming, fell down in a faint.

The identical comedy was replayed at the Byng cottage, where a half-starved woman and a sad faced girl heard of the death of husband and father at the same time they got these golden presents.

"God bless my boy! He remembered us in his good fortune!" wept the mother.

"He'll be back to you sometime—with a million!" promised Thad Moore, taking his departure.

At that moment on the other side of the world a bronzed, hard-visaged man was cooking breakfast tea and damper, beside a lonely camp-fire in the heart of the mallee.



⁽¹⁻¹⁾ The captain's name is fictional, though history's indictment of him is far worse than presented here.

⁽²⁻²⁾ In addition, it was a fact not so widely known but nevertheless true that Great Britain (punishing the theft of a ham by seven years' imprisonment, for instance) offered to supply free of charge these petty-offender felons to the slave-dealers of Morocco—and the offer was refused by the black sultan, on the grounds of excessive barbarity!

⁽⁴⁻³⁾ Men who had served sentences, but who had not been able to leave the colonies.