



THE ROVING PARTY

ROHAN WILSON



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ALLEN & UNWIN

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ROHAN WILSON lived a long, mostly lonely, life until a lucky turn of events led him to take up a teaching position in Japan where he met his wife. They have a son who loves books, as all children should. They live in Launceston but don't know why. Rohan holds degrees and diplomas from the universities of Tasmania, Southern Queensland and Melbourne. This is his first book. He can be found on Twitter: @rohan_wilson.

THEY WHISTLED FOR BLACK BILL THROUGH the foredawn and called his old clan name behind it, a name he had no good use for. He sat upright on the bed and looked about. The fire in the hearth was dead and the hut utterly without light. He doubled the blanket over his woman, covering the small mound of her belly. He pulled on his hat, his boots, all the while listening to those distant souls whistling and calling as if he was some game dog meant for the hunt. Then he swung the bark doorflap outwards and stood in its hollow watching the huge columned gums slowly gain distinction as the sun flared. In the thin hews of light the air was damp and misted and he was staring a good few moments before he noticed them. First the wormy dogs half hidden in the fog bands. Then ranged out in the steaming scrub reefs something arrived as if from an ether dream. Black Bill clenched his teeth. It was a hunting party of Plindermairhemener men.

They watched him across the mists, gripping clusters of spears like long slender needles. Kangaroo mantles hung loosely off their frames to hide the costume pieces beneath, trousers old and torn and black with the blood of game they had taken and looted cotton shirts gone to rags. One of their number was got up in an infantryman's crosswebbing and another was fitted out in a fine worsted coat as if dressed for dinner. Their breath bled in the cold. Not a cast of relics come out of the grasslands where their forebears had walked but men remade in ways peculiar to this new world. As he watched those figures from the doorway the Vandemonian felt for the knife he kept rigged between his shoulderblades.

Foremost among that singular horde was Manalargena who carried across his shoulder a waddy shaped from blackwood and stained with the filth of war. He twisted the tool as he led his party from the scrub flanked by a dog pack, the bark shattering beneath his feet. Manalargena was vain, had always been, and his wife had ochred his hair into long ringlets as precise as woven rope. Indeed all the men wore their hair in this fashion sculpted by the womenfolk but only the headman walked across that ground like a fellow enamoured of the sound of his own tread. *mina bungercarner. nina bungercarner. mina tunapri nina. nina tunapri mina.* He gazed into Bill's face as he spoke.

narapa. Black Bill lowered his knife.

The clansmen arranged themselves on the bare earth beside Bill's humpy and they gestured with open palms for him to sit also. They were freshly painted for war and when Manalargena offered him a muttonfish shell filled with grease and ochre the Vandemonian accepted it, removed his hat and dabbed the paint over his head. Bill wore his hair cut tightly short like the white men of the district but

the clansmen watched him with solemn regard and if their opinion of it was scornful they gave no sign. The headman again addressed Bill and this time he did so partly in English by way of showing him his place. For the Vandemonian was as good as white.

Tummer-ti, he said. You come we need you. tunapri mina kani?

Black Bill studied his deeply creased face.

You come fight, the headman said.

Eh?

Fight with us.

Where? carnermema lettenener?

tromemanner.

Bill looked around at those grimly visaged men of war; each and every one met his eyes and he saw among their faces the bold expectations held for him.

You strong man you fight, the headman said. Come with us.

Black Bill was silent. He scratched at the old ritual scars on his chest. He called to his woman to leave her bed and when no reply came he called again, his words oddly deadened by the mist between the trees. Soon she showed in the doorway bundled in a blanket and Bill asked for the meat to be brought out.

tawattya, she said to the clansmen, but they looked away from her and shook their heads. Her hair long for a black woman, seemed to upset them.

Her name what?

Bill faced the headman. Katherine.

Katarin, the headman said to her. You good woman. You bring food, Katarin. Bring tea. Good woman. We talk.

She stared at him. Then she vanished into the hut.

Manalargena smiled and waited until she returned with a cold joint of kangaroo. The clansmen ate freely and passed the billycan of tea around every mouth. Over the smack of lips the headman praised Bill for the fine wife he had taken, her obedience, her silence, and on a whim he stood and strutted in mockery of his own proud wife and raised their laughter with his portrayal of her arrogant bearing. The beard on his chin was matted, and the lank twists as red as a rooster's wattle jiggled while he walked about. Dark hands flapped at his sides and his nose turned high. The men of his party laughed but Bill watched and kept his tongue still.

Once more the headman sat among the men of his clan and reached for the billycan. He drank, wiped his mouth and looked towards Bill. In the doorway Katherine held her rounded belly. The headman waved a crooked finger at her.

She carry what?

I dont know, said Bill.

The headman studied her a moment and rubbed his plagued left arm. It was a mass of scars where he'd tried to bleed the demon out in his youth.

Boy, he said. Strong boy. I know this.

The cold sun in the trees as it loomed over the hills picked out Manalargena's features, the folds of his face, the crosshatching rent in the flesh of his evil arm. Here was a man who might part the veft of the world by his own words. A man sung up and down the island. The whites wanted him for hanging and several locals had stood their own private funds against the receipt of his head for campaigns conducted upon them by his clan. But Black Bill looked away from him.

The headman said, A boy. My demon tell me.

There was another elder among the party, an old man of skin and sinew, who summoned their eyes to himself by beating his waddy on his palm. He was called Taralta and his face was scarred and churlish. He alone in that clan knew the law and its application and he talked quietly into the hush he tapping had created. He spoke long against the whites and decried their contempt for peace with ancient turns of phrase Bill could not comprehend, metaphors that had lost sense for all but a few wizened lawkeepers. He called the whites the cawing of the crow for morning. An inundation driving his kind into the heights of the mountains, the peaks of the trees. He adduced a great litany of evils befouling his clan and on each point he drew attention to the culpability of the whites and the flagrant disregard they displayed for any notion of justice. He said that if you forgave the devil for eating your food, he would soon eat your children. Black Bill listened to the case put forth and when Taralta was finished he raised his eyes to the lawman's face.

I am obliged to Batman, he said, and no other.

Taralta frowned upon mention of that name. One or two of the seated clansmen, those who had something of the English language, saw through Bill's meaning and they rendered it for the lawman. They stared at the Vandemonian and waited for Manalargena to speak. But the headman was rubbing his bedevilled arm as new spasms appeared upon his shoulder, rippling and flexing beneath the skin. He closed his eyes and seemed intent on hearing whatever counsel it might whisper in whatever sordid tongue it used.

bungana Batman, the headman said with his eyes yet closed and his mouth turning ugly. Why you follow him?

The Vandemonian stood up. I got no more to say on the matter.

When he moved, the men of the hunting company also moved, pushing themselves up by the spears as the game dogs wheeled about, their eyes aflame in the dawn light. Manalargena climbed on his feet and slung his waddy across his shoulder.

Come fight, he said.

No.

I say this. Knife is sharpen on stone. You come now. We find your stone.

No.

Grey light curled above the gums. If there was more of a world beyond that small clearing and the few souls standing there, Bill knew nothing of it in those moments when the headman held him fixed in a glare. But he would not be moved.

My father, said Manalargena, he tell me many thing. He like to speak. And I like to listen. Now you hear me, Tummer-ti. You listen. As he spoke the headman moved his hand as if he was conjuring.

There was two brother you see. They live near a river them brother. They catch plenty crayfish in the river. It was big river very big. They got long legs them brother they walk out that river and catch them crayfish. Under the rock. Then one brother he make the fire. Another brother he sing the song. Then they eat them crayfish you see. They sing and they eat. Always this way. They pass many happy day.

I remember it, said Bill. I heard it before.

You hear me, Tummer-ti. You listen.

Bill looked around at the others. A dour mob. I aint concerned with yer stories, he said.

But the headman went on. Hunter come to the river. He is hungry hunter you see. He want crayfish. He see them brother eating crayfish, singing song. He want crayfish too. He bring up spear. Here the headman made as if to raise something. He bring up that spear and he call out: I hungry, you give me that crayfish. He hold that spear and he call out. But them brother they scared you see. They scared and they run. They run and they change. They change to wallaby and they jump. Now they jump and jump and the hunter he follow them.

So hunter he change too. He run and he change to that wallaby and he jump. Now three wallaby jump near river. They eat grass. They forget the crayfish. They eat grass and they drink water and they forget crayfish. Three wallaby near the river. Very big river.

Black Bill looked at him. They was snakes was how I heard it told.

Snake?

Aye. Snakes.

powrana?

powrana. Bill made a slithering motion with his hand.

No no no. Wallaby. You listen, Tummer-ti. You Panninher man not Plindermairhemener. You listen my story. Three wallaby near the river you see. Not two and one but three. Them brother lost, you understand. They see plenty wallaby. But no see brother. Three wallaby near river eat the grass and drink the water but they forget. Who is brother. Who is hunter. They forget this thing. Now three wallaby. No one sing. Them all lost. All same you see.

Bill looked the headman long in the eyes. That makes no sense, he said.

You no hear. Hear nothing. Manalargena tapped at his temple. A wind was freshly risen in the gum and it dispersed the scraggs of mist and shifted the headman's shirt.

I dont want no part of it, said Bill. You do what you think is right. Do what you have to. But I can help.

The headman snorted. He glanced around at his warriors. They leaned on their long spears, puffs of vapour blowing from their nostrils as they stood in the cold, indifferent to the Vandemonian's refusal. But the headman rubbed his arm slowly as he looked Black Bill over one last time, then without a word he turned and led his clan off into the scrub, the slap of their feet sounding on the earth as they

went. Bill waited as those figures melded once more into the bush and waited even after they'd gone staring into the void, left with only his thoughts.

Inside the humpy he filled a tin bowl from the river bucket and unwrapped the soap cake from its leather. He lathered his hair and rinsed away the clay and possum grease smeared over it, the water running bloodcoloured off his forehead. He washed and rinsed once more. The collar of his shirt hung sodden and redstained about his neck as he ladled the water across his scalp and Katherine, huddled under her blankets, loaded the fire with wood and watched him.

When he was done, when he'd emptied the water outside, he went to the corner of the humpy and retrieved the old brown bessie kept beside their bed. It was a decent piece for which he'd bartered his pair of seasoned game dogs. He checked the mechanism, loaded it and propped the gun beside the door. Then he lowered himself into the chair and sat staring at the weapon. The roving party would be striking out after the Plindermairhemener in a week. Batman had agreed to cut him in on the bounty. Him and the Dharugs. Without their bushcraft the party had no hope of success.

Katherine eyed the gun.

You see them again you'll be needin it, he said.

But Bill knew the gun was only for show. If Manalargena means harm then harm shall follow.

THEY WOULD BE NINE. AS THE dray crawled over the hill it loomed long and blackshaped before the shallow sun, four prisoners hunched and jostling on the flatbed. On the verandah the company of native men passed a pipe among themselves and watched the dray clatter ever closer. Black Bill was among them, on his head a widebrimmed stockman's hat pushed in at the crown. He pulled his turn of the pipe and gave it along to Pigeon as the cart inched down the mud track onto Kingston farm. With the Vandemonian, John Batman and his manservant Gould, the Dharug men Crook and Pigeon newly come from the Parramatta, and now the lags on the flatbed, there would be nine all told for the roving party.

The dray drew up beside the farmhouse, a cockeyed hut hewn from the stuff of the scrub, and the shackled men on the bed looked it over as if it was pestilent. Walled with rounds of gumtree, roofed with bark shingles and bleeding smoke from a stone chimney, its harsh angles were entirely at odds with the fields and hills behind it. A pair of soldiers stepped off the bench seat and they trained the firearms upon the prisoners.

Come off there, you bastards, said the senior man, the overseer.

The fettered men, clanging like dulled cowbells, shuffled across the planks of the bed and clambered to the ground. With the stock of his firearm the overseer formed them into a line beside the cart.

Now pay attention to me, he said. Pay it good. Or I will carve my name into the first dogfucker who doesn't. He brandished his weapon before them, pushing aside his red coat, long since faded to a womanly pink, elbows mended with hide.

You hold that line and keep yer damn eyes on that mud there. You ponder on that mud cause damn my livin soul if you lot aint more useless than a hatful of it. I'm talkin to you, you old pisser. Blood look at me when I talk.

They are a mongrel lot.

Black Bill looked around. William Gould had come up from the back paddocks and was addressing Bill as he stood watching. In his castoffs Gould made barely a better sight than the prisoners but he drew his face into a frown at the state of the new men as his eyes swept over them. Rag and bone and bugger-all else, he said.

Seems that way, said Bill.

One of the four prisoners was a roundshouldered old cur and this fellow fixed the overseer with

malicious stare.

Eyes down, you dog, eyes down. Dont you bloody look at me! The overseer was signalling with two fingers for the prisoner to lower his gaze. Keep your damn eyes off me, he said.

The prisoner dropped his head but his disdain remained and the rest of the shabby lot said not a word as the junior private shifted along to unchain their basils and toss them ringing onto the flatbed. Now freed, the men rubbed their abraded ankles, waiting for whatever came next.

Then Gould called out, Here he comes.

They all turned as John Batman appeared. He stood in the shadow thrown by the house. In his hand was a dead lamb, its head hacked off. When he walked forward into the pale sunlight he was as blood as a surgeon and he held the carcass out before him. Its fleece was red and blood trailed over the mud behind him.

Bickle. I supposed they'd send you, he said, his breath steaming in the cold. He had a voice serrated by the overuse of his pipe and a fondness for rum taken straight. How was the roads?

The overseer wore a smile that was forced upon him. No trouble, Mr Batman. No trouble at all.

For your wife, said Batman.

Bickle took the tiny headless thing. She'll be most pleased she will.

Batman met him with a fierce eye. You got that money yet?

Now I told you about that, said Bickle and laughed. A short tight cough. It wasnt no fairly drawn hand.

Batman moved closer. So you're callin me a swindler?

I'm callin you a swindler. A chiseller. A bilker. You choose whichever suits you best. Pleased with himself, the overseer looked around at his mate and at the black men arranged upon Batman's verandah.

There was a little swell about Batman's throat where he swallowed the word he'd almost used. Remember where you are, he said.

All I know is you turned a knave when it was needed. And knaves dont come up too often.

Well it come up. Now you owe me.

I owe you? Christ. Let a man be, would you. That canny luck of yours will show next time we front up to the table. By God it will. You might just have your money then.

Batman nodded, a slow and measured rocking of the head, but he showed no satisfaction. The horse huffed and shied in her harness. Behind the farmhouse the gum trees lashed in the winds. Batman walked before the line of men who stood with their heads bowed, shivering in their rough hessian. You have been told no doubt what I mean to see through, he said. What that means for youse fellows is this: if you've no stomach for killin, say so now.

The four men looked about but each kept quiet.

Then you are with me, he said. Batman's shirt and coat sleeves were rolled back showing his forearms pasted with a slick of lamb's blood. He wiped his arms with a rag, returned it to his pocket and unfurled his sleeves. Staring at the men, he continued: Now I've as much regard for peace

anyone but I've been given a contract by the Governor and I intend to collect on it.

The men shifted nervously.

How many ayou had seen a black before today? He indicated with a nod of his head the two men the Parramatta where they leaned their long bodies against the uprights of his verandah. The new men seemed unsure of what he expected. He came around to where he might better catch their eyes or look down into their grubby weathered faces. You boy?

No sir.

No?

No sir, not a one.

Well take a look. Go on. They're tamed.

The boy raised his eyes, as did the rest, to study the three black men, and in turn they regarded the prisoners across that open space of rutted grass and mud which served as a turning circle for carts. The black men were alike in bearing and build, tall and well shaped for bush life, properly clothed but for their bare feet. Pigeon kept himself shaved and tended and made a fine figure in his calico jacket but his mate, John Crook, wore on his head a red wool cap marred with filth and holes. It was Crook who leaned forward and addressed the new men in his own language, his hand waving in anger.

Thinks it's white dont it, said the old cur. Dressed up like that.

A cold silence followed. Pigeon came down off the verandah and stepped forward. For a moment he put out his hand to the men as any gentleman might but withdrew it when they plainly ignored him. Maybe they did not know what to make of him, a free man in the employ of Batman, or perhaps they saw in him something of their own failings. Only the boy put out his hand for Pigeon.

Good evenin, said Pigeon.

They shook hands.

Here John Batman interrupted the niceties. He addressed the prisoners. These fellows are of different turn, he said, and as he motioned towards the black men the folds of his greatcoat flapped like canvas sails. They've had something of the wildness beaten out of them. Something, I say; not everything. Now the sort you shall encounter in the scrub hereabouts will not shake yer hand. My word. They are a people . . .

He looked along the row of faces all fixed upon him and the wind blew as cold as river water funnelled through the foothills below the white cotton crown of Ben Lomond, and it set his eyes glistening. Here was a man speaking in deep passion, fullhearted, enjoining them to rise up for a common cause. The lags watched him, trying to still their chattering teeth.

A people who havent the smallest inclination towards layin down for us.

From a pocket of his coat Batman produced a quart flask of Indian rum that ran thickly up the glass then resettled. He pulled the stopper as he repeated, Not the smallest, and threw back a swallow. The Governor is payin us to instil a lesson in the obtuse skulls of these dark skins. But I tell you this right now. It may be the blacks what do the instilling. It may be them affixing our bodies to the trees as you would the common criminal of old. I will offer no indemnity against that outcome. None whatsoever.

Shoals of cloud glowed blood red on the horizon and the sun cast Batman tall and intense. The wind crashed in the blue gums along the hills and squalled down the valley. But the four men by the dray studied the ground in silence. From another pocket Batman produced a cake of negro head. He approached the assigned men and placed it in the palm of a fellow who grinned through his black beard and fixed Batman with his one good eye.

You are a top sort, you are, he said to Batman. Look here, lads, we have some chew for ourselves. He divided the cake four even ways. They rubbed loose the fibres and dipped a wad into the folds of their cheeks.

As they chewed Batman spoke. There is among them a chief. A warrior. Some say witch. He is called Manalargena. If we dont kill this man we all need a floggin, I tell you. Mark him by his beard which he keeps dressed with ruddle. You must bring him down before all others.

The men spat strings of juice on the ground, nodded their heads and mopped their chins, their eyes always upon Batman.

...

Sergeant Bickle pointed at a line on the printed warrant. Make your mark here if you would, he said. It was a crumpled certificate he'd pulled from inside his coat and flattened out upon the bench of the horsecart. Batman read the thing over with narrowed eyes then carried the paper inside his house to sign his name to it. In that time Bickle put the new men to unloading from the dray sacks marked with flour, tea, sugar and tobacco. In the low sun their shadows grew long and spidered, a procession of fairytale horrors shifting over the turf and all the while he goaded them with threats of a skinning at the end of his whip.

Look here, Black Bill said to Batman as he returned with the warrant. They dont have shoes.

Batman studied the bare feet slopping through the mud as they worked to unload. He raised his hand, smoothed back his hair and then resettled the hat neatly on his crown. He looked around at the overseer.

Sergeant Bickle, where are their shoes?

Dont recall I saw no shoes on the requisition.

You what?

I dont recall I—

What use are the bastards without shoes?

I done what I was ordered. Address your request to the Police Magistrate and he'll dispatch em.

Batman shook his head. That no-account wants a ball sendin through his bloody brains.

Seems your crows dont need shoes. Bickle raised his gun at the Parramatta blacks and clicked his tongue. They glared at the soldier where he stood mocking them, their hands tight around the uprights and their jaws firmly set. A month ago the Dharug men had been walking the browned grasslands of New South Wales, but now their feet sank inch deep in the miserable damp of Van Diemen's Land.

They'd trod the August snow slurries and the mud and river marshes and felt the thorns of the pines through their soles and they would not be shod by anyone.

Christ look at the boots on that bastard, said Bickle as he lowered his firearm. Black Bill had on a pair of boots cut in the fashion of a horseman and shined up fresh. The stitching was waxed and whittled against the boots and the leather had been polished with a lump of glass, much in the manner of saddle skirting, to give it a high gloss.

He's stolen them from somebody, said Bickle.

John Batman looked him straight in the face. I tell you what. You get them off his feet and you can keep em.

The overseer worked a spit cud around his mouth while he took stock of Black Bill from hat to heels, his hostile eyes betraying his opinion of what he saw there.

You get them off his feet and I'll call it quits on that money. Call it square.

Bickle nodded slackly, spat on the dirt.

Go and show him some sport. He aint much.

What is he? Six foot?

Sixish. But he's as untrained as the dog in the street.

That's as may be.

A man of your history ought not to worry. I've seen you put down worse than him.

Bickle never took his eyes off the black man where he was stationed upon the verandah. Quits, you say?

My word on it.

Aye. Well then.

He removed his cap and shrugged off his regimental coat before he approached the farmhouse where the Vandemonian was waiting. Bickle's rotten boots squelched over the ground; he dropped his cap on the mud and with a small motion of the fingers called Bill down.

Black Bill was a big fellow. He dipped his head under the crossbeam as he stepped off the decking and his dark face shadowed beneath his hat brim. When he moved, the musculature beneath the gleam of his skin drew taut, the cords of his forearms like pulleys. He seemed ignorant or perhaps contemptuous of the sergeant's intent for he never removed his hat. He waited there before the farmhouse a picture of calm. The assignees had caught on to the happenings Batman had stirred up and they dropped their loads, gathering near the dray to better see what might follow.

The overseer called out. Come ere now, he said, and givem up. He raised his naked fists like some village pugilist calling men to take the ring for a shilling.

Bill maintained his ground, raising one open hand. Watch yourself, was all he said.

But the overseer closed that distance by skipping his feet to hold his stance correct. He lashed out with a right. Bill was up to the task. He moved his head and shuffled back and when the overseer came again faster he struck out with his fist. The strike sat the soldier on his hindquarters. He was up smartly but Bill was over him and snapped him straight to the face hard. The overseer staggered under

the blow. He stepped back and drew a hand across his face. Blood messing the front of his filthy undershirt. Blood in his teeth like a fiend on the kill.

You're done for fucker, he said. From inside some disguised pocket of his coat he retrieved a little highland dirk and circled Bill with the blade outheld, bloody strings swinging from his chin. You miserable nigger, he said.

The overseer feinted with the dirk and Bill pulled away. As he lunged again, Bill swayed back sinuously but the blade opened a gash in his shirt. He removed his hat and tossed it aside and his eyes were dark as coals. He assessed the overseer where he held position, dirk gripped for another pass. Warm blood spilled down the inside of his shirt. He said nothing. Instead he came forward with renewed precision, with a cold certainty about his every movement.

The overseer watched him. Then he lunged, the blade passing near Bill's chest and slicing back again but the Vandemonian timed his swing and caught the overseer across the chin with a punch that sent his head around brutally. He stumbled but held his feet. Already the swelling around his eye was growing blue and bulbous and he turned his head as if he was seeing his surroundings for the first time. Bill allowed him a moment to find what he could in the way of sense. The overseer looked around at the gathered men but no one spoke for a calloff. He spat out more blood and stepped closer.

This time he made no feints but moved straight into attack. Bill grappled his arms and they fell each clutching the other, the knife blade flashing. The Vandemonian caught a handful of hair and yanked back the overseer's head, ramming his forehead into the soldier's face. Bickle was put out cold in that instant and Bill rolled off him. He stood up, retrieved his hat and checked the cut on his ribs. From where he lay the overseer raised one hand and let it fall again onto the mud and he moaned and gagged.

Black Bill came alongside him and John Batman also and together they raised him upright, their loosened eyes rolling about in their skull holes as he tottered to his feet. His lips and nose like broken fruit beneath his overgrowth of russet hair.

That's a goodun, Bill said to the overseer.

He raised his head. A goodun? he said.

Bill dipped his head towards the dirk.

Aye, said Bickle. She cuts fair. Good Scottish steel that. Bickle's bleeding mouth stumbled over his words. You cut?

Not much, said Bill. He touched his chest.

Those men who'd gathered in audience whispered between themselves and stared at the black man until John Batman waved them away.

He's flogged you like a rented mare.

The overseer took up his knife where it lay on the grass and cleaned the blade on his forearm. He spoke to Batman without looking up. He made his case. I see now I was in error.

Seems you still owe me though, dont it.

You bloody scoundrel. You'll have yer money.

With that Bickle was gone back to the dray, coat in hand and rank with blood, and his juniors climbed aboard also and they departed.

The razor wind plying through the fields caused Bill to pinch up his eyes. In the far distance the sheep turned as if blown so by the winds and Bill sat a spell on the verandah watching the last of the sun. Every spring this wind bowled down from the hills, curling the trees over and setting the clouds skating out of the east. The clansfolk followed that salted breeze from the coast into the western hills where the snow dried before it and they harried the kangaroo herds of the lowland plains with their spears, their dogs. He held his cut chest and gazed up at the mountain. Their kind would soon have more than the wind for company.

Batman appeared, cocked one boot up on the decking, leaned on his knee. Well, he pulled a blade. As you said he would.

Bill looked up at him. He knows no better.

Sharp little bastard it was too.

In the quiet that followed they watched the dray haul away up the track with the wheel rim showering gobs of mud and the horse straining at the yoke.

mina carney he mengana knife, he said to Batman.

narapa, said Batman. mina tunapri.

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