

## *Naninja and Janey*

Two old gins were shambling across the darkening plains towards the dry creek bed. They moved slowly against a smoulder of sunset in the sky.

Mary Moyle knew who they were. Old Naninja, the blind one, and Janey who was her shadow, a withered, wizened little old woman with a stump for one arm. She had been bitten by a snake when she was a child, Jim said, and a well-meaning prospector had chopped off her hand.

That was in the early days of the diggings on Skull Creek. The creek had got its name from the number of skulls found in it after an affray between the Aborigines and first prospectors.

Coming down from a dog-toothed range to the east, the creek made a sandy swale through the bare red earth stretching into sandhills, up north. Gold found along its course had been mostly alluvial. It was not until several years after the first rush that an old timer who had stuck to his show, struck a rich reef and new alluvial ground. There was another rush, and in no time the workings of three or four mines sprang up on new and old claims.

Jim Moyle and his brother-in-law were doing well on theirs, when Mary packed her three children and belongings into the mailman's truck at Kakarra, and went out to live with Jim in his tent and the brushwood shade he had made for her.

At first she had been scared of the almost naked blacks who came out of the ranges with their long spears and *woomeras*, and hung round the camp when her husband was at work in the mine. But they were a hunting tribe, Jim said, no longer

fierce and hostile. Mary had lost her fear of them as they stood around, laughing and exclaiming to themselves, as she bathed the baby or fed him from a bottle with a teat. They had brought their women and children to see her, and she had learnt to laugh and talk good-humoredly to them; or stamp her feet and chase them away when she had had enough of them.

Before long there were two or three hundred men in the township which grew round the mines. Several of the men had built huts and brought up their wives and families. A well was sunk on the site of a native water-hole. And during the long dry summers, the natives had become dependent on the township for food and water. Nobody minded while there was alluvial about and payable gold in the mines. The natives, men and women, did odd jobs for their tucker; but after three of the mines closed down, it was difficult for folk remaining in the almost deserted township to eke out their own meagre supplies, much less feed a horde of starving natives.

Mary could not resist giving the gins and children a few scraps of meat and bread. Then the two old women had come along, had lifted their dirty rags of skirts to show her scrawny shanks and empty bellies, their hungry eyes pleading with her, until angry and desperate, Mary felt that she would go short herself rather than send them away with nothing to eat. Naninja and Janey, they were.

When the rains came, and there was more water and game about, the natives could feed themselves. But Naninja and Janey still paid Mary a weekly visit. She was glad to see them one day when the children were sick and she was feeling poorly herself; she let them do the washing. Janey was beside herself with excitement, eager to prove that she could do as much work with one arm as a young gin with two; she scrubbed and belted away at the men's dirty clothes so energetically that Mary handed them over to her every week. The two bob she gave Janey with some meat and bread, a little tea and sugar, sent the two old women off, gurgling with happiness.

Mary became quite fond of them, and amused by their devo-

tion to each other. Naninja, although she sat singing to herself by the wood heap, seemed to boss any job Janey was doing; she would call to her and jabber away instructions, while Janey chattered and laughed, telling her all about the fine lather of soap suds she had made, and just what every garment looked like as she hung it on the line.

It was always Janey who wheedled old clothes, sometimes a bit of Jim's tobacco, out of Mary, and Naninja who took possession of them — although Mary had no doubt that they would share their loot as is the Aboriginal custom.

After the summer began again, with dry weather, duststorms and blistering heat, the natives came down from the ranges. They camped by the dry creek, and men, women and children swarmed through the township. When the few miners left could no longer feed them, they went scavenging in the backyards and round the rubbish heaps. The dingoes, too, were hungry. They prowled round the camps at night, their howling, mournful and weird, as they slunk away over the plains before dawn.

Jim had written to the Department of Native Affairs drawing attention to the plight of the natives on Skull Creek, and had urged that rations be sent up immediately for them.

Instead of Naninja and Janey, a sullen young gin with a baby in her arms had come and offered to do the washing for Mary. She hung her head, pretending not to understand, when Mary asked why Naninja and Janey had not come. The two old women were not dead, Mary knew. She had seen them trailing about the town with the rest of the tribe, Naninja very feeble, and Janey helping her along.

It was strange now for them to be going out into the darkness towards the sandhills, away from the camp fires beside the creek, and any hope of getting food or water.

Mary watched them, vaguely disturbed.

"Naninja! Janey!" she called.

Her voice flew out over the dark plain. The old women

heard it. They stood still, their figures huddled against the waning glow of the sky. But they went on.

"Naninja and Janey, where have they gone?" Mary asked the young gin with the baby when she came next day.

"Walkabout, maybe," the girl replied sulkily.

"Walkabout, rubbish!" Mary exclaimed. "I saw them, last night, going across the plains. No water, no bungarra out there."

"Naninja sick feller — close-up finish'm," the girl muttered, her face heavy and sombre.

"Do you mean to say she's gone out there to die, and Janey's gone with her?" Mary asked angrily.

The girl's eyes flared to anger, too, but it died down as she turned away. She could not explain to a white woman what had happened about Naninja and Janey.

"They're old women. There's not enough tucker in the camp to feed the men and fat swobs like yourself, I suppose," Mary said, seething with indignation. "So you've chased them out of the camp — will let them die of thirst and starvation."

"Chase'm, nothing," the girl said.

Mary understood that the two old women had gone of their own accord, rather than distraint any more on the tribe's scanty food supply. She was appalled at the idea of their wandering out there where the sandy swale made by the creek ran into red earth clamped under black ironstone pebbles, with sandhills further on, wave on wave of them under the pale blue sky, along a limitless horizon. Horror-stricken by the thought of the two old gins going deliberately like that to die of thirst and starvation, tortured by ants and flies, to save a little food for the tribe.

But for the drought and food shortages, Naninja would not have left the camp until she felt her end was near, Mary knew. Then she would not have gone far away. She would have lain down under one of the trees scattered along the creek bank, near the camp, so that the women could wail over her at dawn, and the men gather round to make a shallow grave for her

bones, singing and shouting to scare away the evil spirits which would be hovering near to seize her when she left her old body seeking the camp fires of her people among the stars.

"It's the custom. You can't interfere with tribal laws," Jim said, when Mary told him what Ninda, the young gin, had said.

"Maybe it's the custom when they're starving for an old woman like Naninja to clear out because she's blind and useless," Mary replied heatedly. "But don't forget Janey's gone with her, and she's not so old yet as to be useless."

"No."

"I feel we're to blame." Mary could not rid herself of a sense of guilt and shame for what Naninja and Janey had done. "The prospectors and white people have broken up the natives' way of life, round here. They managed to live well enough until we took their wells and scared off the wild animals. Now, they're starving, have to rely on what we can give them to eat. And we haven't even been able to get government rations for them."

Jim could not deny the truth of what she said.

"The mail truck's due today," Mary went on. "I'm going to send a note to the police station at Kakarra, and say we've got to have rations for the natives. I'm going to tell Sergeant Gilligan, too, that he must send a search party out after Naninja and Janey. There's a chance that Janey, at least, may be still alive. I just can't endure the thought of her doing a perish, out there, in the sandhills."

"I'd go myself," Jim growled. "But a man'd need a couple or horses, or camels, to track those old girls where they've gone."

The mail man rattled along in his truck toward mid-day. He brought stores, as well as letters, month-old newspapers, and the news of the countryside, but no rations for the natives. Mrs Moyle's concern about the two old gins he treated rather as a joke; but he agreed to give her letter to the police sergeant in Kakarra on his return.

It was three days later that Sergeant Gilligan and a black tracker rode into Skull Creek on their camels. They had a

couple of pack camels and were well provided with food and water, but none too pleased about turning out on this wild goose chase after a couple of old gins.

After Sergeant Gilligan had gone, Mary went about her work round the camp, tidying up, cooking for the men, playing with the children as usual, but her mind was obsessed by the thought of those old women out there in the arid waterless country, under the blaze of a sun that would press closer and closer down on them. Patiently, stoically, she knew, they would be waiting for it to draw the last breath from their bodies. Would Gilligan be in time to save them?

Two or three times each day, Mary searched the horizon where a mirage quivered against frail blue of the sky, and black ironstone gravel on the red earth threw a blinding glare in her eyes. She hoped for some sign of Sergeant Gilligan returning — with Janey at least. But as the days passed, days of heat that seared like the blast from a furnace, she could no longer hope. Depressed and miserable, she brooded over what had happened to the two old women. It was outrageous, surely, that they should have to die because gold had been found in their country?

At sunset, six days after Mary had seen Naninja and Janey shambling away over the darkening plains, Sergeant Gilligan pulled into the Creek again with his tracker and camels. They had been out three days. His camel slumped to the ground and Sergeant Gilligan dismounted, looking more cheerful than when he started on his journey.

As Mary went out to meet him, he was obviously pleased to have reached the rough and ready comfort of a mining camp, after his trek through the sun-blasted country further back. He had the air of a man satisfied to have done his duty, rather creditably.

"Oh, well, missus," he said jocosely, "we found your old gins. But the dingoes had got there first."

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