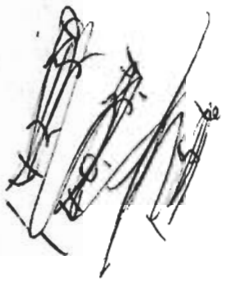

THE BATTLERS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

FOVEAUX

"I urgently recommend it to all who are interested in human nature. Fascinating . . . It is full of real people, of profound sense, and of the kindest and wisest fun. Its vignettes of pub and procession and above all of domestic interiors, can never, in their own line, have been surpassed. They are unique. Dozens of characters stand out as individuals. One feels that one has lived and walked in Foveaux. This book demands attention. I hope it will receive that attention in full measure"—*Frank Swinnerton* (*Observer*)

"A wholly exceptional piece of work: a long and intimate and moving and very lively panorama. Every page of her book is a pleasure to read. Unforgettable. Deserves to be ranked very high indeed"—*Ralph Straus* (*Sunday Times*)

"Full of humanity and humour, of a real and sympathetic understanding of ordinary people. Miss Tennant has plenty of stuff in her to make a dozen novels"—*Lettice Cooper* (*Yorkshire Post*)

"The canvas is crowded with characters and incidents, each authentic and interesting"—*Times Literary Supplement*

"Goodness! What a gift of description she has. All of them are terrifyingly lifelike"—*Roy Fenton* (*Tribune*)

"One of those long novels rich in character and incident which repay a second reading to savour fully. A grand book to salvage on a desert island"—*John o' London*

"Some of the humorous pictures in this book are superior to anything written since Dickens"—*Frank Swinnerton* (*broadcasting*)

THE BATTLERS

by

KYLIE TENNANT

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
1941

Every character in this book, *The Battlers*, is entirely fictitious, and no reference whatever is intended to any living person.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY RICHARD CLAY AND COMPANY, LTD. (T.U.),
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

To the "Battlers"

I wonder where they are now?
They will never read this, never know it is written.
Somewhere a dirty crew of vagabonds,
Blasphemous, generous, cunning and friendly,
Travels the track; and wherever it takes them,
Part of me follows.

CHAPTER I

IF SNOW HAD TAKEN the road through Belburra, instead of the track through Currawong, his whole life would have run a different course. He had pulled in his horse at the fork of the road, and for a minute he sat thinking. True, the road to Belburra was the shorter way home, and he had been away nine months. But Snow was not any too eager to reach home. His return was never the scene of wild enthusiasm. One of his sons might stroll inside and announce: "Hey, Mum, Dad's here." And his wife would remark grimly: "Hello! so you're back, are you?" and Snow would say: "Yeah, I'm back."

He had come over the black-soil plain; the plain that stretches from Narrabri to Moree in a loneliness where the mirages smoke and the great, brown kangaroos leap away from the road, where the enfiladed telegraph-poles dwindle to a pinpoint and disappear over the rim of the earth, where the ground is baked like a tile in summer and in winter forms a black bog that the drovers dread. Snow had crawled slowly across it in the lumbering van he had got in exchange for his sulky. It was slow, but, as Snow said to himself, he was a man who "liked a bit of comfort". He was of that singular breed who travel alone for preference; and as he reined Don in at the fork of the road, there was no mate to influence his judgement which way he should go.

There was the wind, of course—the vicious westerly that makes winter a hell, a westerly biting with all the malice of the thousands of miles of barbed wire over which it had blown. Whichever way he turned, that wind met him face-on. The track through Currawong was more sheltered than that through Belburra.

Then also Don, the horse, was tired; even Bluey, the cattle-dog, was tired, panting and dusty at the end of his chain under the van. Five miles this side of Currawong, Snow knew of a camp where there was good feed and water for the horse. But more important than grass or water, it offered that privacy and retirement so essential to anyone who meditates an onslaught on someone else's sheep. Snow was a big man, six feet one, and every inch of him meat-hungry. To his mind, there had always been something contemptible about buying mutton when it was walking about in the paddocks all around him. Visions of roast

mutton floated before his eyes. He clicked his tongue to Don and turned him along the left-hand track to Currawong. All his life, with that decision, veered into a different course.

When Snow made camp late that afternoon, it was in a hollow between two ridges where a high steel windmill whirled above the tank provided for travelling stock, clanking the pump-rod up and down with a lonely clatter, like a ghost rattling its chains. All along the track there had been a scarcity of feed because, although it was the middle of June, not enough rain had fallen to break the drought. But here was a clearing green with tender grass and, in the grass, patches of reedy, red garden flower and a few overturned stones to tell of a forgotten homestead. Beside the stones two great coral trees lifted naked grey branches that showed, instead of leaves, clusters of flowers, curved blades of scarlet around the stamens, as though a flock of fiery-coloured birds were tilting their tail-feathers in council.

At a decent distance from the civilised trees, all about the open space, a grey-green wall of gums reared up, roaring with the ridges behind under an intermittent surf of wind. Now the wind was thunderous as city traffic; then there was only a faint hissing as the topmost leaves of the gums boiled over in silver spray, flashing like a mackerel shoal that ruffles a dark sea. A pause, and then once more the boughs would leap and whine as though some small animal were caught in their crotch, straining and lashing until the very trunks groaned again.

Snow cared little for the wind, as it hushed his fire sideways like a mother soothing a rowdy child in its cot. All day the wind might fluster the road dust and level the tussocks; but at sundown there would be a breathless, tranquil silence, as the world turned over on its side for the night, with the sky like a translucent bubble of pale green glass, so fragile you would think that, at the tap of a finger-nail, it would ring and shiver the first stars down in trails of fire like water-drops on a window-pane.

Snow, busy making camp, congratulated himself that there were no other travellers on the reserve. It was a cold night, with a frosting of stars, and Snow waited for the wind to come up again before he began his walk towards the homestead a mile back where he had marked a paddock of promising wethers. Noiselessly he climbed over the barbed-wire fence and made his way across a stubble-field smelling like new bread. Behind the field was the paddock, darkly blotted with trees.

As he listened for the faint bleating that betrayed the presence of the flock, and moved, with a low word to Bluey, towards that uneasy sound, Snow's big, loose, slouching body knitted into the swift decision of the born hunter. Even his face altered. Usually

Snow's face had no notable handsomeness, resembling closely the countenance of a particularly sleepy shark. His little, light-coloured eyes, each side of a huge, jutting nose, were half shut, just as his mouth—he breathed through it—was half open to a gape of big, yellow teeth above an almost imperceptible chin. His forehead did not count in the assembly of features, as it was either hidden by an old felt hat or by a growth of straw-coloured hair which had earned him the usual bush name for fair-haired men: "Snow". His words were few and his speech slow. If he became excited, he stuttered. He seldom spoke a sentence without three "bloodys" in it, but he never knew he was swearing. It was as natural as his stutter.

In sheep-stealing, however, he took the quiet pleasure of an artist exercising his skill. Returning with a plump yearling over his shoulders, he had something of the benevolent aspect of a good shepherd in a church window. He was at peace with all the world. As he cut his find's throat and flung the entrails to Bluey, he was thinking that life "on the track" was not so bad, with good places to camp and "cockies' sheep to knock over". He reflected wistfully that in a week or so these good things would be put away from him, and the vacant space filled by his wife's nagging, until restlessness seized him and he started out on the track again. He had posted home from Narrabri no less than ten dirty pound notes, and the thought of the surprise his wife would get made him more than ever feel that life was good.

He hung the carcase in a tree removed far enough from the clearing to escape the notice of any inquisitive visitors. Snow had been "in for meat" several times, and another gaol term was something he did not welcome. It was different in Queensland, where a man could always take a sheep for food as long as he left the skin hanging on the fence.

They had reached the edge of the clearing when Bluey stiffened with a low, warning growl. Instantly Snow stopped in his tracks, peering towards the camp. There was someone there. Snow's great fist tightened round his butcher's knife. Someone was at his tucker-box, noisily and unhandily rummaging in it. A virtuous indignation seized him. Some thieving (*adjective*) robber was "ratting" his tucker-box! He leant down and gripped the dog's collar as he trod cat-footed into the fire-light and contemplated the dim shape.

"What the Hell you think you're doing?" he asked angrily.

A long-drawn shriek as the figure straightened up gave him nearly as great a fright as he had given the thief.

"Cripes! it's a woman!" he said out loud, half in relief.

The object huddled in terror by the tucker-box, babbling at

him, did not look like a woman. It looked like something the darkness had spewed forth in disgust. Its hair hung in bedraggled wisps through which the eyes stared bulging with horror. A toothless mouth gaped at him as the creature panted and stammered. A shapeless mass of ragged clothing covered a body so insignificant that it looked like that of a child.

"Oh, mister, don't, don't . . . hit me. I was that hungry. And I been walkin' and walkin' . . ." the thing gasped, ". . . . in the dark."

"Here," Snow said, quietening the snarling Bluey, "take it easy."

He removed from the fire a blackened billy, from which he poured a no less blackened brew of tea.

"Drink some of this."

His captive gulped it down. "He chucked me out," she mumbled. "Jus' left me by the side of the road hundreds of miles from nowhere an' says: 'Get to Hell out of this, you whore.' And I ain't. Nobody ain't got any right to call me that. I was married to 'im. I was. And I come away cos he says it's a great life on the track, an' . . ." She broke off. "I ain't had nothin' to eat since yestiday morning. . . . An' it was dark. . . ."

"You stay there," Snow admonished. "I won't be long." The meat might be a bit tough, as it was so fresh, but if the hobgoblin hadn't had anything to eat for two days, she wouldn't be fussy.

He had just cut off a leg and was turning back, when another scream brought him back the rest of the way at a run.

"He bit me!" the woman screamed furiously. "You damned blasted mongrel of a dog!"

At Snow's voice Bluey laid down his head on his paws, his yellow eyes still jealously turned on the interloper. Viewing the teeth-marks on the leg held out for his inspection, Snow assured himself that the stranger was more frightened than hurt.

"It's just a nip," he told her. "Why'd you try to sneak away?"

The woman ignored the question. "I 'ates damn dogs," she said sullenly.

She was so small—merely a bag of bones; and as she shiveringly accepted the old coat Snow passed her, he asked curiously: "How old ud you be?"

"Nineteen."

"You look more." She looked about sixty. "What's your name?"

"Dancy. And me married name's Smif."

"Well, listen 'ere, Dancy Smith, or whoever you are. I'm a married man, and I'm making 'ome to me wife, so it ain't no use

you campin' with me, see? But I wouldn't turn a dog away if it was hungry."

The girl Dancy snarled at him. "Oo wants to camp wiv you? I 'ates men—'ates the old bloomin' lot of 'em. Wot do they ever do but sit back and watch women work? I ain't never seen a man yet what was any good. The whole schemin', lyin', crawlin' lot of 'em. I 'ates 'em. And women too," she added liberally. "Camp wiv you? Oo wants to camp wiv you?"

Snow was frying the mutton and she fell silent, watching it ravenously. Then she snivelled a little. "I'm that scared of the dark. Something went 'Yow!' " She imitated the sound.

"That'd be a 'possum."

"I fought it was a ghost." She shuddered. "I got thinking of the time Dad come 'ome. Walked out of the asylum 'e did, wiv a coat over his asylum cloves. He come 'ome to the residential where Mum was stayin' wiv me and the other kids. I was twelve. He come home on the Friday, and Saturday afternoon, when we was at the pi'tures, he cut her throat, and then he cut his own throat afterwards. The landlady made me go in wiv a mop and a bucket and clean up the floor. Bled to death he had, all over it. And me wringin' out the mop wiv me own farver's blood on it. The landlady said they was *my* parents and I had to do it."

With Snow's repugnance there mingled a tiny strain of pity. He said nothing, but turned the meat on the fire.

"Then me married sister took us. She 'ated the sight of me. Thought the day wasn't lucky if she didn't find somefing to frash me for. I'll put you, she says, where they'll make you sorry you was born. And she told all the lies in court!" Dancy broke off. "Ain't that meat done yet?"

"Give it a chance. What happened then?"

"I went to Parramatta. I was in an' out up to the time I was eighteen. The other girls taught me plenty. A edjucation I 'ad."

Snow interestedly contemplated this visitation from another world, as it rambled on in a smattering of filthy words and bitterness, discoursing of alley and slum and reformatory.

"You ain't had much of a fair go," he said slowly at last. "You's what you might call a Stray."

The creature spat. "It's men," she said. "Everywhere you go they're runnin' things. Tryin' to down you. An' women too. All of 'em rotten."

Snow took the mutton from the frying-pan and gave it to her. She ate wolfishly, only interrupting the meal to remark that "the dog looked at her sumfin' fierce"; so that Snow ordered Bluey away. The man could feel the protuberant eyes, with their red

rims and pale lashes, inspecting him calculatingly. She looked, he thought, like a trapped, fierce, little animal.

"Where's your teeth?" he asked.

"I broke 'em."

"You'd look a lot better with 'em than without."

"Well, who the Hell d'you think's got the money to go round buyin' sets of teef?"

This closed the conversation.

Snow pondered. "I could go back through Belburra," he said aloud, "and leave you with Father Paul."

"One of them parsons?"

"'E's a priest."

"Ooh! Not one of them. I 'ates them." Something about Snow's ugly, unshaven countenance seemed to have raised her spirits. "'Ow'd you get here? You working?"

Snow gave the hard, dry croak that served him for a laugh. "Work, eh?" he said. "It's funny about work." This novel situation had loosened his tongue. "I got a sickener of it when I was a kid. My father was one of them half-starved wheat-cockies out from Temora. Graft! He grafted like a team of bullocks, and when I wasn't knee-high to a grasshopper he had me out ploughing and clearing and fencing." He fell silent contemplating that never-ending work. "It was: 'Theodore, go harness them horses,' or 'Theodore, haul the timber,' and me managing great big Clydesdales with tempers just like his (an' his temper was something fierce). Why, I didn't come up as high as the horses' belly! Geeze! I had enough of work to last me a lifetime when I was a kid. Then I married, and a married man, when he can get work, he's got to take it. It's different when you're single. I been workin' on and off ever since."

These were more words than he had spoken for weeks, and he paused, surprised at himself. Then he rose yawning. "Well, I'll give you a lift to Currawong to-morrow, and you can make your way back to Sydney from there."

He was sorting his blankets into two heaps. "There's yours. And if you try to sneak away, the dog'll get you. Understand?"

He rolled himself a last cigarette before turning in, and then tossed the tobacco and papers across to his guest. She caught them eagerly. Then, looking up from licking the cigarette into shape, she remarked:

"You think you'll be well rid of me, don't you?"

There was something in her tone that aroused in Snow a faint feeling of alarm. Rolling up in his blankets, he comforted himself with the thought that no creature as little and skinny as that girl could worry him. He travelled alone.

"G'night, Stray," he said austerely, tilting his hat over his eyes. He did not trouble to remove his boots. He might need to get up in the night to put wood on the fire.

After the camp had sunk into a silence punctuated by the heavy bass snore of Snow and the treble snore of the intruder, Bluey lay with one eye cocked suspiciously at the bundle of bedding that represented, in his canine view, a new and hateful complication to life. If Snow could not see trouble ahead, Bluey could.

CHAPTER II

TOWARDS MORNING A COLD, drizzling rain began to fall. Snow was not at all disturbed. He would have pulled his hat farther over his eyes and slept on, had it not been for the restless stirrings and mumblings of his guest.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"It's raining."

"Well, if you don't like it, hop up in the van. Get back there, Bluey." He aimed a rock at his faithful hound, who had approached with the intention of guarding the van from all marauders. Bluey fled with a yelp, and Snow relapsed peacefully into his dreams again.

The rain was coming down in earnest when he awoke, but there was still a red ember glowing under the big log he had dragged across the fire. It had been his intention to stay quietly in camp all day and eat mutton; but the rain, falling with the heavy deliberation of an after-dinner speech, reminded him that there was a deserted church a few miles along the road. One of his reasons for coming through Currawong had been to remove that church door and fashion from it an upper decking for his waggon. Snow was nothing if not a handy man.

He decided to move on to the church, camp there and eat mutton until the rain stopped, remove the door for his waggon decking and then jog pleasantly on. After all, there was no hurry, and he did not like the idea of turning the Stray, as he privately termed her, away in the rain. Courtesy to women had once been thrashed into him with a leather strap, and some of the scars still remained.

The Stray slid out of the van just as he came to this decision. She rubbed her fists into her eyes, swore, and lounged over to inspect the chops Snow was preparing for breakfast.

"You cud do with more fat," she observed.