BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

FOVEAUX

"I urge you to read 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. It is a striking portrait of a whole generation of people, each 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 Struth (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."—Linton 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."—Ray Frame (Tribune)

"One of the 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 a' 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
I wonder where they are now?  
They will never read this, never know it is written.  
Somewhere a dirty crew of vagabonds,  
Blasphemous, gossipy, cunning and friendly,  
Travels the track; and wherever it takes them,  
Part of me follows.
CHAPTER 1

If Snow had taken the road through Belbanna, 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 Belbanna was the shorter way home, and he had been away six 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, Don't be there." And his wife would remark grumpily: "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 longbow 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 joined 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. Whenever he turned, that wind met him face-on. The track through Currawong was more sheltered than that through Belbanna.

Then also Don, the horse, was tired; even Blotsy, 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 mediates an outburst 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. Visons of roast
mutton floated before his eyes. He clicked his tongue to Dan 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 task provided for travelling stock, clanking the pump-red up and down with a lovely 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 redly, red garden flower and a few overturned stones to tell of a forgotten homestead. Beside the stones two great coral trees lifted raked 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 distant distance from the cultivated trees, all about the open space, a grey-green wall of gums rounded up, roosting with the ridges below 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 shod that ruffles a dark sea. A pause, and then once more the bushes would leap and whizz as though some small animal were caught in their crochets, 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 lift 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 fretting 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 sprinkled like new bread. Behind the field was the paddock, darkly blotched with trees.

As he listened for the faint breathing 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 swill decision of the born hanger. 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 stammered. He seldom spoke a sentence without three "bloody" in it, but he never knew he was swearing. It was as natural as his stutter.

In sheep-scalping, however, he took the quiet pleasure of an artist exercising his skill. Returning with a plump yarning 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 "cookin' 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 Narrabal 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.

Yet he hung the carcass 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 good 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 at his tucker-box, noisily and unhandsomely rummaging in it. A virtuous indignation seized him. Some shivering (affrighted) rook was "rattin" his tucker-box! He leant down and gripped the dog's collar as he rode cut-fooled into the fire-light and contemplated the dim shape.

"What the Hell you think you're doin'"? 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.

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

The object huddled in terror by the tucker-box, babbling at A 9

THE BATTLE
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 belting with horror. A toothless mouth gaped at him as the creature painted and stammered. A shapeless mass of ragged clothing covered a body so insignificant that it looked like that of a chad. 

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

"Here," Snow said, quietening the snarling Bluwy, "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 checked me out," she mumbled, "'Jes' 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 yesterday 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 halfgoblin 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 blazed mongrel of a dog!"

At Snow's voice Bluwy 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 straggler 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 you be?"

"Nineteen."

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

"Dancy. And me married mean's Smitt."

"Well, listen 'ee, 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', 'jiin', cawlin' out of 'em. I 'ates 'em. And women too," she added literally. "Campa wiv you? Oo wants to camp wiv you?"

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

"That'd be a 'joumum'."

"I 'ought it was a ghost," she shuddered. "I 'ought of the time Dad come 'one. Walked out of the asylum 'e did, wiv a coat over his asylum clothes. 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 pictures, he cut her throat, and then he cut his own throat afterwards. The halfgoblin 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 wrigglin' out the mop wiv me own Ever's blood on it. The halfgoblin 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 something to 'faith 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! Rancy 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 education I 'ad."

Snow hesitatedly contemplated this visitation from another world, as it rambled on in a mastication of filthy words and bitterness, discounting 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 ruinin' 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 wolfully, only interrupting the meal to remark that "the dog looked at her sumfin' fierce"; so that Snow ordered Bluwy away. The man could feel the protruberent eyes, with their red
THE BATTLES

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'll look a lot better with 'em than without."

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

This closed the conversation.

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

"One of them parsons?"

"It's a priest."

"Oh! Not one of them. I 'ate 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 seemed 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. Great! He grazed 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 aileen contemplatin' that never-endin' work. "It was: Theodore, go harness them horses,' or 'Theodore, haul the timbers,' and me managing great big Clydesdales with tempers just like his (an' his temper was somethin' fierce). Why, I didn't come up as high as the horses' belly! Greater! 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 Corrawong 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 voice 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.

"Knight, Stray," he said sulkily, lifting 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 tender 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 MORNIN' A COLD, DRIZZLING RAIN BEGAN TO FALL. Snow was not at all disturbed. He would have pulled his last 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 bound, who had approached with the intention of guarding the van from all marauders. Bluey fled with a yelp, and Snow relaxed 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 delibration 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 Corrawong had been to remove that church and fashion from it an upper decker 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 deckin' 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 raised her face into her eyes, swore, and lounged over to inspect the chocks Snow was preparing for breakfast.

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