

THE MIRAGE

by
FREDERICK
BERT VICKERS

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

Briefly,

ABOUT THE BOOK

Impressive and powerful in its telling, and depicted against the background of frontier life in Australia, *THE MIRAGE* is a first novel by a new author, F. B. Vickers.

It is the story of Freddie Adams, Australian half-caste – a man without a world, because he cannot take part in the tribal life that is lived by the aborigines, while prejudice bars him from becoming part of the society which the white man inhabits. Freddie Adams is a character you may not yet have met in any book, the tale of the Australian half-caste being more or less new in the domain of novel writing... but he is someone whom you will remember. And the drama of prejudice, discrimination and hate, that becomes his fate, the destruction of this man, who indeed had his share of good to contribute to the world, makes *THE MIRAGE* another fine title in the Seven Seas Series.

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works by Authors in the English Language



F. B. VICKERS · THE MIRAGE

THE MIRAGE

BY

F. B. VICKERS

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

are published by

SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN

Berlin W 8 • Glinkastrasse 13-15

Published as a Seven Seas Book, 1958

Printed by (52) Nationales Druckhaus VOB National. Berlin

License Number 305/11/58

PART ONE

WANNA KABBI

Chapter One

THERE WAS a strange silence in the aboriginal camp that sprawled across the dry, sandy bed of the Pindan River. It was an anxious silence, the sort of quiet that a hundred and fifty normally happy and talkative people make when they are uneasy in their minds. It was as if a host of chattering monkeys in a forest had suddenly been struck dumb with fear.

The silence in the camp was so deep that it became a sound—a sound that travelled up the river and into Running Water homestead. Hugh Gordon, the manager of Running Water, his wife, and Amelia Curlewis, who was tutor to their eight-year-old son, Brian, listened to it.

"The niggers are quiet to-night," Gordon said.

"It's a welcome change," his wife replied.

Fred Adams, the overseer of the sheep station, listened to that silence as he lay on his bunk in the room at the end of the store. It's about time those devils had a spell from yackhying, he thought.

And the natives themselves listened to that silence—some as if it were a sign from a God in whom they believed; and others with mounting dread.

The camp was a shambles of mia-mias, low walls of boughs, high enough and long enough to shelter a sitting

or a sleeping man from the winds that blew down the river from the inland plains. But all the mia-mias were deserted now. Only one fire burned in the camp where there had been fifty blazing. And that was the fire of Nulla - the old man of the Yamagee tribe.

Nulla's fire and mia-mia were near a snout of grey rock that slid down out of the bank to bury its nose in the sand. Where the rock lost itself in the sand, a spring of crystal clear water oozed out and went trickling through smooth stones into Wanna Kabbi pool. Nulla was the guardian of the spring and the pool, and the Keeper of the Law of the tribe.

Nulla was thin and wizened, doddering with the age of age. His naked body seemed to be perishing like leather thrown out to weather. But Nulla was all powerful, to-night - terribly powerful. He was dressed for a ceremony. His hair was caked with mud taken from the pool. His forehead and arms were tightly bound round with strands of red wool. And the warrior scars on his chest and back, that stood out as if rope had been sewn beneath the skin, were made more prominent by being underlined with white chalk. Two other old men who, like Nulla, wore only a loin cloth, sat one on each side of him. Behind them, in a half circle, sat all the other men of the tribe. There were about fifty of them. They were the men who worked among the sheep that grazed on the million-odd acres of spinifex grass that made up Running Water Station. They wore white men's clothes during the day, but at night in their camp they threw them off and wore only loin cloths. They sat very still, as did the bunch of boys and youths that sat further back on the fringe of the firelight. Back in the darkness, close against a thicket of snakewood, all the gins and their children squatted on the sand.

Everyone sat dead still, listening like people gathered round a radio through which they expected a voice to

come to them, a voice that would give them a message of grave importance. They had been warned that the voice of their Law would speak. That afternoon, they had seen, way out on the horizon, a puff of smoke curl up. It said that Poordog was returning.

Poordog had gone out with Tingle to bring back Dooly and Milani. Milani was Tingle's woman, and Dooly, his tribal brother, had stolen her and taken her away. In doing that to his tribal brother, Dooly had violated the Law of the tribe. Dead or alive, he had to be brought back for trial.

The stage was set. It had all been arranged by Nulla. Poordog was to come in at the rise of the moon. That would give a time of silent waiting, time in which the men could look into their hearts; and silence would build up in them an emotion of fear and respect for the Law. Nulla had prophesied that as the moon rose man high, then and then only would Poordog bring in Dooly.

It was so. No sooner had the first quarter moon risen above the lip of the plain than a dog barked a warning, and a moment later, Poordog and Dooly came out of the darkness and stood before Nulla. The tribe stirred, there was a murmur of amazement, and then silence again.

Poordog made Dooly sit down on the opposite side of the fire to Nulla. He was a young man of about twenty; and, like half a dozen others in the tribe, he was a half-caste. Like the others, he had lived all his life as a member of the tribe. The color of his skin was but an accident of fate, it meant nothing to him that a white man had lightened it. He was proud of the warrior scars that marked him out as a man of the tribe, and he sat holding his head high, his whole bearing proud, his face wearing a complacent smile. He respected the old men of the tribe; that was why he had allowed Poordog to bring him in. But he no longer respected their wisdom.

"Speak," Nulla said in his own language.

Then Poordog told of how with Tingle he had found Dooly and Milani in a cave high up in the Throssel Range. He told of the fight in which Dooly had killed Tingle; and of Milani's escape into the Pedong country where no Yamagee must go. When he had finished his story, Nulla looked at Dooly.

"Milani belongs to me," Dooly said defiantly. "She wanted me, not Tingle, he was too old. I asked Tingle to give her to me. He said no, so I killed him. It is not right that the old men should have the young women."

"It is wrong to take your brother's life!" Nulla said. "It is wrong to take Milani who is your tribal sister, of your own totem."

"She is not my sister!" Dooly cried. "The white man says that only those who are of the same mother and father can be brother and sister, and for that reason Tingle is not my brother."

All this, he said, the white man had told him, as he had told him that the black man's Law was as nothing now that the white man owned all the land. He knew all this because he had lived with the white man. Hadn't he gone into Marble Bar with Boss Adams? Hadn't he seen the town and many things of which Nulla and the other old men knew nothing?

The old men cried out against this heresy, and called upon Nulla to put the spirit into Dooly's belly so that he might die.

But Nulla listened not to the old men. He listened for the voices of the younger men, and they were silent. They knew the Law of the tribe, but they had no faith in it. They knew that Dooly was right when he said that the white man owned the land and therefore their lives. All their lives they had been dependent on the white man for their food, and for that they had had to do his bidding and abide by his Law, though they

knew not what it was. But it was real and all-powerful, so powerful that Nulla himself could not stand against it. Hadn't Boss Adams taken Jemima away from Nulla? And, when Nulla had protested against the taking of his woman, Boss Adams had whipped him, as he whipped them all if they did not do as he said. And hadn't the white man fenced in the land—even fenced in Wanna Kabbi so that only the birds and the white man's sheep, which they dare not kill, could come there to drink? Nulla had not been able to stop that.

Our Law is finished, their silence said.

Then Nulla spoke. "The Law of the Yamagee says that Dooly must die! The Law is the tribe! Without the Law there can be no tribe. The Law is greater than the tribe and greater than any man. Without it the white man would scatter us as the wind scatters the seeds. One man without a brother is as nothing! He belongs to nothing—not even to himself."

The old men grunted, and the young ones bowed their heads. The boys sitting behind them tangled their fingers in the rag of their loin cloths. They were stirred by feelings that needed no comprehension. The gins hid their faces and cuddled the little ones close.

"A rain drop by itself is as nothing," Nulla went on. "It falls on the earth and is for the moment as a drop of blood on the dust. But many rain drops make water! They sink into the dust and the life of the earth drinks of them! Many rain drops are water, and water is life! So it is with our tribe. Our tribe is like Wanna Kabbi. We live by it. We are its rain drops. Together we are its water. To kill a brother is to kill the tribe. To listen to the white man and his talk is to kill all of us. You speak of the white man's magic. But can the white man make water? Can he take it away? No! His magic sucks at our pool all day as a babe sucks at its mother's breast. But is not the water still there when his magic stops? The fathers of our tribe put the water in the pool. It is

our life. The Law is our life. Did the thunder split the sky when the water was low, when the river had not run for as long as man could remember? Did not the spring go on living? Can the white man put water in Wanna Kabbi?"

"No!" the old men cried. And the younger ones hung their heads in shame. All that Nulla had said was true. They could remember the great drought when the spinifex withered down to its very roots, when all things died. Neither Boss Gordon nor Boss Adams could bring the rain then. But Nulla had. It was he who called up the bullroarer that had split the clouds with fire.

"Dooly must die," Nulla said. "The tribe must live by the Law or it is as nothing. If Dooly does not die, we shall be driven from Wanna Kabbi."

There was a gasp, a silent horror. To be driven from the water was worse than death.

Dooly must die, they all said. Even the boys echoed it; and the gins whimpered at the horror that must be. And Dooly could not grin, could not speak. A sort of peace had come to him, a sort of courage. It was right for him to die.

When the old men put their hands on him and laid him flat on his back, he lay still. Nulla took up his spirit stone, spat on it, then rubbed it between his hands. He knelt down beside Dooly and gently rubbed the stone on his belly while calling upon the spirit to enter Dooly so that, when the mopoke called, Dooly's spirit would fly away to the Dreaming Grounds.

Then the men released Dooly, and he sat there, composed as an image in brown stone.

The moon sank down. All was dark and still. The gins took up the piccaninnies and crept over to the shelter of their mia-mias. Far across the plain a dingo howled, and a kangaroo dog answered it with fearful barking. The frightened eyes of a sheep gleamed over the water of Wanna Kabbi.

The dawn wind stirred the leaves of the gum trees that grew on the bank above the pool. Their white trunks were ghostly. The forks of their limbs held the debris of last year's flood, and their branches clusters of white cockatoos. Beneath the trees, in the rich red silt, couch grass lay like a mat, green and soft as velvet.

On the other side of the pool, the water was hemmed in by a shelf of rock that slipped back into the red earth of the plain. On this side the bank rose up twenty feet from the water, then levelled out to the plain, dotted all over with the monotony of spinifex that ran right away to the horizon and the battlemented barrier of the Kimberley Ranges.

When Nulla looked across the plains, when, during the day, he squinted into the heat-tortured distance to the smoky haze that were the ranges, he saw his country, the country of his tribe. While the tribe held together the white man could never take the country from them. He might fence it and graze his sheep on the spinifex, he might shut out the wild things from the pool, but while the tribe held to the Law it still had a life.

The water of Wanna Kabbi was glistening with the first pale light of day. Nulla looked at it. It had never failed them, nor had the Law. There was no other pool in the Pindan River like Wanna Kabbi. There was no other Law for the aboriginal but his own, and he saw the Law running through the tribe as the river ran through the plain. Right from the Throssel Range on the edge of the Pedong country that stretches away into the heart of Australia, right to the shores of the Indian Ocean, where the river in flood time dropped its load of silt among the mangroves just south of Port Hedland. That was the country of the Yamagee tribe, and Wanna Kabbi was its heart.

Dooly must die to preserve all that. The white man had robbed them of much. He had fouled their women, and had caused some among them to hunger for his

food and his magic. He had colored their children with his blood, so that they knew not what they were. But he must never take their Law, nor Wanna Kabbi. And as the tribes of Israel had survived by holding fast to their Law, so Nulla strove for the survival of the Yamagee tribe through theirs.

The sun rose so far away across the plain that it seemed to peep over the lip of a flat world. A curtain of rippled cloud was flushed pink, but in a moment the clouds had been sucked out and the sky was blue space. All was clear and clean now; each slab of ironstone in the Waddara Hills held its shape and color. Each clump of spinifex was a distinct spiky mound on red earth. But as the full orb of the own climbed up, while it still seemed to be within reach of a man, the air began to shimmer, and the purple haze of heat began to fog the distances. Within a few minutes the spinifex seemed to burst into colorless flame and the whole plain was blurred. Then, out of the heat-dazzle, a clear lake appeared, surrounded by pine forests that mirrored themselves in the water. It was a mirage of cool promise in a land stricken with heat.

From the homestead up-river a gong sent its urgent rattle thrumming through the still air to the camp, and the natives who worked on Running Water stirred uneasily.

"We go longa muster sheep," one said, using the pidgin English that Gordon and Adams spoke to them.

Nulla turned on them angrily. "To-day," he said, "you must not work for the white man, you must stay and watch the working of our Law."

The men sat still, but they shivered with fear.

Fear of the Law, and fear of Boss Adams, and they knew not which to obey.

Fred Adams woke to the ringing of the gong and rubbed his bleary, blood-shot eyes that were ringed

round with red-rimmed rims. He scowled at the light like a man who hates to face another day. He threw the blanket aside, and swung his bare legs off the bed. He sat there in the flannel shirt he worked in, scowling at the bare cement floor. He reached down between the leg of his bed and a low chest of drawers, the only furniture in the room, and picked up a half-empty bottle of whisky. He took a swig of the neat liquor, sighed, and wiped the back of his hand across his thin-lipped, cruel mouth. His face looked a shade less mean. He put the bottle back in its place and picked up a pair of moleskin trousers from the floor. He pulled them on and stood up, buckling a belt round them. He was a tall, lean, bony man of about forty-five, but with his hatchet face, his red-rimmed eyes, he looked like a man of seventy.

In the wall opposite his bed was a small window. He stepped over to it, and looked out. He saw the shearing shed, its corrugated iron roof with the sun pouring on it like a magnesium flare.

Near the shearing shed was the horse yard. It was empty! Adams' eyes glared with anger and his face flamed. He'd ordered the natives to have horses in the yard! He'd told them to have them in by daybreak! He grabbed up a pair of riding boots from the floor and pulled them on to his bare feet. He rushed out of the room, grabbing a stock whip off the door as he passed. "I'll learn them!" he snarled to himself.

Outside he stopped, hesitating which way to go. He looked at the homestead, with only its roof showing above the sheltering hedge of oleander that surrounded it. He looked down the river in the direction of the native camp. Had Sammy rung the gong? he asked himself.

He strode over to the back of the homestead, slammed open a gate, ducked his head beneath a bower of bougainvillea, and cursed its flowering vines. The kitchen stood apart from the homestead. He burst into it, and

stood glaring at Sammy, who went on grilling chops on top of the stove.

"Eh, you!"

Sammy looked over his shoulder.

"Did you ring that gong, you yellow scum?"

Sammy turned over a chop. "Me ring. No black fella come." Sammy went on turning chops and pressing them down with a fork.

Adams cursed, enraged, and swung round to come face to face with Hugh Gordon, the manager of Running Water.

Gordon was in his pyjamas, and carried a shaving pot. He was a short man of about forty, with a flabby, unhealthy look. When he looked at Adams, his brown eyes flickered nervously, and his voice had a nervous squeak in it as he asked: "What's up, Fred?"

"No bloody niggers! There's no horses in the yard! A man's got to chase the black animals all the time!" Adams moved on, and Gordon stood aside to let him pass.

As Adams got near the native camp a dog barked, warning the natives of his presence. The young men, who should have been up at the horse yards, babbled in fear-stricken voices, telling Nulla and the old men that Boss Adams was coming.

Nulla bade them be quiet and sit still. They sat, but they trembled, and their bodies crouched as if they were easing them against a blow.

Adams saw that some native rite was going on round Nulla's smouldering fire, but he thought nothing of it. They were only black men, made to do his bidding. Stepping up to them he flicked out the long lask of his whip and let it lie on the sand in front of them so that they could see it.

"Get up! Get up quick! Get that clobber on and get up to them yards!" He cracked the whip.

The musterers rose slowly to their feet.