The Doctor's Drive

Mary Gaunt

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A SCRAP OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I do not know how other people write short stories, but for myself I seldom do it unless I come across an incident that interests me deeply or some scene that cries out to be illustrated. I know I never write a successful short story unless one of these conditions is fulfilled, so it comes that in collecting together this book I seem to be going step by step once again through my own life.

I was a baby of six when the wanderings of my parents took me to Gippsland in the south of Victoria, and the vivid green of the dense tea−tree scrub impressed itself on my mind. There I first remember seeing the Australian aboriginal, and there I first heard, without comprehending the grim tragedy that lay behind, the story of the brig that was wrecked on Ninety Mile Beach, and the white woman who lived with the blacks and despairingly traced initials on the forest trees. My father was a commissioner, then called a warden, of the goldfields, and he used to tell us tales of the early days and the strange people he had come across, and how in the wild rush for gold it often happened that the criminal ended a gentleman and the gentleman a criminal, and we children in our turn speculated what our father would have done had an old friend come to him with a price upon [P.vi] his head. So when I grew older I wrote "A Dilemma."

We grew up, we little band of children, and scattered literally to the ends of the earth the boys first, and I remember how I listened enthralled when one of the sailor boys told me how his boat had been adrift in December for a whole day and night south of the Horn, how bitter cold it had been, how the sea rose up round them and the sky fitted over like a lid, and how they feared the ship would never find them and dreaded their fate if it did not. Many years later I wrote "The Mate's Salvage,"and he corrected it for me and did the seamanship. Later on he told me an accident of a little war in which he was a looker−on, and the tight fit the Americans were in when the Colt jammed. Of course I wrote that.

It was too good to miss, with its tropical setting; and then to my amusement the Colt people wrote to me to say that the Colt never jammed. It was impossible, and if I would visit their warehouse they would demonstrate why. They evidently thought I was interested in munitions I who did not know one end of a gun from another, and shouldn't have recognised a Colt if 1 had met it.

I married and went to live in the pretty little town of Warrnambool on the south coast of Victoria, and there I made the acquaintance of the gentleman who ran an illicit whisky still. Everybody knew it, and I remember his offer to my husband, "Sure, Doctor dear, leave the bit gayrden gate open wan night an'
it's jist a keg I'll be lavin' yez on the verandy. Itia, and there I made the acquaintance of the gentleman who ran an illicit whisky still. Everybody knew it, and I remember his offer to my husband, "Sure, Doctor dear, leave the bit gayrden gate open wan night an'
it's jist a keg I'll be lavin' yez on the verandy. It'll warm, yer heart these could nights, an' not a sowl the wiser at all, at all." My father, a judge by that time, tried [P.vii] the case, and laughed at the manners and customs of the

folks of my new home.

And the years, after all not so very many years, went on, and I was a widow earning my living by my pen. I found nothing inspiring in the London streets, so of necessity I fell back upon the incidents of my youth for material, and as I succeeded, and money allowed, I wandered farther afield.

"Peter Addie and the Ju−ju" reminds me of a weird night I spent alone on Anum Mountain, and the long trek by night from Ho to Palime in the heart of that Togo land we have just taken from the Germans. As the lights my carriers bore flashed on the wet trees, there grew up in me a little fear and the strong feeling that when I had time I must make a story with some such setting.

And when I came back from West Africa I went to China—China of the ages. I remember one summer day drifting down the canal outside the walls of Peking, my companions "The Woman who did not Care"

and a man who had served the British American Tobacco Company. Together we three worked out the story, lunching in a grassy graveyard, the people, courteous and unwashed, who hoped to occupy that graveyard in the future, sitting round us in a ring waiting patiently for our scraps. 1 went farther inland, where no one but a missionary would go, and living with some American missionaries just outside a walled city, I met the man who told me the incident of the old gun in the gateway and the armed men hanging threatening over the city walls. Indeed I did more, for I went on till I almost reached the city of the story. But White [P.viii] Wolf, the great robber chief, held the land in terror, and my men came to me saying that he either held the city Sui Te Chou or besieged it. I might have acted my own tale had I gone a day's journey farther, only then I think the end would have been tragedy.

So I turned in my tracks and went north, north to the mighty rivers and the far eastern shores of Siberia, just wakened to their summer trade, to the Island of Saghalien which used to seem to me the end of the earth; and before I turned west again I too had seen lying in the mouth of the great Amur River the sealing schooners that my brother had told me of when, years before, together we wrote "North Of 53°."

The Graphic published "North Of 53°" and "The Good Samaritan," a true tale of Tasmania, Pearson's Magazine published "A Dilemma" and"When the Colt Jammed"—all four long before I had realised the value of copyright; therefore am I much indebted to the editors of these papers for permission to republish in book form. "Sergeant Mahone" first saw the light in the Sphere, and neither Mr Shorter nor I can remember the terms on which I sold it; but whatever they were I have his good wishes for its success and he has my thanks.

And since I am being grateful to people, in addition to Mrs Lang who helped me choose the stories, I really think I ought to be grateful to and indeed dedicate the whole book to the enterprising publisher who not only helped me to see strange sights but who has the pluck to bring out a book for me at such a time.

For the doings have been of deepest interest. [P.ix] If my readers get out of the book a tenth of the interest I have had in collecting the information and writing the stories, I shall be well paid. A tenth did I say? A hundredth would more than pay me.

And last but not least—nay greatest of all—when I look over this record of my life, there comes to me a curious knowledge, a knowledge that can only come with the passing of years. A tiny girl once watched the daybreak, the red and gold of the sky barred by the trunks of the great Gippsland gums that stood up against the skyline, and realised, possibly for the first time in her life, the beauty of the dawn. The years passed, years full of joy and sorrow, and a woman, a woman who had drunk of life's cup, watched another dawn come up across the green fields and rugged hills of Saghalien, watched the light like arrows of gold cut through the mists that for ever envelop the island, watched and saw the beauty of the northern even as the child had seen the beauty of the subtropical dawn in the faraway south; and then the woman knew that the mind—the soul—what you will − that received these impressions belongs to no time, that part of her was not young in the little child, but it was no older in the woman who felt she had been to the ends of the earth, even as it will not be old if it be granted her to fill life's allotted span, it is of no age because it is eternal.

MARY GAUNT.

MARY HAVEN, NEW ELTHAM, KENT. THE DOCTOR'S DRIVE "THE Mails has got to go through."

Peter Miles was store−keeper and postmaster at Bilson's, and had been store−keeper there ever since Bilson's was any place at all, and postmaster ever since the Government had seen fit to open a post−office.

His motto was, and he stuck to it, "The mails has got to go through." Rain or sunshine, flood or drought, snow or fire, "the mails has got to go through." And this January day the wind was howling like a demon possessed. Down through the narrow gully it tore, a veritable blast from a fiery furnace−the green things shrivelled up before its breath, the tall trees, their great branches tossed hither and thither like twigs, bent and snapped, and every now and then one was rent up by the roots and, falling, crashed among its fellows, and with its wide−spreading roots, which left mother earth so reluctantly, brought away part of the hillside; even above the howling of the wind could be heard the slow slipping and sliding of the loosened earth as it fell towards the roadway. No sunshine to−day, no scrap of blue sky, the heavy clouds hung low, clouds of smoke they were, and the strong smell of that smoke and the aromatic scent of burning gum leaves was heavy in the air.

Just in front of the little store stood the mail−coach, and the horses were being yoked up−only a small coach today, but there were four horses−four horses that were laying back their ears and kicking and plunging as if they did not like the job before them. The driver, a tall, lithe young fellow of five− and−twenty, with a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes and fastened with a leather thong under his chin, stood watching the final touches being put to the harness and the mail bags being brought out and flung into the boot and put on top of the coach. There were a good many mail bags to−day; usually the big coach would have taken them through, but the weather was so threatening that Miles on his own responsibility had decided to send them along in the little coach he kept for emergencies. "The mails has got to go through," and the sooner they got through the better on a day like this.

"No passengers?" asked the driver laconically. "You'd better send a man along to help then, case of trouble."

Peter Miles looked thoughtfully down the road and rubbed his bald forehead hard.

"I was thinking −" he began, and then hesitated, and one of the stable helps, with his hair coming through the broken crown of his straw hat, laughed ironically.

"Sweet day for a passear," he said; "the hills'll be in a blaze long before you reach Bethambia."

"Lucky if we reach Bethambia unsinged, eh, old man?" said the coach−driver grimly, as he gathered up the reins and prepared to mount the box. "Now which of you fellows is coming along? "

Still Peter Miles shaded his eyes and looked along the road. The howling of the wind deadened all other sounds, and the thick smoke and haze made it impossible to see very far; still he looked out expectantly and delayed the coach yet another five minutes. The secrets of the telegraph were his, and he could not betray them; but he knew well enough the contents of that urgent telegram he had sent along to the doctor an hour ago. There was still time for him to catch the coach, and he hesitated to let it go without him.

The horses grew more impatient, and so did the driver.

"Come, old man," he said, "give the word. You're risking our lives."

"Hold on, one minute. Here he is! Here he is!" Through the haze and smoke dashed a man on horseback.

"Here, I say, hold on a minute; I'm coming too."

"Better not, doctor," said the lean coachman, "we're going to have a hell of a time."

"Must", said Dr. Smith, dropping from his horse and throwing his bag inside the coach. "Now shall I come up in front? "

The driver nodded.

"Look after my horse, Miles," cried the doctor, scrambling to the box−seat and settling himself there.

It was lucky he was young and active, for the horses were more impatient than ever now, and the driver, with a quite unnecessary crack of his whip, gave them their heads.

"It'll be hell for leather, Mat," cried he of the straw hat, as the stable helpers jumped aside to let the swaying coach pass, and Mat nodded his head.

Up the road, straight up the hill, swept the horses right in the teeth of the wind, and Bilson's was left behind in the gathering haze.

"Where're you goin' to, doctor?" asked Mat as they steadied down to a trot, for the hill was steep and the wind strong.

"To Coulson's—just this side of Bethambia, isn't it?"

A faint smile stole over Mat Jackson's impassive face.

"Eh, I thought they'd be wantin' you there. It's her first, you see, and Jim Coulson's mighty set on her.

But it's an uncommon awkward time she's chosen."

"They always do," murmured the other out of the depths of his experience. "Never mind, they'll take it more

coolly next time."

"I'd have ridden through, if I was you," said the driver. "You'd have done it easier."

But the other shook his head.

"I've been riding all the morning," said he. "And I never got to bed at all last night. I reckoned on getting some sleep in the coach once we get through this smother."

"Lordy! we ain't goin' to get through this. All the ranges are on fire way back there. I reckon we'll be lucky if we get through at all. It's gettin' worse."

"Ye gods and little fishes! It can't be worse."

"Oh, can't it? just you wait an' see." "I'm bound to get through."

"So's the mails. And once we top this hill it'll be neck or nothing with us. Say the word, doctor; will you go back?" And the driver slightly checked his horses. "Can't we get through?"

He raised his head. The smoke made his eyes smart, and he pulled down his hat over them, but it was little good, it was all round them, heavy and dense. On either hand the tree−tops were shut out as by a pall, and even the leaders were only visible to the men on the box as through a dense grey haze.

Mat, the driver, took a long breath, then pushed back the flapping brim of his hat, and, standing up, took a long look round.

Nothing but dense grey smoke and trees swaying and tossing in the wind seen dimly through it.

"Well, we mout get through. I've seen it worse—only the farther we go, the less chance of getting back if it's too bad to go on. And it ain't pleasant, let me tell you, to be roasted alive without any preliminary preparation. And it's kinder anticipatin'."

The doctor smiled grimly.

"As bad as that? " he said.

"Well," drawled the driver, "it mout be, and it mout not. The wind mout drop, you know, or it mout shift, or it mout rain, or it moutn't be as bad as I think. There's a hundred chances agin things goin'
wrong. But if we meet the fire two or three miles on ahead there, I tell you, doctor, it isn't much I'd give for your chance of seein' Jim Coulson's wife through her trouble. But then again, we moutn't meet the fire; but I'm telling you the truth, if I hadn't the mails behind me it's on the back track I'd be this minute."

"And if the mails can get through, I can," said the doctor. "I reckon we'll go on, Mat."

"Right you are, boss," and he leaned over and touched the off leader, who was fretting herself into a foam over the smoke, with his long whip.

Then the doctor pulled down his straw hat over his eyes again, and in spite of the discomfort of his seat and his doubts as to the safety of his situation, fell into an uneasy doze. The heat was overpowering, the smoke grew denser than ever, and every now and then he was dreamily aware that his companion was exhorting him to keep awake, to hold up and look out that he did not fall off. He was rather afraid of this last accident himself, and grasped the iron rail of the boxseat with a firm hand, and then kept starting wide awake, thinking he had lost it. If he could only have wakened himself up thoroughly, he would have made an effort and gone inside as safer, but dead beat as he was the smoke and the heat made him drowsier than ever, and he kept putting it off and putting it off till of a sudden the horses were pulled to a standstill with a jerk that threw them on to their haunches.

"God Almighty!" he heard Mat's voice in horror and dread. "We're dead men!"

Then he sat upright in a moment, and rubbed his eyes.

It was darker now much darker, though it was but two o'clock in the afternoon, the wind was wilder than ever as it tore shrieking through the trees, and the smoke denser and more choking; but that was not the worst, for right ahead, directly in their path, was a lurid glare thrown right on the heavy smoke banks.

The doctor sat up and rubbed his eyes sleepily, for the moment hardly grasping the gravity of the situation.

"What's the matter, Mat?" The coach−driver pointed with his whip.

"The fire, right ahead," he said. "Both sides of the track, too. The scrub's thick and the track's narrow.

We're dead men, doctor."

The doctor stood up and looked back; but the driver anticipated his thought.

"No good, doctor, we can't go back. The fire'd be on us before you could say Jack Robinson. And it would stop with us all the way. It's due south is Bilson's, and the wind's dead from the north."

The solitary passenger looked to the right and left, but the scrub was close and thick; the country was poor

enough, but the messmate grew up thick and bushy, and in between was tea−tree and bracken and twining creepers and prickly shrubs of which he did not know the names. But it was close enough; there was no escape that way either for man or beast.

"It's sorter different when it comes to the point, doctor isn't it?" said the driver. "All very well to talk o' gettin' the mails through, neck or nothing, till you have to do it; but to drive into that muck of smoke an' fire—the Lord ha' mercy upon us."

"Is it the only way?"

"The only way. We're not above three miles from Bethambia." And he brought down the whip heavily across the horses' backs. "Now then, fellows, for all you're worth."

The doctor put his hand down and gripped firmly the rail as the coach plunged forward and rocked from side to side; but he said nothing. There was nothing left for him to say.

"Let's get it over, in God's name,"cried the driver, and he lashed the horses to a hard gallop. They kicked and plunged and snorted in terror, for the breath of the fire was upon them now, but the hand that held them was firm and strong, and the cruel whip came down on their backs unerringly.

There was no turning back for them either.

The hot wind was hotter than ever now: the mouth of the furnace was open, and it was pouring forth smoke and flame. The reek of it was in their nostrils, and the doctor pulled his hat down closely over his face.

"Look out you don't choke and fall off," said the driver grimly. "I couldn't stop if I wanted to."

"All right," said his companion, and looking out again he noted that the air was full of burning gum leaves. They fell on the frightened horses and on the mail bags, and his own coat was already smouldering in one or two places, and right ahead was the fire. On either side scrub and bracken and tall trees were all one mass of flame, and momentarily it came nearer, borne on the fierce wind.

The horses saw it too and stopped dead, plunging and fighting to be free, and though Mat stood up in his seat and lashed them with a hand made desperate by stern necessity, they were desperate too, and they swerved aside and turned from, the track to the right, bringing the coach sharply against a tree trunk.

"Good Lord!" cried Mat in desperation. "Rats in a hole!"

"We'll have to blindfold them" said the doctor. "Give me that necktie of yours, they'll never face it as it is—and your handkerchief. Now, don't leave me behind." It is hardly an easy matter to blindfold a horse at any time, but never surely did it take so long as that day, when the minutes were so precious. Young Willie Smith cursed the fate that had sent him out from civilisation many times, as he struggled for that plunging off leader's head, but it was done at last—all four horses were blindfolded, and he scrambled up to the box again as the driver lashed them to a gallop.

He wondered if it would be a good move. How could those terrified horses take the coach along that rough track, now scattered over with living coals as the burning branches and twigs fell upon it?p

But it was their only chance. Mat's hands were firm and strong, and the horses answered to the guiding rein. The fire was on either hand now, their faces were blistering under the heat, every piece of wood and ironwork was too hot to touch, and the horses stumbled every now and then where a fall would mean certain death. He bowed his head in his hands. This was the end then. All his high hopes, all his ambition, and his little sweetheart waiting for him so patiently till he could make a home for her up here among the mountains. All, all was lost; this was the end. How long now, how long? Then the driver's voice broke in on his reverie.

"The mails are afire, doctor. Couldn't you put them out? Take this waterproof apron."

The waterproof apron had been pulled up to shield their own legs; but no matter—if Mat were so faithful to his trust, he could not be less so, and with his pocket−knife he ripped it up, and turning round threw it across the mail bags. It didn't half cover them, and he had to crawl half over them and put out the blaze with his fingers. Sometimes he managed to get the waterproof in between his bare hand and the fire, but always that was not practicable, and the mails were such inflammable material, before he got one place out another would be alight. His hands grew sore and painful but he hardly noticed it, only the smoke was so choking and the heat so fierce he could only wonder they held on so long.

First one horse stumbled, then another, but the practised hand of the driver drew them to their feet again. The off leader was down on her knees once, and the coach gave such a lurch he gave up all for lost, while he mechanically laid his arm across the corner of the woodwork that burst into flame.

"Do that again," said Mat between his teeth, "and it's all up with us." But the mare, helped by his guiding hand, struggled to her feet again.

A burning branch fell right across the top of the coach, miraculously sparing the two men on the box−seat, and the doctor, with a great effort., flung it off. Another fell right in front of the horses, but the track luckily was wider here, and Mat managed to draw horses and coach a little aside. It was only clever hands that did it at that headlong pace, but it was done, and they were a little nearer the end.

How long? How long?p

Eyebrows, eyelashes, hair were all singed by the flames; the curtains in the coach windows were on fire, and the horses—their scanty harness was red−hot, and the white handkerchief he had tied round the eyes of one of the leaders was already smouldering. The end must come soon now, things could not go on like this any longer.

"Woa, there. Steady, good mare. Hold up, will you?" And the whip came down with a heavy crack across the backs of the stumbling horses.

Crash! And a tall tree fell close alongside them, and men and coach and horses received the burst of sparks that flew around them.

"It is the end," cried the doctor, his lips cracked and swollen and his mouth dry and parched, yet still making one last effort to put out with his bare, burnt hands the fire that was kindling afresh among the mails.

"By the living God! no," shouted the driver. "We're through! My God! we're through!"

Then the other man turned his head and looked through the dense haze with red−rimmed, smoke−weary eyes, and he saw that his companion spoke the truth. Behind them, was the fire, behind them the flames dancing yellow and red and blue in the heavy smoke, and here—here was only the path of the fire, hot wind, heavy smoke, dense and thick as ever. The breath of the fire had passed, and every living thing was dead. The tall trees were blackened, smoking skeletons, in which the red fire still smouldered, and the air was full of the soft, white, powdery ash that had once been bark and green leaves. But they were safe, safe! and in a few more yards Mat drew up the horses, and they put out the last remnants of the fire that had clung to the coach.

Then they were off again, and in another five minutes were clattering down the road into the township of Bethambia.

The township had fought for its life, and at the first roadside cottage they came across a little knot of men armed with branches and sacks, and looking scarcely less dishevelled than the newcomers themselves. These had been beating back the fire from the township.

"And it was a mighty close shave," said one of them, stepping forward. "But, lordy! Mat, whatever brought ye through on a day like this?"

"The mails, Jim Coulson," said Mat, drawing himself up with dignity, "has got to go through, an' they're through. An' here's the doctor for your missus."

Then a woman made her appearance in the doorway, winding up her hands in her long white apron.

"Is it the doctor?" she asked. "Oh, doctor, I'm that sorry, but the baby was born more than half an hour ago. Just as fine a child as ever you set eyes on, bless him!"