

1864

The Cannibal Coast

Author R. J. Bowring

A Fiction Adventure
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Printed in Australia

First Printing, 2011

ISBN 978-0-9871570-0-3

digitalprintaustralia.com

135 Gilles Street, Adelaide, South Australia 5000

Ph: 08 8232 3404 Fx: 08 8232 3177

books@digitalprintaustralia.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A hearty thank you for the fine work provided by Marjolijin De Jong of My Way Glass Engraving, who provided the front cover image of the lugger. A special warm and heartfelt thank you to my editor Brenda Layman of Select Authors, for her magnificent patience and perseverance. Brenda and Mark have been the foundation rock who stood immovably convinced in my work.

Also, a big thank you to the many friends who've coaxed and encouraged me along the way. Peter & Lyn Hardy, Mary Rainer, Bob & Fi McMullen, Chris Winterflood, Reg Watson, Roy & Diane Cummings, Danielle Touroult, Lauren & Justin Penneyeston, Phil Kelly, Trudy Stanley, my brother KB and his family, and many more who were there when I needed a friendly face, an opinion, or a shoulder to lean on.

When I faltered you gave a steady and willing hand. Thank you!

To the readers, we thank you, your support makes it all worthwhile. I hope you enjoy the story and mention it to a friend.

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Introduction

When Europe's jails were bursting at the seams with the tide of humanity, Penal Settlements were sprouting in the furthest corners of the Empire. Fortunes were being won and lost by landed gentry, settlers, and those bold enough to face the dangers of hostile natives defending their primitive cultures in far off lands.

Paradise was for some an escape from captivity at the hands of ruthless men reluctant to give up slavery and the cheap labour it delivered. But for many the price was high, their freedom short-lived, and often that freedom came with horrifying torture or a quick and bloody death.

For those who embraced the cultures of the land and the times, their paradise was at the point of collision between a more modern age and that dark and clouded past we only speak of in quiet corners.

This is the story of Curry...a bold, daring, and ruthless adventurer who met the challenges of life with only the fear of falling into the hands of a civilized world, slavery, and the hangman's noose.

Russell Bowring

The escape

Curry dared not share his thoughts with the house maid who gently followed each wield with the balming grease, nor with any other worker on the property. They were broken men and women, reduced to a life of 'free' servitude. No bars, no guards, just their own broken minds kept them toiling and snitching on each other, to the satisfaction of the squatter and his wife.

Landed gentry, squatters, and their women; Curry hated the civility of their facade. It was a slight of conscience that cloaked the minds of evil. Beneath a shallow, cultured 'turn of phrase' in clipped English, lay man's inhumanity to man. Curry decided this was his last flogging. There would never be another in his lifetime, no matter how short or long that may be.

He had no ambitions to be like them, to simply imitate a sense of civilized culture with their brown suit coats, starched riding breeches, and silver cutlery at the dinner table. No! He sought an honest zest for life, moral or immoral, it mattered little. He would go to the ends of the earth if need be, to escape 'civilized' immorality - this farce of a life of self-inflicted slavery.

Civilized love was a waltz with words, honor was a trickster's card they played, and their piety was borne of bloody ages where empires were made on the backs and bodies of slaves and servitude. He began to plot his escape and future. There could be no return to this life, and he didn't plan for one.

His escape would mark him forever as an outcast and their only goal would be to drag him back to a hangman's noose.

He reasoned, better to die a free man than serve as an example. But first, he must heal his wounds fully. He would need all his strength, endurance, and cunning to avoid being caught in the chase that would follow. The healing would take three weeks at least, maybe more, because the muscles on his back were deeply torn and ruptured by the flogging.

For two months he watched, waited, and worked out the plan. Time was a luxury that worked in his favour, and the toil he endured served only to temper his resolve. When all was ready, he made his move as darkness fell.

He began by raiding the store for the provisions he would need, then he quietly saddled the squatter's best horse. The first two days were critical. If his plan went badly, he'd need a good mount to outrun his pursuers, though he hoped to avoid so close a chase.

The weapon, he left until last; the squatter would provide it, and pay dearly for the beating.

Curry tied the calico sack to the saddle, and walking the horse in the shadows, approached the homestead. The bedroom lamp was still burning, and Curry could see the squatter's wife moving about getting ready for bed. The squatter was in his study at the end of the verandah.

Curry left the shadows and walked quickly but quietly to the side of the study door. Surprised at first, he could hear the sounds of heavy breathing and the creak of timber.

Peering around the door jam, he found the squatter mounting a kitchen maid like a rutting deer.

He hesitated, not wanting the maid to give the alarm prematurely. He had expected the stag to be alone. Entering quickly he decided, if need be, he would silence the maid as well.

In two long strides he was standing over the pair, who seemed oblivious to his presence until the knife blade touched the squatter's throat. The squatter stiffened and Curry warned,

“Stand up slowly.”

Curry held a finger to his lips to warn the maid to be silent. She nodded. The squatter stood to full height, then he warily cautioned,

“God, man, what are you doing?”

Curry spoke quietly.

“Move to the desk, open the lock to the pistol drawer, and hand the pistol to me..butt first; and be careful, this blade is sharp.”

The squatter's sweat of exertion turned to the cold sweat of fear, and recognising Curry's voice, he knew he was about to die.

“They'll hunt you like a dog for this, Curry.”

Curry took the pistol and tucked it in his belt, then hissed in the squatter's ear.

“Powder and shot. Be quick.”

The squatter obeyed, handing Curry a bag of pistol balls and pointing to the powder storage safe. Curry marched him to the safe with the knife biting a little deeper.

“Open it,” he demanded.

Naked, with a knife at his throat, the squatter knew he was doomed.

He opened the safe, then Curry's cold tone sent a shiver down his spine.

“Hunting me is not your worry, Guv. You need to think about whether you are going to heaven...or to hell.”

Curry slowly turned the squatter until they were face to face. Their eyes met and held.

Curry's eyes were cold and unyielding; the squatters showed a mixture of fear, hate, and self-pity.

The sharp blade easily cut the windpipe, but not deep enough to sever the jugular vein. Horror washed away the look of hate on the squatter's face, but only an ill wind gave it voice.

Curry then drove the blade to the hilt in the squatter's fat paunch, and keeping it embedded, slowly drew it through the kidneys and out the squatter's side.

The squatter's eyes, full of pain and agony now, broke their lock and turned to look at the gut dribbling out of the wound.

His gut...his wound.

Curry, not taking his eyes off the squatter, pushed the live corpse away from himself.

“You have time to think about it, Guv. It will take you a day or two to die and in this weather, you'll be able to smell it when your time is near. Save your last prayer 'till then.”

With his backside against the desk, Curry cautiously placed the pistol down then pulled on one of the squatter's riding boots.

The maid shifted on her feet and in an instant was looking at the gaping barrel. She riveted herself to the spot, as Curry waved the pistol in warning.

Watching both closely he pulled the other boot home then took a sip of the squatter's glass of wine. Shock and pain were turning the squatter's eyes a dull sightless colour until Curry dashed the bitter dry red in his face. Anger returned, and he glared at Curry with open hostility.

Curry's tone aired a demeaning disgust for the squatter.

“Don't take a nap yet, Guv. Your time is short, and you've a lot to ask forgiveness for. You're a murderer Guv, just like me.”

He continued,

“Remember poor old Charlie, the one you buried near the wood yard. You beat him 'till he bled to death inside, the poor old bugger. Killing him for stealing a mouthful of cow's milk...you'll not be blessed for that I wager.”

The squatter shook his head to clear it, covered his throat wound with his hand, and scowled at Curry.

“When they catch you, they'll send you to hell.”

Curry's eyes glittered brightly as he spat his words with scorn,

“Aye! We'll have plenty to talk about when I get there. Look for the man wearing your boots, you sanctimonious English bastard.”

A gasp spun Curry towards the open doorway.

There the squatter's wife stood motionless with her hand to her mouth as though to stifle a mistake.

Slowly, horrified by this chaos in her world and unable to speak, she moved to the bloody naked figure of her husband now lying on the floor.

The maid then spoke vehemently,

“Cut her throat too, Curry, the bitch often watched when he *‘introduced’* a new housemaid to the property.”

Curry hesitated a moment, then dropped the blade point first into the floor near the maid.

Drawing the pistol with his other hand, he cautioned her.

“Be careful whose throat you cut. I've chosen my future, now you must choose yours.”

Without hesitation the housemaid seized the knife and snatched the shocked squatter's wife by the hair. Then jerking her head back to expose the throat, she slashed it from ear to ear.

Wiping the blade on his wife's dress, she turned to the squatter and said calmly,

“Take the bitch with you, so you won't be lonely when you get there. You both deserve a place in hell.”

Reversing the blade she handed it to Curry.

Taking the knife, Curry turned and was swallowed by the darkness. He didn't see the naked maid spit on the writhing couple dressed in death, and no one stirred in the workers' quarters as he trotted the horse out of earshot.

Unhurriedly, he used the main road to clear the property boundary. He knew that mixing his tracks with the normal traffic would not fool the native trackers, but it would gain him some time perhaps. A mile further on, he left the roadway to avoid being seen by some late traveller and set the horse to the ridges. The sparse eucalyptus scrub would not slow him unduly, and it gave him cover for the hours until daylight.

Curry knew his first need was to confuse the native trackers, so for this leg of his journey he kept his direction inland and concentrated on slowing their progress.

The trackers would be keen to follow his every twist and turn, but the troopers would be eager to catch him by calculating his destination. He was playing one against the other, hoping the troopers would throw caution to the wind.

As the horse picked its way through the shadows of the timber in the moonlight, Curry took stock of his situation.

He felt neither elated nor remorseful for taking vengeance on the squatter. His tormentor's death was simply the starting point of a new life, under new rules. Freedom was real, or a man lived in a falsehood, a dream world of lies and deceit. Either he lived under the laws of a corrupt system, or he made his own rules.

This night, Curry had chosen the life and death of a convict outlaw, and there would be no reprieve. They would hunt him to his grave. Dismissing the thought, he concentrated on his plan and timing to avoid capture.

Wherever possible he used the terrain to disguise his passage and confuse the trackers, for he feared them more than the troopers who would follow. Coming to an outcrop of stony ground he dismounted and covered the horse's hooves with calico. He walked him to save injury, and the calico left no mark of a hoof strike on rock.

Twisting and turning often in the thickets and creeks, he changed his direction to make it seem as though he was looking for a place to hole up. Yet the trail he left was always on a westward heading, and clear of any possible contact with roads or human traffic.

An hour before daylight he arrived at the outskirts to the small settlement. All was quiet there and he saw no signs of alarm or movement. By some river gums he dismounted and shouldered the calico swag to continue on foot.

Walking through the dusty street, he kept his direction towards the inland. He had been here before and planned to make the switch in his direction at the sawmill. The miller and workers didn't live at the sawmill, and there were no dogs to cause a ruckus if a stranger ventured on the premises.

Entering from one street, he walked to the saw bench where the sawdust was thickest and then removed his boots. Using his coat as a broom, he disguised his barefooted exit to the street on the other side. The barefoot tracks were now heading towards the coast.

In the chill of predawn, he crept towards the creek camp of the town's itinerants, and heard the sound of snoring.

He stole a coat and pair of boots, leaving his own coat and a pound note to placate the owner. At the water's edge he shaved off his beard.

For the rest of the day he travelled openly and quickly towards the sea, and the next leg of his journey away from civilisation. No one took an interest in a barefoot vagabond heading for port where there was the promise of work on the unloading wharves. He mingled with the traffic on foot, and his idle chatter left the impression that the port was his destination.

At midday he rested briefly in the shade with some travelers, then to confuse his trackers put the stolen boots on, before taking up the march again.

At a crossroads, he took a new direction. Avoiding the main port, Curry found a navigable creek two days' march to the North. Here, with luck, a small sailing boat and its crew might not be missed for at least a day or more. He was very cautious now, moving only in darkness and hiding in the thickets by day.

Curry had been at large for two weeks, and had no idea if troopers were searching for him here, or still beating the scrub a hundred miles inland. He had spoken to no one of his escape, and didn't intend to seek out news.

Finding the boat landing he wanted, Curry watched it for six days in the sweltering heat, and as the days wore on the tension mounted. His vigilant watch was in total silence and not once did he light a fire to cook food for a meal.

He moved with stealth, and never more than ten yards from his lookout in a thick patch of scrub.

Cramped and ever more wary, the pistol often appeared in his hand if something seemed amiss. His nerves were as taught as a fiddle string.

On the afternoon of the sixth day (with a crack like a pistol shot), a branch broke and crashed to the ground not five paces away. Curry almost pulled the trigger on the rotten limb as it shattered into a dozen pieces.

He cursed under his breath. He had been dozing in the heat. It was sweltering in the scrub, though a slight breeze fluttered through the dead leaves. If a boat didn't appear soon he was a dead man. A black crow squawked lazily in the heat and Curry looked towards the sound. With fear of the aboriginal trackers, and contempt for the troopers chasing him, he confessed to himself,

'Aye! The scarecrows will not be far now.'

No one had escaped them for longer than this. They were a felon's curse. He'd seen a wiry old tracker cloaked in nothing but parched black skin, running on the trail of a man where no mark showed the passage. Yet the old crow never made a mistake.

They were devils on the scent and he was taken by their skill, but now it was his tracks they were on, and he knew they would find him soon. With this thought he decided,

'If no sail comes today I'll have to run and they'll catch me for certain.'

He shivered at the image of a stealthy discovery, then the troopers quietly surrounding him. The troopers would use every effort to capture him alive for the hanging at the end.

'Blast their hides,' he cursed, 'and those who tempt them to treachery.'

His thoughts continued to dwell on the trackers skill in pursuit.

'They could follow a seagull on a summer breeze, I swear.'

He arrested the distraction.

'Keep your wits about yourself, Curry. You're not done yet.'

His only hope of escape lay in reaching the open sea. On land, he was done for; at the end of the chase there was only a bloody death, or a hanging...but death all the same.

How right he was. At dawn the gardener discovered the dying squatter and his murdered wife. The farm workers soon gathered around the bloody scene and anxiously pondered the matter. Few had distraught feelings at the fate they suffered, and several voiced the opinion that they deserved it, but they soon looked to saving their own skin.

The murders could not be dismissed. The police would hear of it, and anyone who seized the opportunity to flee would be marking themselves for trouble. Curry and a housemaid were not among them, and it was obvious who the culprits were.

Some saluted them for the guts to end their humiliation, but others cursed them for the trouble to follow.

The authorities would have no kind words or sympathy for any who obstructed the law as they saw it. The culprits must be found and brought to British justice. No matter the felons' justification. Murders had been committed, and someone would have to pay the price.

That very afternoon word came to police conducting enquiries that the maid had been seen in a brothel in Brisbane town. The next day she was arrested in a boarding house nearby, and carted off in chains with tears streaming down her haggard face. Two days later they found her hanging by her scarf in the cell.

Troopers, and a tracker in their employ, took up Curry's trail. It led them a merry chase through sweltering thickets and over stony outcrops heading inland. Troopers sent word ahead to the towns nearby, and the countryside was abuzz with news of the pursuit.

For several days they lost the trail in the confusion of the foot traffic near the sawmill, but a loose word came from a drunk itinerant who seemed to have mysteriously found his fortune and a better jacket. Under threats and questioning, he spilled the beans and the trail was taken up anew.

They lost the trail again near the port, but the discovery of a hidden pair of old boots gave them new hope. The tracker confirmed they were following the same man.

He was able to describe his approximate height and weight, and that this tread was unique. The trail avoided all human contact; this was their felon. They were six hours behind him.

Curry's hide was not ten miles distant.

He checked the crow again, but it was relaxed and busy preening the feathers on its wing.

Sweeping his view to seaward his eyes bulged. A sail had stolen over the horizon and was no more than a half hour from its berth on the landing. The sea was clear of prying eyes and other sail...his elation grew as the distance closed.

The boat was a small yacht, big enough to weather a storm, but small enough for one man to handle. Ideal!

As the craft drew nearer, he gathered his kit, and watched from the trees at the point only long enough to make out that two men were aboard the craft. Quickly then, he sprinted for the wharf and hid underneath it.

What stores were on board he would need. He must risk capturing it intact, rather than steal an empty yacht. As it docked, Curry sprang onto the landing and leveled the pistol, then called to the two men.

“Put your weapons on the deck boys, then cast off. We're going for another trip.”

* * *