

waved. He shouted across the water to Blackwood but the words were broken up into echoes by the cliffs. In spite of Blackwood's efforts to keep her pointed up the main river, the *Queen* was drifting closer, so that Thornhill could see a few fowls pecking miserably around the man's feet, and a shirt drying on a bush. The man got into a skiff now and splashed across towards them. He was a hundred yards away when he shouted, *Got the bugger!* His voice was clear in the still air. He bent to the oars again, digging them in deep. As he came alongside, Blackwood made no move to throw him a line, only glanced up again at the masthead where the sail still hung limp. *Learned that poxy thief*, the man was shouting *Learned him good and proper!*

Smasher Sullivan had a face that the sun had burned piebald like a botched bit of frying. The sandy hair retreated from a red dome of forehead, the eyes were small and naked-looking in a face without eyebrows. He gripped the *Queen*'s gunwale and looked up with a strained eager grin that showed gaps where the teeth were missing. He glanced at Thornhill without interest. It was Blackwood he wanted.

But Blackwood was busying himself with shaking out the sail where it was crumpling in the lack of wind. Smasher Sullivan reached for some things in the bottom of his boat and held them up. *Look what I done*, he called. Thornhill thought for a moment it was fish he had caught and was showing them, or was it a pair of gloves? Then he saw that they were hands cut off at the wrist. The skin was black against the white of the bone.

*Last time that bugger thieves from me*, Smasher called, and gave a harsh high-pitched snigger. There was something horrible about the red skin of his forehead, his naked face. *Damn your eyes, Smasher*, Blackwood shouted, seizing one of the oars, his voice enormous between the cliffs. Thornhill heard the echo of it, the anger rumbling away down the mournful reach of water. *Get on that other damned oar, Thornhill*, he said. *Look sharp, man.*

A dozen strokes took them out of reach of Smasher's skiff. Blackwood shipped his oar and stood with the telescope up to his eye. Thornhill thought he must have been stung by something, the way he tore it away from his face with an angry grunt. He handed it to Thornhill who looked through it seeing only silver-green tree-tops at first, rounded as moss, sliding past his eye. At last he found the line where land met water and jerkily followed it around. There was the hut, a sad affair of bark and sticks, and a smouldering heap nearby. There was the corn patch, such a brilliant green it was sickening. Beside it, a tree stood silver in death, and from one of its branches a long sack hung heavy on the end of a rope.

In the first glimpse Thornhill thought it was a scarecrow put there for the birds, then that it was a beast hung up for butchering. A cat's paw of wind sent the boat tinkling across the water towards the bank. He felt the eyepiece slimy with his sweat. The burden hanging there was not a scarecrow or a hog, but the body of a black man. Puffy flesh bulged around the rope under his armpits, the head lolled. The face was unrecognisable as a face, the only thing clear the yellow ear of corn stuck between the pink sponge that had been the lips.

A stirring of breeze puffed down at them from the cliffs. Blackwood stood holding the tiller, watching for the wind across the water, his whole body twisted away from what he had seen. The wind met them and the *Queen* leapt forward, the sail bulging and the sheets taut. Thornhill took a breath to speak but thought better of it.

When Blackwood spoke, his voice was raspy with a press of feeling. *Ain't nothing in this world just for the taking*, he said. He spat over the side and stared away at where the water crinkled into glare towards the west. *A man got to pay a fair price for taking*, he said. *Matter of give a little, take a little.*

Thornhill watched the mangroves passing, the simple curve of the ridge against the sky. He could hear only the small sound

of the boat, its foot sliding through the glassy water. It had become a still, pearly afternoon, the tide filling up nicely, bearing the Queen along.

Near the end of a long reach with a high unbroken wall of cliff to starboard, Blackwood pointed up ahead. *Got my place up there a ways.* The words came out in clots, as if something in him wanted to tell but something else did not. *Where that First Branch come in.* Thornhill peered forward and saw where another stream, glinting among reeds, veered off the main river. He waited out the silence. *Got myself a pardon, be two years this summer,* Blackwood said, and let out a roar of mirth. *Best pardon money could buy.* He stared forward gripping a stay. There was no sound but the rustle of the water under the keel. *Picked meself out a hundred acres,* he said at last. *Five mile up the Branch, Blackwood's Lagoon they call it.* He was speaking more to himself than Thornhill. *Away a ways up.*

The way he said it, it was a poem.

The thought of his place seemed to have allowed him to forget Smasher Sullivan. His mouth was soft, savouring the words, and there was a private pleasure on his face as he gazed ahead. *Catch a few fish, grow a bit of corn, brew a bit of rotgut, I can please meself.*

In Thornhill's world, a person might own some sticks of furniture, a few clothes, perhaps a lighter. That was wealth. But no one that Thornhill knew personally had bought so much as a yard of land. Even Mr Middleton had not owned the freehold on the narrow house in Swan Lane.

Yet here was Blackwood, a lighterman and convicted lag, no better in any particular than he was himself, owning a stretch of ground. Not simply owning it: naming it after himself!

*How's that?* Thornhill said, astonished. *They give you a hundred acres just for the asking?*

Blackwood glanced at him. *Not a matter of ask up here mate,* he said. *Get your backside on a bit of ground, sit tight. That's all the asking you got to do.*