

It was a sad scrabbling place, this town of Sydney. The old hands called it The Camp, and in 1806 that was pretty much still what it was: a half-formed temporary sort of place.

Twenty years before it had been one of the hundreds of coves hidden within a great body of water as complicated as a many-fingered hand. One hot afternoon in the January of 1788, with big white birds screeching from the trees by the shore, a captain of the Royal Navy had sailed into that body of water and chosen a cove with a stream of fresh water and fingernail of beach. He had stepped out of the boat and caused the Union Jack to be hoisted on a spar leaning crookedly upright, and declared this place part of the extended territories of King George III, Sovereign of Great Britain, Defender of the Faith. Now it was called Sydney Cove, and it had only one purpose: to be a container for those condemned by His Majesty's courts.

On the September morning that the *Alexander* dropped its anchor in Sydney Cove, it took William Thornhill some time to see what was around him. The felons were brought up on deck but, after so long in the darkness of the hold, the light pouring out of the sky was like being struck in the face. Sharp points of brilliance winked up from water that glittered hard and bright. He

master, in this case his wife, at whatever employment might be found. He was in all respects a slave, obliged to do his master's bidding. The felon would thus remain a prisoner, but the master would do the work of a guard. In the case of a family, it meant that the whole household would be able to support itself and come off the Government Stores.

His Majesty's mercy, saving so many from the noose, was made possible by this ingenious and thrifty scheme.

From that first afternoon, then, the Thornhills were on their own.

Steep and bony, bristling with slabs of rock, the hill where their hut had been pointed out to them was inhabited by humans as a cake might be by ants. A few lived in huts, but most had made dwellings beneath the overhanging rocks that stepped up the slope. Some had hung a bit of canvas up by way of wall, others had leaned a few boughs against the opening. The Thornhills' wattle-and-daub hut by contrast was grand, even though it provided no luxuries beyond the mud-caked walls and the floor of damp earth.

The three of them stood at the doorway looking in. None seemed in any hurry to enter. Little Willie had got his thumb into his mouth and stared glassily, avoiding Thornhill's glance. *Least it ain't a cave*, Sal said at last. He could hear the effort in her voice, a pitch too high. *Not a worry in the world*, he made himself say. The boy twisted his head to look up at him, then buried his face, thumb and all, into her skirts. *Snug as anything*. To him his words sounded as hollow as a man talking in a barrel.

The sun was slipping behind the ridge and damp air was beginning to shift down the hill. A man and a woman came along the hillside from another cave towards the Thornhill family. The man sported a huge matted beard but was otherwise quite bald, the woman had a sunk-in toothless mouth and a skirt that hung in shreds around her calves. Both their faces were dark with dirt and

they staggered with drink. The man carried a smouldering stick, the woman a kettle. *Here*, the woman said. *We bring youse this, lovey, help youse out.*

Thornhill thought it was a joke, because the kettle had a wooden bottom. Laughed in the woman's face, but she did not laugh back. *Dig a hole*, she started. A hiccup that jerked her whole chest stopped her. *Light the fire. Round it*. She had to close her eyes from the force of the hiccups. *Good as gold*, she cried. Came right up to Thornhill to lay a hand along his arm, so he smelled her, rum and filth. *Good as fucking gold!*

The man was so drunk his eyeballs were swivelling around in his head. He shouted in a booming voice, as if the Thornhills were half a mile away, *Look out for the poxy savages, matey*, and laughed a gusty laugh full of rum. Then he grew serious and bent at the knees, staggering, to peer at Willie. *They's partial to a tasty bit of victuals like your boy there*. He bent to knead Willie's chubby cheek with his hard fingers, so the boy began to cry and the woman, still hiccupping, dragged the man away.

They cooked the rags of salt pork on sticks in the fire and laid them out on pieces of bark by way of plates. Having no pan-nikins, they drank the tea that the woman had given them straight out of the spout. The bread fell apart in their hands but they picked up the crumbs from the ground and ate them, feeling grains of dirt crunching between their teeth.

The baby, sucking noisily on Sal's tit, was the only Thornhill to finish the meal with a full belly.

They sat on the ground outside the hut in the dusk, looking down at the place they had come to. From up here on the hillside the settlement was laid out plain. It was a raw scraped little place. There were a few rutted streets, either side of the stream threading its way down to the beach, but beyond them the buildings were connected by rough tracks like animals' runs, as kinked among the rocks and trees as the trees themselves. Down by the water was