

Chasm Chase

Port Darwin, Australia – September 1842

“I’d like to rent a couple horses,” Ann said to the inn keeper. “Do you have two available?”

“I’m sorry Miss,” said the woman behind the counter. “What’s your name?”

“The name is Catherine,” Ann lied.

“Well, Catherine, we only keep two horses,” said the lady. “My husband is out feeding them now but we need them for our own transportation.”

“Is there a farm around that may be able to help me out?” asked Ann.

“Up the road until you can’t see no more, then double that, Mr. Hilla can probably help you out. Watch out for the snakes up there though. A quick nip and you’ll be seein’ triple and dead by morning.”

Ann heeded the warning as she walked out onto the dusty street in front of the inn. She tapped Kenneth on the shoulder, from behind, and he jumped.

“Don’t do that,” he whined. “You scared me.”

“You’re such a baby,” she said. “With all we’ve been through you would think you’d toughen up a bit. What are you, eight-years-old?”

“Hey, lay off. I’m twenty-one,” he retorted.

Kenneth looked at least twenty-one, although, in fact, he was just eighteen. Ann knew that he wasn’t likely twenty-one. Just five years earlier, when they met, Kenneth had told her that he was fifteen. She wasn’t really sure that he knew how old he was so Ann simply accepted whatever he said.

Ann was now twenty-six and a veteran weaver of tales. Some might call her a liar, bandit or crook. Born a Scot, she moved to North America and was now on the run in Australia. Ann had become smart when it came to life but her red-haired Scottish rage could sometimes land her in trouble.

Ann's friend, Kenneth was not a thinker. He met Ann back in Upper Canada when he was just thirteen and had followed her every move, request or command since then. Ann's choices had landed Kenneth in some difficult situations in the past but he found her fun and unpredictable.

"Follow me," said Ann. "When the inn keeper leaves the barn, we make a dash and those horses are ours."

"We're going to steal his horses?" questioned Kenneth.

"We need horses," said Ann. "If we are going to get out to the gorge in Nitmiluk, we need horses, and look, he has even saddled them up."

Just as Ann had instructed, when the man who owned the inn left, the two scoundrels sprinted into the barn. Kenneth ran directly behind the first horse and leaped, trying to hop on the smaller horse from the back end. Instead, he planted his face directly into the horse's tail.

Ann hissed at him, "stop messin' around and get on that horse."

Ann put her foot into the stirrup and then threw her right leg over the horse's back. Within seconds she was riding into the woods, hooting, "Wild Annie Watt rides again!"

Kenneth caught up ten minutes later, once Ann slowed her horse to a walk through the forest. Various species of trees and plants surrounded her and Kenneth. A dry creek bed lay to the north side of the trail they were creating. The pair rode in silence for a long time until Kenneth voiced his thoughts.

"Do you think it was a good idea to leave Haggerty and Badger behind?" he asked. "I mean,

they helped us escape but they don't seem very nice and if they know we're going after the treasure, they're not going to be happy if they find us."

Henrietta Haggerty and Charlotte Badger were a couple of poddy dodgers that helped Ann and Kenneth escape into the vast Australian land.

"Relax," said Ann. "Those two are just a couple of cattle thieves. They aren't dangerous. Besides, we marooned them on that island beach. They are stuck on a white sand haven with nobody around. Captain Cook already told the world there is nothing on those islands. At best, they'll be picked up by the penal colony guards. At worst, they die there. We have nothing to worry about."

After riding through four sunsets, Ann and Kenneth arrived at the top of a massive canyon, filled with green water, like emeralds were shining from the bottom. They took their time to find a trail to the gorge floor, never assuming that Haggerty and Badger were only a day behind them.

The intrepid pair crossed the gorge river by hopping from rock to rock. Ann, as always, led the way. "One, two, three, jump," she repeated aloud for each hop.

"Whoa, this is a big gap," said Kenneth, as they looked toward the fourth boulder, sticking out of the water, only the size of an adult snapping turtle.

"No problem," Ann called over her shoulder as she leapt forward. Her left foot hit the rock and she clenched every muscle in her body, working to balance herself. She stood atop the wet stone in a pose like a ballerina with her back leg in the air. It seemed like over two minutes to Ann but it was actually only about twenty seconds until she felt steady and put her right foot down. As her toes hit the rock, she slipped and fell backwards with a splash, into the shallow river.

Kenneth howled with laughter, pointing and slapping his knee. "That was fantastic!" he yelled toward Ann. He pointed and exaggerated his laugh so that he sounded like a kookaburra.

Ann swam toward Kenneth and splashed around wildly. When she reached his rock, Ann reached up and grabbed his pant leg, pulling Kenneth into the river. He went under the water quickly and then popped up, coughing and gasping for air.

“I can’t swim,” he yelled, as Ann did her own best portrayal of a kookaburra.

Ann grabbed Kenneth under his right arm and dragged him, swimming toward the west shore of the river. She pushed him onto the bank and then pulled herself up onto the red dirt.

“Hey look,” said Kenneth, pointing, as Ann pulled her feet from the water. “What’s that?”

Ann looked back into the river and saw a long dinosaur-like animal with the biggest set of teeth she could have ever imagined.

“I don’t know,” said Ann. “I’ve never seen that before. I’ve heard they have all sorts of weird animals here. It could be a kangaroo, a platypus, or maybe a crocodile. I’ve never seen any of them.

Just look at those teeth. No more swimming in the river.”

“Not going to be an issue, here,” said Kenneth. “I didn’t swim in the river this time.”

“Darn it!” Ann scoffed, scrambling through her pockets. “I lost two of my pennywort seeds when I fell in the river.”

Less than twenty-four hours after Ann had stolen the horses, Henrietta Haggerty and Charlotte Badger showed up at the inn at Port Darwin. The two women walked in and greeted the lady behind the desk.

“Hello ma’am,” said Badger. “We’re hoping you can help us out.”

“I certainly will try,” said the lady.

“Well ma’am,” said Badger, “we’re looking for a couple of people. A young man and a woman.”

Haggerty pulled a rolled piece of paper out of her satchel, unrolled it and showed it to the woman behind the desk.

“Wild Annie, huh?” said the inn keeper. “I definitely recognize her, the larrikin. I don’t recognize the man though. The woman called herself Catherine. The bloke she was with looked older than this poster shows. More weathered.”

Haggerty and Badger knew they had the right people.

“Could you tell us when you saw them last?” asked Badger.

“Just yesterday,” said the lady. “They stole our horses.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Badger, tossing a gold coin on the counter.

The two cattle rustlers that Ann thought she had left for dead were now on the hunt.

“Tell me how we know there is treasure out here, again,” said Kenneth, as he and Ann were slowly climbing down a ten-foot rock face.

“You were told the story on the island,” said Ann. “Captain James Cook found Blackbeard’s gold on the island of Newfoundland. Cook brought the gold to Australia when he founded the first penal colony at Botany Bay. Cook’s ship got stuck on the massive barrier reef up along the north-east coast. When his crew stopped the ship from sinking, Captain Cook brought the ship into this river and then he hid the gold in one of the caves here in the gorge. Cook never got the chance to return.”

The story, as it turned out, was more accurate than anyone could have imagined. It took less than seventeen hours for Kenneth and Ann to scour the caves in the gorge and find a large wooden chest. The wood was definitely old, full of gouges and scrapes. The hinges were rusted but the lock gave immediate proof that this was Cook’s treasure, Blackbeard’s gold. The lock was a standard shape for the time, a large shield. On the shield, a scull

and crossbones was raised out of the metal. The most telling aspect of the lock was a raised beard of flames on the bottom of the scull, matching the legend of Blackbeard's fiery facial hair.

Kenneth picked up a rock and threw it at the lock, hoping to break it open.

"Don't throw the rock, dumb-dumb," screamed Ann.

Ann picked up a rock the size of a baseball and started banging away on the metal lock. The lock did not open. She continued to bang on the lock. The stone colliding on the metal lock created sparks that flew off the raised beard, creating the effect of actual flames. The lock still did not break.

"Stop," called Kenneth. "Just wait. We shouldn't break the lock here anyway. It's better that the chest is locked until we get it to the top of the gorge.

For the first time since they met back in Upper Canada, Kenneth said something that helped.

“You’re right,” said Ann, with her hand held above her head, ready to strike the lock again. She lowered her arm. “Grab a handle.”

Kenneth took hold of the handle on the left side of the treasure chest. Ann took the right side. They lifted together then dropped the chest back to the dirt.

“It’s way too heavy,” said Kenneth.

“Drag it then,” replied Ann. “Get it to the gorge wall. I’ll climb up, tie a rope to one of the horses, then throw down an end. You tie the rope to the chest and the horse can pull it up.”

The pair did just that. Ann climbed out of the gorge, tied a rope to her horse and threw the end down to Kenneth. He attempted to tie a bowline around one handle. Kenneth looped the end of the rope to create a hole. Then he brought the working end out of the hole, around itself and back down the hole – like a rabbit coming out of a hole, around a tree, and back into the hole – but the knot slipped

loose. He had started the initial loop the wrong way. Kenneth tried again but the knot slipped again.

Ann called down from the top of the gorge, "What's the hold up down there, Baby Face?" Ann took the chance to poke fun at the name that the authorities gave Kenneth on the 'Wanted Poster'. The same poster that Haggerty and Badger showed the inn keeper.

"One minute," he yelled back up. He tried the knot a third time. Make a loop, bring the rabbit out of the hole, around the tree, down the hole. This time, the knot held tight. "Yank away!"

Ann hit the rear end of the horse and it jerked forward, then stopped. She clenched her fists and growled. Ann took the reins and led the horse. Slowly, the chest began to rise, scraping against the rock wall. Small pebbles bounced down the wall and hit Kenneth on the head. He jumped backward. Kenneth leaned back and watched as Blackbeard's chest continued to scrape up the wall. About five feet from the top of the gorge wall, the chest stopped moving.

“What’s happening?” called Kenneth.

He did not get an answer back. Atop the gorge wall, Ann walked the horse into a problem.

“Hey there, Wild Annie,” Badger yelled, as she strolled toward the horse, Hideous Haggerty by her side.

“How did you get here? How did you find me?” Ann asked, nervously.

“You’re dead,” said Haggerty, ignoring Ann’s questions.

Haggerty ran at Ann, putting a shoulder into Ann’s ribs. Ann and Haggerty crashed to the ground. The horse reared and the rope holding the treasure chest snapped, sending the chest crashing onto the rocks below. It bounced once and then splashed into the gorge river. Kenneth looked, astonished, not sure what to do.

Atop the gorge, Ann and Haggerty rolled in the red dirt, wrestling like the Greco-Romans. Badger peered over the edge of the gorge wall, looking for the treasure. Wild Annie and Hideous Haggerty

rolled toward her. Suddenly, a large black and golden Death Adder slithered out from behind a rock and spooked the second horse. The horse began to run in circles and came close to the edge of the gorge. In the chaos, the horse kicked Haggerty and Ann, then bumped Badger. Charlotte Badger teetered toward the edge. She grabbed onto Haggerty, who still had Ann in a bear hug. All three women toppled over the edge of the gorge and disappeared.

“What did you say the women’s names were?” asked the sheriff.

“I don’t know the older two,” replied the woman behind the reception counter at the inn. “They came by later looking for the young lady who called herself Catherine. Said she was headed out to the gorge, she did.”

“How do you spell that?” asked the sheriff. “I want to make sure my report is correct.”

“I’m no genius speller or nothin’,” said the inn keeper. “I think I would spell it K A T H E R I N E.”

“Well, if you think these women were up to no good,” the sheriff continued, “I’ll ride out and see if I can find this Katherine at the gorge.”