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Book-Length Novel

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BOOMERANG

By
George Whitley



They tore the veil of mystery that had hidden the ancient secret of the Queen of Night, and found the answer to whether her pale smile had



promised Life—or ruthless Death. . . .

THE old man sat in the thin winter sunshine, watching the Manly Ferry come alongside at the Circular Quay. Off Fort MacQuarie she lost the wind, drifted sluggishly until she was abeam of the shallow gully between piles of fuzed rubble that was still called Argyle Street, then hung helpless and motionless. The old man smiled as he watched the passengers struggling with the long, heavy sweeps. "In the old days," he said to the boy at his side, "they'd 'a' asked fer their money back. But then things was dif'rent here in Sydney. If yer didn't like the ferry yer could allus get a car over the bridge—an' look at it now!" His voice shook with senile grief as he gestured toward the broken towers, the straggle of rusted, twisted girders between them like some monstrous, leggy insect defiling the blue waters of the harbour with its death throes. "Look wot them devils did to our bridge!"

The boy was not listening. He was playing with a flat piece of wood shaped like half a pair of parentheses. It had been given him by the old blackfellow who called himself King Tommy, who was reputed to be the last of his race in Australia. Trying to imitate the practised skill of his aboriginal mentor, he threw the toy. It flew with lazy grace, circled slowly. The boy clapped his hands when he saw that he had at last mastered the knack

of making it behave as it should. He reached up childish hands to catch it, succeeded only in tipping it, destroying its equilibrium, so that it fell, with a loud clatter, onto the old man's bald head.

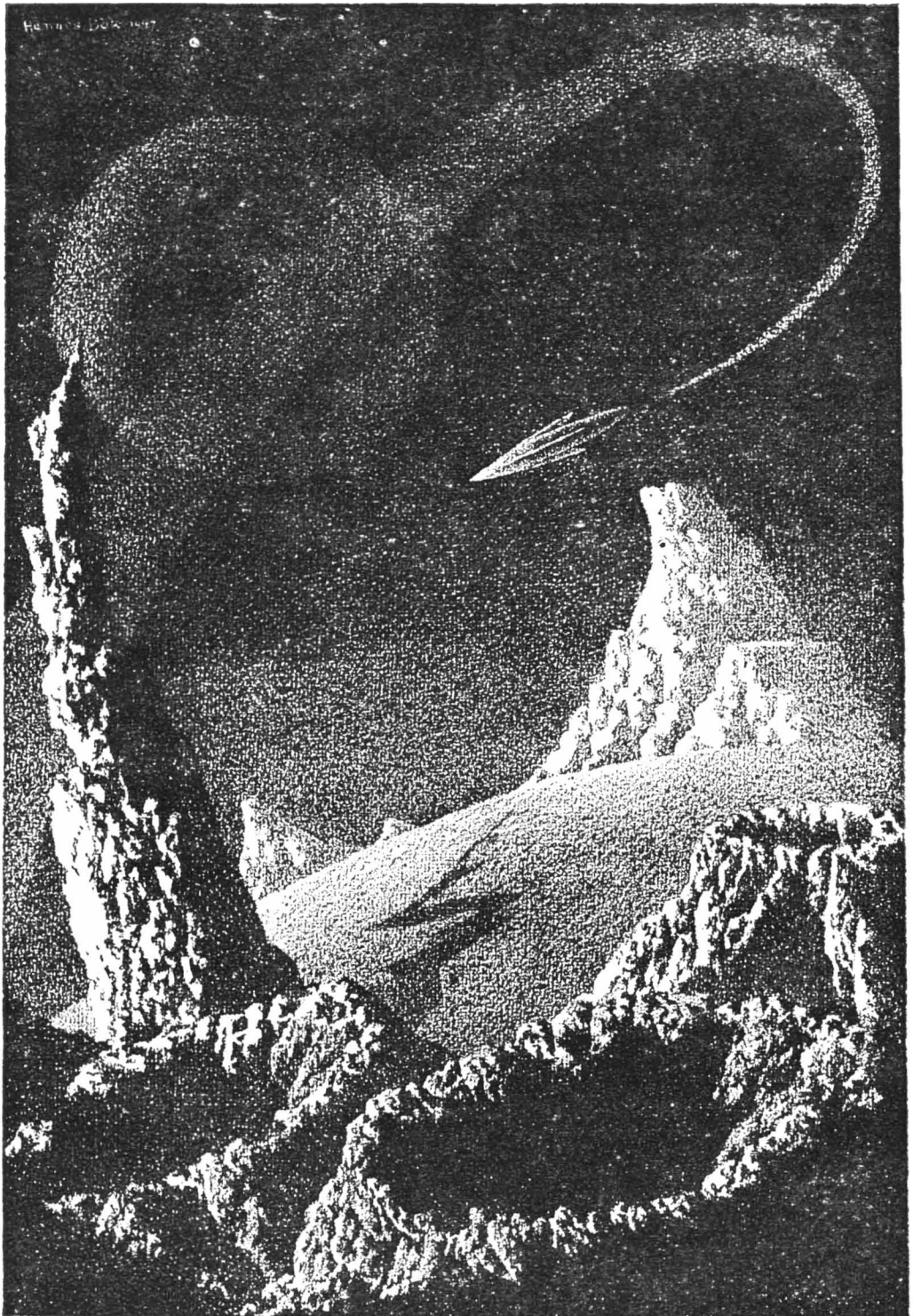
He rose wrathfully to his feet.

"Wot's this yer playin' with? A boomerang? An' 'oo gave it yer? That old rascal Tommy? 'E should 'a' been killed off arter the Risin'—same as all 'is cobbbers were. Not too late now—the League committee allus does wot I wants 'em to. . . . Arter all, I'm the only one in the bunch wot 's a Returned Soldier. . . ."

"Yer wouldn't 'ave Tommy shot, Granddad, would yer?"

The old man smiled at the boy.

"'Course not, Dave. 'Im an' me is the only ones left wot can remember the old days. . . . I saw this 'arbour when it was full o' ships—ships from the old country, ships from the States, takin' away our mutton an' wool, bringin' ammo for the war. . . . An' there'd be the big liners—millions o' men they'd take. An' all for the war. An' then, when the war was over, we 'ad the big ships bringin' our men back. . . . Yair . . . them was the days. An' there was the wireless, so yer could listen ter the races all Saturdee arternoon without settin' foot outside the boozier; an' there was the pleshers. . . . Oh, yer've no idee, Dave! An' it was all along o' somethin' like this"—he lifted the boomerang in his withered



"There was these rockets goin' up all ther time. . ."

hand—"that it all finished. We killed the scientists an' the engineers—an' there was a book burnin' that'd 'a' made old 'Tler look silly. . . . An' we smashed all the machines. An' all 'a'cause o' this. . . ."

"But wot did 'appen, Granddad? Father Coogan says that we made ourselves wings an' flew too high, an' the angels sent down fire from 'Eaven an' burned us all up. Well, nearly all."

"Just wot the Father would say. 'E's a good man in 'is own way, Dave, an' 'e does 'is job. But 'e wasn't 'ere when it 'appened—wasn't even thought of. An' I was. . . ."

"It all started just arter the war. We was fightin' some little yeller fiends called Japs. Oh, ev'rybody was fightin'—I can't rightly call ter mind 'oo was fightin' which. There was the Pommies an' the Yanks an' the Russians an' the Poles an' the Froggies. . . . An' back in the old country they was fightin' old 'Tler an' 'is Jerries—but 'e got knocked out afore the Japs. An' we all thought it'd take years to finish *them* off—an' then the Yanks come along wi' some-thing they called an atomic bomb. They dropped it from airypplanes—ships wot flew in the sky, they was—an' one o' these bombs'd wipe out a city. An' then the Japs threw their 'ands in.

"Now, in the other war, in the old country, the Jerries 'ad been usin' some things called rockets. They wasn't the same as airypplanes—they could fly a lot 'igher an' a helluva lot faster. They used 'em ter blitz Lunnon all the way from Berlin—that was where 'Tler lived—an' they reckon that if Joe—'e was 'ead o' the Russians—'adn't got there in time ter stop 'im, 'e'd 'a' used 'em ter blitz Noo York an' Sydney. An' they allus reckoned that they could use 'em ter fly ter the moon. . . ." He looked up to the eastern sky where low, pale and remote hung the first objective in man's drive to interplanetary empire. "Yair, the moon. But 'Tler an' 'is Jerries never done it—we took all their rockets away from 'em. . . ."

"Well, these 'ere atomic bombs, they was mixed up in it. It seems that they used some stuff called U235—wot it was I disremember. But it went off very loud an' strong—about an 'undred times as strong as gunpowder. Maybe more. Any'ow, they got it ter burn slow like, an', when they 'ad it 'ow they wanted it, they could use it instead o' coal or petrol or any o' them ter drive the machines. Yair. . . . We 'ad machines for *everything* in them days. A man needn't soll 'is 'ands—an' if 'e did a machine'd wash 'em for 'im!

"An' this 'ere U235 was wot the rocket jokers was waitin' for. With that in their rockets there was no limit to 'ow far they could go—the moon was nuthin'. They could go ter the sun if they wanted—or the stars. But they wanted ter go ter the moon first, just ter see wot it was reely like that 'igh up.

"**B**UT it was a year or two, at least, afore men went up in the rockets. They sent 'em up at first without crews—fifty miles, two 'undred miles, a thousand miles. An' they 'ad 'em packed full 'o all kinds o' gadgets like yer dad's thermometer—so as they could see wot they'd 'ave ter wear an' so on when they got up there. Then they started sendin' 'em round the moon. These 'uns 'ad automatic cameras—takin' picshers all the time they was as they flew round. Soon they 'ad better maps of it all than o' many a place around 'ere. . . ."

"But is it very big, Granddad? Is it as big as Garden Island?"

"Bigger. Lots bigger. Why, it must be very near as big as Tasmania—though it doesn't look it from 'ere.

"Any'ow, there was these rockets goin' up the 'ole time. Yer'd see 'em at night—the distant ones like shootin' stars goin' the wrong way, the ones from close to like great spears o' blue fire pokin' up inter the sky. An' now an' again we'd see one o' the things comin' down, danglin' on the end of its parachute an' lookin' as 'armless as a little ole man under a big umbrella. They was allus very careful that there was none o' that U235 left in their motors when they got back. I don't think that even the clever 'uns understood it properly—they was all more'n 'arf scared. But they 'ad ter go on playin' with it just the same.

"Well, they got tired o' sendin' their rockets *round* the moon; they 'ad all the photygraphs an' maps they wanted. So somebody—I can't remember rightly 'oo it was; it was either the Yanks or the Russians—thought they'd try to 'it the moon. So they took one o' their rockets, filled its nose up wi' U235, an' let it go. We didn't see it 'it—not 'ere we didn't. They 'ad it all worked out so as they could watch it from *their* side o' the world. But next night we saw where it 'ad 'it. Ye've seen that big, black 'ole on the full moon, with all the lines runnin' out like a spider's web? Tyko, it's called. It looked about the same way back when nobody 'ad even 'eard o' rockets—but there wasn't that big black 'ole bang in the middle. The

Russians—or 'ooever it was—did that when they scored a bull.

"Nuthin' would please 'em then but ter send men ter the moon. It was all arranged friendly like atween the dif'rent countries. Ev'rybody was ter start at the proper time—even to allowin' those on the side o' the earth away from the moon a bit o' grace. It was all so as nobody could say 'ow the moon belonged to 'Im a'cause 'e was there first. It was to belong to *everybody*.

"At first there was ter be only one rocket from each country—then ev'ry city an' big town wanted its own ship. For months the sky was alive with little 'uns as the pilots an' crews practised takin' off an' landin'. Just crazy, they all was. An' there was all kinds o' nuts even crazier, paradin' the streets with big placards sayin' as 'ow we'd bring the wrath o' Gawd down on us. Most o' the parsons, though, was in favour—an' all the reel big rockets was blessed by bishops.

"I went out ter see the one they was buildin' at Mascot. She was a beaut, she was. *Southern Cross*, they called 'er. An' there she was, standin' up like a big tower o' silv'ry metal on the four 'uge fins at 'er tall. I was only a youngster in them days—an' I'd 'a' given *anything* to 'a' been one o' 'er crew. Don't know as 'ow I wouldn't even now. . . . There was a sheila stowed away in 'er—they found out arter they blasted off. The pore little gal come to a bad end—but so did millions o' people down 'ere wot 'adn't 'er guts. So what?

"Then came the night when all the rockets from all over the world was ter get away. It was dark 'ere—the moon wasn't far off new. It was all worked out so as when they landed they'd be able ter flash light signals — some'ow the wireless wouldn't work over all that distance. Somethin' about 'eavy layers in the straterspear or somethin'. I can't rightly remember. . . .

"There wasn't a soul in Sydney indoors that night. Even the people in the 'orspitals was out on the verandas to watch. An' the domain was solid w' the crowd, an' all the beaches. An' it's a wonder the bridge didn't fall down w' the weight o' men, women an' children on it.

"At first it was like VJ Day—people singin' an' drinkin' an' fightin'. There was shop winders smashed, an' there was bon-fires blazin' in ev'ry street. One o' them jokers w' the placards about the wrath o' Gawd would 'a' burned alive if someone 'adn't called out the military. The Johns

couldn't 'andle it. As it was, there was sixteen people killed an' Gawd knows 'ow many taken to 'orspital.

"But round about eleven things quietened down a bit. Soon the only sound was the Salvation Army band playin' some Moody an' Sankey 'ymn tune or other, very soft and mournful. An' that died away gradual like, softer an' softer, till there wasn't a sound. Not even a dawg barkin'. An' the stars looked down, 'an the Southern Cross 'ung bright in the sky. There was a sheila next ter me, an' she was 'arf cryin'. "Just think of it," she kept on sayin', 'our *Southern Cross*'ll soon be up there. *Our Southern Cross*. My boy friend—'e's navigator of 'er. . . ." Can't say as 'ow it was true or not—there was an awful lot o' bums that night cadgin' drinks by sayin' they 'ad friends an' relatives in the rocket ship, that they knew a lot more than wot they reelly did.

"I remembers lookin' at my watch. Eleven forty-five, it was. Quarter to twelve. An' then, right across the four bright stars o' the Cross, flashes a streak o' dazzlin' blue. It was them cows in Melbourne beatin' the gun. A howl went up from the crowd—if anybody 'ad been mug enough ter let on as 'e was from Victoria 'e'd 'a' been dead for sure. They'd 'a' 'ung 'im from the bridge. . . . But if there was any Victorians present they 'ad the sense ter keep their dirty big mouths shut.

"But the boys at Mascot wasn't ter be caught nappin'. Couldn't 'a' been five minutes arter we saw *Matthew Flinders* streakin' up an' away that *Southern Cross* took the air. Yer've never seed a light like it—yer never will. I sneaked a look at that sheila next ter me—'er wot said 'er boy friend was in the crew—an' as much light seemed ter be comin' from 'er face as from the sky. She wouldn't 'a' changed places w' the Queen o' England.

"But that light from the sky. . . . All our faces was raw the next day as though we'd been lyin' out at Bondi for a week, starin' straight at the sun. An' we 'eard 'er, too. Like all the boilers in the world blowin' off steam all together—but wot's the use? *You* wouldn't know a boiler if one came an' shook 'ands with yer. . . .

"An' we saw the rockets to the north an' the south an' the west, as Perth an' Brisbane, Adelaide an' Hobart got theirs up an' away. Pig Island was slow on the draw—but they got 'em off just afore midnight. Very far away they was to the east'ard—but very bright. It was like as if Gawd 'ad dipped 'Is pen inter the sun an' drawn thin

lines o' fire up the sky. Wonder is that they were able to get up at all w' the weight o' their tongue-twistin' names. . . . *Taranakimarama*. . . .

"An then we all sung *Advance, Australia Fair* an' *Waltzin' Matilda* an' went 'ome.

"It was only three or four days' run ter the moon, in them days. Some of us got up early the mornin' the papers an' the wireless said the first rockets'd be landin'. Just afore sunrise up come the last sliver o' the old moon—with the side where it was still night shinin' very faint an' ghostly. An' then we saw it all lit up as though all the bomber fleets in the world was droppin' parachute flares on a target. It was like a funny sort o' dawn—it *was* a dawn. It was the dawn of an empire like the old jokers wot first come out 'ere in their wooden ships never dreamed of. An' yet . . . I likes ter think as 'ow they'd 'a' been the first ter volunteer for the rockets.

"An' then the sun come up an' we couldn't see no more.

"IT WAS arter that as people got the idee as things wasn't just right. It'd all been fixed up that the crews o' the rockets was ter set up big signalin' lamps, that they was ter flash news to Earth o' 'ow-things was goin'. There *was* an awful lot o' flashin' goin' on for quite a while—but it wasn't searchlights. Then there was one lamp started jabberin' away in Morse. They never found out 'oo it was—the operator was in too much of a 'urry ter send 'is call sign. The message was in English—but then, there was the Pommies, the Yanks, the Pig Islanders, the Afrikanders . . . oh, Gawd knows 'ow many. An' 'e was a damn rotten sender, too. They tried all they knew, but they couldn't make 'ead or tail of 'is signal. There was somethin' about somebody attackin' somebody—but 'oo was fightin' which, they never found out.

"An' then it come out that most o' the rockets was armed. O' course they all said as it was just in case there was savages or wild animals on the moon—but ev'rybody knew as 'ow there wasn't no air an' no life of any kind up there. Then there was some 'oo said as 'ow we should never 'ave let the Jerries send a ship. An' there was plenty as said as 'ow Joe meant ter grab all o' the moon for the Russians. There might be big mines o' this stuff called uranium—an' 'ooever 'ad that 'd 'ave the world. Yair . . . *an'* the stars.

"An' so we was all dreadin' that we'd 'ave another war on our 'ands afore we knew

where we was. Ev'rybody was diggin' deep shelters an' learnin' first aid—an' in ev'ry country they was gettin' out the war rockets, settin' 'em up so as one little gent with a push of 'is finger could blitz a city 'arf the world away. An' they 'ad other gadgets, too. Things wot could see the rockets comin' long afore you or me could, that'd send other rockets up ter meet 'em. But the rockets wot *did* come they come too fast.

"If they meant ter 'it Sydney—which I think they did—their aim wasn't too clever. A good two 'undred mlle wide they must 'a' been—but even then it was bad enough. One moment a fine, quiet Sunday mornin'—an' then scorchin' light, screamin' fire an' all the thunders o' Judgment Day. Years later, it seemed, there was the shriekin' people trapped in the blazin' ruins, the smoulderin' corpses in the street—an' over all the sickenin' stink o' burnt meat. . . . It must 'a' been the same in all the other cities—except the lucky ones wot got a direct 'it.

"Our people didn't know 'oo done it—but they loosed off the war rockets just the same. Some they sent to Tokyo, some to Berlin. An' Moscow. They even say as 'ow some silly fools fired one at Melbourne. But they was all too late. . . .

It must 'a' been a day or two later that we—wot was left of us—saw the rocket comin' down. It wasn't a war rocket, it was one o' the big 'uns like we sent ter the moon. An, she wasn't comin' down on 'er jets—she was driftin' in slow an' careful like under 'er parachute. Ben Davis—'im wot was killed in the Risin'—'ad a launch wot was still workin'; it was afore they smashed the machines. An' 'im an me an' a coupla others went out ter meet 'er. She come down just off the 'eads, an' as we crept up to 'er through the stinkin' mess o' dead fish we could see the name on 'er side—*Southern Cross*. The bright metal was all tarnished an' battered, an' someone 'ad been weldin' on rough patches. But wot I was mainly wonderin' was wot 'er navigator'd say when 'e 'eard about 'is shella.

"The last I seen of 'er she was lyin' in Martin Place along o' all the others. I'm sure it *was* 'er—she musta 'idden 'er face in 'er 'ands—it wasn't charred very much. . . .

"Well, old Ben 'e brought 'is launch alongside the rocket. We could see a joker inside the green'ouse in the nose—an' when 'e saw us 'e come down an' opened

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BOOMERANG

(Continued from page 118)

a door in the side. 'E was the only one left of 'er crew. An' 'ow 'e made it 'ome Gawd alone knows—'e was only 'arf a man. 'E was in a worse state than some o' the dead 'uns we'd been clearin' away all that mornin'.

"We got 'im ashore. Wot 'appened to the rocket we never see. I think she sunk. But we never looked back at 'er. By this time the book burnin' an' such had started—they was goin' inter any 'ouses wot was still standin' and bringin' out books an' throwin' 'em inter the flames of them as wasn't.

"An' there was some 'oo wanted ter throw 'im inter the fire along o' the books. But there was enough of us ter 'old off the mob until 'e finished 'is story. 'E died, then—so it didn't really much matter whot they did ter 'im. . . .

"All them rockets landed by the big 'ole in Tyko, 'e said. An' there was people up there—if yer can call things like octopussies, people. An' the first rocket the Russians sent—'er wot made the 'ole—played merry 'Ell wi' one o' their underground cities. They mighta laughed *that* off as accidental—but when all the rockets started comin' down all at once they thought it was invasion. . . ."

He picked up the boomerang, threw it in the direction of the moon, pale and remote, the first beachhead in Man's drive to interplanetary empire. The aboriginal toy spun lazily, seemed to hang suspended for an appreciable time, then returned to his outstretched hand.

"But wot *did* 'appen? Wot *did* 'appen, Granddad?"

"Can't yer see? They loaded all them rockets up wi' uranium—an' sent 'em back!"