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The Clay Dreaming

Written by Ed Hillyer

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THE
CLAY
DREAMING

Ed Hillier



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PROLOGUE

King Cole is in motion, and that is all he cares to know as he dashes headlong through the streets of London. Blindly he runs, into a spin of lights.

Hills are lifted up, high towers, high mountains and fenced walls – such shapes as he has ever Dreamed. Behind the lights the buildings pile black on every side, threatening collapse.

One Big Ant-hill Creek, this is.

An Australian Aborigine, Cole is not daunted out Bush. His heart is open, his liver glad. He yells for joy.

Light to dark and dark to light, he races through the arches of the Adelphi along the Strand. The streets, filled with a riotous, milling throng, roar and whirl about at every turn. The window displays of bright-lit theatres and their print-shops draw the crowd – figurines no more real than the coloured shapes they stare at, looking-glass images of themselves.

He hears again the wheezing violins, strains of a waltz, sees the white men all in black, their ladies dressed as flowers, smelling not of flowers. They poke and prod and stare until he leaves them all behind, leaping from that cliff above Pall Mall.

A yellow whoosh of flame turns his head – fire-juggler. Cole collides with a column of smoke. A barrel-organ clatters and rolls. Impressions strike with physical force. His skull throbs and his scalp tingles. No matter – after the suffocating attentions of the Athenaeum Club, to be ignored is bliss.

Every few steps, scenes shift beneath his feet. They take on forms new and more clinging. Cole runs on the spot: it is the great globe that spins. He has to run to keep up.

Cityscape darkening, the frantic passage eventually slackens in its pace. Churning thoroughfares give way to ever-narrower lanes. Away from West End glory, night skies return, clear, with very little cloud.

The air, however, closes, rank with rotting vegetation. Hissing and growling sounds – King Cole finds himself in a downtrodden neighbourhood, much emptied of humanity. The front door of nearly every low, black house gapes onto the highway. Deep within dance kitchen fires, ringed with nightmare silhouettes. Queer animal shapes throw themselves across cracking walls and filthy floors.

He pauses a moment to catch his breath.

Were it not for the gas lamps marking the street corners, jutting from blackened brick, they would be no different from clumps of brushwood. By

their flickering light Cole can make out other shapes crawling the street. Taking a step back, he disappears into a recess.

Their clothing much resembles the fine dress he is lately used to, but grown shabby, ill-fitting and old. Battered top hats fold in on themselves. Huge, filthy overcoats part to show second, no less ragged coats beneath. Baggy trousers, rope-tied at the waist, dissolve around gap-toothed remnants snarling at their feet. These stinking, outsize garments swamp the bodies of the pale and stunted creatures that bear them. Despite their obvious burden, they are spectral and insubstantial beings.

Under his breath Cole murmurs an incantation, a charm to ward off evil. He peels himself off the dank wall, lest he stick there, permanently, like a fly to a sticky-bud.

Borne on an east wind, saltpetre, sharp and corrosive, stings Cole's nostrils. The foetor of burnt flesh and charred bone catches the back of the throat. Beneath his feet, a black slime of damp pyrean ash coats the stone paving. Mixed with the ineffable charcoal scent is an alien tang Cole cannot identify – potassium nitrate.

In spite of it all, he senses the proximity of water.

A scattering of trees brackets a black-spired church, some almost as tall as the terrifying spike at its centre. With a trained eye Cole selects the most suitable. He reaches for one of its lower branches and hauls himself aloft. Setting the soles of his bare feet against the trunk, he grasps it firmly between both hands and, glad of the bark beneath his fingers, executes a nimble ascent. In a matter of seconds he nears the treetop.

Balanced between the high branches, King Cole swings back and forth, surveying the surrounding country – his eternal domain.

Immediately to the southeast he can make out a derelict marketplace, then scraggy patches of open ground. To the south lurk vast waterholes, deeper and darker than any salt lake. From these sprout entire forests of dead wood – ships with sails mournfully struck, tightly bound to skeletal masts. As he watches they in turn show indistinct, run aground amongst the misty ghosts of houses, houses of ghosts.

And beyond them all – to his horror – he sees, coiled and slick, the Great Serpent.

CHAPTER I

Thursday the 21st of May, 1868

THE HUNTING PARTY

‘With Earth’s first Clay They did the Last Man knead,
And there of the Last Harvest sow’d the Seed;
And the first Morning of Creation wrote
What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.’

~ Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

In the beginning is the Song, and the Song is of earth, and the earth is Song.

And the earth is without form, and void: and the blank face of the void is white.

And the singers of the Song pick their way across that void, until another song should reach their ears. Faint, hard to place, it grows steadily louder. Brazen, discordant, the music is new to them – the theme all too evocative: a savage song fit to fire the heart, or to curdle the blood.

Song, and dance – barely discernible smudges separate out from the solidifying plenum. Dots here and there in the nowhere, the vibrations begin to take on physical form.

The brute chorus, more urgent now, is calling all of Creation forth.

Gnowee, the Emu’s egg, is born from the land. The darkness divides from the light. Etched across this new horizon are the shadow-sequences of Dreaming. Silhouettes, they loom, assuming substance: becoming...

...a tree...

...a startled bird...

...a serried rank of scarlet jackets.

The North Downs of Kent, a lush, undulating landscape, lay couched in morning mists. No rain fell, but the clods of saturated earth exhaled moist breath. The sun was little more than a bright disc, suspended, its heat remote.

It took Time to burn a hole through the air.

Crisp, white chill gave way gradually to dew. Dawn opaque as pearl turned a translucent opal – a child’s marble, red shift tense within.

Hue, and cry – a pack of foxhounds romped across rough pasture. Giving tongue, they announced their quarry cornered; a huntsman’s horn quavered in reply – sounds neither of triumph, nor of mourning, but imbued with the hollowness of each.

In a copse at the base of a steep slope, the Master of Hounds caught up with his charges. Ringed tight about a dense covert, their white bodies thrashed like maggots in a wound. They yelped and snapped and scratched and howled.

‘Ware Riot!’ the Master called.

Crashing through barriers of undergrowth, the leading body lurched to a halt. Hunting pinks pulsing in pallid twilight, the West Kent gathered, eager for the kill. They could taste metal on the air.

The horses reared and circled, huge heads tossing, their eyes rolling; flared nostrils snorted gout of steam. Something lurked in the clump of trees ahead, causing the animals to panic. Stabbing hooves churned the damp ground into a thick paste. Stumbling in the mulch, the frenzied hounds risked being trampled underfoot.

‘Forrard!’ cried the Master. ‘Hoick to’m!’

But his hounds, whining, kept their distance. Smartly he dismounted, strode forward, and brought up his whip to part the curtains of vegetation. Dismayed, he hollered a caution. Taut reins restrained horse and rider from their sudden urge to flee.

Gasps and oaths escaped the ruffled company. Gentleman farmer, lord and lady alike stared, slack-jawed. There was the dead fox, lolling, back broken, held tight in the grip of a black fist. The hand belonged to a man – very obviously a man. A living soul, he rose up, as if of earth itself: formed of the dust of the ground, in their image, after their likeness – and yet shockingly other.

Stark naked in that glade stood a Stone Age relic – an Australian Aborigine.

‘Not just one, but three of the buggers, black as sin!’

CHAPTER II

Thursday the 21st of May, 1868

BACK AND FORTH

‘We must bear in mind that we form a complete social body...a society, in which, by the nature of the case, we must not only learn, but act and live.’

~ Rugby Magazine

‘What the bloody fucking hell do you think you’re playing at? Someone could have been hurt...or worse!’

Athletic and powerful in his movements, Charles Lawrence paced the front of a small provincial schoolroom. His honest face was thin and weather-beaten; even so, he appeared younger than his 40-odd years.

From outside, the sharp smack of willow gave rise to cheers. Lawrence raised his voice to match.

‘That’s right!’ he shouted. ‘Hang your woolly heads, you black sheep! Hang ’em in shame, as well you might! All excepting you of course, eh, Your Majesty?’

Scattered amongst the facing school desks sat the objects of his scorn: Dick-a-Dick, Mosquito and King Cole were the three Australian Aborigines who had startled the local fox hunt early that same morning. Each was dressed in matching flannels, shirt, and waistcoat. Dick-a-Dick sported a jacket that barely stretched across his muscles, and a vest considerably fancy. They otherwise wore casual clothing of a sort that might as well have been sacking – baggy and cooling, and perfectly anonymous. If not for their midnight-dark skin they might have passed for ordinary workmen.

The infantile and exaggerated postures of the pair seated nearest to Lawrence further distinguished them. Crouched at odd angles in a vain attempt to hide behind child-sized desks, they raised folded arms and peered – yes, sheepishly – through the chinks of their parted fingers.

The classroom was bright, built entirely of bleached pine, and redolent with stale schoolboy sweat. Large windows down one side overlooked a playing field. Closest to these perched King Cole, distracted by the cricket game beyond.

Sensing the approach of his interrogator, Cole snapped to attention and dropped his tousled head. Rapid heartbeats measured the silence.

Lawrence glowered. His clear blue eyes radiated both fire and ice. He took a swift step away.

‘You can’t get painted up and go parading your filthy particulars to all and sundry!’ he said. A dramatic spin of his heel brought him once more face-to-face with the humbled assembly. ‘And whose bright idea was it? Skeeter? Dick-Dick? Was it you, hm, Your Majesty?’

Lawrence waved his hands, imploring.

‘Not that I expect you to tell me. Thick as thieves, you lot, thick as thieves. Wasn’t *my* idea to bring you here.’

Lawrence’s moods were quick, the darkest flush of fury already drained from his rosy complexion. Slackening, his strong tan hands began to fidget. He fingered the book on the teacher’s desk beside him – *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, a recent edition.

Cricket was Charles Lawrence’s driving passion: he was all but married to the game. Playing for Surrey since he was a schoolboy had led him on to Scotland, Ireland, Australia; and eventually back to his native England, shepherd to a most unusual flock. As coach and team captain Lawrence had in his charge a total of thirteen Australian Aborigines – the first ever professional cricket team to visit and tour from overseas.

They had travelled a long way together, and at close quarters.

Lawrence pictured himself, among the Aborigines, back on board the wool clipper *Parramatta*, the frigate-built ship on which they had endured endless passage from Australia.

He had brought with him a goodly supply of copybooks, and endeavoured to teach the Aborigines to read and write. Their fluency in English varied widely, along with their appreciable intelligence. Lessons had started out every morning, but could not last long, for the men soon tired, preferring to amuse themselves in drawing trees, birds, all kinds of animals and anything else they thought of. Fearing the limit to his own abilities, in the event Lawrence had exhausted their attention far sooner.

The Blacks liked to play draughts and cards, and also with the youngsters on board. They would charm pieces of wood from the carpenter and whittle away at them with admirable skill, making needles and lots of other little things for the ladies. They became great favourites with the womenfolk, who delighted in their spirited company, and whose children always wanted to be with them...

Church bells rang the half-hour. Focused again in the moment, Lawrence stood opposite an expectant trio. The Aborigines were blessed with beguiling looks. Their dark eyes large and full, with a soft quality, there was, generally speaking, a degree of docility prepossessing, and expressive of great sympathy.

Faced with such generous and trusting pupils, he found it impossible to stay angry.

‘Do you want to get me into hot water...into trouble?’ stammered Lawrence. ‘Well, then, eh? We might as well pack up our kit right away, climb back aboard ship and spend another three months in the bloody belly of the *Parrabloodymatta!*’

A flash of white teeth from Dick-a-Dick and his bluster fell deflated.

The classroom became quiet. In natural communion, all four men began to watch the game going on outside.

The Aboriginal Australian Eleven had set sail from Sydney on the 8th of February, bound for the Old Land. They had finally arrived, docking at Gravesend, on Old May Day – May the 13th, 1868 – 81 years to the day from when that First Fleet, under Arthur Phillip, had originally departed to establish the new colony.

Leaving behind an antipodean summer’s end, they had made landfall at the start of British summertime. The two seasons were of course hardly comparable. The omnipresent clouds and wearisome vapours of Merrie Olde England were most unlike the bright blue skies of Australia. The Blacks complained of double vision due to the weak light, seeing two balls thrown for every one. Fortunately, by local standards the recent weather had been unseasonably dry, some days freakishly warm – Friday last and especially the Tuesday just gone, with the thermometer hitting 83 Fahrenheit. Still, they’d had only just over a week in which to recover their land legs, and for the Aborigines to acclimatise.

The game in progress beyond the schoolhouse window was a practice session, a part of their brief round of training: after months of inactivity on board ship they had all gained an inch or two around the middle. The high plateau of the North Downs overlooked the pitch from one direction; the tall, tiled spire of St Mary’s church the other. Four oasthouses, so characteristic of the Kentish countryside, directly bordered onto the sports field. Conical roofs bent forward, they too seemed to incline their heads the better to follow the action.

Laurence blinked, his concentration shot.

‘Neddy will insist on leading with the wrong leg,’ he muttered to himself. Making for the door, he turned to point a commanding finger. ‘Wait here,’ he said. ‘We’re not done. I’ll return presently.’

“‘*Bladdy facken hell!*’”

Laughter breaks out.

‘Sounds proper ’Stralian there, inna?’

‘Too bloody roit.’

Mosquito, the smallest of the three Aborigines, leaps from his desk and makes for the open door.

‘Lawrence...’ says Cole, ‘Lawrence said we wait f’r ’im.’

Mosquito throws back a dirty look and keeps on going.

Dick-a-Dick, who has seniority, addresses Mosquito in their own language. ‘*Grongarrong*, him right,’ he says. ‘We should wait.’

Mosquito halts within the doorway. His homelands are at Naracoorte, also known as Mosquito Plains. A skilled carpenter and an ace with the stockwhip, he is, like Dick-a-Dick, a firm advocate of temperance – which is as well, since he is the devil with a drink inside him.

Sulkily, he returns.

‘White men,’ says Mosquito, ‘have no manners.’

This spite is directed at King Cole: the simpleton has spoken out of line. Mosquito then presents his back. Facing Dick-a-Dick, he adopts a dialect only they share. ‘Did you have to invite him?’ he says. ‘He brings bad luck.’

‘*Na? Puru wadjala?*’ asks Cole. He understands well enough that nothing good is said of him. His lip curls. ‘*Mardidjali.*’

‘*Miriwa,*’ spits back Mosquito. ‘Drop dead.’

Still favouring Dick-a-Dick, Mosquito resumes English for Cole’s edification. ‘*He* is the one whose tongue is difficult.’

Feeling the hurt, King Cole rises instantly from his seat. Now all of them are standing.

‘*Wembawemba,*’ jibes Mosquito. ‘Everybody know. Ancestors him no good.’

Cole squares with his accuser. Dick-a-Dick intercedes. Put in the position of children, it is hardly surprising they should act the same, but no less shameful for all that. Dick glares reproachfully at Mosquito.

Mosquito cannot believe it. ‘You side with him,’ he whines, ‘against a brother? He is not *Jardwa!*’

Dick-a-Dick grimaces. *Jardwadjali*, *Mardidjali*, *Wutjubaluk*; the battles they fought over the Murray Lands are over 20 years past, as long dead as their peoples.

‘So few blackfellas...’ he sighs.

Dick calls to mind his birthplace, *Bring Albit*, the sandy spring close to Mount Elgin, and his family crest – *Kiotacha*, the native cat.

A lengthy silence ensues before Dick-a-Dick speaks again.

‘Back in the World,’ he says, ‘we were Lizard...Crow, Eaglehawk. We were Pelican...Fire...and Emu.’

He measures his speech, taking long pauses. One does not speak lightly, nor too quickly, when dealing with weighty subjects. Words are anyway no way to talk. It takes time to summon the right ones.

‘Remember where we come from,’ he says. ‘That is important...’

Taking his fellows each by the arm, Dick-a-Dick directs their attention beyond the window glass. He tells them, ‘We are very far from home.’

Another pause.

‘In this place,’ continues Dick, ‘it does not matter if we are *Gabadj*, or *Guragidj*, Blackheaded Snake, or...’ his eye takes in Cole ‘...Southern Cross.’ Dick-a-Dick lays a placating palm on each man’s shoulder. ‘White Cockatoo?’ he says. ‘Black Cockatoo? Here, whole mob just Cockatoo.’

Sad to speak his mind as if it belonged to somewhere else, Dick-a-Dick allows his words to sink slowly in. They watch Lawrence engaged in parley with their team-mates on the field.

‘You want beat the whitefellas at their own game?’ says Dick. ‘Don’t. Be proud who is your brother.’ His right hand moves to cup the back of Mosquito’s neck. He studies the face of each man in turn. ‘Look after me an’ him,’ says Dick. ‘That about all we got left.’

Mosquito sets his jaw. He drops his head. ‘No good you talk English me.’

‘Soon,’ says Dick, ‘all World become one England.’

King Cole’s mouth hangs open. Belonging to no particular place, condemned to remain a boy, he has so much that he wants to express, yet nothing he dares speak of.

Lawrence returned, breaking the spell.

Dick-a-Dick, leading by example, made his way back to the desks and sat down. Mosquito remained standing, facing down Cole.

‘*Tji-tji*,’ he said. ‘Child. I know my *miyur*... I remember my place.’

‘Skeeter, Cole...please,’ said Lawrence, ‘be seated.’

His few minutes away had given him a chance to reflect on their situation. Lawrence was, if anything, even more contrite than the three Aborigines had contrived to appear. Ninety days confined to a ship – and often cramped and chilly quarters below deck – were akin to a prison sentence even for a civilised gentleman, let alone nomadic tribesmen.

Good morale inspired any team to play better; among players as instinctual as these, it was invaluable. The Blacks, reasoned Lawrence, had only sought to satisfy their characteristic urge to explore new surroundings. They did so in order to cheer themselves. The impromptu hunting party might have been a blessing – in different circumstances.

‘I know you fellows to be responsible men...’ Lawrence began, but faltered. Their actions, although justifiable, could not be condoned. They were in England now.

‘Sorry, Lawrence,’ the Aborigines chimed in singsong chorus. No need for talk. They understood. Charles Lawrence felt moved.

‘I was of a mind not to let you attend Saturday’s party,’ he said, ‘but I suspect letting you go will prove the greater punishment.’

The lesson concluded with a wry smile.

The Aborigines beamed broadly in return.

‘Gave those ruddy toffs a scare did you, boys?’ Lawrence’s bushy moustaches failed to conceal so wide a grin. ‘Wish I’d been there,’ he said, ‘to see the look on their faces.’

A muffled ‘Howzie!’ carried through the window-glass. Four heads turned as one.

The players did not have to be told. ‘Go on, then,’ shouted Lawrence after them, ‘get back to practice with the others!’