

# A HEROINE OF BORROLOOLA

WITH the Borroloola Policeman away on patrol his wife took the message from the native runner. On a page torn from a small exercise book stark tragedy was recorded in half a dozen lines:

*"Dear Heathcock,*

*Shot myself accidentally, think I am settled. Can you come out. Shot the bone in two above the knee, may bleed to death.*

*If you see me you had better come at once. It is a case for the plane immediately —*

*Foster."*

The note had been written four days earlier, by Horace Mole Foster, at his camp on the Wearyan River, 60 miles of river and 15 miles of sea from Borroloola. It was late in February, 1941, and the middle of the Wet season with its storms, rains, floods and bogs.

Mrs. Heathcock radioed the Flying Doctor at Cloncurry, Queensland, and the plane arrived on the following day with the news that it was unable to land at the Wearyan because of the long grass and boggy ground on the unprepared airstrip.

Ruth Heathcock was a trained nursing sister who had first come to the Northern Territory many years before with the Australian Inland Mission. She had no doubts about where her duty lay now. She organised a party consisting of herself, Roger Jose — one of the famous "Borroloola Hermits" — his aboriginal wife and two male aboriginals to travel by dugout to give aid to the stricken Foster.

After three days and three nights of stormy and dangerous travel they reached him. He was beyond all hope of recovery, but she nursed him for 8 days and supported him in his bushman's faith that the Flying Doctor plane would arrive in time.

At 3.00 p.m. on 2nd March Foster died. One hour and twenty minutes later the Flying Doctor landed beside the camp.

Happening in 1941 this episode went unnoticed and almost forgotten against the greater tragedy of those days. Official records of Police and other Government branches in Darwin were crated up and packed off to distant parts considered safe from likely enemy action. It was 1946 before the report of the shooting, and inquest details, came out of its particular crate and, fortunately, got into the right hands.

The Superintendent of Police, Alfred Victor Stretton, had endorsed the report in his usual neat handwriting to draw attention to Ruth Heathcock's "epic of endurance".

The then Commissioner of Police, and Administrator of the Northern Territory, Charles Lydiard Aubrey Abbott, forwarded details to Canberra without delay, stating: "I do not know whether her conduct comes within the ambit of the civil George Medal. I hope it does and I recommend accordingly."

In due course, this outstanding effort in the cause of mercy was recognised by the award of the M.B.E. to Mrs. Heathcock.

By that time her husband, Constable Ted Heathcock had died and she had returned to South Australia. She still lives in Adelaide



*Ruth and Ted Heathcock and their two house-girls at Kahlia Compound, Darwin, in the early thirties.*

## Needless Tragedy

The tragedy, as is so often the case, should never have happened. Horace Mole Foster was a bushman with a lifetime of experience with firearms. He was an intelligent, well-read man. (Like his friend, Bill Harney, he had swallowed most of that famous Carnegie Library established at Borroloola in the late 1890's by the efforts of Police Corporal Power.) He spent years on cattle stations, and years in trepaning around the Gulf of Carpentaria and adjacent waters. He could discuss, and spout slabs of, Horace and numerous other of the old classical writers and would do so without much prompting, in the camp, on the deck of his lugger, or riding along through the bush on horseback.

In the 1930's he leased a saltpan at Manangoora, on the Wearyan River and set up his permanent camp there in paperbark huts. With a native consort and numerous native friends and helpers he lived a surprisingly comfortable and contented life on the proceeds of the salt pan, the products of his garden and catches from a generous sea and river.

On a day in the Wet season of 1941 he handed a shotgun to one of the natives to get some ducks for the camp larder, but the gun already had a misfired cartridge jammed in the breech. Efforts to remove it were unsuccessful. Foster lost patience and angrily exclaimed: "I'll smash the thing — it's a danger to everybody." He smashed the butt savagely on to the ground. The shot discharged, shattering his leg