



THE
SILVER
QUEEN



WILLIAM SYLVESTER WALKER
("COO-BE")



THE SILVER QUEEN

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THE SILVER QUEEN

A Tale of the Northern Territory

BY

WM. SYLVESTER WALKER
(“COO-EE”)

SECOND EDITION

London

JOHN OUSELEY

16 FARRINGDON STREET, E.C.

1908

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P R E F A C E

FROM the wondrous orchids of her northern tropical forests, from her corn, sugar cane, wine and oil, oil to light a million home lights, from plant and plume, from her shears of the golden fleece, from the mineral and gem fields in her possessions, from her mountains, mounds, and motley, paragon in all, Australia is calling for men of pluck and industry, able and willing to work, not for foreign nations only, but for hearths, homes, and a bright future prosperity.

She is calling from her gates of pearl, from her grand northern reaches, for cotton and all fruits, from her untouched sea fringes, from her demilunes of energy and resource, from all her vast potentialities.

From her stone-wrought, stone-quarried cities she calls, from her barren interiors made prolific by underground water, where even her loneliest places whisper "Abide here and I will enchant and teach you how to use me," she returns no barren answer, often a golden or a silver one.

With Tariffs, adjusted to the disintegration of the swarming foreigners who have blocked our paths and wedged our doorways, will come the victory we have waited for so long, when, instead of having to drive the aliens from our gates, we can rejoice in the advent of men of our own blood, English, Irish, and Scotch, and stand shoulder to shoulder to prevent the pauperising influences now experienced everywhere in the Empire of land, country, and reform.

Wealth to the emigrant, fortune to the pursuer, a climate that develops energy not listlessness, all these Australia can offer ; and as a reminiscence of early pioneering days and other gatherings, I have written my story in the Mother Country to tell her where the old New Land awaits her.

THE AUTHOR.

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*"The horses were ready, the rails were down,
But the riders lingered still,
One had a parting word to say,
And one had his pipe to fill.
Then they mounted, one with a granted prayer,
And one with a grief unguessed.
'We are going,' they said, as they rode away,
'Where the pelican builds her nest.'"*

MARY HANNAY FOOTT.

THE SILVER QUEEN

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS TRIBE

“ But other mysteries than these
There are from human knowledge hid
On hill and valley, and amid
Australia’s wilderness of trees.”

—J. C. NEILD.

JOHN SOLWAY happened to be in Sydney, New South Wales, in search of a new sensation, and was walking in the Domain before breakfast, on a bright, unny morning.

He had experienced a certain amount of gold fever during his past career, in the intermittent phases of which he had done so well as to become almost invulnerable to penury, the worst and most trying form of the disease, and, being now consequently impenitent and desirous of adding Fame to the pedestal of a higher ambition, still was at the moment we come across him planning a scheme by which he could attain this distinction, together with a greater addition to his worldly riches.

A panorama of all sorts of schemes connected with exploration and discovery flitted across his teeming brain, to be treated according to its merit, and even while his eyes rested upon a large French corvette anchored off Domain Point, and later the newly-arrived missionary schooner, *John Williams*, lying off the Baths, his mind framed visions totally disconnected from his outer sight.

Why had they not found Leichardt up to this date? ran his mental idea, when opposite the mission schooner.

He had followed the search for the great explorer in the columns of the daily newspapers, but, being a particular faddist on this subject, did not consider the work satisfactory. Why should he not set them an example of the right way of doing it according to his own theory?

He possessed some mules, a regular caballada of them, at present eating their heads off in a Sydney livery stable. Should he go with them to that sandy desert in the Northland, and see what sort of a place it was? He always wanted to explore that particular desert. Gold was often found in what everybody considered the most unlikely places. He wanted to get beyond the outside tracks of Sturt and Giles and find new things.

A west north-west course from Brisbane would take him there. Suppose Leichardt had really doubled on the rescuers' track, after all, and gone westward. The search party had established no positive trace of his existence or non-existence. He might do so,

perhaps come across him in reality. Was it not within the bounds of possibility that the gallant explorer had been abducted by the natives somewhere, and, like Emin Pasha, contracted family ties with them? That very fact, if information could be obtained from the blacks he met with on his journey, might lead to his discovery. He himself, on the other hand, would be prepared to look for copper, precious stones, silver, opals; even coal might make a fortune for him. And thus he might weld all his day-dreams with the discovery of Leichardt as his fame pedestal, if lucky enough to come across him on a line of his own. It was a great idea, he thought, as his eyes rested upon the schooner.

He would certainly work up north-west to find that desert, it had always been the dream of his life. Many an Arctic explorer had not his ideas more firmly fixed on the North Pole than John Solway on this particular desert. The verges might be sand or stones, he thought, but there would most probably be an oasis in the middle of it to gladden his eyes with his own undoubted theory that there was water there.

He mentally added up a list of friends to find one who would be suitable to help him in carrying out his intention; and was surprised to discover that none of them could be depended upon.

He had a smoke, deliberately planning all the time on this, his last proviso; then leaving his seat at Lady Macquarries' chair, he walked onwards in the direction of the old Fig Tree Baths.

There was a strong smell of cooking wafted from the Island schooner in the offing, and wondering much what the South Sea cuisine was like amongst the coloured crew on board her, he turned off the footpath he was on and walked higher up the hill to observe their movements at a vantage.

Finally he ascended a grassy slope and sat down on a flat sandstone rock to watch them, finding that it afforded an easy rest for his legs and feet, as well as his body, being about the height of his previous resting-place.

The crew of the mission schooner were having their morning repast on deck. That was evident enough, and their gesticulations and talk attracted his attention from his own thoughts at last. Noticing how hungry they were, his own gastric juices began to work from sheer force of sympathy.

Suddenly he dropped his pipe, sprang clean off the rock as if something had bitten him, and assumed a position of defiance, for he had felt the heel of his boot touched pretty smartly from underneath and held on to. Then, having released himself by this sudden spring, as he watched at a safe distance from his former perch, he saw the grass, growing thickly along the base of the rock, move at a certain point, and, to his astonishment, a man crawled out from below it and presently stood erect.

The individual who had emerged in this singular fashion was still further impressed upon him by being clad in a blue dungaree suit, very much the

worse for wear. He might have been taken for a sailor or an engineer out of work.

Don't apologise for moving me so much," Solway said, looking at him in bewilderment, but in perfect readiness for anything, even an assault. "I took you for a brown snake with a nefarious design upon my person, having no idea you possibly could be a blue man. There are still some ophidians left about Sydney, especially under rocks. Don't try to excuse yourself, I pray. Also pardon my hostile attitude, unless you have any sort of a mind to reciprocate."

"I don't feel particularly inclined for a fight just now," said the other, with a humorous twinkle in his eye. "I've had no breakfast this morning, to begin with, and precious little to eat yesterday into the bargain, but if you feel really inclined for fisticuffs after having stood a good square meal to me and my companion, Stumpy, who is still asleep under there, he will see fair play, and I shall not hesitate to oblige you."

"How many more of you are underneath?" quoth Solway, in amazement. "Why specialise only one? I am prepared for a dozen, at the least."

"The hollow under the rock holds three or four on a pinch," said the Man in Dungaree. "It is out of the way of the police, and for that reason mainly is Stumpy's residence. He took me in as a boarder last night, and it cost me my last coin. You are not, by any chance, a detective in plain clothes, are you?"

"If you will sit upon the roof of your friend's

domicile, from which you dislodged me, in my company, and assure me that Stumpy—whoever he is—will not interfere with my boot heels in any ante-prandial manner, I will soon enlighten you as to my social state," Solway replied. "Come along! You can taste the smell of a breakfast on the top of that big stone, and that's something towards the realisation of your wishes. Or you will be able to smell the taste of it, which is, under a variation, quite as replenishing to empty stomachs. But what on earth have you been about to have no better quarters to reside in than that bandicoot's cavity? In this free land no man should be a make-believe but a doer."

"Just my opinion, so shake!" cried the Man in Dungaree, "and I'll tell you all about it. I'm dead-broke; that's the entire proposition as concerns myself. If it hadn't been for Stumpy there, I might have afforded myself a good breakfast this morning, instead of only getting a smell of it. But beer's rather a self-forgetting beverage, and, mind you, I don't say I didn't bring my present calamity upon myself. Nor do I affirm that I repent having come to such a pass. No, by the living jingo, not by half a long way!

"I came up to Sydney on board that very mission schooner you allude to in such an unsatisfactory fashion, having embarked at Niué. The skipper took pity upon me and allowed me to work my passage up. Being one of the unemployed, and a long-timer at that, through general or total incom-

petence, my time on board was principally occupied in peeling potatoes for the cook to boil, and in yarning with the coloured crew. I take a great interest in the South Sea Islanders, and can talk their lingo. That I learnt by beach-combing. Otherwise, I should probably have been killed and eaten ere this.

“Life is hardly a sinecure on Savage Island, let me tell you, so there must have been some sort of intrinsic merit about me which ingratiated the inhabitants and prevented them from trying how my carcass would suit their digestions. Perhaps the clothes I generally invest in were my life insurance, policy paid. Thus it happens that I still exist this morning, with an appetite and a thirst that only money or personal sanction on your part can assuage. I am also for sale or auction, either with or without a certain form of proof by proxy. It might be to your interest to buy me.

“Pending my information, therefore, you must see that I am really more than interested in the odour of that breakfast yonder. That’s why I came out of the hole. The day before yesterday I was helping to eat it. You can immortalise to-day’s repast in Stumpy’s domicile just the same as here, and, although I say it who should not speak, sympathetic as is its perfume, the yearning it creates for the real thing is awful.

“I’ll tell you what I will do,” the Man in Dungaree continued ; “you shall provide my friend underneath us with a breakfast in conjunction with myself. In return I will sell you some information he gave me.

I got it from him convivially last night at the price of half-a-crown, and it's worth some tens of thousands of pounds sterling, if not more, when proved.

"Mind you, I don't believe a single word of it myself, and I don't ask you to, either. But if I had money I'd risk it. We divided the beer my last half-crown gave us, equally, on the strength of it. That's just what made us mates afterwards, you see. To do Stumpy justice, he bargained for a royalty of sorts if it comes off, and that fact shows his own belief in it as a moral certainty. Now the question is, do you feel inclined to be liberal, for the sake of the story, both our stomachs, and your own profit?"

"Get Stumpy out," John Solway said, laughing heartily. "If I am as taken with his appearance as I have been by yours, I'll see about it."

Whereupon the Man in Dungaree, crawling upon all fours to the base of the rock, called out:

"Breakfast ahoy, Stumpy! Perhaps a long sleever of beer, if the gentleman above is willing. Come out, mate!"

After due hesitation and various grumbled comments, a young, stiff-built man emerged and stood blinking sleepily in the sun glare.

"Give us the outline of your yarn, Stumpy," said the Man in Dungaree.

"Perhaps it will be better at first hand, as a guarantee of my veracity," he added aside to Solway.

But Stumpy merely blinked his eyes; he seemed overcome with drowsiness, or bashfulness, at being so suddenly unearthed.

"He freshens up wonderfully if you keep him well stoked," hinted the Man in Dungaree again in Solway's ear, "otherwise he's a goner, as you can see for yourself. It was the tippie last night that upset him beyond his bearings this morning."

"Come along, both of you," John Solway observed, "and I'll furnish you with the breakfast we all three stand in need of, down at the Lord Rodney Hotel in Woolloomoolloo. Then Stumpy can give me his version."

On arrival at the rendezvous indicated, John Solway engaged a private room and ordered a sumptuous repast for all three, served according to their separate requirements, and they sat down to enjoy it.

After the first plateful of his own choosing, and a third "schooner" of the Lord Rodney's private and best tap, Stumpy recovered the use of his tongue, and his eyes glistened.

"You see," said he, "it was this way."

He extracted a small map of Australia from a fat pocket-book, otherwise quite empty, then opening it out he placed it on the table before Solway, indicating a cross thereon with a grimy forefinger, and this cross was placed in the middle of the very desert in the Northland Solway had been thinking of.

"Was there water there?" the latter asked immediately. "Have you seen that place personally? Please be explicit."

"Not a drop of water, not a drop," Stumpy answered decisively. "The spot I have marked

is a three days' journey from anywhere else worth talking about, but I have seen it. I've been there myself, and lived to tell of it. That is all I can say, but only to a mate here and there, for the price of a glass of beer, perhaps the chance of a dinner. I live by it. As a rule, of course, my birds being of a feather with myself, they can't take my story up for want of money, and it never struck me to try and finance it more than that, because no one believes it when I do tell it to them. I've stumped up generally myself all round to any mates I had until I ran dry, and that's why my mates call me Stumpy. *Quantum suff.*

"But you take my words and mark 'em down, the words of a gentleman, neither native nor to the manner born, who has seen strange things in this strange country, and the words of a man who wouldn't go back on any mate, whole white, black, or half-caste, as long as he had a shot in the locker. But being insolvent, as I am, and no error, why, what can a man do? I sell my yarn for a share in any good drink that's going forward, and then I go and camp, rent free, under that rock in the Domain and think about it. For I lost a big fortune up there; all that goes to make this world pleasant for a chap. I've got a white mate living up there yet, I believe, for he helped me to get there while I financed the expedition.

"Someone might rescue him or make a fortune in attempting to do so, for although there's not a drop of water at that spot I have marked on the map,

there's enough silver near about to make your hair stand on end. But if you or I, or anyone else, were to get there, they would go mad as sure as fate.

"The tribe I lived with took me there as near as I can judge to where that cross is marked on the map, as well as my mate. I was as good as a king amongst them then, and they carried water with them; they weren't niggers, but light-coloured people. Not half-castes, even, but some sort of breed nearly white, and it was all through the influence of my mate, that journey of ours to where I marked the cross. My mate could do what he liked with them, being made a sort of Chief. Then there was a row between them and some real black people, and I got separated from my lot and knocked on the head. I lost a beautiful wife through it, and remembered no more until I came to myself cadging passages all along the northern, western, and southern coasts, arriving here, stoney, with only my story to support me."

"You will see in what points Stumpy's yarn meets with my approbation," the Man in Dungaree remarked to Solway, with a wink, as he replenished his "schooner" from a portentous jug on the table, in self-evident delight. "I intend to form a mining syndicate on the strength of his apparent ingenuousness," he went on, "although, as I said before, I don't believe a word of it."

"I never tasted a better steak in my life," he concluded; "the rock oysters are grand, the tap's sublime, and I feel so satisfied altogether that I

tender you my heartiest and best thanks. Presently Stumpy and I will make our exit, as I mean to tour him round town. I daresay I can earn a double dinner when I tell my own version of the story to a responsible shareholder. Perhaps he will provide me with another suit of dungaree to start operations with. It is all I ask for, except my meals, but I mean to be the leader of the mining company I spoke about, with guaranteed scrip for half the shares issued. Will you have any at par? They are sure to rise like smoke. Or do you now want to fight on a full stomach?"

"Stop a moment," quietly remarked John Solway, as the other rose to go with a smiling countenance, pushing his friend Stumpy out before him. "Tell your mate to wait outside in the street until you are ready for him."

The Man in Dungaree escorted Stumpy gently, but firmly, by the ear to the bottom of the stairs and returned. Then, closing the door and locking it, he sat himself down in an attitude of intense expectation and replenished his glass.

"I will buy your rights to Stumpy's assertion," Solway said, when these preliminaries ended, "on these conditions: "First, that you go with me as partner on half shares, in consideration of my financing the venture.

"Secondly, if you agree to this method of procedure, I hand you a cheque here in this room, and at once, for £250, of which £150 is to be paid into a bank of my own choosing for Stumpy's keep

whilst we are away. He seems a young man who has been addicted to alcohol and other beverages, and would be better looked after, as I haven't room for him. This sum I wish to arrange to be paid to him weekly under surveillance. The balance will be for yourself, and here is a £10 note to buy dungaree suits with."

The Man in Dungaree nodded gravely in acquiescence, and presently received his cheque. He then signed a written agreement.

"Now tell me your name," said Solway.

"Not at present," replied the Man in Dungaree. "'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' You may know at a future date, if the expedition turns up trumps. Just now my name is on tick, sold, bought out, complicated as the Man in Dungaree, nothing else. You must take me on whatever merits you may assume to be mine, but you can count upon me as a working mate in the affair, which henceforth lies strictly between you and me;" and with this he departed.

"I'm going to lodge you in a palace, old man," he said affectionately to Stumpy, on reaching the street. "You will be allowed three long-sleevers daily; think of that! Likewise you shall smoke Virginia tobacco for the rest of your natural life, if I can run to it.

"As regards myself, the ethereal odour of breakfasts will not in future be dependent on the whim of a passing stranger; I shall be delectably employed, and if I ever come back with that mate of yours, I will build you both a house to live and die in. Your

story, old chap, is the finest thing in finance I ever struck in all my life, though I don't believe a single word of it."

"Ah, you will, if you get captured as I and my mate were," said Stumpy.

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENT OF THE COMPANY

“The night wind moans. The Austral wilds are round me ;
The loved who live—ah, God ! how few they are.
I looked above, and Heaven in mercy found me
This parable of comfort in a star.”

—JAMES BRUNTON STEPHENS.

“GOOD shot, Solway!” muttered the Man in Dungaree, as he came up from looking after their three remaining mules, the others having succumbed to the rigours of their desperate trip.

Solway had just knocked over some sort of a duck with a throwing stick, in the use of which, from the expediency of saving what little ammunition they had left, the two men had become singularly expert.

They were camped on a creek which ran through some rolling hills, on the verge of the desert they had come in search of, the land where Stumpy's legend was born. They had almost attained their premonition, but the exigencies of their daily supply of water had become a matter of urgency.

Of that liquid they had enough for present requirements, even for future providing, but the heat was

great, the way uncertain, and the end not yet attained.

One hundred and twenty-five miles had now to be traversed by one of them, and the event of getting back to Sydney, if aught happened to that one, was to be left to the other, as the only means for the preservation of the great secret.

The Man in Dungaree sat down by Solway on the banks of the small waterhole where he was examining the duck, and looked on critically.

"These birds came from the N.W.," said Solway, "straight from that desert I am going to explore. I want to solve a problem, and this fellow is to be the exponent. I got him pretty easily, because he was crippled. A duck-hawk struck him over yonder, but he managed to flutter down here, where he saw the water, and the hawk seeing me swerved off. The rest of his companions kept pushing on over the route we have come by. They will have a long journey before they reach our last water."

"What are you going to do with him?" asked the Man in Dungaree.

"Eat him, of course, later, after I've examined his gizzard.

"What for? To see if his digestive organs are in proper working order like your own? It won't matter much even if they are not. I'm hungry enough to eat a crow!"

"The gizzard will divine my future action."

"What nonsense! Are you going to imitate the ancients when they voiced augurs of battle, or the

coming out right of journeys by the shape, twistings, or appearance of intestines? I don't remember any gizzards in their divining."

"For all that, this gizzard is going to give me the knowledge I require," Solway reiterated.

"You're a crank, John. How can it do so?"

"It will tell me the truth of Stumpy's story!"

"I don't believe a word of the story. Didn't I always say so? But see what it has driven us to. We have been in hair-breadth escapes by flood and field. We have passed by the skin of our teeth through crowds of hostile blacks. It has filled our cup of perilous adventure to the brim, and now you are about to risk your own precious life across that desert. It's just a toss up whether you ever get back alive, John; and if you don't, what is to become of me? Oh, man, man, why did I ever come out from under that rock in the Domain to tempt you when I did? And why did I let a chap like you into such a fatal secret? If you had not sat down there when you did, just as I was coming out, I could have taken all risks myself, or made money by touring Stumpy about. I never meant to lose you over it. But, anyway, here we are, near enough to our goal to make turning back impossible, and, being hungry as usual, your bird will make a good stew to get on with, if we eke him out with some of the last of our preserved beef. I suppose you are aware that we have only got three tins left? It's a good thing we can amalgamate our interiors with small bush fry occasionally, although I can't say I like lizards."

Those bealbahs we snared weren't bad eating. What sort of a bird is that one of yours, by the way? I haven't seen anything like him before: long legs, long neck, sort of cross between a curlew and a gill bird. If I were in England I should say he looked more like a large landrail than a duck."

"It's a whistling duck," said Solway, as he divided the gizzard into two portions. They lay in the palm of his strong, browned, nervous hand, and he indicated the interior grits with the point of his clasp knife.

"Stumpy's tale is either true or false. That's how I take it. Whistling ducks are never very far from water, but I believe they migrate at seasons. There must be water on that desert. They came straight from the interior of it, and as I have got to cross it to-morrow with Baldur, our best and likeliest mule, I am naturally interested in the question."

"I don't see how a duck's gizzard can decide it," said the Man in Dungaree obstinately.

Solway poked the digestive grains about.

"Look!" he said. "Stumpy was right about the silver. That is indubitable on the evidence before us. This fellow has the colour grit of the sulphide concentrates to aid his digestion. See those bits of ore. But Stumpy must be wrong about the water, or they wouldn't stop to shovel them in as an extraneous aid. They have halted for dinner. I shall only take one water-bag to-morrow."

"It's risky, Solway, and it's wrong. Dash it, I'll go with you!"

"You can't. You own the secret now verified in

silver ore. Old Baldur will be all the lighter without your coming; don't forget that. He's got to carry my pick and shovel as it is."

"I won't let you go, old man."

"Oh yes, you will. I won the toss. Remember, if I peg out, you have got the story; you possess the knowledge of the place, and if you get back safely, you can benefit from all the faults of this trip. I've left you money to do so. I would have camels next time if I were you. I'll follow the wild ducks' flight to-morrow until I reach the water they came from. Have no doubt about me. Now we had best get the supper ready. Where is that nail-tailed wallaby you knocked over yesterday? He'll do instead of this fellow just now. Mules on good feed?"

"Yes."

"Well, your orders are: Camp here for three weeks. If I don't get back by that time, you will know that I am dead. Push south with the first rains; they should come by then. It's a pity we didn't take more time to equalise our chances; a small condenser would have been worth carrying, for some of the salt water soaks. We have pulled through so far, but fancy being reduced to two water-bags! The scrub and those pesky mules did that. There's plenty of water here, but I dare not take both bags, because you have that waterless stretch of country to pass on your way back, and I cannot leave you without one. This secret of ours must not perish, even if I do; you must get back with it to try again. If I fail in my endeavour, your only

chance of life and fortune is to return when the last pair of mules are fit. I am taking the chances, in plain words, because I do not think you are bushman enough to travel that desert in front of us. Anyway, you might not get to where I consider the water is. If I'm very bad, I shall make old Baldur carry me somehow. As Stumpy put his cross on my mark in life, it seems an omen of success, and I'm bound to try to reach it."

"Not alone, if I know it," the Man in Dungaree muttered softly to himself, as he knelt by their camp fire and began to prepare the supper.

The next morning, before dawn, Solway started. Two days afterwards the Man in Dungaree followed on his tracks.

Half-way across the sterile stretch of sand and stones he came on Solway's forlorn hope of a water-bag torn open with a pick point, where Baldur, the best mule, was fallen dead.

There were no tracks from this halting place of disaster. The sand "devils" of the desert had covered them, but the Man in Dungaree kept on by compass, until he found that Solway had indeed reached his mark, at the end of the terrible journey, but was at his last gasp when he got to him.

"So long, old man," the explorer murmured, with his dying breath. "I was—right—Stumpy—was—wrong. There *is* water—here!"

"Stumpy was right in all three instances," muttered the Man in Dungaree when he laid him down. "Solway has gone mad ere he died, as was

prophesied. I see rocks composed of silver ore, but never a drop of water, and I am going mad, too, Heaven help me !”

There was a gunyah a hundred yards away from the spot where Solway lay dead amongst the rocks of silver ore. It was built of boughs and bark, though no sign of tree or bush showed to all horizons, and the dry river bed near to which it stood was half filled with sand that the devils of the desert had blown there.

Who could have built it ?

Sand, sand, sand, and rocks of silver ore. Dry, dusty, and appalling. That was the sarcasm of the dust devils. Silver enough to buy a principality. The gunyah and the silver were real. So was the dead man ; also the living apology for one. For he was sitting in the gunyah as mad as a March hare, or the proverbial Australian hatter, within a quarter of an hour after the death of Solway.

Half an hour beyond that, five peculiarly light-coloured aboriginals, so fair in complexion as to give the impression that they were not aboriginals at all, but a cast-away tribe of European origin, halted at John Solway's dead body, took up the footmarks between it and the bough shelter, and stared in amazement at the sight of the ghastly object within.

For the Man in Dungaree was no longer the Man in Dungaree, but lay stark naked, having gashed his limbs all over to obtain his own blood to drink !

The new-comers all carried well-filled gourds slung over their bare shoulders, and, kneeling by the terrible

object they had found alive, they splashed water over him, and poured some into his mouth.

Such was the vitality of the man that in about an hour he abused them violently, but his senses were gone. Then he fell to laughing in a sort of choked gurgle, interspersed with comment.

"Lost," he exclaimed diffidently, changing his manner again, "I might have been, I tell you. But as for Solway, no, never; he couldn't get lost. "This is—hell—isn't it? I thought I was in heaven. Just getting there when you idiots came and dragged me out of it!"

He glared into their faces.

"If it is, I say it is the devil's own payment! I was fit to die, not to live on here. Are you people real devils? No, you must be some of my old boon companions sent here to share my torments. Where's Stumpy? Where's Solway? I'm better dead since I have lost my mates. No, Solway was sitting up eating and drinking when I last saw him, we had such a meal in paradise. By Jove! I was hungry enough, with a thirst, too, worth a king's ransom. Or was it at the Lord Rodney? How did I get to this place? We had a hard time of it, I know, but our chief object in life was to get here. Only we didn't exactly bargain for Stumpy's — absolute veracity."

The leader, who was with the other four light-coloured natives, looked at him curiously. He seemed to be interested.

"Oh, for the bitter striving against Fate, Nemesis,

the strong against the strong. To touch and realise all human expectation in one brief moment, without the life itself to go on with it!" went on the naked man. And, with a prolonged screech, he fell back motionless and insensible.

The light-coloured people now, at a word from their leader, tended their patient still more carefully, propping up his head, bathing his wounds, and dabbing water on his lips and forehead.

A gourd or two, emptied, lay on the sandy floor alongside the man's own travel-worn water-bag, now dry and dusty as the arid plains around them. An old felt hat, and a patched and mended dungaree suit lay with them, together with his socks and boots.

Directing his followers to form a rude ambulance stretcher out of the materials of the gunyah itself, the leader gathered the lunatic's belongings together, and, when the now senseless form was placed on the litter thus improvised, threw them over him.

Taking hold of the poles at each end, they moved away with their silent freight, following the sand river in a contrary direction to that from whence they came, and travelling all through the night in a northerly direction, but still with a little westing in it.

Three days afterwards, an hour or so before sunset, four of the same sort of natives came back, and placing John Solway's corpse in a sitting posture amongst the rocks and sand, where he had fallen, commenced to form the outline of a canoe around the dead body, raising the sand, and smoothing it into position.

One of them, during the process, suddenly listened with his ear to the ground. Then, rising, he motioned to his companions who did as he had done. After which they placed a pole stick, part of the destroyed gunyah, close to the dead man in his sand canoe, and, depositing a little food and water within reach of his hand, as the symbols of a belief, went away, leaving the body to mummify in the sun.

The heat during the days to come would help that process. There were even no flies to be seen in this dry desert, let alone a bird or a beast, to corrupt or destroy the dead flesh. Nothing to break the silences, either, except the sand rustle of the willy willys or dust devils.

In dumb show, after the departure of the natives, the sunset proclaimed a glorified peacefulness beyond the great secret of human adventure the earth and air had formed so long ago; that which they had guarded so jealously from disclosure by death and drought and lifeless expanse.

Then the silver stars in their ethereal commune of the night scintillated bright intelligence to one another, seeming to say that another soul had been added to the glory of their galaxies beyond the confining limits of earthly grandeur. And later on the bright full moon rose in her silent sympathy and touched the propped up corpse with soft, sleeping shadows and lights, adding inexpressible calm to the great silences where nothing was left that moved or lived. But no one told. There was no one to tell.

CHAPTER III

THE MAID OF THE MARK

“ The City folk go to and fro
Behind a prison’s bars ;
They never feel the breezes blow,
And never see the stars.
They never hear in blossomed trees
The music low and sweet
Of wild birds making melodies,
Nor catch the little laughing breeze
That whispers in the wheat.”

—A. B. PATERSON.

“'ERE! you ain't got no call to hinterfere, mister. You leave the girl to me, can't yer? She's O.K.!”

It was early morning. A couple of horse-teams had camped the night before a little distance from the main up-river road. The waggons, drawn off the tracks, were loaded with wool bales piled high, and securely lashed with green hide ropes. The blue smoke from a couple of burnt through back-logs made thin spirals against a background of polygonum swamp, whence came the sound of tinkling bells.

Some hundred yards away from the camp the heavily timber-capped and cornered posts of a wire fence, enclosing a cattle-run, stood up in their crude

and tar-blackened strength, and at some distance from the timbered corner on the strong wires it surmounted by some eighteen inches, a man's coat hung downwards.

From the sward beyond the camp fire an excited little crowd of teamsters and neighbouring stockmen wrangled and jostled, the centre of their attraction being a powerful, good-looking bay horse with a girl on it, seated sideways in a man's saddle.

The tall, sunburnt individual who had just spoken looked carefully over the buckles, straps, and girths of the horse's panoply, and had brought the right hand stirrup leather and iron, duly adjusted, over the saddle for the girl's inside foot, the left leather being also shortened from his own length to her requirements; thus improvising a lady's side saddle with the man's pommel for the under catch of her right knee.

"I won't have you try it, Millie!" shouted a stalwart young fellow, who was being forcibly held back from the girl's vicinity by the others, in spite of the strength of his struggles to get free.

"And 'oo might you be, mister?" queried the girl's aider and abetter sneeringly, after whispering the word "Go!" to her.

"A dashed sight better man than you, and that I'll let you see directly, if I don't put your lights out at the start," vociferated the captive, fighting still more desperately with those who were holding him.

The girl started full speed for the fence, but suddenly swerved in a semi-circle to change her

direction from the coat on the top wire, towards the heavily-timbered corner of the fence itself.

"Snakes a-movin'! she's—goin'—fur—the—cap!" murmured the first speaker, apprehensively yet admiringly.

And over the six feet of heavily-timbered corner fencing the big bay horse soared like a bird.

"Hooray! Ain't she a daisy now? Easy as fallin' off a log! Didn't I tell yer? How's that fur high, old Clawsy?" (This to the captive.) "She wouldn't go over the coat on the wires. I told you she'd let yer see what she could do!" were the various critical comments that greeted the struggling captive, who had ridden furiously up to the camp, jumped off his horse, and forbidden the girl to attempt to leap, when he was seized by the crowd.

But the girl took the coat on her way back, as if to show that she shirked nothing, and, dashing past the group of men, blew a kiss of jaunty defiance and almost derision to the stranger ere she disappeared amongst the adjacent forest avenues on the other side of the road.

"Didn't I tell yer ye needn't 'a' got yer shirt out?" remarked the first speaker, laughing heartily. "What call 'ad yer to hinterfere at all, yer mopoke?"

"There's a nice quiet corner over there, out on the beautiful grass by the wool waggons, if you want that information," hissed the restrained man savagely.

And the delighted crowd broke up at once and went there with the two men in their midst, all agog for the promised fight.

"Towny" Jones, the stockman, who had been attending to the girl and her mount, was an agile, sandy-haired man, so sunburnt as to look almost like a superior sort of half-caste, and the stranger was a wiry, muscular, black-haired customer of similar calibre.

At it they went, hammer and tongs, in the most approved bush fashion with no small show of science either, but giving and taking all they knew how to.

At length, in the third round, a heavily contested one, Towny Jones, to the utter astonishment of his supporters, was steadied with a splendid counter, followed by an instant vengeful left, which knocked him silly. When he sat up again he was dazed and expectorating.

"Is it dead-finish?" asked his antagonist grimly. "You can come to time all right if you want to, you know. I'm not particular to a second or two."

"What is your name, mate?" the sitting man asked in amazement, amid a gale of laughter. "I'm reckoned top dog about here, but I don't come on in the next act, and am goin' up to the shanty for my 'orse that the gal was ridin', an' a swill of somethin' better than a clean knock-out.

"You've loosened half my grinders, as well as my intellect, and I guess I want a corpse reviver. Give us yer paw and 'elp us up. What is yer sign-on-de-plume, mister, yer go-a-visitin' card, so as I may know when yer comin' round this way again. I've 'ad enough without an extra lay out fur the undertaker!"

"Heard tell of Myall Dick?" the other asked caustically, as he complied with his opponent's wish and pulled him on to his pins again.

A murmur ran round the listening men. The stranger was known to hearsay, if not to sight. The knowledge thus gained seemed to be sufficient, for they stood off from him now as from a superior being.

Towny Jones put on his slouched hat, handed to him with a suppressed grin by one of the bystanders, and walked off in the direction the girl had taken, accompanied by the now mounted stranger. The bourne these two were bound for was concealed as yet, but there was a pretty well-marked track of pedestrian, wheeled vehicle, and shod horse hoof tracks towards it; for the simple reason that they led, one and all, to a sly-grog shanty kept by a certain Andy Heseldine, the father of the girl all the excitement had been about.

This dwelling, though hardly perceptible from the main up-the-river road, by mere chance of selection happened to be most cunningly situated at a very thirsty and desirable distance from the last township on the river.

Of necessity, therefore, the slip-panels the main road went through in the first line of boundary fencing, belonging to the cattle station it enclosed, would be a compulsory halting place to any traveller not conversant with the district.

Whilst replacing the heavy adze-tongued slip rail saplings into the sockets of the road gate posts, and

wiping the dust and moisture from his face, if he happened to possess but half an eye to bush surroundings, that same unenlightened traveller would see smoke amongst the foliage ahead, in the very spot he would expect shade and water from. If thirsty, he would, therefore, walk, ride, or drive, as the case might be, towards it to discover shortly that the chimney of a rather substantial bush dwelling made that smoke.

If of a guileless nature and a trusting disposition, he would probably put in a claim for his chief want—water.

After due inspection by the inmates and a bush telegraph caution, he would be asked inside, told to sit down, and supplied with stronger water than he expected, and as much more afterwards as he cared to pay for.

Losing control of his wits, if spirituously inclined, he would be, on recovery, charged with certain extra drinks he had been quite guiltless of, and, what was sure to follow, overpersuaded by the seductive influences of the cool and shady tenement, would be a game of cards or two, and an additional multiplication of the ready cash already occupying his obliging host's pockets.

Andy Heseldine, in this fashion, the proprietor of this bush shanty, whilst carrying on this nefarious trade against the excise and his fellow-creatures, had lived there severely alone for some time, since the death of his wife, and made considerable profit. He possessed a clique of intimate habitués and added

new victims to that number time after time on occasions like the present.

At various periods during their schooling, he had both his own and adopted daughter staying with him. Now, however, the two girls resided permanently at what it pleased their father to call "home."

His own daughter, the heroine of the leaping episode, was at this time a very handsome, bright, high-spirited girl who could ride any sort of horse flesh. She was free of tongue, almost insolent to strangers, but, at the same time and for the same reason, absolutely worshipped by the wild, reckless bush spirits passing on their way up and down the river; to whom the existence of Heseldine's liquor-selling and card-playing were open secrets.

But, worshipped and petted as she was by all, Millie Heseldine had never shown a marked preference for anyone of her adorers, and, above all, she had never allowed anyone to make too free with her. Although merely a bush girl, a cockatoo farmer's daughter, a sly shanty-keeper and gambler's daughter, if you will, she was born above her station, and yearned to be a real lady with a house in a city, and, perchance, a country dwelling of her own at the station of a big squatter.

Against this crowning desire of her heart, however, quiet as she kept it, was a something pulsating in her physical fibre, that kept her in touch with wild Nature.

The desire to rove, to change her ground con-

stantly, coming from her birth, her soul attuned from her very infancy to the clear, melodious notes of the troubadour magpies, embraced the whole domain of Bushland, because she was bush born and bush bred.

In mental proclivity she revelled in the weird, mocking laughter of the snake killers, the kookaburras. She fell in naturally with the other moods inculcated by the soft coo of the woodland doves, the varied aspect of the story they could tell contained in the croak of frogs in the marshlands of the well-watered forest lands, the nocturnal cry of the opossums, the call of the morepork, and the long-drawn musical queries of the curlews about her.

Each tone and note of wild life was, therefore, dear to her. She understood them all.

A babyhood and youth spent in the eucalyptus-saturated air, that ever-present breathing of vigour and long, healthy life associated with dwellers in forest clearings, had turned out the well-grown girl, every nerve, sinew, and muscle alive and alert with motion and enjoyment.

With the lore and love of the bush, thus forming part of her inner nature, it was not perhaps so very strange that she was bushmarked also.

It was a small but vivid impression, a birthmark, more like a burnt brand in copper colour, of what might either have been taken for an oval gum leaf, with a short, straight, broken-off petiole attached to the base of it, and running through the middle; or a black fellow's bark canoe with the pole stick left in.

Be that as it may, this mark of Millie Heseldine's, small as it was, from some unknown cause produced the most extraordinary facial changes upon any aborigines who ever cast eyes upon it. Even a chance glimpse never failed to make them mouth and gesticulate.

The black women would sometimes cast themselves at her feet and gaze at it, where it was situated on the white flesh in the inner bend of her right elbow; and no doubt the knowledge of all this by-play of emotion and worship made Millie's mother very superstitious about it in her time, until at length she regarded it as an undoubted portent.

It was a curious fact also that, as the child grew older, the blacks would do more for her and her adopted sister, from the sheer influence of this mark, than they would do for all the other whites in the district put together.

Mrs. Heseldine, therefore, who had been a bush school-mistress in the days of her girlhood, noticing all these evidences, for the reason that the adopted daughter was a waif of her own, tenderly guarded because of a beloved former pupil, came to attach almost the same importance to little unmarked Bianca Pearmain under the ægis of Millie Heseldine's talisman that the blacks did.

And thus the future of the pair of girls by mere habit of thought became a matter of daily worry to this brooding mother, almost beyond maternity or guardianship, something she could not account for or understand.

"Take care of those girls, Andy," she had often said to her careless husband. "Some bush destiny awaits them, and they may go astray if you don't keep a clear head; but I'm afraid for you, Andy, I'm afraid because of your love for the bottle and the cards."

Heseldine had, if even through pure selfishness, been sincerely enough grieved at the loss of his energetic, hard-working partner, but to those who knew him now, according to her words, he was making himself completely incapable of carrying out her desires in the way she had wished. He drank deeper and deeper from day to day, until his once hardy frame and iron constitution were going to pieces, and the moral tone of a drunken gambler was neither fit nor impressive for the two girls, now thrown more upon his company and pseudo protection than when Mrs. Heseldine was alive.

In the meanwhile, however, Millie, having fastened the bridle of Towny Jones' big bay horse, on which she had accomplished the sensational double leaps, to one of the verandah posts of her father's domicile, was much annoyed at sundry forceful objurgations on his part from within.

"Father is altogether beyond bearing," she muttered angrily, shocked at his vocabulary. "Mother was equal in birth and manners to anyone, but father's going on like this will land us all in Queer Street some day!"

She listened a moment, shrugging her shoulders in deep disdain, then clinched a half decision,

formulated some time back, to leave this swearing, sottish parent, and seek her own fortune elsewhere.

She had not been greatly astonished to see "Myall Dick," whom she knew as Mr. Richard Cosgrave, fighting his claim to her that morning. He had a certain right to her, which she had hitherto opposed by all the means in her power. He had not pressed this right, but had given her to know, in a quiet, determined fashion, that resistance would be useless, and she was rather overwhelmed by that knowledge. He was not the man she would have chosen for herself, but he had been a friend to the family for years past, and it was he who had presented her, some time ago, with the beautiful blue roan mare she was now thinking of as her means of escape, both from him and her drunken and incompetent father.

Ready dressed, in her riding-habit, she went into the house for a few minutes and returned with a valise and a flushed face, for she had spoken her mind to her blaspheming parent, and was bent upon carrying out her resolve.

When she had saddled and bridled her own mare, she rode away, rather glad that the obtuse author of her being would fall under the brunt of Cosgrave's displeasure for her departure. Her willing mount, stepping briskly along the road, cocked her ears playfully to a distant sound, and presently she met the very man she was escaping from, riding slowly forward, with his late antagonist walking at his side.

Petulant at his orders during the scene of the

morning, she eased her hand as they came forward, and dashed by them at a gallop. He, her lover, turning in his saddle, stared long and keenly at her receding figure, whilst a flush mantled darkly on his brow, for she had again kissed her hand to him in mocking derision.

"It shall be a real one, and more than one, next time we meet, my lady," he angrily thought, "for I can guess where you are off to, and why. What a beauty you have grown since I have been away in the back blocks. I shall have to keep a vigilant eye upon your further movements."

Richard Cosgrave was a digger prospector, and possessed a strange record, a totally distinct and separate one from other men.

To begin with, he had been brought up amongst the blacks, until he was about eight years old, no one knowing his parentage, which was pure white. Then a man amongst the whites found this out, took pity upon him, got him away from the blacks' camp, and put him to school. Here he learned quickly enough, but he never quite forgot his old associates, and was off again with them before he was eighteen; strange to say, then, with the advice and aid of the very person who had paid for his education and keep in the interim.

That individual was an old miner who had taken a fancy to the bright, intelligent boy, and afterwards, under the influences of this strangely-made friendship, this lad of eighteen, though sojourning with the blacks, discovered gold and had made his pile at twenty.

From time to time, however, not satisfied with that, and wishing to become a millionaire, Richard Cosgrave had turned up from time to time at a selection of his own near the township, but like the "wind that bloweth where it listeth," what place he came from, or where he went to, was never known. They were bush secrets jealously guarded by their possessor.

His only attendant was his black foster-mother—a devoted creature who cooked for him, and was only seen when he was. But it was rumoured that he became a black fellow at times, through his great knowledge of tribal customs, and that was why the appellation of "Myall Dick" had come to be his. He was dark, inscrutable, said to be revengeful, and people knew otherwise that he was not a man to be trifled with.

This man, therefore, Dick Cosgrave, rode on with a word or two thrown in here and there to his late antagonist, who seemed to have buckled under to his prestige, until they reached Heseldine's dwelling, which they entered together, their spurs clinking on the verandah as they walked across it.

"'Ave a drink, ole man," Heseldine remarked disconcertedly, when he discovered who his visitor was.

Jones, seeing how affairs were likely to go, after a bit turned on his heel, scorning a second maudlin offer of a drink from the muddled host, unbuckled his horse's bridle from the verandah post it was fastened to, and rode away back to his camp with a

sardonic smile irradiating his battered but good-humoured countenance. It was rather an honour to have come so well out of a fight where "Myall Dick" was concerned.

"Where you been now, Dicksh?" ventured the besotted, sly grog-seller uneasily, terrified by Cosgrave's stern eyes.

"So you're drinking again!" blurted out the gold-digger angrily, wholly regardless of both questions.

Then, noticing the other's fatuousness, and moved by some apparently strong emotion or divination, he continued in a softer, kindlier voice:

"See here, Andy!"—but broke off and turned round for a handshake as Bianca Pearmain entered the room.

"Get her to tidy up!" he curtly observed at this intrusion, with his masterful eyes still upon the inebriate, "and you come along with me, Andy; I've something to tell you."

They went out together, and walking through the pine forest verging on the river bank, presently came to a natural recess, outside which the washed-out roots of a tree made a trellised network, a sort of arbour with a seat inside, where they talked long and earnestly.

Next morning the sly grog-shanty had disappeared. It had been burned to the ground during the night; and with it had gone all traces of Andy Heseldine, Bianca Pearmain, and "Myall Dick," alias Richard Cosgrave.

CHAPTER IV

A FEMININE IMPOSSIBILITY

“ By camp-fires, where the drovers ride around their restless stock,

And past the teamster toiling down to fetch the wool away,
My letter chases Conroy's sheep along the Castlereagh.”

—A. B. PATERSON.

SOME months after the burning of Andy Heseldine's dwelling, and the total disappearance of its occupants, a hardy, good-looking young fellow crossed in a punt over another big river in quite a different part of interior Australia with a fine, upstanding grey horse and a pack-horse.

At the landing-place on the other bank he remounted, rode up the rising track to the summit, and was immediately in the middle of a bush township in all its crude impulses of progression.

In its vicinity was a newly-discovered copper mine, which held gold enough amongst the less valuable ore to pay all working expenses. And the river was navigable for steam-boats.

The rider was Tom Inglis, an Australian-born man, junior partner with a pair of station owners, who had pushed out beyond this last limit of civilisation

in search of additional country for breeding purposes. And young Inglis expected to get the management of this new venture when his seniors had gone back to town.

It was, therefore, with a pleasurable sense of life and elation that he called upon his willing steeds and cantered down the one street of the township to the principal hotel.

When a man has been living in the back blocks for some time, he yearns, naturally enough, for the civilising influence of a woman's presence ; and this is all the more likely to make itself powerfully felt if, in quest of it, he should be fortunate enough to chance upon his own masculine ideal of femininity. But, beyond one or two women who glanced at him as he passed, Tom's chances were meagre enough. The township seemed to be almost deserted.

He was a perfect stranger to the place, although it was the nearest settlement to his new-found far out station. He had never been there before, and the formula of "Man from outer-out-back somewhere" had been the unexpressed idiom of the few stragglers he had met. Beyond this, no one seemed to trouble.

Nearly all the population had gone away to witness the formal opening of the copper mine. They had gone with a certain amount of ceremony and bush display, in buggies, brakes, covered carts, even bullock drays, keenly interested in the prospect of becoming local shareholders.

Arrived at the hotel, Tom rode around to the back and found a groom to whom, under brief supervision,

he entrusted the care of his horses. Then, crossing the yard, he entered the hotel, and from a passage found a large dining-room, wherein, ringing a bell, he was confronted with, apparently, the elderly, plain female cook of the establishment, who apologised for the shortage of attendance, and explained the reasons.

"Not even a barmaid to talk to," thought Tom dejectedly, as he ordered his dinner. "I'll see if I can find a man to play a game of billiards with."

He was unsuccessful here also, after all his foray. The billiard-room was locked up, as the marker was also looking after his perquisites of investment at the copper mine, and there was not even to be seen a barman, boots, or waitress, anywhere.

As for the proprietor, he was a large investor, and therefore invisible also.

With a sigh Tom Inglis resigned himself to the inevitable, resolving to set out for the copper mine himself as soon as possible, and invest in a few shares, because he had learned from the groom that it was a good thing.

He managed to get a shower bath as well as a plunge, and, having effected a change of raiment from his valise, again took his place in the big, lonely, solitary dining-room, where he found, somewhat to his surprise, a remote corner of white damask resplendent with silver and glass spread for his sole occupancy.

Phyllis, his own ideal Phyllis herself, waited upon him. And the beauty of her face added to the divinity of his dinner.

"You live a good way off, I suppose?" was her first query, after setting his chair for him.

Her knowledge for him was self-evident, if abrupt. Tom carried a look of a far comer from his sun tan and general appearance.

"Are there any more gentlemen with you?" she went on, with studied carelessness.

"Yes, my two partners."

"What are they like? I mean," she corrected, "are they older or younger than yourself?"

"Both older. How is it that you didn't go out to the copper mine?"

"Someone's got to stay," she said, with a little more assurance. She had made the same discovery he had in those brief moments, and read his eyes, which were not disrespectful, in spite of his bluff manner, which was caused by sheer nervousness at her presence. "For instance," she said, with a slight access of colour, "what would you have done if I had not been here to look after you?"

"Muddled along somehow, I suppose," he replied, rather mournfully, his face scarlet with the same emotions. "I never hinted that I was sorry you stopped. I never expected such a pleasure, and couldn't find anyone to talk to, except the groom and the cook."

"Well, Bridget is capable, as I daresay you perceive. But, to judge by your voice, you are like the blacks when they say: 'Poor fellow me.' Why should you feel so ill-used? Are you of a social disposition? Shall I waive all ceremony and

come and chat with you in the verandah by and by?"

"I wish you would," he said heartily. "I'm tired of being alone."

"Neither of your partners is married, I suppose?" she asked abruptly.

"Out where we live?" he answered, startled out of his hesitating attitude by the mere impossibility of the question. "Well, no, our place is hardly yet fitted to receive a lady, my dear girl."

"H'm!" she exclaimed, rather resentfully, yet from her blush not quite unappreciative of the compliments in Tom's eyes. "I—see! Then, owing to your enforced seclusion from the ranks of female society, you acquire the right"—pursing her pretty lips to conceal her amusement—"to call *me* your dear girl. Some young gentlemen certainly don't want assurance.

"Shall I tell Bridget that the soup was to your taste?"

Tom nodded, and raising his glass of sherry drank to her health.

"Well then," she concluded, as she bore his plate off with a merry glance over her shoulder, "all things considered, especially your forlorn condition, your 'dear girl' will now bring you, at intervals, the rest of your refreshment."

Tom was upset entirely between bashfulness and boldness. He had never seen such a beautiful girl, and she was one of those who showed in every feature, every poise, that she was to the full as good

as she looked. A girl full of fire and animation, she was as sweet as a budding rose, and made him lose his head altogether.

There was no one about that pleasant evening to interrupt their friendly talk in the verandah, except an old black fellow who passed once or twice. The habitual frequenters of the hotel were all away, and the bar was closed to outsiders.

Tom never forgot that night. It seemed like heaven to him, mixed as it was with the lowing of cattle, the twinkling but occasional and rare light in some distant casement seeming to answer the brilliant stars with a loving touch of tenderness and home desire, after his sojourn in the wilds, and the sweetly scented air, the general restful, far out feeling of an Australian border settlement, left their impression, too, where for the first time in his life one heart had answered his own and held Paradise for them both to utilise and see that it was good.

She wore a spray of blossoming copper-leaved eucalyptus in the bosom of her bodice, and Tom's attention had been particularly drawn to it because of its peculiar rarity.

"The town stockman, Ned Grimthorpe, brought me the spray this morning," she said, with an averted glance. "I am bush-marked with its sign, you know, and some people think it prophetic of my future."

Thus their talk varied until Tom, entirely carried away by her proximity, proposed marriage and was accepted, provisionally, on trial.

He stayed some days after that first interview of theirs without visiting the copper mine, but when he left at last he considered himself an engaged man.

It had been a very brief and unexpected courtship, but when ideal meets ideal, who shall say them nay? Nothing else on earth of happiness seemed to be wanting to either of them, and Inglis rode away with her spray in his buttonhole, his tongue lingering over the "Millie" of her Christian name. He was to come back for her at once, and as he had pressed this, was much in vision during his home journey as he thought about all that had passed between them, the discoveries of her perfections he had made, the decisions he had come to. One scrap of conversation from herself coming into his mind pleased him more than anything else, especially when associated with the glance and caress of the beloved speaker.

"Why," she had said to him, "I could help you to work the station. I am used to the blacks, carry a talisman for them. I can ride, and in general knowledge of the bush and its ways I doubt if even you, Tom, big squatter and bushman as you may think yourself, would be able to instruct me overmuch."

Here was a mate after his own heart, indeed, for he was native-born and delighted with her declaration of ready capability and sympathy with his work.

He came up with some rams which had been the

real object of his visit, and had been despatched on the road for his station, but after helping to convey them safely there, he was detained beyond the time he had promised to go back for his bride. His partners were going to town, according to a sudden determination, and he had to stay for a week over his stipulated time while they fussed about various trivial matters. But after they left and he was getting ready to leave for the settlement, a horseman came along from that very place, bringing the astounding news that a girl from the big hotel had married the town stockman, who was also the Pound-keeper, and describing in detail all the jollifications of the wedding, which, according to his account, was attended by the whole populace.

The traveller had not given Tom the name of the bride, but, connecting his still-cherished, if faded, spray with the town stockman, there was only one girl in the township for him.

He had sent a letter to his betrothed by black-fellow post—the cleft-stick, in which it was tied, proving a security for safe delivery through some superstition—in which he had told her the reasons for his delay. Now he understood why he had received no counter communication, and was paralysed at the thought of what it meant for him.

A month after the departure of the traveller he was sitting at midday in the shade of the bark-roofed verandah of the principal building of his dwelling place, still meditating problems connected with his past.

"I might have expected it," he moralised. "The blacks said she got my letter all right. It was because I did not return at once. I ought to have told Nettlefold and Sargent about my sudden and important resolve, instead of knuckling under to their fads and fancies.

These harassing reflections were brought about by the re-perusal of a letter that his rough-rider, Jim Terry, had delivered to him that morning.

It was worded thus :

"DEAR TOM,—Nettlefold has dropped in for a large fortune, and, of course, intends to go to England to realise how it feels to be passing rich. I also, strange to say, inherit moderately from a deceased aunt. Consider us, therefore, only sleeping partners for some time.

"The firm allows you now £400 per annum as working and managing partner. All town and travelling expenses extra when combined with business. Do your work thoroughly, for all our sakes, also for your own profit; for there are such things as bonuses. I may return in a year or so if I can tear myself away; but I mean to see the old country and the continent of Europe as well. Nettlefold and I have taken our passages by the outgoing P. & O. steamer.

"Our first mob of 1,500 'stores' are on the way up, under Waters. That is our arrangement. The rest devolves upon your own judgment. You will hear shortly from our agents, who are sending your

directions, and will act for you in all personal matters.—Your friend and partner,

“ALEXANDER SARGENT.”

“*P.S.*—It may be, perhaps, your turn next to come in for a fortune.”

“H'm! don't know much about that,” grunted Tom, as he turned the letter over. “Except for this new rise, I consider my luck ended. Spificated, in fact!”

At this point, old Spot, Nettlefold's ancient and valorous bull-terrier bitch, growled ominously.

Selim and Prince, two Kangaroo dogs, red and brindle in colour respectively, who were fast asleep on their backs with their legs propped against the wall of the house at convenient angles, assumed a fighting equilibrium in two instantaneous and responsive somersaults, and, rushing frantically down towards the crossing place, barked furiously. Old Spot never warned in vain.

Jim Terry, the rough-rider, Tom's sole companion at this time, ran out of the kitchen without his hat, and with contemplative hands joined across his forehead, as a protection against the sun glare, stood staring in astonishment. For on the other side of the crossing place were strangers—a black girl and a young white woman—both mounted, both leading pack-horses, and they were riding down the opposite far bank to cross the river.

Disappearing in the hollow, they rose to sight again on the station side, and continuing their

progress at length halted right in front of Tom Inglis, where he was sitting in a lean-to canvas chair in the verandah.

Judge of his amazement when he found that the rider of one of the leading horses was the very girl he had left behind him in the township! His lost love, Millie Heseldine!

She was equally astounded at seeing him.

After hurried explanations, it transpired that the bride mentioned by the passing traveller was quite a different person from Tom's sweetheart.

The wonderment of it all was further increased by Millie herself, who stated that she was now on her way to find another situation, and but for the fact of a flooded river interfering with her journey, and causing a great detour, she would never have chanced upon Tom's station at all, but kept on her way down country, ignorant of his feelings, and imagining that he had thrown her over.

But she would not now listen to any proposition of going back to the township to be married.

Being a girl of quick decision, and seeing there could be no misunderstanding between them now, even if she had to suffer herself about something not disclosed, she determined to stop for a final explanation, and for the purpose of putting Mr. Jim Terry off the scent, proposed to Tom that she and her black companion should undertake the house and kitchen work, until such times as other arrangements could be made.

Tom joyously clinched the bargain at once, but

could hardly understand her manner, though desirous, above all things, of having her near him. What on earth had happened?

So he sang out for Jim Terry, and personally superintended the deportation over to the kitchen for these new auxiliaries to bachelor home comfort.

Wondering much at the extraordinary chance that had led her to his own home, he helped the newcomers to unsaddle, unbridle, and hobble their steeds, Jim heading them up the river to a mob of station horses browsing within sight.

There were not many sheep at Kulbarunna now, most of them having been sold to a neighbour fifty miles away, and Tom and Jim had been constantly on the roads with them.

The advent of the two girls seemed to be a perfect windfall for the station under the new management, for they were both, the white girl and the black, excellent managers and good cooks, whilst Millie Heseldine herself soon put all matters connected with Tom's dwelling house in such wonderful and charming order that the men considered themselves in paradise.

Mutual explanations had been meagre as yet, because of publicity lurking in the person of Mr. James Terry, but a note slipped gently by Millie into Tom's hand one morning bore this warning message, and made the situation plainer if more exorbitant:

"It must never be known that we have met. I rely upon your honour as a gentleman. The past

is never to be brought up, and must be buried. Keep your own counsel ; I will keep mine. Burn this at once."

It finished with three small crosses, which meant kisses.

Tom lit his pipe with a corner of the white slip of paper, casting the rest of it, with its pencilled secret, into the gidya ashes of the fireplace, where it flared redly, blackened, and turned to impalpable ashes

His forehead became grim and puckered. What could be the meaning of her decision, and what were they to do? Luckily for him, there was much work to be got on with just now, and he welcomed it heartily for the above reasons. There were large additions to be made to the old stockyard, and he was out daily selecting and marking timber pending the arrival of workmen, because a former sheep station was about to be transformed into a cattle run.

Once or twice daily, however, he managed to get the opportunity of a word or two with the only young white woman who had ever been seen at Kulbarunna, from which interviews, "all boiled down," as he mentally expressed it, the extract amounted to this: That, owing to circumstances happening since they parted, she thought it best to let that past be. Wishing to be independent, she was willing to stay and work for him, but only in the relations they now occupied. She had been much worried of late, and wanted a rest and perfect

quiet. When that was accomplished she would leave.

So that was what Tom's enforced delay at the station had brought him to. Something had occurred in the interim, but what it was he could not fathom. She was much colder in her manner to him, and would neither talk of marriage nor anything else.

CHAPTER V

LOVE'S LABOUR LOST

“ Not understood ! The secret springs of action,
Which lie between the surface and the show,
Are disregarded. With self-satisfaction
We judge our neighbours, and they often go
Not understood ! ”

—THOMAS BRACKEN.

A WEEK after Millie and her black girl, Leura, had arrived at Tom's station, some of the outside blacks, who were numerous and all over the country, reported to those at the station that a horse valued by Tom himself, then some time astray, had been seen running on the back country of a certain creek some miles up the river, with a mob of mares and foals, and, knowing the locality mentioned, Tom, though it was some distance away, without a second thought, hastily summoned Jim Terry and a black boy to boot and saddle; the three of them, after hasty preparations, riding off to camp for the night at a hut by a stake yard near the vicinity of the runaway.

This yard happened to have been built of unusual height and strength, in order to keep the wild dogs

from a flock of sheep which had been quartered there before they were sold, and therefore suggested itself to Tom as being particularly handy to run the stray mob of horses into.

The outside blacks had given very little trouble. The home station blacks were quiet, and white strangers only showed very rarely, but to Tom Inglis, not long after his start, there entered a haunting and discomfiting doubt concerning Millie Heseldine.

Supposing some loafing sundowner or white man, not worth his salt as a white man, should come along, and finding out the absence of white protectors at the station, would she be safe?

Or if any man who had a prior claim to her, as he now more than half suspected, should arrive and take her away from him. That might bury the past and destroy the chance of the sequel he was determined to have happen, whether by hook, crook, prolonged patience, or the immolation of the man preferred.

She wasn't his wife yet, and if she really resolved to be adamant to him, might never be, but in his conscience, perhaps in hers also, there lingered the old knowledge that he possessed a great claim to her. A claim that she could hardly disregard when she was actually living on his station, nor he either the self-evident fact of his great love for her.

Again, suppose a mob of wild, hunting blacks should come in? There would be no one to protect her, even in that case. What a fool he was not to have left Jim Terry behind! He was too proud to stay himself. Should he tell Jim to go back?

His thoughts running thus in counterfoil only, as he rode along, he became so absent-minded that Jim, his constant companion out on the run, wondered what was the matter with him.

Just as he was making up his mind to send Jim Terry back to guard the girls, a flock of prime wethers, 2,000 strong, came into sight. They were the last lot to be sent away, and he was going to sell them, as they were quite fit for the roads and market. He was keeping them to send down to town with Waters, the drover, when he had finished with the delivery of the expected store cattle. The present shepherd in charge of these sheep was a new hand, and Tom was not entirely satisfied with him.

So that when the three horsemen came on these very sheep wandering with a very wide, straggling "spread" on them, it was evident to experienced eyes that something was up with the flock, and no shepherd or dog had been near them for hours. Moreover, when, on riding all round them, they found no evidence of either man or animal, in spite of loud and prolonged coo-ees, it was still more certain that something had happened beyond the common; perhaps disaster to the shepherd.

"Bitten by a snake, or waddied by the waddy-galos," muttered Tom vindictively.

"Jim," he continued, "ride on with Boro, and round those horses up. You ought to be able to get them into the yard to-night and bring them on to the station to-morrow, if you look sharp. When I find the shepherd I will come on after you. If I

don't come across him, or if he doesn't turn up to-night at his yard, I will go on his tracks with one of the black boys from the station to-morrow, and put Mulga and Jerry on with these sheep.

"Meanwhile, as the flock are now heading for their own yard, I'll stick to them. You and Boro can take my share of rations and tea. I shall get plenty at the shepherd's hut."

The party then separated, Tom bringing the grazing wethers more together with a shrill whistle, which made them run in from their far-spread sides, expecting their dog. Across the ridgy downs where they were he now went on with them, leaving Jim and Boro to diverge on their errand. Tom, coming on to well-grassed, open plains, scoured the country in all directions on horseback by himself, without discovering any traces of the man who ought to have been with the sheep.

On reaching the sheep yard, and finding that the shepherd did not turn up, even at sundown, Tom hitched his horse to a rail near the hut and counted the flock into their yard, keeping his own tally in hundreds by shifting a pebble from one palm to the other.

Rather against his surmises, he found their number quite correct, and fastening the gate hurdles he proceeded to investigate the absent shepherd's dwelling place, wherein cleanliness and order, exhibited in superiority above the common, showed the experienced "hatter," or one well accustomed to live alone, in spite of his other delinquencies.

Under the snow-white powdery gidya ashes heaped up on the hearth clay, failing other marked evidences, he found the hard glowing embers of the wood, which at any rate showed the man's presence there at breakfast time, but the hours passed away and he still did not put in an appearance.

"I'll be stuck here all to-morrow with these sheep if I don't hurry and utilise time," thought Tom. "Who can tell what has happened to him? He may be dead, for all I know, most-probably is; and I had better bring Eacharn and some other of the trackers to make sure."

He reflected also that by this means of procedure his ever present anxiety about the girl of his heart might be relieved by a sudden visit to the home station, and that gladdened his heart more than anything else had done since he left home. So examining once more the fastenings of the gate hurdles and his own horse's straps, buckles, and girths, he sprang into the saddle with alacrity, and rode off in the moonlight, taking a well-known short-cut through the bush, which saved him about three miles.

He reached the station houses at twelve o'clock that night, and was considerably astonished and alarmed when he saw an unusual number of blacks' fires in the valley by the creek at the back of the station. By this time of night, in the ordinary course of things, even the embers of those fires should have been out, but there was a blazing big corroboree fire in the centre of lesser illuminations,

and, worst sign of all, flitting firesticks, carried by restless figures away from the camp ; and it looked as if the aboriginals were up to mischief, or had been.

In the consummate preoccupation of thought which had stuck to him all day, he had gazed vaguely at first at this unwonted display from the elevation of the higher river terraces as his horse surmounted them, until the terrible significance of the situation dawned upon him.

Then, with an oath, he struck the spurs into his horse and galloped wildly forward, for, ahead of him, by the houses, he caught sight of a figure which filled him with dismay.

This figure, when he first detected it, had been gliding stealthily along close to his own dwelling, and its full corroboree presentment in the clear moonlight was ghastly. There was no bodily covering to this stalwart savage, for such it was, save the fiendish contrast of white, yellow, and scarlet against a black skin ; the ribs picked out in white until it looked like a skeleton in the moonlight. But this apparition carried a full fighting complement of spears in one hand, and the moon glint flashed from a steel tomahawk, gripped equally with a bark torch.

Were even now the girls abducted, and was he there to fire the dwellings ?

Tom pulled up and fired three shots from his revolver at this stealthy, silent horror, but, his horse plunging violently, missed him.

The blackfellow ran away down into the valley,

where a savage medley of shouts and cries arose, and excited figures rushed about with frantic gestures, seeming to forebode attack. The explosion of Tom's pistol deadened all else for the moment to his own ears, but dashing forward again, all aghast at any unforeseen possibility, he reined up at the side of his seemingly deserted dwellings, jumping off his horse and leading it forward.

The terror of breathless, gasping suspense broke in upon him. What had happened? Had the girls been killed?

The lime-washed station houses looked eerily very white, and shone like plaster of Paris in the moonlight.

Shadows of tree stems, boughs, laced with shadows the intermittent brightness of the sward, and marked the stillness of his suspense. He was aware of this, thrillingly aware of it; everything was distinctly and vividly marked to his glaring eyes, even to a stray stick or stone. And no sound whatever came from within his own house as he paused aghast for a moment.

Then the main door of the big dwelling opened silently and Millie Heseldine, fully dressed, stole stealthily out, carrying a rifle, and was followed by the black girl with another.

"I thought you would never return in time, Mr. Inglis," she said, in a breathless, agonised whisper. "We wanted someone's help badly. Oh, how frightened we have been!"

The open door showed other firearms on the table

in the moonlight, but the rest of the house only the darkness of ready barricade with closed shutters.

"If we went out of the kitchen—" A pang shot through Tom's heart. She, who ought to have been his wife ere this, had been condemned to menial offices by his own delay. "If we went out of the kitchen," she continued, "we saw blacks slipping like phantoms from tree stem to tree stem to conceal themselves. We have been stuck up by them all day. So, fearing for the worst, we barricaded ourselves in the big house, as far as we could, and loaded all the rifles and revolvers we could find. Until we heard your horse's hoofs, and the shots, we had almost given up ourselves for lost. And I have been praying for your return ever since Mulga and Jerry went away with the milking cows this morning. Oh, how glad I am you are home! When I saw the blacks surrounding the houses, and found Mulga and Jerry never came back, I began to suspect partly what was likely to happen if no help came. We hadn't even time to loose the dogs. Oh, Tom, Tom!"

He took the double-barrelled rifle from her, and motioned her to hold the bridle of his horse.

Then, walking over behind the kitchen to a point on the slope of the hill beyond it, he raised his weapon to his shoulder.

"They would probably have burned her out, and that peering, creeping, listening fiend was here to start the fire!" he thought, as he took steady aim, alive with rage and pent-up emotions.

His two shots plumped into the middle of the big

corroboree camp fire, four hundred yards away. The heavy bullets had the effect of explosive shells therein, scattering sparks and flaming embers in all directions, with the force of their impact.

Scared shouts and yells now arose, and then followed a hurry-scurry of waving, vanishing fire-sticks as all the blacks assembled fled away into the solitude of the outlying bush and mountains.

"First time I've ever drawn trigger on them!" Tom Inglis mused bitterly, "and I wish I had shot to kill. They deserve it. What sort of a devil's dance would they have been up to ere now if that sweet girl had not been as plucky as they make them? The lost shepherd brought me home in the nick of time, and no mistake; and my shots tell 'em that I'm awake to their mischief and ready for them. If they had killed the girls they would have ambushed our return, and there would have been no one left alive to tell the tale."

He strode back in a few minutes, took his horse from Millie, unsaddled it, and led it over to the stable.

"You shall never be left alone again," he said, on final return. "You are in my charge now. Oh, what has come between us?"

Leura, the black girl, had gone over to the kitchen reassured. Tom had let all the dogs loose, and Millie Heseldine was in his arms, in his own house, sobbing on his shoulder as if her heart would break.

"And now tell me your reasons for behaving as you have done," he whispered, when she was more composed.

"First of all, why did you leave with Leura at all? Why run away and not wait for me? Why did you not answer my letter? And what is the main reason for your coldness and not wishing to marry me?"

"For one reason, I—thought—you—were—above—me, that you had spurned—me," she faltered. "I was only a poor country girl, a waitress in an hotel—you a big squatter, a gentleman!"

"After your delay beyond the time appointed, I wondered if you really loved me; if there was not a possibility of you getting tired of me if we did marry. I thought perhaps you might have found joints in my harness that you did not approve of, some bush manners I had let slip to my detriment. I was sure I was not well enough connected for you, although I—loved—you—so dearly. You knew nothing of my people, and I could not tell you then that another man had a sort of claim to me.

"And," she added, standing clear of him, but with both her hands at arm's length on his shoulders, "I was a very wilful girl—then! I hardly knew what it all meant, love and marriage. I wanted to see—for myself—the sort of estimation I was likely to be held in by a—gentleman.

"And I was led away by my feelings without due reflection. I should have kept you at a distance, but I felt I loved you then. It was so sudden, and I could not retract or tell you all, for you were my first love. No one but you ever took my fancy so, or spoke so sweetly to me.

“But when I thought that some day you might chance to hear odd things about me, I felt afraid to lose that love you told me then you had for me, the love that was once my own. I thought of your friends, your partners, and seemed to hear them sneer that I was not fine lady enough for them or you; I couldn't face it. I thought you had given me up on their representations, for every day you delayed was like a year to me; and I felt more bound to that other man I have told you about, whom I forgot completely when you came into my life. He is a very peculiar man and bitterly revengeful. I have been afraid of him.

“So I gave you up, Tom, now that you have forced it out of me; but it is your right to know. I took steps against my own real wishes that I thought would part us for ever. And then somehow the flood waters drove Leura and myself right to your very station doors, in spite of all my precautions. But why must I tell you all this, even if it is your right to be told. I can never be your wife!”

Her eyes, full of the old love, looked fully into his for one brief second.

Then she stood clear of him.

Tom started violently, and held out his arms as if in appeal.

She came forward again, as if against her will, but still forward, step by step, until she was close to him.

At length with an effort she put his arms down against his sides, with a queer little, decisive, finishing push, kissing him, however, silently on the forehead,

her soft, sweet lips lingering there, dewy with moisture and warmth, as if in farewell.

Then she drew herself erect, and said, gravely and proudly :

“No ; it cannot be now. Oh, why did I ever stop here for a moment ?”

Tom lowered his gaze. His former delay had lost him his reward. His colour paled as he indignantly replied :

“In spite of your own misjudgment, caprice, and prejudice, you would have been my honoured wife, and still may be, Cosgrave or no Cosgrave, whoever he is.”

“Then God forgive me for ever doubting either your honour or affection. I shall never forgive myself. I’ll get your supper now, sir,” she added, with a sudden change of manner.

Running over to the kitchen, she bathed her face, smoothed her hair, put on a fresh apron, and a ribbon or two, returning to set the meal, so pretty, so self-possessed, so quiet and unassuming, that Tom regretted the unavoidable futility of the past more than ever.

“I don’t wish this Cosgrave of hers any particular harm,” he thought, as he glanced at her thus employed, “but if he was to go out to-morrow by breaking his neck . . . I would renew my suit.”

At daylight next morning, Tom rode off and ran in a mob of horses, whilst Millie Heseldine busied herself in getting breakfast for him, dressed in a riding-habit, with Leura similarly attired.

There wasn’t a sign of a blackfellow anywhere, which, after the fusillade of last night, was not peculiar.

Millie's own mare was amongst those run into the yard, and after breakfast she and Inglis and her black girl rode off together.

The errant Mulga turned up with her man Jerry, just before they left; stating that they had been scared to death yesterday by a nomad tribe of hunting blacks. They were ordered to follow on the horse tracks in case of accident to the shepherd, and the trio departed.

Millie and Tom were very silent and abstracted during their ride, though it could not be denied that their hands met and clasped for a long time sometimes, as the horses closed together, perhaps to dictate farewells, where no words could be spoken.

A remark about a track, or a mob of kangaroos or emus, was their only conversation. Each was busy with silent and ever-forming thoughts.

They rode first to the sheep yard and hut. The shepherd had returned during the night, and the sheep had been taken out of the yard and were away on their run.

"Tally all right?" he queried, when they ran his tracks to him. "I've got all my marked sheep. I was prospectin' yesterday a bit, and clean forgot I was shepherdin'. I didn't come home till late and found my sheep yarded. Your horse tracks told me I'd been spotted. They'd have yarded themselves, even if you hadn't come on them. I often lets 'em feed home by themselves. Keeps 'em fat! I found some stuff yesterday as I didn't know what it was. Looked like blackfellows' pottery, some on it, and

there was blue chaney stuff in brown rock I never seen afore. Didn't never know them blacks made pottery till I seen it myself."

"Look here, my man," Inglis said, in a stern aside, "next time you go prospecting, and let your sheep slide to do it, you'll get the sack, and something else with it. Suppose the wild dogs had got in amongst those wethers!"

And the self-sufficient shepherd, looking into Tom's angry eyes, saw there decision, said nothing, and mentally resolved to do much better in future.

Neither of the two men knew just then that the shepherd's prospecting truancy was a lead to the first discovery of the blue opal deposits which he had mentioned as blue chaney in brown rock, but it was contemporaneous with the discovery eventually of the "noble" opal, and many other varieties of that precious stone.

"'E ain't no new chum, ain't the boss," the shepherd soliloquised. "'E's as good a man as I am, p'r'aps a trifle better, if it was to come to a clean knock-out. Wonder 'oo the blessed bit of white calico is? And the black velvet un, too!"

For the knowledge of the advent of the new-comers had only just now penetrated to the solitary outlying "hatter," and he had no messmates save his old digging habits, his dogs, and the lore of the bush of his compeers.

Striking to the river again, and re-crossing it, Tom and his companions fell in later with Jim and the station black boy, in full charge of a mob of mares

and foals with the runaway horse, very fresh and in good condition, saddled this time and ridden by Jim, whose stock horse ran with the mob.

Millie and Jim now took the wing riding, with Tom ahead to steady the mob, some of which were wild and unbranded.

From that moment Millie Heseldine and Jim Terry became firm friends, the young stockman admiring the girl's splendid horsemanship and initiative when she shot out to her positions, or restraining the paces of her fiery mount, acted with equal judgment elsewhere.

But also from that day forth, somehow, in spite of all the Fates, the affection in Millie's secret self-centred in Tom Inglis altogether, and although she never let him know it by any ostentation, she waited upon him and worked for him hand and foot.

And the recipient of all her assiduity and care, all unconscious of it, though she mended all his things, musing deeply over her needlework, muttered disgustedly as he thought over it all.

"What a pity this man should come between us to part us as he has done. She's like no other girl I ever even heard of."

And his face grew grim and very sad, for he seemed to be in a position there was no telling the end of, unless her decision was altered; and her proximity daily made his position more trying and unbearable.

CHAPTER VI

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

“ Our fathers came of roving stock
That could not fixed abide ;
And we have followed field and flock
Since e'er we learned to ride.”

—A. B. PATERSON.

THE recovered horse, a rather queer-tempered animal, had been stabled after his escapade, for Tom's own particular riding, and ere daylight next morning he had saddled him and ridden off.

One of the stockmen in Waters' employ had come in to the station in the small hours to tell Tom that the expected store cattle were now within reach, and camped at the nine-mile crossing place down the river. He had sent this man off down the river road again, with the intelligence that he would breakfast with Waters, and took a direction of his own choosing through the bush, away from all tracks on the back country of a certain creek which joined the main river, a little below Waters' camping-ground. He desired to inspect the new cattle in bulk before they moved on, so as to be able to judge of their present condition without asking any other opinion.

He was sure that the blacks had given up all venal designs upon the station, since his fusillade, and that the advent of a stronger party of whites would scare them still more, and, resolving to be back himself again by ten o'clock, his mind was easy on that score.

It was the "nerangi" or "little" daylight of the blacks' phraseology when he set forth thus adventurously from the station houses on the rise, and struck down towards the river for the ford that lay below.

But in this steel-grey glimmer before the dawn the mists on the river levels, through which it hinted coming day, held grim parallels of obscurity as cold and comfortless as Tom's own thoughts about his sweetheart.

It was the beginning of a day of foreboding somehow to him, when he mused upon all that had passed between Millie Heseldine and himself, and its sudden termination, and his only consolation was that now, at any rate, there would be plenty of hard work to distract his attention. Then like a glimmer from the east that pervaded his course came an earnest wish that, before this immediate work was over, the mists of their mutual dilemmas might be dispersed and their way made light before them. It might have been a luminous ether wave from Millie's mind that pervaded his, but of that he was not aware.

Looking round as he splashed through the first crossing place, he saw that his favourite kangaroo dogs, Prince and Selim, were following close at his

horse's hocks; but it was not until he was three miles further on his journey that the consequences underlying the power and pace of the three quadrupeds with him became apparent.

By this time daylight had come, but he soon perceived that its foretellings pointed to a dull, stewy forenoon, and that the sun, that bushman's compass, was certain to be thickly obscured by clouds.

He was now negotiating a short-cut through the bush, fairly well known to him, where he should strike the nine-mile creek, and thinking over the pleasure of his first meeting with Waters, concerning whom Sargent had expressed himself in a farewell letter as "a man worth studying."

"They call him 'Many' Waters on account of his adaptabilities. People say that from drover to bush-lawyer you can hardly displace him. Put him into an active volcano, and he will make something out of it, a good deal more comprehensive than mere calcinated flesh and bones. His right name is Mansfield, but you will understand the character of the nickname when you know him well."

Just at that instant from the thick centre of a clump of sandalwood bushes Tom's impatient steed was forcing his way through, there was a sudden wild scuffle and boisterous thudding, as a large animal started away from under his nose.

It was only a red flying doe kangaroo, after all, but the horse was off, Tom nearly so, and a snapshot of the scene of confusion would have shown the dogs in the foreground leaping madly in the air trying to

see which way their quarry had gone, and Tom's horse bucking frantically, and then bolting.

As he settled to his seat, trying to get command of his startled horse, who was now making no sinecure of his name "Traveller," he saw to his right the flying doe, bounding through the undergrowth for all it was worth towards some thicker timber, and his dogs tearing after her at their utmost speed.

His horse had got beyond command, with the bit between his teeth, his head well down on his chest, and was going nearly in the same direction, but not quite, and Tom had to do all he knew to avoid being knocked out of his saddle by boughs, or stretched lifeless by coming up against a tree; and the moments that passed were to the full as exciting as the inception of the sudden movement had been, but every one of them took him away from the direction he should have gone, if he wanted to meet Waters.

A flying doe can go a long way at a speed that taxes the fastest hounds—but Tom's propulsion into the realms of space called his attention solely to himself and his terrified mount, so that he got no real pull upon him at all until he perceived the dogs, after long and considerable variations of direction, during a severe hunt at top speed, were working the kangaroo round across his own flying course well ahead of him, and they killed it right in front of him.

He had managed to steer his horse clear of trees up to this point, but during the mad excitement of it all was quite unable to tell how far he had gone out of his course.

By almost superhuman efforts, he managed to pull up somewhere near the hounds and their dead quarry, and dismounting he unsheathed his knife and cut off the kangaroo's tail to fasten to the D straps of his saddle. This done, he cut up a pipeful of Barret's Twist tobacco, whilst reproaching himself with the utter absurdity of the whole proceeding:

For he knew that this unpremeditated gallop had taken him miles out of his way, and that now if he intended to be in time to catch a sight of the cattle before they moved off their camping-ground, he must be quick about it.

Then noticing somewhere in the direction he had come an opening which he thought might lead to the waters of the nine-mile creek he had been in search of, he remounted, and rode towards it. But seeing brigalow trees almost at once, he concluded he must be running the creek up, and as that was not his intention, he changed his course again.

He was aware that his dogs were too "baked" to follow him, and that they would now lie up by their kill until the cool of the evening, when they would go straight home. It was very hot and sultry, he was extra mad with both himself and his horse, there was no vestige of the sun, nor could he guess at its position in the dull sky.

"I wonder where the deuce I am!" he ejaculated at last, angrily. "More brigalow! I must be right back at the foot of the ranges. I believe I am bushed in real earnest. All your fault," he added, apostrophising his still headstrong horse, as he

drove the spurs home with all the goodwill in the world.

This led to another desperate escapade in various directions, until Tom himself began to cool down ; but, determining to give his steed a lesson that would last him some time, he still drove him forward in a vain hope of extrication from the labyrinth of hills and gullies by which he was now surrounded.

Presently he was more than surprised to see several hoof-prints crossing his path, and being a little dubious as to what sort of animals they were, because of their size, he dismounted again for a more minute survey. At last he satisfied himself that they were made by mules, not by ponies, and were some days old.

There were twelve of them. Two had been ridden and the rest packed, which he discovered by the comparative impressions of the number of animals indicated. He followed these tracks mechanically, until at length they brought him to a creek bordering on some rather abrupt and densely-wooded ranges, when suddenly brushing through some more thick sandalwoods, he came upon a party of aboriginals of both sexes and different colours congregated upon the banks of a small lagoon, near the bases of the hills.

They had been fishing for fresh water crayfish, as was evident from the well-filled, canoe-shaped wooden vessels around them.

These people were of all shades of complexion noticeable in the tribes he had come across hitherto, but one or two of them were even lighter of hue. A

tall, well-shaped, yellow-coloured individual seemed to be their leader.

Full of his discovery of the mule tracks, Tom did not take more than a passing notice of them.

To his vanity be it spoken, however, one especially well-favoured maiden amongst the crowd flashed a glance of sympathy upon him, but although he spoke aloud to them all as he rode by, none of them answered.

He thought this somewhat strange until he noticed that one seemed to have hip disease, another goitre, another a badly-healed wound, a fourth a broken limb, and so on ; but still keeping on, and attributing their silence to these causes, he became absorbed in his mule tracks again.

Why had these mounted strangers crossed his back country? was his dominant inquiry, whilst keeping his eyes riveted constantly on the hoof imprints.

They led him into still queerer surroundings than any he had seen yet. He knew he was in country he had never seen, far back from the river, and had he not been a consummate bushman he might have deemed himself incalculably lost, but the mule tracks led him on, and the instinct of the explorer added zest to his employment.

Some miles further on from where he had seen the strange party of crippled blacks, his horse, fagged enough now, and quite tractable, bore him over some well-grassed foothills, and down into a deep valley, where, near by, rose a wall of rock with a cave at the base of it. It was big enough to lead his horse into, this cave was, and he noticed that several smooth places

inside it bore the mark of the Red Hand on them, an aboriginal design and delineation, and that an even ledge of rock above his head with a blackfellows' ladder leading up to it by leaning against it suggested water.

This ladder was a primitive enough appliance, being merely a sapling with the bark stripped from it, and the boughs lopped short for a climbing foothold.

He let his horse stand with the reins down, and mounted the blackfellows' ladder. He found that the ledge was hollowed out, and contained a running stream which came from above through limestone, and at the end of the ledge again dropped downwards to the floor level through an opening in the cliff side, which seemed to branch onwards right through the rock itself.

He began to wonder what the time was, computing that it was about midday, and that being so far enmeshed in the hills all that was possible for him now to do was by a patient and minute examination of his own horse's prints backwards to endeavour to reach the place he had come from.

As he led his steed out of the cave some writing on a clear spot of rock in the entrance caught his eye. The characters were formed by a black lead pencil in a good imitation of small print, surrounded by a little marked tablet frame in pencil also :

JOHN SOLWAY.

“THE MAN IN DUNGAREE.”

and the date, which was a fortnight old, was also affixed.

So Tom's problem was solved. These men, whose names were imprinted in the little design, were probably the mule owners, who, attracted by the cave, as he had been, had left their record behind and passed on.

Apparently engrossed by their act, they had taken little notice of the blackfellows' ladder which led up to the ledge with the running water in it, as Tom's investigation had shown that the lopped branches, which were polished by bare feet, had only taken his own boot impressions.

He followed his horse's back tracks from outside the cave entrance until, near nightfall, he found the spot where it had been so outrageously startled, and previously discovered that just beyond it, on the road he had been traversing of back tracks, he had been carried right over the watershed of the nine-mile creek unknowingly into one of its unwatered, grassy, gently-sloping spaces.

Feeling rather reticent about his morning's involuntary excursion, he jogged on to the station, and introduced himself to Waters, who had arrived there with all the cattle, merely stating that he had been kept out unavoidably on the run.

It was long past dark when he arrived, and the men were all camped with the cattle on a billabong¹ at the other side of the river. Jim Terry took his jaded horse over to the stables, and soon afterwards, to Millie's great delight, Tom and Waters were enjoying their first supper together.

¹ An outflow of the river during flood time.

The meal finished, they drew their chairs to the fire, for it was cold enough after nightfall to feel the need of one, and over their pipes Tom related the incidents of his morning's journey, which had prevented their earlier meeting.

"Did you see any cave in the ranges?" Waters asked, when he had concluded.

"I saw one hole at the bottom of a cliff big enough to take my horse into, and room enough for a dozen more besides him," replied Tom. "It was marked in places with the Red Hand, and I—"

"Then, by Jove! old fellow," hastily broke in his questioner, "you have found the dwelling place of a tribe I have been seeking to locate for the last two years. I knew it was somewhere up here, and that was why I took charge of your cattle, but I never expected to jump on to it like this. The night's early yet, and we can be back after daylight. Let's put some tea and sugar into our jackshays,¹ take some bread and meat for breakfast to-morrow, and go and explore that cave hole you mention. Don't say a word about it to any living soul. And let us start right away. Are you on?"

"Right," Tom answered. "There are several good fresh horses in the stable. You saddle up; I'll get the other things."

And half an hour later off they went.

¹ Even-sided pint pots with wire handles to hang on the saddle, with pannikin fitting into them as top covers.

CHAPTER VII

THE MESSAGE IN THE CLEFT STICK

“ The veil was from my eyesight drawn,
‘ Thou knowest now ! ’ said he ;
‘ I am the Angel of the Dawn,
Ride back, and wait for me. ’ ”

—VICTOR J. DALEY.

IT had turned out to be a beautifully clear, moonlight night, as they travelled towards the ranges, and the tracks of Tom's horse in the virgin soil were as plain as could be to the trained and practised riders.

They ran them easily, Tom indeed recollecting all salient points of rocks, trees, spurs, and ridges, as they approached the ranges, for a bushman's vision is as the camera, always imprinting an indelible snap-shot on the memory.

Then, later on, he recognised the lagoon where he had first seen the crippled aborigines, and soon after the pair of adventurers disappeared in the heart of the higher hills.

Day and night work were common enough happenings at Kulbarunna in those early days, and no one save Millie Heseldine troubled their heads about where the night-riders were going to. But

when their two horses came galloping into the stockyard late next day, with broken bridles, and snapped hobble chains, there was agitated surmise on the girl's part, and her dismay was such that she nearly fainted.

"Come on, Miss Heseldine," exclaimed Jim, after a rapid survey of the runaways. "It's our turn now. They've broken away from where they were tied up and hobbled; I don't think it's any worse than that. I'll saddle one of them for you.

"Get on your habit quick, and let's away, for I have strict orders from Mr. Tom to take care of you, so I can't go by myself. Never mind the black girl. She will be all right now there are so many people near about, and the outlying blacks have had a rare fright."

Jim's observant eyes, aided by Millie's, who was as good as he at tracking, followed the back hoof-prints of the now mounted wanderers until they descended the side of a steep valley where Tom Inglis had first noticed the cave.

"Here's the place they broke away from," explained Jim in wonder, as he pulled up under a large belar tree near by. "Steady, lad, there's nothing here now to frighten you. See, miss, where they were plunging!

"Now, what the deuce could it 'a been? Harlequin's quiet enough as a general rule, and so is Peachblossom, and they wouldn't have smashed their gear and made off like that without a big scare of some sort. Someone's frightened 'em away a-purpose—most likely the blacks.

"There's Mr. Tom's bootmarks, likewise Mr. Waters', going into that big cave hole on the cliff side. They haven't come out before or since their horses broke away, or their tracks would have shown on top of all this scrubble. We'll hobble the nags loose this time, let 'em pick, and chance it, for 'pears to me there's no time to lose. Something must have happened. I've plenty of matches, and a revolver, miss, so come along and stick close to me."

The hole or cave tunnel into which they eventually entered, from the water ledge in the outer cave, trended downwards, wetly enough at first, but the ground rose again to a dry surface, and feeling their way by the light of wax matches, they suddenly found themselves in a vaulted chamber. The sides and walls, even to the dome, were salient with jagged glistening surfaces. They saw that an outlet, the same as the tunnel they had entered by, continued onwards, and Millie was full of conjectures as to the two men's motives in entering such an extraordinary place.

Jim's words had not been reassuring, and the idea of anything happening to Tom lay like a nightmare upon her soul. For the second time in her life she felt something like real terror. It was so dark in here with only matches.

Could Tom have sought revenge upon those blacks who had sent a scout to fire the station, by following them here with Mr. Waters, and had both men been lured farther on into this darksome and desolate place and killed?

"Coo-ee!" Jim shouted, hoping for some response from the wanderers.

Then, as an additional signal, he fired one barrel of his revolver straight above him into the dome of the big chamber. There was a heavy report in the confined space, and an extraordinary echo of it, which seemed to rehabilitate to a positive shock, and then to boom and groan away in a descending scale amongst the twists and turns of underground passages leading out of the vault where they were standing.

A dull, inert sound, and Jim fell suddenly at her feet, struck on the head by a fragment of rock loosened by the impact of the revolver bullet.

Millie, despite her innate bravery of venturesome coming, now gave a wild, hysterical scream, which made the pitch black vault and corridors a pandemonium of wailing sounds, and sank fainting to the ground.

When she came to her senses again, Tom Inglis was kneeling beside her in the darkness, his arm round her waist. With a tremor she recognised his voice, as, supporting her in a sitting position, he whispered gently: "Drink this, dear," and placed the cup of his brandy flask to her lips.

"What brought you here?" she asked, wildly importunate, when she had complied with his wishes, for she was frightened out of her wits now by the accident to Jim.

"The 'coo-ee' and the pistol shot, of course," he replied. "Can you rise, dear? Are you injured in any way?"

"No."

"Then lean on me and let us get out of this as soon as possible. I have lost my lantern and used my last match. I am sorry to say that Waters has fallen down a great hole farther back. I can't get at him, although I tried to do so for many hours. Then I lost my way when my matches gave out, and but for your signals don't know where I should have got to.

"I was on ahead and had passed the hole when the fatal accident happened to Waters, and then I thought I heard a smothered gasp and a fall behind me, and almost directly heard a scream and a heavy body fell down the hole. There was only a narrow ledge to pass it by, but we both saw it going in. He must have slipped somehow. In my agitation going back to peer over the abyss I let my lantern fall down it, and heard it splash into the water far below. I couldn't climb down—it was too steep and had no foothold. Then I wanted to get out of the cave and go for help, but got into wrong turnings, and when by my last match but one I got into the main tunnel again I heard Jim 'coo-ee,' and then the report of his pistol, and I felt my way along till I touched you in my path. Jim is not dead, only stunned, his breathing is all right. But I am afraid Waters is gone. He could never have survived such a fall."

Tom's voice seemed to run all round the walls of the domed cavern like the moan of a soul in distress, and, suddenly, flickering, moving lights, emerging from the passage he had come by, surrounded them.

Jim, recovering just then and catching sight of this new and extraordinary phenomenon, sat up with a start, lit a match, and gazed around him in amazement.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "They're gone, whatever they are. And what knocked me silly? So you're all right, Mr. Tom, thank goodness."

The match burnt out, and the tableau of Tom and Millie in each other's arms faded from Jim Terry's astonished vision, and before he could fumble for another the lights were there again, and their weird appearances quickened even Tom's steady pulses not a little.

"Listen, Tom!" Millie cried, in her excitement and terror clinging closer to him as Jim's words echoed back. "It's Mr. Waters' ghost answering from the bourne of the dead," she sobbed hysterically. "And look at the moving lights! Are they ghosts, too? Oh! *what* are they?"

"Nonsense, it's only the effect of the echo, dear. You'll hear my voice reply just the same. And your ghosts are just phosphorescent fungi, that flicker out on the cave walls during the darkness. I've seen the same appearances on trees in the bush at night."

Then with a word to Jim, who rallied determinedly, he assisted Millie towards the cave entrance, Jim lighting match after match to show them where to plant their feet.

But once outside in the open air, the inevitable reaction came upon them after the fright they had all experienced; and they got back to the station in a frame of mind completely upset by the terrible

accident to Waters, and the ordeal they had all gone through.

A black cloud lay upon Millie until it seemed as if she felt it physically, for she moaned from time to time, and refused to be comforted.

"The mark upon my arm!" she declared, when they were safe at the station, and Tom was trying to reassure her, "it burns, burns, burns, like my conscience does. Surely it is prophetic! Why should I have been doomed to select your station, of all places, to come to? I seem to have brought nothing but trouble to you and others, and to myself also, since ever I arrived."

"Not to me, dear," he remarked.

"Oh, yes, yes, I am afraid it will be worse for us all, you especially. I must go away, Tom."

But that was impossible, as it afterwards turned out.

Tom despatched a party of cattle drovers to see if they could find Waters, because he could not persuade any of the station blacks to venture. Nothing would induce them to go near that cave; it was tabooed from some reason best known to themselves.

Beyond the solitary statement: "Debbil, debbil sit down,"¹ they vouchsafed no further intelligence, remaining obstinately sullen.

This confirmed Tom's own real but suppressed opinion. He was not of Millie's way of thinking, that the flickering lights had been borne of ghosts; but he knew perfectly well that the phosphorescent fungi which composed the faint illumination did

¹ The demons live there.

not grow on rocks, although he had given it as an excuse to allay her fears. He thought it probable that the tree fungus was the means employed by the crippled tribe to see with in their underground darkness.

He wanted to go with the drovers to find this out, and rescue Waters if, by any chance, he had escaped, but he found it imperative not to leave Millie, who had become so overstrung with emotion that he almost feared for her reason.

So the party left without him, being duly provided with a fresh lantern out of the store.

On their return they reported that they had found the hole where Waters disappeared, which, as Tom already knew, had water at the bottom of it. But they found no trace of the missing man, gave up all hope of him, and swore by all they held holy that they would never go near the place again.

On cross-examination, it transpired that they had also managed, whilst looking over the edge of this great black hole, to drop their one light-giver down it, and the prospect of return by the light of matches only had not been a pleasant one to them.

At last they got back to the dome cave, and one of them spoke sharply and forcibly to another, because he had fallen down and dropped the only box of matches into a pool of water.

The curious echo woke at once, shuddering round the walls and away through the interior tunnel like a dozen startled ghosts.

Suddenly green, unearthly rings of light, during

their enforced darkness, moved close abreast of them, and, having put out their hands to find out what on earth these phosphorescences could be, they were scared out of their senses to touch something warm, living and hairy behind them. Instantly these mysterious creatures withdrew out of reach. They could not follow, even if they wished to—a doubtful contingency—and what they could be, or were, they hardly dared to reason about. They only felt safe, they said, when they emerged to the light of day, and were in their saddles once more. But one and all of them vehemently asserted that they had touched something living and breathing. Plainly the tunnels of the cave were mysterious and awful, as the blacks had said.

“They’re wampy-wampys, that’s what they are—underground devils, for sure,” asserted their chief spokesman to Tom, in an awed undertone; “and they’ll have all our lives if we go fossicking about there. They’ve got one already: isn’t that plain enough? and they’ll eat his dead body.

“The green lights was from their eyes. They’ve eyes all round them to see in that darkness with, as they lives in it. I’ve known talk of them sort of things before, and where they get together is no place for any white man.

“I tell you, sir, we ’eard ’em ’owlin’ in the caves afterwards. They’ve got dingos’ ’eads and ’uman bodies. Some of the rocks was wore quite smooth from their sittin’ on ’em. Them sort of places, you take my word for it, is best left alone. Anyway,

they've likely disposed long before this of what's left of poor Mr. Waters."

Tom did not dispute their evidence. He was terribly cut up about his companion's inexplicable fate, made still more disconcerting and terrible by the experiences of the cattle drovers.

So the men went off to their duties again, and the herd was variously drafted and sent out on to the run.

Tom determined to take an armed force some day to find out the cave mystery, but in the meantime he nursed the stricken girl with a tenderness born of his love for her.

She lay between life and death for a month, and then, under Tom's care and unremitting attention, her magnificent constitution pulled her through, and she began to get about again, though with an awe-struck expression in her beautiful eyes.

Did such things as ghouls, or cave pixies, really exist? thought Tom, one day when propped in his favourite lean-back canvas chair in the verandah of his house. He, too, was not unaware of old bush tales which hinted the former possibility. Moreover, he had seen the lights, and believed the men's story.

But what a fate to befall any man, to have his body devoured by these awful creatures, even if they had not killed him!

He would go and immolate them, shoot or poison them, for such creatures could not be allowed to exist.

As he came to this decision a curious, half-

paralysed old blackfellow whom he had never seen before, appeared haltingly before him, and, with a confidential air, handed him a cleft stick.

Tied up in the division of it, projecting crossways, was a folded piece of paper. He undid it and read the message it bore, nearly jumping out of his chair in surprise and amazement as he did so.

“Kuriltai rather fun. There’s a young white girl amongst them. Such a beauty! I’m a sort of boss medicine man to the rest of the tribe. But, as I have an eye to something else (not the beauty) the affair must be kept strictly secret. Keep away from the cave. My men are superstitious, and, for all parties concerned, it is better that the supposition of my death should be an assumed fact. Bearer can be trusted.

“MANSFIELD WATERS.”

The crippled blackfellow, who seemed all doubled up, gazed very keenly at Tom, who gave another intense start of surprise as this palsied creature whispered incisively :

“You’re going to act square to the young woman, I suppose? By God, you ought to, you have compromised her enough! You should be pretty well bound to one another by this time.

“Keep them cattle drovers away from the cave as you value your life and theirs. It’s a big thing, but you and she are in it for the good of us all. I don’t want anything about it known to outsiders. And if

it wasn't for her sake, I believe I'd 'a' killed you ere this."

"Who are you?" Tom retorted angrily, hardly able to believe his senses in being thus addressed by a wild, unknown blackfellow.

"No one you know," replied the strange emissary calmly, "though I ain't saying it's impossible you should know me a deal better some day than you have done hitherto."

And with that, raising his hand with a signal as if to impose silence, he vanished in spite of his palsy and general decrepitude like a flash of lightning over the river terrace and down the river bank.

It was Millie coming over from the back of the house who had alarmed him, and on her arrival Tom told her of the note from Waters.

She was delighted to hear of the latter's safety, but he said nothing to her of the mysterious blackfellow's threatening speech or important disclosure, explaining that the caves were not really mysterious or ghoulish, but were held by a sort of imposture, which they were to keep silent about.

Whereat she immediately grew grave and anxious again. He could see that some new and different dread assailed her; and this new phase of her temperament seemed to hint at a further barring of intercourse, if not of further illness, for she said little and presently left him. A cloud had fallen. What did it all mean?

He was to find out later.

CHAPTER VIII

BUSH PHASES

"The wide Bush holds the secrets of their longings and desires
When the white stars in reverence light their holy altar fires,
And silence like the touch of God sinks deep into the breast ;
Perchance He hears and understands the women of the West."

—GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

NAUGHT accruing, however, in a couple of days to cause any further anxiety or estrangement, Tom and Millie drew together again ; and understanding the relevancies of action to be the main part of life where they were, it occurred between them that, if they had a mandate to keep away from the cave of the Red Hand now, they might, nevertheless, obtain further information about the mystery of it, if they employed a delegate who would be secret, trustworthy, sure, and absolutely speechless.

Waters happened to be the possessor of a cattle dog named Lanky that, from the time of his disappearance, had been running about disconsolately at the station.

A lengthy, long-limbed, wiry-haired animal it was, with a stumpy tail constantly in energetic use to semaphore its sentiments.

Lanky had attached himself to Jim, as second-best man, because the latter fed him daily. After Jim, Tom was accepted on trust as third man in favour, but Lanky would look at neither if his master was about, thus proving incontestably that he knew the rights of ownership.

Just now he happened to be fastened to a chain, attached to an iron staple driven into the stem of a box-tree down on the second river terrace, reposing, when he had done calculating upon the chances of the day, in a barrel.

Millie, having noticed Lanky's marvellous affection for Waters, suggested to Tom that the dog should be released and sent off with a return dispatch to his absent master. And Tom wrote to him the following:

"Glad you are safe. Relieved from great anxiety and doubt. Communicate again."

Then, having shut up this message in a metal case shaped like a large watch, which belonged to a pocket compass of his, he fastened it to a strap round Lanky's neck, took him to the cave, and, giving him an old hat of his master's to smell at the top of the ledge, sent him down the opening to find him.

For, with the reticent instinct of the trained bushman, he had decided not to interfere with the cave mystery in person.

Two nights afterwards Lanky, having attached

himself to Tom through the latter's display of confidence in him during this excursion, jumped into his bedroom by the open window and woke him up.

Tom lit a lamp, and, finding the compass case still on the dog's neck, opened it at once and read in a new enclosure a rather startling reply.

Lanky extended himself on the floor, lolling and slobbering his happy, red tongue, perfectly convinced that he had been engaged in the most meritorious act of his life—which perhaps it was from Tom's standpoint, for the reply gave the following information:

“The wild blacks will attack the head station. Keep a bright look out.”

To this Tom replied with a laconic “Right O!” and sent the dog off again before daylight, after having, as a well-merited reward, comforted the inner Lanky considerably.

That morning, after breakfast, Jim was engaged breaking in a spirited colt, while Tom, pipe in mouth, watched the somewhat variegated performance.

The bush lad was sitting easily, but secure as a rock, in a surcingled saddle with ribbon rolled, raw hide girths, gear of breaking bit, bridle, crupper, and martingale; and his master was more than ever impressed with his young rough-rider's useful qualities.

Jim was a handsome fellow, tall and well-made, and his scarlet tie, cabbage-tree hat, grey-blue

Crimean shirt, and corded breeches set him off against the green background to the best advantage.

"He can't shift you, Jim!" Tom called out, in lazy enjoyment of the scene, from an adjacent log in the bright sunshine. "Unless he scrapes you off against a tree, or lies down on you."

"He won't do that, either, Mr. Tom," the young stockman replied. "He's—a—gentleman—he—is!" he added, in jerks, between the plunges of his desperate victim.

At this juncture the colt, getting tired of the plummet-like regularity of his bucks, reared, bounded forward, and bolted for a change, with Jim still a permanent asset in his career as he disappeared into the distance.

Nothing out of the common happened that day, but next morning Lanky came back, bearing a cypher message for Millie.

"Show old man Combo the Mark," it read, and so the ancient but finely-built chief of the tame blacks about the station was sent for.

He arrived with his family of several lubras, a numerous progeny, and a big fly duster of emu feathers.

Forthwith Millie had an interview with him, out on the red loam amongst the cotton bushes, his wives and children playing the part of chorus. And here the expectant smirk of the head of the clan changed to the start of fear, from fear to positive reverence. He ended by literally grovelling at her feet, while repentance, terror, and contrition spoke

in every feature of his face, as he hastened away with his clamouring tribe after him.

This little episode started Tom thinking again.

Who could have mentioned the Mark? and what the deuce did it all mean?

Waters could not have known about it, even if he had been unusually observant. Was the strange mumming blackfellow, who had spoken to him in excellent English, his informant?

It had been very cloudy and threatening away towards the northern sources of the river for the last week or so, but no local rains had fallen, and consequently when Tom, in the midst of this new train of ideas, heard the rush of water over the boulders of the crossing place below the station, he knew that the river had come down. That was what the darkling northern skies had foretold.

Generally after a long period of dry weather the small, stagnant waterholes along the river turned quite black with dead astringent gumleaves, and the consequent washing out of these by flood waters brought the stupefying mixture to permeate through the clear liquid of the great permanent reservoirs, and drugged the fish in them. So, at the yearly period of running water, they drifted along with the current, flapping and kicking near the top of it, a natural food supply to the naked tribes who eagerly availed themselves of it.

"I'll get some fish!" said Tom, aloud. Then he added to Millie, who was passing: "Come down to the lower crossing, and I'll show you something

you haven't seen before, though it's only a black's sport."

So down to the lower crossing they went, and she sat on the bank watching her lover out on the shallows in mid-stream, keenly on the watch for the struggling fish when they were borne up to and past him. And he held a vigilant green stick in his hand.

From her level, Millie could see the lower end of the great Kulbarunna waterhole, now spume-spattered and flecked with lace-like foam, but well above the earth edges of its present height of flood was the old permanent flood mark, just under a line of sedges; and this once attained she knew the whole river would be running from start to finish.

A queer, omnipresent way had Nature with her, for she was a child of it. She felt part and parcel of the warm, sunny days and ambrosial nights; and these moving waters brought back the memory of old times to her, for with them came the delicious odour of the drinking earth of the river banks. In spirit she was back on her father's old location, the lonely clearing in the forest.

Then, awakening as if from a trance, she began to think of something she hesitated to confide to Tom.

It was an unpleasant change from her communion with Nature, because it bore upon the present, and much as she liked the sights and sounds in this new, far-out country, she was face to face with the past again in a dilemma she dreaded.

Cosgrave, or Myall Dick, had appeared suddenly at the hotel in the township after Tom had left, for

the burning of her father's shanty had been but a means on his part to attain an end. It was but a blind, after all, a red herring drawn across a trail for his own purposes.

Her besotted parent, and her adopted sister, were with him—he did not say where, and he had made a wonderful discovery.

On the strength of this, he had asked her to marry him, pressing upon her the advantage the mark on her arm would give him in realising what he had discovered. She knew that he worked secretly amongst the blacks, but his sympathies were not hers, and she had run away from him. The messages Tom had told about, as far as he had personally expressed himself, showed her, only too plainly, that Cosgrave's great discovery was on Tom's run, and here he was again amongst them all, wielding the same power as of old. She had but jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire, after all.

By this time Tom might have seemed to anyone not entirely conversant with the manners of the locality to have gone clean out of his mind. For he was beating and thrashing the water here and there, as it flowed past him, with vicious, downright blows, as if above all things he wished to make it run faster.

But a close observer would have seen that his erratic movements were caused by the fine silver bream, large perch, and occasional catfish, as they were whirled sideways, upside-down, and end on, in the currents, for to him the shallow waters of the crossing now looked full of gleaming scales.

After a successful blow, he would use his disengaged hand to seize the fish he had killed and throw it out on the bank, and presently he was joined by another individual who became as excited as himself before even he took part in the sport.

For Jim had ridden up on the other side of the river, and seeing Tom thus employed, hastily fastening his horse to a tree, he cut another green stick and splashed over the shallows to his assistance.

"Here they come, no end of them!" shouted Tom, whacking harder and quicker than ever, and Jim and he were soon hurling out stricken fish one after the other.

When the number on shore reached about three dozen, all over two pounds' weight, the performers in the watery duet waded out in separate directions, Jim to ride his horse through the streaming shallows and pass on to the station, and Tom to string the best of the fish together on a green withy. Then, calling to Millie, the pair of them set off after Jim, to the home in the wilderness the young woman had wandered to on the sheer edge of circumstance.

CHAPTER IX

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

“ The grey gums by the lonely creak,
The star-crowned height,
The wind-swept plain, the dim blue peak,
The cold white light,
The solitude spread near and far
Around the camp fire's tiny star,
The horse-bells' melody remote,
The curlew's melancholy note
Across the night.”

—GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

As an out-pioneer station of rough symmetry, Kalburunna was a model, for all had worked hard, including Sargent and Nettlefold, when they first came to take up the country. Bush carpenters had been engaged, who, from the materials around them, had planned and executed according to the initiative thus given, and the result was not unpleasing.

The walls of the station house, kitchen, store, stables, and outhouses were formed of mulga uprights, with the thin, grey, impervious, close-adhering bark left on them. Then they had been white-washed with copai or native talc.

The upper and lower ends of the mulga uprights

had been adzed on both sides, clean and even as with a plane, and fitted into thicker horizontal frame joists above and below. For the various roofs, silver box-tree bark showed edges of burnt umber where axe or tomahawk had cut them level.

Primitive no doubt they were, these bush dwellings, but the master metal of hard working-men, helped by Nature's lavish hand, had made them both picturesque, strong, and serviceable, adapted to prove both cool and shady in summer, warm and cosy in winter.

Behind the big house, with its ample verandah running right round it, stood the kitchen, twenty yards away. It was a dwelling house also, possessing two fair-sized bedrooms off the main culinary department, which was also used as a sitting-room.

In one of the other rooms Millie slept, whilst her black girl, Leura, by choice rested by the embers of the kitchen fire, wrapped in her 'possum rug.

Some hundred yards or so away on the top of the first river terrace, where the soil was all red, and on a level with the big house, stood the store with a large so-called native orange tree growing below it, from which callous fruit a capital sort of hot pickle was made.

Projecting river-wise away to the right, long yapunyah tree supports rose from holes cut in the bank to hold a winch platform. The windlass on it was encircled by a manilla rope for a bucket made of a nail can. In this the river water was winched up, and tipped out into bark and tree trunk runnels

running down the platform into earth gutters on land, these leading in their turn into wood-sided tanks to provide irrigation for the kitchen garden, which again was securely fenced from stock intrusion by upright palisaded mulga, cut level at the top and placed close together.

Owing to this simple arrangement, and a gentle landward slope which spread the water all over the enclosed area, all vegetables and fruit trees grew marvellously well, as instanced by a hut in one corner of the enclosure being completely enshrouded by the large-leaved foliage and vine of an ironbark pumpkin, the great globes of which were to be seen on the roof, weighing from forty to eighty pounds apiece.

To the right of the kitchen garden again, and towards the crossing place, were the stockyard, horse yard, milking bails, a crush for branding cattle, or tackling unruly horses or colts, a gallows for hauling up a slaughtered bullock, and back again to the left of the kitchen garden a spreading box tree, with a carpenter's vice and planing bench beneath it. Nearer the bank and out of the way, near a steep bank, was a frame supporting a sort of harness cask made out of bullock hide for salting beef in.

The calls and stir of the hawks and carrion crows in the trees near the gallows, an occasional shout from the blacks' camp down in a creek valley by the mountain at the back of the station, the neigh of a horse, the low of a cow, the gently brooding

coo of the little Rockhampton doves, the twitter of the budgerigars, mingled with the cackle of questing hens, filled the air, perfumed with eucalyptus and sandalwood, with pleasing sound, whilst over all spread the vivid blue of the Australian sky.

Jim had let his horse go, and was now standing by the kitchen door with a big tin dish and a duster in his hands.

Suddenly he dropped them and gazed long and steadfastly across the river.

"Holy Sailor! what's up with them blacks?" he jerked out. "Never saw such a big mob of blacks before! And the dawgs with 'em. Reg'lar lopin' pack o' mongrels. There's sixty if there's a dawg."

Then he raced over to his employer, who, standing in front of the big house, had just fired a rifle shot towards the blacks who were preparing to swim the river, but aiming over their heads.

"What's up?" Jim gasped.

"Wandering blacks," Tom replied grimly; "I don't like the look of them. They want clearing off, and their dogs too, so I've just given them the hint."

At this point a good-looking copper-coloured girl came running rapidly along the river bank towards them. She was all shining with moisture, having just swam across the flooded stream.

She made them understand, between her shrieks and gesticulations, that her man, Jerry, had run away

into the bush for his own safety, and that the valuable flock of rams, of which they were in charge, had also cleared violently and separately into dim distances.

"Mulga," said Tom quietly, "go quick to the lower crossing. I have left a lot of fish there. You get them before dingo or water get them.

"I'll *dose* them," he remarked confidentially to Jim, after the girl had gone on her errand, somewhat reassured by his coolness.

"Now we will go and eat our own fish, Jim. When we have finished we'll make some strychnine baits of the others I left down at the crossing, and settle those confounded dogs this very night. I'm not going to have marauding blacks' dingoes all over the place. Look what they have done already, started the rams to run mad through the country. Besides, we've got to look out, Jim. Blackfellows have been getting far too numerous about the home station lately, and I've had no say in the matter to speak of. Better load your revolver, old man," he continued, going into the house and setting him the example.

"My word, I will!" replied Jim. "They'll be spearing Mulga, if she ain't quick. Oh, I forgot the river was up," he added, cogitating. "They'll cross lower down. Good girl," he concluded, following over, as Mulga vanished into the kitchen with the rescued fish.

Tom's rifle shot had made the blacks negotiate a wide detour, and the pace they put on was sufficient

to head any flood that had many spaces and water-holes to fill up. However, no river would stop them at any time, being expert swimmers. But, though they could not surround the station until they crossed, they would be able to do it, by taking a detour, out of rifle range; and their array was sufficiently formidable to suggest that if they once made up their minds to rush on in a body, say at night, they would be able to immolate the small force opposed to them. But they had not reckoned with the initiative of Tom Inglis, for, though he had no time to call in the cattlemen, now spread north, south, east and west with the herd, he did not fear to face contingencies as they came to him.

The revolvers and rifles about the place were loaded, and after a hasty meal they all went over to barricade the big house, which possessed handy loopholes for fire-arms, having been built with a view to repelling possible attack.

They replenished all the water vessels, and brought plenty of stores inside to last them in case of siege.

"But it won't come to anything," reasoned Tom, who had worked out his chances to a nicety. "Now for the baits, Jim!"

They spread a couple of sheets of an "Australasian" on the ant-bed floor of the house, and having cut about one hundred and twenty pieces of raw fish proceeded to put strychnine crystals into slits in the flesh, so as to let the juice soak in the poison.

Having carefully placed the dog baits in the small canvas bag, Tom took charge of it, and being quite

dark by this time the two conspirators, enveloped in Inverness cloaks, and looking very like a pair of gunpowder plot villains, stole softly out of doors, each carrying a bull's-eye lantern.

The valley over against the mountain was now ablaze with camp-fires ; for the large and apparently hostile crowd of wandering blacks, as well as many so-called waddygālos, were there. One huge corroboree fire, the blazing pulse of the assembly, shot its flames aggressively upwards, the centre radius of many other smaller fires, a sign that the camp was largely reinforced and ready for business.

"Those beggars must have got kangaroo and emu galore," whispered Tom to Jim, as he thought of the scattering of his ram flock by the blacks' dogs, and the consequent sure loss to him.

"I'll give the owners of that pack of dogs a stronger lesson this time for their cheek, or they'll rush the station. I know where to touch them up in a way that will frighten all the fight out of them completely, and scare them clean out of this part of the world besides."

Jim grinned approval, and slipping quickly from tree to tree the two cloaked figures glided down the slope of the valley.

The waddygālos had flitted like dark phantoms through the outlying distances long before Jim and Inglis reached the camp of the hostile assembly, owing to the intermittent flickering of the bull's-eye lanterns carried from the house.

As Inglis and Jim approached nearer, the half-

wild, wholly - mongrel - bred dogs of the strange blacks growled savagely. Some of them barked with the strangled half-howl of the dingo, and, though all erected their bristles on the new-comers' approach, they slunk beyond the fire-lit places where now, from walled darkneses, emphasising the light, shone many pairs of fiercely phosphorescent eyes.

Tom's hands beneath his cloak had been very busy on the outskirts of the camp fires; obscured intervals of ground received his secret contributions, but in the blaze of the fires, as he walked forward, he was only to the multitude a curious observer, whilst, unabashed, Jim gave tobacco here and there to the mystified but conscience-stricken crowd with the air of a city waiter.

It was plain enough now to Tom's practised eyes that preparations had been made for a great feast, a sort of stimulant to a dawn of rapine, for in the full fire-lit spaces were, dismembered, half-cooked joints of emu and kangaroo, and the various hollow, wooden utensils of the aborigines were replenished, but not a ghost of a woman remained about the camp. Nor did he hesitate to believe that the band of males, the strangers, were waddygālos.

These peculiar people were always the real wild men of the woods, the pixies of the bush, the flying spooks of the hour. Even if one hurried round the corners of a creek scrub, as Tom had done on the occasion of one of their emu hunts, with the blacks' dogs close upon their quarry, the waddygālos were never seen.

If a camp was come upon suddenly at night by some lone rider the fires would be doused with sand or earth, and the camp-makers up in trees overhead like 'possums.

But Tom knew why. They were in reality the best and strongest of their tribes, and they never allowed themselves to be seen because of their women. The blacks who had attempted to rush the station that afternoon were the picked men of the wildest of some of these hunting outliers, and thus showed their males for the first time, a startlingly appalling omen which he was prepared to avert.

So he had worked upon their superstitions. He was well aware that tales of the white man's prowess were afloat amongst them, and he knew of their fear of the burning glass with which the white men could draw down fire from Euroka, the sun itself. Therefore it had been a premeditative touch of his to bring bull's-eye lanterns through the dark night. Indeed, it had been as much as the fighting party of males who remained could do to sit still and watch those two bright lights coming down the hill. However, being afraid to seem afraid, now that they were in force and well armed, they sat on.

There was a stealthy reach by every hand for tomahawk, waddy, or spear, just to feel them ready, as the bull's-eye came close, again allayed and stopped by the suspicion that Tom and Jim might have one of those deadly revolvers under his cloak. But both men noticed it.

"Bulgabrow," ordered Tom, to a tame station

black he knew well amongst the crowd, after a searching, wholly fearless gaze all round, which seemed to note each new face specially, "you go at daylight after those horses, Charlie, Blue-bell, Acrobat, Tiger. Look out track, and run 'em alonga yard!"

A guttural grunt of acquiescence, surprise, and satisfaction came from many masculine throats. This was no vengeance, no fight, surely, although the guilty consciences of all there told them they meant to stick up the station that very night, massacre the whites, and carry the women off.

Bulgabrow, who, like the others, was in the plot, nodded, sitting in his place, and as he held out his hand for Jim's expected quarter plug of Barret's, his evil eyes closed to hide the glare in them, as the toes on his right foot felt for his tomahawk.

It was diamond cut diamond now in strategic policy. They must dissemble for the moment, and wait for a more favourable opportunity of knocking the hated whites on the head, for they were now on the alert and probably armed.

The white conspirators eventually disappeared in lessening rays of light towards the station, but a low, continuous, brooding murmur ran round the fires. Was *this* all the two whites had come for? Bah! They could steal upon the station in the early dawn when they were all asleep, and knock them on the head with perfect impunity. What fools they were!

Having burned the bait bag, washed their hands, and inserted their sheath knives several times into

Mother Earth to free them from any adhering particles of strychnine, Tom and Jim went into the big house where the women were watching, silent and armed. Here they all began to talk in low whispers, with rifles and revolvers within easy reach.

All their guardian kangaroo dogs and collies had been tied up at strategic points. One was by each door, back and front. Two of the fiercest had been let loose, and there was now no fear of any sudden surprise.

Not one of the many blacks in camp would be able to venture within two hundred yards of the houses now, without great risk of being pulled down and killed like a kangaroo by those two vigilant unchained sentinels.

An hour or two passed.

Then suddenly came a surprised yell of abortive terror from the blacks' camp, followed by a wailing shriek, which evidenced that the women had again stolen in.

"They've got it, the beggars!" Tom inwardly remarked, as he glanced at Millie and the others. "Better to frighten them secretly by poisoning the whole lot of their dogs than that these women here should be speared and cut up, when the horrors of the attack were finished. There's enough fighting blacks in camp to give us little chance. Jim and I might keep 'em off for a bit, but they would burn us out eventually. And then—"

Another and another yell of terror and astonishment. Then dead silence!

"Serve 'em damn well right," Jim observed, with emphasis.

When the sun rose, red and glowing, next morning, the only traces of the great camp of overnight were some scattered gidya ashes and blackened sticks. Not a man, not a gin, not a piccaninny was to be seen anywhere. Nor was one of the usual station blacks to be even heard of.

And old man Combo, miles away in the heart of a dense scrub, put it all down to Millie's mark, and trembled in his copper-coloured skin.

"They've buried them dawgs somewhere, I'll bet," thought Jim to himself, as he saddled a horse from the stable to run some others in with. "I'm glad I ain't a blackfeller's dawg anyhow, though they might have been pickin' our bones by now if we hadn't acted sharp.

Lanky came in that night with another message :

"The talisman of the mark is getting known here, and will work for your safety. Come out, but one at a time. Let no one know."

To which Tom added on the same slip of paper, to show that he had received it :

"Right O!—but we acted, too, or we might have been too late."

and dispatched Lanky as before.

CHAPTER X

I PUBLISH THE BANNS!

“ ‘ Why should not wattle do
For mistletoe ? ’
Asked one—there were but two
Where wattles grow.

“ A rose-cheek rosier grew,
Rose-lips breathed low,
‘ Since it is here, and *you*,
I hardly know
Why wattle should not do.’ ”

—DOUGLAS SLADEN.

To Millie Heseldine and Tom Inglis, bound faster together now by mutual sympathy, suffering, and affection, more than all the conventionalities of the world could accomplish hitherto, came an event that altered the whole course of their lives in its own due future time.

Cantering along on a self-marked line of travel that had led him to their vicinity was a man, pure and simple in the very highest sense of the words, valise before him, saddle-bags on his pack-horse.

Any sort of doubt was not his own. It belonged to others, and he did his best to cast it out from

them. Sorrow was his, on his own account largely ; but Time had tempered his despair until the character formed in him, wrought, as it were, from the furnace of affliction, shone like pure steel.

Thus he stood, double-banked, before his own bush-world as a healer of division, an arbiter, a friend.

Few could look upon his ardent, radiant face without perceiving the soul within him, shining in light through the clear windows of its dwelling place.

Not a digger, shearer, or bush-worker of any description but wanted to shake him by the hand or fight for him, if necessary, at a word of depreciation from the ribald or profane. These, however, after a single glance felt assured that both physically, for he was a grand athlete, and intellectually, "Parson" Everest was the better man.

His make-weight, too, was expatiated upon in divers and sundry consciences according to their own well-understood scale of morality, and there, too, he had the advantage, although his bush critics were not liable to care for him one whit the worse on that account.

"Don't you call 'im a parson, Jack," observed one bushman to another at a shearers' spree. "You ain't fit to be in the same pen with 'im. Nor me, nor one of us. Did you hear tell, by any chance, what he did for Sandy M'Callough when 'e 'ad a bad touch of the jim-jams?"

"No."

"Well, I saw the lot of it. You know very well

what a born devil Sandy always was! 'Member that fight down at Euroka shed on paying-off day, when he hammered Steve Rogers? It was just Sandy's grit pulled 'im through then. Well, he got on the burst, a regular docker this time, kept it up for weeks as he had a big cheque; and havin' to knock it off sudden, when that played out, 'e went pretty nigh raving mad.

"Not a living soul would go near 'im, not even 'is own mate. It's pretty bad when that happens, you bet, an' although as an observant outsider, I can't claim any extra allowance of Christian charity towards Sandy, I don't wonder at his mate leaving him. Sandy was going about to slaughter the devil, and most of us chaps was up trees, waiting to see him do it. He had killed three tied-up dogs with an American axe, and things were getting monotonous for us all when Mr. Everest steps up.

"'What's the matter, Sandy, my man?' says he. Sandy ups with his axe and makes a blow at him which would have split his head in two; but Everest dodges aside and lays him out with a crack-a-jack under the chin that would have stopped a bullock on the tear, and, anyhow, put Sandy clean out of court. Then he carried him to his own blooming bunk and nursed him like a baby for a matter of ten days, as if he was sort of sorry for half killing him.

"'E didn't stop 'is grog, neither, being no teetotaller, although what he takes beyond his own allowance ain't worth speculatin' on. And when Sandy came to his senses he, of course, found out

who had been taking care of him, and was rather surprised.

“Well, I’m jiggered!” says he, after due reflection, ‘e ain’t no ’oly Joe at all! Not ’im. ’E’s only a brother bushman!’

“Then ’e wanted to go for ’is own mate for not stopping by him.

“But Everest cajoled him out of that, talked ’im out of swearin’, got him living, respectable, and sober. Then ’e took him to church and preached to him, and now Sandy’s a teetotaller, and I hear he’s coinin’ money on the straight perpendicular blue ribbon touch.”

Thus the bush talk went about Parson Everest.

Millie, who always rose with the dawn, on that particular morning had just begun to bustle about her duties. Presently, carefully attired and prettier than ever, she began to lay Tom’s breakfast-table over at the big house, her face a study of many conflicting emotions.

Bound by the everlasting, all-compelling bonds of mutual love, the pair seemed nevertheless as far apart as the graveyard, asunder as the poles. How could she tell with what sort of ideas he looked upon her, since her confession about Dick Cosgrave? What would he say if she disclosed the fact of her former sweetheart’s proximity, and what would be the consequences if Tom and he should meet?

Tom, on his part, had not told her of the implied admission made by the apparently paralysed black-

fellow, whose deep blue eyes had shown him to be a white man, in spite of the clever disguise. If this man, whoever he might be, was disguised for some strange reason, what right had he to hint that it would be best for them to marry?

But Millie knew nothing of the meeting beyond the fact that a blackfellow had brought a letter written by Waters.

That did not prevent her from having her suspicions, however, and a quick, half-stifled sigh from her arrested Tom's attention.

Was he treating her badly, he wondered? In spite of the temporary cloud that had arisen between them, could it be possible that she was relenting? Could that be it?

"What is it, dear?" he asked, his eager, love-hungry eyes riveted upon her face.

"Oh, nothing!" she replied petulantly. "Leastwise, nothing you would care to hear about, unless perhaps—"

She paused as she poured out his tea for him. When so near to him she was hardly mistress of herself. He had been so good, so forbearing, so gentle and useful to her in her illness, so—gentlemanly.

Was he as obtuse as she thought him? His eyes did not look unintelligent. She longed to tell him all, yet hesitated. Could it be by any manner of means that he had his suspicions, too?

The golden moment went by, and she returned to the company of Jim Terry and the others with

gathering and barely-suppressed tears. He had broken down her own barrier of reserve and refusal with his own generous tact, although her innate modesty declined to let her confess that she was not averse to his love now, and that she had loved him ever since they first met. Which way must she turn? What could she do? She must go away and leave him, for this daily agony was insupportable. But could she leave him? Had she the heart to do it?

Her suspicions were vague, but well-founded, even without evidence, for she knew more of "Myall Dick" than Tom did. If she went away the two men might meet face to face, and that thought made her tremble. She knew she had great influence with Cosgrave, but she also knew his character, and a certain trait of revenge in it she was really afraid of. And she had not heard his admission to Tom, which merely meant giving her up. They were at cross purposes and knew it not.

Tom finished his breakfast and then repaired to his favourite canvas lean-back seat, which, by its position in the verandah, faced the river. He lit his pipe, and, with the blue whiffs of tobacco against the bright morning sky, fancied he had discovered something of the soul of her he held so dear, whose brief summons even to a meal held Heaven for him.

She was vacillating surely, coming round to his ardent wishes. But what could he do? She wouldn't go back to the township with him to be married. There was her veto against that. He loved her even better for her recalcitrancy.

Oh, if she would only consent, what an ideal life would open up for them in this wild garden wherein their lot had been cast.

To fight and fend for her with strong arm and ready hand, what of life could hold more of joy for him? Though she did not belong to him, yet he did not think she had given him up. But how was he to persuade her to his own satisfaction?

Just at that moment that trivial imp—or shall we not rather say guardian angel—Circumstance again foreshadowed. Tom looked up to see a pair of steeds, one ridden, the other packed, approaching rapidly along the upper river terrace towards the house.

A man this time! Had his rival come at last? And would all his dream be over? Was he coming to claim her?

He was undeceived a little later when John Everest reined up before him.

“May I turn my horses out and stay the night?” the new-comer pleaded, with a bright smile. “Tomorrow is Sunday, you know, and I should so like to hold a service for your working hands.”

He had given his name as a preliminary, and his last stopping stage, in true bush fashion.

Tom had often heard of him with manly appreciation, and now welcomed him as Abraham, in his patriarchal garb, welcomed the triple presence at Mamre.

For here, given his maid's consent, was a very practical and ready way out of all their difficulties,

and it all lay in the person of this wandering bush-divine.

It was a strictly unorthodox church service next day, and a little disappointing perhaps to Everest, because the cattlemen were all out on the run. Jim, their only proxy, half-a-dozen tame blacks, and a few of their children, the two black girls, and Tom and Millie, made up the entire congregation.

The keen eyes of the preacher had taken in the relations between Tom and Millie during the breakfast served by her that Sabbath morning, and a manly intellect had pretty correctly gauged the minds of both of them.

"Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," was the text he used for his short discourse, and Everest's words upon the poor, unenlightened blacks touched Millie strangely.

"Thy people shall be my people." How alone they were, all of them, thought she, as she mused upon the mark on her arm, and formed many a plan about them. With Tom as her protector, and her own mark, she might do much for these poor coloured folk. Her mind being thus attuned and mixed up with Tom's future progress, there was little difficulty when he asked her the second time, and with the same quiet ceremony, and the same helping hands, their marriage was solemnised at last, after Everest had spent a week among the cattlemen, riding out to their camps with Jim as cicerone.

And when this valued friend—for so he had grown to be—rode away finally, there was an assurance of

faith in both the souls of the newly-joined couple, that their troubles were over.

"God bless all of you!" Everest said at parting. "Good-bye! I must get on. I have the big range to cross before dark, but Mr. Jim Terry here has forewarned me of its little ups and downs," and so he rode away, taking with him Tom's lasting friendship, Jim's respect and admiration, and all the station blacks' good wishes.

CHAPTER XI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

“When Night doth her glories
Of starshine unfold,
'Tis then that the stories
Of Bushland are told.
Unnumbered I hold them
In memories bright,
But who could unfold them
Or read them aright?”

—A. B. PATERSON.

JIM, having been sent out to the Cave of the Red Hand to find out all he could about the dwellers there, arrived back at the station late one night after a week's absence.

He inveigled Mrs. Inglis over towards the store on some urgent plea or other, and Tom could see her listening to him in apparent astonishment under the moonlight and twinkling stars.

Whatever he had to say to her was of short duration, for presently the pair of them came back to the house, and joining Tom in the verandah, sitting between him and his wife, the young stockman poured forth a tale of seemingly incredible

happenings which those who have seen the Jenolan caves would look upon as no wonders at all, but veritable and plain truth.

“By Golly!” exclaimed he, “I don’t know exactly what I haven’t seen. I seen a grizzly bear with flamin’ eyes, an’ a sleepin’ babby with no eyes at all. I seen pillars of organ pipes, lots on ’em, an’ you could play on them with a bit of hard wood; an’ a copper-coloured girl and a white girl in a blackfeller’s canoe. An’ I’ve seen the Kuriltai, and they’re them phosphorescent frauds what come along round us in the darkness in the big vault.

“But there, now! I’ve gone and let one of the bloomin’ cats out of my little bag-of-tricks! If I don’t look sharp, there’ll be no holdin’ the rest on ’em; for they are jumpy things, them cat-facts, let alone the tellin’ of ’em, without a hold-fast lock on one’s talkin’ tackle.”

“Gracious me, Jim!” broke in Mrs. Tom nervously, “explain yourself. Haven’t you gone off your head a little?”

“No, mum, I went straight to the valley from here with Lanky, and after I had turned out Premier in hobbles, I set the dog on the ledge in the corner of the cave, carryin’ him up the blackfellow’s ladder, and let him go down the big hole into the cliff’s side. Then I follered of him. ’E seemed to know all about it, and I found out arterwards that he had a way of gettin’ up to that ledge without the ladder, a little further on, where he could jump on to a projection, and from that to the top. That’s the way

he got down when we come out again, but he wouldn't come on with them then. He just stopped behind.

"'It's you has got the message, Mr. Jim Terry,' that tail of his said, as plain as it could speak. And so 'e 'opped back the way he had got down. 'I've business 'ere,' says that 'ere tail of his again.

"Well, first time I went in arter that dog, he leads the way up to the big circus vault. Out o' that 'e goes again, with me keepin' my bull's-eye on 'im.

"'E warn't in no hurry; no more was I just then. Then we comes to a little round chamber with three or four passages leadin' out of it. Here, in one of these, I come flop up against the most scrumptious girl I ever see, or rather she comes flop up against me. I weren't expectin' to see any girls, and she took me all aback. Then she feels Lanky all over to see if he had got any message. She was light copper colour, and says she in our lingo, as plain as I could have done myself: 'I've been looking out for you, Mr. Jim!' There she 'ad me, you see, and I was fair cornered.

"I was expected underground, and by a copper-coloured girl, too! Did you ever hear the like of it for a staggerer? I was all of a hurry then, as I had to pick up all the ideas I'd dropped.

"'And Lanky,' she says, qualifyin' herself a little and sort of calmin' me down a bit, when she noticed me blushin' me 'ead off.

"I wanted to 'ook it back first time, as I couldn't 'elp thinkin' about bein' buried alive in them dark

caves for ever, if once she got fair hold of me, but she lays her 'and on my arm, and she says: 'You give *me* that bull's-eye, Mr. Jim Terry. I'm not goin' to eat you just yet!'

"I ain't exactly what I calls invincible, in such a case as that, Mr. Tom, so I give up my bull's-eye quite willin' and polite. Lord bless you, sir, after the way she said them words I shouldn't have much minded if she had begun the cannibal business just then! I felt she had bitten a big piece out of my heart already, and was broken down that I hadn't trusted her before I seen her. By Golly! I'll never forget her, never as long as I live!"

He gave a pathetic and heart-broken sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of his heart.

"We goes on a little farther," he resumed, "and we comes to a hole with a ladder down it. She goes down the latter, and in course I goes down arter her. I wasn't going to funk it when a girl done it. Not me! That dawg, 'e gives a whine, an' off he goes round a rock somewhere further on.

"'I ain't quite a circus dog yet,' says his signaller, 'but I've got my eye on you, Jim, and I'm goin' to keep it there.'

"So 'e turned up later on at the bottom somehow, accordin' to promise, but I would have followed that girl anywheres, even without the dawg.

"There was a wooden stage over a river at the bottom, and that and the ladder had been made by white men. No black man could 'a' done it, for they

have neither the savvy nor the tools. I don't know how far me and the girl and the dawg went along that underground river, goin' on the other bank of the stream, but I should say it was a good mile. My Aunt! the things we saw down there on the floor of that rock vault hall when the way opened up a bit and the light of the lantern rested on them! One was like a goanna, as big as a' elephant.

"Sort of a glitterin' crocodile it was, just as if it had been going to spring on you. I was double glad the girl was with me then, when I first saw it, and I don't mind ownin' of it. I shouldn't have cared to be there all alone by myself to be sprung on by that thing! But when she saw me looking at it, says she: 'It's only lime-stone rock, Mr. Jim.' So we goes and sits somewhere on its tail, like a couple of bloomin' rock-pigeons, and I tried to start cooin', but she wouldn't let me begin a note.

"Well, we walked on again, and by and by we came into daylight through a big arch on to such a piece of country as I never seen the like on before.

"A big, deep valley with walls of rocks all round it. Different rock it was to that in the insides of the cave, and I see a reef of quartz stickin' out stiff and jagged and runnin' right across it. The river had eat through the middle of that reef."

Jim came from Bendigo, but had followed the pastoral interest.

"And," he continued, "follerin' down the course of the stream from that point, we come on a blacks' camp. One o' them blacks was mighty like Mr.

Many Waters, an' so I 'eld my tongue when he winked his black eyelid. 'E'd 'a' made a good corner man in a nigger troupe, but I was supposed, I could see, not to be takin' any, and so I looked as solemn as an empty bottle of square-face.

"Then the girl interdooced me to a couple o' ebony pieces as she said was 'er father an' uncle; and an old woman who was 'er auntie. She looked a bit snipey, I thought, and as for the uncle, he made me think about an old-clothes' man I seen once, and the rummest thing about him was that he had got dark blue eyes."

Tom gave an involuntary start, but said nothing.

"So," Jim went on, laughing, "I'd 'opped into a whole family circle of 'em, you see. Aperiently Mr. Black Many Waters was only an outsider. Anyhow, it was 'im right enough, I could go that bald-headed.

"They give me a real bush tea, cooked paddy-melons and wild duck stew. I never knew the blacks cook that way before; did you, Mr. Tom? But I 'ad the wink from the one who I took to be Mr. Waters, and, like the parrot, I thought a good deal more than I could put in words.

"They had a garden full of vegetables, they had real tea and sugar, they had billies and axes, cooking pots, and shovels and spades, and all sorts of tools. And what do you think they was doing all the time I was there, Mr. Tom?"

"Can't say, Jim. Had they killed the grizzly bear for a future feast? What became of it?"

"Oh, I saw 'im long before we came to the blacks'

camp. 'E was in the long passage along the river where it is all like an underground 'all. It's the longest, curliest, rummest room I ever saw, and it didn't seem to 'ave any end to it, because we come across it from one of the middles.

"The grizzly bear was one of the dead things in rocks, same as the goanna me and the girl sat on. E wasn't alive. No more was the sleepin' babby. But they was awful real-lookin'. And them blacks, Mr. Tōm," he added, sinking his voice to a whisper, "*they was diggin' for gold!*

"They was, you take my davy for it," he loudly asserted, noticing Tom's incredulity. "And I saw enough of it to fill a flour-sack. Big, 'eavy, alluvial gold, like beans and dumps, and flakey same as oyster-shells—bits of all sorts they had got stowed away. And all the time I was there with 'em, not one of those blacks but the black girl said a word to me.

"She could talk English like a native, I mean a native white-lubra. So could the other one, the real white girl I saw later. And I'm blowed if I know which of them too, the black or the white, I really likes best," he added disconsolately.

"I got any amount of gold, pokin' about for it from one end of that valley to the other. 'Owever, I only brought one little bit back, for they wouldn't let me 'ave any more. I should say I got over £100 worth. But they made awful faces and signs over it, and when I'd tumbled to their play-actin' I could see that they wanted it to be kept secret above anything

else in this wide world. And as they nearly 'ad a fit over it, I gave it to 'em all back again 'cept the one little bit they signed I might 'ave.

"'Ere it is, Mrs. Inglis, all pure gold. But the girl, the black one, the one I call Native Rose, the only one who spoke to me at all, she says you must put it carefully away and never let any livin' souls but ourselves see it. Don't you let even an old black bush crow look at it. There's all sorts of rites and secrets connected with the gettin' of it, and I had to swear a most awful swear to the girl about it all. She took me away into a terrible dark passage and made me do it. And I 'ad to finish with, 'I wish I may die if I tell beyond those I are swearsed to. Honest Injin, I do.'

"But to hear the way she said them words, and coaxed 'em out o' me. My! she was a daisy!

"You've got to come out and see them all, you, sir, and Mrs. Inglis. Arter that they're goin' to have some ceremonies to keep it all dark. And these blacks with no tongues somehow notified the copper-coloured girl to tell me to say to you that good news was comin' from those that went away. To remember the fire, and distrust any appearances seen there."

"I know, dear, what Jim's message means," Millie presently whispered to her husband. "Shall we go?" she rather dubiously added.

"Certainly we will," he replied, rather voicing his own wish to investigate the wonders that had detained Waters and enlightened Jim. "I'll drive you out

to-morrow. Jim can ride. Very few passing travellers come this way, so that our absence from home is not likely to be noticed. We'll lock the houses up and go, eh, Jim?"

"We'll 'ave to chanst it. They told me," he replied, nodding approval, "leastways the girl did, that you was to take the buggy as far as you could go, and then ride over the hills. She was particular anxious to see Mrs. Inglis. They're goin' to shift, too, very soon, and it will be the very last trip of any of us in at the station. I want to go because I want to see my girls, and as for yourselves, you'll come across the finest sight you ever saw. And the girls will be in it, for Native Rose said we were to see the White Queen!"

In this way, therefore, through Jim's instructions, preliminaries for a really official visit to the cave-dwellers were settled, and he went over to the kitchen to get his supper.

"What is it, dear?" Tom asked, in answer to an appealing glance from his wife.

"I wanted to tell you," she hesitated, "that the people in the valley Jim speaks of—the supposed blacks—are my father and—Richard Cosgrave—'Myall Dick,' as they call him, the man who considered he had a right to me, the man I ran away from, and the girl is my adopted sister, Bianca Pearmain.

"Tom," she continued, clasping her hands and leaning with the interlaced fingers on his strong shoulders, her sweet face close to his, "I thought

before, nay, was sure, that they were not dead, ever since I heard that two black men and two black women were seen watching the fire when my father's place was burned down, and until you left the settlement I believed this. Then Mr. Cosgrave interviewed me himself, for, as a blackfellow, he had seen us together. He threatened me, and I couldn't well tell you before, because I knew that he had deep secrets connected with mining, and was a revengeful man if interfered with. Now that I know for certain that my father and sister are alive, and near us, I ought to be a happy girl, but I have a deep distrust of Cosgrave's nature, which I fear may prompt him to wreak some vengeance on you now we are married, and I have been obliged to forewarn you. I have always flouted him in my manner, and I couldn't help loving you when you came so suddenly and strangely into my life. Be careful of him, dear."

Tom's blood ran hot at this admission, and he promised himself some satisfaction if anything arose between him and this rival, though he soothed her fears on the subject. So, after further consultation, it was decided to start at daybreak next morning, and with Jim to help, the station light American waggon, a big, roomy vehicle, was taken out of its special shed and made comfortable for Mrs. Inglis.

CHAPTER XII

RED ALTAR LIGHT

“A land of camps, where seldom is sojourning,
Where men like the dim fathers of our race
Halt for a time, and next day unreturning
Fare ever on in space.”

—THOMAS WILLIAM HENEY.

ARRIVED at the cave, they turned out the waggon horses they had ridden over the hills with, but once in the big dome chamber again it was an ordeal for Millie to pass the spot, for here was where she had been so terribly alarmed before, and where now the mysteries of the man she had fled from became still more appalling from her knowledge of him.

She hurried past, quivering with apprehension, and Tom repented of having brought her. But some vague hope seemed to buoy her up, and in a little while she became more tranquil.

Jim, now taking the lead with his lantern, led them into a passage which branched off to the left. It was narrow, but high, and further on, hearing something, he extinguished the light by twisting the obscuring metal shade across the bull's-eye, an example followed by the others.

"Stand still," he whispered, "they're comin'!"

Almost directly they were surrounded by the phosphorescent lights again, and, putting out her hand past the faintly-illuminating procession, Millie touched the warm, soft body of a breathing, very-much-alive young woman!

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," whispered this tangible phantom, just beyond the light; "but say nothing. We are all right, and know you are. He is a fine fellow, Millie—oh! you lucky girl! Dick was like to have murdered him until he saw him."

The phosphorescent rings of light, seeming to induce it as a breath exhales and inhales, were by surmise on the level of a female neck and waist on all the halted appearances, but being carried round the body by a belted background of cured skins, the wearers could see the new-comers in the cave gallery fairly distinctly without being visible themselves.

Before Millie had time to learn more, the faint lights began to move on, disappearing in the direction of the dome cave, leaving the darkness intense.

Then they opened their lanterns again, and Jim led the way slowly, until suddenly, after due warning from him, the others came upon a deep, yawning chasm which went right down into the earth, nearly in the middle of the passage, with, however, room enough on one side to walk past. From the top of this descent they could plainly hear running water, and beyond the hole to the left the tunnel still ran

on, behind a huge boulder which glittered with sparkling prisms.

Then Jim held his lantern so as to show a new strong ladder leading into the chasm, and down this they all went. Half-way they observed the green flicker above them again moving past the top of the hole, with a sound as if leafy branches were being dragged over the upper floor.

At the bottom of the ladder they found it necessary to cross a rude bridge to get over a running stream, which, when surveyed from the full light of the lanterns, looked so still, so motionless and shallow, that it had the appearance of white frosted glass. It was not until a piece of limestone was thrown into this stream that they became aware, by the way the waves and ripples danced by, that the motionless-looking surface possessed a strong, deep, swift current, and was really as clear and colourless as crystal.

The milky appearance was due to the white calcareous bed being seen through the transparency of the flow, and the impossibility of judging appearances in the murk of the underground.

Presently little rafts, bearing each a burning cone of coloured fire, came floating round a high, jutting promontory, some distance up-stream, shedding a bright rose-pink illumination through their arched and vaulted surroundings, and showing still more plainly the length and vistas of the great underground chamber and the smooth, polished surface of the limestone rocks, which shone like agate. What had

polished them? Human beings or the ghouls of the darkness? Or merely the rock-wallabies that swarmed in the vicinity?

From these signs Tom thought the Kuriltai, whatever disguises and mysterious belongings they had, must be pretty numerous, but the presence of whites amongst them eased his mind somewhat.

The lights on the bosom of the underground stream now came singly errant in blue or scarlet or white, turning the surroundings into sapphire, ruby, or silver, according to their proximity.

Now came two larger, brighter radiances, placed one at each end of a blackfellow's bark canoe, on raised supports. As this floated down the stream towards them, they saw, standing upright in the centre of the canoe, a beautiful young white woman, robed like a Greek goddess, and wearing a string of rough fire opals round her neck.

"Bianca!" cried Mrs. Inglis excitedly.

Deftly nearing the bank, the occupant of the canoe landed, and, pulling it ashore, where it lighted the vicinity, tripped quickly towards the speaker and embraced her.

"So this is yourself at last, Millie," she whispered, with much affection. "Oh, my dear, I'm so glad. Welcome! I've lots to tell you. Do you know that you are rich? that your husband will not have to take you dowerless? It is all owing to Mr. Cosgrave. He has enough opals alone to buy the station with."

Jim was looking on in wonder. He could not

hear their whispered confidences, but his amazement was plain enough.

"It's my other girl, the white one Native Rose told me of," he muttered. "How did she know the missus?"

"Tom," Mrs. Inglis exclaimed, rather timidly, "This is my adopted sister, Bianca Pearmain."

Tom shook hands with her sister, and their mutual expression showed that they had found favour in each other's sight, though his eyes were the more wondering of the two, because she was the one who had taken stock of him when he was tracking the mules, and had seen him before as a black girl.

There was now an approaching intermittent sound of hardwood sticks beaten together in rhythm to an accompanying chant by many voices, very plaintive and quaintly musical.

Bianca Pearmain moved across the floor, which sparkled like hoar frost under the blaze of her canoe lights, to a place under an arching dome where stalagmites of agate colouring looked like the pipes of some vast organ.

Near by was a lower stalagmite dropping, which had ceased for some cause ages ago. It was of blended yellow and pink colour, and possessed a flat top, to which she ascended, looking more like a goddess than ever.

And as another fleet of volcano floats shot into sight, a brilliant deep ruby-red flame appeared from a sort of limestone altar on the left of where she

stood. She only wanted a silver sickle to be Norma in some Druidical ceremony, for by the altar against her stood three men draped like priests. The whole gallery far and near was lit up, as if by necromancy, with ruby and silver, as, in addition to the red altar light, the three monkish-looking figures were burning magnesium wire.

The glittering floor, composed of limestone particles, seemed to be turned into a mass of precious stones, while the whole of the gloomy underground vault became transformed into a realm of dazzling splendour. And this was the welcome to Tom's little party from the mysterious dwellers in the Cave of the Red Hand.

As spectators they had hardly recovered from their amazement at the glorious transformation scene, when every light went out, and darkness reigned supreme.

But glimmering from the altar was a spark or two, transient and evanescent, and then over their heads in the same bright ruby of the altar fire a vast Red Hand appeared stationary. It was slightly extended at the fingers. For the space of ten seconds it remained blood red, significant and appalling, on the roof above the altar, and then it faded gradually away.

Then the altar fire blazed brightly again, and in the red glare other red lights came from recesses in and behind rocks. These were carried on spoon-shaped sticks by a troop of young girls of singular grace and beauty.

Then followed with white flares the curious tribe of Kuriltai or cripples, the cave ghouls who inhabited these secret recesses. They looked far more unreal and ghastly than when Tom had seen them out in the bright sunlight. Here they seemed to personate animals or birds, for some had kangaroo and wild dog skins on, some had feathers stuck over them, some had leaves, and they came stooping and creeping on the ground, hopping on one leg, hunchbacked, desolate, and weird in the extreme.

There were some three hundred or more of them. Outcasts from all the tribes because not able-bodied, but yet ruling the others with their mysteries, rites, and terrors.

Tom's mind was hard at work all the time to disentangle the wonder of all he saw, but the more he tried the more he got mixed.

Had the young waddygālo girls, who were perfect in form and feature, and very light coloured, been brought in as a contrast to the ghastly beings who inhabited the darkness? Or had the advent of a White Queen, such as the girl in the canoe, prevailed out of mere curiosity against all existing laws?

The lights all went out. There was a breathless silence as the great Red Hand flared in ruby again on the ceiling of the dome above them, and as it faded away the phosphorescent lights from the luminous fungi collars of all the performers, which were only visible in pitch darkness, circled slowly round the spectators and then flitted away, until at last neither the painful sounds of laboured breathing from the

mysterious Kuriltai, nor the soft laughing voices of the waddygālo maidens were to be heard.

Then Jim flashed his lantern again, and with the action found speech.

"Come on!" he cried. "I've seen real waddygālo girls at last! A regular bunch of the beauties. And that's what you and me never done before, Mr. Tom! No, nor anyone else as ever I heard tell on! How did they come here? The waddygālos are far too careful of 'em ever to let them be seen."

"Well, what did you think of them?" asked Tom. "Did they come up to your expectations, Jim?"

"I've seen a pretty girl here and there," he answered, "even amongst the blacks, but these beat 'em into fits with another kind of beauty, Mr. Tom, don't you think? Fancy 'em dressed up! Wouldn't they make a show?"

They all went after Jim in single file for a long distance by the banks of the underground river, until a light ahead, first glimmering, then steadily brightening, broke into open sunlight as they emerged from an archway into a valley.

Here were such grassed sides near the opening as to be almost precipitous; but further on the valley opened out, though its confines still sloped up to cap-crowns of brown, rocky, sheer cliffs that even a rock-wallaby would be somewhat baulked by if he wanted to get out.

On their left, as they progressed, the fine broad stretch of flat to the little river that had its exit from the cave, where it curved away from them out

here in the open, showed ground almost big enough for a small farm. They had not yet gauged the extent of this open space, but subsequently discovered that the park-like acres of it ran for a mile enclosed by the high cliffs.

The river itself, bright and sparkling enough now in the clear sunlight, bubbled and rushed in many curving channels over beds of pebbled mosaic, until it vanished into the hills at the far end of the vale, roaring hoarsely down a deep black chasm.

One curious arboret near the cave exit bore the marks of great age, however, and was undoubtedly a stunted growth or a dwarf variety of the usually gigantic copper-leaved gum, the tree that Millie's birthmark approximated to by the leaf similitude.

"Camp-don't-know-what!" remarked Jim, with a wave of his arms embracing all the beauties and curiosities of this wonderful secluded valley. "If I could only live here for ever with three or four of them young beauties, I'd be happy for the rest of *my* days. Catch me ever wantin' to go back to saddlin' up, backin' colts, foot-rottin' sheep, cattle drovin', and livin' on johnny-cakes, damper, and salt tack!"

The smoke from a fire, at apparently a black's camp, now rose blue and filmy against the silver stems and green foliage of the gums and river-box trees, and Jim's remarks, though muttered only for Tom's ears, as Mrs. Inglis pressed on ahead, might have been inspired by the scene they were coming to. But closer inspection showed the dwellings to

be much better built than anything Tom had observed among real blacks before.

A copper - coloured girl in a print dress and sunbonnet was standing near the fire, which had a large tripod cooking-pot suspended over it from a metal hook on a smoke-blackened crosspiece of hard wood.

She lifted it off with a hand-iron as the strangers approached, set it down on the ground, and ran to meet them. She eyed Tom and Millie with intense curiosity, and warmly embraced the latter as she twined her arm round her waist.

Then, whispering something to her, they both retired into the cool of the largest gunyah, which was built like a bushman's hut.

"My other girl," was Jim's confident remark to his master. "I'm bad again! On the martyr tack, as long as she keeps in sight, or the other one either."

Down the sides of the steep hill crowns and grass slopes the rock - wallabies swarmed in hundreds towards sundown, but of all the day-time birds which made this lonesome paradise Jim's Utopia, none seemed to have stayed longer than the waning afternoon. And towards the gloaming there was not even the monotonous chant of a mopoke or bush-owl.

"Can't make it out," Jim said apprehensively, when they returned to the camp for supper, "except for one reason. I know the birds don't sleep here, for I found that out when I first came. The wallabies, you see, have cleared out, too, as it's sundown. Feel that shake?" as a thud from the

cave end of the valley sent a hollow tremor through the earth beneath them. "Well, I've heard rocks fall at the other end, too, where the river goes into the hole in the other hill. And I expect that is what frightens the animals and birds. This place is debbil, debbil to the blacks at night. Nothin' stops here but us. And we're only likely to be here 'bout once in a blue moon, so if it all don't fall in to-night it won't matter."

As he spoke, there came a sound like the routing of a bull.

"What's that?" he asked of the girl who, with Leura, was preparing the supper.

He regarded her fixedly. She, at any rate, was not disconcerted.

"Nargun!" she exclaimed meaningly.

"Is it the bunyip, my girl?" was Jim's next question.

"No, it's a signal; it's my turn now to ask questions. How did you like Oona?"

"D'ye mean the white one in the canoe?"

"Certainly," laughed the copper-coloured maiden merrily, without reserve, for Tom had joined Millie in the hut they were to occupy. "Perhaps you don't like to say!"

"I tell you what it is," dolefully replied the harassed Jim, "it ain't exactly fair to a young fellow like me. It was *you*, I tell you, that I took the likin' to at first. And then you spring a white girl on to me, and of course I liked *her*. In fact, I love the whole lot of you, even the waddygālo girls.

How can I help doin' so? It ain't the correct thing the way you all go on, with a bashful young 'un like myself. It's more than I can fairly put up with, without goin' loony, and I'll dream the whole night of all the lot of you! I'll never forget Camp—"

"Never Tell!" she suggested. "But I've got to go. I'm wanted. Good-night. I'll be back early to-morrow."

"Never Tell? All right," he said, looking discomfited. "I'd call it 'Eaven, bar the shakes, if you are agreeable. I hope we shan't be blowed up, or swallered up in the night, because I might chanst to wake in the other place. There's pretty dicky goin's-on somewhere underground."

CHAPTER XIII

THE TREE WHERE THE SUNLIGHT COMES

“The valleys of coolness, the slopes of the heat,
With her blossomy traces.”

—HENRY KENDALL.

NATIVE ROSE, evidently through the signal and her intelligence after it, the same noise that Jim Terry thought to be a bunyip the evening before, after seeing Tom's party through their breakfast next morning, told them that they were to go back to the station and await contingencies.

They reached home quite safely, leaving all the mysteries behind them.

“We're not to say a word about it to any livin' soul, but I can't help thinkin' a jolly lot,” was Jim's commentary. “Where did them sparkly green and blue and red stones come from that Oona wore? And that awful red hand, how did it get there?”

In the dusk of that same evening a travel-worn Abbott buggy was driven up to the station, with Andy Heseldine, Bianca Pearmain, Richard Cosgrave, and Mr. Mansfield Waters as occupants of it.

These personages brought with them two kegs, apparently common water kegs, but their contents

were so exceedingly weighty that it was deemed advisable to roll them off the buggy, with several strong hands to steady them on a couple of strong planks.

Whatever they contained it was entirely concerning those kegs that the whole party held a consultation when assembled at dinner that night. Richard Cosgrave led the talking after the table was cleared.

"I suppose it's just as well," he began, "that I should relate the part I have played in the whole of this affair without making any more bones about it. It has fallen to my lot to be pretty well acquainted with the manners and customs of the blacks in this continent.

"I've been fossicking for gold and precious stones ever since I could tell a bit of mundic from a whipstick. Childish impressions generally stick, and I took to the bush like a blackfellow, and was keenly interested in all I saw.

"Knowing what I did of the bush and the blacks, therefore, surely it was not unusual for me to fancy that in their company, for various reasons, I should possess a better chance of finding gold than any other alluvial or deep-sinking white man.

"I could go to a tribe and talk their lingo to them, to start with. By explaining to them what quartz-gold was and showing them a specimen or two I could find out whether they had seen it in its virgin state, and consequently had, from their

showing, many a piece of ground in those days I could work quietly. I put by what I made by my own work, and kept my secret places free from observation.

"It is not generally known that the blacks are geologists. They are, though, in a certain way. They have a wide range of country, and curiously sharp eyes. There are certain stones much sought after by them, and the very act of lookin' for them trains them to know strata and country, beyond the mere animals in it. One sort of stone is the quartz itself, the home of the gold, but it is a water-worn specimen of this they want for curing rheumatism; and different sorts of grey freestones and diorites are wanted for their stone tomahawks, gouges, and cutting implements.

"Travelling over the country in search of these, there are many places, such as the Red Hand Cave you have seen, which they utilise for making their drawings on, remote places off the river and the road that all, save explorers, stick to, and consequently few but myself who can go amongst the blacks ever get the chance of seeing them.

"I sounded the blacks well on these subjects until I could picture the location, and if the description gave quartz indications I took some of the tribe along with me to show the spot.

"As time went on, whilst I was doing this, I found that the friends I had made, Heseldine and his daughters, were likely to come to grief. He was drinking himself into his grave, and his daughters

seemed to be in a position where they would have to shift for themselves.

"I had a fancy then for Millie here," he broke in, his voice and his inscrutable blue eyes momentarily softening, "but I find another man has supplanted my affections in the meantime, and I knew it before, because I kept a watch on my old sweetheart's actions without her knowing it.

"No offence, sir," he added, as Tom glanced at him fearlessly. "You don't know me yet, but you may have cause to some day." Here his eyes were dangerous. "You don't know *me*, nor do you know *my* born rights. I've been a friend to Heseldine and his girls for years."

And his look straight into Tom's eyes seemed to read his very soul, whilst his wife crimsoned and then turned deadly pale. This man knew all about their first meeting.

It was an awkward moment, for the blood was surging through both men's veins like wildfire, and Tom was not one to brook the slightest challenge, but, suddenly changing his manner of hostility, Myall Dick continued:

"I've been a friend to them, to Millie and Pearmain's daughter, ever since they were children. And one great reason why I wanted Millie was because I knew of her bush-mark when she was a little girl. Maybe you don't know what that birthmark meant to me. It gave me the clue to a fortune, and complete safety in realising it. It was a good deal to give up, wasn't it, even without herself?

"Well, when I saw that Millie and Bianca here were done a lot for by any black, male or female, who came near them, I said to myself that there was something strange in that occurrence, and set myself to find out what it was.

"Millie was a totem girl! She was a white girl who belonged, by a certain sign, to a black tribe. And through that she held a ruling power over all the blacks, civilised or uncivilised, on the continent! I got it all out of old Ua, who was with me then, and pretty nigh always was, because she had been my foster-mother.

"Says Ua concerning Millie: 'The white girl has the mark.'

"'What mark?' asked I. Of course we were talking blackfellow.

"'The mark of the tree where the sunlight comes,' says she.

"You know," interpolated the speaker, his eyes lighting up and a rare smile illuminating his stern but handsome face, "that the blacks' language is as pretty when translated into English as it sounds pretty when they talk it, if you know the right meaning of it, which very few people do.

"Then Ua ran into a long rigmarole about a certain belief and custom belonging to a tribe of Murray blacks, who emigrated northwards after the first white comers into their country played up with them.

"This tribe swore they would go to the ends of the earth to be out of the way of the whites, who brought

nothing but burning sorrow to them. So they came into this country where we are now. I knew at once that old Ua's legend had the light of truth, because the pine-ridges on the Murray hold the canoe symbol as a faith in the aboriginals' burying-grounds there, and that one white girl with the symbol of a canoe mark would be to them as one risen from the grave, a living messenger of their belief.

"Her yarn thus bearing on Millie's mark, and me wanting gold, was what made me think the sign would be more than valuable in passing us through all the wild Combo tribes, and as they rule the others it would prove a talisman of perfect safety everywhere.

"I showed Ua a half-sovereign and a gold nugget I had. She knew pretty well the value of that ten-shilling piece, and the print skirts and bodices it would get for her at the nearest store, but when she found out that the gold in the nugget made the half-sovereign, she became as keen about it as myself.

"So I asked her on the quiet if there was anything like that nugget in the neighbourhood of the tree where the sunlight comes.

"Says she: 'Yes, a good deal, but come where I will take you to and I'll get someone to tell you more.'

"I could get about with Ua; she would provide for me well in the bush, where a white man who wants to carry a kitchen and a bedroom on his back would starve. I'd been away with her for months at a time when I was a kiddy and she was a young

woman, and we did it on shanks' pony then. Bah! she was a better travelling mate to me than the whole race of white men with their town ideas, their waggons, animals, and themselves to be looked after, fed, bedded, clothed, armed and watered; and she could cook for me, too, the little we wanted done.

"When a man has a lot of other stomachs to see to, besides his own, they make an uneasy trip.

"And she was safe and secret. We didn't leave many tracks to benefit outsiders. And she was so useful among the tribes for me, because she could make a dye that, with a bit of different mixing would turn me or herself into a Combo, a Murrai, an Epai, or a Kubbai in a brace of shakes. She always kept them ready in her dilli-bag when we travelled.

"Well, off I went with her in my buggy for this trip, and at last we reached the old girl's towri, or country where she was born and used to. We went to her tribe, me as a blackfellow; for she had suckled me, and could speak up for me.

"I was her baby all through with those tribes, the little forlorn white kiddy she had made live until he was a man, and there was always a sort of blood brotherhood between me and the blacks through her talk to them. When I was a child I had mated with many of the black children, and there were men of my own age in many tribes as I grew up that knew me well and considered themselves kin to me. They often asked me to stop, and offered me wives in various places. I didn't want 'em. I was after gold I knew of then and had heard the rumour of.

I wanted to find where that tree was that the sunlight comes to. So some of their old bucks got hold of me and took me out into the bush in old Ua's country to one of their spirit stones, and we sat down by it and had a regular pow-wow.

"They told me that that tree outside the Cave of the Red Hand was a totem tree that was mixed up with the crippled tribe and with others in another country they had been driven away from, and some day I'm going to find out that other country, for the old Cave chief let on about it, in churinga-talk, and I shall take his crippled tribe back there. These old bucks told me firstly, however, that a tribe of cripples had the custody of that tree, and that the place where it grew was everlastingly debbil, debbil to any white man, that no blackfellow beyond the cripples dared to go within coo-ee of it.

"Ua had said there was gold there, so that intelligence did not stop me. I knew well enough that if a blackfellow sees anyone belonging to him crippled, loony, or sick, he has for them a mighty reverence. He holds them sacred, but they are outcasts from him, all the same, by the laws of his tribe.

"These cripples that you have now seen are an outcast band, but the river blacks, and waddygālo blacks, will fight for them and allow no one else to meddle with them. No outsiders, white or black, are allowed to go into that valley where the tree and gold are, but I got in at last through old Ua's machinations.

"The cave-cripples are indeed a queer collection.

They are passed through the tribes everywhere, crippled or deformed ; and from what I have been able to work amongst them by sleight of hand and optical delusion, and from what has been spread about the wonders of Oona and Nargun—Bianca and myself—to say nothing about my other assistants, I'll soon be able to go anywhere in Australia, and do whatever I like amongst any tribes. What's to hinder me from being a millionaire some day from the working of my secret places, when you squatters are played out with overstocking the country? I shall have plenty of underground treasures by that time to dispose of, and to work on the quiet.

“The Kuriltai had some sort of light for navigating their subterranean passages when we first came, but it was only a luminous tree-fungus, fires and fire-sticks. I have improved upon that little lot. I hold them in an iron thrall as Nargun, their Cave god, and can make them crouch in terror with the altar light and the Red Hand. For I can go where I like to get chemicals, and you have seen what the magnesium wire can do.

“My outside messengers, by blackfellow post-running, can get me anything I want also, and the old Cave Chief worships me as a superior being, and has let me into a lot of secrets. He works with me now, as I give him extra power. For the altar fire and the awful Red Hand a dissolving lantern is all I need, with a powerful magnifier and glasses. I can people the white spaces in the cavern with ghosts and skeletons for their benefit, and could frighten

any outsiders into living fits of terror if I chose to exert my full strength of surprises. But, leaving the cavern in its natural state, I know and have already proved that anybody who gets into the top galleries would be glad enough to get out again quick, without seeing anything else, by mere feel and fright.

"Those Kuriltai or cripples masquerade as beasts, kangaroos, and wild dogs when underground to keep others out. But I think one sight of the creatures, or the touch of them in the dark, with their dogskin masks, and hair and tails on, would be almost enough for anyone, without the echo of their caterwauling from the lower levels.

"How we eventually got up here was in this way: I went back to Heseldine, found his two girls that I had got to love for the sake of old times in danger of being turned out to face the world at an hour's notice. Well, it made me feel sick. So I burned his place down and came away with him and Bianca, as Millie was gone.

"Ua turned Bianca into a Combo girl, and Heseldine into an Epai man, same as me. And here we are with a bush Mint.

"I knew well enough that Millie wouldn't come, but I kept my eye on her all the same, and reckon she's been your saviour, Mr. Inglis, when they were going to wipe you out at the station here. Who put 'em up to that, do you suppose? If she hadn't been there, you wouldn't have been living now."

"Yes, I should. I have my own initiative. Your

warning came too late, but I now know that you were the black man who spoke to me that night before it happened," Tom retorted deliberately, fixing a searching gaze upon the speaker.

"Yes, sir. Would you know me as that same now?"

"No, indeed. Your make-up is beyond any knowing, but surely you never put the blacks up to set fire to my station even before the time you appeared to me?"

"That's all right," Cosgrave answered coolly. "But, if you have no objection, as I have been rather long-winded in putting my story before you, I think it will be as well to let Mr. Waters finish it, from the time that he disappeared."

Tom mused. Milly was right. He would have to be very careful of this man. Then he reflected that if he had not come back on the night the black scout was lurking round the houses, Millie might have been abducted. Was the creeping savage with the firebrand Myall Dick himself? His manner showed it plainly enough, and he had only been foiled by the accident of Tom's return. If he had spoken Millie must have come out and gone with him, as his influence over the tribes seemed to be paramount. And her terror of him would have forced her to comply with his demands. Ah, well, he would give him no more chances!

CHAPTER XIV

MILLIE'S DOWRY

"We recked not of wealth in stream or soil,
As we heard on the heights the breezes sing ;
We felt no longer our travel-toil,
We feared no more what the years might bring."

—MARY HANNAY FOOTT.

"LADIES and gentlemen," began "Many" Waters, "Mr. Inglis was exploring the cave with me, and we found the tunnels far more extensive than we expected, spending a long time in exploring them.

"At one time, Mr. Inglis being in front, I fancied I heard someone breathing near me, and being alarmed, as my lantern was not working well, I hurried forward. I tripped over something, and after my light had been extinguished by the fall was pounced upon by what felt like huge, hairy animals.

"I have experienced some peculiar feelings in my time, and been in some tight places, but the thrill of amazement which went through me then in the darkness was quite a new sensation! I had fallen close to a deep hole that I knew of before, and as I was seized by these creatures, who I shortly knew to be

human by their gagging me, there was a noise as of a heavy body falling down it, and a sharp, suppressed cry of anguish which I knew would bring Inglis back.

"I have heard since that it was only a large stone, and that my abductors had invented the cry to give colour to my disappearance, for they dragged me rapidly away with them.

"I had been blotted out of existence at the will of my captors, gagged and overpowered, but afterwards I found out that there were three white counterfeits amongst these blacks who clad themselves with skins of animals. That young lady over there," indicating Bianca Pearmain, "was one of them, although she did not stoop to the other mummeries.

"She simulated a Combo girl and a white Queen, who navigated a canoe in the underground stream. She was not crippled as the real Kuriltai were, but beautiful in form and face."

"Come now, Mr. Waters," exclaimed Bianca, reddening with annoyance, "that is too bad of you. Keep that for Native Rose."

"Very well, my dear," responded he, "but you must remember that Oona should not interrupt even on the strength of her relationship to Nargun, the cave deity."

"Where *is* Native Rose?" asked Jim, highly perplexed and suspicious as he scanned Miss Pearmain's flushed face intently on the strength of his cave experiences. "And where is Oona? I'm blest if I know which I likes best. They are both

lovely, and both talk the same. It's only their skins as is different. And now here's a Miss Pearmain! It's a triangle job that don't work out somehow to my satisfaction, for she's as like the other two as she can be."

"Well," continued Waters, smiling sarcastically at Bianca's embarrassment, on being thus apostrophised in company, "such being the pleasant parts of my incarceration when I had begun to get used to it, I thought I might just as well be considered dead or black after I had learned why I had been detained. The secret alone was worth it, and otherwise I might have spoilt all.

"The pockets of gold we have worked come from the reef in the valley. The drift is all in shallow ground, and the gold of centuries lies there. All that valley must have been deep underground once. It is a bedrock, and the eroding has gone on to the level of the stream, where it seems to stop, but I think the water is working underneath it in the same way as it is at the far end of the valley, and will bring all the hills down on top of it again some day, if it doesn't bury itself lower, as it seems to have done already.

"There are all sorts of formations in the cave galleries visible where the limestone is eroded to the next strata, by water action. There are marbles, and there may be more conglomerates outside the whole region which contain precious metals or precious stones. It may last our time, and probably will, but we have had some experience of underground

tremors caused, I believe, entirely by water action, and I can't be sure of its safety.

"Cosgrave and I, it was evident, had both dropped on to something curious, each in our several ways, he by carefully-planned design, I more or less by accident accelerated by the personal information of Mr. Tom Inglis about some crippled blacks he had seen on this part of his run. On representing this to Heseldine and Cosgrave, they both agreed that as gold was in it, the fairest way for us to proceed was to establish a joint protectorship, admitting the original discoverer of the crippled tribe and their cave, and including his wife, she happening to have near relations with the whites in possession. Also, as my information entitled me to a share of the great secret discovery, I was admitted under the same terms.

"This, they considered, would be the only satisfactory safeguard to the continued working of it. So as Cosgrave is the most learned and secret of us all in aboriginal science, I vote that we agree to leave the matter entirely under his jurisdiction, the rest of us clearing out to follow our usual avocations so as to let him sell the gold and reap our reward as silent sleeping partners. As Nargun, with his cave necromancy, Cosgrave is a god in the eyes of the superstitious cave-dwellers; other interference would spoil his plans."

Cosgrave was looking across at Tom with those inscrutable eyes of his, but said nothing. Those eyes, dark blue with long black lashes, had a far-

away appearance in them, but what was in their vision no one could tell.

"The tree at the entrance to the curious inner valley," continued Waters, "is, I should say, the only one of its peculiar species in the entire district. The leaf of it, which represents the secret sign written on the talking sign-written stones of the guardian chief of the strange tribe of the Kuriltai, is nothing more or less than the leaf of a dwarfed copper gum. The Kuriltai call it the Tree where the Sunlight comes, and near it the ancient headman of the tribe, the one who had led them from their former abode, lies buried with all his churingas of mystery and romance. That tree is a hundred years old if it is a day.

"And here, in a strange region about it, come these pockets of gold, which are of no small moment to us assembled here. We have two five-gallon kegs filled with gold and gold dust from them. The gold is all solid. Those kegs each hold about £8,000 worth. Our individual profits are over £2,000, owing to the first prospector's anxiety to keep the matter secret. Mr. Cosgrave may well call it a bush Mint, and his generous endeavours should be sufficient to make us all keep the strictest silence about it as we value our own prosperity.

"I have only to suggest, finally, that we should all solemnly swear never to reveal what we know either of the Cave, the Kuriltai, or the gold ground beyond the Cave. Are you willing?"

"Wait a bit," Tom interjected. "I'll stand out of

it. Mr. Cosgrave has presumed to dictate to me what I should or should not do on a previous occasion. It is a matter between ourselves, and need not be discussed here. But I hold that anything allotted to me should be paid to my partners, as a royalty."

"We have made those arrangements, Mr. Inglis," Cosgrave broke in, regarding Tom keenly. "Mr. Waters said you would think of your partners. Heseldine and I can work it, after we have sold the gold, on the quiet, and it's a certain income for the present shareholders. Till I give the word, I say, beyond this company assembled here to-night, this secret goes no further. I don't want the place rushed. We'll say it all ain't quite fair and square and above board, except perhaps in the justice you have done to your partners, but we are all in it, and when gold is in question it doesn't pay to talk too much, because every living soul in this big Island thinks he's got a born right to it as well as us.

"If you chose to turn nasty over it, Mr. Inglis, of course you have got us all on the hip, but I can claim the Government reward and put you in a hole by proclaiming the gold-field and over-running your cattle station with diggers. How would you feel if a town sprung up here, a mining town, where you live now on the permanent water? There's two ways of thinking over the matter, you see."

"My wife's share holds me," Tom said, eyeing his rival defiantly. "What made you so generous?"

"Because of my right as her guardian, a self-

appointed one," remarked Cosgrave coolly. "But look here, Mr. Inglis, you're fighting square, and though there's no give or take between us, by your own action, I like a man. Put it another way. What we want to do ninety-nine people out of a hundred in our position would do. What would you do yourself if you found a nugget of gold out on your run far too big for you to carry away? Would you go and tell the world all about it before you had got the value of it? Or would you be inclined to heft it away in little bits until you had removed the lot? I have risked my life in finding this gold; no outsider has done as much as I have. Isn't it worth keeping? My life and those dear to me, in the scale against dead loss all round."

"What about the advice you gave me on our first meeting?" Tom answered, looking him steadily in the face. "No man flouts me with impunity, and I give you fair notice that man to man, without throwing gold into the scale at all, I'll fight you to a finish, bare fists or gloves of diplomacy, until we see who is best man. I stand for what I have to guard, my wife."

"Well done," replied Cosgrave heartily. "I could see it working in you. Gloved hands be it, then, at present; but—well, you're coming to my way of argument, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Tom quietly, "but only about the gold," and Millie slid her hand into his.

A Bible was produced, and those present, much excited by the advent of such unexpected wealth,

vowed to keep all secrets connected with the discovery, and, bar Cosgrave and Heseldine, not to go near it again, or to reveal the spot to anyone.

"Do you think Native Rose or Oona would have me now I've made my pile, or ought I to wait until I have made a bigger one through Mr. Cosgrave? Please tell me, Miss Pearmain," Jim asked, with grave deliberation.

"You had better go and get their opinions," she replied abruptly, looking rather uneasy. "I have nothing to do with your former love affairs. But I forgot—you are not allowed to go and see them."

Then, noticing Cosgrave looking very stubborn and dangerous, she rapidly changed the subject, and, passing out of the room with Millie, left the men to talk over the final adjustment of matters.

Heseldine and Cosgrave went away next morning in the buggy with Ua, who had arrived on foot.

Waters, having bought the station waggon, and hired two men, one to cook, besides taking the prospecting shepherd, after settling up matters with Tom, took charge of his sheep and departed later for Adelaide. Bianca stopped by special request, and did a lot of work with Jim among the cattle; and Kulbarunna, the cattlemen having gone long ere this, firmly convinced of Waters' death, settled down again into its usual quiet, far-out loneliness.

But about the houses now arose ripples of happy laughter, caused solely by the presence of the white women. Tom and Jim rode through the cattle daily, being quite assured by the respectful attitude

of the blacks that no further danger of any kind threatened from them; the birthmark on Millie seeming to now result in such good-will that the station was kept in game and fish, brought by invisible waddygālos, and passed on by the station blacks in endless variety.

And by and by a little son was born to Tom and Millie.

CHAPTER XV

PARTING OF THE WAYS

“What of those tender feet
That have not toddled yet?
What dances shall they beat
With what red vintage wet?
In what wild way will they march or stray?
By what sly Paynims met?”

—JOHN LE GAY BRERETON.

ONE morning Bianca Pearmain was astir, milking the cows, and, being assisted by Mr. James Terry during that operation, received a proposal in the latter's very best form.

He had found out all about her triple personality, the “triangle business” as he called it, and being always terribly in earnest about anything he did, that nerving system was not wanting in this, his first love affair.

“Miss Pearmain,” he exclaimed, but in lowered voice, “or Native Rose, or Oona, for I'm blest if I know which of you I like best, being only a young stockman, risin' twenty-one, I'll graft for you like a buckin' colt, my dear, even upon a free selection. I'd call it 'Eaven to live with you in a bark humpy, if

we had only 'possum rugs to sleep on, or kangaroo rats for tucker. Wouldn't it be prime? But I'm a rich man now, Native Rose, and I'd get you such a 'orse as nobody but Oona ever had. Perhaps when all you three are rolled up into one Mrs. Jim Terry, I'll love Bianca best. Say yes, Native Rose, my darlin'! You was always kindest to me in that character. I've had that kiss you gave me in the dark long ago smackin' at my lips ever since! It has never come unstuck! Give me another."

"Hush, Jim," Bianca blushingly whispered. "Don't you know that if a young woman ever gives you a kiss you should never on any account tell of it?"

"Besides," she added, noticing his face, "Native Rose is out of date now, and not likely to come on the stage any more."

She, in her turn, looked pained at the impression she had made on him. Had that first kiss pledged them for life? she thought.

"Bianca and you have learned many things since then," she added. "Don't be stupid, Jim," she softly continued, for he was much troubled. "See here, I'm old enough to be your mother in one way, because I have got to know more of the world by my woman's instinct than you could probably claim at thirty by experience. Why, you are not twenty-one!"

"I'm risin' twenty-one, and you're but nineteen, Bianca. Ain't that right for double harness?"

"Not for a youth like you. I'm a woman. When

a girl reaches nineteen she's years older than a young man of your age."

"Oh, Bianca, and I've loved you so true!"

"We've been good mates, Jim, you and I, the best of mates. I'll never forget you all my life. I've been Native Rose to you, and I've been Oona, too, and I'd go anywhere or ride anywhere with you in the bush as Bianca, same as I am always doing, Jim, because I know you are a true man at heart. It's more than I would do with any young fellow."

"Well, I am three-quarters man, ain't I, Rose?"

"You are better than most men, Jim; you are a real, good, honest mate. But, bless you, you have several years to learn things in yet. And, Jim, whisper!"

He inclined his head down towards her. They had let the last cow out of the bails, and Bianca, risen from her milking-stool, had on a pink-spotted white print dress and a white sunbonnet, and her flushed face looked as lovely as that of the typical dairymaid's. The whisper was given shyly but confidentially. Jim's form then rose to its full height, and he remained looking down at her, his bronzed face puckering with an amazed, injured expression.

"Honest Injun?" he inquired, his eyes fixed on hers.

She nodded.

"Well, I'm—blowed! He ain't much of a daisy, nohow. More like a Bathurst burr."

"Mind you don't tell, Jim," she added in an

undertone. "It may be and it may not be. But it's half arranged."

"Me tell?" he jerked in scorn. "Did I *ever* go back on you, Bianca?"

"Never," she replied, with a pitying smile that was in itself half a caress, "and I know you wouldn't. Honest Indian, now!"

"Honest Injun," replied Jim mournfully. "And look 'ere, my darlin' Native Rose, now you've said it, if anyone breathed a word against you or—'im, now you've let it out, if the same chap was as big as a gum tree, I'd go for 'im. I'd fight 'eaps of chaps, one down, another come on!" And Jim felt his brawny muscles approvingly.

"And well I know it, my dear old Jim!" she rejoined, laying her hand affectionately on his arm. "Only it is not likely to come to any fighting. Girls are girls, and have their feelings to repress, not to express, and girls sometimes come to find out that they are women, almost old women, in an hour—women who ought not to have any extra sensibility." She sighed deeply and sadly. "Some women are bought and sold like cattle."

"You are sellin' yourself, Rose, and oh! the draggin' heartache it gives me!"

"Now, stop this talking, Jim," she interposed sharply, "and let us go up to the house with our milk. Or stay, you go and head the cows over the lower crossing, so that they'll get to the Mianda billabong. There's fine grass there for them, and I want good cream for butter, perhaps cheese, if you're

good. Coming back, you can get your buckets. I wish to be by myself and think."

Bianca, as she went forward, felt her heart ache as much as Jim did, so much that she realised now what her own affections were in regard to him, for the young people's sentiments were real devoted love on his part, the strongest love of a life, because the first and most innocent. For herself, she stopped and pondered, realising this also.

Jim came racing back, and took her pails away from her.

"Give 'em to me, Rose," he said. "There's no carryin' for you to do when I'm about."

"Jim, dear," she responded shyly, "you may give me a good-bye kiss."

He put her pails down on the grass, and the strangely-associated pair indulged in an innocent and hearty embrace. They had come to understand each other so thoroughly. Her lightest wish was law to him, and he now obeyed her, though to do so almost broke his heart. It was a bush youth and bush maid's love and friendship, innocent, trusting, firm as steel. They might have been left alone on a desert island without mating, if the girl said "No," because of their homely and honest bush creed of natural virtue.

Nevertheless, in Bianca's eyes the hot tears welled suddenly when she was alone again. Her other wooing had been so different. Before his departure with Heseldine, Cosgrave had beckoned her to follow him down to the river flat, where, screened by some

bushes, they sat and talked together for some time, but apart, walked up to the house apart, and, beyond a final handshake, had no other good-bye. But they parted an engaged couple.

About ten o'clock that day, Bianca Pearmain came forward from the vicinity of the houses calling aloud for Jim Terry, who was buckling somewhat viciously a surcingle over the saddle of his newest colt at the stockyard below, on the first river terrace. She mentioned the name of a horse she was accustomed to ride sometimes when she went out on the run with him.

"'E's bin a bit off his feed. I shall have to cut him for the lampas, Miss Bianca," shouted delighted Jim. "I'll run Rory in for you, miss. He's feeding up the creek. He ain't rollin' fat, but he's in good spare condition, spry enough to do a big journey, or run for a Maiden Plate. I shan't keep you many minutes, miss," and Jim, vaulting on to his latest youngster's back, went off at a gallop.

Shortly afterwards the young stockman came back with a mob of horses, which went into the yard smartly, then, unsaddling and letting his colt go, he ran up to the house for Bianca's side-saddle and bridle, and, having selected another horse for himself, finally led up Rory, a large, handsome bay with black points, a splendid, high-class jumper, very fast, with an amiable temper, a perfect picture of a lady's horse, and one of Tom's own. Bianca, by this time arrayed in a riding-habit, wearing a light cap of the same material, sprang to the saddle from Tom's

hand, and away she and Jim went up the river, with Millie and Tom gazing after them, and two kangaroo dogs trotting steadily after their horses' hocks until they disappeared in the blue-hazed distance.

Then Tom proposed to take his wife out for a holiday drive, saying :

"Come along and tell Mulga to get ready. You get some lunch and the tea and billy and things, and I'll take you, baby, Mulga, and Leura down to Thuladjari lagoon in the buggy. The little chap can see the tiny tortoises in the rock shallows, and they will be something new for his wondering eyes to gaze at."

On her acquiescence, Tom had his coat off in a moment, and with a wheel jack, a screw wrench and a bottle of castor oil, saw that the running gear of the cosy double "Abbott" was in good order, having the horses in and the conveyance at the door just as the women were ready.

Away they went, the clear, gentle clank of the light buggy wheels giving a pleasant refrain to their outing—a sound suggesting the working of a good wooden sea-block on one of the old-time clipper ships—until at length they turned the horses out on green grass, backed with water reeds, at Thuladjari, and prepared for relaxation.

Thuladjari was a long, deep waterhole, which shone blue as the bluest sapphire, with vivid swarths of green water-grass resting in and growing on its pellucid edges.

The depth of this lagoon waterhole was never known, principally for the reason that the whites when bathing in it seldom stayed long enough to investigate, because of the fear of a horrible bunyip lurking there.

As for the blacks, from whom the legend came, none of them would interest themselves within a quarter of a mile of the water, unless accompanied by whites.

Tom had always been inclined to think that the blacks' story concerning the bunyip, which must have had some foundation, could be authenticated from the tiny tortoises which disported themselves in the shallows.

They were worth seeing, too, these pretty little creatures with their black and yellow carapaces. They were only to be found in this particular piece of water, and only visible there from the top end rocks.

So might not the parents of these little two and four-inch amphibians be a very large pair who seldom showed, save when coming up for recreation and change at night, and then causing those sounds or appearances which had scared the blacks away from the region, or was an alligator the real bunyip?

Anyway, despite the blacks' legend, above water the bush scene was perfect. A bit back from the margin of the lagoon grew an enormous copper gum tree, deep-rooted, high-buttressed, with its mighty tap-root deep in underground moisture. There was not another tree of the same sort within fifty miles, except the dwarfed, aged one at the Cave valley outlet.

And there, in the widespread shade of this tree's gently-rustling branches, the Abbott buggy was drawn up, and Millie and Tom reclined cosily; whilst the copper leaves above their heads scintillated metallic flashes.

"I wonder how on earth this big tree came here, Tom?" Millie asked suddenly, whilst the horse bell tinkled a gentle music, as the animals lazily shifted from one choice morsel to another, and the smoke from the camp fire curled in pale blue spirals and perfumed their neighbourhood, coming out into bright relief against the deep background of mulga forest and long kangaroo grass of the open flats.

Millie held the baby in her arms, whilst Mulga and Leura, attired in light skirts surmounted severally by a scarlet and blue blouse, attended to the boiling of the billy and some fresh water crayfish in a saucepan. These had been caught by them with their toes when they first came to the waterhole, and flung out on the bank by the same sensitive feelers with backward kicks.

"The Torres Straits pigeons brought the seed, according to 'Many's' theory, I expect," replied Tom, who had been lazily puffing at his pipe but now extinguished it. "See that little tortoise crawling up the rocks, Millie; give me the child."

Joyfully Millie complied, now placing herself close to her husband. And then, as she surveyed both her treasures, her face suddenly clouded.

Tom and herself were nestled against the huge pink stem of the giant gum tree, their limbs and feet

straight out before them, towards the sparkling water. She had slipped her hand into his, and there was a strange, far-away look in her eyes as she said, looking up into the verdurous branches overhead :

"Tom, do you remember the description of the little tortoise, tattooed on Uncas, the little tortoise that was the totem-sign of the ruling chiefs of the Linne Lenape? I never see or think of a tortoise now without being reminded of my own totem symbol, the legendary canoe-leaf, and Dick's story of the 'Tree where the Sunlight comes,' one of the leaves of which tree is the identical sign of my birthmark.

"Is there not, as Mother always said, some destiny connected with it and myself? Look at my past life, my chance meeting with you, and see us now married, against all contrary emergencies. The development goes on. The Fates tried to separate us in every possible way, but failed. What does the future hold for us, and our son there now?"

"Happy days, I hope," Tom answered. "But why do you gloom over it? Surely Providence is, and has been, the ruler of our lives, and I cannot have my bright girl give way to any sort of lingering despondency about emergencies. I am here to protect you. Why, you are making even baby look unhappy. He has apparently forgotten all about the tortoise, from the very expression of your face, and that wouldn't be a bad example for you to follow yourself, and not to moon over the past, or to gloom the future. Cheer up, Millie dearest!"

"Isn't he a beauty, Tom?" she murmured, suddenly and softly, stroking the little boy's hair. "Don't you see the likeness in him to us both? He has your curls, my eyes. Look at his sturdy, perfect form.

"I have dreamed," she continued gravely, as if in error, but despondent as to her intuition, "of our son, grown to be a man, a splendid man in all physical ways, but with a mind warped, and a soul of honour destroyed, disappointing *both* his parents from some fell reason or other. Now, why should this be impressed upon my thoughts so distinctly? Why should he not turn out to be like his father? Is there a warning in that tree, with whose sign I am marked? Oh, Tom, Tom, why should my heart and understanding voice such horrors to me, when all seems so fair and bright before us? Indeed, I sometimes feel that I have more than a woman's special knowledge. In gaining you I gained my all, but I have an awful presentiment that I shall have to suffer for it in some way not yet fully explained, in spite of what you say that I ought to think, and hope, for the better."

Tom was astonished, horrified. He tried all he could do to dissipate his wife's melancholy forebodings, but, despite all his efforts, her grave face and absorbed manner cast a visible shadow over their pleasure party, revoking entirely the gay and cheery manner in which they had set out, and marking that day in their after lives as one to be remembered.

It might have been some strange prescience from

her birthright, and it seemed certainly more than a coincidence that the solitary, copper-leaved eucalyptus which shaded her and Tom near the blue water should have brought such thoughts. But when, at length, they reached home, she whispered to Tom :

“Forgive me for spoiling your day, dear. Perhaps even the black cloud that passed over my soul will have less darkened edges. Let us hope for the best, at any rate, and be happy while we may.”

CHAPTER XVI

“ L A P I S L A Z U L I ”

“ Though tender grace the landscape lacks, too spacious,
Impassive, silent, lone, to be so fair ;
Their kindness swiftly comes more soft and gracious
Who live and tarry there.”

—THOMAS WILLIAM HENEY.

AS Bianca Pearmain and James Terry, Esq., rode away after their little love scene of the morning, with other things than mere permanent union more potent for them both just then, Bianca fell to thinking of the self-effacement she had experienced by accepting Cosgrave's offer.

Not that she disliked the life of adventure she had gone through with her adopted father, and the man who had claimed her in default of Millie, but her affection for Tom, his wife, and their baby boy had increased very much, and, together with her own honest love for Jim himself, now outweighed all other considerations. So that she began to repent her hasty action in grim earnest.

After two hours' riding they had crossed a great plain which led into a mountain gorge, and whilst going through this Jim was speculating on the

probability of a certain wild bull he knew of, a leader of a small mob of still wilder cattle, being in the vicinity, when the sound of the creature itself routing in the ranges became distinctly audible. Both their steeds pricked up their ears, and danced with the prospect of a gallop.

Rory was a perfect lady's hack, but as Tom had trained him, he added to his other splendid qualities that of a first-class stock-horse, and Master Jim, being apt to be a little hard on his mount when after cattle, the big horse was the more impatient of the two in their present behaviour.

The other cattle they had seen on this excursion to the better known parts of the run had been feeding quietly inwards towards the river, and seemed to be getting more settled to their new pasturage, but Jim was uneasy about this wild mob on their outskirts, fearing they might demoralise the others sooner or later.

"There's the bull I told you about, Miss Bianca!" he exclaimed, as the gully narrowed and towered above them. "There he is, right at the top edge of that bluff. Look at him throwing the dust back with his fore hoofs, and lowering his head as if he was going to charge. I'd like to drive that fellow into the station. We could put him and his mob in the mile-square paddock. Shall we try, Miss Bianca? It'll be a bit of—what's that Greek word you told me about, meanin' credit, glory, and all sorts of good things?"

"Kudos, Jim. Yes, let us try, by all means; I can hardly hold Rory, he is so anxious to be off after them."

“Then you follow me,” said Jim, leaning forward, and stooping still lower for branches as his well-trained chestnut, Tiger, breasted the steep ridge he at once headed him at. “We can get round behind them this way. Mind the boughs, miss!”

But Bianca didn't want much tutoring; she rode as well as Jim did. By the time they had scrambled up the middle of a precipitous rocky gully, and got on to the top of the well-grassed tableland, they caught sight of the mob of wild cattle they were after, scampering off for all they were worth, but suddenly, to their surprise and delight, as they raced after them, they saw them turning at right angles for another gully, on the opposite side of the plateau, which went down to a large plain where they could ring them to their hearts' content, if they could only head them.

“Blacks about, or they wouldn't have turned off the tableland like that,” ran Jim's inward commentary to himself as he caught his horse by the head and rattled after the racing, bellowing mob, as hard as ever he could go. “We've got 'em now, for sure!” he shouted to his follower.

The kangaroo dogs swept along with them in the wild rush across the big plateau, but fast as they went, Jim's eyes, keen as a hawk's, saw a queer and unexpected sight.

A hundred yards from the steep rift where the cattle had dashed down, with the riders closing fast on their heels, stood a large ridge-gum tree. Its bark was smooth and silver white, but the side of it

opposite Jim had been burnt out hollow by a bush fire, and formed a charred and blackened funnel some five feet in diameter at the ground base, by eight feet high, narrowing slightly towards the top. In this hollowed chamber, black against the black of it, stood a native who would have been unseen but that Selim, one of the kangaroo dogs who always scented blacks and was their inveterate enemy, dashed for the tree. On reaching it, however, he stopped short suddenly, bounded about, and wagged his tail. Jim was so astonished at this behaviour that he wheeled his horse in his direction, and in the next second or two discovered the cause of the dog's friendliness standing there. The concealed black-fellow had patted Selim on the head, and would never have been observed but for the dog's action, his similarity to the charred inside being almost exact. Now Jim was surprised, because the dog had never before let a blackfellow come near him, his aim in life seeming to be either to "kill" or "tree" ever and always any aboriginal like an opossum. Wherefore Jim looked keenly, and as his late swerve had thrown him abreast of Bianca, he formed his own conclusions, but kept his counsel.

The black man in the black hollow never moved as the pair of them tore past, but peeping just beyond the tree from the snow-white side of it was a light-coloured girl whom Bianca knew instantly. She was Eiya, one of the waddygālo maidens Cosgrave had induced to come into the Red Hand Cave to help him carry on his ceremonies and juggleries.

Whether a woman can read another's eyes or not is hardly for a man to define, but evidently Bianca, in that brief glance, had read something in those of the young chieftainess which filled her with curiosity and astonishment.

As for Jim, he was too intent now to heed aught but the matter in hand, never reining up, but clattering full speed down the gorge incline over loose stones and boulders after the flying cattle, as he shouted instructions to his close following companion as to her position when he should dash forward on the level ground and head them out on the plain to the right. Then, when he had swung them round, she was to head them again, and they would ring them by galloping them round in continual circles. But Rory had too much foot for Jim's horse, and the daring girl, shooting past him, gained the post of honour, and kept it through the long and severe rally that followed.

Between them they kept the small mob of clean-skins going in circles over the plain, with stockwhips cracking and dogs chiming in with bay and bark, until they had winded them thoroughly and got them in command, when they headed them for the river and the station. Even then they had to go at a smart pace, for a young one or two, or an obstinate cow, would try to break out sideways every now and then and had to be headed back again, whilst the bull challenged all comers, until a rain-like and merciless torrent of lashes from Jim's stockwhip fell on him, and reduced him to sullen submission.

"The best day's work we have done, Miss Bianca!" said Jim, as, delighted with their victory, the couple made onwards with their captives for the one-mile paddock. "You rode like a bloomin' angel. But we shouldn't have got 'em so easy if it hadn't been for that white blackfeller in the tree hollow who started 'em off the range."

"What do you mean?" asked Bianca hastily. "How do you know he was a white man, Jim?"

"Well, I wasn't born yesterday, miss, nor yet the day before, but," reddening painfully, "there's been a lot of white blackfellerism up here lately, especially in the Cave, and it weren't Mr. Waters. First the dog told me, and then I seed someone I know! A dog will tell you what a man can't speak sometimes, and I've got eyes in my head."

"Mind the bull, Miss Bianca—he's edgin' off!"

She came back, after her detour, with a face as deeply dyed as his own, and a trailing stockwhip thong, which she caught up into curls and rested the butt on her hip, as she looked him squarely in the face.

"Who was he?"

"What's the name of that dark blue stone in the snake-ring Mrs. Inglis gave you as a keepsake?" he asked, flushing deeper also under his tan. "I never could get the hang of them foreign names properly."

"Lapis lazuli."

"Ladies leisurely!" he replied whimsically. "Them blue stones was the colour of *his* eyes, anyway!"

Bianca's flush grew deeper too. The colour spread to the very roots of her hair, and her eyes flashed angrily.

She had caught his drift. He was too delicate to tell her exactly all he knew, but his bush sight was infallible, and she knew he had not been deceived. The coal black Kubbai seeking shelter, and secreting himself from their sight in the burnt-out hollow tree, was Cosgrave himself!

And now, womanlike, with her human understanding, Bianca understood the look in the young chieftainess' eyes. It was that of defiance and scorn.

Her gauntleted hands clenched on her reins and stockwhip top and coils, as for the first time that day the gallant Rory felt the touch of her armed heel, and snorted with indignation, tossing his head and rattling his bit and curb chain.

She was humiliated, taken down, deceived. It was not part of her way at any time to simulate, and she was sure that Jim felt as bitterly indignant as she did herself.

But he said nothing more, in his chivalry to her, and, having crossed the river, they pushed onwards, with an occasional hard and going dash after the cattle, until they neared the one-mile station paddock, into which they forced the whole head of clean-skin scrubbers: thirty-one head, cows, calves, and the fine-looking roan bull, to learn tamer manners. It had been a hard, long ride, and they had done yeomen's work.

"You can kiss me for good and all, Jim," Bianca whispered tenderly to her young lover as he helped her off her saddle at the door in the dark.

CHAPTER XVII

EXODUS

“ Thus in her likeness that strange nature moulding,
Makes man as moody, sad and savage, too,
Yet in his heart, like her, a passion holding,
Unselfish, kind, and true.”

—THOMAS WILLIAM HENEY.

COMPLETE immunity from the blacks, the want of which constituted the first standing bugbear of the early far-out settlers on the land, being at last assured to Tom, through Millie's curious tribal birthmark and his own diplomacy, he, having now to raise fat cattle for market, enlisted all the likely blackboys, big and little, about the place, as apprentices to learn the art of stock-riding. He found them most apt and teachable, soon becoming smart horsemen, and requiring no wages beyond food, tobacco, blankets, and clothes.

Their eyes in tracking, and propensities for anything that seemed akin to hunting, made them very useful on the run, and when they began to understand their work amongst stock, they took to it with rather more than natural intelligence.

Jim now received his well-deserved promotion as overseer, working all the outer parts of the run with

trained blackboys, and when times were slack Tom and he drew the tribe about the station into further amicable relations with themselves by initiating all who wished to learn into the mysteries of cricket.

They played the game at first with a real cricket ball, but used pick-handles as bats, and many a hard-hitting, exciting match resulted, to the great delight of all.

Boys even of nine or ten years old learned to ride, and rode very well, too, being economical in horse-flesh as light-weights. Not a beast of Tom's was now speared, as was the case formerly, when he and his partners first took up their large stretch of country, and he had cause to know that of late his straying cattle had been put back within his boundaries and stopped from further wandering by outlying parties of aboriginals.

Jim Terry became a power of strength to Tom Inglis. His splendid riding and tracking powers were a sight to see. He had grown up literally under Tom's teaching, a typical young bush Australian, with the keenest of eyes for country and places, and a wonderful memory for a horse or a horned beast.

In calculating the pedigree of a half-grown, doubtful calf, as Tom said, "You can bet your boots Jim will know what cow it belongs to, even if she is away at the other end of the run."

In regard to the daily home life at the station, the little boy was for Tom and Millie their one anxiety. The welfare and bringing up of this child was a

serious consideration for the father, and his ideas began to point townwards.

"It won't hurt him to run about and get the free use of his limbs," he argued, "but when he is six or seven years old I shall take him down to Sydney and place him at a Dame's school."

Later on he would be educated at the Sydney Grammar School, Tom's own *Alma Mater*, which has produced a Premier, a statesman or two for the Empire, in spite of the Socialist theory, which would level Australia to the position of the blacks themselves, with the Japanese to finish their ideas of universal slavery for them.

So the child was always out under the charge of someone until he was four years old, generally in the companionship of little Peter, the aboriginal, Mulga's boy.

They were of the same age, and under this physical tuition little Tom Inglis learned the quickness of eye, scent, hand, and hearing of the blacks until he was five years of age, with a certain wide-awake reliance upon himself which, taught from his babyhood when he could first toddle, became a sure means of averting most bush dangers, chiefly relating to venomous reptiles. This gave him an alert and watchful disposition, and was the very best training that he could possibly have received. He learned his manners at home, and was altogether a very promising young scion of the old stock, and a general favourite all round.

Tom, in his leisure evenings, played chess, draughts, and cards with his wife, Bianca Pearmain, and Jim.

He and his wife became more and more attached to Bianca Pearmain. She was such a bright, domesticated girl, such a needed help, and now that Jim Terry was to the fore in her affections, even brighter and readier and smarter than of yore.

Cosgrave was working double tides in the Cave valley goldfield with all due secrecy. Nobody except themselves knew a word about it, because if ever he visited the station for even a casual word with Tom he came in the guise of a blackfellow. His visits had been rare, however, and not the slightest further arrangement of his marriage with Bianca had been made. Though mysterious and reticent, it was quite evident that he had mighty matters of state resting on his shoulders, and Tom had once come across a tall Epai native on a part of his run very far from the Cave, who turned out to be Cosgrave on close inspection, though what he was doing there he didn't explain.

He intimated at last to Tom that he thought Bianca would be better down in Sydney than up in the bush, and this idea chiming in with Tom's own intentions, the latter volunteered to take charge of her. But between the two men, since their first interview, there had always been a certain stand-offishness, and they never made friends.

Millie herself had now developed business talents, helping Tom considerably with all his station schemes; and by the policy of not making Jim in the slightest degree an outsider, the evening society of two bright, practical, Australian women had smartened that young man up very considerably,

making him particularly anxious about the cut and set of his clothes, the design and colour of a tie, or even the wrinkles of his riding boots.

Tom imported many books from town and read to them all a good deal during these bright evening reunions after their daily work. They also took the office of reader in turns.

In spite of Jim's early schooling, his spelling and vernacular were faulty, and during the first trials his stumbles over some of the big words were terrific, amusing his audience vastly, but the slips were always explained and corrected in due course by urgent request, "So as I can get the hang of 'em for next try," sapient Jim remarked.

They were a very happy working community then, but a change was coming.

The branding yards at Kalbarunna had long since been finished, and many mobs of young cattle had been branded with the station mark, and turned out again. From the old nucleus and other mobs of bought cattle, prime "fats" had been taken down by Waters and sold, topping the market at Adelaide and elsewhere.

There was a good banking account to the credit of the station now, owing to a continuous run of luck and prosperous seasons, but one day Tom received intelligence from his partners warning him that they were going to sell the station, for the market value of stock and land had greatly increased, and they thought it worth while to close with an advantageous offer they had received. In reality they were taking to town life.

Shortly afterwards they came up, being surprised

beyond surprise at the method and order they found. They had been content with Tom's letters up to now, and with their town agents' reports of sales, but, having developed into club and society men in a great measure, though still keen in business matters, the offer they had received was not to be despised ; but they approved of Tom's measures and were disposed to be generous.

"Now I can see," said Sargent, as representative of two respectable elderly bachelors, "we can both see, how it was you never wanted to take trips to town to escape from your loneliness. But you might have confided your intentions to us before we left you here, you lucky young beggar.

"You'll get a third share, with a big bonus added for might-have-been town expenses. And we shall have particular pleasure in making that bonus large, Tom, especially as some man we cannot trace has paid a big sum of money into our banking accounts, verifying to some purpose the old adage that to him who hath more shall be given."

Tom smiled, but said nothing. Their intelligence suited him.

One bright day after the second and last departure of Sargent and Nettlefold, and pending the arrival of the new-comers, who were bringing their own horses and waggons up from the Southern plains, Millie and Bianca were watching little Tom Inglis playing with fat black Peter.

"That canoe mark on my arm, Bianca, seems fated so far to put us into much the same positions as of old amongst the blacks," Millie said, "but how

curiously different from all we ever thought or speculated upon in our earlier times has our destiny become now. Look at my husband, and where can you produce his peer? Brave, manly, generous, and kind, he always has been and always will be so to me. We were torn apart by adverse circumstances after we met, but in spite of all that it seems to me we were fated to wed and prosper. And your lot is your own choosing, too, a very different one from what you expected. Will it continue to be so for us both? I fear not, somehow."

"I believe Dick saw your view of the case also, Millie, in spite of his rage and disappointment, especially as regards Tom. It was that mark on your arm that Dick wanted you so much for. I don't believe he is capable of evincing really devoted love to either of us. Now he will have his revenge, I feel sure. We have both crossed him and must be careful.

"I promised myself to him when his fortune was made, mostly because of my indebtedness, and to get you out of yours, but the society in your home circle is far more preferable to me than his gross peculiarities, and I have now a horror of any more wild work, especially with him."

"Bianca, my dear, Tom will never consent to your marrying Dick Cosgrave after what you have told me when you give me permission to tell him. You shall stay with us. See how fond little Tom is of you, and what a help and companion you are to me. We could not do without you now, my more than sister.

No, no, no, I am not going to let you throw yourself away on such a white blackfellow as Richard.

"It was all very well in our unprotected days, when father dropped so low, that another man not related to us stepped in with his authority ; but now, dear, we have both someone who will protect us, and not suffer us to go lower than his own position, which may be a great one some day. Besides, through him we have both risen above our former selves, even though we are somewhat hampered by the golden chains Richard has imposed upon us, and which we must wear, I suppose."

"I dread Dick's vengeance," Bianca said. "Be sure that he is scheming against us even now in some manner. . . . But here is little Tom coming back. I will go and dress him before his father comes home."

Tom and Jim came riding back together later on, and there wanted but little explanation after one glance at Jim's manly appearance and handsome, cheerful face to guess why Bianca had at last let out the secret of her heart to her adopted sister. She knew, and Jim knew, that Cosgrave, by his unaccountable and prolonged absences, had drawn them closer together, and as Dives seemed to be as a motive power the one solitary luminary in Dick's solar system, much as he might have liked either of the girls during the term of his own self-constituted guardianship over them, they were now both alienated.

"If he was as wealthy as Cræsus, and unsullied as snow," Bianca thought, "he is such an inscrutable and designing man that I should fear him more than

I could ever love him, and I would prefer Jim without a penny to a slavery of that description."

"I am as happy as I can be, Millie," she said, in one of their many confidences. "See how unsophisticated Jim is, and how he has improved. Oh! what a man I could make out of him!"

So in silence these two young women worked on, keeping a brave outward appearance, and striving to avert harm from those they loved, yet both of them in possession of secret misapprehension, a lurking fear of possible happenings, unsolvable as yet from their knowledge of Cosgrave's character.

Neither of them told or even hinted their suspicions to Tom, but the dark shadow always hovering by lay over the daily events of their lives, and during many a sudden advent of recollection and surmise, saddened them even amidst their happiness.

There came a sensation for Millie and Bianca a little later which led to great uneasiness. The little son of the former and his small black playmate, Peter, had gone out with Mulga to hunt for opossums, and did not return for dinner. It was not until late next day, after all of them had scoured the country in various directions, that the trio returned in safety, stating that they had been taken in a buggy by Mr. Cosgrave to the cave. He had suddenly returned from town, where he had been selling more gold, a letter sent to Tom informed him.

Little Tom himself was loud in his praises of Mr. Cosgrave, who turned into a black man, with all sorts of wonderful fireworks to show him. He had been

extremely kind to him altogether, and the mysteries of the Cave had filled him with childish delight.

Cosgrave had sent his letter by Mulga in a cleft stick, and stated by it that he did not care to come into the station now at all, as he was aware of current affairs, and must be doubly secure and secret against the arrival of the new-comers ; but that he had paid in more money for Millie and Bianca. Also that he had acceded to a request of Tom's that he should accept no further partnership in the gold-mining venture, or pay any more money into the partners' account, and concluded by wishing them all health and happiness. He complimented Millie and Tom upon the amiability and courage of their child, and seemed to have taken a great fancy to him. There was not a word in the whole letter about Bianca !

Not long afterwards Tom handed over the station to the new purchasers, and with Jim and the rest of his family circle left for Sydney. They travelled all the way down with their own buggy and camping paraphernalia, taking many of their own horses, which Jim looked after and brought along.

Arrived at Sydney, Tom took a pretty villa down at Manly, and Jim bought the good-will of a livery stable in Sydney, where he broke in riding horses, and let out conveyances of all sorts, doing very well.

Tom established himself in a stock and station agency in Sydney also, going up there daily by steamboat. Then came news from Cosgrave that a further venture would take him away north-west for a year or so, and that Heseldine *père* had bought a selection in the Blue Mountains.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VENTURE OF HIS LIFE

“ Far to the Northward there lies a land,
A wonderful land that the winds blow over ;
And none may fathom or understand
The charm it holds for the restless rover.”

—A. B. PATERSON.

SIX months later Richard Cosgrave, in the character and guise of a tall, yellow Epai, save that he had a cartridge belt round his waist and was armed with a rifle, was sitting on the outside edge of a circular hollow in the middle of a thick scrub in the far north-west interior of Australia.

The tokens of his surroundings, for there were other swept-out circles in the dense timber, seemed to indicate the devastating power of willy-willys, or violent circular gusts of wind, which forcibly uprooting the trees at various times, had dropped them again anyhow. With successive seasons, grass and herbs had grown luxuriantly amongst the uprooted trunks, until summer had dried them into tindery matter, when a spark from a wandering black's firestick set light to the lot and made a further clearance. Nature was engaged in changing the face of the country.

Near to Cosgrave's seat now lay partly consumed and blackened trees, poising earthwards in distorted forms, as if crawling with gaunt limbs in various attitudes. The one he occupied looked like a vagrant black cricket of giant dimensions.

But he paid little attention to the weird shapes around him, because, of all men, he was least inclined to fancy things.

Whilst mad with Millie at choosing Tom Inglis, he had been utterly false to Bianca. He was thinking of the aid his savage mistress had been to him, for, with her knowledge and authority, he would never have reached the remote spot in which he now found himself. Moreover, she had told him a secret about this part of the country for which he would have risked death or disaster twice over, so that, take it all in all, she had done more for him in his own way than any living soul had done before. The scrub contained near by an old blacks' burial-ground with grown-over canoe forms in it.

Silver was what Eiya, the young woman who was with him, had told him about, and the whole country about him was full of it. "Myall Dicks's" vision and hearing through all this train of thought seemed to be the only outward senses exacted, for he was very, very still, but his eyes were wonderfully bright and watchful. It wasn't easy to notice him where he was sitting, but in his strong grip, and poised with both hands across his body, was the deadly weapon that could kill beyond striking distance. His face was very forbidding in its

aspect ; its expression seemed to hint at some disappointment. Here and there lichen-clad boulders of rock, strewn indiscriminately before his sight, in some places forming broken and piled cairns for the harbourage of many a large, swift-footed iguana or frilled lizard.

"Ten miles from the river," he growled inwardly, following his vein of thought. "This must be their old-time Bora ground. The fools! They pegged this scrub off for their rites and mummeries, here in this very spot, when I, and only I, know it for its full value."

His eyes watched straight ahead, keenly on the look-out for something, examining steadily every open glade and tree trunk.

"I agree with the tribe entirely," his running commentary went on, "about sealing up the knowledge of it to the white race, but what a kingdom I could have raised up hereabouts with that girl Millie! Had I known of this place of places before she married Inglis, I believe I should have made away with him on the quiet, solely on the strength of it, instead of trying to get her away from him when she joined him again. Confound his supercilious, cock-sure ways, and his outwitting me, of all other men! To think of that girl having the mark, and that alone being a sure and safe entry to me in this great venture of my life. It makes me well-nigh desperate when I see the possibilities of it amongst the natives here. I could have lived here amongst them with her, contented and happy, a sole ruler, as

far as I can see, and when I had accomplished all I wanted, all I can even now design, with her as my chief benefiting force, I could have taken her, the bride of my desires, out into the world again, with the complete satisfaction of making the other people who composed our part of the world before grovel at our feet because of our wealth.

“Not getting love in the exact fashion I prepared for, or hoped for, I shall now seek a bitter revenge upon her and her husband; and I will have it, too, in its very fullest measure. Before my planning and cunning scheming, those who stood in my way before shall fall, whilst I rise continually to gloat over their misery, paying them back slight for slight, injury for injury, their just and full allotment of misery for what they made me suffer.

“He is a long time following my tracks, to be sure,” Cosgrave reflected, “but I shall nail him the moment he crosses that patch of open ground yonder, and once disposed of, I have no one else to fear up here. So that I can leave this wily chief, who puts an embargo on his country and what is in it, with a full assurance that I can bring the sign required on my return as well as his requirements in coin of the realm.”

His eyes lit suddenly as with an inner glow, and springing to his feet like lightning, he turned completely round as he did so.

Creeping silently towards him from close behind, amongst the uprooted trunks, was the most appalling-looking object possible. It was only about ten yards

off when he fired at it, but whether it was a huge white-headed toad, or a bunyip, when the rifle spoke the creature sprang straight upright with a convulsive bound, gripping a tomahawk.

As the upright, unearthly figure tottered wildly about for a second or so, the arm that wielded the weapon was whirling like a windmill. Then the ghastly creature toppled backwards and lay still, shot clean through the heart from the top of the left shoulder, while in its fall the whirling tomahawk had torn up the ground and thrown particles of earth out of the rent it made.

"The Kurdaitcha—without the shoes," said Dick, stepping towards the dreadful-looking object, now still in death. "For a bit of bush-stalking, Mr. Douraval, this beats all I have ever heard of your wonderful powers. You must have located me from the top of a tree somewhere, and got round behind me on the wings of the wind. Had we met with equal weapons, you poor savage, I should be a dead man by now, for I made sure you were following my tracks. Where's the alatungá, or soothsayer, who put you up to this, I wonder? Hooked it for all he is worth, I expect. There will be no need for him to make any injilla by-play with my body now, though there are plenty of lizards in the silver ore boulders hereabouts to provide for the ceremony, if you had been successful.

"Thanks for your souvenir," he added, as he groped in the hole in the ground made by the tomahawk and brought to light a silver specimen,

so wonderfully wrought by nature that it presented the appearance of a canoe.

"Worth a good lot by its weight, I should say," he muttered, inspecting it curiously. "I could get a hundred notes for it as a curio. But, by God! is it fate, or is there a curse over this native feud of ground, or me, or what? The sign! and spattered with blood, too. What can it mean?"

"Millie was my first idea of this portent, but merely among the natives. Now I have failed with her, I get it again from a native and Nature, but splashed with blood! Bah! What am I thinking of? It was a fair fight, with the odds against me!

"If you hadn't been in such a mortal hurry to dig your own grave, Mr. Douraval," he continued, lifting the fallen tomahawk, "I should never have seen this little token, just after thinking how much it meant for me. But I know the ground is full of silver ore. It has been melted out of some very rich specimen of the lode lying under, or wedged in the roots of a burning tree, until the willy-willy shifted it again to the sand. But it's the most extraordinary coincidence I ever heard of!"

And he placed the silver canoe carefully in a digger's tin specimen box, which he transferred again to a pouch strapped on to his waist, from which he had taken it.

The body of the dead waddygālo was partly encased with white feathers. His face was covered with them, all except his eyes and mouth, and, following the tracks made by the crawling body

when it was alive, Dick soon came to the shoes of the Kurdaitcha vengeance rite, which were made of feathers matted together with human blood, and which he had taken off to drag the spears he had never used by his toes. Taking these shoes and nearer spears up, and carrying them back, with his eyes alert for any other contingency, Dick cast them down on the dead man's body, placed his rifle against his old sitting-place, and gathered great armfuls of brushwood and logs, which he heaped over the corpse.

When it was completely pyred from view, taking his rifle again he brought a large mass of tindery grass, which he thrust under the mass of wood heaped over the corpse, noting the direction of the wind as he did so, and with a lighted match set fire to the pile, as he threw the tomahawk into it also.

When he saw it all well ablaze, he walked quickly away with his rifle at the trail, following his own back tracks in the direction he had expected his opponent to come from.

"Before another tribal Bora comes off," thought he, as he walked along, "the wild dogs and willy-willys will probably have disposed of Mr. Douraval's bones, and no one will know except those most concerned." And he kept on his way until at last he reached the watershed of a beautiful river, with many silver-box bark gunyahs clustered on the nearest bank amid some fine trees. There, near one of the dwellings apart from the others, a fine-looking, almost white

young woman met him, with her beautiful long black hair loose and streaming down her back, her eyes alight and alive with affection.

"Did you find it?" asked Eiya, for such was the woman's name.

"Yes, I found the place all right. You were quite correct in your remembrance."

"I mus' have been 'bout ten year old when my mother got somethin' like rheumatism an' the people here drove her out to pass through there on our way to the Cave. And I remember that sparklin' stuff you call silver in the rocks. It was a big burial-ground then all about there; but that chief he no let you come in here without the sign on the arm. I never see a man like him before. There was an older chief here when I was li'l' girl."

"Well, my dear, I shall have to get the unwritten authority and power; but it's a nuisance having to go back just when I thought I had got everything right. We must be off this time on foot to where I left the buggy horses with your people. Douraval won't trouble us any more. It was a fair fight, but he was after me and nearly got me!"

She clung to him.

"He was dragging his spears with his feet. Came up behind. I made sure he would follow my tracks, and was looking the other way. But a sand-fly must have got up his nose, just at the last moment, and I heard him sneeze, else he'd have killed me for certain, for he'd have been on his feet in another minute."

"Then he would have killed me afterwards." She shuddered uneasily—"But oh, Dick! take care of that spirit that come out of him. He leave his spirit behind and taboo the ground to you if it was Kurdaitcha and you kill him. But perhaps it has gone into the stone, same as he said he would make mine go when I got into the Cave with you."

"To my thinking, it came out of the stone," mused Dick anxiously, for she was a prophetess in these matters. "Now, if I was to tell her that, I wonder what she would say!"

He showed her the silver canoe specimen.

"He dug it up with his tomahawk as he fell. It was all splashed with his blood, but I cleaned it off."

"Then you have let loose his spirit. It would have stayed there if you had left the blood. What totem feather mark did he leave on his back, Dick?"

"The snake."

"Then he left off the Kurdaitcha shoes to crawl and trail his spears with his feet. Well, the snake guard the canoe mark. You will have the bad luck, Dick."

"Not if I work my scheme all right, Eiya. We must be off to-night; I've no time to lose, and it's a long journey."

"Where you go, I go," responded the woman. "You shall be the King of this white tribe yet, Dick; but don't let the chief see the silver canoe. He would kill us."

Dick replaced the specimen in his pouch, and embraced the woman who had done so much for him.

"Go and see the chief," Eiya said. "Tell him nothing but that you will bring the sign on a live body next time."

And the tall yellow Epai went, taking his rifle with him.

The chief met him lugubriously, but watched him keenly. He was a tall, spare man, light-complexioned, but sun-tanned like the other natives who lived in the beautiful spot Eiya had disclosed. When Cosgrave turned away to go back to his camp, a caustic smile flitted over the chief's features, though Dick had told him no word of his adventure.

Before the morning came Cosgrave and Eiya had passed beyond the scrubby waste that surrounded their river paradise, by tracks known to them both, to camps where the rifle and bush knowledge brought food to them, and the small swag carried by each sufficiency of nightly covering to keep warm in by a moving blackfellow's fire—that is to say, a few sticks laid on the ground, not quite parallel but converging to a point, with the fire at the end of them kept slowly burning, and the sticks were shiftable so as to be able to pull them with one hand nearer their bodies if they felt cold when they had burned away from them. Three of these fires—one on each side and one at the feet—were as good as half-a-dozen blankets in the radius of heat they gave out to inured and naked bodies.

"What do I care for money?" asked Eiya, at one of their solitary night camps. "I no want dress when you turn blackfellow. But I mus' put it on

when we get the buggy. I love you more 'n money, or dress, or blanket, Dick."

Eiya made no toil of travel, for she was young, vigorous, and strong, though she had an elder boy and a girl with old Ua. Cosgrave, indeed, had often questioned himself as to whether he was not much better off just now with his savage mistress, more master of himself and his fortune, than if he had married Millie. Would it be really worth his while to carry out the schemes which he had secretly made in the wild Bora ground? Why not risk all with Eiya to guide him? No, he would not forego his revenge. His hatred for Tom Inglis made that impossible, and he could not get into the ground without the living mark.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ODD TRICK

“And lips that speak of the days of old
Wild is your flight,
Oh, spirits of night,
By strath and stream and grove.”

— DANIEL HENRY DENIEHY.

TOM'S villa was near to the ocean beach at Manly, where the translucent sapphire combers of the Southern Pacific came tumbling in with ceaseless melody.

Manly was growing then, but was not the popular resort it is now, when the people come down in their tens of thousands from Sydney for their holiday-making. In Tom's time, a quarter of a mile away from the Corso would take you into the virgin bush of Kuringai Chase, one of the loveliest parts of all Australia, with always a peep of the sea from any height of its wallaby-hunted rocklands.

A year or two had gone by, and Tom Inglis was making money, as he phrased it, “hand over fist.”

Then they learned from Richard Cosgrave that Heseldine had died very suddenly. “He broke up,” Cosgrave had written; “I expect it was through his former way of living having undermined his

constitution." He had left all the money he possessed, about £3,000, to be divided between Millie and Bianca, and Cosgrave intimated that he would see it paid into their banking accounts in due course.

But he never came down to visit them, alleging that he was off again up country immediately after the funeral. Heseldine had left his selection of land and his house to him personally. "I just got down in time to see him die," were the last words in the letter.

Thus Bianca Pearmain had perforce become a fixture with them. She was so helpful, cheerful, and energetic, so necessary to them in the management of their little boy and the house, that they could hardly bear the thought of parting with her, and so she had deferred her marriage with Jim up to now, but it was shortly to take place.

Cosgrave's absence did not trouble them in the least. They wrote to tell him of their latest doings, and there the matter ended.

Home teaching had given place to Tom's first ideas of a Dame's school for his little son, and his part was just now only to make the boy hardy and let him see how things were done. But he was a good swimmer for so young a child, so every morning before breakfast Tom bathed with him in the ocean breakers; in fact, the little boy seemed to be the very soul of his father's life.

Tom's stock and station agency in Sydney, of which he was the principal, necessitated his going up by steamer daily to his offices in Pitt Street, returning in the evening, but on public holidays he

took his family wherever they fancied. They had excursions by train to Mount Victoria, and by coach to Jenolan, where they visited the wonderful caves, which reminded them of quaint adventurous episodes in a similar place on far-off Kulbarunna—so much so that when there they could almost fancy they were going to act them over again.

There was very bright, congenial, pleasant society at Manly for the two young women even then in one or two places. They were asked out there, made a few friends, and gave pleasant little quiet "At Homes" and garden parties in return.

Inglis found his present life about perfect, and the old wild and hazardous times appeared to be fading away into the dimming distance—when one afternoon something happened which seemed to rob him of all that made life worth living.

The nurse who had been out with little Tom Inglis came back crying and half-demented, and not finding him at home, got worse. She said she had last seen the boy some distance ahead of her, running into the scrub, near the lagoon at the northernmost end of the Ocean Beach. This lagoon had an outlet to the sea when in full flood, and Tom and the child had often bathed there when the weather conditions were fine. The nurse stated, amidst her sobs, that she followed leisurely to where he had disappeared into the scrub, gone along the inner bank of the lagoon to the creek that supplied it, right on to a place where they used to get wild flowers, thinking to find him there. She wandered off the road again, calling

him by name and coo-eeing, hunting for him unremittingly until nearly dark, when it suddenly occurred to her that he might be playing off a childish trick by toddling home, and came racing there, to be worse confounded than before. She now became so speechless and hysterical that, as nothing could be done with her, the alarmed parents and Bianca, who had all just returned from boating and fishing in the inner harbour, went rapidly to the place indicated by the nurse, a mile away.

There, at a spot near the sea beach, where Tom and his child had bathed once or twice, they found, on a patch of grass just above the sand, the clothes and boots the little fellow had taken off, apparently for a swim. And this pathetic little bunch of clothes, as they carried them back, heart-broken, was all that remained to remind the frenzied trio of their loved one.

The lagoon in high flood had burst through the sand bar formed by the ocean waves, and a single glance sufficed to convince them all that the child had been swept out to sea and drowned in the heavy surf. They returned speechless and dazed, poor Millie crying and carrying the last sad relics of her little son, but on reaching the house it was wonderful how the mother suppressed her grief as she listened in amazement and terror to Tom's agonised sorrow.

"This is what I have got for taking him to bathe in the breakers," he almost screamed. "It is all my fault," and he broke down utterly. Then Millie's face changed suddenly and alarmingly, for in examining the little boy's clothes she had found

something which she was burning to tell Tom about, when the paroxysm of grief he had given way to seemed to affect his brain, and he fell senseless.

It was a miserable time for them all, for on coming to himself Tom rushed out into the night and spent the rest of it in wandering about the spot where he had found his son's clothes, and away round the rocks in the hope of finding the body. But no sign of it appeared, and he knew the reason. Just beyond the breakers the sea was swarming with sharks. He couldn't go home and tell that to Millie, so next morning, when daylight came, he went up to his work in Sydney by the first boat as if bereft of his senses. How he got through that night and day he never knew. He had not spoken or eaten anything since his fearful discovery, and he fainted outright when he did return home at night on learning that Millie and Bianca had gone away to Sydney during the morning, and had not since returned. They had left no message whatever, and a doctor was called in next day, for Tom's shock to the system had developed into brain fever. What had become of Millie and Bianca? No one knew.

In a lucid interval—for he was delirious and prostrated for weeks—he sent a message for Jim, who had been to Melbourne in the interim and was just returned, and when he came down he was amazed and horrified at Tom's condition.

It was not for three months that Tom, recovering, thought of sending Jim up to Heseldine's location in a faint hope that Millie and Bianca might have gone

there, but on coming back from that quest Jim said the place was locked up and deserted, and being an out location and lonely, no one knew anything.

When Tom came slowly back to strength, Jim, by constantly coming to see him, was a source of great comfort to him, but with regard to the extraordinary disappearance of his wife and her sister no satisfactory clue could be got by any reasoning.

It was as if a bolt from the blue had suddenly struck down Tom's household, and ended all aspirations of life for both himself and Jim Terry.

Rewards, notices, police work were of no avail. Only the bare facts remained, that the little boy's clothing had been found, that he had lost his life, and that the others had totally disappeared. Nothing could get over that. It was a nine days' wonder, then it faded away and was forgotten except by the two men most concerned.

"Jim," said Tom one day when convalescent, as he was seated with him in the verandah of his now deserted home, "I believe I went mad that night when I lost my boy. I have no recollection of what occurred here in my terrible agony of mind. Could it have been possible that I said or did something which may have frightened my wife and sister out of the house? But in that case, why didn't they write to you? Why didn't they leave some message for me?"

"Mr. Tom," replied Jim, laying his hand on the other's shoulder, and thinking his mind was still wool-gathering, "I have been intent over this case ever since it happened, and my impression is that

Cosgrave has spirited your wife and mine that was to be away somehow. I know he had designs upon Bianca. I should never have mentioned the matter to you at all unless things had come to this pass, but I've seen Cosgrave look at you, when you weren't aware, as if he could kill you, but I knew you could jolly well take care of yourself, and as to myself, I'm not afraid of that same either. It's Cosgrave's doing. I'm sure of it. But we can't catch him; he's off to No Man's Land with them."

"I don't know, Jim. That hatred of me all passed off, I believe. He was very straight about money matters, and took greatly to the child, but—" He paused.

"What, Mr. Tom?"

"He might have taken your sweetheart, got her to meet him somewhere, and my wife have gone to protect her."

"What could women do against a man like that, Mr. Tom? Once they were in his power, he would be like a born devil or a mad bull if they crossed him in any way."

Tom jumped up, and entering the house, rang the bell in the sitting-room. The parlour-maid came.

"Selina, I am going up to town by the next boat. Pack my valise. You will apply at my offices for board wages for yourself and cook; I may be away for some time, and I leave you in charge."

"Yes, sir;" and she set about her orders.

"Jim," Inglis returned, with a pallid face and shaking hands, "there's just a last chance. Pick out

four of your best horses and we'll ride up country to Cosgrave's selection in the Blue Mountains first. If we get no news there, we'll go right on to the Red Hand Cave at Kulbarunna. I shall start to-night."

Jim, burning with vehemence and vengeance, was only too eager to join him. At Cosgrave's they got no further clue, however, and prepared for the longer overland travel, for which they bought a buggy. At last they reached the old Kulbarunna station, and to their utter surprise found no one there either. It was totally deserted.

"Blacks too much for them, Mr. Inglis," said Jim. "They had no safeguard like us in Mrs. Inglis, and must have got sick of it. And that same Cosgrave that we are after, mark my words, has been at the bottom of this, and set the blacks against them until they cleared out.

"He could ring the changes round 'em easy as fallin' off a log, he could. Cut 'em out as if he was a stockman on a cattle camp! And we might as well try to hunt a flea in a standing patch of kangaroo grass as seek to catch him, or run his tracks, if he once got a start of us in the bush. Haven't we proved it? He has left no tracks, neither hearsay, sight, description, or anything else."

From which speech it might be seen that the old spot had brought a good deal of the original Jim Terry back.

They rode to the Cave next day, armed with rifles and revolvers and all paraphernalia for exploring systematically and thoroughly. But there was no

sign of life there, and they saw no blacks anywhere, not even at the old homestead.

The cave valley had all fallen in, and the outlet to it was almost completely blocked up. But, on going out again by the entrance cave, with the Red Hands all over it, on the very place that had once held the curious signature of John Solway, "The Man in Dungaree," it was effaced, and instead of it they read this notice :

"How about the odd trick ?

"MYALL DICK."

"He has the pair of them right enough, Jim," Tom cried out. "But who can trace or catch them now ? There are no tracks here ; there has been heavy rain since I was ill and the place is grass-grown, but should I come across him again anywhere in this life I'll kill him as he stands. I'll shoot that man dead, if I shoot myself the next minute."

"And if you don't, I will," said Jim, with emphasis, and they shook hands upon it.

They camped at the old station for a week and scoured the country around, seeing no one, not even a solitary blackfellow, and then they set off back to town. But work and endeavour there had no charms for either of them now, and, after a little deliberation, they sold out of their businesses and went over to New Zealand to seek in a new life in a new country that forgetfulness for a past which they wished to eradicate for ever.

CHAPTER XX

COSGRAVE'S NEW MOVE

"A People's House not built with stone,
Nor wrought by hand and brain alone,
But formed and founded on the heart."

—RODERIC QUINN.

SHORTLY after the tragic disappearance of Tom's child, his mother, and Bianca Pearmain, Richard Cosgrave accosted a little hunchbacked man, who was perched on a rock by the side of a gully which belonged to the selection in the Blue Mountains willed by Heseldine to him.

"There's gold in this gully, Mr. Langley," he said tentatively. "Most folks like gold, and as much as they can get of it, but it's difficult to get here."

The sides of the gully were very steep at this particular part, sheer rock and amply wooded, and Langley was working in the scarlet splash of waratahs in the foreground of a painting-block when Dick spoke to him.

With a head and face as handsome as Apollo's, Langley had the misfortune to have a crooked and bulging spine—the effects of an accident.

He bore this deformity with the soul of a great

idealist, which softened his misfortune, but nevertheless he considered himself quite an outcast from society, and turned to Nature herself for love and information. He was a queer little fortune-hunter also, business-like in all methods, and had managed to support himself very creditably ever since he had graduated at an orphan school in Sydney. He spoke three or four languages well, and could draw and paint beautifully. So he now studied the birds, flowers, and animals in the bush, and sold the pictures he made of them, meanwhile playing the organ for a certain church choir in the metropolis like a deformed angel with the face of a seraph; and he was no mean composer.

He looked up from his painting, his eyes glistening.

"When I've made a name for myself," he remarked, "and earn the money"—as if the mention of gold had attracted him—"I'll build a church up here somewhere. There's always the tone of an organ in these deep mountain gullies, with the sough of the wandering winds re-echoing amongst them. Ah! what a heavenly sonata I could compose if I only had the instrument I wanted here, and could listen and initiate with my fingers on the keys.

"I'd have the finest old-world, old-time windows in my church, to touch the aisles and pews with colour, and they should open for Nature's voices to flow in. Old, deep-toned glass like old precious stones. But I should want a large sum of money to establish this idea of mine, and I have never been able to quite fathom how I shall get it."

"Money?" asked Dick, attracted, amused, and divining ahead. "Suppose I had an idea which would make your scheme realise as easy as falling off a log? What would you say to £5,000 for a few years' personal service? What would you say to a share of what I have come across, what I have already got, in fact?"

"I should be very much inclined to go anywhere with you, do anything I could for you, in that case," answered the artist unhesitatingly.

"Yes, there's gold in this gully, in many of these gullies," Cosgrave replied, whilst regarding Langley keenly; "and you want gold to carry out your design.

"Down there"—pointing to the cool, blue-misted depths below them—"it lies. And some day it will be utilised. I seem to hear the clank and thud of the mining machinery of the future mines, when the gullies here will be worked somewhat differently from what a single man can manage it at present, with a tin dish, a pick, and a shovel.

"What's the good of scratching a rat-hole in these vast depths? A man will have turned over more than enough mullock to bury himself and all his family by the time he has got sufficient metal to clinker his uninviting little sheol of manual labour with. It wants steam power here, as well as localised capital and energy to dig, drive, and carry, to get the gold or coal, kerosene or quarry-stone out and up to the coach roads or railway lines. I like a big thing ready made, in the way of

mining, and I know of a venture worth a man's life-time. You serve me as I want you to do, and your reward is £5,000."

The social pariah, according to his own lights, gasped breathlessly.

"I'm on," he said, when he had recovered from his amazement. There was no hesitation possible after such an offer as this.

"Done," said Cosgrave. So the bargain was clinched, and they shook hands on it.

Langley's chief thought now lay in the direction of sketching material. What a trip it might be! What possibilities of flora and fauna might be developed!

After explaining his views to his employer, "How far is it from here?" he asked. "A very long way off?"

"Rather! It's in the Never-Never Land. And you'll never, never know how you got there until you eventuate. Come up to my shanty and have a snack."

A little half-caste boy was asleep on a camp-bed in Dick's house, which stood amongst a grove of black wattles on the grassy flat of a plateau, about a quarter of a mile away.

"Yes, he's mine," "Myall Dick" answered, with a laugh, after the meal was finished. "I'm a bit of a blackfellow myself sometimes, and I'm going to use him for a certain purpose you'll know of later on. His mother will be here to-morrow under disguise, for we have to go amongst the blacks to get this fortune of

ours, and I'll have to make you up also to pass as one. We'll drop the organ-playing for a bit. You'll hear that in a clump of she-oaks on a windy day, as we travel along, without the time and trouble of waiting for it, for we are off to-morrow, and all is arranged for. The mail coach will pass by on the other side of the gully in about two hours, and there's an easier path across from here than where we met. If you have any letters of farewell to write you had better commence straight away."

Langley's being a hunchback was good for Dick's scheme of re-incarnation, and he thought himself lucky to have come across him.

"About letters?" he asked again, for Langley was considering.

"Since my mother died," said the latter, looking at the child with fresh interest, "I haven't a soul in the wide world to bother about me, except for what they can get out of me. I won't trouble."

"All I want you to do is to educate that little son of mine," Dick averred. "I'll get you as much sketching material as you like for a year or two at the first big town we pass. We shan't go into them, as a rule, but I'll manage it. You'll need lesson-books, pens, and pencils. Also other things. Do you know anything about chemistry?"

"Nothing much, except a little in the way of Nature. I've invented a scent or two, and a tonic, from flowers and bark, but my alembics are simple and home-made."

At daylight next morning Dick Cosgrave and

Langley, with the half-caste child carried by the former, crossed the gully and got on to the coach road. Here a slightly-formed half-caste met them, with a fine American waggon, and a slashing, up-standing team of four horses which left mile after mile far behind them after Dick had taken the reins.

They kept clear of towns all they could, and their nightly camps were highly instructive. Skilled to bush-work they all seemed to be. Wood, water, and grass surroundings suitable for the horses and themselves being selected, the half-caste disappeared, giving place to a comely young woman, clothed in a skirt and blouse, who caressed the little boy, and cooked and kept the camp in order.

In answer to any chance interrogatory from swagman or traveller met in traversing remote parts, where a casual question deserved a civil reply because of the former's rareness, the answer would always be the same, "Overlanding."

When they reached the Kulbarunna, the waggon and horses disappeared, together with the half-caste, but the others, then consisting of a tall Epai of a yellow colour, a hunchback Kuriltai, and a little boy, went into the Cave of the Red Hand, and were lost to the world without.

"The industry I spoke of being near here is not known to outsiders yet," whispered the tall Epai to the hunchbacked Kuriltai, when they had climbed the ledge, passed downwards, and eventually stood in the vaulted chamber. "Ain't even tapped properly

yet. But I'm a god here, a cave demon! and here come some of my attendant sprites!"

The luminous green advancing collars and belts of light came close around them when the lantern was shut off, and one and all of the invisible wearers, seen a moment before to be like wild animals, flitted away again, to Langley's great astonishment. They went on and descended to the lower caves by the ladder, where, through all the subsequent proceedings, Langley was lost in amazement. And when, later, the hunchbacked Kuriltai Cosgrave had turned him into conversed with him in low, confidential voices, between alternate pipe whiffs, the latter informed him of part of his scheme.

"The agency of these blacks with all the outlying tribes will fetch and carry for us," Dick said. "I'm taking 'em all with me, and I've been to one place we are going to before with my wife, who told me about it. There were mule tracks, strange to say, from here to within some two hundred miles of it, and the man lost them one by one. We shall pass the skeletons. He wrote his name on the cave, John Solway, 'The Man in Dungaree.' It's a queer title, but it petered out at his grave. He must have got secret intelligence of the silver that I know to be there, and I'm glad he's dead. Of course the mule tracks are only visible here and there, but the skeletons of the animals remain, the same as his does on the Dry River, a day and a half's journey from the El Dorado. What a tale, eh? But the best of it all is that he has died with enough silver under him and

about him to buy a principality. We want neither horses, pack-horses, camels, nor waggons now, and go flying light, with just our firearms, carried by ourselves or the natives we choose.

"These cave dwellers, who are not half so formidable as the warriors of the tribe we are going to, know the road, because they were once turned out from the country which they knew the secret of also, but I have got a great influence over them, and am going to take them back. We will go slowly, as some of them—but only a few—will have to be borne on litters.

"The outside blacks will carry the cripples. This strong army will get all the comforts we require, slave for us, worship us. And you can paint and botanise all the way to your heart's content, for we shan't over-exert ourselves. All the natives about here, inside and out the cave, revere me as a god, because I know a lot about them, and can speak their languages. You ought to come in as Prime Minister by and by, through my influence, when I have introduced you to the half-white tribe I am going to. There's a very simple way of attaining that which I am going to tell you about to-night.

"I hear that the people who bought the station near by from the former owners don't care about it, and are going away because the blacks around here have been spearing their cattle a lot. Of course that's perfectly natural, and I don't want them to stop, as I have other reasons I will explain to you. After they go—and they start at once—this district will be left

to the kangaroos, wild dogs, and blacks again. All the better for my purpose to realise the opal which lies beneath and even above some ground on the run. That will take some years to develop, because fashion and dogma are against the stone at present, as unlucky. That will wear off, and I shall set the fashion again.

"These fools who bought the country lately never knew what they were living on top of. A squatter only looks for country as it shows on the surface to him, with water, grass, and wood. He doesn't look under it as a practical miner can. Then his stock eats the top off, or he is hunted out by the blacks, or suffers loss by drought and clears of his own accord.

"Now, about the Prime Minister business with the half-white tribe we are going to live with, where the silver is. Would you like a nice young wife, Langley? You can pick and choose here!"

The hunchback flushed unseen under his black skin. He had seen the waddygālo acolytesses! Here, then, he was no social pariah, and El Dorado lay before him.

"Very well," Cosgrave resumed, "wash the dye off, and you'll be taken for a white god."

Langley lay awake half the night musing over his new position, and when the daylight came, his mind being made up, five pilgrims passed from tribe to tribe with their escorting tribes on the outback line, far from roads, with great rejoicings.

The hunchbacked Kuriltai of the previous day had changed to a good-looking white man, although

his body was out of shape. He had found a kindred soul to his transformation in the dark underground cavity ; its loneliness and outcast condition had gone from him like a passing cloud, and his mate and he went out in the light like a pair of larks, singing for the warmth of the sun, the freedom of space. She thought nothing of his crippled shape, but looked within in veneration of his colour and superior attainments. From about them came the lilt of the organ wind in the tree-tops, the breath of the untrammelled air, fragrant, fresh, and free. And they passed on their way.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

“ But the waters of Hope have flowed and fled,
And never from blue hills' breast
Come back—by the sun and sands devoured—
Where the pelican builds her nest.”

—MARY HANNAY FOOT.

AFTER months of travel Cosgrave's special party of Kuriltais and picked waddygālos, together with Langley, reached a wonderful place lying in an oasis of grassed undulating country amidst outlying scrub and mountains.

When they had got through the thick, encompassing belt of forest tangle, on the outside of it, by wallaby tracks known only to the aborigines, and passed the ranges, they found themselves in such a magnificent tract of rolling downs, together with a broad, well-timbered watershed, that Langley, entranced with the outlook, thought at once of the Garden of Eden.

“Doon-a-bri—the place of the big trees,” his chosen mate said laughingly, pointing to the startlingly blue pools of water, the emerald grass and reeds, and the groves upon groves of all sorts of timber.

It was Elysian for the hunchback to turn and absorb slowly the entrancing views.

Here, he felt, was an out-of-the-world feeling of rest in all he saw, idealised with surroundings of absolute perfection bound up in himself, a white friend to talk to, a hinted fortune to be made. There were fifteen miles of well-wooded river flats, with, so Cosgrave said, a fine waterfall at the far end of this great opening in the hills.

This was one side of the picture, as presented to Langley. The other side he hardly knew at present.

But the oasis beyond the desert held other products of a living description than themselves, in a light-coloured, fine-looking local race of natives, and a drove or two of brumbies, or wild horses.

How the latter ever came to be there, when the place itself could only be approached through the wallaby tracks of the densely-grown scrub limit, no one could tell for certain. It could only be conjectured that the water had brought them there originally, and neither inhabitant, equine or human, seemed in the least degree anxious to remove themselves from such a charming interior, which was practically a naturally fenced-in run.

Besides the brumbies were also water-buffaloes, as tame and as accustomed to human beings as the horses.

The light-coloured tribe that had originated in this sequestered region—goodness knows how—from the necessity of passing a Kuriltai or two over its borders at times, had been apparently under similiar

laws to the other tribes dwelling outside their boundaries, but now, according to a compact made with the Chief of the almost white tribe, the original Kuriltai who possessed it were brought back, but isolated at the far end of the valley, where there were some caves, their original habitations.

But when Dick produced his boy and showed a certain mark on his arm, the fine and deeply-bronzed Chief of the dominant tribe led him forward to his kinsmen and proclaimed him successor to himself then and there, having first produced some weird chords from a large wooden instrument, half-clarionet, half-trumpet, which he seemed to carry as a badge of office.

The notes produced by this quaint-looking instrument had a peculiar effect. While not being violently loud, they gave the impression that they were capable of stealing through space to long distances, probably for the reason that the sound of them was so utterly unlike anything a human being or even an animal or a bird could produce.

"He is a cunning beggar, that Chief," Cosgrave remarked. "I never saw his equal before. That speaking trumpet of his gives a regular bunyip scare to any outsider. None but himself and his own tribe knows the power and palaver of it, because he talks to them with it. And they have got sticks with signs on them that talk in another unknown language, so that you can't get to understand what any of them may be up to. As for that confounded trumpet trombone clarionet of his he blows in his

gunyah sometimes and the sound waves come along the earth surfaces and crawl up your legs and shake them!

"I believe if one got that speechmaker from him, and knew the secret of it, his power would soon go. By the bye, what do you think of Doonabri, Langley?"

"Arcadia, Eden, Heaven!"

"It's a lovely retreat," resumed his interrogator; "and there are enough kangaroo, paddy melons, and nail-tailed wallaby in the outside scrub and mountains to snare or kill, besides emus and all sorts of other birds, fish and waterfowl to keep us going for years. The river flats can be cultivated and irrigated easily, and we shall have to build and civilise. No fear of interruption for years, unless a strongly-armed band of whites force their way through."

"The waddygālos or wild scrub blacks of this country keep this place like a ring fence, and they toe the mark outside the circle."

"Well, I told you about the silver. But I didn't let you know that there is, and always has been as far as I can make out, a very strong taboo upon it. There's enough silver in several places about here to make such a field as has not been seen since Broken Hill. Did you notice the Chief particularly?"

"Yes, but I never saw a native like him."

"Nor I either. No one knows the history of this tribe. There's no doubt they have a lot of white blood in them. It took me six months to get here;

it cost me a lot of money, all my brains, and as much as I could spare of legs and strength. Now, did you take particular stock of my wife?"

"I see what you mean," exclaimed Langley. "She has the look of these light-coloured people here."

"You're right. She's a direct lineal descendant, and therefore of the highest ruling caste. She was born away from this tribe, and seeks her proper leadership amongst them again; so that increases my prospects and my rights. I shall make you Prime Minister some day, if you do what I want you to do with my boy. My wife, I was saying, sprang from a descendant of these very people, who developed into a waddygālo ultimately, being taken away from here by a very daring young Combo waddygālo man who risked his life over and over again for her. He was a chief of his tribe and had great knowledge. So has my wife, Eiya.

"Well, this female ancestor of hers became a Kuriltai through an illness, and my wife, being a perfect child, was passed from the cave we have left to the outliers. It would take me a long time to tell you how I got to this place first, and what adventures I had in doing so, but the Kuriltai or cripples had the knowledge of the silver here, and I promised to reinstate them if they told me all about it.

"My plan is gradually to develop this local tribe by civilisation. When they become fairly educated they will probably be more on a par with the rest of the world in their love for the silver calf and its

metallic charms, and will want to utilise their treasures. Meantime, we are happy enough, you and I. Pass the word to the Chief here if you want anything from white sources, and you'll get it in due time from somewhere. It's done on foot at present, and there are no tracks beyond the outside scrub; so that messengers from here are absolutely secret in their goings and comings.

"Now, another thing I must relate is that these peculiar people are monogamists. There have been exchange marriages between themselves and the waddygālos by event or design, and that is why some of the waddygālos are lighter coloured than others. There was a certain belief or religion between the scrub blacks and these people many years ago, and as the scrub blacks are some of them Combo they brought the canoe mark from the south, upon which I am trading. You can see it in their graves.

"Now that we are introducing two extra strains of white blood into this half-white race, it will all tell in the future, and meantime there are plenty of strong, willing workers here to found our new republic, so the riches can wait, and they are worth it. What do you think of my scheme?"

Langley was astounded. The church and organ of his simple creed loomed nearer to him. With himself as tutor to this secluded race much might be accomplished. He would Christianise them, make them factors to his thought, build them up in truth, stability, and life.

"It's absolutely magnificent," he replied. "We shall all find employment. But how in the name of the Seven Churches of Asia do you assert your rights to it all?"

"Come along to-night and see," answered his companion.

Just at that moment a curious routing sound seemed to pervade the camp, under the river timber. It was followed by three combined, varied notes from the Chief's wooden fog-horn.

Twenty-five able-bodied men sprang up from where they were lounging about and disappeared rapidly to the south-east. They came back after nightfall, each of them handing a heavy leathern belt to the Chief, who collected them in his gunyah.

Then the trumpet sounded in a different manner, preceded as usual by the routing noise, which was deeper than an alligator's bellow or the routing of any sort of a bull. In response there was a general assembly around the chief's gunyah, and two thousand five hundred sovereigns were counted out into a strong wooden box, which was forthwith locked up and placed in a square building, where it was guarded afterwards day and night by two armed natives.

"The state chest, my money, and the key to your riddle," Cosgrave said.

"In touch with us on our journey up here, but out of sight, were several more waddygālo men, induced to act as my special bearers, through my power as Nargun, the Cave Deity. They halted at the outside boundary belonging to this tribe until the

outrunners of this Chief, who haggled for the price I pay, brought it in.

"I offered a lower sum before the prospecting right, but he threatened me with instant death if I dared to touch the district. I have proved a second right of entry now, both by my payment and by certain talking stones and sticks which the old Kuriltai Chief has brought, and exhibited to this Chief and one or two of his old men in private. My concession as to the money part of it seems to have quelled his former scruples, as he has apparently accepted it.

"But to none save those who bring the mark on a body, as my son bears it, or the re-incarnation of some dead ancestor, as you a white man do, for it means nothing less than that to any of the Kuriltai tribes, would permission be given to stay here. So say the signs on the stick and stone implements of pallaver and tradition. And from long study of tribal aboriginal customs, this Chief here is acknowledged to have understanding beyond all others. That is why I had to bring my boy, and I hope for great things, great events, after this Chief's death, even if not before ; but he's about my age and may last me out."

"It's one of the biggest and most daring schemes I ever heard of," thought Langley, as he turned into his bunk in his own gunyah that night, after an excellent supper of stewed wood-duck, served by his wife, whilst for bread he had little cakes made from wild oats, and a species of small bean. "I only hope

it won't be frustrated by some mischance," he added cautiously as he fell asleep.

Cosgrave and Langley, helped by the little boy, who, greatly interested, was backed by several other children of the tribe in fetching and carrying minor articles, were building houses some time later, whilst stalwart figures were enclosing ground and preparing it for cultivation, when suddenly the booming of the fog-horn trumpet began to sound.

Then Millie Inglis, Bianca Pearmain, Mulga, Leura, and little black Peter walked into camp. Millie went straight to Cosgrave, looked him seriously and anxiously in the face, opening a small jewel-box, and showed him the silver canoe specimen he had obtained after he shot Douraval.

"Do you mean to harm our boy?" she asked him breathlessly. "Is that the reason you have stolen him from us? Give him to me at once, and let me go back with him!"

"For God's sake put that silver specimen away," whispered Dick seriously. "It comes from their holy ground, and I've made no treaty yet for that part of it. I risked my life for it before, and you'll bring certain death upon us all now!"

With a bound aside he ran for his rifle, for the Chief was peering over Millie's shoulder, and all his followers were running to him armed with spears and nullahs.

In all her beauty of motherly love and anxiety Millie faced the Chief's darkening glances and bared her left arm. There was the true symbol!

Cosgrave's rifle was on a level with the Chief's forehead. Langley ran to his side with a shot gun. For some moments they menaced first one, then another of the threatening crowd of natives.

Then the Chief held up his trumpet over his head, and his fighting men stopped as if turned to stone.

He kissed Millie's hands with grave courtesy, bowed to Bianca, and then, to everyone's great astonishment, stepped up to Cosgrave and patted him on his back, saying, in a language no other white but the one he was addressing could understand:

"Do as you wish. When the real meaning of the sign comes to Doonabri the spell is broken. But *we* go. You have brought the cave dwellers back by agreement. They were driven away from here first before my time. It is our turn now to be driven forth by you to where you have come from."

"Stay," said Dick, looking anxiously at him. "Don't go; I need you."

For he realised how helpless he would be without the Chief's valuable aid. He couldn't work the silver with a tribe of cripples, and the Chief knew that as well as he did.

A compact was made between them after great palaver, and from the moment of its conclusion Dick ruled the light-coloured tribe as he had done the Kuriltai. But, for reasons best known to himself, he would not touch any of the silver zones he

knew of. Nor would he allow his new white captives to go, saying to them :

“You have both fooled me, as I have now fooled you. I’ve broke Tom Inglis’ life through your folly in coming here, and Bianca’s man’s also. I was pretty sure you would both come if I took the boy. You will recognise him if he gets lost again, Millie, as I have branded him with your mark, but you and Bianca are my prisoners. How do you like my revenge? Does it fit in with your own captious little sentiments as to your joint desertion of me? You can go and rule the Kuriltai now at the other end of this valley, but the boy stays here with me, and I’ll turn him out into the world by and by with lots of money, when I have spoiled his character, so that he won’t care a rap for either you, Inglis, or his blessed new adopted aunt.

“You made a big mistake, both of you girls, when you tried to play with me. I’m married now to a fine woman who suits me better than either of you, and we have a boy and girl of our own. But remember, you’ll be speared the instant you attempt to leave the people I have given you. Good-bye, both of you!”

CHAPTER XXII

NEW VENTURES

“And we may travel a weary way ere we come to a sight so grand
As the lingering flush of the sun’s last rays on the peaks of
Maoriland.”

—ERNEST CURRIE.

LONG years afterwards, having experienced many varying vicissitudes of fortune, Tom Inglis and Jim Terry were sitting eating cherries in a beautiful little sandy cove at the mouth of Endeavour Inlet, Queen Charlotte Sound, New Zealand.

A deserted, shingle-roofed cottage stood above them on a hillside terrace, and the fruit on the outlying trees near it was ripe, and very fine, not having been meddled with to any great extent as yet by the tuis and saddle-backs.

They were just inside Humbug Point, so-called from the baffling nature of the winds there, and coast mountains rose all around them. Forested hillsides were blue-green, even in the near distances, for New Zealand always simulates the colours of her own opawa, or haliotis shells, in her seascapes; and the great deep waters of the Sound were strangely opalescent with the same reflections.

The heavy timber at the basis of the big hills varied from black birch to matai, totara, red pine, and rimu, and cast denser green shades in some parts, but the spot where Tom and Jim were seated was brightly sunclad, and the ridge behind them golden with tussock.

From their position they could see past Resolution Bay, Ship Cove, and Motuara Island, away past Jackson's Head, over the glittering sunshot waters of Cook Strait past Cape Koemmaroo towards Terawhiti and the North Island, the serrated backbone of which rose blue and well-defined in the distance.

The great deep waters of the Sound and the Inlet were like a mirror, though there was a hint of a lingering south-east swell over the flashing waters of Cook Strait, and a wash on the beach at their feet.

There was hardly a breath of wind anywhere, and the gannets were coming down from aloft with an arrow-like fall, head and beak foremost, hissing through the still, clear atmosphere like white-hot aerolites.

The watchers could hear the startling plop with which they struck the water in many places, and see their snow-white, floating shapes re-appear like corks; and it was evidently a day of unwonted reckoning for many a silver-sided Picton herring.

The morning was lazily hot, and the two men were very tired and sleepy, for they had been rowing in a large open boat all the night.

Tom had been a broken man for a long time, but

Jim's patience, cheery assiduity, and influence had been a godsend to him, and through his personality he had recovered tone.

For many years past now the two had been together working hard in the open air. At one time it was shearing, at another gold-digging, rabbiting, splitting, fencing, saw-milling, or whatever else they found profitable, each determining to obtain fortune or independence ere they settled down. In this way forgetfulness had come to Tom, and to-day he and Jim were rather excited about the prospect of a new and enthralling venture, the possibility of which had lately been made known to them.

They had pulled ashore for breakfast, which accounted for their post-prandial dessert, whilst their boat lay hauled up on the sandy beach below them.

When their cherries were finished, they re-embarked, and pulled half-way up Endeavour Inlet, where, overcome entirely by the pleasant sun-heat and its refraction off the water, they shipped their oars by mutual consent, and lay down along the bottom boards under the seats for a nap.

About an hour later they were awakened by a sudden jar to their boat, and looking over the gunwale they saw, close to them, two laughing girls in a light skiff just beginning to pull away in all haste towards the head of the Inlet.

"The pretty pirates," remarked Tom reflectively, when they were out of hearing. "I expect they took our floating craft for a derelict, not being able to see anyone in it till quite close. They must have got a

bit of a fright. Probably they are the proprietor's daughters; they seem to be going the right way to his land. Let's give chase!"

They did so, but could not overtake the girls, in spite of all their trying, so at last they ran their heavier boat ashore at the head of the Inlet. Here, just beyond the beach, was a fine pasture flat, and the chimneys of a wooden house were to be seen over some brushwood.

The girls were on the beach waiting for them. They wore light-coloured print dresses and large straw hats, and were evidently sisters.

The new arrivals, as they landed, were graciously asked to come up to the house and partake of a cup of tea, which hospitable offer was thankfully accepted, and after a mutual exchange of laughing badinage about their wanting to get possession of the apparently derelict boat, which they quite frankly acknowledged, the father of the girls now advanced to meet them. He was a thick-set, black-whiskered man, whom the partners had met before in Picton, with reference to this location of his, and was now engaged in shepherding an antimony mine of great promise, which he had discovered near by. It was a remote and very beautiful spot where this settler lived, far out of the usual course for coasters and steamers bound up and down the Sound.

"Down, Barker, down!" exclaimed another girl, running out of the wooden house, as an aggressive black and white collie dog dashed forward, having nosed the strangers.

"My daughter Bertha," exclaimed the man, and, the dog becoming friendly, Tom and Jim doffed their slouch hats and were introduced to the girls' mother.

After tea and a welcome rest in the cool tenement, they went up an adjacent gully with the settler, Sanders, and he showed them blocks of antimony ore, scattered all over the place, half-covered with the earth, mineral collected in matrix veins, in blocks of stone or rock where the solitary prospecting pick and hammer had been at work.

Sanders affirmed that he had not yet found the main lode, but there was little doubt that it existed in a vast hillside near by.

Some roughly-smelted bars of pure antimony, for which he had used but primitive appliances, looked like dulled silver, and were strangely marked with the exact imitation of fern fronds which grew in abundance in the locality of the ore.

It seemed as if Nature had placed her sign-manual or hall-mark on the smelted metal as proof positive of her wondrous generosity to mankind. For under her prodigal growth on earth surfaces she had strewn and hidden away wages and work for a multitude of teeming millions yet.

They climbed to the half-way part of a saddle on the big hill where Sanders indicated a tunnel he had dug into some reddish-looking matrix which looked like cinnabar.

He explained there were two miles of antimony country, as far as he knew about it at present, and

he fully expected to cut the main lode when working it. The bush was very dense with undergrowth under enormous trees, but he had cut tracks through it in various directions.

After seeing so much crude antimony scattered about, Tom decided it was good enough for himself and Jim to purchase the right to work it, Sanders keeping a third share in the venture, as he only wanted money to back his experience.

The bargain at length completed, Tom threw all his energy and business talents into the new business, ably helped by both Jim and Sanders. It gave them all constant employment, and soon after its inception began to develop into a very paying concern. A large wharf was built, and tramways were laid down all through the bush, together with running baskets on steel ropes to get the ore from the hillsides. Steamers began to call regularly to take away the smelted proceeds from the retorts, houses were put up for blacksmiths and miners, and the Company was established and paying.

At last Tom, Australian-like, got restless, and went back to his native country, where he met Waters, and, wishing for more irons in the fire, the twain organised and fitted out a pearling fleet.

Then the Boer War broke out, and both of the pearling partners volunteered for active service with an Australian contingent, and eventually, as a matter of course, dropped across Jim Terry in South Africa.

CHAPTER XXIII

WITH THE PEARLING FLEET

“And some for the isles of the summer sea, afloat in the dancing heat,
And others are exiles all their days 'midst black and brown and white.”

—ERNEST CURRIE.

TOM INGLIS, “Many” Waters, and Jim Terry served their time in the Australian ranks until they were sent back to Sydney, where they bought a fine large fore-and-aft schooner, which they re-christened the *Pearl*, as an auxiliary and inspecting vessel to their other luggers, but Jim went back to New Zealand to look after Tom's interests, as well as his own, in the antimony mine.

With a crew of picked men, a navigating skipper, and a mate, the *Pearl* cruised on the northern coast from Broome, and picked up their fleet looking for new pearling banks.

One day, when inspecting the shell in the luggers, they had some words with a half-caste diver, one of their own crew, who was so light-coloured as to attract attention as to his nationality. Threatening him with punishment for some insubordination on

this occasion, he drew a knife upon Waters, and was at once laid out with a lightning-like blow from Tom.

This rebel against authority had always seemed to the partners to be brooding over, or plotting, something, and was, as a rule, either taciturn or quarrelsome. However, he was an excellent worker, and they were much annoyed at the disturbance, as they rather liked him, in spite of his stubborn ways. He had always been foremost in danger, and had on more than one occasion quelled disturbances amongst their mixed and coloured crews.

But now, according to an unwritten law amongst pearlers, his hands were promptly handcuffed behind his back round an iron stanchion in the afterhold. Somehow, however, when the schooner was standing well off the land to reconnoitre any chance discovery of pearling ground for the fleet, a matter in which Waters was much interested, he must have slipped the handcuffs at about midnight, for, a flat calm having fallen, he stole a dinghy towing astern and vanished.

A light wind sprang up towards morning, and later, at dawn, a furious willy-willy laid the schooner down almost on her beam ends.

After luffing well into it, the whirlwind passed by, without doing any great damage, and a steady breeze following, they kept on their way, until suddenly the fugitive was sighted signalling and pulling back to them from beyond their course.

He came alongside and surrendered. The dinghy

was hoisted to the stern davits and made secure. Then Tom asked him what he had got to say for himself. He had passed over, he said, about half a mile of pearl oysters during the night, and had come back to tell them.

There happened to have been a long, stout line belonging to Waters in the dinghy. It worked with leaden plummets affixed to a peculiarly-shaped wire trawl which, on touching the bottom, opened mechanically, and if only dragged for a few feet annexed all that came in its way.

There were seven large opened pearl oysters in the dinghy when the half-caste came on board.

"I meant to wait for a coasting craft or a steamer and clear out," he said doggedly. "But when I was tired and loafing about on my sculls, the colour of the water changed, so I chucked the scoop over, as I knew I was over a bank, and got these."

Here he produced two very large pearls, not far off half an inch in diameter.

"I don't owe you much for handcuffing a free man," he resumed, "but there's my duty to the fleet to look at, besides, perhaps, some other things, so I came back to stand my punishment."

"Put us on the ground, man, and we'll say no more about it," exclaimed Waters impetuously, taking a rapid bearing by compass of the direction the half-caste had come from, and the course of the schooner.

"That's the talk now, eh?" Curio replied, with a sarcastic smile. "Suppose I do help you? In that

case, will the pearls I brought back be my own? I should like to buy a lugger and start a crew under my own orders."

"We won't dispute it; you found them on your own."

"I wouldn't have come back at all," the half-caste asserted, "but that man there"—pointing to Tom—"saved me from the crime of murder. I had plenty of time to think about it last night. I'd have knifed you, Mr. Waters, the same as I would have settled a snarling dog, because my blood was up. Well, it's had time to cool, and I've come to the conclusion to act differently. But because a man has got a touch of the tar brush on his outside skin, I suppose you think he can't feel, eh?"

"I could be a real friend to you if you would let me, but I can't stand winks and grins, and borak being poked at me every day, with your 'Curio' here, and 'Curio' there, and a snigger or two from others, just because you understand nothing about me, and think you know all."

"How did you get to talk English so well?" replied the unabashed Waters. "Why don't you talk Kanaka, Japanee, South Sea Islander, or even Dago? Where do you come from when you are at home?"

"Never you mind," snapped the half-caste. "That's my business, not yours. A dog can learn, I suppose? A put-upon dog's got sense, eh? I may be as well-born as you are, mind!"

Then, as Waters' really genial personality over-

came his scruples, the half-caste pearler took his proffered hand and shook it heartily.

"We're quits," he said, "and I am your best friend on a pinch from henceforward. Your death might have scragged me but for Mr. Tom's little tap. It's pretty strong where that's brewed, eh? I like a man who uses his fists well, but I'm a born devil sometimes when I'm roused. I suppose it's in my blood and I can't help it. Shake hands, Mr. Tom, though you didn't give me time to put my own up a bit ago; but I was in the wrong and am sorry for it."

From that time forward Curio was a devoted ally to both Tom and Waters. His all-night tossing in the boat, a compunction about quarrelling with men who had stood by him and with him ere this, aided by an insight into the consequences of murder, had done much to sober him from his storm of passion. But, though the schooner beat close-hauled from where she was in the direction noted by Waters, and made several tacks to windward in a failing wind, they could not find the pearl oyster bed over which the half-caste had drifted. So they took the sun again, and made a note of the supposed position in private, hoping to find it at some future time.

The pearls were so large, however, so wonderful, that Tom and Curio soon afterwards sailed for Adelaide by the southern steamer, where Tom eventually sold the larger one at his own price, £650, for the benefit of the half-caste. But the latter would now have nothing to do with the

money, insisting that the proceeds should be placed to the benefit of the Company.

It was a German buyer who took the specimen at Tom's price, knowing he would make double or treble on it. Who gets the justifiable present-day profit? Certainly not the Australian pearler, who has all the risks. Such were Tom's thoughts as he placed the notes away in his case before banking them.

"It is not that I want riches, Mr. Tom," Curio scornfully observed. "I'd sooner do my duty than plank down those notes for my own benefit. I've no desire for money beyond what I can fairly earn, and I spend that pretty quick when I am ashore. I've seen the result of riches, and they have damned me off the face of the earth ever since I can remember. But what's the good of talkin'? Anyway, I've lost all I valued in life through too much money."

Tom was much astonished at this philosophy, and tried to draw him further.

"It'll keep. Perhaps I'll tell you some day," he said. And nothing further could be got from him.

In two or three days they joined the P. & O. liner *Australasia* at Adelaide, Curio in civilian clothes easily passing muster for an extra-bronzed white pearler amongst the saloon passengers, and—at Tom's suggestion—under the name of Mr. Smith, as nothing would persuade him to give his real name.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN WITH THE MARK

“ But now from snow-swept Canada, from India’s torrid plains,
From lone Australian out-posts, hither led,
Obeying their commando, as they heard the bugle’s strains,
The men in brown have joined the men in red.”

—JOHN SANDES.

THE big liner to which Tom and his new *protégé* attached themselves on her homeward trip had originally come from Sydney, and Tom found his company very pleasant. They were clannish and chatty in the smoking-room, as Australians always are, and some of them, having made money, were going “home,” as they called it, to various parts of Great Britain. But more than a moiety of those there assembled were active and strenuous workers in their own land, not speaking much about it, either, except to intimates, because they were on paying speculations, and Australians nowadays have learned to keep these things quiet.

There was a good admixture of bushman and civilian, with a knot of pearlers—the latter with a peculiar look in their eyes, a look as of men who had peered into the visage of fortune and of death at one

and the same time. Tom knew some of them, and talked with them about the wild life up at Broome, which he had realised for some time, and where every man who controls the dark-skinned crowd of workers there is a hero in his own right.

Three parts of the saloon passengers were bound for Fremantle, the rest would keep together until the Indian and Continental passengers joined them at Colombo and Malta.

But with their arrival there would hardly be the same amount of consequential snubbing administered to the Colonials as in the early days, when it was their common fashion of ignorance to regard Australians as no-account people, or the sweepings of the convict ranks. But these haughty and self-sufficient critics reckoned thus before the Soudan, China, and the Boer War opened their eyes, and now they would be in the minority vastly, and rather unclassed, if not in their own eyes, in those of the Colonists.

Running across the Great Australian Bight, Tom found it very strange to think how, from the early beginnings of his life, things had altered in the after years for his own land. He thought much of the great possibilities and probabilities of his native country out there to the northward over the big ocean cradle of the blue Pacific.

That marvellous land of his, so beloved, so vast, so unpopulated in its unknown interiors, so comparatively untouched on its enormous stretch of coast line. He was musing altogether pleasurably

on the starboard side of the vessel, his face turned northwards, solely about Australia; of her first tender tones to him from his own boyhood in Sydney to the present time of his life; of the marvels of her lands, her flowers, her minerals, her precious stones, her future development; of her free, almost unexplainable energy and health given to all her children.

Who could compare the wild-looking, rocky, kopje-strewn barrenness of South Africa with Australia's forested pastures, he thought, her sea-girt shores, her wonderful and ever-changing scenery, except in the fact that many of South Africa's expanses were not unlikely to be treasure lids of Empire also? And out there to the north were limestone cliffs undeveloped as to their certain neighbouring treasures, where the coal and kerosene and gold of their inner and outlying riches lay as yet untouched beyond them.

"A penny, a fresh one from the Mint, for your rapt ideas, Mr. Inglis," rippled a young-looking lady, as she leaned on the taff-rail beside him. "I thought you were in a trance with them; so absorbed, as not to be even aware of my presence."

"They were of my country out there to the northward, Mrs. Somervil, and I beg your pardon for my reverie."

"Do you believe in your country?"

"Firmly and ever, madam. Pessimists, socialists, immoralists, or Empire-breakers—they are all one—in the Old Country, always ready to disbelieve or upset our affairs because they know absolutely

nothing of them, even if it is pure loyalty without a pecuniary motive, cast a slur upon our blood-brotherhood, a sneer upon our country, declaring the popular fallacy of some corrupted individual who had neither heart nor brain, that our birds have no song, our flowers no scent, that Australia is a howling wilderness, the bush a waterless desert, a gloomy, sombre, desolate, melancholic place, a phase of it which I have never been able to see personally, and I know it well. There are those who have long belittled Australia, everything and everybody connected with it, until all said in England against it is accepted as gospel, unquestioned gospel, and with no bad grace, either, as it is somewhat after the fashion to have a down on the Colonies.

"Until quite lately they believed that we were descended from convicts, and telegraphed to us about our 'birth-stain.' They forget, as usual, that they first dumped their own manufactured birth-stained criminals upon us, until we objected. But we are not in the habit of forgetting facts, especially if they are foisted upon us the wrong way about."

"Surely they hardly think as they did — now?" suggested the lady, "after your country's behaviour in the Boer War? Has it not made them think a little of what Australians are, and will be?"

"I'm sorry to say some of them still cling to the old heresy," he replied, gazing at her admiringly.

She was a pretty Englishwoman with flaxen, curling hair, a petite, yet full figure.

Furthermore, she was a widow, alone but for her maid, childless, and reputed wealthy.

"It takes just one second for a heresy or a hearsay to get into an Englishman's brain," he continued, "but a century of object lessons to get it out again if it happens to be wrong. The English people should travel more to their Colonies, help to colonise them, learn our geography and manners, observe for themselves more than they do at present. They would find that constitutionally we are more English than the English, more Irish than the Irish, more Scotch than the Scotch, and more loyal than all the people of the Old Land put together.

"That comes, of course, from our less-confined borders of penury, and our attachment to the Old Land itself, its old traditions of push and valour.

"Australians seem to have a brighter, brisker nature than our congeners of the Old Country, but we muddle up, to some degree, naturally enough, when they muddle up, and are forced to go slow and take rebuffs and loss of prestige, whilst they stay in the Cobden back ages, and run away from any nation that shows a bold front.

"The British button up their pockets now, so we are going to retrench, pay up, and work for ourselves. I await the coming era of Australian discovery, Australian science, and Australian work. . . . But permit me, Mrs. Somervil, to offer you my arm for a stroll round the deck."

And off they went, and presently the lady drew his attention to a certain quiet, khaki-clad figure

reposing on a chair below them on the orlop deck near the chief engineer's cabin. He was sound asleep, and there were a pair of crutches propped against him.

"I hear he is likely to get the Victoria Cross," remarked the lady. "Grant is his name, they say. Oh, how I adore valour! He was wounded ever so many times in the Boer War, and nothing short of absolute crippling stopped him from going on fighting. He is a countryman of yours, Mr. Inglis, I hear, so you should be pleased."

She further informed Tom, who had not noticed the khaki-clad figure before, that the father of this South African hero was with him, but was totally blind, and had not been out of his cabin; that he was attended by a servant, but whether Moor or Negro, according to her English ideas, she had not been able to determine.

The steamer did not get into Fremantle until some days later, and Tom, being up beforehand to get a whiff from the coast, saw one or two pearling luggers after they passed Rottnest.

He smoked a pipe after his morning cup of tea, and was about to take his bath preparatory to breakfast when he noticed young Grant hobble painfully out of a lower-deck cabin on his crutches and, supporting himself against the bulwarks, gaze long and wistfully at the passing low shores.

"Poor young fellow," he thought; "it's a type of face I seem to know. Where can I have seen him, I wonder. Grant? The name seems familiar, too."

He took a turn or two on deck, and then, going below, was soon revelling in his salt water bath. When he emerged from it the crippled hero was managing, as best he could, his ablutions in the adjoining bath-room. Then Tom recognised him; he was a young Australian who had taken a prominent part in a night attack in South Africa, and whom he thought had been killed, as he had seen him fall.

"So he got clear with his life after all," was his inward comment, as he went up to him and introduced himself, at the same time expressing his delight at his safety.

"My horse was shot at the instant of my start," young Grant declared. "In the upset I got my leg and ankle broken, and couldn't move from under him. I heard three more bullets strike his body and got two also, one in the already crippled leg. Then the Boers came up and got me out. They treated me very well, or I shouldn't be here now.

"It's deuced unlucky for me, as I have other business to attend to. But I expect they will put me fairly on my legs when I get to England or France. As long as I can walk about without crutches I shan't feel it so much. Fortune of war old man, mustn't complain!" And, steadying himself on his crutches, he began to roll up his pyjama coat-sleeve.

Tom volunteered assistance with all the cheery words he could think of to back up the young fellow's pluck and resignation, noticing in one

sudden flash of recollection and amazement, during which his mind had gone back years, the same mark his lost wife had borne, on the arm of the young soldier, and in the same place!

He finished his breakfast later on with the determination of finding out from the young fellow the history of the mark, but before he could make a search of him he had gone ashore with his blind father and disappeared.

During the remainder of the day he was monopolised by Mrs. Somervil at Fremantle, and from her he learned that the crippled hero and his father had gone to Perth. She, much to his annoyance, kept him by her side, to the exclusion of everything else. Then they learnt that the mail steamer was to sail again that evening, contrary to general expectation.

Tom being obliged to tranship his baggage to the coastal steamer for the North, as soon as he could get off duty, set about the work, but in the bustle, confusion, and haste, the big liner sailed without his seeing young Grant again.

It was, therefore, in anything but a good temper that he at last, tortured in mind and thoroughly tired out, flung himself into a deck seat on the Australian boat by the side of his henchman. Then all his ideas were unstrung afresh by Curio's set face and revelation.

"I said one day, Mr. Tom, that I might tell you my story. Things have occurred since we left Adelaide that make me want to tell it now. So you had better fill your pipe and I'll begin."

CHAPTER XXV

THE BURIED PAST

“For we must saddle up and ride
Towards the blue hill’s breast,
And we must travel far and fast
Across their rugged maze
To find the spring of youth at last,
And call back from the buried past
The old Australian ways.”

—A. B. PATERSON.

THE moonlight flooded the undulating expanse of ocean with the glittering sheen of silver as the coasting steamer turned up the West Australian coast, and Tom became more and more tortured with past reminiscences and present uneasy surmise as the half-caste pearler’s life-story unfolded.

“You see, Mr. Tom,” he said, “I’ve been bred up in the bush, a white man’s son, as no doubt you’ve guessed by my colour long ere this. Now, that young crippled fellow in khaki, the man with the crutches, the man who is going to get the Victoria Cross, who has gone away in the *Australasia* is my future brother-in-law—that’s to say, he’s engaged to be married to my sister, and that blind man, who is said to be his father, isn’t his father at all, but mine.

"What's the matter, Mr. Tom, are you ill?" he asked sympathetically, for his companion had given a groan and dropped his pipe on the deck.

Recovering himself with a strong effort, Tom replied :

"Hardly ill, Curio, old man, but the young fellow you speak about might be, from circumstances I can hardly yet disclose, or even attempt to grasp, the son I lost when he was a little boy. Up to now I always believed he was either drowned or taken by a shark down at Manly, near Sydney."

"Good heavens!" gasped Curio, "you surely don't know what you are saying. It can't be true—and yet—did you get a touch of the sun ashore, I wonder? Stay a minute; I'll run and get you a drink."

"No, sit still and go on with your story. There's a mystery in my life and in yours you seem to have the unravelling of, and the first light you have thrown upon it struck me rather hard, that's all. Who is the blind man that you say is your father? What is his name?"

"Cosgrave is the name I have known him by since I was a kiddy. Dick, my mother always called him."

Tom's heart gave a violent bound, as he remembered his vow to kill this man. And yet he had only been friendly to his son.

"Then in travelling under the name of Grant he has something to conceal?" Tom asked; "and the young fellow in khaki is not Grant or Cosgrave either?" he asked anxiously.

“Not near as much as I am, but you listen a bit, Mr. Tom, and it will all come out. You will remember I told you I didn't care for riches. I have pretty good reason for hating wealth, because that blind man, my father, is as rich as he well can be. He kicked me out for quarrelling with that khaki fellow when he wasn't a cripple, and we had a row. My father actually struck me! Now he's stone blind by an accident with dynamite. Oh, my God, and before he struck me I thought him the best man in the world! I hadn't seen him for years until I caught a glimpse of him in his cabin. I kept clear of that crippled chap all the time on purpose, because I didn't want to meet him. He has always been put above me, and that's why I hate him. Neither my father nor he could get about much, or take their meals in the saloon, and my poor, blind father couldn't see me, so it was easy.

“Perhaps father's loss of sight came on him for striking his grown son, who had never done anything but care for him as a son should, but I'd have knifed him or speared him, or his favourite either, after he hit me, and laid about to do it, but mother found it out and told me to go away and never come back. But I'm going back now, Mr. Tom, whilst I have the chance, and must cut the pearling when we get to Broome. No one knows the way to where my tribe lives but me, and I am going there to see mother again, and have a revenge that will cry quits with those from whom I have suffered injury.

“I happen to be next in succession to the present

Chief because of mother, and the tribe likes me on that account better than the crippled chap, who is pure white and my father's choice, but they won't interfere with what father says as to his succession as long as he is there.

"I suppose father has gone to England to see if there is any chance of getting cured of his blindness. He never seems happy unless that fellow is stuck close against him.

"I believe, as things have turned out, I've only to say the word to one or two there at my tribe's place to drive out that fellow and his backer, although he is my father, when they come back, or to take my tribe away with me to wander over Australia until we have got a better country to live in without the drawbacks they have created.

"That black man who looks after my father is an aboriginal of another tribe. But he knew me and tipped me the wink and some information. That crutch-carrier fellow wouldn't rule where I live, or ought to live, but for the mark he has got on his arm. He can't rule now as a cripple, and that's where I come in! I have found my inheritance, and I am going to claim it."

"That mark on his arm is exactly what drew my attention to him on board the *Australasia*, and why I thought it possible at all that he might be my lost son—but it's maddening me," interrupted Tom, moving restlessly about in his seat. "How are you going to get to your own country?" he asked, temporising, for he could see young Cosgrave bore

him no ill-will personally, in spite of his hatred for his supposed son.

"Well, there's too many white men knocking about the back country prospecting for gold, on bicycles and motors, to prevent one being spotted if one is supposed to be on the same lay as the other whites. I shall colour myself black, Mr. Tom, and go on foot as a blackfellow, as I don't want to be traced."

"Would you take Mr. Waters and myself? I should like to go unknown also, and we might be of use to you."

"Wouldn't I, Mr. Tom! Wouldn't I do anything for you? You've always treated me as a gentleman since that knock-out blow you gave me, but that was for my own good. You try me and see. I'm the only one who *could* show you the way. You and Mr. Waters can come with me out of the aboriginal camp at Broome. Our country lies in the north, far east of Broome, and south-west of the Roper River. I've friends all along the line, all lines. All aboriginals are my friends. I know, or they know, all the nammah holes, rock holes, springs, native wells, creeks, and rivers, how to get food, how to delude the whites.

"When I have made you up as blackfellows we just vanish out of our world at Broome and no one the wiser. We can be far away next morning out in the bush, though if we were to walk about the town all day we wouldn't be recognised."

And young Cosgrave leaned forward as if struck with a sudden thought, clasped his hands tight over

his forehead, got up and paced the deck for a while. Then he sat down again by Tom, saying :

"I can see the hand of Fate in it, and it is somehow against me yet. I can take you into my tribe, Mr. Tom. But I am not sure that I can get you out again for certain, unless I take my tribe away with me."

"Who's to stop us getting out again if we are armed?" queried Tom incredulously.

"Because in that unknown land where I come from there is silver enough to make a second Broken Hill of it. Silver enough to set all the working miners, and smelters, and engineers, and financiers, and desperadoes in Australia racing for their lives to see who would get there first. Silver enough to mean the banishment and extinction of my entire tribe under a new white rule. Silver enough to make a stranger man's life sacred only as a prisoner, and silver enough to compass his instant death if he set his foot one inch beyond our boundaries if once he entered them.

"No, Mr. Tom, you wouldn't get out of that place alive if you had Mr. Waters to back you, as well as myself, and we were all armed to the teeth. You could never find your way there, for the road to it is a blackfellow's road, a blackfellow's country, a white man's death country. White men leave their bones outside our ground ; and I've seen them there."

"I'm bound to go," Tom said. "Will you take me and Mr. Waters if he is willing? I'll risk all penalties."

"Of course, but when you get to where I will take you, Mr. Tom, if you cannot get out, or I cannot get you out, what will you say to me? I've given you fair warning."

"I'll go, if Waters doesn't," Tom replied. "I want to see your father when he comes back, for I know him well. I think, too, that he will remember me."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE EMU GIRL

“ And hither, with the coming of the dark,
Thou comest, and the night is full of stars.”

—DORA WILCOX.

WHEN Tom Inglis and young Cosgrave got to Broome again, and all the probabilities and possibilities of their project had been carefully disclosed to Waters, the latter, as usual, put the whole affair in a nutshell, discounting their plans with practical common-sense additions of his own.

“Cosgrave’s propositions are the only ones with any chance of success from here,” he dictated. “But—we have not found the pearl bank patch he discovered yet. Therefore, Tom, that being a nest-egg for the future, we have no need to make fools of ourselves in this locality, and as I always like something to fall back upon, we will ignore the supposition that we are speared, knocked on the head, or shot, in regard to our future efforts to return.

“For my part, however, if there is a sporting chance that we shall have to disappear from society altogether, both now and evermore, for goodness’ sake

let us do it in dramatic style from somewhere else than here, where we are beginning to be so well known.

"Now, I happen to have a journey already arranged for, as far as locomotion goes. I was going exploring again, when my spell in town became due, intending to traverse a certain bee line of my own right through Australia. Well, that line was from west to north-east, from coast to coast, in a high latitude, to prove my Torres Straits flock pigeon, seed-carrying theory.

"Emus might also be a cause, as they get over almost incredible distances with great speed. And a long, swift run from water to water is nothing to them. But my theory can wait, with this great chance of a lifetime before us. I never knew of anything equal to it. It is worth trying, solely on Curio's distinctive evidence."

Beyond young Cosgrave Tom had not mentioned his suspicion, and he had told him not to speak of it. He hated to refer to the past at any time.

Tom and his old friend Waters were seated alone in the *Pearls* comfortable saloon when this discussion took place, and where many a trophy of voyaging was exhibited around, from a stuffed flying fish leaping out of a glass sea, in a very natural way, although confined to a varnished case, to guns, rifles, rugs made of slaughtered animals, scrap-books of photographs of birds, beasts, flowers, landscapes, native weapons, etc., arranged in various convenient panels and recesses, and all made nautically secure. In deck-lashed cabinet drawers might have been

found solid gold specimens, gold in the quartz, pearls, and pearl shell, opal in blocks and flakes, rough sapphires, diamonds, stream tin, garnets, kaolin, copper ore from the Burra, silver from the Barrier. It was a comfortable bachelors' sanctum and museum, and where is lonely man more intelligently satisfied than in association with Nature and her great gifts of exploration and travel? Why don't the English yachtsmen go a-cruising throughout the Empire and find new marvels and material for themselves? The best spirit in man is the exploring, developing spirit, the best bride from youth to manhood, even onwards as a guide to a nation's progress and prosperity, is Nature's wide and bounteous self.

Both men had been content to share her with the other so far, the only jealousy aroused showing forth in a kindly emulation as to which of them could annex most treasures from her willing hands.

"We'll lease the fleet," continued Waters, "all but this schooner. We'll go down to Fremantle in her. I want some West Australian immortelles, scented black boronia for this cabin and my pressed flower books. I want outside mineral, all the forms it is found in. I want Murrin and Diorite gold, and for these purposes expect to find a secret motor car of my own awaiting us at Fremantle, which will eclipse anything yet heard of. She, or it, is to be named the *Flying Fox*, and we will be the flying foxes of her crew, as diplomacy will evidently be required. We shall give out as table talk to the

good folks in Fremantle that we merely mean to test our motor car and see for ourselves whether it is possible to cross Australia in it. We've got roads and camel-pads to the outside districts, and are bushmen enough to choose our direct line anywhere under the sun.

"Cosgrave knows the road to his place. Better than that, he knows all the outside intricate black-fellows' paths, and is hand in glove with every aboriginal and half-caste besides, to our great and lasting advantage. We shall get there quite easily and unknown.

"The motor car is from an English firm, a Napier, built to my own specifications. She makes drinking water for us on our journey. She goes by electricity, and generates it as well. She is as high set, but longer and broader, than an Abbott buggy, and has no end of stowage room. I have double and treble outside, inside, and underneath compartments for petrol storage in the build of her, and parted with a small fortune so that she should be completely up to my requirements. When we are ready to start, the schooner will go north to Port Darwin to await orders.

"'Urgent private business' will be the reason I state to Robbens. He knows me, won't talk, and is competent to look after our interests if we give him full powers and directions. There will be no inquiry, no relief expedition, no coroner's inquest, even if it should be required by ultimate Fate."

Young Cosgrave here entered the saloon, and spoke about the country bordering on his own.

“We know the secret of it, have good cause to know it,” he declared; “but we don’t want others to know it. All white men who have ever reached our outside whereabouts have been found dead or dying of bush madness and thirst. We dare not utilise our discovery there, or any discoveries, and they are great ones, for fear of being driven out of our land by an influx of strangers. All the way along the Dry River is water—there is water all over Australia, if you only know how and where to look for it. The water in the Dry River comes from springs in our own country, and washed the channel out long ago.

“It was a boulder river once, like the plains about it, but since then the land has been forming, and the bed of the river is filled up. Shifting sand in the desert—making willy willys—has been covering up everything, moving over the earth, so that the drifting material would in time cover even a hut.”

“Then the filling of the river simply proves to be from plain indication a help to life and vigour which a siphon pipe would bring to the surface, and the lost men perish without having invoked it!” snapped Waters impatiently.

“Bah! half the bush terrors come through the imagination and ignorance of a man separated from his kind. The mirage, of course, indicates water somewhere, not so very far off either, even if its illusory visage shows river timber high in air on a treeless plain, or foretells it in the phantom pools about your feet. Providence ever holds out some sort of kindly beacon to the perishing wayfarer, if they

only had the sense to avail themselves of it. But nine in ten human beings have no idea of water *under* the earth, if that earth is only a dry surface to an eyesight far removed from a pump handle or a water tap.

"However, there is nothing better for a motor car to travel on than the filled-up bed of an underground river, eh, Tom? But here are Captain Robbens and the crew coming back, so we had better dry up, as this conversation concerns no one but ourselves."

Some months afterwards the speaker was laying down further opinions of the illusion country at first sight, from his motor car.

"In due time these supposed deserts—of which this is one of many so-called—will be turned into places for dwellings, granaries, gardens, and store-houses for the benefit of generations yet unborn. I believe all Australia has a buried treasure storage of some sort underground. Dig a whim-well on the out-back Lachlan plains, and you will find the carboniferous plants of the coal measures, as well as good and plenteous water. Nowadays a coal owner is often a millionaire, and a water finder here would make a bullionaire of himself.

"Go to the same depth or deeper elsewhere than the Lachlan underground strata, and what will you find? Water everywhere. Our knowledge of nethermost water and hitherto unknown deposits is coming through artesian bores, and utterly revolutionising old ideas of Australia's waterless distances, or ulterior chances of surface wealth."

The *Flying Fox* has been going very slowly for an hour or so, because of the boulders of the watershed plains of the Dry River country.

After a fast and successful journey all the way, Tom, young Cosgrave, and Waters had nearly arrived at their object point. From there, the Dry River itself promised the crew of the *Flying Fox* an easy track to a thick belt of scrub, which the pearler said lay at the buried river's source, one of the adjuncts of his own wonderful land.

The *Flying Fox*, though not going straight, was keeping on the whole a certain course. She was picking level ground for her wheels among the widely-strewn boulders, which were, here and there, too high for her. But the elevated body of the car kept her undergear free from most of the prominent rucks of rubble by judicious steering. Sometimes she was only going as fast as a man could walk, whilst at others, as the ground suited, she shot ahead a little.

They were far outside the last regular camel-pads now, and were in a no-man's-country, known only to, and traversed solely by, hostile blacks. Yet here, as in many other places in Australia, marked "desert" by antiquated London impressionist maps, the boulders were studded argentiferously.

How many of the dead, spoken about by young Cosgrave, knew how near they had been to their cherished ideals of wealth? How many other Australian explorers in search of pastoral country only had turned away disgusted to their last water-

hole with the binding anathema, after they had seen the arid expanse: "No water, no grass, not fit for a pig to live in!"

Waters knew, however, perfectly well what his surroundings indicated, and Tom thought he did later, from his knowledge of somewhat similar indications in New Zealand.

"It's boulder antimony, isn't it?" he queried.

"No, my boy, it is silver in its compounds. This place is reserved, says Nature to Solomon Silence, until the favoured ones of Fortune come along. There'll be a Silver King or two in residence here some day, and a city or so also, as sure as Fate, if cosmopolitanism is kept away long enough."

When they got close to the Dry Lagoon, although the ghostly mirage rippling about it over sand patches deluded them into the fancy of water, it proved on closer approach to be but a long, wide depression in the ground filling up with sand, in which at the far end a solitary nurtunja pole was sticking up. They had had a long run through dry distances that day, but this was the pole they were steering for by young Cosgrave's orders, and round it a group of three natives were sitting—an old man, an old woman, and a girl, the latter clad in a light skirt, which clung to her limbs, surmounted with a belted tunic.

She had no head covering but her own luxuriant hair, straw-coloured, looped up and fastened to the crown of her head with a scarlet ribbon. She possessed a light complexion, beautiful eyes and

teeth, was lithesome, well-formed, and agile. She whispered affectionately to young Cosgrave, and kissed him on both cheeks warmly, although she looked intensely surprised. He then introduced this desert flower to his companions, who were more astonished than the girl had been, expecting to see only blacks in this part. She had been sojourning with blacks and found whites, all the difference.

"A relative of mine," Cosgrave said importantly; "Alice Langley, daughter of a real white Kuriltai. Our first bush telegraph and courier. My tribe will have news of our arrival in a few hours. You can take that from me as quite certain.

"It is going now," he added, as the girl ran to a rush-woven basket and liberated three whistling ducks, which at first circled hastily around, stupefied with their confinement and dazzled by the light. Then they shaped their course straight towards the river bed, which joined the sand lagoon, and a little later sped fast and far over the mirage waters of its channel.

Young Cosgrave explained: "This being the outside of our country, we all know how to work it for the benefit of ourselves beyond. Those ducks go straight to our dwelling-place; each carries its message back by a tiny strip of parchment tied to its foot."

In the evening many flights of ducks passed, of many species, from various points of the compass, but all took the same course as the messengers when they got to the Dry River. The two old blacks had

a broad, high net which was suspended on two long, light poles across the river bed. The poles were upright in the ground, but not very firmly fixed, and the net, almost invisible from the fineness of the fibre it was composed of, hung straight up and down between them. To the top of these poles were fixed two long, light lines, the far ends of which were held by the two blacks. As a flight of ducks from some point in the south came sweeping towards the sand lagoon, and turned full swing for the bed of the river, the old native man, concealed behind a sand-buttressed boulder, suddenly whizzed a curved, flat piece of bark out over them, and as it poised over their heads uttered the cry of the duck-hawk.

As the oncoming flight saw the rush through the air of the bark boomerang, and the shadow poise above, blended with the dreaded call of their hereditary and vengeful foe, they swooped downwards to a few feet of where the water in the river should have been, flying right against the net, which was instantly pulled over on top of them by the two concealed blacks, and the whole flight secured, almost uninjured.

The travellers sat chatting vicariously at the camp fire by the motor car long into the moonlit hours of the night, and it must have been almost twelve o'clock before they all thought of retiring to rest, when the girl walked away some distance as if to scan the horizon.

"She can give me points all round the bush and elsewhere, Tom," Waters murmured. "You steer

the *Flying Fox* to-morrow with Cosgrave alongside of you, so that I can take a back seat with this child of the desert. Old man," he went on gravely, "I'm hard hit, but there's the new world for me over yonder somewhere, if she is not appropriated already. I've been looking for her all my life. Isn't she lovely and unsophisticated? I have a reason, a strong, compelling reason, for this new life now; and if I have either to stay or leave it for the old one I'll come out on top, see if I don't, and make that girl a queen of society yet. Why, if even in these wild, unknown parts she can be as lady-like and nice-mannered as she undoubtedly is, what on earth will she be when she is out in the world with a competence? I don't know how she has been educated, or who taught her, but she knows considerably more than most teachers I have ever met.

"But what is she going to do now?" he exclaimed wonderingly, as first a low routing, then three combined, modulated notes were heard, four times repeated, from where the girl stood. "That's no bull roarer, that's a clarionet," jerked Waters in surprise. "It's like Cosgrave's call at the Cave, in the first notes, but he had only the native whirler or bull roarer, quite a different instrument from that. Keep quiet!"

A gigantic emu, a cock bird, came running eerily and shyly forward out of the silver moon-hazed night mist and loomed close to Tom and Waters. It was followed by its mate, scarcely less in size. They inspected the motor car curiously, as they ran in,

moving round it in startled fantasy, scared at all shadows, starting and peering with outstretched heads and necks; then, alarmed at the men, sped, as only emus can, straight and swift to the call again, where the fair sounder stood in the moonlight, with the trumpet-shaped instrument to her lips.

There, where she stood alone, on the Dry River plain, she kissed the heads of the great birds, as they wreathed their friendly necks over her, and taking a packet from her breast gave them each a mouthful of Australian manna. Then, stooping, she lifted a sort of cincture harness composed of flexible stuffed bands which she put over the breast, neck, shoulders, and back of the smaller bird, adjusting it carefully.

From a boulder she sprang on to the deep cushion of that back, placing one leg over and the other through one of the soft, padded surcingles, and with a turn of her feet lower down and an ankle twist for an extra purchase sat upright as if in a side-saddle. Then, with a wave of her hand to the watching men she spoke to her desert steeds.

At the sound of her voice the great cock bird slid away towards the smooth path of the Dry River and out into the silences of the ground-clinging mists; then the female, with her rider, shot noiselessly after her pilot mate, as the last carriage on an express train vanishes after its engine into the outer haze from a lighted station.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HAUNTED, AND THE HAUNTERS

“It chanced one day, when the North Wind blew, in his face,
like a furnace breath,
He left the track for a tank he knew—’twas a short cut to his
death.”

—HENRY LAWSON.

“HERE, Cosgrave, wake up, old man, what are you about?—the girl’s gone!” Waters shouted, leaping to his feet and shaking the recumbent figure he had just noticed sound asleep by the *Flying Fox*, the motor car that had accomplished such wonders of speed during its rush across Western Australia. “Get up, sonny, do, there’s not a moment to lose. That girl may alarm the tribe, and for all I know we may be ambushed and killed if we delay. So hurry up if you don’t want to have an unpleasant surprise. What’s a double gun or two against an armed tribe with silver to guard? Light up and get her in order, Tom. See to your sparking plug and carburettor,” he commanded, his own experienced eye and hand running over every part of the gear. “We must be off as soon as we possibly can!”

“Man with a shattered foot and ankle,” muttered

the sleeper confusedly, turning over in his waking dream. "He's got his punishment. I've had mine; so has father. But I'll have my rights in spite of all things! Eh, what?" he said suddenly, sitting bolt upright. "Alice gone, eh? She won't take any harm, bless you. She's used to it. The birds love a long run in the moonlight."

"We're going too!" curtly replied Waters, huffed, uneasy, and impatient, but from a cause much nearer his heart than his brain, which he could not publicly acknowledge. "How you do sleep, Cosgrave. Hurry up and help to get the things ready!"

Young Cosgrave arose with a yawn, and presently bustling himself, their few but serviceable belongings were rapidly stowed away in the locker recesses of the automobile.

Meanwhile, Tom descanted upon a strip of dried meat he was eating hurriedly as he worked, which he called kangaroo biltongue. Waters and he had made some from marsupials they had shot on the road up, hanging the meat on strips of their own skins tied together, as they had seen it done in South Africa.

"It's not half a bad idea," he declared. "Far-out explorers may find it expedient yet in what they call Australia's waste places. It's light to carry, and nearly as good as springbok."

The adventurers took their seats, Waters driving. The car had covered the distances hitherto with marvellous ease and smoothness of running. Three skilled Australian axe and long-handled shovel men had soon got rid of any troublesome inequalities of

ground when met with, and a corduroy bush road, or bank-slicing, had disposed of abrupt baulks in plains, or hindrances of scrub in other parts when unable to make a detour.

"The best trait of the British manufacturer," declaimed Waters, as the motor car hummed along the hard, level, sanded floor of the Dry River through the ground mists, "is that if you give the man idea well diagramed, they sometimes improve on it. Storage tanks, appearance, utility, gear perfect. As to management, you can stop and hold her on the brink of a precipice; as to speed, isn't she going? Good thing the dust devils never go to sleep here, so that there is little risk of our being followed, because our route is obliterated when the sun rises and they begin."

Bur-r-r-r!

Tirelessly, smoothly sped the *Flying Fox* through the remainder of the night hours, its onward flight beguiled by fantastic tales from the half-caste pearler, Cosgrave.

"No, Mr. Tom," he had said, in reply to a question put about the native route, "we don't always use the Dry River, except for secrecy. But it's one of our roads. The dry lake we have just left is our furthest post this way. Where this mirage-land begins lies both our weakest and our strongest point, and for that reason the dead stay here. See there!" and he pointed to two grisly alligator mummies, one on each bank.

Further on was the dry parchment frame of a water buffalo grazing with lowered head.

"It gives one a queer feeling speeding past these weird things in this romantic moonlight, doesn't it?" Cosgrave added. "I always feel inclined to say my prayers when I'm here, and I've been well enough used to it!"

Tom and Waters had long since ceased to be surprised at the pearler's language, of which they had picked up various specimens ever since they had known him. He had been educated, nay, more, he seemed to be of a somewhat religious turn of mind, but no amount of questioning had as yet elucidated the mystery of his erudition for the partners.

"Wait until you get to my home and see for yourselves. Then you can ask particulars," he had always retorted when questioned upon the subject. And this was the only sentence they had ever been able to extract definitely from him.

"The old man and the old woman we saw at the Dry Lake," Cosgrave went on, "are pickets of our advanced line of sentinels, which at that point commences and continues from it, over some queer country, too. Over the far-out mountains on the other side of our possessions, black and coloured people guard us by various methods. We send intelligence from the Dry Lake, as you have seen, by ducks."

"You want us to believe," said Waters irritably, "that a wild Australian whistling duck will carry a message for you, and then waddle out of the water before your Chief with a letter tied round its leg!"

"Didn't I tell you that this part is our illusion

ground. You're not supposed to believe as gospel everything you see here—although it is real enough. Of course the message-ducks are trained birds, and come from Doonabri."

"Caught in the net, eh, blackfellow fashion? You can't stuff me, Cosgrave. Didn't I see Miss Langley take them out of a basket, where she had no doubt placed them after the old people caught them?"

"Well, you ask her about them if you are as cocksure as all that. Maybe she'll tell you, maybe she won't. But *I'm* telling you, and consider I stand a good chance of losing my life through it, the same as you do, unless you chuck me out of the motor car and go back to bring up an armed expedition to benefit yourselves. There's a line of carefully-concealed rock holes about a mile out from this left bank here, but none but ourselves or the outside blacks even dream of them. We know them as facts, but a stranger might look for them until he dropped dead from thirst.

"I was out here duck-netting once. A string of camels came wandering in to the Dry Lake from God knows where. Hours afterwards two Afghans came crawling along in search of them. Death was in their faces, and madness also. In went a message to Doonabri by duck-post, and out came a dozen of our men with ambulances, but the Afghans died on the way before they reached our country, and we had to bury them."

The *Flying Fox* burred gently and swiftly ahead, and for some time there was silence in the car.

"Great Scott!" suddenly exclaimed Tom, starting and pointing, "Cosgrave's mad, or I'm mad! Stop her, Waters! Look at the ghosts in that caravan ahead of us!"

A camel train was coming along the left bank of the waterless river, and an Afghan was riding on the first and last camel.

The string of camels passed silently in the ghostly moonhaze, not a hundred yards off, to the accompanying beat of the pulse in the checked motor-car; passed without splashing through silver pools of some seeming water, which emanated from the ground, and after they had vanished.

"Go on again!" gasped Tom at last. "If I had seen that sight of the dead drivers Cosgrave told us about without having had witnesses, I should be certain that the bush madness was upon me. The water, too!"

"Easy, Mr. Tom, it's all right; you needn't get your frills out. They are our men," whispered Cosgrave. "Supply train going south, and the moon makes those lakes here."

"Are your men Afghans in Indian dress? I can swear I heard one of them sing out 'Hoostah!' before they swung level. Then they slipped by like lost spirits, and I took them for the dead drivers you were speaking of."

"We make good Afghans at times, Mr. Tom, especially if we colour dye a bit; and we keep up these ghostly illusions here for our own security.

"It may send parties back if ever they attempt to

rush our place; and one such party scared back will effectually stop others.

"You begin to see now, perhaps, why we dare not give any sign, except of menace, to the outside world. We have silver under our feet, at Doonabri, and although this maddening, desolated Dry River would grow anything—vines, orchards, rubber, cotton, cereals—if the underground water were utilised, we are afraid to use it, because of the riches hereabouts also.

"Partly through my father's will, partly for the peace of mind of our people, we guard the secret of the silver grounds for all we are worth, because the moment it was known what was in the soil here, and in the boulders, we should have but a short time to wait for the human avalanches that would sweep us away altogether from the life and place we have chosen to live in.

"So we stave off the evil day as long as we can, you see, but it must come eventually. Every year now fresh, hitherto untrodden, mineral-bearing places are being opened up."

"This is a reef country half-buried in sand," interposed Waters. "There are half the treasures of the universe about us, and the greatest of the lot to utilise all with—water—lies close beneath us also."

"Stop her, Mr. Waters," said young Cosgrave suddenly, at this juncture, "and hear it talk. Get out, too, Mr. Tom, and come away from the click of our big night-bat a bit, so that you can hear better."

The motor stopped, and the trio walked away some fifty yards up the sand-filled river, and then

paused to listen with their ears to the ground. Then they came back, resumed their places, and went on again.

"Yes," Cosgrave continued; "you can hear it running underneath, plain enough. I expect that sound is what drives the solitary wanderer mad, thinking he is in the awful thirst delirium, when he can see nothing but dry ground and boulders. In fact, that stage always really comes after the first parched thirst, when they try to shout, and find they can't even speak. But that sounding water they would never take for reality with the dry sand above it. Then they go mad, and perhaps die happily.

"Ah, I thought of water bad enough that night I bolted in the dinghy, after I had got well athirst with passion, and pulling afterwards, for I had no time to get a drink out of the water cask, and the hand at the wheel, who was in with me, and got my handcuffs off—a Manilla man—couldn't leave it to get me some. It passed away after I had chewed a revolver bullet for a bit, but that night it was lots of salt water and no fresh."

"If you had had a condenser like mine in the *Fox* here, you'd have been all right," said Waters. "You deserve a drink for all your yarns and your previous thirst, Cosgrave. I'm going to pull up and have a drink of our own fresh water, qualified with a taste of whisky to alleviate the sympathetic symptoms you have brought on."

"Shall we see any more ghosts to-night, old man? How did you dress your Afghans?"

"The women did that. Used the dead drivers' dresses for patterns and models. We are hardly an uncivilised tribe, Mr. Tom. Now when we go north, south, or west, we follow the latest fashions as exhibited up-to-date by those that have seen them."

"A health to the Illusion Country," declared Waters, as he charged glasses, with the *Fox* at a standstill. "May its skeletons and Afghan ghosts never grow less!"

Then as they burred on again the pearler whispered incisively, as if in answer to Waters' joking question :

"There's the ghost of the Mad Reef further on, Mr. Tom. Hadn't I better tell you about it before it shoots into sight, for it's a queer thing for a civilised man, who knows the power of riches and what the lust for it does for its votaries, to come upon suddenly. Presently we shall pass a bit of a switchback in the river bed, which is caused by a silver reef that crops up and outwards on both banks.

"The sound of the water is heard there also. When you get on the top of the third switchback you can pull up again," he added to Waters. Then, almost before he had concluded the sentence, the motor soared upwards with its own momentum, then rushed down with increasing speed, up and up and down and up again.

With the movement of a new-born impulse on this last summit it was stopped—dead—this vehicle of the living, at Cosgrave's word : "Now!" It was a perfect treble switchback they had traversed, the sand as hard, as level, and as dry as before.

"That was like being at sea again, that bit, wasn't it?" young Cosgrave remarked parenthetically. "There's the ghost of the Mad Reef. He never leaves it!" he added.

Amongst an outcrop of stony rubble on the right bank, a mummified skeleton of a man was propped in a crouching posture. The parchment sections of his hands were supporting his grisly jaw-bones, whilst the ghastly, sun-dried masked skull looked forward straight at them with a grin of anxious silence as expressive as the bared teeth and the dead eyes the eye-sockets could make it. That grin was only the dumb telephone left of one who, in the days of his flesh, had dared all, suffered all, seen all, borne all, but it carried the Mephistophelian expression still, and now guarded a secret that was all it had ventured for, and all it had kept.

"Come and have a close look, Mr. Tom and Mr. Waters, so that you can read its last will and testament," young Cosgrave whispered as he got out silently.

The dried anatomy was sitting within the four boundary marks of a silver lode, a proprietor's and prospector's claim. There was no miner's right but the skeleton itself.

"The Silver King!" remarked Waters ironically, as they stood close by.

But the "pegs" of the dead monarch's claims to untold wealth were symbolised by dry, lichen-clad boulders, piled so as to show distinctive corner marks to any passer-by. Here and there crusted ore, in

profusion even on the boundary marks of the claim marked off, glittered in patches in the moon rays; while attached by a wire round the neck of the mummified corpse itself lay a sort of torque ornament made of bright brass, a blackfellow's royalty plate, of the shape of a half-moon, hung with the curves upwards, and on this was inscribed, plainly visible in the rays of a motor lamp:

JOHN SOLWAY.

"THE MAN IN DUNGAREE."

Tom started in amazement. Where had he seen this cabalistic sign before?

Waters was also petrified with astonishment. Meanwhile Cosgrave replaced the lamp.

"The same that we saw at the Cave of the Red Hand," he observed in a whisper. "Keep quiet, Tom, and await developments; it's a mystery, and a big one!"

"Mr. Langley rigged the corpse up," the half-caste pearler said when he came back, "as a tribute to the first known outside discoverer of this region who kept the claim for himself. But who *was* he, and why did he call himself the 'Man in Dungaree?' We none of us know."

"There were two of them," said Tom to himself. "The Man in Dungaree must have been the other man. I saw their mule tracks."

"Mr. Langley said such a dead finish as his deserved all the lasting records a man could get,

and that the field should be named after him some day," Cosgrave went on when he rejoined them.

"How that poor fellow died no one seems to know except himself. He just faced it quietly. They say the body was found in that position many years ago, propped up between two boulders, and he must have died thirst mad to mark out a claim."

"Your Dry River is interesting, very interesting," murmured Waters, loosing the *Flying Fox* again for her forward flight.

When morning broke upon them with Australia's scarlet and gold Aurora, they still sped along the bed of the Dry River, but halted for breakfast where they saw a warm, purple, sunlit haze of distant hills, with a darker belt of timber intervening. Then Millie's dream in the Cave valley came into Tom's mind, reminding him that in somewhat similar places of sleep and dreamland he had often resought her.

The rush through the small hours of the night had brought many conflicting emotions to the three men who were risking their all upon an unknown quantity, a very last throw of the dice of speculation.

"We are all in the same boat," was a common idea. "What happens to the one will happen to the others."

"I shall be top-dog, and work out a revolution in my time," Many Waters mused, nothing daunted, nothing disheartened. "I could build a city, two cities, in the Boulder Plain alone. And I shall be a multi-millionaire before I peg cut."

But in the midst of their several cogitations, as they prepared breakfast, came an audible sound

from the bed of the Dry River from the same direction previously traversed by themselves.

The reality of it, tested by acute listening, arrested Waters' pannikin of tea half-way on its passage to his mouth.

Young Cosgrave dropped his plate, rose to his feet, and dashing across the level sand of the river bed, ran quickly to the summit of the bank.

"Look out!" he cried. "By Golly, it's another motor! Three in it! Three to three, Mr. Waters, Mr. Tom! No strangers must be allowed to come here whatever happens. They have tracked us down! Get out your shooting irons!"

And he was just going to rush back to join his companions when a deep, routing bull note sang through the air, followed by a loud, vibrating, triple-combined chord of notes, thrice repeated.

The half-caste pearler stopped as if turned to stone. There he stood, stock still, transfigured in spirit also, his hands and arms hanging limply at his sides, his head bowed on his breast dejectedly.

The approaching motor was of a design never seen before, as, gradually slackening, it pulled up right abreast of the *Flying Fox*. Young Cosgrave joined them deprecatingly as a tall, black man in motor dress, goggles and all, leaped lightly down, and going to the back seats assisted first a blind, silver-haired man out, then a younger one who limped.

They were Tom's fellow-passengers of months back.

"How did you get here?" the young man asked

Tom, in great amazement. "You brought him and the other gentleman?" he asked, turning angrily and vindictively to Cosgrave. "Did you remember and regard the consequences?"

"I did, Mr. Inglis," the half-caste returned, as angrily.

"My son?" faltered Tom, stepping forward.

"The only father I know of as a father is here," the young man replied, laying his hand affectionately on the blind man's shoulder.

"He is right," replied the blind man, in the deep, solemn, listening, questioning voice of one accustomed to live in darkness, and yet to see beyond the ken of others in the light. "That *is* your name, though I have never given it to you, and he is your father! for I know him and his voice well. So my son is back. Well, I am glad."

So this was Richard Cosgrave speaking, and thus the manner in which he and Tom met at last.

"My God! can it be true?" the crippled hero asked, more convinced from the voice of one in whom he seemed to place implicit reliance than in Tom's half-doubting assurance; then, gripping Tom's hand, and noticing his emotion, his all-too-patent fatherly love, he cried: "It must be real! Father, oh, father! What will mother say? You must stay with us now."

"My son, my son!" said Tom, clasping him close, and kissing him on the cheek, and forgetting all his feud with Cosgrave senior.

"Explanations at home now!" came the deep,

solemn voice of the blind man sternly and in command. "Peter, help me up. And you, young Inglis, come here and take the lead into Doonabri."

And he turned when seated, full face upon them, his scarred visage and eyeless sockets concealed by the mask and motor goggles he wore, but his extra sense of hearing catching the position of his audience.

Then, with uplifted right hand, he said in low, distinct, concentrated tones :

"Gold has been found beyond Oodnadatta at Arltunga, gentlemen, so I give you full warning of further peril for us all. I hold the cards now, and luckily for ourselves we went no further than Marseilles, where we got all we could get, except my sight, and returned to Adelaide just in time for precautions against this new discovery. I intend to bank up Doonabri, and live at home in future. Inglis" (to the young man), "you must do your duty to your real father now. I have no further claim to you.

"Now for a happy meeting at Doonabri, although I shall not be able to see it."

His voice broke as he gave the word to go to his black attendant. The others followed at once in the *Flying Fox*, Waters wild with astonishment at the unexpected *dénouement*.

The parentage was thus acknowledged, the onward path arranged for—and something else.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW PRISONER

“And we have hearts to do and dare, and yet o'er all the rest
The hearts that made the nation were the women of the
West.”

—GEORGE ESSEX EVANS.

As they neared the end of the Dry River, the leading motor car sounded its peculiar notes warningly, slackened speed, and turned out to the left.

By the regularly-graded scrub road, cut through the thickly-timbered ranges farther on, they progressed, until at last, after due and prolonged notice by the leading motor's loud and musical drone, they shot downwards at full speed from the highest summit towards a river flat, pulling up at length, after a series of lovely and constantly-changing views, in the middle of a panorama of houses, fields, orchards, and vineyards, with a crowd of excited and light-coloured inhabitants running about like disturbed sugar ants over a gunny sack. Some of these people were armed, but all were dressed in European costume. Then suddenly, to his unbounded delight, Tom Inglis recognised amongst them his long-lost wife, and Bianca Pearmain with her.

Cosgrave, or "Myall Dick," now blind and white-haired, dismounted from his car, with the assistance of his black servant, and spoke to young Inglis, who stood by him.

The latter at once sounded the extraordinary tribal alarm, which, in fact, the leading motor had been giving down all the turns of the incline, on hearing which the armed men disappeared in all directions, a good number of them going back the way the newcomers had used. Then came a routing sound, six trebly-blended notes, a stop, then six again.

"Scouts to the Dry Lagoon."

Another and a totally different signal:

"Scrub planters to the in road."

"It will be stopped and concealed altogether. We are prisoners, sir," said young Cosgrave, who was translating the signals to Tom. "We shall never be able to get out again, and I can do nothing now that father is back."

Then followed a sort of pealing of bells from the flageolet notes.

"Church service," muttered young Cosgrave, to Tom's intense astonishment. "It wasn't built when I left."

"After all these years," whispered Millie softly, later, when they were alone, as her husband held her in a close embrace. "Are you not very proud of our boy? I thought Richard would kill him or warp his intellect in some way, so, knowing him better than you did, I followed him here. And now, Tom, let us try to unravel the past a little. Come down to my house—our house now. You are rather grey, and I

can see the lines of your trouble. Otherwise you hardly look a day older, and it *is* only the other day, isn't it, after all?

"Here we are, dear," she said, pausing before the gate of an enclosure which held a substantial verandahed dwelling. "Come along; aren't my flowers lovely? 'Euroka,' the Sunlight, I have always called it. This dwelling has been sunlight to me, the lonely shepherdess of our fortunes only when our son was away. Isn't he a handsome fellow, Tom? I'm dying to hear of his adventures, but you come first. Oh, my darlings, both of you, how glad I am you are restored to me. I have prayed and hoped for this always, Tom, and to-day my happy dreams are true. But whoever could have prophesied that you would both have come in motor cars!"

"And you," he said, when they got inside, and he held her at arm's length to gaze upon her, "you are still my own girl, whose memory became almost a blank to me. I can hardly believe my senses now that I see you again in reality.

"It was a long separation, dear. I never knew what to think; but, of course, now I know why you left me, I honour your motive. I was sure Cosgrave had abducted both you and Bianca. Do you know that I swore to kill him on sight?"

"That was what I was afraid of, Tom, if you found out what he had done."

"Go on, dear," he said; "tell me all. But what a time you must have had up here?"

"Not quite so bad as you think. I had a mission

to perform, and God gave me strength for it. The worst part, of course, was the getting here, and being forcibly detained. The silver here stopped us. We were prisoners, Bianca and myself.

"I had to reform Richard also. He was terribly hard, obstinate, and rebellious, but Time—and his dreadful accident—softened him. I now respect him very much; he is such a good man. To do him justice, after he ran away with Eiya, he made a good husband to her. She died a year ago, poor thing, and was the subject over which both Bianca and myself held a counterpoise to Richard's arrogance; there we were enabled to deal with him according to his merits. He is passionately fond of our son, and Tommie adores him, so there must be some good in the man. Think of him, Tom, an orphan and an outcast, and don't judge him too harshly. We all nursed him after his accident with the dynamite, which occurred some two months after we first arrived."

"But how did you find out that Cosgrave took Tommie away? I never suspected that."

"When we found his dear little clothes that night, after getting home I discovered in his coat pocket a canoe-shaped silver specimen, which reminded me of my own mark, and seemed a token from Heaven. How did it get there? We had nothing of the sort belonging to us. My mind went to Richard at once. He gave it to the boy to amuse him whilst he coloured his face, put on other clothes, and took him away in a buggy—forgetting the specimen.

“You were so terribly strange that night, showing me how much you idolised the boy, that I did not dare to tell you of my secret, fearing you and Richard might kill each other. Therefore, understanding him as I did, I was sure that Bianca and myself were the only two who could organise pursuit with any hope of success and persuasion. I knew my mark would pass me through all the tribes, and indeed I afterwards found out that Richard had imitated it on little Tommie’s arm for the same purpose. The Kuriltai knew he was my child, and that alone was almost enough.

“Well, we first went to father’s location in the Blue Mountains, but Richard had gone. Then, concealing our identity, we bought horses, and went on to the old station, but there were no whites there, nor at the Cave; but Mulga and Leura, who had mated into the Kulbarunna Combos, brought their men, and with little Peter off we went, my mark making them worship me as a queen and follow me all the way. Scores of natives worked for us, supplied us with food, water, and everything; gunyahs were built for us every day, and finally we got up here quite safely and comfortably. The women and their men are here now; Peter you saw on the road up. I am Queen here, Tom, and all my subjects are wonderfully loyal.”

“You are a wonderful woman, Millie, but that very mark on Tommie’s arm so cleverly imitated by Cosgrave brought me to you. He was at my side for hours over in South Africa, and fought like a

hero as he is, but he never knew my name. Oh! my darlings, how proud I am of you both."

"I alter your terms and, becoming the first person singular in my own right as mother and wife, am exactly of the same opinion concerning yourself only," Millie said rapturously.

"Whatever possessed Cosgrave to call himself Grant?"

"Doonabri! the silver mines here. He thought, being compelled to go to Europe with your son, someone might recognise him."

"It was a good bluff with his blindness and all. No one would recognise him now. He threw me off the scent completely."

"Was there no one, no one at all, after all these years?" she added, with an inquisitorial smile.

"Well," Tom said deprecatingly, "I might have married a really charming and rich little widow had not your wonderful mark stopped all that too. She, you woman of destiny, was herself my saviour, in pointing out Tommie to my notice as a V.C. hero. That, of course, as an introduction further led on to the upsetting of my apple-cart altogether, and then came a description of personalities by Cosgrave's own son, which made me keep my own counsel and come on here. How marvellously things work out under the sceptre you wield."

She laughed merrily, then grew grave.

"Say through God's wonderful ruling, Tom. What did you think of our little church, of our choir, our organ, our stained glass windows? Fred Langley, another

Instrument of our entire rectification, has been our lay preacher all the time. He suits me, always did, having the soul of music in him and revering things. He married a native girl and read his own marriage service. What do you think of that? He always said he was a self-appointed priest.

"Naturally enough, his daughter Alice has been my bosom friend and boon companion. In a large way I am responsible for the education and bringing up of that young lady."

"The Emu girl?"

"Yes, she can do almost anything she likes with birds or beasts. The emus are caught when quite chicks. Those two big birds you saw her with she brought up herself, and they have grown up with her since she was a child. To-night there will be an important meeting, but since all our able-bodied men are away scouting on our boundaries, now that we have been apprised of a new danger of the encroaching tide towards Arltunga, it will only be presided over by the remnant of ourselves. Winadyne, our Chief during Cosgrave's absence, will be in his place next to him. He is a man of about your own age, and I expect the whole matter of our future action to be argued out bit by bit among ourselves.

"Of course I can see matters further than poor Richard Cosgrave is able to do now, but from his action since he returned it appears that he still intends to carry out the same plan that obtained after his accident, that is to say—keep our secret inviolate and ourselves unknown.

"Would you be inclined to stay here, Tom?"

"I came here resolved to take my chances, dear, and where you are safe and unharmed is my home. As for Waters, I expect Alice Langley has settled him. But who is this, Millie?"

For a splendid young woman had entered.

Panther-like in grace and litheness of movement, she had flashed her dark blue eyes upon them, and now stood motionless just within the door.

"This is Eula, Richard Cosgrave's only daughter, his second child," Millie said, taking her affectionately by the hand and leading her forward.

The young woman glanced at Tom with a half-terrified air as he bowed.

"The men have brought another motorist in, Mrs. Inglis," she exclaimed, blushing crimson at Tom's salute, but looking reassured. "He asks to see this gentleman, saying he knows him well. Mulga recognised the captive directly she saw him. They are bringing him here now," she added, peeping through the window. "No, they have let him go! He is coming here himself!"

Judge of Millie and Tom's amazement when who should walk in but John Everest, the wandering divine who had married them years ago—a lifetime ago.

His hair was as white as snow, but he was as alert, erect, and vigorous as ever.

"I crossed a motor car's track," he affirmed genially. "On my road further on another motor passed me. From the vigour with which it was

driven, I judged that there was something up, and followed the pair of you, my blackboy keeping me in touch with your movements, as my sight is not quite so good as it used to be. But the new motor's pace was above mine, and I followed more leisurely, camping for the night, as I had water, by the remains of a dried-up corpse, whose brass plate asserted that he had been in life :

JOHN SOLWAY.

'THE MAN IN DUNGAREE.'

I confess that, but for the bushman's instinct of exploration and discovery, aroused by the unexpected and unadvisory tracks of other motor cars than my own in this far-out country, I should not have followed the second one.

"For a man of my years, Mrs. Inglis, I find that motor travelling keeps me together better than any other means of locomotion. I was bound for Oodnadatta, near where I hear there is a new gold discovery, as my present hobby is motoring to the outside tribes, far-out prospectors, and camel men."

"Bless me, Mr. Everest, I fear, for your own sake, that you have become quite a dangerous personage, as far as we are personally concerned. The whole world seems to be on the move in our direction, in fact. But come, Eula, and help me get some refreshment ready for Mr. Everest ; and, Tom, please take him into the verandah and explain matters until lunch is ready. I cannot yet acquit him of

high treason for coming here, but I don't want to starve him before I pass sentence."

"Will you propound the meaning of your wife's conundrum, Inglis?" Everest said.

"Affairs of State, sir, I really believe. She is rather an important personage up here, I am told. Pray treat me as an outsider entirely in this business, a prisoner like yourself, for, although I was in that first motor car racing for this place, the simple fact is I haven't seen my wife for years—and—"

Then Tom told his extraordinary story, to the reverend gentleman's unbounded astonishment, and Everest jumped to the conclusion, under the circumstances, of a benefice amongst his enforced surroundings.

"With the ruling powers' permission," he exclaimed casually, "having entered the gates of Gaza like yourself, and my modest career intercepted by force of arms, I disclaim any wish for further Samsonic action, for here I perceive an end to my labours, and I shall have to be forced to go away. You want a man in Holy Orders amongst you badly. The people here are strangely disciplinary and well-taught, and there must be some divine purpose in their double admixture of white blood. I am delighted with all I have seen of them, and am prepared to take up my pastoral crook to-morrow, if permitted; although I hope I am infringing on no other doctrine or teacher by what I see around me."

Bianca Pearmain now came walking towards them,

hardly the girl she was, but a bright, intelligent woman, with sparkling eyes and an alert manner. Tom introduced his guest to her.

"Have you a school?" Everest asked her instantly and bluntly.

"Oh, yes, for many years. My sister, self, and some of our trained pupils teach in it. Our organist, who has also been our lay preacher for years, provides for the lasting good of our flock, old and young alike. They have been apt pupils, too, learning to read, write, and cypher with wonderful celerity, but of late most of our younger men have been away. There are occasions when a few of the more restless males find their way to the coast cities, the gold fields, and pearl fisheries, until we fancy that many will drift that way.

"But for the strong desire to live as we have done hitherto in this beautiful country, I think we must have been dispersed ere this. One thing militates against the latter—our clannishness and family ties."

"Why should you wish so much for all to remain, Miss Pearmain? If a man is ambitious, surely it is better for him to go out into the world?"

"Well, our life has been so beautiful for a long time past. There are so many things we have learned to do. Our viticulture, our crops, our fruit and jam-making, our wine industry, our carpentering, our building. It is no toil to labour here. We all benefit by it, and our great enemy, the swarming world, does not enfold us in its grasp, and reduce us to impotence."

"Why all this secrecy and desire for isolation, Miss Pearmain? Why not proclaim your civilised tribe as an industrious and God-fearing community to the world? Why take prisoners?"

"It is our custom, has always been our custom. Every stranger that has ever come here has never been allowed to depart. We don't want them, nor do we advertise for them, but if they come here we detain them. And that is partly why we have made the Dry River so hideous, in setting up those skeletons to scare away intruders."

"But why should you do so?"

"Why not?" asked Bianca in a surprised tone. "It is the whole burden of our terrible secret. For that desolate Dry River is highly argentiferous. The ground is silver-bearing here!"

"I must confess you have given me a problem worth studying, Miss Pearmain. Then you prefer your quiet, rural life to making this great secret public?"

"Most certainly, as far as we have gone. The digging mania of the world would overwhelm us with a multitude and we should be dispersed to the four winds of heaven, for we are not strong enough to stand a rush. Oh, there is nothing sacred where valuable ore is concerned, I assure you. You will never get out again, Mr. Everest! No one leaves here once they get in. Are you not one of our betrayers also, one of the outside rim of the present-day encroachers? Yes, sir, you must stop; our men would kill you now if you tried to get away!"

"I daresay I shall be able to make some people

happy, even under these adverse circumstances," he replied, at which she blushed, and then grew sorrowful again.

"To-night there is a most important meeting," she continued. "Please do your best to aid us. Your counsel should carry weight. Once admitted, mind, you have as much right to trench upon our opinions and judgments as one of ourselves."

Here Everest was called in to his lunch, and afterwards, sitting in the verandah again with his host and hostess, he noticed with renewed pleasure and interest the many light-coloured people passing to and fro. They were mostly women, young girls and children, all clad decently, and contented-looking.

Up and down the river in regular, sectional plots ran the village of Doonabri, the unknown, the unsought-for, the unheard-of, and as he gazed Waters sauntered up with young Cosgrave at his heels, the latter looking very depressed about his mother's death.

He held a short conversation with Millie, who placed her hands kindly on his shoulders as she talked to him, and presently, turning to the company on the verandah, young Cosgrave said :

"I see them getting the meeting-house ready, ladies and gentlemen. There's something strange happening down at the Chief Winadyne's house, and that is a sign that he is going to appear in state tournament to-night. There goes the signal! We had all of us better go down, for there is no telling what is going to happen when the old Chief puts on his wonderful feather cloak."

CHAPTER XXIX

“THE MAN IN DUNGAREE”

“ He reached at last, oh, lucky elf!
The town of Come-and-help-yourself,
In Rough-and-ready land ! ”

—ANDREW BARTON PATERSON.

YOUNG Inglis had blown the curious tribal trumpet or clarionet, and ten minutes afterwards the meeting-house, a broad and roomy building capable of holding about four hundred people, began to fill.

Winadyne, the Chief, accompanied by Richard Cosgrave and young Inglis, took one of the centre seats on a raised dais at one end of the hall, and keenly looked over the assembly. Mrs. Inglis sat to the right of her son, who sat next Cosgrave. Next to Mrs. Inglis were Langley, Alice Langley, and Richard Cosgrave's daughter, Eula.

The white strangers and Langley, not including young Cosgrave, who was in company with Winadyne's daughters in the body of the hall, were allotted other places at the table, and sitting thus they faced the gathering.

In the centre of the first row of the audience,

immediately below the dais, sat three old men of the Doonabri tribe, always supposed to be Winadyne's special advisers. Behind them again the assemblage took up about two hundred and fifty seats, and all were women and children.

Richard Cosgrave, senior, now rose from the ruling chair to speak.

"Friends and relatives," he said, "to-night sees the first prophetic and important strangers amongst us, the beginning of our unwished-for end, as it were, as far as you and myself are concerned. For my own part, I have, I consider, been from the first the one and only cause of your unrest and danger, as I only came here for self-aggrandisement to further my own ends. Consequently my judgment has been heavy and my way hard, and in justice to you all now I must do my best to stave danger off from you.

"Knowing since I first arrived that the rocky formations in your Bora ground, or rather the old-time Bora ground of your wilder ancestors, contained a large percentage of silver ore, which none of you understands the value of, I, the white stranger, put a very strong tapu upon that particular section of your ground, and thereby prevented myself, through some sort of a curse, from realising the riches I knew were there. On the mountain-grade road which I was afterwards making for the express purpose of utilising these Bora riches, I came on more silver, and, in the blasting of some matrix rock which obstructed the path, lost my sight.

"Since my first arrival you have come to different

knowledge, a more civilised way of living, a more Christianised state, and that being so, I do not propose to realise any of the riches I know to be in the neighbourhood, for, having laid a curse upon it, I dread from what has happened to myself increasing evil for yourselves on that very account. I am prepared, therefore, to go to extremer measures than I have yet carried out to prevent the knowledge of what the Bora ground, or any other ground, contains penetrating to the outside world. I brought—as it turned out—your good genius with me!”

He indicated Langley as he spoke, almost seeming to gauge his position and character exactly with his sightless orbs.

“Also your promised young white leader, who has been a hero amongst men in the outside world, fighting for the credit of his nationality to knot the cords of Empire closer, and my one wish is now that, under these good and lasting agencies, as I have been given the full and ruling power, you settle yourselves down here peaceably and contentedly for the rest of your lives.

“I have no need for riches now, no wish beyond your continued happiness. I cannot see the outside world of pleasure, or enjoy it as I once thought I should, and fearing the curse I have brought upon myself, fear for you also. And here you have your home, we all have our homes. What do we want more?

“None of the new white strangers who are here to-night will be allowed to leave, but they too can

enjoy a happiness which will benefit them more considerably than outside glory, some that I know of at least, for in giving up my claim as Chief to your young leader I have to inform you that his father is here to-night.”

There was a murmur of repressed astonishment amongst the audience, and young Cosgrave, rising, excitedly called out :

“His place belongs to me by right. It is no birthright at all to him. Besides, he cannot lead. He is crippled, and belongs to the alien tribe by the Falls, where I shall send him when I get my way.”

Had a bombshell fallen amongst the listening people, there could not have been greater alarm and astonishment. The three old men, who alone with Winadyne were attired in ancient tribal fashion with feather cloaks and filleted hair, with black cockatoo plumes stuck therein, whispered together during the confusion and made energetic signs to Winadyne to speak.

He held up a restraining finger, and then motioning to one of them, the man indicated left the hall, to return presently attired in a light tweed suit, and a European complexion.

Richard Cosgrave senior, trembling with excitement and anger at his son's remark, but not gathering in the by-play at all, resumed his seat and waited. Never before had he been bearded like this, but as soon as the bustle and buzzing of voices ceased and silence prevailed, he rose again and, with shaking voice, continued :

"I did not think I should come to love you all as I do. I was a selfish man until God saw fit to afflict me with blindness for attempting to touch blood-bought treasure. The voice that spoke just now was the voice of my own son, the voice of the avenger, as it seems to me. If my way of thinking is not yours, according to our custom, some other hand than mine must reap the reward I once worked so hard for, and am afraid of now, and there is our tribal rule of the majority if I offend. But I hesitate without sufficient proof of sign to ask anyone belonging to me or others to do so, and I see no way beyond my own, unless this may be it.

"Sometimes of late," he went on abstractedly, "I have wandered in sleep full-sighted to a certain spot where I first found the sign of the Bora silver. From that I go to the middle grade of the hills where my accident with the dynamite happened. I see it there, too, in plenty on my out-grade, but a snake is always guarding it ready to strike at my hand if I reach down for it, so it cannot be myself who is to utilise it against a certain wrong I once committed.

"On my journey up here after my return from Europe my night visions have altered and I have had peace, but betwixt sleeping and waking in the morning I see before my eyes—I that have no eyes to see with—the shape of a large crystal, so pure as almost to look like glittering waters.

"As a boy I was always fond of bright rock crystals, and now, according to my vision, I deemed it right to keep the land of Doonabri where the

glittering water lies for the lasting possession of my people."

The oldest of the old men, not the one in the tweed suit, spoke the name of Winadyne out loud.

"Can you see a sign?" Cosgrave asked earnestly, turning to the Chief's allotted place.

"Yes," he replied, in the native language.

He then went out into the ante-room adjoining the building, followed by his two daughters.

The audience thrilled as if on the verge of something strange, for never before had their trusted leader, Cosgrave, seemed to them so out of form and vacillating. Young Cosgrave stood up on a form and watched intently as the Chief went out.

Shortly afterwards there was a slight bustle at the lower end of the hall and an entry through the main door and the middle of the audience of a most extraordinary apparition.

A stooping, faltering creature, apparently insane, attired in a frayed slouch hat, old, torn, blue dungaree breeches and shirt, and carrying a worn red blanket swag. He half crawled and tottered through the wondering and alarmed assemblage, and passed on right up to Winadyne's place at the table, where he flung his swag aside and rose to his full height, the simulated madness disappearing as if by magic.

"In the same fashion," he said briskly, "in which I first came to Doonabri I now have re-appeared. Weary and altogether oblivious of the outer world was I then. Unweary, and loving that outer world more than ever now because of my born right to it,

I and those whom a good and merciful Providence gave me shall go back to it, as will all here, in heartfelt satisfaction. I am your elected Chief by right of marriage before any new white stranger at all came here to dispossess me, though I was a stranger also in my time.

"Stumpy," continued he, "come up here alongside me, and prove your Australian right to the Doonabri silver mines.

"One of the first prospectors of the former generation, ladies and gentlemen," said the Man in Dungaree, as he placed his hand affectionately on the shoulder of the man who had changed into the tweed suit at his signal. "His real name is the Honourable Burton Roderer, but chance throwing us once together, we have foregathered ever since in sight and sound, though I had to leave him behind me in Sydney at first starting before I could smuggle him up here and make a Chief of him. Petersen, it is your turn also to disclose yourself," he added, motioning to the second old man.

"At present he is one of the elder leaders, but take off that feather cloak of his, and wash and dress him up, and you will find him much of the same sort of kidney as his mate Stumpy, from whom I got the first intelligence of this place. Have you anything to say, either of you, now that your real identities are disclosed?"

The man on the bench made no sign, but Stumpy said:

"Facilis descensus Averni, sed revocare gradum."

How does the rest go? I had a pretty hot time of it until I fell in with you, old man. Now I will resume my place, and ask pardon of these ladies for my temporary intrusion. *Quantum suff.*”

Richard Cosgrave was again trembling with excitement, even indignation, at this—to him—utterly unknown collusion.

“Your sign?” he demanded wonderingly.

The Man in Dungaree took from a pocket in his tattered garments a large gold-mounted crystal seal, which, cut flat at the bottom to receive an impression of a crest and motto, shone above through its smooth, clear surfaces like a large drop of clear water.

Many Waters rose to his feet with a shout of joy, surprise, and wonder, exclaiming :

“My long-lost, but always expected, elder brother. Now for the realisation of all *my* big dreams.”

“Yes,” replied the derelict, curtly and coolly, “I recognised you as soon as ever you came here. It’s a queer tale I have to tell you. My brother is right ; my name is Charles Waters. I left Sydney many years ago, hoping, like Mr. Micawber, for something to turn up, which did eventually, from a story told me by my friend Stumpy here in a hollow under a rock in the Domain, and from which I made sufficient capital to pay my own way up here. Like the narrator of this wonderful story, at that time I had been on the Avernus grade, and my patching up since, as you will presently see, has been eventful. You couldn’t kill me with a meat axe, as my boon companions used to say in those early days. I went through

various transformations in my search for fortune from successful digger to broken park loafer, from tramp, sundowner, and South Sea Island beach-comber to Dead Finish here before I drifted onwards in search of fortune again and established it.

"This tribe picked me up with the bush madness strong upon me, and how I got here I couldn't tell you. I had left the world of shadows and pain, and was happy until I came back to it again.

"I dropped on to the silver ore in the outside Dry River country by following the tracks of my financial partner, John Solway, alone. When he died there and I was taken away by my rescuers and recovered my reason, I yearned for Stumpy, who had been the main instrument of the discovery, and as his knowledge of silver by the continual forking of it out to other people proved him to be a man whose talented merit argued success, I sent secret envoys for him, and in time made a consulting Chief of him. Petersen was an old mate of his who had been left up here when Stumpy was forced to skedaddle, so of course he combined. That is how the business part of the whole affair originated, and it's good enough for the world and the Law. Naturally, being rather impecunious as a ruling Chief, I had to agree with Cosgrave, who, despite his sharpness, never discovered my white identity amongst this tribe. And so we just waited until he began to finance the affair, determining to claim our own share when we could advertise the wealth he was preparing for us.

"Unfortunately for him, since his accident other

principles seemed to have militated against what I consider the proper opening up of the land now, but as I am taking you all into confidence, you all become shareholders as well as voters. Are you agreeable to throwing it open?"

Every hand in the room went up save Cosgrave's.

"As far as regards myself," resumed the speaker, "perhaps the less said the better, but when I got back to my senses, and found after a time that I had become free from extra trammels of drink, dice, and devilment, I married a beautiful girl, one of yourselves"—motioning to the women of the assembly. "She bore me three sons and two daughters. She is gone. They are here. I am a grandfather amongst you."

"Winadyne, Winadyne," their voices murmured in tones of affection and respect.

"Then to you, after all, belongs the first discovery and working of the mines also," broke in Cosgrave in a confused manner, "and you have fooled me from the very first. You are a smarter man than ever I took you for, that's all. You know what I told you about the new gold discovery at Arltunga. Won't that have any influence on you to prevent this place being rushed?"

"We all knew it before, when you were away," replied the Man in Dungaree equably. "I am bomar chief, Cosgrave, whatever may have been conceded to you, and our scouts are intelligent."

"True," replied his interlocutor, "you always beat me there. What is your solution, then?"

"Like Stumpy's, the greatest good of the greatest number by dispersing our bullion to the trade of the world, my friend. But it will take some little time. Inglis, sound the inner recall."

From outside again came the routing call without the notes, and the village guard of twenty-five men, amongst whom was Winadyne's eldest son, entered the hall.

"You will take the others this information," Winadyne, or the Man in Dungaree, ordered, motioning to his son and handing him a secret intelligence stick.

The guard left at once.

"And as to the prior possession of this land," continued the Man in Dungaree, "what was it that no doubt led eventually to the formation of our family ties here, and our seclusion all these years? I will tell you."

He took up another bomar-stick which lay beside him on the table, and paused to examine the signs cut on it.

"Well, I became engrossed with this subject of secret intelligence, as hieroglyphed here, as I began to learn the language and methods of this strange and secluded light-coloured tribe, both as to its inception and its signs and musical signals to one another.

"I, at length, learnt more about this singular secret language of the bomar signs from two of the principal men, Petersen and his native compatriot, and it was owing to their directions that I came

across a certain stone which had signs of a mixed jargon upon it. This I made out bit by bit, and transmitted its sculptured knowledge to the bomarstick I now hold. None but myself, Petersen, and Stumpy can now read it or translate it.

“When one finds that a family or two here have in their songs or family speech unknown words of a foreign language, or the tune of a song different in phraseology from the others, a touch of an accent or a language mixed in with the ordinary native talk, he begins to wonder, as I did, how it came to be there, and this stone, I found, disclosed part of the secret to me. It was a trace of a foreign ancestry. Why had my wife and others their peculiarly light colour? From this ancestry. Now, reading from the bomarstick, here it is :

ABEL SKINNER.

DAVID HARNESS.

KOMATU.

} Shipwrecked Mariners.

Their record is in Japanese characters, but it came from before our time, before we were born.

“ ‘We were captured by natives of the interior, and taken to the land of Doonabri, where there are cattle, silver, and plenteous water. Herein we are compelled to stop, being given comely maidens for wives, and glad to be rid of wandering in devil’s ways and waterless places.’

“The whole light-coloured tribe had got the blood of these first three men amongst them, and I bided my time.

“Now I hold that even these two white men could

have taken up these mining rights had they been so disposed, but apparently they found the country paradise and did not trouble further.

“In common with Stumpy, who will assume his title on the prospectus to give colour and rank to us all, and Petersen, his mate, admitting me as partner by Australian diggers' law, we have now a sufficient standing to form a company of the whole tribe, developers and workers upon our real estate, and when we see fit to proclaim the silver fields we can also claim the Australian Government's award in more than one place.

“Our difficulties, our isolation, our right to dwell here, our natural family scruples in not wishing to proclaim our natural advantages to the outside world, can now, according to our decision, be made patent in a Court of Law to the satisfying in full of our own jurisdiction.

“There is sufficient mineral ground within our own boundaries for the whole of the families we have civilised here. It is already marked, shored up, and pegged out by myself and partners on the tribe's behalf since Cosgrave left.

“The rock crystal seal gave me the right to live here from the original light-coloured settlers on the land. My brother, Mansfield, only knows it as a family heirloom descending to the eldest son and as bearing our crest.

“But, according to its right, its peculiar and unassailable right and significance to these people here, from whom I got my name of Winadyne,

'sounding water,' the only claim I propose to hold, and of that but third share only, is the mummy claim on the Dry River, where my own name as prospector and partner of the dead man is recorded. Two-thirds of my own share of this claim when realised will go to John Solway's wife, if she is alive, and Mrs. Inglis, who deserves it, holds the other primal choice of the Bora silver from her own mark.

"I now claim the right of three Australian diggers conjointly with the two first prospectors to the Dry River claim. As for the rule that none is allowed to leave here, I annul it entirely. We can now neither prevent nor resist a further encroachment of civilisation beyond our own, but we are quite secure, and need not trouble ourselves for anything that may eventuate."

"Long live Winadyne," was the general murmur, and a band of women and girls began preparations for a banquet in the big hall.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LIFTING OF THE SOUTHERN CROSS

“Far from the haunting shadow of pain ;
Two by two, again and again,
Strephon and Chloe together move,
Walking in Arcady, land of love.”

—MARY COLBORNE VEEL.

“By Jove, Mr. Tom, that was a regular downright facer for my poor old blind father, and me too as his successor!” remarked young Cosgrave, as, with thoughtful brow, he and Tom paced backwards and forwards on the Doonabri recreation ground after the meeting. I told you old Winadyne was not going to put on his feather cloak for nothing.

“That Man in Dungaree let the cat out of the bag with a vengeance, didn’t he? Where is my father’s leadership and his tying of us up now? He can’t do as he likes. No, by Jove! that man whom we all thought to be our nominal Chief anyway has worked the oracle by neither hurrying nor botching the whole affair, but just biding his time until he had it all in a nutshell. Fancy him being a Sydney-sider after all. He ought to be—what do you call it, Mr. Tom?”

“Diplomatist; I daresay it’s bred in him. But

this is about the biggest mining venture I have ever been in, Cosgrave. What about the tribe?"

"They won't say a word against the Chief, bless you. They will do just as he suggests. They are bound hand and foot to him. He's got the biggest hold on them, and always had, to my mind. He has only been playing with father. But all this puts my shindy with your son into the background, and out of mere delight and satisfaction that I haven't got you and Mr. Waters into Queer Street, I'll go and ask him to cry quits."

Many Waters, Bianca, Alice Langley, Eula Cosgrave, and Langley, together with Everest, were arranging with many others the tables to accommodate the white principals of the race and the guest party at the meeting-house.

But presently Richard Cosgrave, led by the hand by Tom's son, came up, accompanied by young Cosgrave, and whilst the two young men broke into friendly conversation, Cosgrave senior requested Tom to lead him aside for a private talk.

"Yes, it's a wonderful piece of luck for you all, Mr. Tom. It was that native right that really bothered me as much as anything, and that blessed Charles Waters, or Winadyne, or the Man in Dungaree, nursed me in my illness after the accident, when I was cursing my luck, wild with myself and everyone else for weary weeks. I never heard a better manipulated piece of business in all my life. He bamboozled me, and I'm no baby. Well, he nursed me in my illness, and I've taken a fancy to him. So

did your wife, Miss Pearmain, and that boy of yours. Then Tommie volunteered to go to South Africa, and when I heard he was wounded I met him and took him to Europe to see if they could put him straight. You can see they've patched him up a bit, but he will always limp, I'm afraid. I love that boy better than my own son, because, God forgive me now, I have loved his mother, too, since she was a little girl, and I used to play about with her," and with a strangled sob Cosgrave broke down altogether.

"Cheer up, Richard," Tom said kindly. "All has come right, though hardly perhaps as we thought it would. I made a vow that I would kill you on sight if we ever met, because I thought you had abducted my wife and Miss Pearmain."

"I meant a fight to the finish also, after your challenge to me at that station of yours, but I had a meaner, more bitterly subtle nature than you had, and collared the child instead of meeting you fair, as I should have done if I had had any real right on my side. And the very man I bought to suborn your boy, Langley, made a little tin angel of him, so he hasn't come back to you as I should have made him, as I meant him to be—foul-mouthed, a drunkard, a liar, with lots of money to flash about with and break both your hearts. I've heard of Heaven tempering the wind to the shorn lamb, but I was a wolf in sheep's clothing more or less, and got my deserts."

Tom thought of Millie's words under the copper-leaved gum at Thuladjari lagoon, but said nothing; and as Cosgrave went on a great pity stole upon him

for the unfortunate man who had played him and his so false.

"But the kid, when I took him, showed such a liking for me, was so ready to go with me, that I soon nipped him into my buggy and made off with him. You wouldn't catch me easy once I made a start, that I knew, and you knew, but Mrs. Inglis and Miss Pearmain were close upon me and came right up here. Then Winadyne, the Man in Dungaree, played his cards down, submission and tact, and beat me by doing so. But that boy of yours—why, he liked me better as Nargun when I bellowed to scare him than at any other time. That's why I began to fancy the kid, after I stole him away with Mulga to the Cave. Don't take him entirely from me, Mr. Tom, now I'm blind. His mother and all her noble nature comes back to me in his voice, and I'm down again then at the old bush shanty seeing her take that jumping horse over the corner of the wire fence like a young queen. And think what a hero your son is now, in spite of me."

"*Your* son is a good sort, Dick; he loves me."

The broken-spirited man's hand sought for Tom's, and caught it in an iron grip.

"God speaking, Mr. Tom, to both of us," he exclaimed.

"Those two young fellows shall be, already are, the best of friends," rejoined Tom, with business-like alacrity. "I have an antimony mine over in New Zealand I can send your son to if he would like a change at any time. He thinks a lot of you, Dick he said so; and he loved his mother."

"Ah, well, she's gone now, and I struck him, Mr. Tom. Did he tell you that?"

"He did, and doesn't bear malice for it. He thought you the best man in the world before it. Now that you are blind and have suffered tribulation, he knows it."

"What I'm telling you now, Mr. Tom, no one knows. I only hinted at it in my speech to-night. I came here, as you will now understand from what I've said, full of bad intent. I'd been carrying on with a waddygālo girl at the Cave, with myself engaged to Miss Pearmain at the time. I killed a man when I got here, and it brought me bad luck. He was Eiya's promised man, and I shot him on that Bora silver ground—shot him dead, or he'd have killed me. Then I ran away with your little boy. I was going to make a blackguard of him all through spite and envy, but little Langley, the man I'd bought to sell your son's soul to the devil with, stepped in after my blindness and converted me little by little, so that it all came to nothing. I was going to educate the lad at first to break your heart all the more, going to play old Harry all round in my revenge upon you and yours. Then God turned it all the other way, and, though He's got my heart and understanding now, I've had to pay the sum I owed to my own conscience, aye, in bodily and mental suffering also, everything taken from me, even sight. But I still have the joy of knowing now that it was not worse than it is in regard to yourselves. If my sight had lasted, I might have injured you all past knowing.

So my lad said he thought I was the best man in the world! Did he now? He's a good-plucked youngster, isn't he, Mr. Tom?"

"He's full of courage, Dick, but you can lead him better by kindness and sympathy after you've once conquered his temper. He's hard to drive, but if he likes anyone he will do anything for them; and he is a fine-looking youngster now, and as white as my own lad."

"Ah, well! I haven't clapped eyes upon him since I struck him in the face, and never shall again. So you see how I've been cursed for my revengeful ways, my lust for gain, and how I have cursed others."

"What about the tribe, Dick?"

"They will obey Winadyne's word. It has been diamond cut diamond between us two all the time, and he never let me see it until just now. I'm played out, and he has always been a bit the smartest hand. What a nerve the man's got. I've had him covered with my rifle more than once. Jumped to his opportunities like a cat, and pulled the whole tribe through in spite of my opposition! Mere selfishness, you will say, because of my blindness! Well, perhaps it was; anyway, it seems so to me now. But that Dungaree chap, Charles Waters, eh? Who'd 'a' thought it? Hang me if I don't fair love him for his cleverness. There will be some more fine rides now on my *Gum Leaf* and your *Flying Fox* to get scrip and take up country and mining rights. Now's the chance for a bit of bush diplomacy, and, though I am blind, I shall enjoy circumventing everybody but ourselves. We

can take up all the land. I've always been an Ishmaelite, Mr. Tom, my hand against everybody else's, but now I'll work so hard that you and yours will win. Take me down to the sheds and let me go over your motor car. I can tell by the feel of my fingers exactly what she must be like.

"It's wonderful how I, a blind man, enjoy rushing through the air on that wonderful machine of mine, and hearing her talk to me, although I can neither steer nor see her go. I wired instructions to France for her before I left Australia, got her to Marseilles, and brought her out."

Later, when the guests met at the banquet, Charles Waters took the head of the table, with Petersen and the Hon. Burton Roderer, all attired in white linen garments, neither deadbeats nor despairing captives now, but gentlemen, and the outcome of that feast, native and to the manner born, did not lack rejoicing.

The ladies were attired in evening dress, with a native flower or two in their dress and hair. Different sorts of Doonabri wine were circulated, as well as many native dishes of fruits, comestibles, joints, and buffalo marrow-bones.

From far away, in the very middle of the repast, came the news by sound, read by the experts as from a book, that the report of the meeting and the Chief's decision had been spread through the watching outside circles, and their reply was: "We do as Winadyne wishes. We are his men."

Tom and Langley began to get very confidential towards the end of the meal. Seats had been shifted

and changed as though in a family gathering, and partial ceremony had vanished. The older people got together where family interests were concerned, and some of the younger guests formed themselves into limited liability companies, where a third partner did not intrude.

"Ladies and gentlemen," remarked Everest, suddenly and solemnly, in a voice which arrested all further conversation; then, rising with a brimming glass of wine in his hand, he said; "I drink to your future prosperity.

"Of all the strange chances and workings of Providence I shall be able to quote specially that of the Doonabri dwellers. It is one of those wonderful dispensations of the Almighty which prepare the way for great events to develop in their own due time as great and manifold blessings, both for the community, the individual, and the rest of the world. For I foresee towns developing into cities here, and a large and working population ever growing larger. Here in an oasis in the wilderness God has brought you together to be an united family, to found this ultimate destiny, since He has freed you from all discord and oppression. Here you have worked, laboured, and learned the true faith together, the faith that smoothed your path. It is a glorious outlook for you. May you go on and prosper. And that I shall live long enough to see you do so is one of the keenest desires of my heart. I should like to remain with you and become your pastor!"

There was a unanimous murmur of cordial assent.

"No one could be more welcome," affirmed Charles Waters genially. Then his brother Mansfield, rising, made a comprehensive bow.

"Beyond the present company, out in the working world, there must be an infinity of worries, but here, from your faces, there seem to be none whatever, and I really don't wonder at it when Dives is thrown into your balancing scale."

"*Quantum suff*," popped the Hon. Burton Roderer, with emphasis. He was at once pulled down into his seat, corked up again, addressed as Stumpy, and told to hold his tongue, while Many Waters went on:

"I never advertise more than I can help; but when I find an important member of my family here, not lost but gone before, so to speak, to prepare a bounteous feast and a large fortune for us all in remote parts of this Continent, why, I am overcome—even to the blush! I always expected he would turn up somewhere, and I see him now before me a successful Australian mining magnate, on what I myself consider is going to be a permanent silver field in several directions. It is a striking verity, almost too much to believe all at once, but being sure of it, I feel compelled to drink my worthy brother's health as I wonder how his family will take to city life in the not very distant future. How they will enjoy motoring in the Domain, from whence came their fortune, or in the Blue Mountains on their country villa visits. How they will take to yachting, motoring, etc., with always a helping hand in these mines. The idea is stupendous."

"Bah! stop your talking, Mansfield. I've heard of you, seen you, nearly felt in your pockets. Once I nearly borrowed half-a-crown from you, but our family pride stopped that."

"Where?"

"In the Sydney Domain, long years ago, the day of the night I heard the story from Stumpy. I had only the equivalent to it at mid-day, when I passed you."

"Well, you might have had more than that, and a dinner at the Club into the bargain. Surely the story of your wits failing you at any time in your life seems a rather broad statement just now? However, let that pass; I finish my glass to your health and a good journey, for of course you will now have to go and spend a lot of money in Sydney."

"You had better come and see us, when it happens, and take the opportunity of judging for yourself whether we can't treat you better, out of the trammels of a family pride which stood between us on a former occasion. I may have improved in a few respects."

"With pleasure, Charles. I hope your yachting will be on a large scale, as I have grown very fond of the sea."

So, with laugh, talk, and badinage, the banquet at Doonabri progressed to its close.

When over, the pairs sauntering about in the recreation grounds, and seated here and there in the starlight, were not easy to discern except by the very closest inspection of their own minds.

Tom and Millie Inglis, Many Waters and Alice

Langley, young Cosgrave and an heiress of the Silver Mines, young Inglis and Eula Cosgrave—all held a world of human hopes and surmises between them.

“Well, Miss Termagant,” Tommie Inglis was saying to Eula, “I think I shall go to Sydney with Charles Waters. I want a little flattery, perhaps some extra sympathy I don’t seem to get here, after all my trouble. Moreover, I shall probably marry a lady of title!”

“She would never have you, Tommie, with your limp. She’d soon get tired of you, game leg and all! I don’t see much to boast about in having your foot and leg nearly shot off. What a silly thing for a man to do!”

“You never see any merit in anything I go in for, or have done. When did you ever care for me in your life, Eula?”

“Never! I always hated you. Go and marry your titled lady—if you can find one. She will soon get sick of your aggravating ways.”

“Well, perhaps I had better, as they will all be starting soon. One thing I shall find the trip beneficial for,” he hinted darkly.

“Why?”

“To get out of your way,” he retorted.

“I want to ask you a question, Tommie,” she said, after a prolonged silence. “Was your father ever a soldier?”

“No, only a volunteer, like myself. What do you want to know for?”

"Well, because he has a certain expression in his eyes—a manly, determined look that I like. There's a look of him in you sometimes, only it doesn't become you as it does him. It seems to make you look hideous and cross. Just as you always are, you know—" and her voice broke.

"Shall we kiss and make friends, Eula?"

Miss Termagant, thus apostrophised, promptly wound herself about him in all her comforting, caressing, unrestrained love, whilst her beautiful eyes were suffused with tender thoughts.

"Shall I tell you when I first loved you?" she whispered contentedly at last, her fresh young mouth close against his.

"Yes, Sugar-plum, do!"

"When you lost your ability to run about, of course. From that very moment you belonged to me, my hero. You can't run about just as you would like to after other girls now. Oh, I know, you can't deceive me! And if they run about after you!—" Here the eloquent eyes, with the starshine in them, grew dangerous. "You belong to me. You really did belong to me always, only you couldn't see it. Oh, my darling, I love you ten times better with only your one sound leg than I ever did before—and when that began goodness knows. I can do all your fighting for you now for the rest of your life. We were born and made for each other, my darling old boy!"

"I'm getting old, very old," observed Many Waters sententiously to Alice Langley.

"Old, indeed! Nonsense! To me you are ever young," murmured the Emu girl in his ear. "Tell me you are old again, and I will—"

"What?" he asked, much pleased with the bright assurance of love he saw in her eyes.

"Give 'Many' kisses!" she replied—and did.

"Look there!" she added at length, indicating the "gem-pointed" Southern Cross with an eloquent forefinger. "It has taught us, sanctified us, drawn us together, has it not? From *De Profundis* let us sound the *Gloria in Excelsis*, and that constellation shall be our beacon, our lamp of light, crowned with all that we desire."

"I see all you have given me personally in your own eyes, my darling," Waters exclaimed. "The vision is quite distinct to me, there and there only, without the Cross!"

"Really a very pretty compliment," she murmured, blushing radiantly. "But let us go and join the others. It is getting late."

"How would that do?" whispered young Cosgrave to an heiress of the Great Silver Mining Right.

"The very thing!" she replied. "Absolute secrecy."

As for Tom and Millie, in their young people they had much to think about, enjoy, and look forward to. The silver lining had come to their cloud of deep sorrow in joyous purpose, and with a last look ere they retired from their verandah at the beauties of

the star-spangled firmament, where the Cross rode triumphant, it gave what seemed a lingering farewell to them amongst the caresses of the scents from Millie's flower garden.

Next morning they were reminded, as Millie prepared Tom's breakfast in the old, old manner, of one who, though absent, they would fain have with them.

"Let us write him a letter," she said merrily. "Old times don't seem quite the same without him."

And afterwards, when Tom had taken the absent one's place and helped to dry her dishes and set them away in their proper places, the pair sat down and accomplished the following:

"DEAR JIM,—We are all very much alive over here, where the old seeds of promise seem to be developing into a great family tree, with silver apples upon the branches.

"Be careful to hint nothing of this information to any outsider, but you learned that wisdom at the Cave. Let Sanders take over the management of the Antimony Mine, and come to us forthwith, where you will find your old sweetheart, who has waited for you all the time.

"TOM AND MILLIE INGLIS."

"And who is to take the letter?" Tom asked,

when the missive that held such free counsel and important advice was enclosed and addressed.

"Young Cosgrave, of course," his wife replied. "I have spoken to him about it."

"He is waiting to be married, my dear one. Had we not better get him tied up first. Bachelors are so very irresponsible, you know. Look at my experience!"

She laughed merrily.

"Come over to Everest, dear," was all she said.

So there were some deeply-interested couples and many witnesses at these espousals in Langley's little church, not long afterwards, where he presided at the organ and provoked chords of symphony no one but himself could have got out of the little battered instrument. Everest tied the true lovers' knots very firmly, and the breakfast was a marvel.

But young Cosgrave, who had been mated to a daughter of the Man in Dungaree, an heiress of the Great Mining Right, caused general surprise by expressing his desire to start for his chartered destination by himself that very night, despite malignant innuendoes about a moon with no honey in it."

It caused wonder that during the rest of the day he seemed to be taken up more with the gear of his father's new motor car than with the bride, but the laugh against him turned to verjuice in the mouths of his slanderers when it was found that his newly-wedded wife had slipped off with him,

and envy crept into collateral circles when it became plain that this couple meant to enjoy their bridal trip in their own way.

In due time Bianca Pearmain and James Terry were united, and to all the living performers under the great dome chandelier of the Southern Cross that summer night, as they assembled behind their own silver-reflecting footlights on the otherwise dark orb, great prosperity came.

The last to take a sort of contingent farewell must be the Honourable Burton Roderer, scion of a noble and unembarrassed stock, and as his comings and goings hitherto have been generally melodramatic, it is hardly to be expected that his exit can be otherwise.

He was in company with Charles Waters when he made his last remarks.

"Poor Solway!" he remarked. "He suffered and died. But, by Jove, sir, he left his mark!"

"Now, I wonder where I come in?" the Man in Dungaree remarked vindictively. "I tell you what it is, Burton, my boy, if it hadn't been for me, and me only, you would never have shone here in the grandiloquent title you now assume, but would still be in your confounded rock hollow. I sometimes wish I had left you there to work out your own destiny."

"*Quantum suff*" said Stumpy, relapsing into smoke-wreaths of retrospect and contemplation, from which he once again emerged to add: "It's digestion, not destiny, that rules the world."

L'ENVOI.

Wreathing blue of camp-smoke
Where the Thistle stings ;
Austral voices calling
Where the Shamrock clings ;
Eucalypti broadcast
Where the Rose-bee wings ;
Maple, Palm, and Rimu
Sharing equal things.
Assets of the Empire's
Mighty issuings.
Growing Nations worldwards
Loyal offerings,
Mundane, seaborne, levin
Deep sea mutterings.
Britain, know your children,
Servants of your King's.

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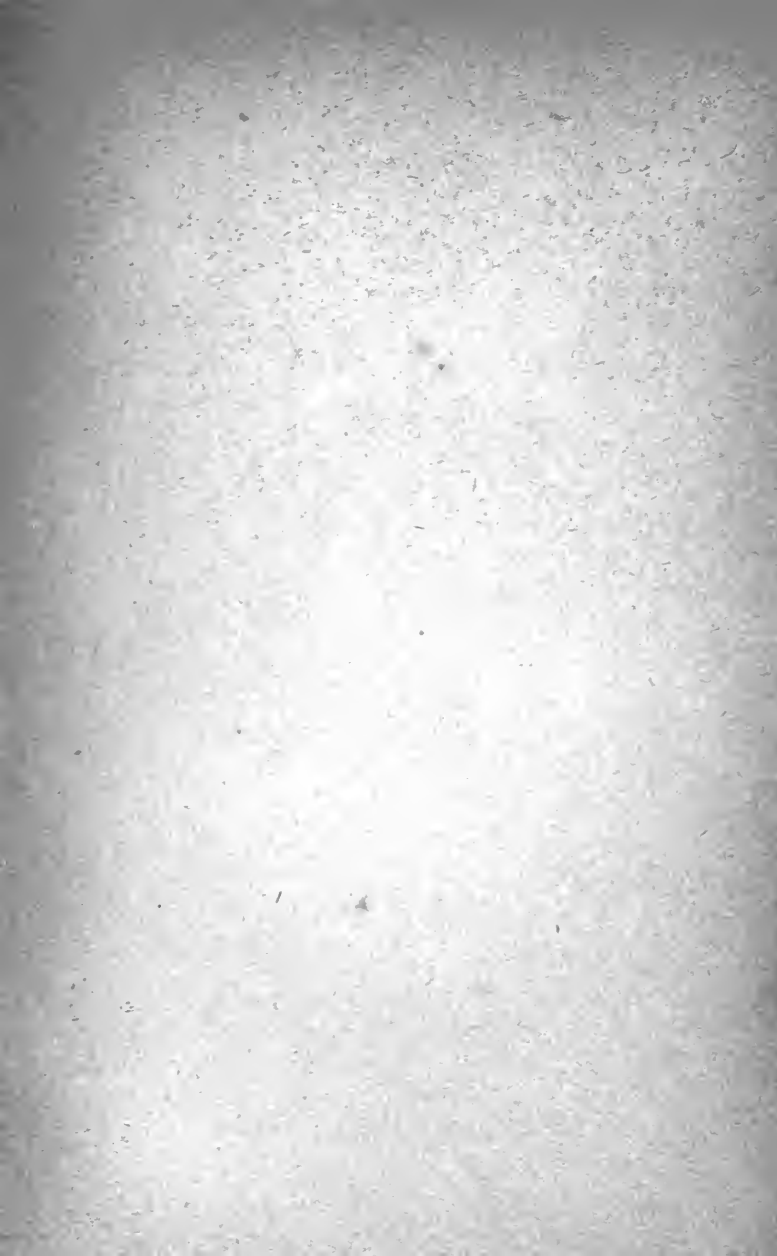
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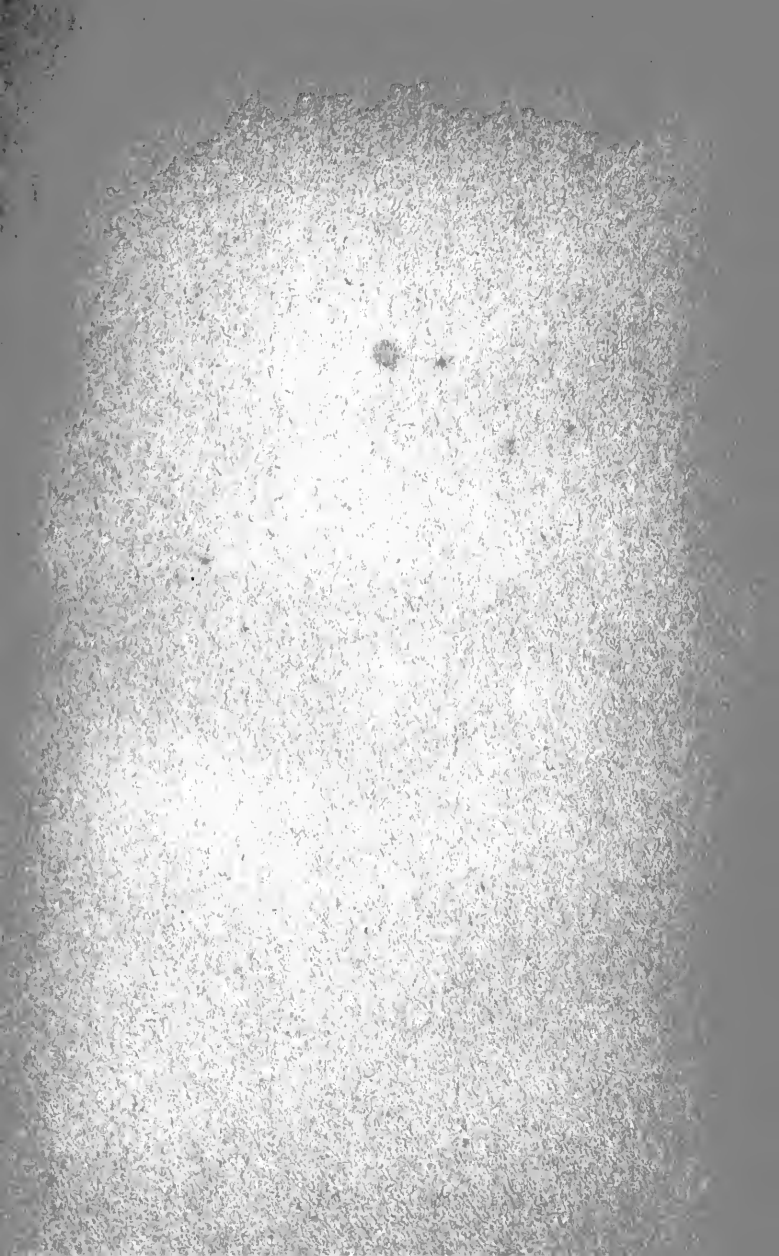
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