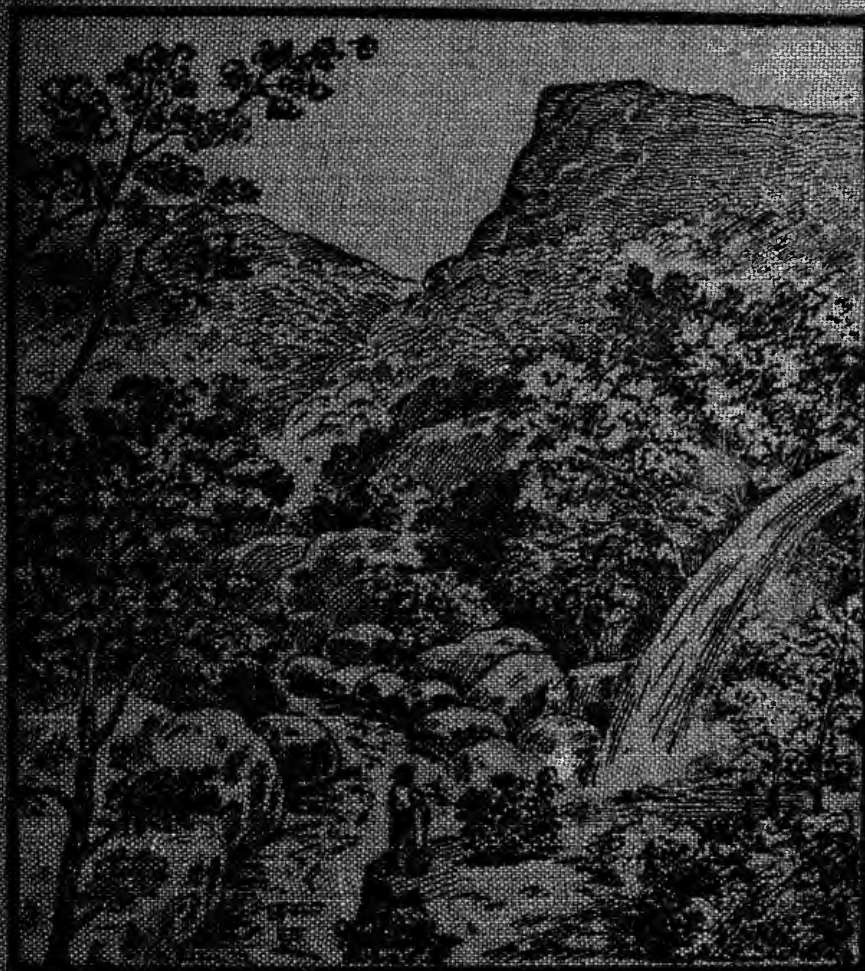


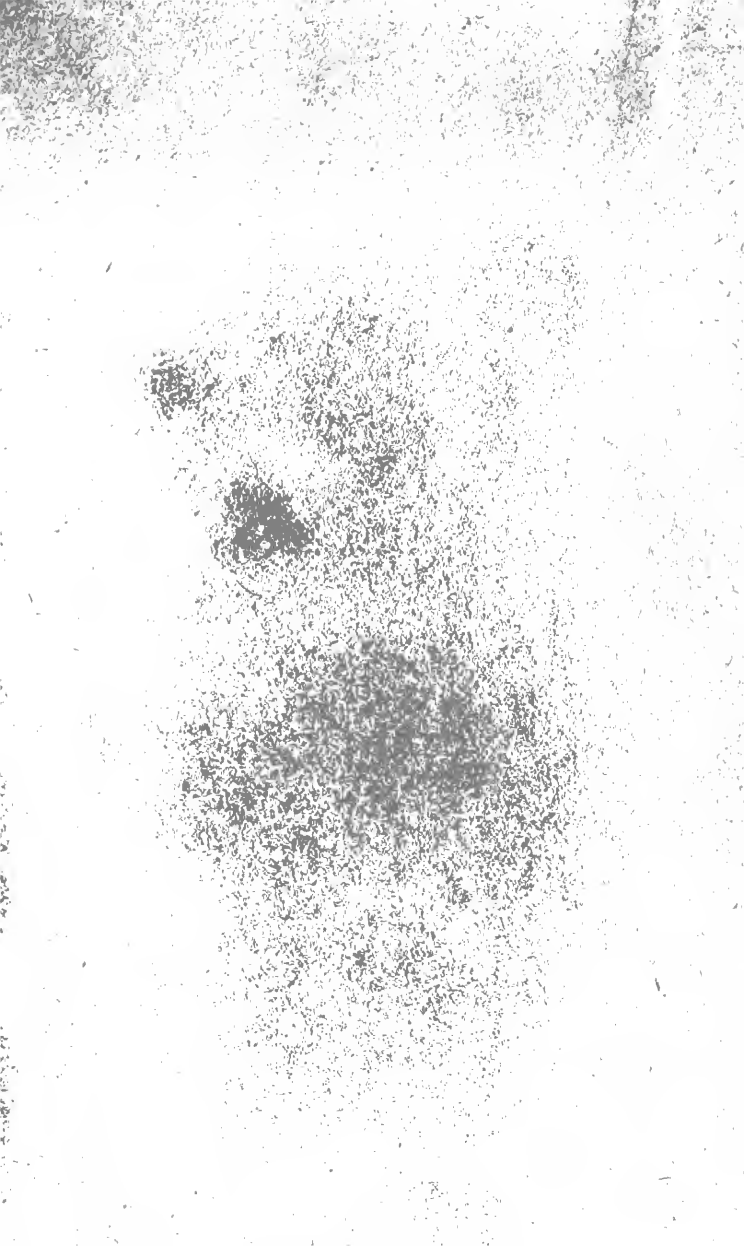
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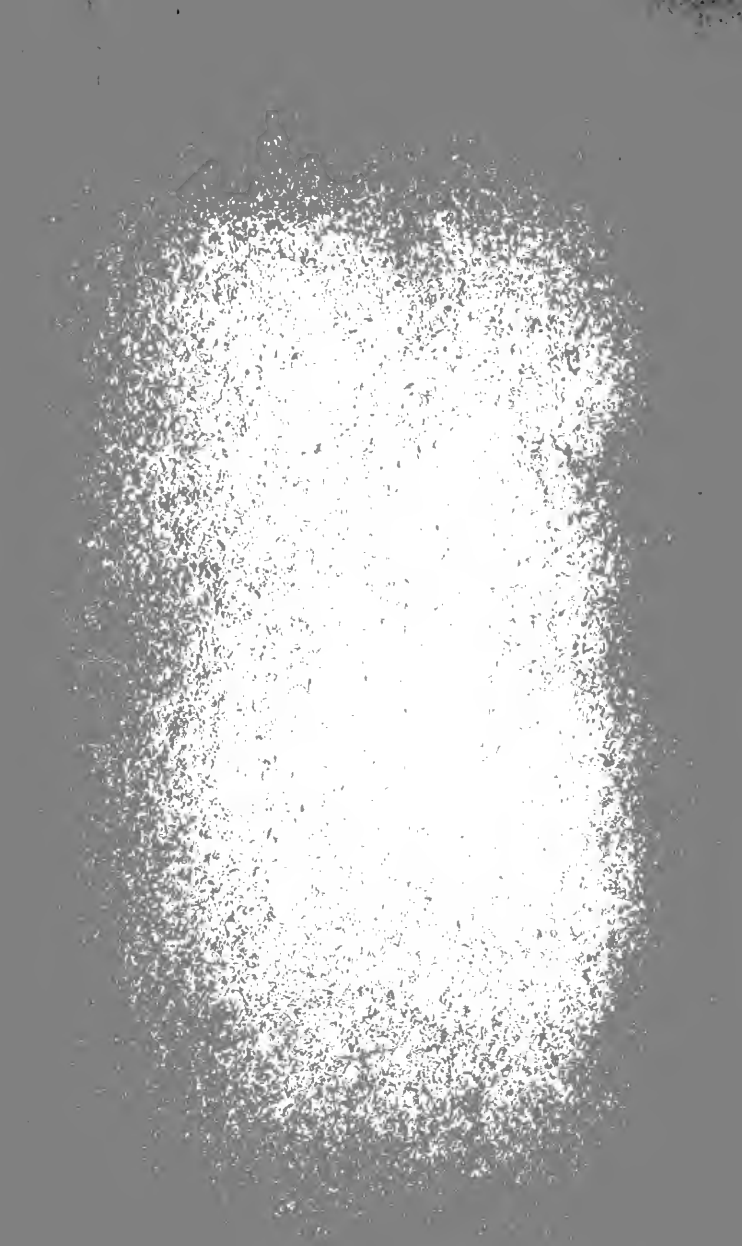
BY "COO-EE"
(WILLIAM SYLVESTER WALKER)





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WHAT LAY BENEATH

A Story of the Queensland Bush

BY

“COO-EE”

(WILLIAM SYLVESTER WALKER)

*Author of “The Silver Queen,” “When the Mopoke Calls,” “From
the Land of the Wombat,” “Native Born,” “Virgin Gold,”
“In the Blood,” “Zealandia’s Guerdon,” etc.*



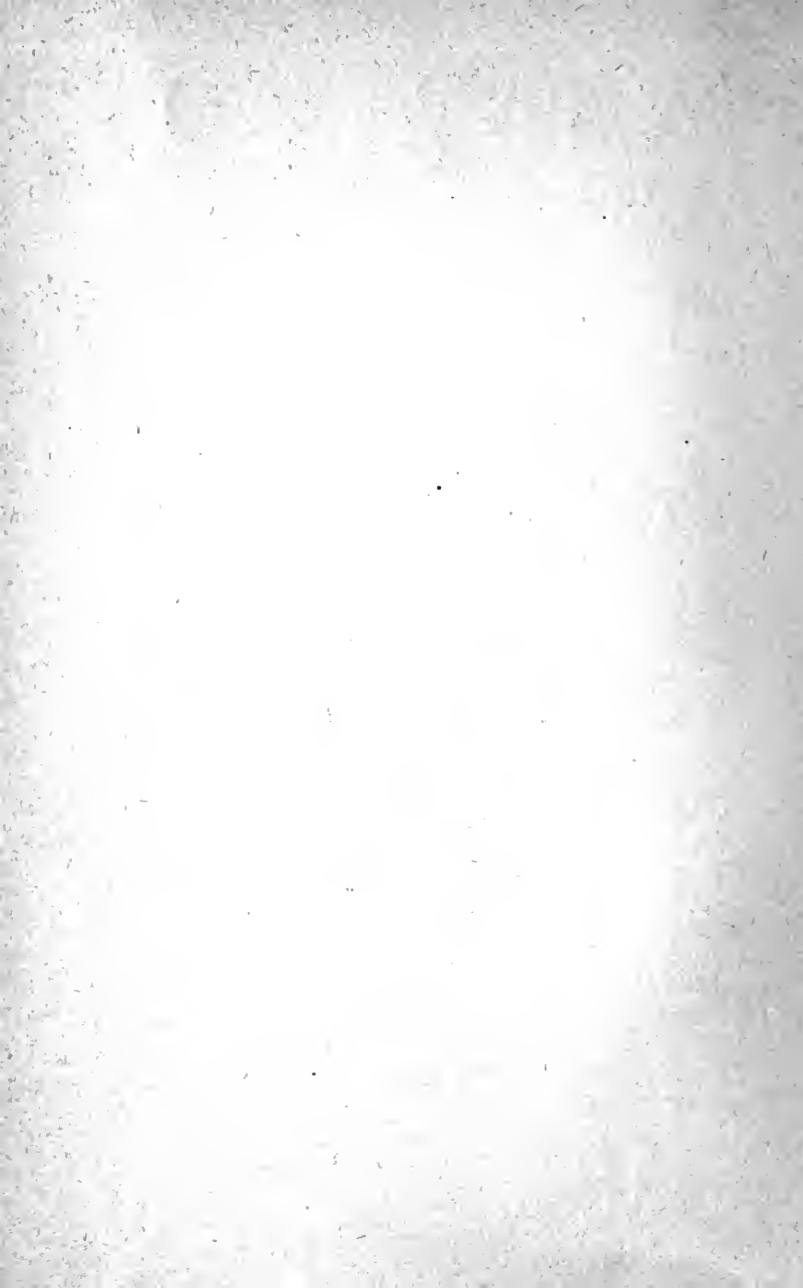
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CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| I The Loot of the Land | 9 |
| II A Bushland Queen | 20 |
| III Two in a Coach | 33 |
| IV Ruin | 49 |
| V Franks | 58 |
| VI At Austen's Hut, and Afterwards | 68 |
| VII The Black Snake | 78 |
| VIII The Plotting of Levi and Another | 93 |
| IX The Black Kangaroo Mine | 105 |
| X The Menace of the South | 119 |
| XI Love in a Motor Car | 128 |
| XII A Waste Place | 136 |
| XIII Lured by the Bell-Birds | 151 |
| XIV The Promised Land | 163 |
| XV The Ways of a Maid | 172 |
| XVI The Twittering of the Cockatoo Parrakeet | 183 |
| XVII Pride's Fall | 195 |
| XVIII At Large | 204 |
| XIX "The Priest" | 213 |
| XX A Travelling Show | 220 |
| XXI Hue and Cry | 226 |
| XXII United | 233 |
| XXIII A Terror of the Bush | 242 |
| XXIV The Court of Half Evidence | 253 |
| XXV Conroy's Haven | 263 |
| XXVI Levi Again | 272 |
| XXVII The Mysterious Lights | 277 |
| XXVIII Innocent and Guilty | 284 |
| XXIX The Grave's Gatherings | 291 |
| XXX McLeod's Deductions | 295 |

“THE SILVER QUEEN”

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE TIMES says:—“This is a story by a popular Australian writer of adventure in the bush, mine-prospecting, aboriginal customs, and the dealing of black with white. It is a curious, out-of-the-way kind of tale, spread over a good many years, and of interest.”

THE SCOTSMAN says:—“From a memory richly stored with reminiscences of Australia, Mr. Walker has garnered many of the incidents in this tale of the Northern Territory. He gives faithful pictures of the existence of the old-time settlers and the natives, and the descriptions of the country have in them a certain poetic charm.”

THE AGE (Melbourne) says:—“The book leaves no room for doubt as to the fertility of the author’s brain in ideas, for it is full of romantic incidents. The story is entertaining.”

THE YORKSHIRE POST says:—“A bright and stirring study of adventure in the bush and coast life in the northern territory of Australia as a reminiscence of his early pioneering days. Incidentally he assures his readers that Australia is still calling for men of pluck and industry who are willing to work. . . . It will please the readers of romantic fiction.”

THE NORTH DEVON CHRONICLE, in a half-column review, says:—“Mr. Walker has evidently a deep acquaintance with the tribal customs of his native country, and this knowledge he supplements with a fertile imagination, the result being a procession of weird and mysterious objects and incidents, blood-curdling to their witnesses, but subsequently explained upon perfectly natural grounds. . . . The work is true to Nature, and gives no idea of straining after effect.”

THE GLASGOW NEWS says:—“It is full of wild adventures in the Australian bush, secret caves, savage blacks, an unknown country surrounded by a waterless desert and impenetrable forest, and, in short, everything that goes to make the average boy happy in his fiction.”

THE NORTHERN WHIG (Daily) says:—“Holds the reader’s interest through many curious scenes and side issues . . . the book is capitally written. . . . The author takes his readers into an entirely new world—both above ground and below. The book is full of thrilling adventures, and gives ample evidence

of the author's accurate knowledge of the country he writes about."

The NOTTINGHAM DAILY GUARDIAN Literary Supplement says:—"The plot is elaborately constructed . . . and there is a lot of good material in the story."

THE MANCHESTER CITY NEWS says:—"The human trend of the subject is concerned with the love of Tom Inglis, a young stock raiser, and his wife Millie. She and her young son are led away by the schemes and intrigues of one Richard Cosgrave. The author always remembers that his chief aim must be to maintain interest, and this aim he is successful in achieving."

The OXFORD CHRONICLE says:—"Oxford (University) men will be interested to hear that the well-known Australian writer, 'COO-EE' (Mr. William Sylvester Walker, scholar of Worcester College), has written a new book, 'The Silver Queen.' 'COO-EE' is the Kipling of Australia and New Zealand, and his latest work is considered the most attractive he has yet penned."

THE MANCHESTER (DAILY) COURIER says:—"The author, under the *nom-de-plume* of 'COO-EE,' has proved himself to be one of the ablest of Australian story-tellers. He is thoroughly acquainted with Australian life. He carries on his reader with attractive interest."

The ABERDEEN DAILY JOURNAL (Half-column review, Aug. 12) says:—"Is weirdly and irresistibly fascinating."

THE CHRISTIAN HERALD says:—"The strange adventures of the Man in Dungaree, the account of the Kiraltai, and the weird happenings in the Cave of the Red Hand, are worthy of the author of 'King Solomon's Mines,' and any young and adventurous spirit who still dreams of finding Australia a veritable Tom Tiddler's ground, should read this book and ponder well ere deciding to venture on a life full of hazard. Mr. Walker is keen on his subject, and hands his enthusiasm over to his readers, for the interest never flags, but is well-sustained to the very last page."

THE ABERDEEN FREE PRESS says:—"The author has lived his life in Australia, and loved it with all his heart. Much that he writes about is strange and even uncanny to us who do not know the country . . . the situations are dramatic and often startling. A good deal of information about Australia can be gathered throughout the book. Its tone also is a high one."

THE GLASGOW HERALD says:—"The book abounds in adventures . . . a series of wonderful events."

And fifty more good Press Notices.

TO LUCY, LADY DARLEY,
*with the Author's sincere affection
and respect.*

WHAT LAY BENEATH

CHAPTER I

THE LOOT OF THE LAND

A FLASK of gunpowder flared scarlet in the sunshine, a vivid spot of colour all by itself, amid the grey-blue gravel and dry sand patches of an Australian creek bed.

A geologist's hammer, a double-barrelled gun, a miner's pick and shovel, were other accessories of scenic effect, but lay nearer to the foreground at the feet of the actors. A large "billy" standing near a camp fire was flanked by three tin plates and pannikins. Saddles, pack-saddles, bridles, and blankets were all strewn about in picturesque confusion, and an Australian crow (*Corvus vastatrix*) croaked slowly and banefully from the topmost branch of a tall dead gum tree on an adjacent bank. All things spoke of loneliness, haste, departure; a waiting and a flitting.

The spot on the world's surface was a wilderness interior in Queensland, and the dry bed of the watercourse, where the inanimate objects were disposed so carelessly, showed a length of one hundred and fifty yards between deep blue water-holes surrounded by long whispering bulrush beds.

Two men in a corner of the creek bed were peering critically and carefully at something which was just being panned off by the smaller of them

in a gold-prospecting dish. In the distance, a third human being wandered restlessly and systematically in search of botanical specimens.

The man holding the pan, in the nearer foreground, swirling the water round for the grains and pennyweights of prospect, was Arthur Franks; his companion, a strong, handsome, bearded man of great stature, Rudolph Delamayne; whilst Austen Conroy was the name of the dreamer and botanist in the background.

Suddenly the man with the gold-dish whispered to Delamayne, although Conroy was far out of hearing.

“Better say nothing about this. You know what Conroy is, what he can't help being. He'd blab the secret to the whole country, and that would never do. We don't want to be driven out of these grand new areas of discovery, and if we let him know all about it, we shall have but another of his pet reformation schemes exerted over a big mining camp, with an exhortation to the populace to study botany, whilst he treats them all to champagne, high living, and the odds on the racecourse.

“Old man, the indications are most uncommon. Rich oxidised blister copper together with a wonderful mass of gold copper from a deep level. See how the gold here, a specimen which, by the way, I procured elsewhere, is powdered through the quartz until it is almost solid. It will yield on an average 300 ozs. per ton. The matrix of this other particular nugget I now hold between my finger and thumb, which contains our fortunes, should bear East by some few degrees North. My theory is that this bit of the main reef has been hove

up somehow from a lower level from where a section of the ore is cut above us by water erosion in the creek. Yes, we shall peg out millionaires, but we must be as secret as the grave. The copper alone reveals 98 per cent. crude to the ton, with 11 ozs. of pure gold."

"Should—a—man—bo—ast?" the crow overhead seemed to croak.

Arthur Franks was a mining expert, well-read, well-experienced, a born bushman, a friend and intimate associate of both Delamayne and Conroy. But the latter had always refused to be stirred by any particular thrill of emotion except that occasioned by his one own beloved and absorbing hobby, botany, his whole nature seeming to be tintured strongly with its latent anodynes, as if he were a chemist, dispensing his drugs for the benefit of all mankind.

"But where is the rest of the great body of the ore?" Franks asked confidentially of Rudolph Delamayne. "Is it up or down the creek? Well, I have proved it to be both, divergent here from elsewhere. Only two days ago I was after wallaby and pigeons, amongst those intervening hills verging on the big river. Well, I shot at a black tree-kangaroo, and could just see him give a great spring forward as I fired, and then disappear bodily over a deep cliff, to the bottom of a gully. Getting down for his carcass, which I saw lying below, I found an opening in the cliff at the ground level. Here a portion of the lode of this oxidized gold-copper ore itself is exposed, and easy to work without anyone being the wiser. But I kept it all quiet until I carried out my theory under crucible tests, and preserved the skin of the tree-climbing

marsupial as a memento of my discovery, and a name to the climax of our fortunes.

“Now this is my plan. We’ll use this godsend of our travel unknown to anyone. I found an excellent location beyond the rolling hills for you and I to knock up a bush hotel at, not very far from this creek’s junction with the river. There we will establish a secret and timely look-out station, parcelling out the division of our new rights or spoils, or whatever else you choose to call them, amongst ourselves. Conroy wouldn’t join us if we told him, he’s too cantankerous, too alert to give it away, doesn’t know enough for my purposes, and I’m not going to have this great gift of Nature ruined by a chance outsider like him. If, at any time, population comes this way, we can secure ourselves by getting mining rights. It’s a very big thing indeed, but not unprecedented. When we get down to Brisbane again, we will only take up a large stretch of this country, as a blind to the general public, on pastoral leases only, which will hold the run of the gold reef—it is iridescent sandstone and leached quartz on top, sure signs of the double value, for there is this copper-gold ore amongst it and even almost crude blister copper, carrying one to twelve ounces of gold per ton to its own 98 per cent. of raw metal. It’s a billionaire’s nest, that’s what it is. Under my plan we will work our present knowledge out, so as to prepare for a bright and prosperous ending for our united selves, without anyone but you and me being the wiser in the interim. Do you see my drift?”

His companion nodded shrewdly, exultantly, and Franks put some small specimens of the rich

oxidized ore he had collected away in a small leather pouch, after first carefully wrapping them up in old rags. Then he went over to the fire, and, lighting his pipe with a small, glowing, aromatic wood ember—the best pipe-light in all the world—came back to throw himself down on the grassy slope of the creek bank nearest to his companion, in deep and earnest thought.

Delamayne stretched himself out and followed suit with a wax match. He was a man luxuriously inclined, indolent, fond of riches, but a strong man for all that. Blowing a cloud into the pure air, he watched somewhat intently certain spirals of tobacco smoke as they circled over his head.

“The letter D,” he said, suddenly, with an expression now void of any satisfaction and with lowering brow. “Does that mean Discovery, Disaster, or Death, Arthur? Tell, oh prophet; I don’t like the omen at all. Hear that damned crow!”

“Dilatory dividends, possibly, in relation to Conroy, ourselves, and the world at large. But get out of that!” Franks shouted the last words, and threw a water-worn pebble, with a remarkable sudden access of energy and good aim, at the croaking bird overhead, and went on: “We haven’t the cash to make a public display of it yet, and unless we negotiate our chances entirely my way—the only proper and safe one at present—we shall be fooled out of our venture. Let Conroy, with his money, take up this country where we are now, and stock it with cattle, as he intends to do. That’s the first part of my scheme. It’s as easy as falling off a log to us, and we can take Conroy into partnership later, when he is about bankrupt, not

before. Let him build his houses and herbariums here by the big water-hole, whilst we locate indiscriminately by the lower end of the creek some distance back from the main river, to watch, ward, and work. I have my own knowledge of the direction the reef will run in, as well as what it is likely to be worth to us."

"Where will it run to, sonny?" asked Delamayne, more cheerful now.

"Why, to where we will locate, of course, in our bush hotel, and back here again to where we will build Conroy's houses. We will erect both family settlements right over the level of the lode for our own security, so that we can import our whole tribe of McGregors and McLeods as shareholders and working partners. They are staunch and true retainers, as you know, wonderfully clannish and ready to do any mortal thing for either of us. What should we have done on any of our former mining ventures, aye, or elsewhere, without McLeod's planning work? He will, of course, now manage for Conroy. But who would have ever thought, when we planned this expedition, that we were again going to stumble on the old Rhadamanthus which let us in for such a loss before, that we were reduced to hotel keeping in Brisbane, in an endeavour to keep our heads above water!"

The three Overlanders, who had been travelling for a fortnight beyond the last verges of civilization, were a private party, ostensibly looking for pastoral country. Franks and Delamayne had been mining mates for some years in the past, and after many ups and downs had saved just enough to enable them to take over the good-will of an

hotel in Brisbane, nothing more. To the billiard room there one day had strayed in a late arrival from the Old Country, Austen Conroy by name. His unsophisticated manners, backed by apparently unlimited resources, won the hearts and ideas of the partners, and they, as old bushmen and traders, had jumped at the idea of forming a station for him in new country, as well as from the grand notion of a real bush holiday for themselves. So they had left Mrs. Delamayne to manage the business in their absence, and send her ten-year-old daughter to school. And they had thus come, where we meet them, across their great discovery.

They had both benefited greatly in health by the trip, and, it being a good season, had kept the expedition going with native game easily enough, but, losing Austen Conroy on one occasion when he had ridden off on his own account and got over a range into the very place they were now on, they had rested for a few days in its neighbourhood, thoroughly exploring the vicinity and being charmed with its conformation and characteristics, for the breeding and fattening of stock, but at its realistic conclusion still opined that Conroy was entitled to the most of the fruits of their discovery when the time came to hand it over to him.

Conroy was a married man as well as Delamayne, and had left his wife under Mrs. Delamayne's care, so that all three explorers had really little to worry about at first starting, until the potentiality of Franks' disclosure upset all calculations and proved a drift of excitement beyond everything else to himself and Delamayne. Conroy had money, as aforesaid, but, the flora of all countries having far more attraction for him

than gold-bearing stone of any description, had lost himself more than once on the road in his one and only quest, because he was no bushman and quite incapable of looking after himself if he wandered out of the sight of their camp fires. However, this very fact of his wayward character had founded their fortunes, and they rejoiced in the aphorism without blaming him more than in pointed sarcasm.

"He'll spend all his coin in conservatories and plants to stock them with, I verily believe," observed Delamayne, carelessly enough now, in absolute merriment with his present surmises and position—so differently exciting from his late lazy town life. "We can run both establishments, Arthur, now I think of it, up here and down in Brisbane, and we'll build Conroy's station for him, as you say, on that fine elevated plateau above our heads at the top end of the biggest water-hole, in order that you may have your eyes about when it is building. The water-hole here is very deep; I couldn't bottom it when bathing."

"And never trouble about mining leases until we are cocksure of the whole thing as the men in possession," rejoined Franks, easily, with his mind still on his one subject. "To have the ownership of the land is nine points of the law, after all, and we'll fence it in until it becomes a private estate, getting Conroy to secure whole blocks of it if we find it worth while. We can then work the oracle at our leisure and in our own due time. Yes, we'll run the double hotel concern as well as the underground one. We've got inception there. Town may be a convenient get-away sometimes to sell the gold on the quiet, and I vote we start back to-night."

2

"Here's Conroy. Mum's the word, old man."

"Right you are," answered Delamayne, enthusiastically.

"See here, my friends," Conroy exclaimed, hurrying forward with a handsome pink flower of about the same hue as his face, "I've found a new Callistemon. I was really not aware they grew so far away from the coast. This species is larger and more deeply coloured than any other I have seen hitherto."

His companions smiled, literally behind their hands, noticing all things, especially their unintentional victim's innocence. They got up and replenished the fire, filled the billy with water, and made arrangements for a meal.

Conroy began to sort his botanical treasures, and when the repast was ready, joined them.

"Johnnies on the coals, wood-duck stew, puftalooona pudding," Franks, the *chef*, exclaimed with pride. "Pile in, Conroy. You look as if the exercise and open air served well with you, and you've actually annexed some rose-pink with your sun tan. Better that colouring than that attained with devil's pool, curacoa and brandy, attending the races, taking odds on the winner of the Brisbane Cup, or otherwise sporting your spondulicks in double backing all the pools we played. What do you think, my son?"

"The calyx tube is actually three lines long," observed Conroy rapturously, as he took the edibles handed to him.

"And our journey some three hundred, old man, so we've got to hurry up," rejoined Franks, with acerbity. "Hard lines for you. We're going to-

night, and are going to build an hotel in your neighbourhood, so as to keep you company."

"That will be just about the right thing to do, I should imagine. It will be so like old times down in Brisbane again, won't it? and we shall all be together as before," observed the botanist, as he pegged heartily into the edibles. "Yes, the country interests me vastly. It does, indeed. I've got a Harpullia, a new Euphorbia, a Callicoma, and a Crowea."

"Ah, glad to hear it. There was a crow here cawing most dismally, and annoying us, until I persuaded him to leave. We have been planning a sort of mutual provident society whilst you were away, old man, though there's lots of time to tell you all about that. But primarily we are going to build your station houses on the left bank of this fine creek, so you will be able to plant and preserve just what herbs and flowers you like. It's a limited liability affair as far as we've gone at present, so you needn't concern yourself at all about it until we tell you, but you will have to pay the piper for the greater part of its commencement, as usual, for we are far too stoney broke for that lay. In return we'll look after your stock, brand and breed up for you, don't you see, and you can mind the matters that most concern and interest you."

"All right," said Conroy, happily. "You're dear, good fellows, and it will suit me and mine down to the ground, I am sure of that."

"Or under it," darkly muttered Franks. "Come and get the horses, Delamayne," he cried, changing the subject abruptly. "Conroy, don't you budge an inch from that fire until we come back, or you'll get lost again, and we mightn't find

you next time. We must be off, as I want to get scrip for taking up this new country before we are dispossessed by any others.

“Your pressed specimens will go in old Bally’s pack this time, for safety; so you needn’t worry about ’em,” he added to the botanist, pausing with a bridle over his arm. Then he joined Delamayne, to bring up the horses.

Five days later the dry bed of the watercourse was deep under the strong, whirling eddies of a flood; the stream ran level from bank summit to bank summit. All was primeval wilderness again, but now and then through the daylight hours, or even during the moonlit nights, an old man kangaroo of the common red species, accompanied by his family, would hop up to the brinks of the flooded creek on either side and, raising himself to his full height, keep his nostrils a-twitch and ears a-cock, as he stared at the running water. Then he would drop quietly to all fours and feed about with his does and progeny until they all hopped off slowly to the ranges again.

CHAPTER II

A BUSHLAND QUEEN

TEN years have passed, ten full years of secret toil and anxiety, and James Forsyth Conroy, the only son of the dreamer and botanist, who had been left in England to be educated, was seated at a Sunday morning service in a certain college chapel at Oxford, gazing intently at a kangaroo carved on the back of the pew seat immediately in front of him.

His hand touched it in farewell, for he was going to where it originated.

The lectern in the nave below him, just beyond the pulpit, bore another symbol of immediate transition for him as far as its wings suggested, for the Bible Clerk of the day was reading the second lesson from the Holy Book, supported above the outstretched pinions of a brazen eagle.

The young man had received the news of his father's sudden death in Australia by letter. All his debts had been paid lately by some mysterious hand, and the passage money sent him was ample for all emergencies.

"See McLeod at Brangal Downs, Queensland," was the only locality in the scant words of the cablegram he had also received, and he had to suffice with that.

He knew Brangal Downs was his father's

station, but, having corresponded little with either of his parents for some time past, was absolutely ignorant of transpiring events; all he now knew was that his immediate presence was required at the Antipodes, and he held himself prepared to follow his instructions as far as they went.

He had now, in deference to this peremptory summons, done with the University altogether, and he was the more ready to go because he assumed that his inheritance, a goodly one indeed, as he had been taught to imagine it, lay on the under side of the world. So his mind flew off after it not unwillingly.

With the few passing hours that brought the sun back to the chorusing birds in the bush around the "Travellers' Rest," in far-away Queensland, a very beautiful girl in deep mourning stood at a glass door which opened from a large, well-furnished room on to a broad, flat, shady verandah festooned with passion flowers and fruit.

The "Rest," as the bush hotel was familiarly called, a well-built structure of wood, was shingled, chimneyed, painted, portalled, and partitioned most amply, thus bearing all signs of long and continuous prosperity. A fine garden, both for flowers, vegetables, and fruit of various kinds enclosed it beyond a strong, white, painted fence, where might have been seen pineapples and loquats. The hotel was a between-stage for the mail coaches, an up-to-date halting place now, but many travellers passing up and down the main river road that ran beyond the enclosures did not diverge as a rule to trespass on their inner lintels, nor troubled either to explore towards Brangal Downs—the great cattle station which lay away up

the creek on the other side of the intervening hills—because they had no interest in it. They, the main body of travellers, some exceptions being allowed for casual acquaintances, naturally kept on past the “Rest” on the main road, for the reason that a large township lay some miles further on, and the hostelry was a good bit out of their track. So that Brangal Downs enjoyed all its own primeval loveliness and solitude as in the past without interruption, even from the mail coaches or stray horsemen.

When Franks and Delamayne had first built the “Rest,” there were no people in the district, and they had a motive in not selecting the river frontage. They had been the pioneers of this part of the inner road, and kept up their name and fame. The hostelry had been a success somehow, not always shown by the bar trade, until Delamayne and his wife died, and were followed by the Conroys, of Brangal Downs.

Now only Franks, considerably out of his usual habit, was dispensing drinks surreptitiously at the front bar of the “Rest” to a quick moving and motley panorama of chance travellers on horseback, who had made a sudden and unlooked-for intrusion. He seemed to be in a state of semi-inebriety, and took little personal notice of anyone there except two men, at whom he cast furtive and rather alarmed glances every now and then.

When the passing contingent had gone, and he was just about to congratulate himself upon their departure, he heard a buggy drive up to the other side of the house, where the girl was, and shortly afterwards a deep masculine voice mingling with hers resounded from the best parlour.

He slipped through the bar to listen, taking possession of the keyhole of a door in the hall passage, and reaching it just in time to hear this statement :

“Now dot transagtion is gomblede, Miss Delamayne,” the deep, rich tones were saying, “Prangal Towns is yours. Levinstein Brothers will be quite satisfied mit your endorsements. I haf brought der bapers.”

Levi Levinstein, the very good-looking junior partner of the firm at the township where the main river road led to, now produced two documents from the breast pocket of his frock-coat, placed a chair by a table for his fair client, dipped a pen in ink for her, and bent over, gallantly adjusting the sheets, a deference and very much intended chivalry, to the great amusement of the concealed spy, who evidently rated him not as his somewhat conceited bearings advertised.

When Bronzewing had placed her signature at the spot indicated on both documents, Levinstein handed her one and took possession of the duplicate. With old-fashioned courtesy, mixed with a good deal of “side,” he then nodded his adieux, kissed her outstretched hand, put on his tall silk hat, and went briskly into the verandah where his harnessed horse stood quietly by, jumped up into the driving seat, and, unfastening his reins from the splashboard, drove away towards the township.

And the watcher on the other side of the passage door chuckled audibly.

Miss Delamayne sat quite still with her voluminous legal document smoothed out upon the table in front of her, and was apparently lost in deep thought.

“So that’s all right, Poppet,” exclaimed the spy, entering suddenly and without knocking. He seemed strangely sober. “And about in the nick of time, too,” he continued. “‘Kangaroo’ Austen was one of the crowd who rushed me unawares just now. He asked after you; there was another big man with him whom I don’t know and don’t like, so I told them I had come up to take you back to Brisbane—heaven forgive me for the lie. I think Austen must have spotted my pale face and hands. None of the others knew me, and I shammed to be half-seas-over to put them all off the scent. It was deuced awkward, Austen’s turning up, but I suppose all we can do now is to wait for the so-called heir,” he added, after a pause.

“What is he like, Arthur?” she asked, without looking up from her transfer sheet. “Have you ever heard any news of him?”

“By now, eh? Now that he has grown up?” Franks ruffled up his hair, as if striving to get rid of the momentary confusion and annoyance caused by thoughts of “Kangaroo” Austen’s supposed suspicions, and Miss Delamayne’s pre-occupied question at one and the same time.

“Lord, I don’t know, Poppet,” he added, gathering his scattered ideas. “How should I? Nobody knows. He was only a comparative piccaninny when he was left in England. I know his father entertained big ideas about him, the only big ideas he ever seemed to have. He was mighty pessimistic about everything else, unless it was some new-fangled discovery of his own connected with plants, and we never could tell him all. But his son is sure to take to you at first sight, darling,

and that might be a good thing for us if he is worth his salt."

"I don't think so," she mused, wearily; "I haven't got over these sudden deaths yet, that of his dear mother in particular. And I can't think about anything else until they are effaced from my memory. But I'd sooner meet him as mistress of Brangal Downs when he does come out, than as the licensee and proprietress of this bush hotel; you can see that, can't you? I can just remember hearing about him when I was a child down in Brisbane, when you and father were arranging for us up here, and I expect he is very proud and wilful, just as his father was. His mother told me we were born on the same day of the month with two or three years or so difference in age. Except yourself, Arthur," she went on, "I have no one now to confide in, respect, or love. You have been my second father always, doubly so since my parents passed away. When young Conroy's mother was taken after poor Mr. Conroy's death, she gave her son to me with her last breath. I was to look after him and love him, for her sake."

Frank started and made an obvious grimace.

"The whole district collectively are your devoted slaves, my dear," he rejoined, vehemently. "Men, women, and children are better and sweeter for your passing presence amongst them, but did not Mrs. Conroy ever think you might have another choice, no matter how lucky her son would be with you as his mentor and caretaker?"

"I don't know," she replied, rather blankly. "But the occasion was so solemn; it seemed to bind me wholly."

Bronzewing Delamayne was well worth the admiring looks bestowed upon her by her guardian, Arthur Franks. Her hair, blue-black and sheeny as the plumage on a wild crow, was caught up and coiled neatly at the top of her classic head. Diana might have been her model for poise of dainty unapproachableness, and her brave, dark brown eyes brought suggestions at times of great depths in her nature when the now troubled waters of her soul should be fathomed by the plummet of daring success or even adversity.

She was to be revered, that was plain to be diagnosed, but the something that dwelt in those depths of her inner soul expressed what would be the power of her love for a brave and worthy admirer. It had been there when she spoke of those who were lost to her, those to whom her affection had gone.

She smiled, and the dazzle of the pearly teeth in her radiant mouth enchained Arthur Franks in yet more rapt adoration of her perfect whole. He had a sacred trust in her from her father, and early association with herself. But even so, her last communication had somewhat staggered him, for there were times when he thought he might have attained her own ideal.

All expressions on Bronzewing's face were inimitable, briefly and changeably apparent like the unparalleled bronze-gold sheen on the wing spots of the woodland dove she was called after.

'Ere one could fully grasp their wonderful tenderness or changeful subtilty of tone they had gone with a flash of mind or purpose to reappear

still more alluringly. Withal she was slightly formed, of a medium height, agile, graceful; a consummate horsewoman; a driver of no mean merit; and possessing, personally, a wonderful business capacity such as befitted a great heiress.

"He may be altogether too high and mighty for me," she sighed, plaintively and comprehensibly, as if in answer to an expression in Franks' face. "He may have turned out somewhat difficult, for all we know. A prig, conceited, or common-place. I like men—brave, honest, true men. I wish I could get a glimpse of him, Arthur, if only from a photograph, so that I might form some sort of an opinion about him. It must indeed strike you as very strange that I should have been given to him so unconditionally by the joint wish of his mother, backed by her obtained consent of my own parents. Suppose I don't like him when I see him, and he——"

"Falls or has fallen from his high estate, like Lucifer—never to hope again?" Franks suggested. "Well, what then? It lies with yourself on your first judgment."

"Arthur, you should know," she went on, with a shudder at the last remark, "you, of all others, my guardian, lately my good genius, the pain it gives me to be bound as a gift, without even the exercise of my own free will, to a man I have never seen. I would sooner marry young Levinstein, if I had to marry. I am sure he would make a most devoted husband, and I should have no difficulty whatever in steering *him*. Of that I am quite certain. But I own Brangal, and young Conroy thinks it is his."

Her eyes flashed almost maliciously, with

another quick change of her subtle expressions.

"Why not use your power to sanctify the soul of your special legacy?" Franks hazarded after a moment's thought. "Even if he did turn out somewhat of a difficult duffer on first sight or trial, you know where to find out the good in a man, Bronzewing. Why not say: 'If he is mine, I shall make him worthy of me.' You made me, my dear; absolutely re-created the true Franks."

He paused again as he thought of the beautiful, quick, sarcastic, ardent soul before him as it looked from her black-lashed eyes.

"You could, I believe, do anything with anyone of us, you siren," he said, at length, regarding her steadily. "I'm just as deeply impressed with you really, Bronzewing, as any one of them. But there is so much of the dove in your nature, my dear child, that the Old Serpent can get no show in your presence. Sometimes I'm half afraid of you myself. I'd be just as happy as I saw you happy, after all, my dear.

"But mark me, if he is a prig, or in any way superior in his ideas to our common lot, that needn't trouble us, we can waive all ceremony and cut him dead, surviving our demerits without complaint. Brangal's ours, my Poppet. It is your gift to him, if it is anything at all. He hasn't a leg to stand on, on his own authority, bar his scholarship, if indeed he has that."

"Brangal was his father's home, and is not ours, to my way of thinking, Arthur. It belongs to the son with all the risk and fancy of it. That is just my dilemma. It binds me to him in a less independent sort of way somehow, more like a guardian, than according to two families' wishes,

for of course it is his really. I only saved it for him."

"Do you think Levi Levinstein suspects anything?" asked Arthur Franks, starting from his chair, his face a shade paler at a sudden thought. "If he did entertain any suspicions from the fact of your buying it back, he would certainly spring the whole country on us. The run absolutely belonged to Levinstein Brothers before you bought it wholesale, at least, by the bond of the mortgage Conroy involved it in."

"No, I am convinced that Levi knows nothing of our plans," she answered, calmly. "As for Aaron, he would be above it. But Brangal belongs to young Conroy, or shall belong to him."

"And you would really give it back to him, knowing what we know?" Franks exclaimed, fairly startled into amazement.

"Right is might, Arthur, in this case," she said.

"So, then, if he is a conceited puppy, you will make him more insufferable still by your action and ruin all my plans. And they were large—for you, my dear—for you only."

She gave no sign, for she had a strong will.

Here Franks felt was a decided veto to his carefully-thought-and-worked-out schemes of the last ten years, at a time, too, when they were nearly all completed in every detail but one.

After considerable deliberation, he said, staring at her:

"Well, you know best, Bronzewing. Maybe you are right as you invariably are, but I must say good-bye. I have to be off to my usual employment, yet I am more than afraid that my brief appearance here this afternoon will bear some

evil fruit from 'Kangaroo' Austen, whom I did not wish to see me. When McLeod takes entire charge of Brangal Downs again, under our own orders, I must get to work in real earnest. I'm ready to open up there now, and must be off to Brisbane in a few days for our rights. Remember the safeguard, whatever you do, should you have any reason to employ it. 'Ware hawks, my dear. The one I have cause to fear most is even now on the wing, and he flies fast and strikes surely."

She acquiesced mechanically, her mind elsewhere; then, giving him both her hands:

"Arthur," she said, "I shall see James Conroy unknown to him first, of that I am determined. Then I shall be able to judge better what I shall do in this case, how I shall advise and act for him."

"As you will, Poppet," he rejoined, bringing both her palms together affectionately in his own strong ones. "It is not for me to gainsay you. It never was, and I could not do it because I know you are right." His eyes and manner brimming over with love for her, he then left her presence.

He went along the verandah to an end room, unlocked it cautiously and silently with a key from his pocket, peering about and listening as he did so. Then he entered, fastened the door on the inside again, and, lifting up a carpet, disappeared down a trap-door in the floor, carefully closing this aperture behind him. Down below on the cellar level he lit a small lamp, and, passing through a thick clamped door underground which opened with a simple push, disappeared into a long tunnel.

Bronzewing now went out into the cool of the verandah again, and sitting down on a canvas chair, with her hands clasped at the back of her head and one knee crossed over the other, fell into a deep reverie, the soft pink of peach bloom from a blossoming young tree near by, against a blue and brilliant sky, forming the nucleus of her passing thoughts, and carrying them far back.

It was a dormant recollection of a similar contrast in her childhood that pulsed her heart, and took her to Brisbane, as she remembered it in her younger days.

But now it was mingled with the knowledge of something interfering with her life. A surmise growing stronger that here she was already standing at the parting of the ways where womanhood and a more than possible marriage convention interfered with girlhood, and where the more serious ties of an inheritance might embarrass and embroil her, if it were not possible for them to become sweeter and more hallowed.

She was a rich woman now, having come into a large sum of money from her father, and under his patrimony and her present position compelled to live as she was doing. A business woman not easily beguiled, yet constrained by what she thought to be her duty. And there shot into her mind, almost a wish for positive penury so as to end it all, as she drummed an impatient tattoo with one balancing foot upon the verandah boards.

Her accustomed world was at her feet where she was now. It knew her and understood her. Here she held absolute sway. She was worshipped,

idolized, a very Queen of the Bush in her present position, but as this one last idea came into her mind she willed it so. To think and to plan was very often to do with Bronzewing Delamayne.

CHAPTER III

TWO IN A COACH

"TAKE care of your clown steb-dancing mit dot stock-whip, Levi," suddenly shouted a big, well-dressed, grey-bearded man, on the outskirts of a small interested crowd near the front verandah of the principal hotel at Barilla. "Don't you see you might very nearly have cut der schendleman's eye out?"

The handsome, dark-bearded and moustachoed man thus wrathfully addressed seemed to crinkle up into his bedizened self. He rolled down the white shirt sleeves of his semi-attire, after handing back a stock-whip to the no longer grinning stockman who had lent it to him, and lost a gold sleeve-link from a cuff as he did so. But, without stopping to look for it, and muttering maledictions inaudible, he hurried across the road, vanishing headlong into a large general goods store, which proclaimed to the general public in enormous golden letters its association and promise with the title of Levinstein Brothers, General Agents and Storekeepers.

The man struck with the unaccustomed lash, a young fellow attired in deep mourning, uttered a wrathful exclamation, and for a moment seemed inclined to pursue the bedizened delinquent, but, curbing his apparent intention with an effort,

merely smiled grimly as he applied his pocket-handkerchief to an injured optic, which showed a nastily bruised surface and a trickle of blood from under the broken skin.

He muttered that "it was nothing" to the burly sympathiser, who rushed up to him when his impromptu assailant had left the scene.

"Ah, it was nodings, you say. Nodings. But that vool brodder of mine is always up to some-dings, mit his mongey dricks, und zo I tell you. But kom mit me, mein son. Ve must have a drink togedder to vash away any intention of injury on our bart. Der schwizzle is goot in der house of call here, and my shout must be mein brodder's apology. He was too nerfous to do it himself."

"Aye," quoth a weather-beaten Scotsman standing near by, who had been deeply interested in the by-play of the incident; "but it's my shout; a plain whisky, Aaron, because, if I don't make any mistake, this young fellow and myself will presently be fellow passengers by the same coach, and I shall have to leave you. More than that, it may be my good-bye to you for all time, as far as I can see in the matter."

"Nod going to leave us for good and all, eh, McLeod? I should be very dashed sorry if dot to me you told."

The Scotsman nodded, smilingly indicating the mature probability of this happening. Aaron puckered his forehead into deep wrinkles, spread deprecating palms out sideways, as if to express surprise and mournful resignation against a compelling power he was utterly unable to cope with, and, shrugging his shoulders almost up to his ears as if to express the withering helplessness of the

present situation still more, the senior partner of Levinstein Brothers led the way to the hotel bar and addressed the barman.

"A macknum of Louis Roederer here at vonce mit ice," he ordered, grandly, completely oblivious of the hint conveyed at the beginning of the Scotsman's appeal.

"I am on my own manure heap here, McLeod," he said, with suave decision. "Your prandy, vine, or viskey I vill taste when to Prangal Towns I komm. Till then I am der brincipal in the matter of the choice of drinkables.

"Mein Gott, I am sorry," he added to the young stranger, when the glasses were filled and the ice clinked pleasantly against them. "I oudt of your eye the stock whip lash will drink, my yonk friend, mit my best vishes for your future welfare."

An incongruous wink passed between Levinstein and McLeod, of which the stranger with the injured eye was entirely unconscious. And as they chatted away, the three of them, waxing presently loquacious over the exhilaration of the rest of the bottle and three cigars, their conversation held prophetic bias concerning the popular reform of Aaron Levinstein's younger brother Levi, as well as of the general run of young men of the present day, generally too assertive in their own admiration.

Levinstein senior presently remarked, as he patted the stranger's shoulder in a paternal fashion,

"Brovidence did not make our own particular race to grack stock-whips, my yonk friend, but to lend and make money." He rose from his seat as if about to depart.

"By emptying Christian pockets," McLeod

whispered, derisively, in the young man's ears. "He's not a bad sort, isn't old Levinstein, but he's a terror for the dibs for all he's so generous. His brother's a bit of a mountebank, as far as I have seen, and I have never been able to quite make him out. They are both shrewd men of business, however, and practically own about half the district, if all the truth was told."

The Scotsman uttered these last remarks in a louder tone, for Aaron Levinstein had strolled off to talk to someone else, after taking his full share of the bottle.

"Whatever made a Jew want to crack a stock-whip for at all?" the young man asked, still defiant and exasperated by the pain of his inflamed eye, which, now badly discoloured, and bloodshot enough through the white of it, seemed to give certain promise of being worse before it was better.

"Ma certie, I hardly know," McLeod replied, considering, "but they get about everywhere, Berliners mostly, and swallow up everything. Always first at mart or money-making, even money-lending. Levinstein would let you have fifty or a hundred pounds on note of hand alone, if he knew you, and could also supply you with a station or two all ready made, when your inclinations ran that way. Aye, to the last hoof and flour-bag. Indeed, he might finance you and let you work it out that way, if he was sure you were a good doer. They have heaps of money and inaugurated this township themselves. But ye'll be coming on with me by the coach, for I'm McLeod of Brangal, that sent ye the wire, and I was once your father's manager. You'll be giving

me the sack the noo, I don't doubt, o'er the lave of it all."

At this juncture, the coach being driven up to the door with a flourish, a rattle, and a dead stop, the two men went out and got into it, starting from their places immediately afterwards as a young lady entered, so as to give her a choice of her face to the horses.

"All aboard," hoarsely shouted the driver in front. Then he drove his prancing steeds away amidst much cheering of interested sports, acknowledging the universal salute by a backward jerk of his elbows, and a pretence of reeling on the driving seat as if overcome by many and prolonged potations.

Stretching plains now appeared before the travellers, presently diversified with clumps of trees, plains that will grow the very best oats in the world when preference comes to pass. The river timber lay on their right, and there was a late evening glimmer of the day's heat lying across the vast distances.

As the spirited team of five horses stole away from the town with a workman-like jingling clank of bars, and a steady thud and rhythm of hoofs, the three insides began to take quiet scrutiny of each other.

The injured stranger took stock of the girl. She, in her turn, bestowed the same wary surplus attention on the Scotsman, who happened to be considering the vegetation of the river frontage out of the coach window on his side in a bashful manner.

When he got his chance, however, he too gave one quick, comprehensive, searching glance at the

pair facing him, for he sat in a corner seat with his back to the horses, whilst the others were side by side. Then he looked out of the window again. The girl saw that the young man next her was very good-looking. It also seemed to her that he was over-tired, and that his eye was very swollen and painful. And in the conflicting emotions which surged to her heart of hearts, she pitied and sympathised with him exceedingly.

But the jingle and swing of the coach seemed to have kept the metre of his last words in the hotel ringing in his brain, for as he continued to press his handkerchief upon the sore place, he presently reiterated it to himself aloud, as if for her benefit, with additional emphasis and anger.

“What does a confounded German-Jew store-keeper want to learn to crack a stock-whip for at all, I should like to know !”

Even the rattle and clank of the conveyance they were travelling in did not drown the words to his neighbour. She, fancying his remark was an expression dictated by real suffering, felt her heart warm suddenly more than ever towards him, with pity and condolence for his injury, and she expressed her sympathy gently.

The listening Scotsman, apparently prompted by the manner of her utterance, winked any amount of sly intelligence to a giant sandal-wood bush at the edge of the coach road, and then frowned as if considering his own position in regard to the pair.

The first word coming thus feelingly from an intelligent and extremely prepossessing young lady, breaking an awkward pause of hitherto unbearable silence, awoke the young man to a glow of pleasure, and he responded warmly, assuring

her that his eye was painful, but would soon get all right. Then his intricate problem broke ground again, with the smart and throb of his injury.

"What does a pawnbroking Jew want to learn stock-whip handling for?" he asked her imperatively.

She flushed defiantly.

"Mr. Levinstein is not a pawnbroker," she declared, with marked emphasis. "He is a big merchant, a well-known man, and well-to-do also. But he has no idea of stock-whip cracking. I give you that point."

"The point was in my eye," he observed, humbly. "I can feel the force of that part of the argument even yet."

She laughed musically.

"Ah, well, he won't do it again. I'm so sorry."

"Of course, he did not mean to hit me. I quite saw that," he said. "But your sympathy just now was so sweet that I felt impelled to make some sort of a fuss about it to get a little more, don't you see. I hardly knew what else to do, in fact. But, of course, it was entirely out of my calculations that he was any sort of a friend of yours, or I shouldn't have been so rude. I apologise most abjectly, and now declare that I bear no malice against my aggressor, as you have spoken for him, although he might have paid me the compliment of expressing his contrition, instead of leaving his elder brother to do so. But why did he run away?"

"Because his brother rounds him up most severely for any lack of dignity on his part, and capering about with a stock-whip is hardly decorous for a man in his position, is it? especi-

ally if he can't do it properly ! But Levi is always apt to get out of bounds, he has such irrepressible spirits, though I can guarantee that he was hardly hilarious afterwards, for I was in the store when he came over and nearly cried ; so you ought to be satisfied."

"Yes," broke in the Scotsman, turning from the door aperture for the first time and addressing the girl as if he knew her intimately, "Levi wants 'cutting out' like some others of his sex occasionally, being too impulsive by long odds if he gets the chance. But how are we all at the 'Rest'?"

"Jolly enough, even without you," the girl replied briskly. "It is a long time since you came to see us. What's up with you lately?"

"Been down in Melbourne, my dear, as usual, attending to business. And I leave you half-way this evening. Got a buggy coming, so I take the short cut," he added, as if aggrieved.

She glanced at the young man, whose uninjured optic was devouring her face with admiration, and signalled to the Scotsman quietly with a movement of one of her pretty gloved fingers, as it lay beside her on the seat next him.

He was a canny man with quick sight and understanding. But he was hardly proof against the girl himself, and felt a certain combined sort of jealousy hidden from her and others that any stranger should be inclined to make too free with her.

Any dissent from what he understood by her signal was, however, he well knew, out of place from him, and would not be tolerated for a moment.

He evidently understood her power, *sang froid*,

and determination, although in his eyes also she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

A bush girl in the lonely places is very often, even if not exactly beautiful, potent to capture entirely and severally all the hearts of her more numerous male subjects, making them ready to die for her if she but lifts her finger. Bronzewing Delamayne was a queen of beauty without compare to all who knew her, and possessed the quality of attraction which had struck the stranger so forcibly and fully, now that he had forced himself out of the sulks to look at her.

As for herself and her ideality, her large, sympathetic heart embraced all men in her district figuratively as the mother of a large and enterprising family of sons would have done, in all innocence accepting them with a sort of clannish pride, as being inmates of her bush kingdom, yet not without a biting lash of sarcasm to fall should anyone of them pass beyond the strict line or limit of discretion, and at these unseasonable times her withering scorn was keener than that of the stock-whip lash which had previously affected the young man by her side.

All unaware of this phase of her character, and surrendering to her magic attractions and winning ways in an entirely new and self-appropriating manner, the young man next her was rash enough to slide into the gravest error of his life.

Thanks to her breezy style and manner, and his own assurance, he took her at a far lower level than that on which she classed herself. Her eyes, grave as a mother's, yet marvellously responsive to roguery and fun, or to any lighter touch of the conversation which

ensued, answered raillery with raillery, jest with jest, in quite a free-and-easy way. And so, as the coach rattled and clanked on in steady progression, the young man flattered himself that he stood very high in her good books, and was inclined to be far too venturesome, to which an added and unexpected incident of travel gave greater colour.

Almost dead-beat with long travel from the South, he at last felt quite unable to keep his eyes open, and after several involuntary dozes towards dark, his form, rocking with fatigue and the swaying of the coach, fell over awkwardly on to his companion, in a helpless fashion.

He found his tired frame instantly supported by two tender arms pulsing with sympathy, and his head drawn to a resting place on her shoulder.

Too tired and sleepy to quite understand, too comfortable to attempt to regain his equilibrium, he dropped from half-waking elysium into complete unconsciousness as darkness came on.

"He's got no mother or father, and wants advice," the girl fiercely whispered to McLeod, as he left the coach further on for a buggy drawn up by the side of the road, after making a low-toned remark. "Don't say another word, he is not going on with you to-night, I'll take care of him myself."

And it was therefore scarcely a surprise to the young man, when she gently roused him at the end of the stage, to hear her whisper in his ear :

"'Travellers' Rest,' and my home. Come inside with me. I'm your hostess. You stop here for the night with me, you understand, even if you are bound to go to Brangal Downs to-morrow."

"Oh, you dear girl," he whispered back, unabashed, when she had ushered him into her parlour, after the departure of the coach, but with far too much assurance in his tone, and making as if to embrace her.

"Steady!" she retorted, in a freezing voice, her eyes gleaming angrily and disappointedly. "I couldn't help pitying you, you know, you were such a new-chum. And you would have tumbled over the other way and perhaps have hurt your eye seriously, if I hadn't taken charge of your poor tired body. But I have been a good Samaritan to a venomous snake, it strikes me, one that would bite and poison the life of its only benefactress."

It did him good, this living, fiery, cutting speech of hers, as nothing else would, punctuated as it was by her indignant and lightning-bearing eyes of severity. The weapons of the softer sex are like her wit—pungent and sharp for her protection at times, and she knew intuitively that he had not read her aright by his assured manner, and so she was justly and indignantly wrathful. She had given him clean love, and he had violated its trust in a common sort of way. And now he was left alone where she had placed him, standing on the brink of an abyss of self-abasement, as poignant as the blankest heartache he had ever known; for he had seen to the depths of her purity as in a lightning flash from that moving, outspoken, living glance of hers. It was one of utter indignation, and he was absolutely enthralled by her outraged virtue as it spoke from her beautiful eyes, her mobile mouth of disdain and sorrow, her disappointed expression.

For the last hour or more he had felt the tender

touch of her compassionate hands and arms, the life and warmth of her body, for which he might have thanked her in a far more gentlemanly way, and tried to understand why it was done. Now she withdrew herself with a jerk of contempt that seemed to freeze his presumption and ignorance. And his heart and senses smarted a great deal more than his eye did.

She waited upon him during his brief sojourn for that night, as if she had known him and expected him all her life as a dear friend, never seeming to think of herself, and making him feel that she didn't. He couldn't make her out at all, or her manner either, however hard he might try. She bustled about for him, served him all the refreshment and supper he needed, suggested things for his comfort he would never have thought of if left to himself, such as hot fomentations for his eye and slippers for his feet, which she brought him herself in person. In short, she waited hand and foot upon him, with all the ready tact and grace of womanhood, and still somehow impressed him more and more with the smart of her opinion.

He did not know that she ruled her whole house and the district about her with her willing sceptre of kindly love, but he was absolutely conscious from her manner and something that lurked through it all that he had deeply and irrevocably insulted her.

Conroy the younger, for it was the same young man we have seen sitting in the college chapel, stroking the curved anomaly of the tail of the carved kangaroo, woke early next morning bitterly ashamed of himself, for he had by this time seen his uncalled-for mistake to its full depths of

depravity as far as she was concerned, and also was conscious that a void had been made in his own heart past all filling. This pearl of price was not his for any irrelevant seeking. Who could she be?

"Well, I had no idea that she was that sort of girl," he reflected. "Mistress of a bush hotel, too; I thought she was easy-going and a bit of a flirt," but the unwarranted insult he had given her pure mind stabbed him deeper and deeper, the more he thought of it, for she had jumped clean into his being now, as if in spite of himself.

He rose early and, in a shame-faced mood, went out into the garden, but the sign-post over the road, beyond revealing to him the pretty name of Bronzewing Delamayne, did nothing more to solve the mystery surrounding its fascinating owner.

Presently she joined him, dressed in white, fresh and blooming as a rose, and seeming to know all about him, which added greatly to his discomfiture.

"Isn't this a nice place?" she asked him. "It is my very own, my father's old free selection. We were well-known neighbours and old friends of your father, and I loved your mother so well."

He had taken her for a common adventuress; oh! the folly of it. What a blow this little speech was to him; what a friend he might have made of her.

"Look at the wonderful colours of the galahs and budgerigars, feeding and climbing about the creamy gum blossoms on those trees in the paddock," she said, delightedly drawing his attention to them. "There's no place like this place to me."

He was deeply abashed now, flushing desper-

ately, but they walked about together, he feeling as if he could have cut his throat willingly, for she was every inch a lady in talk and tone.

Presently she ran into the hotel, and from the bar brought him a "doctor" of her own composition, frothing and delicate, perfumed with nutmeg, yellow with egg, refreshing with spirit. He thought it the most delicious draught he had ever tasted in all his life as he quaffed it off.

"After breakfast," she said, as she took the glass back on the silver salver, "you will ride to Brangal Downs, as you wish, I suppose, to see what arrangements your father has made for you. There is one of McLeod's horses here, which you can have; or I could lend you one of mine. I am only the hostess of a common bush hotel, and yet I am fond of riding—sometimes," she added, in deprecation, as if foiled of a cherished project she had formed of going in his company. "Now, come in to breakfast."

After that meal, when he had stammered out a request for his reckoning, she only put a button-hole nosegay into his coat and gave him her hand to kiss, at his request for pardon, as if she had been an Empress. But it had been her custom with a favoured guest, and one which no man sought as a right.

One of those sweet hands which had been his support for an hour or so in a never-to-be-relinquished transport on the previous day was his for that occasion, but could never be his again, according to his opinion.

"How many hearts have you broken, Miss Delamayne?" he asked her diffidently, at last, after he had mounted his horse at the Brangal slip rails,

for they had walked together there on foot, and, though he had taken the slip rails down in his abstraction, he omitted to replace them.

"Every one of them," replied she, with a merry laugh. "At least, they all say so. But you must keep yours intact, you know. By the way, how did you like the looks of Jessie McGregor? She's one of my handmaidens, a most prepossessing damsel, don't you think? You saw her in the verandah 'ere we left. If you lose your head so suddenly and unexpectedly with any girl you come across in a day's journey, wouldn't *she* do, as it is plain enough that you are rather an impressionable cavalier? Oh, never mind the slip panels," she exclaimed impatiently, for he was about to dismount again; "I'll put them up for you. Now on you go, young man of the frolicsome manners. You can't miss the track if you have any eyes at all." She bit her lip for a second, stamped her foot imperiously, and coloured furiously as if in militant ire. "One moment—can *you* crack a stock-whip? *You* ride, allow me to tell you, not at all like a man, but as a sack of flour," and her rippling laughter irritated him from desperation to rage. She stung him like a hornet in his self-estimation.

"What a girl!" he muttered to himself angrily, as he rode away along the forest track. "Is that their style out here, I wonder?"

But he knew well enough that she had detected the moral blemish in his own nature, and had punished him for it. He could have thrown his hat down upon the ground, got off his horse, and jumped upon it for very savageness at the thrusting agony caused by her last words,

“She’s as chaste as Diana, and yet melting with sympathy,” he thought, as he rode onwards. “And I have let her see my own caddishness, worse luck. But who is she, and how came she to know my father and mother?”

It was only a short ride to Brangal Downs station, his father’s home, but he had plenty of time to moralise upon his misbehaviour during its continuance.

CHAPTER IV

RUIN

CERTAINLY James Conroy could see no traces indicating any sort of poverty when his father's station came in sight after he turned the corner of the highland and forest that, throughout his journey, had preceded him on his left hand.

An elegant mansion of great size and comfort confronted him from enclosed grounds, planted everywhere with imported trees and shrubs. All this was flanked in the background by a small city of other buildings and conservatories, the upkeep of which alone presaged the spending of a small fortune.

A wave of exultation came over him at the thought that he, the Oxford man, the athlete, had now come into his Southern possessions, and he mentally decided he would show these simple Antipodeans how to live, and pay Miss Delamayne out for her scorn of him. A drag, four horses, perhaps a pack of hounds, and hunters better than those of Symonds', might teach them all something of his importance, and further his suit with the haughty beauty.

But his father, John Conroy the dreamer, had always thought more of his exotics, or native botanical specimens, than of the most stringent way of working and financing a large cattle

station, and his son had something to learn about this idiosyncrasy of his that he did not know at present.

As he passed through the gates of the tall iron fence surrounding the property, he rode forward past a lodge, down a gravelled road flanked by beautiful shrubs to the verandah, where he was amazed to see McLeod, his fellow passenger in the coach of the previous day, calmly smoking his pipe in one of the many comfortable lean-back chairs.

"I knew Miss Delamayne would put you up," McLeod declared, briskly, and without any embarrassment, as Conroy pulled up and dismounted. "She told me so, or I was going to have brought you here last night in my buggy, by a short cut of my own from the main road. You'll have seen my wheel tracks coming in on the bridle path as you came from the 'Rest,' no doubt?"

Conroy shook his head.

"Ma certie, maybe ye'll be no worse for a little Colonial experience to make you keep your eyes open if you did not observe the buggy tracks. Ye did not gather altogether, perhaps, that I was the McLeod who was managing Brangal, the same that sent ye the cablegram, so I'll excuse ye. But, laddie, we'll not be pairfect strangers any longer. Come awa ben. What did the lassie do to you?" Did she steal your heart? She's the best match in the district, man, that girl is. Aye, she has a wonderful soul and mind. Did ye no succumb entirely to the spell of her?

"Ye're a lucky youngster, that you are. But I suppose it's not me that should be telling you that. With her and Brangal together, you should do so

well that I suppose the pair of you, when you have got your heads clear, will be giving me the sack, as I hinted before?" And he winked artfully and sagely.

"What do you mean, Mr. McLeod? I do not gather your drift at all. What or who is Miss Bronzewing Delamayne, and what on earth has she to do with you, me, or Brangal Downs? I understood you were only the overseer here. You seem to be pretty free and easy in your manner of welcoming the owner, I must say."

"Come awa ben, and I'll tell you all about it, my lad," McLeod rejoined, looking doubtfully at him. "Here, Larry," he shouted to a black boy lounging near by, "take Mr. Conroy's horse and put him over in the stable."

"Miss Delamayne is the uncrowned Queen of this district," he began parenthetically, as the two sat down in a most luxuriously furnished room. "She is the only daughter of a great friend of your departed father, and he is also dead. Between you and me, laddie, your father had no knowledge whatever of managing stock, unless he imagined it was the flower called by that name. He spent all his money in building this great place and the village forbye it, setting the whole policies out with foreign herbariums and trumperies, instead of living in a less pretentious manner, working for all he was worth himself instead of emptying his pockets. Man, there's trees here worth, a single one of them, more than a fat bullock. There's orchids in the conservatories equal to a consignment of 'store' cattle, and there's been enough free-and-easy waste of money, manners, and ideas, let alone my own, as his old

manager, for a city council of Socialistic ideas. And why should a man deserve a station, after all that extravagance, whether he is owner or no owner! But what did the lassie tell you? That is what I am anxious to hear."

"She asked me if I could crack a stock-whip," the young man answered, colouring. "I think that was her most pertinent question. She didn't give me any other information worth troubling about, with the exception that she knew my people."

"Surely not?" his interrogator asked, amazed and troubled. "You must have had your boarding pikes out too early to lay siege to her, if that was the case."

"Man, it strikes me that you have been boiling some gey queer fish in your billy-kettle if ye went on that procedure. You'll have been led on by her manner to you in the coach, no doubt. But she's not one of that sort, anyway. Now, before I say more about her, let me tell you that Levinstein Brothers had a heavy lien on Brangal through your father's extravagance. He slung his money away like water, as I've told you. And he owed them hard cash besides, so that's how it came to pass. Miss Delamayne has bought them out entirely, so Brangal is hers, not yours. I'm her manager now, though I acted for Levinsteins as a sort of proxy after your father's death, just to keep it in the family, so to speak. Did you not know of all these happenings, and the result of them?"

"Not a word; I knew absolutely nothing of them or the Delamaynes either. Father seldom wrote, and then mentioned only his botanical discoveries,

never his difficulties. His letters were just scientific lectures, and he was always asking me to go to Kew and see the plants he described."

"Never mind that. It was just his way all the time. But nothing that could have been done for him would have saved his station when he threw away his capital as he did. But let me tell you this in secret, if you will take it from me as a friend who wishes you well for your father's sake: you should be in great favour with Miss Bronzewing Delamayne. She's a rich woman and took to you on sight, as I personally observed. But you'll have to earn her and win her now, if you want her, for she's not lightly won, and ye've strayed somehow. Now I know all the district talk, all the district manners, and I'll bet ye a pint of Dalwood red or white wine, to be drunk down, at the 'Rest,' that she never opened her arms to another lad in her life until you came in her way, so that's saying much for you. As for Levi Levinstein, with all his money and good looks, the callant would dare to do no more than kiss her hand, if he did that, and they say he's out and out the best lady's man anywhere about here. But she's a business woman, and might have placed you and Brangal and herself in the scale, and on second thoughts found herself weighing heavier than you and her inclination, if she said what she did to you. There's no telling what's in a lassie's mind, ye ken. And what on earth did ye find to quarrel about?"

Conroy coloured deeply again. So he was assessed like common china at a furniture sale valuation. She had the money, and wanted him at her feet. That must be the fact, he argued,

and became greatly enraged. She must think him nothing better than a fortune-hunter after all.

"Ah, don't flatter yourself," said the other, mistaking his symptoms. "And don't storm or rage, boy, for she'll win ye, in spite of yourself, whatever way ye take it. She holds the cards, and as she is the finest lassie in the whole country, what will ye do to keep her? Brangal was assessed to Levinsteins for £12,000 hard cash. The herbariums round the house will have cost that, together with the waterworks that have been put up, so there's some valuation in it for the lady in the way of expenditure. I don't know what Miss Delamayne gave for it, when all was said and done, but it will be a pretty penny-piece, at Levinsteins' total, I can tell you, for it's a good station for the headquarters of a single lady."

Conroy was dumbfounded entirely. He could see no way out of it all now, in spite of McLeod's hints, and these he did not feel in the least inclined to take, or to feel more confidence in the matter of his misunderstanding with Miss Delamayne. He knew his manner to her had been repellent, and ungentlemanly, and he was well aware that reason had been quite enough to account for her behaviour. He was penniless, as it had turned out, and could only sell himself now, if he was mean enough to do so, after the stinging rebuff he had received. He was sure that, in spite of all excuses he could frame for himself as they ran through his worried mind, she was undoubtedly disappointed in himself. She was not now the perfect stranger to him he had thought her at first, and his whole soul revolted at his trying position. And there the cause of it was before his thoughts

plainly and painfully, although tempered in such a marvellous way by her own sweet attentions to him while he was in her own house, and she, as she said, was his hostess.

What a contrast her kindly manner as such put before him confronted with the merciless lash of her tongue and manner, when once outside and clear of her premises. That was his dismissal for good and all, and he couldn't get out of it. No regret lurked in her last words: they were final, fatal.

Recovering himself after an effort he said:

"That reminds me, Mr. McLeod; your brief directions advised me to come straight to you. You have stated my standing here with a vengeance totally unlooked-for, and coming upon me like an avalanche, as all this has done, I find myself somewhat like my poor father, unprepared, not even having enough money to pay my way back to Brisbane and out into the world."

"I'll lend you twenty pounds, if that will soften your pride of heart," McLeod said instantly. "Oh, laddie, take the best girl in the world and live happy and prosperous hereabouts. You've a chance man never had before, of that I assure you."

The young man looked pale and unhappy after his first burst of emotion and surprise, as he stood there in his deep mourning. He did not show to any extra advantage, either, with his inflamed eye as he paced the room in a maze of sorrow and desperation.

Presently McLeod forced some refreshment upon him, and after looking round the premises, and being astonished at the luxury of them, when

night came on he finally retired to rest in a beautiful bedroom of what had been his father's house, but a very miserable night it was that he spent, haunted by morbid dreams.

He accepted of necessity, and with warm thanks, McLeod's offer of the money next day, giving him an I.O.U. for it, and rode back to the "Travellers' Rest" to catch the down-country coach, fully determined to quarrel with Bronzewing Delamayne when he met her.

But she was not there. She had gone away the day before, Jessie McGregor informed him, in her buggy, to see some friends who lived a good distance off; but the girl did not tell him where.

Levinstein Brothers approached him first when he reached Barilla, and, much to his surprise, the elder one told him at once that he was several sorts of a fool for leaving Brangal at all, whilst Levi apologised frankly for the accident. They made light of the whole suggestion of any sort of misunderstanding between Miss Delamayne and himself, and seemed as sorry as McLeod had been that he was leaving the district. Aaron Levinstein finally hinted plausibly that Miss Delamayne was too much of a lady to do anything without due cause, and declared that his father had been a great friend of his, and that if he or any gentleman wanted money at any time, he was always prepared to let him have it, of course on strictly legal terms; which opinion struck home to Conroy's vitals, regarding McLeod's generosity, as he knew not when he could pay him back.

Bad luck had accompanied his father's venture as far as he had been able to judge, Levinstein

went on soothingly, but Brangal Downs was a good run, and should recoup any losses if carefully managed. And, as there was some time to wait for the coach, they asked him over to their place to supper, as a matter of propitiation, where all this was forcibly re-stated, so that Conroy went away to Brisbane more mystified and worried than ever as to his proper bearings, but still with a feeling in his heart—although that was sore enough on many points—of rage towards Miss Delamayne that would not brook any entreaties, sarcasms, or proprieties. It was, perhaps, fortunate they did not meet on the road. Nor did he see anything of her in Brisbane when he got there.

CHAPTER V

FRANKS

THREE days afterwards the same two men Franks had noticed so particularly called again in the bar of the "Travellers' Rest" in Bronzewing's absence, and were served by Jessie McGregor, who passed the word to Franks of their visit by an emissary. They were now crossing the river two miles away from the hostelry, engrossed in conversation, and Franks saw them for the second time intermittently from the fork of a tree on a considerable elevation, which formed a spying-place near the summit of one of the cliff-sides which shut in the abrupt chasm in the hills behind the bush hotel inside the Brangal boundary fence.

It was a bare, dead tree, which stood alone in the midst of the thick scrub surrounding it, and his position allowed him to see through the level of the surrounding timber without being seen. Franks studied the men minutely with a binocular glass. How he got to his present position, after his descent into the cellars of the "Rest," through a trap-door under the carpet on the flooring of his own bedroom, was not apparent at the time, but presently the men he was watching so earnestly having vanished over the river into the bush, he climbed down, and, striking into a wallaby track from the base of the tree he had been perched in,

turned away from the deep rift in the hill, and, pursuing his course towards a creek running below through a plain, by-and-bye emerged on the open country surrounding Brangal station, where, further on, going into the stables, he came out with a horse, which he tied to the Brangal house verandah, bringing out a pair of saddle-bags presently with something in them which he placed over the saddle. Then, mounting and riding towards the ford where the men had crossed, he finally took up a position near the road leading back to the "Travellers' Rest," and fastened his horse to a sapling.

He knew these two men were steering a course which led to "Kangaroo" Austen's hut, situated on the other side of some ranges on the opposite bank of the river, and, without crossing the ford himself, he waited, watching and listening, after he had made about him sundry arrangements.

He was now close to a huge, thickly-foliaged river gum tree, a little off the track, and fifty yards away his well-shaped horse, peculiarly spotted like a prairie mustang, was tethered by a plaited green halter.

Franks himself now began to indulge in a somewhat extraordinary amusement, for, encircling the trunk of the gum tree he was walking around, were six small bottles of champagne arranged at regular distances apart.

Having collected several pebbles from the crossing place down at the river, he poised himself on one leg like a stork, when opposite a bottle, and threw missiles at it until it was broken. Having by this means extirpated the whole half-dozen, roused by an exclamation, he turned round

and beheld Doughboy, an aboriginal he knew quite well, watching him with much apparent interest and no little apprehension, as the last bottle exploded.

Doughboy was following the tracks of the two horsemen, that being entirely evident and expected by Franks, but the only expression on the latter's face was one of fatuous dementia, which impressed Doughboy very much more than usual as he continued to gaze at him.

At length, with a hesitating motion, the black fellow pointed to his mouth as if deploring the loss of so much good liquor, but the continuance of Franks' idiotic stare, and imbecile smile, caused the aboriginal to hasten over the ford as quickly as possible to get away from him.

When he had vanished, the mad expression faded from Franks' face altogether, and, remounting his steed, he sat erect and alert in his saddle with his empty saddle-bags under him, until presently his horse gave a low whinny.

"Quick as ever, Native Cat, my beauty," he muttered approvingly, as he patted his mount's neck, whilst the animal pawed the ground with his fore hoof, in restraint, eager to be off.

"Here she is at last."

And Miss Delamayne, driving alone, came rapidly forward along the river road through the colonnades of numerous tree trunks.

When she saw him she pulled up, smiling rather sarcastically.

He noticed the look in her eyes when they fell upon the bottles, for she knew where they came from.

"I'm having the last of my tithes, Bronze-

wing," he said, dismounting and leading his horse alongside her "Abbott," for she came from down the river, not following the tracks of the horsemen, who had crossed the stream at an angle from the main road.

"But for a purpose, of course. And I pay for them, you must understand, even though I do not taste their contents. It is for this set purpose I have spoken about, darling, that I am thus masquerading, for both our sakes, and that of others, in my old character. Doughboy, who is going after his master, is all but convinced that I am really a raving lunatic, and will tell Austen so, which is just what I want."

"Ah, well, Arthur, the make-believe is better for you, surely, than the real—otherwise the old—recklessness."

"Just so, I admit that. But I have done that lot at a sitting in the old days when times waxed warm with us, and they never harmed me much. And so did your poor father."

She nodded gravely in sorrowful acquiescence.

"But since you pulled me metaphorically out of that road to the gutter, as you consider it, look here, dear." And he patted with one hand the strong, muscular development of the other arm. "See what hard work has done for me, concurrent with the aid given by your lectures on perfect sanity."

She laughed, edged close, and touching his shoulder with her whip hand, said mournfully:

"The heir's gone altogether, Arthur"—her face overclouding like a summer sun. "He was rather reprehensible, too, in his behaviour, but perhaps it was my fault. He travelled with McLeod and

myself in the coach from Barilla during your absence at Brangal, and as he was mine, you see, bought and sold to me, so to speak, I felt somehow much inclined to take care of him, to reason with him, to show him his faults, if he had any as soon as I saw him. But he was so dreadfully tired with his long journey from the South that at last he fell against me in the coach, and I let him go to sleep on my shoulder; and, as he had got his eye hurt, and seemed so lonely, I couldn't help it. But when I got him to the 'Rest' he wanted to make love to me in a rather offensive manner, not knowing in the least who I was or what right I had to him. So I had to round him up pretty decisively. And now he has gone ramping off in a high temper to Brisbane after seeing McLeod, thinking I'm a bold adventuress. McLeod told him all about Brangal. He would have been rolling in wealth now if he had only behaved properly, and allowed me to break the news to him bit by bit in my own fashion and tell him I considered Brangal his. And I love him, Arthur, oh! tens time more for his very faults and failures."

He started.

"Ah, well, Brangal is not his until you really give it to him, is it? But I'll fetch him back to you, if you only say the word, Poppet. Your poor father is dead and gone now, and secrets can be told to those most interested. It would be better for us all if he came back."

"I shall go to Brangal now, Arthur, at once," she said, considering. "Will you come with me?"

"Certainly, my dear, if it will be any use; but

you high-spirited young people are enough to break any man's heart, who knows anything about the circumstances of your projected betrothal, your love for him, or those circumstances which should augur well for your joint welfare."

She pulled her horses round as Franks again mounted Native Cat, and he resumed :

"But I shall have to start off by our old bush track for Brisbane to-night. Austen noticed my hands at once, you remember, and though it is rather too late to try and lock the stable door now, I've been doing the very best I could in annexing sun-tan to put both my hands and my face in a less subterranean condition.

"My only hope now is that Doughboy will tell Austen that I have been secretly up here on the spree, because he has seen me in the fatuous stage, much the same as in the old days, and that assumption on his part may put Austen off the scent entirely. But you know how suspiciously active he is generally. There was some mullock on my hands, I avow, when he took me unawares, and, with such a peculiarly cunning character as he possesses, that fact will not escape critical comment on his part. To be working like a bealbah* underground for so long a time cannot fail to make oneself distinctly remarkable if seen suddenly and unexpectedly, in the open daylight, and my only hope is that Austen will think I have been drinking quietly in the house, and had fallen down somewhere."

"Suppose he does know anything, or should guess, Arthur, what would happen then?"

*Underground silver rabbit.

Her near-side horse swerved suddenly, to be restrained only by her skilful hands, as a kangaroo rat shot across the road like a streak of red light.

"He would blackmail us for a dead certainty," Franks answered, gazing after the marsupial as if he too wished to travel as fast. "That is why I must be off to Brisbane to make our rights more secure. If Austen were to hint at a suspicion we should have the whole country raised on us, and lose enormously. Now that I have succeeded in getting all things in thorough working order, that would be most disappointing. Had I not better make a clean breast of it all to young Conroy himself, if I can catch him up?" he added, anxiously.

"No, not on any account. He would think I was throwing myself at his head, and the very idea of that, after his stupid behaviour to me, is absolutely repellent. He must go his own way until he learns better wisdom. McLeod met me as I was coming back just now by the paddock fence at the short cut, and he told me what he said. He thinks I hate him, and that I have bought up Brangal entirely to dispossess him, not knowing the object I had. Oh, Arthur, what can I do? He will go to the dogs as surely as his father and mine did."

"Not if I can prevent it, my dear."

"Arthur, what can we do?" she asked despairingly. "He is mine, and I am his. Brangal binds us; I love him, in spite of myself, and he doesn't know it. How could I tell him all at once, after his behaviour? In leaving him to find out his position, he has thrown us all over in disgust."

“He doesn’t know that I am in existence,” Franks said; “I can either work openly, if you allow me, or keep out of sight and employ an agent to see what he does, if it is material to you.”

“Oh, Arthur,” she cried, catching at his words, “it would be such a comfort to me if I thought you could.”

“I have never placed myself before as ambassador of your interests in such a case, Bronzewing; but I—I am beginning to like him for your sake, my darling. Your quarrel is not utterly irrevocable, is it?”

“We have both placed ourselves in false positions, Arthur, both my pride and his will be sure to war to the knife before either of us give in. I cannot retract, no more will he, I am convinced; and, strange to say, I should not like him at all if he had not got just that pride. But here we are at the slip-rails. Jump down and lower them.”

She drove on to Brangal Downs, Franks caracoling along beside her on the turf beside the track.

McLeod had just arrived on horseback from somewhere else, and started in surprise at the double advent.

The housekeeper, Mrs. McGregor, ran out and appropriated Bronzewing at once, whilst Franks and the overseer took their horses and hers to the stables. Then, returning to a cosy sitting-room off the verandah, they found the women-folk getting tea for them, and presently they all sat down and chatted confidentially. Then, their repast over, they adjourned to the drawing-room where, displacing some furniture, the carpet was

rolled back, disclosing a trap-door in the flooring, with a flight of steps reaching downwards. They all descended, and were away underground about twenty minutes before they returned, when the carpet and furniture were replaced.

"Did you ever see such a magnificently bonny show?" asked McLeod, exultingly, but under his breath. "If those Levinsteins had only known of this, Miss Bronzewing, they would have foreclosed on the mortgage lang syne, like the teeth of a wild-dog trap."

"Of course," she replied; "it's grand enough, but all the same it must remain as it is. I should stack some more wine cases, Arthur, to hide the tunnel altogether if I were you."

"Just what I intended to do," Franks replied. "Poor old Austen Conroy left a good stock of creature comforts, didn't he? Pity you can't sell 'em. There was a day when I should have liked better to sample their contents than I do now."

After some further confidential chat, Miss Delamayne drove off to the "Rest," determining to join Franks in Brisbane later, if he had good news; and the latter left Brangal after dark, taking the same overland, out-of-the-way track, with a packhorse, on which he, Delamayne, and Conroy had first travelled to the country.

Meantime James Conroy, the younger, reaching Brisbane, put up at the most modest apartments he could find for a night, and left for Sydney next morning by the inter-colonial boat, determining to shake the dust of Queensland off his feet for ever.

At Sydney he looked round for a couple of days, then, taking a ferry boat, crossed the harbour to Balmain, and, feeling thirsty, walked

into the bar of a certain hotel there and asked for a glass of beer, which was supplied him at once by a stout showy lady of unquestionable good looks, who informed him in the course of chance conversation that their billiard-marker had left his situation.

The game happening to be a rather strong point of his University education, he applied there and then for the place himself and got it.

He had a good bedroom off the billiard-room, a pound at week, his keep, what he could pick up at the tables and in tips, and so, like many another unfortunate, found his first level in the Colonies; with the result that Franks, arriving later at Brisbane, was off the track entirely as to his whereabouts, because his name did not appear in the papers amongst the steerage passengers of the inter-colonial boat. Nevertheless, he guessed at this contingency in some sort, and forthwith despatched a messenger of his own, a youth about Conroy's own age, named Roddy McGregor, with instructions to cast about in Sydney until he found him, and not to let him go when that feat was accomplished.

CHAPTER VI

AT AUSTEN'S HUT, AND AFTERWARDS

"KANGAROO," alias Charles Austen, and his cousin, Austen Bygrave, the two men Franks had been watching so earnestly from his look-out tree, the men he had sought by devious ways to circumvent, having reached the location they were bound for amongst the ranges, turned their horses out in hobbles, opened the door of a good-sized hut near the banks of a mountain stream, and entered.

Austen lit the fire, put a billy and another utensil on the bush stove with a piece of salt beef in it, that wanted warming up, went to a cupboard, produced a bottle of whisky and two pannikins, lighted his pipe, and sat down by Bygrave with an expression of intense irritation, saying testily :

"I think I can see a way, if you don't, old man, to lift that everlasting embargo upon my own person, in not having the means or the right to pay my own passage to the old country, and thereby in my own way have some say in the retrieval of the family estates."

"Indeed, how?" Bygrave answered, disdainfully. "It will take you and them a generation to recover your extravagance. You can't expect me to help you."

"Ah, perhaps not. It is your own design that keeps me from it," Austen replied. "Perhaps I

can do it yet by simply riding backwards and forwards on the same road we have just traversed. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, as you are so supercilious, so doubting. But take it from me that I'll block you and the other trustees yet, see if I don't."

Bygrave nodded a calm and judicial dissent. He was a rich squatter and next heir to the estates "Kangaroo" Austen had mentioned. In spite of his relationship, however, he had never liked his cousin, considering him low class, which indeed he was.

"Thinks of playing up to the level of the heiress, eh?" he thought. "She wouldn't have a man like him, by all accounts."

By special request, Bygrave had ridden up from Brisbane to see his cousin, who, although a gentleman born, had come down in the world. He had squandered all the money he had inherited with the rich Austen estates in England, and, like many another ne'er-do-well, emigrated to Australia to exist how he could on a small allowance, leaving his patrimony to parsimony and regeneration until such time appointed for the purpose under trustees, of whom Bygrave was one.

Bygrave had never seen his cousin before, and was not at all impressed on this first occasion by his trying to borrow money of him, a peremptory refusal of which had brought the problematical remark from Austen.

Charles Austen was a man, albeit unprepossessing in habits, who lived by his wits, in a generally understood broken-down sort of fashion, but as he possessed a redeeming turn for natural history, had supported himself for some time past

in the district by his knowledge of it. He had tried various other shifts, from gold-digging to cattle-driving, but dissipation had been his curse there too, as elsewhere. So now he cured pelts, chiefly marsupial, and supplied individuals or museums with gorgeous bird-skins or ophidians, alive or dead. The kangaroo skins he sold to Levinstein Brothers, and withal he was a daring, resolute man, a great schemer and a hard drinker.

Bygrave did not show outwardly that he was in the least impressed by his cousin's remark, but, although he did not know it, Austen could have bitten his tongue out for having spoken as he had done just now. Fearing few things, he was afraid of his cousin, the great Austen Bygrave, whose rather uncanny reputation had preceded him in just that same way to others, and concerning whom a thought had just struck him that Bygrave might apply the remark to himself.

But as the venom in the thoughtless speech, whatever it was, or however each man took it to be applicable, seemed harmless in his cousin's quarter, Austen now became quite affable, and, thinking Bygrave had passed it over, placed something to eat on the table, and performed the part of host to his guest in a friendly and willing way, as well as his means permitted, pressing him to stay the night and make one of it, which they did. It seemed as if he had read intelligently by Bygrave's manner that the choice of friends he seemed to have at the "Rest" did not affect him in the least, and the men were mutually civil enough until Bygrave rode away next morning back to the township to await the coach, but the breach that had been made between him and his relative by

cross purposes and instinct did not heal up in any sort of reality, in spite of the apparent cordiality of their parting.

Bygrave was native-born and the keenest of all keen bushmen. A perfect rider, he had a great reputation otherwise for daring and strength. He was a tall man of great thews and sinews, and most men were afraid of him in some remarkable manner, as he was said to be a thought-reader and necromancer; and rumour also affirmed that he had run amuck since the death of his wife and only son, who had been killed by a pair of his own horses the lady was driving when he was absent.

In reality, being very shrewd, he was more than impressed by the pointed and evidently intended remark Austen had blurted out. He had noticed his start of surprise when something about Franks' person had caught his eye in the bar of the bush hotel on the first occasion, and how he had pretended unconcern.

That there was something in the allusion afterwards more than appeared upon the surface he was absolutely certain, and his own applicability of the meaning made him determined to see Miss Delamayne, whom as yet he himself had no knowledge of, except from bush tradition.

He had no intention, if he could help it, of aiding his cousin to go and pander with agents or money-lenders again in the old country, as he considered he would do if he had the sum he asked for to get there, and was very angry at having made such a long journey for such a fruitless purpose, and all against his own interests.

He had heard something of the Delamaynes and the Conroys, and knew the latter had been distant

relatives. The fact that there was both a real and a planned relationship between the Conroys and the Delamayne family he would have found out had he known all the gossip of the place. He also would have known that three scions of the same house had managed to drift unceremoniously and unknowingly together when he, the principal and most concerned shareholder amongst the family fortunes of them all, had come along. It was politic of him, even without this exact information, to wash his hands of Austen, to quarrel with him, a scapegrace and a man who had lost caste, and would still impoverish the others if he got a chance, through his irreclaimable propensities. He had listened to effusions of the extreme beauty of Bronzewing Delamayne, of which Austen had been slightly prolific when in his cups and, getting to the ford, instead of going on to the township as he had led his cousin to believe he was going to do, he turned to the left and cantered on to the "Rest," to see what he could see of the famous beauty.

Once there, he hung his horse up to the outer verandah, walked into the bar, and, as luck would have it, was served by Miss Delamayne herself, in a most becoming morning dress.

If ever a man was taken suddenly aback, Bygrave was at this juncture. With all his assurance, man of the world as he was, at the sight of her he let his glass fall, nervously mumbling out something uncouth and apologetic, and, though he could hardly take his eyes off her face whilst he stayed and drank, said little and rode away, still a perfect stranger.

She wondered who the tall, grave, handsome

man was, who now, as he cantered along, considered himself a perfect bounder in not making himself better known, or in finding out something about his cousin, Austen, by judicious questioning.

He did not know that his cousin was a parvenu there, but was aware that Miss Delamayne was reputed to be an heiress, that it was said her father had left her very well off indeed; but he had not been in the least prepared for her extreme beauty, which had caught him off his guard as a revelation of something opportune and divine related to himself.

Ever since his wife's death, indeed before it, Bygrave had been a peculiar man. He was far more dangerous in a scheming position than his cousin, both in will, perception, and soul, and the vision he had seen in the bar burnt into his brain and remained there. A woman might like him, might be made to like him, but he had an uncanny reputation amongst most men of his acquaintance. Oh, he had only to call the cards, he thought. He was rich, and money would mate with money.

Since he had seen the result of the terrible accident to his wife and child, having ridden day and night to do so, something had really gone wrong with his brain.

Gold is not without its alloy often enough, and if this lurking change had come upon him, few had noticed it beyond thinking that his occasional eccentric goings-on were to be attributed to the loss of his wife. He was known to have been passionately attached to the lady he had married, a public singer of great beauty, and they both had idolized their child.

Bygrave was very musical himself. He had a knowledge and culture of the Thespian art and song beyond most performers, and could play almost any instrument with ease, perhaps his most remarkable performance being on a common concertina. And the man who could bring a collection of full notes out of a straight-necked tin teapot or a tune from finger-bowls, as he could, might be calculated to know something more extensive of notes than mere strumming or vamping. As to birds or animals, he could whistle or imitate any cry or sound belonging to them.

Gentlemanly as a host, kindly and courteous to strangers or passing guests as he had been in the luxurious establishment of his principal station, something had snapped in his mental calibre since these deaths, and the ring of the true metal once in his thoughts was now neither quite sincere nor sacred. He knew it personally, and feared the consequences to himself as no one else did.

He rode away blinded to any former purpose now, determined as to a future with some black shadow trying to peer brusquely from the inner depths of his mind and hiding furtively away because it did not quite care to be open about it just at present. It could lurk and wait. And it did. Bygrave became averse to any idea of his cousin's scheming, or even trying to ingratiate himself by any means with Miss Delamayne now, after he had seen her, and he would prevent it by stealth or savage force, if necessary. An excuse came for him in the township to carry out his new-formed plan, for there he met a man, a mere casual acquaintance, who struck a familiar note of detail in talking to him by reminding him that he had

suffered a shock from a horse accident which had affected him, not inwardly, as the accident to his family had affected Bygrave, but outwardly. And he determined to stop a day or so now at Barilla, in pursuit of his plans, combined with a certain sort of sympathy with this man, which made a companion of him for more light, instead of going right on to Brisbane as he had meant to do when he left his cousin's bush domicile.

The particular person he met on his arrival at the township was named Thompson, a horse-dealer by profession, and as Bygrave's reputation concerning horses preceded him, the horse-dealer intimated at once that he had a five-year-old entire that might suit a past master in horseflesh such as he was, but no one else. He would sell or give it to him pending certain conditions.

"I don't mean to say that he would get you off, Mr. Bygrave," he hinted, sardonically, "if you could mount him. But that is what no man has done yet, according to my truthful knowledge. As for myself, I don't mean to try. But—well, you know the reason."

And, he removed his hat to show his head, where it was noticeable that one-half of the hair from about the parting was snow-white, whilst the other was jet black.

Also the whiskers on either cheek corresponded exactly with the hue of the one above it. He had been nearly killed by being thrown on his head from a restive steed that bolted and fell with him.

"Should you think that a mental injury can be as bad, or even worse, Thompson, than a physical one?" Bygrave asked tentatively, though in a jocular fashion, albeit with rather a spiteful

and revengeful grin, for he had detected the antagonism of rivalry concerning horseflesh in Thompson's former speech and resented it. "Of course you had no brains to injure, or you would never have got on that horse that chucked you on your head and turned your hair piebald. So you want me to break *my* neck over your paragon, do you? Very kind of you, I must say. But suppose you had a wife and child killed by horses that never killed you or me, even when they did try, you'd think it precious hard that they should succeed with those so dear to you. If I had been there it would never have happened. And do you know I feel that fact almost more at times than the actual deaths, although mere sorrow is not in it with me for acute suffering at the remembrance of them.

"I shot the horses that did it on sight myself, as I'd have done to any man who hurt or offended me or mine now or at any time, and I'll bet you ten pounds I'll ride your horse without a saddle or bridle and make you give him to me. What's his pedigree?"

"He's a splendid animal, Mr. Bygrave," Thompson answered, uneasily, "and has plenty of breeding, although his sire is only guessed at. Old Saturn, I should say. He used to travel in this district once. Saturn was jet black like this horse is, and he must have come from a pedigree mare that got away to some out-of-the-way place and foaled, for he has been run in out of a wild mob, although no brumby himself, but clean thoroughbred. Will you come to the yards tomorrow and try him? I have a mob of twenty or thirty more to sell.

“There may be ructions, as they are a wild crowd picked up anywhere I could meet with them on the road. I tell you what, sir,” he added, plucking up again, “I have my opinions on the subject of this horse I am talking of, and there—well, bother your ten pounds. If you can ride my Crusader, or rather man-eater, bare-backed, I’ll give you the animal and twenty pounds to boot. There now! Levinstein senior is going to be auctioneer of my little lot to-morrow. Half of them are brumbies, the rest nondescripts.”

“Done with you!” exclaimed Bygrave, fixing him with his eyes. “But you’ll come and dine with me to-night, for I’ve been lonely lately, want company, and you are just the sort of man I like to meet. Let us have a night of it afterwards. The last I had turned out auspiciously, and one before that. That’s why I want another. After the third time, I shall probably accomplish my desires,” he added to himself.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLACK SNAKE

NOWHERE in the wide world is to be found such a pleasant combination of sight, scent, and sound as there is on a bright, fresh morning in an Australian bush township, if you are out for an early stroll. The living record of it comes back with just the same keen attributes to the memory of the senses as it did of yore to those who have experienced it. Nowhere else will the ministry of the pungent camp-fire smoke, or a vagrant whiff of incense bearing river pinewood from fresh-lit chimneys claim the appreciation more. Nowhere else are there such aromatic records of perfume and joyousness. The scent of the virgin ground-grasses, the sweet odours from the leaves and bark of the varied forest trees, the cheerful tinkling of horse-bell chimes from the out station waggon camps, the clank of the copper bullock "frogs," the blended jubilant chorus of the feathered tribes, the clear, bright air, the bounding pulses of the vigorous life and health of these first early exhilarations of primitive settlement, make many calls in their whole presence to the Emyprean of the Australian-born.

Thus in Austen Bygrave's mind, as he had learnt these attributes young, when he emerged from the bar of the hotel for a walk after an im-

promptu cocktail there, all these old associations assailed his consciousness to the full as he proceeded on his way. From a stretching clump of red gums the notes of carolling sent forth by a crowd of varied and variegated bush minstrels spoke to his heart in a way that vividly recalled all his early bush lore, and he paused struck with a sudden thought which made him plan deeply. Recollections of camp and sojourn came thick and fast upon him, and when Thompson joined him later at breakfast in the hotel coffee-room he was in excellent spirits.

They had made a night of it, as previously arranged, in the old bush fashion, and Bygrave had played every instrument in the house, even the poker and tongs, giving forth a turn therefrom of notes, not available otherwise than by his own peculiar manipulation and dexterity.

The windows were wide open, and the fresh, keen air floated in sweetly and unchecked as the two men sat down to enjoy their repast.

"That horse will savage you, Bygrave, and so I give you full and fair warning," said Thompson, suddenly, and rather venomously, for he had his likes and dislikes by this time.

"Oh, no, he won't," answered the former, in perfect cheerfulness. "You say he may have learned some uncivilized tricks with the brumbies, but those of the same sort in my vocabulary of intention will tame him completely before I even attempt to mount him. Few people know how to deal with a man savaging horse as I do, and I particularly want him tame and reliable, as I am thinking of going from here to a lonely out-station of mine, some land I lately purchased out this

way, but have never seen. I made up my mind to do so last night, and I shall want another horse for extra change and pack, besides your untamed and savage Bucephalus. I understand he is to be mine if I back him unaided, so that I shall get him cheap, and even have enough to array him in proper pride and panoply without losing anything."

Thompson nodded, still sarcastic and unbelieving.

Bygrave did not say that he wished to make a more favourable impression upon Miss Delamayne on his way past the "Rest" than he had on the previous day, but he rather thought he would.

"I shall be curious to see your attempt this morning, Mr. Bygrave, I assure you," Thompson, the horse-dealer, remarked, as he sliced the top off an egg and looked extra wise.

"You will excuse me, I know, but seeing is believing, and, although I have heard of your wonderful methods amongst horses, I have never witnessed you try them, or exactly heard anyone say more than you like to be left alone when performing them. So pardon my incredulity with regard to my man-eater, as he is a special case. You will want help, and I should know a violent horse when I see one. With help, my offer no longer stands."

"It won't be wanted, for in my opinion," Bygrave answered, quietly, "there is much to be done by surprise. The whip, now, is a wonderful factor with horses, but perhaps sound has as much to do with an animal for lasting effect as anything else, if you know how to use it. Sound accelerates the beat of a horse's heart by many pulsations

according to the tone of your voice or the sort of realization it happens to inflict. Say you play upon their feelings by their ears and senses, as you would do upon those of a human being if you wanted to get him into your power."

Thompson looked rather more than nervous as he caught the expression in Bygrave's face, which now and then had been as aggressive as his own manner, but the song of a magpie from the clump of bastard ironbarks outside resounding clear and metallic through the open windows seemed to ease his mind with the cheer of the perfect morning, and presently Levinstein senior strolled in, smoking a large cigar, and humming a tuneful lay like the magpie itself.

"Have a soda and hop bitters, Aaron," said Thompson, regaining his self-possession entirely.

"Ach, no, I haf men pestering me all the morning about your horses, Mr. Thompson. Half the crowd say they are no goot, all save one very fine animal that has been put in the crush, and jammed up against the closed gate with planks behind him. What did you do that for? Das is not the vay to so treat such a beautiful creature."

"He's not safe, that's why I did it," Thompson replied, "and I'll bet you a bottle of champagne you don't ride him, Levinstein, for all your talk."

"I shall nod mage der attempt, my friend. Vat vould you do if, after vat you haf dold me, der auctioneer had no prains to be bidded for in your favour, my boy? Eh, how vould you like that? But haf you heard the news?"

"Austen Conroy's Prangal station has been bought outright from us by Miss Delamayne, and the heir who has komm outd of England, and

found 'imself bankrupt, has quarrelled mit her and gone away, no one knows where to. We all thought those two would have made a great match of it. It would haf been for the district a great and lasting goot."

"Conroy? Was it Austen Conroy, the botanist's son?" asked Bygrave, carelessly, as he leaned forward over the table for a match.

"Yes, his father got involved in our books," Levinstein answered. "And we had a mortgage on the run, but Miss Delamayne, after settling that, gave us a fair brice for der station houses and run combined. But id would seem that if there vas any arrangement between the families at any dimes, it vas all upset by this new catastrophe."

"So Miss Delamayne bought it, did she?" Bygrave remarked, in parenthesis. "They say she is an heiress, don't they? I only saw her yesterday after parting with my cousin, and, by the way, what sort of a trade do you do with Charles Austen, Mr. Levinstein?"

"Nod as well as we could vish, vor 'is own beguliar benefit, I am sorry to say. Brincipally I think in the bottle line. He is nod gareful mit his constitutions as he ought to be. Bud, schendlemen, id is time to go up to the sale yards. I will bed you a new hat I ride your horse mid somevun else, Thompson, if you mage id vorth my viles."

"Wait a bit until you see him, Levinstein. I'm a bit piebald now myself by just such another attempt. Follow your own advice and take care of your brains, and those of other people, my boy. You will need them all for both matrimony and merchandise, from what I have just heard. But

can you tell me how a man can ride a horse by sound, or even power of mind or body?"

"Ask me if a man can see the thunder or prevent an earthquake," Levinstein laughed impatiently. "I'm nod taging any, this dime, Thompson mein son. I'll bet you see the horse hears it. How's that for high? You have not seen Mr. Bygrave ride, eh? That's a treat to come, vrom all I am told. You did nod introduce me very personally. I vas vondering what fine fellow he might be all the time. I should sav that man was six feet four, and what power of eye and brain. I am an admirer of fine physique. Bod I should also remark to mineselfs that his intellect was very high-strung at times from the look of his eyes."

Exactly what I have felt about him lately, thought Thompson, with a shudder, and wondered greatly as they moved away towards the yards.

Bygrave, who had loitered behind, now joined them, carrying a large horse-team driving whip.

Up at the sale yards, on the outskirts of the township, the usual crowd lingered, and Levinstein got on the rails, as they mostly all did on his arrival, to inspect a ragged-looking lot of horses, scrubbers mostly, which were soon roped, dragged up, mounted by roughriders, and sold after brief trials to various persons, with much wrangling and chaff, for sums averaging from two to five or six pounds.

For some reason or other a rather fine-looking, strong bay mare formed the last single lot in the yards, and there were winks thereon at the im-

pressive fact amongst certain knowing Colonial lads until the wiriest and strongest-looking of that virile crowd, having offered £2 for the mare, proceeded to catch, bridle, and saddle her, which she allowed him to do with but slight resistance, except a look in a nasty eye and thrown back ears. The roughrider got on her very quietly, expecting a bucking match at the very least, but she stood stock still and refused to budge an inch, to most people's amazement.

"You might have offered another note for her, Jack," shouted one of his pals derisively, "she's quiet enough. She's as strong and well set as a punching-bag if she ain't quite as quick in her returns. Ram the spurs in, old man. By Golly! she is hot coffee, after all!"

For the roughrider, doing exactly as he was told to do both in the offer and in the use of the metal, there was a bay-coloured flash out of the yard, mingled with a loud squeal of rage, a scramble over the displaced slip-rails, a narrow escape from sudden death by several loiterers in that vicinity, a streak of heavy dust and thundering hoofs off the road for two hundred yards with the bolting mare in full career, a dull sudden thud, and a collapsed form at the base of a large gum tree, with a trunk forked like the letter V., which was directly in the way, and a profound and startled silence of all the crowd, amidst which the cries of crows and eagle hawks pulsed shrilly as they whirled out of and over the trees and circled above.

"By God, Jack's killed," shouted the Colonial lad who had just before spoken, and everyone rushed away to find the mare quite dead, with her

neck broken, on the near side of the tree base, and Jack returning from the other end of nowhere to where he had been shot through the fork in the big tree, to gaze wonderingly upon his dead mount and lost bargain. However, he hadn't paid the money, so he got off at Thompson's expense.

"How does it feel like to be catapulted like that, Jack?" asked his mate wonderingly. "I'd have taken my sivy she was quiet as a lamb when she didn't buck right off, and by the holy smoke I didn't think she had that much go in her. Must 'a' bottled it up all right. Come along and see the new man ride the man-eater, as soon as we've got the saddle and bridle off this dead 'un. Bygrave looks a good 'un, no bluff. I expect he's a 'whistler,' as I see him bring a team whip along with him."

Saturn's son was trembling and wincing in the yard branching crush, a magnificent coal-black stallion of great strength, size, power and beauty, and Bygrave, alone and unaided, the whip leaning against the crush rails, was carefully undoing the fastenings of the gate. All the time he was at work thus, the wild steed imagined he heard a little "shepherd's companion" on the twitter along the rails close to his head.

And as there had been in reality one or two of these little black and white wagtail birds doing just the same thing all the morning until the people arrived, the great horse felt a revival of the old feeling of companionship he had felt with his guests in their sympathy for him, and glanced about for them, savage yet alarmed that here was the man who was to plague the life out of him

plainly visible, whilst he could not see his comforters.

But the twitter of the friendly little creatures riveted his attention entirely at times, and though he could not see the bird or birds, he was doing his utmost to do so, whilst he didn't mind his enemy so much. The notes were so close to his head, so constantly shifting from one rail to the other, that he couldn't help wondering at them and giving them his whole attention.

There was a dead silence all round the big yards, the spectators sitting quietly and expectantly on the rails some distance off. It was broken only by Levinstein singing out suddenly :

"That horse is vorth a hundred pounds to the first bidder, schendlemen. I vill tage that offer to stard mit."

But silence still prevailed. The issue with the known and declared character of the big stallion against that of the horse tamer was too interesting by far to weigh against any money offer until it was proved, and spectators backed the steed against the man out of mere contrariness. Bygrave opened the securely-fastened gate at the end of the crush very quietly, and resumed his whip with equal care, as he stood away from it, but between the horse's ears was still the twitter and consolation of the little black and white companions of his prisoned vigil. They were the birds who had been the sole companions of his solitary confinement here and out in the wildest bush, and well he knew it.

There was something masterful yet fearsome in Bygrave's eyes by this time, composedly as he stood back to let the horse out through the crush

gate into the big yard, and the savage animal seemed to understand and fight against it with all his great might, as he shuddered and winced through the opening and away from his tamer, with every muscle, sinew, and nerve strung to the uttermost in bitterness, every sense alive for freedom too, but rage and treason in his heart, fighting against something unknown—something he could not conquer—all the time.

Opposite Bygrave he quivered again and made a violent dash past him. Then, feeling himself free, the great horse gave one or two wild and desperate bounds in the air out in the yard, kicking out also on landing and then careering round the stockyard at full speed, hoping to find an outlet somewhere that would free him altogether, but shying constantly away from the people massed on the rails, though once or twice he went at them open-mouthed, in the height of his wild career.

"He'll eat him up when he gets to work with him," Jack's mate said. "This is no fake of an entertainment. By Golly, there's goin' to be some fun of the right sort, 'toot de sweetie,' as the Frenchman says."

Of a sudden the horse came straight and savage-mouthed at Bygrave, full of his old tricks and angered by the crowd, a splash of foam on his great black chest. But the steed tamer, who was now out in the middle of the yard, carelessly threw the thong of the whip on the dust under the stallion's nose, when he got within reach, and the little "shepherd's companions" were again between his ears in sound and sympathy.

Bygrave wriggled the thong a little without

altering its position, hardly moving his wrist, and the crickle of an angry and venomous snake ran up from it and caught the horse's ears plainly from the moving lash in the dust under his snorting nostrils.

With dilated, startled eyes, the big horse fairly shrank back almost on his haunches. Then he bounded aside and tore round the yard again, trembling all over as he pulled up in a corner right beneath Jack and his mate.

"Roughed 'im a bit, or he would have killed him that time," Jack's mate said wonderingly. "Whatever did he do to him? I've 'eard of it afore, but never seen it. Some chaps say he's the very devil himself with horses, aye, and men too. He don't whistle none, leastways I don't hear him, do you? And 'e don't like anyone near 'im, they say, when 'e's a-'orse-tamin'. But 'e's a cure with 'em some'ow, that's a moral. Look at the man-eater tremblin'."

"It's an Ingin trick, I believe. No one don't know 'ow he does it. I believe it's what you call Hyperotomy or somethin'," Jack answered, stolidly, feeling his own neck carefully to see if it was still a certainty.

"Gammon! look at the 'orse. 'E's a-foam, 'e's tremblin' like mad; but see, he's off again to try to savage 'im yet after 'e's found out what it is. What's the matter now?"

By a turn of the wrist Bygrave had again dropped the whip, but with the handle towards the horse; and now he had the silk cracker of the long lash between his thumb and forefinger, and, as if unable to help himself, the fascinated animal

came tremblingly nearer and nearer, ever ready to break away, still furious for an open chance.

Bygrave dropped his handkerchief carelessly and waited. The sound as of wind being blown into the neck of a bottle came to the furious wild horse with an eerie, low noise, and he approached ever nearer and nearer in expectant listening wonder, his ears cocked, his head on one side, trembling with excitement, his veins showing full under his sleek skin.

His extraordinary master stood quite still.

The horse came closer and closer yet, sheer curiosity getting over his apprehension. Bygrave jerked the whip into his hand, kicked his handkerchief suddenly away, and squealed aloud a 'possum's nocturnal ditty into the horse's ears, as he cracked the long sinuous lash about his head.

Away went the animal, mad with terror again. He had never met such a devil of a man in all his life. It must be a man, after all, but why was he dressed all in black, and why had he such curious, winsome, attractive eyes?

He must look at them once more. He couldn't help it. The animal was now all foam-flecked, and splashed with it looked splendid, magnificent, with his widely-distended, scarlet nostrils; but he was savage again, and turned suddenly, making back full speed.

Bygrave stooped for his whip, which he had thrown down carelessly. The animal was upon him in a moment, as he had his back turned and his eyes off him.

"Look out, sir! By God, the devil's got him at last," shouted Jack's mate, vociferously, jump-

ing off the rails and running round to the spot outside the yard where the attempt had been made.

The savaging horse, however, had stopped the instant he was going to seize the man, because right in his ears rang the minstrelsy of the little birds that had sung to him all the morning.

But at the same time as he paused, with his doubting head in the air, the man recovered himself, and upon the foaming savage jaws that had been mad to bite came the sickening and heavy thud of the whip butt, twice repeated. He turned round and flung his heels up, coming in backwards, but Bygrave was on the alert with his splendid manhood, and the snake crickle under the hind hoofs and the belly of the horse, together with the quickly-given lash, drove him off once more in terror.

“Rope him and throw him and raryfy him? Not I,” Bygrave said, coolly, in answer to shouted questions from Jack and his mate opposite him on the rails. “I’ve got him now, and he is much too good for roping. I’m all right, and always was. It was only a dodge I worked. Please keep quiet and get back to your places. It’s no good for others to be near me; it takes his attention away.”

He had stolen up beside the snake-terrified horse, now too startled to move, and with a quick grip of the mane was on its back before the animal knew it. But the low snake crickle was there too, between the horse’s ears and down his neck and all about his loins, and the animal stood still, fearing to move an inch, as an absent-minded whip-thong trail along the sensitive, sweating skin aided the delusion.

"Chuck me a bridle, Jack," shouted Bygrave to the two stockmen, who were now some distance away. "He's all right now." And presently he had the horse saddled and bridled, and all that afternoon rode him round the township.

"You've made that horse worth a hundred pounds, Mr. Bygrave. If ever you want to sell him again, I'll give you your own price for him," said Thompson, eventually, 'ere he departed.

"Good-bye, Thompson, my man," said Bygrave, sardonically, to the horse-dealer, as he prepared to ride away later minus his horse and twenty pounds. "I won't sell him; and no one will ever ride Mr. Black Snake, unless I tell him to let them, so he won't be worth any money at all to anyone else but me. Look out, Thompson," he added, "mind what you're at, or you'll get chucked again," for Thompson had nearly come out of his saddle as a violent squeal, shy and buck of his horse took him unawares.

"I never knew such a thing done before, never heard of it. By Golly, it's awful," thought Thompson, almost in abject terror, as he hung on for his life to his snorting and frightened horse and got it right again. "Horses are always touchy near houses, confound 'em. I wonder how on earth he managed to tame that devil up at the yards! There's a queer look about his eyes sometimes, in spite of all his jollity, that gets on a fellow's nerves altogether, and might somehow account for it; but I'm glad I'm well quit of him, I am, indeed. First time I've ever been had by a swell and an outsider. But if he isn't the devil himself, he's mighty like him, and that's the plain truth," he concluded, as he

mopped a wet brow and rode away. "What the devil did he do to my horse? He's as quiet as a sheep generally."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLOTTING OF LEVI AND ANOTHER

LEVI Levinstein, the junior partner in the great bush firm of Levinstein Brothers, could hardly be termed at all times a bad fellow, even if he was in danger of being called to account in point of argument otherwise, because of his somewhat more than conceited opinion of himself in matters which did not concern him.

Unlike his elder brother, the working and planning genius of the establishment, he had hardly experienced that contact with the Colonial world which made Aaron's opinion on things in general so deferred to and valuable.

Levi had a grand air which his brother did not possess. The younger brother could sing and play like a magpie, without its wisdom, however, for, as will already have been seen, if ever like his prototype he attempted to mix with purely bush matters, he generally managed to get himself into some sort of a muddle rather awkward to get out of again, if only instanced by the stock-whip affair with young Jim Conroy.

As a sequel to that incident alone he had differed with Miss Delamayne very seriously after he had rushed over to the store, highly excited and slightly flustered. He had been unfortunate enough to run up against her quick temper in a

very trivial matter of business almost immediately.

She had not seen that he had flicked Conroy in the eye out of mere clumsiness in his untutored efforts to wield the long lash on its short handle, but she had let him know, as a matter of business, that he could not impose upon her in the small matter of the price of a frying pan, and then she let him have it all round, after due confession of the mishap outside. She told him frankly he was more cut-out for a highly-cultivated impresario than a business man, which was rash of her, and advised him to go upon the stage and make his pounds, shillings, and pence there, by the exhibition of his stately person and manners to the audience, adding that she would not thank him for a stall ticket when he did so; and this wanton shaft had gone home to the feather in Levi's self-estimation. He felt like burning Conroy alive after his own personal setting down, though the retort from one so respected and esteemed had reduced him to the verge of impotence and tears, as she had hinted in the coach afterwards. But, partly through his brother's observations about the sale of horses, the accident, Bygrave's wonderful riding, and the questions he had asked about "Kangaroo" Austen, some old latent feeling of memory as to the exact reason why Miss Delamayne had purchased Brangal so hurriedly began to revive and take form in a slightly vengeful fashion.

The barb about business ability still rankled in his breast like the wound of a poisonous thorn, only wanting a little touching of the surface skin to bring it to mind again. And now that there seemed a mere possibility of any other claimant

than himself in the field for his fair customer, various little particular comments as to the why and wherefore of her slighting attitude to himself came cropping up in endless profusion in his brain.

"It may be you," he said, suddenly referring to her in his own thoughts as the barb asserted itself, "who wish to be Diva, but the tune I shall play to you at concert pitch by-and-bye shall be of my own conducting, and you may not like it."

Although he had somewhat unconcernedly professed it to himself, he was not heart-whole with regard to Bronzewing Delamayne. He had had his own ideas, but now jealousy predominated. He had been too sure of his own good looks and position. That was pretty evident on the face of this, his sudden determination. Like most men, he had been indeed inclined to worship the very ground she trod on, but he knew very well now that she didn't care the snap of a finger for him, and that knowledge rankled in its turn and smarted sorely also as a great disappointment. The questions the great rich squatter had asked his brother Aaron about Austen, which he had related to him, interested him a good deal because Austen had sometimes ferretted out news for himself on the quiet. Why should he not employ him again for this very same purpose? He might be most useful as a spy upon Miss Delamayne.

Just then Austen's black boy, Doughboy, happened to saunter into the big store, bringing some kangaroo pelts for sale, and Levi saw him through his office window.

As Doughboy was an aboriginal, well conversant with white men's ways, and dressed in

civilized clothing, Levi laid down his pen and went out of his office into the main store to accost him and throw out feelers for the better attainment of his purpose.

"Blendy kangaroo on Prangal Downs now?" he asked, apparently in all simplicity.

Doughboy grinned all over at the German accent.

"A decent lot," he answered, "but Brangal don't belong to you any more, Levinstein, and McLeod would loose his kangaroo dogs upon me if I went fooling round there without proper authority. You've got to give notice to the squatter, you know, that is ask for the leave for to shoot anything, and it's hardly good enough for me now at Brangal."

This was news to Levi.

"Why?" he asked, apparently not at all surprised.

"Oh, I don't know why, but it's pretty well stand off just now all about the place, from what I hear. Franks' lot and all that. It don't do to trifle with them chaps, if they were to get their backs set up against you. Pretty well hard lines for me, eh, when my grandfather owned all that country before the white fellers took it up. You don't look at it in my light, Levinstein. That's the worst of you white men when what you call black fellers are to the fore.

"All that country belonged to my grandfather once, and I've got to take the risk of being warned off it, so it's awkward, if you want me to go there to get skins for you, and I don't like it myself. I don't want a police job for it, and so I tell you. But I remember what my father spoke about when

I was a li'l' piccaninny, and that was the bloomin' fact that my grandfather owned all Brangal. He was a king then. So now I'm down in the world, I that ought to own it, and your lot are up. It makes a feller feel savage sometimes."

"Come into my room, Doughboy, and bring your skins with you. I did want to have a word with you, and I'll give you a tot of rum, even if der whites have done you out of your goundry," Levi whispered, confidentially.

"All right, Levinstein, you're not quite so bad as some of them," said Doughboy, bringing the skins along and wondering what was up.

Levi opened a bottle of Red Heart rum and gave Doughboy the equivalent of a strong eye-opener out of it. Then he remarked casually, still harping on the same string, but from a more veiled source :

"These skins you haf prought in to-day are hardly up to der mark, Doughboy."

"Thev're as good as you'll get them, Levinstein. I want the full price for every one, and not a pennv less, Austen told me. Why, there's not a mark on any of them. I always shoot them through the head myself, and so does Austen when he's sober enough." And Doughboy patted the breach of his Winchester with the manly pride of good marksmanship.

"I think der Prangal Towns gankaroos would fetch a petter brice than these outside ones, Tow-boy," Levi, still persistent, answered, as he critically turned over and examined the parcel, employing a gold-mounted eyeglass to do so, and being apparently vastly fastidious with the cured pelts. "By der vay, how is your employer?"

"Austen? Oh, he's drinking again. Got a shake or two last week, and lets me do all the dirty work, as usual." And Doughboy's eyes glittered with malevolent fire.

"Zo, dat is a bity. Here, I'll ride you a ledder for him. Wait a minute, Towboy. But you can go and get der usual gash for dese skins from the clerk at the desk over there in der store, while I'm riding it."

And Levi Levinstein sat down in his office and indited a few lines to "Kangaroo" Austen, Doughboy's employer.

There was a great spice of shrewdness in "Kangaroo" Austen's character, exhibiting that primitive trait by an especial knack of worming out district talk, or any occurrence likely to be serviceable to himself for—we will say—an equivalent in value. Levinstein was aware of that, and knew also that he was not to be fooled. But for his solitary drinking bouts, which made him a social pariah, he might have made many good friends in the community. As it was, he made enemies.

When Doughboy arrived at Austen's hut again and delivered Levi Levinstein's letter "Kangaroo" Austen paused 'ere he read it to drink off a stiff tot of rum from the first of three bottles the black fellow had brought him from the township.

Then he read it through carefully, but without comment. He offered Doughboy none of the refreshment he had brought, and sent him off down to his camp along the creek which ran close by the hut, wherent the sinister fire in the black fellow's eyes increased.

When he had gone, Austen lit his pipe, drank

off another tot of rum, read the letter again; and deliberated, whilst a kookaburra outside on the top of his dwelling laughed in a wildly demoniac fashion.

At first there did not seem to be anything very particular to Austen in the wording of the letter he was thinking over, and he knew Levinstein well enough to understand that he would not give himself away. But after a little, it became very plain that the context in the caligraphy he was seeking for had caught his sense of detection and fixed it there, for he suddenly started and began to get excited.

On the face of it, the letter was simple enough in all conscience. It ran :

MY DEAR AUSTEN,

I saw some very fine kangaroos last time I drove over Brangal Downs. Their skins ought to sell at a better price than we are giving you for the others this side of the rolling hills.

If you should, by any chance, take it into your head to go to Brangal Downs and investigate, you might get me some for myself personally.

I want a parcel of those Brangal skins most particularly, because I think they might, with your instincts added to mine, turn out to be, after careful comparison, showing more of the golden tint you and I admire so much. I have a relation at home in Brunswick who would like a carriage rug made of them. You might make a very fine rug of Brangal skins for me.

There was neither signature, date, nor address to this communication; but for all that Austen now placed it very carefully in a leather case containing other documents, and locked them promptly away in a box. He had many dealings with both Levinsteins, and understood both men thoroughly at their different valuations.

"H'm," he muttered, as he came back and sat himself down by his rum bottle; "Levi's playing a concealed hand this time, as usual. Now I wonder why that is? Golden tint, a speciality, and Brangal four times repeated. It might pay me to find out."

He poured himself out another full tot of rum. The fiery liquid sent a strong shudder through his frame, and presently he glowed with geniality. If he had sought further enlightenment in the drink, he certainly seemed to have found it.

"By Gad," he exclaimed, excitedly; "Eureka! Franks hasn't been seen up at the 'Rest,' or even talked about for over six months. Where has he been supposed to have been before? I saw him myself quite lately, looking as if he had lost a shilling and found a tizzy.

"He don't drink now; they say Miss Delamayne has reformed him. What was he doing drunk in the bar, then? I wish I hadn't said what I did to my cousin. He might go and cut me out with the heiress. He's audacious enough to do so, and with his wealth it would be easy. If I had those estates in England under my own control again, I might have some chance to marry some girl with money. They will be clear in a year or so, but I could live on them now with money, if what I think is real enough to compel one of my own choice out here to marry me. Miss Delamayne is a rare beauty, like a masterpiece on old china *à la* Watteau—but I'm afraid I haven't much of a chance there without the sequel of her consent. Still——"

All of a sudden he got up and did a step-dance.

Then he brought down a concertina from a shelf and began to sing and play :

“Way down upon de Swanee Riber,
Happy was I.”

“A damned drifter—as I always was,” he murmured, touched by the tune, “even when I had it all my own way.”

Unbidden tears moistened his eyes, and he hastened to drown his sorrow with another strong draught of the maddening and maudlin liquor. He took up his concertina again, and played the “Dead March” in “Saul” with thrilling pathos, talking to himself all the time.

“She wouldn’t have me—Franks is in the way. By Gad, I remember. Now if I had money, money, money—but what was it? I forget again. Well, it’s worth trying to recollect. On my word of honour it is. I might dictate terms if I got a hold on her. She might like the position her money would give her in connection with those estates in England, and as she has plenty of assurance and style, would help my position in Society vastly. Why, she might be a Duchess, with her good looks, let alone her money.”

The concertina ran off into “Sally in our Alley,” most opportunely as a black girl peered through the door.

“Halloa! here’s Kitty! Come up to hear the music, my girl, eh? Here’s a tot of rum, Kitty. It will make you see two ways at once, and that’s just what I like to do myself. Here you are! Some rum, my girl! Been after ’possums, have you? Well, how many did you get? A dozen? In the box trees near the river, I suppose? Is

that rum good, my girl? Is it good? Have another, Kitty! Help yourself! Look here, Kitty, you tell Rosie I'd like to speak to her, will you? Some day when Doughboy is away, you know—you won't, eh? You're jealous. Well, you can just take yourself off, then. Hic—I shan't play any more. Hic! I'm going over to the 'Rest,' and perhaps I shan't come back again. I may go on to England, probably shall, as you seem so jealous about Rosie. I only wanted to bring her a ribbon, after all, from Barilla next time I go in. You go and tell Doughboy I want him to go with me towards the 'Rest,' and that I shall be ready in half-an-hour."

When the girl departed Austen began to dress. Long bachelorising had made him very neat and methodical when he was sober, and to-day even, though he was half-seas-over, those habits seemed to stick to him, for he finished his toilet with extraordinary care. Then he unlocked the box he had put Levi Levinstein's letter into, got out the leathern case, and pocketed the letter.

Kitty told Doughboy that Austen was going away to England for certain. He was fast asleep in his gunyah when she roused him, and he furbished himself up too and waited to carry Austen's Winchester rifle for him, as it was always something for him to go down to the "Rest."

Presently his master appeared, and they set off together along the mountain track, Doughboy a little distance behind.

Austen carried a small sack as well as his rifle, and his brain had been running on one point all the time—Franks! But he had forgotten a former

light for the moment again concerning that personage.

"He can't have been ill, or I should have heard about it. He had been working hard somewhere before I saw him," he thought, trying to attain it again. "That was one thing, although I should have said he was too much of a swell for any sort of bullocking. No, I can't quite get the hang of it yet. What brought him into the bar? I know he didn't like to see me there. Thinks I am after Miss Bronzewing. Well, so I am, and don't care who knows it, if she will have me. Why was Franks' face so pale, I wonder? I don't think he had been on the spree, for I asked him if he would have a drink, and he refused. By Gad, I know now! *He's been below ground somewhere.* Mullock, too, on his hands, that looked like pay dirt. That's hit the bull's-eye at last. His *hands*. Same as I had it before, but the grog took my memory away for a moment, only to strengthen it again. That's the good of good liquor. Been prospecting somewhere, Franks has. I'll go and watch him. Golden tint, eh? I know *of* it, or rather did know of it, as a probability. Then it's turned out to be payable at Brangal, and Levi has either suspicioned it, or got some clue he wants verified. I know my errand now full well. Watch Franks. Watch Brangal. Why couldn't he have said it straight out? I'll have Mr. Levi in my toils soon. He'll have to shell out for this, anyway.

"Now, if I go fossicking about those Brangal ranges, I run some risk of being overhauled by the McGregors, or even McLeod or Franks himself, and I must mind that.

“Well, I can swear I have an old permit of Levi Levinstein’s to hunt there, if I’m caught”—he thought of his letter as he went on—“that I’m after snakes or something, so I shall not want my Winchester after all. I’ll send Doughboy back with it when I get a chance, and if I’m to risk it, if I am to get into a row about trespassing, I’ll get Levi into it, too. By Gad!”

His sudden loud exclamation at this juncture startled Doughboy, who was just then level with him, but a little off in the bush on his right hand.

“What’s up?” asked the black fellow, quickly.

“Took a little too much of that rum you brought, old man. Couldn’t see quite straight; I hit my toe against a boulder, and it made me sing out.”

He pretended to inspect the tip of his boot and started limping, as if the contact with the supposed rock had lamed him.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLACK KANGAROO MINE

DOUGHBOY frowned. It was a palpable falsehood to his quick and all-searching eyes.

"How's Rosie?" asked Austen, thickly and incautiously, noticing his expression and foolishly seeking to propitiate him. "How's the piccanniny?"

Doughboy was looking for a snake under a flat stone and lifted it cautiously, but his eyes glared, snapping fire, ere he turned them on his master again.

"One here, Mr. Austen," he cried, glancing up. "Look out, it's a death adder."

Austen came over, turned the stone over carefully, caught the snake deftly by the neck, and put it in his sack.

"I'm going to look for some more of these chaps, Doughboy," he said, when he had tied the canvas mouth carefully. "On the other side of the 'Rest,' in the middle of the hills on Brangal Downs. You run back and fill that flask of mine, the big one, with the rest of the first bottle of rum. Don't you touch it yourself, mind, but if there isn't enough left in the bottle, open another and fill the big flask right up. You can leave my Winchester in the hut. I shan't want it, as I am not going towards the 'Rest' now, but I should

like a dram with me in case we have to camp out. You can bring it on. I shall hit the middle of the Brangal fence, after I've crossed the river, and you can come on my tracks and take your own time. Bring some tucker with you, too. You needn't hurry yourself; I want to think a bit."

"All right, Mr. Austen," his retainer replied, as he took the rifle. Then he walked leisurely back.

"By Gad," resumed Austen, as he went on his way alone, "if my suspicions are only correct, I shall blackmail Miss Delamayne for all I am worth. But how to frighten her into it? She is as plucky as they make them.

"Ah, there is a fine brown snake out on the loose like me. Hold on a bit, Mr. Bronze Rippler, I want you." And using a forked stick to hold the venomous head down, with his boot he squeezed it severely, half paralyzing it, and then catching the tortured creature in the usual way by the neck close to the head, slipped it into the bag, where it instantly bit the death adder.

"There's Hades inside, and no mistake! If a man was to put his hand in there now, eh?" observed Austen, with emphasis, watching the alarmed and furious contortions of the reptiles at the bag sides and bottom, with a tight grip of the mouth of it till he tied it again. "Just let a man, or a woman either, for the matter of that, put a hand in there for one second of time, and they would hand in their checks for certain a few hours afterwards, if they didn't know how to treat a bite.

"Maybe a deadly snake or two, in a highly-excited state, might scare my peerless Bronzewing, if I get a quiet chance for a treaty by proxy with

her. They may be useful if I have the luck to come across her out in the bush."

By-and-bye he caught a black snake under a flat stone in the hills behind the "Travellers' Rest," and added it to his other captives.

He secured this one two hours later near a marked tree, a barkless, dead high tree on the Brangal run at the top of the big hill. Then he peered about in thick scrub where he could hardly see a yard ahead, and, suddenly finding himself on the edge of a steep precipice, which bounded one side of a narrow deep rift or gully, threw his bag of snakes on to a huge plateau of yellow mullock he saw below him, and, looking for a way to get down, found it in a corner of the rift itself. This he utilized, lowering himself feet first, and discovering that the big heap of earth had come from a tunnelled hole at the bottom of the precipice. He entered this aperture, carrying his bag with him, and disappeared.

Bronzewing Delamayne was sitting in her private parlour reading, happening to be alone in the house just then. A small Webley revolver lay on her desk within reach of her hand. On a sudden she heard a quick step on the verandah, and looked up wonderingly, half-expecting to see Franks, as Austen entered by her open glass door.

"Miss Delamayne," he said, brokenly, "I'm half dead. Please get me a glass of rum or brandy at once. Anything. I've something serious to tell you, or I shouldn't be here in this sort of fashion."

His clothes were disarranged, damp and yellow with wet mullock, and he seemed much agitated.

Without stopping to think what she was doing,

Bronzewing ran out of the room to the bar and obtaining a bottle of rum, poured out half a tumbler full.

Whilst she was away, Austen stepped softly over to her revolver, shot the cartridges out of it, and put them in his pocket.

Then he came back, and leaned against the wall in his former position, as if completely exhausted, and when she returned, panted out in broken sentences :

“I’m the bearer of very bad tidings, I’m afraid. There has been a dreadful accident to Mr. Levi Levinstein in the hills between here and Brangal Downs.

“He was out snake-collecting with me, and fell over the cliffs to the bottom of that gully behind here in the hills, where the big heap of earth has been taken out of a tunnel.

“I found that tunnel there, close to where he fell, after I left him to get help, and came along with matches, hardly knowing what I was doing at the time. It runs right under this house, and I half thought it would lead here when I started, so I came into the cellars and then into a room leading on to the verandah, locked on the inside, but with the key in it. Are you bringing a water supply to the ‘Rest’ from Brangal Creek, or something of that sort? for I got pretty wet in the tunnel, as you can see; but my anxiety made light of it. The key was in the inside lock of the verandah room, and I opened it.

“Will you come back with me and see what you can do? The way I came is the straightest cut to where Mr. Levinstein is lying, so that must be

my excuse for the liberty I have taken. I'm afraid he's dead."

Bronzewing turned pale as she pocketed her revolver, filled a flask with liquor out of the bottle she had brought on a tray with the tumbler, and lit a small lamp.

"Give me the light, Miss Bronzewing, and do you go first," Austen said, deferentially, a little more composed in manner by her willing assistance and want of suspicion. "I'll hold it so that you can see your way."

He uttered this when they had passed from the cellar to the underground passage beyond it.

Half-way through, where his bag of snakes lay, the mouth of the sack tightly tied up with a bit of strong string, his eye rested upon them still moving uneasily. For a second he thought of the fiendish plan he had made if he had chanced to meet Miss Delamayne alone in the bush, but his discovery of the mining tunnel had altered his planned procedure.

So at this point he let the lamp fall, smashed and extinguished it with a kick from his boot, sprang forward, and caught her in his arms in the pitch darkness.

"Now, my dear," he said, "there is no time for shilly-shallying. This is a rich gold mine, and I have jumped it; that's what's the matter, as of course a woman can't be in such a venture, and the shepherders are not in sight. You can't get away from the fact of my having done so. Give me my fair share in the endeavour, in which I also include yourself, as, although you have been playing 'possum all this time, you and your shareholders must know all about the fraudulence

of not declaring it before, thus breaking the law. If you don't do as I wish, I'll raise the whole country and bring ruin to you, and those in connection with you. I want half of all that's going, combined with you, and you only; I shall be a rich man then, and you will be a real lady if you marry me, for I have great estates in England. Give me a kiss, my beauty, and say it's a bargain."

With a shriek and violent wrench of horror, Bronzewing freed herself and ran for her life. She could hear Austen, cursing, swearing, and stumbling behind her in the darkness; but during the struggle, as their positions had been twice reversed, she was making for the mouth of the tunnel, not back to the house. She knew the way better than Austen did, and with hands feeling for the side of the shaft, went faster a good deal than her pursuer.

When she reached the entrance she ran out on the great heap of mullock at the mouth of the tunnel and faced round, standing on the middle of the extreme end of it where it sloped away from her on three sides. Her attitude was firm and composed, and when Austen came out he found her revolver pointed straight at his head.

"No, you don't, Austen," she said. "It is as much as your life is worth; that's all I'll tell you now. But beg my pardon, and swear on your honour as a gentleman you will never breathe a word to anyone else of this, and I will give you a thousand pounds."

Austen hesitated for a moment or two, but her beauty maddened him.

“Ah, you won’t frighten me, my sweet Bronzewing,” he cried, exultingly. “I’ve got you in my power, and the prize that stands behind those barrels is well worth all. You will probably miss me altogether, and I am going to taste the sweets of my discovery because we are alone here. You are part of my bargain, and I want you more than the gold—a deal more. There is not a living soul of your gang about to protect you now.”

Saying this, he gathered himself for a spring.

Bronzewing pulled the trigger of her revolver as he dashed forward, and Austen fell stone dead with a bullet through his forehead, over his left eye.

With a gesture of sudden amazement she let the weapon drop at her feet. Then she ran hastily down the earth embankment, and reaching a corner of the gulley where there was a cleft upwards, climbed up it to the top. She went to the dead marked tree, hastily opened a small door cut in it, and pressed a button on a dial inside. There was a dull, smothered reverberation, a heavy earth-shock, and the tell-tale gully-chasm was obliterated with a sudden falling inwards of rocks, trees, shrubs, earth, and *débris*. Every vestige of the tunnel, the mullock heap, the dead man, was gone, smothered up, utterly obliterated.

Nerved to desperation by all she had gone through, Miss Delamayne forced her way through the scrub and walked on to the “Rest” as calmly as if nothing particular had occurred.

She had shot Austen in defence of her honour, she told herself, and his body was buried beyond ken. But the terror and suddenness of the whole proceeding lay upon her memory like a pall.

When she came to reflect she found that she had now put an impossibility upon the opening up of the gold-mine, which would prove very hard to lift to the light of day at that particular spot or at any other, because of the dead body. There would certainly be minute enquiry about Austen, and the carefully guarded secret of past years, if discovered now, would be vastly to her detriment, and that of her enforced partnership with Franks through her father. The contorted face of the dead man haunted her with the recurrence of woe unutterable, and those dead hands that had twitched for her own undoing guarded both secrets with the iron grip of the dead.

Come what might, she could not disclose it at this juncture. To clear herself to Franks she would tell the whole tale of horror and ask him for his advice. But that was all; nothing else could be done now. No one could be told beyond Franks.

Jessie McGregor met her at the hall door.

"Why, Miss Bronzewing," she exclaimed, "whatever is the matter? I've just come back from Brangal with Bella McLeod, and we felt such a concussion. It shook the house. Have you exploded the Safeguard?"

"Yes, Jessie, I have reason to think there are spies about. You must be extra vigilant here, and send for some of the men to sleep in the house constantly in Mr. Franks' room, as I am going down to Brisbane at once to see him. The coach will be along in two hours. Pack me up the necessary clothes in my small trunk. Did you get me those things from Brangal I told you of?"

"Yes, Miss Bronzewing."

“Very good. Put them in my trunk, too, and now get me some tea. I will let you know by post what I am going to do next. Tell McLeod to have all traces of the marked tree removed, and see that all is right in future above ground.”

“Yes, Miss Bronzewing.”

Above ground! What lay beneath?

When Miss Delamayne departed, and was on the road near the crossing place, she recognised in a horseman passing the tall, grave, much embarrassed stranger, who had called at the “Rest” some days before. He was riding a magnificent coal-black horse in bran new panoply, and leading a wicked-looking chestnut with saddlebags on it. Doffing his hat as the coach passed, he looked at Bronzewing meaningly, rode on to the “Rest,” stayed for a drink, and disappeared again, going no one knew where. But the eye of a soaring eagle-hawk aloft on the look-out for prey, could have traced his path a bit beyond the “Rest.”

He rode on, a victim to many emotions, for he had got to know something before he met Miss Delamayne which affected him greatly, and he now seemed alive with keen purpose. In the township he had left he had bought his chestnut pack-horse, in addition to his clean gift of the man-eater, from no other than Jack, the rough-rider, the hero of the mare that had broken her neck against the forked tree. He had bought the chestnut horse cheap, as a troublesome customer, in the young stockman’s estimation, but had added a generous sum to his demand, and got credit from the fraternity by doing so.

And Bygrave liked it well because of its also

untameable qualities, preferring horses that other people did not care to ride. With him they became perfectly tractable, even obeying orders as to paces, or standing still by word of mouth.

The new chestnut was clean thoroughbred, with a nasty eye but wonderful limbs and quarters, sound as a bell, but very fiery, vicious, and impetuous.

It was nearly as big as the great coal-black horse he was bestriding, and he was using it just now as a change and pack-horse for his long journey. With the neat saddle-bags across the extra Colonial saddle on it, it strained ahead to the fullest stretch of its bridle, as the rider of Black Snake shook them both into a furious gallop along the road, on some bare-foot tracks.

Half-a-mile further he came upon Doughboy and Rosie, indignant-looking and sulky, encumbered by an infant. They were sitting by a small fire under some trees near the road.

Doughboy did not seem at all well pleased to see Bygrave, who knew who he was well enough, having seen him with Austen.

"Where's your master?" Bygrave asked him, as he pulled his horses up, jumped off, and led them towards the fire.

"Gone to England," Doughboy said. "At least he said he was going there before he left me, so I'm off back to my old hunting grounds where I was before I came here. It's a good bit off, but I'll get there in about three weeks, and I'm going to shoot kangaroos on my own hook now, since he has cleared out and left me with nothing to do."

Bygrave seemed inclined to be communicative to

the small party, taking in all the details of apparently hasty travel he saw in the two grown-up aboriginals. He asked Doughboy for a light for his pipe, after he had filled it with tobacco, which he cut from a plug of Barrett's twist, and then accepted the glowing stick taken out of the fire with a caustic smile of deep satisfaction, and puffed it lovingly as he made a few remarks to Rosie about her infant, eyeing her male partner narrowly out of the corners of the curiously attractive eyes that quelled wild horses and men. Suddenly he said:

"Doughboy, there's a nest of young parrots in that branch limb of the tree above your head."

Doughboy grinned derisively. He was perfectly well aware of the fact from his hearing only.

"They're galahs," he said.

"Don't contradict," Bygrave returned, sternly. "If I said they were parrots, they are parrots, even if they do happen to belong to the cockatoo family. Get up the tree, and fetch me one to look at. Do you think I'm a new-chum?"

Rosie looked on in sheer astonishment and alarm as Doughboy, terrified by the look in Bygrave's eyes, laying his Winchester on the ground, began to climb with a very sour face. He got to the lower fork of the box tree, ran along the limb until near to the place where the galahs' nest was, in a hole at the side, and stooping down lay flat along, embracing the bough and placing his ear close to the orifice, where the young birds were making a great noise.

Then he gave a violent, convulsive start, screamed aloud, and fell clean off the limb to the ground, where he collapsed and lay still though apparently not much hurt. It was a drop of about

twelve feet, but he had much of the cat about him and had lit on his feet. Bygrave examined him carefully and critically, getting Rosie to hold his horses, which were at first as frightened at the accident as she was. He saw nothing was wrong, talked to him for a bit in a very commanding tone, and turning in his tracks rode back the way he had come, evading the "Rest" by keeping the main road, but riding on to Brisbane, and missing the township also by going straight through the bush on a line of his own.

The black man and woman with some hastily muttered words, after his departure, in great fright and tribulation, made preparations for an instant departure, packing their small belongings with nervous tremors, and presently followed an exactly opposite course to Bygrave's, Doughboy leading the way to the country he was bound for.

When Miss Delamayne reached Brisbane she had a long, secret conference with Franks at the Clarendon Hotel, which she arrived at composedly enough, but broke down utterly when relating the anguish and suspense of the terrible scene she had gone through.

Franks' brow knitted grimly under the cloak of her falling tears, when her head was on his shoulder and she was sobbing out her anxieties and beliefs, but, comfort her as he might, her mind was made up to leave the country.

The face of the dead man haunted her beyond expression, she said. It would always be there, and she was certain she would go mad if she stopped at the "Rest" any longer. All her patient, loving schemes of waiting for the heir had come to naught. She had been flouted, insulted,

scorned, even by him, and he had gone away considering her a mere common adventuress, instead of one who had borne all things entirely for his sake.

Franks knew her thoroughly. In her childhood she had always been his pet. He had been bound to Delamayne and her mother by the strongest ties of friendship. The secret of the mine had always been a compact between them to confront Austen Conroy with, when his own infallibility was disproved by his bankruptcy, and the strength of the asset they had discovered. These things together should be a cause to cement the families by partnership and marriage. But the sudden deaths of Delamayne and Conroy himself had blocked the revelation, and the partners had been very careless meanwhile.

The final formal opening of the mine had always been a cherished scheme of Franks', and, though he would not tell Conroy until he was quite sure of the Brangal end of the reef, by opening up all along the line from the "Rest," he had proved it when the time came. He was not altogether sorry now that the tell-tale rift in the hills behind the hostelry near the river had been obliterated by the explosion, because it was always a dangerous spot. Nothing better could have happened, as he could now work from both ends. Nature in time would conceal all traces of the explosion, even closer than the mortgage on Brangal had closed it hitherto, although, as for Austen, he would have killed him himself without a word if he had seen him attempt to lay a finger on his ward, and considered he got his deserts and no less. But he said nothing definite, was not disposed to act, because their heir

was at large; and he let her have her cry out until she became a little more composed.

She made up her mind to go to England, expressed her willingness to give up her claims to any part of the Brangal estate, and decreed her intention of becoming a hospital nurse for the purposes of concealment. After a day or two, Franks humoured her, saying:

“I will come to Sydney with you to see you off, poppet. The inter-colonial steamer sails on Thursday, I know. In the meantime there are your own rooms here, darling. If you wish to keep it all dark, do so, and I will stay and be watch-dog for all future emergencies.”

And thus it came to pass that Franks, with the *Safeguard* in trust, kept an eye upon all premises connected with the mine until such time as Fate should determine the issue otherwise.

And as the months progressed, herbage, bushes, growing plants, grass and trees concealed altogether the surface over the tons of rubble blown into the narrow rift of the tell-tale gully. And below it all a dead man guarded the gold and held on to it in grisly silence without the appearance of anyone troubling further in the matter.

CHAPTER X

THE MENACE OF THE SOUTH

To Bronzewing Delamayne, on her way to England by the mail steamer from Sydney, life seemed to have become monotonous and unsatisfying, perplexing and unbearable. The sway she had always held over her little principality far away in the quiet bush was gone altogether, and, though yearning intensely for company, for sympathy, she did not seem to be able to attain it amongst a crowd of strangers, so that it was not at all surprising that she welcomed the addresses of a certain gentleman who apparently knew something about her the moment he saw her, and who, when he introduced himself to her, she also recognised.

It was Bygrave.

He seemed to lay himself out most especially to try and amuse her, to dissipate some of the melancholy under which she seemed to labour.

Individualized by her now at her leisure, he was a big, jovial sort of man who seemed to have lost his former gravity, to possess no more than a harmless eccentricity of manner easily excusable and rather amusing.

She soon found out that he was a rich Queensland squatter, a widower, reputed to be a wonderful rider, possessing a marvellous way with horses. Indeed, his chief complaint to Bronzewing was

that his weight disqualified him from riding for that great blue ribbon of his bushman's idea, the Grand National Steeplechase in England, but he also told her he meant to enter a purchase or two. She considered him rather unrefined in his manner, but her feelings of loneliness prevailed upon her to allow him to monopolize her to more than a certain extent, and he was attention itself.

As for himself, Miss Delamayne attracted beyond all others from the very first, and he never seemed—although he was in great request amongst the other passengers—thoroughly happy unless he was in her society. It was as if she had infected him with a sort of recurring sense of his own importance, and her somewhat marked leaning to him as a compatriot appeared to give him absolutely fresh vigour and life.

She grew quite accustomed to him in time, and pitied him very much indeed when he told her how he had lost his wife and child in a bad buggy accident, narrowly escaping death himself from the shock of it, and but only comparatively lately experiencing perfect convalescence. The injury to himself, he told her quite frankly, had been mental in its after results.

She understood he had a large tract of country in an interior district, out beyond where she lived herself, which he meant to utilise for breeding horses. He was going to take out some on his return trip, and had sold one of his stations down-country before he left. And, pitying his misfortunes, she had pitied him, excusing many of his foibles and idiosyncrasies where they had been slightly distasteful to her.

His coming into her life so suddenly had certainly the effect of taking her out of her own ever-recurring reflections upon the past, the menace of the gold-copper mine and its secrets; but the first time he had told her his name was Austen Bygrave, she felt a shudder of aversion she could in no other but that way of its sounding account for or explain. And half-way through the voyage he proposed to her, giving her a year to make up her mind as he told her he had some most important business in England to settle primarily.

It had all been so unexpected, so provokingly premature. He was enormously rich, would do anything for her, and really seemed to be the way out of all her difficulties by affording the strong protection her lonely heart needed, and if it was all true what he had told her, was a man who wooed her definitely, and wanted her but for herself alone. She found him a perfectly wonderful musician. He could perform on almost any instrument, and sang with wonderful pathos and expression.

Miss Delamayne was taken a great deal of notice of under his self-assumed part of proprietorship, and as she had kept herself somewhat aloof before, soon began to be a very general favourite amongst the passengers.

She had never seen into the life of such a little commonwealth at sea before as she now experienced; it amused and attracted her, and the ocean itself in its ceaseless movement and endless variation held great charms for her. She began to be carried away by her own impulses again, recovering much of her old manner, but ever and anon in the solitude of her own cabin her terrible secret came out and stood between her and all the world, mar-

riage, property, and all she could think of or desire otherwise.

At times, too, she felt as if she must go back and face it all out, taking all risks, all suspicions, all blame, but that feeling subsided after the effect of her new relations, only to come on again with redoubled vigour in her private meditations. She wrote a long letter to Franks, posting it at Suez by the outward-going steamer, imploring him to be most careful and watchful, to strengthen all defences at the "Rest" and Brangal, to wait until something definite occurred about the heir; and, before the end of the voyage, refused Bygrave altogether. He had told her he was the next legatee to the Austen estates, and that alone was enough for her, though she did not dare to tell him why.

Whereupon he seemed to become surly, suspicious, and disagreeable, drank considerably more than was good for him, and once sang a song of questionable taste before a large and mixed audience of second and first-class passengers, causing people to talk all over the ship, and strengthening Bronzewing in her determination to have nothing more to do with him.

But during the final parting of friends who had in any sort of way been drawn together during the voyage, there is always a time for reconciliation if a quarrel has taken place, and he found an opportunity then to whisper that he would never give her up, that he had a mighty and assured claim to her, and if she was trusting to any other strength than his own she was leaning on a broken reed, which he would totally destroy. He hinted that he might have something to say to her some day that might perhaps change her determination. She, however,

went through her year's nursing probation with credit, and as she took up her duties at the hospital, afterwards as a permanency, without once seeing or hearing from him, she began to feel safe, to breathe freely again.

The budget of letters received from Franks as time went on puzzled her more and more, as their bulk was added to and furtively destroyed. For a few months they hinted nothing but sympathy, and a pecuniary draft or two was sent for her benefit. Conroy had got lost in the bush, parted from young McGregor, who had first found him, but had turned up safely and was working at a farm for his living. Her experience with Bygrave had disgusted and frightened her, and her heart rejoiced because Conroy seemed to be going the right way, in spite of their quarrel. Then Levi Levinstein had been to see Franks once or twice; he thought he had something on his mind, but could not tell what it was, and at this piece of information she became anxious again, because she knew Franks would be uneasy.

He had not sold the "Clarendon." It was a good get-away always and he had disposed of several parcels of gold without anyone knowing where they came from. There were rumours in the district about the "Rest." The police had made enquiries about Austen's disappearance, but the "Safeguard" bluffed them all.

Now Bronzewing, of course, had previously thought she knew more and consequently guessed more than all outsiders, who had not acted in her own particular and terrifying drama, and this was where Levi's restlessness came in as far as she was concerned. Although her sudden confusion and alarm had prompted her to fire the Safeguard with-

out thinking of Austen's dead body, a dimly-recurring suspicion had grown upon her that the very thing she had tried to avoid by so doing, namely, the prevention of the knowledge of the mine leaking out, had become futile by some other intervention of knowledge not her own or Austen's. Who could it be who had this secret in his possession? Why had Levinstein something on his mind? Was it he himself who knew something about it, had been a witness to her act? But there was something else that haunted her at times more than the dead man's body did. Her revolver had clicked when she pulled the trigger. There had been no recoil of the weapon. Austen had fallen dead at her feet, however, with a bullet through his head just over the eye; that was certain. Who had shot him if she had not? She distinctly remembered a report which she could not somehow locate to her own pistol, neither at the time nor afterwards. Now and then she thought she had not killed Austen, though she knew she fully meant to. These reflections came with gradually increasing strength time after time since she left Australia. And if Franks was secretly disposing of the gold, would not he be found out too? She had hated the whole disclosure when Franks told her after her father's death.

Did Levi know the secret of the mine? Was he in collusion with Austen, even on the face of the apparently trumped-up story the latter had told her? Had he lurked about and seen the death of the latter? The whole occurrence at that time had been so sudden and horrible, first Austen's terrifying appearance from Franks' working-room, secondly his proposal and mad attempt to force her

into compliance with his wishes. Who was the third party? who could it be? Was there one? Impossible, she had seen Levi under usual circumstances at Barilla as she passed through after Austen's death. They themselves, Franks and she, had been working the mine along the reef illegally for two years past; there was no doubt about that. They had known it all along: it had been always partially working. The person who shot Austen, if there was one, must understand about all that now, if he escaped the explosion. What would the district say if all these carefully-concealed facts were found out at any time? What would the Government do in the case? What could they, the instigators of it all, do if it was found out?

Franks had only hinted these things to Bronzewing in lines she read between in a sort of patchwork of her own making as time went on. She had not told him of her suspicion about her pistol as yet. Should she, or shouldn't she? she asked herself, and finally determined to let chance and time decide, as she had done from the very first, always believing in the upholding of the right somehow.

Although these scrappy items of intelligence, bearing oft-times upon her soul's division, came to her mail by mail, and renewed her own chance acquaintance with the past in multiform vexations and uneasinesses, the views they gave her of a united future were not at all convincing, and with this new brake to the peace of her affairs, and the almost conviction that she had not fired the shot which killed Austen, she felt an increasing desire to cut short her work in England, to go back and

consult Franks as to what they should do on discovery of any reality of it. According to his latest intelligence, the mine could even now be worked from end to end between Brangal and the "Rest" without anyone being the wiser, and that the Brangal end was awfully rich. She knew that the deep gully in the middle had been used for taking out some of the excavated earth, and that was Franks' work with his coadjutors. It was the beginning of the tunnel in the rift to both ends of the reef, and it was the best thing in the world that the Safeguard had been exploded before its time, all but for this dread sequence of being presumably known by someone else, according to her theory.

However, she kept a bold face on the matter, under all circumstances, to her every-day world, and as no more very alarming reports came, settled down again, throwing herself with all her heart and soul into her work, as a relaxation from the strain she had been subjected to. She thought of nothing else for some time, and being assured by Franks that all about the "Rest" had at last settled down into its usual primeval state of quietness, progressed very favourably with her self-imposed work, reaping golden opinions from patients, nurses, doctors, and the management generally.

But, in spite of this alleviation of mind, still came the awkward question of "Who fired the shot?" to cause occasional surmises.

Then she received an altogether unexpected and surprising letter from Austen Bygrave which upset her more than ever. It ran :

DEAR MISS DELAMAYNE,

The reason I am writing to you is because of the total disappearance of a relative of mine out in Australia.

You knew "Kangaroo" Austen, of course, who was in your district of late years. He is the man I allude to. I wouldn't have troubled you in the matter, as he was a sordidly disreputable sort of fellow, and I did not much care about him, but as you are aware I have long since known that if his death can be proved I, as next of kin, inherit the Austen estates in England. They are very large and beautiful; I could improve them greatly, and go in for a large racing stud.

For reasons that I cannot divine, you have refused my most humble adoration. That is, of course, not my fault. Putting it aside for the present, I am anxious to meet you to ask for certain information about my cousin, which only yourself could perhaps supply.

Owing to enquiries set on foot by the trustees of these properties, at first inaugurated by the non-receipt of a remittance forwarded to my cousin, the knowledge of his continued absence from your vicinity has come to hand. As he has turned up nowhere else, as far as they can find out, there is some doubt of his existence. It is a strange coincidence, surely, that I, your humble and devoted slave, should have to make this appeal to you, in spite of what has passed between us.

Any information given by yourself would be, just now, extremely valuable to me, as I ought to be able to trace my cousin from it.

If anything could soften you at any time, by any possible manner of means, there is one person in the world who would be transported to the seventh heaven of delight if you reconsidered your decision. And that person happens to be

Your most devoted admirer and slave,

AUSTEN BYGRAVE.

Bronzewing did not answer the epistle, although all her former state of wild turmoil of mind returned. But, trusting to time and the Safeguard, she still kept silence until a week later a card was handed to her by one of the nurses, and, going down to the visitors' room, found her old suitor awaiting her.

CHAPTER XI

LOVE IN A MOTOR CAR

IT was with a feeling of intense relief that Bronzewing Delamayne found Bygrave did not attempt to broach the subject he had written to her about, either in its abstract or concrete form. On the contrary, he seemed to be so charmed and carried away by the very sight of her, more peerless and unapproachable than ever to him, that, postponing all business topics, he asked her to come out for a motor drive, as he had something to tell her that would probably affect both their lives in a very marked degree. She didn't feel particularly inclined to go with him, but his manner was so earnest, so irreproachable, that at last she gave her consent, rather against her own judgment.

He said he was stopping at the Cecil, and, as she pleaded work just then, appointed their outing for a day later, and took his departure. Next morning he called for her early, driving alone. They ran out of London into the country, to Bronzewing's great delight and pleasure, although she had a feeling that she had been foolish to accede to his invitation, but he had pleaded so earnestly, made such a point of the value of his information, that she—on tenterhooks about the death of Austen, and her own blocking of the fact—had at last consented.

The motor, a large, very powerful double vehicle, Cape-cart tilted, and dust-glassed, was his own, and he dilated much in praise of it, saying that a motor drive seemed to him the best way of divulging his important information to her, as no one could either hear or interfere with them *en route*. She pressed him to tell her right away, but he fenced with her questions, turned the subject, spoke of times when he was more to her than he appeared to be just now, and finally broke off conversation altogether, refusing to turn homewards when she asked him.

“What if I ran away with you altogether, Bronzewing?” he asked, suddenly, as they were flying through the Chiltern Hundreds. “There is no one to say me nay, and if you jumped out now you would break your neck for a dead certainty, and kill me, as I should have to try to save you.”

She looked at him with amazement as the motor sped on, being more certain than ever that there was something mentally wrong with him. Up to now his manners had been unassailable, even if morose for some miles.

“There’s a letter in my pocket,” he resumed, master of a set purpose. “It was a private letter written by my hapless cousin to his trustees not long before his disappearance. In it he mentions your name as a possible get-out of the monetary difficulties connected with his English estates, and a probable return there, as a consequence of his marriage with you. What are you masquerading here as a nurse for, then? What have you to do with the disappearance of my cousin, after his written declaration? What has he to do with you,

I should like to know? You belong to me, by right incontestable, and that you will understand very soon."

Bronzewing was thoroughly alarmed now, as well she might be. There was a set expression on the grim face beside her which she had never seen before, and she wondered what he would do next. They were going through West Wycombe at a dangerous pace, but the watchful eyes alongside her steered the swift machine dexterously enough, although on the outskirts there was imminent danger for a second or two for a nurse and perambulator crossing the road.

"My Queen," Bygrave resumed later, in an earnest voice, as if suddenly making up his mind to a definite point, "don't be afraid, but tell me all connected with Austen. It cannot harm anybody beyond our two selves, and I'm bound to be as silent as the grave about it, since his estates will probably be mine. Will you have me for your slave? I wait for your answer. I ask you to share the estates with me, and let the past lie buried. I have plenty of money without your troubling for anything."

"What did your cousin say?" Bronzewing asked as steadily as she could.

Her colour had heightened, but she did not outwardly flinch as she looked fairly and squarely at her persecutor.

"He merely alluded to you personally as an heiress, who, on marriage with him, would enrich the estates and prevent the sequestration to which they were subjected during his exile in the Colonies, but since I first saw you I resolved to have you all to myself, and I hope it will be proved that he is

dead, and cannot claim you in any way."

"Did he say anything else?" she asked, ignoring this declaration.

"Merely that he was going to see you soon. The letter was stamped and posted in the usual manner."

"Did he not hint how or why he considered me rich?"

"No."

"On your sacred word of honour, Mr. Bygrave?"

"On my sacred word of honour, Bronzewing."

"Then I refuse to tell you anything about your cousin, save that he was a bad, unscrupulous, dangerous man. I did not know very much about him," she went on, "but to me he was always unpleasant, and any reference to him is still distasteful."

"Very well," Bygrave returned, "I'm glad to hear it. Now I'm going to run down to Oxford, and give you some dinner at the Mitre. I'm an old 'Varsity man myself, and it will be queer for me to see the new generation of the same type as I used to be. I wonder if any of the boys of this day have driven a machine like this inside their various quads, as they used to ride their hunters there at odd times in the old days!"

"I wish you would turn," she said. "I don't want dinner anywhere, and I should be getting back now. I've asked you often enough. Do listen to reason; I shall appeal for help wherever you go if you don't."

He smiled disdainfully.

"No, Bronzewing, I do not intend that you shall ever return to your nursing business. Think what it would be to be a great heiress in this country, the mistress of two beautiful country residences, a

town house, acres galore, good rents to draw, the value of the land itself, the ever-increasing pleasure of spending our money in mutual consultation over various improvements. Think of the advantages Society would give you. You would be received with open arms everywhere, and the rest and ease of a patriarchal country life would suit us both now after all the worries and anxieties of our past."

What a drift of sanity lurked in his obvious mental eccentricity, thought Bronzewing, and how he could sue with his eyes, but to her he was now simply odious.

"Besides, why not let old matters form new manners, to abide with my determination and knowledge," he went on, generously. "You never guessed that I was journeying with you on board the liner we crossed the seas on with one purpose in my heart—to win you all for my own. For I had seen you once, and your beautiful face remained to haunt me. It was enough for me to see it never to get rid of it from my memory, try as I would, and it must be mine, with all yourself, to gaze upon and live for for ever. The second time I saw you I loved you still more, but you did not see me then."

"Was that when you rode past the coach?" she asked.

"No."

"When was it, then?"

"You had just shot a man," he remarked, very coolly and decidedly. "He lay dead at your feet. Why did you do that? What was your reason for it? Why did you run away afterwards to become a nurse in England, of all places?"

"I am not sure about shooting him," she said, "but I meant to kill him, and he deserved it."

"I'm with you there," he said. "He did, but I see you have all your wits about you, as usual, so it is no use my trying any paltry subterfuges of not knowing when he was shot and where. But seriously, my dearest girl, I have a much fuller claim over you than that of my unfortunate cousin whom you supposed you shot. In the first place, I know that you cannot repel me when I tell you I knew about my cousin's death all the time, as you now see. That fact alone, and your position in connection with it, equalizes my claim with yours completely. I can give you the fullest reason of his death if you wish it?"

"I don't see why you should. If you can prove I did it, and mean to say so at any time, I am willing to face the consequences in a Court of Law, but——"

"You own the land from the 'Rest' to Brangal? Is that your reason for not wishing the fact to be known?"

"No, I only own the smaller surface enclosing the 'Rest.' The land, all of it, really belongs to the heir."

"Then who is he?"

"James Conroy, Austen Conroy's son."

"Ah, the next heir to the Austen estates, as it so happens, if I die without issue—and fail to attach you personally. But I've made all arrangements to compel you to be mine, Bronzewing, and if you are afraid that any penalty will attach to you, I am your guarantee that it shall not. My darling, I have a far more extensive claim to you than my cousin or anyone else ever had, for I killed him

myself to save your honour! But how pale you look. What is the matter, dear? Oh, what is it? He deserved it, as you said yourself, so where is the crime in it, and who can blame either of us?"

She fainted dead away, but the Fates were at hand to save her.

In trying to assist her, he shifted his steering wheel to a dangerous angle. There was a half-turn up the bank, a whirl and twirl into the road again, a bad skid, and a complete upset of the car.

Owing to the pace they had been going, all this happened in a few seconds, after which there was a wrecked machine and two motionless forms—Bronzewing on the grass, and Bygrave on the road. Bronzewing had been flung out limp and helpless at the first sudden swerve on to the bank. She was safe and uninjured, though still unconscious.

Her tormentor lay still and bleeding from an injury to his head, and it seemed as if he was dead.

By-and-bye, Bronzewing came to herself, and, rising, went over to Bygrave. She had miraculously escaped injury, so she told herself, and was not sorry to see her incubus in the condition he was. With the assistance of some country people, who came running up, she gave him the necessary first aid, with all the due assurance of her office, despatching one of them for a conveyance. Then, having given instructions about the broken motor, now removed from the road, she had her senseless patient carried off and placed in a train from the nearest station to London, attending to him there in her own ward at the hospital.

She gathered from the doctors that there would necessarily be delay about his recovery, that there

was a great element of danger in the injury he had suffered, and, nursing him until they assured her that his case had become almost hopeless, without his once knowing her, she pleaded indisposition and left for Australia.

CHAPTER XII

A WASTE PLACE

As for Jim Conroy, it came to him ere this, the same as to his father, to get an inspiration of how to try his fortune elsewhere than in a billiard-room, through the machinations and endeavours of a stalwart young bushman, the emissary of Arthur Franks, who, staying at the hotel, kept setting forth the beauties of a free, open-air life, and at last persuaded him to give up his self-chosen profession and follow whither he dictated. Together they went back to Brisbane, where Roddy McGregor disclosed the whole advantage of his proposition in a clear and convincing manner, without divulging who he was, or why he had laid himself out so especially to please his new acquaintance, who, however, had taken to him at first sight.

“I’ve got a light waggon, a couple of good, staunch roadsters, together with a complete outfit for kangarooing,” he said. “We are sure to make good money at it, and it’s a fine, free life for such as you and I. I want a mate of just your description, and if in this glorious country we can’t make some profit out of our expedition, why, I shall be a duffer if I can’t show you how to, that’s all.

“First of all, you see, we can carry provisions, a tent, and many other things wherever we can get

with a buggy, and that's a good many places more than you would think, with such a handy pair as mine. I've been wandering all my life, my son, and I'll soon put you up to all the wrinkles of travel and sojourn, easy's falling off a log, guaranteeing you'll kill as many 'roos as I do in a day's work when you have learnt to handle your Winchester, and there's money and health in the business besides. I'd die in a week if I had to mope about in town, same as you have. Kangarooing's a trade, a profession, just as much as your billiard-room work was, but it is not half so dyspeptic, which is another comfort that's worth studying if you want to grow wealthy and wise. Besides the pelts, which we can sell for ourselves at a good profit for all outlay, there are the scalps which the marsupial boards will buy from us as guarantees of their destruction. So a kangaroo counts twice in a manner of speaking, if you know how to work it, you see. And we might come across gold, or its equivalent; what do you say to that?"

Naturally, Conroy warmed to the subject when put in this light. The country life had inducements, great inducements.

He also realized, as he was now forced to work in order to make money for himself, it would be advisable to learn all manners and modes of the bush working man's life. So he promptly accepted Roddy's offer and willing tuition, especially when, after enquiry, he was assured that he would have to earn his own share by real hard graft after initiation. "That's what mates were built for," added Roddy.

So the two set off on their new quest from Brisbane in high spirits soon afterwards, driving

leisurely along the up-country road towards the Warrego, camping at night where bush hospitality did not intervene, and finding Nature as lavish and perhaps a little more varied occasionally than civilization. They had a double-barrelled shot-gun for turkeys and ducks, and Roddy pointed out all bush wonders to his new mate, instructing him how to do things until the willingness on both sides began to make them friends in downright earnest, instead of mere chance acquaintances, and the appellations Roddy and Jim became permanently fixed, as mates' names should be.

"I'll alter the sights on that new Winchester of yours, Jim, and lighten the trigger-pull," Roddy observed one day as they jogged along, the trained horses dividing the outer road rut for easier wheel work, "as soon as we get into the real kangaroo country."

They reached the Warrego at last, struck over towards the back-country of the Paroo, and finally came to that river itself.

"This is the red, short-haired kangaroo country, the sort so good for boot and stock-whip making," Conroy's mate declared. "See if we don't get a big cargo of pelts in some of these big forest mulga scrubs out-back, besides smaller fry. As for tucker*, I doubt if a London restaurant wouldn't jump at the teal, the wood-duck, the whistling duck, and the black duck that our old two-spout scatter-gun would fetch 'em in a day's march on the Paroo frontage or on any of the back lagoons. See 'em now rising off that water-hole, and listen to the whistling duck out of those reeds!

*Food.

“Ever eat a paddymelon? You hold on till I cook you one. They’re like a sucking pig made of chicken if you understand the culinary art, same as a bandicoot almost. Scald ’em just like a little pig is scalded, and stuff and eat ’em roasted. And there’s a lily root about here in deep water I’ll get you that’ll make you want no more potatoes till you see ’em again down-country. And there’s silver bream, perch and catfish, and plenty of fresh water mussels to be fished out.”

“You seem to know your way about, Roddy.”

“Fairly well; I was up here some time after the exploring party, and I’ve got the bush knowledge and the hang of it all. You can’t go very much wrong for birds and animals in Australia, wherever you travel, though the trees change more than a bit in a single day’s journey. Ever seen mulga before? We’re in it now, miles upon miles of it, up and down the river, as well as out-back. If you get a splinter of that stuff in you, you’ll get the Barcoo rot, as it poisons and festers the flesh from only a scratch, but horses will eat the leaves with the greatest relish, and they fatten cattle and sheep. See that park-like ridge mulga away on our left. That’s the stuff for stock. It’s the old broken dead forest, that’s good for nothing but fires and staking horses.

“Now I’m going to follow this Paroo down a bit, and then strike out back from where we find ourselves, up a creek, or straight across country, and chance it until I get a suitable spot for our base camp somewhere near a place I’ve got my eye on. That’s our real beginning, you see. You’ve learned to drive, Jim, since we started. You can find the horses without losing yourself every time,

if they don't stray very far from camp. You know how to mix a damper or Johnny cakes on a bit of inside fresh river box or gum bark, and you can cook a good deal better than you did when you started. That's something, ain't it, old man? So you're beginning to be a real good mate, you see. Now I'm going to teach you to shoot."

"I feel better in real health and spirits than ever I did in all my life, Roddy, and like this picnic no end. I had no idea Australia was such a grand country, such a changeable and wonderful land, when you are clear away from town."

"Ah, you're only learning yet, man. How would it be if you had to build a town yourself some day out where we're going to, eh?"

"Ah, there's not much prospect of that, Roddy."

"Why not? Suppose you found a payable gold or gem field?"

This set Conroy thinking.

"I understand a man does chance upon gold sometimes," he said. "It seems like a fairy tale, but I should not know where to look for it if I wanted to."

"It is chance mostly, Jim, but a chance that is always happening. I know places I've driven over, walked over, and sat upon, that turned out gem or gold-bearing ground afterwards, though I did not notice it at the time by not giving my mind or eyes to my surroundings, any more than in looking for grass and water. It's my saying that if you happen to locate anywhere in Australia, no matter where it is, stick to it, and you'll find something payable about it, but I never practised my motto. If I had done so, I should have come out on top long ere this. Mind you, it's easier to say

than do, for this country breeds a love of wandering from the very change and charm of it all. But you should hear all bushmen talk of the riches they have missed. Why, as an instance, the man who lived on Mount Morgan sold his rights for a mere song. He didn't know the place was all gold, that full of it that he could have founded a race of multi-millionaires, if he had kept it for his family and himself.

"What a lot of bullion and sovereigns must have been minted off that spot since then for the good of the British Empire, and Australia too, for we coin our own bullion nowadays. Wouldn't it make a book of wonder and delight if you got the history of any other El Dorado out here, and the tales and adventures of the people the gold passed through the hands of, from discovery to realization, the sort of men they were, their successes and disappointments, and all they did. Talk about London, eh? We touch the real thing that makes London out here, if we have a mind to, and we have the romance of the finding all that goes to make a man besides."

"I'm longing to get at the kangaroos, Roddy; there's more fun in going after them for me than in gold-digging at present, and perhaps it'll lead to what you say, some day, when I get a sufficient knowledge of bush ways. I don't feel as if I had seen half enough of them yet."

"Hurry nothing, then, mate; take it all as it comes. But look out for sharp surprises, as they may drive you another way sometimes. I've heard of something up here besides kangaroos that may be valuable, or I shouldn't be talking as I do. Live and let live, I say, and be thankful if you are

only alive to work and plan. Keep your eyes open and use them both above and below the ground; but be dark about your findings to others. Them's my sentiments, Jim."

They left the bank of the river shortly afterwards, Roddy striking off from it at right angles through an open box flat. Then, after travelling a considerable distance through rough black-stemmed gidya on a creek over park-like ground, they came to a range of hills which, for a time, seemed a perfect martyrdom to get across. But presently they found a thickly-timbered grassed gorge through which Roddy piloted his brown horses skilfully, although at no small risk and danger to all their belongings, on account of uneven ground, dense scrub, and steep ascents.

Patience, however, and a judicious use of the bushman's stand-byes—the American axe and the small tomahawk, for tree and scrub intervenings—and his third and fourth best bowers, the long-handled shovel and pick for inequalities of ground, got them through and up to the top, whence, still driving in the gorge, they suddenly opened new country, to Roddy's great satisfaction. Here at the end of the mountain glade, which elevated to a plateau level, grassy at the summit, fringed with cliffs and divided with huge rocks, enabled them to look down upon a large plain, the tussocky grass on which, shining yellow in the sunlight, made them think of a lake of molten gold, set in a crucible of purple flat-topped hills, beyond which stretched an ocean of trees to all horizons; such a scene as Conroy had never, in the wildest dreams of his imagination, imagined before, the whole in no way losing the weird beauty of its settings and

surroundings by the brightness of the sun in the unflecked sky overhead.

The extreme end of the gorge where Roddy pulled up his hardy, travel-stained horses at last, with an emphatic rein, was flanked by two brown monoliths of peculiar shape which stood up like leaning pillars, and beyond and below them a long tussocked slope led downwards towards the plain.

"Our journey's over," said Roddy.

Then, turning his team, he drove fifty yards back to a spot where he had seen pigeons fly out from a cavity in the rocks on his left hand. And sure enough, there was a fine native well* with six months' water in it, dry fallen and abundant wood lay about, and at the end of the gorge a look-out over a country stretching to nearly a whole circle.

"I see water glinting on the far end of the big plain below, on a bee-line above those three conical sugar-loaf hills," Roddy went on, when they had gone a second time on foot to the stone monoliths. "It's a big look-out. See, the plain is covered with 'roos."

"I suppose you will form the base camp here, Roddy?"

"Just our sort, mate! A good spot to see everything from. Now we'll let the horses spell for a fortnight, and do our own work on our legs for a bit. And what do you say to a feed, or are you off your tucker with the view?"

The two young men were tanned by the sun heat of long travel to the colour, if not the consistency, of a pair of well-worn leather boots, and their hunger in this instance was nearly good enough to

*Natural storage of water from an overhead drip.

eat their likenesses if nothing better offered. So the young pioneer's question seemed superfluous.

Roddy McGregor soon had the camp in wonderful order. He had an expeditious, practical way of setting about everything that only comes from long experience, and the habit was beginning to have a similar effect upon Conroy, who was unable to refrain from imitating him. Nothing seemed to come amiss to Roddy anywhere. He buckled to on the slightest occasion, and would have done everything everywhere that was to be done without troubling anybody else. And as such a character was infectious in the highest degree, Conroy despite his natural indolence, had been inspired and smartened up by it very much. The pair of young athletes, after starting their fire, now prepared to pitch their tent, digging a drain round it for rain water, getting pegs made with a tomahawk. Then they cut down and placed a framework, over which they fixed their tent; then the fly or outside lighter covering was tied down to an outer framework; and in a day or so they made a cooking place of stones with a bough shelter over it for coolness.

This dwelling of these far-off wanderers in this primeval Eden was pitched in a snug turning of the level ravine, out of sight of anyone below. Rocks towered on each side, but on the wide flat space beneath them, the same yellow grass that dotted the plain below waved and sang its whispering songs to any passing breeze; and the park-like trees of ridge mulga cast pleasant patches of shadow upon the plateau, whilst here and there grew small succulent native wild melons.

It was an ideal spot, this base camp of theirs,

and long did Conroy, after their first meal, leaning against one of the brown stone pillars flanking the gorge, gaze about him. He was fascinated by the wonderful colour in the landscape, the breadth, wildness, the intense loneliness of it all.

"It makes a fellow feel a man to see such a country," he thought. "'Puts a spread on him,' as Roddy would say."

Blue-misted, olive-green, purple, and gold, the landscape spread itself before his sight. It was a new world with no white inhabitants upon it save themselves; not a sign of mankind anywhere. And the wild grandeur of it was indescribable and enchanting, never to fade away again from his vision as a dream of amethyst, sapphire, emerald, purple and gold.

"This district should be taken up again," Roddy declared, as he joined him later. "It's one of our waste places, a blacks' country. I believe there is a bush hotel and a post-office some eighty miles from here, where the road turns off for the Bulloo, that may be just kept alive by passing stock and travellers, but at present the kangaroo and the wild man rule the roost. Here we are on the verges of the Never-Never, touched before, and deserted. But what may be beyond it, or even here as it is now, who can tell?"

"See how Australia develops bit by bit in these far-out wild places. First comes the explorer. After him goes the pioneer squatter on his report or discovery alone, and is lucky or not as he locates with cattle or sheep. When he has fought out the seasons of his lease, successful or broken enough to leave it for good and all, some later wandering prospector or kangarooer comes along and makes

a mineral discovery where the squatter has sold out or given up. And in the latter case, squatting being played out, the pioneer of the land deposed, the mineral find develops and most probably a township springs into existence, which will develop into a city in its time, and the surrounding country becomes inhabited and civilized still more by the advent of the iron horse as the years roll on, and goes on from prosperity to prosperity, until farms spring up everywhere, many of them with a mineral section on them if the farmers have been on the diggings before and have a digger's eyes."

All this sort of talk from Roddy surprised and interested Conroy immensely. He thought it strange that he, being only about a year or so older than himself, could have so much general knowledge.

But bush-bred Roddy had commenced to learn his native lore on his father's first little farm selection near Brisbane in the old days, and what had been his alphabet there had increased to a volume of erudition and working power for himself in a new and quickly-developing land which his heart turned to naturally more and more as he went out to explore farther. He was up to every trick and turn in the manner of the wild life laid before him, and knew mining well. He would go droving, fencing, splitting, shearing, when he wanted a change; but there are few, except their intimates and co-workers, who really know what a grand, sensible, intellectual, hardy race these young fellows are part of through constant employment in the open air.

Brimming with energy and grit, they will work with full vigour, using muscles and body all day

long until their brief hours of rest come to them, when, after sundown, the brain, calling for its due increment in turn, is then filled with such a wide pabulum provided by such sterling papers as the "Australasian," "The Queenslander," "The Town and Country Journal," and perchance the young bushman, a man amongst men in the strong, vigorous life he is living, commences to dabble in thought-out politics with the light of his country philosophically upon him, a frame of mind which produces patriots, athletes, and well-to-do native-born Colonists.

Next morning Roddy McGregor was up and about betimes. He lit the fire, brought wood and water, replenished the water vessels, set the breakfast utensils ready, and was now engaged fixing a white ivory bush fore-sight to Conroy's Winchester. Then he fitted a curved, darkened tin shade over the back-sight to localize the fore without eye dazzle.

Conroy emerged from the tent, yawning, when Roddy broke in smiling, satisfied with his efforts:

"Now you'll do for a first trial, Jim. There's your rifle; I've fixed it all right for you, so as to take this sunlight."

Conroy took it with hearty thanks, examined the native inventive touch, went back to the tent for soap and a towel, and, coming out again without his firearm, caught up a spare bucket.

"When we have done breakfast, we'll tidy up, and then go down and see which way Yeo and Bushman are heading," Roddy observed on his return. "They were a bit restless with sand-flies last night by the sound of the bell. If they are all right now, we'll have a crack at the 'roos,

"I wonder what stuff is glinting there on the sides of those sugar-loaf hills out in the plain? Looks like big diamonds in the sun, don't it? I have only heard of this place on the quiet, never seen it before. To-night when we come back we'll fill some empty shells, if we dispose of the ten loaded cartridges I've parcelled out for our joint back-swap to-day. You don't want to waste a shot up here, and when you've had enough practice you won't attempt to.

"Don't you wish you were in Sydney at billiard work? Fancy ironing your tables, and watching other people play all day and half the night!"

Conroy paused as he inhaled the sweet early air.

"Not I. We're monarchs of all we survey, eh, Roddy? My word, what a kingdom it is, too. How vast!"

"That depends; you're looking at it from above in too high a light altogether. We haven't surveyed more than the outlook yet, old man; and a lot of the whole of it is buried to sight and knowledge in that great sea of mulga forest, in a little bit of which you might lose yourself for ever and ever, and where even sudden death might be lurking for you in some unexpected form or other before you could get even a little bit more forward to the horizon. Let's see how you shoot and explore first as to a permanency of qualification, unless you want a cook's billet!"

Breakfast over, the friends shouldered their Winchesters and strode off to explore their new realm, having put everything about the camp in such thorough order as Roddy enjoined. Their way down from the elevated gorge of their base camp lay on the gentle slope which led to the plain.

They went on until the sugar-loaf hills were reached.

“What a clinking farm this spot would make!” Roddy exclaimed, “and what a site to build a house by these two hills. See, here’s a blind creek, and it is running from those upper waters we saw yesterday. The stuff that glittered so from the top of this nearest hill is native talc. Look at it, like semi-transparent slabs of thick frosted window glass a quarter-of-an-inch thick.”

Roddy then mounted the nearest of the conical hills, where, on a grassed plateau of ascension, lay a great mass of brown, chocolate-coloured rock. He had a small shingling tomahawk with a hammer side to it in his leather belt strap, and with this latter auxiliary to geology began cracking bits off the rock outcrop, which here and there held the blue of weather-worn opal deposit.

“Great Scott!” he called out; “Conroy, come here! Look, it’s alive!”

And in the cleft of the exposed surface of a knocked off stone breakage, was a four-legged, cream-white creature, shaped like a lizard, tail moving and body breathing. But it died before their eyes, wriggling out from its own impressed moulding in the stone, and expiring in the grass at their feet.

“He must have been melted and poured in! I wonder what he lived on,” Roddy said, putting his small hammer tomahawk back into his belt, and picking up his rifle, “and why I was sent to chip him into open air, and death, is more than I can imagine. There are things in Nature past our ken, whatever we may believe. However did he get there, and how did he live? He is an opal

lizard, and his duty was to remain there until he was opalized. But seeing is believing, isn't it! Sh! look at that kangaroo, she's a big doe with a joey hopping by her."

And Roddy slid to the ground like a tailor, and, sitting, fired sideways, resting his elbows on his knees.

The big doe toppled over and lay quite still, shot through the head, about 300 yards off beyond the base of the next sugar-loaf hill.

"We'll take the joey up to camp when we come back, and make a pet of him," said Roddy, who, running, followed by Conroy, had caught the young marsupial. "We'll tie him up here now, and skin the other. Out with your knife, Jim."

CHAPTER XIII

LURED BY THE BELL-BIRDS

NEXT morning the pupil, happening to awake before sunrise, thinking to surprise and captivate Roddy with his new-born bush attainments, left his companion sleeping soundly in the tent, his hands crossed behind his head, his body at full stretch, and a peaceful and benign smile on his face.

Jim Conroy stepped lightly and briskly down the hillside full of his own importance. It was "nerangi" daylight, the "little dawn" of the wild blacks, the steel-grey glimmer before the sunrise, just light sufficient to see by and cold enough with a frost-snap in the air to make him wish to progress briskly, the very hour when if awake you feel your life about to burst into increasing vitality if you are young and able. The rough boulders on the slope were but half-formed in dim, vapoury silhouettes as he passed them, and the earth as yet was asleep in a bath of faint, floating, low-clinging ground mist.

He got to the conical hills of yesterday and, arriving further on near a clump of mulga, one little cock of the dawn trilled his first sleepy canopied voice of tribute to the slowly-brightening sky overhead.

Conroy peered about looking for it, failing exactly to place the little dreamer; but ten minutes

afterwards, when well out in the plain, he heard the horses' bell distinctly in some distant timber. Never calculating consequences, he ran hard for the sound, pushing on straight to where it came from; and the fact that he ought to have followed the tracks from where he had seen the waggon horses the night before never entered his head, when, hearing the bell again still clearer but more to the right, he stood listening intently in surprised doubt. The sound came clearer in its metallic call soon afterwards, but farther in, and pushing hurriedly forward, still thinking how he would surprise Roddy with his extra smartness, he stopped again to listen. It was old Bushman himself; he had the bell on. It rang twice again quite clearly; the old horse had wakened up to some purpose, and was moving fast away over the new grass in the forest, but the sun was now up and all the bush birds were singing a joint heraldic refrain to it, making the occasional bell very hard to distinguish.

He was still pressing on, in a gorge between hills, when he heard it again in a marked ringing measure at the other end. Then the ground began to rise, and still the tinkle seemed to indicate the horses. Something had startled them, surely? he thought. But, though hastening, he didn't seem to catch up with them as fast as he could wish. Had anybody got hold of them? It seemed as if they were being ridden off.

There, again! Perhaps they were bushrangers who were doing this! One of the dangers lurking in immediate places before one came to the horizon of Roddy's prophecy. He must hurry anyhow, so he paced on through the thick timber

to gain on them, every now and then hearing the fleeting tinkle, sometimes, his senses told him, in other directions than the one he was pursuing. This confused him altogether, and at last he pulled up, not over confident as to his own whereabouts. Every tree around him looked the same as the others. There was no real open ground, only between-patches of it, whilst timber, rise, and ridge blocked his sight whichever way he turned. He was hot and tired, with a sinking sensation somewhere about the pit of his stomach that made him wish for a steaming pannikin of tea back at the camp fire, and one of Roddy's Johnny cakes, with something still more substantial in addition to allay his fast-increasing hunger. He wandered on and on, getting more and more perplexed, with the bells all around him, but fainter and fewer and getting farther away as the sun rose higher, until at last he came to a white-soiled, glazy-looking clay-pan surrounded with slight, thin-stalked, rustling reeds in a forest opening, and paused for a drink of its shallow, milky-looking water. Then he took another direction, which he thought would be his route back to Roddy, disgusted with himself, his morning's work, and everything else, still occasionally edging away to where a deeper tinkle of the eerie bells made him certain that the horses were near him somewhere.

The sun was well up now, and still the interminable mulga forest stretched out before him and around him with no sign of the plain he wished so much to find. Ah, he was quite sure now that he had gone wrong, because he saw a bell-bird, a black honey eater which flicked its tail and wings, in a tree close by him, and, though the near note

it gave was not quite the same as the ring of a horse-bell, he thought distance would give it exactly the same mellowed, metallic note he had hastened after all the morning.

He sat down, lit his pipe, and deliberated which direction to take so as to get back to the base camp. When he had finished, he kept on as far as he could judge at an angle from the course he had been following. He believed this would lead him out on to the plain again, but had he known more of the ways of the bush he might have been equally certain that tree stem after tree stem would deflect his straight line little by little, so that a deviation here and there, however small, not knowing how to rectify his line by the sun, and keep it straight, would in time lead him to describe a circle.

At last he came on his tracks again in some soft, red ground, and for a moment wondered what man could be possibly wandering about in his vicinity. He thought they were made by the man or men who had moved the horses away. After inspection and measurement with his boot-sole, he found to his horror the truth of the whole circle theory, but never thought of following his tracks continuously backwards, and so left them. Presently he came, by some lucky chance, to the foot of a cliff, and managed to scale it in order to obtain a clear look round. He found the summit open and grassed, studded here and there with clumps of mulga, affording grateful shelter to mobs of kangaroos. However, the only variety of landscape afforded by the higher altitude was a view of more forest and bigger hills still, and in their direction he set off, feeling sure they were those where Roddy had fixed their base camp.

But the same sea of trees seemed to pervade the rest of his view right away to all distances, and there were no indications whatever of the plain he was re-seeking. He grew sick and faint with hunger and alarm, and by night, still hopelessly plodding onwards, was lost irretrievably to all purposes of return, although he had reached the base of the mountains he had steered for, and from which he hoped next morning to see the country he had wandered from, and which, had he known, was even now not so very far distant. Where he was, he found on the lower ground plenty of water by silver box trees in a narrow, open creek flat, and drinking his fill, lit a camp fire, and put up a rude sort of broken bough shelter, after inspecting a comfortable-looking cave not far off his selection; but the fear of lingering snakes kept him out of that in preference for the open bare ground.

He then discovered a species of wild pig-weed which he par-broiled on the embers of his fire, for want of a better way of cooking or anything else to eat, and went to sleep at last worn out and empty, although, if he had possessed sufficient bush experience, he might have known that a good supper was awaiting him in small thick cray-fish in the below-surface banks of the water-hole close by, which would have eclipsed his portulac supper altogether in similar broiling.

Within ten yards of him, too, 'ere the moon rose, were opossums in holes of the silver box trees which he could have pulled out by their tails and cooked; his knife would have procured yellow grubs from the stems of other trees around him, which even a white man would esteem a delicacy

if very hungry, cooked in the same way. There is never any need either to starve or go thirsty in the Australian bush, except for those who do not know its secrets; but one must travel with the blacks or old hands to learn this lore in all its wonderful variation.

So Conroy hungered painfully till next morning, when, chewing some more mouthfuls of half-cooked portulac, he ascended the range, and not knowing where he was, went over it and dropped on to the back country of a big river where, near a creek, to his great surprise and delight, he discovered a shepherd's hut with a large sheep-yard close to it. He found it inhabited by one Kanaka, who, by signs and broken English, made him aware that he was hut-keeper to an absent companion, one of the same race as himself, who was away with the flock. This dark-skinned Samaritan gave the lost man hope of a good satisfying breakfast, having first amazed him by the dexterity with which he knocked over, with a sort of knob-kerry throwing stick, four out of a large flight of emerald-green budgerigars which happened to be passing through the air when he was conversing with him outside his hut. Then he regaled Conroy plentifully with tea, corned mutton, and damper.

He informed him that the road near by led to a large station to which the sheep belonged, and when the tired wanderer was sufficiently recovered to travel onwards next day, he set out in the direction indicated.

Towards evening he found himself at a big station, and, thinking Roddy would disparage his bushmanship in thus effectually and entirely

changing his locality without knowing it, or being able to help it, began to nourish an idea which had vaguely cropped up in his own mind from time to time, and that was to take this chance of working for himself and by himself at bush work for the future. It was rather a sudden determination, and only came upon him after finding his life saved; but he did not like Roddy to laugh at him, and his pride rebelled at further tuition by a keener and more skilful hand than himself. So he determined to undertake the *rôle* of an ordinary traveller, to pretend he was one, and this offset came from the fact that he was not able to find his way back to his former mate, even had he wished to do so.

On enquiry at the station for work, he found out that the big river he had crossed to get there was the Warrego, and a very different sort of country spread around him from what he had left behind on the creek over the other side of the big range. It was much more open, with large, stretching, well-grassed plains, the river was far wider, and there were some magnificent, long, blue, deep expanses of water along its channels, with terraced, sandy banks down to them fringed with pretty, green, feathery shrubs of large dimensions above the variegated pebbles of the beached watersides.

The manager informed him that he had no work to give him at present, but told him he could go to the men's hut and stay for the night if it suited him. Whereupon Conroy, luckily having three or four pound notes in his pocket, surreptitiously bought a pair of blankets, a billy, and a tin pannikin, which caused the storekeeper some

astonishment. Having, at that worthy's suggestion, had the pannikin filled with the ordinary "pint o' dust" (or flour) allowed to travellers, he bought tea and sugar for his future requirements, and, with a 6lb. hunch of salt beef, which he got free of charge, strolled over to the men's hut as if native and to the manner born, and found another travelling swagman, much older than himself, boiling a similar piece of beef to his in a large zinc bucket.

"Give me your lot, mate," said this individual, "and I'll put it in, too. It'll make 'em both taste the better when they're done. Where the deuce did you come from? You're not a day out from the old country by the looks of your swag."

Conroy modestly averred that the statement was partially true, but did not enlighten him further.

"Ah, I see how it is. You're like the rest of them. Got rid of your money in town, and had to take to the roads without so much of the pleasant jingle of it in your pocket as formerly, eh? Got a lift so far, I expect. And now you're stony-broke, you are just beginning to commence at the bottom of the ladder, and that's why you bought your swag. Well, it's lucky you fell in with me as a guide, young man, because I'm not a professional loafer just tramping for tucker. I'm a grafter,* by trade a carpenter, with a job on contract waiting for me at Cunnamulla; and if you like to stick to me I might put you up to some wrinkles that would be beneficial to you for future work."

Jim Conroy looked hard at his companion. The man was about forty-five, hard, healthy-looking,

*Hard worker.

and active, and the two had their supper together quite comfortably. The beef this practised hand had cooked tasted uncommonly well, especially as he had some warrigal cabbage† with it; his Johnny cakes,‡ made out of the joint provision of flour, were perfect, and the milkless, brown sugared tea and pipes in fellowship afterwards comforted the Colonial experience man wonderfully.

He felt quite a sensation of new articulated pride as he rolled his big double blue blanket round him that night, for his room mate had told him not to cut it, and, although it had cost him the greater part of his money, with a pleasant conviction that he must be more than a full fifty miles away from Roddy, and about to attempt to carve out his own way in an untrammelled land that called for hard work with thew and sinew, brain and energy, he began to think better of himself when he woke next morning. The many rebuffs that had fallen to his lot, since he had been more or less dependent upon the advice or help of any others than himself, made him all the more determined to follow his new line of thinking and meet and learn the bush world alone. But most of all he found he dared not face Roddy and own up to his unskilfulness in the bush.

On the road after their joint breakfast, his friend of the night before, judiciously avoiding any questions, and thus promoting harmony, proceeded as they walked along in company to give him several practical hints as to that particular style of progression. First the importance of taking care of his feet and boots on the long

†Wild thistle, a good substitute as named. ‡Unleavened scones.

journeys that might come to him; how to behave at stations; also at townships, where he was advised to take care of his money, not to spend it except on necessaries, such as a pair of good fishing lines, salt, and other requirements; and not to get drunk on any consideration whatever.

Thus the talk wandered off to fencing, splitting, shingling, the way to roll up a swag and carry it; the methods and modes of the road. Above all, to have a well-coloured, smoke-blackened billy, so as not to look like a new-chum.* How to catch fish in the various rivers and generally get along in the bush, without money and purchased food.

This conversation naturally enough enlightened both of them in no small degree regarding their several capacities, and Bob, the only name his travelling companion would give, told him, with a half-concealed smile of pity, that if Cunnamulla held no work for him, he could branch off from it to Bourke, where he would be pretty sure of employment as a deck hand on one or other of the river steamboats.

Conroy, coming under the already hinted title of the unskilled at Cunnamulla, decided to tramp onwards, and, leaving his kindly mentor at the latter township, journeyed from that place in company with some horse teams going in to Bourke loaded with wool, through the soda-spring and extinct lake country.

At Bourke, his physique being good, he was fortunate enough to get a billet as a general rouse-about deck-hand on board a large stern-wheel paddle-boat, and, as the floods were out, his

*Just out from Great Britain.

passage down stream as far as Echuca was wonderfully venturesome, varied and exciting.

The enormous quantities of wild fowl on the bosom of the Darling and Murray rivers, in the daylight, the screaming of hundreds of sulphur-crested, white cockatoos in the trees overhead, surprised and impressed him. The vagaries of the big diamond and carpet snakes, in the hollow logs the wood gang cut at night into sections for fuel for the engines, by the light of bonfires, made him handle his axe as a destroyer always; and the dangers from all sorts of ants and huge hornets when disseminating lurking places in timber, even to the dislodgment of centipedes and scorpions, awoke a very wary disposition, vastly beneficial to him, as they taught him to keep his eyes open continually.

And rude health and daily-increasing muscular strength coming with it all, he was overjoyed to find how pleasant it was at last to take a place, however humble, as a unit of a hardy working race amongst others instead of lolling about and looking on at what others were doing.

Many practical ideas he got from his cheery, vigorous companions and mess-mates, and 'ere his voyage of a thousand miles on the brimming rivers was over, he added a large and varied stock of real bush wisdom to his already varied Colonial experience. He had earned regular weekly wages, acquired, together with two serviceable suits of dungaree, an appetite that could not be bought for money or gained in a billiard room, or even with Roddy. More than that, the marvellous vigour of the Australian eucalyptian-fed air of the river places put a high-working gauge to his bodily

abilities more palpable than the exhaust pipe of duller, damper climes could have ever done, and became absolute with every working day of his progress in willing and active exertion.

At Echuca he left the steamer, gladdened with new friendships, independent with the money he had earned. He bade farewell to his mess-mates with regret, and got employment with a farmer about seven miles away from the town, learning to fence, to plough, to reap, to drive bullocks, even to crack a stock-whip passably, and, as fate would have it, fell under a spell of womanly influence that came very near to turning him out the genuine bush article, and retaining him as such 'ere his apprenticeship was ended.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROMISED LAND

WHEN Roddy McGregor found that Jim Conroy did not return, he tucked his Winchester under his arm and set out to discover the cause.

A glance of his experienced eyes showed him at once that his mate had never been near the horse tracks at all; so he followed their hoof-prints himself until he came up with them. Then he took their hobbles off, and rode back to camp for a saddle and bridle.

After this he tracked Conroy's boot impressions on one of the horses until he reached his overnight camp. He was much impressed by the remains of the portulac supper, which showed his lost mate to have been hard beset in the midst of plenty, but more than all else was Roddy enamoured with the spot where Conroy had slept, and its surroundings attracted him more than ever as his quick eyes searched them, curiously wide open for more information.

From the deep, rocky water-hole surrounded with trees, where Conroy had rested hungrily, not far away in his survey of the vicinity, Roddy discovered a cave hollow in a huge outlying, upstanding rock which had lately been used by a civilised black fellow, his lubra, and a child.

Bootmarks, clothes' marks on the sand, impres-

sions of bare feet, the touch of fingers, arm and knee joints, a tracing or two, a piece of soap, a shred of towel, a particle of a woman's dress, a broken boot-tag, the butt of a Winchester impressed on the sand, a bit of looking-glass, spelt this knowledge out for him instantly.

He was glad, however, that it was a black fellow and not a white man that was thus sojourning near him. He did not want to be interfered with at all in a certain project he had set his heart upon from his first examination of that cave in the big rock, and yet was sure that his horse hoof-prints would gratuitously give this stranger his own tale on the face of it, and that he would either be followed or overlooked, which he didn't care for either.

This cave of habitation, with the ashes of fires at its entrance, was in a rocky glen of chocolate-coloured fragments of cliff side, which ran creek-wise through a gully between hills about two hundred yards from Conroy's camp, and Roddy came on the cliffs by a mere accident after a tour to see if, by any chance, his lost mate had doubled on his own tracks after leaving, finding that he had been there, even inside it, but the tracks were newer than those of the black fellow and his companions, who had probably shifted the day before.

The creek bed in the glen fed the water-hole where Conroy had camped, and Roddy thought the whole place would be lovely to live at. He noted this at a glance, and, stepping backward to scan the cliff surfaces, where the sun lighted them, saw something half-way up that made him suddenly throw his rifle forward in a sighting position and take aim at a coloured transparency which was apparently perched on a ledge above his head. It

curved slightly outwards from the rock, medallion-wise, but as the rays of the sun illumined it, seemed to Roddy's questing eyes to blaze and coruscate with varied soft internal fires. At this extraordinary effect he lowered his Winchester, and, shading his eyes with his hand, gazed long and steadily.

"Dash me," he muttered, audibly, "if I didn't think it was a couple of Torres Straits pigeons nestling into the stone, until I saw the bigger glow when the sun struck it. It's a big block of opal but if Conroy noticed it, it's his find, not mine. Now I'll see how he got on, and if he managed to cross the big range. If he did, he would get into more civilised country, and be safe."

He followed his lost friend's footsteps from the water-hole he had camped at, over the mountains and down to the watershed of the creek on the other side, where he saw at a distance the Kanakas' hut.

On reaching it, the sight of the clothes, trousers, boots, and throwing sticks in their sleeping apartment made him think of the occupants of the opal cliff cave. Could it have been these men who had been there? No, they had no rifle.

Roddy's diplomacy was equal to the occasion. He waited until the Kanakas returned with their sheep, noting that neither came from his way, and, knowing their nationality, was aware that there would be no woman with them.

He became an every-day traveller at once, as far as outward mendacity went, and as he had, for caution's sake, ridden in on the road from afar off before he approached the hut, knew he was safe from pursuit because of the large flock of sheep coming in and out again with the men behind them,

and a great spread on, which would obliterate his horse's hoof-prints.

Conroy had been there, that was all right; he knew from their unasked description of him. He was now on the beaten track and was safe, but Roddy could not leave his late most important discovery to follow him up. When he departed, he rode clean out of sight on the road itself which ran past the sheep-yard, just as if he was going on to the big station, but then followed his own detour back over the ranges, and, reaching Conroy's camp again long after dark, had hardly lit a fire in the cave when Doughboy, Rosie, and her child walked straight up to it.

Now Roddy McGregor, being in the habit of making Brisbane his head holiday quarters, knew little or nothing certain about late goings on at the "Rest," where Doughboy had come from, nor did he know the aboriginal.

So he proceeded to temporise with this rather awkward host, as he considered him, in order to find out what he was, what brought him there, and all about him.

"I'm kangarooing," laughed Doughboy, gleaming all over his face. "It's this way. I had a cousin in the black troopers up hereabouts. He sent me word that there were plenty good skins up this way. So I came up. I've been here before, and it's my towri, where I was born and belong to, you know. But I don't associate with the other niggers now. They're too wild, and I've been in white service too long."

"What part did you come from?" asked Roddy.

"You know Miss Delamayne?" the aboriginal ventured.

Roddy gave no affirmation.

"Well," said the black fellow, "she keeps the 'Travellers' Rest' down my way of late. I've been in there now and then to get a nobbler, and found that she's a good sort; often give me one without my paying for it. I've been down her way to see her and get her young parrakeets at times, too. I was working for a man called Austen on one of my spells down there, but he didn't treat me well, so I got sick of him and came away after he went to England."

"Aren't you afraid that the blacks up here will kill you?"

Doughboy tapped his Winchester.

"Not while I've got this. I'm a pretty dead shot. And now I'm come to tell you that I know all about you. Same as you do about me, I expect, for I can see you're no new-chum. You've sprung my plant and I've sprung yours, that's all. Your mate came here the other day, and you've been running his tracks. I saw you both in the bush. I suppose he's all right and that's why you came back. I've seen him once down in my part of the country when I've been knocking about with Austen. Did you two have a row?"

"No, he got lost looking after my horses."

"Yes, I found that out. So you're going straight, and don't tell any lies to that mate of yours, nor to me. He ain't much of a bushman. He wasn't on his horse tracks the whole time. It wouldn't pay me to go fooling after him all the day, or I could have found him and brought him back. What's your idea up here?"

"Much the same as yours," Roddy answered, negligently. "I'm kangarooing, too."

"Want a mate now you've lost yours?"

"Don't mind if I do," Roddy said. "But what made you select this cave to live in?"

"It's waterproof, and look here—not a nigger in the district will come near it, so it's safe. It's taboo, you see. The black troopers were dispersing a Waddygalo tribe. One of that lot got away wounded, without their knowing. He crawled a long distance through the bush to die in this cave. That was just what I wanted. It saved all trouble with the others. I found his skeleton here when I came up, cleared the bones away, and buried them. There was a bullet-hole smack through his thigh-bone. Since that time I've put a mark or two on trees telling the news to the Waddygalos in the talking stick language, but I expect they knew all about it. It tells 'em again, anyway. I'm armed, and they take me for a runaway black trooper. Devil a fear is there of one of them coming within a coo-ee of this place."

"What's the stuff in the rocks about here?" asked Roddy, determined to test him; "and your name?"

"That blue-red looking stuff? I don't know. I never troubled my head about it. There's a lot of it about here. Doughboy's what they call me. My grandfather used to own the whole country down where I lived before I came here. Now I'd be hauled up before a beak if they caught me shooting a kangaroo on some parts of it. You whites are queer beggars."

"Suppose you join me kangarooing, eh?" Roddy suggested, looking at him carefully.

"I'd like to. You don't get drunk; you don't curse and swear; you don't tell lies; and you

don't"—he looked most significantly towards Rosie.

"I hope she is a good cook," said Roddy, laughing outright. "No, Doughboy, I'm not that sort. I'll put her on wages. You and I will be all right."

And Doughboy, looking him in the face, swore eternal friendship to him then and there. He said:

"I told you I got tired being with Austen. He was a downright low bad man. I padded the hoof all the way up here to get Rosie out of his way. But to you I think I'll be worth my tucker, as there's a lot of wild cattle about these ranges, with nobody's brand on. We'll get some of them and salt 'em down as we want 'em."

But here he looked alarmed, and turned his head away.

"I'm haunted by a devil," he said, behind his hand.

"What sort of a devil?" asked Roddy.

"A white man who tells the birds to talk to you and knows what you do. But I don't think he'll find me here, if he does come up, and I want to stay with you. I like your sort, and mean to stick to you."

Roddy made up his mind to trust him, although he was sure he must be romancing. This nigger was worth his weight in gold.

"Doughboy," he said, "you're a good fellow. Now, you swear to me that you never tell anybody what I'm going to tell you, and I'll put you on to a bit of luck such as you never had before. Your free selection and its neighbourhood is worth thousands of pounds to me and my mate, if ever he comes back, and if you have any other white man

who bullies you, you must keep away from him. I'm going to make it all it's worth to you to do that. I'll give you a pound a week, besides what I give Rosie to cook for us, so keep your eyes open that your white man doesn't come here when you're kangarooing, or any outsiders either, for I want to keep this place secret and undisturbed, the same as you do. That stuff in the rock is opal, the best sort too, and worth a lot to white men. It has only to be broken out and there's tons upon tons of rock somewhere in the range where the opal won't be at all weather-worn from long exposure, but clean and valuable. My name is Roddy McGregor, and I do know Miss Delamayne, as well as she knows me, only I couldn't tell you until I found out whether you were trustworthy. I'm working for her or Mr. Franks all my time, sometimes when they are in Brisbane."

"Franks is mad," said Doughboy, reverently, pointing to the sky overhead.

"So I've heard, but I don't suppose it will hurt him much," remarked Roddy, thinking it was as well to impress his new mate by his fearlessness of the malady.

"This cave I live in," resumed Doughboy, slightly reassured, "being a real Waddygalo run-to-ground once, until the old dead black cleared them out, is a stand-off. It is not likely that anyone will find us out here, no one but the one devil of a man I told you about. I'm afraid of him, but I'll try to keep away from him, Mr. Roddy, even if he does come up."

"I think it's give and take, Doughboy," the latter said, thoughtfully, hardly catching his drift in his own excitement. "It's a bargain, old man."

“What a slice of luck for me and Conroy, my old mate, when he drops across me again,” he thought, ecstatically, “though I don’t suppose he noticed the opals, after all. Mr. Franks will have to excuse me losing him, but I can’t throw up my hand now for anyone; it wouldn’t do. I’ll send Doughboy down to Eulo some day, when I’m sure of my bearings, with a letter posted to Bourke to catch Conroy. He’s sure to make for the big centre, and I know he’d be too proud to come back here unless I asked him, if he could find his way, which I doubt, even if you put him on the main road.”

CHAPTER XV

THE WAYS OF A MAID

CONROY'S second essay of sheer hard graft was not of his own choosing any more than the first was, coming as it did solely from the fact of his losing himself; but as soon as ever he undertook this new billet, Heartsease Bethune, the prepossessing, energetic daughter of the farmer he was working for, seeing that he was a gentleman, began to run him on the up grade after her own style. She was a fine, athletic girl, managing to get a considerable amount of volunteer work of all sorts out of him, and information also, as confidences with her were soon very soothing to Jim Conroy, from a liking to her personality and character. She was so enthusiastic, withal so good-looking, that the attraction came after his first introduction, although he did not go just then beyond his present state of generality in his own affairs. Miss Bethune was most winning also in her manner and dispositions, and the two liked one another mutually as time went on, until they became bosom friends, as a matter of course.

One day, after slightly over a year's novitiate for Jim Conroy, they were amongst the cream vessels in her own particular presidency, and as he was helping her to pour the milk into the big, broad pans, she suddenly said, in regard to a letter Jim

had received, thrown aside for months, and re-discovered that morning:

"If I was a man I should do just as I liked."

"Suppose you had to do the exact opposite, as I have?" he hazarded, looking at her critically. "Men may be willing enough to do just as they themselves or a woman wish, but have they the power to do so in all cases?"

"You are hardly polite, are you?" she broke in, with a painful flush that became her immensely. "At least—I beg your pardon—don't you care to help me? I thought you liked it." This was because James Conroy seemed more hurt than she had yet seen him.

Evidently her first remark was not in a line with his subject, past and somewhere else. She was a young lady of quick discernment, who had taken a real fancy to this well-set-up, active young fellow, on account of his progressing so greatly on her own initiative, and that of her father's, but she was now slightly embarrassed.

"Tell me," she commanded, after a little, with an intuition from his own words that there was another girl in the case who had piqued and humiliated him. "It might ease your heart a bit. Make a sort of sister of me, if you like, Jim. I might be able to help you." But a sigh and a blank was in her behaviour, in spite of her self-command.

So he told her all his thoughts in a guarded sort of way, avoiding the main theory; he wanted money, he affirmed, and hinted that his time was up on her father's farm.

"I've had a letter from my friend since I came here," he added, "and it's important."

"A girl?" she ejaculated, not to be put down,

"No, a man," he replied. "But there was a girl."

This acknowledgment she had dragged out of him so opportunely was the last wrench to her own heart, as she bustled about listening to his hopes, his fears, his innuendoes of disappointment, his utter incompetence to do anything until he had proved he could keep himself, and that in a high ratio.

To him, as he looked at her face with a feeling of vagueness, but not insensibility, for she had shaken his heart citadel in spite of himself, came a notion that she might have been the very Phyllis to his Corydon, in her spotted print dress and sun-bonnet, if there was nothing else in the way, or if he had only suggested it; but the old love held him.

Presently she said:

"Jim?"

"Yes, miss."

"I know what sort of a girl she is, and why we get on so well together. She is something like me, your eyes tell me that sometimes; go in and win, and I'll help you if you have made a mess of it with her. I shall only have to console myself with an inferior article some day, I suppose. Don't mind me, for my mind is made up; but if you happen to know of any more of your own particular brand down your way, you had better send them up here for my due selection. There, I don't mean that exactly, but I—liked you, Jim. Now—there—the dairy's done, and my best thanks to you. Go and saddle 'Send-I-may-Live' for me, 'Gladiator' for yourself, and bring them round while I put on my habit. I want to ride down to the township with you, just to get you something for a keepsake

before you—go that will put you in mind of a certain fact, that—once in—your life you made another girl feel happy—and independent for—the—short—space—of—a—year.”

There were tears in her eyes, a sob in her throat, and she meant it thoroughly and unrestrainedly. It was an outburst he had never seen from her before, but half-expected sometimes, but in his position had never dared to hint at the attraction he had certainly felt for her. She had her moods, and they enthralled him. They were so energetic and interestingly variable.

He was strangely moved also, for he had no idea of the strength of her attachment, beyond that she had compelled him to like her, and for a second or two he was on the point of avowing that he would stay with her for ever, if she would have him.

She noticed his altered looks, his mute gesture of appeal and sorrow, and for a moment softened, then grew rigid and became herself again.

What visions she had ever indulged in are not for us to pry into, but this was a different reception from the one he had got from Bronzewing, Jim reflected, though the summer storm was over for Heartsease now, and a few minutes afterwards, seated in her saddle, she was the firm friend, the willing, active, pleasant comrade she had always been to him, a consummate and daring horse-woman, a hearty ally smiling and confident as ever. But of the golden heart of her who shall say?

“Why, you are a born hero, Jim,” she declared, enthusiastically, as they cantered along, for he had also made a hurried change into his new uniform of the local mounted infantry, his khaki and slouch-hat showing gorgeously with a scarlet pompom in

the latter; but she alluded to his persistent idea of becoming worthy in someone else's sight, although she did not hint again at the cost to herself. "A born hero to face the odds you have had to. I suppose that is what you were moping about for the last two days before you gave me notice? Wondering how you were going to carry on the campaign—without my aid, or not liking to tell me, eh? Well, you have made a little money, and are going to make some more, no doubt. I had to fish for a reason, you see, for I was curious and part interested, and you can hardly realise how happy it has made me to have a quiet, willing, attentive mate for so long, one who has daily become more skilful under our tuition. I thought you were going to be a permanency as a working hand, Jim, and a home dweller with us, even if you didn't throw in your lot with us altogether, and I am so sorry you have decreed otherwise, for you are an artist spoiled, with all your heroism, but you don't really know it. That is what worries me most of anything now."

She motioned towards him dramatically with her riding-whip, and then broke into a ringing laugh at the expression on his face.

"I could have made you such a——"

"What?" he asked, breathlessly. He was always breathless in her society, for she was full of surprises and pent-up energy.

"Cheesemaker," she replied, drily. "Come along," she added, "there's the fence. Never mind the slip-rails this time, and always remember I taught you to ride."

"Give me no better mate, and I'd do," mur-

mured Conroy, as they took the post-and-rail fence side by side.

“Good-bye, Heartsease,” was hard to say, aye the hardest word he had ever had to speak. For the life of him he couldn’t decide all at once. The memory of Bronzewing came back to him sweet and pure, all her motherly tenderness in it, even under his wanton insult, and her retort to him.

Yet there was another touchstone on the shield of Fate in his life’s record, quite sufficiently active and near to dull Bronzewing’s memory. She had proffered disdain, this one sympathy; one was to him the proficient of a system of pride and independence, the other of work and willingness, modesty and action. Which should he prefer, which accept or strive for?

Bronzewing’s extreme beauty as his first love made her peerless. There were such tender tones about her which had shown in her right of possession of him, in her care of him at the “Rest,” which wounded his self-love; but she had struck him hard and rightly in his own esteem in more ways than one, and her taunt about the stock-whip cut him more painfully than Levi Levinstein had, and on this last subject he was determined to make her recant her words, for he was as proud as Lucifer if not as strong.

On the other hand, this active, sympathetic girl, riding alongside him on her fiery chestnut mare, which was curvetting and prancing after the excitement of the jump, pulling double to the gauntleted hands that spoke to her mouth and senses as no timid mistress could speak, with the poise, and grip, and movement of her body adjusted completely to the mare’s every impulse, swayed him

now as Bronzewing had never swayed him, and he felt she was indeed a steady rock for a young man to lean on. She had the head, the heart, the intelligence, the will—but neither spoke. A girl and money were between them. Further on she, chiming in apparently with his last thought, asked:

“When you got lost from your mate—mate at what?”

He was silent.

She puckered up her lips and laid a finger upon them.

“Tell me,” she said, with a knowing expression; “I’m fly, but safe even to a gold enterprise. Pardon the slang, but we are still in the bush, and I can’t help being part of it a little when I’m with a man. I never go back on a mate, male or female, but you must tell me all if I am to admire you and to think of your future. Father might even finance you if the venture is good. He and I and mother have been on the goldfields ere this. How did it come to pass?”

“Kangarooing,” said Conroy. Her remark hit him hard for the very generosity of it. “It was pleasant work, if not very practical on my part. We were to make money at it, though, and it has turned to opals, my mate says.”

“What made you chuck all thoughts of them and come on here?”

“I didn’t know about the opals, though it appears I was the cause of his finding them. I got lost, and should never have got back to him in the first place; but I was more or less dependent on him, and once away I saw things in a different light.”

“Why?”

"Worry."

"About your girl?"

"No, about my belongings. She inherited them. I wanted to be on my own, so as to make her think better of me."

Heartsease sighed, openly and unequivocally, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"She must be very beautiful to tie you to an assessment like that. Is she, and is it your pride that parts you?"

He gave a short, quick nod to both assumptions.

"Well, we got as far as kangaroos turning into opals. Was your mate your sort?"

"A much better sort of fellow than I am or ever was. He's a native-born prodigy, the best I ever came across. I roughed it a bit with him, and so I ought to know."

"And you're not! Only half-and-half? Well, I saw that already," she added, gravely, "and formed my own opinions. There's a good deal in manner, experience, and disposition, Jim; but you've got a lot of good in you. How did you meet your girl?"

He told her.

She laughed.

"Oh, you—man," she said. "I'm glad you let this out, for now I can see through things as usual. It would have all come right if you hadn't been so abominably rude to her. She had a claim to you you don't know of, somehow, or somewhere, probably through your own people, or she would never have acted as she did."

Jim acquainted her with all he could remember about his own affairs before he left England, but

there seemed no solution to Bronzewing's behaviour in that relation.

"Yes, yes," Heartsease exclaimed, "if it wasn't for that blessed dairy—and the paddock fences, and the new wheat, and—and—fifty things—and father, of course, I forgot him—I'd—I'd—"

"What?" Jim asked, sympathetically.

"Ride with you this moment to your girl—settle matters for you, start you off to—glory—square everything for you with her by telling her that the lambent fire of ardour's claim is not yet quenched, that you still worship her for her—riches. I would read her soul in five minutes, and if she was a good girl I'd have my arms round her neck in ten, for her sake and mine also. I'd risk my life for anyone I cared for."

"If she wasn't, and I wasn't?" asked Jim, in the breathless expectancy that always seemed to pervade him when talking to her, moved with the fire of her temperament.

"I'd marry you myself, of course, you goose, just to save you from yourself. See, there's the smoke of the township chimneys. Let's hurry!"

In a few minutes they went clattering through the streets, and she entered a jeweller's shop. She soon came out and Conroy helped her into her saddle again, and they rode back homewards.

That night Bethune, the farmer, just in from a ride also, annexed as usual the weekly "Australasian," and sat smoking and reading the day's news in the chimney corner.

At length his daughter said:

"Father, I want you to lend Jim old 'Nero,' to get down country with."

"What's up? Your time, eh? Nonsense!

you're not going to leave us. You are the best jack-eroo I ever struck—but there, I seldom ask reasons, at least against private opinions. Yes, Heartsease, I will. Anything serious?"

"No, Daddy, only important."

"All right. Those socialists are kicking up the devil's delight again, I see, just because they think it would be handier for them to draw the rich man's portion and spend what they could get of it themselves, to save the trouble of working for it. Why, they are more extravagant in their ideas than those who know the value of money by that very same work, and I hope Australia will kick them all out, lock, stock, and barrel, and all so-called Liberal ideas with 'em. That lot have all dwindled into a set of arrant Revolutionary, anti-everything-but-themselves humbugs. They look very small pettifoggers by Royalty, mere Empire-breakers, their way very diligently prepared in ploughed sand." And Bethune became immersed in politics again. He was a shrewd sensible man and a strenuous worker for his own hand, and the position he had attained to of a landowner.

"You will start to-morrow?" Heartsease, enquired of Jim, although in the form and manner of a command.

"At daybreak," he rejoined. "Shall I see you then?"

"Yes."

And the morning arriving, when he took her hand by the slip-rails and said "Good-bye, Heartsease," he thought of another parting, which had been entirely different. But he must have money before he could decide for himself with honour.

She turned his palm over, examining the working signs on his fingers, and remarked:

"It's the first time I have held it, Jim, but it's something to part straight and honourably, after all, isn't it? As we were, you know. Here's my keepsake. I've made somewhat of a bushman of you, couldn't with everybody. If ever you want advice, write, or come to us."

She felt in her pocket, bringing out a little enamelled painting enclosed in a locket for his watch-chain. The representation was a small field viola.

"May we both have it, Jim, in our time—my namesake. I have your secrets. You have mine. We've both done right. Good-bye, old chum."

She broke down sobbing ere she reached the house, but Jim never saw her trouble, for he was in the thick timber speeding onward, and out of hearing also.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TWITTERING OF THE PARRAKEET

HE sent Bethune's horse back after reaching his first stage, and then took any work that came his way, for he would not go back to Roddy yet, until he had still more improved himself. He wanted change still, for his mind was very much upset. At last he got on to the river boats again, and from Euston worked his way to Fort Bourke and beyond the New South Wales border and back into Queensland, where he got into the mounted police, serving there some time until he finally succeeded, by a strange chance, in becoming a mounted constable under a sergeant in Barilla, the very township where Miss Delamayne's interests had been so prominent when he first came out from England. His one thought now was that by general smartness and ability he might force her to confess that her last words to him were unqualified. If she snubbed him again he told himself, he would go back to Heartsease Bethune and ask plainly for her, and then he might see if Roddy's news had turned out trumps, with her as his partner.

But he found great changes by this time in the district, which two years ago lay around the "Travellers' Rest." Of that secluded and pleasant bush hostelry there was not a trace left, for bit by bit it had been removed, the very timber of which

it had been composed being carted over to Brangal. That was Franks' trump card. The entrances to the underground passages had been filled up, the very place the "Rest" had stood on was now well within a section of new boundary fencing that included all Delamayne's former property, and amalgamated it with Brangal Downs.

The proprietress, Miss Delamayne, owning all the land around, was in residence at Brangal Downs. Neither she nor Conroy had spoken to each other, although they had met more than once, but shortly after Conroy's arrival, a man rode in unknown to Brangal station, and was shown into the drawing-room.

Consternation in the most terrible form took possession of Bronzewing when the stranger turned out to be Austen Bygrave, the more especially as he informed her that he had come to press his suit more emphatically than ever. It was a matter of wonder to her that he had recovered at all, but there he was, apparently as fit as ever, and that he was sure of binding her to his wishes his manner foretold.

There was a beautiful little cockatoo parrakeet in a cage in her boudoir, which opened on to the verandah, and Bygrave, without affecting any surprise at her terror, after taking particular notice of the bird and asking if it could talk, opened the conversation as if it were only yesterday, and there had been no tragic occurrence or dramatic sequel up to that date between them.

"Bronzewing, my dear," he said, boldly, "I told you you should not get away from me, and I never go back on my word. You are now as much bound to me as I am to you, and you know it. Breathe a

word of my secret, which is yours as well, and I will force you to own up to the fact that you know where my dead cousin lies, have known it all along, as I have. Be true to me, and I will live my life over again in all its freshness and fullness with you as my guiding star, give you all that there is in this world to give in conjunction with my affection, honour, and respect. Bronzewing, without you I shall go mad—am mad.”

“Mr. Bygrave,” she said, in deep tribulation and dejection, “what you propose is absolutely impossible. I never thought you would follow me again, or I should not have come here. I am bound in a way I cannot explain, otherwise than by that you told me of. I hold a family trust, an heirloom, an entail, combined with a deep and most deadly secret. I cannot divulge it for your sake, I cannot dare or even wish, after this lapse of time, to share the knowledge that you hold. I cannot say what my present position means to me, and I could not, in any case, accept your proposal, which, while it clears me personally, if I made use of the story you have given me, would make the whole subject so distressingly painful and ruinous to you and others, that it could not be brought forth to the public without involving us all, yourself especially, in ruin, sudden and complete. To you I am bound by a silence I cannot find it in my heart to break, for your own sake, for mine, certainly for many others; but all relations between us must cease now and for ever.”

Bygrave turned pale as death. Then, rising, he took his hat and gloves, saying:

“Then there is no other course open for me to pursue but that of deep and deadly revenge. I—I

hardly know who or what I am, Bronzewing, since that last accident, in which you participated. I have not been myself at times, I have lived but for you, for you alone, and you refuse to be mine still. That hope taken away, I become absolutely frightened for my own personal sanity, and feel as if I shall become like the very devil himself."

"It would be worse than sacrilege for me to marry you after what has occurred, Mr. Bygrave," she said, more than ever alarmed, turning away from him to bend over her pretty little caged bird in its gilded prison. "If there was no other man in the whole world but you now, we could never be united as things are. The very stones would cry out upon us for our mutual deception, our mutual crime, our bloodstained hands. Though you have held my life and honour in your keeping, as you say you did, and did not fail me at my terrible crisis, I could not marry you. Our knowledge is worse than a parting in our two lives, it is an irrevocable horror, a secret we must both hold until we are dead, because of the part you have played in it. But to share it together in concealment would be a living curse for us."

"It's a lie, a lie," he cried, in a low, strained voice. "A lie; I lied foully, too, thinking to bind you to me more effectually. It's all a lie, the whole of it—you say truly. But that is not your romance, your part in it. I go now, according to my own purposes, for I know your real feeling connected with it all, and can tell it to the world at large at my leisure. I wait for nothing else but revenge upon you and yours now, for it is yourself and young Conroy you are thinking of, and not me, and it

shall be war till the very death for you and him, or myself, if you cannot give me life."

His face was convulsed with fury and the cockatoo parrakeet, just then rippling out its usual warbling, satisfied notes at the sunshine pervading the room, voiced distinctly these alarming words in its subcurrent of song :

"The gold mine you are standing over ! That is your real secret, your real love, your fatal care. Take care of it as you will, your riches shall be turned to dross ; your gold to devilry !"

Bronzewing started in nervous amazement, greatly frightened, but Bygrave was gone. That night, scared out of her senses, she left for Brisbane, driving away with all her household to an out-station, fleeing from the wrath to come, for she thought it was God's voice that had spoken to her from the bird. She went on to Brisbane by the mountain track, the secret road that kept her clear of the township, and Franks came up to Brangal afterwards on guard at her desire ; whilst Bygrave, maddened by disappointment and chagrin, rode straight to the hotel in Barilla, and appeared the very next morning at Levinstein Brothers' store in company with a very smart, good-looking, well-set-up young mounted constable—no other than Jim Conroy himself.

The sergeant in charge at Barilla, on Bygrave's application the day before, had at his request, it being Court day, ordered Conroy to go with him and take notes of some information he was about to gather in relation to one "Kangaroo" Austen, aforetime a settler in the district.

Levi Levinstein was in, and received them most effusively but with great inward trepidation. He

had known of course of Conroy's previous arrival, and, connecting it somehow with the old stock-whip incident, coupled it in his own mind as being a very natural impulse of the young trooper's to impress upon the township of his Colonial christening, the fact that he was no longer a new-chum but a smart officer, and perhaps to work some sort of revenge upon his ancient enemy. Here was an official enquiry on the top of all this about a man he had a good deal more than something to do with afore-time, so that it might be a deadly form of revenge, and nothing else. And when Bygrave produced a letter written by "Kangaroo" Austen, and asked questions, not as to whereabouts, but concerning the state of independence given to the writer of that letter by the selling of kangaroo skins, Levi began to be alarmed in real earnest for his own sake, for he remembered the famous epistle he had written to the lost man, who had never been heard of afterwards, a writing conveying veiled hints about Brangal kangaroos. Suppose that letter had turned up also? It would implicate him most seriously, and thus was he compelled to silence from fear of results, and said nothing whatever about Austen beyond stating the direction in which he used to live, and that it was thought he had gone to England.

Whereupon, mounting their horses, Bygrave taking both his, which were hung up to Levinstein's verandah posts, the new detectives proceeded forthwith towards Austen's hut in the ranges.

On the road Bygrave, merely seeing an unembarrassed young constable before him, and not knowing his name beyond the appellative the

sergeant gave him of "Jim," asked him some questions for his own purposes.

"They say Miss Delamayne is a very rich woman who possesses a great deal of land hereabouts. How did it come to her, or how has she made the money?"

"I am not in the possession of any particular facts relating to her family history or private business," replied Conroy, stiffly. "She never honoured me with them at any time, but I know that she bought Brangal Downs, my father's station, after his death."

"Could you tell me why?" Bygrave asked, quickly, becoming keenly interested.

"Partly, I believe, because it was invalidated on mortgage to Levinstein Brothers. She has since bred up the stock upon it, and I believe she got it fairly cheap as it stands. It is a valuable piece of country now, I hear, and wish it still belonged to me. I shouldn't be here with you in my present guise if it did, as, owing to the loss of it, I have had to fight for my own existence, since I came out here expecting to possess it."

"How is that? How came you to lose it?"

"It was my father's, as I said, but when I arrived it was in Miss Delamayne's possession, and I found I had no claim."

"Did it never strike you that Miss Delamayne might have bought it for a certain purpose?"

"No, I can't say it did. She was pretty abrupt with Levinstein Brothers about the transference, much as if she had a perfect right to it, so they say, but she never told me anything about it, merely referring me to her manager. I found myself ruined through it."

"H'm, then I suppose you bear a grudge in some manner against the fair owner of what should be your property?"

"I still hope it may be mine some day. I could never bear any real grudge against Miss Delamayne. In fact, I—" And he blushed.

Bygrave glared at him. He more than understood: Should this stripling stand in his way of either love or revenge? Not if he knew it, especially as he was Austen Conroy's son, a relation, and the right heir to the Austen estates if all was known.

The conversation stopped. It was patent to Bygrave himself that his last accident had caused a further lesion of his brain, making him subject to violent fits of passion if anything crossed him, and he felt now like a dangerous madman who would have liked to kill Conroy outright to get him out of the way, and for the time meant to do it. He was all the more dangerous because he could mask his feelings until the outburst came, and this new phase of mind, the culmination of his late disappointment and further knowledge, he felt was one he could not resist.

He was impelled to sing aloud through a sort of malignant joy at the fury in him, and having reached a lonely part of the bush, he carolled out:

"Moet and Chandon's the wine I drink;
Oh, heigho! Oh, heigho!
Over the land to the Ocean's brink;
Oh, heigho! Heigho!"

Conroy, still unconscious of Bygrave's dangerous nature, laughed aloud as the rich voice trolled and finished the stave.

"I wish we had some here," he said. "Whenever champagne is mentioned I remember the Barilla township we left this morning, for the reason that I once got a share in a magnum of Louis Roederer from old Aaron Levinstein himself through a sort of accidental assault of his brother's upon me. It was a hot day, I had been—excited, so I enjoyed it considerably as a peace-offering."

"Did you ever come across my cousin?" Bygrave asked, abruptly, ignoring the young trooper's remark. He was nearly at white heat now in his seething crucible of internal passion, but his control over himself was strong. "They used to call him 'Kangaroo' Austen about here."

"No, I never saw him."

Conroy was dubious about a turn off from the track for a moment or so, and pulled up to examine the ground.

"Follow me, I know the country," said his companion, impatiently, and took the lead.

Shortly afterwards they came to the old hut. It still stood and would stand for years yet, being strongly built, but the police, after Austen's continued absence, had taken possession of all the contents, and it was empty.

"Queer sort of a place for an exiled man to live in," Bygrave remarked absently, when they were both inside. "I wonder he didn't prefer the town. I was here two years ago, just before he disappeared. See if you can open that window and let us have a little more air, for goodness' sake. The place smells of bush rats. Formerly it smelt of rum."

It was a wild and lonely scene around this primitive dwelling, hemmed in as it was by rocky cliffs

and sloping hill-sides, and they were, by Conroy's computation, some seven miles from the river and the town.

As he complied with his principal's request, the maniac, for he was little less now, sprang upon him and, overpowering him with the strength of two men, took his revolver and cartridge belts. Then, with the weapon at his head, he compelled him to mount his own big black horse, whilst he took the trooper's carbine in the bucket, and vaulted on to Tiger, turning in his saddle to shoot Conroy's horse dead, as he came whinnying up to him, wondering what was up with his master.

Conroy dug his spurs in to Black Snake's sides and tried to bolt as soon as he was in the saddle, but a peculiar whistle from Bygrave stopped the animal, which pulled up so suddenly as almost to send its rider over its head.

"Ah, I've mesmerised that horse," his captor said, grimly. "He won't take you out of the sound of my voice. Now walk him along in front of me, and, mind you, beware of any more tricks. I've rather more influence over a quadruped than Rarey had. And over a man, too, if he gets in my way."

Black Snake neighed, and Conroy turned pale with conflicting emotions of terror and mystification, and as a bullet whizzed close by his ear, he complied in silence.

"So you're taken up with Miss Delamayne, eh, youngster? Speak up, will you! She's my property." And another bullet sang by him. "Well, turn round and come back with me. I'm going to exhibit you to her at the 'Rest.' But first I'll fasten you to the saddle so that you won't get away. Halt!"

Conroy was forced to obey. Bygrave, with the pistol at his head, pulled up alongside him, made him dismount and unbuckle his stirrup leathers. He was then ordered to ungirth his horse, take off the stirrup irons, pass the two leathers along the stuffing of the saddle under the cantle and pommel, bringing both ends together at the buckles. Then he had to regirth again and mount. After that he was forced to wait with both hands raised over his head whilst Bygrave secured his legs with a turn and re-buckle of the stirrup leathers, and finally Conroy was obliged to submit to have his hands tied before him with a piece of strong whipcord in the stirrup irons, as if they were handcuffed.

"Trussed policeman," Bygrave said, contemptuously, after the operation, "but you can hold on to the pommel for a start if the horse plays up. Now swear you will never inform whatever I may do or have done, or I will shoot you dead as you sit. I'm going to look for her I lost, through you, confound you eternally."

Jim Conroy swore, as compelled to do, but inwardly resolved to be even with his captor some day, although something seemed troubling him beyond comprehension as he stared at his powerful new mount's head and at the man he belonged to. Then Bygrave unbuckled his prisoner's rein on the off side, holding one end, and rode on with him, singing:

"Moet and Chandon's the wine I drink;
 Oh, heigho! Oh, heigho!
 Over the land to the ocean brink;
 Oh, heigho! Heigho!"

"Perhaps I'll get Miss Delamayne to stand you

a glass of that vintage at the 'Rest' or Brangal even, although Louis Roederer seems to be your favourite. You may think yourself lucky you ain't a corpse beside your own horse, young man."

The fit of madness had passed apparently, and Bygrave was almost himself again in sheer jocularity. He was going to show Conroy to Bronzewing just to prove who was the better man, for he had found out that she had some affection for him, after all, and that the secret referred to him, and Conroy was as pale as if he had been the corpse referred to.

CHAPTER XVII

PRIDE'S FALL

BRONZEWING, after her departure, had been worked up into a terribly impressionable state of mind. She had been overstrung in nerve and body beyond her wont both before and since the accident in the motor car. There was little doubt that she had entertained great reverses on ideas of riches in any way, or business matters, connected with money, and Bygrave coming thus upon her in the sudden and unexpected fashion he had, and declaring his set purpose again, had terrified her now almost out of her wits. Looking upon him as one who could hardly be expected to recover or pursue her, she had been reading in her New Testament for some extra comfort, and the seventh to tenth verses of St. Paul's fourteenth epistle of the first to the Corinthians had impressed her greatly. "There are, it may be, so many voices in the world, and none of them is without signification." So now, when her own little pet parrakeet had accused her of her main motives, where was she standing? Was it on the brink of perdition, as far as money or possessions were concerned? The soft, sybillant trill of the little song carrying such plain words to her had frightened her almost

beyond control or collection of thought, because the significant speech was in it, and the tenth verse came in added trepidation as she thought of it in dire concern, as she felt it in perfect enlightenment. Surely it was God speaking to her, warning her of the snare of unlawful possession, putting it into her heart to fly from this demon in human form, who persecuted her so terribly, and wanted it all and her as well. It must have been God speaking.

A dumb ass had voiced a rebuke to the prophet Balaam. Samuel answered the voice speaking to him, and a little bird had, in the tenor of its song, twittered her great secret and showed her the falseness of it. What could it all mean? Had Bygrave heard it, and gathered its piquant meaning also, or had the little parrakeet spoken to her alone as a warning? She believed the latter.

Between her old instinctive repulsion to Bygrave and her fright at what she thought a warning voice from her own little favourite, she hardly knew what to do with herself, she was so unsettled and alarmed, and shortly after Franks had left Brisbane to perform his part of watch-dog again up at Brangal Downs, she became so upset that, after having written to him imploring him to be careful of himself, she left Brisbane for Sydney by an inter-Colonial boat, and disappeared altogether from her friends without more ado.

It would be better for her, she thought, if she changed her name entirely, and so she managed to remove all traces of her former identity, and, after many vicissitudes, found herself once more a nurse in the hospital at Cunnamulla, on the Warrego River, Queensland, without even Franks knowing of her whereabouts. With her spectacles, her quiet,

trained demeanour, her cap concealing her hair, few would have recognised her in her new capacity of Nurse Jones. She had thus, in playing her last card, as Franks had done at the "Rest," removed the danger signal from Brangal Downs, altogether she thought, for without her, there would be no attraction for the demon in human form, who could not be otherwise exorcised from her being.

But Bygrave's mind was now in danger of becoming almost a perfect blank as to the past, present, or future, since his assault and capture of Jim Conroy. With the next paroxysm of mad rage that rushed upon him, with Conroy strapped on his horse by his side, the few lights that were left him went out for the time, one vital spark of reason alone remaining, namely, that he was Bygrave, the rich squatter, who had a house and home in the wilderness, accessible from where he was.

So he made Conroy follow him on the steed that would obey no one but his master, that master getting more irresponsible every minute. And the animal kept just in front of him, no matter how fast or how slow the pace was determined upon. But when they came at last to where the "Rest" had stood, and Bygrave only saw a broad, flat, empty space trodden down by many feet, and covered over with wheel tracks, he lost the little light he had, and paused again confounded.

The last vestiges of reason faded in some queer manner from his eyes as he searched the ground for fancied traces of his inamorata's footsteps. But she had eluded him there as elsewhere. Where had she gone to? He couldn't remember.

His horse passed over the precincts she had

occupied, the imagined places she had sojourned in, then darkness came over his soul as he turned to Conroy, mad with rage for him alone, and unbound and loosened all his fastenings, forgetting all about Brangal and the meeting there, perhaps unluckily for Conroy.

When he had finished, he displayed his prisoner's loaded carbine and revolver ruthlessly, saying, as he finally unbuckled the reins and fastened them round Conroy's waist:

"Now come on, I want to see how you can ride."

And setting his spurs to his own horse, Tiger, Black Snake bounded alongside him at once. At a violent pace they crossed the river and sped away over a line of country Bygrave seemed to choose by instinct as he progressed. After some time he pulled up, Conroy's horse following his every movement.

"I'm going to my own horse station," he said, rather blankly. "Let me see, you were in the Mounted Police once, weren't you? I fancy I've seen you in it before somewhere, only I can't get my mind to think of where. You're good company, anyhow, I should feel lonely without you. Now the motto of your force, when it existed with you as a member of it, if ever it did exist or you yourself ever existed, was: 'Second to None.' But you will have to ride with me as second, my friend, and I'm rather more than nobody at all, my good fellow. Second to none, indeed. Second to none? What a senseless motto. Second to Me if I want to go first, but only that way. You can't ride anywhere unless I wish it. If you try to do so against my orders, I'll drill daylight through you, my dear young man. I'll show you what I mean for the

first time without the drilling. That will keep for when I might want to have a little revolver practice with you, for diversion, so off you go, Mr. 'Second to None.' "

And whistling, Conroy's horse darted to the front and kept going there at such a speed that its rider dared not throw himself off. Bygrave followed him closely, rocking in his saddle with laughter, and they rode on furiously until a signal brought the big black horse to his side again.

Bygrave had neither lost his bushmanship nor his consummate horsemanship, but he was now errantly mad. His one remaining idea just then was that he had got Conroy and was bound to keep him at all hazards, anyway for the present.

They rode W.N.W. for a week, by some latent bushman's ideas left to him, but neither by day nor by night did Conroy escape that vigilant gleam in the basilisk eyes of his powerful and dangerous companion; they were never off him. At length they crossed a range by a pass, and ran a river down, which Conroy thought he recognised as the way he had come with Roddy. They had little to eat on the journey, but what Bygrave supplied, and he always fastened Conroy securely to a tree before he essayed any foraging or cooking.

It was, therefore, to the latter's no small relief that, crossing the river after following it down some miles, they came suddenly upon a deserted squatter's paradise, in a very unusual, but once seen, never-to-be-forgotten state.

A drought of a year-and-a-half had passed over it in Bygrave's absence, with little effect. It was the place held in reserve by him, after the sale of his other stations. The houses still stood, but they

were almost hidden away with abnormal and obtrusive native drapery from a rainfall of unusual heaviness six months ago. The water-holes were full to the very brim from later flooding, and abounded in ducks and fish, but the houses themselves were now over-run with weeds and creepers growing in and out of the windows, and no one seemed to have been near them for ages.

Bygrave was humming a tune as they reached the deserted station, and though Conroy did not suspect it, the danger signal was up for him through one of the madman's varied moods again. Dismounting, his captor tied him by his hands round a verandah post. Then he went inside the doorway in full song:

“Down in the valley where daisies grow;
Oh, heigho! Oh, heigho!
For a tryst with the Devil who saps below,
Oh, heigho! Heigho!”

There was a mummified, hide-bound, dead horse in what had been the best room of the dwelling-house, and it was leaning against the wall by the fireplace. In another corner what had once been a human form had decomposed and was attenuated to rotting rags. The dead horse seemed to excite Bygrave, and he rushed about shouting his dead wife's name all over the place: “Marcia, Marcia, where have you got to? And where is the boy?”

Now the mummified horse stood in a green pile of natural growth, seven or eight inches high, and the bundle of rags and bones below was hardly visible until the weeds were pushed aside to show the skeleton shape. And Bygrave came back and peeped in with another verse of his old ditty.

His grand voice rose almost to sublimity. Then he came grinning back to Conroy. He motioned him with a mincing leer to look at the dried-up deaths in the house, for he had discovered the man by displacing the rank growths. Then, holding his captive by the arm in a grip there was no resisting, he took him in. When Conroy had well observed the twin horrors of dead man and dead horse, Bygrave burst into peal upon peal of maniacal laughter.

His unwilling victim felt as a kangaroo rat must feel when fascinated by the terrible gaze of a big lace lizard. It had been a most trying and terrible ordeal for him all through, as there had been no method in it beyond the unfailing course they had steered. Now he saw he was with an undoubted maniac, and knew he must at all costs keep cool and humour him.

"I want a cook," Bygrave said, suddenly turning businesslike. "Cedric, the Saxon, you shall be thrall to me, and my name's Bygrave, Bygrave, Bygrave; ain't it romantic enough even for a Norman conqueror, you beggar, although it's only Bygrave? Come along."

So back to the horses they went, Bygrave keeping his hold upon him, after having threatened to tie him beside the dead man, because he tried to wrench himself free and make a bolt for it. He was then re-fastened to the post, and sitting down in this position, had to make the best of it through a long, terrible night.

Next morning Bygrave's plans altered again with persistent whimsicality. After breakfasting on some fresh fish he had hooked at the water-holes, he took Conroy to help him catch the horses, com-

elling him to walk just in front of his ready carbine. When they approached the animals they found a man in clerical garments on the same errand; his horses had joined theirs during the night, he having camped lower down the river.

He was as tall and big as Bygrave, and Conroy made an instant appeal to him for help; but Bygrave, brandishing his weapons, threatened to do for them both, and the stranger seemed so horrified by his actions and insane looks that he suddenly turned deadly pale and, putting his hand to his heart, fell back on the sward, lifeless.

To Conroy's inexpressible disgust, Bygrave commenced singing:

“Cassock and Scripture and prayer-book go;
Oh, heigho! Oh, heigho!
Down to the demons who wait below;
Oh, heigho! Heigho!”

Then to his amazement, he calmly stripped the dead body of all its habiliments, returning with them to the house, where he found an old spade, and brought Conroy again to assist to bury the naked corpse. In fact, he made him do the whole work, marching about with the carbine as if on duty.

When it was done, he found the dead man's camp of the night before and at once appropriated his saddles and saddle-bags, tea and sugar, flour and salt meat, so that they were enabled to regale themselves heartily. Then, carrying all the reverend gentleman's belongings with them, they arrived at Bygrave's horse station, where, having again fastened Conroy to a verandah-post, the madman dressed himself in the priest's clothes and

preached to his victim a long sermon of curious wandering phrases mixed with blasphemy, 'ere he released him from the drone of his insane voice.

The days of this awful constraint and doubt had almost driven Conroy mad himself. The uncertainty of the character he had to deal with alarmed him beyond expression, for, although the distraught man seemed to have forgotten his threat to make a target of him, Conroy never knew when it might recur to him to do so, and consequently it was a relief when two days later he was taken under the madman's guard to find the horses, saddle up and depart. He hoped now he might find some other chance of escape. But this was not to be, for, in spite of the clerical garments, the old ideas remained, and Conroy was again placed on the demented man's own horse, which at a signal remained close alongside his master.

They crossed the river, and then, to Conroy's curiosity, Bygrave threw him a box of matches, after making him dismount, and rode off, taking both horses with him. When he was out of sight, Conroy went into the river bed and got some mussels, which he cooked on a small fire, and setting forth afterwards, made the best of his way towards where his lately-acquired instincts and observations told him Roddy might still be.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT LARGE

HE had profited in a measure new to him by his past wild and fearsome experiences in the bush with Bygrave, especially in regard to regaling himself with Nature's stores of sustenance. In this far-away district and on the journey there, he had found that his captor was indeed capable of varying their food with all the knowledge of a black fellow. So that he did not despise mussels as an adjunct to his bill of fare, being very hungry from short rations.

But the reaction of mind brought on by his freedom turned to a positive agony when he now considered the eternal disgrace and loss of prestige he had suffered at his captor's brutal hands. He accepted the last act of apparent charity from the savage and incomprehensible victor with a painful, inwardly-felt sense of great inferiority to him, even in his madness, and as he walked steadily onwards, away from the river on a line of his own after his brief repast, he reviewed certain phases of Bygrave's dementia to find a possible solution for it all.

Had he taken him a prisoner simply to show his wonderful prowess in the bush, or was he jealous about Miss Delamayne, as he had hinted more than once? And, if so, what right had he to be jealous

at all? The man was pleasant and gentlemanly enough to him when he first started. What had he to do with Bronzewing? It laid upon him like a pall. Was he engaged to her? It was after his own remark about her, or anything that suggested her in any way, that he seemed to go mad. Surely it was this that had caused the first sudden attack in the hut, when he had been taken off his guard. But why should he be so furious with him?

Last night he was quite aware that Bygrave had a fit of some sort. He had seen him rolling about on the ground as if in pain. To-day for some time before he left him he had not uttered a single word, and, beyond the fact that he had flung him the box of matches, there had been no iota of evidence against the fact that he had deserted him in the hope that he might perish in the bush. But his residence with Bethune and his daughter had taught him many valuable ideas, and if he was not quite an adept in bush work altogether, he had at least developed a sense of locality, and was a good deal more than half-certain that the country he had been in before he crossed the river verged upon Roddy's territory. Even if Roddy were not there, he might find the old base camp at last, and follow the road back to civilization himself.

He reflected upon the strange and varied nature of the trials he had undergone since he landed, practically a new-chum in his experience of the country. What a cocksure reliance he had placed upon himself at first. Aye, and before he left England. Now, just as he had obtained the very position he had so long worked for, he had apparently lost all hopes of retaining it through his own insufficiency. At last, after having

walked a long way, he cast himself down under the shade of a mulga tree in some thick scrub and fell fast asleep, thoroughly worn out.

After noon he rose and pursued his way, feeling slightly more refreshed in body, but not in mind. The very fact that he was released from the irksome restraint and paralyzing influence following all his relations with his strange and incomprehensible captor was almost enough to bring Conroy back to his abnormal state again, the agony and misery of mind he owed to his defeat. It was galling in more ways than one, to say the least of it, that he, a mounted trooper, should have been bested by a madman. Had he not possessed a faint hope that Roddy might still be in his vicinity, he would hardly have known what to do in his present predicament, horseless as he was, and alone. But on coming down the river with Bygrave, 'ere they reached what he had called the horse station, Conroy had noticed a brown-red pinnacle rock by which Roddy had driven the waggon when he left the down-river road of that locality to form his base camp. It was so singular in shape and colour that he remembered it at once. He had gone through a good deal since that first excursion for kangaroo pelts. These thoughts passing through his mind, he left the scrub where it opened out, observing now a plain that he knew he had seen before with the conical hills in it; then he heard the crack of a rifle, and there he saw Roddy and a black fellow, still after kangaroos, before his gladdened eyes.

They ran forward to meet him when he got clear of the last timber, and, for the first and only time in his life, Conroy fainted dead away. When he

came to himself his friend had, with praiseworthy forethought, made a fire to boil a quart pot of tea, and with bread and meat now pressed Conroy to partake of his hospitality. The half-famished young man did so, and immediately felt better. When he had completely recovered his senses, Roddy asked:

“What on earth has happened, Conroy? You look half-starved. More like a skeleton than your own true self. How in the name of fortune did you get back to this part of the world again? I heard you were in the police force down at Barilla, and was proud of the way you had got on since you got lost from here. But why did you run away from me altogether?”

Conroy informed him that he had been prosecuting an enquiry at Barilla with a stranger, relating to a lost man, and that his principal, the said stranger, had suddenly gone mad in the bush, captured him, and led him off to visit a station of his, situated about fifteen miles from where they were now, and that very day had left him stranded since early morning, taking his horses away with him.

“Why, that’s the old deserted station on the other side of the river; I know it well. What sort of a man was he?”

Doughboy started as Conroy described him.

“Which way did he go?” Roddy continued.

“Down the river, apparently. The man’s as mad as a hatter. What shall we do? I can’t follow him without a horse.”

“Stay and rest, old chum, for a couple of days. You look indeed as if you had been man-handled.

You are not fit to travel yet even, and indeed you are in no state to go by yourself."

"I was maniac-handled with a vengeance," Conroy allowed. "I've been tied up all the time, and thought he would murder me every moment. By the way, there's a dead clergyman out at the old horse station. Bygrave frightened him to death. Probably he had heart disease, and the man's madness and dancing about with my carbine and revolver killed him through shock."

"By thunder!" Roddy exclaimed, "Bygrave may turn up here! And we shall have to be very careful. I've heard of him as a devil with both men and horses, and if he has run amuck as a bushranger, we shall have to look out. But it seems to me that you have come back in the nick of time, and I have much to tell you. I have been shepherding your claim ever since you left, because, as I told you in my letter, I have made a great discovery in your favour; and as we are mates, of course you get your half share whether you are a mounted trooper or not.

"But as you can't chuck the force just now, even with these events happening, without reporting your mishap, we shall have to take up the running ourselves to get you out of it, for I could not let you go alone after a madman. Doughboy is a crack shot if the lunatic should show fight, and you and I are good enough to tackle him double and bare-handed. But what a scare you must have had! Now come along to our opal ground. Doughboy seems to have gone on ahead."

When they arrived at dusk, Roddy reflected: "He's been in some queer mess, Jim has, and hasn't owned up all yet. I hope we shall get the

fellow that took him prisoner all right. It'll mean promotion for him if we do, and then we can come back after he has chucked his billet and work this place quietly. But where, in the name of the deuce, have Doughboy, Rosie, and the kid got to?"

Now Bygrave having disappeared in the abrupt manner he had done, with the horses, merely took a round through the bush and returned to his station. There he re-dressed himself in his own clothes and, packing the priest's garments in a valise, rode off once more on his own horse, with Tiger as pack, and there was grim determination written on every line of his countenance.

At the crossing-place he broke out with :

“ Silver and gold are a man's delight ;
Oh, heigho ! Oh, heigho !
Raven your clusters of hair to-night ;
Oh, heigho ! Heigho ! ”

He then rode seventy-five miles down the river at a stretch, coming on the store he was making for at about ten next morning and, hitching his horses to a rail outside, entered it. Herein being supplied with a surreptitious bottle of spirits as a presumed purchaser, he took up a concertina, and with it so enthralled the storekeeper and his assistant that they called for more music, and were suddenly confronted with a revolver, with mad, blazing eyes behind it.

Then they were made to mount the counter and stand there with their hands high above their heads, whilst their former cheerful entertainer ransacked the entire premises, some of the items taken being blankets, a saucepan, a frying pan,

another good revolver, a supply of cartridges, and a double-barrelled gun, together with the necessary powder and shot. Then he rode off with his loot, playing music-hall varieties on the concertina until he was out of sight and hearing.

There were no police in the district, and the storekeeper and his man had to wait until the next casual traveller arrived to ventilate their grievances, and the varied phraseology they used in the interim was wildly lurid.

The manner in which Bygrave got back to his station was erratic. Once out of sight, he placed the concertina carefully away in one of the packs, and cut up a stolen blanket and a ball of string to muffle the shod hoof-prints of his two horses, travelling behind the river ridges and far out of sight of the road.

When he got back to his station, he proceeded to make it habitable, cooked himself some food, and later on took up his concertina and began to play.

Suddenly Doughboy, Rosie, and the child appeared beside him, and it was evidently a confidential visit on Doughboy's part.

Dropping his concertina on the ground, Bygrave looked vacantly at the intruders on his solitude for a moment or so; and then the anathema of song swelled forth, and an instant afterwards Doughboy was a prisoner even in the midst of it.

“Woman, and witness, and wine, by Gad!

Oh, heigho! Oh, heigho!

They were the cause of it, and as bad;

Oh, heigho! Heigho!”

“What are you doing here?” he shouted in a

terrible voice, with his revolver at the black fellow's head, as he pinned him on the floor, heedless of his consort's shrieks and the crying of the frightened child; heedless also of the Winchester which had dropped on the ground in the scuffle, and with which Rosie withdrew noiselessly as she and her child vanished out of the door.

"I'll kill you! Didn't I tell you to stay here and wait for me! You are the only one who knows, and I gave you a sum of money and your life to stay here, and only here."

"I'm with a white man about fifteen miles away," panted Doughboy, when he could get breath. "It was too lonely and dangerous for me at these houses, and you never came."

He was terribly frightened at the great strength and determination of the man who had thus overpowered him. And he had seen something in his eyes that terrified him still more when he made signs to his wife and child to run away.

"I'm kangarooing, but I've done what you told me, and come back to you," muttered Doughboy, abjectly.

"You incarnate devil," muttered Bygrave to himself, "if it hadn't been for your kangarooing in the past, and that blessed Winchester of yours, I shouldn't have been compelled to own I shot my own cousin, and gone mad over the thought of all the police business it would entail, and what it has cost me."

Doughboy looked more fear-stricken than ever. He simply gasped with terror, but no words came.

Bygrave went on:

"They will say I did it. To inherit his estates, of course. Anyway, I'll have a big splash in the

bushranging world before I make you pay the piper, Mr. Doughboy Blackboy, as the matter stands. *You* are now going to be trussed up!"

He shackled his feet together with a horse hobble and fastened him with Conroy's handcuffs to the same verandah-post his former victim had occupied, then resumed his playing.

Doughboy quaked with fear and frenzy, for if Franks was mad, in his opinion this man was ten thousand times worse. Presently Bygrave gave him something to eat and brought him a blanket which he wrapped round him. And from the bush came the call of a mopoke which told him that Rosie and his child were on their way back to Conroy's camp.

Doughboy did not sleep that night, and, though he tried hard to free himself, was unable to do so.

CHAPTER XIX

“ THE PRIEST ”

WHATEVER hold Bygrave possessed over the unfortunate Doughboy, there was no doubt of the latter's added terror when, daylight coming, his savage master appeared from the inside of the dwelling, where the black fellow had heard him bustling about betimes, attired in the clerical garments he had despoiled the corpse of.

The Reverend Mr. Phillips, as he now introduced himself, was clean-shaven, with the razor found in the deceased gentleman's valise, and all smiles and geniality as he unbound Doughboy, threw a parcel of clothes down on the floor that he had previously purloined from the store, for the black fellow to put on.

But, behind all the guilelessness, in which he addressed his new captive—bidding him put on the things and be quick about it—lurked a steel shot malice in the eyes that, when backed by a ready hand armed with a revolver, terrified the black fellow more than anything else, for he had not seen this phase of Bygrave before. Having given the aboriginal his breakfast, and expressed his satisfaction with his general appearance, Bygrave—whose mind and manner seemed to have merged into strict keeping with the clerical attire—escorted Doughboy to help to get his cavalcade ready. When Tiger and Black Snake were brought up and

saddled, the packs were arranged on the big black horse and Doughboy was commanded to mount it, the new priest encumbering himself with Conroy's carbine and accoutrements.

Then, as they rode away, a signal from the reverend gentleman made Doughboy's horse stop close by the grave where, apparently, he had himself been buried recently, for his make-up was perfect, and Doughboy could not understand it.

With a gesture of his hand he motioned his black companion to silence. It came, too, on the order, still and profound, save for the champing of a bit from a restless steed and motions of increasing and awful terror on the blackfellow's part.

His captor pointed to the fresh-turned soil below which the corpse lay. The black fellow glared wildly where the finger pointed.

"Yes," said the assumed priest, slowly, in a voice that was not his own, "the other one you knew of lies there dead and buried. He went into it, I came out. Listen."

"Yes, yes," shrieked Doughboy, in mortal terror; "yes, yes. His spirit has passed to yours, and yours to his. Let us get away from this. There is death this side of hell with such a man as you, and I don't know what to do with your Bygrave rights, and yet you are the parson. If there is a God, why have you changed like this?"

Mad with fright, he tried to bolt, but a low whistle from the counterfeit priest, and a bullet by his ear, made him aware of the impossibility of that, and convinced him perfectly that he with whom he had to deal was to be feared beyond all others, and he remained seated on the arrested steed, trembling and blue-livid as only a black

fellow can look under the impulse of uncontrollable fear of madness or sudden death.

“I must convert you, Doughboy. Remember in future that I am your soul-saver, and in case of surprises you may keep a couple of my visiting cards and say to anyone who accosts you that you ride in priestly company, if not in priestly service.”

This was all said slowly, in the voice that Doughboy could not understand, and had not heard before, and it frightened him more horribly than ever. His new master extracted a card case and gave from the clerical pockets the indelible proofs of his new identity.

And away they went, straight through the bush, Bygrave with one revolver concealed beneath his clerical coat, for at the first lonely water-hole he got rid of Conroy's cartridges and carbine by throwing them into it, but his saddle holster held the other purloined instrument of death in its concealment.

“And now take me to your white man's camp,” ordered the Reverend Mr. Phillips. “I should like to surprise your master, as I don't intend in future for you to have more than one.”

There was no doubt that the priest was far more terrible and daring than Mr. Bygrave had ever been, and of this Doughboy soon had full convictions. In his turn the black fellow, paralysed as Bygrave's horse had been at his whistle, would have as soon thought of shooting himself dead as of disobeying one of the quick, stern orders of his new chief.

When near the cave the priest said :

“Dismount, Doughboy,” and slipped off his horse also. “Remain here. You'll drop dead if

you attempt to move or give the alarm. Neither horse will stir if you attempt to use them to get away with. Do you hear?"

The black fellow cowered and waited to listen, throwing himself on the ground in a perfect paroxysm of fear and dismay afterwards, and looking at the black horse suddenly as if he had seen a demon.

The Reverend Mr. Phillips presented himself most courteously at the cave opening where Conroy and Roddy McGregor were getting supper ready.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," he said, with deliberation, "I have lost my way, and was so glad to see your shelter. I intended to make my humble way to Eulo to hold a service, but, leaving the beaten track to investigate a peculiar bird in a tree, I wandered on in pursuit and, though I said a prayer for guidance, lost my way, and the only answer I seem to find to my supplication since I breathed it, is that I have found you."

Just then Rosie came up with Roddy's horses, ably seconded by her little son. And, as the black girl's eyes were the sharper, she screamed with terror the moment she saw the Reverend Mr. Phillips.

There were two quick revolver shots, which the Reverend Mr. Phillips loudly protested were complete accidents, caused entirely through his own nervousness at the girl's shrieks. Conroy, desperately wounded in the right wrist, lay writhing in pain; but brave, willing, faithful Roddy lay flat on his face with a stream of blood crimsoning the ground underneath from his neck.

"Come here, you black howler," ordered the reverend gentleman to Rosie. "Bring the horses

up closer. One gentleman is dead; there is no doubt about that. Shall I say God rest his soul? I am afraid I must. These accidents with firearms are so very distressing, but it was all through your screaming so abominably.”

“You devil!” exclaimed Conroy, panting with rage and pain. “You’ve shot my mate. I never saw such infernal carelessness in my life, and what does a man like you want with a revolver?”

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, young man. Wounds mortify in lonely places, I have been told. I’ve seen a sheep bitten by a wild dog become a mass of corruption in a week. You’re only a crawler yourself, or will be in a week hence because of the blow-flies. Now then, you black girl, jump into that waggon till I put the horses in, and get out of this gentleman’s company.”

This he accomplished shortly with his eyes on Conroy, who presently fainted dead away from pain and loss of blood. Then, forcing Rosie and her child into Roddy’s waggon, and taking all the provender he found about the place, also the Winchester rifles that belonged to Roddy and Jim Conroy, he drove away.

Rosie, sobbing convulsively and doubled up in the waggon with her boy whimpering beside her, was a picture of abject misery.

“Stop crying, girl,” the man in priest’s garments said. “I’m taking you to your man, and we are going to my place. Listen. See that kookaburra in the tree there, he has killed a snake and there it is hanging over the branch by him. He’s singing a curious song, isn’t he?”

He pulled up. The girl became pulseless with fright and was quite as amenable as Doughboy

when he took her to him. What was there about this man who made people obey him as his horses did? And why was the fascination never able to compel Bronzewing Delamayne to obey him? Why had some people such a peculiar aversion to him, whilst other impelled by the same feeling had to obey and yield themselves blindly to his dominating influence?

The first night Doughboy, Rosie, and the frightened child passed with the priest, far from where he had left Conroy and Roddy, not one of those three personages ever forgot. He preached sermons to them, sitting close to Doughboy, with one hand clasping a revolver instead of a Bible.

When they set out again, camping here and there at night, after a two days' journey they came on a main road which their persecutor seemed to know perfectly well.

He drove the buggy back into the bush to an inaccessible place, smashed up the gun and, reserving two revolvers, shot the horses, putting an end to these faithful servitors with, be it said, some last trace of lingering regret, finally made a bonfire of the waggon, and managed to set fire to the bush all round them, ere he himself made off on foot and left the blacks to their own devices.

They back-tracked to Roddy's cave camp as hard as ever they could go, highly rejoicing at having got rid of such a dangerous companion as the priest. He disappeared in bush distances until he came to a station where he was hospitably received, held services, and stuck it up afterwards. Then he disappeared. When Doughboy and his family arrived at the old *rendezvous*, both Conroy and Roddy were gone.

The fact was that Roddy, having been pithed in the neck by a bullet, had lost consciousness at first, and, finding out later what was going on, played 'possum, only arousing himself when the rattle of the waggon wheels had died out.

Then he sat up and looked at Conroy, who was insensible. Knowing something of first aid, he tore up a clean linen shirt and bandaged his wound, compressing the arteries to stop the flow of blood.

Then he lit a fire, made some tea, and, after some trouble, brought his mate round.

"Was that your man?" he asked Conroy the next day, as they together negotiated the way to the Kanakas' hut, for he felt he must get his mate into hospital.

"No," said Conroy, who was feverish and off his head, "he was the devil."

Roddy was glad to reach the hut over the range with his failing companion. The Kanakas were gone, but there was a boundary rider camped there with a horse who, hearing they had been fired on by a man in priest's clothes, and seeing Conroy's condition, rode into the station on the river and brought out a pair of horses in a light waggon, in which Roddy placed his mate, now highly delirious; and together the three of them drove post-haste to the hospital at Cunnamulla, where the case was received by Nurse Jones in person.

CHAPTER XX

A TRAVELLING SHOW

"It is extraordinary how happy I feel," thought a tall, clean-shaven man, as he stroked his chin whilst examining a paragraph in the local newspaper in a private sitting-room of the best hotel in Fort Bourke on the Darling River.

"As a stage-manager," he continued, as he sat in the same reverie, "up to all chances, before pulling off my carefully-prepared schemes, it is as well to have a look at one's auditorium from an outside and unknown position, before proceeding to anything extra; but in the meantime my present Nirvana is positively refreshing. Courted, *fêted*, wherever I go, a born caterer to the great many-sided public, induced by the simple purchase of a baboon and his keeper, together with a few horses, no one suspects, no one doubts me. Now for my posters!"

He took a printed impression from a large heap on the table :

PROFESSOR YERKES

Will to-night demonstrate the power of the human will in the management of a savage animal.

Having brought with great care a savage South African baboon of great size through Australia to your beautiful town, an animal so

fierce that he has required the constant efforts of three trained keepers to prevent him injuring himself or others, a sight of wonder is reserved for your audience of to-night as a special favour.

An attendant entered, one of the Professor's own men.

"Take these notices, Stanley, and stick them up all over the town," his master ordered, genially. "Our hippodrome is arranged where I told you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you can bring my buggy round. I'm going to drive out for a breath of fresh air, and I'll give you a look in as I pass. We will open the show at half-past eight, as usual."

"Seen the paper, sir?" the man asked. "There's a big account here," he added, producing a copy of the local news sheet from his pocket.

"Ah, yes, I squared the Editor last night, Stanley," laughed the Professor. "By-the-way, your week's wages are due. Here you are, my good fellow," producing a handful of loose sovereigns and silver from his pocket. "Put your shoulder to the wheel, Stanley, you've got to take the ticket money to-night, and the public gathering will be large. Here is some additional elbow grease to enable you to assimilate the sliding of the human frame on its own axle. Bonus of two pounds extra, Stanley."

"Thank you, sir," the man replied, greatly pleased. "Sorghum has got his dander up properly. Little Ives has been stirring him up now and then, and he won't get any food until after you

come on the stage to put him through his performance."

He chuckled to himself as he went out, looking upon his master as the ordinary itinerant showman; but he was to learn a new lesson, because the Professor had lately detected him in purloining some of the funds.

There was a grim smile upon the Professor's face as he became immersed in the columns of the daily paper, but a quick change of manner that transformed all his bearing when his eye glanced at a casual advertisement:

"Next of kin wanted. James Forsyth Conroy, only son of the late Austen Conroy, of Brangal Downs, required to communicate with Messrs. Redding and Barnet, Solicitors, Brisbane."

There was fury in the Professor's eyes ill to see, and his fists clenched convulsively.

"The living, the living, shall praise thee, O Lord," he muttered. "Skeletons cannot. I must see about proper sepulture for certain grisly forms I know of as I get on further forward on my journey to Barilla. With a reincarnation of my own proper self at that enterprising place, I may do wonders yet when all obscuring mists have settled in their proper places."

There was a large attendance that night at Yerkes' show. A regular gala performance was given with the performing animals and trick ponies and mules; but it was noticed when Sorghum, a great baboon, was brought in to the arena of the circus, at his first roar of rage Stanley, the defaulting cashier, who was close by him, turned livid and fell fainting on the stage.

"My faithful attendant has been overcome by

the toils of the day," the Professor said, sadly, turning to the audience as the man was carried from the arena by other attendants. "You have no idea, ladies and gentlemen, of the mental and physical worries attendant upon such a life as ours," he added, pathetically. "Minor incident after minor incident clogging the springs of our daily work may not be apparent to you upon the surface of our performance, but to such a careful man as my valued servant Stanley, the anxiety felt for the condition of the animals, the proper going of the whole concern, has become a matter of fact to you now, I regret to say, and apparently he has been attacked by some sort of a fit.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I must crave your pardon for such a deflection from our usual course. Keep your seats, all of you, if you please. My attendant is under good care and will recover. Now, if you will permit me, I will show my power over the animal facing us, a ferociously wild creature, I assure you, who seems to be possessed with an evil spirit."

The huge baboon grimaced and jabbered, shook the bars of his cage with mighty strength, his dog-like jaws bared to the inner glow of his fierce eyes as if he would have rejoiced to make mincemeat of Yerkes and tear up the audience limb from limb.

The Professor strode to the bars, causing an outburst of appalling fury from the raving, maddened creature, its hoarse cries resounding through the large tent to the background, and answered by piteous shrieks from Stanley himself.

The next moment it retreated to the furthest corner of the cage in the wildest terror. It seemed to try to get right through the cage, to climb, to do

anything to get away out of it, until at last it sank down in a distant corner, a grovelling mass of impotent abasement.

"Observe the power of the human eye and will, ladies and gentlemen. The performance is over," declared Professor Yerkes, as he turned urbanely to the audience. "I fear my faithful Stanley is worse, I must go to him."

"See here, Jack," whispered a young stockman in the back seats, as he caught a comrade by the coat sleeve, "if my own eyes are in my head, I believe that's the Priest right enough, him that stuck up the station and disappeared. Now what did we come up here for but to earn that Government reward? If you are still with me, let's go and offer ourselves to work in his company as a blind, so as we can pull off his capture. Your horses are up to some tricks, and so are mine if we put 'em through their facings, and he might give us a chance so as we could make certain. Come outside, and I'll talk to you, so that we can run him down on the quiet if we can prove he is our man."

They followed the departing crowd out of the big marquee, and, getting away by the gum trees on the river bank, the young stockman continued:

"You've heard about the Barilla talk: first of all how that chap, 'Kangaroo' Austen, disappeared. Some says he cut his lucky for England, but he was seen in Bygrave's company first. Then Bygrave disappears. Then Miss Delamayne hooks it. Then her young man can't be found. No one knows what's come to Roddy McGregor or any of 'em now, even Doughboy and his lubra and kid are out of sight. You've been a Brangal stockman,

Jack, in the last year of old Conroy's time. Now you and me's hit it, or at least I did since you went away, and I sent for you, me kiddin' on in this town until you come up, and as there's a thousand pounds to share, what are you going to do about it? Didn't I tell you I thought I spotted him at Wentworth?"

"It'll be pretty cool cheek, Billy, to go and tell a man like that, if he is this man, which we can't swear to yet, that he's a robber under arms, won't it? I shouldn't care to have a say in it myself. But we'll try. It may suit him, Billy, too, now that chap of his is ill. It's said the Priest has killed Bygrave as well as the others."

"Well, I can't be quite sure, but the police and the Government reward about the disappearance and the capture of the Priest shook my intellect a bit. Suppose we go and interdooce ourselves as noo hands, and say we've two trick horses. Then we'll be able to tack on and tell if 'e is what we take 'im to be."

But 'ere the stock-riders got to the circus horses' tents, the Reverend Mr. Phillips had really passed out into the bush, with the aid of Professor Yerkes' buggy horses, fine, thoroughbred animals, and perfect hacks. The next night the township was made more lively by certain events in which the nonplussed showmen, unable to account for the absence of their master, took share in, complacently and convivially.

CHAPTER XXI

HUE AND CRY

THE Sergeant in charge at Barilla had been very much upset meanwhile by the total and unlooked-for disappearance of his promising young constable, and failing to make head or tail of the whole matter, except in the matter of the dead horse at Austen's hut, reported to headquarters, stirring up unconsidered quantities of very hot water throughout the force, and in other places throughout Queensland by doing so. No reliable clue had come to any of the police anywhere, mounted or otherwise, and all ranks were keenly chagrined. The disappearing people had apparently worked the oracle of invisibility in thorough bushman style, and the force, not understanding it, were unable to do anything particular in the matter without further information and search.

At last, prompted by a large Government reward, a secret and unknown volunteer turned up at headquarters, and his offer was accepted with alacrity. It came from an aboriginal source, but that didn't matter to the police authorities, or the force either, for the man was one of themselves although of another colour, a noted criminal-hunter from the Queensland section of black trackers.

Just then the knowledge of the Eulo business,

coming hard on the attempted murder of young Conroy and McGregor, set the whole country talking and exaggerating about a cause of new terror in the Priest as a mounted bushranger, and here and there bands of excited, hard-riding, up-country bushmen in various border towns were apt to gallop off in armed parties to see if they could circumvent this ubiquitous free lance, wherever suspicion lurked.

Comparable only to a Murray River hornets' nest, provoked by the advent of an energetic stranger with an axe about to fell their fastness, was the buzzing state of many an up-country district, since the Sergeant's information about his lost constable and his dead horse.

In one of the Queensland divisions, the nearest to the start of the new bush terror's last operations, there happened to be a mighty man of thew and sinew named Peter, an aboriginal, famed for desperate and daring deeds. He it was who now accepted the mission of capture on his own initiative.

He crept away unknown and unrecorded, a half-naked savage armed with tomahawk, nullahs, boomerangs, wooden shield, and spears, ostensibly in pursuit of animals, birds, or wild honey. He was a Sergeant in his squadron, a more than noted tracker, and had been engaged in this sort of secret service before with marked success.

But it so happened the Reverend Mr. Phillips had departed from this earth altogether in two separate fashions, first as Professor Yerkes from his menagerie tents, and secondly metamorphosing into the real and authentic Mr. Bygrave, the rich squatter, who had come out to Australia again

to breed horses, after a sojourn in England. Somehow the connection had not been made with any certainty as regards three being one when the Priest turned up, and escaped Conroy's knowledge through his wandering wits.

Consequently, when the disguised black tracker, Peter, after considerable wandering on various hot scents, came on Mr. Bygrave alone a mile or so beyond the river crossing at the township where Professor Yerkes had caused such a divided sensation, the sleuth-hound was at once affable with him, little suspecting that the well-dressed horsey gentleman had concealed his priest's outfit under the great roots of a tree near the river but a short time before.

Knowing who he was, Peter lurked about with him cordially in different thick scrubs during the day, without shifting their positions very much pending the development of any plan in the maniac's cunning brain, and the great aboriginal tracker became more and more puzzled and hesitating.

Bygrave, as a rich, somewhat eccentric squatter, liked though feared by everyone who knew him as well as Peter did, probably had had one of his usual fits of erratic wandering, and certainly was not the man disguised as a priest who had robbed the store at Eulo and attacked Conroy and McGregor, the news of which had, after some time, caused the Government reward to be offered.

Bygrave's errant brain, backed by all his former prestige of manner, impelled him in some fashion to think that Peter was travelling with him as his black boy, whilst he amused himself. Therefore, at sundown, he gave him orders to remain where

he was for the present, whilst he went into the township, leaving him in charge of Mr. Yerkes' waggon horses, of the sudden absence of whom Peter as yet was ignorant, having come in another direction from the north of Queensland.

Yerkes' men, however, nonplussed at the unaccountable disappearance of their master, were delighted by the advent of a stranger on foot, a highly-melodious stranger, who gave impromptu performances with the landlord's concertina in the hotel where they were all foregathered, and as the evening went on at the township, after they had made merry together, young Fortescue, a neighbouring squatter, was so much impressed by the sound of bells, bells, bells, rising and falling in beautiful catches and clashings of melodious symphonies, that as he and his hackney mounted the river bank at the crossing place, he almost thought for a moment or two that he was back in his native minster town in the old country, until he recognised that the musical chords were produced by a master hand on a musical instrument at the very hotel he always stopped at.

Entering this hostelry later, therefore, after seeing his horse in the attentive hands of a groom, young Fortescue, with his usual well-recognised liberality, ordered drinks for all hands, and presently, rather against the popular vote, carried off the interesting performer, a man of his own class, about whom he had heard vague stories, into a private room where they prepared for a mutual orgie of sound and taste. The room bordered on a balcony upstairs, and the pair of them passed prolific hours qualified by deep potations.

They soon became such firm friends that young Fortescue felt quite sorry when the interesting stranger left, encountering as he did so the sharp eyes of Jack and Billy, just returned to the town side of the crossing place, unsuccessful in their pursuit after the supposed Priest, and with knocked-up horses.

"That's Mr. Bygrave right enough. He's turned up again all right, as I thought he would; I'll swear it's him, so he ain't dead, as they said he was, after all. There he goes, whistling for his horse. I expect he's got it planted somewhere t'other side of the river. Now what the deuce made us take Yerkes for the Priest?"

"I don't know," Billy averred, doubtfully. "More the manner of the show, and the look of 'im to Bygrave than anything else, I think. Mr. Bygrave bought our chestnut 'orse and give a longer price for 'im than we asked, like a gentleman as 'e is. If it was only Yerkes, now, as was the Priest in counterfeit, it wouldn't 'ave hurted to run 'im in as a lark on suspicion; but I like that Bygrave, 'e's a born 'ero, though they do say 'e's a bit bicentric. And I think if 'e was really to go bushrangin', I'd 'ave 'arf a mind to be alongside 'im, and it's after all your talk, Jack, that's turned my opinion in any way. But it's dashed rum 'e's turned up just now, ain't it?"

So they cleared off to their lodging-house to hear the news of the prepossessing musician, and as it fitted in with their previous knowledge of the man entirely, they were bitter against Yerkes, but praised the musical performer in loud words.

"What's it matter if 'e is a bit bicentric?" Billy

said. "'E's a gentleman, and 'e can do as 'e likes, and don't 'e play and sing fine!"

By-and-bye young Fortescue left to ride drowsily home, being awakened on the other side of the river by a clergyman on a blue roan horse who asked him the way to his station.

This question, given as it was with the voice of divinity, woke up the somnolent young squatter and turned his heart to religious matters, and, his brother being away, he took upon himself the part of host, and asked the reverend gentleman to ride on with him and hold a service.

So they departed together. But young Fortescue was very much annoyed and affronted later on when, it being about four o'clock in the morning, at his own house his reverend guest produced sternly and in silence a cocked and loaded revolver, and demanded all his money or his life.

Happening to have about £90 in the petty cash-box over at the store, in notes and loose gold, he was obliged to part with it, being then taken over to the stables where, all hands being "off" after Mr. Yerkes, and the station female servants fast asleep in their beds, young Fortescue was compelled to deliver up "Sir Roger," a noted steeplechaser thoroughbred. The good-bye he uttered to his despoiler as he rode away on the race horse, leading his own, was smothered with concealed anathemas, but as the dawn broke red and rosy there crept into his astonished mind a gradually maturing design to leave the occurrence to be found out or spoken of by anybody else than himself.

To say that Bygrave, as "The Priest" again, appalled the savage black tracker by real madness

would be superfluous, but he did so most successfully. It was neither with disdain, bravado, bravery, nor any other of his noted qualities that Peter received this new and strange master, but with the unqualified alarm and sense of inferiority an Australian savage feels in the presence of something he cannot hope to either explain or understand. He realised, however, that he had bound himself indefinitely to a dangerous, fire-armed madman, who would brook no interference and stick at nothing.

Together they travelled day and night across country by secret, stealthy routes, until they came to Bygrave's deserted station, where the forlorn and terrified Doughboy, together with Rosie and her child, awaited them.

Next day they rode and walked to Conroy's camp, and Bygrave, this time in another mood on finding no traces of either him or Roddy McGregor, rode back to his own station and began to make preparations as if for a siege.

Whatever Doughboy told the disguised black trooper in his chance moments never transpired, but it is certain that, after a brief interval of such communication, Peter was even more obsequious to his self-imposed master than Doughboy himself.

Rosie cooked for them as usual, and they all waited trembling for the next obscurity in detail until the mad brain directing them appointed it.

Finally, obeying these irrelevant impulses, they all started off for Brisbane, avoiding all roads, and as Rosie and her boy got a lift on a horse sometimes, they progressed in a leisurely, pic-nic sort of way until they approached the outermost limits of civilization.

Then Bygrave suddenly shot the horses and left them as he had done before, without either of the blacks, professional or savage, daring to follow him.

Peter stole back shamefacedly to headquarters a discredited man, and Rosie and Doughboy, with their progeny, made tracks between Conroy's cave and the deserted station, apparently unable to leave the vicinity.

CHAPTER XXII

UNITED

WHEN Conroy was brought to the hospital at Cunnamulla, he was in such a very precarious state of mind and body that inflammation set in on his wounded arm, and, after a brief consultation, the leading doctor saw it was necessary to amputate the limb below the shoulder. Roddy, of course, knew Nurse Jones, in spite of her disguises, but a peremptory finger on her lip forbade all intercourse or formal recognition.

Being himself little the worse for his adventure, a dressing or two did for Roddy, and learning later than the operation on his companion had been successfully performed, though the patient would take some time to recover, he proceeded to stroll about the township and try to gather up matters as far as he was able.

From his limited intelligence of former happenings, all he could do had been to send word to the Sergeant in charge at Barilla that he had found Conroy and unearthed an armed bushranger in the garb of a priest, whom nobody knew. Then he had proceeded to describe the details of the dastardly shooting and its result.

Just as Conroy began to recover a little later, therefore, was the time when the papers began to teem with accounts of a bushranging priest who

had held services here and there in other parts of the country and levanted with some stolen horses and money, and the police turned out in force, without, however, coming on any further traces of the delinquent.

Bronzewing, as Nurse Jones, had, without Conroy in the least knowing her, volunteered to nurse the new patient, and at first it had proved a matter of utmost embarrassment for her.

But the doctor of the hospital, selecting her for her peculiar fitness, had insisted that she should attend night duty in this case when the patient, being more restless, required the greatest attention.

It had been a trying task for her, because Conroy in his delirium had mentioned both her name and that of another girl, Heartsease Bethune, with affection, which knowledge came upon her with a peculiar poignancy mixed with regret. Her patient had lain insensible and delirious for a long time after the operation, and great care had to be taken of him lest he should shift the bandages and bring on any further hemorrhage. When he came to himself he betrayed great grief at the loss of his arm, a loss that would affect his whole after life, as he had meant to rise unaided by sheer hard work alone.

This acknowledged circumstance sent him up at once fifty per cent. in Bronzewing Delamayne's estimation, and pity for the maimed young fellow crept in gradually more and more and softened the heart already given to him. The doctor had been afraid of Conroy's mental condition after recovery, considering the state he had been brought in, but as time progressed the wildness in his eyes died down, until at last he was able to sit up in bed.

One day, looking very curiously and strangely at Nurse Jones when she had brought him some beef-tea, having watched her more or less in wonder twenty times a day since his senses came back, he said feebly :

"I know you now, my dear nurse, or believe I do, by the way you carry that tray. It is someone I know, isn't it? Whatever brought you here?"

He was the only patient in a small, bright ward at that time, and they were quite alone.

"Have you not learned more by your gallivanting experiences since I dismissed you so abruptly?" asked Bronzewing, flushing painfully, with a touch of her old manner through all her spectacles, lilac dress, and Sister Dora cap with a neat little bow under her chin.

"You have suffered far too much on my account. But I am so glad you have pulled round. You have been ill a long time, and I fear I have been greatly the cause of it all."

"Oh, Miss Delamayne, I have lain night and day under your soft and gentle presence, even when I did not know who you were, and it soothed me so to think I had someone to care for me. It cannot be possible that you speak words of hope to me in my awful affliction that I fear you will gainsay afterwards, can it? although I am sure you can never forgive me, or pass over my late disgrace, can you? Am I still wandering, or am I sane?" he asked, with a sigh of painful effort. "It can't be real, all this. To lose my arm! Oh," and he sank back hopelessly. "To lose my sweetheart, too! It must be a dream."

"Touch me and see!—my poor boy, my dear and injured boy," murmured Bronzewing, as she

removed her coloured glasses; and he gazed into her beautiful eyes. "I believe we both cared for each other," she went on. "Don't doubt my words for ever, if I was angry. I was given to you really by your mother, but you were so terribly reprehensible, you know, so shortly after we first met, that—I was obliged—to give you up."

It was a great admission for her, but his sickness and trouble had turned her heart to severe repentance, and she had winced at his suffering as if it hurt herself, until he had drawn her to him as if he was part of her.

"I shall beg your pardon for that first behaviour all my life," he rejoined humbly and penitently. "But how strange all this is. Whatever could have brought you here, and what could have been your motives? Oh, I could have killed myself for my rudeness to you at first, and I tried so hard to gain your good opinion afterwards. But I am always unlucky, and thought you hard and implacable. Can I hope that you will forgive, for you were quite justified in what you did. Is there anyone who can part us?" he asked, wonderingly, when she gently told him of his mother's wishes.

"One can," shot warningly into Bronzewing's inner thoughts, the one who had made such a mighty and terrible confession, a confession that had blocked all her plans more than she had blocked them herself, who now prevented her from ever of her own free will disclosing the secret she had kept for Conroy alone. What had become of him? What was she to do?

She could not speak very fully to Conroy just yet, for any over-excitement just now might have

a bad effect upon him, so she soothed and calmed him by all the means in her power, and led him to think of her and himself, until, after he had taken the beef-tea she had brought him, he fell into a deep, comfortable sleep, and dated his gradual recovery from that first gleam of sense in which he had recognised her, and learned somewhat of her motives and her love. As a professional nurse she had out of her own heart administered the anodyne that cured him, namely, the comfort of her own presence, acknowledged though unknown until his late great discovery. His mind could feed over that past and gather strength of body from it.

She dared not tell him yet of "The Priest," this new bush scourge, whom she divined at once was one and the same man who had been the bane to both of them, and as his mind had not yet gone back to more than immediate happenings, she was very prudent with him, and he began to improve daily. The only information as to herself she gave him was that her disguise was to be their secret, and this seemed so romantic to Jim that as joy, absolute joy, never kills, and his pardon gave him also hope of the ultimate attainment of his desires, he began to look upon the loss of a limb as a mere trifle compared to the greater reward, merely asking to see her sometimes without her spectacles. For this peerless girl he would willingly have given another arm in the first full flush of his enthusiasm.

And Bronzewing, too, finding her salvation in her allotted right to Conroy as a protector, doubly so as he had only one arm, at length grew so dear to him that he formally asked and was accepted, but their marriage was postponed until their

enemy could be laid by the heels, and all their purposes tending towards this was only discussed between them in private. She became all things to him, as he had felt she could have been before, in her now rather rare visits, as he progressed further towards recovery, for, with a word of caution and a touch of pride, she told him she wished to put her professional services sometimes in the direction of other patients. It was necessary just now for her to dissimulate, she told him, but one day she brought Heartease Bethune as a casual visitor in confidence, who was delighted with his recovery also, but deeply touched with his misfortune, and after a mutual and leading explanation all round, it was decided by Roddy's wish that her father, who had come with her, should inspect and buy into the country where they had made the discovery of opals, and so give them a chance to develop it and make their own way in the world. This came on through a caution from Franks at Brangal, who was averse to any more mining matters there until Bygrave was caught, and wished them all, Conroy included, to keep out of the district for some time. Bronzewing bought a half-share in the up-country speculation, and one day the rest of the party, Conroy included, left Cunnamulla, secretly disposed to traffic in opals to their hearts' content, and feeling somewhat more secure in their united strength. There had been no more talk of bush-rangers, and Bethune scorned them one and all as a class to be despised, so they never noticed on the very first day of their ginswing a tall, clean-shaven man who passed them walking on the road like an ordinary traveller,

It was worthy of remark, however, that this same individual, after this company of young people had gone by more or less in evidence but unobservant of his person, because so engrossed with each other, became very angry when by himself. Then, leaving the road, he went down to the river, sprang into it, and swam across, clothes and all, proceeding to dry them on his person by still more rapid progression on the other side. He kept diligently on a certain bee-line of his own out into the back-country, and journeyed day and night, pausing little anywhere.

When the party of overlanders had camped with all their stock and household goods in the glorious Australian air, the mysterious wanderer had flitted far away with a desperate look upon his face, but a never-failing purpose seeming to speed him on.

One look through his coloured spectacles had done all this, just because that glance had settled upon the radiant countenance of Jim Conroy, bereft of one arm but thoroughly recovered, with Bronzewing by his side attending to him like a guardian angel; therefore a mad heart surged in consequence. But as he went, the stranger arranged the future entirely to his own satisfaction.

The little knot of travellers by the main camp fire discussed their new venture, and by-and-bye all was still save now and then the bleating of the sheep Bethune had bought to stock the new country with, and even that died away before the dawn. But the river tinkled on over its pebbly shallows until its waters grew roseate, and at that time a frenzied but determined man burst through the intervening scrub at the base of the distant ranges and frightened Doughboy out of Conroy's

cave far away into the bush, whilst the alarmed Rosie shrieked and struggled with an apparition of a male of her own tribe, whom she presently recognised as her former terrible and all-powerful master come back again, who chid her gravely and gently for her outcry and asked for food and drink.

Meantime at Bygrave's deserted station a coterie of emus leaving the river were disturbed by another fleeting black fellow, who rushed into the house and emerged with a Winchester rifle and some cartridges. Then he left for some fastnesses he thought were known only to himself. He passed again at noon on his way back to the cave, lurking silent and ghost-like behind trees and rocks, and ever ready for some deadly purpose. But when he reached his dwelling place once more, there was still no appearance of his comely young lubra, who had been spirited away by the wild man. But the child was there, and glad to see him.

A couple of white-peeled sticks crossed and planted in a peculiar fashion near Doughboy's deserted hearth bore apparently some message for him, for, taking his child by his hand, he fled away in the direction Conroy's party were coming in.

And miles away in the bush, in the very lonesome place in the bush Doughboy had left in the morning, after his visit to the station, sat a savage king with a savage mistress, monarch of all he surveyed.

CHAPTER XXIII

A TERROR OF THE BUSH

BEFORE Conroy's party—with himself in the light of a hero enthroned in their midst, a halo round his head with all their gladness of heart and rejoicing of spirit at his ultimate recovery—reached the very station he had struck off from down the Warrego into Colonial adventures of his own, to everyone's intense astonishment Dough-boy met them.

He looked very care-worn and sorrowful, and was leading his little boy by the hand.

Something appeared to greatly frighten and confuse him when he saw Bronzewing, but he confided his child to her custody and that of Heartsease Bethune, and left them abruptly after they had given him something to eat.

Then he wended his way alone down the river as if he was going to other parts, but once out of sight he ran at a steady lope until he came to the exact spot where the excited traveller of a day or two ago had swum the river, crossed it in the same way as he had done, and went on unhesitatingly until he got to Conroy's cave, whence he disappeared at once and crossed the Paroo by the old deserted station, going to the back of an abrupt rocky hill near by and passing on his way to his own secret fastness.

It was not until a fortnight or so later that Conroy's party arrived and pitched their tents on the new selection by the opal cave and began to clear ground towards the cliffs. And one morning Roddy McGregor, Heartsease, and Miss Delamayne left Conroy and Bethune in camp, and rode out in armed company to view the strategic parts of their new possessions, for the terror of "The Priest" had not left them yet. On their excursion a mutual understanding was arrived at between the three concerning their monetary and business matters, and the offset of their mutual likes and dislikes. The two young women had been confidential, and as Heartsease told Bronzewing the moment she first saw her she felt inclined to throw her arms round her neck, embrace her, and deliver up her young lover to her, notwithstanding she felt she had a certain claim to him herself, whence a complete understanding between the two young women was amicably arrived at.

Roddy McGregor, who now felt that he stood on a certain equality with Miss Delamayne as a partner in his great find, and on account of his own late engagement to another part proprietress of the same great acres of valuable gem-bearing back-country, had listened to confidences between the two girls as they rode along without a spark of jealousy, and was quite loquacious himself with Bronzewing concerning various matters of building and improvement, with an occasional mention of the hero.

"I always said this Southern land would make a clinking good man of him," he volunteered, as he reined up with Heartsease and Bronzewing and pointed to a gorge in the hills far on ahead,

indicating their first base camp thereby, "but I never wanted him to lose an arm by it."

Then he drew her attention to the well-grassed plains about them, the wall of purple, flat-topped hills, the creek running through the middle of it all, and the wide sweep of golden prairie land clear to the forest of trees that lay around it.

"It will be a splendid place for a big dairy farm by-and-bye," he concluded, "when we have cleared the approaches to our houses; but when I consider the big opal cows we have got the milking of back at Conroy's camp, I go farther and say the whole country about here is a place with enormous possibilities awaiting us."

"Am I not the particular gem of your collection, Roddy?" flung in Heartsease, all of a sudden quizzically. "Roddy, do you know that I was very nearly marrying your partner?"

"Aye, he told me all about that when he came back the second time, let it out when he was off his head with the pain of his wound. But on our first acquaintance I knew he felt otherwise, for when we were at our base camp up there in that niche of the hills yonder, he spoke of gems that dwelt in other eyes. And they were not in yours, Heartsease, although you have plenty when you like."

"It didn't take me long to find that out for myself, either," she retorted. "But I've got a soft spot in my heart for poor old Jim yet. Look at him with only one arm after all his striving. Take care you don't fan my partiality to him into activity by any indiscretions elsewhere."

"As if it were possible," edged in Bronzewing, taking up the cudgels for Roddy vivaciously.

"Roddy is rather more than half a *confidant* of mine, and has always been so on subjects we cannot broach at present. I may yet have to become poor myself for Jim's sake, whilst all you people are rolling in money. Oh, I cannot yet disclose to you the whole of what we know; but Roddy has been a staunch friend to me before I knew Jim. It is something you don't know yet, Heartsease."

"Why, Miss Bronzewing," asked Roddy in wonderment. "I mean," he added, abashed, "don't tell anything yet."

"It may be forced from me some day," she added, casually, and Roddy went on, trying to divert her from her subject.

"We'll be building a bungalow, that is Bethune will, when the drays come up. Why, we are all partners together now, and are all going to live together until we get married. We'll build two bungalows, if necessary, and enclose Conroy's cave, as I always call it, within our garden fences. I shouldn't wonder when we touch our wealth to see eventually a town springing up here.

"Bar that treacherous madman who attacked Conroy and myself, I haven't seen a living soul, but Doughboy, Rosie and their child. It has been a no-man's-land to me until Conroy's wanderings told me the real value of it to posterity. It is a safe get-away for us all now; and that's something considering our unsettled circumstances."

Bronzewing looked grave at the mention of the madman, and her face clouded over at once.

"Where did you and James Conroy live first?" she asked, quickly. "You mentioned it just now, but my mind was elsewhere. Please show me the

exact place again. I'd like to visit it and see for myself his first attempt to become a bushman."

"You are not afraid of 'The Priest,' Miss Delamayne? Suppose he should come back?" Roddy asked cautiously.

"No," she replied, and tapped a small revolver strapped in a leather case to her waistbelt. "I can take care of myself. It's not the first time I've risked things."

She paid bitterly for her unguarded and tell-tale speech, for the eyes of both her companions were fixed upon her in new and grave surprise, and to hide her confusion and mental confutation she touched her mettled steed with the spur, galloping hard towards the rift in the hills indicated by Roddy with his riding-whip in answer to her question. She rode so recklessly that she was but a mere spot in the distance 'ere they began to canter onwards in her direction, and it took them a little while to recover from their astonishment.

"I think she must be a bit huffed about my free-and-easy mention of young Conroy," Heartsease declared. "Well, and I don't wonder; I shouldn't have said it, and I should not have liked it myself. But I really did love him, Roddy. Excepting yourself, he was the nicest fellow I ever came across. And now, with that poor arm, or rather no arm at all, of his, I just love him double, in my own impulsive way. But what has she on her mind that is troubling her?"

"I don't exactly know," Roddy replied, staving her question off, for he did not know all. "She has all she wants in the money line by all reports, but there's some dead hitch connected with Brangal affairs that bothers her somehow, and

which she will never share with anyone. Perhaps it's because she bought the place over young Conroy's head before he came out. That's the only thing I can think of. Thinks it put a price on her.

"That's what people say, of course, and that it was to catch him she did it; but when I asked father about it, he just told me to shut up and mind my own business. I was managing his farm for him down Brisbane way before Mr. Franks told me to shepherd young Conroy; but I have been connected with Mr. Franks and the Delamaynes ever since I can remember."

"What can it be?" mused Heartsease. "I know something is troubling her beyond herself."

When Bronzewing reached the edge of the plateau in the gorge she turned in her saddle to see if the others noticed her. She saw them wave their hands in answer to her challenge, but they were a clear mile-and-a-half away still, out on the open plain, as she vanished from their sight.

Riding forward in the grassy gorge, she came to a bush hut which had been put up by Roddy himself after Conroy got lost, as a look-out station disconnected with the cave inhabited by himself and Doughboy. Dismounting there, she tried the latch, when the door was flung suddenly open from within, her horse caught by the bridle, and herself swung back into the saddle by a tall, muscular black native, who, leaping up beside her, bore her senseless form away, murmuring in her ear:

"At last, my long-lost Queen, I have got you, and mean to keep you."

After riding hard and desperately for an hour by almost trackless ways, he forced Bronzewing's horse into a thickly-valed and timbered mountain

range where, by the smouldering remains of a large camp fire, was a bough gunyah, near by which he laid his senseless victim and proceeded to heap more logs lengthwise amongst the embers. He hung the horse by the bridle to a tree and took a long, gloating look upon the face of the one woman he had coveted ever since he first saw her.

She had moaned once or twice through the terrible journey, even in her insensibility, but when she came to full consciousness again in the grip of the muscular savage who confronted her, she was appalled beyond anything. She recognised, even through that cunning device of his, the man whose advent into her life had been a constant source of terror and confusion to her.

"Bronzewing, my darling," he panted, breathlessly, strung to fever pitch by all his emotions, "I told you I would hesitate at nothing. I have been mad at your loss, but am sane enough now, and would always be sane in your presence. The sight of your own dear face has brought me back to light and reason in my deep love for you, and I have you for my own all to myself now. Live with me in the wilderness here, where I can provide for you and shelter you until I have shaken off all pursuit. When my time comes, and I have laid my detractors low at my feet, I will take you out into the world again in our own character and class. I'll give you up now to no one, and, if forced, only with my life and yours."

Bronzewing shuddered, and in terrible straits of bodily terror gasped helplessly as she stared in horror at him, unable to articulate. She was in the power of a man who knew no mercy, no self-restraint.

When I lied to you about shooting my cousin, I did it with a purpose," he went on, sarcastically. "I knew it would bind you hand and foot to be my slave. Nothing can part us now but Death."

A pair of squatter pigeons rose in the scrub somewhere near, and one clap of their beating wings seemed to be rather louder than the others. Bronzewing's savage captor rose convulsively with a sudden start to his knees from the half recumbent attitude he occupied against her, and then sank suddenly down sideways, with passionate hands clasped over his head, which was turned away from her in his unaccountable change of position. He remained still and silent.

Through the mercy of Heaven, the girl fainted dead away again, and lay once more oblivious to all the outer world.

For a second time in her life she had been saved as by a miracle, and knew not how it was done, nor what was the matter with her abductor. She must have lain unconscious where she was for a long time, but when she came to herself again there was no trace of the man she had seen beside her in those moments of paralyzed agony. It was night; she heard the mopoke calling, and the stars shone here and there like points of white fire through the openings and sides of the timbered fastnesses around her. She found a full fire of new logs, and by it half of a cooked wallaby, together with a pint-pot of tea and a cold Johnny cake placed on a piece of clean, fresh-stripped inner bark.

She fortified nature first, wondering who had prepared the meal, and greatly fearing Bygrave's re-appearance; then, child of the bush as she was,

slept or swooned till daylight, when, hearing her horse close by, she remounted thankfully, and rode the tracks of the previous day back, until she found all her party in similar careful pursuit of those same indications of her yesterday's trail, and then she fainted again.

When their tender care had brought her round once more, and she recognised that she was safe with those who were nearer and dearer to her than ever, Conroy said anxiously :

"Bronzewing, my darling, was it 'The Priest'?"

"No, it was my enemy, the arch-enemy of us all," she said, trembling all over, "and I fear he is not dead, but gone away again to trouble us further. We shall never be safe when he is about. Oh, what shall we do? He is relentless, merciless."

"Tell me, you have suffered no harm at his hands," Conroy furiously exclaimed, fearing greatly at her words. "He did not hurt or injure you? Oh, Bronzewing, tell me, tell me!"

"He did not injure me in any way," she answered, mournfully, "but I fear he can never be exorcised from our lives. He is a demon of wickedness."

In her dreadful excitement she had seen nothing, heard nothing, understood nothing, but the fact that Bygrave, in the guise of a savage, had whirled her away, and, with his arms around her, had pleaded his cause afterwards, until he sank beside her.

On hearing this, Bethune, Roddy and Hearts-ease pressed on. They were all armed, and Conroy and Bronzewing rode slowly homewards together.

"I am frightened," she said, "because of the

unhallowed and deadly mystery of this man and his constant disappearances and changes. And now, my dear boy, sick of his persecution, I am going to act so as to lead you to an inheritance that should be yours by right, one that I have kept for you. But when I give myself up, I may be lost to you."

She described to him the whole late abduction, how her captor had fallen apparently senseless or in a fit close beside her, how he had vanished again like a spirit before she recovered, how he had prepared a meal for her which, famished and terrified as she had been, she had partaken of in the one hope of escaping, how she fainted or slept again, and how she found her horse and got free at last.

"I have hesitated to act before about this inheritance of yours," she went on, alluding to her giving up the secret that had jarred on her so long, "but now we really seem to belong to each other I can procrastinate no longer. I have so much to face, so much to dare yet, to make my way, and yours, sure—and if that is indeed possible we must leave this at once and go down to Brangal, so that I can face the shame and sorrow of it all.

"I shall have to fight against doubt, suspicion, and all sorts of pain and misgivings. Our way is dark, and I cannot yet see the end of it; but I must bear it, and so must you. This last outrage is more than I can stand, and until that man is taken, living or dead, we cannot be married, as you already know."

Conroy was amazed and alarmed, but she told him to trust her. Then she, making no half-confidences of her whole story, for the first time in

her life told him all about "Kangaroo" Austen and the gold mine, to which relation he listened in blank reflection, for it gave him some clue to her behaviour of late. Just then the others came back, having found no trace of anyone but the burnt-out camp fire, from which even the pint pot had gone.

"That incarnate devil is abroad still," Bethune said, "but it is a strange thing that he has left no tracks whatever, and I cannot understand that part of it."

Next morning they all departed down country for Brangal, Bethune taking even his sheep from his new selection, and thinking a little more judgmatically about this one vanishing bush-ranging fiend than he had done yet of others of his kidney. None of them cared to stay there, as things were at present.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COURT OF HALF EVIDENCE

"ON Miss Delamayne's evidence, ladies and gentlemen," Aaron Levinstein, J.P., said, at the Barilla Court House on the day of the great inquiry, "there is no proof that the Bygrave we knew here is dead, after all. I haf no great pelief in spooks, but all I haf to say that her affidavit on the behalf of something supernatural connected with this man is quite beyond the marvellous altogether, and almost shows him to be in league mit der teufel. I must say I haf long suspected it; and if it is all true, what if I may haf to change my opinion that a man cannot disappear like a ghost, as id is nod the first time he has done so and turned up again. I haf seen him tame a wild horse, a regular man-eater, that no one about would have tackled as he did. How he did it I could never tell. I called that supernatural, and my only sorrow is that I have not been introduced to him before he took to such wild and terrifying courses."

There was an uneasy look from several people amongst the crowds in the court, and here and there some of them seemed to be bursting with suppressed evidence. Everyone who had come across Bygrave at any part of his career had been summoned, on the strength of that knowledge, and Bronzewing had been subjected to a searching

cross-examination that had shown her life right through in all its goodness, and as well as the Court being with her in sympathy, small phases of questioning had told in her favour. Her evidence disclosed that, being persecuted, she had destroyed the "Rest," and had run away and concealed herself, and so far led up to the fact that she had seen Bygrave quite lately, apparently helpless after his last outrage, but after that neither herself nor any of her party had seen him. No one knew what had become of him. And Conroy had given evidence that he had seen him in a fit, and he had been identified as "The Priest," the scourge and terror of many districts.

Bronzewing's lawyer, a clever Queen's Counsel from Brisbane, though on tenterhooks of purpose through all this, could not disclose the secret of the mine he was aware of from his client until the proper time came, and took a fresh line of interest for his audience and the Court, on the very superstition lurking amongst the hearers concerning Bygrave. Acting on Levinstein's lead, he went further with it.

"He may have escaped and left no trace," the Q.C. said. "It is done every day—a man is left for dead and disappears. He may turn up again materially enough for us all, and therefore we ought to be prepared to protect Miss Delamayne more thoroughly than has been done. He must have got clean away."

"Not with bushmen about," broke in Bethune, stubbornly. "There were no tracks. It is only another proof of the supernatural. There's something uncanny about him, no doubt, and though I have never believed in anything of this sort before

in any particular man, I rather incline to it now in him."

"Do you believe in legerdemain or, shall we say, athleticism, Mr. Bethune?" Bronzewing's lawyer asked. "A deception can be practised with it. Personally, as a cause for an effect, in this case I do. A bound, a spring, a catherine wheel of his hands, if the man were an athlete, would have removed him, or landed him on a rock or a log when the lady was in a heavy swoon, without leaving indicative tracks. Then he could have gone from tree to tree. But who prepared the lady's supper for her? Were there no tracks then? I believe the man is mad at times. Only a madman would have done, or perhaps acted, as he did then."

"No man could have got away without detection," said Bethune, at once defiant. His credit as a bushman was at fault, and he did not like it.

"He was imitating a black fellow," Counsel replied, "and almost had the knowledge of one, by all accounts. The police should use extra vigilance in this case, and work as if they were after one."

"There were no tracks, nothing, no sign of the body being moved even if he was dead. He must have flown away," Bethune argued.

"Did you ever see him, Mr. Bethune?"

"Never, sir, neither dead nor alive."

"Well, you can sit down now. I recall my previous witness."

When Bronzewing had again taken her place in the box he asked her with grave deference:

"What sort of influence had the man over you, Miss Delamayne?"

"Well, he always frightened me, or I was other-

wise unaccountably terrified in his presence. Once, just before he seized upon Mr. Conroy and carried him off, my parrakeet spoke to me about him. I thought he had an evil influence, and that my bird had warned me."

There was an uneasy murmur all round the Court, and several nodding heads appeared among the audience, as if they were prepared to back this assertion to the full.

"What did the bird say?" The Counsel paused for her reply, but a look of distress in his client's eye showed him he was on dangerous ground for their case. "Miss Delamayne is overwrought," he said, warmly; "I ask your permission to let her retire just now. She has been on her feet all the morning, your worship," he added to Aaron Levinstein.

"Certainly, Mr. Hastings. We are all sorry for Miss Delamayne, and would do anything for her."

"What did the bird say?" shot in the Counsel for the police, not to be done. "I shall have other evidence to call if this question is not answered correctly, and I must put it."

Aaron Levinstein was obliged to allow this question to be pressed, but his brother Levi left the Court suddenly, apparently having forgotten something."

"I cannot tell you," she said, firmly, with a look of defiance at the opposing Counsel, "but I will confess to this, that I shot 'Kangaroo' Austen myself in self-defence, and that accounts for his disappearance. Mr. Bygrave saw me do so, and on that showing has persecuted me ever since."

There was an enormous sensation in Court, in the midst of which:

"Then you are my prisoner," ejaculated the Sergeant of Police at Barilla, briskly stepping forward.

"Stop a moment, my friend," Hastings Q.C., interposed; "that must be proved. Someone else shot him, I believe. Cases that baffle the police must give way to magisterial decision and full examination of important witnesses. I will find any amount of bail for my fair client, and I may state that if she shot Austen, he deserved it, in the first place, as it was done in self-defence. His body must be found. My client has yet to speak."

Bronzewing then calmly and clearly gave all details of Austen's death to an amazed audience.

A murmur of applause rose in the Court as the Sergeant stepped down on her conclusion, for he had been standing on the step of the dock during her recital.

"I don't wonder at her being so afraid of Bygrave," Conroy said, standing up. "I've had a similar experience, not only of his fell personality, but in a similarly alarming way besides. When I was in his company, tied to the saddle, my horse, or rather his horse that I was riding, spoke quite plainly to me. It was when it was neighing."

A roar of laughter broke in at Conroy's declaration.

"What did it say?" asked the Counsel for the police.

Conroy coloured up and refused to answer.

"And mine shied when he wanted it to shy, and snorted words at me," declared the horse-dealer Thompson, jumping up in his turn.

"This is very extraordinary," said Mr. Hastings, Q.C. "It is very plain that all people connected with this absconder and bushranger have been

affected in a very remarkable way by something happening to them we cannot, and they cannot, understand, and if a lady's impression of a certain meeting with him is so delicate that she cannot utter the words spoken by a bird, it must surely show that the man is possessed of some extra power which really makes him seem to be in league with the devil himself."

"I thought it was God speaking to me through the bird," said Bronzewing, simply, "and warning me of him. But I cannot say what I heard from it. It would be impossible just now."

And so with every other witness, strange to say, not one of them would state exactly what was said to them in Court, or anywhere else, on any consideration whatever. Neither pains nor penalties affrighted them, or had the power to move them to make a declaration, and harassed police and Counsel were unable to shake the determination of any one of those principally concerned, until the horse-dealer at last, in partial confession, admitted that when his horse threw him, it first gave him full warning, before declaring something else, and he frankly said that he was always afraid of the man Bygrave's personality whenever he was near him, and never more so than after this incident. So the mystery deepened.

Now what was to be done with such a case as this, with such people? Nothing remained but to probe for ocular evidence from the outset of matters, so Franks commenced to throw open the Safeguard gully rift as a preliminary.

There at the bottom, when the effects of the old explosion had been cleared away by gangs of workmen, lay the mouldered skeleton of "Kangaroo"

Austen, with a bullet wound in its skull, just over the left eye-socket.

Bronzewing's revolver lay uncharged and rusted where it had fallen from her hand, and the cartridges belonging to it were in the pockets of the clothes and alongside the corpse that was rotted and decomposed, as corpse and clothes might have been expected to be. There was no evidence at all against Bronzewing on this showing, as it was proved that a rifle bullet of a larger bore than that of her pistol had killed Austen, and the mine, on being re-opened, also, to the further amazement of the district, held an invitation for shareholders to invest, the only full and consistent declaration about the matter, and perfectly within the limits of the law, to the full community.

But who had shot Austen? That was the main point.

In the absence of the man who had harried the district, and elsewhere, in different characters, and Bronzewing's further evidence, Levi Levinstein was taken up upon suspicion, simply because he had left Court with a countenance that suggested a guilty conscience, and was arrested by the Sergeant in a parlous state of mind. But Bronzewing's new and powerful influence among the people got him off after a night's incarceration, and inhabitants settled down to the vivid excitement of gold shares all round the district with remarkable avidity, all, however, with an eye to Bygrave's return. The rightful heir was installed in his father's house, and crushing and refining works began rapidly to replace Austen Conroy's old herbariums, and other buildings.

Then there was a new sensation just at the time

when Austen Bygrave's mysterious and unhallowed reputation was at its height. The district universally acknowledging now that if he was not a sort of demi-god, he was a man of extraordinary power and strength of will, discovered that he had never actually committed a murder, that he had the heart of a man, a certain extra latitude being allowed for his escapades, even as the rich, eccentric squatter, the hard and wonderful rider, the daring bush-ranger who had only ventured violence because of a love affair, and had led the police completely astray by his wonderful bushmanship until his last magic disappearance. All these were qualities talked into being not quite despicable. So as Austen Bygrave only he became favourably reincarnated in the public fancy, and if they had neither been able to prove nor disprove his death, perhaps he would turn up again some day and not be unwelcome. Such softening influence has distance, not presence, upon people's imagination. The populace expecting the resurrection, however, still had impressions and reactions, and when one day a sudden motor-car turned up at Brangal Downs Mines, with two persons in it, onlookers generally suspected that the chauffeur was Bygrave himself in another disguise, and promptly, with menacing gestures and ready weapons, without any reference to their talked-out opinions, assumed the offensive. Bethune himself prepared to immolate the man at the wheel on the spot with a crowbar, because he had left no tracks behind him, only to discover that the suspected chauffeur was really a mild-looking man when he removed his goggles and cap and collars; and all bystanders were more astonished still to be told by Bygrave's solicitor,

his companion, that Conroy was the next sought heir to the Austen estates in England.

But Conroy stated, on hearing this, that he didn't want them. No one would get him out of Australia until the mystery about Bygrave had been cleared up, as he still believed in his return. But his solicitor knowing nothing about him, and being disgusted with the way that the Austen money had worked round to him, he cared less and less for his chances of it, because he had all he wanted without it, except his right arm, and as Bronzewing supplied the want of that until his marriage—which was still postponed by his *fiancée's* wishes, backed up by his own ideas—having feasted the family solicitor, he told him he could put the estates into Chancery, and sent him off entirely nonplussed back to Brisbane again, Bethune's last words ringing in his ears and those of his chauffeur, despite their enveloping habiliments: "Until Tariff Reform comes in, sir, England's no country for anyone to live in. Any estates, even those rebought from their former and legal owners out of the dumped goods of foreign countries, would be an incumbrance to their possessors, and you may keep 'em for all we care. When any of us are bankrupts here or turn Socialists, we'll go, but not before."

But for a change of sight and sound different from the roar of the furnaces in the blacksmiths' shops and engine works of the great Brangal Mines, the young couples still decided to have a jaunt in company under strong escort to where they had taken the dairy farm under their former affliction, and where again opals, being buried until their own decree came to work them, afforded

pleasurable speculation. But no word came of Bygrave, or "The Priest" either, good, bad, or indifferent. Only the memory of one strong, determined man was left, and that alone shook up some individuals pretty considerably even yet.

CHAPTER XXV

CONROY'S HAVEN

It came to pass that Levi Levinstein, now a large shareholder in the great Brangal Mines, was asked for a summer jaunt to the Arcadia the friends were forming in the interior, and, though most of them were now resting in at the new bungalows at Conroy's old camp, which was just clear of the opal mines, McLeod, who happened to be in a wandering mood, was out shooting beyond Roddyston, as this new settlement was called, with Levi, and the pair had just sat down on the first plateau bank of one of the conical hills below Roddy McGregor's old base camp, where they were in solitude. They were talking of Bronzewing's abduction, and presently McLeod averred:

"Now that many people in the Barilla district have shares in the Brangal mines, and up here too, and they are both solid and paying assets, I'll no' deny that Conroy's Cave and the neighbourhood of it is a pretty decent sort of bungalow residential property suitable at this juncture for a pair of friends such as we are, Levi, to discuss matters; but I'll never be easy until I have discovered how that devil Bygrave disappeared. There's not the slightest clue to his disappearance. It has baffled the police and baffled all of us, and as my dear young mistress won't marry her lad until it all

comes right by proved evidence, I vote we have a try to find it out for ourselves. Let's get on to the very spot he vanished at and see if we can discover anything."

"How did you like being arrested over all the upshot of it, and your night in chokey as one of the consequences? That should make you try to help me, anyway," he went on, surveying his companion's gorgeousness, even to his ornamental and tasselled powder-horn. Levi used to shoot, in spite of remonstrances, to the oft-time alarms and dismays of his friends, as he was about as unskilful with a gun as he had proved himself to be with a stockwhip.

As McLeod's interrogation was finished, a kangaroo coughed in the long grass below them.

"Perhaps it's that uneasy demoniac come to life again, eh, mon?" suggested McLeod, alert on the instant with his Winchester at the ready. "Losh, mon, suppose he should take the form or guise of a big old-man kangaroo! for that's what it was."

"Look here," retorted Levi, for the moment in such trepidation that he nearly shot his stalwart friend dead, "the mention of that Bygrave man or his cousin brings sad and terrifying thoughts to me, more than to any other individual, I really believe, for it connects me with Austen and all der worry of his disappearance. Now I'd have you know that der arrest to me did goot. Between man and man I dell to you der trut'. I was in a way deserving of dat chokey. You do not know my story? Vell, I will dell it.

"Austen he komm to Prangal Towns von day ven I was mit him, and then it pelonged to Levin-

stein Brothers. Id vas a long time before he vas disappear afdervarts, and I expect he forgot all about it, put I did not know, only thought he might remember. He dell me there vas gold indication in der hills between der 'Rest' and Prangal Towns himselfs. I say nodings to him, only pooh-pooh at it, and so ve kkomm away. But one day I go dere myself and look, and I find one liddel bit of kvartz as big as my thumb-nail, mit ore all through it, but ore of a very brassy look which put me off to think it vas only pyrites, but which I know now is gold-copper in an oxidized state, since I am a shareholder and haf gone to der roots of der matter, and der mine as vell. Id vas very rich.

"I see a very yellow gankaroo at the same dime hop like I do." He imitated the motion.

"Der jomp of dot gankaroo fix himselfs in my memory, mein son, and ven Miss Bronzewing, whom we all admire so much, flout me one day in mein store apout der brice of a frying-pan, I say to mine selfs: 'Look here, my lady, I vill to you 'ave some revenges.'

"I write to Austen about dot gankaroo, dot jomp like I do. I say the skin is of a golden tint, and he see der gonglusion, and go and get shod for what I thought was really pyrites. Id was all mein vault.

"Now Miss Delamayne, she did not shood him. Who did, when it vas not me for being pud in arrest? And if it was nod Pygrave, who vas it? Pygrave had no rifle on dat day. That was proven at der inquest on his cousin's remains."

At this moment a strong ray of light flashed in their eyes from the hills opposite the old base

camp, but nearer Conroy's Cave than their present situation.

"What's that?" cried McLeod, this time really perplexed, and thinking he might have been caught in his own chaff-bag. He started to his feet as the old eerie feeling of superstition and uneasiness about Bygrave crept over him. "It really may be that devil Bygrave, after all, and I believe he shot his cousin himself just to get rid of him and inherit the family estates, as everybody else believes by this time, proof or no proof. There it is again, but we'll be doing nothing by just standing still. Let's go and see what is causing it."

After considerable exertion in scrambling up between steep cliffs, they got to the spot on the opposite plateau where they had seen the flash of light, but, despite all their search, valour, and brandishing of weapons, they found nothing.

"It's Bygrave right enough," McLeod declared with emphasis, still more uneasy. "Now, it's no good frightening the ladies, Levi, up at the bungalows. Let you and I keep this discovery to ourselves. We're men enough to tackle him if he doesn't take us unawares, and the others are too occupied with their own affairs to help us. I'll not have that plucky young sweetheart of Conroy's put about by any more ghost talk of the man. She's had enough trouble with him, and the past as it is."

The two men strode onward, and at length reached Conroy's Cave, now only a dramatic monument in a far-off corner of a big garden enclosure, where imported trees were planted, and cunningly mingled with the native ones.

At length they reached, in the middle of large cleared and planted spaces, one of the two elegant bungalows built in a style the great riches of Brangal permitted, where, in a broad and shady verandah Bronzewing Delamayne, Conroy, Heartsease Bethune, and Roddy McGregor were now seated.

Doughboy's child, dressed in European fashion, was running about here and there on an open, grassed patch of ground, and seemed to have won the hearts of the company.

"He's a smart little nigger," said Conroy. "See here, he's brought me a small flying squirrel and three geckoes. He caught the flying squirrel last night, and kept it in a perforated box. I told him to get me a kangaroo mouse, but he don't know them, although there are plenty about Brangal."

"Not in the same quantity like in the old days, though, even there," McLeod struck in. "But if he got you a bush rat here it would do just as well. It's quite as pretty an animal in its way, though not perhaps so curious."

"Here, Doughboy junior!" Roddy cried, "leave digging for that yam root in a garden flower-bed and come here. Don't you know you're supposed to be a white boy now?"

"Yes, Massa Roddy," babbled the little fellow, beaming all over his chubby cheeks and nodding in a bright ripple of smiles and satisfaction at his own cleverness. "Me give woot to Heartsease. I put him in the bed to dig up when I wanted him."

"Thank you, Dodo," replied Miss Bethune.

"Eat him up," said the little fellow, dancing and grimacing with delight. "That one sweet like Kismas nut."

"He means Brazilian, and remembers our festivities at Brangal Downs after the opening of the mines," Heartsease said. "He's getting on. You'll be a big man some day, Dodo."

"Well, I was considering," said McLeod, "Brangal was a lovely country in the old days, from the gap in the ranges your father got lost in, Conroy, aye, right down to the river and Barilla. Talk of kangaroo mice, do you ever see butterfly quail now, or the swarms of ducks in the river I used to see? One man couldn't hear another shouting quite near him when they got up. As for turtle, and fresh-water cod!—"

"Oh, stow it, McLeod," Conroy said. "There's enough row there with machinery and men without the quacking of ducks now. You weren't over civil to me once, so I'm bound to extinguish you sometimes in return."

"You wouldn't get an ounce of civility out of me but for Miss Delamayne's sake," the Scotsman returned, "and but from the fact that ye're worth more than a dizzen or twa bawbees now, I wouldn't hold you in any higher esteem that I did then. But did ye ever see the butterfly quail, even after ye missed my buggy tracks?"

"No, but there are lots of squatter pigeons about here, and I like to get away to this place after the racket at Brangal. Roddy and I used to live on them at times. Eight went to a stew, and with some of the potato lily and a herb or two I could get, they were very passable eating. I have learned something, McLeod. We're tired of your old times and old mines just at present; that's why we're here, and we're going to stay here. Don't you wish you had foreclosed on Brangal now, Levi?"

"I would sooner 'ave 'ad the person who stopped dot foreclosure, and brought fortune to us all," Levi said, with his hands on his heart, as he turned to her. "Pud to you, my tear Miss Delamayne, pelong all der abologies in my zystems besides. I have concerning myselfs and my gonduct been confessing to McLeod."

"Let me get you all an iced brandy-and-soda apiece, or a John Collins, stone-fences or cock-tails," she said, and ran off.

"Bud what did those lights we saw mean?" Levi thought. "I shall never sleep quite sound until that man Pygrave is proved to be resting in a sounder sleep than I shall be getting. Dese jokers seem to have forgotten him altogether."

Conroy's retreat was gay with flowers, and McLeod had got a couple of artesian bores down which supplied ample water all day and all night, and ran away also to supply the main creek and irrigate all the plain, if required.

"Conroy's Haven would have been a better name for our dwellings and the big town there is to be," Heartsease Bethune exclaimed. "Cave sounds somewhat hollow—like your old general fallacies. Don't you think so, Jim?"

"I accept the new naming with thanks, but how many have I left of the old failings?" he asked, in the old breathless fashion.

"One is that you don't love me just as much as ever," she flashed, impetuously.

He caught her by the wrist, smiling into her eyes.

"Or that *I* don't love you better."

"Do you?" he asked, his heart in his voice.

"Of course! How could you doubt it? But

what news have you? Is it an end to all our suspense?"

"Ask Bronzewing," he said, as she appeared with a large silver salver, ice, and various foaming and sparkling mixtures in long, frosted tumblers, which the sportsmen imbibed, as well as all the others.

"Miss Delamayne, Jim has been confessing love with Heartsease, or rather she has to him. Do you permit it? Roddy asked.

"It would be no use my objecting, that I can see. They always did it, and always will do it. I am no buffer to their sentiments, absent or present. It seems to do them good, and perhaps Jim finds her a sort of compensation for the loss of his arm when I'm not near him." She gave him a sly smile.

"Suppose we have a game of nap?" McLeod suggested.

"Yes," Bronzewing agreed. "Go and get the card-tables if you are bound to distinguish yourself in any other way than that of babbling about love-making."

"I should have thought Mr. Conroy was more a man of the vorltd now, Miss Delamayne," said Levi, "than to go back to his preakings ins." He could not forego this rather spiteful allusion.

"Levi, I'll spifficate ye!" roared McLeod. "Take care I don't let on about what you told me of yourself."

But Levi, though abashed, had his own affair not yet made public, and, like the parrot, thought more of it, and about a suit he had had made to celebrate it with than about other people, and consequently was uplifted with pride. He still was

awkward about bush matters, but burned to distinguish himself generally. His company taught him that, and although he was a great source of amusement to them, he was apt still to make mistakes. On the face of what Miss Delamayne had said, which he put down to the possibility of his distinguishing himself, he had been in a horribly nervous state of mind about Bygrave, until the memory of his new suit struck him. Then he determined to shine out more conspicuously than ever on his discovery of the flashing lights because of a damsel who was not present, as well as to gain credit with Miss Delamayne, from his superior bearing.

CHAPTER XXVI

LEVI AGAIN

FULL of this new notion, he sprang out of his luxurious couch next morning very early, had a refreshing dip in Conroy's well-appointed bathroom, and finally set out to seek for squatter pigeons, fired by the talk of the previous evening, and his last idea of capturing Bygrave himself.

He hadn't gone far before a large bird flew up off the ground into a tree overhead, and he, taking a hasty aim, managed to secure it, before it flew away again. Its proximity delivered it in a rather unkempt condition into his enraptured hands, minus a liberal amount of skin and feathers.

"Ein!" he exclaimed joyfully, "it shall be der squatter bigeon pird I haf been after so long." Then he shot a brown snake, and marched along towards the flat-topped mountains.

None of the community of the settlement was about yet, and he had heard no one stirring about the bungalows when he left, and, still more intent upon his purpose of valour than yesterday, he saw Roddy McGregor coming down a gorge in the hills some distance off, to be joined at the base by Miss Delamayne. From where Levi was in a hollow surrounded by rocks, which led right up to the pair, he was able to stalk them and, getting into a position where he could see them without being

seen, he narrowly watched their movements. Creeping closer, he was able to overhear such scraps of conversation as:

"He is dying, poor fellow. We mustn't let everybody know it just yet. I trust you entirely, Ròddy."

To which speech Levi gave his own interpretation—an interpretation that scared him immensely.

"It is Bygrave they are dalking of," ran his thoughts, "and he must be up there on the hills somewhere out of sight. I do nod think this shod gun very goot pusiness just now, so I vill wait behind my rock undil they go back to the houses. Berhaps I had bedder to my dale of the squatter bigeon pirds stick."

He did not go any further now, for, having a wholesome horror of the curious occasional flashing light seen yesterday, and McLeod's hints, he therefore saw the participants of his new secret well on their way back to the bungalows before he followed them at a distance, looking shudderingly over his shoulders every now and then until, becoming more himself, and assuming an air of bravado as he got nearer home, he dashed suddenly into a large, bright room where they were all at breakfast and, to their joint alarm and merriment, stood just inside the door brandishing his fowling-piece and waving the relics of his sport.

"Losh, man," exclaimed McLeod, irritably, "ye've spoiled the taste of ma black duck. Tak' awa' the gun, mon, tak' away the gun. Conroy, put him outside till he learns better manners than bringing firearms into a respectable family gathering."

"I haf a squadder bigeon pird shooded!" Levi

exclaimed, still dancing in the doorway, "und I haf shooded a snake, but left him the ants to fatten mid. And, to der best of my pelief, I have found Pygrave."

"Sakes alive," McLeod observed, "ye must have been pretty close to the first of them. Whaur's his feathers, ye galoot? Chase the gouk!" he roared, jumping up to put his friend outside. "Ha, ha, ha! it's a Johnny, indeed, once upon a time a kookaburra! Ye've shot a sacred thing, Levi. Ye've committed sacrilege against all the sporting laws of the bush, once, twice, three times, ye trebly-distilled scops-eared owl. And don't you talk about Bygrave till I tell you. I've learned something you don't know of since you got out of bed this morning," he added as he got him to the door.

A subdued murmur of uneasiness from one or two there ran round the room, until Conroy said it would be proved shortly that Bygrave was really dead, and that there was no more danger to be apprehended by any of them.

With which Levi had to be content, but, being hungry, he went to put away his gun, wash his hands, take his featherless and shattered specimen away from offended eyes, and hurry back.

Almost directly he was outside, there was a loud report, and an acute if feeble cry of anguish and horror.

"The fule's shot himself deid, the noo!" cried McLeod, flinging down his knife and fork, and rushing out, followed by the entire party, to find Levi quaking providentially in the verandah, having blown a pot of flowers on a frame all to

smithereens, and spotted the walls with a liberal supply of No. 5 shot.

"Der triccker got entangled mit der dassels on my camepag," the alarmed Teuton murmured. "I vill dose ornamental dassels gut zem off."

"Do so, unless you want to finish some of our careers abruptly, or your own," the Scotsman remarked. "Did you see anything more of the sun-glare lights?" he asked, when he got him alone afterwards after breakfast, measuring a line for a fence.

"No, but I heard Miss Delamayne dell Roddy that someone was dying, and I thought it must be Bygrave. Berhaps he died after she came back here."

"Go and bury yourself," the irate Scotsman replied, annoyed at his innate foolery and want of judicious wisdom. "You heard what Conroy said. Hold that measuring tape straight and mind your own business in future. I'm going to run the line from the junction of the home enclosure here, and as we do it, we'll have another look round if we can find time, for there's something I don't like about those lights we saw, though they can't have any connection with Bygrave."

Levi struck an attitude, and forgot his end of the line.

"What's the callant got hold of the noo?" McLeod mused, seeing Levi thinking over this last communication. "I never got him for ten minutes together in conversation, or saw him working that brain of his, that he didn't fossick out some mare's-nest or other out of the bush to fall foul of. But losh, he's gey entertaining, so I'll just humour him whenever I can to get another rise out of him."

Conroy and Heartsease rode away that morning on a long planned expedition of their own towards the old base camp, talking over old times, and Roddy and Bronzewing left their motor far in the bush from Bygrave's old station on the other side of the Paroo, and disappeared from thence by a faint bridle track, both armed.

When, an hour later, they stood by the place to which she had been taken by Bygrave, she showed Roddy the exact spot where her captor had rolled over with his hands to his head, and explained the whole matter as far as she was able. She also pointed to the burnt logs of the big fire close to which she was.

"How long were you senseless, Miss Delamayne?"

"For hours, off and on," she said. "It was far on in the night when I came to myself. After his extraordinary collapse, it was very strange there were no signs of his removal when I looked around me again. He was gone, clean gone."

"Perhaps we could explain it to Mr. Bethune now, Roddy. But we dare not, eh? For we are like the witnesses at the great case, tongue-tied as to our own peculiar relations in the matter until a certain mournful event happens. I don't care to give you my impressions from the first part of this affair, but we are quite in accordance about the secrecy of the second, until the proper time."

"Oh, yes," said Roddy.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHTS

“JUST there and now,” Heartsease Bethune said, at the same time, with the old imperious wave of her hand. “Now, Jim! for your precious experience, your long, long tramp after the elves and fairies and pixies of the bush, with me, the final faithful and deserted one, at the end of it all, the turning-point of both our existences.

“Our horses are all right, so come to the monoliths that guard the pass at the edge of the gorge and show—me! Lean on me, and I’ll help you. I should like to see your start in life as well as Roddy’s from its very commencement.”

The inflection of her voice on the pronoun seemed to say that if the old times were gone, they were both a little older, wiser, and richer, and she was still the adviser, the good angel of his life.

And she pitied him so much now, he was so slight, so careworn-looking, so pulled down by all he had come through, so pitiable in the seriously maimed condition of his frame, even with all his riches and happy expectations. She gave a little sigh as she thought over it all.

He went with her obediently. It was a curious parallel that when with her he bowed to her wish as before, when he was her servant, compelled by the weight of her personality. It was mere force

of habit, mutual attraction and sympathy on his part, a knowledge in each of what lay in the other, and even now engaged in other directions matrimonially, as they both were, no syllogism or sympathy of friendship in their natures had been ever really divided from them since they parted. They were born friends, parted friends, well-met friends, eternal friends; and each had a part in life even now not taken from the other, to share in.

"So you went down to those conical hills below us there—out on the plain—then on to the belar clump—over the dividing range—on to the Warrego; yes, I see, past the Kanakas' hut, until you struck the station we passed on the banks of the big river."

Just then there was an appallingly loud splash about ten yards behind them, and, turning round, they saw Levi, who had fallen about ten feet, from one of the walls of the gorge into a pool of water, a rain reservoir made by Roddy during his stay there.

They ran towards him.

He was wet to the hair of his head, of course, and grabbing with both hands at the steep, muddy bank, his gun at the bottom of the pool, and with his hands and countenance smeared and dripping, the latter as red as beetroot from the shame of being seen in such a position. In truth, he was a curious spectacle. In spite of McLeod's advice he had left him, and come on here.

Conroy being unable to help with his former vigour, necessitated the most of the rescue being done by Heartsease, who was strength personified on this occasion.

"You are perfectly killing, Levi!" she said,

shaking with merriment as she assisted him to regain *terra firma*. "What in the name of goodness were you doing up there, and why did you not give us warning that you were about to become somewhat acrobatic?"

"I vas vatching somedings else," he replied, "some great danger to us all. Dere vas someone signalling from dose hills over there all der morning. But you gannot see it from dis walled-in ground."

"Signalling?" asked Conroy. "What for, do you suppose?"

"Dat vas beyond me. I vas thinking it might be Pygrave up to somedings fresh. So I ran towards where I knew you two were, and stop to see again before I dell you. Then I slipped over der cliff into der vorder-'ole as I vas looking."

Conroy looked amazed.

The sun had begun to dry Levi now with its warm rays, but some of his colours had run, and his whites were variegates of unhappy mixtures.

"I told you Bygrave was incapable to harm us now," retorted Conroy, when he could control himself. "You will know all about it by-and-bye if you will only have patience, but I believe if you were to ask Miss Delamayne, she would tell you something about those mysterious lights that would calm you down, and even relieve you from all suspicions, even those cast by others upon yourself heretofore. My opinion of Bygrave is that he long ago met with the fate that follows all unprincipled men."

"But vot can dose lights be?" muttered Levi, cantankerously, as, all a-drip, he turned away looking very much like an addled egg. "Dat is

vot I cannod make oud, bud I vill yet haf mine own liddel satisfaction on der events of der past, and dat is somedings to improve mine consditutions."

"And now that we have got so far, my dear Jim," Heartsease said, reading Levi's eyes on the instant, "I suppose we had better follow. What did you allude to? And what is the matter with Bronzewing, and why is she so frequently away with Roddy? Why is *he* so mysterious lately?"

"He always was as close as wax. Those two are used to hunting in couples with Franks as go-between, and they are the sleuth-hounds in this case. Did I ever tell you how Franks set Roddy on to find me?"

"I'll get all your family history in due time," she said, laughingly, now busy with her horse.

It was some trouble for them both to mount, but she assisted him, getting on from a boulder herself.

"You are partly my own property when you are away from Bronzewing without your arm, Jim, aren't you? and *we* hunted together for a long time, too, in couples. Never forget I trained you, developed you, took an interest in you, and oh!—*lost you*, the old Jim! Your poor arm, your strength and grace gone, it almost breaks my heart to think of it." Her eyes were full of tears.

He reined up with his sole hand and looked at her critically.

"Heartsease, perhaps in my very troubles I have attained your parting gift to me. I often think so," he said, gravely. "Have I the credit of your good opinion?"

The tears were in her eyes as she assented. Then she broke in:

"It's destiny, Jim. But, had our ways not been separated you might still have had your arm. All the same, I see what you mean. Riches in adversity are sent for plain steering, extra plain steering, with lessons of unselfishness; but I can see the flash from across the plain myself now. Whatever is it? And who is that speaking to Levi just below by the conical hills? A man in a big motor."

"It must be Franks come up on urgent business," Conroy replied, cheerfully. "I know Bronzewing expected him. Let's get on."

"No, stay a little; Levi will be all the drier when we get to him. I am living in old times yet, and can't forget them. Don't you remember when we took the fences side by side? Wasn't it jolly to get out together when our work was done?"

"It was the happiest time of my life then," he declared. "But," he said—

"We," she added.

"Well?" he asked, judicially.

"Parted to share trouble."

There was a short pause.

"And live it down together," he added, bravely.

Then she, inquisitive, pressing, asked:

"Won't you tell me what is the secret with Bronzewing? Do, Jim, and why you can't get married."

"I cannot," he replied; "at least not just yet. But here we are. It's Franks, and here is Levi, half-dried. Jump on my horse, Levi," he added. "I'm going home with Franks; Heartsease will look after you.

"How do, Franks?" he went on.

"Well enough, my son. Jump in. I have brought your father, Heartsease. Take care of Mr. Levinstein. Ta, ta!" And the motor shot off.

"We've had such fun with Levi, Arthur," Conroy continued during its progress. "Now Heartsease will tune him up a bit, but he deserves a little consolation, poor beggar.

"He took Bronzewing's pet cat for a 'possum the other night, because it was up in a tree, and would have shot it but for McLeod, who is his bear leader. Just now, working his own way as usual, in spite of warnings from others, and as usual not knowing anything, he fell off a cliff into Roddy's tank and lost his gun, just about the contingency we all hoped for; but no one could suffer from dyspepsia whilst he is about. He keeps us all alive."

"Why, you are a bigger child than ever, Jim!"

"Smaller, you mean; and thinner. I'm less by an arm, four digits, and a thumb, and I only love two women in creation. I lose myself, as you please, in comparative childhood with one, and adore the other. That is to say, I live my hale, sound life over again with Heartsease sometimes, and find all subliminal realizations in Bronzewing."

"You've come to full manhood early," replied Franks, sorrowfully. "It took me longer than you, my son. But here we are."

"Gee!" asserted Conroy, not one whit less cheerful, as he got out, "your new motor can go! Hullo, Bethune," he said, after he came back with Franks from the garages, "I've been turning over old times again with your daughter."

"As per usual, I suppose," the latter assented, gruffly. "You ought to be used to it by now, you two. Any news about those tracks yet?"

"That's what we assembled for, wasn't it? Your bushmanship and Roddy's were beaten by a superior hand, I can tell you that much."

"Impossible!" Bethune declared, wrathfully, "unless it was God Almighty."

"Through His creature's unhallowed acts, it was," replied Conroy, reverently, removing his Panama hat. "You'll know all about it by-and-bye."

"Then I shall be satisfied, not before," said Bethune, turning to embrace his daughter.

Levi went to change into a full-dress Highland costume, and Conroy exclaimed aloud to Bethune:

"You shall be satisfied, old Stonewall Jackson, it's your due, after all. Your daughter can't enlighten you, but Bronzewing, Roddy, and I can when the time comes."

CHAPTER XXVIII

INNOCENT AND GUILTY

NEXT day, for some mysterious reason, Roddy and Conroy were away all day with McLeod and Franks in his motor, but Levi, on asking to go out in his, was kept back by the ladies; and he did not help himself out of his various old dilemmas by taking an extra glass of wine or two at dinner that night.

No one would have thought that the checks he received from various attempts to eclipse others in bush matters, had impressed him in the least. He blazed with Cairngorms, black velvets, gorgeous stockings, dirk, skene dhus and all, but still if he could have seen himself as others saw him, he would have written "first cause of trouble" as a sign of his character above all his finery.

After the ladies had left the table, he waxed pot-valiant, declaring that he believed he could have taken Bygrave himself, if he had been put to it, became magnificently eloquent about the flashing light signals, his own physique, boasted about his shares in the mines, of which he declared he was the original discoverer, and generally made himself rather more than bumptious.

"Ye're hardly knowing what you're saying, Levi, my lad," observed McLeod, nudging him

judiciously. "To make such an assertion before any of us, who have borne the whole of the burden and heat of the day brought on by yourself, is no very wise, and what I call bad manners; aye, the worst of manners, to those who knew their troubles before ye were born, so to speak, aye, before ye were born. There's a quorum of us here will sit on ye the noo for your ain cheek."

"I saw it my own eyes mît, I mean heard mit my ears, what I allude to," argued Levi, in no whit abashed, "and I am going to say good-bye to you all to-night if you dink I haf no manners."

"Who's to drive your motor?" McLeod asked disdainfully.

"Who but myself? I've learned to shood. I have learned to drive my own modor gar."

"Suppose you met Bygrave?" suggested Conroy, knowing his unbelief.

"Someone's been signalling to him that you're coming," Roddy hinted.

And Bethune capped the whole matter by rising and saying:

"I vote we admit Mr. Levinstein into our fraternity as McLeod wishes, that we put him to the final test of the whole matter to-night, and furthermore, that if he behaves himself in future, on coming out of it with an altered opinion of himself, we accept him permanently, for, contrary to his own opinions, just expressed, we all wish him well, even though we have not seemed capable of attaining the level of his own perfection. I put it to the general ruling, gentlemen."

Every hand was raised.

"Carried!" McLeod observed. "And now let us join the ladies."

Levi, somewhat sobered, and certainly very much mystified, followed them into the drawing-room, but there was a certain gloom over the company which he had noticed all along, and which still continued to his further confounding.

The only people engaged in conversation, a short time afterwards, were Conroy and Heartsease, and they spoke in low voices. She said:

"Oh, why don't you tell me, Jim?"

"I cannot yet. It's a lesson to be learned—for all of us, a long line of innocent trouble, caused through inferior practices with only three actors in it."

"I learned my lesson long ago in self-sacrifice," she added, wistfully.

"I know, dear. So have I, at least since my——"

"What?" she asked, exactly in the tone and timbre of his voice.

"Downfall," he replied. "There sat big pride."

"No need to ape humility," she shot in, softly.

"Enjoy ourselves in proper manner, and share our lives."

"With gladness," he added. "So you are coming with me to-night to be enlightened further. Levi will have a fellow passenger. We go out to the garages soon, and harness our petrol steeds."

"Bygrave is not in our category now, so let us be joyful and satisfied. His troubling and troubled spirit is gone to rest, down, down—no, I hope it is released after punishment. Oh, Heartsease, I never could keep a secret. What am I saying? My thoughts ran away with me."

"I nearly knew," she replied. "Oh, Jim, you softy! But why did you stop?"

"There go Roddy and Bronzewing with my father," she added. "But what is the mystery?"

McLeod touched Levi on the arm, and they went also with the others.

Furs and wraps for the Queensland interior winter night were donned, and all stood ready, their breath showing white on the frosty air when outside.

A Siddeley departed first, Bethune driving Roddy and Miss Delamayne; then Conroy and Heartsease Bethune in a large Napier. Lastly, Franks in a new Beeston Humber with McLeod and Levi.

"To-night is a new era setting in, Heartsease," Conroy observed, when three miles on the road. "I am wondering what your father will say,"—he indicated the old base camp as they came opposite to it on the other side of the frost-studded moonlit plain.

"See the stars above the gorge, and—by Jingo! nearly over that kangaroo. Mind your driving," he said to his chauffeur, "and stop her; we get out here." For the others had waited a little further on.

"Here's the place," he went on, as they alighted, and she waited for him. "See those emus scudding up the creek in the moonlight far out? And there's a wild dog, too, trying to catch them."

All the party now climbed the grassy ridge, where McLeod and Levi had seen the lights, and by a rock was not Bygrave, but Doughboy, weak, emaciated and dying. He told them all that he had shot both Kangaroo Austen, Bygrave, and Rosie, through force of circumstances, burying the bodies of the two latter under the big camp fire, where

Bronzewing had laid in a dead faint after her abduction. Near to where the dying blackfellow sat was a hollow under the rock into which he could creep, which accounted for McLeod not seeing him two days ago. He had a circular looking-glass which he had been using as a heliograph to signal with, and had been ill some time. They left him and went on, Bronzewing giving him wine and refreshment.

"That is all the secret," said Conroy. "He surrendered to Roddy a week ago. Poor chap; he saved Bronzewing twice. And now we've some walking to do after a further run. Boots in good order? Good-night, Doughboy. We'll take care of little Dodo; he is waiting for you. Bronzewing and Roddy will take Doughboy back to the bungalows."

The cars left in a body, except the one indicated. When they got to Bygrave's deserted station, and pulled up for a bit, Conroy said in an undertone to Heartsease:

"Here I suffered my penitentiary. I was chained to that verandah post with a bullock chain, but what Bronzewing must have suffered where we are going to is beyond my own experiences, and far more awful, than we can conceive. Thank God, the avenger was at hand to strike the villain down."

Daylight surprised them all in the wildest part imaginable on the flat side of a gorge, where they left the motors and walked amongst hills and thick timber, until they came to a bare spot with the ashes of a large camp fire and partially-burned logs showing old traces of a sojourn there, the place

Bronzewing and Roddy had previously visited, and where she had been in such peril.

A burial service was read over the ashes, and Conroy said "Amen!" Then, turning to his friends, he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, beneath the ashes of this old camp fire at our feet, once a scene of great danger to my beloved Bronzewing, lie the dead bodies of Bygrave, our persecutor-in-chief, and Rosie, Doughboy's wife, whom Doughboy had shot previously, when Bygrave was away lurking at our old base camp to catch Miss Delamayne.

"Doughboy came to Roddy when we arrived up here lately, dying from consumption. He lived by choice in that wallaby cave under a rock on the hills since he shot Bygrave, and was supported by Bronzewing and Roddy. Latterly he insisted upon using a glass they gave him, a small pocket looking-glass, to flash signals with, in the hope that Dodo would see them, and as a sort of good-bye to Bronzewing, for he knew he was dying. He has been the only one who has preserved our fortunes and saved my future wife from peril and assault throughout our trials. He it is who has brought us all together at last.

"We hold his evidence copied in duplicate before Roddy, Bronzewing, and myself, taken down as the words fell from his lips, and the men of our party are here to-night to verify all truths of the statement I am making, with a new and important witness in their midst, whom they will not part with until he too signs our united testimony and clears us in any Court. And now, Heartsease, come with me again home. There are times when it is good to have only one arm, when it makes for

sweet friendship and compassion and companionship, when revenge is dead, and one's only enemy lies beyond the utmost bourne that we ourselves know not yet, but hope to attain some day in a worthier manner."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE GRAVE'S GATHERINGS

DIGGING down under the soft ground where the old ashes and logs of the big camp fire lay, Bethune found the man who had left no tracks behind him. The astute Doughboy had raked the fire aside when Bronzewing was in a state of coma, and buried him beside the body of Rosie, whom he shot earlier in the day when Bygrave had gone to the base camp and captured Miss Delamayne. There lay the remains, mostly bones now, with a Winchester bullet through the skull of both man and woman, the point of entry just the same as "Kangaroo" Austen's had been, a mark of similarity of purpose notified at once by Franks to the company.

"*Under the fire!*" Bethune said musingly. "Now no one but a blackfellow would have thought of that. It's just as I said, and have always said: No one but a black fellow could have got away or got the body away without leaving tracks."

"This discovery sets the whole matter right in the eyes of the world at large," Franks averred. "It shows that Austen's unexplained death caused the obstruction in opening the mine, and making it public, as was my intention; so that clears my ward and myself. This man's death and sepulture here keeps it without a flaw in our evidence as to the rights of the case. Doughboy has been a public

benefactor," he continued, as the dead bodies were covered up again. "But as to a 'crowner's 'quest,' our sworn evidence will do, and should be sufficient, as it would seem like sacrilege to move the bodies now."

"We can bring the coroner here and show them to him," Bethune said, "if he requires it. Well, gentlemen, we can go now. Are you satisfied, Levi, that the lights of your injury-making imagination are now authentic, and provable, as far as Miss Delamayne is concerned?"

"I am satisfied, gentlemen, and make my apologies all round," Levi said, with a face aflame, deep contrition in his heart.

"Beyond being yourself the accessory to all the facts that have transpired," put in McLeod, a little angrily, "I could take ye up yet for being absolutely the primal cause of it all Levi. How will ye like that?"

"I haf been kilty of it all der time," almost sobbed Levi, now painfully ashamed of himself. He was not the one to take things quietly.

"I am kilty all through," he kept repeating, until McLeod threw a douche of sympathy over him, which revived him like a May flower.

"Hoots, you only want a native dog's head to your sporrán, my lad," he said. "Ye must learn a little more experience to join the bush crowd, that's all, now that we've drawn the poison fangs of revenge without a just cause from ye. As to being 'kilty,' as you call it, ye really knew no more about the various goings-on about ye than the man in the moon. It's yer fashious way of meddlin' that forced ye into it. You'll do well if ye keep quiet in future, and mind yer own business.

But how about the sun-glints, eh? Dods, *we* didn't find the cause of them. But I expect we were too much bothered with thinking it was some new device of Bygrave's to want to search very much. That's another lesson to ye, Levi, that self, self, self and the results that same self causes to ye, and all of us. It's only that that is at the bottom of all human nature."

"I'll not give my own opinion in," Bethune said. "It's a credit to be beaten by a blackfellow, and a blackfellow only, just as I said. Bushcraft comes ready born to them, the only inheritance by birth the poor beggars have. But how in the world did we not think of looking under the logs and the ashes? Snakes alive, what a trick!"

"Now we can go back under sealed orders, having accomplished our mission," Franks observed. "See, the day is glorious."

"Aye, forward gentlemen," McLeod cried, "these penitents will guard our property here and yonder at Brangal all our lifetime; but as I shall have big gangs of workmen up here shortly, I'll stay at Conroy's Haven. Ye'll not be wanting all the motors when ye go back."

"Nod mine," said Levi. "I'll stay mit you, McLeod. I want to learn some garpendering. May I offer my humble beditions to all and stay to cain pedder manners? Id vill be like some old dimes mit you at Prangal Towns, McLeod, ven you managed it for us."

"I'll be wondering what next mare's nest is coming, for all that" mused McLeod, as he and Levi prepared in Indian file to follow the rest of the party.

"I of a spell to moralize up here shall be very

clad," Levi informed him confidentially, *en route*. "I am of necessity for prains of wisdom to become one of your own race because of a Scotch lassie. Dat may bring to me the native dog's head."

He adjusted his new Glengarry and blew imaginary pibrochs in the air. A pebble brooch mounted in Brangal gold made to order and stuck on the side of his cap, with an enormous Cairngorm in it, attracted McLeod's attention.

"What's the new branch off?" he asked himself, dubiously. Then he said: "Mon, I'll teach ye about our wark up here, if that's all ye're differin' about. But what's your reason for sparkin' yourself that gear?"

"I'm engaged," Levi said, proudly, "to Jessie McGregor. She cave me her bromises true, or is it trews?"

McLeod quivered with laughter.

"She'll wear 'em, ye ken, ye blind deevil. Faith she'll wear 'em. Ye can't take the breeks off a Highlander."

"Ah," said Levi, sighing, "I hope to see the banks of Bonnie Doon, and—and the heather of the Highlands."

"Cast your bonnet on it here, lad. We'll import some. Well, I'm glad. Fusel oil's not in it, in the crack we'll have thegither to-night, nor the stuff we drink our ain health in when the others are gone. Levi, my lad, here's ma hand on it! But after all our trouble, Bygrave's mystery is only half explained. How did he get the terrifying power he wielded until the rifle bullet stopped the springs of it?"

CHAPTER XXX

MCLEOD'S DEDUCTIONS

IT was after the various marriages had been arranged, when the honeymoons fading into the past had welded all the principal performers together again, that the Society of small-talk at Barilla continuously ranged over all the various matters connected with the Levinsteins, the Conroys, the McGregors, the McLeods, hinting sharp things sometimes but with no sting in the bitterest of them now that matters had turned out so well. The worst of them were little better than suppositions all along. The opals at Conroy's Haven were "potch," they said, therefore no good, a matter, like others, which didn't in the least matter to the partners, as they happened to know better.

Conroy's artesian wells, under McLeod's management at Roddyston, the new opal fields, formed ground for countless acres of tillage, irrigated and brook-sided fields, allotments of pasturage and settlement, and a most enterprising and paying establishment sprang up all around their up-country possessions, worked entirely by the originators, shareholders, and employées of the great gold-copper Brangal mines, which had, in their turn, recently changed the former little town of Barilla into a rising metropolis in a

very short time, and people fond of talk found it all very pleasant to jeer a little, especially if they were not shareholders; but a scientific and mining library and laboratory was established at Brangal at just this time, and in it Conroy spent the greater part of the day learning to write and type with his left hand. But on holidays there was a regular exodus to the Arcadia in the interior which increased largely and developed also. A sanatorium for all over-tasked brains and bodies sprang up there, under the base camp, with the conical hills as background, and was utilized by those who required it, even outsiders from other parts of the country being sent there for the sake of the cheerful relaxation and variety of a dry, warm climate, and cheerful, healthy surroundings.

To the partners, from the thousand and one circumstances about them, Bethune's dairy farm sprang into fuller existence than before, and it was even reported in family circles that Conroy once made a cream cheese with his own one arm, being assisted in the old-fashioned old-time style by Mrs. Roddy McGregor before they returned to Brangal again.

Then Franks, with his right-hand man, McLeod, insisted upon building a large public auditorium of two stories at that great mining town, for the benefit of the workers, their wives and children, and on the first occasion of throwing it open, got a clever conjuror up from Brisbane at great expense. McLeod himself was the moving spirit all through this performance, acting as one of the stewards of the meeting, and wearing a great blue rosette as a buttonhole. The performance was largely attended on the top storey of the new

building, in a great room that was intended for concerts or theatricals. McLeod, to bring on a boom in the proceedings, had given his best silk hat to the conjuror, towards the end, who promptly produced various articles and living things out of it, including a guinea pig and two live rabbits. Then the conjuror made the audience laugh enormously by making porridge in the hat, and after it had been tasted by those nearest to the stage, and pronounced excellent by Levi, brought canaries and pigeons from the same receptacle out of its inexhaustible recesses, and finally fired a pistol through it and bashed it out of recognition. However, it was handed back in some mysterious manner safe and sound and better brushed than when McLeod had given it to him. Recitations and songs had formed interim parts of the entertainment, in which some of the merry-making proprietorship joined, including Levi, but the conjuror was so popular that he had a last call at the very end of the programme.

He entered listening, holding his finger up in a warning attitude. People began to listen too, wondering what was the matter. What could the conjuror have heard to make him put his hand up in that manner? They thought of Bygrave and the old days for a brief instant, and did not know it was a still further solution of their troubles in that direction; but it was, and was almost as exciting as if he had himself appeared after all.

For, amid a breathless pause, down the new streets far away, they could hear the bay of a hound coming nearer and nearer, with the questing call of a hunting animal, its deep-tongued music taken up by another and another, until there

was a big, savage pack, apparently, in full cry after something down the street, and seeming to find the scent hotter and hotter, giving tongue in chorus closer and nearer still they came on, until they all jumped suddenly in at the window and chased whatever they were after with a wild baying chorus right under the very feet of the startled, horrified and amazed audience, who all got up on the seats a good deal quicker than anything, whilst some of the ladies screamed aloud and fainted with fright, to find it was nothing after all but a bad scare.

When the sell had been established, in the light of ventriloquism, because it was perfectly impossible for any dogs in the world to jump a storey high and chase their prey amongst the audience, McLeod talked the matter over amongst the principals of the mine during a large supper, and Bygrave, of course, was the subject of his remarks.

"Maybe ye'll remember your little parrot speaking now, Mrs. Conroy. Here's the reason vouchsafed to me to-night. Bygrave got at a family secret or two with his devilish cunning, and just exploited them on his victims in small-talk by animals and birds, and that's my theory, plain enough to us all now. There'll be no wonder at the way he worked upon many of us, when ye fit his own reasonings to the conjuror's ability, as we have just heard it, for, ladies and gentlemen, Bygrave was just as good and wonderful a ventriloquist as the professional we have heard, although he kept his gift secret for his own purposes.

"What with the whisperin's and th' jisperin's

and the cackle and the clack about Bygrave and his doings, ye have been through, all of ye, myself included, we and the witnesses at the big trial—barring the ladies—were just a set of blitherin' idiots, fearing to give full reasons when they might have set the whole case solidly right, but ye've heard the talk since, how he sold his soul to the devil, who was always with him on a black horse, and the rest of it? He was just a clever man, that's all, though mad as a March hare at last, a man of weighty, selfish, sinful passions which drove him to the devil post-haste, a love-sick fool with a vein of mad chivalry in him.

“Beneath his surface lay the gist of iron pride without redemption, pride in his overbearing strength, pride in himself, pride in his voice, pride all over him with a great portion of malice to all who went against him. With his grand voice, his wonderful imitation of birds and animals, his musical talents, people, of whom you and I are but a small quota, put him on a higher pedestal than he deserved, that's all. Now, on my way over here since the end of the performance, not asking you why you didn't tell your mysterious hearings at the Magisterial Court, I got one without enquiry from a man who did not turn up there at the time, for the same particular reasons of his own.

“He came to me solo, this very hour, a creepy-crawly sort of chap named Stanley, looking a gey sight more like a mute at a funeral, or maybe a discharged valet, than a good, hard-working man. Says he, 'I'd be glad if you'd give me a job on the mines, Mr. McLeod.'

“Says I: 'Are you any good at the deep levels?'

“‘No, sir,’ says he. ‘I can shave, keep petty cash or accounts, undertake storekeeping.’”

“‘Not for me,’ thinks I.

So he let on how he had been with a travelling showman named Yerkes, until my questioning made Bygrave spring out of that original in my own mind.

“Yerkes, from this man’s tale, spotted Stanley stealing petty cash and made a big baboon talk to him about it. ‘You’ve taken some of Mr. Yerkes’ marked money! You know you have. I’ve had my eye on you a long time.’ That’s what he told me the baboon roared at him. I shall put him on as a book-duster in the library. He thinks he’s been in Hades, listening to the devil talking out of a baboon’s mouth, and I didn’t just enlighten him, but said it might be D.T. But he’ll be a decent, sober enough sort of man for my purpose, as I’ve got his secret and he can’t go back on me. And he’ll steal no more petty cash; he’s had too big a fright. But I’m glad he was no’ at the concert, as what I learned there concerns ourselves far more than the general public.

“Bygrave made the birds and horses talk to Doughboy, and so gained such great control over him, and held him as a cat’s-paw for his own personal safety. Now what did his horse say to you, Conroy? Perhaps you’ll tell us now, as we are all partners who won’t talk, and you are the principal.”

“‘Judas Iscariot,’ ” returned Conroy, laughing. “But I couldn’t own up to that in Court, could I? It nearly scared me out of my seven senses when I did hear it, and what with his madness and necromancy, I really thought at times I had got

into the hands of His Satanic Majesty himself, the same as Stanley."

"Ye Balaam's Ass!" added McLeod, parenthetically, in a hoarse stage whisper.

THE END

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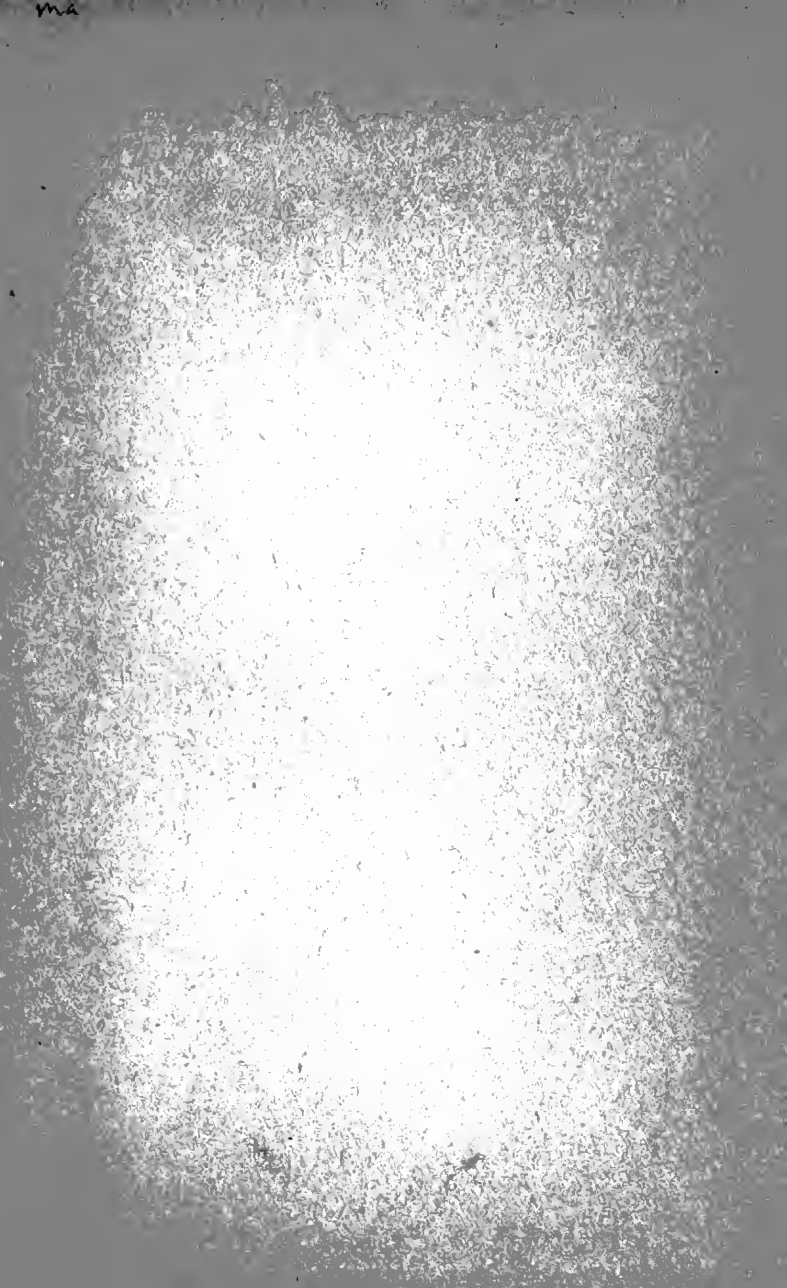
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