



*GOLDEN  
BUCKLES*



*CONRAD H. SAYCE.*



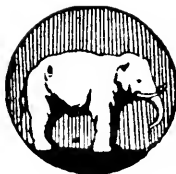
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# GOLDEN BUCKLES





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By CONRAD H. SAYCE



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TO  
EMMELINE SAYCE PIERSON,  
MY FRIEND.



## TO THE READER.

The following pages were written on a horse and cattle station in Central Australia.

My study is a wurley made of broom-bush lashed with green-hide to mulga posts and rails. It is the station "dining-room." Hither come the lowing of yarded cattle, the squeal of frightened horses, the thunder of galloping hoofs, the braying of donkeys, the racket of stock-whips, and the yabber of excited blacks; and, when tin plates are pushed back and pipes well alight, it is here that Bill and Johnny and "old man" Ted tell tales of "when I was a young feller."

My companions are all old bushmen, and their speech is coloured with picturesque and expressive profanity, which is inseparably part of the life they lead. In only this respect have I not been true to my mates. I value the vividness of their phraseology, but know that, away from these great plains, it would give offence. But the men, the scenes, and the life have not been altered, and are told from personal experience.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT.**

The author wishes to record his gratitude to J.H.E.-W., who through 27 years of pioneer station life in Centralia has preserved the culture and bearing of a gentleman. But for his kindness, the following pages might never have been written.



“Where is Australia, singer, do you know?  
These sordid farms and joyless factories,  
Mephitic mines and lanes of pallid woe?  
Those ugly towns and cities such as these,  
With incense sick to all unworthy power,  
And all old sin in full malignant flower?  
No! to her bourn her children still are faring:  
She is a Temple that we are to build:  
For her the ages have been long preparing:  
She is a prophecy to be fulfilled!”

BERNARD O'DOWD.



# GOLDEN BUCKLES

## PART I.

### CHAPTER I.

Ida Hennessy.

Eleven had boomed from the Melbourne Town Hall clock nearly twenty minutes ago, and the last of the late church-goers had hurried along the St. Kilda Road.

Children and old men sat on the lawns and under the trees of the Domain; nursemaids chatted with their cavaliers, many of whom were wearing military uniforms; lovers whispered on the benches, and a few solitary idlers strolled up and down, hardly knowing what to do with themselves, so used were they to shop and office routine.

The asphalt tree-lined road had shed its work-a-day garment of noise, and for once in a while the songs of little birds were heard all the way from Government House to Prince's Bridge.

But no birds sang outside the grim pile of the Barracks. The sentry paced his beat to and fro through the gates, and though he was a young man and good looking, he might not even wave to the nursemaids who kept tantalisingly within sight on the far pavement.

Suddenly he brought his rifle to the salute as two riders passed down the St. Kilda Road. One, to whom the private's salute was directed, bore the stars and crown of a colonel's rank upon his

epaulettes, while his lady companion was dressed in a stylish riding-habit.

Both rode blood horses, which pranced and curvetted at the restraint put upon them, eager to break into a canter, but the gloved hand of the girl was equally master of the bridle-rein as the large sunburnt one of the man, and snatches of conversation passed between them from time to time.

Just past the gates of Government House, both riders instinctively shortened rein, as their mounts' restlessness increased at the sound of hoofs approaching behind them. A young man in civilian dress rode up and passed, turning in his saddle to respond to the lady's greeting. Short as was the sight thus gained, the colonel's eye brightened with appreciation of the superb animal the stranger rode and of the man's ease in the saddle, but jealousy quenched all kindness as he caught the look of pleasure on his companion's face. In answer to his question as to the rider's identity, the girl replied:

"That's Doctor Byrne. He always rides on Sunday morning."

"Do you know him well?"

"Oh, yes. This is the first Sunday we haven't ridden together for ever so long."

"Indeed!"

"Yes," was the reply, and then, becoming conscious of the military man's mood, the girl turned the conversation, asking:

"Did you notice what a lovely horse he was riding?"

Conversation was checked for a time by the sudden determination of both horses to follow the one ahead, and when the riders finally turned down Alexandra Avenue, and let the animals have their way, the mounted doctor was out of sight.

Colonel Gerald Bathwick had recently arrived

back in Australia from Europe. At the outbreak of war, he had been put in charge of one of the first battalions to leave the Commonwealth, and, in the flush of enthusiasm which accompanied the call to arms, he had had little difficulty in developing an almost casual acquaintance with Ida Hennessy into an engagement. He had sailed, and the girl was left, pledged in marriage to a man she hardly knew, and once the dazzle of military splendour was gone, who knows what demands upon her sense of duty were necessary to stifle regret at the step she had taken?

Mrs. Hennessy was frankly glad.

"You know, Edward," she said to her husband, "nothing would please me more than to see dear Ida nicely settled. Her engagement was rather sudden, but it seems so very suitable. Don't you think so?"

"Quite so, quite so. Capital fellow. Knows a good horse when he sees one, but's damnably weak on the putting green; damnably weak. Why, I was telling Major Smithson only last Thursday——"

"I'm glad you like him," his wife broke in. "You know, I was so afraid dear Ida was going to be wild. But there's nothing like being engaged young, is there?"

"Jove, no! You're right, Maud; quite right. Wild, you were saying. She rides a pretty loose rein now, I think. Gad! they'll be a pair when they're well mounted. Wild, eh!"

"I didn't mean wild in that way, Edward. I've never forgotten what happened on the beach that awful day, and I never shall."

The incident which had taken such a tenacious grip of the good lady's memory occurred when Ida was twelve, and was probably her last bid for freedom before her admittance to a "very exclu-

sive" private school doomed her to a life of respectability.

The Hennessys had taken a house at Mornington for the summer months, and on this particular day there was a large garden party on the beach in front of the house. Afternoon tea had been served, and the children had gone off on their ponies with a nurse to bathe. Ida had been troublesome in the water, and the nurse's rebukes had only made her worse, till the spirit of revolt rose beyond control. As the nurse was rubbing her down and scolding her at the same time, the child chanced to look in the direction of the garden party. The well dressed nonentities suddenly appeared in a new light to her. With a bound, she knocked the nurse over, and ran towards her pony. Quickly unhitching the bridle, she sprang on the animal's bare back and galloped madly across the sands towards the party, leaving the horrified nurse shrieking, "Miss Ida! Miss Ida! You've got nothing on!"

Right through the crowd she galloped, wheeled and back again, her bare heels kicking the pony's flanks, and her wet hair streaming behind her.

That night, after having sent Ida to bed in disgrace, her mother crept upstairs and listened at her daughter's door. Softly opening it, she called, "Are you awake, Ida?"

No answer.

Tip-toeing to the bedside, she saw her child wide awake, staring at the window.

"Ida, why didn't you answer me? Why are you such a naughty girl?"

Still no answer.

"Why ever did you behave like that this afternoon, Ida? I can't understand it."

"Oh," came a tired voice from the bed, "I just wondered what God would do; and," she con-

tinued, as if disappointed at the non-success of an experiment, "and He didn't do anything."

Never again had she tried for herself to see what God would do. Her training robbed her of such curiosity, and it needed a very strong stimulus to make her break the rules which applied equally to gods and men.

## CHAPTER II.

## Doctor Byrne.

Some months after the departure of Colonel Bathwick, there arrived on the scenes, just the man who could supply that stimulus. Behind the spare, athletic figure of James Tynan Byrne, with his brown hair and keen, cold eyes, the most casual observer would have suspected an unusual personality. His father, an Edinburgh-trained surgeon, had shown the attitude of his mind in a scene which has become historic in the annals of his University. Dr. Byrne, senior, was giving a course of operating theatre demonstrations at the time when a religious revival mission was occupying people's thoughts. Everyone was thinking of his soul, and the mission bid fair to be a huge success, when one day the doctor looked up from the operating slab and said quietly, "Gentlemen, I see no soul here. I must refer the body to the revivalists."

His son was also an Edinburgh-trained surgeon, having gone home to matriculate into his father's University. Just after completing his course, he received the following letter from Australia, together with others confirming the news of his father's death:

"Dear Jim," it ran, "by the time this reaches you, the old clock will have run down. My affairs are in the hands of Messrs. Todd, Son, and Nephews, who will confirm the news that you are a rich man."

Here followed details of successful dealing in shares. Then the letter went on:

"I have known of this for years, but did not wish to hamper your training, as nothing clogs



the wheels of ambition like wealth. Luckily, you will never have to doctor up the imaginary ailments of fussy old men and women, as I have done, for a fee. Every branch of medical and surgical research is open to you, and you have the means to enter which you will.

"It is usual in such cases to write 'God bless you,' and to drop a tear to show that the writer doesn't believe He will. Instead of that, I hand on what has been the finding of my life: the only God is the mind of man; it is capable of being omnipotent and omniscient, and is apprehended by study, not by faith.

"So, now that you have all the theology necessary to salvation, I will say good-bye.

"Your affectionate father,

"Donald Tynan Byrne."

With his father's wealth, James also inherited his almost cynically analytical mind, which, however, was saved from utter coldness, by a temperament gained from his mother, who died so young that the doctor did not remember her. She was Irish, a lover of horses, of music, painting, and literature, and the man who had dissected a body to find a soul, gave the lie to his own materialism by the tender passion with which he loved his wife. With a capacity for deep emotion which he kept severely under control, young Doctor Byrne came into the circle in which Ida Hennessy moved as an impersonal spectator of life.

In the small hours of the morning following a dance at which Dr. Byrne, at that time almost a stranger, had markedly preferred the company of Ida to that of any other, two girls discussed him as they prepared for sleep.

"My dear," said one, as she coiled up her hair for the night, "did you notice Ida Hennessy? She

had three dances, one after the other, with that man in civilian dress."

"Don't you know who that was? That's Doctor Byrne."

"Never heard of him. But his being a doctor does make a difference."

"Yes, dear, of course it does;" and instinctively each girl drew her gown closer with a delighted little shiver. Few things please a girl of this sort more than the presence of a doctor or a soldier.

"It makes you feel so delightfully naughty." Soldiers and doctors! Just as in ancient Rome it was the women who kept open the Arena, so to-day war would be robbed of all its romance but for the adulation of women. As a sex they are bloodthirsty, and failing soldiers, they dance with doctors.

"Well, even if he is a doctor, I don't see why she should keep him all to herself. She's engaged, too. Why, I wasn't even introduced."

In spite of the condemnation of her friends, Ida continued to see more and more of Doctor Byrne, and on the ground of a mutual love of horses, a firm friendship sprang up between them, which was in danger of becoming something more intimate, when news came of the death of Colonel Bathwick.

Why the young man with the keen eyes had singled out Ida Hennessy, it would be impossible to say. The reason lay as deeply hidden as their two natures. Perhaps her dark hair and eyes, and the sight of her riding along Alexander Avenue one Sunday morning, may have reminded him of a photograph of his mother; perhaps not. Anyhow, when his eyes appraised her, he was conscious of little inward stirrings that had never come under his microscope or dissecting knife, and which were so desirable that he yielded to them;

and that was the reason for the three successive dances which Ida's friend so bitterly complained of. And Ida? Byrne's presence troubled her. He had broken the calm, the matter-of-course habits of her mind. Happenings that had hitherto been accepted without question now appealed to her: dawn, the song of birds, the colour and perfume of flowers, and once, when she found a sparrow with a broken wing, she cried over it, and would have appealed to her doctor friend for help, had it not died too soon.

Whether or not she would have ultimately exchanged the betrothal ring of the dead soldier for one which Byrne might give her, will never be known, for while he was quietly waiting till the tight, self-centred bud of Ida's life should open into the beautiful flower that he knew was only waiting for the sun—his sun, as he hoped—news came that Colonel Bathwick was not dead, but a prisoner in Germany; and, later, that an exchange had been made, and that he was on his way back to Australia.

So the young doctor's ring was not placed on her finger, and she settled back into the path which others called her duty, and thought herself happy because they told her so. A breath of spring had come before its time; winter claimed her again.

## CHAPTER III.

## Golden Buckles.

About half-way along the Avenue, the riders were compelled to draw rein, for some people were crossing the road from the Botanic Gardens. Ida's breath was coming in short gasps, her cheeks were flushed, and her smile of pleasure after the gallop made her look so charming that her fiance's cold brain glowed for a moment at the thought that such a glorious girl was his. But, chancing to look ahead, he caught sight of Dr. Byrne returning along the tan, and at once all sentiment was focussed in a desire to flaunt his possession before this man, who, as he had heard, would have forestalled him had he not returned when he did.

"I'd like to meet your friend," he said, turning to the girl.

"Certainly," she answered, and, as the young doctor came level and was about to pass, she hailed him.

He pulled in his horse beside the other two, and sat there, turning in the saddle with his hand on the animal's rump.

"I want to introduce you to Colonel Bathwick. Gerald, this is my friend, Dr. Byrne."

The men shook hands, and if to either or both of them it was like the preliminary to a duel, there was no sign of it on their faces. Casual questions were asked and answered, and in response to Miss Hennessy's appeal, "Won't you ride a little way with us, Dr. Byrne?" the young man turned his mount, and the three riders proceeded at a walking pace towards Anderson's

Bridge, and up the hill to the right till they came to the white gates on to Domain Road.

"Colonel Bathwick is taking lunch with us. If you have no prior engagement, perhaps you would join us," suggested Miss Hennessy to the doctor.

"Thank you. No engagement could be prior to your invitation. I should like to come very much."

The answer was given with more warmth than the jealous Colonel liked, and as they walked on up Domain Road, he turned the conversation to the subject of horses.

"That's a fine animal you have there, doctor," he remarked.

"Yes," was the reply, and the owner patted the glossy bay neck.

"What is he?"

"He's one of Zubeir's foals; the Arab stallion that Sir James Beaucout sold a few years ago, you remember."

"Yes, I remember. But how did you manage to get hold of it? I understand that Sir James Beaucout's stock is very difficult to obtain."

For answer, Dr. Byrne leant over and pointed to the brand on the near-side shoulder: "X.T.X." "He's a Territory horse," he said. "I bought him in the Dukeland Park sale yards a couple of years ago. By his size I should say that his mother was one of those stock mares for which the back stations are famous."

"You're a lucky man," commented the colonel. "Isn't he, Ida?"

"Yes, indeed. And he's lovely to ride," replied the girl, enthusiastically. "Dr. Byrne and I often used to exchange mounts, didn't we, Jim?"

Bathwick looked round suddenly at the girl as she referred to her friend as "Jim." He raised his eyebrows in astonishment, and his fiancee answered, to explain her blushing confusion: "I

beg your pardon, Gerald, but Dr. Byrne and I know one another so well."

"So I see," he answered, and the light laugh which accompanied the remark was not wholly pleasant.

"You've got harness worthy of the horse," said the military man, breaking the awkward silence that ensued. "What's that engraving on the buckles?"

He indicated the cheek-strap buckles which were made of gold with the bottom bar wide enough to bear a coat-of-arms.

"Oh," laughed the young man, "that's a picture my great, great, great and few more used to wear on his shield. You know," he added, "we're all either robbers or descended from them." Then, quite suddenly, his voice became serious, and he said gravely, "It's an Irish coat of-arms. My mother was Irish. She used to ride with those buckles on her bridle."

Talking thus, they reached the house and handed their horses to a groom. Dr. Byrne seemed more at home than was the Colonel, but the latter noticed with satisfaction that his own reception was that of a returned member of the family, whereas the parents' demeanour towards the younger man was never more intimate than that accorded to a friend.

After lunch, Dr. Byrne pleaded an engagement, and went out to the stables. Colonel Bathwick followed, and for a few minutes the two men were together.

All the time that his tongue had been uttering the pleasing nothings that make up meal-time talk, the keen brain of the scientist had been analysing the soldier and his lady-love's attitude towards him, and he had come to the conclusion that Ida Hennessy was giving up what might have developed into love, solely from a mistaken sense

of duty. The two were to be married in a week, and Dr. Byrne knew he had not even a fighting chance of winning the girl's hand. Man-like, he had not realised how much he cared for the girl till all chance of possessing her had gone, yet he bowed to the inevitable, and his words had no lurking barb as he turned to his companion and said:

"I suppose you're a bit fed up with public congratulations on your safe arrival back in Australia. I want to add a personal one on the event of your marriage. My friendship with Miss Hennessy enables me to know that you are a fortunate man. No doubt she is equally to be congratulated."

"Thanks. Thanks. It's good of you. I hope your friendship with Ida will not be discontinued, and that it will be extended to me. . . . By the way," he continued, after the pause that succeeded his words; "By the way, may I talk shop for a moment or two? I should so much like to see you professionally some time next week. Could it be arranged?"

"Oh yes, I think so. I'm mostly doing research work, and could more or less suit you as regards time."

"One day is as good as another to me," the Colonel assured him, "and almost any time. The afternoon preferably."

"Right. I'll ring you up. The St. Kilda Road Barracks, I suppose?"

"Yes. If I'm not in, leave a message."

Meanwhile, the groom had led the horse out and had saddled up. Byrne ran his fingers under the girth, and after a few caresses and kind words, mounted lightly.

"I'll ring you up to-morrow," he said, as he turned out of the yard. "Good-bye."

## CHAPTER IV.,

## A Doctor's Consulting Room.

James Tynan Byrne, M.D., was not a regular medical practitioner. After passing first in his year at Edinburgh, he had studied for a time in Germany, but returned to Australia at the outbreak of war, narrowly escaping internment. Since then he had given himself almost exclusively to research, and was usually to be found in his laboratory at the top of Collins Street, investigating the action of poisons on the human system, and their various antidotes. In the short time since his return, he had established a name as an authority on his subject, and only very occasionally treated a private patient.

On Monday, as arranged, he had telephoned to the Barracks, making an appointment with Colonel Bathwick for 3 o'clock next day, and now, on the Tuesday afternoon preceding the marriage of Ida Hennessy on the Saturday, he was waiting in his sitting room for the bridegroom-elect.

A motor car drew up at the kerb outside, the bell rang, and in a few minutes his visitor was entering the room.

"It's awfully good of you to see me, Dr. Byrne," he began, taking the proffered chair. "It was not till after I made the appointment that I learnt you are not a regular practitioner. Perhaps you would rather not be bothered with my case."

"On the contrary," smiled the young man, "I shall be delighted to offer you any advice I can. Where and what is the trouble?"

For a quarter of an hour the conversation became more and more intimately personal. A doctor's consulting room is as truly a confessional



as places more usually known by that name, and if the military commander had any idea that he could obtain from the young scientist the advice he needed without an exposure of incidents in his private life which he would rather have left hidden, he was completely disillusioned. Consequently Colonel Bathwick wore rather a sheepish expression when he was left alone for a few minutes, while the specialist went into the laboratory for a few tests.

When Dr. Byrne returned, his face was professionally non-committal.

"You are to be married next Saturday, I understand?" he remarked.

"Yes, Saturday, the fifth."

"H'm!"

This irritated the Colonel. "I—I don't understand," he blurted. "What has my marriage to do with the subject in hand?"

"A great deal."

"What in the devil d'you mean?"

"I mean," said the doctor, tapping a small memorandum card which he held in his hand, "I mean—or rather the result of my tests means, that you ought not to be married on Saturday."

"Oughtn't—to be married!" The Colonel rose to his feet. He was scared, but he tried to hide it from his companion's clear, grey eyes. "Look here, doctor! A joke's a joke. But don't take this one too far. It's rather a serious matter to treat lightly."

"I know it is. A very serious matter. That's why I say that you ought not to be married on Saturday."

"Rubbish!" retorted the Colonel. "I know what's wrong with me as well as you do. Known it for years. I've always taken my pleasure

where I found it, as any other sensible man would do. What I came for was physic, not platitudes."

"You came to me for advice, and I've given it to the best of my ability," returned the doctor calmly.

"Medical advice, man! Medical advice was what I came for. It's not part of a doctor's job to tell a man he ought or ought not to marry."

"On the contrary, I consider it one of his most important duties."

Doctor Byrne looked straight into the flushed face of his visitor, and saw anger give place to cunning.

"You're bluffing, Byrne, that's what you're doing. You can't put off my marriage as easily as that."

His companion did not answer, but quietly tapped the memorandum card. The Colonel tried again.

"Why, dash it all, man. I'm years older than you. I've known chaps absolutely—"

"Don't go into details," broke in the doctor. "It's not necessary."

"—and yet they've been fixed up and got married."

"The more's the pity," remarked the young man.

There was silence for a few minutes, then Colonel Bathwick altered his tactics.

"Assuming you're right, how long would it be before I could marry? According to your idea, I mean."

"Six months or a year. It's difficult to be exact."

His visitor laughed. "And in the meantime you'd step in and carry off the blushing bride, eh?"

Doctor Byrne's patience showed signs of giving way. "We'll confine ourselves strictly to the point," he said sharply, "which is that you must not marry in your present condition."

"Must! Must! I tell you, young man, it's a long time since anyone's dared to say 'must' to me."

"I'll put it stronger if you like. You shall not marry."

"How in the devil will you prevent it?"

The doctor's finger tapped the card.

"You'd give me away, eh?"

"I'd save an innocent girl from being given away, if that's what you mean."

Colonel Bathwick laughed again, a fierce animal laugh..

"Why, you are a young 'un, and no mistake. They'd see through you in a jiffey. They know you're after the girl. . . . I could get a clean doctor's bill in half-an-hour if I wanted to."

"I'm sorry to say that I believe you could."

Dr. Byrne walked to the window and looked out, but he did not see the area wall opposite, nor the little strip of sky above the tall building. He was occupied with thoughts which he doubted his ability to hide from his visitor. At last he turned.

"I know you could get a clean bill," he said quietly. "It would be a false one, and would neither cure you nor safeguard your wife. . . . But I happen even now to be experimenting with an antidote that will counteract the poison in three days if you follow my instructions."

"Now you're talking sense," exclaimed the patient, unable to restrain a sigh of relief.

"Do you agree to carry out the prescription?"

"Of course I do. What d'you think I came here

for? Why in the devil couldn't you come to the point straight away? Three days, you said?"

"Yes. In three days there will be no cause to fear for your wife's safety."

"You put it in a deuced unpleasant way, but I'm obliged to you. When does the treatment start. To-day's Tuesday, you know."

"I'll make up the antidote and let you have it with full instructions before noon to-morrow. Good-bye."

"Thank you. Good-bye"; and with a formal hand-shake the men parted.

## CHAPTER V.

## A Lady's Boudoir.

Dr. Byrne did not leave his laboratory that night. During the few minutes in which he had looked out of the window before telling Colonel Bathwick of his discovery, he had decided he must leave Melbourne till after the day of Ida Hennessy's wedding. So he quietly brought some of his experiments to a stage where he could leave them without losing the result of past work, and made up his notes to date. He indulged in no heroics; yet beneath that studious non-committal face was a mind made up to the supremest sacrifice of which it was capable. When the grey morning light was paling the electric bulbs, he collected those books in which were the results of his researches, destroyed one or two others, and set his laboratory to rights, among other things re-labelling several bottles. A few days later, when strangers broke into his sanctum, they found that some of these labels were wrong. Had the young man's clear mind failed under the strain? Perhaps so.

When everything was put away in its place, Dr. Byrne turned his attention to the Colonel's prescription. From a filing cabinet, he took out the memorandum card referring to his recent patient, and a plain one on which he wrote the names and quantities of the drugs he prescribed. Finally he mixed the medicine and bottled it. Those strangers who noticed the mis-labelling, noticed also that the doctor had occasion to use one of the wrongly named bottles. Had they been familiar with the methodical habits of the young man, they would also have remarked that, contrary

to his wont, he left on the dispensing table, not only the balances, bottles, and test-tubes which he used for mixing Colonel Bathwick's medicine, but the two memorandum cards as well. He did this purposely.

Still in pursuance of his determination to leave Melbourne, Dr. Byrne went to his rooms, and after breakfast, packed a travelling bag. Later in the morning he paid a visit to his solicitors, with whom he arranged some money matters and left his manuscript books for safe keeping.

On coming out of the legal offices, he looked towards the Town Hall; it was nearly half-past ten. Indecision was a weakness which the young man despised, but now he found himself a prey to it. Twice he opened his bag to see if the medicine bottle was there, and twice compared his watch with the Town Hall clock. He was ready to leave Melbourne; everything was in order; he could easily kill time at the Club till 4.30, when the Adelaide Express left Spencer Street. Why not run down to the Barracks, leave the medicine, and cut adrift? Or why not send a Club messenger with the medicine? Still he hesitated. Finally he jumped on a Toorak tram and was taken past the Barracks and round the curve into Domain Road. He would say good-bye to Miss Hennessy before he went away.

Ida received him in her own little sitting-room. Byrne had been there before, but now that he was going away, it seemed to him as if nothing could be more sweet and dainty than that room. But when Ida herself appeared, dressed in a pretty negligé, he knew that the owner was more charming than anything she could possibly possess.

"Why, Jim!" she exclaimed. "Whatever brings you here so early?"

"Early!" he replied. "Why, it's nearly eleven."

"I don't believe you," she laughed. "See, I've

only just got out of bed. . . . But anyhow, won't you sit down?"

As he looked at her, the young man knew that she must have risen an hour ago, for in no less time could the elaborate simplicity of her fragrant dishabille be achieved. He knew also how charming such little untruths can be, if the lips which utter them be as desirable as hers. What he had to say seemed like crushing a frail flower.

"I'd rather stand," he said, in reply to her invitation. "I've come to say good-bye."

"To say good-bye! You're not going away, Jim, are you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know. A good long way, I think."

"And you won't be at my wedding?"

"Not at your wedding with Colonel Bathwick."

There was a minute or two's silence, broken by Ida's entreaty.

"Jim, I do want you to stay. Won't you—for my sake?"

Byrne saw the girl was frightened, and drew his own conclusions—correct ones.

"Ida," he said earnestly, "I'll stay if you ask me, but not to see you marry Colonel Bathwick."

"Why?"

Dr. Byrne sat down. Somehow he felt he could keep himself under control more easily if he had the support of a chair, and he had decided that emotion must play no part in this interview.

"Ida," he began, "we've been friends now for a couple of years, but it's not only as your friend that I will explain why I don't want you to marry Colonel Bathwick. Will you listen?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, let's get rid of the sentimental side first. Interpret love in whatever way you like, you don't love that man. In our profession we learn to

diagnose mental states as correctly as physical ones; in fact the latter are often the direct result of the former, so I know I am right when I say you are marrying Colonel Bathwick merely from a sense of duty."

"Duty?" broke in the girl. "Oh, Jim! how can you say such a horrid thing?"

Byrne held up his hand to check her. "Yes, duty. You were only a girl of 19 when war broke out, and were carried away by the sentiment of the hour. You would have become engaged to almost any decent military man then, and have lived to rue it as you do now. Why, you know absolutely nothing about Colonel Bathwick.

. . . I leave you to imagine what a marriage founded on a mistaken sense of duty will lead to."

"Doctor Byrne!" exclaimed Miss Hennessy indignantly, "please don't continue if that's the sort of thing you're going to say. I'm marrying a man whom I have a great admiration for."

"But your admiration will fall like a house of cards, Ida. You simply admire his uniform and what it stands for. You know nothing about him as a man."

"What in the world do you mean? Surely I know him much better than you do."

"No, Ida, you don't. I know all about him that I care to know, and that has shown me clearly that you shouldn't marry him."

"Jim! Jim!" exclaimed the girl in evident distress. "I thought we were friends. Whatever makes you want to hurt me by saying such terrible things? Why shouldn't I marry the man I—I—so much admire?"

Byrne smiled as a man might smile who is on the rack, and who knows that his control is proof against any torture.

"I'm awfully glad you stammered at that word, Ida," he said. "I want very much to be your friend,



especially now, and that's why I've come to see you. . . . Now, will you let me talk to you like a doctor for a minute or two without interrupting? . . . It's not easy, I assure you."

"I'll promise not to interrupt," she said.

"Well, this is what I want to say. Colonel Bathwick came to see me professionally yesterday afternoon. Doctors are sometimes mistaken, but it was impossible to be so in this case. He is not nearly as well as he looks. In fact, he is very ill. If you marry one another you will be sure to catch the illness from him. I told him all about it, and he quite understands, but he wouldn't listen to the idea of putting off his marriage."

"But couldn't you cure him? You're so clever, you know. I'm sure you could if you really tried."

"It would take a long time, Ida. More than a year, perhaps. And he says he won't wait."

"Of course he won't."

"But, Ida, I'm thinking of you."

If there had ever been the slightest chance of Ida consenting to postpone her marriage, that sentence banished it.

"You want me to disappoint Gerald just simply to save myself?" she exclaimed indignantly. "If you were really my friend, you wouldn't insult me by suggesting such a thing. When I think of all he's been through, I feel as though I would do anything to make him happy. And"—her indignation found vent in tears—"and I don't think it's at all kind of you to tell me all these horrid things."

Doctor Byrne rose from his chair and reached for his hand-bag.

"I'm awfully sorry if I've hurt you, Ida," he said. "Some day you'll know I really did try to be your friend. . . . Now please don't cry. . . . Aren't you going to say good-bye to me?"

She raised her tearful eyes and saw that he was standing ready to go.

"Jim! Jim!" she cried in a broken voice. "I don't want you to go. You musn't leave me. I want you at . . . when . . . when . . . I'm married." The last words came with a jerk. "Oh, Jim! You will, won't you. Promise me you will."

She stretched out her arms to the man she could so easily have loved. He took one of her hands in both of his, and hesitated. Then he said, quietly, "Alright, Ida. I promise." But the wedding which he was thinking of was not the one with Colonel Bathwick.

Dr. Byrne's mind was now fully made up. His reputation as a scientific man, his career, perhaps even his life, weighed as nothing against his determination to save Ida Hennessy from her own misguided sense of duty. He decided to murder Colonel Bathwick. It is an ugly word, yet the young man was a prey to no disturbing emotion as he walked quietly to the Barracks and handed in the fatal dose. He was convinced that the deed was just, and this conviction robbed it of any repugnance, and entirely freed his mind from any chance of future remorse.

The die was cast. He lunched at his Club for the last time, settled a few outstanding accounts, and then caught the interstate express for Adelaide.

## PART II.

## CHAPTER VI.

## Oodnadatta.

Some days later, a group of passengers stood on platform 11 of the Adelaide Railway Station and watched the North train back in. At that early hour, there were not many women in the crowd, and the few exceptions bore the weather marks of a hotter sun and a sterner life than that of the southern city. Some of the men were evidently bound for the suburbs, others would alight at one or other of the inside farming stations, whilst a small group, who bundled their luggage into compartments near together, were returning to the Far North.

No peculiarity of dress or manner marked them out, and if their conversation was principally about horses and cattle, and was strongly flavored with profanity, it was not apparent to the passer-by. An Australian bushman might bring a mob of cattle from north-west Queensland, through perils by drought or flood, starvation, accident, the ill-will of natives, or the countless dangers that ambush "the road"; he might daily face and conquer death, yet when his cattle are trucked and he himself "off to town" with them, he is in no way different in appearance from his fellow passengers. Of such dogged, unassuming, practical stock the Australian Nation is being made.

"Excuse me, could I put my swag up there?"

The question was asked by a young man as he entered one of the compartments of the men from the North, and hoisted his bundle into the rack.

"Right you are, mate, plenty of room," was the answer. The newcomer sat down.

It was Dr. Byrne, or, as the label that hung over the rack above his head declared, James Tynan, passenger to Oodnadatta. He had attempted no disguise save that given by clothes more suitable for his destination than those in which he left Melbourne, and instead of a travelling bag, his belongings were rolled in a couple of grey blankets and a chemical-duck camp sheet fastened with swag straps.

As the train steamed out of Adelaide Station and ran quickly through the suburbs and out into the country, he sat back and read a newspaper account of the death of Colonel Bathwick and the events arising from it.

Out of the mass of journalistic jargon, these facts emerged: Death was proved to be due to a certain poison, and an analysis of the contents of the bottle of medicine bearing Dr. Byrne's signature, showed that they contained that poison. From the death chamber to the laboratory was only a step, and at once what the newspaper chose to call "the mystery" was explained; the prescription, the balances, and test-tubes which still contained traces of the deadly drug, and finally the mis-named bottles, all clearly showed that the young scientist had made a fatal blunder. Instead of a health-giving antidote, Colonel Bathwick had received from his doctor a death-dealing poison.

Tynan smiled when he noticed that no mention was made of the terrible disease from which the patient was suffering. It was clear that powerful influences had been at work to suppress that part of the story. Powerful influences indeed! for, lest the real reason for the so-called "accident" should be used in defence, the whole matter had been kept out of the Courts.

"The name of Byrne," so ran a letter from a

prominent doctor, "a name, honorably famous in Australian scientific circles, has been struck off the medical rolls, and it is with deep regret that the faculty closes its doors upon one so gifted and giving promise of such a brilliant future, yet one who has been guilty of such criminal negligence."

In another column he read: "Touching reference was made by the Archbishop in his sermon to the fact of the deceased's approaching marriage. Truly 'In the midst of life we are in death!' This paper adds its sympathy to that already expressed. . . ."

Tynan crumpled the paper in exasperation and looked out of the window. "Touching reference," he thought. "I wonder if the old buffer would have been so touching if he had known that the scoundrel was killed to prevent him committing a dastardly crime."

At that moment the train rushed past a group of workmen, who shouted to the passengers. "Paper! Paper!"

"Here goes," said the young man aloud, as he tossed the newspaper on the line, adding to himself: "That's the last of James Tynan Byrne, M.D."

At Terowie they changed to the narrow gauge line and sped on through less and less populated country to Quorn, where Tynan was glad of a good meal and a comfortable bed.

Next day all signs of settlement were left behind save the iron buildings at the sidings, with perhaps a grog shanty not far away. Even these signs of civilisation became gradually fewer and further apart; the train throbbed across hundreds of miles of unfenced country flanked by the gaunt slopes of Flinders Range to the east and the hills around Lake Torrens to the west, to Hergott Springs, where the traveller first feels the romance of the Far North, for Hergott Springs is the

terminus of the great overland tracks to Queensland and up the east side of the salt lake, Eyre.

At the end of the third day from Adelaide, as the sun was setting in unveiled pomp, the engine's warning whistle roused the few remaining passengers, and Tynan, looking out of the carriage window, saw the scattered lights of Oodnadatta.

An unmade street on each side of the railway and telegraph office, an hotel, three stores, a school, and perhaps a score of houses; such is Oodnadatta, the metropolis of the Far North. Yet through that telegraph office throbs the news of the Eastern Hemisphere, that rough hotel sometimes entertains men owning thousands of square miles of country on which run cattle almost without number, and from that little school young men who are to be the sires of the coming nation go out to the far back places of Central Australia.

In back-country townships, while the presence of a stranger is at once noted and becomes a subject of conversation in surroundings where such subjects are rare, the object of interest is never made to feel awkward, so that, as Tynan sat on the bench outside the Transcontinental Hotel the morning after his arrival, he was apparently accepted as part of the place.

He watched a string of camels file into the station yard, kneel, and with many groans of protest receive their load. Later in the day he saw them stagger to their feet again and disdainfully file away in charge of a white man and a black-fellow. It was His Majesty's Great North Mail. A woman drove in with a 4-horse buggy followed by a cavalcade of loose horses shepherded by two blacks. He learnt, to his surprise, that she had been three weeks on the road; what was to Tynan an adventure, was accepted by the woman with more unconcern than accompanies many a city lady's shopping. In the afternoon he saw a string

of thirty camels tied nose to crupper, each carrying two little bags of wolfram from a field 600 miles north. He was fascinated by it all: the sense of vast distances conquered, of hardihood becoming routine, of an outlook unbounded by any horizon; these, and also the lounging men in white suits who seemed possessed of unlimited leisure, the blacks who lived in camps outside the township boundary, the tall dignified Afghans who did most of the camel carting, the spirit of prosperous goodwill which pervaded everything, and especially the yellow sun-drenched plains which surrounded the township on every side and stretched away to the northern horizon which beckoned to him so alluringly.

And if, during that day, he thought of Ida Hennessy, it was as a scientist might think of the action of a stimulant on an organism. Sentiment had played its part; he wanted the controlling effect of action.

## CHAPTER VII.

Tom Lawson.

Towards evening, a man rode down the main street from the north, dismounted at the hotel verandah, and went inside for a drink. The horse, a dark bay, was a typical stock-horse, bigly made, short in the back and well coupled, deep-chested, and with strong shapely legs. As Tynan was idly admiring it, he suddenly started with amazement. On the near-side shoulder was the brand X.T.X. With a strange feeling of friendship, he went up and laid his hand on the animal's wither and stroked the shoulder to make sure of the brand. As he did so the owner came out and looked at him in surprise.

"I beg your pardon," said Tynan, smiling, "but I could hardly believe my eyes."

"Why! What's wrong with the horse?"

"It's not the horse, it's the brand," answered Tynan. "A friend of mine in town had a horse with that brand on. I used to ride him, so the brand's familiar."

"Oh," answered the stockman, in a tone which implied that he didn't see much in a brand to cause surprise. "You'll see a couple of hundred of them to-morrow morning. I've got a mob at the Angle Pole now, all X.T.X." Saying which, he mounted, and with a "Good-day," rode off.

On inquiry, Tynan augmented the stranger's scanty information, and found that soon after daylight, the horses would water at the troughs behind the town and be yarded, and would be trucked and sent away before six the same day.

Next morning Tynan was at the troughs early, and, knowing something of the ways of horses, he



stood behind the storage tank so as not to frighten the animals as they came in. Presently a vague tint of brown came into the bright sky between two clumps of mulga on the northern horizon, so faint that if he had not been watching, Tynan would never have noticed it. It grew higher and broader and more dense, till presently the trees in the distance were blotted out. Then, far carried on the keen air, came a faint report—a pistol or a whip; then more reports, and, like an organ accompaniment, the low rumble of hoofs. Indistinct forms broke now and again from the front of the moving cloud of dust, and on the outskirts, other forms rushed hither and thither, and it was from them there came the staccato music of the whips. The horses were coming!

Suddenly from the distant dust and noise, a horseman galloped towards the troughs, wheeled his horse round them to see that everything was right, and drew rein. For a couple of minutes he watched the ears of his drinking horse as they moved each time the animal swallowed, then the man looked up and caught sight of Tynan.

“Good-day,” he said. “You here? Come to see the horses? Keep well behind that tank; they’re as scared as scalded cats.”

And he was off, taking up a position away from the troughs, ready for any emergency.

The horses were evidently used to troughs, for they came straight in, cut up into lots of about fifty, which were all the troughs could accommodate at one time. Tynan noticed that out of the whole mob there were not more than ten of the type he had ridden in Melbourne, and not one of these showed the same breeding. They were nuggetty, medium-sized geldings for the most part, with slightly feathered legs and showing distinct

signs of Clydesdale blood. Just the type, as he found out later, for the military market.

But though he was disappointed at not seeing more roadsters, his heart went out to them all. They were horses, and the X.T.X. brand formed a link of association. As they walked away, he envied even the blackfellows who rode so easily behind the mob.

Tynan watched them shepherded towards the yards till the leaders were within the wing. These yards, used for probably the wildest cattle in the Commonwealth, are built right against the main line, and the young man was soon to see the folly of this. With nervous haste, ready to fly at a moment's notice, the mob was working in, when there came a toot! toot! from the shunting-yard, followed by a rush of wheels and the crash of trucks one into another.

The stockman and boys wheeled like a flash to enlarge the circle, hoping the frightened horses would quieten if they were given more space, but another series of toots completed the mischief. With a wild rush which nothing could check, the horses broke from the yards and dashed for the open country. In vain did the mounted men try to turn the lead; brumbies were in the mob, as one boy learnt to his cost, for, managing to gain a place ahead of the fugitives, the rider was overturned by the mad charge, for a galloping brumby, unlike other horses, will never turn. The stampede went right across the plains to the west of Oodnadatta, till the mob was finally rounded up and held in the scattered mulga of a dry creek six miles away.

Tynan met the stockman returning from the creek about an hour later.

"Got them all?" he asked.

"Yes, I've got the blighters. Did you see the break?"

"Yes, I saw it."

"What did you think of it? Did you ever in all your born natural see such a thing as that blasted yard? Stuck bang up against the line. It'd be all very well down country with 'Mary-had-a-little-lamb' and 'Gee-up-Dobbin' sort of cattle, but they're as wild as mosquitoes up here. It's touch and go every time a hoof goes through those gates. . . . They'll take some stuffing out of us to-night, or I'm a Chinaman."

"Are you short-handed?" asked Tynan.

"Yes. My mate's tanking up at the pub. Silly fool! He's going down on the special. The nigger that got chucked won't be much good. We'll manage, though, somehow."

"Could I give you a hand?"

Keen eyes looked into ones equally keen, and the men liked one another.

"Not used to the job, are you?"

"No, but I can ride."

The stockman shook his head. "Thanks for the offer," he said, "but it wouldn't do. It's not work for a new chum. . . . But I tell you what I would be glad of. If you would give me a hand to truck them. . . . Are you staying at the pub?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you've nothing better to do, I'd be glad if you'd help. I reckon to tail the mob till about three, then work in slowly and give them a drink, and yard and truck them straight away. Could you be at the yards about four?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

"Thanks. Care for a drink?"

By evening, when the horses were trucked and on their way to Adelaide, Tynan had made up his mind.

"Do you want a man for Marnoola Station?" he asked his new friend, as they sat and looked at the moonlit street.

"You bet your life, we do," was the answer. "Jack Donay, the bloke that's with the horses, drunk as a lord, he's gone down to enlist. He's sure to get through; he's as tough as a whip, though he's as slow as a darned wood-heap. Why d'you ask? Did you think of taking it on?"

"I'd like to," replied Tynan. "Could I go up with you?"

The stockman looked at his companion for a moment before replying.

"You'll find it darned rough, but I'd be glad of your company. You're not used to the road, I suppose?"

"No. But I can learn to get used to anything."

His companion thought a while, and as is the habit with many bushmen, did so aloud. "Reckon old Bill'd take him on. Even if he doesn't, he couldn't swear at a few weeks' rations. I've got Jack's saddle and the pack he used coming down." Then, to Tynan, "Alright then. What luggage have you got?"

"I've just got a swag that I can lift quite easily."

"Right. We'll call it a do."

"How about provisions?" asked Tynan.

"Ob, leave that to me. I'll see to the rations. If there's any row, you can square Bill Dookie. He's manager, you know. . . . By the way, what shall I call you?"

"My name's James Tynan. My friends call me Jim."

"And mine's Tom Lawson, and you can forget the Lawson. They'll tell you lots about me up the track. You can believe what you like. . . . We'll spend to-morrow in Oodnadatta and get all the packs ready in the evening for an early start about daylight next day. . . . Have you got a rug and a camp-sheet?"

"Yes."

“And a quart-pot?”

“No, I haven’t got a quart-pot?”

“You’ll want one. That’s the lot I think. You won’t want to buy a butcher’s knife; you can use Jack’s.”

For a time they sat in silence, listening to the click of billiard balls and the exclamations of the players in the room behind, till a couple of men sauntered out of the hotel and joined them, and conversation became general.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## On the Road.

Day after day the plant rode north—two whites, three niggers, and about twenty horses; first came Tom Lawson and the new chum riding abreast and setting the pace, behind them five horses packed and the rest loose with hobbles jangling at their necks, brought up by Jack, Scarry and Albert. It took Tynan several days to distinguish Jack from Scarry, though their features were very different; to him, the fact that they were black obscured all distinguishing marks. But when he noticed that, of the finery they had bought in Oodnadatta, Scarry wore a pale pink hatband, whereas Jack's was white with blue spots, he felt he had advanced one step in knowledge. Albert caused him no trouble from the start, for he wore a waistcoat even on the hottest days.

It was summer. The sun rose clean eyed and fierce, and looked down all day without pity on the cringing earth. Panting beast and bird sought the shade of withered trees, and tiny reptiles crawled for sanctuary beneath the stones; mirage quivered on the horizon and filled each hollow with a mockery of limpid water edged with trees; while the shadow of a wheeling bird of prey was upon the tracks of every stumbling beast. The cruel sun sank slowly to the west, satiated with the lust of another day, and his reeking jaws dripped blood upon his couch. But when the pomp-stained curtains were drawn, the tired earth sighed and little creatures came without fear from their hiding-places and lived beneath the cool stars.

To the men journeying north, however, the cool nights meant nothing else but sleep. In spite of the unaccustomed hardship, Tynan found that novelty conquered the weariness of the road, and his great desire to get further and further away from his old life made the longest day too short. He was not fleeing from justice, but towards it—to a court where man is judged as a man, not as to his ability to clothe himself with shams. He panted for the open air like one who has been confined for a long time in a closed room. He wanted, too, perhaps more than anything else, to let absence, the isolation from men of his stamp, and the fatigue of arduous work, test his feelings for Ida Hennessy, which, breaking suddenly through the ice of his self-control, had led to the death of Colonel Bathwick.

Tom Lawson cast many a questioning glance at his silent companion who sat on his horse so upright and yet with so much ease. The mask which is habitual to professional men gave no indication of the young man's thoughts, and Tom was too true a bushman to intrude any question upon the privacy of another man's life.

All surface water, except that in the largest water-holes, had dried up long ago, because of the drought. The track wandered from one of these oases to another, across country more barren than Tynan had ever seen; ridges of soft red sand crowned with tussocks of spinifex-grass; plains, bare save for a few wisps of gaunt dry grass that sparsely covered them like hair on the head of a corpse; dry creek beds full of loose white sand and edged with box-trees that told of water running below the surface.

When Tynan passed that way again, some months later, the country was hardly recognisable. Grass waved across the plains, hiding the stones in a carpet of green; the sand-hills were

gay with shrubs and tender flowers; while, in gutters where the rain had run, water-melons were to be found. He understood then why travellers gave such conflicting accounts of Central Australia.

From time to time they passed Government bores, which gave water, often warm and brackish, to travelling stock: Wire Creek, The Ten Mile, Hamilton, Blood's Creek, and Charlotte Waters, which latter bore was reached on the sixth day and was their first camp in the Northern Territory.

Each evening, Tom and his companion rode ahead and chose a spot for camp. When the plant came up, packs were pulled off, horses hobbled, a fire lit, and the quart-pots set in a row to boil. Tynan soon learnt to make damper and cook it in the ashes, and also to use his slice as a plate for his chunk of salt beef. Black tea, damper and meat, morning, noon, and night; such is the tucker carried in the packs all over the Territory. After tea, the two white men unrolled their swags, laying the camp sheets so as to avoid the bindey-eyes and goat-head prickles that abounded, lit their pipes, and lay down, the blacks doing the same a little distance away.

They talked at times, not personal talk, but Tynan listened to tales of cattle-camps, brumby-running, musters in flood time, and long overland journeys in drought; for Tom had come "into the country" as a lad, and had known it before the railway was as far north as it was then, in the days when rations and mails were sometimes eighteen months on the road. And the young man, in his turn, told of student exploits in "the old country," which, although they seemed very tame to him now, delighted his listener beyond measure.

One evening Tom was deploring the fact that



he was so uneducated, when Tynan remarked quietly—

“Why, Tom, you’re one of the best educated men I’ve met.”

“Go on! You’re pulling my leg!” denied the bushman. “Educated! Me! . . . Lord! I can read a bit and sign me blooming name, and add up a bill. D’you call that educated?”

“I reckon I’m one of the least educated men north of the Charlotte,” continued Tynan, ignoring the other’s question.

“What in the hell d’you mean, Jim?”

“Why, this. What’s the use of Latin, Greek, and Algebra up here, Tom? I’ve got those, but beyond the fact that I can ride a quiet horse, I know nothing useful. In almost all the occasions you’ve mentioned—camps, musters, floods, and droughts—when you’ve won through by sheer knowledge, sheer education, I should have perished. Not from lack of pluck, mind you, but from downright ignorance. . . . I’m out to learn, Tom, old man; to be educated in the alphabet of real life.”

They lay quietly, at other times, and looked at the stars, listening to the faint clink, clink of hobbles and the lilt of a neck-bell as the horses fed near by; or to the coroboree-chant of the three black boys, which sounded like the very loneliness made vocal.

Each morning, at the first faint signs of day, Tom rolled out of his blankets.

“Daylight!” he shouted to the boys, and, if there was any reluctance on their part, he followed it up with, “Quickfella, you there!”

Last night’s fire was blazing again in a few minutes, and the pots were in a row beside it, while the boys went off with their bridles to round up the horses, tracking them unfalteringly in the grey light. Breakfast was quickly disposed of,

and the horses packed and saddled, and then, when Tom had given a keen glance to every harnessed animal, with an occasional query as to hobbles, the tightness of a girth, or whether the canteens had been filled that morning at the water-hole, the two white men mounted and rode away, followed by the plant.

Tynan woke one night at the touch of a cold, smooth body on his leg. His camp sheet had come unwrapped at the foot, and something had crawled in. He lay still as a corpse, and felt it gliding further and further up his leg. It was a snake, and to have moved would have courted hideous death. He did not want to die. The problem of his life would not be solved that way, and it was worth living if only to see the tangled skein unwind.

Very cautiously he called to his sleeping companion.

"Tom!"

No answer.

"Tom!" louder still.

"Tom! For God's sake wake up!" as loud as he dare.

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"There's a snake in my bed."

The bushman was instantly wide awake.

"Don't frighten it, Tom," whispered Tynan. "It's crawling up my leg. Its head is about opposite my hip on your side."

"Right, old man. Don't stir, whatever you do. Which side does your swag open?"

"Your side."

"Right. You leave it to me."

Tom got up quietly, grasped a stick, and called to the sleeping boys.

"Jack! Scarry! Albert!"

The urgency of his voice was unmistakable, and three heads bobbed up in the grey light.

"Bring um up stick, three fella. Bring um up longa me!"

The boys obeyed, and the four men, armed with sticks, stood round Tynan as he lay, hardly daring to breathe.

"What for?" asked Jack; but Tom cut him short.

"You no yabber," he said, sharply; then added, in explanation: "Plurry snake sit down longa white fella," pointing to where he reckoned the reptile's head was. "Me chuck um camp sheet, quick-fella. You kill um, kill um, kill um. See?" He made demonstrations with his stick.

The trio grunted understanding.

"Are you right, Jim . . . I'll count three and then fling the blankets off. You leap for your life. . . . Ready?"

"Right," came the answer, and Tynan knew how slender was the thread that bound him to life.

"One!"

The slippery coils were nestling down beside his thigh.

"Two!"

Without the flicker of a muscle, he gathered himself for the greatest effort of his life.

"Three!"

The blankets were flung aside. Tynan leaped. Fierce yells of excitement broke the tense silence as the sticks fell again and again upon the writhing form that sought refuge in vain within the folds of the blankets.

It was a snake about six feet long, black and very deadly.

"Did he get you?" Tom was at his companion's side with an anxious face.

"No, Tom. I'm alright. . . . Thanks to you," he answered, holding out his hand.

The bushman took it. "To me be damned!" he exclaimed. "My word, Jim, you've got pluck."

And praise from such a man as Tom did more to restore the new chum's shaken nerves than any tonic could have done.

"Just look at those dirty niggers," said Tom, to change the subject, for a bushman hates any show of feeling.

The boys had taken the snake and thrown it on the ashes of the fire. In a few minutes, before even the skin was properly charred, they pulled it out again and began devouring the savoury morsel with grunts of satisfaction.

"Get to hell out of this!" shouted Tom, as he drove them back to their swags. "If you must be pigs, grunt in your own sty."

"Him plurry good," mumbled Jack, as he chewed vigorously at his portion of the reptile, which hung out of each corner of his mouth. "Plurry good."

"There's no accounting for taste," said Tynan, arranging his blankets again. But, try as he would, there was no more sleep for him that night.

## CHAPTER IX.

## Jack.

Another incident which occurred on the road must be recorded, because of its far-reaching results.

At dawn one morning, Tom told Jack to be careful to fill the canteens before starting. This was always done in case of emergency, but on the day in question it was particularly important, as they would probably not strike water till the middle of the next day.

When the packs were pulled off at noon, Tom found, to his amazement, that the canteens were almost empty.

He went up to Jack in a rage and demanded an explanation.

"What for you no fill um canteen longa water hole, same as me yabber?" he asked.

The black boy had evidently forgotten, but for some reason or another he resented Tom's tone, and replied:

"Plurry white fella! What for he no fill um canteen?"

Tom's fist shot out like a flash, and the man fell. As he rose, he groped for a stick, but the stockman's whip whistled through the air and cut his arm from shoulder to wrist, and the nigger sank back, whining.

There was just enough water in the canteens for four quart-pots, so the delinquent went thirsty, which was no light punishment after six hours in the sun and with a prospect of many more before the next drink. Jack was made to ride ahead of the whites all that afternoon, and

they travelled on far into the night till they reached water.

Lawson said casually to his companion as they turned in that night:

"Got a revolver, Jim?"

"No. I didn't know one was necessary."

"It is sometimes. . . . Good-night."

Exhausted by the long day, Tynan soon fell asleep, and so did Tom; but the latter, with the habit born of years of bush life, woke to complete consciousness some hours afterwards at the sound of a breaking twig.

The moon was an hour off setting, and by her light he saw Jack, stripped of all his clothing, crawling forward towards the two white men.

Lawson did not move, for his revolver was at his belt, and he had taken the precaution of wearing it that night. Nearer and nearer came the figure, and, as the man turned his head to look for the axe, Tom slipped his hand out from the blankets and lay there with cocked revolver, apparently asleep. The blackfellow grasped the axe, and again began crawling forward. When about three yards away, he knelt up and rested the axe-head on the ground, preparatory to his last spring.

A shot rang out! There was a yell of pain, and the axe dropped from the man's broken wrist.

Tynan leapt to his feet almost at the same time as Lawson, and both saw the howling nigger disappearing in the scrub.

"I don't think he'll come back," remarked Tom. "I've smashed his wrist, anyhow."

"Why didn't you kill him, Tom? He would have killed you if you hadn't spotted him."

"You mayn't kill these vermin," he answered. "It's called murder. But if one of them does for a white man, he only gets about a year in a Government camp down country, petted by the ladies and missionaries, and fed on the best of

tucker. He's brought up here again when his time's up, with a new blanket and tomahawk, to murder another of us if he wants to."

"Does that sort of thing often happen?" asked Tynan.

"They're pretty out of hand now-a-days. The whites put the fear of God into them in the early days, and things were better. But since they've been protected, and taught by missionaries and all that rubbish, they're getting very cheeky. . . . Here, you two-fella, Scarry, Albert," he called out, as he saw the other two black boys standing undecided what to do. "You no walk longa Jack. Him silly fella."

"Yah. Him silly fella alright," came back the relieved answer, as the boys saw that the stockman was not angry with them.

The two white men took alternate watches for the rest of the night, but Jack had disappeared.

When they had been several weeks on the road, they were riding towards a low range of hills one afternoon.

"See that toe of high country?" asked Tom, pointing to where the hills sloped away to the plains. "We'll round that about dinner-time tomorrow. From that on we'll be in Marnoola country."

"I see," answered Tynan. "Has the range any particular name?"

"Not that I know of, but those two little peaks that stand up are called 'Blood' and 'Water'."

"'Blood' and 'Water'?" echoed Tynan.

"Yes. Some call them 'The Brothers,' but mostly 'Blood' and 'Water.'"

"However did they come to be called such names?"

"Well, it was before I came into the North," answered Tom. "I was just a lad on Blanchwater at the time. Two brothers, called Dan and Archie

McLeod, were trying to make across country to the Bartonga gold field. The field was all in the boom those days, and I reckon more men pegged out on the way up than ever got there. These two were some of them that died. No one knows how it happened, but their luck was clean out, for a mustering party passed that way with water and tucker the very next day. Dan fell down an old well. I'll show it you to-morrow. He must have been too weak to pull up water. Archie was found at the foot of that first peak. Poor beggar, he had tried to drink his own blood. So they named the peaks after them—'Blood' and 'Water.' You see, it was the best they could do for them."

Tynan saw the staging of the old well next day. It was one of the boundary-marks of Marnoola.

Tom was right about Jack; the blackfellow did not return.

"He's a bad nigger, anyway," said the bushman. "Old Bill Dookie followed him for nine days with a cocked rifle on his saddle. He'd have got him sure, if the beggar hadn't made into the ranges where a horse can't travel."

"Would he have shot him? I thought you said it was punishable as murder for a white to kill a black."

"So it is. But cattle-killing is just plain cattle-killing. Out West here we're amongst wild blacks, and a damned long way from the telegraph line, and further still from a police station. . . . He'd have plugged him alright. Who'd give evidence? None of us, you bet your life."

By the old well at the foot of the Blood and Water peaks, the travellers had turned west, and now the country was far looser than any Tynan had yet seen, and the stages between waters were longer. At each water-hole was a stock-yard, and every vestige of grass had been eaten around it for miles. Tracks of cattle and horses leading in



and out showed that many hundred head of stock were watering at each of the holes.

But ten to twenty miles away from the yards there was an abundance of dry grass, and Tynan soon rid his mind of what Tom called "the green pastures and still waters" idea, and realised that, in the Territory, stock may have to travel twenty miles from water to find feed. Tom pointed out the parakelia to him, a little plant with watery leaves and a purple flower, growing in the driest soil, and on which cattle can live for months without a drink. But the parakelia was drying up and the full number of Marnoola stock was on the waters.

At last the names of landmarks were reckoned in miles from Marnoola Station: Thirty Mile Creek, Eighteen Mile Hill, Fifteen Mile Creek, Three Mile Claypan; till, one afternoon, Tynan saw the first length of fencing he had seen for several weeks—the Marnoola horse paddock, where the working horses fed.

All day the horses had walked at top speed, and showed an inclination to break into a canter as the paddock gate was reached and passed through. A sandhill hid the station buildings, but a great lowing of cattle came from the yards where a group of men were working.

"Good-day, Tom!" shouted a gruff, jerky voice from the hubbub. "Leave packs to niggers . . . give us hand. Got twenty more 'fore dark. . . . Who's the bloke? Bring him, too."

Without waiting for an answer, the speaker stooped over another prostrate calf, and as the two white men rode on to a hitching rail in front of the harness shed, Tynan heard the same voice shouting, "Brand-o!"

"That's Bill Dookie," said Tom, as he dismounted.

## CHAPTER X.

## Impressions.

From the sand-hill near the gate, the station looked like a collection of brush wurleys, with here and there an iron roof. To the north was a two-roomed building made of slabs and pug, and roofed with iron. Tom called it "Government House," and explained that the manager lived there with his lubra mistress and child. The men's quarters and buggy-shed were in a row, and both walls and roof were made of broom-bush lashed to mulga posts and rails with strands of green-hide. Facing these was another row of rough sheds, consisting of kitchen, store, meat-house, and harness-room.

Nothing was here but the barest necessities of life; not the slightest inducement for men to stay for any other reason than a wage. In his first sight of Marnoola Station, Tynan sensed one of the curses of the Northern Territory: it is a place where life is kept at the efficiency point for making money and nothing else. That men live as bushmen all their lives under such primitive conditions is not a commendation, but a tragedy; they often become unfitted for any other life, and die where they have struggled to live.

The future will give more honour than the present to the memory of the pioneers of Central Australia: men who lived and died at privation point with no encouragement than that given by their own stout hearts. They dreamt of homes and the voices of women and children, on the spots where they had built their own rough shelters. But, alas! The prosperity for which they laboured

has been taken to cities, and the country is as desolate and man's life in it as primitive as ever. Central Australia is being exploited, not settled.

While the seeds of such thoughts as these were germinating in Tynan's mind, the horses had been unsaddled, the packs pulled off, and the tired animals led down to the troughs before being hobbled.

"Hi, you there! What the hell you doing? Lend a hand!" This in stentorian tones from the yards.

Tom smiled grimly as he and Jim walked up the hill.

"The old man's a Tartar," he said, "but he's not a bad sort when you get to know him. The syndicate that owns this run and dozens more, always pick hustlers like him and give them commission."

By this time they had reached the yards, and were greeted by the manager.

"Hullo, Tom! Thought you never coming. Good-day," as Jim was introduced. "Tynan's name, is it? Hold leg-rope. Hang on."

Such was the new man's introduction to Bill Dookie, manager of Marnoola horse and cattle station for the Two Continents Meat Syndicate.

For the next two hours Tynan hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels, but he was successful in carrying out Bill's instructions to "get a hold of that leg-rope and hang on."

The receiving yard contained about 200 cows and calves, from which the unbranded youngsters were drafted off in lots of about ten into the branding pen. Here they were lassoed and drawn to the rails with a long green-hide rope, on which three nearly naked blacks were pulling. Tom was given charge of the front leg-rope, and a blackfellow, after securing the back leg, handed the rope to the new chum, who passed it round a hitching post and held on. In this way, the calf

was thrown and a blackfellow loosened the lasso and caught another in readiness. With almost incredible quickness, Bill cut and ear-marked the steers, then called out, "Brand-O!" and the red-hot iron was handed between the rails. Again and again Tynan saw the familiar "X.T.X." pressed on the quivering rump of the prostrate animals, to the accompanying of smoke and sometimes flame, and usually much bellowing.

So insistent was the work, and so necessary was it to keep keenly alert, that Tynan forgot his weariness, his thirst, the miles of new country he had traversed, and the multitude of new experiences that had come to him—everything, in fact, but grasping that green-hide rope and seeing that it was tight on the post.

"How many more?" asked Bill at length, straightening his back and looking with approval at the new-comer, who, in spite of his awkwardness at the unaccustomed work, showed a certain clean activity that pleased the manager.

"How many, mob?" he repeated, to the black who was using the lasso.

"Ner," grunted the man, "close up finish um." And sure enough there proved to be only three more heifers to brand.

During the pause, Tynan noticed for the first time that a girl was looking after the brands, keeping them hot in the fire and handing them between the rails; a big girl, but still in her teens, with the skin and hair of a half-caste.

At last the third heifer staggered to its feet in a dazed fashion and trotted off to join the others.

"Callar!" shouted Bill to the men on the rope. "That's the lot. Now you get tucker. . . . Moocher!" he called to one of them, a tall, nearly naked black, who seemed more intelligent than the rest. "You walk longa kitchen. You get

bacca, tucker, three-fella." He held up three fingers.

"Yah!" grunted the man, and at once explained to his two friends that all three of them were to have a stick of tobacco and a feed.

Bill rubbed his hands, which were covered with blood and grease, in the sand, and then on his trousers, and turned to Tom, as he consulted a battered note-book.

"Two hundred . fifty one since dinner. Hundred . twenty-nine steers . . hundred . twenty-two heifers. . . . Not bad . . old bloke like me. . . . Good trip?"

Bill Dookie looked by no means old. Young men in the bush quickly become withered and wrinkled with the hard life, but years seldom bring the aspect of old age. The manager was a tall, upright man, with grey hair and beard and a hard face, which was saved from appearing brutal by a pair of penetrating but kind eyes. He had a name for severity with the blacks, but it was noticed that a good boy usually stayed with Bill, for, in reality, he was an absolutely just man. With whites also he was strictly just, and, as Tom had said, "Not a bad sort when you know him."

In answer to his question about the trip, Tom answered, "Not bad. The horses had plenty of condition when I trucked them." And then he began to tell of his exigencies of the road.

They were walking away when Tom said a few words which made the manager turn to Tynan. The young man was leaning against the rails, beginning to realise how tired he was.

"Better come down . . . drink of tea . . tucker," said Bill. "Feel like a spell, don't you? . . . Worked in a yard before?"

"No," answered Tynan.

"Ugh! Come on down. Can talk after, if you want to."

Bill Dookie walked over to Government house, and reappeared in about a quarter of an hour with clean shirt and trousers, while Tom showed his companion a place where he could wash and change.

The men's quarters consisted of two little rooms with a passage between, and, as Jack Donay was not coming back, Tom offered Jim the room this man had formerly occupied.

There was a bed made of a bullock-hide stretched on a packing case frame, two kerosene boxes nailed together for table and cupboard combined, and an improvised stool. Nothing else, save cockroaches and dirt and a pile of cast-off rags mouldering in one corner.

Tynan unrolled his swag, washed and changed, and sat on the bed waiting, too tired to notice the disrepair of the brush roof and walls.

Presently a camel-bell clanged, and Tom called from his room across the corridor: "Ready, Jim?" and the two went over to the kitchen.

The place was almost unbearably hot. The stove had been alight all day, and the room was full of flies and the odour of boiled fat beef. As they entered the room, a lubra stuck a fork into a big billy-can, pulled out a chunk of salt meat, and put it on the table with a loaf of bread, a saucepan of tea, and a bottle of tomato sauce. Such was breakfast, dinner, and tea on a station which, in the past year, had sent to market 600 beef cattle and 200 horses, the profit on which was more than £5000.

Tynan was almost too tired to eat. During the fatigues of the road, he had looked forward to sitting down to a meal, and now he came to this: the lubra, the dirt, the flies, the heat, and the

almost uneatable food set out on bare, unscrubbed boards.

One other was present at the table besides the manager, Tom, and the new man: a girl about 16 years old, with blackfellow features, pale brown skin, and fair hair, dressed in one garment only: an overall. She was the girl who had been at the yards. Bill Dookie addressed her as "Ruby," but she spoke very little to him, and when she did, it was in the halting pidgin-English of the blacks. At times she turned and addressed the lubra, who stood idly at the stove watching the men eat, and her talk was then in dialect.

Ruby seemed very interested in the stranger, as she sat there like some timid animal, taking furtive bites at her food. She was Dookie's child, her mother being the lubra in the kitchen, who herself was of mixed blood, having had an Afghan father and a native mother. Bill had been a manager for the Two Continents Syndicate for many years, but had only been five at Marnoola, the lubra and child coming with him from further North and living at Government House.

"Bill's terrible gone on Ruby," explained Tom, later. "He's taught her to do most things on a station, breaking colts, cutting and branding, and all that sort of thing. They do say he's tried to teach her to read and write, too, but it's no go."

"Poor kid," mused Tynan, aloud. "What's ahead of her?"

"The black's camp," replied Tom, with conviction. "It's a damn waste of time and money educating anything with black blood in it. They go there sooner or later." He pointed to a red sand-hill beyond the water paddock, where the blacks had built their low wurlies. "I've known men," he went on, ". . . why . . . there was old Peter Dawson's boy—a half-caste from The Tennant.

They put him to school at Port Augusta, and then to a college affair in Adelaide. He was a smart lad, and did very well. Old Peter was no end proud of him, and what must he do but bring him up to The Tennant for a holiday.

“Within a fortnight the lad was living naked in the black’s camp. When his father tried to get him back, he went for old Peter with a boomerang and then cleared out.”

“Then you don’t agree with missions up here, Tom?”

They were sitting outside the men’s quarters when he asked the question, and, before answering it, Tom spat on an ant with great accuracy.

“You can’t change a blasted nigger’s skin,” replied the stockman, with emphasis. “You can teach them to wear trousers, and blow their noses on a bit of rag, and sing hymns, and all that, but first chance and they’re off. Why, almost all the cattle-killing since I’ve been in the country has been done by mission station blacks. They learn the ways of the whites and turn them against us.”

He smoked for a while in silence, and then continued: “If you’re in these parts long, Jim, you’ll learn that the plain, straight-out, wild nigger is far better than the educated one. A half-caste is the worst of the lot.”

“Are there many half-castes?”

“Thousands.”

“But women?” persisted Tynan. “How does the mixture of blood affect women?”

“I’ll tell you. A bloke working on a line-party at the Alice had a kid by a half-caste jin—same as Susan, Bill’s jin, half black, half Afghan. The kid was a girl with fair skin and fair hair, just like a white, and Ted—that’s the father, Ted



Hindley—was uncommon proud of that girl. He got a billet in Oodnadatta and the kid went to school and grew up with white children till she was nineteen. Then a young plate-layer, Dick Abbott, married the girl. It was a fair and square deal, mind you, real straight-out marriage. They lived together for ten years, and had a home at William Creek and three kids. One time, Dick was away with the repairing gang for four days. When he came back, his wife had gone. She was last seen sitting in the William Creek blacks' camp as naked as the day she was born. After that she cleared.

"I've only heard of one solitary case where a half-caste has not gone back, and that was a boy who went to England with his father and stayed there."

Tom laughed, and seeing Ruby coming from the house, asked:

"Have you had a talk with Bill?"

"No, not yet. Do you reckon I ought to go over?"

"P'raps that's what Ruby's come for."

The child came up, walking with the grace which only natives have, and stood before the men.

"Bill want um yabber longa white-fella," she said, hesitatingly.

"That's you," remarked Tom; then to Ruby: "You tell um Bill alright," and away went Ruby, glad to be out of the presence of the stranger.

Tynan's "yabber" with the manager was soon brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Bill wanted a man to take the place of the one who had enlisted, and would engage Tynan if he could ride.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

"I rode up from Oodnadatta," answered Tynan, "and did some riding before that."

"Oh," said the manager, "that's not riding. Have some quiet horses in the yards to-morrow morning. Soon see what you're like on a horse." And the conversation drifted off to other subjects.

## CHAPTER XI.

## Bush Horses.

The station was astir at daybreak, and it was not yet six when the camel-bell rang for breakfast. The morning was clear, after a cool night, and as Tynan stood under the shower-bath beneath the overhead tank, he felt hungry and healthy with that glow of inward well-being which comes from a strenuous life in the open air.

"Stiff?" queried the manager, as the new man entered the kitchen.

"Not a bit," answered Tynan pleasantly, sitting down to his fried salt meat and bread with a good deal of relish. "Riding never makes me uncomfortable."

"Never been in a muster, that's clear," remarked Bill. "Ridden a good bit in my time, yet chasing horses tunes me up like the devil. . . . Did Albert close . . . water paddock gate? he asked, turning to Tom.

"Yes. Are you going to trap some horses?"

"Yes. Want good big plant go out West in couple days. May 's well quieten beggars before we start."

Two windmill pumps with storage tanks and troughs were enclosed by a fence, and the stock, coming in and out to water, had to pass through an open gate. When horses were needed, this gate was closed, till perhaps two or three hundred thirsty animals were waiting outside. When the gate was opened, these would rush in to water and find themselves trapped. From there it was an easy matter to drive them up to the yards.

After breakfast, Bill turned to Tynan.

"Can you use a whip?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then meet me down at gate in about quarter 'v hour. Drive mob up to yards for drafting."

It was a new and keenly interesting experience for Tynan to see a mob of bush horses. He was down at the gate some time before the manager, and sat on the fence watching the beautiful nervous animals restlessly pawing the ground, wheeling and snorting, and showing off to best advantage their beautiful limbs and glossy coats, for no one can groom a horse to compare with the bush animal in a good season.

Mares were there with foals, and yearlings also, some of them not at all willing to be weaned to make room for the little strangers; young colts in all the rough and tumble of boyhood; and in and out, each separating his particular mob from the others, pranced the stallions. It was a brave sight, with a strong morning sun in the clear sky, which had not yet assumed the pitiless glare of noonday and early afternoon, and Tynan felt fit for any test of riding ever given.

"Not bad lot, eh?" said a voice behind him, and he turned and saw that the manager had come down.

"By gad, no!" Tynan exclaimed, with enthusiasm.

"That's only little lot. Should see beggars roll up after few showers. Run around looking for surface water, . . . only find sip here and there, . . . when they do turn up they're pretty thirsty. Last muster . . . about two thousand horses on run, . . . since then most mares got foals. Been good year for foals. . . . See that chestnut stallion . . . white star? Suffolk Punch. Damned good stock he gets, too. . . . Clydesdale over there. Been here a year. Owners want to

heavy up mob a bit. . . . Had Arab entire few years ago. His stock sold well at the time. . . . Suffolk Punch stamp wanted now—chunky, not heavy, suitable for army . . . farming, delivery cart work.”

Bill spoke in a gruff, disjointed way, due to a lifetime spent with blacks. He seldom used many words, and his remarks to Tynan sprang from a fondness for horses which he saw was shared by the new-comer.

“I used to ride a half-bred Arab with the X.T.X. brand,” said Tynan, eagerly.

“Mare?”

“No; a gelding—a six-year-old.”

“Ugh! There’s troughs. . . used to water, . . . yard where he was branded. Marked him myself. . . . Yarning here won’t yard them horses!” He broke off the conversation fiercely, as if ashamed of himself for indulging in it.

The water paddock gate was opened, and after feints and retreats, a few horses came through very gingerly, galloping and bucking as soon as the fence was passed. Gradually the whole mob followed and Tynan closed the gate. Two hundred heads bent over the water which gushed through the ball cocks on the three sets of troughs, showing how quickly the animals were drinking.

“Aren’t they nervous of the mills?” asked Tynan, pointing up at the broad metal sails which whirled around in the wind, clanking the pump-rods up and down.

“No. Used to it. . . . Even got over scare at the engine.” The manager pointed to a pile of tarpaulin at the foot of one of the mills. “Put her on when wind drops. . . . Horses terribly conservative. . . . Always water here . . . mothers

did before them. . . . Pine when they're taken away. . . . Homesick. . . . Put jam tin on that post, . . . silly beggars make hell of fuss. . . . Nervous . . . get used to it."

Now and again one of the foals would start away, or one yearling would playfully nibble the back of another. At once the whole line would break and scatter, only to return again to the troughs. But gradually their thirst was quenched, and the horses gathered into groups, just as men and women do on similar occasions. Some few strolled towards the entrance, but found it closed.

Presently the manager put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast, and at once three mounted blacks appeared at the top end of the water paddock.

"Coax these beggars up a bit, will you?" he asked. "Don't hurry . . . till . . . clear of troughs. Brutes kick them to pieces . . . not careful. . . . Steady there! Whey, lads! Now into them. Woa! . . . Hoi! Hoi! Use your whip, . . . want to see good riding, watch that girl of mine up there." Bill's sentences became more complete as his excitement increased.

Crack! Crack! Stock-whips sounded like rifle-shots, and in a cloud of dust and to the thunder of hoofs that made the ground vibrate, the mob of horses was hurried up the water paddock towards the yards. Twice they tried to break before the rails were reached, but the mounted niggers checked them, and the girl in a blue overall wheeled and galloped and stemmed the rush as well as any.

"Draft this mob right away," said Dookie, as he dropped the last slip-panel into its place behind the yarded horses. "Here's Tom. He'll take bush . . . you take workers."

From the big receiving yard, the horses were

driven to a smaller one in lots of thirty or forty. This yard opened out to a short lane ending in several gates into different yards. At the top of the lane stood the manager, and as the horses came past him, he shouted "Bush" or "Worker," according to whether the animal was to be allowed to go free to the bush again or was to be retained for station work. So Tynan was stationed at one gate and told to swing it open whenever "Worker" was called, whereas Tom controlled one of the other gates for the bush horses.

Simple as was the task entrusted to him, Tynan found that all his wits were necessary to keep pace with the work which, to the other men, was mere routine. He was so interested in the horses themselves that the shout, "Worker!" often woke him as from a trance. He noticed that many of the animals that came through his gate had white marks on their backs where a saddle had rubbed them at one time or another, and their general behaviour in the yard confirmed his opinion that most of them were broken-in horses which had been having a spell.

"Worker!" shouted Dookie, as a beautiful chestnut gelding came through the gates with a great show of spirit. "Tom!" he called, "that's Prince."

"So I see," answered the stockman, as the animal curvetted through Tynan's gate. "Who's going to ride him this time, Bill?"

"Dunno," was the laughing answer, but further conversation was impossible, as more horses came into the lane. "Bush. . . . Bush. . . . Bush. . . . Worker. . . . Bush. . . . Bush."

At last the whole mob was drafted.

"How many . . ." began the manager, turning to Tynan. "Here, not . . . call you Mr. Tynan. What name. . . . Eh?"

"Jim's as good as any other," laughed the young man.

"Ugh! How many . . . through your gate?"

"Twenty-two."

"Good . . . plenty. . . . Hi, Scarry!" he called to one of the boys who had been hunting up the horses. "Let um that mob go bush. By'm by you bring um up two fella saddle, hobble, side lines, ropes. See?"

"Ya. Me know," was the answer.



## CHAPTER XII.

## A Riding Test.

The three white men walked down to the kitchen for a cup of tea and a smoke, and returned to the yards in about half an hour. The twenty-two horses were in a yard that opened out into the biggest of all, which had a strong breaking-in post in the centre, and, at one corner, a gate leading to the crush and branding pen. The main slip-rails led out to a hard flat piece of open country.

"Now, Jim," said the manager, "see what . . . can do. Scarry, put um saddle . . . that fella," indicating a mare with a small white mark on her back.

The new man rode one horse after another for half an hour, giving each a couple of turns round the big yard, and then out on the flat. Some were quiet, some awkward, one or two bucked badly, but he stuck to each one till he was able to hand it over to a nigger, who took off the saddle and fastened on a pair of hobbles.

The manager's quarter-caste daughter was sitting quietly on the fence watching each movement of horse and rider, and, though Tynan would have repudiated the idea, her presence may have stimulated him to his best efforts. For, to be thrown when a girl was looking on, and a girl who, as the manager expressed it, "can ride any blessed thing with hide on," would have been too humiliating.

When the young man was riding the fifth horse, Dookie stepped up to the girl and spoke to her in a low voice. With a laugh, she called to Scarry in his native tongue, and he answered her in the same, laughing also.

Prince, the big chestnut gelding, was next led out, saddled and bridled. Tynan swung the reins over the beautiful animal's neck, took a short grip on the near-side rein with some of the mane, and watched for an opportunity to mount. The horse backed away, snorting, so Tynan let him have his way till he was against the fence. Suddenly the animal wheeled round and started to back again.

The man was tired. He had been through a severe test for one not used to riding rough horses, and some of them had thrown him about a good deal. But the presence of those silent spectators, and more especially, perhaps, of that girl on the rails, nerved him to beat this animal.

He wedged it into a corner at last and mounted. He dug his heels into its flanks, but was totally unprepared for what followed. Prince was in the centre of the yard with one bound. Before Tynan realised he was out of the corner, the horse had reared straight up, and was turning round on its hind legs, pawing at the air and roaring as if in pain. Then followed quicker and more violent movements than Tynan had thought possible for a horse. Heaven and earth seemed shattered to a thousand whirling fragments, and his body seemed to be jerked every possible way at the same time as he clung to the maddened animal. Now he was high in the air, with the horse's hunched back beneath him, bent tightly as a bow; then he was along the animal's rearing shoulder, or leaning far back like an oarsman at the end of a stroke, while Prince's heels struck lightning blows behind him.

This went on for two whole minutes, and then for a couple of seconds the panting horse stood quivering. Finally, with a mighty rear, up went the lashing front legs, higher and higher, till the animal lost his balance and crashed backwards to the ground.

Tynan was thrown clear, and was on his feet before Prince recovered. His blood was up. Rushing in, he grabbed the bridle, and when the horse staggered to its feet, the rider was again firmly in the saddle.

"Bravo!" came from the manager, "Good man! Good man!" from Tom, and above the shout of approval from the watching blacks, the young man heard the excited laugh of the manager's daughter, and somehow that primitive praise struck an equally primitive chord in his nature, and he was glad.

But Prince had thrown him once and knew how to do it again. It wasted no time in useless bucking. Rearing again, it toppled over, and as it fell, turned quickly, throwing its rider many yards away. Tynan rose more slowly this time, and as he did so the horse rushed at him with open mouth, and the young man only just saved himself by climbing the fence.

In spite of his sudden danger and the terrible contest he had been through, perhaps because of these things, Tynan's mind was singularly clear and alert. The riderless horse careered round and round the yard, bucking and rearing, and lashing out with its heels at the rails, roaring all the time with anger and pain. The young doctor's trained ear caught that note of pain and wondered what was the cause.

Prince was determined to get rid of that accursed saddle at all costs. Suddenly it lay down and began to roll, and finally broke the tackling and stood up quivering and free.

Tynan leapt down from the rails, and, disregarding the warning shout of the two white men, walked up to the horse.

He looked at the saddle. It was smashed beyond repair. Then at the horse. A deep recent sore showed just where the waist of a riding saddle

rests on the back. He looked again at the broken saddle for an explanation, and saw, lying on the sand of the yard, a sharp stone. It had been put underneath the saddle cloth when the horse was saddled up!

He picked up the stone and flung it out of the yard. Prince was standing with heaving sweat-foamed flanks. Tynan went up to him, speaking quietly and rubbing his hand over the trembling shoulders and back. He set the bridle straight after a few minutes, led the horse half way round the yard, then jumped on him, bareback. The animal made no objection, and the new chum rode past the spectators and out on the flat amidst a silence of astonishment.

Returning, he met the manager.

"Good! Jim," he said. "Makings of rider"; and he held out his hand.

But Tynan pretended not to see the overture of friendship and busied himself with the broken saddle.

"I'm afraid it's smashed to pieces," he said. "Waist and gusset both cracked."

The manager dropped his hand.

A quarter of an hour later, as Tynan and Tom were walking down from the yards, the latter turned and said,

"Didn't you see Bill's hand, Jim?"

"Of course I did. But he had no right to treat a horse like that."

"You did a risky thing, mate. Yet I think you've won. Anyhow, he'll never try to bully you again. He always gets a man's fighting weight early, does Bill."

## CHAPTER XI'I.

## On the Run.

Tom was right. Bill Dookie had keen eyes for a man, and he saw one in the new station hand, and consequently treated him with respect. Had Tynan taken the proffered hand, it might have been different, for Bill was too much a lover of horses to excuse his own action in putting a stone under Prince's saddle, and he would have secretly despised Jim for not being man enough to show his displeasure. Moreover the new man had the makings of a rider, and horsemanship is the *sine qua non* of the bush.

All hands were busy preparing for a muster during the next few days. The few unbroken colts which had been drafted into the workers' yard were put in the crush, handled, saddled, and ridden by the black boys under the manager's supervision. Tynan and his friend Tom damped a couple of bullock-hides and cut them up for hobbles. This was new work for Jim, but when he had got over the initial distaste of working with greasy hide, his well-trained surgeon's fingers soon mastered the intricacies of the rose and crown knot, and he was able to beat his companion at his own game. When the hobbles had been well greased, stretched, and hung up to mature, the two men turned their attention to the pack saddles and bags, and found repairs enough to keep them very busy.

Sitting underneath a rough brush verandah in front of the men's quarters, engaged in patching, stuffing, and rivetting, the two men—so different in birth and breeding—were drawn close together. Tom guessed that Tynan was escaping from a

“past,” for what other reason would send a man, so able to hold his own in the more congenial circles of his upbringing, to that God-forsaken corner of the vast continent? But what Tom surmised he kept strictly to himself, and accepted his mate for what he then was, a man with a lithe active body, plenty of pluck, and clean straight thoughts.

For his part, Tynan found the life to be a great relaxation. It was true that the inexcusable roughness of board and lodging was not to his taste, but youth and health and a determination to go through with his self-imposed sentence made it bearable. His bushman friend's acceptance of him as a man was a great delight to him, and the frank comradeship which was robbed of all secondary motives. Cities breed caution and unremitting suspicion, which, when it becomes habitual, hardens itself into that thrice-accursed system known as business. When streets and shops and houses in set rows are left behind, much of this disappears also, and here in the bush, the true brotherhood of man was a daily unconscious practice, not needing the multitude of words with which city-dwellers too often disguise its great simplicity.

At dinner, a week after Tynan's arrival at Marnoola, the manager turned to Tom and asked,

“How are packs, Tom?”

“Four of them are fit for the road,” was the answer. “Two others want new boards. They weren't sent up with the last loading.”

“Four packs quite enough. Got hobbles done?”

“Yes, twenty-five pairs. That ought to be enough. By the way, we're nearly out of hobble chains.”

“Ugh! . . . Order next loading. . . Got couple water bags . . . at house. . . Two you brought

. . . Oodnadatta. Plenty. . . How about canteens? Want take leather. . . Galvanized too."

"I'll test them after dinner," said Tom.

"Ugh! . . How about riding saddles? One Prince broke . . . bit short." Turning to Tynan, "Got good sliding seat. That suit you?"

"Sliding seat?" queried Tynan.

"Yes, No knee-pads."

"Oh, I know what you mean; I've always heard them called hunting saddles. . . Yes, one of those would suit me very well. I never used knee pads till the trip up."

"How you feeling?"

"First rate, thanks."

"Ugh! Start morning. . . Toolooroo Springs. Muster west country first. Parakelia still bit green there. Cattle scattered to blazes. All hands."

"How about the mills?" asked Tom.

"Kitty and Big Dick," grunted the manager. "She knows . . turn mills off and on. . . If wind drops . . . use donkeys in whip. . . She knows."

"A bit risky, isn't it, Bill? There's close on five hundred horses watering at these two wells," said Tom.

"What else?" asked the manager. "Station's short-handed . . bosses in town want cattle . . . mob . . . made up somehow. . . Must have three whites, . . two mustering, one tailing. . . Niggers alone no good. . . Proved it."

Marnoola station was astir early next morning, and, after breakfast, the tucker bags were stocked with a supply of meat, flour, tea, sugar, and tobacco; swags were rolled, quart-pots, canteens, water-bags, and all the gear of a muster-camp packed in the quick secure method which at once distinguishes the bushman from the man from inside.

Tynan rode ahead with the manager and Ruby, for the girl was her father's constant companion, and the plant of twenty horses, packed and loose, followed, driven by Tom and the two black boys. A good wind was turning the mills as the men watered their horses, and Bill gave final instructions to Big Dick, an old black fellow, what to do in case the tanks became empty and the wind failed.

They struck due west across spinifex-crowned sandhill after sandhill, divided by flats where scanty mulga grew, and dry buck-bush rolled in the wind, and where a belated parakelia flower bloomed here and there between occasional tufts of dry grass.

Dinner camp was made under a tall desert oak whose foliage drooped like matted hair and whose bark was wrinkled as if with great age. Packs were pulled off and the horses hobbled for the night on a small plain sparsely covered with dry grass. The quart pots were boiling in front of the fire before dawn next day, and the journey was resumed just as the sun spilt its red splendour over the horizon.

A small clay-pan of water gave the horses a drink late that afternoon, but Dookie did not camp beside it, but pushed on into the night, travelling in the cool till the moon set, for he knew there was no chance of finding water before reaching Too-looroo Springs.

On the afternoon of the second day, Bill called his companion's attention to the cattle-tracks which were converging more and more on the one they were following.

"Sure sign water," he remarked gruffly. "Find fresh tracks meeting . . . follow. . . strike water. . . No need perish . . . fresh tracks about."

A few little birds began to flit about the bushes,



and a couple of flocks of crows, one from the north and another from the east, converged on the line.

"That's another sign, I suppose," said Tynan, pointing to the birds.

"Ugh! Not sure at all . . . Crows after dead beast . . . likely. . . Little birds . . . herbage . . . water miles away. . . Good sign sometimes."

For the next hour they rode across several dry salt lakes where the distance was filled with mirage in which the surrounding sandhills were reflected in perfect illusion. The glistening treacherous surface of caked salt was broken here and there by the light tracks of dingoes, but the cattle had all kept to the well-worn pads which the mustering plant was following.

Presently Dookie turned sharply south out of the bed of a lake, and struck across a high stoney hill covered with mulga. From this vantage-point, the view on all sides was dark with scattered scrub, whilst the tops of a few bare sand-hills broke the monotony with vivid terra-cotta red. But the track led down again almost at once, and Dookie pointed with his stock-whip to what in the distance looked like a thicket of young trees.

"That's a yard," he said, "mulga spars against rails. . . . Not much of a place . . . does well enough . . . mustering cattle."

The mulga yard was on a patch of hard ground above the level of yet another salt-pan. A couple of hundred yards away, Tynan saw a line of black troughs, and investigation showed that they were filled from a short bore pipe.

"There used to be three mud springs before Bill put down that pipe," explained Tom, "but they weren't much good for cattle. The whole flat was bog, and stock couldn't get near the water. We sunk about 10 feet of piping and tapped the

supply. There's only just that bit of soft ground at the overflow now."

Between the yards and the troughs was a rough bough wurley, and the packs were quickly stacked in it, and the tucker bags hung from the roof out of the way of ants by day and dingoes by night. The manager was an old bushman, and when out on the run never left his pack-bags unprotected at night. A hundred times there might be no need for this precaution, but, as he expressed it, "Habit . . . no weight. . . Good thing. Proved it," and it was well worth while for the sake of the hundred and first time. A man's life in the bush depends on the safety of his packs.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## Tailing.

In spite of the long tiring day under the cruel sun, with the added discomfort of thirst, and the constant harassing of flies, Tynan could not sleep for some hours after the others had turned in. He lay on his camp-sheet staring up at the night-blue sky crossed by the blur of The Milky Way, with the Southern Cross slowly marking out the hours of revolution round the pole. The clink of hobbles and the occasional lilt of a bell came from the hill-side as the horses moved about amongst the scanty grass, whilst the solitude seemed at times to become vocal in the high-pitched wail of wild-dogs far away. Cattle bellowed at the troughs, and the sound of running water was a ceaseless accompaniment to his thoughts.

West of that lonely mustering camp lay country known only to the few men who occasionally rode over it in search of cattle, and beyond their tracks was a thousand miles of No-man's Land, marked perhaps here and there by the bleached bones of a venturesome prospector.

The soft majesty of the night, and a sense of vast and primitive simplicity, seemed to reduce life to its Least Common Multiple. The flower which the young man had vainly sought in the cultivated gardens of the mind was here blooming wild; wisdom, which is the unconscious goal of all learning, was vocal in the breeze that sighed over the heat-tired earth; the door of which every religion professes to hold the key was here flung wide, and creeds died out like the camp fire which was slowly crumbling to grey ashes.

For a brief hour the young doctor saw the vision

that comes once and again to most men: the absolute unity of all creation, the inexorable law that guides it, and his own portion therein. Yet suddenly, at the apex of this consciousness, came thoughts of Ida Hennessy. So sharply incessant was his sudden need of her, that he involuntarily cried out and started up. At once there was a patter of running feet, and a marauding dingo disappeared into the scrub.

"Anything wrong?" asked Tom, turning over in his blanket.

"No," replied Tynan; "but I think a wild dog was after our meat."

"That all?" grunted the sleepy stockman.

The vision had passed. Tynan lay down with a weary sigh. His former mental self-sufficiency was slipping from him little by little, and, whereas at one time he had prided himself on the emotional experiment he was trying on Ida Hennessy, he realized now that his interest in the result was not merely scientific. Some day he might call these feelings "love," but though he did not do so that night, he knew that the whole creation was empty for him if it did not hold that one girl. His drowsy, waking thoughts merged into dreams, in which all her guessed perfections had burst into glorious bloom. Who can say what thoughts of future bliss were his, for the strong man is weak at the glance of a woman, the wise a fool, and the meanest wretch a king?

Tynan was left alone in camp next day with instructions to have damper and meat cooked by dusk. The manager went one way with Ruby, and Tom went another, each taking one of the boys.

Tynan walked round the yard in the morning, and saw that it did not need repairing, and made the wurley a little more sun-proof. He mixed up a damper in the afternoon, and was scooping a hole

for it in the hot ashes, when his attention was taken by something moving in the scrub on the other side of the flat. There are so few animals in the bush that the slightest movement at once catches the eye, and the young man was sure he had not been mistaken. He went on with his cooking, however, strongly conscious that someone was watching him. The dough rose under a light sprinkling of ashes, and Tynan was just about to heap on some more, when four blackfellows came out of the scrub, walked in single file to the spring, stooped to drink, and then walked back again in their own tracks and disappeared. They were absolutely naked, and wore their hair bunched at the back with grass and fat, and each was carrying a boomerang and two spears. They walked as if entirely unconscious of the white man's presence, and though they did not seem to hurry, they crossed the distance from cover to cover in an incredibly short time. Tynan felt that no detail of the camp had escaped their notice, and after they were lost to sight, he again had that uncomfortable sense of being watched.

A few crows had come round during the day, and, seeing one perched on a post about a hundred yards away, Tynan took a rifle from the wurley and shot it. At once he knew that those four pairs of eyes had ceased to watch him. He was right. The savages had fled at the report.

Towards sunset a cloud of dust appeared behind a sandhill south of the camp, with presently the sound of lowing cattle. Bill and Tom had met, and a mob of about a hundred cattle came slowly towards the troughs. Some calves broke back at the yards, and the horsemanship of the quarter-caste girl was again equal to the best.

On subsequent days Tynan and Ruby tailed the mustered cattle, releasing them from the yard in the morning, and shepherding them all day to pre-

vent their breaking away to the bush, and in the evening, watering and yarding them again with the little mobs that the stockmen brought in.

On the fourth day, Bill and the nigger came in late with a few cattle, but Tom did not turn up.

"How much water did he take?" asked the manager.

"Just a water-bag."

"Might strike water . . . west," suggested Bill. "Can't tell. . . Tom going . . . far as grass goes. . . Hills out there . . . perhaps rock-hole . . . likely. . . . Good man . . . Tom . . . good bushman."

Nothing could be done that night but build a big fire on a high sand-hill near, and keep it burning all through the hours of darkness.

## CHAPTER XV.

## The New Chum to the Rescue.

The night was just tingeing with grey in the east, and the camp was beginning to stir next morning, when Scarry rode into camp.

"Where's Tom?" asked the manager.

"Him sit down," answered the black-boy. "Him no more walk longa camp."

"What name you yabber?" demanded Bill in amazement. "Tom no more walk longa camp?"

"Yah. Him sit down alright."

"Which way him sit down?"

The boy pointed west. "Longa stones," he replied.

"How long him sit down?"

Scarry pointed to the rising sun, and then to the western horizon.

"Since sunset?" asked Bill.

"Yah."

"What for him no walk longa you?"

"Him no more walk longa me. Him break um leg."

"Then why in the hell didn't you say so at first?" exclaimed the manager, then turning to Tynan, who had just put on the quart pots for breakfast, he explained: "Tom . . . under that range . . . broken leg. Don't know how . . . can't find out from Scarry. . . Nigger's head no good . . . too hard."

The boy in question was busy drinking pannikin after pannikin of water, apparently quite unconcerned that a white man was lying wounded thirty miles away.

"May I go out and see what I can do?" asked Tynan.

The manager looked enquiringly at the speaker, and, in order that he might be allowed to go to the help of his friend, the former doctor lifted one corner of the veil that covered his past. "I've had some experience with broken limbs and that sort of thing," he added.

"Have you?" A keen glance passed between them. "You're the man. . . . Know more about cattle . . . me . . . always did. Take Ruby . . . good tracker. Better'n blackfella. . . . Take pack-horse, tucker, canteen." Then, the urgency of his request rendering his words more connected, he added, "For the Lord's sake, don't waste time. Late with mob already."

It was on the tip of Tynan's tongue to reply that Tom's safety was of more importance than all the cattle on Marnoola, but he checked himself and ate his breakfast of damper, meat, and tea hurriedly.

A quarter of an hour later, Tynan rode out of camp, with Ruby in the lead, followed by Scarry with a pack horse and a couple of spares. They emerged from the scrub towards noon, on a wide plain dotted with thickets of mulga, and obtained a clear view of the barren hills near which Tom was said to be lying.

Suddenly a pair of eagles rose ahead of them, and almost immediately Ruby's sharp eyes caught sight of a dead bullock on the plain. It had evidently not been there more than a couple of days, for not much of it had been eaten, although dingo tracks were all round the carcass.

"Black fella bin kill um," said Ruby.

"How ever d'you know that?" asked her companion in amazement.

The girl pointed to some tracks. "Tom bin follow um up," she continued.

"You mean that Tom saw this and went after the blackfellow who did it?" asked Tynan.



"Yah," she assented, as though it was too obvious to admit of doubt.

The young man looked back. He and the girl had out-stripped the plant by several miles, and he saw three horses—one packed and two spares—just coming over a rise, but no mounted man was following them. With the habit of old workers, the horses had followed the tracks of the leaders, not needing to be driven.

"Where's Scarry?" asked Tynan.

"Me can't know um," answered Ruby in perplexity, and, digging her heels into the horse's flank, she cantered to the top of a small hill and back again to the dead bullock.

"Scarry no come up," she said. "Me think him 'fraid." She pointed to the carcass and then to the tracks of bare feet. "Him Jack's tracks," she remarked.

This deduction seemed almost impossible to the new chum, and he exclaimed, "D'you mean to say you know who made those tracks. Who is Jack, anyway?"

"Blackfella go longa Oodnadatta. Him no come back," she explained, and Tynan remembered that the nigger to whom Tom had dealt out such summary justice on the way up to Marnoola, was named Jack.

One thing, however, was apparent and needed no bushcraft to decide. Scarry was not following, so there was nothing to do but go on without him.

"Scarry can go to the devil!" he exclaimed, angrily. "We must find Tom quick."

For nearly another hour they followed the tracks of bare feet with those of two horses running beside them, till Ruby suddenly pulled up and pointed to some confused marks in the sand just where a clump of thick mulga grew on a stoney rise north of the track. The marks meant nothing

at all to Tynan, but his companion read them clearly.

"Tom fall off um horse," she said.

"What! Fall off his horse! Did it trip?"

The girl dismounted and examined the area of pressed sand.

"Me no think it," she answered. "Tom, he lay down long time."

Very willingly did the university-trained man acknowledge the leadership of this child of the bush. She hitched her horse and walked in a big circle round the tracks.

"Scarry, him 'fraid alright. Him ride back longa camp quick-fella," she announced. "Jack, him no come up. Him walk long way," she waved her hand to indicate that he had gone away and had not molested the fallen man.

Suddenly a streak of excitement flashed across her expressionless face. "Look!" she cried. "Old man Tom walk longa scrub;" and she pointed to where a displaced stone or two told her that a man had dragged his body along.

Following this discovery, Tynan heard, for the first time, the real Australian Coo-ee. Many a time in inside country he had heard whites send out the shrill cry, but he had never thought it possible that the human voice could penetrate so far.

"Car-r-r-weh!" The call was not loud, yet Tynan knew that it was almost as clear at two miles as it was at two yards, whereas on that still afternoon the clear notes could probably be heard still further.

"Car-r-r-weh!"

Silence. Then an answering shout came from the scrub, as if a man was waking from sleep or from the numbness of pain. It was not a hundred yards away.

In his excitement, Tynan forgot all about the horses. There in the wilderness was a white man needing help, and he spurred frantically towards the sound. But his companion, combining the bloods of two races, was wiser. She rounded up the straying horses before she followed.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## Bush Surgery.

Ruby had correctly interpreted the tracks. Tom and the black boy had come across the tracks of a small mob of cattle about the middle of the previous afternoon. These had led them to the freshly-killed bullock.

Cattle-killing in the bush is the crime of crimes. Many thousands of pounds of public money are spent yearly in sending the police on fruitless errands after such delinquents. It may take weeks or months before the news reaches the police camp, and the blacks are away in their desert fastnesses long before the slow arm of the law is stretched out. Even if a cattle-killing nigger is captured, his trial is delayed by a long journey to the court, and the sentence is often such as to encourage rather than check wrong-doers: a few months of well-fed idleness, to be finally released with a new blanket and tomahawk. Like children, the blacks understand reward and punishment only when it directly follows the act, so some of the far-out bushmen do not wait for the law.

When he had seen the dead bullock and examined the tracks, Tom had loosened his revolver in its holster and had followed. The recent tracks had led him, as they did Ruby and Tynan, to where a thick clump of mulga grew upon a stoney rise. Here he had drawn rein, for the tracks had turned into this scrub and were not easy to follow.

Blacks seldom fight in the open. Theirs is the warfare of the wild cat, the snake, and of all

cowards, creeping from ambush in the dark upon an unsuspecting foe. But he fights for his life when he is cornered, and fights to kill.

Jack had been cornered. Beyond that thicket lay the plains upon which he would have had no chance against a mounted man. Suddenly he had let fly his boomerang with deadly precision at the stockman.

Quick as thought, Tom had wheeled his horse, but the missile had struck his lower leg as it was pressed against the saddle-flap in turning, and it had snapped like a match. He had fallen, and his frightened horse had galloped off, to turn up at the Marnoola troughs a week later, rid of both saddle and bridle. Tom had risen to his knees in an instant, and had fired into the scrub, but his assailant, with an almost superstitious fear of a wounded and armed white man, had made off through the mulga and away across the plains. Tom had kept his kneeling position of defence for an hour, but gradually the pain had worn him down, and he had lapsed into unconsciousness. In the cool night he had come to, almost delirious with thirst. Scarry had gone, perhaps mistaking unconsciousness for death. No water, no food, no horse, with a broken leg in the untrodden wilderness! Before unconsciousness again claimed him, he had dragged his aching body up into the scrub where the shade was thickest, so that the next day's sun should not hasten his death and destroy the chance of rescue.

His next memory was of Ruby's call.

Tynan stooped over his prostrate friend and tried to pour some brandy down his throat, but the injured man's tongue was so swollen with thirst that most of the draft was spilt. Some little, however, did trickle down, and Tom opened his eyes. They were glazed and without intelligence, and soon closed again.

By this time Ruby had come up.

"Water," said Tynan; then, realising their position, added, "Hobble the horses, quick."

The girl handed Tynan the bag of water, and soon the packs were off and the horses hobbled. Then for an hour they bathed the unconscious man's lips with a moistened rag till at last some of the precious brandy was forced down his throat. Again his eyes opened, and he tried to speak. At first it was like the rattling of dry pebbles in a can, but after a time, words shaped themselves slowly and indistinctly. But he was still oblivious of his surroundings, for his sentences were disjointed and apparently irrelevant.

"That must be Poison Peak," he muttered; then, with growing excitement, "and there's that white gum . . . and there . . . My God! it's the tobacco tin! . . . I knew I'd find my way right back . . . some day . . . here's that bit I broke off . . . ounces to the ton . . . that's the talk . . . ounces to the ton." He burst into an hysterical laugh and began all over again, jumbling up the peak and the tree and the tobacco tin in a hopeless manner.

At all costs the man must be restored to consciousness before the broken leg was set, for Tynan could not tell what other injuries there were.

Gradually their efforts were rewarded, and reason came back like a dawn. No complications had arisen; the break was a clean one, but the circumstances had been sufficiently terrible to reduce the tough bushman to delirium.

He was able to answer questions after a time, and confirmed the story that Ruby had constructed from the evidence of the tracks. He was even able to take a little food and hot tea.

"Can you bear me to handle the leg?" asked Tynan at length.

"Try me," was the answer. "I'm a damned fool

to crumple up like this. . . . By gad, I'm thirsty! Got any more in that flask?"

"Just a nobbler. I'm saving it till you're ready for me to set the leg. . . . Ruby!" he called, "you cut um . . ." but he broke off in a perplexed laugh. "Tom, old man, you ask her; you know the lingo; I don't. I want a couple of good straight boards for splints. There's a tomahawk in the packs."

Tom laughed at his friend's discomfiture, and gave the necessary order. His recuperative powers were marvellous, and, stimulated by the last drop of brandy, his leg was well and truly set at last.

"Why, Jim!" he exclaimed, when the job was finished, "you're as good as a doctor, any day," and he tried to smile, but the pain made it rather a forced one.

"I only brought a couple of canteens of water," said Tynan, after a time. "One of them's empty and the other's not quite full. Do you know of any water near?"

"There's a spring more than thirty miles west over those hills. But I can ride back to the camp all right if we go slow. What horses did you bring?"

"I rode Prince, and Ruby rode Stalwart. Marie carried the pack, and we've got two spares, Ginger and Mick . . . that is, if the beggars haven't gone back."

"Horses no go back," broke in Ruby. "Me hobble um short. They sit down alright."

"Ginger's a quiet old thing," said Tom. "I guess we'd better be moving pretty soon. There's no water between here and camp. By gad, Jim! I do feel a helpless fool with this leg."

Probably the injured man forgot that moonlight ride before his companion. He was used to taking everything as it came with almost fatalistic

philosophy, his body being trained to endure hardship. He sat stiffly on his horse, and if the pain at times numbed him to a state bordering on unconsciousness, he never uttered one word of complaint. Tynan gave him an allowance of water every hour or so, and when he reckoned they had travelled about twenty miles, he called a halt, and made his friend a bed of broom-bush, whilst Ruby rode ahead for more water. The exhausted men and horses arrived at Toolooroo Springs about the middle of next morning.



## CHAPTER XVII.

## Kadaitcha.

Bill Dookie was away tailing the cattle, and the deserted camp appeared very desolate. Tynan made the sick man as comfortable as possible on a couch of wheat bags stretched between two poles, and then, all claims upon him being over for a time, he began to realise how deadly tired he was.

He sat down on the ground in the shade of the wurley, and let his exhausted mind drift where it would. Lately, when not occupied with something of absorbing interest, his thoughts had flowed more and more often in the channels that led to Ida Hennessy, and he found them lingering around her now with great longing. Absence had made him forget much that was artificial in the city-bred girl, and remember only the traits that were desirable—how desirable, he had travelled more than a thousand miles to learn. How ridiculous now seemed his boast that he would force Ida Hennessy to love him while he watched her development with impersonal, scientific interest. Into the pit of love he had digged for her he had himself fallen.

The murder of Colonel Bathwick also occurred to his mind, but with no sense of remorse. His absolute and unimpassioned conviction of the justice of his deed robbed its memory of any power to disturb him. His thoughts hovered around the living, not the dead.

The sound of voices gradually penetrated his reverie. Two people were talking in the wurley. It could not be Ruby, for she was still down at

the troughs watering the horses. Perhaps Tom was delirious again.

Tynan got up and looked into the wurley. Scarry was there with Tom!

"Where in the devil——!" began Tynan, but the injured man checked him with a sign.

At the sound of Tynan's voice, Scarry had flashed round with a startled look, followed by an appealing one to Tom.

"Scarry say he sorry he no walk all day longa white fellow and Ruby," Tom explained. "He very much 'fraid."

"Yah!" assented the nigger, eagerly. "Me 'fraid Kadaitcha."

"You keep longa white man. Kadaitcha no jump up. You no more 'fraid?" asked the stockman.

"Ner! Kadaitcha he go long way." Scarry waved his hand west.

"Alright," said Tom. "You walk. You get tucker by-'m-by." The boy walked away very much relieved.

Tynan turned to his friend for an explanation.

"What's all this damned rot, Tom, about Kadaitcha? That blasted nigger left you in the lurch, and me too."

"He didn't leave me in the lurch," objected the stockman. "He came back to camp and raised the alarm."

"Alarm be blowed! He came back to save his miserable hide."

"Perhaps. But he saved mine, too."

"Well, why did he leave me?"

"Kadaitcha," answered Tom, and seeing that the word conveyed no meaning to his friend, he explained. "You hear that blasted word 'Kadaitcha' all over the place up here. It's the one thing you can't knock out of the silly beggars' heads. You see, Jack was out after me, and got

me. Scarry belongs to the same tribe, and must either help the other beggar or clear out. He cleared out. . . . See? Same with you. He saw you part of the way, but as soon as there was a chance you might meet Jack, he cleared again. He couldn't help you against Jack. It all sounds rot to us, but they stick to it always."

"Yes, but what is Kadaitcha?"

"Oh—that's a kind of avenging spirit—devil, if you like—who deals out stoush to anyone who breaks the rule. He's supposed to enter into one of the niggers, and the poor beggar can't rest till the other chap is avenged."

"A kind of blood-avenger," suggested Tynan.

"Yes, something of that kind. It may seem childish to you, but it's better not to run up against it unless you have a bally good reason. And, after all, these niggers are only children."

"But I don't see why a dashed nigger should be able to do what he likes," said Tynan, indignantly, with all the assurance of a new-chum.

"Perhaps not. On the telegraph line the blacks are more civilised. You could hunt Scarry away and get another boy in his place. But out here you can't do that. We need the beggars too much. It's rotten, but it's a fact. Some of them are beginning to know it, too; that's the trouble."

"Why not have more whites?" asked Tynan. "The niggers could then go their own way."

"Ask the syndicate that owns this run. Ask any station-owner who lives in a swell house in town and supports his wife and family with luxury. But there!" Tom's tone was disgusted. "What's the good of asking them; they've never been up here. They never bother their heads about us. All they care about is the bank balance going up and up from the sales of cattle and horses. What do they care if a chap dies out

here from a nigger's spear, or if he slowly kills himself on damper and salt beef?"

"What wages does a nigger get?" asked Tynan.

"They don't often get money. It's no good to them. Their wages are worked out in tucker and clothes and tobacco. It'd be worth about a quid a week. Rations and stuff are pretty expensive by the time they get up here."

"There's some newspaper talk about giving the blacks the same wages as the whites for the same work," suggested the young man. "What d'you say to that, Tom?"

"It'll be a damned good day for the Territory when it becomes law."

"How's that?"

"Why, instead of having one or two whites and the rest niggers, they'll have all whites. No man would employ a nigger if he could get a white man at the same price. . . . God! Jim," said the injured man, drearily, "when you've been thirty years in the bush, as I've been, you'll know that niggers are just animals; and lazy, filthy, thieving animals at that."

He lay back with a weary sigh. "I wish I could change places now, just for a couple of hours, with those soft-fingered, sentimental old men and women who get laws made to pet and coddle the blacks. It'd be the stone end of the Aboriginals' Protection Society, or whatever the affair calls itself."

"Look here, old man," said Tynan, "I'm awfully sorry I started you on that subject. You want to rest and not talk to a fool like me." The young man suddenly felt how ignorant he was of the conditions that had seared the heart of his friend.

"Yes, I suppose I ought to rest," agreed Tom, "though how that mob of cattle are to be taken to Marnoola and then on to Oodnadatta, I don't

know. . . . How long before I could take a mob of cattle on the road, Mr. Doctor?"

"Cattle be damned!" exclaimed Tynan, indignantly. "I'm not the Syndicate. . . . I'm your pal," he added, quietly.

The injured stockman made no response to his friend's remark. Men of his character have deep emotions, but very seldom show them. Tom was particularly appreciative of his companion's overtures, for his mind had not been degraded by his rough life.

As he sank back, his mind must have wandered to his fanciful idea of changing place with one of the wealthy members of the Aborigines' Protection Society, for he smiled and asked, "How would a long, cool swig of beer go, Jim?"

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## A Stockman's Last Stand.

Dookie came in with the cattle, and yarded them about sundown. The casual way in which he treated Tom's injury contrasted unfavorably in Tynan's mind with the concern he showed over the disposal of the cattle, their transference to Marnoola, and subsequently to Oodnadatta.

"Close on three hundred," he grunted. "Wild as hares . . . difficult shift them . . . lot o' damned calves, too . . . Cutting and branding . . . hell of a job. . . . Short-handed. . . . Trucking two hundred. . . . Can't leave station. Impossible . . . me . . . Tom! How about young Jones? . . . Offer good price."

"Sid. Jones, you mean?" replied Tom. "I heard in Oodnadatta that he'd left Myoon and gone down to enlist."

"Then who in the devil . . .?" exclaimed the manager, irritably.

"I don't reckon there's a spare man on any station between Charlotte Waters and the Tennant," said Tom. "The war's drained the back-country dry."

"How in the hell can I manage? Blasted nigger's put me . . . devil of a hole."

"I say, Bill!" Tynan had been trying to restrain himself, but now blurted out: "I say, Bill, let the cattle go to blazes. Tom's sick."

"Sick!" exclaimed Bill, in anger. "Sick! Who isn't sick?" He looked into the keen face of the young man, and his anger died. He knew that high words were useless here.

"Jim!" he said, more earnestly than Tynan had ever heard him speak. "Tom sick . . . so am I

... You'll be sick ... stay here long ... damned sick. Everybody. Sick!" The word fascinated him and expressed the result of all the years of his strenuous life, and he went over it aloud, as if to himself, in jerky words and phrases. "Lord! ... how sick ... years and years ... forty years. ... Drought ... flood ... hungry lots o' times ... Close up perish. ... Oh hell! Lot of idlers ... don't know my name. ... What have I got?"

He stood up. "Got these togs ... this chunk ... damper." He threw it into the fire. But his eyes lit on Ruby, who was squatting on her haunches drawing blackfellow diagrams in the sand. His expression softened as he muttered quietly: "Got that girl. So help me God! I have."

Night came with its cool comfort, and the flies gradually ceased to worry the sweat-damp faces of the men. The yarded cattle bellowed ceaselessly, and the sound of water again made itself heard. The sky was nowhere darker than the blue of wood ashes, for the moon shed a silvery radiance over everything. A saddled horse, ready for any emergency, crunched his bit some little distance from where the manager was sleeping on the ground with Ruby beside him. Tynan had unrolled his swag at the entrance of the wurley, so that he might be near if his sleeping friend needed him.

Suddenly there was a yell from the yards! Then the sound of a bucket being beaten with a stick. The bellowing of the cattle instantly rose to a wild crescendo of fear. Cries of pain mingled with the sound of hoofs thundering on soft sand, as the frightened beasts goaded one another in terror.

Bill Dookie was out of his blankets in an instant, and ran to the tree where his horse had been hitched. The animal was not there! Some-

one must have let it go since dark. He paused for a moment. Then the sound of splintering timber increased the pandemonium, and he ran forward recklessly. Down went one side of the mulga yard and three hundred frenzied cattle rushed over it.

The yelling and beating of the bucket still went on.

Like one possessed, the old stockman ran to stem the tide. Rage blinded him to the uselessness of his task. He was just in time to gain the lead of the charging beasts, and stood there shouting and cracking his whip, insolent in the face of such terrible danger. He might just as well have tried to check a tornado. The leading cattle could not turn, for the maddened crowd behind forced them on. Bill's eyes blazed with frenzy, and volleys of shouted oaths came from his lips. A man against three hundred charging cattle! It was splendid! Bill Dookie's last stand had a truly epic grandeur.

A leading bull saw him, and lowered its head. The manager's whip whistled through the air and flicked the animal's eye with fiendish skill, whereat the man broke into a wild laugh. The bull screamed shrilly with pain, and its broad curled forehead caught the man and tossed him high in the air back amongst the mob. Bill's limp and battered body rose above the gleaming horns again and again before it lay quietly on the trampled sand.

All was over in less than three minutes. Then followed silence, on which, as on a sheet of white paper, the little creatures of night etched the tales of their lives in a pattern of tiny sound. The gentle splash of water was as if the moonlight had found speech, and the peaceful splendour of the night seemed all the greater by contrast with the foregoing strife.



## CHAPTER XIX.

## A Stockman's Death.

Tynan had also rushed to the yards, but, in the confusion, he had not seen Bill Dookie. As he was standing looking at the wreck of broken rails, he was startled by hearing a girl's cry. Running towards the sound, he saw Ruby stooping over the body of her father.

Bill Dookie was not dead. Tynan could only guess the internal injuries, but he soon found them to be such as to make it impossible for the man to linger more than a few hours. The white man and the girl brought their unconscious comrade back to camp very gently, and laid him beside Tom Lawson in the wurley.

There was little that could be done. Now that the young doctor's skill was most needed, it was practically useless. The most illiterate could have done all that he did equally well, and it was merely to make a liberal use of fresh water.

The cause of the disastrous cattle rush was easily decided. On the side of the yards from which the yelling had come, were native tracks, which the black boys and Ruby readily identified as Jack's. He had evidently been with white men long enough to know how best to wreak his revenge, and had succeeded this time beyond his wildest hopes.

Dawn heralded a cloudless day. The hours of heat passed slowly by as if reluctant to give even the satisfaction of their passing. Never had Tynan experienced such utter weariness. He had not slept for two nights and had eaten little, and had scarcely energy to combat the flies that filled

the wurley and buzzed round the dying man. It was only the condition of his two helpless companions that kept him from collapsing altogether. He fell asleep in the afternoon from sheer exhaustion, and when he awoke, the westering sun was shining in his eyes through the branches of the shelter.

Bill Dookie's condition was unaltered. The old bushman was making as valiant a stand against death as he had against the charging cattle.

Night fell, and Tynan and the three natives made a range of fires around the camp. In spite of the heat, he felt he could not pass another night in darkness, for the moon was now late in rising. Tom's revolver was loaded, and so was his own and the manager's, and he saw that the magazine of the rifle was full. After a meal—if such it could be called—of stale damper, salt beef, and tea, he settled down to his vigil.

Dookie's breathing became more and more laboured; he was still unconscious. The night was disturbed with the sound of cattle tramping around the troughs and lowing at the ring of fires. A dingo gave tongue near the ruined yard as it scented human blood on the sand, and a chorus of wails answered it from the distance. It seemed to Tynan as if the desolation was eagerly waiting for the passing of a soul; another conquest for grim Nature over the invader.

Presently these accustomed sounds penetrated the dark mind of the dying man, and his eyes opened.

"Hi! Scarry, Jack. Yard them cattle!" He tried to shout the order, but his voice was weak, and ended in a groan as pain racked him through and through.

Tynan was at his side instantly; and Ruby, who had not left him since the previous night, was there also.

"Alright, Bill," Jim said, soothingly. "I'll see to the cattle. You lie still."

"Why in the hell . . . can't get up?" he asked, weakly. "What's up? . . . Oh, Lord!"

"You're just a bit bruised, Bill," answered Tynan. "You had a fall, you know. You'll be better in the morning if you lie still."

"Blasted cattle . . . not in yard," he objected, hearing them wallowing in the mud of the overflow. "Who in the devil . . . them fires?"

He was silent for a time, and the firelight shone on his closed eyes and marred face. Then he looked up again, and Tynan saw that a brief period of intelligence had come back to the dying man.

"Jim," he said, quietly, in a tone quite different from usual. The rough and almost angry manner had left him. It gave Tynan the same pleasant shock of surprise as when a man, who is just going for a swim in the sea, takes off ragged, dirty clothes and reveals a clean, well-knit figure. "Jim, I'm passing in me alley. I remember now. The cattle broke from the yards and I went mad. What frightened them, Jim? Did you find out?"

"Jack," answered Tynan.

"I see." There was no bitterness in his tone. "He got home on Tom, too. How is old Tom?"

"Asleep."

"So you're alone, Jim? . . . I told them down below it was too hot to muster cattle, but they said they must have them, as the market was high. . . . Don't bother about them now, Jim."

Tynan did not smile. The man was faithful to the last.

"Right-oh, Bill!" he answered. "I won't bother."

"I'm passing in me alley," he repeated. "You know well enough I am. . . I've lived up here for over forty years, and I've seen lots of men die. There's a big mob of us gone bush; gone to join the brumbies. The parsons say they'll muster

us all some day, and yard and draft us, and put on a brand for heaven or hell. They'd say I was a dead cert for hell, because . . . because I'm a bushman and a bit of a rough cuss, I suppose. But I don't know. . . . Some of those beggars on the salvation racket have been paid by cattle I've sent down, so I guess I'll be alright somehow.

"Jim, I've tried to ride straight. Maybe I've sometimes come a buster, but I've never let go the reins.

"You rang true metal in the yards that day, and . . . I like you, Jim.

"No one will want to know I'm dead . . . except the bosses of the Syndicate, and they don't know my name. . . . I've nothing to leave to anyone but a saddle and bridle and whip. You can have those, Jim. And . . .

"Jim, I've got one thing I care for more than anything else. You're new to this country, and perhaps you think it queer a white man should take a lubra. But I don't like leaving Ruby."

He called the girl in a voice that was little louder than a whisper. His sight was failing, or he would have seen that she was close beside him.

"Ruby," he said, putting his hand, with an effort, on Tynan's arm, "this white fella allen same father longa you. Him allen same old man Bill. See?"

"Yah. Me know."

"There a couple of geldings watering at the station that belong to me, Jim. Tom knows them. Send them down with the next town mob and buy Ruby something with the money; clothes and boots and that sort of thing. . . .

"So long, Jim . . . so long, Ruby. Me plenty walk. You stay longa this fella. Me go big fella corroboree."

And a few minutes afterwards he was gone.

## CHAPTER XX.

## A Stockman's Burial.

A mustering-camp in Central Australia, forty miles from the nearest settlement, an injured man, a new chum, a quarter-caste girl of fifteen, two blacks, and a corpse; it was upon such a predicament that the sun rose next day.

Tynan awoke late. The re-action had set in, and after Bill Dookie's death he had fallen asleep as though he would never wake again. Tom had not disturbed him at daylight, but had given orders to the boys to hunt up the hobbled horses, and to Ruby to light the fire and put on the quart-pots. By the time the young man was ready for breakfast, another misfortune had been added to the rest. The horses were nowhere to be found.

Albert had come across a bunch of hobbles hanging in a mulga, and had learnt from the tracks that the blackfellow who startled the cattle in the yards had first unhobbled the working horses. Probably they were by now well on their way to Marnoola. Jack had planned his revenge well and cunningly.

"It's just as I told you, Jim," said Tom, when the news was being discussed. "Give me a wild nigger and I'll make something of him. But these beggars that have been spoilt up there at the Mission Station are the cause of most of the mischief done in this country. No warragal would have the sense to keep at us like this. He would just have one go and clear out. I wouldn't be at all surprised if we don't hear from Mr. Jack again some day."

"Well, there's one thing to be done first of all,"

said Tynan, pointing to the shrouded figure in the wurley, "and I'll start right in at it now."

The Marnoola plant always included an old shovel for raking the ashes round a damper, and Jim set out with this to select a spot for Bill Dookie's grave. He found a sheltered piece of ground under a sandhill, and set the boys to work, while he went back to attend to some necessary cooking. He knew that, with the horses away, their position was pretty serious, for it would take several days for a boy to walk to the station and return, and a cattle-camp in the middle of summer was no place for a man with a broken leg. The meat supply was running short, and he had to throw away some of the few remaining pieces because they had gone bad. But his mind just then did not seem capable of solving any future problems; he just mixed up a damper with flour and baking powder and water, and boiled the last of the salt meat to satisfy present needs.

By the time the grave was dug it was noon, and such a noon as dwellers in inside country can hardly imagine. Pitiless heat, with a dust-filled north wind which was not strong enough to blow away the clouds of flies that did not give the men one moment's peace from before dawn till long after sunset.

Bill's camp-sheet was spread out on the ground with his blanket and pillow—a sugar sack stuffed with horsehair. Then the dead man was lifted on. Blacks and whites were knit together with a strong bond during these sad offices, and though the boys had many a grudge against the late manager, all these were forgotten in the presence of death.

The dead man was fully dressed, with his leg-gings and boots and even spurs, and his pouch with tobacco and pipe and matches was left on his belt. The blanket was folded over him, and

finally the camp-sheet, which was turned over at the ends and fastened with three swag straps. A bundle lay on the sand at last, containing all that was mortal of a man who for forty years had faced death in the bush, laying the foundations of the great Australian nation that is yet to be.

The corpse was carried to the grave and slowly lowered with stirrup leathers, girths, and surcingles buckled together. When these were pulled up, Tynan stood bareheaded for a moment. No muttered words spoilt the simple act of reverence, and suddenly the continuity of all life came to the man as clearly as it had done on that first night at the Springs, since which so much had happened.

"Good luck, Bill, old man," he said, with a smile. "I'll follow your tracks some day."

Then the grave was covered in.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## Poison Peak.

That evening, when the heat of the day was moderating, Tynan shot a bullock, skinned it, and brought as much of the meat as they could use up to the camp. As he was lying at the entrance of his wurley about an hour later, Tom said to him:

"Jim, old man, you're being broken in rather suddenly."

"I wish to God I had been broken in a year ago," was the dismal answer. "I'd be some good by now. I told you I was an uneducated chap, Tom."

"Be damned!" was the indignant answer. "If anyone ought to curse at himself, it's not you. Look at me—no good at all."

"Oh, you'll be alright in a short time," said Tynan, his self-condemnation disappearing at the chance of cheering his friend.

"And even if I could get about," continued the injured man, "I couldn't do anything more than you're doing."

For several minutes they were silent. So closely had the rough bushman and the cultured scientist come to understand one another since first they met, that they could enjoy one another's company in silence. Presently Tom said:

"You're being damned good to me, Jim; damned good!"

Tynan laughed. It is embarrassing for one man to say such a thing to another, particularly in the bush, where such expressions are rare.

"Oh, I'll send in a bill for professional services, you bet," he answered with a smile.



"I'll pay alright," answered his friend, quickly. "At least I know where the money is."

"Gold, mind you, Tom," laughed the other. "None of your bally cheques for me."

"Yes, gold!" was the answer. "Gold!" He repeated the word as if it were food from which he drew nourishment.

In a flash, Tynan's mind reverted to the jumble of delirious words he had listened to when he had first found Tom with a broken leg, and, not thinking what he was saying, he quoted, "Poison Peak . . . a white gum . . . tobacco tin."

Tom stopped him with a shout. "Good God, Jim! You know the place, too? How in the devil . . .?" He was very excited, and Tynan put a restraining hand on his arm.

"No, old man. I don't know the place. I was only joking. I'm sorry."

"But Poison Peak and the tobacco tin?"

"You were delirious when I found you with the broken leg, and you talked about some peak or other and a white gum and a tin. That's all."

"What did I say, Jim?"

"Oh, nothing but what I've told you. I had forgotten all about it till just now."

The sick man was silent for a few minutes, and then said quietly:

"That's what I meant by paying your bill, Jim."

"Tom, old man, don't be a fool. I was only joking about the bill. You know I was."

"Yes, I know. But I'm not joking about the gold."

"What do you mean?"

"Mean, man! Mean! I mean I've seen with my own eyes enough gold to . . . to make everyone in Adelaide drunk for years. With my own eyes. Do you believe that?"

"Of course I do," answered his friend, more to calm the excited man than from conviction. "But

look here, Tom, I'll clear right out and camp on the sand-hill unless you drop that excitement. You can tell me about the gold some other time, can't you?"

"No, I can't. I want to tell you now. I'll be as quiet as you like if you'll promise to listen. You must listen, man; you must!"

"Alright, I'll listen. But, mind you, Tom, if you get excited, I'll clear."

"You'll be a blasted fool if you do," commented the stockman in an undertone, and forthwith began:

"It was four years ago—the year that Bill Dookie came here as manager. I had been about three years on Marnoola at the time, but had never been far west. Things were pretty slack here before the Syndicate took it over. Immediately Bill came, he wanted a docking muster of all the cattle, and I went west with two niggers. When we were at this place, some wild blacks came in, and they told me there was water under that range of hills about ten miles on from where you picked me up. Do you remember the hills I mean?"

"Yes, low, barren-looking hills—I remember."

"Well, I understood the blacks to say there was water on this side, so I started out, for a water-hole might mean cattle, and I knew a lot of X.T.X. cattle had gone to blazes west of the springs.

"I took plenty of flour and tea and sugar in the packs, and enough water for two or three days. Luckily it was winter, and there were patches of green feed about, so I reckoned the horses could stand two dry days.

"I got to the hills on the afternoon of the second day, but didn't strike any water. There were plenty of cattle tracks about, but it was parakelia country, and, you know, the beggars can go for weeks without a drink if that stuff

is at all green. When I couldn't find the water-hole, I thought perhaps the niggers had meant there was water on the other side of the hills, so I pushed on till dark and camped, as I reckoned, about sixty miles from here. That night I was debating whether to turn back. I had a little water left in the canteens for myself and the niggers, but I guessed I would perish some of the horses if I wasn't careful. I had short-hobbled the poor, thirsty beggars on a bit of green feed, but they just licked it and nosed round for water.

"I roused the boys before daylight, and sent them after the horses. In about a quarter of an hour one nigger brought them all back except two, and after a couple of hours the other one returned alone from the north-west.

"'Two-fella horses break um hobbles,' he told me.

"'Which way walk?' I asked.

"'Dat way!' He pointed north-west. 'Me see plenty tracks dat way. Me think um water.'

"'Water!' I exclaimed.

"'Yah!' he answered. 'Big mob cattle all day walk dat way!'

"Well, I tried it. It was worth the risk. I don't know how the horses did it, but we followed the tracks of those two horses for more than ten miles. We got down on a plain again, and then into some sandhills. At last the poor, knocked-out beggars we were riding began to get excited, and I noticed several big pads leading into the main one. Sure enough, we found water, and the other two horses were there, too. It was a spring at the corner of a salt lake, something like the springs here, only the lake was bigger.

"I gave the horses two whole days' spell, then started mustering round, for close on four hundred cattle must have been coming in to water there.

I couldn't handle that mob with only two boys, but I wanted to get an idea of how many were there, so that I could come back with more tucker and a bigger party. I also pushed out west to a high peak I saw in the distance.

"God! Jim, I've always been a fool for new country. It was that wanting-to-know-what-was-over-there sort of spirit which first sent me up north here. I had no earthly reason for going there, for all cattle tracks stopped twenty miles west of that water, but I reached that peak, though I reckon it was close on eighty miles away. I found water there, too: good, permanent water."

He paused for a moment, and then went on:

"I found gold there, too, Jim. When I was a young chap, I did a bit of prospecting, so when I found alluvial traces in the bed of a little mulga creek there, I followed it up. There's a white gum where the creek turns a bit, and I wedged a tobacco tin in the fork of an old mulga just by the reef.

"I think I must have gone mad for a bit, but as true as I'm sitting here, Jim, I saw gold sticking out on each side of a little rift just opposite that tobacco tin. It must be like a jeweller's shop window inside that rock."

"Did you bring away any samples?"

"No. I didn't want to do anything that would make the station chaps suspicious. I had cut things a bit fine already, and when two of my horses were poisoned, I just looked at that peak and all around it so hard that I could never forget it, and cleared right out. I named the place Poison Peak after the two horses.

"I got back to the salt lake alright and mustered about two hundred head of cattle. I reckoned I could handle that lot. But I was wrong. I only yarded fifty-three at this yard here; the others

went to blazes. You see, I had seventy dry miles to travel, and I daren't take more than two and a half days. The cattle were alright for tucker; there was parakelia all the way. But I've never handled a wilder mob in all my life. I lost another horse—clean knocked out with galloping and no water—and a fourth was so done when she got in, that she died next day."

"Did you go west again?"

"Never till three days ago."

"Why in the hell didn't you?"

"Well, Bill was wild at my losing those four horses. We were short of workers at the time, and he needed all he could get for mustering the rest of the run. The cattle I brought in were the very devil to yard, and precious little good when yarded—wild as blessed brumbies. So he decided to leave that outside country till some other time."

"But why didn't you go out there yourself? Surely . . ."

"How? On foot?" broke in Tom.

"No. With horses or camels and rations for six months. Good heavens, man—"

Tom laughed a little bitterly. "A man gets a quid a week up here, Jim, or thirty bob, if he's lucky. When he does manage to scrape a cheque together, there's only one way of spending it, only one blessed way: and that's in forgetting all about how it was earned."

"You mean in a spree?"

"Yes. And that's where I am, Jim, and always shall be."

"But why didn't you tell a chap that had money, and go shares?"

"Because I'd never get my whack, Jim," was the immediate answer, which displayed a suspicion of business methods which Tom shared with most of his fellow bushmen. "They'd fool me right and

left. No, I found that gold, and no one but me's going to get it. God! Jim, the inside of that rock must be like a jeweller's window," he repeated.

"But you've told me, Tom."

"Yes. But I know you're straight. Perhaps some day we'll go out west together."

Fate was not entirely against the new chum and his helpless companion, for on the third day after the manager's death, two working horses came to water at the springs in daylight. They were old camp horses, and had not made back to Marnoola, though for the first two days they had not come to the troughs till after sunset.

This solved the question of moving Tom, and Tynan at once sent the two black-boys to the station on foot for fresh horses, while the three others packed up also and started on the home-ward track.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## Golden Buckles.

— Those who have paid flying visits to back-country cattle stations, give very different accounts of them. Some say that the life is an idle one, and they wonder why station hands do not die of ennui; others express the opinion that stockmen lead a most strenuous existence in very primitive surroundings. Both cannot be right.

At times on a station, a whole week may go by when there is little else to do but water the stock, grease the tackling and hobbles, and do odd jobs. A chance visitor at such times decides that the hardship of station life has been very much exaggerated. Following such a lull may come a month when, from dawn till dark, every white man and nigger on the place is working at top speed. Stations farthest from the track are more subject to these variations than those near the railway, for the latter can send down four or five mobs of stock in the year, and thus keep the station machinery in constant motion, whereas the former must concentrate on one big town mob each year, and it may be as long as three months on the road.

Between these extremes came Marnoola, the station with the X.T.X. brand.

Immediately on his arrival back at the station, Tynan despatched a warragal nigger from the black's camp, to The Cliff telephone station, a hundred miles away, with two telegrams. One was to the Syndicate directors in Adelaide, and the other to Kate's Well, the nearest police camp. At Tom's request he put his name to both tele-

grams for, as the former expressed it, "I've got no education to answer all their flaming questions."

The nigger waited at The Cliff for the answers. The one from the town was characteristic. "Still waiting for the cattle. Wire when likely to reach Oodnadatta. Impossible replace manager immediately. Carry on as usual."

The one from Kate's Well was equally unsatisfactory: "Macintosh gone east on case. Will attend your message later."

Tom was very much better by the time these messages were received. Tynan and he had taken up their quarters at Government House with Ruby, and, lying in the shade of two pepper-trees, the injured stockman bade fair to make a quick recovery. He did not take to the life of idleness kindly, however.

"There's absolutely nothing for you to do," said Tynan, in answer to one of his protests. "The mills are working good-O. You stay where you are."

"But I'm pointing on you, Jim," he objected. Tynan was wearing overalls, and had just come up from greasing the mills, and from a long morning mending some troughs which the horses had broken.

"You're not," was the answer. "But you'd be a big nuisance if you used that leg before I give you leave."

"Well then, I'm pointing on the Syndicate."

"My son," said Tynan, with a gravity that was not wholly mockery, "if you were supported in affluence for the rest of your life—cool beer and all that—you would not be pointing on the Syndicate. Look at this telegram. 'Still waiting for cattle.' Indeed! And they know Bill Dookie's dead, and you're knocked up."

"What do we count?" asked Tom bitterly. "Who



is Bill Dookie? Not half as important as a mob of cattle."

"But surely . . ."

"Jim, Jim, old man. Don't tear your shirt! If you stay in this country you'll see that a man's life is only studied if it'll increase the price of cattle in the auction yards."

Tynan wanted to change the subject and turned to the other telegram.

"Our luck's right out," he said. "When do you reckon Macintosh will come along?"

"Ask me another. If he catches any nigger out east he'll have to take him up to Port Darwin. If Ransome, the trooper, comes out here, he can't possibly start away till Mac gets back."

"And by that time . . ."

"Jack will have gone to blazes."

Tynan made no immediate answer to the two telegrams, but, by the six-weekly mail, he wrote a full description of the cattle-killing, of the attack on Tom Lawson, and of Dookie's death, to Kate's Well, and added, in his letter to the Syndicate, a statement of the utter impossibility of carrying out a muster till Tom's leg was properly mended.

Meanwhile the routine life of the station went on and summer cooled to autumn.

More and more often did Tynan's thoughts turn to the girl in Melbourne. His months in the bush had simplified him a great deal. To face untouched nature is to subject oneself to a refining process which it is impossible to resist. No pretence can long exist under such circumstances: vices stand out in vivid colors, and heroism and comradeship become as rugged as the weather-tanned faces of the men who practise them. In Melbourne, the young doctor had worn many of the shams from which he thought himself free, but in his case they were largely intellectual.

But these were slipping away, and he now acknowledged that he loved Ida Hennessy. Had it been possible to estimate the pride of young Dr. Byrne—and it was perhaps his strongest trait—some idea of his love for this girl could be gained, for he overcame it sufficiently to give her a chance of finding out where he was.

Before his hurried departure, he had taken from his bridle the buckles bearing his mother's crest, and they were amongst his few possessions at Marnoola. How vividly did they recall the pleasant rides with the lady of his choice, and he knew that, even if she had ceased to have any regard for him, she could not fail to recognise the buckles.

So he made a bridle and used the golden buckles, and sent it down by mail to Ida Hennessy. He put all the skill he could command into the work, and though he was not used to the needles and the awl, he allowed no false stitch or crooked line. He stitched with fine copper wire across the forehead band the station's brand, X.T.X.

"That ought to be hint enough," he thought. "If she wants to, she can easily find out what station has the X.T.X. brand. Otherwise——" He did not finish the thought.

Tynan did not forget Bill Dookie's last charge to him. Every evening he devoted a couple of hours to teaching Ruby. Also, during the day, the two friends talked as much as possible to the girl, not in the pidgin-English used with black-fellows, but in simple sentences about everyday affairs.

His self-imposed task was by no means easy, for her black parentage was an almost impassable barrier, behind which her small intelligence seemed to hide. The names of concrete things were readily learnt, being merely an association of sound with shape; the days of the week fol-

lowed, and questions and answers about what she had done and seen. But any abstract consideration left her with a vacant expression, and she often lapsed back into the native, "Me can't know um," beyond which it seemed hopeless to try to go.

When at last Tynan had taught her the four compass points, and she could tell from which direction the wind came, and whether the Dulana gate into the horse paddock was north or south of the station, he felt as if he had passed one milestone on the long road of her education.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## Bad Petrol.

Routine did not remain uninterrupted. As long as there was sufficient wind and nothing went wrong with the mills, the tanks could be filled each day, and the hundreds of horses that came in to the Marnoola troughs could be watered. But once let the wind drop for a few hours, and the stock were entirely dependent on the little petrol engine. Tynan was used to delicate machinery kept scrupulously clean, and the sight of this engine out in the open at the head of the well, with only a piece of canvas to protect it, was not comforting; but Tom laughingly assured him that the more the sand blew into the bearings, the more the engine seemed to like it, and that it had never given the station any trouble whatever.

But when Tynan returned one day from a trip to The Cliff for mail, Tom met him with a very long face. The mills had been still for two days, the tanks were nearly empty, and there were over two hundred horses waiting for a drink, and—to crown it all—"that blasted engine's jibbed."

Tynan had broken camp that morning at four, and had ridden hard, but the urgent need gave him new strength. He quickly confirmed his companion's report. A windless sky, tanks gaping wide and deep, and an engine that had "jibbed." He made a few tests, and found that everything seemed in good order.

"She seems alright, Tom," he said. "I'll give her another try."

In vain. He turned on the petrol and worked

the handle till he was red in the face. Nothing happened; not the faintest explosion.

"I'll take her to pieces and clean her," he said; and, with leggings and spurs still on, he proceeded to his task. When Tom saw the parts of the engine strewn on a clean piece of canvas, he became alarmed, for he regarded machinery with a kind of superstition.

"Will you be able to put her together again, Jim?" he asked.

"Oh, that'll be easy enough," said Tynan. "But the bally thing doesn't seem dirty. These valves certainly don't require grinding."

He had drained the petrol tank, and was using the spirit for his work, when Tom remarked: "That's the new petrol you're using. I opened a fresh tin a couple of days ago. They sent it up in five-gallon oil drums. It's supposed to be safer on the camels that way."

Tynan said, "Yes," but had really paid no attention to Tom's remark, for he was busy inserting the piston at the time, and was having some difficulty with the rings.

In a couple of hours the engine was reassembled and connected with the pump.

"Now for some petrol," said Tynan, reaching for a bottle that was standing near.

A quick turn, an explosion, then another. He forced the speed lever over, and the engine picked up faultlessly.

"Gad! she's going," sighed Tom, with great relief, as he watched the water being jerked out of the pipe into the empty tank. "Jim, old man, I was more cut up about this than when my leg was broken. It's a good job you came back when you did. In another day I'd have had to shift a mob of thirsty horses forty miles. I'd have lost no end of mares and foals."

The petrol gave out towards the middle of the

afternoon, and Tynan filled the tank with the new supply. He cranked up, but nothing happened. Again; still no result. The engine seemed to be dead. For half an hour he tried, made the tests, then gave it up and went to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

"I'm beaten, Tom," he said. "We'd better get relays of niggers to draw water in buckets. That's all we can do. The whip's gone absolutely bung, too."

"I wish we had a windlass," said Tom.

For a quarter of an hour they sat and smoked. Tynan went over the parts mentally one by one, but could find nothing amiss. "She'd have gone just as well if I'd put water in the petrol tank," he said. "There was no mixture. The spark's alright."

"What d'you mean by no mixture, Jim?" asked Tom.

His friend explained, and was more than ever convinced that no petrol vapour had passed into the cylinder at all.

"Did you say you opened a new tin of petrol?" he asked.

"Yes. It came in an oil drum. They put it in at The Cliff. It's safer."

"But why in the hell did it work so well this morning?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, I mean that the petrol must be at fault. I don't see any other solution. Though why it acted this morning beats me."

Suddenly Tom sprang to his feet. "It didn't," he exclaimed, excitedly. "You used some of the old petrol that was in a bottle, didn't you?"

"Yes, and I drained the other out." Tynan was also on his feet. The fate of five hundred horses might depend upon their finding the cause of the failure of the engine.

"Are you sure it was the old stuff I used?"

"Dead sure. I left it in that bottle for cleaning the engine. I thought the new petrol sure to be better."

"Is it all gone?"

"Yes. I emptied the tin right out."

"That's a dashed pity. If we had some, we could test it."

"I've got half a bottle I used to clean my town togs last time I came up."

"Let's have it, Tom. Quick as you like."

Tynan put two spoons on the sand in a sheltered spot, and filled one with the old petrol from Tom's bottle and the other with what was then in the engine. He lit a match and held it gradually closer to the first. When the flame was about an inch and a half away, the fumes caught fire and the spirit flamed violently and left a clean spoon. To the second the flame needed to be held very close and combustion was comparatively quiet and the spoon had oil marks on it when the experiment was over.

"Well?" asked Tom, hardly understanding what it was all about.

"The new petrol has a flash-point too low for our purpose. It is not much better than kerosene. It was probably put into an oily drum and is no good to us."

"What had we better do?"

"Test this little drop in the engine to make absolutely sure, and then send in like mad to The Cliff for some good petrol."

The test proved that the engine was in good order, for it ran for a time till it had used up the half bottle of petrol, but refused to go when the new spirit was put in.

Scarry was despatched post haste to The Cliff with a spare riding horse and one carrying a pack, and was told to bring back two canteens of good petrol.

All hands were then put on the two wells, with ropes and buckets to keep the troughs full, while Tom stood at the gate and admitted the thirsty horses in batches of about fifty. It was terribly slow work, for blacks soon tire, but at all costs those horses must be watered. By dint of many brews of tea and pipes of tobacco and the biggest tuck-out at dinner some of them had ever had, the work continued till dark.

Fortunately the weather was cool, so that before the last bucket of the day was drawn up, all horses that had come in had had a drink and had gone to the bush again.

But the tanks were still empty. Side by side, Tom and Jim watched the sun set in a cloudless sky. The red turned to gold, and it again to orange, and then to yellow, which stained the horizon with its pure colour half-way round to the east.

"Wind to-morrow, Jim," said the stockman. "Yellow sky."

"I hope you're right," was the answer.

Station breakfast was at 5.30, and in case Tom's forecast was wrong, all hands were again at the buckets before six. The water-paddock gates had been shut at night, and a big mob of horses were waiting for a drink.

"Full O!" shouted Tynan when one line of troughs was full, and at once his friend swung open the big gate and admitted a few horses.

Tynan was busy urging the boys to keep pace with the drinking horses, when he heard shouts from the gate.



"She's going, Jim! She's going! Oh, my grandmother, the bally thing's going!"

"What's wrong?" called Tynan, jumping over the troughs and running to the gate.

"Look! Look! you blind bat!" shouted Tom, waving his arms in the direction of the mill and behaving like a maniac.

The other man looked. The sails were beginning to move. Slowly at first, then faster, till, in a couple of minutes, a stream of water gushed into the empty tank.

"God! What a beautiful sound!" said Tom.

The blacks continued to haul up water for another hour, but the wind was steady. The X.T.X. horses were saved.

Before things at Marnoola were again on a normal footing, a tragedy occurred on the track from The Cliff.

Scarry was returning with the petrol, and camped on the last night in a clump of mulga. Whether a sharp bough pierced one of the canteens, or whether the nozzle came unscrewed, will never be known, but one of the vessels evidently began to leak. The black boy had pulled up for the night, hobbled the two saddle-horses, and had lifted off one of the canteens and put it under a tree out of the way. As he walked round to the other side of the pack-horse for the other canteen, he struck a match to light his pipe. Instantly there was a flash and an explosion. By a miracle the nigger jumped back and was not touched. But the horse! Petrol drenched it in flame from head to tail. It bolted wildly through the scrub, blind, deaf, and maddened with pain, squealing and dashing itself against trees, rolling in the sand, rearing, plunging, and bucking in vain efforts to get rid of its terrible burden.

It was a very scared black-boy who arrived at the station next day empty-handed. He had left the other canteen at the camping-place, for pack-saddle, gear, and horse had gone up in one roaring, shrieking mass of flame.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## A Child is Born.

In the course of time, two letters arrived from the Two Continents Meat Syndicate. The first was in confirmation of the telegram—an indignant enquiry why the cattle had not been sent. No notice was taken of the death of the late manager or Tom's injury, save the remark that the hitch had occurred at a very unfortunate time, as it was impossible to find a man to take Dookie's place. A hope was also expressed that Lawson would soon be able to attend to his duties.

The second—in answer to Tynan's—was more mild. His letter was so evidently that of an educated man, and he had been particular to point out that the accidents had occurred whilst carrying out the Syndicate's orders with a short-handed staff. The directors were used to dealing with men who expressed themselves but poorly, and they bullied them accordingly, so this letter came as a great surprise. They expressed regret that they had evidently misunderstood the serious nature of the case, mentioned the unsatisfactory nature of telegraphic communications, and their satisfaction that such a man as Tynan had taken the affair in hand. Quite at the end, they asked that, if possible, a mob of either cattle or horses should be sent down, and volunteered the information that they were already in touch with a new manager.

Tynan laughed as he handed this letter to his friend.

"Mild, that," he remarked.

"Oh," said Tom, "if they can't get what they

want in one way, they try another. But, in any case, old man, the end's the same."

"What end?"

"Wealth for the man who doesn't do the work, and when the chap who does the work is worn out—the Old Age Pension from the Government."

"Well, how about a mob of horses? Will it need a muster?"

"Oh, no. About five hundred horses water here, and we can trap them at the gate."

Accordingly, the gate into the water-paddock was closed night after night, and opened again in the mornings to admit the waiting horses. After they had had a drink, they were driven up to the yards and drafted, those suitable for sending to town running into one yard, the foals into another, and the horses that were to be allowed to go bush again, into a third.

In three or four days all the horses watering at Marnoola had been through the yards, and a mob of one hundred and fifty were being tailed by Scarry and Albert preparatory to the journey down to Oodnadatta.

Working horses were also mustered, and a few colts broken-in, before everything was ready for the road. The pack gear had been brought from the Springs, and new water-bags and green-hide hobbles made, and, finally, one night at tea, Tom announced that he would start away at daylight next day.

"I'll wire to the office from The Cliffs. That'll give them plenty of time."

Breakfast was over before dawn next day, the hobbled workers brought in and watered, and the town mob started in charge of Tom and two blacks, Scarry and Albert. It was a very short-handed plant, but nothing else could be done.

The third boy, Big Dick, waited until the mid-

dle of the morning, and then followed with the packs and spare horses.

Tynan watched the plant of twenty horses disappear over the sand-hill, then turned back to the station. He was alone with Ruby, the native cook, and an old warragal who chopped wood and did odd jobs.

Those who, in city comfort, write the biographies of great men, often remark that greatness is developed in solitude, and in support of their statement instance that many of those who have given to the world something of enduring worth have spent some part of their lives away from their fellows, and say that it is to these years of formative solitude that their greatness is attributable. That may be so.

The time of self-enforced banishment was often very wearisome to Tynan. He had never consented to the false standards of city life, and in the company of bushmen, who judged their fellows on the basis of manhood, he had been immediately at home. As he told Tom, he needed to learn the very A B C of bush language, but he had always had the voice to speak it, the voice of sincerity.

But he was very lonely. Tom and he were pals, but there were many notes in his nature which found no echo in that of the simple-hearted stockman; and now even Tom had gone away. So he threw himself more strenuously into the task of teaching Ruby. It was a charge laid on him by a dying man. He had no illusions as to the ultimate destination of the girl: the black's camp; but he continued her education to keep his mind from brooding upon many things, chief of which was a girl in Melbourne.

At first he had been actuated by a hope that if once Ruby could read and write, she might obtain a situation down country away from her

people, and manage to make good there, but even before Tom left for Oodnadatta, he had given up that hope.

Ruby was going to have a child.

Tom had been gone from Marnoola for several weeks, when he put the horses on camp one night near Red Creek, and strolled up to the store in the morning.

The settlement consisted of a galvanised iron store with an old stone barn attached, and a house a few yards away, where lived Bob Nugent and his wife. These, with the inevitable wood pile and yards, were set at one corner of a vast stoney plain across which ran the overland telegraph line from Adelaide to Port Darwin. No traveller ever passed north or south without calling there, and beside drapery, grocery, and liquor, it was possible to luxuriate in a meal cooked by Bob Nugent's wife, and to hear all the scandal of Oodnadatta and the Territory.

Tom telephoned his wire to the Syndicate, telling when the horses would arrive at Oodnadatta, and when he had transacted a few items of business, he leaned against the counter and drank beer. Tom was a man of great self-control. Periodically he drew his cheque and went on the spree, deliberately, and entertained no regrets when he had spent his money in the way he had planned. But no man could make him drink to excess at other times. So, for the sake of company, he drank beer.

He gave the news of Marnoola and such as he had picked up on the road, and in return heard of the doings in Oodnadatta and the south.

Presently Bob Nugent said: "I bet you two drinks I've got later news of Marnoola than you have."

"Done," said Tom. "What is it?"

"Tynan's lubra's got a kid."

"Ruby?"

"Yes, that's the name."

"Holy sailor!" exclaimed Tom, in amazement.

"Didn't you know it was coming?" asked Bob.

"Never a word. Jim's a close un alright. But how did you hear?"

"Oh, the Afghan—old Abul Mohammed, you know—took the loading out to Marnoola. It's a wonder you didn't pass him."

"I came round by Tunarla Soak. It's better feed there than on the straight road. So old Abul brought the news. Eh?"

"Yes. He told Dick at The Cliff, and he telephoned it to me."

"Well, I'm damned! It's my shout, anyway. We'll drink to the health of Mr. and Mrs. Tynan and family."

### PART III.

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#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### Dukeland's Sale Yards.

Ida Hennessy received the bridle.

Grief was probably the most genuine emotion she had ever experienced; not her sentiments regarding the tragic death of Colonel Bathwick, for these were on a par with her regard for him: mere reflections of those about her. His death affected her no deeper than a concern to fail in none of the outward signs of mourning, and, while the sudden light of publicity startled her a little at first, she was more than compensated by having her photograph in the society papers, and by being referred to in them as "pretty Miss Hennessy, the charming daughter of . . ."

But grief at the loss of the man who had gone away came as slowly and unconsciously as the unfolding of a flower. It was as gentle as mist, but it wrapped her round and penetrated to those inner recesses where the seed of love lay covered over by the parched ground of convention. And the little seed quickened and began to send out roots.

This went on for months without influencing her mind. That organ—so unnecessary to one of her upbringing—was wholly absorbed in fashionable war charities, gossip, dress, and orthodox gush about Art, with a big "A," for the



Hennessy's treated Art as they did God—with patronage. So spring came to her heart before she was aware of it; and that which made her aware was the bridle.

The parcel containing it had been brought up on a breakfast tray to her bedroom, together with other mail. It had claimed her attention first, and the strands of dark leather lay coiled on the white bedclothes long after the toast and coffee had grown cold. She did not know that it was Tynan's own work. Her life was so surrounded with veneer that she failed to recognise the touch of a man's hand. But the buckles! There was no doubt about the sender of these.

What she did not know at the time, she had made it her business to learn since: that her friend had saved her from a life that is worse than death, and as she picked up the golden buckles and looked at the old crest, such a rush of love came up from her heart that it broke down all barriers. She covered the bridle with kisses.

It was vain to search the wrapper for a note; none was there. She looked at the post mark: Charlotte Waters. It was only a name to her, but it made her glad to know that her lover was still in Australia.

Then her eye caught the lettering on the forehead-band—X.T.X. She remembered it was the brand of his horse, the one she had so often ridden, and its presence on the bridle told her that he too was thinking of those rides. It was some time before it came back to her that Dr. Byrne had said that his horse came from the Northern Territory, and had pointed to the X.T.X. to confirm his statement. Perhaps all Territory horses were thus marked.

Gradually she reasoned it out. There was a station in the Territory from which Jim's horse

had come, and by some strange coincidence he was now on that station. She knew at last why he had taken this indirect way of telling her his whereabouts. Their last meeting made any clear message impossible, and this hint—capable of being understood by her alone—left her open to act or not, as she thought fit.

That afternoon she paid a visit to her saddler, and whilst choosing one or two things, casually asked him about brands. There was one on a horse she had seen of which she would like to know the origin. It really didn't matter, but she just thought that, as she was calling . . .

The saddler told her that her best plan would be to go to a stock and station agent—Dalgety and Co., for instance—and find out what station used the brand she had in mind. But couldn't he be of service to her?

She thanked him. "Oh, no. It really isn't worth bothering about." The secret was too precious to entrust to another.

Trifling as was the act, when Ida Hennessy came out of Dalgety's office with the name and address of the X.T.X. Station on a slip of paper in her little gold purse, a big step had been taken towards her liberation. She was accustomed to having everything done for her, and considered "helpless" and "ladylike" to be synonymous terms. Taking her affairs into her own hands was, therefore, a signal of revolt.

In a few days, an answer came to a letter she had written to Adelaide.

"Messrs. Larcher Brothers acknowledge the favour of the receipt of Miss Hennessy's enquiry," it ran. "They beg to state that they are the agents for the Two Continents Meat Syndicate, one of whose stations is Marnoola, in the Northern Territory. A sale of Marnoola horses is to take place at Dukeland's Yards on Tuesday

next, the 18th inst., when they will be pleased to see her and any of her friends."

Tom yarded the horses in good time at Oodnadata, and trucked them in sevens and eights the same afternoon. In spite of the efforts of his many friends in that hospitable township, he was quite sober when he boarded the train as drover in charge, but he had evidently imparted a startling piece of news to some of them. As the crowd turned away, some of the men remarked, "Fancy that young chap having a kid"; and one young lady was heard to remark to another, "Such a nice young man, too. But, there, they all go that way in the North."

The Tuesday of the horse sale dawned bright and cool, with just enough wind to ensure that the day would maintain throughout some of the freshness of the morning. The yards at Dukeland's are always well worth a visit, but just before a sale they are doubly so. The seats rise tier above tier round the amphitheatre of the selling yard; to the left, the lane with its double row of numbered pens for receiving the horses of different buyers, to the right, another lane leading to the great receiving yard which, on this particular morning, contained 150 X.T.X. horses. In front was the rostrum of the auctioneer, from which every spot in the yards was visible, and especially the little lurking-places where buyer tried to hide from buyer.

When the auction opened at noon, the seats were pretty well filled, and amongst the one or two ladies who were there, one might have been noticed who did not seem at home in her surroundings.

It was Ida Hennessy.

Every detail of the journey that finished at the Dukeland's Yards had been an adventure to a girl brought up as she had been. Many of the faces

around her showed signs of perilous trips across the wilderness, but her train journey had been equally hazardous to her. Love is a great stimulus, and under its influence nothing is impossible.

At twelve sharp the auctioneer mounted the rostrum with Tom and two clerks.

After a few preliminary remarks about the history of the famous X.T.X. horses and of the especial excellence of this picked mob, the proceedings began.

Singly for the most part, but at times in well-matched pairs, the horses were driven into the ring, where a man, standing beside the big centre post, kept them moving with a whip.

Brisk bidding was the order of the day, for several Indians were buying for the Government, and the horses were of the stamp they required, with short and well rounded barrels, and sturdy legs; an active but strong horse, perhaps heavy for the saddle, but ideal for gunnery and quick farm work. Once or twice £30 was reached, but the prices usually ranged pretty evenly between £15 and £20, one or two being as low as £8.

Ida screwed up her courage at the end of the sale, and walked over to the auctioneer. He was standing with a group of other men who made way for her as she came up.

"Larcher Brothers kindly invited me to see the horses," she explained.

"Did they?" was the reply. "We are always delighted to see ladies here. Are you interested in horses?"

"Oh yes, I'm very fond of them," she said. "But my real reason is that I know the X.T.X. brand so well."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, my brother is on Marnoola."

"I see."

"And I wondered if you would be so kind as to introduce me to the man who brought the horses down. He could tell me about my brother."

"Certainly. Certainly. Here, Tom!" beckoning the stockman forward, "this lady's brother is on Marnoola. She wants a word with you. This is Mr. Lawson, madam; he came down with the horses."

"Thank you so much," she said, to the auctioneer, then turning to the embarrassed bushman, she smiled and held out her hand. "How do you do, Mr. Lawson? It's too bad for me to bother you when you want to get away. But I do so want to hear about my brother who is on Marnoola station."

"Jim, you mean? Jim Tynan? Him that came up last September?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm his sister, Miss Tynan."

Ida was amazed at her own audacity, but once she had decided on her course of action, forces that hitherto had been latent, came into operation and carried her on almost in spite of herself.

"Oh, Jim's alright," said Tom lamely.

"That's nice. I'm so glad to hear it," she replied, to encourage the man to go into details.

"Why, did you think he wasn't alright?"

"Oh, no. He gives the very best reports in his letters," she said, lying cheerfully. "But you know how much better it is to hear from someone who has just seen him. That's why I came to you. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, Miss Tynan, I don't mind. Him and me are cobbers—friends that is—up there."

"That is nice. I'm so glad you are my brother's friend," and, though Tom had no idea how he came there, he eventually found himself sitting at a little table in the refreshment shed, and taking tea with this charming young lady. He told her

all about the muster, his accident, and the manager's death, the trouble with the engine, about Jim's kindness to Ruby, and finally, quite simply, about the child.

This last piece of news so affected his companion, that he hastened to add:

"You see, Miss, that's nothing up there."

"Of course not," replied Ida, to hide the agony of her mind. It was as if she had gone forward into a strange country beacons by a great light, and it had suddenly gone out and left her in the dark.

A few minutes later they parted, and the simple-hearted bushman did not know that he had been one of the actors in a tragedy.

\* \* \* \*

"Had a good trip, Tom?"

Tynan asked the question as the two friends sat in the Marnoola kitchen, drinking tea. Tom had just come up with the plant from Oodnadatta, and his clothes were travel-stained.

"Not too bad," was the answer. "But a chap can't see much of Adelaide in a couple of days."

"Why didn't you stay longer?"

"The drover's ticket makes you return by the next train. Besides, you were here on your own."

"Oh. I was alright," said Tynan.

"Tell you what, though," continued Tom. "I saw your sister in town. Guess where I met her."

"My sister?" Tynan's amazement was genuine, though his companion thought it feigned.

"Yes. A little lady as pretty as paint. Very anxious to hear about you."

Tynan grasped the situation, and his heart beat fast with hope. "Oh, yes, of course. But how in the world did you come to meet my sister? I thought she was in Melbourne."

"So she was till she heard of the sale of Mar-poola horses. Then she came over."

"You met her at the sale yards?"

"Yes, at Dukelands."

"By gad! I am surprised. What did she say?"

"Oh, I don't know. Lots of things. That you hadn't written lately, for one. You see, we had tea together," Tom winked, "so I've mostly forgotten all she said. I'm rather out of practice with pretty young ladies. Say, Jim, old man. She's a thoroughbred, she is."

"But what more did she say?" urged Tynan. "Surely you can remember."

"How do I know what she said? She asked a lot of questions and I answered them; that's what we talked about. Oh, I remember. I was to thank you for a bridle. Was that the thing you were making here?"

"Yes, that was it. Do you remember any of the questions she asked?"

"Oh, you know the ones. About your health and how you were getting on and if you weren't coming down to see them soon."

"Did she ask that?"

"My oath, she did! And not once either. I told her you were well and getting on first rate, and about the muster and Dookie's death and my leg and . . . Oh, every bally thing I could think of; about the engine and Ruby and the whole lot. I never knew I had so much wind till I sat down and began answering her questions."

Tynan was silent for a time and then asked, "Did she send any message?"

"Yes, even before I started in and painted you red, white, and blue, she said she wanted you to write more often, and that she was looking forward to seeing you soon very much; I was to be sure and say, 'Very much.'"

"I see. And when you left?"

"What d'you mean? We just said good-bye. What else d'you suppose we did? I don't know where she went, but I know I went straight in and ordered a nobbler. You see, I'm handier with cattle than with her kind, yet somehow it wasn't bad."

The conversation drifted off on the price which the horses sold for and other matters, till Tom said,

"Larcher Brothers sent me up to the Syndicate offices; they wanted to see me. I met the new manager there, a chap with a face like a meat axe—Angus Macfarlane. He reckons to be in Oodnadatta the train after next."

How's he coming up?"

"He wants the big buggy and a couple of packs to be sent in for him."

"Good," said Tynan. "I'll take them down, and I reckon I'll go on to Melbourne to see my sister."



## CHAPTER XXVI.

## Face to Face.

Tynan stood waiting in the drawing room of Gum Glen, the Hennessy's country house.

True to his purpose, he had taken the buggy and plant of horses down to Oodnadatta, had handed them over to the new manager, and had caught the fortnightly train down to Adelaide. His journey from there to Melbourne was in strong contrast to the one he had taken over the same line ten months before. Then he was paying the price of his self-sacrifice; now he was on the way to reap the reward.

It was entirely in keeping with the character of the man that he was not afraid to visit Melbourne. He retained his moustache and beard, but they were not intended for a disguise, though they certainly altered his appearance beyond general recognition; there was something about the natural life he had been living that made it seem superfluous to shave. Simplicity is often audacious, and Tynan's view of the murder was so impersonal and straightforward that it gave him an almost foolhardy courage, as if he hoped thereby to impose his own conviction on other people. As a matter of fact he hardly gave the matter a thought, for he was intent upon the more vital issue of his visit.

City dwellers are apt to think that their streets and buildings must appear huge and awe-inspiring to any man from the country, whereas the reverse is usually the case. Everything seemed dwarfed to Tynan as he drove into the city from Spencer

Street Station; the streets were short and narrow, and the buildings not half as high as he had once thought them.

The crowds certainly did strike him as larger than he had ever known before, and the stolid disregard of one man for another came as rather an unpleasant shock. His standard of comparison had changed. For ten months his vision had been bounded only by the horizon or a distant range of hills, and in such surroundings every man is of necessity neighbour to every other.

He had been informed that the Hennessys were out of town, and had followed them to a little place in the heart of Gippsland, where, amongst deep tree-fern gullies and gum-clad mountain slopes, fashionable Melbourne is wont to recover from the too strenuous labour of killing time.

And now he stood by the open window and waited.

To one accustomed for the past months to limitless miles of plain and sand-hill with here and there a scraggy mulga, to a sky of such fierce blue that it seemed to be the domed roof of a furnace, to the mocking mirage, dust storm, dry creek beds, and to all the myriad pests that poison the hours with their ceaseless worrying, the view from the window was like a cool drink on a hot day.

From a garden of well-tended disarray, a paddock where cows and horses fed, sloped down to a little torrent that glinted in the sunlight, before it hid away in a tangle of bramble and fern, like the coyly smiling lips of a girl hiding in a mass of hair. A steep mountain side rose beyond the creek, clothed nearly to the summit with tall straight gums, and crowned with a cairn of stones. Higher peaks still shut in the valley to the left, while to the right, the crags fell away to gentler and

gentler slopes, till a view was obtained of a wide river-watered valley.

The landscape was in strong contrast with Marnoola. Coils of smoke rose here and there on the hill-sides, not from the hearth of some rail-splitter or pioneer tiller of the soil, but of those who, in houses of elaborate simplicity, bring into the bush the make-believe of the town.

Somehow it did not please Tynan. He would have found wild sincerity akin to his mood, but to see Nature, tamed as it were to eat out of the hands of hypocrites, made him long for the free wastes where man and stark nature look fearlessly into one another's eyes, and where pretence is the herald of death.

He turned to the room, and the lavishness of its display annoyed him. No money had been saved, but no taste had been spent, for the Hennessys, who possessed so much of the former, had none of the latter; a not infrequent combination. The kitchen at Marnoola came to his mind, and in spite of all, heat, flies, dirt, the lubra cook, the rough service, and the well nigh intolerably coarse food, he would gladly have been there just then if only he could have met Ida Hennessy. He felt that those crude conditions were true, whereas every detail of the room he was in was false. If only he could have met her in the open air and on horseback.

Strange thoughts for a man about to meet the girl he loved and who loved him! Much longing is apt to make the object almost undesirable when nearly attained. Who has not ardently looked forward to an event, and then, on the morning of its fulfilment, wished it could not be? The extreme of attraction borders on repulsion, just as it is impossible to indicate the line of demarcation between hatred and love. Tynan had dwelt for

many months in an emotional desert, and his longing for the oasis was so intense that he began to be critical of the trees surrounding it.

A clatter of hoofs roused him. A girl was riding down the gravel path, and it needed no second glance to assure him who it was. He watched her dismount and hand the reins to the groom. With that attention to trifles which often characterises times of deep emotion, he noticed that she was not using the golden buckles. Never mind; to-morrow they would be riding out together.

He had given no name, and with his moustache and beard there was no chance that anyone at Gum Glen would know him. He heard the maid announce that a gentleman was waiting for Miss Hennessy, then footsteps coming towards the door. He had never felt so agitated in all his life. He tried in vain to recall his habit of self-mastery; deep waters were already rushing over the barrier. The door-handle turned. Tynan faced away from the window so that he was in shadow, and watched the girl he loved enter the room.

She did not recognise him.

"If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll change my costume," she said, glancing at her top boots and riding-habit. "I won't be long."

"Please don't; it reminds me of past pleasures," said the man, making no attempt to disguise his voice.

The girl started back against the partly open door so that it shut noisily.

"You!" she cried.

"Yes, Ida; me." He made a step or two towards her.

"What made you come?"

"Because you asked for me. Ida, aren't you . . . ?" His voice was perplexed.

"I, ask for *you?*" she broke in. "I've not written a line to you since . . . since you went away." Her voice was harsh with restrained emotion.

"You asked for me at the Dukelands Yards. You know you did, Ida. So I came."

"What do you want?"

"YOU!"

So far the dialogue had been conducted without any show of feeling. Both were in the condition of a man having received a violent blow: too dazed to make any outward demonstration. From what Tom had told him, Dr. Byrne had expected at least a welcome. He had come prepared to open the flood-gates of his heart to this girl and overwhelm her with love. This chilly reception was a shock to him. Ida Hennessy, on her part, was taken completely off her guard. Her lover had not announced his coming, and at his sudden advent, her love for him had struggled violently to break through the hatred under which she had buried it. She had still to learn that hatred is often little more than a disguise for love. But at the word "You" she seemed to gain possession of herself, and strode out from the door as if to challenge his statement.

"Me! You surely do not want me!"

"I do. I came over a thousand miles for that purpose."

"And did you leave your mistress well?"

"My mistress?"

"Yes, your mistress. Or perhaps you have already made her your wife. And does the child take after you or her?"

The man picked up an ivory paper-knife from a little table, and, holding it in both hands, seemed to study it thoughtfully for some time. At last

he looked up, and the tension of his mind showed in lines upon his face. Suddenly the paper-knife snapped. He dropped the pieces on the table with a sigh of resignation and looked up again.

"I see," he said simply.

"I'm glad you do. Now perhaps you will go, after having added insult to injury."

"Injury!" He caught up the word triumphantly. "So you admit injury?"

"When I visited the Dukelands Yards, I considered you still a gentleman. I did not know this then. Now—" She flicked a blot of mud on her polished riding boots. "Won't you go before I call someone?"

"Yes," said the doctor, quietly. "I'll go. But I want to say this first: You have dared to pass judgment. I do not plead. I merely condemn the outlook that makes such judgment possible. Along with me, you judge the men who are laying the foundations of a nation. What men are more to be admired than those upon whose tracks civilisation will follow with healthy men and women and happy homes? But these pioneers are rough, with the vices as well as the virtues of full-blooded men, yet I count it an honor to call any one of them 'friend.'

"Many of them live incredibly lonely lives. I know one who has not seen a white woman for fifteen years, and another who was tied to an outlying station with absolutely no white companions for twelve. Because these men have endured hunger and thirst, have fought bare-handed with Nature, and have given up all which you and I mean by the word 'civilisation,' must they also give up the love of woman and child? Your condemnation is as superficial as the life you lead.

"You thought, perhaps, that I'd deny your ac-

cusation or kneel to you and plead excuses as though I were ashamed of being a man. No, no, indeed! Before such pettiness as you have shown my knees are stiff, for I have lately breathed the same clean air as men. I'm going north. I'm going back to be with men."

Ida Hennessy did not take her gaze from the floor. This man who had scorned to plead for himself, had taken up the cudgels for his friends, and she did not feel at all secure upon her pedestal. He was speaking again.

"Before I go, I'll say one thing more. What you and your set understand by love, I don't know. Neither do I care. But as I mean the word, I loved you, and perhaps I love you still. But you—you have sold the woman in you for a sterile respectability. Now, may I go?"

Ida Hennessy did not move from the door. Presently, without raising her eyes, she said in a low voice, "Perhaps . . . you love me still. Did you say that, Jim?"

The young doctor's face lit with joy and passion for a moment. Then he looked round the room and at the broken paper-knife, and his eyes became hard.

"Yes, I said it, and it's true. But, by thunder! if you think I'm a man with whom you can flirt, whom you can spurn and then call by one slight movement of your dainty finger, you're wrong. There are many poodles in your set; lead one of those, but don't think I'll feed out of your hand."

He looked down at her. Her bent shoulders were quivering. One step and he could take her in his arms. But, coupled with his love for her, was a burning indignation at the attitude she had adopted. He had yet to fling his pride upon love's altar.

"May I go?" he asked again, though this time his voice was all broken up with the strain he was undergoing, and as she still did not answer, he quietly opened the door and went out.

Ida heard the scrunch, scrunch of his feet on the gravel, and ran to the window. Would he turn his head? No, he was gazing north, to the great free lands where men are men. He did not look back.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

## Another Visitor.

Ida Hennessy remained at the window long after her visitor had disappeared round a bend in the road. There was little in her appearance to indicate what was going on in her mind. Perhaps her hands gripped the riding-crop more tightly than usual, and perhaps once or twice it bent slightly. That was all. She seemed lost in contemplation of the hillside of trees opposite.

Her mind was recalling with minute exactness what had passed in that room during the last half hour. Her lover had thought his appeal was falling on thoughtless ears, but had he known it, he was writing his words upon a surface which would retain them unblurred forever. So vividly had he pictured the scenes of his recent life, so thrilling had been his appeal for her to judge a bushman by a bushman's standard, that in spite of the fact that both scenes and standard were alien to her, she felt that perhaps for the first time in her life she had touched reality—the things that are at the foundation of life, not the highly polished veneer that was usually presented to her.

Irresistibly, that part of her to which Dr. Byrne had appealed in the old days—that part which the Colonel had failed to touch—was drawn out in sympathy to those who in loneliness are laying the foundations of a great southern nation. She was humbled also. Her own insignificance, in comparison with these men, made her former judgment of them appear presumptuous.

Sympathy is immediately reciprocal, and it

acted on this girl like warmth on a chrysalis. She felt wings opening within her, joyous wings, and she laughed softly to herself as she knew they would one day carry her to the man she loved. Love had surmounted the last barricade—pride, and now hoisted its victorious flag over the citadel of her being.

Then she turned from the window and saw the broken paper-knife, and her lover's pain came back to her with a rush. She took up one of the broken pieces and covered it with kisses and tears.

She was not left long undisturbed. The gate clicked, and a man's steps were heard on the gravel drive. Slipping the broken piece of ivory inside her habit, she ran to the window. He saw her and waved. It was Philip Dennis. Her lover's sudden appearance had driven the visit of this other man completely out of her thoughts.

She opened the French window and waved back. "Where are the others?" she called. "Didn't you meet them?" They greeted one another with evident friendship.

"No. Did they go down to meet me?"

"Yes, and now they'll think you haven't come."

"I must have missed them," he replied. "I admit I had eyes for only one person, and when she wasn't there, I took a short cut."

"So it seems. Just look at your boots? You must have come across the creek."

"Through the creek you mean," he answered ruefully. "I slipped on that log and went right in."

"Serves you right, you foolish boy," laughed Ida. "That's what comes of being impatient. Where's your bag?" she asked, looking down at his muddy boots. "I'm not at all sure if father's slippers will fit you; you've got such enormous feet."

"I left my bag at the station with James. But don't bother about me. Tell me how you are."

"You can see for yourself," she answered. "I've just come in from a ride."

"Then you must have passed that Johnny who was standing on the platform as the train came in."

"What was he like?"

"Oh, rather a good-looking chap, but awfully brown. Looked as if he didn't belong round here. Deuce of an expression he had though—hard as nails."

Ida knew well to whom her visitor referred, and laughed to hide her true feelings. "Good description, Phil.," she said, "good description. If you're not careful you'll be a genius and disgrace us all."

"As long as I don't disgrace you, Ida, I don't care," he replied with warmth.

"You'll certainly do so if I keep you standing out here with wet boots. Come inside. I suppose you want to wash. You know where everything is. I'll send a pair of father's slippers and socks into you. Now I must go and change, too."

Phillip Dennis was in every way a suitable acquaintance for Ida Hennessy. His grandfather would certainly not have been considered so, for he was one of those rugged personalities that hewed a way across a trackless continent. Towards the end of his life, he had been engaged carting stores from Port Augusta to Alice Springs, living a rougher life than is probably possible in any other part of the world. Philip's father would also have been regarded with suspicion by the Hennessys. He followed the occupation of his sire, became the owner of several horse teams, dealt in cattle, and finally settled down on one of the largest cattle-stations in South Australia. He left a fortune to his son, a youth who, beside his

wealth, inherited none of his ancestor's qualities except a superb physique. Philip Dennis was a wealthy idler; a very desirable acquaintance for Ida Hennessy.

Thus it came about that papa and mamma were away when young Dennis turned up at Gum Glen.

"Well, well, we were all young once," said the father, as an original contribution to the subject under discussion.

"Yes, indeed," panted his stout partner. "How nice it would be to get dear Ida settled after that horrid affair in September."

As though the elements were on the side of the parental match-makers, the cool day died to a warm scent-laden evening. The sound of the little torrent and the ever present voices of the trees, came through the open French window. Ida had been playing to the accompaniment of Philip's rather fine tenor voice. His was by no means the face of an idler. The strength that had made his fathers what they were, had modelled his head. It was full large and would have appeared almost rugged if the hair had not been so perfectly groomed. Here was an opportunity for great things; but the will was lacking. Lips and jaw were not in accord with the rest of the face, and the eyes, although they were of the same steely blue as those of his father, lacked courage. In fact Philip Dennis had not, for years, faced any more serious problem than the matching of a tie or the ordering of a meal.

There are many such in Australia: grandsons of pioneers—who are themselves mere triflers with life.

At the conclusion of a song which Mrs. Hennessy had especially asked for, Denis looked round and saw that both parents had left the room. He and the girl were alone.

"Are we to take it as silent criticism of our music?" asked Ida, when her companion had drawn attention to the absence of the old people.

"I don't mind what it is so long as it leaves me alone with you," he answered.

"Now that's not complimentary to father and mother. You drive them away with your singing, and then say you don't care," she said, laughing.

"You know what I mean, Ida. You know I love to be alone with you."

"That's nice of you." She glanced at her expensively simple evening gown. "Is it because you like my frock?"

"I said nothing about the frock. Ida, you know well enough why I like being alone with you."

"How am I to know?"

"Shall I tell you?" His voice was eager, and he stepped towards her. Knowing full well what he wanted to say, and unwilling that he should say it, she tried to turn it off lightly.

"That all depends. You don't notice my frock. Perhaps you like being with me for some uncomplimentary reason. To study my eyes, for instance. Am I cross-eyed, Philip?"

"No, indeed," he laughed. "Your eyes are the sweetest in the world."

"And my frock?"

"It couldn't be anything but perfect because you are wearing it."

She laughed, thinking she had turned him from his purpose. "What a testimonial! What a testimonial! I'll take a position as mannikin right away. Everything's perfect if only I wear it!"

But he would not be put off. "I mean that your own perfection makes everything else not worth looking at. Ida, I've never met a girl like you."

"I don't expect you have. Even poor weak women are not all the same."

"I mean I've never met anyone I like better than you."

"It's nice of you to say so."

"Ida, it's the truth. I want you to marry me." His face lost its weak lines for a moment, and wore the masterful expression of his fathers.

"How serious you are," said Ida, timidly. "You almost make me afraid."

"I was never more serious in my life. Ida, will you marry me?"

"Why, Phil., of course not. We've been such good friends, and now you've spoilt it all with this nonsense." She rose from the music stool, and, without knowing it, stood with her back to the door as she had done when listening to Dr. Byrne.

"Nonsense? Ida, you know it's not nonsense. I know lots of girls, but none of them come up to you. Really they don't. I reckon we could have a ripping time together. We'd go about just where you liked, and you could have as much riding and that sort of thing as you wanted. You know, I'd make you awfully happy, Ida."

In his earnestness, his hands strayed over the table, and he picked up part of the broken paper-knife. Ida instantly saw the significance of what he had done, and remembered where the other part lay.

"Ida, you like me, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Phil., very much. You're one of my best friends."

"Then won't you marry me?"

"No, Phil., I can't do that."

"Can't! Why?"

"Now, Phil., it's not right of you to ask that." She was not the least bit agitated. She was surprised at the calm way in which she had taken this very nice young man's proposal. Perhaps she knew how shallow his protestations were,

because of the light that had recently shone upon her own nature. "You really mustn't be angry . . . and don't you think it's nearly time for bed?"

Before she retired for the night, Ida took the broken paper-knife from its hiding place inside her gown, and with it on the table beside her, wrote a letter to her lover. Without meaning to do so, she included it in a bundle which Philip Dennis posted next day when he strolled to the post office for the mail.

That letter went astray.

It reached Oodnadatta two days after the string of camels had left for the north-west. In due course it arrived at Marnoola, where it lay unclaimed for a time and was then sent back.

## PART IV.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## In Search of Letho.

Dr. Byrne left Gum Glen, returned to Melbourne, and at once caught the express to Adelaide and the North. His thoughts were bitter. He had hardly dared to formulate in his mind the hope that had brought him down so hurriedly from Marnoola; it was like a castle built of morning cloud on the summit of a crag, which the sun of reality had dissolved away, leaving the rocks upstanding grim and bare.

He bought a plant of horses and gear at Oodnadatta, and persuaded a black-boy to join him. Several large crates had come up with him from Adelaide, and he left these for a time at Jepp's store. There was a look of determination on his face; he was no longer a new chum, hesitating amid new surroundings. His mind had a forward, not a backward, cast, and when he set out from the township at daybreak two days after the arrival of the train, he had the air of a man whose thoughts were centred on definite plans.

He shortened the time which Tom and he had taken to reach Marnoola by nearly a week. Formerly he had travelled with tired horses, but those he was now using were fresh, and he spared neither them nor himself. A ruthless impatience possessed him, and the boy, who had heard in



Oodnadatta that the white man had not been long in the country, and who tried to act to his own advantage in accordance with this knowledge, found that Tynan's voice could be as curt as a whip lash, and once, only once, he found that his companion could use his fist.

In Tynan's mind, every mile was one added to the number that separated him from Ida Hennessy. He took an almost Spartan pleasure in thus escaping from one who, in spite of all his disappointment in her, he sincerely loved. To crush that love was now his chief desire, and he knew but one way: complete absorption in some enterprise.

On the first evening at Marnoola, he revealed to Tom what that enterprise was. The stockman was amazed at the change which had taken place in his friend. Instead of the old spirit of enquiry, he saw a mind definitely made up, and the very speech of the man betrayed his irritation at any inaction, any pause in the carrying out of his plans. To pause was to think, and Tynan wanted action, not thought.

"Look here, Tom," said the young man, when he had answered his friend's enquiries about the trip, "you remember that gold you spoke of out west."

"Do I what?"

"You said the difficulty was in financing the undertaking. How long do you reckon would be a fair test?"

"Six months would show whether there was anything worth while. But what in the hell's the good of asking that?"

"And what would be the cost of fitting out a plant for two whites and as many niggers as are necessary, for six months?" went on Tynan, ignoring his friend's objection.

Tom thought for awhile, adding up on his fingers and muttering aloud, while Tynan waited.

Then he named a figure. "I've worked it out at that lots of times," he said. "But, mind you, that's an inside estimate, Jim."

"Double it," said Tynan emphatically. "Look here, old man, if I supply the cash, will you come in with me and test that find of yours?"

"Will I?" said the other, jumping up. "My oath, I will! But is that a dinkum offer, Jim?"

"Yes, Tom, absolutely. I'm talking dead on the level. I could give you money proof right now. Shall I?"

"Damn it all! No! I'll take your word. But by the holy sailor!" Tom was more excited than he cared to show.

Tynan breathed a sign of relief, but immediately brought his mind back to the subject in hand.

"Do we want camels or horses, Tom?"

"Camels. Horses need a drink once a day. If you break camels to it they can travel dry for a week. That west country's pretty dry, though we ought to strike a good time now. But are you really serious, Jim? D'you mean to start soon?"

"Yes, right away. Where d'you reckon we could get camels?"

"It's hard to say. You might be able to buy an odd one or two up the line, but it's a dead cert that some of the Afghans would sell you camels at Oodnadatta."

"We'll have to go to Oodnadatta, anyway," said Tynan. "I've got several cases of stuff there for the trip. I bought it in Adelaide."

"The devil, you did! You came up ready for business then?"

"Yes, Tom, I did. Look here, don't ask me why I'm doing this. It's not for the money; I'd take it on if we were looking for bally fossils. I must

get right away and forget everything. I want to be right up to the neck in something, and I'm told that the search for gold is pretty absorbing."

Tom touched his friend's arm, not sentimentally, but just to emphasise his words. "Right, Jim, I understand. . . . Yes, if you get what they call gold fever, you'll sure forget heaven and hell."

"Well, that's settled. I've got a plant here of ten horses, three riding saddles, two packs, and a couple of pairs of five gallon canteens. I reckon after a few days' spell those horses ought to be ready for the trip down again."

So, in a week's time, Tynan and his friend, with the nigger and plant, were on the road back to Oodnadatta.

As Tom had thought probable, it was no difficult matter to buy camels from the Afghans in Oodnadatta. The city man wisely left it to the bushman to do the bargaining, for the Indian, with true Oriental persistence, called heaven and earth to witness that the price Tom insisted upon meant ruination to him and his entire family. Nevertheless, the bargain was concluded, and five camels, two of which were broken in to riding, were finally yarded at Jepp's store.

Tom's judgement in the matter of stores was also invaluable. In spite of Tynan's assurance that he need not consider expense, he cut the luxuries—or what he considered as such—clean out, and doubled or even trebled Tynan's estimate of the more prosaic rations: flour, meat, sugar, tea, baking powder, tobacco, and matches.

"Them's *rations*," said Tom emphatically, pointing to his selection. "Take a whole camel-string of the rest if you like, but they'll only be a nuisance."

"But we won't be on the go the whole six

months," objected Tynan. "We'll make a decent camp and have a chance to do a bit of cooking."

"Yes, but not the time," said Tom. "But fire ahead! What would you suggest that I haven't got?"

"Well, jam for one thing," said Tynan. "And powdered milk for another. It's awfully light, and I can't stand black quart-pot tea. Coffee's nice for a change, and I vote for a few tins of fish. And how about tomato sauce?"

"Oh yes, how about lots of things? Don't think I couldn't guzzle tucker I've not included in my list. You see, the only question is, what's absolutely necessary? The other things aren't worth the room they take up."

Finally a compromise was arrived at to the satisfaction of both.

Of personal luggage there were blankets and chemical duck camp sheets for sleeping on, which could also be rigged against wet weather, a change of clothes and boots, revolvers, cartridges and a rifle, towels and soap. Tom saw to the few simple cooking and meal utensils, and was firm in his decision not to take along a camp bed which Tynan had brought, but agreed to a hurricane lantern and a small canteen of kerosene.

"You see, Jim," he said. "This is just a flying trip of ours. We may not need to be away six months, but when once we peg our claims and settle down to work them, then you can have all the beds and soft tucker you like."

The young man left the more important matters entirely to his friend, looking on and helping so that he would understand, but in no way interfering. Every strap and fastening of the saddles was subjected to rigid testing, and was in many cases duplicated. He was especially critical over the water canteens and bags, for on these the life

of three men depended. Spare ropes, hobbles, and nose-lines were not stinted, and a few prospectors' tools were secretly bought and packed away with a case of gelignite and one of detonators.

Finally all was ready. The packs were loaded and stacked in the yard, and the black-boy Banjo, the same one who had gone up the road with Tynan, received his order one evening to "Bring um up camel, picaniny daylight."

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## Start of Expedition.

To the small resident population of Oodnadatta, the fitting out of the expedition evoked no interest. That which is romance in cities is routine here.

Cattle are trucked in these yards that have travelled overland for a thousand miles. Men of the territory, lean and brown, put up at the Oodnadatta Transcontinental Hotel, spend a few days in the bar and on the benches outside, and then saddle up and return. Distance is spoken of in days and weeks and months, not miles, and that which makes travel possible or impossible is water. Much wealth has come down that north road, which, after all, is not a road, but a track staggering from water-hole to water-hole; wealth not in coin carried by sumptuously dressed women or cigar-smoking men, but crude rough wealth, the blood of the north; cattle, horses, gold, rubies, and now in these days, wolfram.

You cannot judge a rich man in Oodnadatta. On any day a man may ride into the township, travel-stained, loosely seated as is the way with these superbest horsemen in the world, with unshaved chin, battered hat, and sun-burnt chest showing through an open shirt, smoking a briar pipe black with the commonest plug, a man who could rig the markets of a continent.

Standards in that far northern township are not the whiteness of a man's hands and the cut of his clothes, but just this: the only thing that matters in the whole wide world, *manhood*.

But Oodnadatta is not Utopia. Those who would

reconstruct the social fabric on ideal lines which pre-suppose an ideal humanity, can set up no colony here. Many and many a man, entombed for years in the loneliness of some far out station, with no companions but cattle and blacks—of which the former are often to be preferred—has drawn his cheque, come down to the head of the line, and cashed it in a few days' wild carouse. Gambling and drink are on a scale proportionate to the size of the country; nothing petty, nothing mean; the very vices are those of full-blooded men.

Oodnadatta was still asleep when the five camels left the yards at the north end of the town and made for the bore where they were to drink. Similar expeditions have set out in an equally unassuming manner; some have never returned, and traces of them may or may not be found in years to come. Others have caused the wires of the world to buzz with news, and a township has sprung up in the desert in a day. The true story of Australian exploration will never be told. With the reticences of true heroism, those who have opened up this vast continent and given some indication of its wealth, have gone down to death unrecorded.

Tom had come north with a survey party when he was a youth, and since then had driven many thousand head of stock across the country. He was not only a competent bushman, but he also knew the country so well that he could afford to do what a less experienced man would have attempted only at great risk; he kept off the stock routes. Such a proceeding would have been impossible in summer, but good local rains had left surface water about, so that no difficulties were encountered for the first week.

Day after day the same routine was followed.

At the first sign of dawn, Tom, who was leader of the party, roused the camp, and Banjo, the black-boy, started to track the camels. Last night's fire was re-kindled and the quart-pots filled and placed against the blaze. A roll of American cloth served as a table, and the simple constituents of the meal were spread out on it: damper and meat usually, with an occasional tin of jam. This close association on the march with the old bushman, taught Tynan in a short time more than he would have learnt during years of station life. Tom was, as he himself expressed it, "Just a meat and damper cook," but his friend learnt how many different ways there were of making even those prosaic items palatable, and with his appetite sharpened by long days of travel, he got to like tucker which when served in the Marnoola kitchen had seemed hardly eatable.

For the time being he was satisfied. He was doing something; he was facing primitive conditions in a primitive way; he was driving down into forgetfulness—at least he hoped so—an ache which under easier conditions of life would have been intolerable.

They struck the Sisters' Creek on the fourth day, just south of Mount Randol, and followed the dry sandy bed to Afghan Soakage, where they camped for a day, as there was good feed for the camels. Then on past the junction, following the Oolanoo, a tributary of the main creek, till their way led to a jungle of mulga swamps. Tom shot half a dozen ducks here, and they made a welcome change from tinned beef. To avoid the swamps, the party took a more westerly line, making for Tent Hill and up Emu Creek to Prospect Hill on the 133rd meridian. Tynan walked up this hill one afternoon and found a cairn of stones on top and an empty tin match box, evi-



dently placed there by some surveying or exploring party. West again, running north to the Shaw Ranges, with good camel-feed and water all the way to The Colonel, a dry creek rising in the Franklin Ranges on the border of the Northern Territory, and losing itself in the unexplored sands to the south. Their track lay along the bed of this creek for nearly a week, and high in front of them rose the Franklins, where so many men have hunted for the elusive speck and have left their bones to mark their failure.

One day, Tom, who rode a camel at the head of the string, turned and pointed to the ground, shouting back the word "Native." When Tynan came up to the place, he saw the tracks of naked human feet leading in the same direction in which they were going. Right through the ranges they came across such signs: the marks of a recent fire or a broken pitchee near a water-hole, and twice they saw smoke signals rising ahead of them, but never once did they see or hear a black-fellow.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## The Grave in the Wilderness.

On the same day that they first saw native tracks, they topped the pass, and after a few miles of level going, began to descend again towards evening. They pulled off the packs at a native well near a dry creek, and Tynan was surprised to see, some little distance away, a few old mulga posts and rails which had evidently once enclosed a small square. He meant to ask his companion whether natives were responsible for the work, but unpacking the camels and preparing tea occupied his attention at the time, and he forgot about it.

The two friends were lying out on their swags after tea, smoking and talking, when Tynan asked: "How is it you know this route so dashed well, Tom? We've struck water every two or three days, yet since Mount Randel we've not even crossed a cattle-pad."

"Yes, we're in unoccupied country here, all right," Tom answered.

"Then how in the world do you know the waters?"

"I've been out as far as this once before."

"You have? When ever was that, Tom?"

"Years ago. Just after I had chucked up the surveying job."

"I see. What were you after? Gold?" It was always difficult to get Tom started on a yarn.

"No, not exactly gold, though traces have been found in these ranges." He puffed at his pipe for a time, and then continued: "One of the first chaps to prospect up here was named Macartney, and he

came alone with two niggers. Pretty wild beggars they were; but Mac. had a name with blacks. Still, nobody was much surprised when the niggers returned three months later without the white man. They said they came for stores, and that he had sent them with a note, which they had lost on the way. Raggan was police sergeant in Oodnadatta at the time, and didn't believe their tale. For all that, you couldn't do anything but send out some rations, on the off-chance of his wanting them; so my brother and I volunteered to go back with the niggers. And those two sons of the devil made it a picnic for us, I can promise you.

"From the first day out we had to cover them with revolvers all day and tie them up at night. We pretty nearly perished. I don't want to do a trip like that too often. The beggars led us off the track, over a hell of a route, but at last we hammered sense into them and found Macartney—that is, we found all that was left of him: some rags, a belt, boots, and things like that; no gold or tools or any sign of a camp. He must have been dead six or eight weeks. One of his legs was broken. I reckon those two niggers knew more about it than they chose to tell.

"We were burying him when they cleared. . . . Some parts of what happened after that I don't remember. I know we struck east, for it was morning when we left the grave, and the sun was in our eyes. After what seemed a long time, Mark—that's my brother—gripped my arm and pointed. He was stronger than I was, and not so far gone. He was pointing to this well. But that grip knocked me down, and it was some time before I could get up again. I just wanted to lie there and die; you see, I hadn't caught sight of the well.

"Then I heard him shout, and the next thing

I remember was seeing him lying in the sand writhing with pain. He had fastened his pannikin to his belt and braces, and was dipping down the well when a snake must have bitten him. He died very quickly. You see, he had no strength left. . . . Did you notice some old forks and rails as we came in to-night?"

"Yes, I meant to ask you what they were."

"That's his grave. . . . I got water somehow. The smell of it nearly drove me mad. You didn't know water had a smell, did you? You wait till you're so thirsty you'd sell your soul for one tiny drop, then you'll know. . . . I ripped up my shirt and tied the strips together and weighted them with a stone. Then I lowered it into the water again and again, and sucked the end."

"How did you get on for food?"

"I was just coming to that. . . . We'd left the horses; but one old chestnut mare—a good horse, that, I broke her in myself—followed our tracks. She had flour and tea in her packs."

For a few minutes there was silence, broken only by the falling of embers into the heart of the glow, and presently by the wailing chorus of a pack of dingoes.

"So you see," said Tom, rousing himself from the melancholy mood in which he had told the story, "I ought to know the track. I found it on the way back, alone with that old pack-mare."

Tynan lay staring at the stars that night long after his friend had gone to sleep. He had never been so remote from his fellows in his life, yet somehow he never felt so near to them. Just as on that first night at Toolooroo Springs, the unity of all creation appealed so strongly to him that he seemed for a time to lose his own individuality. Space and time were annihilated, and the silence seemed made up of the sound of what had been

both here and on the farthest star. Then a change came over his consciousness, and it was as if all the past had crystallised in him; as though all those sounds had blended into one—himself. He was alone, surrounded by the lifeless coldness of a vacuum, and he tried to cry out, but there was no air to carry any sound. As he struggled to pierce the gloom of his utter isolation, a face seemed to take shape very, very far away. It was the face of Ida Hennessy. Surely she would hear him. He gathered all his powers, and . . .

“Here, Jim!” Tom shook him roughly by the shoulder. “Can’t you let a chap sleep?”

“What’s wrong?” asked the dreamer.

“Why, you’ve been kicking up a hell of a row.”

“Sorry, Tom. I didn’t know I was.”

That face remained in his mind for a long time. What if he had indeed isolated himself by his pride from the woman he loved. Pride seemed merely negative when looked at by the pale radiance of the night sky. When he did fall asleep the question was still unanswered.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## Smoke Signals.

From Mark's well—as Tom called their camping place, in memory of his brother—the party struck due north on the 132nd meridian. This bearing led them far to the west of Marnoola, into the country between Toolooroo Springs and the great stretch of boggy salt known as Lake Deception.

With almost uncanny instinct—for he was in country he had never seen before—Tom led them from one water to another. He had what bushmen call “a great eye for country,” and when they had camped dry for a couple of days, as they had to do several times, Tynan was certain that the leader of the party had not missed any water.

One day, towards the end of the afternoon, they stopped beside a small spring which rose in the sand at one corner of a large dry salt lake. There was a very small supply of water, but judging by the area of boggy ground below it, the spring was evidently permanent.

“Do you know where we are, Jim?” asked Tom.

“No chance! Do you?”

“Yes. We're about 110 miles due west of Marnoola.”

“How ever do you know that?”

“See that stoney rise east of us?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you've seen it from the other side. That time I broke my leg, you know.” He laughed and added. “But the chief reason I know it, is that I've been here before. This is that spring I told you about.”

"I remember. Then where's Poison Peak?"

"You can't see it yet. It's about eighty miles west of us."

"Then we travel west to-morrow?"

"No. I reckon on three or four days' spell here. We've passed through all the good country we'll ever see on this trip. From here on we're into loose sand, ridge after ridge running across us, and as much chance of surface water as there is on a beach."

"How do you propose tackling it?"

"Well, we'll give the camels a spell here on good feed. We'll keep them away from water till just before we're going to start. Then we'll fill the canteens and dash across. There's water at Poison Peak—a rock-hole with a spring in the middle of it. Between here and there we'll be going dry."

"I see."

"I reckon on about twenty miles a day. It's good weather now, but you can't tell how soon it'll change. If it comes out hot, we'll travel by moonlight."

For three days the camels were hobbled on the good feed that grew in the neighbourhood of the little spring. They were mustered each morning, but not allowed to drink. The two white men and the nigger lay all day under rigged camp-sheets, rousing themselves only to eat and to draw water. The afternoon of the third day was spent in thoroughly overhauling the stores and gear, in gradually filling the four canteens, and in cooking damper for four days. "Shut-eye," which was Tom's name for bedtime, was early that evening, for he proposed making a start at dawn next day.

Tynan was roused in the morning by the lilt of a camel-bell, and saw, in the dim grey light, the

five ungainly beasts coming to camp with that aloof and unhurried dignity which is peculiarly their own. Tom had already kindled a fire and placed the three quart-pots in front of it.

"Come and give me a hand with these camp-sheets, Jim," he called.

"Right-O! I'm coming." Tynan flung back his blanket, slipped on his boots, and hurried out in the cold air.

A trench was scooped in the sand near the spring, about a foot deep, and long enough for five camels to water there at once. Two camp-sheets were spread over the trench, and water was poured into them, forming quite a serviceable trough. It was a tedious job, for there was a very small flow of water, and the camels seemed never to have had enough; but at last it was over, and the men went to breakfast.

"I don't like this change of wind," remarked Tom, as he cut himself a slice of damper. It's been due south for over a week, and now it's almost west. If it swings round any more, and blows from the north, we're in for rotten weather."

"Rain, d' you men?" asked Tynan.

"Lord, no! Heavy, sultry weather. Hot as hell. However, here goes!" and he gulped down the rest of his tea, and stood up and shouted to Banjo to bring the camels closer up to the packs.

Before six o'clock, they were filing away from camp, heading due west. Tom went first on a free camel, Banjo next, sitting sideways on top of a light load, two other draft camels tied nose-line to crupper followed, and Tynan brought up the rear, also on a free camel. At times he rode abreast of the leader, but for the most part kept in the rear, both for the sake of urging the line



to keep up the pace, and to call out if a nose-line broke—a not infrequent occurrence.

Within the first hour, the firm plains over which they had travelled since crossing the Franklins, changed to ridge after ridge of loose red sand. Great tufts of spinifex clothed the slopes, and the hollows between were often so filled with dense mulga scrub that travelling was very slow. Tom rode a quarter of a mile ahead to search out the best track across these valleys, leaving Banjo to follow his camel-tracks.

During the first afternoon, as they topped an unusually high ridge, Tynan saw, or thought he saw, a coil of smoke far away northward. The distance was so great and the mulga so dense, that it might have been a tall tree enlarged by the heat which quivered over the landscape. Tom was a good way ahead at the time, and his friend did not mention the matter till after supper.

“Did you notice any smoke to the north about three o’clock this afternoon?” he asked.

“Yes. And I saw some almost due ahead of us a bit later. They must be niggers’ fires.”

Next morning, just before they started, Tom gripped his companion’s arm, and led him to the fringe of the camping ground.

“You remember that smoke you saw yesterday?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, look there.”

Tom pointed to the ground in several places, and even the city-bred man had no difficulty in understanding what he saw there. All around were the tracks of naked feet. Their breadth and the spread of the great toe apart from the others proclaimed them native. Here and there it was plain to see that someone had been sitting down. Without a doubt, wild blacks had been within a spear’s thrust of them that night.

"You carry your revolver handy, I suppose?" said Tom.

Tynan pointed to his belt, at which hung a revolver pouch.

"And at night?"

"I haven't up till now, but, by gad! I will in future."

Many more smoke signals were seen that day, often in front, but still on the north of their line of march.

"How d'you feel?" asked Tom during dinner.

"Good," smiled Tynan, "though I must admit a revolver's a great comfort."

"Yes. But I don't expect you'll have to use it. The beggars are just curious, that's all. . . . By the way, it's a dashed good sign."

"Good sign! What? That warrigals are about?"

"Yes; for, don't you see, it means there's water somewhere between that spring and Poison Peak. We may be jolly glad of it before we're through."

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## The Supposed Tree Stump.

A big fire was made that night, and the two white men kept alternate watches. It was a new experience to Tynan, knowing that eyes were peering at him out of the dusky faces in the shadows beyond the circle of flickering light. The air was still and sultry. During the day the wind had gradually changed to the north, and the weather had become more and more oppressive, till at night, in the gloom of the weird trees, it seemed that the whole world was shut away and lost beyond recall.

During the second watch, one of the camels began to roar, but its complaint died away to silence again.

Banjo went after the camels as usual at day-break, but only returned with four.

"What for you no bring 'um up other camel?" asked Tom.

"Him bin break 'um leg," was the answer.

"Which way?" And both white men started after the nigger.

What they found explained the sudden roar which had broken the stillness of the night. One of the draft camels lay dead, about half a mile from camp. Tracks all around left no doubt as to the perpetrators of the deed. The blacks were evidently not following them out of curiosity.

The third day was one of constant tension. Tom rode with a rifle over his knees, and every now and again fired into the scrub to scare away any lurking enemy. In spite of the fact that the weather had become almost unbearably hot and

that the two riding camels shared between them the load of the one that had been killed, the party pushed on and did thirty miles before sunset.

"Hoosh-tar, Kabul! Hoosh-tar, Emir! Shah! Sultan!" The four camels knelt, and Banjo at once began to pull off the packs.

Tom checked him. "By-'m-by," he said. "We get um tucker first time."

In explanation to his friend, he accused himself of being the cause of the fifth camel's death."

"However could you have saved it, Tom?"

"By doing what we're going to do to-night," the bushman replied. "Camp here till dark, and then go on for another hour. I'd like to go on right through the night, but Sultan's feet are too sore."

"But won't the niggers follow us?"

"No. I don't think so. They usually watch where you camp, and then creep in at night. I bet if we returned here to-morrow morning we'd find a whole lot of tracks. We'll be as safe as a house if we move on."

"But the camels?"

"That's the trouble. The poor beggars are thirsty and may wander. I wish to hell I knew where the niggers are getting water, but it's too close scrub to run about looking for it. We're cutting it pretty fine for ourselves, too. . . . I reckon we'll close-hobble the camels on as good feed as we can find in the moonlight, and take it in turns to watch them, like we do with a mob of cattle."

Immediately it was dark, the men made a big fire, as if preparing for a night's camp, but at once set off west again through the scrub. After about an hour, they found a little well-grassed flat, free from trees, and short-hobbled the camels on it, making camp in the scrub near by. Tom took first watch, Tynan second; no fire was lit.

A sleep of utter exhaustion overwhelmed the young man, in spite of all danger, and it seemed as if he had only just stretched himself on top of his swag when Tom shook him. Instantly he was fully awake and, to the bushman's satisfaction, his hand at once went to his revolver.

"Right, old man," said Tom, "it's only me. I've just come off watch. Everything's quiet."

"What's the time?"

"About half past two." Tom ought to have called him at one, but he had given the untried man a little longer to rest.

"You're a damn good chap, Tom. Where are the camels?"

"I'll show you."

The four tall beasts were still feeding in the little open space, and seemed in no mood to stray.

"I'd just walk round the beggars every half hour or so," explained Tom. "You'll easy enough keep your eye on them in this light, and the moon won't set till close on daylight. Keep them on this patch if you can. . . . So long!"

Tynan walked round the camels, drove them a little closer together to let them know he was there, and then sat down, with his rifle at full cock, on a log where Tom had evidently been sitting. The tall grey animals looked ghostly in the moonlight, and in a few minutes the main details of the scene were quite plain.

Not a breath of wind stirred. The watcher's arms and face were damp with sweat, and a crowd of tiny midges gave him no peace. But the weeks of travel had made him disregard many discomforts, and he did not even bother to drive the little pests away.

His mind was beginning to wander—and if it was speeding on its way to Melbourne, who can be surprised?—when one of the camels lifted its

head and looked intently at the scrub opposite to the spot where Tynan was sitting. Then he imagined that he saw something move from one tree to another, just where the camel was looking. He watched it for several minutes with the rifle at his shoulder, while his heart pounded away with excitement. The thing was too vague to shoot at, and it is impossible to sight properly in moonlight. Nothing would be gained by firing at a shadow, and a report would betray their whereabouts to the blacks. At last he gave it up as a trick of an over-wrought imagination. Moreover, the camel had resumed its feeding.

Then from the east, and quite near, came a feeling that someone was looking at him. For a moment he did not turn round, but kept the rifle pointing in its original direction. Taking a firm mental grip of himself, he wondered whether this growing sense of horror was merely nerves. No, they were steady enough. He most decidedly was being watched.

He wheeled and faced east suddenly. Silence. Just twisted trees throwing tangled shadows on the sand. It is marvellous how the mind records objects even when no special attention has been paid to them. Before he sat down on the log, Tynan had glanced around, and now, as he looked again, peering intently into the scrub, he felt sure that he had not noticed before a short stump about fifty yards away.

His mind was superlatively alert. A twig cracked, and he looked away for a moment, then back again at the old stump. It seemed to have changed its position very slightly. He began walking slowly towards it with his rifle pointed. A night-owl hooted close by. He could not tell till afterwards how long the ordeal lasted. The owl hooted again, but Tynan did not take his attention from the stump. He seemed to know that

savage human lips had framed those ghastly bird-notes.

The thing he was looking at suddenly collapsed. Where formerly was a stump, there was none. But at the same instant there was a report. Tynan did not know he had fired. The action was purely reflex. Then he saw something black writhing on the ground.

The silence was instantly full of a sound like the rustling of leaves. To his horror every shadow seemed alive, fleeing back into the scrub, of whose mystery they seemed a part. He saw that writhing thing go back and back till it, also, was lost in the gloom.

He put his hand to his head. The thing was too uncanny to be real. Then he heard Tom's voice, and that lusty shout restored him at once.

"Here, Tom! Here!" he answered.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, yes. I'm alright."

"What did you fire at?"

"A nigger, though I'm hanged if I knew what it was when I fired. . . . To tell you the truth, I didn't know I had pulled the trigger."

"Did you hit him?"

"Yes. He was over here in the scrub." Tynan began to go towards the spot, but his friend restrained him.

"Steady, Jim! Steady! I reckon we'd best wait a bit."

So, side by side, the two white men watched the camels till dawn.

When the light was strong enough to reveal of any ambushed enemy, they went to the spot where Tynan had last seen the nigger. Instead of the body, they found marks where it had been dragged away. They followed for a quarter of a mile, but judged it best not to go further. There were tracks of natives in abundance, but when

Tom had been shown the place where the nigger had stood so incredibly still in imitation of a tree-stump, he suddenly called out,

"See, Jim! See that track?"

"Yes. I see it. Nice roots for a tree," he laughed.

"Yes, yes," answered Tom in excitement. "Do you know who you've shot, man? It's Jack. See that cut across the heel? By gad, we've got the devil at last."

"Jack?" queried Tynan, in amazement. "You mean that nigger that caused so much mischief?"

"Yes, that's the chap. The one from the Mission Station."

"I wish I'd known," said Tynan. "I'd have made a cert of him. . . . But there! The whole bally thing was a fluke. I didn't even know it was a nigger till I heard the report."

"Never mind, let's hope he's a gone coon. I wondered why these niggers were so persistent. They'd never have followed us after dark if that blasted nigger hadn't led him. He's a good example of trying to civilise blacks. Give a nigger his tucker and clothes if he wants them, and teach him just enough for his work, and he's right. Anything more than that makes rascals of them. . . . And it's not only me that says it," continued the stockman, as they walked away towards camp. "You ask any man who has lived for any time in this country, and he'll tell you the same."



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## A Sand-storm.

The remainder of the journey to Poison Peak was accomplished without any interference from blacks. No signal smokes were seen by day, no mishaps occurred at night. The enemy seemed to have been finally scared away. Constant watch was kept, however, and this nervous tension added to the strain of travel. But Fate did not allow them to reach their goal without a further test.

Had everything gone smoothly, the end of the fourth day would have seen the travellers camping in the shadow of the peak, with but an hour's climb ahead of them. As it was, the fourth evening found them still in thick scrub, with their objective like a grey cloud against the brilliant sunset. Tynan had turned suddenly sick that afternoon, and when, with a call upon all his remaining strength, he had done his share of the unloading, he lay down in the sand with his head on his rolled-up swag, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

The promise of the previous night had been fulfilled. All day the men had travelled with sweat-soaked clothes under a sky that was without the mercy of a single cloud. Wind had come in hot puffs like an oven door opening, but even these died down at sunset, leaving a world gasping for breath.

Tynan had experienced his first touch of the sun. At tea he could eat nothing, and, though Tom gave him a liberal allowance of water, his thirst was as unquenched after two quarts of tea as before. What sleep he gained that night was fit-

ful and exhausting. Many a time in his almost delirious dreams, he imagined himself with Ida Hennessy. Sometimes he was riding with her along tracks amongst tall trees whose foliage even the noon sun failed to pierce; at others they were boating together on a river edged with willows which overhung the water, making canopies of green where lovers idled; again, upon a wind-swept cliff, they watched the grey sea beat itself to spray, and laughed as it dashed past their faces, leaving lips and cheeks cool and bitter-sweet to kiss. Always this sense of coolness and of water. And every time he woke, he saw the lifeless trees, and the moon sailing in a cloudless sky, and was conscious once more of his burning head and aching body.

Suddenly the clink of hobbles made him remember his watch.

"Tom!" he shouted. "Tom!"

"Hulloa!" came the answer from not far away.

"Why ever didn't you call me to watch the camels?"

Tom laughed. "You were making such a row in your sleep, old man, that I reckoned you would scare the beasts clean away."

"Was I? I'm sorry, Tom. But, you know, I ought to do my share."

Tom became suddenly serious, and said almost tenderly: "You're doing all your share, Jim; don't make any mistake about that. You've got a touch of the sun, that's all. . . . Besides," and he told a lie to satisfy his friend, "Banjo took most of your watch."

Tynan got out of his blankets, and in order to bluff away the deadly weakness that was mastering him, asked how far they were from Poison Peak.

"It can't be more than fifteen miles," was the answer. "There's a ten mile stretch of bare

sandy country to cross yet, and I reckon we'll get out of this blasted scrub in a couple of hours. . . . But come and have breakfast. I've got a stew going. It ought to be rather good."

So it was, considering the ingredients at hand, and Tynan did his best to show his appreciation. But all he could do was to drink as much black hot coffee as Tom would let him have. His body seemed to crave stimulants, although the satisfying of his thirst merely brought on sickness again.

Not a breath of wind broke the oppressive stillness of the morning. Every tree waited; every insect was mute with wonder at that awful sultriness.

"It can't last long," was Tom's opinion as he tightened the girths round one of the camels, and Tynan, whose little strength was nearly exhausted by the easy task of rolling up his swag, prayed that his friend might be right.

Morning held its breath till noon. An occasional puff of hot wind was like the panting of a wrestler preparing for a final throw. Seated on his camel, Tynan lolled forward, unconscious of anything but the necessity of holding on.

Some slight relief was gained when they emerged from the scrub upon an absolutely barren plain. In front of them was the short range of hills of which Poison Peak was the highest feature; to north and south the mulga scrub ended abruptly and gave place to level sand, unrelieved by grass or shrub or tree of any kind. So bare was it that, at Tom's direction, Banjo collected a handful of sticks and carried them along to boil the quart-pots at mid-day. Tom saw the uselessness of urging his companion to eat, and was again extravagant in his allowance of tea.

"There's good cool shade up there, Jim," he said, encouragingly, pointing to the west. "The shade of rocks, and any amount of spring water. And I

reckon one sight of that gold would revive a dead man."

Tynan had just enough strength for that afternoon, and no more. He had reached his limit, and when his friend helped him to mount, he clutched the front of the saddle for some time before he could trust himself alone. His head felt very light, and any sudden movement made him sick and giddy. Ahead of them, Poison Peak was almost lost in a slate-blue haze which was hiding the horizon. Northward, a few puffs of white cloud showed like browsing sheep, whereas the rest of the sky was filmed here and there with gossamer grey. The air was so still that it seemed as if the pad-pad of the camels must break the silence for miles around.

Slowly the flock of white clouds spread out over the pastures of the sky. Behind them, and more slowly, came a well-defined billowy mass of grey, from which jutted out three shapes like the heads of wolves with gaping jaws. A brown streak began to show against the grey, low down on the sky-line. It was the color of milky tea at first, but as it rose with the clouds, it looked as if a fire were burning in its heart, for an angry red shone here and there through the brown. The three wolf-clouds rushed wildly across the sky, increasing each moment in size and in the weirdness of their outlines. The bank of grey rose higher and higher, massed in thunder shapes, the deep blue of whose shadows was lit up from time to time with hidden lightning. And, like a curtain bellied with the wind, behind which were the fires of hell, the immense brown cloud came sweeping on.

No sound. No breath of air. The ground cringed in terror of the approaching storm.

The herald clouds crossed the sun, and at once the landscape was wrapped in deepening twilight. Then, as if to clear the way, came two or three

short sharp puffs of cold wind. They ceased, and again the oppressive stillness was unbroken.

The sound of rustling leaves came gradually out of the silence, and grew so rapidly, that soon a forest seemed to be lamenting at the chastening of a gale. A faint rumbling echoed through all that approaching mass, while flashes lit up each towering column of cloud. The dark brown curtain came tailing across the plain below.

It enveloped them suddenly. Wind sped howling past. Thunder crashed and lightning flashed, so near that the very air was tainted. Sand! Sand! Sand! A thousand men shovelling at once could not have thrown so much dust into the air. The darkness of utter destruction, the agent of some merciless fiend whose power had blotted out all light for ever, was tangibly flying upon the wind.

In an instant each man was alone. The head of the camel he rode was lost to view, and even the front of the saddle could only be found by touch. Breathing was a struggle that absorbed every power of mind and body. They had to definitely will each breath, or life would have gone in company with the shrieking fiends that sped past them.

All at once Tynan's camel swerved, and before he had time to check it, even if he had had the power, it was kneeling down.

What could he do? He was alone. He was more afraid than he had been in his life before; afraid of the evil powers that were wrecking their fury on the exhausted earth. Gathering the last of his strength together, he shouted: "Tom! Tom!" But the wind caught his voice, tore it to tatters, and strewed them far away to the south, and not the tiniest shred of his shout reached even his own ears. Then he must have fallen off his camel.

The storm passed by, as clean-cut as it came,

trailing over the landscape like the skirts of Death. It left a clean, cool air and a sky marred by no sultry vapours. No morning in spring could be more joyous. The earth appeared to be newly awake and smiling, and all living creatures seemed cleansed of weariness like a man cleanses his body with water. This was true only by contrast with what had gone before, and it had one exception—the exhausted man—though even he yielded quickly to the spirit of well-being that filled the air.

“Come on, Jim. Drink this.”

From somewhere very far away, Tynan heard the words, and automatically obeyed. Almost at once his lungs began to tingle, and then a fire of new life coursed through his veins. He looked up. Tom was kneeling at his side with a flask of brandy. The bulk of his camel towered above him, half buried in sand, and the other three animals knelt quite close by.

“Better?”

“Yes, thanks, but—”

“Have another.”

After the second draught, he sat up. The situation was easily explained. Tynan was riding the last camel when the storm broke, and his animal had knelt because those in front had done the same. The only difference in their experiences was that whereas Tom had got off his camel and sheltered of his own free will, the other white man had done it involuntarily, and had succumbed to exhaustion for a time.

No rain had fallen, but the air had just the same feeling of being newly washed that comes after a thunder shower. The cool change brought health and renewed spirits to Tynan. Half an hour after the storm had passed, it was hard to believe that he had been recently so near the limit of his strength. He looked and saw the mass of

Poison Peak looming up, every detail clearly defined through the sparkling atmosphere, and it looked as if a half-hour's walk would bring him to the foot of the hills.

"Nearly there," he said to Tom, smiling.

"Yes, only about five more miles."

"Five miles be hanged! It's not more than two. I bet I could walk there in three-quarters of an hour easily."

"Don't you believe it. See that line of mulga trees out there? How far do you reckon it is?"

"Oh, about a mile. I should say it's half way between here and the foot of the peak."

"Well, I know for a cert that the trees are nearly four miles from the hills. That makes it five we've got to go; it may be nearer six. You see, after a storm up here, it's absolutely impossible to judge distance. . . . How do you feel now?"

"By gad, Tom, I'm hungry."

"That's good. What do you say if we put on the pots right away? It's only about half-past four, but that doesn't matter."

"Good," said Tynan. "This change has put new life into me. I don't feel a bit sick now, but am as hollow as a drum." He stood up. For a few moments everything seemed to sway and toss around him, then a horrible darkness came over him, and he would have fallen had not Tom come to his assistance."

"Thanks, Tom," he said feebly, when he had recovered. "I had no idea I was so weak."

All he needed was nourishment, and a good meal went far to completely restoring him. They opened their first tin of fish, and while the cool breeze kept off the flies, he ate with the relish of hunger. Afterwards he lay back and sipped tea with great content.

Tom was in high spirits, and sought to add to his friend's cheerfulness. "By the Lord, Jim, I

like your pluck. I reckoned you were clean knocked out last night, and here you are as chirpy as a grasshopper."

Tynan took his hat off and let the wind play with his hair. "It's this cool wind, Tom. Two hours ago I thought I was about done, whereas now . . . are we going to start soon?"

"Yes. Right away."

One after the other the great beasts rose from the sand which had drifted around their loads, shook themselves, and knelt down again, looking round at the men with that disdainful glance of theirs.

Tucker was packed away, nose-lines adjusted, and as the party set out for the last few miles of travel, Tynan shouted from the rear:

"All aboard! Not stopping this side of Poison Peak."



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## Gold Madness.

The mass of rising ground of which Poison Peak is the apex, runs roughly north and south. Behind it is no distinct fall to the same level as the country east, but the high land continues for many miles—how far, no white man knows, for no one has ever had reason to cross it. The peak is nearly central, and is cut off from the other hills by two deep gullies which are just dry sandy creek beds where they emerge on the plain, but grow rocky and precipitous as they rise.

The only source of water in the district is a small rock-hole, a spring which gurgles over its basin and flows down one of the gullies in a silver trickle till it loses itself in the sand.

The whole range is barren, save for the vegetation in these two gullies. From a distance, it resembles nothing so much as the slag-heap of some vast furnace, for stratum after stratum of rock, coloured as if by the smelting of hell, rises from base to summit. Rain might fall here continuously for a week, but when the sun shone out again, it would swelter down on the same arid waste. If wealth indeed is hidden here, it has a grim keeper, for Death sits on the peak and his minions perch on every crumbling crag.

The caravan halted at the entrance to the northern gully late on the afternoon of the sand-storm, and the order was given for the camels to kneel.

“Not going up to-night?” asked Tynan.

“No, Jim. The gully’s unfit for camels. They’ll have to go round about six miles and come to the

water from the west. It's only about a mile and a half up the gully."

"Why not walk up after tea, Tom. I feel as right as pie, and by gad! I'm anxious to see that gold."

"Not more anxious than I am, old man. No. We'll take it steady. This sandy bed doesn't last for more than a hundred yards. Then it's clambering over rocks and trees. I reckon we'd better wait till morning."

Tynan's assurance that he was "as right as pie" must be taken with reservations. He was very restless, and quite unable to quieten his over-taxed nerves; a condition which frequently follows exhaustion. In his excitement, he mistook this activity, and his deception was made easier by the fact of a healthy appetite. In reality, the keen expectation of finding gold, which had supported both men during the trials of the journey, took advantage of his weakness, and became an obsession. Fortunately for him, his companion retained his self-control, or the young man might have added one to the long list of prospectors who did not "come back." He sat by the fire nursing his knees after tea, and every now and again he looked up the gully.

"There's gold within a mile and a half of us, Tom. Think of that!" he muttered.

"Yes, old man. Nothing's surer except that just now we want something more than gold."

"More than gold!" Tynan was easily startled in his present state.

"Yes. We both want a dashed good sleep."

"Sleep be blowed!" exclaimed the young man. "D'you think I'll sleep a wink to-night, Tom?"

"I don't like to think of it if you don't, old man," said Tom, so seriously that for a minute or two the obsession loosened its grip.

"I'll try, Tom, really I will. . . . But my brain's on fire. . . . You said a mile and a half, didn't you? Well, if we start at six, we ought to be there by—" Tom made an exclamation of impatience, and the rambling finished with: "I think a sight of that gold would cool my head."

"Gold never cooled a man yet," was the emphatic answer.

"But I think it would cool mine, Tom." Then with a cunning smile, he asked: "Would you be surprised if I went up there in the night, Tom?"

The bushman stood up opposite his crouching companion. The firelight shone on his weather-worn face and rough clothes, and seemed to emphasise the rude strength of one who had gained it in a daily struggle with Nature.

"Look here, Jim!" he said sternly. "You must drop this, right now. We're mates, but you've put me in charge of this plant, and by G— I am in charge! You're to go to bed at once and not stir till I sing out in the morning. See?"

Tom had not meant to be so positive, but he saw the rising passion in his friend's face, and knew that no half measures would suffice.

Tynan sprang to his feet before Tom had finished speaking, and confronted his companion across the fire.

"Who in the hell are you giving orders to?" he demanded. "I'll do what I like. I'll—"

But the barrel of a revolver, pointed directly at him, brought the sentence to an abrupt close.

"Sit down!" was the command, followed by: "and hand me your revolver."

There was no alternative, so Tynan obeyed. Tom kept him covered for about five minutes, till he saw that the rage had died out of the other's face, then he addressed him again.

"Jim, old man, you and me are mates. I've met all kinds of men up here, but never one I liked as

well as you. . . . But I know this country, and the cursed grip gold takes of a man. It's worse than whisky, and that's saying a lot. Jim, I've seen it drive men stark mad. . . . Now you and me have got to take this good and sober. You've had a touch of the sun and are not quite right."

"Tom, I'm awfully sorry," said Tynan penitently, "but I'm just all to pieces in my mind. You don't know how near the edge of things I am."

"Then be a good chap and don't fall over it."

"Right. I'll go to bed."

For hours the weary man tossed on his blankets. Body and mind ached, but both were still at full tension. His friend's prompt action had restored the balance that was being upset, and he fought—of his own free will now—to keep his thoughts from speculating on what would happen next day. The lust that sends men out to the ends of the earth in search of gold bears no ratio to their need of it. Tynan was a wealthy man, yet gold fever had attacked him so strongly that if his companion had been less experienced, this one-time brilliant young doctor would probably have died of exhaustion.

Skirting round the object of their journey in search of a train of thought sufficiently absorbing to occupy his mind to the exclusion of aught else, it was inevitable that he should at last come to Ida Hennessy. Why was he tossing restlessly at the foot of Poison Peak instead of sleeping quietly in his Melbourne bedroom? Not all the gold in Australia could alter his position with her; but the search for it was to drive her memory from his mind. That it had not succeeded was apparent. In pride he had come north and west into the wilderness, and it had shown him what a pitiful thing his pride had been.

But he could not run away from love. As all

the artificial props for his pride had been knocked away—for nothing but what is real can live in the bush—each mile had brought him nearer to the naked truth, even as it had brought him nearer to a lode of gold. He knew now that in losing Ida he had lost what would have made his life worth living; but now . . . .

In sleep, the dreamer is always the central figure, and always heroic. All wishes are fulfilled in that magic land of make-believe. So when at last Tynan's thoughts were of reconciliation, of mutual love, and of unending vistas of happiness, it is safe to conclude that he slept.

Tom watched the fire till nearly midnight, and then tip-toed to the side of his friend. He listened to the deep regular breathing for a moment, then smiled and lay down to sleep. In his own quiet way, Tom liked this city-bred man better than anyone he had ever met.

Like all bushmen, he was awake at dawn. The sun had still an hour or two to rise before it would shine over the top of Poison Peak, so when Tom saw that Tynan was still asleep, he signed to the boy to lie down again, and did the same himself.

Now that the object of his quest was nearly within his grasp, he was strangely indifferent to it. Many times he had pictured this identical morning, with its mad rush up the gully at the first signs of day; and now he was lying idly on his blankets. As a matter of fact, he was experiencing one of those strange psychological impulses which, when the object of a very strong desire is almost attained, makes us stay our hand. Probably many of the failures in the region of high endeavour can be attributed to this. So much energy has gone in anticipating achievement, that when it is almost accomplished, there is not the

necessary power to carry it to completion. Tom lay and gazed at the brightening sky, at the trees, at the weird colours of Poison Peak, and there was no quickening of his pulse. In order to stir up his mind, he went over the details of his previous visit, when that reef had startled him almost to madness. But he could arouse no more interest than to determine to go up the gully after breakfast. He turned on his side and did what he could scarcely remember having done before: he went to sleep again after sunrise.

No one can predict what he will do or think in a crisis. Both these men were on the top-note of expectation, yet they reacted in entirely opposite ways.

But two hours later! With increasing difficulty the white men had climbed the creek bed till it narrowed to a steep gully. On each side of them, the strata showed as clearly as if it had been prepared for a geological specimen. What ages of polishing with wind-blown sand had gone by since first, when the earth turned in its sleep, this rift had been made! On top was the slag-like formation, stratum upon stratum of vivid colours, but lower down was grey granite veined here and there like marble. This evidently constituted the body of the range; the other—who can tell whence came that multi-coloured refuse pile on pile?

When the rift up which they scrambled was nearly closing in at the top, two smaller ones joined it, one going north and of no great length, and the other south extending for perhaps a quarter of a mile up into the western footing of the peak. At the junction of these stood a white gum.

Tynan had been so busy keeping pace with his companion that he almost stumbled against the tree before its significance struck him. When it

did he leant against it and shouted till the gully was full of echoes.

"Tom! Tom! Here's that white gum!"

But Tom was already crashing through the bushes in the southern ravine. All apathy had left him, and his face, usually so open and kind, was fierce and set as he urged his body to do its utmost to respond to the passionate impatience of his mind.

Tynan followed. They dashed on, stumbling, bruised, bleeding, with torn flesh and clothes, panting, swearing, shouting, while great sweat-drops tinged with dirt and blood blinded their eyes. The younger man managed to get ahead, and saw the tobacco tin first, whereat he gave a yell of joy. But his companion, with a sudden sprint, was abreast of him, and flung him to the ground and raced on.

On reaching the tin wedged in the fork of a mulga tree, Tom made straight for the wall of the gully as if he would dash himself against it; but a needle-bush hid the entrance to a crack in the rock, and with a leap through the bush, he fell down against a solid wall of rock, sobbing and reaching up his torn hands, fondling the rock as a man might fondle the face of a woman whom he had braved many dangers to win.

Tynan was on his feet again in an instant, gained the crumpled tin, and was just in time to see his companion disappear behind the bush. He followed with a shout, and fell exhausted beside the sobbing man.

Their climb had brought them nearly to the top of the range, and the loose, brightly coloured strata showed a few feet above them. Below these was grey granite, while the rock on which the men lay was a bluish dolorite. But between the granite and the dolorite, like a mineral sandwich, was a

hard milky stone stained with dull red, and it was this which Tom was caressing with such extravagant affection.

"Gold!" he cried, with the tender tones of a lover. "Gold! Gold! How beautiful it is. . . . It's waited all the time for me. . . . for me!"

Between his knees was a piece of the whitish quartz that had broken off from the rest. It was about the size of a man's hand, and was thickly covered with red and yellow stains. Tom flung his arms round it, kissing its rough surface, and finally lay down with his head upon the hard mass, crooning little words of endearment which sounded strange from a bushman. Such display of emotion would have been ridiculous, did not the excesses border on madness, and turn the scene from comedy to tragedy.

Tynan was too exhausted to give rein to his excitement. He lay panting on the ground. Though he had never seen gold in the rough before, he knew the meaning of those reddish stains, and indeed the gold on the broken lump was apparent to anyone. The sight of his friend steadied him, but only for a time; he was too weak to resist the contagion.

Tom looked up, and the next moment the two men were hugging one another almost to suffocation, using every possible term of endearment and protestation of undying friendship, stooping together to fondle the broken lump, covering the face of the rock with kisses, and at times breaking away to wave their arms and shout with all their might.

Here was gold! Power! The vitalising agent of the world! They did not know how much of it could be taken to the great cities that smile so affably on those who have gold; but it was here, and belonged to them, and no one in the wide



world was present to dilute the joy of complete possession.

Complete possession? No one? There was Tynan! There was Tom! Such was suddenly the thought of each, and how subtly did they try to hide it. Power cannot be perfect if shared, and madness possessed these men for perfect power.

The paroxysm of delight passed almost simultaneously away, and as they lay back, their eyes met, and each read the same tale in those of the other. In order to cover their designs, they began to quietly discuss the find, the sudden lull in the emotion storm being more terrible than its outburst.

"What weight d'you think that lump ought to yield, Tom?" asked Tynan, and as he spoke casually, his hand stole round to his revolver-pouch, while his eyes watched his companion as a cat does a mouse.

"Oh, it's hard to say, till it's crushed," was the answer, while he too felt for his weapon. Suddenly Tom laughed. It was a cruel, mirthless laugh, and immediately the other man's face blanched with fear. Tynan's pouch was empty. Tom had forgotten to return his revolver.

At all costs the pretence must be kept up. Tynan moved a little closer to his companion and asked, with a forced laugh, "What's the joke, Tom?"

A fierce gleam came into the bushman's lust-maddened eyes, and he slipped his revolver out of its pouch and laid it on his lap. "Oh," he said casually, "I was just thinking of the things a chap can do with money, that's all." And he idly cocked the hammer of his weapon.

All at once Tynan sprang. Every particle of strength in his well-knit figure went into that supreme effort. But Tom had watched him

closely, and leapt aside. Tynan tripped and fell, and his head crashed into the lump of gold-stained quartz. He lay still. Tom backed slowly against the wall and took aim. It somehow did not seem right to shoot a man at too close quarters. As he stepped back, another piece of quartz tripped him, and in order to get a firm stand, he kicked it out of the way. The stone struck the forehead of the unconscious man, and a trickle of blood flowed over the milky surface and mingled with the stains of gold.

He took aim carefully, then lowered the weapon. No, he would not shoot; it would make a noise, and the blackfellow might hear. Why not crush the skull with that lump of quartz? It would have the appearance of an accident, and he would then have unquestioned right over this gold, this power.

He took a step forward to carry out his design, when a hail from the top of the ravine checked him. Banjo was looking down.

"Which way me hobble um camel?" he asked.

That simple question saved the life of one man and the sanity of another. Tom stood dazed for a moment, looking down at his friend, as if he did not know how he got there.

"Hi! Misser Tom! Which way me hobble um camel?" came the question again, answered at length by a shaky voice.

"You take um back longa camp. Good feed there all about. You sit down longa camp. Me came by-'m-by."

No wife could be more tender and devoted to a sick husband than was Tom to his friend. Night and day he cared for him, apparently giving no thought to the object of their journey, till he had nursed him back to health again.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## Blasting.

Long days of unremitting toil were succeeded by nights of unbroken sleep. Camp was made near the water-hole on the table-land, just above the ravine where the men worked all day. A tiny spring bubbled up, and after brimming over the rock basin, the water fell into the gully and was lost. Thousands, perhaps millions, of years of scanty rain on Poison Peak had stored this supply, which was the only source of the precious liquid in that arid district.

Every three or four days, the camels were brought from their pasture at the mouth of the gully, given a drink, then taken back and hobbled, for there was no herbage on the plateau.

As a nightmare passes at the advent of day, leaving a fainter and fainter memory of the time of terror, so those first hours of madness gradually faded like a dream. In fact, neither man ever remembered clearly what had happened from the time they reached the white gum to that later time when, with water from the spring, Tom had restored his companion to consciousness.

Mining toil came natural to Tom, for he had been used to rough work and food from his childhood; but Tynan nursed blisters for days, and knew more about muscles, because of the stiffness of his own, than he had ever done in his student days.

They had worked with picks, hammers, and wedges, for several feet into the rock face. The richest of the quartz had been roughly crushed and washed, and the residue of sparkling metal

scraped into a billy can. Every evening the day's find was weighed and stored in a leather bag. But a point had now been reached when pick and wedge had to be exchanged for more deadly tools. They were satisfied that the lode was of high grade ore, and it was now necessary to know how far it extended.

"You see," explained Tom, "what we really want to know is whether it's just a pocket or whether it goes further. If it does, I reckon we peg our claim and go back right away and register it. If not, we can get what's there and clear out. We're both rich men, anyway."

"Then you propose blasting, Tom?"

"Yes. The sooner we know, the better."

Next morning, three holes were drilled at the back of the adit, one pointing due west, one southwest, and the third north-west. By thus splaying their direction the full worth of each explosion would be gained. Each hole was rammed with gelignite and finished off with a detonator and fuse.

"We're taking no risks on this journey," said Tom, as he unrolled a coil of fuse for each detonator, and brought them together at the entrance of the adit. When I fire these, we'll both make into the gully for our lives. You've no idea how far rocks carry."

The scraping of a match; the glow as it was shaded in a pair of hard hands; and a man stooping over the junction of three wires. A splutter and a trail of smoke, then three trails crawling towards the adit. Both men ran till an overhanging rock offered them shelter, and they crouched down.

Boom! Boom! A pause. Boom! followed by the rumble of falling rocks. The air in the gully seemed to strike the confining walls with a shock,

and both men, though they were expecting the explosions, staggered as if from a blow.

Tynan started back up the gully.

"Wait a couple of minutes, Jim. Some of the rocks may be only loosened and may fall in a minute or two; and besides, the adit will be full of fumes. So they waited about five minutes and then walked back to the scene.

"By gad! I never thought it would do that," exclaimed Tynan, amazed.

"Neither did I," agreed his companion. "It lifted more than I thought it would."

The little gully was full of a debris of huge boulders which entirely covered the spot where they had been working. The part of the cliff which had been laid bare by the explosion, was hidden by the accumulation of rocks which still smoked as if the fires of the earth's centre had an outlet there.

Tom began scrambling over the boulders in haste to see what had been discovered, and Tynan was not long in following him.

"Any good?" he shouted.

Tom had reached the wall face first, and answered the question with a joyous shout.

"Jim! Jim! Look at that! Just look at that!"

The charges had lifted the top off the mineral sandwich, and had broken far into the quartz. What met the gaze of the two excited men was indeed a marvellous sight.

A mass of quartz had fallen away with the shock, leaving a surface literally studded with gold. On this nobbly surface were many little pockets whose convex sides glittered with the precious metal as brilliantly as a jeweller's show-cushion by electric light. There, on that freshly broken surface, was enough gold to satisfy any man.

"What d'you think of that, Jim?"

"Good Lord! Tom, if it goes on like that, we're on a terribly rich thing. It's a couple of feet broader here than on the face, and any amount richer. I wonder how far it extends.

He tried to loosen one of the pieces of gold with a knife, but it was too firmly embedded.

"Leave it, Jim," Tom advised. "We'll have to clear the rubbish away before we can tackle the face. I vote we go and have a drink of tea."

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## Disaster.

As they reached camp, Banjo met them, apparently with news.

"What name?" asked Tom.

"Camels no bin come up."

"What for camels no bin come up?"

"Poison bin catch um."

"Poison?"

"Yah."

Tom looked at the nigger's expressionless face, then at his friend who was stirring the fire into a blaze, and then out across the plateau. He was too deeply stirred for any but the one word "Hell!" and his tone was made up of fear, anger, and self-condemnation. Had he not given a name to the peak because of the poison-weed which grew there? In his eagerness to test the find, he had become careless of the very means of life, for such indeed were the camels.

"What's wrong, Tom?" asked Tynan, who had not heard the conversation.

"Everything!" was the dejected answer. "This nigger says the camels have eaten poison-weed. He couldn't bring them up to water to-day. That means they're dead or pretty bad."

How great a mockery did the gold seem now? Wealth beyond their wildest imagination was here waiting for them, but they were cut off from the world as surely as sailors wrecked on an unchartered island, with their boats—in this case the rightly-named "Ships of the desert"—useless.

"Perhaps he's wrong," suggested Tynan, faintly. "Let's go and see."

They found the boy's story correct. Two camels lay dead, the third could not rise on its legs, but the fourth, although stiff in the joints from the same cause, did not seem to have eaten so much of the deadly herb. By good fortune, the survivor was the stronger of the two draught camels, and such was their relief after thinking that all had died, that it was an almost cheerful party which led the ungainly beast back to camp.

"I'd best clear right out to-morrow, Jim," said Tom, summing up a conversation about their next move. "I'll leave you most of the tucker, and make straight for Marnoola, and bring back horses." His tone was confident, but he remembered with misgiving the eighty mile dry stage. "Or perhaps Macfarlane would lend me a couple of camels. Yes, he's sure to do that. Or would you rather go and leave me, Jim? I'd just as soon."

"I suppose we couldn't both go?"

"Impossible, Jim, old man."

"Then I'll stay."

It was an easy thing to say, yet even Tynan realised a little what it meant, but not all. To camp for weeks with a nigger in that desolate spot, depending for life on a trickle of water, and with no means of crossing the two hundred miles which separated him from the nearest white man. Hour by hour his mind would follow his companion on his perilous journey, beset by blacks, thirst, accident, a thousand dangers, with the bare chance of being able to get camels and return.

He had not the faintest suspicion of his companion's integrity. Those nightmare hours of madness weighed not a feather's weight against the months of comradeship during which Tom had shown the good metal he was made of. He knew that there was a chance of life for both of them if Tom took the trip, so he repeated:



"Yes, Tom, I'll stay."

"You've got plenty of good water, so you'll be as right as rain."

Plenty of good water!

Tynan was first to see what had happened. He walked over to the spring, with the quart-pots in his hand. The rocky basin was empty! Like a flaw in an earthenware pot, marred in burning, a crack ran right across the bottom. Where the water now flowed it was impossible to tell; the explosion which made the men so amazingly rich, left them desperately poor, for it had shattered the bowl which held the water of life.

Disaster affects people very differently. To Tynan it came with no sudden shock. He merely thought he was mistaken, and after standing and staring at the crack for some time, stooped down to fill one of the pots. He must have stayed there for some time, squatting on his haunches, wondering idiotically why the quart-pot remained empty.

"Hi! Jim! What in the deuce are you doing? I could have filled twenty quarts by now," shouted Tom.

Tynan heard his friend's shout, and turned his head. Something in the way he did this struck Tom as unusual. It was so slow, so tired; the way a man might turn in his sleep. So he walked over.

Each needed another witness before he could believe that of his own eyes, but crouching together over the empty pool, they knew at last that their fate was sealed.

One canteen of water, filled that morning by the nigger for washing purposes, and a water bag nearly full, was all that stood between them and a most terrible death; terrible not only because of physical suffering, but also because Death

whispers the hope of life so long in the ears of its perishing victim.

The remaining hours of light were spent in a feverish search for water. The spring had been above the gold reef, and the men groped about with picks and wedges to see if the split in the basin of the spring came out anywhere below. Thousands of pounds' worth of gold mocked them in their search. They would gladly have exchanged it all for a sign of water. Lumps of gold-encrusted quartz were kicked out of the way as rubbish. In vain. The fissure which drained the basin had apparently no outlet. Whether or not, with the accumulation of water, the spring would someday flow out in another place, it was impossible to tell, and they could not stay to find out. By blasting they might have tapped the water again, but every stick of gelignite had been used in those three charges.

When all hope had gone, they would have turned to fly like hunted animals, but saner councils prevailed, and they decided to wait till morning before setting out to meet death. They were men, and would die fighting.

Some gold, taken the day before, was standing in a little muddy water in an old billy-can. How eagerly the men peered down at it, measuring, not the wealth below, but the wealth above; the amount of muddy liquid, not the weight of golden sand. The water was carefully decanted off and the gold emptied into a cloth and squeezed so that the last drop might be saved. Then the cloth was shaken out and the worthless treasure scattered.

Hope came with the dawn, but as surely as dawn became day, so did hope die in the light of grim reality.

Tynan got up and went straight to the pool. It was empty. Then he clambered down to see

whether the water had come through. He found Tom there on a similar errand, and they returned together dejectedly to camp.

Every ounce of weight was a subject for consideration, for one camel cannot carry a big load on a dry stage. The canteen of water and a six weeks' supply of flour were of first importance. Tom reckoned that in four weeks they would either have reached Marnoola or . . . he did not give an alternative; he just said it would take four weeks to reach the station, and added two more in case of emergency. A few tins of meat were allowed, tea, sugar, and tobacco, but all gear other than a blanket apiece was left behind. Though Tom did not explain the reason, he insisted that a small bag of salt should be put into the packs.

After much hesitation, a small bag of gold was added to the load, for the purpose—as Tom expressed it—“of buying a plant for another try,” though he knew well that he had seen the last of Poison Peak, for not all the gold in the world could buy back that little spring.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## Salt Meat.

Two haggard white men, a black boy, and a famished camel! Tynan was lying full length on the sand underneath a mulga, caring nothing that the ants were crawling over him, and that flies were buzzing round his closed eyes and gaping mouth. His withered body could be seen through rents in his tattered clothes. The skin of his face was so dry, it looked as if any movement would crack it across; his eyes were feverish and unlit by reason; and out of his mouth lolled a swollen tongue.

His companion stood over him, leaning one hand against the tree, and gazing hopelessly at the desolate view of gnarled trees, sand, and unclouded sky.

The black-boy chewed parakelia stolidly, and spat. He could not understand these men who vomited at the juicy leaves and hoarded that little drop of water in the canteen.

"You make um camp?" he asked.

Tom nodded, and the boy proceeded to pull off the pack from the kneeling camel, and, having with difficulty induced it to rise, led it away and hobbled it.

How strange these fools of white men were. When they looked into your eyes you saw Kadaitcha there and were afraid, but when water was gone they were no good any more. "Silly fella, quite," he summed them up.

He wandered some little way from camp, collecting wood and also a handful of parakelia for himself. It was not good tucker for it pained

inside, but anything was better than having one's tongue lolling out.

Suddenly he stopped. A track arrested his attention! He stooped down. A blackfellow had made it only a short time before. Just then, this meant one thing and one only. Quatcha! Water! He would have dropped his firewood then and there and followed the tracks, had he not felt, in his untutored mind, that a white master is a master always till he is dead. So he took the wood to camp, lit a fire, and then said to Tom:

"Me bin find um black-fella track dat way."

Tom looked up, but did not catch the boy's remark. His senses were becoming dull and unreliable. So Banjo said again:

"Me tink me find um quatcha, by-'m-by."

That magic word "Quatcha," water!

"Which way?" asked Tom, looking so fiercely into the boy's eyes that the native almost wished he had followed the tracks at once.

"Dat way." He pointed to where he had been picking up firewood. "Me bin find um black-fella track."

"You bin find um black-fella track?"

"Yah."

"You no bin find um quatcha?"

The one followed naturally on the other in Banjo's mind, so he answered:

"Neh. Black-fella, him bin find um quatcha alright."

The logic was simple and convincing. The presence of a native meant that water was obtainable somewhere. It might be a long way away, but if that nigger could walk to it, Tom felt that, in his extremity, he could do so too.

"Look here!" said he, forgetting in his excitement that he was talking to the boy. "Look here, if you fetch along that son of the devil,

I'll give you my pocket-knife;" one of the white man's possessions that Banjo coveted very much.

The boy looked puzzled for a moment, then shook his head.

"What name you yabber? You yabber longa me same as you all day yabber," he remarked.

Tom smiled. He could afford to smile now that a glimmer of hope had penetrated the darkness of despair.

"You track um up black-fella," he explained. "You fetch um longa camp. Me give pocket-knife longa you."

He took from his belt a big clasp-knife, pointed to it, and then to the boy.

"You know um?" he asked.

"Yah. Me know um alright," was the ready answer. "Me track um up quick-fella."

He was gone in a minute.

There were two pints of water left; two precious pints. Tom debated. His companion was in that lethargic state of exhaustion that might at any time change to the madness of those who die of thirst: a madness that makes the victim fling his clothes away and walk, walk, walk, usually in a circle where Death sits in the centre. Or he might slip away into the unknown country with hardly a flutter of the eyelids to tell of the wing-beats of his liberated soul.

To hoard that water any longer would be miserly, and with the faint prospect of help, they might need just the strength that it would give to take them to where help lay.

With far more care than he had taken over washing gold, he poured the water into one of the quart-pots, and waited. It was well to wait, for Chance is a strange player with whom to throw dice with life as the hazard.

After three hours he was still watching the pot

of water, when, with no sound to herald them, two men stood by him, Banjo and another.

"Me bin find um alright," grinned Banjo.

Tom handed over the clasp-knife without a word. He knew that one must never break a promise to a child or a nigger. Then he looked at the black-boy's companion.

Tall, deep black, naked, and armed with a boomerang, two spears and a small wooden shield. The man, though evidently afraid, was held there by a kind of shy animal curiosity which did not mar a certain barbaric dignity in his bearing. His massive head and face were nearly hidden with hair, which on top was plastered with mud and fat, and around his cheeks stood out in a thick tangle. Broad nose through which a piece of carved wood was thrust, and very bright black eyes which glittered beneath overhanging brows. On forehead and chest were many long scars—tribal marks—and legs and arms showed signs of many wounds. Standing there squarely on both feet, he looked down at the unconscious man, at Tom, at the camel-pack, and then at the black-boy, to whom he said a word, showing a set of perfect teeth which gleamed when his beard and moustache parted for a moment and closed again till the only features discernable were those bright watchful eyes.

Tom held out a stick of tobacco. Instantly it was snatched and hidden in the native's hair.

"Tell him we want quatcha," said Tom to Banjo.

"Him can't know um quatcha," was the answer. "Him walk longa Barrow. Him can't know um yabber longa me."

"Oh, he's a Barrow nigger, is he?" said Tom to himself, then, standing up, he pointed to the stranger and made the universal pantomime for water.

He raised his hand and turned the palm up, which means "where is it?" Then he stooped and pretended to scoop up water with his hands and drink it, and again made the sign "where is it?"

With a gleam of his teeth, the man showed that he understood, but, watching him closely, Tom saw a look of cunning come into the black eyes. Warraguls usually run away from a white man "quick-fella," but this man saw helplessness incarnate, and with the cruelty of his race, decided to let it die.

He shook his head.

Tom went through the pantomime again, and even poured a drop or two of water out of the quart-pot into a pannikin and back again, but though the teeth gleamed recognition of the need, the man merely shook his head and squatted down on his haunches.

Other methods had to be tried, and the reason for including a bag of salt in the loading soon became apparent.

Tom called Banjo and gave a whispered order, at which the boy's eyes lit up with excitement. A broad surcingle was lying near the fire, and Banjo picked it up and ran it idly through his hands. Tom leant forward and held out another stick of tobacco. The supple hand of the native was stretched out eagerly, and in that instant the bushman summoned all his remaining power for one great effort. He suddenly gripped the man's extended wrist and twisted it with strength enough to fling a heifer in the branding yards. Instantly Banjo leapt on the struggling man, whipping the surcingle round that slippery body, and buckling it tight. The captive did not cry out, but fought like the wild animal that he was, but at last, bound hand and foot, he was propped



up against a tree at some little distance from camp. A fire was lit so near him that the hot and thirst-producing smoke blew all around him.

Tom rubbed salt into pieces of tinned meat and fed the man with them. He eagerly licked the salt and swallowed the tasty morsels till he had eaten as much as he could hold; then the fire was made up, and Tom returned to camp, feeling as if he was at the very end of his endurance. Fiery spots danced before his eyes, the trees seemed to sway to and fro in a most sickening manner, and his knees could hardly support his weight. But he steeled his will and went over to the quart-pot of water.

No sacramental wine was ever drunk so reverently as that last pannikin of tea. Tom forced his companion's share down his throat with great difficulty. It resulted in a flicker of the eye-lids, a gurgling effort to speak, and lethargy again. His own portion, while it brought strength to his body and enabled him to swallow some meat, did nothing to alleviate the awful thirst.

He intended to watch the captive all night long, but sleep would not be denied him. It was fitful, but the hours of darkness were cool, and in the morning Tom's first thought was one of hope.

The position of the bound man caused him to smile. There was Banjo sitting up on his blanket, examining his knife with great interest. Around his ankle was a hobble, connected by a chain with one round the bound legs of the wild black. Banjo had watched all night of his own free will, fastened to the captive, so that any movement to escape would at once arouse him. White men might be fools, but a pocket-knife was a very desirable possession.

Tom took another handful of salt and walked over, giving a passing "Good fella" to his boy,

praise which, coming from him, was praise indeed, and made the boy show his teeth with pleasure.

The wild man must have been raging with thirst. He eagerly licked the salt to get the temporary relief which it afforded, but only created a greater longing for water. Tom let the medicine do its work, and when no more salt could be forced on him, bound a green-hide hobble around the man's neck, and attached a long rope to it.

Before leaving camp, Tom built a rough bough shelter over his unconscious companion and slung the canteens and quart-pots on the camel. Then he mounted, fastened the rope to the saddle, and told Banjo to free the man's ankles. He leapt to his feet at once and made a dash for liberty, but the neck-rope pulled him up. Again and again, with his hands bound behind him, he tried to break away, but at last gave it up, and set out sullenly to slake his overpowering thirst.

Tom cocked his rifle, and hung on, for he was very weak. Once the man tried to fray the rope against a tree, but a shot searing a hole through his plastered hair effectually stopped all such tricks. It was a strange procession and a grim one, for the lives of two white men depended on the issue.

They reached water in three hours, a rock-hole in an unexpected outcrop, not deep, but containing enough of the life-giving liquid to save the party for four or five days, perhaps more. The desolate mulga scrub was all around it, and a perishing white man might have passed within five yards of the hole without knowing it was there. Native tracks were seen in the sand, but they were several weeks old. In all probability this was one of the sources of water used by the

blacks who had harassed the party on their outward journey.

Tom was an old bushman or he might never have returned to his friend, but might have vomited his life away on the banks of the rock-hole. He drank very little at first; a few sips, then filled the canteens; then a few more sips, and waited; and just before leaving, he put his face and hands in the pool and took a drink. He gave the wild black a drink also—as much as he needed—but instead of setting him free, took him back to camp, for the man might have poisoned the water in revenge.

As soon as Tynan regained consciousness, he was put on the camel and taken to the rock-hole, and was left there while another trip was made for the stores and gear. The warragul was still bound to a tree when Tom and the black-boy returned for the last time. For their own safety they burnt his spears and boomerang before releasing him and sped him on his way with some parting shots, and Tom kept a sharp look out for any revenge he might take. But the frightened man made off as fast as he could, and they saw no more of him.

As long as the water in the rock-hole lasted, they camped beside it, to gather strength for the next stage of that terrible journey. Finally they filled canteens and quart-pots, gave man and beast a drink, and started out again.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

## A Bush Letter-Box.

At last they reached the little spring from which they had set out west on their adventure. The water in the canteens had lasted, but the fatigue of travel on foot had reduced them both to mere shadows of the men they were. Haggard unshaven jaws, sun-blighted eyes, scraggy necks that seemed just bone and sinew wrapped in tanned skin, and drooping frames on which hung tattered clothes. Both men had worn their boots to the uppers, and now trudged along with their feet bound in rags and bits of leather.

They camped at the spring as long as they dared. The camel was in a very low state, and though their supply of rations was strictly limited, they had to give the poor beast an opportunity to pick up. For themselves, they knew that the rest they stood in need of could only come at the journey's end.

When they had been there for nearly a week, Tom said to his friend: "Jim, I don't half like tackling the 70 miles to the Toolooroo springs without having a look round. You see, we can't reckon on any water, and it's a long stage with only one camel. Old Sultan's pretty well done for."

"What could you do by looking round, Tom?"

"Well, there's the south route through the Franklins. There was water when we came up about 20 miles away from here, and another lot 15 miles further on, but I reckon they'll be dry by now. My brother's grave is further than the springs, so there's just the chance of those two claypans."

"And if they're dry, we'd have all that way down through the ranges and . . . Why, Tom we wouldn't have tucker for half the distance. Let's take the shortest route and chance it."

"We might meet someone if we went south. It's a thousand to one we wouldn't, but we're taking long odds anyway."

"So we might at Toolooroo springs, Tom. Some Marnoola people, you know."

"Yes, that's right."

Tom puffed at his pipe for a few minutes. "If I thought there was any chance of water at those two camps south, I'd advise it, I would indeed, Jim. If we're on water we'll get on somehow, but neither of us is fit to tackle another perish. . . . How about if I leave you for a day or two and cruise round with the camel?"

Courage is often due to physical well-being, and cowardice to the reverse, so it must not be thought strange that Tynan replied:

"Why not send Banjo?"

"He couldn't do much good on foot."

"Well, why not let him take the camel?"

"That'd leave us absolutely stranded."

"Oh, he'd come back alright. He played the game when he brought that warragul in."

"But he wanted my knife." Tom looked down at his rags and laughed. "I've got nothing more he wants now, I'll bet."

"Tom, old man," urged Tynan, and his voice had a pleading note in it that told his friend he had been taxed to his limit; "Tom, old man, I'll promise him my watch and pouch when he comes back."

"As you like," was the response. "I'll bet he comes back for that."

So Banjo was given his orders in the morning, and was sent south with the camel, water, tucker,

and tobacco, to see if there was water in the clay-pans at which the party had camped coming up.

A week went by. No sign of Banjo. Another one was nearly gone. The men looked blankly into one another's eyes and saw death written there. The black-boy had "slipped them up."

When the two men finally gave up trying to deceive themselves and one another as to their dilemma, and acknowledged that they had now to make plans for a journey without either camel or black-boy, they still had a fortnight's rations for two men.

"We're not dead yet, by a long chalk," said Tom, with forced cheerfulness. "Something may have delayed that nigger. I reckon we give him another day and then take water and tucker and start out and let him catch us up. What d'you say?"

"Yes, I reckon that's the best thing we can do." was the answer, given in the same spirit, for though both of them knew that probably they would never reach the Toolooroo springs, they realised that to give way to despair would lessen what chances they had, so both of them put a bold face on the venture.

Mutual danger had drawn these two men of such different birth and training, very intimately together. Failure and hardship make a far stronger social cement than success and ease, as is borne witness to by the almost proverbial clan-nishness of the poor, and the travellers had had a full measure of both hardship and failure. Tom had grown to admire the way in which the young man "stuck it out" under conditions entirely alien to his disposition, while Tynan felt that no grander type of man trod God's earth than the Australian bushman. But beyond all particular acts of heroism or endurance, sheer manhood

spoke to sheer manhood with a voice which is seldom heard in the midst of the conventions of life.

Thus Tynan felt that he was breaking through no manly reserve when he said to his friend on the evening before they left the spring:

"You know, Tom, I'd like to leave a note here before we go."

"A note? What d'you mean?"

"Oh, something to tell we've been here, that's all," he answered casually.

Tom knew what he was thinking, but remarked lightly:

"I see; so that when the Poison Peak gold field is world-famous, and you and I are bloated millionaires, you can hand the note to the Melbourne Museum as a relic."

"Yes, that's the idea."

"And who's this famous note to be addressed to? Your sister or somebody else's?"

Tynan kept up the joke. "As I haven't got a sister, I'm afraid it'll have to be to someone else's, Tom."

"Not got a sister? Then who was that dainty little piece I met at the Dukeland's Yards? Her name was Tynan."

"No it wasn't, Tom."

"Well I'm—!" Tom was prevented from giving an exact description of his feelings by a sudden thought. What he had hardly noticed at the time, seemed to him now of special significance: the expression on the young lady's face when she heard that Tynan had a child at Marnoola.

The young man noticed his friend's perplexity, and asked:

"Why, what's wrong, Tom?"

"If she wasn't your sister, Jim, I'm afraid I've been and put your pot on."

"What way d'you mean?"

"Why, that kid at Marnoola. You know, old man, I wouldn't have told her for the world if I'd known. Yet it came out with the rest as natural as possible."

"Yes. I suppose it did."

"Did she turn you down?"

"Yes."

"And now you're going to write a note to her!" Tom knew very well that his companion thought that note would be the last writing of a man about to die. "By all that's holy, Jim! If a girl I knew treated me that way, I'd tell her to go to hell. I would, straight."

"So I did," said Tynan, sadly, "only in different words."

"I'm awfully sorry I messed things up for you, Jim. I am indeed."

"But I'm rather glad you told her, Tom. You see . . . well, I mean . . . if a girl turns a chap down for that, he's better without her . . . at least, that's what I thought at the time. . . . But, Tom, she's never had the ghost of a chance. She's never got out of the mud where her set wallows. . . . She may not even have meant to send me away. I've often thought that, since I've come out west, especially lately. . . . So you see, I may be the one that's in the wrong after all. Anyhow I'm going to write a note to her."

"I see." Tom did not mean that he understood his friend's attitude, but that he had just arrived at a solution of what had often puzzled him: Tynan's sudden return north and the reckless energy with which he had thrown himself into a hazardous undertaking.



Tynan wrote the letter that evening by the light of the camp fire. When it was finished—and it did not take long, for he had made it up to his satisfaction long before he broached the question to Tom—he tore the leaf out of the note-book and put it in his wallet, addressing the package to Ida Hennessy in Melbourne. A meat tin jammed in the fork of a mulga tree served as pillar box, and Tynan smiled at the irony of the thing, for was it not a tin wedged in a mulga that marked the spot which had lured him into the wilderness?

The letter ran as follows:—

“Dear Ida,

“I came into the wilderness to forget you and have failed. I have failed, too, in the outward quest, for whereas we found gold, we were unable to bring it away because of the lack of water.

“Both failures have taught me many things, chief of which is that a woman’s love is worth more to a man than his pride. If mine stood at bay and fought off your love when we last met, I lost what I see now to be the most precious thing in all the world.

“If I am wrong, pardon me for thinking you loved me; if right, pardon me also for the wrong I did you, and believe me that I wronged myself as much more as I value your love more than my own.

“In any case believe that the thought of you has given me strength to struggle out of the clutches of Death more than once, and that if I die before reaching help, as seems likely, I can look upon my life as not entirely vain, seeing that in it I met you.

“J.T.B.”

Before consigning it to the meat tin, he wrote a request on the package that if found it should

be forwarded to the address within. There was no chance of anyone passing that way for many years, but Tynan felt easier in his mind when he had accomplished his task. Probably his confession had the same efficacy as prayer, which at once blesses the petitioner in that it sets him to work to answer his own request.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## A Narrow Escape.

It was early afternoon. The unclouded sun shone down upon a vast stoney plain, but for all its strength, there was that in the air which proclaimed the season winter. Mirage filled every hollow; a bush on the horizon was magnified by the heat into a tree; the tiny desert creatures kept in the shade of stones and burrows in the sand; but the frost of the previous night would not wholly relinquish its grip.

Two men shuffled over the western horizon, making for a plateau that bulged in the east. They walked with the doggedness of instinct more than with the incentive of conscious volition, and every movement told of extreme fatigue and thirst. Neither of them wore a shirt, and in lieu of trousers, a few strips of ragged cloth impeded each stumbling step. One, the slighter of the two, leaned heavily on a stick, while over the naked shoulder of the other hung an empty water-bag and a flour bag, while a pannikin mocked his thirst each time it jangled at his belt.

"Three miles," said the one with the pannikin, pointing to a line of trees at the base of the plateau, but his voice was so weak and choked that his companion could not have understood. Even if he did, he made no sign, but staggered on. Any change of motion, any thought to break that thin thread of resolve to go forward, would have been fatal.

Those who desire to paint a picture of Young

Australia will choose just such a subject: the indomitable spirit of man staggering towards the future, dragging Death a captive at his heels.

The sun rolled on an hour, and the dust which followed the shuffling figures was nearer now by two miles to the line of trees. The older man was now supporting his fellow, and over those tracks in the dust, dingoes would howl that night, for they were stained with blood.

What mocking irony is it that calls a bed of sand a creek? They stumbled down the low banks and into the loose white sand, where a thin line of dead mulga trees proclaimed that rain falls sometimes on the table-land.

But now! The men's feet sunk to the ankles. Tynan stumbled and fell, rose and stumbled again. He lay with arms stretched out, panting, having hardly strength enough to keep his gaping mouth from the sand.

Tom stood for awhile, leaning heavily against a dead tree. He dared not sit. Into his weakening brain one thought had come, and he clung to it as the last hope of life.

He remembered the bullock which had been killed during the cattle muster, and his pursuit of the culprit. Also that when Jack had escaped he had gone west, not east. He must have subsequently doubled back on his tracks, as was proved by the disaster at the yards, but—and this was the question that occupied Tom's tottering mind—where had Jack got water? Not from the Toolooroo Springs, for the Marnoola men were there; unless indeed he crept in at night. No, the bushman would not admit that possibility, lest it weaken the last thread of strength by which he hung to life.

So he looked down at the bare blistered

shoulders of his companion and said: "So long, Jim. You've been a good mate and have played the game. But we're done. If I return I'll bring water. . . . So long, old man."

The voice was feeble, and the words muffled by a swollen tongue, and the man gasping there in the sand could not have heard. But the thought penetrated to the brain standing on the borderland of the unknown country, and Tynan held up his hand. Tom took it and nearly fell, but recovering, stumbled off through the drifted sand. He was too weak to mount the opposite bank, so he climbed it on hands and knees, and continued so across the table-land, with the empty water-bag strapped to his naked back, and the pannikin rattling against the stones.

Banjo found him—*coming back!* Now walking, now crawling, with a bag of water clasped to his breast.

Banjo had not "slipped them up." He had not understood Tom's directions, being probably too elated at the prospect of owning a watch to pay strict attention. The first two water-holes were dry, and he had gone on, according to his interpretation of the instructions, to the well near Mark's grave. Here he had filled the canteen, and had returned to find the camp abandoned. So, with a full supply of water, and the tucker and gear which had been left behind, he had tracked the two perishing white men.

In the creek, his camel had shied at the prostrate figure of a man. Tynan was still alive. After doing all that lay in his power, he had gone on in pursuit of Tom, and had found him, temporarily mad on all points save the one that had sustained him to endure such hardship for his friend's sake.

Jack's water-hole was not a large one, and it

contained not more than a couple of days' water; but it saved two lives. It was remembered by Banjo because it was here he became the proud possessor of a watch.

## PART V.

## CHAPTER XL.

## A Definition of Love.

With the coming of the bride, the first breath of Spring had blown over the winter-bound heart of Ida Hennessy, and in the strength-giving gladness of that breath, she had taken her first step towards freedom. But, as is often the case in nature, Winter had again clouded the sky and hardened the ground. But its frigid rule was nearly over. The seeds which had trembled for joy at the voice of Spring, just hid again and waited patiently.

Sorrow is often a surer self-revealer than happiness, and in the weeks which followed Dr. Byrne's departure from Gum Glen, sorrow held a mirror before Ida's shrinking gaze. The foundations of her life were subjected to the most searching tests; most of them were found to be rotten, and the edifice of her life came toppling about her. Constantly before her mind's eye was the spare sun-browned figure of a man who in every line and movement emphasised the fervour of his words. She began to realise that he was not pleading for himself, nor for the northern men whom he so much admired, but for her, for a girl who he saw was being strangled by hypocrisies. She compared him with the men of her set, with Philip Dennis and other idlers about town. She thought also of the girls she knew, and con-

trusted them with the real girl whom Byrne had in his mind when he made the appeal. Was it made in vain? No. One thing at least had been achieved; she saw how false were the standards by which she had judged life hitherto.

More definitions have been given of love than of any other emotion, and each is true in so far as it is the experience of one who has loved. Therefore when it is said that love for Dr. Byrne grew in the mind of Ida Hennessy, it is well to define what is meant.

When first she met the young doctor, in the days when her betrothed was fighting in France, she had singled him out from her other men acquaintances because he was the only one of them that could be singled out. In her set the unpardonable sin is non-conformity to type; any originality, any individuality, any insistence upon the right of private judgment and action is considered "bad form." Some are exempt; men either of great wealth or of brilliant attainments. These can do and be what they like: it is called "eccentricity," and, let him attempt to explain it who may, in their cases it is rather admired than decried.

Dr. Byrne came in with introductions which set all financial and social considerations at rest, and a record for brilliant medical research. Fashionable women naturally sought his acquaintance. He was a man of individuality, and stood out above the idlers with whom he mixed in theatres and drawing-rooms, and it was with a glow of pleasure that Ida Hennessy saw she had claimed his attention.

Girls amongst whom Ida Hennessy had been brought up are esteemed in inverse ratio to their attainments. To be able to do things, even to think them, is a mark of inferiority. Ignorant—and if possible ornamental—idleness is the goal



aimed at, but by a strange chance, what is decried in themselves, is admired in men. Consequently there was much to be admired in Dr. Byrne. That was the second stage of love.

The third was one of unrest. Sooner or later we seek to emulate what we admire, if we have strength to admire it intensely. The doctor was no purveyor of polite nothings, and conversation with him during the times they rode abroad together, made her want to follow the working of his mind, if only that he might be encouraged to open it more fully. Her education had turned her out a "finished gentlewoman," and her teachers were assured that she would think and say and do the right thing on the right occasion, because she had learnt from them what was the right thing for every possible occasion. But, listening to Byrne, she found herself coming to conclusions that were at variance with her training, and found herself even questioning the premises upon which so much of her superficiality was based.

The keen mind of the young man was conscious of what he was doing. As remorselessly as he would have acted if Ida's mind had been a living organism upon his operating table, he cut away layer after layer of tissue in order to expose the beating heart. The experiment was a fascinating one, but dangerous to both parties. With the eyes of a surgeon he pierced the diseased moral tissues that were choking her life, and saw with the eyes of a man, that a woman was there—and he desired her for his own.

Ida merely felt how clever, how strong, how manly he was; how superlatively finer than any man she had ever met. The flutterings which might afterwards turn out to be reciprocal desire, were too much hidden for her to be aware of their presence.

That was before Colonel Bathwick returned to Australia to claim her as his bride.

Tragedy numbed the wound which Dr. Byrne had made, but the cut flesh could never heal again; it was not healthy. Many times he had made her feel, not only the pulses of his own virile mind, but the feeble struggles of her own. The murder of Colonel Bathwick, though it shocked her at the time, impressed itself so clearly, that she found her mind returning to it again and again, as to an event from which all others are dated—before and after. Not that she fully understood the sacrifice he had made or the living death he had saved her from; but she came to know that he had made a sacrifice, and that it was for her sake.

She found the triflings which previously she had called pleasures, more and more distasteful. She had eaten mental food and now yearned for it, and knew of only one who could give it to her. Everything that appeared to her worth while began to be coupled with him in her mind. She began to wonder what he would think of this and that. In short, she wanted him. The rose had grown to be a bud just waiting for the sun.

Then the bridle came, and Dukelands Park, and Tom, and . . . and.

Only love could have prompted Ida to take that trip to the horse-yards. It was a very eager, very timid girl who sat there in the crowd. And she received a cruel blow just when she was most sensitive. Ida returned to Melbourne feeling that she had asked for bread and had been given a stone.

Old standards can only be lowered one by one, for everybody must march under some banner or other. The standard by which Ida condemned the young man for being a father of a child and

at the same time sending tokens of love to her, had not yet been lowered.

With the abandonment of despair, she threw herself into many of the trivialities she had fore-sworn. Friends welcomed her effusively, taking her return as a justification of their own worthlessness, and a condemnation of the better way of life which they had seen her struggling after.

Then Dr. Byrne himself had come, without any excuse, pleading not for himself but for her. While his voice was vibrating with all the intensity of his nature, her standards had been torn to ribbons. She had been so overcome that he had gone before she realised it. Like a successful operation, her womanhood had been laid bare; fold after fold of false morality had been cut away, till the last had gone, and there, exhausted and bleeding, was the woman whom he loved.

Dr. Byrne did not know how skilful he had been. He had drained the cup of failure to the dregs in the very hour triumph, and, intoxicated with the drug, he had gone out to live a life of forgetfulness.

And she? One after another her standards had gone, till now she acknowledged but one. The man she loved; he was her standard.

## CHAPTER XLI.

## Love to the Rescue.

"Women are all very well in their way," Tom had said in the days when Tynan first met him, "but the bush is no place for them."

Fortunately for the world, the words "home" and "woman" are still synonymous, and it was the impossibility of making a home in the bush that had led Tom to express himself in this way. Whatever the difficulties may be—and most of them could be overcome by wise administration—it is a fact that the handful of white women who live between Oodnadatta and Pine Creek, look forward eagerly to the day when they will be able to "go down," as to something so desirable, that the thought of it sustains them through years of hardship.

It was into this country that Ida Hennessy came in search of the man she loved. Only those who know the circumstances can appreciate the heroism that stimulated the delicately nurtured girl to face such a trip, for the North was to her what it unfortunately is to most Australians, a totally unknown land, over which the imaginations of a popular novelist or two have roamed in search of the extraordinary.

She told those whom she asked for advice that she was on her way to Marnoola Station. She feared the humiliation that would come if they asked her any questions, but soon found that she had no cause to be alarmed on that score. Never by look or word did the few bushmen she met on the road add to her discomfort. They simply

aided her to the limit of their powers and then stood aside. That she was evidently rich mattered nothing; that she was a woman, everything. No one knew, and no one inquired, her business, content to let her hide behind the simple announcement: "I'm going to Marnoola Station." The Australian bushman is a gentleman.

Like a child's, her mind was open to every new impression, and as, in her case, "perfect love had cast out all fear," many minor discomforts went unheeded because of their novelty. Her familiarity with horses was a great advantage, but sleeping on the ground under the stars, cooking food at an open fire, and doing without the thousand and one things which are only noticed when missed; these were all strange. But she was stimulated beyond her natural powers of endurance by love. At one time she had thought love to be just a pleasant recreation, something to be taken up and put down according to one's mood; but now she found it was the source of all her strength, and without it she knew she would be like one of those stars that have no sun—desolate, and condemned for ever to despair.

Thus it came to pass that Ida Hennessy was sitting one evening under the pepper-tree outside the Marnoola Government House. The west was flaming with color. The royal sun had hastened all day across the desert of the sky to the palace where his queen awaited him upon a couch, curtained with splendour. Majestic banners of cloud announced in symbols of gold and crimson that the king had come, and all the pomp of heaven was there to do him honor. The voices of the stars arose and "all the sons of God shouted for joy." Too pure for mortal ears, this heavenly clamour appeared as color, staining the air from deepest crimson to keenest golden grey, and then was lost in the blue of the darkening sky.

Softer came the music and more slow, as the curtains were drawn around the kingly couch; the pageant faded like the sigh of one who falls asleep within her lover's arms; till only one tiny lamp announced where slept the royal pair.

Ida watched the sky with eyes which love had anointed, and it is only such eyes that ever really see beauty, for "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." She put her hand down and caressed the head of a little child which lay in the sand at her feet. It was Ruby's child, a boy with a dusky skin and fair hair.

She had been at the station for nearly a week. Her strength, already sorely taxed by the journey, had given way at the blow of disappointment which struck her when she found that Tynan was not at Marnoola. Although she had given his name as her own, pretending to be his sister, Angus Macfarlane had guessed at once what had brought such a dainty little lady north. The rugged Scot had been kindness itself to her in her trouble. He had vacated Government House in favor of his guest, with Ruby to wait on her, and had taken up his abode in the men's quarters.

But true love has remarkable powers of recuperation, and a few days' rest and the delicate consideration of Macfarlane had restored her again to hope. She had not decided what her next move would be, but her womanly instinct assured her that her journey had not been in vain.

All the glowing colors of the west had been distilled to a band of pure primrose light, when a camel stood out against the sky, as it came over the sandhill which overlooked the station from the west. A black-boy was riding it, sitting sideways on a pack saddle. They came to the water paddock, and, after both man and beast had taken a drink at the troughs, Ida lost sight of them as the buildings and stock-yards hid them from view.

A quarter of an hour later, when she was preparing to go indoors, the manager came to the gate. He was evidently the bearer of news.

"May I come in, Miss Tynan?" he asked.

"Please do, Mr. Macfarlane. What a lovely evening. Would you sooner sit outside or in?"

"Well, Miss, I mustn't stay. I just came up to tell you that a nigger rode in a few minutes ago from the west.

"Yes, I saw him. Did he say . . . ?"

Macfarlane looked at the eager delicate face, and wished he knew suitable words with which to break the news. But he was no diplomat, and blurted out:

"He came from Toolooroo Springs, about forty miles from here. Your brother and his mate are there, alive and well."

"My brother there! Oh, Mr. Macfarlane, how glad, how very glad I am! Alive and well! You're sure he said 'alive and well'?"

"Well, you see, Miss, it's certain he's alive, for they sent in for rations. And if a man's alive in this country we take it for granted that he's well."

"Yes, yes, of course. Oh, how happy I am! Did the black-boy say anything else?"

"No. You see, they can't say much. But by the look of things, I should gather that the party's had a pretty rough trip. Anyhow, they've run out of tucker."

"What can we do?"

The question surprised the manager. He had expected hysterics, or, at any rate, a rush of feminine emotion, and had been prepared to beat a hasty retreat. But, instead, the girl had the perfect self-possession to suggest that she could do something. A second source of surprise was when he found himself explaining to her in de-

tail how he proposed to act, "just as if she was a blooming man," as he expressed it to himself later.

"Luckily I've got some working horses in the paddock," he said. "I sent a boy after them right away. I propose packing one with a week's rations and sending it out at once. The camel won't be much good for months by the look of its feet. I'll send out to-morrow and bring in a team of buggy horses. You see," he added, so as not to alarm her, "I reckon they've done all the riding they want for a bit, and would rather like a lift in a buggy."

The girl put her white hand on the manager's rough brown arm and looked up into his face. "Thank you, Mr. Macfarlane. You're . . . you're more than kind."

"Oh, a chap couldn't do any less," he said casually, though the touch of that little hand made it rather an effort to appear casual. He was turning to go, when Ida checked him.

"Mr. Macfarlane, I wonder if you would add one more to the favors you have done me," she asked timidly.

"What d'you mean?"

"I wonder if you would let me go out with the pack-horse."

"But!" He was too astonished at the suggestion to find words. "Surely you don't mean . . . !"

"Yes, I do. Indeed I do. I know I'm a woman, but I can ride, and. . ." the reason was very feminine, "I want to so much."

"But I'll be sending out in an hour's time. You can't ride through the night, and the Springs are forty miles away."

Again that little hand was placed on his arm,



and a voice full of the tenderness that love had aroused, pleaded with him.

"Mr. Macfarlane, listen! I came from Melbourne to find my brother. I rode up from Oodnadatta, and no one can say that one day's ride was shortened because I was a woman. And now you won't make me wait till he comes, will you?"

"You could go in the buggy if you liked."

"No. Oh, Mr. Macfarlane, I want to be the first to see him . . . . You see . . he's my . . . he's not my brother."

Macfarlane had ruled men with his will for many years. He was reputed to be a man who never changed his mind once it was made up. But now, against his better judgment, he submitted.

"Very well, Miss . . er . . ."

"Hennessy." Ida supplied the name.

"Very well, Miss Hennessy; though I don't at all like your taking it on. I'd go with you myself, only I must stay behind to drive the buggy. I'll send Ruby with you; she's as good as any white man on the road. . . . When could you be ready?"

"In a quarter of an hour," she answered. "And thank you very much."

Before the working horses were mustered, Ida Hennessy was ready and waiting beside the hitching rail. Macfarlane, who thought that even the best of women were useless creatures outside a very limited sphere, received another surprise when he saw this city-bred girl, dressed in riding breeches and coat, mount and ride away into the night. For some time he gazed in silence at the spot where the darkness had swallowed up the plant, then sought relief in words.

"Well I'm . ." He broke off suddenly, remembering that a lady had recently stood beside him, and changed the expression, but not the thought:

"Well I'm blest!"

Probably he was right. Most men are blessed by contact with a woman.

## CHAPTER XLII.

## Golden Buckles.

A loaded steel bar will return to its original shape when the weight is removed, so long as its elastic limit has not been exceeded. But if too great a strain has been put upon it, the bar will never regain its former strength.

It is somewhat the same with men, and is illustrated by the two who finally arrived at Toolooroo Springs. Tom Lawson, born and bred to hardship, recovered quickly from the fatigue of that terrible journey, whereas his companion, not one whit behind him in the dogged pluck that had carried them through, had borne too great a burden. All his subsequent life he would be a weaker man because of what he had undergone. One hardship had followed too quickly on another; thirst and hunger had again and again attacked an already weakened body, and not all the will-power in the world could bear up for long against such persistent privation.

Tynan arrived at the Springs strapped to the camel's saddle, for he was too weak to hold himself on, and when he realised that they were within reach of help, and that life no longer depended on his power to keep going, he collapsed utterly.

Water was good and abundant, and there still remained enough flour to make a couple of dampers, but the exhausted man seemed suddenly to have lost all interest in life. For weeks he had struggled toward this spot; his mind had focussed itself on this bough wurley and had seen nothing beyond; he had, as it were, told his body that nothing more was required of it but just to reach

the Springs, and now it was as if he had no further right to make any more demands upon it.

Perhaps, also, he had lost the will to live. His recent prolonged struggle against death was due to the working of the law of self-preservation, and not a little also to pride which refused to be beaten in the presence of another man; but now that he could afford to wait in comparative safety and let others continue the struggle for him, he nearly let go his hold on life.

Besides, why should he live? In his present state of utter mental and physical exhaustion, he was open to the attack of the cowardly suggestion that he should not again take up the challenge of life. Such a thought never comes to a man when he is fighting against odds, but only when, bruised and bleeding, he had been carried outside the arena for a time. Gladly would he have buckled on his armour and entered the lists again when the trumpet called, if only he could wear a lady's token in his helmet; but, in his pride, he had scorned it when it had been offered, and now he found that pride was not a strong enough incentive to make him want to live.

Tom was also in a pretty exhausted state, but allowed himself no rest until he had done all that he could for the weaker man.

The sacking bed which Tynan had made for him when his leg was broken, was still in the wurley, and a few more bushes piled on the roof made it tolerably sun-proof. Banjo carried up a couple of kerosene tins of water from the spring and warmed them at the fire, and the rough bush nurse bathed his friend's body again and again, to the sufferer's great relief. He managed to shoot a couple of pigeons at the troughs that evening, and had them stewing in a billy-can all night, so that a rich broth was ready for the sick man next day.

At dawn the faithful Banjo left with the camel for Marnoola, carrying a note addressed to Macfarlane, and there remained nothing more for Tom to do but wait.

All day Tynan lay with closed eyes, not sleeping, for the aching of his body kept him awake, but in a state of utter listlessness. He accepted his friend's ministrations almost automatically, and then sank back again, letting his mind swing idly between the mortal and the immortal, having no strength to concern itself with either. In this condition, the mind is extremely susceptible to any suggestion, as the eastern masters of Yoga know so well.

About seven o'clock in the evening of the day that Banjo left the Springs, Tynan slowly opened his eyes and raised his head, and appeared to listen intently. Then he smiled, and when he lay back again, his face had lost its vacant expression. Let those who wish to ascribe it to coincidence, do so, but the fact remains, that it was about seven o'clock on that evening when Macfarlane brought the glad news to Ida Hennessy.

A few minutes later, Tom walked up to the wurley with three pigeons in his hand, and sat down at the entrance and began to pluck them. It was dark inside, and the older man was surprised to hear Tynan's voice asking:

"Any luck, Tom?"

"Yes, I potted three," he answered. "They're terribly shy." Then, as this was almost the first sign of interest in anything that the sick man had taken since their arrival, he added: "How are you feeling, Jim?"

"Not too bad, Tom, thanks. I must have had a bit of a sleep. . . I feel dashed hungry."

"That's good. Luckily I've got some of that broth left. Will you have a drink of tea with it?"

"No thanks, old man. Just the broth."

It was very little that the patient could take, but that little did him a lot of good, for soon afterwards he fell into a deep sleep, which lasted well into the following morning.

He awoke with such keen hunger that Tom cut his own rations very short, for although they had enough flour to last till the evening, and help ought to have arrived by then, it was not wise to run themselves right out.

"How long have we been here?" asked Tynan, after a time.

"Nearly a day and a half. Don't you remember coming in, old man?"

"No, Tom, I don't."

"I'm not much surprised. You were as close up to the sweet bye and bye as it's safe to go."

"Was I? . . . I'm afraid I've been a dashed nuisance to you on this trip, Tom."

"Go to blazes! If anyone in this plant ought to be sorry, it's me, not you. I suggested the trip in the first place; then I hadn't the sense to know that all that gelignite was sure to knock the bottom out of the rock-hole; and then I jolly well ought to have watched those camels better than I did. . . . But what's the good of being sorry? We've been mates, and have got through. We won't shed tears over one another's graves yet awhile."

"I don't see Banjo about," said Tynan, later. "Where is he, Tom?"

"He ought to be on his way back from Marnoola with stores by now. I sent him in yesterday morning, and I reckon he'll make the pace. He's a good nigger."

"Yes, he is. Couldn't we do anything for him, Tom?"

"Yes, we could, if you like. I wouldn't advise giving him money. It's no good to a nigger. If

we fit him out with new togs and a blanket and new pipe, he'll think himself just Christmas."

Tom, who knew how terribly his friend had suffered, and had been inclined to fear the worst when he had collapsed so utterly, was pleasantly surprised at the way things were shaping. After dinner, Tynan again fell asleep, and the sun was only an hour or two off the western horizon when he next opened his eyes.

He was alone. Tom was hiding at the troughs, waiting for the pigeons to come and drink. No wind was stirring, and the foretaste of a winter night had chilled the air. All at once Tynan leant up on his elbow and listened. He thought he heard horses coming from the east.

Such a sound meant that help was near. Yet the smile that lit Tynan's face was not such as the prospect of relief would bring. His eyes, which had been either dull and listless, or bright with fever, now shone with the tender light that only burns on love's altar. The young scientist had travelled far since the days when he had rejected everything but what his mind could grasp, for he was now drawing the breath of life itself from what he once would have called an illusion.

Presently Tom returned, empty-handed.

"The beggars are too cunning," he said. "I bet they'll come in after dark. I only wish I had some bird-lime."

"Any sign of Banjo?" asked Tynan.

"No, not yet. I went up on the sandhill. You can see two or three miles of the track from there. But he's sure to turn up some time to-night."

So he had been deluded when he thought he heard horses! But it seemed to make no difference to the comfort the young man derived from it.

The last meal was just finished when a plant of

horses came over the sand-hill. In the fading light, Tom suspected nothing unusual when he announced to his friend:

“Here they come! By gad! they’ve sent horses. I wonder who’s come along. A couple of them are mounted.”

Tom walked out to meet the riders, more excited than he cared to show. It was his first contact with civilisation, after so many weeks during which he had wondered more than once whether he had not severed the connecting link for ever. But he was totally unprepared for what he saw. A white woman and a half-caste lubra! He could only stand and stare foolishly at the advancing horses.

Ida rode straight up to the bushman, and did not dismount.

Without any preliminary greeting, she asked: “Is he inside?” and pointed to the wurley. Receiving an affirmative nod of the head, she rode forward again, leaving Tom still staring at her with astonished eyes.

“Well, I’m . . . ” and he also hesitated as to an exact description of his condition, finally deciding on the word “blest!”

Tynan had struggled to his feet, and had tottered to the entrance of the wurley. For a minute or two, the landscape was blurred and dark, and he clutched at the two posts for support. The low sun shone full on him as he stood there. From a face covered with a scrubby beard, his eyes looked out over gaunt cheek bones, and his hair hung matted over forehead and ears. His neck, so scraggy that it seemed abnormally long, stood up from the collar-bone over which the skin was tightly stretched, as dry and yellow as parchment. His body was terribly emaciated and discolored with bruises, while a few rags, clinging to



his waist, hardly hid the festering scars on his legs.

Darkness went gradually from his eyes, and he ceased to feel as if the earth was rocking. He looked up.

Ida Hennessy stood before him.

He was dazed for a moment as if by a strong light, and shaded his eyes with a shaking hand. Then, like one who is certain that speech will dispel a vision, and yet is unable to bear its presence, he asked:

"Is that Ida?"

"Yes . . . Jim, it's me."

He lowered his hand, and stretched it out like a man groping in the dark. "I can't see very well," he said to himself. "When I can't touch it, I'll know it's not there . . . and that it's all imagination. . . . A chap doesn't like to made a fool of, even if he's not very well."

Ida took the groping hand in one of hers. Tynan tottered forward with a start, and would have fallen if she had not caught him.

"Jim! Jim!" she cried, brokenly, "It's me. It's Ida Hennessy."

Marvelling how light he had become, she carried him unaided into the wurley, and laid him on his blankets and knelt at his side.

"Jim," she said again. "It's really me. Feel." She put her soft cheek against his rough hand. "You must not think you're dreaming. All that is over now."

"But I went away from her," he said, still thinking he was alone. "I was proud, and . . . and perhaps I refused her love. . . I told her about it in that letter. . . God knows I——"

"Yes, yes, Jim," broke in the girl, almost in tears. "You went away, but I came after you, because I loved you."

Hitherto he had been staring at the bushes on the roof, but now he turned quickly and faced her. The shock of her sudden appearance, though subconsciously he had anticipated it all day, had stunned his mind for a time, but now the light of intelligence flickered back into his eyes, till at last it burnt in a steady flame.

"Ida," he said, and his voice was no longer that of a sleep-talker, "Ida, say that again, will you? Perhaps I didn't hear it right."

At the sound of the voice she loved, the girl broke down, but through her sobs came the confession.

"I came to find you, because I love you."

"But Ida"; he still did not fully realise what she had said, "I refused your love when it might have been mine."

"It was not love then, Jim. I too was proud. I blamed you for a thing I didn't understand. A girl who loved a man wouldn't do that."

"And you don't blame me now, little girl?"

She kissed his wrinkled brown hand. "No, dear, of course I don't."

"Really?"

For answer she lifted her face to his, and weak as he was, he held her to him in a first long kiss.

"Dearest," he said at last, "that child is not mine."

"Not yours?"

"No. It was born when I had been at Marnoola barely six months."

"Then, Jim, why ever did you let me think it was?"

"My dear, I wanted your love. And love covers a multitude of sins, you know."

Ida hid her face in her hands. "Oh, Jim! Jim!

It's I who have sinned. Will love ever cover mine, do you think?"

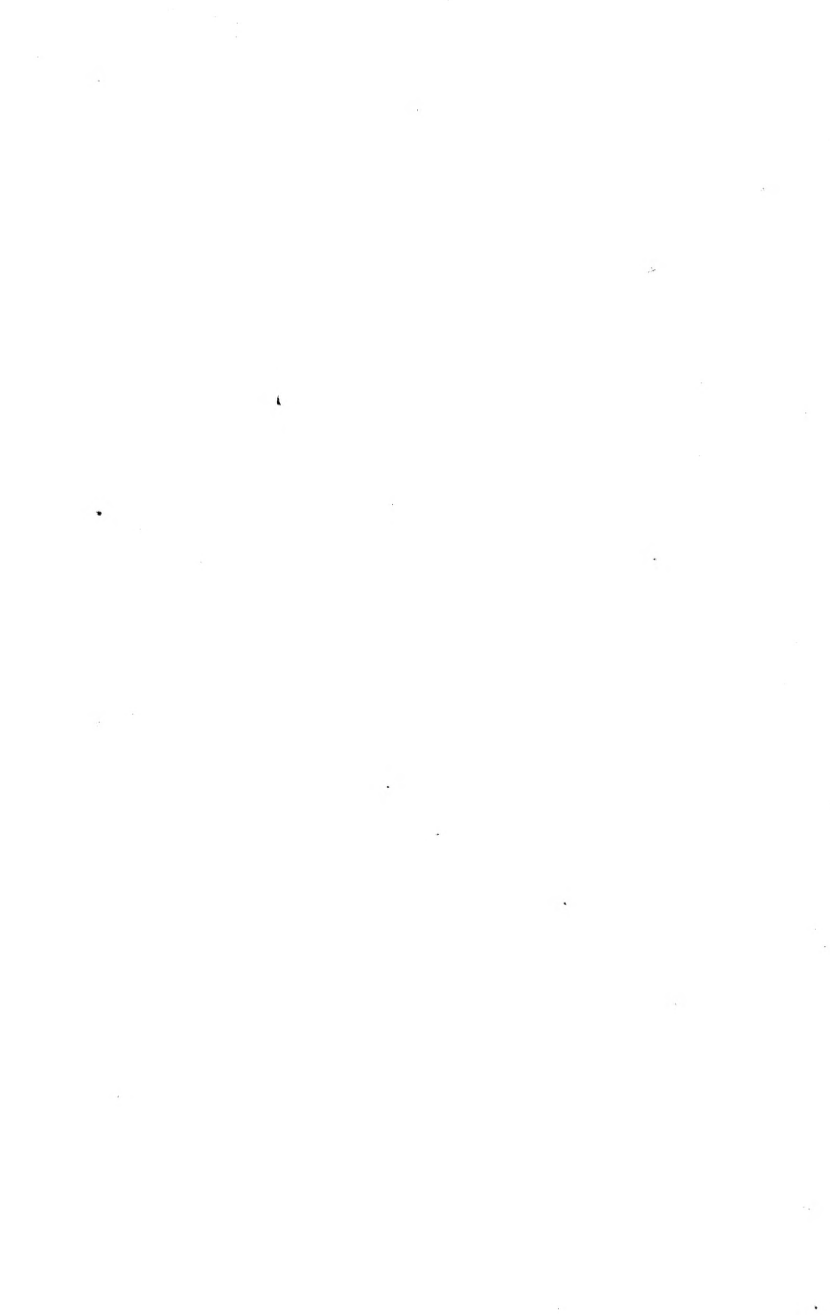
"It has done that, my darling, for both of us."

It was dark when Tom came up from the troughs with a bridle in his hands.

"I didn't leave this with the rest of the gear, Miss," he said, "thinking as you might want to take special care of it."

Ida motioned him to speak gently, and tip-toed out of the wurley. Tynan was fast asleep.

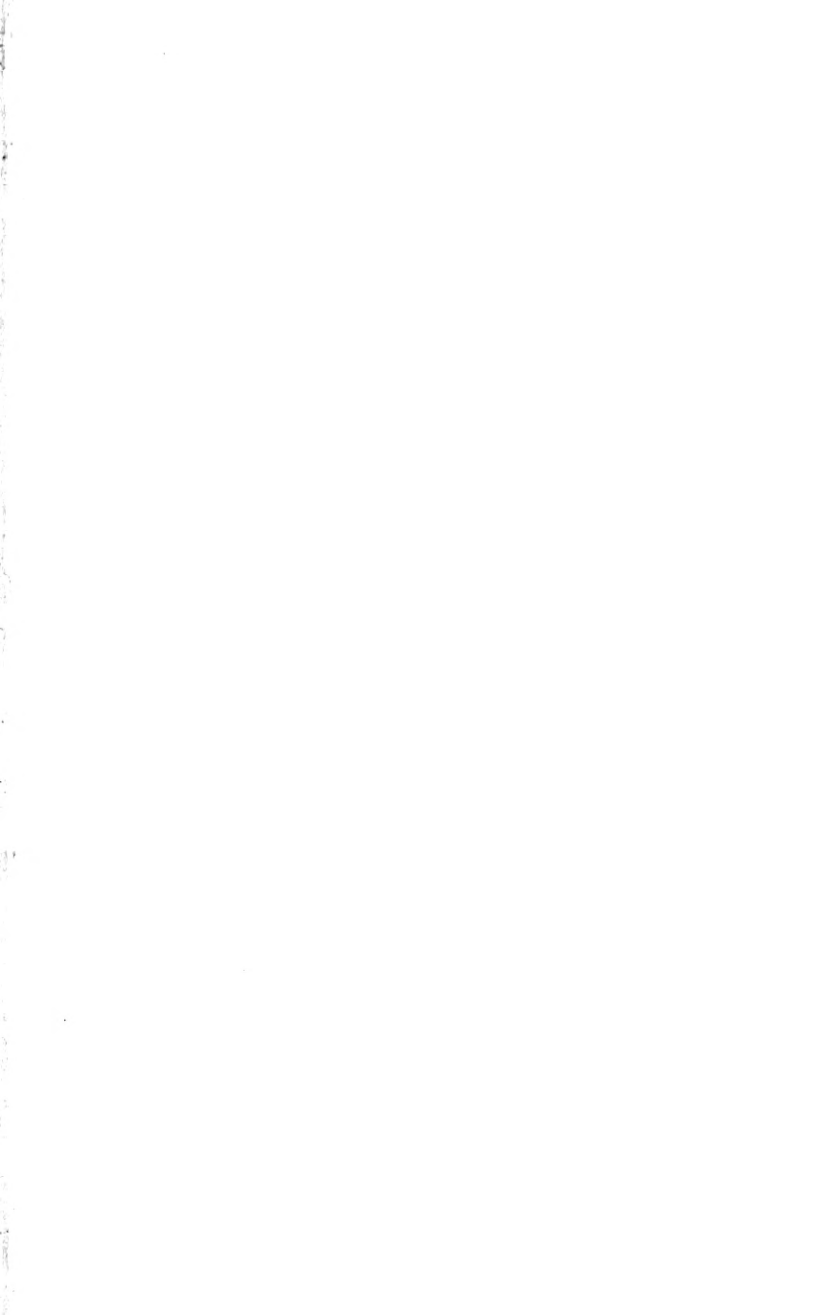
"Thank you," she said. "I do want to take special care of it;" and added, in explanation, "This is the bridle he sent me from Marnoola, and which told me where he was. . . You see, he's not my brother. . . . Did you notice the golden buckles?"







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