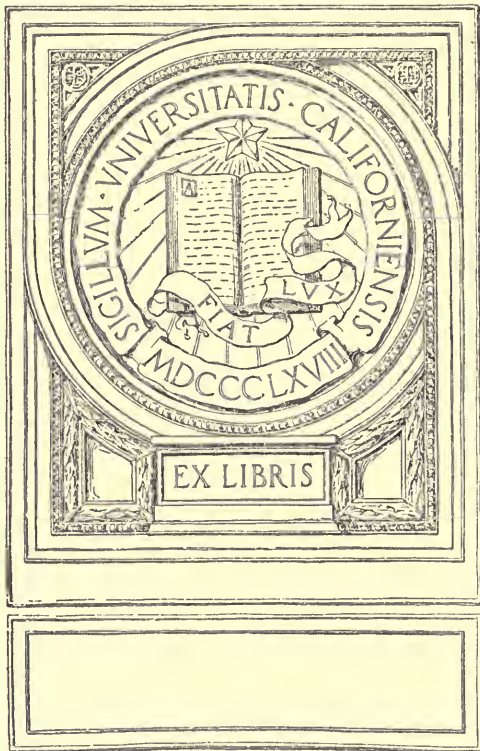




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PREFACE

Of the stories in this volume many have already appeared in the columns of the *Bulletin*, *Town and Country Journal*, *Freeman's Journal*, and *Australian Star* (Sydney), and the *West Australian* and *Western Mail* (Perth), while several now appear in print for the first time.

I wish to thank the editors of the papers mentioned for the right to republish in book form.

H. L.

Sydney, March 17th, 1900.

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THE SONGS THEY USED TO SING

ON the diggings up to twenty odd years ago—and as far back as I can remember—on Lambing Flat, the Pipe Clays, Gulgong, Home Rule, and so through the roaring list; in bark huts, tents, public-houses, sly grog shanties, and—well, the most glorious voice of all belonged to a bad girl. We were only children and didn't know why she was bad, but we weren't allowed to play near or go near the hut she lived in, and we were trained to believe firmly that something awful would happen to us if we stayed to answer a word, and didn't run away as fast as our legs could carry us, if she attempted to speak to us. We had before us the dread example of one urchin, who got an awful hiding and went on bread and water for twenty-four hours for allowing her to kiss him and give him lollies. She didn't look bad—she looked to us like a grand and beautiful lady-girl—but we got instilled into us the idea that she was an awful bad woman, something more terrible even than a drunken man, and one whose presence was to be feared and fled from. There were two other girls in the hut with her, also a pretty little girl, who called her "Auntie," and with whom we were not allowed to

play—for they were all bad; which puzzled us as much as child-minds can be puzzled. We couldn't make out how everybody in one house could be bad. We used to wonder why these bad people weren't hunted away or put in gaol if they were so bad. And another thing puzzled us. Slipping out after dark, when the bad girls happened to be singing in their house, we'd sometimes run against men hanging round the hut by ones and twos and threes, listening. They seemed mysterious. They were mostly good men, and we concluded they were listening and watching the bad women's house to see that they didn't kill anyone, or steal and run away with any bad little boys—ourselves, for instance—who ran out after dark; which, as we were informed, those bad people were always on the lookout for a chance to do.

We were told in after years that old Peter McKenzie (a respectable, married, hard-working digger) would sometimes steal up opposite the bad door in the dark, and throw in money done up in a piece of paper, and listen round until the bad girl had sung the "Bonnie Hills of Scotland" two or three times. Then he'd go and get drunk, and stay drunk two or three days at a time. And his wife caught him throwing the money in one night, and there was a terrible row, and she left him; and people always said it was all a mistake. But we couldn't see the mistake then.

But I can hear that girl's voice through the night, twenty years ago :

Oh ! the bloomin' heath, and the pale blue bell,
In my bonnet then I wore ;

And m  mory knows no brighter theme
Than those happy days of yore.
Scotland ! Land of chief and song !
Oh, what charms to thee belong !

And I am old enough to understand why poor Peter McKenzie—who was married to a Saxon, and a Tartar—went and got drunk when the bad girl sang “The Bonnie Hills of Scotland.”

His anxious eye might look in vain
For some loved form it knew !

.

And yet another thing puzzled us greatly at the time. Next door to the bad girl’s house there lived a very respectable family—a family of good girls with whom we were allowed to play, and from whom we got lollies (those hard old red-and-white “fish lollies” that grocers sent home with parcels of groceries and receipted bills). Now one washing day, they being as glad to get rid of us at home as we were to get out, we went over to the good house and found no one at home except the grown-up daughter, who used to sing for us, and read “Robinson Crusoe” of nights, “out loud,” and give us more lollies than any of the rest—and with whom we were passionately in love, notwithstanding the fact that she was engaged to a “grown-up man”—(we reckoned he’d be dead and out of the way by the time we were old enough to marry her). She was washing. She had carried the stool and tub over against the stick fence which separated her house from the bad house ; and, to our astonishment and dismay, the bad girl had brought *her* tub over against her side of the fence. They

stood and worked with their shoulders to the fence between them, and heads bent down close to it. The bad girl would sing a few words, and the good girl after her, over and over again. They sang very low, we thought. Presently the good grown-up girl turned her head and caught sight of us. She jumped, and her face went flaming red; she laid hold of the stool and carried it, tub and all, away from that fence in a hurry. And the bad grown-up girl took her tub back to her house. The good grown-up girl made us promise never to tell what we saw—that she'd been talking to a bad girl—else she would never, never marry us.

She told me, in after years, when she'd grown up to be a grandmother, that the bad girl was surreptitiously teaching her to sing "Madeline" that day.

I remember a dreadful story of a digger who went and shot himself one night after hearing that bad girl sing. We thought then what a frightfully bad woman she must be. The incident terrified us; and thereafter we kept carefully and fearfully out of reach of her voice, lest we should go and do what the digger did.

I have a dreamy recollection of a circus on Gulgong in the roaring days, more than twenty years ago, and a woman (to my child-fancy a being from another world) standing in the middle of the ring, singing :

Out in the cold world—out in the street—
Asking a penny from each one I meet ;
Cheerless I wander about all the day,
Wearing my young life in sorrow away !

That last line haunted me for many years. I remember being frightened by women sobbing (and one or two great grown-up diggers also) that night in that circus.

"Father, Dear Father, Come Home with Me Now," was a sacred song then, not a peg for vulgar parodies and more vulgar "business" for fourth-rate clowns and corner-men. Then there was "The Prairie Flower." "Out on the Prairie, in an Early Day"—I can hear the digger's wife yet: she was the prettiest girl on the field. They married on the sly and crept into camp after dark; but the diggers got wind of it and rolled up with gold-dishes, shovels, &c., &c., and gave them a real good tinkettling in the old-fashioned style, and a nugget or two to start housekeeping on. She had a very sweet voice.

Fair as a lily, joyous and free,

Light of the prairie home was she.

She's a "granny" now, no doubt—or dead.

And I remember a poor, brutally ill-used little wife, wearing a black eye mostly, and singing "Love Amongst the Roses" at her work. And they sang the "Blue Tail Fly," and all the first and best coon songs—in the days when old John Brown sank a duffer on the hill.

The great bark kitchen of Granny Mathews' "Redclay Inn." A fresh back-log thrown behind the fire, which lights the room fitfully. Company settled down to pipes, subdued yarning, and reverie.

Flash Jack—red sash, cabbage-tree hat on back of head with nothing in it, glossy black curls bunched

up in front of brim. Flash Jack volunteers, without invitation, preparation, or warning, and through his nose :

Hoh!—

*There was a wild kerlonial youth,
John Dowlin was his name!
He bountied on his parients,
Who lived in Castlemaine!*

and so on to—

*He took a pistol from his breast
And waved that lit—tle toy —*

“Little toy” with an enthusiastic flourish and great unction on Flash Jack’s part—

*“I’ll fight, but I won’t surrender!” said
The wild Kerlonial Boy.*

Even this fails to rouse the company’s enthusiasm. “Give us a song, Abe! Give us the ‘Lowlands!’” Abe Mathews, bearded and grizzled, is lying on the broad of his back on a bench, with his hands clasped under his head—his favourite position for smoking, reverie, yarning, or singing. He had a strong, deep voice, which used to thrill me through and through, from hair to toenails, as a child.

They bother Abe till he takes his pipe out of his mouth and puts it behind his head on the end of the stool :

*The ship was built in Glasgow ;
'Twas the “Golden Vanitee”—*

Lines have dropped out of my memory during the thirty years gone between—

And she ploughed in the Low Lands, Low !

The public-house people and more diggers drop into the kitchen, as all do within hearing, when Abe sings.

“ Now then, boys :

And she ploughed in the Low Lands, Low !

“ Now, all together !

The Low Lands ! The Low Lands !

And she ploughed in the Low Lands, Low !”

Toe and heel and flat of foot begin to stamp the clay floor, and horny hands to slap patched knees in accompaniment.

“ *Oh ! save me, lads !”* he cried,

“ *I’m drifting with the current,*

And I’m drifting with the tide !

And I’m sinking in the Low Lands, Low !

The Low Lands ! The Low Lands !” —

The old bark kitchen is a-going now. Heels drumming on gin-cases under stools ; hands, knuckles, pipe-bowls, and pannikins keeping time on the table.

And we sewed him in his hammock,

And we slipped him o’er the side,

And we sunk him in the Low Lands, Low !

The Low Lands ! The Low Lands !

And we sunk him in the Low Lands, Low !

Old Boozer Smith—a dirty gin-sodden bundle of rags on the floor in the corner with its head on a candle box, and covered by a horse rug—old Boozer Smith is supposed to have been dead to the universe for hours past, but the chorus must have disturbed his torpor ; for, with a suddenness and unexpectedness that makes the next man jump, there comes a bellow from under the horse rug :

Wot though !—I wear !—a rag !—ged coat !

I’ll wear it like a man !

and ceases as suddenly as it commenced. He struggles to bring his ruined head and bloated face

above the surface, glares round; then, no one questioning his manhood, he sinks back and dies to creation; and subsequent proceedings are only interrupted by a snore, as far as he is concerned.

Little Jimmy Nowlett, the bullock driver, is inspired. "Go on, Jimmy! Give us a song!"

*In the days when we were hard up
For want of wood and wire—*

Jimmy always blunders; it should have been "*food and fire*"—

*We used to tie our boots up
With lit—tle bits—er wire;*

and—

*I'm sitting in my lit—le room,
It measures six by six;
The work-house wall is opposite,
I've counted all the bricks!*

"Give us a chorus, Jimmy!"

Jimmy does, giving his head a short, jerky nod for nearly every word, and describing a circle round his crown—as if he were stirring a pint of hot tea—with his forefinger, at the end of every line:

*Hall!—Round!—Me—Hat!
I wore a weepin' willer!*

Jimmy is a Cockney.

"Now then, boys!"

Hall—round—me hat!

How many old diggers remember it?

And:

*A butcher, and a baker, and a quiet-looking quaker,
All a-courting pretty Jessie at the Railway Bar.*

I used to wonder as a child what the "railway bar" meant.

And :

*I would, I would, I would in vain
That I were single once again!
But ah, alas, that will not be
Till apples grow on the willow tree.*

A drunken gambler's young wife used to sing that song—to herself.

A stir at the kitchen door, and a cry of "Pinter," and old Poynton, Ballarat digger, appears and is shoved in; he has several drinks aboard, and they proceed to "git Pinter on the singin' lay," and at last talk him round. He has a good voice, but no "theory," and blunders worse than Jimmy Nowlett with the words. He starts with a howl—

*Hoh !
Way down in Covent Gar-ar-r-dings
A-strolling I did go,
To see the sweetest flow-ow-wers
That e'er in gardings grow.*

He saw the rose and lily—the red and white and blue—and he saw the sweetest flow-ow-ers that e'er in gardings grew; for he saw two lovely maidens (Pinter calls 'em "virgings") underneath (he must have meant on top of) "*a garding chair*," sings Pinter.

*And one was lovely Jessie,
With the jet black eyes and hair,*

roars Pinter,

*And the other was a vir-ir-ging,
I solemn-ly declare !*

"Maiden, Pinter!" interjects Mr. Nowlett.

"Well, it's all tho same," retorts Pinter. "A maiden *is* a virging, Jimmy. If you're singing,

Jimmy, and not me, I'll leave off!" Chorus of
 "Order! Shut up, Jimmy!"

*I quicklŷe step-ped up to her,
 And unto her did sa-a-y :
 Do you belong to any young man,
 Hoh, tell me that, I pra-a-y ?*

Her answer, according to Pinter, was surprisingly prompt and unconventional ; also full and concise :

*No ; I belong to no young man—
 I solemnly declare !
 I mean to live a virging
 And still my laurels wear !*

Jimmy Nowlett attempts to move an amendment in favour of "maiden," but is promptly suppressed. It seems that Pinter's suit has a happy termination, for he is supposed to sing in the character of a "Sailor Bold," and as he turns to pursue his stroll in "Covent Gar-ar-dings":

*"Oh, no ! Oh, no ! Oh, no !" she cried,
 "I love a Sailor Bold !"*

"Hong-kore, Pinter! Give us the *Golden Glove*, Pinter!"

Thus warmed up, Pinter starts with an explanatory "spoken" to the effect that the song he is about to sing illustrates some of the little ways of woman, and how, no matter what you say or do, she is bound to have her own way in the end ; also hōw, in one instance, she set about getting it.

Hoh !

*Now, it's of a young squire near Timworth did dwell,
 Who courted a nobleman's daughter so well—*

The song has little or nothing to do with the "squire,"

except so far as "all friends and relations had given consent," and—

*The troo-soo was ordered—appointed the day,
And a farmer were appointed for to give her away—*

which last seemed a most unusual proceeding, considering the wedding was a toney affair; but perhaps there were personal interests—the nobleman might have been hard up, and the farmer backing him. But there was an extraordinary scene in the church, and things got mixed.

*For as soon as this maiding this farmier espied :
"Hoh, my heart ! Hoh, my heart !
"Hoh, my heart !" then she cried.*

Hysterics? Anyway, instead of being wed—

This maiden took sick and she went to her bed.

(N.B.—Pinter sticks to *virging*.)

Whereupon friends and relations and guests left the house in a body (a strange but perhaps a wise proceeding, after all—maybe they smelt a rat) and left her to recover alone, which she did promptly. And then:

*Shirt, breeches, and waistcoat this maiding put on,
And a-hunting she went with her dog and her gun ;
She hunted all round where this farmier did dwell,
Because in her own heart she love-ed him well.*

The cat's out of the bag now :

And often she fired, but no game she killed—

which was not surprising—

Till at last the young farmier came into the field—

No wonder. She put it to him straight:

*"Oh, why are you not at the wedding?" she cried,
"For to wait on the squire, and to give him his bride."*

He was as prompt and as delightfully unconventional in his reply as the young lady in Covent Gardings :

*"Oh, no ! and oh, no ! For the truth I must sa-a-y,
I love her too well for to give her a-w-a-a-y !"*

which was satisfactory to the disguised "virging."

*" and I'd take sword in hand,
And by honour I'd win her if she would command."*

Which was still more satisfactory.

Now this virging, being—

(Jimmy Nowlett: "Maiden, Pinter—" Jim is thrown on a stool and sat on by several diggers.)

*Now this maiding, being please-ed to see him so bold,
She gave him her glove that was flowered with gold,*

and explained that she found it in his field while hunting around with her dog and her gun. It is understood that he promised to look up the owner. Then she went home and put an advertisement in the local *Herald*; and that ad. must have caused considerable sensation. She stated that she had lost her golden glove, and

*The young man that finds it and brings it to me,
Hoh ! that very young man my husband shall be !*

She had a saving clause in case the young farmer mislaid the glove before he saw the ad., and an *old* bloke got holt of it and fetched it along. But everything went all right. The young farmer turned up with the glove. He was a very respectable young farmer, and expressed his gratitude to her for having "*honour-ed him with her love.*" They were married, and the song ends with a picture of the young farmeress milking the cow, and the young farmer going whistling to plough. The fact that they lived

and grafted on the selection proves that I hit the right nail on the head when I guessed, in the first place, that the old nobleman was "stony."

In after years,

*. . . she told him of the fun,
How she hunted him up with her dog and her gun.*

But whether he was pleased or otherwise to hear it, after years of matrimonial experiences, the old song doesn't say, for it ends there.

Flash Jack is more successful with "Saint Patrick's Day."

*I come to the river, I jumped it quite clever!
Me wife tumbled in, and I lost her for ever,
St. Patrick's own day in the mornin'!*

This is greatly appreciated by Jimmy Nowlett, who is suspected, especially by his wife, of being more cheerful when on the roads than when at home.

"Sam Holt" was a great favourite with Jimmy Nowlett in after years.

*Oh, do you remember Black Alice, Sam Holt?
Black Alice so dirty and dark—
Who'd a nose on her face—I forget how it goes—
And teeth like a Moreton Bay shark.*

Sam Holt must have been very hard up for tucker as well as beauty then, for

*Do you remember the 'possums and grubs
She baked for you down by the creek?*

Sam Holt was, apparently, a hardened flash Jack.

You were not quite the cleanly potato, Sam Holt.

Reference is made to his "manner of holding a flush,"

and he is asked to remember several things which he, no doubt, would rather forget, including

. . . *the hiding you got from the boys.*

The song is decidedly personal.

But Sam Holt makes a pile and goes home, leaving many a better and worse man to pad the hoof Out Back. And—Jim Nowlett sang this with so much feeling as to make it appear a personal affair between him and the absent Holt—

*And, don't you remember the fiver, Sam Holt,
You borrowed so careless and free?
I reckon I'll whistle a good many tunes*

(with increasing feeling)

Ere you think of that fiver and me.

For the chances will be that Sam Holt's old mate

*Will be humping his drum on the Hughenden Road
To the end of the chapter of fate.*

.

An echo from "The Old Bark Hut," sung in the opposition camp across the gully :

*You may leave the door ajar, but if you keep it shut,
There's no need of suffocation in the Ould Barrk Hut.*

.

*The tucker's in the gin-case, but you'd better keep it shut—
For the flies will canther round it in the Ould Bark Hut.*

However :

What's out of sight is out of mind, in the Ould Bark Hut.

.

*We washed our greasy moleskins
On the banks of the Condamine.—*

Somebody tackling the "Old Bullock Dray;" it must be over fifty verses now. I saw a bushman at a country dance start to sing that song; he'd get up to ten or fifteen verses, break down, and start afresh. At last he sat down on his heel to it, in the centre of the clear floor, resting his wrist on his knee, and keeping time with an index finger. It was very funny, but the thing was taken seriously all through.

Irreverent echo from the old Lambing Flat trouble, from camp across the gully:

*Rule Britannia ! Britannia rules the waves !
No more Chinamen will enter Noo South Wales !*

and

*Yankee Doodle came to town
On a little pony—
Stick a feather in his cap,
And call him Maccaroni !*

All the camps seem to be singing to-night:

*Ring the bell, watchman !
Ring ! Ring ! Ring !
Ring, for the good news
Is now on the wing !*

Good lines, the introduction :

*High on the belfry the old sexton stands,
Grasping the rope with his thin bony hands ! . . .
Bon-fires are blazing throughout the land . . .
Glorious and blessed tidings ! Ring ! Ring the bell !*

Granny Mathews fails to coax her niece into the kitchen, but persuades her to sing inside. She is the girl who learnt *sub rosâ* from the bad girl who sang "Madeline." Such as have them on instinctively take their hats off. Diggers, &c., strolling past, halt

at the first notes of the girl's voice, and stand like statues in the moonlight :

*Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod ?
The beautiful—the beautiful river
That flows by the throne of God !—*

Diggers wanted to send that girl "Home," but Granny Mathews had the old-fashioned horror of any of her children becoming "public"—

*Gather with the saints at the river,
That flows by the throne of God !*

But it grows late, or rather, early. The "Eyetalians" go by in the frosty moonlight, from their last shift in the claim (for it is Saturday night), singing a litany.

"Get up on one end, Abe!—stand up all!" Hands are clasped across the kitchen table. Redclay, one of the last of the alluvial fields, has petered out, and the Roaring Days are dying . . . The grand old song that is known all over the world ; yet how many in ten thousand know more than one verse and the chorus ? Let Peter McKenzie lead :

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min' ?*

And hearts echo from far back in the past and across wide, wide seas :

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And days o' lang syne ?*

Now boys ! all together !

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
 For auld lang syne,
 We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,
 For auld lang syne.*

*We twa hae run about the braes,
 And pu'd the gowans fine ;
 But we've wandered mony a weary foot,
 Sin' auld lang syne.*

The world was wide then.

*We twa hae paidl't i' the burn,
 Frae mornin' sun till dine :*

the log fire seems to grow watery, for in wide, lonely
 Australia—

*But seas between us braid hae roar'd,
 Sin' auld lang syne.*

The kitchen grows dimmer, and the forms of the
 digger-singers seemed suddenly vague and unsub-
 stantial, fading back rapidly through a misty veil.
 But the words ring strong and defiant through hard
 years :

*And here's a hand, my trusty frien',
 And gie's a grup o' thine ;
 And we'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,
 For auld lang syne.*

.

And the nettles have been growing for over twenty
 years on the spot where Granny Mathews' big bark
 kitchen stood.

A VISION OF SANDY BLIGHT

I'd been humping my back, and crouching and groaning for an hour or so in the darkest corner of the travellers' hut, tortured by the demon of sandy blight. It was too hot to travel, and there was no one there except ourselves and Mitchell's cattle pnp. We were waiting till after sundown, for I couldn't have travelled in the daylight, anyway. Mitchell had tied a wet towel round my eyes, and led me for the last mile or two by another towel—one end fastened to his belt behind, and the other in my hand as I walked in his tracks. And oh! but this was a relief! It was out of the dust and glare, and the flies didn't come into the dark hut, and I could hump and stick my knees in my eyes and groan in comfort. I didn't want a thousand a year, or anything; I only wanted relief for my eyes—that was all I prayed for in this world. When the sun got down a bit, Mitchell started poking round, and presently he found amongst the rubbish a dirty-looking medicine bottle, corked tight; when he rubbed the dirt off a piece of notepaper that was pasted on, he saw "eye-water" written on it. He drew the cork with his teeth, smelt the water, stuck his little finger in, turned the bottle upside down, tasted the top of his finger, and reckoned the stuff was all right.

"Here! Wake up, Joe!" he shouted. "Here's a bottle of tears."

"A bottler wot?" I groaned.

"Eye-water," said Mitchell.

"Are you sure it's all right?" I didn't want to be poisoned or have my eyes burnt out by mistake; perhaps some burning acid had got into that bottle, or the label had been put on, or left on, in mistake or carelessness.

"I dunno," said Mitchell, "but there's no harm in tryin'."

I chanced it. I lay down on my back in a bunk, and Mitchell dragged my lids up and spilt half a bottle of eye-water over my eye-balls.

The relief was almost instantaneous. I never experienced such a quick cure in my life. I carried the bottle in my swag for a long time afterwards, with an idea of getting it analysed, but left it behind at last in a camp.

Mitchell scratched his head thoughtfully, and watched me for awhile.

"I think I'll wait a bit longer," he said at last, "and if it doesn't blind you I'll put some in my eyes. I'm getting a touch of blight myself now. That's the fault of travelling with a mate who's always catching something that's no good to him."

As it grew dark outside we talked of sandy-blight and fly-bite, and sand-flies up north, and ordinary flies, and branched off to Barcoo rot, and struck the track again at bees and bee stings. When we got to bees, Mitchell sat smoking for awhile and looking dreamily backwards along tracks and branch

tracks, and round corners and circles he had travelled, right back to the short, narrow, innocent bit of track that ends in a vague, misty point—like the end of a long, straight, cleared road in the moonlight—as far back as we can remember.

.

“I had about fourteen hives,” said Mitchell—“we used to call them ‘swarms,’ no matter whether they were flying or in the box—when I left home first time. I kept them behind the shed, in the shade, on tables of galvanised iron cases turned down on stakes; but I had to make legs later on, and stand them in pans of water, on account of the ants. When the bees swarmed—and some hives sent out the Lord knows how many swarms in a year, it seemed to me—we’d tin-kettle ’em, and throw water on ’em, to make ’em believe the biggest thunderstorm was coming to drown the oldest inhabitant; and, if they didn’t get the start of us and rise, they’d settle on a branch—generally on one of the scraggy fruit trees. It was rough on the bees—come to think of it; their instinct told them it was going to be fine, and the noise and water told them it was raining. They must have thought that nature was mad, drunk, or gone ratty, or the end of the world had come. We’d rig up a table, with a box upside down, under the branch, cover our face with a piece of mosquito net, have rags burning round, and then give the branch a sudden jerk, turn the box down, and run. If we got most of the bees in, the rest that were hanging to the bough or flying round would follow, and then we reckoned we’d shook the

queen in. If the bees in the box came out and joined the others, we'd reckon we hadn't shook the queen in, and go for them again. When a hive was full of honey we'd turn the box upside down, turn the empty box mouth down on top of it, and drum and hammer on the lower box with a stick till all the bees went up into the top box. I suppose it made their heads ache, and they went up on that account.

"I suppose things are done differently on proper bee-farms. I've heard that a bee-farmer will part a hanging swarm with his fingers, take out the queen bee and arrange matters with her; but our ways suited us, and there was a lot of expectation and running and excitement in it, especially when a swarm took us by surprise. The yell of 'Bees swarmin'!' was as good to us as the yell of 'Fight!' is now, or 'Bolt!' in town, or 'Fire' or 'Man overboard!' at sea.

"There was tons of honey. The bees used to go to the vineyards at wine-making and get honey from the heaps of crushed grape-skins thrown out in the sun, and get so drunk sometimes that they wobbled in their bee-lines home. They'd fill all the boxes, and then build in between and under the bark, and board, and tin covers. They never seemed to get the idea out of their heads that this wasn't an evergreen country, and it wasn't going to snow all winter. My younger brother Joe used to put pieces of meat on the tables near the boxes, and in front of the holes where the bees went in and out, for the dogs to grab at. But one old dog, 'Black Bill,' was a match for him; if it was worth Bill's while, he'd camp there, and keep

Joe and the other dogs from touching the meat—once it was put down—till the bees turned in for the night. And Joe would get the other kids round there, and when they weren't looking or thinking, he'd brush the bees with a stick and run. I'd lam him when I caught him at it. He was an awful young devil, was Joe, and he grew up steady, and respectable, and respected—and I went to the bad. I never trust a good boy now. . . . Ah, well!

"I remember the first swarm we got. We'd been talking of getting a few swarms for a long time. That was what was the matter with us English and Irish and English-Irish Australian farmers: we used to talk so much about doing things while the Germans and Scotch did them. And we even talked in a lazy, easy-going sort of way.

"Well, one blazing hot day I saw father coming along the road, home to dinner (we had it in the middle of the day), with his axe over his shoulder. I noticed the axe particularly because father was bringing it home to grind, and Joe and I had to turn the stone; but, when I noticed Joe dragging along home in the dust about fifty yards behind father, I felt easier in my mind. Suddenly father dropped the axe and started to run back along the road towards Joe, who, as soon as he saw father coming, shied for the fence and got through. He thought he was going to catch it for something he'd done—or hadn't done. Joe used to do so many things and leave so many things not done that he could never be sure of father. Besides, father had a way of starting to hammer us unexpectedly—when the idea struck

him. But father pulled himself up in about thirty yards and started to grab up handfuls of dust and sand and throw them into the air. My idea, in the first flash, was to get hold of the axe, for I thought it was sun-stroke, and father might take it into his head to start chopping up the family before I could persuade him to put it (his head, I mean) in a bucket of water. But Joe came running like mad, yelling :

“ ‘ Swarmer—bees ! Swawmmer—bee—ee—es !
Bring—a—tin—dish—and—a—dipper—a—wa-a-ter ! ’

“ I ran with a bucket of water and an old frying-pan, and pretty soon the rest of the family were on the spot, throwing dust and water, and banging everything, tin or iron, they could get hold of. The only bullock bell in the district (if it was in the district) was on the old poley cow, and she'd been lost for a fortnight. Mother brought up the rear—but soon worked to the front—with a baking-dish and a big spoon. The old lady—she wasn't old then—had a deep-rooted prejudice that she could do everything better than anybody else, and that the selection and all on it would go to the dogs if she wasn't there to look after it. There was no jolting that idea out of her. She not only believed that she could do anything better than anybody, and hers was the only right or possible way, and that we'd do everything upside down if she wasn't there to do it or show us how—but she'd try to do things herself or insist on making us do them her way, and that led to messes and rows. She was excited now, and took command at once. She wasn't tongue-tied, and had no impediment in her speech.

“ ‘Don’t throw up dust!—Stop throwing up dust!—Do you want to smother ’em?—Don’t throw up so much water!—Only throw up a pannikin at a time!—D’yer want to drown ’em? Bang! Keep on banging, Joe!—Look at that child! Run, someone!—run! you, Jack!—D’yer want the child to be stung to death?—Take her inside! . . . Dy’ hear me? . . . Stop throwing up dust, Tom! (To father.) You’re scaring ’em away! Can’t you see they want to settle?’ [Father was getting mad and yelping: ‘For Godsake shettup and go inside.’] ‘Throw up water, Jack! Throw up—Tom! Take that bucket from him and don’t make such a fool of yourself before the children! Throw up water! Throw—keep on banging, children! Keep on banging!’ [Mother put her faith in banging.] ‘There!—they’re off! You’ve lost ’em! I knew you would! I told yer—keep on bang—!’ ”

“ A bee struck her in the eye, and she grabbed at it!

“ Mother went home—and inside.

“ Father was good at bees—could manage them like sheep when he got to know their ideas. When the swarm settled, he sent us for the old washing stool, boxes, bags, and so on; and the whole time he was fixing the bees I noticed that whenever his back was turned to us his shoulders would jerk up as if he was cold, and he seemed to shudder from inside, and now and then I’d hear a grunting sort of whimper like a boy that was just starting to blubber. But father wasn’t weeping, and bees weren’t stinging him; it was the bee that stung mother that was tickling father. When he went into the house, mother’s other eye had

bunged for sympathy. Father was always gentle and kind in sickness, and he bathed mother's eyes and rubbed mud on, but every now and then he'd catch inside, and jerk and shudder, and grunt and cough. Mother got wild, but presently the humour of it struck her, and she had to laugh, and a rum laugh it was, with both eyes bunged up. Then she got hysterical, and started to cry, and father put his arm round her shoulder and ordered us out of the house.

They were very fond of each other, the old people were, under it all—right up to the end. . . . Ah, well ! ”

Mitchell pulled the swags out of a bunk, and started to fasten the nose-bags on.

ANDY PAGE'S RIVAL

Tall and freckled and sandy,
Face of a country lout ;
That was the picture of Andy—
Middleton's rouseabout.
On Middleton's wide dominions
Plied the stock-whip and shears ;
Hadn't any opinions——

AND he hadn't any 'ideers"—at least, he said so himself—except as regarded anything that looked to him like what he called "funny business," under which heading he catalogued tyranny, treachery, interference with the liberty of the subject by the subject, "blanky" lies, or swindles—all things, in short, that seemed to his slow understanding dishonest, mean or paltry ; most especially, and above all, treachery to a mate. *That* he could never forget. Andy was uncomfortably "straight." His mind worked slowly and his decisions were, as a rule, right and just ; and when he once came to a conclusion concerning any man or matter, or decided upon a course of action, nothing short of an earthquake or a Nevertire cyclone could move him back an inch—unless a conviction were severely shaken, and then he would require as much time to "back" to his starting point as he did to come to the decision.

Andy had come to a conclusion with regard to a selector's daughter—name, Lizzie Porter—who lived (and slaved) on her father's selection, near the township corner of the run on which Andy was a general "hand." He had been in the habit for several years of calling casually at the selector's house, as he rode to and fro between the station and the town, to get a drink of water and exchange the time of day with old Porter and his "missus." The conversation concerned the drought, and the likelihood or otherwise of their ever going to get a little rain; or about Porter's cattle, with an occasional enquiry concerning, or reference to, a stray cow belonging to the selection, but preferring the run; a little, plump, saucy, white cow, by-the-way, practically pure white, but referred to by Andy—who had eyes like a blackfellow—as "old Speckledy." No one else could detect a spot or speckle on her at a casual glance. Then after a long bovine silence, which would have been painfully embarrassing in any other society, and a tilting of his cabbage-tree hat forward, which came of tickling and scratching the sun-blotched nape of his neck with his little finger, Andy would slowly say: "Ah, well. I must be gettin'. So-long, Mr. Porter. So-long, Mrs. Porter." And, if *she* were in evidence—as she generally was on such occasions—"So-long, Lizzie." And they'd shout: "So-long, Andy," as he galloped off from the jump. Strange that those shy, quiet, gentle-voiced bushmen seem the hardest and most reckless riders.

But of late his horse had been seen hanging up outside Porter's for an hour or so after sunset. He

smoked, talked over the results of the last drought (if it happened to rain), and the possibilities of the next one, and played cards with old Porter; who took to winking, automatically, at his "old woman," and nudging, and jerking his thumb in the direction of Lizzie when her back was turned, and Andy was scratching the nape of his neck and staring at the cards.

Lizzie told a lady friend of mine, years afterwards, how Andy popped the question; told it in her quiet way—you know Lizzie's quiet way (something of the old, privileged house-cat about her); never a sign in expression or tone to show whether she herself saw or appreciated the humour of anything she was telling, no matter how comical it might be. She had witnessed two tragedies, and had found a dead man in the bush, and related the incidents as though they were common-place.

It happened one day—after Andy had been coming two or three times a week for about a year—that she found herself sitting with him on a log of the wood-heap, in the cool of the evening, enjoying the sunset breeze. Andy's arm had got round her—just as it might have gone round a post he happened to be leaning against. They hadn't been talking about anything in particular. Andy said he wouldn't be surprised if they had a thunderstorm before mornin'—it had been so smotherin' hot all day.

Lizzie said, "Very likely."

Andy smoked a good while, then he said: "Ah, well! It's a weary world."

Lizzie didn't say anything.

By-and-bye Andy said: "Ah, well; it's a lonely world, Lizzie."

"Do you feel lonely, Andy?" asked Lizzie, after a while.

"Yes, Lizzie; I do."

Lizzie let herself settle, a little, against him, without either seeming to notice it, and after another while she said, softly: "So do I, Andy."

Andy knocked the ashes from his pipe very slowly and deliberately, and put it away; then he seemed to brighten suddenly, and said briskly: "Well, Lizzie! Are you satisfied!"

"Yes, Andy; I'm satisfied."

"Quite sure, now?"

"Yes; I'm quite sure, Andy. I'm perfectly satisfied."

"Well, then, Lizzie—it's settled!"

But to-day—a couple of months after the proposal described above—Andy had trouble on his mind, and the trouble was connected with Lizzie Porter. He was putting up a two-rail fence along the old log-paddock on the frontage, and working like a man in trouble, trying to work it off his mind; and evidently not succeeding—for the last two panels were out of line. He was ramming a post—Andy rammed honestly, from the bottom of the hole, not the last few shovelfuls below the surface, as some do. He was ramming the last layer of clay when a cloud of white dust came along the road, paused, and drifted or poured off into the scrub, leaving long Dave Bentley, the horse-breaker, on his last victim.

"'Ello, Andy! Graftin'?"

"I want to speak to you, Dave," said Andy, in a strange voice.

"All—all right!" said Dave, rather puzzled. He got down, wondering what was up, and hung his horse to the last post but one.

Dave was Andy's opposite in one respect: he jumped to conclusions, as women do; but, unlike women, he was mostly wrong. He was an old chum and mate of Andy's who had always liked, admired, and trusted him. But now, to his helpless surprise, Andy went on scraping the earth from the surface with his long-handled shovel, and heaping it conscientiously round the butt of the post, his face like a block of wood, and his lips set grimly. Dave broke out first (with bush oaths):

"What's the matter with you? Spit it out! What have I been doin' to you? What's yer got yer rag out about, anyway?"

Andy faced him suddenly, with hatred for "funny business" flashing in his eyes.

"What did you say to my sister Mary about Lizzie Porter?"

Dave started; then he whistled long and low. "Spit it all out, Andy!" he advised.

"You said she was travellin' with a feller!"

"Well, what's the harm in that? Everybody knows that—"

"If any crawler says a word about Lizzie Porter—look here, me and you's got to fight, Dave Bentley!" Then, with still greater vehemence, as though he had a share in the garment: "Take off that coat!"

“Not if I know it!” said Dave, with the sudden quietness that comes to brave but headstrong and impulsive men at a critical moment: “Me and you ain’t goin’ to fight, Andy; and” (with sudden energy) “if you try it on I’ll knock you into jim-rags!”

Then, stepping close to Andy and taking him by the arm: “Andy, this thing will have to be fixed up. Come here; I want to talk to you.” And he led him some paces aside, inside the boundary line, which seemed a ludicrously unnecessary precaution, seeing that there was no one within sight or hearing save Dave’s horse.

“Now, look here, Andy; let’s have it over. What’s the matter with you and Lizzie Porter?”

“*I’m* travellin’ with her, that’s all; and we’re going to get married in two years!”

Dave gave vent to another long, low whistle. He seemed to think and make up his mind.

“Now, look here, Andy: we’re old mates, ain’t we?”

“Yes; I know that.”

“And do you think I’d tell you a blanky lie, or crawl behind your back? Do you? Spit it out!”

“N—no, I don’t!”

“I’ve always stuck up for you, Andy, and—why, I’ve fought for you behind your back!”

“I know that, Dave.”

“There’s my hand on it!”

Andy took his friend’s hand mechanically, but gripped it hard.

“Now, Andy, I’ll tell you straight: It’s ~~the~~ truth about Lizzie Porter!”

They stood as they were for a full minute, hands clasped; Andy with his jaw dropped and staring in a dazed sort of way at Dave. He raised his disengaged hand helplessly to his throat, gulped suspiciously, and asked in a broken voice:

"How—how do you know it, Dave?"

"Know it? Andy, *I seen 'em meself!*"

"You did, Dave?" in a tone that suggested sorrow more than anger at Dave's part in the seeing of them.

It's " ~~the~~ truth, Andy!"

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"Tell me, Dave, who was the feller? That's all I want to know."

"I can't tell you that. I only seen them when I was canterin' past in the dusk."

"Then how'd you know it was a man at all?"

"It wore trousers, anyway, and was as big as you; so it couldn't have been a girl. I'm pretty safe to swear it was Mick Kelly. I saw his horse hangin' up at Porter's once or twice. But I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll find out for you, Andy. And, what's more, I'll job him for you if I catch him!"

Andy said nothing; his hands clenched and his chest heaved. Dave laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

"It's red hot, Andy, I know. Anybody else but you and I wouldn't have cared. But don't be a fool; there's any ~~large~~ quantity of girls knockin' round. You just give it to her straight and chuck her, and have done with it. You must be bad off to bother about her. ~~the~~ truth! she ain't much to look at any-

way! I've got to ride like blazes to catch the coach. Don't knock off till I come back; I won't be above an hour. I'm goin' to give you some points in case you've got to fight Mick; and I'll have to be there to back you!" And, thus taking the right moment instinctively, he jumped on his horse and galloped on towards the town.

His dust-cloud had scarcely disappeared round a corner of the paddocks when Andy was aware of another one coming towards him. He had a dazed idea that it was Dave coming back, but went on digging another post-hole, mechanically, until a spring cart rattled up, and stopped opposite him. Then he lifted his head. It was Lizzie herself, driving home from town. She turned towards him with her usual faint smile. Her small features were "washed out" and rather haggard.

"'Ello, Andy!"

But, at the sight of her, all his hatred of "funny business"—intensified, perhaps, by a sense of personal injury—came to a head, and he exploded:

"Look here, Lizzie Porter! I know all about you. You needn't think you're goin' to cotton on with me any more after this! I wouldn't be seen in a paddock with yer! I'm satisfied about you! Get on out of this!"

The girl stared at him for a moment thunderstruck; then she lammed into the old horse with a stick she carried in place of a whip.

She cried, and wondered what she'd done, and trembled so that she could scarcely unharness the horse, and wondered if Andy had got a touch of the

sun, and went in and sat down and cried again; and pride came to her aid and she hated Andy; thought of her big brother, away droving, and made a cup of tea. She shed tears over the tea, and went through it all again.

Meanwhile Andy was suffering a reaction. He started to fill the hole before he put the post in; then to ram the post before the rails were in position. Dubbing off the ends of the rails, he was in danger of amputating a toe or a foot with every stroke of the adze. And, at last, trying to squint along the little lumps of clay which he had placed in the centre of the top of each post for several panels back—to assist him to take a line—he found that they swam and doubled, and ran off in watery angles, for his eyes were too moist to see straight and single.

Then he threw down the tools hopelessly, and was standing helplessly undecided whether to go home or go down to the creek and drown himself, when Dave turned up again.

“Seen her?” asked Dave.

“Yes,” said Andy.

“Did you chuck her?”

“Look here, Dave; are you sure the feller was Mick Kelly?”

“I never said I was. How was I to know? It was dark. You don’t expect I’d ‘fox’ a feller I see doing a bit of a bear-up to a girl, do you? It might have been you, for all I knowed. I suppose she’s been talking you round?”

“No, she ain’t,” said Andy. “But, look here, Dave; I was properly gone on that girl, I was, and—and I want to be sure I’m right.”

The business was getting altogether too psychological for Dave Bentley. "You might as well," he rapped out, "call me a liar at once!"

"'Taint that at all, Dave. I want to get at who the feller is; that's what I want to get at now. Where did you see them, and when?"

"I seen them Anniversary night, along the road, near Ross' farm; and I seen 'em Sunday night afore that—in the trees near the old culvert—near Porter's sliprails; and I seen 'em one night outside Porter's, on a log near the woodheap. They was thick that time, and bearin' up proper, and no mistake. So I can swear to her. Now, are you satisfied about her?"

But Andy was wildly pitchforking his thatch under his hat with all ten fingers and staring at Dave, who began to regard him uneasily; then there came to Andy's eyes an awful glare, which caused Dave to step back hastily.

"Good God, Andy! Are yer goin' ratty?"

"No!" cried Andy, wildly.

"Then what the blazes is the matter with you? You'll have rats if you don't look out!"

"*Jimminy froth!*—It was *me* all the time!"

"What?"

"It was me that was with her all them nights. It was me that you seen. *Why, I popped on the woodheap!*"

Dave was taken too suddenly to whistle this time.

"And you went for her just now?"

"Yes!" yelled Andy.

"Well—you've done it!"

"Yes," said Andy, hopelessly; "I've done it!"

Dave whistled now—a very long, low whistle. “Well, you’re a bloomin’ goat, Andy, after this. But this thing’ll have to be fixed up!” and he cantered away. Poor Andy was too badly knocked to notice the abruptness of Dave’s departure, or to see that he turned through the sliprails on to the track that led to Porter’s.

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Half an hour later Andy appeared at Porter’s back door, with an expression on his face as though the funeral was to start in ten minutes. In a tone befitting such an occasion, he wanted to see Lizzie.

Dave had been there with the laudable determination of fixing the business up, and had, of course, succeeded in making it much worse than it was before. But Andy made it all right.

THE IRON-BARK CHIP

DAVE REGAN and party—bush-fencers, tank-sinkers, rough carpenters, &c.—were finishing the third and last culvert of their contract on the last section of the new railway line, and had already sent in their vouchers for the completed contract, so that there might be no excuse for extra delay in connection with the cheque.

Now it had been expressly stipulated in the plans and specifications that the timber for certain beams and girders was to be iron-bark and no other, and Government inspectors were authorised to order the removal from the ground of any timber or material they might deem inferior, or not in accordance with the stipulations. The railway contractor's foreman and inspector of sub-contractors was a practical man and a bushman, but he had been a timber-getter himself; his sympathies were bushy, and he was on winking terms with Dave Regan. Besides, extended time was expiring, and the contractors were in a hurry to complete the line. But the Government inspector was a reserved man who poked round on his independent own and appeared in lonely spots at unexpected times—with apparently no definite object in life—like a grey kangaroo bothered by a new

wire fence, but unsuspecting of the presence of humans. He wore a grey suit, rode, or mostly led, an ashen-grey horse; the grass was long and grey, so he was seldom spotted until he was well within the horizon and bearing leisurely down on a party of sub-contractors, leading his horse.

Now iron-bark was scarce and distant on those ridges, and another timber, similar in appearance, but much inferior in grain and "standing" quality, was plentiful and close at hand. Dave and party were "about full of" the job and place, and wanted to get their cheque and be gone to another "spec" they had in view. So they came to reckon they'd get the last girder from a handy tree, and have it squared, in place, and carefully and conscientiously tarred before the inspector happened along, if he did. But they didn't. They got it squared, and ready to be lifted into its place; the kindly darkness of tar was ready to cover a fraud that took four strong men with crow-bars and levers to shift; and now (such is the regular cussedness of things) as the fraudulent piece of timber lay its last hour on the ground, looking and smelling, to their guilty imaginations like anything but iron-bark, they were aware of the Government inspector drifting down upon them obliquely, with something of the atmosphere of a casual Bill or Jim who had dropped out of his easy-going track to see how they were getting on, and borrow a match. They had more than half hoped that, as he had visited them pretty frequently during the progress of the work, and knew how near it was to completion, he wouldn't bother coming any more. But it's the

way with the Government. You might move heaven and earth in vain endeavour to get the "Guvermont" to flutter an eyelash over something of the most momentous importance to yourself and mates and the district—even to the country; but just when you are leaving authority severely alone, and have strong reasons for not wanting to worry or interrupt it, and not desiring it to worry about you, it will take a fancy into its head to come along and bother.

"It's always the way!" muttered Dave to his mates. "I knew the beggar would turn up! And the only cronk log we've had, too!" he added, in an injured tone. "If this had 'a' been the only blessed iron-bark in the whole contract, it would have been all right. . . . Good-day, sir!" (to the inspector). "It's hot?"

The inspector nodded. He was not of an impulsive nature. He got down from his horse and looked at the girder in an abstracted way; and presently there came into his eyes a dreamy, far-away, sad sort of expression, as if there had been a very sad and painful occurrence in his family, way back in the past, and that piece of timber in some way reminded him of it and brought the old sorrow home to him. He blinked three times, and asked, in a subdued tone:

"Is that iron-bark?"

Jack Bentley, the fluent liar of the party, caught his breath with a jerk and coughed, to cover the gasp and gain time. "I—iron-bark? Of course it is! I thought you would know iron-bark, mister." (Mister was silent.) "What else d'yer think it is?"

The dreamy, abstracted expression was back.

The inspector, by-the-way, didn't know much about timber, but he had a great deal of instinct, and went by it when in doubt.

"L—look here, mister!" put in Dave Regan, in a tone of innocent puzzlement and with a blank bucolic face. "B—but don't the plans and specifications say iron-bark? Ours does, anyway. I—I'll git the papers from the tent and show yer, if yer like."

It was not necessary. The inspector admitted the fact slowly. He stooped, and with an absent air picked up a chip. He looked at it abstractedly for a moment, blinked his threefold blink; then, seeming to recollect an appointment, he woke up suddenly and asked briskly:

"Did this chip come off that girder?"

Blank silence. The inspector blinked six times, divided in threes, rapidly, mounted his horse, said "Day," and rode off.

Regan and party stared at each other.

"Wha—what did he do that for?" asked Andy Page, the third in the party.

"Do what for, you fool?" enquired Dave.

"Ta—take that chip for?"

"He's taking it to the office!" snarled Jack Bentley.

"What—what for? What does he want to do that for?"

"To get it blanky well analysed! You ass! Now are yer satisfied?" And Jack sat down hard on the timber, jerked out his pipe, and said to Dave, in a sharp, toothache tone:

"Gimmiamatch!"

"We—well! what are we to do now?" enquired Andy, who was the hardest grafter, but altogether helpless, hopeless, and useless in a crisis like this.

"Grain and varnish the bloomin' culvert!" snapped Bentley.

But Dave's eyes, that had been ruefully following the inspector, suddenly dilated. The inspector had ridden a short distance along the line, dismounted, thrown the bridle over a post, laid the chip (which was too big to go in his pocket) on top of it, got through the fence, and was now walking back at an angle across the line in the direction of the fencing party, who had worked up on the other side, a little more than opposite the culvert.

Dave took in the lay of the country at a glance and thought rapidly.

"Gimme an iron-bark chip!" he said suddenly.

Bentley, who was quick-witted when the track was shown him, as is a kangaroo dog (Jack ran by sight, not scent), glanced in the line of Dave's eyes, jumped up, and got a chip about the same size as that which the inspector had taken.

Now the "lay of the country" sloped generally to the line from both sides, and the angle between the inspector's horse; the fencing party, and the culvert was well within a clear concave space; but a couple of hundred yards back from the line and parallel to it (on the side on which Dave's party worked their timber) a fringe of scrub ran to within a few yards of a point which would be about in line with a single tree on the cleared slope, the horse, and the fencing party.

Dave took the iron-bark chip, ran along the bed of the water-course into the scrub, raced up the siding behind the bushes, got safely, though without breathing, across the exposed space, and brought the tree into line between him and the inspector, who was talking to the fencers. Then he began to work quickly down the slope towards the tree (which was a thin one), keeping it in line, his arms close to his sides, and working, as it were, down the trunk of the tree, as if the fencing party were kangaroos and Dave was trying to get a shot at them. The inspector, by-the-bye, had a habit of glancing now and then in the direction of his horse, as though under the impression that it was flighty and restless and inclined to bolt on opportunity. It was an anxious moment for all parties concerned—except the inspector. They didn't want *him* to be perturbed. And, just as Dave reached the foot of the tree, the inspector finished what he had to say to the fencers, turned, and started to walk briskly back to his horse. There was a thunderstorm coming. Now was the critical moment—there were certain pre-arranged signals between Dave's party and the fencers which might have interested the inspector, but none to meet a case like this.

Jack Bentley gasped, and started forward with an idea of intercepting the inspector and holding him for a few minutes in bogus conversation. Inspirations come to one at a critical moment, and it flashed on Jack's mind to send Andy instead. Andy looked as innocent and guileless as he was, but was uncomfortable in the vicinity of "funny business," and must have an honest excuse. "Not that that mattered," commented Jack

afterwards ; "it would have taken the inspector ten minutes to get at what Andy was driving at, whatever it was."

"Run, Andy! Tell him there's a heavy thunder-storm coming and he'd better stay in our humpy till it's over. Run! Don't stand staring like a blanky fool. He'll be gone!"

Andy started. But just then, as luck would have it, one of the fencers started after the inspector, hailing him as "Hi, mister!" He wanted to be set right about the survey or something—or to pretend to want to be set right—from motives of policy which I haven't time to explain here.

That fencer explained afterwards to Dave's party that he "seen what you coves was up to," and that's why he called the inspector back. But he told them that after they had told their yarn—which was a mistake.

"Come back, Andy!" cried Jack Bentley.

Dave Regan slipped round the tree, down on his hands and knees, and made quick time through the grass which, luckily, grew pretty tall on the thirty or forty yards of slope between the tree and the horse. Close to the horse, a thought struck Dave that pulled him up, and sent a shiver along his spine and a hungry feeling under it. The horse would break away and bolt! But the case was desperate. Dave ventured an interrogatory "Cope, cope, cope?" The horse turned its head wearily and regarded him with a mild eye, as if he'd expected him to come, and come on all fours, and wondered what had kept him so long; then he went on thinking. Dave reached the foot of

the post ; the horse obligingly leaning over on the other leg. Dave reared head and shoulders cautiously behind the post, like a snake ; his hand went up twice, swiftly—the first time he grabbed the inspector's chip, and the second time he put the iron-bark one in its place. He drew down and back, and scuttled off for the tree like a gigantic tailless "goanna."

A few minutes later he walked up to the culvert from along the creek, smoking hard to settle his nerves.

The sky seemed to darken suddenly ; the first great drops of the thunderstorm came pelting down. The inspector hurried to his horse, and cantered off along the line in the direction of the fettlers' camp.

He had forgotten all about the chip, and left it on top of the post !

Dave Regan sat down on the beam in the rain and swore comprehensively.

“MIDDLETON’S PETER”

I.

THE FIRST BORN

THE struggling squatter is to be found in Australia as well as the “struggling farmer.” The Australian squatter is not always the mighty wool king that English and American authors and other uninformed people apparently imagine him to be. Squatting, at the best, is but a game of chance. It depends mainly on the weather, and that, in New South Wales at least, depends on nothing.

Joe Middleton was a struggling squatter, with a station some distance to the westward of the furthest line reached by the ordinary “new chum.” His run, at the time of our story, was only about six miles square, and his stock was limited in proportion. The hands on Joe’s run consisted of his brother Dave, a middle-aged man known only as “Middleton’s Peter” (who had been in the service of the Middleton family ever since Joe Middleton could remember), and an old black shepherd, with his gin and two boys.

It was in the first year of Joe’s marriage. He had married a very ordinary girl, as far as Australian girls go, but in his eyes she was an angel. He really worshipped her.

One sultry afternoon in midsummer all the station hands, with the exception of Dave Middleton, were congregated about the homestead door, and it was evident from their solemn faces that something unusual was the matter. They appeared to be watching for something or someone across the flat, and the old black shepherd, who had been listening intently with bent head, suddenly straightened himself up and cried :

"I can hear the cart. I can see it!"

You must bear in mind that our blackfellows do not always talk the gibberish with which they are credited by story writers.

It was not until some time after Black Bill had spoken that the white—or, rather, the brown—portion of the party could see or even hear the approaching vehicle. At last, far out through the trunks of the native apple-trees, the cart was seen approaching; and as it came nearer it was evident that it was being driven at a break-neck pace, the horses cantering all the way, while the motion of the cart, as first one wheel and then the other sprang from a root or a rut, bore a striking resemblance to the Highland Fling. There were two persons in the cart. One was Mother Palmer, a stout, middle-aged party (who sometimes did the duties of a midwife), and the other was Dave Middleton, Joe's brother.

The cart was driven right up to the door with scarcely any abatement of speed, and was stopped so suddenly that Mrs. Palmer was sent sprawling on to the horse's rump. She was quickly helped down, and, as soon as she had recovered sufficient breath, she followed Black Mary into the bedroom where young

Mrs. Middleton was lying, looking very pale and frightened. The horse which had been driven so cruelly had not done blowing before another cart appeared, also driven very fast. It contained old Mr. and Mrs. Middleton, who lived comfortably on a small farm not far from Palmer’s place.

As soon as he had dumped Mrs. Palmer, Dave Middleton left the cart and, mounting a fresh horse which stood ready saddled in the yard, galloped off through the scrub in a different direction.

Half an hour afterwards Joe Middleton came home on a horse that had been almost ridden to death. His mother came out at the sound of his arrival, and he anxiously asked her :

“How is she?”

“Did you find Doc. Wild?” asked the mother.

“No, confound him!” exclaimed Joe bitterly. “He promised me faithfully to come over on Wednesday and stay until Maggie was right again. Now he has left Dean’s and gone—Lord knows where. I suppose he is drinking again. How is Maggie?”

“It’s all over now—the child is born. It’s a boy ; but she is very weak. Dave got Mrs. Palmer here just in time. I had better tell you at once that Mrs. Palmer says if we don’t get a doctor here to-night poor Maggie won’t live.”

“Good God! and what am I to do?” cried Joe desperately.

“Is there any other doctor within reach?”

“No ; there is only the one at B—— ; that’s forty miles away, and he is laid up with the broken leg he got in the buggy accident. Where’s Dave?”

"Gone to Black's shanty. One of Mrs. Palmer's sons thought he remembered someone saying that Doc. Wild was there last week. That's fifteen miles away."

"But it is our only hope," said Joe dejectedly. "I wish to God that I had taken Maggie to some civilised place a month ago."

Doc. Wild was a well-known character among the bushmen of New South Wales, and although the profession did not recognise him, and denounced him as an empiric, his skill was undoubted. Bushmen had great faith in him, and would often ride incredible distances in order to bring him to the bedside of a sick friend. He drank fearfully, but was seldom incapable of treating a patient; he would, however, sometimes be found in an obstinate mood and refuse to travel to the side of a sick person, and then the devil himself could not make the doctor budge. But for all this he was very generous—a fact that could, no doubt, be testified to by many a grateful sojourner in the lonely bush.

II.

THE ONLY HOPE

Night came on, and still there was no change in the condition of the young wife, and no sign of the doctor. Several stockmen from the neighbouring stations, hearing that there was trouble at Joe Middleton's, had ridden over, and had galloped off on long, hopeless rides in search of a doctor. Being generally free from sickness themselves, these bushmen look upon it as a serious business even in its

mildest form ; what is more, their sympathy is always practical where it is possible for it to be so. One day, while out on the run after an “outlaw,” Joe Middleton was badly thrown from his horse, and the break-neck riding that was done on that occasion from the time the horse came home with empty saddle until the rider was safe in bed and attended by a doctor was something extraordinary, even for the bush.

Before the time arrived when Dave Middleton might reasonably have been expected to return, the station people were anxiously watching for him, all except the old blackfellow and the two boys, who had gone to yard the sheep.

The party had been increased by Jimmy Nowlett, the bullocky, who had just arrived with a load of fencing wire and provisions for Middleton. Jimmy was standing in the moonlight, whip in hand, looking as anxious as the husband himself, and endeavouring to calculate by mental arithmetic the exact time it ought to take Dave to complete his double journey, taking into consideration the distance, the obstacles in the way, and the chances of horse-flesh.

But the time which Jimmy fixed for the arrival came without Dave.

Old Peter (as he was generally called, though he was not really old) stood aside in his usual sullen manner, his hat drawn down over his brow and eyes, and nothing visible but a thick and very horizontal black beard, from the depth of which emerged large clouds of very strong tobacco smoke, the product of a short, black, clay pipe.

They had almost given up all hope of seeing Dave

return that night, when Peter slowly and deliberately removed his pipe and grunted:

"He's a-comin'."

He then replaced the pipe, and smoked on as before.

All listened, but not one of them could hear a sound.

"Yer ears must be pretty sharp for yer age, Peter. We can't hear him," remarked Jimmy Nowlett.

"His dog ken," said Peter.

The pipe was again removed and its abbreviated stem pointed in the direction of Dave's cattle dog, who had risen beside his kennel with pointed ears, and was looking eagerly in the direction from which his master was expected to come.

Presently the sound of horse's hoofs was distinctly heard.

"I can hear two horses," cried Jimmy Nowlett excitedly.

"There's only one," said old Peter quietly.

A few moments passed, and a single horseman appeared on the far side of the flat.

"It's Doc. Wild on Dave's horse," cried Jimmy Nowlett. "Dave don't ride like that."

"It's Dave," said Peter, replacing his pipe and looking more unsociable than ever.

Dave rode up and, throwing himself wearily from the saddle, stood ominously silent by the side of his horse.

Joe Middleton said nothing, but stood aside with an expression of utter hopelessness on his face.

"Not there?" asked Jimmy Nowlett at last, addressing Dave.

"Yes, he's there," answered Dave, impatiently.

This was not the answer they expected, but nobody seemed surprised.

"Drunk?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes."

Here old Peter removed his pipe, and pronounced the one word—"How?"

"What the hell do you mean by that?" muttered Dave, whose patience had evidently been severely tried by the clever but intemperate bush doctor.

"How drunk?" explained Peter, with great equanimity.

"Stubborn drunk, blind drunk, beastly drunk, dead drunk, and damned well drunk, if that's what you want to know!"

"What did Doc. say?" asked Jimmy.

"Said he was sick—had lumbago—wouldn't come for the Queen of England; said he wanted a course of treatment himself. Curse him! I have no patience to talk about him."

"I'd give him a course of treatment," muttered Jimmy viciously, trailing the long lash of his bullock-whip through the grass and spitting spitefully at the ground.

Dave turned away and joined Joe, who was talking earnestly to his mother by the kitchen door. He told them that he had spent an hour trying to persuade Doc. Wild to come, and, that before he had left the shanty, Black had promised him faithfully to bring the doctor over as soon as his obstinate mood wore off.

Just then a low moan was heard from the sick room, followed by the sound of Mother Palmer's voice

calling old Mrs. Middleton, who went inside immediately.

No one had noticed the disappearance of Peter, and when he presently returned from the stockyard, leading the only fresh horse that remained, Jimmy Nowlett began to regard him with some interest. Peter transferred the saddle from Dave's horse to the other, and then went into a small room off the kitchen, which served him as a bedroom; from it he soon returned with a formidable-looking revolver, the chambers of which he examined in the moonlight in full view of all the company. They thought for a moment the man had gone mad. Old Middleton leaped quickly behind Nowlett, and Black Mary, who had come out to the cask at the corner for a dipper of water, dropped the dipper and was inside like a shot. One of the black boys came softly up at that moment; as soon as his sharp eye "spotted" the weapon, he disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him.

"What the mischief are yer goin' ter do, Peter?" asked Jimmy.

"Goin' to fetch him," said Peter, and, after carefully emptying his pipe and replacing it in a leather pouch at his belt, he mounted and rode off at an easy canter.

Jimmy watched the horse until it disappeared at the edge of the flat, and then after coiling up the long lash of his bullock-whip in the dust until it looked like a sleeping snake, he prodded the small end of the long pine handle into the middle of the coil, as though driving home a point, and said in a tone of intense conviction:

"He'll fetch him."

III.

DOC. WILD

Peter gradually increased his horse's speed along the rough bush track until he was riding at a good pace. It was ten miles to the main road, and five from there to the shanty kept by Black.

For some time before Peter started the atmosphere had been very close and oppressive. The great black edge of a storm-cloud had risen in the east, and everything indicated the approach of a thunderstorm. It was not long coming. Before Peter had completed six miles of his journey, the clouds rolled over, obscuring the moon, and an Australian thunderstorm came on with its mighty downpour, its blinding lightning, and its earth-shaking thunder. Peter rode steadily on, only pausing now and then until a flash revealed the track in front of him.

Black's shanty—or, rather, as the sign had it, "Post Office and General Store"—was, as we have said, five miles along the main road from the point where Middleton's track joined it. The building was of the usual style of bush architecture. About two hundred yards nearer the creek, which crossed the road further on, stood a large bark and slab stable, large enough to have met the requirements of a legitimate bush "public."

The reader may doubt that a "sly grogshop" could openly carry on business on a main Government road along which mounted troopers were continually passing. But then, you see, mounted troopers get thirsty like other men; moreover, they could always get their

thirst quenched *gratis* at these places; so the reader will be prepared to hear that on this very night two troopers' horses were stowed snugly away in the stable, and two troopers were stowed snugly away in the back room of the shanty, sleeping off the effects of their cheap but strong potations.

There were two rooms, of a sort, attached to the stables—one at each end. One was occupied by a man who was "generally useful," and the other was the surgery, office, and bedroom *pro tem.* of Doc. Wild.

Doc. Wild was a tall man, of spare proportions. He had a cadaverous face, black hair, bushy black eyebrows, eagle nose, and eagle eyes. He never slept while he was drinking. On this occasion he sat in front of the fire on a low three-legged stool. His knees were drawn up, his toes hooked round the front legs of the stool, one hand resting on one knee, and one elbow (the hand supporting the chin) resting on the other. He was staring intently into the fire, on which an old black saucepan was boiling and sending forth a pungent odour of herbs. There seemed something uncanny about the doctor as the red light of the fire fell on his hawk-like face and gleaming eyes. He might have been Mephistopheles watching some infernal brew.

He had sat there some time without stirring a finger, when the door suddenly burst open and Middleton's Peter stood within, dripping wet. The doctor turned his black, piercing eyes upon the intruder (who regarded him silently) for a moment, and then asked quietly:

"What the hell do you want?"

"I want you," said Peter.

"And what do you want me for?"

"I want you to come to Joe Middleton's wife. She's bad," said Peter calmly.

"I won't come," shouted the doctor. "I've brought enough horse-stealers into the world already. If any more want to come they can go to blazes for me. Now, you get out of this!"

"Don't get yer rag out," said Peter quietly. "The hoss-stealer's come, an' nearly killed his mother ter begin with; an' if yer don't get yer physic-box an' come wi' me, by the great God I'll——"

Here the revolver was produced and pointed at Doc. Wild's head. The sight of the weapon had a sobering effect upon the doctor. He rose, looked at Peter critically for a moment, knocked the weapon out of his hand, and said slowly and deliberately:

"Wall, ef the case es as serious as that, I (hic) reckon I'd better come."

Peter was still of the same opinion, so Doc. Wild proceeded to get his medicine chest ready. He explained afterwards, in one of his softer moments, that the shooter didn't frighten him so much as it touched his memory—"sorter put him in mind of the old days in California, and made him think of the man he might have been," he'd say,—"kinder touched his heart and slid the durned old panorama in front of him like a flash; made him think of the time when he slipped three leaden pills into 'Blue Shirt' for winking at a new chum behind his (the Doc.'s) back when he was telling a truthful yarn, and charged the said 'Blue Shirt' a hundred dollars for extracting the said pills."

Joe Middleton's wife is a grandmother now.

Peter passed after the manner of his sort; he was found dead in his bunk.

Poor Doc. Wild died in a shepherd's hut at the Dry Creeks. The shepherds (white men) found him, "naked as he was born and with the hide half burned off him with the sun," rounding up imaginary snakes on a dusty clearing, one blazing hot day. The hut-keeper had some "quare" (queer) experiences with the doctor during the next three days and used, in after years, to tell of them, between the puffs of his pipe, calmly and solemnly and as if the story was rather to the doctor's credit than otherwise. The shepherds sent for the police and a doctor, and sent word to Joe Middleton. Doc. Wild was sensible towards the end. His interview with the other doctor was characteristic. "And, now you see how far I am," he said in conclusion—"have you brought the brandy?" The other doctor had. Joe Middleton came with his waggonette, and in it the softest mattress and pillows the station afforded. He also, in his innocence, brought a dozen of soda-water. Doc. Wild took Joe's hand feebly, and, a little later, he "passed out" (as he would have said) murmuring "something that sounded like poetry," in an unknown tongue. Joe took the body to the home station. "Who's the boss bringin'?" asked the shearers, seeing the waggonette coming very slowly and the boss walking by the horses' heads. "Doc. Wild," said a station hand. "Take yer hats off."

They buried him with bush honours, and chiselled his name on a slab of bluegum—a wood that lasts.

THE MYSTERY OF DAVE REGAN

“AND then there was Dave Regan,” said the traveller. “Dave used to die oftener than any other bushman I knew. He was always being reported dead and turnin’ up again. He seemed to like it—except once, when his brother drew his money and drank it all to drown his grief at what he called Dave’s ‘untimely end.’ Well, Dave went up to Queensland once with cattle, and was away three years and reported dead, as usual. He was drowned in the Bogan this time while tryin’ to swim his horse acrost a flood—and his sweetheart hurried up and got spliced to a worse man before Dave got back.

“Well, one day I was out in the bush lookin’ for timber, when the biggest storm ever knowed in that place come on. There was hail in it, too, as big as bullets, and if I hadn’t got behind a stump and crouched down in time I’d have been riddled like a—like a bushranger. As it was, I got soakin’ wet. The storm was over in a few minutes, the water run off down the gullies, and the sun come out and the scrub steamed—and stunk like a new pair of moleskin trousers. I went on along the track, and presently I seen a long, lanky chap get on to a long, lanky horse and ride out of a bush yard at the edge of a

clearin'. I knowed it was Dave d'reckly I set eyes on him.

"Dave used to ride a tall, holler-backed thoroughbred with a body and limbs like a kangaroo dog, and it would circle around you and sidle away as if it was frightened you was goin' to jab a knife into it.

" 'Ello! Dave!' said I, as he came spurrin' up. 'How are yer!'

" 'Ello, Jim!' says he. 'How are you?'

" 'All right!' says I. 'How are yer gettin' on?'

"But, before we could say any more, that horse shied away and broke off through the scrub to the right. I waited, because I knowed Dave would come back again if I waited long enough; and in about ten minutes he came sidlin' in from the scrub to the left.

" 'Oh, I'm all right,' says he, spurrin' up sideways; 'How are you?'

" 'Right!' says I. 'How's the old people?'

" 'Oh, I ain't been home yet,' says he, holdin' out his hand; but, afore I could grip it, the cussed horse sidled off to the south end of the clearin' and broke away again through the scrub.

"I heard Dave swearin' about the country for twenty minutes or so, and then he came spurrin' and cursin' in from the other end of the clearin'.

" 'Where have you been all this time?' I said, as the horse came curvin' up like a boomerang.

" 'Gulf country,' said Dave.

" 'That was a storm, Dave,' said I.

" 'My oath!' says Dave.

" 'Get caught in it?'

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘Got to shelter?’

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘But you’re as dry’s a bone, Dave!’

“ Dave grinned. ‘——and——and——the
——!’ he yelled.

“ He said that to the horse as it boomeranged off again and broke away through the scrub. I waited; but he didn’t come back, and I reckoned he’d got so far away before he could pull up that he didn’t think it worth while comin’ back; so I went on. By-and-bye I got thinkin’. Dave was as dry as a bone, and I knowed that he hadn’t had time to get to shelter, for there wasn’t a shed within twelve miles. He wasn’t only dry, but his coat was creased and dusty too—same as if he’d been sleepin’ in a holler log; and when I come to think of it, his face seemed thinner and whiter than it used ter, and so did his hands and wrists, which always stuck a long way out of his coat-sleeves; and there was blood on his face—but I thought he’d got scratched with a twig. (Dave used to wear a coat three or four sizes too small for him, with sleeves that didn’t come much below his elbows and a tail that scarcely reached his waist behind.) And his hair seemed dark and lank, instead of bein’ sandy and stickin’ out like an old fibre brush, as it used ter. And then I thought his voice sounded different, too. And, when I enquired next day, there was no one heard of Dave, and the chaps reckoned I must have been drunk, or seen his ghost.

“ It didn’t seem all right at all—it worried me a lot. I couldn’t make out how Dave kept dry; and the

horse and saddle and saddle-cloth was wet. I told the chaps how he talked to me and what he said, and how he swore at the horse; but they only said it was Dave's ghost and nobody else's. I told 'em about him bein' dry as a bone after gettin' caught in that storm; but they only laughed and said it was a dry place where Dave went to. I talked and argued about it until the chaps began to tap their foreheads and wink—then I left off talking. But I didn't leave off thinkin'—I always hated a mystery. Even Dave's father told me that Dave couldn't be alive or else his ghost wouldn't be round—he said he knew Dave better than that. One or two fellers did turn up afterwards that had seen Dave about the time that I did—and then the chaps said they was sure that Dave was dead.

“But one fine day, as a lot of us chaps was playin' pitch and toss at the shanty, one of the fellers yelled out:

“‘By Gee! Here comes Dave Regan!’

“And I looked up and saw Dave himself, sidlin' out of a cloud of dust on a long lanky horse. He rode into the stockyard, got down, hung his horse up to a post, put up the rails, and then come slopin' towards us with a half-acre grin on his face. Dave had long, thin bow-legs, and when he was on the ground he moved as if he was on roller skates.

“‘‘El-lo, Dave!’ says I. ‘How are yer?’

“‘‘Ello, Jim!’ said he. ‘How the blazes are you?’

“‘All right!’ says I, shakin' hands. ‘How are yer?’

“‘Oh! I'm all right!’ he says. ‘How are yer poppin' up!’

"Well, when we'd got all that settled, and the other chaps had asked how he was, he said: "Ah, well! Let's have a drink.'"

"And all the other chaps crawfished up and flung themselves round the corner and sidled into the bar after Dave. We had a lot of talk, and he told us that he'd been down before, but had gone away without seein' any of us, except me, because he'd suddenly heard of a mob of cattle at a station two hundred miles away; and after a while I took him aside and said:

"'Look here, Dave! Do you remember the day I met you after the storm?'

"He scratched his head.

"'Why, yes,' he says.

"'Did you get under shelter that day?'

"'Why—no.'

"'Then how the blazes didn't yer get wet?'

"Dave grinned; then he says:

"'Why, when I seen the storm coming I took off me clothes and stuck 'em in a holler log till the rain was over.'

"'Yes,' he says, after the other coves had done laughin', but before I'd done thinking; 'I kept my clothes dry and got a good refreshin' shower-bath into the bargain.'

"Then he scratched the back of his neck with his little finger, and dropped his jaw, and thought a bit; then he rubbed the top of his head and his shoulder, reflective-like, and then he said:

"'But I didn't reckon for them there blanky hailstones.'"

MITCHELL ON MATRIMONY

"I SUPPOSE your wife will be glad to see you," said Mitchell to his mate in their camp by the dam at Hungerford. They were overhauling their swags, and throwing away the blankets, and calico, and old clothes, and rubbish they didn't want—everything, in fact, except their pocket-books and letters and portraits, things which men carry about with them always, that are found on them when they die, and sent to their relations if possible. Otherwise they are taken in charge by the constable who officiates at the inquest, and forwarded to the Minister of Justice along with the depositions.

It was the end of the shearing season. Mitchell and his mate had been lucky enough to get two good sheds in succession, and were going to take the coach from Hungerford to Bourke on their way to Sydney. The morning stars were bright yet, and they sat down to a final billy of tea, two dusty Johnny-cakes, and a scrag of salt mutton.

"Yes," said Mitchell's mate, "and I'll be glad to see her too."

"I suppose you will," said Mitchell. He placed his pint-pot between his feet, rested his arm against his knee, and stirred the tea meditatively with the handle

of his pocket-knife. It was vaguely understood that Mitchell had been married at one period of his chequered career.

"I don't think we ever understood women properly," he said, as he took a cautious sip to see if his tea was cool and sweet enough, for his lips were sore; "I don't think we ever will—we never took the trouble to try, and if we did it would be only wasted brain power that might just as well be spent on the black-fellow's lingo; because by the time you've learnt it they'll be extinct, and woman 'll be extinct before you've learnt her. . . . The morning star looks bright, doesn't it?"

"Ah, well," said Mitchell after a while, "there's many little things we might try to understand women in. I read in a piece of newspaper the other day about how a man changes after he's married; how he gets short, and impatient, and bored (which is only natural), and sticks up a wall of newspaper between himself and his wife when he's at home; and how it comes like a cold shock to her, and all her air-castles vanish, and in the end she often thinks about taking the baby and the clothes she stands in, and going home for sympathy and comfort to mother.

"Perhaps she never got a word of sympathy from her mother in her life, nor a day's comfort at home before she was married; but that doesn't make the slightest difference. It doesn't make any difference in your case either, if you haven't been acting like a dutiful son-in-law.

"Somebody wrote that a woman's love is her whole existence, while a man's love is only part of his—which

is true, and only natural and reasonable, all things considered. But women never consider as a rule. A man can't go on talking lovey-dovey talk for ever, and listening to his young wife's prattle when he's got to think about making a living, and nursing her and answering her childish questions and telling her he loves his little ownest every minute in the day, while the bills are running up, and rent mornings begin to fly round and hustle and crowd him.

"He's got her and he's satisfied; and if the truth is known he loves her really more than he did when they were engaged, only she won't be satisfied about it unless he tells her so every hour in the day. At least that's how it is for the first few months.

"But a woman doesn't understand these things—she never will, she can't—and it would be just as well for us to try and understand that she doesn't and can't understand them."

Mitchell knocked the tea-leaves out of his pannikin against his boot, and reached for the billy.

"There's many little things we might do that seem mere trifles and nonsense to us, but mean a lot to her; that wouldn't be any trouble or sacrifice to us, but might help to make her life happy. It's just because we never think about these little things—don't think them worth thinking about, in fact—they never enter our intellectual foreheads.

"For instance, when you're going out in the morning you might put your arms round her and give her a hug and a kiss, without her having to remind you. You may forget about it and never think any more of it—but she will.

"It wouldn't be any trouble to you, and would only take a couple of seconds, and would give her something to be happy about when you're gone, and make her sing to herself for hours while she bustles about her work and thinks up what she'll get you for dinner."

Mitchell's mate sighed, and shifted the sugar-bag over towards Mitchell. He seemed touched and bothered over something.

"Then again," said Mitchell, "it mightn't be convenient for you to go home to dinner—something might turn up during the morning—you might have some important business to do, or meet some chaps and get invited to lunch and not be very well able to refuse, when it's too late, or you haven't a chance to send a message to your wife. But then again, chaps and business seem very big things to you, and only little things to the wife; just as lovey-dovey talk is important to her and nonsense to you. And when you come to analyse it, one is not so big, nor the other so small, after all; especially when you come to think that chaps can always wait, and business is only an inspiration in your mind, nine cases out of ten.

"Think of the trouble she takes to get you a good dinner, and how she keeps it hot between two plates in the oven, and waits hour after hour till the dinner gets dried up, and all her morning's work is wasted. Think how it hurts her, and how anxious she'll be (especially if you're inclined to booze) for fear that something has happened to you. You can't get it out of the heads of some young wives that you're liable to get run over, or knocked down, or assaulted, or robbed,

or get into one of the fixes that a woman is likely to get into. But about the dinner waiting. Try and put yourself in her place. Wouldn't you get mad under the same circumstances? I know I would.

"I remember once, only just after I was married, I was invited unexpectedly to a kidney pudding and beans—which was my favourite grub at the time—and I didn't resist, especially as it was washing day and I told the wife not to bother about anything for dinner. I got home an hour or so late, and had a good explanation thought out, when the wife met me with a smile as if we had just been left a thousand pounds. She'd got her washing finished without assistance, though I'd told her to get somebody to help her, and she had a kidney pudding and beans, with a lot of extras thrown in, as a pleasant surprise for me.

"Well, I kissed her, and sat down, and stuffed till I thought every mouthful would choke me. I got through with it somehow, but I've never cared for kidney pudding or beans since."

Mitchell felt for his pipe with a fatherly smile in his eyes.

"And then again," he continued, as he cut up his tobacco, "your wife might put on a new dress and fix herself up and look well, and you might think so and be satisfied with her appearance and be proud to take her out; but you want to tell her so, and tell her so as often as you think about it—and try to think a little oftener than men usually do, too."

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"You should have made a good husband, Jack," said his mate, in a softened tone.

"Ah, well, perhaps I should," said Mitchell, rubbing up his tobacco; then he asked abstractedly: "What sort of a husband did you make, Joe?"

"I might have made a better one than I did," said Joe seriously, and rather bitterly, "but I know one thing, I'm going to try and make up for it when I go back this time."

"We all say that," said Mitchell reflectively, filling his pipe. "She loves you, Joe."

"I know she does," said Joe.

Mitchell lit up.

"And so would any man who knew her or had seen her letters to you," he said between the puffs. "She's happy and contented enough, I believe?"

"Yes," said Joe, "at least while I was there. She's never easy when I'm away. I might have made her a good deal more happy and contented without hurting myself much."

Mitchell smoked long, soft, measured puffs.

His mate shifted uneasily and glanced at him a couple of times, and seemed to become impatient, and to make up his mind about something; or perhaps he got an idea that Mitchell had been "having" him, and felt angry over being betrayed into maudlin confidences; for he asked abruptly:

"How is your wife now, Mitchell?"

"I don't know," said Mitchell calmly.

"Don't know?" echoed the mate. "Didn't you treat her well?"

Mitchell removed his pipe and drew a long breath.

"Ah, well, I tried to," he said wearily.

"Well, did you put your theory into practice?"

"I did," said Mitchell very deliberately.

Joe waited, but nothing came.

"Well?" he asked impatiently, "How did it act? Did it work well?"

"I don't know," said Mitchell (puff); "she left me."

"What!"

Mitchell jerked the half-smoked pipe from his mouth, and rapped the burning tobacco out against the toe of his boot.

"She left me," he said, standing up and stretching himself. Then, with a vicious jerk of his arm, "She left me for—another kind of a fellow!"

He looked east towards the public-house, where they were taking the coach-horses from the stable.

"Why don't you finish your tea, Joe? The billy's getting cold."

MITCHELL ON WOMEN.

"ALL the same," said Mitchell's mate, continuing an argument by the camp-fire; "all the same, I think that a woman can stand cold water better than a man. Why, when I was staying in a boarding-house in Dunedin, one very cold winter, there was a lady lodger who went down to the shower-bath first thing every morning; never missed one; sometimes went in freezing weather when I wouldn't go into a cold bath for a fiver; and sometimes she'd stay under the shower for ten minutes at a time."

"How'd you know?"

"Why, my room was near the bath-room, and I could hear the shower and tap going, and her floundering about."

"Hear your grandmother!" exclaimed Mitchell, contemptuously. "You don't know women yet. Was this woman married? Did she have a husband there?"

"No; she was a young widow."

"Ah! well, it would have been the same if she was a young girl—or an old one. Were there some passable men-boarders there?"

"I was there."

"Oh, yes! But I mean, were there any there beside you?"

"Oh, yes, there were three or four; there was—a clerk and a ——"

"Never mind, as long as there was something with trousers on. Did it ever strike you that she never got into the bath at all?"

"Why, no! What would she want to go there at all for, in that case?"

"To make an impression on the men," replied Mitchell promptly. "She wanted to make out she was nice, and wholesome, and well-washed, and particular. Made an impression on *you*, it seems, or you wouldn't remember it."

"Well, yes, I suppose so; and, now I come to think of it, the bath didn't seem to injure her make-up or wet her hair; but I supposed she held her head from under the shower somehow."

"Did she make-up so early in the morning?" asked Mitchell.

"Yes—I'm sure."

"That's unusual; but it might have been so where there was a lot of boarders. And about the hair—that didn't count for anything, because washing-the-head ain't supposed to be always included in a lady's bath; it's only supposed to be washed once a fortnight, and some don't do it once a month. The hair takes so long to dry; it don't matter so much if the woman's got short, scraggy hair; but if a girl's hair was down to her waist it would take hours to dry."

"Well, how do they manage it without wetting their heads?"

"Oh, that's easy enough. They have a little oil-skin cap that fits tight over the forehead, and they

put it on, and bunch their hair up in it when they go under the shower. Did you ever see a woman sit in a sunny place with her hair down after having a wash?"

"Yes, I used to see one do that regular where I was staying; but I thought she only did it to show off."

"Not at all—she was drying her hair; though perhaps she was showing off at the same time, for she wouldn't sit where you—or even a Chinaman—could see her, if she didn't think she had a good head of hair. Now, *I'll* tell you a yarn about a woman's bath. I was stopping at a shabby-genteel boarding-house in Melbourne once, and one very cold winter, too; and there was a rather good-looking woman there, looking for a husband. She used to go down to the bath every morning, no matter how cold it was, and flounder and splash about as if she enjoyed it, till you'd feel as though you'd like to go and catch hold of her and wrap her in a rug and carry her in to the fire and nurse her till she was warm again."

Mitchell's mate moved uneasily, and crossed the other leg; he seemed greatly interested.

"But she never went into the water at all!" continued Mitchell. "As soon as one or two of the men was up in the morning she'd come down from her room in a dressing-gown. It was a toney dressing-gown, too, and set her off properly. She knew how to dress, anyway; most of that sort of women do. The gown was a kind of green colour, with pink and white flowers all over it, and red lining, and a lot of coffee-coloured lace round the neck and down the front.

Well, she'd come tripping downstairs and along the passage, holding up one side of the gown to show her little bare white foot in a slipper; and in the other hand she carried her tooth-brush and bath-brush, and soap—like this—so's we all could see 'em; trying to make out she was too particular to use soap after anyone else. She could afford to buy her own soap, anyhow; it was hardly ever wet.

"Well, she'd go into the bathroom and turn on the tap and shower; when she got about three inches of water in the bath, she'd step in, holding up her gown out of the water, and go slithering and kicking up and down the bath, like this, making a tremendous splashing. Of course she'd turn off the shower first, and screw it off very tight—wouldn't do to let that leak, you know; she might get wet; but she'd leave the other tap on, so as to make all the more noise."

"But how did you come to know all about this?"

"Oh, the servant girl told me. One morning she twigged her through a corner of the bathroom window that the curtain didn't cover."

"You seem to have been pretty thick with servant girls."

"So do you with landladies! But never mind—let me finish the yarn. When she thought she'd splashed enough, she'd get out, wipe her feet, wash her face and hands, and carefully unbutton the two top buttons of her gown; then throw a towel over her head and shoulders, and listen at the door till she thought she heard some of the men moving about. Then she'd start for her room, and, if she met one of the men-boarders in the passage or on the stairs, she'd drop

her eyes, and pretend to see for the first time that the top of her dressing-gown wasn't buttoned—and she'd give a little start and grab the gown and scurry off to her room buttoning it up.

“And sometimes she'd come skipping into the breakfast-room late, looking awfully sweet in her dressing-gown; and if she saw any of us there, she'd pretend to be much startled, and say that she thought all the men had gone out, and make as though she was going to clear; and someone 'd jump up and give her a chair, while someone else said, ‘Come in, Miss Brown! come in! Don't let us frighten you. Come right in, and have your breakfast before it gets cold.’ So she'd flutter a bit in pretty confusion, and then make a sweet little girly-girly dive for her chair, and tuck her feet away under the table; and she'd blush, too, but I don't know how she managed that.

“I know another trick that women have; it's mostly played by private barmaids. That is, to leave a stocking by accident in the bathroom for the gentlemen to find. If the barmaid's got a nice foot and ankle, she uses one of her own stockings; but if she hasn't she gets hold of a stocking that belongs to a girl that has. Anyway, she'll have one readied up somehow. The stocking must be worn and nicely darned; one that's been worn will keep the shape of the leg and foot—at least till it's washed again. Well, the barmaid generally knows what time the gentlemen go to bath, and she'll make it a point of going down just as a gentleman's going. Of course he'll give her the preference—let her go first, you know—and she'll go in and accidentally leave the

stocking in a place where he's sure to see it, and when she comes out he'll go in and find it; and very likely he'll be a jolly sort of fellow, and when they're all sitting down to breakfast he'll come in and ask them to guess what he's found, and then he'll hold up the stocking. The barmaid likes this sort of thing; but she'll hold down her head, and pretend to be confused, and keep her eyes on her plate, and there'll be much blushing and all that sort of thing, and perhaps she'll gammon to be mad at him, and the landlady'll say, 'Oh, Mr. Smith! how can yer? At the breakfast table, too!' and they'll all laugh and look at the barmaid, and she'll get more embarrassed than ever, and spill her tea, and make out as though the stocking didn't belong to her."

NO PLACE FOR A WOMAN

HE had a selection on a long box-scrub siding of the ridges, about half a mile back and up from the coach road. There were no neighbours that I ever heard of, and the nearest "town" was thirty miles away. He grew wheat among the stumps of his clearing, sold the crop standing to a Cockie who lived ten miles away, and had some surplus sons; or, some seasons, he reaped it by hand, had it thrashed by travelling "steamer" (portable steam engine and machine), and carried the grain, a few bags at a time, into the mill on his rickety dray.

He had lived alone for upwards of 15 years, and was known to those who knew him as "Ratty Howlett."

Trav'lers and strangers failed to see anything uncommonly ratty about him. It was known, or, at least, it was believed, without question, that while at work he kept his horse saddled and bridled, and hung up to the fence, or grazing about, with the saddle on—or, anyway, close handy for a moment's notice—and whenever he caught sight, over the scrub and through the quarter-mile break in it, of a traveller on the road, he would jump on his horse and make after him. If it was a horseman he usually pulled

him up inside of a mile. Stories were told of unsuccessful chases, misunderstandings, and complications arising out of Howlett's mania for running down and bailing up travellers. Sometimes he caught one every day for a week, sometimes not one for weeks—it was a lonely track.

The explanation was simple, sufficient, and perfectly natural—from a bushman's point of view. Ratty only wanted to have a yarn. He and the traveller would camp in the shade for half an hour or so and yarn and smoke. The old man would find out where the traveller came from, and how long he'd been there, and where he was making for, and how long he reckoned he'd be away; and ask if there had been any rain along the traveller's back track, and how the country looked after the drought; and he'd get the traveller's ideas on abstract questions—if he had any. If it was a footman (swagman), and he was short of tobacco, old Howlett always had half a stick ready for him. Sometimes, but very rarely, he'd invite the swagman back to the hut for a pint of tea, or a bit of meat, flour, tea, or sugar, to carry him along the track.

And, after the yarn by the road, they said, the old man would ride back, refreshed, to his lonely selection, and work on into the night as long as he could see his solitary old plough horse, or the scoop of his long-handled shovel.

And so it was that I came to make his acquaintance—or, rather, that he made mine. I was cantering easily along the track—I was making for the north-west with a pack horse—when about a mile beyond

the track to the selection I heard, "Hi, Mister?" and saw a dust cloud following me. I had heard of "Old Ratty Howlett" casually, and so was prepared for him.

A tall gaunt man on a little horse. He was clean-shaven, except for a frill beard round under his chin, and his long wavy, dark hair was turning grey; a square, strong-faced man, and reminded me of one full-faced portrait of Gladstone more than any other face I had seen. He had large reddish-brown eyes, deep set under heavy eyebrows, and with something of the blackfellow in them—the sort of eyes that will peer at something on the horizon that no one else can see. He had a way of talking to the horizon, too—more than to his companion; and he had a deep vertical wrinkle in his forehead that no smile could lessen.

I got down and got out my pipe, and we sat on a log and yarned awhile on bush subjects; and then, after a pause, he shifted uneasily, it seemed to me, and asked rather abruptly, and in an altered tone, if I was married. A queer question to ask a traveller; more especially in my case, as I was little more than a boy then.

He talked on again of old things and places where we had both been, and asked after men he knew, or had known—drovers and others—and whether they were living yet. Most of his inquiries went back before my time; but some of the drovers, one or two overlanders with whom he had been mates in his time, had grown old into mine, and I knew them. I notice now, though I didn't then—and if I had it

would not have seemed strange from a bush point of view—that he didn't ask for news, nor seem interested in it.

Then after another uneasy pause, during which he scratched crosses in the dust with a stick, he asked me, in the same queer tone and without looking at me or looking up, if I happened to know anything about doctoring—if I'd ever studied it.

I asked him if anyone was sick at his place. He hesitated, and said "No." Then I wanted to know why he had asked me that question, and he was so long about answering that I began to think he was hard of hearing, when, at last, he muttered something about my face reminding him of a young fellow he knew of who'd gone to Sydney to "study for a doctor." That might have been, and looked natural enough; but why didn't he ask me straight out if I was the chap he "knowed of?" Travellers do not like beating about the bush in conversation.

He sat in silence for a good while, with his arms folded, and looking absently away over the dead level of the great scrubs that spread from the foot of the ridge we were on to where a blue peak or two of a distant range showed above the bush on the horizon.

I stood up and put my pipe away and stretched. Then he seemed to wake up. "Better come back to the hut and have a bit of dinner," he said. "The missus will about have it ready, and I'll spare you a handful of hay for the horses."

The hay decided it. It was a dry season. I was surprised to hear of a wife, for I thought he was a hatter—I had always heard so; but perhaps I had

been mistaken, and he had married lately ; or had got a housekeeper. The farm was an irregularly-shaped clearing in the scrub, with a good many stumps in it, with a broken-down two-rail fence along the frontage, and logs and "dog-leg" the rest. It was about as lonely-looking a place as I had seen, and I had seen some out-of-the-way, God-forgotten holes where men lived alone. The hut was in the top corner, a two-roomed slab hut, with a shingle roof, which must have been uncommon round there in the days when that hut was built. I was used to bush carpentering, and saw that the place had been put up by a man who had plenty of life and hope in front of him, and for someone else beside himself. But there were two unfinished skilling rooms built on to the back of the hut ; the posts, sleepers, and wall-plates had been well put up and fitted, and the slab walls were up, but the roof had never been put on. There was nothing but burrs and nettles inside those walls, and an old wooden bullock plough and a couple of yokes were dry-rotting across the back doorway. The remains of a straw-stack, some hay under a bark humpy, a small iron plough, and an old stiff coffin-headed grey draught horse, were all that I saw about the place.

But there was a bit of a surprise for me inside, in the shape of a clean white tablecloth on the rough slab table which stood on stakes driven into the ground. The cloth was coarse, but it was a tablecloth—not a spare sheet put on in honour of unexpected visitors—and perfectly clean. The tin plates, pannikins, and jam tins that served as sugar bowls and salt cellars were polished brightly. The walls and

fireplace were whitewashed, the clay floor swept, and clean sheets of newspaper laid on the slab mantleshef under the row of biscuit tins that held the groceries. I thought that his wife, or housekeeper, or whatever she was, was a clean and tidy woman about a house. I saw no woman; but on the sofa—a light, wooden, batten one, with runged arms at the ends—lay a woman's dress on a lot of sheets of old stained and faded newspapers. He looked at it in a puzzled way, knitting his forehead, then took it up absently and folded it. I saw then that it was a riding skirt and jacket. He bundled them into the newspapers and took them into the bedroom.

“The wife was going on a visit down the creek this afternoon,” he said rapidly and without looking at me, but stooping as if to have another look through the door at those distant peaks. “I suppose she got tired o’ waitin’, and went and took the daughter with her. But, never mind, the grub is ready.” There was a camp-oven with a leg of mutton and potatoes sizzling in it on the hearth, and billies hanging over the fire. I noticed the billies had been scraped, and the lids polished.

There seemed to be something queer about the whole business, but then he and his wife might have had a “breeze” during the morning. I thought so during the meal, when the subject of women came up, and he said one never knew how to take a woman, etc.; but there was nothing in what he said that need necessarily have referred to his wife or to any woman in particular. For the rest he talked of old bush things, droving, digging, and old bushranging—but

never about live things and living men, unless any of the old mates he talked about happened to be alive by accident. He was very restless in the house, and never took his hat off.

There was a dress and a woman's old hat hanging on the wall near the door, but they looked as if they might have been hanging there for a lifetime. There seemed something queer about the whole place—something wanting; but then all out-of-the-way bush homes are haunted by that something wanting, or, more likely, by the spirits of the things that should have been there, but never had been.

As I rode down the track to the road I looked back and saw old Howlett hard at work in a hole round a big stump with his long-handled shovel.

I'd noticed that he moved and walked with a slight list to port, and put his hand once or twice to the small of his back, and I set it down to lumbago, or something of that sort.

Up in the Never Never I heard from a drover who had known Howlett that his wife had died in the first year, and so this mysterious woman, if she was his wife, was, of course, his second wife. The drover seemed surprised and rather amused at the thought of old Howlett going in for matrimony again.

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I rode back that way five years later, from the Never Never. It was early in the morning—I had ridden since midnight. I didn't think the old man would be up and about; and, besides, I wanted to get on home, and have a look at the old folk, and the mates I'd left behind—and the girl. But I hadn't

got far past the point where Howlett's track joined the road, when I happened to look back, and saw him on horseback, stumbling down the track. I waited till he came up.

He was riding the old grey draught horse this time, and it looked very much broken down. I thought it would have come down every step, and fallen like an old rotten humpy in a gust of wind. And the old man was not much better off. I saw at once that he was a very sick man. His face was drawn, and he bent forward as if he was hurt. He got down stiffly and awkwardly, like a hurt man, and as soon as his feet touched the ground he grabbed my arm, or he would have gone down like a man who steps off a train in motion. He hung towards the bank of the road, feeling blindly, as it were, for the ground, with his free hand, as I eased him down. I got my blanket and calico from the pack saddle to make him comfortable.

"Help me with my back agen the tree," he said. "I must sit up—it's no use lyin' me down."

He sat with his hand gripping his side, and breathed painfully.

"Shall I run up to the hut and get the wife?" I asked.

"No." He spoke painfully. "No!" Then, as if the words were jerked out of him by a spasm: "She ain't there."

I took it that she had left him.

"How long have you been bad? How long has this been coming on?"

He took no notice of the question. I thought it

was a touch of rheumatic fever, or something of that sort. "It's gone into my back and sides now—the pain's worse in me back," he said presently.

I had once been mates with a man who died suddenly of heart disease, while at work. He was washing a dish of dirt in the creek near a claim we were working; he let the dish slip into the water, fell back, crying, "O, my back!" and was gone. And now I felt by instinct that it was poor old Howlett's heart that was wrong. A man's heart is in his back as well as in his arms and hands.

The old man had turned pale with the pallor of a man who turns faint in a heat wave, and his arms fell loosely, and his hands rocked helplessly with the knuckles in the dust. I felt myself turning white, too, and the sick, cold, empty feeling in my stomach, for I knew the signs. Bushmen stand in awe of sickness and death.

But after I'd fixed him comfortably and given him a drink from the water bag the greyness left his face, and he pulled himself together a bit; he drew up his arms and folded them across his chest. He let his head rest back against the tree—his slouch hat had fallen off revealing a broad, white brow, much higher than I expected. He seemed to gaze on the azure fin of the range, showing above the dark blue-green bush on the horizon.

Then he commenced to speak—taking no notice of me when I asked him if he felt better now—to talk in that strange, absent, far-away tone that awes one. He told his story mechanically, monotonously—in set words, as I believe now, as he had often told it before;

if not to others, then to the loneliness of the bush. And he used the names of people and places that I had never heard of—just as if I knew them as well as he did.

“I didn’t want to bring her up the first year. It was no place for a woman. I wanted her to stay with her people and wait till I’d got the place a little more ship-shape. The Phippses took a selection down the creek. I wanted her to wait and come up with them so’s she’d have some company—a woman to talk to. They came afterwards, but they didn’t stop. It was no place for a woman.

“But Mary would come. She wouldn’t stop with her people down country. She wanted to be with me, and look after me, and work and help me.”

He repeated himself a great deal—said the same thing over and over again sometimes. He was only mad on one track. He’d tail off and sit silent for awhile; then he’d become aware of me in a hurried, half-scared way, and apologise for putting me to all that trouble, and thank me. “I’ll be all right d’reckly. Best take the horses up to the hut and have some breakfast; you’ll find it by the fire. I’ll foller you, d’reckly. The wife’ll be waitin’ an’——” He would drop off, and be going again presently on the old track:—

“Her mother was coming up to stay awhile at the end of the year, but the old man hurt his leg. Then her married sister was coming, but one of the youngsters got sick and there was trouble at home. I saw the doctor in the town—thirty miles from here—and fixed it up with him. He was a boozier—I’d

'a shot him afterwards. I fixed up with a woman in the town to come and stay. I thought Mary was wrong in her time. She must have been a month or six weeks out. But I listened to her. . . . Don't argue with a woman. Don't listen to a woman. Do the right thing. We should have had a mother woman to talk to us. But it was no place for a woman !”

He rocked his head, as if from some old agony of mind, against the tree-trunk.

“She was took bad suddenly one night, but it passed off. False alarm. I was going to ride somewhere, but she said to wait till daylight. Someone was sure to pass. She was a brave and sensible girl, but she had a terror of being left alone. It was no place for a woman !

“There was a black shepherd three or four miles away. I rode over while Mary was asleep, and started the black boy into town. I'd 'a shot him afterwards if I'd 'a caught him. The old black gin was dead the week before, or Mary would a' bin alright. She was tied up in a bunch with strips of blanket and greenhide, and put in a hole. So there wasn't even a gin near the place. It was no place for a woman !

“I was watchin' the road at daylight, and I was watchin' the road at dusk. I went down in the hollow and stooped down to get the gap agen the sky, so's I could see if anyone was comin' over. . . . I'd get on the horse and gallop along towards the town for five miles, but something would drag me back, and then I'd race for fear she'd die before I

got to the hut. I expected the doctor every five minutes.

"It come on about daylight next morning. I ran back'ards and for'ards between the hut and the road like a madman. And no one come. I was running amongst the logs and stumps, and fallin' over them, when I saw a cloud of dust agen sunrise. It was her mother an' sister in the spring-cart, an' just catchin' up to them was the doctor in his buggy with the woman I'd arranged with in town. The mother and sister was staying at the town for the night, when they heard of the black boy. It took him a day to ride there. I'd 'a shot him if I'd 'a caught him ever after. The doctor'd been on the drunk. If I'd had the gun and known she was gone I'd have shot him in the buggy. They said she was dead. And the child was dead, too.

"They blamed me, but I didn't want her to come; it was no place for a woman. I never saw them again after the funeral. I didn't want to see them any more."

He moved his head wearily against the tree, and presently drifted on again in a softer tone—his eyes and voice were growing more absent and dreamy and far away.

"About a month after—or a year, I lost count of the time long ago—she came back to me. At first she'd come in the night, then sometimes when I was at work—and she had the baby—it was a girl—in her arms. And by-and-bye she came to stay altogether. . . I didn't blame her for going away that time—it was no place for a woman. . . She was a

good wife to me. She was a jolly girl when I married her. The little girl grew up like her. I was going to send her down country to be educated—it was no place for a girl.

“But a month, or a year, ago, Mary left me, and took the daughter, and never came back till last night—this morning, I think it was. I thought at first it was the girl with her hair done up, and her mother’s skirt on, to surprise her old dad. But it was Mary, my wife—as she was when I married her. She said she couldn’t stay, but she’d wait for me on the road; on—the road.” . . .

His arms fell, and his face went white. I got the water-bag. “Another turn like that and you’ll be gone,” I thought, as he came to again. Then I suddenly thought of a shanty that had been started, when I came that way last, ten or twelve miles along the road, towards the town. There was nothing for it but to leave him and ride on for help, and a cart of some kind.

“You wait here till I come back,” I said. “I’m going for the doctor.”

He roused himself a little. “Best come up to the hut and get some grub. The wife’ll be waiting. . . . He was off the track again.

“Will you wait while I take the horse down to the creek?”

“Yes—I’ll wait by the road.”

“Look!” I said, “I’ll leave the water-bag handy. Don’t move till I come back.”

“I won’t move—I’ll wait by the road,” he said.

I took the packhorse, which was the freshest and

best, threw the pack-saddle and bags into a bush, left the other horse to take care of itself, and started for the shanty, leaving the old man with his back to the tree, his arms folded, and his eyes on the horizon.

One of the chaps at the shanty rode on for the doctor at once, while the other came back with me in a spring-cart. He told me that old Howlett's wife had died in child-birth the first year on the selection—"she was a fine girl he'd heered!" He told me the story as the old man had told it, and in pretty well the same words, even to giving it as his opinion that it was no place for a woman. "And he 'hatted' and brooded over it till he went ratty."

I knew the rest. He not only thought that his wife, or the ghost of his wife, had been with him all those years, but that the child had lived and grown up, and that the wife did the housework; which, of course, he must have done himself.

When we reached him his knotted hands had fallen for the last time, and they were at rest. I only took one quick look at his face, but could have sworn that he was gazing at the blue fin of the range on the horizon of the bush.

Up at the hut the table was set as on the first day I saw it, and breakfast in the camp-over by the fire.

MITCHELL'S JOBS

"I'm going to knock off work and try to make some money," said Mitchell, as he jerked the tea-leaves out of his pannikin and reached for the billy. "It's been the great mistake of my life—if I hadn't wasted all my time and energy working and looking for work I might have been an independent man to-day."

"Joe!" he added in a louder voice, condescendingly adapting his language to my bushed comprehension. "I'm going to sling graft and try and get some stuff together."

I didn't feel in a responsive humour, but I lit up and settled back comfortably against the tree, and Jack folded his arms on his knees and presently continued, reflectively:

"I remember the first time I went to work. I was a youngster then. Mother used to go round looking for jobs for me. She reckoned, perhaps, that I was too shy to go in where there was a boy wanted and barrack for myself properly, and she used to help me and see me through to the best of her ability. I'm afraid I didn't always feel as grateful to her as I should have felt. I was a thankless kid at the best of times—most kids are—but otherwise I was a straight enough little chap as nippers go. Sometimes

I almost wish I hadn't been. My relations would have thought a good deal more of me and treated me better—and, besides, it's a comfort, at times, to sit and watch the sun going down in the bed of the bush, and think of your wicked childhood and wasted life, and the way you treated your parents and broke their hearts, and feel just properly repentant and bitter and remorseful and low-spirited about it when it's too late.

"Ah, well! . . . I generally did feel a bit backward in going in when I came to the door of an office or shop where there was a 'Strong Lad,' or a 'Willing Youth,' wanted inside to make himself generally useful. I was a strong lad and a willing youth enough, in some things, for that matter; but I didn't like to see it written up on a card in a shop window, and I didn't want to make myself generally useful in a close shop in a hot dusty street on mornings when the weather was fine and the great sunny rollers were coming in grand on the Bondi Beach and down at Coogee, and I could swim. . . I'd give something to be down along there now."

Mitchell looked away out over the sultry sandy plain that we were to tackle next day, and sighed.

"The first job I got was in a jam factory. They only had 'Boy Wanted' on the card in the window, and I thought it would suit me. They set me to work to peel peaches, and, as soon as the foreman's back was turned, I picked out a likely-looking peach and tried it. They soaked those peaches in salt or acid or something—it was part of the process—and I had to spit it out. Then I got an orange from a boy who

was slicing them, but it was bitter, and I couldn't eat it. I saw that I'd been had properly. I was in a fix, and had to get out of it the best way I could. I'd left my coat down in the front shop, and the foreman and boss were there, so I had to work in that place for two mortal hours. It was about the longest two hours I'd ever spent in my life. At last the foreman came up, and I told him I wanted to go down to the back for a minute. I slipped down, watched my chance till the boss' back was turned, got my coat, and cleared.

"The next job I got was in a mat factory; at least, Aunt got that for me. I didn't want to have anything to do with mats or carpets. The worst of it was the boss didn't seem to want me to go, and I had a job to get him to sack me, and when he did he saw some of my people and took me back again next week. He sacked me finally the next Saturday.

"I got the next job myself. I didn't hurry; I took my time and picked out a good one. It was in a lolly factory. I thought it would suit me—and it did, for a while. They put me on stirring up and mixing stuff in the jujube department; but I got so sick of the smell of it and so full of jujube and other lollies that I soon wanted a change; so I had a row with the chief of the jujube department and the boss gave me the sack.

"I got a job in a grocery then. I thought I'd have more variety there. But one day the boss was away, sick or something, all the afternoon, and I sold a lot of things too cheap. I didn't know. When a customer came in and asked for something I'd just look round in the window till I saw a card with

the price written up on it, and sell the best quality according to that price ; and once or twice I made a mistake the other way about and lost a couple of good customers. It was a hot, drowsy afternoon, and by-and-bye I began to feel dull and sleepy. So I looked round the corner and saw a Chinaman coming. I got a big tin garden syringe and filled it full of brine from the butter keg, and, when he came opposite the door, I let him have the full force of it in the ear.

“ That Chinaman put down his baskets and came for me. I was strong for my age, and thought I could fight, but he gave me a proper mauling.

“ It was like running up against a thrashing machine, and it wouldn't have been well for me if the boss of the shop next door hadn't interfered. He told my boss, and my boss gave me the sack at once.

“ I took a spell of eighteen months or so after that, and was growing up happy and contented when a married sister of mine must needs come to live in town and interfere. I didn't like married sisters, though I always got on grand with my brothers-in-law, and wished there were more of them. The married sister comes round and cleans up the place and pulls your things about and finds your pipe and tobacco and things, and cigarette portraits, and “ Deadwood Dicks,” that you've got put away all right, so's your mother and aunt wouldn't find them in a generation of cats, and says :

“ ‘ Mother, why don't you make that boy go to work. It's a scandalous shame to see a big boy like that growing up idle. He's going to the bad before

your eyes.' And she's always trying to make out that you're a liar, and trying to make mother believe it, too. My married sister got me a job with a chemist, whose missus she knew.

"I got on pretty well there, and by-and-bye I was put upstairs in the grinding and mixing department; but, after a while, they put another boy that I was chummy with up there with me, and that was a mistake. I didn't think so at the time, but I can see it now. We got up to all sorts of tricks. We'd get mixing together chemicals that weren't related to see how they'd agree, and we nearly blew up the shop several times, and set it on fire once. But all the chaps liked us, and fixed things up for us. One day we got a big black dog—that we meant to take home that evening—and sneaked him upstairs and put him on a flat roof outside the laboratory. He had a touch of the mange and didn't look well, so we gave him a dose of something; and he scrambled over the parapet and slipped down a steep iron roof in front, and fell on a respected townsman that knew my people. We were awfully frightened, and didn't say anything. Nobody saw it but us. The dog had the presence of mind to leave at once, and the respected townsman was picked up and taken home in a cab; and he got it hot from his wife, too, I believe, for being in that drunken, beastly state in the main street in the middle of the day.

"I don't think he was ever quite sure that he hadn't been drunk or what had happened, for he had had one or two that morning; so it didn't matter much. Only we lost the dog.

"One day I went downstairs to the packing-room and saw a lot of phosphorus in jars of water. I wanted to fix up a ghost for Billy, my mate, so I nicked a bit and slipped it into my trouser pocket.

"I stood under the tap and let it pour on me. The phosphorus burnt clean through my pocket and fell on the ground. I was sent home that night with my leg dressed with lime-water and oil, and a pair of the boss's pants on that were about half a yard too long for me, and I felt miserable enough, too. They said it would stop my tricks for a while, and so it did. I'll carry the mark to my dying day—and for two or three days after, for that matter."

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I fell asleep at this point, and left Mitchell's cattle pup to hear it out.

BILL, THE VENTRILOQUIAL ROOSTER

“WHEN we were up country on the selection, we had a rooster at our place, named Bill,” said Mitchell; “a big mongrel of no particular breed, though the old lady said he was a “brammer”—and many an argument she had with the old man about it too; she was just as stubborn and obstinate in her opinion as the governor was in his. But, anyway, we called him Bill, and didn’t take any particular notice of him till a cousin of some of us came from Sydney on a visit to the country, and stayed at our place because it was cheaper than stopping at a pub. Well, somehow this chap got interested in Bill, and studied him for two or three days, and at last he says :

‘Why, that rooster’s a ventriloquist!’

‘A what?’

‘A ventriloquist!’

‘Go along with yer!’

‘But he is. I’ve heard of cases like this before; but this is the first I’ve come across. Bill’s a ventriloquist right enough.’

“Then we remembered that there wasn’t another rooster within five miles—our only neighbour, an Irishman named Page, didn’t have one at the time— and

we'd often heard another cock crow, but didn't think to take any notice of it. We watched Bill, and sure enough he *was* a ventriloquist. The "ka-cocka" would come all right, but the "co-ka-koo-oi-oo" seemed to come from a distance. And sometimes the whole crow would go wrong, and come back like an echo that had been lost for a year. Bill would stand on tiptoe, and hold his elbows out, and curve his neck, and go two or three times as if he was swallowing nest-eggs, and nearly break his neck and burst his gizzard; and then there'd be no sound at all where he was—only a cock crowing in the distance.

"And pretty soon we could see that Bill was in great trouble about it himself. You see, he didn't know it was himself—thought it was another rooster challenging him, and he wanted badly to find that other bird. He would get up on the wood-heap, and crow and listen—crow and listen again—crow and listen, and then he'd go up to the top of the paddock, and get up on the stack, and crow and listen there. Then down to the other end of the paddock, and get up on a mullock-heap, and crow and listen there. Then across to the other side and up on a log among the saplings, and crow 'n' listen some more. He searched all over the place for that other rooster, but, of course, couldn't find him. Sometimes he'd be out all day crowing and listening all over the country, and then come home dead tired, and rest and cool off in a hole that the hens had scratched for him in a damp place under the water-cask sledge.

“Well, one day Page brought home a big white rooster, and when he let it go it climbed up on Page’s stack and crowed, to see if there was any more roosters round there. Bill had come home tired; it was a hot day, and he’d rooted out the hens, and was having a spell-oh under the cask when the white rooster crowed. Bill didn’t lose any time getting out and on to the wood-heap, and then he waited till he heard the crow again; then he crowed, and the other rooster crowed again, and they crowed at each other for three days, and called each other all the wretches they could lay their tongues to, and after that they implored each other to come out and be made into chicken soup and feather pillows. But neither’d come. You see, there were *three* crows—there was Bill’s crow, and the ventriloquist crow, and the white rooster’s crow—and each rooster thought that there was *two* roosters in the opposition camp, and that he mightn’t get fair play, and, consequently, both were afraid to put up their hands.

“But at last Bill couldn’t stand it any longer. He made up his mind to go and have it out, even if there was a whole agricultural show of prize and honourable-mention fighting-cocks in Page’s yard. He got down from the wood-heap and started off across the ploughed field, his head down, his elbows out, and his thick awkward legs prodding away at the furrows behind for all they were worth.

“I wanted to go down badly and see the fight, and barrack for Bill. But I daren’t, because I’d been coming up the road late the night before with my brother Joe, and there was about three panels of

turkeys roosting along on the top rail of Page's front fence; and we brushed 'em with a bough, and they got up such a blessed gobbling fuss about it that Page came out in his shirt and saw us running away; and I knew he was laying for us with a bullock whip. Besides, there was friction between the two families on account of a thoroughbred bull that Page borrowed and wouldn't lend to us, and that got into our paddock on account of me mending a panel in the party fence, and carelessly leaving the top rail down after sundown while our cows was moving round there in the saplings.

"So there was too much friction for me to go down, but I climbed a tree as near the fence as I could and watched. Bill reckoned he'd found that rooster at last. The white rooster wouldn't come down from the stack, so Bill went up to him, and they fought there till they tumbled down the other side, and I couldn't see any more. Wasn't I wild? I'd have given my dog to have seen the rest of the fight. I went down to the far side of Page's fence and climbed a tree there, but, of course, I couldn't see anything, so I came home the back way. Just as I got home Page came round to the front and sung out, "Insoid there!" And me and Jim went under the house like snakes and looked out round a pile. But Page was all right—he had a broad grin on his face, and Bill safe under his arm. He put Bill down on the ground very carefully, and says he to the old folks:

'Yer rooster knocked the stuffin' out of my rooster, but I bear no malice. 'Twas a grand foight.'

“And then the old man and Page had a yarn, and got pretty friendly after that. And Bill didn’t seem to bother about any more ventriloquism; but the white rooster spent a lot of time looking for that other rooster. Perhaps he thought he’d have better luck with him. But Page was on the look-out all the time to get a rooster that would lick ours. He did nothing else for a month but ride round and enquire about roosters; and at last he borrowed a game-bird in town, left five pounds deposit on him, and brought him home. And Page and the old man agreed to have a match—about the only thing they’d agreed about for five years. And they fixed it up for a Sunday when the old lady and the girls and kids were going on a visit to some relations, about fifteen miles away—to stop all night. The gov’nor made me go with them on horseback; but I knew what was up, and so my pony went lame about a mile along the road, and I had to come back and turn him out in the top paddock, and hide the saddle and bridle in a hollow log, and sneak home and climb up on the roof of the shed. It was a awful hot day, and I had to keep climbing backward and forward over the ridge-pole all the morning to keep out of sight of the old man, for he was moving about a good deal.

“Well, after dinner, the fellows from roundabout began to ride in and hang up their horses round the place till it looked as if there was going to be a funeral. Some of the chaps saw me, of course, but I tipped them the wink, and they gave me the office whenever the old man happened around.

“Well, Page came along with his game-rooster.

Its name was Jim. It wasn't much to look at, and it seemed a good deal smaller and weaker than Bill. Some of the chaps were disgusted, and said it wasn't a game-rooster at all; Bill'd settle it in one lick, and they wouldn't have any fun.

"Well, they brought the game one out and put him down near the wood-heap, and roused Bill out from under his cask. He got interested at once. He looked at Jim, and got up on the wood-heap and crowed and looked at Jim again. He reckoned *this* at last was the fowl that had been humbugging him all along. Presently his trouble caught him, and then he'd crow and take a squint at the game 'un, and crow again, and have another squint at gamey, and try to crow and keep his eye on the game-rooster at the same time. But Jim never committed himself, until at last he happened to gape just after Bill's whole crow went wrong, and Bill spotted him. He reckoned he'd caught him this time, and he got down off that wood-heap and went for the foe. But Jim ran away—and Bill ran after him.

"Round and round the wood-heap they went, and round the shed, and round the house and under it, and back again, and round the wood-heap and over it and round the other way, and kept it up for close on an hour. Bill's bill was just within an inch or so of the game-rooster's tail feathers most of the time, but he couldn't get any nearer, do how he liked. And all the time the fellers kept chyackin Page and singing out, "What price yer game 'un, Page! Go it, Bill! Go, it, old cock!" and all that sort of thing. Well, the game-rooster went as if it was a

go-as-you-please, and he didn't care if it lasted a year. He didn't seem to take any interest in the business, but Bill got excited, and by-and-by he got mad. He held his head lower and lower and his wings further and further out from his sides, and prodded away harder and harder at the ground behind, but it wasn't any use. Jim seemed to keep ahead without trying. They stuck to the wood-heap towards the last. They went round first one way for a while, and then the other for a change, and now and then they'd go over the top to break the monotony; and the chaps got more interested in the race than they would have been in the fight—and bet on it, too. But Bill was handicapped with his weight. He was done up at last; he slowed down till he couldn't waddle, and then, when he was thoroughly knocked up, that game-rooster turned on him, and gave him the father of a hiding.

“And my father caught me when I'd got down in the excitement, and wasn't thinking, and *he* gave *me* the step-father of a hiding. But he had a lively time with the old lady afterwards, over the cock-fight.

“Bill was so disgusted with himself that he went under the cask and died.”

BUSH CATS

“DOMESTIC CATS” we mean—the descendants of cats who came from the northern world during the last hundred odd years. We do not know the name of the vessel in which the first Thomas and his Maria came out to Australia, but we suppose that it was one of the ships of the First Fleet. Most likely Maria had kittens on the voyage—two lots, perhaps—the majority of which were buried at sea; and no doubt the disembarkation caused her much maternal anxiety.

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The feline race has not altered much in Australia, from a physical point of view—not yet. The rabbit has developed into something like a cross between a kangaroo and a possum, but the bush has not begun to develop the common cat. She is just as sedate and motherly as the mummy cats of Egypt were, but she takes longer strolls of nights, climbs gum-trees instead of roofs, and hunts stranger vermin than ever came under the observation of her northern ancestors. Her views have widened. She is mostly thinner than the English farm cat—which is, they say, on account of eating lizards.

English rats and English mice—we say “English” because everything which isn’t Australian in Australia, *is* English (or British)—English rats and English mice are either rare or non-existent in the bush ; but the hut cat has a wider range for game. She is always dragging in things which are unknown in the halls of zoology ; ugly, loathsome, crawling abortions which have not been classified yet—and perhaps could not be.

The Australian zoologist ought to rake up some more dead languages, and then go Out Back with a few bush cats.

The Australian bush cat has a nasty, unpleasant habit of dragging a long, wriggling, horrid, black snake—she seems to prefer black snakes —into a room where there are ladies, proudly laying it down in a conspicuous place (usually in front of the exit), and then looking up for approbation. She wonders, perhaps, why the visitors are in such a hurry to leave.

Pussy doesn’t approve of live snakes round the place, especially if she has kittens ; and if she finds a snake in the vicinity of her progeny—well, it is bad for that particular serpent.

This brings recollections of a neighbour’s cat who went out in the scrub, one midsummer’s day, and found a brown snake. Her name—the cat’s name—was Mary Ann. She got hold of the snake all right, just within an inch of its head ; but it got the rest of its length wound round her body and squeezed about eight lives out of her. She had the presence of mind to keep her hold ; but it struck her that she was in a fix, and that if she wanted to save her ninth life, it

wouldn't be a bad idea to go home for help. So she started home, snake and all.

The family were at dinner when Mary Ann came in, and, although she stood on an open part of the floor, no one noticed her for a while. She couldn't ask for help, for her mouth was too full of snake. By-and-bye one of the girls glanced round, and then went over the table, with a shriek, and out of the back door. The room was cleared very quickly. The eldest boy got a long-handled shovel, and in another second would have killed more cat than snake; but his father interfered. The father was a shearer, and Mary Ann was a favourite cat with him. He got a pair of shears from the shelf and deftly shore off the snake's head, and one side of Mary Ann's whiskers. She didn't think it safe to let go yet. She kept her teeth in the neck until the selector snipped the rest of the snake off her. The bits were carried out on a shovel to die at sundown. Mary Ann had a good drink of milk, and then got her tongue out and licked herself back into the proper shape for a cat; after which she went out to look for that snake's mate. She found it, too, and dragged it home the same evening.

Cats will kill rabbits and drag them home. We knew a fossicker whose cat used to bring him a bunny nearly every night. The fossicker had rabbits for breakfast until he got sick of them, and then he used to swap them with a butcher for meat. The cat was named Ingersoll, which indicates his sex and gives an inkling to his master's religious and political opinions. Ingersoll used to prospect round in the gloaming until he found some rabbit holes which showed encouraging

indications. He would shepherd one hole for an hour or so every evening until he found it was a duffer, or worked it out; then he would shift to another. One day he prospected a big hollow log with a lot of holes in it, and more going down underneath. The indications were very good, but Ingersoll had no luck. The game had too many ways of getting out and in. He found that he could not work that claim by himself, so he floated it into a company. He persuaded several cats from a neighbouring selection to take shares, and they watched the holes together, or in turns—they worked shifts. The dividends more than realised even their wildest expectations, for each cat took home at least one rabbit every night for a week.

A selector started a vegetable garden about the time when rabbits were beginning to get troublesome up country. The hare had not shown itself yet. The farmer kept quite a regiment of cats to protect his garden—and they protected it. He would shut the cats up all day with nothing to eat, and let them out about sundown; then they would mooch off to the turnip patch like farm-labourers going to work. They would drag the rabbits home to the back door, and sit there and watch them until the farmer opened the door and served out the ration of milk. Then the cats would turn in. He nearly always found a semicircle of dead rabbits and watchful cats round the door in the morning. They sold the product of their labour direct to the farmer for milk. It didn't matter if one cat had been unlucky—had not got a rabbit—each had an equal share in the general result. They were true socialists, those cats.

One of those cats was a mighty big Tom, named Jack. He was death on rabbits; he would work hard all night, laying for them and dragging them home. Some weeks he would graft every night, and at other times every other night, but he was generally pretty regular. When he reckoned he had done an extra night's work, he would take the next night off and go three miles to the nearest neighbour's to see his Maria and take her out for a stroll. Well, one evening Jack went into the garden and chose a place where there was good cover, and lay low. He was a bit earlier than usual, so he thought he would have a doze till rabbit time. By-and-bye he heard a noise, and slowly, cautiously opening one eye, he saw two big ears sticking out of the leaves in front of him. He judged that it was an extra big bunny, so he put some extra style into his manœuvres. In about five minutes he made his spring. He must have thought (if cats think) that it was a whopping, old-man rabbit, for it was a pioneer hare—not an ordinary English hare, but one of those great coarse, lanky things which the bush is breeding. The selector was attracted by an unusual commotion and a cloud of dust among his cabbages, and came along with his gun in time to witness the fight. First Jack would drag the hare, and then the hare would drag Jack; sometimes they would be down together, and then Jack would use his hind claws with effect; finally he got his teeth in the right place, and triumphed. Then he started to drag the corpse home, but he had to give it best and ask his master to lend a hand. The selector took up the hare, and Jack followed home, much to the family's

surprise. He did not go back to work that night; he took a spell. He had a drink of milk, licked the dust off himself, washed it down with another drink, and sat in front of the fire and thought for a goodish while. Then he got up, walked over to the corner where the hare was lying, had a good look at it, came back to the fire, sat down again, and thought hard. He was still thinking when the family retired.

MEETING OLD MATES

I.

TOM SMITH

You are getting well on in the thirties, and haven't left off being a fool yet. You have been away in another colony or country for a year or so, and have now come back again. Most of your chums have gone away or got married, or, worse still, signed the pledge—settled down and got steady; and you feel lonely and desolate and left-behind enough for anything. While drifting aimlessly round town with an eye out for some chance acquaintance to have a knock round with, you run against an old chum whom you never dreamt of meeting, or whom you thought to be in some other part of the country—or perhaps you knock up against someone who knows the old chum in question, and he says:

“I suppose you know Tom Smith's in Sydney?”

“Tom Smith! Why, I thought he was in Queensland! I haven't seen him for more than three years. Where's the old joker hanging out at all? Why, except you, there's no one in Australia I'd sooner see than Tom Smith. Here I've been mooning round like an unemployed for three weeks, looking for someone to have a knock round with, and Tom in

Sydney all the time. I wish I'd known before. Where'll I run against him—where does he live?"

"Oh, he's living at home."

"But where's his home? I was never there."

"Oh, I'll give you his address. . . . There, I think that's it. I'm not sure about the number, but you'll soon find out in that street—most of 'em'll know Tom Smith."

"Thanks! I rather think they will. I'm glad I met you. I'll hunt Tom up to-day."

So you put a few shillings in your pocket, tell your landlady that you're going to visit an old aunt of yours or a sick friend, and mayn't be home that night; and then you start out to hunt up Tom Smith and have at least one more good night, if you die for it.

This is the first time you have seen Tom at home; you knew of his home and people in the old days, but only in a vague, indefinite sort of way. Tom has changed! He is stouter and older-looking; he seems solemn and settled down. You intended to give him a surprise and have a good old jolly laugh with him, but somehow things get suddenly damped at the beginning. He grins and grips your hand right enough, but there seems something wanting. You can't help staring at him, and he seems to look at you in a strange, disappointing way; it doesn't strike you that you also have changed, and perhaps more in his eyes than he in yours. He introduces you to his mother and sisters and brothers, and the rest of the family; or to his wife, as the case may be; and you have to suppress your feelings and be polite and talk

common-place. You hate to be polite and talk common-place. You aren't built that way—and Tom wasn't either, in the old days. The wife (or the mother and sisters) receives you kindly, for Tom's sake, and makes much of you; but they don't know you yet. You want to get Tom outside, and have a yarn and a drink and a laugh with him—you are bursting to tell him all about yourself, and get him to tell you all about himself, and ask him if he remembers things; and you wonder if he is bursting the same way, and hope he is. The old lady and sisters (or the wife) bore you pretty soon, and you wonder if they bore Tom; you almost fancy, from his looks, that they do. You wonder whether Tom is coming out to-night, whether he wants to get out, and if he wants to and wants to get out by himself, whether he'll be able to manage it; but you daren't broach the subject, it wouldn't be polite. You've got to be polite. Then you get worried by the thought that Tom is bursting to get out with you and only wants an excuse; is waiting, in fact, and hoping for you to ask him in an off-hand sort of way to come out for a stroll. But you're not quite sure; and besides, if you were, you wouldn't have the courage. By-and-bye you get tired of it all, thirsty, and want to get out in the open air. You get tired of saying, "Do you really, Mrs. Smith?" or "Do you think so, Miss Smith?" or "You were quite right, Mrs. Smith," and "Well, I think so too, Mrs. Smith," or, to the brother, "That's just what I thought, Mr. Smith." You don't want to "talk pretty" to them, and listen to their wishy-washy nonsense; you want to get out

and have a roaring spree with Tom, as you had in the old days ; you want to make another night of it with your old mate, Tom Smith ; and pretty soon you get the blues badly, and feel nearly smothered in there, and you've got to get out and have a beer anyway—Tom or no Tom ; and you begin to feel wild with Tom himself ; and at last you make a bold dash for it and chance Tom. You get up, look at your hat, and say : “ Ah, well, I must be going, Tom ; I've got to meet someone down the street at seven o'clock. Where'll I meet you in town next week ? ”

But Tom says :

“ Oh, dash it ; you ain't going yet. Stay to tea, Joe, stay to tea. It'll be on the table in a minute. Sit down—sit down, man ! Here, gimme your hat.”

And Tom's sister, or wife, or mother comes in with an apron on and her hands all over flour, and says :

“ Oh, you're not going yet, Mr. Brown ? Tea'll be ready in a minute. Do stay for tea.” And if you make excuses, she cross-examines you about the time you've got to keep that appointment down the street, and tells you that their clock is twenty minutes fast, and that you have got plenty of time, and so you have to give in. But you are mightily encouraged by a winksome expression which you see, or fancy you see, on your side of Tom's face ; also by the fact of his having accidentally knocked his foot against your shins. So you stay.

One of the females tells you to “ Sit there, Mr. Brown,” and you take your place at the table, and the polite business goes on. You've got to hold your knife and fork properly, and mind your p's and q's,

and when she says, "Do you take milk and sugar, Mr. Brown?" you've got to say, "Yes, please, Miss Smith—thanks—that's plenty." And when they press you, as they will, to have more, you've got to keep on saying, "No, thanks, Mrs. Smith; no, thanks, Miss Smith; I really couldn't; I've done very well, thank you; I had a very late dinner, and so on"—bother such tommy-rot. And you don't seem to have any appetite, anyway. And you think of the days out on the track when you and Tom sat on your swags under a mulga at mid-day, and ate mutton and johnny-cake with clasp-knives, and drank by turns out of the old, battered, leaky billy.

And after tea you have to sit still while the precious minutes are wasted, and listen and sympathize, while all the time you are on the fidget to get out with Tom, and go down to a private bar where you know some girls.

And perhaps by-and-bye the old lady gets confidential, and seizes an opportunity to tell you what a good steady young fellow Tom is now that he never touches drink, and belongs to a temperance society (or the Y.M.C.A.), and never stays out of nights.

Consequently you feel worse than ever, and lonelier, and sorrier that you wasted your time coming. You are encouraged again by a glimpse of Tom putting on a clean collar and fixing himself up a bit; but when you are ready to go, and ask him if he's coming a bit down the street with you, he says he thinks he will in such a disinterested, don't-mind-if-I-do sort of tone, that he makes you mad.

At last, after promising to "drop in again, Mr.

Brown, whenever you're passing," and to "don't forget to call," and thanking them for their assurance that they'll "be always glad to see you," and telling them that you've spent a very pleasant evening and enjoyed yourself, and are awfully sorry you couldn't stay—you get away with Tom.

You don't say much to each other till you get round the corner and down the street a bit, and then for a while your conversation is mostly common-place, such as, "Well, how have you been getting on all this time, Tom?" "Oh, all right. How have you been getting on?" and so on.

But presently, and perhaps just as you have made up your mind to chance the alleged temperance business and ask Tom in to have a drink, he throws a glance up and down the street, nudges your shoulder, says "Come on," and disappears sideways into a pub.

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"What's yours, Tom?" "What's yours, Joe?" "The same for me." "Well, here's luck, old man." "Here's luck." You take a drink, and look over your glass at Tom. Then the old smile spreads over his face, and it makes you glad—you could swear to Tom's grin in a hundred years. Then something tickles him—your expression, perhaps, or a recollection of the past—and he sets down his glass on the bar and laughs. Then you laugh. Oh, there's no smile like the smile that old mates favour each other with over the tops of their glasses when they meet again after years. It is eloquent, because of the memories that give it birth.

“Here’s another. Do you remember ——? Do you remember ——?” Oh, it all comes back again like a flash. Tom hasn’t changed a bit; just the same good-hearted, jolly idiot he always was. Old times back again! “It’s just like old times,” says Tom, after three or four more drinks.

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And so you make a night of it and get uproariously jolly. You get as “glorious” as Bobby Burns did in the part of Tam O’Shanter, and have a better “time” than any of the times you had in the old days. And you see Tom as nearly home in the morning as you dare, and he reckons he’ll get it hot from his people—which no doubt he will—and he explains that they are very particular up at home—church people, you know—and, of course, especially if he’s married, it’s understood between you that you’d better not call for him up at home after this—at least, not till things have cooled down a bit. It’s always the way. The friend of the husband always gets the blame in cases like this. But Tom fixes up a yarn to tell them, and you aren’t to “say anything different” in case you run against any of them. And he fixes up an appointment with you for next Saturday night, and he’ll get there if he gets divorced for it. But he *might* have to take the wife out shopping, or one of the girls somewhere; and if you see her with him you’ve got to lay low, and be careful, and wait—at another hour and place, perhaps, all of which is arranged—for if she sees you she’ll smell a rat at once, and he won’t be able to get off at all,

And so, as far as you and Tom are concerned, the "old times" have come back once more.

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But, of course (and we almost forgot it), you might chance to fall in love with one of Tom's sisters, in which case there would be another and a totally different story to tell.

II.

JACK ELLIS

THINGS are going well with you. You have escaped from "the track," so to speak, and are in a snug, comfortable little billet in the city. Well, while doing the block you run against an old mate of other days—*very* other days—call him Jack Ellis. Things have gone hard with Jack. He knows you at once, but makes no advance towards a greeting; he acts as though he thinks you might cut him—which, of course, if you are a true mate, you have not the slightest intention of doing. His coat is yellow and frayed, his hat is battered and green, his trousers "gone" in various places, his linen very cloudy, and his boots burst and innocent of polish. You try not to notice these things—or rather, not to seem to notice them—but you cannot help doing so, and you are afraid he'll notice that you see these things, and put a wrong construction on it. How men will misunderstand each other! You greet him with more than the necessary enthusiasm. In your anxiety to set him at his ease and make him believe that nothing—not even money—can make a difference in your

friendship, you over-act the business ; and presently you are afraid that he'll notice that too, and put a wrong construction on it. You wish that your collar was not so clean, nor your clothes so new. Had you known you would meet him, you would have put on some old clothes for the occasion.

You are both embarrassed, but it is *you* who feel ashamed—you are almost afraid to look at him lest he'll think you are looking at his shabbiness. You ask him in to have a drink, but he doesn't respond so heartily as you wish, as he did in the old days ; he doesn't like drinking with anybody when he isn't "fixed," as he calls it—when he can't shout.

It didn't matter in the old days who held the money so long as there was plenty of "stuff" in the camp. You think of the days when Jack stuck to you through thick and thin. You would like to give him money now, but he is so proud ; he always was ; he makes you mad with his beastly pride. There wasn't any pride of that sort on the track or in the camp in those days ; but times have changed—your lives have drifted too widely apart—you have taken different tracks since then ; and Jack, without intending to, makes you feel that it is so.

You have a drink, but it isn't a success ; it falls flat, as far as Jack is concerned ; he won't have another he doesn't "feel on," and presently he escapes under plea of an engagement, and promises to see you again.

And you wish that the time was come when no one could have more or less to spend than another.

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P.S.—I met an old mate of that description once, and so successfully persuaded him out of his beastly pride that he borrowed two pounds off me till Monday. I never got it back since, and I want it badly at the present time. In future I'll leave old mates with their pride unimpaired.

TWO LARRIKINS

"Y'ORTER do something, Ernie. Yer know how I am. *You* don't seem to care. Y'orter to do something."

Stowsher slouched at a greater angle to the greasy door-post, and scowled under his hat-brim. It was a little, low, frowsy room opening into Jones' Alley. She sat at the table, sewing—a thin, sallow girl with weak, colourless eyes. She looked as frowsy as her surroundings.

"Well, why don't you go to some of them women, and get fixed up?"

She flicked the end of the table-cloth over some tiny, unfinished articles of clothing, and bent to her work.

"But you know very well I haven't got a shilling, Ernie," she said, quietly. "Where am I to get the money from?"

"Who asked yer to get it?"

She was silent, with the exasperating silence of a woman who has determined to do a thing in spite of all reasons and arguments that may be brought against it.

"Well, wot more do yer want?" demanded Stowsher, impatiently.

She bent lower. "Couldn't we keep it, Ernie?"

"Wot next?" asked Stowsher, sulkily—he had half suspected what was coming. Then, with an impatient oath, "You must be gettin' ratty."

She brushed the corner of the cloth further over the little clothes.

"It wouldn't cost anything, Ernie. I'd take a pride in him, and keep him clean, and dress him like a little lord. He'll be different from all the other youngsters. He wouldn't be like those dirty, sickly little brats out there. He'd be just like you, Ernie; I know he would. I'll look after him night and day, and bring him up well and strong. We'd train his little muscles from the first, Ernie, and he'd be able to knock 'em all out when he grew up. It wouldn't cost much, and I'd work hard and be careful if you'd help me. And you'd be proud of him, too, Ernie—I know you would."

Stowsher scraped the doorstep with his foot; but whether he was "touched," or feared hysterics and was wisely silent, was not apparent.

"Do you remember the first day I met you, Ernie?" she asked, presently.

Stowsher regarded her with an uneasy scowl: "Well—wot o' that?"

"You came into the bar-parlour at the 'Cricketers' Arms' and caught a push of 'em chyacking your old man."

"Well, I altered that."

"I know you did. You done for three of them, one after another, and two was bigger than you."

"Yes! and when the push come up we done for the rest," said Stowsher, softening at the recollection.

"And the day you come home and caught the landlord bullying your old mother like a dog——"

"Yes; I got three months for that job. But it was worth it!" he reflected. "Only," he added, "the old woman might have had the knocker to keep away from the lush while I was in quod. . . But wot's all this got to do with it?"

"*He* might barrack and fight for you, some day, Ernie," she said softly, "when you're old and out of form and ain't got no push to back you."

The thing was becoming decidedly embarrassing to Stowsher; not that he felt any delicacy on the subject, but because he hated to be drawn into a conversation that might be considered "soft."

"Oh, stow that!" he said, comfortingly. "Git on yer hat, and I'll take yer for a trot."

She rose quickly, but restrained herself, recollecting that it was not good policy to betray eagerness in response to an invitation from Ernie.

"But—you know—I don't like to go out like this. You can't—you wouldn't like to take me out the way I am, Ernie!"

"Why not? Wot rot!"

"The fellows would see me, and—and——"

"And . . . wot?"

"They might notice——"

"Well, wot o' that? I want 'em to. Are yer comin' or are yer ain't? Fling round now. I can't hang on here all day."

They walked towards Flagstaff Hill.

One or two, slouching round a pub. corner, saluted with "Wotcher, Stowsher!"

"Not too stinkin'," replied Stowsher. "Soak yer heads."

"Stowsher's goin' to stick," said one privately.

"An' so he orter," said another. "Wish I had the chanst."

The two turned up a steep lane.

"Don't walk so fast up hill, Ernie; I can't, you know."

"All right, Liz. I forgot that. Why didn't yer say so before?"

She was contentedly silent most of the way, warned by instinct, after the manner of women when they have gained their point by words.

Once he glanced over his shoulder with a short laugh. "Gorblime!" he said, "I nearly thought the little beggar was a-follerin' along behind!"

When he left her at the door he said: "Look here, Liz. 'Ere's half a quid. Git what yer want. Let her go. I'm goin' to graft again in the mornin', and I'll come round and see yer to-morrer night."

Still she seemed troubled and uneasy.

"Ernie."

"Well. Wot now?"

"S'posin' it's a girl, Ernie."

Stowsher flung himself round impatiently.

"Oh, for God's sake, stow that! Yer always singin' out before yer hurt. . . There's somethin' else, ain't there—while the bloomin' shop's open?"

"No, Ernie. Ain't you going to kiss me? . . . I'm satisfied."

"Satisfied! Yer don't want the kid to be arst 'oo 'is father was, do yer? Yer'd better come along with me some day this week and git spliced. Yer don't want to go frettin' or any of that funny business while it's on."

"Oh, Ernie! do you really mean it?"—and she threw her arms round his neck, and broke down at last.

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"So-long, Liz. No more funny business now—I've had enough of it. Keep yer pecker up, old girl. To-morrer night, mind." Then he added suddenly: "Yer might have known I ain't that sort of a bloke"—and left abruptly.

Liz was very happy.

MR. SMELLINGSHECK

I MET him in a sixpenny restaurant—"All meals, 6d.—Good beds, 1s." That was before sixpenny restaurants rose to a third-class position, and became possibly respectable places to live in, through the establishment, beneath them, of fourpenny hash-houses (good beds, 6d.), and, beneath *them* again, of *three-penny* "dining-rooms—*clean* beds, 4d."

There were five beds in our apartment, the head of one against the foot of the next, and so on round the room, with a space where the door and washstand were. I chose the bed the head of which was near the foot of his, because he looked like a man who took his bath regularly. I should like, in the interests of sentiment, to describe the place as a miserable, filthy, evil-smelling garret; but I can't—because it wasn't. The room was large and airy; the floor was scrubbed and the windows cleaned at least once a week, and the beds kept fresh and neat, which is more—a good deal more—than can be said of many genteel private boarding-houses. The lodgers were mostly respectable unemployed, and one or two—fortunate men!—in work; it was the casual boozier, the professional loafer, and the occasional spieler—the one-shilling-bed-men—who made the place objectionable, not the

hard-working people who paid ten pounds a week for the house; and, but for the one-night lodgers and the big gilt black-and-red bordered and "shaded" "6d." in the window—which made me glance guiltily up and down the street, like a burglar about to do a job, before I went in—I was pretty comfortable there.

They called him "Mr. Smellingscheck," and treated him with a peculiar kind of deference, the reason for which they themselves were doubtless unable to explain or even understand. The haggard woman who made the beds called him "Mr. Smell-'is-check." Poor fellow! I didn't think, by the look of him, that he'd smelt his cheque, or anyone else's, or that anyone else had smelt his, for many a long day. He was a fat man, slow and placid. He looked like a typical monopolist who had unaccountably got into a suit of clothes belonging to a Domain unemployed, and hadn't noticed, or had entirely forgotten, the circumstance in his business cares—if such a word as care could be connected with such a calm, self-contained nature. He wore a suit of cheap slops of some kind of shoddy "tweed." The coat was too small and the trousers too short, and they were drawn up to meet the waistcoat—which they did with painful difficulty, now and then showing, by way of protest, two pairs of brass buttons and the ends of the brace-straps; and they seemed to blame the irresponsive waistcoat or the wearer for it all. Yet he never gave way to assist them. A pair of burst elastic-sides were in full evidence, and a rim of cloudy sock, with a hole in it, showed at every step.

But he put on his clothes and wore them like—like a gentleman. He had two white shirts, and they were both dirty. He'd lay them out on the bed, turn them over, regard them thoughtfully, choose that which appeared to his calm understanding to be the cleaner, and put it on, and wear it until it was unmistakably dirtier than the other; then he'd wear the other till it was dirtier than the first. He managed his three collars the same way. His handkerchiefs were washed in the bathroom, and dried, without the slightest disguise, in the bedroom. He never hurried in anything. The way he cleaned his teeth, shaved, and made his toilet almost transformed the place, in my imagination, into a gentleman's dressing-room.

He talked politics and such things in the abstract—always in the abstract—calmly in the abstract. He was an old-fashioned Conservative of the Sir Leicester Deadlock style. When he was moved by an extra shower of aggressive democratic cant—which was seldom—he defended Capital, but only as if it needed no defence, and as if its opponents were merely thoughtless, ignorant children whom he condescended to set right because of their inexperience and for their own good. He stuck calmly to his own order—the order which had dropped him like a foul thing when the bottom dropped out of his boom, whatever that was. He never talked of his misfortunes.

He took his meals at the little greasy table in the dark corner downstairs, just as if he were dining at the Exchange. He had a chop—rather well-done—and a sheet of the *Herald* for breakfast. He carried

two handkerchiefs; he used one for a handkerchief and the other for a table-napkin, and sometimes folded it absently and laid it on the table. He rose slowly, putting his chair back, took down his battered old green hat, and regarded it thoughtfully—as though it had just occurred to him in a calm, casual way that he'd drop into his hatter's, if he had time, on his way down town, and get it blocked, or else send the messenger round with it during business hours. He'd draw his stick out from behind the next chair, plant it, and, if you hadn't quite finished your side of the conversation, stand politely waiting until you were done. Then he'd look for a suitable reply into his hat, put it on, give it a twitch to settle it on his head—as gentlemen do a "chimney-pot"—step out into the gangway, turn his face to the door, and walk slowly out on to the middle of the pavement—looking more placidly well-to-do than ever. The saying is that clothes make a man, but *he* made his almost respectable just by wearing them. Then he'd consult his watch—(he stuck to the watch all through, and it seemed a good one—I often wondered why he didn't pawn it); then he'd turn slowly, right turn, and look down the street. Then slowly back, left-about turn, and take a cool survey in that direction, as if calmly undecided whether to take a cab and drive to the Exchange, or (as it was a very fine morning, and he had half an hour to spare) walk there and drop in at his club on the way. He'd conclude to walk. I never saw him go anywhere in particular, but he walked and stood as if he could.

Coming quietly into the room one day, I surprised

him sitting at the table with his arms lying on it and his face resting on them. I heard something like a sob. He rose hastily, and gathered up some papers which were on the table; then he turned round, rubbing his forehead and eyes with his forefinger and thumb, and told me that he suffered from—something, I forget the name of it, but it was a well-to-do ailment. His manner seemed a bit jolted and hurried for a minute or so, and then he was himself again. He told me he was leaving for Melbourne next day. He left while I was out, and left an envelope downstairs for me. There was nothing in it except a pound note.

I saw him in Brisbane afterwards, well-dressed, getting out of a cab at the entrance of one of the leading hotels. But his manner was no more self-contained and well-to-do than it had been in the old sixpenny days—because it couldn't be. We had a well-to-do whisky together, and he talked of things in the abstract. He seemed just as if he'd met me in the Australia.

“A ROUGH SHED”

A HOT, breathless, blinding sunrise—the sun having appeared suddenly above the ragged edge of the barren scrub like a great disc of molten steel. No hint of a morning breeze before it, no sign on earth or sky to show that it is morning—save the position of the sun.

A clearing in the scrub—bare as though the surface of the earth were ploughed and harrowed, and dusty as the road. Two oblong huts—one for the shearers and one for the rouseabouts—in about the centre of the clearing (as if even the mongrel scrub had shrunk away from them) built end-to-end, of weatherboards, and roofed with galvanised iron. Little ventilation; no verandah; no attempt to create, artificially, a breath of air through the buildings. Unpainted, sordid—hideous. Outside, heaps of ashes still hot and smoking. Close at hand, “butcher’s shop”—a bush and bag breakwind in the dust, under a couple of sheets of iron, with offal, grease and clotted blood blackening the surface of the ground about it. Greasy, stinking sheepskins hanging everywhere with blood-blotched sides out. Grease inches deep in great black patches about the fireplace ends of the huts, where wash-up and “boiling” water is thrown.

Inside, a rough table on supports driven into the black, greasy ground floor, and formed of flooring boards, running on uneven lines the length of the hut from within about 6ft. of the fire-place. Lengths of single six-inch boards or slabs on each side, supported by the projecting ends of short pieces of timber nailed across the legs of the table to serve as seats.

On each side of the hut runs a rough framework, like the partitions in a stable; each compartment battened off to about the size of a manger, and containing four bunks, one above the other, on each side—their ends, of course, to the table. Scarcely breathing space anywhere between. Fireplace, the full width of the hut in one end, where all the cooking and baking for forty or fifty men is done, and where flour, sugar, etc., are kept in open bags. Fire, like a very furnace. Buckets of tea and coffee on roasting beds of coals and ashes on the hearth. Pile of “brownie” on the bare black boards at the end of the table. Unspeakable aroma of forty or fifty men who have little inclination and less opportunity to wash their skins, and who soak some of the grease out of their clothes—in buckets of hot water—on Saturday afternoons or Sundays. And clinging to all, and over all, the smell of the dried, stale yolk of wool—the stink of rams!

“I am a rouseabout of the rouseabouts. I have fallen so far that it is beneath me to try to climb to the proud position of “ringer” of the shed. I had that ambition once, when I was the softest of green hands; but then I thought I could work out

my salvation and go home. I've got used to hell since then. I only get twenty-five shillings a week (less station store charges) and tucker here. I have been seven years west of the Darling and never shored a sheep. Why don't I learn to shear, and so make money? What should I do with more money? Get out of this and go home? I would never go home unless I had enough money to keep me for the rest of my life, and I'll never make that Out Back. Otherwise, what should I do at home? And how should I account for the seven years, if I were to go home? Could I describe shed life to them and explain how I lived. They think shearing only takes a few days of the year—at the beginning of summer. They'd want to know how I lived the rest of the year. Could I explain that I 'jabbed trotters' and was a 'tea-and-sugar burglar' between sheds. They'd think I'd been a tramp and a beggar all the time. Could I explain *anything* so that they'd understand? I'd have to be lying all the time and would soon be tripped up and found out. For, whatever else I have been I was never much of a liar. No, I'll never go home.

"I become momentarily conscious about daylight. The flies on the track got me into that habit, I think; they start at day-break—when the mosquitoes give over.

"The cook rings a bullock bell.

"The cook is fire-proof. He is as a fiend from the nethermost sheol and needs to be. No man sees him sleep, for he makes bread—or worse, brownie—at night, and he rings a bullock bell loudly at half-past five in the morning to rouse us from our animal

torpors. Others, the sheep-ho's or the engine-drivers at the shed or wool-wash, call him, if he does sleep. They manage it in shifts, somehow, and sleep somewhere, sometime. We haven't time to know. The cook rings the bullock bell and yells the time. It was the same time five minutes ago—or a year ago. No time to decide which. I dash water over my head and face and slap handfuls on my eyelids—gummed over aching eyes—still blighted by the yolk o' wool—grey, greasy-feeling water from a cut-down kerosene tin which I sneaked from the cook and hid under my bunk and had the foresight to refill from the cask last night, under cover of warm, still, suffocating darkness. Or was it the night before last? Anyhow, it will be sneaked from me to-day, and from the crawler who will collar it to-morrow, and 'touched' and 'lifted' and 'collared' and recovered by the cook, and sneaked back again, and cause foul language, and fights, maybe, till we 'cut-out.'

"No; we didn't have sweet dreams of home and mother, gentle poet—nor yet of babbling brooks and sweethearts, and love's young dream. We are too dirty and dog-tired when we tumble down, and have too little time to sleep it off. We don't want to dream those dreams out here—they'd only be nightmares for us, and we'd wake to remember. We *mustn't* remember here.

"At the edge of the timber a great galvanised-iron shed, nearly all roof, coming down to within 6ft. 6in. of the 'board' over the 'shoots.' Cloud of red dust in the dead timber behind, going up—noon-day dust. Fence covered with skins; carcasses being burned;

blue smoke going straight up as in noonday. Great glossy (greasy-glossy) black crows 'flopping' around.

"The first syren has gone. We hurry in single files from opposite ends of rouseabouts' and shearers' huts (as the paths happen to run to the shed) gulping hot tea or coffee from a pint-pot in one hand and biting at a junk of brownie in the other.

"Shed of forty hands. Shearers rush the pens and yank out sheep and throw them like demons; grip them with their knees, take up machines, jerk the strings; and with a rattling whirring roar the great machine-shed starts for the day.

"'Go it, you —— tigers!' yells a tar-boy. 'Wool away!' 'Tar!' 'Sheep Ho!' We rush through with a whirring roar till breakfast time.

"We seize our tin plate from the pile, knife and fork from the candle-box, and crowd round the camp-oven to jab out lean chops, dry as chips, boiled in fat. Chops or curry-and-rice. There is some growling and cursing. We slip into our places without removing our hats. There's no time to hunt for mislaid hats when the whistle goes. Row of hat brims, level, drawn over eyes, or thrust back—according to characters or temperaments. Thrust back denotes a lucky absence of brains, I fancy. Row of forks going up, or jabbing, or poised, loaded, waiting for last mouthful to be bolted.

"We pick up, sweep, tar, sew wounds, catch sheep that break from the pens, jump down and pick up those that can't rise at the bottom of the shoots, 'bring-my-combs-from-the-grinder-will-ye,' laugh at dirty jokes, and swear—and, in short, are the 'will-

yer' slaves, body and soul, of seven, six, five, or four shearers, according to the distance from the rolling tables.

"The shearer on the board at the shed is a demon. He gets so much a hundred; we, 25s. a week. He is not supposed, by the rules of the shed, the Union, and humanity, to take a sheep out of the pen *after* the bell goes (smoke-ho, meals, or knock-off), but his watch is [hanging on the post, and he times himself to get so many sheep out of the pen *before* the bell goes, and *one more*—the 'bell-sheep'—as it is ringing. We have to take the last fleece to the table and leave our board clean. We go through the day of eight hours in runs of about an hour and 20 minutes between smoke-ho's—from 6 to 6. If the shearers shored 200 instead of 100, they'd get £2 a day instead of £1, and we'd have twice as much work to do for our 25s. per week. But the shearers are racing each other for tallies. And it's no use kicking. There is no God here and no Unionism (though we all have tickets). But what I am growling about? I've worked from 6 to 6 with no smoke-ho's for half the wages, and food we wouldn't give the sheep-ho dog. It's the bush growl, born of heat, flies, and dust. I'd growl now if I had a thousand a year. We *must* growl, swear, and some of us drink to d.t.'s, or go mad sober.

"Pants and shirts stiff with grease as though a couple of pounds of soft black putty were spread on with a painter's knife.

"No, gentle bard!—we don't sing at our work. Over the whirr and roar and hum all day long, and

with iteration that is childish and irritating to the intelligent greenhand, float unthinkable adjectives and adverbs, addressed to jumbucks, jackaroos, and mates indiscriminately. And worse words for the boss over the board—behind his back.

“I came of a Good Christian Family—perhaps that’s why I went to the Devil. When I came out here I’d shrink from the man who used foul language. In a short time I used it with the worst. I couldn’t help it.

“That’s the way of it. If I went back to a woman’s country again I wouldn’t swear. I’d forget this as I would a nightmare. That’s the way of it. There’s something of the larrikin about us. We don’t exist individually. Off the board, away from the shed (and each other) we are quiet—even gentle.

“A great-horned ram, in poor condition, but shorn of a heavy fleece, picks himself up at the foot of the ‘shoot,’ and hesitates, as if ashamed to go down to the other end where the ewes are. The most ridiculous object under Heaven.

“A tar-boy of fifteen, of the bush, with a mouth so vile that a street-boy, same age (up with a shearing uncle), kicks him behind—having proved his superiority with his fists before the shed started. Of which unspeakable little fiend the roughest shearer of a rough shed was heard to say, in effect, that if he thought there was the slightest possibility of his becoming the father of such a boy he’d — take drastic measures to prevent the possibility of his becoming a proud parent at all.

“Twice a day the cooks and their familiars carry

buckets of oatmeal-water and tea to the shed, two each on a yoke. We cry, 'Where are you coming to, my pretty maids?'

"In ten minutes the surfaces of the buckets are black with flies. We have given over trying to keep them clear. We stir the living cream aside with the bottoms of the pints, and guzzle gallons, and sweat it out again. Occasionally a shearer pauses and throws the perspiration from his forehead in a rain.

"Shearers live in such a greedy rush of excitement that often a strong man will, at a prick of the shears, fall in a death-like faint on the board.

"We hate the Boss-of-the-Board as the shearers' 'slushy' hates the shearers' cook. I don't know why. He's a very fair boss.

"He refused to put on a traveller yesterday, and the traveller knocked him down. He walked into the shed this morning with his hat back and thumbs in waist-coat—a tribute to man's weakness. He threatened to dismiss the traveller's mate, a bigger man, for rough shearing—a tribute to man's strength. The shearer said nothing. We hate the boss because he is boss, but we respect him because he is a strong man. He is as hard up as any of us, I hear, and has a sick wife and a large, small family in Melbourne. God judge us all!

"There is a gambling-school here, headed by the shearers' cook. After tea they head-'em, and advance cheques are passed from hand to hand, and thrown in the dust until they are black. When it's too dark to see with nose to the ground, they go inside and gamble with cards. Sometimes they start on Saturday after-

noon, heading 'em till dark, play cards all night, start again heading 'em Sunday afternoon, play cards all Sunday night, and sleep themselves sane on Monday, or go to work ghastly—like dead men.

“Cry of ‘Fight;’ we all rush out. But there isn’t much fighting. Afraid of murdering each other. I’m beginning to think that most bush crime is due to irritation born of dust, heat, and flies.

“The smothering atmosphere shudders when the sun goes down. We call it the sunset breeze.

“Saturday night or Sunday we’re invited into the shearers’ hut. There are songs that are not hymns and recitations and speeches that are not prayers.

“Last Sunday night: Slush lamps at long intervals on table. Men playing cards, sewing on patches—(nearly all smoking)—some writing, and the rest reading Deadwood Dick. At one end of the table a Christian Endeavourer endeavouring; at the other a cockney Jew, from the hawker’s boat, trying to sell rotten clothes. In response to complaints, direct and not chosen generally for Sunday, the shearers’ requests both apostles to shut up or leave.

“He couldn’t be expected to take the Christian and leave the Jew, any more than he could take the Jew and leave the Christian. We are just amongst ourselves in our hell.

“Fiddle at the end of rouseabouts’ hut. Voice of Jackeroo, from upper bunk with apologetic oaths: ‘For God’s sake chuck that up; it makes a man think of blanky old things!’

“A lost soul laughs (mine) and dreadful night smothers us.”

PAYABLE GOLD

AMONG the crowds who left the Victorian side for New South Wales about the time Gulgong broke out was an old Ballarat digger named Peter McKenzie. He had married and retired from the mining some years previously and had made a home for himself and family at the village of St. Kilda, near Melbourne; but, as was often the case with old diggers, the gold fever never left him, and when the fields of New South Wales began to blaze he mortgaged his little property in order to raise funds for another campaign, leaving sufficient behind him to keep his wife and family in comfort for a year or so.

As he often remarked, his position was now very different from what it had been in the old days when he first arrived from Scotland, in the height of the excitement following on the great discovery. He was a young man then with only himself to look out for, but now that he was getting old and had a family to provide for he had staked too much on this venture to lose. His position did certainly look like a forlorn hope, but he never seemed to think so.

Peter must have been very lonely and low-spirited at times. A young or unmarried man can form new ties, and even make new sweethearts if necessary, but

Peter's heart was with his wife and little ones at home, and they were mortgaged, as it were, to Dame Fortune. Peter had to lift this mortgage off.

Nevertheless he was always cheerful, even at the worst of times, and his straight grey beard and scrubby brown hair encircled a smile which appeared to be a fixture. He had to make an effort in order to look grave, such as some men do when they want to force a smile.

It was rumoured that Peter had made a vow never to return home until he could take sufficient wealth to make his all-important family comfortable, or, at least, to raise the mortgage from the property, for the sacrifice of which to his mad gold fever he never forgave himself. But this was one of the few things which Peter kept to himself.

The fact that he had a wife and children at St. Kilda was well known to all the diggers. They had to know it, and if they did not know the age, complexion, history and peculiarities of every child and of the "old woman" it was not Peter's fault.

He would cross over to our place and talk to the mother for hours about his wife and children. And nothing pleased him better than to discover peculiarities in us children wherein we resembled his own. It pleased us also for mercenary reasons. "It's just the same with my old woman," or "It's just the same with my youngsters," Peter would exclaim boisterously, for he looked upon any little similarity between the two families as a remarkable coincidence. He liked us all, and was always very kind to us, often standing between our backs and the rod that spoils

the child—that is, I mean, if it isn't used. I was very short-tempered, but this failing was more than condoned by the fact that Peter's "eldest" was given that way also. Mother's second son was very good-natured; so was Peter's third. Her "third" had a great aversion for any duty that threatened to increase his muscles; so had Peter's "second." Our baby was very fat and heavy and was given to sucking her own thumb vigorously, and, according to the latest bulletins from home, it was just the same with Peter's "last."

I think we knew more about Peter's family than we did about our own. Although we had never seen them, we were as familiar with their features, as the photographer's art could make us, and always knew their domestic history up to the date of the last mail.

We became interested in the McKenzie family. Instead of getting bored by them as some people were, we were always as much pleased when Peter got a letter from home as he was himself, and if a mail were missed, which seldom happened—we almost shared his disappointment and anxiety. Should one of the youngsters be ill, we would be quite uneasy, on Peter's account, until the arrival of a later bulletin removed his anxiety, and ours.

It must have been the glorious power of a big true heart that gained for Peter the goodwill and sympathy of all who knew him.

Peter's smile had a peculiar fascination for us children. We would stand by his pointing forge when he'd be sharpening picks in the early morning, and watch his face for five minutes at a time, wondering sometimes whether he was always *smiling inside*,

or whether the smile went on externally irrespective or any variation in Peter's condition of mind.

I think it was the latter case, for often when he had received bad news from home we have heard his voice quaver with anxiety, while the old smile played on his round, brown features just the same.

Little Nelse (one of those queer old-man children who seem to come into the world by mistake, and who seldom stay long) used to say that Peter "cried inside."

Once, on Gulgong, when he attended the funeral of an old Ballarat mate, a stranger who had been watching his face curiously remarked that McKenzie seemed as pleased as though the dead digger had bequeathed him a fortune. But the stranger had soon reason to alter his opinion, for when another old mate began in a tremulous voice to repeat the words "Ashes to ashes, an' dust to dust," two big tears suddenly burst from Peter's eyes, and hurried down to get entrapped in his beard.

Peter's goldmining ventures were not successful. He sank three duffers in succession on Gulgong, and the fourth shaft, after paying expenses, left a little over a hundred to each party, and Peter had to send the bulk of his share home. He lived in a tent (or in a hut when he could get one) after the manner of diggers, and he "did for himself," even to washing his own clothes. He never drank nor "played," and he took little enjoyment of any kind, yet there was not a digger on the field who would dream of calling old Peter McKenzie "a mean man." He lived, as we know from our own observations, in a most frugal

manner. He always tried to hide this, and took care to have plenty of good things for us when he invited us to his hut; but children's eyes are sharp. Some said that Peter half-starved himself, but I don't think his family ever knew, unless he told them so afterwards.

Ah, well! the years go over. Peter was now three years from home, and he and Fortune were enemies still. Letters came by the mail, full of little home troubles and prayers for Peter's return, and letters went back by the mail, always hopeful, always cheerful. Peter never gave up. When everything else failed he would work by the day (a sad thing for a digger), and he was even known to do a job of fencing until such time as he could get a few pounds and a small party together to sink another shaft.

Talk about the heroic struggles of early explorers in a hostile country; but for dogged determination and courage in the face of poverty, illness, and distance, commend me to the old-time digger—the truest soldier Hope ever had!

In the fourth year of his struggle Peter met with a terrible disappointment. His party put down a shaft called the Forlorn Hope near Happy Valley, and after a few weeks' fruitless driving his mates jibbed on it. Peter had his own opinion about the ground—an old digger's opinion, and he used every argument in his power to induce his mates to put a few days' more work in the claim. In vain he pointed out that the quality of the wash and the dip of the bottom exactly resembled that of the "Brown Snake," a rich Victorian claim. In vain he argued that in the case of the

abovementioned claim, not a colour could be got until the payable gold was actually reached. Home Rule and The Canadian and that cluster of fields were going ahead, and his party were eager to shift. They remained obstinate, and at last, half-convinced against his opinion, Peter left with them to sink the "Iawatha," in Log Paddock, which turned out a rank duffer—not even paying its own expenses.

A party of Italians entered the old claim and, after driving it a few feet further, made their fortune.

We all noticed the change in Peter McKenzie when he came to "Log Paddock," whither we had shifted before him. The old smile still flickered, but he had learned to "look" grave for an hour at a time without much effort. He was never quite the same after the affair of Forlorn Hope, and I often think how he must have "cried" sometimes "inside."

However, he still read us letters from home, and came and smoked in the evening by our kitchen-fire. He showed us some new portraits of his family which he had received by a late mail, but something gave me the impression that the portraits made him uneasy. He had them in his possession for nearly a week before showing them to us, and to the best of our knowledge he never showed them to anybody else. Perhaps they reminded him of the flight of time—perhaps he would have preferred his children to remain just as he left them until he returned.

But stay! there was one portrait that seemed to give Peter infinite pleasure. It was the picture of a chubby infant of about three years or more. It was

a fine-looking child taken in a sitting position on a cushion, and arrayed in a very short shirt. On its fat, soft, white face, which was only a few inches above the ten very podgy toes, was a smile something like Peter's. Peter was never tired of looking at and showing the picture of his child—the child he had never seen. Perhaps he cherished a wild dream of making his fortune and returning home before *that* child grew up.

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McKenzie and party were sinking a shaft at the upper end of Log Paddock, generally called "The other end." We were at the lower end.

One day Peter came down from "the other end" and told us that his party expected to "bottom" during the following week, and if they got no encouragement from the wash they intended to go prospecting at the "Happy Thought," near Specimen Flat.

The shaft in Log Paddock was christened "Nil Desperandum." Towards the end of the week we heard that the wash in the "Nil" was showing good colours.

Later came the news that "McKenzie and party" had bottomed on payable gold, and the red flag floated over the shaft. Long before the first load of dirt reached the puddling machine on the creek, the news was all round the diggings. The "Nil Desperandum" was a "Golden Hole!"

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We will not forget the day when Peter went home. He hurried down in the morning to have an hour or

so with us before Cobb and Co. went by. He told us all about his little cottage by the bay at St. Kilda. He had never spoken of it before, probably because of the mortgage. He told us how it faced the bay—how many rooms it had, how much flower garden, and how on a clear day he could see from the window all the ships that came up to the Yarra, and how with a good telescope he could even distinguish the faces of the passengers on the big ocean liners.

And then, when the mother's back was turned, he hustled us children round the corner, and surreptitiously slipped a sovereign into each of our dirty hands, making great pantomimic show for silence, for the mother was very independent.

And when we saw the last of Peter's face setting like a good-humoured sun on the top of Cobb and Co.'s, a great feeling of discontent and loneliness came over all our hearts. Little Nelse, who had been Peter's favourite, went round behind the pig-stye, where none might disturb him, and sat down on the projecting end of a trough to "have a cry," in his usual methodical manner. But old "Alligator Desolation," the dog, had suspicions of what was up, and, hearing the sobs, went round to offer whatever consolation appertained to a damp and dirty nose and a pair of ludicrously doleful yellow eyes.

AN OVERSIGHT OF STEELMAN'S

STEELMAN and Smith—professional wanderers—were making back for Wellington, down through the wide and rather dreary-looking Hutt Valley. They were broke. They carried their few remaining belongings in two skimpy, amateurish-looking swags. Steelman had fourpence left. They were very tired and very thirsty—at least Steelman was, and he answered for both. It was Smith's policy to feel and think just exactly as Steelman did. Said Steelman :

“The landlord of the next pub. is not a bad sort. I won't go in—he might remember me. You'd best go in. You've been tramping round in the Wairarapa district for the last six months, looking for work. You're going back to Wellington now, to try and get on the new corporation works just being started there—the sewage works. You think you've got a show. You've got some mates in Wellington, and they're looking out for a chance for you. You did get a job last week on a sawmill at Silverstream, and the boss sacked you after three days and wouldn't pay you a penny. That's just his way. I know him—at least a mate of mine does. I've heard of him often enough. His name's Cowman. Don't forget the name, whatever you do. The landlord here hates him like

poison; he'll sympathize with you. Tell him you've got a mate with you; he's gone ahead—took a short cut across the paddocks. Tell him you've got only fourpence left, and see if he'll give you a drop in a bottle. Says you: 'Well, boss, the fact is we've only got fourpence, but you might let us have a drop in a bottle'; and very likely he'll stand you a couple of pints in a gin-bottle. You can fling the coppers on the counter, but the chances are he won't take them. He's not a bad sort. Beer's fourpence a pint out here, same's in Wellington. See that gin-bottle lying there by the stump; get it and we'll take it down to the river with us and rinse it out."

They reached the river bank.

"You'd better take my swag—it looks more decent," said Steelman. "No, I'll tell you what we'll do: we'll undo both swags and make them into one—one decent swag, and I'll cut round through the lanes and wait for you on the road ahead of the pub."

He rolled up the swag with much care and deliberation and considerable judgment. He fastened Smith's belt round one end of it, and the handkerchiefs round the other, and made a towel serve as a shoulder-strap.

"I wish we had a canvas bag to put it in," he said, "or a cover of some sort. But never mind. The landlord's an old Australian bushman, now I come to think of it; the swag looks Australian enough, and it might appeal to his feelings, you know—bring up old recollections. But you'd best not say you come from Australia, because he's been there, and he'd soon trip you up. He might have been where you've

been, you know, so don't try to do too much. You always do mug-up the business when you try to do more than I tell you. You might tell him your mate came from Australia—but no, he might want you to bring me in. Better stick to Maoriland. I don't believe in too much ornamentation. Plain lies are the best."

"What's the landlord's name?" asked Smith.

"Never mind that. You don't want to know that. You are not supposed to know him at all. It might look suspicious if you called him by his name, and lead to awkward questions; then you'd be sure to put your foot into it."

"I could say I read it over the door."

"Bosh. Travellers don't read the names over the doors, when they go into pubs. You're an entire stranger to him. Call him 'Boss.' Say 'Good-day, Boss,' when you go in, and swing down your swag as if you're used to it. Ease it down like this. Then straighten yourself up, stick your hat back, and wipe your forehead, and try to look as hearty and independent and cheerful as you possibly can. Curse the Government, and say the country's done. It don't matter what Government it is, for he's always against it. I never knew a real Australian that wasn't. Say that you're thinking about trying to get over to Australia, and then listen to him talking about it—and try to look interested, too! Get that damned stone-deaf expression off your face! . . . He'll run Australia down most likely (I never knew an Other-sider that had settled down over here who didn't). But don't you make any mistake and agree with him,

because, although successful Australians over here like to run their own country down, there's very few of them that care to hear anybody else do it. . . . Don't come away as soon as you get your beer. Stay and listen to him for a while, as if you're interested in his yarning, and give him time to put you on to a job, or offer you one. Give him a chance to ask how you and your mate are off for tobacco or tucker. Like as not he'll sling you half a crown when you come away—that is, if you work it all right. Now try to think of something to say to him, and make yourself a bit interesting—if you possibly can. Tell him about the fight we saw back at the pub. the other day. He might know some of the chaps. This is a sleepy hole, and there ain't much news knocking round. . . . I wish I could go in myself, but he's sure to remember *me*. I'm afraid he got left the last time I stayed there (so did one or two others); and, besides, I came away without saying good-bye to him, and he might feel a bit sore about it. That's the worst of travelling on the old road. Come on now, wake up!"

"Bet I'll get a quart," said Smith, brightening up, "and some tucker for it to wash down."

"If you don't," said Steelman, "I'll stoush you. Never mind the bottle; fling it away. It doesn't look well for a traveller to go into a pub. with an empty bottle in his hand. A real swagman never does. It looks much better to come out with a couple of full ones. That's what you've got to do. Now, come along."

Steelman turned off into a lane, cut across the

paddocks to the road again, and waited for Smith. He hadn't long to wait.

Smith went on towards the public-house, rehearsing his part as he walked—repeating his “lines” to himself, so as to be sure of remembering all that Steelman had told him to say to the landlord, and adding, with what he considered appropriate gestures, some fancy touches of his own, which he determined to throw in in spite of Steelman's advice and warning. “I'll tell him (this)—I'll tell him (that). Well, look here, boss, I'll say you're pretty right and I quite agree with you as far as that's concerned, but,” &c. And so, murmuring and mumbling to himself, Smith reached the hotel. The day was late, and the bar was small, and low, and dark. Smith walked in with all the assurance he could muster, eased down his swag in a corner in what he no doubt considered the true professional style, and, swinging round to the bar, said in a loud voice which he intended to be cheerful, independent, and hearty :

“Good-day, boss !”

But it wasn't a “boss.” It was about the hardest-faced old woman that Smith had ever seen. The pub. had changed hands.

“I—I beg your pardon, missus,” stammered poor Smith.

It was a knock-down blow for Smith. He couldn't come to time. He and Steelman had had a landlord in their minds all the time, and laid their plans accordingly ; the possibility of having a she—and one like this—to deal with never entered into their calculations. Smith had no time to reorganise, even

if he had had the brains to do so, without the assistance of his mate's knowledge of human nature.

"I—I beg your pardon, missus," he stammered.

Painful pause. She sized him up.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Well, missus—I—the fact is—will you give me a bottle of beer for fourpence?"

"Wha—what?"

"I mean——. The fact is, we've only got fourpence left, and—I've got a mate outside, and you might let us have a quart or so, in a bottle, for that. I mean—anyway, you might let us have a pint. I'm very sorry to bother you, missus."

But she couldn't do it. No. Certainly not. Decidedly not! All her drinks were sixpence. She had her license to pay, and the rent, and a family to keep. It wouldn't pay out there—it wasn't worth her while. It wouldn't pay the cost of carting the liquor out, &c., &c.

"Well, missus," poor Smith blurted out at last, in sheer desperation, "give me what you can in a bottle for this. I've—I've got a mate outside." And he put the four coppers on the bar.

"Have you got a bottle?"

"No—but"——

"If I give you one, will you bring it back? You can't expect me to give you a bottle as well as a drink."

"Yes, mum; I'll bring it back directly."

She reached out a bottle from under the bar, and very deliberately measured out a little over a pint and poured it into the bottle, which she handed to Smith without a cork.

Smith went his way without rejoicing. It struck him forcibly that he should have saved the money until they reached Petone, or the city, where Steelman would be sure to get a decent drink. But how was he to know? He had chanced it, and lost; Steelman might have done the same. What troubled Smith most was the thought of what Steelman would say; he already heard him, in imagination, saying: "You're a mug, Smith—Smith, you *are* a mug."

But Steelman didn't say much. He was prepared for the worst by seeing Smith come along so soon. He listened to his story with an air of gentle sadness, even as a stern father might listen to the voluntary confession of a wayward child; then he held the bottle up to the fading light of departing day, looked through it (the bottle), and said:

"Well—it ain't worth while dividing it."

Smith's heart shot right down through a hole in the sole of his left boot into the hard road.

"Here, Smith," said Steelman, handing him the bottle, "drink it, old man; you want it. It wasn't altogether your fault; it was an oversight of mine. I didn't bargain for a woman of that kind, and, of course, *you* couldn't be expected to think of it. Drink it! Drink it down, Smith. I'll manage to work the oracle before this night is out."

Smith was forced to believe his ears, and, recovering from his surprise, drank.

"I promised to take back the bottle," he said, with the ghost of a smile.

Steelman took the bottle by the neck and broke it on the fence.

“Come on, Smith; I’ll carry the swag for a while.”
And they tramped on in the gathering starlight.

HOW STEELMAN TOLD HIS STORY

It was Steelman's humour, in some of his moods, to take Smith into his confidence, as some old bushmen do their dogs.

"You're nearly as good as an intelligent sheep-dog to talk to, Smith—when a man gets tired of thinking to himself and wants a relief. You're a bit of a mug and a good deal of an idiot, and the chances are that you don't know what I'm driving at half the time—that's the main reason why I don't mind talking to you. You ought to consider yourself honoured; it ain't every man I take into my confidence, even that far."

Smith rubbed his head.

"I'd sooner talk to you—or a stump—any day than to one of those silent, suspicious, self-contained, worldly-wise chaps that listen to everything you say—sense and rubbish alike—as if you were trying to get them to take shares in a mine. I drop the man who listens to me all the time and doesn't seem to get bored. He isn't safe. He isn't to be trusted. He mostly wants to grind his axe against yours, and there's too little profit for me where there are two axes to grind, and no stone—though I'd manage it once, anyhow."

"How'd you do it?" asked Smith.

"There are several ways. Either you join forces, for instance, and find a grindstone—or make one of the other man's axe. But the last way is too slow, and, as I said, takes too much brain-work—besides, it doesn't pay. It might satisfy your vanity or pride, but I've got none. I had once, when I was younger, but it—well, it nearly killed me, so I dropped it.

"You can mostly trust the man who wants to talk more than you do; he'll make a safe mate—or a good grindstone."

Smith scratched the nape of his neck and sat blinking at the fire, with the puzzled expression of a woman pondering over a life-question or the trimming of a hat. Steelman took his chin in his hand and watched Smith thoughtfully.

"I—I say, Steely," exclaimed Smith, suddenly, sitting up and scratching his head and blinking harder than ever—"wha—what am I?"

"How do you mean?"

"Am I the axe or the grindstone?"

"Oh! your brain seems in extra good working order to-night, Smith. Well, you turn the grindstone and I grind." Smith settled. "If you could grind better than I, I'd turn the stone and let *you* grind, I'd never go against the interests of the firm—that's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Ye-es," admitted Smith; "I suppose so."

"So do I. Now, Smith, we've got along all right together for years, off and on, but you never know what might happen. I might stop breathing, for instance—and so might you."

Smith began to look alarmed.

“Poetical justice might overtake one or both of us—such things have happened before, though not often. Or, say, misfortune or death might mistake us for honest, hard-working mugs with big families to keep, and cut us off in the bloom of all our wisdom. You might get into trouble, and, in that case, I’d be bound to leave you there, on principle; or I might get into trouble, and you wouldn’t have the brains to get me out—though I know you’d be mug enough to try. I might make a rise and cut you, or you might be misled into showing some spirit, and clear out after I’d stoushed you for it. You might get tired of me calling you a mug, and bossing you and making a tool or convenience of you, you know. You might go in for honest graft (you were always a bit weak-minded) and then I’d have to wash my hands of you (unless you agreed to keep me) for an irreclaimable mug. Or it might suit me to become a respected and worthy fellow townsman, and then, if you came within ten miles of me or hinted that you ever knew me, I’d have you up for vagrancy, or soliciting alms, or attempting to levy blackmail. I’d have to fix you—so I give you fair warning. Or we might get into some desperate fix (and it needn’t be very desperate, either) when I’d be obliged to sacrifice you for my own personal safety, comfort, and convenience. Hundreds of things might happen.

“Well, as I said, we’ve been at large together for some years, and I’ve found you sober, trustworthy, and honest; so, in case we do part—as we will sooner or later—and you survive, I’ll give you some advice from my own experience.

"In the first place: If you ever happen to get born again—and it wouldn't do you much harm—get born with the strength of a bullock and the hide of one as well, and a swelled head, and no brains—at least no more brains than you've got now. I was born with a skin like tissue-paper, and brains; also a heart.

"Get born without relatives, if you can: if you can't help it, clear out on your own just as soon after you're born as you possibly can. I hung on.

"If you have relations, and feel inclined to help them any time when you're flush (and there's no telling what a weak-minded man like you might take it into his head to do)—don't do it. They'll get a down on you if you do. It only causes family troubles and bitterness. There's no dislike like that of a dependant. You'll get neither gratitude nor civility in the end, and be lucky if you escape with a character. (You've got *no* character, Smith; I'm only just supposing you have.) There's no hatred too bitter for, and nothing too bad to be said of, the mug who turns. The worst yarns about a man are generally started by his own tribe, and the world believes them at once on that very account. Well, the first thing to do in life is to escape from your friends.

"If you ever go to work—and miracles have happened before—no matter what your wages are, or how you are treated, you can take it for granted that you're sweated; act on that to the best of your ability, or you'll never rise in the world. If you go to see a show on the nod you'll be found a comfortable seat in a good place; but if you pay the chances are the ticket clerk will tell you a lie, and you'll have

to hustle for standing room. The man that doesn't ante gets the best of this world ; anything he'll stand is good enough for the man that pays. If you try to be too sharp you'll get into gaol sooner or later ; if you try to be too honest the chances are that the bailiff will get into your house—if you have one—and make a holy show of you before the neighbours. The honest softy is more often mistaken for a swindler, and accused of being one, than the out-and-out scamp ; and the man that tells the truth too much is set down as an irreclaimable liar. But most of the time crow low and roost high, for it's a funny world, and you never know what might happen.

“ And if you get married (and there's no accounting for a woman's taste) be as bad as you like, and then moderately good, and your wife will love you. If you're bad all the time she can't stand it for ever, and if you're good all the time she'll naturally treat you with contempt. Never explain what you're going to do, and don't explain afterwards, if you can help it. If you find yourself between two stools, strike hard for your own self, Smith—strike hard, and you'll be respected more than if you fought for all the world. Generosity isn't understood nowadays, and what the people don't understand is either ' mad ' or ' cronk.' Failure has no case, and you can't build one for it. . . . I started out in life very young—and very soft.”

“ I thought you were going to tell me your story, Steely,” remarked Smith.

Steelman smiled sadly.

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PREFACE

Of the stories in this volume many have already appeared in the columns of the *Bulletin*. Others appeared originally in the *Town and Country Journal*, the *West Australian* and the *Western Mail*, while several now appear in print for the first time.

I wish to thank the editors of the papers mentioned for the right to republish in book form.

H. L.

Sydney, June 9th, 1900.



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Storekeeper—or the Publishers.

THE SHANTY-KEEPER'S WIFE

THERE were about a dozen of us jammed into the coach, on the box seat and hanging on to the roof and tailboard as best we could. We were shearers, bagmen, agents, a squatter, a cockatoo, the usual joker—and one or two professional spielers, perhaps. We were tired and stiff and nearly frozen—too cold to talk and too irritable to risk the inevitable argument which an interchange of ideas would have led up to. We had been looking forward for hours, it seemed, to the pub where we were to change horses. For the last hour or two all that our united efforts had been able to get out of the driver was a grunt to the effect that it was “’bout a couple o’ miles.” Then he said, or grunted, “’Tain’t fur now,” a couple of times, and refused to commit himself any further; he seemed grumpy about having committed himself that far.

He was one of those men who take everything in dead earnest; who regard any expression of ideas outside their own sphere of life as trivial, or, indeed, if addressed directly to them, as offensive; who, in fact, are darkly suspicious of anything in the shape of a joke or laugh on the part of an outsider in their own particular dust-hole. He seemed to be always

thinking, and thinking a lot; when his hands were not both engaged, he would tilt his hat forward and scratch the base of his skull with his little finger, and let his jaw hang. But his intellectual powers were mostly concentrated on a doubtful swingle-tree, a misfitting collar, or that there bay or piebald (on the off or near side) with the sore shoulder.

Casual letters or papers, to be delivered on the road, were matters which troubled him vaguely, but constantly—like the abstract ideas of his passengers.

The joker of our party was a humourist of the dry order, and had been slyly taking rises out of the driver for the last two or three stages. But the driver only brooded. He wasn't the one to tell you straight if you offended him, or if he fancied you offended him, and thus gain your respect, or prevent a misunderstanding which would result in life-long enmity. He might meet you in after years when you had forgotten all about your trespass—if indeed you had ever been conscious of it—and “stoush” you unexpectedly on the ear.

Also you might regard him as your friend, on occasion, and yet he would stand by and hear a perfect stranger tell you the most outrageous lies, to your hurt, and know that the stranger was telling lies, and never put you up to it. It would never enter his head to do so. It wouldn't be any affair of his—only an abstract question.

It grew darker and colder. The rain came as if the frozen south were spitting at your face and neck and hands, and our feet grew as big as camel's, and went dead, and we might as well have stamped the

footboards with wooden legs for all the feeling we got into ours. But they were more comfortable that way, for the toes didn't curl up and pain so much, nor did our corns stick out so hard against the leather, and shoot.

We looked out eagerly for some clearing, or fence, or light—some sign of the shanty where we were to change horses—but there was nothing save blackness all round. The long, straight, cleared road was no longer relieved by the ghostly patch of light, far ahead, where the bordering tree-walls came together in perspective and framed the ether. We were down in the bed of the bush.

We pictured a haven of rest with a suspended lamp burning in the frosty air outside and a big log fire in a cosy parlour off the bar, and a long table set for supper. But this is a land of contradictions; wayside shanties turn up unexpectedly and in the most unreasonable places, and are, as likely as not, prepared for a banquet when you are not hungry and can't wait, and as cold and dark as a bushman's grave when you are and can.

Suddenly the driver said: "We're there now." He said this as if he had driven us to the scaffold to be hanged, and was fiercely glad that he'd got us there safely at last. We looked but saw nothing; then a light appeared ahead and seemed to come towards us; and presently we saw that it was a lantern held up by a man in a slouch hat, with a dark bushy beard, and a three-bushel bag around his shoulders. He held up his other hand, and said something to the driver in a tone that might have

been used by the leader of a search party who had just found the body. The driver stopped and then went on slowly.

"What's up?" we asked. "What's the trouble?"

"Oh, it's all right," said the driver.

"The publican's wife is sick," somebody said, "and he wants us to come quietly."

The usual little slab and bark shanty was suggested in the gloom, with a big bark stable looming in the background. We climbed down like so many cripples. As soon as we began to feel our legs and be sure we had the right ones and the proper allowance of feet, we helped, as quietly as possible, to take the horses out and round to the stable.

"Is she very bad?" we asked the publican, showing as much concern as we could.

"Yes," he said, in a subdued voice of a rough man who had spent several anxious, sleepless nights by the sick bed of a dear one. "But, God willing, I think we'll pull her through."

Thus encouraged we said, sympathetically: "We're very sorry to trouble you, but I suppose we could manage to get a drink and a bit to eat?"

"Well," he said, "there's nothing to eat in the house, and I've only got rum and milk. You can have that if you like."

One of the pilgrims broke out here.

"Well of all the pubs," he began, "that I've ever—"

"Hush-sh-sh!" said the publican.

The pilgrim scowled and retired to the rear. You can't express your feelings freely when there's a woman dying close handy.

"Well, who says rum and milk?" asked the joker, in a low voice.

"Wait here," said the publican, and disappeared into the little front passage.

Presently a light showed through a window, with a scratched and fly-bitten B and A on two panes, and a mutilated R on the third, which was broken. A door opened, and we sneaked into the bar. It was like having drinks after hours where the police are strict and independent.

When we came out the driver was scratching his head and looking at the harness on the verandah floor.

"You fellows 'll have ter put in the time for an hour or so. The horses is out back somewheres," and he indicated the interior of Australia with a side jerk of his head, "and the boy ain't back with 'em yet."

"But dash it all," said the Pilgrim, "me and my mate ——"

"Hush!" said the publican.

"How long are the horses likely to be?" we asked the driver.

"Dunno," he grunted. "Might be three or four hours. It's all accordin'."

"Now, look here," said the Pilgrim, "me and my mate wanter catch the train."

"Hush-sh-sh!" from the publican in a fierce whisper.

"Well, boss," said the joker, "can you let us have beds, then? I don't want to freeze here all night, anyway."

"Yes," said the landlord, "I can do that, but some of you will have to sleep double and some of you'll

have to take it out of the sofas, and one or two 'll have to make a shakedown on the floor. There's plenty of bags in the stable, and you've got rugs and coats with you. Fix it up amongst yourselves."

"But look here!" interrupted the Pilgrim, desperately, "we can't afford to wait! We're only 'battlers,' and me and my mate, pickin' up crumbs by the wayside. We're got to catch the ——"

"Hush!" said the publican, savagely. "You fool, didn't I tell you my missus was bad? I won't have any noise."

"But look here," protested the Pilgrim, "we must catch the train at Dead Camel ——"

"You'll catch my boot presently," said the publican, with a savage oath, "and go further than Dead Camel. I won't have my missus disturbed for you or any other man! Just you shut up or get out, and take your blooming mate with you."

We lost patience with the Pilgrim and sternly took him aside.

"Now, for God's sake, hold your jaw," we said. "Haven't you got any consideration at all? Can't you see the man's wife is ill—dying perhaps—and he nearly worried off his head?"

The Pilgrim and his mate were scraggy little bipeds of the city push variety, so they were suppressed.

"Well," yawned the joker, "I'm not going to roost on a stump all night. I'm going to turn in."

"It'll be eighteenpence each," hinted the landlord. "You can settle now if you like to save time."

We took the hint, and had another drink. I don't

know how we "fixed it up amongst ourselves," but we got settled down somehow. There was a lot of mysterious whispering and scuffling round by the light of a couple of dirty greasy bits of candle. Fortunately we dared not speak loud enough to have a row, though most of us were by this time in the humour to pick a quarrel with a long-lost brother.

The Joker got the best bed, as good-humoured, good-natured chaps generally do, without seeming to try for it. The growler of the party got the floor and chaff bags, as selfish men mostly do—without seeming to try for it either. I took it out of one of the "sofas," or rather that sofa took it out of me. It was short and narrow and down by the head, with a leaning to one corner on the outside, and had more nails and bits of gin-case than original sofa in it.

I had been asleep for three seconds, it seemed, when somebody shook me by the shoulder and said :

"Take yer seats."

When I got out, the driver was on the box, and the others were getting rum and milk inside themselves (and in bottles) before taking their seats.

It was colder and darker than before, and the South Pole seemed nearer, and pretty soon, but for the rum, we should have been in a worse fix than before.

There was a spell of grumbling. Presently someone said :

"I don't believe them horses was lost at all. I was round behind the stable before I went to bed, and seen horses there ; and if they wasn't them same horses there, I'll eat 'em raw !"

"Would yer?" said the driver, in a disinterested tone.

"I would," said the passenger. Then, with a sudden ferocity, "and you too!"

The driver said nothing. It was an abstract question which didn't interest him.

We saw that we were on delicate ground, and changed the subject for awhile. Then someone else said:

"I wonder where his missus was? I didn't see any signs of her about, or any other woman about the place, and we was pretty well all over it."

"Must have kept her in the stable," suggested the Joker.

"No, she wasn't, for Scotty and that chap on the roof was there after bags."

"She might have been in the loft," reflected the Joker.

"There was no loft," put in a voice from the top of the coach.

"I say, Mister—Mister man," said the Joker suddenly to the driver, "Was his missus sick at all?"

"I dunno," replied the driver. "She might have been. He said so, anyway. I ain't got no call to call a man a liar."

"See here," said the cannibalistic individual to the driver, in the tone of a man who has made up his mind for a row, "has that shanty-keeper got a wife at all?"

"I believe he has."

"And is she living with him?"

"No, she ain't—if yer wanter know."

"Then where is she?"

"I dunno. How am I to know? She left him three or four years ago. She was in Sydney last time I heard of her. It ain't no affair of mine, anyways."

"And is there any woman about the place at all, driver?" inquired a professional wanderer reflectively.

"No—not that I knows on. There useter be a old black gin come pottering round sometimes, but I ain't seen her lately."

"And excuse me, driver, but is there anyone round there at all?" enquired the professional wanderer, with the air of a conscientious writer, collecting material for an Australian novel from life, with an eye to detail.

"Naw," said the driver—and recollecting that he was expected to be civil and obliging to his employers' patrons, he added in surly apology, "Only the boss and the stableman, that I knows of." Then repenting of the apology, he asserted his manhood again, and asked, in a tone calculated to risk a breach of the peace, "Any more questions, gentlemen—while the shop's open?"

There was a long pause.

"Driver," asked the Pilgrim appealingly, "was them horses lost at all?"

"I dunno," said the driver. "He said they was. He's got the looking after them. It was nothing to do with me."

.

"Twelve drinks at sixpence a drink"—said the Joker, as if calculating to himself—"that's six bob, and, say on an average, four shouts—that's one pound four. Twelve beds at eighteenpence a bed—that's eighteen shillings; and say ten bob in various drinks and the stuff we brought with us, that's two pound twelve. That publican didn't do so bad out of us in two hours."

We wondered how much the driver got out of it, but thought it best not to ask him.

.

We didn't say much for the rest of the journey. There was the usual man who thought as much and knew all about it from the first, but he wasn't appreciated. We suppressed him. One or two wanted to go back and "stoush" that landlord, and the driver stopped the coach cheerfully at their request; but they said they'd come across him again and allowed themselves to be persuaded out of it. It made us feel bad to think how we had allowed ourselves to be delayed, and robbed, and had sneaked round on tiptoe, and how we had sat on the in-offensive Pilgrim and his mate, and all on account of a sick wife who didn't exist.

The coach arrived at Dead Camel in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and distrust, and we spread ourselves over the train and departed.

A GENTLEMAN SHARPER AND STEELMAN SHARPER.

STEELMAN and Smith had been staying at the hotel for several days in the dress and character of bushies down for what they considered a spree. The gentleman sharper from the Other Side had been hanging round them for three days now. Steelman was the more sociable, and, to all appearances, the greener of the two bush mates; but seemed rather too much under the influence of Smith, who was reserved, suspicious, self-contained, or sulky. He almost scowled at Gentleman Sharper's "Good-morning!" and "Fine day!", replied in monosyllables and turned half away with an uneasy, sullen, resentful hump of his shoulder and shuffle of his feet.

Steelman took Smith for a stroll on the round, bald tussock hills surrounding the city, and rehearsed him for the last act until after sundown.

Gentleman Sharper was lounging, with a cigar, on the end of the balcony, where he had been contentedly contemplating the beautiful death of day. His calm, classic features began to whiten (and sharpen) in the frosty moonlight.

Steelman and Smith sat on deck-chairs behind a half-screen of ferns on the other end of the balcony,

smoked their after-dinner smoke, and talked in subdued tones as befitted the time and the scene—great, softened, misty hills in a semicircle, and the water and harbour lights in moonlight.

The other boarders were loitering over dinner, in their rooms, or gone out; the three were alone on the balcony, which was a rear one.

Gentleman Sharper moved his position, carelessly, noiselessly, yet quickly, until he leaned on the rail close to the ferns and could overhear every word the bushies said. He had dropped his cigar overboard, and his scented handkerchief behind a fern-pot *en route*.

“But he looks all right, and ac’ts all right, and talks all right—and shouts all right,” protested Steelman. “He’s not stumped, for I saw twenty or thirty sovereigns when he shouted; and he doesn’t seem to care a damn whether we stand in with him or not.”

“There you are! That’s just where it is!” said Smith, with some logic, but in a tone a wife uses in argument (which tone, by the way, especially if backed by logic or common sense, makes a man wild sooner than anything else in this world of troubles).

Steelman jerked his chair half-round in disgust. “That’s you!” he snorted, “always suspicious! Always suspicious of everybody and everything! If I found myself shot into a world where I could’nt trust anybody I’d shoot myself out of it. Life would be worse than not worth living. Smith, you’ll never make money, except by hard graft—hard, bullock-

ing, nigger-driving graft like we had on that damned railway section for the last six months, up to our knees in water all winter, and all for a paltry cheque of one-fifty—twenty of that gone already. How do you expect to make money in this country if you won't take anything for granted, except hard cash? I tell you, Smith, there's a thousand pounds lost for every one gained or saved by trusting too little. How did Vanderbilt and ——"

Steelman elaborated to a climax, slipping a glance warily, once or twice, out of the tail of his eye through the ferns, low down.

"There never was a fortune made that wasn't made by chancing it."

He nudged Smith to come to the point. Presently Smith asked, sulkily:

"Well, what was he saying?"

"I thought I told you! He says he's behind the scenes in this gold boom, and, if he had a hundred pounds ready cash to-morrow, he'd make three of it before Saturday. He said he could put one-fifty to one-fifty."

"And isn't he worth three hundred?"

"Didn't I tell you," demanded Steelman, with an impatient ring, and speaking rapidly, "that he lost his mail in the wreck of the *Tasman*? You know she went down the day before yesterday, and the divers haven't got at the mails yet."

"Yes. . . . But why doesn't he wire to Sydney for some stuff?"

"I'm ——! Well, I suppose I'll have to have patience with a born natural. Look here, Smith, the

fact of the matter is that he's a sort of black-sheep—sent out on the remittance system, if the truth is known, and with letters of introduction to some big-bugs out here—that explains how he gets to know these wire-pullers behind the boom. His people have probably got the quarterly allowance business fixed hard and tight with a bank or a lawyer in Sydney; and there'll have to be enquiries about the lost 'draft' (as he calls a cheque) and a letter or maybe a cable home to England; and it might take weeks."

"Yes," said Smith, hesitatingly. "That all sounds right enough. But"—with an inspiration—"why don't he go to one of these big-bug boomsters he knows—that he got letters of introduction to—and get him to fix him up?"

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Steelman, hopelessly. "Listen to him! Can't you see that they're the last men he wants to let into his game? Why, he wants to use *them*! They're the mugs as far as he is concerned!"

"Oh—I see!" said Smith, after hesitating, and rather slowly—as if he hadn't quite finished seeing yet.

Steelman glanced furtively at the fern-screen, and nudged Smith again.

"He said if he had three hundred, he'd double it by Saturday?"

"That's what he said," replied Steelman, seeming by his tone to be losing interest in the conversation.

"And . . . well, if he had a hundred he could double that, I suppose."

"Yes. What are you driving at now?"

"If he had twenty ——"

"Oh, God! I'm sick of you, Smith. What the——!"

"Hold on. Let me finish. I was only going to say that I'm willing to put up a fiver, and you put up another fiver, and if he doubles that for us then we can talk about standing in with him with a hundred—provided he can show his hundred."

After some snarling Steelman said: "Well, I'll try him! Now are you satisfied?" . . .

"He's moved off now," he added in a whisper; "but stay here and talk a bit longer."

Passing through the hall they saw Gentleman Sharper standing carelessly by the door of the private bar. He jerked his head in the direction of drinks. Steelman accepted the invitation—Smith passed on. Steelman took the opportunity to whisper to the Sharper—"I've been talking that over with my mate, and ——"

"Come for a stroll," suggested the professional.

"I don't mind," said Steelman.

"Have a cigar?" and they passed out.

When they returned Steelman went straight to the room he occupied with Smith.

"How much stuff have we got, Smith?"

"Nine pounds seventeen and threepence."

Steelman gave an exclamation of disapproval with that state of financial affairs. He thought a second. "I know the barman here, and I think he knows me. I'll chew his lug for a bob or may be a quid."

Twenty minutes later he went to Gentleman Sharper's room with ten pounds—in very dirty Bank

of New Zealand notes—such as those with which bush contractors pay their men.

Two mornings later the sharper suggested a stroll. Steelman went with him, with a face carefully made up to hear the worst.

After walking a hundred yards in a silence which might have been ominous—and was certainly pregnant—the sharper said:

“Well I tried the water.”

“Yes!” said Steelman in a nervous tone. “And how did you find it?”

“Just as warm as I thought. Warm for a big splash.”

“How? Did you lose the ten quid?”

“Lose it! What did you take me for? I put ten to your ten as I told you I would. I landed £50 ——”

“Fifty pounds for twenty?”

“That’s the tune of it—and not much of a tune, either. My God! If I’d only had that thousand of mine by me, or even half of it, I’d have made a pile!”

“Fifty pounds for twenty!” cried Steelman excitedly. “Why, that’s grand! And to think we chaps have been grafting like niggers all our lives! By God, we’ll stand in with you for all we’ve got!”

“There’s my hand on it,” as they reached the hotel.

“If you come to my room I’ll give you the £25 now, if you like.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” exclaimed Steelman impulsively; “you mustn’t think I don’t ——”

“That’s all right. Don’t you say any more about it. You’d best have the stuff to-night to show your mate.”

"Perhaps so; he's a suspicious fool, but I made a bargain with him about our last cheque. He can hang on to the stuff, and I can't. If I'd been on my own I'd have blued it a week ago. Tell you what I'll do—we'll call our share (Smith's and mine) twenty quid. You take the odd fiver for your trouble."

"That looks fair enough. We'll call it twenty guineas to you and your mate. We'll want him, you know."

In his own and Smith's room Steelman thoughtfully counted twenty-one sovereigns on the toilet-table cover, and left them there in a pile.

He stretched himself, scratched behind his ear, and blinked at the money abstractedly. Then he asked, as if the thought just occurred to him: "By the way, Smith, do you see those yellow boys?"

Smith saw. He had been sitting on the bed with a studiously vacant expression. It was Smith's policy not to seem, except by request, to take any interest in, or, in fact, to be aware of anything unusual that Steelman might be doing—from patching his pants to reading poetry.

"There's twenty-one sovereigns there!" remarked Steelman casually.

"Yes?"

"Ten of em's yours."

"Thank yer, Steely."

"And," added Steelman, solemnly and grimly, "if you get taken down for 'em, or lose 'em out of the top-hole in your pocket, or spend so much as a shilling in riotous living, I'll stoush you, Smith."

Smith didn't seem interested. They sat on the

beds opposite each other for two or three minutes, in something of the atmosphere that pervades things when conversation has petered out and the dinner-bell is expected to ring. Smith screwed his face and squeezed a pimple on his throat; Steelman absently counted the flies on the wall. Presently Steelman, with a yawning sigh, lay back on the pillow with his hands clasped under his head.

"Better take a few quid, Smith, and get that suit you were looking at the other day. Get a couple of shirts and collars, and some socks; better get a hat while you're at it—yours is a disgrace to your benefactor. And, I say, go to a chemist and get some cough stuff for that churchyarder of yours—we've got no use for it just now, and it makes me sentimental. I'll give you a cough when you want one. Bring me a syphon of soda, some fruit, and a tract."

"A what?"

"A tract. Go on. Start your boots."

While Smith was gone, Steelman paced the room with a strange, worried, haunted expression. He divided the gold that was left—(Smith had taken four pounds)—and put ten sovereigns in a pile on the extreme corner of the table. Then he walked up and down, up and down the room, arms tightly folded, and forehead knitted painfully, pausing abruptly now and then by the table to stare at the gold, until he heard Smith's step. Then his face cleared; he sat down and counted flies.

Smith was undoing and inspecting the parcels, having placed the syphon and fruit on the table. Behind his back Steelman hurriedly opened a leather

pocketbook and glanced at the portrait of a woman and child and at the date of a post-office order receipt.

"Smith," said Steelman, "we're two honest, ignorant, green coves; hard-working chaps from the bush."

"Yes."

"It doesn't matter whether we are or not—we are as far as the world is concerned. Now we've grafted like bullocks, in heat and wet, for six months, and made a hundred and fifty, and come down to have a bit of a holiday before going back to bullock for another six months or a year. Isn't that so, Smith?"

"Yes."

"You could tako your oath on it?"

"Yes."

"Well, it doesn't matter if it is so or not—it *is* so, so far as the world is concerned. Now we've paid our way straight. We've always been pretty straight anyway, even if we are a pair of vagabonds, and I don't half like this new business; but it had to be done. If I hadn't taken down that sharper you'd have lost confidence in me and wouldn't have been able to mask your feelings, and I'd have had to stoush you. We're two hard-working, innocent bushies, down for an innocent spree, and we run against a cold-blooded professional sharper, a paltry sneak and a coward, who's got neither the brains nor the pluck to work in the station of life he togs himself for. He tries to do us out of our hard-earned little hundred and fifty—no matter whether we had it or not—and I'm obliged to take him down. Serve him right for a crawler. You haven't the least idea what I'm

driving at, Smith, and that's the best of it. I've driven a nail of my life home, and no pincers ever made will get it out."

"Why, Steely, what's the matter with you?"

Steelman rose, took up the pile of ten sovereigns, and placed it neatly on top of the rest.

"Put the stuff away, Smith."

After breakfast next morning, Gentleman Sharper hung round a bit, and then suggested a stroll. But Steelman thought the weather looked too bad, so they went on the balcony for a smoke. They talked of the weather, wrecks, and things, Steelman leaning with his elbows on the balcony rail, and Sharper sociably and confidently in the same position close beside him. But the professional was evidently growing uneasy in his mind; his side of the conversation grew awkward and disjointed, and he made the blunder of drifting into an embarrassing silence before coming to the point. He took one elbow from the rail, and said, with a bungling attempt at carelessness which was made more transparent by the awkward pause before it:

"Ah, well, I must see to my correspondence. By the way, when could you make it convenient to let me have that hundred? The shares are starting up the last rise now, and we've got no time to lose if we want to double it."

Steelman turned his face to him and winked once—a very hard, tight, cold wink—a wink in which there was no humour: such a wink as Steelman had once winked at a half-drunken bully who was going to have a lark with Smith.

The sharper was one of those men who pull themselves together in a bad cause, as they stagger from the blow. But he wanted to think this time.

Later on he approached Steelman quietly and proposed partnership. But Steelman gave him to understand (as between themselves) that he wasn't taking on any pupils just then.

AN INCIDENT AT STIFFNER'S

THEY called him "Stiffner" because he used, long before, to get a living by poisoning wild dogs near the Queensland border. The name stuck to him closer than misfortune did, for when he rose to the proud and independent position of landlord and sole proprietor of an out-back pub he was Stiffner still, and his place was "Stiffner's"—widely known.

They do say that the name ceased not to be applicable—that it fitted even better than in the old dingo days, but—well, they do say so. All we can say is that when a shearer arrived with a cheque, and had a drink or two, he was almost invariably seized with a desire to camp on the premises for good, spend his cheque in the shortest possible time, and forcibly shout for everything within hail—including the Chinaman cook and Stiffner's disreputable old ram.

The shanty was of the usual kind, and the scenery is as easily disposed of. There was a great grey plain stretching away from the door in front, and a mulga scrub from the rear; and in that scrub, not fifty yards from the kitchen door, were half a dozen nameless graves.

Stiffner was always drunk, and Stiffner's wife—a hard-featured Amazon—was boss. The children were

brought up in a detached cottage, under the care of a "governess."

Stiffner had a barmaid as a bait for chequemen. She came from Sydney, they said, and her name was Alice. She was tall, boyishly handsome, and characterless; her figure might be described as "fine" or "strapping," but her face was very cold—nearly colourless. She was one of those selfishly sensual women—thin lips, and hard, almost vacant grey eyes; no thought of anything but her own pleasures, none for the man's. Some shearers would roughly call her "a squatter's girl." But she "drew;" she was handsome where women are scarce—very handsome, thought a tall, melancholy-looking jackeroo, whose evil spirit had drawn him to Stiffner's and the last shilling out of his pocket.

Over the great grey plain, about a fortnight before, had come "Old Danny," a station hand, for his semi-annual spree, and one "Yankee Jack" and his mate, shearers with horses, travelling for grass; and, about a week later, the Sydney jackeroo. There was also a sprinkling of assorted swagmen, who came in through the scrub and went out across the plain, or came in over the plain and went away through the scrub, according to which way their noses led them for the time being.

There was also, for one day, a tall, freckled native (son of a neighbouring "cocky"), without a thought beyond the narrow horizon within which he lived. He had a very big opinion of himself in a very small mind. He swaggered into the breakfast-room and round the table to his place with an expression of

ignorant contempt on his phiz, his snub nose in the air and his under lip out. But during the meal he condescended to ask the landlord if he'd noticed that there horse that chap was ridin' yesterday; and Stiffner having intimated that he had, the native entertained the company with his opinion of that horse, and of a certain "youngster" he was breaking in at home, and divers other horses, mostly his or his father's, and of a certain cattle slut, &c. . . . He spoke at the landlord, but to the company, most of the time. After breakfast he swaggered round some more, but condescended to "shove" his hand into his trousers, "pull" out a "bob" and "chuck" it into the (blanky) hat for a pool. Those words express the thing better than any others we can think of. Finally, he said he must be off; and, there being no opposition to his departure, he chucked his saddle on to his horse, chucked himself into the saddle, said "s'long," and slithered off. And no one missed him.

Danny had been there a fortnight, and consequently his personal appearance was not now worth describing—it was better left alone, for the honour of the bush. His hobby was that he was the "stranger's friend," as he put it. He'd welcome "the stranger" and chum with him, and shout for him to an unlimited extent, and sympathise with him, hear of jobs or a "show" for him, assure him twenty times a day that he was his friend, give him hints and advice more or less worthless, make him drunk if possible, and keep him so while the cheque lasted; in short, Danny would do almost anything for the stranger except lend him a shilling, or give him some rations to carry

him on. He'd promise that many times a day, but he'd sooner spend five pounds on drink for a man than give him a farthing.

Danny's cheque was nearly gone, and it was time he was gone too; in fact, he had received, and was still receiving, various hints to that effect, some of them decidedly pointed, especially the more recent ones. But Danny was of late becoming foolishly obstinate in his sprees, and less disposed to "git" when a landlord had done with him. He saw the hints plainly enough, but had evidently made up his mind to be doggedly irresponsible. It is a mistake to think that drink always dulls a man's feelings. Some natures are all the more keenly sensitive when alcoholically poisoned.

Danny was always front man at the shanty while his cheque was fresh—at least, so he was given to understand, and so he apparently understood. He was then allowed to say and do what he liked almost, even to mauling the barmaid about. There was scarcely any limit to the free and easy manner in which you could treat her, so long as your money lasted. She wouldn't be offended; it wasn't business to be so—"didn't pay." But, as soon as your title to the cheque could be decently shelved, you had to treat her like a lady. Danny knew this—none better; but he had been treated with too much latitude, and rushed to his destruction.

It was Sunday afternoon, but that made no difference in things at the shanty. Dinner was just over. The men were in the mean little parlour off the bar, interested in a game of cards, and Alice sat in one

corner sewing. Danny was "acting the goat" round the fireplace; as ill-luck would have it, his attention was drawn to a basket of clean linen which stood on the side table, and from it, with sundry winks and grimaces, he gingerly lifted a certain garment of ladies' underwear—to put the matter decently. He held it up between his forefingers and thumbs, and cracked a rough, foolish joke—no matter what it was. The laugh didn't last long. Alice sprang to her feet, flinging her work aside, and struck a stage attitude—her right arm thrown out and the forefinger pointing rigidly, and rather crookedly, towards the door.

"Leave the room!" she snapped at Danny. "Leave the room! How dare you talk like that before me-e-ee!"

Danny made a step and paused irresolutely. He was sober enough to feel the humiliation of his position, and having once been a man of spirit, and having still the remnants of manhood about him, he did feel it. He gave one pitiful, appealing look at her face, but saw no mercy there. She stamped her foot again, jabbed her forefinger at the door, and said, "Go-o-o!" in a tone that startled the majority of the company nearly as much as it did Danny. Then Yankee Jack threw down his cards, rose from the table, laid his strong, shapely right hand—not roughly—on Danny's ragged shoulder, and engineered the drunk gently through the door.

"You's better go out for awhile, Danny," he said; "there wasn't much harm in what you said, but your cheque's gone, and that makes all the difference. It's

time you went back to the station. You've got to be careful what you say now."

When Jack returned to the parlour the barmaid had a smile for him; but he didn't take it. He went and stood before the fire, with his foot resting on the fender and his elbow on the mantelshelf, and looked blackly at a print against the wall before his face.

"The old beast!" said Alice, referring to Danny. "He ought to be kicked off the place!"

"He's as good as you!"

The voice was Jack's; he flung the stab over his shoulder, and with it a look that carried all the contempt he felt.

She gasped, looked blankly from face to face, and witheringly at the back of Jack's head; but that didn't change colour or curl the least trifle less closely.

"Did you hear that?" she cried, appealing to anyone. "You're a nice lot o' men, you are, to sit there and hear a woman insulted, and not one of you man enough to take her part—cowards!"

The Sydney jackeroo rose impulsively, but Jack glanced at him, and he sat down again. She covered her face with her hands and ran hysterically to her room.

That afternoon another bushman arrived with a cheque, and shouted five times running at a pound a shout, and at intervals during the rest of the day when they weren't fighting or gambling.

Alice had "got over her temper" seemingly, and was even kind to the humble and contrite Danny, who became painfully particular with his "Thanky,

Alice"—and afterwards offensive with his unnecessarily frequent threats to smash the first man who insulted her.

But let us draw the curtain close before that Sunday afternoon at Stiffner's, and hold it tight. Behind it the great curse of the West is in evidence, the chief trouble of unionism—drink, in its most selfish, barren, and useless form.

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All was quiet at Stiffner's. It was after midnight, and Stiffner lay dead-drunk on the broad of his back on the long moonlit verandah, with all his patrons asleep around him in various grotesque positions. Stiffner's ragged grey head was on a cushion, and a broad maudlin smile on his red, drink-sodden face, the lower half of which was bordered by a dirty grey beard, like that of a frilled lizard. The red handkerchief twisted round his neck had a ghastly effect in the bright moonlight, making him look as if his throat was cut. The smile was the one he went to sleep with when his wife slipped the cushion under his head and thoughtfully removed the loose change from about his person. Near him lay a heap that was Danny, and spread over the bare boards were the others, some with heads pillowed on their swags, and every man about as drunk as his neighbour. Yankee Jack lay across the door of the barmaid's bedroom, with one arm bent under his head, the other lying limp on the doorstep, his handsome face turned out to the bright moonlight. The "family" were sound asleep in the detached cottage, and Alice—the only

capable person on the premises—was left to put out the lamps and “shut up” for the night. She extinguished the light in the bar, came out, locked the door, and picked her way among and over the drunkards to the end of the verandah. She clasped her hands behind her head, stretched herself, and yawned, and then stood for a few moments looking out into the night, which softened the ragged line of mulga to right and left, and veiled the awful horizon of that great plain with which the “traveller” commenced, or ended, the thirty-mile “dry stretch.” Then she moved towards her own door; before it she halted and stood, with folded arms, looking down at the drunken Adonis at her feet.

She breathed a long breath with a sigh in it, went round to the back, and presently returned with a buggy-cushion, which she slipped under his head—her face close to his—very close. Then she moved his arms gently off the threshold, stepped across him into her room, and locked the door behind her.

There was an uneasy movement in the heap that stood, or lay, for Danny. It stretched out, turned over, struggled to its hands and knees, and became an object. Then it crawled to the wall, against which it slowly and painfully up-ended itself, and stood blinking round for the water-bag, which hung from the verandah rafters in a line with its shapeless red nose. It staggered forward, held on by the cords, felt round the edge of the bag for the tot, and drank about a quart of water. Then it staggered back against the wall, stood for a moment muttering and passing its hand aimlessly over its poor ruined head,

and finally collapsed into a shapeless rum-smelling heap and slept once more.

The jackeroo at the end of the verandah had awakened from his drunken sleep, but had not moved. He lay huddled on his side, with his head on the swag; the whole length of the verandah was before him; his eyes were wide open, but his face was in the shade. Now he rose painfully and stood on the ground outside, with his hands in his pockets, and gazed out over the open for awhile. He breathed a long breath, too—with a groan in it. Then he lifted his swag quietly from the end of the floor, shouldered it, took up his water-bag and billy, and sneaked over the road, away from the place, like a thief. He struck across the plain, and tramped on, hour after hour, mile after mile, till the bright moon went down with a bright star in attendance and the other bright stars waned, and he entered the timber and tramped through it to the "cleared road," which stretched far and wide for twenty miles before him, with ghostly little dust-clouds at short intervals ahead, where the frightened rabbits crossed it. And still he went doggedly on, with the ghastly daylight on him—like a swagman's ghost out late. And a mongrel followed faithfully all the time unnoticed, and wondering, perhaps, at his master.

"What was yer doin' to that girl yesterday?" asked Danny of Yankee Jack next evening, as they camped on the far side of the plain. "What was you chaps sayin' to Alice? I heerd her cryin' in her room last night."

But they reckoned that he had been too drunk to hear anything except an invitation to come and have another drink ; and so it passed.

THE HERO OF REDCLAY.

THE "boss-over-the-board" was leaning with his back to the wall between two shoots, reading a reference handed to him by a green-hand applying for work as picker-up or woolroller—a shed' rouse-about. It was terribly hot. I was slipping past to the rolling-tables, carrying three fleeces to save a journey; we were only supposed to carry two. The boss stopped me :

"You've got three fleeces there, young man?"

"Yes."

Notwithstanding the fact that I had just slipped a light ragged fleece into the belly-wool and "bits" basket, I felt deeply injured, and righteously and fiercely indignant at being pulled up. It was a fearfully hot day.

"If I catch you carrying three fleeces again," said the boss quietly, "I'll give you the sack."

"I'll take it now if you like," I said.

He nodded. "You can go on picking-up in this man's place," he said to the jackeroo, whose reference showed him to be a non-union man—a "free-labourer," as the pastoralists had it, or, in plain shed terms, "a blanky scab." He was now in the comfort-

able position of a non-unionist in a union shed who had jumped into a sacked man's place.

Somehow the lurid sympathy of the men irritated me worse than the boss-over-the-board had done. It must have been on account of the heat, as Mitchell says. I was sick of the shed and the life. It was within a couple of days of cut-out, so I told Mitchell—who was shearing—that I'd camp up the Billabong and wait for him; got my cheque, rolled up my swag, got three days' tucker from the cook, said so-long to him, and tramped while the men were in the shed.

I camped at the head of the Billabong where the track branched, one branch running to Bourke, up the river, and the other out towards the Paroo—and hell.

About ten o'clock the third morning Mitchell came along with his cheque and his swag, and a new sheep-pup, and his quiet grin; and I wasn't too pleased to see that he had a shearer called "the Lachlan" with him.

The Lachlan wasn't popular at the shed. He was a brooding, unsociable sort of man, and it didn't make any difference to the chaps whether he had a union ticket or not. It was pretty well known in the shed—there were three or four chaps from the district he was reared in—that he'd done five years hard for burglary. What surprised me was that Jack Mitchell seemed thick with him; often, when the Lachlan was sitting brooding and smoking by himself outside the hut after sunset, Mitchell would perch on his heels alongside him and yarn.

But no one else took notice of anything Mitchell did out of the common.

"Better camp with us till the cool of the evening," said Mitchell to the Lachlan, as they slipped their swags. "Plenty time for you to start after sundown, if you're going to travel to-night."

So the Lachlan was going to travel all night and on a different track. I felt more comfortable, and put the billy on. I did not care so much what he'd been or had done, but I was green and soft yet, and his presence embarrassed me.

They talked shearing, sheds, tracks, and a little unionism—the Lachlan speaking in a quiet voice and with a lot of sound, common sense, it seemed to me. He was tall and gaunt, and might have been thirty, or even well on in the forties. His eyes were dark brown and deep set, and had something of the dead-earnest sad expression you saw in the eyes of union leaders and secretaries—the straight men of the strikes of '90 and '91. I fancied once or twice I saw in his eyes the sudden furtive look of the "bad egg" when a mounted trooper is spotted near the shed; but perhaps this was prejudice. And with it all there was about the Lachlan something of the man who has lost all he had and the chances of all he was ever likely to have, and is past feeling, or caring, or flaring up—past getting mad about anything—something, all the same, that warned men not to make free with him.

He and Mitchell fished along the Billabong all the afternoon; I fished a little, and lay about the camp and read. I had an instinct that the Lachlan

saw I didn't cotton on to his camping with us, though he wasn't the sort of man to show what he saw or felt. After tea, and a smoke at sunset, he shouldered his swag, nodded to me as if I was an accidental but respectful stranger at a funeral that belonged to him, and took the outside track. Mitchell walked along the track with him for a mile or so, while I poked round and got some boughs down for a bed, and fed and studied the collie pup that Jack had bought from the shearers' cook.

I saw them stop and shake hands out on the dusty clearing, and they seemed to take a long time about it; then Mitchell started back, and the other began to dwindle down to a black peg and then to a dot on the sandy plain, that had just a hint of dusk and dreamy far-away gloaming on it between the change from glaring day to hard, bare, broad moonlight.

I thought Mitchell was sulky, or had got the blues, when he came back; he lay on his elbow smoking, with his face turned from the camp towards the plain. After a bit I got wild—if Mitchell was going to go on like that he might as well have taken his swag and gone with the Lachlan. I don't know exactly what was the matter with me that day, and at last I made up my mind to bring the thing to a head.

"You seem mighty thick with the Lachlan," I said.

"Well, what's the matter with that?" asked Mitchell. "It ain't the first felon I've been on speaking terms with. I borrowed half-a-caser off a murderer once, when I was in a hole and had no one else to go to; and the murderer hadn't served his time, neither. I've got nothing against the Lachlan, except that he's

a white man and bears a faint family resemblance to a certain branch of my tribe."

I rolled out my swag on the boughs, got my pipe, tobacco, and matches handy in the crown of a spare hat, and lay down.

Mitchell got up, re-lit his pipe at the fire, and mooned round for awhile, with his hands behind him, kicking sticks out of the road, looking out over the plain, down along the Billabong, and up through the mulga branches at the stars; then he comforted the pup a bit, shoved the fire together with his toe, stood the tea-billy on the coals, and came and squatted on the sand by my head.

"Joe! I'll tell you a yarn."

"All right; fire away! Has it got anything to do with the Lachlan?"

"No. It's got nothing to do with the Lachlan now; but it's about a chap he knew. Don't you ever breathe a word of this to the Lachlan or anyone, or he'll get on to me."

"All right. Go ahead."

"You know I've been a good many things in my time. I did a deal of house-painting at one time; I was a pretty smart brush hand, and made money at it. Well, I had a run of work at a place called Redclay, on the Lachlan side. You know the sort of town—two pubs, a general store, a post office, a blacksmith's shop, a police station, a branch bank, and a dozen private weatherboard boxes on piles, with galvanized-iron tops, besides the humpies. There was a paper there, too, called the *Redclay Advertiser* (with which was incorporated the *Geebung Chronicle*),

and a Roman Catholic church, a Church of England, and a Wesleyan chapel. Now you see more of private life in the house-painting line than in any other—bar plumbing and gasfitting; but I'll tell you about my house-painting experiences some other time.

"There was a young chap named Jack Drew editing the *Advertiser* then. He belonged to the district, but had been sent to Sydney to a grammar school when he was a boy. He was between twenty-five and thirty; had knocked round a good deal, and gone the pace in Sydney. He got on as a boy reporter on one of the big dailies; he had brains and could write rings round a good many, but he got in with a crowd that called themselves 'Bohemians,' and the drink got a hold on him. The paper stuck to him as long as it could (for the sake of his brains), but they had to sack him at last.

"He went out back, as most of them do, to try and work out their salvation, and knocked round amongst the sheds. He 'picked up' in one shed where I was shearing, and we carried swags together for a couple of months. Then he went back to the Lachlan side, and prospected amongst the old fields round there with his elder brother Tom, who was all there was left of his family. Tom, by the way, broke his heart digging Jack out of a cave in a drive they were working, and died a few minutes after the rescue.* But that's another yarn. Jack Drew had a bad spree after that; then he went to Sydney again, got on his old paper, went to the dogs, and a Parliamentary push that owned some city fly-blisters and country

* See "When the Sun Went Down," in "While the Billy Boils."

papers sent him up to edit the *Advertiser* at two quid a week. He drank again, and no wonder—you don't know what it is to run a *Geebung Advocate* or *Mudgee Budgee Chronicle*, and live there. He was about the same build as the Lachlan, but stouter, and had something the same kind of eyes; but he was ordinarily as careless and devil-may-care as the Lachlan is grumpy and quiet.

“There was a doctor there, called Dr. Lebinski. They said he was a Polish exile. He was fifty or sixty, a tall man, with the set of an old soldier when he stood straight; but he mostly walked with his hands behind him, studying the ground. Jack Drew caught that trick off him towards the end. They were chums in a gloomy way, and kept to themselves—they were the only two men with brains in that town. They drank and fought the drink together. The Doctor was too gloomy and impatient over little things to be popular. Jack Drew talked too straight in the paper, and in spite of his proprietors—about pub spieling and such things—and was too sarcastic in his progress committee, town council, and toady reception reports. The Doctor had a hawk's nose, pointed grizzled beard and moustache, and steely-grey eyes with a haunted look in them sometimes (especially when he glanced at you sideways), as if he loathed his fellow men, and couldn't always hide it; or as if you were the spirit of morphia or opium, or a dead girl he'd wronged in his youth—or whatever his devil was, beside drink. He was clever, and drink had brought him down to Redclay.

“The bank manager was a heavy snob named

Browne. He complained of being a bit dull of hearing in one ear—after you'd yelled at him three or four times; sometimes I've thought he was as deaf as a book-keeper in both. He had a wife and youngsters, but they were away on a visit while I was working in Redclay. His niece—or, rather, his wife's niece—a girl named Ruth Wilson, did the housekeeping. She was an orphan, adopted by her aunt, and was general slavey and scape-goat to the family—especially to the brats, as is often the case. She was rather pretty, and lady-like, and kept to herself. The women and girls called her Miss Wilson, and didn't like her. Most of the single men—and some of the married ones, perhaps—were gone on her, but hadn't the brains or the pluck to bear up and try their luck. I was gone worse than any, I think, but had too much experience or common sense. She was very good to me—used to hand me out cups of tea and plates of sandwiches, or bread and butter, or cake, mornings and afternoons the whole time I was painting the bank. The Doctor had known her people and was very kind to her. She was about the only woman—for she was more woman than girl—that he'd brighten up and talk for. Neither he nor Jack Drew were particularly friendly with Browne or his push.

“The banker, the storekeeper, one of the publicans, the butcher (a popular man with his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head, and nothing in it), the postmaster, and his toady, the lightning squirter, were the scrub-aristocracy. The rest were crawlers, mostly pub spielers and bush larrikins, and

the women were hags and larrikinesses. The town lived on cheque-men from the surrounding bush. It was a nice little place, taking it all round.

"I remember a ball at the local town hall, where the scrub aristocrats took one end of the room to dance in and the ordinary scum the other. It was a saving in music. Some day an Australian writer will come along who'll remind the critics and readers of Dickens, Carlyle, and Thackeray mixed, and he'll do justice to these little customs of ours in the little settled-district towns of Democratic Australia. This sort of thing came to a head one New Year's Night at Redclay, when there was a 'public' ball and peace on earth and good will towards all men—mostly on account of a railway to Redclay being surveyed. We were all there. They'd got the Doc. out of his shell to act as M.C.

"One of the aristocrats was the daughter of the local storekeeper; she belonged to the lawn-tennis clique, and they *were* select. For some reason or other—because she looked upon Miss Wilson as a slavey, or on account of a fancied slight, or the heat working on ignorance, or on account of something that comes over girls and women that no son of sin can account for—this Miss Tea-'n'-sugar tossed her head and refused Miss Wilson's hand in the first set and so broke the ladies' chain and the dance. Then there was a to-do. The Doctor held up his hand to stop the music, and said, very quietly, that he must call upon Miss So-and-so to apologise to Miss Wilson—or resign the chair. After a lot of fuss the girl did apologise in a snappy way that was another insult.

Jack Drew gave Miss Wilson his arm and marched her off without a word—I saw she was almost crying. Some one said, ‘Oh, let’s go on with the dance.’ The Doctor flashed round on them, but they were too paltry for him, so he turned on his heel and went out without a word. But I was beneath them again in social standing, so there was nothing to prevent me from making a few well-chosen remarks on things in general—which I did; and broke up that ball, and broke some heads afterwards, and got myself a good deal of hatred and respect, and two sweethearts; and lost all the jobs I was likely to get, except at the bank, the Doctor’s, and the Royal.

“One day it was raining—general rain for a week. Rain, rain, rain, over ridge and scrub and galvanised iron and into the dismal creeks. I’d done all my inside work, except a bit under the Doctor’s verandah, where he’d been having some patching and altering done round the glass doors of his surgery, where he consulted his patients. I didn’t want to lose time. It was a Monday and no day for the Royal, and there was no dust, so it was a good day for varnishing. I took a pot and brush and went along to give the Doctor’s doors a coat of varnish. The Doctor and Drew were inside with a fire, drinking whisky and smoking, but I didn’t know that when I started work. The rain roared on the iron roof like the sea. All of a sudden it held up for a minute, and I heard their voices. The doctor had been shouting on account of the rain, and forgot to lower his voice. ‘Look here, Jack Drew,’ he said, ‘there are only two things for you to do if you have any regard for that girl; one is

to stop this' (the liquor I suppose he meant) 'and pull yourself together; and I don't think you'll do that—I know men. The other is to throw up the *Advertiser*—it's doing you no good—and clear out.' 'I won't do that,' says Drew. 'Then shoot yourself,' said the Doctor. '(There's another flask in the cupboard). You know what this hole is like. . . . She's a good true girl—a girl as God made her. I knew her father and mother, and I tell you, Jack, I'd sooner see her dead than' The roof roared again. I felt a bit delicate about the business and didn't like to disturb them, so I knocked off for the day.

"About a week before that I was down in the bed of the Redclay Creek fishing for 'tailers.' I'd been getting on all right with the housemaid at the 'Royal'—she used to have plates of pudding and hot pie for me on the big gridiron arrangement over the kitchen range; and after the third tuck-out I thought it was good enough to do a bit of a bear-up in that direction. She mentioned one day, yarning, that she liked a stroll by the creek sometimes in the cool of the evening. I thought she'd be off that day, so I said I'd go for a fish after I'd knocked off. I thought I might get a bite. Anyway, I didn't catch Lizzie—tell you about that some other time.

"It was Sunday. I'd been fishing for Lizzie about an hour when I saw a skirt on the bank out of the tail of my eye—and thought I'd got a bite, sure. But I was had. It was Miss Wilson strolling along the bank in the sunset, all by her pretty self. She was a slight girl, not very tall, with reddish frizzled hair,

grey eyes, and small, pretty features. She spoke as if she had more brains than the average, and had been better educated. Jack Drew was the only young man in Redclay she could talk to, or who could talk to a girl like her; and that was the whole trouble in a nutshell. The newspaper office was next to the bank, and I'd seen her hand cups of tea and cocoa over the fence to his office window more than once, and sometimes they yarned for awhile.

"She said, 'Good morning, Mr. Mitchell.'

"I said, 'Good morning, Miss.'

"There's some girls I can't talk to like I'd talk to other girls. She asked me if I'd caught any fish, and I said, 'No, Miss.' She asked me if it wasn't me down there fishing with Mr. Drew the other evening, and I said, 'Yes—it was me.' Then presently she asked me straight if he was fishing down the creek that afternoon? I guessed they's been down fishing for each other before. I said, 'No, I thought he was out of town.' I knew he was pretty bad at the Royal. I asked her if she'd like to have a try with my line, but she said No, thanks, she must be going; and she went off up the creek. I reckoned Jack Drew had got a bite and landed her. I felt a bit sorry for her, too.

"The next Saturday evening after the rainy Monday at the Doctor's, I went down to fish for tailers—and Lizzie. I went down under the banks to where there was a big she-oak stump half in the water, going quietly, with an idea of not frightening the fish. I was just unwinding the line from my rod, when I noticed the end of another rod sticking out from the

other side of the stump; and while I watched it was dropped into the water. Then I heard a murmur, and craned my neck round the back of the stump to see who it was. I saw the back view of Jack Drew and Miss Wilson; he had his arm round her waist, and her head was on his shoulder. She said, 'I *will* trust you, Jack—I know you'll give up the drink for my sake. And I'll help you, and we'll be so happy!' or words in that direction. A thunderstorm was coming on. The sky had darkened up with a great blue-black storm-cloud rushing over, and they hadn't noticed it. I didn't mind, and the fish bit best in a storm. But just as she said 'happy' came a blinding flash and a crash that shook the ridges, and the first drop came peltering down. They jumped up and climbed the bank, while I perched on the she-oak roots over the water to be out of sight as they passed. Half way to the town I saw them standing in the shelter of an old stone chimney that stood alone. He had his overcoat round her and was sheltering her from the wind."

"Smoke-oh, Joe. The tea's stewing."

Mitchell got up, stretched himself, and brought the billy and pint-pots to the head of my camp. The moon had grown misty. The plain horizon had closed in. A couple of boughs, hanging from the gnarled and blasted timber over the billabong, were the perfect shapes of two men hanging side by side. Mitchell scratched the back of his neck and looked down at the pup curled like a glob of mud on the sand in the moonlight, and an idea struck him. He got a big old felt hat he had, lifted his pup, nose to tail, fitted it in

the hat, shook it down, holding the hat by the brim, and stood the hat near the head of his doss, out of the moonlight. "He might get moonstruck," said Mitchell, "and I don't want that pup to be a genius." The pup seemed perfectly satisfied with this new arrangement.

"Have a smoke," said Mitchell. "You see," he added, with a sly grin, "I've got to make up the yarn as I go along, and it's hard work. It seems to begin to remind me of yarns your grandmother or aunt tells of things that happened when she was a girl—but those yarns are true. You won't have to listen long now; I'm well on into the second volume.

"After the storm I hurried home to the tent—I was batching with a carpenter. I changed my clothes, made a fire in the fire-bucket with shavings and ends of soft wood, boiled the billy, and had a cup of coffee. It was Saturday night. My mate was at the Royal; it was cold and dismal in the tent, and there was nothing to read, so I reckoned I might as well go up to the Royal, too, and put in the time.

"I had to pass the Bank on the way. It was the usual weatherboard box with a galvanised iron top—four rooms and a passage, and a detached kitchen and wash-house at the back; the front room to the right (behind the office) was the family bedroom, and the one opposite it was the living room. The *Advertiser* office was next door. Jack Drew camped in a skillion room behind his printing office, and had his meals at the Royal. I noticed the storm had taken a sheet of iron off the skillion, and supposed he'd sleep at the Royal that night. Next to the *Advertiser* office was

the police station (still called the Police Camp) and the Courthouse. Next was the Imperial Hotel, where the scrub aristocrats went. There was a vacant allotment on the other side of the Bank, and I took a short cut across this to the Royal.

"They'd forgotten to pull down the blind of the dining-room window, and I happened to glance through and saw she had Jack Drew in there and was giving him a cup of tea. He had a bad cold, I remember, and I suppose his health had got precious to her, poor girl. As I glanced she stepped to the window and pulled down the blind, which put me out of face a bit—though, of course, she hadn't seen me. I was rather surprised at her having Jack in there, till I heard that the banker, the postmaster, the constable, and some others were making a night of it at the Imperial, as they'd been doing pretty often lately—and went on doing till there was a blow-up about it, and the constable got transferred Out Back. I used to drink my share then. We smoked and played cards and yarned and filled 'em up again at the Royal till after one in the morning. Then I started home.

"I'd finished giving the Bank a couple of coats of stone-colour that week, and was cutting in in dark colour round the spouting, doors, and window-frames that Saturday. My head was pretty clear going home, and as I passed the place it struck me that I'd left out the only varnish brush I had. I'd been using it to give the sashes a coat of varnish colour, and remembered that I'd left it on one of the window-sills—the sill of her bedroom window, as it happened.

I knew I'd sleep in next day, Sunday, and guessed it would be hot, and I didn't want the varnish tool to get spoiled; so I reckoned I'd slip in through the side gate, get it, and take it home to camp and put it in oil. The window sash was jammed, I remember, and I hadn't been able to get it up more than a couple of inches to paint the runs of the sash. The grass grew up close under the window, and I slipped in quietly. I noticed the sash was still up a couple of inches. Just as I grabbed the brush I heard low voices inside—Ruth Wilson's and Jack Drew's—in her room.

“The surprise sent about a pint of beer up into my throat in a lump. I tip-toed away out of there. Just as I got clear of the gate I saw the banker being helped home by a couple of cronies.

“I went home to the camp and turned in, but I couldn't sleep. I lay think—think—thinking, till I thought all the drink out of my head. I'd brought a bottle of ale home to last over Sunday, and I drank that. It only made matters worse. I didn't know how I felt—I—well, I felt as if I was as good a man as Jack Drew—I—you see I've—you might think it soft—but I loved that girl, not as I've been gone on other girls, but in the old-fashioned, soft, honest, hopeless, far-away sort of way; and now, to tell the straight truth, I thought I might have had her. You lose a thing through being too straight or sentimental, or not having enough cheek; and another man comes along with more brass in his blood and less sentimental rot and takes it up—and the world respects him; and you feel in your heart that you're a weaker man than he is. Why, part of the time I must have

felt like a man does when a better man runs away with his wife. But I'd drunk a lot, and was upset and lonely-feeling that night.

"Oh, but Redclay had a tremendous sensation next day! Jack Drew, of all the men in the world, had been caught in the act of robbing the bank. According to Browne's account in court and in the newspapers, he returned home that night at about twelve o'clock (which I knew was a lie, for I saw him being helped home nearer two) and immediately retired to rest (on top of the quilt, boots and all, I suppose). Some time before daybreak he was roused by a fancied noise (I suppose it was his head swelling); he rose, turned up a night lamp (he hadn't lit it, I'll swear), and went through the dining-room passage and office to investigate (for whisky and water). He saw that the doors and windows were secure, returned to bed, and fell asleep again.

"There is something in a deaf person's being roused easily. I know the case of a deaf chap who'd start up at a step or movement in the house when no one else could hear or feel it; keen sense of vibration, I reckon. Well, just at daybreak (to shorten the yarn) the banker woke suddenly, he said, and heard a crack like a shot in the house. There was a loose flooring-board in the passage that went off like a pistol-shot sometimes when you trod on it; and I guess Jack Drew trod on it, sneaking out, and he weighed nearly twelve stone. If the truth were known, he probably heard Browne poking round, tried the window, found the sash jammed, and was slipping through the passage to the back door. Browne got his revolver,

opened his door suddenly, and caught Drew standing between the girl's door (which was shut) and the office door, with his coat on his arm and his boots in his hands. Browne covered him with his revolver, swore he'd shoot if he moved, and yelled for help. Drew stood a moment like a man stunned; then he rushed Browne, and in the struggle the revolver went off, and Drew got hit in the arm. Two of the mounted troopers—who'd been up looking to the horses for an early start somewhere—rushed in then, and took Drew. He had nothing to say. What could he say? He couldn't say he was a blackguard who'd taken advantage of a poor unprotected girl because she loved him. They found the back door unlocked, by the way, which was put down to the burglar; of course Browne couldn't explain that he came home too muddled to lock doors after him.

"And the girl? She shrieked and fell when the row started, and they found her like a log on the floor of her room after it was over.

"They found in Jack's overcoat pocket a parcel containing a cold chisel, small screw-wrench, file, and one or two other things that he'd bought that evening to tinker up the old printing press. I knew that, because I'd lent him a hand a few nights before, and he told me he'd have to get the tools. They found some scratches round the key-hole and knob of the office door that I'd made myself, scraping old splashes of paint off the brass and hand-plate so as to make a clean finish. Oh, it taught me the value of circumstantial evidence! If I was judge I wouldn't give a man till the 'risin' av the coort' on it, any more than

I would on the bare word of the noblest woman breathing.

"At the preliminary examination Jack Drew said he was guilty. But it seemed that, according to law, he couldn't be guilty until after he was committed. So he was committed for trial at the next Quarter Sessions. The excitement and gabble were worse than the Dean case, or Federation, and sickened me, for they were all on the wrong track. You lose a lot of life through being behind the scenes. But they cooled down presently to wait for the trial.

"They thought it best to take the girl away from the place where she'd got the shock; so the Doctor took her to his house, where he had an old housekeeper who was as deaf as a post—a first class recommendation for a housekeeper anywhere. He got a nurse from Sydney to attend on Ruth Wilson, and no one except he and the nurse were allowed to go near her. She lay like dead, they said, except when she had to be held down raving; brain fever, they said, brought on by the shock of the attempted burglary and pistol shot. Dr. Lebinski had another doctor up from Sydney at his own expense, but nothing could save her—and perhaps it was as well. She might have finished her life in a lunatic asylum. They were going to send her to Sydney, to a brain hospital; but she died a week before the Sessions. She was right-headed for an hour, they said, and asking all the time for Jack. The Doctor told her he was all right and was coming—and, waiting and listening for him, she died.

"The case was black enough against Drew now. I

knew he wouldn't have the pluck to tell the truth now, even if he was that sort of a man. I didn't know what to do, so I spoke to the Doctor straight. I caught him coming out of the Royal, and walked along the road with him a bit. I suppose he thought I was going to show cause why his doors ought to have another coat of varnish.

“‘Hallo, Mitchell!’ he said, ‘how’s painting?’

“‘Doctor!’ I said, ‘what am I going to do about this business?’

“‘What business?’

“‘Jack Drew’s.’

“He looked at me sideways—the swift haunted look. Then he walked on without a word, for half a dozen yards, hands behind, and studying the dust. Then he asked, quite quietly:

“‘Do you know the truth?’

“‘Yes!’

“About a dozen yards this time; then he said:

“‘I’ll see him in the morning, and see you afterwards,’ and he shook hands and went on home.

“Next day he came to me where I was doing a job on a step ladder. He leaned his elbow against the steps for a moment, and rubbed his hand over his forehead, as if it ached and he was tired.

“‘I’ve seen him, Mitchell,’ he said.

“‘Yes.’

“‘You were mates with him, once, Out Back?’

“‘I was.’

“‘You know Drew’s hand-writing?’

“‘I should think so.’

"He laid a leaf from a pocketbook on top of the steps. I read the message written in pencil:

"To Jack Mitchell.—We were mates on the track. If you know anything of my affair, don't give it away.
—J.D.

"I tore the leaf and dropped the bits into the paint-pot.

"‘That’s all right, Doctor,’ I said; ‘but is there no way?’

"‘None.’

"He turned away, wearily. He’d knocked about so much over the world that he was past bothering about explaining things or being surprised at anything. But he seemed to get a new idea about me; he came back to the steps again, and watched my brush for a while, as if he was thinking, in a broody sort of way, of throwing up his practice and going in for house-painting. Then he said, slowly and deliberately:

"‘If she—the girl—had lived, we might have tried to fix it up quietly. That’s what I was hoping for. I don’t see how we can help him now, even if he’d let us. He would never have spoken, anyway. We must let it go on, and after the trial I’ll go to Sydney and see what I can do at headquarters. It’s too late now. You understand, Mitchell?’

"‘Yes. I’ve thought it out.’

"Then he went away towards the Royal.

"And what could Jack Drew or we do? Study it out whatever way you like. There was only one possible chance to help him, and that was to go to the judge; and the judge that happened to be on that

circuit was a man who—even if he did listen to the story and believe it—would have felt inclined to give Jack all the more for what he was charged with. Browne was out of the question. The day before the trial I went for a long walk in the bush, but couldn't hit on anything that the Doctor might have missed.

"I was in the court—I couldn't keep away. The Doctor was there too. There wasn't so much of a change in Jack as I expected, only he had the gaol white in his face already. He stood fingering the rail, as if it was the edge of a table on a platform and he was a tired and bored and sleepy chairman waiting to propose a vote of thanks."

The only well-known man in Australia who reminds me of Mitchell is Bland Holt, the comedian. Mitchell was about as good hearted as Bland Holt, too, under it all; but he was bigger and roughened by the bush. But he seemed to be taking a heavy part to-night, for, towards the end of his yarn, he got up and walked up and down the length of my bed, dropping the sentences as he turned towards me. He'd folded his arms high and tight, and his face in the moonlight was—well, it was very different from his careless tone of voice. He was like—like an actor acting tragedy and talking comedy. Mitchell went on, speaking quickly—his voice seeming to harden :

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"The charge was read out—I forget how it went—it sounded like a long hymn being given out. Jack pleaded guilty. Then he straightened up for the first time and looked round the court, with a calm,

disinterested look—as if we were all strangers and he was noting the size of the meeting. And—it's a funny world, ain't it?—everyone of us shifted or dropped his eyes, just as if we were the felons and Jack the judge. Everyone except the Doctor; he looked at Jack and Jack looked at him. Then the Doctor smiled—I 'can't describe it—and Drew smiled back. It struck me afterwards that I should have been in that smile. Then the Doctor did what looked like a strange thing—stood like a soldier with his hands to Attention. I'd noticed that, whenever he'd made up his mind to do a thing, he dropped his hands to his sides: it was a sign that he couldn't be moved. Now he slowly lifted his hand to his forehead, palm out, saluted the prisoner, turned on his heel, and marched from the court-room. 'He's boozin' again,' someone whispered. 'He's got a touch of 'em.' 'My oath, he's ratty!' said someone else. One of the traps said:

“‘Arder in the car-rt!’

“The judge gave it to Drew red-hot on account of the burglary being the cause of the girl's death and the sorrow in a respectable family; then he gave him five years' hard.

“It gave me a lot of confidence in myself to see the law of the land barking up the wrong tree, while only I and the Doctor and the prisoner knew it. But I've found out since then that the law is often the only one that knows it's barking up the wrong tree.”

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Mitchell prepared to turn in.

"And what about Drew," I asked.

"Oh, he did his time, or most of it. The Doctor went to headquarters, but either a drunken doctor from a geebung town wasn't of much account, or they weren't taking any romance just then at headquarters. So the Doctor came back, drank heavily, and one frosty morning they found him on his back on the bank of the creek, with his face like note-paper where the blood hadn't dried on it, and an old pistol in his hand—that he'd used, they said, to shoot Cossacks from horseback when he was a young dude fighting in the bush in Poland."

Mitchell lay silent a good while; then he yawned.

"Ah, well! It's a lonely track the Lachlan's tramping to-night; but I s'pose he's got his ghosts with him."

I'd been puzzling for the last half-hour to think where I'd met or heard of Jack Drew; now it flashed on me that I'd been told that Jack Drew was the Lachlan's real name.

I lay awake thinking a long time, and wished Mitchell had kept his yarn for daytime. I felt—well, I felt as if the Lachlan's story should have been played in the biggest theatre in the world, by the greatest actors, with music for the intervals and situations—deep, strong music, such as thrills and lifts a man from his boot soles. And when I got to sleep I hadn't slept a moment, it seemed to me, when I started wide awake to see those infernal hanging boughs with a sort of nightmare idea that the Lachlan hadn't gone, or had come back, and he

and Mitchell had hanged themselves sociably—
Mitchell for sympathy and the sake of mateship.

But Mitchell was sleeping peacefully, in spite of a
path of moonlight across his face—and so was the
pup.

THE DARLING RIVER

THE Darling—which is either a muddy gutter or a second Mississippi—is about six times as long as the distance, in a straight line, from its head to its mouth. The state of the river is vaguely but generally understood to depend on some distant and foreign phenomena to which bushmen refer in an off-hand tone of voice as “the Queenslan’ rains,” which seem to be held responsible, in a general way, for most of the out-back trouble.

It takes less than a year to go up stream by boat to Walgett or Bourke in a dry season; but after the first three months the passengers generally go ashore and walk. They get sick of being stuck in the same sort of place, in the same old way; they grow weary of seeing the same old “whaler” drop his swag on the bank opposite whenever the boat ties up for wood; they get tired of lending him tobacco, and listening to his ideas, which are limited in number and narrow in conception.

It shortens the journey to get out and walk; but then you will have to wait so long for your luggage—unless you hump it with you.

We heard of a man who determined to stick to a Darling boat and travel the whole length of the

river. He was a newspaper man. He started on his voyage of discovery one Easter in flood-time, and a month later the captain got bushed between the Darling and South Australian border. The waters went away before he could find the river again, and left his boat in a scrub. They had a cargo of rations, and the crew stuck to the craft while the tucker lasted; when it gave out they rolled up their swags and went to look for a station, but didn't find one. The captain would study his watch and the sun, rig up dials and make out courses, and follow them without success. They ran short of water, and didn't smell any for weeks; they suffered terrible privations, and lost three of their number, *not* including the newspaper liar. There are even dark hints considering the drawing of lots in connection with something too terrible to mention. They crossed a thirty-mile plain at last, and sighted a black gin. She led them to a boundary rider's hut, where they were taken in and provided with rations and rum.

Later on a syndicate was formed to explore the country and recover the boat; but they found her thirty miles from the river and about eighteen from the nearest waterhole deep enough to float her, so they left her there. She's there still, or else the man that told us about it is the greatest liar Out Back.

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Imagine the hull of a North Shore ferry boat, blunted a little at the ends and cut off about a foot below the water-line, and parallel to it, then you will have something shaped somewhat like the hull of a

Darling mud-rooter. But the river boat is much stronger. The boat we were on was built and repaired above deck after the different ideas of many bush carpenters, of whom the last seemed by his work to have regarded the original plan with a contempt only equalled by his disgust at the work of the last carpenter but one. The wheel was boxed in, mostly with round sapling-sticks fastened to the frame with bunches of nails and spikes of all shapes and sizes, most of them bent. The general result was decidedly picturesque in its irregularity, but dangerous to the mental welfare of any passenger who was foolish enough to try to comprehend the design; for it seemed as though every carpenter had taken the opportunity to work in a little abstract idea of his own.

The way they "dock" a Darling River boat is beautiful for its simplicity. They choose a place where there are two stout trees about the boat's length apart, and standing on a line parallel to the river. They fix pulley-blocks to the trees, lay sliding planks down into the water, fasten a rope to one end of the steamer, and take the other end through the block attached to the tree and thence back aboard a second steamer; then they carry a rope similarly from the other end through the block on the second tree, and aboard a third boat. At a given signal one boat leaves for Wentworth, and the other starts for the Queensland border. The consequence is that craft number one climbs the bank amid the cheers of the local loafers, who congregate and watch the proceedings with great interest and approval. The crew

pitch tents, and set to work on the hull, which looks like a big, rough shallow box.

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We once travelled on the Darling for a hundred miles or so on a boat called the *Mud Turtle*—at least, that's what *we* called her. She might reasonably have haunted the Mississippi fifty years ago. She didn't seem particular where she went, or whether she started again or stopped for good after getting stuck. Her machinery sounded like a chapter of accidents and was always out of order, but she got along all the same, provided the steersman kept her off the bank.

Her skipper was a young man, who looked more like a drover than a sailor, and the crew bore a greater resemblance to the unemployed than to any other body we know of, except that they looked a little more independent. They seemed clannish, too, with an unemployed or free-labour sort of isolation. We have an idea that they regarded our personal appearance with contempt.

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Above Louth we picked up a "whaler," who came aboard for the sake of society and tobacco. Not that he hoped to shorten his journey; he had no destination. He told us many reckless and unprincipled lies, and gave us a few ornamental facts. One of them took our fancy, and impressed us—with its beautiful simplicity, I suppose. He said: "Some miles above where the Darlin' and the Warrygo runs inter each other, there's a billygong runnin' right

across between the two rivers and makin' a sort of tryhangular hyland; 'n' I can tel'yer a funny thing about it." Here he paused to light his pipe. "Now," he continued, impressively, jerking the match overboard, "when the Darlin's up, and the Warrygo's low, the billygong runs from the Darlin' into the *Warrygo*; and, when the Warrygo's up 'n' the Darlin's down, the waters runs *from* the Warrygo 'n' inter the Darlin'."

What could be more simple?

The steamer was engaged to go up a billabong for a load of shearers from a shed which was cutting out; and first it was necessary to tie up in the river and discharge the greater portion of the cargo in order that the boat might safely negotiate the shallow waters. A local fisherman, who volunteered to act as pilot, was taken aboard, and after he was outside about a pint of whisky he seemed to have the greatest confidence in his ability to take us to hell, or anywhere else—at least, he said so. A man was sent ashore with blankets and tucker to mind the wool, and we crossed the river, butted into the anabranche, and started out back. Only the Lord and the pilot know how we got there. We travelled over the bush, through its branches sometimes, and sometimes through grass and mud, and every now and then we struck something that felt and sounded like a collision. The boat slid down one hill, and "fetched" a stump at the bottom with a force that made every mother's son bite his tongue or break a tooth.

The shearers came aboard next morning, with their swags and two cartloads of boiled mutton, bread,

"brownie," and tea and sugar. They numbered about fifty, including the rouseabouts. This load of sin sank the steamer deeper into the mud; but the passengers crowded over to port, by request of the captain, and the crew poked the bank away with long poles. When we began to move the shearers gave a howl like the yell of a legion of lost souls escaping from down below. They gave three cheers for the rouseabouts' cook, who stayed behind; then they cursed the station with a mighty curse. They cleared a space on deck, had a jig, and afterwards a fight between the shearers' cook and his assistant. They gave a mighty bush whoop for the Darling when the boat swung into that grand old gutter, and in the evening they had a general all-round time. We got back, and the crew had to reload the wool without assistance, for it bore the accursed brand of a "freedom-of-contract" shed.

We slept, or tried to sleep, that night on the ridge of two wool bales laid with the narrow sides up, having first been obliged to get ashore and fight six rounds with a shearer for the privilege of roosting there. The live cinders from the firebox went up the chimney all night, and fell in showers on deck. Every now and again a spark would burn through the "Wagga rug" of a sleeping shearer, and he'd wake suddenly and get up and curse. It was no use shifting round, for the wind was all ways, and the boat steered north, south, east, and west to humour the river. Occasionally a low branch would root three or four passengers off their wool bales, and they'd get up and curse in chorus. The boat started

two snags; and towards daylight struck a stump. The accent was on the stump. A wool bale went overboard, and took a swag and a dog with it; then the owner of the swag and dog and the crew of the boat had a swearing match between them. The swagman won.

About daylight we stretched our cramped limbs, extricated one leg from between the wool bales, and found that the steamer was just crayfishing away from a mud island, where she had tied up for more wool. Some of the chaps had been ashore and boiled four or five buckets of tea and coffee. Shortly after the boat had settled down to work again an incident came along. A rouseabout rose late, and, while the others were at breakfast, got an idea into his head that a good "sloosh" would freshen him up; so he mooched round until he found a big wooden bucket with a rope to it. He carried the bucket aft of the wheel. The boat was butting up stream for all she was worth, and the stream was running the other way, of course, and about a hundred times as fast as a train. The jackeroo gave the line a turn round his wrist; before anyone could see him in time to suppress him, he lifted the bucket, swung it to and fro, and dropped it cleverly into the water.

This delayed us for nearly an hour. A couple of men jumped into the row boat immediately and cast her adrift. They picked up the jackeroo about a mile down the river, clinging to a snag, and when we hauled him aboard he looked like something the cat had dragged in, only bigger. We revived him with

rum and got him on his feet; and then, when the captain and crew had done cursing him, he rubbed his head, went forward, and had a look at the paddle; then he rubbed his head again, thought, and remarked to his mates:

“Wasn’t it lucky I didn’t dip that bucket *for’ard* the wheel?”

This remark struck us forcibly. We agreed that it was lucky—for him; but the captain remarked that it was damned unlucky for the world, which, he explained, was over-populated with fools already.

Getting on towards afternoon we found a barge loaded with wool and tied up to a tree in the wilderness. There was no sign of a man to be seen, nor any sign, except the barge, that a human being had ever been there. The captain took the craft in tow, towed it about ten miles up the stream, and left it in a less likely place than where it was before.

Floating bottles began to be more frequent, and we knew by that same token that we were nearing “Here’s Luck!”—Bourke, we mean. And this reminds us.

When the Brewarrina people observe a more than ordinary number of bottles floating down the river, they guess that Walgett is on the spree; when the Louth chaps see an unbroken procession of dead marines for three or four days they know that Bourke’s drunk. The poor, God-abandoned “whaler” sits in his hungry camp at sunset and watches the empty symbols of Hope go by, and feels more God-forgotten than ever—and thirstier, if possible—and gets a great, wide, thirsty, quaking,

empty longing to be up where those bottles come from. If the townspeople knew how much misery they caused by their thoughtlessness they would drown their dead marines, or bury them, but on no account allow them to go drifting down the river, and stirring up hells in the bosoms of less fortunate fellow-creatures.

There came a man from Adelaide to Bourke once, and he collected all the empty bottles in town, stacked them by the river, and waited for a boat. What he wanted them for the legend sayeth not, but the people reckoned he had a "private still," or something of that sort, somewhere down the river, and were satisfied. What he came from Adelaide for, or whether he really did come from there, we do not know. All the Darling bunyips are supposed to come from Adelaide. Anyway, the man collected all the empty bottles he could lay his hands on, and piled them on the bank, where they made a good show. He waited for a boat to take his cargo, and, while waiting, he got drunk. That excited no comment. He stayed drunk for three weeks, but the townspeople saw nothing unusual in that. In order to become an object of interest in their eyes, and in that line, he would have had to stay drunk for a year and fight three times a day—oftener, if possible—and lie in the road in the broiling heat between whiles, and be walked on by camels and Afghans and free-labourers, and be locked up every time he got sober enough to smash a policeman, and try to hang himself naked, and be finally squashed by a loaded wool team.

But while he drank the Darling rose, for reasons best known to itself, and floated those bottles off. They strung out and started for the Antarctic Ocean, with a big old wicker-worked demijohn in the lead.

For the first week the down-river men took no notice; but after the bottles had been drifting past with scarcely a break for a fortnight or so, they began to get interested. Several whalers watched the procession until they got the jimjams by force of imagination, and when their bodies began to float down with the bottles, the down-river people got anxious.

At last the Mayor of Wilcannia wired Bourke to know whether Dibbs or Parkes was dead, or democracy triumphant, or if not, wherefore the jubilation? Many telegrams of a like nature were received during that week, and the true explanation was sent in reply to each. But it wasn't believed, and to this day Bourke has the name of being the most drunken town on the river.

After dinner a humorous old hard case mysteriously took us aside and said he had a good yarn which we might be able to work up. We asked him how, but he winked a mighty cunning wink and said that he knew all about us. Then he asked us to listen. He said:

"There was an old feller down the Murrumbidgee named Kelly. He was a bit gone here. One day Kelly was out lookin' for some sheep, when he got lost. It was gettin' dark. Bymeby there came an old crow in a tree overhead.

“ ‘Kel-ley, you’re lo-o-st! Kel-ley, you’re lo-o-st!’ sez the crow.

“ ‘I know I am,’ sez Kelly.

“ ‘Fol-ler me, fol-ler me,’ sez the crow.

“ ‘Right y’are,’ sez Kelly, with a jerk of his arm. ‘Go ahead.’

“So the crow went on, and Kelly follered, an’ bymeby he found he was on the right track.

“Sometime after Kelly was washin’ sheep (this was when we useter wash the sheep instead of the wool). Kelly was standin’ on the platform with a crutch in his hand landin’ the sheep, when there came a old crow in the tree overhead.

“ ‘Kelly, I’m hun-gry! Kel-ley, I’m hun-ger-ry!’ sez the crow.

“ ‘Alright,’ sez Kelly; ‘be up at the hut about dinner time’n’ I’ll sling you out something.’

“ ‘Drown—a—sheep! Drown—a—sheep, Kel-ley,’ sez the crow.

“ ‘Blanked if I do,’ sez Kelly. ‘If I drown a’sheep I’ll have to pay for it, be-God!’

“ ‘Then I won’t find yer when yer lost ag’in,’ sez the crow.

“ ‘I’m damned if yer will,’ says Kelly. ‘I’ll take blanky good care I won’t get lost again, to be found by a gory ole crow.’ ”

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There are a good many fishermen on the Darling. They camp along the banks in all sorts of tents, and move about in little box boats that will only float one man. The fisherman is never heavy. He is mostly a

withered little old madman, with black claws, dirty rags (which he never changes), unkempt hair and beard, and a "ratty" expression. We cannot say that we ever saw him catch a fish, or even get a bite, and we certainly never saw him offer any for sale.

He gets a dozen or so lines out into the stream, with the shore end fastened to pegs or roots on the bank, and passed over sticks about four feet high, stuck in the mud; on the top of these sticks he hangs bullock bells, or substitutes—jam tins with stones fastened inside to bits of string. Then he sits down and waits. If the cod pulls the line the bell rings.

The fisherman is a great authority on the river and fish, but has usually forgotten everything else, including his name. He chops firewood for the boats sometimes, but it isn't his profession—he's a fisherman. He is only sane on points concerning the river, though he has all the fisherman's eccentricities. Of course he is a liar.

When he gets his camp fixed on one bank it strikes him he ought to be over on the other, or at a place up round the bend, so he shifts. Then he reckons he was a fool for not stopping where he was before. He never dies. He never gets older, or drier, or more withered looking, or dirtier, or loonier—because he can't. We cannot imagine him as ever having been a boy, or even a youth. We cannot even try to imagine him as a baby. He is an animated mummy, who used to fish on the Nile three thousand years ago, and catch nothing.

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We forgot to mention that there are wonderfully few wrecks on the Darling. The river boats seldom go down—their hulls are not built that way—and if one did go down it wouldn't sink far. But, once down, a boat is scarcely ever raised again; because, you see, the mud silts up round it and over it, and glues it, as it were, to the bottom of the river. Then the forty-foot alligators—which come down with the "Queenslan' rains," we suppose—root in the mud and fill their bellies with sodden flour and drowned deck-hands.

They tried once to blow up a wreck with dynamite because it (the wreck) obstructed navigation; but they blew the bottom out of the river instead, and all the water went through. The Government have been boring for it ever since. I saw some of the bores myself—there is one at Coonamble.

There is a yarn along the Darling about a cute Yankee who was invited up to Bourke to report on a proposed scheme for locking the river. He arrived towards the end of a long and severe drought, and was met at the railway station by a deputation of representative bushmen, who invited him, in the first place, to accompany them to the principal pub—which he did. He had been observed to study the scenery a good deal while coming up in the train, but kept his conclusions to himself. On the way to the pub he had a look at the town, and it was noticed that he tilted his hat forward very often, and scratched the back of his head a good deal, and pondered a lot; but he refrained from expressing an opinion—even when invited to do so. He guessed that his opinions

wouldn't do much good, anyway, and he calculated that they would keep till he got back "over our way"—by which it was reckoned he meant the States.

When they asked him what he'd have, he said to Watty the publican :

"Wal, I reckon you can build me 'your national drink. I guess I'll try it."

A long colonial was drawn for him, and he tried it. He seemed rather startled at first, then he looked curiously at the half-empty glass, set it down very softly on the bar, and leaned against the same and fell into a reverie; from which he roused himself after a while, with a sorrowful jerk of his head.

"Ah, well," he said. "Show me this river of yourn."

They led him to the Darling, and he had a look at it.

"Is this your river?" he asked.

"Yes," they replied, apprehensively.

He tilted his hat forward till the brim nearly touched his nose, scratched the back of his long neck, shut one eye, and looked at the river with the other. Then, after spitting half a pint of tobacco juice into the stream, he turned sadly on his heel and led the way back to the pub. He invited the boys to "pisen themselves;" after they were served he ordered out the longest tumbler on the premises, poured a drop into it from nearly every bottle on the shelf, added a lump of ice, and drank slowly and steadily.

Then he took pity on the impatient and anxious population, opened his mouth, and spake.

"Look here, fellows," he drawled, jerking his arm in the direction of the river, "I'll tell you what I'll dew. I'll bottle that damned river of yours in twenty-four hours!"

Later on he mellowed a bit, under the influence of several drinks which were carefully and conscientiously "built" from plans and specifications supplied by himself, and then, among other things, he said:

"If that there river rises as high as you say it dew—and if this was the States—why, we'd have had the Great Eastern up here twenty years ago"—or words to that effect.

Then he added, reflectively:

"When I come over here I calculated that I was going to make things hum, but now I guess I'll have to change my prospectus. There's a lot of loose energy laying round over our way, but I guess that if I wanted to make things move in your country I'd have to bring over the entire American nation—also his wife and dawg. You've got the makings of a glorious nation over here, but you don't get up early enough!"

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The only national work performed by the blacks is on the Darling. They threw a dam of rocks across the river—near Brewarrina, we think—to make a fish trap. It's there yet. But God only knows where they got the stones from, or how they carried them, for there isn't a pebble within forty miles.

A CASE FOR THE ORACLE

THE Oracle and I were camped together. The Oracle was a bricklayer by trade, and had two or three small contracts on hand. I was "doing a bit of house-painting." There were a plasterer, a carpenter, and a plumber—we were all T'othersiders, and old mates, and we worked things together. It was in Westralia—the Land of T'othersiders—and, therefore, we were not surprised when Mitchell turned up early one morning, with his swag and an atmosphere of salt water about him.

He'd had a rough trip, he said, and would take a spell that day and take the lay of the land and have something cooked for us by the time we came home; and go to graft himself next morning. And next morning he went to work, "labouring" for the Oracle.

The Oracle and his mates, being small contractors and not pressed for time, had dispensed with the services of a labourer, and had done their own mixing and hod-carrying in turns. They didn't want a labourer now, but the Oracle was a vague fatalist, and Mitchell a decided one. So it passed.

The Oracle had a "Case" right under his nose—in his own employ, in fact; but was not aware of the fact

until Mitchell drew his attention to it. The Case went by the name of Alfred O'Briar—which hinted a mixed parentage. He was a small, nervous working-man, of no particular colour, and no decided character, apparently. If he had a soul above bricks, he never betrayed it. He was not popular on the jobs. There was something sly about Alf, they said.

The Oracle had taken him on in the first place as a day-labourer, but afterwards shared the pay with him as with Mitchell. O'Briar shouted—judiciously, but on every possible occasion—for the Oracle; and, as he was an indifferent workman, the boys said he only did this so that the Oracle might keep him on. If O'Briar took things easy and did no more than the rest of us, at least one of us would be sure to get it into his head that he was loafing on us; and if he grafted harder than we did, we'd be sure to feel indignant about that too, and reckon that it was done out of nastiness or crawlsomeness, and feel a contempt for him accordingly. We found out accidentally that O'Briar was an excellent mimic and a bit of a ventriloquist, but he never entertained us with his peculiar gifts; and we set that down to churlishness.

O'Briar kept his own counsel, and his history, if he had one; and hid his hopes, joys, and sorrows, if he had any, behind a vacant grin, as Mitchell hid his behind a quizzical one. He never resented alleged satire—perhaps he couldn't see it—and therefore he got the name of being a cur. As a rule, he was careful with his money, and was called mean—not, however, by the Oracle, whose philosophy was

simple, and whose sympathy could not realise a limit; nor yet by Mitchell. Mitchell waited.

O'Briar occupied a small tent by himself, and lived privately of evenings. When we began to hear two men talking at night in his tent, we were rather surprised, and wondered in a vague kind of way how any of the chaps could take sufficient interest in Alf to go in and yarn with him. In the days when he was supposed to be sociable, we had voted him a bore; even the Oracle was moved to admit that he was "a bit slow."

But late one night we distinctly heard a woman's voice in O'Briar's tent. The Oracle suddenly became hard of hearing, and, though we heard the voice on several occasions, he remained exasperatingly deaf, yet aggressively unconscious of the fact. "I have got enough to do puzzling over me own whys and wherefores," he said. Mitchell began to take some interest in O'Briar, and treated him with greater respect. But our camp had the name of being the best-constructed, the cleanest, and the most respectable in the vicinity. The health officer and constable in charge had complimented us on the fact, and we were proud of it. And there were three young married couples in camp, also a Darby and Joan; therefore, when the voice of a woman began to be heard frequently and at disreputable hours of the night in O'Briar's tent, we got uneasy about it. And when the constable who was on night duty gave us a friendly hint, Mitchell and I agreed that something must be done.

“Av coorse, men will be men,” said the constable, as he turned his horse’s head, “but I thought I’d mention it. O’Briar is a dacent man, and he’s one of yer mates. Av coorse. There’s a bad lot in that camp in the scrub over yander, and—av coorse. Good-day to ye, byes.”

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Next night we heard the voice in O’Briar’s tent again, and decided to speak to Alf in a friendly way about in the morning. We listened outside in the dark, but could not distinguish the words, though I thought I recognised the voice.

“It’s the hussy from the camp over there; she’s got holt of that fool, and she’ll clean him out before she’s done,” I said. “We’re Alf’s mates, any way it goes, and we ought to put a stop to it.”

“What hussy?” asked Mitchell; “there’s three or four there.”

“The one with her hair all over her head,” I answered.

“Where else should it be?” asked Mitchell. “But I’ll just have a peep and see who it is. There’s no harm in that.”

He crept up to the tent and cautiously moved the flap. Alf’s candle was alight; he lay on his back in his bunk with his arms under his head, calmly smoking. We withdrew.

“They must have heard us,” said Mitchell; “and she’s slipped out under the tent at the back, and through the fence into the scrub.”

Mitchell’s respect for Alf increased visibly.

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But we began to hear ominous whispers from the young married couples, and next Saturday night, which was pay-night, we decided to see it through. We did not care to speak to Alf until we were sure. He stayed in camp, as he often did, on Saturday evening, while the others went up town. Mitchell and I returned earlier than usual, and leaned on the fence at the back of Alf's tent.

We were scarcely there when we were startled by a "rat-tat-tat" as of someone knocking at a door. Then an old woman's voice *inside* the tent asked: "Who's there?"

"It's me," said Alf's voice from the front, "Mr. O'Briar from Perth."

"Mary, go and open the door!" said the old woman. (Mitchell nudged me to keep quiet.)

"Come in, Mr. O'Breer," said the old woman. "Come in. How do you do? When did you get back?"

"Only last night," said Alf.

"Look at that now! Bless us all! And how did you like the country at all?"

"I didn't care much for it," said Alf. We lost the thread of it until the old woman spoke again.

"Have you had your tea, Mr. O'Breer?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. O'Connor."

"Are you quite sure, man?"

"Quite sure, thank you, Mrs. O'Connor." (Mitchell trod on my foot.)

"Will you have a drop of whisky or a glass of beer, Mr. O'Breer?"

"I'll take a glass of beer, thank you, Mrs. O'Connor."

There seemed to be a long pause. Then the old woman said, "Ah, well, I must get my work done, and Mary will stop here and keep you company, Mr. O'Breer." The arrangement seemed satisfactory to all parties, for there was nothing more said for awhile. (Mitchell nudged me again, with emphasis, and I kicked his shin.)

Presently Alf said: "Mary!" And a girl's voice said, "Yes, Alf."

"You remember the night I went away, Mary?"

"Yes, Alf, I do."

"I have travelled long ways since then, Mary; I worked hard and lived close. I didn't make my fortune, but I managed to rub a note or two together. It was a hard time and a lonesome time for me, Mary. The summer's awful over there, and livin's bad and dear. You couldn't have any idea of it, Mary."

"No, Alf."

"I didn't come back so well off as I expected."

"But that doesn't matter, Alf."

"I got heart-sick and tired of it, and couldn't stand it any longer, Mary."

"But that's all over now, Alf; you mustn't think of it."

"Your mother wrote to me."

"I know she did"—(very low and gently).

"And do you know what she put in it, Mary?"

"Yes, Alf."

"And did you ask her to put it in?"

"Don't ask me, Alf."

"And it's all true; Mary?"

There was no answer, but the silence seemed satisfactory.

"And be sure you have yourself down here on Sunday, Alf, mo son." ("There's the old woman come back!" said Mitchell.)

"An' since the girl's willin' to have ye, and the ould woman's willin'—there's me hand on it, Alf, me boy. An' God bless ye both." ("The old man's come now," said Mitchell.)

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"Come along," said Mitchell, leading the way to the front of the tent.

"But I wouldn't like to intrude on them. It's hardly right, Mitchell, is it?"

"That's all right," said Mitchell. He tapped the tent pole.

"Come in," said Alf. Alf was lying on his bunk as before, with his arms under his head. His face wore a cheerful, not to say happy, expression. There was no one else in the tent. I was never more surprised in my life.

"Have you got the paper, Alf?" said Mitchell.

"Yes. You'll find it there at the foot of the bunk. There it is. Won't you sit down, Mitchell?"

"Not to-night," said Mitchell. "We brought you a bottle of ale. We're just going to turn in."

And we said "good-night." "Well," I said to Mitchell when we got inside, "what do you think of it?"

"I don't think of it at all," said Mitchell. "Do you mean to say you can't see it now?"

"No, I'm dashed if I can," I said. "Some of us must be drunk, I think, or getting rats. It's not to be wondered at, and the sooner we get out of this country the better."

"Well, you must be a fool, Joe," said Mitchell. "Can't you see? *Alf thinks aloud.*"

"*What?*"

"Talks to himself. He was thinking about going back to his sweetheart. Don't you know he's a bit of a ventriloquist?"

Mitchell lay awake a long time, in the position that Alf usually lay in, and thought. Perhaps he thought on the same lines as Alf did that night. But Mitchell did his thinking in silence.

We thought it best to tell the Oracle quietly. He was deeply interested, but not surprised. "I've heard of such cases before," he said. But the Oracle was a gentleman. "There's things that a man wants to keep to himself that ain't his business," he said. And we understood this remark to be intended for our benefit, and to indicate a course of action upon which the Oracle had decided, with respect to this case, and which we, in his opinion, should do well to follow.

Alf got away a week or so later, and we all took a holiday and went down to Fremantle to see him off. Perhaps he wondered why Mitchell gripped his hand so hard and wished him luck so earnestly, and was surprised when he gave him three cheers.

"Ah, well!" remarked Mitchell, as we turned up the wharf.

“I’ve heerd of such cases before,” said the Oracle, meditatively. “They ain’t common, but I’ve hear’d of such cases before.”

A DAUGHTER OF MAORILAND

A SKETCH OF POOR-CLASS MAORIS

THE new native-school teacher, who was "green," "soft," and poetical, and had a literary ambition, called her "August," and fondly hoped to build a romance on her character. She was down in the school registers as Sarah Moses, Maori, 16 years and three months. She looked twenty; but this was nothing, insomuch as the mother of the youngest child in the school—a dear little half-caste lady of two or three summers—had not herself the vaguest idea of the child's age, nor anybody else's, nor of ages in the abstract. The church register was lost some six years before, when "Granny," who was a hundred, if a day, was supposed to be about twenty-five. The teacher had to guess the ages of all the new pupils.

August was apparently the oldest in the school—a big, ungainly, awkward girl, with a heavy negro type of Maori countenance, and about as much animation, mentally or physically, as a cow. She was given to brooding; in fact, she brooded all the time. She brooded all day over her school work, but did it fairly well. How the previous teachers had taught her all she knew was a mystery to the new one. There had been a tragedy in

August's family when she was a child, and the affair seemed to have cast a gloom over the lives of the entire family, for the lowering brooding cloud was on all their faces. August would take to the bush when things went wrong at home, and climb a tree and brood till she was found and coaxed home. Things, according to pa gossip, had gone wrong with her from the date of the tragedy, when she, a bright little girl, was taken—a homeless orphan—to live with a sister, and, afterwards, with an aunt-by-marriage. They treated her, 'twas said, with a brutality which must have been greatly exaggerated by pa-gossip, seeing that unkindness of this description is, according to all the best authorities, altogether foreign to Maori nature.

Pa-gossip—which is less reliable than the ordinary washerwoman kind, because of a deeper and more vicious ignorance—had it that one time when August was punished by a teacher (or beaten by her sister or aunt-by-marriage) she “took to the bush” for three days, at the expiration of which time she was found on the ground in an exhausted condition. She was evidently a true Maori or savage, and this was one of the reasons why the teacher with the literary ambition took an interest in her. She had a print of a portrait of a man in soldier's uniform, taken from a copy of the *Illustrated London News*, pasted over the fireplace in the whare where she lived, and neatly bordered by vandyked strips of silvered tea-paper. She had pasted it in the place of honour, or as near as she could get to it. The place of honour was sacred to framed representations of the Nativity and

Catholic subjects, half-modelled, half-pictured. The print was a portrait of the last Czar of Russia, of all the men in the world; and August was reported to have said that she loved that man. His father had been murdered, so had her mother. This was one of the reasons why the teacher with the literary ambition thought he could get a romance out of her.

After the first week she hung round the new schoolmistress, dog-like—with “dog-like affection,” thought the teacher. She came down often during the holidays, and hung about the verandah and back door for an hour or so; then, by-and-bye, she’d be gone. Her brooding seemed less aggressive on such occasions. The teacher reckoned that she had something on her mind, and wanted to open her heart to “the wife,” but was too ignorant or too shy, poor girl; and he reckoned, from his theory of Maori character, that it might take her weeks, or months, to come to the point. One day, after a great deal of encouragement, she explained that she felt “so awfully lonely, Mrs. Lorrens.” All the other girls were away, and she wished it was school-time.

She was happy and cheerful again, in her brooding way, in the playground. There was something sadly ludicrous about her great, ungainly figure slopping round above the children at play. The schoolmistress took her into the parlour, gave her tea and cake, and was kind to her; and she took it all with broody cheerfulness.

One Sunday morning she came down to the cottage and sat on the edge of the verandah, looking as wretchedly miserable as a girl could. She was in rags

—at least, she had a rag of dress on—and was barefooted and bareheaded. She said that her aunt had turned her out, and she was going to walk down the coast to Whale Bay to her grandmother—a long day's ride. The teacher was troubled, because he was undecided what to do. He had to be careful to avoid any unpleasantness arising out of Maori cliquism. As the teacher he couldn't let her go in the state she was in; from the depths of his greenness he trusted her, from the depths of his softness he pitied her; his poetic nature was fiercely indignant on account of the poor girl's wrongs, and the wife spoke for her. Then he thought of his unwritten romance, and regarded August in the light of copy, and that settled it. While he talked the matter over with his wife, August "hid in the dark of her hair," awaiting her doom. The teacher put his hat on, walked up to the pa, and saw her aunt. She denied that she had turned August out, but the teacher believed the girl. He explained his position, in words simplified for Maori comprehension, and the aunt and relations said they understood, and that he was "perfectly right, Mr. Lorrens." They were very respectful. The teacher said that if August would not return home, he was willing to let her stay at the cottage until such time as her uncle, who was absent, returned, and he (the teacher) could talk the matter over with him. The relations thought that that was the very best thing that could be done, and thanked him. The aunt, two sisters, and as many of the others, including the children, as were within sight or hail at the time—most of them could not by any

possible means have had the slightest connection with the business in hand—accompanied the teacher to the cottage. August took to the flax directly she caught sight of her relations, and was with difficulty induced to return. There was a lot of talk in Maori, during which the girl and her aunt shuffled and swung round at the back of each other, and each talked over her shoulder, and laughed foolishly and awkwardly once or twice; but in the end the girl was sullenly determined not to return home, so it was decided that she should stay. The schoolmistress made tea.

August brightened from the first day. She was a different girl altogether. "I never saw such a change in a girl," said the young schoolmistress, and one or two others. "I always thought she was a good girl if taken the right way; all she wanted was a change and kind treatment." But the stolid old Maori chairman of the school committee only shrugged his shoulders and said (when the schoolmistress, woman-like, pressed him for an opinion to agree with her own), "You can look at it two ways, Mrs. Lorrens." Which, by the way, was about the only expression of opinion that the teacher was ever able to get out of him on any subject.

August worked and behaved well. She was wonderfully quick in picking up English ways and housework. True, she was awkward and not over cleanly in some things, but her mistress had patience with her. Who wouldn't have? She "couldn't do enough" for her benefactress; she hung on her words and sat at her footstool of evenings in a way that gladdened the teacher's sentimental nature; she

couldn't bear to see him help his wife with a hat-pin or button—August must do it. She insisted on doing her mistress' hair every night. In short, she tried in every way to show her gratitude. The teacher and his wife smiled brightly at each other behind her back, and thought how cheerful the house was since she came, and wondered what they'd do without her. It was a settled thing that they should take her back to the city with them, and have a faithful and grateful retainer all their lives and a sort of Aunt Chloe for their children, when they had any. The teacher got yards of copy out of her for his "Maori Sketches and Characters," worked joyously at his romance, and felt great already, and was happy. She had a bed made up temporarily (until the teacher could get a spring mattress for her from town) on the floor in the dining-room, and when she'd made her bed she'd squat on it in front of the fire and sing Maori songs in a soft voice. She'd sing the teacher and his wife, in the next room, to sleep. Then she'd get up and have a feed, but they never heard her.

Her manners at the table (for she was treated "like one of themselves" in the broadest sense of the term) were surprisingly good, considering that the adults of her people were decidedly cow-like in white society, and scoffed sea-eggs, shell-fish, and mutton-birds at home with a gallop which was not edifying. Her appetite, it was true, was painful at times to the poetic side of the teacher's nature; but he supposed that she'd been half-starved at home, poor girl, and would get over it. Anyway, the copy

he'd get out of her would repay him for this and other expenses a hundredfold. Moreover, begging and borrowing had ceased with her advent, and the teacher set this down to her influence.

The first jar came when she was sent on horseback to the town for groceries, and didn't get back till late the next day. She explained that some of her relations got hold of her and made her stay, and wanted her to go into public-houses with them, but she wouldn't. She said that *she* wanted to come home. But why didn't she? The teacher let it pass, and hoped she'd gain strength of character by-and-bye. He had waited up late the night before with her supper on the hob; and he and his wife had been anxious for fear something had happened to the poor girl who was under their care. He had walked to the treacherous river-ford several times during the evening, and waited there for her. So perhaps he was tired, and that was why he didn't write next night.

The sugar-bag, the onion-basket, the potato-bag and the tea-chest began to "go down" alarmingly, and an occasional pound of candles, a pigeon, a mutton-bird (plucked and ready for Sunday's cooking), and other little trifles went, also. August couldn't understand it, and the teacher believed her, for falsehood and deceit are foreign to the simple natures of the modern Maoris. There were no cats; but no score of ordinary cats could have given colour to the cat theory, had it been raised in this case. The breath of August advertised onions more than once, but no human stomach could have accounted

for the quantity. She surely could not have eaten the other things raw—and she had no opportunities for private cooking, as far as the teacher and his wife could see. The other Maoris were out of the question; they were all strictly honest.

Thefts and annoyances of the above description were credited to the “swaggies” who infested the roads, and had a very bad name down that way; so the teacher loaded his gun, and told August to rouse him at once, if she heard a sound in the night. She said she would; but a heavy-weight “swaggie” could have come in and sat on her and had a smoke without waking her.

She couldn't be trusted to go a message. She'd take from three to six hours, and come back with an excuse that sounded genuine from its very simplicity. Another sister of hers lay ill in an isolated hut, alone and uncared for, except by the teacher's wife, and occasionally by a poor pa outcast who had negro blood in her veins, and a love for a white loafer. God help her! All of which sounds strange, considering that Maoris are very kind to each other. The schoolmistress sent August one night to stay with the sick Maori woman and help her as she could, and gave her strict instructions to come to the cottage first thing in the morning, and tell her how the sick woman was. August turned up at lunch-time next day. The teacher gave her her first lecture, and said plainly that he wasn't to be taken for a fool; then he stepped aside to get cool, and, when he returned, the girl was sobbing as if her heart would break, and the wife comforting her. She had

been up all night, poor girl, and was thoroughly worn out. Somehow the teacher didn't feel uncomfortable about it. He went down to the whare. August had not touched a dishcloth or broom. She had slept, as she always did, like a pig, all night, while her sister lay and tossed in agony; in the morning she ate everything there was to eat in the house (which, it seemed, was the Maori way of showing sympathy in sickness and trouble), after which she brooded by the fire till the children, running out of school, announced the teacher's lunch hour.

August braced up again for a little while. The master thought of the trouble they had with Ayac-nora in "Westward Ho," and was comforted, and tackled his romance again. Then the schoolmistress fell sick and things went wrong. The groceries went down faster than ever, and the house got very dirty, and began to have a native smell about it. August grew fat, and lazy, and dirty, and less reliable on washing-days, or when there was anything special to do in the house. "The savage blood is strong," thought the teacher, "and she is beginning to long for her own people and free unconventional life." One morning—on a washing-day, too, as it happened—she called out, before the teacher and his wife were up, that the Maoris who supplied them with milk were away, and she had promised to go up and milk the cow and bring the milk down. The teacher gave her permission. One of the scholars usually brought the milk early. Lunch time came and no August, no milk—strangest of all, only half the school children. The teacher put on his hat, and went up to the pa once

more. He found August squatted in the midst of a circle of relations. She was entertaining them with one of a series of idealistic sketches of the teacher's domestic life, in which she showed a very vivid imagination, and exhibited an unaccountable savage sort of pessimism. Her intervals of absence had been occupied in this way from the first. The astounding slanders she had circulated concerning the teacher's private life came back, bit by bit, to his ears for a year afterwards, and her character sketches of previous teachers, and her own relations—for she spared nobody—would have earned a white woman a long and well-merited term of imprisonment for criminal libel. She had cunningly, by straightforward and unscrupulous lying, prejudiced the principal mother and boss woman of the pa against the teacher and his wife; as a natural result of which the old lady, who, like the rest, was very ignorant and ungrateful, “turned nasty” and kept the children from school. The teacher lost his temper, so the children were rounded up and hurried down to school immediately; with them came August and her aunt, with alleged explanations and excuses, and a shell-fish. The aunt and sisters said they'd have nothing to do with August. They didn't want her and wouldn't have her. The teacher said that, under those circumstances, she'd better go and drown herself; so she went home with them.

The whole business had been a plot by her nearest relations. They got rid of the trouble and expense of keeping her, and the bother of borrowing in person, whenever in need of trifles in the grocery line.

Borrowing recommenced with her dismissal; but the teacher put a full stop to it, as far as he was concerned. Then August, egged on by her aunt, sent a blackguardly letter to the teacher's wife; the sick sister, by the way, who had been nursed and supplied with food by her all along, was in it, and said she was glad August sent the letter, and it served the schoolmistress right. The teacher went up to the pa once more; an hour later, August in person, accompanied, as usual, by a relation or two, delivered at the cottage an abject apology in writing, the composition of which would have discouraged the most enthusiastic advocate of higher education for the lower classes.

Then various petty annoyances were tried. The teacher is firmly convinced that certain animal-like sounds round the house at night were due to August's trying to find out whether his wife was as likely to be haunted as the Maoris were. He didn't dream of such a thing at the time, for he did not believe that one of them had the pluck to venture out after dark. But savage superstition must give way to savage hate. The girl's last "try-on" was to come down to the school fence, and ostentatiously sharpen a table-knife on the wires, while she scowled murderously in the direction of the schoolmistress, who was hanging out her washing. August looked, in her dark, bushy, Maori hair, a thoroughly wild savage. Her father had murdered her mother under particularly brutal circumstances, and the daughter took after her father.

The teacher called her and said: "Now, look here, my lady, the best thing you can do is to drop that

nonsense at once" (she had dropped the knife in the ferns behind her), "for we're the wrong sort of people to try it on with. Now you get out of this and tell your aunt—she's sneaking there in the flax—what I tell you, and that she'd better clear out of this quick, or I'll have a policeman out and take the whole gang into town in an hour. Now be off, and shut that gate behind you, carefully, and fasten it." She did, and went.

The worst of it was that the August romance copy was useless. Her lies were even less reliable and picturesque than the common Jones Alley hag lie. Then the teacher thought of the soft fool he'd been, and that made him wild. He looked like a fool, and was one to a great extent, but it wasn't good policy to take him for one.

Strange to say, he and others had reason to believe that August respected him, and liked him rather than otherwise; but she hated his wife, who had been kind to her, as only a savage can hate. The younger pupils told the teacher, cheerfully and confidently, that August said she'd cut Mrs. Lorrens' throat the first chance she got. Next week the aunt sent down to ask if the teacher could sell her a bar of soap, and sent the same old shilling; he was tired of seeing it stuck out in front of him, so he took it, put it in his pocket, and sent the soap. This must have discouraged them, for the borrowing industry petered out. He saw the aunt later on, and she told him, cheerfully, that August was going to live with a half-caste in a certain house in town.

| Poor August! For she was only a tool after all.

Her "romance" was briefly as follows:—She went, per off-hand Maori arrangement, as 'housekeeper' in the hut of a labourer at a neighbouring saw-mill. She stayed three months, for a wonder; at the expiration of which time she put on her hat and explained that she was tired of stopping there, and was going home. He said, 'All right, Sarah, wait a while and I'll take you home.' At the door of her aunt's house he said, 'Well, good-bye, Sarah,' and she said, in her brooding way, 'Good-bye, Jim.' And that was all.

As the last apparent result of August's mischief-making, her brother or someone one evening rode up to the cottage, drunk and inclined to bluster. He was accompanied by a friend, also drunk, who came to see the fun, and was ready to use his influence on the winning side. The teacher went inside, brought out his gun, and slipped two cartridges in. "I've had enough of this," he said. "Now then, be off, you insolent blackguards, or I'll shoot you like rabbits. Go!" and he snapped his jaw and the breech of his gun together. As they rode off, the old local hawk happened to soar close over a dead lamb in the fern at the corner of the garden, and the teacher, who had been "laying" for him a long time, let fly both barrels at him, without thinking. When he turned, there was only a cloud of dust down the track.

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The teacher taught that school for three years thereafter, without a hitch. But he went no more on Universal Brotherhood lines. And, for years after he had gone, his name was spoken of with great respect by the Maoris.

NEW YEAR'S NIGHT

It was dark enough for anything in Dead Man's Gap—a round, warm, close darkness, in which retreating sounds seemed to be cut off suddenly at a distance of a hundred yards or so, instead of growing faint and fainter, and dying away, to strike the ear once or twice again—and after minutes, it might seem—with startling distinctness, before being finally lost in the distance, as it is on clear, frosty nights. So with the sounds of horses' hoofs, stumbling on the rough bridle-track through the "saddle," the clatter of hoof-clipped stones and scrape of gravel down the hidden "siding," and the low sound of men's voices, blurred and speaking in monosyllables and at intervals it seemed, and in hushed, awed tones, as though they carried a corpse. To practical eyes, grown used to such a darkness, and at the nearest point, the passing blurs would have suggested two riders on bush hacks leading a third with an empty saddle on its back—a lady's or "side-saddle," if one could have distinguished the horns. They may have struck a soft track or level, or rounded the buttress of the hill higher up, but before they had time to reach or round the foot of the spur, blurs, whispers, stumble and clatter of hoofs, jingle of bridle rings, and the occasional clank

together of stirrup irons, seemed shut off as suddenly and completely as though a great sound-proof door had swung to behind them.

It was dark enough on the glaringest of days down in the lonely hollow or "pocket," between two spurs, at the head of a blind gully behind Mount Buckaroo, where there was a more or less dusty patch, barely defined even in broad daylight by a spidery dog-legged fence on three sides, and a thin "two-rail" (dignified with the adjective "split-rail"—though rails and posts were mostly of saplings split in halves) running along the frontage. In about the middle of it a little slab hut, overshadowed by a big stringy-bark shed, was pointed out as Johnny Mears's Farm.

"Black as—as charcoal," said Johnny Mears. He had never seen coal, and was a cautious man, whose ideas came slowly. He stooped, close by the fence, with his hands on his knees, to "sky" the loom of his big shed and so get his bearings. He had been to have a look at the penned calves, and see that all slip-rails were up and pegged, for the words of John Mears junior, especially when delivered rapidly and shrilly and in injured tones, were not to be relied upon in these matters.

"It's hot enough to melt the belly out of my fiddle," said Johnny Mears to his wife, who sat on a three-legged stool by the rough table in the little white-washed "end-room," putting a patch of patches over the seat of a pair of moleskin knickerbockers. He lit his pipe, moved a stool to the side of the great empty fireplace, where it looked cooler—might have been cooler on account of a possible draught suggested by

the presence of the chimney, and where, therefore, he felt a breath cooler. He took his fiddle from a convenient shelf, tuned it slowly and carefully, holding his pipe (in his mouth) well up and to one side, as if the fiddle were an inquisitive and restless baby. He played "Little Drops o' Brandy" three times, right through, without variations, blinking solemnly the while; then he put the violin carefully back in its box, and started to cut up another pipeful.

"You should have gone, Johnny," said the haggard little woman.

"Rackin' the horse out a night like this," retorted Johnny, "and startin' ploughin' to-morrow. It ain't worth while. Let them come for me if they want me. Dance on a night like this! Why! they'll dance in ——"

"But you promised. It won't do you no good, Johnny."

"It won't do me no harm."

The little woman went on stitching.

"It's smotherin' hot," said Johnny, with an impatient oath. "I don't know whether I'll turn in, or turn out, under the shed to-night. It's too d——d hot to roost indoors."

She bent her head lower over the patch. One smoked and the other stitched in silence for twenty minutes or so, during which time Johnny might be supposed to have been deliberating listlessly as to whether he'd camp out on account of the heat, or turn in. But he broke the silence with a clout at a mosquito on the nape of his neck, and a bad word.

"I wish you wouldn't swear so much, Johnny," she said wearily—"at least not to-night."

He looked at her blankly.

"Why—why to-night? What's the matter with you to-night, Mary? What's to-night more than any other night to you? I see no harm—can't a man swear when a mosquito sticks him?"

"I—I was only thinking of the boys, Johnny."

"The boys! Why, they're both on the hay in the shed." He stared at her again, shifted uneasily, crossed the other leg tightly, frowned, blinked, and reached for the matches. "You look a bit off-colour, Mary. It's the heat that makes us all a bit ratty at times. Better put that by and have a swill o' oatmeal and water, and turn in."

"It's too hot to go to bed. I couldn't sleep. I'm all right. I'll—I'll just finish this. Just reach me a drink from the water-bag—the pannikin's on the hob there, by your boot."

He scratched his head helplessly, and reached for the drink. When he sat down again, he felt strangely restless. "Like a hen that didn't know where to lay," he put it. He couldn't settle down or keep still, and didn't seem to enjoy his pipe somehow. He rubbed his head again.

"There's a thunderstorm comin'," he said. "That's what it is; and the sooner it comes the better."

He went to the back door, and stared at the blackness to the east, and, sure enough, lightning was blinking there.

"It's coming, sure enough; just hang out and keep cool for another hour, and you'll feel the difference."

He sat down again on the three-legged stool, folded his arms, with his elbows on his knees, drew a long breath, and blinked at the clay floor for awhile; then he twisted the stool round on one leg, until he faced the old-fashioned spired wooden clock (the brass disc of the pendulum moving ghost-like through a scarred and scratched marine scene—Margate in England—on the glass that covered the lower half) that stood alone on the slab shelf over the fireplace. The hands indicated half-past two, and Johnny, who had studied that clock and could “hit the time nigh enough by it,” after knitting his brows and blinking at the dial for a full minute by its own hand, decided “that it must be getting on toward nine o’clock.”

It must have been the heat. Johnny stood up, raking his hair, turned to the door and back again, and then, after an impatient gesture, took up his fiddle and raised it to his shoulder. Then the queer thing happened. He said afterwards, under conditions favourable to such sentimental confidence, that a cold hand seemed to take hold of the bow, through his, and—anyway, before he knew what he was about he had played the first bars of “When First I Met Sweet Peggy,” a tune he had played often, twenty years before, in his courting days, and had never happened to play since. He sawed it right through (the cold hand left after the first bar or two) standing up; then still stood with fiddle and bow trembling in his hands, with the queer feeling still on him, and a rush of old thoughts going through his head, all of which he set down afterwards to the effect of the heat. He put the fiddle away hastily, damning the

bridge of it at the same time in loud but hurried tones, with the idea of covering any eccentricity which the wife might have noticed in his actions. "Must 'a' got a touch o' sun," he muttered to himself. He sat down, fumbled with knife, pipe, and tobacco, and presently stole a furtive glance over his shoulder at his wife.

The washed-out little woman was still sewing, but stitching blindly, for great tears were rolling down her worn cheeks.

Johnny, white-faced on account of the heat, stood close behind her, one hand on her shoulder and the other clenched on the table; but the clenched hand shook as badly as the loose one.

"Good God! What is the matter, Mary. You're sick! (They had had little or no experience of illness.) Tell me, Mary—come now! Has the boys been up to anything?"

"No, Johnny; it's not that."

"What is it then? You're taken sick! What have you been doing with yourself? It might be fever. Hold up a minute. You wait here quiet while I roost out the boys and send 'em for the doctor and someone——."

"No! no! I'm not sick, John. It's only a turn. I'll be all right in a minute."

He shifted his hand to her head, which she dropped suddenly, with a life-weary sigh, against his side.

"Now then!" cried Johnny, wildly, "don't you faint or go into disterricks, Mary! It'll upset the boys; think of the boys! It's only the heat—you're only takin' queer."

"It's not that; you ought to know me better than that. It was—I—Johnny, I was only thinking—we've been married twenty years to-night—an—it's New Year's Night!"

"And I've never thought of it!" said Johnny (in the afterwards). "Shows what a God-forgotten selection will make of a man. She'd thought of it all the time, and was waiting for it to strike me. Why! I'd agreed to go and play at a darnee at Old Pipeclay School-house all night—that very night—and leave her at home because she hadn't asked to come; and it never struck me to ask her—at home by herself in that hole—for twenty-five bob. And I only stopped at home because I'd got the hump, and knew they'd want me bad at the school."

They sat close together on the long stool by the table, shy and awkward at first; and she clung to him at opening of thunder, and they started apart guiltily when the first great drops sounded like footsteps on the gravel outside, just as they'd done one night-time before—twenty years before.

If it was dark before, it was black now. The edge of the awful storm-cloud rushed up and under the original darkness like the best "drop" black-brushed over the cheap "lamp" variety, turning it grey by contrast. The deluge lasted only a quarter of an hour; but it cleared the night, and did its work. There was hail before it, too—big as emu eggs, the boys said—that lay feet deep in the old diggers' holes on Pipeclay for days afterwards—weeks some said.

The two sweethearts of twenty years ago and to-night watched the retreat of the storm, and, seeing

Mount Buckaroo standing clear, they went to the back door, which opened opposite the end of the shed, and saw to the east a glorious arch of steel-blue, starry sky, with the distant peaks showing clear and blue away back under the far-away stars in the depth of it.

They lingered awhile—arms round each other's waists—before she called the boys, just as they had done this time of night twenty years ago, after the boys' grandmother had called her.

"Awlright, mother!" bawled back the boys, with unfilial independence of Australian youth. "We're awlright! We'll be in directly! Wasn't it a pelterer, mother?"

They went in and sat down again. The embarrassment began to wear off.

"We'll get out of this, Mary," said Johnny. "I'll take Mason's offer for the cattle and things, and take that job of Dawson's, boss or no boss"—(Johnny's bad luck was due to his inability in the past to "get on" with any boss for any reasonable length of time)—"I can get the boys on, too. They're doing no good here, and growing up. It ain't doing justice to them; and, what's more, this life is killin' you, Mary. That settles it! I was blind. Let the jump-up selection go! It's making a wall-eyed bullock of me, Mary—a dry-rotted rag of a wall-eyed bullock like Jimmy Nowlett's old Strawberry. And you'll live in town like a lady."

"Somebody coming!" yelled the boys.

There was a clatter of sliprails hurriedly thrown down, and clipped by horses' hoofs.

"Insoide there! Is that you, Johnny?"

"Yes!" ("I knew they'd come for you," said Johnny to Mrs. Mears.)

"You'll have to come, Johnny. There's no get out of it. Here's Jim Mason with me, and we've got orders to stun you and pack you if you show fight. The blessed fiddler from Mudgee didn't turn up. Dave Regan burst his concertina, and they're in a fix."

"But I can't leave the missus."

"That's all right. We've got the school missus's mare and side-saddle. She says you ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself, Johnny Mears, for not bringing your wife on New Year's Night. And so you ought!"

Johnny did not look shame-faced, for reasons unknown to them.

"The boys couldn't find the horses," put in Mrs. Mears. "Johnny was just going down the gully again."

He gave her a grateful look, and felt a strange, new thrill of admiration for his wife.

"And—there's a bottle of the best put by for you, Johnny," added Pat McDurmer, mistaking Johnny's silence; "and we'll call it thirty bob!" (Johnny's ideas were coming slowly again, after the recent rush.) "Or—two quid!—there you are!"

"I don't want two quid, nor one either, for taking my wife to a dance on New Year's Night!" said Johnny Mears. "Run and put on your best bib and tucker, Mary."

And she hurried to dress as eager and excited, and smiling to herself as girlishly as she had done on such occasions on evenings before the bright New Year's Night twenty years ago.

BLACK JOE

THEY called him Black Joe, and me White Joe, by way of distinction and for the convenience of his boss (my uncle), and my aunt, and mother ; so, when we heard the cry of "Bla-a-ack Joe !" (the adjective drawn out until it became a screech, after several repetitions, and the "Joe" short and sharp) coming across the flat in a woman's voice, Joe knew that the missus wanted him at the house, to get wood or water, or mind the baby, and he kept carefully out of sight ; he went at once when uncle called. And when we heard the cry of "Wh-i-i-te Joe !" which we did with difficulty and after several tries—though Black Joe's ears were of the keenest—we knew that I was overdue at home, or absent without leave, and was probably in for a warming, as the old folk called it. On some occasions I postponed the warming as long as my stomach held out, which was a good while in five-corner, native-cherry, or yam season—but the warming was none the cooler for being postponed.

Sometimes Joe heard the wrong adjective, or led me to believe he did—and left me for a whole afternoon under the impression that the race of Ham was in demand at the homestead, when I myself was

wanted there, and maternal wrath was increasing every moment of my absence.

But Joe knew that my conscience was not so elastic as his, and—well, you must expect little things like this in all friendships.

Black Joe was somewhere between nine and twelve when I first met him, on a visit to my uncle's station; I was somewhere in those years too. He was very black, the darker for being engaged in the interesting but uncertain occupation of "burning off" in his spare time—which wasn't particularly limited. He combined shepherding, 'possum and kangaroo hunting, crawfishing, sleeping, and various other occupations and engagements with that of burning off. I was very white, being a sickly town boy; but, as I took great interest in burning off, and was not particularly fond of cold water—it was in winter time—the difference in our complexions was not so marked at times.

Black Joe's father, old Black Jimmie, lived in a gunyah on the rise at the back of the sheepyards, and shepherded for my uncle. He was a gentle, good-humoured, easy-going old fellow with a pleasant smile; which description applies, I think, to most old blackfellows in civilisation. I was very partial to the old man, and chummy with him, and used to slip away from the homestead whenever I could, and squat by the campfire along with the other piccaninies, and think, and yarn socially with Black Jimmie by the hour. I would give something to remember those conversations now. Sometimes somebody would be sent to bring me home, when it got too late, and Black Jimmie would say:

"Piccaninnie alonga possum rug," and there I'd be, sound asleep, with the other young Australians.

I liked Black Jimmie very much, and would willingly have adopted him as a father. I should have been quite content to spend my days in the scrub, enjoying life in dark and savage ways, and my nights "alonga possum rug;" but the family had other plans for my future.

It was a case of two blackfellows and one gin, when Black Jimmie went a-wooing—about twelve years before I made his acquaintance—and he fought for his bride in the black fashion. It was the last affair of that kind in the district. My uncle's brother professed to have been present at the fight, and gave me an alleged description of it. He said that they drew lots, and Black Jimmie put his hand on his knees and bent his head, and the other blackfellow hit him a whack on the skull with a nulla nulla. Then they had a nip of rum all round—Black Jimmie must have wanted it, for the nulla nulla was knotted, and heavy, and made in the most approved fashion. Then the other blackfellow bent his head, and Jimmie took the club and returned the whack with interest. Then the other fellow hit Jimmie a lick, and took a clout in return. Then they had another drink, and continued thus until Jimmie's rival lost all heart and interest in the business. But you couldn't take everything my uncle's brother said for granted.

Black Mary was a queen by right, and had the reputation of being the cleanest gin in the district; she was a great favourite with the squatters' wives round there. Perhaps she hoped to reclaim Jimmie—

he was royal, too, but held easy views with regard to religion and the conventionalities of civilisation. Mary insisted on being married properly by a clergyman, made the old man build a decent hut, had all her children christened, and kept him and them clean and tidy up to the time of her death.

Poor Queen Mary was ambitious. She started to educate her children, and when they got beyond her—that is when they had learnt their letters—she was grateful for any assistance from the good-natured bush men and women of her acquaintance. She had decided to get her eldest boy into the mounted police, and had plans for the rest, and she worked hard for them, too. Jimmie offered no opposition, and gave her no assistance beyond the rations and money he earned shepherding—which was as much as could be expected of him.

He did as many husbands do “for the sake of peace and quietness”—he drifted along in the wake of his wife, and took things as easily as her schemes of reformation and education would allow him to.

Queen Mary died before her time, respected by all who knew or had heard of her. The nearest squatter's wife sent a pair of sheets for a shroud, with instructions to lay Mary out, and arranged (by bush telegraph) to drive over next morning with her sister-in-law and two other white women in the vicinity, to see Mary decently buried.

But the remnant of Jimmie's tribe were there beforehand. They tore the sheets in strips and tied Mary up in a bundle, with her chin to her knees—preparing her for burial in their own fashion—and

mourned all night in whitewash and ashes. At least, the gins did. The white women saw that it was hopeless to attempt to untie any of the innumerable knots and double knots, even if it had been possible to lay Mary out afterwards; so they had to let her be buried as she was, with black and white obsequies. And we've got no interest in believing that she did not "jump up white woman" long ago.

My uncle and his brother took the two eldest boys. Black Jimmie shifted away from the hut at once with the rest of his family—for the "devil-devil" sat down there—and Mary's name was strictly "tabooed" in accordance with aboriginal etiquette.

Jimmie drifted back towards the graves of his fathers in company with a decreasing flock of sheep day by day (for the house of my uncle had fallen on times of drought and depression, and foot-rot and wool rings, and over-drafts and bank owners), and a few strips of bark, a dying fire, a black pipe, some greasy 'possum rugs and blankets, a litter of kangaroo tails, etc., four neglected piccaninnies, half a score of mangy mongrels, and, haply, a "lilly drap o' rum," by night.

The four little Australians grew dirtier and more shy and savage, and ate underdone kangaroo and 'possum and native bear, with an occasional treat of oak grubs and gohanna by preference—and died out, one by one, as blacks do when brought within the ever widening circle of civilisation. Jimmie moved promptly after each death, and left the evil one in possession, and built another mia-mia—each one being less pretentious than the last. Finally he was left, the last of his tribe, to mourn his lot in solitude.

But the devil-devil came and sat down by King Jimmie's side one night, so he, too, moved out across the Old Man border, and the mia-mia rotted into the ground and the grass grew there.

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I admired Joe; I thought him wiser and cleverer than any white boy in the world. He could smell out 'possums unerringly, and I firmly believed he could see yards through the muddiest of dam water; for once, when I dropped my boat in, and was not sure of the spot, he fished it out first try. With cotton reels and bits of stick and bark he would make the model of a station homestead, slaughter-yards, sheep-yards, and all complete, working in ideas and improvements of his own which might have been put into practice with advantage. He was a most original and interesting liar upon all subjects upon which he was ignorant and which came up incidentally. He gave me a very interesting account of an interview between his father and Queen Victoria, and mentioned casually that his father had walked across the Thames without getting wet.

He also told me how he, Joe, had tied a mounted trooper to a verandah post and thrashed him with pine saplings until the timber gave out and he was tired. I questioned Jimmie, but the incidents seemed to have escaped the old king's memory.

Joe could build bigger woodheaps with less wood than any black or white tramp or loafer round there. He was a born architect. He took a world of pains with his wood-heaps—he built them hollow, in the

shape of a break-wind, with the convex side towards the house for the benefit of his employers. Joe was easy-going; he had inherited a love of peace and quietness from his father. Uncle generally came home after dark, and Joe would have little fires lit at safe distances all round the house, in order to convey an impression that the burning off was proceeding satisfactorily.

When the warm weather came, Joe and I got into trouble with an old hag for bathing in a waterhole in the creek in front of her shanty, and she impounded portions of our wardrobe. We shouldn't have lost much if she had taken it all; but our sense of injury was deep, especially as she used very bad grammar towards us.

Joe addressed her from the safe side of the water. He said, "Look here! Old leather-face, sugar-eye, plar-bag marmy, I call it you."

"Plar-bag marmy" meant "Mother Flour-bag," and ration sugar was decidedly muddy in appearance.

She came round the waterhole with a clothes prop, and made good time, too; but we got across and away with our clothes.

That little incident might have changed the whole course of my existence. Plar-bag Marmy made a formal complaint to uncle, who happened to pass there on horseback about an hour later; and the same evening Joe's latest and most carefully planned wood heap collapsed while aunt was pulling a stick out of it in the dark, and it gave her a bad scare, the results of which might have been serious.

So uncle gave us a thrashing, without the slightest

regard for racial distinctions, and sent us to bed without our suppers.

We sought Jimmie's camp, but Joe got neither sympathy nor damper from his father, and I was sent home with a fatherly lecture "for going alonga that fella," meaning Joe.

Joe and I discussed existence at a waterhole down the creek next afternoon, over a billy of crawfish which we had boiled and a piece of gritty damper, and decided to retire beyond the settled districts—some five hundred miles or so—to a place that Joe said he knew of, where there were lagoons and billabongs ten miles wide, alive with ducks and fish, and black cockatoos and kangaroos and wombats, that only waited to be knocked over with a stick.

I thought I might as well start and be a blackfellow at once, so we got a rusty pan without a handle, and cooked about a pint of fat yellow oak-grubs; and I was about to fall to when we were discovered, and the full weight of combined family influence was brought to bear on the situation. We had broken a new pair of shears digging out those grubs from under the bark of the she-oaks, and had each taken a blade as his own especial property, which we thought was the best thing to do under the circumstances. Uncle wanted those shears badly, so he received us with the buggy whip—and he didn't draw the colour line either. All that night and next day I wished he had. I was sent home, and Joe went droving with uncle soon after that, else I might have lived a life of freedom and content and died out peacefully with the last of my adopted tribe.

Joe died of consumption on the track. When he was dying uncle asked: "Is there anything you would like?"

And Joe said: "I'd like a lilly drap o' rum, boss."

Which were his last words, for he drank the rum and died peacefully.

I was the first to hear the news at home, and, being still a youngster, I ran to the house, crying "Oh, mother! aunt's Joe is dead!"

There were visitors at our place at the time, and, as the eldest child of the maternal aunt in question had also been christened Joe—after a grandfather of our tribe (my tribe, not Black Joe's)—the news caused a sudden and unpleasant sensation. But cross-examination explained the mistake, and I retired to the rear of the pig-sty, as was my custom when things went wrong, with another cause for grief.

THEY WAIT ON THE WHARF IN BLACK

“Seems to me that honest, hard-working men seem to accumulate the heaviest swags of trouble in this world.”—STEELMAN.

TOLD BY MITCHELL'S MATE.

WE were coming back from West Australia, steerage—Mitchell, the Oracle, and I. I had gone over saloon, with a few pounds in my pocket. Mitchell said this was a great mistake—I should have gone over steerage with nothing but the clothes I stood upright in, and come back saloon with a pile. He said it was a very common mistake that men made, but, as far as his experience went, there always seemed to be a deep-rooted popular prejudice in favour of going away from home with a few pounds in one's pocket and coming back stumped; at least amongst rovers and vagabonds like ourselves—it wasn't so generally popular or admired at home, or in the places we came back to, as it was in the places we went to. Anyway it went, there wasn't the slightest doubt that our nearest and dearest friends were, as a rule, in favour of our taking away as little as we could possibly manage with, and coming back with a pile, whether we came back saloon or not; and that ought to settle the matter as far as any chap that had the slightest consideration for his friends or family was concerned.

There was a good deal of misery, underneath, coming home in that steerage. One man had had his hand crushed and amputated out Coolgardie way, and the stump had mortified, and he was being sent to Melbourne by his mates. Some had lost their money, some a couple of years of their life, some their souls; but none seemed to have lost the heart to call up the quiet grin that southern rovers, vagabonds, travellers for "graft" or fortune, and professional wanderers wear in front of it all. Except one man—an elderly eastern digger—he had lost his wife in Sydney while he was away.

They sent him a wire to the Boulder Soak, or somewhere out back of White Feather, to say that his wife was seriously ill; but the wire went wrong, somehow, after the manner of telegrams not connected with mining, on the lines of "the Western." They sent him a wire to say that his wife was dead, and that reached him all right—only a week late.

I can imagine it. He got the message at dinner-time, or when they came back to the camp. His mate wanted him to sit in the shade, or lie in the tent, while he got the billy boiled. "You must brace up and pull yourself together, Tom, for the sake of the youngsters." And Tom for long intervals goes walking up and down, up and down, by the camp—under the brassy sky or the gloaming—under the brilliant star-clusters that hang over the desert plain, but never raising his eyes to them; kicking a tuft of grass or a hole in the sand now and then, and seeming to watch the progress of the track he is tramping out. The wife of twenty years was with him—

though two thousand miles away—till that message came.

I can imagine Tom sitting with his mates round the billy, they talking in quiet, subdued tones about the track, the departure of coaches, trains and boats—arranging for Tom's journey East, and the working of the claim in his absence. Or Tom lying on his back in his bunk, with his hands under his head and his eyes fixed on the calico above—thinking, thinking, thinking. Thinking, with a touch of his boyhood's faith perhaps; or wondering what he had done in his long, hard-working married life, that God should do this thing to him now, of all times.

"You'd best take what money we have in the camp, Tom; you'll want it all ag'in' the time you get back from Sydney, and we can fix it up arterwards. . . . There's a couple o' clean shirts o' mine—you'd best take 'em—you'll want 'em on the voyage. . . . You might as well take them there new pants o' mine, they'll only dry-rot out here—and the coat, too, if you like—it's too small for me, anyway. You won't have any time in Perth, and you'll want some decent togs to land with in Sydney."

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"I wouldn't 'a' cared so much if I'd 'a' seen the last of her," he said, in a quiet, patient voice, to us one night by the rail. "I would 'a' liked to have seen the last of her."

"Have you been long in the West?"

"Over two years. I made up to take a run across last Christmas, and have a look at 'em. But I couldn't

very well get away when 'exemption-time' came. I didn't like to leave the claim."

"Do any good over there?"

"Well, things brightened up a bit the last month or two. I had a hard pull at first; landed without a penny, and had to send back every shilling I could rake up to get things straightened up a bit at home. Then the eldest boy fell ill, and then the baby. I'd reckoned on bringing 'em over to Perth or Coolgardie when the cool weather came, and having them somewheres near me, where I could go and have a look at 'em now and then, and look after them."

"Going back to the West again?"

"Oh, yes. I must go for the sake of the youngsters. But I don't seem to have much heart in it." He smoked awhile. "Over twenty years we struggled along together—the missus and me—and it seems hard that I couldn't see the last of her. It's rough on a man."

"The world is damned rough on a man sometimes," said Mitchell, "most especially when he least deserves it."

The digger crossed his arms on the rail like an old "cocky" at the fence in the cool of the evening, yarning with an old crony.

"Mor'n twenty years she stuck to me and struggled along by my side. She never give in. I'll swear she was on her feet till the last, with her sleeves tucked up—bustlin' round. . . And just when things was brightening and I saw a chance of giving her a bit of a rest and comfort for the end of her life. . . I thought of it all only t'other week

when things was clearing up ahead; and the last 'order' I sent over I set to work and wrote her a long letter, putting all the good news and encouragement I could think of into it. I thought how that letter would brighten up things at home, and how she'd read it round. I thought of lots of things that a man never gets time to think of while his nose is kept to the grindstone. And she was dead and in her grave, and I never knowed it."

Mitchell dug his elbow into my ribs and made signs for the matches to light his pipe.

"An' yer never knowed," reflected the Oracle.

"But I always had an idea when there was trouble at home," the digger went on presently, in his quiet, patient tone. "I always knowed; I always had a kind of feeling that way—I felt it—no matter how far I was away. When the youngsters was sick I knowed it, and I expected the letter that come. About a fortnight ago I had a feeling that way when the wife was ill. The very stars out there on the desert by the Boulder Soak seemed to say: 'There's trouble at home. Go home. There's trouble at home.' But I never dreamed what that trouble was. One night I did make up my mind to start in the morning, but when the morning come I hadn't an excuse, and was ashamed to tell my mates the truth. They might have thought I was going ratty, like a good many go out there." Then he broke off with a sort of laugh, as if it just struck him that we might think he was a bit off his head, or that his talk was getting uncomfortable for us. "Curious, ain't it?" he said.

“Reminds me of a case I knowed,——” commenced the Oracle, after a pause.

I could have pitched him overboard ; but that was a mistake. He and the old digger sat on the for’ard hatch half the night yarning, mostly about queer starts, and rum go’s, and curious cases the Oracle had knowed, and I think the Oracle did him a lot of good somehow, for he seemed more cheerful in the morning.

“We were overcrowded in the steerage, but Mitchell managed to give up his berth to the old digger without letting him know it. Most of the chaps seemed anxious to make a place at the first table and pass the first helpings of the dishes to the “old cove that had lost his missus.”

They all seemed to forget him as we entered the Heads ; they had their own troubles to attend to. They were in the shadow of the shame of coming back hard up, and the grins began to grow faint and sickly. But I didn’t forget him. I wish sometimes that I didn’t take so much notice of things.

There was no mistaking them—the little group that stood apart near the end of the wharf, dressed in cheap black. There was the eldest single sister—thin, pale, and haggard-looking—that had had all the hard worry in the family till her temper was spoilt, as you could see by the peevish, irritable lines in her face. She had to be the mother of them all now, and had never known, perhaps, what it was to be a girl or a sweetheart. She gave a hard, mechanical sort of smile when she saw her father, and then stood looking at the boat in a vacant, hopeless sort of way.

There was the baby, that he saw now for the first time, crowing and jumping at the sight of the boat coming in; there was the eldest boy, looking awkward and out of place in his new slop-suit of black, shifting round uneasily, and looking anywhere but at his father. But the little girl was the worst, and a pretty little girl she was, too; she never took her streaming eyes off her father's face the whole time. You could see that her little heart was bursting, and with pity for him. They were too far apart to speak to each other as yet. The boat seemed a cruel long long time swinging alongside—I wished they'd hurry up. He'd brought his traps up early, and laid 'em on the deck under the rail; he stood very quiet with his hands behind him, looking at his children. He had a strong, square, workman's face, but I could see his chin and mouth quivering under the stubbly, iron-grey beard, and the lump working in his throat; and one strong hand gripped the other very tight behind, but his eyelids never quivered—only his eyes seemed to grow more and more sad and lonesome. These are the sort of long, cruel moments when a man sits or stands very tight and quiet and calm-looking, with his whole past life going whirling through his brain, year after year, and over and over again. Just as the digger seemed about to speak to them he met the brimming eyes of his little girl turned up to his face. He looked at her for a moment, and then turned suddenly and went below as if pretending to go down for his things. I noticed that Mitchell—who hadn't seemed to be noticing anything in particular—followed him down. When they came on deck again we were right alongside.

"'Ello, Nell!" said the digger to the eldest daughter.

"'Ello, father!" she said, with a sort of gasp, but trying to smile.

"'Ello, Jack, how are you getting on?"

"All right, father," said the boy, brightening up, and seeming greatly relieved.

He looked down at the little girl with a smile that I can't describe, but didn't speak to her. She still stood with quivering chin and mouth and great brimming eyes upturned, full of such pity as I never saw before in a child-face—pity for him.

"You can get ashore now," said Mitchell; "see, they've got the gangway out aft."

Presently I saw Mitchell with the portmanteau in his hand, and the baby on his arm, steering them away to a quiet corner of the shed at the top of the wharf. The digger had the little girl in his arms, and both hers were round his neck, and her face hidden on his shoulder.

When Mitchell came back, he leant on the rail for a while by my side, as if it was a boundary fence out back, and there was no hurry to break up camp and make a start.

"What did you follow him below that time for, Mitchell?" I asked presently, for want of something better to say.

Mitchell looked at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"I wanted to score a drink!" he said. "I thought he wanted one and wouldn't like to be a Jimmy Woodser."

“SEEING THE LAST OF YOU”

“WHEN you’re going away by boat,” said Mitchell, “you ought to say good-bye to the women at home, and to the chaps at the last pub. I hate waiting on the wharf or up on deck when the boat’s behind time. There’s no sense in it, and a lot of unnecessary misery. Your friends wait on the wharf and you are kept at the rail to the bitter end, just when they and you most want a spell. And why? Some of them hang out because they love you, and want to see the last of you; some because they don’t like you to see them going away without seeing the last of you; and you hang out mostly because it would hurt ’em if you went below and didn’t give them a chance of seeing the last of you all the time—and you curse the boat and wish to God it would start. And those who love you most—the women-folk of the family—and who are making all the fuss and breaking their hearts about having to see the last of you, and least want to do it—they hang out the longest, and are the most determined to see it. Where’s the sense in it? What’s the good of seeing the last of you? How do women manage to get consolation out of a thing like that?”

"But women get consolation out of queer things sometimes," he added reflectively, "and so do men.

"I remember when I was knocking about the coasts, an old aunt of mine always persisted in coming down to see the last of me, and bringing the whole family too—no matter if I was only going away for a month. I was her favourite. I always turned up again in a few months; but if I'd come back every next boat it wouldn't have made the slightest difference to her. She'd say that I mightn't come back some day, and then she'd never forgive herself nor the family for not seeing me off. I suppose she'll see the end of me yet if she lives long enough—and she's a wiry old lady of the old school. She was old-fashioned and dressed like a fright, they said at home. They hated being seen in public with her; to tell the truth, I felt a bit ashamed, too, at times. I wouldn't be, now. When I'd get her off on to the wharf I'd be overcome with my feelings, and have to retire to the privacy of the bar to hide my emotions till the boat was going. And she'd stand on the end of the pier and wave her handkerchief and mop her old eyes with it until she was removed by force.

"God bless her old heart! There wasn't so much affection wasted on me at home that I felt crowded by hers; and I never lost anything by her seeing the last of me.

"I do wish the Oracle would stop that confounded fiddle of his—it makes you think over damned old things."

TWO BOYS AT GRINDER BROS.'

FIVE or six half-grown larrikins sat on the cemented sill of the big window of Grinder Bros.' Railway Coach Factory waiting for the work bell, and one of the number was Bill Anderson—known as "Carstor Hoil"—a young terror of fourteen or fifteen.

"Here comes Balmy Arvie," exclaimed Bill as a pale, timid-looking little fellow rounded the corner and stood against the wall by the door. "How's your parents, Balmy?"

The boy made no answer; he shrank closer to the entrance. The first bell went.

"What yer got for dinner, Balmy? Bread 'n' treacle?" asked the young ruffian; then for the edification of his chums he snatched the boy's dinner bag and emptied its contents on the pavement.

The door opened. Arvie gathered up his lunch, took his time-ticket, and hurried in.

"Well, Balmy," said one of the smiths as he passed, "what do you think of the boat race?"

"I think," said the boy, goaded to reply, "that it would be better if young fellows of this country didn't think so much about racin' an' fightin'."

The questioner stared blankly for a moment, then

laughed suddenly in the boy's face, and turned away. The rest grinned.

"Arvie's getting bahnier than ever," guffawed young Bill.

"Here, Carstor Hoil," cried one of the smiths' strikers, "how much oil will you take for a chew of terbaccer?"

"Teaspoonful?"

"No, two."

"All right; let's see the chew, first."

"Oh, you'll get it. What yer frighten' of? . . . Come on, chaps, 'n' see Bill drink oil."

Bill measured out some machine oil and drank it. He got the tobacco, and the others got what they called "the fun of seein' Bill drink oil!"

The second bell rang, and Bill went up to the other end of the shop, where Arvie was already at work sweeping shavings from under a bench.

The young terror seated himself on the end of this bench, drummed his heels against the leg, and whistled. He was in no hurry, for his foreman had not yet arrived. He amused himself by lazily tossing chips at Arvie, who made no protest for a while. "It would be—better—for this country," said the young terror, reflectively and abstractedly, cocking his eye at the whitewashed roof beams and feeling behind him on the bench for a heavier chip—"it would be better—for this country—if young fellers didn't think so much about—about—racin'—and fightin'."

"You let me alone," said Arvie.

"Why, what'll you do?" exclaimed Bill, bringing

his eye down with feigned surprise. Then, in an indignant tone, "I don't mind takin' a fall out of yer, now, if yer like."

Arvie went on with his work. Bill tossed all the chips within reach, and then sat carelessly watching some men at work, and whistling the "Dead March." Presently he asked :

"What's yer name, Balmy?"

No answer.

"Carn't yer answer a civil question? I'd soon knock the sulks out of yer if I was yer father."

"My name's Arvie; you know that."

"Arvie what?"

"Arvie Aspinal."

Bill cocked his eye at the roof and thought a while and whistled; then he said suddenly :

"Say, Balmy, where d'yer live?"

"Jones' Alley."

"What?"

"Jones' Alley."

A short, low whistle from Bill. "What house?"

"Number Eight."

"Garn! What yer giv'nus?"

"I'm telling the truth. What's there funny about it? What do I want to tell you a lie for?"

"Why, we lived there once, Balmy. Old folks livin'?"

"Mother is; father's dead."

Bill scratched the back of his head, protruded his under lip, and reflected.

"I say, Arvie, what did yer father die of?"

"Heart disease. He dropped down dead at his work."

Long, low, intense whistle from Bill. He wrinkled his forehead and stared up at the beams as if he expected to see something unusual there. After a while he said, very impressively : "So did mine."

The coincidence hadn't done striking him yet ; he wrestled with it for nearly a minute longer. Then he said :

"I suppose yer mother goes out washin'?"

"Yes."

"'N' cleans offices?"

"Yes."

"So does mine. Any brothers 'n' sisters?"

"Two—one brother 'n' one sister."

Bill looked relieved—for some reason.

"I got nine," he said. "Your's younger'n you?"

"Yes."

"Lot of bother with the landlord?"

"Yes, a good lot."

"Had any bailiffs in yet?"

"Yes, two."

They compared notes a while longer, and tailed off into a silence which lasted three minutes and grew awkward towards the end.

Bill fidgeted about on the bench, reached round for a chip, but recollected himself. Then he cocked his eye at the roof once more and whistled, twirling a shaving round his fingers the while. At last he tore the shaving in two, jerked it impatiently from him, and said abruptly :

"Look here, Arvie! I'm sorry I knocked 'over yer barrer yesterday."

"Thank you."

This knocked Bill out the first round. He rubbed round uneasily on the bench, fidgeted with the vise, drummed his fingers, whistled, and finally thrust his hands in his pockets and dropped on his feet.

"Look here, Arvie!" he said in low, hurried tones. "Keep close to me goin' out to-night, 'n' if any of the other chaps touches yer or says anything to yer I'll hit 'em!"

Then he swung himself round the corner of a carriage "body" and was gone.

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Arvie was late out of the shop that evening. His boss was a sub-contractor for the coach-painting, and always tried to find twenty minutes' work for his boys just about five or ten minutes before the bell rang. He employed boys because they were cheap and he had a lot of rough work, and they could get under floors and "bogies" with their pots and brushes, and do all the "priming" and paint the trucks. His name was Collins, and the boys were called "Collins' Babies." It was a joke in the shop that he had a "weaning" contract. The boys were all "over fourteen," of course, because of the Education Act. Some were nine or ten—wages from five shillings to ten shillings. It didn't matter to Grinder Brothers so long as the contracts were completed and the dividends paid. Collins preached in the park every Sunday. But this has nothing to do with the story.

When Arvie came out it was beginning to rain and the hands had all gone except Bill, who stood with his back to a verandah-post, spitting with very fair

success at the ragged toe of one boot. He looked up, nodded carelessly at Arvie, and then made a dive for a passing lorry, on the end of which he disappeared round the next corner, unsuspected by the driver, who sat in front with his pipe in his mouth and a bag over his shoulders.

Arvie started home with his heart and mind pretty full, and a stronger, stranger aversion to ever going back to the shop again. This new, unexpected, and unsought-for friendship embarrassed the poor lonely child. It wasn't welcome.

But he never went back. He got wet going home, and that night he was a dying child. He had been ill all the time, and Collins was one "baby" short next day.

THE SELECTOR'S DAUGHTER

I.

SHE rode slowly down the steep siding from the main road to a track in the bed of the Long Gully, the old grey horse picking his way zig-zag fashion. She was about seventeen, slight in figure, and had a pretty freckled face with a pathetically drooping mouth, and big sad brown eyes. She wore a faded print dress, with an old black riding skirt drawn over it, and her head was hidden in one of those ugly, old-fashioned white hoods, which, seen from the rear, always suggest an old woman. She carried several parcels of groceries strapped to the front of the dilapidated side-saddle.

The track skirted a chain of rocky waterholes at the foot of the gully, and the girl glanced nervously at these ghastly, evil-looking pools as she passed them by. The sun had set, as far as Long Gully was concerned. The old horse carefully followed a rough bridle track, which ran up the gully now on one side of the watercourse and now on the other; the gully grew deeper and darker, and its sullen, scrub-covered sides rose more steeply as he progressed.

The girl glanced round frequently, as though afraid

of someone following her. Once she drew rein, and listened to some bush sound. "Kangaroos," she murmured; it was only kangaroos. She crossed a dimmed little clearing where a farm had been, and entered a thick scrub of box and stringy bark saplings. Suddenly with a heavy thud, thud, an "old man" kangaroo leapt the path in front, startling the girl fearfully, and went up the siding towards the peak.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped, with her hand on her heart.

She was very nervous this evening; her heart was hurt now, and she held her hand close to it, while tears started from her eyes and glistened in the light of the moon, which was rising over the gap ahead.

"Oh, if I could only go away from the bush!" she moaned.

The old horse plodded on, and now and then shook his head—sadly, it seemed—as if he knew her troubles and was sorry.

She passed another clearing, and presently came to a small homestead in a stringy-bark hollow below a great gap in the ridges—"Deadman's Gap." The place was called "Deadman's Hollow," and looked like it. The "house"—a low, two-roomed affair, with skillions—was built of half-round slabs and stringy-bark, and was nearly all roof; the bark, being darkened from recent rain, gave it a drearier appearance than usual.

A big, coarse-looking youth of about twenty was nailing a green kangaroo skin to the slabs; he was out of temper because he had bruised his thumb. The girl

unstrapped the parcels and carried them in; as she passed her brother, she said:

"Take the saddle off for me, will you, Jack?"

"Oh, carnt yer take it off yerself?" he snarled; "carnt yer see I'm busy?"

She took off the saddle and bridle, and carried them into a shed, where she hung them on a beam. The patient old hack shook himself with an energy that seemed ill-advised, considering his age and condition, and went off towards the "dam."

An old woman sat in the main room beside a fire-place which took up almost the entire end of the house. A plank-table, supported on stakes driven into the ground, stood in the middle of the room, and two slab benches were fixtures on each side. The floor was clay. All was clean and poverty-stricken; all that could be whitewashed was white, and everything that could be washed was scrubbed. The slab shelves were covered with clean newspapers, on which bright tins, and pannikins, and fragments of crockery were set to the greatest advantage. The walls, however, were disfigured by Christmas supplements of illustrated journals.

The girl came in and sat down wearily on a stool opposite to the old woman.

"Are you any better, mother?" she asked.

"Very little, Mary, very little. Have you seen your father?"

"No."

"I wonder where he is?"

"You might wonder. What's the use of worrying about it, mother?"

"I suppose he's drinking again."

"Most likely. Worrying yourself to death won't help it!"

The old woman sat and moaned about her troubles, as old women do. She had plenty to moan about.

"I wonder where your brother Tom is? We haven't heard from him for a year now. He must be in trouble again; something tells me he must be in trouble again."

Mary swung her hood off into her lap.

"Why do you worry about it, mother? What's the use?"

"I only wish I knew. I only wish I knew!"

"What good would that do? You know Tom went droving with Fred Dunn, and Fred will look after him; and, besides, Tom's older now and got more sense."

"Oh, you don't care—you don't care! You don't feel it, but I'm his mother, and——"

"Oh, for God's sake, don't start that again, mother; it hurts me more than you think. I'm his sister; I've suffered enough, God knows! Don't make matters worse than they are!"

"Here comes father!" shouted one of the children outside, "'n' he's bringing home a steer."

The old woman sat still, and clasped her hands nervously. Mary tried to look cheerful, and moved the saucepan on the fire. A big, dark-bearded man, mounted on a small horse, was seen in the twilight driving a steer towards the cow-yard. A boy ran to let down the slip-rails.

Presently Mary and her mother heard the clatter of

rails let down and put up again, and a minute later a heavy step like the tread of a horse was heard outside. The selector lumbered in, threw his hat in a corner, and sat down by the table. His wife rose and bustled round with simulated cheerfulness. Presently Mary hazarded—

“Where have you been, father?”

“Somewheers.”

There was a wretched silence, lasting until the old woman took courage to say timidly:

“So you’ve brought a steer, Wylie?”

“Yes!” he snapped; the tone seemed defiant.

The old woman’s hands trembled, so that she dropped a cup. Mary turned a shade paler.

“Here, git me some tea. Git me some *tea*!” shouted Mr. Wylie. “I ain’t agoin’ to sit here all night!”

His wife made what haste her nervousness would allow, and they soon sat down to tea. Jack, the eldest son, was sulky, and his father muttered something about knocking the sulks out of him with an axe.

“What’s annoyed you, Jack?” asked his mother, humbly.

He scowled and made no answer.

The younger children—three boys and a girl—began quarrelling as soon as they sat down. Wylie yelled at them now and then, and grumbled at the cooking, and at his wife for not being able to keep the children quiet. It was: “Marther! you didn’t put no sugar in my tea.” “Mother, Jimmy’s got my place; make him move.” “Mawther! do speak to

this Fred." "Oh! father, this big brute of a Harry's kickin' me!" And so on.

II.

When the miserable meal was over, Wylie got a rope and a butcher's knife, and went out to slaughter the steer; but first there was a row, because he thought—or pretended to think—that somebody had been using his knife. He lassoed the beast, drew it up to the rails, and slaughtered it.

Meanwhile, Jack and his next brother took an old gun, let the dogs loose, and went 'possum shooting.

Presently Wylie came in again, sat down by the fire, and smoked. The children quarrelled over a boy's book; Mrs. Wylie made weak attempts to keep the peace, but they took no notice of her. Suddenly her husband rose with an oath, seized the novel, and threw it behind the fire.

"Git to bed! git to bed!" he roared at the children; "git to bed, or I'll smash your brains with the axe!"

They got to bed. It was made of saplings and bark, covered with three bushel-bags full of straw and old pieces of blanket sewn together. The children quarrelled in bed till their father took off his belt and "went into" them, according to promise. There was a sudden hush, followed by a sound like a bird-clapper; then howls; then a peaceful calm fell upon that happy home.

Wylie went out again, and was absent an hour; on his return he sat by the fire and smoked sullenly.

After a while he snatched the pipe from his mouth, and looked impatiently at the old woman.

"Oh! for God's sake, git to bed," he snapped, "and don't be asittin' there like a blarsted funeral! You're enough to give a man the dismals."

Mrs. Wylie gathered up her sewing and retired. Then he said to his daughter: "You come and hold the candle."

Mary put on her hood and followed her father to the yard. The carcase lay close to the rails, against which two sheets of bark had been raised as a break-wind. The beast had been partly skinned, and a portion of the hide, where a brand might have been, was carefully turned back. Mary noticed this at once. Her father went on with his work, and occasionally grumbled at her for not holding the candle right.

"Where did you buy the steer, father?" she asked.

"Ask no questions and hear no lies." Then he added, "Carn't you see it's a clear skin?"

She had a keen sense of humour, and the idea of a "'clear skin' steer" would have amused her at any other time. She didn't smile now.

He turned the carcase over; the loose hide fell back, and the light shone on a distinct brand. White as a sheet went Mary's face, and her hand trembled so that she nearly let the candle fall.

"What are you adoin' of now?" shouted her father. "Hold the candle, carn't you? You're worse than the old woman."

"Father! the beast is branded! See!—What does PB stand for?"

"Poor Beggar, like myself. Hold the candle, can't you?—and hold your tongue."

Mary was startled again by hearing the tread of a horse, but it was only the old grey munching round. Her father finished skinning, and drew the carcase up to a make-shift "gallows." "Now you can go to bed," he said, in a gentler tone.

She went to her bedroom—a small, low, slab skillion, built on to the end of the house—and fell on her knees by the bunk.

"God help me! God help us all!" she cried.

She lay down, but could not sleep. She was nervously ill—nearly mad, because of the dark, disgraceful cloud of trouble which hung over her home. Always in trouble—always in trouble. It started long ago, when her favourite brother Tom ran away. She was little more than a child then, intensely sensitive; and when she sat in the old bark school she fancied that the other children were thinking or whispering to each other, "Her brother's in prison! Mary Wylie's brother's in prison! Tom Wylie's in gaol!" She was thinking of it still. They were ever with her, those horrible days and nights of the first shadow of shame. She had the same horror of evil, the same fearful dread of disgrace that her mother had. She had been ambitious; she had managed to read much, and had wild dreams of going to the city and rising above the common level, but that was all past now.

How could she rise when the cruel hand of disgrace was ever ready to drag her down at any moment. "Ah, God!" she moaned in her misery, "if we could

THE SELECTOR'S DAUGHTER

only be born without kin—with no one to disgrace us but ourselves ! It's cruel, God, it's cruel to suffer for the crimes of others ! ” She was getting selfish in her troubles—like her mother. “ I want to go away from the bush and all I know. . . . O God, help me to go away from the bush ! ” Presently she fell asleep—if sleep it may be called—and dreamt of sailing away, sailing away far out on the sea beyond the horizon of her dread. Then came a horrible nightmare, in which she and all her family were arrested for a terrible crime. She woke in a fright, and saw a reddish glare on the window. Her father was poking round some logs where they had been “ burning-off.” A pungent odour came through a broken pane and turned her sick. He was burning the hide.

Wylie did not go to bed that night ; he got his breakfast before daylight, and rode up through the frosty gap while the stars were still out, carrying a bag of beef in front of him on the grey horse. Mary said nothing about the previous night. Her mother wondered how much “ father ” had given for the steer, and supposed he had gone into town to sell the hide ; the poor soul tried to believe that he had come by the steer honestly. Mary fried some meat, and tried to eat it for her mother's sake, but could manage only a few mouthfuls. Mrs. Wylie also seemed to have lost her appetite. Jack and his brother, who had been out all night, made a hearty breakfast. Then Jimmy started to peg out the 'possum skins, while Jack went to look for a missing pony. Mary

was left to milk all the cows, and feed the calves and pigs.

Shortly after dinner one of the children ran to the door, and cried :

"Why, mother—here's three mounted troopers comin' up the gully!"

"Oh, my God!" cried the mother, sinking back in her chair and trembling like a leaf. The children ran and hid in the scrub. Mary stood up, terribly calm, and waited. The eldest trooper dismounted, came to the door, glanced suspiciously at the remains of the meal, and abruptly asked the dreaded question :

"Mrs. Wylie, where's your husband?"

She dropped the tea-cup, from which she had pretended to be drinking unconcernedly.

"What? Why, what do you want my husband for?" she asked in pitiful desperation. *She* looked like the guilty party.

"Oh, you know well enough," he sneered impatiently.

Mary rose and faced him. "How dare you talk to my mother like that?" she cried. "If my poor brother Tom was only here—you—you coward!"

The youngest trooper whispered something to his senior, and then, stung by a sharp retort, said :

"Well, you needn't be a pig."

His two companions passed through into the spare skillion, where they found some beef in a cask, and more already salted down under a bag on the end of a bench; then they went out at the back and had a

look at the cow-yard. The younger trooper lingered behind.

"I'll try and get them up the gully on some excuse," he whispered to Mary. "You plant the hide before we come back."

"It's too late. Look there!" She pointed through the doorway.

The other two were at the logs where the fire had been; the burning hide had stuck to the logs in places like glue.

"Wylie's a fool," remarked the old trooper.

III.

Jack disappeared shortly after his father's arrest on a charge of horse and cattle-stealing, and Tom, the prodigal, turned up unexpectedly. He was different from his father and eldest brother. He had an open good-humoured face, and was very kind-hearted; but was subject to peculiar fits of insanity, during which he did wild and foolish things for the mere love of notoriety. He had two natures—one bright and good, the other sullen and criminal. A taint of madness ran in the family—came down from drunken and unprincipled fathers of dead generations; under different conditions, it might have developed into genius in one or two—in Mary, perhaps.

"Cheer up, old woman!" cried Tom, patting his mother on the back. "We'll be happy yet. I've been wild and foolish, I know, and gave you some awful trouble, but that's all done with. I mean to

keep steady, and by-and-bye we'll go away to Sydney or Queensland. Give us a smile, mother."

He got some "grubbing" to do, and for six months kept the family in provisions. Then a change came over him. He became moody and sullen—even brutal. He would sit for hours and grin to himself without any apparent cause; then he would stay away from home for days together.

"Tom's going wrong again," wailed Mrs. Wylie. "He'll get into trouble again, I know he will. We are disgraced enough already, God knows."

"You've done your best, mother," said Mary, "and can do no more. People will pity us; after all, the thing itself is not so bad as the everlasting dread of it. This will be a lesson for father—he wanted one—and maybe he'll be a better man." (She knew better than that.) "*You* did your best, mother."

"Ah, Mary! you don't know what I've gone through these thirty years in the bush with your father. I've had to go down on my knees and beg people not to prosecute him—and the same with your brother Tom; and this is the end of it."

"Better to have let them go, mother; you should have left father when you found out what sort of a man he was; it would have been better for all."

"It was my duty to stick by him, child; he was my husband. Your father was always a bad man, Mary—a bad man; I found it out too late. I could not tell you a quarter of what I have suffered with him. . . . I was proud, Mary; I wanted my children to be better than others. . . . It's my fault; it's a judgment. . . . I wanted to make my children

better than others. . . . I was so proud, Mary."

Mary had a sweetheart, a drover, who was supposed to be in Queensland. He had promised to marry her, and take her and her mother away when he returned; at least, she had promised to marry him on that condition. He had now been absent on his latest trip for nearly six months, and there was no news from him. She got a copy of a country paper to look for the "stock passings;" but a startling headline caught her eye:

IMPUDENT ATTEMPT AT ROBBERY UNDER
ARMS.

"A drover known to the police as Frederick Dunn, *alias* Drew, was arrested last week at ——"

She read to the bitter end, and burned the paper. And the shadow of another trouble, darker and drearier than all the rest, was upon her.

So the little outcast family in Long Gully existed for several months, seeing no one save a sympathetic old splitter who would come and smoke his pipe by the fire of nights, and try to convince the old woman that matters might have been worse, and that she wouldn't worry so much if she knew the troubles of some of our biggest families, and that things would come out all right and the lesson would do Wylie good. Also, that Tom was a different boy altogether, and had more sense than to go wrong again. "It was nothing," he said, "nothing; they didn't know what trouble was."

But one day, when Mary and her mother were alone, the troopers came again.

"Mrs. Wylie, where's your son Tom?" they asked.

She sat still. She didn't even cry, "Oh, my God!"

"Don't be frightened, Mrs. Wylie," said one of the troopers, gently. "It ain't for much anyway, and maybe Tom'll be able to clear himself."

Mary sank on her knees by her mother's side, crying "Speak to me, mother. Oh, my God, she's dying! Speak for my sake, mother. Don't die, mother; it's all a mistake. Don't die and leave me here alone."

But the poor old woman was dead.

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Wylie came out towards the end of the year, and a few weeks later he brought home a—another woman.

IV.

Bob Bentley, general hawker, was camping under some rocks by the main road, near the foot of Long Gully. His mate was fast asleep under the tilted trap. Bob stood with his back to the fire, his pipe in his mouth, and his hands clasped behind him. The fire lit up the undersides of the branches above; a native bear sat in a fork blinking down at it, while the moon above him showed every hair on his ears. From among the trees came the pleasant jingle of hobble-chains, the slow tread of hoofs, and the "crunch, crunch" at the grass, as the horses moved about and grazed, now in moonlight, now in the soft shadows. "Old Thunder," a big black dog of no particular breed, gave a meaning look at his master,

and started up the ridge, followed by several smaller dogs. Soon Bob heard from the hillside the "hy-yi-hi, whomp, whomp, whomp!" of old Thunder, and the yop-yop-yopping of the smaller fry—they had tree'd a 'possum. Bob threw himself on the grass, and pretended to be asleep. There was a sound as of a sizeable boulder rolling down the hill, and presently Thunder trotted round the fire to see if his master would come. Bob snored. The dog looked suspiciously at him, trotted round once or twice, and as a last resource gave him two great slobbery licks across the face. Bob got up with a good-natured oath.

"Well, old party," he said to Thunder, "you're a thundering old nuisance; but I s'pose you won't be satisfied till I come." He got a gun from the waggonette, loaded it, and started up the ridge; old Thunder rushing to and fro to show the way—as if the row the other dogs were making wasn't enough to guide his master.

When Bob returned with the 'possums he was startled to see a woman in the camp. She was sitting on a log by the fire, with her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands.

"Why—what the dev—who are you?"

The girl raised a white desperate face to him. It was Mary Wylie.

"My father and—and the woman—they're drinking—they turned me out! they turned me out."

"Did they now? I'm sorry for that. What can I do for you? . . . She's mad sure enough," he thought to himself; "I thought it was a ghost."

"I don't know" she wailed, "I don't know."

You're a man, and I'm a helpless girl. They turned me out! My mother's dead, and my brothers gone away. Look! Look here!" pointing to a bruise on her forehead. "The woman did that. My own father stood by and saw it done—said it served me right! Oh, my God!"

"What woman? Tell me all about it."

"The woman father brought home! . . . I want to go away from the bush! Oh! for God's sake take me away from the bush! . . . Anything! anything!—you know!—only take me away from the bush!"

Bob and his mate—who had been roused—did their best to soothe her; but suddenly, without a moment's warning, she sprang to her feet and scrambled to the top of the rock overhanging the camp. She stood for a moment in the bright moonlight, gazing intently down the vacant road.

"Here they come!" she cried, pointing down the road. "Here they come—the troopers! I can see their cap-peaks glistening in the moonlight! . . . I'm going away! Mother's gone. I'm going now!—Good-bye!—Good-bye! I'm going away from the bush!"

Then she ran through the trees towards the foot of Long Gully. Bob and his mate followed; but, being unacquainted with the locality, they lost her.

She ran to the edge of a granite cliff on the higher side of the deepest of the rocky waterholes. There was a heavy splash, and three startled kangaroos, who had been drinking, leapt back and sped away, like three grey ghosts, up the ridge towards the moonlit peak.

MITCHELL ON THE "SEX" AND OTHER "PROBLEMS."

"I AGREE with 'T' in last week's *Bulletin*," said Mitchell, after cogitating some time over the last drop of tea in his pannikin, held at various angles, "about what they call the 'Sex Problem.' There's no problem, really, except Creation, and that's not our affair; we can't solve it, and we've no right to make a problem out of it for ourselves to puzzle over, and waste the little time that is given us about. It's we that make the problems, not Creation. We make 'em, and they only smother us; they'll smother the world in the end if we don't look out. Anything that can be argued, for and against, from half a dozen different points of view—and most things that men argue over can be—and anything that has been argued about for thousands of years (as most things have) is worse than profitless; it wastes the world's time and ours, and often wrecks old mateships. Seems to me the deeper you read, think, talk, or write about things that end in ism, the less satisfactory the result; the more likely you are to get bushed and dissatisfied with the world. And the more you keep on the surface of plain things, the plainer the sailing—the more comfortable for you and

everybody else. We've always got to come to the surface to breathe, in the end, in any case; we're meant to live on the surface, and we might as well stay there and look after it and ourselves for all the good we do diving down after fish that aren't there, except in our imagination. And some of 'em are very dead fish, too—the 'Sex Problem,' for instance. When we fall off the surface of the earth it will be time enough to make a problem out of the fact that we couldn't stick on. I'm a Federal Pro-trader in this country; I'm a Federalist because I think Federation is the plain and natural course for Australia, and I'm a Freectionist because I'm in favour of sinking any question, or any two things, that enlightened people can argue and fight over, and try, one after the other, for fifty years without being able to come to a decision about, or prove which is best for the welfare of the country. It only wastes a young country's time, and keeps it off the right track. Federation isn't a problem—it's a plain fact—but they make a problem out of every panel they have to push down in the rotten old boundary fences."

"Personal interests," suggested Joe.

"Of course. It's personal interest of the wrong sort that makes all the problems. You can trace the sex problem to people who trade in unhealthy personal interests. I believe in personal interests of the right sort—true individualism. If we all looked after ourselves, and our wives and families—if we have any—in the proper way, the world would be all right. We waste too much time looking after each other.

"Now, supposing we're travelling and have to get a

shed and make a cheque so's to be able to send a few quid home, as soon as we can, to the missus, or the old folks, and the next water is twenty miles ahead. If we sat down and argued over a social problem till doomsday, we wouldn't get to the tank; we'd die of thirst, and the missus and kids, or the old folks, would be sold up and turned out into the streets, and have to fall back on a 'home of hope,' or wait their turn at the Benevolent Asylum with bags for broken victuals. I've seen that, and I don't want anybody belonging to me to have to do it.

"Reminds me that when a poor, deserted girl goes to a 'home' they don't make a problem of her—they do their best for her and try to get her righted. And the priests, too: if there's anything in the sex or any other problem—anything that hasn't been threshed out—they're the men that'll know it. I'm not a Catholic, but I know this: that if a girl that's been left by one—no matter what Church she belongs to—goes to the priest, they'll work all the points they know (and they know 'em all) to get her righted, and, if the chap, or his people, won't come up to the scratch, Father Ryan'll frighten hell out of 'em. I can't say as much for our own Churches."

"But you're in favour of socialism and democracy?" asked Joe.

"Of course I am. But the world won't do any good arguing over it. The people will have to get up and walk, and, what's more, stick together—and I don't think they'll ever do that—it ain't in human nature. Socialism, or democracy, was all right in this country till it got fashionable and was made a fad

or a problem of. Then it got smothered pretty quick. And a fad or a problem always breeds a host of parasites or hangers-on. Why, as soon as I saw the advanced idealist fools—they're generally the middle-class, shabby-genteel families that catch Spiritualism and Theosophy and those sort of complaints, at the end of the epidemic—that catch on at the tail-end of things and think they've caught something brand, shining, new ;—as soon as I saw them, and the problem spielers and notoriety-hunters of both sexes, beginning to hang round Australian Unionism, I knew it was doomed. And so it was. The straight men were disgusted, or driven out. There are women who hang on for the same reason that a girl will sometimes go into the dock and swear an innocent man's life away. But as soon as they see that the cause is dying, they drop it at once, and wait for another. They come like bloody dingoes round a calf, and only leave the bones. They're about as democratic as the crows. And the rotten 'sex-problem' sort of thing is the cause of it all ; it poisons weak minds—and strong ones too sometimes.

"Why, you could make a problem out of Epsom salts. You might argue as to why human beings want Epsom salts, and try to trace the causes that led up to it. I don't like the taste of Epsom salts—it's nasty in the mouth—but when I feel that way I take 'em, and I feel better afterwards ; and that's good enough for me. We might argue that black is white, and white is black, and neither of 'em is anything, and nothing is everything ; and a woman's a man and a man's a woman, and it's really the man that

has the youngsters, only we imagine it's the woman because she imagines that she has all the pain and trouble, and the doctor is under the impression that he's attending to her, not the man, and the man thinks so too because he imagines he's walking up and down outside, and slipping into the corner pub now and then for a nip to keep his courage up, waiting, when it's his wife that's doing that all the time; we might argue that it's all force of imagination, and that imagination is an unknown force, and that the unknown is nothing. But, when we've settled all that to our own satisfaction, how much further ahead are we? In the end we'll come to the conclusion that we ain't alive, and never existed, and then we'll leave off bothering, and the world will go on just the same."

"What about science?" asked Joe.

"Science ain't 'sex problems;' it's facts . . . : Now, I don't mind Spiritualism and those sort of things; they might help to break the monotony, and can't do much harm. But the 'sex problem,' as it's written about to-day, does; it's dangerous and dirty, and it's time to settle it with a club. Science and education, if left alone, will look after sex facts.

"You can't get anything out of the 'sex problem,' no matter how you argue. In the old Bible times they had half a dozen wives each, but we don't know for certain how *they* got on. The Mormons tried it again, and seemed to get on all right till we interfered. We don't seem to be able to get on with one wife now—at least, according to the 'sex problem.' The 'sex problem' troubled the Turks so much that they tried

three. Lots of us try to settle it by knocking round promiscuously, and that leads to actions for maintenance and breach of promise cases, and all sorts of trouble. Our blacks settle the 'sex problem' with a club, and so far I haven't heard any complaints from them.

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"Take hereditary causes and surrounding circumstances, for instance. In order to understand or judge a man right, you would need to live under the same roof with him from childhood, and under the same roofs, or tents, with his parents, right back to Adam, and then you'd be blocked for want of more ancestors through which to trace the causes that led to Abel—I mean Cain—going on as he did. What's the use or sense of it? You might argue away in any direction for a million miles and a million years back into the past, but you've got to come back to where you are if you wish to do any good for yourself, or anyone else.

"Sometimes it takes you a long while to get back to where you are—sometimes you never do it. Why, when those controversies were started in the *Bulletin* about the kangaroos and other things, I thought I knew something about the bush. Now I'm damned if I'm sure I could tell a kangaroo from a wombat.

"Trying to find out things is the cause of all the work and trouble in this world. It was Eve's fault in the first place—or Adam's, rather, because it might be argued that he should have been master. Some men are too lazy to be masters in their own homes,

and run the show properly ; some are too careless, and some too drunk most of their time, and some too weak. If Adam and Eve hadn't tried to find out things there'd have been no toil and trouble in the world to-day ; there'd have been no bloated capitalists, and no horny-handed working men, and no politics, no freetrade and protection—and no clothes. The woman next door wouldn't be able to pick holes in your wife's washing on the line. We'd have been all running about in a big Garden of Eden with nothing on, and nothing to do except loaf, and make love, and lark, and laugh, and play practical jokes on each other."

Joe grinned.

"That would have been glorious. Wouldn't it, Joe ? There'd have been no 'sex problem' then."

THE MASTER'S MISTAKE

WILLIAM SPENCER stayed away from school that hot day, and "went swimming." The master wrote a note to William's father, and gave it to William's brother Joe to carry home.

"You'll give that to your father to-night, Joseph."

"Yes, sir."

Bill waited for Joe near the gap, and walked home with him.

"I s'pose you've got a note for father."

"Yes," said Joe.

"I s'pose you know what's in it?"

"Ye—yes. Oh, why did you stop away, Bill?"

"You don't mean to say that you're dirty mean enough to give it to father? Hey?"

"I must, Will. I promised the master."

"He needn't never know."

"Oh, yes, he will. He's coming over to our place on Saturday, and he's sure to ask me to-morrow."

Pause.

"Look here, Joe!" said Bill, "I don't want to get a hiding and go without supper to-night. I promised to go 'possuming with Johnny Nowlett, and he's going to give me a fire out of his gun. You can

come, too. I don't want to cop out on it to-night—if I do I'll run away from home again, so there."

Bill walked on a bit in moody, Joe in troubled, silence.

Bill tried again: he threatened, argued, and pleaded, but Joe was firm. "The master trusted me, Will," he said.

"Joe," said Bill at last, after a long pause, "I wouldn't do it to you."

Joe was troubled.

"I wouldn't do it to you, Joe."

Joe thought how Bill had stood up and fought for him only last week.

"I'd tear the note in bits; I'd tell a hundred lies; I'd take a dozen hidings first, Joe—I would."

Joe was greatly troubled. His chest heaved, and the tears came to his eyes.

"I'd do more than that for you, Joe, and you know it."

Joe knew it. They were crossing the old goldfield now. There was a shaft close to the path; it had fallen in, funnel-shaped, at the top, but was still thirty or forty feet deep; some old logs were jammed across about five feet down. Joe suddenly snatched the note from his pocket and threw it in. It fluttered to the other side and rested on a piece of the old timber. Bill saw it, but said nothing, and, seeing their father coming home from work, they hurried on.

Joe was deep in trouble now. Bill tried to comfort and cheer him, but it was no use. Bill promised never to run away from home any more, to go to school every

day, and never to fight, or steal, or tell lies. But Joe had betrayed his trust for the first time in his life, and wouldn't be comforted.

Some time in the night Bill woke, and found Joe sitting up in bed crying.

"Why, what's the matter, Joe?"

"I never done a mean thing like that before," sobbed Joe. "I wished I'd chucked meself down the shaft instead. The master trusted me, Will; an' now, if he asks me to-morrow, I'll have to tell a lie."

"Then tell the truth, Joe, an' take the hidin'; it'll soon be over—just a couple of cuts with the cane and it'll be all over."

"Oh, no, it won't. He won't never trust me any more. I've never been caned in that school yet, Will, and if I am I'll never go again. Oh! why will you run away from home, Will, and play the wag, and steal, and get us all into such trouble? You don't know how mother takes on about it—you don't know how it hurts father! I've deceived the master, and mother and father to-day, just because you're so—so selfish," and he laid down and cried himself to sleep.

Bill lay awake and thought till daylight; then he got up quietly, put on his clothes, and stole away from the house and across the flat, followed by the dog, who thought it was a 'possum-hunting expedition. Bill wished the dog would not be quite so demonstrative, at least until they got away from the house. He went straight to the shaft, let himself down carefully on to one of the old logs, and stooped to pick up the note, gleaming white in the sickly summer day-

light. Then the rotten timber gave way suddenly, without a moment's warning.

.

They found him that morning at about nine o'clock. The dog attracted the attention of an old fossicker passing to his work. The letter was gripped in Bill's right hand when they brought him up. They took him home, and the father went for a doctor. Bill came to himself a little just before the last, and said: "Mother! I wasn't running away, mother—tell father that—I—I wanted to try and catch a 'possum on the ground. . . Where's Joe? I want Joe. Go out, mother, a minute, and send Joe."

"Here I am, Bill," said Joe, in a choking, terrified voice.

"Has the master been yet?"

"No."

"Bend down, Joe. I went for the note, and the logs gave way. I meant to be back before they was up. I dropped it down inside the bed; you watch your chance and get it; and say you forgot it last night—say you didn't like to give it—that won't be a lie. Tell the master I'm—I'm sorry—tell the master never to send no notes no more—except by girls—that's all. . . . Mother! Take the blankets off me—I'm dyin'."

THE STORY OF THE ORACLE

“WE young fellows,” said “Sympathy Joe” to Mitchell, after tea, in their first camp west the river—
“and you and I *are* young fellows, comparatively—think we know the world. There are plenty of young chaps knocking round in this country who reckon they’ve been through it all before they’re thirty. I’ve met cynics and men-o’-the-world, aged twenty-one or thereabouts, who’ve never been further than a trip to Sydney. They talk about ‘this world’ as if they’d knocked around in half-a-dozen other worlds before they came across here—and they are just as off-hand about it as older Australians are when they talk about this colony as compared with the others. They say : ‘My oath!—same here.’ ‘I’ve been there.’ ‘My oath!—you’re right.’ ‘Take it from me!’ and all that sort of thing. They understand women, and have a contempt for ’em; and chaps that don’t talk as they talk, or do as they do, or see as they see, are either soft or ratty. A good many reckon that ‘life ain’t blanky well worth livin’;’ sometimes they feel so blanky somehow that they wouldn’t give a blank whether they chucked it or not; but that sort never chuck it. It’s mostly the quiet men that do that, and if they’ve got any complaints to make against

the world they make 'em at the head station. Why, I've known healthy, single, young fellows under twenty-five who drank to drown their troubles—some because they reckoned the world didn't understand nor appreciate 'em—as if it *could* !”

“If the world don't understand or appreciate you,” said Mitchell solemnly, as he reached for a burning stick to light his pipe—“*make it* !”

“To drown *their* troubles !” continued Joe, in a tone of impatient contempt. “The Oracle must be well on towards the sixties ; he can take his glass with any man, but you never saw him drunk.”

“What's the Oracle to do with it ?”

“Did you ever hear his history ?”

“No. Do you know it ?”

“Yes, though I don't think he has any idea that I do. Now, we were talking about the Oracle a little while ago. We know he's an old ass ; a good many outsiders consider that he's a bit soft or ratty, and, as we're likely to be mates together for some time on that fencing contract, if we get it, you might as well know what sort of a man he is and was, so's you won't get uneasy about him if he gets deaf for awhile when you're talking, or does funny things with his pipe or pint-pot, or walks up and down by himself for an hour or so after tea, or sits on a log with his head in his hands, or leans on the fence in the gloaming and keeps looking in a blank sort of way, straight ahead, across the clearing. For he's gazing at something a thousand miles across country, south-east, and about twenty years back into the past, and no doubt he sees himself (as a young man), and a Gippsland

girl, spooning under the stars along between the hop-gardens and the Mitchell River. And, if you get holt of a fiddle or a concertina, don't rasp or swank too much on old tunes, when he's round, for the Oracle can't stand it. Play something lively. He'll be down there at that surveyor's camp yarning till all hours, so we'll have plenty of time for the story—but don't you ever give him a hint that you know.

"My people knew him well; I got most of the story from them—mostly from Uncle Bob, who knew him better than any. The rest leaked out through the women—you know how things leak out amongst women?"

Mitchell dropped his head and scratched the back of it. *He* knew.

"It was on the Cudgegong River. My Uncle Bob was mates with him on one of those 'rushes' along there—the 'Pipeclay,' I think it was, or the 'Log Paddock.' The Oracle was a young man then, of course, and so was Uncle Bob (he was a match for most men). You see the Oracle now, and you can imagine what he was when he was a young man. Over six feet, and as straight as a sapling, Uncle Bob said, clean-limbed, and as fresh as they made men in those days; carried his hands behind him, as he does now, when he hasn't got the swag—but his shoulders were back in those days. Of course he wasn't the Oracle then; he was young Tom Marshall—but that doesn't matter. Everybody liked him—especially women and children. He was a bit happy-go-lucky and careless, but he didn't know anything about 'this world,' and didn't bother about it; he hadn't 'been

there.' 'And his heart was as good as gold,' my aunt used to say. He didn't understand women as we young fellows do nowadays, and therefore he hadn't any contempt for 'em. Perhaps he understood, and understands, them better than any of us, without knowing it. Anyway, you know, he's always gentle and kind where a woman or child is concerned, and doesn't like to hear us talk about women as we do sometimes.

"There was a girl on the goldfields—a fine lump of a blonde, and pretty gay. She came from Sydney, I think, with her people, who kept shanties on the fields. She had a splendid voice, and used to sing 'Madeline.' There might have been one or two bad women before that, in the Oracle's world, but no cold-blooded, designing ones. He calls the bad ones 'unfortunate.'

"Perhaps it was Tom's looks, or his freshness, or his innocence, or softness—or all together—that attracted her. Anyway, he got mixed up with her before the goldfield petered out.

"No doubt it took a long while for the facts to work into Tom's head that a girl might sing like she did and yet be thoroughly unprincipled. The Oracle was always slow at coming to a decision, but when he does it's generally the right one. Anyway, you can take that for granted, for you won't move him.

"I don't know whether he found out that she wasn't all that she pretended to be to him, or whether they quarrelled, or whether she chucked him over for a lucky digger. Tom never had any luck on the goldfields. Anyway, he left and went over to the

Victorian side, where his people were, and went up Gippsland way. It was there for the first time in his life that he got what you would call 'properly gone on a girl'; he got hard hit—he met his fate.

"Her name was Bertha Bredt, I remember. Aunt Bob saw her afterwards. Aunt Bob used to say that she was 'a girl as God made her'—a good, true, womanly girl—one of those sort of girls that only love once. Tom got on with her father, who was packing horses through the ranges to the new gold-fields—it was rough country and there were no roads; they had to pack everything there in those days, and there was money in it. The girl's father took to Tom—as almost everybody else did—and, as far as the girl was concerned, I think it was a case of love at first sight. They only knew each other for about six months, and were only 'courting' (as they called it then) for three or four months altogether, but she was that sort of girl that can love a man for six weeks and lose him for ever, and yet go on loving him to the end of her life—and die with his name on her lips.

"Well, things were brightening up every way for Tom, and he and his sweetheart were beginning to talk about their own little home in future, when there came a letter from the 'Madeline' girl in New South Wales.

"She was in terrible trouble. Her baby was to be born in a month. Her people had kicked her out, and she was in danger of starving. She begged and prayed of him to come back and marry her, if only for his child's sake. He could go then, and be free;

she would never trouble him any more—only come and marry her for the child's sake.

"The Oracle doesn't know where he lost that letter, but I do. It was burnt afterwards by a woman, who was more than a mother to him in his trouble—Aunt Bob. She thought he might carry it round with the rest of his papers, in his swag, for years, and come across it unexpectedly when he was camped by himself in the bush and feeling dull. It wouldn't have done him any good then.

"He must have fought the hardest fight in his life when he got that letter. No doubt he walked to and fro, to and fro, all night, with his hands behind him, and his eyes on the ground, as he does now sometimes. Walking up and down helps you to fight a thing out.

"No doubt he thought of things pretty well as he thinks now: the poor girl's shame on every tongue, and belled round the district by every hag in the township; and she looked upon by women as being as bad as any man who ever went to Bathurst in the old days, handcuffed between two troopers. There is sympathy, a pipe and tobacco, a cheering word, and, maybe, a whisky now and then, for the criminal on his journey; but there is no mercy, at least as far as women are concerned, for the poor foolish girl, who has to sneak out the back way and round by back streets and lanes after dark, with a cloak on to hide her figure.

"Tom sent what money he thought he could spare, and next day he went to the girl he loved and who loved him, and told her the truth, and showed her

the letter. She was only a girl—but the sort of girl you *could* go to in a crisis like that. He had made up his mind to do the right thing, and she loved him all the more for it. And so they parted.

“When Tom reached ‘Pipeclay,’ the girl’s relations, that she was stopping with, had a parson readied up, and they were married the same day.”

“And what happened after that?” asked Mitchell.

“Nothing happened for three or four months; then the child was born. It wasn’t his!”

Mitchell stood up with an oath.

“The girl was thoroughly bad. She’d been carrying on with God knows how many men, both before and after she trapped Tom.”

“And what did he do then?”

“Well, you know how the Oracle argues over things, and I suppose he was as big an old fool then as he is now. He thinks that, as most men would deceive women if they could, when one man gets caught, he’s got no call to squeal about it; he’s bound, because of the sins of men in general against women, to make the best of it. What is one man’s wrong counted against the wrongs of hundreds of unfortunate girls.

“It’s an uncommon way of arguing—like most of the Oracle’s ideas—but it seems to look all right at first sight.

“Perhaps he thought she’d go straight; perhaps she convinced him that he was the cause of her first fall; anyway he stuck to her for more than a year, and intended to take her away from that place as soon as he’d scraped enough money together. It

might have gone on up till now, if the father of the child—a big black Irishman named Redmond—hadn't come sneaking back at the end of a year. He—well, he came hanging round Mrs. Marshall while Tom was away at work—and she encouraged him. And Tom was forced to see it.

“Tom wanted to fight out his own battle without interference, but the chaps wouldn't let him—they reckoned that he'd stand very little show against Redmond, who was a very rough customer and a fighting man. My uncle Bob, who was there still, fixed it up this way: The Oracle was to fight Redmond, and if the Oracle got licked Uncle Bob was to take Redmond on. If Redmond whipped Uncle Bob, that was to settle it; but if Uncle Bob thrashed Redmond, then he was also to fight Redmond's mate, another big, rough Paddy named Duigan. Then the affair would be finished—no matter which way the last bout went. You see, Uncle Bob was reckoned more of a match for Redmond than the Oracle was, so the thing looked fair enough—at first sight.

“Redmond had his mate, Duigan, and one or two others of the rough gang that used to terrorise the fields round there in the roaring days of Gulgong. The Oracle had Uncle Bob, of course, and long Dave Regan, the drover—a good-hearted, sawny kind of chap that'd break the devil's own buck-jumper, or smash him, or get smashed himself—and little Jimmy Nowlett, the bullocky, and one or two of the old, better-class diggers that were left on the field.

“There's a clear space among the saplings in

Specimen Gully, where they used to pitch circuses; and here, in the cool of a summer evening, the two men stood face to face. Redmond was a rough, roaring, foul-mouthed man; he stripped to his shirt, and roared like a bull, and swore, and sneered, and wanted to take the whole of Tom's crowd while he was at it, and make one clean job of 'em. Couldn't waste time fighting them all one after the other, because he wanted to get away to the new rush at Cattle Creek next day. The fool had been drinking shanty-whisky.

"Tom stood up in his clean, white moles and white flannel shirt—one of those sort with no sleeves, that give the arms play. He had a sort of set expression and a look in his eyes that Uncle Bob—nor none of them—had ever seen there before. 'Give us plenty of —— room!' roared Redmond; 'one of us is going to hell, now! This is going to be a fight to a —— finish, and a —— short one!' And it was!

"'Go on,' said Mitchell—'go on!'

Joe drew a long breath.

"The Oracle never got a mark! He was top-dog right from the start. Perhaps it was his strength that Redmond had underrated, or his want of science that puzzled him, or the awful silence of the man that frightened him (it made even Uncle Bob uneasy). Or, perhaps, it was Providence (it was a glorious chance for Providence), but, anyway, as I say, the Oracle never got a mark, except on his knuckles. After a few rounds Redmond funked and wanted to give in, but the chaps wouldn't let him—not even his own mates—except Duigan. They made him take it

as long as he could stand on his feet. He even shammed to be knocked out, and roared out something about having broken his —— ankle—but it was no use. And the Oracle! The chaps that knew thought that he'd refuse to fight, and never hit a man that had given in. But he did. He just stood there with that quiet look in his eyes and waited, and, when he did hit, there wasn't any necessity for Redmond to *pretend* to be knocked down. You'll see a glint of that old light in the Oracle's eyes even now, once in a while; and when you do it's a sign that you or someone are going too far, and had better pull up, for it's a red light on the line, old as he is.

"Now, Jimmy Nowlett was a nuggety little fellow, hard as cast iron, good-hearted, but very excitable; and when the bashed Redmond was being carted off (poor Uncle Bob was always pretty high-strung, and was sitting on a log sobbing like a great child from the reaction), Duigan made some sneering remark that only Jimmy Nowlett caught. and in an instant he was up and at Duigan.

"Perhaps Duigan was demoralised by his mate's defeat, or by the suddenness of the attack; but, at all events, he got a hiding, too. Uncle Bob used to say that it was the funniest thing he ever saw in his life. Jimmy kept yelling: 'Let me get at him! By the Lord, let me get at him!' And nobody was attempting to stop him, he *was* getting at him all the time—and properly, too; and, when he'd knocked Duigan down, he'd dance round him and call on him to get up; and every time he jumped or bounced, he'd squeak like an india-rubber ball, Uncle Bob said,

and he would nearly burst his boiler trying to lug the big man on to his feet so's he could knock him down again. It took two of Jimmy's mates all their time to lam him down into a comparatively reasonable state of mind after the fight was over.

"The Oracle left for Sydney next day, and Uncle Bob went with him. He stayed at Uncle Bob's place for some time. He got very quiet, they said, and gentle; he used to play with the children, and they got mighty fond of him. The old folks thought his heart was brcken, but it went through a deeper sorrow still after that and it ain't broken yet. It takes a lot to break the heart of a man."

"And his wife," asked Mitchell—"what became of her?"

"I don't think he ever saw her again. She dropped down pretty low after he left her—I've heard she's living somewhere quietly. The Oracle's been sending someone money ever since I knew him, and I know it's a woman. I suppose it's she. He isn't the sort of a man to see a woman starve—especially a woman he had ever had anything to do with."

"And the Gippsland girl?" asked Mitchell.

"That's the worst part of it all, I think. The Oracle went up North somewhere. In the course of a year or two his affair got over Gippsland way through a mate of his who lived over there, and at last the story got to the ears of this girl, Bertha Bredt. She must have written a dozen letters to him, Aunt Bob said. She knew what was in 'em, but, of course, she'd never tell us. The Oracle only wrote one in reply. Then, what must the girl do but clear out

from home and make her way over to Sydney—to Aunt Bob's place, looking for Tom. She never got any further. She took ill—brain-fever, or broken heart, or something of that sort. All the time she was down her cry was—‘I want to see him! I want to find Tom! I only want to see Tom!’

“When they saw she was dying, Aunt Bob wired to the Oracle to come—and he came. When the girl saw it was Tom sitting by the bed, she just gave one long look in his face, put her arms round his neck, and laid her head on his shoulder—and died. . . . Here comes the Oracle now.”

Mitchell lifted the tea-billy on to the coals.

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