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BUSHMEN ALL.

A Romance of the Never-Never.

BY

GILES SEAGRAM,

Author of "Jack Halliday, Stockman."

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E. W. COLE,

MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY.

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To My Old and Tried Friend,

CHARLES MALEY.

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BUSHMEN ALL.

PROLOGUE.

It was a dark night in October. Now and then thick masses of cloud parted for an instant and revealed a moon nearly at the full. These momentary gleams of light did but intensify the gloom that followed. The place was the road from Ballarat to Bungaree. The year one of the early sixties.

A solitary swagman trudged along the track. Ever and anon he stopped, and, turning round, listened. At last he came to where the road branched. To the left ran the way to Jasper's Glen Avon Station. That to Bungaree bore to the right. Throwing down his swag, he sat on it, and peered anxiously into the darkness which blotted out the track on which he had come. He looked so long, and listened so intently that the beating of his heart disturbed him. He took out a flask and drank.

"If Ben is playin' the fool," he muttered savagely, "I'll make it 'ot for 'im. I'll crack is bloomin' lay for 'im, or else he'll ante up pretty stiff." After a pause he added, "Blast the job, I don't arf like it."

Presently the sound of voices raised in anger caused him to spring to his feet and move a few feet further from the road. A farmer's cart containing two men, and having a saddled horse tied behind, emerged from the darkness moving slowly towards him. The occupants were evidently quarrelling. The spring cart

stopped at the parting of the ways, and a young man jumped out.

"I'll make yer pay for this night's work, Barney," he said with an oath, as he mounted the horse and turned on the Glen Avon track.

"Aw right, Ben," hiccoughed the other with tipsy gravity, "I'll sus-sus-see you in Li-Li-Liver-pool. G-g-git up, Dandy."

"Give us a lift, boss, will yer?" said the swagman, suddenly coming forward.

The farmer and the traveller drove off, leaving the horseman gazing curiously after them. After several nobblers apiece, Barney succumbed to sleep and slipped off the seat. The swagman looked at him for a few moments, during which another cart met and passed them.

Then he commenced to search Barney's pockets. His efforts partially roused the farmer, who showed fight. The robber persisted and Barney woke right up. A struggle ensued.

Dandy, urged to it by the noise in the cart, quickened his pace. The reins dangled over the front and fell on his hind legs. He broke into a canter. In their excitement neither man noticed nor heeded the increased speed.

A hundred yards ahead an old man was camped. Hearing the clatter of the cart he rose, and, as it came level with him, struck a match. Dandy shied and turned sharply to the right. While still on the sidling one wheel struck against a stump and the men were thrown violently out. A sapling jammed between the wheel and the body of the cart brought Dandy to a standstill.

The swagman was on his feet in a moment. He examined the other in some concern. "'E ain't dead, anyway," he muttered, "on'y dead drunk."

A moment later the clouds parted and the moon shot a ray of light over the scene. The illumination lasted but a couple of seconds, yet in that time the old man—the innocent cause of the disaster—took in the whole details.

"Snarly Joe's gitin' on," he grunted, "he's on a fair way to git lagged."

Ten minutes later he was looking at the farmer's dead body by the light of a flickering wax match. Daylight the next morning found him between Creswick and Clunes.

CHAPTER I.

THE STICKING UP OF COOMARELLA.

Early one morning in January, long ere the summer sun shot its first ray of light like a veritable flame of fire across the awful desolation of the Coomarella Plain, two mounted men, leading pack-horses, emerged from the gidyea scrub and made their way to the track which wound its sinuous course eastward. They were typical native bushmen of that period. Tall, large-boned, and muscular, and carrying not an ounce of superfluous flesh, they appeared in the full pride of their manhood to be equal to any test of skill, courage, or endurance to which Fate or Fortune might put them. The younger was fair and cheerful, the other was a trifle shorter and stouter, and five or six years older. He was dark and morose looking. Both wore the conventional stock-rider's garb of that time—blue shirt, strapped moles, and cabbage tree hat.

They had scarcely reached the track when a black-fellow appeared on the top of a low rise a couple of hundred yards ahead of them. He was riding an old grey horse and led another which was heavily packed.

“One of McCaber's bloomin' niggers,” growled the dark man as they approached each other, “doin' a white man out of a job. I'd like to pot 'im on the wing; the blessed country's goin' to the dogs—ruined by cheap labor.”

His companion laughed merrily.

“Worry about cheap labor? Not me! Black shoot black—that would never do, Jim.”

Then in a rollicking voice he broke forth into song—

Oh, I'm looking for a job,
Not a copper in my fob,
But I'd sooner rove—and rob—
Than be a squatter's man.

By this time they had reached the blackfellow, who had stopped and awaited their approach.

“Hullo Snowy! What name you?” asked the younger man, who called himself White, while he addressed his companion as Black.

The boy grinned from ear to ear, making a dazzling display of teeth as he answered “’Amlet.”

“Great Cæsar!” ejaculated his questioner.

“Whaffor you yabba Teesar?” he said angrily, “baal budgery pfella you, mine think it. Teesar bin’ all same pflour bag. Whaffor you monkey yabba. Pompey bin’ crack ’em ole man Teesar eobra with nulla-nulla, ’im bin tumble down *long time*.”

White whistled softly, then murmured to himself, “Queen Anne’s dead,” and laughed.

“Whaffor,” said the black more angrily, “you big pfella pfool. Baal Anne tumble down, ’im bin’ walk-about longa creek three pfella moon.”

Shaking the reins he made a start forward, but the sight of Black’s revolver and a sharp direction to stop, caused him to pull up abruptly, assume a sullen aspect, and remain stubbornly silent.

When White had exhausted his patience as well as his persuasive powers, in a vain effort to get the blackboy to speak, he handed him over to the more vigorous treatment of his mate.

“Here Jim,” he said, “try your hand on this lump of dumb ebony, but don’t be too rough; he’d be missed.”

Black smiled sardonically. “Never fear, I’ll make

the nigger speak. I've never been bested by any black varmint yet."

He proceeded to "make the nigger speak" by the curious method of depriving him of the power to do so. This he did by subjecting him to a process of gradual asphyxiation. And, as the grip of his powerful fingers slowly tightened on the blackboy's throat, he became more and more impressive (and blasphemous), in his commands to his hapless victim to speak. His usually unprepossessing face was now livid with rage, and a murderous gleam blazed from his maddened eyes.

"Stop! Let go!" said White in sharp imperative tones, very unlike his usual suave accent, and the other relaxed his grasp at once. The blackboy fell to the ground. White sprang to his side. A moment's observation convinced him that the boy was coming round, so calmly filling his pipe, he waited for his revival, apparently ignoring his mate altogether.

When Hamlet recovered sufficiently to be able to speak he was thoroughly cowed, though one glance of mingled terror and hate which he cast on Black, boded ill for him should he at any future time be at the mercy of the blackfellow. Then he said that he was on his way out with rations to the stockmen at Emu Lake, where the sadly diminished herds of Coomarella were being tailed. Emu Lake, the only permanent water on the run, was distant a day's journey, which his questioner interpreted as meaning 40 miles. Asked as to the head station he stated that there was no one there, except the boss and the cook. The reason given was scarcity of water and absolute absence of feed within 30 miles of the homestead. A few horses were kept yarded and fed on a little bush hay which still

remained from that which had been garnered during the last good season. He further stated that "the boss big pfella growl and the cook piccaninny growl from sun jump-up to sun lie-down."

With strict injunctions to go straight out to Emu Lake and not to hurry back, the blackboy was speeded on his journey. Breaking into a smart canter White and his mate soon covered the three or four miles which intervened between them and the station. They rode up to the back of the men's hut, and, hanging up their horses, went in to interview the cook.

"Good day 'Doctor,'" said the younger man as he entered. "Why, Grigg, old fellow, how are you? Who'd'a' thought of your being in this wretched hole. Shake hands, old man. Come in Jim, here's an old friend, Grigg, from the Warrego."

The cook shook White's hand saying, "Hullo, Dick!" and stared carelessly at the other.

Turning to the safe he produced some corned beef of a full age and corresponding toughness, and a damper which tried to atone for its monstrous hardness of crust, by the wondrous softness and stickiness of its crumb. Placing a couple of pannikins on the rough slabs which served as a table, he pointed to a billycan half full of tea which was gently simmering at the fire, and, turning away, went on with his work.

Dick pulled a wry face but laughed pleasantly and made a determined attack on the beef and damper. Most of the meat found its way—after vain efforts at the mastication of some of it—to the capacious maw of a half-bred cattle pup, which fraternised with Dick at once, but which looked at Black with evident suspicion. After surreptitiously removing the inside

from his piece of damper and vainly soaking the crust in the tea. White suggested that his mate should interview Mr. McCaber with reference to the purchase of rations, while he would attend to the horses.

Jim, who had made no pretence of eating, and had, therefore, fallen under Grigg's displeasure, rose at once, and without a word walked outside. The pup being busy chasing his tail—as all healthy minded, self-respecting pups do—did not notice Black's movement until he ran against his legs and received a vicious kick, which sent him sprawling and howling half way across the hut. The cook shook his fist at Jim's retreating figure and muttered, "You cur, I know yer."

Before attending to the horses, Dick picked up and petted the dog and apologised to the old man for his mate's rudeness, the only acknowledgment being a grunt.

"No wonder they call him Old Grumps," he said to himself as he led the horses to the yards which were about 200 yards from the hut in the opposite direction from the Government House.

It was a time of drought in the Never-Never country. Very little rain had fallen for the last two years, and none at all for over twelve months. The outside runs had suffered severely. Many were already abandoned, and the depleted remains of the numerous herds had been left to take their chance. McCaber, of Coomarella, still hung on tenaciously, hoping 'gainst hope for the rain which came not. His mental state was divided between praying for a deluge and heartily anathematising all and sundry. He was a hard man, unpopular with his compeers, and hated by the rank and file of bushmen. "Flint-face" the latter called

him, and if ever an outward appellation satisfactorily described the inner nature it did so in his case. This was the man whom saturnine Jim Black was about to interrogate with a view to the purchase of rations, while his mate Dick was unostentatiously helping himself to the scanty stock of fodder stored in a small shed at the yards.

The Government House consisted of two rooms, one behind the other, with a verandah all round. The walls were slabs, pugged without and bag lined within. The roof was of cane grass thatch over a bag ceiling. The floors were of mother earth, hardened and in places worn by continued traffic.

Black knocked at the open door, and McCaber, thinking it was the cook, called out roughly, "Come in. What the dickens do you want now?"

His visitor stepped inside the front room, which was empty, and waited. Presently the squatter entered it from the back, and, encountering the forbidding looking stranger, demanded with an oath, who he was and what he wanted.

"Any chance of work. Boss?" asked Jim with an ugly leer which was the nearest approach to a smile that ever ventured to trespass on such unlikely ground.

"Work," he laughed heartily and derisively. "No, there isn't. Who are you and what are you?"

"James Black, stockman."

"Well, Mr. James Black, make yourself scarce. I've no work, and if I had I would not give it you. Git now, do you hear?"

"If yer won't give me work, will yer sell me some rations. I suppose you'll do that."

"Your impudence is on a par with your ignorance.

No, I won't sell you rations, neither will I give you any. What business have you coming here? Who asked you to come here? Clear out. Do you hear?" His orders were followed by a volley of oaths.

The stockman never budged, but his dark face grew darker, and his eyes began to show the dangerous glitter which bespoke his rising passion. With a palpable effort he controlled himself and quietly confronted the infuriated squatter, who was not accustomed to being bearded in his own den. Both men were silent for a moment looking steadily into each other's eyes. Then the visitor spoke.

"A man must live, Boss. It's mighty rough to be told to starve when I'm willing to give yer own price. What can I do?"

"Do." and he laughed unpleasantly. "Why, clear out. Herd with the niggers. You're Black by name and black enough by nature. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"If yer won't sell me rations I'll take 'em." He made a half step forward as he spoke, but checked himself.

McCaber sprang back a couple of paces, and, taking down a rifle from the wall, turned, and, raising the weapon, threatened to put a bullet through him if he wasn't out of the house in ten seconds.

Black turned towards the door, and as he reached the threshold, glanced round. The squatter was following him, but had lowered the gun. Instantly he swung round and threw himself on his antagonist. Quick though his action was, it was not quick enough, for just as he grappled with McCaber the latter brought up the rifle and pulled the trigger. Though pulled at a venture it nearly accomplished its purpose. As it came

into position Black swerved to one side, and the bullet grazed his ear and cheek, and found its exit through the bag and thatch.

"You murderin' villain," gasped the stockman as he grasped the other by the throat, receiving but not heeding two tremendous blows on the head.

The two men were fairly well matched. The squatter was heavier and taller. His antagonist had a decided advantage in the throat grip, but was more excited, and had his powers less under control; for when McCaber realised his peril he became cool and calculating, and endeavoured as far as possible to husband his strength for the supreme effort. He might eventually have triumphed but for an accident. In the very nature of things the struggle could not last long. The strain was too great, the call on the physical powers too exhausting, to be long drawn out.

They reeled from side to side. Black with his terrible clutch on the other's throat defended himself with the right hand from the squatter's rapid, well delivered blows. Presently they crashed against the table over which was hanging a slush lamp ingeniously contrived to give a modicum of more light by being fashioned from an inverted brandy bottle, cut in half and suspended neck downwards. The mouth was securely corked to prevent the water, which more than half filled the lamp, from escaping. Upon this transparent fluid the fat which provided the illuminating power floated. As the bottles, glasses, pannikins, and other articles went flying in all directions, the bottom of the lamp touched McCaber's face.

Instantly an inspiration seized him. He was beginning to feel the force of Black's hand upon his throat.

He could not endure it much longer. The touch of glass on his cheek acted like a charm. He seized the oscillating lamp by the neck, and with a strength born of renewed but desperate hope, he wrenched it from its suspending wires. Throwing the water and fat straight into his opponent's face, he drove the upper part of the bottle which, though fairly well cut, had a slightly jagged edge, with all his might against the hand and wrist which with such cruel persistency gripped his throat, and was gradually becoming more vice-like and rigid.

With a cry of mingled pain and rage Black involuntarily released his hold and momentarily drew back. McCaber drawing a long breath and striving to follow up the temporary advantage he had gained, struck wildly but uncertainly with the rough edge of his novel but formidable weapon. Jim partially avoided the blow, but a small arc of the serrated circle struck his cheek obliquely and travelling across it, made three or four irregular furrows from which the blood flowed freely.

Both men were by this time much distressed, and their efforts lacked both the spirit and force which had characterised their initial endeavours. The combat appeared to have resolved itself into a question of physical endurance. Rapidly weakening though they were, neither would willingly slacken his efforts. It was a duel *a l'outrance*. To an observer the farcical element in a struggle between antagonists now too exhausted to seriously hurt one another, would have been most in evidence. To the actors themselves it was tragedy—a life and death struggle. Panting, almost gasping for breath, and reeling and staggering like drunken men, they still faced each other, making feeble and unavailing efforts to gain the advantage.

Presently the squatter, imagining he saw an opportunity to force the fight, aimed a little more vigorous blow, and Black ducked and closed with him. McCaber was borne back a pace, and tripped over one of the inequalities in the floor. He struggled to regain his equilibrium, but his opponent, realising his advantage, exerted all his remaining strength in a final effort, and the squatter went down, his head striking the earth with a dull thud. The lamp struck the slab wall in falling and was shattered into a thousand pieces.

The fall produced partial insensibility for a few moments, and when McCaber recovered consciousness Black was sitting across his chest, almost exhausted but triumphant. Neither spoke: in fact, they were for a few seconds physically incapable of coherent utterance. Then the stockman, who during the delirium of the previous rough and tumble combat had forgotten his firearms, suddenly remembered them. He promptly drew his revolver, and with another villainous leer on his swollen, discolored, scarred and bleeding face, held it within six inches of the other's head.

Not a word was said, but both men glared at each other, eye to eye, like wild beasts. Only for a few seconds however. McCaber was a brave man, but the fiendish hate and the tigerish ferocity which gleamed from below those black brows above him, struck a chill to his heart. This man, in whose power he was, was capable of all evil, he read murder plainly in that distorted, sensual face, and in those speaking eyes. He shifted his gaze.

The other laughed, if laugh it could be called, when not a muscle moved and only an ugly sounding note was emitted from the throat.

"Now you dog," he muttered, still breathing heavily. "will yer sell me some tucker now? Some weevily blackfellow's flour at a bob a pound, eh?"

"No, I'll——" began McCaber. He never finished the sentence. The refusal had barely left his mouth when the other plunged the barrel of his bulldog revolver between his teeth. This operation effectively precluded for the time being, any further remarks from the squatter.

"Look, you old 'Flint Face,' you 'ungry 'ound, yer black labor beast, yer bullyin' eur, I'm top dog now, and so 'elp me ten men and a boy, I'll blow the back of your blasted 'ead off if you don't promise to sell me some of yer doubly rotten maggotty flour and sugar. I will, my colonial oath, I will. Will you sell, or shall I fire? Speak now or you'll never darned well speak again. I'll count three and then——"

The squatter, white as a sheet, tried to do as requested, but with three inches of steel jammed hard against his throat, he found articulation impossible.

"One," said Black slowly, "two ——"

At that moment Dick appeared at the door.

"What ho, Jimmy," he cried, "have you got those rations yet? Hullo! what's up? Had an earthquake? Oh, I see!" he continued, smiling as he glanced around the room, "been having a friendly spar, or was it a wrestling match? Cumberland or Cornish rules, which? Anyhow, I see you've tossed the caber. Ha! Ha! Ha! What is it, Jim?"

"The bloomin' skinflint won't give or sell any rations," growled his mate. "Won't even speak."

"Take that steel pipe out of his clapper trap. Much as he likes smoking, he prefers short clays to long steels.

You, Jim, you prefer long steals, the longer the better. Ha! Ha! Come," he added sharply, "take out that iron and give the man a chance."

Slowly and reluctantly Black did as directed, and, also at Dick's order, rose from his seat on his enemy's chest and leaned against the wall, revolver still in hand.

"Now, McCaber," said Dick quietly, "get up and fill our ration bags and we'll pay you, or we shall be compelled to help ourselves."

Thoroughly beaten, and realising the folly as well as the uselessness of further resistance, the squatter did as requested. Dick compelled him to make out an account which ran as follows :—"14 lbs. flour at 1s., 7 lbs. sugar at 1s. 6d., 1 lb. tea at 5s., $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. salt 6d.; total. £1 10s."

"What name shall I put ?" asked McCaber.

"Black and White," said Dick laughing. "We're like the labor employed on Coomarella, piebald."

After a good dinner in Government House, set for three, when the slender resources of the store were well nigh exhausted in supplying the demand of the two guests for tinned fish, preserves, and pickles, Black produced a bottle of battle-axe brandy which he had fossicked out from among the squatter's hidden treasures. Dick took one nobbler only, and, refusing to allow his mate more than two, gave a stiff one to the old cook, and politely returned the bottle to its owner.

Half an hour afterwards the visitors left, riding two beautiful bay mares, with well developed, well-bred foals at foot, and driving their own four horses well packed with canteens of water and bundles of bush hay. When they had gone there was not a station horse available nearer than Emu Lake over forty miles distant.

CHAPTER II.

ANDY GILLIGAN'S MIDNIGHT VISITORS.

Across the dreary downs, through the evil smelling, stifling gidyea scrub, over the occasional barren, mulga-topped ironstone rises, and up and down the long low hills of loose red, hot, shifting sand, rode the two robbers, for such their action at Coomarella stock yards proved them to be. At long intervals they came upon and passed over the dry bed of a creek, fringed with gnarled, wind-bent, stunted, hollow-trunked red gums, which with difficulty maintained a precarious existence. Once or twice they picked their way across considerable stretches of black alluvial flats, studded here and there with dying or dead box trees, and cracked by the long continued heat and drought—into innumerable fissures, deep and wide, rendering considerable detours unavoidable. But whatever variation was presented to their sight by plain or hill, sand or scrub, watercourse or flat, there was still the same deadly monotony of a fiery sun overhead and a parched, lifeless land underfoot. Grass there was none, edible bush there was none. Animal life was almost non-existent and was solely confined to a reptile or two and a few insects, mostly ants.

By two o'clock that afternoon they had traversed twenty miles or so, and began to feel the fearful heat, untempered as it was by the slightest breeze, no longer endurable. The grateful shade of a large bean tree attracted their attention, and in a few moments they were under its shelter. But they speedily discovered that the ant claimed ownership by virtue of the law not

only of priority of discovery, but of effective occupation. The whole of the space which was free from the pitiless glare of the sun literally swarmed with members of the various emmet tribes. These promptly combined to make common cause against the intruders, and with such success that Dick and his mate were forced to adopt retaliatory measures.

"Look here, Jim, these vermin must go, or we shall have to. Let's sweep 'em out into the sun."

So saying he began to break down some branches, which, with the aid of a couple of saddle straps he speedily converted into a good serviceable broom. Black followed his example, and in a few minutes both were busily engaged in clearing the shade space and forcing the ants outside. They worked hard and with considerable success, large numbers of their insignificant but persistent tormentors being passed through the fire, a sacrifice to Moloch. A very few moments exposure to the direct rays of the sun sufficed to kill them. They literally frizzled up as if in contact with actual fire.

The partial respite from the annoying attentions of the ants which their vigorous measures brought to them was, however, dearly bought. The unwonted exertion in the great heat, following the wearying ride of several hours, rendered their stay under the bean tree anything but one of peace and repose. They sat and smoked in silence for awhile, Black apparently absorbed in thought, while the other kept up a desultory fight with stray bands of the enemy.

Presently, after a rather vigorous onslaught upon a phalanx of black ants, he exclaimed, "By Jove, Jim, we've crossed the blooming barrier this time."

"What d'yer mean?" growled the other.

"Mean? Why we've got over the knot this time. This thing is robbery under arms. We've stuck up Coomarella. Highway robbery! This means swinging sure enough if they catch us."

"There'll be blood spilt afore they git me," said Black, turning and looking fixedly at his mate.

Dick regarded him in silence for a moment, and then burst into laughter.

"Why, Jim, your mother wouldn't know you, let alone Sergeant O'Halloran. You look like the damaged front of a chemist's shop."

"Chemist's shop!" echoed the other. "If I'd got my bloomin' way with the old swine, I'd 'ave made a butcher's shop of the Government 'Ouse."

"You fool," rejoined Dick pleasantly. "That temper of yours will hang you yet. As it is, you've put the pot on fairly well. Through your blamed foolishness you've turned us into horse thieves and bushrangers."

"We was cattle duffers before, so what's it matter?" growled Black.

"Lifting a few cleanskin poddies or even a 'beef' or two is good business. The profits are sure and the risks trifling, but sweating branded warrigals after nearly murdering their owner is bad. No market for goods and detection sure. McCaber holds the cards now, and he'll play the game and give no chances. He's no blessed mug."

"Mug! Blast old 'Flintface.' If ever I see 'is ugly mug again I'll let daylight into that carcase of 'is as sure as my name's Jim Black."

"In that case McCaber will live long," laughed Dick. "Tell me, now," he continued, "is James Blood *really*

your name, or is it only a bush name like Black. If it isn't, it ought to be ; it describes you so well."

"Does it?" sneered the other. "Yer tryin' to be funny. 'Ow many darned names 'ave you got besides White an' Carter? Yer judgin' me by yerself."

"If I am, then Blood you are, as you ought to be, for Richard Carter is my name, and, like Tim Doolan, 'of poor but honest parents,' I was born on the Old Man Plain. Then he carolled forth a verse of the "Wild Colonial Boy" and wound up by saying, "Dick Carter of Cunnamulla, the real Simon Pure, at your service."

"Rats," said Black sharply. Then he continued somewhat inconsequentially, "Besides it was you as took the flamin' prads an' now yer want to put it on to me. Call yerself a mate?"

Without pausing for a reply he launched forth into a comprehensive condemnation of things in general and bush matters in particular. He included in his sweeping denunciation the country, the climate, the police, Grigg and his dog, McCaber and his ancestors, the two bay mares, his mate's hilarity, and his own doubly condemned visual optics. After this vigorous philippic he subsided into sudden silence, finding an outlet for his pent-up passion in a series of warlike operations, conducted with a stick upon the unfortunate ants within range.

Dick sat and smoked, ruminating the while upon the best course of action to pursue, and noticing with an amused smile his mate's ineffective efforts to drive away his insignificant tormentors. Presently he put his pipe down and spoke, this time quietly but with a tone of authority.

"Look here, Jim, we're in a tight place. There's no

mistake in that, and McCaber holds the winning cards, if he can only play them, but in spite of that I think we can get the bulge on him. You accuse me of taking the yarramen. Of course I did. It was our only hope. If we'd left 'em for Flintface we should have had Buckley's chance of getting away. Now, we get two days start and the best horses on the run. The nigger can't be back till to-morrow night, and his old crocks are poor, and not in the same paddock as the bays. Now then. Jim, could we have done anything else?"

"No, I s'pose not," somewhat reluctantly assented his mate, who had relinquished his death-dealing operations, and was soothing his ruffled feelings with a quid of black American.

"When we get through this wretched desert—forty miles will fetch the first water, and another twenty the first grass or bush—we can leave the track and strike across country to Andy's Gilligan's, dab Thorpe's brand on the foals and leave them."

"What! Show ourselves on the Warrego?" exclaimed Black. "why the bloomin' traps from Charleville or Cunnamulla would have the darbies on us in no time. See any green?"

"Rather, Jim, in fact your noble phiz has a speaking display of all the colors of the rainbow and more, but not so nicely arranged, too much black and blue, and rather blurred."

"Cheese yer chyackin' an' go ahead with the yarn."

"My plan," continued Dick, "is to get the best yarramen Thorpe or Gilligan has got and strike out west. Last summer I was out with the old man away past Boolaroola looking at some country he was going to take up. We discovered a splendid water hole which

the niggers told us—we had a black boy, Micky the Dart, with us who knew their lingo—was never known to be dry. They called it Bulla-bullina. It was full of fish, and the country was alive with game, and the feed was splendid. If we can get back a bit, without being seen, no one would ever dream of looking for us there. What do you think of it ?”

“ Yes,” answered Black, “ it seems all right, but its darned risky showin’ our noses on the Warrego.”

“ Risky ! Of course it is, but we’re not bread and butter, milk and water men. Besides, when men stick up a station and do grievous bodily harm to the squatter, not to mention robbing him, they must be prepared to take risks. What do you say ?”

“ Good enough, I’m yer colonial Moses. We’d better clear straight away.”

* * * * *

Late one night about ten days after the Coomarella incident, two men rode up to Andy Gilligan’s public house on the Warrego. That worthy was abed, but upon learning the identity of his nocturnal callers he rose with alacrity, and admitted them. After a few moment’s hurried conversation he left the room—having previously supplied some liquid refreshments—and presently returned with a young man whose general appearance, manners, and dress bespoke him a town and not a bush-bred lad. Him he introduced to the two travellers as George Monty, a man who could be trusted to keep quiet and who was “ pretty fly.”

“ These are friends of mine, George,” he said. “ They’ve just come across from Thargomindah, and want to get to Bourke and on to Sydney to blow their cheques. What horses have we in the yards to-night ?

These gentlemen want two first class hacks and two good packs. They will exchange with us, giving four horses and two foals, besides leaving here two horses which got mixed up with theirs. They don't want to be bothered with 'em any longer." He winked slowly and deliberately at Monty as he concluded.

"We've Black Arrow and the Barber, two of the best prads on the river, and for packhorses, old Yorkie and Chester are in good fettle and as tough as nails."

"They'll do splendidly, George. Will you take these gentlemen's horses to the yard, and saddle up those you've named and bring them down to the house? Take off the gear before you go. Here," he continued, holding out the bottle, "take a nip, and be as slick as you can."

In a short time the four new steeds were at the door, and the packs were being loaded with a fresh supply of stores, including powder and shot and fish hooks. It was fully an hour before dawn when the two men started, equipped and provisioned for a far longer journey than to Bourke. Everything had been done so quietly that no one save Andy Gilligan and his man Monty, knew of their visit.

The next morning the two foals duly received the recognised and well-known brand of Samuel Thorpe, Esq., owner of Keedoorra Station, situated about a mile from Keedoorra Hotel, kept by Mr. Andrew Gilligan. Then with a number of other animals they were driven a few miles back from the river and turned into one of the station paddocks. Two of the horses (bay mares) which had been left by the midnight visitors, were placed in a small paddock joining the yards where a number of others were temporarily depasturing. The following

morning the whole were yarded and started on the road for the Sydney market.

The mob was owned by Thorpe, and all bore the T.K. brand of Keedoorra except the two bay mares. Though the drovers were station hands, yet, strange to say, their Boss listened to and accepted instructions from Andy Gilligan without protest. Just before the slip rails were thrown down and the mob started on the Bourke-road, Tom Flowers, the drover in charge, and the publican were closeted together in a small room off the bar. Glasses and a bottle were on the table. Gilligan was speeding the parting guest with a final bumper of Hennessy's battle-axe and a choice of the best cigars the Warrego afforded.

"Drink up, Tom, and have another. No? Well then take another cigar, that's right! . They're the best on the river. I keep them for my special pals and for special times. Now about those two bays. Keep them in the mob until near Bourke, then cut them out and leave them behind, or, better still, pound 'em at Bourke. Picked up by your mob just a few miles outside, you understand."

"Yes," answered Flowers slowly, "I savvee. But what if I'm challenged by the traps to-morrow, or the next day, or any day before I make Bourke?"

"You've only got the one yarn to remember, don't alter it. It's like falling off a log; it's so simple."

"Right you are, Andy. Which way are *they* gone?"

"I really don't know. Tom, they wouldn't tell me, but anyhow they started down the river." He spoke so quietly and with such apparent candour that the drover almost believed him.

The rails were down and the mob headed down the

Bourke road. The two bays broke away and endeavoured to make back, but Flowers was at that moment mounting his steed.

"So long, Andy," he cried, and, clapping his heels into Coolibah, he headed the recalcitrant horses back to the mob.

About a fortnight afterwards the Sydney papers narrated the particulars of the extraordinary sticking up of Coomarella Station in the far west of Queensland by two bushrangers, who, after grievously assaulting the owner, Mr. McCaber, and one of his blackboys, had stolen two of the station horses, no trace of which had yet been discovered. The police were scouring the country, and it was confidently expected that the miscreants would soon be arrested.

A week later the following paragraph appeared, headed "The Sticking up of Coomarella. We have been informed that the two valuable horses stolen from Coomarella by the bushrangers calling themselves Black and White have been recovered at Bourke. It appears that Drover Flowers, in charge of a mob of Keedoorah horses, noticed two strange animals come into the mob a few miles out of Bourke and reported the fact to Sergeant O'Halloran, who at once identified them as the stolen pair. No trace of the men has been found, and the police are absolutely without any clue as to their whereabouts. They are believed to have separated, and are supposed to be in hiding in the settled districts. It was rumored last night that one of them had been seen in Sydney, but the rumor has not been confirmed."

CHAPTER III.

BOOLAROOOLA: PLACE AND PEOPLE.

Boolaroola Station was out west in New South Wales. It was a long way out. It was not on any of the big rivers, but in the back country. The Homestead was built on the creek of the same name. Creek was its courtesy title, dry ditch or narrow gutter would have been a more matter-of-fact designation. It had its source at the north end of Rat's Range, often called the Devil's Footsteps.

This was the only elevation of any note on the run, or indeed for many miles beyond. It was merely an iron-stone ridge or combination of ridges, consisting of three successive steps or plateaux, the most easterly being the highest. The whole extent of the range was perhaps four miles long by nearly a mile wide. The highest point was sometimes called Mount Rat. The creek ran along the foot of its western slope to its southern extremity. Here it swerved to the right and pursued a westerly course until it finally debouched on to a salt-bush plain, in the middle of which was a swamp, surrounded by a few stunted, unhealthy looking gums.

This swamp had been rather grandiloquently named Jaspermere, after the owner of the run. Though generally dry, the timber around it bore unmistakeable evidence of big floods in the past, which from the high watermark attained, must not only have filled the swamp but have covered the entire plain.

David Jasper, in taking up the country, had been largely influenced by that fact. True, no white man

had seen the country in that condition ; but, argued Mr. Jasper. " What has been will be again, and the more remote the last flood the nearer the next one."

Where the creek left the timbered land and entered the plain it ran through a red clay rise, about six miles below the station. Here the channel was deep, and the banks which were about twenty feet apart, very precipitous. At the Homestead the creek was wider and deeper, and the banks of a gently sloping gradient. Here was the only depression of any size, or holding capacity in its whole length. Here also the timber was larger and of better quality than elsewhere. These facts accounted for the selection of the site as suitable for the Head Station.

At the time of which I write the run had not long been taken up. Mr. Jasper was a Victorian, who, finding his native country too cribbed, cabined, and confined to allow of the expansion he desired, quitted it for the greater opportunities afforded by the larger areas offered, and lower rents demanded by the mother colony. Having decided to make his future home at Boolaroola, his first object had been to erect a house for his wife and family. This project took precedence of all others from the fact that Mrs. Jasper—a worthy daughter of one of the early pioneers—steadfastly refused to entertain the idea of staying at home at ease while her husband roughed it abroad.

" But, Mary," said Mr. Jasper the last time they discussed the subject, " you'll have to rough it, cook in the open air, and live on damper ; sodden damper and tough johnnycake."

" Better a dinner of damper where my love is than roast turkey alone," she answered with a smile.

“Would you give up this comfortable house with every convenience to live in a tent amid daily, hourly discomforts?”

“Better live in a mia-mia with David than dwell in a mansion without him.”

“But think of the weather, my dear. You’ll freeze in the winter and frizzle in the summer.”

She laughed merrily. “Sauce for goose, sauce for gander. We’ll freeze and fry together, lad.”

“Do you think you could stand the everlasting flies and ants—greenheads, blueheads, redheads, blackheads and bulldogs—as well as scorpions and all sorts of crawling vermin, besides snakes?” he asked, with a vivid recollection of his wife’s fear of a mouse.

“Of course I could,” she answered stoutly, but with an inward thrill of horror. “Flies we have always with us, and I think ants are just lovely—to study, especially such a variegated lot as you foresee. I’d really like to make a—a formicary, is that what you call it? An artificial nest, you know, and find out all about them. Besides,” she added, abandoning the defence and becoming aggressive, “the ants and flies would not be worse than the horrid rats and loathsome cockroaches we have at Glen Avon, anyhow.”

Conscious of coming disaster he changed his tactics, and as a forlorn hope kind of argument said: “But after all, Mary, the parting will not be for long. Not more than a year at the outside.”

The impending defeat became an utter rout, when, with a sob half strangled ere it achieved utterance she threw her arms around his neck in a passionate embrace. “For better for worse, till death us do part. Wasn’t that it, David?”

He kissed her very gently and silently, and, thanking God for such a helpmeet, made no more objections.

And so it came to pass that the whole family left the refined and congenial surroundings of Glen Avon, near Ballarat, and for some months dwelt in tents in what the elders hoped would be to them the "promised land" of prosperity and happiness. In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Jasper the party consisted of Anita, a golden-haired lass of eight summers, Frank (whose brown locks matched his father's), a sturdy little urchin of five, wee David turned two and just able to walk alone, Miss Redwood, the governess, and Norah Casey.

Norah had lived with Mr. and Mrs. Jasper ever since her mother died, leaving her an orphan at the age of ten. That was ten years ago now, and during that time she had endeared herself to the hearts of the family by her many good qualities. She was treated as one of themselves, but never presumed on such treatment. Mrs. Jasper early discovered that Norah had a taste for reading, and the library was made as free to her as to themselves. Under the careful tuition of her mistress and through a judicious selection of authors, Norah became, within a limited circle, a very well-read young woman. When the family moved to Boolaroola, Norah came as a matter of course, scorning the half-hearted suggestion of Mrs. Jasper that she might better herself at Ballarat.

The Government House was a roomy building, constructed of locally sawn redgum and dogwood, and roofed, as were all the other station buildings—with a substantial cane-grass thatch. It was surrounded by a wide verandah. The kitchen stood a few feet from the back of the house, a covered way connecting the two.

Here the station hands came for their meals, for Lankey "the Doctor" who held sway here, catered alike for the House and the Hut, and, needless to say, gave satisfaction to both. The men's hut was about two hundred yards further from the creek than the kitchen.

Close to the hut was a well which had lately been sunk, and which gave a small supply of water at a depth of a hundred feet. It was described as good stock water when viewed from an impersonal and optimistic outlook, but characterised as "brine and bitter at that" when spoken of from a personally experimental point of view. Made into very sweet strong coffee and swallowed piping hot, it was not unpalatable—after one was used to it. To become accustomed to its after effects was, however optimistic the drinker might be, a triumph of mind over matter which never took place. A blacksmith's shop, stockyards, and a small horse-paddock completed the station improvements.

Two or three flocks of sheep and a few hundred head of cattle comprised the whole of the stock then on the run. Several well-sinking and dam-making parties were at work in different localities, and Dan Coffee was engaged in a fencing contract, and had his camp on the bank of the creek near its outlet to the plain. This was the condition of affairs on Boolaroola when Farmer Giles took up his residence there.

After his old mate Jack, now Mr. Halliday had entered on his new sphere of action at Netley, he could not bring himself to go back on the run although Mr. McCarthy had offered him work with the cattle. So after another pleasant week at the Twelve-Mile, he bade Mrs. Keats and Alice good-bye and tramped back to Albemarle, in the back country of which he had left his mare

Warelda. His heart was heavy when leaving the neighbourhood of Netley, for he was genuinely attached to Jack, while his feelings towards the folk at the Twelve-Mile were such that he regarded Alice as a sister and Mrs. Keats as a second mother.

Under these conditions the river, once his joy and delight, now became distasteful to him, so, hearing that men were wanted at Boolaroola, he left the Darling and rode out into the back country. On arrival at the station he was immediately engaged as horse-driver. Needless to say, he was more than pleased to find that Lankey had preceded him. Sorely puzzled as to how he had managed to get so far in so short a time—for upon Albemarle cutting out he had gone “on the spree” at Menindie—he put the question to him :

“How’d I get here, Farmer ? Dashed if I know myself. I only stayed in Menindie two days after you fellers cleared, then I put the peg in and started up the River with me bluey. Never touched another drop until I met Ruggy Jack at a shanty near Weinteriga. We ’ad two or three nobblers of chain-lightning, after which I remèber now’t else till I found myself in the Boolaroola Hut, bein’ fed with a spoon by Mrs. Jasper. God bless her.”

“It’s a long road and a dry traek from Weinteriga here, I wonder you struggled through.”

“Struggled through ! I’d ’ave pegged out like a poisoned dingo, if the boss ’adn’t come along. ’ He’d been in to the River and was drivin’ back when he picked me up nearly naked and clean off my dot, about forty miles out. He tied me in the trap and drove straight on. He nearly settled ’is bloomin’ yarramen, but he saved me.” Then after a pause he added, some-

what shamefacedly, "I've promised Mrs. Jasper that I'd knock off the bloomin' pizen, and I will—if I can."

"If you don't knock it off, it'll knock you under," said Giles, and the conversation ended.

Among the men employed about the head station was one calling for special notice. Charlie Ross was a young fellow about twenty-one, who had learned to use an axe and ride a colt in the Western District of Victoria. Now for the first time he had crossed the Murray, seeking experience and a cheque. Pushing back from the more settled districts he had arrived at Boolaroola, and was engaged as a rouseabout, a month or two before Giles appeared.

He was a smart, dapper, dandified young fellow with a ready smile and a gift of rough repartee which Giles often envied. Being blessed—as befitted a Wiltshire lad—with "latter" wit himself, he always knew what he ought to have said, when the opportunity for so doing had gone, and, therefore, appreciated the apt wit and quick thought of Ross at its full value. Being always neat and tidy, Charlie was usually selected by Mr. Jasper to accompany him on his trips of inspection or journeys about the run. In spite of the poet's dictum that "a favorite has no friends," he, being free from "side" and from any suspicion of toadyism or "crawling" was generally liked by the men.

Jerry Smith, one of Dan Coffee's fencers, was the exception which proved the rule. He was in every respect dissimilar to Ross. Several years older, he was taller and bigger, and negligent to slovenliness in the matter of dress. Loud and self-assertive in his manner, he seldom had a good word for anyone, and was as ready with a sneer as he was with an oath. His jokes when

not blasphemous or obscene, were pointless, and his retorts were invariably of the "you're another" type. His badinage was of the bludgeon order, and was intended to bruise and not to tickle. He never laughed at other's sallies, but guffawed immensely at his own. His one redeeming feature was a passion (coupled with a capability) for hard work. That fact, together with his reputation as a pugilist, kept him on the run.

"He's the devil's own blag'erd, yer honor," said old Dan Coffee one day to Mr. Jasper, "but by all the powers I've never seen his like at fencin' an' it's fencers I want. Sure a blag'erd that can graft is more to me nor an angel that couldn't cut a hundred posts a day. I'm a conthraCTOR, sir, not a priest."

From the time of their first meeting Jerry never lost an opportunity of annoying or irritating Ross, evidently with the idea of goading him to break the peace, but so far without success. Charlie's neatness, his quiet manner, and his never failing smile—for whether pleased or angered he smiled still—seemed to stir up all the evil in Smith's nature.

The men often wondered at Ross's placidity under such conditions. The ever present cheerfulness of the man puzzled them. When they became better acquainted with him, some were able to distinguish by the gleam in his eye between the smile which made for mirth and that which meant mischief. Later on, others not so fortunate, discovered by practical experience, that courtesy and kindness may go hand in hand with invincible courage and stern determination.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INTERVENTION OF NORAH.

It was Saturday night in the men's hut. Except Ross, who had been out with Mr. Jasper, all the ordinary hands, as well as Dan Coffee and several of his men, were there.

One or two were reading the latest *Australasian* or *Town and Country Journal*. They were revelling in news of the outside world not more than eight or ten weeks old. Ever and anon, as something particularly interesting claimed their attention, they would read it aloud. Then the others would cease their reminiscences or arguments, political or personal, for awhile and listen with almost painful quietude to the stumbling, faltering narration of news from "inside" or "down south."

Most of the items selected for their mental delectation were details of crimes, such as murders, bushranging exploits, cattle duffing feats, and pugilistic encounters, either in or out of the prize ring. Now and then as a sop to the younger men, short allusions to the latest race meeting, intercolonial cricket match, or sculling achievement would be given, particularly if any more than ordinary ebullition of larrikinism was connected with it. But of all exciting topics, bushranging and cattle stealing seemed to appeal more strongly to all parties as being more appropriate to and in accordance with, the eternal fitness of things bush-like.

A lengthy article descriptive of the operations of a notorious gang of Queensland cattle duffers proved of most absorbing interest on this occasion. Their highly

organised and very successful system of "lifting" had at last been broken up by the police, who, however, had not yet been able to effect their capture. A paragraph to the effect that two of the men, considered to be the most desperate of the gang, had last been heard of near the River Darling, and were supposed to be making for the back country, was particularly interesting.

"Good iron!" "Bully for them!" "Hope they come here." "No fear o' that." "Yes they will." "Not they." "They're too fly for that," and a confused babel of excited exclamations and interjections brought the narrative to an abrupt conclusion. The reader, however, continued the perusal, slowly taking in the purport of the final paragraph. Suddenly he rose to his feet with a shout, and waving the *Town and Country Journal* in the air, commanded silence.

"Shut up yer row you fellers," he cried. "listen to this."

Almost immediately the din ceased and the company assumed a pleasantly expectant attitude. Nor were they disappointed. The paragraph ran as follows.

"From information received the police have formed the theory that the two men they most desire to capture, are identical with the *soi disant* Black and White who stuck up Coomarella Station about two years ago. It will be remembered that the bushrangers were never seen after, having disappeared as completely and suddenly as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up."

The Coomarella episode had often been talked of; in fact, it was a favorite topic throughout Queensland and New South Wales generally. The bushrangers were always extolled and McCaber—more often alluded to as "Flintface"—vilified and condemned. And it must

be admitted that personal acquaintance with him invariably made men willing to believe the evil they had previously heard of him. This by the way.

When the reading ceased there arose a general discussion on the merits of these "duffing" gentry : and the methods adopted by them were freely criticised, and approved or condemned according as they were adjudged clever or clumsy. The police were somewhat grudgingly awarded a meed of praise for the skill they had displayed, but that was merely as a display of judicial impartiality, all the men's sympathies being with the outlaws.

The pros and cons had been discussed *ad nauseum* when Ross entered the hut, and attention was diverted from the newspaper to a matter more immediately affecting them.

"How's the run lookin', Charlie?" enquired Dan Coffee,

"Bad," he answered. "The Rock Hole at the Range is nearly empty, Kooka Swamp has about a week's supply, the Lake (the name Jaspermere was always ignored by the men, who invariably spoke of it as 'the Lake') is as dry and shrivelled up as one of Macbeth's witches, and the Claypan Dam is as bad. Fact is all the waters are about played out; we shall have all the stock—sheep and cattle—on the West Well soon."

"West Well's purty bad," said Dan.

"You're right," replied Charlie, "I tasted it once. Ugh! It's enough to poison a rat."

"'Ow was it it didn't stiffen you then?" asked Smith, following up his sneering pleasantry by a series of loud guffaws.

Ross laughed good-humouredly. "Bravo, well done, Jerry! I drank, I survive. Don't you risk it old man, it's too dangerous."

Smith scowled. He did not relish this Roland for his Oliver, but before he could reply, Lankey, who had just arrived, interposed with the remark :

"I reckon we won't be long without rain, an' plenty of it."

"What makes you think so?"

"The weather an' the vermin," replied the cook.

"I must admit they're both of 'em too close to be pleasant," said Charlie, wiping his brow with one hand while he flicked a too venturesome specimen of the emmet tribe from his cheek with the other.

"'E thinks 'e's bloomin' smart," sneered Smith *sotto voce*.

"We 'ad a long spell of weather just like this afore the big flood, an' the ants are takin' to the 'igh ground now same as they did then. Mark my words, we'll 'ave a bust-up afore long."

"Ross 'ull bust-up with darned conceit some o' these days; 'e's gettin' worse and worse," said Jerry, addressing the company generally.

"If ever Smith 'busts up,' I guess it'll be after dinner, lads," answered Charlie, smiling genially. This delicate allusion to his opponent's well-known abilities as a trencherman convulsed the audience.

"'Ark to 'im!" jeered Smith, now white with passion. "Look at 'im! The side 'e puts on! What style! 'E's a bloomin' ban-box man. You'd think it was the Lord Dook o' Shice Mc'oola talkin', instead of a common rouseabout. Fancy 'is 'ighness turned into a

jemmy ducks, a flunkey. Oh, the bloomin' dook. Ha, Ha, Ha !” and he laughed—as he spoke—viciously.

“Steady on Jerry. Mind your stops,” said Charlie, his smile contrasting vividly with the hate depicted on the face of the other. “If you go on like this we shan't know what to make of you.”

“Make of me ! There's one thing yer can bet, I wouldn't make a blessed fool o' myself like you do.”

“You've no need to.” He spoke very quietly but incisively, and smiled as genially as ever.

The hut roared with laughter. At first Smith failed to see the point, then the arrow struck home, and for a moment he was speechless.

“Yer always darned well niggin' an' naggin' an' throwin' yer dirty slurs at me. D'yer want to fight ?” He advanced menacingly.

“That's what the wolf said when he wanted to chew up the lamb,” said Charlie, adding as he stroked his chin reflectively, “I'm the lamb.”

The men laughed. Smith was as much galled by their merriment as by Ross's repartee.

“I'm a liar then,” he stammered in a voice half choked with passion.

Charlie smiled but said nothing.

“Call me a liar, why don't yer ? Blast yer !”

“I'd like to oblige you, Jerry, but how can I when you've just told the truth.”

The men laughed uproariously. Smith was silent for a moment, then he said savagely :

“Yer a lyin' cowardly cur. Yer grinnin' ape ! Yer crawlin' 'ound ! Yer afraid of a 'idin'. Yer misbegotten thing !”

"You're—a—liar," said Ross in clear and distinct tones. He folded his arms as he spoke.

Jerry rushed forward threatening vengeance immediate and effective. The men blocked his way. He pushed them rudely from him, and slowly advanced swearing and shouting and foaming with passion. The din was deafening. Some were loudly calling for fair play, some were appealing to Smith to wait till the morning. Some tried to impede his progress.

Charlie stood quietly waiting his onset at the end of the hut near the door. His face was pale, but over it there still hovered the ghost of a smile, a feeble caricature it seemed of his customary genial one. He really appeared to be the least concerned of any in the hut.

Jerry looked so big and strong and Charlie so small and weak that the result of a physical encounter seemed a foregone conclusion. Besides, Smith's reputation as a fighter had preceded him from the River. His strength was enormous, and, as to skill, the story of how he knocked out Dutch Jack—a professional pugilist from Sydney—in five rounds at Wilcannia not more than a year before, was vividly fresh in the minds of all present.

He struggled fiercely on. A few feet now only separated the two. Another moment and the infuriated fencer—whose fury seemed to feed upon the opposition it met with—would have flung himself upon the little figure before him.

The unexpected often happens. It did so in this case. The door burst open, a flash of something white dazzled the onlookers' eyes, and then the figure of Norah Casey went down with a thud, she having sprung between the foes just in time to receive the blow aimed at Ross.

A second's amazed silence, groans from some, muttered curses from others, and both Charlie and Smith were on their knees at the side of the prostrate girl.

"Oh, Norah, Norah, speak to me!" cried Jerry, now utterly oblivious of everything but the senseless form before him.

"Git out o' that yer murtherin' blag'erd," said Coffee, "don't yer see you've killed the colleen," and, suiting the action to the word, he dealt him a tremendous blow on the side of the head which stretched him at full length on the floor. "Git on to 'im me bhoys, an' kape the spalpeen down."

Two or three of his mates threw themselves upon him, and effectually prevented him from taking part in the subsequent proceedings. Indeed, he had no wish to do so. The reaction caused by the knowledge that he had smitten down the only being on Boolaroola that he cared a snap of his fingers for, left him limp in body and miserable in mind. He groaned as he thought of the situation, and inwardly resolved to settle "that blasted dandy" at an early date.

Meanwhile water, rather copiously administered, soon brought Norah round. She essayed to rise, and was promptly helped to her feet by Ross and McDermott, who, with the fallen Smith, constituted her trio of admirers. Taking an arm apiece, the two former escorted her in silence to Government House, Lankey walking solemnly behind them.

At the kitchen door she stopped and after the cook had gone in, she spoke. "Thank you both very much. I hope Jerry is not hurt. Why *do* you men quarrel so? Can't you live in peace? Promise me, you, Charlie, and

you, Pat. that you won't do anything or say anything to Smith about to-night's work."

"I promise," said Charlie, readily.

"I 'spose I must," said Pat, rather ungraciously. "but I'd like to break all the bones in his body first."

"Oh, you wicked creature, promise me at once or I'll never speak to you again."

"Very well, Norah," sighed McDermott. "I promise, but it'll be the devil's own job to keep it."

"Are you hurt much, Norah?" asked Ross. "You went down an awful whack."

"Oh, no, not much," she answered, laughing. "I saw the blow coming and put up my arm, and so I got it on my hand instead of my forehead. I think it was the fall, not the knock, or maybe I fainted: anyhow, barring my hand and a headache I feel quite right. Good night, I shall get into trouble if I stop gossiping any longer. So long." She ran inside. Then she put her head round the corner of the verandah and said quietly. "Remember your promises," and was gone again.

McDermott was a fine strapping fellow of Irish parentage. He was one of the rouseabouts, and a steady, hardworking man. One of his peculiarities was a tendency to drop into brogue when excited, or when inclined to be facetious. His brogue varied as his excitement or sense of humor ebbed or flowed. In a normal condition he spoke fairly correct English. Despite their mutual affection for the girl, he and Ross were very good friends indeed. In many things they were as opposite as the poles. The one was fair, and, save the moustache, clean shaven, the other dark, with a face innocent of any acquaintance with the razor.

The one was short and neat, easy tempered and quiet, the other tall and careless, hot tempered, and boisterous. Ross was a lover of Shakespeare, a well-worn copy of whose works he always carried with him. He was also a student of Dickens and Scott, while McDermott had no taste for literature other than that of the "Hunted to Death" type. The common ground upon which they met was found in their attachment to each other, a regard which, though often put to the test, was always equal to the strain imposed upon it. Giles was early admitted to their friendship, and to this day cherishes delightful remembrances of their kindness and loyalty.

Norah was a very fine looking girl. She had the erect carriage of the Celt, and the distinctive beauty of the Irish type, modified somewhat by the freer surroundings and more genial climate of Australia.

During her ten years service in the Jasper household her sterling worth, her modest demeanour, and invariable good humor had well earned the respect of both master and mistress. Having no parents or near relatives, she had lavished all the affection of her warm heart upon her young charges, and had no desire, nay, objected strongly to leave them. Hence she was treated more as a friend than a servant, and showed her appreciation of such treatment by giving no occasion for the curtailment of the freedom and privileges she enjoyed.

McDermott she had known at Glen Avon. In fact, they were both natives of Bungaree, near Ballarat, and consequently in bush classification were known as "Bungaree Savages." The term originated in an election address in the early days by an aspirant to Parliamentary honours, who began his electoral campaign

with the words, "Gentlemen of Ballarat and Savages of Bungaree." Needless to say, this would-be witticism effectually precluded the utterer from any participation in the subsequent proceedings.

Charlie Ross found favor with Norah (as he did with most women) at first sight. Jerry Smith paid her great attention also, and was treated by her with gentle courtesy. So far she appeared to have no special predilection for any one of her three admirers, and generally so managed her meetings—in Lankey's kitchen—that at least two of them were present. On such occasions Lankey generally departed to the hut in disgust, and his return was accepted as the signal for their exit.

On this particular evening Norah was expecting to see McDermott and Smith, and the cook, knowing that, had left early. As the time passed and they did not come, she went outside and half unconsciously directed her steps towards the hut. Presently she was startled by the sudden uproar and stopped. Her first impulse was to retreat. Her second was to ascertain the cause of the tumult. She walked slowly towards the door. As she neared it she heard Jerry's threatening voice, and instinctively quickened her pace. She reached the hut pale and trembling, fearing she knew not what. One swift glance through the space between the jamb and the door sufficed to stop the trembling limbs and steady the palpitating heart.

A moment's pause, an upward glance, an unspoken petition for help, and the door burst open and she threw herself between the two rivals, with the result already described.

CHAPTER V.

HOW BARNEY CASEY CAME TO GRIEF.

The following afternoon being Sunday, Giles strolled over to the kitchen, inspired by a desire to see Norah. As he neared the door Lankey and Norah came out. The cook shaped a course for the hut. The latter stopped, and in reply to Giles' enquiries, stated that she felt none the worse for her escapade of the night before.

"Come in and have a chat," she continued; "you've quite forsaken me lately. Come now, what's the reason?"

"Too many cooks spoil—I mean there's many a slip—no, that's not it. Confound it," he exclaimed in some confusion. "you know what I mean. Two is a pair, but three is a mob."

Norah laughed. "One feels more safety in a mob sometimes. Perhaps I'd better call Lankey back. No? Then sit down like a good boy and give an account of yourself."

Norah was a good talker and Giles a good listener, so they got on splendidly together. The pleasure of her conversation, which—to the slower witted Wiltshire lad—bubbled and sparkled, and alternated from grave to gay in a bewilderingly rapid fashion, was such as he had seldom experienced in the bush. He was always comfortably happy in her presence. To-night most of his contributions were eulogies of his mates, Pat and Ross.

Presently the drink question—a veritable "King Charles' head" to Norah—was brought up, and Giles was once more treated to a kindly homily upon the evils of intemperance. Norah was a total abstainer and an

aggressive one. She always tried to drive home her truths by personal application to her hearers. A teetotaler was a *rara avis* in the bush. Norah was only tolerated in that capacity, because she was—Norah. She was particularly impressive on this occasion, so much so that the lad grew restive under the combined effects of argument and exhortation. The one he could not confute, the other he tried to ignore.

“Why the dickens have you such a derry on drink?” he exclaimed at last.

Norah made no reply for a moment, but her pained look made him regret his flippant speech. “I’ll tell you if you care to listen,” she said.

“Certainly,” he responded. “It’s always a pleasure to hear you talk.”

She smiled rather sadly. “I don’t think there will be much pleasure either in telling or hearing this, Giles.”

Farmer, realising that his only safety was in silence, smiled in what he intended to be a deprecatory manner.

“Well,” she said, after a short pause, speaking low and fixing her eyes on the table, “I’ll tell you. Pat knows all about it. He comes from the same place as I do. You can tell the story to Charlie if he doesn’t know it, that is if you care to.”

Giles checked the impulse to say that nothing would please him better, and gave what he hoped was a non-committal nod.

“Me father, Bernard Casey—God rest his soul,” said Norah, “was a ‘cocky’ in the Bungaree district near Ballarat, and had as fine a farm of 320 acres as any man could wish. I was born there. It was a dear old place. The house wasn’t much to look at, but ’twas cosy and comfortable within and—’twas home. Me

mother was not very strong, but she worked hard and never complained. Oh, she was the patient woman and so religious. 'Twas her religion—blessed be God—that pulled her through, I think. She was as handy with the needle as she was at milking the cows or making a cheese, or baking bread. She was a scholar too. Me poor father had no book learning, so she kept the accounts, and did all the writing. She managed so well that with father's hard work, and her care, by the time I was seven the farm was clear of debt, and there was a nice little nest egg in the bank at Ballarat."

"Then the trouble began, me father—rest his soul—began to take things easy. He was more often in the township or away in Ballarat than at home. Somehow or other the company he got into was not the kind mother liked. Too much of his money was spent at the pub, and from a sober home loving man he gradually became a drink-lover and spent more and more both time and money away from his wife."

"Then he came home the worse for drink. I well remember that night. I was about eight then, and had never seen a drunken man. Me darling mother had never reproached him—perhaps it would have been better if she had—but had often pleaded lovingly with him to alter his conduct. He was never cross with her, but he used to laugh and sometimes give her a kiss. Drunk or sober he was always good to her. He was not a brute. This night she never said a word, but took off his boots, made him comfortable on the bed, and came out and sat by the fire. I was thoroughly scared, and climbed into her lap and sobbed meself to sleep."

"Once before this mother had got the priest to speak to him, and it steadied him for a bit, so she saw Father

O'Donnell again, and he tried his best—no man could do more than he did—but it was all no use. From that time he grew worse and worse, and neglected the farm and the home more than ever.”

She was silent for a moment and then continued in a voice which struggled to be even. “He was a good man—barring the liquor—good-natured and easy—too easy, in fact; always kind and ready to help when help was wanted, but foolish with his money.”

“No one’s enemy but his own,” said Giles, rather fatuously, and the next moment as he caught the look in her troubled eyes, could have bitten his tongue with vexation. He realised—as usual too late—the unconscious stupidity as well as the maladroitness of the remark.

She smiled rather sadly as she replied, “His own enemy, and the only enemy of his own, that’s the worst of it Giles.”

“There was one man,” she continued after a pause, “whom mother always disliked and feared, and this fellow was one of father’s greatest chums. He was a young man named Ben Morgan. He had a small credit selection near our place, but he used it for grazing only. He was a stock jobber, bought and sold horses and cattle, and was sometimes away for two or three weeks at a time. Father’s greatest bursts were always when Morgan was home.”

“Things went on from bad to worse, until at last father began to talk of selling out, paying his debts, and making a fresh start on Government land. Then mother discovered that he owed Morgan a lot of money which he had borrowed from time to time when he was on the spree. That nearly broke her heart. Her

grief only drove him to drink deeper, and one day—I was nearly ten then—he came home and told us he had sold ‘Ennis Vale,’ as we called the farm, to Ben Morgan for £300 clear of what he owed him.”

“Bye and bye he told mother that he had taken the deeds from the bank, that Morgan had them, and that he was going to meet him at *The George*, in Ballarat, and get the money on the morrow. He went in the next day, and was seen to receive the money from Morgan at the pub. Then it seems they commenced to argue about something, and had a big row, nearly coming to blows, but no one knew what it was about. Finally they patched up their quarrel, and started home in father’s spring cart, with Ben’s horse tied behind.”

“The next morning the horse and cart were found a few yards off the track jammed between two trees, and not far away lay poor father’s body. There was no money on it, and none was ever found. Poor mother broke down altogether when they brought the body home. She did not live much longer. We were absolutely penniless, and but for the neighbours would have wanted bread. Two months afterwards she died, and my baby brother died with her. Then I came to Mrs. Jasper.”

She spoke at the end with such difficulty and emotion that Giles involuntarily turned his head away. When he looked at her again she had dried her eyes and risen to leave the room. Then she looked him full in the face with a wistful, yearning expression which went straight to his heart.

“Oh, Giles, I do wish you boys were on the safe side. It hurts me sometimes when I look at you and think of the future and—of the past. Better to be sure than sorry. Won’t you, can’t you, give it up?”

She touched his arm gently with her hand as she spoke. A magnetic thrill passed through him and his heart beat tumultuously. The look of those eyes, the loving entreaty of that voice, and the magic touch of those fingers made him her slave at once. Give up? Was there anything too dear to stand against her favor? He felt that anything, everything, could go to secure her approbation.

In the overpowering rush of emotion all thought of Ross or McDermott was swept away, and in another moment he would have been on his knees in a passionate but probably involved declaration of affection. Charlie or Pat would have had her in their arms ere the thought dawned upon him. For once his natural inertia of mind and will saved the situation, for even as the idea—a few seconds too late—flashed across his brain. Mrs. Jasper opened the door.

Mrs. Jasper's entrance was the prelude to Giles' almost immediate exit. He entered the hut a prey to conflicting and confusing, but at the same time pleasurable emotions. His mind was in the seventh heaven of joy and delight. Ten minutes of the tonic effect of the mental and moral atmosphere of the hut had a remarkable result. It brought him safely from the dangerous heights of self-delusion to the barren sand of actual fact. The process left him sane, but somewhat saddened, and a trifle limp. He spent a few moments dimly wondering whether he appeared to Mrs. Jasper and Norah as the awful fool he realised himself to have been. Then he turned in and found in the sweet forgetfulness of slumber, a panacea for all his troubles.

The rest of Norah's story, which Giles obtained from McDermott afterwards, was briefly as follows:—An in-

quest was held on the body of Bernard Casey. The cart track showed that in leaving the road one of the wheels had gone over a stump close to where the body was found. The medical evidence disclosed a broken neck and sundry marks and cuts on the skull which might have been caused by an accident or might have been the result of blows. Two witnesses testified that they passed the deceased about half a mile from the fatal spot, and that he was then alone. Ben Morgan disappeared that night and nothing was seen or heard of him for four or five weeks when he reappeared on the scene. He stated he had been horse jobbing in Riverina, which proved to be true. An open verdict was returned by the coroner's jury.

Upon the death of Mrs. Casey, Morgan quietly entered into possession of the farm. To Mr. Jasper, who felt inclined to challenge his right, he showed a legally witnessed and duly stamped receipt for the purchase money, signed by the deceased man on the afternoon of the day he met his death. Shortly afterwards Morgan let the property for a term of years and left the district altogether.

"I only saw the scoundrel once," said Pat in answer to Giles' question, "but I took particular stock of him. He was about 25 then, was tall and dark, and had a nasty sulky look. He was always clean shaved except for a moustache. If ever I saw him I'd know him among a thousand. His confounded image is in me eye now. He had a slight scar on the chin from a knuckle duster in a scrap. He's a fair gallows bird is Morgan. Begorra, I'd like to hang him meself. 'Twould be like rum and milk before breakfast."

Ross knew nothing of this story. Pat, from motives

of delicacy to Norah, not having mentioned it to anyone. Now he and Giles enlightened Charlie as to the cause of Norah's orphanhood, and the three chums agreed to keep their own counsel, at the same time registering a resolve that, should they ever come across Mr. Morgan, they would give him his deserts.

But what crime he had been guilty of, and what were his deserts, they would probably have been hard put to it to say. Instinct rather than reason caused them to think that somehow or other, in some way or other, he was responsible for Barney Casey's death.

CHAPTER VI.

CHARLIE ROSS'S STORY.

"Charlie," said Mr. Jasper one morning a few days after the disturbance in the hut, "harness up Dolly and Jess. I want to go to Coffee's camp. Put the back seat in too, as I am going to take the children. And, Charlie," he added as Ross turned to execute the order, "what is this I hear about you and Smith?"

"I don't know what you've heard, sir," he answered, smiling, "but there's not much to say. We were chaffing each other a little and he got a wee bit cross and said things. That's about all."

"Oh, indeed! Is that all?" said Mr. Jasper rather sarcastically. "Well, really, whatever your faults may be Charlie, prolixity of speech does not appear to be one of them. I cannot charge you with setting down aught in malice, but I'm very much afraid you *do* extenuate. I hear you behaved yourself very well, and that Smith's attack was wholly unprovoked. I'm glad you didn't fight. I cannot control the contract men, but, remember this, I won't allow any fighting among my own men." He turned to go.

"Excuse me, sir," said Charlie, "I'm afraid I was to blame quite as much as Smith. I said some things which annoyed him, and—and"—he hesitated a moment, and then said, "I must confess I said them on purpose."

Mr. Jasper looked at him for a moment or two, and the other returned his gaze steadily but respectfully.

"Mind this, Ross," (he never used the surname unless he wished to be impressive), "mind this, let the man alone. These altercations must cease. Don't chaff him, he can't stand it. You understand?" All right then, be quick with the trap now. I want to get away."

A few minutes afterwards he was discussing the question with his wife.

"You know, my dear, that fellow Smith is an incorrigible blackguard, and would as soon murder Ross as eat his dinner, if he could do it with impunity. I have just forbidden Ross to fight, or, in fact, have anything to do with him. I am very pleased with his conduct in this affair. His modesty and sense of fair play towards even Smith astonished and delighted me. I had hard work not to let him see it. He tried to take the blame, and shield that confounded rascal by admitting that he tried to irritate him."

"Did he promise you not to fight?" asked Mrs. Jasper.

"Yes, well, N-o, not exactly, but I'm sure he won't after what I've said to him on the matter."

"I hope not, because, poor little man, he would have no chance against that great fellow."

"I'm not so sure about that, my dear," replied Mr. Jasper, "he is not very big, but he has a large heart. By the way, I wonder whether Norah has given *her* heart to either of the trio. She is very quiet and says nothing. It was very fortunate that she strolled over there Saturday night, or blood might have been spilt."

"Yes, it was quite providential," answered his wife, "and I'm proud of Norah's behaviour in the matter, but I do not like her being out at night, and she has promised not to go out again without my permission."

But there's the buggy, and the children are out already, you had better go."

That morning Giles was bound for the West Well with a tank of drinking water for the use of one of the shepherds, who was to shift his mob there the next day. The trap passed him just before his track diverged to the left, this side of the big sandhill, about two miles from the station. Mr. Jasper pulled up for a moment to give him some instructions, and Giles took the opportunity of handing Charlie a tobacco pouch which Grigg, Coffee's cook, had left at the hut on Saturday night, and asked him to give it to the old fellow. He was an "old hand," morose, and bad tempered, and was known as Grumpy Grigg, generally abbreviated to Grumps.

Frank occupied the front seat with his father, and Anita sat behind with Ross. The latter were great friends. Children took instinctively to Charlie, and felt at home at once. Anita chatted to him about her lessons. Miss Redwood would make her learn French verbs. "Did you have to do that at school?"

When he confessed that he knew very little about English verbs and nothing at all about French ones, she clapped her hands gleefully.

"What a nice school yours was, I wish I went to one like it." Then she added after a moment's pause, "Verbs is bad but ——"

"Are bad, you mean, Nita." He always used the diminutive in speaking to her. When alone it was further abbreviated to Neets.

"Oh, Charlie!" she exclaimed, "you said you didn't learn grammar." She looked at him reproachfully.

"I didn't learn it at school, Nita; I could never

understand it, but I've picked up a little since by reading, and noticing how educated people speak."

"I'm sure that must be much nicer than having it as lessons. I'll ask mamma if I can't be learnt that way."

"Can't be taught you should say."

"So I should, Miss Redwood told me that yesterday. But I wanted to say that verbs is—I mean are, bad, but figures are—are—just horrid stupid things. I *can* learn verbs if I try *very* hard, but the old figures won't come right, no matter how many times I do them. Do you like sums. Charlie?"

He frankly admitted that he did not; and then he spoke of his home—where his widowed mother still lived—on the edge of a little creek which ran into the Glenelg River. What a pretty place it was, nestling in the gully, how the old house, with its honeysuckle covered porch and wistaria covered walls always attracted the attention of strangers. He told her of the little garden in the front with its hedge of sweet briar, of the thyme bordered beds where the old-fashioned favorites, the various stocks, wallflowers, marigolds, and sweet peas, displayed their beauties and diffused their perfumes.

He waxed roughly eloquent as he recalled the central plot with its magnificent flowering fuchsia, the pride of the whole family, and the trellised vines on the northern side of the house, which gave such luscious fruit and such grateful shade from the summer sun. The big garden at the back with its fruit trees and beds of vegetables—oh, the wondrous cabbages they used to grow—and the big gum tree at the bottom, from the lowest limb of which the swing depended, and in the higher branches of which the opossums disported themselves in the cool

night air. while their humbler confreres, the bandicoots and those funny little spotted animals miscalled native cats, roamed the ground below and burrowed, seeking what they might devour.

He told of the flight of steps roughly cut in the sloping bank of the creek, of its gently gurgling stream in the summer, and its wildly rushing torrent in the winter ; of the narrow footbridge, a mere plank thrown across from bank to bank, and how on one occasion, when a raging flood was whirling along just awash, he fell in.

"Oh, Charlie," cried Anita, who had been listening with breathless attention, "how did it happen ? You might have been drowned."

He laughed. "I was trying to dance a jig on the middle of the plank, and one of our neighbours, a crusty old farmer. stood on the bank shaking his fist at me and ordering me to get off. I took no notice but danced in defiance, until my feet slipped and in I went."

"Oh," she cried with a slight shudder and clasping her hands tightly, "how did you get out ?"

"I didn't, I was fished out. The old farmer ran to the next bend and, just as I was sweeping by, grabbed me by the leg, and, holding on to a stout root with one hand. drew me safely ashore with the other."

"Oh," said Anita, with a sigh of relief, "what did you say ?"

"Nothing. I was too scared, besides being half-drowned."

"What did the farmer say ?" asked Mr. Jasper. who was as interested as his daughter.

Charlie laughed again. "As soon as he found I was out of danger, he shook me well to get the water out of my clothes, and thrashed me well to prevent my catch-

ing cold. Then he said : ' You young rascal, you never need be afraid of drowning. You were dancing on a plank just now, some day you'll dance off a plank and on to nothing. Jack Ketch'll teach you a new step.' "

Mr. Jasper laughed heartily at the old man's prophecy. The others joined in the mirth, though puzzled Nita, vainly sought an explanation of the farmer's oracular deliverance.

" Tell me some more," said she at last. " What made you leave such a lovely home ?"

Encouraged by a nod from Mr. Jasper, he told how on the death of his father he had had to leave school, and had worked for his mother at home until the youngest of his three brothers grew big enough to help about the garden. Then he had left the dear old spot and had come to New South Wales to seek his fortune. " I can help mother better," he said, " by being away, as wages are very low in Victoria."

Mr. Jasper's good opinion of and confidence in Ross were strengthened by what he had heard, so that although Smith was in the camp, he felt no fear in going off with Dan Coffee and leaving Charlie with the children.

Suddenly remembering his commission to Grigg, Charlie tied up the horses and hastened to discharge it, promising the children that he would not be away long. Coffee's camp consisted of a few tents and gunyahs, a makeshift bullock yard, and the " caboose." This latter was an airy shed-like structure, the walls and roof being composed of saplings and cane grass thatch. One end was used as the kitchen, the other as the dining room. Here it was that old Grigg worked and grumbled from daylight to dark. Here it was that Coffee's men entered into the results of his labor, eating of and swear-

ing at the food he set before them with impartial heartiness. Grigg was not a good cook. The men realised it every day, and they took good care that his knowledge of the fact should be kept green and fresh.

Charlie entered unobserved.

"Hullo Grumps," he said, slapping him on the back, "the top of the morning to ye. Got any 'post and rail?' Give us a drink, Doctor, I've yarned this morning till my throat's like a limekiln. Thanks. Ah, that's better. Fill it up again, and give us a smile with it this time."

"Where is it?" said Grigg, now speaking for the first time, and holding out his hand. "I know you've got it."

"Oh, the pouch; here you are, Giles gave it me this morning to give to you." As he handed it to him he said, "Now don't forget your manners. Say thank you."

Grumps' only audible reply was a grunt. A moment later he put some brownie before his guest.

"Have some cake," he said shortly.

Charlie munched a piece of the crust; the inside was practically pulp.

"'Upon my word, Grumps, you're improving. You deserve a medal for this pudding, I mean cake. You've never made better, I'm dead sure. I never tasted anything like it since I made some myself when I was a nipper. We ate the crust and made the crumb into bullets to shoot parrots with."

So he continued for fully five minutes, occasionally varying the procedure by aiming pellets of the doughy portion at his host, until at last he rose and left the hut

saying. " Thanks for the tea, old man, and all the nice things you haven't said. Good bye."

Grigg turned and honestly tried to smile, he failed it is true, but he really tried, yet never a word said he.

The fact of his having neither sworn, nor grumbled, nor taken exception to his visitor's chaff was proof positive that Charlie was *persona grata* with him as with most of the others. The fact was that the old man had been so long a " hatter " and so long at variance with his fellows, that he was ashamed to show or acknowledge the possession of the milk of human kindness, except in a negative way. Ross understood this perfectly, and to keep up the illusion, and gratify Grigg's *amour propre*, he never omitted to banter and chaff him whenever they met. The old fellow would have resented any different treatment, and Charlie knew it. At heart they understood each other, and in deeds they showed it.

CHAPTER VII.

“HE CALLED ME A BLOOMING DOOK.”

Half-way between the “caboose” and the buggy Ross met Smith. With a “Morning, Jerry” he attempted to pass on, but the other stepped in front of him and blocked his path. They looked steadily at each other for a few seconds. Then Charlie, making as if to pass, said, “Excuse me, old man, I’ve got to look after the children. I must get back to the trap.”

“No yer don’t, yer got away from me on Saturday night, but I’ve got yer now,” he answered, still barring the road.

“No you haven’t,” laughed Charlie. “I can run too fast for that.”

“Run! You’ll want carryin’ when I’ve done with yer,” he retorted, laughing loudly at his pretty wit.

“That’s very good, Jerry, but thanks all the same, I’m not a crow.”

Smith stayed his sneering hilarity. Like a trapped “brumby” he scented danger, though he could not see it.

“What d’yer mean?” he snapped suspiciously.

“Nothing, only not being a crow, I shan’t want carrion.”

For a moment the fencer was nonplussed, then he saw the point.

“Yer kid yerself you’re darned smart, don’t yer? You! What are yer? A blasted flunkey, a loblollyboy. Ho! Ho! Ho! A bloomin’ dook turned nurse gal.

You ain't a man, you're nothin' but a—a—a—thing."

In his excitement he roared out the last word, and, stepping still closer, assumed a threatening attitude.

"Come, Smith, don't get so excited. I don't want to have a row. If I've done you any harm or wronged you at all, I'm sorry. I can't say more than that. Just let me pass, that's a good fellow, or I'll get into trouble with the Boss." He stepped back a pace.

"Never 'armed me? Before you showed yer ugly mug 'ere Norah was always glad ter see me, an' now—an' now she throws 'erself between us just ter save yer from a hidin'. Never wronged me? You lie, yer skunk." The more conciliatory Ross became the more truculent was Jerry's speech and manner.

"Don't say that word again, please," said Charlie quietly and with a melancholy smile. "It's not a nice one, besides I'm not used to it"

"Not a nice word! Listen ter the thing! 'E doesn't like it. The bloomin' dook, the toff, the swell, the blasted liar of Boolaroola."

Ross paled a little. "Don't," he said entreatingly, "please, Jerry, don't say that any more. Don't shout so loud and don't use your tongue too freely."

"I'll use my 'ands. yer cowardly lyin' son of a——"

He never finished the sentence, for with a queer little laugh Charlie dashed at him, and before the astonished bully could realise what had happened he was stretched on the ground, with the blood flowing freely from his nose and mouth.

Smith rose to his feet hurriedly, passed one hand over his damaged face in a dazed sort of way, and then rushed furiously at his antagonist. Now Ross was a graduate of the Hamilton Boxing and Athletic Club,

and never was the skill there acquired put to a better use than at this juncture. Easily evading the wild, bull-like onslaught of his opponent and the equally wild blows aimed at him, he quietly used his knowledge of the art and used it so effectively that in less than a minute the bully went down again.

It happened that Mr. Jasper and Coffee emerged from the creek from an inspection of the weir at the very moment that Charlie, goaded beyond endurance, struck the first blow. They hurried to the spot, the one full of anger and indignation that Ross should have so soon forgotten and defied his orders as to be the actual aggressor, and the other filled with a joyous satisfaction that at last "the dirty blag'erd" was getting his deserts.

Just as Smith somewhat slowly picked himself up from his second tumble, and was with a little more caution preparing to renew the combat, Mr. Jasper and Old Dan arrived.

"Stop that at once," cried the squatter, angrily. "Ross, I'm surprised and disgusted with you. Go back to the buggy."

Charlie turned away without a word. Mr. Jasper followed immediately, leaving the inwardly delighted but outwardly disgusted contractor to settle matters with his man.

"How is it, Ross," asked Mr. Jasper, "that you so soon forget my positive instructions, and are guilty of striking the first blow?"

"I'm very sorry, sir. I tried hard to get out of it, but he forced me into it."

"How's that? Can't you control your temper? What did he do?"

"I really could not help it, sir," said Charlie, earnestly.

"He goaded me as much, or more, than I did him on Saturday. I begged him to stop. I told him I was sorry, but the humbler I became the more abusive he grew, until at last I could do nothing else than knock him down. I'm extremely sorry, sir, but I think I was right. If you think I was wrong I'd better leave the station."

"Perhaps after that long speech you'll be good enough to tell me what he did to justify your assault," said Mr. Jasper coldly.

By this time they had reached the buggy.

"He called me a bloomin' dook," replied Charlie. He was untying the horses as he spoke and trying hard not to smile. Having loosed the horses and conquered his desire to laugh, he turned and added in an undertone, "I can't tell you more now, sir, because of the children."

The drive to the station was in marked contrast to the drive out. During the altercation between the two men the children had fortunately been playing in the bed of the creek, and had neither seen nor heard anything of it until just at its close. Tiring of the water-course they climbed the bank to look for Father. Anita's head reached the level just in time for her to witness Charlie knock Smith down. The sight frightened her, and her father's anger did not tend to reassure her. Charlie's explanation mystified her. Something dreadful must have happened or papa would not be so cross. She felt uncomfortable and apprehensive all the way home, and had some difficulty in restraining her tears.

After hearing from Ross a detailed account of the fracas, Mr. Jasper felt constrained to exempt him from

blame, and expressed the hope that there would be a better understanding between them in the future.

That afternoon at lessons Anita found more difficulty than usual in mastering the moods of her French verbs. Though her eyes were fixed on Ahn's Course, and though she mechanically conjugated the various moods, yet her mental vision clearly depicted Ross and Smith in furious combat, and her father in great anger. Above the deadening drone of *J'aurais, tu aurais, il aurait*, which she ground out with monotonous precision, Charlie's excuse, "He called me a bloomin' dook," rang ever in her ears.

"Miss Redwood," she ventured at last, "what is a dook?"

"Dook! I suppose you mean duke. Well, a duke is a peer, my child," she answered, wondering alike at the pronunciation and the question. "Let me hear you conjugate *avoir* in the indicative negatively.

Anita rose and successfully ran the gauntlet of the present tense, stumbled through the imperfect, made a hopeless muddle of the preterite, and sat down.

Miss Redwood sighed. "You had better put away the French and do the sums I've set you."

At arithmetic she did no better, till at last her compassionate teacher told her to close the book and run out and play. As she still lingered, Miss Redwood asked her, "What is it, my dear?"

"Will you tell me, please, what a peer is? Is it a jetty?"

"Yes, if you spell it p-i-e-r, but a p-e-e-r is a member of the peerage."

"Oh," said Anita, still mystified, "what's the peerage?"

"Bless your dear heart! What's the matter with you? The peerage is the House of Lords in England. Now run away or I'll give you some more verbs."

Anita was not satisfied. "Mamma," she said a little later on, "what is a p-e-e-r?"

"One who is equal. One in the same class," replied Mrs. Jasper.

"Oh, thank you," said Anita, still further mystified, "and mamma, what does blooming mean?"

"Why this sudden thirst for knowledge, child? Blooming means to be in bloom, to be bright or to be flourishing."

Anita asked no more questions about dukes and peers, blooming or otherwise, but stored up in her mind the information she had elicited, and often wondered what it all meant, and how it applied to Ross, and why he should object to be dubbed a bright peer or a flourishing duke. Perhaps it was because dukes were bad men, and as she cogitated over that suggestion she remembered the story of the Norman conquest. Yes, that must be it. The Duke of Normandy was a very wicked naughty man, because he robbed and killed the poor English. Then she thought of the Duke of Wellington, and felt at once that this theory was untenable, for was not the victor of Waterloo a good man? Didn't he kill a lot of nasty Frenchmen?

That night she fell asleep pondering over the problem, and the question troubled her even in her dreams. For in her bewildered imagination she saw Charlie wearing the familiar cocked hat of the Iron Duke. His blue shirt and white moleskins seemed quite congruous and entirely in keeping with the head-piece. He was engaged in a desperate struggle with William

the Norman clad in complete armour, on the end of a pier, stretching far, far out to sea. She only was there with them. She watched the varying fortunes of the fight with agonising interest, and felt herself being drawn nearer and nearer to them as they swayed from side to side on the perilously narrow jetty.

Suddenly they lurched towards her, she tried to scream but could not. Then next moment the mailed figure clasp ing the wearer of the cocked hat by the waist, lifted him off the planking, and plunged into the water. With a cry she tried to stop them as they reeled by and received a severe blow on the arm in doing so. The next moment she awoke and realised with a sob of inexpressible relief that her mother was shaking her by the arm and calling her.

On the following Sunday Mrs. Jasper, as was her wont, conducted a little service for the children. She read and spoke about portions of that sublime compendium of Christian ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, giving special prominence to the duty of forgiveness. The best way to get rid of our enemies was to make them our friends by loving them. She told them the story of the Eastern potentate who set out to destroy his enemies, and who, when they had surrendered to his army, cut their bonds and set them at liberty. When his generals, who had expected to see them put to death, remonstrated he replied, "I have done what I promised. I have destroyed my enemies. I have made them all my friends."

Anita thought of her dream, and wondered whether Charlie could not transform his enemy into a friend by a similar action.

A day or two afterwards Ross was doing some work

at a fence near Government House when his little friend skipped out to have speech with him. She had conjugated her French verbs so well that Miss Redwood had given her a quarter of an hour's recess. After asking about his work and telling him of her lessons she broached the subject nearest her heart.

"Charlie," she said in a low voice and trembling a little, "Charlie, do you forgive Smith for calling you names?"

He dropped the auger in surprise, and did not answer for a moment. She thought he was angry, and she inwardly quaked as she waited for his reply. She was reassured by his genial laugh as he answered. "What a queer question, Neets. Of course, I forgive him as Wamba the fool ——"

"Oh!" she ejaculated in a pained tone; "Mamma says we should never call anyone by that name."

"I meant Wamba the jester," he explained. "He said that someone forgave an enemy as a Christian."

"Oh, I'm so glad! Mamma says we ought to be kind to those who hurt us, and then they'd be our friends. I'm so glad," she repeated, and clapped her hands in glee. At that moment the tinkle tinkle of Miss Redwood's little bell sounded from the schoolroom. and she scampered away.

Mr. Jasper's hope that a state of peace between Ross and Smith would result, from the recent fracas seemed likely to be realised so far as any open rupture between them was concerned. The realisation by Jerry that his smiling antagonist was not the fearsome weakling he had thought, had as much to do with it as Charlie's newly developed spirit of forbearance from chaff and caustic comment.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLOOD.

The weather continued very hot, and, despite the prognostications of Lankey, backed up as they were by the abnormal activity of the ants, very dry. All the surface waters were done, and the West Well was being taxed to its utmost gallon to provide water for the stock, all of which were dependent upon it for their supply. The country immediately around the Well was already denuded of every scrap of grass or edible bush, and the circle of desolation had a daily widening radius. The situation was regarded by squatter and shepherds alike as becoming very serious. The one from the point of view of the certain deterioration and probable loss of stock, the other from the aspect of more miles to be traversed, and more work to be done between, sunrise and sunset.

One morning, about a fortnight before Christmas Mr. Jasper set out to visit Ben Trevenna's well sinking camp on the edge of the great Rungatowie Plain. This tract of country which stretched north and west as far as the eye could reach, was of a better character than most of the Boolaroola run. In fact, it possessed potentialities of wealth in the way of a carrying capacity and a stability of soil such as little of the more developed country "inside" could boast of. But this lightly timbered, heavily bushed plain required water to enable it to carry the vast flocks and herds which Mr. Jasper was hopeful of some day pasturing on it. So far all efforts to obtain water had failed, and as a last resource

Trevenna had been offered a large bonus in addition to full rates per foot if he were successful in getting water anywhere on the plain.

It was to this site confidently selected by the old Cornishman that Mr. Jasper drove on this particular morning. Anita occupied the front seat with her father, and Ross sat behind. The ten miles was soon covered, and the pretty little camp, picturesquely situated at the mouth of a tiny glen or gully, sheltered by dog-wood and sandalwood trees, and looking straight out on to the plain, came into view. Leaving Charlie to hobble out the horses, the squatter and his daughter walked over to the little mound around the windlass.

Ben was speedily hauled up by his mate, Dick Trevorra, and the topman, and catechised by Mr. Jasper.

Yes, they were getting down. No, there was no water yet, but there would be before long. How could he tell? Well, he had worked underground, man and boy, for forty years, and he thought he knew the indications of water by this time. What were the indications? Well, he could hardly say, but he would bet the boss a new hat that they would strike water before the New Year.

Mr. Jasper laughingly accepted the wager, and sincerely hoped that the bad luck which had so persistently dogged his steps would still attend him now that he had taken to betting. "For," he said, "if I lose the bet, I win; but if I win the bet I lose."

He descended the trial hole in a hopeful mood, but returned to the surface in rather a chastened spirit, having found nothing that he could see to at all justify the exaggerated optimism of Trevenna. The old

“Cousin Jack,” however, stuck to his guns, and his last words after the whole party had partaken of brownie and billy tea and were about to drive off were : “ ’Iss you, water before New Year, an’ fresh at that, an’ plenty of it Gaffer.”

Being desirous of seeing Coffee with reference to the excavation of a dam, just below the embouchure of the creek on the Pan Pan plain, Mr. Jasper took the southwestern track through the scrub. This came out on to the flat just below the fencer’s camp, and, crossing the bed of the creek, turned sharply to the left up a steep incline on to the plateau on which the tents were fixed.

As previously described, the Boolaroola Creek finished its existence as a creek by tearing its way through steep banks of red clay. Just level with the camp a small weir or dam had been thrown across the channel to increase the holding capacity of a small natural hole there. This weir was a rough timber structure banked on the inside with earth and clay and likely to withstand any ordinary flood. It had so far answered its purpose as to increase the depth of water in the Red Banks—as the hole and camp were called—after the last fall of rain by several feet.

Almost immediately above the weir a large dogwood tree which had been growing on the opposite bank had been felled. This had fallen across and spanned the creek like a bridge. Indeed, it fulfilled Dan’s purpose in so doing and saved considerable time in going to and from the timber country on the north side. The top and lateral branches had been cut away, but some of the lower limbs, being awkwardly situated to get at, had been allowed to remain. They formed a fringe

immediately below the trunk, and, indeed, two or three of them reached to within a foot of the dam.

While the squatter and the contractor were busy inspecting the site of the proposed tank and discussing the merits and demerits of the scheme and arguing over the price of the work to be done; Ross and Anita went to the caboose. No one was there save the cook and his faithful dog—an evil-tempered looking mongrel, half cattle, half Smithfield—whose bristles seemed to be always either rising or falling, but never at rest. His one redeeming feature was a passionate devotion to his master, an affection which, as far as it was possible with such a distempered, distorted nature, old Grumps returned.

After a short stay at the caboose they returned to the creek, and Anita amused herself for awhile by running up and down the rough cut steps in the banks. Then she wandered along the dry bed towards the station, and two or three times made short excursions into the scrub for flowers or pretty grasses. At last, being satisfied with her nosegay, she turned, and, selecting an easy gradient, came out of the creek some distance from the camp.

No one had noticed the sudden change which had come over the north-eastern sky until a deafening clap of thunder called their startled attention to the fact, that the long-looked-for and almost despaired of rain had come at last. A few large drops—to the surprised observers, so long unused to rain of any kind, they seemed to be preternaturally large—were all that fell at the Red Banks. But the sight presented to them eastward at the station, and more particularly north-east of them at the Rats Range, was magnificent.

What little wind there had been had ceased, and a remarkable silence seemed to have fallen upon all nature, animate and inanimate alike. Gradually a few clouds spread over them, but still a few drops only fell. It appeared to the awe-stricken watchers as if the whole concentrated fury of the elements, so long pent up, was now being wreaked upon the series of iron-stone plateaux among which the creek had its origin.

At the first signal of the storm Mr. Jasper and Coffee had hurried to the camp, to find the frightened struggling horses securely tied and the buggy wheels lashed, but no one there. The squatter's first impulse was to cooey, but that was at once discarded as the constant rolling thunderclaps seemed to deaden and make impossible all other sound. Then they started for the caboose. There was no one there but the cook and his cur. Then the three sallied forth and each took a different route. Coffee made straight for the tree bridge and crossed to explore the scrub. Mr. Jasper returned to the buggy in the vain hope of the missing ones having returned. Old Grumps, looking more grumpy than ever, made for the creek higher up.

When the first terrifying peals reverberated through the still air they startled poor Anita so much that she hid behind a gum tree which grew on the edge of the creek. Dropping her nosegay she covered her face with her hands and trembled. Then as flash after flash and peal after peal followed in such quick succession as to be almost unending, she crouched at the foot of the tree and fell a-sobbing.

And what of Charlie? Stretched alongside of the trap, asleep at his post, his first thought on being so

rudely awakened was of Anita. Springing to his feet and pulling on his bluchers he was about to look for her when the kicking, plunging horses recalled him to his present duty. For once, but only for a moment or two, he lost his usual quiet self-possession, and cursed Dolly and Jess most heartily as he struggled to make them more secure. Then with a piece of wire he lashed the wheels together, and with a parting malediction started with his usual calm determination of manner to look for his young charge.

Jumping into the creek he made for where he had last seen her, with the rather wild idea of running her tracks. He picked them up easily enough, and was following their devious course as fast as possible, when a new sound made itself heard above even the continuous sustained roll of the thunder.

"By Jove!" he muttered, glancing up the creek, "here's a go, the blessed creek's coming down. I must get out of this."

Even as he spoke a wall of water four or five feet high flashed round the bend in front and hurled itself at him with a roar, which temporarily drowned the thunder.

The creek bed was but narrow. He sprang for the nearest, which happened to be the south, side, and just managed to get a firm hold of a strong root which projected from the almost perpendicular bank when the full force of the water struck him. It carried him off his feet with a whirl and flung him along like a streamer in the wind. He hung to the root with his head just above water, till his muscles, strong as steel and pliable as rubber, seemed to have reached breaking tension.

Then, as if tired of playing with him, the rapidly rising torrent threw him into the bank with a shock

which seemed to affect every muscle and nerve in his body. He braced himself for one supreme effort, and hung on. Then he felt his foot touch something solid, and found, by pressing on it, that his boots had been wrenched off his feet, and that it was another root, and one capable of taking at least part of his weight. He at once used it to stay himself as he very carefully worked his hands higher and higher until his body was half out of the water.

Glancing above him he noticed a tangled matted mass of roots about six inches above his reach. To attain to them was safety. It was not far but the ordeal he had just passed through, though short, had been sharp, and had materially weakened him. Still the water was rising fast, and the longer he delayed the final effort the less chance of success he would have. A silent prayer for help, one thought of the old home and mother, and he put his fortune to the touch. Gradually pulling himself up by the arms at last he thought he could reach the roots above. Then calling every available ounce of muscular endurance and the whole of his will power into play, he hung by one arm and reached for the nearest projection above him.

Just at that instant his feet lost their hold in the rising flood and were washed off. For a second as they did so his body rose three inches ere the sweep of the water carried it out again. That second saved him, for the grasp he then obtained enabled him to resume control of his lower limbs, and he was speedily stretched at full length on the bank—safe, but feeling limp and exhausted. The whole of the incident had not taken more than a few minutes though to Charlie those minutes seemed hours. He was young, and, as he said,

“as fit as a fiddle,” so that the result of a few moments’ rest was astonishing.

“Thank God for that,” he said with all reverence. “I wonder what has become of poor little Nita,” and he raised himself to a sitting posture. By this time the thunder and lightning had somewhat abated, but the creek was running within three feet of the top, and bringing with it a mass of dead timber and other debris.

At this moment, to his great astonishment, the old cook appeared, and, sitting beside him, produced some bread and meat, and a bottle of lukewarm tea, with the remark :

“Yer look damp an’ ’ungry, wire in.”

Charlie accepted both the situation and the invitation with a nod, and fell to without any more ado.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE DUKE OBTAINED HIS TITLE.

When Mr. Jasper returned to the buggy and found that Anita and Charlie were still absent, he tried to console himself with the thought that, as they were both away, they must be together and were probably under shelter somewhere near. He tried to cooey, but quickly realised the futility of that. He could barely hear his own voice in the scarcely intermittent roar of the thunder, and added to that he now recognised another sound—the noise of many waters rushing in one tempestuous bore along its narrow course.

Fearing the worst he started up the creek towards the advancing flood which as yet he could not see. Cutting across a bend he struck the creek just as the watery wall rushed foaming by, just past the spot where a moment later Ross was to experience his fearful five minute struggle for life. Then he followed up the bank of the creek eagerly scanning its seething waters. Warned by one or two earth-falls, he kept back from the edge, and where opportunity offered to scan the creek ahead, he crossed the smaller of the bends from point to point. And thus it was that he passed close to the tree on the far side of which his daughter crouched. He casually noticed that it appeared to lean overmuch toward the creek and guessed, what was actually the fact, that the bank was undermined, and that at any moment another fall of dirt might take place, which would probably result in the old gum crashing into the stream.

Mr. Jasper continued for some distance up the creek and watched the whirling waters tear away great bodies of soil, and bear on its bosom huge logs and driftwood of every description, which were tossed and thrown about like tiny cockboats on the ocean. Presently the body of a stray sheep which had fallen in was swept swiftly by. "God help the man or beast that gets in there," he muttered, and he shivered as he thought of his little girl. "A short shrift and a troubled one. From battle, murder, and sudden death, good Lord deliver us."

The creek was now running from bank to bank, and in some of the shallower places had overflowed and formed lagoons. The thunder had in a measure abated, but the wind was blowing with increased force and a steady rain was falling. Though puzzled to account for the disappearance of Anita and Ross, his mind was by this time relieved of the dread of their being drowned. If they had fallen in or had been caught unawares by the flood waters, he would have surely seen something of them—they must be safe somewhere. So thinking, he started to retrace his steps once more.

Meanwhile Charlie slowly munched the bread and meat and sipped the cold tea which had been so opportunely provided by the old cook. He thought of the grim old farmer's prediction as to his ultimate fate, and smiled. "I certainly wasn't born to be drowned, at any rate, not yet," he said half aloud.

Then he had a few whiffs of tobacco, provided and cut up in solemn silence by Grigg, who sat and looked at him but never spoke. Feeling stronger for the rest and food, Ross sprang to his feet reproaching himself for his needless delay. The rain was now general and the

wind rising, but the electric discharges less frequent and the atmosphere clearer.

"Grumps, you old sinner," he said laughing, "you'd better get back an' brew some hot tea, we'll need it soon. So long, keep cool and keep out of the wet." So saying he started up the creek.

He had not gone far when Grigg's dog, Smut, which had been on a fossicking expedition of his own, came bounding towards him giving vent the while to a series of short barks.

"Get out, you brute," he exclaimed, aiming a kick at the excited creature as he jumped at him, "I've no time for kangaroo rats or wallabies to-day, get out."

Smut, contrary to his usual malevolent nature, showed no animosity or illwill for the intended kick, but bounded away to a tree overhanging the creek, disappeared behind it for a moment, and returning, fawned upon him, and with short entreating yelps ran back towards the tree.

"I wonder what Smut has got there," he muttered ; "some jolly lizard I suppose, or perhaps he's tree'd Coffee's old cat. I'd better see."

He quickened his pace and followed the excited but now satisfied dog, which bounded in front, barking joyously. As he neared the tree, suddenly the thought that perhaps it was Anita or her body that Smut had discovered, sent him on with a rush. A few yards from it he felt the ground giving way beneath him. With a sickening feeling of dread he threw himself back and thus escaped. With a dull splash and a swish the undermined bank fell into the stream. A moment afterwards the old gum, groaning and creaking its remonstrances, slowly toppled over

into the water, still, however, preserving a precarious hold on the firmer soil behind. Smut who at the commencement of the subsidence, had howled dismally from his post behind the tree, sprang into its lower branches as the ground fell away, and thence jumped clear. But above the howling of Smut, the crash of the falling timber, and the swish of the rushing water, Charlie was horrified to hear a human cry, and to see, a moment later, the form of his little friend drifting down the stream. For awhile her clothes floating on the surface kept her up, and Ross, grasping that fact, ran swiftly across the bend to the next point, tearing off his blue shirt as he ran.

He paused to gather breath. Then just before the girl came opposite to him, he caught her appealing look, and crying "Hold up, Neets, I'm coming," took a header. He had calculated the distance and time to a nicety, and rose to the surface just in time to grasp the child as she began to sink.

She clutched him frantically, hampering his movements so much that he feared they would both go down.

"Neets," he cried sharply. "let go, you're choking me. I've got you, I'll save you." He was struggling for sheer life, and realised the impossibility of either guiding their course or keeping afloat much longer.

His appeal was successful. Opening her eyes she looked into his, and, taking courage, released the deadly grip she had in her desperation taken. He had just managed with a great effort to obtain a more scientific hold of her when the force of the current drove them against the right bank.

He was a powerful swimmer, but the impotence of any effort of his to combat the full power

of the stream was borne in upon him at once. The flood was his master. Could he but keep clear of snags and prevent his being hurled against the side, all might still be well. He knew from the height of the water that the current would carry them over the weir. If he could only manage to steer straight and keep their heads above water, the torrent would land them somewhere on the plain, shaken and bruised it might be, but safe.

Now they had entered between the high red clay banks which had given their name to the camp. Once around the next bend they would have a straight run over the top of the dam, and on to the shallower water below. Narrowly escaping being impaled on a projecting root as they were swept around the last point, they entered the long reach across the end of which the weir had been built. This stretch of water contracted rapidly until at the dam it reached its narrowest part. Then the creek widened out a little, but closed in again just as it ran out on to the plain. Consequently the speed of the stream increased greatly in velocity as it neared the weir.

One glance ahead and Charlie's face blanched, while his grip of the child involuntarily tightened. A quantity of debris of various kind had piled itself against and on the top of the weir. The lower limbs of the tree-bridge reaching almost to the weir had greatly assisted the accumulation of the tangled mass which now reached to the level of the trunk. The bulk of the water was rushing over the top, having a fall of about 15 feet, but a considerable quantity was still forcing its way through the barrier which impeded its free flow.

Anita felt the increased pressure of Ross's hand and

instinctively knew that he was troubled. She spoke for the first time.

“Are we going to be drowned, Charlie?”

She tried to be brave, but the low broken voice revealed the tears she strove to suppress.

He cast a rapid glance right and left. He forced a little laugh—a very poor attempt it was—but it inspired the child’s heart with courage.

“Drowned,” he said, “oh, no, we’ll be all right, please God. I wasn’t born to be drowned you know, Neets.”

She said something in an undertone that he did not catch.

“What is it, dear?” he asked between his set teeth. Despite his optimistic assurance to her, he could see nothing ahead of them but death or serious injury, and, brave though he was, his face paled again at the prospect.

“I’m saying my prayers, Charlie,” she whispered; “I’m not afraid now.”

Her simple faith inspired him with renewed hope. He determined to make one more effort. They were now being whirled along at a greater speed than ever. About half-way to the dam he saw a strong root hanging from a living tree above. He saw men running about on the bank and knew they saw him. Could he grasp that root and hold it till a slip noose could be passed over them from above? He would try. Fortunately they were being carried along on the south side. These were the thoughts of a few seconds. The next moment he was battling hard in the endeavour to get nearer the only hope of life he saw. Swiftly they were carried down, slowly, oh so slowly! they drew nearer the bank.

Grouped above watching the struggle with varying

degrees of interest or anxiety, were Mr. Jasper—his pale strained face giving little indication of the agony of mind within—Dan Coffee garrulously and aggressively sympathetic, three or four of the fencers, and McDermott and Farmer Giles.

The last two, despite wind and rain, had just made a record gallop from the Head Station. When the storm suddenly burst in all its fury on the Devil's Footsteps, Mrs. Jasper, apprehensive of she knew not what, suggested that they should go down to the Redbanks with waterproof rugs and a cloak for Anita. The two fleetest horses on the run were fortunately in the yard.

They were just passing the big sandhill where the track from the West Well comes in, about two miles out, when they heard a strange noise over and above the roar of the storm. Instinctively they drew rein and listened.

They glanced enquiringly, wonderingly towards the Range, and, as their gaze withdrew, they saw the wall of water coming towards them sweeping round the bend above.

"Holy smoke!" cried Pat, "phwhat's this. Git up, Dido."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Giles, "Git up, Raleigh. Houp la!"

The exclamations were uttered simultaneously, and the next moment both horse and mare were fully extended and going as they had rarely gone before. Still, swift as their pace was, the bore swept by like a flash. As they passed point after point they noticed how quickly the water increased in volume; though after the first tempestuous, tumultuous rush its velocity seemed to decrease.

Gallantly their steeds bore them on, needing neither heel nor hand to keep them going, but only a word of encouragement now and again. They sat **down** to it in grim determination. They were riding to win. Splashing through the ever increasing pools, slipping and nearly falling on the claypans, jumping the water-courses, laboring up the sandhill slopes, and racing across the flats, they covered the last four miles in record time. Incidentally they covered the horses and themselves in sweat and mud from head to foot. A group on the bank saw them coming and gesticulated wildly.

They pulled up and threw the rope lines to the ground just as Charlie's desperate endeavour to reach the gum root became apparent.

"Lasso men get ready," said Mr. Jasper with a snap.

In a few seconds Dan, Pat, and Farmer stood rope in hand, too keenly, nervously anxious, to speak, but watching eagerly the struggling man below.

Some of the others shouted hoarse words of encouragement. Charlie never heard them. Another minute and he would be swept past the slender line of hope. He put every ounce of strength into a final effort and failed by a few short inches. The men watched intently, every muscle set, every nerve strained. Charlie and his precious burden shot past the spot. Some groaned, some cursed.

"Now," snapped Mr. Jasper.

Whir-r-r, Coffee's lasso rang through the air, overshoot the mark and fell, dashing the water into Ross's face. He clutched the rope, but could not hold it, the strain was too great. "Now! Now!" from Mr. Jasper, sharper than ever.

Whir-r-r. Whir-r-r ! Two more lassos went hurtling down from the hands of McDermott and Giles. The latter's effort failed, the loop falling just behind its objective. Pat's throw was a magnificent one. It was beautiful to watch. The circle seemed to hover in the air above Charlie like a thing of life, and settled over and around him in a quiet workmanlike manner.

The slack was pulled in, a turn around the tree having previously been taken, and Ross ceased his futile struggle with the current, content to cling passively to the rope. Indeed, he was capable of nothing else, his last ounce of strength was used up—his last reserve exhausted. Another slip noose was passed down the rope, over the pair below, and fastened above.

Anita, on the first lasso falling over them, had released her hold of Charlie, and grasped it too. Hanging thus the current kept them like hooked monsters straining at the end of a line. What was to be done ? Then McDermott volunteered to go down the bank, and with a rope around his waist and another in hand, was lowered away to the water's edge. He succeeded after some trouble in getting Anita in his arms, and they were speedily hauled up.

Charlie was visibly weakening. It was doubtful if he could hold out much longer. If he released his feeble grip on the rope he was done for. He would be drowned, as Dan Coffee put it, "like a hooked whale* on a night line."

"Stick to it, me bloomin' duke," called out McDermott as he prepared to descend again. "My colonial, you *are* a bloomin' duke, there's no kid about it ; you deserve to be a blessed prince, so you do."

Charlie smiled feebly, relaxed his hold, and fainted.

*Murray or river cod.

“Lower away there,” shouted Pat, “lower away, you divils, or the duke’s a goner. Lower away,” he yelled. “Blast yer, don’t yer hear me.”

They let him go with a run and pulled in the slack when they heard him strike the water.

McDermott was big and strong, but he had all he could possibly do to rescue his rival and friend from death. He could not pull in the rope which held Ross, for when Anita was taken from the lasso, the line had somehow been pulled up and was around Charlie’s neck. So long as he retained his hold of it all was well, but now his grasp had gone, any extra pull on the line would tend to choke him.

Realising this, Pat shouted once more to those above, “Lower away, lower away,” until he was swinging in the current at Charlie’s side. Then he grasped him tightly and was dragged through the water and up the steep bank bearing his inanimate burden. He was limp enough when they hauled him over the top, and quite content for a space to lie on the ground and gasp.

At this point, according to all well conducted stories, the men ought to have cheered both Ross and McDermott, but they didn’t. Jerry should have evinced a desire to do Charlie a service, and Grumps should have smiled and shaken hands all round, but nothing of the kind happened.

One man said, “Good on yer, Mac,” while another ventured to remark, “Charlie’s ’ad a rough time,” that was all.

Under Mr. Jasper’s directions Ross was soon brought to, and, with Pat and little Anita, was rapidly driven to the station. McDermott had quite recovered by the next morning, but Charlie was a couple of days in

the hut before being allowed to resume duty. Anita spent two days in bed, two days of blessed exemption from verbs and figures and Mangnall's questions.

"Mamma," said she when on the evening of the second day Mrs. Jasper had come to give her children the good-night kiss, "Mamma, what is a duke? And what does it mean?"

"A duke, my dear, is a nobleman, next in rank to a prince."

"A noble man!" she echoed her mother's words gleefully. "Of course he is. Oh, how nice." She clapped her hands and laughed merrily.

"There's not much the matter with you, little puss," said her mother, looking lovingly at her, "except, perhaps, a thirst for peers and the peerage."

Anita laughed. "What is a nobleman? What does noble really mean?"

"Nobleness has many meanings, my dear, but I think the best of all is—goodness. Tennyson the poet says: 'Tis only noble to be good.'"

"Oh, yes, I know, mamma; he made up some poetry about the Queen of the May. But what does duke mean?"

"Oh, the word signifies a leader. It comes from the Latin word dux. Now kiss me, dear, and go to sleep. Good-night."

The next day Ross resumed work, and Anita made it her business to waylay him. It was after dinner, and she caught him leaving the kitchen.

"Charlie," she cried, "wait a moment, I want to ask you something."

He laughed. "As long as I'm not asked to inculpate myself, I don't mind."

"I don't know what you mean by *increamate*, long words are not nice. What I want you to tell me is, why do you get cross when people call you the duke?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he answered, after a moment's thought, "except that perhaps it is or was because of the person who called me so."

"Well, Charlie," she said very seriously, "will you do me a favour?"

"Yes, Neets, a dozen if you like."

"Really and truly I mean, not pretending or make believe."

She spoke so earnestly that Charlie checked his smile. "Yes, really and truly. 'Honor bright I will,' as Farmer Giles says."

"Well, then, I want you to promise not to be cross any more when people call you the Duke. I like it very much. Mamma says it means one who is a leader a noble man. And Mr. Tennyson—a man in England who makes up verses and puts them in books—says—says—oh, I forget the words, but something about noble men being nice good men. I'm sure it's very lovely. I'm going to learn the poetry some day, and then I'll tell it to you. I'm going to call you Duke. You shall be my Duke. You'll promise, won't you? And you won't mind, will you?"

And Charlie Ross was fain to accept the patent of nobility conferred upon him by the men and confirmed by Anita. Henceforth he became "The Duke."

CHAPTER X.

RUNNING THE BOUNDARY.

Mr. Jasper's favorable opinion of Ross was confirmed and augmented by his gallant conduct during the flood. Nor was he at all sparing in his praise of McDermott's brave action, while he accorded Giles a measure of commendation for his ready thought in bringing the lasso lines. Ready thought! Had he not tripped over the coil of ropes he would never have thought of them. With his usual diffidence he hesitated to correct Mr. Jasper until the opportunity for doing so had passed. Consequently once again he obtained credit for a ready wit.

To quote his own words. "And I a Wiltshire Moonraker, too!"

Although all danger from drought had passed away owing to the phenomenal rainfall at the Rat's Range, yet the reports from other parts of the run showed that very little rain had fallen elsewhere. An inch was registered at the Head Station, half of that quantity was estimated at Redbanks, and Trevenna reported, by virtue of the record of an old pannikin, about the same quantity. The storm, which seemed to be something of the nature of a water spout with a fringe of light spray all around, spent its full fury on the iron-stone range. Mr. Jasper estimated that at least four inches fell there during the afternoon, the bulk of it within the first half hour.

He based his figures upon the contents of sundry dilapidated jam tins, an honest but headless camp

oven, and a dissolute looking billycan. As the tins varied in their records from two inches to five inches, according to their situation and state of preservation, he rejected their evidence. The billy which was discovered perched in the fork of a tree ten feet above the ground was found to be full, and on that account and because of its unwonted elevation, its record was discredited. The open faced camp oven frankly confessed to four inches, which he accepted.

"If a man is pretty full when he is elevated, what can you expect from a blooming billycan?" asked Charlie one night when he first heard the story.

"I don't know. But if the man continued elevated I should expect him to be pretty soon where the billy was, up a tree," said Giles, getting in first for a wonder.

"When a cove's up a tree 'is ticker's often up the spout," laughed one of the men.

"Sure it's a case of no tick as well as no ticker then," said Pat.

"Sometimes," said Lankey, who had just entered and had had the conversation repeated to him, "sometimes a man is up a stick because 'is moke 'as jumped a bar."

"In that case," said Giles, "though the nanto clears the bar, his owner is generally wrecked on the outer side of it."

"And instead of getting home after the wreck, he's always an outward bounder," said Charlie rising. "Really, Farmer, you're too smart altogether to-night, I'll have to clear out."

"Yes," said McDermott, "I'm wid ye. I can't stand that Farmer any longer." And they left the hut together.

Of course, all knew perfectly well that it was Norah's presence in the kitchen, of which Lankey's entrance was a sign, that drew them out. They generally went together and returned together. Under such circumstances it is easy to understand that the wooing of Norah did not make such progress as either of them would have liked. Still, what was the hurry ? Time was plentiful, and Norah's company was pleasant and her manner agreeable, even if shared equally with another. It must be confessed, however, that neither of them showed such complaisance when on rare occasions they met her alone. At such times it took all Norah's tact and native Irish wit to fend off her lovers from the danger point of open proposal. That would have necessitated a decision which she was not yet ready nor willing to give.

And then there was Jerry Smith. What could she do with him ? His passion flattered but sometimes frightened her. In her innate gentleness of heart she shrank from hurting his feelings, though she had no regard for him. His devotion was so open and palpable that it needed no words, being seen and read by all. Knowing his vindictive character, his hatred of Ross, and his pugilistic reputation, she hesitated to give him his *congè*, and so he continued to live in a fool's paradise.

Smith's attitude towards the "Duke," which title, now that Charlie no longer objected to it, was becoming generally applied to him, was one of sullen, sneering resentment. This conduct, though galling enough was, under the circumstances, better than the continual mental sparring and wordy warfare which used to take place between them, and which made an open rupture

an event to be daily expected. Charlie's advances towards a more friendly feeling being invariably repulsed, he soon ceased to make them, and after a while mutual silence effectually prevented open hostilities.

The morning after the conversation recorded above, Giles was about to start for the horses when a message from Mr. Jasper altered the direction of his steps in favor of Government House. Presently the squatter appeared, napkin in hand, straight from his egg and toast.

"Giles," he said, "have you had any experience with cattle?"

"Yes, sir, a little." He answered wonderingly, hopefully.

"What do you call a little?" he asked, smiling.

"About eighteen months, sir, principally at Middle Camp on Netley, and one droving trip to Durham Downs with Joe Watson."

"Do you know what running the boundary means?"

It was Giles' turn to smile now. "Rather, it's made up of bushmanship, horsemanship, and hardship."

Mr. Jasper laughed heartily. "Come now, Giles, who told you that. It's true enough, but too smart to be original."

"Barcoo, sir, I beg your pardon, I mean Charlie Pollard."

"I know him," he answered, "a splendid bushman he is. Are you one of his pupils?"

"Yes, sir, but my definition of boundary running is shorter than his."

"Come. Giles, out with it."

"Gumption, grit, and go."

"Bravo. Upon my word, you improve on acquaint-

ance. You'll do. I want you to get ready to-day and start early to-morrow. Whom would you like with you ? I can't spare Ross."

"McDermott, sir," came the answer promptly.

"Very well, tell him and get to work at once. You'll have plenty to do."

As Farmer made for the hut he seemed to be walking on air. Scarce could he keep from running and jumping, so pleased was he at the prospect before him. Pat when told shared his enthusiasm too, though his delight consisted in the pleasure of the anticipation of something new, while Giles' was more akin to the renewal of an old love.

That day they worked with a will, and by night had all things ready—saddles (riding and pack) were examined, bridles, surcingles, hobbles, dee-straps, and all the various paraphernalia of a pack-horse turn-out were scrutinised and tested. Stores were requisitioned, pack bags loaded, personal impedimenta cut down to the minimum, and nothing except absolute necessities allowed a place. In addition to revolvers—Giles had a bull-dog and Pat a pin-fire of some French make—they carried a gun. Though the men never carried firearms when on ordinary station work, they were considered indispensable when travelling beyond the usual limits of the daily round.

That night McDermott went to the kitchen to take leave of Norah, and went alone, for the Duke suddenly discovered that he had a letter to write home. The next mail bag was due to leave the station to intercept the horse-back mail to Tilkaroo, about 60 miles east, in a fortnight's time. Consequently it is no wonder that,

after filling in the date, Charlie, remembering this, should have postponed finishing his epistle until later.

When Pat returned to the hut he was singing and whistling quite gaily. Walking across to Charlie, who had just turned in, he said : " Duke, old fellow, you're a bloomin' white man. Don't let that murdherin' spalpeen Jerry have much show while I'm away. Good-night."

The next morning Giles was in such high spirits he could scarcely contain himself. While saddling up after an early breakfast, the thought of the week ahead with its freedom, its romance, and its glorious possibilities, stirred his youthful imagination. Almost unconsciously he repeated Byron's lines, " There is a pleasure in the pathless wood."

" Eh ! What's that ?" asked Pat.

" Nothing ; just throw over that surcingle, will you ?"

" Surcingle be blowed, you've got it on."

" So I have ; I quite forgot. ' There is a rapture on the lonely shore.' "

" Eh ! What's wrong now ?"

" ' There is society where none intrudes,' " he murmured softly.

" Look here, Farmer," said Pat, coming round, " what ails ye. What's the matter wid ye ? ' Pon me soul ye give me the shivers wid yer groanin'. Aren't ye well, or is it drinkin' ye've been ? Sure, it's a wee drop I'd like myself."

As they were starting Mr. Jasper gave them a pocket compass. " Go west, Giles, and work north. Stay out till you've finished. Good-bye."

At noon they camped for dinner under a shady pine.

The morning was very hot, the flies were particularly pertinacious and exasperating, while the pack-horse seemed to be afflicted with an irresistible inclination to "act the bloomin' goat," as Pat called it, consequently Giles had lost much of the poetic fervour which had characterised his mood at starting.

Just here while the quairpot boils a short description of "running the boundary" may be given for the benefit of the uninitiated. On the back country stations before the runs were fenced it was the custom to "tail" or herd the cattle during the day and watch or yard them at night. This was done until they became used to the country and its waters and could be trusted not to "make back." Fewer men were then required, as the stock practically looked after itself. But it was occasionally necessary, particularly after rain, to go round the herds and see that none had gone away. This was generally done by two (or more) parties starting in opposite directions and working in a circle outside all cattle tracks until they met. Then they knew that, seen or unseen, the cattle were within the area encircled. This was "running the boundary," and often necessitated, on large runs or after heavy rain, being absent for weeks at a time. All stock making away had to be followed and brought back to within the station limits.

On Boolaroola the herd was a small one, and, as the surrounding country was practically waterless, there was no danger of the cattle making off. Consequently there were no regular stockmen on the run. A fall of rain almost always has the effect of making the herds restless, so that, as a matter of precaution, Mr. Jasper determined to run the boundary. Hence the presence

of Giles and Pat under the pine, anathematising the ants and flies and waiting for the "jackshay" to boil.

That night they camped at a cane grass swamp between two hopbush rises, having covered about 40 miles during the day. Countless hordes of mosquitos made any attempt at slumber hopeless, so they at last reluctantly relinquished the idea. Most of the short summer night was spent in yarning, smoking, and drinking tea, ever and always waging war to the death against their insignificant but well nigh maddening foes. They struck camp at "piccaninny daylight," glad to escape from such a fearful spot. The glamour of the trip was fast vanishing before the experience of its hard realities. They named the place Mosquito Swamp.

As soon as the stars in the eastern sky began to pale their fires and diminish their number, Giles started after the horses. On the way back he came across the tracks of blackfellows, evidently not more than two or three days old. Over the grilled chops and "beggars-on-the-coals" the probability of meeting wild blacks was discussed. McDermott was particularly interested, as he had not yet seen any.

"There's nothing I'd like better," he said, "than a bit of a scrap with 'em. 'Twould be great sport entirely." His eyes sparkled. He evidently looked upon the prospect of a scrimmage with much pleasure.

"'Twouldn't be all skittles and beer, Pat, if we woke some night to find spears sticking into us and nullas cracking our 'cobras' like eggshells."

"Sure Farmer," he answered, "we'd soon be asleep again. We'd be dead before we'd time to wake."

Then Giles mentioned what he had seen, and what he had heard from Barcoo of the treachery of the natives,

and concluded as they rose to saddle up by repeating that famous bushman's advice to Jack Halliday and himself regarding blacks :—"Never trust them, never be familiar with them, and never let them get behind you."

"That's all very well," said his mate, "but a man isn't a blessed wheel or a porcupine ; he can't face all ways at once."

Seeing no sign of cattle they turned north, and about four o'clock that afternoon came on fresh tracks going west. They wheeled and followed along their southern edge till sundown and then camped. More rain had fallen here than in the country first traversed. The cattle had also made that discovery. The next day they pushed on from dawn to dusk, still in a westerly direction, and in the stillness of that night heard the welcome sounds which assured them that they would head the wanderers on the morrow.

Since leaving Mosquito Swamp they had shifted their revolvers from the dee-straps to their belts. At night they had abstained from camping near water, and had tied up the tongues of the horse-bells. This day, indications of blacks had been seen two or three times, and once they had stumbled across the yet hot ashes of one of their fires. Still they had seen none. They watered the horses at a convenient crabhole about an hour before dark. The camp selected was in a patch of thick scrub on the edge of a dry claypan. Before hobbling the horses they led them along the edge of the claypan to, and through another thick bush to a well-grassed little plain beyond. A sharp look out was kept for signs of possible danger, but none were seen.

Being very tired they turned in early. Waking

about an hour before dawn, Giles roused Pat. "Look after your precious skin and boil the pot while I go for the yarramen," he said.

Having brought the horses back to the belt of scrub and short hobbled them, he made through the timber for the camp. It was now light, though the sun had not yet risen. He had not walked many yards before a thin blue column of smoke came into view. He dropped on the sand at once, and with bull-dog in hand, reconnoitred very cautiously. A few yards further a glimpse of a low native break-wind was obtained, in front of which a few small sticks were smouldering. These were responsible for the smoke which had attracted his attention. There was no sign of life about the camp save tracks, and tracks of men only.

"Ho," thought he, "this is a buck's turn-out; these niggers must be out for game—or mischief."

He moved towards the camp as quickly as possible, taking every precaution to avoid being seen. About a hundred yards from home he suddenly descried a big naked blackfellow armed with spear and waddy, dodge from a bush in front of him to another just ahead.

Giles stood motionless for fully a minute looking intently around. During that time he counted a dozen blacks all naked save for a girdle round the waist, but fully equipped for war. They were stealthily nearing the camp, taking cover as they went. Not knowing what else to do, he did the same. Presently they stopped behind a big bush and had a whispered consultation. Then they crawled a little nearer.

They were not forty yards from McDermott who, all unconscious of their presence, was busied about the breakfast. Giles followed close, dimly wondering in

his slow way what he ought to do. The next moment, through a break in the thicket he saw Pat's deadly peril. His dull brain worked at last. He saw in a flash not only his duty, but the answer to a question which had been vaguely troubling him. Why had the blacks refrained from using their spears? Three of the most formidable looking had fetched a circuit, and were now approaching McDermott from behind. He, supremely indifferent to everything but the task of the moment, stood at the fire watching the quartpot. But for the nearness of the natives in his rear those in front might easily have speared him.

"Look out, Pat. Behind you!" Farmer shouted; "the blacks."

Simultaneously he fired at the one nearest to him in front, who in common with the others had his spear poised ready for throwing. He missed, but the shout and the shot, being so unexpected, disconcerted them. They lowered their weapons and faced about peering into the scrub behind them.

As McDermott sprang around, revolver in hand, the blacks rushed at him, with wild looks and wilder cries and waddies swung on high. They were not ten paces from him when he coolly snapped his revolver in their faces. It missed fire twice.

"Take it! Bedad, it's no use to me," he shouted, and hurled it with all his force at the face of the leader. The weapon struck him full in the eye, and with such power that he staggered for a moment, and, with a yell of pain, threw his head back, thus coming into collision with the one immediately behind him.

Giles' shot, wretched though the aim was for so short a distance, having checked the frontal attack, diverted

attention to him, and several spears were thrown at random. Luckily none of the "shafts at random sent" found target in his body, and from the shelter of the dense broom bush behind which he crouched he followed up his first shot by another equally ineffective, and still another which scored an outer, striking the savage who seemed to be the leader in the arm, causing a somewhat precipitate retreat from the line of fire, and thus leaving him free to go to Pat's assistance.

The momentary check given to the rush by McDermott's presentation to the foremost blackfellow of his faithless pinfire, was used by him to considerable advantage. As the third of the trio came to the front he stooped and caught up the quartpot with his right hand, grasping the handles with the sugar bag.

Turning swiftly he cried out, "Rush oh, come along ye divils," and throwing the pot at his foes, he continued, "Here's the tay an' here's the water, an' be jabers here's the sugar, yer can make it yerselves."

Two of the blacks ran shrieking, half scalded and wholly cowed, but he of the damaged optic still advanced. Pat promptly closed with and threw him, his head striking the empty quartpot as he fell. When Giles reached him he was kneeling on the chest of his prostrate foe, and with both hands fast in the blackfellow's hair, was doing his best to flatten out the pot, using the savage's skull as a hammer.

In spite of the gravity of the situation they had just passed through, Farmer could not help laughing at the ludicrous position and the strenuous solemnity of Pat's operations.

"Steady, you wild Irishman, you'll break the blooming jackshay."

“ Hold your whist, Farmer,” he ejaculated between the blows, “ sure his mates had the tay, an’ I’m givin’ him the pot.”

He punctuated every second or third word, in direct opposition to all the laws of consonance, sequence, or syntax, with full stops, emphasised by and agreeing with the contact of the skull and the quart.

“ Then pot luck means good luck—to the nigger,” answered his mate, “ for I’m sure you’re only tickling his head. Besides, you’ll knock yourself out. Get up and let’s get out of this.”

“ Faith, Giles, you’re right,” he said, rising and breathing heavily, “ his blessed ‘cocoanut’ ’ud make two or three good spalling hammers, so it would. Off wid ye yer black tief,” he continued, stooping for the whip. But the blackfellow did not wait—he went.

After a hasty breakfast the two men—not having troubled to boil the much indented pot again—hurried after the beasts they had heard during the night. They christened the flat they were leaving Battle Camp.

They soon came up with the cattle, which proved to be a mob of about a hundred head, mostly steers and heifers. They had some difficulty in heading them. However, by dint of hard riding, the liberal use of loud language, and the whip, the cattle were turned for home. Then the stockmen kept them at it to such purpose that when at last, just about sundown, they called a halt at a waterhole in a mulga creek, they had no bother with them. If the cattle were half as tired as the drovers were it was not to be wondered at.

The next day they travelled until nearly dark, and then they were well within the Boolaroola boundary. Giv-

ing the horses a well-earned rest for a couple of days, they watched the cattle. The monotony was varied by revolver practice, playing mumble peg—a game with pocket knives—stalking an emu, shooting crows, and hunting for and unearthing lowan's nests. At night they fell back upon song and story. Pat did the singing, his repertoire consisting of Thatcher's Songs and a few older ballads of the bush. The "Old Bullock Dray," with its eight long verses and its eight line chorus, sung most religiously after each verse, was his favorite.

Giles did the yarning. Once after he had narrated before a full assembly in the Boolaroola hut, a story of his boarding school days at Warminster, the Duke rose, and, speaking solemnly and judicially, said: "Farmer, you're a real good hand at spinning a cuffer. Your yarns sound as if they were really true, and you tell them as if they actually happened."

The men all burst out laughing, but for the life of him the Wiltshire lad could not see the joke. It dawned upon him later on, when the opportunity for a retort had gone.

To return to our "beefs." On the third morning, as the cattle appeared to have settled down, the journey was resumed. Giles named the little watercourse which they were leaving Lowan Creek. They soon crossed the rain belt and entered the dry country again. Cutting no more tracks they gradually veered to the north, and still edging to the right, were at last going due east.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FINDING OF MONTY.

Towards noon of the second day after leaving Lowan Creek they cut the tracks of a mob evidently intent on getting away, and, turning north-east, set out in pursuit. Their course ran along a great plain broken at irregular intervals by lightly timbered ironstone ridges and occasional sandhills. That night they camped without water. Fortunately the canteens were full, so that the steeds had a small drink apiece before being short hobbled on the geranium which was growing luxuriantly all around them. The next morning, starting at the first pale silvery streak of dawn, they had covered nearly thirty miles by noon, and, happening upon a little dirty water in a claypan, halted for dinner. They scooped up half a bucketful of the yellow fluid with a pannikin, diluted it with water from the canteens, and gave it to one of the horses. This operation they repeated for each of the others.

The water, besides being discolored and thick, contained living creatures whose very appearance was nauseous. Farmer's previous experience had brought him into contact with these water vermin, but McDermott, a new chum in outside country, was ignorant of their existence. When, therefore, he scooped up some of the liquid in his pannikin and proposed to test its flavour, Giles advised him to strain it through his handkerchief or an empty tea bag.

"Git out," he said scornfully, "I'm not scared by it's

colour. You're too soft for this country, Farmer Giles ; you ought to go back to England. Here's luck, me boy, and a stronger stomach to ye."

A soft compassionate, forgiving smile spread over his mate's features as Pat raised half a pint of the muddy liquid to his lips.

" Ah," he said, " it looks good enough to be pea soup, meat and drink together." With that he took a big mouthful.

The next instant the tin dropped from his grasp, and with wondrous explosive force the contents of his mouth were ejected on to the ground. A hideous looking disc-shaped creature, with a hard yellow back and a soft bright red belly from which depended innumerable (so it seemed) short hairy legs, made for its home in the claypan.

Pat vomited furiously. Between the retchings he swore and bewailed alternately. " Oh, murder, it's poisoned I am ! Ugh the varmint ! Look at the brute. He tried to crawl down me throat. Ugh ! Farmer, you scoundrel, ye t'ief of the wor-ld, why didn't ye tell me. Wait till I git better, I'll learn ye to play thricks on strangers. Oh, divil take it ; there's wan of 'em down me stomach now. Ugh !"

Leaving him to recover both his usual inward quietude and outward serenity, Giles prepared the midday meal under the scanty shade of a stunted mulga. Presently Pat came over, and after a drink declared that he was all right. His subsequent prowess with the damper—the last of the eornd meat had been eaten the day before—went far to confirm his statement.

" 'Twas a mighty good job I tasted that stuff before dinner instead of after," he said.

"Quite right, old man," said Giles, "you should always take soup before solids."

"Before solids is it? Be jabbers, 'twas the solids—Ugh! the crawlin' baste—that killed me intirely."

Soon after leaving Pea Soup Flat, they were startled to see a human footprint. Dismounting they followed the tracks for nearly a quarter of a mile, till they doubled back in the direction the men had before been going. Mounting again, they carefully examined the plain on every side. So far as the eye could reach—that is to the next ridge—nothing was to be seen but bush and an occasional clump of stunted trees, indicating where in good seasons a little water gathered. They started again, this time with a double object in view—to head the cattle and to discover the author of the tracks.

"That's a white man's track," said Giles, "and a lost one to boot. How on earth the poor wretch got out here is a mystery. Though it's at least three days since he was here, he may be living yet."

"He's got Buckley's show of that," said Pat, incredulously, "why the galoot must have taken nine or ten days to git here. He's pegged out all right."

"McDermott," said his mate with mock solemnity, "McDermott, late of Victoria, later still of Boolaroola, now of parts unknown, but past, present and to come always a Bungaree Savage, listen to me."

"Giles," said Pat, mimicking his companion's style, "late of Wiltshire a moonraker; later still of Netley, a stockrider; now of these parts, boss of one man; but past, present and to come always Farmer Giles, full of jawbreakers, book learning, and tall yarns, I'll listen to you. Go ahead."

"Well, my lovely greenhorn, first of all never pro-

phesy unless you know, which in this case you don't. Second, remember your pannikin of soup to-day —— ”

“ Bad cess to it. I'm not likely to forget that,” he broke in.

“ Remember your soup to-day,” repeated Giles, “ whenever you're tempted to—to pit your inexperience or ignorance against the experience or knowledge of other folk.”

“ Bedad for me sin's, I'm gettin' it hot. Go on, rub it in, I deserve it.” He spoke in such a comically repentant tone and with such unwonted meekness of manner that his mate burst into laughter.

“ Pat, you're a jewel of the first water. May I always have as good a mate as you. Listen now. This man's tracks show that he was still going fairly strong, say three days ago. Suppose it took him nine days—as you say—to get here. That makes twelve from somewhere. He may have been riding and carrying plenty of tucker. Where are your twelve days now ? Suppose he was looking for his nanto where we cut his tracks. In that case he may have plenty to eat still, which, barring flour, is more than we have. He may have found his horse and be at home again by this time. Or supposing he is still on foot, he may be an old bushman (which I doubt) and no bushman need starve in this part as long as he can get water.”

“ No,” interjected McDermott, “ not while he could get turtle soup like I had this morning. Ugh !” He shuddered at the recollection.

“ Anyhow, the odds are the man is alive yet, if he is not a weakling, and has struck water now and then.”

And so they passed the time keeping a sharp look out for man and beast, but seeing no living thing bigger

than a brush wallaby or a "gohanna." Presently they halted for a moment on a low rise to survey the prospect ahead. Still the illimitable plain, still the all-pervading salt bush, still the same mirage far down on the horizon, looking particularly alluring with its placid rush fringed lake, glimpses of which could be seen so clearly through the tall umbrageous gums which lined its shores. To the right—that is south-east—they noticed that the timber or scrub country was encroaching on the plain and turning their eyes northward they saw the herd they were following.

"Holy Moses!" cried the astonished Pat, "Look! Look at the bastes! Phwat the divil ails 'em? It's bewitched they are."

When first seen the cattle were standing quite still, in the form, roughly speaking—of a large circle, with gaps here and there in it. They all faced inward, their heads bent down slightly and their eyes evidently fixed on one common object in the centre. Nothing could be seen from the point of view of the onlookers but salt-bush. As they looked the beasts commenced to advance slowly, then stopped simultaneously for a few seconds and advanced again. They continued these tactics until the circle became so circumscribed that they were pushing and jamming each other for places in the ring.

Suddenly and for no apparent reason they broke into confused sections, wheeled about with one accord, and with heads up and tails in the air galloped away, bellowing loudly as they went. Presently they stopped, turned again, remained stationary for a moment or two, and then commenced their forward movement once more.

"Come along, Mac," said Giles, breaking into a canter and steering away from the cattle, "we'll score two by tricks this deal, not to mention one for his nob."

"Whose nob?" cried Pat, still excited and puzzled by what he saw.

"The lost man's. Come on."

"Phwat the dickens d'yer mane? Phwhere in the name of all saints are ye goin' now? Is it mad ye are, like those bletherin' bastes beyant?"

Giles laughed. "'Arrah, Paddy, why don't you be aisy.' Here are our 'beefs' and here's our man."

McDermott looked straight ahead. "Where?" he asked, "I'm darned if I can see anythin' barrin' bush and scrub, the way we're goin'. Can you see him?"

"No, I can't; but he's over there in the centre of that cattle ring all the same. I want to get at the back of the beasts without scaring them. If we can do that we may be able to get 'em jigging towards home without any bother, and that 'ill give us a show to attend to the stranger. Savvee?"

They were within a hundred yards of the cattle before attracting any attention. Then they burst upon them at a gallop, shouting and cracking the whips. The surprised beasts rushed from before them, parted into two sections as they neared the centre of the circle, and to Giles' disgust did not coalesce again. Following his portion for about a quarter of a mile he kept them going at a good pace and left them satisfied that for the present they were all right. The other wing had galloped away almost at right angles. Looking across he saw Pat galloping towards their head. The old pack-horse, which stayed to graze when they com-

menced the drive, welcomed Giles back with a whinny of joyous recognition.

He soon found the human object of their search. Sitting under a bush was a man, his head bent forward and buried in his hands. The startled stranger looked up at Farmer's coo-ee, half rose to his feet, and fell in a partial collapse. Hastily hobbling the horse, Giles ran to his assistance. A dash of water brought him to. Bestowing the emaciated looking stranger in a better shade, with a rug under him, Giles lit a fire and prepared some food.

His previous experience on Netley now stood him in good stead. This man was suffering more from want of food than of water. Getting the only tin of condensed milk—private stock, not station supply—which they possessed, he mixed about a quarter of it in a pannikin of hot water. Then having made and cooked some very thin johnnycakes, he split them carefully and cooked them again. When sufficiently done on the coals he propped them up in front of the fire to finish.

His old mate, Chummy, who was a medical student, had explained to him once that this rather tedious method of preparing "beggars-on-the-coals" converted the starch into something or other which rendered the food much easier of digestion. He remembered also that Jack Halliday had so acted with the food he gave Barwon and Cockney Joe when they were bushed in the back country of Middle Camp.

When the toasted cakes were fully done they were broken into small pieces, mixed with the milk, and boiled with additional water in one of the quartpots. Previous to this the wondering stranger had been given a few spoonfuls of the diluted milk and water. Now he was

sparingly fed with the bread and milk. Then was Giles free to scrutinise his patient.

He was a young man, and from his appearance and style of dress a town-bred youth and not a bushman at all. Though looking so weak and emaciated, he must have had good reserve force, for he seemed to recover very rapidly, and after a few more homœopathic doses of "pobs"—as Lankey called it—he sat up and looked quite cheerful.

Giles was now faced with a double problem. How long would McDermott be away? What was he to do with the man now he'd found him? Towards evening the stranger was able to give Giles some of the information he wanted. He told him that he had been working for old Thorpe at Keedoorra Station on the Warrego. Having left there he had ridden out to Galway Downs looking for work. On leaving the Downs for Peenadoora he had taken the wrong track. Subsequently he had tried a short cut, lost his bearings in the scrub and camped for the night. The next morning he had failed to find his horse and had been hopelessly bushed ever since. He did not remember how many days he had been out, but had kept himself alive by eating roots and herbs. Fortunately he had not suffered from want of water. Such was his story. Long afterwards Giles discovered that it was composed of fact and fiction in about equal parts; and that the townified looking young man had graduated in phases of bush life which were altogether outside the range of his own back block experiences.

So far as Giles could tell, taking into account the devious course they had come, he reckoned that Peenadoora Station was 70 miles away, but some of its out-

camps would be much nearer, if one could only strike them. They could not take the man, they could not leave him, so it finally devolved upon Giles to take him back to civilization. At that conclusion he had just arrived when he heard the welcome sound of Pat's voice in the distance singing—

“Of mutton and damper
I'm sure you'll have enough,
And in the bucket we will boil
Such a whopper of a duff.”

“The Old Bullock Dray” had rarely sounded so sweet to him as at that moment.

That night it was settled that McDermott should take the cattle back to where they had cut their tracks, and wait for Giles there. So the next morning having divided the pack and rigged up the pack-horse with a blanket, they separated. The stranger was tied into the saddle, Giles—who was not going to take any unnecessary risks—bestrode the pack-horse. He struck for where he thought Peenadoora ought to be, and covered over 40 miles that day. The stranger was dead beat. So much so that Giles had to lift him from the saddle. The next morning a few miles from the camp they met a party of stockmen looking for new country, and they readily accepted the custody of the wanderer.

He had spoken very little since leaving the Circus Camp, as Pat had called the spot where they had found him. Now that they were parting he took out his pocket-knife.

“I should very much like you to keep this,” he said, “in memory of the castaway you have rescued. Some day we may meet and I may be able to repay you. Keep the ‘dover’ till we do.”

"I hope I'll never need such assistance. Good-bye."

He smiled feebly, "Who can tell? So long." They shook hands and parted.

After Giles rejoined McDermott, nothing further of an untoward nature happened, and the boundary runners arrived at the Head Station early on the second day before Christmas.

That night, after having given a full report to Mr. Jasper, Giles had to rehearse the whole story of the trip in the hut, all hands being present except Pat, who had quietly vanished early in the evening. At the conclusion of the story he took out the pocket knife and examined it. It was just an ordinary clasp knife bearing the imprint of a good maker, but along the big blade was the name "Geo. Monty" cut into the steel with acid. As he read the inscription one of the men laughed.

"Poor Monty," he said, "I knew him at Andy Gilligan's two years ago. 'E's a daisy is Monty. A downy cove, my bloomin' colonial" Then he laughed again.

Giles remembered that he had not told the stranger his name or anything about himself. Wondering whether they would ever meet again, he determined at any rate to preserve the knife as a memento of a pleasant albeit a rather rough trip.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DISCOMFITURE OF JERRY SMITH.

While McDermott and Giles were away running the boundary, Smith was particularly attentive to Norah. That is to say, he tried to be. Every alternate evening he rode over from the Redbanks and haunted the kitchen or its vicinity in the hope of getting speech with her. Now that Pat was away he fondly hoped to press his suit, but he forgot to reckon with the Doctor. Lankey viewed his proceedings with pronounced disfavor, and laid himself out to burke his desires. This he sometimes managed by button-holing him and keeping him busily engaged whenever Norah came out of the house on any errand. This operation, at which the Doctor was a veritable pastmaster, was known among the men as "cornering off," an expressive and self-interpreting phrase.

Smith inwardly chafed and fumed at Lankey's obstructive tactics, but outwardly was as civil and sociable as his sneering tongue and malicious nature would allow him to be. He recognised that it would be bad policy to have an open rupture with the cook. The breaking off of friendly relations between them would effectually close the kitchen to him, and his chances of speaking to or even seeing Norah would, under such exclusion, be exceedingly remote. So, while full of angry resentment at Lankey's officious and self-appointed guardianship, he had perforce to curb his temper, speak him softly, and trust to luck and perseverance to attain his ends. Sometimes after a

whole evening spent for naught, listening with weariness and vexation of spirit to some of Lankey's oft told tales, he would ride back to the camp swearing vengeance on all and sundry, but particularly on the Doctor.

"Curse 'im," he muttered late one night as he rode home.

A whole evening had been wasted in listening to and pretending to appreciate an apocryphal story of Lankey's intimate connection with the bushrangers Ben Hall and Morgan.

"It's a pity they didn't cut 'is darned gizzard, or chop 'is lyin' tongue out. So 'elp me I'll do for 'im some o' these days. 'E ain't goin' to play with Jerry Smith for nothin'. If it wasn't for the blessed gal, I'd screw 'is bloomin' neck as I would a chicken's."

Generally speaking, the only occasions on which Lankey relaxed his rather exacting chaperonage were when the Duke came on the scene. Then he would rise and leave the room, saying, "I think I'll see 'ow the lads are doin' down at the hut."

"Whether urged by instinct or impelled by fate," or in response to a telepathic communication, or a message of a more mundane character cannot be determined, but strange to relate, within a few moments of his departure Norah would invariably open the door.

"Oh, cook," she would say, stepping inside, "Mrs. Jasper wishes you to—oh, I beg your pardon," adding as she glanced around, "is the cook out? I hope I haven't disturbed you." Then she would make as if she would fain retire.

"Come in," "Come in," they would both cry together.

“ Well really,” with assumed reluctance, “ if you are quite sure I’m not in the way I —— ”

“ Come away, lassie,” the Duke would reply, “ come away, it’s weary we are for the sound of your sweet voice and the glint of your bonny black eye. Aren’t we, Jerry ?”

“ It’s weary I am of Lankey’s cracked clapper, anyway,” Smith would answer with a sneering laugh.

And so, protesting that she really had only five minutes to spare, she would sit on the seat opposite them and stay for an hour. Sometimes indeed, until Mrs. Jasper’s clear cut, “ Norah, Norah,” rang out or the loud gong-toned clock in the house struck the—all too early—hour for retiring. Sometimes she would run in and get her needle-work and stitch and hem and gather and tuck with her nimble fingers, while her bright roguish eyes and her mirthful smile played upon each of them impartially, with heart rending and heart mending glances.

Most of the conversation was carried on by the Duke and Norah. Beside the ordinary humdrum details of “ the trivial round, the common task ” which constituted their every day lives, and the extraordinary topics of interest such as the flood for instance, or the drought preceding it, they had another subject in common—books. Norah’s early taste for reading had been fostered and developed by Mrs. Jasper, who exercised a wise jurisdiction over the class of book she read.

And so Norah and Charlie often discussed the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Scott, or Lever, or the poems of Moore, Tennyson, or Longfellow, and quoted passages which had especially appealed to them, or criticised

the characters delineated. On these occasions Smith sat sullen and silent, inwardly cursing his book-learned rival and laying it up against him for future settlement. Now and then he ventured a remark upon some favorite of his, generally a volume with a blood curdling title and an obscure or unknown author. His failure to gain recognition in literary matters embittered him still more against the Duke.

Sometimes they varied the proceedings and played dummy whist. Occasionally, when for some occult reason known only to himself, Lankey stayed in the kitchen with them, they played cribbage. Then it was that Smith rose to the situation, grasped the sceptre, and held sway. His cribbage education was perfect. He had played for so long and so often, that he read the cards and counted their values at sight with such speed and precision as to be *facile princeps* among the quartette. It was his only mental accomplishment. The one thing in which he excelled other than in mere physical strength.

Then it was that Norah used to create much fun by her hopeless attempts at counting. By the pretty little ways she had of shrugging her shoulders or elevating her eyebrows, or opening her eyes in astonishment, or knitting her brows, when discounting her errors, or laughing with merry contagion when forced to admit her failure. On these occasions Smith was as genuinely happy as one with such a warped and twisted nature could be.

It happened once or twice during the period mentioned that Jerry became so utterly tired of a conversation in which he could take no part ; for neither Norah nor Charlie took any interest in "The Poisoned

Damper or the Black Gin's Revenge," or even in "The Newgate Calendar," that in the bitterness of his soul he rose and, bidding them a curt good-night, left the room in high dudgeon.

But the Duke rarely gained any advantage over his rival during his absence. Norah had a quiet way—in tone and manner—which effectually precluded any undue familiarity. In fact she never stayed very long after Smith's departure.

She would rise to go saying with a kindly smile, "You'll excuse me, Charlie, won't you? But I must ask Mrs. Jasper about this pleat. And it's really getting late, and we have had a nice evening, haven't we?"

And what could the Duke do but smile responsively and answer, "The quality's all right, Norah, if the quantity isn't."

And sometimes when he showed signs of becoming demonstrative or tried to get too close to her as she rose to go, she evaded him so prettily and with such a charming grace that, although he was repulsed and beaten, there was no sting in the defeat.

One night, however, fortune favored Smith and afforded the opportunity which an adverse fate in the person of Lankey had so long denied him. It was the day before Giles' and Pat's return, and Jerry and Charlie were with Norah in the kitchen. General topics, the weather, the dingoes, the progress of Coffee's contract, Trevenna's wager with Mr. Jasper, had all been discussed *ad nauseam* and a momentarily lull occurred in the conversation.

"Christmas Eve, to-morrow night," said Norah. "How different it all seems in the back blocks. Heigh-

ho," and she heaved a little sigh ; " no festivities, no meetings with one's friends. no week's break in the ordinary life, no church services, and no—no—no Christmas presents." Though she commenced with a sigh she ended with a smile.

"Put it another way," said the Duke ; " no drink, no gourmandising, no prospect of rows, no bilious attack, no black draught or blue pill, and no sore head in the morning."

Jerry felt out of sympathy with both summaries of civilised Christmas observances, and kept silence. He would gladly have dared the dangers of gastric disturbances, or fistic encounters, to have had a free hand at the wassail bowl, the Christmas goose, and the dozen and one things which go to make the Christmas dinner at once a delight and a terror.

"For shame, Charlie !" exclaimed Norah reprovingly, "I thought better of you than that. What have drinks and fights and sore heads to do with you ?"

"Oh, yer think 'im an angel," broke in Smith abruptly, "'e ain't no better than the rest of us."

"Quite right, Jerry," said the Duke, his pleasant smile contrasting strongly with the other's sneer, "I'm only a man, not very big and not very good. Just an ordinary knockabout, with faults and follies the same as other men."

"Really, Charlie, 'one touch of nature,' you know the rest. I feel almost inclined to go into the confessional myself."

"You !" said both at once, with a unanimity of mind most remarkable, "you have nothing to confess."

"Oh dear ! Oh dear !" she exclaimed, laughing, "What fools these mortals be."

The Duke, recognising the quotation, laughed too. Jerry looked in astonishment at both. "Well, I'm blowed, that's pretty straight," he muttered under his breath.

Just at that instant the door opened and Mr. Jasper walked in. "Is Ross here ? Oh, there you are Charlie. I'm sorry to disturb your merry party, but I want to speak to you ; come into the office with me, will you."

The Duke rose at once. "So long," he said. ' I don't suppose the Boss will keep me long ; I'll be back soon."

There was silence for a while after the door closed. Jerry sat still and gazed intently at Norah. Though she busied herself with her work and never looked up, she knew it, she felt it. Her heart was beating a little quicker and her fingers were not quite so sure of their duties as usual. Twice he made as if to speak, but he checked himself. For once her ready wit failed her. Oh for Charlie's return. Surely he would not be long. Then Smith moved his feet a little and she knew he was going to speak.

"Jerry," she spoke out. she felt she must stop him at all hazards. "Jerry, what breed is that dog of Grigg's ? What a faithful creature it is. I do like dogs, but not about the house. you know. I mean tied up or out with the shepherds, and that sort of thing. Fancy that dear little dog finding poor little Nita and running backwards and forwards to Charlie to get him to come to her help. What an intelligent collie it must be. Or is it a cattle dog ?"

He had been screwing up his courage to the sticking point, and had just determined—come what might—to speak. A carefully prepared sentence, long and

laboriously thought out, was on the tip of his tongue, when she shattered the purpose and wrecked the word he was going to say. He was furious, helplessly furious. That wretched dog ! He registered an inward vow to give it a bait at the first opportunity.

Then he spoke. "A collie ?" he repeated with a snort of derision. "No, the miserable cur is a Smithfield mongrel."

"Oh, how interesting ! What is a Smithfield mongrel, Jerry ? Is it a sheep or cattle dog ? Or just a faney breed ?"

His speech failed him altogether for a moment while he mentally consigned all dogs past, present, and to come to the fires of Gehenna. Then he explained that Grigg's dog was an ill-favoured, bad-tempered brute of no breed at all, always snarling and biting. It wasn't worth its tucker, and old Grumps was a born idiot to pay the registration fee.

While he was speaking she could not help feeling that much of his description of Grigg's dog was applicable to himself, and the humor of it brought a light rippling laugh to the surface.

He saw and heard, thought she was laughing at his wit, took heart of grace, and continued in the same strain about Smut's owner.

She promptly stopped him. "Please don't talk like that. Poor old man. I don't like to hear things like that. They hurt me."

"Hurt yer," he cried, astonished. "why yer laughed an' I thought yer liked it, else I'm blessed if I'd a' said it."

She rose. "I must get inside now. It must be late. What a pleasant time we've had."

She made for the door. He had risen while she was speaking, and at her first movement sprang clumsily forward and stood in front of her.

"I want to speak to yer," he said hoarsely.

"I really can't stay now," she answered, trying to get past him. "Come round to-morrow night."

"Yer must," he said, stepping back a pace nearer to the door.

"Must ! You forget yourself. Let me pass, please." Her face was flushed, there was an angry glitter in her sparkling eyes, but her tone was quiet and incisive.

"Norah," he said entreatingly, "Norah, do stay one minute an' let me speak."

His tones touched her—she hesitated. He saw that and pressed forward to follow up his advantage. "Norah, dear," he began, and putting out his hand touched her on the arm.

The effect was electric. She stepped back and drew herself up to her full height. Her face pale, her features set, and her eyes flashing angrily. "Mr. Smith," she spoke coldly and slowly as if exercising self-repression, "you have heard of the saying 'eyes on, but hands off,' it applies to yourself in this case. If you dare to touch me I'll never speak to you again. Stand back and let me pass please."

Jerry winced, he felt like a whipped hound. His passion gave way to jealous anger. She wouldn't speak like that to McDermott or the Duke. Yet she treated him with contempt. "Yer not so mighty perticler with others," he sneered. "Did yer snort and say 'ands off to Pat the night afore 'e went away.'"

The colour came into her pale cheeks again. "I think you are very rude and impudent, and ——"

she stopped abruptly. "Cowardly," she was going to say, but even now she shrank from hurting his feelings more than was absolutely necessary.

"Rude an' impident," he sneered. "When I only speak of what I saw!"

She started. "Taken to spying?" she asked. "You'd better not let Ross or McDermott come to hear of that, or there'll be trouble. Open the door, please."

He did so in silence and stood aside. As she passed him he threw his arms around her and tried to kiss her. She uttered a low scream and struggled vigorously to free herself from his clutches. A step came round the corner unheard by either. The next moment Jerry received a resounding whack on the head from a piece of wood wielded by the surprised and indignant Lankey. Norah was free.

"Yer miserable contemptible 'ound!" said the cook, "out o' this an' sharp, too, or I'll do yer a mischief."

The other glared at him in impotent fury for a moment and then slunk away. Now that the trouble was over, Norah was trembling violently, and was troubled by the thought of what might happen if Pat or Charlie came to hear of Jerry's behaviour. Therefore, she sat down for a while and told the Doctor what had happened, and persuaded him, for her sake, to say nothing about it. Lankey at last reluctantly consented to hold his peace.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE MEN'S HUT.

To Giles and McDermott the most gratifying result of their trip around the run was their promotion. Giles was appointed stockman. He was made responsible for the safety and well-being of the cattle. So long as his duties were properly discharged, the details of method and manner were left to his discretion. Pat was promoted from the ranks of the rouseabouts, and succeeded his mate as horse driver. In both cases increased responsibility carried with it increased pay.

Following the incident of the flood, Ross had received a substantial rise in his wages. He was given charge of and made responsible for the whole of the equine stock on the run, with the title of head horseman. The men dubbed him "the groom," as Mr. Jasper still retained him for personal service when required.

It was in consequence of his recently acquired responsibility that, during the afternoon of the day following his return, Giles rode out along the South road. Though the weather was blazing hot, a new born zeal quickened by his being clothed in a little authority, drove him forth. About ten miles out he came upon horse tracks suddenly diverging from the road into the scrub. A cursory examination showed him that four horses had that day traversed the track towards the Head Station, and at this point had turned abruptly to the west. Wondering what horses they were, he left the road and followed them. A very short distance sufficed to convince him that he was following two horses

carrying men, and two being led and pre-umably carrying packs.

Anxious to ascertain who the two travellers ahead of him were, Giles made as rapid a progress as the nature of the country would allow. That they were good bushmen and knew where they were going he was soon convinced. Despite the scrub and the constant deviations from the straight line which it compelled them to take, they kept a remarkably direct course.

About five miles from the road there was a low sandy rise from the farther side of which a small plain extended for about a half a mile. From the top of the elevation he gazed intently ahead and presently saw a thin column of smoke ascending from the scrub on the other side. It was so thin that he looked twice to make sure, and when he looked the third time it was gone.

Turning sharply to the right and riding through the bush as fast as he could, he presently emerged on the open country. He galloped across the plain still at right angles to the strangers' tracks and continued that course until he struck an old wheel track which led from the West Well to a one-time sheep camp on the northern edge of the scrub wherein he had seen the smoke. Turning he followed the single wheel track until he reached the remains of the old shepherd's gunyah. After giving the horse a drink at the little waterhole, he entered the timber country in order to strike the stranger's camp, or, if they had gone, their tracks.

He soon found it. It was on a flat about 100 yards across, nicely grassed and closed in by dense scrub. In the centre were two stalwart athletic looking men stretched under a sandalwood tree smoking. Their

horses were a few yards away feeding. The latter attracted his attention at once, being splendid looking animals and in fine condition. Good horses were not scarce on Boolaroola, but with the exception of Mr. Jasper's thoroughbred Raleigh, there were none to compare with these he saw grazing before him.

As he emerged from the scrub his nag whinnied, and the strangers' steeds neighed in friendly response. The two men were on their feet in an instant and looked at Giles in a way he did not quite like. The revolvers they grasped did not tend to reassure him. They continued scrutinising him until he reached them.

They were both young and fine specimens of New South Wales bushmen. tall, sinewy. and bigboned. One. the younger. was a pleasant looking fellow—the other struck Farmer at once as being "bad." He had a sinister look and a hard cold eye which Giles did not like.

"Good day, mates," he said, dismounting. "have you got a drop of tea there?"

They both replied. He of the pleasing countenance said, "Yes, old man, plenty of it. and brownie too. Help yourself."

He of the sinister looking face ignored the question by putting another. It was of an imprecatory nature, and demanded the visitor's name. whence he came, and whither he was going.

"Thanks," said Giles, ignoring sinister face, and helping himself from the quartpot. "Ah, that's better," he continued, putting the pannikin down, "lucky I struck your camp. I forgot to bring any water with me, and I can't stand the claypan stuff. It reminds me too much of the yellow soup on the Lower Paroo."

He of the sinister look still eyed him suspiciously. "Who the dickens are you?" he queried again.

"Me? Oh, I'm Farmer Giles, late of the Darling River, now stockman for Jasper on Boolaroola. Where have you sprung from?"

Before sinister could reply, pleasant face broke in. "Giles?" he said, "Farmer Giles? Were you ever at Durham Downs? Didn't you have a mate called Halliday?"

"Yes. We travelled there with cattle. Joe Watson in charge about a year ago."

"He's all right, Jim; I know him." Then turning he said, "We've just come across from Wackabong, and are making 'inside.' We tried a short cut from the road beyond," indicating the south-west, "intending to strike the track again between Lake Jasper and the West Well. Are we far out of our bearings?"

He smiled so pleasantly and spoke in such a nice manner that Giles, simple lad, felt hurt to think what an awful liar he was. Wackabong was in just the opposite direction from that in which he knew they had come. He was more than ever convinced that they were bent on mischief of some sort.

"Not much," he answered, "the station bears about nor-east from here, but just about half a mile through here," pointing in the direction he had come. "you'll strike a single dray track which will take you to the West Well."

"Thanks," replied the other. "I don't feel easy on these cross country trips. I like a track to follow. Jim," he continued to his mate, "there's a track just over here straight to the station; no more wandering in circles and beating about like a ship with a head

wind. We've lost enough time with these short cuts, I'm going to stick to the Queen's highway in future."

His laugh was so hearty and so contagious that Giles had perforce to join in.

Jim only grunted, and looking at him again suspiciously, said: "Which way are yer goin'?"

"Oh," he replied in an eager tone, "as you've come from Wackabong, you can say whether you came across any stray nantos between here and the road, or the fresh tracks of any."

'Twas the other spoke. "Not a sign of one, neither head nor hoof. No cattle either. Nothing but some emus and a kangaroo or two."

"That's a good job," said Farmer, in a relieved tone, "I needn't trouble to go any farther this way, I'll get round by the Lake and then home. So long; I suppose I'll see you at the station to-night."

"You bet," laughed pleasant face, "if we don't lose the track. I'm longing to stretch my legs under a squatter's table again. So long."

Giles reached home about sundown, having skirted the southern edge of the Lake and then ridden back by the road. As he anticipated, his strange acquaintances had not turned up. He had scarcely put his horse into the little paddock when dust on the East road foreshadowed the arrival of a team of some sort.

A few minutes sufficed to prove it to be that of Dudley, a hawker from the River who once a year penetrated as far as he could into the back country, where he reaped a veritable golden, or, rather, paper and "shin-plaster" harvest.

That night Lankey's kitchen was taxed to its utmost

to accommodate his guests. Later still the crowd grew bigger, for, in addition to two or three of the shepherds, Trevenna and his mates and all Dan Coffee's men appeared. It was Christmas Eve. Such a gathering had never taken place at Boolaroola before. Presently there were mingled sounds of revelry, melody, and strong language in the men's hut.

Dudley had quickly disposed of several bottles of his own special brand of sarsaparilla, which, as an alterative and blood purifier was—it was claimed—without a rival west of the Warrego. Its effect upon men who had lived long on mutton or beef and damper, and whose systems sadly lacked the salts supplied by fruit and vegetables, was remarkable. The quickness of its action was only equalled by the marvellous diversity of its effects upon its votaries.

On this occasion under the charm of "Dudley's Drops," as they called it, the young men's fancies lightly turned to thoughts of music. The old hands, on the contrary, plunged into "All Fours" or foregathered near the empty hearth yarning and smoking. There under its genial influence their tongues were loosened, their memories refreshed, and their imaginations inspired to great and still greater efforts of mendacity. Oh, those reminiscences of the digging and the ante-digging days! How they grew in horror as the evening wore on! And how their narrators, with as many strange oaths as Shakespeare's soldier, fairly revelled in the recitation of the dark deeds of the black past.

Giles and Ross often wondered whether any or how much of their tales were true or whether their whole repertoire were vile emanations from minds and senses

steeped in the horrors of a morbid imagination. They never solved the problem.

The Duke was vigorously working a brand new glittering concertina (which Dudley afterwards raffled for ten times its value), and the resultant sounds were said by him to be Finnigan's Wake. McDermott, who played the tin whistle, said it reminded him of Wilkins and his Dinah. Pat's opinion, however, was received by the rest with hilarious derision, for aspiring to be a musician himself, his verdict was imputed to him for professional jealousy. Jerry had just finished a step dance when the door opened and the two strangers stepped in.

They were scarcely across the threshold before Dudley's Drops in varying quantities were pressed upon them. Old Dan Coffee, in tipsy gravity, and possessed with a due regard for the dignity befitting a boss contractor, proffered half a bottle. The other extreme was represented by one of the "lizards," who, with shaky hand and uncertain lips, offered them the dregs of a pannikin. The term "lizard" was one rather contemptuously applied to the shepherds by the horsemen.

The strangers declined, save for a nobbler apiece; the hospitality showered upon them. The one laughingly the other with surly civility. They glanced scrutinisingly round the hut. Giles, who was watching them, noticed a gleam of recognition pass between them and the hawker. They looked hard at old Grigg, and he returned their gaze with one of his usual sour looks.

Presently the older man's glance fell on Smith, who at that moment happened to look at him. Noticing the stranger give a slight start, Giles turned his gaze on

Jerry. The fencer's face was deathly pale. He turned away at once. Whether they were friends or foes Farmer could not tell, for they never came near or spoke to each other during the evening.

Then he of the open countenance caught the stockman's eye. "Hullo, friend Farmer," he cried jovially, "we managed to find our way you see, thanks to your directions."

Giles looked him full in the face and winked hard as he answered, "I was going to organise a search party."

Jim turned a malevolent eye on him. "What the ——" he began, but checked himself.

The other crossed over. "Seems to me, Giles, old man," he said pleasantly, "that we ought to understand one another. You're not the fool I took you for at first, and we are not quite so stupid as you think. Your directions were straight enough, but we noticed where your tracks suddenly came on the old pad. We turned and followed them for a bit till we discovered that we were tracking a tracker. Then we came on to the West Well, and here we are."

"Well," said Giles, after a moment's pause, "to tell you the truth, I thought you were after some of the Boss' 'cleanskins.' I never credited you with being stupid."

"To be equally frank with you," the other said, confidentially, "we're in trouble. It's nothing much, but we want to keep out of sight for a bit. Jasper's 'cleanskins' need not worry you. I give you my word for that. I ask you as a favor to keep quiet for a week after we leave here, that's all. Will you?"

What could Farmer do but accede to his request?

Here was an appeal for help from a man in trouble. His heart replied ere his reason considered it.

"Yes," he answered, "you may depend on me, but I must know who you are."

"Giles you're a brick. My name is Dick Carter, of Cunnamulla. Dick the Devil, they call me." Then he added apologetically and with a smile of deprecation, "it's an infernal shame, isn't it?"

"May be, but at any rate it's an infernal title."

"Ha, ha ha !" he laughed. "Good boy, Farmer."

"What's your mate's name?"

"Jim Blood, 'a first-rate fellow in a row,' as the poet says."

As he spoke it dashed across Giles' mind that these were the two notorious Queensland cattle duffers whose exploits had been served up in the last papers he had yet seen, and who were then supposed to be making west. Dick he remembered was the leader of the gang. He it was who planned the depredations—exploits the men called them—and whose coolness and resourcefulness had so long carried them through. Jim Blood was his right-hand man whom rumour credited with worse deeds than "lifting cleanskins."

By this time the fun had become fast and furious, indeed altogether too fast and furious for Farmer. All Fours had ceased to interest, music had ceased to charm, yarning had given place to argument, and argument was rapidly resolving itself into a state of chaotic action. Some had reached the combative stage, and with wild eyes and clenched fists were seeking an outlet for the raging fire within. Some were in the maudlin mood, ready, aye eager, to weep over one another at the slightest provocation. Some were

merry, laughing inanely at everything and everybody, breaking forth into absurd snatches of song devoid of tune or time, or tumbling over in their vain efforts to dance. Some were mad, unmistakeably mad, and they were mostly the "hatters" who once more justified the old proverb "as mad as a hatter."

Some were sober—that is to say, capable of self-control, and conspicuous among these few were Dick the Devil and Jim Blood, who surveyed the jabbering, hiccuping, swearing crowd with quiet contempt. Dudley had left the hut before this, and was with his black-boy mounting guard at the van. His past experience in the bush—particularly in the back blocks—had taught him many things. One was that many of the old hands suffered, when under the influence of liquor, from a strange reversion to type. And the type was that of the primeval savage whose respect for private property was commensurate with the power of the owner to keep it. So, when he saw that his famous Drops were releasing the elemental passions of his patrons, he slipped quietly out to be ready for emergencies.

Presently Smith, who was fraternising with McDermott—for all the world as if Norah Casey had no existence—lurched forward, striking Pat on the chest. Pat promptly responded by closing with him, and the next moment the twain were rolling on the floor. Someone separated them. Jerry remained at full length, and was soon in a heavy stupor.

His rival gazed at him with tipsy gravity, laid his head on the table, and fell asleep too.

Giles looked around the hut. The Duke had disappeared. Old Grigg was seated at the other end.

He had drunk little and said less, but his eyes always seemed to be fixed on Carter or Blood. Two or three of the fencers were *hors de combat*, and snoring where they fell. Old Dan Coffee and two or three other seasoned veterans still plied the bottle, while a stray man or two wandered aimlessly about. The end was near.

Giles went outside and thought on what he had seen. Would he as the result of his bush life come to this? He hoped not, but he was afraid so. The thin line of a better home training and a purer environment in his younger days, were the only barriers, and they were fast breaking down, or, rather, wearing away. Was life to be one long monotony of toil broken only by drunken brawls, and nerve and brain destroying dissipation? He was on the stool of repentance, yet had he not the grace nor the courage for a high resolve.

The door opened, the two strangers passed out, and seeing Giles, stopped to speak.

"A sweet lot of beauties," said Dick smiling and jerking his thumb towards the hut, "a bottle of battleaxe would buy the whole box and dice of them. We're off in the morning—'so early in the morning before the break of day tra-la,' so we'll say ta-ta to-night. Farewell, adieu, so long my melancholy Farmer. Remember," he said as he walked away, "remember me, for I—Dick Carter of Cunnamulla—never forget."

As he was speaking his mate moved on. When opposite the other door of the hut Grigg came out and advanced towards him. Smut who had been lying some distance away came rushing to meet his master, jumping and barking as he came. The two men had almost met when the dog bounded between them and

wheeling round showed his teeth and growled at Blood. Quick as thought he received a violent kick and fell over, howling.

"Yer coward, Jim Blood," hissed the old man through his half-closed mouth, "I know yer. I know yer. Yer cheated Jack Ketch once, but I'll live to see yer 'anged yet. Yer cur."

Blood sprang at him with uplifted arm and an oath on his lips.

"Hold up, Jim," cried Dick in a tone of authority, "let me settle this little business."

He walked towards them. Giles followed close at his heels. Jim released his grip on Grigg and waited.

Dick faced the old cook and speaking slowly and distinctly said, "This is evidently a case of mistaken identity. You understand." He put his hand meaningly to his hip pocket as he repeated in suave tones and smiling withal, "A case of mistaken identity. Savvee."

"Yes, blast yer, I understand," growled Grigg, as he turned towards the hut.

The two men strolled across to the hawker's van while Giles followed the cook.

"Hullo, Dud. How's trade?"

"Hullo Dick. What's the latest?"

"Bad, old man, bad. Behold two poor innocents driven from home by adverse circumstances! We're going west. 'To the west, to the west, to the land of the free.' Who've you got with you?"

"Oh a Coomarella nigger, one of Thorpc's boys. He's asleep in here."

"Not Micky the Dart? Yes? Good iron! Rouse him up Dud. We're in luck's way. Sure the devil looks after his own after all."

As the blackboy emerged from the van he grinned a cordial recognition. "Debbil—debbil Dick. Budgery pfella you."

Dick patted Micky on the head and talked kindly to him for a moment or two in a mixed dialect, partly native and partly pidgin English, which even Dudley could not fully comprehend. The boy's part in the conversation consisted of sundry short laughs and numerous flashes of white teeth punctuated by monosyllabic interjections of an approving or negative character. The short conversation concluded, Micky returned to his rug under the van, and Dick took Dudley a little apart, where they conferred together earnestly for some time.

"What darned mischief are yer up to now?" growled Black Jim as they returned.

"Arranging for a telegram to Bulla-bullina, that's all."

"What 're yer givin' us? Don't be a fool."

"Straight wire, Jim. It's all O.K. Horse hire and mileage pretty stiff, but hang the expense. Better hang the expense than hang yourself. Eh, mate. Ha, ha ha!"

Blood, muttering something under his breath, walked sullenly away. Dick turned to Dudley. "You understand, don't you?" he said. "Hang about as long as possible. Keep your eyes and ears open. If anything turns up send the boy. You can bet your life on Micky, he's as good as gold. So long, old man, we're off early to-morrow, going east if anyone should ask. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE QUEEN'S WRIT FAILS AT BOOLAROO LA.

By sunrise the next morning Carter and Blood were five or six miles on the East road. A strong westerly wind was raising clouds of dust.

"If we get off the track," said Dick, "we sha'n't swallow so much sand." They turned to the left and went north across country.

"Wretched weather," growled Jim, "a cove can 'ardly see."

"Lovely weather you mean. I never knew a better Christmas Day—for us," answered Dick meaningly.

"Blowed if I can see it."

"Of course you can't," laughed the other, "but the dust which is blinding you is blinding your tracks too. Savvee?"

"Umph," grunted Jim, and no more was said.

Early in the forenoon they arrived at the northern end of the Devil's Footsteps, whence they followed up a narrow winding gully with rough precipitous sides for about a mile. The gully appeared to end in a sheer face of rock, barring all further progress. On riding right up to this wall a narrow opening to the left, completely hidden by bushes, was discerned. Through this strait gate the two men passed. There was barely room for one horse to get through at a time. The passage immediately opened out into a little dell not more than three or four hundred yards in length and breadth. In the centre was a rockhole. On the far side a small cave the home of the dingo, was strewn

with feathers, fur, and old bones. Loosing the horses, Dick and his mate cleaned out the cave and settled down for a quiet Christmas Day.

That morning was a melancholy one at Boolaroola. Sore heads, enlarged livers, snappy tempers, and clouds of dust, fine penetrating dust, and aggressive sandy dust mostly pure silica, made human life scarce worth living. Most of the younger men, half ashamed of their share in the night's carousal, kept clear of "Dudley's Drops," and passed the forenoon by sleeping, reading, or mending their clothes. The old hands, on the contrary, rose early. Many of them had spent the short hours of sleep on the floor of the hut, in varying degrees of discomfort. The shepherds had, willy-nilly, to start for their flocks long before sunrise, consequently some of the heaviest drinkers were gone. The rest, one by one, found their way to the hawker's van, and set about testing the homœopathic principle that like cures like.

They did not express themselves so, but said. "Let's git a 'air o' the dog that bit us."

They got a hair, in fact, several hairs; indeed, locks would more adequately describe the prescriptions they swallowed. Unfortunately, their experience did not tend to increase one's respect for proverbial philosophy, even when hoary with old age.

Lankey's Christmas dinner was but poorly patronised, despite the attractions of that mysterious masterpiece of his, known far and wide as "poisoned pup." The general desire was for liquid refreshment and not for food of a more solid character. Consequently not half the company answered the dinner-bell by their presence, and few of those did justice to the good things provided by Mr. Jasper's generosity and Lankey's skill.

Shortly after dinner the gale moderated, and during the afternoon gradually died away. Life in the open became once more preferable to that between four walls. Consequently the younger men went out hunting or shooting, or, as in the case of Ross and Farmer, for a ride simply to get away from the atmosphere of mingled depression and hilarity which pervaded the hut. Though both men had been largely in harmony with the proceedings of the night before, yet the same features struck a discordant note in their hearts in the morning.

Crossing the creek below the waterhole and ignoring roads, they struck at random through the timber. They talked of their work and future prospects, of their homes and the Christmas days of long ago. "Long ago" was but a figure of speech, which translated into ordinary prose meant two or three years. But Youth measures the flight of years by emotions and not by days, by Memory's sweet perspective and not by the almanac, by the swift flight of Love's imagination and not by the dull tread of Time.

Leaving the romance of the past they returned to the hard matter of fact topics of the present. From these they drifted somehow on to books and book writers. Now, while Farmer's knowledge of literature had a wider scope than Charlie's it was more fragmentary and lacked the thoroughness which, within its more limited range, his possessed. Giles spoke of authors and works Ross had never heard of, but when asked to quote, had to fall back on generalities or give the most skimpy samples of their writings, and even then was seldom certain of the exact words. On the other hand, any author Ross knew he knew thoroughly. Dickens, Scott, Lever, Shakespeare, Moore, and Burns

were his particular favorites. He knew them—so it seemed—by heart, and had the faculty of knowing exactly what to quote and how. This, coupled with a modesty which shrank from parading his knowledge, made him a charming companion. It was no wonder that Norah, who had similar tastes and a knowledge within the same limits, found pleasure in his company.

Returning home they had a lively spin after an old man kangaroo. They came upon him suddenly under a hopbush on a little plain, fringed on all sides by lightly timbered scrub country. He headed to the left towards the Range. Away they went like boys let out of school, laughing and shouting as they galloped across the flat. Through the scrub they ceased their chatter, and set themselves down to the keen enjoyment of fast riding through a country which required constant care, careful steering, immediate decision, and instant action the whole time. Whether to jump a bush or crash through it, which side of a tree to steer, whether the limb ahead would allow their passage underneath it or not, these questions required lightning-like answers. Nerves and muscles were kept in a constant state of activity, the mind ever on the alert, and the blood was sent coursing more quickly through their veins.

Oh, the wild exhilaration of a ride such as I have attempted to describe! Even now at the thought of it I feel the thrill as of yore, and live again in imagination those glorious days of old “when all the world was young,” and when youth, throwing caution to the dogs, flung itself body and soul into the excitement of the moment.

Their quarry easily held its own through the scrub, and when they emerged on the far side had a good lead.

After a final spurt at full speed towards the creek, they pulled up, content to let the "old man" escape. They had had the joy of the chase. Alighting to give the horses a "blow" and standing in the shade of a stunted gum, they capped their ride in the orthodox manner by a quiet smoke.

"What do you think of those two travellers?" asked Charlie suddenly.

"Think," echoed Giles. "Well, they looked like a couple of smart Sydney-siders."

"Yes, too smart to drink. Where'd they come from?"

"I don't know. They came in on the West road and went away this morning on the East road, so I suppose they're going 'inside.'"

"How do you know they went east?"

"Well, Mr. Bush Lawyer," answered Giles laughing, "if you must know I'll tell you. Long before daylight my 'coppers' were so hot that I was forced to get up for a drink. When I went outside they were just starting, so I waited to see which way they were going. Come along, let's be off."

Mounting they started along the bank of the creek which, as before mentioned, skirted the foot of the range for some miles before turning and running past the station. Looking across at the hill they noticed smoke ascending.

"Hullo," said Charlie, "where there's smoke there must be fire, and smoke like that means a camp fire. Who the dickens can be in the range?"

"Oh bother!" said Giles, testily. "Let's get home. Blacks perhaps," and they cantered off.

As they rode into the station they were astonished

to see two more strangers, mounted on fine looking steeds and leading a pack horse, coming round the bend from the East track.

"Well I'm jiggered," said the Duke, "here are some more Christmas guests. Extremes meet, feast and famine, drought and flood; no visitors for over six months, and then a mob all at once."

The strangers hobbled their horses and came to the hut. Then there was another surprise. They introduced themselves as police troopers who were after a couple of desperadoes known as Dick the Devil and Black Jim. They were supposed to be making west. Their description left no doubt as to the identity of the men wanted. Yet when asked whether any such had been seen at the station, not a soul answered a word.

"Very good," said the sergeant, "it's easy to see we're on their tracks; I can read you men like a book. The Boss will probably speak even if his men are all dumb dogs." He cast a scornful glance around the hut and made his way to Government House.

No, Mr. Jasper had not seen any such men as he described, but believed there had been a couple of strangers at the hut the night before, and suggested that Ross or Giles or the cook might be able to furnish some information. So back to the hut came the sergeant.

"Where's the cook?" he asked abruptly.

Both tone and manner put him out of court at once. No one took any notice of his request for information, though they all stared hard at him. He lost his temper.

"Now, my men," he said, speaking angrily, "I demand an answer to my question. I'm a police officer with warrants for the arrest of these men, and if you

fellows put any obstacles in the way of their capture, you become accomplices and I shall know how to deal with you. Where are these men ? Where's the cook ? I demand an answer in the Queen's name."

The men gazed at him blankly and "dumb as dumb sheep" were they. Then the sergeant lost his temper altogether.

"You're a pretty set of scoundrels," he cried scornfully, "but I'll find a way to make you speak."

Unwittingly he had already done so. "Look here, mate," said McDermott, rising and going towards him, "this hut is our house, and if you're not mighty careful you'll go out on your head. Dumb dogs are we ? Is it scoundrels we are ? Take back those words or I'll knock your darned head in."

Pat adopted a menacing attitude right in front of the trooper. Several of the men crowded round. The other officer stood just behind. "Stand back," said the sergeant, "in the Queen's name I ——"

As he spoke he put his hand behind him. Pat saw the action, guessed it was to get a revolver from his hip pocket, and sprang at him. The crowd surged in. The other trooper rushed to his comrade's assistance. In less time than it takes to tell the two officers of the law were overpowered, and struggling and protesting, were hustled roughly to the door, and thrown violently outside.

Once more they betook themselves to Government House. In wrathful tones the sergeant told Mr. Jasper of the shameful treatment he had received, and demanded from him, as a J.P., his support and assistance. Mr. Jasper listened very quietly to his complaint and then suggested that as Lankey was in the kitchen and

not in the hut, he might get some information from him. They adjourned to the kitchen, but Lankey refused point blank to describe the two strangers. Then he was sent to the hut to fetch Charlie and Farmer.

The Duke's cross-examination was well nigh as fruitless as the cook's—the men were tall, one dark and one fair—that was all the information he could give. When questioned, Giles corroborated Charlie's evidence and stopped short.

"Is that all you know?" asked Mr. Jasper. "Come," he continued, as Giles hesitated, "do you know which way they came?"

"Yes, sir, along the road from the West Well."

"From the west!" ejaculated the sergeant.

Giles ignored the implied question, and kept silence.

"As they came here after dark," said Mr. Jasper, "how do you know they came from the west?"

"Because I was out that way and cut their tracks."

"Do you know which way they went?"

"Yes. I saw them start an hour or so before daylight on the East road," answered Giles. Then he told them how it was he happened to be up at that early hour. The sergeant looked suspicious and Mr. Jasper gravely displeased.

No more was seen of the troopers at the hut. They camped at the House and left early the next morning on the same track by which they had come. It was afterwards discovered that they were so convinced that the men had gone west, that they doubled back for about twenty miles before reluctantly coming to the conclusion that Giles had spoken truly. Then they turned, and, describing an arc, camped that night at the north end of the Range, within a mile of the duffers'

retreat. The next day they rounded the Range and cut the River road. Then they turned east, all unconscious of the nearness of the men who had, thanks to the gale of Christmas Day and the perverted idea of loyalty among the station hands, completely circumvented and mystified them.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIGHT IN THE FIRELIGHT.

Boxing Day saw not only the departure of the police troopers but a general exodus of all the outside hands. Trevenna and his mates started early for their camp. Dan Coffee and his men lingered till nearly noon before leaving for the Redbanks. Later on Dudley followed them.

"Boolaroola's well rid o' that deil o' Dud-lee," sang Charlie as he watched the van disappearing in a cloud of dust round the corner of the home paddock fence. This sentiment was fully approved by the other men. Their endorsement of the Duke's poetic pronouncement was, however, couched in the plainest and severest form of prose. They were now sober and in their right minds. They had also totalled up the orders they had given on the station, and realised how dearly they had paid for their whistle, or, rather "for wetting their whistle." Hence their righteous approval of Charlie's sentiment and their vigorous condemnation of Dudley and his Drops.

"'Tis whipping the cat we are," said McDermott, winking at Giles.

"It's a whipping with the cat we deserve," he answered.

"Thru for you Farmer, me boy; stand aisy now while I give ye yer deserts first," laughed Pat, and, whirling his whip aloft, he caught the other a smart cut on the legs before he could get beyond reach.

"Pleasure first and penance after," cried Charlie, "come on, lads, there's Lankey's bell."

"Duty before dinner," retorted McDermott, aiming another but this time ineffectual blow at Giles.

Then the three chums raced for the kitchen, the Duke leading and McDermott hopelessly distanced. The others followed more leisurely.

That night no one was surprised by the arrival of old Grigg. Dudley's Drops had broken the long spell of an enforced abstinence, and once more an overpowering craving for drink had taken possession of him. It was as if the demon of desire, for a time thrust out, had suddenly returned with renewed strength and with an intensity of passion increased sevenfold. Against such, the poor victim had neither heart to rebel nor strength of will and body to resist. So with an order on the station from Coffee he had come in for his cheque.

The next morning he returned to Redbanks, and when the hawker left there that afternoon for the Wackabong track, he saddled his horse, and, whistling Smut to follow, went with him. That was the last Boolaroola ever saw of old Grigg. Peace to his ashes. He was the most cantankerous man, the most inveterate grumbler, and the worst cook that ever roamed the Riverina. That night they camped at the Lake, and the next morning started together on the Wackabong road which ran south-west from Jaspermere.

Wackabong was the most remote station in that direction, and Dudley was the first hawker to venture out so far. This was his first trip and Grigg had determined to go there with him, and then return in his company to the River. They journeyed about fifteen miles before noon that day and pulled off the road about

a quarter of a mile to a little waterhole in a clump of timber, intending to stay there for the rest of the day. Ever since Christmas Eve the old man had been drinking steadily. The only effect it seemed to have on him was to increase his churlishness and correspondingly decrease even the little desire for speech which he ever evinced.

Dudley's short stay at Redbanks Camp was responsible for a re-enactment on a smaller scale, of the scenes which characterised his sojourn at Boolaroola. But for Mr. Jasper's prompt action, his rather high-handed peremptory notice to the hawker to quit, and his strongly worded remonstrances to Dan Coffee, it would have been longer. That Dudley would have remained with the fencers until their purchasing powers became exhausted or—a very remote probability—until his idea of a "fair thing" had been realised, or until his bibulous customers had drunk themselves dangerous, no one who knew the character of the man could doubt. One result of the utter demoralization of the camp was that Coffee's working bullocks realising the relaxation of discipline, determined to enjoy their unwonted liberty to the fullest extent. So with steady steps they sought fields which were fresh on which to depasture, and waterholes which were new at which to drink.

When in the comparative sobriety of the early hours of the day following Dudley's departure, Coffee realised that not only was he without a cook, but that his "bulls" had not been seen for nearly a week, and that the bullock-driver was still worshipping at the shrine of Bacchus—passive adoration not active, the man was dead drunk—he gave reins to his vituperative powers and cursed most comprehensively, impartially,

and bitterly. Finally he sent Smith as the most sober of the men to look for the erring cattle.

"Mind ye, Jerry," he said, giving him his final instructions, "ye've got to bring them bullocks back an' lose no time about it, either. If yer come back without 'em yer can follow old Grunps, blast 'im. An' mind me now, keep away from that blood suckin' 'ound Dudley, curse 'im. Do yer 'ear?"

Jerry readily promised all that was asked. Why not? It pleased the boss and didn't hurt him. But all the time there was a mental reservation of power to revoke his pledges should sufficient inducement offer. Besides, circumstances alter cases. So, when well assured that the white and yellow tents of the camp were out of sight he altered his course and made for the Wackabong road. He advanced two very satisfactory reasons for this deviation—first, the bullocks *might* be in that direction; second, the hawker was *sure* to be.

"Charlie," said Mr. Jasper that morning, "I want you to take Dandy and ride over to Sandy Patterson's camp. If he and his mob are all right, go across the plain, past Jaspermere, till you cut the horse-pad from Kotoka. Some sheep are coming through from the River by that track for Wackabong. They are about due on the run now."

Then he turned to McDermott. "Yoke up the wagon team, Pat, and call for me as you pass. I want to get some dogwood logs for the saw mill. Bring Wood with you, he's pretty strong, as some of the logs are three man power."

"Giles," he continued, "I'd like you to take a turn round the other three shepherds' camps and see if they're

quite off the spree yet. I'm a little anxious about the sheep."

Charlie reached Sandy's camp, a mile or two past the West Well, about nine o'clock. He found the long-limbed grey-headed old veteran asleep on his stretcher. Oblivious alike of the fierce rays of the sun which beat upon him through the open door, or the plaintive bleating of his securely yarded flock, he slept on. As the Duke looked at him he turned and groaned in his troubled slumber. Charlie turned away, and, releasing the long suffering sheep from durance, put them in charge of the old man's collie and returned to the tent.

The shepherd was still sleeping. His liquor perfumed, stertorous breathing sounded exasperatingly loud in the calm, still, hot morning air. Charlie felt annoyed both at the scent and the sound. Searching the tent he found a bottle of Drops. Upon this he laid his sacrilegious hands and unceremoniously poured its contents upon the sandy floor. Then he refilled the bottle with cold tea from the billy.

"Rouse up, Sandy! Rouse up ye lazy loon!" he cried, shaking him vigorously. "Wake up, man, wake up! Your sheep have not been yarded since last night, and to-morrow will be the third day."

"Eh! What?" exclaimed the still half-dazed shepherd sitting up and yawning and rubbing his eyes. He had only caught Charlie's last words. "The third day? Eh mon I havena' been sleeping twa days. Whaur's the bottle? I maun hae a wee drap afore I let the sheep gang." He groped under the stretcher for the liquor as he spoke.

"Here's the bottle," said Charlie, holding it up, "I've

a dashed good mind to break it ; but where's the jumbucks ? The yard's empty, the sun's high, and the shepherd's drunk. Sandy, you beast, I'm fair 'shamed of you." He made as if to break the bottle.

" Mon, mon !" cried Sandy in horror, springing from his couch now thoroughly awake, " dinna waste the tippie. 'twould be awfu' sinfu', ye ken. Gie us a wee drap an' I'll aye be awa' aifter the sheep."

The Duke poured a little drop into a pannikin for himself and handed over the bottle. He drank his down quickly. " What brand is this, Sandy ?" he asked, smacking his lips.

The old Scot took a deep draught of the mixture and dropped the bottle on the floor in disgust and despair. A moment later, muttering incoherent imprecations, on Dudley, the Duke, and the world in general, he started off on the trail of his flock.

Charlie finished the bottle with his boot and proceeded on his journey. While skirting the Lake he struck the hawker's tracks, and, knowing that old Grigg had gone with him, he turned and cantered after them. About noon he came up to their camp at the waterhole, and was sorely troubled to find the old cook the worse for liquor. Knowing Dudley to be utterly unscrupulous, he determined to get the old man away from his influence.

With his usual smiling good nature he greeted Grigg, and tried quietly to persuade him to return to the station, or, failing that, to leave the hawker and take the River road. But the old man would listen to neither suggestion, and as the Duke persisted in his arguments and entreaties, he became abusive and showered most opprobrious and revolting epithets upon his only friend.

Charlie changed his tactics and used strong language too. He tried to frighten the old fellow by hints of violence and threats of the use of physical force in compelling him to give up his project. Instead of having the desired effect, the result of this experiment was as the pouring of oil on the flames. Grigg lost his self-control and struck Charlie two or three violent blows.

At this juncture Smith arrived. The old man greeted his advent with a scowl and resumed his usual taciturn manner. Ross continued pleading with him to leave the camp. Presently Jerry interfered.

"Why can't yer let 'im alone, Charlie?" he said, "'E's not a bloomin' kid. 'Ere, Doctor, 'ave a nobbler with me."

The old cook turned on him furiously. "With you! Yer low down dog! You an' Jim Blood are a pretty pair."

Smith turned white and trembled with rage as he said, "What d' yer mean?"

"I know yer," muttered Grigg, "both of yer. Yer mean enough to go through a corpse. I know yer."

For a moment it looked as if there would be bloodshed. Jerry rushed at the old fellow knife in hand. Charlie stepped in front of him.

"Don't take any notice, Jerry," he said, "it's the liquor talking, not the man."

At this moment fortunately, for all concerned a diversion was caused by Dudley, who was on the van a few yards away. "Hullo," he exclaimed, "here's the men the police were after. They've managed to dodge them somehow. Good luck to 'em."

And sure enough Carter and Blood rode up a minute or two later. The sight of the latter seemed once more

to rouse all the evil passions in the breast of the old cook. Despite Charlie's efforts to placate him he insisted upon giving Jim Blood a piece of his mind, couched in language extremely likely to provoke a breach of the peace.

Blood took no notice for awhile. Suddenly he turned on him with an oath, and, drawing his sheath knife, threatened to plunge it into his heart if he annoyed him any more. Dick promptly knocked up his mate's arm, and just as promptly did the Duke knock the old man down, and so the incident closed.

Shortly after this the two cattle duffers resumed their journey westward, and Jerry, loaded up with a couple of bottles of Drops, left to look for Coffee's bullocks.

Charlie was now in a strait between his duty to Mr. Jasper and his self-imposed duty to Grigg. The one claimed his attention through his reasoning powers, the other spoke to him through the heart. In the end the claims of old Grumps out-weighed those of the travelling sheep, and he lingered at the waterhole. By and by as the afternoon wore on Grigg announced his intention of going to Kotoka and thence to the River. Dudley hinted that it was a long dry track, and the old man cursed him heartily. The Duke had won.

They left together, and thus Charlie was enabled to cut the horse-pad and rescue the cook at the same time. There were no signs of any sheep nor of any dust nor smoke betokening there being any in the vicinity. After fixing camp in the scrub about a hundred yards from the track, Ross bade his mate good-bye, promising to come back and go along the horse-pad with him in the morning.

It was very late that night when he arrived at the station. So late that no one but Giles knew what hour it was. He was very tired, and Dandy was pretty well exhausted too.



Old Grigg is camped by himself where the Duke left him. The night is dark. A little fire still burning gives but a faint glow. Away in the scrub to the west the faint tinkle-tinkle of a horse bell is occasionally heard. The cry of the curlew, or the distant howl of a wandering dingo seeking his meat by night, are the only other sounds, save the whirr and buzz of some nocturnal bird, that break the solemn stillness of the sultry air. The old man rises from the rug, pushes the few firesticks together, and little tongues of flame shoot up and around intermittently, casting weird and fitful shadows across the camp.

But Grigg cares for none of these things. He sits alone and sips at a flask. He, so silent in the presence of his fellow men, mutters and talks to himself in his solitude. 'Tis ever the way with "hatters." He smokes and is continually lighting his nearly empty pipe with red coals deftly and harmlessly handled. Presently, after another pull at the flask, he knocks the ashes out of his briar root, takes out his knife, and proceeds to cut up some tobacco. Still he mumbles and talks to himself. Smut lies asleep under a bush on the other side of the fire.

From the inky blackness of the scrub behind him a man emerges and creeps stealthily from bush to bush towards the camp. With almost infinite patience he gradually works nearer and nearer. Now he is so near that the old man's words can be heard. He listens

intently. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, the horse bell faintly rings. The old man smiles, kicks the dying embers of the fire together, and takes yet another sip.

"Good ole 'oss," he says. "best o' mates barr Smut an' the bloomin' Dook."

The listener starts involuntarily, causing a rustling among the leaves. Smut hears the sound and growls ominously.

"Lay down, Smut. I believe 'e's jealous o' the Dook. Growls to 'ear 'is name mentioned. Silly ole dog ! Silly ole Dook ! Charlie's comin' back to-morrer to see me along the 'orse pad. 'E's smart, but I'm as smart as 'im. I'm a goin' back to Dudley. I'll slip the bloomin' Dook up. Ha, ha, He He !" The old fellow chuckles to himself.

His laughter prevents him hearing another rustling of the leaves, and the creaking of a stick, as the listener once more involuntarily starts as he hears the old man's plan for outwitting Ross. Smut hears it though, and rises from his lair under the bush with every muscle alert and every hair along his back bristling with anger. He growls again.

Tinkle, tinkle, the sound is getting fainter. At his master's word Smut reluctantly retires to his bush. The watcher, with painful slowness, gradually creeps nearer and nearer. He grasps a sheath-knife in his right hand. Now he is but a few feet from his intended victim. Smut is growling continuously, and his master is cursing him with almost equal continuity.

Suddenly the man rises and throws himself upon the astonished Grigg. Simultaneously Smut flies to his master's assistance. For one short moment the steel gleams in the light of a fitful flame, and is then plunged

to the hilt in the body of the faithful mongrel. He tumbles over sideways, gives one or two convulsive kicks and for ever lies still. The handle of the knife stands out from the body, giving silent evidence of the cause of death.

The old cook, who still has the pocket knife in his hand, struggles violently. The other is heavier and stronger. He grapples with and strikes his victim on the head and face with his fist.

Neither men speak. The under one strives to use his knife, the other to prevent him.

In the struggle near the fire they kick some straggling pieces together. These catch and cast a lurid light on the contestants. The old man suddenly ceases to struggle and the other almost as suddenly relaxes his grip. The next instant Grigg makes a violent effort to turn and thrusts at his assailant with the knife. The other seizes his hand, and, wrenching the knife from his grasp, plunges it at his breast. The old man's arm, involuntarily raised, receives the blow instead.

Just then a momentarily gleam of light flashes across the pair, and the old fellow catches sight of his antagonist's face. He shudders.

"Oh, Charlie! Dook!" he cries.

The next moment he lies lifeless on the ground from a terrific blow from a waddy which the other picks up.

His assailant rises, unconsciously dropping the knife as he does so. Gazing steadily at the form before him for a minute, he turns on his heel and walks hurriedly away. Some distance from the camp he mounts a horse and rides rapidly off.

CHAPTER XVI.

FARMER FIGHTS A RETIRING ACTION.

Giles' inspectorial visit to the three shepherds would, under ordinary circumstances, have been a very easy day's work. As events happened it proved to be a very hard one. The first camp was Murphy's. Him he found clothed with penitence, and in his right mind respecting Dudley's Drops. In his present chastened spirit he would cheerfully have signed any number of total abstinence pledges. He would just as cheerfully have broken them at the first opportunity. Giles was pleased at the result of his inspection. With his usual optimism, he congratulated himself upon the prospect of having naught to do but a pleasant round of visits.

Arriving at Taffy Jones' camp, he found the temporary hut or gunyah empty, and the flock away. A cursory examination revealed nothing suggestive of any departure from the even tenor of a shepherd's life. Knowing what the "old hands" were, when once started "on the spree," he was thankful for the negative evidence mutely tendered by the condition of the camp. From the rise which separated the yards from the plain beyond he caught sight of sheep in the distance and rode over to them. The flock appeared to be larger than was usually allotted to one man. A closer view revealed the annoying fact that Taffy's ewes and Robinson's wethers were boxed. Scattered over a large area, and taking advantage of a freedom from control, which was as rare as it was delightful, they roamed hither and thither at will.

There were no shepherds visible, and Giles hesitated as to the course to pursue. Should he look for the men or round up the sheep? The sheep were there; the men were—where? Kingsley's line, "Do the work that's nearest," flashed across his mind and settled the question. Cracking the whip he cantered around the far side of the mob and headed them towards Robinson's camp. There, in addition to the herding yard, others had lately been built, including a roughly constructed and exceedingly primitive drafting race. Keeping a sharp look out for the men, he drove the sheep across the plain and into a belt of better timbered country.

Upon passing through this he emerged on another small plain. There, under a shady beefwood tree, he espied the two shepherds. At the barking of their dogs the sheep sheered off, and Giles rode over towards the men. They were stretched at full length on the ground. The dogs rushed out of the shade barking furiously. He dismounted and with left arm through the reins and whip gathered up in his right hand, walked up to the tree.

Both Tom the Soldier—as Robinson was called—and little Jones were, despite the noisy demonstration of their dogs, fast asleep. The cause of their midday siesta, as well as that of the amicable intermingling of their flocks, was plainly visible. A half emptied bottle of Drops was lying against the butt of the tree. Vexed at the sight, and acting on the spur of the moment, Giles did an injudicious thing. Picking up a short chunk of wood he broke the bottle. Then he roused the delinquent shepherds.

It took some time for them to grasp the situation.

The little heap of shattered glass, however, contributed largely to their eventual realization of the position. Farmer's vigorously worded expostulations materially assisted.

"Who did that?" asked the fiery little Welshman, rising to his feet.

"I did," said Giles, adding somewhat gratuitously. "I'd do it again if I had the chance."

An angry altercation ensued. Robinson took little part in it, except that of egging on his comrade. Both men were slightly under the influence of liquor. Suddenly Jones rushed at Giles in a threatening manner. His dog, a savage looking brute with an evil looking eye, joined in the fray. Their sudden rush startled the horse. He pulled back so sharply and so vigorously that he broke away, capsizing Giles in the operation. The men laughed uproariously.

Their merriment at his discomfiture completely spoilt Farmer's little reserve of temper. Thereupon he gave them the full benefit of his inmost thoughts and ideas respecting themselves as men, and of their conduct as "lizards." He did not mince matters. Gradually their laughter died away, and a sullen demeanour took its place.

Then they set the dogs at him. By this time he had the whip loose, and curled it around him of the evil eye so quickly and with such unexpected force that the brute jumped back howling. The other discreetly followed.

Swearing at Giles, the Welshman, grasping a stout stick, rushed blindly at him. Jones was an old man but strong and hearty. Just now he was temporarily maddened by drink and anger. What was the other

to do? His only chance was to knock down or go down. He chose the former. His knowledge of boxing came in handy. The shepherd staggered back, caught his heel against a tussock, and toppled over sideways. Then Giles prudently backed away a little.

Robinson now came forward and both men, inciting their dogs to do likewise, rushed at the younger man. Now a stock whip, though a handy weapon in the hands of an expert user, has its obvious limitations when brought into play against an attacking force of four, especially after the first volley. Farmer soon found that out, and found also that a strategic movement to the rear, combined with a fighting front, was his only chance of escaping an ignominious defeat.

He stopped Robinson with the butt end of the whip handle, but not before that old soldier had got one home on his chest, which sent him staggering back several paces. Recovering himself, he caught Taffy's pet with his left boot fair under the jaw, and toppled him over backwards a howling heap of discomfited dog.

Robinson's collie grabbed him by the leg, and went away with a large mouthful of trouser, flavoured with a portion of the cuticle of his calf. Jones acted more warily this time and tried to effect a flank movement. He so far succeeded as to be able to give his opponent a swinging blow in the side, but in dodging a return, slipped and fell over.

Giles jumped back from a lunge of Robinson's, and brought the lash into play again, this time on the prostrate Welshman. Then Robinson's dog sneaked up behind. In trying to evade the dog and fend off his master—who was pressing him very closely—he tripped

and fell backward. As he scrambled to his feet Soldier Tom sent him spinning over again. In falling he caught Robinson a stinging upper cut with the loaded myall handle which for a moment or two prevented him from following up his advantage.

Almost ere the stockman touched the ground the two dogs sprang at him. The collie seized him by the shoulder, chawed through his blue serge and underlying flannel to the skin, and bounded away with his mouth full. The other dog went for his neck. He jabbed the latter in the mouth with the whip handle, then letting that go, seized it by the throat. Jones now kicked him in the back. For the moment Giles did not mind that. He was satisfied for the time to strangle the Welshman's wretched cur. His master could wait.

Seeing the dire predicament of his dog, Jones stayed the kicking operations and exerted himself to release Farmer's grip. Robinson's collie had returned, and was helping himself to some more shirting. His master had risen and was about to join once more in the fray, when an unexpected diversion happened.

Shouting "Hoop-la ! Hoop-la !" Dick Carter galloped straight down the little flat closely followed by his mate.

Once more Giles was free. Keeping his hands tightly clenched round the dog's throat he rose from the ground. The struggling brute clawed at his torn clothes with his hind feet. Dick's pleasant laugh recalled Giles to himself. A sudden revulsion of feeling swept over him. He dropped the dog, and, trembling like a leaf, swayed from side to side. The next moment he would have fallen had not the cattle duffer caught him.

Then followed an abundance of strong language from

the shepherds, many explanations from Giles, and much laughter from Dick. Assuming command the latter ordered Jones and Robinson to the drafting yards. Soldier Tom he evidently knew, for he addressed him by that name. When, a little later, the sheep were yarded, Dick and Blood threw themselves into the drafting with enthusiasm. They compelled the shepherds to work hard too. Giles did what he could, but that was not allowed by the self-appointed boss to be much.

The shepherds having started off with their respective flocks, Dick turned to Giles and shook him warmly by the hand.

“Good-bye, Farmer,” he said, “one good turn deserves another. Dick the Devil never forgives a foe, nor forgets a friend. So long. Come on, Jim.”

The next moment they were gone.

As a rough count of the sheep had shown a considerable shortage, Giles felt constrained to go in search of the missing ones. It was much against his inclination, for he was not only tired, but the reaction from the previous high tension of mind and muscle had left him temporarily unstrung. However, a pot of tea, a contemplative smoke, a quiet rest in the shade, and an unaccustomed forty winks—his eyes would *not* stop open—and he rose refreshed, fully determined as he afterwards expressed it, to play up and play the game.

Accordingly he scoured plain and plateau, sandhill and scrub until he had recovered practically all the missing sheep. To drive them to the yards was a tedious job, but that accomplished he was free to return home. The satisfaction engendered by the consciousness of duty faithfully fulfilled, was somewhat tempered by a

bruised and aching body, and a very much dilapidated state of attire.

He crossed the creek below the station waterhole, just as the sun was hiding itself behind the scrub which limited the western horizon. Near the horseyard he met Mr. Jasper.

"You're a real sundowner to-night, Giles," he said laughing. "I expected you two or three hours ago."

"Like Old Sol. I've just finished my course, and, like his, it's been long and hot."

As Mr. Jasper looked at Giles his face revealed the successive phases of emotion which swept over him. First astonishment, then annoyance, quickly followed by grave concern, which was in turn succeeded by an irrepressible sense of the ridiculous.

Slow-witted Farmer failed to see any cause for the squatter's mirth. Indeed, it appeared to his dull comprehension as quite uncalled for, and though he generally—as in duty bound—fully appreciated the Boss' jokes, on this occasion he did not. He felt no inclination whatever to "laugh with counterfeited glee," but on the contrary felt his self-respect wounded and remained silent.

"Giles," said Mr. Jasper when he had conquered his risible faculties sufficiently to enable him to speak, "Giles, I apologise—to the sundowner. I never saw one so picturesquely bedraggled and—and—and so dirty, as you are. What ever have you been doing, man?"

"Drafting sheep, sir," he answered, shortly. His sense of humor had not yet returned to him.

"Drafting sheep!" echoed Mr. Jasper, "why you look as if a mob of Merino rams had been drafting you, or

as if you'd had a five minutes fight with a steam thrasher."

Giles thought of the thrashing he had so narrowly escaped, and smiled grimly, but remained silent.

Noticing Farmer's evident displeasure the squatter ceased his funning. "You'd better get a wash and change your clothes, Giles, and after tea come up to the house and report your adventures. If appearances are not very deceptive, it strikes me you have a very interesting tale to unfold."

After tea, in clean attire and a better temper, Giles gave Mr. Jasper a brief resume of the day's work, but omitted any reference to the scrimmage on the flat. The squatter made no comment until the arrival of Carter and Blood was mentioned.

"What!" he exclaimed, indignantly, "are those two scoundrels hanging about the run still? I wish the police were here now. Anyhow, I'll send word to them to-morrow. Where have they gone?"

"To Bourke, sir."

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Jasper incredulously.

"Or Wilcannia," said Giles, "I'm not sure which."

"Whom are you talking about?"

"The police, of course, sir," answered Giles in surprise.

"Confound the police!" exclaimed the squatter vexatiously.

"I think they're pretty well confounded as it is," said the stockman, adding, as if an afterthought, "at least I hope so."

Mr. Jasper looked angry. "I thought better of you than that," he said severely, "I didn't expect your sympathies to be so entirely on the side of evil. I'm

sorry I've been mistaken. Perhaps you'll tell me now where your friends have gone. The scoundrels !"

"I don't know," snapped Farmer, who did not appreciate the lecture. "but this I *do* know. If 'those two scoundrels,' as you call them, had not come along, the boxed mobs would have been food for the dingoes to-night and scattered all over the run by to-morrow."

"How's that ? What did they do ?" His tone was sharp.

"Do !" echoed Giles. "Everything. They drove both sheep and shepherds to the yards, and stopped and drafted the whole lot."

"Humph." was all Mr. Jasper said.

He was so astonished at what the stockman told him that he forgot to enquire the cause of his torn and dishevelled habiliments, and the woe-begone aspect he had presented on his return. Having ascertained that the tally of the flocks, allowing for the boxed stragglers still to be drafted, was practically correct, he dismissed Giles with no other comment than a curt "That'll do. Good-night."

Later on Farmer amused the other men very much by narrating his day's experiences. His lead was followed by several, who related short chapters of their lives. "Moving incidents by flood and field," or humorous anecdotes of men and women they had known, or wondrous stories of records in work, or play, or travel, or drink.

"That reminds me," said Lankey, apropos of a story of some bibulous bushman with a Falstaff-like thirst, a Gargantuan appetite, and an ostrich-like digestion, "that reminds me of 'Arry Figg an' the cat."

"What was that ?" "Give us the yarn." "Git it

off yer chest. Doctor," cried several voices at once.

"Well," said the cook, after lighting his pipe, "'Arry Figg 'ad the biggest put-away of any chap I ever knew. 'E was always clemmin'. 'E was a South Aus.* man, an' there wasn't a pub in Adelaide but 'ud give 'im a bob to clear out if 'e came there to dinner. It paid 'em, too. One day some o' the young bloods made a wager that Figg 'ud eat a whole cat at one sittin'. One of 'em told 'im 'e 'ad backed 'im to polish off a rabbit, an' 'Arry said 'e was on. So they got a bloomin' cat an' got it made inter pies, nice juicy pies. Figg come up to the scratch, 'ungry as a 'unter; 'e'd 'ad no breakfast."

"'The rabbit ain't ready yet,' says one on 'em, 'you'd better 'ave a meat pie.' So 'e started an' I'm blowed if 'e didn't scoff that blessed cat, with only a pint o' sheaoak to wash it down. Then 'e looked around. 'I feel a bit better now,' 'e says, 'after that little snack,' 'e says, 'but ain't that rabbit done yet. I want to finish me dinner.'"

"'You've eat it,' they says, 'in them pies.' 'Well,' he says, 'I ain't 'ad 'arf a feed, I'm jolly 'ungry yet.' So the bloke who won the bet gave 'im five bob to go an' git a square feed."

"Harry Figg must have been an epicure in his way," said Farmer, when the laughter ceased.

"That reminds me," said Wood, "of a yarn about old Walker who made a rise at the diggings and bought a brewery. After a bit he went home for a trip. He was a very ignorant man was Walker, but he tried to play the swell at 'home.' One day in a flash eating-house in London, where all the nobs go, he called for

* Pronounced Orse.

some mutton. When it came he sung out in a loud voice—he was a loud red-faced man who used his blooming dover like a shovel—‘Hi, waiter, give us some mustard, will yer.’ ”

“His neighbour at the table ventured to say, ‘Mustard with mutton! You must be a bit of an epicure, sir.’ Walker glared at him for a moment, then he ‘beefed’ out, ‘No, sirree, your mistook. I ain’t a Heppicure. I’m a brewer—that’s what I am.’ ”

“That’s something like the yarn about old Surly Sampson from the Wimmera—a miserable three-cornered angle-tempered brute, always swearing or growling at something. They say that he called for mustard like old Walker. The waiter, to make quite sure, lifted his eyebrows and said, ‘Mustard with mutton, sir?’ ”

“Surly Sampson glared at him in a fury. ‘Yes,’ he shouted, ‘blast yer eyes, d’yer think I’d eat it with pudden’.”

Stories of this description about well-known squatters were numerous, and in many cases well authenticated. After listening to several of the type given above, Giles ventured to ask Pat how he fared carting timber with the Boss as a mate.

“Spiffin!” he answered laughing, “he’s a beggar to graft, an’ as strong as a horse, but one log bested him. Wood and me were carryin’ to the wagon. This bloomin’ log was a big un, an’ one end was just on a ‘bulldogs’ nest.’ I took that end and started. One of them blessed bulldogs got a holt of me, begorra I dropped it sudden.”

“‘What’s the matter, Pat,’ says he, quite short

like ; ‘ is it too heavy ? Ain’t you man enough for it ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Faith,’ says I, ‘ you’re right, sir, it’s a heap too heavy for me.’ ”

“ He jumped down, quite cross like. ‘ Nonsense,’ he said, ‘ it’s not at all heavy,’ an’ he grabbed it. He took a step and flinched, an’ I guessed one of ’em had him, two steps more an’ he dropped that stick like a hot spud. Four of ’em had him an’ gave him fits. He jumped around like a blow fly in a bottle. I never knew the Boss could swear till then.”

“ ‘ What’s the matter, sir,’ says I, ‘ is it too heavy ? Ain’t you man enough for it ? ’ He turned sharp an’ looked at me, an’ then brought his teeth together with a snap. Then he says, ‘ McDermott, you’re right, the log is a bit heavy—we’ll let it lie. Drive on.’ ”

“ ‘ That reminds me ——,’ began another, but Giles promptly interposed, and stopped the flow of reminiscences by calling attention to the time. It was near eleven o’clock. As the Duke was not back it was supposed that he had struck the travelling sheep.

That night, tired though he was, Giles could not sleep. His mind kept dwelling on the events of the day. Twice or thrice he went out into the cool night air for a smoke. The last time he did so, the Duke surprised him by coming up from the horse yard.

“ ‘ Hullo, Charlie,’ he said, “ what luck ? My word, you’re late.”

“ ‘ Yes,’ he answered without stopping, “ I am late, and I’ve had no luck. Good-night, I’m dead beat.”

A few minutes afterwards, when Giles went inside again, he looked at his watch. It was just after three o’clock.

CHAPTER XVII.

JERRY REPORTS THE MURDER OF GRIGG.

Despite the abnormally late hour of his return the night before, the Duke was up the next morning and ready to respond to the first gentle tintinnabulation of Lankey's breakfast bell. Giles, although equally ready for breakfast, felt tired and stiff and indisposed for much work. Still, assuming a virtue he was far from feeling, he promptly rejected Mr. Jasper's half-proffered day in the hut, and ventured to remind him of the boxed stragglers of Robinson's and Jones' mobs, at that time awaiting separation in the drafting yard.

"Very well," he said with a smile. "let us hope to-day's drafting won't have such disastrous effects as yesterday's. McDermott and Wood can go with you. I'm coming too. Ross," he continued, turning to Charlie, "you'd better take a fresh horse and have another look for those Wackabong sheep. Take the Redbanks track and then bear more to the north than you did yesterday. Without they're loafing on Rungatowie they must be here to-day."

The Duke started almost immediately, and a few minutes afterwards the others also took the Redbanks road. Mr. Jasper was anxious to see whether Coffee and his men had put a period to their Christmas jubiliations. He found the contractor himself in the caboose, having perforce to act as cook, and fuming and fretting at Smith's non-appearance with the bullocks. The rest of the men were away.

Coffee's condemnation alike of Dudley and his Drops,

of Old Grumps and Jerry, of the absconding bullocks, and the sodden bread he had just taken out of the camp oven, was pathetic in its evident sincerity and its heartfelt expression. In the choice of language, however, there was room for no feeling on the part of the listener, but that of paralysed astonishment at the number, variety, and character of the expletives used. Giles thought of Long Dick Seawicker, the only other man he knew whose vindictive vocabulary equalled Coffee's.

Leaving the irate contractor to stew over his own fire, they pushed on to the yards, drafted the sheep, and drove them to their respective shepherds. It fell to the lot of Wood and Giles to deliver Robinson's quota.

"Did yer give me away, Farmer?" asked Soldier Tom as they turned to go.

"I would if I could."

"How's that? What d'yer mean?" he asked in surprise.

"If you were mine, I'd give you away quick enough. Good riddance to bad rubbish. How much d'you want for the dog?"

He grinned. "Ten lovely John Dunne's," he said. "What for?"

"To make a vest out of his hide in place of my blue shirt."

He laughed. "Barney's too good a dog, We can't trade."



In consequence of his dereliction from duty, involving as it did the loss of several hours, Smith was compelled to camp on the trail of the errant cattle. Before daylight the next morning he came upon them, and,

rounding them up, started for home. Now, Jerry was a good fencer, but could not crack a stockwhip had his life depended on it. Neither could he use it with any effect, so that, despite his best efforts, the bullocks travelled along through the scrub in that leisurely manner peculiar to such beasts. Heartily cursing their lethargic movements and their manifest inclination to spread, he rode up and down, shouting and plying the whip as best he could.

Suddenly, when nearing the Kotoka horse-pad the mob halted, split into two portions, and raced away in a panic-stricken stampede. With heads down, tails up, and making the scrub ring with their bellowing, they behaved more like wild steers than well-conducted working bullocks. Anathematising a cruel fate, which in the person of Dan Coffee, had put him on horseback in the scrub instead of post hole sinking on the plain, he rode forward to see the cause of their extraordinary conduct.

The sight that met his gaze had almost as much effect on him as on his bovine charges. Before him lay the body of old Grigg, and close beside him that of his faithful Smut. Hastily dismounting he looked in horror on the scene, noted the evidences of a severe struggle, but shrank from touching the body. He trembled as he looked. What was he to do? His will seemed paralysed, his brain devoid of power to suggest, and his hands to execute. The continued snorting and pulling back of his horse brought him at last to his senses.

Hastily hobbling him, he approached the body. Pale and trembling he threw the old cook's calico swag wrap over it. Stepping back his foot struck something hard. Stooping he picked up an open pocket knife.

As he looked at it a stain on the blade apparently of blood attracted his attention.

"Good Lord !" he ejaculated, and nearly dropped the knife in his agitation. Then as he examined it more closely a gleam of fiendish satisfaction passed over his face, as fear gave place to hate. After another careful scrutiny he thrust the knife just as it was under one of his swag straps.

"Yer devil," he muttered, as he turned away from his horse for a final survey of the camp. "Yer sweep. Yer swine. This'll settle ye're bloomin' 'ash, any'ow."

Then noticing a piece of white paper he stepped forward and picked it up. It was an envelope, and bore an address. With painful slowness Jerry spelt out the name.

"Well—I'm—jiggered " was all he said, and said so slowly as to suggest that the reading of the name had nearly taken his breath away.

Thrusting the paper into his pocket he mounted the horse and galloped off. For once at least a sense of duty seemed paramount in his breast ; nor thought of his bullocks, nor fear of his boss, nor raging headache, nor the drink cursed dryness of mouth and throat, could give him pause.

Leaving the horse-pad he crossed the angle to the Wackabong road at a canter, then he galloped till his steed—old seasoned bullock-horse though he was—gave unmistakable signs of crying hold enough. Then he walked for a space, only to break into a canter again, and from a canter into a wild gallop, till the horse once more assumed authority and stopped. And so by a succession of short walks, long canters, and wild but brief gallops, he did his best to reach the station in

record time, and to ruin the old horse in doing so. When he alighted at the home paddock slip-rails the horse trembled so violently and was so distressed, that Jerry was content to drive him through the gate and run the rest of the distance.

Happening on Lankey at the woodheap, he breathlessly and with much emotion imparted the dreadful news to him. "Old Grumps is gone," he ejaculated, adding in a tone of mystery, "it looks pretty bad for the Dook."

Lankey rose from his stooping position with a billet of pine in his hand. "What's that about the Dook? What's 'appened to 'im?"

"Nothin' yet," he answered mysteriously, "but somethin' will pretty soon. Where's the Boss?"

"Out on the run. What's that about Charlie?"

Jerry lowered his voice, and, looking carefully round, he said, "It looks as if the Dook 'ad—'ad," he hesitated.

"Spit it out, mon. 'Ad what? 'Ad a fit?"

They were at the kitchen door now. "Fit be blowed; no, 'e's settled old Grumps, done for 'im clean."

"Murdered 'im?" asked the cook in horror.

"That's about it."

Lankey looked at him for a second or two in blank astonishment as if unable to grasp his meaning. Then he spoke.

"Jerry Smith, ye're a liar. an' if yer not out o' this smart I'll murder you. Yer miserable lyin' 'ound, git."

The Doctor backed his vigorous words by an evident intention to drive them home at the point of the pine stick, so Jerry, discouraged, beat a hasty retreat.

Halfway along the covered passage to the house Jerry encountered Norah. Her first impulse was to pass him without notice, but, yielding to the kindly instincts of her heart, she bade him the time o' day.

He stopped. "Norah," he said, "I got some bad news."

His tone was so strange and his look and manner so different from what they usually were, that Norah almost against her will stopped also.

"What is it? Anything happened to—to Mr. Jasper."

He noticed the momentary hesitation in asking the name and the colour which rapidly followed the previous paling of her cheeks. Was it McDermott or Ross she was thinking of? Inwardly he cursed them both.

"Oh, no," he answered, "I ain't seen the Boss. It's Grigg, our cook as was, 'e's dead."

She could scarcely repress a sigh of relief. "Poor fellow! When was it? How did it happen?"

"No one knows," replied Jerry, his agitation becoming more apparent as he thought of his morning's discovery. "I come across the—the body this mornin' near the Kotoka 'orse-pad. I'm afraid it's a bad job for someone. It looks like—like ——," he hesitated and stopped. Then taking his courage in both hands he said, speaking rapidly and with much emotion, "it looks like foul play, like murder."

It was now her turn to pale. She caught at one of the verandah posts. "Murder," she gasped, "oh, dear, how dreadful! Who ever could it be? Surely there must be a mistake. Are you sure? Was it one of those dreadful cattle thieves or bushrangers who were here lately? How do you know it is murder?"

"Know ? Oh I—I saw—the body."

"Did you examine it ? What killed him ?" she asked with a woman's natural instinct for details.

"Yes," he said hesitatingly, "I looked at it. The dog's a goner too. I got a clue to the man as did it, too. I picked up this close to the body." He handed her the knife, which she took rather gingerly.

"Oh !" she exclaimed, "is this blood on the blade ? How awful, take it away. Whose knife is it ?"

"It belongs to Charlie Ross," he said, almost in a whisper.

"What !" she exclaimed. All color had left her face, and the ghastly white of her cheeks contrasted vividly with her raven tresses and her wondrous full-orbed jet black eyes.

"Yes," he repeated, "it's Dook's right enough. I know it, an' 'e can't deny it. Besides, I picked up this as well," and he held up an envelope.

She glanced at it and read the address in a flash.

MR. C. ROSS,

Boolaroola Station,

via Bourke, N.S.W.

Looking suddenly at him she fancied she detected a momentary gleam of triumph or exultation in his eye.

"Well," he said, "what about it now ?"

Instantly she drew herself up and faced him. "You seem pleased," she spoke in hard cold tones. "but I don't believe you. I don't believe that is his knife, and if it is I don't believe you found it where you say you did. The envelope may be his, I believe you stole it. I believe that you're trying to get an innocent man into trouble. I believe you know he is innocent. Charlie Ross could never do a thing like that. I don't

wish to hear any more." Forgetting her errand in the kitchen she turned and went inside.

Although Norah had held herself up so bravely before Smith, she broke down when she reached the privacy of her own room. For a few minutes she wept silently, but ever and anon a great convulsive sob shook her whole body. Then she dried her eyes and sat lost in thought.

Presently she communed with herself. "It's a wicked cruel lie. He's trying to hang Charlie. He's a bad wicked man. Charlie would never do such a thing; he is too kind and good. I can't believe, I won't believe it. I wish I'd snatched that envelope from him and torn it up. Jerry must have robbed the Duke and now he's trying to—oh, the villain. Perhaps the whole thing is a lie. I don't believe a word of it. Grigg is not dead and Charlie didn't kill him, and Smith knows he didn't. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What a miserable wretched bad man he is. I wish I'd never seen him. I wish Mr. Jasper would send him away. I think I'll ask Mrs. Jasper to try and get the Boss to give him the sack."



Upon the return of Giles and Wood from Robinson's camp, followed almost immediately by the arrival of Mr. Jasper, another act in the drama commenced. After hearing the story in silence, he told Jerry and Farmer to get fresh horses and come with him to the scene of the tragedy. They were soon on the track and making fast time. A silent and glum trio they were. Mr. Jasper's feelings were those of mingled horror and doubt. Giles' were those of dangerous animosity towards Jerry. Prior to this he had treated him with

an indifference tinged with contempt ; now he hated him with a bitter hatred.

After leaving the Lake well behind, they turned off the Wackabong track to cross the angle to the horse pad. As they neared the spot previously indicated by Smith they came on fresh sheep tracks, evidently the travelling mob which the Duke had missed the day before. Over the next rise they came on the spot.

"There," said Jerry, "it's behind that broom-bush."

Giles' feelings as they approached the fatal spot are indescribable. Pity for poor Grigg, horror of the foul deed, regard for Ross and a firm conviction of his innocence, mystification as to who the murderer could be, combined with a blind unreasoning hatred of Jerry, made his mind a chaos of conflicting emotions. They rode past the bush and halted.

There was no body there ! The remains of a camp fire, a saddle and bridle which they recognised as Grigg's, and one or two articles of personal attire were all there was to be seen. Taking the details in at a glance, Giles turned and looked at Jerry. He was as white as a sheet, and trembled violently as he gazed in bewildered terror at the spot where a few hours ago he had looked on and covered the body of the old cook.

"What's the meaning of this, Smith?" said Mr. Jasper sternly. "Have you brought us out here on a fool's errand ? Dead men don't get up and leave their saddles behind them."

Jerry gasped. "It's true, sir, this is where it was. The dog, too, sir, was just there dead an' stiff as a crowbar."

They searched the place indicated but failed to find Smut's body. The sheep had been over the spot and

obliterated all signs of any struggle. Perhaps the body had been removed or buried by the sheep men ? In looking around for a possible grave they discovered the dead body of the dog about twenty yards away, and covered with grass and leaves. After a thorough but fruitless examination of the scrub within a radius of a hundred yards they gave up the search and rode away in the wake of the sheep.

About three miles further on they came up with them camped for the night, and were more mystified than ever when they could get no information from any of the party. In fact, none of them, so it happened, had seen the camp—the scrub was very thick just there—and the fact of the sheep tracks being over it proved that the body must have been removed before their arrival.

The Duke, who had joined the mob about two hours before, now came in from one of the wings, marvelling greatly at their unexpected appearance, but greeting them as usual with his old-time smile. He evidently noticed the restraint with which his salutations were returned, for, after looking enquiringly at them, he turned to the fire, filled a pannikin from the billy, and came over to Farmer.

“Fine weather this for getting up a thirst,” he said, after quenching his, “but God help the poor wretch who has a long stage and a dry bag.” Then he added in a lower tone, “What the dickens is up now ? Has Dick the Devil stuck up the station or made a clean sweep of the cattle ? or what is it ?”

Giles answered in a low voice. “The death of Old Grumps is troubling him.”

The words were scarcely uttered when Mr. Jasper

said : " Ross, I want to speak with you, come over here." indicating a tree a few yards away, " and you too Giles, and you Smith come along."

" What," cried the Duke, not hearing nor heeding Mr. Jasper in the emotion caused by Giles' words. " Grigg dead ? Get out, Giles. Tell that to the marines. How d'you know ? Who told you ?"

" Come on, old man, the Boss is waiting."

" Eh ! What ? All right, I'm coming." He spoke as one in a maze. They reached the rendezvous together. He looked from one to another enquiringly.

Mr. Jasper stood close to the trunk of the tree, looking grave and troubled. A pace or two from him stood Smith, ill at ease. Charlie stopped a few paces in front of them and waited. Giles ranged alongside and glared at Jerry.

" Ross," said Mr. Jasper, in grave and measured tones. " Thomas Grigg is dead. You were the last man seen in his company. As a Justice of the Peace I wish to ask you a few questions, which you may answer or not as you think fit."

" Go ahead, sir. I'm quite ready."

" I must warn you," continued Mr. Jasper, " that anything you say may be used against you. Therefore, you need not incriminate yourself."

A smile passed over the Duke's pale face. " I understand, sir."

" When and where did you last see Grigg ?"

" Last night, sir, camped near the Kotoka pad, in the angle between it and the road to the station."

" Was he alive and well then ?"

" Yes, except that he was a little muddled with drink."

“ Did you leave him on friendly terms ?”

“ Yes, and I promised to come back early this morning and see him along the track a bit.”

“ Had you any quarrel at all with him during the day ?”

Charlie hesitated and the red blood rushed to his pale cheeks, then left them as rapidly, making, in the sudden contrast, his face appear paler than before.

“ We had a friendly row, sir. I threatened to thrash him if he didn't leave the hawker's camp. I wanted to get him away from the drink.”

“ Is that all ?”

“ No, sir. I knocked him down to save him from Blood's knife,” said he, flushing again. Then he told the story of the cattle-duffer's attempted assault on Grigg and its cause.

“ You never returned to Grigg's camp after you left him ?”

“ No, sir.”

“ You left him before sunset. What time did you get home ?”

“ About two or three o'clock in the morning, I don't know exactly.”

“ Why didn't you come straight home ? What were you doing ?”

“ I struck the cattle-duffers' camp, sir, and stayed with them awhile, and then I turned into Dudley's for a bit, and then to the station.”

“ Have you anything else to say ?” asked Mr. Jasper, quietly.

“ Yes, if you don't mind,” answered the Duke.

“ How do you know Grigg is dead ?”

“Smith saw his body this morning and reported to me.”

Charlie smiled as he turned to Jerry. “How do *you* know he was dead? Did you examine the body? Was it cold?”

“Becoz I could see, an’ becoz I examined the body, an’ becoz it was cold,” answered Jerry unblushingly, “an’ I seen blood on the corpse an’ I picked up a knife with blood on it,” he continued, gaining confidence as he went. “an’ the knife belongs to Charlie Ross, an’ I found a letter near the knife addressed to you, an’ that’s all I know about it.”

“Yes, Ross,” interposed Mr. Jasper at this point. “This is the knife. Is it yours?”

Charlie smiled. “Yes, sir—that is, it was my knife. I gave it to the old man as a keepsake; in fact, we swopped knives, and I reckon I got the worst of the change. This is the one he gave me.” He exhibited a one-bladed broken-handled knife for their inspection.

After the further examination and cross-examination of both Smith and Ross, Mr. Jasper adjourned the proceedings. “This is the most mysterious thing I ever had anything to do with. It seems to me that you are both speaking the truth. I’m afraid those scoundrels Carter and Blood have had something to do with this. Smith, you’d better get after those bullocks of yours before they get away again. You can see these sheep through, Ross, and come back to-morrow. Come along Giles, let’s be going.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

, THE DUKE AND NORAH.

On leaving the travelling sheep Mr. Jasper and Giles rode back to Grigg's last camp. There they performed the mournful duty of collecting the scattered remains of his swag, and after a fruitless quest for any clue to the mystery of his disappearance, started homewards. Soon after cutting the station road they met Dudley *en route* for Wackabong. His intention was to overtake and camp with the travelling sheep. Mr. Jasper examined him rigourously with reference to his knowledge of, and the part he had played in, the events of the last three days. So far as his evidence touched upon that given by Ross and Smith it corroborated theirs, and confirmed Mr. Jasper's belief in the substantial accuracy of their statements.

"Giles," said he after leaving the hawker, "we'll make a better examination of the country around Grigg's camp to-morrow morning. We may find some tracks which may help us, or even drop on the body itself."

"In that case, sir, hadn't we better camp at the waterhole where Dudley was. It'll save a lot of time and travelling."

"Certainly Giles, if we only had something to eat. Much as I wish to fathom the mystery, I don't care about tackling it on an empty stomach."

"Oh, well," answered the stockman promptly, "I have some tea and sugar and flour, enough at any rate for to-morrow."

“Well done, Giles, your forethought is remarkable. I can understand now why they call you Farmer. Because you always provide food. Is that it?”

Giles laughed and modestly disclaimed any particular merit as a commissary, though he admitted a strong objection to depleted ration bags. He suppressed the fact that the little store he had mentioned was that which he had found in old Grigg’s swag.

The next morning almost by accident they stumbled across a camp which bore evident traces of having been lately occupied. Investigation led to the conviction that it was that of Dick Carter and his mate. It was snugly situated in a thick patch of scrub on a low rise, which was surrounded by a plain. It was not more than two miles from the waterhole. A semi-circular structure, half gunyah half break, had been erected as a protection against the wind, and in it were two beds of ample thickness, composed of saltbush and hopbush twigs, topped up with leaves and grass.

“Your friends the duffers are evidently fond of short stages and comfortable quarters,” said Mr. Jasper jocularly.

“They appreciate your hospitality, or their stages would be longer,” said Giles.

“My hospitality!” he echoed, “four words would sum that up. Short trial, long term.”

“Which would completely prove the fallacy of the proverb, ‘short reckonings make long friends,’ don’t you think, sir?”

“Well, Giles, perhaps a short shrift and a shorter swing would suit the rascals better, and save the country a lot of expense.”

During this conversation they were slowly picking

their way through the thick scrub towards the open plain in the direction of the horse pad. Almost unconsciously Giles kept his eyes on the ground. Passing round a tree he noticed a single horse track comparatively fresh and trending west. At first he thought nothing of it, but as it persistently appeared in his path he called Mr. Jasper's attention to it.

"Ever since we left their wurley," he said, "we've been following a single horse track. This horse had a rider, that's clear; let us keep to his trail, sir. It strikes me it'll lead us to old Grigg's camp."

Following the tracks, which after crossing the open plain and re-entering the scrub, ceased the directness of their line and pursued a more tortuous course, the searchers came in time to a spot where the rider had hung his horse to a tree as well as hobbled him, and proceeded on foot. They felt they were on the verge of a discovery or at least a clue. Why did this man ride out alone from the camp, and, having arrived close to where Grigg was, tie up his horse and go afoot?

"It seems to me, sir," said Giles, after some talk over the matter, "that he left the camp just before dark, consequently, though able to steer straight enough through the first belt of scrub and across the plain, it was too dark for him to do so in this scrub, which accounts for his major-mitchelling tactics."

"I believe you're right, Giles. Let us leave our horses here and go on foot too."

Near the tree under which they tied their horses Giles picked up an empty match box, evidently not long discarded. Further examination of the immediate vicinity revealed unmistakable evidences of a camp. Some broken bushes, a "green" bone, prints of

crows' feet, the white ashes of a small fire, a little heap of used tea leaves, and some human footprints, convinced them of its recent occupation.

The man they were tracking had, after securing his horse, made a temporary camp, and had later on walked over to his horse, and then continued his journey on foot. At least so their investigation led them to believe.

Through the timber they carefully followed the prints until they ended about thirty yards from the old man's camp. Then owing to the sheep tracks they were foiled. Though they searched with painful precision and with an utter disregard of time, they failed to find any more human tracks. With feelings of disappointment and vexation they commenced to retrace their steps. Suddenly it occurred to them that the man must have walked back too, so they fetched a circuit and promptly hit returning tracks. They found that after leaving the tree, where he had tied his horse, instead of going back whence he came, he rode away almost due south until he cut the Wackabong road. There the subsequent traffic along the road and the loose nature of the dust rendered further progress impossible.

They returned to the scrub and continued the search for the remains of Grigg. For three or four hours they continued the scrutiny in gradually widening circles until at last they were well away from all sheep tracks, and had lost all present hope of discovering the body. Over a pot of tea and a cold johnny-cake they were rather lugubriously discussing the situation when the stockman noticed a lately broken branch hanging from a tree a few yards away. Walking across he saw at

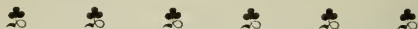
once that he had struck the tracks of Dick Carter and his mate.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast," so with something to guide them they quickly followed. They found the course to be a straight one and nearly due west. Suddenly, however, it turned almost south. The cause was soon apparent, for in about a quarter of a mile they came on the track of a hobbled horse, presumably that of Grigg's. A little further on they saw where someone, Dick, Giles guessed from the footprint, had unhobbled and secured the animal. Thenceforth they followed five horse tracks, always a three and a two, indicating that two were being ridden and three led. The direction once more changed to a westerly one.

Becoming convinced of the hopelessness of accomplishing anything more that day they turned for home. When they came to think about it, what good could they have done had they overtaken the cattle-duffers? There was no proof of their being connected with Grigg's death. True they had stolen what was supposed to be his horse. But then they were armed and desperate men, fugitives from justice who would not stand upon ceremony, if occasion demanded action. So after all the wisest and best thing to do was to go home.

Thus they reasoned and congratulated themselves upon taking such a common sense view of the situation and its responsibilities. Long afterwards they found out how near they had been to success in their quest. Had they but followed the tracks a few hours longer a most important discovery would have been made, and what was for long a painful speculation and a matter of

vague suspicion, would have been at once sheeted home to the guilty person.



Early that afternoon the Duke, having seen the travelling sheep across the boundary, returned to the station. He was surprised to find that Mr. Jasper and Giles had not returned. After tea Mrs. Jasper, desirous of news of her husband, sent for him. After satisfying her curiosity as far as he could, he spent the rest of the evening in the kitchen with Norah.

“Oh, Charlie, I’m so glad to see you,” said Norah, who, strangely enough, happened to follow him from the house to the kitchen. “I want to hear all the news. Where’s the Boss? What are he and Giles up to? Oh, before you say anything, I must tell you that I don’t believe a word that Smith said about you and poor old Grigg. Jerry is a bad wicked man. there now.”

The Duke gave her a circumstantial account so far as he knew them, of the events of the last two or three days, nothing extenuating nor setting aught down in malice. So complete was his recapitulation and so conscientious was he that, though sorely tempted to omit his nocturnal visit to Dudley and his consequent arrival home during the small hours of the morning, he did not do so, but made a clean breast of the whole business.

Norah listened in silence to the Duke’s recital. “It is a very strange story. I can’t understand it a bit; I mean about poor Grigg. Jerry says he saw his dead body. What has become of it?”

“It’s certainly a most mysterious affair. It beats me, knocks me clean out. I’ve got a theory, but there’s little to back it but supposition.”

“What is it ? Did Jerry kill him ?”

Charlie started. “Heaven forbid,” he exclaimed. “Oh, Norah, don’t let your dislike of Smith go so far as that.”

“Well,” she said impatiently, “what is your opinion ? Did Jim Blood or his mate Dick do it ?”

“No, I’m sure they didn’t Dick Carter would not allow that, and Jim daren’t do it against his will.”

“Somebody must have done it, anyhow ; perhaps he killed himself.”

“My theory is,” said the Duke after a pause. “that the man was not dead when Jerry saw him, except, may be, dead drunk. That he woke up and being still in a muddled state, wandered away in the scrub and lost himself.”

“But even in that case he must be dead by this time.”

“Not necessarily so. Old Grigg was a tough old cuss, a real hard case. It would take something out of the ordinary to kill him. Suppose he wandered away a bit off his head ; if he happened to strike water he would come round. He’s an old bushman, he’d live where lot’s of us would starve. I don’t believe he’s dead yet.”

“But supposing he did not strike water,” urged Norah.

“But me no buts,” retorted Charlie. “He did find water, he must have done. I won’t believe he’s dead till I see his remains. Why, I’ve known men to live for weeks as long as they could get a drink, and there is still plenty of water about from the last rain.”

“Plenty ?” echoed she in surprise.

“Yes, in places,” he retorted. “And if there isn’t, I’ve made up my mind my theory is correct, so that if

the facts don't fit it, or don't seem to, so much the worse for the facts. Until I see the body or hear of it being found, I'm going to stick to my opinion."

"You're an unbelieving Thomas."

"No, I'm a *Hopeful Hass* rather. To-morrow morning if the Boss is not back, I'm off to look for old Grumps—that is," he said smiling, "if I don't meet Dudley on the track and get drunk myself."

Norah looked very grave. "Really, Charlie, I'm sorry you are getting to be so fond of the drink, especially when you see its miserable effects around you. I wish you'd give it up." She looked at him appealingly.

"What! Give up cakes and ale, eschew sack? Never!" He laughed lightly.

"Yes," she retorted quickly, "and live cleanly." Why didn't you finish the quotation.

"Because," he responded, still laughing, "no one, not even Smith, could accuse me of lacking comparative cleanliness. Why. I really believe that half Jerry's derry on me is due to my absurd habit of washing my face and hands."

"Don't be ridiculous, cleanliness is next to godliness. If you can't, or won't be good, at any rate be clean."

"'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clean or unclean.'" misquoted Charlie. "Don't preach, it doesn't suit you; leave that to priests and parsons."

"Fie, for shame! 'Act well your part, there all the honour lies,'" she rejoined, laughing.

"Honour! 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more.'"

"'Hold, enough!' or rather 'Et tu Brute,'" she replied, blushing very prettily, "really, Charlie, you're far too smart at quotations for me."

“ ‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much.’ ”

“ Still, ‘ I’d rather seal my lips than speak that which is not ’ true,” she answered. “ But give Shakespeare a rest, and get back to where we started. I can’t help thinking that, bad as you men are, you don’t drink as much as your forefathers used to.”

“ That’s because we can’t stand so much, not because we like it less.”

“ For shame, Charlie,” she said, indignantly. “ Just look at Lever’s stories, and Thackeray and Dickens, and all the old writers. Why to drink and be drunken seemed to be the natural order of things. There was no sense of shame about it as there is now.”

“ Yes, I suppose you’re right, you always are. Bother the drink, ‘ Almost thou persuadest me. ’—but not quite. Peccavi.”

“ What does that mean ?” she asked.

“ It means I have sinned. There’s a story of Napier, after one of his victorious campaigns in India, sending a despatch to the English Government consisting of that one word, ‘ Peccavi.’ I don’t know how true it is, but that’s the yarn.”

“ I don’t see the point or the moral or whatever it is,” said Norah, whose acquaintance with Indian history was not on a par with her literary knowledge.

“ Translated it read, ‘ I have Scinde,’ a province he had just conquered contrary to his orders.”*

* The story, probably apocryphal, which Ross alluded to, runs that Napier, having disobeyed his instructions by annexing Scinde, was uncertain how to announce the fact in his despatches. Learning his predicament, a little girl, who was studying Latin, suggested that he had better cry “Peccavi.” This afterwards became the subject of a famous “Punch” cartoon.—G. S.

“Very good. I do hope it’s true, so many of the best things turn out to be untrue—that is, oh, you know what I mean, the things that ought to happen don’t, and those that didn’t happen very often do—especially in books.”

“Yes, the impossible often takes place, and the unexpected generally happens.”

“That is why you think the old cook is still alive, I suppose.”

“It is not a matter of thought, but a belief. To-morrow I hope to justify my obstinacy and clear up the mystery by finding old Grigg still in the flesh. I want to get away early so I had better clear. Good-night.”

They stood at the kitchen door, “Good-night, Charlie,” she said, and, contrary to her usual custom, held out her hand. He took it, held it for a moment, and looked at her in silence. Her colour came and went, “Good-night,” she repeated.

He dropped her hand and with a swift movement held her in his arms for one brief moment.

“Norah,” he breathed, as he kissed her lips, “Norah, my darling, I love you. Good-night,” and he was gone.

The girl stood for a moment with flaming cheeks and beating heart watching his receding figure gradually growing dim in the distance. Then she sighed and walked slowly into the house. Reaching the privacy of her own room, she threw herself down on the bed and no longer restrained the tears which a sympathetic nature sent to her relief. Presently becoming calmer she sat up and prepared to disrobe. Then Gay’s line

flashed across her memory and she laughed between her sobs—

“ ‘ How happy could I be with either were t’other dear *laddie* away,’ ” she said. Then she dried her eyes and laughed again.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOHN HALLIDAY, SQUATTER.

When Wood arrived from Tilkaroo with the mail the day after Mr. Jasper's fruitless search for traces of Grigg, he brought the following letter for Giles :—

“Dunster Downs,

“via Bourke,

“Dec., 187—

“My Dear Farmer—

“Two or three of your letters are before me. Their dumb reproaches have entered into my soul, or, rather, have pierced my rather thick epidermis so far that, at last, I am goaded to action. (I hope you notice the consistency of the similes used.)

“If you were not so good a correspondent (how the dickens you do it staggers me) I should not appear to be so bad a one. But comparisons are mal-odorous, as Dogberry didn't say. I'm afraid ere this you have reached the conclusion your pet hero (Wellington) did, when waiting for the laggard Blucher, viz., that patience had ceased to be a virtue, so I'll get to business.

“You'll notice by the heading that I have left Netley. If my foot is not on my native heath, it is at any rate on a patch of country which I can call my own. I bought the lease from a fellow called Thorpe, a real backblocker ; has lived on the frontier all his life, gradually being pushed westward as settlement advanced. I met him at Wilcannia races. He had just come in from this part then and secured the lease of five hundred miles of new country.

“ His description of the Promised Land—as he called it—was, after making due allowance for the imagination inspiring influence of the walnuts and the wine, or, rather, the brandy and the beer—best Goolwa, Castle-maine, or English—for he drank both with a splendid impartiality coupled with an utter disregard of consequences, which approached the sublime ; his description was, I say again, of such a character that I succumbed to the temptation to own such a Paradise, and after a flying visit to the spot, gave him a cheque for £500, and christened the run Dunster Downs after my birthplace in Somerset, with a jackshay of ‘ post and rail.’ Thorpe, with the cheque in one hand and a pannikin in the other, stood as godfather, and promised all sorts of future felicity to the happy owner. There !

“ ‘ Hold enough ! By Jingo,’ I fancy I can hear you cry, ‘ Jack’s as fond of long-sentenced scribbling as he used to be of long-winded speeches.’

“ To resume, here I am with six hundred head of cattle and ten thousand sheep—the ‘ beefs ’ from Queensland, the muttuns from Mt. Murchison. The country is mostly open, sandy downs, lightly timbered, with sandhills and a little—very little—stony country ; one big creek, the Toonalatchie, with box and here and there a gum, and several small creeks. All water holes are full, and bush and grass are plentiful. So are the blacks—fine big fellows, but wild as wallabies and as free from outward adorning, bar grease and dirt, as the proverbial frog is from feathers. I’m afraid we’ll have some trouble with them. My men are a bit scared. They’re mostly down country fellows, not back-blockers. I wish Barcoo and Chunkey were here. I’d feel safe

then, but I don't with the crowd I have. If they clear out, as I think they will, I shall be in a tight place.

"By the plan I see that I am about one hundred and fiftymiles as the crow flies north-west of Boolaroola. The Head Station consists of Government House and men's hut. The former is an airy structure, the walls and roof thereof being composed of saplings and cane grass thatch, and measures about twelve by twelve. Two or three bags sewn together and hanging across the entrance form the door. A canvas stretcher, one box for a seat, and another for a table, a saddle, a pannikin, and a pipe, and the inventory's complete.

"Men's hut ditto, with the addition of a fireplace and a B.B. (bag and board) meat safe hanging from the ridge, and a four hundred gallon tank outside. By the way, we've no Doctor. All hands take it in turns to cook, each succeeding one seems worse than the one before. Oh for a week at Lankey's table ! Lobscouse and Poisoned Pup !

"I forgot to say the station is on the creek at a big hole called Bulla-Bullina. Thorpe says it has never been known to be dry. I hope it never will be. By the way, I've heard lately that Thorpe bears the reputation of being connected with the smartest cattle duffers in Australia.

"Oh, I don't think I told you of my first speculation in sheep. Before I left Netley I bought a lot of sheep *cheap*, sent them down to Gawler and sold them *cheaper*. Dropped about five hundred pounds on that job. Drunken drover, &c., &c.

"Have been here about a month. As soon as things are settled and I can get a decent roof-tree built I'm coming down for a wedding at the Twelve-Mile.

Alice will be there, and I hope to see you too. It's a bit rough to ask her to come to such a place as this, but she wishes it ! Such being the case, ' Well, then,' as Joe Gargery said to Pip, ' Twixt sich whar's the use ?'

" I am just about to start with the mail for Leopard Creek Station seventy miles east, whence a horse mail leaves once a month for Bourke. It is five o'clock now, and by travelling all night in the cool—save the mark—I hope to get there by daylight.

" Yours ever,

" JACK."

" P.S.—I don't want to take you away from Mr. Jasper, but there's always a ' bite and a sup ' for you where I am, and plenty of hard graft, too. Your mates McDermott and His Grace, seem to be fine fellows. So long.—J.H.

" P.P.S.—Just another line. Best man I've got, ' Redgum ' he's called, has just come in and says blacks have started killing sheep and spearing cattle. I'm afraid there'll be trouble, and perhaps an exodus of shepherds when I come back, which, unfortunately, won't be for a few days, as I have important business to do first.—J."

The strenuous toil, the mental excitement, and the worrying strain of the last few days, had brought Giles to such a condition of physical weariness that he had hardly finished reading the letter when he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The Duke had been permitted by Mr. Jasper, after urgent entreaty, to spend one more day in searching for traces of the old cook. He was not yet back, nor was he expected to arrive until the morning. Mc-

Dermott was at Trevenna's camp, carting timber for the well. None of the contract men were in ; Lankey had not yet left the kitchen, Wood was away somewhere, and the one or two other men were quietly reading the latest papers. Presently the door opened with a bang, and Wood entered noisily.

"Farmer, Farmer," he cried, "where's that blessed Farmer Giles got to now ? Oh, there you are coiled up in the bunk. Tumble out now, sleepy head, an' be smart about it too, the Boss wants you at once. Immediately, if not sooner. You'd better look slippery, old man, he's in a deuce of a hurry. Is the Duke back yet ? He wants him too."

As Giles crossed the threshold, wondering whether any new trouble had arisen, he heard Wood cry, "Pretty rough, ain't it. The Boss says I'm to start with the bloomin' mail at twelve to-night, so if you chaps have any letters to go you'd better get 'em ready. I'm goin' to turn in for an hour or two."

Mr. Jasper was penning a report with reference to Grigg's death or disappearance, and desired Giles to go through the evidence with him, so that no link in the chain should be missed or anything bearing on the subject omitted. The lad felt flattered and honored by the request, and willingly gave him all the assistance he could. When the report—a voluminous one—was completed, he rose to go, but was motioned to a seat.

"I am also reporting on the re-appearance of, and the track taken by the bushrangers when they left here. I want you to help me in this matter too."

"I'm afraid I can't be of much use to you, sir," answered Giles, wishing himself anywhere but in the Boolaroola office.

“Come, come, that’ll never do. You know more about those precious rascals than you’ve admitted. I’m convinced of that. Surely you’re not in sympathy with them. Come now, let me have your story, please.”

“Story, sir,” said he, “like Canning’s needy knife-grinder, I’ve no story to tell.”

“Giles,” he said, severely, “you’re quibbling ; your answer is more creditable to your literary knowledge than it is to your moral estimate of the exactness of language. Have you anything more to say ?”

Farmer rose, flushed and angry. “No, sir, I cannot say any more, except,” he added as he walked to the door, “that I don’t think you are quite fair to me. Good-night, sir.”

CHAPTER XX.

SERGEANT O'HALLORAN'S THEORY.

Early the next morning—New Year's Day—McDermott arrived, bringing with him not only Trevenna and Trevorra, but the topman Jones. The welcome news that good water had been struck late the night before at a depth of 120 feet, soon spread. Old Ben announced the fact in person at Government House, and proceeded forthwith to pick the best hat in the station store. In his pleasure at losing the wager, Mr. Jasper insisted upon Trevorra and Jones making a similar choice.

The Duke arrived late that evening from his self-imposed investigation. He appeared tired and dejected, and briefly reported that his quest had been fruitless so far as actual results were concerned. To Giles he was a little more communicative. He had searched far and near for traces of the missing man, but had found none. As a last resource he had followed, as Mr. Jasper had done before him, the track of Dick Carter and his mate. He noted where they had picked up the fifth horse, and continued the trail until he came upon their midday camp. That he carefully scrutinised for tracks but saw none, save those of Dick and Jim.

"I couldn't find the sign of a track anywhere, Farmer," he said, "except Carter and Blood's, but just before I left I knocked my toe against this." He held out a sheath knife as he spoke. "Have you ever seen that before?" he asked, as Giles took it.

"Bothered if I know. All Johnson's sheath knives are alike when they ——" He stopped abruptly.

"Yes, I have my lovely Duke," he continued after another examination of it, "it's the dead spit of the one Jerry Smith carries."

"Used to carry, you mean. So I thought."

"This thing's too deep for me. Jerry finds your knife alongside Grigg's dead body, and then the dead body disappears. The cattle duffers steal Grigg's nanto, and you find Jerry's blooming dover in their camp. What does it all mean?"

"Hanged if I know," he answered, adding with a sorry attempt at pleasantry, "someone would be hanged if I did. I give it up. Douse the glim. I'm tired."

The departure of Wood with Mr. Jasper's police report and the return of the crestfallen Duke closed the most eventful eight days in the history of Boolaroola. The failure of Ross to substantiate his theory regarding Grigg's fate did not cause him to abate one jot or tittle of his belief in it. Though for awhile the old man's disappearance continued to be a favorite topic of conversation, it gradually ceased to claim so much attention, and by insensible degrees ceased to be the all-absorbing theme of discussion. The usual routine work had to be done. Giles' duties took him away from the station a great deal, while McDermott's services as horse driver were in constant demand in various parts of the run. In fact, everyone from Mr. Jasper down, had more than enough to keep him busy. "The trivial round, the common task," of their daily duties so completely absorbed their mental and physical powers that little time was left and less inclination felt for morbid imaginings. The whole machinery of the station having suffered temporary dislocation, was put into gear again and was

soon running as smoothly as ever. Indeed, so satisfactorily were the daily details of existence being carried out that it almost seemed as if that last week in December were nothing more than a horrid dream, as if Dudley's Drops, the two bushrangers, and old Grigg's dramatic departure, were after all only the figments of a disordered imagination.

The Duke showed McDermott the knife he had found while searching for Grigg. He identified it at once as Smith's property. No one else had been told, and Jerry had never mentioned his loss. When, therefore, about three weeks after the New Year, Smith was in the hut one night with a number of others, the trio determined to test him.

"Hullo, Jerry!" said Pat suddenly, "got a new dover, have you? What's the brand?"

Smith started and changed color as he answered, "No, it ain't, I've 'ad it a good while now."

"I suppose that means about three weeks," said Giles.

"Three weeks or three months," cried he, turning savagely on the speaker. "What the blazes 'as it got to do with you?"

"Nothing at all," said Giles innocently, "only I thought you might have got it from Dudley."

"What have you done with the old one, Jerry," asked Pat quietly, "lost it?"

"Lost it be —. Yes, I lost it or some bloke shook it. P'raps you coves did, yer seem to know somethin' about it."

He rose to go, scowling at Giles and Pat and looking suspiciously at the Duke, who was silently listening to the conversation.

McDermott jumped up. "Hold hard, Jerry, me boy. Your knife has been found : where did you have it last ?"

"Been found ! 'ave it last !" he stammered, turning very pale.

"Yes," said Pat holding it up. "Here it is. Where did you lose it ?"

By this time the cross-examination of the fencer had attracted general attention. Scenting something sensational, cards were dropped, pipes put down, Lankey and his yarns disregarded, and every man in the hut had fixed his gaze on Smith. His jaw dropped and his feet shuffled uneasily. He gave one swift furtive glance around like a hunted beast. Then he lifted his head and looked at McDermott defiantly, and with a gleam of triumph in his shifty eyes.

"I lost it when I were out lookin' for Coffee's bulls. I 'ad it cuttin' some 'bacca at Dudley's camp, but I never seen it since. I must 'ave dropped it there. You'd better 'and it over, it's my property." He held out his hand for it.

"No yer don't, Jerry," said Pat, slipping it into the sheath on his belt. "Findin's, keepin's."

"Oh, all right," said Smith reluctantly, "yer can 'ave it. I've got another." He moved away as he spoke, but pausing at the door added, "Where'd yer find it ?"

The Duke rose. "I found it, Jerry," he said, "but not where you say you lost it, but at another camp. Shall I tell you where ?"

The other trembled perceptibly as he stood for a moment in the doorway looking at Ross with mingled feelings of hatred and irresolution showing themselves

on his face. Then he turned and walked away without a word.

The disappointed and somewhat mystified men picked up their cards, refilled their pipes, and turned every man to his game, his book, or his yarn, and the incident closed.

The next day Mr. Jasper demanded an explanation from Ross concerning his suppression of the knife-finding incident in his report to him.

"I wanted to make sure whose it was before I gave it to you. That's all sir," answered Charlie. "Here it is, sir, identified and duly claimed by Smith as his property."

Shortly after this incident Dudley reappeared. Since he had joined the Wackabong drovers nothing had been heard of him. Mr. Jasper fondly hoped—as time went on—that he had found some other way back to the River. Now he suddenly dissipated these hopes by his arrival at Jaspermere, duly reported by Giles, the next day. Instead of coming to the station, he started across the Pan Pan plain to a party of dam-sinkers, and after a sojourn of two or three days there, shifted his moving market to one of the camps on Rungatowie plain. So he moved from camp to camp, from contractor to contractor, from shepherd to shepherd, until at last in the course of his itinerary he completed his visitation and reached the Head Station.

Mr. Jasper disliked the hawker and had more than a vague suspicion that the man was after no good. However, as he had refrained from dispensing his famous Drops, either as a matter of policy or from a depletion of stock, Mr. Jasper did not care to make any definite objection to his presence on the run. Still,

when at last he saw the van disappearing in a cloud of dust round a bend in the road to the River, he felt a sense of gratification and security which he could not have defined or given a definite reason for.

The next day—it was now the first week in February—Sergeant O'Halloran with two troopers and a black tracker, arrived at the station, having passed Dudley camped at Dingo Creek about twenty miles along the road. He appeared anxious, they said, to get back to civilization and comfort once more.

After a lengthy conference with¹ Mr. Jasper, the Sergeant made an informal but searching examination of Ross, Giles, McDermott, and Smith, touching both the alleged murder of Grigg and the words and actions of the two outlaws. A further consultation with Mr. Jasper ensued, at the conclusion of which the officer announced his intention of following the tracks of Carter and Blood to their hiding place.

"We'll have them this time," said Sergeant O'Halloran, "they can't very well escape ; our fellows are out west from Bourke, and the Queensland police are watching the border. They're booked for the gaol this time." He rubbed his hands in the gleeful anticipation he had conjured up.

Mr. Jasper smiled. "Don't be too sure," he said, "they may slip through your hands yet ; they are very resourceful rascals."

The Sergeant laughed aloud. "Slip !" he cried, "their next slip will be into the handcuffs. I'll bet you a new hat that we have the darbies on them under a fortnight."

Mr. Jasper laughingly declined the proffered wager as

being contrary to his principles, but wished the officer and his men a speedy capture and a safe return.

That night Micky the Dart, who all unseen had followed the police party to the station, had an interchange of courtesies with Tarpot, the black tracker. Both boys belonged to the Coomarella tribe, but had not met for some time. They had much to communicate on matters aboriginal, and then discussed their present business at considerable length. Finally Tarpot said, "All right, Micky, mine lose 'em 'longa 'crub, my word." Then they both laughed and lit their short clays for a farewell smoke.

Early the next morning Giles was sent to show the troopers the scene of the alleged murder, and the camp from which he and Mr. Jasper had traced the unknown midnight marauder, and to put them upon the tracks of the cattle duffers where they struck west from the Kotoka horse-pad.

The result of the police inspection of the sites of the camps in question, and the rehearsal by Giles of the principal events of that fatal week, was to crystallise into a firm conviction a somewhat nebulous theory which the Sergeant had been trying to fit to the facts for some time.

"Look here, lad," he said to Giles as they were about to part, "I'm pretty certain Carter and Blood killed the old man. He was the only witness, except McCaber, of their sticking up Coomarella Station. He recognised them at Boolaroola. He hated Blood for kicking his dog. He would have turned against Blood at any time. With him out of the road, conviction for robbery under arms would be much more difficult and uncertain. With Grigg dead these scoundrels

could easily prove an alibi. There's no doubt Blood did the job. with or without Carter's knowledge, probably without. What do you think?"

"I don't know," stammered Giles, fairly bewildered by the rapidity of speech and thought shown by O'Halloran. He recognised the reasonableness of the inferences the Sergeant had drawn to support his theory. Then an inspiration came to him. "What about the body?" he asked as one would propound an insoluble problem. "Jerry Smith saw it lying there early that morning."

"Quite so, my son," said the other patronisingly. "When Carter found out what his mate had done, his quicker wit suggested the removal of the body. So they returned and took it away, and have either buried it or hidden it in the scrub. I'll keep my eyes open for that. Good-bye."

The troopers started due west on the well-defined track made by the bushrangers, and Giles turned south-east to cut the road for home. As he did so he caught sight of a figure on horseback entering the scrub about two hundred yards to his left and bearing apparently north-west. The momentary glimpse was not sufficient for him to identify the rider or his steed.

"Who the dickens is that?" he muttered. "Looks something like a blackfellow," and dismissed the matter from his thoughts.

The new theory of Griggs' fate monopolised all his attention, and his slow mind continued to wrestle with its probabilities and improbabilities until he reached the station. Then other matters claimed his attention, and O'Halloran's theory was relegated for awhile to the limbo of a convenient forgetfulness.

Four days later the baffled troopers returned. The weather had been extremely hot and oppressive. They had lost the tracks on some loose sandy country, a strong wind having effectually erased them. Then they cast about in several directions, but Tarpot had failed to pick them up again, and, having used all their stock of water, had been forced to return. Nothing daunted, they started again the next morning for Wackabong, thence intending to strike across to a tributary of the Toonalatchie Creek, whence their way to Dunster Downs was easy to find and fairly well watered.

In the meanwhile Dudley cosily camped a little distance from the road at the Dingo Creek, was living in solitude. His blackboy, Micky the Dart had gone after the horses which had broken the hobbles and made back (or someone had taken the hobbles off and "lifted" them). At any rate, Micky was on their tracks. At least, this was the story he was prepared to tell any enquirer, but however, as events happened, he was not called upon to do so.

CHAPTER XXI.

REDGUM DECIDES TO FACE THE MUSIC.

The accuracy of Mr. Halliday's prevision of pending trouble was unpleasantly realised upon his return from Leopard Creek. He found his whole staff gathered at the Head Station, in a state of nervous apprehension bordering on panic. About half the sheep were massed there also, the balance having been abandoned to the tender mercies and voracious appetites of the black-fellow and the dingo.

He had scarcely unsaddled and hobbled out his horse when the men approached him in a body. He scented trouble, and was prepared for a bad quarter of an hour. But his most dread anticipations fell short of what he was confronted with. He stood in front of 'the House' and the men halted a few paces from him. One quick glance revealed the fact that with the exception of Denny, a Queensland black boy, the muster roll was complete.

At each sheep camp there were, for the sake of mutual comfort and safety, two shepherds, with separate yards for their flocks, and a hut-keeper. The latter acted as cook and caretaker, and, when necessary, took his turn in watching at night.

The four old shepherds were there before him, one with his head tied up and another carrying his right arm in a sling. The two still older hut-keepers were with them. The solitary stockman was there, and the two rouseabouts and the big bullock driver made the tally complete.

The latter, Roderick Barr, from Gundagai, deserves more than a passing notice. He stood six feet four inches in his bluchers, and was forty-six inches round the chest. Devoid of surplus flesh he was as hard as nails. He had vivid red hair, a florid face, and full beard and whiskers of a dull brick color. He was good tempered and easy going. Slow of thought and speech—a man of few words. He grasped a new idea with difficulty, but when he did grasp it it became a more difficult matter still for him to give it up. Ponderous in action as in thought, he was slow to move, but once started could be depended upon to keep going. He was known as “Redgum.” The transition from “Red Rod,” through “Red Barr,” “Red Stick,” and “Red Log” to “Redgum” was not only a natural sequence, but to the bush mind the result of it described him admirably.

Mr. Halliday glanced along the line. A feeling of indignant contempt, struggling with his sense of humor, resulted in a rather disdainful smile making itself apparent. The men saw and resented it at once. Some assumed a defiant attitude, others looked sullen, one or two decidedly aggressive, and a couple as if half ashamed of themselves. But the huge form of “Redgum” gave no more sign of any inward feeling than the eucalypt he was named after. As a matter of fact, though he stood there with the others he felt a dim sense of incongruity about his action, and was too busy battling it out in his own slow method of reasoning to notice the squatter’s unpleasant facial expression at all.

“Now men, what’s the matter? What are you all doing here? You, Brady and Johns,” he continued,

directing his glance at two of the shepherds, "why aren't you at the camp looking after the sheep?"

Brady, an "old hand," stepped out. "We want our cheques, we're goin' away. We ain't goin' to stay 'ere an' be massacred for you or yer old crawlers either." He began in a sullen tone, but ended with a note of defiance.

"That'll do, Brady, stand back a bit!" Then he turned to the stockman. "Wilson, what have you to say?"

"Well, sir," answered the young fellow rather shamefacedly, "the blacks are spearing the cattle, and it ain't a bit of use my trying to stop 'em. I can't do two men's work, and it ain't safe to be out alone. I've done my best, I can't do more. They nearly did for me the other night."

The squatter interrogated them all in turn and received as a consequence a somewhat disjointed and in places hysterical, but on the whole a fairly accurate account of what had transpired in his absence. Briefly it was as follows:—

The day he left for Leopard Creek the natives had attacked the two flocks at the farthest outpost and had slightly wounded the two shepherds. Although armed, they did not appear to have offered any resistance, but fled incontinently to the camp, whence, reinforced by the hutkeeper, they had hurried in to the Head Station. En route they called at the other camp and infected the hutkeeper there with their fears. He and his two mates, Brady and Johns, brought their mobs—as one flock—to the station the following day. Simultaneously with their raid on the sheep the blacks had attacked the

cattle. killing some. wounding others. and scattering the rest.

Wilson had honestly tried to do his duty. For two days and one night he stayed out on the run endeavouring to muster the scattered herd. The second day while driving a mob through a belt of thick mulga he was ambushed. Taken by surprise he emptied his revolver without effect. Then a spear glancing off his boot at the same instant that a boomerang displaced his hat, leaving him bareheaded, slightly grazed, and thoroughly frightened. sent him off helter skelter.

It was his first experience of wild blacks. and the suddenness of the attack and his narrow escape had given him an attack of "the jumps" which had not yet worn off. He was keenly sensitive, and the fact that he had dropped his revolver in his flight, rankled in his heart. He arraigned himself at the bar of his inner consciousness—his ideal self—on the charge of cowardice. With much bitterness of spirit he adjudged himself guilty; which was a gross miscarriage of justice.

When Mr. Halliday had finished his brief examination of the other men, he turned to Barr, who stood at the end of the line, whip in hand, waiting his turn.

"Redgum," said he, "if you are going to desert me with the others. if you are frightened of a few warrigal niggers, if you are going to leave a man in the lurch, if you are going to show the white feather, then you're not the man I think you are."

Redgum had been wavering between two courses. It was partly a class question, one of loyalty to his fellows. He desired to stand by his mates, but would like to help the Boss. His sympathies were for his

own class, the workers, as against the capitalist. Still an innate sense of fairplay made him revolt against the idea of forsaking a man in his extremity. Mr. Halliday's utterance settled the question.

"Boss," he began, "these coves," indicating the others with a contemptuous sweep of his right hand, "these coves can do—as they—darn well please, but my bloomin' colonial oath, yer can bet, yer bottom dollar—on Rod Barr from Gundagai. I cotton to a white man when I meet one, an' by gum—yer suit me—right down to th' ground. Yer needn't be scared o' me turnin' dog on yer."

It was a long speech for Redgum, and he emphasised its length by the deliberation of its delivery, which he punctuated at irregular intervals by striking the ground with the butt of the huge whip he held.

Mr. Halliday smiled. "I knew you'd ring true." Then to the blackboy who had come along during the interview and had squatted behind him, he said: "Denny, you make-a-light another one boss and walk-about, or sit down alonga me at station?"

"Whaffor you yabba walkabout? Budgery pfella you mine think it. Plenty tuckout sit down alonga 'tation. Mine sit down too."

"You fellows still want to go?"

"Yes," from all but Wilson, who moved his lips but said nothing.

"Very well. It's a free country. I'll settle up with all of you in the morning, except Wilson, who is too good a man to be spared. Sam, come here."

Wilson walked over wonderingly while the others turned to the hut.

"I'm very pleased with you," said the squatter, "you

behaved splendidly. I'm well rid of this cowardly crew, but you've got to stop. Two brave men and a black-boy are worth more to me than a dozen cravens. You'll stay, won't you ?"

He held out his hand to the bewildered lad, who took it mechanically and answered, " Yes, sir, I suppose I'd better if you wish me to."

" Thank you, Wilson. With you and Redgum and Denny we'll be O.K."

Sam walked over to the bullock driver. " I'm stayin' on," he said, " the Boss doesn't think I'm a coward."

" Good iron !" said Redgum, adding after a pause, " coward be blowed. Yer all right. Come over to my gunyah to-night."

The next morning the eight malcontents shouldered their swags for Leopard Creek, a distance of seventy miles with no water between the stations.

When they had gone the squatter and Denny set out to ascertain the state of affairs away from the station, leaving the others to look after the five thousand sheep depasturing close at hand, and to guard the station and stores from spoliation, theft, or destruction. Wilson had in a large measure recovered his self-respect and Mr. Halliday entertained no fear of his showing the white feather. Both men were well supplied with arms, and the squatter rode away fully confident that whatever happened they would give a good account of themselves.

Late that night he returned. The situation was graver than he had anticipated. Dead sheep and cattle were in evidence at every waterhole. Of live cattle they saw not a hoof, and of sheep but a few small isolated mobs. Denny went to Redgum's camp

and left his master to face the problem of how to save himself from ruin.

The squatter's thoughts were not of a pleasant character. As the result of a short mental calculation, a prospective loss of several thousand pounds confronted him. How to prevent such a sudden and calamitous end to his career as a squatter was the question? With a set, grim face he sat in thought. He must formulate some plan or adopt some means for grappling with the situation, and that at once. Occasionally he jotted down a few words or figures in his note book. In his intense preoccupation he did not hear, or, hearing, did not heed, Redgum's anything but gentle footsteps as he approached the House, or as he shuffled his feet outside.

"In Boss?" said the bullocky's deep tones at last.

"Yes, Barr," said Mr. Halliday, starting and strangling a half-born sigh as he spoke. "Come in lad."

Pushing aside the bag curtains the giant entered. "Thought I'd tell yer," he said slowly, "our mob's all right. I did the lizardin' an' Sam went out prospectin'. Bit o' good stuff is Sam. Though 'e is a crow-eater."

"Sit down," said Mr. Halliday, indicating an empty jam case. He was getting interested, and had some difficulty in curbing his impatience.

"No, Boss, I can't stay. Must go on watch now, only I thought I'd tell yer."

"Tell me what? That Wilson is a good fellow?" said he, smiling. "I knew that Redgum, and I guess he'll be a better one before you've done with him."

"I thought I'd tell yer as 'ow Sam come 'ome just afore dark, a reglar sundowner is Sam, an' 'e brought

a tidy mob o' jumbucks with 'im. Lost 'is dashed ol' yarraman, 'owever."

"One minute. Barr. How many sheep did he bring?"

"'Bout a thousan' I reckon."

"What happened to the horse?"

"Niggers killed 'im : at Ten-Mile Bluff."

"Killed him !" exclaimed the squatter starting up.
"Where's Wilson?"

"Dead to th' world. Denny's lookin' after 'im. I must go on watch now or them blamed niggers might be on th' job : only I thought I'd tell yer. So long Boss." Bending nearly double to get through the curtains, he lumbered ponderously away.

As the Boss hastened to the hut he overtook and passed the bullock driver on his way to the sheep yards, which lay about one hundred yards beyond the hut. It was bright moonlight, and he was rather amused to notice that Redgum was fairly bristling with weapons of war. He carried two muzzle-loading shot guns over his shoulder and two revolvers, a small tomahawk, a cartridge pouch, and the usual sheath knife in his stout leather belt.

"You've plenty of tools. I notice. Barr," he said pleasantly.

"Might want 'em. Boss. 'Andy to 'ave 'em any'ow," answered the giant, stalking stolidly on.

At the hut Mr. Halliday found Wilson lying on one of the stretchers looking pale and worn out. Denny crouching on his haunches near the empty fireplace, looked up as his master entered and showed his immaculate white teeth in token of his pleasure.

"What's the matter, Sam, my boy. Are you hurt? Redgum says you've done magnificently to-day."

Wilson smiled feebly. "I had a long day, Sir. I took Topsy and scoured both sides of the Toonalatchie down to Clovely Reach. There I found a mob and turned 'em for home. At the Ten-Mile Bluff the niggers tried to stop me. We had a lively five minutes, Sir, and then I had to round up the sheep and start again."

"Never mind the sheep," said Mr. Halliday, as he stopped, evidently exhausted, "Are you hurt?"

"A little, Sir. It ain't much, only it bled a bit before I got time to tie it up, so I feel weak."

A personal examination revealed a couple of flesh wounds which had evidently bled profusely, but which were not at all dangerous, and sundry abrasions of the skin which Wilson rather apologetically accounted for as "gravel rash which I got when Topsy came down."

After his wounds had been washed and dressed he was allowed to continue his story. Then taking his own time and method he gradually related the details of his day's work. Mr. Halliday was filled with admiration at the record as well as at the modesty of its recital.

After the brush at the Ten-Mile Bluff, through which he came unscathed, Wilson brought the sheep safely to within six miles of the station. There, while crossing a box flat stretching out from the Toonalatchie, he was suddenly attacked from the rear. Several of the first flight of spears struck the mare, which plunged violently forward for a few paces and then fell dead, throwing him clear as she did so. He scrambled to his

feet to find a spear head sticking into his thigh, the haft having been broken by his fall.

Fortunately the posterior points of the barbed head had not penetrated the flesh so that he had no difficulty in at once pulling it out, though he had no time to try and stop the bleeding.

Jumping to the cover of a thick bush near to which he had been thrown, he opened fire on the blacks, who, thinking him disabled, were advancing to give him the *coup de grace*. He missed them, it is true, but one or two of the bullets whistled their course so close to the leaders that they withdrew panic stricken. After a short respite, during which the bush received so many spears that it somewhat resembled a gigantic porcupine, three or four of the more daring spirits, armed with boomerangs and accompanied by a large black and yellow mongrel dog, rushed forward. Wilson emptied his six chambers as rapidly as possible. The effect was electric in its suddenness. The dog leaped into the air with a yelp of pain and fell dead at the feet of the foremost native. With wild cries and mournful howls the entire company fled in great disorder from the field.

Then Wilson tore his cotton shirt in halves and using one portion wherewith to tightly bandage his wound, limped slowly after his charges. In considerable pain and with increasing weakness he managed to keep the mob headed in the right direction until nearly sundown. He was then about a mile from the station. Here he encountered another check. A small party of blacks, attracted by the dust, came over to procure some cheap mutton. They and Wilson met almost face to face round the end of a sandhill. All the astounded savages

fled but one. He advanced boldly, making a vicious cut at his opponent's head with a stone-headed tomahawk. Unable to jump aside, Wilson raised his left arm in defence, and at the same time fired point blank at his assailant.

The next moment he was making ineffectual efforts to rise whilst the blackfellow was establishing a record for sprinting. He left his tomahawk behind, but he took with him the smell of burnt powder and singed hair in his wildly dilated nostrils, the dread sound of the white man's thunder booming in his ear, and the track of an Eley bullet smarting on his cheek.

When, some time later, Redgum attracted by the shot came upon the scene, he picked up the insensible form of his mate and carried it in his arms towards home. Wilson recovered consciousness on the way and feebly requested to be allowed to walk, but Redgum swore so vividly that poor Sam gave up the idea. At the hut it was seen that the tomahawk had struck his bare arm and cut it badly. This his mate tied up as well as he was able, put him to bed, and then went back and yarded the sheep. Returning he sat by and attended to his wants until Mr. Halliday and Denny arrived home.

CHAPTER XXII.

DICK AND JIM ARRIVE AT DUNSTER DOWNS.

At the close of Wilson's narrative he looked up somewhat shamefacedly and said, "I didn't drop my revolver this time, Sir."

"Nor any of the niggers either, eh Sam?"

"No, Sir, I'm afraid I'm not a good shot. But," and his face lightened up and broke into a comical smile as if deprecating any unnecessary credit, "but I settled one of their yelpin' curs."

Mr. Halliday smiled. "Redgum says you're 'a bit of good stuff, though you are a croweater.' and I quite agree with him. You've done splendidly. You'll have to take a few days in the hut to get a bit stronger. Denny shall stay and nurse you. Do you hear, Denny?" he said, turning to the black boy. "you sit down alonga hut all day and plenty look-out alonga Sam."

Denny grinned his acquiescence and his master, wishing Wilson "good-night and a good night's rest," left for his own quarters. His first action there was to open the wages ledger and by a stroke of the pen double the pay of both Barr and Wilson.

The next morning he shifted his quarters from the "House" to the "Hut." Early though he was, he found Redgum fresh from his self-imposed vigil busy making a huge damper.

"Must 'ave somethin' to eat. Boss," he said, "an' this yer cart wheel." pointing to the dough. "will keep us goin' a day or two."

Mr. Halliday's troubles were, of course, intensified and remedial action made much more difficult by Wilson's temporary disablement.

Redgum, however, rose to the occasion in a quiet matter-of-fact sort of way which filled his employer with unqualified admiration. Mounted on a stout half draught cob, intended primarily for use in the light spring dray, and accompanied by one of the squatter's sheep dogs, he took entire charge of the six thousand sheep now depastured at the station. For ten or twelve hours a day he tended his immense flock, and at night camped alongside the yards. In addition to this he did most of the cooking—at early morn or late at night, and when meat was wanted, the killing as well—all this with a quiet simplicity which was in itself heroic. Redgum never dreamed he was doing anything but his ordinary day's work. The work had to be done, so he did it, and did it well. “A hero's work for a living wage.”*

Leaving Denny to look after Wilson's wants and to guard the homestead, Mr. Halliday rode out with the idea of recovering some of the four thousand sheep and five hundred head of cattle which were running loose. He soon discovered that the blacks, warned by Wilson's successful foray, had driven them further down the Toonalatchie. So far, indeed, were the scattered remnants of the flocks now pasturing that their recovery single-handed was hopeless. Still he was not the man to acknowledge defeat without making a bold bid for victory. Accordingly on the second day of his solitary excursions he picked up a mob of about five hundred sheep about thirty miles away. These

*“The Men of the North,” a poem by N. A. Webb, L.L.B.

he drove towards the station until dark, then he set himself to watch them till morning. At first that proved an easy task—the sheep, used as they were to being yarded at night, soon closed up and settled down. He rode round them once or twice and then satisfied with his inspection, dismounted and commenced his evening meal.

He had not seen any blacks since mustering the little flock, and had been careful to keep away from the creek and any known water hole, and, as the night was dark, he did not anticipate any trouble from the natives. Quietly munching a piece of Redgum's "cart wheel," he mused the while upon the vicissitudes of a pioneer squatter's life, and the mutability of human hopes and aspirations. A week ago all his prospects seemed bright and promising and his union with Alice but a question of providing suitable accommodation. Now, all was dark and gloomy. All his cattle and nearly half his sheep were at present as lost to him as if they were dead. In fact, judging from the numerous carcasses of both "beefs" and "jumbucks" which he had already seen, that conclusion appeared close at hand.

"Oh well," he said, unconsciously giving utterance to his thoughts, "Gordon's right after all. 'What's worth having must aye be bought, life isn't all skittles and beer.' It's no use throwing up the sponge. I'll have to fight to the finish. All the same, I'd like some help. I'd give a hundred pounds for three of the Netley lads—Barcoo, Chunkey, and—and—yes, and Farmer."

Just then a general movement among the sheep attracted his attention. He struck a match to light

his pipe, preparatory to riding around them again. As he did so there was a wild rush and a tumultuous scramble. Before he was fairly in the saddle, the mob, broken up into a dozen or more parts, was scattered in as many different directions. The clue to its sudden dissolution rang in his ears the next moment. A couple of dingoes, seeking their meat by night, had approached within a few yards of the flock before being observed. Then their sudden rush had effectually broken up the mob. But Mr. Halliday's startling appearance on the horse had caused them just as suddenly to leave their particular victims and flee supperless away, venting their disappointment—when at a safe distance—in dismal blood curdling howls.

Quickly realising the futility of trying to muster the frightened sheep, the squatter turned for home. His thoughts were now more bitter than they were before, but he set his teeth and grimly determined to see the thing through. It wanted an hour to daybreak when he arrived at the station. As he came through the little belt of scrub near the yards, he was suddenly challenged by the vigilant Redgum.

“Speak up there,” he cried with the gun at his shoulder, “whoever you are. By gum, black or white, I'll put a bullet, through yer.”

“By Jove, Redgum, you're a perfect wonder! Do you ever go to sleep?”

The bullocky lowered his weapon. “Sleep! Of course. I've just got up ter get th' breakfas'.”

On the fourth day Wilson had so far recovered as to be able to do a little work about the hut. He took over the cooking from Redgum and released Denny from his position as nurse. Reinforced by the blackboy,

Mr. Halliday started out upon another expedition of recovery, taking food sufficient for two or three days. During the first day they saw no sign of stock at all except the remains of numbers of sheep which had fallen victims to the wild dogs, and two or three cows which had been speared by the natives.

Towards evening of the following day, when about forty miles from home, they came with startling suddenness upon a small mob of sheep securely yarded on a flat between two high sandhills. As they topped the nearer hill they saw, not only the yarded sheep, but the gunyahs indicating a considerable encampment of blacks. Riding down the slope they made at once for the yard. Instantly the place seemed alive with natives. Denny slowed his horse for a moment, but seeing that his master was determined, he pulled out his revolver and followed.

They had scarcely reached the flat when a shower of spears, which fortunately fell short, showed them that the blacks meant mischief. Turning his horse and crying, "Come on, Denny," he galloped straight at them, shouting and firing as he went. The blackboy at the call had ranged alongside and was blazing away wildly.

The sight of two horsemen galloping straight at them, the rapid discharge of the revolvers, and the ugly unfamiliar sound of the bullets whistling past them caused consternation among the natives. A few stood their ground and threw another volley of spears, but their nerves were shaken and their aim consequently bad. Then as their efforts had not checked the wild charge, they too turned and fled headlong in the wake of their more panic-stricken fellows. The gins and

piccanninies had flown screaming at the first sight of the intruders.

Having cleared the ground of opposition, the squatter turned his attention to the yard. This proved to be a rough brush enclosure evidently made by the blacks themselves. The sheep, about two hundred in number, showed unmistakeable signs of having been penned up for some days. All were hollow looking and weak. Some were scarcely able to stand. In one corner of the yard were the jumbled up remains of a number which had been slaughtered for food. The blacks, wearying of running them down when they wanted a feast, had constructed this yard and driven a mob into it so that they might satisfy their cravings for mutton without the trouble of hunting.

Mr. Halliday speedily released the emaciated half-starved sheep, but made no attempt to drive them away, owing to their weakness. In his dealing with the blacks he had scrupulously avoided coming into conflict with them, and on this occasion had remained consistent to his principles, and fired all his shots over their heads or into the sand at their feet. But the sight of these poor sheep dying of starvation stirred him to more forcible action. With the willing assistance of Denny he fired and burnt the whole encampment. Humpys, dilly bags, spears, nulla-nullas, stone-headed tomahawks, coolimans, boomerangs, and everything inflammable about the camp was consigned to the flames. At last, feeling that Justice was satisfied by such a holocaust he rode away seeking a suitable spot in which to camp for the night.

Two days after the skirmish the squatter and his faithful black boy reached the station once more. The

net result of their four days' campaign was a conviction forcibly borne in upon Mr. Halliday that without assistance from some quarter or other, he was practically powerless to cope with the difficulties which encompassed him.

All the waters were in or near the Toonalatchie Creek. The remaining sheep were about forty miles away on the creek, but scattered over an extensive area. The same area contained a large population of warlike blacks. To recover the sheep in the teeth of the opposition of the natives, could only be achieved by considerable bloodshed. That was a contingency Mr. Halliday shrank from. Besides, even the chances of success, considering the enormous disproportion of numbers, were exceedingly doubtful if it came to serious action. So, for the present, he decided to direct his energies towards mustering and bringing in to the immediate locality of the station as many of the cattle as he could.

By this time Wilson had regained sufficient strength to take his share of the work at the homestead, and so make easier the strenuous life that Redgum had been living. Accordingly the squatter felt no compunction at leaving the station for three or four days, confident in the loyalty, courage, and resourcefulness of his men.

His first trip in search of the wandering cattle was productive of much better results than his previous attempts at sheep mustering. He and Denny returned on the fifth day with nearly a hundred head. Only once had the blacks made a threatening demonstration, but a few shots sufficed to send them to the right-about. The recovered beasts were handed over to the care of

Redgum and his mate, and the following morning Mr. Halliday set out again.

About ten miles east of the station he was considerably astonished to see three men ride out of the scrub. It was a hundred and fifty miles, as the crow flies, in the direction they appeared to come from, to the nearest station, which was Boolaroola, and there was no known water between the two places. If the squatter exhibited signs of surprise at the unexpected advent of these men upon the scene, the effect upon the black boy was even more marked. He looked with a curious, frightened air at all three in turn, and dropped discreetly behind his master, trembling slightly. Then, noticing that none of the travellers appeared to have recognised him, he resumed his wonted phlegmatic look, though he continued to scrutinise them quietly but keenly.

The strangers reined up. "Mr. Halliday, I suppose," said the youngest of the three smiling. "Any chance of a job on Dunster Downs?"

"Every chance. I want three good men."

"Well, I'm sorry we can't fix you up, but you can take us as we are; 'Jordan's a hard road to travel,' as the poet says. I want a square feed and a long sleep. Then I'm your Moses."

"What do you mean? I want three men, you are three. Why can't you fix me up, as you call it?"

"We're not three, we're two. Two jolly good men and a bit. The bit," indicating a little old man with a vacant gaze, "the bit is a cook. The worst I ever struck. Still, Boss, you must take us as we are. The tail goes with the hide. Two up to sample, one short."

"Come along then," said Mr. Halliday, turning his steed. "We'd better get back to the station."

"What's your name," asked the squatter as he rode off with Denny on his right and the spokesman of the two on his left. The others followed behind.

"Richard is my name. My mate's called James."

"What are your other names, and what's the old man called?"

"It doesn't matter about our Christian names, the others are good enough. You can call us Mr. Richard and Mr. James if you like, As to the old 'un, we picked him up near pegging out in the scrub. He's got the Darling Pea right enough. Mad as a hatter. He never told us his name. Ask him."

The squatter looked curiously at Dick for a moment. "Very well," he said smiling, "let it be Dick and Jim. Richard and James sounds too formal." Then, turning in the saddle, he asked the old man his name.

Directly appealed to as he was, the old fellow seemed surprised and stared at his questioner vacantly. "Charlie Smith," he said, slowly.

On the way to the station Mr. Halliday briefly but vividly sketched the position of affairs on the run, and the events which had led up to it. He told the men the work he expected them to perform and the remuneration he proposed to give in return. The gravity of the situation and the element of danger inseparable from the task of evolving settled order out of the existing chaos, appealed strongly to Dick's imagination. Jim accepted the job as a matter of course. If it involved the shooting of a few niggers, so much the worse for them. Old Smith gave no indication by word or look that he heard anything that was said.

"You're in a tight place, Boss," said Dick, "but the job's all right and so's the screw ; we'll fight the niggers and we'll pull you through. ' Yes, let me like a soldier fall ' as the poet says, if we don't."

Then in the joy of his heart at the prospect ahead he burst into song—

"You may talk about Old England,
The pride of all the world;
You boast about the Union Jack,
That's always been unfurled;
You talk about your jolly Jack Tar,
That in the navy sails;
But we have just as first-class men
In sunny New South Wales."

During the journey Dick looked rather inquisitively and with a puzzled air at the blackboy. Presently he said, "What's the nigger's name ? Where is he from ?"

"Oh, he's one of the Coomarella tribe. I picked him up at Leopard Creek. He's a good boy. Denny's his name."

"Coomarella, eh !" said Dick, taking another searching look at Denny, who trembled under his gaze. "I thought I saw a likeness," he continued, withdrawing his eyes from the frightened boy. "Your nigger's the dead spit of another Coomarella nigger I once knew, Micky the Dart."

The next morning after "the square feed and the long sleep" that Dick had stipulated for, he declared that he and Jim were ready for any possible contingency. As he phrased it, they were "ready for anything from mumble peg to manslaughter." Charlie Smith was duly installed as cook, and signalised his appointment by a breakfast of "puff de lunies" and charred chops.

Mr. Halliday had arranged to provide the new men

with fresh horses, but Dick refused point blank to ride any other than his own.

“No, Boss,” he said, “I’ll stick to Black Arrow, especially for a job like this. He’s better than a blooming tracker or a bloodhound. He’s keener on niggers than a fox terrier on rats.”

The squatter smilingly acquiesced.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MCDERMOTT'S LITERARY INVESTMENT.

In his rivalry with Ross to secure the favor of Norah, Pat, like Jerry, had early noticed the advantage which Charlie's love of reading and knowledge of good authors gave him in conversational intercourse with her. But, unlike Jerry, he had not contented himself with cursing his rival's book-learned lore. He admitted his own deficiency and deplored his want of literary taste. After much thought and with many misgivings, he determined to remove the disability under which he labored, by cultivating a taste for reading. Though in deadly earnest, he knew not how or where to begin. He shrank from letting Norah or Ross know. For awhile he thought of taking Farmer into his confidence, but a groundless fear of being called a fool for his pains, deterred him. So, like many another brave man ready to face any known danger, he quailed before a difficulty of his own creation. He determined, though he had never heard of that worthy, to follow Macawber's example and wait for something to turn up. Or rather, he came to no determination, but allowed himself to drift, waiting for Opportunity to bestow her gifts upon him. She gave him his chance sooner than he dared expect.

On Christmas Day, Ross and Giles being away for a ride, McDermott feeling a trifle ashamed of the part he had played in the previous night's carousal, strolled across to Dudley's van. While conversing with the hawker and chaffering with him as to the worth of a

meerchaum pipe he wished to buy, he noticed some books in the van. He looked hastily around. No one was near but Micky the Dart, and he did not count.

"Got any books, Dudley?" he asked, assuming an indifference he was far from feeling.

"Books! Rather! Some good ones, too. Do you want any?"

"Trot 'em out," said Pat, "an' let's have a look at 'em. Here, take yer bloomin' pipe; if the books ain't cheaper than that yer won't sell many."

"Here you are," said Dudley, handing one down, 'Tracked to Death,' a slap up ——"

"Rubbish," exclaimed McDermott, feeling decidedly uncomfortable in his new role as literary censor. "I want somethin' better than that."

"Good enough. Here's a copy of White's 'History of Bushranging.' It's the only one I've got left. You can have it for ten shillings; that's cheap enough."

"Is it a real good book?"

"Good! Just look at the cover. The price is really fifteen shillings, but, as I said ten, I won't go back, you can have it for that."

"Is it the only one you have left?" asked Pat in anxious tones. His nervousness was wearing off. He realised that he wanted all his wits about him to cope with Dudley.

"The very last. They've sold like winking. In fact, Lankey almost took this last night. He's almost sure to take it to-day."

"Well, old man, as it's the bloomin' cobbler and worth fifteen bob, keep it. I wouldn't take advantage of yer. Thousands would, yer know. 'Pon me word,

yer too soft for this country. Yer losing money fast. You should sell out, man, an' buy a farm."

"Cheese your borack. What the dickens *do* you want?"

"Somethin' real good," was McDermott's rather indefinite reply.

The hawker surveyed his stock for a moment. " 'Heroes of the Prize Ring,' five bob."

"Blood an' bruises," said Pat, derisively. "Pass."

"Mayne Reid's 'Headless Horseman,' same price."

"Blood an' hair. Pass again."

" 'Lady Audley's Secret,' three and six."

"Pass, pass, pass. Pass all yeller backs."

After a few more of Dudley's suggestions had been rejected with contumely he ceased his running catalogue. With considerable energy and warmth of language, he suggested that his customer should cease to play the fool, and say what he really *did* want.

Thus adjured Pat assumed an air of solemnity befitting the gravity of the situation. He thought hard, but his ideas ran slowly and the formulation of them in words was more difficult still. In desperation he scratched his head vigorously.

"I thought so," sneered Dudley. "what you want is not a book but a small tooth comb."

McDermott was nettled. Not at the implication of a want of personal cleanliness which the hawker's words conveyed. In the rough badinage of the bush, such witticisms—and worse—were allowed by all the laws of propriety and common usage. So long as the spirit of *camaraderie* or jovial jest was present it mattered little what was said. No, it was not Dudley's joke that vexed Pat, but the problem he was wrestling

with—what to read and how to get it, and yet not allow the hawker to suspect him of any desire for self-improvement.

“What *you* want, yer omadhoun is a polthogue on the head. It might tache yer, be jabers, to bring some dacent books wid ye now an’ again.”

The other slapped his thigh. “I see what’s the matter? Why the dickens didn’t you say you wanted something classical? Right you are, my boy. I’ve just half a dozen of the very books you want.”

“Let’s have a look at ’em,” said Pat, eyeing the hawker suspiciously. “Why didn’t yer trot out the blamed things before?”

Dudley produced his “classics” from a box at the bottom of the van. There were, in fact, a few volumes which he looked upon as dead stock, and which had been packed away as unsaleable. Yesterday he would have taken five shillings for the parcel, now he was prepared to ask as much for each volume. As he handed them to the embarrassed McDermott, he made them the subject of a running commentary of a highly eulogistic character. He capped each volume’s virtues with the highest price he dared ask. In that respect he was no craven.

“Here you are. classics every one. ‘Burke’s Speeches,’ hurrah for old Ireland. There you have politics, patriotism, and political economy. Four bob. Dalton’s ‘Atomic Theory’—that’s science up to date, that is, two half-crowns. Ah, here we are. ‘Night Thoughts,’ by Young—that’s poetry, beats old Thatcher all to pot, comes next to Byron does that, and only three and six. Why, the cover’s worth more than that.”

“Here’s another, ‘Dr. Syntax in Search of the—the Pictureskew.’ Now, that’s the book for you. He was the greatest traveller England ever knew. Spent all his life in hunting for some extinct beast, called a ‘pictureskew.’ Chock full of exciting adventures, and as true as—as—‘Bell’s Life,’ seven and six and cheap at that. ‘Lives of the Saints,’ there you have religion and adventure—good Catholic religion and wonderful adventure too—keep you awake at nights, all in one like a ham sandwich, and just as tasty—six bob, worth ten any day.”

“This,” he said, handing out the last, “this is the ‘Life of Mungo Park’—that’s geography. Who was Mungo Park? Oh, he was the—the—the—greatest nigger that ever lived. He was King of Timbuctoo, at the source of the Nile. Livingstone thinks an awful lot of old Mungo—five shillings. Let’s see, that makes thirty five bob. Take the lot and give me one John Dunne and we’ll cry quits. What do you say?”

Pat said a good deal, and in the choice vernacular of the bush. The books might be all that Dudley’s fancy painted them; he hoped they were. In appraising their value he had a shrewd suspicion that the hawker was trying to overreach him. After passing judgment upon Dudley’s literary qualifications, arithmetical ability, and moral character as a trader, he concluded by offering him ten shillings for the lot. Five minutes afterwards, under cover of a new Crimean shirt, the books in question were surreptitiously conveyed to the hut and safely hidden in McDermott’s bunk without attracting any attention.

Since that memorable day Pat had been intermittently wrestling with his literary acquisitions. He

sampled them all in turn, but the only ones he made any progress with were Mungo Park and the Saints' Lives. He failed to find the wild adventures in Dr. Syntax which Dudley had foreshadowed, and Thatcher's Bush Songs he placed far above the Night Thoughts of Young. He had been successful in keeping his books out of sight, and, as most of his reading was done when away from the station, no one suspected him of any aspirations in the direction of mental culture.

One afternoon during the period that Dudley was visiting the various camps on the run—major-mitchell-ing the men called it, loafing was Mr. Jasper's description of it—Pat came home early, and, having finished his day's work, went to the hut. It so happened that Ross, who had been away for a couple of days, had come in just before and was lying in his bunk. Unconscious of Charlie's presence, McDermott produced one of his hidden treasures and commenced to read.

Astonished at the unusual sight, Ross quietly slipped out of his bunk and approached him from behind. He had just noticed with growing amazement that the volume was Dalton's Atomic Theory when the would-be reader closed it with a bang.

"Blast Dalton," muttered Pat, "and Dudley too. If that's science, good-bye science. I'm blamed well done with it."

He turned as he spoke, and, finding the Duke standing at his elbow, flushed angrily. Then ensued the nearest approach to a quarrel which the rivals ever had. Nothing but the wonderful forbearance of Charlie prevented an open rupture. At last, convinced that sympathy and not ridicule, help and not hindrance were being really proffered by his mate, Pat

apologised for his abruptness, and professed his willingness to be guided by him in the matter of reading.

That evening Giles was duly informed of McDermott's literary aspirations. To his hearty congratulations he added the expression of his determination to assist. Under the direction of his two mentors, Pat soon made considerable progress. Starting with a couple of Lever's rollicking stories, he passed on to *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist*. A couple of Grant's novels were followed by selections from the Duke's well-thumbed Shakespeare. This finished his first course. He had stipulated that Norah should be kept in ignorance of his mental awakening until he informed her himself. Both his mates scrupulously respected his wish.

The night after the second departure of Sergeant O'Halloran's party, the three chums spent a couple of hours in the kitchen with Norah. Lankey, following his usual custom, promptly repaired to the hut. There in the congenial company of his fellows he was not "cribbed, cabined, or confined" by any artificial restraint in selection of topic or language. There he was free to recall those reminiscences of the past which so delighted his hearers. After his departure the conversation turned upon the likelihood of the police reaching Dunster Downs via Wackabong, and their chances of securing the men they were after.

"They'll strike the Toonalatchie right enough, and then it's all plain sailing. Just follow the creek," said Farmer.

"Yes," replied Pat, "plain sailin' up the creek and plain sailin' back again. That's about all. A nice little picnic party."

"Like the king of old, you think that O'Halloran will march his men up the creek and then he'll march 'em back again," said Ross.

"What else would he do?" queried McDermott, "yer don't s'pose that Dick the Devil an' Black Jim are just dodgin' Pompey at Bulla-bullina waiting for the traps to come and fetch 'em. They ain't such mugs as that."

"Dick's smart enough," said Charlie. "but Jim looks a regular Bill Sikes."

"Bedad then," exclaimed Pat excitedly, "Andy Gilligan must be old Fagin."

Norah looked up from her work at Pat in pleased surprise, and he, simple lad, blushed furiously. The Duke laughed so contagiously that Giles, who had been deep in thought, laughed too, wondering the while what the joke was. Then he suddenly addressed McDermott.

"Was Ben Morgan anything like Jim Blood? He's tall and dark."

Charlie and Pat glared at him for a moment in speechless wrath. Then all three looked at Norah apprehensive of the effect the introduction of a subject which hitherto had been tacitly regarded as taboo, would have upon her. The girl's breath came a little quicker and her head was bent a little lower, as she struggled with a refractory gore which apparently would *not* come right. There was an awkward silence for a brief space, then she looked up.

"Was he?" she asked in a low voice and with an underlying note of eagerness in the tone. "Why don't you answer?"

"Like Jim Blood!" echoed McDermott in scorn. He

turned and faced Giles as he spoke. "No, not any more than me, an' I'm tall an' dark. Besides Blood's a Sydney-sider not a Vic."

"Your question reminds me," said Norah, also turning to Giles and effectively removing any sense of irritation which the other's aggressive tone and manner had created by one of her sweetest smiles, "Your question reminds me that I had a letter from a friend at Ballarat by the last mail. She told me that Mat Morgan was now on our old farm, and that Ben himself had not been seen for about three years. He was supposed to be in Queensland somewhere. There," she continued, folding up her work, "I've done enough dressmaking for one night, Farmer and I will play you two at crib."

Now both the others were expert cribbage players, while Norah was but a novice at the game, and Giles, although he had had much experience was no better than his partner. His slow mental powers made his counting always particularly, and often exasperatingly, slow. Consequently when after several ignominious defeats he suggested a change of programme, the proposition was carried on the voices.

"I'll show you a trick or two," he said, "some of those Halliday taught me at Netley."

If the Wiltshire lad's intention was to amuse he succeeded admirably, though perhaps not exactly in the manner he had anticipated. For instead of creating wonder and astonishment by his marvellous display of legerdemain, his efforts merely evoked uproarious laughter by their palpable failure. Some of his simple tricks were fairly successful, but his more ambitious attempts were provocative of much merriment. En-

couraged by his apparent success and by the ironical encomiums of the Duke, he persevered until he had completely exhausted his repertoire of tricks. His audience of three was also exhausted by their cachinnatory efforts, and had he not ceased would fain have called a halt to recover.

“No more cards to-night,” said Norah, gathering them up. “We enjoyed your conjuring very much, Giles. Didn’t we?” She turned to the others for confirmation.

“Rather,” laughed the Duke. “Why. Farmer, you’ve got the stuff they make heroes of. You have, straight wire! You go on to the bitter end. You ought to be an explorer.”

Giles accepted the compliment in all sincerity and blushed with pleasure.

“I would not mind being an explorer if I had Barcoo—Charlie Pollard, you know—for a mate. I’d go anywhere with him. In fact,” he added modestly and in all seriousness, “I think we’d have made a better fist of it than Burke and Wills, anyhow.”

The blunders, failures, and disasters attending the expedition mentioned were fruitful themes of discussion among the bushmen at that time. Rightly or wrongly, Burke himself was adjudged to be the biggest blunder, while Wills was credited with being a good man, but no bushman. Giles having struck the note, the usual discussion followed, and, widening as it went, gradually ceased to be of Australian exploratory work only, but crossed to the dark continent.

Ross enlarged on the good work done by Livingstone. Giles contributed his quota by alluding somewhat indefinitely to the labors of Burton, Speke, and Grant.

Then McDermott, who had preserved his wonted silence to this point, took up the thread. He told them of Mungo Park's explorations on the Gambia and Niger Rivers, and of his unfortunate death by drowning at Busa on the Middle Niger.

As Pat warmed to his theme he soon lost all self-consciousness and spoke from the fulness of his knowledge on the subject, never noticing the undisguised astonishment of Norah, until he had finished. Then he blushed for the second time that night, and wondered whether he had made an exhibition of his folly or not.

"Why, Pat," said Norah, laughing and evidently well pleased, "you must have been reading. I'm really surprised at you. I should never have thought you guilty of it. Twice, too. First Dickens, then Mungo Park. Come now, tell me, what it means?"

Then at first shyly but with increasing boldness as he went on, he narrated the story of his purchases from Dudley, of his first struggles with Dr. Syntax and Dalton's Atomic Theory, of the depths of despair he had reached when Ross inspired him with new hope by diverting his attention from Burke's Speeches to Mr. Pickwick, and from Young's Night Thoughts to Charles O'Malley.

Norah laughed at Pat's serio-comic recital of his literary woes till the tears came into her eyes. Then she rose, and, as she dismissed them, said that she did not remember ever having spent a more enjoyable evening.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE ACTION AT BATTLE FLAT.

Mr. Halliday's high estimate of the value of human life had made him, in all his encounters with the blacks, scrupulously careful to avoid bloodshed. All his shots were aimed high or wide. He fired to frighten, not to kill. The result of these tactics, accentuated as they were by Wilson's ineffective shooting, was disastrous. When, time after time, the white man's thunder speaking weapons had produced nothing more formidable than noise and smoke, the prestige previously attached to them, faded away. Instead of achieving his object, he created in the breasts of the blacks a contemptuous familiarity for arms which made a noise, and a noise only. This contempt soon extended to the users of such harmless weapons. Consequently the work of recovering the scattered flocks was made much harder by his misinterpreted leniency. A worse man would have made a better and a speedier job.

The news of the facility with which mutton could be obtained as compared with wallaby or kangaroo rat, spread with marvellous rapidity among the whole of the Toonalatchie tribe, and their confreres the Coonaroas. This, and the unexpected immunity from punishment which followed their primitive methods of commandeering, soon resulted in the whole of the two tribes pitching their camps on Dunster Downs. The Coonaroas occupied the higher or more northerly part of the creek—that nearest the Head Station, leaving to their kinsmen the lower reaches, which they were already most effec-

tively occupying. The day that Mr. Halliday left with Dick and Jim, about two hundred Coonaroas arrived at the Tooramurra water hole, about three miles north of the Head Station. That afternoon the men of the party held a long and animated "yabba-yabba," which resulted in arrangements being made for ensuring an ample supply of mutton.

The bush and grass in the vicinity of the station was becoming very scarce. Redgum's immense flock of six thousand sheep had destroyed far more with their hoofs than they had with their teeth. The size of the mob, the fear of the blacks, and the woeful lack of shepherds had all militated against the best use being made of the country on which they were depastured. Necessity compelled Redgum, during Wilson's enforced absence, to prevent the sheep from spreading over such a wide area as would have tended to preserve the bush and grass, and at the same time allow them a better chance of keeping their condition. Consequent upon this unfortunate concentration of stock upon the light sandy soil, the distance to the feeding ground was daily becoming greater.

Now that Sam felt—or declared himself to be—fit for more active service than "damper spoiling" involved, Mr. Halliday divided the flock into two mobs. No blacks had been seen for some days ; in fact, Barr had reported the creek to be clear of them. So Wilson, taking one mob, started out early that morning in a southerly direction, while Barr a little later directed the steps of his, towards the north. Denny was sent to keep an eye on the cattle which had been recovered, and instructed to report to Redgum anything which called for notice or attention.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the squatter and his newly engaged men started from the station. About five miles out they came upon Wilson's mob and turned aside for a final word. As a matter of fact, Mr. Halliday was rather dubious of the lad's physical fitness for the work in hand, and desired to reassure himself on that point before going further.

"Well. Sam," he said, as Wilson rode slowly to meet him. "how do you feel now? Do you think you're strong enough yet? It strikes me that a couple more days in the hut would do you good."

"I'm as right as a trivet, Sir," he answered. "I've had enough of the hut. This blessed lizarding is bad enough. but wood and water joey is worse. I'll be all right, Sir. with Rover to carry out my orders and Jennie to carry me."

He smiled entreatingly as if deprecating any desire on Mr. Halliday's part to send him home. The squatter looked at him doubtfully for a moment or two.

"It's no use, Sir," broke in Sam. "I won't go back to the camp, I'm dead sick of it. Besides, there ain't any niggers about here; they're all down the creek."

"Very well," said the other, smiling, "so be it. I don't doubt your spirit, lad. that's willing enough but the flesh may be weak. However, have your own way. Good-bye."

Dick stopped behind to light his pipe. "You're a—blessed crow—ain't you?" he asked between the puffs.

"Yes. I'm a Yankalilla native. They breed good men there."

"So I see," laughed Dick, "first-class lizards? anything else?"

"Yes, any blooming thing you like from boxing to buckjump-riding, from prize ploughing to slinging an axe, from ringing a redgum to ringing a woolshed, from loading wheat to long jumping."

Dick laughed again. "If they are as good at the long jump as you are at the long bow, they're pretty pure."

Sam pulled up his horse. They had been slowly following in the wake of the others. He looked at Carter, who had also stopped, in a curious manner.

"I don't know whether you think you've got the loan of me or whether you're trying to be funny, but I'll tell you something about two Yankalilla men. Jack Stevens covered thirty-six feet six inches in three standing jumps. Sam Wilson can't jump, but," here he dismounted and commenced to unbuckle the dee-strap which held the hobbles, "but he can box, and if you'll get off the nanto for a few minutes, he'll darned well show you whether he's drawing the long bow."

Dick laughed pleasantly. "I was only joking, Sam. You're a bit of good stuff, if you are a croweater," he said unconsciously quoting Redgum's summary of Wilson's character. "You remind me of Chunkey; he was a dandy to blow—I don't mean that you're a blow-hard—but Chunkey was a regular fire-eater, and he was a blessed crow too."

Instantly mollified by the explanation, Sam remounted. "I know Chunkey," he said, "met him at Markaranka once. He's a South *Aus. rider for you!"

"You're right. Chunkey's Al at Lloyd's at buck-jump riding, blowing, and bruising. I never saw his

*Pronounced Orse.

equal. He'd ride, and lie, and fight for sheer pleasure. One year at Wilcannia races I saw him tackle nine different men during the two days. All the time he was sober he was fighting; and such a good-tempered cove, too."

"I wish I were going with you," said Wilson, in a lugubrious tone, "I'm a cattle man. I'll go off my jolly dot if I've much crawling after these darned jumbucks. If the Boss weren't such a white man, I'm blowed if I'd do it. To see you fellows going off makes me as miserable as a bandicoot."

"So long, old man," said Dick, and then as he turned away he broke forth into the chorus of an old song, slightly altering it to suit the occasion—

"You'll be shepherding jumbucks
While we are potting black bucks
From piccaninny daylight till the sun goes down.
But keep your pecker up, sonny,
Love is more than sport or money;
A bonny lass who loves you is waiting in the town."

Dick broke into a canter and Wilson turned with a sigh from thoughts of home and the girl he had left behind him, to the commonplace and just at present distasteful task of doing the duty given him.

"Dick's a queer card," he muttered as he started to reduce the spread his mob had attained. "I'm blessed if I can make him out. Where he and his surly-looking mate came from knocks me. Anyhow, it's a good job for the Boss they turned up."

During the next two or three days Mr. Halliday's party came upon widespread evidence of the ravages wrought upon the free running stock by the blacks and the dingoes. Dead sheep or mutilated and dying ones were noticed wherever they went. Sometimes singly,

but more often in threes and fours, their bodies were found, torn and disabled and left to die. Whenever life remained they were given the *coup de grace* by the stroke of a sheath knife. At first the squatter attempted to minimise his loss by removing the pelts, but the number requiring to be skinned rapidly attained such proportions that he was compelled to relinquish the task.

Near the Toonalatchie they came upon numerous deserted native camps, all of which were littered around with the bones and skins of sheep killed and eaten by the blacks. As the tally of his losses continued steadily mounting up, Mr. Halliday began to realise that he was paying dearly for his humanitarian scruples. When, on the afternoon of the third day, they came upon a fine bullock which had been speared, mutilated, and left to die, the last vestige of pity for the perpetrators of the outrage passed away. As he put a bullet through the beast's brain, he fully determined that such wanton cruelty should be stopped at any cost. The sight of that helpless bullock, from the living, palpitating body of which the blacks had hacked and cut away enough to satisfy their appetites and then left to the cruel mercies of the crows, the wild dogs, and the innumerable swarms of ants, immediately dissipated any lingering doubts as to his future course of action.

With stiffened muscles, a hardened heart, the dying moan of the tortured beast in his ears, and the wild lust for revenge in his blood, he left the spot an altered man. Had the party chanced upon any of the natives that afternoon, no quarter would have been given and no prisoners taken. Another of those regrettable incidents which have so often taken place on the border

line of settlement. and which seem inseparable from the opening up of new country, would have had to be chronicled. Fortunately the opportunity for immediate and indiscriminating revenge did not occur.

The next day, having mustered about a thousand sheep. the party set out for the station, from which they were distant about fifty miles. They had traversed about eight miles by noon and the stock showed an irresistible desire to camp. The spot chosen was a little flat running out from the main creek, and under the scanty shadow of the box trees and the denser shade of the bean trees, the mob settled down for a couple of hours' siesta. The horses were hobbled on a patch of grass close by, the quarts were boiled, the midday meal dispatched, and pipes filled and fired.

Jim, as usual, smoked in silence, rarely deigning to speak, unless directly appealed to and then in the shortest, most direct manner. Dick, as was his wont, varied his enjoyment of the soothing weed by alternately chaffing his mate and singing snatches of bush ballads. As he possessed a musical voice and an extensive repertoire of songs, both new and old, he was an agreeable companion, and Mr. Halliday was considerably amused not only by his ready wit and the apparently inexhaustible flow of badinage, but by the old-time flavour of many of the songs he sang. His ready smile, his contagious laugh, his imperturbable good humour, and his capacity for and cheerful willingness to work, caused the squatter to entertain a very favorable opinion of him.

From time to time one of the trio rose, and, casting a glance at the sheep, carefully scanned the country immediately adjacent to the camp, particularly to-

wards the creek. So far all was well. No blacks and no recent tracks of any, had been seen during the day. The mob, huddled together in smaller or larger lots according to the shade available, showed no indications of restlessness or desire to "string out" from the camp.

Dick had just finished a rather prolonged scrutiny, had thrown himself down in the shade, and was in the act of transferring a live coal from the fire to his pipe, when his horse neighed two or three times, and, jumping around, faced towards the creek. Dick forgot his pipe, forgot also for a brief space that his fingers held a live coal.

"Send I may live!" he ejaculated, "there's niggers about." Then he suddenly dropped his pipe-light, and in vigorous language condemned himself from age to age as a mental imbecile, not fit to carry a blinded Chinaman's lame dog to dinner.

"Boss," he said, after finishing his self-depreciating remarks, and looking rather ruefully at his forefinger and thumb, "Boss, there's niggers handy. Blowed if I didn't think so, now I'm dead sure. Black Arrow never made a mistake yet."

Mr. Halliday had risen and his eyes were following the direction of the horse's gaze. "How is that?" he said, "I can't see any sign of them."

"Just now," answered Dick, making another effort to light his pipe, this time with a firestick, "I thought for a moment that I saw a thin curl of smoke rise from the creek. It disappeared so suddenly that I thought my blessed eyes had fooled me, till the yarraman sang out. He never makes a mistake. He was bred on a black labor station, and, being a motherless foal, was

brought up by hand by the blooming niggers. He's never forgotten the smell of 'em. He'll scent a black-fellow as far as any other prad 'ull smell a camel. He's great on niggers, is Black Arrow. A darned good thing for us, too."

"In that case we'd better shift. Bring in the horses, Jim. Pack away the traps and the tucker, Dick. I'll move round and give the sheep a start."

"Have your barker ready and keep your eyes skinned, Boss," said Dick.

Mr. Halliday moved away towards the Toonalatchie, rousing up and closing in the scattered bunches as he went. He had crossed the alluvial flat and reached the higher and more sandy and more thickly timbered ground, when he saw some of the mob on his extreme left, stringing out in the direction of the creek. Imitating the bark of a dog he ran towards their head to turn them. The leaders were over the ridge of the sandhill in front. Those on the near slope answered to his collie-like cries, broke the line of contact with those over the summit, and returned to the mob. Wishing to secure the others, he ceased his "speaking up" efforts and ran at top speed up the soft slope and down on to the flat below.

As he emerged from the thicket of bushes which formed a close fringe around the little plain, he was startled to see the sheep he was after being driven away by a number of naked savages, not fifty yards in front.

Without a moment's hesitation he continued his course, shouting as he ran. The blacks wheeled round at once and a shower of ill-aimed, hurriedly thrown, spears hurtled harmlessly past him. Taking cover behind a sandalwood tree, he opened fire on the leaders

of the now advancing natives. He had two six-chambered revolvers, but his spare cartridges were on his saddle.

Forgetting for the moment his lack of ammunition he emptied one revolver at once, and, fortunately, to some effect. Two of the attacking party dropped and the others with wild cries of rage at once sought shelter behind bush and tree. The wounded men lay quiet for a moment or two and then crawled to cover also. Husbanding his resources, he awaited further developments. Presently he noticed that his adversaries were executing an encircling movement. Not wishing to be caught like a rat in a trap, he dodged from his place of vantage to another tree a few yards behind him.

Quick though his action was, the blacks were quicker. As he slipped to shelter a dozen spears focussed themselves at the spot. Two or three struck the tree, two or three others spent their force in the ground at his feet, others whistled past him most uncomfortably close. The last one reached its mark, penetrating the back of his leg below the knee. He clutched at a low limb for support, missed it, and fell.

With cries of exultation the natives rushed from their shelter and advanced upon him in the form of a widely extended half circle. With an effort he dragged himself to a kneeling posture, and, taking deliberate aim, fired two of his precious cartridges at the nearest of his foes. To his great astonishment four of the natives dropped where they stood. the others fled howling to shelter.

“Richochet hits count as much as bulls in this game.” he muttered grimly. Then he tried to pull out the

spear but failed. His foot seemed to be partially paralysed. Casting a glance at the four victims of his second volley, he was astonished and alarmed to notice that they had taken cover.

“No bulls-eye after all,” he said to himself. “Perhaps not even an outer. Where the dickens are those fellows? They ought to be here now. If they’re much longer they’ll be too late—except for the funeral.”

With set teeth and white face he struggled to get into an upright position. With a great effort he succeeded by using one of the lower limbs as a lever in getting his sound foot nearer the tree and in such a position as to bear his weight. His other leg was limp and useless, while the loss of blood which he had tried in vain to staunch, was making him feel very weak.

During his effort to get more shelter by assuming an upright position, the blacks had continued their enveloping tactics. Very soon, to his dismay, he found that he was the centre of an irregular cordon, whereof the radius at no point exceeded forty yards. He managed to lift himself round so that he faced the direction from which he looked for help, and stood with his back to the tree, revolver in hand, determined to sell his life dearly.

The end was near. Two or three spears hissed their way past him, one dangerously close to his head. Then, apparently in response to a preconcerted signal, a shower of them rained around him from all sides simultaneously, and then, with hoarse shouts the bloodthirsty savages rushed at him with boomerangs and nullah-nullahs.

Clutching the tree with his left hand he aimed coolly and deliberately at the advancing crowd. They were now not more than ten or fifteen paces away. Amid a

shower of waddies, short spears, and stone-headed tomahawks, he fired his last four shots. This time every bullet found its billet, and four of the savages leaped into the air and bit the dust. He felt a stinging sensation in the right wrist, and the revolver dropped from his grasp. Then a waddy, hurled at short range, struck the arm which clung to the branch, with tremendous force. The broken arm released its grip, and Mr. Halliday collapsed insensible at the foot of the tree.

CHAPTER XXV.

REDGUM AND WILSON ON THE WARPATH.

When Mr. Haïnday left the camp to rouse the sheep from their noonday rest. Jim in obedience to instructions, went after the horses. There were five of them, three riding and two pack. Jim, who was just in the middle of a quiet smoke, resented being disturbed. It was not two o'clock yet, and the sun was blazing hot. They had travelled a good eight miles already. Besides that, the sheep wanted to camp, and so did he. Why should he have to bring in the horses while Dick stayed in the shade? So with feelings of resentment and jealous anger, he walked sullenly over to where the steeds were, now about a quarter of a mile away. Led by Black Arrow, they showed a disposition to make away in the direction of the Toonalatchie. Fervently cursing his mate's hack, he was compelled to quicken his pace in order to intercept him.

When at last he had the bridle on and stooped to take off the hobbles, his evil nature was thoroughly stirred. Black Arrow was very restless and excited, and Jim's rough tones and rougher treatment were not such as were calculated to quieten the equine nerves or in any way tend to allay the horse's excitement. With considerable difficulty he managed to get the straps off. Rising from the ground, he struck the highly strung animal a violent blow with the steel rings, and the next moment was being dragged along the ground, holding fast to the reins and vainly calling "Whoa, Way" and as vainly punctuating his commands with oaths.

At last Jim was enabled to scramble to his feet and resume command. Boiling over as he was with rage, he had the good sense to curb it, and, slipping his arm through the bridle, led the reluctant animal to where the other four were still feeding. Having secured the riding hacks, and freed the pack horses, he essayed to mount his mate's steed in order to get back to the camp quickly. But in this he reckoned without his horse. Black Arrow had not forgotten the blow from the hobbles, and every time Jim attempted to get near him, he snorted violently and jumped back. After several efforts, much bad language, and considerable waste of time, Jim acknowledged himself beaten for the time being, mounted one of the station horses, and led and drove the others.

Dick, who had watched his mate's performances, at first in contemptuous amusement and later on with rapidly increasing anger, had heard Mr. Halliday's first fusilade, and was chafing and fuming at his enforced absence from the scene of the combat.

In a few terse descriptive terms he enlightened Jim as to what he thought of him and his folly, and, mentioning the shots he had heard, urged him to haste. "Look lively now and move your lumbering carcass, the Boss is in a tight place."

With the prospect of a melee and a chance of "pott-ing the niggers" before him, Jim needed no second bidding. In a very few moments both men were speeding in the direction Mr. Halliday had taken, and, guided by the cries of the blacks, they attained the crest of the sandhill just as the savages started their final attack.

With revolvers in hand they galloped headlong down

the sandy slope, crashed through the bushes, and emerged on the plain just in time to see the squatter fall in a heap at the butt of the tree, apparently dead.

Firing a couple of shots each and shouting loudly, they charged down on the astonished blacks, who, taken by surprise, made but a feeble resistance and fled. A few spears had been hurriedly thrown before the stampede became general. One of them grazed Black Arrow's shoulder and caused him to swerve to the right. As he did so, he struck an unseen stump with such force that he stumbled badly, limped two or three paces, and stopped.

Dick picked up the injured foot. "Bruised heel ! What cursed luck ! Poor old hoss." He patted Black Arrow affectionately.

"Get a scatter on 'em. Jim, and keep 'em moving, while I have a look at the Boss," shouted Dick, as his mate galloped past him.

Hanging up his horse he turned to the prostrate squatter. A hurried examination showed him that, though badly hurt, he had only fainted. Looking at the spear wound, from which the blood was still flowing, he saw at once the absolute necessity for extracting the barbed head and staunching the life draining stream as quickly as possible. He drew his sheath knife, and, kneeling alongside the body, tested its edge.

"I'd better get that blamed thing out before he comes round," he muttered.

After carefully wiping the knife, he took the broken haft of the spear in his hand. Then a couple of short, sharp incisions and the wound was free. Mr. Halliday groaned, tried to sit up, but fell back again unconscious.

Dick used his big silk handkerchief as a bandage, supplementing it with a portion of his cotton shirt, which he twisted around the leg and tightened with a wool carter's twitch. The tremendous pressure of this tourniquet had the desired effect of stopping the loss of blood and restoring the squatter to consciousness. Then he set the broken arm, fortunately a simple fracture, using wood from one of the pack saddles as splints and shirting for bandages.

When Jim returned from his pursuit of the blacks his face and neck streaked with blood from a crack on the head from a boomerang, he found Mr. Halliday sitting at the foot of the tree in comparative comfort, with his head carefully enwrapped in some more of his mate's shirt. Dick, pipe in mouth and tomahawk in hand, was busy fashioning a rude stretcher out of some saplings and saddle straps, and as absorbed in his work as if "potting niggers" were the last thing he would dream of doing.

"Hullo, Jim," he said, as the other dismounted. "Hope you had good sport. Sorry I couldn't go with you, but I'd to butcher the Boss a bit, and now I've turned chips. Where's the niggers?"

"They won't trouble us again, blast 'em. Away to blazes across the creek, an' goin' as if the devil was after 'em," said Jim, with a saturnine smile.

"By Jove, and so he was," laughed Dick. Then he added, "Bring up the packhorses, Jim, and then round up the jumbucks while I finish this stretcher."

It was nearly four o'clock that afternoon before Battle Flat—as it was afterwards called—was left behind. Mr. Halliday was anxious to know how many, if any, blacks had been killed, but he obtained no satis-

faction. Jim treated his enquiry with silent contempt. Dick said he didn't know and he didn't darn well care. His colonial troubles ! He had no time to tally dead niggers. Go and look ? Not he. He'd see the Boss everlastingly condemned first and then he wouldn't. Needless to say he didn't.

Unable to do anything else, the squatter accepted the situation in as philosophic a spirit as possible. He wonderingly contrasted Dick's prompt and unhesitating efforts to save his life with the utter callousness he displayed in reference to the lives of the blacks. He fully recognised that Dick's ready resourcefulness in dealing with his wounds, had saved his life, and he did not fail to express his sense of gratitude.

"That's all right," he answered shortly, "don't worry yourself about trifles. It's all in the game. The tail goes with the hide, you know. Live jumbucks are worth more than dead niggers."

At last they moved off. Mr. Halliday, in the extemporised litter made by the handy stockman, and carried by two of the horses, and Dick riding the squatter's horse, while Black Arrow followed limping behind. Their progress was necessarily slow, the pace being moderated to ensure the minimum of jolting and jarring of which the squatter's rough and ready conveyance was capable. Jim busied himself with the sheep. His mate kept near the litter.

Presently, as his custom was, he broke into song, parodying a well-known plantation melody—

"A few buck blacks
Dropped in their tracks
On the banks of the Toonalatchie.
Oh! count them not,
But let them rot,
Way down the Toonalatchie."

That night they camped near a partly dried billabong on the edges of which there was an abundance of feed for the horses. Before turning Black Arrow loose on a refreshing looking patch of green pasture, Dick tended him carefully and tenderly. He applied hot fomentations to the bruised heel for some time. Then with kind words and gentle caresses, he led him slowly to where the grass was thickest, and returned to the camp singing snatches of the "Old Bark Hut."

The squatter, noticing his wonderful patience with and kindness to his dumb beast, marvelled the more at the brutal callousness of his conduct in reference to the dead or injured blacks.



The day that the mustering party encountered the Toonalatchie tribe at Battle Flat, the Coonaroas found their free supply of mutton abruptly stopped. For a day or two they had contented themselves with cutting off a straggler or two, and by careful generalship, did it when Redgum was too far away to notice their operations. Becoming emboldened by their immunity from detection and punishment, they enlarged the scope of their methods and cut off a mob of about one hundred. Unfortunately for them it included a large black wether, which on account of its size and colour, was very conspicuous, and on account of its tameness, almost a pet. Wending homeward that night, Redgum looked in vain for Paddy, as they called the wether. After yarding the flock he carefully scanned it until he became satisfied the sheep was missing.

That night, as the result of a long discussion, it was decided to send Denny on the morrow with the southern mob, and that the two white men should go with the

northern one. The discussion was mainly Wilson's. The decision was Redgum's. Sam put the arguments for and against any or all possible courses of action with a bewildering impartiality. His mate listened in stolid wonderment and then calmly ignored them.

"Stow yer yabba," said the giant at last. "Listen now while I tell yer. Paddy's gone, that's certain."

"You're a fact. Not lost but gone before you knew it," interrupted Sam.

"Bein' gone," reiterated Redgum, ignoring or not noticing the levity of the younger man's remark, "bein' gone 'e ain't gone alone. Th' niggers 'as cut 'em off. We'll 'ave ter git 'em to-morrow. Denny'll take your mob. You can come wi' me, an' 'ave some fun. We'll round them blinded niggers inter th' creek. Must 'ave Paddy back afore th' Boss comes."

And so it came to pass that the blackboy went south, while Redgum and Wilson, well mounted, went north. Each man carried a shot gun, revolvers, and a stock whip.

"If we're goin' to yard the niggers in the Tooramurra Hole, we must have whips," said Sam. "Besides, how could we cut out the blacks without floggers?"

"With shot guns," said Redgum sententiously.

As soon as the sheep came near the Tooramurra, the two men dropped behind and allowed them to spread. Then they themselves made a wide detour and came out a considerable distance ahead of the mob and gained the cover of the creek timber without seeing or being seen by the blacks. Still keeping wide and taking all possible advantage of cover, they gradually crossed the Toonalatchje flats and completed the half-circle by

arriving in the sandhills at the back of the big water-hole, where they supposed the natives were camped.

Dismounting they cautiously advanced, leading their horses. They had crossed three sandhills and the intervening flats, and were ascending another very high one when "baa, baa" sounded just in front. Giving Wilson his horse to hold, Redgum threw himself down near the top and peered over.

The creek valley was before him. Just below him were a number of sheep. He recognised Paddy at once. Two blackfellows, not fifty yards away, were driving them towards the native camp, which was between them and the waterhole. Across the valley he could see the leading stragglers of his mob on the top of the sandhills, getting perilously within the danger zone. As his eyes gradually took in the whole scene he noticed two small parties go out in opposite directions from the blacks' gunyahs, with the evident object of cutting off another small mob. He withdrew and hurriedly communicated the result of his observations to his mate. Tying the horses to a sandalwood, they took cover behind a thick cherry bush on top of the rise. The two natives below them, satisfied that their charges were all right, were squatting on the ground chatting volubly. Away to the right and left the two cutting off parties were cautiously making their way.

Lying on the sand with his gun hidden by the bush, Redgum took careful aim at the talkative shepherds below and fired. The effect was marvellous. The two blacks, peppered with shot, leaped to their feet and with agonised cries of terror and pain, ran towards the camp. The camp itself immediately disgorged its population, who—men, women, and children—ran hither

and thither, uttering shouts of alarm and surprise, and not knowing from what quarter the attack had come. The camp resembled a gigantic ant bed, suddenly and ruthlessly disturbed. The foraging parties fell back on their base at full speed. The sheep across the valley doubled back on the main body in safety, while the small mob below huddled together around the big black wether.

Safely ensconced behind the bush, the white men awaited developments. Presently the hubbub ceased and the puzzled blacks took counsel together. After much yabba-yabba and gesticulation, they evidently decided upon a plan, for two parties of about a dozen in each started to reconnoitre. They advanced from the camp in diverging lines which would meet the sandhill about one hundred and fifty yards each side of the cherry bush. They advanced cautiously, taking advantage of all the cover afforded as they came, and keeping a keen look out in every direction.

Redgum and Wilson slipped down the sandhill, rode along the flat till level with the respective points towards which the blacks were heading. Hastily hanging up their horses they climbed to cover at the top of the rise, where, lying hidden, they awaited developments.

As the blacks approached the sandhill their lines gradually assumed a wider angle, the result being that the white watchers had more than once to shift their quarters in order to be even approximately in front of the lines of attack. It seemed as if instinct impelled the natives to deflect from the straight path; or perhaps the keenness of their vision was responsible for the repeated variations in their course. More probably their idea was that by making a wider detour they

would have a better opportunity of ambushing their opponents.

Both Redgum and Wilson were so intent on watching, each his own particular party, that it was not until they were too widely separated to be visible to or communicate with each other, that they noticed a large party of blacks making direct for the cherry bush whence Redgum had tested the effect of duck shot on the toughened epidermis of the aboriginal. The central advance reached the top of the sandhill just as their left wing got within Wilson's effective range.

The sight of the blacks at the cherry bush caused him to fire sooner than he would otherwise have done. His nervous hurry affected his aim. The contents of his first barrel buried itself harmlessly in the sand some yards in front of the natives, who instantly scattered like frightened rabbits and took shelter. With considerable mortification, Wilson realised that now they were practically out of gunshot and by their widely extended formation, safe from his fire.

For half a minute he lay watching them and wondering what to do next. Then he heard in the distance Redgum's two barrels fired in quick succession. Instinctively he sprang to his feet and looked north. Instantly two or three spears whizzed by him. Almost simultaneously he started down the sandhill with strides such as he had never compassed before. The momentary glance north had shown him that the central party of blacks had seen him and were making straight for his horse.

It was a race for life. Behind him the natives, seeing him flee, were swarming up the sandhill, on his right about twenty of them were coming down the flat at top

speed. followed by others moving less quickly. He had not more than fifty yards to run, the nearest of his opponents about one hundred and fifty yards. At the bottom of the sandhill he caught his foot in an unseen root and fell headlong to the ground. The blacks shouted and yelled in triumph. Recovering himself he sprang forward, reached the horse, and paused for a moment to take breath. A spear thrown from the rise fell at his feet. Wheeling round he took rapid aim and fired his second barrel. Cries of pain and rage and a general bolt to cover, soothed his wounded spirit. Springing into the saddle he galloped away with the music of the spears singing around him. Turning in the saddle he gave his foes a parting shot or two from his revolver as he rode.

After making successful pursuit impossible, he turned his horse and at a suitable spot crossed the flat and creek and turned north towards the Tooramurra. His blood was up, and the wild idea of attacking the camp single handed occurred to him. He smiled grimly as he shaped his course towards it.

Meanwhile Redgum, having peppered his attacking party and given them pause, mounted his horse and rode along behind the sandhill until it impinged on the flat about a mile north. There he left it, and, crossing the Toonalatchie unseen, turned south towards the spot on which his flock had been depastured. And so it came about that he and Wilson met nearly opposite the blacks' camp.

"Hullo, Sam," he said, "ready for a scrap? We've got ter clear them darned niggers out. Loaded up? Got your whip ready? Come on then. Them niggers 'as got ter go."

They turned into the valley and rode straight for the blacks' camp. At two hundred yards they pulled up and fired a couple of revolver shots at the gunyahs. Then, weapons in hand, they slowly advanced. The gins and piccaninnies fled across the flat. A number of the men were away, but those still in camp showed a disposition to fight. At one hundred yards Redgum halted long enough for them to take careful aim with the revolvers and fire.

Then they charged wildly forward, firing as they came. Two or three of the blacks were hit, the rest fled precipitately. At close range the white men discharged their shot guns at the fleeing, shrieking crowd. The stinging little pellets of lead completed their discomfiture, their one and only desire being to get away. Having emptied their barrels, they then loosed the stockwhips and galloping along the rear and flanks, rounded them up and drove them forward with much shouting, cursing, and laughter.

"Keep th' black brutes a-movin', Sam. They've got ter go."

Sam did not need the exhortation. He had several old scores to settle, and he paid them all that day. He lashed the men unmercifully, coiling his fourteen feet of greenhide round their naked bodies with all the strength and skill he possessed. His strokes seldom failed to fetch blood, and always produced cries and shrieks of pain. He was an expert with the whip.

"Beef it out, you black beauties, beef it out. I'll make you sing, blast you. Give it lip. Houp-la."

Still, infuriated as he was, and in his present temper brutally vindictive, he never struck the piccaninnies.

and gave the gins but an occasional flick. "Just to keep 'em jigging," he said.

Redgum plied his whip just as vigorously as his mate, but to little tangible effect, except the moral one. Had it been a bullock whip he could have flayed them alive, but fortunately he was not so effective with the short handle as he was with the long.

After driving the blacks for about three miles down the creek, they returned and destroyed the camp by fire. Into the flames they threw everything that would burn. They made a clean sweep of all things aboriginal. Tooramurra was a sweeter, healthier spot when their task was done, than it was before.

Then the jackshays were boiled, and under the soothing influence of "post and rail," followed by a pipe, their ordinary natures resumed control. Inwardly feeling a trifle ashamed of themselves, they went after the sheep.

The Coonaroas were seen no more at Tooramurra or anywhere else on the Toonalatchie for many a long day. Leaving the creek frontage to their kinsfolk, they contented themselves with the back country.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GILES IN THE DUFFERS' DEN.

The next day Denny met the squatter's party about thirty miles from the station. He told them of the clean sweep Redgum and Wilson had made of the Coonaroas. He reported that there were no signs of blacks along the creek. Dick thereupon volunteered to ascertain what the Toonalatchie tribe were doing, and started on that errand at once. He returned the next day as the party went into camp at the 15-mile.

He had examined the creek, so he said, for twenty miles south of the scene of their encounter at Battle Flat, without seeing a single blackfellow. From tracks he had followed he was satisfied that the Toonalatchie tribe, like their kinsmen, the Coonaroas, were migrating *en masse*.

"You can take my colonial word for it, Boss," he said in conclusion, "you won't be bothered with myalls for a bit. They've got a Barcoo start all right. Black Jim put the fear of the debbil-debbil into their hearts, and Wilson's lambastin' gave 'em a taste of greenhide they won't forget. They'll keep wide of Dunster Downs, you bet."

The next day Mr. Halliday was able, thanks to Dick's prompt surgical attention and treatment, assisted by a sound constitution and a strong will, to exchange the litter for the saddle. Leaving the others with the sheep, he and Denny rode slowly into the station. Two or three days' complete rest worked wonders. Barring the broken arm, he rapidly recovered from his wounds,

and in a week or two experienced no ill effects from his injuries.

Meanwhile Dick and Jim not only kept watch and ward over their flock, but by sundry excursions south and west, increased its tally by the recovery of two or three hundred more. Black Arrow was kept in camp for a week and doctored with hot fomentations until the bruised heel was quite well. Then they shifted camp to the 10-mile Bluff, where, the feed being good, they turned their own horses.

The next morning, to Dick's surprise, he saw a half-naked blackfellow coming towards him. It was Micky the Dart. From his waistband he produced a letter and, squatting in the shade, waited. Carter read the note twice and then burnt it. After questioning the black minutely, and being satisfied with his answers, he patted him on the head and threw him a stick of tobacco.

"Which way yarraman sit down, Micky?"

"'Im bin knock up so mine bin leave 'um longa Soakage."

"When you leave 'um Soakage?"

"Three pfella sleep. Mine make a light 'tation las' night. Nother one blackpfella, all same mine brother, yabba you longa creek."

That afternoon the sheep were yarded early. That night the two white men and Micky left for the station. When near it, Micky went in to see Denny. Upon his return the party diverged from the road and followed up the creek for some distance. Thence they crossed to the Leopard Creek road and journeyed along it. When fairly on the stony country, Dick and Jim turned to the right, but Micky, riding one of the station horses

and leading the other, galloped along the track for five or six miles, short hobbled the horses, and struck across country on foot.

The two men waited for the blackboy at a little swamp where stony land and sandhills met. Upon his arrival they filled waterbags and canteens and set out east along the trough between two sandhills.

The next day Denny managed so that his duty took him to the 10-Mile Bluff, and that night Mr. Halliday knew of Dick and Jim's flight. Denny speedily recovered the station horses, but could not—so he said—find any traces of the deserters.

Two days later the police party arrived at the station. While Sergeant O'Halloran and the squatter discussed the situation, Tarpot and Denny had a long and animated yabba-yabba. For a long time they could not agree upon some point. Tarpot was urging a course of action to which Denny objected. Finally, after much talk, gesticulation, tea drinking, and studying of impromptu plans sketched on the sand, Denny gave in to the theory held or the argument propounded by the police tracker.

Sent out the next morning to scour the country for tracks of Carter and Blood, they returned at the end of the second day and reported their failure.

"Baal make a light track. 'Im walk longa Leopard Creek mine think it. Too much bullock all day walk-about," said Tarpot. No amount of questioning, cajoling, or threatening could make him vary his story.



For some time after Grigg's disappearance, Jerry made persistent efforts to ingratiate himself with Norah. At last he confessed himself beaten and dis-

continued his unwelcome attentions. His failure to prejudice her against Ross, her prompt refusal to believe evil of him, and her indignant defence of his character, caused Jerry to hate the Duke more and more. The finding of his lost knife, McDermott's cross-examination of him respecting it, and his refusal to return it, filled him with impotent rage. It soon became apparent to him that even among his old mates there was an undefinable feeling of distrust towards him.

Chafing at his snub from Norah, at Pat and Charlie's indifference to his anger and contempt for his threats, and at the loss of prestige which had lately been his fate, he determined to quit Boolaroola. Coffee's fencing contract was now finished, so he drew his cheque and prepared to leave. Borrowing a horse he set out to run in his own, which, since the striking of water at Trevenna's Well, had been running on Rungatowie Plain. Having secured it he was about to return when a party of horsemen rode over a low ridge. He was hidden from sight by a little patch of timber. As the riders drew near he recognised them as Carter and Blood and Dudley's blackboy.

He coo-eeed, and they responded by riding over to him. Then ensued a few minutes animated conversation. Jerry talked fast and with some show of excitement. Blood interpolated a word or two at intervals. Dick listened, hummed a song tune, and now and then nodded his acquiescence. On parting the outlaws made for their retreat in the Range, Jerry for the Redbanks.

The next morning when Smith left the Station for the River there was a general feeling of satisfaction, both in the hut and the house. That afternoon, Charlie,

who had been away all day looking for horses, came in on the East road. About a mile from Dingo Creek he met Dudley, and with him Jerry. The hawker explained that his horses had made away, and that he had been stranded while Micky was looking for them. Then, when found, one of them was very lame, and that had compelled him to camp at Dingo Creek for another week. Now he was off and very glad to get away, and was pleased to have Smith's company in to the River.

The day after Smith's departure, Giles rode out north of the Rat's Range to ascertain the condition of the waterholes in that direction. The following afternoon, as he rounded the end of the Range, he noticed smoke. The Mount had always a peculiar fascination for him. He knew more about it than anyone else on the run. Its rugged beauty, its isolation, and its silence, appealed to his sense of the romantic. At present the smoke stirred his imagination. He sat on the horse and looked at it until the thin blue column ceased to be perceptible.

"Some jolly niggers, I expect," he muttered, "I must root 'em out o' that."

He turned, and as he rode up the creek the sight of fresh horse tracks banished the idea of blacks from his mind. Dismounting at the wall, he turned to the left and, with rein on arm, led his horse through the narrow entrance into the dell. As he pushed his way through the aperture, his horse stumbled and pulled him back. Giles almost unconsciously exclaimed :

"Hold up, Dido ! What's the matter with you ?"

The next moment, as he emerged from the bushes, his astonished gaze fell on Dick Carter, who stood, not ten paces off, with revolver raised.

"By Jove, Farmer," said Dick, lowering his weapon, "you've the luck of a fat priest. If you hadn't spoke before you showed up, you'd have never spoken again."

Dick's face was pale, and there was a hard, cruel look about his eyes which Giles had never seen before—and did not like.

He remained silent for a moment taking in the scene, too amazed at his reception and what he saw to speak. A few paces behind Dick stood Blood, whom he did not at first recognise. The thick black growth of hair on his face had given place to the dark blue skin of the newly shaven. Behind him was—he could scarcely believe his eyes—Jerry Smith. Dick watched him with an amused smile.

"Welcome to the Duffers' Den, Giles. I'm glad to see you. As glad as Halliday was to see us. Good men are scarce, but he's one. Take the saddle off and stay with us to-night. I've got a lot to tell you, and we've whips of tucker."

Jim and Jerry had retired to the little fireplace in front of the cave. Dick and his visitor followed them slowly.

"I saw a smoke," said Giles at last. "and thought it might be niggers, then I saw your tracks, but never dreamt it was you."

"I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls," as the poet says, chanted Dick. "These granite walls are more to my taste; this is the stone-jug for me."

"I'm afraid I can't stop all night," said Giles, as he selected a smooth rock to sit on.

"I'm afraid you'll have to. I've a lot to tell you." He spoke as one accustomed to command.

They were sitting around the empty fireplace. Jim and Jerry nodded as Giles came up, but said nothing.

"I must go," he repeated, "the Boss'll want to know what kept me."

"Jasper will believe anything you tell him," said Dick, smiling.

"I'm not going to tell him a lie to please you," said Giles, bristling up.

"A lie ! My dear Farmer, there's no need to do so. No one who knows you would suggest such a thing. 'An honest man's the rarest show on earth,' as the poet says. You can tell him you couldn't get back, and was forced to camp out. That'll be true enough."

Giles, making a virtue of necessity, gave a reluctant acceptance of the invitation to stay.

The rest of the afternoon and most of the evening were devoted by Dick to a long account of the trouble at Dunster Downs. He was warm in his praise of Halliday and regretted that a relentless fate in the shape of Sergeant O'Halloran compelled him to leave. Presently Dick turned to Giles and laughingly asked him if he'd had any more dog-and-man fights.

"No," he answered, "the lizards have had no chance to get on the spree since; but old Grigg's death upset the pot a bit."

Jerry started and turned pale. Jim and Dick exchanged glances.

"Grigg dead ? I never heard of that."

"Yes, Smith here found his body near the Kotoka horse-pad the morning after you left Dudley at the little waterhole."

"Yes," said Jerry excitedly, "I found the body, an' Charlie Ross is the cove what murdered 'im."

"That's a lie, Jerry," said Giles.

Smith jumped to his feet and made for Giles, who had also risen.

"Sit down you fool," said Dick sharply. Jerry scowlingly obeyed.

"Strange we never heard of Grigg's death," said Dick.

"Too good to be true," growled Jim.

A brief account was given of the circumstances attending Grigg's disappearance, and then they turned in. Several times during the evening Giles had found himself looking at Blood with a puzzled air. There was something strange about the man, and yet something that seemed to be dimly familiar to him. From every scrutiny he turned his gaze away unsatisfied. The fancy kept him awake a great part of the night.

The next morning he left the little valley, still puzzled about Blood's appearance, and wondering what connection there could be between Smith and the others. Before leaving he promised Dick to say nothing about his discovery of them for a month. It went much against his grain to do so, but Dick's unqualified praise and admiration of his old mate, Halliday, biassed him in his favor. The work Dick and Jim had done at Dunster Downs, especially after the skirmish with the blacks, weighed with him. Dick's personality also influenced him, but the factor which turned the scale was the fact that if he did not promise, he would not be allowed to go.

As they parted Dick shook him warmly by the hand.

"Farmer," he said, impressively, "there're not many men I'd trust, but I do you. If ever I can help you, or do anything for you, I'll do it. You can reckon on me ; I won't fail you."

As Giles somewhat ruefully rode away, he heard the voice of the bushranger singing :—

“Friend Draper steals ten thousand pounds,
And gets three years in gaol;
While Devil Dick gets seventeen
For sticking up the mail.
One punishment is over
When the other's just begun,
Which shows how much depends upon
The style in which it's done.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

FATHER O'DONNELL AT BOOLAROOOLA.

When Smith left the Station, McDermott was at Trevenna's Well, carting timber for the erection of a hut and yards there. He finished his work on the Saturday following Giles' visit to the Duffers' Dell, as it was afterwards called. On account of the heat he did not start at once for home, but waited until some time after sundown. Wood and another man were left at the well to finish the building work.

While sitting in the wagon, heedless alike of the passage of time or the pace of his team, his mind reverted to that memorable Christmas week. No other seven days had been so crowded with incident and excitement, nor had had such an influence on his life. The revulsion of feeling which he had experienced on the morning after the horrible orgies of Christmas Eve had never left him. Though he still scorned the idea of total abstinence being necessary for himself, he inwardly acknowledged the truth of many of the arguments Norah so persistently urged.

His literary investment had also created a new interest in his life, an interest which was rapidly growing and bearing fruit in more ways than one. He was building better than he knew. With the reading of good books and the consequent enlargement of his mental view came a more eager desire for betterment. He found a growing distaste for things in which he had previously delighted, and a half-conscious groping for something better.

Lastly, his love for Norah which he had, during that crowded week, found time and opportunity to confess, was silently but surely exercising an uplifting and purifying effect on his life, as well as improving his personal appearance.

Musing on these things, he suddenly awoke to the consciousness that the team was at a standstill. A tree had fallen across the road and barred the way. As he jumped to the ground to remove the obstacle he was further astonished to see a horseman emerge from the scrub and cross the track just in front of his leaders. For a few seconds he had a clear view of the rider ere he vanished from his sight in the scrub. The moon was near the full, and his quick eye took in all the details of the mount at a glance.

"Hullo there," he cried as the shadows of the dog-wood swallowed up both horse and rider. "You're off the track, mate."

He started to run as he shouted, but the sound of increasing speed which the hoof beats gave, being the only answer, he turned for the wagon.

"Well, I'm jiggered," he muttered, "who the dickens is that? I never saw that chap before."

During the rest of his journey to the station he was occupied in trying to "place" the stranger, but he failed utterly. The next morning he narrated his adventure to his two mates.

"The fellow was a big man, on a big horse, a fine looking beast he was too ——"

"Who? The man?" asked Giles, interrupting him.

"Yes, thickhead, the yarra-man."

Charlie and Farmer laughed at Pat's ready retort.

"What was he like?" asked the former.

"Which one o' the three d'yer mean?" said McDermott, with a grin.

"Upon my word, Pat!" exclaimed Ross, "you're getting as bad as old Falstaff. You started with a man, and now you've jumped to three. Tell us about the whole six without any more ado."

Pat laughed good-humouredly. "Don't be stretching it, Charlie; sure it's only three. A big man, a big horse, an' a big wether. The man had a clean shave, the yarraman had a short tail, an' the wether had horns."

Giles felt uneasy. The description might be made to fit Blood and his nag the Barber. He had hoped that the temporary tenants of the Dell had gone. Now it appeared otherwise.

"I s'pose I'd better tell the Boss," said McDermott.

"Of course," replied the Duke.

"Not at all," said Giles hurriedly. "What's the good. The man whoever he is, now he knows that he's been seen, isn't going to sit down and wait to be arrested for sheep stealing. He's far enough by this time, I'll bet. Let him go. Perhaps he's some traveller who's been lost and picked up a straggler to keep himself alive. I wouldn't tell the Boss, at least not yet."

His mates looked at him in unfeigned astonishment. Giles was conscious of a blush and felt angry in consequence.

"Not yet?" echoed Charlie. "When then?"

"Look here," answered Giles, more hotly than seemed necessary, "Jerry said he saw old Grigg's body. He must have thought he did. No one else ever found as much as a track. We don't want the Boss going on another wild goose chase. Pat says he saw this man ——"

"Steady, Farmer, mind yer stops. I did see the man." He was evidently nettled at the doubt implied.

"Well," continued Giles, "Pat saw this man. Jerry saw Grigg's body. The best thing to do is to run his tracks back and see where he got the sheep from. How do you know it's one of ours. It may be a straggler from a travelling mob."

"There's very little in your argument," said the Duke, "but I'll tell you what. I'll run the fellow's tracks back if you'll run them the other way."

Giles agreed to that at once. After breakfast Charlie took the Trevenna Well road to look for some horses, and Giles accompanied him ostensibly to see how the cattle fared north of the Range.

That evening the trio met in secret conclave again. Ross said that he ran the tracks back to Tom the Soldier's camp. That he had charged the shepherd with complicity in the theft of the sheep, but Robinson had strenuously and indignantly denied the charge. "I am positive he lied, though," said the Duke in conclusion.

Giles reported that he had tracked the traveller to the end of the Range and up to the head of the creek, where he saw the charred remains of a sheep's head and portions of a green pelt, and other evidences of a lately occupied camp. On leaving the creek he saw horse tracks going north.

Then they waited upon Mr. Jasper and each man told his separate story. The squatter listened wonderingly, but passed no comment. The next morning he verified Giles' statement by following the tracks of the unknown for about fifteen miles, nearly due north.

He also visited the Dell and Robinson's Camp, but never spoke of his investigations to any one of the trio.

Giles often pondered over the fancied resemblance of Blood to someone he knew. He taxed his memory without avail. He called to his mental vision all the likely, and a good many of the unlikely, men he could think of, but to no effect. His mind held fast to a faint impression that he had seen a face like Blood's before, but, despite his efforts, it remained but an impression.

The morning after Mr. Jasper's visit to the Dell, he sent Ross to Tilkaroo for the mail. Among the budget of letters which Mr. Jasper received was one from the Rev. M. O'Donnell. Father O'Donnell, who had known him at Ballarat, had lately been shifted to Bourke. He wrote to say that he intended visiting the outlying portions of his immense parish, and that he hoped to be at Boolaroola upon a date given, which was now in about a week's time. He wished to be remembered to Norah and McDermott, both of whom had grown up under his spiritual care.

Giles was delighted to get a letter from Mr. Halliday. He wrote a graphic account of what had happened there from the date of his return from Leopard Creek until the arrival of Sergeant O'Halloran. He concluded by eulogistic references to Redgum, Wilson, and Dick.

"And now comes the strange part of my story. These two men who so suddenly appeared when I was *in extremis*, and without whose whole-hearted assistance I should be a ruined man to-day, these two men who saved my life as well as my fortune, and to whom—especially to Dick—I feel deeply grateful—these two, I say disappeared as suddenly and as mysteriously as

they had come. 'Another of Jack's long-winded sentences I fancy I hear you say.' "

"However they did it I don't know, but they covered their tracks as completely as if they had taken their leave in chariots of fire drawn by horses of fire, instead of in good Sydney saddles on black thoroughbreds. My black boy, Denny, is a splendid tracker, almost equal to Barcoo, but he failed altogether. Then after the police came on the scene with the news that my life preservers were two of the worst scoundrels west of the Darling, they sent their boy, Tarpot, out with Denny, but with the same result."

"Oh, I was going to tell you about Denny. When I picked him up at Leopard Creek he said his name was 'Amlet, and that he was a Coomarella boy. He used to live with McCaber, but old 'Flintface too much all day big-one growl,' and when he added kicking to growling, 'Amlet gathered up his shirt and fled naked to Leopard Creek. The name 'Amlet annoyed me. I thought to dub him Prince, but it smacked too much of a farm horse, then Denmark suggested itself, which, shortened to Denny, I adopted, so Denny he is."

"When my bushranging pals arrived Dick recognised the boy, but didn't enlighten Jim, who failed to do so. Denny knew them instantly, and seemed to have a great aversion to the big dark one. By and bye, after O'Halloran came—he told me that Jim had used him cruelly at Coomarella, and that he (Denny) hated him, and would like to kill him. So much for Denny."

"This letter is being taken by Sergeant O'Halloran who intends to strike east from Leopard Creek to Peenadoora, where he will post it. You should get it in two or three weeks instead of five or six."

“ P.S.—Three men have just arrived looking for work, so I’m set up again. Two of them are picturesque looking rascals of the sundowner type, the other looks more like a Sydney or Melbourne larrikin than a bushman ; he calls himself George Monty, from the Warrego.”



In due time Father O’Donnell appeared, and was cordially welcomed to Government House. His driver came to the hut, and promptly fraternised with McDermott, whom he recognised as a brother “ savage.” It was Friday when the priest arrived, and word was sent to all the camps that Father O’Donnell would hold a meeting in the men’s hut on Saturday evening, and that Mass would be celebrated on Sunday morning.

On Friday night the priest paid a visit to the hut, and made himself very agreeable. He possessed a pleasing personality, a jocular turn of speech tinged with something more than a suspicion of brogue, and an entire freedom from hauteur on the one hand and from condescension on the other, which made him a favorite wherever he went. When he left the hut that night all hands declared their intention of attending his meeting on the morrow.

He had a long conversation with Norah, in the course of which he told her that a friend of his had been searching some titles in the Lands Office in Melbourne when he made a remarkable discovery. By a mistake he quoted the wrong number of one of the sections of which he was seeking the owner’s name. Consequently he was surprised to be told that Bernard Casey was the registered owner.

“ It was your father’s section he had had searched,”

said he in conclusion, "the title is still in his name. Ben Morgan has never had it transferred. It's queer. Perhaps it'll come back to you some day, Norah, and then it's only the Christian name will want altering."

Norah laughed. "There's little fear o' that, Father," she answered.

Then thinking of McDermott and Ross she said, "Oh, Father O'Donnell, will you talk to the men to-morrow about drink. Oh, dear me, it's an awful curse. There was a hawker here on Christmas Eve—a real bad man ; he had a lot of drink with him. Oh, it was dreadful ! I don't think there was a sober man on the run that night, except the hawker."

Early the next evening the men's hut was crowded. There was scarcely a man absent. Besides the station hands, all the fencers, well-sinkers, and dam and tank sinkers were there. The Government House party turned out in full force.

After reverently reciting two or three short prayers, of which "Our Father" was one, Father O'Donnell spoke on the subject of temperance. After an eloquent description of the results of a life of temperance and virtue, he turned to the evils of intemperance. As he spoke of the threefold curse which the sin of drunkenness was, he warmed to his subject, and in turns warned, exhorted, entreated, and finally commanded his listeners, as they valued their eternal salvation, to free themselves by the help of God, from the awful sin "which so easily beset them."

In solemn words and impassioned tones he painted the triple alliance of evil which possessed the drunkard. First he sinned against society, secondly he sinned against himself by debasing and degrading the image

of God by blotting out the divine from his nature, and lastly he sinned against his Maker, his Saviour and the Holy Spirit. He finished a stirring address by a heart-searching appeal to his hearers to live the Christian life, and by the help of God and His Spirit and the Sacraments of the Church, to shake themselves free from the shackles of sin which bound them.

He asked all Catholics who wished to partake of the Holy Communion to come with him to the House, where he would instruct and prepare them for participating in the most sacred service of the Church.

At the preparation meeting Dan Coffee, Murphy the shepherd, McDermott, and one of the tank-sinkers named Maguire, took the total abstinence pledge.

They, with Norah and Father O'Donnell, celebrated Mass in the early morning. Murphy was enabled to do so through the kindness of the Duke, who rode out to the shepherd's camp and looked after the sheep for him.

Norah's unfeigned pleasure at the decisive step which Pat had taken completely removed any doubts which he had on the subject. Strengthened by the rites of the Church and by Norah's approbation, he felt equal to facing the world in defence of his newly-adopted principles. The Duke, realising the advantage which Pat had gained, almost wished he were a Catholic too.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DICK PLAYS A LONE HAND.

Since the receipt of the last letter from Dunster Downs Giles had been debating with himself a question of conscience. Ought he to go to the help of his old mate? His heart said yes. But would it be fair to Mr. Jasper after his treatment of him? His sense of duty said no. The pleasant intimacy of Ross and McDermott and in a lesser degree, that of Norah, told heavily in favor of Boolaroola. So, longing to go, yet unwilling to leave, he preserved an activity of mind in strong contrast to his lethargy of action. A trifling incident served to turn the scale.

The three mates had often discussed the identity of the midnight marauder whom McDermott had seen on the road from Trevenna's Well. So far Giles had, on account of his promise, refrained from telling them all he knew. The time had now expired, so that one night, the conversation having turned in that direction again, he expressed his belief that the unknown sheep-stealer was Jim Blood. Challenged as to how he knew he told them the story of his visit to the Duffer's Dell, and the promise of secrecy he had given.

"That's why you were so strong on tracking the man before telling the Boss," said Charlie. "I couldn't make out why you were so hot about it. Now I see."

"What a difference a clean shave makes," said Pat, "I didn't know him."

"Yes," answered Giles, "I shouldn't have known him if he hadn't been with Dick. In fact, at first I thought

he was somebody else, but for the life of me I can't remember who."

As he spoke the long taxed recesses of his memory solved the question which had so sorely puzzled him. Jim Blood and Ben Morgan of Bungaree were one and the same. Allowing for the lapse of years the general description tallied. The scar on the chin was strongly corroborative.

"I've got it ! I've got it !" he cried, and in his excitement he commenced to execute a sandjig on the floor.

"Got what ?" cried his mates in unison, much surprised at his unwonted display of calisthenics.

"I see it ! I see it !" continued Giles.

"Sure, Farmer, dear," said McDermott soothingly, "is it green frogs or the blue devils ye've got ? Don't mind 'em, me bhoy, we're wid ye."

"What a fool I was not to have seen it before," said Giles, resuming his seat, hot and out of breath.

"Strikes me," interjected Pat, "you're a bigger fool now you have seen it. What is it at all ?"

"Why Jim Blood is Ben Morgan," he cried in triumph, "that's what it is."

"Farmer," said Pat, laughing heartily, "you've got 'em worse than I thought. Go and put your head in the trough. You'll be better then."

"What makes you think so. Giles ?" asked Charlie.

"Because of the mark on his chin which Pat told us about, besides that he had his sleeves rolled up, and I saw the letter B tattooed just above his right wrist."

McDermott stopped his merriment. A dark scowl spread over his features. "You're not stuffin' us, Giles, are you ? When I told you about the scar I'd forgotten the tattoo mark. Straight dinkum ?"

"Straight wire, Pat. Honor bright," answered his mate.

"Then why the dickens didn't you shoot the black-faced, black-hearted scoundrel on the spot," burst out McDermott angrily. "Oh, you silly fool! What a chance you missed. Were you too scared?"

Giles looked at him in astonishment. He felt overwhelmed by the impetuosity of Pat's utterance. "I didn't know it was he ——" he began.

"Didn't know!" cried the other in scorn. "When you saw the mark and the B too."

"No. I couldn't recollect, besides ——"

"Couldn't recollect! Hadn't the bloomin' pluck, you mean," interrupted McDermott, who seemed carried away with rage.

Giles' slow nature began to respond to the contagion of anger.

"You'd better case off, Pat, or we shall quarrel. You, yourself, laughed at the idea of the two men being the same, and when I suggested it, said you'd know him anywhere among a thousand, and I never knew he had any tattoo marks; you never told us that. You met the man and didn't know him. Yet you expected me to recognise him. Bah! And shoot him at sight, on a bare suspicion, which I never had. I don't want to have a row. When you're in a better temper and'll listen to reason I'll talk to you, but not before."

That night Mr. Jasper was surprised to receive a week's notice from Giles. After hearing what he proposed to do, the squatter, though sorry to lose his services, commended his action.

"Considering your motive for leaving and Mr. Halliday's urgent need of help, I don't think you need trouble

about the week, Giles," he said, "but go as soon as you can fix things up. Which way are you going?"

"Thank you, sir. Along Rungatowie to the horse-track from Peenadoora to Leopard Creek, and then along that."

The next afternoon, just after sundown, Giles started for Trevenna's Well, whence he intended the next morning to strike north across the trackless plain. His two mates were the last to bid him good-bye. They walked along with him as far as the creek. There he alighted to tighten the girth on the pack-horse.

"Good-bye Duke," he said. "Take my tip, old man, and sign the pledge. You'll be a rank outsider if you don't."

Charlie laughed. "'Tisn't always the favorite that wins, you know, Giles. Sometimes the pot boils over. Good-bye."

"Begorra!" cried Pat, "it's boilin' over I am wid pinitence for the fool I made meself last night. "Farmer," he continued, folding his arms, "Luk at me, an' if ye'd hit me fair betune the eyes I'd be obliged to ye. Sure I deserve a lambastin', so I do."

"Pat," said Giles, laughing good-humouredly, "it was the goodness of your heart and your love of fair-play—and Norah—that made you speak as you did. You're the kindest-hearted, hottest-tempered and truest mate I ever had or wish to have. We make a good trio. You're hot and quick. Charlie's cool. And I—well, I'm slow. So long, old man."

"You may be slow, Farmer," said Pat, gripping his mate's hand tight, "but dash my buttons, you get there all the same."

Giles was once more in the saddle. "So long, lads.

If I hear of Blood's whereabouts you shall know it, and we'll hunt him down together."

Amid a duet of "Good-bye," "So long," "Take care of yourself," "See you in Sydney," Giles crossed the creek. As he topped the opposite bank he looked round, waved his cabbage tree as a last farewell, and disappeared down the slope into the scrub.

The next morning, with canteens and waterbags filled, he struck out north on the great plain which stretched out several days' journey ahead of him. His intention to continue until cutting the Peenadoora horse-track was destined to a speedy alteration. About five miles from the Well he suddenly crossed a line of horse tracks. He wheeled round and looked at them, whence they had come and whither they were bent. They cut his direction of travel at an acute angle, running north-west to south-east, and seemed likely to hit the north end of the Devil's Footsteps. Dismounting, he sought the nearest shade, lit his pipe, drew various geometrical figures on the ground, and from his muttered self-communings, seemed to be wrestling with some abstruse geographical and arithmetical problem.

"I'll chance it," he said at last. "If they did it I ought to be able to." Knocking the ashes from his pipe and rinsing out his mouth with a drop of water, he mounted again, and, turning his face north-west, followed the horse tracks towards the sandhill country ahead.

About a mile further on the tracks suddenly turned to the left to a small clump of trees. There he saw tracks of two more horses which presently continued south, the others diverging again to the north-west. He thought a long time about the two fresh tracks. He

had been, and was still, following four tracks. Whence then had these others come ?

“By Jingo, I’ve got it,” he cried, and in his self-satisfaction he struck the saddle flap so hard that Warelda, fresh from her long spell, swerved so violently and so suddenly, that he was hard put to it to keep his seat and retain control of the pack-horse.

“Jerry Smith was out for his horse about that time ; he must have struck them and had a yarn. That accounts for his doubling back to the Dell. I wondered how he knew they were there.”

That night Giles had left the great plain behind, had crossed the belt of timber which fringed it, and was camped in the trough which ran between two immense sandhills. He had had no difficulty in following the tracks. They became clearer and more numerous as he neared the timber, and, just before entering the valley between the sandhills they assumed the aspect of a well-worn pad. He calculated he was fifty miles from Boolaroola Station, and that another one hundred and twenty would bring him to Dunster Downs. He gave the horses a bucket of water each, and short hobbled them on the half dry grass which grew luxuriantly on the lower slopes of the huge mounds of sand.

The next morning he started long before sunrise, and, save for an hour’s rest at midday, when the horses contented themselves with a drink and a roll in the sand, he continued travelling till dark. The weather was close and oppressive, and his horses, being unused to work for a considerable time, gave evidences of having had quite enough. They stood where he hobbled them, too tired to feed. Towards the close of the day Giles was surprised to see two fresh horse tracks on the pad he

was following. He had not noticed them coming in, and wondered where they could have come from. The hope of solving the question kept him going longer than he would otherwise have done.

After watering the horses next morning there remained just one small bag of water to last him until he reached Dunster Downs, now, he reckoned about seventy miles away. He looked long and earnestly for signs of rain. The sky was as brass. A fierce pitiless sun, untempered by the slightest breeze, beat down upon him. The huge sandhills on either side, too hot for the naked hand to touch, added their stored up heat to that coming from above. By their great height they seemed to prevent any movement in the hot still air from being felt in the valley below.

Loose burning soil beneath, walls of fire on either hand, and a fierce blaze overhead—such were the conditions under which Giles commenced his third day's journey. At starting he doubted whether the horses would reach Dunster Downs in two days. Half an hour after sunrise he was certain they could not. An hour later he doubted whether they or he would ever reach there. He was wet through with perspiration. Sorely tempted though he was, he refrained from touching the water bag, except when the sun rose, to shift it to the shady side. He walked the horses very slowly, yet the sweat poured from them in streams. He looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. Another hour of this and he would camp until the cool of the evening, and travel by night. The cool of the evening ! Why, even in the hour preceding the dawn the contents of the water bag were lukewarm. The humour of the thing struck him, and he laughed aloud.

As he ceased his laughter he was startled to hear a distinct but distant "Ha, ha, ha" apparently coming from the valley ahead of him. Could it be an echo? No, he dismissed that idea at once. Could it be a human being mocking him? That supposition seemed almost as absurd. It was not the kookaburra, of that he was certain.

He pulled up and scrutinised the country all around—on either side the eternal heaps of sand, covered with bushes and tufts of grass—ahead of him, as behind him, as far as the eye could reach, the everlasting trough, studded with saltbush and cotton bush, with an occasional quondong, sandalwood, or desert oak. As he gazed he was struck by the appearance of a large green bush growing at the bottom of the sandhill about two hundred yards ahead. As he looked a bird flitted from it to another bush. It was the first living creature, save an ant, which he had seen since leaving the plain. The sight inspired him with hope.

The horses seemed to share in his feeling, for when he started them again they travelled at a much quicker rate. Presently Warelda gave a cheerful whinny. To Giles' great astonishment an answering neigh came from behind the green bush, and the next moment a man stood forth. It was Dick Carter, of Cunnamulla.

Five minutes afterwards the horses had drunk their fill from the cool sweet water of Thorpe's Soakage, and were hobbled out for the day. Giles had also made ample amends for his previous self-denial, and was smoking the pipe of peace with Dick.

"Where on earth did you come from?" he asked. "Your tracks seemed to drop from the skies. I never saw where they commenced."

"Oh," replied the other laughing, "I'm not Dick the Angel, you know. I came across from Thorpe's new station on the Peenadoora pad. It's about seventy miles from both Leopard Creek and Halliday's place. Rocky Glen he calls it. It's a little gully on the edge of the stony country, about thirty miles from here. Thorpe discovered this soak, so it's called after him, by the few that know it."

"Where's your mate?"

"Jim? Oh, he and Jerry are mates now; they have taken a contract together. I'm playing a lone hand now, Farmer. On the strict Q.T., too. 'My brow is wet with honest sweat, I *rob* not any man,' as the poet says. I'm going to Dunster Downs for a job. I fancy Halliday will put me on."

"I'm sure he will," said Giles warmly.

Dick was very agreeable. He chanted the praises of Mr. Halliday, he told stories of his own early life, he related queer yarns he had heard about Jacky Dow of the Murrumbidgee with his everlasting "Just so, I see, I see," of Ready Money Miller, of the Tysons, when Jimmy and Johnny were cattle jobbers, and Peter kept a butcher's shop at Bendigo, of Lochie McBean, of Gideon and William Lang of the Old Man Plain, and others.

Then, by degrees, he got Giles to talk about himself, his life at Netley, his mates at Boolaroola, and, before the Wiltshire lad realised what he was doing, he had told Dick all he knew about Jim Blood's identity with Ben Morgan, and the latter's relationship with Bernard Casey and his supposed connection with his death, also of the bond between Ross, Pat, and himself to bring Blood to justice.

When he had finished there was silence for a time. Giles lit his pipe and had the uncomfortable feeling that he had been pumped. Dick smoked meditatively.

"That yarn of yours about Bungaree, Farmer," said he at last, "explains a lot that I could never make out. I'm glad you've told me. Some day it may come handy. I may be able to help."

Then he turned to song, and rendered "Far Away" with such tenderness and pathos of tone that Giles rapidly became sentimental, and was filled with thoughts of home and loved ones far away. But Dick's rollicking rendering of a drinking song soon knocked that out of him, and when the singer finished with "The Peripatetic Philosopher," he was back in the bush at once, swag on shoulder, seeking work and finding none.

At sundown they started for Dunster Downs, which Dick said was fifty miles distant. Eight hours, with an hour's rest at half time, brought them to the open country twenty miles from the station. There they watered the horses, gave them a couple of hours more rest, and rode slowly on.

The next morning Sam Wilson was restored to his position as stockman, Redgum once more betook himself to "bull punching," Carter, or, as he figured on the station books—R. Dick, was given a flock of sheep, and Giles assumed the position of rouseabout.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MONTY TURNS UP TRUMPS.

Dunster Downs was once more in good working order. Charlie Smith, the cook, had been given a mob of sheep to look after, and Monty was installed in the kitchen. The latter expressed his pleasure to see both Dick and Giles, though he had never known the latter's name till then. Notwithstanding their daily contact, Monty never alluded to the circumstances connected with their former meeting. Although Giles thought this somewhat strange, he respected the other's reticence, and carefully abstained from making any allusion to their previous acquaintance.

Heavy monsoonal rains had fallen in March and April and as a consequence all the water holes were full and feed was abundant. So far the blacks had not shown up since their wholesale migration into the back country, and, as water and game were plentiful there, their return was not anticipated. Giles, in his capacity of rouseabout, soon acquired a considerable knowledge of the country. Timber carting with Redgum, or ration carrying to the shepherds, or accompanying Mr. Halliday on his tours of inspection, or occasionally assisting Wilson with the cattle, all gave him the opportunities he desired to learn the topography and characteristics of the country.

He had been there nearly a month before he met Charlie Smith, the ex-cook. He was then sent out with the spring dray to deliver rations to Dick and Smith, whose camps were about ten and fifteen miles

respectively from the station. After leaving the former's rations at his camp, he was on the road to Smith's location when he met the erstwhile cattle duffer himself.

As they parted, Carter said, "You'll find an old friend at Smith's camp, Giles. He's a terror to talk, so don't get pitching cuffers to him, or he'll keep you going all night, and whatever you do fight shy of his damper."

After dropping Smith's rations at his tent, Giles, whose curiosity had been whetted by Dick's remarks, drove the cart in the wake of the flock to get speech with his unknown friend. As he approached he was struck by a familiarity in his general appearance, but did not recognise him until he got quite close.

For a moment he stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment, then, jumping to the ground, he ran forward, and, seizing the old man's hand, wrung it violently.

"Why, Grigg, old man, I *am* pleased to see you. Don't you know me, Farmer Giles, from Boolaroola?"

The old fellow looked at him in a dazed sort of way. "Charlie Smith's my name," he said slowly, "I don't know yer."

"Nonsense!" cried Giles, "you remember me at Jasper's station. We all thought you were dead except Charlie Ross—the Duke you know—he reckoned you'd turn up some day, in spite of Jerry Smith saying he saw your dead body. What happened to you? How'd you get here?"

The shepherd passed his hand over his brow once or twice in a troubled manner, and looked at his questioner in perplexity.

"Charlie Smith is my name," he reiterated, "I don't know yer. Ye're not a Ballarat man. I know

Ben Morgan an' Snarley Joe, an' Barney Casey, the Bungaree cocky, but who are you ? I don't know yer."

Giles, greatly excited at what he had heard, did his best to induce the old man to talk, but he merely looked at him vacantly and refused to say more. Realising at last the futility of further questioning Farmer bid him good day, and returned to the Head Station as quickly as possible.

The next mail from Dunster Downs carried two letters from Giles to Boolaroola. The one to Ross gave particulars of the trip as well as of the unexpected discovery of Grigg in the person of Charlie Smith. The other was a short note to Mr. Jasper announcing the fact of Grigg being alive, and physically well, but mentally a complete blank.

Shortly after Wilson had left with the mail Jim Blood and Jerry Smith rode up to the station and asked for work. Mr. Halliday said he had no need for them, and advised them to move on.

"If you want rations," he said, "you can have them, but I won't allow you to stay here. In consideration of your work while you were here before, Blood, I shall not report your arrival to the police, but if I hear of you're loafing about the run or making any trouble I shall arrest you myself and report afterwards."

Jim scowled. "Yer talk big, talk's easy. I'd like to see yer tryin' to do it, Boss," he said menacingly.

"That'll do, Blood !" said the squatter sharply, "I'm not McCaber of Coomarella, so I'll allow you to stay to-day and get what rations you want for the track. But don't let me see you after to-morrow morning. Mind that now. Go !"

Jim advanced a few steps in a truculent manner,

stopped for a moment irresolutely, then turned and strode to the hut in silence.

That afternoon Mr. Halliday rode out to the 10-Mile Bluff. "Look here, Dick," he said at the conclusion of a lengthy discussion, "I'll stand by you and help you all I can, but I expect a straight deal. If I find Blood hanging about I'll run him in or shoot him at sight, and then I shall have to report your presence here. I don't want to do that. I owe my life to you, and I'll do my best to save yours if you act square."

"Boss," replied Dick with a laugh, "when I'm straight I'm very very straight, but when I'm crook I'm the Devil. Just now I'm as straight as old Redgum and as stiff in the neck as Sergeant O'Halloran. I'll see that Jim and Jerry make themselves scarce. You can bet on me every time."

The Dunster Downs hut had a full muster that night. Besides Monty, Redgum, Giles, and the two travellers, Dick and one of Monty's mates arrived after tea. The evening was partly musical—partly militant. The musical portion came first. After two or three bush songs, the cook contributed one or two town ditties. Then Dick sang a bush ballad called "Gow, of Mount Gam-bee," his audience joining vociferously in the chorus, which, rising to a shout in the last line, ran as follows:—

"I've lived on beef and pigweed in the drought of '63,
I've starved on yowah and mungeroo adown the Strelee-kee,
But the hardest patch I ever struck was Gow of Mount Gam-bee.

He fed his blacks on 'roos and rats and 'Wallapabraza pflour.'
His staggy meat was lively, and his sodden damper sour.
And weevils big as bull-ants played leap-frog in the flour."

*See notes at end of chapter.

Giles felt a strange fascination in the scar on Blood's chin, and his gaze was constantly fixed upon it. So much so that at last the outlaw scowled at him fiercely and demanded, with an oath, what he was looking at.

"That mark on your chin," he answered innocently. "Did you get that in a scrap? It reminds me of Ben—Ben—confound it, whatever was the name? Anyhow, it doesn't matter; we'll call him Bungaree Ben. He had a mark just like that of yours, and the funny thing is that it was just where yours is. Ben got it in a scrap at Ballarat. The chap he was fighting with had a knuckle duster ——"

Giles stopped short and looked at Jim in well feigned astonishment. Blood had risen to his feet. He trembled violently, and tried to speak, but save an inarticulate gasp was unable to utter a sound. His usually sullen face was livid, and across it flashed varying emotions, the intensity of which for the time being deprived him of the power of speech. Surprise, rage, hate, and fear alternated and succeeded each other with confusing rapidity.

Giles looked from him to Jerry, who still remained seated. He was as white as a sheet, and had his usually shifty eyes fixed on Farmer as if fascinated. There was a wild look of fear in them, the cruel fear of a craven beast brought to bay.

A painful silence reigned in the hut for a brief space—the silence of dread expectation. The men looked from one to another wonderingly, mutely. Giles shuddered.

It was Dick's presence of mind which saved the situation. He sprang to Blood's side. "Another of your bad turns, Jim," he said. "Sit down and you'll be as right as a trivet in a moment or two."

He pushed him forcibly back to his seat. "Jim gets fits like this now an' then," he explained to the company, "but they don't last long."

Presently, as if impelled to it by an unseen force, Jerry stepped across the hut, and, without any warning, struck Farmer a violent blow which stretched him on the floor, behind the form upon which he had been seated.

That was the signal for a few minutes' pandemonium. Redgum was sitting next to Giles. With an alertness of thought and a quickness of action foreign to his usual nature, he seized Jerry by the collar and hurled him across the hut. Jim strove to rise, but Dick pinioned him with arms of steel. Monty's mate rushed at Redgum, ducked between the giant's legs and brought him to the ground. Jerry, seeing his antagonist down, threw himself upon the struggling bullocky, who now had the two on top of him. Giles rose, and, seizing Monty's mate by the collar, dragged him backwards, at the same moment that Monty himself, coming to Farmer's assistance, knocked Jerry sideways with a tremendous blow on the neck.

At that instant the door opened and Mr. Halliday entered and looked with amazed enquiry around. Redgum slowly uplifted his huge form from the floor and sat down. Smith and Monty's mate shuffled slowly to their seats. Monty stroked his moustache meditatively as if considering the problem of to-morrow's menu. Blood gave up his efforts to get free, and ceased his cursing. Giles remained standing looking rather sheepishly at the squatter.

Dick spoke. "A bit o' rough horseplay, Boss, a kind of Donnybrook Fair business, when-you-see-a-

head-hit-it kind o' thing. It's all over, sir. They're quite sane again now."

Mr. Halliday nodded and turned to the cook. "George," he said, "these two men," indicating Jim and Jerry, "leave here in the morning. Give them what rations they want, and see that they go. Giles, I want you to go to Clovelly Reach to-morrow. Denny tells me the blacks have returned to the Lower Toonalatchie. I want you to see how far they are away. You'd better camp at Clovelly to-morrow night."

Before turning in that night Monty went out for a quiet smoke, and with the idea of a yarn with the two new arrivals. As he approached their camp Jerry spoke, and he stopped.

"An' 'e such a soft lookin' bloke, too !"

"Soft !" growled Blood's deep bass, "'e was too blamed deep fer me. 'E looked so simple an' spoke so innercent 'E'll never 'ave me on a string again. I'll take my colonial oath 'e won't."

"My word, 'e's got yer reckoned up. 'Ow 'e chewed over that yarn about Ballarat."

"Chew ! I'll darned well give 'im more than 'e can chew. A lead pill in 'is bloomin' cobra 'ill stop 'is blessed yabba."

"Don't waste yer powder, Jim. Let 'im sweat. A spear's better than a bullet, an' it don't speak so loud."

"What yer givin' us ?" asked Blood, contemptuously.

"Ye're as big a fool as 'im, talkin' o' spears !"

"Let 'im rip, I tell yer," persisted Jerry, "the niggers 'ill fix 'im. I shouldn't wonder if they don't 'ave 'im to-morrer."

At this stage the pair of rascals lowered their voices,

and Monty quietly withdrew to the hut, wondering what new devilry was afoot now.

The next morning Giles started early and reached Dick's camp at the Ten-Mile Bluff before that worthy had set out to follow his sheep. He asked his visitor to stay awhile, and used all the arts and wiles of which he was such a master to prevent his departure. Under one pretence or another he kept him there until it was nearly noon. Then he persuaded him to stay until after dinner. During that meal Jim and Jerry rode up. They stopped and joined in the dinner, but ignored Giles' presence altogether. Once or twice he essayed to go, but Dick always managed to get him to defer his departure.

When the simple meal was over, Dick took Jim a little apart and spoke to him earnestly. He listened in silence, and at last gave a sullen assent.

"Come on, Farmer," said Dick, as they prepared to move off, "we're all going over to Jerry's namesake—Charlie Smith. You'd better come too." Seeing an evident intention to demur he added in a lower tone, "I want you to come particularly, Giles." Then louder he said, "Come along, sonny ; you've whips o' time to get to Clovelly Reach to-night."

Giles having yielded so often that morning, yielded once more rather unwillingly and went.

They found Charlie Smith camped under a shady myall, his sheep spread well out on the plain in front of him feeding. He must have been asleep, for he gave no sign of hearing them until they had dismounted and were but a few feet from him. Dusting his clothes as he rose, he turned and looked at his visitors.

Dick stood a pace or two behind, Giles a little to the

side, of the other two. "Good day, Charlie," said Blood gruffly.

The old man said nothing, but stared hard at Jerry. He passed his hand over his brow and rubbed his eyes, and then looked curiously at Jerry again. It was a vaguely enquiring glance he cast, not his usual vacant gaze.

Giles turned his eyes on Jerry and stared at him with astonishment. He was ghastly pale, his eyes seemed starting out of his head. His lower jaw had dropped. Great beads of sweat formed on his brow, ran together, and poured off his face. His limbs trembled. He swayed to and fro like a drunken man, and would have fallen but for his horse.

Meanwhile the old man continued staring at Jerry, and as he looked the light in his eyes gradually became brighter. A gleam of intelligence flashed across his face. He rubbed his eyes as if awaking from sleep. He looked at Giles and smiled feebly but intelligibly. Catching Jim's glance he relapsed into gloom till once more, lifting his eyes to those of Jerry, a swift glance of recognition gleamed from them.

With a great effort Smith controlled himself. "Come on Jim," he said hoarsely. "let's git. The old fool's mad." He turned to mount.

The old man had found his memory and his voice at last. "Yes, git yer cur. I know yer, Snarley Joe, the corpse robber ; an' you too, Ben Morgan."

As Grigg commenced to speak Dick stepped quietly forward and stood by Giles' side. "Shut up, you old fool," he said sharply, and turning to the others he said, "strikes me you'd better cut your stick. Show a clean pair of heels. You're both getting too well-known

in these parts. Go west for your health Jim. that's better than going east to your death. Take my tip and lie low. So long."

As they rode away Giles noticed that they had a number of blacks' spears on one of the pack horses. "A present for the niggers out back, I expect." said Dick, whose eyes had followed Giles' glance.

Carter went back to his flock, but Giles stayed another hour with Grigg hearing from him all he had to tell, which was simply his fight for life towards the end of that night when he camped near the Kotoka horse pad, and how with the last moment of consciousness he had seen his would-be murderer's face and recognised him as Jerry Smith. He remembered nothing more until he found himself strapped on his horse in company with Dick and Jim just the day before meeting Mr. Halliday.

Giles told him briefly what had happened at Boola-roola since that eventful day, and how it was he came to be at Dunster Downs.

As he was riding away the old man cried after him, "Mind yer write an' tell the Dook all about it, Farmer."

He was making his way as quickly as possible in the direction of Clovelly Reach, when, about an hour afterwards, he heard a faint "coo-ee." Pulling up he saw Denny galloping towards him at full speed.

"What name you make-a-light, Denny?"

For reply the blackboy handed him a letter saying, "Paper yabba."

It was a note from Monty warning him not to camp at Clovelly Reach or evil would come to him. "Make up your camp," the note concluded, "and when it's dark shift quietly away a few hundred yards. Please

destroy this letter. Geo. Monty. P.S.—What did I tell you when we parted on the plain?"

Giles burnt the note, bade Denny goodbye, and left.

At Clovelly he made quite a comfortable camp with bushes and grass, and half an hour after dark moved quietly away through the timber back from, and further down the creek for about a quarter of a mile.

He had scarcely spread out his rug when he heard a rustle in the darkness behind him. His heart beat violently. Blood and Smith had evidently noticed his movements and followed him. Cocking his revolver, he lay on the rug and peered anxiously into the gloom. The shelter of a little bush helped to make him feel more secure. He listened intently. A stick cracked straight in front of him. Then some leaves rustled.

His strained eyes fancied they saw the form of Blood creeping towards him. He raised the revolver, and was taking aim when Denny's low voice said, "Baal shoot, mine camp alonga you to-night," and Denny himself stepped into view.

NOTES ON "GOW OF MOUNT GAM-BEE."

PIGWEEED (*Portulaca oleracea*).—An anti-scorbutic. The young leaves are eaten raw. The older ones are used as a pot herb. The blacks grind the minute black seeds into a paste with water and cook. In the "big drought" of the sixties, many men, in the absence of other food, had to subsist largely on this plant.

YOWAH.—An edible bulb, appreciated alike by black and white. Habitat, Central Australia.

MUNYEROO (*Claytonia balonnensis*).—A plant with a sub-acid taste. Used as a vegetable, and also made—with sugar—into tarts. Seeds ground and eaten by the blacks.

"**WALLAPABRAZA PFLOUR**."—Gow, a squatter in the South-East of S.A., is said to have rationed his blacks on pollard, and explained to them that it was Valparaiso flour.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CAPTURE.

The next morning Denny accompanied Giles to the camp he had vacated the previous night. The rough bed of bush and grass upon which he had bestowed so much labor was bristling with spears. One or two were sticking in the ground in close proximity to it, and a few others were lying around in different directions. Giles realised as he looked on the scene what a narrow escape he had had, and a silent prayer of gratitude went up to the God Whose watchful providence had once more preserved his life.

Denny grinned prodigiously at the sight before him, and gathered up the spears with alacrity. Just before leaving the Head Station, Jerry Smith had visited his humpy and helped himself to the stock of weapons which the blackboy had accumulated since the flight of the Toonalatchies. It was upon Denny casually mentioning the fact to the cook that the latter had hastily dispatched him with the note.

After carefully bestowing his recovered property in the recesses of an immense hollow box-tree, Denny, instead of returning to the station, started on an expedition of his own. Westward the tracks of Blood held their way, and westward Nemesis, in the person of Denny, formerly Hamlet of Coomarella, steadily followed in their wake.

All this gave Giles considerable food for thought as he pursued his belated journey down the creek. He was away four days, and on his return reported that.

though a few natives had been at the lower waterholes of the creek, they had since departed. Then he betook himself to the kitchen.

"Here, George," he said, handing Monty the old knife which he had given him on the Peenadoora Plain, "here's your blooming dover. It's out of pawn now. You've more than cleared the slate : in fact, I'm in *your* debt now.

The cook laughed pleasantly. "Thanks, old man. If you're satisfied, I am. It's level pegging now ; let's cry quits and start afresh. Eh !"

"Good enough," answered Giles, somewhat sheepishly extending his hand, "give us a holt of your murra, Doctor." A trifle ashamed of displaying such unwonted feeling, they clasped hands for a second, and henceforth the rather ill-assorted couple were firm friends.

During the absence of Giles, Wilson returned from Leopard Creek with the inward mail.* The papers he brought contained news of an encounter between the Queensland police and two men who were supposed to be the long wanted Coomarella robbers. After a hot engagement, during which one of the troopers was badly wounded and both their horses shot, their assailants separated and disappeared in the gidyea scrub. Owing to the death of the police horses, and the isolated character of the scene of the encounter, the unwounded trooper had to go on foot a distance of thirty miles to the nearest station to procure help for his disabled mate. Having done that he started post haste for Chartaringa. It was a week after the date of the encounter before the Chartaringa police left for the scene, and a yet longer

time before the Cunnamulla and Charleville detachments came to their assistance. So far no trace of either man had yet been discovered, but numerous parties were out scouring the country. Such was the report. It was evident to those at Dunster Downs that Blood and Smith were the men alluded to.

On returning to the Head Station, Giles wrote another letter to Ross urging him and Pat to come at once. Mr. Thorpe, of Rocky Glen, who was leaving the next morning, took a number of letters for his fellow squatter, promising to post them at Peenadoora. Thus the letter to the Duke was assured a much more speedy delivery than if it had waited for the next mail via Leopard Creek.

Denny's disappearance caused Mr. Halliday considerable anxiety. At first he thought that Blood had come across him, and in a fit of passion had either killed him or had so injured him that he had not been able to get back to the station. He ventured to hint as much to Dick, who laughed at the idea.

"Oh no Boss, he's all right. Not that Jim wouldn't settle his hash if the fit took him—and he got the chance. But Denny's too fly for that. He hates Jim, but he's too scared to go near him alone. When he was Hamlet, Jim nearly choked him; now he's Denny, he's waiting to choke Jim. 'And so it will be, I can easily see, as long as the world goes round,' as the poet says."

Mr. Halliday smiled. "I'm afraid you're a fatalist and a pessimist too, Dick."

"I don't understand you," said Dick frankly, "but this I know—that what was, is, that what is, will be,

and that what isn't, ain't, and ain't likely to be. Jim was, is, and always will be, a fool. Now Denny ——," he stopped suddenly.

"What about Denny?" asked the squatter, somewhat amused at Carter's philosophy.

"If you want to know, Boss, why not put Giles on his track? There's one thing about Farmer, he won't cry a go as long as there's a shot in the locker—I mean a johnny-cake in the flour bag."

Mr. Halliday took Dick's advice, and Giles, who was despatched to track the tracker, reported at the end of a week that Denny was following the trail of the two fugitives from justice, and intended to stay out until they reached their destination.

"Which way were they going, Giles?"

"At first due west, then along a kind of blind creek running north. When I left Denny the tracks were going about nor-west."

Dunster Downs was not far from the Queensland boundary, which was somewhere—no one exactly knew where—between it and Leopard Creek. Consequently when one evening three Queensland police troopers made their appearance it occasioned no surprise. Hoping for Denny's speedy return, Mr. Halliday pressed them to stay for a couple of days and give their horses the rest they needed. The following afternoon Sergeant O'Halloran and two troopers arrived, having journeyed from Bourke via Peenadoora and Rocky Glen stations. The next day was spent in a council of war. Ways and means were discussed, possible and impossible contingencies were provided for, theories propounded and contemned, and plans for concerted action adopted.

The next morning Denny arrived, and, after being

filled to repletion, and thereby being made comfortably uncomfortable, he coiled up in his gunyah and went to sleep.

To the disgust of Sergeants O'Halloran and Radford, Mr. Halliday would not allow the boy to be disturbed. He made the most of the liberty allowed him. Surely never blackfellow slept so long or so soundly as Denny! So at least thought the police. Knowing the errand, Denny had been engaged in, and anticipating something definite as the result, they fumed and fretted at their enforced inaction. Six officers of the Crown to sit idly by, waiting the pleasure of a sleeping blackfellow! They chafed under the indignity. But they knew Mr. Halliday too well, and Sergeant Radford at least, understood the aboriginal temperament too well, to allow them to think for a moment of defying the interdict. So Denny slept until in the fulness of time even he could sleep no longer, and woke up.

Denny's information, supplemented by Giles' narrative and illustrated by a rough plan compiled from both, led to the conclusion that the little lake which the black-boy mentioned as being the refuge of Jim and Smith, must be near or in South Australia. As the boundary line was not defined, the police determined to act together in the matter of arrest, and then deport their prisoners into Queensland, where Sergeant Radford would formally re-arrest them.

The next morning the police party, consisting of the six officers and their trackers—Tarpot and Quandong—with Mr. Halliday and Denny, set out across the Toonalatchie, steering a course N.N.W. from the station.

With the departure of the police, Dick Carter seemed to lose his natural gaiety of spirits. He stuck to his post at the Ten-Mile Bluff, but his heart was at the little lake among the sandhills. The thought of his old mate being trapped, and of him being aware of the proposed trapping and taking no steps to avert it, galled his spirit. Nothing but the conviction of his utter impotence to effect any good—through being too late—prevented him from the mad enterprise of an attempt at rescue.

The police party were getting impatient. They had left the open country behind them long ago. They had passed the dangerous cracked land with its huge fissures of black soil, and its patches of coarse rank grass level with the pommels of their saddles. They had crossed the stony tableland where "gibbers" varying in size from a bullet to a bullock, were strewn in such prodigal profusion that oftentimes it was impossible to pass, and considerable detours were rendered unavoidable.

For two days now they had been ploughing their way fetlock deep through loose sand or leading their horses up and down the slopes of sandhills scarcely any harder. They were beginning to doubt the good faith of their guide. Three days ago he had said to-morrow. Now he said to-day. The outlook was not promising. Nothing could be seen from one sand ridge but another, the exact counterpart—it seemed to them—of every one they had passed. Leading their horses, they toiled on. At noon Denny, who was leading, suddenly stopped and made frantic gestures to those behind. They halted, preserving, according to previous instructions, a complete silence. The two

sergeants and Mr. Halliday hurried forward. The blackfellow was at the foot of the next ridge. He told them in low, excited tones that the lake was just over the sandhill, and that the white men were there ; he could hear them. The officers listened with painful intensity, scarcely venturing to breathe. They heard nothing. Then they very cautiously ascended the hill, and, lying prone, peered over the top.

Before them lay a fine champaign stretching across to another line of sandhills some miles away. Below them, nestling in the centre of an area of park-like country, was a beautiful lake. The land, for some distance back from the water, was covered with verdure. Immediately in front of them were the men they sought, camped in a little clump of trees between two of which they had constructed a rough wurley. They had evidently just dined, for the appetising odour of grilled meat tickled the nostrils and tantalised the stomachs of the watchers. Both men were reclining in the shade afforded by the gunyah, smoking. Their horses were quietly grazing on the green feed about one hundred yards from them.

In low tones the Sergeants settled the plan of attack. The horses were tied to some trees on the flat. Five minutes afterwards two parties crossed the hill on foot about two hundred yards apart and turned direct for the camp. They descended the sandhill, unnoticed.

Serenely ignorant of danger, Jim and Jerry smoked on, dreamily gazing on the placid lake in front of them. Suddenly one of the police horses from behind the sandhill neighed. Jim sprang around, saw the advancing troopers, drew his revolver and jumped behind a tree. The police halted. Sergeant Radford called

upon the two fugitives in the Queen's name to surrender. Blood's reply was an oath followed by a well aimed shot at his old antagonist, Sergeant O'Halloran. It struck the peak of his cap, and, dislodging it, left him bare-headed with the blood trickling down his face.

A confused volley from the police whistled harmlessly through the timber. Jim's next shot, aimed at a pale-faced, boyish-looking trooper, was so close that he involuntarily ducked and felt his head. Then he jumped to cover and advanced cautiously by a flank movement. Jim noticed his tactics and called upon Jerry to watch him. Getting no reply he turned to look at his mate. As he did so the trooper ran forward another ten yards.

At the first alarm Jerry, from the vantage post of a hollow dwarf gum, had opened fire on the members of Radford's force. His aim was bad, and they, dodging from tree to tree, escaped injury and reserved their fire until they had gradually outflanked him, and the tree no longer afforded much shelter. By this time he had emptied his revolvers. The police bullets began to rattle around him. Some of them knocked off patches of bark, some buried themselves in the wood, others knocked up little spiffs of dust about his feet. He sought further shelter, and when Jim looked round he was huddled together in the blackened hollow of the tree partially hidden from view.

"Git up, yer cur," hissed Jim ; " git up, or I'll blow yer 'ead in."

" I—I—I can't," shivered Jerry, " Oh," he said, and cowered still more as a bullet knocked some charcoal in his face.

Jim turned on the police. They were preparing for

a rush. The white-faced trooper was not thirty yards from him. They sighted and fired simultaneously. Both staggered back hit. The other police rushed in. Jerry threw up his arms crying, "I surrender. I surrender."

Blood heard the words. With a cry of rage and pain he twisted himself round and fired his last bullet point blank at his shrieking mate. It struck him in the arm as he lay in a helpless heap.

"Coward ! Cur ! Dog !" muttered Jim, a moment later, raising his hand-cuffed wrists to strike him.

When the firing ceased. Denny ran forward and grinned his delight in the face of the now impotent ruffian.

"You bin kick'um me, you bin catch 'um alonga t'roat at Coomarella long-time. Now you go longa Warrego an' big pfella pleeseman hang you longa rope." The most satisfied person in that camp was Denny.

Leaving the police to make their way towards Chartaringa by easy stages, Mr. Halliday and his boy hastened back to Dunster Downs, where Ross and McDermott arrived the same day. They were thoroughly knocked up, having walked from Rocky Glen. In their impatience to reach the station they had over-ridden their horses, and had to pay the penalty in stiffened limbs and blistered feet.

Giles welcomed them heartily. "I'm glad you've come," he said, "but you're too late to join in the hunt. The Boss has just returned from no-man's land. They collared Jim and Jerry some days ago. Jim put up a fight, but Jerry collapsed like a house o' cards."

"Hard luck !" exclaimed the Duke. "All our padding the hoof for nothing. Not even in at the kill. It's too jolly bad."

"Never mind, Charlie, keep your spirits up. You've a chance of seeing him hanged."

"Spirits, Giles," said Ross laughing, "as Touchstone says, 'I care not for my spirits if my legs were not weary.' I'm that done up I wouldn't go fifty yards to see the Queen, let alone Blood."

"Bedad, then, I would," said Pat, "I'd go barefoot to see the spalpeen swingin'."

The next day Mr. Halliday gave them work on the run.

"Giles," said the squatter some days after, "I've bought a mob of five thousand Paroo ewes to be delivered at Chartaringa in two or three weeks' time. I want you to go and take delivery of them, and, after they're shorn at Chartaringa Station, to travel them up. I've arranged for the shearing."

Three days afterwards Giles, Pat, Charlie, and Dick Carter left for Chartaringa with a packhorse turnout, to meet the sheep from the Paroo. Dick was no longer the smart, well set-up, nattily dressed, full-bearded stockman of yore. He was now the Doctor, in which capacity he wore blue dungarees, blucher boots, a striped cotton shirt, a patched coat, and a greasy felt hat, with a torn blue fly net hanging from its edges. His face was shaven save the upper lip. He shaved once a week, so that he generally presented a stubbly appearance.

On the road down Dick propounded a scheme to Giles which fairly took his breath away. It was this. If Giles and his mates would assist in effecting the escape of Blood from the Chartaringa gaol, he, Dick, would guarantee to hand over to them an order signed by Ben Morgan authorising the manager of the National

Bank at Ballarat to deliver to the bearer the deeds of his property at Bungaree known as "Ennis Vale."

"Je-hosh-a-phat !" exclaimed Giles when he recovered his power of speech. Then he burst into laughter. "Ha, ha, ha ! Break the gaol ! Oh, oh, oh ! Storm the Bastille ! 'Pon my word, you're the funniest man I've met ; a real bush Don Quixote. Ha, ha, ha. Besides," he added, suddenly becoming serious, "of what use would the deeds be—in Morgan's name ?"

"They're still in Casey's name," said Dick. "The old cocky refused to sign the transfer. That's what the row was about. Jim told me all about it when he gave me the order. Here it is."

Giles looked at it curiously. It was signed by Ben Morgan, the signature being attested by John Halliday, J.P., and Samuel Wilson, both of Dunster Downs, N.S.W.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RESCUE.

During the journey to Chartaringa Carter's wild proposition occupied much of Giles' thoughts. He considered it so often and so long that by insensible degrees his mind became habituated to the idea. The sense of lawlessness which he at first associated with it gradually faded away. Ceasing to oppose it on moral grounds, he began to question the practicability of the project. Having reached that stage, Dick's arguments and plans soon brought him to accept it as feasible.

Having arrived at that conclusion he promptly broached the subject to his mates. At first both of them declined to consider the matter as anything but a huge joke. When at last Giles' strenuous seriousness convinced them that he was in earnest, Pat relapsed into silence, but the Duke took up an attitude of determined opposition. He pointed out that gaol-breaking was a criminal offence. He enlarged upon the risks they would incur and their almost certain detection and failure. The moral issue failing to affect Giles and the fear of failure being treated as pure imagination, Ross took another line. He emphasised the folly of the project.

"Dash it all, Farmer," he said, "suppose we get the man out he can't get away. He'd be jugged again in twenty-four hours. Where should we be then? Do you think Morgan would consider us? Not much! He'd blab, just for spite. No, Farmer, it's a crime to

start with, it's folly to think of getting the man out, but it's perfectly idiotic to imagine, even if we freed the brute, that he wouldn't be copped again in a day or two."

But the Duke's arguments failed to convince Giles. He had made up his mind that the scheme would succeed, and refused to be turned from the purpose. The warmer Ross waxed and the weightier the arguments he advanced, the more stubborn became Giles. At last he expressed his determination to go on with the affair even if he had to do it single-handed.

"I'm with you, Farmer," said McDermott, who had hitherto remained silent. He spoke very seriously. "It means a couple of stretch if we're caught, but—I'll chance it."

Charlie laughed. "You're a pretty pair of fools! As mad as they make 'em. Ten to one you're jugged; but jug one, jug the three; I can't stand out. I'll have to be in it, if only to try and keep you two greenhorns out of trouble."

On arriving at Chartaringa they fixed their camp on the banks of the river, not far from, and at the back of, the police station.

The town was full of drovers, shearers, and rouseabouts. Some of the earlier sheds had already cut out and cheque men were numerous. The "lambing-down" process was going on merrily. Liquor was flowing freely at a shilling a nobbler. The four hotels were filled to overflowing. Perspiring barmen were supplying all and sundry without question. Several cheques had "crossed the bar" and had to be liquidated as speedily as possible. The affable proprietors kept tally.

The day following their arrival, Sergeant Radford's

appearance with his two prisoners created considerable stir in the neighbourhood. The inhabitants felt that at last Chartaringa had come to its own. That two bushrangers should be lodged in their gaol, cast a glory upon the town, gleams of which were reflected upon them. On the morrow they were to appear at the police court. So the morrow was made a gala day. The surrounding stations poured in their contingents over night, stragglers arrived in the morning.

Early, very early, they began to be merry. The only break in their jollification was during the short trial of their distinguished visitors. Ben Morgan, alias James Black, alias James Blood, and Joseph Smith, alias Jeremiah Smith, alias Snarley Joe. were promptly committed for trial on the charge of shooting with intent.

The court house disgorged its packed mass of interested sympathetic humanity, into the hot dusty street. The heroes of the occasion were transferred to cooler quarters and honored by separate cells. The next day they were to be removed under escort to the scene of their future trial. Sergeant Radford, accepting the hospitality of Glen Bower Station, left to spend the night there. Dick and the three chums went back to their camp.

For awhile they sat and smoked in silence. each man pondering over the next act in the drama. Now that it was so near, Giles and Pat realised its seriousness. The Duke was hoping that even now one of them would suggest the abandonment of the project. As a matter of fact, both Farmer and McDermott were wavering. Each was waiting for the other or the Duke to broach the subject.

Dick turned the current of their thoughts awry and braced them up to action by breaking into song—

“The emu on the flat,
The engaging little rat,
And the 'possum in the old gum tree;
The sleeping lizard lying still,
And the wallaby on the hill—
Oh! they've all got a mate but me.”

His laughing face became suddenly grave as he sang the last line.

“Poor old Jim!” he said, with a break in his voice. He was either genuinely affected or was a most consummate actor, for, as he abruptly turned his head away, the three mates all noticed the moisture glistening in his eyes. The crisis was past. Dick had won!

Late that afternoon Giles took delivery of Mr. Halliday's sheep, which he yarded at the camp and prepared for an early start in the morning.

All that long remembered day Chartaringa was wound up to concert pitch. Jim and Jerry were well known to a number of the bushmen. A larger number still professed an apocryphal acquaintance with them. Their doings and misdoings were remembered with advantages that day. Men who had never had a civil word for them while they were at liberty, were now bubbling over with admiration of their conduct. The fact of their being laid by the heels was sufficient to evoke general sympathy for them.

Dick, thoroughly disguised by his week's growth of beard, his dilapidated felt hat, his greasy cotton shirt, his loosely belted moles, and string-tied bluchers, moved freely about the township. Though his friends there, were many and his acquaintances more, yet none recognised him, save those few to whom he made him-

self known. One of the publicans was an old mate of his, and to him Dick talked in private for a considerable time. Towards sundown Dick returned to camp. As he passed the last hotel, two men rode out of the yard and asked to be put on the Coomarella track.

"Thanks mate," said one of them on parting. "this shop's too bloomin' sudden for us. You fellows are making the pace a cracker all right. So long."

The meal in the drover's camp that night was a silent one. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Dick, usually bubbling over with song and story, moved about with unusual quietness. Giles slowly munched a morsel of damper and gazed across the creek with a vacant far-away look. Charlie contented himself with a drink of tea only. A meditative smoke completed his meal. Pat watched the other two in nervous silence. He ate nothing but frequently moistened his lips at the pannikin. His unwonted silence would have been painful if the others had noticed it. At last Giles mechanically reached for the billy. Finding its lukewarm contents to be strongly bitter, he viciously kicked it across the fireplace. Even then Pat refrained from chaffing him.

"Look here, Dick," said the Duke at last, with startling suddenness. "How came you to get that order from Jim?"

Dick smiled, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and took a seat on the tucker box. The others looked at him expectantly.

"It was like this," he said. "When the Boss here," indicating Giles, "camped with me at Thorpe's Soakage he told me all about that Bungaree business. I'd never known it before. He told me of the vows you

fellows had taken to run Morgan down and land him in the lock-up. Now Morgan, or Jim Blood, as I knew him, was my mate. He's an awful fool, and—and not exactly the clean potato. He'd put you three where the weather wouldn't trouble as soon as he'd eat his dinner ; in fact, sooner. Oh, he loves you lot, especially Farmer !”

He smiled grimly, and looked at Giles as he stopped. There was such a wealth of meaning in his eyes that the Wiltshire lad involuntarily shivered as he looked into them.

“Don't worry about us,” said Ross, rather sharply, “we can look after ourselves. Go on with the yarn.”

“What I was going to say,” resumed Dick, “was, that bad as Jim is, he was my mate, and had got me out of one or two tight places. My motto—as you know, Giles—is, ‘One good turn deserves another.’ So when he came to Halliday's with Smith, I had a long yarn with him. After that rough and tumble in the hut, I persuaded him that his liberty, perhaps his life, depended upon squaring you fellows. After he had given me that order I felt safe.”

He stopped and looked queerly at Giles. “Farmer,” he said, “did you ever wonder why I kept you so long at the Ten-Mile Bluff the next day ? I'll tell you. I was afraid to let you go. I was in your debt.”

“In my debt ! Get out !” cried the astonished Giles. “I never lent you anything.”

“Oh, yes you did,” retorted he. “Dick Carter of Cunnamulla has a better memory than Farmer Giles of Netley. You gave me your silence. You lent me your word of honor for one calendar month. I redeemed that loan at the Ten-Mile.”

"I'm bothered if I know what you mean," exclaimed the other rather irritably. "Why don't you talk plain English." The whole affair was beginning to jar on his nerves.

"In plain English then ; if I hadn't kept you with me, you—you," he hesitated, "your mother would now be in mourning."

He rose suddenly. There was a baleful look in his eyes.

"Don't ask any questions, and forget what I've said." He spoke as one commanding obedience.

He paced up and down for a minute or two and then resumed his seat and story together.

"As I was saying, with Jim's order in my pocket I felt safe, for I had you fellows nobbled in anticipation, but I fell in. I'd forgotten the blackfellow. When I heard that Denny had vamoosed the ranch I knew the game was up. Then the rescue idea struck me. You know the rest."

There was silence for a brief space. McDermott and Giles instinctively looked at Ross and waited.

"Carter," said Charlie quietly, "we'll carry out our contract, but we must be paid in advance. No, Dick," he put up his hand warningly, "you've had your say, it's my innings now. I'm going to speak plain. You're as big a scoundrel as Morgan. You're worse, in fact, because you're clever and he's a fool. It's no use saying one thing and meaning another. We must have that order before we leave this camp to-night. I wouldn't trust you, Dick. Your word isn't worth that," and he snapped his fingers in the air.

Dick sprang to his feet. Once more Giles saw that hard, cruel look which had so staggered him at the

Duffer's Dell. The Duke rose also, and the two men, so alike in some respects, so dissimilar in others, faced each other.

"You've got the bulge on me, Charlie, and you know it, or you wouldn't dare to talk like that. No, I'll take that back, you're no coward. I'm the cur to take your tongue slanging so quietly. If you hadn't got me under the whip, if my old mate wasn't in that cursed gaol, I'd shoot you where you stand."

"I quite believe you, Dick," said the Duke smiling. "but I'm top sawyer just now. We've got to look after number one. We're taking risks enough, but we're not going to risk that order. What is it to be?"

There was a moment's suspense. Then Dick produced the order and handed it to Giles. "Here you are, Farmer," he said. "I'm a poor, simple, confiding fellow. I'll trust you."

"'Needs must when the devil drives,'" muttered Pat below his breath.

At the *Stockman's Rest*, kept by Dick's old friend, Burchett, the police troopers were comfortably installed in a private parlor, whence—unseen themselves—they had a clear view of the bar. Into this little room the drovers entered.

"By Jove! We've struck it," said Giles. "The quietest spot in the township."

"Bar one," said Trooper Hedley.

"If there's a quieter crib than this, I'd like to be in it. Where is it?"

"The gaol," said Hedley, laughing. "Thank your stars that—like the man who fell out of the balloon—you're *not* in it."

"Faith, Giles, ye're in for drinks if ye're not in for

ye're deserts. Ante up now, an' look pleasant." said Pat.

A general conversation between the police and the drovers ensued. The only item which had any interest for Dick was the statement that it was a good job for Greave that he was on duty at the lock-up and not in the township.

"He's a fine fellow," said Hedley, "but a true believer in the bottle. If he were here to-night he'd be paralytic in less than an hour. It's an awful pity."

"Sure, I expect he grieves that he isn't here," said McDermott.

"Pat, you're fined seven drinks without the option," said the Duke, ringing the bell.

Immediately after that round Dick left the room and had a few moments conversation with the publican.

Shortly after the payment of Pat's fine for punning, the trooper at the gaol was surprised and pleased to receive a bottle of battle-axe brandy from his mates at the hotel. At least the blackfellow that brought it said it was from them. He put the bottle away and with heroic resolution went quietly round the cells to make sure that all was in order. Having satisfied his conscience in that respect, he broached the liquor and drank to the good fellowship of the force. Then he toasted the Sergeant for being away, and the owner of Glen Bower for keeping him away. Finally, with a half tipsy sense of his responsibility, he secreted the keys of the cells in an old tobacco tin, and pledged himself in a bumper.

About the time that Greave had finished his round of inspection the three mates met at the back of the gaol at a spot previously indicated by Dick. There

they found two short steel crowbars, a saw, and a pick and shovel. The bars and pick had been lately sharpened. They stood and looked at the tools in silence for a moment, and then looked at each other. Pat was the first to move, picking up one of the bars and muttering something very like a curse, he cautiously struck the wall of the gaol.

There was no building stone within hundreds of miles of Chartaringa, consequently the police station was built of huge sun-dried bricks. The walls were between two and three feet thick, and strengthened on the inside by perpendicular slabs of pine about three or four inches apart.

It was a clear starlight night. The atmosphere was so still that the slightest sound recorded itself with startling clearness. To the three men at the back of the gaol, it seemed an exaggerated clearness. Though the July day had been warm, there was a cold nip about the July night.

They plied their tools carefully and as noiselessly as possible. Having once obtained a face to work upon they rapidly enlarged it. Their nerves were highly strung, and they spoke with bated breath. Their sense of hearing seemed abnormally acute. All kinds of unfamiliar sounds smote their listening ears.

Despite the temperature the perspiration dropped from their foreheads in great beads. Yet the whirring wings of a nocturnal bird, the sudden splash of a falling twig in the creek, or the unexpected snap of a gum branch, made them shiver. The only grateful sounds that reached them were the echoes of Trooper Greave's tipsy singing, and the continuous babel of confused

revelry and wrath which was wafted from the distant hotels.

Dick was on guard two hundred yards or so up the creek towards the township, and—though they knew it not—one of his old mates was in the other direction. Once he came to them, heralding his approach by the cry of the kookaburra, followed by the bleat of a lamb.

“Greave is grieving no longer,” he said.

“He’ll wish he was in his grave to-morrow,” responded Pat.

“So he ought,” chuckled Dick, “he’s dead to the world already.”

They had penetrated to the pine lining when Dick returned again with the news that Greave was fast asleep in a drunken stupor. A few minutes work sufficed to force the ant-eaten slabs apart. Having done that, the three mates returned to their camp. They had finished their contract. Dick had arranged for the rest.

Ten minutes afterwards Morgan and Smith, newly clad and mounted on police horses, rode away in different directions. Smith was ignorant of the means adopted for his escape. Morgan guessed but held his peace.

Half an hour afterwards Dick was playing euchre with the three troopers at the *Stockman’s Rest*, Giles and Pat mingled with the crowd in the *Chartaringa Hotel*, while Charlie fraternised with the barman at the *Royal*.

It was broad daylight before the troopers had slept off the effects of Burchett’s drugged beer. At the station they found Greave still asleep. The empty bottle told its own tale. A few minutes investigation

showed that not only were their prisoners gone, but all the police horses also.

Hedley had just returned from the township with the news that two men had been seen the night before galloping away on the Coomarella road, when Sergeant Radford arrived. Almost his first thought was of tracks. Unfortunately for him the Dunster Downs sheep had obliterated all tracks, between the gaol and the creek. When questioned on the matter, Giles explained that the sheep had been liberated at daylight, and had made along the creek northward. Being brought back by the dogs, they had kept nearer the back of the gaol. Which was perfectly true.

The Sergeant was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet. Within an hour he and his two men on hired horses were speeding along the Coomarella road. Within the third day they were back, the Sergeant furious at the loss of time, the men half mutinous for want of rest, and the horses knocked up.

Meanwhile—Giles having engaged some more men—the Dunster Downs sheep were making satisfactory progress towards their new home.

EPILOGUE.

It was a frosty night in midwinter. The Bungaree hilltops, clad in their mantle of snow, shone resplendent in the moonlight. Outside, the shea-oaks shivered and moaned in the keen biting wind. Inside, the new dining room at Ennis Vale was aglow. A cheerful wood fire crackled and sparkled on the capacious hearth. Seated in front of it were Mr. and Mrs. McDermott and Charlie Ross, who had that evening arrived from Boola-roola. Asleep in his cradle close at hand lay the baby.

"Oh, Charlie, we *are* glad to see you," said Norah for the fifth time in half an hour. "Now that you've refreshed the inner and warmed the outer man, we expect to hear all the news."

"That's rather a large order," laughed the Duke, "but I'll do my best."

"First of all," interrupted Norah, "what has become of dear old Giles? I've never seen him since the night he so dramatically produced the order for the deeds. Poor Giles. I believe he'd learnt a nice little speech by heart, but at the moment he wanted it, it went from him. I'll never forget it. He stammered and blushed, started to speak, and stopped two or three times, and finally handed me the precious document in silence. Before I'd time to look at it, he took my hand. 'Good-bye, Norah,' he said, 'I'm off to Dunster Downs in the morning.'"

"Go on, Mavourneen," said her husband smiling, "finish the story."

"Well," continued Norah, blushing very prettily, "the foolish boy threw his arms around me, kissed me three times, and was gone before I'd time to speak. I've never seen him since. And I've never been able to find out how or where he got that order from Morgan."

"The whole thing's very mysterious," said the Duke solemnly, "don't you think so, Pat?"

"Begorra, I do that same."

"And then," continued Norah, "when you two came back to Boolaroola I thought you'd be sure to throw some light on it, but you didn't!"

"Didn't," echoed Pat, winking surreptitiously at Charlie, "how could we? Sure Farmer Giles had us beat. We thought he was slow. Bedad, he fairly tuk me breath away wid his swiftness. He had us following him like pet lambs. Then all to oncet he rides off to Boolaroola, kisses me wife that was to be, an' comes back an' says, says he, 'Mr. Jasper wants you an' the Duke, you'd better go,' so we went."

"Where is he now?" asked Norah.

"He's droving with Halliday," answered Charlie. "The last two years' drought finished the work the niggers began. Halliday left Dunster Downs penniless. He's droving by contract now and doing well at it. Hopes to be married next year. The last I heard of him he was travelling down the Strelecki with a big mob of Queensland cattle. Giles and Sam Wilson are with him yet. They've never left him."

"What became of Dick Carter?"

"He got clear away. He told Giles he was going to turn croweater, and get a job in South Aus. He'd better luck than his mate Black Jim."

"Don't you think he had something to do with

Morgan's escape from Chartaringa gaol?" asked Pat gravely.

"I'm sure he had. Anyway, it didn't do Jim much good. Radford had him again within a month. They gave him a long drop at Brisbane, and the doctor said death was instantaneous. Jerry will be out at Christmas. Poor old Grigg died in earnest the second time. Tried the short cut to Boolaroola. Missed Thorpe's Soakage—got in the wrong valley—and pegged out. Jasper's making his fortune fast. Good wells all over Rungatowie, and half the country fenced. My little lassie is down here at boarding school somewhere."

At this moment Master McDermott awoke and directed attention to himself.

"Isn't he a beauty? What legs he's got. Look at his arms."

"What d'you call the kinchin?" asked Charlie.

"I call him 'Union Jack,'" said Pat.

"How's that? Why?"

"Because he's named after an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotchman. 'Twas his mother did it. Sure I hadn't a say in it at all, at all. So I call him 'Union Jack' or 'Jack' for short."

"Now Pat, don't be foolish," said Norah, blushing for the second time. "Good night, Charlie, I must put baby to bed."

"What is the kiddie's name?"

"Giles—Ross—McDermott," said Pat.

"Poor—little—kiddie!" said Charlie.

The End.

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