

WYTHA

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HODDER & STOUGHTON



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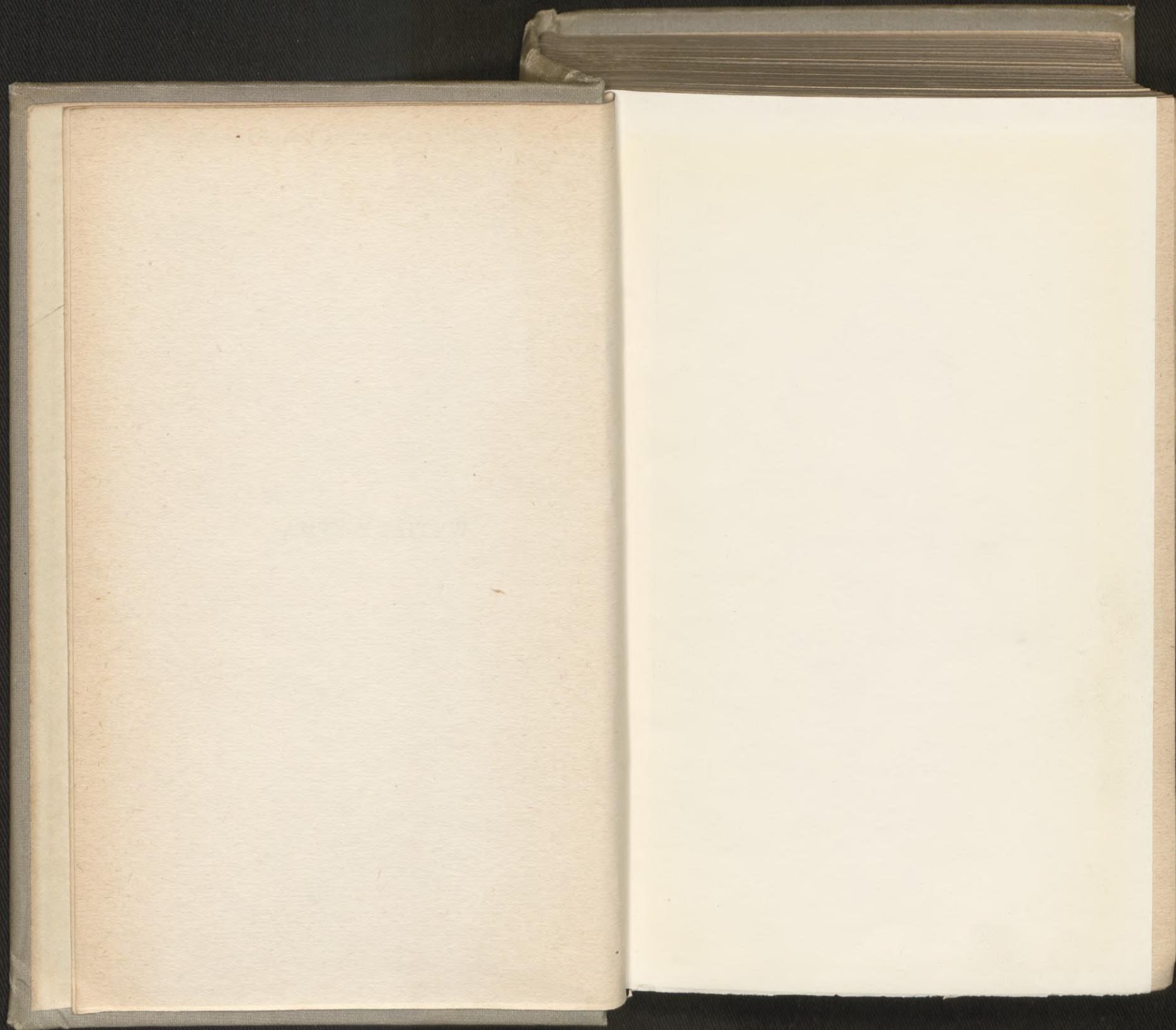


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WYTHA WYTHA





Frontispiece.

The Gully Mine.

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*Wytha Wytha.*

# WYTHA WYTHA

A TALE OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE

BY

H. N. B.

BAKER

LONDON

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

27 PATERNOSTER ROW

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## PREFACE

**I**N the following pages the writer's chief aim has been to delineate present day bush life in an auriferous district of Australia.

The bush-ranging period of our history is now of the past; comforts and conveniences of European civilisation have superseded damper and billy-can tea; the Australian settler in the sun-chequered, shadowy bush, lives much as do his fellow subjects in any part of the world; influenced, of course, by the different circumstances of his newer surroundings.

Our foremost Australian novelist's powerfully realistic portraiture of that earlier period has familiarised the public with its stirring adventures, its risks, and privations, so that Australian bush life and bush-ranging are, with many, almost synonymous.

We do not wish our present more settled conditions to become associated in the minds of our kinsmen across the sea, with highly imaginative bush organisations and a corresponding lowering of the social tone.

Through their home literature, the varied aspects of country life in Canada and the United States are widely known. We are not a literary people—

## PREFACE

though perhaps it is early to pronounce judgment, which future developments may reverse.

The fundamental oneness of the English speaking people within the Empire has recently been much emphasised; it may therefore be hoped that a picture of home life on our side will be of some interest.

H. N. B.

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## CHAPTER I

THE ROSE COLOURED SPECTACLES OF EARLY  
DAYS

"AN ideal life, indeed! Look here, Lyndon, you don't half appreciate your luck. A sheikh of the primitive East with the comforts of the modern West! A son of the desert with the culture of the European gentleman! A very centaur of antiquity galloping across your run! A nineteenth century easy chair politician, reading the daily journals at home!"

"Stop that Pegasus, Hugh; the eye sees what it will see. You always had a knack of projecting yourself into your surroundings."

"I came here with no particular wish to see anything except Cousin May and yourself," said Hugh Wylie, "though having, like most people, my own ideal of the conditions that go to make up an enviable life, I recognise them when I see them."

"I'm satisfied," Mr Lyndon replied. "All the same you should be philosopher enough to know that a man's environment is not the most important factor in his estimate of happiness. May and I would have been as happy had we settled elsewhere; or, better still, been able to stay quietly in our old home."

"Oh! I didn't venture on the domestic side of the question," said Wylie lightly. "I grant you any universal application of one's own superlative is unphilosophical; it's very natural though—a juxtaposition not uncommon, hey? Philosophy and Nature don't run well in harness nowadays."

"Ah, well, I find that experience generally suggests the 'But' and the 'If,'" Lyndon remarked, "and philosophy, you know, Hugh, should rest on experience."

"In spite of experience and in spite of philosophy I will maintain that your life—as a prosperous squatter—is really an idyllic one," cried Hugh Wylie.

"My dear fellow, you've been reading your Virgil during the voyage out. Preparation probably for our bush life, but I assure you the pastoral ideal is going out of fashion, even here. Our conditions are gradually changing; though (geographically) outside the modern vortex, we don't escape its influence."

"No doubt bush life will be levelled and smoothed after the ubiquitous modern fashion," Mr Wylie remarked. "Advance Australia is your motto I observe; it smacks of the period."

"It's a good motto," said Lyndon. "Advance we must; there's no standing still in these times. Industrial enterprise is Australia's life blood, energetic progress its vivifying oxygen."

"Talk of oxygen," cried Wylie, expanding his broad chest and inhaling a mighty draught of the crisp mountain air, as the two men drew rein on the summit of a round topped, grassy hill. "Oxygen indeed. What a light, dry atmosphere. Lucky

fellow, you, Lyndon, carrying on your occupation in this pure air, working with Nature—utilising her silent solitudes, stocking her with pastures. Your counting-house the living world, your investments the wool on your sheep's back."

"The investments are not always profitable, let me tell you, Wylie," interjected his companion.

But Hugh took no notice. "If you want change," he continued, "there's your trip to town—exciting wool sales—Cup day—club gossip—old acquaintances. Then the interest of observing, on your return, how the live stock have fattened and the paddocks improved."

"There's another side to the picture," said Lyndon, grimly; "there are such things as bad seasons, when the stock don't fatten, nor the paddocks improve. Well, as I said before, I'm satisfied, though I don't wear your rose tinted glasses, and though I already see signs of a change in affairs for the squatter."

Hugh Wylie pursed up his lips. "Ah! you object to the name," continued the other. "Well, settler if you like. The pleasant conditions will last our time, I think, so I hope you will cast in your lot with us. The society of such an old friend will go far to bring our life up to your idea of it."

George Lyndon laid his hand, as he spoke, on the other's saddle, a look of affection coming into his eyes. Wylie responded warmly. "Home never seemed home after you and May left," he said, "if Gorong comes into the market, as you think likely, I'll realise my little pile, buy it, and become your neighbour."

The two men had been school mates and companions in youth, and when George Lyndon married Wylie's charming cousin, May, Hugh did his duty manfully as best man and bridegroom's friend, albeit there was a sore place in his heart, which had not been entirely proof against the fascinations of the fair bride.

Very soon after the Lyndons emigrated to Victoria, which at that period offered a promising sphere for a young man with moderate means; so Lyndon made the supreme effort which astonished his many friends, gathered together all he had, and went forth to make a home, perchance a fortune, in the Eldorado of the south. People said he must have been "terribly hit, poor fellow"; and, indeed, nothing but the stimulating influence of the little god could have moved handsome, easy-going George to so great an effort.

The Lyndons arrived in Victoria before the gold fever burnt out, and the land fever burnt in. Wytha Wytha Station was in the market. Not many miles beyond the Dividing Range, it was within reach of cleared tracks leading to good roads, yet fairly outside the area of the advancing vanguard of selectors. Lyndon purchased Wytha and settled there. About three years after Hugh Wylie suddenly appeared, and was received with the enthusiastic warmth which the young colonist cherishes for friends from the old home.

We meet him now riding with Lyndon along the ridge which overlooks Wytha Wytha. That station is picturesquely situated on an undulating stretch of mountainous country; a little north of the Dividing

Range. The home station, near the centre of the run, is almost encircled by a winding creek which pursues its tortuous way among the hills, in some places rushing over stones and loose boulders, in others flowing gently along its pebbly bed. Fronting this creek—high up above it at this period—stood Wytha cottage, its ivy covered chimneys rising among feathery wattles and towering gums, which sheltered a large garden; a portion of this was now cleared and occupied by the foundations of a new stone house to take the place of the original cottage.

At the back the run sweeps away in wooded undulations towards two high hills, clear of trees and covered with short grass; at the foot of these the creek flows quietly until it reaches a deep valley strewn with gravel and boulders, which impede its course, forcing it to eddy round as it tosses noisily onwards.

Gorong Station adjoins Wytha Wytha, rising abruptly from the opposite bank of the creek to a plateau on which stands the homesteads, and stretching onwards to the base of a turreted mountain which shuts in the western horizon.

It is smaller than Wytha, more compact, having only one frontage to the creek. At the period of Mr Wylie's arrival in Victoria circumstances made it probable that it would be offered for sale. Meanwhile, he made a tour of the other colonies without finding any special temptation to settle in any of them. Gorong then came into the market and he secured the place, setting up his roof tree there.

## CHAPTER II

### TWENTY YEARS AFTER

TWENTY years have passed since that commencement of his Victorian life. Wylie has become an old settler—reconciled even to being called a squatter—he has worked Gorong as a cattle station, for he loves trees, and after two decades of occupation his land is not thoroughly cleared. The cattle have their favourite hiding places, but the master and his stockman, Jim, know their haunts, apparently regarding them as frolicsome kittens, whose vagaries it is amusing to circumvent.

Wylie has remodelled and enlarged the original cottage, but he will not hear of building a new one, declaring that it harmonises with its surroundings and is a typical bush home.

A long, low wooden structure it is, of one story, with rooms in all sorts of unexpected places, apparently tumbled together accidentally—but forming a fairly cosy living place—at least for a bachelor. A bachelor Hugh Wylie has remained, though the ideal cousin May has long since vanished, he watching—with a half pitiful, half amused wonder—the gradual effacement of many a cherished illusion concerning her. Still he has a warm corner in his heart for the real woman, who is always bright and kind, though years and prosperity have

### TWENTY YEARS AFTER 7

confirmed her natural love of ease, and craving for pleasant excitement.

“Cousin Hugh” thoroughly identified himself with the family life at Wytha; it supplied the interest and sympathies which his quieter home lacked. Of late the Lyndons had spent many months of each year in Melbourne, and Wylie was always a trifle restless during their absence.

Twenty years had brought changes to them also. Wytha House had come to be reckoned a show place—perhaps somewhat modern for its surroundings. The garden, however supplied a needed touch of age, with its magnificent creepers covering verandah and balconies: its majestic trees shading smooth lawns, and clumps of brilliant flowers grouped around.

During the early years of her residence in Victoria Mrs Lyndon had missed the elegancies of her English home, but, as they became available in the colony she gathered them about her, so that, for a time, Wytha House was continually receiving some addition or improvement. Recently, however, such attentions had been transferred to their Toorak residence, which was provided, in the first instance, for the purpose of securing the best educational advantages for their only remaining child, but had long since become a necessity to both parents, for as prosperity increased Mr Lyndon reverted to his former habits, and again became a popular figure in town society.

Gorong had been singularly free from the ordinary vicissitudes of a squatting business; the larger station at Wytha suffered more from bad seasons and prospered more in good ones. On the whole,

however, prosperity predominated, and Mr Lyndon was reckoned a wealthy man. Indeed there now seemed to be every probability of his becoming a millionaire, for shortly before the time at which our story commences traces of gold had been found on his property; and though the strain on his resources which the search for it entailed was considerable, he expected that the proved existence of rich deposits would very soon amply compensate present inconvenience, and there seemed little doubt that these would be found near the gully at the southern boundary of the run.

Mr Lyndon's frequent absences from Wytha had necessitated the employment of a responsible manager. One had been secured in the person of Mr Berners, a former neighbour of both Lyndon and Wylie in the home country, where he had been regarded as heir to his uncle, an old county magnate. His expectations in that direction were, however, disappointed, and he had been unfortunate in subsequent attempts to increase his small fortune. Family trouble intensified financial perplexity. His wife became a confirmed invalid soon after the birth of their only child. Affection for them remained the one unchanged good point in Berners's character. Otherwise disappointment had converted his natural earnestness into moroseness, his energy into worry, and his ambition into a consuming desire for triumph over the injustice of fate.

Not possessing sufficient means to commence business on his own account, he accepted Lyndon's offer to become manager at Wytha, and soon after took up his abode at the Farm Cottage, such improve-

ments having been made there as would secure Mrs Berners's comfort. Berners fell in with the proposal the more readily because an opening just then presented itself for profitably investing his small fortune, by means of which he hoped, at no very distant date, to take up land for himself.

Thus it came about that soon after their landing in Australia the Berners family were settled at Wytha Farm Cottage, which they had now occupied for many years.

The anticipated discovery of gold had changed the outlook of the principal persons connected with this history; as well as the mode of life now become habitual to Mr and Mrs Lyndon. The big house was oftener shut up, and Wylie, gazing at it from the opposite side of the creek, found it difficult to stifle his discontent at these frequent and prolonged absences. He made a practice himself of visiting Melbourne every spring, desiring to keep in touch with the outside world, but always returned with fresh zest to Gorong, forgetting—at least for a time—the desolate aspect of the mansion on the opposite hill in the interest his station afforded, and in the companionship of new books brought from town. So had passed two decades of uneventful bush life.

Now Wytha House had been silent longer than usual, and the master of Gorong at length hails the day of his friends' return with quite an unwonted excitement. He has taken his afternoon ride at an early hour, and nearing his home, at a bend of the track, leading to the main road, dismounts, and, looping his bridle to the stirrup, dismisses his horse

with a "Go home, Lubra," then climbs a steep ascent to watch for the approaching carriage.

Hugh Wylie's appearance certainly justifies the enthusiasm with which he entered on his career as a squatter twenty years before; he is, however, by no means a typical Australian settler; his movements are too deliberate, his manner too dilatory; the far-away look in his eyes indicates the man of reflection rather than of action, and, in spite of his grey beard, the humorous curve of his mouth suggests a sense of the irony of things in general rather than a praiseworthy determination to turn them to the best account for himself. Tall and spare, his figure conveys an impression of strength, and he carries his fifty years as lightly as a man with simple wants and ample means of gratifying them should do.

His attention is at this moment divided between observation of a vehicle just coming into view and satisfaction at the volume of water which the noisy creek below forces on his notice. Ocular and aural impressions translate themselves into a running accompaniment as thus:—

"No more shortness of water this season."

"Lyndon bows along as if he were glad to see the old place again."

"I'll have that hand rail made secure for Edith."

"The cattle must be driven off the lower paddock."

Hidden for a few moments by trees, the carriage now comes abreast, and Wylie, leaping from his vantage post, waves his hat, crying, "Welcome! welcome! the sun shines on us once more."

"Cousin Hugh has not forgotten his pretty speeches," laughed Mrs Lyndon, as the carriage drew up with a jerk and she leant forward to shake hands.

"Did it seem long?" asked Edith Lyndon, from behind a barricade of rugs and packages, which she vigorously pushed aside in order to join in the greeting.

"Long? after you had been absent half a century I began to think I had confused my reckoning, so, Crusoe-like, took to notching a tree. A formidable row of marks calls you to account."

"How about those much-vaunted friends who never forsake you? We've brought you a fresh batch; sent at the last moment, so they're among the wraps," said the girl.

"Thanks, many. My old friends did not forsake me. They sympathised, and were not even jealous of the notches."

"Well, you know," Mrs Lyndon interposed, "we were anxious that Edith should have the full benefit of the signor's lessons, since this term finishes her education."

Hugh shot a comical glance at the young girl. "My dear, I respectfully condole with you," he said. "No more realms of knowledge to explore! Mysteries of nature gauged—glories of art—"

"Now, Cousin Hugh, that's not fair," Mrs Lyndon exclaimed. "I used the ordinary expression, which means nothing at all about realms of knowledge, or glories of art—as you know quite well."

"Mother, he's only ironical as usual," cried Edith.

"What! sparring already?" Mr Lyndon called

out, from the box seat. "How are you, Wylie? All right at the station?"

"I believe so," Wylie replied. "Saw Berners yesterday. He said nothing to the contrary, but *looked* as if things could never be right in this world—or in any other, for the matter of that."

"That's his way," replied Lyndon; "he's a dogged worry, but he's also a dogged worker."

"Mother, if you don't mind, I'll walk across with Cousin Hugh, and be at home almost as soon as you are," Edith said.

"Make haste, then," cried her father, "for I can hardly hold these brutes."

"They smell their stable," Wylie remarked, catching the girl as she leaped clear of the carriage step. The horses bounded down a steep incline and half way up the opposite ascent, rather to the detriment of Mrs Lyndon's nerves.

"Take care, George," she cried.

"All right, my dear, the impetus helps up the hill."

As he spoke, they turned in at the lodge gate; the horses galloping along a broad avenue, shaded by noble trees, and unwillingly drew up before the portico of the house. Two men ran round from the back and steadied the impatient animals, while the master assisted his wife to alight.

"Take them round; bring in the luggage after," he said, following to the stable, as Mrs Lyndon went indoors.

Edith and Wylie had turned into a forest track, from whence, emerging on the open, they climbed by a winding path to the plateau on which Gorong

Cottage was situated in the centre of a somewhat overgrown garden, which merged on one side into the orchard, sloping downward to the creek.

Fronting them stood Wytha House, the slanting rays of the setting sun shining full on its western side, darting about the trellised balcony, lighting up some of its windows, casting strange shadows on others, gilding the tops of the feathery trees on the lawn, and leaving the big gums along the drive in the gloom of the falling twilight.

They stood watching the arrival. "What a power spirit is, even in brutes," said Wylie; "those horses have travelled twenty miles, but weariness disappears before hope and anticipation."

"Cousin Hugh, it is the instinct for supper, to put it plainly, avoiding fine words," cried the girl.

"I stand rebuked by the educated young lady, and humbly apologise," Wylie retorted.

"Where's Ponto?" asked the girl; "I don't remember your meeting us before without him."

"Well, there were two reasons. Sharing his master's impatience at your prolonged absence, he would have been proportionately demonstrative at meeting you again; and your father very properly objects to dogs jumping on his horses; besides Janet desires his presence at home when Jim is about on the station. Of course Janet has her way; women always do."

"I suppose she has some sufficient reason," Edith remarked.

"Certainly; did you ever know a woman who hadn't?" asked Wylie.

"It's high time I came back; you're getting

unbearable," cried the girl, as they reached the garden gate, at which stood a big cattle dog, thrusting his nose against the paling. He caught sight of them and commenced a series of curvets, interspersed with jumps and short barks.

"Down, Ponto, down!" shouted his master.

"Oh, you darling, are you glad to see me?" exclaimed his companion, fondling the animal, as he ran from one to the other, endeavouring to combine a loyal preference for his master with excited delight at the appearance of his old play-mate.

They entered the cottage, going forward to "Cousin Hugh's den," as Mr Wylie's sanctum was called. It was tolerably spacious, but far from lofty; in fact, when he stretched his long legs, and straightened his tall figure preparatory to laying aside his pipe, one was apt to feel nervous at the close proximity of his head to a clumsy beam which stretched across the apartment. Its walls were lined with books of a very miscellaneous description, their owner being cosmopolitan in his reading as well as in his sympathies. An office table, with ink-stained desk and stuffed pigeon-holes, stood by a window, side by side with a smaller one, heaped with magazines and newspapers. The recess on each side of the fireplace was filled with gun racks and fishing tackle. A case of native birds adorned the mantelshelf, and peering from the top of the bookcases were staring owls, voracious hawks, bright-eyed opossums and pert looking wallabies. A fire burned on the hearth, and Hugh drew his armchair near, seating his companion in it.

"Ah! the room begins to look home-like now," he said, as she leant back, almost lost in its depths.

"How cheerful the fire is," she remarked, "though I don't feel a bit cold. You are never in town during the month of June—the Melbourne season, you know—and we've actually left it to come home. Now that I'm to be regularly introduced we shan't be able to do it again, I suppose."

"So you intend to fall into the monotonous ranks of fashionable sameness, and join in the 'follow my neighbour' game."

"I'm afraid I'm not very original," Edith replied, "and indeed I don't see why one need be; everybody is bright and charming; if you would only come to town a little oftener you'd get to enjoy it, too."

"I dislike level country, and I should hate to see all my cattle of one pattern."

"There's plenty of change in Melbourne, and no two people are really alike, you know."

"Not if you get at them," Wylie admitted. "But you never do really get at them," he added, "in the hubbub you call society, where everybody appears like everybody else, does the same thing at the same time and in the same manner. There used to be room for originality in Melbourne, now they are getting into the stereotyped pattern. Child, I don't want to see you don the straight waistcoat and become enslaved to it all."

"Dear me! what a tirade. I assure you I'm as free as air—as this crisp, delicious air. It was getting chilly in town; heavier atmosphere, I suppose. Slave indeed! I could fight anybody, I feel so brave up here." And she stretched her arms joyously,

whereat Ponto made a jump and landed one paw in her lap, reaching up to lick her face. "But I don't want to be licked, Ponto, for all that," she continued, gently putting the dog aside.

"Hydatids, eh?" asked Wylie. "I'm beginning to wonder how we live at all. What with germs in the air and spores in the water, microbes in the system and so on."

"People appear to live just as comfortably in spite of such horrors," said the girl. "Perhaps, after all, they mainly exist in the imagination. Why, indeed, shouldn't imagination be as powerful elsewhere as it certainly is at Gorong?"

"You're a saucy puss," cried Wylie, "but it serves me right for grumbling now that we've got you back again. And here comes Janet with the inevitable cup of tea. I hope there'll be tea in heaven, Janet; for there will be a lot of women there—good souls! How would they get on without their cup of tea?"

"Mr Wylie, sir, I'm afeard ye knows but little about it; it's ill makin' jokes of solemn subjects."

"You are right, Janet, but one can't help being foolish sometimes."

"We should do our endeavour to improve, sir," said Janet, firmly. "How well ye're looking, Miss Edith, my dear. Growed, too, I do believe. I hope ye've come to stop awhile now. You've done with schoolin', as I hear."

"We shall stay until October at any rate, Janet," Edith replied. "Mr Wylie tells me you wouldn't let Ponto away; how is that?"

"The master didn't object to let the dog bide,

seein' as Jim was out after the cattle. 'Twas in this way, Miss Edith, my dear. This very day week Jim was away with the master helping to muster, and me here lonesome, which I didn't mind, as ye well knows, Miss, for I'm used to the bush and not easy to scare, ye may be sartain of that. But these sundowners as comes along now—why, they're worse than bushrangers as used to be. We knowed what to expect of them. 'Twas your money, or a pistol, and as ceevil as you please; but these here swags, or what ye call 'em—surly bears as they be. No satisfyin' of them—a swagging round as though masters of the place."

"Yes, but this particular visitor of yours, Janet, what did he do?" Edith inquired, aware of the housekeeper's tendency to lapse into generalities.

"Well, Miss, I says to him, 'Why don't ye get to work?' 'Work,' says he, 'ain't I allays a working? What else is this travelling over the land—the land, mind ye, as is ours?' 'The land yours,' says I; 'fine land 'twould be if the likes of ye had the handling of it.' And, indeed, Miss, that's gospel truth. They'll be the ruin of the country."

"Don't go into political economy, Janet," Wylie interjected.

"Economy, sir?" There's no sort of economy with them fellows. See the good bread they'll chuck away, and burn the very flooring of the hut as shelters 'em."

"Did you give bread to this one, Janet?" asked Edith.

"No, Miss, I did not, but I gived him a drink of milk. He took a swill, and says he, 'Hand

out the brandy, old gal ; milk don't agree with me.' Says I, 'If ye can't drink wholesome milk ye can go to the tank there. No brandy will ye get from me.' Then he casts his eye sharp round and comes close up, gripping my arm, and, setting his teeth, lets out a handful of hawful oaths ; and says he, 'I'll soon make ye find the brandy.' The words was just out of his mouth, when I seed Mr Berners a riding along to the gully. I up with one hand—he was gripping t'other—and such a coo-ee-ee as I sent out ; I never thought I could have done it. Mr Berners, he turned round instant. Sharp he is. Quick as lightning he drove his horse straight down that 'ere steep bank, and was across the creek afore the fellow war out of sight. He took up a minute speaking to me, for I was all of a tremble ; but that minute was too much, for the tramp got in among the scrub, and Mr Berners searched and searched, but couldn't come on him."

"And now you keep Ponto at home when Mr Wylie and Jim are away. You are quite right, Janet," Edith remarked.

"Well, Miss, I'm not altogether easy to give in to that coward. I feel like standing up agin him. Still, by times I can't get his looks out of mind."

"Ponto will stand up against him, Janet. He would give an account of him," said Mr Wylie, "and we'll have up one of the dogs from the out station too. There is more queer company about than there used to be."

"There is," replied the housekeeper emphatically ; "and, sir, I'm not clear that they fine roads be

altogether a benefit. They are convanient when ye wants to go to town no doubt, but they're just as convanient for they loafers a travellin' to us, ye see," Janet remarked, glancing dubiously from one to the other of her interlocutors.

"There are two sides to everything," said her master ; "life is just a delicate balance all round."

"Certainly the good side is uppermost in this instance," said Edith, rising, "they'll be expecting us at home. I've not eaten such scones since I was here last," she added, turning to Janet.

"And ye'll not take another cup of tea, Miss," asked the latter ; "what a young leddy ye've grown to be sure ! Your bonnie face is purely welcome to us ; and the master says yes to that, I'll warrant."

"We've all missed you sorely, child," he said, following her from the house.

"You'll not be home for dinner, sir ?" Janet called after them.

"Do you suppose we could spare him this first evening ?" Edith replied.

They descended the path to the rustic bridge, made chiefly for the girl's convenience, and in a few minutes were mounting the opposite hill.

"How homelike it all looks !" Edith exclaimed, as they came in sight of the brightly lighted house, with its comfortable inhabited aspect.

"You've no idea what a ghostly, blank appearance it has worn during your absence," cried Wylie ; "that big white place, with its closed windows and litter of fallen leaves gives one the doldrums."

"They should open the windows and keep the garden decent," she replied.

"Oh, perhaps they do; I avoid the place whenever I can."

"Took in the picture by intuition," laughed the girl.

"What have you been gossiping about all this time?" cried a cheery voice, and Mr Lyndon came out to meet them.

"Janet had a long story to tell father about a fright she got awhile ago."

"And interspersed it with valuable—if somewhat incisive—remarks," added Wylie.

"Come along, old fellow, it's pleasant to sit down with you again," exclaimed Lyndon.

The drawing-room door stood open and his wife came forward with a smile of welcome. She was still a young woman, and might have passed for Edith's elder sister.

"You have neglected us cruelly," she said; "we expected to see you on Edith's birthday; that lovely necklace was but a poor compensation for your presence."

"The first birthday that I've not spent with her, isn't it?" Wylie asked. "I thought you would have returned for it. Sixteen we've all spent together. This seventeenth ushers in a new order of things, I suppose."

"There will never be any new order of things between us, Hugh; it is always the same. Blood is thicker than water," said Lyndon.

"See my new necklace! I wouldn't wear it until you had seen it on me," cried Edith, dancing up to Wylie; a pale blue cloud of floating drapery, with shimmers of light flashing from a magnificent

diamond necklace which circled her stately neck. It was nearly a year since the girl had visited her country home, and Wylie was astonished at the growth and development which he had scarcely observed in the dusk of evening at Gorong; now, in the blaze of the lighted drawing-room, brimming over with happy spirits, her luxuriant hair drawn back and forming a wavy coronet about her head, her large blue eyes bent on him with an expression of mirthful sweetness; the glint of jewels and shimmer of blue playing about the girlish figure, she seemed to gather to herself all the rays of light, reflecting them back with a fresh radiance; at least that was Hugh Wylie's impression, as he exclaimed—  
"Child, I never knew how pretty you are until now."

Even her father noted her appearance.

"My dear," he said, "you look like a brilliant fairy queen."

"Probably it's the necklace," she replied, making a *moue* at them both.

"Mr Berners," announced a servant, throwing wide the door of the room.

"Heralding dinner, I hope," exclaimed the master of the house, extending a hand to the new arrival.

### CHAPTER III

#### BUSH LIFE

MRS LYNDON prided herself on the elegance of her domestic surroundings. As she entered the dining-room on Mr Berners's arm she turned to Wylie, leading Edith with her father on the other side, and drew his attention to a new arrangement of the table. "I saw it for the first time at Bishop's Court," she said; "they've just come from England, you know; I admired that centre strip of embroidery so much that I sent for some; it's becoming common in town now, though."

"It's artistic; the flowers harmonise with the real ones, which are certainly elegantly arranged."

"That's nice of you, Cousin Hugh; I was afraid you would indulge in a hit at new fangled ways," Mrs Lyndon returned.

"I'm English enough to have a sneaking sympathy with the adornment of our daily sacrifice to the Lares and Penates of modern life."

"Lares and Penates? You live so closely with your silent friends that you talk like a book."

"Who is to blame for that?" asked Wylie, significantly. "But don't you think we English have come to regard Dinner (with a capital D) as a species of high festival to the social deities, a ceremonial rallying point of the religion of the hearth?"

#### BUSH LIFE

"Let us assist at it with suitable assiduity," cried Lyndon.

Mr Berners entered into conversation with his hostess; she was evidently referring to some recent town gossip.

"You see, Mrs Lyndon," he remarked aloud; "I'm out of the world, which does not tolerate a poor man."

"We shall all be poor, if that gold is not found soon," she replied; "what a time you've been searching, to be sure."

"Not so long considering the ground we have to go through; besides, there are difficulties with the men."

"I'm inclined to wish you had never heard of it," said Wylie.

"We are bound to make the best of the land, and since there is every prospect of gold being discovered there, I hold that it is the owner's duty to find it," Berners remarked.

"I hope it won't be my duty to find any on my place," cried Wylie. "I should hate to see the paddocks cut up into holes, ditches and heaps."

"You are off the lead altogether; it runs north and south, and does not crop on to you at all."

"*Dei gratia*; I like peace. You may say good-bye to that when you begin gold-digging," returned Wylie.

Their host was very silent; his wife glanced at him and he roused himself to say, cheerfully, "You are getting well forward, I hear. We shall soon be through."

"You are expecting Tom soon, Mr Berners?" asked Edith, desiring to change the conversation,

Berners's face brightened. It always did at his son's name. "Almost directly," he said; "last mail brought us word that he was sailing earlier than he originally intended."

"Tom has been very satisfactory," Wylie remarked. "I always knew that he would be."

"That run on the Continent will do him a world of good," Lyndon declared. "If a man comes out here fresh from his university he is apt to fancy that he knows the world whereas college life is one-sided; and a young fellow with that as his only standard soon becomes a prig or a bore."

"Tom won't be either, you'll see," cried Wylie.

"The idea of Tom being a prig," laughed Edith; "don't you remember, father, what a jolly boy he was?"

"Whatever Tom may be, he owes a great deal to you, Mr Wylie," said Berners. It was an immense concession for a man to make who never allowed that either he or his family had received anything but injustice from the world at large.

"Not at all, Mr Berners," Wylie replied; "his cheerful companionship always brought pleasure, and his letters have been quite an interest to me."

"He has not been much in society, I fancy," Mrs Lyndon remarked.

"He was about town a little last season; I sent him a few introductions," said Wylie.

"After all, then, you don't despise society so very much," returned the lady archly.

"It depends on how you take it. A header may be bracing, but you get suffocated if you stay too long below."

Mrs Lyndon glanced at her daughter. "I will send coffee to you here," she said. "Good-night now. We are both tired."

After their departure the gentlemen drew round the fire; wine was placed on a small table, and silence ensued. Soon grey puffs floated spirally upward, and the scent of tobacco hung heavily about the room. Lyndon pushed the decanter towards Berners, remarking, "I went to the Lands Office about that business after I got your letter, but there's nothing to be done; the selectors must have their own way."

"It's a terrible nuisance;" said Wylie, "they are overrunning the country. I wish you could see your way to securing the run."

"It is out of the question just now," replied the other. "If they would only hold off until we get the gold it would be all right."

"So far from holding off," said Berners, "they are holding on to watch our works; following the trend in order to take out miners' rights, you may be sure."

"You are thoroughly satisfied about that trend?" Wylie questioned.

"How could we all be mistaken," asked the manager; "the miners, as well as Mr Lyndon and myself? Besides there is the opinion of that expert we had from Melbourne to examine the place. Do you suppose we are all wrong, Mr Wylie?"

Berners was irritated; he respected Hugh, but somehow the two men rubbed each other the wrong way. Wylie could never make up his mind as to his real feelings towards the manager of Wytha,

He admired his energy and devotion to the interests of his employer. He made excuses for his irritability and moroseness. Still there remained an uncomfortable residuum, which was neither distrust nor aversion, but something painfully bordering on both. Only on the subject of Tom was there any unanimity between them. A vague consciousness of this always put Wylie on his guard when in the other's company. He could not have put his feeling into words, or even distinct thoughts; but it had an almost imperceptible influence on his manner, which galled Berners, rendering him quick to detect occasions of offence. Wylie, however, was careful not to give him the opportunity of making a quarrel; there was indeed no ground of objection in any direction. The manager was indefatigable in the fulfilment of his duties, never sparing himself or seeking relaxation, grudging in personal expenditure, but liberal in outlay on behalf of his invalid wife or only child. Wylie sympathised with him in that as did also the other members of the little circle, for Mrs Berners and her son were as lovingly regarded as was the husband and father distinctly respected.

On the present occasion Wylie met his somewhat irate question quietly. "I don't suppose anything about it, Mr Berners," he said. "I am incompetent to express an opinion about mining. Naturally, however, I view with some anxiety my cousin's increasingly heavy outlay in that direction."

"It's no fault of mine," returned the manager. "The strictest economy is practised. Nobody can expect to wake up a millionaire without a little trouble and expense."

"No one is blaming you, Berners," Mr Lyndon interposed; "we know you are doing all you can. Of course there are difficulties; but, after all, as you say, we must not expect to make a pocket without some effort. Nothing venture, nothing have," he added, turning to Hugh; "I'm sorry we got upon this subject, the very first night of our return, too."

"One doesn't think of much else now. Among friends, what is in the heart surely comes to the lips," Wylie answered.

After a little more desultory conversation, Berners rose; he soon wearied of surface talk, perhaps because topics came up of which he knew little, and cared for not at all. He was too intense—too self-absorbed to find interest or amusement in ordinary conversation. Amusement indeed was not in his vocabulary, or, if there at all, it took the form of labour, incessant labour towards a definite object, namely, the building up of a fortune which should enable him to triumph over that fate which had proved so adverse to him, and to win back for his son the position which by birth belonged to him.

"I suppose you'll be down at the Gully tomorrow," he said to Lyndon, as he buttoned his coat in preparation for the outer air which struck cold while they stood in the hall.

"Yes; I'll be there early. I want to see the fresh men you've put on," Lyndon replied.

Good-nights were exchanged. Hugh lingered a moment. Putting his hand on Lyndon's shoulder, he said, "Forgive me, George, but I must beg one thing of you. Don't let that mine business thrust aside the work of the station; there is your true

mine. I fear Berners is so much engrossed with the one that he does not leave himself sufficient time for the other."

"You are mistaken there, I'm sure," said Lyndon; "he is the sort of fellow who couldn't leave anything undone if he tried to do so."

When the manager left Wytha House he did not go straight home, but made his way across the forest to the workings at the gully. The broken, rocky space stood out bare and gaunt in the moonlight, its sides, wet and shining, encircling a great red and yellow heap of *debris*, near which hung some gallowslike machinery above a confusion of pulleys, buckets and barrows, in front of a rough shed containing a small engine, some picks and other implements.

The place was silent, the men long since asleep in their huts. A dog lying just inside the shed came the length of his chain to whine on the manager, whom he recognised. The latter stooped and looked down the shaft; he listened, but the gravelike pit sent up no sound. "What have I come here for like a fool?" he thought. "If that burst had meant anything there would have been more before now; in fact, it is a good omen, only my cursed luck makes me afraid. It is a promising sign; we may be close on the gold. Old Wylie is a croaker; he's quaking about the money he lent on that machinery. I've risked more than I ought, perhaps, too. Pshaw! It's all safe. It must be."

Turning away, he rapidly mounted the hill, cleared the forest and came out on the open sheep run.

Before him rose the round, grassy hill, at the foot of which lay his home. As he drew nearer he caught a glimpse of the light shining from his wife's chamber. Making for that across the creek and its reedy border, he climbed the fence to avoid going round, and was soon by her side. "You are late, dear," she said. "Of course there was much to talk of. I hope you had a pleasant evening."

"Oh, yes, tolerable. We are always on the one subject now. But, darling, you should not sit up. Let me help you to get to bed;" and he pushed his wife's sofa close to her couch. She was accustomed to be lifted from one to the other.

"How is Edith," she asked, "and Mrs Lyndon?"

"I had forgotten the ladies; they are all right. Edith struck me as quite grown up."

"She is seventeen, you know; they will be coming to see me?" she questioned.

"To-morrow they said," he replied.

"I suppose you've forgotten any messages as usual," she continued.

"Didn't I tell you? They sent their love, I fancy, wasn't it?"

"How should I know?" she laughed; "you dear old bear, you are not like anybody else. A thousand times better, though," she whispered as he laid her gently down, tenderly packing the bed clothes about her.

Berners was a different man in her presence. Surliness changed into tenderness, hastiness into patience, haughty moroseness into a wistful depression. Unhappily his wife's influence did not extend beyond the limits of their home; she was unable to

follow him into the activities of life, otherwise the asperities of his disposition might probably have been softened, and higher aims have replaced that fixed ambition which pledged him to his fight with fate.

Next morning Lyndon met his manager at the gully; they descended the shaft together, and stood in the low drive, watching the progress of the works.

"The ground is pretty hard there," said Lyndon to the boss, as the men called a miner of some experience, who acted as captain of the mine; they had not employed a mining manager, Berners being sufficiently ubiquitous to fill that position in addition to his regular business on the station.

"Hard ye may call it, sir," said the man, "but we'll soon be through this, and then we shall see how things is 'bout to wear."

"Do you think the gold is so near?"

"It may be, sir; and mayn't be," replied the oracle.

"You seem to be pumping more?" Lyndon remarked.

"As much as they pumps will manage; more power would have answered better maybe."

"You're not afraid of the water?" asked the master, quickly.

"'Twon't do us no harm, won't the water, by herself," replied the miner, significantly.

"There was a small burst of sand, you remember, last week?" Berners interposed.

"You mentioned it; but I did not understand that it was of any consequence."

"I don't consider that it is. You've had no more?" he asked, turning to the boss.

"Not so far, sir," the latter answered; he had a dogged, cautious manner that fidgeted Lyndon.

"Why, man, you don't anticipate any, do you?" he said.

"I never hanticipate nothin' in mines, sir. When ye've been at 'em as long as I, ye'll come to see they're as unsartin as the whimsiest of the female sex. They may be good, and they may be bad, and they may be neither one nor 'tother; but keep ye a danglin' on, hopin' and fearin'—a drainin' the life blood out of ye."

"You are not encouraging at any rate, my man," Lyndon remarked.

"Well, Mr Lyndon, if ye needed encouragin' I might do it; but ye don't. Ye've shown a handsome spirit in this ere mine—for mine I believe it to be after all."

"That's right; we'll work on and hope for the best," cried Lyndon cheerily. His sanguine temperament soon threw off anxiety. He had got rid of the little experienced on the previous evening; and now, seeing the works in full progress, with the mullock veined quartz giving promise of a successful issue to this enterprise, his fancy readily leapt over obstacles and fastened on the fortunate result.

Lyndon and his manager left the gully, and mounting their horses rode round the run. The paddocks were green with thickly springing grass after the early rains. The sheep never looked better, and their owner easily put from him the recollection of the lien which already rested on next season's shearing. But there was one annoy-

ance he could not ignore—the encroachments of selectors.

A cloud came over his pleasant countenance. "Confound them," he said; "what a fool I was to buy that town place instead of making this freehold!"

"Many of them expect to be bought out when the mine is floated," said Berners; "it can easily be done then."

"I suppose so. What on earth can they make of a few acres here and there? Not agricultural either."

"Some of it is fairly good. The farm, for instance," Berners replied.

"Oh! that is settled on Mrs Lyndon, I'm glad to know."

For the moment he forgot that the bank had a mortgage on it, raised with her consent, for the purpose of obtaining mining plant. Berners remembered, but made no allusion to the fact.

"I'll just look in on Mrs Berners," Lyndon said, as they approached the farm.

A pony carriage stood at the gate. "My wife and Edith, I expect," Lyndon remarked. Entering, he found his daughter sitting close by the invalid, while Mrs Lyndon opposite was entertaining her with an account of the Birthday ball which had recently been held at Government House. Mrs Berners liked to hear what was going on in the world, and sympathised with other people's enjoyments, though such must ever be but a memory to herself.

Mrs Lyndon soon rose. "We are too many for

an invalid's room," she said; "I hope we have not tired you."

"On the contrary, it has been quite refreshing. Your coming is like a whiff of fresher air; it is good to be taken out of oneself. Sick people are apt to be selfish."

"Not you, dear Mrs Berners," said Edith.

"Don't allow me to become so then. Come and see me often."

"You will have quite a hurricane of the outside world when Tom arrives," Mrs Lyndon remarked.

"Ah!" replied the mother, flushing; "that will be a day. I hardly dare to think of it."

Lyndon rode beside his wife's carriage. "Mrs Berners looks more fragile than ever," she remarked.

"I thought so too. I hope she will live to see her son again."

"Oh, father, you don't suppose she is likely to die just yet," cried Edith, "she seems to me to have always looked like that."

"It will be an awful blow to Berners, come when it may," he said.

"Yes; I declare I should be quite afraid of him," Mrs Lyndon averred, "his temper would be dangerous."

"Mother, I don't believe he is as bad as you fancy. See how attached the family are."

"Well, he is bad enough anyway. . . . There's Hugh. We were coming to the cottage," she added as Wylie rode up.

"That's right. I have been keeping an eye on this track; I saw your carriage," he replied.

"I leave you here," said Lyndon, "must get some letters off by this post."

They remained a few minutes on the brow of the hill after he departed. Gorong Cottage, on its oblong knoll, well up above the creek, fronted them. The long, low house, with its verandahs wreathed in green and array of outbuildings, wore a cosy, home-like aspect; the large garden gay with many coloured chrysanthemums and scarlet geraniums, interspersed with snowy masses of Lauristina, and clumps of violets and heartsease lay basking in the noonday sun, which, high up on Wytha Hill, shot its brilliant rays across to the undulating forest behind Gorong, lifting up the riband of red track which meandered through it on towards the mount—grim guardian of Gorong—whose dark mass limited the horizon; its jagged turrets, tipped with an aureole of glory peculiar to this hour of the day and season of the year. Even Mrs Lyndon was impressed.

"How pretty and peaceful it looks," she said.

"Grand, too, mother," Edith replied, "I don't remember ever before observing that curious slant of the sun's rays on the top of the old mount."

"The air is very dry to-day," said Wylie; "and you happen to be on the spot at the supreme moment. It won't last; you see it is fading already."

"One never seems to have exhausted a place," said the girl, "I thought I knew every trick of light and shadow here."

"The Creator's two books have much in common," Wylie answered; "you may believe that you know them by heart; and some day—when you are

casually glancing at either, a fresh light suddenly shines out, and you get a glimpse of something you had not previously suspected—a hint of possibilities which had escaped you a hundred times before."

"Yes. But if one considers, it's not surprising, since both are messages from the same author," Edith remarked.

"The more one notices and compares, the clearer does the impress of the one personality become," Wylie said.

They had driven down a side path which wound round the hill, gradually breaking the steepness of the descent.

"How that trailer has grown!" exclaimed Mrs Lyndon, when they had reached the cottage.

"Is it doing well with you at Toorak?" asked Wylie.

"Very well; that was a happy thought of yours, to train it about those pillars. It was generally admired at my last garden party."

"Garden parties are a pretty fashion," he returned, "it is so much pleasanter to stroll about in the open air, than to be crowded in a stuffy room."

"I mean to give a series this spring, while you are down. Of course you will be down in October as usual."

"No one else shall drive me on Cup day," Edith announced, "I do enjoy that box seat beside you, on the cart."

"Suppose it rains?" suggested her mother.

"Oh! it won't rain; it never does when I want to go anywhere," cried Edith seizing Ponto's forepaws, and waltzing round with him.

Janet appeared to beg that the leddies would visit her new fowlyard, and choose some fancy chicken from recent clutches. Treasures of the stable were also exhibited, and a beautiful Arab which Mr Wylie was breaking in for Edith.

"I shall teach her to follow me and come at my call," said the girl.

"Don't spoil her. Pet fillies are a nuisance," Hugh declared.

"Are pet girls a nuisance too?" she asked.

"That depends," returned he cautiously.

"Pet cousins are, when they're old bachelors, you know."

"Are they? I don't know any old bachelors who are pets."

"How you two sharpen your wits on each other," cried Mrs Lyndon; "you were always fond of sparring, Hugh, even as a lad, I remember." As she spoke a vision of the high spirited young cousin of twenty years before rose to her memory. She glanced affectionately at the elderly man, caressing his grey beard, his eyes brimming over with amusement, as he bandied words with her child.

"How long ago it seems," she said with a half sigh; "scarcely indeed long ago, rather a different world altogether."

"It was a happy youth, May," he said, "and it's a happy middle age, is it not?"

"Yes; but George and I would both be gratified if you did not object to society so much."

"I am far from objecting to society," he averred; "on the contrary, I admire its capacity for hard labour and its courage in upholding its standard of duty."

"Now, you're laughing again," she exclaimed.

"No really; I am filled with wonder at the expansion and culture of social life in Melbourne."

"Then why not take advantage of it?" she asked.

"It is not my line; my duties are humbler. I help to supply the animal pabulum on which society thrives; it is not a very elevated vocation, perhaps, but you'll admit that it is useful."

After luncheon Hugh escorted the ladies to their lodge gate; going on to transact some business in the neighbouring township.

"Dear old Hugh!" said Mrs Lyndon, gazing after; "he seems bound up with one's life."

"With mine certainly, mother," Edith replied; "he is always mixed up with our doings, even when we are in town, and he here—what he will say when he comes down—and all sorts of references."

"When that gold is found we must get him to leave Gorong," Mrs Lyndon declared.

"One can't imagine Gorong without cousin Hugh."

"That's nonsense, Edith. We must take you home, and have you properly introduced. Hugh can come with us."

"Shall we be very rich?" asked the girl; "that would be splendid to go to England, and the Continent too; there are heaps of things I should like to see."

"Yes! it is an education; gives a finish that nothing else can give," Mrs Lyndon said, with great earnestness.

## CHAPTER IV

### "THE GULLY MINE"

A WEEK after this conversation Mr Berners came to Wytha House at an unusually early hour. Lyndon was in his stable-yard, giving orders to the grooms; directly he entered the library, where Berners waited for him, he perceived that something was wrong. The manager's usual dogged expression was now mixed with an excitement that amounted to fierceness.

"What is it?" asked Lyndon, hurriedly.

"There's been a burst of sand again; much worse than the other. In fact, the mine is swamped."

Lyndon steadied himself by the nearest chair, trembling from head to foot; the abruptness of the announcement unmanned him for the moment, but he recovered himself directly. Berners saw that he had blurted out the ill tidings too suddenly, and tried to soften matters.

"When I say swamped, of course, I mean temporarily," he observed.

"How did it happen?" asked the other.

"We were anxious last night; the men fancied they heard suspicious sounds. I was there at daylight this morning, but it was all right, and work commenced at the usual hour: however at the

### "THE GULLY MINE"

third stroke of the pick in the south drive, the rush came. It was a narrow shave for the man; he delayed a moment to give the alarm."

"Is the machinery destroyed?" Lyndon inquired.

"How should it be? It is the lower drive, you know."

Then Berners explained. "I've been down," he added; "there is nothing to be seen but a mass of sand and water."

Lyndon was silent; he felt helpless, knowing little of mining, and having left the oversight of this—his first essay—to Berners. After a while he asked, "What is to be done?"

"We can do nothing until the burst settles," said the other; "after that, we must drain the mine, and clear the drives."

As Lyndon did not speak, the manager continued, "On the whole," he said; "I believe these bursts are sure signs of a rich reef."

"Signs are of little use," replied Lyndon; "the reef is terribly hard to get at."

"We must not be disheartened," Berners urged; "these accidents are naturally in the chances of things."

"Yet many reefs have been opened without difficulty or delay."

"When the cap is near the surface. Our country here appears to be much disturbed. It will prove richer in the end."

"I'll go and have a look at it," said Lyndon.

They walked down in silence. The place presented a dreary appearance. Buckets and picks had been hastily thrown out; the cage swayed loosely; broken

pulleys hung menacingly; timber, lanterns and candles strewed the ground. The miners lounged about, blank and gloomy.

Lyndon glanced at the shed, the engine was safe, he made a few inquiries, then turned away depressed and perplexed. As Berners had said, there was nothing to be done at present. That, at anyrate, was a respite; perhaps the accident might not be so serious after all. He plunged into the forest aimlessly, trying to regain some of his natural hopefulness before returning home. His wife must not see how harassed—almost terrified—he was. Emerging from the bush at a clearing on an unfrequented part of the run, he came on the selector who had taken up that area; the man was ploughing the virgin soil after the early rains; it had been carefully grubbed and roughly fenced, and the sandy loam looked more promising than could have been expected from its previous scrubby aspect. Lyndon glanced at it with surprise, he had not been accustomed to think of the place at all in connection with agriculture.

"It's likelier soil than you would have thought, Mr Lyndon," said the new occupant.

"Suppose it is," replied the other testily, "what's the use of a few acres? You can't do the land nor yourself justice."

"'Tis as much as me and my boys can manage at present; may be we'll add to it by and by, when the railway gets near enough to carry produce to a market."

"Buy me out, hey? Not so easy, my man. We squatters have opened the country, and the country,

in the long run, must stick by us. You can't work it properly without capital."

"That may be, Mr Lyndon; we haven't much capital, foreby our two hands; but there's a lot of us, you see. Many a leetle makes a muckle, they do say."

"What's the use of a muckle of leetles?"

"Well, sir, time will show. I don't want no ill blood between us. We're accordin' to law—no offence meant—ye understand."

"I understand; I wish you no harm. I was thinking of your advantage when I spoke. Good-morning."

This little encounter helped to clear Lyndon's mental atmosphere. His chagrin at the accident of the morning merged into vexation with the interlopers on his run. He went home full of the annoyance caused by their presence, and mentioned, almost casually, the stoppage of the works at the gully. Wylie looked grave, but Lyndon's indifferent manner reassured him. So soon as it was tolerably safe Berners was one of the first to descend the mine. The drives were found choked, and labour of many months had been rendered useless. Further investigation made plain that more powerful machinery was needed to keep the water under. To do Berners justice—although it did not greatly affect his interest—he was as much, perhaps even more, worried than the actual owner. He knew Lyndon's embarrassments, and that the present machinery had been procured by means of a loan from Wylie; also that the works had been kept going latterly, and the men paid, by means of an advance from the bank, secured

on the mortgage of Mrs Lyndon's property—Wytha House and the Home Paddocks. There remained only the farm, a part also of her marriage settlement. Very gloomily the manager pondered this condition of affairs, and naturally shrank from discussing it with Lyndon. Yet to a man of his temperament this very reluctance spurred his determination, and he resolved to delay no longer. The Lyndons had been absent, visiting at an adjacent station, Wylie being with them. Indeed, he had suggested this temporary diversion, having detected Lyndon's uneasiness, and assured himself that nothing could be done until the extent of the injury at the mine was ascertained. Berners guessed the motive which urged the master of Gorong to this unwonted dissipation. It suited his views, as he preferred to grapple alone with the misfortune. Now, however, that its extent was known, he was impatient for Lyndon's return in order that steps might be at once taken to repair it. Giving up the search, he argued, was not to be thought of, after all that had been sacrificed to carry it on so far. The farm must be mortgaged, for, after clearing off the lien on the approaching clip, there would be little enough left to meet the expenses of the two establishments. Difficulty roused his habitual impatience to conquer. Accordingly, on the evening of the family's return to Wytha, accompanied by some friends, Berners's groom rode over with a note declining an invitation to dinner, but asking for an interview later. Lyndon disliked evening business, but he knew that the present was a critical time, so made an effort to fall in with the manager's

wishes. The latter had been waiting some minutes before the host left the dining-room, remarking with studied carelessness, "Mr Berners wants a word with me; I'll soon be back. If our friends wish to join the ladies you'll pilot them, Wylie."

"All right," said Hugh, in a light tone, shooting a scrutinising glance from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"You should have joined us, Berners," Lyndon said, on entering his library. "Young Fenner is excellent company, and the *père* not so heavy when his son is present."

"Humph!" greeted the other. He was provoked at the apparent levity of the person chiefly concerned in the perplexities which weighed so heavily on his own thoughts.

"This affair of the mine must be arranged," he continued; "it is no use wasting time."

"A night off would not have made much difference. However, here we are now. Let's have it out. Are the drives clear?" Lyndon asked.

"As clear as they can be, until we get better machinery," returned the manager.

"Better machinery? It was only the other day this was purchased, and guaranteed to be powerful enough."

"It was not the other day; it was two years ago, and we had no idea of danger from these bursts."

"It's a deuced nuisance. I don't see my way. We can sell the present plant, I suppose?"

"Certainly; but selling and buying are very different operations," Berners replied.

"Of course we shan't get full value," Lyndon remarked. "Can't we postpone awhile? Next

year I shall be in a better position. Our new plan of shearing alongside of Fenner's will be advantageous to us. Save a fortune besides increasing the value of the wool."

"But the present question is, when shall you order fresh machinery," Berners persisted.

"When I can pay for it, man," cried Lyndon angrily.

"Well, I suppose you can pay for it one way or another, now. Delay is undoing all that has been done; throwing away a golden chance, in fact."

Lyndon made no reply. He rose, walked the length of the room, came back to the fire, filled and lighted his pipe; Berners watching with clouded countenance.

"You'd see things fairer, if you'd take a pipe," Lyndon remarked at last.

"I can't smoke when I'm bothered," said the other.

"That's just the right time; you want soothing."

"Soothing? Stuff; I want action—doing. We must go on. It's folly to let things slide; folly, madness, suicide," cried Berners in an ascending scale of intensity.

"Well, well; we haven't let things go very long at anyrate, it's only a week or so since you were able to get down."

"Arguing is useless. What will you decide on?"

"Decide! I hate deciding. What's your plan? I expect you've got one."

"There doesn't seem much opening for a plan," said Berners; "money must be raised, the simple question is—How?"

"Exactly, how?" echoed the other; he was tired of the business, languidly resenting the disturbance this gold seeking had brought into his easy pleasant life, yet lacking the resolution, or even the desire, to withdraw. When prospects were good, hope and expectation stimulated him, but when delay and difficulty had to be encountered, he inclined to roll the burden on the stronger will, himself drifting along with it. The manager perceived that the discussion was following the usual course, that he had but to suggest, and Lyndon would comply. Thus mollified, he became more sympathetic. "I do believe this disappointment actually troubles me more than it does you," he said, "I've thought of nothing else. I see only one outlet."

"Where?" asked the other shortly.

"The farm is unencumbered; though small, it is valuable."

"Raise another mortgage you mean; the money advanced on the home station is all thrown into that pit, and nothing to show for it."

"There is a great deal to show for it. We have made out which way the lead runs, the mine is opened, and now all we want is to clear it and get through that fault in the reef."

"You are really convinced of that?" asked Lyndon, his sanguine temperament beginning to reassert itself.

"As sure as one can be of anything," returned Berners.

"The farm is Mrs Lyndon's," her husband remarked.

"She will not object," Berners asserted. "She knows this is no child's play, that we must persevere."

"I'll see you to-morrow," said Lyndon; then, with more cordiality, "come to the drawing-room, won't you?"

"Not to-night. I can't throw off worry as you do."

Lyndon remained in the library, smoking and thinking—really thinking—that is, for him. He disliked trammelling his wife's property; neither could he accustom himself to these embarrassments so unexpectedly intruded on his prosperous existence. The strain had been gradually tightening during the past two years, almost ever since the golden prospects had opened before him. Until then his station had furnished ample means.

At first claims had been easily met by temporarily discounting a brilliant future; the present embryo of that future, however, showed a horse leech power of sucking up every avenue of supply; itself the while steadily eluding his grasp. And yet—and yet—it was impossible to stop now. It would be a work of years for the station alone to clear off his liabilities; even supposing they fixed their residence wholly at Wytha. There was no help for it—the farm must be mortgaged. Arrived at this point, Lyndon rose, shook himself, passed his hand over the unwonted pucker on his smooth brow and prepared to join his family. He had, however, lingered longer than he was aware. Voices in the hall and steps on the stairs told him that the party in the drawing-room had separated for the night.

Presently Wylie entered the library. "What is it, George?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Are they going to bed?"

"Yes. Fenner is tired with the long drive; so are the rest."

He lit his pipe and deliberately sat down.

"What has Berners to say about the mine?" he persisted.

"Don't bother, Hugh; it is no use," said the other.

"How do you know that? Two heads are better than one. Tell me."

Thus urged, Lyndon related the substance of the interview, ending with—"It is only a temporary pull after all. We shall laugh at this next year."

"I hope so," said Wylie gravely. Meanwhile it is very puzzling."

"You have always been prejudiced against this business," Lyndon remarked. Dissatisfied himself, he doubly resented an appearance of dissatisfaction in the other.

"I had misgivings about commencing it, but looking all round now I feel that, having begun, you must go through with it."

"That's the outcome of all our arguments; therefore it's no use bothering any more," Lyndon reiterated.

"No; but you must not touch May's property again. There is no occasion; I'll find the necessary money."

"You? Why you've sunk ever so much already in that bottomless pit. It's not to be thought of, Hugh. Good-night."

"I don't mean to say 'Good-night' until we've settled this. We can't afford to delay. Let

Berners go to town and see about the plant. Draw on me to meet the bills," said Wylie with quiet determination.

Lyndon objected for some time longer, but ultimately gave way, as was his custom; and Wylie left the house, engaged to supply the means of purchasing the requisite machinery.

## CHAPTER V

## THE FENNERS FAMILY

MR FENNERS was the owner of the station nearest to Wytha Wytha, and a neighbour of the Lyndons, as neighbours count in the bush. He belonged to the very limited class of men whom it used to be customary to differentiate as "born with a silver spoon in the mouth." Without effort on his part wealth rolled in on him; every affair he took in hand prospered, not because of any specially sagacious management, but apparently because it could not help it. He did not originate new enterprises or venture on far sighted speculations, but steadily plodded along—rich, satisfied, respectable. The family—father, mother, son and daughter—were not so much united as all of one piece. Of course they had a proper regard for each other, but beyond this there was a striking oneness of pattern. Good temper, agreeable manners, satisfaction with everything and everybody—themselves included—and an absolute conviction of the fitness, smoothness and perfection of circumstances in this best of all possible worlds. It could not be said that the family were optimists, or that they surveyed the world through rose-coloured spectacles, for they had no particular opinions, and it never occurred to any of them to take an independent outlook; their con-

victions were inherent — accepted as matters of course—just as their position and possessions were a part of the nature of things. Contented, cheerful, prosperous—an impressive warning to unfortunate people hampered with ideals—the Fenners family went on their way in life, having gotten much goods and a full share of the respect which much goods command. The juniors of the family were older than Edith Lyndon, and had the advantage of her in having made the tour of Europe and spent two whole summers in England. They considered it a duty to inspect everything, and consequently had been too busy to see much. Rushing from one sight to another they came back full of the delights of travel, and with an undisturbed faith in the general amenity of mundane conditions.

James Fenners, a tall, brawny, fresh looking young man of twenty-seven years, had lately considered that, in accordance with the accepted order of affairs it was advisable that he should take a wife. His perception on this point had been unusually quickened since Edith Lyndon's return to Wytha. He had been a frequent visitor there, and his sense of propriety had accordingly deepened into something approaching a really strong desire. His parents had long considered the suitability of such a marriage, though they were in no hurry to forward promising tendencies in that direction, which, according to their experience, were sure to appear at the proper time. James Fenners was of opinion that the proper time had arrived; he actually began to look forward a little, and made (almost for the first time in his life) a resolution that he would endeavour

to win Edith's regard and make her his wife while, as yet, there was no rival in the field, this unwonted commotion of his inner life having shaken his faith in the universally happy conjunction of circumstances. As for Edith, she had no inclination for James, or for anyone else. Lovers had not yet entered into her calculations. If she had been called upon to formulate her views on the subject she would probably have admitted that by-and-by, when she had seen the world and grown older, it might be "nice" to fall in love and marry like other people, but at present life had scarcely opened for her, and she fully proposed to enjoy the delights of the fairy vista, dimly seen in the future. Fanny Fenners, though her senior in years, possessed the non-angular temperament, which is always young. The girls chatted and laughed, recalled the pleasant past, projected themselves into a still brighter future, planning amusements, discussing social problems, riding and driving about the neighbourhood, making the most of the short winter days with their variable sunshine.

Mr Berners was in Melbourne where he proposed to remain a few days, after his business, in connection with the new mining plant, was completed, in order to meet his son on his return from Europe.

Tom Berners's pleasure at being at home again was very great. He was a genuine Australian—a native in feeling and habits, though not by actual birth; and, in his secret heart, preferred Australia to any other land. Almost his first words to his father, on landing, had expressed this. Four years

of absence seemed to have intensified, rather than weaned, his affection for the country as well as for the friends he had left in it; and whenever he had found himself in places of interest he accumulated mementoes of each suitable for his distant friends. A patent saddle and a pair of curiously mounted pistols for his father; the latest improvements in rifles for Mr Wylie; an album containing superb photos of the English cathedrals for his mother; a portfolio ornamented with Roman enamel, filled with engravings of the pictures and statues that had pleased him most, for Edith; Italian bric-a-brac for Mrs Lyndon; a stout English walking-stick, made and mounted in London, for her husband. Janet and Jim, with the farm servants and old station hands, were all remembered. On the night of his arrival he proudly exhibited such of these surplus stores as had been procured just before joining the steamer at Naples.

"I hope Mrs Lyndon will like those bronzes," he said; "and that portfolio for Edith, it's slightly gorgeous, perhaps; but I know she will like the engravings."

He had named his friends at Gorong and Wytha before, and his father had given news of them, between the process of hunting luggage, getting it passed out, and conveying it with themselves to the railway station. Among the rest Edith's name had been frequently mentioned. Now Mr Berners's habitual soreness against Fate disposed him to magnify incongruities; he looked at his tall, bearded son, sunburnt, easy mannered, presenting an aspect of manly independence, and it irked him

to observe this familiar mention of his employer's daughter.

"I would not call her Edith, if I were you, Tom," he said.

Tom opened his eyes. "Why not, father?" he asked, surprised.

"Miss Lyndon is quite the young lady now; she is grown up, you know."

Tom considered a moment. "Well she must be seventeen, now I think of it," he replied; "one can't fancy that bright child a grown woman. Dear me, is this the beginning of the changes people prophesy for the returning wanderer?"

"You've not been so long away as all that. Still I find it difficult to realise that you are a man, just as you remarked about Miss Lyndon's being a woman. I could shut my eyes and fancy you a noisy, restless boy."

"I feel like that, father. I want to jump and shout for very joy at being at home again."

"Pray don't. A fellow six feet high can't indulge in freaks, at least in an hotel."

Tom laughed. "I see," he said, "but tell me about Edith; is she tall? I am sure she is pretty."

"Miss Lyndon," Berners replied, with marked emphasis on the name, "is very much admired. Mrs Lyndon has become more of a town lady than she was when you left."

"Four years ago," Tom exclaimed; "it seems a long time, and of course there must be changes. I never anticipated them, though. I always thought of you all just as I left you."

"The changes are chiefly in appearance; but

the world is made up of appearances, you'll find, Tom," said his father.

Edith Lyndon had been part of Tom Berners's life. As a big schoolboy he had petted and patronised her, sharing many of her country pleasures during his holidays, astonishing her with thrilling tales of victory in the cricket field and hair breadth escapes on the river, not to mention "pommelling fellows," knocking down "cubs" and so on. Afterwards—when at the university—the distance between the under graduate of twenty and the school girl of thirteen was still more marked; of course he was not less fond of Edith—a dear, sunny child. Students' sisters are objects of interest at twenty; none of these, so far as he could see, surpassed Edith; in fact, he would back her to "take the shine" out of any of those girls who crowded the hall to witness the Latin play, but still she was a child, and he was—or thought that he was—a man; between twenty and thirteen the gulf is greater than it is between thirteen and thirty. Tom assumed airs of guardianship; when they rode together he was her protector, and her mentor when they worked or played together at Gorong, making "hard" sums come right, and volunteering free translations of her German. After it had been settled that he should go to Cambridge, they talked much of the proposed journey, and he promised to note all the objects of interest which she must visit when her turn came. This he had conscientiously done, and was prepared with advice as to the best seasons, and means of inspecting certain places. He felt it hard to be met with a reminder that she was

"Miss Lyndon," and grown up. Somehow a barrier was suddenly raised between them, and he was compelled to recognise that conditions were changed. He hoped she would not be "stand offish," "stuck up," he was sure she could not be; however, as his father had hinted, it might be well to be a little guarded; so Tom cogitated, and was rather silent during the remainder of the evening. His gaiety had received a check; however, next morning brought a revival, and they commenced the home journey in excellent spirits. His first evening was, of course, devoted to his mother; but next morning saw Tom early on his way to Gorong. He took the path that ran through a wooded paddock sloping down to the creek, remembering that Mr Wylie had been used to stroll thither often before breakfast. Suppose he should surprise him now, as he sat enjoying his morning pipe on the old stump among the bracken. Speculating on this probability the young man, avoiding the bridge, swung himself across by the aid of some overhanging branches and big boulders, and lighting on a tussock, climbed the bank. The movement disturbed Mr Wylie, who rose from his seat to peer between the bushes, and found himself saluted by a vigorous waving of the new comer's hat; before he could decide on his identity they were shaking hands and pouring out quite a volley of ejaculations, interrogations and expressions of gratification.

After a few moments they surveyed each other. "You are not altered, Mr Wylie," said Tom.

"I can't say that of you," returned the other; "what a tall fellow you've become, and broad-chested

too. I did not expect you would have filled out like that already."

"It's travel and idleness you know. I must buckle to now, and make up for my year's holiday."

"You worked pretty hard at Cambridge. I was glad you took your degree without any botching."

"It won't be much use to me. I mean to stick to engineering."

"What has cost effort is always useful; you never can foresee how useful anything may prove in the long run. Let us go in to breakfast. Janet will be delighted to see you again," said Wylie.

As they approached the cottage, they perceived two figures flitting in and out among the shrubs in the garden. "There's Edith and Fanny Fenners," cried Wylie, "they frequently come down to breakfast, when Lyndon and the rest have gone shooting early. Mrs Lyndon rarely appears before noon; so the girls come to brighten my table."

"By their presence, and by their offerings, it seems to me," Tom answered; "they're gathering flowers. I'm sure;" and he eagerly peered across the paddock. Wylie sent out a ringing coo-ee in the same direction.

"Who is that with Mr Wylie?" Fanny exclaimed. "Look, Edith, it's early for a stranger to pass this way."

"I don't recognise him," said Edith. "Stay, surely it must be Tom Berners. Mrs Berners told me she expected him early this week."

The girl stood watching; presently the young man left Mr Wylie to go round by the gate, and leaping the fence, came quickly towards them

Edith put out her hand, saying, "I should not have recognised you if we had met anywhere else; welcome back! How you have grown to be sure! Why didn't you tell us how tall you are?"

Although prepared for change, Edith's appearance upset Tom's calculations. A close fitting, dark winter dress set off her elegant figure and pure complexion; while the coronet of bright hair and dignity of the shapely head contrasting with the winning expression of her face, seemed at once to attract and command. Then suddenly a vision of the pretty child he had petted and played with rose to his memory; recollections of the past merged into a vivid consciousness of the present, and an unusual sensation of embarrassment stole over him.

It was but momentary. Provoked with himself, he threw it off, and said, "I might well reciprocate the question; you are surely more changed than I am."

Wylie broke in with "Well, children, you didn't expect to stand still, did you? Come in. Tom is ravenous; we're all ravenous."

"Now, then, for traveller's tales and a true and minute account of your doings," he resumed when they were seated, and preliminary disjointed queries had to be made and answered.

The young man was at ease again, and launched into a description of seeings and doings, which prolonged the meal beyond the limits of Janet's patience, who found a pretext for entering the room, and then hung about, speedily relapsing into her habit of mingled reproof and admiration of "Master Tom's" proceedings.

Edith, accepting her former playfellow's height, breadth and beard, fell back on their accustomed relations, relating various incidents which had occurred during his absence, interested in what he had to tell, and assuming a like interest on his part in their concerns. So Tom Berners was soon *au courant* of events, great and small, taking up his previous position in the little circle which had gathered (or grown) about the Wytha Wytha Station.

## CHAPTER VI

## THE POLO PICNIC

AFTER Tom Berners's return a Polo picnic was arranged, and enthusiastically hailed as a special dispensation in his favour. The party started off in merry mood, and after thorough justice had been done to early luncheon, that important item of the day's programme, the "families" dispersed about the many shady nooks, wooded knolls, deep gorges, and rocky cliffs with which this part of the range abounds. Then farmers, selectors and station people, male and female, gathered round the *al fresco* table; echoes of merry talk, interspersed with light laughter, floated about the hollow. Preparations for the match—(choosing sides, fixing the goal)—followed. Mr Lyndon was named judge, and Mr Fenners starter. The players all belonged to the same club, which happened to add zest to this friendly rivalry; as it certainly prolonged the game, the sides being very equally matched, and neither boasting any startlingly brilliant player. Towards the close of the game the contest, as usual, became hotter. James Fenners was nearest, the ball within his reach, and he stooped forward with uplifted mallet, when his pony suddenly swerved, destroying his rider's balance, and jerking one foot from the stirrup.

Berners, immediately behind him, was instantly beside the swaying rider, and Fenners righted himself in a moment; that scarcely perceptible pause had, however, been sufficient for Tom's mallet to catch the ball.

"You won," he said, handing it to Fenners, both at the goal.

"I should certainly have won," said the other, "but for this shying animal. I can't think what possessed him."

"My pony's fault," Tom explained; "he was too much excited."

The judge gave in favour of Fenners, and his side was declared victorious amid the cheers of their opponents, with one cheer to welcome Tom Berners home again.

It will be seen that the match was rather friendly than strict, strictness being reserved for the test match with the rival club. Owing to the lateness of the meeting that year some of the crack players were absent. However, those who attended gave in their adhesion to the Wytha theory, affirming the enjoyability of the outdoor excursions on a fine winter's day in that sheltered spot. The present had unquestionably been delightful, and after the excitement of the little incident with which the game closed, players and spectators trooped off to the dining-room of the Hollow, to be refreshed with a substantial afternoon tea preparatory to commencing their various homeward journeys by the brilliant light of an Australian full moon.

Mr Lyndon had rather envied his manager the privilege of being free to absent himself from the

polo picnic. The festivities jarred on him; he was out of tune, and would gladly have avoided them altogether had he not felt that it would be undesirable so to challenge observation.

Like many persons of sanguine temperament, beings entirely unused to the strain of continued anxiety, he readily succumbed to an experience which was not only foreign, but unnatural, to his disposition. He had but a choice of extremes—to forget or to be crushed. Hitherto the former had been easy; always—and with good reason—buoyed up by hope, so soon as immediate pressure was removed his spirit regained elasticity at a bound, and happy prospects of the future were not blurred by a somewhat misty present. Now, however, embarrassments were becoming chronic, and pressure was steadily tightening; the unlooked for obstacles, which had for some time hindered progress, had now culminated in the stoppage caused by the flooding of the mine; and, although Wylie's intervention had enabled him to procure new machinery without further burdening his property, unforeseen delays in preparing the ground and erecting the plant had heavily increased the current outlay for wages and necessary expenses, in spite of Berners's economical management and increasing vigour in pushing on the works, which indeed left him neither time nor inclination for his station duties.

Lyndon was too *distract* and restless to be his own manager, though occupation would have largely mitigated his trouble; so, at their joint request, Tom became overseer *pro tem.*, and found things by no means in the best order.

Ewes had been forgotten and left in marshy paddocks, and the lambing, which had already begun, was below the average. Shearing sheds, too, wanted repairs, and dams needed overhauling, so Tom had plenty to occupy him; he was surprised at the indications of relaxed attention, knowing how careful his father had always been, but he set to work zealously to mend matters, and was successful in saving the later lambs. The station hands liked working under him, and discharged their duties with greater energy; thus a few weeks' steady labour put the place "ship shape," as the men said, for the approaching shearing.

Wylie observed with pleasure this improvement in the management of the run. He had repeatedly tried to recall the attention, both of Lyndon and Berners, to the requirements of the station. The former had pooh-poohed, the latter resented, his interference; it was therefore a relief to him to find young Berners temporarily installed, and going about the business with his father's energy, plus a healthy, cheerful interest in what he had undertaken.

"I am glad to see you at this, Tom," Wylie remarked, one day, as they sat together at luncheon. (Being at that end of the run, the new overseer had dropped in at Gorong instead of going home to the farm.) "I was near the dam yesterday," Wylie continued; "and I rode across to have a look. I see you've got that awkward leakage stopped; I was afraid it would be necessary to upset the whole thing in order to get at it."

"Do you think it will stand if a flood should come down, say?"

"It will stand anything we are likely to have yet. The bad floods come later, you know. Where did you learn that plan of rigging up a faulty pump?"

"I noticed an arrangement on that principle on a co-operative farm in France. Our pump was terribly out of order. Considering one day how to fix it up I recollected what I had seen, and thought the principle could be applied with variations here. I hope it will answer, for this season at anyrate."

"No doubt of it. You like station business better than you formerly did?" Wylie asked.

"No; I am of the same mind. I prefer engineering. My father wants me to take to the land; says Wytha needs another head, and that I might gain experience here, and then take up a place for myself. Of course I'll stay for the present to please him; but I've no idea of making it a regular occupation. I suppose you believe in that gold business?" Tom added interrogatively.

"Yes, I believe the gold is there, but I wish with all my heart they had never thought of searching for it."

"It's wonderful how it engrosses both my father and Mr Lyndon."

"It is a perfect aurumania; and, like other manias, once it gets hold, there is no shaking it off," said Wylie.

"They expect to get on to it directly, I fancy," Tom remarked.

"It's about time," Wylie rejoined. "This sort of thing has been going on during the last three years. As ill luck would have it, a mining geologist came up, the year after you left, and he started the idea.

Lyndon brought an expert from Sandhurst. He agreed with the other, and the search was commenced."

"Well, I suppose it is all right," Tom replied. "There certainly is a peculiar fascination about gold seeking; it usually repays the trouble, too, doesn't it?"

"I am not sure that any amount of material success really compensates for the mental and moral outlay incurred; spiritual fibre is a kind of exchange that can't be equalised."

"People generally are scarcely of that opinion," said Tom. "Mental and moral fibre are pretty lavishly expended, and a tangible pocket of gold more than balances."

"Never take up that opinion, Tom," said Wylie seriously; "reverence your spiritual fibre; there lies your true manhood; avoid what threatens to soil or weaken it."

"I don't imagine gold seeking permanently injures anybody; it's absorbing work, but people come out right enough," the young man replied.

"All's well that end's well. Hey? How universally results guide judgment! Are you going?" Wylie continued; "I'll ride with you as far as the house. I promised to drive my cousin this afternoon."

Mrs Lyndon felt the change in her husband; she was loud in lamenting, and not slow to resent it. Their married life had hitherto been very free from disagreement; truly attached to one another, their dispositions harmonised, and prosperous circumstances averted occasions of discord, which had been

more numerous of late than at any previous period of their lives, whose even tenor indeed rendered present asperities harder to bear.

"I can't conceive what has come over George," Mrs Lyndon remarked, when the lodge gates had closed on the cart in which she sat by Wylie's side; "he is so silent, even morose; I threatened this morning to go off to town. Your home companions should at least be cheerful, if the country is to be tolerable."

"You see, May, he is worried about this machinery fitting; have patience a little longer; it will soon be all right again," Wylie pleaded.

"I've heard that for a long time, and I see no improvement; on the contrary, things get worse," she declared.

"I know it is very trying; we must make the best of it. Have patience," he repeated.

"That is always your cry, Hugh. It is not so easy for a woman. Men have plenty to occupy them. What is there for us, in a lonely place like this, when one's own people grow unsociable—not to say ill-tempered?"

"George is not ill-tempered; he may be irritable just now. There has been much to worry him, as you are aware."

"I can't do any good here, so I mean to return to town," Mrs Lyndon announced. "He has always gone with us, but to-day he told me plainly that he would not leave Wytha until that horrid machinery was started again; as if Mr Berners was not worrying enough over it."

"George is right," returned Wylie; "he ought

not to leave while it is in process of erection. Mr Berners is thoroughly to be relied on, no doubt, but two heads are better than one; besides, the master's eye counts for something."

"Then you support him. It is too bad. Neither of you consider me," cried the lady.

"You know the contrary, May. You are George's first thought, and, next to Edith, mine also," Wylie protested.

"There is Edith, too," the lady continued; "she ought to see the world. We can't keep her cooped up here."

"Plenty of time. Where is she? I thought she was coming with us," cried Wylie.

"James Fenners and his sister have come to stay a few days again. I'm glad she has companions. They have gone across to see Mrs Berners."

Wylie's representations somewhat mollified his cousin's indignation. She returned to the house in better spirits, and even promised to postpone her departure until the mine was at work again, on the understanding that Mr Lyndon would then accompany her.

## CHAPTER VII

TOM BERNERS

FROM the heights of the bald hill, on the same afternoon, Tom Berners observed the arrival of his mother's visitors.

"How Edith can talk to that fellow as she does I can't make out," he thought as he watched the party enter the farm precincts. "What on earth she sees in him—a thick-headed fool!"

Tom was not often so severe, but he was provoked just now. The two ladies and their cavalier were evidently enjoying each other's company. His first impulse was to descend and join them, but he recollected that the men to whom he was going would then disperse to their huts, without the necessary inspection of certain works. For a moment he hesitated, then hurried off to keep his business appointment. That finished, he pushed across to intercept the party on their homeward walk. When he again caught sight of them they were passing through the farm garden, and Edith was in the act of receiving a small bouquet which James offered. With a gracious smile she accepted the flowers, stopping to fasten them at her throat. They did not observe Tom. A thrill of hot anger rose in his breast—a passion of jealousy which for the moment mastered him. He stood still, struggling for self-control.

Miss Fenners perceived him. "Mrs Berners is expecting you at home early this afternoon," she cried.

The Fenners's obtuseness noticed nothing, and Tom recovered sufficient equanimity to salute the party with a hasty "Good afternoon;" diving immediately into the bush beyond, as if in hot pursuit.

"What a hurry he is in!" Fanny Fenners remarked.

"Heading a stray beast, I expect," her brother replied.

Edith said nothing; she had met Tom's eye for a second, as he hurried past; his glance of reproachful appeal, strangely recalled a long forgotten incident; she was not conscious of having ever thought of it since, now the scene suddenly rose before her. She saw herself, a little girl sobbing bitterly, and—in the intervals of her grief—calling with outstretched arms to a favourite parrot which had escaped from its cage, and was perched on the topmost branch of a great tree on the further side of the swollen creek.

The bird had been her first pet, and—half beside herself with grief—she had followed it to the water's edge; Fanny Fenners—a bigger girl than herself—vainly trying to comfort her with the promise of a prettier bird. In the midst of this trouble—the two boys—James and Tom, appeared on the scene, returning from a neighbouring store, then used as a post-office, whither they had been to fetch the Wytha post-bag. Observing the girl's distress, they scrambled down the bank, shouting, "What's the little one crying for?"

"My Polly, my pretty Polly!" Edith sobbed, running to Tom, and pointing to the bird. Both boys began to take off their boots.

"I'll get it; don't cry, Edith, said Tom, proceeding to remove his jacket.

"No; I'm the biggest. I can get it quickest," James interposed; and the little girl, considering the tallest lad most likely to be successful in recapturing the bird, elected that James should be her champion. Then Tom had walked off alone, turning upon her just such a look as she had seen in his eyes again that afternoon.

The big boy breasted the current bravely, reaching the opposite side in safety, and made several attempts to climb the smooth trunk of a tall white gum, the lower branches of which had been lopped off. Among the topmost boughs sat the bird, calmly surveying his approaching captor, whom he soon recognised as an old friend, and commenced accordingly to display his accomplishments, saluting him with a shrill, "Who are you?" "Don't you wish you may get it?" and so on; James, numbed with cold, making vain attempts to reach him. Then Tom, who had been hiding in the scrub, came down again, and, before the girls had noticed him, was across the stream.

"Have a cup of tea, Tom?" cried the bird. It was his final bit of bravado; the boy clutched him, and holding his prize aloft, ran at full speed to the bridge below, followed by James. When the girls met them, Tom triumphantly restored the bird, and was rewarded with "You dear boy!" as the quivering lips were held up to his.

Walking homewards with the same friends on that winter afternoon, so many years after this little incident, it rose vividly to Edith's memory, and she was very silent, absently responding to her companions' talk.

"I am afraid you're very tired," James said.

"I'm sure I am," his sister remarked.

"We ought to have taken the ponies," Edith rejoined, glad of the excuse offered for her changed manner. Then she made an effort, partly to entertain her guests, and partly to put aside an importunate question. "What if the little child's lips could have again been offered? Would that reproachful look have gone out of Tom's eyes then?"

She thrust the thought away from her; but it recurred again and again, leaving an unwonted sense of mental disturbance that surprised and annoyed her.

"Let us have a rest before dinner," Fanny exclaimed, when they reached the house.

"I'll send tea to your room," said Edith, "I shall follow your example."

"Leaving a fellow all alone," James grumbled.

"You can have a smoke, and go down to the gully. Father will be about leaving now," Edith suggested.

"A poor substitute! Lyndon is not himself nowadays," the young man muttered.

Not, however, being fond of his own society, he followed her advice, and betook himself to the Gully Mine.

The starting of the new machinery created quite a sensation in the little circle; everyone had sensibly

or insensibly felt the tension of the late suspense; besides, many were personally interested—in a greater or less degree—in the success of the enterprise. Free as James Fenners was from the faintest tendency to speculation, he had begged to be allowed to hold a few promoter's shares in the company which it was intended to form; his action being prompted solely by a desire to associate himself with the concerns of the Lyndon family.

Wylie had risked a considerable sum in the venture; in fact, for the first time in his career as a squatter, he had forestalled the profits of his annual cattle sales. Berners identified himself with the mine, chiefly from a zealous sympathy; on the monetary side he was very slightly involved, not considering himself justified in withdrawing safer, if less tempting, investments. There were, consequently, a variety of reasons for the general interest taken in the recommencement of work at the Gully Mine.

Even Mrs Lyndon and Edith shared the excitement and agreed to be present at the opening, Tom Berners and James Fenners took an active part in preparations for fitly celebrating the occasion, and were sanguine in their prognostications of approaching success. Fanny, too, caught the general enthusiasm, and readily prolonged her visit in order to be present on the eventful day. Hitches of one kind or another delayed it more than once, but at last everything was ready, and a little before noon a somewhat heterogeneous party assembled at the mine.

It was a bright spring day. Warm rays of

quivering light from the vertical sun darted among the wooded heights that encircled the gully; rich greens of foliage and brilliant greens of vegetation contrasted with reddish brown gravel and yellowish white pipeclay, intermixed with shining mullock streaked quartz. Ceaseless murmur of the creek below and windy sough of the trees above mingled with the twitter or scream of birds, drowsy lowing of cattle and murmuring buzz of insect life. Through all rose the sound of human voices, rough and gentle, tone of command and sturdy response among the workers, light laughter and interested observation from the spectators.

Presently a significant silence, broken by the sharp click of a crank and the engine's piercing shriek; then the whirr of machinery, instantly drowned in a loud "Hurrah!" "Hurrah again!" "Three cheers for the Gully Mine," "Cheers again for her plucky owner." The great trees above, swaying majestically in the breeze, echoed back the shouts, and the pulsations of the solemn forest seemed quickened to take part in the general rejoicing.

Soon men emerged from the mine, donned their jackets, and stood in line headed by Mr Lyndon and his manager. Wylie and the younger men grouped about the ladies. Station hands from Wytha and Gorong occupied the background, crowding round the rugged edge of the bare crevasse, which sloped downward between high wooded ridges, rising on the opposite side, and undulating onwards towards the mount, which stood out, a dark wall, against the horizon.

The excited human company and ugly mining appliances which occupied the gully appeared as incongruous intruders, vulgarising this mighty solitude; and the great sun, advancing on his westward course, left them in shadow, throwing the full brilliance of his rays on the forest expanse beyond.

But the practical and commonplace was amply vindicated when vessels of various shapes and sizes appeared, gathering round baskets of champagne and barrels of ale. The gentlemen busied themselves in filling and distributing. Tom and young Fenner approached the ladies with a fizzing bottle, begging them to ensure good luck by joining in the toast, roared forth in stentorian tones: "Success to the Great Wytha Consols."

Enthusiasm is contagious, especially when combined with beer, so the toast evoked a fresh outburst, under cover of which Mrs Lyndon retired.

Something in the scene, the circumstances, or in herself (she could not tell which) touched a chord in Edith Lyndon's nature, and her eyes filled with tears as she prepared to follow her mother.

Tom was immediately at her side. "The noise has been too much for you," he said; "let me help you up the ascent."

"I don't know why, but the enthusiasm of a crowd always upsets me," she replied. "I'm not sorry and I'm not glad, only excited, too, I suppose."

"There is something very moving in the emotion of a number of one's fellow creatures," he remarked; "I have felt it at the stir of passion in a large assembly. Is it an unconscious sense of human powerlessness and vacillation?"

"Vacillation? Yes; I was thinking all those people could not really care so much as they seemed to do."

"They are in earnest for the moment, but unreliable—like the rest of us," the young man said.

"Everybody is not unreliable," the girl declared, vaguely aware of a mixed negative.

"Perhaps not. Why, indeed, should you think otherwise? The rough teachings of life are not for you."

There was a tender cadence in the low tones of his voice that vibrated through his companion's soul, and held back a question which she had intended to ask as to why he absented himself so frequently of late. She had complained, not long before, that he neglected his old friends, and he had put forward excuses about the engrossing work of the station. Edith, however, felt that reason did not account for a certain restraint and guardedness apparent in his manner when he did come among them.

The truth was that after the meeting at the garden gate of the farm he had taken himself severely to task, for he had discovered that he loved this girl, not as his child playmate and companion, but as the one woman in the world for him.

Of course he was a blockhead and an ass, that went without saying, though he repeated it many times; the heiress of Wytha and Gorong—the only child of his father's employer—it would be dishonourable even to try to win her love; besides it was plain that she liked James Fenners, who could offer her the position to which she was entitled.

It was better to face facts. What had he, Tom

Berners? Very little except a clear brain, strong hands and—a courageous heart he would have said, but now that last seemed gone—melting away in a sort of unmanly hopelessness. Honour, however, remained; he would guard his secret and avoid the sweet presence which he found was dearer to him than life. Edith wondered at the change, was resentful, uneasy. Now the expansion of the moment seemed to have restored the free hearted Tom of former days, and yet she was secretly conscious of a difference which restrained that open communication hitherto common between them.

She knew that he was looking into her face with an eager gaze, she felt his hand tremble as he helped her across a rough place, and yet she could not break the spell that held them silent.

It seemed hours, though in reality only a few minutes had passed since he had remarked that "the rough teachings of life" were not for her.

At length she summoned her spirit. Why should she be afraid to say anything to Tom? Then aloud, with an effort, "You are different; why have you altered to us?" she asked.

"Altered?" he repeated her word; "yes, to myself; never to you. Remember that. Always your —"

"Mrs Lyndon is becoming impatient; she sent me to look for you," cried James Fenners, from the shelving bank above them, over which he was forcing his way. "You had better go round, it is too steep here," he added.

"No," said Edith, regaining her courage immediately; "I'll climb up; we have often done it."

James stretched out his hand, but Tom was before him. Casting restraint to the winds, he swung her up the bank quite in the old style. A bright colour came to her cheek as she laughingly thanked him, declaring that she loved a scramble as much as ever.

Fenners looked grave; he did not approve of the position somehow, though he saw no reason why he should not. He made several attempts to occupy his usual place at Edith's side, but Tom was reckless, snatch the happy present he would, though he knew the ego within would extort a merciless penance. So he held his ground, taking part in the conversation with much of his accustomed spirit, and accompanying the ladies to their home.

During the walk they discussed a suggestion previously made by Fanny Fenners. "A surprise party," she remarked, "would be just a suitable finale to our visit this winter."

"They are very pleasant in the country; don't you think so, Mrs Lyndon?" James added.

"Let us descend on Cousin Hugh to-morrow evening," cried Edith; "it will be fun. What will Janet say?"

"We must get some others, you know," said James; "I'll undertake to rout up the Warroo people, calling in at Yamby," Tom proposed. "You could go in the opposite direction, Fenners."

"All right," said James; "we shall shepherd them along."

"You had better say Friday," Mrs Lyndon suggested. "Cousin Hugh stays at home that evening to receive reports from the out-stations."

"The very day before we go home. A splendid wind up," exclaimed Fanny.

Thus it was arranged that the Wytha season (as Wylie called it) should close with a surprise party at the bachelor's house.

## CHAPTER VIII

### "A PROPOSAL"

THE uncomfortably charged social atmosphere had cleared; prospects at the mine were encouraging, and Lyndon's spirits rose proportionately. His sanguine disposition reasserted itself. Even Berners relaxed. His son's presence and favourable indications at the works combined to lift the cloud under which he usually lived. Mrs Lyndon was pleased at the near prospect of returning to Melbourne. Edith shared her mother's agreeable anticipations, and all the more heartily because everybody else appeared to be relieved and cheerful. Wylie intended to accompany the Lyndons, his annual visit to town being nearly due.

The Fenners of course were happy and satisfied. James, indeed, had lately fallen short of the family standard, for doubts would occasionally intrude concerning Edith's attitude towards him. There were times when he felt unsettled, disturbed—an unprecedented experience for him. Mental debate ensued. Should he speak to Edith before she left Wytha, or wait for an opportunity in Melbourne? After a while he determined to consult her father, who quickly relieved the lover's mind by deciding the question for him; and although a final settlement was indefinitely postponed, it was, at anyrate, a

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present relief to know himself obliged to let the matter glide for a while. After making Fenners clearly understand that such was his only course just now, Mr Lyndon had hurried off to his wife.

"You've no idea how annoyed I am, Mary," he said, "surprised, thunderstruck in fact; you will never guess what has happened."

Mrs Lyndon looked up quickly. "I hope nothing is wrong at the mine," she remarked.

"No, no; I would not disturb you by naming what that young fellow has been saying, only perhaps it's as well now that Edith is going into society."

"Edith? Young fellow?" echoed the lady. "Is it James? He has proposed for her then."

"God bless my soul! You don't mean to say you expected it," cried the father; "the poor, dear child. I was never more astonished in my life."

"Then you had better get used to it, George; you'll have plenty of surprises of that sort now. Edith is no longer a child, and she grows more beautiful every day. Of course you put James off; at least for the present."

"I told him it was not to be thought of; and when he pressed for some kind of promise, I could only think of the old-fashioned period of probation; so I said, wait a year and see how things shape."

"He will have to wait longer than that," Mrs Lyndon replied; "we shall take her to Europe. It is more than probable that she will make a much better marriage."

"You, May, of all women," cried Lyndon. "Surely you are not going to turn out a match-making mother. My poor little Edith, our own sweet pet."

"You need not bewail her, nor fear for me," his wife rejoined. "I shall never become a husband hunter. Still it is right that the girl should have a chance of settling well in life."

Lyndon sighed. Like fathers generally he had never realised that his little girl had grown to be a woman; now he perceived it as a distasteful fact suddenly forced upon him.

"Settling," he echoed, "we need not contemplate that for many a long day," relapsing into his habit of postponing the disagreeable.

"I wish James had held his tongue, though," he added.

"I will speak to him," said Mrs Lyndon; "and make him understand that she is not to be disturbed at present. And George, as we're on the subject, I may as well say, I shall be specially glad to get her away this year. Now that Tom Berners has returned there must be less intimacy in that direction."

"Tom? he's a sort of foster brother, has not a notion of this kind of thing," Mr Lyndon exclaimed.

"Perhaps not. I had misgivings months ago; now I begin to think I was mistaken. However, we are leaving next week, and I shall take care to avoid him in town."

"One does not like the idea of avoiding Tom, but if I thought—pooh! it's altogether out of the question."

The master of Wytha went off, musing dubiously on the perplexities of circumstances; and wondering why things did not always move smoothly.

Mrs Lyndon had spoken to Fenners, settling his mental questionings, and so obliging him to fall back

on congenial proclivities and swim quietly with the stream, upheld by faith in his usual good fortune.

Thus all were prepared to take part in the Gorong festivity, arrangements for which brought the young people together again, and broke down the unacknowledged shyness that had been growing up between them.

Tom threw great energy into his efforts to make the surprise party a success. Edith should carry away the happiest recollections of this year's sojourn at Wytha; on that he was determined. As for himself, he would pay for this indulgence, he was well aware of that; indeed, it would be rather a satisfaction than otherwise. If he could not call it vicarious suffering, at least his heart pain would—in a sense—be for her sake, so the expectation was not wholly bitter; he let himself go; the future must bring separation and retribution, but at least they would share the happy present.

Mr Wylie usually dined at home on Friday, it being late before the overseer came in from his out station. He was sitting quietly smoking—a book and decanter on the small table at his elbow, when the sound of wheels broke the evening silence. A twinkle in his eye, as he looks up, endorses the suspicion of collusion previously awakened by Janet's frequent visits to the door, and extra fussiness of manner.

Wylie lays aside his pipe, and opens the window. It had been a warm spring day, now the moon's radiance floods the brown garden paths, with a wondrous whiteness; mysterious shadows flit in and out among the trees, shafts of light dart about the

verandah, printing a mosaic of flickering trellis, and flowering trailers on the walls of the cottage.

Suddenly the solemn moon temple is transformed into a fairyland of glowing eyes; twinkling sparks light up the trees and bushes and border the drive from the large gates, focussing into a blaze of brilliant illumination on the spacious verandah, where a figure moves rapidly from post to post.

"It's you—is it? you young magician?" Wylie calls out.

A low titter—and "Oh! Master Tom, he spied you," in Janet's voice. The first carriage passes through the gates, and Tom vigorously applies the handle of his riding whip to the open front door.

Wylie comes forward to welcome his guests.

Soon the long, low sitting-room resounds with merry laughter and lively talk, seats spring up, as if by magic for the ladies. Gentlemen stand about, stooping over chairs, leaning against the bookcases, or passing from one group to another.

Presently sounds of music are heard, and Tom Berners—in his character of master of the ceremonies—whispers Mr Wylie, who approaches Mrs Lyndon and asks the honour of her hand for the opening quadrille. The company pass through the French windows to the wide verandah, now transformed into Aladdin's palace, each scented climber swaying in the light air becomes a will-o'-the-wisp; banners of wandering branches float rhythmically with the movements of the company.

The impromptu musicians make up for lack of power by the energy of their inspiring strains.

Gaiety and friendliness rule the moment, a

pleasant neighbourly warmth mingles with that charm of simplicity which hangs about bush surroundings; enhancing—not obtruding—the refinement and culture nowhere more apparent than in the homes of many Australian squatters.

Tom Berners was the soul of the party; he had his trouble, poor fellow, but choked it down as most of us often do, with other skeletons in the closet of our hearts, to be accounted for by and by. His zeal to procure a plethora of illumination had prompted a ride to a distant town in order to procure a number of coloured lamps, and had lost him the chance of securing Edith for the first dance, James Fenners having, of course, stepped in. When Tom returned late that afternoon he called at Wytha on his way to Gorong, under pretence of getting advice as to the disposition of the lights, and had then managed to snatch a moment alone with Edith. "You'll give me the first dance?" he begged. The girl looked as vexed as even he could desire.

"I'm so sorry," she said; "but James made me promise." Then, seeing how his countenance clouded, she added, "you should have spoken before . . . Tom."

Mr Berners's suggestion as to the use of her Christian name had naturally induced a certain shyness in connection with it which had insensibly influenced the girl also, so that she avoided the familiar address without, however, adopting the formal prefix. Now her friendly use of the former soothed Tom's ruffled feeling, and though he dared not trust himself to thank her, he felt a pleasant warmth and release from restraint stealing over him.

"Why did I mind about these lanterns?" he said. "I certainly did not calculate on being absent so many hours. Now I have lost my chance by it you see."

"I can give you the second dance, and one other during the evening," she replied.

"The second, and the last, may I say?" he urged.

Edith nodded. "A thousand thanks," he exclaimed more earnestly than the occasion seemed to warrant.

"Are you going to fix those lamps?" Mrs Lyndon interposed.

"Yes, I must be off to have all ready for you," said Tom, bowing himself out.

When the host had done his duty by opening the ball with Mrs Lyndon they both retired, with other seniors, to the whist tables arranged in the sitting-room. Dancing was kept up by the young people with great spirit, and a real enjoyment, which is sometimes lacking in more pretentious gatherings, an enjoyment partly due to the pleasant exercise itself, and partly to the charm of social intercourse to which it so readily lends itself.

An *al fresco* supper and a couple more dances brings the evening to a close. A popular valse has been reserved for the last—a sort of stirrup cup—before separating.

As the favourite strain sounds out partners are quickly sought, and the floor is soon crowded. Tom has some difficulty in piloting his partner, though both are good dancers, and move as by one impulse. Amid the general buzz of talk they are silent. The young man cannot bring himself to ordinary topics.

To-night is for him a supreme moment.

Not conscious of any presentiment of evil, something still whispers that here and now is the end of the free and happy days they two have passed together. Before the future hangs a cloud, whose enveloping folds strike chill at his heart; instinctively he clasps Edith closer, and draws her on with increased rapidity.

"Stop; I'm out of breath," she said at last.

"Forgive me; you are tired. Have I hurt you? I think I must be mad." He blurted out the words with short gaps between each abrupt sentence, then recovering himself, added more quietly, "I beg your pardon. Was I very rough? lean on me."

"Oh, no!" said the girl, "only a little out of breath; but you were going at a terrific pace you know."

"Was I? I am sorry. I was thinking, I wished that valse could last for ever."

"In that case, don't you think we should be awfully wearied?" she asked, laughing.

"Shall we ever have another valse," Tom continued, ignoring her question, as if he were thinking aloud.

"Why not?" she asked, "you will be in town as you used to be, I suppose pretty often."

"I don't know. It seems to me there is nothing beyond to-night." Then feeling himself perilously near a folly which he had resolutely abjured, he pulled himself together saying, "we always miss you so much; one feels sorry when the Wytha season closes."

It was but a grim attempt at lightness; and Edith

answered gravely—as to the thought discerned behind the words.

“I am sorry, too, when I am at Wytha, I would like to stay; and when I am in town I like to stay there.”

“But you do not like town as well as Wytha?” Tom questioned sharply.

“No; Wytha is home; and there is Cousin Hugh, and Mrs Berners—and you.”

“Me? Do I count? Ah, if I could hope that——”

The music stopped, suddenly it seemed to Tom, though in reality the valse had outrun its usual times.

The blood rushed to his forehead; had he betrayed his secret? Had he flung that mad hope into the silence that followed the cessation of the music? He glanced almost fearfully at his companion; her calm look reassured him. “I was going to say,” he continued, a little awkwardly, “that when I come to Melbourne it must be to begin work in earnest.”

“You do not mean to take up land then?” she asked.

“If I did, it would have to be in the far north, and engineering would be very useful there; irrigation is a necessity in that part of the country you know.”

“Of course, you will come to us, as you always did, when you come to Melbourne,” Edith was saying, when Wylie came up.

“Scenes that are brightest soonest fade,” he hummed. “Mrs Lyndon is in this case the instru-

ment of destiny; she says it is time to go, and waits for you young folks”—addressing Edith and Fanny, who was standing among a group near.

A chorus of—“That breaks up the party!” was met by—“And quite time, too,” from the elders, emerging from the card room.

Carriages blocking the way and horses straining at their bridles necessitated hasty leave takings. Tom, master of himself now, and resolved to hold his own this once, kept Edith’s hand close within his arm, took her wraps from Fenners, insisted on arranging them, and altogether appropriated her until he had placed her beside her mother and Fanny in the carriage. Then Nemesis swiftly overtook him, for he saw James jump in, and his sister make room for him immediately opposite Edith.

“Your surprise party has been a success. Come in, and have a quiet smoke,” Mr Wylie said, putting his hand on the young man’s shoulder. There was something in the touch which suggested to Tom that his friend’s eye had been on him. Half reluctantly he followed to the house.

Wylie, however, commenced to speak of the evening’s festivity, interspersing comments on the quality of his tobacco, and such like sedative topics.

The other’s blood grew cool, and he began to feel a little ashamed of himself, for he knew that he had been on the point of abandoning his resolution. During the last few weeks he had repeatedly told himself that it would be selfish to disturb this girl—barely on the verge of womanhood—and unmanly to take advantage of their childhood close association to win affections, which,

as yet, had but few opportunities of expansion. Not even a prospect of success would, he felt, justify his suit until he had a more assured position to offer, and her inclinations had also been fairly tested. Besides, what folly to argue the subject when she probably preferred James, and any advance on his own part must entail the suspicion of interested motives.

Such thoughts again passed rapidly through Tom's mind between the pauses of Wylie's desultory talk.

"James means to look up that station of his out north, I hear," the latter after awhile remarked.

"Does he? I thought he was going to town," Tom replied.

"He has altered his plans. You have not been together as much as you used to be lately," Wylie said.

"Perhaps not. I am disappointed, surprised I should say, at some things about Fenner's," remarked Tom, rather vaguely.

"The quips and cranks of humanity are always surprising. Even we old people, who ought to be up to it all, are continually finding that out. However, James is little changed. A good fellow, as he always promised to be," said Wylie.

"He is rich; the terms are synonymous," Tom grunted.

"Of course with me," the other interjected.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Wylie; I did not mean with you."

"It is Fenner's then who is responsible for your sudden conversion to Mammon worship?" asked

Wylie; "for a rich man of mediocre character he is as little purse proud as any one I have met."

"A rich man of mediocre character," repeated Tom; "that's just it, his riches give him confidence."

"A legitimate attribute of riches. Rely upon it, whenever results are generally accepted, there is some reason behind," Wylie declared.

"Then you consider riches a sufficient ground for presumption?" the young man queried.

"That depends upon what the particular kind of presumption may be. But let that lie," Wylie continued; "James asked me if I thought you would go with him as a working partner in the station."

"I! certainly not. He could not really desire it."

"Why not?" asked the other; "it seems very natural that two lads brought up together should carry their mutual confidence into the business of life. You have not got James' money, and he has not got your ability or force of character. Why not swop, as you swopped marbles a few years ago?" Wylie asked.

"It is not to be thought of," Tom reiterated.

"Well, hear me out," Wylie interrupted; "I expect you have made a pretty large hole in that money your mother's parents left you."

"Oh! I'm poor enough, if that's what you mean," cried Tom.

"I mean precisely what I say," the other persisted. "Your college expenses and trip to Europe must have absorbed a considerable portion of your

own money; still you could put a working partner's share into the station; there would be no obligation. In fact, James considers the brains and energy you can supply a fair equivalent for the capital he furnishes. This really seems to me to offer you an excellent start in life."

"I want no start that he can offer. He is rich, I am poor; our ways are separate. What does it matter? It will be all the same a hundred years hence." Tom shook the ashes from his pipe, making a great show of carelessness, until he met Wylie's eye fixed upon him with a disturbed expression of sorrow and disappointment, then his own fell; he rose up and turned towards the fire, staring moodily into it.

"Be a man, Tom; look things in the face; it is always the first wound that smarts most. My boy, I'm sorry indeed. I was a fool not to have foreseen this," cried Wylie.

"Don't fear for me, sir, I can bear my own smart. What I can't bear is to see a cold-blooded fellow like Fenner's expecting to win her."

"There is no question of winning in any case at present," said Wylie; "Edith must see the world and have a chance of learning her own mind. She is too young in spirit—if not in years—to be disturbed yet."

"Since you have found me out, Mr Wylie, I should like you to be sure that I never intended—or even desired—that she should know my feelings. I should not have known them myself if Fenner's pretensions had not been so apparent."

"Look here, Tom, it's better for you to under-

stand, once for all, that neither of you have the smallest chance."

"I never supposed I had; only I could not tolerate that he——"

"Never mind, James," Wylie interrupted. "Make a determined effort to forget all this. It's ill beginning life with a sore heart."

"I shall carry a sore heart all my days; but it will not make me less courageous, I hope."

"Most of us have said that sort of thing," replied the elder man. "I know it's no use my telling you that eternally sore hearts are about as rare as broken ones. Yes, yes! I understand, our own are always the exceptions. As I said before, I am truly distressed that this should have happened. I blame myself, too."

"You need not do that, Mr Wylie; hopeless as I am I would not exchange my feelings to-night for those of six months ago."

"Don't brood; accept the inevitable," returned Wylie.

"It shall not overwhelm me, more I can't promise," Tom replied.

"Beware of exaggerated views, either of your own position or of any other person's," Wylie remarked. "I verily believe exaggerated views do more harm than false ones; they flood the whole nature with unhealthy sentiment. Now again with regard to James, you are in the same boat; don't you think you might reconsider his proposal?"

"I could not endure it. If he has any true instinct he must have some idea of my feelings. I wonder at his making such a proposal."

"Occupation is the best of medicines," said the other oracularly.

"So soon as my father can spare me I mean to be off to work. I'll try not to disappoint you, Mr Wylie," Tom declared.

"I shall find you here when I return from Melbourne?" Wylie asked.

"Yes, I can't leave while my father is so engaged at the mine."

This talk with his old friend did Tom good. He had taken out his skeleton and faced it, and though put back, deep down in his heart of hearts, it was less bare and chilly, warmer in the tenderness of a sweet sorrow, tending to ennoble the nature, with which it was bound up.

"If she ever comes to know my love," he thought, "she shall know too, that I have never shamed it. If I cannot win, I will at least show myself worthy to have loved her."

Wylie had accompanied Tom to the gate; afterwards he strolled about awhile, musing (as occasions not seldom led him to do) on the process of disenchantment, as thus:

"After all," he thought, "I envy the lad. What did he say? Rather bear the smart than return to negative quietude. Yes, yes, the old story; what a pity it does not last! Will it though in this case? May was handsome, she took you by storm; you fell in love and knew it, too, no mistake about that; but this lassie steals into your heart; you don't suspect what is going on until she is fairly in possession. That sort may be harder to dislodge. I am vexed for that boy; we ought to

have foreseen it. I hope Edith is not hit. He will be the better though for having aired his trouble. I have not liked his look lately while he has been damming it up; too much of his father. Well! well, he and I have talked most things over during these years; never dreamt of this topic though. Wish he'd gone with James, 'twould have been good for both. Glad I spoke out; no secrets now. If he were in a better position now—Pshaw! Castle building; nonsense."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE THREE CORNERED PADDOCK

THE summer that year was unusually wet. At Christmas the country was flooded; then hot weather set in, and Melbourne went out of town. The Lyndons departed to Hobart where the season was in full swing. Mrs Lyndon was convinced that her husband needed complete change.

"Your father is not himself," she said to Edith; "we must make him come with us. If he goes up to Wytha he'll be worried to death. Mr Berners is always writing; he fidgets unreasonably about that mine. Your father is taking the infection."

"I wish that mine had never been thought of," Edith replied; "father is different. Sometimes so depressed, then again in high spirits."

"When he is too far away to be running up and down he will be able to throw off the worry," Mrs Lyndon declared.

The wife carried her point, and, much to his manager's disgust, Lyndon accompanied his family to Tasmania.

The previous three months had been passed in continued oscillations between hope and disappointment. Sometimes they were on the verge of realising their brightest expectations, then came the check, with more weary weeks of suspense; and through

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all, above all, was the incessant drain of money, increasingly difficult to provide, for carrying on the works. Advances were raised in every possible direction, involvement grew deeper and deeper; and as entanglements multiplied, it became imperative to keep up, even to heighten, the indications of wealth and prosperity which had hitherto distinguished the Lyndon *ménage*. Thus the husband not only acquiesced in, but even instigated, the lavish expenditure which his wife deemed suitable to their position; and Mrs Lyndon's dinners, balls and afternoon receptions were among the most brilliant in a really brilliant society.

Wylie looked on in perplexity. Once again he ventured a remonstrance, but was met by an outburst of angry desperation that left in his mind a terrible dread.

Station work that year demanded more than ordinary attention; heavy rains, succeeded immediately by warm sunshine, combined to produce a luxuriant growth, which necessitated careful watching against fires. Disease among the flocks was prevalent in the district, resulting from damp land and abundant feed. Thus Tom Berners was kept busy, visiting the stock, changing their quarters, in the saddle from morning to night; and it was largely owing to his care and forethought that the station had been able to support the strain put upon it by its owner.

A few weeks after the Lyndons' departure to Tasmania Mr Berners remained one evening very late at the gully works. He watched the night shift go on, and lingered until he was satisfied that

the nature of certain fresh indications would require further time to develop. Leaving at length, long after his usual hour, he hurried homeward by a short cut across the run, taking advantage of a brilliant moon to push through a rough, scrubby enclosure, known as the Three Cornered Paddock. This was really a part of the farm property, though it adjoined the Wytha Station on two sides, the third running down to a point abutting on to the road leading from the creek to the farm garden.

The land here consisted chiefly of loose boulders or stony light soil, covered with a tangle of wild geranium and coarse bracken, growing among broken rocks and knotted roots of old trees. Though called a paddock, the nature of the ground prevented its being used as such; and it was open to the road below, being fenced only on the two sides adjoining the station. The place was unoccupied, except occasionally by a few stray goats belonging to the huts; there was not even a bridle path through it, the scrubby, stone strewn ground beneath overhanging branches of matted trees, rendering it unsuitable for riding.

Berners often wondered afterwards what strange chance had led him to choose that unfamiliar road. It offered a straight line from the hill above the gully to his house, and, without consideration, his thoughts intent on the state of the mine, he removed the slip rail on the station side and led his horse through. The moon's rays, darting among the hanging branches, gave sufficient light to enable him to avoid the more stony places, and he rode carefully on toward the descent which led down to

the farm road. Before commencing this descent, the ground rises abruptly to a stony knoll. Mounting this, Berners's horse slipped on a loose bit of rock. His rider pulled him up quickly, and the animal bounded to the top, setting his feet with some force on the edge, and dislodging a number of stones, loosened by the recent rains. These rolled sideways over the ridge into a tolerably clear space below, on which the moon shone full.

Turning his head, while he gave his horse a moment to recover. Berners caught a glint of shining yellow among the recently unearthed stones. At first it scarcely attracted his notice; he even proceeded a few paces along the ridge, in order to choose his point of descent, when some association with the peculiar shade of light playing upon a boulder near brought the yellow glint of the dislodged stones to his mind. He dismounted, fastened his bridle to an adjacent stump, and returned to the spot. There lay the stones, certainly two, if not three of them, with their golden shimmer full in the moonlight.

"Pshaw! I see nothing but that mine wherever I go," he muttered, scrambling down towards the little points of colour. Taking the stones in his hands, he found their weight significant; then placing them on the top of a bare boulder, full in the moon's rays, he commenced to test them with his knife. Of course he was well acquainted with mullock and other decoys; he had handled them too often to be deceived. Digging, scraping, feeling, weighing, holding at different angles of light, breathless with increasing excitement, some minutes passed before

he could realise what had happened to him. When he comprehended at last that this was gold—real gold, the smaller pieces apparently broken off last, richly studded, the larger ones showing good prospects—his heart seemed to stand still. Dizzy and faint with overpowering emotion he clutched at the nearest tree, leaning against it, with both hands firmly grasping the stone, closed his eyes and tried to think.

“What did it mean?” A sense of all that it implied rushed to his mind. Unable to marshal his perceptive faculties, he saw without reasoning; intuitively conscious of far-reaching deductions, his frame trembled in sympathy with the tension of every quivering nerve.

Then a sound struck on his ear, and he started violently. Collecting his scattered senses, he swiftly placed the stones in an inner pocket, and moved forward. Presently, however, he became aware that the noise which had attracted his attention was occasioned by the impatient stamping of his horse. Securing the animal more carefully, he proceeded to trace, so far as he could, the course which the stones had taken in their fall.

After much groping he made out a small hollow among the roots of a fallen tree, which had pushed its way into the shallow soil, and managed to draw nutriment from the rock beneath. By this time the moon was sinking low in the heavens, rendering it impossible to pursue the search further; so he replaced the tangled undergrowth, drawing some withered boughs and dry twigs across it, and marking the inner sides of a couple of gums, whose drooping branches hung low over the spot.

This done he glanced sharply around, mentally registering the bearings of the place, satisfied himself once more that the stones were safely concealed in his pocket, then threw his horse's bridle over his arm, and descended to the farm road.

As his home came into view, Berners mechanically stopped to gaze on it. “If, if, only this should prove to be no dream! if it were not another *ignis fatuus*! Was it a delusion of the evil one? Had the worry of the search at the gully driven him mad?”

The practical man, who scoffed at fancies, actually began to retrace his steps; he wanted to reassure himself as to the reality of what had happened; then he recollected the stones, and with his hand in unmistakable contact with this solid evidence he advanced, walking like a somnambulist; with wide open eyes fixed on the house which held the two who were dearer than all else in this world or the next. If this should indeed prove what it promised to be, how blessed the change for them!

To do Berners justice, that was his first thought.

Money could do anything. His invalid wife might be able to gratify her constant wish to see once more the home across the sea which she had never ceased to regret.

And Tom? What might not he achieve with his abilities and spirit, if poverty no longer balked his career!

Berners attached an exaggerated value to money. Years of brooding over the losses of earlier days, unchecked indulgence of his longing for triumph over an adverse fate had deepened his craving for riches, until it had become the master passion of his nature.

Now, suddenly, in a wholly unexpected manner, possibilities beyond his wildest imaginings appeared to be opening before him.

If only it is real; if only it is true; was the burden of continually recurring wonder.

Reaching his own gate he again paused to steady his mind, determined to jealously guard his secret.

Entering with those precautions against noise which companionship with invalids renders habitual, in spite of repeated proof of their uselessness, Berners tried, though he scarcely hoped to reach his office unheard. His wife's anxious wakefulness, however, was not to be eluded.

"How late you are to-night, Robert," she said; "you get worse and worse; that mine will quite wear you out."

"My darling, I hoped you were sleeping; it will soon be over now, and you will have no occasion to complain."

"It is on your account; I cannot bear that you should slave in this way."

"Nonsense! I don't slave; but I cannot rest while the work is at this critical stage. It won't last much longer. Now, go to sleep, dear. Have you had your draught? No; why not take it from Tom? He has not been sitting up too, I hope."

"He stayed with me until midnight, but I could see the dear boy was dreadfully sleepy, so I pretended to be sleepy too, and sent him away."

"Let me give you the draught, and then I shall take a shake down in the office, as I must be up early to-morrow."

"You won't be refreshed. Lie down in your own

bed. Leave the dressing-room door open as usual. I'll call you at any hour you wish."

"No; here is your draught. Take it now, for my sake and Tom's. Sleep peacefully, everything is going well."

"Except yourself," she replied.

"Do I look ill?" he asked, turning her face towards him, as he stooped to kiss her.

"Really you seem bright," she cried; "I declare your eyes are shining like the Robert of long ago."

"The Robert of long ago is coming back, you'll see. Now, ma'am," holding the draught to her lips.

She held them up to him again, then drank it smiling.

He shaded the night lamp and sat down for a few minutes. Soon the choral took effect, and she was quietly sleeping. Then he stole from the room and made his way to the office, stopping to listen at the door of Tom's room and satisfy himself that its occupant also slept,

Reaching his office, Berners took from a drawer in the table a small double pointed instrument and a phial containing a little liquid; with these he proceeded to manipulate his precious find, apparently with very satisfactory results. Laying the stones on the table with a deep breath of relief, he remained some minutes with eyes fixed on them, handling them lovingly from time to time. Then the reaction from strong emotion set in; with a short gasp he lay back in his chair, his fingers still gripping the stones. Presently, rousing his energies, he opened a cupboard, and producing a bottle, poured out half a tumbler of spirit, and drank eagerly. Usually temperate, almost

to abstemiousness, he now felt the need of stimulant to enable him to formulate some plan of action. Drawing his chair to the window, he settled himself to watch for the first sign of coming dawn; perhaps he dozed, for the next thing he became aware of was the distant crowing of a matutinal cock, and a faint yellow streak on the eastern horizon, heralding the approach of day.

Calmed and invigorated by rest, he quickly decided on two points—absolute secrecy and thorough examination. Then, buttoning his coat and replacing the stones in the pocket, in order to fit them to their original position, he took a second glass of whisky and sallied forth; this time on foot, and provided with a couple of implements to help the investigation he was about to make.

No one was stirring. He quickly crossed the main road, and made his way to the shelter of the scrub and overhanging trees in the Three Cornered Paddock.

There was no difficulty in identifying the place; the litter of twigs, which he had heaped among the undergrowth, beneath the two marked gums, was undisturbed.

Creeping beneath the sweeping branches, which he carefully replaced, he found himself in a natural alcove, shut in on two sides by jutting points of the rocky ground, above which clung a coarse vegetation. Another opening was tolerably screened by the trees.

Eager to verify his hopes, he was yet painfully conscious of an unaccustomed dread of observation; a fear of detection amounting almost to a sense of

guilt. Twitter of awakening birds shook his nerves; stirrings of reptile life startled him; and an inquisitive opossum, who insisted on watching the intruder from the topmost branch of one of the gums, seemed to Berners to throw out a magnetic stream from his bright eyes, that held him motionless, until he summoned courage to fling a handful of gravel, when the little Paul Pry scuttled off with a rush, and the man, roused by the action, laughed softly and set to work.

Soon he was too much engrossed for nervous or other sensations; his utmost strength and energy being applied—first to discovering the original position of the fallen stones: and, when he had ascertained that, to removing a much larger one from which the former appeared to have been broken or washed off.

He came upon a second fibrous root, penetrating deep into the crevices of the rock, about which a layer of sandy soil had gathered.

Pick and spade were vigorously handled; coat and hat laid aside; with perspiration pouring from his brow, he tugged at the long fibres, which appeared to have been embedded there for centuries. The sun rose higher in the heavens; he feared he should be obliged to postpone his task; that dread called out fresh strength. With a mighty force of compelling will, he raised the pick for a great stroke, and felt something give way beneath it; then applying both hands, he dragged out the decaying root; and lo! amid the earth, clinging round the long fibres, were stones, which matched those already in his possession.

Why prolong the scene? The man himself never understood how he got at it—or could recall the sensations he experienced—as he neared the goal. Probably the spur of necessary haste and the engrossing desire of securing his prize fully occupied him; eclipsing all other faculties in the blaze of will power, that mechanically directed, and supported his efforts, until, at last—he knew that he had unearthed the cap of a quartz reef, which showed unmistakable signs of being rich in gold.

The rapidly climbing sun left no time for consideration, filling his pockets with such specimens as he could take with him, he carefully covered in the disturbed débris; cut an armful of bottle brush from a neighbouring bush, strewed these over the spot, and bent the gum branches downwards as far as possible.

Berners then left the Three Cornered Paddock on the side that adjoined the station, and returning home leisurely along the track which led from the Gully Mine to the farm cottage, reached his office, having seen no one, but the groom, to whom he carelessly gave an order in passing.

Looking in on his wife he found her still sleeping, and heard from the servants that Mr Tom had gone down to the fattening paddock.

Thus he had ample time to remove all traces of the night's adventure—before meeting his son at the breakfast table as usual.

## CHAPTER X

## A DEPARTURE

A FEW weeks after that fateful night Tom Berners appeared at Gorong, just as the master was sitting down to his dinner.

"*A la bonne heure, mon garçon,*" cried the elder man, gaily; "the sight of you makes an old fellow vivacious and prompts him to express his vivacity in the most vivacious of languages."

"I wanted a talk with you and thought dinner would be an excellent preparative," said Tom.

"To be sure; here Janet, arrange for Mr Tom."

While the housekeeper busied herself in attending upon them conversation was confined to current topics; afterwards, having adjourned to the verandah, enjoying the evening coolness and the soothing influence of the squatter's faithful companion, Wylie asked, "What is it, Tom? I see you have something on your mind."

"I can't make my father out," replied the other, "you know how urgent he was that I should remain here and develop a taste for station work, now he is just as anxious for me to go on, at once, with the engineering."

"I suppose he has his reasons," returned Wylie, "though, between you and me, Tom, there have been many things lately that I can't make out."

"That bothering mine is at the bottom of it all,"

the young man exclaimed ; " my father says it does not require such close supervision now, so he can manage the business of the station himself."

Wylie's countenance clouded. " When I took to squatting," he said, " I anticipated an ideal life—a sort of Eden. Ah, well ! there was worry and perplexity even there I suppose at last. Why are we discontented ? It's the common lot. What are you going to do ?"

" I meant, as I told you, to go to Melbourne and look about for some opening where I might gain experience. You know I passed the examination before I went to England ; and have not lost sight of the subject since. What I want now is practical experience."

" You really mean then to abandon the land and take up engineering as a profession ?" asked Wylie.

" I can't say ; even if I went north and took up a run my hobby would prove useful," Tom replied.

" Very likely, but a definite aim is preferable ; it is not like you to be desultory," Wylie remarked.

Tom sighed ; he knew he had not been able to conquer the craving which underlay his unsettlement, but he said, " my indecision must come to a point now. I came to tell you that my father has received a letter from a business acquaintance in Sydney, who offers me a good position in the firm of Frith, Ross & Co."

" It is a respectable firm," said Wylie, " probably your father came into contact with them about that last purchase of machinery for the Gully Mine."

" I don't know," replied the other ; " it appears that they have a large irrigation contract on hand

somewhere about the Murray districts, I should have an opportunity of seeing and assisting that kind of work."

Wylie reflected ; he had not favoured Tom's proposed residence in Melbourne. Certain observations which he made when last visiting there had left an uncomfortable doubt in his mind concerning Edith. Perhaps it was that intercourse with the world had rubbed off the perfect unconsciousness of early youth, perhaps the admiration she excited had awakened feelings hitherto latent ; at any rate there was a change, of that he was certain ; though so slight as to elude ordinary observation, her old friend, and second father, had been aware of it.

Once, too, she had let drop an allusion to Tom Berners, as in comparison with a somewhat irrepressible aspirant for her favour, and her manner on that occasion created a misgiving in Wylie's mind, as to whether she remained so entirely fancy free as he had believed.

On the whole he thought it would be safer for Tom to take up his abode in Sydney, besides it was clearly the most advantageous course for him also.

" It's high time you changed your surroundings," Wylie declared ; " there are too many associations here. You are getting morbid."

" Very likely ; anyhow I'll go," cried Tom.

" And with a good heart lad !" Wylie urged.

" With a heart for any fate," said the young man.

" To be sure. God bless you !" exclaimed the elder cheerily ; though his own was sore for the young fellow's troubles.

"Thank you, Mr Wylie ; you've been very patient with me as usual. You have always been my good friend."

"Not been, Tom, are ; we trust each other thoroughly."

Tom took the offered hand in a hearty clasp. "Good-night," he said, in a husky tone.

"You'll come over as often as you can before you leave. I shall miss you terribly," said Wylie.

Mrs Berners took her son's proposed departure much to heart at first, but gradually her husband accustomed her to the idea, dwelling on the excellent prospects before him, until she became tolerably hopeful, and when the actual parting came she bore the wrench better than could have been expected, encouraged by promises of letters and telegrams. "And Tom," she said, "remember you will spend next Christmas with us here."

"All right, mother dear, you have the pudding ready, trust me to do it justice," Tom exclaimed.

So the young people who had brightened that isolated bush circle, were again scattered ; and the elders left behind plodded on in quiet monotony. Wylie fell back on "friends that never forsook him." Edith took care that he should have a plentiful supply of them. Wherever she was, or however occupied, she never forgot the hermit of Gorong, and the best as well as the most amusing publications were always on his table.

Mrs Berners reverted to her knitting, relieved by an occasional read, and frequent letters to Tom.

Berners himself was more engrossed than ever ; he had a ready excuse now for extra occupation.

Tom's absence entailed double work on him, and, as he was out early and late, he had his bed removed from the dressing-room adjoining his wife's chamber, to his private sanctum or office, as it was called, their indoor servant taking his place in order to be at hand to attend on her mistress.

The groom's wife acted as cook in the household department of the establishment, occupying with her husband an outbuilding in the rear. By these arrangements unobserved egress and ingress from and to the office was secured. One door of the office opened on to the front verandah, the other into the house, so that by locking the inner entrance Berners could pass in and out without attracting the attention of the household.

One thing, however, was patent to all, and increasingly so as the time went on. It was the strange change which was taking place in the man himself. His restless desire to get rid of Tom had been the first indication of this. He could not endure the young man's presence.

Not only had he an altogether unfounded notion that his son watched him, but he experienced a painful feeling of shame in his company which he could neither justify nor conquer. He had therefore exerted all his influence to procure a position for him with the Sydney firm. When Tom had really gone he felt relieved for a time, but soon fell back into the grip of the suspicions which now entirely mastered him.

The more he reflected upon the situation as he daily or nightly developed the prospects of his reef, the more imperative did the necessity for secrecy seem

to become, and this had a most injurious effect on his disposition.

Always distrustful of his fellow men, he now was persuaded that every person about him misdoubted his representations and spied on all his movements.

He even became irritable with his wife, forbade her questionings, and resented any attempt at remonstrance on her part. Then, when he saw the tears which his harshness had provoked, he would abjectly beg pardon, entreating her to be patient only a little while longer; telling himself, too, that what he endured was for her sake—that she and Tom should reap the benefit. His suspicion of everyone grew into a settled habit, degenerating at length into a cowardly terror of detection.

The first premonition of this came to him on the very morning after his discovery as he stole forth to identify the spot and verify his anticipations, and with every morning since, as the earliest streak of dawn saw him, with uneasy glance and stealthy tread take the road to the Three Cornered Paddock, the sensation intensified.

He seemed to himself a criminal, moving secretly among the shadows to gloat on the evidences of his crime; and yet, as he argued continually, there was no crime, the discovery had come to him entirely without his seeking, it was his own, vouchsafed to him only; was it not fair that he should appropriate the results?

It was this greed of appropriation which absorbed all his faculties, as he became convinced of the richness of his reef, and more immovable in his determination to hold it solely for himself. A scheme

for the purpose of achieving this began to simmer in his mind, and take definite shape, as outward circumstances abetted his secret desire. It was increasingly forced on him that Lyndon would ere long be obliged to raise money on the only portion of his property which was still unencumbered.

If the farm must go, why should not he purchase it? Lyndon would rather sell it to him *en bloc* than cut it up among selectors. True, it was settled on Mrs Lyndon—so was Wytha House and the Home Paddocks; yet both had—with her consent—been mortgaged to their full value. Would it not be better to sell the farm—and reduce the liabilities on the rest of her property?

Hovering thus on the verge of dastardly crime, he was nevertheless to be profoundly pitied; had he possessed one friend to whom he could have opened his heart, he might, even then, have been withdrawn from the brink of the precipice.

Ashamed that his wife should know how deeply he was already implicated; aware that it was absolutely futile to attempt making her an accomplice, he dared not consult her. With Tom it would probably be even worse; he would insist on making the existence of the reef public. Berners knew he could never have managed as he had, except for his son's absence, so he shut himself from the outside light to ponder and plan in the darkness of his own soul. But the conflict did not last very long. By little and little, almost unawares, he became committed to his scheme; and then a consuming desire to achieve it took possession of him, obscuring doubt and misgiving, and concentrating every faculty on

the attainment of his object; it was his curse that the powerful aid of circumstances seemed to be enlisted on the side of the downward grade, goading him to take the deepest plunge.

Meanwhile the ordinary routine of station work went on, no one suspecting the conflict within the bosom of the saturnine manager, whose increased moroseness and disturbance was attributed to prolonged anxiety at the continual delay of success in the Gully Mine.

Berners's small property, invested on his arrival in Victoria many years before, had accumulated to a respectable sum, the salary he received being sufficient to cover his expenses, including those connected with his son's education. When the latter came of age he inherited a sum of money, bequeathed to him by his maternal grandfather, so that Berners had not been called upon to furnish funds for Tom's residence at Cambridge. Consequently he had a sufficient sum for the purchase which he now contemplated, and which he was assured Lyndon would be driven to accept.

Meanwhile he made a short visit to Melbourne for the purpose of selling certain shares, and, taking advantage of a rising market, netted a larger profit than he had expected. Again circumstances helped him. Did not that augur well? Perhaps his action might prove to be advantageous to all concerned; he would not haggle about price, but pay to the full market value, even a little beyond suggested a sophisticated instinct, as the remembrance of the rich lode on the property occurred to him.

When the land was absolutely his own he might

venture to recommend a temporary stoppage of the gully works, and so give Lyndon a chance of retrieving himself. Then, after a sufficient interval, the lode should be rediscovered and a company floated to work it.

The former owner of the property might even be offered some promoters' shares, in consideration of the chance he had missed, and so be pulled through his difficulties, while the lay of the quartz, once thoroughly proved on the farm reef, would be a guide to any future works at the gully or elsewhere on the Wytha property.

Clearly his action would benefit all, and instead of being a criminal deceiver, the plotter almost persuaded himself that he was playing the part of a benefactor.

Buoyed up by such imaginings, Berners returned home in a more satisfied frame of mind, and though when he renewed his stealthy visits to the Three Cornered Paddock, suspicion and distrust revived also, neither became so absorbing as it had been; indeed, he was too entirely occupied in devising measures for the accomplishment of his plans and the regulating of their future development.

## CHAPTER XI

### "IN SYDNEY"

IT need scarcely be said that Mr Tom Berners managed to be back in Sydney before the middle of the month of May, nor that his interest in the shipping column of the daily papers was unremitting. Not having been able to ascertain the precise date of the Lyndons' departure from Hobart, his study commenced too soon and was protracted—as it seemed to him—an interminable length of time.

Then, after all his pains, as is so often the case, the steamer eluded his watchfulness, slipped in one evening, and landed her passengers before the hotels closed for the night. Consequently the young man had the mortification of finding that the plan he had arranged for meeting his friends on board was frustrated.

However, he could pretty well guess which hotel they would choose, so he set forth to call on Mrs Lyndon at the earliest permissible hour. Again he was balked; Mrs Lyndon was at home, Mr and Miss Lyndon had just gone out; so said the groom of the chambers as he ushered Tom upstairs.

The lady received him kindly, but with a certain restraint; evidently she was on her guard. Her words were friendly, though, like her manner, they

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conveyed an impression of that kindly indulgence which unquestioned superiority shows to the inferior, who still has a claim to consideration and regard. There was nothing to offend, nothing tangible which could wound, and yet her visitor was keenly conscious of all she intended to convey.

The masculine "hands off" lacks delicacy, and even falls short in discretion, being apt to blurt out suspicions or to adopt so repellant a manner as to justify a "What do you mean by it?" Feminine graciousness, on the contrary, knows how to manipulate the softest and sharpest of velvety claws, and the victim's forced smile becomes but a pitiful covering of the wound within.

Tom Berners, however, covered his manfully and held his ground, with ears alert for every sound, hoping for the return of the absent members of the family.

Mrs Lyndon was full of their engagements. She was really very sorry, but they had not one evening to spare; he must excuse her, but she could not say when they were likely to be at home; it was horrid to be so engaged, in fact she was quite worn out; the Hobart season had been especially gay. Of course society had its claims; there were responsibilities which it was a duty not to shirk, more particularly when you had young people to introduce, and—and—arrange for. "I am sure, my dear Tom, you quite understand that," she said, "it is so different now our daughter is no longer a child. It is right that we should afford her the advantage of a wide knowledge of the world. Some of our acquaintances seek a closer intimacy. It is very

desirable that she should have the best opportunities of forming correct opinions respecting the characters of those with whom she comes in contact."

Tom winced, and Mrs Lyndon fancied she saw that, but was doubtful again, when he quickly recovered himself and said, "Miss Lyndon is certain to form correct opinions; she has the intuition which dives beneath the surface."

"I don't know about intuition and that sort of thing. Girls should not set up to see further than their elders, not that my daughter ever does; she is very amenable; but (as I was saying) you will excuse our being so much occupied. Oh, yes! Mr Lyndon will call on you. I am sure of that. Let me see, you are at——?"

"Here is my address, Tom rejoined, pencilling a card, which he laid on the table.

The lady took it up. "Oh, yes! he will call. I hope we shall see you again before we leave."

On this hint he was perforce obliged to retire. Descending the stairs, he scanned every corner of the vestibule, and remained standing a few minutes on the steps, vainly glancing along the street, only at length to turn homeward in a gloomy, though defiant, state of mind.

One clue to their movements he had obtained; during the earlier part of their interview, Mrs Lyndon had intimated that they meant to attend the Opera that evening, in company with one of those wandering stars, who descend on benighted colonies from the magnificent sphere of the British nobility. Lord Southbrook had made their acquaintance in Hobart; he was now a guest at Government House, but had

asked leave to join their party at the Opera. Lord Southbrook was a most charming companion, full of anecdotes, had seen everything, knew everybody, and so on.

"Confound him," thought Tom; "but I'll go all the same." And though he professed a supreme contempt for the English nobleman, it must be confessed that he took special pains about his general appearance that night, and was unusually critical in the matter of dress.

He had been in the theatre some minutes, scanning the crowded tiers, before he discovered the seat occupied by the Lyndons. It was an opening night, and the house was filled with a brilliant company, a galaxy of fair faces, framed in sparkles of glittering jewels and cloudy gossamer of rainbow splendour, relieved against a throng of bronzed, bearded countenances.

The vice-regal box was occupied, and not far from it Tom Berners descried Mrs Lyndon's party. Herself, a strange gentleman and lady, Edith in a corner at the end of the front seat, Mr Lyndon behind the strange lady, to whom he frequently addressed himself, and Lord Southbrook (as Tom supposed), leaning over the back of Edith's seat, with an air of familiarity which caused a tingling sensation in the arms of this interested spectator.

However, as open warfare was out of the question, cautious diplomacy must be tried, and our tactician during an interval made his way to the seats resolved to challenge fate.

Lyndon, who to tell the truth (caring little for music) was rather bored, received him cordially, glad

of a companion who understood what interested him and could share many of his tastes; his wife bowed over her shoulder with raised eyebrows and a surprised, "So you've found us"; Edith turned quickly, reaching across her cavalier to greet the new comer. The Englishman, however, was not to be suppressed, he kept his place and in a short time succeeded in monopolising her again, while her father established a similar claim on Tom.

The young man's answers to Mr Lyndon's remarks and queries were somewhat vague, but the master of Wytha wanted to talk rather than be talked to, a condition of mind favourable to the inattentive listener, who, in the present case, waited and watched for a chance of engaging another person's attention.

She *should* look at him. She *must* speak to him.

Edith was listening, a little listlessly, to the noble *raconteur* at her side. She moved slightly, although aware of his glance. Probably the tension of his spirit was visible in his countenance, for its expression startled the girl. There, once again, was the look of reproachful disappointment, mingled with an intense earnestness that compelled her interest.

"Dear old Tom! He feels himself neglected," she thought; and on the spur of the moment appealed to her neighbour.

"Lord Southbrook, would you mind giving Mr Berners your seat for a little? He is a very old friend, and I want to have a talk with him."

She spoke in her usual tone of voice, leaning back towards Tom, who heard what had passed, and hastened to occupy the vacated place.

Edith was scarcely at her ease. Her liveliness

was partly forced, and she was not sorry that the singers reappeared at this juncture. Tom, too, wanted a moment to realise the delicious sensation of being by her side once more, and to collect his fluttering spirits. So their conversation was carried on by snatches, though he managed between the songs to impart a good deal of information about his doings and goings.

Lord Southbrook had joined Mrs Lyndon, who listened attentively to his criticisms of the performance, interspersed with racy anecdotes of the great world. She was vexed with her daughter, and with her husband, for encouraging by his presence the questionable interest Edith manifested in her old playmate, though she was too wise to treat the matter as of any consequence.

Mrs Lyndon was silent during the short drive to their hotel; they had taken leave of their friends at the door of the theatre; still she did not think it wise to express her annoyance until she was alone with her husband.

Their daughter had lately shown signs of independent judgment; increasing experience of the world had developed a keener insight, and she no longer accepted the surface of things. There had even been occasions when it had been plain that she did not always see with her mother's eyes, and the latter began to suspect the existence of a balancing check to the yielding sweetness of the girl's disposition. Probably that stately poise of the head and delicately firm mouth were characteristically as significant as the large, thoughtful eyes and gentle lovingness of her general expression,

The wife, however, did not need to be as reticent as the mother, and Mrs Lyndon had no hesitation in expressing an opinion respecting her husband's proceedings. "I really wonder at you, George," she said, "encouraging young Berners to join us in public."

Mr Lyndon opened his eyes. "Why not in public?" he demanded.

"Your manager's son is not the sort of person one cares to see hovering about Edith continually," returned the lady.

"Hovering about Edith?" Lyndon repeated; "he hovered about me quite as much. Berners is a gentleman, though he is my manager. He is as well born as I am."

"I don't dispute that. All the same, I dislike this intimacy," Mrs Lyndon declared.

"My dear, you disturb yourself needlessly," replied her husband; "as to this intimacy, it's late in the day to object to that."

"It was different when they were children," she said.

"I thought we had settled that there is to be no question of Edith's future, until we return from Europe," the father remarked.

"I hope you will soon be able to leave, George," said his wife.

"I can't say; it only worries to mention it," Lyndon spoke in that irritable tone, which she had now learned to understand. No more was said at that time, but Mrs Lyndon privately resolved to make the period of their stay in Sydney as short as already fixed engagements would allow.

Certainly, if Mrs Lyndon was shallow and self-

pleasing, she was, at least, well intentioned; and by no means low toned or wholly worldly. She could never have sunk to the level of the manœuvring mother, neither did she consciously entertain any distinct ambition on Edith's behalf; in truth, she was very far from desiring her marriage at present; nevertheless, gratification at the admiration the girl excited produced a simmer of new ideas concerning opening possibilities which rendered it intolerable that the manager's son—who had made little social mark, and whose success depended on his personal energy—should advance pretensions to her daughter's special regard.

The mother might not seriously favour Lord Southbrook's suit, but his attention carried a certain *éclat*, as from a rare quarry which could not be brought down any day.

She did not dislike Tom Berners; on the contrary, the quiet dignity with which he ignored her slights, and refused to see that she wished to shun him, impressed her in spite of herself; aided perhaps by a kindly recollection of the spirited boy whose presence was associated with the early happy years of her married life.

So she lay wakeful after the encounter with the young man at the opera, a stream of memories, mingled with forecasts, doubts, anticipations and plans, chasing each other through her disturbed brain and banishing sleep.

## CHAPTER XII

### A ROUGH RIDE

IT was Mrs Lyndon's custom to breakfast in her own apartment, therefore when Edith came down next morning she found only her father and young Berners, to whom an invitation had been given overnight, deep in the discussion of bush topics, having special reference to Wytha, with erratic variations on the irrigation theme, and the general adaptability of the unoccupied districts.

Her entrance caused no break in her father's interest in his subject. She was country born, and used to taking part in country pursuits, Tom, however, during the meal made several attempts to direct the conversation into fresh channels.

That breakfast was a delightful oasis to him. The little party revived the freedom of former years. Edith did not talk much, but her gentle brightness threw a halo about everything—at least to the consciousness of one of that trio—and he could not control the subdued yet eager tenderness of his voice and manner when addressing her.

"We are arranging an excursion to the Yaloak Mine when you came in," he said; "the train goes rather more than half way. I can get horses to meet us at the terminus. Don't you think you could come also?"

### A ROUGH RIDE

"A ride?" exclaimed Edith. "How delightful! We did not ride much in Hobart. When shall we go?"

"Why not to-morrow?" Tom asked, addressing Mr Lyndon, "the weather is just right now."

When Mrs Lyndon heard of this expedition she was much annoyed, and threw as many obstacles as possible in the way. Finding these were readily overruled, she took a sudden determination.

"Lord Southbrook wants to see something of the country districts," she remarked. "This would be an excellent opportunity for him to do so. A mine is one of his special curiosities. Let us all go."

"Suppose the road is too rough for you, May," said her husband.

"Oh, I can ride leisurely. I am not such a poor horsewoman, even now, as to mind a few stumps and stones."

"Well, my love, if you wish it," Lyndon replied. "but I really am afraid you will be tired."

The lady, however, carried her point, and induced Lord Southbrook (nothing loth) to join the party.

This change of programme was not enthusiastically accepted by the original projectors of the expedition, one of them, indeed, found it difficult to repress certain savage explosives of vexation at this check on his blissful anticipations. Here, however, as in most cases, discretion was evidently the better part of valour, so he made an attempt to appear gratified, which poorly covered his chagrin. But discretion very soon vindicated her good name, when the party left the little country station, and entered on the bush track which led to the Yaloak Mine.

A British nobleman is not likely to be shamed on horseback by an Australian settler. It may even be conceded that he will ride more gracefully and with equal courage, but familiarity with the most difficult hunting country is no substitute for the steady patience and practised quickness, with which the experienced bushman negotiates tussocky stumps, and avoids collision with hanging branches. Lord Southbrook kept his seat with all the grace of the row and pluck of the hunting field, though the pitfalls that beset his path sorely tried his patience, and the ingenious vagaries of his steed in avoiding them frequently upset his equanimity. As time passed Mr Lyndon became anxious to increase their speed. He feared they might reach the mine too late for the thorough investigation he desired to make. Tom had taken care that Edith's horse should be well up to his work; they generally led the way, pulling up at intervals to wait for the elders. Lyndon hovered between the advance party and rear guard, disliking to leave his wife, yet wishing to push on.

"Your father is getting impatient, that's the third time I've seen him consult his watch," Tom remarked. "I really think it would be better for Mrs Lyndon to rest at the store yonder."

The laggards came up, and Tom hazarded his suggestion; Lyndon cordially endorsed it, and Lord Southbrook's curiosity concerning the mine was by no means so keen as when they started.

Mrs Lyndon made a vigorous attempt to detain Edith; but her father supported her request to be allowed to proceed.

"There really is no occasion for her to give up,"

he said; "her horse is quite fresh, and the child is not a bit tired; does she look so now? Come, May, let her go on."

It was impossible to suggest fatigue in view of the brilliant glow which healthful exercise and pleasant excitement in the open air, had brought to the face which the girl turned towards her mother.

"I am glad they remained behind," Lyndon remarked, thinking of his wife and her companion. "Southbrook would have been terribly disgusted with this roughness," as they entered on a descent of tussocky, broken ground, sparsely timbered, on the outer edge, with a few magnificent specimens of sheoak.

"He rides well," said Tom; "but this sort of thing requires horse and man to the manner born."

"Then you two are nowhere, not being to the manner born," cried Edith.

"Don't interpret too literally," Tom rejoined; "if not absolutely an Australian baby, I claim as an Australian boy, you know."

Here they came out on the rugged, shelving bank of a rushing river, and turning sharply to the left entered a steep gully overlooking some extensive mining operations.

"Yaloak Mine?" queried Mr Lyndon.

"Yes," replied Tom, dismounting and sending his horse forward, while he laid his hand on Edith's bridle, guiding her's among the boulders which strewed the path and the ruts made by traffic to and from the works.

"Your father wants to get round and inspect," he said, for Mr Lyndon kept to the front.

"Will it be any help for our gully mine do you think?" asked Edith.

"It may; but I really know nothing about mining; never took any interest in it until lately. It's all right," he continued as the horse tripped, "leave the bridle to me."

"I am not afraid, I can manage him; too many cooks, you remember," she said with a bright smile.

"There is a truer proverb still about a two-fold cord," he replied; "how fond we were of that proverb game! When I was away at school I used to store up all the proverbs I came across, in order to puzzle you at home."

"I recollect," she said; "we often played in the dusk on Cousin Hugh's verandah."

"We had a happy childhood," Tom remarked, "what will the future be?"

"I hope that is not symbolic," cried the girl, when her horse had been barely saved from a fall; she would have gone over his head if Tom had not caught and held her firmly.

"It was my fault," he said; "I was not thinking of the road, as I ought to have been. Here we are at last." He lifted her from the saddle, holding her for a moment. "Lean on me," he said, "you don't get your feet all at once, after such a ride."

A lad came to take the animals, and Tom drew her arm within his, leading her forward to join her father. "I'll just see to the horses," he remarked, "they have the journey back."

"Right, my boy," exclaimed Mr Lyndon, "a good bushman never forgets his horse. It is a main part of his stock-in-trade."

The inspection occupied more time than they had calculated upon, Lyndon making minute inquiries, and insisting on seeing every portion of the mine, so that it was late before they started on their homeward way. Mrs Lyndon and her escort had reached the terminus before they arrived.

"I began to think we should have to return without you," she said. "The train is almost due. Edith, you must be tired to death. I hope you have had enough of rough rides."

"I have enjoyed it immensely, mother," she declared.

"Oblivious of roughness, if one may judge by your looks, Miss Lyndon," Lord Southbrook remarked.

"When one is in pleasant society a little roughness doesn't matter," she replied, steadily meeting his significant glance.

"I'm afraid I shall knock that fellow down yet," Tom murmured; but when he was seated in the railway carriage, by the side of "that fellow," and opposite Edith and her parents, he reflected that the Englishman had—albeit unwittingly—done him a good turn, for notwithstanding her calm rejoinder, Edith's heightened colour showed that she had understood the earl's innuendo.

When this dawned on Tom, he settled himself quietly in his coupé, falling in with the somewhat languid mood of his companions. The elders, wearied with the long day, dozed peacefully.

"What a confounded noise this thing makes," exclaimed the Englishman. "One can't hear oneself speak."

No one replied, and he sat back sulkily in his corner.

The girl glanced towards him, a saucy, amused look in her face. Tom intercepted the glance, fixing her eye for a moment, a world of passionate questionings in his gaze, and hers fell before it.

"She begins to understand," he thought, "and— and she is not angry."

Tom had hitherto been sadly neglectful of his social duties. Now, however, he was disposed to make full amends, cultivating acquaintances, receiving friendliness, attending public entertainments, and accepting private invitations.

"Tom Berners seems to go everywhere," Mrs Lyndon remarked. "It is odd how he has got into the best society."

"It's natural though," replied her husband, "people soon come to take one's measure, and find out who is who."

In spite of Mrs Lyndon, Tom Berners held his own. Indeed there was a power about him that compelled her respect, though it equally urged her to hasten from his neighbourhood. The more so, as she perceived a change, or rather a quickened unfolding of character in her daughter, on which she had not calculated. Edith had always been a clever, lively girl, full of spirit, and keenly alive to the amusements and pleasures which came in her way, a little thoughtless, but swayed by kindly—even considerate—impulses, and of a warmly affectionate disposition. Intercourse with the world had brought to light deeper qualities; and she began to show a sense of the true proportion of things. There had

always been a large simplicity about her, which went straight to the reality behind appearances, and exercised a singularly restful charm. This trait had recently become more marked.

An entertainment had been given in recognition of some colonial festival, which was further being celebrated by a grand display of fireworks. These were visible from a gallery which ran round the reception rooms, and for a while dancing ceased, the guests thronging outside to watch the spectacle.

"Now is my one and only chance," thought Tom, as he passed out with Edith on his arm. All at once he made up his mind, a point which he had been long striving to compass. Since the night of their return from Yaloak he had debated with himself, argued, cogitated, despaired and hoped, running through the agitating gamut, and finding himself continually as far as ever from decision.

He perceived that Mrs Lyndon's persistent opposition, and Lord Southbrook's visible annoyance, had not been without a suggestive effect on Edith's comprehension, and would have, in a degree, prepared her for what he desired to say; his state of feeling would no longer be an unthinkable condition, as might have been the case six months earlier. Besides, his prospects were opening more rapidly, as well as more hopefully than he had ventured to expect, a successful career lay before him, wealth and position were merely a question of time; and what is time at twenty-six, especially amid the hurried movements of colonial life?

"This is my chance," he kept repeating to himself as they threaded their way to a small alcove in a

corner of the gallery, which commanded a fine view of the public reserve in which the pyrotechnic display was going on.

They watched it for some time in silence, Edith occasionally noticing some particularly fine presentment, or joining in the admiring plaudits of those who stood near.

Tom scarcely spoke ; he was striving to still the tumultuous beating of his heart, and to regain his self-command.

The exhibition began to wane ; twangings of musicians preluded the next valse, and the numbers in the gallery perceptibly thinned.

"I must speak to you," said he, plunging at once into his subject. "I never intended to. I told Mr Wylie I would not, but things are different—and—and—in fact it's no use. I can't help it. I have tried, but really I shall not be able to bear my life, if you go away without knowing the truth, that you are the only woman in the world I ever can love. Oh! my darling, don't turn away," for she had moved a little apart from him. He seized her hand, holding it fast, and pouring out a torrent of burning words. The hand trembled as he pressed it to his lips and against his throbbing brow. She felt the thrill of overwrought emotion, which shook his frame.

"Don't, don't," she said, at last. "I can't bear this."

"No, no. I didn't think to break down so completely," he whispered. "If you could understand how I have struggled to keep this to myself, you would forgive me."

He went on more calmly. "I only want you to know. I don't desire to bind you to me ; only remember that I love you more than words can express. You are not angry with me?" he questioned, doubtfully.

"I am not angry. Why should I be? But I am sorry. Oh, Tom, I did not suppose you cared like this," she replied, in a low, agitated tone.

"Never mind me," he murmured. "I can bear it. What I could not bear was that you should go to the other end of the world, and not understand that the love and light and life of my soul had gone with you."

"I wonder when this came to us," she said, musingly, as if thinking aloud.

"Us," he cried, gathering at the significant pronoun. "You said us, my darling, my treasure."

"Hush!" she cautioned. There were still a few people in the gallery. "I don't quite comprehend it all ; but I am not sorry that you love me, though I thought I was at first. Perhaps I ought to be. Oh! Tom, you forget, we are going to England," she broke off abruptly.

"I am not seeking to bind you—only—only, dearest, there is no one you love better, is there?"

She remained silent, and he continued pleadingly.

"When you return, say that I may ask you to be my wife."

He lingered on the last word, uttering it with a hushed tenderness that touched the girl.

"Edith, where are you? You'll certainly take cold ; Mr Berners, I wonder you have not more consideration. It is frightfully windy here." Mrs

Lyndon took her daughter's arm, and Tom followed, humbly apologetic, desolated at the idea of her having taken cold, and yielding the evidence of his senses that the wind blew from the opposite quarter.

Mrs Lyndon was very angry, and the more so as she perceived that both the young people were agitated.

Mrs Lyndon and Edith having departed in their carriage, Tom seized an opportunity of telling Mr Lyndon what had occurred.

"You don't mean to say you have induced her to engage herself to you," exclaimed the father angrily. "Tom Berners, I wouldn't have believed it of you! A mere child, who knows nothing of the world."

"Look here, Mr Lyndon," cried Tom; "I stand on my right as a man to win the woman I love if I can. It was due to myself that I should show her my heart; that is all I have done. She is as free as air, to choose whom she will. She only knows that for me she is the one woman in the world. I could not help speaking, and I would not if I could."

The young man's straightforward self-respect appealed to Lyndon's best instincts; besides, he had always liked Tom, and his easy temper naturally asserted itself, as he muttered—

"Mrs Lyndon will be vexed; promise me that you will not write to Edith."

Tom hesitated, but gave the promise on the assurance that Edith should know the reason of his silence.

The Lyndons left Sydney next day, Lord Southbrook accompanying them.

Berners was at the station long before the hour

of departure. When the party arrived the elder lady apparently did not observe him. She passed, her head in the air, leaning on her daughter's arm, Mr Lyndon and the earl in close attendance. Edith turned her face towards him. He saw that she was pale, and looked as if she had not slept. His heart leaped to his mouth. "Surely her mother is not severe with her," he thought, reproaching himself for having exposed her to this.

"We are off at last. Any message for Wytha?" cried Lyndon, stopping to address Tom.

"I wrote to Mr Wylie last night," he replied, significantly.

The bell commenced to clang. "I must go," Tom muttered, half aloud. As he spoke Edith leaned forward, now with heightened colour and set lips.

"Good-bye, Tom," she said, in a clear voice, stretching out her hand to him.

The tears all but sprang to his eyes as he took and pressed it.

Was it fancy, or was the pressure gently returned in response to his murmured "God bless you"?

## CHAPTER XIII

### EMBARRASMENTS

ON arriving in Victoria the master of Wytha found, as indeed most of us too often do, that the Nemesis which haunts pleasure-seeking humanity had hoarded whips and scorpions wherewith to greet his reappearance within the arena of business.

Urgent demands for his presence at Wytha, pressure of creditors, polite but anxious, unwelcome reminders of overdrawn accounts, mingled with domestic claims on his pocket and on his time, provided a sufficiently harassing welcome home.

Satisfying as best he might the last-named demands, he left his family, settled for the winter in their residence at Toorak, and proceeded to his station.

"Glad to see you at last, George," said Mr Wylie, joining him immediately after his arrival. "So we are not to have May and Edith this year?"

"No; they remain in town. They want you down; charged me to pack you off. You will go, won't you?" Lyndon replied.

"Not yet; though it has been lonely enough of late. I have fallen back on my books as usual, with Ponto for companionship out of doors."

Both men felt a restraint, and their light talk was only a feint; putting off topics which touched them

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more nearly. Wylie dreaded to speak of the mine; still he knew he could not escape the subject. Lyndon also shrank from it, although it wholly occupied his thoughts. Avoidance, however, was no longer possible when Berners entered; he at once came to the point. "It is high time you were here, Mr Lyndon," he said. "I'm at my wits' end about those gully works."

"Cannot we leave them alone this evening, at any rate," Wylie interposed. "We can go down to the mine to-morrow, George; and think over the matter meanwhile."

"There has been too much delay already, Mr Wylie," said Berners. "Bob declares the mine may be flooded any day; we have to be always on guard. In fact things are barely kept going for want of the necessary appliances."

So—with iterated repetition and endless variations—was the monotonous tale poured into the ears of the harassed proprietor. Other troubles also loomed darkly; the encroachments of selectors increased, and fossickers eagerly watched the progress of the search at the gully, ready to peg out so soon as the lead should be discovered.

Shearing difficulties also threatened; the union raised its rates;—intimidation of non-union men grew bolder—and altogether the master of Wytha found his actual position very different from the ideal condition which Hugh Wylie had—with much truth at the time—pictured some years before.

After a week's hesitation, and much discussion, Lyndon could hit on no better solution of difficulties than that proposed by his manager, who offered to

purchase the farm homestead for a fair price in ready money.

"That property is Mrs Lyndon's; I have an impression, too, that it cannot be alienated without Edith's consent," Wylie had reminded them; and Berners, turning sharply on Mr Lyndon, had asked—"Is that the case?"

"I think not; I really know very little about it," replied the other; "however, there need be no difficulty about that; Edith can give an undertaking if necessary. I do not believe it is necessary though. What's the use of objecting, Hugh? There is no other way," Lyndon declared wearily.

He could not contend with anxiety; Berners had reckoned on that, assured that—after a few preliminary kicks—he would subside into his accustomed sanguine easiness.

Wylie was perplexed; he had helped to the utmost of his ability. He could do no more, unless he was prepared to sell Gorong; his last aid having been given at the cost of a heavy mortgage—the first he had ever raised—and which it would take some years of prudent management to clear off.

The remark about the children claiming under Mrs Lyndon's settlement had occasioned Berners much thought; on the one hand it was imperative that he should secure the property;—on the other—a flaw in the title would imperil possession, most likely at the very moment when it would be of the utmost consequence, to be beyond the reach of interference.

Of course, he found that Edith's consent to the

sale was necessary, and further—that—being under age—however willing she might be—she was legally incapable of giving it. Berners was baffled, but not defeated; he was not the man to be turned from a settled purpose. This land he would have and hold, title or no title. Assured by personal investigation, as well as by legal opinion, of the bearing of this obstruction, he set himself to devise a plan of overcoming it. Since the law could neither be altered nor safely strained to further his object, he must have recourse to a conscientious sense of responsibility and personal honour; and he began to see how these might be used to carry out his intentions. Knowing her thoroughly, he was sure that the Edith Lyndon of legal maturity would feel bound to uphold the covenant, made with her full knowledge and consent, under legal disability. It was only a question of waiting a while, until her legal sanction could be secured. Meantime the place would be his own, and, although still keeping his discovery secret, he might be making preparations for the unexpected disclosure which should come by and by, in such a manner as to leave no room for suspicion of collusion on his part.

The arrangement of the legal obstruction to his proposed purchase, and his own delay in coming to a decision concerning it, detained Berners longer in town than he had anticipated. While debating the matter in his own mind his thoughts had been fully occupied, but his plan of action once settled, he was immediately seized with terror lest something should happen at Wytha to frustrate his designs, and he hurried home, arriving late one night, to steal forth

at the first streak of dawn and satisfy himself that his treasure remained undisturbed.

The possession of this secret, with its immediate temptations and impending possibilities, had indeed exercised a most disastrous influence on his character. Even his love for his wife, the one restful sweetness of his life, did not escape this baleful influence. He still fancied she watched, perhaps distrusted, him. There was nothing he dreaded more than that she, or Tom, should discover his secret. Imagination exaggerated this danger, and angry suspicion betrayed him into harshness. Her appealing looks aggravated. Her questions drove him to frenzy. The once peaceful home became a slumbering volcano, a succession of violent eruptions, uncertain quiescence and gloomy brooding. The sick woman's forced smiles, and pitiful make believe at satisfaction, resembled the transitory brilliance of the vegetation on a thin lava soil quaking above the threatening fires which burned beneath.

Such necessity for vigilant caution in their domestic intercourse destroyed the sweet spontaneity of happier days, and she longed with an intense craving for some relief of this continued tension. Previous to Mr Lyndon's return from Sydney, there had been an unusually lengthened period of domestic calm at the farm, when husband and wife rejoiced together over letters from their son, which were full of hope and pleasant details of his work, describing also a visit to Moonee Run, which he proposed to occupy so soon as his present engagement should terminate.

Discussing Tom's prospects, and lingering over a subject which mutually interested and drew them

together, the wife's confidence revived, and an idea that had before occurred to her forcibly returned to her mind; her husband was too isolated she thought, if he would take counsel with a friend his responsibility would be lightened and things move more easily, as they used to do. Tom mentioned that he had heard from Mr Wylie; this gave her the opening which she desired, and, after speaking of his regard for their boy, she ventured her modest advice. "I do believe, dear, if you would talk over these business difficulties with Mr Wylie, you would find he——"

"How dare you interfere? Do you want to ruin me?" Berners thundered, his face working, and his eyes wildly piercing hers.

The look of surprise and wounded feeling that he encountered recalled his excited senses, and he continued more quietly, "Women do not understand these affairs. Never hint at such a proceeding again, Amy."

"I did not mean to vex you," she replied, plucking up courage to add, "women may not understand business, but, at least, they possess some common sense. Men are sometimes too much engrossed to think of an obvious advantage; lookers on—you know the proverb."

"Lookers on?" he cried; "what do you mean? I will allow no lookers on. If you spy on me, Amy——"

It was now her turn to interrupt. "I never spy on any one, least of all on my husband, whom I trust thoroughly," she said.

"Do you?" he asked, looking steadily at her; "then

if you do, take this warning, and remember what I say. If you, by word or deed, appeal to Mr Wylie, or to anyone else, in reference to me or my doings ; more, if you do not guard as sacredly secret whatever occurs between us, or whatever you may choose to fancy, I give you my solemn word that you will destroy us all and live to curse the sickly fancies that bred doubt of your husband."

His tone, more than his words, awed her ; she felt that he was deeply in earnest ; more, that he was combating some terrible danger.

After this the wife ventured no more remonstrance, schooling herself to avoid the smallest appearance of curiosity, or even observation of irregularity in his comings and goings, ignoring irritability and striving to soothe the suspicious alertness which he seemed incapable of controlling, struggling all the while against a nameless dread, which she would not admit even to herself, watching and waiting with a silent courage, born of love and fear, which seemed rather to brace than overtax her delicate nerves.

## CHAPTER XIV

EDITH LYNDON

MEANWHILE the sale of the farm homestead was concluded ; Berners paid the money, and received possession of his property, Mrs Lyndon and her daughter readily endorsing the transfer, the latter having at her father's request privately signed an undertaking to confirm the sale on attaining her majority.

Both Wylie and the lawyers looked askance on this arrangement, but the principals in the affair were determined, and carried out their determination.

"I suppose we may now commence our preparations for the voyage," Mrs Lyndon remarked, when all was settled.

"I cannot leave until the lead is found," her husband replied, "there is every probability of our coming on it quickly now the new gear will be fitted."

"Must you really wait ? I am sick of the mine," the lady declared. "Let them find the gold and send us the money. Why should we stay ?"

"There is much more than that to be done, May," Lyndon answered. "When the mine is proved we must float a company to purchase the land."

"Why, it will take another year," she cried; "you must take us home and be back in time for all that."

"But, mother, the gold is not found yet," Edith interposed.

"It will be now," said Mrs Lyndon; "they all say so. Why shouldn't we go?"

"If you like to go without me I'll find the means," said Lyndon, "though it will not be easy to do so just now."

"Edith is really losing time; she ought to be introduced. You will soon join us, George?" asked his wife.

"So soon as I possibly can," he replied gravely.

"We ought not to go without father," Edith remarked. "Besides the mine is uncertain still."

"Oh, that will be all right. You won't mind our leaving, George?" Mrs Lyndon urged.

"I shall mind; but if you wish it I do not object," he said.

"Then I think, if we are to go without you, there is no use in delaying," she rejoined. "Let me see; we might manage to catch an early steamer—say in a fortnight."

Mr Lyndon looked serious. It would be inconvenient to provide sufficient ready money, and his wife's calls on his purse when travelling would, he knew, be large. Still he did not like to oppose. This expedition had been so long talked of and so often postponed. Besides, if it were necessary on Edith's account, as her mother said, he must make an effort to furnish the means.

Mrs Lyndon went on planning. The idea had

taken possession of her now, and when that was the case she always carried her point.

There was, however, a new element to be reckoned with on this occasion.

"Do you really mean it, mother?" Edith asked.

"Certainly. Have not many of our friends been obliged to leave their husbands behind when they went to England?"

"Very likely. They may have had reasons; we have none that I can see," Edith replied.

"No reasons, you ungrateful girl," exclaimed her mother, "when it is on your account that I am going."

"Then put that aside, mother," she entreated. "If it is on my account there is no reason whatever. I am quite content to wait until father can come with us."

"My dear child, your mother knows best," Lyndon interposed; "my comfort must not stand in the way of your advantage." He saw an impending explosion, and hastened to avert it.

"What has come to you, Edith, to set up your opinion against mine?" cried her mother, indignantly. "What do you know of the world or of what is fitting in your position? It is very unbecoming on your part to question my judgment."

"I don't question your judgment, mother; I only say I think we should not separate."

"Be thankful that you have a mother who knows better than you do. Let me hear no more of this," said Mrs Lyndon. "George, you might look in at the P. and O. office, and see about berths. It will be advisable to secure them without delay."

"I am sorry, mother, but if it comes to this, I

repeat I do not wish to go. Perhaps it is better to say plainly I mean to stay here until father can accompany us."

It was the first time that Edith had deliberately asserted a determination to follow her own judgment, as opposed to that of her mother.

"Am I to understand that you refuse to accompany me?" she asked after a moment's awful pause, in an ominous tone.

Lyndon fidgeted. He wished to appease her, but did not know what to say, though feeling that he ought to speak; but Edith forestalled him. "You are going on my account, mother, and as I shall not go of course you will not leave us," she said.

Then the torrent of wrath broke forth, threatening to overwhelm both husband and child. Indignation at unlooked for opposition, disappointment at baffled intentions, misgivings as to a future of conflicting wills—all these and other subtle elements of vexation fed the fire of Mrs Lyndon's anger, aggravated by a consciousness of the incongruity of contending against her daughter's calm acceptance of the reason put forward for the desired journey, which indeed was but one of many that influenced her.

"My dear," said Lyndon, when the first outburst had spent itself, "if you set your heart on this journey we will see what can be done. We need not decide yet. Wait a little, and see how things shape." This was his favourite formula when perplexities pressed. "Postpone—wait—who can tell what the future has in store?"

"No; I shall not wait, Edith must choose between me and you," cried his wife.

"As if you could be separate," exclaimed the girl; "choosing one parent is choosing both. You know it mother. How can you grieve us so?"

"Grieve," echoed the angry mother; "who is it that causes all this grief? An ungrateful rebellious child."

"No, no, May; I won't hear that," the father interrupted, "she means to do right."

"Look, mother dear, at our position," Edith put in; "here is father—as we all see—worried and troubled, and—and, it's no use hiding the truth, I have seen it for some time, scarcely knowing where to turn for money. Are we to leave him alone here, with all these annoyances and go to the other end of the world increasing expense and amusing ourselves? You could not do it, I could not do it, it would be like draining his heart's blood."

The girl had by this time worked herself into a passion of tears, and ended with a burst of sobs.

"It is not so bad as that my child; though it is bad enough, God knows"—her father said.

Mrs Lyndon swept from the room, and he drew the girl to him, pillowing her head on his breast. "I did not know you had guessed so much," he whispered; "it is only temporary though, don't make yourself uneasy, my love."

"I am not uneasy, father," she replied; "only whatever happens let us all three share it together—and, don't think me presumptuous, but would it not be better to let us understand your position. We might retrench, and so help you."

Lyndon explained, with tolerable clearness, the condition of affairs at Wytha; the glamour of his sanguine temperament, no doubt, gave a more hopeful colouring than circumstances strictly warranted; for the girl was not alarmed at what she heard, on the contrary (as she had said), the truth did not appear so terrible as fancy had suggested. The father, for his part, experienced so much relief from speaking of his anxieties to a sympathetic listener, that they dwarfed in magnitude as he proceeded, and before he had finished he was persuaded that things were by no means inextricably entangled, "If only the mine fulfilled reasonable expectations."

Self-pleasing and intolerant of opposition, Mrs Lyndon certainly was, but she was neither sulky nor vindictive, strongly attached to her husband and child, she always persuaded herself that her own inclinations were supremely for their advantage; and Edith knew that if she could once be brought to see what was really her duty in the present instance, her acquiescence would be honest, if not hearty.

She did her utmost to please her mother, falling in with many arrangements which she would gladly have avoided, and Mrs Lyndon tacitly condoned the rebellion which had again deferred their visit to Europe.

As the months went on and affairs at the gully merely repeated themselves, Lyndon became mentally as well as physically more unable to support the prolonged strain; the restraints of his home grew irksome, he took refuge in the excitements of

gambling, betting and their attendant temptations, his evenings being seldom spent in company with his family, either at home or in society; and Edith had reason for a terrible suspicion that the sobriety which had hitherto been habitual was fast deserting him.

Like the lonely invalid at Wytha Farm, she, too, watchèd and waited, loving and fearful, carrying a sick heart into the gayest scenes, and wondering whether her mother did not or would not see the dangers which seemed gathering more and more closely about them.

A respite, however, was afforded by the propitious season which followed that troublesome winter. Pastoral interests flourished in the cycle of wet seasons that had come round; shearing at Wytha that spring was especially satisfactory, and the master returned from his station in better spirits, although the Gully Mine still remained in the anticipatory stage.

Even Berners scarcely dared to hope, he carried on the works mechanically, dreading what each day might bring forth, and actually almost hating his own good fortune in having possession of the long sought gold.

He felt like a thief and could only pacify his qualms of conscience by deciding to make Mr Lyndon a large sharer in the Farm Mine when Edith's majority should enable him to make his discovery public, without risk to his ownership of the property. Meantime he cut down expenses at the gully to the narrowest point, which action depressed Wylie still more, because he gathered from it that the manager had also given up hope.

About this time Mrs Berners received the following letter, which comforted her a little on its own account, and much more, because once again the tie of a common love for their child drew husband and wife together:—

“MY DEAREST MOTHER,—I am writing again immediately (as you see) after my last horrid letter; horrid it was for me, as well as for you and father, for I hated to say that I could not come home this time, as we intended. But, never mind, dear mother (father will see it as I do, I know), this privation is just a necessity of your boy's grand prospects; so, look forward to the day when he will come back to you a proud and prosperous squatter. Father will think I am going too fast, and, of course, I don't expect to own my run just yet. Still, I see my way to making a good portion of it purchased ground before my lease is up. If I had not come across this chance I should have been at home, like other employés, for my holidays; but, being my own master and working for myself, I cannot afford a holiday just at present, and the reason will console you for the result. Give me all the news about dear old Wytha and its people. When does Mr Lyndon return from Tasmania? Not *via* Sydney this year, I fear; and when does that confounded mine mean to come to the good? Glad you had such a grand shearing; the price of wool goes up still. Hurrah for the squatters! Up here we shall live by irrigation; though it is more trouble, it may be better in the end to be independent of such a capricious madam as the weather. Anyway, it is

Hobson's choice with us; we may as well make the best of it. Now, mother, don't you fret; and that pudding I could not eat this year, well, if it won't keep, have another ready for me next Christmas, though, perhaps, I may have business in Melbourne before that, when, of course, I should take Wytha going and returning. Don't forget to give all the news when you write.—Your loving son, TOM.”

Mr Wylie became so uneasy at the condition of affairs at Wytha that, contrary to his custom, he went to Melbourne in the month of March to meet the Lyndons on their return from Tasmania. The trip had been pleasant in more senses than one, according to the temperament of each of the family.

Wylie brooding long alone in the immediate presence of disappointment and perplexity was surprised at the cheerful ease, even high spirits, with which his friends greeted him.

“How good of you, cousin Hugh, to come to meet us,” cried Mrs Lyndon brightly; “this is really a delightful finish to our holiday.”

“You look as if you had been having a good time,” said Wylie, trying to rise to the general level.

“On the whole I can't return the compliment,” she remarked. “What do you think, Edith—does he not look moped?”

“We shall shake that out of him, now we have got him here,” exclaimed the girl gaily.

Lyndon had been attending to the family luggage, but the clasp of Wylie's hand was enough to bring back his uneasiness. He began to hate Victoria.

Was he never more to breathe freely there? Mrs Lyndon, however, kept up the conversation, aided by Edith, and Hugh allowed himself to catch something of their liveliness.

Business had accumulated during Mr Lyndon's absence. Some of it was imperative and had to be arranged before he could proceed to Wytha. Wylie was therefore obliged to stay in town longer than he had intended, being determined not to return without Lyndon.

Mrs Lyndon insisted on his availing himself of the opportunity, for renewing his acquaintance with the gay world.

"You were always a little rusty; you will be getting crusty, too, if you don't mind," she said.

"Don't be hard on me, May," he rejoined; "I really cannot enjoy your big parties, but I'll go with you to the flower show if you like."

"You will be delighted," cried Edith; "the autumn show is splendid, I always think the spring exhibition the brightest and prettiest; but the autumn one is gorgeous, magnificent."

"Brightly beautiful youth—gloriously handsome maturity;—hey, missie?" Wylie exclaimed, bowing to each of his companions.

Edith's prognostications were amply verified. The late treasures of the season in their full blown splendour were indeed "things of beauty," and an enduring memory of "joy."

The fine hall, too, with its elegant decorations, and brilliant company, presented a most imposing spectacle.

Wylie glanced round approvingly. His taste

was gratified by the environment and his enthusiasm for natural beauty roused by the central objects of the display. He lingered about the tables, loth to tear himself from their fascinations—admiring, comparing, inquiring, making memoranda of new developments or rare plants—until it was necessary to make way for other visitors.

"That is the pleasantest gathering you have taken me to," he remarked as they drove away from the hall.

"I knew you would enjoy it. What a crowd there was to be sure" said Edith.

"Mrs Brown told me that she had attended these autumn exhibitions ever since they were instituted: she thinks they become increasingly popular," Mrs Lyndon replied.

"Captain Cuttle makes a note of that," exclaimed Wylie, with his merry twinkle, "one score to the good for your Melbourne society; though, to tell the truth, I observed a number of the company who did not appear to have come for the sake of the flowers."

"A large proportion came for no other purpose, cousin Hugh," Edith remarked. "You are always satirical about Melbourne society. What is it you don't like among us?"

"Shall I venture to tell you in one word?" he rejoined. "Well, then, it is self-consciousness."

"That is a prevailing characteristic of the age. I don't suppose Melbourne society is singular in that respect," said the girl.

"There are fewer counteracting and more aggravating elements here than in older lands; that

accounts for the pronounced nature of the disease, which strikes a stranger as almost universal, spreading from the fashionable girl who flirts with the *aide-de-camp*, to the milliner's young lady who minces along Collins Street on the tip of her toes and drives you into a fever of anxiety lest she should fall headlong propelled by the height of her heels."

"You are always laughing at us women. Why don't you turn your attention to your own sex, cousin Hugh?" Mrs Lyndon interposed.

"It is even worse in that direction I confess," said Wylie. "We are all infected, from the Member of Parliament, who imagines that the whole colony—nay, Europe itself—listens with bated breath to his eloquence as reported in the morning journals, to the shopman who strikes an attitude in the gallery of the theatre, and summons all his self-possession to support him under the fire of admiring eyes which he feels to be fixed upon him. You see," continued Wylie, more seriously, "our wonderful progress, socially and materially, naturally provokes self-consciousness. People are astonished at us. How then can we help being astonished at ourselves? Then we miss the counteracting check of large and varied standards of comparison, not to mention the toning down which the experience of the ages brings."

"I am glad the men come in for their share of your criticism; the vials of your wrath are often emptied on the heads of us poor women," Edith remarked.

"Pardon," cried Wylie; "I did not mean to treat

you to this tirade. Nevertheless, I uphold my thesis."

It will be seen that Mr Wylie had not come to town in the best of humours. He was aware of that, and consequently very glad when Lyndon's business set them free to proceed stationwards.

## CHAPTER XV

### "A DISCOVERY"

THE brief twilight of an evening in early May was just closing when the cousins arrived at Wytha.

"Stay and dine with me," said Wylie. "I am bound to remain at home for Jim's report. You will find no one at the house." The travellers were at the junction of the Gorong and Wytha tracks, and Lyndon, who was driving, paused as the other spoke.

"Will Berners come here?" he asked.

"I'll send a message by the groom," Wylie replied, tearing a leaf from his pocket-book, and pencilling a few lines. "There," he continued, handing it to Lyndon, "he will understand that you prefer dining here, and will come down and join us."

"They alighted on the spot where Edith had left the carriage to walk home with Wylie, nearly two years before.

He thought of it sadly, wondering at the changes which had come to their erstwhile happy bush homes.

Neither he nor Lyndon spoke much; even Ponto's demonstrations of delight at his master's return failed to elicit more than a passing caress, and Janet's stream of local gossip fell on inattentive ears. Lyndon was moody, and when Berners joined them

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his presence did not tend to increased cheerfulness. Wylie, in his capacity of host, made several attempts at shaking off this depression, but his companions were not responsive, and he at length succumbed to the weight on his own spirits. Certainly the three men who dined together at Gorong on that memorable night were far enough from the irrepressible chatter and affectionate brightness which usually characterised the first evening of the family's return to Wytha. Now, however, the feminine element was lacking which might, even in present circumstances, have temporarily dissipated the gloom which prevailed.

Berners had little fresh information to give. When Lyndon asked a question he reminded him of the report which he had regularly received.

"Really, Mr Berners, one would suppose you expected me to learn your letters by heart," Lyndon remarked testily, when the manager referred him to a written statement of outlay at the gully works which he had forwarded some weeks before, "I cannot remember every item," he added.

"I could not forget if I tried," returned the other; totting off an array of figures sufficient to daunt a mining man of stouter calibre than the owner of the Gully Mine.

Then Berners brought forward his proposal to dismiss most of the men, only retaining enough to keep the works going. "Station prospects are better just now; a couple of seasons might see us in a position to go on again," he said.

Wylie again pointed out that any public show of doubt about the mine would be fatal to their credit.

"You suggested that last year, Mr Berners," he urged; "it seems to me that the argument holds as much now as then."

"It is easy to object. What is your remedy?" asked the other.

Lyndon interfered with his accustomed plea for delay. "We will go down to-morrow," he said, "and settle about things after."

"As we have done so often," Berners retorted. His tone was almost contemptuous, and both his companions looked at him in surprise.

Berners left early, declining to smoke; Lyndon finished a pipe with Wylie, and soon followed; the latter walking with him to the hand-rail bridge; and turning, when he reached his own gate, to observe Lyndon ascending the path on the opposite side of the creek, he watched the dim outline of his figure disappearing among the trees with a strange feeling of dismay.

A pair of gates at the top of the track opened into the Wytha home paddocks; here the path widened leading to the ornamental lodge at the entrance of the demesne immediately surrounding the house. An old pensioner had formerly inhabited the lodge; when he died, it had been shut up, the family being so little at the house.

As Lyndon proceeded up this path, he perceived a figure slouching along in front; there was no moon, but the stars shone clearly, and quickening his pace, he soon approached near enough to discern one of the obnoxious swagmen whose presence about the place Berners had been denouncing that evening, declaring that they camped there to spy on the gully

works with a view to pegging out ground so soon as it should be known how the lead ran.

Lyndon's temper was at the point when a straw would make it brim over; not usually inconsiderate or unkind, present perplexities upset the equilibrium, and his wrath burst forth on the man, who represented in his eyes an intrusive spy on his unlucky mining operations, as well as a probable thief of his property. Moreover, the man was plainly the worse for drink; he moved unsteadily from side, muttering to himself as he went. "What do you want here?" cried Lyndon, overtaking him.

The man looked up stupidly, as a hand was laid on his arm.

"Be off with you," continued the squatter; "I'll have none of you here. Off with you at once," turning him face to the gates.

"Sure, sir, ye won't be hard on a poor fellow, I was just going to lie in the porch yonder," pointing to the vacant lodge, "till morning, and then I'll up and go."

"I'll have none of you here," Lyndon repeated; "off with you, get down to the road; I'll see you off my land."

Suiting the action to the word he pushed the man through the gateway, following him along the outside ridge which led to the farm paddocks, skirting the public road. The fellow went grumbling onwards to the top of the ridge. "Now, then," said Lyndon, "there's your track, if I find you trespassing here again I'll have you to the next police station."

"The manager be bad enough," said the intruder, "but ye are a lot worse; 'tis the likes of ye that

this embryo trunk, he parted the young branches, and leaning forward peered eagerly downward, to meet the startled glance of his manager's piercing eyes, apparently looking directly into his own.

Astonishment, incredulity, wonder flitted rapidly through Lyndon's mind. Was he dreaming? Had recent worries unhinged his faculties?

Lying motionless across his support, mechanically grasping it with one arm, firmly holding back his leafy screen with the other, he stared back, momentarily magnetised by the questioning eyes below.

Presently he became aware that darkness was on his side. While the full glare of a lantern fell on Berners's agitated countenance. The latter, after a prolonged look round, re-entered the thicket. Evidently some slight movement of the leaves had alarmed him, but observation of the spot whence the rustle had sounded appeared to have allayed his fears.

"He probably thinks it is an opossum roused by his presence here," thought Lyndon; "but what on earth is he doing?"

Far fetched imaginings, wild suggestions surged on the bewildered spectator; none, however, approached the truth, which dawned on him when he saw the other return to a small heap by the side of some metal implements, gleaming conspicuously in the glimmer thrown by a shaded lantern turned towards a big fallen tree which lay between it and the outside area of the paddock. The lighted side of the lantern fell full on the manipulator and his instruments, the reflection of which against one of the dark sides had attracted Lyndon's attention in the distance.

All this Lyndon took in as he lay motionless on his branch, dark suspicion and angry indignation burning within him. Surely that shining white stone which Berners was manipulating was quartz; and—and that speck of glitter—was it possible—here?

The manager threw it aside as though dissatisfied, and selecting a lump of earth from his heap proceeded to clean that. Lyndon watched, almost afraid to breathe, struggling to control the passion rising within him. The earthy mass was separated, and a beautiful specimen of quartz, more thickly studded with glitter revealed. Placing it with the smaller piece, Berners now consulted his watch, holding it up to the lantern, "A quarter of an hour more," Lyndon heard him murmur, as he went towards the upturned rootlets of the fallen tree. Here half his body disappeared, his head only remaining visible, while he vigorously wielded a pick.

"My God! it is the cap of the reef," Lyndon ejaculated, neither knowing, nor caring if the words were audible; his frame quivered with passion, as he leaped from his perch and threw himself on the man, who was stooping forward in a shallow hole, which had been scooped out of the rock beneath the broken soil on the surface.

Quick as lightning Berners dashed at the lantern, and this sudden wrench, in an unexpected direction, loosened the other's hold; the extinguishment of the light giving him, too, the advantage of familiarity with his surroundings. Not knowing how much had been discovered, he remained silent, fearing lest his voice should betray him.

Lyndon, overmastered by his passion, could find

no words to express his scornful indignation. Momentarily losing his balance, when Berners wrenched himself free, he stumbled back against the fallen trunk. This rough contact broke the spell, and the angry torrent burst forth. "You consummate scoundrel, I see it all now. You've fooled me into searching below there, knowing all the while that the reef is here. You mean-spirited cad; I'll be even with you, lying thief that you are; I'll—I'll——" breath failed; he stopped, half suffocated with passion.

At the first outburst Berners saw that he was discovered, and as the stinging epithets were hissed forth between the other man's set teeth he struck at him in the dark, scarce knowing what he did.

The blind blow, spent in the air, carried with it much of his angry disappointment. He even experienced an unrealised sensation of relief that the mask had been torn off and the weight of this cankering secret dragged from him.

Before Lyndon had recovered the power of speech, Berners's natural disposition reasserted itself, and he was again the dogged, practical and—contradictory as it may appear—zealous manager, though with a difference. His sense of proportion was now gone, any feeling approaching to delicacy of conscience wiped out, and he experienced no difficulty in ignoring the duplicity and dishonest scheming of the past year. The revulsion was instantaneous, and without set purpose he instinctively acted upon it.

Now that the lantern was extinguished, the bright starlight flickered uncertainly among the bushes, and Lyndon had not noticed his enemy's futile thrust.

Perceiving this, and taking advantage of the pause, Berners interposed. "Hold there! how dare you!" he cried, "I believed the lead was at the gully as much as you did, till—by accident, the other day—I came on this."

"And—and!" broke in the other; "you got the land from me, didn't you? Carrying on the lower works all the time, you thought to—my God! I can hardly believe the evidence of my senses."

"I meant to let you share," Berners interjected.

"Let me share!" cried Lyndon passionately. "Share my own. Do you think the land is yours? Knaves outwit themselves. I'll let you know whose land this is, and whose gold that is, which you've got hidden away there—sneaking cheat that you are."

"Be quiet, I say," cried the other; "the land is mine, bought and paid for; you can't deny it. But you shall share."

"Curse your bargaining!" shrieked Lyndon.

"Be aught wrong, gentlemen?" inquired a voice from the top of the rocky mound near by. The disputants started and looked up, to find Wylie's man, Jim, gazing doubtfully at them.

"I war getting back to our out station, by reason of them fat steers as 't isn't safe to leave wi' they sundowners about," he explained, "and I thought I heard some one a-calling. Thinks I, 'tis they noosances, a-quarrelling with Mr Berners. But be anything wrong, masters?" glancing uncertainly from one to the other.

"Everything is wrong when rascals are about robbing their employers," said Lyndon, angrily.

"That true, sir, but I don't see none o' 'em hereby," Jim rejoined.

Berners interposed. "No, not here; up yonder. You have no time to lose, Jim."

"Is your master about, yet?" Lyndon called after him, as he hurried back to the track.

"He war smoking in the garden when I comed away," replied the man, passing quickly onwards.

"There is nothing to be gained by all this noise," Berners remarked. "If you will be calm, we can come to some arrangement, which will benefit both of us."

"Understand me, once for all," said Lyndon, sternly. "I utterly refuse to hold communication with a dastardly deceiver, who bought my land under false pretences, but the sale was illegal, and your sham claim on our honour is gone—gone—a thousand times gone," he continued, working himself again to a red heat. "I'll brand you before the world. Your name shall be a by-word of disgrace; and those who bear it will hide their heads in shame."

Lyndon's heart smote him after he had uttered the latter allusion; he hesitated, half disposed to recall it. Why should he remind the wretched man of the innocent wife and child, who must suffer with him? But it was too late for compromise of any kind; at his last words, Berners had turned away in silence—striding rapidly in the direction of his home.

Lyndon drew out his match-box, struck a light and groped for the heap he had seen the other manipulating. Having neither the means nor the

inclination to examine the stones, he hastily thrust them into his pocket and turned away, intending to cross the creek by a bridge which led from the public road to Gorong.

To go home he felt would be useless. He could neither sleep nor rest until he had talked over with Wylie this extraordinary change in the aspect of affairs. He needed the counsel of a sagacious and trusty friend to clear his own mind, and help him to decide on the course of action which it behoved him to take.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A TRAGIC NIGHT

THE invalid at the farm lay watching and wakeful, listening for the stealthy opening and closing of the office door—her frequent experience, indeed, but to-night prolonged much beyond the usual time.

She wondered, and questioned, and guessed. She looked at the clock, at her sleeping draught, at the open door of the dressing-room, whence issued sounds proclaiming the undisturbed repose of its inmate. "Would it be possible to wake that woman," she wondered, "and send her to see whether the office were occupied?" "Could she have dozed, and her husband entered unnoticed?" Her hand was on the bell when the loud report of a pistol, near at hand, echoed through the silent house. This was more than her over-wrought nerves could bear; with a violent start she dropped the bell and fell back on the pillow shrieking wildly.

The bell, clanging noisily, rolled along the floor towards the adjoining room, and Mary, roused by it and her mistress's screams, rushed, half asleep, to the bedside to find Mrs Berners insensible. Long before the usual remedies took effect Mary had summoned her fellow servant.

"To think of the master being out this time o'

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night," she said, "'tis he as ought to be here seeing to her."

"I think we'd best call the men and send for the doctor," the other suggested. "I've often seen her faint, but not to lie like this."

Mrs Berners opened her eyes, staring about with a questioning look. "You've been terrible bad this bout, ma'am," said Mary; "take this, 'twill hearten you up," holding the accustomed restorative to her mistress's lips.

She drank eagerly, then lay back with closed eyes. Presently her face began to work, and she glanced excitedly at the clock.

"Where's your master?" she asked.

"He's not come home, ma'am," replied both women together.

"Great God, what does it mean?" cried the invalid, knitting her brows as if to recall some vague impression.

"Did you hear any noise outside?" she inquired after a few moments' thought. "I don't know whether I have been dreaming, but I certainly heard a pistol go off."

"A pistol, ma'am," cried the women; "it's them swags, no doubt, a-prowling about the place," and Mary glanced timidly at the windows.

"Did either of you hear it?" Mrs Berners repeated.

"Lor, ma'am, no," Mary answered, "I was sleeping quiet as a babe when you screamed enough to wake the dead. I come running out, and tumbled over the bell a-lying on the floor there."

Mention of the bell recalled to Mrs Berners's memory the whole experience of the evening. She

was sure now that the loud report was no dream. Instantly she connected her husband's prolonged absence with Mary's allusion to the swagmen. "Had he come into collision with one of them and—and—what did that shot portend?"

"Call the men immediately," she cried in agitation, "and bid them search round the place. Send off one of the boys to Gorong to inquire for your master. Don't lose a moment," as the women looked dubiously at each other.

The watchers in that chamber waited long, and the mistress, lying with her face to the wall, endeavoured to control the agitation that shook her feeble frame, the maids whispering apart by the fire which usually burned in the invalid's room.

Meanwhile the men had gone out at the yard gate, searching first the paddock at the rear of the premises. "The master should be here directly. Dick rides straight. 'Twon't take he long to get to Gorong," said Simon O'Connor, head man, groom and Jack of all trades at the farm.

"Ay, ay," returned his companion; "will we be going in this way?" he asked, as, having made the circuit of the place, they reached the front gate of the garden. "There have been someone through here," Simon remarked. "They gates have been swung to in a bustle; nought latched, ye see. They calves might have got in. Eh? What's this? The saints defend us! Holy Mary! Sure 'tis the master!"

There, just at the spot where Tom Berners had seen Edith Lyndon fasten James Fenners's offering at her throat—there, beneath the swaying trees, half hidden in the long grass, lay the unhappy manager.

A sight it was to sicken the strongest. The whole upper part of the face was shot away, nothing remaining to mark his identity but the thick bushy beard, splashed with blood, and his clothing, which was undisturbed.

"We'll get the stable door and carry 'im on that," said Simon, starting off at a run, and beckoning his mate to follow.

Returning a few minutes later, carrying the door of the stable, they heard the tramp of approaching horses, and presently Mr Wylie and the boy who had been sent to Gorong appeared. Simon placed the door against a tree and went forward.

"What's all this, Simon?" Wylie called out. "Where is your master?"

"Sir, sir," called Simon, "Mr Berners have been shot. He's lying dead there—ay, dead as a door nail. Jack"—to the boy—"be off for the doctor. 'Tain't no manner of use, but ride for yer life and bring 'im."

Here a groan broke from Wylie as he stooped over the body. "Go, one of you men," he cried, "follow the boy. The doctor may be busy; the lad won't know how to act. Yes, take Mr Tom's mare; she goes like the wind."

The mention of Tom brought another groan from Wylie.

"Ay, sir," said Simon, in a broken voice, "he'll feel this dreadful."

Between them they got the body on to the door which had been fetched, and carried it towards the house.

"Go round by the back, quietly," whispered

Wylie, nodding in the direction of Mrs Berners's light. "Keep off the gravel. There—gently. Hold on, Simon, while I open the door."

They laid their ghastly burden on the bed.

"Did you find the pistol?" he inquired.

"Yes, quite close; he was almost lying on it," Simon replied, handing it to the other.

Wylie took it, and started in surprise as he observed the dead man's own crest on the silver mounting; recognising also one of the handsome pair which Tom had brought from Europe as a present for his father. He laid it down, his hand trembling, an expression of wondering awe on his countenance. A terrible suspicion had taken hold of him, suggested first by the peculiarity of the wounds and now almost confirmed by the fact that the pistol from whence the shot had been fired was Berners's property. Had the disappointments and worries of the gully works proved too much for one of his irritable temperament? Had anything suddenly happened to upset the tottering balance of his mind?

Wylie turned away gloomily, moving to the window, whence the doctor's approach should soon be visible. But his troubled vigil was quickly disturbed; an imperative message from Mrs Berners reminded him of the harrowing duty that had devolved on him. The grievous tidings must be broken to her. How he did it he never knew, retaining only a vague memory of having entered her chamber in helpless mental entanglement, laying hold only of one idea, that she must not be told the full extent of her calamity; then a confused

scene of insistence on her part and reservation on his, in the midst of which she had succumbed to one of the fits common to her malady.

On returning to the office he found the surgical examination had been made in the presence of Simon O'Connor. His eyes questioned the doctor as he entered; the latter bowed his head in grave affirmation.

"I feared it," Wylie whispered.

"There can be no doubt," returned the surgeon; "no hand but his own could have done it. I am astonished; the last man I should have judged capable of such rashness."

"He has been a good deal perplexed lately; some last straw must have thrown him over here," replied Wylie, touching his own forehead.

"It is terrible for the family," remarked the doctor.

"I have just left Mrs Berners in a fit. You had better see her," said Wylie.

The medical man went to the house, but it was many weeks before the poor lady was conscious of his or anyone else's care. Indeed, the tragedy of that night had been publicly investigated, and privately pigeon-holed as a mystery of local history, before the widow fully realised her terrible bereavement.

The sun had risen and signs of movement were apparent on all sides when Wylie rode away from the Farm, proposing to call at Wytha on his way home, and rouse Lyndon, who was, of course, the proper person to make what arrangements were necessary in consequence of that night's catastrophe.

As he passed the huts near Wytha home paddocks he perceived that the bad news had travelled before him. The men stood about in groups, talking excitedly.

"Where is your master?" he cried to the first servant he saw.

At the sound of his voice the housekeeper came out. "I'm all of a tremble, sir," she said; "this dreadful news have quite upset me. And have you left Mr Lyndon at the Farm?"

But Wylie scarcely heard her. He was off his horse and half through the house before the woman, following, reached the foot of the staircase. She heard him burst into the master's room. "Lyndon, Lyndon," he called, but there was no response. The bed had not been slept in; everything was in perfect order.

Wylie was ransacking the rooms, but nothing was to be discovered.

Closing the door of Lyndon's den—a compound of library and office—he looked searchingly round, removed several papers; tried the desk and table drawers, opened a cupboard, again without result. The apartment (like the one above stairs) had evidently been prepared for the master, but showed no traces of recent occupation.

As he stood gazing about him, and endeavouring to devise some reasonable plan of investigation, he saw—though without conscious notice—the lad who carried the Wytha and Gorong post-bags, flit across the paddock to the stable-yard; presently an outcry from that quarter, followed by loud talking, forced his attention; he walked round the

terrace, and met some of the men, accompanying the lad to the house.

At sight of their faces, Wylie's heart stood still; something frightful had happened—another catastrophe.

"What now men?" he gasped.

"Here be Jack," said the groom, indicating the post-boy; "he says, as he was coming along the bit of open atween the road and Wytha run, and the pony he shied right into the bush; and Jack he gets off to see what's up with the beast; and—and—Lor a mercy—he sees the master lying agin a tree in the scrub near by the track."

"Lead-on to the place," Wylie interrupted, pointing to the pony, whose bridle was yet on the boy's arm.

"My horse," he shouted, in a tone that terrified the listeners. Mounting, instantly he was by the side of the lad; the others requisitioning such horses as were at hand or following on foot.

So he passed on; silent, stern, straight over every obstacle, like a man pursued by some horrible dream. It was but a short ride, though into it was compressed a lifetime of agony.

When they reached the place the sight which met their eyes was harrowing enough, though less frightful than that which Wylie had encountered earlier in the small hours of that terrible morning.

Lyndon lay across a prostrate tree, face downwards, as the boy had described; when they raised him, a fork of the tree was found to have penetrated the left temple; a few spots of blood oozing from it had discoloured the forehead. The base of the

skull discovered marks of a heavy blow, evidently delivered from behind, with sufficient violence to throw him forward and bring his forehead in contact with the pointed fork of the fallen tree.

The bright morning sun shone full on the white face, its habitually sweet expression still playing about the mouth, the ominous discolouration above the temple contrasting strangely with the happy serenity of the countenance.

Wylie passed his arm gently round the prostrate form, supporting it on the bier extemporised by the station workers.

Himself a man of middle age, not unpractised in the chances, changes and troubles that at one period or another come to us all, was now brought face to face with a hitherto unconceived grief and dismay.

An inroad of neighbours and the arrival of two medical men from the nearest township roused him from the stupor of first grief, he remembered the stricken women in Melbourne, who must not be allowed to learn these terrible tidings through the medium of the public journals. He must go; who else could be trusted to break it to them? Yet how leave the still form here and that other mutilated one yonder?

Confusion ruled everywhere; the decorous domain was already a scene of disorder. Wylie was conscious of the unwonted liberties already taken with this stately home. It struck him with a dull pain as he passed along unheeding the respectful sympathy, with which the people made way for him.

One who had just arrived, however, stepped

forward and laid a hand on his shoulder, forcing his attention.

"Mr Wise! I thought you were at the other end of the district," he exclaimed.

"What can I do?" asked the new comer, passing his arm through Wylie's, and drawing him towards the shrubbery.

"Will you go to town and break it to them?" Wylie inquired.

"Certainly; only won't they take it better from you," said Mr Wise.

"I must probe this mystery. Four-and-twenty hours lost may throw us altogether off the scent," Wylie declared.

"I see. I'll do my best," cried the other.

Mr Wise's undertaking in respect to the widow and orphan was an immense relief, leaving him at liberty to set on foot immediate investigations.

The Rev. Septimus Wise was the Anglican parson in charge of that scattered district. During many years he had travelled up and down, holding services at central places, visiting the stations, farms and small townships.

Many a happy hour had the parson spent at Gorong in company with its master and his young friends Edith Lyndon and Tom Berners, who had been used from childhood to his kindly sympathy and affectionate interest in all their small concerns, and his influence over them was a growing quality, which the vicissitudes of life were sure to increasingly bring out.

Aware of this, Wylie felt that Mr Wise's presence at this crisis was most opportune.

Strengthened by the touch of friendly sympathy, he set himself to restore order in the excited household at Wytha, and carry on the station work before he took his way homewards, having appointed a meeting with the local inspector of police late in the afternoon. He had also despatched a telegram to Tom Berners, but was aware that it could not reach him for many days; even then there was always the chance of his being at a distant part of his run.

Meantime the responsibility both at Wytha and the farm devolved on him solely. Sadly considering his position, he approached Gorong, and was surprised to observe his man Jim waiting on the verandah. He came forward to take his master's horse, saying in a low voice, "I'm wantin' to speak to ye, sir."

Wylie looked up sharply. Apparently there was little to be noted in that stolid countenance, but the master's nerves were painfully alert, and he instinctively apprehended a fresh trouble.

"Well, Jim," he said, when the man returned, "if it is anything that will keep let it; I've had enough for one day, and want to clear my mind before the inspector comes."

"I'm terrible grieved, Mr Wylie," returned Jim, "for you, sir, and for all concerned. I wish 'twould keep—I'd not add to your trouble. The inspector be comin', ye say. More cause why I must tell ye."

"Go on, then, and be quick about it," said Wylie, with an air of weary resignation. For the first time that day he took out his pipe, filling it mechanically as he threw himself into his chair.

Jim followed to the room, looking cautiously round and securing the door.

"To the point, Jim," cried Wylie, with closed eyes.

"Then, sir, if ye will have it short," exclaimed the man, "I'll tell ye right out. Last night, after I'd gone from here to the out station I come on the master yonder," nodding in the direction of Wytha, "and Mr Berners a-quarrelling in the three cornered paddock."

Wylie started as if he had been stung, and sat up with staring eyes fixed on the narrator.

"Mercy on us! Mr Wylie, don't ee stare like that, sir," cried the man, "it's uncanny like."

"You heard Mr Lyndon and Mr Berners quarrelling last night, Jim?" questioned Wylie. "Are you sure? You might have mistaken their voices. There are men camping up there."

Then Jim described the meeting of the previous evening in the three cornered paddock, relating what he had heard and seen, and how he had lingered, before turning off to the Gorong out station, and had watched Mr Lyndon come out of the paddock and pass along by the track nearest the main road.

"I seed him," he said, "go along into the scrub as though he war makin' short for the bridge below, and, thinks I, he's a-goin' to talk with Mr Wylie over this disputin', whatever 'twas, as they disagreed about."

"Stay here, Jim," said Wylie, as he rose and paced the verandah, trying to collect his thoughts.

A more terrible suspicion than that which the sight of Berners's pistol had awakened now burst on him,

Could passion have driven the unfortunate manager to strike that treacherous blow from behind, which brought Lyndon into fatal contact with the fork of the prostrate tree.

Yet Berners was the last man to be guilty of violence, irritable, anxious and suspicious he was; but neither hasty nor given to fits of passion.

Why then that act of self-destruction? That also was, at least, as improbable as the other, judging from the man's previous career. Still, there seemed no room for doubt there, and the one desperate deed gave a motive for the other.

Returning to Jim, he declared, "I can't see my way at all. I don't know what to think. The only thing plain seems to be that we must speak out the whole truth."

"Tell the perleese all we know, sir?" asked Jim; "if so be you say so, we must; but I don't trust in them, not I; and then there is Mr Tom and the poor lady."

"Don't Jim," cried Wylie. "I know it—I feel it; but the truth will be best for all in the end. Perhaps it may help to a clue that will clear Mr Berners."

Jim shook his head. "If he did it, sir, he was not in his right mind."

"One cannot believe he did it. I need not warn you, Jim, to keep this quiet," Wylie replied.

"'Deed, and ye needn't," returned Jim. "If 'twas only for Mr Tom's sake, leave alone Mr Berners hissel', who we all respects, 'spite of his fidgetty ways."

## CHAPTER XVII

### AFTERWARDS

ONLY three weeks had passed since the fatal night which brought misery and desolation to Wytha. Wylie, who had taken a prominent part in arranging matters, perceived already that the affairs of the family were in a worse condition than he had ever suspected; he was also haunted by an uncomfortable misgiving that more remained behind.

Mr Lyndon's sudden decease had been the signal for an inroad of creditors, and it was only by his personal influence, backed by Gorong acres as security, that Wylie had been able to stave off the impending crisis until the widow and her daughter should have left the place.

He proposed to settle them in a less expensive house and to sell the Pines, the situation of which had ensured a sufficiently high price, not only to pay off the mortgage on itself, but to leave a surplus for the settlement of other claims.

Lyndon's business responsibilities were so complicated that as yet Wylie saw but a short way before him.

The first step however was to find a home for the women.

"One thing at a time," he said to himself. "If May will only be reasonable I may get them

comfortably housed." Then his mind wandered off to the other sufferers. "Poor Tom," he murmured, "I dread that meeting." Returning again. "It is but a month since we were all together in town." . . . "I wonder is there insanity in Berners's family? Never heard of it, though I knew several of them at home." And so on, venting the agitated thoughts that seethed through his brain in such disjointed ejaculations.

Nor was the master of Gorong alone in this mental disturbance. The scattered population of that wide district shared his perplexity; an unprecedented state of ferment reigned everywhere, and public opinion was highly excited, both before and after the inquests.

An officer from the Melbourne police quarters and a detective were investigating every circumstance bearing on the outrage; catching at and following up the faintest appearance of a clue to the mystery; but entirely without result, so far.

The inquest on Berners had been held first. With the evidence of the medical man, and of the servants who had discovered his body, there was no alternative but to bring in a verdict of suicide while in an unsound state of mind.

In Lyndon's case, there were complications which led to diversity of opinion. Jim's evidence was the most important; but for it there was nothing to involve Berners. In accordance with Wylie's advice he had told the simple truth, though with extreme reluctance; for as he remarked to Janet, "It was impossible to tell how them lawyers might twist a man's words."

In the present case they succeeded in eliciting that he had heard "the gen'elmen a-quarrellin'"; but couldn't say what words were used. Under pressure however, he admitted that Mr Lyndon had called out "rogue," and "cheat," but Jim never understood who the master meant. "Maybe he was pointin' to them swags."

The evidence, though important, was by no means conclusive. On the one hand it was argued that had Berners lived he might very likely have easily explained the whole matter. On the other hand, the fact of his suicide deepened the probability of the dark suspicion which attached to his memory.

Then Lyndon's pockets were found to have been rifled, though his watch was untouched. It had stopped at ten minutes before midnight, and cross-examination elicited from Mrs Berners's attendant that her mistress must have heard the report of the pistol very soon after that time.

The coroner pointed out the significance of Jim's testimony as bearing on the one theory, and then showed how unlikely it was that Berners—even in a fit of insanity—should have robbed his victim, as weighing in the opposite scale.

Moreover, there was no trace of Lyndon's purse or money found on Berners, or anywhere else in the neighbourhood. It seemed to have disappeared, yet Wylie remembered having seen Lyndon change a £5 note at the railway station.

The summing up was impartial, still it was plain that the coroner himself had little doubt as to who had committed the crime.

A local jury must necessarily be influenced

by previous knowledge of the parties concerned, especially when, as in this instance, both had been long and thoroughly well-known among them. A thousand characteristic traits recurred to their minds, which gave the lie to the theory of Berners's guilt, and yet the damaging facts and implications remained.

At length the foreman announced a unanimous verdict. "Mr Lyndon was killed by a blow delivered from behind, but there is not sufficient evidence to show by whom delivered."

Wylie was thankful that Berners had escaped being publicly branded as the murderer, though it was plain that a strong suspicion attached to him, his recent change of manner and habit disposing people to believe that his mind was unhinged.

So—after his troubled, anxious life—friends and neighbours laid him in the little bush cemetery, and listened with a hushed feeling of awe and sympathy as the clergyman unhesitatingly commended their unhappy "brother" to One who saw through the labyrinth of mystery that shrouded his last hours.

Next day Mr Lyndon was buried, with much lamentation and many expressions of universal respect. As Mr Wylie and some of the deceased gentleman's most intimate friends passed along the thronged cemetery he experienced a melancholy gratification in recognising tokens of real feeling.

"Poor George," he thought, "everybody loved him!"

Soon, however, had come the stern realities of business, forcing back regrets and sentiment.

Mrs Berners lay in a semi-conscious state. Her

son was absent inspecting a distant portion of his run when the telegram announcing his father's death reached Moonee, and he did not receive it for several days. Starting on the instant, he had arrived within telegraphic distance, and communicated with Wylie the previous week, begging that a letter might meet him in Sydney, whither he was hastening with all speed.

The writing of that letter had been one of Wylie's most painful tasks; he now daily expected to hear of the young man's arrival in Sydney, after which his appearance at Wytha was a matter of hours. Therefore Wylie had hastened Mrs Lyndon's departure, feeling that it was better for all to avoid a meeting.

A serious addition to his trouble had been his knowledge of the relations which existed between Tom and Edith. The daughter's grief was yet too keen for the intrusion of other thoughts, but he knew that, by and by, the inevitable break in this life-long intimacy would add much to the weight of sorrow which the girl must bear.

Only once had there been any allusion in this direction. It came about when the day of their departure from Wytha was fixed.

Edith had then vainly entreated her mother to sanction a visit to the half-conscious invalid at the farm.

"I wish," she said afterwards to Wylie, "that you would persuade mother to let me call on Mrs Berners. God knows I shrink from going as much as she would, but it seems cruel for us to hold the innocent woman under a ban."

"I have called and done what I could for her," Wylie replied.

"If we leave without the smallest sign of sympathy," Edith urged; "it will wound her deeply, and put a slight upon her in everybody's eyes."

"It's not easy to see what is best, child," Wylie remarked evasively.

"It's not what is best for ourselves, but what is right," Edith replied; then, after a moment's hesitation, she lifted her head, looking steadily at her companion—"Cousin Hugh, you need not be afraid for me. Of course, I know all is at an end between me and Tom. The son of the man who is suspected of my father's murder can never be anything to me. That is one reason why I wish to show we are sorry for them, as for ourselves, though our friendship must be broken off."

"I am sorry for both of you, my dear," Wylie said. "Of course, it must be as you say; it is hard on the innocent, but there is no help for it. The sins of the fathers are, in the ordinary course of natural law, visited on the children."

He glanced at her questioningly.

"I shall bear up," she said, answering his look. "Poor Tom! how terrible it is for him."

"If you can support it, he must," the other replied.

"You forget the horrible suspicion—that is the worst of all," the girl urged.

Respecting the visit to Mrs Berners, a compromise was effected, Mrs Lyndon consenting to Edith's going on condition that Wylie accompanied her.

They might have spared the discussion, for the poor lady was unconscious of the girl's presence.

"I am glad we went, though," said Edith. "The nurse will tell her, and the neighbours will see that we have afforded no pretext for slighting her."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### BAFFLED

IT was perhaps as well that Mr Wylie was absent when Tom Berners arrived at the farm. The sudden shock of grief and dismay which spurred him to travel day and night until he reached settled districts was there absorbed in a blaze of angry indignation.

At the first opportunity he had procured back copies of the Melbourne papers; on opening the earliest of these his eye was caught at once by a sensational heading; "The Wytha murder and suicide"; "Suspicion directed to Mr Berners." The narrative had a basilisk attraction for him, and he read breathlessly, as if fascinated by the wild imaginings of some impossible romance, until he came to the evidence given by Mr Wylie's man, Jim, and the consequent summing up of the coroner.

Then his passion burst forth, and for the moment literally overcame him. Happily he was alone, and could give vent to his emotions without compromising his claim to sanity. From that moment his sorrow seemed to be dried up by the stream of fiery resentment with which he met the suspicions attaching to his father.

In this frame of mind he arrived at his home, having made no effort to control his anger until he

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began to realise that he was about to confront his mother.

The meeting—though agitating—was, on the whole, beneficial, for it roused her numbed sensibilities, and gave a fillip to her nerves, which tended to restore her normal state of health. In her presence Tom put a strong curb on himself; and, warned by her medical attendant, was careful not to allude to the more distressing circumstances surrounding the death which they mourned together.

Their first interview was necessarily short; before he left her the young man said, "There is a great deal to be done, you know, mother. You won't be surprised if I am absent pretty often. I shall never rest until this mystery is probed to the bottom."

So a fresh investigation was set on foot, and a large reward offered in order to induce those swagmen who were known to have been camped near Wytha on the night of Lyndon's death to come forward with any information they might be able to furnish. The sole result of this, however, was that a number of persons appeared to claim the reward who were quite unable to throw any light on the catastrophe.

In the midst of these inquiries Mr Wylie returned to Gorong; baffled on all sides, young Berners's indignation had become more sorrowful and less fiery; and he thankfully welcomed the presence of his old friend, who heartily joined in his efforts to clear his father's memory.

"I am as earnest as you are in this matter, Tom. I cannot believe he did it," said Wylie, abstaining from adding the usual formula about unsoundness

of mind, which so angered the son of the unhappy man.

Berners's business ability was very helpful in the complicated condition of Lyndon's affairs; and he carried through certain delicate negotiations in reference to the separate leasing of the house and home paddocks (which belonged to Mrs Lyndon), irrespective of claims on the adjoining property.

"You have shown a tact and capacity for which I scarcely gave you credit," said Wylie, when Tom had succeeded in bringing the negotiations to a successful issue.

"It is some consolation to be of use to you," the young man replied. "My father's affairs are straight enough, on too narrow a basis for complications. I cannot understand why he bought the farm though. I never heard that he had done so until now. Mother thinks Mr Lyndon wished to sell with the intention of going to England. Was that so?"

"It was sold against my advice," Wylie answered, "but Lyndon seemed determined. We wanted money, and your father wanted the place."

"Why? I wonder," asked Tom.

"Well, for one thing, he was eager to carry on the gully works," Wylie said. "Resources were exhausted, and he probably bought the farm, partly to provide the needed cash, and partly because he liked the place, and saw his way to improve its productiveness."

"You see, Mr Wylie," Tom replied, "those farm lands are properly a portion of the estate. They add materially to its value, and as I mentioned

last week, we are ready to restore them and leave the place as it used to be."

"Such an offer is just what I should have expected of you, Tom," cried Wylie, "but it would be of no avail. The run will be broken up and sold by mortgagees."

"The farm, however, would be Mrs Lyndon's, and might be leased for her benefit," Tom urged.

"In the first place, we could not refund the purchase money," Wylie declared.

"That can wait," interrupted the other.

"And in the second," continued the elder man, "Mrs Lyndon does not wish to possess it. In fact, to be plain with you, she will not endure to hear it even mentioned."

"Or the unhappy family who lived there," said Tom, bitterly.

Wylie was silent.

"Surely, surely," Tom exclaimed, "she cannot really believe that my father—after all these years of devotion to Mr Lyndon's interest—could have actually—I cannot bring myself to name it."

"Don't let us go over that again, my boy," Wylie said. "Wait as patiently as you can for time to elucidate the mystery."

"And Edith?" questioned the young man, in a broken voice.

Wylie fidgeted; he got up, and took a couple of turns about the room, while Tom braced himself to say—"I have been wanting to speak to you about this. You heard what passed between us last year in Sydney. I promised her father, on certain conditions, that I would not write to her, and I

have never written. I agreed to wait until her return from Europe. Ah!" he broke off, "how full of hope I was, busy, planning and working in order that I might be able to offer her a fitting home. Now, now, all is torn from me. My one hope lies in being able to give the lie to this monstrous imputation."

"She grieves for you—and for your mother, Tom," Wylie put in.

"I know that," he replied; "but tell me she does not believe this horrible calumny?"

"I can honestly tell you she does not actually believe it," the other rejoined, "but with her—as with us all—the weight of this uncertainty presses heavily."

Berners sat perfectly still, his face buried in his hands. Looking up at length, he cried—"Mr Wylie, she is my life. There is no life or happiness for me apart from her. I say it now, once and for ever. I am not given to change; without her I must do without life, in its truest sense, and I shall do without it. Of course, I feel that we are separated, until I can clear my father's memory."

"That is so, as you say, Tom," Wylie returned gravely; "she understands that too. It could not be otherwise. Therefore think as little of the past as may be. A man must do his duty, even if his heart's life is put out."

"Yes, and mine is plain. Nevertheless, this silence between us must be broken; and I now beg you, as occupying her father's place, to give me back my promise, and yourself see that she receives one letter from me."

"What good can come of it? Don't reopen these painful wounds," urged Wylie.

"They are not closed with either of us," said Tom. "For her sake, as well as my own, I press this. Indeed, I tell you fairly, Mr Wylie, if I can't get a letter to her I will go to town and see her. I am not afraid to face Mrs Lyndon. I will communicate with Edith."

"You may not be afraid to face Mrs Lyndon," Wylie replied; "but you will be afraid to intrude on her sorrow; you will respect her bereaved condition."

"That is why I desire to write. Edith will prefer it; my presence, alas! that I should admit it, would be too painful. Nevertheless, I must break this silence, only once remember, unless—unless my present inquiries prove successful."

Wylie had been considering. After a while he said, with marked distinctness. "There should be no misunderstanding between us about this. For her sake, as well as your own, but chiefly I put it for hers, intercourse between you must cease, entirely and always; it is no use mincing words, I mean there must be no idea of future renewal, your own sense and right feeling will supply reasons. Promise that you will make no attempt to see her."

"On condition that you undertake that she shall receive one letter from me," Tom urged.

"One letter?" cried Wylie. "Well, yes! I will forward it; only one, remember."

"It is hard; but I suppose it must be so," the young man said.

"Firmness is the truest kindness in this case," Wylie replied. "I don't mind telling you honestly, Tom, it would have pleased me much to have it otherwise; to have seen my two children drawn closer to each other, and to me."

"Thank you, sir; you never said as much before," cried Berners, touched by the other's earnestness.

"If I say it now," Wylie returned, "it is not to encourage a delusive hope, but to let you know you have my sympathy. If I am stern, it is in her interest, which should be more to you than your own feelings."

The young man's unselfish love responded to that appeal. "I promise to write only once," he said, "and to forward my letter through you."

"Then the subject is closed between us," Wylie declared.

"Until I can show her, and all of you, that my name bears no brand of shame," cried Tom, emphatically.

He had carried his point, but he soon found how much easier it is to mould the weaker will or win the responsive acquiescence of friendship than to coerce the stubborn logic of facts or alter the stern sequence of adverse circumstances. It was natural that all his heart should go forth in this letter to the girl he loved; and it was not until some of this pent-up feeling had spent itself that he began to realise how uncertain was the basis on which his hopes rested. Strong desire had clothed hope with a probability which vanished when translated into the realism of written words. So when Tom came to assert the impossibility of his father's guilt through

the prosaic medium of pen and ink, he was forced to recognise the actualities of the case, and driven to acknowledge that, whatever his settled belief might be, the formulating of it in writing demanded a firmer support than known facts afforded.

Throwing down his pen in despair he tried to look fairly at the situation. What if he was never able to prove this mystery? Then Edith and her family must ever shrink from all who bore his name.

Had he, the son of the man accused of her father's murder, any right to seek to hold her to him? Would she not be, perhaps rightly, offended at his want of delicacy? Want of delicacy? Nay, at his brutal selfishness? He reread what he had written, and, by the light of these new reasonings saw that he had unconsciously assumed in Edith a like state of feeling to his own, and had inconsiderately overlooked the gap that must be left in her life by the loss of a beloved father, the ever fresh want and yearning sorrow which would be more enduring than the harrowing remembrance of his violent death.

Tom seized the half written sheet and thrust it into the fire, watched until the last piece was consumed, then hurried from the house.

Outside the cool night air swept across his heated brow, as he mechanically took his way to the spot where his father's body had been found. After awhile the broken hillocks, with their shadowy trees across the road, caught his eye; he passed into the three cornered paddock, making his way through the neglected tangle of scrub and loose

stones, to the spot where his father and Lyndon had been last seen. His ardent will rose up to pierce the mystery that hung about the spot. Oh! if some sign might be given, some indication vouchsafed! But there was neither sight nor sound. The heavens glittered coldly above, and the earth was as adamant beneath his feet, a blank stillness confronted his every effort to penetrate beyond the common visible world that lay around him.

The mute solemnity of the place, however, exercised a tranquillising effect on the young man's troubled spirit; he slowly retraced his steps and once more commenced a letter to Edith. This time putting a strong restraint on himself he tried to present what he wished to say in such a manner as would harmonise with what he imagined to be her point of view, ruthlessly keeping back any strong expression of personal feeling.

When he took that letter to Gorong next morning Wylie saw that he had not slept, his face showed marked traces of the stress and struggle he had passed through.

"Poor lad! poor lad!" said Wylie again gently, "it is hard on you, but take a firm grip of the right. Suffering is strength."

"Is it? Then I shall be very strong," Tom murmured hoarsely.

A few days after he received the following reply to his letter:—

"DEAREST TOM,—I do not hesitate to write, because I want you to understand that our terrible trouble has not made any difference in my love for you. I say this plainly, now that we must not meet

again. You see that as clearly as I do. I could not bear an interview which would hurt my mother deeply, and be merely productive of pain to us both. Will it be some comfort to you to know that I cannot believe this dreadful thing? And yet there are so many corroborating circumstances that I dare not absolutely reject it. The future may bring more light, but we must not build on that. Good-bye, Tom, and God bless you! I think you will understand how sorry I am for your trouble; in the midst of our own grief I have often thought of yours.—Your sincere friend,

"EDITH LYNDON."

"I have just received a report from the police office," said Tom to Mr Wylie, a few days after the receipt of Edith's letter; "it leaves us just where we were."

"It is very dark, but you have done all a man could do," Wylie replied.

"To no purpose," Tom put in.

"I don't know that," said Wylie. "You have put machinery in motion, that may yet work out results; besides it is always a satisfaction to have done what one could."

"Satisfaction and I go different ways," said Tom gloomily.

"Have you heard from Moonnee lately?" asked Wylie, desiring to turn his companion's thoughts into another channel.

"Yes; things are getting into confusion there too, but it doesn't matter," replied the young man.

"You ought to be there, Tom, and now your

mother is better, what hinders you from going?" urged the other.

"It is scarcely worth while to make the effort. I should be out of the way of hearing; if anything occurred to throw light on this perplexity," said Tom.

"Rely on me to follow up the faintest opening, and to communicate with you directly. You ought to be at Moonnee. A station, especially at the outset, needs the master's presence. Besides, how are you to meet the expense which any future investigation may entail, if you throw away your property—or neglect it—which means the same thing?"

That last argument appeared to impress the young man; and Wylie followed up his advantage. He saw that Tom needed occupation of healthy interests, and, though aware that the loss of his companionship and assistance would be a serious disadvantage, Wylie desired to see him go out into the fresher moral atmosphere of the great world of wholesome work once more.

So those who would miss him most were fain to urge his departure, in the belief that fresh surroundings and the imperative demands of business would dispel the morbid hopelessness which was growing on him.

## CHAPTER XIX

### "A NEW HOME"

MRS LYNDON'S new home was one of half a dozen recently built cottages (villas, the auctioneer called them), in a suburb of Melbourne, not far from her former residence.

This particular cottage was distinguished from the others by an air of comparative retirement, due chiefly to its standing further back from the street, and being surrounded by an old garden, the trees of which shaded it from observation; it also pointedly repudiated the conspicuously fresh paint and highly elaborate ornamentation obtruded by its neighbours.

During one of his weary days of house hunting, Mr Wylie had accidentally lighted on this conveniently central—and yet secluded—house; the garden, which had evidently been laid out long before the cottage was built, pleased him, and when he brought Edith next morning to inspect the accommodation, she declared it was precisely what they wanted. Not distant from their accustomed haunts, and yet withdrawn from rivalry with the mansions of the more fashionable district, its detachment, too, from the line of the other houses, promised immunity from the observation of neighbours.

Mrs Lyndon declared that she was indifferent as

to where she went, or what became of her. It was her fixed belief that their property had been mismanaged; she was sure "George would never have left them in such a miserable condition." Poor Wylie had much to bear, for she hinted that their meagre income was due to his want of business capacity. It was in vain that Edith reminded her of the state of affairs, during the last two years, and assured her that their income would be sufficient, that she need stint herself of no accustomed comfort, except perhaps in the matter of hiring instead of using her own carriage.

The first year of her widowhood had offered many opportunities for a renewal of these complaints; it had been a very trying time to Edith, her chief relief being in Wylie's visits, which were now as frequent as he could possibly make them; indeed, between his cousin's business affairs and her private claims on his attention, he found the studious, contemplative life he had so long enjoyed entirely changed; his dog and his books, faithful friends for many years, were neglected. Ponto grew morose and dejected, the favourite volumes remained dusty and unopened, but Wylie could not resist the mute appeal in Edith's eyes, nor his cousin's demand for assistance in the domestic or personal difficulties which she considered insurmountable.

Used to rely on her husband, she had no confidence in her own or Edith's generalship, and when the latter would have taken up responsibilities, her mother preferred appealing to "Cousin Hugh." Thus he was kept busy ministering to real, or fancied needs. He had made a point of being with

them when the anniversary of Lyndon's death came round, it had passed better than he dared to expect.

We meet them again in the following spring, Mrs Lyndon lounging in an easy chair by the front window of her drawing-room, which opened on to a broad walk, raised above the small closely shaven lawn in the centre of the garden, and looked over the wide street beyond; the apartment was, of course, comparatively small, and was the only reception room their present accommodation permitted, but it was elegantly furnished and pleasantly situated. Twilight was falling rapidly on the busy street outside, cabs and carriages rolled along towards the hilly road beyond; city men intent on exercise, with a view to an appetite for dinner, walked briskly from the station below; a small crowd of *gamins* followed the lamplighter as he set one tiny star after another flickering on the pavement; newsboys bawled out cabalistic formula representing the names of the evening papers; the bell of the muffin cart tinkled humbly, and the shriek of the railway engine whistled shrilly; the sights and sounds of a populous suburb at eventide were at their height.

Mrs Lyndon sat absently watching and listening—her thoughts far afield—mentally arranging the details of a new departure which she proposed making, now that their year of retirement had fully expired.

Edith, playing soft music at the other end of the room, glanced occasionally over her shoulder at her mother, from her to the darkening garden outside, and twinkling lights beyond.

"I am sure you can't see over there," said Mrs Lyndon. "Come and talk to me child."

The girl rose with alacrity. "How cheerful the town looks, and the people hurrying to their homes!" she cried; "those familiar noises too. I like them."

"I have been thinking, Edith," her mother continued, "that we had better drive into town early to-morrow, and see madame about those alterations in my velvet dress; your black lace will need a little freshening also."

"Do you really mean to go, mother?" asked the girl.

"Certainly," Mrs Lyndon replied; "touch the bell, and send a message to Hanson, that I shall require a carriage at eleven to-morrow."

When the servant had retired, she continued, "I am sure it is not to please myself that I go again into society. It is a duty I owe to you, Edith. Your poor father would have required it of me."

Edith sighed; she could not conquer her reluctance to appear in general society so soon—as it seemed to her—after their great trouble. And though she liked the Fenners family, and was grateful for the kindness which they had shown to her mother and herself at the time of their heavy trial, she shrank from too close an intimacy. Besides she was aware, from Wylie's admissions, that their income barely covered their expenditure, and she had sufficient social experience to be sure that their re-appearance in their former circle meant additional expense, which she feared would have to be met from their cousin's own resources.

Mrs Lyndon plunged into details as to what she

liked, and what would be appropriate, with an interest which showed Edith that the idea of this ball had stirred her mother's dormant energies and might perhaps lift her out of the dissatisfied groove into which she had fallen of late, if so it would be well to attend, and she tried to anticipate some pleasure from it. Pleased excitement is contagious. This, added to Edith's natural liking for society, soon created an animation and readiness to enter with zest into the amusements of the evening which fully gratified her mother.

When the evening of the ball came, Mrs Lyndon was purposely late in arriving. Mr Fenners and his son had been hovering about the top of the staircase, desiring personally to conduct the widow and her daughter to the reception room. They had just been called away when Mrs and Miss Lyndon were announced. The name immediately attracted attention, and a faint buzz of admiration or of welcome greeted their appearance.

The elder lady, attired in rich black velvet, with mourning ornaments, bore herself with the dignity of a dethroned queen, wearing "the double crown of sorrow." Her still fine complexion and handsome features had an air of refinement which had been less marked in her day of prosperity, and which harmonised well with the sombre richness of her dress.

By her side walked Edith, a cloud of black lace floating about her stately figure; statuesque head encircled simply with its heavy coronet of bright hair, her sweet face flushed, and the large eyes dewy with repressed emotion. As they ascended the

stairs a thought had flashed upon her that this was the first time she had entered a ballroom unsupported by her father's arm. A crowd of memories revived, and the effort to control herself sent the mantling blood to her cheeks, increasing the expression of every feature.

Partly perhaps on account of the tragedy associated with her name, and partly from her touching air of subdued emotion, her appearance carried with it a winning charm which commanded general admiration.

James Fenners had taken care to secure as many dances with Edith as she could be induced to promise him, he speedily led her off to join in the waltz then going on. She was glad of the relief rapid motion brings to the surcharged heart, as well as of the excuse it afforded for silence.

"You are making up for lost time, Edith," cried James. "I never knew you waltz so vigorously before."

"One comes to a ball to waltz, you know," she replied.

"Of course. Another turn?" he asked, and off they went again, until the girl was obliged to stop.

Exercise had done its work, though the flush on her cheek was no longer one of expressed emotion, and her eyes, not now dewy, shone with the brilliance of pleasant excitement.

"You are out of breath," said James. "Let us walk round the rooms, and see who is here."

He took pains to amuse her, pointing out and naming several strangers, who now occupied the places of former habitués in the shifting kaleidoscope

of Melbourne society, putting her *au courant* with their antecedents and belongings, retailing current gossip, and exerting himself to entertain in a manner which was very unusual with easy-going, matter-of-fact James.

"Miss Lyndon! it is really you? I can scarcely believe in my good fortune," cried a voice at her side. The pair turned to find Lord Southbrook standing with outstretched hand.

Edith changed colour. The sight of him revived sad memories, and her companion, who appeared to have developed a new sense, actually accepted the possibility of painful experiences intruding even in this best of worlds, and interposed with the view of giving her time to rally. "*Our* good fortune, you mean, Southbrook," he said. "Why should you wholly appropriate the luck of meeting Miss Lyndon in public again?"

"When did you arrive?" Edith inquired. "Some one said you had gone home."

"So I did," he replied, "but I found nothing to keep me there. The magnetism of this country is irresistible. I only landed yesterday and ventured here uninvited."

Lord Southbrook walked away to Mrs Lyndon to pay his respects, speedily ingratiating himself and taking his former place in her esteem.

Fenners had his turn again with Edith before Southbrook's chance came. The latter looked on grimly, ostentatiously declaring his intention of not dancing, except with Miss Lyndon, and keeping his position at her mother's side.

The vicissitude of the past year had developed

Edith's character, and this enlarged experience was reflected in her outward aspect. The light, girlish manner was gone, leaving a tender thoughtfulness, which brought an added charm to her naturally sweet expression. The earl perceived this change, together with others, that heightened her attractiveness, and the admiration which had long simmered in his bosom flamed suddenly into a passionate desire to gain her love. Now that young Berners was out of the way he considered his chance of winning her a fair one. Of course he saw that James Fenner was in hot pursuit; but he did not believe he was likely to prove such a dangerous rival as Tom had threatened to be.

He commenced, like a wise man, by laying siege to the mother, and when at length his opportunity with the daughter came, exhibited a delicacy in referring to the events which had happened since they met which conveyed a soothing sense of his real, though unobtrusive, sympathy.

Lord Southbrook was not slow in availing himself of permission to call on Mrs Lyndon. When James Fenner and his sister came round next day, they found the earl established by Edith's side assisting her to dispense afternoon tea among a group of other visitors. Of course the ball of the previous night was the topic of conversation, everybody being loud in commendation of the arrangements made for the convenience and enjoyment of the guests.

Mrs Lyndon, happy to see the young people enjoying each other's society, sat apart, professing to be occupied with the evening paper, but really indulging cheerful anticipations.

"If she likes James best," she thought, "I shall not try to influence her inclination, though of course the earl would be preferable."

James Fenner preferred his suit early in the season; and though Edith at first refused to listen, he persevered, until gradually she had come to take refuge in his familiar affection from the pressure of Lord Southbrook's more passionate pleading.

"You must choose between them, Edith, they can't go on like this," her mother said one day.

"I have told Lord Southbrook it is quite useless to urge me. I never can marry him," the girl replied.

"Your poor father had a great regard for him; but I don't wish to press you, if you're attached to James," Mrs Lyndon remarked.

"I am not attached to James," cried Edith; "I like him as an old friend; but I don't want to marry him, or anybody else."

"That is absurd, child," exclaimed her mother, "of course you must marry, and that soon. You are very fortunate in securing two such chances."

"Mother, let us live quietly together," Edith pleaded; "I'll try to make up to you for everything else, only let us remain as we are."

"Impossible," cried Mrs Lyndon, "besides I can never be happy while you are unmarried. Your poor father would not be satisfied. You must be crazy to throw away your opportunities."

The Fenner had secured a house at Queenscliff, and made a great point of the Lyndons spending the first three months of the new year with them there.

It had been settled between the elders of both

families, without Edith's knowledge. The project was very distasteful to her, and she had raised objections, which her mother denounced as selfish, closing further argument by falling into a passion of tears, occasioned (she declared) by the unkindness of her only child.

Christmas was drawing near, and Wylie had promised to spend it with them; after his departure they would go to Queenscliff, early in the new year. Edith shrank from burdening Hugh with her private perplexities; besides there were troubles which she scarcely admitted to herself. After much mental debate she resolved to take the first opportunity of appealing to the good feeling which she knew James Fenners possessed; she had confidence in his kindness and honour, and—though she did not believe that he loved her as much as he imagined—she trusted in his sincere regard.

A few days before Christmas, he came in one morning in a state of unusual excitement. Edith was arranging some choice flowers which he had sent her earlier. "Southbrook is off by the mail, I hear," he cried; "is it true? You've given him his congé at last then?"

"Has he gone?" she asked; "he has been talking of going for some time, you know."

"You have definitely settled him then?" he repeated.

"Do you think it is fair to talk about that sort of thing?" Edith said, evasively.

"Plenty of girls do," James replied; "everybody understood what he was after. I'm sure I don't care who knows how fond I am of you."

As the girl made no reply he came closer, stooping towards her, while she bent over the flowers, and laying his hand on hers arrested her movements, saying, "You will make up your mind now, dearest, I was certain you could never take that Englishman. It's a token for me, is it not? You'll consent to make me happy now, like the darling Edith that you are."

"I want to speak to you, James," she said, not withdrawing her hand; "I have been thinking a great deal about you lately; it is better that we should understand each other."

"Of course," he assented; "that is what I have always said. I'll do anything you wish, Edith."

"I don't think," she continued; "that you heard how much we saw of Tom Berners when we were (all three of us) in Sydney that autumn. Before we left he spoke to me, and to father also, and—and, the end of it was there was to be no engagement between us until I came back from England."

When she named Tom, Fenners started and flushed muttering something about "cheek." The girl took no notice, but it seemed to rouse her spirit; lifting her head she looked steadily at her companion.

"Of course, he can never be anything to me now," she said; "his very name is painful to us, though it is dreadful that Tom should be involved in his father's sin."

"James, I must tell you," Edith continued; "I scarcely knew it at the time, but since his troubles and ours I have found out that—that I really did love him."

Her voice was almost inaudible. Presently tears

came to her relief. She buried her face in her hands, weeping softly.

Fenners's kind heart was touched. He comprehended vaguely that she had made this effort urged by a sense of what was due to him.

Smoothing her hair caressingly, he tried to comfort her.

"Never mind, dear," he said, "it will all pass; such things always do when there is no use in indulging them. I like Tom, too. I am not going to be jealous of him now he can't come between us any more. Poor fellow, it's hard on him; but time will make it easier you may be sure of that. Come, Edith, look up, I shall not mind if that's what you are thinking of."

"Now, James," she said after a while, "you must see that I cannot engage myself to you."

"I don't see it, Edith," he cried, "this is all past. We are going to make a new future."

"At any rate I must have time to get over this," she replied.

James was silent. He leant back in his chair, considering, and apparently trying to come to some resolution.

"Look here, Edith," he said at last; "shall we make a bargain? It seems you discovered your liking for Tom when he was no longer near you. Perhaps I may have the same luck. I'm always hanging about and bothering you. I can see you often wish me a hundred miles away—well, I'll go. I am wanted badly enough at the station. If you will promise to try to love me I'll go up country, and leave you alone with my people at Queenscliff."

This was an immense concession. Still she did not wish to hold out false hopes.

"Well, James," she said, "telling you plainly, I will not answer for results; I promise honestly to try."

"To try what?" he asked, desiring to hear her repeat the words.

"To try to love you as a woman should love the man she marries," said the girl very gravely.

"My precious wife that will be," he whispered, pressing his lips to her forehead.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE SECRET DRAWER

"SUPPOSE we all go to the pantomime to-night," cried Mr Wylie, as he sat at Mrs Lyndon's breakfast-table the morning after Boxing Day. "I see they have resuscitated an old favourite of mine. A good laugh favours digestion, especially about Christmas time."

As he spoke a servant entered with a telegram. "The messenger waits for an answer, sir," she said, handing it to him. He opened it in some haste, for there was not much at Gorong likely to need telegraphing.

"What is it?" Edith asked, seeing that he turned pale. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Mrs Berners is worse."

"I don't see why they should send for you," Mrs Lyndon cried; "what can you do for her?"

Hugh had risen from the table, and was already writing his reply. "I'll bring it myself," he said to the servant, following almost immediately.

After despatching the messenger he remained in the hall considering.

"Hugh," called Mrs Lyndon, opening the door of the breakfast room, "your coffee is cold; you've eaten nothing."

He came back slowly, mechanically taking the

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fresh cup Edith handed to him. "I must go at once," he said.

"Nonsense. What use can you be?" Mrs Lyndon remonstrated.

"Is she dangerously ill?" Edith asked.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" said Wylie. "She died last night."

Both ladies were shocked. Tears came into Edith's eyes; she had always loved Mrs Berners. Poor Tom! here was another blow for him; her mother was grieved too. Death is a great clarifier. The natural prejudice which had shrouded the friendship of happier days dispersed, and the lady of Wytha House remembered her invalid neighbour at the farm as she had been before the catastrophe which had smitten them all at one fell swoop. "She was a good woman," Mrs Lyndon said; "she must have been very lonely of late. We ought not to regret her release."

"It is very sudden; I saw her the day before I left," Wylie remarked; "she looked much as usual. No, thank you, my dear," as Edith put out her hand for his cup. "We've none of us made much of a breakfast, I fancy," he continued, glancing round. "When does the next train leave?"

*Bradshaw* was consulted, and they found he had barely an hour to catch it.

"Let Edith come with me to the station, May, will you?" Wylie urged. "I know you object to early drives."

"I was too abrupt, my dear; I should not have told you just yet," he said, when they had driven off, looking regretfully at her pale face.

"No; as mother says, it must be a release to her;

but I am so sorry for Tom ; he will have nobody left now."

This was the first time she had named Tom to Mr Wylie, and he had never been able to satisfy himself as to her feelings towards the young man. Now she spoke quietly, finding less difficulty since that confidential talk with James Fenners.

"Yes, he will feel this terribly," Wylie replied. "If he could only have been with her, it would be less hard to bear, for he must see—as we all do—that life brought little else than pain to her."

"Let us have full particulars," Edith begged.

"I'll write to-night, after I get back from the farm," Wylie promised ; "I shall go there first. I'm disappointed to have to leave in this hurried manner."

"Won't you run down to Queenscliff?" questioned the girl. "The sea will do you good. You'll have more trouble now."

"Perhaps I may," said Wylie ; "James tells me he is going to the station."

"Yes," Edith assented.

"He is a good fellow, my dear," Hugh remarked.

"Did he ask you to tell me that?" she replied.

"No!" said Wylie ; "but he did ask me to put in a word for him."

"You need not, Cousin Hugh ; I'll try my best without anyone's urging ; but some things cannot be forced."

"Dear child! good child!" Wylie murmured. "Happier days are in store for you I am sure."

"We might be as happy as we can be without father," she rejoined, "if mother would only be content as we are ; but it is no use talking.

Give my love to Janet and kiss Ponto for me," she added, as the cab drew up at the station, holding her face up for Wylie's parting salute, "That for you, that for Ponto"—she said lightly, trying to conceal the strong current of feeling stirred by the sad news of the morning.

During the previous year several branch lines of railway had been completed, which brought Moonnee within easy reach of the outskirts of civilisation. Tom Berners also happened to be transacting business at his post town, when the telegram conveying the intelligence of his mother's death arrived. He did not return to Moonnee, but, travelling without interruption, reached the farm on the fourth day. The funeral had taken place the evening before, it having been found impossible to wait longer for him.

The young man felt that Fate had now done her worst ; there was nothing left to care for, no object to strive after. A dogged hopelessness, bordering on defiance, took possession of his mind. If he worked, it must be for the sake of the work itself, irrespective of its results, whether prosperous or the reverse.

He set on foot negotiations for the sale of the farm to the lessee of Wytha with such great indifference as to terms that Wylie insisted on taking the business out of his hands and conducting the negotiation for him.

A spurring restlessness urged Tom to get back to his rough lonely life at Moonnee ; yet the farm and its neighbourhood had a strong fascination for him.

One night Tom sat in the office, which had also

been his father's private room. He was engaged in drawing out some of the farm accounts, and finding the large ink-bottle in his father's escritoire almost dry, had tilted it on end, steadying it with its own brass top. An access of energy had prompted his action that evening, but he soon wearied. A sense of the hopelessness of everything returned, and he pushed away the paper on which he had been writing with a hasty movement. In doing so his elbow struck violently against the tilted bottle; it rolled over, and the heavy brass top fell with a sharp click into the receptacle for the now broken bottle. Throwing the fragments on to the hearth Tom proceeded to lift out the brass top and found that it did not readily move. Examining it more closely, he perceived that the grooved edge had become fixed between the wood and a small metal knob, which had been displaced by the sudden jerk of the falling lid. Using some force he succeeded in releasing it, and, to his extreme surprise, discovered an opening beneath. Closer inspection showed that the ink bottle had rested on a false bottom, which slid back by means of a spring connected with the tiny knob that had been displaced and had caught in the grooved rim of the lid.

The young man's curiosity was now fully aroused; he wrenched off the false bottom, and putting his hand into the opening below, found that it extended across the whole width of the escritoire, forming a long, narrow drawer.

His heart beat high. This must have been his father's secret place. Should he now discover any

clue to the mystery of his death? He drew forth a sheet of foolscap, covered with tracing, an envelope unsealed, but carefully secured with a string, and, behind these, three bright pieces of gold which had evidently been manipulated by an assayer. Turning these last over and over, he wondered had they come from the Gully Mine. He never remembered to have heard of nuggety gold being actually found there. What could be the meaning of their presence here? Perhaps the papers might reveal something, but first he searched the drawer, minutely examining every corner and feeling around and beneath the opening. Satisfied that it contained nothing more, he unfolded the sheet of foolscap; on it was roughly sketched a plan, which closer inspection showed to represent a portion of the three cornered paddock. This quickened Tom's interest to agitation. A plan of that place above all others, and here, on the very spot where Jim declared both his father and Mr Lyndon had last been seen, were certain squares marked in red ink. Often had Tom been over that spot. He knew every tangle of the scrub and growth of the bracken springing in the interstices of the broken, rocky ground.

So absorbed was he in speculation as to the meaning of this that he forgot the envelope which lay beside it.

At length his eye fell on it and he noticed an endorsement in his father's hand as thus, "Written undertaking—Edith Lyndon." Trembling with excitement he drew out the enclosure and held in his hands a paper in Edith's own writing. It set

forth that she relinquished all claim on the farm lands, and personally promised, for value already received, to legally confirm the sale of them as soon as she should attain her majority.

This paper was signed by her in a clear, firm hand, and witnessed by both her father and mother.

Tom held it almost caressingly, with a sense of dazed astonishment which delayed his grasp of the situation.

Although unaware of any definite idea in connection with the papers, curious latent associations were working, and presently he realised the fact that this property, which had been forced on him, was certainly hers.

"Of course, the place is hers," he thought; "she has no power to alienate it, even if she wished to do so. Wylie is bound, as her father's representative, to hold it for her until she is of age. I'll go to him at once."

He had taken his hat, when he glanced at the clock, which showed long past midnight. "Too late," he muttered. "What a fool I am, sitting mooning here when I should have gone off to Gorong at once. Wylie must be with me," he said aloud, rising up, with a "get thee behind me, Satan," air, and frowning at some imaginary suggestion. He was resisting a strong inclination to again explore the particular spot in the three cornered paddock which was indicated on the plan in red markings.

Forcing himself to wait, however, he set to work to close the escritoire, securing the papers and specimens for Mr Wylie's inspection.

Mr Wylie was taking his accustomed stroll by the creek on the following morning, when a short bark from Ponto attracted his attention. The dog trotted off to meet Berners, whom Wylie discerned coming swiftly towards him, "I'm glad the lad is recovering his energy," thought Hugh as he noted his alert step and eager expression.

Tom was almost breathless with agitation and haste.

"Eh; what's the matter?" continued Wylie, now noticing his young friend's condition.

Then Berners told him of the previous night's discovery, and how he had made it. "Here are the papers," he said, producing them, "and these are the specimens," handing them to his companion.

"I don't understand these nuggets," Wylie replied, examining them minutely; "they never came from the Gully Mine. What are the papers about?"

They were now seated on Wylie's favourite riverside resting-place, the trunk of a fallen tree. Tom spread out the sheet of foolscap upon his knee. "You see it is a plan of the three cornered paddock," he said; "but what are these markings?" pointing to the red squares.

Wylie's curiosity was now as thoroughly roused as Tom's had been the night before. He took the paper, holding it to the light. Suddenly the blood mounted to his forehead.

"Good God; is it possible?" he murmured under his breath.

"Is what possible?" the other demanded. His senses now preternaturally acute.

"Does that supply a key?" Wylie asked, indicating the envelope, still unopened.

"I don't know about a key," said Tom, "but it shows plainly that we are interlopers claiming a place to which we have not the least right."

"What do you mean? Ah; I see," as he read Edith's undertaking. "I knew she had given some promise of this kind."

"And you allowed it, Mr Wylie. Why, it is illegal," cried Tom.

"I had no business to interfere. Her mother's trustees are dead. I have never been regularly appointed," Wylie answered.

"How could any lawyer let that pass?" the young man asked indignantly.

"I recollect the lawyers—both your father's and Lyndon's—warned them that there was a flaw in the transaction; but Lyndon wanted the money, and your father wanted the land; both knew that Edith's promise could be entirely trusted, so the bargain was concluded."

"It is no bargain!" cried Tom. "You are her guardian now. You're bound to take the place over. It is hers."

"It will not be convenient," Wylie replied. "We shall have to let it and pay you interest on the money it cost your father until she is able to sell."

"We owe you rent. But all that is plain sailing. Why did my father want that land? I have asked that question before, and can get no satisfactory reply to it."

"True," said Wylie gravely, a strange look passing over his countenance. "Let us go over there," he continued, rising as he spoke.

Scarcely a word passed between them as they

walked; Wylie was absorbed in thought; Tom oppressed by dread for which he could give no reason.

Reaching the top of the hill on the opposite side of the creek, they crossed the fence at the corner where the farm lands abutted on the Wytha domain, just as Lyndon had done on the night on which he met his doom.

Consulting the plan at every turn, they threaded their onward way, Tom gradually growing indifferent. He had been there so often. Every inch of the ground, every aspect of the place, was familiar to him.

Wylie, on the contrary, was intensely agitated, he observed the excessive tangle of the undergrowth, the pronounced downward sweep of the branches overhanging the enclosure which answered to the red markings on the plan. Whether it was presentiment, or a sudden insight that burst upon him, he never knew, yet he was fully assured that here he should find the matrix of the nuggets he had that morning seen, and reasoning from what that implied, the late manager's scheme opened before him, bringing with it a terrible confirmation of the suspicions attaching to him. For, if Lyndon should, by any means, have discovered what Wylie knew they were about to find—there was motive enough for the catastrophe that followed.

With these thoughts in his mind he thrust aside the thicket and stood by the broken rock within.

There Wylie pushed forward, saying hoarsely, "Leave me to search, Tom, you keep a lookout. We don't want spectators here."

The young man was surprised at his tone, but he

saw the wisdom of the suggestion and stationed himself where he could command the fence for some distance all round.

Attacking a stone whose sharp edge stood out a little awkwardly, Wylie soon loosened it. When it was removed a very slight exertion of strength removed several others on the exact spot indicated by the red squares, below which a larger opening, on which tools had been used, was revealed.

A curious calmness possessed him. He knew what he should find. It was all plain now, and the widened reef, with its broken top and commencement of underground workings, did not astonish him, though he occupied himself at the opening longer than was needful, in order to consider how he should deal with his unhappy companion.

"This must wipe out his last hope of proving his father's innocence," he thought.

But Tom was becoming impatient. "What is it?" he called out. "Have you discovered the meaning of the markings?"

Wylie came towards him. "Stooping tires me now," he said; "let us sit down, and I'll tell you." He pointed to some large stones lying about.

"There is no doubt where the nuggets came from," he said, when they were seated.

Tom started as if he had been stung, and looked at the other defiantly. What he saw in Wylie's face, however, quelled defiance. He threw up his hands as though forbidding the utterance of the direful foreboding which his companion's aspect had suggested and darted to the enclosure from whence Wylie had emerged. The latter remained sitting;

he comprehended that the agony of the son should be sacred from every human eye.

It seemed as if hours passed, and Wylie was on the point of seeking his companion, when Tom appeared—his face lined and grey—but resolute; he moved steadily forward. Wylie rose as he approached, and linking his arm in the young man's, whispered—"My dear fellow, there are palliations; you don't know all. I am bound to say that I honestly believe your father was not in his right mind. You won't allow that, I know; but I assure you many people here observed his strangely changed manner. Even your mother did, as I gathered from a hint she let drop one day."

"Thank God she died without knowing this," he exclaimed, ending with an exceeding bitter cry, "Father, father! I would never have believed this!"

"Let us give him the benefit of our doubts concerning his responsibility," said Wylie.

"To think that should be my best hope," murmured the other, in anguish of heart.

"There is much to be done," Wylie remarked, endeavouring to recall Tom to action; "we must be prudent. It is plainly a rich reef, and may be worth a large sum of money."

"And it is hers," the young man exclaimed. "Ah! what might have been hindered if this had not been kept secret."

"There are some things that can yet be undone," Wylie said. "We must keep this quiet, until we can get the ground properly examined. Come, Tom, let us replace these stones, and close up the place as well as we can."

A few days later, and an expert, secretly summoned from Melbourne, was surveying the ground, and Tom himself working with a pick assisted by Jim, who could be trusted. Soon they had laid open sufficient to test the reef, proving beyond all question the valuable nature of this discovery.

Assays were privately made, and the mining engineer's report furnished confidentially. Still, in spite of every caution, stories leaked out, and one morning some fossickers appeared, hanging about the fence to watch proceedings.

This brought the discussions, which had been going on between Wylie and Berners, to a climax.

"We must settle this business, Tom," Wylie said; "I am cooler than you, and I know the world better. Have you telegraphed for your lawyer, as I requested?"

"Yes," replied Tom; "but I would rather have gone to town if those fellows had not been hanging round."

"Send him over to me when he arrives," Wylie continued; "your presence here is necessary to keep the fossickers in check. On no account let there be a hint, at present, about the property changing hands."

"I suppose you are right," the young man reluctantly admitted; "but I should like all the world to know it is not mine, nor ever has been."

Wylie's suggestion was that the property should be vested in him, as Edith Lyndon's guardian under her father's will, for her sole use and benefit, but that this reconveyance should not be made public until Berners had caused the ground to be thoroughly

prospected, and had made arrangements for floating a company to work the mine, and that the price paid to Mr Lyndon should be refunded in the form of shares in the new company.

Throughout the transaction he was careful to assume that the quartz reef on the land had been recently discovered, on account of which Berners was willing to cancel the agreement made between his father and Mr Lyndon, at a time when the auriferous nature of the ground was not suspected.

His object was to enable Tom to redress the wrong which had been done, without a public explanation of circumstances that must go far to verify the suspicion attaching to his father.

There could be no advantage to anyone, he argued, in sheeting home the crime to the dead, it would but deepen the shame which already weighed heavily on the innocent man who bore his name.

Thus the affair was settled, though Edith was as yet entirely unaware of the wealth that was to pour into her lap.

Her guardian had several reasons for this reticence, he wished to be quite certain of their position, before encouraging any change in their mode of living; also there were outstanding debts on the small portion of the Wytha Estate, which still belonged to Mrs Lyndon, it was therefore important to know how they actually stood, before challenging the attention of creditors. Further he particularly desired—personally—to explain this change in their affairs—hoping to soften the indignation the widow and her daughter must naturally feel on

learning the truth, and to induce Mrs Lyndon to acquiesce in the version which he proposed publicly to put forward.

Tom threw himself heartily into the work of opening the mine, *her* mine, he eventually called it. He took up his responsibility, engaged a first class mining manager, and a number of miners to open up the reef and further prospect the property, which (as yet) was generally regarded as belonging to him.

Very quickly the wild solitude of the rocky three cornered paddock became a thing of the past. Trees were felled, scrub dug out, tracks made, mullock heaps began to appear, sheds were run up, and with the first whistle of the engine, the last shred of mystery vanished, and this sombre spot, scene of such tragic experiences, changed into a bare, open, gravelly space, noisy with the discordant sounds, and prosaic with the commonplace ugliness of a new gold field.

When these preliminary works were in full operation, and the paddock in possession of its authorised occupants, its reputed owner went to Melbourne, armed with reports, specimens and plans for the inspection of mining men.

It happened to be a period of speculative excitement, booms, mining and otherwise, were the order of the day, and the omniscient ones, whom Berners sounded, declared that he could not have hit on a more propitious season.

So shares in the Wytha Freehold Gold Mining Company were rapidly taken up, and the enterprise started with more solid avouchment for its success

than was the case with some equally promising companies commenced about the same time.

Wylie went with Berners to town, for Mrs Lyndon was on the eve of returning from Queenscliff, and now that the discovery they had made was to be published on the Melbourne Exchange she must be informed of it. Indeed, he had feared that some allusion in the papers might meet her eye, until a letter of inquiry from Mr Fenners reassured him.

That gentleman wrote to ask the meaning of hints as to recent finds on the Wytha Estate, which he had observed in the public journals. He mentioned that he had avoided speaking to Mrs Lyndon on the subject, because he knew she disliked any reference to mining. To this letter Wylie replied, promising full information soon, and requesting that any notice about the matter, might be kept from Mrs Lyndon for the present, as he wished to be thoroughly satisfied before apprising her of it.

Now, however, the discovery would become common property, she could not avoid hearing of it in ordinary society, and Wylie prepared to meet his cousins on their return from Queenscliff, and communicate to them the happy change which had taken place in their pecuniary position.

## CHAPTER XXI

### "LEAVE TAKINGS"

MRS LYNDON received Wylie's tidings with delight. When she really grasped the meaning of the facts he laid before her, the pleasure she showed gauged the pain which the restrictions of narrow means had caused her.

"We shall be able to accomplish our long desired visit to Europe," she said, after having plied her cousin with exhaustive inquiries.

"That will be delightful," cried Edith, more interested than she had yet been.

The idea of leaving the colony opened an unexpected prospect of relief. But she speedily relapsed into seriousness, occasionally glancing at Wylie, as if hesitating to question him.

"I see that Edith wants to hear more," he remarked, taking advantage of a lull in Mrs Lyndon's voluble rehearsal of magnificent projects for their future, and proceeded to give a rapid sketch of the discoveries made in the farm paddock, and the arrangements resulting therefrom. He was careful to give prominence to his own action, and that of the lawyer, avoiding the mention of Tom Berners whenever it was at all possible. But the mere naming of the three cornered paddock proved too much for the widow. She broke out into a passion

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of self reproach at her own heartlessness in being capable of rejoicing at a prosperity which her husband could no longer share.

"I did not deserve his kindness," she moaned, in all sincerity; "even when he was with us, I used, at times, to feel that. Now he lies murdered in his grave, how can we be happy under any circumstances? Cruel, cruel to forget, even for a moment."

After Mrs Lyndon had retired, Wylie explained to Edith the circumstances of the case, showing her that Mr Berners must have known that the gold was there, and that the knowledge of it had prompted him to purchase, so that the land had been bought in a dishonourable, even criminal manner, which ultimately, there was sufficient reason to believe, led to murder and suicide.

"I need not say," Wylie continued, "that Tom has behaved nobly throughout; indeed the call for action on his part has been the saving of him. If he had not been forced to throw himself into this business, I believe the shame and grief would have utterly prostrated him."

Wylie wished to avoid saying much about the young man, but he could not withhold this tribute so justly his due.

"You consent then to leave the settlement of this affair in my hands as your guardian?" he concluded.

"Of course, Cousin Hugh, I am sure you will not allow Tom to sustain loss through us," she replied.

"Trust me," said Wylie; "I'll settle all that. The only thing we can do to help him is to drop a veil over the fact that his father purchased knowing the reef to be there."

The girl rose; she wanted to be alone, to think over all she had heard, and indulge the pitiful sympathy with Tom that filled her heart.

An idea which had frequently suggested itself began to take shape in Tom's mind; he would realise his property as soon as he could and leave Australia. It seemed as if he might throw off some of this miserable inheritance in some distant land outside the pale of civilisation.

"When these arrangements are finally completed I shall go back to Moonnee," he remarked to Mr Wylie, soon after; "and see about getting out of it."

"I expect you are wanted there, but I would not be in a hurry to get out of it, if I were you," said the other.

"I must go where it may be possible to avoid these constant reminders of what indeed I can never forget," Tom rejoined.

"We will talk it over," Wylie replied; "I should like to see Moonnee. When things are straight here, and Mrs Lyndon has really gone, we might go up together."

"Are they thinking of sailing so soon?" asked Tom. He had heard from Wylie of the purposed visit to Europe, but did not suppose it to be so near.

"Yes," said the other, "May has not been well lately; we hope the change of scene will be beneficial. I expect they will be off in a month or so."

Tom was silent. Though he had no hope even of seeing Edith, the mention of her leaving the country struck him painfully. He had just spoken of going away himself, yet now—with a not un-

common inconsistency—he was pained at the mention of her departure.

Meanwhile there were a few remaining claims to be settled at Wytha before publicly giving up possession of the farm land, therefore he returned thither with Wylie, and during the ensuing month completed arrangements, and finally abandoned his old home, retiring to Gorong for the present as Mr Wylie's guest.

The latter experienced as much relief as did Tom himself, when all was settled; and they entrenched themselves in their peaceful retreat, not venturing into the noisy region on the opposite side of the creek.

Early in July Mrs Lyndon decided to antedate her departure and sail by the next steamer. She announced her intention to Wylie in a letter summoning him to Melbourne.

"I must go to town to-night," he said, as he read it: "you'll remain till I come back, Tom."

"Are they going at once?" the latter inquired.

"Almost directly. I shall not be away long; then we can see about our expedition to Moonnee."

Wylie had determined to accompany his guest when he went to his distant station, seeing the young man's state of mind made it desirable that he should not be allowed to brood over recent events, which he could hardly avoid doing if alone.

"Which steamer are they going by?" Tom asked.

"The *Britannia* I fancy, but it does not seem quite settled," Wylie replied.

"I must see her before she leaves; no, don't interrupt me," Tom continued, as Wylie commenced

to speak. "I shall be at the other end of the world when she returns; now is my only chance of saying a few words, which I must—ay—and I will—say to her."

"You are looking solely from your own standpoint. Edith Lyndon has some claim on your consideration," Wylie urged, unconsciously emphasising the surname.

The young man shrank at the implication, inadvertent as it was, on his friend's part.

"I know it," replied the young man sadly; "still she may summon resolution to grant my request."

"At anyrate, you won't press it if she objects," Wylie again urged.

"Don't be afraid," said Tom; "I won't force myself upon her, though I shall go to Melbourne."

During the journey the subject was again discussed between them, and Wylie, perceiving that the young man was absolutely determined, began to waver in his opposition. He considered that his sanction—even if reluctantly given—might be a support to Edith, and, at least, would divest the meeting of objectionable secrecy.

When he arrived at the cottage his cousin's drawing-room was full of visitors. It was her last reception, and all her acquaintances crowded round her.

Gradually the room emptied, Fanny Fenner and her brother remaining, as usual, to the last.

"I hope I may persuade you to bring Mrs Lyndon and Edith round," she said, addressing Wylie. "Mother has a reception to-night."

"I am in their hands," he replied, "though time

grows short, and we ought to secure this evening for final arrangements."

Her urgency, however, prevailed, and they promised to appear for an hour.

"You're a brick, Fanny," said James to his sister, as they drove homewards; "they refused me over and over again."

"Now I have won that point for you, mind you pin Edith to-night. If there is no definite engagement before she goes home you'll lose her after all," Fanny replied.

"I expect that's about what it will come to," he said.

"Don't give in," cried his sister; "carry it through now. Win first, rest after."

The disheartened lover had little difficulty in appropriating the lady of his choice that evening. Edith was ready to indulge him to any extent short of committing herself to a decided engagement. She was really fond of James, regarding him as a big, strong brother, to be petted and ruled, amused or made useful, as occasion demanded.

Moreover, at the present time she was doubly anxious to show him every consideration in compensation for the abrupt break to be made in the relations which had existed between them. She knew that, in all probability, she would have married him, in order to gratify her mother, if this unexpected change in their circumstances had not intervened.

As things had eventuated, Mrs Lyndon preferred to launch her daughter in the great London world unhampered by colonial ties. But Edith had an unpleasant consciousness that their treatment of James Fenner had scarcely been fair.

"Have you considered what I said to you the other day?" he asked, as they strolled together on the terrace outside Mrs Fenner's reception rooms, which had been closed in for the present occasion.

"Yes; I have thought a great deal about it," she replied; "and, James, I am more and more convinced that it is better for us both to be quite free."

"Then you mean me to understand that it is all broken off between us," he said, seriously.

"It was never 'on,' as you know, James," she replied; adding laughingly, "mind I expect to be able to bring out the very handsomest of wedding presents that Europe can furnish for your wife."

"Tut, tut, don't, Edith; you are very heartless," he exclaimed.

"No, I am not; I'm awfully fond of you, but I foresee that I shall be still fonder of your wife by and by," she cried, glancing at a pretty girl who had just passed them, concerning whom Edith was aware a general impression existed that she would not prove obdurate to young Fenner's entreaties.

James silently followed Edith's look; the hint evidently worked in his mind, for presently he said, "It is more likely that I shall have to find a wedding present for you."

"Mind it's magnificent," she said merrily; "now if you want this valse let us join in. Cousin Hugh looks bored; we must go directly."

The few intervening days before their departure passed rapidly. Berners watched and waited, but

could find no opportunity of approaching Edith; neither was Wylie in the least more disposed to countenance the desired interview.

Only two days remained, and Tom resolved to write, begging for a word with her before she left. Having decided on this he wandered out, and finding himself near the railway terminus took the train to Williamstown in order to look at the vessel which would soon be her temporary home. He had made a similar pilgrimage once before. It was not very satisfactory; though, somehow, it gave him a mournful pleasure to row round the ship and picture her leaning over the bulwarks or sitting on the deck. He wondered where would be her favourite place, and which of those ports would supply light and air to her cabin.

However, on this occasion fortune favoured his desire. Returning he met Edith in the train.

"Is it really you, Tom?" said Edith when they were alone.

He was seated opposite, devouring her with his eyes.

"Can you endure the sight of me, only for a little while?" he asked. "I intended this very day to write and beg for an interview before you leave the country. I want to ask you not to hate me, even to remember me kindly sometimes."

"Hate you, Tom? I have longed to tell you how grieved I am for you. Your share of the trouble is worse than ours. Poor Tom!" she murmured.

His excitement calmed the agitation which his sudden apparition had caused the girl; extricating

one hand, she laid it gently on his bowed head, "Look up, Tom," she murmured, "you have nothing to be ashamed of. Let us leave the dark past, grieve at it we must, but don't let it crush you."

"Crush?" he echoed, "would that it would, that I were stamped out and done with."

"Oh, Tom, this is dreadful, it is not like you," she whispered.

Her tone of sorrowful dismay touched a softer chord. "I have never given way like this before," he cried; "how could I? Is there anyone left me to whom I dare open my heart? Mother gone, father worse than dead, you removed far, far from me for ever. Desolate indeed, fallen so low that I read in every countenance the galling memory of our disgrace. I can't reason, my brain whirls when I think of it all. Ah! and my heart faints, dies, in face of this weary, barren future."

"Let us make the most of these precious minutes," she said. "I want to know first what you mean by days of wandering."

Her manner conveyed the impression of the same affectionate interest which it had always been her habit to show him; the familiar, accustomed voice soothed his passion, and he spoke more collectedly.

"I shall get rid of Moonnee," he said, "and go somewhere, perhaps to the backwoods of America or Africa—it doesn't matter where—away from these dreadful associations."

"It will pain me to hear of you as an aimless wanderer," she said. "I am sure you will find interests at Moonnee which will gradually occupy

your attention and help you to bear up far better than objectless travel can."

"If you wish me to stay there I will—cost what it may," he declared.

The pathetic ardour of his looks and voice moved her deeply. "Though separate outwardly, in heart we can still bear it together," she said.

He drew her to him. "My darling, my darling, will there be still that link between us? Oh! Edith, I used to think I loved you as much as man can love, but I never knew how much that really is until we were parted for ever."

The girl had put forth a strong effort in order to calm his agitation, reaction now left her powerless, and she lay on his breast quietly weeping, while he poured out burning words of love and passionate regret.

"I shall never be ashamed that I have loved you," she whispered.

"Ah! darling, that gives me strength indeed," he murmured, pressing his lips to hers in one long, long kiss.

## CHAPTER XXII

### AFTER TWO YEARS

TWO years had passed since Mrs Lyndon and her daughter sailed for Europe. Wylie's love of quiet had been severely tested, and it must be admitted that the trial had not proved a perfect success. Even those unchanging friends, his favourite books, began to pall; Ponto was dead, Janet developed symptoms of deafness, and Jim grew increasingly severe on "station hands," with their new fangled ways, all greed and grudge; greedy of wages, grudging work. "What good can ye get o' sich like?" he would ask contemptuously. "Look at them miners,"—jerking his head in the direction of the farm paddock—"aspendin' their time in resolutionin' and unionin', instead of mindin' their biseness. 'Twarn't that way us English folks whipped the world."

It will be seen that Jim's views were limited, and he obstinately declined enlargement, holding steadily to his three articles of faith, *i.e.*, that a true born Briton could pommel two of any other nationality; that unionism and strikes were the product of—and strictly confined to—the colony; and that his master and the family (as he always styled the former inhabitants of Wytha House), were the real Britishers, as contrasted

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with the local public, whom he recognised simply as colonials.

"And Mr Wise, surely," Janet would remonstrate.

"Well, I can't say; parsons doesn't count, being neither fish, flesh, nor fowl. I say naught about 'em," was Jim's cautious rejoinder.

Holding such opinions he naturally refused to delegate the superintendence of the out stations, even for a few days, as had once been his custom.

There was always some special necessity which demanded his presence. The slip rails of the fattening paddocks would be left down; the colts were too frolicsome, they'd do one another a mischief, etc., etc.

Wylie almost envied Jim his power of identifying himself with his work, and the pleasure he had in it, apart from results, personal or otherwise. Janet stormed and complained, principally occupying his tardy visits with reproaches, and caustic prophecies concerning the remote period at which he was likely next to appear.

Tom Berners avoided Wytha, and seldom left Moonnee for any length of time. Brooding over the strange mesh of circumstances into which his family had been drawn, the meanness of the deception practised on Mr Lyndon struck him most painfully; his open, straightforward nature recoiled from it; he had no means of gauging the state of his father's mind at that period, nor was he sufficiently versed in the subtleties of human character to have traced palliations, had such existed. There was no room for hope of disproving this treachery, whatever the future might reveal respecting the greater crime;

and Tom found the former the more revolting, and the humiliation it entailed on himself more distressingly hopeless. His reason, indeed, recognised the relative proportions of both crimes, yet the lesser meanness rankled most. An inconsistent tangle of pride, honour and feeling kept that in the foreground, probably because he could not cheat himself with false hopes in that direction. It haunted him whenever he was alone, and was the secret reason of his disinclination to visit Gorong.

Thus, from various causes, a depressing dulness settled on that once pleasant home, and but for Mr Wise its master might have ignominiously succumbed to the more agreeable diversity of town life.

"I have been seriously thinking of wintering in Melbourne," he said one day to the clergyman. "You see, I have not got the variety of personal interests which claim your attention. After all, cattle and paddocks are but a poor substitute for one's fellow creatures. The overseer at Wytha and that snobbish new mining manager at the farm are not my sort. They don't want anything of me, and I, for my part, am hopelessly bored, when a spirit of amicability urges me to make overtures to them."

"You don't sort, as Janet says of Jim and the miners," remarked Mr Wise.

"No, we don't," returned the other snappishly; "I hate the whole thing, though I suppose the wealth it produces ought to condone the accompanying noise and ugliness. I confess I often go a mile round rather than pass that way."

"Go and see Tom, Moonnee will be pleasant now," the parson advised.

"Why does he never come here?" cried Wylie; "I begin to think he's too squeamish."

"Tom, too? It will be my turn next. You are turning pessimist," laughed the parson.

"I have had my misgivings on that point lately," the other admitted; "in fact it was that which suggested a plunge into the world."

"I really believe it would do you good," said Mr Wise; "I am not afraid of losing you either. You would come back to us before very long, leaving your pessimism behind."

"I am a little anxious, too, about Edith," Wylie continued; "there was a dissatisfied tone in her last letter that is quite unusual with her. It left on my mind a feeling that there was something behind, which she was keeping from me."

"When are they likely to return?" asked Mr Wise.

"I scarcely know," said the other; "last year they proposed to be here before the end of this; lately nothing has been said about it."

"I expected to have heard of Edith's marriage," the clergyman remarked.

"Well, yes, one naturally did," Wylie replied; "but somehow she seems to see little attraction, even in a coronet."

"Very likely, but I wonder some good, honest Englishman has not won her," Mr Wise remarked.

Wylie sighed. He remembered the muffled figure in the boat, lying off the steamer that bore her from these shores.

"There was a mail in yesterday," the clergyman continued, "we should get our letters this morning."

"Yes, the boy must be here directly; it was this expectation of hearing to-day that brought Edith to my mind," said Wylie.

The advent of the post-boy at Gorong was commonplace enough; the correspondence of Jim and his wife might be set down as *nil*; occasionally there would be a letter for some of the station men; Wytha and the mines had their own bags. What little interest there might be centred in the master himself, and to-day, after the arrival of the mail, that interest evidently amounted to excitement.

"What is the matter?" asked Mr Wise, when his host had emitted sundry ejaculations.

"Well!" said Wylie throwing the letter he had been reading on the table, "it's wonderful; I never dreamt of such a thing. Good heavens! can it be true?" he exclaimed, taking up the sheet again, and running his eyes over it. "I thought I understood something of women; certainly of May, whom I've known from childhood." He stopped as if searching the past for some light on the astonishing present.

"What has happened? What has she done?" put in the parson.

"Guess, guess, and guess again, as the children used to say," cried Wylie, assuming a gaiety, which, plainly, he was far from feeling. "The dear, bright children," he went on; his thoughts tenderly recurring to merry games, and ingeniously constructed puzzles, which had filled that now quiet room with gleesome laughter.

"My guess is that Mrs Lyndon has surprised you by consenting to her daughter's marriage with some unimportant person," Mr Wise announced.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Wylie; "weddings run in your thoughts to-day, friend Wise; but you're off the scent. The funeral baked meats. . . Ah! well, it's hardly so close as that though."

"You don't mean to say that Mrs Lyndon——"

"There is no longer a Mrs Lyndon," Wylie interrupted.

"Married again! You've taken my breath away, indeed," cried the parson.

"And to a French whipper-snapper—a count forsooth. They are all counts. Why didn't he call himself a prince while he was about it?" exclaimed the disgusted master of Gorong.

"I hope he's not an adventurer at anyrate. What's his name?" asked Wise.

"Oh! you can read the letter," cried Wylie, pushing it across to his companion.

Mr Wise took the paper, and found that it contained a few lines from Mrs Lyndon, which had been added to by her daughter. The elder lady announced her marriage somewhat abruptly, excusing herself for not having mentioned the matter to Wylie on the ground of previous inability to decisively make up her mind, which process, however, appeared to have been accelerated by some unexpected clencher on the part of the count.

The deed was now done, and she felt sure her dear cousin would approve of the step she had taken, especially when he made acquaintance with the count, who possessed every quality that could be desired in a husband. Hugh would soon have an opportunity of judging for himself, since they proposed to avoid a winter in Europe by arriving in

Victoria probably towards the end of October ; when the precise date of their departure was settled she would inform him, and beg that he would engage a furnished house for them to occupy until the end of the year, by which time she hoped her affairs would be settled, so as to enable them to return before the commencement of the Paris season. She added that they hoped Cousin Hugh would use his influence with Edith to induce her to yield to their wishes and make her permanent home with them.

Before Mr Wise proceeded to peruse Edith's addendum, he laid down the letter to consider ; Wylie had gone out and was pacing the garden with hasty steps ; he stopped when he approached the open window, and glanced in.

"Ah, you are trying to digest it," he cried, observing his friend's action.

"It needs time," said the other, "though, when one comes to think of it, I don't know why we should be so surprised. There are few handsomer women than Mrs Lyndon was, even after she could introduce a grown up daughter."

"If it had not been a foreigner!" said Wylie.

"Let us see what Edith says about him," returned the parson, again commencing to read.

Edith said very little about her mother's bridegroom, alluding to him simply as Count de Merthe ; and intimating that both he and her mother were anxious to settle their Australian affairs, in order to be in occupation of the Hotel de Merthe in the spring of next year.

The chief object the girl had in writing to Wylie on that occasion evidently was to express her decided

resolution to take up her abode in Victoria. "I am Australian born," she wrote ; "my property is in Victoria, my money is made there, it seems my duty therefore, as well as my pleasure, to settle there. I am getting quite elderly you know, Cousin Hugh. It will be easy to find a lady to live with me as companion, and you will be always near. We might spend our winters at Gorong. You could enlarge the cottage—don't you think? I'm longing to see you again, and the old home, in spite of its sorrowful associations." Messages to Mr Wise himself, and to Janet, with the promise of another letter before they sailed, made up the rest of her communication.

"The pity of it is mainly on her account," said the clergyman ; "it is hard and objectionable, too, for a girl and her mother to part."

"It seems we have but a choice of evils," Wylie remarked ; "I think she will be better, as well as happier, under my protection ; the alternative being that of her mother's foreign husband, together with the acceptance of a manner of life uncongenial to her natural tastes."

"We need not, however, settle that matter at present," the parson remarked.

"Edith has on more than one occasion shown that she possesses a will of her own," continued Wylie, pursuing his own train of thought.

"She has plenty of good sense," Mr Wise rejoined, "and more self-control than could have been expected considering the indulgence lavished upon her from her cradle."

"Yes," said Wylie, thoughtfully. "Yes, I can rely on her habitual regard for the right."

Again he called to mind that figure in the boat, and was glad that Tom's native sensibility (he did not now call it squeamishness) rendered the neighbourhood of his former home distasteful.

"You will scarcely go to Melbourne just yet then?" Mr Wise asked, as he was leaving next morning.

"I'll wait for Edith's promised letter," Wylie replied. "Probably that will oblige me to go. But, indeed, whether it be due to your agreeable society or to the exciting news received, most likely in part to both, I don't feel the need of going as I did yesterday."

"It's curious how events change one's outlook," remarked the clergyman sententiously.

"And one's inlook also," laughed Wylie.

"You have the last word as usual," the other cried, as he passed through the gate.

"*Au revoir* then, and let it be soon," Wylie called after him. "We must brush up our French," he muttered grimly, as he returned to the house.

## CHAPTER XXIII

## A CONFESSION

THEIR next meeting came about more quickly than either had anticipated. The rain set in early that season, always an inspiring circumstance for the squatter.

Wylie was in his stableyard one morning of the following week, rejoicing in the auspicious downpour and giving certain directions necessitated by it, when he espied Mr Wise descending the opposite hill, riding fast and breasting the rain with lowered head.

"You're doubly welcome, the pleasure being the greater because it is unexpected," was his greeting as the parson rode into the yard. "I thought this was your week at C——," he continued.

"I ought to have been there," Mr Wise replied, divesting himself of waterproof and leggings, stamping briskly as he did so.

"The fire before explanations," said Wylie, leading the way to his den.

"I sent a messenger to C——, postponing my visit," the parson resumed; "I wanted to see you without delay about this," producing a letter and handing it to the other.

"More surprises?" questioned Wylie; "they seem to be the order of the day just now."

He glanced at the date and signature.

"Whew! What's this?" he ejaculated, commencing to read. It ran thus:—

"MY DEAR MR WISE,—I have not the pleasure of your personal acquaintance, though probably we know one another by sight. To come to the reason of this letter. Late last night I was summoned to attend the deathbed of a prisoner whom I had seen several times in the gaol hospital. This man has always been unsatisfactory; of a dogged, sullen disposition, I could never get at him. In fact, he appeared to dislike my visits, and always refused conversation. I was therefore the more surprised at his requesting my presence. When I reached the hospital I learned from the doctor that the man knew that he was dying, hence this urgent summons.

"So soon as he was aware of my presence he desired that we might be left alone, and then, with much difficulty and many breaks, made the following statement: About four years ago he arrived at Wytha Station late one evening, having walked several miles that day. He went towards the homestead, intending to seek shelter for the night in the dismantled lodge. On his way thither Mr Lyndon overtook him and angrily ordered him off the place, following him some distance to make sure that he actually went. But when that gentleman left him the man turned in among the scrub, and, spreading his blanket under some trees, lay down to sleep. How long he slept seems uncertain, but the next thing he remembers is being roused by a smart kick and seeing Mr Lyndon standing over

him. Again he ordered him off the station, adding that, though he could not stay himself, he would send a couple of men after him. He then walked quickly onward and Hall (that is the prisoner's name) rose up and followed. His swag stick was in his hand, and coming up to Mr Lyndon he struck him with all his force, causing him to fall forward on his face. Hall declares that he had no intention of killing him; indeed, that he was not aware that he had done so, but thought he was only stunned by the fall, and would certainly punish him when he recovered. He therefore immediately left the place, and it was not until some time after that he heard of Mr Lyndon's death, and of the suspicion which attached to his manager. Hall then went over the border, not daring to remain in Victoria, but he declared he could rest nowhere. The manager's dark, proud face haunted him, drawing him back to Wytha, and compelling him to wander about those ranges. There he committed the burglary for which he was sentenced. During the last year he has rapidly developed consumptive symptoms, and, being now warned of his approaching end, he makes this confession, desiring to repair the injury done to the manager's memory by his silence. He also desires young Mr Berners's forgiveness, and craves to see him before he dies. I do not know where to find him, but I think it likely you will have his address. It is necessary that there should be no delay if Mr Berners wishes to question Hall further, as the doctor assures me that the end cannot be far off. I enclose a copy of Hall's deposition, which was

taken down in writing and signed by him in the presence of the governor of the gaol and a magistrate."

This letter bore the signature of the Pentridge gaol chaplain, and was accompanied by a copy of Hall's deposition, duly witnessed, as mentioned in the body of the letter.

It is not to be supposed that Wylie had read this without many exclamations of surprise, relief and even of rejoicing. The mystery of the murder was lifted, and Berners cleared at last of the irretrievable crime.

Neither the squatter nor the clergyman was of the emotional type. Years, too, had done their work in dulling excess of feeling, and yet this unexpected revelation moved them strongly. Some time elapsed before they were sufficiently collected to consider what action it behoved them to take. There must of course, be no delay in communicating with Tom; and a telegram was dispatched demanding his immediate presence.

When that was gone Wylie said, "We ought to see this man and fully satisfy ourselves. He may die before Tom can arrive."

"I was about to make the same suggestion," the other replied. But they were too late to interview the prisoner, who, after the exertion of making his confession, had sunk into a stupor, from which he never rallied.

"He will be buried at noon. Will you see him first?" asked the governor of the gaol, when Wylie and his friend reached the place.

They proceeded to the dead-house; in itself full of

melancholy suggestions, to which, in the present instance, was added a crowd of sorrowful reminiscences, mingled with feelings of awesome resentment.

"Who would have supposed that miserable, degraded being held the secret which has overshadowed us all for so long?" said Wylie, speaking rather to himself than to his companions.

The governor, however, took up the remark.

"I remember meeting Mr Lyndon once," he said. "The circumstances surrounding his death made a strong impression. We have taken particular care to have everything connected with Hall's confession made strictly regular."

"We are grateful for the trouble you have both taken," Mr Wise replied, including the chaplain in his acknowledgments.

"Poor Lyndon!" murmured Wylie; "even his murderer is beyond our reach."

"Leave him there," said Mr Wise, gently.

"To think that his death was due to the revenge of that evil will," continued Wylie.

"It was very unlike Lyndon to refuse shelter to any man," the parson remarked, with apparent irrelevance, though in reality following a link of association in his own mind.

Wylie was quick to catch the inference. "You trace up to that as the ultimate cause," he said.

"Ultimate causes are beyond us," replied Mr Wise; "I was only recalling how unusual was anything approaching to harshness with him."

"A most amiable man, I should have judged Mr Lyndon to be," the governor remarked, as they left the goal.

On their way back to Melbourne, Wylie again recurred to Mr Wise's comments.

"I recollect," he said, "how terribly worried poor George was that night. What with those disastrous gully works, and Berners's complaints of the selectors and swagmen—he was in a highly irritable mood when he left me."

"Moods often influence more than actual intentions; it is easy to see, how meeting this Hall on the instant, must have worked on our dear friend," the parson replied.

At the club they found a telegram for Mr Wylie, which had been sent on from Gorong. It was from the overseer at Moonnee, and stated that Mr Berners had joined a neighbouring settler in an expedition to the unexplored country westward, and might probably be absent six months.

"How provoking that he should be away at this particular juncture; the first time that he has left home for two years," cried Wylie; "what possessed him, I wonder, to go off just now?"

"Probably there will be letters for us explaining his action," the parson remarked.

"One is anxious that he should have these good tidings (good from his point of view), as soon as possible," Wylie continued.

"Yes; but they are good enough to keep," returned the other; "and this break in his isolated life will bring increased zest for the relief when he comes to know of it."

"His absence throws the onus of what should be done in this matter on us," Wylie remarked.

"We had better notify the Detective Department

of what has happened. Tom kept up communication there, I know," Mr Wise said.

This was done; and, acting on the advice he received from the inspector of police, Wylie decided to keep Hall's confession secret for a while; however, he had not been home many days before he found that the ubiquitous representatives of the dailies could not be circumvented. Hints began to appear, which revived the story of the Wytha murder; conjectures and garbled accounts followed, rendering it advisable to publish an accurate statement of the facts with a copy of Hall's confession.

"So poor Berners's memory is vindicated at last. I never believed that he did it."

"Young Berners will hold up his head again, now."

Thus ran the talk on the morning that the authenticated narrative appeared. It was the universal topic, and interested the colony for a few days then dropped out of sight, and was forgotten long before the son, who was so closely affected by it, had even heard of the comfort which was in store for him.

But, though the public generally believed that Tom need no longer chafe under inherited disgrace, neither Wylie nor the clergyman were quite so confident.

"Now that his father is cleared of the grosser crime, I can't help fearing that his treachery about the reef will come into greater prominence with Tom," Wylie remarked, one day, in conversation with Mr Wise.

"That was what really knocked him over, and drove him away from the old place," the parson replied.

"Well, he will be obliged to come down when he hears of this. There are details which he must finally close up," said the other.

Early in October Wylie was again called to Melbourne, in order to receive the Countess de Merthe and her daughter. He hired a house for them, remaining himself at the club, and awaited their arrival with mingled feelings of curiosity and annoyance, wondering how he should comport himself towards the bridegroom, and indeed generally under conditions which even yet were scarcely realised.

He rehearsed the first interview, arranging his own part in it with much ingenuity, and impressing on himself the fact that the deed being now done, it behoved him to accept it with as few grimaces as possible.

"It's an ill wind that blows no one any good, they say; this one will have blown that dear child to me at anyrate," he thought, relaxing vigilance in respect to his behaviour towards the others, while he indulged happy anticipations of brighter days in store for his lonely home.

But, as is commonly the case, Wylie's diligent rehearsals proved but a useful mental exercise; for when the meeting actually took place he forgot all his carefully arranged speeches, and the new arrivals, on their part, entirely failed to conform to his fancied pattern. The count, indeed, took matters into his own hands, overwhelming Mr Wylie with the most gracious assurances of regard. A dark, little man he was, looking as if he had been born in full dress, expressly for the purpose of embodying the importance

of the De Merthes. *Noblesse oblige* manifestly prompted the dignified affability of his language and bearing, this obligation being enhanced on the present occasion by the responsibility of upholding the honour of France in the eyes of the barbarians among whom poverty and love had temporarily cast his lot.

*La France, c'est moi* might be read in his every gesture. "I declare," said Wylie afterwards, "I began to feel that I was under the deepest obligations to him for condescending to ally himself with us."

Instead of the dapper adventurer, mobile, anxious to please, whom he had pictured, here was a man of birth and breeding, who evidently took himself and his position very seriously, gathering up into it, so to speak, the persons and things with which he came into contact.

The reserved English gentleman, self contained and keen witted, experienced a sensation of being de-individualised and swept suavely into the charmed *entourage* of the grand manner.

"My ladi is empressée to behold you again, sir," said the count, presenting his wife with an elaborate bow, and Wylie felt that his "How are you, May?" was wholly unworthy of this dignified presence.

However, he rallied quickly when Edith, brushing past the count's proffered arm, came forward.

"How delightful it is to see you again, Cousin Hugh," she cried, giving him a great hug, which he returned with interest, careless of the vulgarity of such a public proceeding.

The girl did not seem to be overawed by her stepfather's grand air; her pleasure in being (as she

called it) at home once more was apparent in every word and look. She glanced round, noticing alterations which had escaped Wylie, plying him all the while with questions about Gorong, Melbourne, mutual friends and old haunts, mixing all in a confused medley, with allusions to the voyage, their long absence and English relatives left behind. In this gush of pleasant talk he regained his self-possession, and even presumed to be amused at the incongruous appearance of the newly married couple as they left the vessel.

The small nobleman, with his magnificent air of protection, convoying his consort (wife seemed too commonplace a term), her tall figure and voluminous skirts almost effacing him as she swept onwards.

"She could carry him along in those petticoats without feeling it," thought Hugh, and the merry twinkle in his eye drew Edith's attention, as he perceived, by the supernatural accession of gravity which she felt it necessary to assume. She would not even confide to him, he saw, what she really thought of her mother's marriage.

Describing the scene afterwards to Mr Wise, Wylie remarked, "It reminded me of Janet's pet bantam escorting one of her well fed hens."

If amused, Wylie was also puzzled. He had intended to inform them of Hall's confession, revealing the identity of Lyndon's murderer. Now, however he felt that to introduce that subject would be to strike a jarring note in the smooth harmony which the count's presence created. How could he welcome the bride and bridegroom with an account of the previous husband's violent death? The more he

turned it over in his mind the more impossible it became; besides, he remembered the widow's distress on a former occasion when it had been necessary to revive the subject. Suppose there should be a similar scene now, on this first evening of their return. He had not the courage to risk it. Should he tell Edith alone? She ought to know, but to give the information to her only would be an implied slight to her mother. After much cogitation he decided that his news would keep until next day, when he might find an opportunity of seeing the ladies, without the count's ubiquitous, all-embracing presence.

"Why do you insist on going to the club, Hugh?" the countess had asked.

"We expected you to stay here; its very nasty of you," Edith chimed in.

"The ladies have reason," added the host. "You deprive us of pleasure. Is the club too attractive?"

"I shall be happy to introduce you, count, then you can judge of its attractions. The city is convenient for business, May," Wylie said, turning to her, "but I'll run over in the morning. You won't be out before lunch?"

"The *déjeuner* can wait your hour," replied the count, anticipating his wife's answer, a habit which Wylie had observed more than once during the dinner.

"Thanks, I'll be here," he cried. "There are special matters which I want to talk to you about, May," he continued; "and to you also, Edith."

"The beesenese must not be forgotten, but we need not fatigue the ladies too much. I, myself am a man of affairs, and at the service of mi ladi and

the meese. I will also attend you, sir," said the count, gracefully motioning with his hand as to wave off acknowledgments of his condescension.

"If you will have it, you must, though you won't find it agreeable," thought Wylie, as he strode off impatiently. "What fools women are," he muttered. "I'm much mistaken if May hasn't overdone it this time."

## CHAPTER XXIV

## "FRENCH OPINIONS OF THE BUSH"

BEFORE Mr Wylie returned to Gorong he had discovered that beneath his suave grand manner, Count de Merthe possessed a full share of his compatriots' respect for *les rentes*, and a capability too, of dealing with them.

Shrewd as he was serious—painstaking as elaborate—he speedily mastered every detail connected with his wife's Australian property. What he found most difficult to comprehend was, how the auriferous portion of the estate came to belong to her daughter.

When convinced on that point, he expressed himself as desolate at the idea of a demoiselle of wealth—an heiress of family—refusing the opportunity of securing a position in the great *monde* and burying herself in the colonies; "which as you know, sir, are excellent for the making of money, but the spending—the *faire plaisir*, ah!"—with a shrug; "we go elsewhere for that."

The countess had borne his disclosures respecting the death of her former husband, with greater equanimity than Mr Wylie had ventured to expect, the presence of her lord always seemed to exercise a soothing, not to say soporific, effect. For him the conditions of Mr Lyndon's

will were more interesting than details of his death.

Edith had listened with breathless interest, striving to keep back the emotion which the mention of her father's violent end awakened. When Wylie had finished his account of Hall's confession—she said softly. "I never could feel that Mr Berners was really guilty."

The count's short experience of bush life impressed him very much; he frequently alluded to it, especially to the auriferous portion of the station.

"The gold," he would say, "it was delicious to handle that rich stone. A fine country very—for to get rich—but one cannot live. No,"—shaking his head with decision—"no, one cannot live."

"Is the new terminus finished?" asked Edith, in whose hearing this reference to the mines had been made.

"The railway? Oh yes! not finished, as we reckon finished," the count answered; "but the train stops not far from Gorong. We drive about half hour. Yes, I remember now; the train was late, we wait some minutes, it arrived. I enter, and arrange myself in the carriage. When I look out to bid adieu to Mr Wylie, he was talking—talking to a strange man. Eurasian? no; Creole? no, no; half-breed? *ce n'est pas cela*," impatiently, "What you call the squatter wild? Bushman? Oh yes! he was dark, very—hands brown; gloves? Ah no! beard rough—hanging here"—placing his fingers on his breast; "big eyes, shining, excited—hair?—well, I wonder was it ever arranged; thick

curl—he throw it back, so so—aboriginal—wild man."

"That must have been Tom Berners," said Edith quietly.

"Yes; Mr Wylie call him Tom, Tom," replied the Frenchman. "Very glad to see that wild bushman."

Edith laughed. "Cousin Hugh told us he had gone out with an exploring party," she remarked. "I expect he came on without waiting to interview the barber."

"The barber—barbier—poor man! He will have work indeed. Your cousin, he steps forward to present the bushman; but the people come round—they could speak then—and shake hands—shake hands. *Ma foi!* one aches to think of it. The train moved on—and I lost the advantage of a novel experience."

During this narration, the countess watched Edith closely. Of late the near prospect of separation had wakened the mother's instinct, never really dead within her.

She had always desired her child's welfare; and had now come to hope that she might attain happiness in carrying out her own plan of life, since their ideas as to what constituted it differed so widely.

Now, as she observed the light in the girl's eye and the satisfied expression, which came into her face, she called to mind the episode of their Sydney visit, some years before. The terrible barrier which had since been raised between themselves and Berners had obscured the memory of

what had passed between Edith's father and the young man. Now the barrier was removed. Was it in that direction that her child would find happiness? The thought passed rapidly through her mind; it was distasteful, almost inconceivable—yet she would put no obstacle if the girl's heart was set upon it. Always powerfully influenced by the present impression, it now seemed to her that Edith's happiness was the chief thing to be considered, and, to her daughter's surprise, she replied to the count's last remark.

"Tom Berners is a gentleman; not rough when you come to know him."

The count lifted his eyebrows with an *Et tu Brute* air.

"If you aver it, madame," he said, "I must believe; faith will be merit indeed, for it is difficile."

Edith shot a grateful look at her mother as she retired from the room.

It was as the count had reported. Tom arrived suddenly and found Wylie at the local terminus. His party had come into a settled district, where he heard the good tidings that awaited him. Of course he could not travel leisurely after that, but pushed on without delay, full of a triumphant excitement, which had not spent itself when he reached Gorong.

Wylie and Mr Wise repeated in minute detail the circumstances of their visit to Pentridge, and subsequent action in respect to it. Tom listening eagerly, bursting out from time to time in ejaculations of thankfulness and satisfaction.

Then there was the astonishing story of Mrs Lyndon's marriage to relate. "The count observed you I am sure," said Wylie; "I saw him surveying you much as he might have done some strange animal."

"Well," said Mr Wise, "it must be confessed that you don't seem to have studied appearances of late."

"I expect I am rather savage," Tom admitted, "I'll run over to the township to-morrow and get a shampooing."

But, when the first blush of triumphant gratification had passed, it became evident that Tom was not at his ease, and as the days went on he fell into a state of restless depression, which made Wylie aware that, as he feared, the remembrance of the deception practised by his father on Mr Lyndon, weighed more heavily than ever on the young man. It was in vain that his friends pointed out how his own action in restoring the land, and, more than that, in exerting himself to develop and secure the hidden treasure for its rightful owner, had fully exonerated him personally from the shadow of a taint.

At last Wylie lost patience. "I tell you what it is, Tom," he said, "you've brooded over this until you've grown squeamish and sentimental. I shall leave you to work your own way out of this. May will be away soon, and I'm off to Melbourne to see as much of her as possible before she leaves. The count has gone to Sydney with a party of travellers whom he has made acquaintance with."

"You won't get rid of me that way," Tom interrupted, "Melbourne is an excellent place to blow off sentiment."

"This is very nice of you, Cousin Hugh," was the countess's greeting when Wylie arrived at her house.

"I thought you would be here to-night," said Edith, "you come at the right moment; James Fenners and his wife are dining with us *en famille*."

It was Wylie's first meeting with Mrs James since she had borne that name, though she had always been a favourite of his on account of her simple, unaffected manner; James was as genuine and rather more optimistic, than formerly, probably not without reason, since he had secured a gentle little wife who suited him much better than Edith could have done.

These young people had a house near Brighton, and were very urgent that their old friends should spend a few days with them during the count's absence.

"I'm afraid Edith will feel very lonely when her mother has really gone," remarked Mrs James Fenners to her husband on their way home that night.

"Yes, I don't see how she can live by herself. It is unusual and far from agreeable I should think." James spoke as if he were perplexed, and vainly wrestling with some unsolved problem.

"Why has she not married, I wonder?" his wife

continued. "I heard she had some excellent opportunities in England."

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man, as if grasping an errant idea; then added indifferently. "A good many such stories are mere gossip."

After that he relapsed into silence; his wife had struck a chord, which had been sounding faintly in his mind of late, overborne, indeed, by his dislike of much thought, especially in a direction where he did not see his way, and yet from time to time making itself heard. Now, however, his honest regard for Edith roused him to listen.

Next morning Fenners went off to town, full of more purpose than he generally carried about with him. Arrived in Collins Street, he dashed up the steps at the club and hastily asked the man in the hall if Mr Wylie was there.

"Just gone out, sir," was the reply; "only a few minutes ago."

"Did he say when he should be back?" Fenners inquired.

"Not to me, sir," said the man; "I'll inquire of Mr Berners."

"Is Berners here?" cried James.

"He arrived some days ago with Mr Wylie."

Here was a chance of finding out something about Tom's feelings and intentions; "If I wasn't such an awkward fellow," thought James, "however, here goes, I'll have a try," and he opened the library door.

At the table sat a man writing; it needed a second glance to assure himself that it was Berners. He was squarer and more robust in figure, but his

bronzed face showed traces of a fiery probation, he looked much older, and his eyes, when he fixed them on vacancy, pondering a word or a phrase, had a weary expression that went to his old playmate's heart. "I scarcely knew you, old fellow," he cried, coming forward with outstretched hand, "this is luck; how glad I am to meet you again!"

James's person and voice were easily recognisable; years passed lightly over him. Berners returned his greeting warmly; it was cheering to see a familiar face and feel a friendly clasp, amid the crowded hurley-burley of constantly changing figures, which the non-frequent visitor encounters in cosmopolitan Melbourne.

"I heard you had been out exploring," James continued, "just arrived in town, I suppose?"

"I came down with Mr Wylie, you have seen him, haven't you?" asked Tom.

"I was looking for him now, but you'll do just as well," replied Fenners. "Come along with me. You've never met my wife, I fancy."

"I have not had that pleasure, but I congratulate you with all my heart," said Berners.

"All right, I want to introduce you," cried James, feeling that he was going on swimmingly, "we've got a place down Brighton way. A whiff of the briny will freshen you up after the baking you've been getting up north."

"Thanks; but I don't think I can manage it. You are a bold man, James, to venture upon carrying down strangers at first hand. There is somebody else to be consulted now, isn't there?"

"Oh, she'll be pleased to see you," exclaimed

Fenners. "Come now, don't hesitate, you're the very man we want to make our party complete. I conclude Wylie told you he was coming, and—and—the others." He could not decide how far it might be wise to mention Edith and her mother.

"Yes, he told me," said Berners, with some reserve.

"Then, of course, you'll come. A party of real old friends is not to be got together every day," James urged.

"I suppose not in these changing times," replied the other.

"When will you be ready?" asked James briskly. "I'll call for you, say in an hour?"

Tom still hesitated. At last he said, "Much has happened since I met Mrs Lyn—the countess, I mean."

"A lot has happened to her, at anyrate," Fenners put in. "What on earth she married that Frenchman for I can't make out, but it is none of my business."

"I'm not sure she will like to meet me," continued Tom.

"Stuff!" ejaculated the other. "Why, she has known you all your life. Why shouldn't she like to meet you *now*?"

Tom understood the stress his friend unconsciously laid on the "now," and winced at the remembrance of what it implied to his companion, still more at thought of the residuum which remained within his own knowledge, yet the temptation to go was very great. He had been feeling that he must see Edith. For some time after his return he entertained the hope that she would write, if only to tell him that

she was glad that harrowing mystery had been cleared up, but she made no sign.

Here was an opportunity of meeting her on neutral ground, and of testing her mother's attitude towards him.

The marked manner in which Mr Wylie had eluded questions and abstained from allusions only increased Tom's anxiety. That very morning he had been on the point of asking whether he thought the countess would allow him to call on her, but when he heard of the projected visit to Brighton, he had postponed his question, feeling sadly depressed and forsaken when Wylie left.

James perceived that Berners wanted to accept his invitation, in spite of a reluctance which he did not understand, so he clinched the matter by remarking in an innocent manner, "Miss Lyndon and you used to be great allies. I should think she'll be hurt—in fact, all of them will be hurt—when I go back and tell them you would not come."

"Should you tell them?" asked Tom. "It is not that I don't want to go, you know."

"Then I'm off for an hour," cried Fenner. "Shall be back punctually. Mind you're ready."

## CHAPTER XXV

## "BY THE SALT SEA WAVE"

MR WYLIE and his young cousin came quickly round the Bluff Point on the beach below Brighton, evidently very warm; he with unbuttoned coat fanning himself now and then with his hat; she with veil thrown back, a lovely flush on her face. "There, we are safely round," Edith exclaimed, as they clambered across some rocks close in by the cliff, barely beyond reach of the white spray sent up by the high waves of a rapidly incoming tide, their billowy crests tossed into foam by a warm wind. "I really expected to get wet," she continued, "we were wrong to run it so closely."

"I had no idea the tide was so nearly in. It would have been a nuisance to climb that cliff," Wylie replied; dubiously eyeing the red mass above him.

"We are safe now; let us rest a little," the girl said; seating herself on a rock as she spoke. Her companion, drawing a long breath, sat down beside her. "I should soon be out-stripped in a race now," he remarked.

"It has been more of a climb than a race," Edith answered.

"We raced the tide though and won," cried Wylie; "let us claim that for our pains."

"I am glad mother and Mrs James decided on a drive," Edith said.

"You may be sure we should have escaped this scamper if they had been with us," Wylie rejoined, rising and shading his eyes with his hand, in order to examine two figures appearing at the edge of the bluff, and surveying the beach below. He took a step or two forward to verify his surmise. "So Master Tom has emerged from the dumps," he thought. "What next I wonder?" turning as he recognised the new comers, and calling Edith's attention to them, they meanwhile coming down the face of the cliff.

"Fenners appears to have fallen in with Tom Berners," he remarked in difficulty.

The girl started, the flush on her face deepening, and gazed searchingly a moment. "I should scarcely have recognised Tom," she said.

"He looks much older," returned Wylie. "Years reckon by events sometimes." He went forward to meet the young men.

"You are too late to have the glory of rescuing us," he cried; "we had to run for it."

"Did you come round below here then?" Fenners asked. "You must have had a pretty close shave."

Wylie proceeded to point out with much minuteness where they had been, and James, equally interested in the adventure, remained talking in a loud tone, intended to signify his entire engrossment at that peculiar moment.

Tom had joined Edith, drawn towards her without definite intention, not knowing what he meant to say, nor what he actually did say, when they met.

Only she put her hand in his, murmuring inconsequently, "Oh! Tom, how glad I am that it is not true."

Presently the others turned round. "Mr Wylie has not been the most prudent of guides, I'm afraid," James exclaimed.

"We are none the worse," she said, smiling.

Wylie looked at his watch. "It is time we were going," Edith remarked, rising from her rocky seat. Whereupon James put his arm through Wylie's and darted towards the zig-zag path they had just descended, dragging his companion with him.

"What's this for?" the elder man demanded, when a shelving rock afforded a minute's resting space.

"Oh, you know," said the other, glancing towards the beach.

"Ahem! This is a plot, is it?" he asked.

"Not exactly," replied James. "It was quite by chance that I found him. It occurred to me that I had best bring him down."

"Indeed; that's why you knock the breath out of me in this frightful manner, then," Wylie panted.

"We are nearly up," said James.

"I should hope so," rejoined the other grimly.

The young people plainly had no intention of essaying the difficulty of the zigzag. They moved along the beach below, partially sheltered by protruding promontories of broken rock, round which, at intervals, sudden gusts eddied, veering with the flood tide, entangling Berners in the girl's draperies and blowing her veil across his face. The touch of her garments thrilled his soul; a delicious sensuousness

stole over him—exquisite in proportion to his previous isolation; and he dreaded to break the spell by a word.

"You don't seem as full of triumph as I expected now that your instinct has proved to be right," Edith remarked.

"I'm but a poor fellow; I've learnt that at any rate," he replied.

"As how?" she queried.

"I don't feel to have the courage of a man," he cried. "I'm like the creatures one watches circling round the fire that consumes them."

"I'm stupid at understanding parables," the girl remarked demurely.

"It's just this," he said fiercely. "I ought not to be near you. We are cleared in the world's eyes, but those whose opinion one values most know that the stain of treachery can never be wiped out. I was bold to press my love once; now I dare not ask for what my whole being craves."

"You are too proud to give me the chance of refusal." As Edith spoke a sudden gust blew her dress against the cliff; it caught in a jagged piece of rock, remaining fixed.

Tom flew to the rescue and between them the torn flounce was disengaged. "Take my arm; let me help you," he said.

"I could not think of it. We are to be wholly self-sufficing, you know."

He drew her arm within his own, pressing it closely.

"You can't really believe that I am proud," he whispered; "what have I to be proud of?"

"Hasn't somebody said something about a pride that apes humility?" she rejoined.

"You shan't charge me with that—no," as she tried to release her arm; "I won't let you go until I've got your answer. It must be all or nothing now. I can't endure this suspense longer. Send me away after, if you will, but hear me now."

The vacillation of the last few weeks was gone, and Edith, seeing his excited resolution, quietly submitted to be led slowly onward.

Presently he stopped and stooped towards her, speaking in a voice of suppressed passion. "Look here, Edith; this is about the situation. You bear an honourable name, I ask you to exchange it for one disgraced by fraud; you are a rich girl, I am a comparatively poor man, by my own fault mainly, for I had no heart to strive; you have position and friends, of late I have been indifferent to both. In fact, I have nothing to offer but myself—which must always be yours, whether you will take it or not."

She felt his arm tremble, but he deliberately relaxed his hold on hers, leaving her free to remove it if she chose.

Need it be said that it remained there, and these young people were disgracefully late in returning home?

"I do believe that is the first bell," Edith exclaimed; one sounding loudly as they came in sight of the house, which was visible a quarter of a mile off.

"Is that a bell ringing? What does it matter? Don't heat yourself," said Tom, with supreme indifference to the outside world.

"We shall be awfully late," urged the girl.

"Never mind. I'll bear the blame, and say—well, anything you like. I don't care," he persisted.

"Don't be absurd, Tom. You ought to care."

"I don't then, and I can't," he cried; "nothing signifies now. I've got you, my darling. Everything else may go."

"I shall go at all events," she exclaimed, breaking into a run. His long strides kept him abreast without effort.

"Shall we have a race?" he said; "you won't shake me off."

The pace was slackened as they drew nearer, and James, who hidden by a curtain was watching for them with much self gratulation, announced their approach to his wife and Wylie, who were also in the drawing-room.

"Here they come," he cried; "and Edith, look, she has gone round by the terrace. I'll fetch Tom in."

"Here is Tom Berners, our old chum, my dear," he said, presenting him to Mrs James; "and I hope you'll like each other," he added heartily.

"I'm afraid we—I—am late. I hope you'll forgive me, Mrs Fenners," Tom remarked, somewhat incoherently.

"If you can dress in ten minutes," she said, laughingly.

"All right; I'll be under the time you've allowed, Mrs Fenners."

"Hurry him up, James; seaside walks make one hungry," put in Mr Wylie, glancing up from the evening paper.

When the gong sounded the second time the countess and her daughter descended. Berners

was already in the drawing-room, looking (as James remarked *sotto voce*) "twice the fellow he was this morning."

Fenners was ready enough to do a kindness, but he seldom took the trouble to think one out. The rarity of the effort imparted double zest to the present happy result of his consideration, and he awaited with an approach to anxiety the reception which Tom would receive from the countess. Wylie, too, was not without misgivings, and had warned James that he "doubted how May would take it."

However, they were reassured when that lady entered, leaning on her daughter's arm, and going up to the young man, said simply, "I am glad to see you again, Tom."

After that everything was plain sailing, as Wylie remarked in an aside. The spirits of the party rose perceptibly, and the generally quiet house resounded with their gaiety. Berners was the life of the company, relating stories of amusing experiences in the wilder parts of the country, drawing out Mr Wylie, and flirting audaciously with his hostess.

"I think I'll take a spell out that way myself next season," said James, alluding to Tom's description of their camp life in one specially fine district.

"Nonsense, James; that sort of thing is well enough for bachelors," said his wife.

"Let him try it, Mrs Fenners; when he once returns he will never leave your side again," said Tom, glancing at Edith as he spoke.

"Perhaps that might be rather too much," Wylie remarked.

When the ladies retired, he turned on Tom. "I

must say you're the most inconsistent fellow I know."

"Oh! consistency, like time, is for slaves. I'm a free man now. But what is your special complaint, Mr Wylie?"

"Why, for the last month you've been moping and moaning; only this very morning I lost patience with you. Now, here you are to-night with spirits enough for a dozen people."

"Ha, ha," laughed Tom; "spirits indeed, I should think so! I've won her, and am the happiest man alive."

"Wasn't I right to make you come down?" asked Fenners, triumphantly flourishing his pipe.

"You are the best fellow in the world, James. I can never thank you enough."

"Ahem!" ejaculated the elder man, remembering certain opinions expressed by Tom some years before, on the occasion of receiving a proposal of partnership from James.

He, however, kept them to himself, remarking aloud, "It's just the old story in a new setting."

## CHAPTER XXVI

## WEDDING BELLS

THE streets of Melbourne are perceptibly less crowded on the morning of a mail day; people are busy indoors with their correspondence; nevertheless some—even business men—were seen making their way, at an early hour, to a quiet suburban church, on the day fixed for the departure of that year's last mail steamer; Miss Lyndon the heiress was to be married that morning. Curiosity was all the more keen because there were no invitations—the wedding was strictly private.

"You recollect there were odd reports about that young Berners, naturally they prefer to attract as little attention as possible," Mrs Grundy whispered.

"I wonder the count did not prevent his wife's consenting to the marriage; Berners has very little property—wasted a lot in irrigation fads," a male of the Grundy species declared. Some commonplace people indeed hinted that the probably lengthened separation of mother and daughter supplied a sufficient reason for avoiding the company of mere acquaintances. Comments—apologetic or the reverse—were however of little account to the small wedding party.

Count de Merthe—being a man of the world—after a few admonitory shrugs, had acquiesced in

the astonishing procedure to which his wife had committed herself.

Certainly when he comprehended that the proposed bridegroom was no other than the wild bushman, whom he had encountered when leaving "Wytha," he felt it his duty to offer a strong remonstrance, but finding himself in a minority, submitted with a better grace than could have been expected; it was not prudent, he reflected, to offend a young man—even though a barbarian—who would be the proprietor of those much-to-be-coveted mines, so he lent the sanction of his presence to his step-daughter's marriage.

Mr Wylie, of course, gave the bride away.

Susan Fenner was the only bridesmaid.

"Just fancy, one bridesmaid—no rice—no slippers—Edith Lyndon was always odd:" so again Mrs Grundy.

But she was mistaken in the matter of slippers.

Mrs Fenner and Mrs James took care of that; though the carriage which bore the bride and bridegroom away, contained also her mother and the count, old slippers were showered after it, exhausting the Frenchman's capacity of wonder at the extraordinary practices rife in Australia.

An hour later the mail boat was steaming down the bay; and Tom Berners with his wife, far on the first stage of their journey to Sydney, from whence they would make their way leisurely to "Moonnee."

Tom declined to give up the place.

"It will be a fine property by and by," he said; "besides I don't want to live altogether on my wife's money."

"Dear me! its only lately that I have discovered how proud you are," she rejoined.

"Moonnee is the last shred; I confess to a lingering pride in it."

The place amply justified his expectations; and when Hugh Wylie the second became his father's manager there, it was the centre of a populous district—with Bernerstown for its capital. But why forestall events?

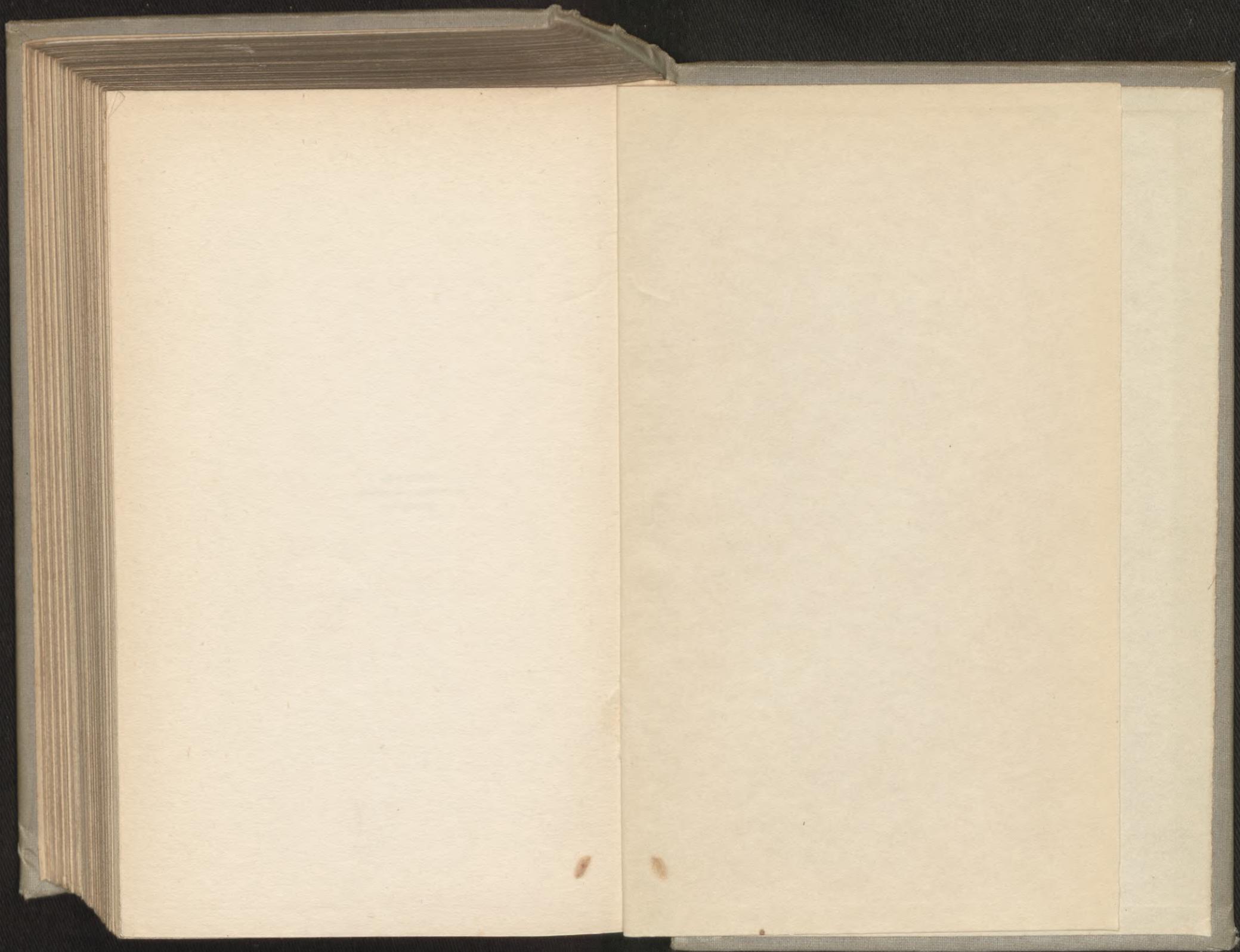
"People," Mr Wylie maintains, "are much less interesting when they are happy."

It may however be mentioned that an arrangement was made with Countess de Merthe, by which Wytha reverted to Edith, and became the Berners's bush home; a delightful country resort for them and their many friends: for indeed the Grundy prophecies have been wholly falsified, and the Berners's town house is also one of the many pleasant homes which adorn the social life of Melbourne.

Better still, it is known as one where every effort for the lessening of suffering and the promotion of the true prosperity of the colony meets with sympathy and help.

Its master and mistress recognise their responsibility to the land which has brought them health and wealth, love and friends. The troubles of earlier days have taught them to value the real and the enduring; to suspend judgment—to love mercy—and to cultivate that "Charity—twice blessed—which blesses him that gives and him that takes."

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