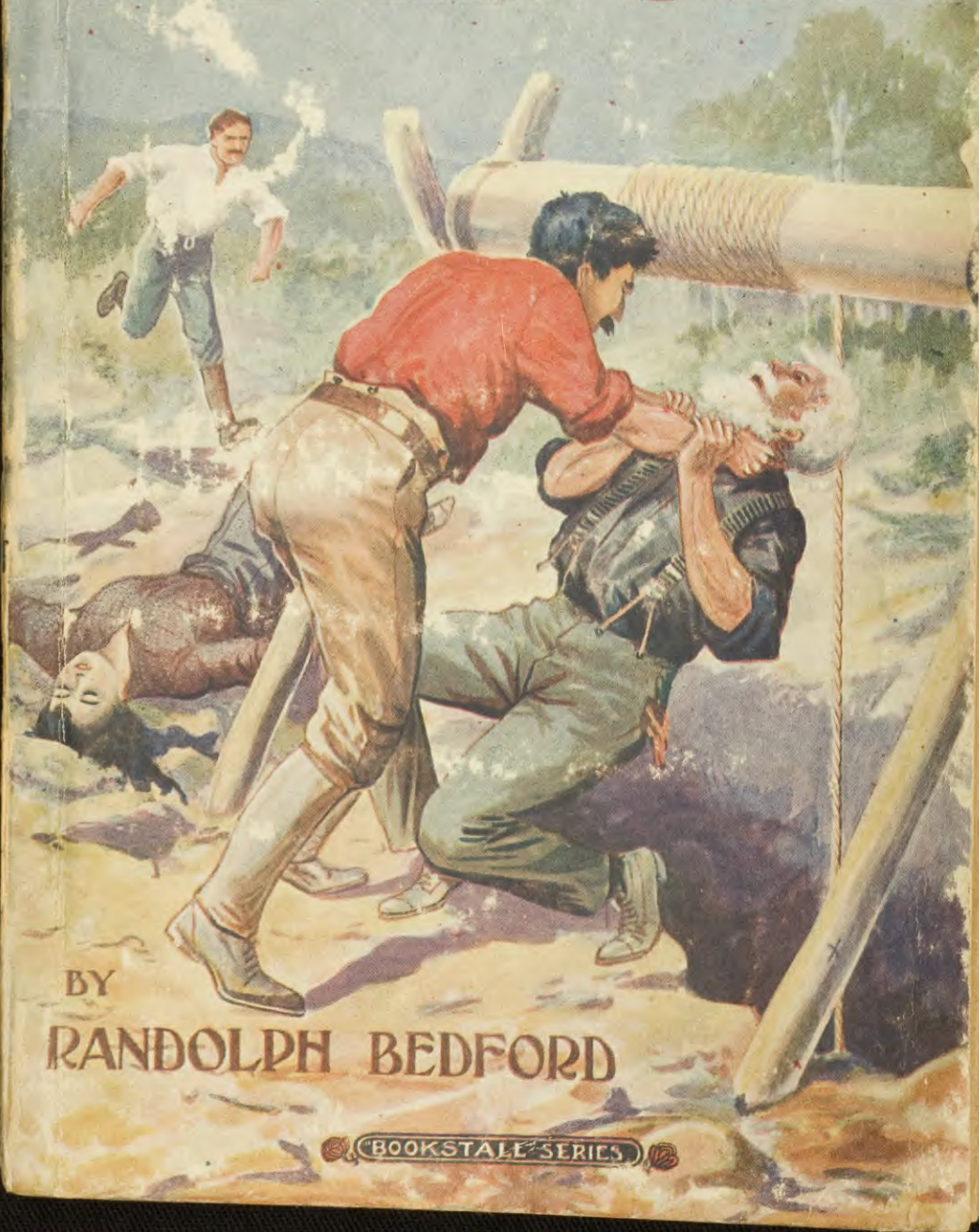


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SILVER STAR



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RANDOLPH BEDFORD

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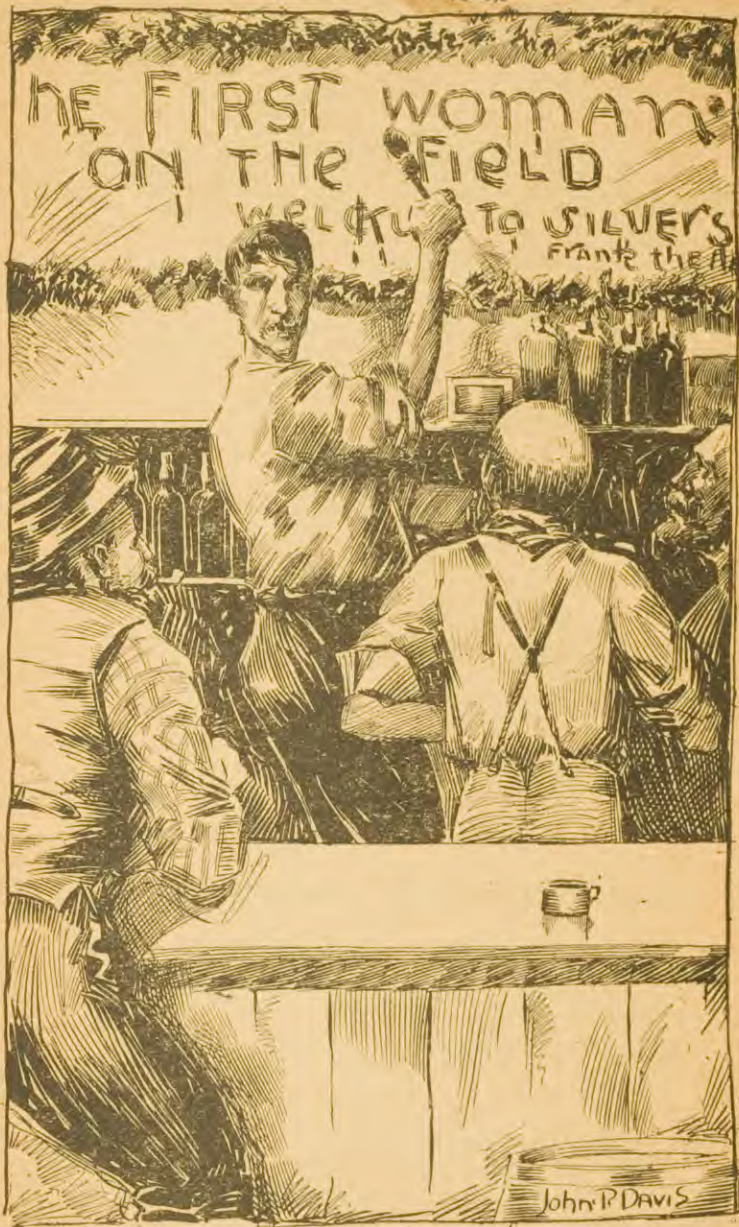
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THE SILVER STAR.



"There! Will that do?" demanded Frank the Artist.

Frontispiece.

See Page 24.

THE
SILVER STAR

BY
RANDOLPH BEDFORD

*Author of "Billy Pagan," "White Australia," "The Snare
of Strength." etc , etc.*

Illustrations by John P. Davis.

SYDNEY :
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CHAPTER I.

WHEN poverty has eaten all else its famine devours love. Alice Power, an orphan at eighteen, had two years of the grudging affection of her mother's sister, Mrs. Pontet, a lady who had been made angular and hard by a running fight with privation.

And at last the poor woman's long patience had worn out, and she vented her spite against the world on her niece, and told her that she was eating children's bread. The girl felt all the terrible loneliness of the young. She knew that she worked hard and uncomplainingly; and, in the first resentment of the injustice—and all injustice is murderously terrible to generous youth—she did a desperate thing. She left the little cottage among the peach and pear bloom at Unley, and ran away to Adelaide, with two shillings in her pocket.

Necessity drove her to a labour registry: the same necessity blinded her vision. She accepted a situation in Silver Star, not knowing where Silver Star might be. Continuous failure for Baldy Davis had made the registry-office keeper careless of the truth—an easy transition, for she was a woman, and earned commissions by painting all employers as angels and all situa-

tions as places of asphodel and roses, carefully suppressing the facts of overwork and the cockroaches in the kitchen sink. And so, little by little, she had made Baldy Davis a benevolent old gentleman of eighty, and then she altered his sex and engaged Alice Power as companion to an elderly lady who lived at Silver Star because of an asthmatic condition. Then, and very hurriedly, that there might be no after consideration and repentance, she gave Alice Power money for the journey and despatched her by the train to Terowie with a letter to Buck Crawford—the driver of the coach from Terowie to Silverton and thence to Silver Star.

The journey by rail to Terowie had been a vision of delight to the Adelaide born and bred girl; but the glory of leaving the iron road and striking with the coach boldly through wheat fields and into the desert land; the exhilaration of that wild gallop behind six swift horses through the mazes of the ghostly tracks; the joy of occupying the box seat next to Buck Crawford—that driver who was the Czar of the road—left her almost stunned with adventure. And as the coach progressed at a gallop towards the Barrier, Crawford pointed out the road to Teetulpa where he had “lost enough oof to fill a cart, Miss” and through Mannahill, where there was no hill to speak of and no manna at all, but only an immeasurable sea of biting, sterile sand; and they had left Olary with its goats and old kerosene tins and mud and canvas shealings and mouldy inhabitants slumbering as of old, and had driven on satiated with the uniformity of air and sky until a faint shadow like a heat-cloud appeared on the horizon, and Buck Crawford pointed to it

with his whip, and said that the cloud was "a big blow from the Barrier Range."

Long before that time he had made a lifelong friend of the girl from Adelaide. Her very look up to him as he explained something of the bush expressed complete trust and confidence; and, as her face, creamy as new ivory, hazel-eyed, firm-chinned, eyes steadfastly alight, looked up to the big man on the box, *his* face—hard and clean, and with the long shrewd jaw of the Yankee of half a century ago—softened to the softness of boyhood. He had very bright eyes which seemed to challenge the sky and the sun, and which saw everything by night or day—saw three stumps on the nearside of the track and two saplings on the off side, and steered his galloping six between without drawing rein.

His wind-beat, sun-beat face had not a line in it of care, but only the wrinkles which come of laughing and the crowsfeet caused by long looking on plains that seemingly held water when they but held the mirage. Heavy curling yellow hair "as long," as he said himself, "as if he were half a poet;" great yellow moustaches and a goatee which exaggerated the Yankee shrewdness of the jaw. He saw as well by night as by day, putting out the headlights of the coach and steering under the starlight by his ability to know as substance that which seemed but shadow, travelling quickly through the stages as if the darkness were sunlight, and rarely with the outside swingle bars scraping the bark from a tree.

And in the long intimacy of two hundred miles and more of driving without the loss of a moment beyond

that necessary for the changing of horses and the feeding of the passengers, each found a friend, frankly and without the consideration—conscious at least—of sex.

In the day-time all his bush love was unfolded to her; he talked of the habits of this horse and that, analysing them as if he analysed human motives.

“Y’see that offside leader, Miss? That’s Rocket; and the terrible whip illustrated the name, for at its touch Rocket jumped almost out of his harness, but in a moment was his old self again—running with loose traces and never pulling a pound.

“He’s a very big horse, Mr. Crawford.”

“Very big and very valueless; he’s a loafer. And see him putting on side coming into Silverton. All skite he is. But you always find the smallest kind of ‘possum up the biggest kind of tree.”

And then, with innocent enough pride of achievement, he used the whip as if it were a scythe, cutting the leaves of the salt bush by the side of the track as regularly as if with a knife. When Rocket, injured by the whip that could not keep him to duty, lost his temper and bit the ear of the middle leader, who was a worker and ready to pull the coach alone had he been able, the whip became terrible, falling like lightning out of the sky; and when she said deprecatingly, “Oh, Mr. Crawford!” he replied, “Don’t be too softhearted. It’s being softhearted that spoils other people. Man or horse has got to be taught by getting hurt. The boy that never knew the stick ‘ull have to cry himself blind when he gets old.”

Bush land, gum belt, plain ; down a dizzily-graded creek bank, galloping across the drift sand and pig-jumping up the other bank went the horses, over a hill into a plain from one concentric circle of hills to another, rattling over quartz and ironslugs, ploughing through deep red dust that arose in the air and made golden ladders to the sun. And ever the blue hills in the golden vapour forward, the burned salt-bush and the stunted mulga and the wicked black and red blooms of Sturt's Desert Pea—which is the Mephistopheles of all flowers. Drove of kangaroo started up as the coach racked on its great thorough braces nearer to their feeding grounds ; bustards, fat and heavy, and pencilled with delicate feathers of silver, ran through tussocks until they had sufficient way to carry them into the air ; rabbits were everywhere ; and once a flock of emu burst from a scrub belt and ran off with racehorse speed towards the heart of the westering sun.

“ Many's the time I've thought of training an emu to run for the Melb'n' Cup,” said Buck Crawford. “ But I don't think they'd stay the distance, Miss.”

And at night, when wrapped in Crawford's 'possum rug she dozed, and her head fell towards his shoulder, he took all the reins in his big right hand and made her comfortable. While she slept the coach ran swiftly through the starlight and the Cross dipped low ; and it was only in the chill wind that the sun blows to the plain just before daybreak that she awoke and sat up.

“ I'm so sorry I went to sleep, Mr. Crawford.”

“ Oh ! no fear ; you ain't used to keeping awake night and day.”

"But it was lonely for you."

"No fear. I sometimes drive all night without anybody up here—when it's cold, y' know. And I think."

"What do you think about all that time?"

"Oh! Australia, an' what she's going to be. Rome was a world beater—so was England. Australia will be greater."

"How?"

"Australia 'ull be a world leader. I'd like to go in Parliament and help. Mightn't be able to do much, but sometimes I think when I hear all the imported 'push' singing out 'Empire' that a good lunatic who would keep on saying 'Australia! Australia!' would be better than nothing."

"You're not imported, Mr. Crawford?"

"No, Currency—just like you, Miss. I was born in the Hawkesbury—New South, y'know. I used to have to grind corn overnight in a little mill for my next day's breakfast."

"And you are not tired of the bush?"

"Never—the bush never went back on a man yet if he treated it right. The best men are always the further out; or the man who's got to keep moving thinks so, and that's as good."

Out from the east the dawn spread his golden fan, stick by stick and fold by fold; the horses reached a down grade at the moment and plunged down it as if the daybreak brought them new strength. And so it had, for dawn meant that another half-hour would complete the stage.

"And what else do you think of?"

"When I'm alone I recite Adam Lindsay Gordon to the horses. I mind meeting a buggy once and two women in it, and me galloping the horses and yelling 'The Swimmer' at the top of my voice. They turned the horses and galloped into Terowie and told the police a lunatic had stolen the coach."

"But has a poet so much of a hold over you?"

"Hasn't he! Why, you see he was a bushman; and he could ride a comet if you put a bit in its mouth; and then he was in trouble and he wrote poetry a man can read. D'ye know what's helped me? They say he didn't write it, and I don't care who did."

"What is it?"

"Life is mostly froth and bubble,
Two things stand like stone—
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in your own."

"Yes—that's fine; a real man would feel like that. But Mr. Crawford, was it true?"

"Was what true?"

"You won't mind?"

"I? No! Say anything you like."

"At Terowie they told me you kept the coach passengers awake all night reciting Gordon's poems to them."

Buck Crawford grinned. "That's a true bill, I think. Y'see, if they're decent people it 'ud be a pity not to talk Gordon to 'em, an' if they're bad lots they deserve to be kept awake. Come up, Maud! Pull, Tallboys! Yup! altogether—pull, Chloride, you black waster, pull!"

They were through the heavy sand and before them

was Silverton—beautiful in the golden air of early morning and getting ready to roar again.

For more than half the day Buck Crawford drove a smaller coach through from Silverton to Silver Star; and as they rocked down the rises and hogged along the dusty plain, Buck Crawford, who had earlier learned of her destination, but had not yet found the courage to tell her of her impending loneliness in the Apollyon Hotel's womanless menage, gave her advice, as he styled it, "between man and woman."

"If I knew the crowd that let her come up to a place like this," he had said to himself, "I'd whip the soul case out of them first and run the coach over them afterwards."

"You look out up there, Miss," he said, indicating the as yet unseen Silver Star by a wave of his whip hand. "You make friends of everybody, or some of the wasters 'ull talk. Davis is all right, an' so's Barney Cue and Jersey Clarke—an' I'm all right——"

"I know you are, Mr. Crawford."

"Thank yer, Miss; an' Charlie 'Olt's as good as gold, but his cousin Joe's a poor thing—low grade and refractory dirt at that."

"And the old lady I'm going to?"

"Eh? H'm. Come up, Lily! Git to it, Alligator! Pull, Ploughman. There's the Silver Star, Miss."

Alice looked ahead and saw the canvas and weather-board and galvanized iron township whose reason was Charlie Holt's discovery of ore worth £300 a ton.

With that desire to finish well which is the strong desire of every real man and of every horse worth his

fodder the weary team came into Silver Star at a gallop and stopped. A dozen hands were upheld to help Alice, but she selected Buck Crawford and alighted. Baldy Davis, perspiring by reason of nervous prostration at the sight of her, led her through the cheering crowd of all the hard cases of the Barrier and into the great clay-floored bar-room.

The Lady of the Silver Star had reached her principality.

CHAPTER II.

THACKARINGA was in its prime. Paddy Green worked his rich claims, the "Six over Six" and the "Seven over Six." The Gipsy Girl and Charlie Nicol and the prospectors who followed riddled the Apollyon Valley and found the Day Dream. The Nine Mile and the Umberumberka were in due course of being proved duffers, and Fitzgerald Moore was in charge of the Pinnacles. The Pioneer at Thackaringa had yielded over £20,000; Lubra ore was worth £600 a ton; May Bell ore was worth £480; certain silver shows owned by one of the greatest of Australian democrats, and known as "Charlie Kingston's claims," were producing ore worth £150 a ton. Because the crest of the Day Dream Hill was of ironstone—heavy, dark and rugged—any ironstone rise was pegged and worked and boomed. Mount Robe men swore by this year, to swear at it the next. And a boundary rider named Charles Rasp pegged out a long iron hill on Mount Gipps horse paddock—the Broken Hill; and all men laughed at him. Twenty-five years before, prospectors from Bendigo had broken the caps of the richest silver lodes of modern times, but had passed on never knowing the nature or value of the rejected metal; for a man gets

what he looks for, and these looked for gold only and departed hot-foot on its phantom track.

Broken Hill was a range of manganic iron, weather blackened and forbidding, covered with dreary mulga—susurrant in the everlasting winds—the only life the energetic flies and thousands of wallaby. From the summit of the black hill the mulga looked like a grassy sea. And because it was to be great and lasting it was slow of discovery and growth; while the Day Dream and the Lubra and the Silver Star arose in a night and died in little more than a year. And Silverton was a roaring drunkard in a dust cloud. Goat Hill shares were worth £1000—or rather they were selling at £1000—for they were not worth anything. The Hen and Chickens was booming with the Silver Star, and J. S. Reid was printing the “Silver Age.”

Silver Star was roaring with a smaller voice. It had one consistently rich claim and twenty elusively richer; it had two alleged hotels, and a store or two, and a weekly coach from Silverton. The Apollyon, Thomas Cartwright Davis' hotel (he was popularly known as Baldy Davis) had first place; the Native Silver Hotel, over the way and separated by two chains of finely-milled dust, was the second-rate house. Baldy said that no man visited the Native Silver until the Apollyon had kicked him out; but this may have been merely trade pride-fulness.

Outside the bar, and looking to the mulga clad hills that masked the dusty street, sat two old men drinking, very solemnly, rum from pannikins—giving it just sufficient water from the water bags that swung and

cooled in the wind to acquit them of the charge that they drank the spirit neat. Within the great ceilingless bar was a worn and tattered bagatelle table with a jew lizard sleeping on it ; under it and on the clay floor and on the tables were the reasons for the existence of Silver Star—specimens of iron and quartz and greisen, and tin specimens, and silver, and mica and asbestos. One prospector had brought in a great block of kaolin, and talked of beating the potteries of Staffordshire here in the centre of the desert of saltbush plain and concentric hills of mulga ; rocks were piled on the bar counter ; a slug of horn silver showed its dull ugliness in a beer glass ; a specimen of native silver was sheltered by a glass inverted. By the bar counter was a red-painted box, and on it the painted words :

V.R.

ROYAL MAIL.

For this was the Silver Star post office, too.

Men said that Baldy Davis made as much money of beer and whisky cases as of their contents ; for with the cases he builded living rooms against the original bar of galvanized iron on rough bush timber ; and the side-walls proved the statement with such notifications as :

“ Pugdog Stout.”

“ Stow away from Boilers.”

“ Keep Cool.”

“ Milk Gin for the Kidneys.”

“ Bull’s Head Brand.”

Baldy Davis, a great bull of a man, nodded his shining hairless head as he smeared the glasses with a cloth—an

operation he styled "washing up." By a long table near the bagatelle table, with its jew lizard still slumbering, a thin, almost cadaverous young man, splashed with red paint, was laboriously writing on a long strip of calico, no two letters alike, and using as much paint on his face and clothing as he had given to the banner. He stepped back from it a yard or so with all the joy of the artist—prouder than Tintoretto gazing at one of his furlongs of crowded canvas. The strip of calico was surrounded by salt bush foliage, and the dusty leaves looked almost as artificial as the flagrant art of the glaring paint.

The cadaverous man suspended his looks of admiration and wrote below the notice, as if he were a great painter signing a picture, "Frank the Artist."

That done he stepped away from the calico, and Baldy Davis saw it in all its beauty thus :

THE FIRST WOMAN ON THE FIELD.

Welkum to Silver Star.

Frank the Artist.

"How's she now?" asked Baldy Davis as he smeared the last glass with the ancient towel.

Frank the Artist waved the brush, and sprayed himself with the red paint yet again.

"Slow, boss, slow. Y'see a artist 'as to 'ave plenty o' time. I got to put the shadin' in yet."

"Well," squeaked Baldy Davis in strange contradiction to the deep bass of the living skeleton he addressed; "If the artist don't finish before the coach

comes in with the girl the artist won't 'ave any more rum for a month o' Sundays."

At that Frank the Artist painted frantically, but only for a moment; and then he said, "It's no use 'urryin', but I'll do it if I get a snifter now."

"Jus' one then, mind; it's got to be fixed up over the bar, too."

"I'll finish the hartist's work, any way," said the cadaverous man as he came to the bar counter.

"Y'll have to nail it up too. W'en it's on the table it's a bit o' kaliker; but w'en it's on the wall it's a trumpal arch, an' a trumpal arch I want."

He put the rum bottle on the counter, and Frank the Artist clutched it affectionately, saying, "You're makin' a big to do over this ere noo barmaid."

"She's more'n a barmaid," replied Baldy Davis, "She's the first woman in Silver Star—all the talent's comin' in."

Under cover of this enthusiasm for the first lady on the field Frank the Artist poured for himself a very comprehensive drink of rum, while Baldy Davis continued, "There'll be Jersey Clarke an' Barney Cue an' Charley 'Olt—Here! y'aint leavin' no room for the water."

"I don't never have no water with it—I take a chaser after. It bites better."

Baldy Davis looked at the bottle as if it were his enemy, and put it away in safety as he said, "It wasn't a second mate's nip that—it was enough for the whole boat's crew and the bos'un. Does all hartists love rum like you?"

"All of 'em—but the noospaper coves is the worst."

"I knew a reporter once used to fry fish in it; but, spare me days, he wasn't any worse than you."

"Nev' mind, nev' mind," said Frank the Artist persuasively. "Who else is comin'?"

"Charlie 'Olt an' Joe 'Olt—he's a cross-grained waster, but Charlie's all lode stuff."

"Charlie 'Olt struck it rich in the Silver Star, ain't 'e?"

"My colonial oath he has. The stuff's worth three hundred pounds a ton."

"I'd like to 'ave a few ton of it."

"Get on; if y'ad y'd sell it for a ton o' rum."

"Gimme a little one now."

"Not much! Go an' paint the trumpal arch fust."

Frank went back to the table and his work as if he walked in the martyr's sheet of fire as a large, wild-whiskered old man put his head and shoulders through the door and roared, "Pannikin empty."

It was apparently a well understood formula. Baldy Davis took the rum bottle to the verandah. Frank the Artist looked after him and muttered that everything went to "Bob the Finisher." By "everything" he certainly meant rum, but he was accidentally truthful in his statement. Everything at Silver Star did go to Bob the Finisher—if only it stayed at Silver Star long enough; for Bob the Finisher was the undertaker.

As Baldy Davis returned he was followed into the bar by a spare old man, travel stained and poverty stricken, and bent under the weight of a swag, his face masked by

the impalpable dust of the salt-bush plains, and yet bearing some evidence of the refinement of civilization and better days than these.

The weariness of his eyes softened Baldy Davis, and he said in rough welcome, "H'lo mate, what'll you 'ave?"

"Water, please."

"Water an' what?"

"Only water."

"D'ye want to wash in it?"

"No! To drink."

"To drink alone?"

"Yes, please."

"Right y'are. First time I was ever asked for it. Y'aint got me on a string?"

"No—really."

"You're goin' to drink it? No gammon?"

"Yes—of course."

"All right, all right—there y'are."

"Thank you."

The wild-whiskered undertaker's head and shoulders filled the doorway again as Sands drank the water—drank it delicately for all his stress—and Bob the Finisher's voice cried again, "Pannikin empty!"

Davis took the bottle to the door, where now Bob the Finisher's two cronies had joined the undertaker, and supplied the held out pannikins.

"See that bloke?" said Baldy Davis. "He drinks water."

Bob the finisher looked at his drinking companions and said solemnly, "Water—Bill! Water—Jim!"

They replied with equal solemnity. "Water—Bob!" and retired with him as if frightened.

Davis returned to the bar and looked at the new comer as he set down the glass. "D'ye like it, mate?"

"I was perishing for it."

"Have a rum now?"

"No. More water, please."

"More! Another pannikin! Well! Well! Well!"

And he refilled the glass from the water bag and asked, "Ave you got a claim about 'ere?"

"No! I'm carrying my swag."

"I see you had Matilda up; but I thought you might 'ave a mine—everybody has."

"Have they?"

"Course. I had five rich silver mines once and their close up rooned me."

"I am not likely to have any silver mines—rich or poor. I am a derelict; and you have been kind."

"Kind? A drink of water?"

"Not only the water—but the words."

"I didn't say nothing."

"May be not the words then but the way of it. The good humour and the smile. I have seen little of either for many a year."

"You go on! Don't talk like that. An' ole bloke like you's got no right going round the bush. Ain't you got any friends?"

"None—I forfeited them."

"How?"

"I'll tell you. I was in a position of trust. I wanted to be rich quickly."

"If you try to get rich in a year you'll be 'anged in six months."

"I served seven years."

"You was innercent?"

"No, guilty!"

"I'm glad o' that."

"Glad! Why?"

"Every bloke I met what did time said he was innercent. You're the first that owned up."

"I did not tell a lie to screen myself. Why should I now when I have suffered?"

"And then you come out?"

"I don't know why I tell you all this, but I cannot help it. As employers came to know my story all offices were closed to me. I took to the bush, doing anything."

"Mining?"

"No. I was too old to learn; but I found this as I walked here. Is it gold?"

And he handed to Baldy Davis a specimen of mineral in glistening yellow cubes.

"Le's see," said Davis. "Yes—it is——"

"Ah!"

"Yes, it's noo chum gold—iron prytes."

"Valuable?"

"About as valuable as ice-cream at the South Pole."

"Oh!"

"Y'see, an old tenderfoot like you shouldn't be playing walk about in these tracks. It takes a real hard-faced man to keep goin' here—straight wire, it does."

"It's a dreadful place."

"Not it—there's not a real man here doin' badly, and a lot are makin' big money."

"Then I starve in the midst of plenty?"

"Y' will if y' haven't anything better than iron prytes."

"I have an interest in a mine."

"What sorter mine?"

"Silver."

"Where?"

"The Broken Hill."

"Silver! There's no more silver in that than you'll find in a cloud."

"Then I have been robbed of my last money. I paid eighty pounds, all I had, for a fourteenth of it."

"It might be worth a tenner. I mean ye' might get a tenner for it if ye' met a mug. I'll see if I can't sell it to some of the drunken blokes. They might do in their money that way as well as any other. Put it away—hold it. Meantime have a rum."

"No—I want food and work."

"Can y' keep books?"

"Yes, it was my profession."

"Well, look here. I can't write meself, an' I takes the blokes' word for it, an' I believe I've lost a brewery an' a keg o' rum this last week or two."

"I'll be glad to keep the books, and I only want my food."

"Not much; no tucker wages here. Ten bob a day is what we pay boys; an' you're worth that."

Taking silence for consent he walked from behind the bar, bringing with him a day book,

dog-eared and spirit stained; and Sands, falling into his humour, sat with him at the table and they examined Baldy Davis's unique system of book-keeping. While they were so engaged there came to the door a prematurely aged man of fifty or so—Jersey Clarke, known on every rush since Canoono—strong still by reason of work with a promise to it—weakened a little by the excess which follows stress and the careless taking of life in the hand. The old men, still agitated by the blasphemy of Sands' teetotalism, showed him the water bag, and the pointed out Sands; and Jersey Clarke received the information with a slightly cynical surprise. Then curiosity pressed him and he walked to the work of art and watched amusedly the candid vanity of Frank the Artist. Meantime Sands had justified his appointment.

"There's a case of beer entered here without any name to it."

"Le's see," said Baldy Davis. "That's a drop o' blood there, aint' it?"

"Yes."

"Then that was the day Charlie Holt struck chlorides in the Silver Star—we wet the mine with a case o' beer."

"But there's another case charged to him here."

"Eh! So there is. Well, I can't think. Le's see, who was here that day? Charlie 'Olt, Joe 'Olt, Bob the Finisher, Buck Crawford, Jersey Clarke."

"Eh?" said the prospector.

"Nothin'! Nothin'! Terrible Dick, Barney Cue, Frank the Hartist an' me. Here! Charge it to all o'



John P. DAVIS

They examined Baldy Davis's unique system of book-keeping.
The Silver Star.



them, an' we're bound to get paid—all of them except me."

"Frank the Artist, too?"

"Oh, nev' mind him. Y'might as well charge him with a railway and expect to get the money."

Frank the Artist brought the painted calico and mounted a ladder behind the bar and then nailed up the calico. Jersey Clarke, finding that his picture gallery had removed itself, joined the two at the table.

"H'lo Baldy."

"How are you, Jersey?"

"Heard you takin' me name in vain."

"Oh, on'y goin' through the books."

"What'm I doin' in your flamin' books."

"You owe for a case of beer."

"First I heard of it."

"Well you do, anyway—seven pound ten."

Jersey Clarke opened the pouch at his belt, took therefrom a greasy wad of notes and counted out the money.

"Well I dunno who drunk it. I'd jest as soon 'ave castor oil meself. There y'are, seven ten—gimme a rum."

"Glass or pannikin?"

"Glasses now! S'truth, we are toffs." He looked at the smeared glass critically and added, "D—— dirty toffs, too."

"Well, you'll get it cleaner when the noo barmaid comes."

"Got a barmaid comin' up? My oath, you'll be gettin' that proud you'll have to get a whole pair o' braces to keep your pants up."

"Yes, didn't I tell yer? Frank's puttin' the triumphal arch up now."

"That's a triumphal arch, is it? Thought it was a lunatic asylum gate."

"Doubleyer—Hee—Hell—Sea—yew—hem! Hell! You do spell!"

Frank the Artist, intolerant of criticism, resented the implication.

"Why—where's it wrong?"

"Can't you see for yerself? You can see it, can't you, Baldy?"

Baldy Davis, who couldn't read his own name, looked at the calico critically and replied, "Yes, my oath, that's cruel. I never met a artist that could spell yet."

Frank the Artist, taking a brush overloaded with paint, altered the "C" to "K" and made the word "welkum." Then he said triumphantly, "There! Will that do?"

"Now you're right," said Jersey Clarke.

"You can do it right if you on'y think," said Baldy Davis. "It's lucky we was here to tell yer. Come down an' 'ave a rum."

The artist descending and feeling that common men had patronised him retorted with a foreign language, "I'll 'ave some akwer poorer in mine this time."

"What's that?" asked Davis, all his respect for learning suddenly returned.

"Water," replied the artist nonchalantly, and affecting not to notice the effect he had created.

"Terrible edyercated," said Baldy Davis confiden-

tially to Jersey Clarke. "Travelled a lot, has Frank. He talks German like a trombone player."

The artist, still widely inflated, left the bar and returned with the two old men and Bob the Finisher, and pointed out to them the beauties of his composition on the wall.

Before half an hour had gone Baldy Davis had received payment for the mysterious case of beer from Bob the Finisher; and then he attacked Barney Cue, a big dark headed man with a great, if uncultivated, sense of humour, a kindly man of much enduring strength. Cue capitulated; but the next comer, Joseph Holt, a thin dark man, perpetually sneering, refused even consideration of the claim. Furthermore, and as usual, he committed one of the cardinal sins of a mining camp: he drank alone.

"I say," said Baldy Davis. "You remember the day your cousin Charlie struck chlorides."

"I remember the day he struck chlorides in my claim," replied Joseph Holt sulkily.

"The warden says it was his claim," said Cue.

"I say it's mine and he knows it."

Cue was full of fight, but its evidence was always quiet. "If you say that Charlie Holt keeps another man out of his property," said Barney Cue, "you call him a thief; and he's my friend, and I allow no man to say that of my friend."

"The claim was mine."

"He offered you a half interest in it when you grumbled."

"I wouldn't take half. I should have had all."
"You're a greedy cantankerous cow," said Cue.
"What!"

Baldy Davis interposed.

"No fightin' to-day. The lady 'ull be 'ere directly."
"Give me a brandy, then," said Holt; and as it was served he drank it and went away sulkily.

"He's a mean cow," said Davis.

"I wouldn't drink if he asked me to," said Cue to the unspoken thought rather than to the spoken words.

"That's all right—I wouldn't neither—without presin'; but he doesn't ask yer."

And then they heard the noise of whip cracks, and a black boy driving a pack horse before him drove up and dismounted to catch the pack horse. And then a tall, lithe Australian rode up on a big flea-bitten grey and dismounted and entered the bar room, bringing with him the atmosphere of the great plains. He was very fair, very blue-eyed, very candid—his eyes laughed before his mouth did. He was Charlie Holt, a man of the open road—so young and so strong that he knew not how youthful he was nor the limits of his strength—careless, generous, never tiring—part of the genius of Australia.

He unstrapped from the saddle bow a gunny bag, and having given his instructions to the black boy he entered the bar-room saying cheerfully, "Hullo, Baldy! How are you, Barney?"

"Al! What sort of a trip?"

"Not much. I like that Broken Hill. If there's anything in her she's big."

"But there ain't nothin' in her—here's a speciment—a big iron blow, that's what she is."

"She's two miles long and three chains wide," said Charlie Holt, and Cue supplemented him.

"Iron rides a good horse. I'll have a look at her myself, some day."

Davis served the drinks, and said, "You've been away a fortnight."

"Yes, about that."

"Was the mica show any good?"

"I wouldn't have it on my mind. There's a lot of stuff about a hundred miles from here."

"What is it?"

"Actinolite."

"What's that?" asked Davis, and Cue replied for Holt, "Get a corfin made of it, Baldy, and old Nick won't be able to singe your topknot till half past eternity."

"Asbestos?"

"Something like it. Here's a gold specimen. Got it eighty miles away. Couldn't find any more there, and not enough water to wet a flea's whiskers."

"That cousin of yours was here just now."

"How is he?"

"How is he? As he always is—a cross-grained, cantankerous—that's how he is."

"Poor old Joe."

"Poor old Joe! D'ye know what I'd do with him? Call a roll up and give him twenty-four hours to leave the camp."

"Oh, he's not a bad sort when you know him," said Charlie.

"You're too easy, Charlie, too dead easy."

"Why, ever since yer found the Silver Star he's hated yer."

"Nonsense! Why should he?"

"He likes limelight and money—you've got the honour of pioneerin' the camp—that he doesn't like; and by crums, he don't like you ownin' the best claim on the field and him workin' a little tucker proposition."

"Why, you offered him half, and what did he do?"

"Refused it and said he ought to have the lot."

"Well, it's no use you trying to put me against him, Barney. He's my cousin and he's his mother's legacy to me, too."

"Well, you've got to stand it then. But you're not the first man that fed a lizard an' it turned out to be a snake."

"I'll chance it," replied Charlie Holt laughingly, secure in his strength and his trust in everybody with the wondrous confidence of success won while yet a boy. He mounted the grey.

Davis stopped him with a hand laid on the horse's mane. "Mind ye' come back slippy—there's a lady comin' up by the coach."

"What for? Nurse or barmaid?"

"Barmaid."

"I'll be along. Why, the only woman likely to come is a hard-faced woman of fifty."

"I s'pose so," said Davis. "But it 'ull be a skirt, an' it takes a skirt to make a place look homelike."

"So long," said Charlie Holt, and rode away.

"Over the river," said Baldy Davis, proudly believing that he was speaking French; but Bob the Finisher called him to duty.

"Pannikin's empty!" cried Bob the Finisher.

CHAPTER III.

EMBARRASSED by the noise, Alice stood in the centre of the Apollyon bar-room, while Baldy Davis made himself known.

"Mr. Davis, Miss."

"A beauty!" said Barney Cue in a loud stage aside. "She's a world beater."

"Davis is better than he looks, Miss," said Buck Crawford.

"The luck's better, Miss. I thought that old crow eater at the registry office in Adelaide 'ud send up a lady about fifty; and here you are like a two-year-old."

Buck resumed the introduction.

"And this is Barney Cue, Miss; and this is Jersey Clarke."

Cue shook hands without looking at her, so nervous was he, and saying, "Er! Ah! Hum!" he went back again.

"Bless you, Miss. I hope you will live for ever," said Jersey.

"How kind you are, even before you know me."

Bob the Finisher joined the group, but not for an introduction,

"Pannikin's empty," said he, and Alice asked who he was.

"Bob the Finisher."

"The Finisher?"

"We call him that—he's the undertaker for Silver Star."

"Death here, where all the men seem so strong?"

"Death's hardfaced enough to come into this bar, Miss," said Crawford; "and it takes pluck for a Jimmy Woodser to do that."

"A Jimmy Woodser is a cove that drinks with the flies, Miss," explained Baldy Davis.

"Dry up," said Jersey Clarke. "That ain't the talk for beauty."

Alice turned to Davis. "Will you ask the housekeeper to show me to my room?"

"Housekeeper!" said Buck, and turned away.

"Why, she don't know," said Clarke. "Tell her, Baldy."

"Well, what do I say? She's out now, Miss. If you don't mind me showin' you."

"Thank you, and"—she stopped as the cadaverous sign painter—his vanity hurt by the unintentional slight put upon him—introduced himself.

"Frank the Artist, Miss."

"An artist, here?"

"Yes, Miss. I wrote that."

"That! Oh!" She looked at the calico sign for the first time—"The first woman on the Field. W-e-l-k-u-m to Silver Star." "Oh!" and she laughed at the spelling.

"There, y'see," said Buck, "she's taking it in good part."

"I'm glad you're takin' it right, Miss."

"Taking what right?"

"The first woman on the Field."

"Oh, but that is a joke—it must be a joke."

"Why, Miss?"

"Isn't it all a joke? Isn't the spelling a joke?"

"I told him the 'k' was wrong, first go off," said Frank the Artist disgustedly, and left the hearing of further adverse criticism.

"Then it is not a joke," persisted Alice. "You mean that there is not another woman on the field?"

She had addressed Buck Crawford; and he replied gravely: "That's it, Miss."

"Oh! I must go back at once."

Baldy Davis spoke deprecatingly. "It's a good camp, Miss, except for the cursed drink"; but she stopped him, and demanded of the coachdriver the reason why he had not told her.

"I didn't think, Miss; and you're better alone here than there."

"An' there's no coach for two days," supplemented Davis.

"I return then."

"Oh, come now, Miss."

"Mr. Crawford, could I stay here separated from decent women and all refinements? No! Better the struggle in the city again."

"You can't get away for two days, Miss."

"Give me some work to do then."

"That's it; work's the thing to make yer fight trouble. There's no labels to the bottles; but that don't matter. It's all the same tanglefoot. Charge 'em a bob a drink."

"I'll work hard to pay you back the expense of bringing me here, Mr. Davis."

"Don't fret. A smile 'ud pay us for a year," said Crawford; and, uneasily, he added to Davis, "Let's clear out."

Davis went to the bar-room door with him, and then advised: "Get Charlie Holt. He'll persuade her."

"Why, won't I do as well?"

"Y' can drive six horses, Buck, but y' can't wheedle a woman. So long, Miss."

"We'll try Charlie with it, then. So long, Miss," said Crawford in his turn; and the other men followed them and left Alice Power alone except for the old derelict of the tracks and present bookkeeper at the Apollyon Hotel—Robert Sands. She did not see him, and, for the first time a full knowledge of her situation came to her. The sense of loneliness depressed her, and she covered her face with her hands, and, leaning against the bar counter, broke down in tears.

Sands placed the dog-eared ledger on the table, and came to her. "Why? What? This will never do—my dear, my dear. Don't cry."

"I w-w-wasn't c-c-crying."

"Weren't you? Then it was my mistake—my mistake,"

"It—it wasn't your mistake. I *was* crying."

"Were you, then? Well, I thought so, but I didn't like to insist."

"I suppose I am a fool to think so deeply of my position when you are all so kind."

"And you intend to return?"

"Yes."

"My dear, I am an old man. I may speak to you?"

"Yes."

"Do not think too much of the conventions; they are but the shadow of decency, and not its substance. You are afraid here because all the little furnishings of your world are absent—the policeman and the tram-car and the suburban villa are not here, and you are afraid?"

"But there is not another woman for fifty miles."

"But these are white men—the pick of all Australia. You are safer here than in the cities. The city is full of temptations—poverty and competition and indecent proximity breed them. I have felt evil come to me through their presence."

"You!"

"I! One day I may tell you all; for I am old, and age feels no shame—the shame that must not come to you. Do not return. Here is no poverty to tempt—here is the strength that respects weakness."

"Oh! I cannot stay."

"Think of it. You have a day or more for consideration."

"I will."

Bob the Finisher appeared at the door with the usual "Pannikin *empty*."

"Don't bother the lady," said Sands. "I'll get it."

"No," said Alice. "It's my work."

But Bob the Finisher, indignant at the delay, had advanced to the bar-counter; and, seeing him closer, Sands said, "He's had enough already."

Alice replaced the bottle on the shelf. "If that is so, he will have no more."

"Wot?" said the staggered and staggering undertaker. "Wot! No more!"

"None—not a drop."

Bob the Finisher gasped. "Wot? Wot? Well, I'll see to this. I will that," and he went off grumbling.

"You've done an illegal act, Miss," said Sands, laughing.

"But how?"

"Acting in restraint of trade. You'll ruin Mr. Davis if you stay here for long."

"Another reason why I go south-west again, Mr. Sands."

"Let the day decide, and don't cry any more, my dear."

He took up his books and went to an inner room, as Frank the Artist entered from the street. He looked around, saw no man, and rubbed his hands anticipatively.

"Started work, Miss?"

"Yes."

"I'll have a rum."

"Is this the bottle?"

"Yes, Miss."

"A shilling, please."

"I don't pay, Miss. I'm Frank the Artist."

"Mr. Davis gave me no such instructions. You must pay."

"But it's for the good of the 'ouse."

"I obey orders," said Alice, as she replaced the bottle on the shelf. The artist was about to object, but his expostulations were cut short by the entrance of Joseph Holt—his thin, dark face more malevolent, although as he saw the lady, the expression of it changed its mere cruelty to that of a more cruel desire.

"What! the new girl. My colonial, you're a beauty, all right. Here, Miss, you mustn't work. There's cattle to do that. Hey, Frank!"

"I ain't cattle."

"But you're an artist, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Then go an' fill the waterbag. Do as I tell you," and he added, speaking to him aside, "and don't hurry back an' I'll give you half a quid."

Frank took the waterbag; and, grumbling, left the bar; and Joseph Holt, with that impudent familiarity which most women he had besieged up to then accepted as the easy manner of the man of the world, placed his whip on the counter and leaned on it.

"You're the new girl?"

"Yes," replied Alice, coldly, instinctively disliking him.

"What's your name?"

"Power."

"An' glory, too, I reckon. My name's Joe Holt. Give me a whisky. No water—I take a chaser. My word! you're a nice-looking piecey. Eh! you don't talk. Look here! I've got one of the best claims on the field, and I'm going to have the very best pretty quick. Savee!"

"I hear."

"Well, you're a pretty girl, and you ought to be a sensible girl, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a sensible girl shouldn't be standoffish with a man who'll soon be mining a foot of ore worth three hundred pound a ton."

"Why not?"

As if it were a challenge, he seized her hands. "Why not? You mock-modest Miss."

"Let me go," she said, struggling to withdraw her hands. He laughed cruelly at her agitation. "A little baggage like you, coming to a field where there hasn't been a white woman before, pretending you don't know what a kiss is."

"You are hurting me—let me go."

"I know. You're cheekier than the cheeky ones, once a man gets to know you."

"You brute. I'll tell Mr. Davis."

He laughed again. "That old bandicoot! 'Ere! Give me a kiss."

"Oh, will no one help me?"

"Dashed good play-actin', I call it. There!"

He kissed her and released her as Charlie Holt entered

the bar-room, to see Alice take the whip from the counter and slash her insulter's face with it.

"Damn you!" shrieked Joseph Holt, mad with the pain. "You little fraud!"

He rushed at her, and met instead Charlie Holt, who struck him on the jaw and dropped him in his tracks.

"The brute! The brute!" said Alice. "He insulted me!"

Charlie Holt looked at the man on the ground.

"Get up," he said. "Take some more if you want it."

Joseph Holt rose with his hand to his livid face with the crimson wale across it.

"Not now," he said; "not now! By God, I'll never forgive either of you!"

"Go."

"I'll go." He took up his whip. "You've been away to see a new mine."

"Yes. The Broken Hill. What's that to you?"

"You'll see. I've got a surprise for you. You'll see"; and, cursing them both, the self-styled Bad Man of Silver Star left them.

"I'm sorry," said Charlie Holt, haltingly.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you!"

"For nothing, Miss. You defended yourself."

"I don't know how I did it. I hope I haven't hurt him much."

"Don't fear. He'll be all right again in half an hour."

"You are Mister *Charlie* Holt?"

"Yes—who told you? . . . Why, it's the girl from Unley."

"So it is! I've been waiting for you to recognise me."

"Do you remember that day?"

"Yes."

"But didn't you know me by name?"

"I had forgotten the name. I only heard it once, you know; but Mr. Crawford told me—he's very fond of you."

"He's my best friend."

"He's a good man, and he says you are, too."

"Does he?"

"Yes. He said, 'Charlie Holt's as good as gold.' Was that your cousin?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Crawford said he had zinc in him."

Charlie Holt laughed. "He means that Joe's low-grade and refractory. Poor old, cross-grained Joe."

"He's a bad man—a bad man!" said Alice vehemently. "Oh! my mind is made up now. I go back to-morrow."

"What! Leave Silver Star!"

"Yes. I must go."

"Why should you? We may be rough here, but we are straight. Not quite respectable, but we respect good women."

"But—alone here! You do not know how conventions make up a woman's world; and to be here with conventional civilisation absent is to be ship-wrecked in the centre of a great sea."

"I understand."

"And then this man—this insult!"

"He is but one. If you were to tell that story, he would be tarred and feathered—perhaps killed."

"Oh! I shall not tell."

"Tell me, how did you come to be engaged here?"

"My mother died a year ago. I lived with my aunt. Poor woman, she has daughters of her own, and her love for them left no affection for me."

"I can understand."

"At last I tried to find work—work in a city."

"Hard for the friendless and the good."

"I was insulted there in ways that make my cheeks burn when I think. Then a registry-office keeper told me of work as a companion here."

"A companion?"

"Yes, to a lady; and the salary tempted me. I was told that the salary was enough to make up for the loneliness of a small country township."

"And then you came here and saw that artistic production?"

He pointed to the calico sign and laughed.

"Oh! How can you laugh?"

"Isn't it something to laugh at? I mean the accidental deception; and then the rude awakening at the hands of a backblock artist."

"But the deception is cruel."

"Look at me. Do you think you can trust me?"

As she looked at him for the moment, and looked away, Bob the Finisher tried again. "Pannikin

empty!" said he; but he was a voice crying in the wilderness.

"Yes," said Alice softly, "I could trust you—you are a good man."

"I wish I were better, for your sake. Now, we're to be brother and sister. I'm brother Charlie. Who are you?"

"I'm sister Alice."

"Pannikin *empty*," cried Bob the Finisher impatiently.

"Only one man has insulted you, and you have punished him. All your humiliations have been at the hands of women; all the deception of you was done by a woman. Now, try and trust a man."

"Whom?"

"Davis."

"Yes—he's good."

"Buck Crawford!"

"Yes, he's a love of a man."

"Here—is he a brother, too?"

"I suppose so."

"But I'm to be the only brother."

"Well, they shall be uncles."

"Oh!" said Bob the Finisher, varying the formula in his disgust, "Pannikin's bone-dry."

"Barney Cue and Jersey Clarke?" proceeded Charlie Holt, deaf to the existence of the undertaker.

"I suppose they are all right. And there's the kindest of them all—that new bookkeeper, Mr. Sands."

"He only came to-day. And you like him?"

"Yes, the gentle kindly old man, as friendless here as I."

"As you were, you mean. Well, I'll be *his* friend, too."

Bob the Finisher came between them. Patience had been a long grey pain to him, and now patience was dead.

"I tell yer me blessed pannikin's empty."

Alice roused herself, saying: "I'm so sorry, Mister—er—Mister Finisher,"

She took the pannikin, filled it with water, and resumed conversation with Charlie Holt. Bob the Finisher had been searching in the fluffy accumulations of his pockets for a match, and accepted the pannikin and its contents in good faith.

"You will stay?" asked Charlie Holt again.

"I cannot tell you. I must think."

"I hope she don't," muttered Bob the Finisher, going up the bar-room to his lounge under the verandah. "Why, me pannikin 'ud always be empty."

Buck Crawford and Baldy Davis joined Charlie Holt at the bar; and Davis asked the burning question of the lady—as he had already styled her in his mind.

"Well, now, lady, you're goin' to stay."

"You will stay, sister Alice?"

"H'lo," said Buck Crawford, as if his friend had annoyed him. "You're in a hurry to get related."

"I think I must go back, brother Charlie."

"Brother Charlie! Thunder me blind!" said Baldy Davis. "Brother Charlie!"

"That ain't fair, Miss," Buck Crawford expostulated. "I druv you up."

"Well, uncle Buck, you shall drive me down again."

"Oh, no! No! Stay!"

"Sooner'n that, Miss," said Buck Crawford, "call Charlie anythin' you like."

It was at this moment that Bob the Finisher drank the contents of his pannikin, found that foreign element called water, and almost choked over it.

"Why, what's the matter with the Finisher?" asked Davis of the little wild-whiskered old man who entered the bar with the news.

"The lady give 'im water be mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake," said Alice. "I thought he wanted it."

"Miss," said Buck Crawford, solemnly, "you might have killed the man."

"Oh! What have I done?"

Davis laughed again. "You very near killed the undertaker, Miss. Why, we might have had nobody left to bury us."

"Give him that nip," said Buck Crawford, passing his own drink to the old man, and he'll be good again."

"Say you'll stay," pleaded Charlie Holt again; but the arrival of Barney Cue and Jersey Clarke and other men prevented a reply just then. They entered excitedly, Cue first and holding official blue papers in his hand.

"Charlie! see that?" he said. "While you were away at Broken Hill, that dingo cousin of yours"—

"Joe?"

"Yes, that sleepin' lizard, Joe."

"What's he done?" asked Davis.

"Jumped the Silver Star!"

"Jumped my claim?"

"Well—applied for forfeiture."

"I knew there was zinc in him," said Buck.

Charlie Holt was incredulous. "I can't believe it. The man I nursed when he was sick—the man my mother treated as if he were her son. To do this dirty thing. I'll not believe it."

"It's gospel truth," said Jersey Clarke. "He's lower'n a bandicoot."

"He's the lowest thing in trousers," said Barney Cue.

Charlie Holt sat at the table as if dumbfounded, and said at last: "Mates, you know how we regard a jumper, even when he's a stranger. A mean thing that cannot find a slug for himself, and crawls like a camp follower after us to steal the thing he is not strong enough to take openly. But this man has been my brother. We have drunk from the same billycan, eaten from the same tin of meat, shared the last bread and salt. And to find this takes the fight out of me."

"It ain't took the fight out o' me," said Cue. "You'll battle this through before the warden."

"You shall fight!" said Alice, roused by the story of the treachery of the man who had insulted her. "You shall fight, I say, and I will help you."

"You will help me?"

"Yes, against your enemy and mine—for he is mine, too."

"But you are going away?"

"No! I have no doubts now. I stay!"

"Drinks for everybody," said Baldy Davis, delightedly. "I'll send for a girl to keep you company Miss."

"The Lady of the Silver Star!" cried Charlie Holt, lifting his glass.

"I'd drink that toast," cried Buck Crawford, "if I had to drink it in Rough on Rats."

CHAPTER IV.

A MONTH had altered Silver Star. Through the ever-open door of the Apollyon the lounge at the bar could see a new saloon. Where Bob the Finisher had gazed through the golden haze of alcohol on unbroken mulga and sapless saltbush, was now a painfully new building of galvanised iron, with a wondrous sign-board breaking the monotony of the slope of its roof—a sign-board from the brush of Frank the Artist—for, though most other men knew better, Frank the Artist's spelling governed all the signs on Silver Star—bearing this legend :—

The DENVER CITY HOTEL.

By

JHON SMITH.

LISENSE to RETALE FIMENTD
AND SPIRITS LIQUARS.

Baldy Davis had lived up to Silver Star's possession of the "Lady." The Apollyon bar-room ached with mirrors—mirrors everywhere, behind the bar, and in front of it, and over the door, and hiding some of the stencilled warnings as to "stowing away from boilers"

on the fragments of the beer cases which had been used in the building of the residential portion of the house. These mirrors were a great comfort to the new barmaid, Maudie Timms, imported as a companion for the Lady, and dismally failing in that respect; but imported also as a barmaid to relieve the Lady of drudgery, and fairly successful in that—seeing that the men who paid for the drinks did most of the work of their own services. And all that month, and almost unconsciously, Alice Power and Charlie Holt walked into love, both keeping step for step and linking fingers—like frightened children in unlighted rooms.

Buck Crawford, only an hour arrived from Silverton, sat talking in the bar-room with Baldy Davis, a chastened Baldy now, regularly washed and laundried and shaven, and forced by the presence of the Lady to wear a whole set of suspenders, and not merely half a pair.

Maudie Timms, an impudent girl of twenty-three, dressed in the redingote and elaborate skirt and the exaggerated bustle of the early eighties—walked up and down behind the bar, her new boots squeaking, her bustle making sounds like a bamboo grove creaking in a gale. Every attitude spoke of enormous vanity and self-consciousness. She was a red-haired, muddy-skinned, muddy-eyed, densely-freckled girl, and exaggerated her air of ugly pertness with the straight fringe of the larrikinness, clipped by scissors that never knew compromise, but went unswervingly round the head from right to left. She moved about the bar perfunctorily, dusting bottles and looking at herself in every mirror she passed, a red-haired Narcissus—her self-admiration a disease.

"And how's the Lady?" asked Buck.

"Pretty as a pitcher, but she ain't a success in business."

"Too much conscience, ain't she?"

"She near rooned the business. Soon as a man got a few drinks in she wouldn't give him any more, Close up rooned the trade."

"Made 'em take to the water-bag?"

"She got 'em on to tea and sugar. She'd 'ave 'ad them all down on their marrer bones singin' hymns in another week. Why, she's converted Jersey Clarke and Barney Cue."

"She did more'n that."

"How?"

"Converted the hardest case on the Barrier."

"Who's that?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. D'ye think I ain't seen you shirkin' your liquor?"

"Well, I"——

"So do I. We all do—we're all the better for knowin' her."

"Except Joe Holt. He's boozin' alone now, always."

"He was always an ugly swine," said Buck; "but he's worse now. The man that drinks alone is on the way to the gallows."

"Well, the Lady would have rooned the trade only for the new girl. She's all right—she's got no conscience at all."

"That's the one I brought up four trips ago."

“ Yes.”

“ She gave me more trouble that coach than a waggon-load of monkeys.”

“ She’s all right in the bar, anyway ; an’ she never gives no change—says it’s against her principles.”

Buck Crawford watched the girl. “ She seems mighty struck on herself.”

“ She walks up and down like that all day when she ain’t serving drinks, an’ when she is she looks at herself in the blokes’ eyes.”

“ There’s only two kinds of girls,” said Buck, out of the depth of his considerable experience ; “ exceptin’ the Lady, of course ; and one kind is eye-rollers and the other kind is dimplers.”

He stopped to watch Maudie smirking at herself in a mirror she had hitherto neglected, and concluded, “ This one is a eye-roller.”

Maudie came from behind the bar, took certain drinking glasses from the table, and strutted back to her place behind the counter. Davis watched her with a disgust that was quite personal, and was tempered only by his admiration of her unscrupulous successes in business.

He led the way to the outside world.

Left to herself, Maudie looked at herself without ceasing, and found the contemplation so beautiful that she burst into song, singing in a voice derived from the mother of all flies : “ By the blue Hallsayshun—mountains.” The bustle wandered, and she settled it decisively in its place southerly, and sang on, with little memory and much contempt for the words. The song had either promoted or been suggested by tender

memories of Charlie Holt, and love and hatred made her talk aloud.

“ Ain’t he a nice bloke, that Charlie ‘Olt ? An’ that rich, an’ beautiful eyes. What’s the matter with me ? He only sees that Alice Power. Lady o’ the Silver Star ! Oooh, wouldn’t I like to see ‘er took down—the stuck-up cat ! Oooh ! my word, ‘ere he is.”

A wrench at the bustle, a patting of the fringe, a sucking of the lips to make them redder, and Maudie Timms was ready to receive cavalry.

Charlie Holt came in happily ; for he was to see Miss Power. Perhaps some refraction of the rays came back to Maudie Timms, and encouraged her.

“ Good morning, Miss Timms.”

“ Good mornin’ ! ‘Ow did the jumpin’ oase go ? ”

“ I’ve just left the court. I won it.”

“ Good on you.”

“ Has Miss Power gone out yet ? ”

She answered him shortly, seeing what interest had made him so happy that day. “ I ain’t seen her ”—a statement which not only showed Maudie Timms’ acceptance of Alice Power as a rival, but had the additional merit of being untrue.

Charlie Holt felt the antipathy and moved towards the door. “ She may be walking,” he said.

“ Wait a bit—stop as long as you useter.”

“ I ”——

“ Ole Stick-In-The-Mud ”—’twas thus she indicated that great and good man, her employer, Baldy Davis—“ he won’t call me a good business girl if you don’t buy nothin’.”

"I forgot," said Charlie, feeling the shame of a detected thief.

"Mustn't take a shingle off the roof, y'know, tho' they ain't shingles here. It's ten-foot galvanised iron, aint it? He! he! he!"

Charlie Holt answered the tremendous joke with an order. "I'll take a cigar," he said.

Maudie, in taking the box of cigars from a shelf, stopped to look at herself as usual.

"D'ye think I've a nice figger?" she asked him, with heavy coquetry.

"Y-yes," replied the very embarrassed Charlie, "I think so."

"Go over to the table an' I'll bring the cigar to you," said Maudie Timms, her muddy eyes pleading.

"I really can't stay long."

"Well—a minute."

He sat at the table unwillingly; and Maudie brought him the cigar, kissed the band, and presented it to him.

"There! That's a nice one. I picked it fer yer."

"Thanks! Sorry I haven't any silver."

"Oh, never mind the bob," said Maudie, for love makes us generous, even if it only be generosity with other people's goods.

"I never run a bar account, thank you," said Charlie Holt, stiffly, hesitating between his desire to get away and positive rudeness.

"My word! Ain't he cold?" said Maudie to herself, and then unmasked another battery with brutal directness, there being no half-measures in Maudie Timms,

"D'ye like my fringe?"

" Really—I—yes, I think I do," replied the unhappy young man, for who so unhappy as he who listens to the love-talk of the lady who is not wanted ?

She attempted to sit down by him, and the shocking contraption of steel and whalebone, which made an emu of her, prevented her arriving within a foot of the seat.

Maudie treated the situation with perfect sang-froid.

" Excuse me," she said ; " me himprover."

She rose, pushed it aside, and held it aside, and so sat down, and the improver rose on the off side from Charlie Holt, ballooning to its limit.

" D'ye know where I got this dress ? " asked Maudie of the bashful one.

" No."

" D'ye like it ? All the seams is piped."

" It's a very nice dress."

" It come all the way from Sydney."

" A long way ! "

" D'ye know what it cost ? "

" No " ; and as he spoke, he looked away, as if to watch for the Lady.

" Y'd never guess. Pipin', linin', an' makin', three pound twelve an' six, an' the bustle was six an' eleven three farthin's—say seven shillin's, becoss y' don't get the farthin' change. They on'y put it on for guiver."

" For what ? "

" Guiver ! Skite ! Oh ! you know—kid."

" I see. You'll excuse me ; I must go."

" Y' ain't heard a word I said. Ye're always thinkin' of her."

The storm gathered; he heard the thunder in her voice—the thunder that goes before the rain.

“Of whom?”

“The Lady of the Silver Star! Lady, indeed! If she’s a lady, where d’y get yer women?”

Charlie rose. “Miss Power is my friend. I will not hear her spoken of slightingly.”

“There! I’ve angered yer. I apologise.”

“It doesn’t matter; but never mind. I must go.”

“Well,” said Maudie, “get yer change first.”

He followed her to the bar counter; she took notes and silver from the till, and pushed them towards him without counting.

“Your change, Mr. ’Olt.”

Charlie Holt took up the change and laid it down again.

“You’ve made a mistake. This is change for a five-pound note. I gave you a pound note only.

“It was a fiver.”

“Pardon me, Miss Timms, it was one.”

“Nev’ mind. Take it with—with—my love.”

“What! Theft! How dare you?”

“Davis won’t know.”

Sternly he pushed back the notes, and took up the silver, saying: “Never dare insult the manhood of this camp again, or Davis *shall* know,” and left the bar, indignant at the insult implied.

Maudie took up the change slowly and with a shaking hand.

“Turned down! Turned down cold, Oh! I ’ate

him ! I 'ate him. No ! I love 'im, the beautiful bloke that wouldn't be squared. Oh, my lady, let me get a charnce, on'y a charnce, an' I'll kill you. He watched for her. He never looked at me dress."

She struck the billowing "improver," and said : " Oh, d—the bustle," and then, with a final wail of agony she cried : " He turned me down, turned me down cold," and broke into loud sobbing.

CHAPTER V.

WHILE she bellowed with her head on her arms, Joseph Holt came in and called her impatiently to duty.

"Here! Whisky."

"O-o-oh, o-o-oh!" yelled Maudie.

"Here! Attend to your business."

"I won't, I won't. I don't care."

"You're making your fringe turn up."

At that dreadful information Maudie stopped crying and sniffed.

"So things are not going well with you, Redhead?"

"No, they ain't—there!"

"They're not coming my way either. I lost the jumping case."

"So he told me."

"Who?"

"'Olt, your cousin. O-oh, o-oh, o-oh, me heart's broke. He's got eyes on'y for her."

"For her? For Alice Power?"

"Yes! O-oh, d— her! There!"

"D— him, too."

"Oh, it ain't him. He's a toff—he is. It's her, the cat!"

"It's him, too, I tell you. Give me a whisky."

She rose wearily and gave him the bottle and glass as if life were indeed now over; and he drank the spirit moodily, and talked again like a man so stung by injustice that he found silence impossible.

"Yes, the warden gave it against me. He said it wasn't a genuwine jump. Give me another, d—— him! I'll show him."

"Oh, yes; you'll do a lot with a big stick and a basket er eggs."

"I'll lick 'em all! I'll beat three cartloads of water out of Charlie Holt yet."

"Why—what's he done? The mine was his."

"It wasn't. It should be mine."

Maudie had become as cheeky as a minah again, and she was defending the absent and the beloved as she said: "Oh, everything should ha' been yours, except the waxworks and the equator."

"Oh! I know you. You're struck on my cousin; and that's why you hate Alice Power."

"What if I do? Wouldn't you? With her high an' mighty ways! She—the Lady of the Silver Star, an' me—Baldy Davis's common barmaid. Oh, I 'ate her! An' he! He on'y thinks of her; an' he never l-l-looked at me, an' I got this dress for him. Three pound twelve an' six. Oh! oh! an' the bussel hextra!"

"I hate her, too, Maudie—hate her and love her—but I hate him all through. You want him and I want her."

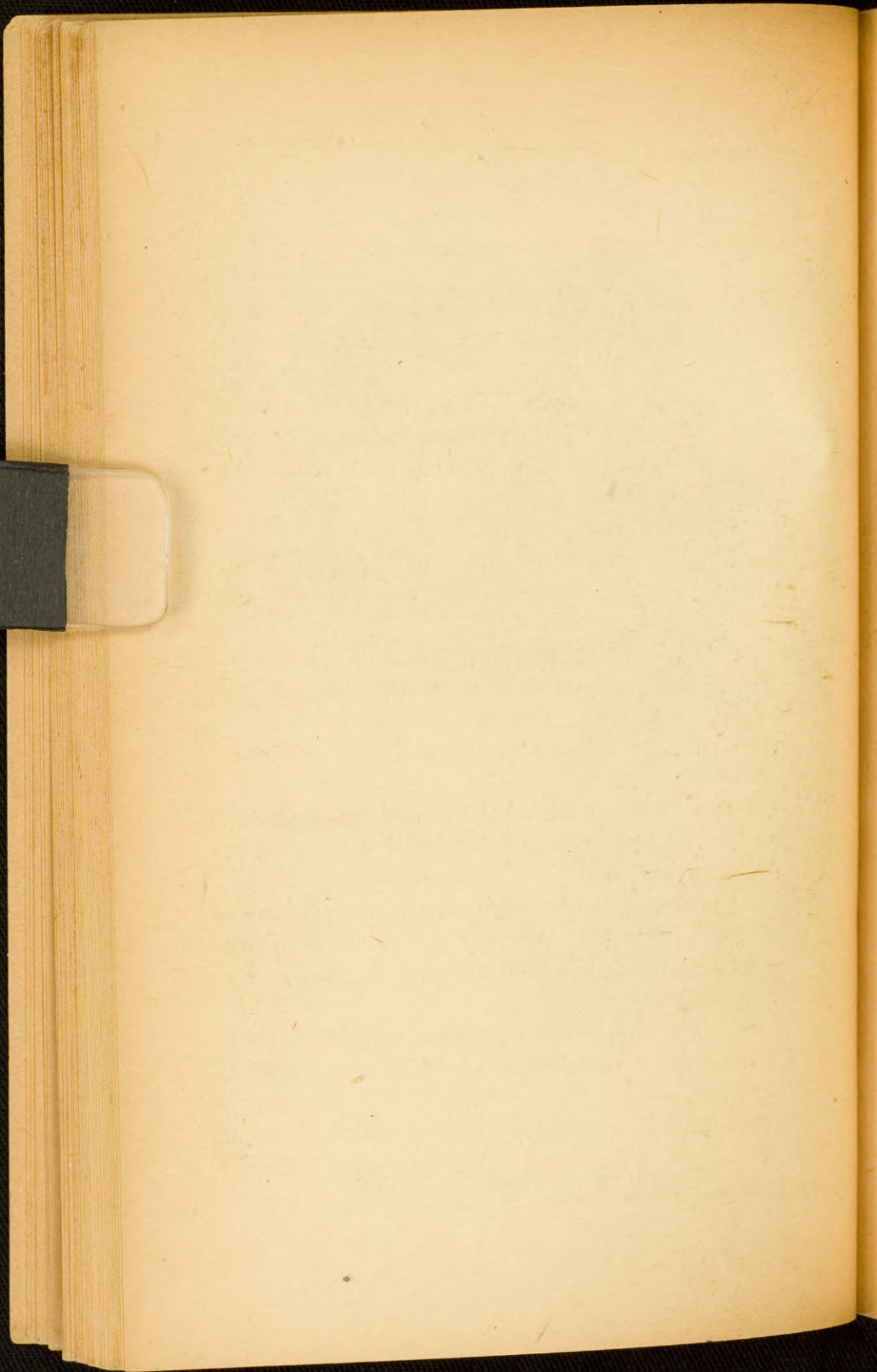
"Yes! Yes!"

"I've put the tale about at the Native Silver, over the



"I've put the tale about over the road."
The Silver Star.

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road, about her being flighty—not too particular, you know.”

“Yes. I heard it. That’s the game that’ll put him against her. He’s that proud; and I might have a chance yet.”

“Give me another whisky. Of course you’ll have a chance. D—— him! If I can’t get his mine I’ll get his girl. She struck me with a whip. I’ll make her crawl to me like a beaten dog.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I like to see it?”

“See it? You will if you live long enough. Now, don’t forget—drop the hint about her whenever you get the chance.”

“I will—I’ll just drop across the road to Sarah Reed. She’ll let ’em all know—talks in her sleep, she does.”

“All right. I’ll wait. There’s a pound note.”

“No change,” says Maudie, grown suddenly business-like.

“My troubles! Give me another,” said Joseph Holt; and he took up the bottle and carried it to the table, and there seated himself.

Maudie was almost comforted, at any rate, sufficiently comforted to admire her loveliness in one of the many mirrors, and was happy at the prospect of revenge by slander.

“Oh! won’t it be great? I’ll take her down a peg or two. He’ll turn me down cold, an’ think of—her, eh? We’ll see, we’ll see.”

She left the bar-room, and crossed the road to deliver wholesale poisons, which Sarah Reed would distribute by noisy and continuous retail.

Said Joe Holt, drinking moodily at the table : " To beat them both at the one stroke. My oath, that's the game ! Where's that fraud, Frank the Artist ? I can't wait much longer."

And Frank the Artist, ten minutes later, entered tardily to his cue.

" Well, what about it ? "

" A nip first," he said.

Joseph Holt gave him the bottle. " Don't eat it," he said.

" That's good," said the derelict. " It makes a man of me."

" Then it can do more than your father did. Well, has that old sundowner really got a fourteenth in Broken Hill ? "

" Yes, he has got it all right. He says a cove took him down for eighty pound for it."

" And he doesn't know the value of it ? "

" I think he'd sell it for twenty ; an' it's a certainty he'd sell it for fifty."

" And you told him I was here, and a likely buyer ? "

" Yes, he was trying to sell it at the Native Silver, an' nobody 'ud buy it."

" Well, you go off and shepherd him here. See nobody else gets the offer."

Frank the Artist lingered ; and the Bad Man of the camp said impatiently, " Go on. What are you waiting for ? "

" A nip."

Take it. One of these days it will nip you in two."

Frank the Artist drank, and went away wiping his mouth.

Joseph Holt laughed, and said to himself: "That Broken Hill has got a chance, and the old sundowner doesn't know it. Tichborne was right: 'Them as has plenty o' money an' no brains was meant for them as has plenty o' brains and no money.' Some clever man must benefit by every fool."

He rose suddenly as Alice Power came in from walking. To her ill-concealed aversion he opposed a not ungraceful bow and an exaggerated politeness.

"The Lady of the Silver Star—greetings from the Bad Man of the Field."

She felt that she must say something, and bade him "Good morning"; and took refuge behind the counter.

Joseph Holt followed, carrying the bottle. "There's the whisky," he said, "or what's left of it."

"Thank you."

"Thank you!—as if you were thanking a personal devil. Oh, you white cold beauty. I'd like to bring you to heel—to make you tremble at my step, as if you were a gin."

"Dare to talk to me like that again, and I'll call for Mr. Davis."

"Poor old Baldy. I'm not afraid."

"Or for your cousin."

"Don't remind me that he struck me. Don't remind me that you lashed my face with my own whip."

"Did you not deserve it? Oh, why don't you leave this happy little camp, and go."

"Leave my beautiful cousin in possession of the field

—the undisputed owner of claim and girl. No! I've not given up yet."

"I would spare you; but you make me tell you how I loathe you."

"A woman can be made to do anything by a man. I'll make you love me yet."

"If you knew how abhorrent to me your presence is—how I loathe you as I loathe evil."

"Aye, and I am evil. Evil you shall find me—and at the last you shall make evil your good."

Sands appeared at the door; and, with the sight of him, Alice found a new courage.

"Do you want me to publicly shame you?" she said. "Another word, and I appeal to that old man, and through him to every straight man in the camp."

Joseph Holt knew that it wouldn't suit his plans to annoy Sands; and he replied, sulkily, as if beaten. "There is no need. I take this new defeat as I took the first."

He returned to the table as Sands came down to the bar; and Alice spoke to him, glad of the distraction. "Walking early, Mr. Sands?"

"Yes, a long walk, too, it was, my dear." He spoke as if physical weakness had exaggerated the usual sadness of his mental outlook. "The day was very fine—the world seems more beautiful to them who are about to leave it."

"Don't talk so, Mr. Sands. How could we do without you?"

"Everybody can be done without, my dear."

Joseph Holt called to him, "Are you busy, Sands?"

"No, Mr. Holt; no. Do you want me?"

"Yes—a bit of business."

"Certainly, Mr. Holt. Excuse me, Miss Alice"; and Sands went to the table, and seated himself by the Bad Man of the Field.

Alice, counting the money in the till, looked at her *bete noire* suspiciously, and listened.

"What was it, Mr. Holt?" began Sands.

"Just this. Frank the Artist tells me you told him that you have a little interest in a claim at the Broken Hill."

Sands replied eagerly, "It is all the Broken Hill. I have a fourteenth of it. I want to sell it."

"Well, I'd like to do you a good turn," said Holt, benevolent as a crocodile wanting to do a good turn to the retriever who has come from the country for the bathing season.

Alice stopped suddenly in the work of counting, all her suspicions on fire.

The benevolence was too much even for the simple old man, who asked his intended benefactor, "Why?"

"Oh, well, you know," replied Joseph, rather puzzled to explain a good turn. "I s'pose you want it?"

"I want nothing more in this world for myself; but for somebody else—yes."

"Well, what d'ye want for it—a tenner?"

"It would not be worth selling it for that. I paid eighty pounds for it."

"More fool you. You'll never see it again."

"What would you give me, then?"

"Twenty pounds."

“ If it’s worth anything, its worth more than that. I suppose I’ll never get what I paid for it.”

“ It isn’t worth it. Look here, say thirty.”

“ It would be of such little use to the one I wish to remember. I must have fifty pounds ; and little it is for my purpose.”

“ Well, what you do with it is your funeral. Say forty-five.”

“ Make it fifty pounds.”

“ Forty-seven ten—there. That’s the limit. Take it or leave it.”

The old man sighed. “ I must consent. Well, there is great goodwill, if the gift be little.”

“ I’ll give you the dollars now, if you’ve got a transfer.”

“ I have my receipt.”

“ I’ve got a blank transfer here, I think.” He searched his pockets as if doubtful of the thing he knew was certain. “ Ah, here we are ! I’ll get the pen and ink.”

He went to the bar counter for the writing materials while Sands read the form of the transfer, slowly and shortsightedly.

“ Pen and ink,” said Joseph Holt to Alice.

She pointed to it. “ If you have a spark of manliness in you, be merciful to that old man.”

“ Merciful ! I’m the mug this trip. He’s getting forty-seven ten for a share in an iron hill.”

He returned to the table, and while he wrote Alice made a dozen movements as if to interfere, then hesitated and did nothing. Joseph Holt read the transfer aloud as he wrote ; and Alice listened intently.

“ I, Robert Sands, of Silver Star, in the Colony of New South Wales, hereby transfer all my right, title and interest in and to one-fourteenth undivided share or interest in the Broken Hill ’ ”——

“ The Broken Hill,” thought Alice. “ Charlie Holt told me of it.”

“ — ‘ in the Broken Hill mineral leases Nos. 46, 49, 50, 51, 52, 58 and 59, comprising the Broken Hill Blocks 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16, in the parish of Picton, County of Yancowinna, Barrier Silverfield, New South Wales.’ ”

“ A fourteenth interest in all that ground must be worth something,” said Alice to herself.

“ Is that right ? ” concluded Joseph Holt.

“ Yes,” replied Sands, “ that’s right.”

“ Who will you transfer to ? ”

“ To your name ? ”

“ H’m, no—better not. You sign the transfer in blank.”

“ As you like.”

“ To blank, in consideration of the sum of forty-seven pounds, ten shillings now paid to me.” And sign there.”

Sands signed his name, and asked : “ Where is the money ? ”

“ Here—notes. There you are.”

And at that moment Alice, siezing her courage, came from behind the bar.

“ I suppose it’s all right,” said the old man. “ When I paid my last eighty pounds for that share I dreamed day dreams.”

"Well," said Joseph, Holt, exultant like most mean natures in the moment of victory. "She's mine."

"She's not!" cried Alice, rushing to the table and seizing the transfer.

As she spoke she crumpled the paper in her hand, opened a button of her bodice, hid the paper, and stood there, swaying a little, breathing more heavily for her own daring, but facing the swindler bravely, with her hand at her breast.

"You thief!" she cried. "You would rob the poor old man."

"Well, it's worthless," shouted Joseph Holt, exultation turned to baffled rage.

"Was that why you bought it? Give him his money, Mr. Sands. Give him his money."

And, lest there should be any doubt of the cancelling of the contract, she gathered notes and gold together, and threw them at Joseph Holt.

"It's transferred to me," he said.

"It's not—it's in blank, and here it will stay until I destroy it."

"Oh! my dear, you've lost the sale," said the old man; "and the money was for you."

"I don't want it. This man is a swindler. Look at his eyes—the eye of a thieving dog detected in his theft. If this is worth a handful of gold, it is worth enough to give you ease for life."

Joseph Holt tried bluster. "I'll have that paper if I tear the clothes off your back to get it. You've stolen that transfer."

"She has not," said Sands. "It is hers. There is your money ; take it. I give the share to her."

Joseph Holt walked to the door, utterly beaten, utterly malevolent. "For the third time you've beaten me," he said. "It will be a bitter reckoning yet for you ; and I'll not let you off a penny of the payment."

And then he went away and left her trembling, now that the necessity for strength had gone.

CHAPTER VI.

"MY dear," said Sands, "have you saved me from folly?"

"I have saved you from a thief!"

"Dear lady. It was for you. It is all I have in the shape of the money or the venture; take it with my love."

"I'll take your love, and keep it; and I'll hold your property safe for you until——"

"Until?"

"Until it proves to be worth nothing or millions."

"All yours, dear girl—all yours."

Half-afraid, he kissed her forehead, but though she flushed she did not draw away.

"God bless you now and always," said Sands, and left her.

"The brute! The thieving brute!" said Alice vehemently; "but it's safe now, and safe it shall stay."

And then she turned happily at the sound of Buck Crawford's honest voice—not an indecisive tone in it.

"Miss," he said, as he shook hands with her; "you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Your coach was late in last night, Mr. Crawford. I didn't see you."

"The day stages are getting longer, and my horses are as weak as cats. You seem as if you were a bit galled, Miss. Been annoyed?"

"That man—Joseph Holt."

"The cross-grained waster! Charlies's as good as gold, but Joe's low grade, and refractory dirt at that." He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "D'ye know, between you an' me an' the gatepost, I believe there's zinc in him."

"He's bad all through. He tried to swindle poor old Mr. Sands. How does such a man get wealth in a clean camp like this? He seems to be hated, yet look at his pretensions of being a leader."

"His cold cheek carries him, Miss. Y' know I told you you always find the smallest kind of 'possum up the biggest kind of tree."

"Mr. Crawford, I'm afraid of that man."

"I'll bet you didn't show it."

"No—but I fear."

"Let me take your fears and bury them, Miss."

"But how?"

At that Buck Crawford looked around nervously, went to the door and looked up and down the street, and returned with a great air of secrecy, holding his cabbage tree hat by the string. He stood by her, silent and shamefaced for a moment; and then said suddenly, "Be Mrs. Crawford."

"Buck! Are you joking?"

"I'm the poorest fun merchant on the Barrier at this minute. Miss, I've loved you ever since you climbed

into my coach at Terowie ; when you were delighted with my team, and the coach, and the track, and the sunlight, and—and—me."

" Oh ! My friend—I——"

" Let me say my say. I see you now sittin' on the box next me, and my six horses gallopin' outer their skins on a down grade, and your face creamy under the plain little straw bonnet, with the velvet ribbon lilac strings."

" Not lilac—mauve."

" Some blue or red they was—under your little chin, and your eyes soft as a child's and honest as a white man's."

" It seems a long time ago."

" It seems as if it happened in another life to me, because I only seem to have lived since I began to know you."

" Oh ! My friend, my friend !"

" Comin' up on the coach that trip your ear got a bit sunburned on the near side. I kep' the sun away on your off side. When I was drivin' I'd look down at you, Alice, an' see that little curl blowin' in the wind ; and there it is now, Alice."

She put the straying lock of hair back into alignment hurriedly, and said : " Oh, dear friend, don't tell me any more."

" I'm pretty well off, if I ain't much to look at, Alice."

" It's the honestest face in the whole world."

" I'd make life for you so that it would never make any

more row for you than a lady walkin' in silk ; an' for God's sake don't say 'No.'"

"Oh ! My friend, it can never be."

"Never ?"

"Never that, always my friend Buck—always my dearest friend."

"It'll have to do, I s'pose. I'd sooner know you a mile off than call the Queen my aunt."

"Dear friend, but you seemed as if you had something on your mind. Was it that that made you so suddenly break the news to me ?"

"I'm sorry I did."

"Sorry because you have done me the honour of the offer of a good man's love. I'm proud of it. But why did you ?"

"Alice, I can call you that ? I'm no snake, but a man. There's only one safe way in anything—that's truth, eh ?"

"Yes—the truth."

"Someone has been scandalising you."

"Me ? Oh !"

"Don't fear—we know—all the boys know. We want to find the party that started it. I say—Joe Holt."

"But why ?"

"Charlie beat him in the jumping case, and he wants revenge through you."

"And I say—Maudie Timms."

"The new barmaid ; then it is both hatred and jealousy."

"Jealousy ? Of me ? For whom ?"

“ For Charlie Holt.”

“ Mr. Holt ! I——”

“ Oh ! don't say a word that isn't all true. You said that to you my face is the honestest in the world—but his is the dearest.”

“ How did you know ? ”

“ When a man loves much he gets the sight of an eagle-hawk. Now—don't blush—next to me there's no man I'd rather see have you. But I think you'll soon have plenty of chances beside him.”

“ What can you mean ? ”

“ You'll see ! You'll see ! I'll go and dig up these dingoes and backbiters. And if the time ever comes, Alice, when you want a friend to die for you, or live for you—which ever is most use—send to yours truly, and never count the cost.”

He left her, not daring longer to trust himself ; and at the street door he spoke to Barney Cue, and Baldy Davis and Jersey Clarke, and other men, who had waited him outside, with a queer suggestion of men awaiting a verdict.

Alice, shaken and sorry, took up a little square of drawn thread work, and drew thread by thread out mechanically, and without interest ; and Jersey Clarke, hat in hand and ill at ease, came to her as if she were a schoolmaster and he an erring boy due for a thrashing. She started suddenly as she saw him, and said : “ How are you, Mr. Clarke ? Won't you sit down ? ”

Clarke balanced himself on the front of a chair, and replied :—

"Pretty well, Miss, thank yer."

"And is the claim looking well?"

"Yes—pretty well—we got ten ton bagged, waitin' for waggons now."

"There's such a lot of loading waiting for the teams, isn't there?"

"Ya-a-airs." He stopped, coughed, cleared his throat, opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again without saying anything. And then, at long last, he spoke:—

"Lady—ya'—ya'—said ya' liked me."

"Yes, and I do."

"Well, about these yarns: we don't b'leeve a word."

"I know. My friends give me courage."

"Well, we has a meetin', chairman an' all reg'lar. I carries it umaniously, as y' might say, 'cepting a clout on the 'ead I gives to Terrible Dick for movin' a amendment. 'There,' ses I, 'that 'll teach yer to reckernise freedom o' speech,' an' I hands him a sockdolager."

"But what was it about?"

"The amendment was to give yer a 'loominated address an' a corfy service: but I ses 'No. A compliment's a compliment,' ses I, 'an' the Lady is my best friend; lechshered me,' I ses, 'till I give up Jimmy 'Ennessy, an' went on to soft stuff.' So we carries it umaniously."

"Carried what?"

"'A compliment's a compliment,' I ses, 'an' the biggest compliment y' can give is to offer yourselves.' So 'ere I am to offer meself."

"Offer yourself? Mr. Clarke—how?"

"In merridge—all reg'lar an' above board. Offerin' me an' me claim, three township blocks, one water well, four waggons an' hate an' fifty 'orses."

"Oh, Mr. Clarke, you must be joking."

"I knoo I 'ad no chance; but a compliment's a compliment, an' I done it."

"And thank you, thank you."

"Shake 'ands an' off I go."

And off he did go, greatly relieved that the compliment had carried with it no penalty of acceptance.

He reported "no progress" to the waiting group at the door; and Baldy Davis replaced him by Alice's chair.

"Well," said Baldy Davis; "an' how's the Lady?"

"Oh," very well, Mr. Davis."

"Well, Buck told y' about the yarns?"

"And he's gone to find the slanderer."

"Don't you mind—don't you mind."

"The money's in the till—already counted. I'll go away."

Baldy, made more comfortable by the business-like turn given to the conversation, took a chair, and replied: "I know it's all right, without y' sayin' it. What a comfort y' been here. Everything goes right here now, an' there y' sit, sewin', sewin'—y' make a man think."

"Of what?"

"Of a fireplace in a big town—me sittin' one side of

it readin' the paper, s'posin' I could read—an' you sittin' opposite, sewin'."

"But that would be——"

"Of course it would. There's no chance, I know."

"None, Mr. Davis—none."

"It's a pity you ain't a middle-aged widder; there might be a chance then."

"Oh, you've been so good to me; don't spoil it all with talk of the impossible."

"We'll forget it, Lady. Cut it out; nev' mind me. But I can't sit with you, sewin'—sewin'—sewin'. It gives me thoughts, it gives me thoughts."

He squeezed her hand, and walked dejectedly towards the street whence Bob the Finisher appeared ready with his formula.

"Pannikin's empty," said Bob the Finisher; and Davis turned on him fiercely and gladly, happy that he had somebody to attack.

"I'll empty y' down a shalf if y' bother me."

"But me pannikin's empty," persisted the undertaker.

"Arrah! Y'll make me spit blood—go an' drink water."

"Don't you insult me," said Bob the Finisher.

Davis, quite losing patience, took him by the neck and the waistband and propelled him out of sight.

It was Barney Cue's turn; and he felt his position keenly.

"Ah, Mr. Cue," said Alice, kindly, for she liked all these simple men of the open air.

"Yes, Barney Cue. Y' know what I'm going to say?"

"Surely—not the same as the others?"

"Well, I s'pose so."

"Oh, this is becoming ridiculous."

"It's a way of bein' perlite."

"Is that all?"

"I know there's no charnce. I wouldn't be so brave if there was."

"You're not a marrying man, Mr. Cue?"

"No, Lady. I was born for the track, and the track 'ull have me at the finish; but if ever I see an angel walk straight out of heaven you're her, Miss Power—so shake hearty before I go."

"Not going away?"

"Further out, Lady Miss, further out; the place is getting too popyerlated. There's a parson an' a policeman comin' here nex' week, an' the gaol an' the church is goin' up now."

"And will two more crowd this great plain?"

"They'll crowd it for me, Miss. I must have room to stretch myself, and I hate a lot of people. Good-bye, Miss Alice. I'll never forget you, never till water runs up hill."

"Good-bye, you dear good man."

He held her hand for a moment, looking at her very gravely, and then went away.

"I hope that's the last," said Alice to herself. "The great big, simple children that they are."

She heard a footfall behind her, but did not turn, saying to herself, "There's another."

Then she half turned, and saw^e him, and turned at once away from him with the wild hope, "Oh, will he ask me, too?"

He was very serious as he said: "I've been looking for you all the morning."

"For me, Mr. Holt? Where?"

"Everywhere! On the Purnamoota track and the Silvertown-road, and down by the claim, and the little place where the scented broom is, and the main rise and everywhere."

"Everywhere but where I was."

He seated himself beside her, and said: "Well, I've found you now, and nothing else matters."

"Doesn't it?"

"No. Oh, I've just heard a thing that made me mad with rage."

"Don't worry. I heard it, too. Mr. Crawford is seeking the man who told the lie."

He spoke with some jealousy. "Have you handed your defence to Buck?"

"No. He took it."

"I'll be your advocate and counsel, too."

"The fee might be too high."

"I'll do it all for love."

"For love? Oh!"

"You must know I love you. I betray myself to everybody."

"Except to me."

He became ardent to boldness at that challenge. "Were you in doubt? Did you think of me at all? Shall I tell you all?"

Being the woman, she was not at any disadvantage in the love-making, and replied equably in contrast to his embarrassment: "I was in doubt! I did think of you! You have told me all!"

"And——"

"And—and," she laughed nervously to hide her own agitation now. "And—oh, Mr. Holt—they lived happily ever afterwards."

CHAPTER VII.

“**W**HAT have I done to deserve such happiness, sweetheart ?” She was in his arms, looking at him half glad and half frightened.

“You’ve done everything by being in love.”

“My darling. I have the right to defend you now. Your honour is my honour, and my name is yours. Who could have started this lie ?”

“You say you betrayed yourself—to whom ?”

“To everybody.”

“To any woman ?”

“I think that new girl, Timms, has known ever since she came here.”

“A month ago ! Four weeks would work any mischief in that mean vanity—and she is in love with you, dear.”

They talked of the devil, and the devil they heard—a red-haired devil. Charlie Holt said to Alice very softly : “Go dear. I will prove her guilty or innocent before she leaves me.”

“I must do as I am told, I suppose,” said Alice, with the quick, glad submission of the woman newly in love. “I have a master now.”

"A master who is your slave, Alice," he said kissing her; and Maudie Timms, singing raucously "The Blue Hallsayshern Mountains," as she entered, saw them and stopped suddenly, and a vicious look came into her eyes.

Alice disappeared into the residential portion of the house; and Maudie Timms' anger changed to fear as she looked at Charlie Holt.

"I was waiting for you!"

"Y' needn't look at me as if you was a J.P. I ain't done nothink."

"We'll see," said Charlie Holt, very sternly.

Obviously perturbed, she went behind the counter and tried impudence.

"How are you poppin' up?" she said.

"I want you to answer a question or two."

"Where's your search-warrant, constable? Oh, don't look so 'ard at me. What 'd y' 'ave?"

"Nothing. I want an answer to a question."

"I mightn't give y' one."

"Then I'll tell Mr. Davis my suspicions, and if they're well-founded we'll drive you out of the camps."

She was reduced almost to tears; but, woman-like, brazened it out until her brazenness exhausted itself in the face of failure.

"Call yourself a gentleman—comin' an' bullyin' a hard-workin' respectable girl. I ain't to blame if your flash piece gets talked about, am I?"

"Another word like that, and I'll call Davis. You started these lies about Miss Power."

"I didn't. I didn't start them."

“Then you carried them, after somebody else started them.”

She was weeping with rage now—not sorry for what she had done, but sorry for having been found out—and she shrieked her excuses at him.

“I didn’t start ’em, anyway; she’s a stuck-up cat an’, an’ you wouldn’t look at me dress.”

“Is that any excuse?”

“It ain’t me fault I was gorn on you, is it? I offered you the fiver change, too, an’ ole Stick in the Mud ’ud never, never have known.”

“Tell me who put you up to this?”

“Your cousin,” she said, still sobbing.

“Joe Holt! Impossible!”

“He did! So there! He was wild about you winnin’ the jumpin’ case, and jealous of you with her.”

“The man who was once my brother!”

“Y’ won’t bring me into it?”

“Yes—it is too serious.”

“Oh! Oh! Baldy Davis ’ll sack me.”

“I can’t help that. The camp must know. We are clean men, and Joe Holt is a leper.”

Disregarding her cries, he went to the door of the bar-room and called to the men under the verandah.

“Davis! Buck! Here!”

Maudie howled then. “Oh! Oh! They’ll know all about me, an’ she’ll laugh at me. Oh, I’ll poison meself, I will!”

Charlie called the others. “Cue, Jersey! Come here, all of you.”

They trooped into the bar, and with them were Bob the Finisher and the old men—but Buck Crawford was absent.

“ See her—that woman ! ” said Charlie Holt. “ She has spread the lies about the Lady.”

Maudie, in great terror, lifted her face, and showed it dirty with crying ; and her much-prized fringe had lost its admired straightness.

“ I didden’ ! I didden’ ! ” she cried, “ It was Joe Holt told me to.”

“ The flamin’ hound ! ”

“ Zinc in him. He’s all zinc.”

“ An’ you helped him. Out of this, you baggage ! ” said Baldy Davis.

“ Oh, Mr. Davis,” wailed Maudie, bankrupt of all her old insolence. “ Oh, Mr. Davis, ain’t I been a good-business girl ? ”

“ This ain’t business,” replied Davis, sternly, as from the till he counted out the notes and placed them before her. “ Here’s a month’s wages. Now, off duty this minit—an’ clear by the next coach.”

The red-haired egotist took the money, but was too ignorant to blame herself, and blamed Alice Power instead. “ Oh, the stuck-up cat ! ”

“ Go at once,” said Charlie.

“ I’m goin’ ” ; and then suddenly, when she seemed utterly beaten, she turned the defeat into a victory by accusing Charlie Holt.

“ It was all your f-f-fault.”

“ Mine ? ” he repeated, aghast.

"Yes," sobbed Maudie in her martyrdom. "Y' wooden' look at me—and me dressed l-l-like a lady, an' now I'm turned away, got the sack—an' no where to go—not a friend in the world."

Her air of utter dejection and friendlessness softened the men more than her words; and Charlie Holt, generous always, voiced the pity of them all.

"Davis," he said, "we don't fight with women. Forgive her."

"All right," replied Davis. "We'll take it out of the man's hide. Here! You! Carrots!"

"Carrots!" thought Maudie. "The cheek! He means to keep me on."

"Copper-top! You!"

"Yes, Mister Davis." She spoke with downcast eyes; her voice low, so that a blind man might have set her down as modest—but not any man who could see her.

"Go an' wash your face an' put your fringe straight, an' go back to dooty."

"I'm kep' on, 'pon me sivy. I'm kep'-on," she cried in triumph.

"And don't go talkin' any more about ladies. If you do you'll get it where the chicken got the axe."

"I'll never say nothink about nobody."

"And that means," said Sands (who had read the large print of the book called Maudie Timms) to Barney Cue, "that she'll say a great deal about everybody."

"So I'm kep' on! I'm kep' on."

"Yes," replied Davis, "accordin' to good behaviour. Now go an' wash your face."

“Righto!” She walked back to Charlie, and looked at him with genuine gratitude. “You’re a toff. I’m sorry—an’ don’t tell Baldy I offered you the change.”

“Not I!”

“I couldn’t help bein’ gorn on you, could I? Nev’ mind! Good-bye!”

She left him and went to her room still weeping, but quietly.

“Copper-top ’ll think twice before she opens her mouth again!” said Cue. “It’s been a lesson to her.”

“Not her,” replied Jersey Clarke. “She’ll be as cheeky as a minah in an orchard as soon as she’s put her fringe straight.”

Davis made a gesture of impatience. “Never mind her,” he said. “What about Joe Holt?”

“We want him. If he’s got zinc in him, let’s roast him a bit,” That from Cue, but Charlie pressed his claim.

“He’s my man, and it’s my quarrel.”

They stared at him in surprise; and Davis asked, “Why is he yours?”

“Because the Lady is mine—now.”

“So you’re the winner?”

Jersey Clarke brightened under the prompting of the solution to his problem, and said: “No wonder she turned me down—claim an’ ’orses an all.”

Davis shaking Charlie’s hand warmly, seemed never to have had a disappointment. “You’re the best man,” he said; “an’ you have the best right to her.” Then he added more slowly, “I see now why Copper-head got mad.”

And before he could explain himself in answer to their wondering glances, Joe Holt came in—Joe Holt, walking unwillingly, and occasionally glancing back at the implacable face of Buck Crawford following closely.

“I gave him his choice,” cried Buck, “walking or being carried here like a trussed fowl.”

“What do you want?” demanded Joe Holt, still sullen, but with the sullenness of the hunted animal at bay.

Charlie Holt replied, addressing, not the questioner but the audience.

“This man, who was my mate, who robbed me twice, and was forgiven, has committed now the worst crime. He has attempted to steal the reputation of the lady who is to be my wife.”

“Then she’s promised?” asked Buck, his last hope gone with his question.

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re got her, and you’re got the claim,” said Joseph Holt. “What more do you want?”

“Satisfaction for your treachery. You thief of reputations!”

“You want me to put my hands up?”

“Right here and now.”

“Glad of the chance. Fighting’s my game. I was champion middleweight of Port Augusta.”

“A Skiter to the finish,” said Buck Crawford.

Charlie Holt said, impatiently: “No talk—up with your hands.”

“A ring! a ring!”

"You hold the watch, Baldy," said Barney Cue, as Maudie Timms entered, patting her fringe with one hand pulling the ever erring bustle into position with the other. Maudie showed them her primitiveness, her close connection with the cave women.

"What is it? A fight! A fight!" she cried joyfully. This girl of the gutter exhilarated at the prospect of two men thirsty for blood as the hind loves to see the bucks fighting.

Davis sternly demanded silence.

"Get behind your bar, Copper-top," he said. "This is men's work."

Then Maudie shamelessly deserted her fellow-plotter, and went over to the enemy.

"Hit him, Mr. Charlie!" she cried shrilly. "The brute takin' away ladies' characters."

Davis took her by the arm and forced her behind the bar counter. "There," he said "you get into your pew, and if y' move from there I'll sack you—real sack this time."

The threat quietened her. "Oh I'll be good," she said, and taking up a towel she cleaned glasses with feverish energy.

The ring of men crowded round the two combatants as Alice came from her room.

"Oh, stop!" she cried, "Stop!" but for the first time a wish of hers was uttered to deaf ears. Even Buck Crawford was firm with her.

"You mustn't interfere," he said almost sternly, "This is a man's fight."

He led her to the door of her room again, made her enter, and closed the door.

“Better stop it ; the Lady won't like it.”

“It's got to be fought out,” said Charlie Holt stubbornly. “Don't touch me.”

“Let the bloke go,” said Joe Holt. “He hit me, and I'll have a piece of him.”

Buck, at Charlie's shoulder, gave him a running fire of advice.

“Don't let him hold you, or he'll kill you. He's my weight, Charlie, but I'll swear he's got no heart.”

“Stand off, and belt him when you get a chance, and he'll sling his alley in soon,” said Barney Cue.

They circled round each other like game cocks ; and then Charlie Holt forced the fighting, and got home twice with body and face blows, and took a blow on the face in return. And then his left crashed on to Joseph Holt's mouth, and Buck cried, “First blood to you, Charlie !”

“That was a good 'un in the teeth,” said Davis ; and Jersey Clarke cried, “Hit him another, Charlie.”

“I haven't got a friend,” said Joe Holt. “I'm fighting all of you.”

“Hit him when he whines, Charlie.”

It was at this moment that Frank the Artist's vanity led him into danger. According to Frank the Artist, he knew everything about everything—especially fighting, having been, according to his own story, champion lightweight of Grong-Grong Creek in 1881. Certainly, under cross-examination, it appeared that Grong-Grong Creek in 1881 held only one other man, and he was an

old gentleman who was dying very slowly and deliberately of asthma. But Frank the Artist held to his championship, and now gave the benefit of his experience to Joe Holt.

"Duck clear of his straight lead and short-hook him with the left."

Baldy Davis, feeling his dignity insulted by the interference of a derelict, struck the ex-champion's face with his open hand and drove him back.

"Duck clear o' that," said Baldy Davis; "an' if you come back I'll short-hook you with my boot."

Buck, watching the fight tensely, kept up his quickly changing advice—changing with the fortunes of war.

Maudie, from her "pew," watched the fight in convulsions of excitement, jumping up and down as the men clinched, and crying "Oh!" to every blow they struck.

Then Joseph Holt began to weaken. "Oh!" he said, gruntingly.

Charlie Holt put his weight and all his soul into that last blow, and landed on the point; and the Bad Man of Silver Star crashed to the clay floor.

"Knocked out—it's a knock out."

"Oh, surely it ain't all over yet?" grumbled Barney Cue.

Davis, watch in hand, counted the seconds very slowly: "One—two—three."

"Them is slow seconds, Baldy."

"Spoil sport," said Buck. "He wants to give Joe a chance."



Then Joseph Holt began to weaken.



"Good enough, too" said Jersey Clarke. "Fair play is bonny play, and I ain't seen enough blood for my taste."

"Four—five—six," counted Davis. "You blokes make me lose count talking all the time. Where was I? Two! Three! Four! Five! Six!"

"He's all right," said Charlie.

"He's come to."

Davis addressed the fallen man with an appearance of much fairness.

"I've given you a chance," he said. "Seven! Eight!"

"I've had enough," said Joseph Holt as if he were in pain. "I've had enough for to-day."

But one man in Silver Star that day felt no interest in that fight, and that one man was Bob the Finisher. He sat on the form under the verandah, and looked at the excited men with eyes that saw nothing.

Alice had re-entered from her room; and she upbraided the victor—though with a secret admiration for him. "I'm angry with you. Why did you fight?"

"There is your slanderer," he replied, as if the fact excused everything. And it did; but she, like all women, though glad of the punishment, pretended to depreciate it.

"He was too mean for you to touch."

"Make a lane for the vermin," said Buck.

"Stand back—let the dingo out."

Joseph Holt rose as if in pain, and walked to the street door.

"The vermin is going," he said. "The dingo will

come back, with his teeth ready. You're got the claim and the girl, Charlie Holt—you may not have either long."

Buck started towards him with the whip that was long enough to reach the sixth horse; but Charlie stopped him. "Let him go. He's beaten until he's an old woman. Let an old woman have the use of her tongue."

Joseph Holt faced them with his hand on the door-frame. "Listen to me. I'm a bad man. Am I a coward among men? No! I'm not afraid of God or man; and, as I breathe here now, I swear to make this reverse good, to wipe out this defeat."

"Bah!" said Charlie Holt, contemptuously. "This is the nineteenth century. There's a good gallows waiting everywhere for a murderer."

"Did I say I'd wipe it out in blood? I mean in sorrow and disgrace—for you and her—for one of you—or both."

"Come away, dear, come away," said Alice, clinging to her lover, and shrinking from the deadly earnestness of the beaten man.

"He cannot hurt you, sweetheart."

"Not to-day. To-day is gone for me; but, thank God, there is always to-morrow—to-morrow."

And with this purpose and its intensity making him something of an heroic figure, he was gone.

After the stress, the quiet; after the battle, the recreation of the warrior. She made much of him and sang to him in the evening, in a voice that had more sweetness than power; but he was so much in love that

to him it sounded as the purest voice since the sons of Asaph invented choir practice.

After he had gone to his camp Alice went to her room, but not to sleep. From her window she watched the wonderful white Barrier moon pale, and the mulga and the saltbush lose the shadowy loveliness lent to them by the moonrays, and become greyer and more material in the light of the waning stars. And then the sun, with one magnificent bound, rose from behind the edge of the saucer of the rising plain, and it was day.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALICE and her lover steeped in their love dream, intoxicated with youth and sunlight; Joseph Holt living a hatter's life in his lonely camp on the iron-slugged rise, and plotting impotently, and drinking himself into a madness in which he could plot clearly; Maudie Timms laboriously working back, if not into favour, at least into toleration; ready to take all license as soon as pity should give her a little liberty.

And Buck Crawford, finest man of all the good men of Silver Star, drove his four hundred and fifty miles a week, through bush-lands, gum-belt and plain, salt-flat and clay-pan—under the sun and under the stars; sunrise to moon-setting, and the swinging low of the Cross; pushing weary horses over dry stages; encouraging them with the voice alone until the whip had to be used, for the life was all out of them that drought, and as soon as they felt the brake they stopped dead. Sunrises that were all gold and glory on the *great plain*; moon-settings that changed from the shape of a bronze football to the form of a copper haystack, and then to a strip of purple silk. Self-made hay upon the stalk for a hundred miles; drought splitting the desiccated earth; dryness in the ground and in the mouth; air like

champagne ; and a steadfast man guiding, coaxing and forcing weary horses through sand and over iron and quartz. Every day a work of Alvaro, and resolution and high courage, paid for meanly ; while in the cities some ignorant brute made boiler composition or sold fish oil, and made much more by the trader's lying.

After that rejection by Alice he had become more silent ; he rarely now awoke his passengers to recite Adam Linsay Gordon to them in the night-long drive under the stars. He saw nothing but work before him for ever. Yet the future was kind enough to give him no hint of the long years that his vitality would require to die, nor of the grave in the west coast of Tasmania, where the wild west wind whips the sea and blows, without a rock to break all the open leagues from Cape Horn.

Silver Star is as forgotten now as the names of dead men who were in life obscure ; yet to the fancy of the man who knew the sight of those old tracks, slowly being reclaimed and covered by the saltbush and the mulga memory brings back that great personality—memory hears the six horses of Buck Crawford's coach throwing the miles behind them—memory hears them galloping again.

He had missed a journey for some reason, and his substitute he had no faith in. It was on this trip that the fifteenth lady came to Silver Star—a hard, angular, severe, thin woman in a stiff black dress, all crape and crinoline ; a hard, rusty dolman, which rose on the lady's dress "improver" like the hump of a camel. It

was Mrs. Pontet, Alice Power's aunt—at last able to pursue her niece, and pursuing her with the appearance of Nemesis, and a softened heart beneath it all.

Buck Crawford waited for the coach, and, like all energetic and self-reliant men, blamed himself for having suffered a substitute at all. Meantime he mended a whip, and worried about the dry tracks and the horses, and cursed the substitute in all his comings in and goings out.

He entered the bar-room of the Apollyon for his whip-handle, and sat by the bagatelle table, making fast the thong of the fall to the wood.

Maudie Timm, gay in a new and monstrous dress of blue and yellow, and over-adorned with much glaring jewellery—proofs of her many conquests and soft-headed prospectors—laid siege to him at once; for although she disliked him because she had never been able to deceive him, she knew his importance in the little world of Silver Star, and that to be disliked by Buck Crawford meant to be suspected by his friends. So she attempted to flatter him with an appearance of interest in his concerns.

“When's the coach coming in, Mr. Crawford?”

“I don't know—he's late now.”

“The 'mergency man can't get a coach through dry stages like you, Mr. Crawford.”

He resented the flattery. “That'll do—no delooder-in'.”

“I ain't, Mr. Crawford. I mean it—'onest!”

“Straight wire?”

“Straight as a line.”

Praise softens us all ; flattery makes a woman think that black is white. Crawford, too sane to believe that, had an idea that after all black might be grey, as he replied : " Well, I s'pose you can't expect a new-chum to know how to nurse horses over dry stretches like I do."

" You're goin' down again to-night, ain't you ? "

" Yes, to-night."

Even her desire to placate him could not quite destroy malice ; and she said maliciously, as she took the soiled bar-towels, and moved towards the door of the kitchen : " You're goin' down to bring up the parson and the weddin' cake, Mr. Buck Crawford, for her."

He smiled as she left the room, knowing that nothing so pitifully mean as she could hurt him ; but when she was gone he was gloomy enough ; for with all his loyalty the disappointment of Alice had bitten deep. He addressed the whip : " Parson and weddin' cake for him, and at the end of the dry track a coffin of beer cases for me and Bob the Finisher ; or, maybe, not even a coffin—a dry track and dead horses and a perish for me and dingoes' teeth for a funeral. By cripes ! Didn't Adam Lindsay Gordon know ? Isn't he a comfort to a man ? "

He recited the gloomy verses as if they gave him a melancholy pleasure :

" The rending beak of the eaglehawk,
Or the hot, red tongue of the native dog,
That couch was rugged—those sextons rude ;
But the bravest of all earth's men—we know—
Must become at the last but earthworms' food
When once they've gone where we all must go."

"He knew how to comfort a man, did Adam Lindsay Gordon. Knew men and horses; and that's all I know. I don't know women."

He bound the thong to the handle with waxed string, turned the waxed end underneath, and cut it off neatly.

"Even if I had it would have been the same. Alice and Charlie! It's pure nature, and good luck to 'em."

"Talking to yourself again," said Alice, and he started to see her standing by him. "What were the thoughts?"

"I was thinking of how much Adam Lindsay Gordon knew."

She laughed at her memories. "The passengers complained that you kept them awake all night quoting him. You kept me awake half the night; but I didn't want to sleep. I'll never forget that night."

"Nor me!"

"Nor you! Nor the dear old coach that brought me to Silver Star and my happiness."

"I'm bringing up the parson and the weddin' cake next trip." And he tried the fall of the whip, as if that whip were his only care.

"Always the good friend! Helping me to my happiness even in that."

He cracked the whip at its full length—a crack like a rifle shot.

"Well, that'll do. I'll see you before I go. That coach is overdue. I'll have a look at the track. So long."

"*Au revoir*," said Alice, as he left her and went to the

verandah ; and there the other lover met him, but Buck passed him saying merely : " So long."

The bridegroom-elect put out a restraining hand, and said : " Have a drink, old man."

" Too early ; and I never drink in the morning—and I've had one—and the Lady's in there."

" So long then." And Charlie Holt passed on to happiness.

The lonely man looked after him, made a movement as if to follow him, and arrested himself, for he thought : " I can't bear to see them together." Then he went down the track looking for the overdue coach.

They met quite frankly now ; and she looked at her lover no longer afraid.

" Sweetheart, are you as well as you look this morning ? "

" Better than that, I think."

" There ! " He kissed her as if the caress protected her for always. I have to ride to see a new claim a mile away. I won't be long away. I've told Buck everything we want."

" But who is looking after the claim ? "

" I've shut down. No more work at the mine until after—after the honeymoon. I must go."

" But come back soon."

" Less than half an hour, sweetheart."

He kissed her and left the bar ; but Maudie Timms came in in time to see it.

" Aa-a-ahem ! Ha ! Ha ! I seen yer," said Maudie Timms. " Nev' mind. I won't tell nobody."

"We didn't know that you were here; but it does not matter," said Alice coldly, as she walked towards the door; and Maudie, bridling with anger, went behind the bar counter, and wiped the glasses roughly as if they had hurt her.

At the door Alice met Frank the Artist; Frank the Artist had been made a special messenger, and was out of breath.

"Miss, here's a note—for—for you."

"Who is it from?"

"If you look inside you will see."

"Of course, how silly of me!"

She opened the letter, and read:—

"Dear Miss Alice,—You helped me a few weeks ago. Will you help me again now? I am waiting at Mr. Charlie Holt's claim—the Silver Star—for you. I think I can find out the value of that Broken Hill share. Will you bring the blank transfer with you, and come as quickly as you can?"

Always your friend,

"ROBERT SANDS."

"Of course I'll go."

She turned to Maudie Timms. "Will you please tell Mr. Davis that I have gone to the Silver Star to see Mr. Sands, and that I will return quickly?"

"My word. But, I say, you're dilly to go there by yourself, I think."

"What can happen to me? Mr. Sands is waiting for

me at Charl—Mr. Holt's claim. Please tell him I'll return soon."

And without waiting for a reply she turned out to the dusty street, crossed it, and disappeared in the mulga.

"I'm goin' too, Miss," said Frank the Artist to Maudie; and as he went he thought heavily: "Am I playing the straight game? Am I? I wish I knew."

CHAPTER IX.

LEFT to herself, Maudie Timms found all her resentment against Alice returning.

“Oh! don’t she look down on me,” she said aloud. “An’ won’t she look down more when she’s married. Unless I get married meself. No! I won’t. She’s got him. But that ain’t her fault. If she’d never been here he wouldn’t have had me. I’m not his style—that’s it.”

Aimlessly she looked at the contents of the till; and its riches obsessed her, so that the idea of leaving the service of Baldy Davis became abhorrent to her.

“Nine sover’i’ns an’ six fivers—it’s nice trade this is, an’ no change.”

A new thought struck her; she took the pen and ink from the bar, and putting her head down on her arm, protruded her tongue, and wrote laboriously on a newspaper. The tongue unconsciously imitated every movement of the pen. She made a blot on the paper, licked the ink off, spat it out, and resumed writing. At last four words showed in sprawling characters on the paper; and she read them with her head on one side.

“Mrs. Maudie Baldy Davis! It don’t look so bad. An’ I s’pose he’s got some other name besides Baldy.

Lor! what a lark! Ole Mrs. Maud Stick in the Mud."

In great glee she laughed; then, as if she were already a proprietor, she polished glasses with new vigour; then she looked at herself in a mirror, and decided that she must be irresistible; and it was with a new confidence that she seized the irritating bustle, and put it where it should be.

"I could do it if I liked. Charlie Holt's the only man I couldn't get by cockin' me eye at him."

Then she looked at the reflection of her beauty in a drinking glass, and concluded: "I could twist old Baldy round me finger, too."

Her day dreams were broken in upon by the entrance of Davis and Barney Cue—the latter strangely excited.

"Well your luck's in all right," said Davis.

"Yes, I pegged that Broken Hill South yesterday."

"And they've really struck chlorides?"

"The hill's rotten with it. Here! it's my shout."

"We'll have a bottle of wine."

Maudie, as she cut the wires of the champagne bottle, felt the opulence of Silver Star, and wailed inwardly:

"I can't leave it—I can't give up servin' wine and go back to long beers in a thrip'ny bar. Not me."

"Ave a cigar with me?" said Davis.

"Right she is."

"Have a drink yourself, Miss," said Barney Cue, as Maudie poured the wine.

"Thanks," replied Maudie, filling a glass for herself, and holding it so that she might see the bubbles breaking on the rim. "Here's another! Kind love!"

“Luck!” said Davis. “And may the Devil admire us,” said Barney Cue.

“Don’t you give him no chance,” cried Maudie Timms, and laughed shrilly; for the champagne had already found her vulgarity. Then, feeling that Davis’s eye was on her, and that she wasn’t yet secure in the stirrups, she returned to business as Cue asked “How much?”

“Three pound.”

“No,” said Davis, hurriedly and ashamed: “Two pound ten.”

Maudie whispered to him. “No, Ssh! He’s in luck—three pound.”

“There it is! Well, I’m off to the Silver Star. I want to see Charlie.”

“So long, Barney.”

“So long, Baldy.”

“Look here,” said Baldy Davis, when Cue had gone. “I’ve winked at you givin’ no change; but don’t go over-chargin’. It’s bad for trade.”

Maudie’s squirrel brain decided on the hurried plan of the morning.

“Well, if you want to know, I want to make as much money as I can—it’s all for you.”

Davis felt uneasy without knowing why. “Go on!” he said.

“Yes.”

“Really!”

Maudie became emphatic. “See that,” she said, as she ducked her finger and then drew it across her throat. “Is that wet—is that dry—cut my throat if I tell a lie.”

"Why," said Davis, seeing only insincerity in her. "I'd be cuttin' your throat all day."

Maudie become coquettish—heavily coquettish like a Flanders mare. "Go on," she said, "you are a oner."

"An' I think you're a twicer," replied Davis, knowing well that she was the fraud his slang indicated.

"What's a twicer?"

"A nineteener."

"I wish y' meant it," said Maudie, sticking out her skirt behind, and having immediately to settle her bustle again. Her heavy flirtation was suspended by Sands coming to report progress, and finding the surprise of his life.

"I've done the books and ordered the stuff, Mr. Davis," he said. "Is there anything else?"

"No. You'd better quit this job."

Maudie's mean little soul was jubilant. "Got the sack," she said to herself. "He's got the sack. Good enough for him."

"Do you want me to leave here?" asked Sands, trying to conceal the shock the discovery had been to him.

"Yes—you'd better quit."

Maudie's meanness enjoyed itself again. "Serve him glad. An' she'll go too, soon. Baldy's a bit of all right."

"But why?" persisted Sands. "Have I not given satisfaction?"

"It's just this way, mate. I don't like employin' millionaires at fifteen bob a day."

"Millionaires?"

"Did you hang on to that fourteenth of Broken Hill?"

"I tried to sell it to Joe Holt for fifty pounds, and Miss Alice stopped the sale and seized the transfer."

"What? Well, d— my sister's aunt's cat! But that's good."

"She said he was a thief, and made him take back his money."

Maudie became livid-lipped with envy. "Always puttin' on side, she is," said Maudie to herself.

"Then she's made yer. That little girl's made yer. They've struck chlorides on Broken Hill."

"What are chlorides?"

"Chloride of silver, I mean. Barney Cue says the hill's rotten with them!"

"And what does that mean?"

"That you're rich enough to buy a dozen Silver Stars or soon will be."

"Too late for me, but not too late for her."

"For her? Who?"

"Alice. She little knew when she stopped that sale that she saved her own fortune. God bless her! She will have all the gifts—beauty, youth, goodness, wealth, love—all at the one time."

Then did Maudie's temper explode with great violence.

"Blow her!" she yelled; "always comin' out on top."

"You're all white, too," said Davis to Sands, whom the news had made strangely weak. "What'll y' drink?"

"My friend, all your kindness shall be remembered."

"Here! Quit that! What'll you drink? Now if you say 'Water,' I'll send for Bob the Finisher."

"I am no drinker," said the newly potential millionaire; "but for this day, it shall be anything you like."

"Wine—a big bottle," said Davis to Maudie, who stared at the new millionaire hypnotised.

"Hurry up, Copper-top. Shake a leg."

"He don't look like a millionaire, anyway. More like a penn'orth of coppers," said Maudie, as, still dazed, she served the wine. But as the men drank, she recovered sufficiently to enjoy the rare pleasure of overcharging her own master.

"Three pounds," she said.

"Crums! You're a fine business girl all right; but it's only out of one pocket into the other."

"I must see her," said Sands. "She has the transfer, and holds her own fortune, and she must know it at once."

"Who—the Lady?"

"Yes, where is she?"

"Oh, she left a message sayin' to tell Mr. 'Olt she'd gone up to the Silver Star to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes. Frank the Artist brought the message."

"I will go to her now." He walked resolutely to the street door, and then stopped indecisively. "Frank the Artist brought the message as from me? I don't like the look of it. I must satisfy myself at once." And he went away walking more quickly than usual, the emergency giving him new energy.

"Good luck to him an' good luck to her," said Baldy Davis. "He's straight, although he drinks water. I

don't think, you know, that shows a bad 'cart. I think he's only 'arf-witted."

"She's got everythink," said Maudie Timms gloomily. "I've got nothink."

"You're on a good job here, an' you're a good business girl, an' you can stay as long as you like."

"Oh, d'y'r mean it?"

"Course I do."

"An' I'd put the price up, too, because it'ud be all the better—the more we made the more I'd make."

"Yes, I suppose I wouldn't mind risin' the wages."

"Oh," said Maudie, languishingly. "I wouldn't want no wages, not then."

"Why wouldn't yer?"

"Because it'ud be halves—then."

"Then? How halves?"

"Oh, go on—you are a one."

Baldy Davis looked injured, as if he had been wrongfully accused of a crime.

"I don't know watcher mean," he said.

"Oh, dicken to that. Look after the bar, won't you a minit?" and then very shyly, "De-ar."

"Dear?" repeated the scandalised man. "Dear! My oath!"

She turned at the door, and said to herself joyfully,

"'Ooked him! 'Ooked him!" and then, seeing Buck Crawford at the door, her theatricality insisted on public triumph. Playing to the gallery, which was Buck Crawford, she shouted loudly to Baldy Davis: "Now mind! Keep it to yerself for a bit. It's *our secret*, and

I don't want anybody to know nothink," and she was gone.

"She's barmey," said Davis, disgustedly and red with shame.

"H'lo!" said Buck Crawford. "What have you been doin' that you've got to keep it dark?"

"Dash me if I know, Buck. She's barmey! Copper-top's barmey."

"Not her! She thinks you are."

"How?"

"She thinks she's caught you."

"What—to marry her?"

"Yes."

"No fear," said Baldy with great decision. "No bad habits for me. I play poker, and rattle the tats, an' I whiskify; but I ain't a bad man at 'eart. No! no marriages for me!"

"That's what she thinks, anyway."

"She? I wouldn't ha' minded the Lady, but Copper-top!"

He laughed loudly as the meaning of her blandishments became clear.

"That's what she meant goin' halves. She thinks she can wind me round her finger."

"If she did, she'd break your braces; an' you've only got one."

"I'll give her the sack—that's what I'll do."

"I wish that coach would come. It'll be in so late that I'll have to turn back with it as soon as I can get the wheels greased."

Hoof-sounds padding through the dust suddenly

became hoof-sounds on the harder clay of the verandah floor, and Charlie Holt rode up and threw a prospecting pick into the bar and dismounted.

"Another duffer," he said. "Coach not in yet, Buck?"

"No—that emergency man must be growing spuds on the road instead of bustling the team."

"You got a duffer in the noo show?" asked Davis.

"Yes—no good."

"Old man Sands, my bookkeeper, has struck it; so's Barney Cue."

"How's that?"

"Broken Hill struck chlorides, and he's got a fourteenth."

Maudie, as she passed on her return to the bar softened her voice, as was her wont, to greet Charlie Holt. "Good day, Mr. Holt."

"Good morning, Miss Timms."

"Ah!" said Maudie to herself, and weeping mentally a little, "he's a toff, he is."

"A fourteenth!" said Charlie. "I'm glad. If they've struck chlorides, she's big enough to be a world beater."

"And Barney's pegged the South."

"Good business for me, we're in everything together."

"So I told old Father Sands, and he close up fainted—says it's all for the Lady."

"For Alice? Why?"

"She saved it from Joe. Collared the transfer when he tried to take the old man down."

"Good for the Lady," said Buck. "She's a thoroughbred; and it's time to look for that coach again."

"She told me she was minding the transfer," said Charlie Holt. "But where is she? She promised to wait."

"A message came for her to go to your claim."

"My claim? What for? It's closed down."

"To see Mr. Sands, I think. He came here after, and didn't know nothink about it." That was from Maud.

Davis supplemented the information. "He said he'd go up there and see her."

"But I can't understand why she should when I told her the claim was closed down."

Maudie came to his assistance, saying: "Frank the Artist brought her a letter."

"That fellow would do anything for a pint of rum."

"I don't like it, Baldy."

"Oh, you'll find she'll turn up all right. Who would hurt her?"

"Who would? But I am uneasy. Who *would* hurt her? Joe Holt would, and she has the transfer, Baldy, I'm going to the Silver Star. If she returns tell her to wait."

And he was mounted and galloping down the street ere they could reply.

"He's gorn now," said Maudie Timms, as if they had an intimate secret which might be frankly shared.

"Y'didn't tell anybody, did you?"

"About what?"

"About you an' me."

Baldy Davis became indignant and aggressive.

“There ain’t nothin’ to tell anybody, and there never will be—see?”

“Oh!”

“Look here, Miss Coppertop, you’re a good business girl, an’ all that; but if you ever try to roll your eyes at me again, I’ll—I’ll—I’ll sack yer.”

“Ho! very well. You’re quite mistaken. Very well!”


And as Bob the Finisher came in from the street, she said mechanically, “Pannikin empty?”

And he replied with one of those digressions from habit which make history:—

“No, coach comin’!”

Then did Maudie Timms forget the existence of her bustle. She sat down upon it and broke into loud and bitter sobbing.

CHAPTER X.

FOR all the beauty of the day, the high winds that herald the Barrier winter—a winter of hot bright days and clear cold nights—were abroad. The great jew lizards that slept in the tracks were fewer and more torpid of habit ; the saltbush seeded to the winds ; the year was nigh its change—which to men who knew Old World seasons was no change at all. 

Alice Power, hurrying to the Silver Star claim, felt some of the sadness that comes to all who think ; who, while the world is yet glowing, can see the end under the beauty and know that summer is going—summer is gone.

Had her thoughts been translated into words, they would have been these :

“ How beautiful is all the world to-day, because he is mine, and I am his ! And that dear old man’s fortune may be dawning, too, for him.” She put her hand to her breast to know that the transfer she had wrested from Joseph Holt was still safe. “ I may be the means of bringing comfort to him in the few years that may yet be his. And there is the claim, too—my claim, also, it shall be soon. Dear little claim that my lover found, and that brought me here to find my happiness.”

Frank the Artist, following her closely, felt all the glamour of the day making him lazy; for it had been assisted with half a pint of rum. And he settled himself on a great outcrop of gossan and talked to himself:—

“She’s gorn! I s’pose the yarn he told me is all right—that he wanted to apologise to her. Anyway, he gave me a drop in a bottle. He’s a better man than Baldy Davis, anyhow. There am I talkin’ at the fight, an’ what happens? I ses to Joe Holt—me havin’ been champion lightweight o’ Grong-Grong Creek in the year one thousand eight hundred an’ eighty one, I ses, ‘Duck clear of his straight lead, an’ short’ook him with the lef’.’ An’ Baldy ’ands me one to go on with, an’ ses ‘e, ‘I’ll short’ook you with me boot.’ Let him get another artist. No more labels or tr’umphal arches for him.”

He rose and walked to a break in the mulga, whence he saw Alice Power walking on the treeless plain.

“Ain’t she a beauty, that Miss Power! There she is, skippin’ through the saltbush. I wonder if Joe ’Olt means well? Wonder if I done anythink crook! I don’t think he’s got the cheek to ’urt her; but he’s a bad bloke. I’ll go and see.”

And he departed resolute of spirits, if a trifle uncertain in the legs, and made such good headway that he reached the Silver Star ahead of its Lady.

Barney Cue and Robert Sands walked together towards the Silver Star.

“Have you heard of your luck?” asked Barney Cue.

“Yes, the luck has come in time.”

“I’ve seen her. She’s the biggest thing in the world.”

“Is it really true?”

"It's gorspel. I've seen her. I pegged the Broken Hill South for me and Charlie."

"Then she is doubly provided for, thank God!"

"I'm glad twice over you've got the luck, now you tell me that. And where are you off to?"

"Miss Alice has gone to Charlie Holt's claim, and I am going there to meet her."

"The Silver Star's shut down, though."

"I know."

"I'm going there after I call at the Silver King. I want to borrow a few drills from Charlie Holt. I'm out of steel."

"I'll see you there then, Mr. Cue. I must hurry;" and at the forking of the bridle track they separated.

Along that rotting hill of mica which men knew as the Silver Star were many windlasses covering trial-shafts; but most of the shafts were deserted—proved duffers nearly all of them—sunk to strike the "continuation of the Silver Star lode" when there was no "continuation" and no "lode"; for Charlie Holt had mined a rich little gas-vein, and the end of it was in sight already.

On Charlie Holt's claim there was a bough shed, used as a smith's shop, and under it a forge and anvil, a cooling tub and a 400-gallon iron tank painted red. By the horse yard broken up by hoofs and desiccated by the searching winds, were two tents—their flaps beating idly in the gale. A pile of bagged ore was stacked by the logging of the shaft, and a living tree, its trunk half hidden by mullock, grew through the dump. A windlass, with its swaying rope, was over the shaft

and above it ballooned a windsail ; and a bough shelter broke the sunrays for the bracemen. Picks and shovels and greenhide ore buckets were strewn about the dump.

Joseph Holt—his eyes mad as a mountain steer's—sharpened a sheath knife on the grindstone in the blacksmith's shop. He felt the edge of the knife, and laughed madly as he sheathed it ; then, taking up the bottle and glass which were really the cause of the wild and false sense of injustice his vanity had suffered, he brought them to the dump, and there seated himself and drank morosely, and talked to the sweeping high winds :—

“ If that hamfatted artist doesn't come quickly, I'll break his jaw for him when he does turn up ; and when she comes here, it will be the Broken Hill transfer or her life. I'll do him in, too, that old chap—as soon as look at him.”

He interrupted himself to drink again. “ How I hate her—and love her ! Love her, because I want her as a thirsty man wants water—hate her because she will not look at me. . . . Oh ! to see her beaten—to see her in a woman's proper mood, which is submission—dependent as a gin. Kicked to heel like a drover's dog. Kiss her one minute and strike her the next. . . . With the revenge will come the money. If I don't get that Broken Hill interest, I'm flat broke ; but I'll get it . . . by all the little tin gods that were ever invented, I'll get it !”

He drank again ; and his seething brain took another fancy as he looked at the heat haze trembling on the rise.

"Look at the haze on the iron slugs—breaths of all the dead men trembling in the heat."

His gaze wandered to the brandy bottle in his hands, and his thoughts took another turn.

"How many dead men has Jimmy Hennessy counted out? Old J.D.K.Z. square face; he's strong—strong as mustard; Old Jamaica, he's made men do things; but Jimmy Hennessy's the daddy of 'em all. Here's to you, Jimmy—you're comfort—comfort and laziness and fire all together at the same time. There's ten ton of ore bagged there—fifteen hundred quid if it's a penny; and it's all his. Strike him dead! He's got the girl and the claim, and if that old Snufflebuster Sands dies she'll have the share in Broken Hill, and Charlie will get that, too. . . . No! he won't. If I wade through hell to it I'll have it!"

He staggered up the dump, and, leaning on the windlass frame, looked down the shaft. "Oh! to see Charlie Holt down there, smashed but alive, and to throw stones down on him and laugh at all his cries!"

The wind lulled and changed in a minute, and he turned suddenly: "Who said murder? Who said it? Nobody! . . . It was only the wind in the sail, but 'murder's' the word. . . . Yes, and money. . . . Money and murder, that's what the wind says; that's what the wind says crying down the sail."

He descended the dump to the bottle that was his heaven and his hell, and drank again.

"Here's luck. Strike him dead and send whips of luck to me."

And then he saw Frank the Artist, breathless from the

long run made to head off the Lady; and he swayed unsteadily to meet him.

"So you've come, Michael Angelo Rembrandt?"

"Yes," gasped Frank the Artist. "I run to get here before her—she's comin'."

"Where? Quick! How?"

"Behind me now! She started before; but I come through the mulga, and got here quick—to—to—tell yer."

"To get a nip, you mean."

"Gimme one, then."

"Not much. Clear out. Come back in half an hour and I'll give you a bottle."

"Can't I have one now?"

"There! There's a nip in the heel of it—clear out, quick!"

"Will I?" said Frank the Artist to himself, grown suddenly suspicious. "I won't go far."

And he took the heel tap behind the large tent near the horse yard, and waited.

"She's coming," said the dipsomaniac. "Good! I'll lie low for a bit."

And as he hid behind the dump Alice appeared from a mulga belt and advanced through the saltbush and the scented broom.

"Mr. Sands!" she cried, as she came to the blacksmith's shop and waited. "Not in the yard nor in the sheds. Can he be in the tent? Mr. Sands! Mr. Sands!"

With the practice born of use, for she had been below since her engagement had given her at least a sentimenta

interest in the claim, she climbed the dump, and leaning on the cross piece of the windlass, cried: "Is anybody below?"

And then she shrieked, for Joseph Holt came behind her, clasped her in his arms. She half turned in his grip and saw him.

He saw that look of revulsion, and it maddened him the more.

"Ah! you don't like the look of me. Ssh! You little devil."

"Charlie! Charlie!"

"He's not here—not yet. You're to be married soon, aren't you—and get that precious character of yours put right again?"

"You brute! You brute!" she cried, and struck him in the face.

He laughed. "Scratch away; I like it."

"Oh, you're mad!" cried the struggling girl. "Let me go!"

"When I get that transfer of the Broken Hill share."

"It is not mine."

"That old fool's got one leg in the grave. Give it to me!"

"It is not mine, and I will not give it up."

"You want it for your fancy man, Charlie."

At that she wrenched one hand free and struck him on the face. His rage began to be cold, and was therefore more dangerous.

"Will you give it up or shall I choke you?"

"It is not mine. I will not give it up."

"Then I'll have your life."

“ Charlie ! Save me ! ”

“ He’s not here. He’ll find your body.”

She snatched the knife from his belt.

He laughed again, and bending her hand back released her for a moment, and took the knife again.

“ Hurry ! ”

“ I’ll die first. It is my honour and my trust.”

“ We’ll see—down with you.”

He threw her under the windlass ; but she caught at the rope and gripped it desperately, and swung on the shaft hidden to the waist.

She closed her eyes to shut out the horror of the depth below.

“ You will not give it up ? ” he cried.

“ Oh, if I could ! ”

“ I want the money, and I want you. I hate you, and I love you, and I’ll have you.”

“ God help me ! ”

“ Aye ! Call to the skies. There’s no man to help you.”

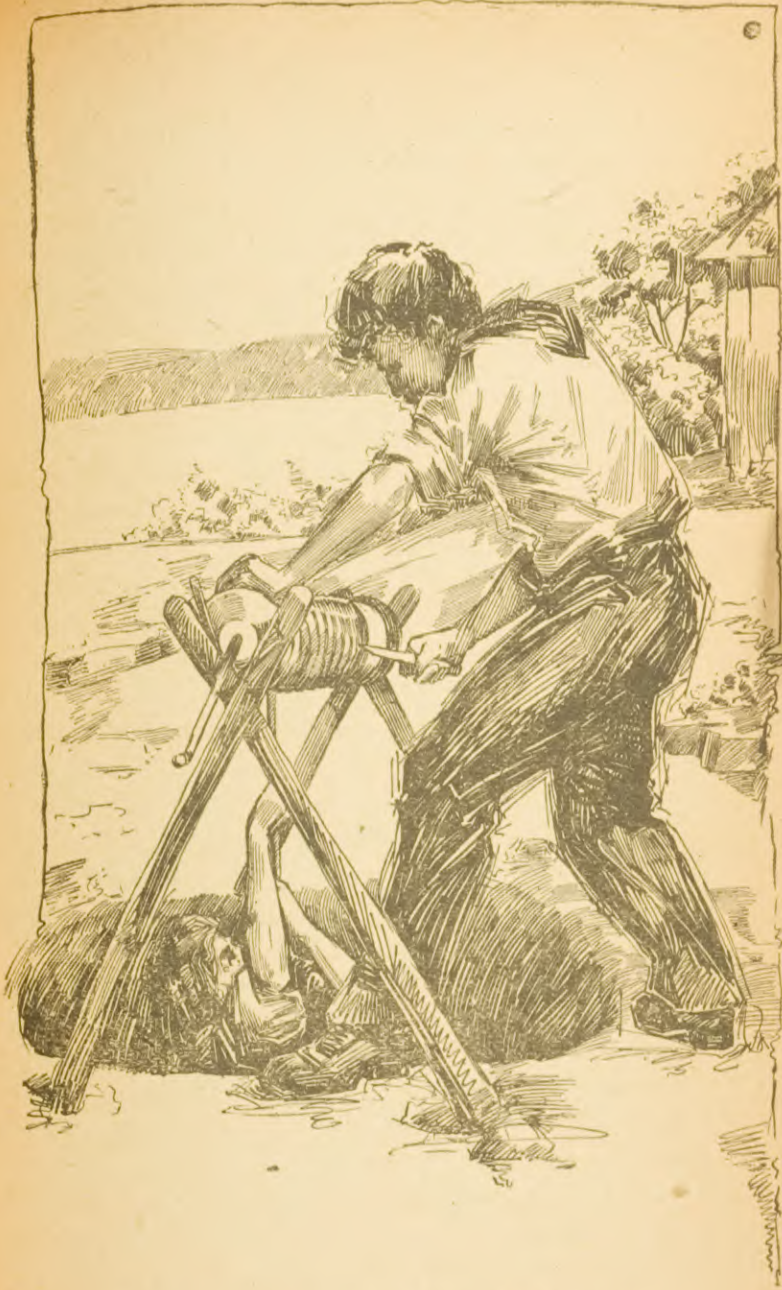
He took the knife from his belt, and brought its edge against the rope. “ Time’s up ! Do you consent ? I want you, too.”

“ No ! No ! No ! ” she said quite despairingly now.

“ Then if you’re not for me—you are for none. No man shall have you if I don’t. I’ll throw you—an angel—to the pit. I’ll send you pure to the grave. I’ll give your beauty to the dark.”

“ And my memory to my dear love—and my soul to God.”

“ And mine to hell if another man ever sees you again.”



She caught at the rope and gripped it desperately.



He cut at the rope ; but Sands struck his hand, and the knife fell down the shaft as Joseph Holt turned and struggled with him. The heroic old weakling thought not of himself, but cried to Alice :—

“ Swing out, Alice ; swing to the other side ! ”

It was her last conscious act ; she fainted, but only for a moment as she swung herself to the brace. And she saw Joseph Holt tripping Sands with his feet and choking him with his hands and forcing him over the sill of the shaft. “ This shaft’s your grave, you old thief ! ” said he.

“ The rope ! ” cried Alice. “ Cling to the rope ! ”

He had fallen lower ere he grasped it—only his head showed above the mouth of the shaft. Joseph Holt felt for his knife and remembered its loss, and then pulled out the catch. The windlass revolved with frightful rapidity, and the descent would have been as bad as a direct fall only that the barrel revolved stiffly in its bearings, the drum being too long for the uprights. But, as it was, Sands was shaken almost to pieces when Frank the Artist, rushing up the dump, held with all his weight on to the strap that served as a brake, and then threw himself on to the slowing windlass handle, and lowered Sands slowly to the bottom ; for Frank the Artist could not raise the weight.

“ And now for you, my lady ! ” said Joseph Holt, not seeing Frank the Artist, and forgetting Sands as being a dead man. “ I’d have you now if death were coming over the next rise.”

“ Oh, there is no escape ! ” she cried, as Charlie Holt ran up to her. “ Oh ! my love it is the end ! ”

"I've a ton of lead for you," said Joseph Holt, trying to draw his revolver; but his cousin knocked him down, and immediately forgot him, for Alice was in his arms and sobbing.

It was left to Barney Cue to put Joseph Holt out of action, for he shot the madman through the arm as he lifted his revolver to shoot Charlie.

"Not now! But I've five shots left yet," gasped Joseph Holt, struggling with his pain. "Wait! Wait!" and he ran into the mulga belt and disappeared.

"Never mind him," cried Frank the Artist. "Get the old bloke. Joe threw him down the shaft."

Cue ran up the dump and looked down the shaft. "You spragged it just in time. I'll go down on the timbers. Who's got a strap? I'll tie him to the rope."

"I ain't," said Frank the Artist.

"My belt will do, then," said Barney Cue, and he climbed down the shaft. A few minutes later he called on them to haul; and they brought Robert Sands to surface, badly shaken, but alive.

Charlie Holt half led, half carried, Alice to his horse, and the horse bore her slowly to the township; and Frank the Artist, who had not known such a strenuous day for many years, assisted Barney Cue to support the wavering steps of Robert Sands.

CHAPTER XI.

JOSEPH HOLT, exhausted by running and the pain of his wounded arm, halted on the open plain.

"That waster Cue has broken my arm," he said, clenching his teeth against the pain. "I've done for that old fool, anyhow—he's smashed down the shaft. His fourteenth of Broken Hill is anybody's now. Well, I've done myself in. They'll run me down until they kill me; but I'll wipe out a few first—Buck and Charlie for choice, and then that damned girl. I'd like to spoil her face and make it a thing to shudder at."

The rustling of a wallaby in the mulga startled him, and he fingered the revolver nervously. "I'm done in; but not without a fight for it. I'll go on, double round the hill, and get back to the mine. I'll be beaten soon; but that's not yet."

His doubling round the hill was the safety of Charlie Holt and the Lady, for when Joseph Holt came round the hill by the Silver Star the lovers had already passed on to the township and to safety.

Frank the Artist and Barney Cue holding up the dead weight of the old man between them, left the mine and walked very slowly through the mulga belts to the plain.

"My word," said the perspiring Artist, "the old bloke weighs twenty-two 'underweight to the ton."

"You're in bad condition," said the herculean Barney Cue, "too soft for the Silver Star. Go and work in a feather bed factory."

He put one knee in the dust, and made a seat of the other; and Sands rested and drank from the waterbag carried by Barney Cue.

"How's that? Better?"

"Yes."

"Well, on we go again—no time to lose. That swine Joe is about somewhere."

"It is 'ot," said the perspiring Frank. "I'd like a go o' rum now."

"You put your back into it, and this old chap you're carrying will give you a 400-gallon tank of it."

"He carn't; he don't keep a pub."

"No, but he's going to be a millionaire, and he'll be able to buy pubs by the waggon load."

"Is he? My oath!" and Frank the Artist became suddenly energetic and fearful for Sands.

"We musn't let him fall," he added. "Hold up, Mister, it ain't far."

"I am very shaken, but I'll do my best," replied Sands.

And then a bullet sang from the mulga belt, and Barney Cue drew his revolver.

"There! D—— it! Out of the scrub, the murderin' cow! You take the old man. I'll catch this tiger if a man can do it."

He plunged into the scrub in the direction of the report, and Frank the Artist found a new anxiety.

"Nice thing," he said aloud, "if that Joe 'Olt 'ud hit me. I've got to carry the old bloke meself. If Joe shoots, the old bloke 'ull get it first. Oh, won't I 'ave a rum when I get to Baldy's. Hold up, mate, come on!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE precise and angular lady whom Buck Crawford's substitute had delivered to the Silver Star that day could not be induced to make herself at home. She would not even remove her bonnet, as if the action would leave her gagged and bound in the enemy's hands.

She waited by the bagatelle table in the Apollyon bar-room, stern and uncompromising, looking straight before her—a woman hard-hearted—which is the cruellest and most ungrateful thing on earth.

In Buck Crawford she found a character as uncompromising as her own, but a mind more logical and a sternness more judicial.

"So you're the Lady's Aunt?"

"Yes. For a mnoth I was quite distracted to find her whereabouts. We are a very respectable family."

"You seem to have been a very uncomfortable family," said Buck grimly.

"Shame has never touched our name—except once; and I fear for our good name now."

"Don't you tell me you think the Lady'll ever bring shame to you. It's the other way."

"How can you say that to me, sir? I was born and

educated a lady. I was early left a widow with a large family; I have worked with my hands to keep them clean and unspotted from the world."

"An' miserable, too."

"I love that girl, Alice," said Mrs. Pontet, softening under this direct and disrespectful criticism of her fetich, which was her family.

"You don't seem to have shown it much," said Buck.

"She ran away."

"I would have followed her then; but—I don't like to tell you."

"But why? Did you think harm of the Lady for a minute? I had her on my coach for four days, and I never swore at the horses once. Don't tell me you cast her off at the beginning because you thought her crook—don't tell me that. I don't believe it. I won't listen."

"I'll tell you why. It is because she's good that I wanted her back again. She's like her father, and he disgraced us; and I feared for her."

"If her old man was like her he's full brother to an angel—and I don't give a d—— for what his brands are. Beg pardon for swearin'."

"She fell among friends. She might have fallen among thieves. We were afraid."

"If you were, why didn't you track her here before? You found out about her at the registry office weeks ago."

"I must tell you then, it seems, sir. I could not follow her before — because of my — because of my poverty."

And with the confession the sternness disappeared;

the black bonnet lowered its crest a little ; a tear or two coursed down the withered cheeks ; and Buck Crawford, with a new and poignant condemnation of his own brusquerie, saw that this woman had been hardened from without, and not from within.

“ Eh ? ” said Buck, hot and uncomfortable with shame.

“ I got a bill of sale on my piano to follow my misguided niece ; and—and—it took a fortnight to get the money.”

“ My dear woman ! ”

And then Mrs. Pontet lost all her hardness, and wept as she talked brokenly. “ And that was why ! We can all have generous impulses ; but poverty ”——

Buck Crawford, like most strong men, always weakened at the sight of a woman's tears—they horrified him really like the sight of a child in pain, not to be alleviated. He put his arm around that body of rusty crape, and said comfortingly : “ My dear woman—you are an angel, too, of your kind. I didn't know. It ain't often a piebald mare's reliable ; but good an' bad run in all shapes.”

Then sincerity recognised sincerity, and cried brokenly : “ Oh, you're a good man, and I'm glad I told you.”

“ Well, mum, your niece is heiress to an old man who swears he'll give her his interest in Broken Hill.”

“ It wouldn't be right to take it.”

“ And she's going to marry the man who owns the Silver Star, the best claim on the field.”

“ Is he a good man ? ”

“ He was born to be a bishop.”

"I'm glad he's a miner. I only knew one bishop, and he wasn't manly."

"Charlie is."

"This bishop never recognised us after my husband lost his money."

"Well, Charlie Holt will buy you forty pianos and kill your money-lender into the bargain."

"Oh! don't let him do that; it would get us talked about. And are they to be married soon?"

"As soon as I come back with supplies next coach."

"Supplies?"

"Here's the list."

He handed the paper to Mrs. Pontet; and that astonished lady read aloud: "'Three pair white gloves—two kids!' Two kids?"

"Kid gloves, y' know, and cotton gloves for Baldy. His hands sweat."

Mrs. Pontet shuddered, and hurriedly read on: "'Weddin' cake. One veil. One quart orange blossoms. Six bottles lavender-water. Serge suit. One parson.' One Parson?"

"Yes, to marry 'em; and I'll see fair."

"They must be married from my house. People would talk."

"Well, you're a decent sort," said Buck. "Now, you've had a dusty drive, and you're tired. A bottle of wine with me. Ginger, a bottle of wine."

"Ginger yourself!" replied Maudie, stung to madness by the reading of the list of supplies for her rival's wedding. "Ginger yourself! What'll you 'ave? I'desick?"

"Oh, really," protested Mrs. Pontet. "I never—never."

"What—not with cake?" persisted Buck Crawford so innocently that Mrs. Pontet capitulated.

"Well—I might, a little—with a piece of cake."

"An' a tin o' that seed cake, Ginger."

Maud tossed her head and refixed her bustle, but did not otherwise resent the name; and by and by she brought the wine and cake and cut the wire of the champagne.

"Where's my niece now?" asked Mrs. Pontet.

"At the claim. She'll be down soon, and then we'll make it up and kiss all round."

Mrs. Pontet received the suggestion with horror. "Indeed no," she said. "But I know what you mean. Really only half a glass—no more."

"It won't bite you," said Maudie Timms almost in contempt of the weakness; "it's good. Anybody could see you was a noo chum at this."

Mrs. Pontet, regarding her with the old severity of manner, said: "I trust that you also are a new-chum—at this."

"Me? No fear. I'm an old hand. I been here five weeks. I was the second woman on the field, and Sarah Reed's the third."

Proud of her position as a pioneer of five weeks, Maudie took the money and flaunted back to the bar. There she regarded with great disfavour the ladylike habits and delicate eating of Mrs. Pontet, who ventured on the cake crumb by crumb, as if she were a sparrow, and sipped the wine as if she suspected poison in the cup

"Old sight," said Maudie, "all crape an' crinoline. Thank Gord, I don't make a show of meself. *Ive*' got taste, *I* have."

And as if to prove it she admired herself in the heel of a glass, and settled her bustle for the hundredth time that day, for from being once a mannerism it had become an obsession.

"I cannot forget your kindness," said Mrs. Pontet to Buck Crawford. "I hope we shall meet again"; and her hand trembled so that she spilled the wine.

"When you're goin' down I'll drive you, mum."

Maud came from behind the bar with a cloth, and wiped the table, cheerfully impudent all the time; fixing Mrs. Pontet with her eyes: "What a lot of clumsy kids I've got."

Mrs. Pontet regarded her with quiet scorn and withdrew to her room.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUCK CRAWFORD took his letters from the table and walked out to the street door, saying to himself: "It'll be the big coach. I s'pose they're all goin'—but I mightn't have anybody."

"Gettin' ready for the road, Mr. Crawford?" said Maudie.

"Yes, I'll have to fix up that list again. If the lady goes home to be married I won't want the parson."

"Keep him on the list, Mr. Buck. I might want him myself."

"Why, you ain't caught a fish yet," said Buck, and so escaped.

"Not yet, but I will," said Maudie, her teeth clicking in resolution. "Here's Jersey comin'."

As Jersey Clarke crossed the street from the Native Silver Hotel Maudie ran to the till and took therefrom the rings and bangles that made her look like a pawnbroker's window full of unredeemed pledges, and donned them hurriedly.

"H'lo? Where's Baldy?"

Maudie gave him one of her most winning smiles and replied: "Out! won't I do?"

"Oh, yes. Lord! I am tired."

"Are yer—yer poor old chap."

"Not so old, neither," said Jersey Clarke sharply.

And then he added, "Yes I'm dead beat."

"I'd like a nice long rest, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," said Jersey, not knowing that respective ideas of restfulness differed extremely.

"Where'd you like to be, Mister Clarke?"

"Well," said Jersey, describing the prospector's heaven; "I'd like to have me horses turned out on a nice patch o' grass near a good waterhole in the granite, and plenty o' tucker an' a good ounce reef."

"Gold?"

"Yes, I'm sick of silver."

"An' I'm tired of public life. I'd like to retire. You know, settle down—get married."

"H'm."

"Yes. Not to no flighty young feller who'd make yer jealous, but to a nice, steady goin' gentleman comfortably off—a nice gentleman like—well, like you."

"My word, you are quick off the mark!"

"Now don't go sayin' that it's too sudden," said Maudie; "that's played out."

"Ye mean it?"

"Straight wire."

"Well, come to think of it," said Jersey Clarke; "if you mean business, I don't mind."

"Righto—when?"

"Well, what do *you* think?"

Maudie laughed nervously. "What d'ye think yer-self, go on. You're the gentleman."

"Well, you say!"

"Well, as soon as the parson comes up."

"That's next coach. My grief. You *are* sudden!"

"Is it a deal?"

"Oh, yes. Give us a drink."

"Bottle o' wine?"

"Yes."

She opened the wine and filled two glasses.

"This is where you kiss, ain't it?" asked Jersey, admitting his own ignorance and his belief in her knowledge at the same time.

"You can kiss me 'and."

"Only the hand?"

"Hand to-day. Face to-morrow. Don't get too bold too fast. Another, kind love?"

"Looking at yer," responded Jersey Clarke, not to be outdone in gallantry. "Three quid, ain't it?"

"No, a pound to you."

"It was three quid last time."

"Yes—but not *now*—old darlin'."

"Now, see here. It's three quid, an' three quid I pay. Don't do that again."

"You're angered. I on'y did it for your good, Jers—that's all, dear."

"Well?"

"I was jokin'."

"Well, don't joke again."

"Jers!"

She had come from behind the counter, having just deliberately untied her boot lace; and now she placed her foot on a chair, and called him again; "Jers!"

"What?"

"Come an' tie up me boot—dear."

Still irritated by the assumption that he would abet her in petty thefts and meannesses, he came to her sulkily. "All right."

She attempted to delay him over the operation. "Tie it in a true lover's knot, Jers.;" and Jersey Clarke most ashamed replied, "Oh, talk sense," as Baldy Davis entered and discovered his shame.

"Lord! There's Baldy!" said Maudie Timms, removing her foot from the chair.

"Send I may live," said Davis to himself; "she's got the dead wood on Jersey Clarke."

Flushed with victory, Maudie Timms walked to the entrance to the residential portion of the Apollyon Hotel, saying as she left the bar. "Will y' look after the bar for two twos, Mr. Davis—I mean, Baldy?"

And she escaped before he could resent the familiarity.

"Baldy!" echoed Davis gaspingly. "The cold cheek; an' she ain't frightened o' the sack no more. What's she done to you?"

Jersey Clarke, with affected gaiety, pointed to the wine beading in the bottle. "There's the wine, Baldy—drink to the bride."

"Mordie! S'truth, Mordie! An' she's leg-roped you, an' got you in the bails, an' branded you H-A-double S—HASS! Good Lord! Jersey Clarke—tailed, earmarked, branded, docked, hoofs cut an' broken to harness."

"Well," said Jersey Clarke, his mind groping to find a virtue for the red-haired girl, "she's a good business-woman."

"Yes, and a good wife she'd make for Solomon the

King of all the Jew-boys ; but you ain't him. What's she bringin' to you ? ”

“ I dunno. ”

“ Well, I'll tell you. Cheek and fringe an' hardface an' a bustle. What are *you* bringin' to her ? ”

“ A good claim, two water wells, township allotments an' eight an' fifty horses. ”

“ An' one goat, an' you're him. She'll take all you've got an' give you no change. She never does. ”

“ Talk away ! Talk away ! ” said Jersey Clarke, very much ashamed of himself. “ You're jealous. ”

From the corner of his eye Baldy Davis saw Maudie returning, and knew that prompt measures were necessary. He said in a hoarse whisper to the captured man : “ Here, get away by to-night's coach, before she breaks you to double harness. I'll give her a pound a week rise, and she won't think of y' a minit after that. ”

“ Not me, ” said Jersey Clarke ; “ if there's one thing I can't do its to run away from a woman. ”

“ Jers, dear, ” cried Maudie, with exaggerated sweetness, affected really to convey to Baldy Davis the paradise he had declined. “ Jers, dear, bring me them glasses. ”

As Jersey Clarke obeyed, Baldy Davis saw not the tragedy any more but the comedy of the prospector's entanglement. “ Send I may live, ” laughed Baldy Davis with cruel mirth. “ Jers dear ! Ho ! Ho ! ”

“ Take the tow'l, Jers, dear, ” said Maudie. “ I'll wash an' you wipe up. ”

And then Charlie Holt, supporting Alice Power and followed by Buck Crawford, entered ; and Maudie's

triumph changed to white-lipped fury as she saw that she had lost her audience.

"Why, what's up? What's happened?" asked Davis.

Charlie Holt replied: "Joe Holt enticed her to my claim on a false message."

"The dog!"

"Full o' zinc. He's chock full o' zinc."

"He attempted robbery and murder. Robbery of Mr. Sands's Broken Hill transfer, and murder of her because she was faithful to her trust. Look up, sweetheart, you are safe here."

"Let me rest, dear. Let me rest."

He led her to Davis's big chair by the table, and seated her there; and Maudie's passion broke bounds.

"Always in the limelight—always puttin' on the side," said Maudie, and burst into tears.

"And the message was bogus."

"Yes, but for poor old man Sands, Alice would be in the well of the Silver Star shaft."

Baldy Davis clenched his great fists determinedly.

"I'll kill that Frank the Artist. He brought the message."

"He was deceived, and at the last he proved a friend."

Mrs. Pontet, a little less stern than at her arrival, came from her room at the sound of the familiar voice, and went to Alice.

"Auntie!"

"She has come through a great trial, madam," said Charlie Holt.

"I've done with hardness," said Mrs. Pontet. "There's only one place for my sister's child, and that is here."

She opened her arms, and the weary girl went to her embrace.

"I never knew you before," said Alice, "never knew you like this."

"My poverty disguised me—warped me. I feared for you. And this gentleman is to marry you?"

"Yes, Charlie, this lady"—

"Happy to know you, madam, and glad that your misunderstandings sent her here."

"But you must be married from my house. It is my right."

"Then it shall be so, but soon. Will you leave by the coach to-night, madam?"

"Yes."

"Then, Buck, we go to-night with you."

"I'll have passengers, after all, then," said Buck. "I'm ready now."

"Then never mind baggage," said Charlie to the Lady. "We'll buy it where we're going . . . Why, it's Mr. Sands."

And Sands supported by the perspiring Artist, entered, and staggered to a chair.

"He's bruised," said the Artist; "that's all; no bones broke. Barney Cue is chasin' Joe 'Olt."

"Alice," said Sands, "the share is yours. You will be very rich. It is all for you. I will not live long to use it. It's been a hard life, and it will be an easy quitting and happiness at the last."

"You shall live to love us long. I am to be married from my Aunt's house. She is here."

"Your aunt, who drove you away! A hard woman."

"Not hard now; you shall know her. My aunt, Mrs. Pontet."

Sands rose electrified. "Mrs. Pontet!"

The woman in the rusty crape advanced to him.

"John! John Garth!"

"Who calls me John Garth?"

"I do. Sister of the Helen Bruce you married."

"For God's sake, hush! Who is that girl, your niece—the girl I know as Alice Power?"

"Her mother changed her name after your disgrace. She is your daughter."

"It was my own, then, that I saved! Mary, we were like brother and sister once. She must not know—my daughter."

"It is right she should know. Alice, this man is your father. Do not seek to know any more."

"My darling girl," said Sands, embracing her; "you shall know all some day."

"I know all I want to know, dear Mr. Sands—Daddy."

"There's nothing to know," said Baldy, "he's as straight as a gun-barrel."

"We're all for Silvertown to-night, by the second coach," said Charlie Holt. "Can you travel, Mr. Sands?"

"I'll try," said Sands, as the coach, rocking on its great springs of leather, stopped at the door, and Buck Crawford, tying the reins around the brake pedal, alighted. He and Barney Cue entered the bar together.

"Did you catch him?" asked Davis of Cue.

"Yes," said Buck, "he caught him, and then Bob here got him."

"Where is he? Where's Joe Holt?" asked Davis.

"He's mine," said Bob the Finisher. "Barney Cue shot him, and he's mine." And, he added, as if to leave the consideration of trivialities and speak of things that really mattered: "Pannikin's empty."

"Good enough for him, I say," said Davis. "Here, Frank, put the luggage on the coach. Copper-top! A last drink for everybody."

"Charlie, Mr. Sands and the aunt can travel on the box. You an' the Lady take the inside."

"But I'd like to talk to you sometimes, Buck," said Alice.

"Only sometimes though! No! You an' Charlie go inside. It won't be so rough on the horses. It won't take their minds off their work—an' it won't be so rough on—me."

He turned aside to say the last, and tried the whip fall in a clear space of the bar.

Baldy Davis came to his mate. "No drink, Buck?"

"No."

The elder man put his hand affectionately on Buck Crawford's shoulder.

"Bite on the bullet, Buck," he said. "Bite on the bullet."

"Never fear," replied Crawford, going to the coach and mounting to the box-seat, when suddenly Alice returned, saying: "Oh, I nearly forgot."

She entered the bar again and shook hands with them all.

"Good-bye, Frank, and thank you for everything and good-bye, Miss Timms."

But Maudie, entrenched behind the bar, put her hands behind her back, and said: "Good-bye, Miss Power."

Alice was so happy that she persisted. "Won't you shake hands, Maud?"

At that Maudie gave her hand grudgingly, murmuring, "Oh, I s'pose so."

"Good-bye. And good-bye, Mr. Clarke; and I hope you'll never come to the end of the silver."

But Maudie had proprietary rights, and could not bear this. "Jers," she said sharply.

"Yes, Mord."

"Come 'ere—wipe them glasses."

"Scuse me, Miss Alice—yes, Mord."

"Good-bye all," said Alice, standing at the door. "Good-bye, dear old Silver Star. There'll be plenty of ladies here yet, but none will love you as the first did."

Buck Crawford, from his high seat on the box, cracked his great whip; and the six horses stood up to their collars at the sound.

"All aboard," cried Buck.

Maudie Timms could bear it no longer. "Oh, I'm a beast and she's a lady!" said she, running to the chair by the bagatelle table. "Here, Jers! untie me boot."

He unlaced a boot; she took it off, and ran to the coach with it.

"All clear?"

"All clear—right away," said Buck. "So long all."

"Stand the leaders up to it, Frank."

And the whip cracked like a rifle shot, and the team broke away at a gallop.

"Long life, Miss," cried Maudie; "and you too, you beautiful toff." She kissed her hand to Charlie Holt, and cried: "And there's my trotter case for luck."

She threw her boot after the coach; and it struck Bob the Finisher on the ear and almost deprived Silver Star of its undertaker.

"The Lady of the Silver Star," cried Davis. "Hip! Hip! Hip!"

"HOORAY!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE Barrier night descending to the great saucer of the plain, the primrose of late sunset fading, and the mystery of the night to come. On the ascending plain loomed the coach heavily black, and the horses at a walk.

And behind the coach were Charlie Holt and Alice Power, filled with the hope of the new life but saddened a little at parting from the place that had meant so much to them. They stopped to look back at the lights below, which winked into existence as the darkness came to earth.

"Good-bye to Silver Star," said Alice very softly.

"Only for a little."

"The coach is far ahead."

"We've eased the horses up the rise, Alice."

"Oh, you darling fraud. You walked up so that we might be alone."

"Does it matter, Alice? We'll catch it at the top of the hill."

"Nothing matters, I think."

"Nothing—while we're together. No road can be too steep, no way can be too long."

And then the moon arose—a great globe of beaten gold flattened at the upper edge, three days senescent after her full pride ; and the man and the girl walked on framed in the mobile silver light.

[THE END.]

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THE SAMARITAN OF THE RIVERINE.

A Samaritan of the Riverine

PART I.

IN the wild, burning sheep-walk of Central Eastern Australia, watered by the mighty Darling and sundry smaller and deceitful streams; where the winter is a flood; where the summer is a furnace, and the sun and the baked dust and the parched gums are of a uniform dull red; and where the early spring is as delicate as its sister seasons are fierce, the Samaritan of the Riverine lived in the body. And there he lives in the memory even unto this day.

But the people of the rivers did not generally know him as the Samaritan, nor do they. His real name was Stephen Been. The wags of the river styled him "The Has Been."

He was over seventy years of age, erect as a gum-tree, strong almost as a man thirty years his junior, and withal, gentle as a child, for his feet were very near the grave; and already there were whisperingly chanted in his ears the forewords of the song that all

men shall one day, dying, hear, and that the new-born have not yet forgotten. The world had dealt with him more cruelly than it does with its beasts, for he was merely a man, and a dull one, which is an animal of no fixed commercial value. This simple soul had been intended to pass through the furnace of the world unsullied. Here was a child's heart in a man's body, and everything had seemed to combine to degrade the mind of the man to the level of the beast.

When Stephen Been was arrested in a suburb of London, long ago when last century was young, he might have been described on the charge-list thus: "A clod, 18 years old." At any rate, the law recognised that he was a clod, and immediately set about breaking him in twain as a preliminary to fertilising the barren soil of his mind. The poor, shivering, frightened animal had stolen half a sheep valued five shillings, and the law sentenced him to seven years' penal servitude to square the accounts. "Debit, one half sheep, five shillings. Received payment with thanks, seven years' transportation."

If the law had made out the account in a business-like manner that is the way it would have read.

So the Clod, with a number of other clods, and a fair sprinkling of genuine criminals, was embarked for Botany Bay to serve his sentence and indirectly to lay the foundation of the Australian Nation.

Botany Bay was not the Clod's destination, by the way. Port Jackson was the particular hell he was bound for, but the knowledge of Australian geography held by English State officials at that time was limited.

If that voyage did not make of the Clod a fiend, it was not his fault. The genuine criminals, just before alluded to, were bad enough, the marines and the crew were worse. An earlier voyage of this very ship had lasted nearly two years, for the transport had taken out a cargo of female convicts on that occasion. And now it had been entrusted with the conveyance of mostly first offenders, whose chief crimes had been poverty and hunger, and whom the State alleged it intended to reform, and the State's methods of reformation were the lash, the chain, the tube gag, the collar, the scaffold—in a word, its instrument was the executioner, its example, blood.

That orgie was 40 years old and strengthened by its experiences when Stephen Been landed at Sydney Cove. Being stupid, he was very quiet, and his gaolers, mistaking his stupidity for stubbornness, brought him up for punishment on the paltriest of excuses.

They would flog the mule out of him, said they, and instead they flogged a devil in. So he became an animal, and as he passed from the lower vegetable state he had been born in to the higher life of the carnivora, he was made what the system called, "A dangerous felon." He attempted to escape. Seven years were added to his first sentence, his floggings were more frequent; then Hobart Town and Maria Island, the aggravated hells of conviction, followed. Just before his additional sentence had expired, a member of the Clod's gang—a hybrid creature, half convict, half convict's gaoler—proposed that the gang should escape in a body. The gang acted on his suggestion and attempted to break

gaol. Mr Hybrid sold them to the commander of the station, and all the escapees were captured.

More floggings, more gaol for the animal-clod. The law limited the term of imprisonment then passed on him, but it did not specify the number of lashes he was to receive. The commandant could attend to that trivial question, and, to do him the justice due to a zealous Government official, the commandant did. The informer was at this time about twenty-four years of age. He had yet to serve five years of his sentence for forgery, but the Crown granted him a free pardon as the reward of his treachery, and he left Tasmania for the mainland.

Stephen Been returned to his cell in Hobart Gaol and received the first of his new series of floggings. He did not feel the strokes, he was repeating to himself, as if he could forget it, the oath he had sworn to kill the informer. He did not flinch from the flogger, for he thought of his revenge, and revenge is the kindest liniment for wrong. So at last the most meritorious convict system had made the inoffensive Clod, first an animal, now a devil. In '52 he was discharged from Hobart Gaol after serving twenty-four years in a hell that could only have been made by man. Twenty years of a life that might have been made a source of good to the living, thrown away on expiation of an alleged crime that had long been dead.

The name of the Hybrid informer was Abel Shaw. He departed for Australia, as previously stated, and when gold was discovered at Bendigo he went to the field, and was allowed to mine, for he held a free pardon.

His claim was one of the lucky holes, the informer's fortune was assured from the hour.

In '54 Stephen Been reached Bendigo also, and stepped into a new world. His intention was to raise himself into a respectability he had never known in the days of his innocence, and to do this only money was necessary; for the one-time Clod saw that respectability is merely accumulated money in its most portable form. He had never borne the appearance of a typical criminal, and as the police inspection was lax owing to the smallness of the force, he was allowed to secure a claim unquestioned. In three days he had bottomed. With what trembling eagerness he washed his first pan of dirt! The result of his labour with the pick, and the shovel, and the cradle, and the dish meant more than gold to him. Good, they meant peace; bad, they were the prophets of a return to the old life. But the results were good. The Clod-animal poured the water from the dish very carefully, and saw seven water-worn pebbles, which he took up on the point of his clasp-knife, and felt anxiously with his tongue. Then he began to tremble and to flush hot and cold, and at last the tears came.

He found gold. More, he had found hope. For over a fortnight he won at the rate of upwards of three ounces a day.

Fortune, as if to atone for his twenty four years in perdition, courted him and gave him gold. The ring of the pick was gold. The sweat of his brow, which had been agony at Maria Island, was wealth at old Bendigo.

And then the determination to kill the informer came back to him and blotted out all his visions of happiness. He had been planning what he would do with the money. Of course he would go back to his own little village in Devonshire provided, certainly, that he could escape the vigilance of the police. And when he reached England he would play the banker to his family and all of his old friends.

His people should never toil again. Happiness should be theirs for the rest of their days, and all the old daddies, who had mumbled their kind-hearted commonplaces over him as a boy, worn old figures whose joints had been curved and gnarled by the bitterness of their unproductive labour, Clods who had wrought to make the master rich, the master whose clay they were—should have their pipes alight and their glasses filled for ever and ever.

So the poor heart, that wanted to buy love at any price or to steal it if need be, builded his castles and day-dreamed between the pick-strokes. All the people he intended to benefit were long since dead, and freed at last from the dread of starvation which had accompanied them as a shadow through all their cheerless, songless lives. But Stephen did not consider that death might have spoiled his plans. He had suffered so much, and yet had lived, and he thought it must have been terribly difficult to die. And so he planned lovingly for the few people who had given him a kind word or look in the days of his cloddishness—planned to requite them as their misery deserved, not

with the measure of man, but with the measure of love, brimful and running over.

But a product of the old, half-forgotten hell—Shaw, the informer to wit—stepped in and blasted all these unselfish intentions.

Stephen Been met his enemy in a a busy street, or rather track, of the camp some months after he began to win a fortune.

The Samaritan-to-be forgot all his dreams of benevolence to the dwellers in the little English village he left so long ago. Within the space of a thought he sprang at the informer, closed with him, and bore him to the ground, and there deliberately began to strangle him. A trooper—probably for the first time in the history of the world—was at hand, and he promptly struck Stephen Been with the blunt edge of his sword, and towed him to a large hut with many intermissions in the slabs thereof which served as a gaol. Final result: The informer was regarded as a martyr who had done his duty to society, and had been undeservedly punished thereof; and “Lag” Been was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment.

A few months after his sentence had expired he fell in with his enemy again, this time at Wood’s Point. A little more gold-winning, another assault, another sentence, this time for five years. And when that sentence had expired he found himself with only a few pounds as capital. His gold had been deposited with a man who was shortly after detected robbing a sluice-box, and all the metal in the possession of the thief was handed to the robbed company as being their property.

Said Stephen Been, as he left Beechworth Gaol in '62, and shook his impotent hand at its heavy blue-stone walls : " I'll kill the dog next time ! I'll kill *you* if I live long enough ! "

But he did not stay long in the county of Gold. The existence of the metal meant men, and the presence of men meant police and the law. Even to find his enemy and wreak a just vengeance on him was not sufficient inducement to brave the terrors of solitary ; the hunted man saw that only in comparative solitude could he find peace. Wherefore he shouldered his swag and stepped bravely north—an indescribably pathetic old man of 55. The torture of rigorous discipline had brought the sorrow that whitens the hair and furrows the face. It had made his heart old before his heart had known youth, but it had also developed in him wonderful physical endurance ; it had deadened his body to pain, made it indifferent to hunger ; converted him into a perpetually adaptable creature to all, however rapidly changing, conditions of existence.

And as he trudged along the rough track his heart began to beat with youth as it had never beaten before. He had never felt love, except that dull half-awakening to human sympathy in old Bendigo in '54, and now the million scents and voices of the eternally beautiful bush told him that such pure attractions as it could offer were the especial property of such as he.

" Ting-a-ling ! " said the bell-bird, and the swag was heavy no more ; " Tweet-tweet ! " said the minah, and gaol and the informer were forgotten.

North, farther north, through the giant granite ranges, through the valleys of the Murray, and into the plains of the west he travelled—flying from man always, going deeper into the heart of the great wild whose message of peace had been breathed to him 300 miles nearer the sea.

At the stations in his track he never asked for the usual ration of flour and mutton ; he demanded it and paid for it, and then tramped to his lonely camp, a mile removed from even the horse paddock. This sullen reserve lasted long after the Murrumbidgee had become a daily sight to him, and the speed of the current heralding its junction with the mighty Murray showed longer and stronger in the eddies at the bends. There, venturing near to a homestead unusually early in the day, a horseman rode up to him and inquired if he wanted work.

“Yes, sir,” said Stephen Been, humbly pulling at his hat, as if he were still a number and not a man.

“I want a man to load wool and to take charge of a barge to Echuca.”

Of course Stephen Been accepted, and a new era began for him. He fulfilled his contract satisfactorily, and made many trips on the river, which he began to love as he loved children, and all things that were young and were not men. He could not read, and yet he was the best freight clerk the rivers ever had.

“Two tons of wire for Burrabogie,” said the carrier at Echuca, “and a case of whisky for Mungadal,” and so on. And Stephen Been could have told you all his freight before he was out of port a day. He used to run over the names of the stations on the river just for

the pleasure of feeling his importance as a freight clerk. You might find him a dozen times a day chanting the euphony of the station nomenclature thus : " Groongal, Pevensey, Mungadal, Eli Elwah, Burrabogie, Illillawa, Albemarle, Terrywalka, Ulonga," to infinity.

And then it was a new life. His importance as steersman of the barge, the quiet green-leaf tinted water, the sobbing of the engine of the towing steamer as it breasted the current—all had the charm of novelty, and the appreciation of newness which is surely God's best gift to the adventurous man with a soul.

By-and-by he became a property-holder. The " Boss " liked the strong old man who could work without a word, who never used the usual language of the river and the shearing-shed (the " Boss " could curse fluently, by the way ; and the " Super " was exceedingly profane and blasphemous), and who could be trusted alone with a bargeload in a " stranger " port because he never got drunk. So one day, being present at the sale of a river navigating company's fleet, the " Boss," having previously sounded his bargeman on the subject, purchased the " Tilpa," a side-wheel steamer, ordinarily used for trading purposes, and her attendant giant, the " Bunyip " barge. Then he arranged instalment terms with the ex-convict, and Been entered on his new line of ship owning. On the strength of being a shipowner, he secured long credit with several firms for the supply of miscellaneous stores, and started from Echuca one summer night with steamer and barge laden almost hull down with everything that the inhabitants of the west might require—sheep shears and moleskins,

fencing wire and onions, boots, saddles and tobacco—a floating store.

It was a happy life from the beginning. He managed to pay for the barge, he opened a bank account, he was respected, men called him "Captain Been," he had never to leave the beloved rivers. Most of his dealing with the stations lying on the 3,000 miles of water were on the credit system, and here his absolute dearth of education told much against him. However, his faultless memory and a unique description of book-keeping invented by himself and consisting chiefly of sundry knife-cuts on the starboard paddle-box, enabled him to collect at least 75 per cent. of his money. That and 100 per cent. profit considered left him very much on the right side of the ledger. He would sell his stock at the head of the Darling, and then load with wool for Echuca, to return with stores on the next fresh. The life drew from him all sourness. He became the Samaritan of the Rivers. The "Tilpa" up or down trip continually carried men who wanted to "work their passage," and who evidently translated that phrase as meaning the consumption of as much tucker as the cook could prepare. And be the end of their stage at Brewarrina, or Bourke, or Tilpa, or Louth, or Wilcannia, or Mendie, they left with half a pint of whisky in their stomachs and a shilling or two in their pockets, and some tobacco and rations in their swags. Did not Bathurst, the educated loafer of the rivers, get three pounds of Captain Been by telling a story of an asthmatic mother, and did he not a year afterwards tell me that Been was the Samaritan of the Riverine, and wherefore is not this history written?

The loafers who sponged on him loved this simple old man who knew of nothing but the rivers, and would talk of them for hours.

“ You know that bend near ‘ Crismus Island,’ ” he would say, “ there’s two of the cunningest water-hens you ever see. I believe they know the ‘ Tilpa ’ now. Why, they’ve been here this five years, an’ whenever we passes there they flies around to the stern’s much as t’ say, ‘ Let’s see if it’s the dear old ‘ Tilpa,’ or that puffing ‘ Billy, the Saddler,’ what’s always firin’ rifles at us. I believe they can read the name of my boat, too.”

And then he would repeat that only boast of his, to the effect that “ he could take the ‘ Tilpa,’ what was drawing four feet seven, over a four foot six bar ; and he could steer her from Dunlop to Albemarle blindfold ! Yes, he could. Oh, yer might stare and yer might say no ! But he could. If it comes to that, he’d give you a passage an’ prove he could do it blindfold—there ! ”

His friends loved him, and he knew no enemy. There was in his nature a stubborn good, which even the great penal system had been unable to destroy. From Fort Bourke to the Campaspe he was known and honoured, and yet even most men knew his history.

His moments of sadness were few. He felt fiercely revengeful when he thought of the informer, but the memory of his wrong was beginning to fade in his prosperity.

Only when he saw children playing he realised what he had lost, and their voices were as the touch of a hand on his old loveless heart. If he could have stolen one of

those curly-haired babies at Culpaulin or Dunlop I believe he would have done it.

But '78 brought him the love he craved for.

In a reach near Easter Island the "Tilpa" stopped in the early moonlight to "wood-up," and the gentlemen of the river who worked their passages wrestled languidly with the axe on the rottenest, and therefore the most easily cut and the worst fuel they could find.

In the centre of a space embayed in the shore by the island a solitary traveller's fire gleamed fitfully. The traveller was extremely disgusted with his situation; he had been intended by nature to be the most gregarious of men, and circumstances had made him an Ishmael on the track.

This was his second night away from home, and the prospect of the road, which had seemed to him free and independent and glamoured with the romance of the bush, was now very, very dreary.

Therefore, when he saw the "Tilpa" moored to the bank and all hands, from captain to cook, cutting wood for the engine, he walked over to the workers, wishing to lend a hand and too proud to risk a snub. So he stood by while they worked, and would very probably not have spoken to them but for the fact that he saw a tall, spare, magnificent old man bowing under the weight of a dead branch.

"Daddy? I'll give you a lift, Daddy," he said.

Stephen Been staggered with amazement, and the weight fell on the traveller's shoulders.

When the work was finished the captain almost forced the young man to accompany him to the little

saloon next the wheel-house, where they drank a tot of whisky each. He questioned the young fellow in a kindly, inquisitive manner, which proved his interest, and, little by little, he found that the traveller's name was George Garth, that he had quarrelled with his father, whom he said he did not like, and there was an end of the matter. He had set out from Louth two days before to walk until he met something to do.

And then the captain insisted on Garth remaining aboard, and he sent one of the gentlemen who were "working their passage" for the swag by the new chum fire. Then he installed his friend in the best berth on the wheel-deck, and saw Garth, worn out with his unusual tramp, fall asleep as the "Tilpa" steamed down the moonlit river.

That word "Daddy" from such a man had given Stephen Been the son of his loveless dreams; had won the Samaritan for ever.

Next day Garth asked to be given something to do, and the old man, who had very hazy ideas on the subject, suggested that he ought to take stock. And Garth did so, and placed the "Tilpa's" financial condition in such a light that the Samaritan thought his knife-notch style of book-keeping might not be absolutely perfect after all.

He broached the subject to the mate in the wheel-house that evening.

"Seems to me, Jim," said he, "that the young man might 's well stay on an' look after the bills. Be a—what's it?"

"Soopercargo," said the mate, shortly.

"Yes, that's it," assented Stephen Been. "Won't do makin' any more cuts on the paddle-box."

"That's a fact. If you chop it much more there'll be no starb'd sponson at all. Bime-by you'll have a ship made of holes."

And so George Garth became supercargo, and the trade with the young women at the stations increased amazingly, and the old man found the young one more valuable than he had ever dreamed he could be, and loved him more dearly with the birth of each successive day.

The affection was mutual—the old man was lovable, and then they had so much in common; both loved the river—that was everything. And Been showed the supercargo the wonderful water-hens in the bend near Christmas Island, and told numberless stories of driving the steamer full speed ahead when the river was dangerously low because the banks were streets of fire; and of shooting the punt-rope at Wilcannia when the stream was in flood; he sang, in his rough vocabulary, the epic of the river men. And when they passed a tortoise paddling and spluttering in an insanity of fear of the smoking bulk of the steamer, Been would remark that the terrapin was very like an old jew lizard he had known at Fort Bourke in '74, and "that there jew lizard, he was a terror for santypedes an' such like, an' he once et half a pound o' shin o' beef at a sitting, he did."

For his part, Garth was in paradise. The preliminary work of setting affairs in order being ended, he had nothing to do while the boat was between stopping

places, and so he roamed over the steamer at his will, now in the wheel-house, now on a sponson, then in the bows. With the first streak of the day the steamer's whistle rang along the river reaches, and as she steamed away the nude figure of the supercargo appeared on a paddle-box; he dropped a bucket into the foaming wheel-wash, drew it up, and drenched himself with the contents. And after that, by the time he was dressed, the steamer woke the life of the river before the sun had touched it, and the mallards started for the day's flight, for they were unreasoning creatures and flew on in a straight line ahead of the steamer, too foolish to think of getting out of the way. And the ghostly cockatoos fled daily before the "Tilpa" westward, when the summer was waning, for they intended to winter in the Murray.

At 8 o'clock the bell sounded breakfast, and Garth joined the captain and his mate in the saloon, which was about the size of a fairly large packing-case; and after that smoke-ho, and a revel in the careless knowledge that the next homestead would not be sighted till the afternoon. It is a fine life, this innocent existence of the rivers; it is a paradise for whoever has a soul, and souls were owned by Been, the captain, and his supercargo, Garth.

But discord came to the paradise as usual. One day in June of '79, when the river was at its lowest, and the "Tilpa" and her heavy-laden barge passed Dunlop on the last upward trip for the season, the super of the station hailed the steamer and came aboard. He only wanted a few trifling things, he said, but he delayed the

"Tilpa" half an hour, and in his desultory conversation with the captain told him that Coruna, the next station eastward, had changed hands. The new owner, he remarked, was Mr. Garth, a J.P., and no end of a swell.

The captain retailed the news to the supercargo later on, and was amazed at the confusion of the young man.

"You ought to know all about it, I suppose, Dad," said Garth at last. "This Mr. Garth is my father, and we've never agreed, that's why I left him, that's why I don't want to see him again till I'm independent of him."

These remarks, of course, only resulted in making Been all the more curious, and, by judicious pumping, he learned all the facts.

Garth, senior, was very unscrupulous. He had done shady things in stock deals and mining transactions. Garth, junior, objected, and the old man had told him to clear out with his honesty, and not to come back again unless his honesty brought him enough to live on.

And, therefore, Garth, junior, had cleared.

"You're a white man," commented Been, when the young fellow had concluded. "We'll let him see that honesty does pay. I 'aven't much longer to live, and the craft's yours when I go. No, no talk now; I've said it, and I wouldn't go back on my word for no man."

They stopped at Coruna to canvass the new owner before some other trading river tramp secured the business. Captain Been, now quite an experienced diplomat in his way, sent a message by the mate requesting Mr. Garth, J.P., to honour the steamer with his presence, and five minutes after a white-haired old gentleman stepped on the "Tilpa's" deck. He was

Mr. Garth. He started violently as the supercargo came forward saying, "How are you father?"

He did not start when the supercargo introduced him to Captain Been; he merely said: "Glad to meet you, captain; I hope we shall be able to do business together."

But Stephen Been, as he took his customer's proffered hand, felt sick with long-thwarted revenge; for Mr. John Garth, J.P., and the informer of old Maria Island were the one man.

PART II.

THE shock to the Samaritan had been very great. There, in the midst of the new life of fairness and clean hands and free goings out and untrammelled comings in, the corpse of the convict time had come to resurrection. For several hours following the departure of the informer, who had left the "Tilpa" without any idea of her captain's identity, he sat in the little cabin next the wheel-house, with his arms folded, and his head fallen on his breast. The supercargo looked in once or twice to ask where the steamer was to tie up, and had been told to "steam easy till I tell you." The dusk crept over the river, and the great sponson and bow lamps were lit, and the cook rang the bell for supper, but the captain still sat in the cabin on the wheel-deck and told his friendly querists that he was "all right—never better—leave him alone."

He sat there and thought until he was almost mad. At 9 o'clock the mate went to him and insisted on being heard. "The night was very dark, the river was dangerously low, the stream was sown with snags. Hadn't they better tie up?"

Stephen Been aroused himself by great effort, rose, and went into the wheel-house. There he went over

the rough chart—which was rolled up in a great box and was almost as long as the river itself—and told them to tie up in the next bend. His voice, hollow as the voice of the dying, made mate and supercargo look at him surprisedly. They saw that the face was not the face of the Samaritan. Always clean-shaven, it had resumed the expression of the hunted convict at bay—its lines had hardened; the lips seemed to have become thin and sneering and cruel; the eyes were shot with yellow gleams of revengeful madness; the mouth was half open in a horribly hungry fashion, the eye-teeth standing conspicuously in the bare and livid gums were like the fangs of the wild dog.

“You are ill, Dad,” said the supercargo pityingly.

“No, I’m not,” answered Been. “I lifted a big weight to-day, an’ I’ve strained my back.”

The mate suggested a sweating bath in a wet sheet, but Stephen Been refused all the remedies of the river and, without waiting to see the beloved “Tilpa” snug for the night, turned in.

In the darkness there came to him strange old shapes he hoped he had forgotten—the ghosts of the gang who attempted to escape, for which Abel Shaw had sold them to the commandant. There came the ghost of young Hitchins, the boy who had, in a frenzy of recapture, killed the constable who had attempted his arrest; the boy who had, in the awful desperation of his gallows-death, uttered blasphemies that made even the executioner shudder. There came the shape of Peter Wells, who died on the triangles during his punishment as ring-leader of the escape. There came

to him others ; sad shapes saying hesitatingly that the time for justice had arrived ; noisy, blasphemous shapes, calling on him in the names of his manhood and of his oath to avenge their stripes and the greatness of their old-time misery. Some were cold and half apathetic, some despairing, some hot with the white heat of long nursed wrong ; but all of them commanded him to do the one deed—to slay their common enemy.

And as if they had been so many men, and he was indeed their captain too, he had told them that justice should be done, and had waved them aside as if they interfered with his thoughts. Then the shapes left him to decide on the manner of Garth's death.

All sorts of schemes, mostly impracticable, suggested themselves to him. He would decoy the informer into the dry waste in the back-blocks of the river, kill his horse, and leave him to die of thirst ; he would invite him aboard the steamer, and leap into the river with him ; he would lock him in the cabin and shoot him. These and a hundred other plans worked in his brain contemporaneously.

He rose early the next morning, still undecided on the manner of Garth's death, still determined to exact full payment of the revenge owing him. However, for that week, at least, he could do nothing. He must mature his scheme.

The "Tilpa" resumed her journey up-stream with her captain in the same undecided frame of mind. Three days after they had reached Brewarrina the river fell alarmingly, and the "Tilpa" was forced to remain tied up at the wharf until the next fresh. During

this period of enforced idleness the captain came to a conclusion as to the way the death sentence passed by the ghosts of the murdered on the informer should be carried out. The accepted plan was grotesquely horrible ; the jury of dead felons, by their foreman, Stephen Been, had both found the verdict and imposed the expiation. Garth, the owner of Coruna, was sentenced to be dressed in the old Canary costume, then to be tied up and flogged to death. The labour of decoying and binding him was easy to the Samaritan's diplomacy and the Samaritan's strength and revenge would make his arm tireless of the scourge until the end. A fine revenge, truly ; the Samaritan felt almost happy as he thought over it.

The fresh did not arrive until August, and then it was very small, and only carried them a score miles west of Louth.

The mate and supercargo worried and fretted under the delay. They cursed the river, which was not much more than a chain of pools. They stamped the deck, because September was very close at hand. Ere this they should have been halfway back from Echuca, ready to sell out the store to the shearers, and to get the earliest bales of the clip, and beat the hated "Saddler" and the "Warrego" on the down-stream journey.

Stephen Been smiled calmly at the delay. There was plenty of time, he said ; he did not care if the barge went down-stream empty. Let the "Saddler" have the wool ; what did he care ? A few homestead lessees—men with a paltry 10,000 sheep or so—had cut out

early, and the clip of these small men came to the "Tilpa" and filled the barge fairly well, and this fact served to cheer the supercargo and the mate. They would not be able to trade very much, because the store was almost empty, but they could get wool loading in early, so that they would be ready to race to the market on the rise when it did come. But they felt uneasy for all that, simply because all the life of the stream seemed uneasy also.

The rats began to leave the river and scurry up the banks and on to the plains; every day saw an exodus of rabbits. And then there came that leaden hush of everything which precedes any unusual occurrence in nature. The river did not seem to ripple as it struck the floats of the "Tilpa's" wheels; the duck flew away from their natural home; the screaming cockatoos screamed no more and flew south instead of west as usual; the gum-leaves murmured not; the air was heavy with suppressed fear; even the birds of the month, the parakeets, which were merely animated shrieks in a dress of emerald and crimson flying athwart the gold of the sun, were strangely mute; the whole earth seemed to hold its breath so that it might not sigh the apprepension which filled it.

And Stephen Been, noting these signs, stretched a wire cable from the towing-frame of the "Tilpa" to the great eucalypt growing in the billabong inside the southern bank; and the engine, rusted by its long rest, drove the steamer to an opening in the tree-fringe just abeam of the anchoring gum. They prepared, in short,

with the impudent daring of man, for a standing fight with an inundation.

They saw no man belonging to the land, they were as much alone as if the river had been a trackless sea. No news of the flood came to them; they blamed Bourke for not having sent warnings. But Bourke himself was wrestling despairingly with the water giant.

The founders of the town had built it in the shorter parallel of a horseshoe bend, just where the river can do its greatest, most destructive work.

While the people of the "Tilpa" grew sick with anxiety, Bourke was up to its armpits in water—Bourke was dishevelled and drunken with the flood.

It came to the "Tilpa" in a wall of water and wreckage—a wall of water that broke and reformed and fell upon itself with the sound of thunder; a wall that tore patriarchal trees from their roots and hurled them along like matches; a wall that hissed like a great serpent, and gathered and crushed the face of the world in its constricting folds.

It came with battering-rams of trees, of wreckage covered with snakes and other creeping things huddled together like friends, their venom snapped by fear.

As the "Tilpa" and her barge rose with the flood the crew hauled on the cable and started the engines, and so by-and-by drew the steamer and her charge up to the tree which the mate said would stand forty floods.

But at 3 o'clock the next morning, when the rain was falling in sheets, the mate recanted. The fastenings of the cable disappeared; the water crept into the limbs

of the tree and shook it till it groaned. And still they held on.

In mid-current the water was black with timber and living trees ; rafts of *debris* carrying hopeless animals, opossums swooning with fear, bears wailing like little children lost in the streets of a great city.

At 4 o'clock they heard a steamer's whistle shrieking above the roar of water, and a few minutes later a wool-laden barge shot past them. Then followed a steamer, her red lights tinging the water as with blood, her stack vomiting sparks. The men on the "Tilpa" could see that one wheel had been carried away by the battering ram of wreckage ; very probably the rudder had gone also, and she was attempting to steer out of the current with the remaining wheel.

It was the "Warrego," she had ridden from Louth on the face of the flood.

The "Warrego" disappeared, then came more wreckage ; the flood drew back for an effort, advanced again, and passed triumphant, carrying with it the "Tilpa's" barge and £3,000 worth of the season's clip !

Just after daylight the saviour eucalypt was torn from the soil. Stephen Been sprang to the towing-frame and cut the cable with two lightning strokes of the axe, and the "Tilpa" went full speed ahead, steering south on to the plain, which was now a sea. Any one of these logs that came down with the current like stones from a sling would sink the steamer in an instant, and they tried to make for the dead water. But it took time to leave the current ; its force was so great that the helm answered spasmodically, and between

the spasms the engine drove the steamer down the stream with a frightful velocity. They were not caught by the dreaded wreckage, they caught it.

Finally, at 11 o'clock, they reached the still water covering a treeless plain, and there they anchored. That plain, although the Samaritan knew it not, covered Corona station.

They breakfasted at noon, and the captain was unusually jolly. The loss of the barge did not matter much, he said, with a curious smile on his face. He wouldn't want it any more, but he was sorry for the boys' sake all the same.

During the afternoon the wreckage became larger. It was not confined to trees and river *debris* now—fences, rails, boxes, furniture—and to show how far the water could penetrate, a cradle came bobbing and turning into the haven of the steamer. They found that the cradle, by virtue of its shape, was an ark of this deluge, the rescued being mostly snakes and tarantulas and scorpions and centipedes, and all the insect horrors and creeping things which no living man may imagine.

At 4 o'clock a hut came down, escaped from the current, careered wildly in the eddies, and then collapsed with a noise like the discharge of artillery against a tree which had so far been too strong for the flood. Then a minute later another hut, swimming high out of the water, ran down in midstream and then abeam of the "Tilpa," and suddenly shot athwart the current and collided with the same tree.

But it did not go to pieces. A projection in the

timber wedged it in the tree-fork, and there it stood exposing its bulk to the swirl of the deluge. Stephen Been and the mate and Garth looked at the arrested shanty, expecting it to break up. Suddenly the captain exclaimed, "Damned if there ain't a man on the thing!" quite as suddenly he lowered the dinghy, one of the two only boats of the "Tilpa," sprang into her, and pulled for the wreck before anybody fairly understood his intention.

He had become a Samaritan again. He had forgotten his revenge at the sight of a man in danger; he had left a haven for the jaws of death.

The man on the hut was still now. He had been waving his arms to the "Tilpa" until he saw the boat put off to his rescue.

The Samaritan pulled to the wreckage as if his own existence depended on his speed. His struggle to keep the broadside on to the boiling current was almost Titanic. But at last he reached the lee of the anchored hut, and, after fastening the dinghy to a projecting spar, swung himself into the tree.

The castaway greeted him with a cry of joy. Stephen Been clambered on to the hut and straddled the ridge-pole, so that he was face to face with the man who had suffered the perilous voyage on the quaking building.

And then the Samaritan became Been the Convict again. His face was transfigured; he looked at the wretch whose eyes were so close to his as a terrier might look at a rat. His face expressed an awful joy, the happiness of the strong courageous devil who finds a coward devil in his grasp.

The informer noted that sudden change, and in the space of a thought recognised his old enemy and shrieked aloud.

"So I've got you," said Stephen Been very slowly, enjoying to the full Shaw's accession of fear. "I knew I'd get you some time." And then, with the snarl of a wolf: "D'ye remember little Hitchins an' Peter Wells, you dirty liar, do yer? D'ye remember Bendigo and Wood's Point? An' you're a swell now, are you? An' a squatter an' J.P., an' all! An' ye've got a son who'd drown yer if he knew what y'are! And I've been playing 'a lone 'and all me life. Through you, you dog—through you!"

The informer opened his mouth to shriek for mercy, but the roar of the water drowned his voice, and the grip of the captain on his wrist made him dumb.

"I'm goin' to leave ye here," said Been again; "an' it's an easier death than I meant for yer, it's an easier death than they'd agree to; they'll 'ave ter content themselves with it."

He spoke of "them" as if they were indeed men and not impotent shadows.

The informer made no answer, he was dumb with terror.

"So good-bye to yer," concluded the captain. "May ye go to the hell ye sent those boys ter an' may ye meet 'em there!"

He ceased and swung himself from the roof, but ere his feet touched the tree the informer, mad with fear, caught his wrists in a grip of steel and screamed aloud above the artillery of the flood.

The struggle was very brief. Stephen Been wrestled with his enemy on the swaying hut for a moment, and, freeing himself, reached the tree and looked down for a foothold in the boat.

But that struggle had given them both to death. The swaying of the hut had loosed the spar, and spar and boat darted off with the current.

The convict gnashed his fangs in rage and climbed higher into the tree to signal for the other dinghy. To his surprise it was not more than a dozen lengths away ; the mate and the supercargo had seen the struggle and had hastened with their assistance. They steered the boat under the gum and called to Stephen Been to drop in.

"I't 'ull only hold another safely," advised the supercargo.

Stephen Been prepared to take the jump, and seeing him, the informer, shrieked again. Then the supercargo looked to the figure on the hut, and recognised in this blood-eyed, foam-flecked, wild animal in the coverings of man—his father.

Still he did not falter.

"There's only room for one," he repeated to the man whom he respected. "Jump, Dad !"

Been hesitated, the expression of affection had half-killed the wolf in him.

The informer began to cry and pray and blaspheme by turns, his big round face working convulsively.

"Jump, Dad !" said the supercargo. "Jump quick ! We can't hold on here much longer !"

Stephen Been was decided ; the wolf was altogether dead, the Samaritan breathed again.

"I'll wait till nex' time," he said. "Take this snivellin' vermin, though he ain't good enough to sit in the boat with you, George."

Even in that awful moment George Garth wondered at the words, and the expression of dying hatred, but he had no time to think just then.

A crying, shivering bundle fell through the air and into the boat, and the dinghy headed for the steamer, the mate calling to the captain to hold on a little longer.

But before they could reach him the great gum-tree went down and the hut, with Stephen Been perched on its roof, drifted with the boiling current.

They got away from their moorings, and the engines going in a marvellously short time, but the hut was not then in sight.

The darkness did not end the search. All through the night the "Tilpa" was a blaze of red lights tramping up and down the water-road, one moment staggering painfully up hill against the swift stream, the next shooting like an arrow from a bow with the current, and the whistle shrieking at every pile of wreckage.

At dawn they spoke of him as of the dead, yet they persevered in the search. They intended to find his body if they tramped the river as long as Phillip Vanderdecken cruised off Table Mountain.

And at 10 o'clock they found him, and he was yet alive. The house had collapsed against a heap of *debris*, and the timber had pinned him by the waist. During the night the pile had largely increased, and the great

weight almost cut him in two. Yet he had survived the awful experience—his feet had been frozen in the icy water, his middle had been crushed by the weight of the flood-wreck, and still the wonderful vitality the convict system had developed in him had strengthened him to triumph.

He did not know them as they hailed his discovery with cries of pity and affection, as they dug him clear of the *debris*, as they tenderly lifted his bruised body and dangling, useless limbs from wreck to raft, and from raft to the steamer-ark. He only heard the fearful chorus of the flood, the rushing of great waters, and the clarion song of the Newborn as its Antiphon.

In the afternoon he awoke to find himself in his own berth and the supercargo bending anxiously over him.

"Oh, Dad, Dad," said the young man, "you're all right, ain't you? You don't feel any pain?"

Stephen Been smiled. "I'm not all right, George; but I ain't feeling any pain. My back's broke, that's what it is!"

And then he dozed again. As the lamps were lighted he asked if the river had gone down.

"Not enough to be safe out of the dead water," the mate told him; "but they could get a boat ashore in the back-wash easily."

Then Stephen Been cried fiercely: "Let him go ashore, then! Put the vermin ashore! I'm the last of them all—don't let him see me dead!"

And wondering they obeyed him. The supercargo, quite at a loss to account for the hatred of his father, told Garth, senior, that he must quit the steamer, and

a deck-hand rowed the pariah to the edge of the flood near to a point where the light of a slush-lamp said very plainly :

“ I am the cheer of a man.”

At 9 o'clock the Samaritan made his will in a style peculiarly his own. He called into the cabin the cook, and the engineer, and the deck hands, and the gentlemen of leisure who had, probably for the first time in their lives become energetic, in the search for him, and there verbally transferred the “ Tilpa ” and her trade to the mate and the supercargo.

“ Ye've all been called as witnesses that this day the twenty-seventh of September, eighteen seventy-nine, I've given the ' Tilpa ' an' two barges at Echooky, an' the book debts, an' trade, an' all to Jim Drake an' George Garth, so 'elp me Gawd.”

And they all said they witnessed the bequest, and the ceremony was over.

Only Drake and the supercargo were to watch the sick man that night, and when the cabin was cleared of the others he lay on his pillow quite exhausted.

They had suggested sending to Louth for a doctor, but he said, “ A doctor could do him no good, he was cast right enough,” and so they fed his flickering strength with brandy. Despite his exhaustion, he insisted on giving them full particulars of the trade. In this way :

“ There was a man on Burrabogie who owed twenty-six shillings in seventy-four, nex' time you're on the 'Bidgee collect it. I don't reck'lect his name, but ye're bound to find 'im ; he was a little cove with a wart

under his ear and a ginger beard. When ye're up that way, too, leave a bag o' lollies with the sooper at Benduck; 'e's got a lot of babies an' one of 'em useter cotton ter me quite reg'lar. An' alwus give a nip to the puntman at Wilcannia, and he'll drop the rope for yer any time at night."

He fell into a half sleep towards midnight, and the watchers turned the lamp-light low. The change of light seemed to awaken him, but although he spoke again he did not regard their presence.

"Up at Crismus Island there's the cunningest water-hens you ever see."

And again:

"Yer can drive this yer 'Tilpa' over a four foot-six bar, an' she draws four foot-seven."

And yet again:

"Damn the 'Saddler'! I'll beather to Echookey blindfold!"

At 2 o'clock in the morning he awoke out of the present to the memories of his old life—the little Devonian village; Maria Island; Norfolk, the beautiful hell of the Pacific; of the boy Hitchins; of Peter Wells; of old Bendigo; and then as he came to the association with the supercargo he made Garth's tears well anew.

"That vermin can't be yer father," said the Samaritan. And then, with an intonation of loving cunning in his voice, he added: "For I love you, George, my boy!"



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