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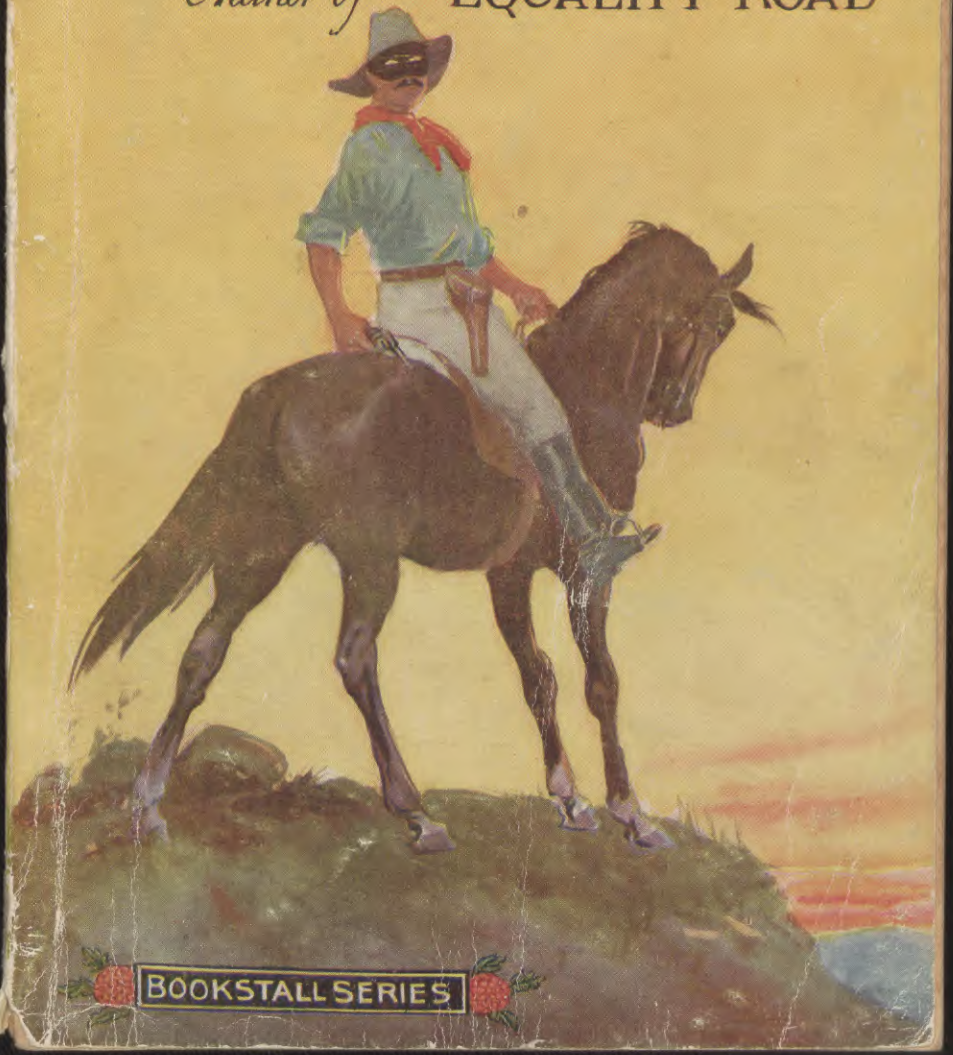
THE MYSTERY OUTLAW

By VERA BAKER

Author of "EQUALITY ROAD"



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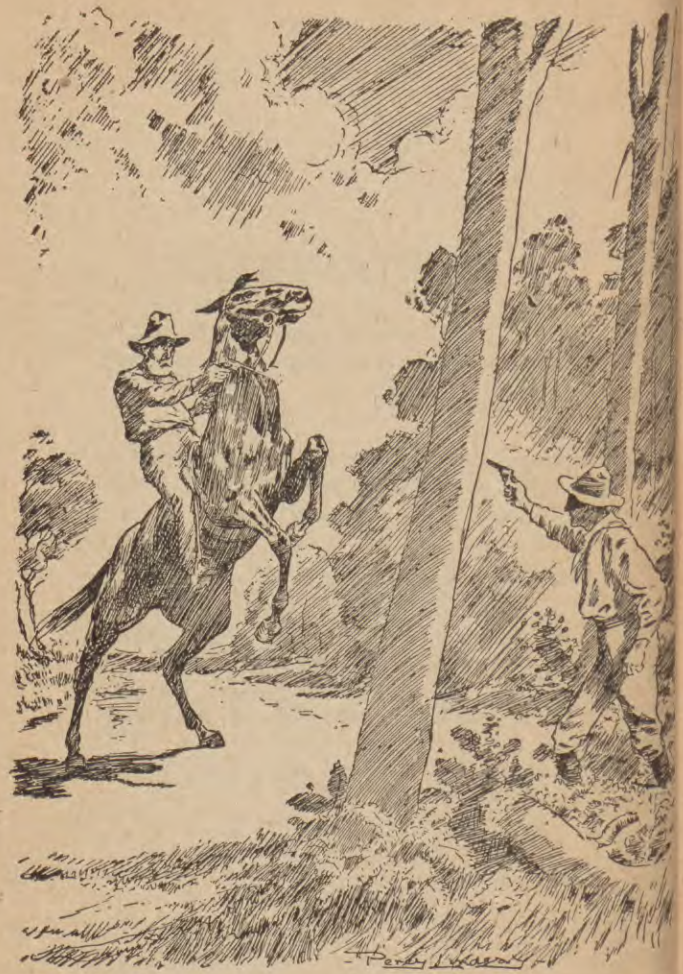

The next instant there was a double report. They had both drawn at the same moment. (See page 143).

MYSTERY: OUTLAW.

CHAPTER I.

Up the long, straggling, ill-lit street floated the lively strains of an accordion, the merry sounds appearing to lend a brighter cloak to the gloomy-looking township that ran through the valley, hemmed in on every hand by the high, sombre walls of the ranges. It would seem that from the township of Kelmare, there in the valley, there was no escape, but cunning tracks led the way to the outer world, and an arm of the railway had even pierced a tunnel to pass through this remote district. But in spite of this big step towards progress, Kelmare remained almost as it had been fifty years before, save that it had grown much quieter as the years passed their way.

The message of the accordion was that of a night of pleasure. From the window of a square building a little more pretentious-looking than the rest, brighter lights showed forth; but the glittering brilliancy of the stars mocked the yellow glow. Within the hall light feet kept time with light hearts, with laughter and banter to help the dance along. But to one youthful heart there came no echoing light and laughter.

A girl stepped from the hall into the deep, still night. On a face meant for laughter, was written impatience and discontent. Once outside the hall, she paused a few feet from the doorway, glancing up the road as though her eyes pierced the gloom beyond. She was not aware that another, whose eyes and heart had followed her every movement throughout the evening, was at her elbow, and she started a little when a hand lightly touched her shoulder. She turned quickly, and the tone of her voice was slightly petulant.

"What do you want, Steve?"

"So, Deb. you are not enjoying it, after all," said the man in a low voice.

Slowly she turned from him, and silence was her answer.

He nodded towards the ranges that rose like a black wall behind the township. "You were always sayin' how tired you were of being cooped up back there, an' when I asked to bring you to your first dance in Kelmare this evening, I thought it great because you seemed so pleased about it, an' your father letting you come—an' all. You were mighty quiet in the hall there to-night, Deb. But how you laughed and sang as we rode down through the hills together!"

"I had a dance with you. I didn't want any more—with anyone." She faced him again, and in the starlight he could see the luring curve of her lips and the gleam of her eyes.

He moved nearer to her, his voice tenderly low. "What's the trouble, girl?"

"Steve, it's not what I thought, what I want. It's only a sort of imitation. These people in Kelmare don't live, they only try to. Oh, it's slow, and there's no life! I might have known what it would be like to-night. Can't you understand? I want the real! Not—this!"

Nervousness made the man's voice somewhat unsteady. "I'm sorry you're not satisfied, Deb. You know very well that I'd do anything to please you, but when I offered once to take you to Melbourne, you laughed at me. I asked you to marry me so that we could go together to the city, and—you only laughed, Deb, you laughed!"

"When I go away from here, I want to leave the hills and everything behind. I want to forget them. You belong to this, and I don't want any of it," replied the girl, as she turned abruptly from him.

"You will be coming back to the hall?" he asked.

"No," she answered, shortly.

"Where are you going?" quickly asked Baxter, taking a step forward.

"Home."

"But the dance ain't nearly over. It's just this minute gone midnight," he protested.

"I don't care," she answered, carelessly. "I don't want to stay any longer. You needn't come with me. I can get my own horse from the stables."

"The night will be nothing when you are gone," said Baxter.

She paused an instant, looking past him.

"If you won't stay," continued the man, "I'll come along with you. You can't possibly ride home on your own. It's a long ride, and—"

But the girl hesitated no longer. "That's why I'm going home alone. Good-night."

The next minute Steve Baxter was standing alone, shadows about him, and white stars gleaming overhead. The music and laughter from the hall appeared as from another world, and he heard them not. He was listening for another sound. It came —the quick clatter of horse's hoofs over rough metal. The clatter became a dull thud upon the unmade road leading from the township. Then the sounds died gradually away, passing into the silent ranges that guarded the west of Kelmare.

Baxter remained motionless, staring into the night. Half mechanically he fumbled for a packet of cigarettes, selected and lit one, then turned again towards the hall. At the doorway he paused. Light feet flitted past him. Laughter was in the air, and it seemed to the onlooker that the accordion sang and made mock of him. Muttering an oath, he turned away, stepping once more into the night. A deep horseshoe marked his forehead, betraying his mortification. . . To be slighted and put to one side by the girl he loved. . . An oath, followed by rough laughter, broke across the night, and he strode on to the hotel stables from whence had come the sounds. As he made for the loose box, where his horse had been put up, the groom sauntered towards him.

"After your horse? Off early, aren't you, Steve?"

"I'm turning Clip out into the back paddock, Bob. I won't be wantin' him till to-morrow evening," curtly answered Baxter, as he led the horse out of the box. Ten minutes later he was in the back bar of the hotel, calling for drinks.

"Hell! I'm not going to hang after her any longer. What's the use, anyway? Forget all about her, son," he told himself.

But the intoxicating drink only made more vivid in his mind the picture of bright eyes and scarlet lips, and but deepened the cry of his heart.

"Deb—Deb—Deb!"

And along the rough, winding track leading deep into the western ranges galloped a reckless rider, her blood tingling in answer to the keen little breezes that whipped her round, awaking in her heart rebellion against convention and the ties that held her from cities. On through the night, with its wild, sweet magic, to where a shanty stood on the rise of Wungamool.

CHAPTER II.

At the door of McAlister's shanty a girl stood looking down on to the track that twisted between two hills. To her view it presented itself as a white thread winding through a sea of green, a thread along which a dark object was making its way.

Overhead was the clear blue sky, with fleecy clouds showing above the western horizon. On every hand stretched forest hills, mile after mile of gaunt gums and sweet-smelling bushes, of gullies and rippling streams. It was a typical Australian bush scene; a typical Australian autumn day—drowsy, warm, and still.

McAlister's shanty stood on a prominent rise. It was a somewhat dilapidated building from the early days, and the girl could see here and there, almost hidden in the surrounding sea of green, the gleam of a settler's home. But ever her eyes returned to the object that moved along the road below.

Deb McAlister's life had been one of uneventful happenings. She had known no life beyond what Wungamool had offered her, had known no folk other than the rough-living, open-hearted settlers and their brave, generous wives. But youth ran wild among the ranges of Wungamool. So had she, McAlister's daughter, sprung up among her native hills, till now, like youth of all ages, and with

imagination fired by deeply imbibed contents of the old bookcase, she had begun to dream, and the forest bird longed to spread its wings and fly beyond the hills that bound it, away to a world of light and glamor. But the bird's wings were clipped.

The black object on the ribbon-road had disappeared round the hillside, and the girl turned indoors to the kitchen, where a woman was ironing at the large table, and a burly man sat at the open fireplace, his chair tilted back, his feet up against the wall.

"Git to work with them irons, and give your mother a spell," was her father's greeting, as he gave a backward jerk of the head.

The girl obeyed readily enough, while the mother, wiping her hot hands on her apron, turned to the storeroom. "Have you been watching for the coach?" she asked in her soft voice.

"Yes," replied the girl, and added, slowly: "I think there's a passenger on."

"A passenger!" exclaimed her father, bringing his feet with a clatter to the floor.

"I think there were two figures on the box, though it was really too far off to be quite sure." Deb spoke the last words as though to herself.

The man meditated awhile, then—"Maybe someone's coming to take over Glass' place," he said.

The girl looked quickly up. "Do you really think that, Dad?"

"I can't think o' nobody else, unless it's the minister."

"But you know that he never comes here—at least, only to church meetings, and there are none here this week," put in Mrs. McAlister, her fine-looking face flushing a little.

"We'll soon see, anyway," replied her husband. "Maybe it's only one of the girl's fancies, after all. She's always seein' things that ain't." He raised his voice. "I say, Deb! what's happened to Steve? Why didn't he come home with you last night?"

"I didn't want him. I came away before the dance was over." Deb's iron moved evenly.

"Have y' had a quarrel?" sharply asked the man.

"No," replied Deb. "I came away before him, that was all."

"Y' did, did you?" said McAlister. "And did he stay till the finish himself, then?"

"I don't know," was his daughter's reply.

He looked closely at her, but her expression was non-commital, as she frankly met his searching glance.

"You're pretty deep, you are," the man remarked, slowly nodding his head. "What you know, you don't tell."

The girl defiantly set her lips, her eyes fell again to her work, and she continued in silence her ironing. Her father, still closely watching her, rose to his feet.

"I'll be gettin' the mail ready, Deb!"

"Yes, father."

"I'm going to see old Lane to-night about a cow he has for sale. You can get into the bar and look after things in there while I am away. I may

be late. An' no putting on high airs, either." He stretched his arms, yawned aloud, thrust his hands into his pockets, and went out of the room.

Mrs. McAlister glanced at her daughter, saying, "I'll go into the bar to-night, Deb." Tone and glance conveyed a mother's love for her only child. But the love was by no means all on one side. The girl smiled, and shook her head.

"Dear, you like it as little as I do, and you work hard, hard enough during the day without going at night as well. Don't you worry, mother."

No further word was spoken, and in silence the two worked. The sound of horses' hoofs and a clatter and rattle told of the arrival of the coach. The girl's heart quickened, and through her parted lips the breath came unevenly; why, she could not understand, only that without warning something entered within her, quickening her pulses—something that carried her right beyond herself, away from the old, long shanty kitchen, away from Wungamool, and beyond the threshold of the outer world. What was it?

"Hey, Deb!"

The stentorian voice roused the girl from her dreaming, and in answer to her father's call she went out into the post-office. Two others were there, and to one of these, the coachman, she gave the day's greeting. The next moment, her father was introducing her to the newcomer.

"This is my daughter, Mr. Grey. Deb, here's the gentleman who's come to take over Glass' place."

His significant glance gave to her its silent message: "I guessed so."

And Deb turned to the stranger, whose like she had never before seen. How different, this one, from the rough and ready hillmen. His dark suit was fine and well-fitting; even under the dust that covered them his boots showed the polish. His hands were white, though strong, and his general appearance neat and elegant. For the first time in her life the girl felt embarrassed, and the blood warmed her face.

Then another figure came within her range of vision, for there, standing straight and silent by the open door, was Steve Baxter, whom Deb discouraged, since he was but of the ordinary folk of her everyday world. The young hillman met her glance. He did not fail to note the rising color and eager lips of her, and in the newcomer he at once sensed an enemy.

"Mr. Grey will have supper here to-night, Deb."

"Yes, dad," Deb answered. She was the only one who had observed Baxter standing in the post office doorway, and when she looked up again, he had disappeared. Almost at the same instant the bell in the bar room rang.

"Who the devil's that?" exclaimed McAlister, raising his eyes from the papers before him. "See who it is, and attend to him, Deb."

"It might be someone to see you," suggested Deb, knowing only too well who it was. But she did not feel like a meeting with Baxter this morning.

"If it was anyone to see me he wouldn't be ringin' in the bar at this time o' day," retorted McAlister. "Go on, girl, an' do as you're told!"

Reluctantly enough, Deb went. As she entered the bar, Steve Baxter was leaning with one elbow along the counter, his fingers drumming an irregular tattoo. He straightened himself as the girl entered.

"Good-day, Deb. You got home all right last night?" His voice was unusually quiet.

"Of course, I did," she answered at once. "Why shouldn't I?" Impulsively she added: " I didn't mean to be rude to you, Steve. It's just the way I was feeling at the time. Forget it, will you?"

"Seems you're feeling better to-day, then," was his reply, judged by the tone of her voice and her smile. He spoke now with a return of his own natural cheerfulness, and his face brightened.

"I am, in a way," answered Deb. "No, not that way!"—as he caught hold of her hand. She snatched it away, tilting back her chin. "You know I hate fooling!" she cried.

"I ain't fooling!" he declared hotly, roused by her attitude. "I wasn't doing you no harm."

"Then don't go making love to me, or—or—anything like that," she answered. "I've told you before it's no good. Why won't you believe what I say?"

"You say one thing one day, an' the next, you're altogether different. A chap doesn't know how to take you," was his defence. He suddenly thought

of the newcomer in the post office, and his open-looking face grew sullen.

"Give us a pint, Deb," he said.

She filled the mug for him, watching him drink, and her eyes softened a little. After all, she liked Steve so much—had always liked him, but not in the way he desired. She thought of the many pleasant hours they had spent together. Why couldn't he be satisfied with everything remaining just as it had been between them? Why did he want to spoil everything?

He caught her glance as he set down the mug. All at once his eyes mocked.

"You don't like men to drink, do you?" he said, evenly.

"I don't like men who drink too much, and don't know when to stop," was her guarded reply.

"Give us another," said he, pushing the mug towards her.

And in silence she obeyed him, while his eyes still mocked. Outside, the coach rattled off.

Finishing the second, he demanded a third, and as she passed it to him her lips curled, and she said, scornfully:

"What a fool you are, Steve Baxter. The amount you drink doesn't trouble me in the least. It's only yourself you're harming." She turned to her father, who at that moment entered the bar. "Dad, will you attend to Steve? It seems as if he has come to stay for some time, and I must be helping mother to get the tea ready."

"Get along, then," answered McAlister, indifferently.

But as she left the bar room she heard Steve Baxter utter an oath, and guessed that he had turned to go. Her father's voice came to her, and she stopped to listen.

"What's your hurry, Steve?" said McAlister. "Won't you stay to tea? It's a dashed long ride across the hills."

"No, I'll be gettin'," came in Steve's voice.

And the next minute the girl heard his horse galloping along the track. Waiting no longer, Deb hurried to join her mother in the kitchen.

"Mr. Grey is in the dining-room," said Mrs. McAlister. "He will have supper before he goes across to Glass'. Who was in the bar, Deb?"

"Steve Baxter."

"Oh. Did he——"

But Deb did not want to answer questions and talk about Steve Baxter, so she interrupted her mother's words:

"What do you think of Mr. Grey?"

"I didn't see much of him," was the reply. "He seems rather—out of place for these parts, I should think. But one can't always judge by appearances. He doesn't look like a man who has roughed it. We'll see."

"He comes from the city," said Deb, "that's why he is different. I'll set the table now, mother. Perhaps Mr. Grey would like his tea right away. It is rather early, I know, but he has had a long drive. I'll get his first, and we'll have ours later."

And she straightaway busied herself among the dishes, endeavoring, in her work, to turn her thoughts from the man who was riding from Wungamool towards Kelmare. But she was not altogether successful.

That evening, while her father was seeing Lane about the sale of a cow, Deb McAlister was answering the many calls that came from the bar.

"Hullo!" exclaimed one of the men as she entered. "Where's y' old man?"

"My father is away for the evening," coldly answered Deb, who had a great dislike for the questioner.

"That's good—what!" replied the man, with a knowing look. "It's a pity he ain't away more often." And he leered at the girl behind the counter.

He was a burly, coarse-looking man by name of Cranford, ever on the lookout for arguments, and beer at the expense of others. Deb had turned from him at his last words, a sickening sensation at her heart, and was giving her attention to more agreeable-looking customers.

The girl loathed the work of serving in the bar; serving drinks to the men, and being a target for their rough compliments and good-natured enough sallies. She was far from sorry when closing time drew near and the last loiterer took his departure. McAlister himself was not over particular about the closing of the bar on time, very often keeping it open till the early hours of morning. But Deb herself waited eagerly for the clock to strike the

hour when she might be free from her detested duties.

It was with relief that she closed and barred the door, and turned her back on the bar. Entering the sitting-room, she found her mother to be not alone as she had expected. Grey had not yet taken his departure, and was seated in the low chair near the hearth. He turned to the girl as she came slowly into the room, and, rising quickly from his seat, wheeled it about for her. But with a look of thanks she declined to take it, and seated herself on the sofa beside her mother.

It was an hour later before Deb retired for the night. Grey had gone half-an-hour before. As she extinguished the light, she sat awhile by the open window, looking out upon the night.

The air was wonderfully pure, wonderfully sweet, and the girl inhaled deeply. The stillness was broken by a clatter beneath her window, which told of her father's return. She heard him unharnessing the horse and turning it out into the paddock, and heard him enter the house. A door slammed behind him. And all was silent again.

Deb turned from the window and got into bed. Her thoughts were no longer of Steve Baxter. He was forgotten entirely. A new image filled her mind—the image of Clive Grey.

CHAPTER III.

The following day, having finished her usual household duties in good time, Deb went for a walk to the white boulder. The view obtained from this height was magnificent, and, though she was hardly conscious of the fact, it was because of this that Deb had chosen the white boulder for her own particular retreat.

Away towards the west, mile upon mile of blue hills rose towards a clear sky, while in the valley below a silver stream glittered and rippled in the sunlight. The spot became almost a sanctuary to Deb, for here she passed her time undisturbed, and here her desires seemed ever nearer, with the shanty many miles away. Here at the white boulder Deb dreamed her dearest dreams, and built her wonderful castles.

As she stood gazing upon the sparkling stream below, she again, as on the night before, fell to thinking of the stranger who had come to Wungamool. Before he had taken his departure to Glass' deserted farmhouse, he had told Deb stories of the city he had left behind, and there in the shabby, comfortable sitting-room she had listened, and pictured to herself all he told of, while her mother sat mending beside her.

How different he was from all other men she had ever known! He had refused a drink from the bar when it had been offered to him, and had, as her

mother afterwards told her, raised disapproving eyebrows at oaths uttered recklessly by the men. Nor would he as much as enter the bar itself. His voice contrasted greatly with the deep, careless, and offtimes rough speech of the local men. Even Deb herself, girl as she was, and particular as she had grown to be, felt uneasy and ignorant in his presence.

Deep in her fancies, she did not notice a figure approaching the boulder, and looked sharply up when a footfall sounded close at hand.

The object of her thoughts smiled, and raised his hat as he met her glance. Was he blind to the red that suddenly flamed in her cheeks? It could hardly be likely.

"This is indeed a pleasure I did not anticipate," he said. "I did not expect to meet you here, Miss McAlister."

"Nor I, you. It is so very seldom anyone takes this track at all," she answered.

"And you?" he queried.

"I? Oh, I come for a walk to this place every afternoon," she told him.

"And a very nice spot it is to walk in. A pretty spot—a very pretty spot. I came on to the track quite by accident, and followed it. Er—do you object to my staying here with you awhile?"

"No—oh, no," was her frank reply.

She thought it strange that he should have asked it, and looked wonderingly at him. He was as neatly dressed as the evening before, and looked curiously out of place amid his present surroundings. He

moved his hat, and was wiping his forehead very carefully with a white handkerchief, so as not to disturb the neatly-brushed hair. Still holding his hat, he turned again to her.

"Do you know, I am rather surprised that a girl like you should—a—tie herself to a place like this. It is so out of the way, so—a—uneducating, you know." And the man looked about him.

"I don't tie myself, I'm tied," Deb told herself. But she did not say the words aloud. Looking straight ahead, she remained silent.

"Do you like being here?" asked the man, then.

"No." Her answer came readily enough this time.

"Then—a—why do you stay? I hope you will excuse the question, Miss McAlister, but you know, it does seem strange to see a girl like you living in such a wild, forsaken place as this."

Deb mechanically smoothed down the front of her dark frock, looking anywhere but at the man at her side. She could not tell him all the truth. After all, he was a stranger to her—at least, practically so.

"I have always lived here," she answered him. "And then, there's my mother. I couldn't leave her." This thought had never before occurred to her. How strange it should present itself now.

"Oh, yes, of course, your mother." Grey's steady glance was upon her face, but she could not meet it. A sudden feeling of guilt possessed her, for what reason, she could not tell. It was merely the working of an uneasy conscience, brought on by dissatisfaction, and fed by the superior attitude of Clive Grey.

He moved a little, looking down at his well-kept hands.

With the rough work of farming to claim him, Deb wondered how long his hands would remain as they now were.

"It's pretty hard on you, I should think," came the man's smooth voice. "And you were in the bar last night, too. It's not a—a—altogether a very nice occupation for a young lady, is it? I was rather astonished." As he paused, she raised surprised eyes, and seriously regarded him. But she could find no words for answer. "You know, for a young lady to go into a public bar and serve intoxicating drinks to—a—rough men—I could hear them talking, and their language was not altogether the thing—for you to be there did not seem quite proper. Now, really, Miss McAlister, what do you think?"

"That you'd be better employed minding your own business," was her first thought, and it would have been her prompt reply to any other who would have dared to speak to her in such a manner. But this man, he was so very different; so particular regarding his personal appearance, so careful as to his habits, and manner of speech. He was from the city, and should know—so Deb believed. Perhaps it was not quite "proper" for a "young lady" to attend in the bar room. She remembered that once Steve Baxter had spoken a few words to her father against it. But McAlister had only grunted that

there was no need for Baxter to be jealous, and that "it didn't do no harm, and the girl should make herself useful"; while Deb herself, just to be in opposition to him, and to fan the young man's jealousy, told him she'd go into the bar as she pleased, and that it was no concern of his. He should not know how she really hated it.

But she could not laugh at Grey as she had laughed at Baxter, nor could she tell him that she served in the bar to obey her father's commands; so to turn from the unpleasant subject, she rose to her feet.

"I had better be going home. The mail will be in very shortly, and Dad will be wanting me to help him." She turned so that she faced him fully. Her eyes were candid, and her lips smiled slightly. "Good-bye, Mr. Grey."

He, too, had risen from the boulder, and stood before her. "You are not offended with what I have said?" he asked.

"Oh, no," replied Deb, and her smile deepened.

"I shall see you again," he said. "Good-bye for the present."

And as she left him, Clive Grey watched till her figure was hidden from sight among the trees, then he went his own way, a smile playing about his lips.

Yes, he would surely see her again.

CHAPTER IV.

Away in the ranges some sixteen miles east of Kelmare was a one-man mill. The lone timber splitter seemed the very embodiment of the spirit of the forest about him. With heart and mind open to the beauties and wonders of a bountiful Nature, John Ryder was, like Nature, a friend to all mankind; but two there were who had a deeper hold upon his friendship than the world apart; the teamster familiarly known as "old Bill"—whose camp lay handy to the millman's, and reckless, open-hearted Steve Baxter.

Baxter was this day the means of drawing Ryder down from the ranges into the township, but the hillman rode into the valley of Kelmare to learn that Baxter had quitted the township some days before.

Wondering a little, Ryder left the store and made his way to the station into which the train from citywards had just steamed. He arrived there as the train moved on its way further outback, and at sight of a young man on the platform, gazing moodily at the ground, a surprised half-smile flitted across Ryder's face. He casually strolled towards the moody one.

"Good-day, Steve!"

Baxter swung round. "Hullo, Jack! What the devil brings you here?"

"You!"

"What's that?"

"I heard only a few minutes ago that you had cleared out for the city. How is it that you come to be here?" asked Ryder.

"Just returned." And Steve nodded after the departing train.

"Well?" queried the other, smiling.

Baxter warmed at the significant tone of the simple word, and his reply came a little heatedly: "It's all very well for you, Jack. You're satisfied with trees an' dingoes, an' ain't looking to see what you can grab from life. Strike me dead, but it's a dog's hole, is Kelmare!"

Ryder laughed good-naturedly. "So you went to see what you could grab from the city, eh? What did you get?"

"Done in!" was the truthful reply.

"Ho! And what did you do down there?"

"Drank."

"You generally do," dryly remarked Ryder. "No wonder you were done in."

"Oh, damn it all, Jack! You were brought up to straight livin' an' all that. They cleared my pockets down there—bloomin' sharpers!"

"Look here, Steve," said the other, earnestly. "I've a living for you. But there is no pub, an' it's straight."

"Over yonder, with the palings?" And Baxter nodded towards the eastern ranges.

"Ay." Ryder steadily watched his companion. "The contract is too much for one to carry on with. I want a hand. It's a chance, Steve, and handy to Wungamool," he added, softly and knowingly.

With sudden determination, Baxter held out his hand. "I'll take it, Jack. It will keep me going, an' this knockin' about as I am now does no good to a man."

So, early the following morning, John Ryder and Steve Baxter left the dreary township and took the track for over the ranges. Little was said on the way, for Ryder was not a talker, and Baxter seemed to have left his tongue behind him in the township; so they left the conversation to Nature, who, with her trees and her birds, was voluble enough.

Once Baxter remarked: "This is different from when I came up with you before."

"The difference, son, is in yourself," came the answer. "That short visit to the city woke you up. It made you realise that the greater things are here."

Baxter looked about him, then back again at the man at his side. "But square an' all, Jack, don't you ever get lonely in the wilds here?"

"Lonely! I've never thought about it."

Steve laughed softly. "But you're a dreamer. Perhaps you dream of someone——" He paused, his glance finishing the sentence.

"Maybe." And Ryder's face warmed a little.

"You're a strange chap. I can just imagine your ideal. She would be high above any others."

"The forest always gives high ideals," was the answer.

"Even if it doesn't give the real goods," put in Baxter.

A little later, Steve's voice again broke the stillness. "Another seems likely to beat me out, Jack; but, somehow, I don't place any trust in him. I don't like his looks. But I'll just keep my eyes open. I cleared out to the city to try and forget, but it was a fool thing to do, now I think of it. Some day—I feel pretty certain—she will understand, and come to me."

It seemed a lot for Baxter to say. It was as if he were speaking aloud his thoughts.

"Deb McAlister?" said Ryder.

"Ay. I'm glad we'll be handy to Wungamool."

It was close on noon when the two arrived at their destination. The dray rattled its way along a dry creek bed, and at sight of camp Baxter suddenly knew that what he had been seeking in the far-off city was now his. Surely here he would find the heart of life.

The autumn sun was warm, but it was fresh and cool in the depths of the forest there. Ryder's hut stood near a dry creek bed, and was on every hand walled in by high ranges. At the rear of the hut flowed a stream of crystal water, fern-banked, where mosses sent up a cool, earthy odor to mingle with that of the musk and gum. The barking of the dogs was a royal welcome to the two, and, having unharnessed, and carried the stores to the hut, Ryder stood awhile at the door there, and stretched wide his arms.

"Good luck to you, Steve. We'll make it our day off, and call first for dinner."

And soon potatoes and bacon were frizzling over the camp stove.

But Steve's heart was at Wungamool, and every opportunity that came his way found him following it there. Instinctively he felt that, with the coming of Clive Grey to the district, a new world was opening before the girl he loved. And he was right; for during the week that followed, Grey wooed and won the girl of the hills. Still, Baxter was nearly always near, and one evening, following a dance that had been held at the shanty, he called Grey to one side, and spoke candidly to him:

"See here, Grey! I don't trust you. I don't believe you're running straight——"

"Er—excuse me—but what do you mean?" drawled Grey.

"What I dam' well say!" was the sharp retort. "But if she comes to any harm by you, then look out for your hide!"

Clive Grey did not answer. It was not his way to reply to hostile talk, and he always avoided arguments. He turned in silence from the young man before him, and Baxter, downing the impulse to follow and relieve his feelings by way of clenched fists, also turned on his heel.

Then the little world of Wungamool turned again, rousing the hills from apathy. A rider, dust-begrimed and hatless, his horse in a lather, one day

"See here, Grey! I don't trust you. I don't believe you're running straight."

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galloped up to McAlister's shanty, the bearer of startling news.

* * *

The rider's appearance was a signal for a general move from the bar on to the verandah. Here, panting for breath, and trembling from excitement and his hard ride, he became the centre of an eager, curious throng.

"What's the trouble? What's the fuss? What's happened?" They were general questions, asked in many voices.

The rider dismounted, and supported himself by leaning against his horse, his hand up against the animal's neck. His words came quickly, stumblingly:

"Clark an' Hammond's been held up an' robbed. They had a good run out there this week, and was taking their luck to the township when a masked man bailed 'em up along the north road. Got clean away with the lot, he did. Clark an' Hammond was in Kelmare when I was there, an' the troopers was comin' away just when I did. Maybe they'll pay a visit to these parts. . . . For God's sake give us a handle! I'm burning dry!"

Many voices asked many questions. Many voices gave various opinions as to the hold-up. Deb McAlister, hearing the noise and buzz of unusual excitement, came out on to the verandah, and in a very short space of time had heard the whole story. Hurrying indoors, she told her mother of the news.

"A bushranger near Wungamool!" exclaimed Mrs. McAlister in alarm. "It is to be hoped they

catch him before he has time to do any more mischief!"

"Oh, mother, I don't," answered Deb, her voice trembling a little with excitement. "Just think of it. It's about time something did happen to wake up old Wungamool, it is so slow! I hope they don't catch him for a long while. I have often felt inclined to turn bushranger myself."

"You will joke about it, Deb, but it's a serious matter; but what if he were to come right here, hold us up, and rob us? It would be no joke then, I assure you."

Deb looked about her. "Anyway, if he did come here, he wouldn't get very much," she answered slowly. "I rather wish he would come myself, it would be such fun. . . . Now, don't look so serious, mother, and don't shake your head at me like that. After all, he is not here—yet, and the troopers lost no time in going out after the hunt. They are out in the hills already, so it will have to be a sharp man who will dodge them." She smiled reassuringly at her mother; but, as before, Mrs. McAlister shook her head.

"I only hope they catch him right away," she said.

"And I don't," muttered the girl, her eyes glinting mischievously. But her words were not loud enough for her mother to hear. And she really meant them.

CHAPTER V.

Grey was by no means a demonstrative lover. Dearly though he loved Deb, it was as though he laid a restraint upon himself, and checked any show of emotional feelings towards her. Always quiet, always self-possessed, he seemed to place his dignity before anything else.

And so it was with Deb. The man's attitude towards her almost forbade any outward show of love on the part of the girl herself, so that she was towards him even as he was towards her. Deb did not in the least doubt Grey's love for her, nor did she pause to analyse to the depths her real feelings towards him. He had brought with him to Wungamool and to her a new atmosphere—the atmosphere of the city towards which she had yearned, and in his coming had broken the monotony of her quiet life when she was calling for excitement and glamor. And, at the present time, these things weighed more than anything else with Deb McAlister.

Clive Grey was no longer a stranger in the district. Already he was a familiar figure at church meetings and at McAlister's shanty. He had furthermore come to win the contempt of the district men. The bushmen objected strongly to the outsider's polished boots and sleek appearance, and to his affected speech. His smooth manners annoyed them. It annoyed them still more that he had

never been heard to swear. But the limit to their annoyance was capped when he won McAlister's daughter.

Mrs. McAlister, seeing only her daughter's happiness, which was always echoed by her own, was content, while the loudest in protest against her was the girl's own father.

"Him! He's nothing but a soft, womanish sort of creature at the best," declared the disgusted shanty keeper.

"He's the man I am going to marry, anyway." Deb had a master will, and showed it.

"Marry—that! Not if I know it!" McAlister emphasised his words with a shake of his clenched fist.

"You can't prevent me," was her ready answer. And she tilted back her head, giving a short defiant laugh.

"Hang me if I can't! You'll marry Steve Baxter," stormed the man.

"I won't marry Steve Baxter. I don't care what you say."

"None of your slack, young lady. The trouble is you've always had too much of your own way!" Which was quite true. But Deb still defied him.

"I am going to marry Clive Grey."

And McAlister, defeated by her quiet determination and mocking eyes, went off, fuming.

Then came Baxter himself, who could no longer hold back. The thought of losing Deb over a man like his rival was more than he could bear.

"Deb," he said, earnestly. "I don't want to back in where I'm not wanted, but it strikes me this Grey ain't all he cracks to be. He hasn't got no go in him. I don't care a damn what he was back there in the city, but he doesn't suit these parts, least of all, you——"

"As it happens, Steve Baxter, he suits me very well indeed. That's why I am going to marry him." And with this cool remark, Deb seated herself on the verandah step, while the man stood looking down at her.

"Deb, you can't marry—him. Don't you see? He's not a man!"

"And you, of course, are," she taunted.

"I am twenty times the man he is, anyway, though I do say it myself!" retorted Steve Baxter.

"What an opinion you must have of yourself!" was her mocking reply. "It's rather a pity for you that—I don't happen to think the same. You're as bad as Dad. Why can't you let me alone? I am no longer a child, and know very well what I am doing without your advice, and I'll do just as I please in spite of you both." Then she added, half-angrily, half-good-naturedly: "Mind your own business, Steve Baxter!"

But, though he said no more at the time, Baxter seemed to think it very much his business—to see the girl he himself wanted giving herself to another, and that other one for whom he held nothing but contempt.

CHAPTER VI.

"Y'know," drawled Bullocky Bill, meditatively, "this is a rum world when y'come to think of it, an' rum things happen."

Baxter, leaning indolently against the hut, blew a ring of smoke into the air. "True for you, Bill. Rum things do happen. What in particular are you thinking of?"

The bullocky stared before him at the figure of a third man, who lay at length upon the ground, his eyes watching the stars which were beginning to glitter above.

"What say you, Jack?" he asked.

"Speed ahead. I'm listening," answered Ryder.

And William Glennister, known to his Australian acquaintances as Bullocky Bill, told his tale. . . .

"You know that old hut back along the track a bit? Well, about forty odd years ago a woman lived there with two children. When her husband had died, she had just carried on as best she could; but the women in those days knew how to battle. The farm wasn't a large one by any means, though it kept them going, and there were a couple of cows to help things along. The two children—a boy of about sixteen and a girl a couple of years younger—being born of the bush, and having no other companions, loved Nature better than most. He was a hardy young devil, afraid of nothing; and though she was as daring and as fearless as he, she was yet

a dreamer, preferring the stars to the sun, and the soft night to glaring day. Together they lived like the forest creatures they were, and found nothing in life to complain of.

"The mother died, and on her deathbed gave them new knowledge. The two had always looked upon each other as brother and sister, and they now learnt that while the woman was the mother of the boy, she had adopted the girl almost at birth, following the dying wish of her dearest friend.

"When they were left, several folk tried to get them away from the ranges, but no amount of persuading would induce them to leave the old home. The lad had grown to young manhood by this time, and she—well, she was still a child. Yet together they determined to carry on the work as the woman had done before them.

"The burial service was performed one day, and the marriage service the next, the result being a chorus of protests from the townsfolk. But when two young savages are determined, nothing on earth will turn them. However, there were no two, savage or civilised, more lovable than those two. The world to them was a thing practically unknown. They had all they desired, and asked no more.

"Now one day some commercial chap from the city was investigating Kelmare, and he happened to hear about the two in the ranges. Instead of condemning the young rebels against convention, he became mighty interested, and having heard that my team passed this way, he asked me to bring him

out. He seemed a very decent sort of chap, so I didn't mind.

"That was the first time of many he came out with me, for he seemed completely taken up with those two, and there wasn't a mortal thing he wouldn't have done for them had they needed it. One day he said to me:—

"'I wish they were my own, Bill. I can't very well ask them to come citywards with me, for there they would be out of their element altogether, and most probably break their hearts over what we commonly call home-sickness. I have always wanted a son.'

"'All the same whether you asked them or not,' I said, 'they wouldn't leave the ranges.'

"He nodded his head—'I believe you.'

"This went on for some months, and one day, after he had been in the city for some time, he came up to find that a third had added itself to the little community. What a party that was. Of course, he insisted on being godfather, and all the rest of it, and the youngster was named after him.

"The mother and father thought their baby the greatest marvel the world had ever seen, and the mighty godfather believed it too. He came up more often than he had done before, and one day told me he'd give a good deal if only he could clear out from the city altogether. As he said himself: 'The mountains have a hold on me. It's God's free life among the ranges here. Down there among the crowds of the city I can hear the ranges, big and splendid, calling me.'

"I thought it was rather a strange way for a chap to speak. Anyway, I only said: 'Well, if that's how you feel about it, what's to prevent you from clearing out?'

"He answered in two words, but they were enough: 'My wife.'

"Do you know, there was a sort of bitterness in his tone that made me feel I had heard too much, so I didn't say any more.

"Whenever he sent word by me that he would be along, the little mother and the father, with the baby in one or the other's arms, would meet us along the track some distance from the farm, and when he saw them, the man himself was always just like a big kid himself——"

"Give a picture of the mother!"

The unexpected interruption came from the man lying upon the ground. His eyes were still watching the stars, which now spangled the whole heavens. His figure was just a dim outline. Baxter was sitting back on his heels, his shoulders against the wall of the hut. The narrative had been punctuated by the mopoke's mournful note. It now sounded again.

"Well, I'm no champion at drawing pictures," said the bullocky, slowly. "But I'll do my best. You know that she was wild and free, and you know that she was a lover of the twilight. All that showed in her face. She loved life, so she laughed a lot, excepting sometimes when she would sit and dream; but even her dreams must have been very happy ones. She had black, shining hair, and blue

eyes, blue as Australian summer skies. Her husband was a fine, strapping young fellow, and what those townsfolk yonder would call an outlaw. As I was saying, there were three big children and one little child when those four came together.

"One day—the child would be a little over a year old—when we were going up as usual, and were looking out for them, we saw only the boy, with the baby in his arms. At first we thought that the girl was up to some prank, and was hiding somewhere. But when we got closer and he began to walk towards us, we could see that something was the matter, for when he looked up his face was no longer the face of a boy, but that of a man.

"The baby was laughing and crowing in the father's arms, but the father took no heed of him. His face was white and drawn, and his eyes glassy-looking. When he tried to speak, no word came. I took the child for him, and his hand, as it for an instant touched mine, was burning hot. We hurried up to the little home, but as soon as we reached it, he pushed before us.

"We didn't say anything when we saw her. Her husband just dropped on his knees beside the bed and took her face between his hands. She looked right past him, and, when he spoke, did not answer.

"The chap who had come up with me was the first to speak. He had been looking close at the girl, and now straightened himself.

" 'I'll get straight away for a doctor.' It was all he could say. The lad's horse was grazing near the

house, and the man had soon saddled it and ridden off.

"The boy by the bed had stopped calling to her, but it was terrible to see the look in his eyes. Then I saw another light come into her face, and she saw him then, and knew him, because she smiled, and put her arms about his neck. I cleared."

Bullocky Bill coughed a little. His voice had fallen softly, and he was speaking as he had learned to speak in his home country—as he had spoken before that home country had cast him off.

"She was dead when the doctor arrived early the following day. And two days later her husband had followed her. A disease is often swift and sure. But the child laughed and played as though the whole world were at its command, and sorrow and death a thing unknown. The man who was its guardian didn't say much. He took the child, and left for the city."

The three sat silent awhile, looking into the night.

"Is that the lot?" asked Baxter, then.

"Just about. It was twelve years before I saw the man again. When we met, I thought he would never let go my hand. It appeared that he had come back to the ranges for good, bringing the boy with him, and a fine young lad he had grown to be—another of his father, save that he benefited by what the father had lacked—education, for the man had given him the very best. I was wondering what the wife had to say about it all, but didn't

care to ask. But he told me later that she had died.

"I knew well enough that he intended telling the boy everything about himself in time, but the man was killed suddenly by a falling tree, and—well—"

Ryder rose to his feet, and moved, a big shadow, towards the speaker.

"Bill," he said very quietly, as the other paused, "you forgot to give us any names at all."

"Did I? Did I? Oh, yes. Their name was Dane."

"And the man's?"

"If I remember rightly, he called himself Ryder." Bill was glad that the darkness hid his face.

"My faith!" suddenly ejaculated Steve Baxter, starting to his feet and moving towards the figure of his mate.

But John Ryder—let him still be called so—after standing a moment motionless, turned slowly without a word, and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER VII.

Baxter had arrived at the camp from Wungamool late one night with added bitterness in his heart. Galling enough as Deb's reproaches were, they needed no spurring on, and additional reproaches from her father set Steve's temper to a fine edge. What had McAlister said to him that night, as the two stood together on the verandah before Baxter took his departure?

"She goes walkin' with him, or they sit together in the parlor, an' you just stand by and watch."

The trouble with Steve was that he did not "just stand by and watch." It was little enough he saw of Deb these days, when Clive Grey claimed all her time and attention.

"What do you want me to do?" he demanded of the girl's father. "D'ye expect me to butt in where I'm not wanted——"

McAlister took his pipe from his mouth, and frowned. "Do? Butt in any time—anything to cut out that old woman of a man she declared she's going to marry!"

"Not on your life!" emphatically answered Baxter, laughing a little. "I'll do my damnest to cut him out, you may jolly well be sure. But to butt in any time an' every time——" He shook his head. "It goes against the grain. I'll play clean every time."

"An' as sure as you do, you lose." The tone of

McAlister's voice was by no means pleasant. There was more than a suggestion of a sneer underlying it.

"I won't lose!" was the answer. Anger was rising within Baxter. "I've never played a dirty game in my life, an' I'll win on a clean one now. He's crooked—I know he's crooked, an' Deb herself 'll soon find it out."

"She's a damn long time in findin' it out, then. I can't do nothing with her, and there's her mother at the back of her, too. Looks as if you're not too keen yourself, after all; or else you're not half the man I took you to be—to let a cove like that get the best of you. Damned if I'd let any man beat me for a girl!" The sneer was unmistakable now.

"That's it!" angrily cried Baxter. "I'm too much of a man to do any dirty, underhand work, and follow your rotten suggestions. You might be Deb's father; but by heaven! I'll do without your help. Y' can keep to yourself in future, as far as I'm concerned!"

He moved towards where his horse was tied to a corner post, and McAlister's words followed him: "All right, let Grey have her. Perhaps she's got the better man, after all."

In two strides Baxter was back at the other's side, his hands clenched by his sides, his jaw thrust forward, and his eyes blazing with anger.

"Say that again! Say it again, Sam McAlister!"

But McAlister already regretted having said the words. His own anger had flared even as had Baxter's and it now died as quickly as it had risen.

"I meant nothing, Steve," he said, quietly. "We both done our block. Let's shake, and forget it."

He held out a frank hand, but Baxter made a swift motion with his own right hand as though he threw the other from him. He was not so easily mollified, and his anger was longer living than the other's. The words that had passed still rankled sorely, and would rankle for some considerable time.

"Get to hell!" he answered, his lips twisting. "An' thank y' lucky stars that I didn't knock your damned head off for those last words of yours!"

McAlister felt tempted to answer; but he held his peace. He was by no means a quarrelsome man, as a rule, and, in spite of the words by which he had sought to urge Steve on towards winning Deb from Grey, he thought more of Baxter than of any man of his acquaintance. He remained silent, therefore, deeply regretting the words he had spoken, but convinced that in time Baxter would come round to realise why they had been spoken, and that the other had given them but in encouragement—a strange sort of encouragement, it is true; but encouragement nevertheless.

But Steve rode off, black rage in his heart and mind.

"The miserable little skunk!" It was of Grey he spoke thus, not of McAlister. The scene that had just passed had greatly deepened Baxter's feelings towards his rival.

But he did not forget the other man. . . "So Clive Grey's a better man than I am, is he? You

might be Deb's father, but you'll pay for those words, McAlister," he told the trees.

But how often does one find it far easier to forget? Though he tried to believe otherwise, Baxter's heart was, after all, too big and generous to harbor revenge. And he did forget McAlister's words—after a time. Though for a time they lived.

CHAPTER VIII.

McAlister was preparing for his fortnightly journey down into the township. He was taking his time as he adjusted the stirrups to his liking.

"Why don't you use your own saddle, Deb? Or if you must use mine, fix up the stirrups when you've finished?" he asked, indifferently enough.

Deb, watching from the verandah, and impatient to be indoors and at the book from which her father had called her a few minutes before, fidgeted a little.

"One of my stirrups is nearly cut through. You'll be late for the bank if you don't hurry, Dad."

Her father looked skywards, finished one stirrup, and turned his attention to the other.

"I won't miss it," he answered. "Once I'm away I'll make the pace, an' the bank'll see me in plenty of time."

As he sprang into the saddle, he called a last word to his daughter: "Look after the bar if I'm not back in time."

She answered him by a wave of her hand before hurrying indoors. But his last words did not trouble. Since Clive Grey's coming, Deb had never served in the bar. In her father's absence, that task now fell to her mother. It was just as well McAlister knew little of this, or of the reason.

Once on the main track the shanty-keeper, true

to his word, made the pace. To ensure safety for the £200 he carried upon him, a revolver, loaded in its six chambers, rested in his hip pocket. It was now some days since the bushranger, known now as Mystery, had been heard of, but McAlister was taking no risks. It had been his boast that, should he ever run up against the bushranger, the other would have a pretty hot time of it. "He wouldn't bluff me, you bet your life on that!" had declared McAlister on more than one occasion.

Ahead of him was a dangerous corner, and the rider drew in the reins, slackening the horse's speed. But even as he took the curve, a figure appeared as from the earth before him, and he found himself looking into a dangerous weapon, held by a strong hand. The intruder, a handkerchief covering his face, had already his other hand upon the horse's bridle. The animal reared, but soon became quiet.

"Get down," said the outlaw to McAlister, with a sideways jerk of the head.

But McAlister did not move. So sudden was it all that he was taken completely by surprise, and astonished beyond measure.

"Get down!" Again came the curt order. "An' keep your hands away from your pockets. Look sharp, now!"

There was no hesitation this time. McAlister dismounted, and the bushranger, keeping him covered, ran through his pockets. The first thing he drew out was the revolver, and very deliberately he emptied it before replacing it in the owner's pocket.

He found himself looking into a dangerous weapon.

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He then passed his hand over the other's waistcoat, and, feeling it bulky, opened it. From the shirt he took the well-filled wallet, and thrust the contents into his own pocket.

And McAlister, raging within, stood helpless, not daring to move while the other's keen, determined-looking eyes seldom left his face.

Mystery drew back a little, pointing to the horse. "Now ride—ride like hell!" he commanded.

There was no need for a second bidding. McAlister mounted, and rode off, and soon his figure was enveloped in the distance in a cloud of dust. Truly, he had ridden "like hell."

Leaving the road for the forest, the bushranger struck out along on old bridle track which was nearly grown over. Some distance along he left this, and again plunged into the forest. In time, he stopped before a large tree in one of the narrow gullies, pulled some bushes away from the trunk, and exposed a large opening. In this he hid his spoil.

Ten minutes later he left the carefully and cunningly-concealed spot, and once again emerged from the forest on to the track, changed utterly beyond recognition in clothing and bearing.

McAlister returned to Wungamool much earlier than was his wont. Leaving his horse—its heaving sides, foam-flecked body, and quivering nostrils telling too plainly their own story—he stamped loudly into the kitchen wherein his wife and daughter were at work.

A few words sufficed to tell all. Surprise widened

the girl's eyes and parted her lips, sending the swift color to her face. The woman took a step nearer to her husband.

"Mystery! Sam, is it true?" she ejaculated in alarm.

But her husband paid her no heed. Up and down the room he raged, and the two women, knowing him, continued with their work.

"Let me get at him! Only let me get at him! By cripes, I'll make him pay! God, I will!" And McAlister brought his fist down heavily upon the table, causing it to shake so that the dishes upon it rattled. His red face was working with anger, and his words, generously punctuated with oaths, came in tones harsh with passion. His presence seemed to fill the kitchen.

Mrs. McAlister continued her baking, wise enough to refrain from answering her husband; but fear was working within her, increasing her alarm. She dreaded the bushranger. While Deb, glowing with excitement, and caring little for her father's loss, remained silent near the window.

"If only I knew who he is. He was at me like lightning, else I'd 've had him. What's the bloomin' troopers doing? A lot of blanky good they are! Havin' a good time of it while honest, hard-working men are robbed in broad daylight on an open road—on the main track. Struth! but I'd like to have hold of that Mystery for five minutes. I wouldn't want no more, an' cripes! wouldn't I deal it out to him. Two hundred quid I had on me, and he cleaned me of every penny—every

dashed penny! If only I could lay hands on him he wouldn't see daylight again!"

He turned again, and kicked savagely at a kitten which chanced to be in his path. His foot missed its object, however, and came in sharp contact with the table leg. The pain added fresh fuel to his anger, and he swore violently, hopping about on one foot, and nursing the injured one in both hands.

Deb gave a sudden laugh. The sight of her father dancing about on one foot, the other held between his hands, was to her extremely ludicrous. Had her life depended on it she could not have restrained her mirth.

The man swung round. "What the hell are you laughin' at?" he roared.

The mother lifted her head, and gave her daughter a warning glance; but Deb ignored it.

"What are you laughin' at, eh?" repeated her father.

Deb's eyes fell again to her mending, and her face resumed a serious expression. He could not see the merriment in her eyes.

"Nothing," she answered, boldly. "Can't I laugh when I want to?"

"Not at me, young lady, not at me! There's a time for laughing, an' remember, only fools laugh at nothin'!"

There was a pause, during which a summons came from the bar, and in answer to which McAlister limped out into the bar.

Deb raised dancing eyes to her mother.

"Deb, Deb!" reproached Mrs. McAlister.

"I can't help it, mother." She dropped her sewing, and rose to her feet. The laughter left her eyes. "There are times when I don't care what I do, and I couldn't help laughing at Dad when he missed the kitten and hurt his own foot instead." She gave her mother a quick, warm kiss. "I am going out for a stroll," she said, and left the house by the back door.

Clive Grey was already on the track.

Deb was leaning back against the white boulder when he came up, and she turned to greet him.

"I met your father returning from the township, and think something must have put him out, for he was whipping his poor horse terribly, and galloping along like a madman," said Grey.

So he had taken it out on his innocent horse, laying his whip on to it as though the animal had been the bushranger himself, and the cause of his anger.

Deb smiled a little, then grew serious again. "Something did put him out. He ran across Mystery," she answered.

There was silence awhile, then—"Ah, and who is this man, this—Mystery?" asked Clive Grey, in tones that read as if Mystery were an annoyance to Grey himself.

"That's what everyone wants to know," replied Deb, thoughtfully.

"The police in the township are not very—a—competent, I should think, if these outrages continue without check from them."

Deb turned quickly, and eyes and lips emphasised the contempt in her tones: "The police in Kelmare!

They're asleep, like everything and everybody else there. How can anyone in such a place as Kelmare remain awake?" Nevertheless, in spite of this little outburst, she was secretly pleased that the troopers had not been vigilant enough to catch the mysterious outlaw.

For a while there was silence. The man was watching the girl's face, though his eyes shifted as she raised her own to his.

"Your father doesn't care for me, Deb," said Grey, slowly.

She looked away, then back again at him. "Why do you think that?" she asked, hesitatingly.

The man laughed. "He makes no attempt to hide his dislike, my dear Deb."

"He thinks you are too soft," Deb told him, frankly. "You see, he likes a man who—who——" She stopped, at a loss for words to express what she would convey.

"Yes, I know what he likes. I quite understand that part," said the man, and his tone was as the tone of one who forgives a great wrong done him. "He likes a man to drink and swear, and I don't do either; so you see——" And he finished the sentence with a gesture.

"Do you care?" asked Deb. "You don't seem to."

"Care! I am a Christian man, I hope, my dear Deb, and as a Christian can overlook much that otherwise—I should care about." His voice softened, and he moved nearer to her.

"But you are not like your father. You do not think as he does; and as long as you like me, Deb, nothing else matters."

But it was as if she did not hear him. For the moment her thoughts had flown far away. Such thoughts could not have been too agreeable, for discontent marked itself on her features, and a frown showed itself upon her forehead. It was as if for the time she had forgotten the man at her side.

"Deb."

His voice was low. Evidently she did not hear him. She made no sign.

Grey touched her lightly on the arm. "Deb, what are you thinking about?"

She moved her arm from under his touch, and turned to him with one of her swift movements and sudden change of mood. All at once she was laughing.

"Oh, Clive! Dad was wild! You should have seen him! You should have heard him! He tramped up and down the kitchen, cursing, and stubbed his toes because he tried to kick the kitten, and kicked the table instead!"

Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks dimpling, and her white teeth gleaming between scarlet, laughing lips.

Grey watched, his breath came quickly, and again his hand closed over her arm.

"Deb!"

Behind them, twigs cracked and snapped beneath heavy weight. The man drew a little away from the girl, but she did not move at all. The next

minute, horse and rider came in sight. As they passed, Steve Baxter, without a word, lightly touched his hat to Deb McAlister, while her companion, not forgetting his usual courtesy, returned the salute. But the one swift glance Baxter cast his way was full of unutterable contempt.

"He was here the day before yesterday. I saw him going home—drunk, late at night," said Grey, very slowly and evenly, when Baxter had gone his way.

A surge of indignation swept over Deb, and for the first time she felt angry with the man beside her. "Did you!" she retorted.

It was as if, in his jealousy of Baxter, Clive did not trust her, and yet she had put Steve to one side for him—Steve, whom she had always liked. She would never have married him, but she might at least have been a little more friendly towards him but for Grey. And now Grey was at that contemptible little trick of "telling tales," and trying to lower Baxter in her regard.

Deb turned her back to him, and Grey, thereby seeing his mistake, tried to rectify it by changing the subject. But it was some little time before Deb again heeded him, and then not before he had redeemed his words against the other man by some sort of an apology.

. . . . .

And that evening, a rider silently made his way through one of the deep gullies to the road east of Kelmare. He sat easily in the saddle, the reins slack, and every now and again raised his face to-

wards the starlit sky. The night was perfect, and the silent rider was one who appreciated beauty in any form, and to whom the wonder of Nature always made a strong appeal.

But his mission was not one of peace, for he was a law-breaker, a "wanted" man.

But Mystery laughed at those who sought him, laughed at law and at the world, and went his own reckless, lawless way.

And the forest closed about him; and evening deepened into night.

CHAPTER IX.

Then another came to the ranges, another heart seeking forest life—the old teamster's granddaughter. The only child of dead parents, she had hitherto boarded in the city, ekeing out an existence by the labor of her own hands. But a freer life lured her to the teamster's camp. There had been none to tell her whether the step she was taking was wise or unwise. She was wholly independent, and knowing well what she wanted went in search of, and found it.

In a very short space of time the men noticed a vast difference about their little settlement. The distance between the two camps appeared considerably lessened by the softening influence of the young woman's presence. To Bill she was all in all. It was something to return to camp after a day's trying work and find a bright spirit waiting with words of welcome and of cheer. The old man began to live again.

And Zilah Kent was very happy. She went her way, free and unconventional, loving the forest mountains about her. Her companions were the birds of the bush, the camp horses, and the dogs. And, under open skies, she found life improved a hundredfold.

As yet, after five weeks of this life in open places, Zilah had never been to the township beyond the journey through to the ranges, and several times

had she expressed the wish that she might visit the valley; so one afternoon, while on his way to the mill, Ryder pulled up at the teamster's camp, and the girl answered his call.

"I've heard you say that you would like to go down into the township," said the man. "I am going down this afternoon. Would you care about coming along with me?"

"I shall come," she answered him. "There are several things I want to get at the store. What time do you intend leaving?"

"In about an hour's time—if that will suit you."

"That will suit nicely. I shall be ready then."

"Then I'll be along to time. Be a good girl."

The man's eyes twinkled as she turned from him at his use of her grandfather's pet phrase. She had taken but a few steps, however, when she again faced him, laughing. As in a flash, in the laughing girl before him Ryder saw his desire. His horse, impatient to be gone, fretted.

Raising high her hand, Zilah waved her fingers. "So long, grandmammy Jack!" she said.

And that afternoon in the township, a girl rode past Zilah Kent. For one instant, as if in answer to the steady gaze directed towards her, the rider's head turned, and the other girl had a glimpse of large, expressive eyes, and passionate lips.

Zilah was surprised at the quickening of her heart as it suddenly called to the other; was surprised at the desire that swept over her to know this girl with the vivid face, who held her head high with unconscious grace. She turned to Ryder.

"Do you know her? Who is she?"

"Deb McAlister," came the immediate answer.

"She is a beautiful girl. Is she the one Steve Baxter wants to marry?"

"Yes."

"I don't blame him. I wish you would help me to meet her," said Zilah.

He smiled a little. "Are you going to try to play the good angel to Steve?"

"That never entered my mind. I want to know her for myself," she told him.

He gently beat his whip against his legging, and looked at the ground, then back again at his companion's bright face. "It is late, but I shall bring her along to you since you wish it. Maybe, you can persuade her to ride back with us and keep you company this night. You will like her. You love the forest, and the heart of it is in Deb McAlister, though it is not yet awake."

"The heart of it is in you," was the impulsive answer. "You are Nature itself."

Deb had dismounted and entered a general store halfway along the road, and towards this John Ryder made his way to deliver Zilah's message. As Deb stepped from the store, he advanced.

"Good-day, Deb."

Genuine pleasure lit up her face as she returned his greeting, for Deb McAlister was no exception to the general feeling all had towards the millman.

"It's a long while since I have seen you in Kelmare, Jack," she said.

"Your own visits here appear to be limited," he answered, smiling.

"I came down to-day instead of Dad. He has gone out into the hills in another direction. I've just left the order in the store there. No, it's not often anyone sees me in Kelmare."

"And where are you bound for now, Deb?"

She looked about her. "Nowhere in particular. I was just going to take my time going home, that's all."

"There is someone along the street who would like to know you," said Ryder. "Will you come along and meet her?"

She looked sharply at him. "The girl you were with a minute ago?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"She is old Bill Glennister's grand-daughter, and is staying with him at the camp."

"I thought it must be, when I saw her with you. I have heard one of the men say that she was there," said Deb, slowly.

"Will you come along?" asked the man.

She hesitated.

"Deb, she is just a girl like yourself, and has not spoken to another for some time," he appealed. "I have heard you speak about the loneliness of Wungamool, and how you have often wished for another girl companion."

"That was some time ago." She spoke somewhat uneasily; but Ryder saw that she was wavering.

"You have your mother, she has no one at all. Just think how she, a girl from the city, must feel up there, where there is not another woman."

Deb hesitated no longer. "I will come," she said, simply, and freeing the horse's bridle from the post to which it had been fastened, she led the animal while she walked by Ryder's side. As they came up to Zilah, the hill girl experienced an unusual shyness, but her head was high as she faced the other.

"I hope you did not mind my asking Jack to speak to you for me," said Zilah, holding out a friendly hand.

Deb placed her own hand within it, and looked into Zilah's smiling face. "I am glad," she said, and smiled in answer. Shyness fled.

"Will you come back with me for the night?" suggested Zilah. "I wish you would, for even if I am not actually lonely up there, I should love to have another girl with me, and when I say you—" She paused but an instant. "You will come, won't you?"

"If I am not back at Wungamool before dark, they will be thinking something has happened to me," replied Deb. Her face was glowing. Eager as was the other girl to have her, she was no more eager than Deb herself was to go. It would be a totally new experience for her to spend the night with another girl away from home.

"Bob Cranford is in the township," put in Ryder. "He told me he would be returning to Wungamool

this evening. He could very easily take a message along to Mrs. McAlister. Wouldn't that do, Deb?"

"I think so. As long as mother knows where I am it will be all right. But I would not have her worrying, especially on my account."

"I think I know where to find Cranford, and I'll see him straight away." And Ryder left the two girls together while he went off in search of the other man. Knowing Cranford, he made straight for the hotel, where he found him just preparing to leave.

Zilah looked at the face before her, and thought she had never before seen one so lovely. She herself was by no means beautiful, but there was a softness and sweetness about her that made her very attractive. She was as a pansy to Deb's dahlia. But there was something of the pansy about Deb, too.

"We should be back before dark. It will be just beautiful riding. There is nothing I love so much as riding through the hills at twilight."

"Jack said you were from the city." There was just a trace of wistfulness in Deb's voice and eyes.

"But this is far lovelier than the city," was the other's enthusiastic answer. "I suppose I shall have to return some day, and I hate the very thought of that day ever coming."

"I have never seen the city. Kelmare is the nearest to any city I have ever got."

"Then you've not missed much," promptly replied Zilah, and tried to imagine Deb in the whirl of

the city machine, realising how much she would be out of her element there.

Before many minutes had passed, Ryder returned to them, and they made ready for the return to the ranges. And so it was, when the shadows began to fall, three rode through the hills from the township.

As they rode past the corner hotel, Zilah remarked upon the large, excited crowd gathered there. Every person—man, woman, and child—appeared to have collected in that one spot.

"Whatever can be the matter?" exclaimed Zilah.

Deb said nothing, only looked towards Ryder.

His answer was short! "Mystery in action again."

He was right. In the centre of the swaying group was the angry, gesticulating victim; the coachdriver between the township of Kelmare and one of the outlying eastern districts. The picture thus presented to the three riders told its own story. Zilah was silent, wondering greatly at the daring and mystery of the outlaw. Deb, also, was silent; but into her face had come a sudden, eager glow of excitement.

. . . . .

As night fell, across the ranges an anxious mother awaited her daughter's coming. The hours passed, and Mrs. McAlister, unable any longer to bear the suspense, went into the bar where her husband was attending to the usual group there.

"What's the matter?" asked McAlister, as she entered, her anxious-looking face betraying her uneasiness.

"It's Deb, Sam. It's late, and she's not back yet from Kelmare. Something must have happened to her. With—with Mystery along the road, one never knows—" Her voice trailed off.

"Oh, I say!" called out one of the men upon hearing her words. "I saw Jack Ryder in Kelmare, an' he said to tell ye that Deb was goin' back with them for the night. It went clean outer me head, an' I forgot to tell ye before."

"Going back with them?" emphasised Mrs. McAlister, looking wonderingly at Cranford.

"Ay. He had the girl with him—old Bullocky Bill's girl, y'know. Strike me! but she ain't half a bad-lookin' piece of goods, neither. Wish I was Deb."

Mrs. McAlister, on hearing the reason for her daughter's absence, had expected an outburst of anger from her husband; she was, therefore, surprised at the very matter-of-fact way in which he took the news. He even looked pleased. But she understood better when one of the men shouted from across the room:

"We needn't be lookin' for Steve at Wungamool to-night, then."

The little woman went back to the sitting-room where Clive Grey was waiting.

"I am sorry, Clive; but Deb won't be back at all to-night," she said.

"She won't! But she knew that I would be here. Where is she?" asked Grey, in surprise.

"She met some friends from across the hills in Kelmare to-day, and is spending the night with them," she told him.

"I see. I see. And Steve Baxter is there, is he not?"

But the woman objected to the man's tone and attitude, and answered briefly: "I believe he is."

And Grey realised that he had gone far enough. He and Deb were not yet married, and he had no wish to lose the mother's confidence. His voice and expression spoke of offended dignity; but it had lost its objectionable note.

"Then I'll take my departure, since there is nothing else for me to do. Deb might have at least let me know, and saved me the trouble of coming here; but I am afraid she sadly lacks consideration for others." And he turned to go.

"I am sorry you have had the trouble of coming here for nothing, Clive," said Deb's mother, softening. "I know it is inconsiderate of Deb, especially when she know you were coming, and it's hard on you."

"It doesn't matter, Mrs. McAlister. It doesn't matter. Don't worry yourself about it." And the tone was now one of resignation. On hearing him speak, one would have believed the man to have received some mortal hurt. And his expression vied with his tone.

He left the shanty by the back door that he might avoid the noisy crowd in the bar; for it was Clive

Grey's custom to keep himself as far from the bar as possible, though whether it was because of his principles, or the fact that the men had ever remarks to hurl his way when he came in contact with them there, it would be hard to say. But one thing he was well aware of—Bob Cranford was in the bar, he had heard his loud voice, and Grey had not forgotten those occasions on which he and Cranford had met, for Cranford always made him a butt for insolent remarks and sneers.

Leaving the shanty paddock, Clive Grey struck out along the narrow track leading to his own abode.

CHAPTER X.

When Ryder and the two girls reached the camp, after an exciting race through the forest, it was to find that neither the teamster nor Baxter had as yet returned. They had tea together at the teamster's camp, and, later, the girls strolled along the track leading to the creek.

Such a warm night it was! Trembling with the little winds that sighed through the trees so that the leaves rustled gently in a cool, soothing murmur. Such sweet-scented air, heavily-laden with honeyed black wattle. How deep, still, and mysterious was the forest, and overhead the moon sailed like a ball of light across the sky. Moon shadows everywhere. Great trees, tall and gaunt; and the narrow track leading to the creek. Magic in all, suggestive of an intangible, wonderful presence.

"Even if darkness had set in before we got back, we should have had the moon later," said Zilah, meditatively, looking up at the lantern in the sky.

But Deb McAlister had suddenly turned. There was a catch in her breath: "Let us go back."

"Tired so soon?" asked Zilah, surprised, looking at her.

"Not tired, only——" She checked herself. "How heavy the black wattle smells. It is late this year! I hate it! It makes me think of graves.

There are so many black wattle trees in Kelmare cemetery."

"Don't think of such unpleasant things," answered Zilah. "It is not nearly as strong as it was. It is dying off. There will be a lot of wild honey."

"There has always been wild honey."

"Listen! There is a wattle bird calling—'Tip, tip, top o' the wattle!' " softly called Zilah.

"It calls all day."

"And there is a mopoke."

"I have listened to it all my life," answered Deb McAlister, tonelessly.

Zilah looked at her. The moonlight claimed Deb for its own, gleaming in her eyes, caressing her parted lips, and robbing her face of color. Beside her, the other girl appeared as a soft, shadowy figure.

The mournful call came again.

"It's a tawny frogmouth," said Deb McAlister, and stopped. "It is down near the creek. Do you know it? It is such a cunning little bird, marked so that it can hide itself among the branches or on the limb of a tree." Her voice had changed to one of delight, and her face was colorful and animated. A creature of moods was she, at one moment denying the wonders of Nature, at another breathing the very essence of the hills about her.

"It has a sad cry, but I love it," she said, again. "Still, moonlight nights are always sad, don't you think?" Her voice dropped lower, slower. "At dusk, there is something wonderful. Have you ever

felt it? It is—what is it? But during the day there are only trees, bushes, and bracken fern. These nights I would be like Mystery, and have the forest for my own."

"And all mankind for your enemy. He is an outlaw."

"I don't care." Deb threw back her head with the gesture characteristic of her, and there was silence awhile. "Not so very long ago I could think of nothing else but the city. I longed to go there. How I hated this! Even now, sometimes, I hate it, but not as much as I did. I don't know . . . a change has come, somehow." She was still looking ahead.

Again there was silence, with the ranges about them like giant shadows.

"But about the man you are going to marry—Mr. Grey?" asked Zilah, then.

But the other girl did not answer.

The moon passed on, and the shadows were many and deep when they returned to camp to find the old teamster awaiting them. He was not alone, for Ryder and Baxter were with him.

The moonlight showed Zilah's face to be bright and happy; but Deb hardly looked at, and spoke little to Steve, and rode away next morning without having said more than a few conventional words to him.

CHAPTER XI.

As Steve Baxter dismounted before the shanty, Deb came up from her daily stroll, and greeted him with a return of her old frankness, which at once sent the man's head into the clouds.

Deb herself, had she been questioned, would have been totally unable to explain this sudden change in herself. She knew only that, as she returned from the bush, and recognised horse and rider outside the shanty, she was glad, very glad, to see Steve, and allowed herself to show her feelings.

Before going into the house itself, Baxter for a few minutes entered the bar, where McAlister was alone. A few words passed between the two men, a little strained and conventional at first on Baxter's part, though cordially enough on McAlister's. But Steve's coming thus required no words to explain his mission, and McAlister was sharp enough to read below the surface, and tactful enough to refrain from comment on what had last passed between them. It was with a feeling of relief that Baxter passed to the rear of the shanty and rejoined Deb.

They had the evening to themselves, for Clive Grey did not put in an appearance at all during the night.

"I do not know," said Deb, in answer to a question of her mother's; and then turned to Steve, laughing—"You know, he was very annoyed at my staying away that night last week, so perhaps he is treating me to a little of my own medicine."

Did she care? Baxter wondered. Or was she just in one of her reckless, laughing moods that defied everything and everybody?

They were in the kitchen, Mrs. McAlister, as usual, working at the large table. The man, watching her, wondered if her hands were ever idle. He had never known them to be so. There came the noises of an entry of men into the bar, and this was closely followed by the clink of glasses and a murmur of voices. But Steve kept to the kitchen.

Deb rose quickly, and moved to the back door, opening it. The starlight streamed in, and cool breezes and beautiful night lured. Slowly Baxter crossed to the girl's side, and as she stood with hand up against the door, she turned to him, her face alight with youth and love of life.

"Let us go for a ride," said Deb.

Steve required no second asking. A ride with the girl he loved, and on such a night as was now calling, was all that he could wish for. But the mother gently interposed.

"But, Deb, child, isn't it rather late now to think of going for a ride?"

"Late!" echoed the girl. "Mother, it is a glorious night, and so bright out. Look!" And she flung wide the door to give weight to her words.

Mrs. McAlister raised her head, and looked. "Very well, dear. Only—don't be too late in coming home, will you?"

"We'll be back before ten, I promise," answered Deb, and without further delay, went off to get ready for the ride.

She was back in a very short space of time, and before long, Steve had the horses at the door.

Deb kissed her mother before setting off, and Mrs. McAlister left her work to watch them ride away together. Very soon, their figures were lost amid the shadows. She shook her head a little as she returned to the table, for she felt that Deb was not doing altogether the right thing—that she was not quite fair in her actions to Clive Grey. But the little woman was very weak where her daughter was concerned, and though she tried to deceive herself that it was otherwise, the fact still remained that, in her heart, she preferred Steve Baxter for a son-in-law before Clive Grey. After all, it was Clive's own fault if her daughter had ridden with Steve this night. He had failed Deb in not coming down to the shanty as usual, and in sending her no word regarding his absence. This was one of his nights for calling to see her. But Deb appeared very matter-of-fact about it all. Perhaps she and Clive had quarrelled. Still, had that been the case, she would surely have let her mother know. Again Mrs. McAlister shook her head.

But Deb knew of no reason for Clive Grey's absence, nor did she greatly care. She laughed and talked animatedly as she rode with Baxter, and the man felt a great happiness at this return of her old, frank friendship. He did not speak of Grey. It was the girl herself who made first mention of the other.

"He gave me quite a little lecture," she informed

Steve. "Now it will be my turn to lecture him because he has not kept his appointment."

"I'd like to be handy to hear you," replied Baxter. "I've had my turn in lectures from you before this, and I'd like to hear you going hammer and tongs for another."

She flashed him a look from her laughing eyes. How alluring she was! She wore no hat, and her dark hair clustered about her face; while her eyes, bright blue by daylight, looked black in the starlight. Her lips were never more scarlet, more passionate, and she herself never more buoyant with life.

Steve, watching, felt forbidden words rise to his lips, but checked himself from uttering them. He must not speak, experience whispered that to do so would but change her friendly attitude to one more distant, more cold. He must be content with riding along the shadowed track close by her side: to know that she was glad of his company, and had, for a time at least, no thought for the man to whom she had given her promise.

"You do not seem to care that he has turned you down to-night," he said, with something of an effort, bringing his thoughts back to Grey.

"Me! Care! I care for nobody, nobody!" she replied, and there was a flash of defiance in her eyes, while her figure straightened a little in the saddle.

Baxter saw that his remark had not been altogether a wise one, and that he was treading upon slippery ground. He went more carefully.

"No, I don't believe you do. What do you think of Zilah Kent, Deb?"

"I like her," was the immediate answer. "She—there is something about her I'd like to be myself. I don't know just what it is. I don't think she is a scrap like a city girl."

"How many city girls have you seen?" Baxter could not resist the little taunt.

"Only two," admitted Deb, "and that is some little time ago, now. They were passing through Kelmare. Neither of them looked a scrap like Zilah Kent, and they walked along with their eyes straight ahead as though they didn't want to see anybody or anything, and couldn't be bothered with turning their heads. Oh, but they were dressed wonderfully! As they passed me I heard one of them say to the other: 'What a blessing it will be to get back to town!' How I longed to be like them!"

Steve laughed at her mimicry of the haughty damsels.

"Zilah Kent is not like that," added Deb.

"No, she's not. I think myself that she must be a mistake. Meant for the country, and born in the city."

"Then I must be a mistake, too. Meant for the city, and born in the country," slowly answered Deb.

"No," instantly denied Baxter. "You're in your right place, if only you could see it."

"Perhaps that is true. I am not nearly as keen on the city as I used to be. But all city girls are

not like the two I saw in Kelmare, are they?" asked Deb.

Baxter recalled his visits to the capital, and as before gave his answer: "No, they're not."

"See that white gum along the track there? I'll race you to it."

And Deb was off before the man had realised her sudden change of the subject. There at the white gum she stopped, waiting for him to come up.

"Oh, Steve," she called. "I didn't know you were so slow! And now, we had better make tracks for home."

"So soon? Why, we've been away no time," protested the man.

"But I told mother I'd be back before ten, remember," she reminded him. "It can't be very far off it now."

Baxter's answer was to wheel his horse about, and they rode back along the way they had come.

The cool evening breezes had dropped, but before they had gone very far along the return track a rustling and murmuring again sounded amongst the leaves, foretelling the coming of the wind. One by one the stars began to disappear from the sky, and the light to fade.

"Looks jolly like a storm coming up," said the man, and they urged their horses to a smarter canter.

By the time they reached the shanty the wind had risen in good earnest, and darkness had wiped all the stars from the sky. The two were just able to

make out the track ahead, which showed dimly white through the trees.

"It's just as well we did turn back," remarked Steve Baxter, as Deb dismounted. He jumped from his own saddle, and taking the horses by the bridles, led them towards the stables.

"You'll find the lantern hanging up just behind the door, Steve," called Deb.

"Right-o!" he answered.

Deb entered the bright kitchen. "Fancy such a beautiful night turning out like this!" she said to her mother.

"I am glad you are back," was all Mrs. McAlister replied.

Supper was prepared. The table was laid. The kettle steamed away on the hearth, and the whole presented a picture of cheer and comfort to Steve as he entered a few minutes later.

"Cripes! This looks good!" he exclaimed, and moved towards the hearth. "It's coming up all right," he added.

Deb turned from her contemplation of the fire. "What? The wind?"

"Too right," he answered, decisively.

"It's pitch dark, too," returned she. "Come on, mother, sit up to the table. You, too, Steve, sit just there. Now leave that kettle alone, mother. I'll pour the tea."

And Mrs. McAlister, thus gently admonished, sat quiet, while Deb waited on them all.

Supper finished, Baxter rose, and was about to

leave when McAlister, having closed the bar for the night, came into the kitchen.

"You ain't going away to-night, Steve. Strike me, man, but just listen to that wind! You can't see a hand's length in front of you, and it's a rotten track for you at any time, let alone on a night like this! Stay here to-night. Y're welcome, you know."

Baxter hesitated, looking at Deb, who, however, made not the slightest sign. McAlister stood behind his wife's chair, both hands resting thereon.

"If Mrs. McAlister——" began Steve, when she interrupted.

"By all means, Steve, stay. As my husband has said, you are very welcome."

Baxter looked again towards the girl. "And you?" he asked.

"You're quite big enough to please yourself," replied Deb.

It was enough. Baxter again hung his hat upon the peg behind the kitchen door.

CHAPTER XII.

The wind was blowing in fitful gusts, and Zilah Kent shivered as she rose from her bed and looked out into the dull, cheerless forest. It was not exactly cold. If there had been no wind the air would have been close and oppressive; but the winds were sharp, and cutting as they did through the warm atmosphere, caused a sort of eeriness to pervade the air.

Zilah lost no time in dressing. She was later than usual this morning, and could hear her grandfather already moving outside.

Having prepared the teamster's breakfast, attended to him, and seen him off with his team, the girl stood awhile looking about her. In the wilds of the forest there she looked a slight, dainty figure, and John Ryder was not blind to this as he approached on horseback.

"Isn't it awful weather?" called Zilah.

"It is. What are we going to do about it?" he replied, cheerfully.

"I wish we could do something," was the answer. "And you are going down to Kelmare, too. I don't envy you your ride."

"It certainly won't be too pleasant." He looked earnestly at her. "You will be alone all day. Will you be nervous?"

"Nervous! Not in the least!" was her laughing, scornful answer. "But what about Steve? Where is he?"

"He did not come back to camp last night." Ryder spoke thoughtfully, looking away from her. "He probably stayed overnight at Wungamool—I believe that's where he went to. It wouldn't be the first time he has stayed there." He looked again at her. "I'll be going. The sooner I am away, the sooner I'll return, and I'll waste no time getting back. Anything you're wanting in Kelmare?"

"Nothing, thanks," was her answer.

She watched him as he rode down the track, breasting the wind, then her thoughts went back to Steve. Had he strayed overnight at Wungamool? Why had Jack looked so serious in speaking of it?

Her thoughts, startled, suddenly flew to another. "Absurd!" she told herself. "I am mad! It can't possibly be. Steve Baxter and—Mystery. Steve and Mystery. I wonder if that is what Jack suspects. But then, if Steve were the other, Jack would surely know. Oh, I'm dreaming!"

And impatiently she returned to her work, striving to shake off such disagreeable thoughts. Nevertheless, they would not be so easily shaken off.

"And Deb McAlister won't be bothered with just Steve Baxter, and imagines herself in love with Mystery. Then how does she regard Clive Grey, I wonder?" Zilah smiled to herself, a tender smile. It was as if she understood Deb's romantic, passionate young heart.

"Hey! Anyone about!"

The clear call roused her, and she went out to greet its owner.

"Hullo! what's happened to the others? Where has Jack got to?" asked Baxter.

"He has gone to Kelmare. Didn't you know he was going to-day?"

"Oh—ay. I'd forgotten it was his day to go down," replied Steve, uneasily. "Where's your grandfather?" he asked then.

"It's his day for the mill," answered she.

"Of course, what am I thinking about." He was frowning a little at his own forgetfulness.

"I'm afraid that you must be very much in love that you should forget, Steve," she teased, smiling.

"Are you!" he retorted, good-humoredly. He frankly met her clear gaze. "An' maybe you're right. I stayed overnight at Wungamool. It was such a brute of a night—so dark and windy, that I didn't altogether care about making tracks back to camp here, that's all. But I should have remembered Jack was bound for Kelmare."

He dismounted, drawing the bridle over the horse's head. "Did Bill go early with the team?"

"Yes."

"And you're all alone?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll give the horse a feed, and get to work."

"Have you had breakfast?" asked Zilah.

"I had it before I left Wungamool." He faced her again. "Miss Zilah, tell me—dinkum. I know Deb's engaged to marry that—that fellow Grey;

but I've a notion, somehow, that she's really not over keen on him, and that it won't come off. She's always hittin' at me, and all that, but last night she was more like her old self to me. It has bucked me up a lot. I'm not going to cave in an' let another man—especially a man like Grey—beat me without fighting him. Do you think I'll win?"

"I am sure you will win, in the long run, Steve," she reassured him. "You're an honest man"—was she trying him?—"and a straight worker. You'll win in the end."

He stood a moment, motionless, looking into space. Then—"There are many honest, straight working men about Wungamool," he answered. "That's what seems to be the trouble. If I was only something different—Grey, now he was different, you see, and he went straight in and won."

"But you suggested just now that it appears as if he won't hold her. What then? If you win, you want to win for all time, not only for a little while."

"True for you. Well, I'll take your words for what you mean, and—keep going."

He smiled, but it was a smile Zilah could not altogether understand, as he turned and left her.

Steve's heart was light as he hurriedly prepared for the mill, and he called cheerfully to Zilah as he galloped past the hut:

"I'll be back at the usual time, midday."

The mill itself was but a mile from the teamster's camp, and within a very short space of time Baxter was hard at work there. None the less, his thoughts

found time to wander now and again to the evening before. Deb had been kinder towards him than she had been for many a day, and that was everything to Steve.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. McAlister. Where is Deb?"

"Good afternoon, Clive," was the reply, as the man closed the door behind him. "You are along early to-day. Deb went out a few minutes back, and I can't say, I'm sure, where you are likely to find her."

But Grey knew. After a few more words to Mrs. McAlister, he went out again, and made along the usual track.

Deb, however, contrary to his expectations, was not at the white boulder. The man looked wonderingly about him, when something prompted him to look over the side of the steep hill. There he saw her, seated on a ledge some little way down the incline, her legs dangling dangerously over the edge.

"Deb," he called.

She looked up. "Hullo, Clive! You're early."

"What on earth are you doing down there?" he demanded. "Come up here. I have something to say to you."

Deb sat without movement or answer. Her swaying feet had become still.

"Deb, do you hear me? Please do as I ask," called Grey, in tones quieter than those he had previously used.

At this, she scrambled up from the hillside, and stood beside him, panting from exertion, brushing the earth from her dress and hands.

"I was waiting for that 'please'," she told him, and smiled.

But Clive did not smile. He was looking very serious. "Deb, you were out riding with Steve Baxter last night," he said, without preliminary.

She looked candidly at him. "I know I was. Who told you—mother or dad?"

"Neither. It was not necessary for them to inform me. I saw you myself," was his answer.

"You did!" she exclaimed in surprise. "But I did not see you at all. Where were you?"

"Does it signify? At any rate, Deb, I was returning home when I saw you together, riding along the track towards the shanty."

She did not answer, only stood looking at him.

"It is hardly necessary to add that I was more than annoyed, being greatly displeased," he continued. "You must remember that you are engaged to me, and it is not your place to ride at night with any other man."

"Indeed!" she flashed. "You were not returning from the shanty yourself when you saw us. You needn't talk so big, Clive. You seem to forget that you were to have been up at the house last evening, but failed."

"I was unable to go," he interrupted

"And that night when I stayed away from Wungamool you preached to me about it for ages," she went on, paying no heed to his interruption.

"That was altogether different, my dear girl, altogether different. You stayed away simply for your own pleasure. Business kept me away last

night, and I had no chance of letting you know I should not be able to see you."

"I have known Steve Baxter for years, and there is no harm in riding with him, surely. We have been friendly ever since he first came to the district, and I was only a youngster; we have ridden together often enough before." She paused, then added mischievously: "We greatly enjoyed it last night."

"I don't doubt it," replied the man. "I don't doubt it for one minute. You appeared to be enjoying yourselves very much when I saw you. But it must not occur again, Deb. Do you understand? It is not at all fair to me. You must do as I say in future."

She turned quickly to him, but the hot words died upon her lips, and, instead, she laughed a little. Going to where the man stood, straight and stiff, she placed one hand upon his arm.

"For goodness' sake don't let us quarrel, Clive. I can't be bothered, and besides, I might say something nasty to you, and, really—I don't want to do that," she said, with a touch of gentleness, thinking that, after all, perhaps Clive might be right, and that she was not altogether fair to him. At the same time realising that it was likely she would, at times, continue to be unfair to him.

For one moment he made no movement; then he turned fully to her catching her arms in his two strong hands. It was the first time she had ever experienced his strength. His hands held her immovable, and she stood rigid. But there was no displeasure on her face.

"I can't help it, Deb," he said, breathing quickly and unevenly. "I can't bear to see you happy in the company of any other man, no matter who he is, and to see him looking at you as only I have the right to look at you!"

"Clive, you are hurting my arms," was all she said. Her voice was low, and she no longer smiled, or as much as looked at him. Never before had she known him to be like this, and for the moment, she felt almost submissive.

Slowly he released her arms, and Deb felt the spell gradually lift. But she was still a little under its influence. Her arms, where he had gripped them, were tingling.

"Clive, I don't want to cross you, but I can't be expected to tie myself down just for you. You failed me last night. If you had been there, I should very probably have ridden with you. But how could we ride together when you were away? And so, I went with Steve." But she did not think it necessary to add that, last night, she had preferred Steve to Grey. Feeling that she had made sufficient apology, she turned about.

"Let us go back now, and forget all about it."

"I'll do my best to forget," he answered, a little stiffly.

"Oh, don't speak like that!" she cried, half-reproachfully, half-impatiently. "You're not doing your best when you do. I have told you I am sorry. Do you want me to go down on my knees to you?

And you seem to forget that it was all as much your fault as mine. You shouldn't have slipped me up!"

She placed her arm within his, shaking it, and he took her hand in a warm clasp as they began to walk back towards the shanty.

"Very well, Deb, I'll forget all about it, since you have said you are sorry, and that it is not likely to happen again."

He spoke now in quiet, assuring tones.

But Deb tried to remember when she had promised him that "it would not happen again."

CHAPTER XIV.

Deb McAlister had of late a great desire to again see Zilah Kent, but in no way could she think of meeting the other girl. Had it not been for Steve Baxter, she would have ridden across the ranges to the teamster's camp, but the thought of Steve being close by there was enough to prevent her from doing so; nor would she as much as send a message by him.

And Zilah Kent's own thoughts were of the girl she had first met riding through the township, and she, too, looked forward to another meeting. She was thinking of Deb now as she waited along the track for her grandfather. Baxter had been away for the day. He had gone to Kelmare to meet the morning train, which was bringing implements for the camp.

Zilah seated herself upon a fallen log, and traced patterns on the ground with a stick.

She was wondering if Deb would marry Grey in spite of Baxter's words of a few days ago. She herself did not know Clive Grey, had never as much as seen him, and Baxter's reports of a rival could not be altogether relied upon. She had heard from Ryder that Grey was a very quiet-looking man, who kept much to himself, and whose faults were an unknown quantity; so, from the accounts given by the two men, Zilah had formed her own opinions as to the man to whom Deb McAlister was engaged to be married.

And Deb herself, that one evening the two girls had spent together, had said nothing whatever of Clive Grey.

"I wonder why?" thought Zilah. It seemed strange that a girl should not once mention the man she was to marry.

She heard the sound of an approaching horse, and looked up to see Ryder. As he came up to her, the man dismounted.

"I am just waiting for grandfather," she informed him. "He should be here soon."

"He will be along the track any time now. Is Steve back yet from Kelmare?"

"Not yet."

"Hum. I expected him to be back before this. He is late," said Ryder, slowly.

The girl stood up, the stick dropping from her hand. "Jack, will you take me for a ride to Wungamool one of these days? I'd like to see Deb McAlister, and where she lives, and—I'd like to meet Mr. Grey. If I knew the way, I'd go myself."

"I think it can be done, but not for a few days," he answered, and smiled. "You couldn't very well go alone, even if you knew the track. And we have so much to keep us going here for awhile. They are calling out for palings down below."

"I know, Grandad was telling me how busy you are. But if you will just take me along any time you can spare an afternoon off."

"I'll be only too pleased, and I know that Deb herself will be mighty glad to see you. If—" He broke off, staring past her into the distance.

"What's the matter?" asked she, and turning to follow his intent gaze, she saw what had arrested his attention.

On the highest ridge of the ranges there, a horse and rider stood outlined against the horizon, a dark picture against the sky.

"Who is it?" asked Zilah, drawing her brows together in wonderment. "And what on earth is he doing away over there?"

"I can't say—I don't know," replied the man. "It may be someone after cattle."

But another idea had quickly taken possession of the girl, and she spoke excitedly. "Oh, Jack! I wonder if—do you think it might be Mystery?"

"It is not quite unlikely. Though Mystery would hardly show himself off like that. He must know that he can be plainly seen up there—whoever it is." He stopped, then added: "It is too far off to recognise either horse or rider. The troopers passed the mill just after I returned from dinner. Did they come this road at all?"

"No."

"Then they must have gone straight on and towards that ridge. But that isn't a trooper up there. One can see that much, at least. If it should be Mystery, then he had better watch out for himself."

"Look! He is going," cried the girl.

And as she spoke, horse and rider disappeared down the far-off side of the ridge, leaving it again a clear cut line across the horizon.

"Just fancy seeing Mystery!" exclaimed Zilah.

"I don't think it was he, somehow. It must have been someone else," replied Ryder. "Here comes your grandfather now."

But had they been watching the ridge a few minutes later, they would have seen several horsemen pass over it towards the direction the other had taken.

For it was Mystery.

Ever vigilant, and keen, he was fully aware that the troopers were in the vicinity. To hoodwink them would have been to him the easiest thing in the world, but, reckless and daring, he had, out of sheer bravado, climbed to the top of the highest ridge, and had so shown himself to all the district around. Down in one of the gullies beneath him he caught sight of four objects moving along.

"Troopers," he told himself. "I'll give them a couple of minutes."

But he gave them five minutes, then, with the knowledge that they could not have failed to see him, he rode on away from the ridge.

The troopers had seen him almost immediately he arrived and appeared against the horizon there.

"Hey!" ejaculated one, pointing up. "That looks mighty like our man."

The four had seen the outlaw at almost the same moment, and the trooper's words were echoed.

"Now use your heads," roughly said the Sergeant. "He must see us. Make no sign whatever. Keep just as you are, but don't go along with your eyes shut. Watch!"

The order was easy enough to give, but not so

easy to follow. The horseman on the ridge had turned about and had disappeared from view of those below.

The Sergeant gave the words. "He's taken to the north road. Now, you fellows, get busy, an' show what you're worth!"

The four hunters spurred on their horses, and the chase began. Once upon the ridge, they sighted the outlaw heading, as the Sergeant had foreseen, for the north road, and they gave hot chase.

Though they followed as swiftly as the rough mountain tracks would allow, the distance between pursuers and pursued did not appear to lessen. Along hillside, through gullies, on they rode, the troopers keeping on the track of the outlaw.

"If we could only head him off we'd have the blighter," muttered the Sergeant. But there was no way of heading him off.

When he came to one of the larger, deeper gullies, Mystery turned round in the saddle, laughing at those who came on behind. But they did not know that he laughed. They knew only that, when they emerged from the gully, there was no sign of a rider on the clear track ahead, and as there was but one exit from the gully, and he had not passed through it, there appeared to be no doubt but what he was hidden within.

Leaving two men stationed there at the opening, the Sergeant, with the fourth man, turned back in search.

There was no sight of the outlaw, though the

truth was easily guessed at when a cunning little opening was discovered on one side of the gully.

"That's where he's gone, damn him!" said the Sergeant.

"It's rough, and very steep. Not a very safe ride," doubtfully replied his companion. "I'm no shirker myself when it comes to ridin'; but I wouldn't care to tackle that track."

"You!" was the scornful reply. "You can't ride a donkey; but nothing would stop that—Mystery from getting away there."

"He might have turned back after we passed," was the suggestion.

"Shakes! Call up the others!"

The trooper felt his fingers tingling to come in contact with the other's sneering face. The Sergeant's temper was never at any time of the gentlest, and it was now at its worst. He had been so certain of a capture, and he cursed not only the man who had escaped him, but everything and everybody.

The two troopers were called up, and the search resumed, but to no account. Mystery had got clean away.

"But he won't beat me, by God!" exclaimed the Sergeant, shaking his clenched fist towards the sky. "I'll get him yet!"

It was towards evening when the four hunters, making the return journey by a different route from the one by which they had come, passed McAlister's shanty, and stopped awhile there. McAlister himself was not at all surprised at their appearance. It

was not the first time they had been through Wungamool.

"Did you git him?" he asked.

"Can't y' see we did?" snapped the Sergeant, sarcastically.

The men in the bar came out, crowding round, but the troopers, their own tempers tried by failure, but more by the Sergeant's growlings and hectorings, were in no mood for answering questions.

"No luck," was their brief and only reply.

As they again mounted to take their departure, Clive Grey appeared, walking round the shanty verandah. Even as he did so, Deb McAlister came out. The man's eyebrows raised inquiringly as he turned to her.

"What are the police doing here, Deb? Has anything happened?" asked Grey.

"No. They are after Mystery," was her reply.

"And did they catch him? It's to be hoped they did."

"Well, as you see, they didn't," she returned, and the troopers having ridden off, she went indoors again, Clive following.

Deb made but a poor companion that evening. Though agreeable enough, she spoke little to Grey, and several attempts at conversation on his part fell flat, so that, feeling himself somewhat neglected, he took his departure earlier than usual.

The girl was not sorry to see him go. Before she retired for the night, she looked out through the open window across the hills. The night was dark, and the ranges looked blacker and more solemn

than ever. But to the girl's fancy a figure stood out through the darkness, a romantic figure built by her own imagination.

"I'm glad they didn't get him."

She was hardly aware that she spoke the words aloud.

Had Clive Grey only heard them!

CHAPTER XV.

The hill girl had put aside the dream she had been basking in, and looked at her lover through clear glasses. Was this the man she loved? Was it true that she could ever have really loved him?

Steve Baxter had been right in his words to Zilah, for Deb McAlister now realised that Clive Grey was as naught to her. He no longer influenced her heart.

Then she thought of another. Too often, of late, had he filled her mind. Strong, manly, daredevil as she imagined the outlaw to be, he echoed her ideal. New dreams came to her, and the city no longer lured. The wild, free nature began to assert itself.

Clive Grey!

He had never been known to fight a man in his life, was too weak to be reckless, and cared nothing for Nature's wildness and freedom. Too well she realised the truth of her father's words, but pride prevented her from showing it.

It was just about this time that Steve Baxter crossed the ranges on another trip to Wungamool. Once again he approached Deb regarding Grey. Was it merely love that compelled him to try and turn the girl from the other man and win her for himself? Or did he understand more than he dared confess? At least, he saw more than the girl herself intended that he should, and spoke thus to her:

"You're not blind, Deb. You know yourself that

you wish he was a bit different. In the first place he only took your fancy just because he came from the city, an' dressed an' spoke up to the knocker. But you woke up to him. Oh, I can see it! I've got eyes, and I can see the way you look at him at times, as if you wish he—he—just wasn't. You know what I mean. You don't love him, girl, not you!"

Baxter was right, and because she knew well that he was right the girl was stung to defiance, and obstinately turned on him, her eyes flashing, her tongue sharp.

"How dare you speak to me like that! How dare you say those things about the man I am going to marry! Yes, I am going to marry him in spite of you all. I hate you, Steve Baxter! You wouldn't say those things to Clive himself!"

In his turn, Baxter flared. "I have said them to him! But he ain't man enough to throw 'em back at me. He swallows everything that is said to him—swallows it like a meek little—worm that he is——"

Inwardly, Deb winced. The words hurt. She knew them to be true. Clive would swallow everything said just like—"a meek little worm."

"Him!" snorted Steve Baxter. "He won't even lift a fist!"

"Because he is above condescending to a low brawl!" retorted Deb, at the same time fervently wishing that Grey would assert himself by way of his fists, or—any way, sooner than just give in to all that was said of, and to him.

"Any way, Steve Baxter, I am not going to trouble myself arguing with you on anyone else. You take too much upon yourself," continued the young lady. "When will you learn to keep to yourself when you're not wanted, instead of interfering in my affairs? I never want to see you again, so please be good enough to keep out of my way for the future!"

Dull red showed in the man's face, and for a moment there was a tense silence. Then Baxter spoke very slowly, very evenly:

"Very well. I'll not forget those words of yours. I'll keep to myself in future, and not trouble you again. But, all the same, something tells me that some day you will want me, and then you will have to come to me, for I'll never come to you again. Don't worry, I'll keep out of your path right enough."

He turned sharply, his step firm, shoulders squared, resolution expressed in his carriage.

Deb McAlister laughed scornfully, but when she entered the house her eyes were brilliant, and her lips brooding. Unrest wrapped her round.

That night she avoided meeting Grey by being away from the shanty at his usual time of arrival. She strolled along one of the hidden tracks, away from the white boulder, in case he should search for her there, and on her return seated herself on a fallen log some little distance from the shanty, where she could watch without being seen. She saw Grey take his departure, and watched him out of sight before making her way back to the house.

The girl's mother looked questioningly at her as she passed through to her own room, but refrained from any remark. Despite the close bond of relationship and love between them, her daughter was at times beyond the mother's understanding, the eccentricity of Deb baffling the simpler nature of Mrs. McAlister. But it had come about that, these days, Deb hardly understood herself.

And Steve Baxter rode away through the forest, away from Wungamool and Deb. He had hardened himself against softer feelings that strove to govern his heart, and his face was sternly set. On he rode through the bush towards the camp he shared with one whose peace of heart and mind he envied, who never had, and never would fail him.

But on the near side of the dry creek bed he drew rein and dismounted, dropping the bridle. The horse stood quietly, making no move when its master stepped a little further away. It was as if the animal understood its rider's mood.

The ranges loomed deep and dark. The keen night winds had commenced their play, poignant with the voices of great forests and their sweetness. They played about the silent watcher, stirring his blood and quickening his pulses with their magic, and the man's heart thrilled in answer to the silent call of the forest and of the night.

He did not hear the snapping of twigs under firm footsteps, and a minute later a tall form was at his side, and a familiar presence made itself felt.

Baxter turned to the one who had come to him

there, and, after awhile, spoke half-wonderingly: "You were made for this."

"For what?"

The other opened wide his arms, indicating by his action the wonder and grandeur of the night. "For all this."

But Ryder only laughed. "It has always been mine. I found it early." And he added, soberly, "It is my inheritance."

His was the understanding of the little winds and the whispering, scent-laden messages.

As the two stood together there, it gradually dawned upon Ryder's mind that all was not well with his companion. Quietly he asked:

"What's troubling you, Steve?"

And the other shortly answered him: "I received my exit, straight and sure, to-day."

"How is that?" queried Ryder.

And again in brief tones came the answer. "She told me straight an' direct that she hated me, an' that I wasn't to see her or to go near her again."

After a short pause, Ryder spoke again. "Are you breaking your heart over it, lad?"

"By heaven! I'll break his damned hide!" exploded Steve Baxter, clenching his fists.

Like a shadow in the darkness his companion's arm stretched out, and a firm hand rested on the other's shoulder. It was a simple action—a gentle restraint upon the other's violent outburst, yet withal, conveying a mate's sympathy.

"Who is he?" asked Ryder.

Baxter forced himself to calmness, laughing carelessly. "The chap who beat me out of the running," he answered. And though he tried to speak lightly, there was a frown on his forehead, and his eyes were hard.

Ryder refrained from comment at the tone. It was as if his eyes pierced the gloom and read the other's expression.

"I don't know him very well, but from what I can judge, he was never made for Deb McAlister," was all he said.

"True for you," answered Steve. "That's what's got me down. I know damn well she doesn't love him, an' yet she swears she'll marry him—won't hear a word against him. There's a false note striking somewhere, but it's got me beat."

He could not understand that the "false note" was the girl's own obstinate pride.

"Time will show," replied Jack Ryder.

"It's a mighty long while showing," was the dissatisfied reply.

And together they turned for the camp.

And across the ranges another was looking from her window into the night. A girl's restless heart forbade sleep. She felt that she was altogether wrong. She knew that Steve Baxter was right. And yet . . and yet . . She would have acted again as she had acted this day.

While upon watcher and sleepers alike glittered the stars, white and brilliant, in the dark mantle of the sky.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Deb, child, I want you to take a run into Kelmare to-morrow morning. Your father forgot to bring sugar out with the rest of the goods yesterday, and he will not be home again now till to-morrow evening. I want to finish those preserves."

Deb wiped and placed away the last dish, and turned to her mother. Above all, she loved a journey down through the ranges into the valley of Kelmare. Not that she had any love whatever for the township itself; to her it was but a cheap imitation of greater places. But the ride along the bush track, the freedom, the wildness, the wonder of the way. . . The girl's heart was waking, and the realisation of the beauty of her native hills was the best that Wungamool had ever offered her.

"I'll start off first thing to-morrow, mother," she answered, as she commenced to sweep out the kitchen.

And that night Deb went early to bed, that she might have the long day fresh on the morrow.

She rose with the birds at dawn, hastily dressed herself, and went out into the kitchen. Her first action was to fling wide the door, and the promise of a glorious morning filled the room. Deb inhaled deeply the pure air, heavy-scented with gum and forest shrubs, fresh with the dew of dawn.

In the east, where the day was waking, the sky showed grey and gold.

Deb's heart was very light. She moved here and there, lighting the fire, and preparing the table for breakfast. She then went out into the open, called up and milked the two cows, caught and stabled her horse, and returned to the house.

Mrs. McAlister was later than usual. Deb looked at the clock. Her mother had stayed up late the night before getting ready the fruit for preserves. The girl decided to wait awhile longer before calling her to breakfast.

The magic of the morning had stirred her senses, and she sang softly as she worked.

The hands of the clock moved round. The kettle sang upon the hearth; and Deb went off to her mother's room.

Softly entering there, she looked towards the bed. Mrs. McAlister's face looked strangely young.

"Mother," whispered Deb.

The room seemed very still, very peaceful.

"Mother, it is late, dear. Breakfast is waiting for you," said Deb, and moving close to the bed, she took her mother's face between her two hands and kissed it.

A shock ran through her whole frame, and she stood rigid, her body slightly bent forward.

But assailing fears soon startled her to life again. Her hands hovered restlessly about the other's head, and her voice rose louder, quicker, appealingly.

"Mother—mother—mother!"

But worlds can change in a night.

The sunlight streamed in through the window, embarrassing in the warmth of its first rays the still,

white face upon the pillow, and the figure of a girl who, with bowed head and shaking body, knelt beside the bed, her young hands clasped tightly about a poor, lifeless one.

And, true to her words, Deb McAlister started for Kelmare "first thing." But how different was the journey, and on what a different mission was she bound! She sobbed, but her eyes were dry and burning, and her throat ached intolerably. The wonder of the way had passed, for sorrow and shadows were deep about her, and sped with her along the narrow track leading to the valley.

CHAPTER XVII.

The days that followed on her mother's death proved very lonely ones for Deb. Mrs. McAlister, ever quiet, uncomplaining, and unfailing, was of that type of woman whose presence passes almost unnoticed, but whose absence always causes a big gap.

To her daughter, Mrs. McAlister had been mother, companion—all in all, and the young girl's heart was very heavy during the unnatural days that came after. She yearned for understanding companionship and sympathy. Her father, after the first shock, appeared stolidly indifferent towards her. It was not that he was a hard-hearted man, far from it; but his daughter had never on the slightest occasion sought his advice or sympathy, and he had never understood her. She had always proved capable of looking after herself, and had always obstinately defied any attempt at opposition on his part.

Doubtless, she could still go her own way. Little he dreamed of the aching, weeping heart of her. The girl was passing through bitter waters. To Clive Grey she would not go, meeting him as little as possible. His words of sympathy she found unbearable. Mystery, for whom she had romantically raised her pedestal, appeared but a phantom. And then she knew there was but one, and to him she could not go, for pride and defiance still held the

barrier. Nevertheless, the barrier was not as high as it had been, since sorrow, with its softening influence, had passed by.

Bitter waters are cleansing. Deb McAlister was beginning to find herself.

Then came one whom, in her sorrow and her bitterness, she had almost forgotten—Zilah Kent.

When Zilah rode up to the shanty with Ryder as guide and escort, Deb was surprised that this girl, of whom she had so often thought before her mother's death, should have since been almost forgotten. But her welcome shone in her eyes as she went forward to meet Zilah.

"Oh, I am glad you have come!" she said.

Zilah's hand eagerly met the one held towards her. "I should have come sooner had I known the track," she answered.

"And had I had the time sooner, I should willingly have acted as guide," said Ryder, as he in turn shook hands with Deb.

"You are so very busy back there, then?" was Deb's question.

"Exceedingly. I've left Steve going for his life at the mill, and as soon as my horse has had a feed and a short spell, I must get back to him."

Deb turned in dismay to Zilah. "But you are not going back so soon? You will stay with me here?" she asked quickly.

"I'll stay as long as you wish," was the other girl's reply.

Ryder's words had, to an extent, brought a feeling of relief to Deb McAlister. If the two men were

so busy at the mill, then no doubt that was why Steve Baxter had not put in an appearance at Wungamool for many days. He had not, perhaps—as she had feared—taken her words so seriously, after all.

An added feeling of relief was felt at Zilah's answer, and Deb turned again to the man. "I'll make a cup of tea, and there are some scones just from the oven. You'll not hurry away too soon?"

"Not before I have tested those scones, Deb," was the cheerful answer. "I'll see to the horses right away, and be along again shortly."

And he went off, whistling. Deb's hand closed warmly over Zilah's.

"I am so glad you have come," she said again. "If you only knew how lonely it has been here, how —empty."

"I can well imagine it, Deb," was the gentle reply.

"Yes, of course. I was forgetting. You have been through it all yourself. No, don't say anything about it. I know just what you would say, but—don't say it."

She smiled a little. "You see, it will be easier if you don't."

As they went indoors she added, hesitatingly: "Perhaps you would sooner have a room to yourself; but I'd love you to share mine—if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course, I would sooner share yours," replied Zilah, earnestly.

Ryder joined them in the kitchen, and, having freely tested and praised Deb's scones, went out into the bar.

"Hullo, Jack! Thought I recognised your voice," greeted McAlister.

"Good-day, Sam. I'm off for the camp again. I brought old Bill's girl along to spend a day or so with Deb. Knew you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all. She'll be company for Deb. The girl's been moping a good deal since her mother died."

"It's only natural she should miss her mother, you must remember," answered Ryder.

"Yes, I suppose so," said McAlister, meditatively. He rubbed his forehead. "She was a good woman, Jack, and—I dunno, I didn't seem to understand how good she really was until she died."

"It's generally the way. There is so much we often appreciate—when it is too late."

"That's so. That's so. I'm not complainin' about the girl, mind you. Deb has done great, and keeps things going in splendid order. But—it isn't the same as when the missus was alive. Deb is a good girl, but she's a good deal for herself, y'know. Too dashed independent, that's what she is. But she'll wake up if she ever marries Grey, or anyone else, for that matter."

Ryder flicked his whip, and looked out through the open door. He sympathised with McAlister, and he also sympathised with Deb. The root of the whole trouble was that father and daughter did not

understand each other—never had understood each other.

"She'll look after you, Sam," replied the millman. "You say she is doing great, and that shows her interest is in the shanty and you. Deb's a fine girl. Of course, nobody, not even a daughter, can fill a wife's place; but, after all, it would have been worse if you hadn't had Deb, or if she didn't bother herself about you and the place. Think of that."

It was a consoling speech, and had its effect. McAlister was visibly cheered by the words. Ryder had been right. Too well did the other realise his wife's value—when it was too late.

"I must get back to work," said Ryder, holding out a hand. "Well, so long, Sam, and——"

"Must you go off now," interrupted the other. "Then wait a bit. Try this first."

Ryder emptied the glass placed before him, paid for a second, and went out into the kitchen to say good-bye to the girls.

After he had gone, McAlister came in, and Deb, not altogether at her ease, introduced Zilah to her father.

McAlister gave her a bluff, good-natured welcome, shook her warmly by the hand, and spoke a few unconventional words.

Zilah was agreeably surprised. Without exactly knowing why, she had believed Deb's father to be something of an ogre.

"I like your father, Deb," she said, when the man had gone out again.

Deb raised wondering eyebrows. The idea that anyone should like her father seemed rather a strange one to her.

"Do you?" she said. Then, as an afterthought, "He was rather nice to you."

"Isn't he nice to you?" asked Zilah, in her turn surprised.

"Yes, I suppose he is—sometimes. But we don't always get on well together."

"Whose fault is that?"

"I don't know. Both, probably. We're so different, we seldom agree," replied the hill girl. And to change the subject, she asked: "Will you come for a walk, or are you too tired?"

"Tired! Not a scrap. I feel like a walk."

"We'll have time for a short stroll before tea," said Deb. And together they slowly made their way to the white boulder.

Zilah was greatly enthusiastic over the view presented to them there, and her exclamations of delight were a pleasure to Deb. On their first meeting there had seemed so much to be said; but, now, there seemed to be so little. It was as if each was satisfied with just the other's companionship, and words were not needed for understanding to hold them together.

That evening Zilah met Clive Grey. The girl did not know whether she liked him or not. Generally she formed first and lasting impressions, but with Grey she found she could not do so. Though there was something about him she instinctively disliked, there was also something about him she liked,

though she could place neither dislike nor liking. An opinion, therefore, she could not form, and she felt somewhat baffled. Grey's courtesy towards her appeared genuine, as did his affectionate attitude towards Deb. He was quiet, as was his nature. Where, then, was the artificiality? Zilah felt it to be there, yet . . . .

"He is not the sort of man I could imagine Deb marrying; but—will she marry him?" was her thought.

For Deb's attitude towards Grey was one of mingled tolerance and kindness, touched with coolness, as though she were afraid of betraying too much; but it certainly was not one of love, or even of regard for a future husband.

Zilah was puzzled, and the thought was still with her that night as she sat on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped about both knees, which were drawn up to her chin. She watched Deb brush her dark hair before the old dressing-table mirror.

"Deb, can you imagine yourself the wife of Clive Grey?" Zilah asked, slowly.

The other turned to face her. "Why?" she asked.

"Because, somehow, I can't," was the reply. "I can't picture you waiting on him, mending his clothes, preparing his meals, and so forth."

Deb laughed, and having finished brushing her hair, moved to the open window.

"How strange you are," she said, after awhile. "Is that what you think of marriage? I've never thought of anything like that."

"And yet you'll have it, day after day, for the rest of your life, if you marry," said Zilah, evenly.

"I'll have it day after day for the rest of my life if I don't marry, I suppose," came the lightly-spoken answer. "There is my father, you know."

"And there is Steve Baxter." Zilah had spoken the words before she fully realised them.

"Of course, there is Steve Baxter, and there are lots of others, too," came Deb's answer.

"Steve loves you, Deb," said Zilah.

"So he has told me. Clive loves me, too." And Deb laughed again.

Zilah became silent. The other girl was in a mood she did not understand, and could not frankly meet. How changeable she was!

"There are a good deal——" Deb's words broke off short, and she leaned eagerly from the window, peering into the night.

At her low exclamation, Zilah was quickly at her side. "What is it?" she asked.

"Look!" whispered Deb. "Who's that?"

Zilah's sight was not as keen as the other girl's, and she did not immediately make out a dark object moving along the track.

"It's a horse and rider," said Deb, agitation trembling a little in her voice.

And to her companion's mind immediately came a picture: that of a horse and rider silhouetted on a ridge against a paling sky.

The dark object was nearing the shanty, moving silently, steadily through the night. Deb's fingers closed round Zilah's wrist. Her imagination had

soared its highest. "Do you think it can be Mystery?" she asked in low tones.

Zilah woke to the spell hanging over the other, and she answered as coolly as she was able:

"No, why should he come this way, and at this hour?"

"But who else could it be? I wish I could see clearly; but it is so dark." Deb leaned further from the window, and the night wind blew her hair back from her forehead and fanned her bare throat. Suddenly she shivered.

"Whoever it is, Deb, don't let him see you like that. Come in. The wind is cold."

But Deb did not move.

"You are making a hero out of a bushranger, an idol out of a false shadow—just because you know so little about him," slowly said Zilah. "What if he turned out to be old, ugly, and horrible?"

Deb turned a moment to her companion. "But he is not like that."

"How do you know he isn't?" came the question.

"Because—because—oh, he couldn't be!"

"Why couldn't he be? If he were caught, and turned out to be an ordinary, common man—that would spoil all your dreams, wouldn't it? But simply because they can't catch him, and so little is known about him, you imagine the most wonderful things——"

But Deb was leaning again from the window. It is doubtful if she heard the other's last words.

"He is coming along this track. Quick, Zilah!"

But the more practical Zilah had turned to the

table to extinguish the light. She could hear Deb's breath coming unevenly.

"Zilah——"

The light went out.

"Are you there, Deb?" A man's voice came up from the darkness below the window. And the girl stepped hastily back.

"Oh!" The exclamation was one of impatience and disappointment. The spell had snapped. In the darkness, Zilah smiled.

"Deb!" came Grey's voice again.

There was silence awhile, then—"What do you want?" she asked, sharply.

"I left my pocket book in the kitchen, and as I am going away before daybreak——"

"You had better go round yourself and get it," she interrupted. "If the kitchen door is locked, call up Dad."

Again there followed silence. The man was evidently waiting for further word or sign from her, but none came. Deb stood trembling at the bed head, her feelings deepening to anger. Zilah was close at her hand.

"So it was only Clive Grey, after all," muttered the former. "Only—Clive—Grey!"

"And not Mystery," gently said Zilah. "But surely you would sooner it had been Mr. Grey, Deb, than the bushranger, seeing you are to marry——"

"I hope the kitchen door is locked!" flashed Deb. "Dad'll be mad with Clive at being roused up, and —I'll be glad!"

"Poor Mr. Grey. And all this because he hap-

pened not to be Mystery. It's not his fault, Deb."

"You are laughing at me," said Deb. She was feeling exceedingly foolish, exceedingly childish, as though she had been caught at some mischievous, forbidden game. "Well, I don't care, I'm sure." She kicked off her shoes, and caught back her hair. Tears were in her eyes. "What did you put out the light for, Zilah? Well, it doesn't matter, if you are ready."

But when Zilah got hesitatingly into bed beside her, Deb's warm arms went out and crept about her friend.

"I know you think I'm silly," she whispered. "But—oh, I don't know myself sometimes! Don't be annoyed with me. It was so good of you to come here and stay with me, that——"

But Zilah stopped the stumbling apology, and they talked of other things—the city, and the camp across the ranges.

Clive Grey found the kitchen door unlocked. Entering there, he struck a match, found his pocket book, and went out again into the night, softly closing the door behind him.

Beneath Deb's window he paused again, looking up. But all was dark and silent. And he rode on his way.

Had he only known the emotions that, on first seeing his dark figure along the distant track, had passed through the girl, and those other feelings that had claimed her as she recognised him beneath her window, how strange his own reflections would have been.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Sergeant of Police had taken alone the coach along the western road from Kelmare. Two of the troopers were scouring the eastern ranges. It was the first time since his coming to these parts that Sergeant Duffy had gone unaccompanied, and his reason for doing so on the present occasion was simply that—he wanted to be alone. Nor would he as much as ride on the box seat of the coach. The volubility of the coachman was well known, and the sergeant was far from being in a mood for talking, or even listening. As it was, it seemed to him bad enough that he should sit inside and listen to the driver exercising his tongue upon the horses.

"Let me down at Condon's," had been the Sergeant's curt command.

"Right you are, boss," cheerfully replied the coachman; while to himself he had said: "And why the devil couldn't he ride to Condon's?"

But Condon's was still five miles further along the road, when the coach was brought to a sudden standstill.

Like lightning the Sergeant, prepared for all emergencies, and never taking any chances, drew his revolver; but a report shattered the window and sent the weapon from his hand. Quick as he had been, another had been even quicker.

The door was kicked open from outside.

"Out you come, Duffy!" came an order in a man's decisive tones.

Cursing, and holding his bleeding hand, the Sergeant came "out," to be confronted by a man whose face was completely covered by a handkerchief. Only the eyes glinted ominously through two slits.

"Get along, coachie. You're not wanted this trip," said the man with the revolver.

And the trembling coachman needed no second word to send him off.

"You dog!" the Sergeant hurled after him. "You'll pay for this!"

"For what—not staying to be shot?" asked the bushranger. "The coachman valued his life. What a fool you are, Duffy!"

"What do you want with me?" demanded Duffy, trying to show a bold front.

The other dropped his careless attitude. "You'll soon know. Get a move on."

A jerk of the head gave the direction, the pointing revolver urged the Sergeant towards it. He took a few hesitating, backward steps.

"Look here——"

"Shut your mouth, an' shift!" snapped the other.

The revolver was raised a little more threateningly, the narrow eyes hardened still more.

The Sergeant, seething with rage and mortification, set his teeth. What would they think of him, back there in the township—of him who had been especially sent from the city to track down the notorious outlaw? The hunter himself had been trapped. Like nearly all blusterers and bullies the

Sergeant was something of a coward at heart. He felt altogether defenceless, altogether powerless, and so submitted utterly as he moved through the forest with the bushranger at his heels.

What was the other going to do? But he was soon to know. After they had gone in absolute silence for about four miles, Mystery called a halt.

The captive looked about him. On three sides of them the forest grew thickly, shutting them in; on the fourth side it was somewhat clearer, so that a ridge was to be seen a few yards away.

"We'll take a spell here," said the bushranger, and added, very slowly, "There's a little story I want to tell you."

He motioned to the ground, and the other very reluctantly, and very ill at ease, obeyed the gesture, and sat down among the bracken fern.

Mystery had slipped the revolver into his belt, giving the Sergeant a significant, warning glance as he did so. He now folded his arms and leaned back against a tree, surveying the other awhile.

A mad desire swept over his victim to tear the disguising handkerchief from his face, but he sat in silence, his eye meeting the other's, his arms also folded. It was a strange picture thus presented.

"You've very probably heard this story before," commenced Mystery. "It happened about eighteen years ago in a place called—well, never mind the name of the district. Some ten years before that again there were two young fellows in love with the same girl. When one married her, and beat out the other—who, by way of mentioning, was a

trooper who had just managed to fluke into the Service—this johnny swore he'd get him one way or another. Just about this time there'd been a good deal of cattle-duffing going on, and the girl's husband was caught in a net of circumstances. The trooper nabbed him, and convicted him, though he knew well enough that the man was innocent. You see, he was determined to get him, and—he did."

The outlaw's eyes had not left the other's face, which had now become a greyish hue, while his lips trembled.

"The man was sent up for fifteen years, and the wife and child were left to get along as well as they could without him. Luckily, a few friends stuck to them; but the traitor who'd got her husband out of the way persisted in his attentions towards her, reviling the man he had betrayed, and forcing his own company upon her so that it sent her clean out of her mind, and one day she—threw herself over a cliff. . . What's the matter, Duffy? You're not lookin' too well on it. Don't you like the story? Somehow, I didn't think you would care for it. Well, it's nearly finished now. Ten years later the husband came out of prison, a broken man, and a consumptive. He hadn't the strength to carry out his revenge towards the trooper, but there was the child; he was a lad by this. Since the father could do nothing, he made the boy swear he'd get even with the other man. The boy swore willingly enough. He couldn't forget his mother, and how she had looked when they brought her home. The father didn't last any time, and the lad was soon left alone again——"

But the Sergeant of Police had sprung to his feet, as the other left the tree and slowly advanced upon him.

"You are—you are——"

"It doesn't matter about my name. I found it necessary to change that when I was a kid." Passion deepened the man's voice, and distorted his face beneath the handkerchief. "But I've got you, Duffy. I never forgot, and I've got you as I swore I would. And you'll pay—as I swore you would, you——"

Step by step the Sergeant fell back before the threatening figure, and step by step the other advanced, pressing him towards the edge of the ridge.

Suddenly, with a shout, Duffy snatched the handkerchief from the outlaw's face, and to one, Mystery stood revealed. But the secret did not live long.

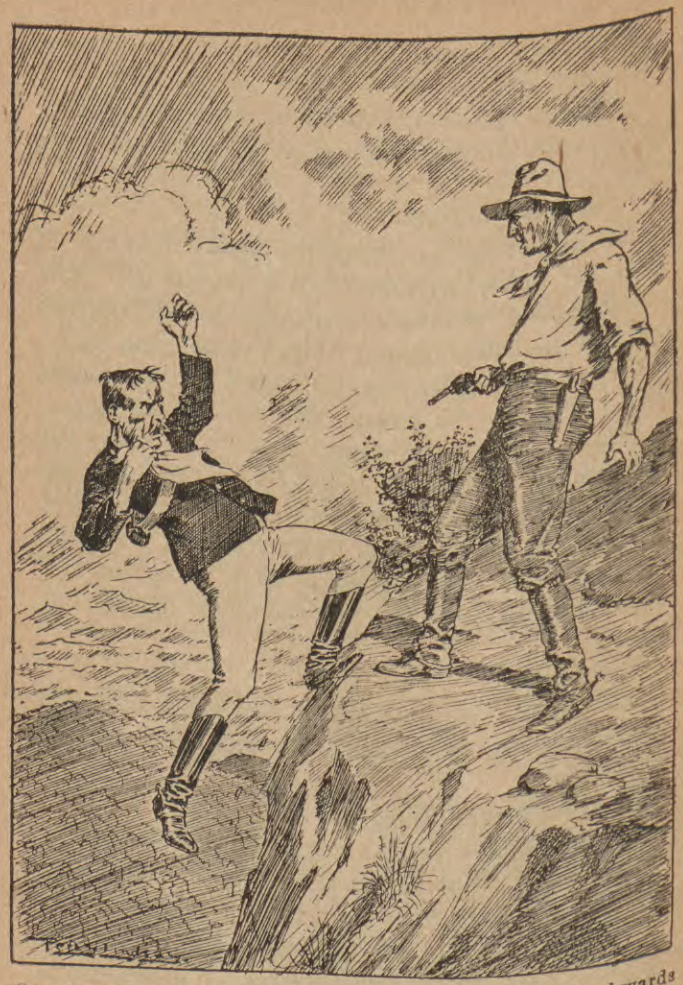
It was over.

One terrible cry the Sergeant had given as he fell backwards into space, grabbing frantically at the empty air.

How quiet everything was!

Mystery knelt upon the ridge, and peered into the depths below. But he could see nothing but darkness, hear nothing but the silence of Death.

Little enough had the coachman to tell the township, but when, following on his report, a search was made and the body of Sergeant Duffy was finally found, the black stain of murder was for the first time recorded against Mystery's name.



One terrible cry the Sergeant had given, as he fell backwards into empty space.

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The new Sergeant of Police was neither a coward nor a bully. A quiet, conscientious, and just man, he took up the late Sergeant Duffy's duties determined to tear away the mystery surrounding the outlaw.

CHAPTER XIX.

About a week later, following the afternoon he had taken her there, Ryder returned to Wungamool for Zilah.

Deb made no attempt to persuade the other girl to extend her visit, since Zilah had already stayed longer than she originally intended. But McAlister's daughter felt a deep regret at being deprived of a companion, who had come to mean so much to her during their days spent together.

Zilah, too, though pleased at the prospect of returning to her grandfather, whom she knew missed her, was sorry to leave Wungamool. Deb had done her utmost to make the visitor's stay as enjoyable as possible, and she had succeeded.

"Time has simply flown," said Zilah. "And yet I seem to have been here for an age—everything has been so much like a home to me, and then, having you."

"I shall miss you," simply replied Deb.

"No more than I shall miss you, Deb," was the answer.

Their days together had been so happy, so free of even the slightest worry. Deb had wondered greatly at her father's amiability, and was not a little pleased that, in such a manner, he helped to make everything more agreeable than it otherwise might have been. She had dreaded friction between her father and herself during Zilah's stay.

"But he will go back to his old way when she has gone," she told herself, believing her friend's presence to be the sole cause of the change in her father's manner. She was wrong, however. McAlister was simply trying to understand his own daughter, and acting as he considered best for them both, in an effort to win her confidence.

In spite of her experience during her first night with Deb, Zilah heard no more from the other with regard to Mystery. When news of Sergeant Duffy's death had first reached them, the two girls were sitting together on the verandah enjoying the morning sun.

"Of course, they are blaming Mystery," had said the messenger. "He bailed the coachie up, you know, and took the Sergeant off. Still, there are some who think Duffy fell over the ridge by accident—Mystery would hardly chuck him over, and there's no sign of a struggle or anything."

He entered the bar, and was soon engaged in deep conversation with McAlister.

Zilah looked at Deb. The other turned and, meeting that glance, spoke quickly:

"Yes, I know what's on your mind, but don't say it. Of course, it was an accident. But don't let us talk about him."

Zilah laughed. "I had no intention of saying anything at all. You surmised incorrectly, Deb. I don't want to talk about it."

And never at any other time had the outlaw been mentioned between them. Whatever Deb's thoughts were, she now held them close to herself.

They said good-bye cheerfully, with smiling lips, though Deb felt suddenly as if she would choke. A dark presentiment had swept through her, like a foreshadowing of tragedy, and she felt that much would happen ere the two of them met again. But Zilah felt no such forebodings.

"I am sure your father would not mind if you were to come and stay awhile with me. He could surely spare you for a few days," Zilah said just before they parted. "We must see as much as possible of each other now, you know."

"Yes," answered Deb. "Yes, of course. I'll ask Dad."

Zilah waved her hand as she and Ryder rode off together, and Deb raised her arm in reply. When they had passed from sight, she sat down on the edge of the verandah, striving to analyse the shadow that had so suddenly enveloped her mind.

"There is no need to ask if you enjoyed yourself," said John Ryder to Zilah.

"I enjoyed myself immensely. Deb is a darling, and her father could not have been nicer."

"That sounds good. You would have seen a great deal of Clive Grey. What did you think of him?"

"I don't know, honestly. There was something I liked about him, and yet—there was a good deal I couldn't understand. I didn't see a 'great deal' of him. . . Unless you call three times a 'great deal'."

"I had an idea he went to the shanty every day," laughed Ryder.

She shook her head. "To tell you the truth, I don't think Deb gives him too much encouragement. But what do you think of him, Jack?"

"Like you—I really can't say. I do not know him very well, but I believe there is something good in the man if one could only find out what it is. He is not the utter weakling they make him out to be, I'm sure of that. The second time I met him he had had an accident with his horse, and accepted my offer of help. That day seems to stand out because to me he appeared altogether different from what he has been at other times. And yet I can't explain the difference. I have heard that he is ready to sell out up there."

"Sell out!"

"It came to me from a reliable quarter that he is willing to consider any reasonable offer for the place. Mick Glass went in mainly for dairying; but Clive Grey gave the whole over to grazing. No doubt he did not fancy the hard work attached to the dairying. Maybe he is tired of the life."

"But if he is going to marry Deb, he must settle down," said Zilah.

"He will take her to the city," was his reply.

Ryder urged his horse to a canter, and for awhile silence fell between them. It was the first time Zilah had ever heard her companion speak of another as he had just spoken of Clive Grey. When they spoke again, it was about the camp to which they were returning.

But Steve Baxter said nothing whatever about Wungamool itself, let alone anything about Clive

Grey. His welcome to Zilah, while it was cheerful enough, was brief.

"Hullo! Back again!"

He had not even asked her how she had enjoyed her stay.

But to Steve Baxter, Wungamool meant just Deb, and regarding Deb, he had nothing to say—nothing to ask. Even on those occasions when Zilah spoke of the other girl, Baxter immediately became silent, and once, when she was giving the three men an account of a day spent riding in the bush, Steve had risen from the step of the hut, and wandered off.

But the fact that he had not altogether hardened his heart against Deb was proved a little later when his horse might be seen tethered to one of the shanty verandah posts, and the man himself adding to the company in the bar.

Nevertheless, there may have been another reason than Deb for his presence there.

Who can say?

CHAPTER XX.

It was during the evening following the robbing of the Wungamool mail coach that some frequenters of the bar entered the shanty, and among them, the first time for many a day, was Steve Baxter. Grey was in the kitchen with Deb when they arrived and entered there, seating themselves at the long table. With their noisy coming talk immediately turned to the Mystery and his latest exploit.

"He bluffs 'em every time, for never a sight of his face does he show, and devil a track does he leave open."

"Who is he? That's what we want to know, an' what we've been wantin' to know all along—Who is he? He has the cunning of Old Nick."

"And never a trooper to match him. It's damned clever cunnin'! Strike me dead, if it ain't!"

But Steve Baxter sat well back, saying little, watching all.

Deb listened, missing not a word. Somehow, the unexpected coming of Baxter had raised a little her drooping spirits. She had fallen back to moodiness following Zilah's departure back to the teamster's camp a little over a week ago. But now, her eyes had regained their brightness, and her face was pink from the glowing fire.

Grey watched her, wondering. He could not help but notice her attitude towards him of late, but it was just like the man to pass no comment upon it.

He simply waited. Her renewed animation at the present time did not escape him, and he was very much aware of Baxter's presence.

Deb did not move, though she started a little when he spoke to her, whispering: "Come into the other room, Deb. Their talk must annoy you. It is not too—too pleasant."

She moved impatiently. "No!" Then she smiled to herself, this child of fancy, thinking of green forests, and therein, Mystery. Though it was over a week since word of the Sergeant's death had been made known, the girl refused to believe it other than an accident. And she was only one of several who held this opinion. Mystery would never stoop to murder, she firmly told herself. How she longed to be away from the conventionality of her present life. But her dreams were not the vivid ones that once had been. The city no longer called. Deb suddenly abhored the man at her side.

Grey was blinking. The fire was warm. He gave a sudden, audible yawn, then with a quick movement placed a hand to his mouth, and straightened himself.

"Excuse me, Deb," he said.

But Deb was sitting very quiet, her hands clasped about one knee, gazing into the flames, which cast flickering shadows all about her. How vividly her mind built. What a wealth of imagination had she.

At last the men rose, shambling from the room. Steve Baxter was the last to leave, and he moved slowly, and as he went he very deliberately looked at the man and girl seated together at the fireside

at the other end of the long room. But the expression on his face was calm and inscrutable. Deb wondered at it, but Grey's eyes narrowed a little. Without a word to either, Baxter passed out. The girl felt the slight, and the pink of her face deepened to scarlet. Her lips trembled a little, and the pictures in the fire became blurred, and were replaced by others.

Suddenly she woke from her reverie and looked full at the man beside her. His hair was neatly brushed, as usual, and his boots polished so that they shone brightly in the flickering firelight. His collar was spotless, and the dark tie carefully arranged. He put out an arm towards his companion, but she drew abruptly away, with a gesture that was almost one of aversion.

"For heaven's sake, say 'damn'!" suddenly exclaimed Deb McAlister.

"Deb! Deb!"

"You make me despise you—you with your weak will and self-satisfied smile, your polished boots, and —and—talk! Swear occasionally; drink—do anything but smile, be polite, and attend church meetings. Oh, do something and show yourself a man! You have made me ashamed of you!"

Her vehemence left him speechless awhile. Then, rising to his feet, he spoke:

"I don't think, my dear girl, you realise quite what you are saying. This comes of listening to such disgraceful talk as was going on here a minute ago. It was not fit for any decent man—let alone a woman—to hear. And all this going on about

Mystery. It's past time they had him well under lock and key. But you were so obstinate, and would not come away. Why, you'll be asking me to hold up a mail coach, next."

"You haven't the nerve to do so," was her startling reply. "The man who held up that coach had at least strength and courage. You have neither."

"He hides himself behind a revolver and a mask. There is neither strength nor courage in that. He is simply an outlaw."

"A man."

"Are you forgetting Sergeant Duffy?" he asked.

"Like a number of others, I do not believe that Mystery killed him. In spite of everything, I repeat that he is—a man!"

He looked strangely at her, as if not quite comprehending. Then after a while he spoke again: "You think so? Then listen. I'll match this Mystery! There you are, since you want me so badly to do something."

"You'll what?"

He became emphatic of a sudden. "Look here, Deb, how long will you give me to bring him in?"

She laughed at him, loudly and frankly. "As long as you like."

"I am not joking, my dear," he told her. "I'll finish the game in a week. But you must say nothing whatever about this to anyone else, and you must marry me the day following, when we'll leave this hole and go to the city."

"You're getting reckless, Clive Grey!" she taunted. "Better be careful."

"Maybe you don't want him to be caught."

"I don't."

"And you think I am not equal to it, eh?"

"Admitted. I know you are not." And she laughed mockingly again.

"Then I'll just prove to you that you are wrong, and bring him here in a week's time."

"You are very confident," said Deb. She did not laugh now. The man was evidently in earnest.

"I am jealous of Mystery, and jealousy will drive a man to do practically anything. Oh, I know well enough what you've been thinking of me lately, my dear girl. I am not as obtuse as all that. Well, do you agree to the conditions I have made?"

"You need not be afraid I am likely to say anything to anyone. I do not wish to make fools of us both," was her scornful reply.

"And you will marry me the next day?"

"If you bring him in, yes. But I am not afraid of that, either." Nor was she in the slightest.

"Good-night, Deb," said Grey. "I won't trouble you before. You'll see me with Mystery this night week, or you'll never see me again. Meet me then at the white boulder." And turning sharply, he left her.

As he passed through the bar, one of the men called to him.

"You're a fine fellow, you are," said Cranford. "Let's see how you can get rid of this."

Had Grey known Cranford was in the bar, he most certainly would have taken the back track home. But it was too late now to turn round.

"This" was a mug of beer which the speaker held out. But Clive Grey moved back.

"I don't drink," was all he said, very quietly.

"The devil you don't. Don't swear neither, do you? Perfec' young lady, you are, ain't you?" was the answer.

In silence, Grey made to go his way. He never quarrelled; therefore, he would not argue.

"Hold on!" called Cranford, stretching out a detaining hand. "I say, Lizzie, what 'ud you do if this here Mystery was to bail you up, eh? Tell us—what 'ud you do?"

"Beat him!" said Grey at once.

There was a derisive shout of laughter from all.

"What would you do?" suddenly asked Grey of Cranford.

"Put him outer action quick an' lively," was the prompt retort.

Grey laughed.

"Who says I wouldn't!" shouted Cranford, his fist clenched threateningly, and the mug held high. "Come on, who says I wouldn't?"

"I do," came the unexpected, spirited answer from the man they despised.

"You do—you! Do you dare me, you little puppy?"

"Yes, I do dare you to get in the way of Mystery. You could do it easily enough. It's not often he misses a chance when there's gold along the track—except when the troopers are too handy. And I believe you've had a run of good luck, lately."

At the other's defiance, Cranford angrily threw the contents of the mug he held full in his face, calling him a name.

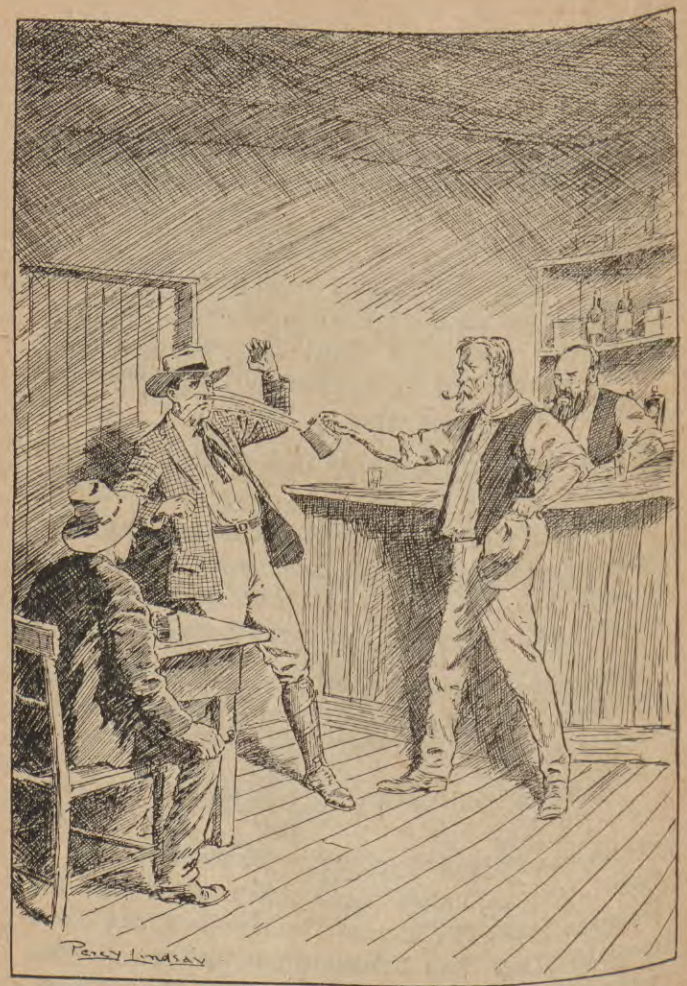
There was a moment's silence. All eyes were fixed on Grey. Surely he would not take such an insult. It was past any man to stand down before that. Surely he would retaliate. And for one moment it certainly looked as if he would; there flashed across his features such a look as had never been seen there before. But it passed, and very quietly he took out his handkerchief and proceeded to wipe his face and chin.

"You'll pay for that," he said, calmly. And that was all.

The men muttered among themselves, contempt deepening in their glances, as they looked sideways towards him. He was not worthy of even one straight glance from any of them there.

Cranford laughed boisterously, and straightened his figure, which had been slouching in readiness for an attack.

"I ain't afraid of you or anyone else—not me! An' I'll just show you that I ain't afraid of this dam' Mystery, either." He swung round on them all. "A flamin' bushranger that's got the troopers bluffed! It won't be my fault if I don't meet him, an' then I'll show him an' you all just what I think o' him!" He again faced Grey. "Now, unless you want another messin' up, just git outer this joint before I damage you. Git!"



Cranford angrily threw the contents of the mug full in his face.

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"And don't show round here again. Take my warning," put in McAlister, white with anger at his prospective son-in-law's weakness and cowardice.

And Grey "got."

CHAPTER XXI.

Slowly Deb returned to her seat by the dying fire. She was feeling humiliation to its depths, though her brain seemed as if it were on fire.

She had heard Cranford's challenge to Grey as the latter was passing through the bar, and, mastered by curiosity, and with Clive's boast of a minute before ringing in her ears, Deb rose and moved to the door that separated bar from kitchen. A chink between two boards made an excellent peep-hole. Deb peered through.

Quickly her eye passed over the group. Steve Baxter was not there. Evidently it had been his horse she had heard galloping away while she and Grey were still in the kitchen.

But she forgot all about Baxter when Cranford emptied his mug in Grey's face. Now, now was Clive's chance to show he was, at least, something of a man!

And he had proved himself to be a coward.

Deb had heard her father's angry dismissal, and she heartily applauded it. It was the end. After what had just passed, never again could she greet Clive Grey in anything but contempt. It was the end of everything.

She sat in the chair, rising emotions stirring within her.

He had told her he would match Mystery. Had informed her that he would bring the outlaw in in a

week's time. How could he even discover who the mysterious bushranger was? And yet, he had boasted he would run him down. The ludicrousness of it! The man who had just submitted to a gross insult bring in a man who had for many a month now baffled settler and trooper alike!

Deb felt that she wanted to scream with laughter as such thoughts swam across her mind. The feeling grew. Then she remembered that those in the bar would hear her if she gave way to the desire that seemed to be mastering her. But when she told them, they would readily understand why she laughed.

She rose quickly, and opened the door. The sharp night chilled her, warm from the fire, and stilled the tempest of her brain.

Deb McAlister did not know what it was to be hysterical, though she had just dangerously approached being so. Brooding over the loss of her mother, added to other conflicting emotions at work within her, had strung her nerves to the highest pitch.

The cold night helped her to steady herself, and she was shivering when she again closed the door. But she did not return to the warm hearth. Instead, she went to her own room for the night.

"As if I could every marry him now. It will be as much as I can do to speak civilly to him—whenever I should happen to meet him!"

Truly, Clive Grey, trudging home through the dark, cold night, had this night sunk to the lowest level in the opinions of all.

But his final judgment was yet to come.

CHAPTER XXII.

And so it came about that a few days following the incident in McAlister's shanty, a man was riding along the main track leading into the township. In his pocket was gold. It was not always safe to hold gold outback, nor was it always safe to carry gold along a lonely track, and the rider, being well aware of this, was not surprised when a figure stepped from the bushes and called on him to halt. He had courted this.

Then, for the first time, the outlaw met with open defiance. The horseman's hand went quickly to his pocket, and the next instant there was a double report. They had both drawn at the same moment.

The horse reared and plunged, and the next minute was galloping wildly down the track.

After the space of some seconds, when the clatter and echoes of horse's hoofs had died away, a man moved slowly from the tree against which he had been leaning, and, unsteadily approaching the figure that lay face downwards upon the ground, smiled a little—a twisted smile. It, at least, would rise no more. Turning, he made his way along a bridle track that ran through the bush, and as he went he stumbled, and at times groped his way as men do when they are blind.

. . . . . .

Deb McAlister was alone in the kitchen, and at

the sound of the opening door she turned to see him there, swaying, one hand held to his breast.

"Clive!"

"Yes, Deb. . ."

"Then you did attempt it, after all? I did not think you would. And he——"

She stopped, staring at him, and the beating of her heart almost stifled her.

"I have not failed," said the man, with forced evenness. His voice was not the voice of Clive Grey. And still Deb remained without movement, as though in a dream. It was all so horribly unreal. But when the man staggered a little, she woke, and springing forward assisted him to a chair, though when she made to tend his hurt, he held her back.

"But you are hurt—bleeding!" she cried.

"It is no good. It will soon—be finished."

She looked helplessly about her. "Let me call Dad." And then she remembered that her father was in the farther paddock. If only she could do something.

The injured man's grip on her hand tightened, and he tried to draw her down to him.

Her eyes were wide and wondering. "You said you had not failed. Where, then, is Mystery?"

"Mystery is here," said the man.

"Here?" she whispered.

"Ay—here." And Clive Grey, looking straight into her eyes, nodded his head. "I should have told you that night. But it was—a test. I have played well; but he got me, Deb. Cranford got me. I should have told you—you thought more of Mystery

than of Clive Grey." Blood began to trickle from his mouth. "When Duffy was—killed, I felt, somehow—that it was all up. I've played my last game. . . ." He struggled with words. "Deb, you loved me—not the man you thought I was—not Clive Grey—but me. They laughed at me for a fool. They were—the fools. Deb. . . I . . A paper in my pocket. . . ." He gasped and coughed horribly. His hand released hers and went to his mouth, the other groped beneath his vest, and drew out a crushed, folded paper. She took it from him as he held it towards her. "Read it—it is to you. Hide it. . . ."

And Deb placed the crumpled sheet beneath the bodice of her dress.

The door swung open, and two men stood there. The wounded man made an attempt to rise. His hand, covered with blood, dropped from his mouth, and he fell heavily forward to the floor.

Deb, unable to move, stared down at the lifeless body. Clive Grey! Clive Grey! Was that Clive Grey? Her lips, white and dry, were parted, and her eyes were wide with fear. Slowly she raised her head, and, looking across at the door, realised her father and the Sergeant of Police. She took a deep breath, and moistened her lips with her tongue.

"Dad, what does it mean? What has happened?"

"It means that Cranford has been shot dead, and that an outlaw and a murderer was your lover. How he managed to bluff us all for so long, God only knows! But who would have suspected him—him above all others!"

"Then Clive——"

"Was Mystery—yes. The man you declared you would marry in spite of me was a murderer and a bushranger," he said sternly, and his lips twisted. "Well, this is the finish——"

"Don't," said the girl. "Oh, don't!"

She placed both hands to her head, and closed her eyes. Surely she was dreaming. If only she could wake up and know it all for a hideous dream! But there was no sign of pity in her father's eyes. The Sergeant was kneeling beside the body.

A third figure came and stood in the doorway there.

Deb opened her eyes to see him steadily regarding her, and as she met his glance, knowledge swept through her.

"You knew!" she cried. "I know now why you seemed so strange. You knew, and yet you kept quiet! You would not tell me, but let things go on just as if——"

Baxter checked her wild words. "Hush, Deb. I did not know. I only wondered. But I was watching and waiting. I knew that if I had guessed rightly, he would betray himself in time. I could not tell you anything, in case I was on the wrong track. I was waiting to make sure, that was all."

"You knew," she repeated, as though she did not hear his words.

Her father's face was sternly set; but there was a light of compassion in the Sergeant's eyes.

"I knew that he was only actin' up to the softie," was all Baxter said. He was very quiet.

Deb turned and hurried to the shelter of her room. It was as much as she could do to keep from screaming.

An hour later, her heart and mind, now fully awake, realised the substance from the shadow, and the barrier crashed.

But Steve Baxter had gone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was two days later before Deb McAlister ventured to read the paper Mystery had given her just before his death, and as she turned it over, the girl felt a thrill run through her. What did it contain?—that paper? Slowly she opened it. . . .

"I don't know why I am writing this. It is just as though the constant thought of you, the desire to be with you, compels me to make a confidant of my pen. I am alone in the house here. It is some time ago since the clock showed midnight. The moon is very bright. Looking from the window, everything is to be seen as though it were daylight. You will be asleep, Deb, sound asleep; but it is so long now that I slept through the night that I have almost forgotten what it is like. Sleep! Not much of it comes to me. Now it is as far off as ever, and I am thinking of you, and wondering, if you only knew everything, what you would think. But I shall speak to you on paper—speak just as I feel I would surely speak if you were with me, and I know you would not scorn me as you scorn—Clive Grey.

"To-morrow I shall be on the road again. There is a bully to be brought to account. Cranford has a debt to pay. Somehow I feel as if I am about to pay a debt, too. But I am getting morbid. I wonder why I am like this? Maybe, it is the bright moonlight.

"But I'll tell you my story, Deb. I know you will understand, and it will ease the strange oppression hanging over me.

"Years ago, through the treachery of another man, my father was convicted of cattle stealing, and, though innocent, circumstances so strong were brought against him that he was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment.

"While he was serving the sentence, despair and the traitor's persistent insinuations and attentions sent my mother to her death: she threw herself over a cliff.

"Ten years having passed, my father was released—a dying man. His death followed soon after he left the prison, but not before I had sworn to him that I should make the author of all this treachery pay. I was only fourteen at the time, and when I reached fifteen years of age my father's brother, with whom I had lived, was killed, so that I was left alone.

"As the son of my father, a man who had passed ten years in prison, charged with cattle-duffing, I discovered there was no place for me in the district. Wherever I turned, whenever I tried to get work—and God knows! I was willing enough—my name was against me. There was only one thing left to do—change my name. This I did, moving to a part of the country where I was utterly unknown.

"But I never lost track of the trooper who had brought my parents to their deaths, and I waited for the time to come when I should be able to make him pay in full. Luck was against me, and in bitterness

and desperation I joined a gang of police suspects. Later the gang broke up; but I had been well educated in the meantime as to breaking the law, and I played a lone hand, and went my own road. Law! I hated it as a thing that had helped to betray, rather than to defend, me and mine; and he represented the law. I still watched him, awaiting my chance. Then, for a while, I lost track of him, but a little later tracked him to the city. But the city was no place for me. I came to Kelmare and Wungamool, and was soon on the road again.

"Fate played right into my hands. As Sergeant of Police, the man I was waiting to hunt down was sent to hunt me, for he followed me here. My chance came, and I got him. There was no mistake. He paid in full, meeting the same death that had been my mother's. Though mine was not the hand that deliberately sent him over the ridge, I none the less sent him to his death. My only regret is that he did not have my father's ten years of suffering and agony before the finish.

"Only for one, I should now have left Wungamool and Kelmare, and hit out along another track. But that one held me as a magnet. There is no need to tell you, Deb, who acted as that magnet. As Clive Grey I won you, but as Clive Grey I know I cannot hold you. I despise myself for the part I am acting, but cannot break away. To do so now would be to betray myself. If only I could, with you, go right away from Wungamool, be neither Clive Grey nor—Mystery, but just myself, there would be a chance. You think far more of Mystery than you do of Clive

Grey, but that is only because of the glamor of romance and adventure, your own love of all that is wild and free, that makes you think you love an outlaw. There is only one way, and I am taking it. In two more days you will know me as Mystery. The greatest test will come then; but will it stand or break? If it stands, you and I shall leave for another district, and there we can start over again, I making up for all I have lost. And as myself, I can hold you. I know I can do that. I am tired of wandering, and seeking—all the time seeking—God only knows! I want my own home in the hills, and you there with me. You, above all, to be always with me. To know I really have you. . . . It is a dream that is coming true. . . . And that I now live for. . . . ."

Tears were in the girl's eyes as she finished reading the message. Broken, unfinished, it ended like the man's life itself.

But the pedestal on which Deb had placed a false idol had crumbled to the dust and would never again be raised. Her awakening had been too violent to allow it to remain. Sorrow and pity for the outlaw she felt indeed; but her heart, weary, and seeking rest, turned longingly towards the one sure haven.

Was it to be denied her?

CHAPTER XXIV.

A fortnight had passed since the death of the bushranger. As Clive Grey, he was soon forgotten; as Mystery he lived long in memory. For a time Wungamool had been like a seething cauldron, bubbling over. It was still seething, but the hand of Time was gradually quelling the excitement, and soon it would restore the placid monotony of the little district among the ranges.

A new Deb McAlister lived at the shanty. Very quiet had she grown since the day of the tragedy, and very subdued had become her spirit. But the dark head raised itself as high as ever, and even if the face had grown paler, the lips still curved passionately, and the eyes glowed with life.

The girl's father had in nowise softened towards her. The fact that Mystery and Clive Grey had been one and the same, and that as the latter had courted the shanty-keeper's daughter was bitter acid to McAlister. He could not forget it, and heavily upon Deb's head fell her father's anger. To think that, time without number, the outlaw had visited the shanty, had sat therein making love to the owner's daughter, while troopers ranged the country in search. . . And to remember that the man who had bailed him up and relieved him of 200 pounds, while that very night he showed himself in a different guise under his very nose. . . Clive Grey! All the time it had been the very man he had

laughed at—Clive Grey. How he had fooled them all. And even though he had been finally judged, and had paid his last account, the bitterness against him still ate at the heart of the shanty-keeper. And McAlister felt that he could never forgive his daughter, whom he blamed for his humiliation. It was by no means easy to brook the jeers of some, and laughter of others, and, though he had always been a fairly popular man, these in plenty now came McAlister's way.

Once, during the first week, Steve Baxter had come to Wungamool. Meeting Deb along the track, he had spoken a few conventional words to her, and ridden on. His coolness had acted like a damper on her eagerness. Perhaps he did not know how pleased she was to see him. He came a second time, on this occasion to the shanty.

Deb was preparing tea in the kitchen when she heard a firm step in the bar, and a familiar voice speaking to her father. Her pulses leaped at the sound, and the red flags flew to her face. She had grown to value that voice.

She placed extra dishes upon the table, and went out to collect more wood for the fire. When she returned to the kitchen a few minutes later, no voices came from the bar, and the next minute, her father came in alone.

"Tea is ready, Dad," said Deb. She spoke a little nervously. "Didn't I hear Steve's voice in the bar? Won't he—I thought he might be staying to tea, so have set a place for him."

"No. Y'needn't have troubled yourself about that. He's gone. Wanted to get back," answered her father, as he pulled a chair up to the head of the table.

The glowing color left Deb's face, and she felt a lump rise in her throat. It was a disappointment. Was Steve deliberately avoiding her? It certainly looked like it.

Pouring out the tea, she passed a full cup to her father. In her unsteady hand, the cup rattled in the saucer, spilling the tea, and sending a few drops splashing on to McAlister's outstretched hand.

"Hang it! Can't you look what you're doing!" he exclaimed roughly.

Deb's lips trembled, and her eyes smarted. The sharp rebuff was all that was needed to complete her submission to her feelings, and she turned so that her father could not see her face.

He vigorously stirred his tea, tasted it, and asked for more sugar. She passed him the basin, and took her own place at the table.

But the tears would not be held back. Everything was blurred, and swimming before her eyes. She rose hastily, and the next minute, sobbing uncontrollably, had hurried from the kitchen, and out through the back door.

McAlister, looking not a little surprised, started to his feet. It was the first time he had known his daughter to cry, and he was completely taken back.

"What the devil!——"

Slowly, he resumed his seat, abstractedly buttered a piece of bread, and lifted his cup to his lips.

He put both down again, untasted, and pushing back his chair, went out after his daughter.

"Deb!"

There was no reply.

"*Where are you, Deb?*"

Still there was silence.

But after a short search, he found her crouching in hopeless attitude against a tree just off the track. She was sobbing more quietly now. Looking down at her forlorn figure, the man felt something rise within him. It was not an altogether unknown sensation, but it was one that had become almost dead, not having been experienced for years. He felt half-ashamed of that feeling now: a rush of fatherly tenderness.

He stooped beside his daughter, and rested a hand upon her shoulder.

"Deb, what is it, girl?" he asked, gently.

She looked up at him, her face blurred and stained with tears, her eyes swimming. She was feeling so miserable! so utterly alone!

And to McAlister came suddenly a picture of a baby in his young wife's arms. How the years had flown! And what they had brought. . . His wife gone, his baby a woman, weeping over some woman's sorrow. And he had been very hard on her of late. After all, had there been any real justification for his attitude towards her? And only this very evening he had spoken harsh words to a heart that called for comfort and tenderness—that yearned for sympathy. Vaguely he understood this.

He stooped beside his daughter and rested a hand upon her shoulder. "What is it, girl?"

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"Deb, why are you crying? It ain't because I spoke rough to you this evening, is it?"

She shook her head.

"If I hadn't spoken like that, you wouldn't 've cried?"

"I—don't—know."

"Is it because of that—that——" He could not finish the sentence.

Again she shook her head. "No, it's not because of him."

A thought struck McAlister. She had prepared a place for a third at the table.

"Is it because of Steve Baxter, Deb?"

This time there was no shake of the head. No reply. Only her bent head seemed to speak for her.

"Ah," breathed the man. He patted her shoulder, and helped her to her feet. "Come along, Deb, and let's have tea. We'll talk it over then. I've been mighty hard on you lately, I know; but—well—we'll forget all about that now. Come along."

Together they entered the kitchen. Deb had dried her eyes, and, though still nervous, was a good deal calmer. Already she was ashamed of her show of feelings; but felt also a thrill of gladness at her father's changed attitude. So much had she kept buried in her heart, and now it would be such a relief to let some of it free.

"It is Steve, then?" queried McAlister, to make sure of his ground before going further. To feel more at ease in his new role of consoler, he helped himself to a liberal supply of cold meat.

Deb hesitated, then decided to be candid.

"I told Steve once, when I was in a temper, that he was never to speak to me again, and he has kept away from me ever since; or, even if he does speak, is very—very—cold." She fidgeted with her knife. "It is just as if he can't be bothered with me," she finished.

"He took you at your word, eh?"

Deb nodded her head. "He takes so little notice now, that I don't think he cares. I suppose it is my own fault; but I don't like being—snubbed."

"I don't think you'd mind so much about that if it was anyone but Steve Baxter. Is that it?" asked her father. The turn events seemed likely to take greatly pleased him.

Deb's silence was her answer.

"Well, y'know, you snubbed him—as you call it—often enough, and gave him no chance. A man won't hang after a girl forever, especially if she treats him as you've treated Steve. The wonder is that he hung out as long as he did. But I'll tell him——"

"No, no," quickly cut in his daughter. "Don't tell him anything at all. Perhaps he doesn't care for me now, and I couldn't——"

"Not care for you now!" McAlister was wise. "I don't think you need worry yourself about that, my girl. I've got my eyes open. Perhaps he is only waiting a little, and will speak to you one of these days."

"No. He said that he would never speak to me again, and if ever I should want him, I would have

to go to him, for he wouldn't come to me. And—he meant it. I didn't seem to care much about it at the time; but now——"

"Um. Well, there's only one thing for you to do," answered her father at once.

"What is that?" asked Deb.

"Go to him."

"Oh, but I couldn't. Not after what has happened."

"He came to you often enough. And whatever has happened has taught you your lesson. Steve Baxter's no blinded fool. He's been along this track twice during the last fortnight, and it hasn't been to see me, you may bet your life!"

"But you saw how he went off again this evening. If he came to see me at all, surely he would speak."

"I dunno. He mightn't. Maybe it's just to let you know he's still about, and is giving you an opening. It's up to you to go to him now."

"But, Dad, I couldn't," came her answer again, in low tones.

McAlister said no more. He was quite satisfied that enough had been said.

In silence he finished his tea, and Deb made a pretence of doing the same.

A little later the girl left the room, and, returning, in silence handed her father a sheet of paper.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Read it," was all she said. "You will understand a little better then."

And when he had finished reading Mystery's message to the girl, McAlister looked critically at his daughter awhile.

"Well," he said slowly, after a pause. "Life was pretty rough on him, after all. Who could blame him for trying to give it a few knocks back? Yes, though he fooled me, and did me out of 200 quid, I'll say that much for him." He paused, then added: "You'd better keep this to yourself, Deb. It won't do for it to get about."

Deb took the crumpled sheet from him, smoothed it out, then sighed. "Somehow, it's like committing a crime; but—it's the best thing to do."

And next minute the sheet was but ash in the glowing fire.

CHAPTER XXV.

One evening, leaving the three men smoking together outside the teamster's hut, Zilah Kent strolled away from the camp. She was in disgrace, and feeling like a penitent child, wished to be alone. But there was another feeling stirring within her heart—such a feeling as she had never before experienced, but which required no analysis.

Just after the evening meal she had disappeared from camp, and at her absence her grandfather had become uneasy, and had called up Ryder and Baxter. The two men did their utmost to set his mind at rest, but with night drawing on, Bill showed only too plainly his uneasiness.

"She always told me whenever she was going for a walk. She has never gone off like this before. Something must have happened."

"Nothing could have happened to her, Bill. She'll turn up soon, and has probably just gone off on a little excursion of her own. Don't you worry your head about her." Thus spoke Baxter.

They stood conferring together beneath one of the trees near the hut, and Bill was for searching the forest. But John Ryder had fallen to sudden silence, and made no suggestion.

"I'll just have another look down near the creek first. That is where she generally goes," said Bill, and turned from them.

Ryder's voice checked him. "It is all right, Bill, Don't you trouble about searching the creek or forest. She's safe and sound, I'll warrant you, and when she does come back the best thing you can do will be to give her a good spanking, and——"

There was a sudden commotion among the branches of the tree under which they stood, and the girl sprang down before them, a move which Ryder had wittingly encouraged by his words. In her excitement, the girl fell to her knees, but was up again in a flash, standing straight and indignant before them.

"How dare you!" she cried to Ryder. "Spank me! Spank me!"

He faced her in silence, her anger in nowise moving him.

After one long stare of amazement, Baxter had turned his back discovering something about his legging that evidently required the closest attention. Bill had but uttered her name. But so overruled was she by Ryder's words, that she thought of nothing else.

"And why shouldn't I go roaming the forest, and climbing trees if I wish to, Jack Ryder? Must I consult you every time? You're not my master. I shall do as I please, and nothing will stop me."

"Perhaps a little consideration for your grandfather might help to check you. You are very thoughtless for your years."

The tone of his answer was stern. He was not laughing now. It was the old teamster's unnecessary

anxiety that held his mind, and he voiced what any other man would have hesitated to.

Swinging round to follow his momentary glance, the girl saw her grandfather standing close behind her. What showed in his face sent mischief and hot words flying. She placed her arms about his neck.

"Gran, I am sorry, really sorry. Forgive my thoughtlessness."

"Yes, child, yes. Don't heed what Jack says."

"But he is right, dear. You should—should—spank me, and send me back to the city. I am nothing but a worry to you here."

"Zilah, do you want to go back?"

"No. It's the worst punishment you could give me."

He patted her head. "And myself, too, child."

Her arms tightened a little about his neck. "Gran, you can't realise how I love all this. I feel sometimes that I am not responsible—when I want to rush through the forest, shouting at the top of my voice, just to let the trees and sky know how much alive I am. I never want to go away, and I dream, sometimes, of a dear little cottage, with a garden of the sweetest, old-fashioned flowers. . . ."

All at once she remembered the other two, and her arms dropped from Bill's neck. As she turned, Ryder raised his head from a piece of harness he was mending. Baxter had moved further away, and was looking in another direction. But, as she again encountered Ryder's glance, Zilah felt the warm blood rushing to her face and neck. Had he heard? She experienced a sensation she had never before

known, and with a whispered word to the old man, "I won't be far away, Gran," she left him.

Now she stood near the ruins of what had once been a cottage, and rested her arms against a tree. Gradually she became aware that someone had come up behind her, for she felt his presence. Big and silent he stood there. But she did not move, though the man knew she understood that he was there. A strong hand reached out and rested on her own, which was up against the tree. She trembled a little at the touch, and her breath came unevenly. But she could find no word to say.

"A cottage you said, sweetheart? Give me the right to build it here, where there was once another, and let me share it with you."

"The right?"

"Ay, to call you wife."

She felt the tears smart in her eyes. But she kept her face turned from him, and he heard only her light laugh and the careless tone of her answer.

"That is a very big thing to ask, Mr. Ryder. Are you joking? Well, let me think; a big thing like that takes some thinking, and——"

He let drop her hand, and straightened himself. "You make it a subject for a joke, and that is unworthy of you," he said quietly, and turned from her.

But when he heard his name called, he turned again to see her standing there, both arms held towards him, the light of the stars reflected in her tear-bright eyes.

"Jack, I was only teasing. Come back to me. I want you to tell me that you—that you. . . Oh, Jack, come back!"

And John Ryder went back.

And there, among the ruins of the hut wherein he had been born, he told her what she wanted to know.

And through the forest, under starlit skies, rode another whose dreams had fallen, and who was seeking the real.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Steve Baxter turned quickly as the sound of horse's hoofs came to him through the night. Bill had disappeared somewhere, and the young man was alone, waiting the return of his partner.

Who could be the rider along the track at such an hour?

He was very soon to know, and started forward as she rode up.

"Deb!"

"I don't know what you will think of me—for coming like this." At the moment, it was the only greeting she could give him.

Her face was burning, and she could not raise her eyes to meet his. Oh, if she should not be welcome! Then, one look she gave him, and that one look told her enough.

A rattle of chains came from the bullock yard. The teamster was among the team.

Baxter assisted the girl to dismount, and held her tightly. "Deb, you have come to me!" How glad he was that the others were away from the camp.

"I felt that I had to come, Steve. You wouldn't come to me. But I feel so ashamed—coming like this. Where is Zilah? I am going to stay for a few days with her. Why are you here at this camp, alone?"

"I felt I had to come, Steve."

"We were all here together a few minutes ago. Zilah is not very far away. But we do not want her or anyone else for a while, and I'm pretty sure they are feeling the same."

"I—I—Steve, you don't think any the less of me for coming to you, do you? And for acting as I have done? Do you still want me?"

"Want you! Haven't I always wanted you!" he exclaimed. "Lord! Didn't I hang round you enough?"

"But not lately."

"How could I—after what you said? And I wasn't going to butt in so soon after what had happened. Besides, didn't I tell you once that you would come to me? I was waiting, and just showing up occasionally to let you know I was—waiting."

"Don't laugh at me," she said.

"I ain't laughing at you, Deb. Not I. If I am, it's only because I'm so damned pleased. To think it has come at last!"

"And you really don't think any the less of me?" she asked, again.

"How that is worrying you. Of course, I don't think less of you. I've always wanted you mighty bad, and I still want you mighty bad. But you've come to me, Deb, and I'll never let you go. I've got you, and I'll keep you! Just let anyone else come backing in after you!"

"You won't have any trouble in keeping me," she answered him. And her laugh was tremulous.

"Steve, what a fool I've been! But I didn't know then. I know now."

. . . . .

"I say, Jack, did you?"

Baxter's voice drifted across from the corner where his bunk was situated.

"Did I? Did I what?"

"Crack you don't know, old innocent! How often do you take starlight strolls? Besides, I saw your face as you went off. That was enough. And did she say 'yes'? But, of course, she would."

Jack did not answer; but Steve knew that he smiled in the darkness.

"It's funny how some things turn out, ain't it?" came the dreamy voice again.

No answer.

"Three months ago you'd never seen this girl of yours—didn't know she even existed. And now—think of it."

Still silence.

"Remember the day when I first came up, and we were speaking about ideals? I wonder if——"

"Listen. you old gasser! If you don't dry up, you'll feel the weight of this boot."

Significant silence awhile, then: "Say, Jack, take your hand off that boot. I want to ask you something, dinkum."

"Well? Let it out."

"You're getting a partner for life. Will you want this one any more?"

"I am not getting a mill partner. I can't do without you, Steve, old fellow, however the track turns."

Baxter became animated. His sleepy drawl quickened. "I say, old mate, I wonder if she——"

Something crashed against the wall of the hut above his bunk, and fell with a thud to the floor at his feet. In the darkness, Ryder laughed.

"You're a crook shot, anyway," retorted Baxter, and pulling the blankets well about his head, shut his eyes and lips for the night. His heart was singing within him. To-night, he would let Jack live alone in his own happiness; to-morrow they should share together. Oh, but the world could be kind!

When Zilah returned to camp, it had been to find Deb awaiting her there—Deb, with shining eyes and glowing face. And Zilah, thinking of the man who had left her but a moment before for his own hut, understood.

"Steve has just gone," said Deb, after the first greeting was over. She said no more, and the words required no explanation.

"And it's a double wedding we'll have!" cried Zilah, catching the other girl in her arms.

And the great, grey forest slept, silent, mysterious, and beautiful; still, in its sleep, guarding those within its shelter.

But the spirit of one who had passed beyond life still held his place amidst its green wonder, its sweetness, and its whispering breezes.

THE END.

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