TO EL DORADO

by

JOHN ARMOUR

AUTHOR OF

"THE BURNING AIR"

"THE SPELL OF THE INLAND"

ETC.

WINDSOR
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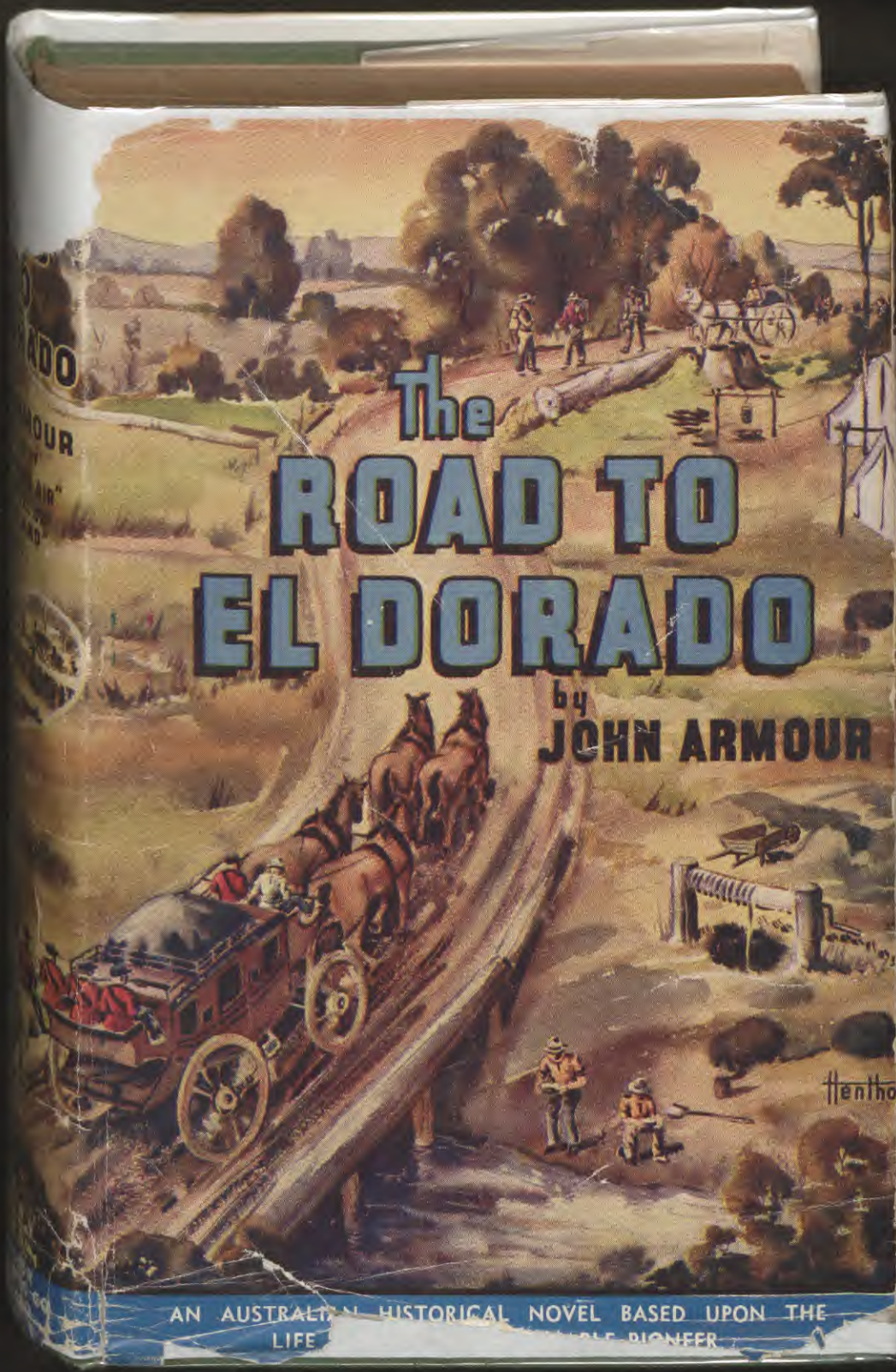
The
ROAD TO
EL DORADO
by
JOHN ARMOUR
AN AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL BASED UPON THE
LIFE

THE ROAD TO EL-DORADO

By John Armour

It is a very old, but nevertheless true saying, that truth is stranger than fiction, and nowhere can one expect to find more exciting adventure and full blooded incident than in the mining camps of early Australia. The great glamour of America's wild West is surpassed by the stirring days of the "fifties" right at our own back door, and John Armour has woven this into a great story

✦ ✦ ✦

Read these Extracts

"Next morning one of the men brought in a dead rabbit and showed it to Mr. Austin. The squatter was much annoyed, and expressed the opinion that the native cats were killing his imported pets. . . . These were the first rabbits ever brought to Australia. . . . In the long run the native cats perished but the rabbits thrived." . . . See Chapter III.

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"So that is the state of affairs," said the squatter. "Without notice or a word of explanation three of my men go off to those blasted goldfields."

That was the first news I had of one of the greatest events in Australian history.. . . . See Chapter V.

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"Are you getting much?"

"About fifty pounds a day each."

There was one wild rush to get to work. . . . Dishes rattled as earth was washed away, leaving in nearly every case a few specks of gold. Suddenly every man was transformed. Hunger, fatigue and thirst were forgotten. The weakest man became a giant, and toiled without taking time to stretch his back. Yells rent the air when some lucky digger unearthed a precious lump and his cries acted as a powerful stimulant, impelling the other men to drive in their spades with renewed vigour. . . . During the next few days we picked up the first crops from the rich banks which soon became famous as the Ballarat Diggings. . . . See Chapters VIII and IX.

✦ ✦ ✦

Australian Edition **Price 6/-**

To Mr R. H. Croll

With Very Best Wishes
from the Author
Yours Sincerely
John Cowper

The Manse
2 Marlowe Sts
Canterbury

THE ROAD TO EL-DORADO

Also by

JOHN ARMOUR

•

THE SPELL OF
THE INLAND

•

BURNING AIR
ETC.

THE ROAD TO EL=DORADO

by

JOHN ARMOUR

Yours Sincerely
John Armour

THE WINDSOR PUBLISHING CO. PTY. LTD.
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1938

Whilst the characters mentioned in this book are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any living person the story is actually founded on facts

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PROLOGUE

ALEXANDER ROSS found peculiar pleasure in gazing into the fire. He had lived through thousands of stirring adventures, and somehow in the moving flames the old man could picture the old scenes and the old faces. The world he once knew had moved on. His companions of other days were no more, and he no longer understood the world he found himself living in. So, as he gazed into the glowing fire, he saw through the mists of time. Across the years he heard the call of many voices, and in his imagination he lived the old scenes over again.

One moment he was back in Batman's village, and the next he was struggling with the gold-maddened crowds at Ballarat. In the early days of Victorian settlement he had carried mails to the pioneering outposts, had ridden with Adam Lindsay Gordon, and had fought with aboriginals and bush-rangers from the Lachlan to the Ovens.

On that tragic Sunday morning in 1854 he had heard the rattle of muskets and the yells of the soldiers as they stormed the Eureka Stockade. He had heard, too, the swearing of the maddened diggers as they drove the Chinese from the Buckland Valley.

His children and his grand-children and his great-grand-children had in turn climbed upon his knee with the old, old demand — "Tell us a story." And now we, the children of a new day, come with the same request. So the old man tells us of those days of long ago when the "gold fever" burned, when the bushrangers rode, and when the pioneers braved the dangers of the roads to reach the El Dorado of the South.

CHAPTER I.

Shepherding Days.

BEVERIDGE was murdered. Yes, it seems quite appropriate that I should start my story with that incident, because it had such a far-reaching influence upon my life. What great issues of our lives depend upon small threads. Had Beveridge not been murdered I may not have met Holt—in fact, I suppose my life would have been very different.

One incident somehow leads on to another. Because you do one thing, you follow up by doing something else. That is what happened to me after the murder of Beveridge. Away in a lonely spot near the Murray—not far from where Swan Hill now stands—the blacks had surrounded a pioneer, and his bleeding body was left riddled with spears.

An inquiry had to be made, and the culprits punished. Of course, it was a mere accident that in the autumn of 1849 I was given an opportunity of riding across Victoria. Well, the chance came and, in company with Sergeant Wilson, I rode from Geelong to the Murray. But you will want to know how all this came about; and that in itself is quite a long story, so I will go back and pick up some very necessary threads.

Shortly after my parents reached Tasmania from Scotland, they became interested in Fawkner's enterprise at Port Phillip. Loving adventure, as he always did, my father soon set out for the mainland; and

it is certain that he was associated with some of the earliest happenings of Melbourne. For a time he was actually in the employ of Fawkner, and then he became acquainted with a squatter named Armytage, who had settled in the Geelong district. My father was appointed one of the shepherds on the newly established station, and my earliest recollections gather round those old pastoral days.

I could never ascertain for certain, but I have every reason to believe that I was one of the first white children born in the Geelong district.

While with Mr. Armytage we lived in a hut at some distance from the homestead, and when I was able to run about, I helped father with the sheep. Our hut was a moveable building, being constructed on block wheels. When pasture was eaten out, and it was necessary to move on, bullocks were yoked to the hut, and we, with all our belongings, were dragged to a new sphere of operations. A big yard made of hurdles served as a fold, into which, every night, the sheep were driven. When the yard got dirty, the hurdles were shifted to a clean place.

Most of the shepherds at that time lived in a similar way. Occasionally a white woman accompanied her husband at his moveable camp and shared all his dangers. Such a one was my mother; but, apart from her, I rarely ever saw another white woman. There was no such thing as schooling, as neither my father nor mother could read or write, and I did not learn to read until I was nearly grown up.

At that time squatters were pushing out from the Port Phillip settlement, and were claiming all they saw. The pioneering spirit was not lacking, and every day brought fresh adventures and experiences. Water was a necessity, so our camps, and all the first homesteads, were constructed beside streams. Aboriginals were plentiful, and they frequently resented the coming of the whites. The poor creatures wandered about naked, carrying with them a few spears and boomerangs. The men, with weapons, went in front, and the lubras and piccaninnies, bearing the burdens, brought up the rear.

They frequently visited our camp on their periodical begging expeditions; and if father were away, they became cheeky and demanded a "big mob" of flour and tobacco. As a little fellow, their visits caused me constant dread; but I got to know their ways, and that knowledge was very valuable to me later on. When they came to understand us better, some of the aboriginals helped us at a busy season, and the lubras made very good shepherds.

Mr. Armytage had a large station. Winchelsea country, where there is now a thriving township, was a part of it, but I can remember that district when the only sign of civilisation was the station homestead. We were situated about twenty miles from Geelong, and as a little fellow I was occasionally taken to that growing village. In those days it was the most important place on Port Phillip; and I rarely ever heard of Melbourne. Geelong was nearer to the rich lands of Western Victoria, and was the hub of our little universe. Race meetings were sometimes held, and men rode in from miles around. Immigrant ships came in and discharged passengers and cargo.

I can remember Moorabool Street starting to take shape, and the huts and shops built of Van Diemen Land pine. The wharves were a great attraction; but the place that charmed me most was Farrell's horse saleyards, that were situated near the frontage.

During the first few years of settlement horses were very scarce, as they were not bred at Port Phillip. Consequently when the animals were brought over from Tasmania, or round from Sydney-side, there was keen competition among the pur-

chasers. Some of my first trips to Geelong were connected with horse-buying expeditions.

A shepherd's life was not exciting. Provided they knew their work, and did it, they were left very much to themselves. The average man received fifteen shillings a week and rations. It might interest you to know that the weekly allowance for a shepherd was eight pounds of flour, ten pounds of meat, two pounds of sugar, a quarter of a pound of tea, and a bit of salt. Most of the men made their own damper, so at an early age I acquired a knowledge of bush cookery. A loaf of damper, which in those days was called a cart wheel, would last a man about a week.

I learned to ride a horse when I was extremely young—so young that all knowledge of learning how to do it has entirely faded from my memory. I can only remember being perfectly at home on the back of any horse—galloping about, jumping fences or rounding up cattle. I didn't know what fear was, and, living with hardy shepherds and blacks, I acquired a bush instinct and a keen sense of direction.

At the age of ten I secured my first position away from home, and was set to work minding pound horses. Many a warrigal I had to deal with. The animals were shut up in yards at night, but I had to keep with them during the day and bring them into the yards again at night. My pay was five shillings a week and food—such as it was; but if I lost a horse, I got no pay that week, so you can imagine how I hung on to the wild horses that were sometimes brought in.

This job brought me near to Geelong, and I was able to ride into the township and see the ships being unloaded. There were always a few curious blacks looking on, and, knowing some of their "gibberish," as we called their language, I often tried to get them to talk.

My work at the pound made me known to the police, and somehow the friendly troopers kept an eye on me, and frequently gave me a bit of serious advice. They must have thought well of my riding ability and my bush knowledge, for it was through them that I got the opportunity of going on that big trip.

After succeeding in a hard struggle with some brumbies one evening, I found that my efforts had been watched. Sergeant Wilson, of the Geelong police, greeted me with approval.

"Did you count them, Sandy?" he asked.

"You bet I did."

"Ever lose any?"

"Not often."

"What happens then?"

"Sometimes I come on them again," I said. "Other times they get right away, and the owners find them before I do. That's unlucky for me, because I lose a week's pay."

"Do you ever get a holiday?"

"Never."

"Well, do you think you could get another boy to take your job for a few weeks?"

"I think I could; but I will need to ask Dad."

"Then ride out to-night and see him," said Sergeant Wilson. "Tell him I want you to come with me up country."

"When do you start?"

"Mid-day to-morrow."

Well, Dad did not object. In fact, my parents thought no more of that journey than modern parents would think of their boys going off to a football match.

I was fitted out for the trip, and, rising very early next morning, I reached Geelong police station about noon. The sergeant was pleased to see me, and before that day was out Geelong was left behind, and we were heading northward on my first big overland

journey. Heavily laden packhorses were led, while we both rode sturdy mounts, with additional equipment strapped to the pummels of the saddles. As we jogged along I was as happy as happy could be, although we were going to investigate a murder.

The sergeant chatted freely, and told me something about the expedition and some of the difficulties that were confronting the police. The murder of Beveridge meant that other white people were in serious peril. Clashes had occurred between whites and native tribes, with the result that the blacks were becoming suspicious, and were ready to spear isolated settlers.

The difficulties of the police were increased by the fact that convicts had reached Port Phillip country. Another batch had been turned adrift in the vicinity of Portland. The captain knew he would not be able to land them at Geelong or Melbourne, because the anti-transportation feeling was at its height, and he was not prepared to carry them back to England.

The Port Phillip people were saying openly that if convicts were landed, the scoundrels would be ducked and sent back to the greater scoundrels who dared to send them out. Feeling was menacing, so every available trooper was needed. That was why the sergeant risked the journey with me rather than take another policeman.

Our progress was steady, but not rapid. For the first night or two we camped at station homesteads; but then, for the most part, we camped in the bush. I can still remember some of our talks on that long journey. Strange to say, it was while we were passing over the country where Ararat was afterwards built that Wilson waxed eloquent concerning the future of the colony.

"Mark my words," he said emphatically, "when you are an old man there will be thousands of white

men in Geelong and Melbourne, and there will be hundreds of farm-houses and stations throughout all this country. In fact, some day there will be roads built and perhaps railways."

Wilson proved to be a true prophet, but he little realised that I would live to see Melbourne become a city of one million people. And, stranger still, we little guessed that in a few short years there would be thousands of men tearing up the ground at that very spot, lured on by the magic word—**Gold.**

CHAPTER II.

Across Victoria in 1849.

I WILL relate only one or two incidents connected with that long ride across Victoria. As we advanced, kangaroos hopped away, and we saw hundreds of emus. Occasionally we came on sheep and cattle, and here and there we visited crude station homesteads manned by two or three white settlers. In places the blacks were also numerous, and many of them had evidently not come much into contact with white men. At times they looked at us threateningly. They were entirely naked, and carried clubs and spears. The tribes varied in numbers from groups of twenty or thirty to mobs of more than one hundred.

One day, after missing a waterhole, our horses showed signs of thirst, and the sergeant was getting anxious. Towards evening, however, the horses scented water, and, giving them the reins, they brought us in the direction of a pool. Undergrowth concealed the water, and as we approached a couple of blackfellows stood up behind some bushes. Calling out something in their gibberish, and brandishing their spears, they dared us to approach. In a few moments the waterhole seemed to be alive with naked natives.

"It's going to be dirty," said Wilson. "We had better get our blunderbusses ready."

Our horses scented the water, and were stepping out eagerly.

"The bravest course is the safest," was Wilson's next comment. "We will ride straight at them. They will make off when they see our guns."

He had scarcely uttered the words when a spear was thrown, which passed a few inches from his shoulder. At the same moment the horses noticed the blacks and propped suddenly. Up went their ears, and together at the same instant they snorted the loudest I ever heard horses snort. It proved too much for the natives, who, fearing some debbil-debbil, made off as fast as they could run. Our horses continued to snort, and the sergeant fired off his blunderbuss to add to the general confusion. We did not see another blackfellow that evening.

At one station outpost we found the hutkeeper in great distress. He was pouring down curses on the whole race of blackfellows and vowing to sweep them off the face of the earth. A strange incident happened, concerning which I shall have more to say later. The shepherd's anger was caused by the fact that he had found a number of sheep with their legs broken. This was a trick of the blackfellows, not uncommon in those days. The natives, having caught more sheep than they required for one meal, broke the legs of the remaining animals, so that they would be very easily caught a few days later, when their appetites would again need satisfying.

The shepherd was faithful and kindly, and the sight of the maimed sheep made him furious. We did not see him again, but we had a shrewd suspicion that later on some poor blackfellows would pay the penalty for the misdeeds of their dark brothers.

Now I must tell you about an incident of that journey which strangely affected my life. We camped one night with a shepherd who lived in a rough log hut near the edge of the Wimmera country. He had evidently lived by himself for so long that he was not at first inclined to say more than "Yes," or "No." Yet from the moment I first saw him he held me by a peculiar charm.

He seemed to be a man of about forty years of age, and bore marks of great hardships. His hair was well over his ears and neck, and I suppose it had

been trimmed by himself in the crudest possible manner. He had dark eyes that seemed to match his hair and whiskers, and across his right cheek there was an ugly scar. As a garment he wore a shirt-like coat strapped round the waist, and a scarf about his neck. Walking with a slight limp, he showed us where to put the horses, but did not volunteer any conversation.

After we had a drink of tea together, Wilson took his blunderbuss saying that he would try and bring down a kangaroo. I was too tired to go hunting, and as the shepherd had suggested a swim, I willingly accompanied him to an adjacent pool. It was not until we were stepping out of the water that I noticed his back was covered with ridge-like stripes. Being at that time very ignorant, I indiscreetly asked him what had caused the strange marks.

The question threw him into a rage, and he glared at me with horrible ferocity. "Bah!" said he, "that is the way they treat men in this infernal country. Many a time I have been tied up to a tree and flogged."

"What for?" I innocently asked.

He gave me another savage look. "Ask that fellow you are travelling with. I suppose he knows something about it. Curse the lot of them. But I'll get even yet; mark my word."

On a rough table in the hut the shepherd had a number of curios, and later in the evening, prior to Wilson's return, I was amusing myself fingering them. There were strange looking bones, several skulls of blackfellows, and some queer looking stones.

Naturally the skulls attracted me, but lifting one of the stones and noticing its weight, I again volunteered some conversation.

"What a heavy stone—is it lead?"

"Nonsense. Try again."

"Is it iron?"

"Bah! What do you know about iron? It is as much like iron as a kangaroo is like a sheep."

"Well, I don't think I've seen anything like it before."

"No, I don't think you have. That is the stuff men fight for—murder for. It is gold."

I laughed, because I thought the shepherd was joking.

"There's nothing to laugh at," he growled. "If you don't like to believe me, ask—well, ask that fellow you are travelling with."

"Did you bring it out to Australia with you?" I next inquired.

"When I came out to Australia I wasn't one of your first-class tourists. I travelled third-class—and very third. I wasn't allowed any excess luggage, so I didn't bring any stones out to Australia."

"Then you found it here?"

"Not exactly here—over Sydney-side. The big bit at the back I picked up at a creek not fifty miles away. Take my tip, lad, you may be working down an Australian gold mine some day."

"Why not show it to the police?"

"Police be hanged; what do they know about gold?"

"They would know the value of it, and reward you for your discovery."

"I did show that stone once to a 'big-gun' official, but he knew as much about it as you do—if not less. I told him there were traces of gold in the stone; but the ignorant fool laughed in my face, and could only say: 'How ridiculous! Fancy anyone thinking there was gold in Australia.'"

It was late when Wilson returned, and as soon as he entered the hut my strange companion became silent. However, during the time we had been together I had gleaned a few facts concerning him. He had volunteered the information that his name was Peter Holt, and that he had come out to Australia when he was seventeen years of age. He possessed an uncanny knowledge of the bush, and could speak in blackfellow gibberish. I didn't know

whether to be afraid of him or to like him. There was something about his manner that was decidedly attractive; yet my boyish instinct seemed to warn me. I saw him take down his gun and hide it in his bunk; and, later, when I made some remark about the weapon, he shot a horrible glance at me.

What alarmed me was that when Wilson came in Holt sat on his bunk, frequently casting a suspicious glance at the sergeant.

My companion seemed to take the hutkeeper as a matter of course, and when a chat did not appear acceptable, he suggested that we should make up our camp. I was not sorry when the sergeant led the way out of the hut.

I could see that he meant to make up a camp outside, and a good place was easily found under some spreading gums.

When we were alone, I eagerly asked Wilson what he thought of the shepherd.

"Quite a typical specimen," he replied. "Such chaps are very common over Sydney-side."

"I don't think he likes us visiting him."

"I shouldn't wonder. I noticed he was always interested in the floor when I was about."

"Why should he dislike you?"

"Well, to begin with, he has been a convict. Perhaps he is an escaped convict, and in that case he would look upon every member of the force as an enemy."

Then I told Wilson about the scars I had seen on his back.

"I saw enough marks on his hands and face to satisfy me," replied the sergeant. "He has evidently been a bad lot, and has received his share of the whip. However, he need not fear me. I don't want to get the poor wretch into trouble again. If he is trying to make good, let him have a chance. I could see that my company was embarrassing to him, so that was why I pretended to go shooting. Keep your eyes open in the morning. You may meet him again

some day, and it may be worth something to recognise him."

I took the sergeant's advice, and in the morning I had further opportunities of seeing the strange shepherd. Shortly after daylight he had his campfire burning, and I spent a little time with him as he went about his duties.

I calculated his height to be five feet eight. I noticed his peculiar limp, which indicated that his right leg was a trifle short. Besides the mark on his right cheek, there was a scar on the right eyebrow. His hands were very small, but showed traces of wounds.

Perhaps it was a good thing that I did take such stock of his features, for I was destined to meet him again.

* * *

Day after day we rode on, and the country opened out into a vast plain. The weather was mild, and nearly every night we hobbled our horses and slept beside a fire. Sometimes the blacks got cheeky, and came dangerously near to us; but the firing of a blunderbuss usually put them to flight.

At last we reached the scene of the Swan Hill murder. Two white men at the homestead were very pleased to see us, and we remained in the neighbourhood for more than a week, spelling our horses, interviewing friendly natives, and giving a hostile tribe a first-class fright.

When Wilson had completed his investigations, and the settlers in that district were comparatively safe, we bade farewell to the lonely white men and commenced our long ride back to Geelong.

CHAPTER III.

Batman's Village.

WHEN I returned from Swan Hill I felt that I was worthy of a better job than minding pound horses, so I went on several journeys with carriers and drovers. This work brought me in touch with a man named Austin, who owned a station called Barwin Park. I remember Mr. Austin as a medium sized man with a long beard. In fact, that was an age when long hair and beards were the fashion. If a man's hair was short he was picked out as a convict or a jailbird. The average man wore a blue jumper, with a black handkerchief round his neck. That attire was sufficient for every occasion—even Church.

The first time I camped at Barwin Park was while on my way to races at Geelong. I reached the station homestead late in the afternoon, and as I was riding past the drafting yards, whom should I meet but Mr. Austin. He greeted me kindly, and inquired where I was making for.

"To the Geelong races," was my reply.

"And where will you stay when you get there?"

"At the Black Bull, I suppose."

"You keep right away from the Black Bull," said Mr. Austin sternly. "That is no place for a kid like you."

"Dad said I better stay there."

"Well, I know more about the Black Bull than your father does. There are always cut-throats prowling about, and if you have any money, they will quickly relieve you of it."

"Well, I suppose you are right," I said; "but I

will need to camp somewhere, and it will be a bit too cold under a tree."

"You needn't camp under a tree. There is plenty of room here, and you can ride into Geelong in the morning. Put your horse down in the yards, and the men will find you a camp."

Well, I did so; and later I did full justice to all that the station cook provided.

Next morning a curious incident happened. One of the men brought in a dead rabbit and showed it to Mr. Austin. The squatter was much annoyed, and expressed the opinion that the native cats were killing his imported pets. Some time previously he had received a consignment of rabbits from the Old land, and the squatter was looking forward to the day when he would be able to indulge in rabbit shooting; but it seemed that the animals would be killed off before they could get established.

These were the first rabbits ever brought to Australia, and how easy it would have been then to have killed them off, and saved Australia from a curse. Many years afterwards, when riding over that country, I noticed rabbits swarming everywhere. Truly Mr. Austin got plenty of shooting, but it was a pity for Australia that he did not leave his pets in Old England.

In the long run the native cats perished, but the rabbits thrived. However, Mr. Austin has other memorials, including the homes at Geelong and the Austin Hospital at Heidelberg; but many Australians have a grudge against him because of the rabbits.

A few months after the Swan Hill adventure I got a position as a mail carrier. My new boss, a man by the name of Ben Dawson, had heard of me through Sergeant Wilson. I secured a room in Geelong, and Mrs. Currie, who kept the boarding house, supplied me with meals when I was in town.

In those days horses were scarce, and it needed a good animal to stand up to the continuous travelling along the rough tracks. Horses were bred over

Sydney-side, and brought to Melbourne by boat, or driven overland. A horse sale was always regarded as a big event, and when the news went forth that horses were expected, men would ride long distances to Melbourne in the hope of being able to secure some of the coveted animals.

For his mail-carrying work Dawson constantly needed fresh horses, so one fine day I set off with him and another bushman to attend a horse sale at Melbourne. That was my first visit to Batman's village, and I still retain vivid recollections of early Melbourne. There cannot be many men alive now who can say they rode to Melbourne before the digging days.

Our great city was then only a tiny village, but the place was starting to take shape. The streets were very muddy, and in places gullies ran across them. Kirk's Bazaar was then only a yard, and there were stables on the opposite side owned by a man named Billy Lang.

We camped near the site of the Post Office, and that part was then very rough and muddy. Our horses were tethered among the blackwood and gum trees, and nobody seemed to ask any questions. Other travellers and teamsters were camped near by; and apparently the place was regarded as a common camping ground.

Melbourne to-day is one of the great cities of the Empire, and its inhabitants demand amusements, architecture, learning, and all that the world can provide; but on my first visit to Batman's village I did not take long to see the sights. There was plenty of mud and scrub, blacks and camp fires. A big swamp stopped people from going out Essendon way. Gum trees were growing along the streets. Ferns and scrub covered vacant allotments. Bullock drays got bogged in Bourke Street, and at night time camp fires revealed the locality where teamsters had pitched their tents.

A number of blacks were camped along the

Yarra, and I came on another large encampment at the top of Collins Street.

A sailing vessel came into port while we were in Melbourne, so we, of course, had to go down to the wharves and welcome the newcomers. A hundred or more immigrants were on board, and when they came ashore we gave them a good colonial welcome.

The place of most interest to me in Batman's village was the horse saleyards. For an hour or two this place presented an animated scene. Strangers had gathered from the surrounding stations, and freely discussed the merits of each horse. Squatters were there in long coats and tall hats, and as a contrast shepherds and teamsters and drovers stood about in their blue jumpers, with dark handkerchiefs round their necks.

When the sale commenced brisk bidding was indulged in, but we managed to secure several horses. For one clumsy looking animal—a half-draught—Dawson paid £35. Many buyers told him that he had made a very bad bargain; but my master knew what he was doing, and the animal in question rendered splendid service later on.

On the return journey to Geelong we were obliged to travel slowly. The roads were very rough, and in places almost impassable. There were no proper bridges over any of the creeks, and usually we went straight through streams and holes, as the travellers did with their bullock drays.

The track between Melbourne and Geelong passed over plain country, but in wet weather there were boggy patches that caused trouble. The usual method of travelling was by bullock dray. Each vehicle was constructed with a heavy pole, and the animals were yoked in pairs. It was a frequent sight to see four, six, and even eight bullocks yoked into a dray pulling loads of supplies for the newly founded settlements. This, too, was the way wool was carried from the stations to the seaboard, and the way families were carried out to settle the country. When

a man yoked ten or more bullocks to a dray he was considered, in colonial language, to be very "flash." At night time the bullocks were let out of their yokes, but hobbled. Handicapped in this way, they struggled about during the night, and found what food they could.

Waggons had not then been introduced, so these bullock drays were all the fashion until long after the diggings broke out. I happened to know the first man in the Geelong district to make a waggon. We called him Charlie the Swede, and he later lived near Hamilton and conducted carrying operations on a big scale. When he first brought his waggon into Geelong folk came out to their doors to watch it pass.

. . . . . .

On returning to Geelong we were for a time the observed of all observers. Our fresh horses excited curiosity, and many envious eyes looked in our direction.

When we approached the old jail we were surprised to notice that quite a crowd had gathered in the vicinity. Half the people of Geelong were collected at one spot, and we wondered what could be the cause of all the excitement. But the mystery was soon solved, for an old chap gave us the information that all the excitement was on account of Tom Doyle.

"Well, what about him?" Dawson inquired.

"They have just hung him, and the crowd came along to show a bit of sympathy."

True enough, we had only missed the hanging by five minutes; but later on we were given gruesome descriptions. That same evening many would-be sympathisers showed their regret by getting hopelessly drunk.

And that's that!

CHAPTER IV.

A Meeting of Three.

I SOON found that my employer was a kind man, and, fortunately for me, he took a keen interest in my welfare. When I handled the horses well, he gave me a word of praise, and that encouragement always meant that I wanted to do still better. I often laugh now when I think of it; but Dawson knew how to get the best out of me. When he told me one day that I was the best man he ever had, I felt that I wanted to prove it by doing a man's job. The opportunity soon came, and I accompanied him on several occasions into the Western District of Victoria.

Dawson had contracted to carry the mails from Geelong to a place called the Grange. The name has since been changed to Hamilton. After doing the trip together on several occasions, I was left in charge on the handsome salary of fifteen shillings a week. When I became acquainted with the track, the return journey of about three hundred and forty miles took me eight or nine days; but it meant rapid travelling.

The track was through Camperdown, Colac, Carramit, Mortlake, and Hesham. At Camperdown there was a rough store, and at Mortlake there was a saddler's shop. Mount Rouse was also on my track, where for some time a missionary to the natives had lived, but when I was on the mail run the only regular white inhabitant was the protector of the aboriginals. At a little place known as Germantown a party of German settlers had a thriving community, and each trip I looked forward to a meal of vegetables with them.

In those days the Grange could boast of having a police station, but not a public house, although there was an hotel a few miles away at a place called the Crossing. A police magistrate had his headquarters at the Grange, and I frequently did special work for him.

On those lonely trips I met with squatters, drovers, shepherds, ex-convicts and blacks, and heard many a gruesome story of crime and adventure. Wherever the white pioneers had pitched a camp I was always sure of a friendly reception. There were few travellers, and as I was somewhat in touch with the outside world, my visits were welcome. The squatters insisted that I should be made comfortable, and although food was sometimes on the rough side, it was always plentiful.

I am often amazed now at what I did in those days. Week after week I travelled long distances, and I was really only a little chap—I know that, because I had great difficulty in getting on a horse's back. I did not mind how lively the horse was, but I had to coax the animal beside a log or a stump so that I could mount.

I must have been a sturdy little fellow, but even my parents frankly admitted that I was no beauty. I was stumpy, with a liberal supply of freckles, and my hair had a touch of colour in it. In fact, my nickname for a time was "Ginger"; but when I grew older my mates called me "Sandy," and that stuck to me through life. As a boy my red hair sometimes made me feel ashamed; but I learned afterwards that many famous and good men had red hair, so I altered my opinion. Whenever I see a ginger chap I give him a special smile. There's not enough of those red-heads nowadays.

For nearly two years I assisted Ben Dawson with his mail contracts. During that time the western tracks became well known to me. Sometimes I rode through to Melbourne, and to other districts,

but mostly I travelled backward and forward between Geelong and the Grange.

On one occasion, when I was entrusted with an important letter to the police magistrate, I was asked to make the trip in record time. To do so I altered my course slightly when I reached a point about fifty miles from the Grange. This meant missing one of my usual stopping-places, but I cut off several miles. My plan was to camp that night with a lonely shepherd and get a very early start next morning.

It was almost dark when I rode up to the hut and gave a friendly call to the shepherd, whom I had previously visited. I had scarcely flung myself to the ground when the hut door opened; but imagine my surprise when, instead of seeing the cheerful face of my friend, I found myself confronted by a wild-looking stranger.

"What do you want?" a gruff voice demanded.

"I'm the mail carrier," I explained. "My name is Sandy Ross, and I've come to spend the night with Will Lobb, so that I can get through to the Grange in good time to-morrow."

"Lobb doesn't live here now. He moved away a month ago, and I'm in charge."

"I'm sorry," I replied, "because I planned to spend the night with him."

"If it's only a camp you want," said the gruff stranger, "that can easily be given. Put your horses down in the yard and I'll get a bit of tea ready."

Throwing the saddles and mails by the hut door, I soon had the horses fixed up for the night. I shall never forget the look on the shepherd's face when I later walked into his camp. His appearance was sufficient to alarm a bushranger, with his long hair and whiskers and a big red jumper covering his body. "Come and sit down," he said, pointing to a box.

Moving forward to the inviting fire, I noticed another figure in the corner, that of a youth of about twenty years, with long, curly black hair. A coarse

dark beard made him look much older than he actually was. He greeted me with a nod, and shifted his box to make room.

"That chap is Alf Jennings," said the shepherd, giving me a kind of formal introduction. "He is camping with me till he gets on the track of a job."

By the light of a crude lamp I got a better view of the shepherd's face. Suddenly it flashed upon me that I had seen the fellow before. Across his right cheek there was a noticeable scar, and another on his eyebrow.

"I think I have seen you before," I remarked.

"Well, I cannot recall your face."

"Perhaps not; but I remember yours."

This made the shepherd glare at me.

"You seem very positive," he replied.

"Don't you remember me camping with you a year or two ago, when I was riding through to Swan Hill with Sergeant Wilson?"

"Your memory is good," said the shepherd. "I do remember you now; but that Wilson fellow is not with you to-night, is he?"

"No, he never comes out this track. He is in Geelong most of his time."

"May he ever stay there."

Conversation soon turned to other topics ,and Holt placed an excellent meal before us: I was both tired and hungry, and did full justice to the shepherd's cookery.

During the course of the evening, while looking round the hut, I casually asked Holt if he still had those wonderful stones.

"Stones," he said, greatly surprised. "What stones?"

"The golden ones you had up country."

Holt looked right into my face with an amused, perplexed expression.

"I don't remember showing you any stones," he replied, shaking his head.

"You surely must," I said. "Don't you remember the stones you kept on your table up country?"

"I'm afraid, lad, your memory is not so good as you think it is. You have made a mistake this time, I'm sure, for I haven't the slightest idea of what you are talking about."

I was a bit dumfounded by his calm denial, and did not know what to say further.

Taking advantage of my silence, the black-whiskered young man asked Holt how long I had stayed with him at his last camp.

"Only one night, as far as I can recollect; but I think he must be taking me for some other chap he met on that trip."

In vain I tried to recall other things to Holt's mind; but he greeted every inquiry with an amused, perplexed grin. This surprised me greatly at the time, for I could not see how the shepherd's memory could have failed him so completely. When I got a little older, however, I managed to put two and two together.

Holt soon led the conversation into other channels, and deluged me with all manner of questions. He inquired about the track to Geelong, and how often ships came in. In spite of his wild appearance, I confess I found him very entertaining, and he frequently related strange stories of the bush. His companion was really a likeable fellow, but his language was appalling. I was accustomed to hearing men swear; but this young fellow used the worst language I ever heard. As we will be meeting Jennings again, I must try and tell you something about him. When he stood upright he was a few inches taller than Holt. He was well built and strong, but I gathered from his conversation that he was not fond of work. Every boss he ever had was a scoundrel, who cheated him and made him work day and night, like a slave.

When I remarked that my boss, Ben Dawson,

always treated me well, Jennings spat into the fire and poured out a string of oaths.

"I've never met a boss yet that didn't treat his men like a pack of dogs," he almost yelled. "If your boss treats you well, he is getting at you in some other way."

With Jennings, black hair predominated. He was slovenly in his style, which took from his good looks. He had blue eyes, a long nose and a pleasant face. Yet at times I detected a sly expression that I did not like. He seemed to have a grudge against everybody, and the world in general. In his grudges he was often seconded by Holt, and I felt, after a few attempts at argument, that it was best to let them have it their own way. Both men seemed to be at open war with all bosses, policemen and rulers.

I was not sorry when morning came, and I was able to get on the track again. My strange companions of the night somewhat frightened me, and I did not feel free of their influence until I reached the Grange and had handed over the important letter to the police magistrate.

CHAPTER V.

The Storm Approaches.

MY long journeys week after week gave me confidence both with horses and men. I was known as Sandy the mail boy, and could get a camp at any station or hut along the route. As the mail matter increased I was obliged to take two horses—one I rode and the other I used as a kind of pack-horse. Of course I had all kinds of messages to do for the lonely pioneers, and each trip I had parcels and odd materials strapped to the saddles. As I got a little older squatters entrusted me with special jobs, and these brought me extra shillings in the way of tips.

During those days I often sat by camp fires and listened to the old bushmen. For the most part they talked about what happened in the Old Country when they were boys, and that, of course, was not of much interest to me. I also heard whatever scraps of news came to Geelong or to the shepherds along the tracks; but I'm afraid I did not take any item of news very seriously. Not being able to read for myself I could not detach news from yarns, but on several occasions I heard bushmen speaking in strange ways and planning to leave their jobs.

Not long after my visit to Holt, while on a return trip to Geelong, I met in with some strange adventures. One evening I pulled up at an old shepherd's camp where I had planned to spend the night. This time I was running late, and instead of being able to reach the homestead I had to content myself with a hut.

Having camped there before, I felt sure of a

friendly welcome, but was disappointed when the dog did not greet me with his usual barking. No one responded to my call, and on gaining entrance to the hut I concluded that the shepherd had deserted. A mewing cat was the only living thing left at the camp. The poor creature had evidently not been fed for some time, and was eager to make friends with me. From evidences that met my eyes I concluded that the shepherd had not been about for days, and apparently he had gone off in a hurry. It was impossible for me to push on, and as I had a little food I determined to camp. After easing my hunger and making a bunk, I was soon fast asleep on the hard floor.

The shepherd's disappearance made me feel timid; and, to make matters worse, I was awakened several times during the night by strange noises. Something crawled about on the roof, and I had a feeling that an animal was trying to get into the hut. Before getting into my bunk I had securely barred the door, but being alone and far from the nearest human being, I had a strange sensation. Time after time during the night I was awakened, but fear kept me from calling out, so I lay as still as a mouse.

After a time the noise ceased, and I dropped off to sleep. When I again awoke the light was coming in through cracks in the hut, and in the daylight I felt much braver.

Throwing open the hut door, I was pleased to see that the horses were safe in the brush yard; but I had scarcely stepped outside when several figures rose up from behind bushes. They yabbered away to each other, and in less time than it takes me to tell it, I found myself surrounded by a tribe of blacks. They had evidently been travelling, for their lubras and piccaninnies were with them. Some were naked, but others had bits of blanket and other strange apparel covering their lean bodies.

Chattering like monkeys, they closed in on me, and I could see that my position was going to be

difficult. My first impulse was to make a dash for safety; but on second thoughts I realised that I would not have time to saddle the horses and pack on the mails without having the whole tribe upon me. The men had weapons, and, judging by their painted bodies, I gathered that they were out for mischief. I learned afterwards that some shooting had taken place at a neighbouring station, and, as usual, the black men had the worst of it. Probably they were vowing to get even, and this, of course, was hard luck for me. I had no firearms, so any attempt to defend the hut would be madness.

The blacks evidently wanted food, but I had not enough to satisfy my own needs. How then could I satisfy a hungry tribe? However, nothing prevented me from handing over the hut; so while the blacks were assembling with their spears at the door, I quickly gathered up a few articles, and as I passed out, assuming a cheeky manner, I gave the natives all the food I had. With my heart beating wildly, and with bridles and mails over my shoulder, I walked smartly towards the horses.

As I anticipated, the aboriginals were more interested in the hut than in me. The more daring ones peeped through the door, expecting perhaps to see another white man or woman. My plan was to give them a chance to plunder the hut; and they were not long in making a beginning. As there was very little left to steal, I knew I had to act quickly. Fortunately the horses were easily caught, and I had the saddles and mails on in record time. To avoid going back to the gate, I broke a hole in the brush fence, led the horses through the opening, and springing into the saddle I was soon trotting away. After moving quickly for several miles, I felt comparatively safe, and it was not till then that I realised I was very hungry. In my hurry I had not saved a bit of food, and there was a journey of many miles before I reached another shepherd's hut.

There was nothing for it but to hurry forward.

You can imagine my feelings, however, when I was again confronted by a deserted hut. Fortunately there was some food in a tin, so I tried to satisfy my hunger with hard, stale biscuits.

In this case also, the shepherd had been gone for some time. His personal belongings had disappeared, and the fire had not burned for days. It occurred to me that both men had fallen victims to the blackfellows; and I tried to picture the dead bodies of the shepherds and their dogs somewhere out in the bush.

The horses needed a spell, or I would have made off again without delay. Somehow my appetite left me, and I kept out of the hut in case of a sudden attack. I fancied I saw a blackfellow crouching behind every bush. It was a queer sensation, and I can quite imagine how Robinson Crusoe felt when he saw the footprint on the sand.

It was late in the afternoon when I approached the next homestead. The squatter was bringing in some sheep, and, coming up with him, I began to relate my experience with the blacks.

"You were wise in making off," the squatter remarked. "They have been very impudent lately, and had you resisted them, you would have stopped a spear."

When I reported that both huts were deserted, he became angry, and cursed the shepherds for their callousness.

"Less than a fortnight ago I paid them up in full, and they assured me they were returning to their camps. That is what comes of letting shepherds have a day together."

"Then you do not think they have been murdered?" I inquired.

"They haven't been murdered," replied the squatter, "but they will be poorer and wiser men before long. The sooner they get their rude lesson the better."

I did not like to ask further questions, and the squatter did not volunteer any more information.

He seemed to take the matter very badly, and was very much annoyed with the shepherds.

On reaching the homestead another horseman rode up and drew rein beside us.

"What brings you in?" asked the squatter.

"Something has gone wrong at the north hut."

"How gone wrong?"

"I can't find Wilks. There is no one at the hut. Even the dog is gone."

"You mean that Wilks has left?"

"Seems like it, sir. There is no trace of clothes or bedding."

"Did you see any tracks?"

"Several men had been at the hut, and I followed their tracks down to the creek. At the crossing I plainly picked out the footprints of three different white men and two or three dogs."

"So that is the state of affairs," said the squatter, as he gave an angry glance at us both. "Without notice or a word of explanation, three of my men go off to those blasted goldfields. I'll have nobody left soon."

That was the first news I had of one of the greatest events in Australian history. Gold had been discovered. Holt, the ex-convict, was right, and now his prediction was coming true. Away in a secluded valley, beyond the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, a man named Edward Hargraves had proved beyond doubt that Australia possessed rich gold deposits. Odd bits of gold had been found before this by such men as Peter Holt, but I was too young to pay any attention to these early rumours of gold.

A month or two later a story was circulated that a squatter and his blackfellow had picked up a gold nugget that was sold in Sydney for £4000. The possibility of obtaining such dazzling prizes was a temptation to rich and poor alike, so for weeks afterwards I was constantly meeting little groups of men who were making for New South Wales.

A couple of months after my first experience

with the deserted huts I had occasion to pay another visit to the camp of Peter Holt. Naturally I was thinking what a lot I had to tell him about the gold rush. But alas, when I reached his hut I found that he, too, was among the number who had gone off. A few sentences scribbled on a piece of paper was tacked to the door. Not being able to read, I took the note into the Grange, where the words were read by the police magistrate.

"I didn't know that fellow could write," was his comment. "He has evidently had an extensive past. I had my eye on him too."

The note was merely to inform his employer that he had gone off to search for gold, and his next address would be somewhere over Sydney-side.

CHAPTER VI.

Buninyong.

FOR some weeks I continued to carry the mails to the Grange; but my work quickly decreased. All along the track the chief topic of conversation was gold. Squatters and business men were alarmed because people were leaving Victoria in droves. Almost every day I met with shepherds, shopkeepers, and even squatters, who declared that they were making for the goldfields across Sydney-side. Masters complained that there would soon be no men left to carry on the work; and the general feeling was that Victoria would be completely ruined.

On my return to Geelong after each trip I was informed of additional ones who had gone off to the diggings. Every settlement began to wear a deserted appearance; and it seemed to me that before long I would have no mails to carry, because the country was rapidly being depopulated.

When the crisis was at its height a party of Melbourne citizens offered a reward of £200 to the person who gave the first intimation of a paying goldfield within two hundred miles of Melbourne. In a few weeks hundreds of prospectors were scouring the country, and signs of gold were found in many places. A man named Esmond found gold-bearing quartz in the neighbourhood of Clunes, and the news of this find brought hundreds of men quickly to the scene. Almost at the same time a discovery was made at Anderson's Creek, a few miles up the Yarra. Then for the next few weeks prospectors were pushing out in all directions, and many wild rumours were in circulation.

Early in August, 1851, I gave up, for a time, my position as mail carrier. On my last trip the weather had been bitterly cold, and all the way back to Geelong I had been exposed to a biting south wind. A good deal of rain had fallen, and I had ridden along mile after mile in wet clothes. Consequently I was very pleased to get back to Geelong and beside a fire in my cosy quarters.

While finishing supper my landlady entered, announcing that two men had called to see me. No sooner had she given the information than the two men appeared. One was my father and the other a shepherd named Henderson. The water was dripping from their coats and hats, and I could see they were cold and hungry. Thanks to Mrs. Currie, they were soon seated before an inviting meal.

The presence of my father in Geelong did not excite my curiosity, for he frequently came into the township on droving business, and brought me parcels from mother.

When the meal was over and pipes were being brought out, I casually asked my visitors if they were making back next day with sheep.

Father shook his head, and Henderson smiled.

"We are not going back," replied father—"at all events not for some time. Our jobs will be good if we return, but the probability is we shall not."

"Not going back," I said in surprise. "What are you going to do, and what is to become of mother and the others?"

"They will be all right. Your mother and the children will stay at the homestead for a few months. They will be useful there, and happy too, I hope. If I make good I'll make a proper home in Geelong."

"And where are you going?" I inquired.

"To the diggings."

"To Sydney-side?"

"Not so far, lad—to Buninyong."

"Where is that?"

"Not a hundred miles from here. Gold was

struck there a few days ago, and we are leaving first thing in the morning. We stand a good chance of being among the first on the field."

"It's the early bird that catches the worm," Henderson remarked. "That was why we travelled all day in the biting wind."

"I have seen a lot of men go off to New South Wales," I said. "You never thought of going there?"

"It's too far away," said father. "Many a man wanted me to go, and the temptation was often great, but now it is different. Buninyong is only a stone's throw away, and we will be over there before the sun sets twice."

"How about coming with us?" asked Henderson.

"What about my job—who will do the trip to the Grange?"

"The job can wait," replied Henderson. "If you can get a horse, grab it at once. The morning may be too late."

I looked at father. Evidently he wanted me to come, but was not going to press the matter.

"Can you get a horse, lad?" inquired father.

"I think I can."

"Better go out and make sure. See your boss. Let the mail trip go for the time. In a week or two there will be nobody left at the Grange; so why worry? When the news gets round every man in the country will want a horse."

My experience of the last few weeks convinced me that father was right; so, acting upon his advice, I went out in the rain in search of my employer. Finding him at his cottage, I mentioned what was in my mind. He did not seem upset, but thought we were going out on a wild-goose chase.

"There will be nothing doing down here," said Dawson, "so if you want to go I will not try to stop you."

My next difficulty was about a horse; but I was agreeably surprised when my employer offered me an old packhorse in part payment of money due to

me. I was the proud owner of a saddle, and, as I had a little money saved, I was able to buy a few things that were required for the journey.

Ben Dawson told me he would do the next trip to the Grange himself, and then in all probability he would let the mail contract go, and follow us to the diggings.

Father and Henderson camped with me that night, and we left Geelong next morning before curious ones were about to see which way we were moving. The tracks were very bad, and, owing to the heavy rain that had fallen, most of the streams were swollen. As our packs were considerable we were limited, for the most part, to a walking pace.

We camped the first night with a shepherd, and next day we got our first glimpse of Mount Buninyong. Fortunately the weather had improved during the night, and as the day advanced the mount stood out clearly in the sunshine.

Suddenly, when emerging from some timber, we noticed, a few chains ahead, three men struggling along on foot. They were heavily loaded with pots, tools and clothing. It was an easy matter to urge on our horses and come up with them. Evidently they had been walking for days, as they looked tired and dirty.

"What way are you making?" Henderson asked.

"To Buninyong," their leader replied.

"How far have you come?"

"From Colac way."

"You have done well," father remarked.

"We had a good start," said one of the men. "As a matter of fact, we were on our way to Sydneyside when we heard of the strike at Buninyong, so decided to see what was doing here before we ventured further. We thought we would be amongst the first on the field, but there are dozens on ahead. They have been passing us all day long."

We hardly expected the information, but we were soon to realise that our informant was speaking

the truth, for a mile or two further on we came up with a party of ten men struggling forward with their swags. They had joined forces along the track and travelled together. Then each mile we travelled we met others, all bent upon reaching the hoped-for El Dorado before the real rush set in.

On reaching our destination, we found that a once peaceful pastoral district was swarming with prospecting parties. As fresh diggers came along sheep were startled, and went scampering across the hillsides, only to be frightened again by another party of men and dogs. Men were breaking up the soil in every direction, each eager to outstrip the other in the race for wealth.

Having selected a likely place to begin operations, we hobbled the horses and set about making a comfortable camp. Although the weather was improving, the wind was bitterly cold, so we built a bark covering over the fire, and tried to keep ourselves warm.

For some days the diggers worked hard, but steadily a feeling of disappointment came over the field. Groups of men gathered and talked. Hard things were said about those who had circulated the news of the gold discovery, and most of the men felt that they had been deceived. In some places the yellow metal was showing up, but it was embedded in quartz rock, and we had no means of extracting it.

One evening a big, burly looking fellow called Spears visited our camp. He had become acquainted with my father, and we saw him almost every day. On this occasion he was the bearer of some important news, and as we sat by the fire he gave away a few secrets.

"I'm on the track of something," he kept repeating. "By a fortunate accident I heard a whisper, but so far only three men are aware of it."

"You will, of course, tell us," said Henderson, with a laugh.

"That's the point," said Spears. "We are ready

to strike a bargain with you on one condition."

"Well, what are your terms?" father asked.

"If I give you my secret," said Spears, "will you place your horses at the disposal of the whole party for two or three days?"

"Why do you need horses?"

"Because it is now a matter of speed. We must all move soon; but it is necessary for us to get away quietly and quickly. Now, if you are wise, you will not hesitate. This field is no good, and I have heard a whisper of another strike. Why stay here and starve?"

I remember father and Henderson looking at each other, while Spears leaned back and smoked. He apparently held a trump card. Then in another instant the three men stood and shook hands as they repeated after each other the word "Agreed!"

CHAPTER VII.

Mysterious Neighbours.

THE events of that night and the days immediately following were written indelibly upon my mind. When Spears realised that father and Henderson were going to stand by him, he steadily unfolded his plans. He was strangely excited, and frequently looked around carefully to make sure that no other men were within hearing.

"Buninyong is a duffer," he began, "and most of the men intend leaving. Some are returning to their old jobs, but a few of us are moving over to Clunes. We have reason to believe that there has been a new strike in that vicinity. My mate, Tom Harkness, overheard a newcomer telling his partner about it, and urging him to pack up and be off at once. During the conversation Tom frequently heard the name Clunes mentioned.

"Only yesterday morning, very early, I was awakened by two men creeping past my tent, who were carrying all their belongings. They were secretly making off to some new field, and I clearly heard them say 'Clunes.'

"Then the other night I had a dream, during which I saw many men down a hole digging. They were calling to their mates to come, and behind them was a big notice-board, on which was written the word 'Clunes.' That dream has given me a strange presentiment, and I feel we must get out of this as quickly as possible and move on to Clunes.

"But that is not all. I have yet something far more startling to relate. When Tom Harkness and I came first to Buninyong, we pitched our tent next

to a camp occupied by three men, whose names were Dunlop, Hall, and Berkley. From the very beginning they were disgruntled, and one day I noticed that Dunlop was missing. Well, we didn't think much of that, and did not ask any questions; but a few nights later I was awakened by someone prowling round our tent. Thinking a thief was about, I quietly peeped out, and saw a man crawl into our neighbours' camp. I was going to give the alarm, but was surprised to hear Hall and Berkley greet the newcomer cheerfully. Then I heard Dunlop say: 'Not a sound.' I listened closely, but the men talked in whispers. Thinking there must be some crook work brewing, I kept an ear open without letting myself be seen; but they continued to talk in an undertone, and I was not able to hear much.

"Next morning I noticed that Hall was the only occupant of the camp. Naturally I asked him what had become of his mates, and he made me suspicious at once by telling me that he hadn't seen Dunlop for over a week; but Berkley had gone back to his job at Sunbury. Although I knew the man was lying I assumed a very unconcerned style and expressed sympathy with him for being left alone.

"Hall worked away all day, but retired with the darkness. I purposely sat late by the camp fire, but shortly after I had crawled into my bunk I heard a low whistle, and an answering one from Hall's tent. You can guess I was soon up and listening. I saw my neighbour come out of his camp, and in another instant he was joined by Berkley. Then both crawled back into the tent.

"Judging by the subdued conversation I gathered that they were talking over some serious business. By this time my curiosity was fired to white heat; so I crawled out, and creeping behind my neighbour's tent, was soon rewarded for my daring.

"'How far is it from here?' Hall asked.

"'Not more than fifteen miles,' Berkley replied.

'Dunlop will stay there till we come; but we must go at once.'

"Are you sure you can find it again?'

"'Yes, I have lit several fires. Dunlop has a log blazing on the last ridge. We will make for that.'

"'There are no other men in the locality?'

"'Only the blackfellows.'

"'And is the gold showing?'

"'Tons of it; and soft ground too. But quickly now, we haven't a moment to lose.'

"Both men came quietly out of the tent, and how they missed seeing me I cannot understand. Keeping flat on the ground behind a low bush, I heard something of what they said as they dismantled their camp. In a few minutes the tent was pulled down. Apparently Hall had their other belongings already packed, and had only been waiting for the signal. I could see they were very anxious not to disturb their neighbours; and when their swags were packed up they very cautiously moved away.

"In another moment I had roused Tom Harkness, and we started off in pursuit. Keeping a few chains behind, we followed them through the night. True enough, the fires showed up; but with the dawn we were obliged to drop well behind. However, we have located definite landmarks, and Tom is holding a rough camp till I come with mates and horses. Those fellows have struck gold somewhere, but we are well on their tracks. Harkness has a little food, and is trying to keep the trail, but we must get out and join him without delay. I have bribed a black boy to come and we will soon track Dunlop to his claim."

Having heard this story, we were all anxious to be off. Plans were quickly made, and then father and I went out for the horses, and tied them up in a little hollow among some gum trees. By midnight we were packed up. Taking down the tents was the last job, and then we were away.

As previously arranged, we went away quietly,

one by one. After travelling singly for a little distance, we were to meet at a given point. The plan worked well—in fact, too well, for when we assembled at the appointed place our contingent numbered a dozen persons. Spears had told two or three in strict confidence, and they of course had told a few others —in equally strict confidence.

When daylight came we trudged forward in real earnest. The horses and most of the men were heavily laden, and the country being rough, we were not able to do more than two miles an hour. About mid-day we reached a rough shelter that had been constructed by Harkness. Spears assured us that his mate was not far away, so we camped for lunch.

A few whistles brought Harkness up from a valley where he had been prospecting. He was surprised to see such a number, but, noticing Spears, he felt relieved, and, in response to numerous questions, gave us the information that he had located the place, some little distance ahead, where diggers were working. He had only seen two men, and had not been able to get near enough to distinguish them.

Of course, we were all excited by the news, and after a hasty lunch we tramped on again.

About the middle of the afternoon Harkness passed the word along that we were getting near the place where the prospectors were working; so we moved forward quietly and slowly.

"How far now?" Henderson asked.

"Not more than a mile," Spears replied.

Scarcely had he spoken when somebody called out: "Look down there!"

We all did so, and glancing down the valley we saw several men at work.

Almost at the same moment one of their number caught a glimpse of us, and gave a whistle to warn his mates.

In an instant they were up from their work, and, in a manner almost menacing, ten angry looking diggers awaited our approach.

CHAPTER VIII.

Gold! Gold! Gold!

FATHER and I tied up the horses and hurried with the others down the gully. The diggers, nodding to each other, held their spades and picks, and we wondered for a moment what would happen. Spears and Harkness were walking near me, and I could see them eyeing the strangers closely.

"Dunlop is not there," Spears said.

"No," said Harkness. "Our men are further down the creek. We must bluff these fellows, or our game is lost."

The leader of the party came forward as we approached, and, after a gruff greeting, asked who we were.

"We are diggers, like yourselves," said Henderson.

"Where have you come from?"

"Buninyong."

The leader looked surprised, and glanced at some of his mates, who were also coming forward to meet us.

"Why did you leave Buninyong?" asked one of the others.

"The place is no good," Spears replied, "so we thought we would try Clunes. We heard they were getting good gold there."

"Well, you haven't heard the truth," said the leader, whose name we afterwards learned was Morgan. "Clunes is no good. There is gold showing, but it will take machinery to get it. We left yesterday and, to tell you the truth, we were making for Buninyong, although we have been doing a little fossicking as we came along."

It was now our turn to look at each other. Here was a peculiar situation, and one which was not without humour. A little explanation followed, and we realised that we were hurrying to a field which these fellows had left, and they were moving to a place we had deserted. Fortunately we all saw the joke, and were soon laughing together.

"The Buninyong people are all moving over to Clunes," said Spears.

"Well, the Clunes people are making for Buninyong," replied Morgan.

"Then we had better not go any further," remarked Henderson.

"Why not try your luck with us here?"

"Are you getting anything?"

"A colour; that's all. But it looks a likely place."

"Come on, then," said Henderson, "we will give this spot a good trial. If there's nothing here our party had better split up and every man can go his own way."

This was agreed upon, and for an hour both parties worked and talked together; but we could see our new friends were becoming restless. Some talked of pushing on, and I could see that Spears was encouraging them in that object. Father and Henderson were also trying to use gentle persuasion.

"Now is our chance," Harkness whispered to me. "We must throw these fellows off the scent and get them away in some other direction."

At that moment Spears threw down his spade and suggested that we should push on, as there was nothing showing up.

"You are right," said Morgan. "This hole is a duffer, but where shall we go?"

"We had better separate, I think. That would give us more chances of finding something."

"Very well; but there is no good going back over our old tracks."

"Quite so," said Spears. "Then you go east and we will make west."

The members of our party tried to appear unconcerned; but I knew they were very anxious.

Morgan thought a moment, and then shook his head.

"That's no good," he said. "The only likely place is further down this gully. There is bound to be a stream somewhere, and it is sure to be on the low ground. Let us all make down the valley."

Spears bit his lip, and Harkness felt like cursing, as the men gathered their tools and followed their leader.

"Can't we stop them?" whispered Spears.

"Too late now," said father. "If we find Dunlop's claim these fellows must share the secret."

Leaving the horses tied up, we trudged on for about a mile. Harkness and Spears were in the lead, and, boylike, I was with them. There was plenty of undergrowth, and we were obliged to go slowly and force our way through.

"The stream must be on the right," Morgan was explaining, when the sound of dishes rattling came to our ears.

"Listen," said Spears. "Others are here before us."

Human voices were now heard only a few chains down the creek, and, moving out from some dense scrub, we caught our first glimpse of the diggers.

"There he is!" Spears exclaimed. "Dunlop is that fellow in the middle. We have dropped nicely on his secret nest. Serves the fellow right for trying to keep it dark."

"Hullo, Dunlop," said Spears in an easy tone, as we came within speaking distance. "You are doing a bit of prospecting too?"

"Yes, a little."

"Are you getting anything?"

"Yes, we are," was Dunlop's cool reply. "In fact, we have been trying to keep our claim a secret, but you have stumbled upon us somehow."

"Well, we haven't come to rob you," said Hender-

son. "If you have found something worth while we will do the fair thing by you."

"You are reasonable, anyhow," remarked Dunlop, "so we will make one request. We have been prospecting here for some time, and it is only fair that we should have first pick where we work."

"Agreed," called all our party together.

"You mark out your boundary," said father, "and we will keep well outside of it."

"Very well," replied Dunlop. "You chaps can dig anywhere except between our tent yonder and that bent tree. Those points will be our boundaries, and we will peg them out right away. Take my advice and peg out your own boundaries too, for we will not have this field to ourselves very long, mark my word."

"Why not?"

"Because there is gold here."

"Are you getting much?"

"About fifty pounds a day each."

I'll never forget the effect of those words. Our men seemed to go instantly mad, and there was one wild rush to get to work with spades and dishes.

Dunlop and his party marked out their claim by driving in tall pegs. Others quickly adopted the same method, and in a few minutes the ground around us was taken up. Spears and Henderson suggested that we should move a little further down the stream. We quickly did so, and located a likely place. A few miserable natives had an encampment near by, and were sitting on the ground watching. I suppose they expected us to pass on, but their mia-mias were on the very spot we wanted, so the poor creatures were driven away in none too gentle a fashion, and all our claims were pegged out.

As if by magic, spades, picks, and axes were being wielded. Cockatoos and other birds, disturbed by the industry of man, flew screeching away. Dishes rattled as earth was washed away, leaving in nearly every case a few specks of gold.

A man working a few yards from us picked up

a piece of gold about the size of an egg. He gave a scream of delight which brought others around him. When they saw the gold they rushed back to their own positions and worked as though they hadn't another day to live.

Within an hour of our arrival at Dunlop's claim, a row of men had established themselves along the creek—each with a dish in his hand and scarcely ever raising his head, but digging and washing with desperate earnestness.

The little stream became known as the Yarrawee, and during the next few days we picked up the first crops from the rich banks which soon became famous as the Ballarat Diggings.

CHAPTER IX.

Gold Fever.

EVEN though so many years have intervened, and so many strange adventures have befallen me, the incidents of that first day at Ballarat stand out vividly in my mind. What a day it was for us, and what a day for Australia. Of course, we had no idea of the magnitude of the discovery, and we still had much to learn in the art of getting the gold; but suddenly every man was transformed. Hunger, fatigue and thirst were forgotten. The weakest man became a giant, and toiled without taking time to stretch his back. Fresh yells rent the air when some lucky digger unearthed a precious lump, and his cries acted as a powerful stimulant, impelling the other men to drive in their spades with renewed vigour.

I was the youngest member of the party, and my mates had nicknamed me "The Kid," but the experiences of that day suddenly made me a man. I had pegged out a claim between father and Henderson, and entered into all the wild scenes of enthusiasm. Nuggets were fished up like pebbles, and every man worked without thought of food or rest. The diggers soon took on the colour of the mud they churned up. The pleasant mountain stream became a quagmire, and I was sent up the gully to get clean drinking water.

Daylight faded all too soon. The sun set as on other days. Birds sang their evening songs, and the weary miners gave up for the night. Timber and undergrowth gave way before the axes, and tents were pitched. Father and Henderson were good

bushmen, and before dark our camp was quite cheerful.

Fortunately, we had brought a good supply of food, as well as blankets. The horses were hobbled near the camp, with bells hanging from their necks. Around us many fires were burning as tired diggers tried to get a rough meal. Most of the fellows were exhausted beyond description, for they had been working like lashed horses. Some were too tired even to eat, and lay down among the ferns. All were wet through with perspiration and their clothes and boots were covered with clay. A few wise ones threw off their damp clothing, washed in the icy water of the stream, and then, after a good rubbing, wrapped themselves in blankets or dry clothing. At last the camping places were adjusted, the fires subsided, and the weary pioneers slept for the night.

Next morning I was awakened by the sound of a tomahawk, and peering round, I found that father and Henderson were gone from the tent. Crawling out, I found that breakfast was ready. A mist was in the valley, and the view beyond a chain or two was concealed. However, I could hear voices along the creek, and the sound of spades and dishes told the tale that the diggers were once more at work. Another day of almost superhuman toil followed. With the rising of the sun, the mist cleared, and the sunshine revealed the fact that other bands of diggers had stumbled on the spot, and were also hard at work. We did not worry about what other fellows were doing, but every man struggled and scrambled in a wild search for gold. Time was hardly taken to eat. Probably, in the minds of many was the fear that the golden valley would soon be worked out, and every man was anxious to make the most of his opportunity. So they struggled and grasped, scraped and dug with tomahawk and spade.

Along with a number of the first-comers, we had commenced operations at a bend in the creek which

was afterwards called "Golden Point." Here for a time each man could easily earn from twenty to forty pounds a day. Fresh parties of diggers soon reached the field. How the word got round we never knew, but in the course of a few days news of our discovery had travelled many miles.

In less than a week Buninyong and Clunes were deserted, and all miners who could move hurried to the new diggings. At first we were the centre of a group. Soon after we were the centre of a howling mob. It seemed as if the very birds carried the news north, south, east and west. Men swarmed and buzzed and settled like locusts on the gold-bearing tract. They came panting, dusty and travel-stained, and flung off fatigue at the sight of the diggings. Running to a portion of unoccupied ground, they pegged out their claim, and then plied spade and pick-axe as though they had not another day to live.

Quickly the face of nature was changed. We hacked down trees for firewood, pitched tents in every direction, and wrestled with nature for the treasure that lay all around us. So keen were some of the men that at the first peep of day they tore off most of their clothing and worked like tigers all day long.

New arrivals came in at the rate of one hundred a day, and in a month 2500 men were gathered at Ballarat. From this burning spot gold-fever struck inward to the very heart of the land. It burned itself into the veins of the inhabitants and maddened their brains. There was but one conversation, and one thought — gold, gold, and the diggings.

After the first week of the rush it fell to my lot to take the horses away in the hope of bringing back food. Many of the diggers had made small provision for their needs; so men were hurried away to bring food. Fabulous stories were told at hotels, stores and shepherds' huts along the track. Melbourne and Geelong residents soon heard staggering accounts

of the rich gold find, and that was why, in the course of a few days, men swarmed upon us as we worked.

Probably I was one of the first from the Ballarat diggings to return to Geelong. A man from another party accompanied me, and throughout the journey we were inundated with all manner of questions. Fellows on the way to the diggings wanted directions, and confirmation of ridiculous reports. My companion had some nuggets with him, and the sight of the gold never failed to arouse the greatest enthusiasm among those hurrying towards Ballarat.

When we reached Geelong we found that the wildest excitement prevailed. Everywhere men were leaving their jobs. Storekeepers were thinking of closing their shops. Stations for miles around were losing all their hands. Every man we saw seemed to be either packing up or making off for the diggings. When the news got abroad that we had ridden back from Ballarat, we were besieged by intending diggers.

Acting on father's instructions, I bought as much food as I could load on the horses. Prices were already soaring, and in part payment for the supplies obtained I handed over some real gold dust. It was fortunate we had horses, for they were in great demand. In fact, every kind of animal or vehicle that could move was being sought after and commissioned for service.

We were soon hurrying northward again, and formed part of a motley throng that followed the tracks that led to the goldfields. Men of almost every walk in life were in the rush. Rich and poor were meeting together and hurrying northward to participate in the glittering prizes. Some had bullock drays and a few fortunate ones had horses. Many were on foot carrying huge bundles, tents and tools. Not far from Geelong we passed a whole family stepping out bravely. Each member had some burden to carry, and the father was pushing an overloaded barrow.

When we again reached the diggings we found that during our absence many changes had taken place. The miners were spreading along the creek and across the flat. Fresh crowds had poured in, and tents were pitched in every direction. Many of the newcomers were ill-equipped, and had rushed to the field with insufficient provisions. Consequently we were able to sell some of our foodstuffs at a handsome profit. This fact opened up another possibility, and father was quick to seize upon it. I could travel backwards and forwards with the horses, and, in addition to keeping our party supplied, I could sell to others. With the horses I could do as much as a man, but father thought the work in the water and mud would prove too much for me. Accordingly, we made a little paddock for the horses, and I started in business as a general carrier.

CHAPTER X.

Mount Alexander.

THE bush surrounding the goldfields was soon thinned of its timber, for there were hundreds of huts to build and thousands of camp fires to replenish. The ancient hunting grounds of aboriginals were speedily changed into a succession of yellow-coloured upheavals, and the diggings presented the appearance of great ant hills swarming with busy workers.

I frequently rode down to Geelong, and every week I found it harder to get provisions. I carried a small bag of gold dust and nuggets strapped closely to my skin, and was able to pay the enormous prices that were demanded for common necessaries. At Ballarat it was an easy matter disposing of all surplus foodstuffs. Successful diggers did not waste time bartering, but measured out a quantity of gold dust, and handed it over for the food that would sustain their bodies.

The fame of Ballarat circulated throughout the adjacent colonies, and crowds of men from Sydney-side came pouring down upon us. Enthusiastic diggers ferreted out every creek and valley, in the hope of finding even richer fields, and soon gold workings were located all around us.

In the first few weeks the claims in our neighbourhood were carried through the sand layer until the pipeclay was reached. Then, with the appearance of stone and clay, the claim was supposed to be worked out, and was abandoned.

One day I noticed a group of men beside a claim, and, being curious, I joined the party, and

was told by a spectator that they were having some good fun. Apparently a new chum had entered a deserted claim, and was working the flesh off his bones down in the pipeclay, while his mate, on the top, kept guard, and as required hauled up the bucket. The diggers, who were convinced by past experience that the gold was all gone, encouraged the miner in his efforts by saying that he was sure to strike something good.

"Burrow right down through that stone," a wag called out. "The deeper you go the better the gold."

"The tougher the stone the richer the dust," was a further comment.

The poor fellows got plenty of advice, and the diggers whispered to one another and enjoyed the joke.

"Put the poor beggar wise," remarked a sympathetic fellow. "Tell him there's nothing there."

"Not yet a while," replied the wag. "We had to pay for our experience. Why shouldn't he pay for his?"

The fun had proceeded about an hour when the man down below, whose name happened to be Cavanagh, was seen to pick up something. Striking a few more blows with his pick, he again stooped and fingered something very carefully.

"Getting through the pipeclay?" asked the wag. "You will soon find a bucketful of gold."

"Yes," replied Cavanagh, holding something up. "This is a bit in advance."

For a moment he held up a nugget the size of a small potato, and then, stooping down again, he literally picked up nuggets as though he were picking up beans. Men crowded to the edge of the hole, and, looking down in amazement, watched Cavanagh putting the gold into his upturned hat. In a few moments a multitude buzzed about the claim where gold could be picked out without being washed, and envy burned in many a heart. These men had struck the first of those rich pockets which were afterwards

found in such abundance throughout the Golden Point field.

Even at that exciting moment the wag saw humour in the situation.

"Didn't I tell you the best gold was lower down?"

A laugh followed and relieved the tension, whereupon Cavanagh's mate asked the crowd to get on with their own jobs.

"You were laughing at us a moment ago and thinking we were mad; but now you are jealous of us. No need of envy. We have shown you a little trick, and if you will only get busy yourselves and dig deeper, you will find fortunes under your feet."

"Bravo!" said the wag. "Back to your tents, O Israel."

Instantly the diggers dispersed and disappeared like rabbits into burrows. Every man worked with renewed vigour, and dug his shaft down a few feet deeper. Marvellously rich pockets were soon found, where gold was almost shovelled out; and as fortunate ones came upon the precious nuggets, shouts of rejoicing were heard across the field.

Before another month had passed Ballarat took rank as the richest goldfield in the world.

On one occasion when I returned to the diggings from Geelong, I was surprised to find men pulling down their tents and packing up their belongings. Bullock drays were being loaded, and hundreds of men were moving away. The wildest excitement prevailed, and everybody seemed to be in a desperate hurry. Men yelled, bullocks bellowed, and dogs barked. The whole affair was so mysterious that I did not venture to ask any questions until our own claim was reached.

"What's it all mean?" I asked father.

"Another rush, lad. It started somehow in the middle of the night, and men have been hastening away ever since."

"And where are they all going?"

"To a place called Mount Alexander. They say its richness is dazzling."

At that moment several men, all fully loaded, scrambled by, and we were able to hear scraps of their conversation.

"Not more than forty miles as the crow flies," said one.

"Nothing like it ever heard of before," came from another. "Nuggets everywhere. Chunks of gold in every dish, and easy sinking."

The men passed on to join the travelling throng, and we were left to our own thoughts.

"That's what we have been hearing all day," Henderson observed.

"Yes," said father; "and it is strange how this gold fever affects you. Somehow you want to get away with the crowd."

"Shall we try Mount Alexander?" Henderson suddenly asked. "I don't see we could better ourselves, but there would be no harm in making an investigation."

"One had better stay here," said father. "We must hold what we have."

"Very well," said Henderson. "I'll hold this claim while you and Sandy make a fast trip to the new field."

"It's a bargain," said father, who was really keen to move off. "If we strike it lucky I'll send Sandy back for you; but if the field is a duffer, we will both be back without much loss of time."

"Shall we leave in the morning, dad?" I inquired.

"Sooner than that, boy," replied father. "We will get away as soon as the horses have had a feed and a rest."

Father was true to his word. We packed up quickly, and late in the afternoon we rode off, leading in turns the loaded packhorse. Any uncertainty regarding direction was removed by the fact that in front, behind, and on every side, were wayfarers journeying to the same goal. The whole movement

was like a pilgrimage, where men were mixed up in an incongruous mob, driving bullock drays and propelling wheelbarrows loaded with necessary goods. It seemed as though some drastic compulsion urged the diggers onward.

Night came on, but the rush proceeded; so we struggled on through a park-like forest. The details of those early rushes are still very vivid in my mind. Every effort was put forth to gain some small advantage over your fellows. A wild excitement took possession of the diggers which turned their brains, and made many of them act like madmen.

By the following evening we had reached the new diggings, which were situated about forty miles north-east of Clunes, and near the present site of Castlemaine. Once again we pegged out a claim, and before dark we had the satisfaction of knowing that the new field was as rich as Ballarat. Around us on every side were men already churning up the ground, while others hurried here and there looking for a favourable spot to put down their boundary pegs. Long after dark men continued to stagger into the new workings. Although they were footsore and hungry, many eager ones kindled fires and toiled on during the night in their desperate search for glittering prizes. Gold madness was responsible for many fights, as late arrivals tried to take possession of favoured spots. Next morning black eyes and bandaged heads told their own story.

When I crawled out of our little tent next morning, the sun was up. For a moment I scarcely knew where I was, because during a single night the place had undergone a transformation. Holes were being sunk so close together that as you walked about you were in constant danger of tumbling into some digger's claim. Father had been at work for a couple of hours, and he greeted me with the information that he was desperately hungry, but would not leave his hole till the mad rush settled down.

"Get yourself some breakfast and bring me a bite," he said.

"Have you been working all the night?" I asked.

"No; but I have had a hard fight to hold our claim against swarms of madmen."

"Are you getting anything?"

"I've picked up at least fifty pounds this morning."

"Fifty pounds!" I said, in amazement.

"Yes, but don't speak so loudly. If we can keep this up for a few weeks, there will be no more shepherding work for us."

Day after day we toiled; and when we stopped for a little rest our neighbours told us astonishing stories of success. The soil all around us was wonderfully rich in the yellow metal, and in almost every dish, at times, the gold showed up like grains of wheat. With fresh diggers pouring in by the hundreds, the wildest excitement prevailed.

From the point in Specimen Gully, where the gold was first located, men swarmed over Mount Alexander, pushed down into Forrest Creek, and poured along Moonlight Flat. Here and there slate-like stone resisted the spades and picks, but most of the ground was easily worked, and the golden treasure was gathered into bags and tins. Successful diggers went delirious with joy, lit their pipes with bank-notes, and paid for their food with handfuls of gold.

All too soon I had to hasten away with the horses, leaving father alone in the midst of that surging mass of gold-maddened men.

CHAPTER XI.

Along the Tracks.

ON reaching Ballarat I found Henderson in good spirits, for the claim was still yielding well. In fact our very success was now causing embarrassment, because we had not sufficient man power to hold our workings. Partners of a kind could be easily got, but we were not keen to share our fortunes with some of the characters around us. When our difficulties were at their height I had to push on to Geelong, for supplies were running short, and Henderson informed me that if I did not get back quickly he would starve in his claim.

Men were still moving up to Ballarat, and as I rode down from the diggings I had to act as a kind of traffic director. I was not more than five miles on my journey when I was hailed by a party of gold seekers, and found myself replying to a hurricane of questions. A young fellow stood out in front of the others and in an impudent way demanded how far it was to the diggings. His manner made me angry; but I pulled up the horses and stared at my questioner. At once I recognised him as the man known as Alf. Jennings. Looking round quickly, my eyes rested on another member of the group whom I knew as Peter Holt.

"Hullo," I said, "when did you leave the Grange ?"

"You talk as though you know us," Jennings replied.

"I know two of you. Don't you remember me camping one night at your hut, near the Grange?"

"Yes; you are the kid who carried the mails. Are you on the same job up here ?"

"Not exactly. I'm carrying for our party on the diggings."

"Well, well !" exclaimed Holt, as he came forward beside Jennings. "This is a happy meeting. You will be able to give us all the information we want."

I could now see his face clearly, and through his whiskers the scars were plainly visible, but a smile was on his face, and the old expression which once frightened me was gone. His hair and beard were neatly trimmed, and he was now quite good looking.

"You were right," I said.

"What about, lad ?"

"About the gold. Don't you remember what you told me that night I camped with you up in the Wimmera."

To my amazement Holt laughed heartily, and turning to his mates, he told them to go forward and get a fire going.

"You see," he said, pointing to me, "this lad is the son of my old pal, and we must have a few minutes together to talk over family matters."

"Certainly, Harry," came from one of the fellows, as a chorus of approval greeted the request. "We will not be far ahead, and will have a drink ready by the time you catch up."

"Why does he call you Harry?" I asked.

"That fellow has enough impudence for twenty men," Holt laughingly replied. "But what does it matter? Isn't one name as good as another?"

"Are you making for Ballarat?" I inquired.

"Yes; but we don't want those fellows ahead to know all our business. Fortunately they are all easily bluffed—simpletons the lot of them. We would be hard up for mates to take any of them. You see, I have a special method for locating where

the gold is, but I'm not going to let them get my secret."

"I have often thought of you and those nuggets you showed me in the Wimmera," I said, "but I didn't think then that your words would come true."

"Now there is something I want to tell you," said Holt, and his manner suddenly changed. "You realise that I do know a little about gold. Well, it may be worth your while to keep in touch with me. I have many secrets, and I have a quicker way of getting gold than most of the Ballarat diggers."

"You will need to be very smart, then, for the gold in some places is being brought up in heaps."

"Mark my word, lad, when we get busy the diggings will get a few surprises; but, remember this, if you notice us at Ballarat, or anywhere else, don't speak to us until I say so. If my plan is to be successful, we must work quietly. When success is a certainty I will make it well worth your while. Don't mention our names to anybody. I will be able to find you easily, but if you should stumble into our camp, get away again as quickly as possible. Do you understand ?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, I'll explain more when I see you on the diggings. In the meantime forget all about us."

I promised to comply with Holt's request, and after a further chat, we parted good friends. As I rode on, however, the words of the ex-convict went running through my mind, and I felt certain that he possessed some great secret. His previous words had come true, and somehow I felt that his arrival at the diggings would be followed by some big discovery. Then it suddenly occurred to me that I had missed a great opportunity. Why did I not tell Holt to make himself known to Henderson and then work along with us as partners. Even yet it might not be too late, for a sharp ride back would soon bring me to Holt.

My mind was soon made up. Leaving my pack-

horse in a secluded spot, I was quickly retracing my steps, but imagine my surprise when I found no trace of Holt or any of his party. They had completely disappeared, and I saw no fire. Naturally I was very disappointed, but I concluded that they had turned up a side track. For a couple of hours I rode along in a doleful mood, reproaching myself because I had let such an opportunity pass; but at last I was aroused from my reflections by hearing my name called. Two men who had been resting beside some bushes a few yards away arose and came towards me.

"Hullo, Sandy," said one of them, "I'm right glad to see you."

The speaker was a man named Harry Parker. I had frequently seen him in Geelong, and he was well known to my father.

"Are you taking to the goldfields at last?" I inquired.

"Couldn't resist it any longer," replied Harry, "although I did leave the boss in a fix."

Harry, by the way, was one of those conscientious chaps who felt that the boss couldn't get on without him. That explains why he stuck to his job so long; but the gold fever got him at last.

"Your boss will have to come to the diggings too," I suggested.

"Most of the bosses have gone up," replied Harry. "There is hardly a man left in Geelong or Melbourne. Shops are closing. The warders have gone from the gaol. Sailors are leaving their ships; and now even the police are deserting."

Harry gave a look at his mate, and both laughed.

"Don't you know Fullerton?" Parker said, as he winked at me, "or should I say ex-Trooper Fullerton. You see, my mate is a deserter, and I am living in mortal dread of him being arrested and taken back. Promise me, Sandy, that you will not report him to Sergeant Wilson."

Again both men laughed.

"They don't like the troopers at Ballarat," I said. "They are always jumping other people's claims; but if you will both promise to work hard and find tons of gold, I may consider taking you on as partners."

"Good for you, Sandy," said Harry. "Where is your claim?"

"Right in the pick of the diggings," I said proudly. "You hold it for me while I go down for food, and a share of the gold will be yours."

"Is there any gold in your claim?"

"Heaps of it. Look here."

I took out several nuggets from my pocket as calmly as you like, and Harry's eyes nearly dropped out of his head as he stared at the gold.

"That's the stuff all right," said Fullerton. "The sight of it is more than a man can stand. Do you blame me for deserting when I am sick and tired of taking nuggets away from drunk returned diggers? Less than a week ago I arrested a wild fellow for persisting in telling Geelong that he belonged to the 'hairystocracy' now. I didn't mind a man wanting to be an aristocrat, but I objected to a fellow claiming to be one and at the same time acting like a pig. So I locked him up, and when we searched the fellow we found all his pockets full of gold. The bank official who took charge of the nuggets said they were worth over £300. Fancy people on the diggings picking up gold like potatoes, and me staying in Geelong to arrest a few drunks. It's more than human flesh could stand, so——"

"So you deserted," put in Harry.

"So—so I started out for Ballarat," replied Fullerton, with a knowing wink.

I have heard it said that the successful chap never makes the same mistake twice. I had let Holt and Jennings slip through my fingers, but here were two strong, honest fellows, and suddenly I made up my mind that I would go back with them to Ballarat and see if they could be of any service to Henderson.

I told them of my plan, and they fell in with it at once.

We were soon mounted, swags and all, and a few hours later I had the joy of piloting the new recruits through the diggings to our claim.

Henderson was right glad to see us, especially as Parker and Fullerton had brought a little food. When preliminary explanations were over we soon struck an agreement, and I was once more able to start out for Geelong, but this time knowing that the worst of our troubles were over.

CHAPTER XII.

Among Bushrangers.

THE year 1851 was an extraordinary one for Australia. First came the goldfields of New South Wales, with the rush to Sydneyside. Then came the remarkable turning of the tide, and men rushed back to Victoria. Scarcely had we become familiar with one goldfield when the cry went up: "A new rush!" Instantly thousands of men, as though obedient to some migratory instinct, would fold up their tents and hurry away.

I saw something of the first rush to Ballarat, and a few weeks later I found myself in the midst of the rush to Mt. Alexander. Before this exciting year was over I was destined to be an actor in the biggest rush of all.

Enterprising prospectors kept on pushing out in every direction, and a few weeks before Christmas diggers crossed the granite mountains and commenced to gather from the almost limitless wealth of Bendigo.

Fullerton went through with me to Mt. Alexander, and had worked beside father, while Parker had kept Henderson company. My job was to ride between our parties and to Geelong as occasion demanded. Thus it was that I happened to be with father when the news came suddenly to our field that another wonderful discovery had been made about twenty miles distant. Consequently we were soon in the midst of all the excitement. Those who were not doing well at once threw up their claims, pulled down their tents and scrambled away. The new rush happened at a convenient time for us, as our claim was not giving the yields it did at first.

So it did not take us long to make up our minds, and in a very short time we were once more on the march. Soon it was apparent that a huge army was on the move, and the murmur grew to a rumble as the diggers left their claims and struggled away, carrying staggering loads. Some were swearing, some laughing; all were hurrying, hoping for great things from this last found El Dorado. Nor were they disappointed, for the new diggings, which were known as Sandhurst, dimmed for a time the glories of the other fields.

We were again successful in obtaining profitable claims, and our savings steadily accumulated.

For several months our interests were divided between Sandhurst and Ballarat. A good deal of my time was spent on the tracks, but gradually I found regular carriers were taking my work from me. Bullock drays brought loading to the goldfields, and enterprising traders started crude shops.

Henderson brought his wife and family to the diggings, and this gave me an added interest. There were five children; the eldest, a girl named Jean, was about my age and then came Jim. There were three younger children—two girls and a boy.

Life on the diggings, of course, was hard for children. Food was often scarce and coarse, and milk was unobtainable. In wet weather oceans of mud surrounded the tents, and in dry times we were nearly smothered in dust, as well as being plagued by millions of flies. Ants swarmed over our food, and we had difficulty in getting good drinking water.

When the Hendersons came we tried to make life more comfortable by building a bark hut. Wind breaks made of boughs and bark were also put around the tents.

On the diggings could be seen every style of tent and hut. Some were patched up with bags, tin, bark, boughs, and any material that could cover a corner. Our difficulties were increased by the fact that the enormous number of fires consumed all the dry wood,

and diggers swore and cursed as the green stringy bark timber refused to burn. Food was badly cooked, and many men were wet for days at a time.

With the first rush for gold, men were not prepared to spend much time fitting out their camps. When rushes took place in rapid succession, nobody felt very permanent in any locality. However, as the winter of '52 approached, we were compelled by the severity of the cold to seek better shelter.

Having worked the claim at Sandhurst for five months with considerable success, we managed to sell out to another party, and then we planned to work together at Ballarat. Henderson had struck a rich pocket, and we deemed it advisable to concentrate upon one place.

I took the horses up to Sandhurst to assist with the removal, and on the return journey we had our first adventure with bushrangers.

Lawless ruffians had for months been sweeping the country, and it was our lot to fall in with some of these fellows. Fortunately we were not carrying much gold, but what we had was greedily snatched by the bushrangers. We fell easy victims, as we were at the time leading the horses through difficult country, and the ruffians sprang upon us from concealed positions, and had us at once covered by their weapons. They searched us very closely, and I remember how Fullerton's eyes flashed. The ex-policeman did not take the experience kindly; but my father did not seem to mind. I suppose he remembered that most of his gold was safe with the escort, and he did not worry about the little the bushrangers were getting. The robbery, however, threw Fullerton into a fearful temper. It was not the loss of the gold that angered him, but the thought that he, a policeman, had been coolly cornered by a band of wasters and deprived of weapons and other belongings. Naturally, Fullerton was in a bad mood, and vowed all sorts of vengeance against the next thief he met.

Now, there happened to be a strange sequel to our adventure. Less than an hour later father and I were riding along together, while Fullerton had dropped a few chains behind, when two more bushrangers suddenly sprang out and covered us with their guns.

"Get off, and put your hands up," they commanded.

There was nothing for it but to comply, though father smiled as he submitted to the search, knowing that these ruffians were not likely to secure much booty. Further, we knew that Fullerton was not far away, and had not been noticed by the bushrangers. As a matter of fact, he had observed them, and he told us afterwards that the sight made him grind his teeth.

One robber kept us covered, while the other investigated our belongings; but when no gold was found the searcher gave father a cruel blow, which knocked him down. At the next instant the outlaw that held the musket was knocked insensible by a blow which Fullerton delivered with a stick.

"Grab the gun, Sandy," said the ex-policeman, as he sprang upon the other robber with the fury of a tiger.

I did as directed; while father struggled to his feet half dazed.

Fullerton held his man and gave him the most frightful hammering I ever saw one human being give another. All his pent-up fury was ventilated upon the wretch who had struck father. He certainly got a dose of his own medicine, with interest added. The tables were turned with a vengeance, and I have often wondered what the thoughts of the bushrangers were when we departed, leaving them both half dead, and minus certain articles that we appropriated. Fullerton's temper immediately subsided, for he felt that something had been wiped off the slate.

CHAPTER XIII.

Peter Holt.

These incidents go to show how numerous criminals were in the neighbourhood of the goldfields. Many convicts had escaped to Victoria, where in the confused and unsettled state of the country they found opportunities for the display of their criminal propensities. Hard work on the diggings did not appeal to them; so bushranging was resorted to.

In 1852 bands of rogues were robbing in all directions, and the gold escort was a special magnet which attracted them. The track from Sandhurst ran through the gloomy Black Forest, and this region provided shelter for scoundrels; and I never felt safe on that track until I came out of the forest at a place now known as Woodend.

When we were all established together at Ballarat we felt that it was no longer necessary to keep the horses. Ben Dawson, who now regularly visited the diggings with teams, was glad to take them over, and we felt relieved when we no longer had the care of them.

With the arrival of thousands of men from other countries, disease in many forms made its appearance. Small wonder that sickness broke out when such a polyglot crowd swarmed on one spot. Some fellows toiled all day long in icy water until they were doubled with cramp. A strange malady known as "colonial fever" swept through the goldfields. Men rotted like sheep and died beside the gold they had won. Medical men were scarce. There were no hospitals or nurses, and few comforts of any kind.

Those who were maddened by the gold refused to leave their claims when the fever gripped them, and stricken ones sometimes fell unconscious in the pits they had dug.

One evening, while strolling over the diggings with Harry Parker, I noticed a coat and some tools lying upon the heap of earth that had been raised from a claim. Looking into the hole, we saw a man in the attitude of sleep. He did not stir, and we could not wake him. Descending by a little ladder we found that he was dead. A bag of gold was strapped to his belt and several nuggets were grasped in his cold, stiff hands. Thinking that he must have died from fever we did not touch the body but withdrew from the claim. A little distance away a number of diggers were gathered by a blazing fire, so we went across and informed them of the tragedy.

"That must be Tom Shaw," said one.

"Must be," remarked another. "I wondered why he did not return to his tent. I don't suppose we can do anything, but we better have a look."

The men rose, and the glare from the camp fire lighted up their faces. Although they were covered with yellow mud, yet I instantly recognised one as Peter Holt.

"Hullo!" I said, as greeting an old friend.

"Hullo, Charlie," he replied quickly, "how you are growing. Another few inches and you will be taller than your father. By the way, how is your dad? Is he still on the diggings? And how is that brother of yours?"

By that time he had walked right over to me and taken me by the hand. I was greatly surprised by his greeting, and was about to reply, when he looked sternly into my face and said: "Not a word, remember what I told you."

He continued to shake my hand, talking quickly as he did so, and I was not given a chance to reply.

When the other fellows had followed Parker a few yards, Holt assumed a different style.

"You must come over to my camp some evening," he suggested. "My mates are mostly an ignorant lot, and I haven't much in common with them; but I could make a great man out of you if I had half a chance. We have so much to talk over, but I don't want these fellows here to know what I have on hand."

"Have you started your new scheme?"

"Not yet; but I am getting things in readiness. In the meantime I am doing a bit of digging; but it is only a sort of hobby. Hard work never makes money. It's brains, lad, that makes fortunes—brains, I tell you. But come on, we will see what has happened over yonder."

A young fellow with dark bushy hair was walking a few paces from us. I could not mistake him, even in the semi-darkness.

"He is with you still," I said, nodding towards Jennings.

"Yes," replied Holt, "he is the only fellow I can rely upon in this terrible hole. He has stuck to me since he came to my camp at the Grange, and will do anything for me. Mark my word, I'm going to make it worth his while."

On reaching the scene of the tragedy our eyes were again fixed upon the dead man.

"Poor Shaw," said Holt. "Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing him all day."

"We had better lift him up," Parker suggested.

"Don't be a fool," Holt retorted. "He is certain to be full of fever, and if we touch him we will soon be dead too. Let the police do their own job. If a few troopers die, it won't matter much; they can be easily spared."

"We must tell the police."

"Certainly," Holt agreed. "Jennings and I are going past the quarters presently, and we can give the information. It is not for us to be touching dead men. For all we know, the fellow may have been murdered."

The other men returned to their fires and tents, while Harry and I accompanied Holt and Jennings a part of the way to the police station. This gave me an opportunity of having further conversation with Holt, and he asked me all manner of questions about the diggings, and how we were doing. Then, when we decided to turn back, Holt pressed me to come along to his camp the next evening.

"I'll have time for a long chat," he said, "and I've got a lot of things to tell you; but remember what I told you."

Next evening, when supper was finished, I started off for Holt's camp. Being curious, I stepped over to Shaw's claim, expecting perhaps to see the dead man still there. To my surprise I found that a live man had taken his place, and that live man was Alf Jennings.

"Hullo, Sandy," he said in a cheerful voice, as he peeped up at me. "What time is it?"

"Time to knock off, long ago. Most of the fellows have finished tea."

"Well, I'll knock off too. Go over to the tent and tell them I'll be across in a minute."

Holt and his mates greeted me kindly, and at a favourable moment I made some comment about Jennings being at work in Shaw's claim.

"Yes," replied Holt, "he was very lucky; got the claim for an old song from Shaw's mate, who wanted some cash to take him to another field.

Later in the evening Holt came part of the way home with me, and during our conversation he volunteered the information that he had a great scheme on hand and wanted to let me into the secret.

"It's nice to have a chap to yarn with," remarked Holt. "Those fellows at my camp can only swear and talk about grog. I get disgusted with such conversation, and it is a real pleasure to have a proper yarn. You have more sense than all those other fellows put together—except Jennings. He is a smart lad."

Holt seemed very interested in me, and his bit of flattery didn't do me any good. Somehow, Jennings did not appeal to me. From the very beginning I disliked the fellow. He had a foul tongue, and I never felt happy in his company.

"I have a great plan," Holt continued, "but we must observe the utmost secrecy. You know what a gold rush is like. You have seen maddened men almost devouring each other and fighting like tigers for a few yards of earth; but mark my words, if my secret gets out, men will tear the flesh from my bones in their eagerness to share in the spoils."

"You may depend upon me keeping quiet," I said. "I will not breathe a word, even to my father."

"That's the spirit. Secrecy is the essence of the contract, and it will be plenty of time for your father to know when you become wealthy. Now, another point. If you see me in the daytime, give me a nod, but don't appear to be friendly. Come over and see me often, for we will have lots of things to talk about. By the way, can you read?"

"No."

"Well, you must learn. No man can get on in life unless he can read and write."

"How can I learn?" I asked.

"If you are patient and willing, I will teach you," replied Holt.

"Thank you very much," I stammered. "I have often wanted to be able to read."

"Very well, that's a bargain," said Holt. "You help me and I will help you. Perhaps if my scheme turns out well I will make you my partner."

The end of the matter was, I became a frequent visitor at Holt's camp. He started to teach me to read and write, and, being anxious to learn, I made good progress. Father was quite pleased, and encouraged me all he could.

I soon became attached to Holt; and after lessons were over I lingered at his camp while he told story after story. I never felt fully at home

with Jennings, although in many ways he was a very fascinating fellow, and often attempted to be friendly with me. His habit of jeering at every man who was prospering irritated me, and I noticed that the very sight of a policeman or the mention of one made him swear. The other men who associated with Holt kept much to themselves, and frequently disappeared when I came on the scene.

Each evening, under very strange conditions, my studies proceeded. The men around us, who had worked like beasts of burden during the day, stopped for a little relaxation. With mud-bespattered shirts, clay-soiled pants, and heavy yellow-stained boots, hundreds of digging parties gathered round their fires. Lines of smoke ascended as weary men prepared crude meals and gambled for little heaps of gold dust.

When thousands of immigrants came in from foreign countries much colour was added to the diggings. Never before, I don't suppose, was learning acquired under such strange conditions. Sometimes while struggling with the spelling of simple words we would be disturbed by the merry jingle of a French chant or the strains of a German chorus. Men of almost every race were mixed up in the general confusion. Indefatigable Chinamen worked claims abandoned by European neighbours. Differences in class were laid aside. The scholarly adventurer ranked on the same footing as the illiterate labourer. For the time being the man with the superior muscle and the best staying power was the conqueror. The man of aristocratic birth was called "swell," or "Joe," and frequently these adventurers were unfit for hard work, and were sometimes employed to light fires or do the cooking.

So in the midst of these strange happening and strange scenes I was steadily taught to read and write by the strangest teacher pupil ever had.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Convict's Story.

One night I found Holt in a talkative mood. Together with some of his companions he had been indulging in grog, and when our lessons were over and we were left to ourselves he fell into a reminiscent mood.

"I've had a strange life," he remarked, "but I suppose I brought most of my misery upon myself. When a tree is trampled on when it is young it usually grows up a crooked thing. That was the way with me. Misfortune knocked at my door, and instead of conquering misfortune, I allowed misfortune to conquer me. I could have been well off and in a comfortable home to-day had I not been a fool.

"My mother died when I was ten years old, and that was the beginning of my troubles. I was sent to a boarding school, and there treated more like a prisoner than a school boy. One of the masters hated me, and made my life a hell. I was thrashed at regular intervals, and replied by doing all the mischief I could, and so multiplied my floggings. After enduring this existence for two years I determined to run away. Creeping out one cold night, I hurried away in the darkness, and kept in hiding for several days. Then, after knowing what it was like to be desperately hungry, I obtained work in a little factory. The work was hard, and I ran away again; but this time I determined to go home. I felt that if father knew how I had been treated he would take my part.

"The old servant who had been at our home for years told me that my father had gone away six

weeks before, and that a surprise was in store for me on his return. Her remark made me feel curious; but I naturally thought that she meant that I would get a whipping. The old servant wanted to know why I had left school, so I poured out my story in her sympathetic ear. The result was that I stayed quietly at home until father returned. Then I found out the nature of the surprise. Father had married again.

"At first he threatened to send me back to school; but later he put me to work in another factory where he had an interest. From the first day I hated the place. The foreman was a bully, and kicked and punched the boys if they irritated him. When I fell asleep at work, I was aroused by the rough boot of the foreman. To make matters worse, I got no sympathy at home, for my stepmother always blamed me; so I gradually grew to hate her, and her feeling towards me was somewhat similar.

"In the factory there was a man named Burge, who was the worst companion I could have chosen. He taught me to gamble, to drink, and to steal. When I got away with money he praised me at great length. All the time I was drifting from bad to worse.

"Father was always busy; and if I could do anything to enrage my stepmother, I did it. Frequently I stole out of the house at night and visited a gambling den where Burge and his mates collected.

"One evening Burge took me down a narrow lane and brought me into a low drinking shop. Going to the back of the building, we climbed up a staircase which led to an attic room. My companion gave several knocks, and then feeling for something he seized a cord which he pulled. A man inside coughed, and Burge followed by five knocks and a cough. The door was then opened, and a voice said, 'Come in.'

"On entering I was introduced to a little wizened creature that Burge called the Captain. Around

him were various utensils, vessels and tools. A fire was burning in a kind of stove, and there was a little lamp near by. Burge and the Captain spoke for a moment in whispers and gestures, and then the Captain replied: 'All right, we will let him into the know. He may be useful, but he will have to do what we tell him.'

"The Captain then asked me a great number of questions and extracted from me all kinds of promises. Afterwards I was given my first lesson in the art of 'coining,' and when the lesson was over I was handed a few coins and given strict instructions how I was to pass them off. At the time I didn't think very much about it, and regarded the affair more in the nature of a joke. Every few days Burge brought me more coins, and when I had passed them he always demanded his share of the revenue. This went on for some time, and then Burge, instead of bringing me the coins, sent me to the Captain. I learned the trick of getting into the room, and soon became an expert at coining. But a rude awakening was coming, and it came suddenly.

"I had gone to the Captain's room one night, and we were busy with the metal, bringing out the coins in grand style, when we heard steps running up the staircase. A woman screamed, and in a few moments a stern voice demanded, 'Open this door.' The Captain looked at me in consternation, and the next minute the door was smashed in by a heavy weapon. Several armed men came in, and we soon found ourselves in prison.

"Father was informed of my arrest, and he tried hard to save me, but it was useless. We were both found guilty, and were sentenced to be transported for long terms of imprisonment.

"A few weeks later we were packed into a convict ship, and the horrors of that long voyage will remain with me till my dying day. Fever broke out on board and men died like flies. Every few days dead bodies would be thrown overboard. We were cramped down

below like sardines in a tin, and only the strongest survived the terrible ordeal. The Captain was one of the first to succumb, and was buried when we were a few weeks out from England. I was very sorry for him at the time, but I realised afterwards that he had escaped a deal of suffering. The food was bad. Water was scarce. Vermin and rats crawled over us, and we were treated worse than dogs.

"Sydney was reached at last, after five months of hell at sea. What an amazing place Port Jackson appeared after the agony we had endured. That was the year 1830. Several ships were in the harbour, and there was quite a lot of traffic about the rough streets. We were marched along a dusty road to a convict depot, and for some months I worked in a road-making gang.

"Men were flogged till the blood spurted from their backs. No beasts of burden could have been treated worse, and we were forced to carry or drag huge loads, while often tortured by thirst.

"When my gang was road-making near a station homestead in the vicinity of Goulburn I fell under the displeasure of my taskmaster, and was cruelly flogged. With blood streaming from my back, I was left in utter misery, tied to a tree. I was groaning in agony, tortured by flies, heat and thirst, when suddenly I felt water upon my lips. Looking up, I thought I saw a vision, for a beautiful young woman was bending over me and holding a cup of water to my lips. The surprise left me speechless. It seemed as though an angel was attending me. She bathed my wounds, spoke to me as though I were a wounded hero, and covered my back with soothing ointment. When she had finished she told me I would soon feel better, and then I watched her walk back towards the station homestead.

"Some days later I was again cowardly struck by our ganger. Because I tried to protect myself I was furiously hit across the face with a rough stick.

I remembered no more for some time; but when I came to myself the young lady was again attending to my wounds. There was a gash across my face, and I will carry the mark of it to my grave. She spoke kindly to me, and every day came across and adjusted the bandages. Her face has haunted me down through the years, but I never heard who she was. In that terrible place no convict suffered without receiving her help.

"Many a time in my fancy I thought the kind lady must be my mother come to me in angel form. Her smile and cheerful words seemed to promise a ray of hope. Perhaps some day I will meet her again, and I'm sure I will know her.

"At last I was taken from the gang, because I had been assigned as a servant to an up-country settler. This fellow worked me like a slave, and struck me with a stick as the humour suited him. Often my blood boiled, and I planned how I could escape. I was still only a boy, and had no chance of resisting the giant strength of the brutal settler. Several times when I had caused his particular displeasure he tied me to a cart wheel and flogged me with a rope. This settler had several other convicts assigned to him, but they were usually working a good distance from me. For over a year I endured this brutality, but I was growing all the time, and my determination to have my revenge was also growing.

"The day came at last when we were all working at the cattle yards. I made some slight mistake, and the settler flew into a fearful fury and ran at me with a drafting stick. I was jammed in a corner of the yard and could not escape. Quick as lightning I picked up a stone and, throwing it full force, struck him between the eyes. He fell like a log, and I made sure he was dead. In my desperation I appealed to my fellow convicts to make for the bush. A free man in the employ of the settler tried to dissuade us, but we overpowered him, stole some horses, food and

firearms, and rode away. Our food was soon exhausted. The horses were knocked up, and we were reduced to desperate straits. Two of my mates gave themselves up, but I and another wild fellow kept to the bush. Each day our plight grew worse. Sometimes we would hide ourselves near a shepherd's hut, and when the man was away out in the bush we stole his provisions.

"At last we fell in with some blacks who treated us very kindly for a few months; but then my mate foolishly quarrelled with them over a lubra, and he was speared for his folly. He died an agonising death. After this occurrence I did not trust the blacks, so one dark night I crept out of their camp and preferred to be alone.

"Another month of misery followed. I stole food wherever possible from huts and homesteads, but often was reduced almost to starvation. By this time I suppose I was given up as dead. Keeping well concealed by daylight, I was able to spy upon homesteads and do the robbing by night. Fortunately, I had been able to steal some clothes, with the result that my convict appearance was gone.

"Falling in one day with drovers who were taking cattle to a station beyond Goulburn, I was allowed to accompany them. Proving to be useful, they were kind to me, and promised to get me a job at the station where the cattle were to be delivered. They were true to their word, and I became a shepherd at a very lonely hut. My experience with the blacks helped me, as I was frequently visited by natives.

"Some years afterwards I went across the Murray into Victoria, and with a number of men took sheep to the Wimmera country. There you visited me with that policeman friend of yours, and saw gold nuggets I had picked up here and there during my wanderings. Let me tell you I knew gold would be discovered, and, what is more, I know a place over Sydney-side where a heap of gold will yet be got, but

I am keeping it quiet. Anyhow, I have a better method of getting gold than digging it up. I know how to put chemicals together so that by using a small quantity of gold you make a piece ten times its size. That is the secret I am going to give you presently. We will manufacture the gold, and our mates here will pretend to dig it up."

"That would be swindling," I remarked.

"Not at all, lad. The Government will buy our gold. It will be real gold, and as good as any here—although a trifle lighter."

I did not know what to make of Holt and his proposal, but I felt very sorry for him. He must have suffered terribly for the sins of his boyhood. Yet he appeared to be a gentleman in spite of himself, and he held me as if in a spell.

"What I have said must not be told to another living soul," Holt remarked.

"I understand."

"I'm sure you do. That is why I have told you so much. I have tried to go straight for years now, and I don't think a policeman in Australia would recognise me; but somehow I always try to keep away from them. The crowds of strangers on the goldfields will keep the troopers busy, and every week will make my position safer; but it is time we got to bed. It must be nearly midnight. Come over again to-morrow; but in the meantime not a word, remember, to anyone."

CHAPTER XV.

New Friends.

As the year 1852 drew to a close many sober people thought that a severe famine was imminent. The shearing season came, but there were no shearers to shear the sheep. Farmers realised that there would be no reapers to harvest the crops, and on all sides I heard people dismally prophesying that thousands of poor people would starve.

Some squatters visited the diggings in the hope of luring away unsuccessful miners, but men who were prospering could not be enticed from their claims even by the promise of extravagant rewards. Even those who were not successful could seldom be tempted away. Usually they were so maddened by the gold that they were not prepared to return to their old jobs.

I remember one beautiful morning I was standing outside our claim with half a dozen other fellows when a squatter, with a boy by his side, strolled towards us. Both were very well dressed in riding habit, and I have no doubt that the squatter took us for a body of idlers. He was well built, with well-trimmed whiskers and large sparkling eyes. His erect and smart walk attracted our attention at once.

Stepping briskly up to us he announced that he wished to engage men for the shearing. We all listened patiently to what he had to say, and then Fullerton replied with a knowing wink that we would undertake the job on our own terms.

"Very well," said the squatter as he adopted a

haughty attitude. "Let me know what your terms are."

I saw Fullerton wink at father, but he replied very seriously that we were prepared to shear the sheep for the wool upon their backs.

The squatter turned away in disgust, but on being recalled by Fullerton he quickly obeyed the summons, supposing, perhaps, that our spokesman had thought better of his offer. For a moment he stood confronting us in anticipation. Then Fullerton, coolly thrusting a bank note into a camp fire until it blazed, proceeded to light his pipe with the same. The ex-policeman with a knowing leer remarked that his mates were in need of a cook, and were prepared to offer him a pound a day if he would condescend to accept the office.

"We notice," continued Fullerton, "that you have a boy with you, so you will be set up for an off-sider."

To my surprise the squatter thanked Fullerton for his kindly consideration, and then very quietly expressed the opinion that the country was going to the dogs. The next moment he had strutted off to continue his search for shearers.

The men all laughed, but I felt very sorry for the disappointed sheep owner. As they moved away the boy gave me a searching glance. He was a year or two younger than myself, and somehow I was instantly attracted to him. His well-dressed appearance, as he walked by his equally well-dressed father, was a striking contrast to the rough scenes around him.

Probably it was one of those singular acts of Providence that later in the day an accident befell me. I was hurrying to one of the stores, and in my haste, instead of climbing through a crude fence, I made a wild leap, hoping to clear the obstruction in one bound. Unfortunately—or perhaps I should say very fortunately—my foot caught in one of the poles and I fell heavily to earth. The shock must have stunned me, for when I came to my senses I

saw a kindly face peeping into mine, and somebody was rubbing dust from my torn shirt.

"What is the matter, lad?" came from a sympathetic voice.

On looking up I met the gaze of the squatter we had laughed at earlier in the day.

"What happened, boy?"

"I really don't know," I replied. "I must have had a spill."

"Never mind—you will soon be all right. There are no bones broken."

Struggling to my feet and taking a drink that the squatter offered me, I soon felt better.

"Have you got any shearers?" I suddenly asked.

He looked surprised and said, "Yes—two. Why do you ask?"

"I overheard you speaking with some men," I replied.

"Can you shear?" he inquired bluntly.

"Not much," I said, "but I suppose I could help you a little."

"Then come along with me and I'll be glad to give you a job."

Why I made that reply I do not know, and why I considered taking a job shearing when our claim was yielding so well was another mystery. But when I look back upon my long life there are many things that I simply cannot explain. Perhaps I was still half stupid from my fall, but I have always thought that the hand of the Great Guide was in my remark.

A few minutes' explanation followed, during which I told the squatter that we were doing very well on our claims, and I would need to see what father thought about the proposal.

"Well, you see your father and meet me here in an hour's time. Can you ride?"

The question, of course, made me smile, and I proceeded to relate some of my qualifications in that direction.

"You will do," replied the squatter. "Get your

father's consent and come along with me for a few weeks. It will be a Christmas holiday for you."

Father and Henderson both laughed when I returned and told them what was in my mind.

"Go by all means," was father's comment. "The diggings will not last for ever, but if we continue to prosper at the present rate we might be squatters ourselves in a few years."

Well, I decided to go and made preparations accordingly. Father thought that a spell away from the diggings would be a holiday for me.

"You will not be away more than a month at most," he said, "and a change with good food for a time is what you need, my boy."

Before the hour was up I was waiting for the squatter at the appointed place. He seemed right glad to see me, and in the course of our conversation he obtained my name, and I was informed that he was Grant, of "Gowrie Park." His son was introduced as Albert, and we were soon walking along together to what they called their camp.

About a mile from the diggings we came to a little paddock where seven horses were saddled. Four men were waiting, and as they nodded respectfully to Mr. Grant, I gathered that the squatter had succeeded in getting additional recruits. One man was a regular station hand from "Gowrie Park," but the other three were prospective shearers.

We were soon trotting along like a cavalry regiment with Mr. Grant in the lead. I rode beside Albert, and we were soon chatting away like old pals. I learned that Gowrie Park was situated about twenty miles north-west of Ballarat, and there were some thousands of sheep to shear. Not being heavily loaded we were able to trot along a good deal of the way.

Before reaching Clunes we took a track leading westward, and reached the homestead at dusk. The house was built of blue stone, and the sheds and stables were also roughly constructed of stone with

bark and wood covering the roofs. Nestling among stunted gums that were growing around a lagoon, the homestead had a pleasing situation.

I camped in one of the available huts with another chap, and early next morning shearing operations commenced. I was, of course, very slow with the blades, for I had only shorn a few sheep here and there, and my back soon ached as I crouched over the animals. Mr. Grant frequently took pity on me and gave me a turn at drafting, mustering, or picking up the wool. Days quickly went by, and it was a real holiday for me. Albert and I became fast friends, and during spare hours we went for rides together. He was a bright boy of fourteen or fifteen years. He was of sturdy build, with fair hair and blue eyes. Having been to school in Melbourne he was much better educated than other boys I had met.

Sometimes I was taken over to the homestead, and in a week or two I found myself being treated more like a visitor than a shearer. Mrs. Grant was kindness personified, and seemed to know instinctively what was going on all over the station. There were five children in the family—three boys and two girls. Albert and George were the eldest, and the youngest was Peter. Between them were two girls, Margaret and Maud. I was soon at home with all the children, and was regarded somewhat in the light of a hero because I always carried some gold nuggets in my pockets.

When Albert found I was not frightened of horses he brought the wildest brumbies for me to ride, and when I succeeded in keeping in the saddle during a buckjumping bout I was always sure of a word of commendation from Mr. Grant. So hard work and pleasure were mixed, and in pleasant surroundings I experienced one of the brightest times in my boyhood days.

A week before Christmas the shearing was finished, and the wool was ready to be taken by

bullock teams to the coast. Albert and I were both very sad at the thought of parting, and I would easily have forgotten about the diggings if those happy days could only have gone on for ever.

Reluctantly I said farewell to all at Gowrie Park, and received the warmest invitations to come back again whenever I wanted a change from the diggings. We were taken back to Ballarat in much the same style as we had left it. On the journey Albert vowed he would come and see me some time, and perhaps try his hand at digging. We parted the best of friends, hoping that we would soon meet again.

CHAPTER XVI.

Strange Happenings.

Father was glad to have me back, for in a dozen ways I was useful on the claims. I soon found my way round to Holt's camp, and gave him a detailed account of my experiences. He seemed very interested in Gowrie Park, and asked hundreds of questions about the people on the station. I was surprised that he should want to know the ages of the children, and how long they had been at Gowrie Park. He even wanted a minute description of Mr. and Mrs. Grant. Of course, I was pleased that he was so interested, and gladly gave all the information I could.

In a casual style Holt informed me that his scheme was progressing by leaps and bounds. What he called his "chemical formula" had given results far beyond his expectations, and in the course of a few months his claim would yield dazzling results. Of course, I was wildly excited, and wanted to know more. Accordingly he showed me a piece of gold, and asked if I could distinguish it from any of the nuggets I had unearthed. I confessed that I could not.

"Very well," said Holt, "you take that piece and hand it on to the gold buyer. Don't tell him that it is manufactured gold, but see if he will pass it. If he does, you should be convinced that my secret is worth having."

Next day I acted as requested, and the gold buyer did not hesitate for a moment. This satisfied me that Holt had made a great discovery. So I had

now another reason for keeping on friendly terms with the ex-convict.

My education steadily proceeded, and I was given many additional opportunities of testing out what Holt called "the new gold." I tried the metal on bankers and different gold buyers, but the result was always the same. It was not questioned anywhere, and when I seemed doubtful on one occasion the buyer put the metal through his usual process and then told me to bring along as much of the same stuff as I could dig up.

At Christmas we gave up, for a little time, our desperate search for gold. Some diggers, who had firearms, went out shooting. Others gathered round the grog shanties and celebrated the festive season by getting drunk. Those who were not on paying gold worked on, hoping to catch up to their more successful neighbours. We went for a long walk away to the west, as father was anxious to see the country in that direction. He often spoke of giving up mining and of going back to the land, and as he now had a considerable sum of money saved he was looking forward to the day when he would have a farm or a station of his own.

A few weeks after Christmas, from various observations I had made, I concluded that Holt was able to obtain as much gold as he wanted. I begged him to let me into the secret, and after extracting all sorts of vows from me, he promised to do so. I was informed that a party was going out to the "factory" a week later, and arrangements were made for me to be in the company. In the most impressive manner Holt demanded secrecy. I was not to breathe a word to another living soul. In my imagination I tried to picture the heaps of gold and the surprise that was in store for father when he realised what riches I possessed.

It seemed a lifetime waiting for the appointed hour, but at last the day arrived. It was agreed that we would move out of camp shortly after night-

fall. Holt was anxious that not a soul should see us leave. Three men were to remain and continue digging operations, giving a semblance of work as usual. As we were likely to be away for several days, I told father that I was going to prospect a valley some miles off with a digger who had located a likely spot. He offered no objection to my going, so the way was now clear.

On the appointed evening I had a few things packed up, and was nearly ready to leave, when an unexpected event intervened. How true it is that the greatest events of life hang upon slender threads. My long career amid many dangers has convinced me that there is a Divinity that shapes our ends, and at the destiny shaping moment the all-wise God in marvellous ways directs His people. Our plans are often broken; but God has a better plan.

I was almost ready to leave when father took desperately ill. Henderson thought he must be suffering from cramp; but he soon lapsed into unconsciousness. Fullerton hurried for a doctor, and when the doctor arrived he found father suffering from ptomaïne poisoning. His condition was very serious, and we all experienced a desperate night, but towards morning he showed a decided improvement. All day I stayed with him, and towards evening I suddenly realised that I had disappointed Holt.

When father fell into a deep sleep I hurried away to the camp of my teacher to explain why I had been detained. As I expected, I found that he was still away, and the men left at the camp could give me no indication when he would return, or where he had gone. I was obliged to return without any information, and I confess I was bitterly disappointed.

Next morning, while I was giving father his breakfast, Fullerton came into our tent.

"Bad news, boss," said the ex-trooper, as he sat down on my bunk.

"What has happened?"

"We have been robbed. The gold escort has been stuck up, and the scoundrels have secured the whole load.

"At a dangerous point logs were drawn across the Melbourne track, and while the troopers were trying to clear a way several were shot down and the others captured and tied up. The desperadoes were all masked, and they carried off the gold without one being identified."

Throughout the day the robbery was the only topic of conversation. Every honest digger was furious, and if any of the miscreants had fallen into the hands of the miners they would have been lynched on the spot.

With warmer weather early in '53 sickness increased. As many women and children were now appearing on the goldfields, the death rate caused by maladies was frightful. Colonial fever broke out in a virulent form and swept through the diggings. For weeks we worked in the midst of death and disease, only looking up and uncovering our heads as dead bodies in crude coffins were carried past us. With terrible suddenness fever came to the tent of the Hendersons, and four days afterwards the three youngest children were dead. The two eldest, Jim and Jean, were fortunately staying at the camp of some friends a couple of miles away in the bush, and this circumstance, perhaps, saved their lives. The Hendersons were plunged into the deepest grief, and the sad happenings left a vivid impression upon me.

Before we could recover from this blow we were plunged into further gloom by Harry Parker contracting the scourge. After a desperate struggle, lasting several weeks, Harry's life was saved; but all around us the fever took a heavy toll.

Almost a fortnight passed before I went again to seek Holt. I found that he had returned to his camp, but he received me very coldly. I tried to

explain about father's illness and the fever, but he remained unmoved.

"I thought I could trust you," he said, shaking his head, "but you have failed me badly."

We started lessons again, but Holt did not seem inclined to be bothered with me. The other men about the camp regarded me very strangely, and I concluded that they were disgusted with me because I had not kept my promise. Jennings did not appear, and I was told that he had taken up a claim on another field.

Night after night I received very cold treatment, but for a time I persisted. Holt was always restless, and often during our lessons he would go out of the tent and walk round for a few moments. Frequently he said he was too tired to teach, and after a short yarn I would go back to our own camp. I was very anxious to learn all I could, for my associations with the Grants had given me an idea of the advantages of education, and I wanted to let them see I could read.

At last the crisis came. As I approached Holt's tent one evening, a rough camp-follower, who had been drinking, demanded what I was doing prowling about their camp.

I replied that I had come to have a yarn with Holt.

"Well, you better clear out and have a yarn elsewhere."

"Leave the youngster alone," Holt called from his tent. "He is not harming you."

"Have it your own way," retored the bully, "but I wouldn't trust the kid—not an inch of him."

Later that evening Holt told me that I had better keep away from his camp for a time.

"You see, these fellows here are all very ignorant," he explained, "and they are getting very suspicious of you. Matters may come all right later, but the fact is my scheme has failed, and these fellows are very sore with me. Never mind, Sandy,

the trouble will blow over in a few weeks, and then we can be good friends again."

Naturally I felt sad, but there was nothing for it but to say good-bye.

"Cheer up, Sandy," said Holt, "we may meet again."

"I hope we do," I replied.

And we did.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Bolt from the Blue.

Walking home that night I felt very despondent. It was quite clear that Holt and his companions had turned against me, and I had not only lost my teacher, but I had lost as well all chance of possessing his secret.

Suddenly, as I turned a bend in a sheltered part of the track, a man dressed in the attire of the average digger stepped out in front of me and looked hard into my face.

"Good-night, Sandy," was his greeting.

I was delighted to see my old friend, Sergeant Wilson, but was somewhat surprised to see him without his uniform.

"How are you, sergeant?" I said joyfully. "When did you come?"

"I've been here for a few months, but I've been keeping very quiet."

"Why—have you deserted?"

Wilson laughed.

"No. I'm doing special duty, and I don't want to be seen. You seem pleased to see me."

"I am—very pleased."

"Well, I had an idea that you wouldn't want to see me."

"Whatever made you think that?"

"Because I've been watching you closely. Perhaps you know why."

"I do not."

I confess I was very surprised, and Wilson did not seem at all friendly towards me.

"Now I want to give you some serious advice,

Sandy," Wilson continued in a serious tone. "I don't want you to get into trouble; but if you are not very careful you will soon find yourself in gaol."

"I haven't done anything wrong," I replied, somewhat angrily.

"I hope you haven't; but you have been keeping company with some of the worst characters on the diggings. Now tell me, where did you go with those fellows a couple of weeks ago?"

"Nowhere."

"Now, come on, that won't do, Sandy. Make a clean breast of everything and I will stand by you. That is why I'm singling you out. I know your father and mother, and you are only a kid. I can quite see that you have been carried away by the bribes and the lies of seasoned scoundrels."

I was shocked, and again protested that I had always found Holt a good fellow, and I explained how he was teaching me to read.

"Where did you meet this fellow Holt?"

"You should know," I replied. "We met him at that hut on the trip to Swan Hill."

"Oh, I see," said Wilson. "That fellow is in the gang too; he is cunning enough to keep out of sight, apparently."

"You can have nothing against Holt," I protested.

"I have something against them all; but you will hear about that later. In the meantime I want to know exactly—exactly, mind you—where you went with Holt and his gang the last time they went bush."

"I didn't go with them at all."

"You are speaking the truth?"

"Yes, I was to have gone; but that was the night father took ill. Then the Henderson children died. I hardly left our camp for a fortnight. Father could tell you that."

"Well, where were you going with Holt that night ?"

I then gave Wilson a full account of how we came to be associated.

He asked me hundreds of questions, and he seemed convinced at last that my story was correct.

"In future," said Wilson, "keep right away from Holt and his gang. They are known scoundrels, and we have the strongest suspicions regarding them. As you have often been seen in their company, you too are under suspicion. I don't want the job of arresting you, Sandy, so take a friendly warning from me. Keep my advice to yourself, and do not recognise me if you see me about the diggings. Stick to your work and keep with your father. Good-night."

I struggled back to camp feeling sick at heart. I was angry with Wilson, for I thought he had treated me like a child. Further, I was very sore because I felt that I had practically been ordered off by Holt. Long after the others had crawled into their bunks I sat by the smouldering fire trying to think my way through the mystery. At last a feeling came to me that Wilson was right, and I began to see things differently.

In the quiet of the night, as I brooded by the fire, a small stone fell beside me. It gave me quite a fright, and then I heard my name spoken in a low voice.

"Who is there?" I asked.

"Come over here. We have a message from Holt," came a voice from behind some bushes.

"You come here," I replied—for the experiences of the day had made me nervous and suspicious.

"Very well," came the reply, "but I don't want to disturb the chaps who are asleep."

Two men immediately appeared, and I recognised them as fellows I had seen lurking about Holt's camp. They sat down beside me, and I was informed that Holt wanted to see me at once, as he had good news for me.

Probably that was one of the greatest temptations of my life. It flashed through my mind that this was my last chance of hearing of Holt's secret. Wilson could easily be wrong, and, after all, Holt had been kind to me.

"Is Holt going into the bush to-night?" I asked.

"He is leaving in an hour, so you must come at once."

"I don't want to go," I replied in a trembling voice.

"But you must. Holt thinks the world of you, and you will be very rich. Come on, it is the chance of a lifetime."

For a moment I was greatly tempted and very frightened.

"Are you coming?" inquired one of the men.

"No, I'm going to bed."

Suddenly a heavy hand was clapped over my mouth and I was told that if I spoke or moved I would be stabbed. The other man produced a piece of cord, and I had visions of being strangled. Fear made me desperate. Fortunately my right arm was free, and quickly seizing a piece of burning stick, I poked the fiery end into my assailant's face. He was compelled to release his hold, and, darting from his grasp, I rushed into the tent. Looking out, I was pleased to see the fellows making off.

For hours I lay awake wondering what I should do. Harry Parker was still very ill, and I did not wish to disturb him or father. The men were certainly bent on mischief, but at last I convinced myself that nothing could be done until morning, so I tried to fall asleep.

I dozed but dreamed and dreamed. My mind was full of Holt and the experiences of the night. Waking up, I was conscious of a burning sensation in my head. Something was wrong, for I was aching from head to foot. When morning came I knew I was very ill, and father was alarmed.

What happened during the next few weeks is not clear in my mind. I hardly know what was

dream and what was reality. I must have been desperately ill, and waking up one day out of delirium I saw my mother sitting beside me in the tent. It seemed to be only right that she should be there. Later I was told that Fullerton had ridden through to Geelong and brought her to the diggings. She could ride, so, leaving my two brothers and sister in the care of friends, she was hurried to Ballarat. A doctor had told father that my only hope lay in very careful nursing.

I was too weak to speak or move much, but I remember watching my mother as she sat near me and sewed. She wore a quaint little black and white bonnet, with strings tied under her chin. Her dress was of dark material, and seemed to be a mass of buttons and tucks and frills. She had a round face, with blue eyes, and a neatly shaped nose and chin. Her fingers were never still, and nothing escaped her notice. Mother's presence was soon felt, for our camp underwent a swift transformation. The Hendersons received comfort also, for there are a thousand little things a woman can say and do which make all the difference when a fellow is sick or a heart is sad.

Sergeant Wilson visited father when I was at my worst, and for a long time they talked together. Fullerton guessed that something was weighing heavily upon me, so with a few chosen companions he kept guard in our immediate neighborhood. Father had a string fastened to my bunk and attached to a horse bell by the camp fire. By pulling a cord I could always bring somebody into my tent.

At last the fever subsided, and I knew what was going on around me. I was awakened one night by something crawling in my tent. For a moment I thought a dog had got in and was sniffing after food. I kept perfectly still, but the crawling noise continued. Then I saw the form of a man.

"Where are you?" came a whisper from a strange voice.

I was too frightened to speak, but felt for the cord and pulled it. The bell rang out in the quietness of the night. Somebody came running with a lantern, and a figure rose up in my tent. Already Fullerton had knocked a man senseless, and as father came forward with the lantern I saw the ex-policeman spring upon the other intruder as he dashed from the tent. The light fell plainly upon the two men, and I saw that my visitor was none other than Alf Jennings. Fullerton's blood was up, and his fingers clutched his opponent's throat. Like a flash Jennings seized a knife and slashed right and left. The next instant he sprang from the ex-policeman's grasp and disappeared into the night, making pursuit hopeless.

Blood was streaming from Fullerton's arm, but he helped to bind the man he had knocked senseless.

I recognised our prisoner as one of the men who had attacked me the evening I took ill.

"Did you know the fellow who escaped?" I was asked, and was able to answer in the affirmative.

"Then we will get him in the morning," said Fullerton.

Shortly afterwards the police, led by Sergeant Wilson, arrived and took charge of the prisoner.

Wilson was a man of action, and did not believe in wasting time; so, collecting a few volunteers, they quietly surrounded Holt's camp, and at the appointed signal stormed the tents; but, alas, the birds had flown.

For some days a vigorous search was maintained but the wanted men had disappeared from the Ballarat field, and had hidden themselves among that struggling crowd that still surged between the diggings. It would have been a good thing for us and for Australia had we never heard of them again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Melbourne, 1853.

AT last I was able to leave my bunk. One morning mother surprised me with the intimation that a young visitor had called to see me. At first I had notions of Jennings, and then a bright boy appeared from behind the tent.

"Albert," I said, "you have really come."

"Yes, Sandy; but I did not expect to find you ill."

"Have you made up your mind to start digging?" Albert laughed.

"Not this time, Sandy. We are down again with cattle. There is quite a brisk demand, and a fat bullock is as valuable as a nugget. I'll be seeing you often now, as we will be bringing cattle or sheep through every week or two."

We had much to tell each other; and later in the day Albert brought his father, who insisted that I should spend a few weeks at Gowrie Park as soon as I was fit to travel. Father showed our visitors over our claims, and then, before they departed, we enjoyed a drink of tea together.

The Grants were true to their word, and a few weeks later Albert came to our camp in triumph, saying that a horse was saddled and waiting to take me to Gowrie Park.

We were soon as happy as two schoolboys, and as mother packed up for me, she gave me so much good advice about taking care of myself, that it was quite impossible for me to remember it all.

After a good meal, and laden with an ample supply of cakes for the journey, we were soon trudging away to the depot, where horses and men were waiting.

I received a great welcome at Gowrie Park, and the children had come some distance along the track to meet us.

Albert took me straight to the homestead, and Mrs. Grant showed me into a neat little room that I was to occupy during my stay on the station.

I was treated as an honoured visitor, and everything possible was done to make me happy. Albert and Margaret took me for rides and rambles over almost every part of the station. I was always hungry, and each day I felt stronger.

Margaret loved the riding excursions, and seemed perfectly at home with any sort of horse. She usually rode a beautiful black pony.

My holiday lasted three weeks, and it passed all too quickly; but our friendship was further established, and I felt that I had known the Grants all my life.

Like many other squatters, Mr. Grant was rapidly extending his operations. He had taken up more land further north, and spoke of pushing over the Murray into New South Wales.

The goldfields, which at first had threatened to ruin the pastoral industry, were now proving a blessing. The diggers needed food, and the squatters were thus provided with a big, ready market at their very doors. Fat sheep and cattle brought high prices, and successful diggers paid for their requirements with gold. Consequently, Mr. Grant saw great possibilities in the prevailing conditions, and was busy pushing his operations far afield.

Shortly after my return to Ballarat, I accompanied my parents to Geelong, where father purchased a cottage, and stayed long enough to see mother and the younger children comfortably settled. My brother Robert, who was two years my junior, had secured a position in a store, while my

youngest brother, Tom, and my sister Jean, were put to school.

Mother insisted that I should take a prolonged rest, and was not anxious for me to return immediately to the diggings. Consequently I spent a week or two trying to identify my old haunts in Geelong, and watching ships being unloaded. But, getting tired of inactivity, I seized the opportunity of accompanying some carriers who were travelling through to Melbourne.

The progress that was being made on every side filled me with amazement. Although buildings were being rushed up, many people were obliged to live in tents, while large numbers passed night and day with no roof other than the sky. Overcrowded Melbourne had an improvised suburb on the south side of the Yarra, called Canvas Town. The Government charged five shillings a week for each camp site, and in this primitive township many new chums took their first lessons in roughing it.

Having secured a lodging-place, I was settling down to enjoy the sights, and was gazing curiously into a shop full of guns when a heavy hand thumped me on the shoulder. I got quite a fright, but, looking round, I was agreeably surprised to see Ben Dawson smiling at me.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

I started to explain about the fever and Holt; but Dawson was in a hurry, and presently he interrupted me by saying: "Come on, Sandy, we can talk while we get on with the job."

Dawson always was a great man for business, and much of his success was the result of his ability to arrive at quick decisions. He was now a business man in a big way. His teams regularly traded with the goldfields, and he owned several farms, and in addition had thriving stores both in Geelong and Melbourne.

"Now you are well again, Sandy," said Dawson, in his business-like way, "I want you to take charge

of some of my ventures. They are all paying well, and I consider a man is a fool to stay on the diggings when there is so much money to be made away from them."

"We have done well," I protested. "Father must be a rich man now—and so is Henderson."

"You are among the fortunate diggers; but there are thousands who have not made wages, and many are almost destitute.

"Well, they can work for the successful men."

"Exactly; but they could also work away from the diggings and earn far more. I felt from the start that my job was to supply the diggers with what they wanted, so I buy and sell and carry, and my results are permanent. Come on, now, I've a little business along here."

Dawson guided me at last to a strange kind of market down by a wharf, which he called "Rag Fair."

"I'm after a few bargains," said Dawson. "Most gold hunters bring far too much luggage with them. They cannot pay for storage or for cartage, and they must have suitable things for the diggings. Consequently their elaborate goods are sold off at ridiculous prices. I buy up some of the best of the chests and articles.

Dawson hurried me on from one business place to another, as he bought and sold and ordered. Towards evening we were very tired and hungry, and dropped into an eating-house for a meal. We were soon confronted by a lively scene. A number of returned diggers were seated at tables, enjoying a holiday, and spending money freely. They were indulging in extravagant displays, and their wants were being attended to by gaily dressed girls. A couple of girls were trying to amuse the party with singing and dancing.

We were almost finished our meal when a party of well-dressed men entered and, after looking care-

fully at the diggers, took their places at a table only a few yards from us.

The girls at once danced attendance upon them, which greatly irritated the diggers, and caused them to make many uncomplimentary references about the newcomers.

Sensing trouble, the leader of the party stood and addressed the crowd. He explained that he was a mining engineer, and was quite ignorant of the ways of the country. If he had given offence through ignorance, he was very sorry, and, if they wished, his party would immediately retire.

In a moment there was a hush throughout the room. Men were soon busy eating again. I was amazed beyond belief, for I knew the voice only too well. For a moment my senses seemed to leave me, and I was carried back in thought to the diggings and other scenes. The speaker was none other than Holt, the ex-convict, yet he spoke in the language of a cultured gentleman. Beside him, also in immaculate dress, was Alf Jennings.

I was almost paralysed by fear, and had no opportunity of explaining to my companion.

Dawson, however, must have noticed my altered looks, for a few moments later he reached for his hat, and led the way out into the street.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Gold Escort.

When we were outside I informed Dawson that the well-dressed party in the eating house consisted of criminals.

"Quite likely," replied my companion, as he lit his pipe. "It is very difficult now-a-days to tell who is who; but why are you afraid of them?"

"I'm afraid of that fellow Jennings. He tried to kill me once, and I didn't want him to recognise me."

"Are you sure they are wanted criminals?"

"Sergeant Wilson assured me they were."

"Do you want to inform the police?"

"I wouldn't like to see Holt caught. You see, he was very good to me at Ballarat, and taught me to read. Besides, he has had a very hard life."

"Take my advice, Sandy, and forget about the fellows. You cannot catch one without the other, and I don't want to be mixed up in the affair. Probably the police are hard on their tracks now."

I felt that Dawson was right, and he soon brought the conversation back to his business plans and engagements. His enthusiasm won me over, and I agreed to many of his proposals.

"You are the best man I ever had," said Dawson, "and my firm belief is that you are only wasting your time digging for gold at Ballarat. Put your money into my business, and for the rest of your life you will have sure returns."

Dawson was a past master in the art of flattery, and he made you feel that you were the one chap in the world he cared about. He knew how to give that little bit of praise which often means so much,

and, further, he very quickly saw when praise was due. He was the very essence of honesty, but loved to make a good bargain, and was one of the keenest business men I have ever known. The diggings, of course, gave him his great opportunity, and everything he touched seemed to turn to money. He was the proud possessor of long dark whiskers and a specially long moustache, which he playfully curled as he spoke or smoked. Although not of average size, he made up for that deficiency with his keen eyes and his very alert manner. It meant much to me during the next few years that I was closely associated with that wide-awake man of business.

In due course I returned to Geelong with Dawson, and mother was quite pleased that the new arrangements would keep me out of the gold claims.

It was quite evident that I was to be given a good deal of responsibility, for my old friend went to considerable length in explaining the wide ramifications of his business. He wanted me to ride at once into the Western District and take delivery of some horses. Then he was anxious that I should keep an eye on the teams that were trading with the goldfields. Every branch of his work was expanding, and he was still planning additional ventures.

During the next few months I had many strange experiences as I made forced trips north and west. To obtain first-hand knowledge of the carrying business, I frequently accompanied teams to the goldfields. Carrying was then very profitable, and we got as much as £100 a ton for taking goods from Geelong to Ballarat. Living was very expensive, and many unsuccessful diggers were in dire need. Robbers lurked along the tracks, and prosperous looking travellers were frequently "stuck up".

Once when returning from Ballarat with two or three bullock-drays and several unlucky diggers as passengers, we were suddenly confronted by a mob of thirty Chinese trotting along in an agitated

manner. Soon we learned the cause of their discomfiture. Two horsemen had been forcing them through the bush, and they were being driven back on to the road a little ahead of us. Dogs were barking after them, and the horsemen were encouraging the dogs and enjoying the fun.

"Why are all these Chows allowed to come into the country?" inquired one of my passengers.

"They are swarming here by the thousand," remarked another, "and there will be no room for white men to stand presently."

"White men can't live beside those fellows."

"They have eyes like owls, and can pick out gold at night."

Many similar expressions were uttered by my comrades, and I had known for some time that the Chinese question was giving serious alarm.

The poor, frightened Asiatics hurried past us with their loose clothes flapping in the wind and their pigtails dangling behind them. Broad-brimmed hats almost concealed their faces, and they were chattering like monkeys.

Presently we came up to the horsemen, who made signals for us to stop.

"You can't get along this track," said one of them casually.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Yesterday's storm has made havoc along the creek. A big tree is down across the culvert, and several smaller ones block the track further on."

"We have axes," I said, "and we often have to cut a way through."

"You will get through the bush much easier," he replied. "There is a rough track, and other drays have gone that way."

Accordingly we did as we were advised, and after a hard struggle we worked our way round, and reached the track again some thirty chains ahead.

No sooner had we done so than two more horsemen were seen riding towards us. They did not take

much notice of us, and this was fortunate, for I recognised one of the riders as Alf Jennings. The sight gave me a shock, but I tried hard to keep cool.

"These chaps must have a mob of cattle in the valley," was the comment of one of my companions.

I had other thoughts and fears, which were soon to materialise. In the distance we heard the cracking of whips, and the clatter of many horses.

"Here comes a mail coach," said one of my passengers, as the vehicle swung round the bend.

"What are the police troopers doing beside it?" asked another.

"It's the gold escort," I said, as a sudden fear seized me. "There must be a trap, for they are allowing them to follow the road."

In the bottom of the valley the troopers stopped when they saw several logs across the track. Instantly shots rang out. Bushrangers hiding behind trees had opened fire upon the escort. Now we knew why we had been warned away from the valley. The outlaws had a clever trap set, and were making a desperate effort to capture the gold. Fortunately the troopers were prepared, and their guns were soon barking in reply. It was soon evident that the bushrangers had met with more resistance than they had expected, for shots rang out further back in the bush. Suddenly the two horsemen we had recently passed came galloping towards us, pursued by troopers. It was now quite clear that the bushrangers had received the worst of the encounter, and were trying to escape in different directions.

As Jennings and his mate galloped towards us, I did a plucky thing for a youngster. Feeling certain that my old enemy was concerned with the outrage, I turned the bullocks side on to block the oncoming horsemen, and then drew back behind the dray wheel. Jennings saw the move, but his blood was up, and spurring on his beast, the noble animal jumped clean over the pair of bullocks.

"Come on!" Jennings called to his mate.

But the other fellow was not so fortunate. While spurring up his horse for the plunge, a shot went off almost in my ear. One of the passengers, having secured my gun, fired at the second bushranger when he was about to jump. The man rolled from his horse like a log, while the frightened animal baulked, then turned, and galloped away.

Quickly I made an opening for the troopers, who were hot on the heels of Jennings, but the scoundrel was a good horseman, and being mounted on a splendid animal, he soon outdistanced the police.

A few moments afterwards we heard the rights of the whole affair. Probably a dozen bushrangers had made the attack, but several additional police were in the coach, all well armed. Three troopers were wounded in the first volley, but the return fire was so rapid and accurate that the outlaws were soon withdrawing. One, having been shot down, was captured, and the victorious police were in pursuit. Seeing Jennings and the other horseman ahead firing, several troopers charged towards them, with the result already described.

Going down into the valley we found wounded men and horses all around. I recognised the captured man as one of the fellows who associated with Holt. He was in a bad way, and the sight of blood streaming from his mouth made me feel faint. The other wounded man was dead before anything could be done for him.

It took the police a little time to patch up their wounded men and horses, and ask us all manner of questions. The two bushrangers—one living and one dead—were placed inside the coach, and when the track was cleared the escort was ready to move on.

"We gave them a nasty shock that time," commented the sergeant. "They will not be so daring for a while; but I wish we had got their leader. I'm sure he is wounded, for I fired twice at him."

"You really saw him?" said another trooper.

"Positive! I know Holt too well to make a mistake. His face was covered, but I know his walk and the way he moves his arms. He may fool greenhorns in Melbourne with his dandy ways, and he may fool grog-muddled diggers; but when he comes near Jack Hood, depend upon it, I will spot him."

Naturally I got something of a rude shock to find that my one-time friend, Holt, was the leader of a desperate gang of criminals. Suddenly a flood of light was thrown upon his gold-making discovery. So this was the vaunted scientific process—stealing the gold by force of arms, and shooting down innocent men. How easily had I been deceived by a plausible scoundrel. Doubtless Holt was scheming all the time to entangle me in his net, make me a law-breaker, and use me as a pawn in his game. Perhaps, by a slight alteration of events, I might have been a fugitive galloping along by the side of Jennings. Truly a veritable Divinity must have hedged me that night when father took ill, for had I gone with Holt he would not have led me to a secret way of making gold, but to a way of stealing it. Like a flash I remembered that the day following father's illness, the great gold escort robbery had taken place, and there was little doubt that Holt was mixed up with it.

"There is a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we will."

Yet I owed much to Holt, and even after so many years I cannot think of him without a touch of sadness. Many a time, in lonely places, I have thought kindly of him because he taught me to read.

Jennings escaped, and I lived to rue the day when my digger passenger shot the wrong man.

CHAPTER XX.

The Miner's Right

ACTING on the advice of Dawson, I put money into some of his ventures, and most of these speculations brought me good returns in the years to come.

Dawson was far-sighted enough to buy up many allotments around Melbourne and Geelong, and he persuaded me to secure some. Hundreds of blocks were being sold at that time, and many of the new owners were diggers who roamed about the country. Some of them died, or were completely lost sight of, and the blocks were never claimed.

My work frequently brought me to the diggings, and I was able to keep in touch with my old companions. Having introduced Dawson to Mr. Grant, the two men planned to open a number of butcher shops for the goldfields. By this means the squatter had a regular market for his fat animals, and was able to keep a stream of cattle moving towards the diggings. This undertaking meant additional duties for me, as I frequently assisted in droving operations. Dawson could not be everywhere, and each month he entrusted me with additional responsibilities.

For me there was one pleasing part about those droving operations. I had many opportunities of visiting Gowrie Park, which became almost a second home for me. From his own stations Mr. Grant was not able to maintain the regular supply of fat animals, with the result that Albert and I were entrusted with numerous buying expeditions.

While I was frequently affected by the prevailing gold fever, and sometimes yearned to be back on a claim, father continually advised me to seize the many opportunities that were offering away from the diggings. He was quite sincere in his advice, and soon acted upon it himself. Taking up land in the vicinity of Learmonth, he established himself as one of the early Ballarat farmers.

Henderson, with his family, kept to the diggings, and his camp became our regular meeting place. I had almost grown up with Jim and Jean, and they were like brother and sister to me. We had roamed about the diggings together, and had always enjoyed what fun was going. Now Albert Grant was frequently in our company, for, through me, he had come to know the Hendersons, and never failed to visit them when he came to Ballarat.

The picturesque life on the diggings was always a joy to us, and Jean especially was interested in the bright costumes worn by some of the foreign immigrants. The appearance of anything like fine manners or swell clothes instantly brought forth good-humoured barracking. New chums frequently presented themselves on the diggings clothed in London or Paris costumes, and were usually welcomed with noisy merriment, and amidst ironical cheers were at once named "Joeys."

One day when we were out strolling we noticed a crowd gathering beside a tent. Coming nearer we found that the police were making a raid on one of the numerous sly grog shanties, and consequently the crowd had gathered to see the fun. When the illicit decoctions had been placed outside, the officer in charge demanded:

"Who is the owner of this tent?"

The question fell on a silent assembly.

"Very well," said the officer, "seeing this property has no owner, I'll quickly show you what I'll do with it."

Seizing a pick, he knocked a hole in the top of

the cask, and then dipping a small vessel into the liquor, he soused the tent inside and out.

"What a waste of grog," came from a spectator.

"What a lovely smell," commented another.

The officer applied a match, and soon the tent was a blazing mass. Smothered imprecations came from the crowd, and suddenly a gun went off. Evidently the heat had caused it to explode, and the crowd, thinking that further explosions might follow, took the hint and quickly dispersed.

Whenever an opportunity presented itself I visited father on his farm. He took kindly to the land, and his savings from the diggings gave him a very good start. When he had a rough home built, I helped to bring mother and the rest of the family to Learmonth.

In moving among the diggers as I did, both on the roads and at the workings, I could feel that there was a very serious undercurrent of discontent. The monthly payment of the licence fee was a constant source of irritation. The tax had been imposed under the impression that every man who went to the gold-fields picked up a fortune; but such an idea was utterly erroneous. A large proportion of the diggers earned much less than a labourer's wage.

The Government, by claiming that all gold in natural deposits belonged to the Crown, adopted the policy of granting licences to diggers. For the first few years the rate of payment was thirty shillings a month, and many men earned so little that there was no recourse but to evade payment. Frequently police officers displayed little tact in collecting the licence fees, with the result that matters drifted from bad to worse.

The maintenance of order in the mining districts was almost impossible. The diggings were scattered, and few officials were available to keep in check the bands of lawless men who flocked to the gold-fields. The difficulties of the Government were greatly increased by the fact that swarms of diggers

were rushing from place to place. Officials no sooner got stationed in a district when the men swarmed away to a new field.

At Ballarat, probably one-fifth of the diggers systematically paid no fees, and the police devoted two or three days a week to what was called "digger hunting."

One day I found myself an unwilling spectator of one of these police raids. As the troopers came on, shouts of "Joe! Joe! Joe!" resounded on all sides. There was a wild scramble for the neighbouring gullies. Diggers who had licences lowered their mates, who were without them.

A smart fellow, closely followed by the police, made a game effort to get away, and leaped across planks and holes. Mounted men tried to head him off; while hundreds of diggers hurled vile epithets. The fugitive gave a wonderful display of fleetness, and drew many of the troopers in his direction. He had almost reached some tents, when he stopped so suddenly that I thought he would be ridden down. In a few seconds he was surrounded by troopers, but, to my surprise, he coolly folded his arms and asked his pursuers why they were hunting him like a felon.

"Your licence, you scoundrel," was an officer's demand.

"Oh, is that all," said the young man, as he put his hand in his pocket and, to the disgust of the police, pulled out the required document.

Roars of laughter broke from the gathering crowd, with fresh outbursts of "Joe! Joe!"

There was constant friction between the diggers and the police, and all kinds of tricks were played on the troopers. Miners, covered with yellow mud, would act suspiciously to attract the police, and then deliberately crawl into muddy drains with the object of leading their pursuers into the muck. When they were caught they would quietly produce their digging warrants.

When unlicensed diggers were caught they were

handcuffed like felons and dealt with according to the caprice of their captors. Dissatisfaction and discontent prevailed everywhere, but the Commissioners refused to relax their obnoxious means of collecting the tax. Indignation meetings were held, and rumblings of revolt were heard on every side; yet officials persisted in harshness and absurdities. To make matters worse, the diggers who desired to do the right thing and procure licences were often obliged to travel miles, and even then were frequently kept waiting for hours at the tent of the Commissioner before any attention was given to them.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Gathering Storm

DURING the year 1854 many circumstances contributed towards the general discontent. A little tact on the part of the authorities would have saved the situation; but the diggers felt on every hand that they were being unjustly treated. Rumours circulated that the Commissioners were employing ex-convicts and other rascals as informers. Disgruntled diggers believed that doubtful characters were ready to swear to anything at the official's bidding. Wild talk was heard from fiery orators wherever discontented diggers gathered. Men of different nationalities were forming separate societies, while on almost every claim the possibility of open rebellion was freely discussed. The disturbed state of affairs caused many excitable fellows to collect arms and prepare for the worst.

Early in the year Jim Henderson, working with Fullerton, took up a fresh claim some little distance from where his father and Parker were digging. This meant that when in Ballarat I often made a camp with Jim.

It was while on one of these visits, during the spring, that I found my friends complaining about the dryness of the season. Little water was flowing in the creeks, and in some places the diggers could not obtain water for gold-washing. Consequently many men were forced into idleness, which meant that they had more time on their hands to hold indignation meetings and to abuse those in authority.

As my friends were considerably hindered by the dry weather, we all agreed to walk over to

Henderson's camp and give them a little surprise. To my delight, Albert Grant was there before us, having that day brought in more mutton for the miners. By this time I was starting to suspect that Albert easily found excuses for visiting the Hendersons. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to do, because Jean was a very attractive girl. She had not received much schooling, and had had a rough life, with few opportunities, but she was bright and full of fun. She was very fair, with a rosy glow in her cheeks and a mischievous, merry sparkle in her eyes. No wonder Albert visited the Hendersons, and no wonder we frequently saw him sitting near to Jean.

We were busy exchanging news, when Harry Parker came into the camp with the intelligence that a man had been killed over at the Eureka Hotel.

"Was it an accident?" inquired Henderson.

"Most of the chaps about the hotel are saying it was murder."

"I wouldn't be surprised," remarked Fullerton. "The place has not a good name."

"Has the pub-keeper been murdered by one of his victims?" Jean asked.

"No, no; Bentley is too shrewd for that," continued Harry. "It appears that a poor drunk named Scobie wanted to get into the pub late last night, and because nobody would open the door, the drunk entertained the neighbourhood by giving Bentley a verbal reference. The pub-keeper came out not only to protect his character, but also his doors and windows, that were being vigorously battered. A crowd gathered to see the fight, which ended in Scobie's head being split open with a spade."

"You say there were fellows watching the fight," observed Fullerton.

"Yes, there were dozens about; but perhaps they were all as drunk as Scobie. Anyhow, there is a

crowd at the hotel now, and some of the wild heads are talking of lynching Bentley."

"You were wise to come away and leave the fools," said Henderson. "Let the police have a proper job for once. It will take their minds off licence hunting."

This affair for a long time disturbed the peace of Ballarat. Bentley was brought before the court and promptly acquitted.

During most of that year business undertakings kept me in the neighbourhood of Ballarat. Dawson saw to purchasing goods and dispatching the teams from Melbourne and Geelong, while I secured return carrying. For convenience I had a rough office and storeroom constructed, where all manner of goods were left until claimed. Dawson had men building additional shops, sheds and yards in the now fast-growing goldfield city. Consequently, during the stormy days of '54 I spent much of my time at Ballarat, and saw something of the riots and the fighting.

Returning to my office one day about the middle of October, I was filled with curiosity when I saw crowds of diggers in the vicinity of the Eureka Hotel. Hundreds of men were streaming in that direction from every part of the field, and, naturally, I wanted to know what all the stir was about. A few moments later I found myself in the midst of a turbulent throng, and every man seemed determined to wreak vengeance upon Bentley. Insulting remarks were being hurled at the people within the hotel, while the police and soldiers who were standing by came in for their share of banter. I never saw such a motley crowd before or since. Men belonging to nearly every race under the sun, and dressed in hundreds of different styles, poured forth invectives.

I was soon jostled among some suspicious looking fellows who had their hats pulled down over their eyes. Then, to my horror, I saw Alf. Jennings standing only a few feet from me. Pressing in

among some Frenchmen, I tried hard to keep concealed, while at the same time I wanted to keep an eye on my old enemy. Another cold shiver passed down my spine when I saw Peter Holt press up beside Jennings.

"Miserable cowards, the lot of them," I heard Holt murmur. "There's not one with enough courage to strike a blow."

"There are soldiers and police waiting," whispered Jennings.

"What are a few dozen red-coats beside this mob. We are enough to eat them. Now is the time to begin."

"Better wait a few minutes."

"Not another second," said Holt. "The temperature is well up, but they are all too cowardly to start. The powder is dry. Now for the match."

"There are troopers standing by the lamp-post."

"What of it?" snarled Holt. "Aim right at them —go on, start them up."

Jennings took a stone from his pocket, and, nodding to his companions, hurled the missile at a policeman. The stone missed the trooper, but crashed into the lamp, scattering glass in every direction.

"Good shot," said Holt. "That will start them."

It did. There was a mighty murmur of muttering men. As if moved by a sudden impulse, the mass of humanity swayed forward. Two of the policemen made a movement as though attempting to arrest the offender. The effect was electrical. From a thousand upturned faces poured roars of derision. Like a storm breaking in all its fury, the surging, turbulent crowd gave free vent to its feelings. Hundreds of men seized stones and hurled them in the direction of the police or the hotel. A veritable hail of missiles poured against the building, and in a few seconds every window was broken. Above the rattling of stones could be heard diggers calling: "At them! At them!"

All the pent-up hatred of months boiled over at that moment, and the infuriated crowd rushed at the police and swept them away as chaff. In a moment the front door of the hotel was battered to splinters, and the tumultuous crowd swept into the building breaking and pillaging. Beer was handed round and passed out to the mob. Furniture was broken, and during the confusion a digger gathered inflammable material and set the place on fire.

Soon there was a great blaze, which drew from the gravel pits most of the diggers who had stayed behind. In the general excitement some were left below, with no hope of getting up, because their mates on top had hurried off to watch the riot.

When the cry arose, "The soldiers are coming!" the diggers drew back and watched the greedy flames complete their work of destruction.

Later in the day three men were arrested, and this did not tend to calm the diggers, who continued to hold indignation meetings.

Bentley, who had escaped to the Commissioner's camp during the riot, was re-arrested, and after another trial was convicted and sentenced to three years' hard labour.

For the burning of the hotel the three men were tried in Melbourne, and each was sentenced to several months' imprisonment.

Stormy meetings followed, and the diggers demanded the release of the prisoners. Committees and leagues met day and night, while secretly many miners prepared arms and ammunition. Every day the situation grew worse, and the Ballarat diggers looked with bitter glances at the red-coats, and around their camp fires planned revolution.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Battle Eve.

APPARENTLY the Government expected a violent outbreak, for all available soldiers and police were concentrating at Ballarat. In many quarters ill-feeling manifested itself, and skirmishes between soldiers and diggers became frequent. When military detachments marched with fixed bayonets along the rough tracks they were usually greeted by cries of "Joe!" "Joe!" and sometimes clods and stones were hurled at them. At night-time huge fires were kept burning, and much noise was made, with the object of preventing the soldiers and police from obtaining rest. Monster meetings were held, and there was an abundance of violent speeches. The diggers determined, amid enthusiasm, that they would burn their miners' rights, and if any men were arrested for having no licences, the united people, under all circumstances, would defend and protect them.

Having been a digger, it was only natural that my sympathies were entirely with the miners. I often listened to the speeches, and one night, when returning from a meeting with Jim Henderson, two men, dressed as other diggers, stopped us at a quiet part of the track.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" one of the men inquired.

I knew the voice, but for the moment I could not place the man.

"Pardon this interruption, Sandy, but I have important news for you."

The speaker was Sergeant Wilson, and his com-

panion was Hood, who commanded the escort on the day of the attempted robbery.

"Why are you not in uniform?" I inquired.

"That, of course, is our business," replied Wilson. "We are on very important duty, and we do not want the miners to recognise us. However, we are risking detection so that we may give you a little advice. Several times lately we have seen you at meetings, but we hope you are not getting mixed up with any of the leagues or gangs."

" That, of course, is our business," was my reply.

"And ours too," said Wilson.

"In what way?"

"Look, Sandy," said Wilson very seriously, "you and Jim are only boys, and we want to protect you and give you good advice. There is every prospect of a big row here at Ballarat, and we want you and your mates to keep out of it."

"It will serve the police right if there is a row," I protested. "I think the miners are being unjustly treated."

"They may have a measure of right on their side," continued Wilson, "but there is a right way and a wrong way of getting grievances adjusted. The miners will probably use force, and if they do there will probably be useless bloodshed. They have not a hope of winning by the means they are adopting. Anybody can see that the men are badly led. Wild foreigners and scoundrels are the spokesmen, and the diggers are following blindly. So stick to your work, boys. Be as busy as you can all day, and go to bed at sundown. Hundreds of soldiers are on their way here, and the row will be all over in a week or two. So, good-bye, boys, and take the advice of an old friend who wishes you well."

In a moment Wilson and Hood had disappeared, and we were left with something serious to think about.

"He is right about the foreigners, anyhow," said

Jim. "I've heard many sensible chaps say the same thing."

We kept very much to ourselves for a few days, but then curiosity got the better of us, and one night we again found ourselves in the midst of a turbulent crowd. In the centre was a bonfire, and the diggers, with great enthusiasm, were throwing their licences into the flames and vowing never again to pay the Government tax. Leaders vied with each other in making wild speeches, and the diggers were lavish with roars of applause and cheers.

Then a man who appeared to be slightly lame stepped forward and was assisted to the improvised platform. He looked calmly from side to side, and raised his hand to silence the applause. His figure and gestures were strangely familiar, and even in the dim light I realised that the new speaker was Peter Holt.

"Who's this chap?" I heard several diggers inquire. I could have given the crowd some very interesting information, but somehow the ex-convict held me spellbound and almost mesmerised.

"Comrades in arms," he began, "the hour of destiny is striking, and we must be ready. The writing is on the wall, and it is visible to all those who are not mentally blind. While I am loyal to the Queen, I do not, and will not, respect her man-servants, her maid-servants, her oxen, and her asses."

The last word was delivered with an emphasis, and was received with great applause. I could scarcely believe my eyes and ears as Holt proceeded to denounce Government and officials. Over and over again the crowd yelled in approval. He had humour and eloquence, and almost with the charm of a magician he swayed his hearers as they pressed nearer to him to catch every word. From reason he turned to emotion, and for a few moments I thought his frenzy would drive the infuriated diggers to

make a mad attack upon the police and tear the officials limb from limb.

"You have suffered and I have suffered," he continued. "We all have suffered. How much longer must this agonising cry be heard? The stars are looking down and the blood of our fallen comrades is crying aloud for vengeance. We are treated as dogs and the off-scourings of humanity. We bleed, we bleed. Look!"

Quickly he threw off his coat and pulled aside his shirt, revealing the scars and wales.

"Look!" continued Holt. "See how Her Majesty's officials have treated me. They whipped me with prickly rods, bolted chains to my feet that burned away the flesh, starved me, and treated me a thousand times worse than a mad Turk would treat his dog. And why? Because I would not turn informer against my mates. And now the officials are again expecting us to be dogs. But I call upon you to show that you are men. Why should we pay a licence fee? Have we not made the country, and is it not ours? Why should we grovel and slave in the mire for gold, and then hand it over to the Government? Comrades, I appeal to you in the name of liberty and justice—Cast not your pearls before swine."

Amid applause he was helped down from the platform, and half-maddened men gathered around him and indulged in fierce hand-shaking.

While admiring Holt's eloquence, his speech convinced me that Wilson was right, and that he had given us good advice.

"We will go now," I whispered.

"Wait a minute," was Jim's reply. "There will be a lot more fun yet."

"Well, if there is, I don't want to be in it. Remember what Sergeant Wilson said, Jim. He is right, too. The diggers are being badly led by firebrands and men of doubtful character. That fellow who has just spoken is a leader of bushrangers.

What interest has he in the diggers or in the colony? He is more interested in robbing gold escorts."

I could see that many of the diggers were only anxious to pick up fortunes and get away with them. The foreign element was large, and was drawn from all the corners of the earth. Further, it was easily seen that a large portion of the foreign population was hostile to anything British, and at the critical hour it was chiefly that section that got control of affairs.

On the last day of November, in the face of growing discontent, there was an irritating display of the condemned practice of digger hunting. This show of force quickly brought matters to a head. When the troops were withdrawn, the miners assembled on Bakery Hill, hoisted their banner, and the leaders, kneeling beneath it, swore to defend one another to the death. At this dangerous turn of events an Irishman named Peter Lalor assumed command, and preparations were made for open rebellion. Messengers were hurriedly sent to other diggings, and the insurgents hoped that in a few days the whole country would be in a blaze.

The diggers pitched their headquarters on the Eureka Lead, near the Melbourne track. About an acre of ground was roughly enclosed with slabs and limbs from trees. The frail stockade was built not merely to act as a defence, but also to serve as a screen, for behind the enclosure the militant insurgents commenced drilling and fiery orators made impassioned speeches.

Within the stockade the blue standard of the insurgents, which they called "The Southern Cross," was hoisted on a long pole, and in this flimsy stronghold the leaders proclaimed "The Republic of Victoria."

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Third of December, 1854.

WHILE the excitement was at its height there was an all-round dislocation of business, and thousands of miners were no longer following their usual occupation. The men who were inclined towards peaceful methods gathered in groups and listened to the latest bits of news. Reform League agents foraged in all directions for suitable war material. These fellows were usually very cheeky, and became abusive if their demands were not instantly granted. Consequently we lost our guns and pistols, and the levying officers left us crude receipts on behalf of the Reform League.

From a commanding position, afterwards known as "Soldier's Hill," the military officers watched the movements of the diggers. A breastwork, consisting of firewood, trusses of hay and bags of corn, was thrown up around the principal buildings of the camp, and for security the women and children were placed in a specially protected store.

During the disturbed state of the country I spent much of my time with Jim Henderson and Fullerton, and I frequently camped with them.

On the evening of Saturday, December the second, we had gone for a long walk. Passing not far from the stockade we noticed that the scene presented a quieter appearance than it had done for some days. The blue flag fluttered overhead, but the insurgents, for the most part, were resting. Parties were moving off in various directions to collect additional food and firearms, while those within the stockade were reposing in fancied security.

Retiring early, there was every indication of a peaceful night. For the time being the diggers were sick of meetings, and were content to rest. Shortly after midnight I was awakened by footsteps near our camp. Quietly a man put his head into the tent and whispered: "Are you there, mate?"

"Who are you?" I asked as I sat up in bed.

"I'm Tom Croft, your neighbour," came again in a soft voice. "The chows are in our claims, and working away with candles."

My mates were soon awake and sitting up in their bunks.

"What's the matter?" Fullerton asked.

"The chows have jumped my claim. Come along quickly and we will bag the rascals."

"Have you seen them?"

"I saw lights flicker from your claim and from mine, and I'm certain thieving chows are busy."

"We'll be with you in two minutes," said Fullerton, as he crawled from his bunk. "Keep very quiet, lads, and no noise."

"Have you any guns?"

"Only one old thing I managed to keep hidden away."

We were soon dressed and outside the tent. Fullerton and Croft made a few hurried arrangements, while Jim and I roused several other neighbours. Then, armed with a gun, knives and ropes, we quietly surrounded both claims and trapped the thieves, who had lowered themselves into the pits and were picking out tiny nuggets as they gleamed in the candle light.

When Fullerton gave the pre-arranged signal we made a wild dash, and called upon the Chinese to surrender. Four fellows were in one claim, and three in the other. Being taken completely by surprise, escape was impossible. Apparently they knew only a few words of English; but we made them understand that if they didn't come up we would shoot them.

The first yellow man to reach the top was a little fat fellow, who shook like a leaf in the wind.

"Search him," said Croft.

"Useless," retorted Fullerton. "These fellows will rob you while you are looking at them. They must be stripped, and we can search their clothes in the daylight."

One by one we made the fellows come up, and rough hands divested them of their flowing robes, and bound their wrists behind their backs. At last we had the seven men standing before us in the candle light, arrayed only in their pig-tails.

"I've heard of chows hiding gold in their pig-tails," somebody remarked.

"Then they must be cut off," said Fullerton.

"Of course," echoed our mates.

Our knives flashed. The Chinamen winced, and seven pig-tails were thrown at Fullerton's feet.

"Our property," was the ex-constable's comment of approval. "Now prod them along up the hill."

On the rise above our camp a big stringybark tree spread its branches, and near it we stopped.

"This will do," said Fullerton. "We will hang the wretches on that limb."

"Better not," I protested, "it's not worth it. After all, the chows have only stolen a few bits of gold."

"Greenhorn," muttered Fullerton. "I don't mean to kill them; but we will give the chows and all their race the fright of their lives. Hitch ropes round their necks."

The Chinamen started to cringe and yell, but a few blows silenced them. Soon the seven naked thieves were drawn up with halters round their necks, ready to be hung. For nearly an hour we kept the miserable wretches in suspense while we fixed ropes round the limb and made extensive preparations. Then Fullerton decided to reprieve them and substitute floggings, which were instantly carried out with ropes and sticks. At last the thieves

were let go, and amid a shower of stones the naked figures fled across the diggings.

"I vote that the clothes belong to us," said Tom Croft. "We will search them in the daylight."

"They were robbing our claims," replied Fullerton. "Therefore the clothes are ours."

"Certainly the duds are yours," came a chorus of voices.

"Thank you, boys, for your assistance," said Fullerton. "If you ever need help, let us know."

We lingered for a few moments, laughing and discussing our adventure, when we were surprised by the report of a gun. Again and again discharges rang out in the quiet morning air, followed by deafening blasts, as many muskets were fired together.

"There is a fight on," said Tom Croft. "It's over on the flat, too."

"The soldiers are attacking the stockade," Fullerton remarked, "Let us see what is happening."

Throwing clothes, pig-tails and belongings in a heap beside our tent, we dashed off as fast as we could travel. The discharging fire-arms illuminated the skyline and showed us the direction of the conflict. Diggers tumbled out of their bunks and called after to us for news. In a very short time we reached a point where we could get a glimpse of the struggle. Redcoats were close to the stockade, and were pouring a hail of lead into the rebel stronghold. Dragoons were coming up from one side, while troopers were trotting up from the other. Already the insurgents were surrounded, and were getting the worst of it. The miners outside the stockade were without arms, and the majority of them, like ourselves, were not keen to be mixed up with the business.

The military authorities had evidently picked the right moment to attack. Hundreds of rebels had left the stronghold to spend Sunday with their friends, while hundreds more had gone away some

distance, hoping to bring back abundant supplies of food. Probably at the moment of attack the stockade did not contain more than two hundred men. Consequently, only a small portion of the rebels were actually in the skirmish.

When the fire from within weakened, the red-coats charged with fixed bayonets, bounding over ropes, slabs and overturned carts. Climbing over the palisades the soldiers attacked the inner defences. We could hear the yelling and the crackling of musketry, which told us only too plainly that a bitter hand-to-hand fight was in progress. The rebel flag was torn down, and the soldiers hacked their way over the wreckage.

The job was soon done. A few diggers managed to break through and escape, but many surrendered themselves as prisoners and were collected in groups. The red-coats tore down the palisades and set fire to tents and huts within.

The engagement was soon over, and the soldiers had possession of the stockade and 125 prisoners. With the dawn these fellows were marched down the gully and retained at the soldiers' encampment.

Twenty-six diggers and four soldiers had been killed, and the bodies were collected and placed in a row. Friends came, and when the corpses were identified they were placed in rough coffins and taken away. The four dead soldiers were buried in the cemetery with military honours.

The spirit of the rebels, cowed by the loss of the stockade, was still further depressed by the arrival next day of over eight hundred well-equipped soldiers. Ballarat was placed under martial law; but such a state was more acceptable to the diggers than the previous administration. All well-disposed persons were urged to return to their ordinary occupations and to abstain from assembling in large groups.

It was soon apparent that the sympathies of the people of Victoria were powerfully roused in favour

of the diggers. Huge indignation meetings were held in Melbourne, and with the utmost enthusiasm resolutions were carried demanding an immediate settlement of the differences between the Government and the diggers.

When some of the prisoners who had been taken at Eureka were brought to trial in Melbourne, they were one by one acquitted, and each successive acquittal was greeted with ringing cheers by the crowd waiting outside the court house.

In the end the Government was compelled to give way, and some very necessary reforms were introduced. The hateful licence-fee was abolished, and in its place was issued a "miner's right," which gave the holder permission to dig for gold in any part of the colony, and at the same time qualified the bearer to vote in the election for the council.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Rebel Chief.

WHEN the excitement of the rebellion was over, life became pleasant again. With the presence of many soldiers, the peaceful miners felt a sense of security. Frequently Jim and Jean Henderson were my companions, and during the long summer evenings we enjoyed many rambles together. Albert Grant often accompanied the drovers when they brought cattle and sheep to the diggings. When he was in the neighbourhood he always sought us out, and somehow he would lag behind with Jean as our walks proceeded. We could see that a strong friendship was growing up between them, and the two young lovers had to endure much good-humoured banter, not only from me, but also from our numerous friends.

One evening as we walked, Jean did not seem to possess her usual good spirits, and before we had gone far she commenced to unburden her soul.

"Have you ever been to the Ovens River country?" she inquired.

"No, I have never been there, Jean; but I suppose I shall see it some day, because Dawson has teams trading in the north-east."

"Is it far away?"

"About two hundred miles."

"Is the country wild?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because father has made up his mind to go there."

"Has he heard of a fresh gold rush?"

"I think he has. Several of his mates are going,

and he has been very restless during the last few days."

"I hope you do not go," I said feelingly. "I will be very lonely here if you all go away and leave me."

"You will have Albert."

"If you go to the Ovens, I fancy Albert will follow you.'"

"I wish he could come, but I don't think his father would give him permission."

"Well, suppose I come instead."

"That would be splendid. And, remember, Sandy, it is a promise."

Jean and I were always good friends, and we regarded each other very much like brother and sister.

That same evening, when we returned to Henderson's camp, we found that our old friend was determined to shift. His claim was under offer to a neighbouring party, and if the transaction were completed, he would move off. The incidents of the last two months had left Henderson discontented, and, hearing of fresh diggings in the north-east of Victoria, he was very anxious, with many others, to try his fortune in a new field.

That same night, while in my shed, I had a visit from a man who called himself Dick Hooper. The hour was late, and I felt a bit suspicious of the intruder because he had come upon me very quietly, and asked if I were all alone.

"What brings you here at this time of night?" I demanded.

"Listen, mate, I have something very important to tell you. We are in desperation, and we simply must have your help."

Even by the crude light in the shed I could see that the man was very agitated, and he looked from side to side to make sure no one else was near.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Look, Sandy," continued Hooper, "you are well known to the diggers, and most of them would trust

you. You were a digger yourself, and we know that you feel for us. That's why we come to you for help."

"Well what can I do?"

"We want you to help our wounded leader, and you can do it without any risk. We are all under suspicion, and our movements are watched by dozens of Joe's. If we move out into the bush, secret agents follow us, and in the meantime poor Peter Lalor can scarcely get a bit of food to eat."

"And where is Lalor?"

"We cannot give you the exact spot, but you are aware that a large reward is offered for the arrest of our chief and several others who took a leading part in the rebellion. The police are determined to get them, but we are equally determined that they shall not be caught. Lalor is a sick man, and he is still in a critical condition. While defending the stockade he was severely wounded; but some of the pikemen covered him with slabs, and he escaped detection. After the soldiers retired he crawled out, and friends helped him away to the bush. Fortunately we were able to find a doctor, but Lalor was so badly wounded that his left arm had to be amputated. Although we have him secreted in the scrub, the police spies have been so watchful during the past few days that it has been impossible to get food to him. Now will you ride out into the bush and leave provisions at the point arranged. It will be very easy for you to get through. You are constantly riding out to the yards and meeting mobs of cattle the drovers are bringing in. It will appear to the police that you are only doing one of your usual trips."

For a long time we discussed the matter, and then, after a lot of persuasion, I undertook to deliver the foodstuffs, provided I could take Jim Henderson with me. Reluctantly Hooper agreed to this condition, but reminded me that the more who knew the whereabouts of the rebel chief, the greater the risks.

I received full instructions from Hooper, and next day I talked the plan over with Jim. The end of the matter was that late in the afternoon we carried bundles out to the drafting yards—walking right past several police officers who were known to be on the watch. Shortly after sunset we saddled horses and rode towards the appointed place.

Leaving the horses tethered in a rocky valley, we proceeded on foot. We were able to keep thoroughly concealed, as the undergrowth was dense, and for the most part we followed the course of the valley. At last we reached a fallen tree, which we recognised from Hooper's description. Here we were to be met by a digger, but if nobody appeared our task was to hide the food beside the log.

We had not been waiting long when we heard the crackling of undergrowth, as somebody moved through the bush in our direction. Presently a man appeared who gave every appearance of being a lonely propector. When he came within speaking distance he quietly asked us to direct him to "Vinegar Hill." By placing an emphasis upon the last words, we were easily able to recognise the passwords that had been given to us. In fact, it was the word used by the diggers to gain admission to the stockade.

I replied with "Vinegar Hill," and the newcomer immediately asked us to follow him. My inclination at the moment was to get away as quickly as possible, but I did not wish to appear cowardly.

"There is no danger," said our guide. "The road is clear."

We were led over a hill and then down into a deeper valley, where another man was sitting on a log awaiting our approach. This fellow had long hair and ragged clothing, with a gun hanging from his shoulder. His hat was drawn well over his face, but there was something in the way he moved his head that made me suspicious. I was conscious that

the armed man was glaring at me from under his slouch hat. Then suddenly standing up, he looked straight into my face, and I found myself confronted by Peter Holt.

"So we meet again," he said.

"Yes, I know you, in spite of your disguise," I replied.

"I've often thought of you, Sandy, and meant some day to square accounts."

"You can see we have risked our lives bringing you food," was my retort, "and I hardly think it is proper for you to speak of squaring accounts."

"Very well," said Holt, "we will let that all pass, but I once gave you the credit of playing informer."

"Evidently your friends in Ballarat know we can be trusted."

"Yes, somebody must trust you, or you wouldn't be here; but let me give you a little warning. We have as many spies as the police, and if you give any information concerning our whereabouts it will mean your certain death. Now follow me. Lalor has a message for you to take through."

We were led several chains up the valley, and brought to a shady bower which was almost entirely surrounded by bushes and wild creepers, with a little stream gurgling through the undergrowth. Holt gave a low whistle, and we noticed three men resting under a tree. Two stood to greet us, but the third man was smothered in bandages and merely sat up in his rough bunk.

"Provisions at last," was Holt's salutation. "And I think these young fellows could be trusted with that message."

The wounded man, who was indeed Lalor, the rebel chief, faced us with a pleasant smile. He was about thirty years of age, but his face bore marks of the sufferings and hardships he had endured. He spoke with a pleasing strong Irish accent, and expressed warm appreciation of our services, and then handed me a little package to pass on to Dick

Hooper. I had scarcely placed it in my pocket when two policemen suddenly appeared from behind trees and in the name of the Queen called upon us to surrender.

"Run for it," said Holt, as he levelled his gun, and, firing quickly, wounded a constable.

Several other troopers now appeared a chain or two away, and opened fire. Shot whistled around us as we obeyed Holt's call to run. Lalor sprang to his feet and disappeared in the scrub. Another man grabbed the provisions and followed his leader, while the others tried to fight a kind of rearguard action.

Jim and I could run like hares, and, dashing up the hillside we separated from the outlaws. Troopers were hard upon our tracks, but we were accustomed to the bush, and steadily gained upon our pursuers. Feeling at last quite safe, we made our way round to the horses, and lost no time in getting back to the yards. When we were safe again at camp, we vowed that never again would we risk another food carrying expedition.

Several days later Hooper paid me a further visit, bringing the intelligence that Lalor had got safely away, and in another part of the country he would be kept securely hidden until the storm blew over.

CHAPTER XXV.

How I Fell in Love with Alma.

ON a beautiful day in the autumn of 1855 the Henderson family moved away from Ballarat and started out on a long journey to the Ovens River country. During the early morning they had folded up their tents like the Arabs, and when we gathered to bid them farewell they were all ready to start. Four other diggers were also making the trip, so in all, the travellers numbered eight.

Albert Grant happened to be in with sheep, and had camped with me the previous night, to enable him to be present when our friends took their departure. Quite a crowd gathered to wish the adventurers a good journey and to give them a cheerful send-off.

The work of preparation had taken several days. Six bullocks and two drays had been secured. Henderson constructed a kind of tent over one dray, so that in wet weather Jean and her mother could be kept dry. Three bullocks were yoked to each vehicle—one in the shafts and two in the lead. The ones in the lead had yokes on them, but the animals in the shafts were harnessed like horses, but the collars were turned upside down.

Each dray was well loaded with foodstuffs, tools, tents and digging equipment. When the last bundles were packed on top and roped down, there was hearty hand-shaking all round, and amid a chorus of good wishes the long journey was started.

We all accompanied our departing friends a little way, but one by one the companions dropped out, until Albert and I alone kept up as the bullocks

plodded forward. Even Mrs. Henderson walked with the others, resolving not to ride until the drays cleared the diggings. Of course Jean and Albert walked together and I strolled along with Jim. We all tried to be cheerful, but with Mrs. Henderson and Jean tears were never far from the surface.

In this way we travelled a couple of miles, and then the time came for us also to drop out. Jean and her mother took seats in the covered dray, and the sturdy bullocks, stepping out again, carried our friends further and further from us. Sitting on a log, we watched the caravan moving away. Jean waved her handkerchief until the drays disappeared from view. Then with sad hearts we tramped back to the diggings.

Albert had said many things to Jean, and her words were still ringing in his ears. They had given each other little keep-sakes, and Albert had promised to visit the Ovens whenever his father gave him permission.

There was no need for me to say much, so I let Albert talk on and tell me what was in his heart. It did him good, I am sure, and so I learned how on the previous night the two lovers had solemnly pledged loyalty to each other.

Albert was desperately in love, and as we trudged back along the rough, dusty track I found myself listening to a running commentary.

"Hasn't she got wonderful eyes?" my friend remarked. "She can speak better with them than I can with my tongue. Don't you think she is a marvellous girl?"

"She certainly is," I agreed.

"Don't you think she is a beautiful girl?"

"I have thought so for a long time."

"You have known her for years, Sandy?"

"Yes, we were children together."

"Strange that you never fell in love with her."

"Yes, I suppose it is strange; but I have always been rambling about and, while looking for gold in

distant fields. I have missed diamonds at my feet."

"And that's how you missed falling in love with Jean."

"Probably, my mind was usually occupied in other quarters."

"Well, my mind now will always be occupied with Jean. I'm sure she will never be very far from my thoughts, and some day we will live in a big station homestead. You will come and see us, and we will all be as happy as happy can be."

Ballarat seemed very quiet without the Hendersons, and I was not sorry when Dawson visited me with many new plans for the future. Another man was put in charge of our depot at the diggings, while I was entrusted with numerous journeys of inspection. There was much to be done, for Dawson had big deals on hand, and saw many opportunities of making money. There was a continuous demand for cattle, sheep, and horses. New stations were opening up, and business was brisk.

During the next few months I paid many visits to my parents at the farm. They were prospering, and ploughed fields, green potato crops and haystacks told of my father's industry. Cattle and sheep were grazing on the hillsides, and a ready market was available for all the farmers could produce.

While on a hurried trip to Western Victoria, I chanced to meet with a squatter who had suffered a succession of misfortunes. Much of his grassland, fencing and buildings had been destroyed by fire, and he was badly in need of ready money to put his property in order again. He wanted to sell me a number of store cattle and a mob of horses. Although his offer was very tempting, I was not able to take advantage of it; but among his best horses was a beautiful upstanding bay filly with white fetlocks and a white face. I was greatly attracted by the animal, and in a half joke I asked the squatter to put a price on the mare.

"I don't want to sell her," he said. "She is very

valuable—worth several hundred pounds."

"Is she broken in?"

"Yes, fully. She has no vices of any kind; but high spirited, of course."

"Is she fast?"

"As fast as lightning."

On the spur of the moment I offered the squatter one hundred pounds for the mare; but the price didn't make him enthusiastic.

"She is worth five hundred."

"Perhaps she is; but I have to think of what she will bring in the yards, so I am offering one hundred."

We argued for nearly an hour, and the upshot was I bought the filly for one hundred and twenty pounds, and in addition I threw in the horse I was riding. The squatter was not satisfied but admitted that he must get ready money.

"What is her name?" I asked as I completed the deal.

"In keeping with the times, we named her after the battle. She responds already to Alma."

So that is how I came to possess my wonder animal—the best horse I ever owned. As I rode away from the station I was, of course, very proud of my purchase, but I wondered what father would say, and what Dawson and the Grants would say. I knew enough about a horse to know that the animal was valuable, but for a long time I maintained secrecy concerning the price I paid for Alma.

An amusing incident happened while I was riding back to Ballarat. In the vicinity of Ararat I was ordered to stop by three troopers. I suppose I was still harbouring a grudge against the police force and resented being halted so abruptly.

"Where did you get that horse?" one demanded.

"Tell me your right to know," was my reply.

"We will not waste time arguing that point. You see who we are, and we certainly want to know how you came by that horse."

"I bought and paid for her; here is the receipt."

Another trooper rode up and carefully examined the document. I was feeling very angry about being held up, when suddenly the man who was examining the receipt looked hard at me.

"Sandy, how are you?" he exclaimed.

"Mr Wilson! Fancy meeting you here."

"As I am now an inspector of police, Sandy, you are likely to meet me anywhere. Here is your receipt. You seem to have plenty of money."

"I have been doing very well, and money is rolling in."

"See and spend it wisely."

"Mr Dawson sees to that. Perhaps I paid too much for the filly, but she fairly took my eye."

"She would take the eye of any horse lover. Keep her out of the reach of bushrangers or you will find she will take their eyes too."

"I will do my best in that respect, Mr. Wilson, I've always tried to take your advice—about keeping away from crooks and out of miners' quarrels."

"I was a bit afraid for you several times lad—especially when you were mixed up with that fellow Holt. By the way, we were hard on his tracks last week, but the villain seems to have slipped out of the net again. He has that curly-headed rascal Jennings with him too."

We had a happy chat together, and on parting Wilson advised me to bolt for it if Holt or any of his gang appeared.

"Her legs will be your best protection. So let her use them."

A few weeks later, while meeting some teams on the track to Firey Creek diggings, I noticed two horsemen ahead. I was in the humour for a little sprint, so touching Alma's side with my stick, we were soon going forward at a glorious trot. The horsemen ahead were also trotting, but it only took a few minutes to bring me level with them. I was proudly giving them a greeting as I was passing,

when, to my amazement, I found myself riding beside Mr. Grant and Albert. Drawing rein, they both exclaimed at once: "Where did you get that horse?"

"Bought her in the Western District a month ago."

"Then you paid a mighty big price for her."

"Not as much as you might think. She was a bargain; and isn't she a beauty?"

Of course we had a lot to talk about, and we rapidly exchanged news until the Firey Creek settlement was reached. Here we decided to camp for the night, and so witnessed a very strange event.

About midnight I decided to walk around the horses and see if they were all safe. My attention was attracted by a murmur of voices only a few chains from me. I was surprised, for I thought we were some distance away from the diggers' camps. Hearing a subdued struggle and groans, I knew something was wrong, so hurriedly aroused my companions, and we were soon creeping in the direction of the voices. About fifty men had gathered under a gum tree, and in subdued tones were eagerly talking. In the centre group a man was bound hand and foot, with a gag across his mouth. A rope, having been fixed to the fellow's neck, was thrown over a limb above him. When we arrived sturdy fellows were commencing to hoist him up.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Grant asked a bystander.

"We are lynching this scoundrel. He was caught in the act of stealing a digger's bag, and we're going to make sure he won't trouble us any more."

By this time the fellow was suspended by the neck.

"You cannot do this," said Mr. Grant, stepping forward. "I am a justice of the peace, and in the name of the Queen I command you to let that man down."

"He is a prisoner condemned," retorted the party leader.

"Condemned by whom?"

"By all of us. He is a thief caught in the act."

"He may be; but you cannot take the law into your own hands. There is a right way and a wrong way to punish robbers. Let him down, I say."

Mr. Grant displayed great courage and firmness. Stepping into the midst of the bloodthristy mob, he warned them of their folly, and eventually persuaded the men. The wriggling and half-choking victim was lowered and allowed to fall heavily.

"Very well, mates," said the mob leader, "we will try other methods. Put the boots in boys, and kick him into pulp."

Fists and feet were soon showering blows upon the unfortunate thief; but after a further struggle Mr. Grant stood over the victim and succeeded in quieting the mob.

"Let the police deal with him," said the squatter.

"No we will save the troopers any trouble. Unloose him and let us kick the wretch out of the camp."

"Agreed, agreed," came a chorus of voices.

In a second the cords were cut, and the shower of kicks recommenced.

The thief with his released hands dragged the gag from his mouth and bounded off. It happened that he sprang past the man who held a lighted torch. For a second only I saw the robber's face, I saw the black curly hair and the expression I knew and feared. Alas, it was then too late. Jennings, the bushranger, dashed from our clutches, and with fox-like cunning disappeared into the night.

I was taken too much by surprise to say anything before the crowd, who seemed comforted by the thought that the robber must be bruised from head to foot; but when we were quiet again at our rough camp, I told Mr. Grant a little of what I knew about the man he had rescued from death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Gowrie Park.

THROUGHOUT the year 1855 my beautiful Alma carried me rapidly on a succession of journeys, and in the lonely places was my constant companion. When I first rode her to the farm at Learmonth my parents were charmed, and my younger brothers and little sister, Jean, all clamoured for a ride on the wonder horse.

Those were days of great changes and rapid progress. Thousands of people continued to pour into the colony. Fresh lands were opening up. New gold rushes continued to occur. An ever increasing number of colonists were settling on the land, while the more venturesome pioneers were pushing further and further afield. All this movement meant a rapid increase in the carrying business. Dawson more and more took me into his confidence and allowed me a larger share of the profits. Although quite young, I realised that I was steadily becoming a man of means.

In November of that year I was saddened by the news that Mr. Grant and his family were leaving Gowrie Park. Having acquired a large property across the Murray River, in the vicinity of Deniliquin, they decided to place a manager in charge at Gowrie Park, while they took up residence at the larger property.

I determined to visit my friends before they removed to New South Wales, and one evening, a few weeks before Christmas, I trotted up the path leading to the homestead. Near the stables I was greeted by Albert, George and Margaret. They had

recognised me in the distance, and ran down from the house to watch Alma trot in.

"We can't mistake you now," said Albert. "We guessed who the horseman was five minute ago."

"Doesn't she make the dust fly?" continued George.

Margaret patted Alma's nose, and exclaimed: "Isn't she a beauty!"

"She is a beauty, Margaret," I said with enthusiasm. "She is just like——." I was going to say "like you," but somehow the words didn't come.

Fortunately Margaret was so absorbed in admiration that she did not notice my stammer, but from that moment Alma had a serious rival. Like a flash I seemed to realise that Margaret was exceedingly beautiful, and that she was no longer just a little girl. She was starting to grow up, and I could no longer speak to her as I once had done. I suppose she was then only about fourteen years of age, but she was nearly as tall as her mother. Her eyes were large and blue—in fact, I thought they were very blue. Among horses and cattle she had as much courage as her brothers, and the better the horse the greater was her joy in the ride. It was easy to see that while she possessed something of the gentleness of her mother, she had also much of the daring adventuresome spirit of her father.

The time passed all too quickly, and although I felt strangely happy, I also felt very shy. Every day we went out riding. We mustered cattle and drafted sheep, and Mr. Grant told me something of the new country across the Murray. He had entered upon a big undertaking, involving many risks, but had great hopes of ultimate success. For some time he had been gathering flocks and herds that would eventually stock his new station.

Albert took me completely into his confidence. Months and months had passed by since the Hendersons had left Ballarat, and in the meantime he had only heard scraps of news. Any bits of information

I possessed were sweet morsels to him; but I did not know much more than Albert had already heard. The Hendersons had settled far up the Buckland valley, and their claims were yielding satisfactory results. Fresh interests seemed to be gathering round them, and Albert had not mentioned his love secret to anyone except me. Consequently, when we were alone, the subject of our conversation was frequently Jean Henderson.

"How long would it take to ride to the Buckland?" Albert asked one day.

"You would need about a fortnight to do it in comfort, and get back again."

"Father could not spare me for so long just now, and besides, if I took a ride into the north-east, what a lot of questions I would have to answer."

"Don't you want your parents to know?"

"They must know some day, but at present I want to keep the secret all to myself."

"Don't you think your father and mother would be pleased?"

"I don't think so. You see, they have never seen Jean, and I suppose they would think she is just some ordinary girl. No, I must keep it a secret, and you must help me to keep it, Sandy."

"You can depend on me, Albert, I will keep your secret as securely as if it were my own."

Margaret had her wish, and enjoyed many rides on Alma, and she loved to race us all back to the homestead when returning from an outing. Sometimes her mother came out, terrified by the pace at which we were racing home. Of course we always made promises not to race, but somehow Margaret easily persuaded me to change horses when she saw good ground ahead. Then in her mischievous way she would challenge all of us. Usually I had her little black pony, but he was very game, and I always roared laughing at the way he tried to keep up. Then when the sprint was over, Margaret would face about and with Alma snorting furiously she would

wait for us to come up. Alma seemed to enjoy the fun as much as we did, but probably she thought her competitors a very poor lot.

One morning Mr. Grant arranged a riding expedition across the station, and it was agreed that Margaret, Albert and I should accompany him. We started out in good style, but that day Margaret, instead of riding her black pony, was mounted on a timid young chestnut hack. She was wearing a dainty bonnet with ribbons neatly tied under her chin. Her fair hair, tied also in a pretty bow, fell gracefully across her shoulders from under the bonnet.

Mrs. Grant came down to the yards to see us off, and with a mother's thought urged us to take care. We all assured her we would be on our best behaviour, and with our good resolutions freely expressed, we sprang into the saddles.

"Now, mind," persisted Mrs. Grant, "no galloping."

"I will keep an eye upon them," was Mr. Grant's assurance.

So we rode away. But there was galloping that day, much of it, and Mr. Grant's eyes were upon us, too.

When several miles from the homestead, an emu rose ahead of us and trotted off.

"A chase," said Albert, "come on."

"Right," I called, and we dashed forward together.

Margaret sensed the fun and raced after us; but suddenly her hack got out of hand, and plunged away to the left. I was hard on the track of the emu, but, looking round, I was amazed to see Margaret in difficulties and her furious beast plunging away in another direction, jumping over logs and dashing past trees. In vain Margaret tried to steady her mount, but the animal was completely out of hand. Swinging Alma round instantly, I found that Mr. Grant and Albert were already in

pursuit; but their horses were slow, and I could see that only Alma had the slightest chance of overtaking the runaway.

Then I noticed what had escaped my eyes at first. Away on our left a mob of maddened horses were stampeding, and Margaret was being carried right into the face of the thundering cavalcade. There was not a second to be lost, for the mob consisted of at least a hundred infuriated animals, and they would bear down everything before them.

I gave Alma the reins, and the noble animal seemed to know that it was a matter of life and death. She pricked her ears and threw them back when she heard the thundering hoofs. It seemed almost hopeless that I could reach Margaret before the crash came. We were at the three corners of a triangle, with the runaway racing nearer and nearer the path of the galloping, maddened mob. I heard the roar of the thundering hoofs, and I seemed to hear the cry of a brave helpless girl. Limbs were crashing, cockatoos were screeching. Horses were tumbling and dust was flying, but on, on came the living avalanche. In the agony of that terrible moment I instinctively breathed an inward prayer and echoed it by shouting: "Come on, Alma!"

The beautiful creature needed no urging, but leaped forward, displaying her wonderful mettle. Bounding over logs, across holes and missing trees and stumps, I was literally hurled into the danger zone. Every second I gained on the runaway, but so too did the panic-stricken mob. To the left I saw a wall of maddened horses sweeping wildly upon me, and only a few yards in front was Margaret, still holding on with the courage of despair. Would I be in time?

Pressing my boots into Alma's side, she made a last wild effort, and I was plunged beside the runaway. In a second my arm had reached Margaret.

"Let go the stirrups and reins," I yelled, "and hold on for your life."

She did so, and holding her with every ounce of my strength, I dragged her across the saddle before me. Margaret clung to me and I clung to Alma, swinging her gently aside till we were securely covered by several sturdy trees. We were only just in time, for the infuriated horses thundered past, crushing shrubs and limbs. Alma snorted and pranced, while Margaret and I clung to each other. Clods, dust and sticks were showered upon us, but in a few seconds we were out of danger, although enveloped in a cloud of dust.

"You are safe now, Margaret," I said, "but it was a close shave. Step down to that log, and we will have a spell."

I drew Alma beside the fallen tree, and Margaret was soon upon the ground.

I was dismounting when Albert came up. His face was white, and he could only stare at his sister, without uttering a word. In another minute Mr. Grant was also upon the scene.

"Where is Margaret?" he called through the dust, for his daughter was hidden from view by our horses.

"She is safe," I replied.

"Thank God—thank God!" exclaimed the father as he sprang from his horse and, embracing his child, kissed her fondly.

"I didn't think you could possibly reach her in time, Sandy," he said. "From where I was it seemed that the mob crushed you both. Thank God you were riding Alma."

Margaret was still sobbing gently, but apart from a few scratches and bruises, she was unhurt. From his daughter Mr. Grant turned to me, and held me so firmly by the hand that I thought my fingers would break.

"Thank you, Sandy," he said, with a trembling voice, "you are a brave man. From the bottom of my heart I thank you, and may God reward you for your courage."

I could make no reply, but noticing that Albert was also speechless, I said: "Come on, we will bring in the runaway."

This proved to be no easy task, for we had to follow the horses a long way before we managed to cut out the saddled beast and corner him. Then we could see what had led to the breakaway. A bridle strap had broken, which allowed the bit to fall from the horse's mouth. Consequently Margaret had no chance of holding the bolting animal.

When we assembled again, Margaret had recovered her good spirits and in her roguish way remarked that the old emu had been very lucky. We mended the broken bridle, and, mounting the chestnut, I insisted that Margaret should have Alma.

Returning slowly to the homestead I soon found that I was the hero of the day. For the benefit of Mrs. Grant and the others the story was told and retold, and I must frankly admit that I was not accustomed to the type of praise I received.

Incidentally I seized the opportunity of informing my hosts that the praise was due to Alma, and I said I was now satisfied that the price I paid for her was not too much.

"And what did you pay?" Mr. Grant asked.

"One hundred and twenty pounds."

"Then you got a bargain."

That night, as the household, according to their usual custom, gathered for worship, which was led by Mr. Grant, it seemed that the squatter was strangely affected. Several times his voice broke as he thanked the Great Father of all for his protection and mercy. Then Margaret, having kissed the family good-night, suddenly leaned over me and placed a kiss on my cheek.

I was taken by surprise by this new experience, and of course looked very foolish. Yet in a mysterious way I felt that I was now more than a friend—I was a member of the family, and that thought gave me peculiar joy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Wild North-East.

FOR the next few months my movements were largely governed by the impending departure of the Grants. Our business interests, as well as our friendships were becoming more intertwined as the days passed. Naturally I was saddened by the thought that my good friends would be so much further away, and I determined to be with them as much as possible over the Christmas season.

Bullock teams, flocks of sheep, and mobs of cattle and horses had been sent on ahead. At last, early in the year 1856, I managed to be at Gowrie Park when the squatting family rode off to pastures new. Mrs. Grant was an accomplished horsewoman, and rode with Maud and Peter, while I rode with Mr. Grant and the older members of the family. Of course, Albert and Margaret tried hard to persuade me to accompany them right to Deniliquin. It was a big temptation, and my heart told me only too plainly how much I wanted to do so, but business affairs were pressing around me, and Dawson kept a big programme constantly ahead. Consequently it was with a sad heart that I dropped out of the party, but not before my friends had extracted a promise that I would visit them at the first opportunity.

On returning to Ballarat I found a difficult task awaiting me. Dawson had collected at Geelong a large mob of horses, which he asked me to drive to Albury and deliver to their new owner. The undertaking not only involved a long journey, but competent drovers were difficult to obtain, and I could see that the brunt of the work would fall on

me. However, by very good fortune I chanced to fall in with Tom Croft, who for a time owned a claim adjoining Fullerton's. Having sold his claim, he was a free man, and being a first-class bushman, he welcomed the thought of sharing adventures with me. Arrangements were soon completed, and on reaching Geelong we found that Dawson had secured three men to act as my assistants.

This undertaking not only taxed my patience, but it tested my resourcefulness. The horses were fresh, and many of them were very wild. Frequently the animals tried to break back, and as in many places there were no fences and no clear tracks, the job was very difficult.

For the first few days we were kept constantly on the qui vive, and had many a hard gallop to prevent warrigals from going their own sweet ways. At night we lit fires, and while some slept, others kept vigil.

The blacks were troublesome, and while passing through the King River country we lost a fine animal by being speared. He was on the outside of the mob, and seemed to received the full volley from the hidden tribe. Tom Croft was as daring as any bush-ranger, and, galloping in the direction of the blacks, he put them to flight by one shot from his gun. As nothing could be done for the wounded horse, we were obliged to shoot him; and I have no doubt the blackfellows returned and feasted on the carcase.

The day following we suffered another misfortune. Meeting with two horsemen during the morning, we rode along together in a friendly manner The strangers evidently knew the country well, and gave us valuable information about the station homesteads between us and Albury. They had recently visited most of the Ovens River diggings, and explained where the best tracks could be found.

While having lunch together, one of the

strangers quietly informed us that they had picked the two horses they required.

"What is the joke?" I asked.

"No joke at all," came the reply, as both men stood up and showed us loaded pistols, which they had kept closely concealed under their coats. "The fact is," the speaker continued, "we are bushrangers. So you had better take things quietly, for we mean to take our horses."

As we had put our guns aside during lunch, resistance was useless. Then a dread possessed me that they would take Alma, and I spent some very anxious moments trying to devise a plan to save her. But my fears were dispelled when one of the bushrangers said that they would be satisfied to pick the best horses out of the mob, and leave us possession of our mounts. They quickly indicated the horses they wanted, and we were ordered to run them into an improvised yard and hand them over.

During the round up I contrived to keep as far away as possible until the bushrangers disappeared. Somehow I had a suspicion that the rascals would change their minds about Alma.

Two days later we delivered the horses to their new owner, who received us in a very kindly manner, and did not seem upset about his losses. Then, being no longer limited by the pace of a mob, we decided to make a rapid dash along the valley of the Ovens River. Tom was still very interested in the diggings, and the prospect of seeing the Buckland pleased him immensely. Accordingly we instructed the other drovers to return to one of Dawson's depots in the Goulburn Valley, while we made a tour of inspection.

At the station homestead where we delivered the horses we secured a fresh supply of firearms, which made us feel comparatively safe. Having been warned that bushrangers were lurking in the mountains, we determined to keep our horses fit and our powder dry. At first we travelled over extensive

plains covered with long dry grass. Kangaroos hopped away at our approach, and at almost every billabong numbers of blacks were camped beneath spreading gum trees. Even along that remote track we passed several parties of Chinamen, and it was apparent that the yellow men were finding their way to the Buckland as well as to every other Australian goldfield. Continual enmity existed between the white men and the Asiatics, and if the Chinese ventured near to places where Europeans were working, the dogs were put after them. Somehow the poor fellows never showed fight, but if they were threatened they would run for their lives, with their pig-tails dangling behind them. When driven from one place they quietly moved on and made another camp.

Away to the south we could see the peaks of the Australian Alps, and as we pushed on we gradually left the great plains behind us. At last we came in among the foothills, and one evening, as darkness approached, we camped beside a big fire near the spot where Myrtleford now stands. In the nighttime the dark, steep sides of the surrounding hills gave the appearance of heavy storm clouds gathering.

Shortly after daylight next morning we were again on the track, for we hoped to reach the Buckland before nightfall. Following the course of the Ovens River, we wound our way along the narrow valley. Shrubs, trees and ferns were growing in great profusion, and at many points diggers were working near the river-bed. We met disappointed miners leaving the field, and enthusiastic ones arriving. Here and there the cracking of whips indicated the teamsters were struggling on with loads of supplies.

Throughout that day progress was very slow, for we were frequently called upon to assist carriers who were in difficulties. Great ruts, sharp turns, logs and tangled undergrowth made progress

difficult. On our right a prominent mountain stood out, and the sunlight glistened on its granite top. Later on I was destined to become more familiar with that peak, for it was the famous Mount Buffalo.

At last we reached the point where the Buckland gurgled down from the mountains and joined forces with the Ovens. Here we turned westward and struggled along an almost impassable track across a basin where for untold centuries the waters of the Buckland had bestowed wealthy deposits. In the cool still mountain air we could hear the rattling of hundreds of gold cradles, and we knew we were approaching the famous Buckland diggings.

Then the hills closed in again, and our horses scrambled along a narrow valley. In places the steep mountain sides came down almost into the stream, but in parts the valley widened out to several chains. In these little flats human beings of every nationality swarmed like ants. Crude huts and tents and shops were scattered about in every direction, and we knew that somewhere among that restless crowd the Hendersons were at work. How to find them was the problem, and as we rode along watching the crowd in which every being seemed to look alike, we almost despaired of locating our old friends.

Naturally I was thinking much of Albert Grant, for I had promised him that if I ever found myself in the vicinity of the Ovens, I was to search diligently and bring news of Jean Henderson. That was the final charge Albert had given me that morning when the squatting family had ridden away to their new Gowrie Park beyond the River Murray.

I inquired from police troopers, from storekeepers, from diggers and their wives, but always with the same result. Our friends were not known, and had not been seen on the diggings. Night came on, and the weary diggers lit their fires and cooked their evening meal. We too felt very tired and

hungry, and at a crude store we were fortunate in obtaining a camp for ourselves and our horses.

Next morning the storekeeper advised us to try further up the stream, as the diggings continued a mile or two beyond. After breakfast we were glad to do so, and had not gone more than a mile when we met two friendly old diggers. Asking them if they knew a man named Henderson, I was surprised by the strange reply.

"Is he an American?"

"No; he lived in Australia before the diggings broke out."

"There is a party of Americans ahead," he continued, "and one of them is named Henderson."

Then the other old fellow thought for a minute and corrected his mate. "I'm sure Henderson is not an American," he said.

"Perhaps not; but there are Americans all around him."

"Has he a son named Jim?"

"Yes," I said eagerly.

"And a daughter?"

"Yes."

"That must be the man. Go straight on. Their camp is half a mile ahead. You can't miss them."

Ten minutes later we drew up beside well-remembered tents, and, giving a well-known call, we soon brought Jean and her mother from within.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Buckland Valley.

WHEN I saw Jean Henderson standing before me, flushed with surprise, I wished again that Albert could have been my companion in travel. She gave a shriek of delight, and joy was clearly written on the faces of mother and daughter.

"Sandy!" they both exclaimed at once. "When did you come?"

"We got here last night, but couldn't find you."

"You have done well to find us as quickly as you have in this terrible place," said Mrs. Henderson.

"Don't you like the Buckland?" I quickly asked.

"How can we like it when there is nowhere to go, and nothing to see, and often a shortage of food?"

"I think there is a lot to see," I replied, laughing. "Look at those wonderful hillsides."

"If you had been looking at them as long as we have been, you would not think them wonderful," was Jean's retort.

"What is the matter with them?" I asked.

"You may think them wonderful," Jean continued, "but for months and months they have shut us in. At Ballarat we could see something, but here only steep mountain sides, and we long to know what is on the other side."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Henderson. "Buckland is a prison, and if we stay here much longer we will all be as narrow as the valley itself."

"Never mind about the valley," I suggested, "gold makes up for a lot."

"Gold isn't too plentiful now, either."

"Well, your luck will soon change now that we are here."

A few moments later we had our horses tied up, and Jean was leading us to her father's claim.

"I'm glad you are out of the confusion of the lower valley," I remarked.

"Yes, it is terrible down there," Jean replied—"hardly room to stand, so the men say. Conditions are much better up here with us. In fact, we are a very select neighborhood."

"Then you have friendly people around you?"

"Yes, we are very fortunate in that respect. A party of English and American boys are camped near us, and we have good fun when the day's work is over. They are all musicians, and we have some wonderful concerts."

"Then you are not altogether unhappy here?"

"I don't mind so much, but mother is always anxious to get back to Ballarat."

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring Albert," I quietly remarked. "The Grants are so busy with their new station that he couldn't get away."

Jean blushed slightly, and asked many questions; and I was trying to tell her some of the latest news, when Jim noticed our approach, and came forward to meet us.

We were soon a cheerful party, and in our honour work was stopped for the day. Jim took charge of the horses, finding them a comfortable yard and food. We had so much to talk about that we all seemed to be asking questions at the same time.

While we sat on logs and chatted outside Henderson's crude hut, one of the American boys, known in the neighbourhood as "Frisco," paid us a visit. He was a likeable fellow of about five and twenty, and in the friendliest possible way invited us to visit their claim.

"How about another concert to-night?" Jean inquired.

"The very idea," replied Frisco.

"Our friends like music," continued Jean, "and I have been telling them how well you all sing."

"Then it shall be a special concert to-night," said the American. "and I guess and calculate we'll have some fun."

"They are such happy fellows," Jean whispered to me when Frisco had gone. "They are always cheerful, and without them we would have died of loneliness."

"Frisco seems to be the essence of good cheer," I remarked.

"He is; but wait till you meet Harold Wood—their leader. He is a wonderful chap."

"Is he an American, too?"

"No, he is English, and a splendid horseman. They had a buck-jumping exhibition here one day, and he rode the wildest horses with the greatest ease. I know only one better horseman."

"And that is Albert," I suggested.

"No, Sandy Ross," she said, smiling.

The compliment flattered me a little; but I was determined to put in a good word for my friend.

"Albert is a wonderful horseman," I persisted.

"I know he is," Jean quietly replied, "but Harold Wood is better."

The remark did not please me, and it made me cross to hear the confident way in which Jean spoke about another young gallant. Somehow I thought it best to say no more, but determined to keep my eyes open. Naturally I found myself very anxious to meet this fellow, Harold Wood.

Later in the day we went for a stroll around a part of the Buckland diggings. Jean accompanied us, and while she was held in conversation with Tom Croft I seized the opportunity of having a talk with Jim.

"Who is this Harold Wood?" I inquired.

"He seems to be general-in-command of our American neighbours."

"But Jean says he is not American."

"I think he is like ourselves—Australian; although he is always trying to copy the Americans."

"How old is he?"

"Perhaps twenty-six years."

"Do you like him?"

"Not much. He is always skiting about what he can do, and the Americans take him at face value. He is one of those dandy fellows, always brushing his hair and dressing up. He's too polished for me."

"Jean seems to think well of him."

"She cannot see beyond him at present. He is a captivating chap, and can talk the leg off a camp-oven."

This was disquieting news, and at once I tried to think of some plan by which Albert could be brought to the Buckland. Then it occurred to me that I might score a bigger success if I managed to prevail upon the Hendersons to give up digging for gold.

On reaching the claim occupied by the Americans we received a warm welcome, and I looked keenly at the mud-covered young fellows in the hope of picking out Harold Wood. However, I was doomed to disappointment. The party, for the time being, was leaderless, as Wood had gone down the valley to transact some business, and would probably be away until next day.

"What a pity he had to go to-day," I remarked. "I've been hearing about his singing, and we will miss him at the concert to-night."

While Jean did not make any comment, I could see that she was disappointed, and her lack of conversation and interest betrayed the fact that Harold Wood was her chief attraction at the camp of the Americans. So it proved again at the concert in the evening; for Jean there was something lacking, and she did not disguise the fact.

Frisco played on a kind of accordeon, and the boys sat round and sang in parts. Sometimes it was

a bright rollicking tune, and then again we would find ourselves listening to a slow plaintive air. The sad notes echoed down the valley as if prophesying some impending gloom. The music depressed me and made me think of Albert, far away, dreaming his dreams and making his youthful plans that perhaps would never be realised.

Next day Tom and I rode down to Lower Buckland, where I hoped to meet some of Dawson's men. Fortunately several teams had recently arrived, and I was able to help in the settling up process. The result was that I found myself in possession of several hundred pounds at a time when I was not anxious to be burdened with the care of money. This fact led to a surprising result, for that very evening, while I was in bed in Jim's tent, I was awakened by a scratching noise near my pillow.

Not wanting to disturb my mates, I quietly picked up one of my boots and waited. I thought at first that a dog or an opossum was trying to get under the canvas.

Very quietly and steadily the side of the tent was lifted, and in the dull moonlight the face of a man appeared. I had been awakened out of a dream in which bushrangers had figured, and for a moment I thought Alf Jennings was crouching beside me. With all the power I possessed I brought down the heel of my boot on the intruder's face. There was a momentary gasp, then darkness, and the sound of retreating footsteps.

Tom and Jim were disturbed. I explained quickly that a man had been trying to get into the tent; but when we got outside the robber had disappeared. Fortunately my money was safe, and we agreed to keep the matter to ourselves for fear of frightening Mrs. Henderson and Jean.

Naturally this incident shook my nerves a little. I tried to persuade myself that I had only dreamt about Jennings, and that I could not have identified him in the darkness. Nevertheless I wished to

avoid further risks, and so next morning I intimated that Tom and I were starting out that day for Melbourne.

The Hendersons were greatly surprised, and Jean begged me to stay longer. After a great deal of persuasion I decided to remain a day longer, and Jean promised to come with me for a ride. It proved a memorable day.

Tom kindly offered Jean his horse, and after an early lunch we were ready to start out. I took no further risks with the money, but had it carefully strapped under my shirt. Jean led the way, and to begin with we wound in and out among the diggings of Lower Buckland. Crowds of miners were on every side. Splashing themselves with mud, and tearing up stones with their picks, they laboured as if their very lives depended upon what they did that day. Here and there groups of blackfellows looked on as if wondering why the white fellows had all gone mad. More interesting still were the groups of Chinese with their big hats and pig-tails and loose clothing.

As we rode along together Jean seemed to be quite herself again. The continued absence of Wood disappointed her greatly, and only that morning Frisco had given us the information that he had been called away to the Lower Ovens on urgent business, and did not expect to be back for two or three weeks.

Perhaps it was this news that made Jean think of Albert again. I was glad to hear her questions, and pressed home the subject as far as I dared.

At last, finding a lonely track, we turned to the left and moved up a small, thickly timbered valley. Through a gap in the trees we saw water tumbling from the top of Mount Buffalo and falling into the great gorge below.

Tying up the horses, we struck out on foot. Fern fronds surrounded us, and overhead giant gum trees spread their branches, while we walked on a carpet of moss.

There in that quiet spot we rested. Far down the valley we could hear the rattling of the cradles, and away in the distance the granite top of Mount Buffalo glistened in the sunlight. We exchanged confidences, and I told Jean how Albert still loved her and thought of her every day. Jean related many of her experiences in the Buckland, and told me how the American boys had brought brightness into their lives. I told her I thought the Americans were fine fellows, but in my opinion Albert was miles ahead of any one of them.

Jean confessed that she liked Harold Wood, but not in the same way as she cared for Albert. I pressed home the advantage, and told her all about my visits to Gowrie Park, and how the Grants had gone to live in New South Wales, and how Albert's constant inquiries were of her.

At last Jean seemed to be satisfied, and I was entrusted with a very special message to deliver to Albert at the earliest possible moment.

Our conversation was so pleasant that we did not realise how time was passing until the sun disappeared behind the mountains. We were a long way from camp; but somehow that did not matter. I had good news to take to Albert, and I would find a pretext for visiting Deniliquin.

Early the following morning, after a few final words with Jean and Jim, we commenced our long journey southward. We had not gone more than a couple of miles when a man, who had been coming towards us, suddenly left the roadway and disappeared into the scrub.

Tom and I laughed at the fellow's perplexity, thinking him a madman; but a year later that little incident came back into my mind with startling vividness. Shortly you will know the reason why.

A week later we trotted into Melbourne, after having ridden across Victoria from north to south.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In Western Victoria.

WHEN business, a few months later, took me into Northern Victoria, I seized the opportunity of making a hurried trip to Deniliquin. Albert wrote to me regularly, and I was kept well informed concerning the doings on the new station, which had been called "Allora," but since my trip to the Buckland I wanted to see my friend face to face.

Thus it was that, in the winter, Alma carried me far into the plains to the north of Bendigo, and then across the Murray River into New South Wales. By that time I was an expert bushman, and a few directions received at intervals kept me on the right track.

As I had not given my friends a hint of my approaching visit, you can imagine the surprise and excitement I caused when, one afternoon, I rode up the path to Allora homestead. I was dismounting near the stable when Albert and George came running down from the house.

"We have been expecting you," said Albert, "and I knew you would want to surprise us. What do you think of Allora?"

"Everything looks new," I remarked, "and the land is very flat."

"It will carry the sheep, though, and grow wheat too."

"Alma looks better than ever," said George, as he led my steaming animal into a crude stable built of logs and covered by a thick straw roof.

A moment or two later I was receiving a wonderful welcome inside the station house, and

was called upon to answer hundreds of questions about events in Victoria.

Albert soon made an opportunity of getting me alone, and then I had to relate in detail my experiences on the Buckland. Naturally he wanted to know more about the fellow Harold Wood, and was disappointed that I had not seen him. The message from Jean comforted him, but I found myself answering dozens of awkward questions.

"I must find some way of getting to the Buckland," Albert said.

"Yes, a trip there would satisfy you," I suggested. "You may even find Jean changed. She may not appeal to you as she did a year ago."

"Has she changed, Sandy?"

"I thought she had."

"In what way?"

"She did not seem as bright as she used to be."

"The misery of a mining camp has done that. It is no place for a girl. I must find some way of getting her out of that horrible den. Wouldn't it be great if we could persuade her father to take to the land?"

"That's the plan I have in mind, Albert."

"Couldn't we go to Buckland together some time, and between us we should be able to persuade the Hendersons to give up the life of the goldfields and live on the land?"

"Well, let me know when you can go, and I'll find a way of keeping you company."

The thought pleased Albert, and I could see he was still very much in love. Invariably when we were alone our conversation drifted back to scenes on the Buckland, and I was entrusted with all kinds of messages for Jean should I visit that part of the colony again in the near future.

My first visit to Allora was a very enjoyable experience, and was but a forerunner of many similar visits. Kangaroos were plentiful out on the plains, and we had many a wild chase after them.

Margaret had many a ride on Alma, and each day seemed to be happier than the one that went before. At last my joyous holiday came to an end; but before leaving I obtained a promise from Mr. Grant that after shearing Albert would be allowed to accompany me on one of my cross-country rides.

On the morning of my departure I was accompanied for several miles by Margaret, Albert and George. The two girls would shortly travel to Melbourne, where they were to have special schooling. Fortunately their parents were good scholars, and, assisted from time to time by tutors, the Grant family had been educated.

At last I had to ride on alone, but, looking back as Alma trotted off, I saw my friends waving handkerchiefs and hats. Then as the distance between us increased, a great glistening sheet of mirage came across the plain, and my good companions disappeared in the shimmering illusion. With a light heart, having delivered my message, and feeling very happy, I allowed Alma to step out, and we were soon dashing across the vast plain.

In the late spring of '56 I found myself once again at the Grange and was able to identify many of the scenes of my boyhood days. Owing to the exceptional demand for all kinds of horses I had hurried off to the Western District on an extensive buying expedition. Looking back now across the years I think of that journey as the turning point of my life. With the expenditure of large sums of money I came face to face with temptations I had never before confronted. Success deprived me somewhat of my sense of values and undesirable flatterers gathered round me like crows round a carcase. So I learned some bitter lessons and faced both joy and tragedy.

I had not been long in the Grange district when I met a man named McIntyre who invited me to accompany him to Portland, as he expected the arrival of a brother from the Old Land. Having

business also at that settlement, I was glad of a companion by the way. The ride proved an interesting but tragic affair.

Camping one night at a settlement called Branxholme, Mr. McIntyre complained that he was not feeling well. Next morning he did not seem improved, but we decided upon an early start. My companion's horse was flash and full of tricks, so I suggested that he should ride Alma, and I would quieten his troublesome beast. He would not hear of such an arrangement. He mounted the horse with some difficulty, but no sooner was he in the saddle than the animal reared up and rolled over heavily on its rider.

Mr. McIntyre lay motionless. He was breathing when we picked him up, but died a moment or two afterwards.

Later we buried the poor fellow as best we could, and then it remained for me to ride on to Portland and meet the ship.

Continuing my journey next day, I chanced to meet another horseman. He was an attractive, well-dressed young man of not more than thirty years of age, and was at once interested in the way Alma moved. My new companion was slightly above the average height, with grey eyes, fair hair, and short sideboards. He had a bright fascinating manner of speech, and as we trotted along he tried to find out all about me and my horse. A couple of hours passed very pleasantly, and then quite suddenly my fellow-traveller became sullen. It was my turn then to ask questions, but when I found he was was hardly answering me, I gave up trying to continue the conversation. Occasionally I gave a glance at him, but he seemed to be brooding over something that was worrying him greatly.

On reaching a hotel we stayed for lunch. I went into the dining-room and sat down before my companion came in, and the hotel-keeper asked me where I was going with Gordon.

"I was not aware of his name," I replied, "but I found him a very queer companion; one moment he was bright and happy, but the next I couldn't get a word out of him."

"That's like him," laughed the hotelkeeper, "You don't know him as well as I do. You see, he is never done writing doggerel, which some of his jockey mates imagine is poetry. When he gets a literary fit you cannot get a word out of him. I suppose he is struggling for the right word in his head."

"You say his name is Gordon?" I remarked.

"Yes, Adam Gordon. He is a bit of a jockey, a bit of a horsebreaker, a bit of a policeman, and a bit of a swell. I like him, though. We all do; but don't take him too seriously."

That was how I first met Adam Lindsay Gordon.

During the afternoon we continued our journey, and I was very pleased to find that my poetical companion had the strings of his tongue loosed once more. It so happened that we fell in with another horseman. This time I recognised the rider, and so did Gordon. He was a thick-set man, with a wealth of dark hair and neatly trimmed sideboards. He had a pleasing, intelligent face and a slight double chin gently folded over a stiff white collar and black bow tie. We were soon chatting away pleasantly to our new companion, who was none other than Edward Henty—the pathfinder of white settlement in Western Victoria. For some miles we rode together, and Alma thought it was right to assume central position. On my right was one of the founders of the colony of Victoria, and on my left was Adam Lindsay Gordon, who, in spite of the hotelkeeper's criticism, was destined to win a place in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Reaching Portland, I found that the boat had got in the day before, and the passengers' belongings were being brought ashore, and a cargo of wool was being taken aboard the vessel.

Finding McIntyre, it fell to my lot to give him the sad news of his brother's death. It was a great disappointment and shock to the bereaved man.

Next day we started on the return journey to Mount Rouse. A bullock dray conveyed the new arrivals and their belongings, while I rode alongside. On reaching Branxholme, Mr. McIntyre expressed a wish to see his brother's grave.

We all assembled at the solemn spot, and Mr. McIntyre was saying something about having a fence put round the grave when I noticed him stagger. Then, without a further word, he fell across the grave. I thought for a moment that he was overcome by grief, but when he did not move I tried to raise him. There was no response, and the poor fellow remained motionless. He had fallen dead upon his brother's grave; and I thought it strange that I should be with them both when they died.

The brothers were buried side by side, and obtaining assistance, I completed the journey with the stricken family, and left them at last in the care of relatives at Mt. Rouse.

On reaching the Grange I heard from Albert Grant that, owing to continued dry weather, he found it impossible to get away. Sheep were dying everywhere, and he could not leave his father at such a time.

There was still much for me to do in the Western District, where I remained, except for brief intervals, until the following year.

CHAPTER XXX.

Through the Buckland Riot.

TOWARDS the end of June, 1857, I visited Melbourne to confer with Dawson. I had been making some big purchases, and I wanted my opinions confirmed by my chief. During the year I had profited by many experiences, and my very success had become a danger. Being young and daring, I had frequently attended race meetings, and on several occasions experienced the joy of riding Alma to victory. I had ridden against Adam Lindsay Gordon and other notable riders of the period, and on Alma's back I found I could compete with the best horses in the Western District. Probably, as a result, I was getting conceited, and being frequently in the company of high-spirited young fellows, I was tempted to be rash in business deals. I forget exactly what had happened, but I was worried over some of my speculations, and quite suddenly I decided to ride to Melbourne and talk matters over with Dawson. This proved to be the best thing I could have done at that stage, and very soon I found myself face to face with other difficult problems which somehow brought me to my senses.

Fortunately I found Dawson at Melbourne and unburdened myself to him. He gave me a short, sharp lecture and threatened me with all kinds of ruin. Then taking up a letter from his table, he looked hard at me.

"I'm sorry you have another big trip ahead," he said. "You must go at once to the Buckland."

My face brightened up at the prospect.

"You need not be sorry for that," I replied.

"I'm a bit weary, but I'll start out this hour if you wish me to."

"Then you had better start out this very hour. I'm sorry, Sandy, dreadfully sorry, but there is bad news. I've had a letter from Jim Henderson."

"Whatever is wrong?" I murmured.

"Jean——"

"She is not dead?"

"No, Sandy, not dead; but perhaps worse than dead. She's lost."

"Lost!"

"She has disappeared — gone off with some worthless scamp."

"Does Jim give his name?"

"Yes, a fellow named Harold Wood."

Dawson handed me the letter to read. Like one in a dream I tried to follow the handwriting. Among other things I read: "We are in desperate trouble—Jean has left us. Harold Wood has taken her away, we know not where. Send word to Sandy, and get him to come at once. Mother is heartbroken, and I fear for father."

I tried to read on, but my eyes came back to the statement, "Jean has left us. Harold Wood has taken her away." The words burned into my very soul.

"Tom Croft is away at Ballarat," Dawson at length commented. "He will probably be back to-morrow; so if you care to wait, he could go with you."

"I will not wait," I said. "I must find out what has happened."

"That letter only reached me a few hours ago. Jim wrote to me because he did not know your movements. I was getting a man ready to go for you."

"Alma is footsore," I said.

"I know, Sandy; but the best horse I have will be ready for you in half an hour."

After a hasty meal I mounted my borrowed

steed and the few requirements I needed for the journey were strapped before me on the saddle.

"Don't be in a hurry to return," said Dawson, "and take fresh horses as often as you need them."

He gripped my hand warmly, and then I started off on a wild dash across Victoria. A few miles at a sharp trot carried me beyond the suburban area. Fortunately the horse was fresh, so on and on I went. I dashed past bullock teams and lonely trampers. Some called a greeting, but I could only stare ahead as the words kept rising in my mind: "Jean has left us. Harold Wood——"

Sheep and cattle galloped off at my approach. Mud and water splashed as we plunged into pools. Down I went into valleys under spreading trees, over great ruts, through rushing streams, past the homes of settlers and roadside camps, but ever onward and northward. Darkness fell, and I was obliged to travel blindly. A bitter south wind was blowing, but I was unconscious of cold or wind or pain or darkness. I remember seeing a light by the wayside at what appeared to be a public house. Obedient to the force of habit, I drew rein and rode into a yard. I had a hazy idea that somebody took my horse and of a man leading me into a room where a big fire was burning, and where food was placed before me. I could hear voices around me, but I was too tired to speak, so when the meal was finished I went to bed. During the night I struggled and tossed, and in a dream I thought I was beside a waterfall in the midst of ferns and bushes. I fancied Jean Henderson was with me, and a heavy sadness oppressed me as she spoke of her love for Harold Wood.

When I awoke I heard a crackling noise nearby. A big kitchen fire was blazing, and heavy footsteps were sounding through the house. It was morning and I was again face to face with stern reality.

Day was breaking when I once more mounted and rode on. Changing horses a couple of times, I reached the track along the Ovens on the third of

July. Next day I reached the lower waters of the Buckland and gazed across at Mt. Buffalo. Soon I was guiding the horse around claims and heaps of stones, and along rough tracks. Only an occasional digger met my view, and the whole place seemed strangely quiet. I was so occupied with my thoughts, planning what was to be done, that I scarcely realised that the diggings were almost deserted.

Slowly I became conscious of a noise away in the distance. It seemed like the roaring applause of a football crowd far up the valley. Then nearer came the rumbling as if an approaching army muttered. Shots rang out, and shrill voices called from hill to hill. Nearer, nearer came the sounds, and the muttering grew to a mighty roar. Then down the valley like an avalanche, hundreds of Chinese came running. Like bees swarming from a hive, the yellow men were swarming from their claims. Big men and small men, old and young, dashed past with pigtails and loose garments fluttering in the breeze. Companies by tens and dozens made off for their lives.

At first I was inclined to laugh; but I soon realised that something very serious was taking place. The living stream of Asiatics swelled into a mighty river, and I was caught in the tide. My horse refused to face the panic-stricken, chattering mob, and swinging round, dashed along with the fugitives. On, on came the tide of fleeing yellow men, with no possibility of checking the stream. At last, after many attempts, I got my horse under control and, taking up a position behind some trees, I watched the fearful crowd hurry by. I had no idea there were so many Chinese in Victoria, for they seemed to be coming down the valley in thousands.

I was not kept long in doubt concerning the cause of the hasty exit. Far up the valley I heard the firing of guns and the cursing and swearing of white men. The Asiatics were being driven from

the field. I knew that the feeling against the Chinese had been growing daily. Many protests against this foreign inrush had been forwarded to the authorities, and at last the diggers had become exasperated. Taking the law into their own hands and, falling upon the Chinese with sticks, stones and other weapons, they soon had the yellow men in hopeless retreat. White diggers hurried along the sides of the hills as if attempting to outflank their enemies, while from every angle volleys of stones were being hurled at the unfortunate Chinese.

At last the fugitives had all passed me, and the first wave of whites appeared. The diggers were in fighting mood, and as they hurled missiles at the retreating enemy, they accompanied the stones with such horrible invectives that I thought the very ground would open up and receive the retreating horde.

When a shower of stones fell in my direction I was greatly exercised in keeping my horse behind the trees, but in a few moments the danger passed, and the pursuit rolled down the valley. Thus it was that I chanced to be caught in the fiercest anti-Chinese riot in Victorian history.

Proceeding up the valley, I found that camps and tents formerly occupied by the yellow men were either wrecked or burnt. Many of the poor fellows had been beaten with sticks or injured with stones. With such fury had the whites fallen upon the Chinese that the latter were quickly driven off, leaving most of their belongings behind. The successful diggers, feeling that they had solved the problem of the yellow peril, jumped the claims of the Chinese and appropriated whatever tools had been left behind.

My heart beat wildly as I neared the spot where the Hendersons were encamped. I had almost gained the tents before I was recognised. Then Jim gave a shout and hurried towards me. During my long ride I had thought out all kinds of words

to say, but when I found myself confronted by the sorrow-stricken trio I suddenly became dumb. Never before had I realised how helpless I was. Words would not come, and my lips refused to move. We could only grip each other, and our hands expressed what our tongues failed to do. Mrs. Henderson was the first to find words.

"I'm so glad you have come, Sandy," she said through her tears. "You may be able to find her and bring her back."

"Whatever happened?" I asked.

"My little girl has run away," explained the heartbroken mother. "I'm sure she didn't want to go, but that fellow, Harold Wood, has such grand ways with him, he must have turned her brain."

"I will do anything for you," I said, trying to comfort her, "but first sit down and tell me all about it."

"You must have ridden through the thick of the riot," Jim suddenly remarked. "However did you manage it?"

"My horse got a fright, that was all."

"We remembered the advice your friend Wilson gave at Ballarat, and kept out of the affair."

"How did it start?"

"Nobody seems to know exactly. The ill-feeling has been growing for months, but when hundreds of additional Chinese poured in during the last week, jumping claims, breaking every mining rule, the white diggers were driven to desperation."

"I fancy the Chinese will keep away from the Buckland in future," I remarked.

"Probably," said Mr. Henderson, "but the police will not."

"Yes, this affair is bound to bring the troopers here; but you have nothing to fear. I can testify that you had no part in the riot."

"We have troubles enough without adding to them."

"You have, indeed; but I want to help you. That's why I came."

Slowly I heard the painful story. Father, mother and son told what they knew, and I was able to piece the evidence together. I learned that, with the passing of the months, Jean and Wood had become more and more attached. The Hendersons had tried to check the growing friendship, but the couple had met secretly. Then Wood suddenly made up his mind to try another field, and induced Jean to leave her parents and accompany him. She had not given the slightest hint of her intention, but one morning they found that she had gone, leaving a farewell note which told of her rash act.

"Have you consulted the Americans?" I asked.

"They don't know any more than we do. Wood quarrelled with his companions when they accused him of taking more than his share of gold. They evidently parted bad friends."

"What does Frisco think?"

"He seems genuinely sorry, and assured us that they only met Wood on the road to the Buckland. As he had a good knowledge of gold mining they were content to be guided by him, and gradually he made himself their leader."

The disturbed state of the district made it impossible to obtain additional information. The riot was the one topic of conversation, and the miners were buoyant.

The next day Frisco and his friends were back in camp, and I soon found that no love was lost between them and Harold Wood. Evidently they had been cheated and tricked by him, and they did not attempt to conceal the fact.

There seemed to me only one likely road for Wood to take, and that was down the Buckland and then along the Ovens. Consequently I determined to go at once in pursuit and make a desperate effort to rescue Jean.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The Horror of It!

I TRIED to prevail upon the Hendersons to return at once to Ballarat, but they had a feeling that Jean might regret her rash act and return home.

Jim agreed to accompany me on my search, and about noon on the day following the riot, we strapped our belongings to my horse and started out on foot. We camped that night a mile or two from Porepunkah, and next day we purchased another horse; then we were able to travel faster.

The whole countryside was in a state of tumult. Detachments of police were hurrying forward to quell the disorders, while numbers of Chinese struggled on as though they were still being pursued. Some bore the marks of the recent skirmish, and were minus their belongings.

The riot intensified our difficulties, for nobody noticed ordinary travellers. We plied hotelkeepers, police officers and teamsters with questions, but we could obtain no information of value.

Feeling certain that the runaway couple would endeavour to go as far away as possible from the Buckland, we pushed on as rapidly as we could. Several times travellers gave us news that sent us hurrying to isolated diggings; but failure followed failure.

At last we approached an eating-house not far from where Wangaratta now stands. Owing to continuous travelling I was beginning to feel exhausted and ill, so Jim rode ahead to make arrangements for our accomodation. I was content to follow at a walking pace, and when half a mile

from the eating-house was surprised to see Jim riding rapidly towards me.

"Why should he return?" I thought. Then it occurred to me that he must be anxious about my sickness.

He soon came up to me, and I knew by his excited manner that he had found out something.

"I've seen him!" he exclaimed, as he pulled up his horse beside me. "Wood is not more than two miles away. I saw him pass while I was at the hotel."

"Was he alone?"

"He was with two other men."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No, I didn't know what to do; I was so surprised."

"Did he see you?"

"No; I was in the stable at the time, and saw him through the broken door."

"Did you notice which way he went?"

"Yes; they were following a track leading to the right."

"Come on," I said, as I urged my horse into a trot.

The news had transformed me. I forgot about fatigue and sickness, and made a furious resolve to grapple with Harold Wood at the earliest possible moment.

After a brisk trot we reached the eating-house. Handing over our horses to the groom, we made our way inside, hoping to obtain a hasty meal. Meeting the hotelkeeper I informed him that we were on the lookout for a fellow named Harold Wood. In an evasive manner he told us that there were some young fellows knocking about, but he had not taken much notice of them.

"A man named Wood has been staying here," I said.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I saw him here half an hour ago," said Jim.

"What do you want him for?"

"He has run away with my sister, and we're going to hunt him down."

"Some of the boys have been about," said the hotelkeeper, "but I don't know their names. They come and go, but as long as they pay their way I don't ask questions."

I could see that the hotelkeeper was not anxious to give information so, asking for a hurried meal, we were shown into a rough dining-room. In a very short time abundance of food was placed before us, and we were left to ourselves.

Our table was situated near a window which looked out upon a track leading off the Ovens Valley-road. Several men were sitting on a log outside, smoking and laughing at a band of Chinese who were struggling past. Suddenly one of them stood up and looked along a side-track.

"The boys are returning," he said. "Is the road clear?"

"Quite clear; nobody in sight."

We did not take much notice of the conversation, but some moments later we heard greetings being exchanged. Through a window curtain I noticed horsemen passing.

"There he is," Jim said, as his face became deathly white.

"Who?"

"Harold Wood."

I could scarcely see for the curtains, so we both sprang across to the window. Three horsemen were passing.

"That's him," Jim continued, "the man in the centre."

A strange, cold chill passed down my back. I shuddered.

"No!" I gasped.

"Yes," said Jim, as he clutched my arm. "I would know him a mile off."

"No, no," I protested. "That is not Wood. That is Alf Jennings, the bushranger."

"The man who threatened you at Ballarat?"

"The very same."

"The friend of Holt?"

"Yes; bushranger and highway robber. Didn't you know him at Ballarat?"

"No, I don't remember having ever seen him."

The horsemen stopped and entered into conversation with the men who had evidently been watching the road for passing policemen. Probably the outlaw had only gone a little way into the bush to avoid meeting some troopers who were known to be travelling to the Buckland. When the road was clear they had returned.

"To think that the scoundrel has deceived you all," I moaned. "Now I understand; now I know."

"Understand what?"

"Why Harold Wood was absent during the whole of my stay in the Buckland last year. Then it was not a dream at all. I did see him. He did try to rob me. He must have stayed in the neighbourhood all the time. And that fellow who ran away into the bush like a lunatic—now I know. We had surprised Jennings, and he could do nothing but make a wild dash into the bush for cover."

For a few moments the room seemed to swim around me, and I staggered back. Jim kept me from falling, and I sank into a chair.

"Oh, the horror of it all—the horror of it."

"Pull yourself together, Sandy," I heard Jim say. "We must act."

"We can do nothing."

"Yes, we can. We must go out and speak to him."

"If we go out there we will be shot down. Probably his companions are also bushrangers, and they will be well armed."

"Then can we try and find some troopers?"

"We had better stay where we are. If they know

we are here they may come inside and murder us."

From behind the curtains we had a closer view of the horsemen, and could hear some of the conversation. Fortunately they did not dismount, but after receiving some packages, which we guessed were provisions, they rode leisurely away. We watched them cross the Ovens road and then turn into another side track. They had travelled some chains before we thought of leaving the window. This strange revelation upset all my calculations, but I realised that there was not a moment to lose.

We deemed it advisable not to speak further with the hotelkeeper. From what he had said concerning "the boys," we gathered that the bushrangers were known to him, and for obvious reasons he preferred to screen them. Consequently we completed a hurried meal and took to the road again. With a little chaff in the nose-bags for the tired horses, and a little food for the equally tired riders, we made a desperate effort to get on the heels of Jennings before darkness set in. While daylight lasted we easily followed the tracks of the bushrangers. The hoof marks of the horses were easily seen in the soft earth, but with the approach of night further pursuit was hopeless. There was nothing for it but camp, so we hobbled our horses with their nose-bags on, and kept guard in turn.

Next morning as soon as it was light enough to follow the track we were once more in pursuit. Meeting two troopers we gave them the information we possessed and told our story. Showing the tracks of the bushrangers, we begged them to accompany us and bag the whole party. I don't think they believed our story, and didn't take us seriously. Stating that they were under strict orders to proceed to the Buckland, they made that their excuse for refusing our request.

Throughout the day we pushed on as fast as we could, bearing away south-west. Ever before us were the hoof-marks which indicated the way

Jennings had taken, and we were hoping that by locating their camping place we might have them surrounded while they slept.

Suddenly two horsemen appeared from behind trees, and came on to the road in front of us. Both had large handkerchiefs covering their faces, and we were not kept long in doubt concerning their intentions.

"Hands up," came the abrupt command, and we found ourselves covered by pistols.

We were utterly helpless, and there was nothing for it but to submit. In a manner none too gentle we were ordered to dismount, and the masked ruffians searched us, and appropriated whatever valuables we possessed. The delay annoyed us; but eventually I plucked up sufficient courage to request that we be allowed to proceed, as we had important business on hand.

"Business," said one with a sneer. "We have important business too. Get on your horses and go back the way you came."

Resistance was useless, so we were obliged to obey. Having ridden with us for a couple of miles, one of the bushrangers proceeded to give us some parting advice.

"Get this into your heads, you greenhorns," he said. "This road will be closed for two days. If we catch you trying to get past, your skeletons will be left bleaching under the gum trees."

In obedience to the outlaws' command, we slowly retraced our steps and, hungry, cold and penniless, we camped that night at a waterhole, waiting for the morning and wondering what further adventures were in store.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Back to Ballarat.

Next morning we struck out on another track. We were hungry and tired and cold, but fortunately we met some drovers, who willingly shared their food with us. A day later we reached one of Dawson's changing stations, situated on the Albury-Melbourne track. Here two troopers were encamped, and, after hearing our experiences, the kindly policemen advised us to leave the outlaws to them.

As we had lost track of Jennings, I did not see that Jim could serve any useful purpose by pushing on with me. His parents needed him at the Buckland, so I suggested that he should return. The fact that Jennings was again in the company of the bushrangers indicated that he had left Jean somewhere until his present exploit was over. There was a possibility that the couple had quarrelled and separated, or perhaps Jean had discovered that her lover was a desperate villain. In that case she might have enough sense to return to her parents.

We agreed to part company. Jim returned to the Buckland, while I pushed on to Ballarat, which I reached a few days later. Without loss of time I sought out my friend Wilson. From my appearance he gathered that there was something wrong.

"What brings you here?" he inquired.

"We're in great trouble," I replied.

"You haven't turned bushranger, have you?"

"No; but I would like to find a certain bushranger."

"Which one—your old friend, Holt?"

"No: Jennings."

"Has he been robbing you?"

"Worse than that. He has carried off Jean Henderson."

"Tell me all about it, lad." And Wilson sat down beside me.

I soon related my story, and told how the plausible Harold Wood had proved to be none other than the bushranger, Alf Jennings. Wilson frequently stopped me and asked questions, and at length he volunteered the information that there had recently been numerous robberies in the north-east. An attempt had been made on the gold escort, and several well-known bushrangers, including Holt and Jennings, had been seen on the Buckland track. No wonder that the bushrangers had warned us that the road was closed.

Coming out from the police station, I found that snow was falling. I was bitterly cold and strangely tired, and could scarcely make up my mind what to do next. There did not seem to be any course left but to return to Melbourne and confer with Dawson. Accordingly I made my way back to a hotel. I was writing some letters when a man, whose clothes were powdered with snow, came into the room. I was absorbed with plans, and scarcely noticed him; but suddenly he gave a yell of recognition.

"Hello, Sandy!" I heard.

Looking round, I found myself face to face with Albert Grant.

"This is fortunate," he said. "Dawson told me you were still in the Western District."

"I was away at the Grange for a long time, but during the last fortnight I've had a hurried trip to the Buckland."

"To the Buckland, Sandy. How is Jean?"

"You have not had any news?"

"None for weeks. But you look pale and sick, Sandy. What is the matter?"

"Everything is wrong, Albert. I have bad news. Come along to my room, and I will tell you."

Breaking bad news is always a difficult job; and

I've had more than my share of it to do. My task that day tried me severely. Every sentence I uttered dashed to the ground some fond hope of Albert's. His castles came crashing around him; and he could only stare as I related the story.

"Do you think Wood married her?" he inquired at length.

"Probably."

"And the wretch has deserted her already."

"Perhaps not. She may be at some hiding place known to the bushrangers."

"Then she may learn the truth, and return to the Buckland."

"I'm hoping for that, Albert."

"We can only hope. That is all I have left."

"For you, Albert, hope is not enough. You must forget."

"Yes, Sandy, I think you are right. I must forget; but it will not be easy. Poor Jean; she will find out some day, when her husband is shot down, as bushrangers usually are."

"We can well say 'Poor Jean.' She can expect nothing now but a life of misery. It might have been very different if that scoundrel had not come into her life."

"I would have tried to make her happy. Every day I thought of her, and often in my dreams I saw her."

"I suppose your parents still know nothing of your secret."

"Fortunately they do not."

"Then it remains with us alone. Now change your wet clothes and come and sit with me by the fire. We will spend the remainder of the day together."

During the afternoon snow continued to fall, and diggers crowded into the hotel, drinking heavily and singing loudly. Work outside was impossible, so every eating house and drinking shop was crowded. We were in no mood for the coarse jokes

and songs of the drunken mob that struggled for the shelter of the hotel. Consequently we kept to our room, keeping warm as best we could.

Next morning snow was thick on the ground, and I was aching from head to foot. The excitement of meeting Albert had sustained me during the previous day, but I had spent a wretched night, and on rising from my bed I realised that I was very ill.

I tried to make a brave show until we sat down to a late breakfast, but then Albert became suspicious. The poor chap had scarcely slept a moment, and had suffered far more than I had, for he endured distress of mind as well as anguish of heart. Suddenly he looked at me when he realised I was not eating.

"Are you off your food, Sandy?"

"I'm not feeling well; but don't worry about me."

"I think you should have stayed in bed."

"We can't stay here, Albert, that's why I got up."

"But if you are ill you mustn't go out in the snow."

"I'm not very ill yet, but I feel I'm in for fever again. We must get out of this place as quickly as possible. The diggers are streaming in again, and soon bedlam will be loose. Let us move on."

"But where can we go, Sandy? Every place will be crowded to-day. Nobody can work until the snow melts."

"Tell your men to wait here. You must come with me. I'll need you."

"But where?"

"To Learmonth."

"That's twenty miles away."

"It doesn't matter. If I'm going to have fever again I must get home. You'll get me there, Albert, and a few days at dad's farm will do us both good."

The memory of that day has lingered with me down the years. Every bone in my body seemed to be aching, and each step taken by the horse sent a fresh shoot of pain through my body. Perhaps it

was madness starting out in the snow, but the difficulties of the journey left my companion little time to reflect upon his own troubles. Sleet and snow had ceased to fall, but a biting wind swept across the tableland.

Mile after mile we struggled on. The horses had difficulty in keeping their feet, as quantities of snow clung to their hoofs, and at intervals we were obliged to dismount and scrape their feet. At length I could scarcely hold the reins, and Albert rode beside me guiding my horse.

It was almost impossible to follow the track, as the snow made road and field look alike. Trees bent down with their white burdens and we seemed to be the only human beings out of doors. Occasionally our horses were startled by the sudden snapping of branches weighed down by snow.

At last Learmonth appeared in the distance; but somehow I got bushed, and was not able to locate a single landmark. The district was new to Albert, and as every track was covered, we wandered about for nearly an hour before we found a gate in a fence. Thinking that this might be the entrance into a farm homestead, we dragged the gate open and struggled into the paddock. True enough, a house was hidden among some trees, and smoke was coming forth from a chimney.

"Wait here a minute," Albert said, "and I'll go and get directions."

I was almost frozen, and past being interested in anything. Listlessly I watched my companion ride through the snow, and disappear behind a shed.

A few moments afterwards he came running back towards me on foot. He took the reins from my hands and started to lead my horse.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"We're going inside for a while. The farmer insists upon us staying here. You are not fit to go another yard. We'll get a good warm up and some food before we go any further."

I saw the farmer coming to meet us, and a moment later received a very agreeable surprise. The sturdy farmer proved to be none other than my father, who smiled when he heard how easily we had been bushed. I had come in by the back gate, and had not recognised the place.

"Why are you out in such weather?" father demanded.

"I've got the fever again, and Albert has brought me home."

"How far have you come to-day?"

"From Ballarat."

"All that way in the snow with fever. It's enough to give you a death of cold. Hurry inside at once."

When I dismounted I could hardly walk; but father helped me along, while Albert attended to the horses. Mother greeted us at the door, and I was soon put into a chair by a roaring fire. My sister and brothers gathered round me, and in response to their questions I tried to tell the sad news from Buckland, and why I had come home.

"Be kind to Albert," I requested, before my mate came into the room. "Remember he loved Jean Henderson. The poor chap is heart-broken, but he has stuck to me like a brick."

"Albert is very welcome," mother gently replied. "Now warm yourself while I get your bed ready."

Soon afterwards I was in bed with warm blankets around me and warm food to eat.

Around the big kitchen fire Albert continued my story, and told my parents much of what he knew.

For several days I was very ill and the household took all precautions, believing I was again down with fever. Mother was the only one who came into the room, but Albert was allowed to stand at the door and talk to me several times a day. My brothers and sister were kept well away, for after

her experiences on the diggings and the loss of the Henderson children, mother had a wholesome dread of disease.

In less than a week, rest and nursing had its effect. My temperature dropped, and I slept soundly. We were all glad to know that it was not the fever. Probably my real trouble was exhaustion, intensified by an attack of influenza.

When Albert saw that danger was past, he sat with me hour after hour, and I tried to keep him interested. His stay on the farm had benefited him greatly.

One morning he came into my room with the information that he was leaving for Allora.

"Stay another week," I begged him. "I'll be about again to-morrow; then we'll have a holiday together."

"I wish I could, Sandy; but the men are waiting in Ballarat, and father will be sending out search parties. I couldn't leave till I knew you were better. Losing Jean has been a terrible blow, but I didn't want to lose you too. If you ever meet her, say Albert Grant has forgiven all, and is trying to forget."

Without another word my friend walked from the room and moved away to face life once more.

When I once got on my feet I recovered quickly. Albert had written to Dawson on my behalf, and my senior partner had instructed his men to keep a sharp lookout for Jean Henderson.

As soon as I was well enough I rode into Ballarat, and had further interviews with my old friend, Inspector Wilson. I was informed that the troopers had been close on the heels of the bush-rangers, but they had again disappeared among the mountains, and were evidently keeping to their hiding-places. More than likely Jean Henderson was with them, as no trace of her could be found.

Dawson, being both wise and kind, asked me to remain in the vicinity of Ballarat and attend to our

interests on the goldfields. On my first visit to Melbourne after my illness, I brought back Alma, and she was destined to be with me in many more sensational adventures.

At last the Hendersons became tired of the Buckland. No news came of Jean, so the broken-hearted father and mother decided to return to Ballarat. This was good news, and early in November we saw our old friends again. They had sold their claims and all their belongings, and had returned by coach. For them the charm of the diggings was gone, and Henderson seemed a broken man.

After Jim had seen his father and mother settled, for the time being, with my parents on the farm, he came back to Ballarat and helped me with droving operations. I was very glad to have his companionship; and as he moved about the country he maintained a persistent search.

Henderson never fully recovered from the shock of Buckland. As a digger he had been successful for many years, but although he had accumulated a small fortune, he now seemed unable to make up his mind what to do. Father tried to keep him busy and interested, but he was always waiting for news —always hoping, always on the lookout. Occasionally he travelled into Ballarat, and while on such visits he walked for hours at a time, glancing at every face, looking along every street and track and peeping upward at windows. The weeks and months passed, but no news came.

Speaking to Inspector Wilson one day, he informed me that Jennings had disappeared.

"I think the fellow must have left the country," my friend remarked, "and probably he has taken Jean with him. Hundreds of successful diggers are returning to the Old Country and to America, and I have no doubt they boarded some ship and are now right away."

So time went on, and 1857 was left behind.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

On a Journey North.

DURING the year 1858 I reached the age of twenty-one years. Probably I had travelled as much in the colony of Victoria as any other young man of my age. All over the country I had seen a widespread transformation. I had seen townships and farming communities spring into existence even in remote places. Ballarat, Geelong and Bendigo were fast becoming cities, while the growth of Melbourne was a constant marvel to me. Thousands of immigrants were still pouring into the colony. From a population of 77,000 in 1851, Victoria had by the end of the 'fifties reached nearly half a million, and had become the most populous of the Australian colonies. Long before '58 farmers, shopkeepers and squatters ceased grumbling about the country being ruined, for the real advantages of the gold discoveries were now recognised. There was tremendous prosperity everywhere.

Early in '58 Dawson realised that his numerous undertakings were getting beyond his control. Our assets had accumulated, but several rivals had entered the field, and competition was becoming severe. Accordingly we agreed to dissolve partnership. Dawson retained his trade with the Ballarat and Bendigo fields, and most of his interests around Geelong. With the assistance of Tom Croft and Jim Henderson, I assumed control of our interests north of the goldfields. Many of the teams were sold, and for months we were busy making new arrangements.

When our affairs were finally adjusted, I found myself the proud possessor of several thousand pounds. I confess that I was very much astonished when I learned that I was a man of capital. Dawson had dealt very fairly with me, and had from time to time assisted me to invest my savings wisely. I retained some blocks in Geelong and Melbourne, and during that year I bought a holding south from Clunes, at a place known later as Coghill's Creek. Some months later, becoming bold by my success, I purchased a station across the Murray, and so commenced my career as a squatter.

I still maintained a small carrying business, but for the next few years my attention was given chiefly to cattle dealing and droving. At that time another carrying company was making its presence felt. In '53 a man named Cobb, assisted by others, had commenced carrying passengers by coach. Suitable vehicles, suspended on leather springs, were imported from America, and these coaches, on the rough roads of Victoria, soon proved very useful.

A few years later the business was taken over by James Rutherford and Company, but the name Cobb and Co. was retained. As the coaching services were extended into many parts of Victoria, this company gradually secured a monopoly of the mail contracts. When business in New South Wales was stirred up by the Lambing Flat gold rush, Rutherford extended his operations to that colony. A year or two afterwards the coaches and lights of Cobb and Co. appeared on the tracks of Queensland. Rutherford was a man of great business capacity, and by the end of the sixties his company in the three eastern colonies were harnessing 6000 horses each day, and their coaches were travelling 28,000 miles every week. For half a century, throughout Australia, Cobb and Co. were household words.

As thousands of men were employed on the diggings, good prices were obtained for all foodstuffs that could be grown. Hay, potatoes and other vegetables were produced in large quantities. Hundreds of Chinese, who were unsuccessful on the diggings, were being employed as farm labourers. Early in '59 father must have had more than a dozen of these yellow men working in his fields. They were patient and industrious, and worked for small wages.

Nowadays the harvest is gathered by means of great machines, and the present generation can scarcely realise how men toiled to gather the harvests of seventy years ago. Scythes were the only implements then in use for cutting the crops. While teams of men did the mowing, others, equipped with rakes and forks, collected the partially dried hay into heaps. Then followed further laborious days when the stacks were built, and finally the hay had to be carried miles to the market. Consequently the hard-working Chinese were in keen demand, and groups of them, with their loose clothing and wide hats, were familiar sights on those early farms.

After having lived for many months with my parents at Learmonth, the Hendersons bought a farm in the vicinity of Miners Rest. Of course we all assisted in the process of getting them settled, and whenever possible Jim remained with his parents. This new interest had a very beneficial effect upon our old friends. They were soon busy getting their homestead in order and attending to the varied problems of the farm.

In the late autumn of '59, accompanied by Tom Croft and several other men, it fell to my lot to superintend the removal of a large flock of sheep from the Beaufort country to a station west of Deniliquin. It proved a very slow and tiresome journey, but was not without adventure. During the

weary hours of travel, I was comforted by the prospect that when the sheep were delivered I would spend a few days with my good friends at Allora.

Reaching a point one evening about thirty miles north of Bendigo, Tom and I decided to push on and spend the night at the Campaspie Crossing. Leaving the men in charge of the flock, we planned to sleep at a hotel situated near the place where Rochester now stands. It was well after dark when we reached the little settlement, and all lights were extinguished. Riding up to the hotel, we knocked loudly, but could get no response. Then we tried at the store, and at a cottage, but nobody would reply to our calls. In desperation we rode back to the hotel, and continued knocking loudly. At last a window was opened a few inches.

"Who are you?" a voice demanded.

"Drovers," I called.

"I don't believe you," came the answer.

"We can easily prove that," I replied. "We are tired out and want a room for the night."

"I can't give you one."

"Why not?"

"I've got six troopers staying here, and the place is full up."

"What brings them here?" I inquired.

"They are out after the bushrangers, and have taken all my available beds. I'm sorry, but I can't take you in."

With that the window closed, and we were left again in the village of silence.

"Come on," said Tom, "we will camp on the river bank."

"There is nothing else for it; but we will be cold without blankets."

We rode on along the river, and in the darkness searched for a suitable camping spot. At last we were cheered by the sight of a fire ahead.

"Somebody is camped further along," was Tom's comment.

"It looks like it," I replied. "We will share their fire."

A few moments later we reached the scene, and found a lonely white man seated by some blazing logs. The stranger cheerfully gave us permission to share his camp, and, having hobbled our horses, we sat down together around the friendly fire.

"What keeps you on the track at this late hour?" the stranger inquired.

I explained who we were, and what had happened at the hotel. Suddenly our new friend broke into a hearty laugh.

Not understanding the reason for this merriment, I quietly looked at the bushman. He was a man about five and thirty, with long hair and whiskers, which badly needed trimming. His clothes were torn and shabby, and I concluded that he was some poor tramp who was down on his luck. Yet his manner was genial and friendly, and although he said little, his remarks were full of meaning.

"I see it all," he observed, as he continued laughing. "Old Bill, at the pub, was not taking any risks with you chaps. That's a good joke, boys."

"How a joke?"

"Can't you see? He took you for bushrangers. There are no police at his pub. at all, but the folk in the village are nearly half dead with fright because a couple of bushrangers are prowling about. That's the way of it, boys. You were taken for the gang, so old Bill kept his doors locked and his lights out. What a joke. Six troopers staying with him. Why didn't he say twenty?"

"Did you hear who the bushrangers were?" I inquired.

"One is that lame wretch, Holt, and the other is some young fellow he has led astray. Do you know them?"

"I've met them a few times on my travels."

"I met both the rascals yesterday. They had a meal at my camp, but concluded I was not worth

robbing. In fact, Holt told me quite frankly that he never robbed 'poor drovers.' Apparently we are quite safe."

Next morning we shared a humble meal with the bushman, and, thinking he must have fallen on bad times, and being anxious to do him a good turn, I asked him if he could take a job with me.

"I'm sorry, lad," he said, "but I have work at present. In fact, I'm waiting to meet a mob of cattle that my drovers are bringing down from my station at Deniliquin. I will need to keep with the wild bullocks from here to Bendigo, so I'm sorry I can't help you."

Naturally I felt rather foolish when I realised that I had offered a position to a man who owned four stations and a large butchering business as well. That strange squatter I frequently met afterwards—sometimes at cattle camps, sometimes on the tracks, and sometimes in cities. I've been with him when the floods poured down the Warrego and Darling, and when the drought left desolation and death along the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee; but in good time and bad time he was always the same, always genial and kindly and simple in his tastes. The bushrangers that day at Rochester did not rob him because he was only a poor drover. Out of pity I offered him a job; but that man was none other than James Tyson, whose life story became one of the bush romances of eastern Australia.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Held by the Gang

IN due course we delivered the sheep to their new owner, a squatter named Dalziel, whose property adjoined Deniliquin Station. When the sheep were put through the yards and counted, we started our drovers on the return journey with a mob of fat bullocks, and while the men were steadily covering the first stages of the journey, Tom and I made a hurried visit to Allora.

This time I gave my friends another real surprise, and reached the station homestead about lunch time. Margaret and Maud were away at school in Melbourne, and that, of course, was a keen disappointment to me. Peter, the youngest boy, was at a boarding school in Bendigo. However, Albert and George were right glad to see us, and were soon busy with plans for our entertainment.

Around the dining room table we were plied with all manner of questions, and of course I had to relate my adventure with James Tyson.

We were still laughing loudly when there was a knock at the door. Albert went in answer to the summons, and suddenly found himself confronted by two armed men.

"Put up your hands," a stern voice commanded, "we are bushrangers."

One fellow held the door while his companion, with a pistol in each hand, stepped into the room.

"Up with those hands," he repeated. "This place is in our possession."

There was nothing for it but to submit. Mr. Grant made as though he would pounce on one of

the bushrangers, but another armed man appeared in the doorway, and we could see that resistance was useless. As I held my hands up, my eyes rested upon the last arrival. Peter Holt had again come into my life, and he recognised me at once.

The bushrangers looked tired, and small wonder, for we heard later that they had been travelling continuously for several weeks. So these were the men who had refused to rob Tyson because of his apparent poverty, and whom we narrowly escaped in our journey.

Holt had aged, and I could see that the desperate life he was leading was burning away his strength. Yet he faced Mr. Grant in a determined way, and demanded food and money, and fresh horses.

"We are at your mercy," said Mr. Grant. "Take what you require. We have no option."

"Good," said Holt. "My mates have possession of your yards, and your station hands are locked in one of the huts. We will take fresh horses; but get this into your head—if you talk about our visit or give information to the police, we will come back and drill some lead through you."

Then his eyes fell on me.

"You are here too, Sandy; and I've caught you again."

"It looks like it," I replied. "But someday you will be caught yourself."

"We take our chances about that, but the troopers will need to be smarter than they have been lately. Now, what have you people got in the way of valuables? We will trouble you for your jewellery, watches, money and such like trifles. Get over together in that corner, all of you, while we collect our requirements."

Suddenly Holt's eyes rested upon Mrs. Grant, and he stared at her with the strangest expression in his face. Then he slowly walked towards her as one in a dream, and continued gazing at her. For

several seconds there was a terrible suspense, and I could see that Mr. Grant was waiting for an opportunity to spring upon the bushranger.

"Did you ever live at Goulburn?" Holt quietly asked.

"I did," Mrs. Grant replied.

"Were you there in '35?"

"I was."

"Do you remember bathing the wounds of a convict when he had been almost flogged to death?"

"Many poor fellows were whipped. I tried to help them when I could."

"I know you did. I know you did."

Holt's voice was no longer gruff, and the savage expression passed from his face. The pistols were lowered as he confronted the lady.

"Do you remember treating one young wretch when his back was torn and his face cut open?"

"Yes, I remember. I pitied him because he was only a boy."

"I was that boy," said Holt, "and I still carry those cursed scars on my face. I've waited over twenty years to thank you; but I'm glad I can do it now. Will you let me kiss your hand?"

Gently the outlaw took her fingers and kissed them.

"Your kindness years ago," he said, "saved me from becoming a beast. Your words and sympathy kept me from going mad."

"I'm sorry I could not help you more," Mrs. Grant quietly replied. "I tried to get you released. I wanted them to give you a chance. Even now I would like to help you, if I could."

"It is too late now. But do you blame me for becoming a bushranger. When I was only a youngster I was chained in one of those infernal gangs. When my back was skinned and torn by those scoundrels who called themselves officers of the law, you were the only one who pitied me. You gave me water to drink. You bathed my wounds, poured in

oil and acted the Good Samaritan. When I came to after each flogging I found you bending over me. I cursed every one of them and swore; but you did not go away until you had put on clean bandages. Those inhuman wretches drove me to it. That is why I am a bushranger. That is why every policeman is my inveterate enemy. That is why I am having my revenge."

"I'm sorry for you," said Mrs. Grant; "but you are only making matters worse for yourself."

"It can't be helped now. One day I'll be shot down; but meanwhile I'm having my revenge."

Holt surveyed his prisoners, then suddenly drew himself up.

"Put down your hands," he said. "Because of this woman's kindness to me years ago I will not rob you. As far as I'm concerned, your homestead is safe. Get us something to eat, and we will make off."

In a few minutes a substantial meal was placed before the bushrangers, and parcels of food were made up for them to take away.

While Holt relaxed somewhat, his companions were not prepared to take any risks. For the most part we were kept assembled and closely watched.

"Are you still a drover?" Holt asked me.

"Yes, I like the life."

"Did you get tired of the diggings?"

"Partly."

"I thought you would have been a squatter by now."

"I may be some day," I commented.

"Do hurry up and get some land. Then Jennings and I will pay you a visit."

"Is he with you today?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"I'm not concerned about him," I said, "but I am concerned about the girl he stole away from Buckland."

"Oh, that Henderson girl; yes, Jennings always was a fool."

"Do me this favour. Tell me where she is," I asked.

Holt glared at me with a sarcastic smile.

"I know nothing," he replied. "Ask Jennings."

"Tell him," I said, "that when I see him I'll shoot first, and ask questions afterwards. That's what I think of him."

"You had better keep out of his road."

"And he had better keep out of my road."

When the meal was over, Holt again thanked Mrs. Grant, and ordered all the men to follow him to the horse yards. Two other members of the gang had mounted guard outside, and I was considerably relieved to see that Jennings was not there. When we reached the yards, however, a chill passed down my spine; for I saw my beloved Alma tied to a fence, with a bushranger's saddle on her back. One of the fellows who had been keeping guard was standing near by. He was a vicious looking rascal with jet black whiskers, and a face that had not been washed for a month.

Pointing to Alma as we came up, this fellow informed Holt that he had picked his horse.

"Good," said the outlaw leader. "It was your turn to take first pick. My, she is a perfect racehorse. I hope there are others like her. Get your horses quickly, boys. It's time we were off."

"I'm sorry, Sandy," Mr. Grant whispered to me. "This is too bad."

A sudden determination seized me as I saw my beautiful horse in the clutches of the bushrangers.

"Can I help you by remaining?" I asked Mr. Grant.

"No," he said, with a wink. "Alma is worth ten of my horses."

The outlaws gathered at the main yard and ordered several horses to be caught and brought to them for examination. I pretended to be very busy,

but, slowly manoeuvring to that corner of the yard outside of which Alma was tethered, I slyly waited my chance. It was not long in coming, for all the bushrangers gathered near to Holt as he tried to pick a beast. For a moment all their backs were turned. Slipping quickly through the fence, I had my horse untethered before anyone guessed at my intention.

"What are you doing there?" roared the fellow with the black whiskers.

With one bound I was on Alma's back, and the noble animal, as if sensing danger, sprang at once into a gallop. I hadn't a second to spare, for the enraged outlaw rushed to the fence and blazed at me with a pistol. Lead whistled around me, but there was no damage done. A few seconds more and I was out of the range of their weapons. To my joy I then noticed that some booty, including two loaded pistols, was strapped to the saddle. The bushrangers cursed and swore, but had enough sense to know that they were beaten. On Alma's back I could easily keep out of their reach.

From a distance of about a quarter of a mile I watched the outlaws select their horses, and when their choice was made I was not sorry to see them depart.

As the gang rode away to the south-east, I quietly moved back to the homestead from the north-east, and amid laughter and cheers I trotted in among my friends.

"You had better get after them," Albert shouted. "They have stolen your saddle."

"I won't worry about that," I commented. "This one will do me for a time, and I have some jewels and pistols thrown in."

I wanted to share losses, but Mr. Grant wouldn't hear of it. He was very glad, as we all were, that Alma had been saved, and our adventure provided amusement for several days. However, I took no risks, because there was a possibility that the bush-

rangers would return. Consequently each night I put my beloved animal in a paddock two miles from the homestead.

Three days after our adventure with the gang we were visited by five police troopers, who had for weeks been chasing the bushrangers. Regardless of Holt's threats, Mr. Grant gave the officers all the information he could, and after spending a night at Allora they rode away in the tracks of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Towards the Lachlan.

ON leaving Allora we moved northward, and made several stock inspections. At one station we purchased a mob of fat bullocks, and, having secured a fresh team of drovers, we started again southward.

While camped one day for lunch we were visited by a couple of men who, in a very careless manner, rode up saying they would have something to eat beside our fire. I took them for station boys, and was attracted by their splendid mounts.

One of the fellows, after eyeing Alma up and down, asked if she were for sale.

"I'm not parting with that animal," I said.

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"I think I could get you to change your mind."

I told him I didn't think so, and then laughed the matter off. Our visitors asked many questions about the track we intended to take, and where we were to deliver the cattle. Then as carelessly as they had arrived they mounted their horses and made ready to depart.

"We may see you along the track," one remarked.

"Quite likely."

When they were out of hearing, one of my drovers looked at me and said: "Do you know who that fellow is?"

"I do not."

"Well, that's Ben Hall, the bushranger, and he has his eye on your horse."

"Probably he is planning to get her later on."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Very well, mates," I said, "we will change our course."

We did so, but, strange to say, our altered course brought us again upon the tracks of the bushrangers.

Two days later, leaving the cattle in the care of the drovers, Tom and I rode into a station homestead for the night. When we came near the house we were surprised to see that one of the station buildings had been burnt down, and smoke was still rising from the ruins. A further surprise was in store, for we saw three troopers awaiting our approach. The sergeant promptly came forward, asking who we were and what were our movements. On being satisfied that we were genuine cattle men, the troopers proceeded to question us concerning the whereabouts of bushrangers.

While our story was being related and further questions were being asked, a tall, stern looking man approached from the house and greeted us with a nod.

"Here is Mr. Cameron, the owner of this station," said the sergeant. "We have to thank him for getting one of the scoundrels who have already defied us too long. Come over to the shed and see if you can identify him."

Entering a log structure roofed with bark, I expected to come face to face with one of the outlaws who had raided Allora, but looking round I saw nobody.

"Here he is," said the sergeant, as he drew aside a horse-rug that had been covering an object on the floor.

The next second we were gazing at a dead man. Blood was on the face, and there was a gaping wound in his throat.

"Do you know him?" asked the sergeant.

"Yes, he was with the gang that stuck up Allora."

"You are quite certain?"

"Quite. I have cause to remember him, because he tried to steal my mare, and fired at me as I rescued her. Death has calmed the savage look he wore in life, but even the bloodstains cannot conceal his jet black whiskers."

Then the sergeant told us what had happened at Cameron's homestead on the previous day. When the squatter saw the bushrangers coming, he took up his defence in the house. His young children were placed behind a barricade of furniture, and the old muzzle-loaders were put in readiness. Mrs. Cameron displayed great daring and loaded the guns while her husband opened fire on the outlaws. The house was soon in a state of siege, and from behind sheds the bushrangers returned the fire.

When night came on, the scoundrels took shelter behind a stake fence, and, being annoyed at stubborn resistance given, thought to have their revenge by setting fire to the stable. This proved their undoing, for the blazing building gave Cameron the chance to get some clear shots, and one of them took deadly effect. Shortly after this the outlaws, considering that discretion was the better part of valour, mounted their horses and rode away.

As a result of this encounter, Cameron brought upon himself the hatred of the outlaws, who vowed vengeance. Fortunately the Government gave Cameron some consideration. A trooper was set apart to guard his homestead, and another to accompany him whenever he was out on his run or away from home.

In those days, for the most part bushrangers were taken as a matter of course. If you happened to see them along the tracks you said nothing. As a rule they did not trouble drovers or poor men. They found it more profitable to "stick up" mail coaches, stations, or gold escorts.

The first criminals of this class were, like Holt, escaped convicts. In the late fifties, however, the free, Australian-born type of bushrangers appeared, and they proved more dangerous than the earlier convict class. These fellows, sometimes mere boys, were expert bushmen and expert horsemen. Moving across great stretches of country, they robbed in a wholesale manner. Being in constant need of fresh horses, they raided the stations and stole the mounts which they needed. Most of these fellows were either respectable farmers to begin with, or the sons of such; but unfortunately hard work did not appeal to them.

Frequently in their attempts to put down the bushrangers the police found themselves baffled and betrayed by the very men whose interests they were trying to defend. For some unaccountable reason some young Australians of that day thought the bushrangers stood for pluck and the bush ideal of romance. For several years these fellows carried on a widespread campaign of robbery; but in the end the gangs were broken up, and nearly every one of them died by violence.

No sooner had we returned to northern Victoria than I found myself engaged in further large movements of stock. At that time settlement was pushing away to the north-west. Having moved over the Murrumbidgee, squatters were seeking to occupy the Lachlan River country, and large flocks and herds were being taken out in that direction.

Accompanied by Tom Croft and Jim Henderson, and assisted by two other drovers, I undertook to deliver a large flock to a station beyond the Lachlan, owned by a man named Halford. This expedition took me far out into the open country and involved me in perhaps the most remarkable adventure of my whole life.

A bullock dray carried our provisions, and we were all armed. Day by day, as we moved across the

"Old Man Plain" of the Riverina, striking mirages met our gaze. For hours at a time we saw what appeared to be the waters of a lake gently rolling in upon the shore. By these strange reflections the distant Murrumbidgee timber appeared visible hours before it actually was in sight.

In those days Hay was called Lang's Crossing, or Leonard's Punt. A man named Gideon Lang was one of the first Murrumbidgee settlers. Leonard, as well as being the proprietor of the first hotel in the district, was also owner of the local punt, by means of which traffic was taken over the river.

As we pushed further inland, tracks petered out; we passed beyond the region of fences. All day long kangaroos hopped away from us, and here and there mobs of emus scampered off. Tribes of blacks seemed to be always following us, and frequently their attitude was dangerous. One day a section of our flock was cornered by a crowd of natives, and before we could ride up to the rescue, a number of animals had been speared. Usually the blacks kept beyond our reach; but I suppose they dogged our steps in the hope of picking up stragglers.

In due course we reached our destination, and some miles from the station we were met by Halford and his men. The homestead consisted of a hut and a shed, both built of logs. In addition there were several yards and a fenced-in horse paddock. Halford had two men in his employ, and they had evidently been working very hard preparing for the arrival of the flock.

It was impossible to allow my companions more than a brief rest. We had several other big contracts on hand, so it was necessary for them to push back towards Hay.

During the trip Alma had shown signs of sickness, so I thought it advisable to remain behind

for a few days, give my horse a spell, and help the squatter to get settled.

It turned out that this decision involved me in an astonishing adventure, which could easily have cost me my life, and actually did cost the lives of two men.

CHAPTER XXXVI

In Strange Company.

TWO days after the departure of my droving team, one of Halford's men galloped into the homestead and informed his master that the blacks were swarming on to his run, and that a number of sheep had been killed or injured by them.

"The devils," roared Halford, "I'll teach them a lesson. Get all the guns and pistols and come on."

I advised the squatter to proceed with extreme caution, as on our journey to the Lachlan the blacks frequently showed fight.

"Showed fight, did they? I'll take the pepper out of them. I'll shoot twenty blacks for every sheep they have killed."

There was no holding Halford. He and I rode a little in advance, and the two station men followed. In less than half an hour we reached the scene of the depredations. The sight of a few dead sheep made Halford swear, but a quarter of a mile further on a worse spectacle met our eyes. A number of sheep had evidently been caught, and in each case, before the animal had been liberated, a leg had been broken. This was a common practice of the black-fellows when they caught more game than they needed for immediate requirements. The sight of these crippled sheep turned Halford into a demon. Even his men were almost as vicious as he was.

"Where are the black wretches?" he said. "Come on, we will shoot down every one we see."

Suddenly several natives rose from under a tree and stared at us. They were evidently preparing for a corroboree, and were plastered over with feathers.

"You black curs," roared Halford, as he raised his gun and fired pointblank.

One of the painted savages sprang into the air and fell. Others yelled. At the same moment the station hands opened fire, and several more reeled and sank.

Then from under every tree some dozens of blackfellows sprang to their feet and ran towards us. In a few seconds we were surrounded.

"Come on!" I shouted. "Gallop for it, or we will all be killed."

Swinging Alma round, she raced off as a shower of spears descended. One tore through my coat and another scratched Alma. Almost at the same instant the two station men rolled from their horses with several spears through their bodies. Halford's horse was struck and, jumping suddenly, unhorsed the squatter and galloped off. I swung round to save Halford, firing at the nearest aboriginal as I did so. Fortunately the squatter was not hurt, and, springing up behind me, he fired two more shots as we broke through at Alma's fastest speed.

Any attempt to save the other men would have been courting certain death. As the natives were there in swarms, nothing could be done but gallop out of danger and await developments. We were not kept long in doubt. Crowds of blackfellows ran after us, and they appeared to be bent on mischief. I had never seen the natives so menacing. We kept out of the reach of their spears, but as they were following us back to the homestead, we had to decide quickly what was to be done. I suggested riding off for our lives and for assistance, but Halford would not hear of it.

"We will shut ourselves in the hut," he said, "and fight it out. I have plenty of powder. It will never do to let them see we are afraid."

"What about my horse," I replied. "I'm not going to have Alma stop a blackfellow's spear; I would sooner stop one myself."

"Let us shut her in the shed, and then we can easily shoot down the blacks as they approach."

We had no time to lose, for the natives were approaching rapidly.

On reaching the homestead we locked Alma in the log hut with a couple of buckets of water, and her saddle on, in case we had to gallop for it. As the shed was only a few yards from the hut, we could protect it.

Next we dragged what we could inside the hut, including a tub of water. The dogs were barking furiously, but we whistled them inside, bolted the door and made the windows secure.

I noticed holes at intervals round the walls through which firearms could be discharged, and Halford explained that he had been prepared for an attack by the natives. "And," he added, "now that they have come, we will teach them a lesson."

After loading our guns and pistols, we peeped through a hole and saw the natives coming up—some hundreds of them. Spears soon commenced to land on the hut, and I wondered what my companion would do.

"Let them come closer," said Halford. "They can waste their spears, but I am not going to waste my powder. When I shoot I intend to kill."

"Well, I've never shot a blackfellow," I replied, "and I don't like starting even now."

"Right," said Halford. "You protect your horse, and I'll protect my hut. Now for it."

With that he opened fire. He was a splendid shot, and whenever a native came within range he quickly received some lead. Some took cover behind fences and trees, while the more daring ones scrambled up behind the shed. Several times they ventured into the open and tried to force the shed door. Above the din I could hear Alma prancing, snorting and trampling boxes and tools. Her terror called me into action, and I was forced to fire upon the natives to prevent them breaking in.

For more than two hours the siege continued, and I did not like the situation at all. I knew our ammunition would run short, and when darkness came our plight would be desperate. Whenever a black man came within range, Halford shot with deadly effect, and from various places of concealment the blacks hurled showers of spears at us. Other groups stood well back, and by means of strange antics tried to work themselves into a frenzy.

As some of the blacks were making another attempt to force the shed door, Halford and I fired together and sent most of them staggering for cover. To our surprise we heard what seemed like echoes of our shots. Again and again came the sound of reports.

"What was that?" Halford asked.

Peeping through one of the holes, I saw the blackfellows running off in every direction. Again came the report of firearms.

"Somebody must be coming to our help," said Halford. "We are saved."

Unbolting the door and rushing outside, I saw four horsemen trotting towards us and firing upon the retreating natives. When they reached the yards, two men took charge of the horses while the other two stepped towards the hut.

"You were in a tight corner," said one of our deliverers, "but we have cooled their courage a bit. What happened?"

"The black vermin speared a lot of my sheep, and when we sent a few charges after them, instead of running away, they swarmed upon us like ants. Two of our mates are out there somewhere riddled with spears. Our ammunition was getting low, and things were beginning to look black for us."

Halford was still explaining and vigorously cursing the blacks, when two other men stepped into the hut. For a moment I thought I was in a trance. Peter Holt and Alf Jennings stood before me. Our eyes met, and recognition was instantaneous.

I stood for a few seconds staring at Jennings. Then an avalanche of hatred flooded my being. In that moment I knew that our rescuers were bushrangers, but I knew also that fate had brought my enemy before me, and that the time had come for drastic action. My blood was up, and I threw caution to the winds.

"So you are here, Jennings," I muttered. "We meet at last. You chaps have come in the nick of time, and we thank you; but I have an old account to settle."

"What is this?" asked Halford, as he stepped between us.

"It is a fight to a finish," I said, as I glared at Jennings.

"Stop!" interrupted Holt, with his commanding voice. "This is no time to quarrel among ourselves. We must gallop for our lives, or the blacks will get us all."

"You can all gallop except Jennings. Before he goes he must tell me where I can find Jean Henderson."

"I don't know where she is," the bushranger roared. She left me a week after our marriage."

"And you ruined her life for a week. You broke the hearts of her parents and the heart of her rightful lover, Albert Grant."

"Why all this fuss about a girl?" he asked.

These words further infuriated me, and I was now beside myself with rage.

"Listen, mates," I said. "Three years ago this fellow Jennings was being lynched by miners. A rope was round his neck, and he was about to be hoisted, when Albert Grant and his father rushed in at great risk and saved him. As a return for that rescue this unmitigated scoundrel seduced Albert's intended wife, and now refuses to disclose her whereabouts. Albert Grant is hundreds of miles away, but I stand here in his place, and Jennings must settle accounts with me."

Handing my weapons to Halford, I threw aside my coat.

"Now, Jennings," I continued, "if you are not a cowardly swine, throw down your firearms and knife, and we will settle matters with bare fists. I mean to give you an unmerciful hiding, or die in the attempt.

With an oath, the bushranger complied, and the next second we rushed upon each other with the fury of mad bulls. I was struck on the face and head and body, but in that exciting hour I seemed to be insensible to pain. Fortunately, Halford had enough presence of mind to call upon Holt to referee the fight, and this probably saved me from the fury of the other members of the gang.

Jennings had more skill with his hands than I had, but I closed with him and struggled, twisted and hit. I was bleeding from nose, mouth and ears, but I kept on my feet. Gradually my good constitution told. Jennings was becoming exhausted when I succeeded in striking him a blow which sent him to the floor.

"Spell!" called Holt, as he rushed between us.

"Spell when one is dead," I said. "Come on, Jennings."

At that moment spears again came upon the hut. As the door was open, I saw natives streaming across the yard and returning to the attack.

"Shoot for your lives!" roared Halford, as he bolted the door.

Every man grasped a gun, and shots soon rent the air. Crowds of blackfellows outside were bent on killing us, while inside deadly enemies fought shoulder to shoulder. Truly I was in strange company. As we loaded our guns and fired through the openings, Jennings watched me closely. I also fought with one eye upon him, for I knew the deep-dyed villain would be capable of treachery. Holt saw my predicament, and came to the rescue with stern words and terrible oaths.

Fortunately, the bushrangers had plenty of ammunition, and they had no scruples about killing blacks. The safety of their horses greatly concerned them, but somehow the snorting of the animals kept the blacks at a distance.

We were surrounded, and from every direction spears, clubs, sticks and stones were hurled at our fort. Spurts of flame leapt from the hut, and blackfellows reeled and fell.

At sundown our enemies became more noisy and more aggressive. While we were planning to meet every contingency, another surprise came. About half a mile away the sound of guns again answered our shots, and the blacks with much gesticulation and noise again took to their heels.

"More white men," said Halford, as he opened the door. "Thank our lucky stars."

"Police troopers!" called Holt. "They are right on us. To our horses, quickly."

There was a wild dash for the door. For a second I made as though I would slam the door and keep Jennings back.

"Tell me," I demanded, "did you marry Jean Henderson?"

"No."

"Then where is she?"

"I've not heard of her since last year. She was then at a Bendigo eating house called the 'Blue Lion'."

For a second I looked hard at him. His face was swollen and black with powder smoke.

"Jennings," I said sternly, as I stood away from the door, "you have done my best friends a terrible injury, but you have to-day helped to save my life. Now go, and may I never see you again."

"We may meet again," he remarked, as he glared at me and passed out.

As a matter of fact, we did meet once more; and I still shudder as I think of that terrible night in '62.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

After the Battle.

WHEN the bushrangers were clear of the hut, they raced to the yards, and in the space of a few seconds they had mounted their horses and galloped off.

This sudden onslaught from within the hut and the sight of the uniformed troopers coming up in the distance spread consternation among the poor aboriginals. As it happened, the bushrangers dashed off in the direction the blacks were running, and the poor creatures interpreted the flight of the outlaws as a furious attack, which sent them scampering in confusion.

Halford and I were glad to get into the fresh air, and for a moment we stood staring at the strange scene.

"That fellow Jennings ruffled your temper," the squatter remarked.

"Yes," I said. "I know him."

"Well, I don't know any of them, but their hasty retreat has made me suspicious."

"I had no chance of telling you that our visitors were members of a notorious gang," I said. "I've met them all before; but Holt and Jennings I've known for years. I'm sorry I lost my temper, but I could not help myself."

"I don't know what we would have done without them," remarked Halford. "If our ammunition had given out, the blacks could have burnt down the hut."

The police troopers soon arrived, and we learned that for days they had been hard on the tracks of

the bushrangers. Having black-trackers with them, they were able to travel quickly and follow the trail. It happened that they saw wounded sheep, and the sight of the suffering animals made the troopers feel as Halford did. Then they were horrified by finding the bodies of the two men who had been speared. It was while they were at the scene of the tragedy that they heard firing, and knew that the squatter must be in difficulties. Instantly they had galloped to the rescue.

We were now perfectly safe, and a night of horror was averted. Our deliverers consisted of a party of five constables and several blacks. In a few sentences Halford explained what had happened. All eyes seemed to be on me, and I must have presented a sorry spectacle, with my blackened face, torn clothes and blood from head to foot.

The leader of the police inquired about the bushrangers, but Halford was very guarded in his replies. Naturally, after the assistance they had rendered, he was not anxious to be the means of capturing the outlaws.

The sergeant quickly understood the situation, and ordering one man to remain at the hut and keep a big fire burning, he called on the others to follow him.

"Come on," he shouted, "we must try and get a few shots before dark."

The task of capturing the bushrangers was almost hopeless, for they were riding good horses. However, the police made a brave attempt, and later we heard the report of firearms in the distance.

At the earliest moment I brought Alma from the shed. She was still trembling, and had passed through a terrifying ordeal, but had escaped with the loss of a few pieces of skin.

Shortly after dark the troopers returned, and greatly regretted the fact that they had not been able to get a decent shot at any of the bushrangers.

"Never mind," said the sergeant, "we have done

something. Those blackfellows have been given a lesson they are not likely to forget in a hurry."

"They will not trouble you any more," was the opinion of one of the troopers. "We must have got about twenty, and the rest are still running."

Halford, however, took no risks. Fires were lighted around the hut, and we kept guard in turns. We had a rough meal beside a blazing pile, and then my companions had compassion on me. My swollen and bruised face aroused their sympathy and I was told to go to bunk. Being thus relieved, I soothed myself by a warm wash and was soon asleep.

Next morning we had gruesome duties to perform. The dead natives were buried in one large grave, and the two station men were buried in separate graves not far from the scene of the tragedy.

The troopers decided to remain in the neighborhood and use Halford's homestead as a base for their operations against the bushrangers; but in company with one of the constables I started off for Hay. On the way we passed the drovers and the bullock dray, and on reaching Hay I was glad to find Tom Croft and Jim waiting at Leonard's hotel.

At that time the natives were numerous in the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee country, and I must tell you something about them as they were known to me in those far-off days.

Most of their arts were connected with hunting, and they had hundreds of ways of securing game. In the Riverina, after heavy rain they had some success in chasing down kangaroos. The flats became very boggy, and the marsupials hopped with difficulty. It was a great sight to see the smartest of the natives, attired as they were born, running at their highest speed on the higher ground and keeping the kangaroo on the soft flat. Any game caught was dealt a blow which resulted in a fractured thigh. In this helpless condition the animal

awaited the captor's leisure. It was the application of this practice to sheep that brought down upon the aboriginals Halford's displeasure.

Natives living far back from the rivers were occasionally unclean, due no doubt to the scarcity of water. On the other hand, the river blacks bathed constantly, and were always clean. Usually the piccaninnies learnt to swim before they could walk properly; and it didn't seem to matter how civilised their parents became, the young children would spit like kittens when angry or frightened.

I have frequently seen the sick carried about from camp to camp and well cared for. And I have known blacks to be wonderfully loyal and kind to white men.

While they were preparing for or observing certain rites, it was dangerous to go near them. This was probably the mistake we made at Halford's, which led to the tragedy. During their ceremonies the tribesmen were on the tip-toe of excitement, and were usually very cruel to those who were being initiated. If a blackfellow was caught away from his district, he was frequently subjected to great cruelty. Before the unfortunate victim was killed certain portions of his fat would be hacked off and eaten by the captors, who claimed that such a cannibalistic feast increased their own fighting powers and endurance.

When occasion presented, the natives ate to excess. I have seen a blackfellow eat and eat to distention, sleep the clock round, and then be ready for tucker again. They ate any living thing, from a mouse to an old man kangaroo. Lizards, iguanas and snakes were considered delicacies, and at certain seasons of the year grasshoppers, caterpillars and moths were acceptable provender.

Men and women anointed themselves all over with a greasy substance, and then completed their toilet with a lavish application of pipeclay. They

took instinctively to horses and dogs, but somehow they did not care for work among sheep, although frequently gins made good shepherds. Work among horses, however, was regarded as sport, and they soon learned to ride, and many became patient horsebreakers.

For the most part, as we moved about, we found the tribes friendly. Often they were too friendly, for they pestered us in a hundred ways, and would not go away until we threatened to shoot them or until we put the dogs after them.

The smartest of the natives soon made themselves useful on the stations, but they could not be relied upon when the migratory habit possessed them. This happened once or twice a year, and at such times nothing could hold them. Having been nomads for countless generations, I suppose the devil of unrest seized them, and they could not resist the call of the wild. After a walk-about they would return to the station, naked, poor and miserable, and for weeks their appetites could scarcely be appeased. On the stations they wore moleskin trousers and coloured shirts; but when on a "walk-about" they quickly discarded the fashions of the white men.

* * *

For several weeks Tom Croft took charge of our undertakings while I quietly rested at Hay.

When I was fully recovered from the shaking I had received on the Lachlan, I decided to visit Allora. Taking Jim with me, we made a quick journey, and received a great welcome at the homestead. The girls were still away, but I was pleased to receive from Mrs. Grant a very cordial invitation to pay them a visit at Christmas time, when Margaret and Maud would be back at the station.

My main concern was to report to Albert, and this I did at the first opportunity. I had much to tell him, and as I related my recent adventures I tried

hard to fathom his thoughts. He heard the story calmly, only occasionally asking questions. Even the description of my fight with Jennings did not seem to move him; but when I recounted the words of the bushranger concerning Jean Henderson, I saw him bite his lip and turn away.

"I'm glad you let the fellow go," Albert observed at last. "I would not like to think you had killed him or handed him over on my account. He will probably be caught soon enough."

"I've hated him for years," I remarked, "but I feel better now that I've given him a thrashing, although I suppose he'll want his revenge."

"Don't let that trouble you, Sandy; he will have enough sense to keep out of your road; but I think the police will soon catch him."

"I hope they do; for I'll never feel safe while he is at large."

"Forget about him, Sandy. I am trying hard to forget, too. We have been very busy, and that has been a help."

"Then you do not wish to come with us to Bendigo?"

"No, Sandy. That is your job and Jim's; and I know you'll do it. What has been done cannot be undone. I must forget, but it is so hard, so very hard."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

On Detective Work.

LEAVING Tom Croft in charge at Deniliquin, I set out for Bendigo with Jim Henderson. I was keen to investigate at the earliest possible moment the clue I had forced from Jennings. It was well that I gave Tom a hint that we might be away for some time, for events moved rapidly, and I did not see Deniliquin again until the Christmas season.

Mile after mile and day after day Jim and I rode on. In due course we reached our destination, and after the sparsely populated Riverina, Bendigo seemed to be a huge city.

Having put up at Heffernan's Shamrock Hotel, we soon entered upon our search. Without much difficulty we located the Blue Lion eating house, and very nervously we stepped inside. Behind a crude counter in a front room, which served as a kind of cake shop, stood a young girl of some eighteen summers. She looked at us shyly as I enquired for Jean Henderson.

"She is not here," the girl replied. "Mrs. Harvey only employs two girls, and my mate's name is Elsie Davies."

"Have you been here long?"

"About two months."

"Is Mrs. Harvey in?"

"Yes."

"Then could we speak to her?"

The girl walked out, and returned a moment later, invited us into an adjoining sitting-room. We were not kept waiting long, for Mrs. Harvey soon came bustling in. She had evidently come

fresh from the baking board, for her hands and face bore traces of flour, and her dark frock was almost entirely covered by a huge apron which dangled to the floor.

We explained out business; but Mrs. Harvey seemed perplexed, and in a guarded manner commenced to ask us questions.

"Why are you seeking the girl?" she inquired.

Briefly I explained some of the circumstances, and then she asked:

"Are you her brother?"

"No," I answered.

I then introduced Jim as that relative.

Stepping back, Mrs. Harvey looked Jim up and down.

"Yes," she said, "you are like her."

"Then you have seen Jean Henderson," I remarked. "She has been here."

"You have guessed," was her naive reply, "I have not told you."

It was apparent that Mrs. Harvey knew more than she was inclined to tell; but I could not fathom her desire for secrecy. Stepping closer to her and speaking softly, I made a determined effort to gain her sympathy.

"Mrs. Harvey," I said, "we have searched all over Victoria for Jean Henderson. We are her friends, and desire to see her that we may urge her to return to her parents. Unfortunately she was badly deceived by a scoundrel; but I have reason to believe that she has escaped from his clutches, and her parents are anxious to have her home."

"So that is it," Mrs. Harvey remarked. "I knew there was a mystery somewhere. Jean told me as much; but she was always a good girl to me, and I was sorry to lose her."

"Then she was in your employ?"

"Yes, she was with me until two months ago, when she and her companion suddenly left."

"Did she give any reason for going?"

"A letter came for her one day, and after that she seemed very timid, and told me she must leave Bendigo. I tried to persuade her to stay, but it was hopeless, and, what was worse for me, her mate, Ellen Bridges, went with her, and I was left without girls."

"Did Jean tell you where she was going?"

"Yes; but I promised I wouldn't tell anyone."

"But we simply must know. I can quite understand why she pledged you to secrecy. She is living in fear of a notorious rogue who pretended to be her lover. He must be tormenting her in some way. Unfortunately her parents shifted from the diggings at the Buckland, and the poor girl does not know where they are. Did she tell you anything of her life-story?"

"Only that she thought her parents were still alive, but she was unable to find them."

"Her parents are alive, and they are very anxious to find their lost daughter. Surely you must understand the feelings of her mother. Come, tell us where she is, and we will never divulge the source of our information."

This was too much for Mrs. Harvey, and we were told in confidence that Jean Henderson and her companion had gone to Castlemaine.

Having obtained the address and further useful information, we moved away again on our quest.

Next day we journeyed to Castlemaine, only to find that Jean had left that settlement a month before. This time we could gather no definite news, but heard several conflicting reports. We interviewed coachdrivers, carriers and police, and after due consideration determined to follow up the scanty clues we possessed.

It is not necessary for me to relate in detail the experiences of the following month. We hurried here and there in our endeavour to investigate every clue.

Some days our hopes would burn brightly, but

time after time our long rides only ended in failure; but as we had come very near success on two occasions, we determined to leave no stone unturned.

As the days and weeks passed by, I realised again how difficult our task was. Restless, gold-digging crowds were still surging on the highways. People of all ranks and trades were continually moving from place to place, and few men were naturally accurate observers. Consequently, after weeks of disappointment, we abandoned our intensive search and determined to take a brief holiday in Melbourne.

Riding to the city by way of the old Mount Alexander road, we put our horses in a stable and then set about exploring the fast growing capital, which Jim had never previously visited. Even in those days Melbourne was a hive of industry. Vehicles of all sizes and conditions dashed about the streets, which in places were inches deep in mud. Bullock teams struggling along with huge loads, ploughed great ruts in the thoroughfares, which in many places became pools of water and mud. Cobb and Co.'s coaches were much in evidence, and fashionable people travelled in luxurious carriages. Immigrants seemed to be pouring from ships in an endless stream, and flocking off to various fields. Houses and shops and schools were being constructed in every direction, and the inhabitants of the city all seemed to be as busy as ants. Such was Melbourne at the end of the roaring fifties.

At that time railway construction was proceeding rapidly, and one day Jim and I had the novel experience of undertaking a train journey from Williamstown to Geelong and back.

The Hobson's Bay Company had opened a line to Brighton, and one to Hawthorn was nearing completion. Steps were also being taken to construct lines to Ballarat and other country centres.

Following the excitement of our first railway journey, while we were planning further sightseeing,

our holiday was unexpectedly interrupted. Sitting one afternoon beside some trees not far from where the Treasury now stands, we were looking at a paper, and had scarcely noticed the approach of two young women until they were within a few feet of us. They were hurrying by, when Jim gave a yell which made them jump with fright. Looking up from the paper I saw the cause of Jim's exclamation—one of the girls was Jean Henderson, and brother and sister were soon beside each other.

"And you are here too, Sandy," Jean said. "Fancy meeting you again."

Then, before we could exchange greetings, the poor girl burst into tears, and cried so pitifully that we were at our wits end to know what to do.

Fortunately her companion was a girl of resource, and smiling at Jim she informed us that her name was Ellen Bridges.

"Yes, I know," Jim replied bashfully.

The girl gazed at us in wonder. She was about twenty years of age, inclined to be tall, with large blue eyes and a wealth of fair hair. Being neatly attired, in a simple blue dress, she presented a charming picture.

"But how could you know my name?" was her quick enquiry.

Jim blushed and became speechless, so I had to take up the conversation as best I could. For a few moments Ellen remained suspicious, but gradually Jean recovered herself and, having apologised for her tears, formally introduced us to her companion.

"Why do you cry?" Jim inquired, as he noticed the tears continuing to stream down Jean's cheeks.

"Because I'm so happy."

"We are happy too. We've all been searching for you, and it's like a dream to think that we have found you at last."

Jim spoke sympathetically, and his words had the effect of plunging Jean into a fresh outburst of

sobbing. Ellen had sufficient presence of mind to suggest that we move back from the public pathway, and suggested leaving us to ourselves while she hurried home.

"I will follow soon," said Jean. "Tell Mrs. Hawkins I'm delayed."

"Come, cheer up, Jean," I said when Ellen had gone. "You must not cry when we all have so much cause for happiness. We traced you to Bendigo, and then to Castlemaine; but we didn't expect to find you here."

"Oh, it's good of you, and I've given you all so much trouble."

"Never mind about that now. We have found you, and your father and mother are waiting to give you a welcome home. Right glad they will be to see you."

"Where are they?"

"On a farm out from Ballarat."

"What do they think of me?"

"They are very sorry that you were deceived by a scoundrel."

"Yes, he is a scoundrel, Sandy, a terrible scoundrel. I've proved it."

"We all know that now, Jean; but he will not trouble you any more."

"I'm still dreadfully frightened of him."

"When did you last see him?"

"Not since I left him. I don't want to see him again."

"Has he ever tried to see you?"

"Often. He always seems to find out where I am. Only three months ago he wrote to me demanding that I should meet him on a road outside Bendigo."

"And that was why you left Mrs. Harvey?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"We traced you to the Blue Lion. But we'll tell you all about it another time. Where are you staying now?"

"Ellen and I are working with a Mrs. Hawkins. Her boarding house is across the way."

"Then you must prepare for another shift, for we are taking you away at once to Ballarat."

"What about Ellen? She has no friends alive, and we have been together for so long. I cannot leave her all alone."

"We will take Ellen too," said Jim. "The house on the farm is big enough, and Mother needs lots of help."

"That will be splendid," I remarked. "Now hurry and get ready for another journey, and this time we will pay the fare."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Re-union.

RETURNING with Jean to the home of Mrs. Hawkins, we informed that good lady of our meeting. As the girls had not told their mistress much about themselves, she was surprised and greatly touched by our story. While she rejoiced with us at the prospect of the Henderson family being re-united, she also displayed regret at losing Jean. When she learned that it was our intention to persuade Ellen also to come and live at Ballarat, her regret was increased.

Later that evening Jean told us something of her wanderings and experiences since the day she left the Buckland. It was a story of remorse, suffering and sorrow. She had gone through the form of a marriage ceremony with the bushranger, but learned a short time afterwards that the matter was open to grave suspicion. After a few weeks Jennings commenced to show himself in his true colours, and treated her like a dog. Much against her wishes she was taken to one of the hiding places of the bushrangers, and there witnessed a furious quarrel between members of the gang.

Escaping at last, she obtained work as best she could, but was frequently in dire need. Added to her hardships and the thought that she was married to an outlaw, was the constant dread that Jennings would return and take her by force to some den in the mountains. Then came the fresh horror that the police knew of her whereabouts and were keeping her under suspicion.

When Jean had almost reached the point of despair, she fortunately fell in with Ellen Bridges, who secured her a position where she was working. As both girls were in difficulties, a very warm friendship was quickly cemented between them. On one of the diggings of the north-east, Ellen had suddenly found herself all alone. Her parents had died within a few weeks of each other. An only brother had not been heard of for several years; while a married sister was believed to be at Bendigo. Thus Ellen had found herself alone, and since their first meeting the two girls had kept together.

Weighed down by hardships and difficulties, Jean at length determined to return to the Buckland and throw herself upon the mercy of her parents; and together she and Ellen set off upon what was meant to be a journey of reconciliation. Alas! The Hendersons had left the Buckland some months previously, and nobody could tell where they had gone; but some believed they had gone to Bendigo.

Months dragged on, and the girls found the problem of earning a living a difficult one, and had little time or money to continue a search. After many hardships, however, they managed to reach Bendigo. Here Helen hoped to find her sister, and Jean her parents. Both were disappointed, and to make matters worse, Jennings located them, and, through the medium of his spies, threatened them, with the idea of obtaining money. In addition, the police kept Jean constantly watched, hoping, no doubt, that the bushrangers would attempt to see her, and thus provide an opportunity for the capture of some members of the gang. The reason for the vigilance of the police was not recognised by Jean, who saw in it only a cause of embarrassment and dread. At last they fled to Melbourne, believing that the growing city would prove their best hiding place. And the rest of the story the reader knows.

Frequently, as Jean related her story, tears came to her eyes; but we tried to cheer her as best we could.

"I tried to find father and mother, and tell them how it all happened," Jean murmured, "but, not finding them, I told it many times to our Heavenly Father. I'm sure He understands and has forgiven me."

"Yes, He has forgiven you, Jean. We all have—even Albert."

"Poor Albert. How is he?"

"He is well, but sad."

"Tell him he must try and forget."

"Albert's heart was almost broken, but he is trying hard to blot out every unhappy memory. When I left him three months ago his last message was: 'Tell Jean, if you ever find her, that I have forgiven all, and will continue to think of her as she was before the Buckland days'."

"Albert always was kind, and I have been so cruel. Isn't it a pity?"

"Yes, Jean, it is a pity; but God in Heaven has other plans for us, so we must all try and adjust our lives to altered circumstances. We are young yet, and I'm sure God will give us fresh chances. Let us not brood over the past. What is done cannot be undone; but we can forget those things which are behind and press forward hopefully to what is ahead."

"What a wonderful thing it would be, Sandy, if we could only start all over again."

"That is what we're going to do, Jean."

It did not take us long to make our arrangements. Obviously there was only one thing to do, and that was to return to Ballarat as quickly as possible. We all felt, however, that the girls should stay a few days with Mrs. Hawkins till she obtained other help. Ellen and Jean refused to be separated, so it was not a difficult job to persuade them to accompany us. Accordingly I arranged for the girls

to travel to Ballarat with Jim the following week, while I rode on ahead with the horses.

We spent three more days together in Melbourne before the day arrived for my departure. Naturally, Jim was in great spirits, and spoke frequently of the surprise that was awaiting his parents. Reluctantly he consented to my proposal that I should pave the way for their arrival by breaking the news to his parents.

While accompanying me to the stables on the morning of my departure, I noticed that Jim was more talkative than usual. On the previous night, while I was having a further long talk with Jean, Ellen and Jim had been out together seeing some of the sights of the city, and now I found him full of enthusiasm about Melbourne, and more so about Ellen.

"Don't you think she is marvellous, Sandy?"

"Yes," I said, teasingly, "Melbourne is marvellous."

"I don't mean Melbourne; I mean Ellen Bridges. Did you ever see such blue eyes before?"

"Never."

"Hasn't she got a most charming smile?"

"Very charming."

"And wonderful hair?"

"Yes, wonderful."

"And isn't she sensible too?"

"Yes, Jim—very sensible."

"I don't know what has come over me, Sandy. I'm as happy as a parrot. I seem to be walking on air. I don't know what's the matter with me."

* * *

Two days later, after a rather lonely ride, I reached Ballarat. Althoughly nearly ten years had elapsed since gold had been discovered, the miners were still busy. Tents and canvas structures were being replaced by houses and streets of buildings. With its prosperous gold mines and extensive adjoining farm lands, Ballarat already showed signs of becoming an important city.

The following day I rode out to Coghill's Creek and surprised the Hendersons. Already their farm was looking prosperous. Stables and sheds were clustered around a comfortable house, and in the fields healthy crops were awaiting the reapers. A band of Chinamen had arrived for the harvest, and had taken up their quarters in one of the sheds.

Of course Mr. and Mrs. Henderson were anxious to know what I had done with Jim.

Possessing a great secret, I adopted a playful attitude, and reported to the anxious parents that I had left their hopeful son in Melbourne, in the company of two young women. My statement was received with laughter; but I assured them that such was the case.

"Fancy my Jim with two young women," said the mother, shaking her head. "Why he is the shyest boy in the world."

"He may be; but that doesn't alter the fact that Jim is down in Melbourne looking after two young women."

"Who are they?"

"Ah, that's a secret. You have seen one before, but the other is a stranger to us."

"And there are some strange women in Melbourne, I'm told."

"Yes, there are."

For a few moments I was able to keep up the joke; but Mrs. Henderson suddenly looked hard into my face, and her expression changed to intense seriousness. Holding me by the coat collar, she asked the question I expected.

"Sandy, is one of those young women my Jean?"

"Yes; we have found her, Mrs. Henderson. She is well, and you will see her soon."

My friends uttered exclamations of delight, and the next moment Mrs. Henderson flung her arms around my neck and kissed me in delirious joy.

I was subjected to a hurricane of questions, and I had to tell the whole story. Because she had been kind to her Jean, Ellen Bridges became a heroine in the eyes of Mrs. Henderson, and she said that her daughter's companion must make her permanent home with them.

"You will probably not have her with you long," I hinted.

"Why not?"

"Because I think somebody will be taking her away."

"Is that the way of it, Sandy—you have fallen in love with her?"

"No, I haven't; but Jim has."

"What is she like, Sandy?"

"Very fat, very short, very freckled, very red hair——"

"Sandy, you're joking."

"Well, you wait and see for yourself."

The Hendersons did not have long to wait; so they commenced to prepare for the home-coming.

"This will be a great Christmas for us all," commented Mrs. Henderson. "We will get all your folk to come across from Learmonth, and we will have a re-union."

"Capital idea," I agreed; "but I am sorry I will not be with you."

"Why?"

"I'm due back in the Riverina."

"Now, Sandy, why must you go back there at Christmas-time?"

"Well, you wait and see."

A few days later I had the pleasure of meeting Cobb & Co's coach, which brought the girls and Jim to Ballarat. They were all excited and radiant, and as I sorted out the luggage with Jim, he tried to tell me something of the wonderful days he had been having.

"She is simply marvellous," he remarked. "All the way up I've been trying to compose a poem about her, but the only words I can find that will rhyme with Ellen are 'felon' and 'melon,' and they are of no use."

After a delightful break at the goldfield during which we tried to identify some of our old haunts, we proceeded next day to Coghill's Creek.

Although the Clunes coach passed not far from Henderson's farm, I had arranged for a private vehicle to complete the journey. We arrived at the homestead before lunch time on a beautiful day in the early summer, and I have not forgotten the scenes of that day of re-union. To attempt to describe what actually happened would be sacrilege. Mother, father and daughter clung to one another; and Jim—well Jim was left with Ellen, and I was left with the driver—and the horses.

However, an hour later, we had settled down, and as we gathered round the large table of the farm-house, with a wonderful meal before us, we were soon a very happy party. Ellen, I am sure, felt very shy, but she was treated as if she were Florence Nightingale, and could not fail to see that she was very welcome.

After lunch, Mrs. Henderson drew me aside and whispered: "Sandy, I think she is so sweet."

So that wonderful day drew to a close, and toward evening I rode across to my father's farm and surprised my parents with the glad news.

"We must see the Hendersons soon and rejoice with them," my mother remarked. Then she patted me on the shoulder and said: "You have been a good friend to them, and a good son to us, Sandy."

And such praise was music in my ears.

CHAPTER XL.

At the Billabong.

IN the happy hours of the next few days plans were quickly made. Jim decided to give up the droving life and become a farmer.

One day our two families had a happy picnic together on the shore of Lake Learmonth, and I could see that peaceful days were again in store for both families. So, on a bright morning, when the reapers were busy in the fields, I moved away from the peace of the old home farm and journeyed forth to face the stirring events that were very near.

After a brief call at my station, where I had a manager employed, and where I had an opportunity of discussing business matters with Tom Croft, I again rode on. Dashing across the great plains I was light-hearted and strangely excited. I had not seen Margaret for a long time. Would she be the same sweet, happy girl? She had been to school, and while living with rich relatives in Melbourne she had met many people, and doubtless many enterprising young men.

When at length I reached Allora homestead I found that extensive alterations and improvements were being effected. A few chains from the house, nestling among some trees, a neat little log building was in course of erection. Additional yards and sheds were also being built, and the homestead presented a busy appearance.

The girls were home from Melbourne, but were out riding when I arrived. Needless to say, I received a great welcome from the other members of the family. Alma was soon at home in a favourite

stall, and I was being entertained at afternoon tea when the daughters of the station came rushing into the room. Both were flushed and beautiful, and Margaret was quite grown up.

"We knew you were here," she said, in her vivacious style. "We saw Alma, and she looks better than ever."

I felt strangely shy as I tried to answer all kinds of questions and give some account of my doings. Margaret was so bright and attractive that my eyes followed her as she tripped gaily about the room. She was no longer a little girl, but a beautiful, cultured young lady. She possessed the gentleness and beauty of her mother, but in addition much of the strength and daring of her father. The fears that had come into my mind as I journeyed towards Allora were quickly dispelled as we laughed and talked together. In the joy of that day I felt that I had suddenly been transported to another world. There was something in Margaret's manner, something in the words she said, and something in the questions she asked that made me feel exceedingly happy. She was the same sweet, delightful Margaret, only she was grown up. Many times that afternoon I thought of Jim Henderson. Now I knew what he meant when he said he seemed to be walking on air. For me the world had suddenly become a thousand times more beautiful, and life seemed grand and good and noble.

The young folk soon had me outside inspecting the improvements that were being made, and discussing the merits of some new horses. Albert and George had their duties to attend to, while Maud and Peter were very interested in their ponies. Consequently, I soon found myself alone with Margaret, and for me no greater joy was now possible.

Strolling about, we came to the new building among the trees, and I asked what it might be.

"Oh, that's going to be our new chapel," said Margaret.

"New chapel!" I repeated, in surprise.

"Yes, we're going to have our own station Church."

"What a new idea," I remarked. "I suppose Allora will be the first station in the country to have its own chapel."

"I don't think so, Sandy. Father says every station should have its own Church, and he knows of many homesteads that have them."

"But what is the good of a Church if you haven't got a minister?"

"Well, when the minister comes we can have a service; and father says he is going to ring a bell every morning, and we will start each day with a service."

"I'm afraid, Margaret, my wandering life has prevented me from being a good churchman."

"I know that, Sandy, but I think we will be able to improve you."

As I looked into her eyes and laughed, I felt that she would be quite capable of that job.

The little chapel was nearly completed, and the carpenter informed us that he would have it in shape for the opening day. Then Margaret told me that they were going to have a real opening service, and her father had arranged for a real minister to visit Allora for the occasion.

The next few days passed all too quickly, for I was very happy. We went for rides and picnics. We drafted sheep and mustered cattle, and day by day Christmas came closer.

Then one evening, as the sun was setting, a horseman, with dark whiskers and a dark suit, rode up to Allora homestead. Almost at a glance I could see that the visitor was a clergyman; and a few moments later I was introduced to the pioneer minister, whose name was William Holmes. This good man, I was to hear later, had travelled more than 600 miles, mostly by bullock dray, to take up work at a parish which he had established some forty

miles from Allora. Leaving his previous home beyond Sydney, he had travelled with his wife and children, with his furniture and belongings, and with a favourite cow tied on behind the bullock dray. Of such were the pioneers of those grand old days.

Mr. Holmes was agreeably surprised when he learned that the little chapel was in readiness for a service, and that Allora promised to be one of the loyal centres of his new parish.

On the following day the opening function took place. The service was deeply impressive, and down the years it has lingered in my memory. At the appointed time the station bell rang. The Grants walked from the house, and the men, with clean shirts for the occasion, strolled from the sheds. Gathering outside the building, we listened to a brief statement and prayer from the minister. Then, opening the door, he invited us to follow him inside.

We were only a little band, but never did a minister have a more interested congregation. Mr. Grant led the singing, and when the meeting was over we moved out from the building, knowing that away in a solitary place we had dedicated a house to the glory of God. True, it was only a poor building, built mostly of logs, but as the years went by it became very dear to us. Although the storms and rains of seventy years have battered around it, that log chapel still stands. Not for a large sum would we have it shifted, for in and around that crude building our fondest and most treasured memories linger.

Across the years I still clearly remember the events of the Christmas season of 1859. True to the traditions of his Church, Mr. Grant started each day with a short service in the little log chapel. After the manner in which Margaret had indicated, so it happened. At a certain time each morning the station bell rang, and all gathered for family worship. The squatter, with his hair now turning grey, was

CHAPTER XLI.

The Year 1860.

IN the first flush of my wonderful happiness, finding myself alone with Mr. Grant, I gave expression to what was in my heart, and declared my love for Margaret. My future father-in-law did not say much, but quietly remarked that his daughter was very young.

"I am aware of that," I explained, "but I will be patient."

"I will speak to her mother, Sandy. Doubtless she will have mixed feelings, as I have; but your words have not altogether surprised me."

Then the squatter extended his right hand and clasped mine. For a few seconds he gazed into my face, and in his eyes I read hope.

"Sandy," he said, with deep emotion, "you have my blessing."

I spent another two very happy weeks at Allora. Mrs. Grant spoke to me alone, and to Margaret and I together. She put everything in such a charming manner that her advice was like a heavenly benediction.

One day, while riding out on the great plains, I told my secret to Albert, who did not attempt to conceal his pleasure.

"This has been my hope for many a day," he said. "We have been almost brothers, Sandy. Now we will be brothers indeed. You will not get father or mother to say very much, but I am sure they are pleased."

Then in the quiet of the lonely plains I told Albert what had happened in Melbourne, and how

we had found Jean Henderson. Previously he had not raised the question, and I had thought it best to say nothing. Now he wanted to talk, so I told him all, and we continued to discuss the matter till the homestead came in view.

"So she is really married to a bushranger," was Albert's final remark. "What a pity; but that book is now closed for ever, and we must write finis. I'm trying to forget, Sandy; and I must keep on trying, but it pleases me to know that you and Margaret are going to be happy."

At last the day came for me to leave Allora. All the station folk assembled to give me a send-off, and then Margaret accompanied me for a few miles on the journey.

When well out of sight of the homestead we dismounted and walked together. All too quickly the time passed as we made solemn promises to each other. Margaret agreed to write to me whenever it was possible to get a letter through, and I promised to visit Allora as often as I could. At last we reached the point where I was obliged to ride on alone. Suddenly Margaret pressed my arm very tightly, and I found her looking into my face with such an inquiring glance.

"Sandy," she whispered, "before you go you must tell me a secret. Something is troubling Albert. At times he seems so sad. What is it, Sandy? I'm sure you know."

"I do know, Margaret, but I don't think I ought to tell. It is a secret known only to Albert and myself."

"But I don't think we should keep any secrets from each other now, do you?"

Margaret spoke so sweetly, and I thought her reasoning so good, that I soon found myself telling her the story.

When the story had been told, Margaret again pressed my arm. "Between us we shall be able to help him," she whispered.

"I'm certain of it," I replied. "When I think of how happy we are, I realise how much poor Albert must have suffered."

"I'm glad you told me, Sandy. I'll try and help him, but I'll never let him know you told me."

Half-an-hour later I was looking back at Margaret waving to me across the plain. Then when trees came between us, and with her last words indelibly impressed on my mind, I gave Alma the reins, and headed towards Deniliquin.

For me the year 1860 proved quiet and peaceful. I made big alterations and improvements on my own station, where I spent much of my time. Most of my droving interests I handed over to Tom Croft, and I gradually devoted myself to settled pastoral work.

Margaret wrote to me regularly, and her letters were a delight. She told me in her own chatty way of all the doings at Allora.

True to my promise, whenever any reasonable excuse presented itself, I rode away cheerfully towards Deniliquin to spend a few happy days at Allora.

Two events of that peaceful year I must refer to because they were of more than passing interest. In the early summer, while on a sheep-buying expedition along the Murrumbidgee, I met in with a strange adventure. Approaching Hay I saw a number of people gathered along the bank of the river, and apparently some interesting event was taking place. Being curious, I rode nearer, and saw men swimming horses across the stream. Then I was surprised to hear strange sounds that I had never before heard. Apparently the noise was being made by an animal, and was something between a growl and a bellow. At last I was able to see near some trees on the river bank a number of camels. The turbaned Indian drivers had one animal put down, and the creature was growling horribly as they were placing a load upon its back. When I came

nearer I noticed that the punt was taking quantities of supplies across the stream. Indians were calling to each other in a strange language. Men were busy carrying material from the punt. Alma and other terrified horses were snorting as if replying to the growling of the camels. White and black spectators looked on with undisguised curiosity, while a tall man with a dark beard and a wealth of black hair shouted instructions. I did not realise it at the time, but I was witnessing part of a romantic event in Australian history. The strange cavalcade was the Burke and Wills party moving out on the ill-fated expedition across Australia, and the tall dark man was Robert O'Hara Burke, the leader of the party. I little thought then that those shouting, vigorous men and growling camels were going forth to their doom. For some years afterwards four camels, left behind by the expedition, roamed the countryside in the neighborhood of Wilcannia.

The other incident of 1860 which must be related, happened at Ballarat. Jim Henderson soon settled down to work on the land, and acquired a property adjoining his father's farm. Ellen Bridges stayed with Jean, and very soon Mrs. Henderson realised that she was going to have two daughters instead of one. Ever since that romantic meeting in Melbourne, Jim had been attracted to his sister's companion. In fact, it had been a case of love at first sight. Seeing each other almost every day, their courting made rapid progress, and I was not surprised when I heard that they were to be married.

Of course I had to return to Ballarat for the wedding, and reached the home of my parents a few weeks after I had seen the Burke and Wills expedition. The marriage took place a day or two after my arrival, and caused considerable excitement throughout the countryside.

After the ceremony, which was conducted by a minister who rode out from Clunes, we all retired to the big farm barn, that had been elaborately de-

corated for the occasion. Flowers and branches covered the walls, and the crudely constructed tables were heaped with good things. Around the farmsteading all kinds of vehicles and horses had assembled, for farmers had gathered from near and far. Some had ridden; some had come in spring carts, and others had travelled in drays.

When the breakfast was over, sturdy young men dismantled the improvised tables, and very quickly the barn was transformed into a dance hall. With lanterns hanging inside and outside, the farm homestead that night presented a gay spectacle. A musician in a corner worked hard with his accordion while a master of ceremonies shouted instructions.

I had my first dance with Jean, who quickly wanted to know where I had learned the art, and who had taught me.

So far I had not breathed a word at home concerning my love affair, but Jean had reason to be suspicious, because Margaret had taught me to dance, and I had proved a very apt pupil.

Later in the evening my mother also became suspicious.

"Sandy," she whispered, "I think you will be next. I've guessed something. Who is she, my boy?"

"Wait till to-morrow, mother," I said, laughing; "then I'll tell you all."

CHAPTER XLII.

Holt's Last Stand.

NEXT day, when a convenient moment had occurred, mother succeeded in getting me all to herself. Then she worked the conversation round to what was in her heart, and I soon found myself revealing my inmost secrets. Needless to say, she asked many questions about the Grants, and, of course, I had to give a detailed description of Margaret. This I did with great enthusiasm, and I soon proved that my intended wife was easily the most capable, the most beautiful, and the best young lady in all the world.

Mother told my secret to the rest of the family, and father gripped my hand and gave me his blessing.

One moonlight night, before my departure from Ballarat, my brothers led me off on what they said was a secret expedition. Across the paddocks we met groups of young men and women, and then away we went in a body to Jim's home. Gathering near the homestead, the leader of the party gave a whistle. This was the signal for the commencement of operations.

Suddenly a hundred weird noises broke the silence of the night. Tins were rattled, a shower of stones rained on the house-roof. The dogs barked, and the revellers answered with cat-calls and uncanny howls.

After we had been battering tins for some minutes Jim appeared in the doorway. Quietly taking a pipe from his mouth, he faced the crowd of tin-kettlers.

"When you chaps are tired," he remarked, "you had better come in and have a drink of tea."

The crowd quickly gathered in the dining-room, and, amid greetings and laughter, the real home-warming ceremony commenced. The musician, with his accordion, was placed in a corner, and the lassies and gallants danced till the early hours of the morning. As day was breaking the party dispersed, and we reached home in time to feed the horses and have breakfast.

As the Christmas season approached, leaving all happy at Ballarat, Alma again carried me rapidly northward. Needless to say, I had my work so arranged that I was able to spend the holidays at Allora. Margaret knew my movements, and guessed very accurately the time when I would be approaching the homestead. Hiding among some trees, she was in readiness to give me a great surprise, but the neighing of her horse betrayed her position. I guessed the secret, and, trotting in the direction of the sound, I soon found Margaret. She laughed gayly, and was not displeased at being discovered. How wonderful it was to be together again, and what a lot we had to tell each other. Of course we dismounted, and walked most of the way on to the homestead.

You can imagine the happy days that followed. We had picnics and visits to neighbouring stations. Margaret and I went for long rides together, and out in the silence of the great plains we planned for the days which were to be.

During the year 1861 I had the joy of many visits to Allora. The clump of trees where Margaret met me at the end of '60 became our favourite meeting-place. Here several spreading gum trees grew together, and, near by, black oaks marked the scene. The place became known to us as "The Oaks," and during the following months many happy incidents became associated with the spot. When Margaret knew I was coming she waited for me at "The Oaks,"

and when I was leaving the station she always accompanied me to the same spot. From beneath the trees Margaret watched me ride away, and waved her handkerchief till I was out of sight.

During the weeks of separation I was always able to picture my darling waiting for me beside the oaks, and so, very fondly, I allowed my imagination to play upon the happy reunion and the charming greeting. Such were the thoughts which cheered me during the lonely hours. Margaret never failed me. The meeting realised was always sweeter than the anticipation. When she knew I was coming she was always there, until that day in '62, when, alas, I looked for my Margaret in vain.

The shearing was over on my station, and large bullock teams carried the wool clip to the Murray. Then when my busy season was over I took Albert with me and searched the countryside for additional flocks. My companion knew the squatters well, and we both thoroughly enjoyed our tour of inspection. On reaching a station to the west of Deniliquin, owned by a man named Flood, we were very hospitably entertained; but on moving out from the house in the morning we suddenly found ourselves prisoners. A stranger approached, and, after obtaining directions concerning the track to an adjoining station, he produced a pistol and coolly told us to move on ahead of him towards the horse yards.

There was nothing for it but to comply. However, I was not much worried, because Alma was safe at my own station, and if we lost the animals we had been riding we could not regard the matter as a serious calamity.

Down at the yards two other bushrangers had the station men under control. Mr. Flood noticed that many of his horses had been brought in, and the outlaws were busy choosing their animals. On reaching the fences, our warder informed us that the gang needed fresh horses and a plentiful supply of provisions.

"Very well," said the squatter, "I am at your mercy, so take your pick."

"We certainly mean to do that," said one of the other bushrangers, who appeared from among the horses.

At once I recognised the voice and the figure. Peter Holt was again confronting me.

"Good morning, Sandy," he said, with a strange smile. "Where is your moke?"

"That's him over in the corner."

"Not that thing," he growled. "I mean the one we should have had a long time ago."

"That beast is well out of your reach," I replied. "You have no hope of getting her."

"Don't be too sure," Holt remarked. "We have a habit of finding out where the good horses are."

I smiled by way of answer, and was considerably relieved when I found that Jennings was not with the bushrangers.

The outlaws soon picked out the horses they wanted, including an upstanding grey, and proceeded to put their saddles on the stolen beasts.

"If my advice is any good," said Mr. Flood, "I would like to give you a word of caution."

"Well, speak out," demanded Holt.

"Don't take that horse," replied the squatter, pointing to the grey.

"Why not?"

"Because he's no good."

"You think you are very clever, don't you?" sneered Holt, who favoured the animal in question, "but you can't deceive me as easily as that."

"I'm not trying to deceive you," said Flood. "That grey horse will not take you any distance from the police."

"You mean that you don't want me to take your best horse. You have him entered for the races, I suppose; but you can't catch an old horse with chaff. Put the saddle on him, Sandy."

"Please yourself," said Mr. Flood, "but don't say I didn't warn you. Take him if you want him, but get away quickly, because the troopers are in the neighbourhood."

Obeying Holt, I soon had the grey horse ready for him; but somehow I felt strangely sorry for the outlaw. Moreover, I felt certain that Mr. Flood was speaking the truth, so, looking at the weary, emaciated bushranger, who was my one-time teacher, I ventured to add a further word of caution.

"You had better take my horse," I suggested. "He is not brilliant, but he is fast and very reliable. You are welcome to him, Mr. Holt."

My touch of sympathy surprised him, and for a few seconds his untamed spirit was softened, but he quickly lapsed into his severe manner.

"I don't want your horse," he growled, "so you had better give up trying to play the squatter's game. You need another visit from Jennings. He's the boy to straighten you up."

Holt sprang into the saddle and called upon his mates to do likewise.

"Hand me those provisions," he ordered.

Albert complied, and I told Holt who he was.

"You remember his mother," I said. "She befriended you years ago."

"I remember," he said, as he stared at Albert. "Tell your mother that while I live Allora Station will not be robbed."

Then without another word he rode off with his companions.

They had hardly been gone five minutes when we heard galloping horsemen among the trees.

"I guessed as much," said Mr. Flood. "The troopers are coming."

The squatter was right. Five policemen were seen galloping towards the homestead.

"The gang will get a fright this time, I'm thinking," a man remarked.

"They will," said Mr. Flood.

"That fellow on the grey horse stands no chance at all."

Amid a cloud of dust the troopers arrived at the yards.

"Which way did they go?" the sergeant called.

The squatter pointed out the direction.

"How long since?"

"About ten minutes."

"Good," again called the sergeant. "Our trick has worked splendidly. Spencer, pick up their tracks and lead on. Mr. Flood, get your men mounted quickly and follow us with whatever weapons you can find."

In less than five minutes we were equipped like a cavalry regiment, and were galloping after the leading trooper.

We were soon hot on the tracks of the bushrangers, and the outlaws realised that it was a race against death. Alas, Holt found out to his cost that the squatter had spoken the truth. The beautiful grey animal was broken-winded, and further, a shoulder muscle had been strained. This did not show itself when the animal ran in a paddock, but after a hard gallop the beast went lame.

Holt soon dropped behind, and his mates made a plucky attempt to save him by firing on the troopers. Their horses were good and fresh, but, realising that their task was hopeless, they were obliged to abandon the doomed leader.

Steadily the police gained, and we saw the grey horse stumble and crash. Picking himself up quickly the bushranger made off on foot and concealed himself among some trees. He was soon surrounded, and the police closed in. Shots rang out from all sides, and from behind a tree Holt fired at the oncoming troopers. Soon the unequal fight was over, and Peter Holt fell, riddled with lead.

The troopers rose from the protection of logs and made a dash towards their man. No further resistance was offered, and when I reached the scene Peter Holt had been disarmed and was a prisoner.

As I gazed at the poor fellow, stretched upon the ground, with blood streaming from his mouth, a strange wave of sympathy flooded my being. Springing from my horse I was soon beside the fallen bushranger, and the troopers wondered at my eagerness.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Holt," I said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," he muttered. "Keep them all away, Sandy, till I'm dead."

The sergeant was a man of tact, and beckoned his men to withdraw.

"He appears to know you," the officer remarked.

"He does," I replied, "and I would like to have a little time with him alone. I knew him in his better days, before the diggings broke out."

"You have my permission," said the sergeant.

Kneeling beside the dying bushranger, I held his head while he looked into my face and gasped. I wanted to say many things, but in that terrible moment I found it hard to express what I felt.

"I'm done for, Sandy," he muttered, "but it's good to have you by me. I should have taken your horse. You meant well, boy, and I thank you. I knew this would happen some day, Sandy, but I didn't expect it so soon. My time has come, and it is well; for I'm sick and tired of this hunted life."

Clutching my hand, the dying outlaw fixed his eyes upon me with a look of deadly earnestness.

"Years ago, Sandy," he whispered, "I wanted to get you into my gang. You remember the time; but somehow I failed. I was very angry with you then, but I'm glad now that I didn't get you. My life has been a long misery, and I've gone from bad to worse. Now the end has come, and I'm sorry for the past; but take my advice, lad. Go straight and keep your peace of mind."

At that moment Mr. Flood came up with some water. Holt clutched at it and drank eagerly. Then once more he struggled to speak.

"Young Grant," he whispered. "Did you say he was here?"

"Yes."

"Then bring him to me."

"I will; but first answer me a question."

"What is it?"

"Where is Jennings?"

"I don't know. We parted company. He is a low-down scoundrel. While we were sticking up Beringa Station he murdered an old couple in cold blood. I never stood for that, so we told Jennings to leave our gang. Watch that fellow, Sandy, and keep out of his reach."

"I'm not frightened of him, Mr. Holt."

"I know you are not; but he hates you and has sworn to murder you. Don't risk another fight. Keep away from him. Take the advice of a dying man."

"Thank you, Mr. Holt; I know your advice is good."

I called to Albert, and he was soon beside us. Holt saw him, and a faint smile came into his dying eyes.

"Give me your hand," the bushranger said. "You are like your mother. She is a beautiful, good woman, and you are fortunate in having such a mother. Tell her I died thinking of her. She always made me feel I should be living a different life. I suppose you two are friends."

"Yes," I replied. "Albert will some day be my brother-in-law."

"You are fortunate, Sandy. I would like to be starting life again with you; but that cannot be. Instead, I want you to bury me; then forget."

"I will never forget you, Mr. Holt," I said feelingly. "I owe you so much. I will forget the evil days, but will always remember with gratitude the help you gave me."

I had only finished the words when the bushranger gave a final gasp, and a moment later he was gone.

The troopers came back, and questions were asked me which I tried to answer as best I could. I was easily able to give satisfactory proof of identification. I mentioned where the scars were to be found on the dead man's back and face, and soon the sergeant was satisfied.

"Strange that you should have known this outlaw so well," he remarked.

"I knew him at Ballarat. He was my teacher, and you can get the whole story from my good friend, Inspector Wilson."

When the police gave permission I proceeded to bury all that remained of Peter Holt. True, he was an escaped convict and an outlaw, but I knew something of his history, and that knowledge saddened me.

The bushranger's grave was beneath the tree where he had made his final stand. Some years later, acting upon my instructions, Mr. Flood had a fence and stone erected to mark the spot. On the stone were the words—

Peter Holt.

1861.

The tree still stands, but the rains of seventy years have thrice worn away the words. Throughout life I always felt that I owed the bushranger much, for he taught me how to hold communion with great minds in the volumes of our tongue.

CHAPTER XLIII.

1862.

YOU have watched the birds in the springtime building their nests. They are busy and happy, and they sing as they work. We human beings can learn lessons from the feathered tribes, for when men accompany their work with a song the work is usually quickly and well done.

So it was that when the gentle hand of time ushered in the year 1862 I was like a bird that sang at its work. True, there was much to be done on my station, and I worked very long hours; but like the birds in the springtime I was happy because I was nest building.

On a little rise above the primitive huts and sheds of my original homestead a dignified house was being built, and I hoped soon to have a home worthy of the bride I would shortly bring to it. I took peculiar delight in watching the carpenters at work, and instructed my old man cook to feed them well. From neighbouring stations and from my father's farm I brought shrubs, trees and flowers, and my first garden appeared.

At least every month I journeyed to Allora and discussed with Margaret the shape and size of the buildings and the position of every tree and fence. On each visit she had hundreds of questions to ask, and when I described some part of the work, I was cheered when she said: "Oh, I think I'll like that."

In the winter of '62, having acquired another small station adjoining my own, I set about adding to my flocks. Taking Tom Croft and another drover with me, I set off for a station called Boona, situated

beyond Narrandera. From the owner, a man named Howes, I had received the offer of a large flock, so I was hoping to make a satisfactory purchase.

About twenty miles from our destination we were overtaken by a horseman mounted on a splendid animal. In the manner of the bush we were soon chatting together. The stranger was a sturdy fellow, but his unkempt whiskers, long hair, and rough clothes did not seem to be in keeping with the beautiful animal he was riding. He looked at Alma with a critical eye, and passed some very favourable comments. I returned the compliment by praising his own wonderful beast.

"He is a good horse," said our companion, "and I could tell you a great story about how he came into my possession."

"Then let us have it," I pleaded. "We are all in the humour for a story."

"Another day, mate. In the meantime, you may hear it from other lips."

A mile beyond our meeting point we came in sight of the homestead of a station known as Happy Valley. I had some business to transact with the owner, so, on reaching the track which led in, we nodded to our fellow-traveller.

"I'll come in too," said the stranger. "Andy Millar is an old friend of mine, so I must put it up to him to do me a good turn."

Accordingly we rode in together, and Mr. Millar came forward to meet us. I introduced myself; but when our companion of the way joined us I was amazed to see him suddenly produce a pistol and point it at Millar.

"Now I've got you," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked the squatter.

"I mean this as a little introduction. I'm Ben Hall, the bushranger."

"I've heard of a scoundrel by that name," Millar replied firmly.

"And I've heard of another by the name of Andy Millar, who is always wagging his tongue about what the boys are doing. That's why I've come in to give you a little friendly warning; for if you talk about our movements again, we'll come back and drill a few holes through your brain box. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, quite plainly."

"I'm glad of it. Now get me a sturdy pack-horse, the best one you have, and be quick about it."

After the bushranger departed Mr. Millar asked what we meant by bringing the outlaw down upon him. I tried to explain that we were in ignorance of his identity; but the squatter refused to be convinced, treating us as persons under suspicion, and declaring that we were hand in glove with scoundrels.

Needless to say, we had a very trying time, and it was not till our return journey with a large flock of sheep and a letter of explanation from Mr. Howes that Andrew Millar recognised that we had no connection whatever with the bushrangers.

* * *

Having assumed extensive obligations in the Riverina, I found it necessary to sell some of my assets in the neighbourhood of Melbourne and Geelong. Consequently, in the early spring, I journeyed southward, and finding my old friend, Ben Dawson, I learned with great satisfaction that the suburban building allotments I had secured years before were now valuable properties. Retaining only a few blocks in each city, I disposed of the remainder at a very handsome profit. In fact, for some of the ground I received more than ten times the original price. Consequently I was able to meet all my commitments and establish myself securely beyond the Murray.

It was while I was realising on my early investments that Ben Dawson took me one evening to dine at a leading city hotel. Opposite us, at the same table, were two men, who nodded as we took our seats. One, after looking hard at me for a moment, expressed the belief that he had met me somewhere

before. He was fully ten years my senior, and an empty sleeve was pinned across his coat.

"Your face is familiar, but I can't think of your name," he said, with a delightful Irish accent.

"My name is Ross," I replied, "Sandy Ross."

He still looked puzzled.

"Have I seen you at Ballarat?" he inquired.

"Quite likely. My father has a farm at Learmonth, and I once worked on the Ballarat diggings."

"Were you there in '54?"

"I was."

"Then you will remember the Stockade?"

"I do, but I was too young to be mixed up with the affair, although I saw much of the fighting. After the skirmish I carried food into the bush for Peter Lalor, and nearly got caught by the police while doing it."

Both men opposite laughed, and my questioner stretched his hands across the table.

"Shake hands," he said. "I'm Peter Lalor."

He was at the time the member of Parliament for South Grant, a constituency which he held for some years. We enjoyed a long chat and Lalor was interested in my experiences with Peter Holt.

"He was a clever fellow," the one-time rebel remarked, "but the bitterness in his heart prevented him from listening to reason. I'm always ready to fight in a just cause, as you know, but Holt wanted to fight everybody all the time. I was quite glad when he went his way and I went mine."

* * *

My sheep-buying expedition to Boona, and my trip to Melbourne kept me a long time from Allora. Then, on returning from the city I found that a visit must be further delayed, because the shearers had arrived, and they were claiming all my attention. Accordingly for a few weeks further I was obliged to be satisfied with letters, and with my thoughts. I had not seen Margaret for two months, and the delays were a severe test of patience.

Shearing time, however, was not without exciting incidents; but for me the time passed all too slowly. Superintending operations I felt a sense of pride. I was now a squatter, and it was shearing time on my own station. Day by day the men chased each other for the ringer's place, and shouted "Tar!" or "Wool away!" Station hands and black boys brought in the sheep, and others took away the shorn flocks. Above the whistling of the boys, the clicking of the blades, the bleating of the sheep, the barking of the dogs and the voices of the men, I seemed ever to hear the voice of Margaret calling me. In a strange way I felt her near me, and longed for the time when she would come to the homestead.

As the sheep were being put through the yards and the shed I could scarcely avoid reflection upon my changed circumstances. Eleven years before, I was a poor lad carrying mails, and glad to receive a few shillings a week as wages. Now I was the proud owner of two stations, with rapidly increasing flocks, and in addition I had acquired sufficient education and knowledge to control my growing interests. Further, I possessed a large circle of friends, and, best of all, I enjoyed the love of one whose courage and conversation always lifted me far above the ordinary.

At last the shearing days came to an end. The heavy bales of wool were hoisted upon the waggons, and bullock teams started to carry my wool southward to the sea. The shearers and their followers set off with packhorses for the next shed, while my men settled down once more to the routine of the station. Finally I was free to travel northward.

Alma had rested for weeks, and was now in great heart. So, early one October morning I saddled my favorite steed, and with the light heart of a schoolboy I rode away from that settlement which I was starting to think of as my own. It was grand to be free of pressing duties, grand to be once more on Alma's back, and grand to be heading for Allora.

I whistled and sang as we dashed along. Alma pricked up her ears and moved like an aristocrat, while ever before me danced the shimmering mirage.

Margaret knew I was coming, and I pictured her waiting for me at The Oaks. I had so much to tell her, so many surprises to give, and so many fresh plans to talk over. I had asked Margaret to think of a name for the station. I had been thinking, too, and we would soon be comparing notes. In my wonderful happiness I hurried forward, thinking only of the joy of the prospective meeting, but never dreaming that a dreadful trial was immediately before me.

I had told Margaret the hour and the day to expect me at The Oaks, and as I drew near our trysting-place my heart started to beat strangely. Eagerly I looked for the waving handkerchief or for any sign of my dear one. Evening was approaching, and hundreds of cockatoos were screeching in the trees as they made for their roosting places, but there was no sign of Margaret.

Every moment I expected to hear Alma neighing and to see my dear one galloping along the track, but I was doomed to disappointment. I searched for tracks, thinking that perhaps Margaret was playing a joke, but I was soon satisfied that there were no fresh hoof marks. I was very disappointed, because I had looked forward to having Margaret to myself for a while before the homestead was reached.

After waiting at The Oaks for half an hour, hoping that she would appear, I eventually decided to ride on. It was dusk when I reached the gateway which led through to the homestead. Still Margaret did not come. By the fading light I noticed tracks of one horse leading in.

"Somebody has ridden into Allora," I thought, "but nobody has come out."

Riding on slowly I was still hopeful of meeting Margaret. Darkness came on as I drew near to the homestead, and then suddenly I became apprehensive. No lights were to be seen, and the yards

and buildings were strangely quiet. Nearer and nearer I came. Still no signs of life appeared.

Reaching the stable yards, I dismounted, and tried to comprehend the situation. Across the paddock dogs howled. No, they didn't bark, they howled.

The men's quarters were in darkness, and at the house itself there did not seem to be any sign of habitation.

"The homestead is deserted," I thought. "Where can they all be?"

In a small yard adjoining the stable a horse was eating chaff from a box; but I was further puzzled to see that the saddle and bridle had been left on.

Putting Alma into the stable, I set out to investigate, but an uncanny feeling was gripping me.

Around the house was a stake fence with creepers growing over it. Following this fence along I moved towards the rear of the building. Then for a moment I was cheered by seeing a light in one of the rooms. Creeping nearer I planned how I could give the homestead folk a surprise, when something, I know not what, prompted me to stop and listen. Then the strangest thing happened, and to this day I have not been able to explain it. In my very ear I heard the voice of my loved one, and the voice said very clearly: "Come no further."

"Margaret," I whispered, "where are you?"

A deathly silence followed, and I gripped tightly the stake fence. Then the voice came again, more distinctly than before.

"Go back," I heard, "Go back. Go back."

"What—whatever is the matter?" I asked nervously; for by then I was becoming unhinged.

No reply came. I held on to the fence and trembled. Across the yard the dogs howled together. Then suddenly from within the house somebody roared a volley of curses. Instinctively I drew back, for a drunken man raged and swore. Jokes vanished from my mind. I was face to face with the supreme trial of my life.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A Night of Horror.

KEEPING in the shadow of the fence, I hardly dared to move. Such horrible language coming from within Allora Homestead left me petrified. The remarkable messages from an invisible guide had lulled me almost into a trance. My brain refused to work, and I could only remain motionless, as one held in the grip of a supernatural power.

How long I stood there I know not, but I felt myself being held back from the house by an invisible hand. Several times I heard furious outbursts. Then the back door was quietly opened and closed. I waited breathlessly and at last I felt certain that somebody was creeping towards me. Grasping a stick, I crouched in the darkness and awaited the mysterious figure that approached so cautiously. Seeing something white moving along the fence towards me, I made ready to strike, when suddenly I was startled by a soft voice. "Sandy, where are you?" came from the ghost-like figure.

There was no delusion this time. I couldn't be mistaken.

"Margaret," I whispered. "Margaret, Margaret."

"Sandy, Sandy," came the echoing response.

The next moment my dear one was in my arms.

"Quick, quick," she gasped, "let us hide behind the stable."

"Margaret," I said, "Whatever is the matter?"

"We are all prisoners, Sandy. A bushranger surprised us while we were at tea, and he has the

whole family and our men shut up in the kitchen. He forced the men to bind each other."

"How did you get out ?"

"I am the only one he allows to leave the room, and he is continually ordering food, whisky and tobacco. He wants fresh horses, but as they are all out in the paddocks, he will not trust the men to run them in until daylight; so we must put up with him till morning. Sandy, you must ride to Oakwood and bring assistance. Albert is there now."

"No, Margaret, I'll grapple with the rascal myself, and at once."

"You mustn't think of it, Sandy. He has loaded pistols on the little table before him, and he would shoot you if you entered the room."

"Where are the station guns?"

"The bushranger holds all our weapons, and he has them in the corner behind him. Sandy, you must do as I say. I knew you would be arriving, and I prayed that God would keep you back from the house. I kept breathing: "Go back, Go back," and God has answered my prayer. Now ride quickly to Oakwood and give the alarm. I will humour the bushranger and keep him from murdering the household."

"Margaret, who is he?" I suddenly asked.

"I heard the men whispering that his name is Jennings. Now you understand why I wanted you to keep away."

"Jennings," I gasped. "Then, my darling, you are not going back into the house to be in the clutches of that villain."

"Sandy, you must be brave. Our rescue depends upon you, but I must play my part. I'm certain father thinks I have gone mad, for I've been joking and laughing with the bushranger. Later he may fall asleep. Then I'll release some of the men. Now, do ride quickly for help, and when you return, creep up to the back door and place a stick on the step.

That will tell me you have the house surrounded. I'll feel safer then."

"I'll not be far away, darling. I will be hiding behind the tank-stand near the back door."

"Don't attempt to attack the house, Sandy. Have men hidden by the horse yards. They are sure to go there early in the morning, and you may have a chance to capture him. But I must hurry inside again, or Jennings will be suspicious. Be brave, Sandy. Be quick, and may God protect you."

"Darling, you have shown me what bravery is," I whispered, as we held each other convulsively in a fond embrace.

A moment later I was alone. Margaret quietly returned to the house, while with extreme caution I led Alma from her stall and from the homestead grounds. When I was satisfied that Margaret had crept inside without incident, I mounted and rode forth into the night.

Fortunately Alma had travelled quietly during the day, and was still ready for a gallop. A serious responsibility now rested upon rider and horse. Oakwood was many miles away, and to ride from Allora leaving Margaret in grave peril was indeed a sore trial. Gruesome questions flashed through my over-wrought mind. Would Jennings become maddened by drink and shoot the whole household? With such a notorious scoundrel almost any crime could be perpetrated. Yet I felt that Margaret was right, and her courage was superb. If we could surround the homestead in the darkness, the bushranger might be our prisoner in the morning. So I galloped on with Margaret's words ringing in my ears: "Be brave, be quick." I dashed past trees and fences, jumping over logs and bushes, ever heading for the neighbouring homestead. Fortunately I had been over the track several times before; but night travelling across the great plains is never easy. Often I had to slow down and take my bearings from the wind and the stars.

Suddenly my fears left me. The gruesome visions that almost drove me to desperation passed from my mind, and in their place came peaceful thoughts. Margaret seemed to be strangely near. I fancied her riding beside me, and I almost heard her whisper: "May God protect you." In a remarkable way I was conscious of some mysterious power, and my heart was strangely warmed. I became confident and fearless. Right before me I seemed to see my dear one facing the bushranger, but inwardly praying that God would guide me across the plains. A beautiful calm possessed me, and I felt certain that the wit and cleverness of Margaret would prove more than a match for the villainy of Jennings.

The night was very dark, and how I kept near the track I do not know. I thought at the time, and I have often thought since, that an unseen Guide piloted me that night through the bush.

Suddenly Alma stopped, and peering into the darkness ahead of me I found that we had reached a fence. Dismounting, I was amazed to find not only a fence, but a gate in a fence. It was the track leading to Oakwood homestead, and I couldn't have travelled better had it been broad daylight. A few moments later I reached the house, and aroused the station folk. Mr. Watson answered my call, and, going near his window, which was open, I explained the nature of my errand.

"I will be with you at once," the squatter said. "Albert Grant is with us, and, fortunately, three police troopers are also camped on the station."

Leaving the household stirring, Mr. Watson accompanied me to the men's quarters, and there was an instant scramble from bunks. Some hurried out into the night to bring in horses, others prepared fire-arms and equipment, and the cook hurried to prepare a meal.

As soon as the alarm had been given, I set about giving Alma food and water. Another hard ride

with scarcely any rest was ahead. While attending to my beast by the aid of a lantern, Albert, half dressed, dashed into the stable.

"Sandy, what does it mean?" was his greeting.

"We must hope for the best," I replied, "but we must lose no time. Allora is held up by that scoundrel Jennings. Your people are all prisoners. The bushranger is drunk, and anything might happen. Margaret crept from the house on my arrival and gave me warning. She will humour the bushranger till we arrive."

"Jennings!" gasped Albert. "What can we do?"

"We must get to Allora without unnecessary delay. Jennings is a cold-blooded murderer, and I tremble to think of what might happen; but we must see to it that he never gets the chance of sticking up another station."

"Yes, Sandy. His career of crime must stop."

After hasty preparations and hasty refreshments we had our relief force ready for the track. The three troopers accompanied us as we rode forth into the night. Albert was by my side, and he and Mr. Watson knew almost every inch of the country, and a couple of hours later the outbuildings of Allora came in view. Mr. Watson proved an excellent general, and soon had his men stationed at convenient points around the homestead, while he and two troopers concealed themselves near the horse yards.

Tethering our horses out of sight we took up our places and waited for the dawn. Albert and I took possession of the stable, and our special job was to communicate with Margaret. We crept to the back door, placed a stick upon the step, and then hid behind a tank, from where we could hear what was happening within.

Somebody was snoring, and occasionally we heard voices, but moments seemed like hours as we crouched, listening and waiting. At last we heard the rattling of cups, and light feet tripping about.

"Margaret is making morning tea," Albert whispered. "So far all must be well."

Suddenly we were startled, for the door was opened with a bang, and Margaret hurried over to the tank to refill a kettle.

"Margaret," I whispered, "we are here. Are you all safe?"

"Yes, Sandy; but Jennings will not go to sleep. He is very cunning, so I must not stay outside. I will bring you a jug of tea, but don't attempt to enter the house. When daylight comes, be in hiding at the horse yards; he is sure to go there."

A few moments later Margaret returned with provisions and a jug of steaming tea.

"Albert and I will stay here till dawn," I whispered. "Call if you need our help."

"There are troopers here too," Albert put in. "Could you pass the news to father. Tell him not to worry, for the homestead is surrounded."

"I'll try. Now, remember, wait till the morning."

Margaret again hurried within, and I saw her no more till the sun was shining.

With the first streak of dawn Albert and I crept back to the stable and impatiently waited for the day. Mr. Watson heard our story and then, visiting the men, gave final instructions.

At daybreak a man emerged from the house and came hurrying towards us. We guessed accurately what his instructions were, but I'll never forget the surprise the fellow received as he opened the stable door and walked in.

"Not a word, Don," Albert said. "We know what has happened, and we have the homestead surrounded. Jennings can't escape, so do what he told you to do, but act as though we were not here."

"He told me to take his moke and run our horses in," Don replied.

"Then do so quickly, and bring in as many as you can. At the right moment we will settle with the bushranger."

Jennings watched proceedings from a window, and when the horses were run in he emerged with all the menfolk. The crafty scoundrel had his prisoners bound, and compelled them to walk before him. Right past the stable they moved. Albert clutched his musket, but somehow he could not raise the weapon.

"I can't shoot, Sandy," he whispered. "It's too much like revenge."

"Neither can I," was all I could utter.

Jennings passed by to the yards. Picking his mounts, he commanded the unbound man to catch and saddle the animals. Suddenly the horses plunged across the yard, and in the midst of the commotion the report of a gun disturbed the stillness of the morning. Jennings staggered and fell, and the next moment Watson and his men were hurrying to the scene.

"You murdering cowards," the bushranger cried. "I'll shoot the lot of you."

Fortunately the unbound man was quick to seize his opportunity, and grappled instantly with Jennings. Others were soon supporting him, and the bushranger, although kicking and struggling and swearing, was a prisoner.

"You brutal murderers," I heard him gasp as Albert and I leapt into the yard.

"Did you think that way when you shot down the police and the folk at Beringa?" I inquired.

"You are with them too," he said, as he glared at me like a ferocious animal.

"Look, Jennings," I said: "you have robbed and wronged and murdered. Even Peter Holt and his gang cast you off as one too vile to associate with them. Now the boomerang has returned. You have no one to blame but yourself that you have been treated as a wild beast. Probably you have but a short time to live, for if you recover from this wound you will only be saved for the gallows. So let it not

be said that your last moments were spent in cursing."

I'm afraid my words only made him worse, so I stepped back and helped to untie the prisoners, while Watson and the troopers tried to aid the bleeding bushranger. He had been shot through the chest, and it was soon apparent that he was beyond earthly help. The dread was past. Relief had come, and I could only pray that God would have mercy on the dying outlaw.

The end soon came.

"He is gone," I heard Watson remark, and lifting some bags from the yard fence he covered the body of Alf Jennings.

Suddenly I felt a hand clasp mine, and turning found Albert gazing into my face.

"Jennings is dead," I whispered.

"Yes—Jean Henderson is a widow now."

CHAPTER XLV.

After the Storm.

WHEN the bushranger breathed his last a marvellous sense of relief came upon us all. Yet, in the presence of death there could be no rejoicing. With subdued conversation the men gathered in groups, and the complete story of the hold-up was recounted. The appearance of the police was regarded as providential, and we were all pleased when the troopers assumed full responsibility. Leaving the men to their reflections I hurried to the house, accompanied by Mr. Grant and his two sons. Gathering together in the kitchen we were so overcome that scarcely a word was uttered. The squatter embraced his wife and Maud, while Margaret threw her arms round my neck.

"Thank God," said Mr. Grant, "we are all safe."

Then suddenly Margaret burst into tears and cried piteously. I tried to soothe her; but with the lifting of the strain her brave spirit reached breaking point. My words failed to rouse or comfort her, and almost in a state of collapse she sank into a chair. In such a circumstance I could only look on and appear foolish. Mrs. Grant soon came to the rescue, and Margaret was carried to her room, where, after a brief rest, she was again her old dear self.

In the meantime breakfast was being prepared, for there were many hungry and tired men to cater for. At the men's quarters the cook was very busy, and in a short time troopers and station hands were refreshing themselves at a wholesome meal. There was but one topic of conversation, and by popular

assent Margaret was pronounced the heroine of the hold-up. Men and troopers agreed that her daring and her skilful acting had not only saved the lives of the homestead folk, but had also brought about the bushranger's downfall.

At "Government House" also, breakfast was quickly prepared, and with our party too there was but one subject discussed. Slowly the events of the night were reconstructed, and Mr. Grant started to realise what a noble part Margaret had played.

"I knew you had some plan in mind, my dear," said the proud father. "I gathered as much from your winks and from your eyes; but I didn't dream that you had got word to Sandy."

"You did a capital piece of work, Margaret," Mr. Watson added: "The whole countryside is under a debt of gratitude to you."

"Why give me the praise?" Margaret protested. "All I did was to creep out of the house. I knew Sandy would be about somewhere. In fact, he had sensed danger, and was on guard. We have lots of secrets between us, and we simply used one in a kind of secret service job, didn't we, Sandy?"

"Our thanks are due to you both," Mr. Grant said.

"Sandy, you are a marvel in the bush!" Albert exclaimed with enthusiasm. "How you found your way to Oakwood in the darkness beats me."

When breakfast was over the station bell was rung, and a message went forth for all hands to gather at the log chapel.

"Let us now return thanks to Almighty God," said the squatter, "for His great deliverance."

In obedience to the summons we all rose and slowly moved from the house. Mr. and Mrs. Grant led the way, and we followed in a kind of procession. Across the paddock the station men and the troopers came to meet with us in that morning service of thanksgiving.

Maud played the harmonium, and I sat with Margaret. Everyone at the homestead attended. We all felt a sense of relief.

At times the squatter spoke with difficulty. Obviously he was greatly moved, and that morning the words of the old psalm came home to us with a new meaning:

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when men rose up against us . . .

"Blessed be the Lord who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth.

"Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken and we are escaped.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Then Mr. Grant led the company in prayer, thanking God for His mercy and His protection.

With the conclusion of the service we were all free to go our several ways; but there lingered with each one the consciousness that he or she had been lifted up before God, and in a mysterious way we felt that our Heavenly Father's benediction would make work easier and pleasure all the sweeter.

In due course an inquest was held, and the body of Jennings was removed for burial. Soon we settled down to the old ways, and the fatal visit of the bushranger became only a memory.

* * *

The grain was ripening in the fields as I once more approached Ballarat. This time I was on a special mission, and Alma brought me first to the farm of my parents, and then later to the home of the Hendersons. As it happened, Jean was keeping house by herself. The menfolk were in the fields, and Mrs. Henderson was on an errand of mercy to a neighbouring farm.

With her womanly instinct, Jean guessed that I had some message of importance, and she gently obeyed when I asked her to sit down beside me.

"Is—is that man in Ballarat?" she nervously enquired.

"No, Jean. That man—— Jennings will never worry you any more. He is dead. I saw him shot down by the police. He can do us no further harm."

"I'm relieved, Sandy; but yet I'm sorry for the poor wretch. He had some good points, but what misery he brought upon himself!"

"Jean, you must forget him. You are still very young — and, may I say — very pretty. You have suffered, but you are a wiser and a better girl. Let us believe that happier days are ahead. I'm sure of it, Jean."

* * *

And now my story must come to an end. I have tried to tell you something of those far-away days which I can still remember clearly, although events of later times are fast fading from my memory. There is much yet to tell; but while I will leave further stories for other days, there is one event I must record before this tale is finished, and its nature you will easily guess.

Early in the year 1863 Margaret and I were married. The ceremony was celebrated by the Rev. William Holmes in the little log chapel at Allora. Albert was my best man, and Maud acted as bridesmaid. Neighbours from great distances gathered to do us honour. Unfortunately, it was a very busy time on the farms at Ballarat, and none of my people could be present; but we proposed to visit them shortly after the wedding.

As we stood together during the ceremony, the sunlight streamed in through a window and shone upon Margaret in her bridal attire. I was very happy, and as the ray of light played upon my dear one, I felt that not only was the Church bestowing her blessing, but the Most High was also granting His benediction.

That was indeed the greatest day of our lives, and we both felt that, for a time, earth had become

paradise. Looking at Margaret in her bridal attire, I felt that no other bride could ever have been so beautiful.

The wedding breakfast was spread in the dining room and along the house verandah, and for the remainder of the day the homestead folk gave themselves up to rejoicing. There were songs and laughter, speeches and feasting, and all the other items that contribute to make your wedding day a memory for life.

My new relatives gathered me to themselves, and in the most endearing and embarrassing manner welcomed me into the inner family circle. Henceforth my affairs were to be inseparably bound up with the fortunes of the Grants of Allora.

The Epilogue

EXTENSIVE preparations were made for our visit to Ballarat, and in due course we were received with special honour at the home of my parents. Mere words could not describe how mother received Margaret. She indeed gave her the kiss of welcome, and almost cried in sheer happiness. My sister was equally delighted, and my brothers shyly tried to entertain their new sister. Father was not a man who could express himself easily, but I could see that he was pleased, and didn't he enjoy showing Margaret over the farm! In anticipation of our visit, father had purchased a new buggy, so, of course, we were driven around Lake Learmonth, across country to many points of interest, and into Ballarat.

For the benefit of Margaret, we talked over the old digging days, and tried to identify some of the scenes of our early struggles and successes. To my delight, I was able to show my wife the very spot where I had first met her father and Albert.

Peaceful times had come for the Hendersons. Their farms were being brought under the plough, and their fields gave evidence of prosperity. Fresh interests were rapidly coming into their lives, and the dark days were being forgotten. Jim and Ellen now possessed a vigorous young son, who constantly kept them amused and happy.

Of course, Margaret was very interested in Jean, and in due time they met. To my surprise, they soon understood each other and became warmly attached. Somehow Margaret possessed the art of winning the trust of those around her, and she soon won her way to Jean's heart. The result was that many confidences were exchanged.

"Jean is very different from what I imagined," Margaret said to me one day. "She is really

beautiful, and I can quite forgive Albert for falling in love with her."

"Yes, she had many admirers even in her childhood days."

"I'm sure she still has many admirers."

"Yes, every young farmer in the district wants to marry her."

"What a pity that villain came between them. We are so happy Sandy, and they are both so sad. It makes me feel so sorry for them."

* * *

The latest addition to the ever-increasing number of young farmers who were taking up land in the Ballarat district was Tom Croft, my former companion of the track and cattle camp. He had acquired a property almost midway between the Hendersons' farm and that belonging to my father. Thus Tom also became one of the pioneer farmers of the Ballarat district. Bringing a wife from Melbourne, his family interests became more and more intertwined with ours.

* * *

After frequent ups and downs, and many adventures on many fields, two other old friends had also returned to Ballarat, and I was very pleased to meet again Fullerton and Harry Parker. They had become the proprietors of a large corn store and livery stables situated a few chains from where the Ballarat Town Hall now stands. Their business became a great success, and was soon well known to the farmers of the district. For many years this establishment was my headquarters in Ballarat, and father and mother regularly left their buggy there while they did their shopping.

Of course, I could not resist telling Margaret how, years before, Mr. Fullerton had offered her father a job as camp cook. My wife never forgot the joke, and frequently referred to it, both at home

and also when face to face with our companion of the digging days.

Before we returned to the Riverina we paid a brief visit to Geelong, and once again I tried to identify some of the old haunts of my boyhood days, but the march of time had brought many changes. The city itself and all the surrounding settlements were rapidly being altered by the oncoming tide of progress. One evening as we strolled out together from Geelong, we chanced to come upon the northern road, and as we followed the well-worn track I told Margaret how, many years before, we had moved forth by that very way to the great adventure of '51, which proved to be for me "The Road to El Dorado".

* * *

What exactly led up to that remarkable event I cannot now remember, but we had returned from Geelong and were spending a day or two with my parents before leaving for our own home. We have always regarded the matter somewhat in the light of a miracle, without pretending to understand it. I will simply relate the incident and the reader can decide for himself.

On the day before we were due to depart, my parents had arranged a family reunion. The Hendersons and other friends were expected, and while awaiting their arrival we sat and talked upon the verandah. Along the road below the house a horseman slowly rode, but we were not much interested in his movements until he opened the front gate and came trotting towards us. Suddenly Margaret sprang from her seat with an exclamation of surprise.

"Albert," she shrieked. "Whatever brings him here?"

Margaret was right, and a few moments later my brother-in-law joined our happy circle and was immediately bombarded with questions.

"What job brings you to Ballarat?" I enquired.

"Same old job, Sandy — chasing after stock."

"Yes, I heard there were special sales. Did you get any bargains?"

"Enough to keep me busy for a week or two. I guessed you would still be out here, so I planned to give you a surprise."

We almost dragged Albert inside, where Mother literally forced him to have a "Bite of something." Then I was conscious of Margaret hurrying from room to room. How she managed to do it so quickly I don't know, but quietly word was passed round that Albert must not know that the Hendersons were coming. Leaving Mother to entertain her guest, my wife beckoned me to follow her outside. Margaret's mind was working quickly, and already she had a plan devised.

"Listen, Sandy," she said in her persuasive way. "I want Albert and Jean to meet again, but they must not know until they come face to face. It must be a complete surprise for both. Now, you will help me, won't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then this is how it will be arranged. When the Hendersons arrive see that they are shown round the garden, but at your first opportunity bring Jean in to me. I believe that Albert and Jean are both yearning to meet again, but neither will take the first step. We are so happy, Sandy. Surely we can help to make them happy, too."

"You are wonderful Margaret, but we must act quickly. Look, there is Henderson's buggy coming in at the front gate now."

Quickly I gave my parents a few final instructions, and they soon had our old friends amused in the garden. My brothers took charge of the horse, and I found myself entertaining Jean. Clothed in a blue dress which perfectly matched her eyes and fair hair, she indeed presented a charming

picture. Never before had I seen her looking so beautiful. For one thing, I had never seen her so well dressed.

"Where is Margaret?" Jean shortly asked.

"I don't think she could have seen you arriving, but you will never guess what she is doing. Come along in quietly and we will give her a surprise."

Jean entered into the joke at once, and when we reached the dining room door I stood back and whispered, "Go in quickly."

Softly as we had walked, Margaret had sensed our approach and had fled by another door to the kitchen.

With a bound Jean entered the room — then suddenly halted. Albert stood, and I shall never forget the expression which came over his face. For a moment it betrayed confusion. Then he smiled.

"Jean—Jean," he uttered, and sprang towards her.

"Albert—Albert," came the echoing response.

I heard no more, but as I gently closed the door I saw them fall into each other's arms, and I knew what the result would be.

Before that memorable day was passed the hearts of two true lovers were at peace. Jean and Albert were as happy as children, and talked and laughed together, as they did in days of yore. The past was forgotten, and in the quiet of the evening Albert asked Mr. Henderson for his daughter's hand in marriage.

* * *

Before the passing of 1863 we were comfortably settled on our own station beyond the Murray. How beautiful it was to have my dear one by my side always and to realise that my dreams had come true. Station life was in her very blood, and in every complicated situation Margaret knew what to say and do.

It took us a long time to find the right name for our property, but suddenly one morning, as we

looked out from our breakfast room across the garden, Margaret thought of those words by which our estate was afterwards known.

"Let us call our home 'Eden Park,'" was her simple suggestion. We instantly agreed, and henceforth I was to be known as Ross of Eden Park.

In the course of the years happy voices of children were heard in the homestead, and their youthful frolics cheered us on our way. Often at evening time, when Margaret and I sat by the fireside, the little ones scrambled on our knees with the usual request, "Tell us a story." There were many tales to tell, but the one most frequently asked for was how Margaret kept vigil that terrible night, and how old Alma carried me through the darkness to Oakwood.

In the late sixties Eden Park had become well known throughout the Riverina. We counted our sheep by the thousands, and we dreamed of extending our lands and our flocks.

Then came the great drought of '68, when for months the sky was like brass. Fires raged in the wooded country. Rivers ceased running and became chains of lagoons. Pools became mudholes, into which cattle and sheep floundered and bogged. On every side the scene was one of desolation, despair and death. Swarms of carrion crows uttered their mournful cries and feasted upon thousands of carcases. The earth cracked and blistered under the shimmering heat, and each day as we rode forth the glittering mirage danced before us as if mocking us in our desperate struggle. Day by day my men and horses were kept busy dragging dead sheep and cattle from the waterholes and piling them in great heaps. The air was filled with a ghastly smell, but laboriously we placed wood on the carcases and tried to burn them.

In those days of blasting, blistering drought my fortune was almost swept away. My neighbours,

after struggling on month after month, were at last compelled to give up — riding away from their stations penniless. If it had not been for Margaret, I think I would have given up too; but her courage never faltered. In the darkest days she was by my side, calmly giving advice and whispering encouragement. So with grim tenacity we held on. My last neighbour surrendered his station and moved southward. Then the very rain that would have saved him fell in torrents before he had gone fifty miles on his journey.

Relief came at last, and with Margaret's help I set out to repair my losses and build up again from the very ashes of my ruins. Abundant seasons followed, and we were able to weather the storm. True, there were many dark days and many perplexing problems, but there was the sweetness too, for Margaret's face was ever shining on me like heaven's blessing. With my darling near me I felt I must succeed. Her very presence made me invincible, because she was for ever pointing onward, and pointing upward.

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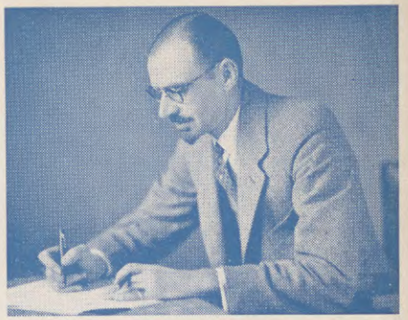

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