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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DINGO BOYS: THE SQUATTERS OF WALLABY RANGE ***

G Manville Fenn

"The Dingo Boys"

Chapter One.

"Have I Done Right?"

"Better stay here, squire. Aren't the land good enough for you?"

"Oh yes; the land's good enough, sir."

"Stop and take up a run close by. If you go yonder, the piggers'll eat you without salt."

Here followed a roar of laughter from the party of idlers who were busy doing nothing with all their might, as they lounged about the wharves and warehouses of Port Haven.

Emigrants' guide-books said that Port Haven was a busy rising town well inside the Barrier Reef on the east coast of Northern Australia, and offered abundant opportunities for intending settlers.

On this particular sunny morning Port Haven was certainly not "busy," and if "rising," it had not risen enough for much of it to be visible. There were a few wooden buildings of a very rough description; there was a warehouse or two; and an erection sporting a flagstaff and a ragged Union Jack, whose front edge looked as if the rats had been trying which tasted best, the red, white, or blue; and upon a rough board nailed over the door was painted in white letters, about as badly as possible, "Jennings' Hotel;" but the painter had given so much space to "Jennings'," that "Hotel" was rather squeezed, like the accommodation inside; and consequently from a distance, that is to say, from the deck of the ship *Ann Eliza* of London, Norman Bedford could only make out "Jennings' Hot," and he drew his brother and cousin's attention to the fact—the 'el' being almost invisible.

"Well, who cares?" cried his brother Raphael.

"So's everybody else," said their cousin, Artemus Lake. "I'm melting, and feel as if I was standing in a puddle. But I say, Man, what a place to call a port!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Norman. "Of course we're not going to stop here. Are we going to anchor close up to that pier thing?"

"Pier, Master Norman?" said a hard-faced man in a glazed straw hat, "that's the wharf."

"Gammon! why, it's only a few piles and planks.—I say, Rifle, look there. That's a native;" and the boy pointed to a very glossy black, who had been squatting on his heels at the edge of the primitive wharf, but who now rose up, planted the sole of his right foot against the calf of his left leg, and kept himself perpendicular by means of what looked like a very thin clothes-prop.

"If that's a native," said Raphael, "he has come out of his shell, eh, Tim?"

"Yes," said Artemus, solemnly. "Australian chief magnificently attired in a small piece of dirty cotton."

Captain Bedford, retired officer of the Royal Engineers, a bluff, slightly grey man of fifty, who was answerable as father and godfather for the rather formidable names of the three bright, sun-burned, manly lads of fifteen to seventeen—names which the boys had shortened into "Man," "Tim," and "Rifle"—overheard the conversation and laughed.

"Yes, that's a native, boys," he said; "and it is a primitive place, and no mistake, but you're right: we shall only stop

here long enough to load up, and then off we go inland, pioneers of the new land.”

Man tossed up his straw hat, and cried “hooray!” his brother joined in, and the sailors forward, who were waiting to warp the great vessel alongside the rough wharf, joined in the cheer, supposing the shout to be given because, after months of bad weather, they were all safe in a sunny port.

At the cheer three ladies came out of the companionway, followed by a short, grey, fierce-looking man, who walked eagerly to the group of boys.

“Here, what’s the matter?” he cried. “Anything wrong?”

“No, uncle,” said Norman. “I only said ‘Hooray!’ because we have got here safe.”

“Did mamma and the girls come out because we cheered?” said Rifle. “Hallo, here’s Aunt Georgie too!”

He ran to the cabin entrance, from which now appeared an elderly lady of fifty-five or sixty, busily tying a white handkerchief over her cap, and this done as the boy reached her, she took out her spectacle-case.

“What’s the matter, Rifle?” she said excitedly. “Is the ship going down?”

“No, aunt, going up the river. We’re all safe in port.”

“Thank goodness,” said the lady, fervently. “Oh, what a voyage!”

She joined the ladies who had previously come on deck—a tall, grave-looking, refined woman of forty, and two handsome girls of about twenty, both very plainly dressed, but whose costume showed the many little touches of refinement peculiar to a lady.

“Well, Marian, I hope Edward is happy now.”

The lady smiled and laid her hand upon Aunt Georgina’s arm.

“Of course he is, dear, and so are we all. Safe in port after all those long weeks.”

“I don’t see much safety,” said Aunt Georgie, as she carefully arranged her spectacles, and looked about her. “Bless my heart! what a ramshackle place. Surely this isn’t Port Haven.”

“Yes; this is Port Haven, good folks,” said Captain Bedford, joining them and smiling at the wondering looks of all.

“Then the man who wrote that book, Edward, ought to be hanged.”

“What’s the matter, aunt?” said Norman, who hurried up with his cousin.

“Matter, my dear? Why, that man writing his rubbish and deluding your poor father into bringing us to this horrible, forsaken-looking place!”

“Forsaken?” cried Captain Bedford, “not at all. We’ve just come to it. Why, what more do you want? Bright sunshine, a glittering river, waving trees, a glorious atmosphere, and dear old Dame Nature smiling a welcome.—What do you say, Jack?”

The sharp, irritable-looking man had joined them, and his face looked perplexed, the more so as he noted that the girls were watching him, and evidently hanging upon his answer.

“Eh?” he cried; “yes; a welcome, of course. She’s glad to see our bonnie lassies fresh from Old England. Here, Ned, give me a cigar.”

“Thank you, Jack, old fellow,” whispered the captain, as he took out his case. “For Heaven’s sake help me to keep up the poor women’s spirits. I’m afraid it will be very rough for them at first.”

“Rough? Scarifying,” said Uncle John Munday, puffing away at his cigar. “No business to have come.”

“Jack! And you promised to help me and make the best of things.”

“Going to,” said Uncle Jack; “but I didn’t say I wouldn’t pitch into you for dragging us all away from—”

“Bloomsbury Square, my dears,” said Aunt Georgie just then. “Yes, if I had known, you would not have made me move from Bloomsbury Square.”

“Where you said you should die of asthma, you ungrateful old woman. This climate is glorious.”

“Humph!” said Aunt Georgie.

“Well, girls,” cried the captain, passing his arms round his daughter and niece’s waists, “what do you think of it?”

“Well, papa, I hardly know,” said Ida.

“This can’t be all of it, uncle?” said the other girl.

“Every bit of it, my pet, at present; but it will grow like a mushroom. Why, there’s an hotel already. We had better get ashore, Jack, and secure rooms.”

"No," said Uncle Jack, decisively, as he watched a party of rough-looking idlers loafing out of the place, "we'll arrange with the captain to let us stay on board till we go up-country. Rather a shabby lot here, Ned."

"Um! yes," said Captain Bedford, smiling at the appearance of some of the men as they gathered on the wharf.

"Better stay here, I say; the women will be more comfortable. As we are going up the country, the sooner we load up and get off the better. German and I and the boys will camp ashore so as to look after the tackle."

"Yes, and I'll come too."

"No," said Uncle Jack; "your place is with your wife and the girls."

"Perhaps you are right," said the captain, as he stood watching the sailors busily lowering a boat to help to moor the great, tall-masted ship now sitting like a duck on the smooth waters of the river, after months of a stormy voyage from England, when for days the passengers could hardly leave the deck. And as he watched the men, and his eyes wandered inland toward where he could see faint blue mountains beyond dark green forests, he asked himself whether he had done right in realising the wreck of his property left after he had been nearly ruined by the proceedings of a bankrupt company, and making up his mind at fifty to start afresh in the Antipodes, bringing his wife, daughter, and niece out to what must prove to be a very rough life.

"Have I done right?" he said softly; "have I done right?"

"Yes," said a voice close to him; and his brother's hand was laid upon his arm. "Yes, Ned, and we are going to make the best of it."

"You think so, Jack?" said the captain, eagerly.

"Yes. I was dead against it at first."

"You were."

"Horribly. It meant giving up my club—our clubs, and at our time of life working like niggers, plunging into all kinds of discomforts and worries; but, please God, Ned, it's right. It will be a healthy, natural life for us all, and the making of those three boys in this new land."

Captain Bedford grasped his brother's hand; but he could not speak. The comfort given by those words, though, was delightful and his face lit up directly with a happy smile, as he saw the excitement of the three boys, all eager to begin the new life.

He looked a little more serious though, as his eyes lit on the party of ladies fresh from a life of ease; but his countenance brightened again as he thought of how they would lighten the loads of those ill able to bear them. "And it will be a happy, natural life for us all. Free from care, and with only the troubles of labour in making the new home."

But Captain Bedford was letting his imagination run. More troubles were ahead than his mind conceived, and directly after he began making plans for their start.

Chapter Two.

"We're off now."

Busy days succeeded during which every one worked hard, except the people of Port Haven. The captain of the ship hurried on his people as much as was possible, but the sailors obtained little assistance from the shore. They landed, however, the consignments of goods intended for the speculative merchant, who had started in business in what he called sundries; two great chests for the young doctor, who had begun life where he had no patients, and passed his time in fishing; and sundry huge packages intended for a gentleman who had taken up land just outside the town, as it was called, where he meant to start sugar-planting.

But the chief task of the crew was the getting up from the hold and landing of Captain Bedford's goods; and these were so varied and extensive that the inhabitants came down to the wharf every day to look on as if it were an exhibition.

Certainly they had some excuse, for the captain had gone to work in rather a wholesale way, and the ship promised to be certainly a little lighter when she started on her way to her destination, a port a hundred miles farther along the coast.

For, setting aside chests and packing-cases sufficient to make quite a stack which was nightly covered with a great wagon cloth, there were a wagon and two carts of a light peculiar make, bought from a famous English manufacturer. Then there were tubs of various sizes, all heavily laden, bundles of tent and wagon cloths, bales of sacking and coarse canvas, and crates of agricultural machinery and tools, on all of which, where they could see them, the little crowd made comments, and at last began to make offers for different things, evidently imbued with the idea that they were brought out on speculation.

The refusals, oft repeated, to part with anything, excited at last no little resentment, one particularly shabby, dirty-looking man, who had been pointed out as a squatter—though that term ought certainly to have been applied to the black, who was the most regular and patient of the watchers—going so far as to say angrily that if stores were

brought there they ought to be for sale.

These heavy goods were the last to be landed, for after making a bargain with the gentleman whose name appeared in such large letters on the front of his great wooden shanty, four horses, as many bullocks, all of colonial breed, bought at Sydney where the vessel touched, half a dozen pigs, as many sheep, and a couple of cows brought from England, were landed and driven into an ill-fenced enclosure which Mr Jennings called his "medder," and regularly fed there, for the landlord's meadow was marked by an almost entire absence of grass.

Day by day, these various necessaries for a gentleman farmer's home up-country were landed and stacked on the wharf, the boys, Uncle John, and Samuel German—"Sourkrout," Norman had christened him—under the advice of the captain seeing to everything, and toiling away in the hot sunshine from morning to night.

At last all the captain's belongings were landed, and the next proceeding was to obtain half a dozen more bullocks for draught purposes, and two or three more horses.

These were found at last by means of the young doctor, who seemed ready to be very civil and attentive, but met with little encouragement. After the landlord had declared that neither horse nor ox could be obtained there, the doctor took Captain Bedford about a couple of miles up the river, and introduced him to the young sugar-planter, who eagerly supplied what was required, not for the sake of profit, but, as he said, to do a stranger a kindly turn.

"Going up the country, then, are you?" he said. "Hadn't you better take up land where you can get help if you want it?"

"No," said the captain, shortly. "I have made my plans."

"Well, perhaps you are right, sir," said the sugar-planter, who was, in spite of his rough colonial aspect and his wild-looking home, thoroughly gentlemanly. "You will have the pick of the land, and can select as good a piece as you like. I shall look you up some day."

"Thank you," said the captain, coldly; "but I daresay I shall be many miles up the river."

"Oh, we think nothing of fifty or a hundred miles out here, sir," said the young squatter, merrily. "Your boys will not either, when you've been up yonder a month. Come and see me, lads, when you like. One's glad of a bit of company sometimes."

They parted and walked back, driving their new acquisitions, and were getting on very badly, from the disposition on the part of the bullocks to return to their old home, when the black already described suddenly made his appearance from where he had been squatting amongst some low-growing bushes; and as soon as he stepped out into the track with his long stick, which was supposed to be a spear, bullocks and horses moved on at once in the right direction, and perhaps a little too fast.

"The cattle don't like the blacks as a rule. They are afraid of the spears," said the doctor.

"Why?" asked Norman.

"The blacks spear them—hurl spears at the poor brutes."

"Black fellow," said the shiny, unclothed native sharply, "spear um bullockum."

"Why, he can speak English," said Rifle, sharply.

"Oh yes, he has hung about here for a long time now, and picked it up wonderfully.—You can talk English, can't you, Ashantee?"

The black showed his teeth to the gums.

"What's his name?" asked Artemus, otherwise Tim.

"Oh, that's only the name I gave him, because he is so black—Ashantee."

"Eh, you want Shanter?" cried the black sharply.

"No; but mind and drive those bullocks and horses down to Jennings', and the gentleman will give you sixpence."

"You give Shanter tickpence?" he cried eagerly, as he lowered his rough shock-head and peered in the captain's face.

"Yes, if you drive them carefully."

"Hoo!" shouted the black, leaping from the ground, and then bursting out with a strange noise something between a rapid repetition of the word wallah and the gobbling of a turkey-cock; and then seeing that the boys laughed he repeated the performance, waved his clumsy spear over his head, and made a dash at the bullocks, prodding them in the ribs, administering a poke or two to the horses, and sending them off at a gallop toward the port.

"No, no, no, stop him!" cried the captain; and the three boys rushed off after the black, who stopped for them to overtake him.

"What a matter—what a matter?" he said coolly, as they caught and secured him.

"Mind he don't come off black, Tim," cried Norman.

"Black? All black," cried the Australian. "White, all white. Not white many."

"That's not the way to drive cattle," cried the young doctor, as he came up with the captain.

"Not give tickpence drive bullockum?"

"Yes, if you are careful. Go slowly."

"Go slowly."

"No. Bullockum 'top eat grass. Never get along."

"You'll make them too hot," said Rifle.

"No, no," shouted the black; "no can get too hot. No clothes."

"Send the fellow about his business," said the captain; "we'll drive the cattle ourselves. Good lesson for you, boys.— Here you are, Shanter."

He took out a bright little silver coin, and held it out to the black, who made a snatch at it, but suddenly altered his mind.

"No, not done drive bullockum. Wait bit."

He started off after the cattle again, but evidently grasped what was meant, and moved steadily along with the three boys beside him, and he kept on turning his shiny, bearded, good-humoured face from one to the other, and displaying a perfect set of the whitest of teeth.

"Seems ruin, doesn't it?" said Tim, after they had gone steadily on for some time in silence—a silence only broken by a bellow from one of the bullocks.

"Hear um 'peak?" cried the black.

"What, the bullock?" said Rifle.

The black nodded.

"Say don't want to go along. Shanter make um go."

"No, no, don't hunt them."

"No," cried the black, volubly; "hunt wallaby—hunt ole man kangaroo."

He grinned, and holding his hands before him, began to leap along the track in a wonderfully clever imitation of that singular animal last named, with the result that the horses snorted, and the bullocks set up their tails, and increased their pace.

"Be quiet!" cried Norman, whose eyes ran tears with laughter. "Yes, you are right, Tim. He is a rum one."

"I meant it seems rum to be walking along here with a real black fellow, and only the other day at Harrow."

"Black fellow?" cried their companion. "Hi! black fellow."

He threw himself into an attitude that would have delighted a sculptor, holding back his head, raising his spear till it was horizontal, and then pretending to throw it; after which he handed it quickly to Norman, and snatched a short knobbed stick from where it was stuck through the back of the piece of kangaroo skin he wore.

With this in his hand he rushed forward, and went through the pantomime of a fierce fight with an enemy, whom he seemed to chase and then caught and killed by repeated blows with the nulla-nulla he held in his hand, finishing off by taking a run and hurling it at another retreating enemy, the club flying through the air with such accuracy that he hit one of the horses by the tail, sending it off at a gallop.

"Norman! Rifle!" cried the captain from far behind; "don't let that fellow frighten those horses."

"I—I—can't help it, father," cried the boy, who was roaring with laughter.

"Tink Shanter funny?" cried the black; and he gave vent to the wallah-wallah noise again.

"Yes, you're a rum beggar," said Rifle, who looked upon him as if he were a big black child.

"Yes; Shanter rum beggar," said the black, with a satisfied smile, as if pleased with the new title; but he turned round fiercely directly after, having in his way grasped the meaning of the words but incorrectly.

"No, no," he said eagerly; "Shanter no rum beggar. No drunkum rum. Bah! ugh! Bad, bad, bad!"

He went through an excited pantomime expressive of horror and disgust, and shook his head furiously. "Shanter no rum beggar."

"I meant funny," said Rifle.

"Eh? Funny? Yes, lot o' fun."

"You make me laugh," continued Rifle.

"Eh? make um laugh? No make black fellow laugh. Break um head dreffle, dreffle. No like black fellow."

In due time they were close up to the hotel, where, the boys having taken down the rails, the new purchases made no scruple about allowing themselves to be driven in to join the rest of the live-stock, after which Shanter went up to the captain.

"Get tickpence," he cried, holding out his hand.

The coin was given, and thrust into the black's cheek.

"Just like a monkey at the zoological," said Norman, as he watched the black, who now went to the wharf, squatted down, and stared at the stern, sour-looking man—the captain's old servant—who was keeping guard over the stack of chests, crates, and bales.

The next thing was the arranging for the loan of a wagon from the landlord, upon the understanding that it was to be sent back as soon as possible. After which the loading up commenced, the new arrivals performing all themselves, the inhabitants of the busy place watching, not the least interested spectator being the black, who seemed to be wondering why white men took so much trouble and made themselves so hot.

One wagon was already packed by dusk, and in the course of the next day the other and the carts were piled high, the captain, from his old sapper-and-miner experience, being full of clever expedients for moving and raising weights with rollers, levers, block and fall, very much to the gratification of the dirty-looking man, who smoked and gave it as his opinion that the squire was downright clever.

"Your father was quite right, boys," said Uncle Jack, as the sheets were tightened over the last wagon. "We could not stop anywhere near such neighbours as these."

Then came the time when all was declared ready. Seats had been contrived behind the wagons; saddles, ordinary and side, unpacked for the horses; the tent placed in the care which bore the provisions, everything, in short, thought of by the captain, who had had some little experience of expeditions in India when with an army; and at last one morning the horses were put to cart and wagon, one of which was drawn by three yoke of oxen; every one had his or her duty to perform in connection with the long caravan, and after farewells had been said to their late companions on board ship and to the young doctor and the sugar-planter, all stood waiting for the captain to give the word to start.

Just then the doctor came up with his friend of the plantation.

"You will not think me impertinent, Captain Bedford, if I say that Henley here advises that you should keep near to the river valley, just away from the wood, so as to get good level land for your wagons."

"Certainly not; I am obliged," said the captain quietly.

"He thinks, too, that you will find the best land in the river bottom."

"Of course, of course," said the captain. "Good-day, gentlemen; I am much obliged."

"If you want any little service performed, pray send," said the doctor; "we will execute any commission with pleasure."

"I will ask you if I do," said the captain; and the two young men raised their hats and drew back.

"Father doesn't like men to be so civil," said Man.

"No; he doesn't like strangers," whispered back Rifle.

"Of course he doesn't," said Tim, in the same low voice. "It wasn't genuine friendliness."

"What do you mean?" said Man.

"Why, they wouldn't have been so full of wanting to do things for us if it had not been for the girls. They couldn't keep their eyes off them."

"Like their impudence," said Rifle, indignantly.

"Of course. Never thought of that," cried Man.

Just then the captain, a double-barrelled rifle in his hand, and well mounted, was giving a final look round, when the dirty-looking fellow lounged up with about a dozen more, and addressed him as duly set down at the beginning of the first chapter.

But the laughter was drowned by the sound of wheels and the trampling of hoofs; the wagons and carts moved off, each with a boy for driver, and Uncle Munday came last, mounted like his brother, to act the part of herdsman, an easy enough task, for the cattle and spare horses followed the wagons quietly enough after the fashion of gregarious beasts.

The little caravan had gone on like this for about a mile along a track which was growing fainter every hundred yards, when Man Bedford gave his whip a crack, and turned to look back toward the sea.

"We're off now, and no mistake," he said to himself. "What fun to see Uncle John driving cattle like that! why, we ought to have had Master Ashantee—Tam o' Shanter—to do that job. I wonder whether we shall see any fellows up the country as black as he."

His brother and cousin were musing in a similar way, and all ended by thinking that they were off on an adventure that ought to prove exciting, since it was right away west into an almost unknown land.

Chapter Three.

"Are You Afraid?"

After the first few miles the tracks formed by cattle belonging to the settlers at Port Haven disappeared, and the boys, though still full of excited anticipations, gazed with something like awe at the far-spreading park-like land which grew more beautiful at every step. To their left lay the winding trough-like hollow along which the river ran toward the sea; away to their right the land rose and rose till it formed hills, and beyond them mountains, while higher mountains rose far away in front toward which they made their way.

For the first hour or two the task of driving was irksome, but once well started the little caravan went on easily enough, for it soon became evident that if one of the laden carts was driven steadily on in front, the horses and bullocks would follow so exactly that they would almost tread in their leader's feet-marks, and keep the wheels of cart and wain pretty well in the ruts made by those before. As to the cattle Uncle Munday drove, they all followed as a matter of course, till a pleasant glade was reached close by the river, where it was decided to stop for the mid-day halt. Here carts and wagons were drawn up in a row, the cattle taken out, and after making their way to a convenient drinking place, they settled down to graze on the rich grass with perfect content.

Meanwhile, to Norman's great disgust, he and Artemus were planted at a distance in front and rear to act as sentries.

"But there isn't anything to keep watch over," said the elder boy in remonstrance.

"How do you know, sir?" cried the captain, sharply. "Recollect this—both of you—safety depends upon our keeping a good look-out. I do not think the blacks will molest us, but I have been a soldier, Man, and a soldier always behaves in peace as he would in war."

"More blacks in London," said Tim, as they moved off to take up their positions on a couple of eminences, each about a quarter of a mile away.

"Yes," replied Man, who was somewhat mollified on finding that he was to keep guard with a loaded gun over his shoulder. "I say, though, doesn't it seem queer that nobody lives out here, and that father can come and pick out quite a big estate, and then apply to the government and have it almost for nothing?"

"It does," said Tim; "but I should have liked to stop in camp to have dinner."

"Oh, they'll send us something, and—look, look—what are those?"

A flock of great white cockatoos flew nearly over their heads, shrieking at them hoarsely, and went on toward the trees beyond the camp.

"I say, doesn't it seem rum? They're cockatoos."

"Wild, and never saw a cage in their lives."

"And we never fired and brought them down, and all the time with guns on our shoulders. Look!"

"Father's waving to us to separate. I daresay they'll send us something to eat."

The boys separated and went off to their posts, while smoke began to rise in the little camp, the tin kettle was filled and suspended over the wood fire, and Aunt Georgie brought out of their baggage the canister of tea and bag of sugar set apart for the journey.

Bread they had brought with them, and a fair amount of butter, but a cask of flour was so packed that it could be got at when wanted for forming into damper, in the making of which the girls had taken lessons of a settler's wife at the port.

In making his preparations Captain Bedford had, as hinted, been governed a good deal by old campaigning experience, and this he brought to bear on the journey.

"Many things may seem absurd," he said, "and out of place to you women, such for instance as my planting sentries."

"Well, yes," said Aunt Georgie, "it's like playing at soldiers. Let the boys come and have some lunch."

"No," said the captain; "it is not playing: we are invaders of a hostile country, and must be on our guard."

"Good gracious!" cried Aunt Georgie, looking nervously round; "you don't mean that we shall meet with enemies?"

"I hope not," said the captain; "but we must be prepared in case we do."

"Yes; nothing like being prepared," said Uncle Munday. "Here, give me something to eat, and I'll go on minding my beasts."

"They will not stray," said the captain, "so you may rest in peace."

It was, all declared, a delightful *alfresco* meal under the shade of the great tree they had selected, and ten times preferable to one on board the ship, whose cabin had of late been unbearably hot and pervaded by an unpleasant odour of molten pitch.

To the girls it was like the beginning of a delightful picnic, for they had ridden so far on a couple of well-broken horses, their path had been soft grass, and on every side nature looked beautiful in the extreme.

Their faces shone with the pleasure they felt so far, but Mrs Bedford's countenance looked sad, for she fully grasped now the step that had been taken in cutting themselves adrift from the settlers at the port. She had heard the bantering words of the man when they started, and they sent a chill through her as she pictured endless dangers, though at the same time she mentally agreed with her husband that solitude would be far preferable to living among such neighbours as the people at the port.

She tried to be cheerful under the circumstances, arguing that there were three able and brave men to defend her and her niece and daughter, while the boys were rapidly growing up; but, all the same, her face would show that she felt the risks of the bold step her husband was taking, and his precautions added to her feeling of insecurity and alarm.

In a very short time Rifle had finished his meal, and looked at their man German, who was seated a little way apart munching away at bread and cheese like a two-legged ruminant. He caught the boy's eye, grunted, and rose at once.

"Shall we relieve guard, father?" said Rifle.

"No, but you may carry a jug of tea to the outposts," was the reply; and after this had been well-sweetened by Aunt Georgie, the boy went off to his cousin Tim, not because he was the elder, but on account of his being a visitor in their family, though one of very old standing.

"Well," he cried, as he approached Tim, who was gazing intently at a patch of low scrubby trees a short distance off; "seen the enemy?"

"Yes," said the boy, in a low earnest whisper. "I was just going to give warning when I saw you comma."

Rifle nearly dropped the jug, and his heart beat heavily.

"I say, you don't mean it?" he whispered.

"Yes, I do. First of all I heard something rustle close by me, and I saw the grass move, and there was a snake."

"How big?" cried Rifle, excitedly; "twenty feet?"

"No. Not eight, but it looked thick, and I watched it, meaning to shoot if it showed fight, but it went away as hard as ever it could go."

"A snake—eight feet long!" cried Rifle, breathlessly. "I say, we are abroad now, Tim. Why didn't you shoot it?"

"Didn't try to do me any harm," replied Tim, "and there was something else to look at."

"Eh? What?"

"Don't look at the wood, Rifle, or they may rush out and throw spears at us."

"Who?—savages?" whispered Rifle.

"Yes; there are some of them hiding in that patch of trees."

"Nonsense! there isn't room."

"But I saw something black quite plainly. Shall I fire?"

"No," said Rifle, stoutly. "It would look so stupid if it was a false alarm. I was scared at first, but I believe now that it's all fancy."

"It isn't," said Tim in a tone full of conviction; "and it would be ever so much more stupid to be posted here as sentry and to let the enemy come on us without giving the alarm."

"Rubbish! There is no enemy," cried Rifle.

"Then why did my uncle post sentries?"

"Because he's a soldier," cried the other. "Here, have some tea. It isn't too hot now, and old Man's signalling for his dose."

"I can't drink tea now," said Tim, huskily. "I'm sure there's somebody there."

"Then let's go and see."

Tim was silent.

"What, are you afraid?" said his cousin.

"No. Are you?"

"Don't ask impertinent questions," replied Rifle shortly. "Will you come?"

For answer Tim cocked his piece, and the two boys advanced over the thick grass toward the patch of dense scrub, their hearts beating heavily as they drew nearer, and each feeling that, if he had been alone, he would have turned and run back as hard as ever he could.

But neither could show himself a coward in the other's eyes, and they walked on step by step, more and more slowly, in the full expectation of seeing a dozen or so of hostile blacks spring to their feet from their hiding-place, and charge out spear in hand.

The distance was short, but it seemed to them very long, and with eyes roving from bush to bush, they went on till they were close to the first patch of trees, the rest looking more scattered as they drew nearer, when all at once there was a hideous cry, which paralysed them for the moment, and Tim stood with his gun half raised to his shoulder, searching among the trees for the savage who had uttered the yell.

Another followed, with this time a beating of wings, and an ugly-looking black cockatoo flew off, while Rifle burst into a roar of laughter.

"Why didn't you shoot the savage?" he cried. "Here, let's go right through the bushes and back. Perhaps we shall see some more."

Tim drew a deep breath full of relief, and walked forward without a word, passing through the patch and back to where the tea-jug had been left.

Here he drank heartily, and wiped his brow, while Rifle filled the mug a second time.

"You may laugh," he said, "but it was a horrible sensation to feel that there were enemies."

"Poll parrots," interrupted Rifle.

"Enemies watching you," said Tim with a sigh. "I say, Rifle, don't you feel nervous coming right out here where there isn't a soul?"

"I don't know—perhaps. It does seem lonely. But not half so lonely as standing on deck looking over the bulwarks on a dark night far out at sea."

"Yes; that did seem terrible," said Tim.

"But we got used to it, and we *must* get used to this. More tea?"

"No, thank you."

"Then I'm off."

With the jug partly emptied, Rifle was able to run to the open part, where Man greeted him with:

"I say, what a while you've been. See some game over yonder?"

"No; but Tim thought there were savages in that bit of wood."

"What! and you two went to see?"

"Yes."

"You were stupid. Why, they might have speared you."

"Yes; but being a sentry, Tim thought we ought to search the trees and see, and being so brave we went to search the place."

He was pouring out some tea in the mug as he said the above, and his brother looked at him curiously.

"You're both so what?" cried Man, with a mocking laugh. "Why, I'll be bound to say—" *glug, glug, glug, glug*—"Oh, I was so thirsty. That was good," he sighed holding out the mug for more.

"What are you bound to say?" said Rifle, refilling the mug.

"That you both of you never felt so frightened before in your life. Come now, didn't you?"

"Well, I did feel a bit uneasy," said Rifle, importantly; but he avoided his brother's eye.

"Uneasy, eh?" said Man; "well, I call it frightened."

"You would have been if it had been you."

"Of course I should," replied Man. "I should have run for camp like a shot."

Rifle looked at him curiously.

"No; you wouldn't," he said.

"Oh, shouldn't I. Catch me stopping to let the blacks make a target of me. I should have run as hard as I could."

"That's what I thought," said Rifle, after a pause; "but I couldn't turn. I was too much frightened."

"What, did your knees feel all shivery-wiggle?"

"No; it wasn't that. I was afraid of Tim thinking I was a coward, and so I went on with him, and found it was only a black cockatoo that had frightened him, but I was glad when it was all over. You'd have done the same, Man."

"Would I?" said the lad, dubiously. "I don't know. Aren't you going to have a drop yourself?"

Rifle poured the remains of the tea into the mug, and gave it a twist round.

"I say," he said, to change the conversation, which was not pleasant to him, "as soon as we get settled down at the farm, I shall vote for our having milk with our tea."

"Cream," cried Man. "I'm tired of ship tea and nothing in it but sugar. Hist! look there."

His brother swung round and followed the direction of Man's pointing finger, to where in the distance they could see some animals feeding among the grass.

"Rabbits!" cried the boy eagerly.

"Nonsense!" said Man; "they're too big. Who ever saw rabbits that size?"

"Well, hares then," said Rifle, excitedly. "I say, why not shoot one?"

Norman made no answer, but stood watching the animals as, with long ears erect, they loped about among the long grass, taking a bite here and a bite there.

Just then a shrill whistle came from the camp, and at the sound the animals sat up, and then in a party of about a dozen, went bounding over the tall grass and bushes at a rapid rate, which kept the boys watching them, till they caught sight of Tim making for the party beneath the tree, packing up, and preparing to continue the journey.

"Now, boys, saddle up," cried the captain. "See the kangaroos?"

"Of course, cried Norman; we ought to have known, but the grass hid their legs. I thought their ears were not long enough for rabbits."

"Rabbits six feet high!" said the captain, smiling.

"Six what, father?" cried Norman.

"Feet high," said the captain; "some of the males are, when they sit up on their hind-legs, and people say that they are sometimes dangerous when hunted. I daresay we shall know more about them by-and-by.—What made you go forward, Tim, when Rifle came to you—to look at the kangaroos?"

"No, uncle; I thought I saw blacks amongst the bushes."

"Well, next time, don't advance, but retire. They are clever with their spears, and I don't want you to be hit."

He turned quickly, for he heard a sharp drawing of the breath behind him, and there was Mrs Bedford, with a look of agony on her face, for she had heard every word.

"But the blacks will not meddle with us if we do not meddle with them," he continued quickly; though he was conscious that his words had not convinced his wife.

He went close up to her.

"Come," he whispered, "is this being brave and setting the boys a good example?"

"I am trying, dear," she whispered back, "so hard you cannot tell."

"Yes, I can," he replied tenderly; "I know all you suffer, but try and be stout-hearted. Some one must act as a pioneer in a new country. I am trying to be one, and I want your help. Don't discourage me by being faint-hearted about trifles, and fancying dangers that may never come."

Mrs Bedford pressed her husband's hand, and half an hour later, and all in the same order, the little caravan was once more in motion, slowly but very surely, the country growing still more beautiful, and all feeling, when they halted in a beautiful glade that evening, and in the midst of quite a little scene of excitement the new tent was put up

for the first time, that they had entered into possession of a new Eden, where all was to be happiness and peace.

A fire was soon lit, and mutton steaks being frizzled, water was fetched; the cattle driven to the river, and then to pasture, after the wagons and carts had been disposed in a square about the tent. Then a delicious meal was eaten, watch set, and the tired travellers watched the creeping on of the dark shadows, till all the woodland about them was intensely black, and the sky seemed to be one blaze of stars glittering like diamonds, or the sea-path leading up to the moon.

It had been decided that all would go to rest in good time, so that they might breakfast at dawn, and get well on in the morning before the sun grew hot; but the night was so balmy, and everything so peaceful and new, that the time went on, and no one stirred.

The fire had been made up so that it might smoulder all through the night, and the great kettle had been filled and placed over it ready for the morning; and then they all sat upon box, basket, and rug spread upon the grass, talking in a low voice, listening to the *crop, crop* of the cattle, and watching the stars or the trees lit up now and then by the flickering flames of the wood fire; till all at once, unasked, as if moved by the rippling stream hard by, Ida began to sing in a low voice the beautiful old melody of "Flow on, thou Shining River," and Hester took up the second part of the duet till about half through, the music sounding wonderfully sweet and solemn out in those primeval groves, when suddenly Hester ceased singing, and sat with lips apart gazing straight before her.

"Hetty," cried Ida, ceasing, "what is it?" Then, as if she had caught sight of that which had checked her Cousin's singing, she uttered a wild and piercing shriek, and the men and boys sprang to their feet, the captain making a dash for the nearest gun.

Chapter Four.

"White Mary 'gin to Sing."

"What is it—what did you see?" was whispered by more than one in the midst of the intense excitement; and just then German, who had been collecting dry fuel ready to use for the smouldering embers in the morning, did what might have proved fatal to the emigrants.

He threw half an armful of dry brushwood on the fire, with the result that there was a loud crackling sound, and a burst of brilliant flame which lit up a large circle round, throwing up the figures of the little party clearly against the darkness, ready for the spears of the blacks who might be about to attack them.

"Ah!" shouted Uncle Jack, and seizing a blanket which had been spread over the grass, where the girls had been seated, he threw it right over the fire, and in an instant all was darkness.

But the light had spread out long enough for the object which had startled Hetty to be plainly seen. For there, twenty yards away in front of a great gum-tree, stood a tall black figure with its gleaming eyes fixed upon the group, and beneath those flaming eyes a set of white teeth glistened, as if savagely, in the glow made by the blaze.

"Why, it's Ashantee," cried Norman, excitedly; and he made a rush at the spot where he had seen the strange-looking figure, and came upon it where it stood motionless with one foot against the opposite leg, and the tall stick or spear planted firmly upon the ground.

Click, click! came from the captain's gun, as he ran forward shouting, "Quick, all of you, into the tent!"

"What are you doing here?" cried Norman, as he grasped the black's arm.

"Tickpence. Got tickpence," was the reply.

Norman burst into a roar of laughter, and dragged the black forward.

"Hi! father. I've taken a prisoner," he cried.—"But I say, uncle, that blanket's burning. What a smell!"

"No, no, don't take it off," said the captain; "let it burn now."

Uncle Munday stirred the burning blanket about with a stick, and it blazed up furiously, the whole glade being lit up again, and the trembling women tried hard to suppress the hysterical sobs which struggled for utterance in cries.

"Why, you ugly scoundrel!" cried the captain fiercely, as hanging back in a half-bashful manner the black allowed himself to be dragged right up to the light, "what do you mean? How dare you come here?"

"Tick pence," said the black. "You gib tickpence."

"Gib tickpence, you sable-looking unclothed rascal!" cried the captain, whose stern face relaxed. "Thank your stars that I didn't give you a charge of heavy shot."

"Tickpence. Look!"

"Why, it's like a conjuring trick," cried Norman, as the native joined them. "Look at him."

To produce a little silver coin out of one's pockets is an easy feat; but Ashantee brought out his sixpence apparently from nowhere, held it out between his black finger and thumb in the light for a minute, so that all could see, and then in an instant it had disappeared again, and he clapped his foot with quite a smack up against his leg again, and

showed his teeth as he went on.

"White Mary 'gin to sing. Wee-eak!" he cried, with a perfect imitation of the cry the poor girl had uttered. "Pipum crow 'gin to sing morrow mornum."

He let his spear fall into the hollow of his arm, and placing both hands to his mouth, produced a peculiarly deep, sweet-toned whistle, which sounded as if somebody were incorrectly running up the notes of a chord.

"Why, I heard some one whistling like that this morning early," cried Tim.

"Pipum crow," said the black again, and he repeated the notes, but changed directly with another imitation, that of a peculiarly harsh braying laugh, which sounded weird and strange in the still night air.

"Most accomplished being!" said Uncle Munday, sarcastically.

"Laughum Jackamarass," said the black; and he uttered the absurd cry again.

"Why, I heard that this morning!" cried Rifle. "It was you that made the row?"

"Laughum Jackamarass," said the black importantly. "Sung in um bush. You gib Shanter tickpence. You gib damper?"

"What does he mean?" said Uncle Jack. "Hang him, he gave us a damper."

"Hey? Damper?" cried the black, and he smacked his lips and began to rub the lower part of his chest in a satisfied way.

"He wants a piece of bread," said the captain.—"Here, aunt, cut him a lump and let's get rid of him. There is no cause for alarm. I suppose he followed us to beg, but I don't want any of his tribe."

"Oh, my dear Edward, no," cried Aunt Georgie. "I don't want to see any more of the dreadful black creatures.—Here, chimney-sweep, come here."

As she spoke, she opened the lid of a basket, and drew from its sheath a broad-bladed kitchen knife hung to a thin leather belt, which bore a clasped bag on the other side.

"Hi crikey!" shouted the black in alarm, his *repertoire* of English words being apparently stored with choice selections taught him by the settlers. "Big white Mary going killancookaneatum."

"What does the creature mean?" said Aunt Georgie, who had not caught the black's last compound word.

"No, no," said Norman, laughing. "She's going to cut you some damper, Shanter."

"Ho! mind a knife—mind a knife," said the black; and he approached warily.

"He thought you were going to kill and cook him, aunt," said the boy, who was in high glee at the lady's disgust.

"I thought as much," cried Aunt Georgie; "then the wretch is a cannibal, or he would never have had such nasty ideas.—Ob, Edward, what were you thinking about to bring us into such a country!"

"Bio white Mary gib damper?" asked the black insinuatingly.

"Not a bit," said Aunt Georgie, making a menacing chop with the knife, which made the black leap back into a picturesque attitude, with his rough spear poised as if he were about to hurl it.

"Quick, Edward!—John!" cried Aunt Georgie, sheltering her face with her arms. "Shoot the wretch; he's going to spear me."

"Nonsense! Cut him some bread and let him go. You threatened him first with the knife."

The whole party were roaring with laughter now at the puzzled faces of Aunt Georgina and the black, who now lowered his spear.

"Big white Mary want to kill Shanter?" he said to Rifle.

"No; what nonsense!" cried Aunt Georgie indignantly; "but I will not cut him a bit if he dares to call me big white Mary. Such impudence!"

"My dear aunt!" said the captain, wiping his eyes, "you are too absurd."

"And you laughing too?" she cried indignantly. "I came out into this heathen land out of pure affection for you all, thinking I might be useful, and help to protect the girls, and you let that wretch insult and threaten me. Big white Mary, indeed! I believe you'd be happy if you saw him thrust that horrid, great skewer through me, and I lay weltering in my gore."

"Stuff, auntie!" cried Uncle Jack.

"Why, he threatened me."

"Big white Mary got a lot o' hot damper. Gib Shanter bit."

"There he goes again!" cried the old lady.

"He doesn't mean any harm. The blacks call all the women who come white Marys."

"And their wives too?"

"Oh no; they call them their gins. Come, cut him a big piece of bread, and I'll start him off. I want for us to get to rest."

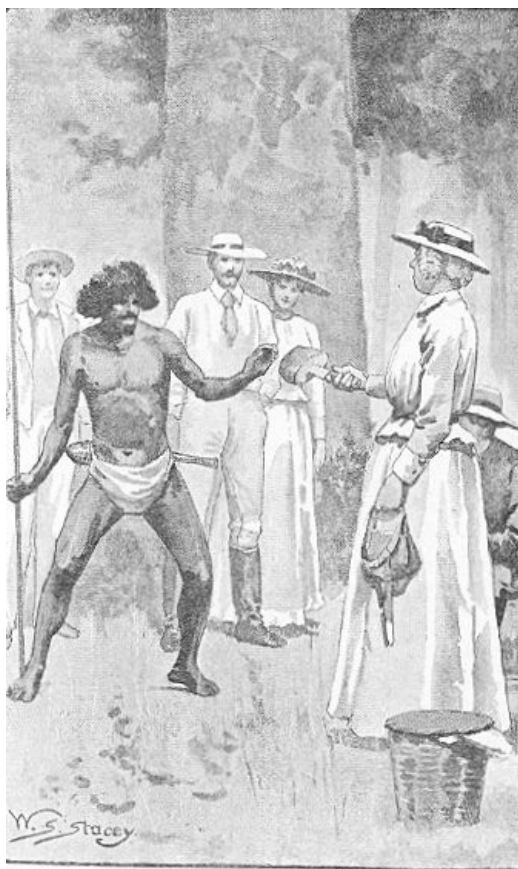
"Am I to cut it in slices and butter it?"

"No, no. Cut him one great lump."

Aunt Georgie sighed, opened a white napkin, took out a large loaf, and cut off about a third, which she impaled on the point of the knife, and held out at arm's length, while another roar of laughter rose at the scene which ensued.

For the black looked at the bread, then at Aunt Georgie, then at the bread again suspiciously. There was the gleaming point of that knife hidden within the soft crumb; and as his mental capacity was nearly as dark as his skin, and his faith in the whites, unfortunately—from the class he had encountered and from whom he had received more than one piece of cruel ill-usage—far from perfect, he saw in imagination that sharp point suddenly thrust right through and into his black flesh as soon as he tried to take the piece of loaf.

The boys literally shrieked as the black stretched out a hand, made a feint to take it, and snatched it back again.



Shanter and Aunt Georgie.

"Take it, you stupid!" cried Aunt Georgie, with a menacing gesture.

"Hetty—Ida—look!" whispered Tim, as the black advanced a hand again, but more cautiously.

"Mind!" shouted Rifle; and the black bounded back, turned to look at the boy, and then showed his white teeth.

"Are you going to take this bread?" cried Aunt Georgie, authoritatively.

"No tick a knifum in Shanter?" said the black in reply.

"Nonsense! No."

"Shanter all soff in frontum."

"Take the bread."

Every one was laughing and watching the little scone with intense enjoyment as, full of doubt and suspicion, the black advanced his hand again very cautiously, and nearly touched the bread, when Aunt Georgie uttered a contemptuous "pish!" whose effect was to make the man bound back a couple of yards, to the lady's great disgust.

"I've a great mind to throw it at his stupid, cowardly head," she cried angrily.

"Don't do that," said the captain, wiping his eyes. "Poor fellow! he has been tricked before. A burned child fears the fire.—Hi! Ashantee, take the bread," said the captain, and he wiped his eyes again.

"Make um all cry," said the black, apostrophising Aunt Georgie; then, turning to the captain, "Big white Mary won't tick knifum in poor Shanter?"

"No, no, she will not.—Here, auntie, give him the bread with your hand."

"I won't," said Aunt Georgie, emphatically. "I will not encourage his nasty, suspicious thoughts. He must be taught better. As if I, an English lady, would do such a thing as behave like a murderous bravo of Venice.—Come here, sir, directly, and take that bread off the point of the knife," and she accompanied her words with an unmistakable piece of pantomime, holding the bread out, and pointing with one finger.

"Don't, pray, don't stop the fun, uncle," whispered Tim.

"No; let 'em alone," growled Uncle Jack, whose face was puckered up into a broad laugh.

"Do you hear me, sir?"

"No tick a knifum in?"

"No; of course not. No—No."

"All right," said the black; and he stretched out his hand again, and with his eyes fixed upon Aunt Georgie, he slowly approached till he nearly touched the bread.

"That's right; take it," said the old lady, giving it a sharp push forward at the same moment, and the black leaped back once more with a look of disgust upon his face which gave way to another grin.

"What shame!" he cried in a tone of remonstrance. "'Tick knife in, make um bleed. Damper no good no more."

"Well, of all the horrible creatures!" cried Aunt Georgie, who stood there full in the firelight in happy unconsciousness of the fact that the scene was double, for the shadows of the two performers were thrown grotesquely but distinctly upon the wall of verdure by their side.

Just then a happy thought struck the black, who advanced again nearly within reach of the bread, planted his spear behind him as a support, holding it with both hands, and then, grinning mightily at his own cunning in keeping his body leaning back out of reach, he lifted one leg, and with his long elastic foot working, stretched it out and tried to take the piece of bread with his toes.

A perfect shriek of laughter arose from the boys at this, and the black turned sharply to give them a self-satisfied nod, as if to say, "She can't get at me now," while the mirth increased as Aunt Georgie snatched the bread back.

"That you don't, sir," she cried. "Such impudence! You take that bread properly, or not a bit do you have."

As she spoke she shook the knife at him, and the black again leaped back, looked serious, and then scratched his head as if for a fresh thought.

The idea came as Aunt Georgie stretched out the bread again.

"Now, sir," she cried, "come and take it this instant."

The black hesitated, then, slowly lowering the spear, he brought the point down to the bread and made a sudden poke at it; but the fire-hardened point glanced off the crust, and two more attempts failed.

"No," said Aunt Georgie; "you don't have it like that, sir. I could turn the crumb round and let you get it, but you shall take it properly in your hand. Now then, take it correctly."

She made another menacing gesture, which caused the black to shrink; but he was evidently hungry, and returned to get the bread; so this time he advanced with lowered spear, and as he drew near he laid the weapon on the bread, and slowly advanced nearer and nearer, the spear passing over the bread till, as the black's left hand touched the loaf, the point of the spear was within an inch of Aunt Georgie's breast. But the old lady did not shrink. She stood her ground bravely, her eyes fixed on the black's and her lips going all the time.

"Oh, you suspicious wretch!" she cried. "How dare you doubt me! Yes; you had better! Why, if you so much as scratched me with the point of your nasty stick, they would shoot you dead. There, take it."

The captain felt startled, for just then she made a sharp gesture when the black was in the act of snatching the bread. But the alarm was needless; the savage's idea was to protect himself, not to resist her, and as the quick movement she made caused the bread to drop from the point of the knife, he bobbed down, secured it almost as it touched the ground, caught it up, and darted back.

"Shanter got a damper," he cried; and tearing off a piece, he thrust it into his mouth. "Hah, nice, good. Soff damper. No tick knifum in Shanter dis once."

"There," said the captain, advancing, "you have your damper, and there's another sixpence for you. Now go."

The black ceased eating, and looked at the little piece of silver.

"What for tickpence?" he said.

"For you—for your gin."

"Hey, Shanter no got gin. Gin not have tickpence." He shook his head, and went on eating.

"Very well then; good-night. Now go."

"Go 'long?"

"Yes. Be off!"

The black nodded and laughed.

"Got tickpence—got damper. No couldn't tick a knifum in Shanter. Go 'long—be off!"

He turned sharply, made a terrible grimace at Aunt Georgie, shook his spear, struck an attitude, as if about to throw his spear at her, raised it again, and then threw the bread high up, caught it as it came down on the point, shouldered his weapon, and marched away into the darkness, which seemed to swallow him up directly.

"There, good people," said the captain merrily, "now time for bed."

Ten minutes later the embers had been raked together, watch set, and for the most part the little party dropped asleep at once, to be awakened by the chiming notes of birds, the peculiar whistle of the piping crows, and the shrieks of a flock of gloriously painted parrots that were busy over the fruit in a neighbouring tree.

Chapter Five.

"How many did you see?"

It was only dawn, but German had seen that the great kettle was boiling where it hung over the wood fire, and that the cattle were all safe, and enjoying their morning repast of rich, green, dewy grass. The boys were up and off at once, full of the life and vigour given by a night's rest in the pure fresh air, and away down to the river side to have a bath before breakfast.

Then, just as flecks of orange were beginning to appear, Aunt Georgie came out of the tent tying on an apron before picking up a basket, and in a businesslike way going to the fire, where she opened the canister, poured some tea into a bit of muslin, and tied it up loosely, as if she were about to make a tea-pudding.

"Too much water, Samuel," she said; "pour half away."

Sam German lifted down the boiling kettle, and poured half away.

"Set it down, Samuel."

"Yes, mum," said the man obediently; and as it was placed by the fire, Aunt Georgie plunged her tea-bag in, and held it beneath the boiling water with a piece of stick.

Just then the captain and Uncle Jack appeared from where they had been inspecting the horses.

"Morning, auntie," said the former, going up and kissing the sturdy-looking old lady.

"Good-morning, my dear," she replied; "you needn't ask me. I slept deliciously, and only dreamed once about that dreadful black man.—Good-morning, John, my dear," she continued, kissing Uncle Jack. "Why, you have not shaved, my dear."

"No," he said gruffly, "I'm going to let my beard grow."

"John!" exclaimed Aunt Georgie.

"Time those girls were up," said the captain.

"They'll be here directly, Edward," said the old lady; "they are only packing up the blankets."

"Oh!" said the captain; "that's right. Why, where are the boys gone?"

"Down to the river for a bathe, sir," said German.

"What! Which way?" roared the captain.

"Straight down yonder, sir, by the low trees."

"Quick, Jack, your gun!" cried the captain, running to the wagon, getting his, and then turning to run in the direction pointed out; his brother, who was accustomed to the captain's quick military ways, and knowing that he would not give an order like that if there were not dire need, following him directly, armed with a double gun, and getting close up before he asked what was the matter.

"Matter?" panted the captain. "Cock your piece—both barrels—and be ready to fire when I do. The boys are gone

down to the river."

"What, are there really savages there?"

"Yes," said the captain, hoarsely; "savages indeed. Heaven grant we may be there in time. They have gone to bathe, and the river swarms for a long way up with reptiles."

Uncle Jack drew a deep breath as, with his gun at the trail, he trotted on beside his brother, both increasing their pace as they heard the sound of a splash and shouting.

"Faster!" roared the captain, and they ran on till they got out from among the trees on to a clearing, beautifully green now, but showing plain by several signs that it was sometimes covered by the glittering river which ran deep down now below its banks.

There before them were Rifle and Tim, just in the act of taking off their last garments, and the former was first and about to take a run and a header off the bank into the deep waters below, when, quick as thought, the captain raised his gun, and without putting it to his shoulder, held it pistol way, and fired in the air.

"Now you can shoot!" cried the captain; and again, without stopping to ask questions, Uncle Jack obeyed, the two shots sounding almost deafening in the mist that hung over the ravine.

As the captain had anticipated, the sound of the shots stopped Rifle at the very edge of the river, and made him make for his clothes, and what was of even greater importance, as he reached the bank where the river curved round in quite a deep eddy beneath them, there was Norman twenty yards away swimming rapidly toward a shallow place where he could land.

Words would not have produced such an effect.

"Now," said the captain, panting for breath from exertion and excitement, "watch the water. Keep your gun to your shoulder, and fire the moment there is even a ripple anywhere near the boy."

Uncle Jack obeyed, while as Norman looked up, he saw himself apparently covered by the two guns, and at once dived like a dabchick.

"Madness! madness!" groaned the captain; "has he gone down to meet his fate. What are you loaded with?"

"Ball," said Uncle Jack, laconically.

"Better lie down and rest your piece on the edge of the bank. You must not miss."

As they both knelt and rested the guns, Norman's head appeared.

"I say, don't," he shouted. "I see you. Don't do that."

"Ashore, quick!" roared the captain, so fiercely that the boy swam harder.

"No," roared the captain again; "slowly and steadily."

"Yes, father, but don't, don't shoot at me. I'm only bathing."

"Don't talk; swim!" cried the captain in a voice of thunder; and the boy swam on, but he did not make rapid way, for the tide, which reached up to where they were, was running fast, and as he swam obliquely across it, he was carried rapidly down.

"What have I done—what does it mean?" he thought, as he swam on, growing so much excited now by the novelty of his position that his limbs grew heavy, and it was not without effort that he neared the bank, still covered by the two guns; and at last touched bottom, waded a few paces, and climbed out to where he was able to mount the slope and stand in safety upon the grass.

"Ned, old fellow, what is it?" whispered Uncle Jack, catching his brother's arm, for he saw his face turn of a ghastly hue.

"Hush! don't take any notice. I shall be better directly. Load that empty barrel."

Uncle John Munday Bedford obeyed in silence, but kept an eye upon his brother as he poured in powder, rammed down a wad, and then sent a charge of big shot rattling into the gun before thrusting in another wad and ramming it home.

As he did all this, and then prised open the pan of the lock to see that it was well filled with the fine powder—for there were no breechloaders in those days, and the captain had decided to take their old flint-lock fowling-pieces for fear that they might be stranded some day up-country for want of percussion caps—the deadly sickness passed off, and Captain Bedford sighed deeply, and began to reload in turn.

Meanwhile, Norman, after glancing at his father, naturally enough ran to where he had left his clothes, hurried into shirt and trousers, and as soon as he was, like his companions, half-dressed, came toward the two men, Rifle and Tim following him, after the trio had had a whispered consultation.

"I'm very sorry, father," faltered Norman, as he saw the stern, frowning face before him, while Uncle Jack looked almost equally solemn.

Then, as the captain remained silent, the lad continued: "I know you said that we were to journey up the country quite in military fashion, and obey orders in everything; but I did not think it would be doing anything wrong for us all to go and have a morning swim."

"Was it your doing?" said the captain, coldly.

"Yes, father. I know it was wrong now, but I said there would be time for us all to bathe, as the river was so near. I didn't think that—"

"No," said the captain, sternly, "you did not think—you did not stop to think, Norman. That is one of the differences between a boy and a man. Remember it, my lad. A boy does not stop to think: as a rule a man does. Now, tell me this, do I ever refuse to grant you boys any reasonable enjoyment?"

"No, father."

"And I told you before we started that you must be very careful to act according to my rules and regulations, for an infringement might bring peril to us all."

"Yes, father."

"And yet you took upon yourself to go down there to bathe in that swift, strange river, and took your brother and cousin."

"Yes, father. I see it was wrong now, but it seemed a very innocent thing to do."

"Innocent? You could not have been guilty of a more wild and mad act. Why would not the captain allow bathing when we were in the tropics?"

"Because of the sharks; but there would not be sharks up here in this river."

"Are there no other dangerous creatures infesting water, sir?"

A horrified look came into Norman's eyes, and the colour faded out of his cheeks.

"What!" he said at last, in a husky voice, "are there crocodiles in the river?"

"I had it on good authority that the place swarmed with them, sir; and you may thank God in your heart that my enterprise has not been darkened at the start by a tragedy."

"Oh, father!" cried the boy, catching at the captain's hand.

"There, it has passed, Man," said the captain, pressing the boy's hand and laying the other on his shoulder; "but spare me such another shock. Think of what I must have felt when German told me you boys had come down to bathe. I ought to have warned you last night; but I cannot think of everything, try as I may. There, it is our secret, boys. Your mother is anxious enough, so not a word about this. Quick, get on your clothes, and come on to breakfast. —Jack, old fellow," he continued, as he walked slowly back, "it made me feel faint as a woman. But mind about the firing. We did not hit anything. They will very likely ask."

As it happened, no questions were asked about the firing, and after a hearty breakfast, which, in the bright morning, was declared to be exactly like a picnic, they started once more on what was a glorious excursion, without a difficulty in their way. There was no road, not so much as a faint track, but they travelled on through scenery like an English park, and the leader had only to turn aside a little from time to time to avoid some huge tree, no other obstacles presenting themselves in their way.

German, the captain's old servant, a peculiarly crabbed man in his way, drove the cart containing the tent, provisions, and other immediate necessities; Uncle Munday came last on horseback with his gun instead of a riding-whip, driving the cattle and spare horses, which followed the lead willingly enough, only stopping now and then to crop the rich grass.

The progress was naturally very slow, but none the less pleasant, and so long as the leader went right, and Uncle Munday took care that no stragglers were left behind, there was very little need for the other drivers to trouble about their charges; while the girls, both with their faces radiant with enjoyment, cantered about quite at home on their side-saddles, now with the captain, who played the part of scout in advance and escort guard, now behind with Uncle Jack, whose severe face relaxed whenever they came to keep him company.

Hence it was that, the incident of the morning almost forgotten, Norman left the horses by whose side he trudged, to go forward to Rifle, who was also playing carter.

"How are you getting on?" he said.

"Slowly. I want to get there. Let's go and talk to Tim."

Norman was ready enough, and they went on to where their cousin was seated on the shaft of one of the carts whistling, and practising fly-fishing with his whip.

"Caught any?" said Rifle.

"Eh? Oh, I see," said the boy, laughing. "No; but I say there are some flies out here, and can't they frighten the horses!"

"Wouldn't you like to go right forward?" said Norman, "and see what the country's like?"

"No: you can see from here without any trouble."

"Can you?" said Rifle; and catching his cousin by the shoulder, he gave him a sharp pull, and made him leap to the ground.

"What did you do that for?" said Tim resentfully.

"To make you walk. Think the horse hasn't got enough to drag without you? Let's go and talk to Sourkrout."

"If old Sam hears you call him that, he'll complain to father," said Norman quietly.

"Not he. Wouldn't be such an old sneak. Come on."

The three boys went forward to where Sam German sat up high in front of the cart looking straight before him, and though he seemed to know that the lads were there by him, he did not turn his eyes to right or left.

"What can you see, Sam?" cried Rifle eagerly.

"Nought," was the gruff reply.

"Well, what are you looking at?"

"Yon tree right away there."

"What for?"

"That's where the master said I was to make for, and if I don't keep my eye on it, how am I to get there."

He nodded his head toward a tree which stood up alone miles and miles away, but perfectly distinct in the clear air, and for a few minutes nothing more was said, for there were flies, birds, and flowers on every hand to take the attention of the boys.

"How do you like Australia, Sam?" said Norman, at last.

"Not at all," grumbled the man.

"Well, you are hard to please. Why, the place is lovely."

"Tchah! I don't see nothing lovely about it. I want to know why the master couldn't take a farm in England instead of coming here. What are we going to do for neighbours when we get there?"

"Be our own neighbours, Sam," said Rifle.

"Tchah! You can't."

"But see how beautiful the place is," said Tim, enthusiastically.

"What's the good of flowers, sir? I want taters."

"Well, we are going to grow some soon, and everything else too."

"Oh! are we?" growled Sam. "Get on, will yer?"—this to the horse. "Strikes me as the captain's going to find out something out here."

"Of course he is—find a beautiful estate, and make a grand farm and garden."

"Oh! is he?" growled Sam. "Strikes me no he won't. Grow taters, will he? How does he know as they'll grow?"

"Because it's such beautiful soil, you can grow Indian corn, sugar, tobacco, grapes, anything."

"Injun corn, eh? English corn's good enough for me. Why, I grew some Injun corn once in the hothouse at home, and pretty stuff it was."

"Why, it was very handsome, Sam," said Rifle.

"Hansum? Tchah. What's the good o' being hansum if you ain't useful?"

"Well, *you're* not handsome, Sam," said Norman, laughing.

"Who said I was, sir? Don't want to be. That's good enough for women folk. But I am useful. Come now."

"So you are, Sam," said Tim; "the jolliest, usefulest fellow that ever was."

"Useful, Master 'Temus, but I don't know about jolly. Who's going to be jolly, transported for life out here like a convick? And as for that Injun corn, it was a great flop-leaved, striped thing as grew a ear with the stuff in it hard as pebbles on the sea-saw—seashore, I mean."

"Sam's got his tongue in a knot," said Norman. "What are you eating, Sam?"

"Ain't eating—chewing."

"What are you chewing, then. India-rubber?"

"Tchah! Think I want to make a schoolboy's pop-patch? Inger-rubber? No; bacco."

"Ugh! nasty," said Rifle. "Well, father says he shall grow tobacco."

"'Tain't to be done, Master Raffle," said Sam, cracking his whip; nor grapes nayther. Yer can't grow proper grapes without a glass-house.

"Not in a hot country like this?"

"No, sir. They'll all come little teeny rubbidge things big as black currants, and no better."

"Ah, you'll see," cried Norman.

"Oh yes, I shall see, sir. I ain't been a gardener for five-and-twenty years without knowing which is the blade of a spade and which is the handle."

"Of course you haven't," said Tim.

"Thankye, Master 'Temus. You always was a gentleman as understood me, and when we gets there—if ever we does get there, which I don't believe, for I don't think as there is any there, and master as good as owned to it hisself, no later nor yes'day, when he laughed at me, and said as he didn't know yet where he was a-going—I says, if ever we does get there, and you wants to make yourself a garden, why, I'll help yer."

"Thankye, Sam, you shall."

"Which I will, sir, and the other young gents, too, if they wants 'em and don't scorn 'em, as they used to do."

"Why, when did we scorn gardens?" said the other two boys in a breath.

"Allus, sir; allus, if you had to work in 'em. But ye never scorned my best apples and pears, Master Norman; and as for Master Raffle, the way he helped hisself to my storbys, blackbuds, and throstles was nothing to 'em."

"And will again, Sam, if you grow some," cried Rifle.

"Don't I tell yer it ain't to be done, sir," said Sam, giving his whip a vicious whish through the air, and making the horse toss its head, "Master grow taters? Tchah! not he. You see if they don't all run away to tops and tater apples, and you can't eat they."

"Don't be so prejudiced."

"Me, sir—prejudiced?" cried the gardener indignantly. "Come, I do like that. Can't yer see for yourselves, you young gents, as things won't grow here proper?"

"No!" chorused the boys.

"Look at the flowers everywhere. Why, they're lovely," cried Norman.

"The flowers?" said Sam, contemptuously. "Weeds I call them. I ain't seen a proper rose nor a love-lies-bleeding, nor a dahlia."

"No, but there are plenty of other beautiful flowers growing wild."

"Well, who wants wild-flowers, sir? Besides, I want to see a good wholesome cabbage or dish o' peas."

"Well, you must plant them first."

"Plaint 'em? It won't be no good, sir."

"Well, look at the trees," said Rifle.

"The trees? Ha! ha! ha!" cried Sam, with something he meant for a scornful laugh. "I have been looking at 'em. I don't call them trees."

"What do you call them, then?" said Norman.

"I d'know. I suppose they thinks they're trees, if so be as they can think, but look at 'em. Who ever saw a tree grow with its leaves like that. Leaves ought to be flat, and hanging down. Them's all set edgewise like butcher's broom, and pretty stuff that is."

"But they don't all grow that way."

"Oh yes, they do, sir. Trees can't grow proper in such syle as this here. Look here, Master 'Temus, you always did care for your garden so long as I did all the weeding for you. You can speak fair. Now tell me this, What colour ought green trees to be?"

"Why, green, of course."

"Werry well, then; just look at them leaves. Ye can't call them green; they're pink and laylock, and dirty, soap-suddy green."

"Well, there then, look how beautifully the grass grows."

"Grass? Ye-e-es; it's growing pretty thick. Got used to it, I suppose."

"So will our fruits and vegetables, Sam."

"Nay, Master Norman, never. The syle won't suit, sir, nor the country, nor the time, nor nothing."

"Nonsense!"

"Nay, sir, 'tain't nonsense. The whole place here's topsy-turvy like. Why, it's Christmas in about a fortnit's time, and are you going to tell me this is Christmas weather? Why, it's hot as Horgus."

"Well, that's because we're so far south."

"That we ain't, sir. We're just as far north as we are south, and you can't get over that."

"But it's because we've crossed the line," cried Rifle. "Don't you remember I told you ever so long ago that we were just crossing the line?"

"Oh yes, I remember; but I knew you was gammoning me. I never see no line?"

"Of course not. It's invisible."

"What? Then you couldn't cross it. If a thing's invisibile, it's because it ain't there, and you can't cross a thing as ain't there."

"Oh, you stubborn old mule!" cried Norman.

"If you forgets yourself like that, Master Norman, and treats me disrespectful, calling me a mule, I shall tell the captain."

"No, don't; I'm not disrespectful, Sam," cried Norman, anxiously. "Look here, about the line: don't you know that there's a north pole and a south pole?"

"Yes, I've heard so, sir; and as Sir John Franklin went away from our parts to find it, but he didn't find it, because of course it wasn't there, and he lost hisself instead."

"But, look here; right round the middle of the earth there's a line."

"Don't believe it, sir. No line couldn't ever be made big enough to go round the world; and if it could, there ain't nowheres to fasten it to."

"But I mean an imaginary line that divides the world into two equal parts."

Sam German chuckled.

"'Maginary line, sir. Of course it is."

"And this line—Oh, I can't explain it, Rifle, can you?"

"Course he can't, sir, nor you nayther. 'Tain't to be done. I knowed it were a 'maginary line when you said we war crossing it. But just you look here, sir: 'bout our garden and farm, over which I hope the master weant be disappointed, but I *know* he will, for I asks you young gents this—serusly, mind, as gents as has had your good eddication and growed up scollards—How can a man make a garden in a country where everything is upside down?"

"But it isn't upside down, Sam; it's only different," said Norman.

"That's what I say, sir. Here we are in the middle o' December, when, if the weather's open, you may put in your first crop o' broad Windsor beans, and you've got your ground all ridged to sweeten in the frost. And now, look at this. Why, it's reg'lar harvest time and nothing else. I don't wonder at the natives being black."

"Look, look!" cried Tim suddenly, as he pointed away to where, on an open plain on the right, some birds were running rapidly.

"I see them! what are they?" cried Rifle, excitedly.

"Somebody's chickens," said Sam, contemptuously.

The boys looked at him and laughed.

"Sam German has got to grow used to the place," said Norman. And then, as his father cantered up, he pointed off. "Do you see those, father?"

"What, those birds?" said the captain, eagerly. "Comebacks, sir. Guinea fowls. A bit wild," said Sam, quietly.

"Guinea fowls?" replied the captain, sheltering his eyes. "No; birds twenty times as large, you might say. Why, boys, those must be emus."

"Emus?" said Rifle. "Oh yes, I remember. Ostrichy-looking things. Are those what they are?"

"I do not think there's a doubt about it," replied the captain, after another look at the rapidly-retiring birds, which, after a long stare at the little train of carts and wains, literally made their legs twinkle like the spokes of a carriage wheel as they skimmed over the ground and out of sight.

"Yes," said the captain again, as the last one disappeared. "Emus, the Australian ostriches. You boys ought to make notes of all the wild creatures you see."

"We shan't forget them, uncle," said Tim. "Let's see; there was the black, the snake—"

"Snake? Have you seen one?"

"Oh yes," replied Tim.

"Thirty feet long, wasn't it?" said Norman, giving his brother a look.

"Thirty? More likely three, uncle. I think it was nearer six though."

"Did you kill it?"

"No; it wouldn't stop, but crawled into the bush, and I don't think I should have tried."

"Well, be on your guard all of you. I suppose they are pretty plentiful, and some are very dangerous, but I believe they will all get out of our way if they can. What birds are those?"

A couple of dusky-green birds, with their feathers barred across like those of a hawk or cuckoo, with lines of a darker green, started up from some grass and flew off, their long, pointed tails and rounded heads and beaks showing plainly what they were.

"Ground parrots," said the captain. "It's curious, in a country to which one kind of bird is peculiar, what a variety one sees."

"Is one kind of bird peculiar to this country, then?" asked Norman.

"Well, it is not fair to say peculiar, but one kind is abundant—the parrot—and there are several kinds here."

"Are cockatoos?" said Rifle, eagerly.

"A cockatoo, you might say, is a parrot. The only difference seems to be that it has a crest.—But how much farther do you make it to the tree, German?"

"Miles," said that worthy, rather gruffly. "Keeps getting farther off 'stead o' nigher, sir."

"The air is so wonderfully clear that distance is deceiving. Never mind, keep on slowly, so as not to distress the cattle and the horses with their heavier loads."

"Needn't ha' said that, sir; this horse'll go slow enough," grumbled German. "I get thinking sometimes as he ain't moving at all."

The captain laughed, and as he rode a few yards in advance to carefully scan the country in front, a great deal of whispering and gesticulation went on between the gardener and Norman, while the other boys looked on full of mischievous glee, and egged the lad on.

"No, no, Master Norman; don't, sir. It'd make him cross."

"Yes, and he'd discharge you if I told him how you threw cold water on his plans."

"I ain't a bit afraid o' that, sir," said German, with a grin. "He can't send me back. But I don't want to rile him. I say, don't tell him, sir."

"But you laughed at everything he meant to do."

"That I didn't, sir. Precious little laughing I've done lately."

"Well, then, say you're sorry, and that you think father's plans are splendid."

"What, tell a couple o' big thumpers like that?" whispered German, with virtuous indignation; "no, that I won't. I wonder at you, Master Norman; that I do."

"Oh, very well, then," cried the boy. "Here goes. I say, father—" He ran forward, and as he joined the captain, taking hold of the mane of his horse, and walking on beside him, Sam's face was so full of pitiable consternation that the other two boys laughed.

Sam turned upon them fiercely.

"Ah, it's all very well for you two to grin," he growled. "Think o' what it's going to be for me."

"Serve you right for saying what you did," cried Rifle, by way of consolation.

"Oh, Master Raffle, don't you turn again me, too.—He's too hard, ain't he, Master 'Temus?"

"Not a bit," cried the latter. "You grumble at everything. You're a regular old Sourkrout, always grumbling."

"Well! of all!" gasped the gardener, taking off his hat and wiping his brow.

"Look here," cried Rifle; "father will be back here directly, so you had better go down on your knees and say you're very sorry."

"That I won't," said German, sturdily.

"And say you believe that the place is beautiful, and that you'll make a better garden than we had in the country, and grow everything."

"No; you won't ketch me saying such a word as that, sir, for I don't believe the place is any good at all. I say, see them chaps yonder?"

The boys looked in the direction pointed out by Sam with his whip, and Rifle exclaimed, "Blacks!"

"Yes; I saw one too."

"I seed three or four dodging in and out among the trees," said Sam.

Rifle ran on to join his father.

"Stop a moment, Master Raffle," cried Sam, imploringly. "Oh, he's gone! Go on too, Master 'Temus, and say that I didn't mean it. The captain would be so put out if I found fault, after promising to stand by him through thick and thin."

"Then will the land grow potatoes?" said Tim mischievously.

"If I don't make it grow some as is twice as big as those at home, I'm a Dutchman. Oh dear! Here he comes."

For the captain had turned his horse's head and returned.

"Did you both see blacks?" he said anxiously.

"Yes, both of us, uncle, going from tree to tree along there toward the river."

"How many did you see, Tim?"

"I think it was two, uncle; but I'm not sure, for they darted from bush to bush, and were in sight and out again directly."

"And you, German?"

"Oh, I saw 'em first, sir, just as Master 'Temus says, running and dodging from bush to tree, so as to keep out of sight."

"But how many did you see?"

Can't say for certain, sir; but I don't think there was more'n six.

The captain hesitated for a few moments, then, as if decided what to do, he spoke.

"Keep on, and make for the tree. Have you the gun handy?"

"Yes, sir, close to my elber."

"Loaded."

"That she is, sir. Double dose o' big shot."

"That's right. But I don't think there is any danger. The blacks will not meddle with us if we leave them alone. Look here, boys, we shall go armed for the sake of precaution, but I fervently hope that we shall not be called upon to fire upon the poor wretches. I daresay we shall encounter some of them, and if we do, you must keep them at a distance. Let them know that we are their masters, with firmness, but no cruelty."

"Look, there they go again!" cried Norman, pointing to a patch of woodland, a quarter of a mile forward, to their left.

"Yes, I saw one dart in amongst the scrub," said the captain. "There, keep on as if nothing had happened. It is not worth while to startle your mother and the girls. Now, each of you to his duty, and let the people see that we mean business, and not to take any notice of or to molest them."

Each boy returned to his driving duties, and, on the plea of Mrs Bedford looking dull, the captain made the two girls ride close to the wagon, where she sat with Aunt Georgie, after which he went back to where Uncle Jack was steadily

driving his flocks and herds, and warned him of what he had seen.

"Humph not pleasant," said the captain's brother. "Think they're dangerous?"

"I think that the farther we get away from civilisation the less likely they are to interfere with us, so long as we do not molest them."

"Not going to turn back, then?"

"What, because we have seen a few blacks? Hardly likely, is it?"

"No," said the other; and, keeping a sharp look-out, they went on at their slow crawl for nearly three hours before the landmark was reached, all pretty well exhausted, for the heat had been growing intense. But the great tree was one of many standing out of quite a shady grove, and this was cautiously approached by the captain, who scouted forward in front to find it apparently quite free from any appearance of ever having been occupied, and here in a very short time the little caravan was arranged so that they had some protection in case of an attack; a fire was lit by German, while the boys turned the horses loose to graze; and water being near in a creek, the customary kettle was soon on to boil, and Aunt Georgie was unpacking the store of food, when German shouted, "Hi! quick! look out!" and there was a glimpse of a black figure passing rapidly among the trees.

Chapter Six.

"Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

A run was made for the wagons, in whose shelter the ladies were placed, while with quite military precision, the result of the captain's teaching, men and boys stood to their arms, so that an inimical tribe would have had to face six double guns, whose discharge had been so arranged, that two would always be loading, two firing, and the other two ready to pour in their shots in case of a rush.

It was just at the edge of the grove at one end, where a glimpse of the black figure had been seen, and every eye was strained on the watch for the next appearance of danger.

"I'm glad we were warned in time," said the captain in a low voice. Then, after a painful pause, "Mind this; not a shot must be wasted. If we are to fire on the poor wretches, I should prefer for them to be at a distance, so that the charges of buck-shot may scatter and wound as many as possible, so as to give them a lesson. A close shot means death. No one fires till I give the word."

The moments grew into minutes, and as Norman looked back over his shoulder, he could see the anxious faces of the four ladies peering out at him from their shelter, but not a word was spoken.

"Think they will get round to the back to try and drive off the bullocks?"

"I was thinking of going to see, and— Look out!"

For all at once there was a loud rustling of the bushes in front of them, as if something was making a rush, and the next moment a black figure bounded into the open space where the fire was burning.

"Why, it's old Shanter," cried Rifle, bursting into a hearty laugh, in which the black joined, showing his white teeth with childish delight as he came close up, holding out something hung on the end of his spear, and carrying what appeared to be a bag made of bark in his left hand, in company with his boomerang, his war-club being stuck in the skin loin-cloth which was the only garment he wore.

"White Mary—big white Mary," he cried, while every eye scanned the trees behind him, but only for a moment or two, as all felt now that it was another false alarm.

"What do you want?" said the captain rather angrily, for he was vexed at the black's arrival.

"Shanter want big white Mary," cried the black; and he shook the objects on his spear, which proved to be a couple of opossum-like animals evidently freshly killed, and then held out his bark basket or bag.

"What for?" cried Norman.

"Good eat. Good, nice;" and then as, seeing there was no danger, the ladies came forward, the black went to Aunt Georgie, and held the bag to her. "Good, cook, fire," he said. "Big white Mary. Little white Marys—" Then he stopped short looking at Mrs Bedford, as if puzzled what to call her. But a gleam of intelligence shot across his face, and he cried, "Other white Mary."

"He's brought these for us to eat," said Rifle.

"Good eat," said the black. "Big white Mary gib soff damper."

He nodded and smiled triumphantly from one to the other.

"Put away the guns," said the captain angrily. "Here, I cannot have this black crow haunting our camp. He'll be bringing his tribe to pester us. What would you do, Jack?"

"Don't know yet," said Uncle Jack. "What has he brought in his bag?"

"Some kind of fruit," said Rifle, who had joined his aunt in the inspection of the contents of the bag, as she thrust in her hand, and snatched it away again with a cry of disgust.

"Good eat; good eat. Roastum fire," said the black indignantly, and pouncing upon a couple of large, fat, white objects which the lady had dropped, he ran with them to the fire, and placed them close to the embers, afterwards going through a pantomime of watching them, but with gesticulations indicative of delight.

"Why, they're big fat grubs," cried Norman.

"Of course," said the captain. "I have heard that they eat them. And these other things?"

He turned over the two dead animals.

"Good eat," cried the black; and he rubbed the front of his person, and grinned as broadly as nature would allow him to spread his extensive mouth. Then, turning to Aunt Georgie, "Big white Mary gib soff damper?"

The lady snorted loudly, and looked as if she would never give him another piece; but she drew her knife, and cut off a goodly-sized piece of a loaf, and held it out once more on the point of the knife.

Shanter took the bread without hesitation.

"No tick a knife in um," he cried laughing. "Shanter no 'fraid."

Then taking his bread, he went off to a short distance, and sat down to eat it, while a meal was prepared for the travellers, who then settled down to rest till the heat of the day was past.

But after a few minutes the boys were on their feet again, and ready to explore about the outskirts of the patch of woodland chosen for their resting-place; and on reaching the fire they found that the black had come close up, and seeing his grubs neglected, was busy roasting and eating them.

He looked up, laughing good-humouredly, drew out three or four of the freshly-roasted delicacies from the embers with a bit of pointed stick, and held them up to the boys.

"Good," he said.

"Well, you eat 'em," replied Norman.

The black needed no further invitation, but devoured the nicely-browned objects with great gusto, and smacked his lips.

"I say," cried Tim; "they don't smell bad."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Rifle.

"Seems so nasty," said Norman, as he watched the black attentively, while the fellow carefully arranged some more of the delicacies among the embers. "They're great fine caterpillars, that's what they are."

"But they smell so good," said Tim. "I've often eaten caterpillars in cauliflower."

"So have I," said Norman; "but then we didn't know it."

"And caterpillars lived on cauliflower, so that they couldn't be nasty."

"I don't see that these things could be any worse to eat than shrimps. Old Shanter here seems to like them."

"Old Shanter—O' Shanter—old Tam o' Shanter," said Rifle, thoughtfully.

"You'd better help him to eat them," said Norman, tauntingly.

"I'll eat one if you will," cried Tim. "They smell delicious."

"Very well. I will, if Rifle does too," said Norman.

"Then you won't," said that young gentleman. "Ugh! the nasty-looking things."

"So are oysters and mussels and cockles nasty-looking things," cried Tim, who kept on watching the black eagerly. "I never saw anything so nasty-looking as an old eel. Ugh! I'd as soon eat a snake."

"Snakum good eat," said Shanter, nodding.

"You eat one, then," cried Norman. "I'll shoot the first I see."

"Look here," cried Tim; "are either of you two going to taste one of these things?"

"No," cried both the others; "nor you. You daren't eat one."

"Oh, daren't I? You'll see," replied Tim. "Here, Shanter, give me that brown one."

"Good!" cried the black, raking out one looking of a delicate golden-brown, but it was too hot to hold for a time; and Tim held it on a pointed stick, looking at the morsel with his brow all puckered up.

"Go on, Tim; take it like a pill," cried Norman.

"He won't eat it: he's afraid," said Rifle.

"It's too hot yet," replied Tim.

"Yes, and always will be. Look out, Rifle; he'll pitch it over his shoulder, and pretend he swallowed it."

"No, I shan't," said Tim, sniffing at his delicacy, while the black watched him too, and kept on saying it was good.

"There, pitch it away," said Norman, "and come on and have a walk. I'd as soon eat a worm."

By this time Tim had sniffed again and again, after which he very cautiously bit a tiny piece off one end, hesitated, with his face looking very peculiar before beginning to chew it, but bravely going on; and directly after his face lit up just as his cousins were about to explode with mirth, and he popped the rest of the larva into his mouth, and held out his hand to the black for another.

"Oh! look at the nasty savage," cried Rifle. "You'll be ill and sick after it."

"Shall I?" cried Tim, as with his black face expanding with delight Shanter helped him to some more, and then held out one to Norman to taste.

"I say," cried the latter, watching his cousin curiously, as he was munching away fast; "they aren't good, are they?"

"No," said Rifle; "he's pretending, so as to cheat us into tasting the disgusting things."

"But, Tim, are they good?"

"Horrid!" cried the boy, beginning on another. "Don't you touch 'em.—Here, Shanter, more."

The black turned over those he had roasting, and went on picking out the brownest, as he squatted on his heels before the fire, and holding them out to Tim.

"Well, of all the nasty creatures I ever did see," said Norman, "you are the worst, Tim."

He looked at the grub he held with ineffable disgust, and then sniffed at it.

"You'll have to go to the stream with a tooth-brush, and clean your teeth and mouth with sand."

He sniffed again, and looked at Tim, who just then popped a golden-brown fellow into his mouth.

"Ugh!" ejaculated Rifle, but he took the one the black held out to him on the stick point, smelt it cautiously, looking at Norman the while.

Then both smelt together, looking in each others eyes, Tim feasting away steadily all the time.

"I say," said Norman; "they don't smell so very bad."

"No; not so very," replied Rifle.

"I say: I will if you will."

"What, taste this?"

"Yes."

"Get out. Think I'm going to turn savage because I've come to Australia? Don't catch me feeding like a bird. You'll want to eat snails next."

"Well," said Norman, "Frenchmen eat snails."

"So they do frogs. Let 'em."

"But this thing smells so nice. I say, Rifle, bite it and try."

"Bite it yourself."

Norman did, in a slow, hesitating way, looked as if he were going to eject the morsel as the corners of his lips turned down, but bit a piece more instead, then popped the remaining half in his mouth, and smiled.

"Horrid, ain't they?" cried Tim, while, grinning with genuine pleasure, the black held out another to Norman, who took it directly, held it in first one hand, and then the other, blew upon it to cool it, and then began to eat.

"Oh, they are horrid," he cried. "Give us another, blacky."

"Look here," cried Rifle, watching him curiously, to see if there was any deceit. "I'm not going to be beaten by you two. I say—no games—are they really nice?"

"Find out," cried Norman, stretching out his hand to take another from the pointed stick held out to him. But Rifle was too quick; he snatched it himself, and put it in his mouth directly.

"Oh, murder! isn't it hot," he cried, drawing in his breath rapidly, then beginning to eat cautiously, with his features expanding. "Here, give us another, Tam o' Shanter," and he snatched the next.

"Oh, come, I say, play fair," cried Norman, making sure of the next. "Ain't they good?"

"Licious," said Rifle.—"Come on, cookie. More for me."

"All agone," cried the black, springing up, slapping his legs, and indulging in a kind of triumphal dance round the fire to express his delight at having converted the three white boys, ending by making a tremendous bound in the air, and coming down on all fours. "Eat um all up. You go 'long—come along. Shanter find a more."

"No, not now, old chap," said Norman. "Wait a bit."

"Had 'nuff? Good, good!" cried the black, holding his head on one side and peering at all in turn. "Good—corbon budgery!" (Very good!)

"Yes, splendid. We'll have a feast next time."

The black nodded, and picked up the two little animals which he had tossed aside, and rehung them upon his spear.

He was evidently going to roast them, but Norman stopped him, and pointed out into the open.

"Come along with us."

The black understood.

"Yes; Shanter, come along. Chop sugar-bag."

"But, look here," continued Norman, pointing in different directions. "Black fellow?"

"Black fellow?" cried Shanter, seizing his nulla-nulla—the short club he carried with a round hard knob at the end. "Black fellow?"

He dropped the dead game off his spear, dodged sharply about among the trees, and ended by hurling his weapon at a tree twenty yards away, in whose soft bark it stuck quivering, while the black rushed up, seized it, dragged it out, and then treating the trunk as an enemy, he attacked it, going through the pantomime of knocking it down, beating it on the head, jumping on the imaginary body, and then dragging it in triumph by the heels to where the boys stood laughing. Here he made believe to drop the legs of his dead enemy, and gave him a contemptuous kick. "No budgery. Shanter mumkull (kill) that black fellow."

"You seem to have found a very cheerful companion, boys," said a voice behind them, and Uncle Jack came up with a grim smile on his countenance. "Is that the way that fellow means to kill us?"

"No; that, was to show how he would kill all the black fellows who came near us."

"Mumkull black fellow," cried Shanter, shaking his club threateningly. "No come along."

Seeing the group, the captain, who had been taking a look round, and been speaking to German, who was seated on the top of one of the loaded wagons keeping watch, came up to them.

"That black fellow still here?" he said sternly.

"Black fellow come along," cried Shanter. "Where?"

He rushed about among the bushes, dodged in and out through the trees, and went through a pantomime again of hunting for enemies, but soon came back.

"No black fellow. All agone. Shanter kill mumkull."

"Very well," said the captain; "now then, you go."

He pointed away back in the direction they had come, and, looking disappointed, the black went off toward where the river lay, and soon disappeared among the trees.

"It will not do to encourage any of those fellows about our camp," said the captain decisively; and they returned to where the ladies were seated in the shade, all looking rested and cheerful, and as if they would soon be used to their new life.

A couple of hours later they were on their way again, with the captain and Uncle Jack in front scouting; and as they went on, the latter kept pointing out suitable-looking pieces of land which might be taken up for their settlement, but the captain always shook his head.

"No, Jack," he said; "they will not do."

"But the land is rich in the extreme."

"Yes; but all one dead level. Floods come sometimes, terrible floods which rise in a few hours, and we must have high ground on which to build our station, and to which our flocks and herds can flee."

"Right; I had not thought of that," said Uncle Jack, and they journeyed on till night, making a grove of magnificent trees their resting-place, and then on again for two more days, their progress being of course slow in this roadless land. Everything about them was lovely, and the journey was glorious, becoming more and more like a pleasure excursion every day as they grew more used to the life. The girls were in robust health, the boys full of excitement, and not a single black was met.

It was toward the close of the third day since Shanter had been dismissed, and they were still journeying on over the plain toward a range of mountains far away in the west, for there the captain was under the impression that he would find the tract of land he sought.

As before, they had marked down a clump of trees for their resting-place, and this they reached, just as the golden sun was sinking in a bank of glorious clouds. Here all was peaceful; water was at hand, and the bread brought from the settlement being exhausted, the flour-tub was brought out of the wagon, and Aunt Georgie proceeded to make the cake to bake for their meal—the damper of the colonists—a good fire being soon started by the boys, while the men quickly rigged up the tent.

This done, Sam German came up to the boys and took off his hat and scratched his head, looking from one to the other.

"What's the matter, Sam?" said Norman.

"In trouble, sir."

"What is it?"

"That there little ord'nary heifer as master brought out."

"What the red and white Alderney?" said Rifle.

"No, sir; that there one like a tame rat."

"What the mouse colour?"

"Yes, sir."

"Has she been eating some poisonous weed?"

"I dunno, sir."

"Well; is she ill?" said Rifle.

"Dunno that nayther, sir. She's gone."

"Gone?" cried Tim. "Ida's favourite?"

"Yes, sir. Gone she is. I can't mind o' seeing her for a long time."

"Then you've lost her?" cried Norman angrily. "Now, don't you be too hard on a man, Master Norman, because I ain't the only one as druv the cattle. Mr Munday Bedford's had a good many turns, and so has master, and you young gents druv 'em twiced—"

"Hi! German," shouted the captain just then. "I can't see the mouse-coloured heifer;" and he came toward them with Ida, who had been looking for her pet. "Where is she?"

"That's what I was talking to the young gents about, sir. I can't find her nowhere."

"Not find her?" cried the captain angrily. "I wouldn't lose that animal for fifty pounds. She is so choice bred. Well, saddle a couple of horses. You and one of the boys must go back in search of her. She must have hung back somewhere to-day."

"Can't call to mind seeing her to-day," said the gardener.

"Not seen her to-day?"

"No, papa," said Ida. "I looked for her this morning, but I did not see her, nor yet yesterday, nor the day before. I thought you had tied her up somewhere."

"Never mind, father; we'll soon find her," said Rifle. "She will not have strayed far from the track, will she, Sam?"

"I can't say, sir, now, as I've seen her for three days."

"Then you have neglected your duty, sir. You ought to have known every one of those beasts by heart, and missed one directly. It is disgraceful."

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid it is, but I never missed her, and I feel about sure now that I haven't seen the poor beast since three days ago, when you came to me and said you wanted to drive for a couple of hours, and sent me to mind the leading cart. Next day Mr Munday Bedford, sir, was driving all day at the rear. I was very careful. Shall I start back at once?"

The captain was silent for a few minutes. Then turning to Ida: "Do you think it is three days since you have seen the heifer?"

"Yes, papa; I am almost sure it is," she replied. "But have you been to try and find her?"

"Yes, every morning; but I never for a moment imagined that she was gone right away."

"I won't come back without her, sir," said German eagerly.

"It is of no use," he replied sternly. "We cannot wait here, perhaps six days, for you to go back and return. No: we may find her later on when we are going back to the port. We can't go now."

"Oh!" said Ida, piteously.

"I am very sorry, my dear, but it would be madness to stop. We must go on."

"But couldn't you get some one else to look for her?"

"Whom shall I send?" asked the captain drily; and for the first time Ida realised how far they were from all society, and that by the same time next night they would be farther away still.

"I forgot," she said. "You know best."

"Let us go, father," said Norman. "We boys will find her."

The captain waved his hand and turned away, evidently very much put out at the loss, for the mouse-coloured heifer was destined to be the chief ornament of the dairy out at the new farm.

"I can't help it, Miss Ida," said German, deprecatingly. "I took all the care of the poor beasts I could. I get all the blame, because I found out she was gone, but I've been right in front driving the leading carts nearly all the time; haven't I, Master 'Temus?"

"Yes, Sam; but are you quite sure she has gone?"

"Now, boys!" shouted the captain; "tea!"

They were soon after seated near the fire, partaking of the evening meal. The last rays of the setting sun were dying out, and the sky was fast changing its orange and ruddy gold for a dark violet and warm grey. Very few words were spoken for some time, and the silence was almost painful, broken as it was only by the sharp crack of some burning stick. Every one glanced at the captain, who sat looking very stern, and Mrs Bedford made a sign to the boys not to say anything, lest he should be more annoyed.

But Aunt Georgie was accustomed to speak whenever she pleased. To her the captain and Uncle Jack were only "the boys," and Norman, Raphael, and Artemus "the children." So, after seeing that everybody was well supplied with bread, damper, and cold boiled pork, she suddenly set down the tin mug to which she was trying to accustom herself, after being used to take her tea out of Worcester china, and exclaimed:

"I'm downright vexed about that little cow, Edward. I seemed to know by instinct that she would give very little milk, but that it would be rich as cream, while the butter would be yellow as gold."

"And now she's gone, and there's an end of her," said the captain shortly.

"Such a pity! With her large soft eyes and short curly horns. Dear me, I am vexed."

"So am I," said the captain; "and now say no more about her. It's a misfortune, but we cannot stop to trouble ourselves about misfortunes."

"Humph!" ejaculated Aunt Georgie; and she went on sipping her tea for a time.

"This is a very beautiful place, Edward," she said suddenly. "I was saying so to Marian here. Why don't you build a house and stop without going farther?"

"For several reasons, aunt dear. But don't be uneasy. I shall select quite as beautiful a place somewhere farther on, one that you and the girls will like better than this."

"I don't know so much about that," said the old lady. "I'm rather hard to please.—Oh!"

"What's the matter?" cried those nearest, for the old lady's ejaculation was startling.

"I've got it!" she cried. "Oh the artfulness of the thing, Edward, that man."

"What man?"

"That black fellow. Depend upon it, he came here on purpose to steal our poor little cow, and he has driven it away somewhere to sell."

The captain started and looked excited.

"Oh no, aunt," cried Norman; "I don't think he was a bad sort of chap."

"See how honest he was about the 'tickpence,'" said Rifle.

"I don't think he was the sort of fellow to steal," whispered Tim to Hester.

"I believe that you have hit the right nail on the head, aunt," said the captain; and the boys looked across at one another, thought of the grub feast, and felt hurt that the black, whose many childish ways had won a kind of liking for him, should be suspected of theft.

"Well," said the captain; "it will act as a warning. Bought wit is better than taught wit. No more black fellows anywhere near our camp. It is my own fault. I was warned about them. They have none of the instincts of a civilised man, and will kill or steal, or be guilty of any crime. So understand here, boys, don't make friends with any more."

"Coo-ee!"

The cry was far away, but it came clearly enough through the night air. Then again, "Coo-ee!"

"The blacks," cried the captain. "Quick! They see the fire, and think it's the camp of friends. Away from it every one. Guns."

There was a quick movement. The ladies were got under shelter, and the men and boys took refuge in the shadow cast by the bushes, all feeling that a white in the full light of the fire would be an easy mark for a spear.

The captain gave his orders briefly that there was to be no firing unless the blacks attacked them, and then they waited, Rifle suffering all the time as he crouched down in the scrub from an intense desire to answer each "coo-ee" as it came nearer and nearer, and now evidently from the track they had made in their journey that day.

"It is not a large party," whispered the captain to Artemus, who was close to him.

"Only one, I think, uncle, for it's the same man who keeps coo-eeing."

"Impossible to say yet," was whispered back by his uncle. "Feel frightened?"

"Well, I hardly know," said the boy. "I don't feel at all comfortable, and keep on wishing they'd gone."

"Naturally, my boy. I shall fire a shot or two over their heads when they come close in. That will scare them, I expect."

"Coo-ee!" came from the darkness before them, but they could see nothing now, for all near the ground and among the trees was almost black, though overhead the stars were coming out fast, and eight or ten feet above the bushes it was comparatively light.

"Coo-ee!" came again from apparently a couple of hundred yards away, but not another sound.

"Creeping up very cautiously. Suspicious because of the fire, and receiving no answer," whispered the captain. "They thought it was the camp-fire of their tribe, but now feel sure it is a white man's fire."

"Queer work this," whispered Uncle Jack to Norman, who was with him on the other side of the track, the fire lying between them and the captain.

"Yes, isn't it, uncle?" was whispered back.

"I'm beginning to ask myself why I'm here when I ought to be in London at my club."

"I'm glad you are here, uncle," whispered Norman.

"Can you see any of them, Tim? Your eyes are younger than mine."

"No, uncle," came after a pause.

"They must be crawling up, so as to hurl their spears from close by."

"Coo-ee!" came again from very near now. "Not suspicious, then?" said the captain, wonderingly.

"I can see one now, uncle," whispered Tim. "He's high up."

"In a tree?"

"No: moving; coming nearer; he's on horseback."

"Nonsense! Black fellows don't ride horses out in the scrub."

"But he is mounted, uncle. I can see plainly now."

"You are right," said the captain, after a short pause.

"Coo-ee!"

This was only from a few yards away, and directly after a familiar voice shouted:

"Why baal not call along coo-ee? Hi, white fellow! Hi, boy! Hi, big white Mary!"

"Why, it's Shanter," cried Norman, excitedly. "Hi coo-ee!"

"Coo-ee! coo-ee!" came back, and directly after a black face was seen above the bushes full in the glare of the fire, and then the body came into view, as the black's steed paced very slowly and leisurely forward, and suddenly threw up its head and gave vent to a prolonged "moo," which was answered by first one and then another of the cows and bullocks chewing their cud close to the camp.

"Hooray!" shouted Rifle and Tim together. "Here's a game. Look! he is riding on the little Alderney."



'Hey!' cried the black, drumming the heifer's ribs with his bare legs.

"Hey!" cried the black, drumming the heifer's ribs with his bare legs, and giving her a crack near the tail with his spear to force her right up into the light, where he sat grinning in triumph with his spear now planted on the ground.

"Yes, that's the ord'nary heifer, sure enough," grumbled German.

"Shanter fine along this bull-cow fellow all 'lone. Yabber moo-moo hard!"

He gave so excellent an imitation of the cow's lowing that it was answered again by the others.

"What, you found that heifer?" cried the captain.

"Shanter fine bull-cow fellow all 'lone."

"Where? when?"

The black pointed with his stick.

"Bulla (two) day. Come along bull fellow slow, Big white Mary gib Shanter soff damper; no eat long time. Fine sugar-bag—kill poss? No; Shanter come along bull-cow fellow."

"I can't make out his jargon," said the captain, tetchily.

"He says, father, he found the cow two days ago, and couldn't stop to eat because he wanted to bring it along. He's hungry and wants damper."

"Soff damper," said the black, correctively.

"Soft bread because he's hungry. Isn't that what you mean?" cried Norman.

"Soff damper. Big white Mary gib damper. Marmi gib Shanter tickpence bring bull-cow fellow all along."

"That I will," cried the captain. "Tut, tut! How I am obliged to eat my words. You're a good fellow, Shanter," he cried, clapping the black on the shoulder. "Go and have some damper.—Give him some meat too."

However badly Shanter expressed himself, he pretty well comprehended all that was said; and at the captain's words he began to rub his front, leaped off the heifer, and followed the boys to the fire, round which the party gathered as soon as they found there was no danger, and where Aunt Georgie, in her satisfaction, cut the fellow so big a portion

of bread and bacon, that his eyes glistened and his teeth gleamed, as he ran away with it amongst the bushes to lie down and eat.

Half an hour later they found him fast asleep, and the first thing the boys saw the next morning, after a delightful night's rest, was the shining black face of Shanter where he was squatting down on his heels, watching them and waiting for them to wake.

Norman lay for some minutes, still half asleep, gazing at the black face, which seemed to be somehow connected with his dreams and with the soft sweet piping of the magpie crows, which were apparently practising their scales prior to joining in the morning outburst of song, while the great kingfishers—the laughing jackasses of the colonists—sat here and there uttering their discordant sounds, like coarse, harsh laughter, at the efforts of the crows.

Chapter Seven.

“I am Satisfied.”

Norman sprang up rested and refreshed, and then glanced round uneasily, expecting to see his father come and order the black to be off.

But the captain was busy examining the cattle, the horses and their harness, and the loading of the wagons; helping German to tighten a rope here, and rearrange packages where they had broken loose, and seeing generally to the many little matters that have so much to do with the success of an overland journey with a caravan.

Then breakfast was announced just after the boys had returned from the river, where they had had to content themselves with a wash, while Shanter looked on, and then followed them back, apparently supremely proud and happy to be in their company.

Breakfast over, and the provisions repacked, Shanter not having been forgotten by big white Mary, as he insisted upon calling Aunt Georgie, the horses and drawing bullocks were put to, a last glance cast round to see that nothing had been left, and then, prior to giving the word to advance, the captain mounted with his little field-glass to the top of the highest load, where he carefully scanned the country, and made remarks to his brother as to the direction to take that day.

“Yes,” he said at last; “the river evidently makes a vast bend here, and curves round to the north. We will go straight across from here to that hill—mountain I ought to call it.—Do you see, German?”

“Yes, sir, I see,” said the gardener, shading his eyes.

“There can be no mistake as to your course; the plain is perfectly level and treeless, and we ought easily to get there for our mid-day halt. How far do you think it is—eight miles?”

“Twenty,” said Uncle Jack, sturdily.

“Nonsense!”

“Yes, twenty. The air is so clear that places look closer than they are.”

“Well, we will not argue,” said the captain, lowering himself down. “There’s your mark, German; make straight for that.”

“No,” shouted a voice; and all turned with a look of wonder to Shanter, who had evidently been listening intently, and who was now in a great state of excitement, gesticulating and flourishing his nulla-nulla wildly.

“What do you say?” cried the captain, frowning.

“No go 'long,” cried Shanter, pointing across the plain. “No—no. Horse fellow—bull-cow fellow, all go puff-puff.”

And he went down on all fours, with his eyes wide and staring, mouth open, and tongue lolling out, breathing hoarsely and heavily, snuffling about the while at the ground. Then he threw up his head, and whinnied like a horse in trouble, snuffled about again, and lowed like an ox, and finally seemed to grow weaker and weaker till he fell over on his side, struggled up again, fell on his side, stretched out his head and legs, and finally gave a wonderful imitation of a horse or ox dying.

“All go bong (dead),” he cried. “No go along. No water drink. Big fellow horse, can’t pull along.”

He pointed again and again, out over the plain, and shook his head violently.

“White fellow come 'long,” he continued, as he leaped up, shouldered his spear, and started, pointing before him to the tree-spread track nearer the river. “Bull-cow fellow eat.”

He made believe to snatch a mouthful of grass, and went on munching it as he walked slowly on as if pulling a load.

“Much water, drinkum, drunkum,” he continued, pointing in the direction of the river.

“He seems to be right, Ned,” said Uncle Jack, as the boys looked on eagerly.

“Yes; I suppose he is. Perhaps it is sandy and waterless all across there.”

"And if we keep by the river, we shall get grass, shelter, and water."

"Yes; but I do not like to have my plans overset by a savage."

"Not when the savage knows better?" said Uncle Jack, drily.

"How do I know that he does?" said the captain. "How can I tell that he is not going to lead us into some ambush, where his tribe will murder us and seize upon our goods and stores?"

"Humph I hope not," said Uncle Jack. "I'll shoot him dead if he does, but I think I'd trust him."

"I want to get rid of the fellow," said the captain; "and he is always coming back."

"He'll soon be tired," said his brother. "These people seem to be very childlike and simple. It is a novelty for him to be with us. One of these days he will be missing. I shouldn't worry about him."

"Gee-hup, horse fellow!" shouted the black, just then. "All along. Shanter know. Baal that way."

He pointed over the plain and shook his head. Then shouldering his spear, he stepped off nearly due west, and the caravan started.

Day succeeded day, and the two halts were regularly made in pleasant places, but the captain was never satisfied. They were good, but he always found some drawback. The progress was very slow, for it was hot, but the land was dry, and the difficulties they had with the wagons were very few, and their few miles were got over steadily day after day, with no adventure to signify; and to make up for the slow progress, their cattle were fresh and in good condition at each morning's start, while the whole process seemed like a pleasant excursion of the most enjoyable kind.

At last one day, the hottest on their journey, the draught cattle had a laborious pull, for the ground had been rising slightly during the past forty-eight hours, and next morning had suddenly grown steep. The river was still close at hand, though it was now more broken and torrent-like, but beautifully wooded in places, and the soil for miles on either side looked wonderfully rich. To their right were plains; but in front, and to their left, hills and mountains hemmed them in; and when utterly exhausted, the cattle slowly drew their loads into the shade cast by some magnificent trees, just behind which a cascade of sparkling water dashed down from the mountains beyond, while the river-glade was glorious with ferns and verdant growth of kinds that they had not seen in the earlier part of their journey, every one seemed to be imbued with the same idea, and no one was the least surprised when the captain looked round with his face lit up with satisfaction.

"There," he cried, "was it not worth the long journey to find a place like this. No flood can touch us here. The land is rich; the place beautiful. Wife, girls, boys, what do you say to this for Home, sweet home?"

The answer was a hearty cheer from the boys; and, as if he comprehended everything, Shanter burst into a wild triumphal dance round the spear he had stuck into the ground.

"Hurray!" he shouted. "Make gunyah. All carbon budgery. Plenty budgery. Bull-cow eat. Plenty sheep eat. Hurray!"

There was not a dissentient voice. Uncle Jack smiled, Sam German began to look round for a slope for a kitchen garden, while the captain, Mrs Bedford, and the girls began to talk about a site for a house; and, tying a handkerchief over her grey hair and pinning up her dress, Aunt Georgie beckoned severely to Shanter, who came to her like a shaggy black dog.

"Get some wood, sir, and make a fire."

"Makum fire, makum damper, pot a kettle tea?" he asked.

"Yes; dampers and roast mutton to-day," she said.

"Make big fire, roast mutton," shouted Shanter, excitedly, and rushing to the side of one of the wagons, he threw down spear, boomerang, and waddy, snatched an axe from where it was stuck in the side, and five minutes later he was chopping wood with all his might.

That afternoon and evening were indeed restful, though little rest was taken, for all were in a state of intense excitement, and examining in every direction the site of their new home. It was fancy, of course, but to the boys it seemed that the cattle had all taken to the place, and settled down to a hearty feed of the rich grass.

But there was work to be done that evening, though not much. The tent had to be set up, and as the boys drove in the pegs, it was with a heartier will, for they knew that they would not be withdrawn for some time to come.

The position for the house was soon decided, for nature herself had planned it; a charming spot, sheltered to the north by a range from the scorching north wind; and in addition there was a grove of magnificent gum-trees, just far enough apart to have allowed them to grow to their greatest perfection, while dotted here and there were other trees with prickly leaves and pyramidal growth, their lower boughs touching the ground, every one a perfect specimen that it would have been a sin to cut down.

From this chosen spot the land sloped gradually down to the sparkling river, with its beautiful falls and pools, while away on the other side, beyond the bed of the stream, stretched out a grand expanse of land all on a gentle slope. On the hillier side an equally beautiful expanse, extending for miles, sloped upward toward the mountains, offering pasture that would have satisfied the most exacting.

"We are the first settlers here," cried the captain, "and as I have a right, Jack, to-morrow we will ride in different directions, and blaze trees for our boundaries. Then there will only be the plan and description to send to the crown offices in the city, and we take up a grand estate that will in due time be our own."

"Our own!" cried Norman, excitedly. "But you will have a bit of the river too?"

"I shall take up land on both sides—a large estate. There is plenty for all Englishmen, but those who are enterprising enough to do as we have done, of course, get the first choice."

"I'm very glad you are satisfied, my dear," said Mrs Bedford, affectionately, as they all lingered in the glorious sunset light over their evening meal, the whole place seeming a perfect paradise.

"I am satisfied," said the captain, "for here there is ample reward for those who like to work, and we can see our boys have a grand future before them in the new land."

"I'm glad too," said Aunt Georgie, in her matter-of-fact way. "You may quite rely upon us all setting to work to make the best of things, when you men and boys have built us a house to keep off the rain—for I suppose it does rain here sometimes, though we have not seen any."

"Rain, aunt? Tremendously."

"Well then, of course you will begin a house soon?"

"To-morrow," said the captain. "Plenty of work for us, boys."

"Of course," said Aunt Georgie. "Well then, we shall soon begin to make things comfortable, and we shall all be very happy and content."

"Thank you," said the captain. "I hope every one will take the advantages for what they are worth, and will excuse the inconveniences."

"I know that Marian will," said Aunt Georgie; "and as for the girls, we shall be too busy to think of little things. I should have liked for it not to have been quite so lonely."

"We are too many to feel lonely," cried the captain, cheerily.

"But I meant about neighbours. How far do you think we are from the nearest neighbours, Edward?"

"Don't ask me," he said, merrily. "So far that we cannot quarrel with them.—There, girls, you will have to help and make the house snug as fast as we get it up. To-morrow we will mark it out, and then set up a shed to act as an additional shelter for our stores, which must be unpacked from the wagons. Every one must take his or her department, and as we have that black with us, and he evidently does not mean to go, he will have to work too. By the way, I have not seen him for the last hour or two."

"He had such a dinner," said Tim. "Aunt feeds him so."

"That, I'm sure, I do not, my dear," said Aunt Georgie, shortly.

"Well, aunt, he always goes and lies down to sleep after you've given him anything," said Rifle.

"And that's what he has gone to do now," added Norman. "He'll come out of the woods somewhere soon. But I say, father, shan't we have time to fish and shoot?"

"Plenty, and ride too, boys. But there, we've done a good day's work, and now I suppose we shall have to do a little sentry business. The blacks are evidently very, very scarce in the country, not a sign of one in all these many days' journey. But it would be wise to keep to a little vigilance, though I doubt whether they will trouble us much here.—Jack," he continued, rising, "we'll take the guns and have a walk round, to look at the cattle before going to roost for the night, while the girls get the place clear.—Coming, any of you boys?"

They all three sprang up eagerly.

"That's right. Come along. Hallo!" he added, "here comes Tam o' Shanter."

For at that moment the black darted out from among the trees, and ran across the intervening space to where they were, carrying his nulla-nulla and boomerang in one hand, his spear at the trail in the other.

He had evidently been running fast, and was out of breath as he came up to cry in a low, hoarse voice:

"Now then all along—come quick, black fellow metancoley, come along mumkull white."

"What!" cried the captain, "a number of black fellows coming to kill us?"

"Hum. You shoot fast, mumkull black fellow, all go bong."

Chapter Eight.

"Let me go: I can run fast."

The minute before, all peace, rest, and the promise of plenty; now, an alarm so full of horror that every one there felt chilled.

A rush was made to the wagons for the guns and ammunition, the ladies were hurried into the little square formed by the vehicles, as the safest place, and the advantage of having an experienced soldier for their leader was shown at once, though all the time the captain was bitterly reproaching himself for not having spent more time in providing for their defence, instead of giving up valuable hours to rest and planning what they should do.

"I ought to have known better, Norman," he said angrily, as the boy walked by his side to obey his orders, and convey them to one or the other. "Take a lesson from it, my boy, and if ever you march in an enemy's country, wherever you halt, do as the old Romans did; entrench yourself at once."

"But we have entrenched ourselves, father," said the boy, pointing to the boxes, barrels, and cases which had hastily been dragged out of the carts and placed outside to form a protection before the openings beneath the wagons, and also to fire over in case of an attack.

"Pooh! not half enough. There, we can do no more. Now about that black.—Here, Jack, what do you say? Is that fellow in collusion with the people coming on?"

"No," said Uncle Jack, decisively. "If he had been, he is cunning enough to have lulled us into security. He need not have uttered a warning, and the blacks could have surprised us after dark."

"Yes, there is something in that," said the captain. "And look what he did, father, directly he had warned us."

"What?"

"Set to work with his boomerang covering the fire over with earth to smother out the smoke."

"But it might all be cunning to put us off our guard with him, and it would be a hideous danger to have a traitor in our little stronghold."

"For him," said Uncle Jack, grimly.

"Yes," said his brother. "But there, I'll trust him. I should not display all this horrible suspicion if it were not for the women. They make quite a coward of me. Now, can we do any more?"

"No," said Uncle Jack; "there is no time. We can keep a good many at bay."

"If you fire steadily," said the captain. "No shot must be fired without good reason. In war, many go to one enemy the less. In this case every shot must tell."

"Rather horrible," said Uncle Jack, quietly; "eh, Norman, lad? But there, they can avoid it. They have only to leave us alone, and we should never hurt a soul."

By this the little party were crouching about their wagon and box fort with their guns ready, and plenty of ammunition at hand; the fire only sent up one tiny curl of smoke, and this was stopped instantly, for Shanter crawled from where he had been lying flat close to Tim and Rifle, and scraping up some more earth with his boomerang, he piled it over the spot where the smoke issued, and returned by rolling himself over and over till he was back beside a large box. Their position was in some respects good, being on an elevation, but in other respects bad, as the captain pointed out to Norman.

"We are not far enough away from the trees in front there. The scoundrels can creep up through the bushes, and use them for a shelter from which to throw spears. Listen. The first who sees a black figure give warning by a low hiss."

Fortunately the cattle had all strayed off grazing in the other direction, and were invisible from where the little party lay waiting the expected onslaught; and just as Uncle Munday had made allusion to the fact that if the enemy were seen in that direction, the cattle would give warning, the captain said in a low voice, "I wish they'd come."

Norman stared.

"Before it is dark, my boy. In less than an hour we shall not be able to see them, and our position will be ten times as bad. There, I have done all I can for our protection. I must go and reconnoitre now."

His words were loud enough to be heard from behind, and Mrs Bedford's voice rose in supplication.

"No, no, dear. Pray don't run any risks."

"Hush!" said the captain, sternly, "we must know whether the enemy is near."

The danger, as far as they could make out from Shanter's broken English, lay across the little river; but instead of being in the visible sloping plain, it was away beyond the trees to their right, and hidden by the broken mountainous range, and after glancing at the priming of his double gun, the captain turned to his right.

"Here, Shanter!" he said in a low whisper. "Come with me. Come along—show black fellow."

There was no response for a moment or two, and then Rifle spoke.

"He isn't here, father."

"Not there?"

"No; he was lying down here just now, but while I was watching the trees over there, he must have crept away."

"Crept away? But I want him to go with me to scout. Who saw him go?"

There was no reply, and feeling staggered by the ease with which these people could elude observation, and applying it to the enemies' advance, the captain looked sharply round for danger, half expecting at any moment to see a dim-looking black form emerge from behind a bush, or others rapidly darting from tree to tree, so as to get within throwing distance with their spears.

"Well," he said, "I must go alone. Keep a sharp look-out, boys."

"What are you going to do, father?" said Norman.

"Scout," said the captain, laconically.

"No; let me go: I can run fast. I'll be very careful and shelter myself behind trees. You can't leave here."

"He's quite right Ned," said Uncle Jack.

"I can run faster than Norman, uncle," cried Tim eagerly. "Let me go."

"No, me, father," cried Rifle, excitedly.

"Silence in the ranks!" cried the captain sternly. Then, after a moment or two's pause, he said firmly, "Private Norman will go as far as the ridge yonder, scouting. He will go cautiously, and keep out of sight of the enemy, and as soon as he has made out whether they are advancing and the direction they will take, he will return."

"Yes, father."

"Silence!—Now go.—Stop!"

The captain caught the boy by the arm, as he was creeping near the box, and as all followed the direction in which the captain was gazing, they saw a black figure darting from tree to tree some eighty or ninety yards away and with his back to them.

"That's Shanter," whispered Norman.

"Yes: follow him, and try and keep him in sight. If he joins the enemy come back at once. There, you need not creep over the space between us and the trees; there can be no enemy there. Quick! How soon the darkness is coming on!"

Norman stepped on to the great chest, leaped down, and ran off, as a low piteous sigh—almost a sob—was heard from behind; but though it had an echo in the captain's breast, he crouched there firm as a rock, and steeling himself against tender emotions, for the sake of all whom he had brought into peril and whom it was his duty to protect.

There before him was his eldest son, carrying his gun at the trail, and running swiftly in the direction of the black, who from running boldly from tree to tree was now seen to be growing very cautious, and suddenly to drop down and disappear.

The captain drew a long deep breath.

"We may trust him," he said softly; "he is evidently our friend. Now for Norman's news."

Yet, though he was at rest on this point, he was uneasy about an attack on their right flank or rear, but that could not come from the rear, he knew, without some panic on the part of the cattle; while he was hopeful about the right flank, for the ground was precipitous in the extreme, and from what they had seen so far, it was hardly possible for any one to approach.

But though Shanter had dropped quite out of sight of those behind the little barricade, he was still visible to Norman, who ran on and was getting near to where the black was creeping from bush to bush on all fours, looking in the dim evening light like a black dog carrying his master's stick, for Norman in one glimpse saw that he was drawing his spear as he crawled, his boomerang was stuck behind him in his waistband, and his nulla-nulla was across his mouth tightly held by his teeth.

When about some twenty yards away, and approaching in perfect silence as he thought, the black looked sharply round, rose to his knees, and signed to the boy to go down on all fours.

Norman obeyed, and Shanter waited till he had crawled up. Then making a gesture that could only mean, "Be silent and cautious," he crawled on, with the boy following him, till, after what seemed quite a long painful piece of toil, they reached the foot of a steep rocky slope whose tree-fringed summit was some fifty feet above their heads.

Shanter pointed to the top, and began to climb, mounting easily for some distance, and then stopping by a small tree, whose gnarled roots were fixed in the crevices of the rock. Here he held on, and reached down with his spear, by whose help Norman soon climbed to his side, where he paused to sling his gun by its strap, so as to leave his hands at liberty.

The rest of the ascent was made with more ease; and when Shanter reached the top, he raised his eyes above the

level with the greatest caution, and then seemed to Norman to crawl over like some huge black slug and disappear.

The boy prepared to follow, when Shanter's head reappeared over the sharp ridge and his arm was stretched down with the spear, so that the final climb was fairly easy, though it would have been almost impossible without.

As soon as Norman was lying on the top, he found that the other side was a gentle descent away to what appeared to be a wide valley between mountains, but everything was so rapidly growing dim that the distant objects were nearly obscured by the transparent gloom. But nearer at hand there was something visible which made the boy's heart begin to beat heavily. For as Shanter drew him on all fours cautiously among the bushes to where there was an opening, there, far down the slope, but so near that had they spoken their words would have been heard, was a great body rising, which directly after resolved itself into smoke; and before many minutes had been spent in watching, there was a bright flash of flame which had the effect of making all around suddenly seem dark, while between them and the bright blaze a number of black figures could be seen moving to and fro, and evidently heaping brushwood upon the fire they had just lit.

Norman Bedford, as he lay there among the bushes, felt, at the sight of the blacks, as if boyhood had suddenly dropped away with all its joyous sport and fun, to leave him a thoughtful man in a terrible emergency; that he was bound to act, and that perhaps the lives of all who were dear to him depended upon his action and control of the thoughtless savage at his side.

"Poor father!" he said to himself, as his courage failed and a cold perspiration broke out all over him; "you have done wrong. You ought not to have brought out mamma and the girls till we had come and proved the place. It is too horrible."

That was only a momentary weakness, though, and he nerved himself now to act, trying to come to the conclusion which it would be best to do—stop and watch, sending Shanter back with a message, or leave the black to watch while he ran with the news.

The position was horrible. Setting aside his own danger up there on the ridge, where the slightest movement might be heard by the sharp-eared blacks, there they were, evidently encamping for the night with only this ridge dividing them from the spot selected for the new home.

What should he do?

Before he could decide, as he lay there watching, with dilated eyes, the black figures passing and repassing the increasing blaze, Shanter placed his lips close to his ear.

"You pidney?" (understand), he whispered. "They all black fellow."

"Yes. Go and tell them at the camp," Norman whispered back.

In an instant the black's hand was over his lips, and his head was pressed down amongst the grass, while he felt the black's chest across his shoulders. He was so taken by surprise that he lay perfectly still, feeling that after all his father was right, and Shanter was treacherous; but his thoughts took another direction as quickly as the first had come, for Shanter's lips were again at his ear.

"Black fellow come along fetch wood."

In effect quite unnoticed, three or four of the men had been approaching where they lay, and now seemed to start up suddenly from some bushes twenty feet below them.

Retreat was impossible. The precipice was close behind, and to get away by there meant slow careful lowering of themselves down, and this was impossible without making some noise, which must be heard, so that all that could be done was to lie close and wait with weapons ready, in case they were discovered—a fate which was apparently certain.

Norman laid his hand upon the lock of his gun, ready to raise it and fire if they were found, and a slight rustle told him that Shanter had taken a fresh grip of his club.

That was all, and they lay waiting, listening to the rustling noise made by the black fellows as they pushed their way through the scrub, still coming nearer and nearer.

They were agonising moments, and again Norman felt that his father's doubts might be correct, for the enemy approaching were evidently not gathering wood, but coming up there for some special purpose. Was it, after all, to surprise the camp, and was Shanter holding him down to be made a prisoner or for death?

He was ready to heave himself up and make a brave struggle for life as he shouted out a warning to those in camp, and as the rustling noise grew nearer his heart seemed to beat more heavily. But his common sense told him directly that he must be wrong, and that, too, just as he could hear the mental agony no longer, for when the rustling was quite near, the men began jabbering quite loudly to each other, and directly after one tripped in the darkness and fell forward on the bushes, the others laughing loudly at his mishap.

That settled one thing: they could not evidently be going to surprise the camp, or they would have been cautious, and a warm sensation of joy even in the midst of his peril ran through the boy's breast.

But why were they there, then?

He soon had evidence as to the meaning of their coming, but not until he had suffered fresh agonies. For as he lay

thinking that the noise and laughter must have been heard by those in camp, the blacks came nearer and nearer in the darkness, and their next steps seemed as if they must be over or upon them. "And then there will be a horrible struggle," thought the boy, one in which he would have to play his part.

He drew in his breath, and the hand which grasped the gun-lock felt so wet that he trembled for fear it should moisten the powder in the pan, while the next instant he felt a great piece of prickly bush pressed down over his head, as if trampled and thrust sidewise by some one pushing his way by. There was loud rustling close by his feet, and then the blacks went a couple more steps or so, there was a sharp ejaculation, and they stopped short.

Had Norman been alone he would have sprung up; but Shanter pressed him down, and in another instant he felt that the exclamations had not been at the discovery of hiding enemies, but because one of them had nearly gone down the precipice.

Then followed more talking and laughing, all in an unknown tongue to Norman; till after a few minutes the blacks continued along the ridge for some little distance, stopped again, and ended by going leisurely back toward the fire, with the bushes rustling as they went.

Norman drew a deep breath of relief, and a low whisper came at his ear: "Mine think good job all black dark. Myall black fellow no see. Nearly plenty numkull."

"Are they gone?" whispered back Norman, as he felt the heavy weight of the black's chest removed from his back.

"All agone down fire. Come for more fire all about."

Which means they were reconnoitring, thought Norman. Then, as he raised himself a little and looked down at the brightly-blazing fire, about which several men were sitting, he saw other figures go up, and there was a loud burst of chattering and laughing.

"Hear um all yabber yabber," whispered Shanter. "All myall black fellow. Come 'long, tell Marmi, (the captain)."

"Yes; come quickly," said Norman.

"Ah!" whispered Shanter, clapping his hand over the boy's mouth. "Myall black fellow big ear."

He pointed downward, and Norman shivered again, for, softly as his words had been uttered, he saw that they had been heard, for the group about the fire had sprung up and their faces seemed to be turned in their direction.

Shanter placed both hands to his mouth and uttered a soft, long-drawn, plaintive, whistling sound, then paused for a few moments, and whistled again more softly; and then once again the plaintive piping rose on the air as if it were the call of a night bird now very distant.

The ruse had its effect, for the blacks settled down again about the fire, and were soon all talking away loudly, and evidently cooking and eating some kind of food.

"No talk big," whispered Shanter; and creeping close back to the edge of the precipice, he lowered his spear and felt about for a ledge which promised foothold. As soon as he had satisfied himself about this, he turned to Norman.

"Now, down along," he whispered; "more, come soon."

The boy slung his gun again, and taking hold of the spear, lowered himself over the edge of the rugged scarp, and easily reached the ledge, the black, whom nature seemed to have furnished with a second pair of hands instead of feet, joining him directly, and then began searching about once more for a good place to descend.

He was longer this time, and as Norman clung to the tough stem of some gnarled bush, he looked out anxiously in the direction of their camp; but all now below was of intense blackness, not even a star appearing above to afford light.

"Mine can't find," whispered the black; and then, "Yohi (yes); now down along."

Norman obeyed, and once more clung to the steep face by the help of a bush; and this process was repeated several times till the black uttered a low laugh.

"Myall black fellow no see, no hear. Mine glad. Come tell Marmi."

The captain was nearer than they thought, for they had not gone many steps before they were challenged, and the voice was his.

"Back safe, father," panted Norman, who was terribly excited.

"Why have you been so long?" said the captain shortly. "The anxiety has been terrible."

"Hush! don't talk loud. There is a party of black fellows on the other side of that ridge;" and he rapidly told the narrative of their escape.

"So near the camp, and quite ignorant of our being here.—Will they come this way in the morning, Shanter?"

"Mine don't know. All go along somewhere—fine sugar-bag—fine grub—fine possum. Wait see."

"Yes; we must wait and see," said the captain, thoughtfully. Then to the black, "They will not come to-night?"

“Baal come now. Eat, sleep, all full,” replied Shanter. “Big white Mary gib Shanter damper?”

“Hungry again?” said the captain angrily. “But make haste back. They are in sad alarm at the camp.”

“Shall we be able to stay here, father?” said Norman, on their way back through the darkness.

“Stay, boy? Yes. Only let them give us a few days or weeks’ respite, and I do not care. But look here, boy, we have gone too far to retreat. We must hold the place now. It is too good to give up meekly at a scare from a gang of savages. Come, Norman, you must be a man.”

“I was not thinking of myself, father, but about mamma and the girls.”

The captain drew a sharp, hissing breath.

“And I was too,” he said in a low voice. “But come, let’s set them at rest for the night.”

Five minutes later Norman felt two soft hands seize his, and hold him in the darkness, as a passionate voice whispered in his ear: “Oh, Norman, my boy—my boy!”

Then there was a long silent watch to keep, and there was only one who slept in camp that night—to wit, Shanter. And Rifle said merrily, that the black slept loud enough for ten.

Chapter Nine.

“Along o’ that there nigger?”

But Shanter, though he slept so soundly, was ready to start up if any one even whispered, and also ready to lie down and sleep again the moment he found that all was well; and at the first grey dawning of day, when the great trees began to appear in weird fashion from out of the darkness, and the tops of the mountains to show jagged against the sky, he sprang up from where he had slept close to the warm ashes, yawned, gave himself a rub as if he were cold, and then shook out his arms and legs, and picked up his weapons.

“Mine go along, see myall black fellow. Little Marmi come.”

This was to Norman, who turned to the captain.

“Yes; go, and be very careful. Recollect it will be broad daylight directly.”

Norman gave a sharp nod, and caught his brother and cousin’s eyes fixed upon him enviously.

The captain noticed it.

“Wait,” he said; “your turns will come, boys.—Now, Norman, scout carefully, and put us out of our misery at once. If the blacks are coming this way, hold up your gun as high as you can reach. If they are going in another direction, hold it with both hands horizontally above your head.”

Norman nodded and ran after Shanter, who was already on his way, and together they reached the precipice, and climbed the face to creep down at once among the bushes, from which place of vantage they could see right into the blacks’ camp, where a party of nineteen were squatted round the fire eating some kind of root which they were roasting on the embers.



Norman crouched there watching them.

This went on for some time, while, knowing the anxiety at their own camp, Norman crouched there watching them, till Shanter whispered softly, "All go along. Mine glad."

He was right, for suddenly one man sprang up and took his spear, the others followed his example; and they stood talking together just as the rising sun peered over the horizon and turned their glistening black bodies into dark bronze.

Then followed a good deal of talking and pointing, as if some were for climbing over the ridge, and at first the others seemed disposed to follow them; but another disposition came over the party, and, shouldering their spears, they went off toward the mountains, one portion of which formed a saddle, from which at either end two lines of eminences of nearly equal height went right away as if there was a deep valley between.

"Baal black fellow now. Come all along, Shanter want big damper."

They waited a few minutes longer, till the party had disappeared in what looked to be the bed of a dry stream, leading up into the mountains; and then, with a feeling of elation in his breast, Norman hurried to a prominent part of the edge of the steep escarpment, and stood holding his gun up on high with both hands, horizontally, as agreed upon, till, with a fierce look, Shanter ran to him and dragged it down, giving a sharp look toward the place where the blacks had disappeared.

"Little Marmi want myall black fellow come along?"

"Baal black fellow now," said Norman; and Shanter's fierce countenance became mirthful.

"Baal black fellow now!" he cried, with a hoarse chuckle. "Baal black fellow now. You pidney?"

"Yes, I pidney—I understand," cried Norman, laughing.

"Come all along. Shanter want big damper. Break-fuss," he added with a grin.

They soon lowered themselves down the wall of rock, and ran to the camp, where the captain had just arranged that soon after breakfast Rifle and Tim were to take it in turns to mount to the highest point of the ridge to keep watch, while the rest worked at preparations for their defence and that of the cattle.

In the relief they all felt for their escape, a hearty meal was made, the watcher was sent out to perch himself where he could look out unseen, and the day's work began.

The cattle were first counted, and found to be none the worse for their journey, and grazing contentedly on the rich feed. Just below them was an ample supply of water, and altogether, as they showed no disposition to stray, they could be left.

Weapons were then placed ready for use at a moment's notice, and all hands set to work to unpack the wagons, the cases being ranged outside, barrels rolled to the corners and built up, and all being arranged under the shadow of a great tree, whose boughs would do something toward keeping off rain. This by degrees began to assume the character of a little wooden fort, and lastly, over the tops of the wagons, a ridge pole was fixed formed of a small tree

which fell to Uncle Jack's axe, and across this three wagon cloths were stretched, forming a fairly waterproof roof to protect goods that would spoil, and also promising to be strong enough to check a spear which might reach it through the branches of the trees.

As evening came on, this stronghold was a long way from being finished, but it promised some security if it were found necessary to take to it for shelter, and it was decided that the women should occupy it, and for the present give up the tent to the men.

Every one was highly satisfied with the day's work, and, as Rifle said, they could all now devote themselves so much more easily to other things—this when he had been relieved in his guard by Tim, who had stalked off to his post looking, with his shouldered piece, as important as a grenadier, and no doubt feeling his responsibility far more.

But matters had not gone on without a hitch, or to be correct, several hitches, consequent upon the behaviour of Shanter, who in every way showed that it was his intention to stay.

The beginning of it was a complaint made by German, who went up to Tim and touched his hat.

"Beg pardon, Master 'Temus, sir, but along o' that there nigger."

"What about him?"

"I asked him as civilly as a man could speak, to come and help me unload the big wagon, and he shouldered his clothes-prop thing and marched off. Aren't he expected to do something for his wittles?"

"Of course, Sam. Here, I'll go and set him to work."

Tim walked away to where the black was busy carrying wood to replenish the fire.

"Here, Shanter," he said; "come and help me to carry some boxes."

"Baal help boxes. Plenty mine come along wood."

"There's enough wood now."

"What metancoly wood," (much, a large number). "Baal come along boxes."

"But you must come," cried Tim.

Shanter seemed to think that he must not, and he took no more notice, but marched away, fetched another big armful of wood, and then took the big kettle to fill at the spring.

"I say, uncle," cried Tim, "here's insubordination in the camp."

"What's the matter?" said Uncle Jack, who was chaining up the wheels of one of the wagons to insure its not being dragged away.

"The black will not work."

"Send him to me."

Tim ran back to Shanter.

"Here," he cried; "Uncle Jack wants you."

"Baal come along Uncle Jack," said the black sharply. "Uncle Jack come along Shanter."

"But I say: that won't do," cried Tim. "You must mind what's said to you."

"Shanter going get grub. You come along mine."

"No; I'm going to work, and you have to help."

Shanter got up and walked straight away in the other direction, and Tim went and told his uncle.

"Lazy scoundrel!" cried Uncle Jack. "Well, if he doesn't work he can't be fed."

"Shall I go and tell the captain?"

"No; he has plenty of worries on his mind. Let's do without the sable rascal. We never counted upon having his help."

So the work went on without the black, and the captain did not miss him; while the ladies, finding a plentiful supply of wood and water, were loud in Shanter's praises.

Just before dark he walked back into camp with a bark bag hanging from his spear, and a pleasant grin upon his face.

"Baal black fellow," he cried.

"There now," said Aunt Georgie, who was busy preparing the evening meal, helped by Mrs Bedford; "there it is again. I was doubtful before."

"Baal black fellow," said Shanter once more.

"Yes, there. You see how it is, Marian; these people must be descendants of the old Philistines, all degenerate and turned black."

"Nonsense!" said Uncle Jack, and he looked very sternly at the black.

"But it is not nonsense, John," said the old lady. "Surely you don't mean to say that I do not know what I'm talking about. That dreadful man is a descendant of the old Philistines. You heard him say as plainly as could be something about Baal."

Norman burst into a roar of laughter.

"Norman, my dear, how can you be such a rude child?" cried the old lady reprovingly.

"Why, aunt, baal means none, or not any."

"Nonsense, my dear!"

"But it does, aunt. Baal black fellow means that there are none about."

"Baal black fellow," cried Shanter, nodding. "Mine not see plenty—all gone."

"There, aunt."

"Oh dear me! what a dreadful jargon. Come here, sir, and I'll give you some damper."

Aunt Georgie seated herself, took one of the great cakes she had made, and broke it in half, holding it out to the black.

"He doesn't deserve it," said Uncle Jack, sternly.

"Big white Mary gib damper," cried the black excitedly, taking the cake and sticking it in his waistband, while he slipped his spear out of the handles of his bag. "Shanter find white grub. Plenty all 'long big white Mary."

As he spoke, he emptied the contents of his bag suddenly in the old lady's lap, laughed at the shriek she gave, and walked off to devour his cake, while Norman and Rifle collected the curious white larvae in a tin to set them aside for a private feast of their own, no one caring to venture upon a couple that were roasted over the embers.

Just then the captain was summoned to the evening meal, and after a glance round, he called to Shanter:

"Here, boy," he said, as the black came up grinning, and with his mouth full; "go up and look black fellow.—That's the best way I can think of telling him to relieve Tim," he said.

The black nodded, shouldered his spear, and marched off.

"He obeys you," said Uncle Jack, who had looked on curiously.

"Of course. So he does you."

Uncle Jack shook his head.

"No," he said. Then the incidents of the day were related, and the captain looked thoughtful.

In due time Tim came down from his perch, and took his place where the evening meal was discussed in peace, but not without an occasional glance round, and a feeling of dread that at any moment there might be an alarm; for they felt that after all they were interlopers in an enemy's country, and on their voyage out they had heard more than one account of troubles with the blacks, stories of bloodshed and massacre, which they had then been ready to laugh at as travellers' tales, but which now impressed them very differently, and filled them with an undefined sensation of terror, such as made all start at every shadow or sound.

Chapter Ten.

"That black is of no use."

Strict watch was kept, but the night passed peacefully away, and the morning dawned so brightly, everything around was so beautiful, with the birds singing, the sky all orange, gold, and vivid blue, that in the glorious invigorating air it was simply impossible to be in low spirits. The boys had no sooner started to climb the hills and scout for danger, than they met Shanter, who came toward them laughing.

"Black fellow all gone. No see bull-cow and big horse fellow. All gone away. Budgery job. Shanter mumkull all lot."

He gave then a short war-dance, and a display of his skill with his spear, sending it flying with tremendous force and never missing the tree at which he aimed, into whose soft bark it stuck quivering, while he ran up, dragged it out, and belaboured the trunk with his club.

It was an expressive piece of pantomime to show how he would kill all the black fellows he met; and when he had

ended, he stood grinning at the boys, waiting for their praise.

“Oh, it’s all very fine, old chap,” said Norman, speaking for the others; “but how do we know that you would not run away, or be mumkulled yourself by the black fellows?”

Shanter nodded his head, and smiled more widely.

“Mumkull all a black fellow—all run away. Budgery nulla-nulla. Plenty mine.”

He whirled his club round and hurled it at the nearest tree, which it struck full in the centre of the trunk. Then as he picked it up—

“Shall we trust to what he said? If he is right, we needn’t go scouting,” said Norman.

“Let’s go back and tell uncle,” suggested Tim. “There’s no need to go on the look-out,” cried Rifle.

“Those people are Tam o’ Shanter’s enemies, and he would not go on like this if they had not gone.—I say, I want to see you use this,” he continued, as he touched one of the flat pieces of wood, the black having two now stuck in his waistband.

“Boomerang,” cried the black, taking out the heavy pieces of wood, one of which was very much curved, rounded over one side, flat on the other, both having sharpened edges, such as would make them useful in times of emergency as wooden swords. “Boomerang,” he said again.

“Oh yes; I know what you call them,” said Rifle; “but I want to see them thrown.”

As he spoke he took hold of the straighter weapon and made believe to hurl it.

“No budgery,” cried the man, taking the weapon.

“Mumkull black fellow.” Then, taking the other very much curved piece of wood, he gave it a flourish. “Mumkull boomer.”

“Who’s boomer?” said Norman. “Black fellow?”

Shanter gesticulated and flourished his curved weapon, shook his head, stamped, and cried, “No black fellow. Boomer-boomer.”

“Well, who’s boomer?” cried Rifle. “A black fellow?”

“No, no. Mumkull plenty boomer.”

He dropped spear, nulla, and boomerangs, stooped a little, drooped his hands before him, and bent his head down, pretending to nibble at the grass, after which he made a little bound, then another; then a few jumps, raised himself up and looked round over his shoulder, as if in search of danger, and then went off in a series of wonderful leaps, returning directly grinning.

“Boomer,” he cried; “boomer.”

“He means kangaroo,” cried Tim, excitedly.

“Of course he does,” said Rifle. “Boomer-kangaroo.”

“Kangaroo boomer,” replied the black eagerly. “Boomer.” Then taking the straighter weapon, he hurled it forcibly, and sent it skimming over the ground with such unerring aim that it struck a tree fifty yards away and fell. “Mumkull black fellow,” he cried laughing.

Then picking up the second weapon, he threw it so that it flew skimming along through the air close to the ground for a considerable distance, curved upward, returned over the same ground, but high up, and fell not far from the thrower’s feet.

“Budgery,” cried Shanter, regaining his weapon, and laughing with childish delight.

“Here, let’s have a try,” said Norman, seizing the boomerang—literally boomer or kangaroo stick—and imitating the black’s actions, he threw it, but with such lamentable want of success, that his brother and cousin roared with laughter, and the black grinned his delight.

“Here, I’ll show you,” cried Rifle; but he turned round hurriedly, for there was a loud hail from a distance, and in obedience to a signal they all hurried to where the captain stood with Uncle Jack, both coming now toward them, and as they drew nearer the boys could read the look of anger in the captain’s face.

“We were just coming back, father,” cried Norman.

“Coming back, sir? How am I ever to trust you lads again. I sent you on a mission of what might mean life or death, and I find you playing like schoolboys with that savage.”

“We were coming back, father,” said Rifle, apologetically. “We met Shanter here, and he said that the black fellows were all gone.”

"And we thought he would be able to tell better than we could," said Norman, humbly.

"Humph! there was some excuse," said the captain, sternly; "but I expect my orders to be carried out.—Here, boy."

Shanter advanced rather shrinkingly.

"Black fellows. Where are they?"

"Baal black fellow," said Shanter, hastily. "All gone. Plenty no."

"Come back into camp then, lads," said the captain, "and help. There is plenty to do."

The captain was right: there was plenty to do. The question was what to begin upon first.

They all set to work to contrive a better shelter; and released now from dread of an immediate visit from the blacks, their little fortress was strengthened, and the first steps taken toward making the first room of their house; the captain as architect having planned it so that other rooms could be added one by one. But on the very first day the captain had an experience which nearly resulted in a serious quarrel and the black being driven from the camp.

For Shanter would not carry boxes or cut wood, or help in any way with the building, all of which seemed to him perfectly unnecessary; but just as the captain was getting in a towering passion, the black uttered a shout and pointed to the cattle which had been grazing and sheltering themselves beneath some trees, but now were rushing out as if seized by a panic. Heads were down, tails up, and they were evidently off for the bush, where the trouble of getting them back might be extreme. But Shanter was equal to the occasion. He saw at a glance the direction the cattle were taking; and as the sounds of their fierce lowing and the thunder of their hoofs reached his ears he darted off to run up a long slope opposite to the precipice Norman had climbed; and before the captain and the boys had reached their horses to saddle them and gallop after the herd, Shanter had descended the other side and gone.

"That black is of no use," said the captain, angrily. "He might have helped us to find the beasts; now I'm afraid they are gone for ever."

"No, no. It may be a long chase," said Uncle Munday, "but we must overtake them, and bring them back."

It took some time to catch and bridle and saddle all the horses, and with the exception of Sam German all were about to gallop off along the trail left by the cattle, when the captain drew rein.

"No," he said; "we must not leave the camp unprotected. We might have unwelcome visitors, Jack. You and I must stay. Off with you, boys. I daresay you will find the black hunting the brutes after all."

The boys waited for no further orders, but stuck their heels into their horses' sides, and the animals, full of spirit from idleness, went off at a headlong gallop. There was in fact quite a race over the open ground, where the beaten track could now be seen deeply marked.

But the run was short. Two miles away they caught sight of the drove, and drew rein so as not to scare them, for they were coming steadily along, and there close behind was Shanter, spear in hand, running to and fro, prodding, striking, and keeping the drove together; while the boys, now dividing, rode round to join him behind, bringing the frightened cattle back into camp panting, hot, and excited, but the panic was at an end.

"That will do," said the captain, pleasantly. "I give in about Tam o' Shanter;" and from that hour the black was installed as guardian of the "bull-cows and horse fellows," to his very great delight.

In his broken English way he explained the cause of the panic.

"Plenty 'possum fellow up a tree," he said. "One make jump down on bull-cow fellow back. You pidney? Kimmeroi (one) run, metancoly run. Bull-cow stupid fellow. Plenty frighten. No frighten Shanter."

That little incident had shown the black's real value, and he was henceforth looked upon as a valuable addition to the station, being sent out at times scouting to see if there was any danger in the neighbourhood. His principal duties, though, were that of herdsman and groom, for he soon developed a passionate attachment to the horses, and his greatest satisfaction was displayed when he was allowed to go and fetch them in from grazing for his young masters.

He had a great friend, too, in Aunt Georgie—"big white Mary," as he would persist in calling her—and oddly enough, it seemed to give him profound satisfaction to squat down outside after he had fetched wood or water, and be scolded for being long, or for the quality of the wood, or want of coolness in the water.

Meanwhile, the building had gone on merrily, for there was an intense desire to provide a better shelter for the ladies before the glorious weather changed and they had to do battle with the heavy rains. Sam German gave up his first ideas of fencing in a garden, and worked most energetically with his axe. Then one or other of the boys helped with the cross-cut saw, and posts were formed and shingles split—wooden slates Rifle called them—for the roofing.

A rough sawpit was made, too, under Uncle Munday's superintendence, the tools and implements thoughtfully brought proving invaluable, so that in due time uprights were placed, a framework contrived, and, sooner even than they had themselves anticipated, a well-formed little house was built, was completed with windows and strong shutters, and, at the sides, tiny loopholes for purposes of defence.

This one strong room covered in, and the boarded sides nailed on, the building of a kitchen at the side became a comparatively easy task, and was gone on with more slowly, for another job had to be commenced.

"I consider it wonderful, boys, that they have escaped," said the captain; "but we have been tempting fate. We must fence in a good space for the cattle, a sort of home close, where we know that they will be safe, before the enemy comes and drives them off some night while we are asleep."

This enclosure was then made, the posts and rails on one side coming close up to the space intended for a garden; and a further intention was to board it closely for a defence on that side when time allowed.

Every day saw something done, and in their busy life and immunity from danger all thought of peril began to die out. They even began to imagine that the weather was always going to be fine, so glorious it remained all through their building work. But they were soon undeceived as to that, a wet season coming on, and the boys getting some few examples of rain which made Sam German declare that it came down in bucketfuls; while Rifle was ready to assert, one afternoon when he was caught, that he almost swam home through it, after a visit to the lower part of the captain's land, to see that the sheep were all driven on to high ground, up to which they had laboured with their fleeces holding water in a perfect load.

And hence it was that, to the astonishment of all, they found that a whole year had passed away, and the captain said, with a perplexed look, that they seemed hardly to have done anything.

But all the same, there was the Dingo Station, as he had dubbed it, on account of the wild dogs which prowled about, with a substantial little farmhouse, some small out-buildings, paddocks enclosed with rails, and their farming stock looking healthy and strong. Sam German, too, had contrived to get something going in the way of a garden, and plans innumerable were being made for the future in the way of beautifying the place, though nature had done much for them before they came.

As for the elders, they did not look a day older, and all were in robust health. The change was in the boys:

Norman and Rifle had grown brown and sturdy to a wonderful degree, while Tim had shot up to such an extent that his cousins laughingly declared that he ought to wear a leaden hat to keep him down.

"It almost seems," said Uncle Jack one day, "that keeping a tame black is sufficient to drive all the others away."

"Don't seem to me that Shanter is very tame, uncle," cried Norman, merrily; "why, he is always wanting to go off into the scrub, and coaxes us to go with him."

"I say, father," cried Rifle, "when are we to go off on an expedition and have some hunting and fishing? I thought when we came out here that we were going to have adventures every day, and we haven't seen a black since that first night."

"Ah, you'll have adventures enough some day, boys. Have patience."

"But we want to go farther away, uncle," said Tim. "Are we always to be looking after the cattle and building?"

"I hope not," said the captain, merrily. "There, we shall not be so busy now, and we shall feel more free about several things."

Just then Shanter was seen crossing the front, munching away at a great piece of damper made from the new flour Sam German had brought up from Port Haven, it having been necessary for an expedition with a wagon and horses to be made at intervals of two or three months to replenish stores. They had had visitors, too, upon three occasions: the young doctor, Mr Freeston, and the sugar-planter, Mr Henley, having found their way to the station; the latter, as he said, being rather disposed to take up land in that direction, as it seemed far better than where he was, while the doctor casually let drop a few words to the boys at their last visit, that he thought it would be a good part of the country for him to settle in too.

"But there won't be any patients for you," said Norman.

"No," cried Rifle. "We never have anything the matter with us."

"Oh, but there will soon be settlers all about," said the doctor. "This part of the country is sure to be thickly settled one of these days, and it will be so advantageous to be the old-established medical man."

"I say," said Tim, as he and his cousins rode back after seeing the doctor and Mr Henley some distance on the way, "Doctor Freeston had better begin to doctor himself."

"Why?" said Rifle.

"Because it seems to me that he must be going mad."

Chapter Eleven.

"I said it was a snake."

"Norman, Rifle, Tim! Help! Help!"

"What's the matter?" cried Tim. "Here, boys, quick! There's something wrong at the house."

The three boys, who had heard the faint cries from a distance, set off at a run.

"It must be aunt. The girls and mamma are down by the waterfall," cried Rifle.

"Yes; it's aunt sure enough," said Norman, as they saw the old lady hurrying toward them.

"It must be the blacks come at last," cried Tim; "and oh, boys, we have not got our guns!"

"Who's going about always tied to a gun?" cried Norman, angrily.—"Here, aunt, what's the matter?"

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" cried the old lady, throwing her arms about the lad's neck, as he reached her first, and with so much energy that she would have upset him, and they would have fallen together had not his brother and cousin been close behind ready to give him their support.

"But don't cling to me, auntie," cried Norman, excitedly. "If you can't stand, lie down. Where are they?"

"In—in the kitchen, my dear," she panted; and then burst into a hysterical fit of sobbing, which came to an end as the boys hurriedly seated her beneath a tree.

"How many are there, aunt?" whispered Rifle, excitedly.

"Only one, my boys."

"One?" cried Norman. "I say, boys, we aren't afraid of one, are we?"

"No," cried the others.

"But I wish old Tam o' Shanter was here with his nulla-nulla."

"Never mind," said Norman, flushing up as he felt that, as eldest, he must take the lead. "There is no chance to get the guns. We'll run round by the wood-house; there are two choppers and an axe there. He won't show fight if he sees we're armed."

"I don't know," said Rifle, grimly. "He must be a fierce one, or he wouldn't have ventured alone."

"Perhaps there are a dozen of 'em behind, hiding," said Tim. "Shall we cooey?"

"No," said Norman, stoutly. "Not till we've seen. He may be only begging after all. Come on."

"Stop! Stop! Don't leave me here," cried Aunt Georgie excitedly, as the boys began to move off.

"But we can't take you, aunt," said Rifle, soothingly, "with a lot of blacks about."

"Blacks? Where?" cried Aunt Georgie rising.

"Where you said: in the kitchen."

"Stuff and nonsense, boy! I never said anything of the kind. I said it was a snake."

"Snake!" cried the boys in chorus.

"You didn't say anything of the kind, aunt," cried Norman, indignantly.

"Don't contradict, sir. I declare I never said a word about blacks. I went into the kitchen and heard a rustling sound between me and the door, and I thought it was one of the fowls come in to beg for a bit of bread, when I looked round, and there on the floor was a monstrous great serpent, twining and twisting about, and if I hadn't dashed out of the place it would have seized me."

"A big one, aunt?"

"A monster, my dear. But what are you going to do?"

Norman laughed, and looked at the others.

"Oh, I think we shall manage to turn him out, aunt," he said.

"But be careful, my dears, and don't run into danger."

"Oh no; we'll get the guns and talk to him through the window."

"I am glad it wasn't mamma," said Rifle.

"Or the girls," cried his cousin.

"Then I'm of no consequence at all," said the old lady, wiping her forehead and looking hurt. "Ah, well, I suppose I'm old and not of much importance now. There, go and kill the dreadful thing before it bites anybody."

They were not above eighty or ninety yards from the house, and they hurried on, closely followed by Aunt Georgie, meaning to go in by the principal door, when all at once a black figure, having a very magpieish look from the fact of his being clothed in an exceedingly short pair of white drawers, came from behind the house, and seeing them, came forward.

"Hi! Shanter!" shouted Norman, "look out. Big snake."

The black's hand went behind him instantly, and reappeared armed with his nulla-nulla as he looked sharply round for the reptile.

"No, no; in the house," cried Norman, leading the way toward the open door so as to get the guns.

Shanter bounded before him, flourishing his club, all excitement on the instant.

"No, no; let me come first," said the boy, in a low husky voice. "I want to get the guns. The snake's in the kitchen."

The black stopped short, and stood with his club hanging down, staring at the boy. Then a grin overspread his face as Norman reappeared with two loaded guns, one of which he handed to Tim, Rifle having meanwhile armed himself with an axe, from where it hung just inside the door.

"Now then, come on round to the back. It's a big one."

But Shanter laughed and shook his head.

"Ah, plenty game," he said. "Baal play game."

"No. There is one, really," cried Norman, examining the pan of his gun. "It attacked aunt."

Shanter shook his head.

"Baal. Can't pidney. What say?"

"Big snake no budgery, bite aunt," said Norman.

"Snake bite big white Mary. Baal bite: all mumkull."

"Oh, I do wish the man would speak English," cried Aunt Georgie. "There, you boys, stand back.—Shanter, go and kill the snake."

Shanter shook his head and tucked his nulla-nulla in his waistband again, laughing silently all the time.

"But there is a terribly great one, Shanter, and I order you to go and kill it."

"Baal mumkull snake."

"Yes; you can kill it, sir. Go and kill it directly. Throw that thing at it, and knock it down."

Shanter shook his head again.

"Here, I'll soon shoot it, aunt," said Norman; but Aunt Georgie held his arm tightly.

"No, sir, I shall not let you go.—Rifle, Tim, I forbid you to stir.—Shanter, do as I tell you," she continued, with a stamp of her foot. "Go and kill that horrible snake directly, or not one bit of damper do you ever get again from me."

"Big white Mary gib Shanter plenty damper."

"Yes; and will again. You are a big, strong man, and know how to kill snakes. Go and kill that one directly."

Shanter shook his head.

"Why, you are not afraid, sir?"

"No. Baal 'fraid snake," said Shanter in a puzzled way, as he looked searchingly from one to the other.

"Then go and do as I say."

"He's afraid of it," said Norman. "I don't like them, aunt, but I'll go and shoot it."

"Mine baal 'fraid," cried the black, angrily. "Mumkull plenty snake. Metancoy."

"Then why don't you go and kill that one?" said Norman as his aunt still restrained him.

"Baal snake bunyip," cried Shanter, angrily, naming the imaginary demon of the blacks' dread.

"Who said it was a bunyip?" cried Rifle. "It's a big snake that tried to bite aunt."

Shanter laughed and shook his head again.

"Baal mumkull snake bulla (two) time. Mumkull bunyip plenty. Come again."

"What muddle are you talking?" cried Norman, angrily; "the brute will get away. Look here, Shan, are you afraid?"

"Mine baal 'fraid."

"Then go and kill it."

"Baal mumkull over 'gain. Shanter mumkull. Make fire, put him in kidgen."

"What!" cried Aunt Georgie. "You put the snake in the kitchen?"

The black nodded.

"Mine put snake in kidgen for big white Mary."

"To bite me?"

"Baal—baal—baal bite big white Mary. Big white Mary, Marmi (captain), plenty bite snake. Good to eat."

"Here, I see," cried Norman, bursting out laughing, the black joining in. "He brought the snake for you to cook, auntie."

"What!" cried Aunt Georgie, who turned red with anger as the boy shook himself loose and ran round to the kitchen door, closely followed by Shanter and the others.

As Norman ran into the kitchen, he stopped short and pointed the gun, for right in the middle of the floor, writhing about in a way that might easily have been mistaken for menace, was a large carpet-snake.

Just as the boy realised that its head had been injured, Shanter made a rush past him, seized the snake by the tail, and ran out again dragging it after him with one hand, then snatching out his club, he dropped the tail, and quick as thought gave the writhing creature a couple of heavy blows on the head.

"Baal mumkull nuff," he said, as the writhing nearly ceased. Then, taking hold of the tail again, he began to drag the reptile back toward the kitchen door, but Norman stopped him.

"No; don't do that."

"Plenty budgery. Big white Mary."

"He says it's beautiful, aunt, and he brought it as a present for you. Shall he put it in the kitchen?"

"What?" cried Aunt Georgie; "make the horrid fellow take it, and bury it somewhere. I was never so frightened in my life."

All this was explained to Shanter, who turned sulky, and looked offended, marching off with his prize into the scrub, his whereabouts being soon after detected by a curling film of grey smoke.

"Here, come on, boys," cried Tim. "Shanter's having a feed of roast snake."

"Let's go and see," cried Norman, and they ran to the spot where the fire was burning, to find that Tim was quite correct. Shanter had made a good fire, had skinned his snake, and was roasting it in the embers, from which it sent forth a hissing sound not unlike its natural utterance, but now in company with a pleasantly savoury odour.

His back was toward them, and as they approached he looked round sourly, but his black face relaxed, and he grinned good-humouredly again, as he pointed to the cooking going on.

"Plenty budgery," he cried. "Come eat lot 'long Shanter."

But the boys said "No." The grubs were tempting, but the carpet-snake was not; so Shanter had it all to himself, eating till Rifle laughed, and said that he must be like india-rubber, else he could never have held so much.

Chapter Twelve.

A Real Expedition.

The Dingo Station never looked more beautiful than it did one glorious January morning as the boys were making their preparations for an expedition into the scrub. The place had been chosen for its attractiveness in the first instance, and two years hard work had made it a home over which Uncle Munday used to smile as he gazed on his handiwork in the shape of flowering creepers—Bougainvillea and Rinkasporum—running up the front, and hiding the rough wood, or over the fences; the garden now beginning to be wonderfully attractive, and adding to the general home-like aspect of the place; while the captain rubbed his hands as he gazed at his rapidly-growing prosperity, and asked wife and daughters whether they had not done well in coming out to so glorious a land.

They all readily agreed, for they had grown used to their active, busy life, and were quite content, the enjoyment of vigorous health in a fine climate compensating for the many little pleasures of civilised life which they had missed at first. The timidity from which they had suffered had long since passed away; and though in quiet conversations, during the six early months of their sojourn, mother and daughter and niece had often talked of how much pleasanter it would have been if the captain had made up his mind to sell his property and go close up to some settlement, such thoughts were rare now; and, as Aunt Georgie used to say:

"Of course, my dears, I did at one time think it very mad to come right out here, but I said to myself, Edward is acting for the best, and it is our duty to help him, and I'm very glad we came; for at home I used often to say to myself, 'I'm getting quite an old woman now, and at the most I can't live above another ten years.' While now I don't feel a bit old, and I shall be very much disappointed if I don't live another twenty or five-and-twenty years. For you see, my

dears, there is so much to do.”

And now, on this particular morning, the boys were busy loading up a sturdy, useful horse with provisions for an excursion into the scrub. Sam German had left his gardening to help to get their horses ready; and full of importance, in a pair of clean white drawers, Shanter was marching up and down looking at the preparations being made, in a way that suggested his being lord of the whole place.

All ready at last, and mounted. Mrs Bedford, Aunt Georgie, and the girls had come out to see them off, and the captain and Uncle Jack were standing by the fence to which the packhorse was hitched.

“Got everything, boys?” said the captain.

“Yes, father; I think so.”

“Flint and steel and tinder?”

“Oh yes.”

“Stop!” cried the captain. “I’m sure you’ve forgotten something.”

“No, father,” said Rifle. “I went over the things too, and so did Tim. Powder, shot, bullets, knives, damper iron, hatchets, tent-cloth.”

“I know,” cried Aunt Georgie. “I thought they would. No extra blankets.”

“Yes, we have, aunt,” cried Tim, laughing.

“Then you have no sticking-plaster.”

“That we have, aunt, and bits of linen rag, and needles and thread. You gave them to me,” said Rifle. “I think we have everything we ought to carry.”

“No,” said the captain; “there is something else.”

“They’ve forgotten the tea,” cried Hetty, merrily.

“No. Got more than we want,” cried Rifle.

“Sugar, then,” said Ida. “No; I mean salt.”

“Wrong again, girls,” cried Norman. “We’ve got plenty of everything, and only want to start off—How long can you do without us, father?”

“Oh,” said the captain, good-humouredly, “you are an idle lot. I don’t want you. Say six months.”

“Edward, my dear!” exclaimed Mrs Bedford, in alarm.

“Well then, say a fortnight. Fourteen days, boys, and if you are not back then, we shall be uneasy, and come in search of you.”

“Come now, father,” cried Rifle, laughing. “I say, I do wish you would.”

“Nothing I should enjoy better, my boy,” said the captain. “This place makes me feel full of desire adventure.”

“Then come,” cried Norman. “It would be grand. You come too, Uncle Jack;” but that gentleman shook his head as did his brother.

“And pray who is to protect your mother and sisters and aunt, eh?” said the captain. “No; go and have your jaunt, and as soon as you cross the range mark down any good site for stations.”

“Oh, Edward dear,” cried Mrs Bedford, “you will not go farther into the wilderness?”

“No,” he said, smiling; “but it would be pleasant to be able to tell some other adventurer where to go.”

“I know what they’ve forgotten,” said Ida, mischievously, and on purpose—“soap.”

“Wrong again, Miss Clever,” cried Norman. “We’ve got everything but sailing orders. Good-bye all.”

“You will take care, my dears,” cried Mrs Bedford, who looked pale and anxious.

“Every care possible, mother dear,” cried the lad, affectionately; “and if Tim and Rifle don’t behave themselves, I’ll give ’em ramrod and kicks till they do.—Now, father, Tam o’ Shanter’s looking back again. Shall we start?”

“You’ve forgotten something important.”

“No, father, we haven’t, indeed.”

“You talked about sailing orders, and you are going to start off into the wilds where there isn’t a track. Pray, where is your compass?”

"There he is, father," cried Rifle, merrily; "yonder in white drawers."

"A very valuable one, but you can't go without one that you can put in your pocket. What did we say last night about being lost in the bush?"

"Forgot!" cried Norman, after searching his pockets. "Have you got it, Tim?"

Tim put his hand in his pocket, and shook his head.

"Have you, Rifle?"

"No."

"Of course he has not," said the captain; "and it is the most important thing of your outfit.

"Here it is," he continued, producing a little mariner's compass; "and now be careful. You ought to have had three. Good-bye, boys. Back within the fortnight, mind."

Promises, more farewells, cheers, and twenty minutes later the boys turned their horses' heads on the top of Wallaby Range, as they had named the hills behind the house, at the last point where they could get a view of home, pausing to wave their three hats; and then, as they rode off for the wilds, Shanter, who was driving the packhorse, uttered a wild yell, as he leaped from the ground, and set all the horses capering and plunging.

"What did you do that for?" said Norman, as soon as he could speak for laughing, the effects on all three having been comical in the extreme.

"Corbon budgery. All good. Get away and no work."

"Work?" cried Rifle. "Why, you never did any work in your life."

"Baal work. Mine go mumkull boomer plenty hunt, find sugar-bag. Yah!"

He uttered another wild shout, which resulted in his having to trot off after the packhorse, which took to its heels, rattling the camping equipage terribly, while the boys restrained their rather wild but well-bred steeds.

"Old Tam's so excited that he don't know what to do," cried Tim.

"Yes. Isn't he just like a big boy getting his first holidays."

"Wonder how old he is," said Rifle.

"I don't know. Anyway between twenty and a hundred. He'll always be just like a child as long as he lives," said Norman. "He always puts me in mind of what Tim was six or seven years ago when he first came to us."

"Well, I wasn't black anyhow," said Tim.

"No, but you had just such a temper; got in a passion, turned sulky, went and hid yourself, and forgot all about it in half an hour."

"I might be worse," said Tim, drily. "Heads!" he shouted by way of warning as he led the way under a group of umbrageous trees, beyond which they could see Shanter still trotting after the packhorse, which did not appear disposed to stop.

"Well, I'm as glad we've got off as Shanter is," said Rifle as they ambled along over the rich grass. "I thought we never were going to have a real expedition."

"Why, we've had lots," said Tim.

"Oh, they were nothing. I mean a regular real one all by ourselves. How far do you mean to go to-night?"

"As far as we can before sunset," said Norman; "only we must be guided by circumstances."

"Which means wood, water, and shelter," said Tim, sententiously. "I say, suppose after all we were to meet a tribe of black fellows. What should we do?"

"Let 'em alone," said Rifle, "and then they'd leave us alone."

"Yes; but suppose they showed fight and began to throw spears at us."

"Gallop away," suggested Tim.

"Better make them gallop away," said Norman. "Keep just out of reach of their spears and pepper them with small shot."

After a time they overtook the black, and had to dismount to rearrange the baggage on the packhorse, which was sadly disarranged; but this did not seem to trouble Shanter, who stood by solemnly, leaning upon his spear, and making an occasional remark about, "Dat fellow corbon budgery," or, "Dis fellow baal budgery,"—the "fellows" being tin pots or a sheet of iron for cooking damper.

"Fellow indeed!" cried Rifle, indignantly; "you're a pretty fellow."

"Yohi," replied the black, smiling. "Shanter pretty fellow. Corbon budgery."

But if the black would not work during their excursion after the fashion of ordinary folk, he would slave in the tasks that pleased him; and during the next few days their table—by which be it understood the green grass or some flat rock—was amply provided with delicacies in the shape of 'possum and grub, besides various little bulbs and roots, or wild fruits, whose habitat Shanter knew as if by instinct. His boomerang brought down little kangaroo-like animals—wallabies such as were plentiful on the range—and his nulla-nulla was the death of three carpet-snakes, which were roasted in a special fire made by the black, for he was not allowed to bring them where the bread was baked and the tea made.

So day after day they journeyed on over the far-spreading park-like land, now coming upon a creek well supplied with water, now toiling over some rocky elevation where the stones were sun-baked and the vegetation parched, while at night they spread the piece of canvas they carried for a tent, hobbled the horses, and lay down to sleep or watch the stars with the constellations all upside down.

They had so far no adventures worth calling so, but it was a glorious time. There was the delicious sense of utter freedom from restraint. The country was before them—theirs as much as any one's—with the bright sunshine of the day, and gorgeous colours of night and morning.

When they camped they could stay as long as they liked; when they journeyed they could halt in the hot part of the day in the shade of some large tree, and go on again in the cool delightful evening; and there was a something about it all that is indescribable, beyond saying that it was coloured by the brightly vivid sight of boyhood, when everything is at its best.

The stores lasted out well in spite of the frightful inroads made by the hungry party: for Shanter contributed liberally to the larder, and every day Norman said it was a shame, and the others agreed as they thought of cages, or perches and chains; but all the same they plucked and roasted the lovely great cockatoos they shot, and declared them to be delicious.

Shanter knocked down a brush pheasant or two, whose fate was the fire; and one day he came with something in his left hand just as breakfast was ended, and with a very serious aspect told them to look on, while he very cleverly held a tiny bee, smeared its back with a soft gum which exuded from the tree under whose shade they sat, and then touched the gum with a bit of fluffy white cottony down.

"Dat fellow going show sugar-bag plenty mine corbon budgery."

"Get out with your corbon budgery," cried Norman. "What's he going to do?"

They soon knew, for, going out again into the open, Shanter let the bee fly and darted off after it, keeping the patch of white in view, till it disappeared among some trees.

"Dat bee fellow gunyah," cried Shanter, as the boys ran up, and they followed the direction of the black's pointing finger, to see high up in a huge branch a number of bees flying in and out, and in a very short time Shanter had seized the little hatchet Rifle carried in his belt, and began to cut big notches in the bark of the tree, making steps for his toes, and by their means mounting higher and higher, till he was on a level with the hole where the bees came in and out.

"Mind they don't sting you, Shanter," cried Tim.

"What six-ting?" cried Shanter.

"Prick and poison you."

"Bee fellow ticklum," he cried laughing, as he began chopping away at the bark about the hollow which held the nest, and brought out so great a cloud of insects that he descended rapidly.

"Shanter let 'em know," he cried; and running back to the camp he left the boys watching the bees, till he returned with a cooliman—a bark bowl formed by peeling the excrescence of a tree—and some sticks well lighted at the end.

By means of these the black soon had a fire of dead grass tufts smoking tremendously, arranging it so that the clouds curled up and played round the bees' nest.

"Bee fellow baal like smoke," he cried. "Make bee go bong."

Then seizing the hatchet and cooliman he rapidly ascended the tree, and began to cut out great pieces of dripping honeycomb, while the boys laughed upon seeing that the hobbled horses, objecting to be left alone in the great wild, had trotted close up and looked as if they had come on purpose to see the honey taken.

It was not a particularly clean process, but the result was plentiful, and after piling his bark bowl high, Shanter came down laughing.

"Plenty mine tickee, tickee," he said; but it did not seem to occur to him that it would be advantageous to have a wash. He was quite content to follow back to the camp-fire and then sit down to eat honey and comb till Tim stared.

"I say, Shanter," he cried, "we didn't bring any physic."

"Physic? What physic? Budgery?"

"Oh, very budgery indeed," said Rifle, laughing. "You shall have some when we get back."

Shanter nodded, finished his honey, and went to sleep till he was roused up, and the party started off once more.

Chapter Thirteen.

"Don't Say He's Dead."

It was comparatively an aimless expedition the boys were making. Certainly they were to note down any good sites for stations; but otherwise they roamed about almost wherever Shanter led them. Now it would be down some lovely creek, overhung by wide-spreading ferns, in search of fish; now to hunt out and slay dangerous serpents, or capture the carpet-snake, which the black looked upon as a delicacy. Twice over they came across the lyre-tailed pheasant; but the birds escaped uninjured, so that they did not secure the wonderful tail-feathers for a trophy.

The last time Tim had quite an easy shot with both barrels, and there was a roar of laughter when the bird flew away amongst the dense scrub.

"Well, you are a shot!" cried Norman.

"Shanter plenty mumkull that fellow with boomerang," said the black, scornfully.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Tim, reloading coolly. "The feathers would only have been a bother to carry home."

"Sour grapes," said Rifle, laughing.

"Oh, all right," replied Tim; "perhaps you'll miss next. Why—"

Tim stopped short, with the little shovel of his shot-belt in his hand, as he felt the long leathern eel-shaped case carefully.

"What's the matter?" said Norman.

"You feel here," cried his cousin.

"Well," said Norman, running his hand along the belt, "what of it?"

"Full, isn't it?" said Tim.

"Yes. Quite full."

"You're sure it's quite full?"

"Oh yes."

"Then I didn't put any shot in my gun, that's all. I loaded after I came out this morning."

"Well, you are a pretty fellow," cried Rifle. "I shouldn't like to have to depend on you if we were attacked by black fellows."

"Black fellow," cried Shanter, sharply. "Baal black fellow. Plenty wallaby. Come along."

That day, though, they did not encounter any of that small animal of the kangaroo family, which were plentiful about the hills at home, but went journeying on along through the bush, with the grass-trees rising here and there with their mop-like heads and blossom-like spike. Even birds were scarce, and toward evening, as they were growing hungry and tired, and were seeking a satisfactory spot for camping, Tim let fall a remark which cast a damper on the whole party.

"I say, boys," he exclaimed, "whereabouts are we?"

Norman looked at him, and a shade of uneasiness crossed his face, as he turned in his saddle.

"What made you say that?" he cried.

"I was only thinking that this place is very beautiful, but it seems to me all alike; and as if you might go on wandering for years and never get to the end."

"Nonsense!" said Rifle.

"But how are we going to find our way back?"

"Go by the sun," said Norman. "It would be easy enough. Besides we've got the compass, and we could find our way by that."

"Oh, could we?" said Tim; "well, I'm glad, because it seemed to me as if we've wandered about so that we might get lost."

"What, with Shanter here?" cried Rifle. "Nonsense! He couldn't lose himself."

"Want mine?" said the black, running back from where he was trudging beside the packhorse.

"How are we to find our way back?" said Tim. The black stared without comprehending. "Here, let me," said Rifle. "Hi, Shanter! Mine find big white Mary over there?" and he pointed.

"Baal fine big white Mary," cried the black, shaking his shock-head hard. "Big white Mary—Marmi dere."

He pointed in a contrary direction.

"How do you know?" said Rifle.

The black gave him a cunning look, stooped, and began to follow the footprints of the horses backward. Then turning, he laughed.

"Of course," said Norman. "How stupid of me! Follow the back track."

"But suppose it comes on to rain heavily, and washes the footmarks out. How then?"

"Don't you croak," cried Norman, who was himself again. "Who says it's going to rain?"

"Nobody," said Tim; "but it might."

"Pigs might fly," cried Rifle.

Just then Shanter gave a triumphant cry. He had come to a large water-hole, by which they camped for the night, and had the pleasure of seeing their tired horses drink heartily, and then go off to crop the abundant grass.

"Now, boys," said Norman that night, "I've something to tell you. To-morrow we go forward half a day's journey, and then halt for two hours, and come back here to camp."

"Why?" cried Rifle.

"Because we have only just time to get back as father said."

"Why, we've only—"

"Been out eight days, boys," interrupted Norman; "and there's only just time to get back by going steadily."

"But we can't get back in time," argued Rifle. "We shall only have five days and a half."

"Yes we shall, if we don't make any stoppages."

"Oh, let's go on a bit farther; we haven't had hardly any fun yet," cried Rifle.

But Norman took the part of leader, and was inexorable.

"Besides," he said, "the stores will only just last out."

To make up for it, they started very early the next morning, so as to get as far away as possible before returning. Then came the mid-day halt, and the journey back to the water-hole, over what seemed to be now the most uninteresting piece of country they had yet traversed, and Shanter appeared to think so too.

"Baal black fellow; baal wallaby; baal snakum. Mine want big damper."

"And mine must plenty wait till we get back to camp," said Norman, nodding at him, when the black nodded back and hastened the pace of the packhorse, whose load was next to nothing now, the stores having been left at the side of the water-hole.

It was getting toward sundown when the ridge of rocks, at the foot of which the deep pure water lay, came in sight; and Shanter, who was in advance, checked the horse he drove and waited for the boys to come up.

"Horse fellow stop along of you," he said; "mine go an' stir up damper fire."

"All right," replied Norman, taking the horse's rein, but letting it go directly, knowing that the patient would follow the others, while with a leap and a bound Shanter trotted off, just as if he had not been walking all the day.

"I am sorry it's all over," said Rifle, who was riding with his rein on his horse's neck and hands in his pockets. "We don't seem to have had half a holiday."

"It isn't all over," said Tim; "we've got full five days yet, and we may have all sorts of adventures. I wish, though, there were some other wild beasts here beside kangaroos and dingoes. I don't think Australia is much of a place after all."

"Hub!" cried Norman. "Look, old Tam has caught sight of game."

"Hurrah! Let's gallop," cried Rifle.

"No, no. Keep back. He's stalking something that he sees yonder. There: he has gone out of sight. I daresay it's only

one of those horrible snakes. What taste it is, eating snake!”

“No more than eating eels,” said Rifle, drily. “They’re only water-snakes. I say, though, come on.”

“And don’t talk about eating, please,” cried Tim, plaintively; “it does make me feel so hungry.”

“As if you could eat carpet-snake, eh?”

“Ugh!”

“Or kangaroo?” cried Rifle, excitedly, as they reached the top of one of the billowy waves of land which swept across the great plain. “Look, Shanter sees kangaroo. There they go. No, they’re stopping. Hurrah! kangaroo tail for supper. Get ready for a shot.”

As he spoke he unslung his gun, and they cantered forward, closely followed by the packhorse, knowing that the curious creatures would see them, however carefully they approached, and go off in a series of wonderful leaps over bush and stone.

As they cantered on, they caught sight of Shanter going through some peculiar manoeuvre which they could not quite make out. But as they came nearer they saw him hurl either his boomerang or nulla-nulla, and a small kangaroo fell over, kicking, on its side.

“Shan’t starve to-night, boys,” cried Tim, who was in advance; and in another minute, with the herd of kangaroos going at full speed over the bushes, they were close up, but drew rein in astonishment at that which followed.

For as the boys sat there almost petrified, but with their horses snorting and fidgeting to gallop off to avoid what they looked upon as an enemy, and to follow the flying herd, they saw Shanter in the act of hurling his spear at a gigantic kangaroo—one of the “old men” of which they had heard stories—and this great animal was evidently making for the black, partly enraged by a blow it had received, partly, perhaps, to cover the flight of the herd.

The spear was thrown, but it was just as the old man was making a bound, and though it struck, its power of penetration was not sufficient, in an oblique blow, to make it pierce the tough skin, and to the boys’ horror they saw the blunt wooden weapon fall to the earth. The next instant the kangaroo was upon Shanter, grasping him with its forepaws and hugging him tightly against its chest, in spite of the black’s desperate struggles and efforts to trip his assailant up. There he looked almost like a child in the grasp of a strong man, and to make matters worse, the black had no weapon left, not even a knife, and he could not reach the ground with his feet.

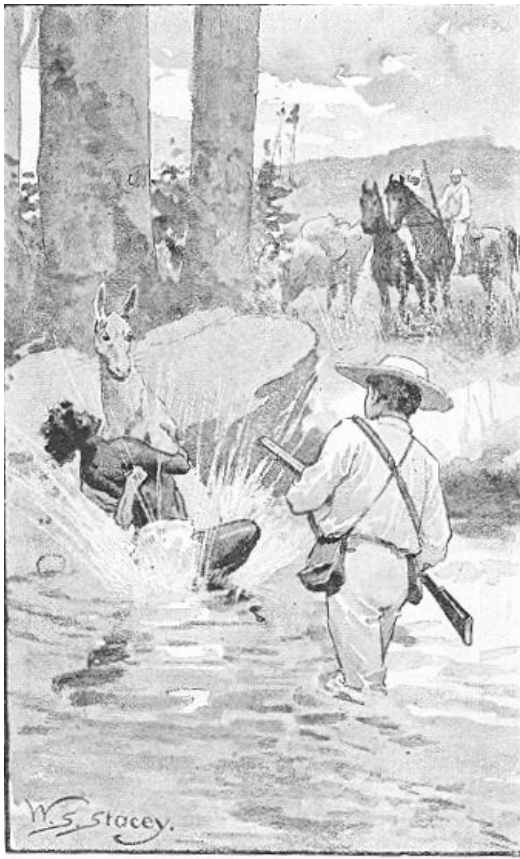
Poor Shanter had heard the horses coming up, and now in his desperate struggle to free himself, he caught sight of Raphael.

“Boomer—mumkull!” he yelled in a half-suffocated voice. “Mumkull—shoot, shoot.”

The gun was cocked and in the boy’s hands, but to fire was impossible, for fear of hitting the black; while, when Norman rode close up, threw himself off his horse, and advanced to get a close shot, the kangaroo made vicious kicks at him, which fortunately missed, or, struck as he would have been by the animal’s terrible hind-claw, Norman Bedford’s career would, in all probability, have been at an end.

Then, in spite of Shanter’s struggles and yells to the boys to shoot—to “mumkull” his enemy—the kangaroo began to leap as easily as if it were not burdened with the weight of a man; and quickly clearing the distance between them and the water-hole, plunged right in, and with the water flying up at every spring, shuffled at last into deep water.

Here, knowing the fate reserved for him, Shanter made another desperate struggle to escape; but he was wrestling with a creature nearly as heavy as a cow, and so formed by nature that it sat up looking a very pyramid of strength, being supported on the long bones of the feet, and kept in position by its huge tail; while the black, held as he was in that deadly hug, and unable to get his feet down, was completely helpless.



Without a moment's hesitation, Norman waded in after them to try to get an opportunity to fire.

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Without a moment's hesitation, Norman waded in after them to try to get an opportunity to fire; but the kangaroo struck out at him again with all the power of its huge leg, and though it was too far off for the blow to take effect, it drove up such a cataract of water as deluged the lad from head to foot, and sent him staggering back.

The next moment the object of the kangaroo was plain to the boys, for, as if endowed with human instinct, it now bent down to press poor Shanter beneath the water, and hold him there till he was drowned.

Rifle saw it, and pressing the sides of his horse, and battling with it to overcome its dread of the uncanny-looking marsupial, he forced it right in to the pool, and urged it forward with voice and hand, so as to get a shot to tell upon Shanter's adversary.

It was hard work, but it had this effect, that it took off the kangaroo's attention, so that there was a momentary respite for Shanter, the great brute rising up and raising the black's head above the water, so that he could breathe again, while, repeating its previous manoeuvre, the kangaroo kicked out at Rifle, its claw just touching the saddle.

That was enough, the horse reared up, fought for a few moments, pawing the air, and went over backwards. Then there was a wild splashing, and Rifle reached the shore without his gun, drenched, but otherwise unhurt, and the horse followed.

The black's fate would have been sealed, for, free of its assailants, the kangaroo plunged the poor helpless struggling fellow down beneath the surface, attentively watching the approach the while of a third enemy, and ready to launch out one of those terrible kicks as soon as the boy was sufficiently near.

"Oh, Tim, Tim, fire—fire!" cried Norman, as he saw his cousin wade in nearer and nearer: "Quick! quick! before Shanter's drowned."

Tim had already paused four yards away, and up to his armpits in water as he took careful aim, his hands trembling one moment, but firm the next, as the kangaroo, bending downward with the side of its head to him and nearly on a level with the water, which rose in violent ebullitions consequent upon Shanter's struggles, seemed to have a peculiar triumphant leer in its eyes, as if it were saying: "Wait a bit; it is your turn next."

It was all the work of a minute or so, but to the two boys on shore it seemed a horrible time of long suspense, before there was a double report, the triggers being pulled almost simultaneously. A tremendous spring right out of the water, and then a splash, which sent it flying in all directions, before it was being churned up by the struggling monster, now in its death throes; then, gun in one hand, Shanter's wrist in the other, Tim waded ashore, dragging the black along the surface, set free as he had been when those two charges of small shot struck the side of the kangaroo's head like a couple of balls and crushed it in.

Drenched as they were, the three boys got Shanter on to the grass, where he lay perfectly motionless, and a cold chill shot through all, as they felt that their efforts had been in vain, and that a famous slayer of kangaroos had met his end from one of the race. The sun was just on the horizon now, and the water looked red as blood, and not wholly from the sunset rays.

"Shanter, Shanter, old fellow, can't you speak?" cried Norman, as he knelt beside the black.

Just then there was a tremendous struggle in the water, which ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"Man, don't say he's dead!" whispered Tim, in awe-stricken tones.

Norman made no reply, and Rifle bent softly over the inanimate black figure before him, and laid a hand upon the sufferer's breast.

"You were too late, Tim; too late," sighed Rifle. "I'd heard those things would drown people, but I didn't believe it till now. Oh, poor old Shanter! You were very black, but you were a good fellow to us all."

"And we ought to have saved you," groaned Norman.

"I wish we had never come," sighed Tim, as he bent lower. "Can't we do anything? Give him some water?"

"Water!" cried Norman, with a mocking laugh. "He's had enough of that."

"Brandy?" said Rifle. "There is some in a flask. Father said, take it in case any one is ill."

"Get it," said Norman, laconically, and his brother ran to where, not fifty yards away, the saddle-bags were lying just as they had been left early that morning.

The brandy was right at the bottom, but it was found at last, and Rifle hurried with it to the black's side.

Norman took the flask, unscrewed the top, drew off the cup from the bottom, and held it on one side to pour out a small quantity, but as he held it more and more over not a drop came. The top was ill-fitting, and all had slowly leaked away.

The lad threw the flask aside, and knowing nothing in those days of the valuable hints for preserving life in cases of apparent drowning, they knelt there, with one supporting the poor fellow's head, the others holding his hands, thinking bitterly of the sad end to their trip; while, in spite of his efforts to keep it down, the selfish thought would come into Norman's breast—How shall we be able to find our way back without poor Shanter?

The sun had sunk; the water looked dark and black now. Night was coming on, and a faint curl of smoke showed where the fire left in the morning still burned feebly. But no one stirred, and with hearts sinking lower and lower in the solemn silence, the boys knelt there, thinking over the frank, boyish ways of the big sturdy savage who lay there before them.

Once or twice a piping whistle was heard from some rail, or the call of a waterfowl, which made the horses raise their heads, look round, and then, uttering a low sigh, go on cropping the grass again, after looking plaintively at their masters, as if protesting against being turned out to graze with their reins about their legs and their bits in their mouths.

Then, all at once, just as the stars were beginning to show faintly in the pearly-grey sky, the three boys started back in horror, for there was a curious sound, something between a yawn and a sigh, and Shanter suddenly started up and looked round. Then he rose to his feet, as if puzzled and unable to make out where he was.

Then his memory came back, and he ran to the edge of the water-hole, peered through the darkness with his hand over his eyes, and without hesitation waded in, seized the kangaroo, as it floated, by one of its hind-legs, and dragged it ashore.

"Marmi Rifle; chopper—chopper," he cried.

One was handed to him in silence, for a curious feeling of awe troubled the boys, and they could hardly believe in the truth of what they were seeing in the semi-darkness. But the blows they heard were real enough, and so was the wet figure of Shanter, as he approached them, bearing the great tail of his enemy.

"Big boomer go bong," said Shanter in a husky voice.

"Want mumkull mine. Shanter mumkull big boomer. Now fire big roast and damper."

With a sigh of relief the boys made for the fire, threw on a few twigs to catch first, and as there were a good heap of embers, larger pieces of wood soon followed. Then after removing the horses' saddles and bridles, and hobbling them to keep them from straying, the boys gladly took off some of their soaking garments and huddled round the fire, where the black was busily roasting the tail of the smaller kangaroo, which he had fetched, while the boys were occupied with their horses.

"Mine wear baal clothes," he said pityingly, as he, with his skin dry directly, looked at their efforts to dry themselves. Then the big tin billy was boiled and tea made, its hot aromatic draughts being very comforting after the soaking, and by that time the tail was ready, enough cold damper being found for that evening's meal.

But though all was satisfactory so far, Shanter did not join in. He would eat no damper, drink no tea, and he turned from the roast tail with disgust, squatting down over the fire with his arms round his knees, and soon after going off to a spot among the bushes, where he curled up under a blanket and was seen no more that night.

"Poor old Shanter doesn't seem well," said Norman.

"No wonder," replied Tim.

"And he thinks he killed the old man. Why didn't you speak, Tim?"

"Wasn't worth it," was the reply. "I didn't want to kill the great thing."

An hour later the boys were under their canvas shelter, forgetting all the excitement of the evening, and dreaming—of being home in Norman's case, while Rifle dreamed that a huge black came hopping like a kangaroo and carried off Aunt Georgie.

As for Tim, he dreamed of the encounter again, but with this difference—the boomer had still hold of Shanter, and when he took up the gun to fire it would not go off.

Chapter Fourteen.

"Can't find way back."

It was long before sunrise when the boys rose to see after Shanter, expecting to find him still lying down, but he was up and over by the water-hole examining the huge kangaroo.

"Mine mumkull kangaroo," he said, as the boys came up, and then, "Baal."

"Didn't you kill it, Shanter?" said Norman, smiling. "Baal. Who kill boomer? Big hole all along." He pointed to the terrible wound in the animal's head caused by the shots Tim had fired. And as the black spoke he examined the knob at the end of his nulla-nulla, comparing it with the wound, and shook his head.

"Baal make plenty sore place like dat. Go all along other side make hole. Baal."

He stood shaking his head in a profound state of puzzlement as to how the wound came, while the boys enjoyed his confusion. Then all at once his face lit up.

"Bunyip mumkull boomer. All go bong."

"You should say all go bong Tam. Why, can't you see? Tim shot him while he was holding your head under water."

"Eh? Marmi Tim shoot? What a pity!"

"Pity?" cried Rifle, staring at the black's solemn face. "Pity that Tim saved your life."

"Mine want mumkull big boomer."

"Never mind: he's dead," cried Norman. "Now come along and let's boil the billy, and make some damper and tea."

"Mine don't want big damper," said Shanter, rubbing himself gently about the chest and ribs.

"What? Not want something to eat?"

"Baal, can't eat," replied the black. "Mine got sore all along. Dat boomer fellow squeezum."

Norman laid his hand gently on the black's side, wondering whether the poor fellow had a broken rib, when, with the most solemn of faces, Shanter uttered a loud squeak.

Norman snatched back his hand, but placed it directly after on the other side, when Shanter squeaked again more loudly; and at every touch, back or front, there was a loud cry, the black looking from one to the other in the most lugubrious way.

"Why, Shanter, you seem to be bad all over," said Rifle.

"Yohi. Mine bad all along, plenty mine bad. Tam go bong."

"Nonsense!" cried Norman. "Come and have a good breakfast. Plenty damper, plenty tea, and you'll be better."

"Baal damper—baal big tea," said the black, rubbing himself. "Boomer mumkull Tam o' Shanter. Mine go bong."

He laid himself gently down on the grass, rolled a little and groaned, and then stretched himself out, and shut his eyes.

"Oh, it's only his games," said Rifle.—"Here, Shanter, old chap, jump up and say thanky, thanky to Marmi Tim for saving your life."

"Marmi Tim baal save Tam o' Shanter. All go along bong."

"I'm afraid he is bad," said Norman, going down on one knee to pass his hand over the poor fellow's ribs, with the result that he uttered a prolonged moan; "but I don't think there are any bones broken. Let's get some breakfast ready. He'll be better after some hot tea."

They threw a pile of wood on the embers, in which a damper was soon baking; and as soon as the billy boiled, a handful of tea was thrown in and the tin lifted from the fire to stand and draw. But though they took Tam a well-sweetened pannikin of the refreshing drink he would not swallow it, neither would he partake of the pleasant smelling, freshly-baked cake.

"I say, I'm afraid the poor chap is bad," whispered Tim.

"Not he," said Rifle. "His ribs are sore with the hugging the boomer gave him, but he's only shamming. I'll rouse him up."

He made a sign to Norman, who looked very anxious, and when the lads were a few yards away, Rifle made them a sign to watch their patient, who lay quite still with his eyes shut, and then suddenly shouted:

"Quick, boys, guns—guns! Black fellows coming."

Shanter started up into a sitting position and tried to drag out his nulla-nulla, but his eyes closed again, and he fell back heavily.

Norman tried to catch him, but he was too late, and a glance showed that there was no deceit in the matter, for the drops of agony were standing on the black's face, and it was quite evident that he had fainted away.

He soon came to, however, and lay gazing wonderingly about him.

"Black fellow?" he whispered anxiously, as if the effort caused him a great deal of pain.

"All gone along," cried Rifle, eagerly; and the black closed his eyes again, while the boys consulted as to what they had better do.

"That's soon settled," said Norman. "We can't fetch help to him, and he can't move, so we must stop here till he gets better. Let's cut some sticks and drive them in the ground, tie them together at the tops, and spread a couple of blankets over them."

This was done so as to shelter their invalid from the sun, and then they saw to their own tent and prepared for a longer stay. After this Tim and Rifle went off to try to shoot something, and Norman stopped to watch the black.

It was a weary hot day, and the boys were so long that Norman began to grow anxious and full of imaginations. Suppose the lads got bushed! He would have to strike their trail and try to find them. Suppose poor Shanter were to die before they came back! How horrible to be alone with the dead out there in that solitary place.

The sun rose to its full height, and then began to descend, but the black neither moved nor spoke, and the only companionship Norman had was that of the two horses—his own and the one which carried the pack. These cropped the grass round about the camp, their hobble chains rattling a little, and the peculiar snort a horse gives in blowing insects out of the grass he eats were the principal sounds the boy heard. It was some comfort to walk to where they grazed and pat and talk to them.

But he was soon back by Shanter's blanket-gunyah watching the shiny black face, which looked very hard and stern now. He had tried him again and again with tea, water, and bread, but there was no response; and at last he had settled down to letting him rest, hoping that his patient was asleep, and feeling that he could do nothing but leave him to nature.

But it was a sad vigil, and not made more pleasant by the sight of the great kangaroo lying just at the edge of the water-hole, and toward which a perfect stream of insects were already hurrying over the dry ground, while flies buzzed incessantly about it in the air. Then, too, again and again some great bird came circling round, but only to be kept at a distance by the sight of the watcher by the tents.

"Will they never come back!" cried Norman at last, quite aloud, and he started in alarm, for there was a loud discordant laugh close at hand.

He picked up a stone and threw it angrily into the ragged tree from whence the sound had come, and one of the great grotesque-looking kingfishers of the country flew off.

At last, after scanning the distant horizon for hours, seeing nothing but a few kangaroos which looked like black fellows in the distance, and a couple of emus stalking slowly across the plain, Norman could bear it no longer.

"Shanter," he said; "must go and find Marmi Rifle and Marmi Tim. Do you hear? I'll come back as soon as I can."

But there was not so much as a twitch at the corners of the black's lips, and the boy hesitated about leaving him. At last though he rose, caught and saddled his horse, gave one final look round, but could see nothing; and he was about to mount when a sudden thought occurred to him, and taking a couple of halters he knotted them together, hitched one over the kangaroo's neck, and attached the other end to the saddle.

The horse jibbed and shied a little, but at last he made a plunge, and the dead animal was dragged into a hollow a couple of hundred yards away, so that there should be no fear of its contaminating the water-hole. Then the halters were cast off, thrown over the tent, and after a glance at Shanter, Norman mounted to take up the trail made by Rifle and Tim, but only leaped down again, and turned his horse out to graze; for there away in the distance were the two boys cantering gently toward the camp, and half an hour later they rode up, well supplied with clucks which they had shot right away upon a creek.

That night passed with one of them watching, and the next two days glided by in the same dreary way, Shanter lying as if unconscious, and nothing passed his lips.

"Father can't be angry with us for not keeping to our time," said Rifle, sadly. "Poor old Shanter, I wish I could do him some good."

That night passed and still there was no change, and about mid-day the boys were dolefully examining their stock of provisions, which was getting very low; and it had been decided that they should watch that night and shoot anything which came to the water-hole to drink, though the animals likely so to do were neither many nor tempting for food to a European.

There was no choosing as to whom the duty should fall upon; for all decided to watch, and after seeing that Shanter lay unchanged, night had about waned, and they were gazing at the stars in silence, for fear of startling anything on its way to the pool, when just as they were feeling that the case was hopeless, and that they might as well give up, Norman suddenly touched Tim, who pressed his hand, for he too had heard the sound of some animal drinking.

They strained their eyes in the direction, but could see nothing, only the bushes which dotted the edge of the water-hole on its low side, the far end being composed of a wall of rocks going sheer down into the deep water.

What could it be? They had had no experience in such matters, and in the darkness there all was so strange and weird that sounds seemed to be different to what they would have been in the broad day.

But they wanted food, and there was some animal drinking, and though they supposed the country to be utterly devoid of deer, it still was possible that such creatures might exist, and it would be a new discovery if they shot an antelope or stag.

But the moments glided by, and the sound ceased without either of them being able to locate the position of the drinker. Their cocked guns were ready, and if they could have made out the slightest movement they would have fired; but there was the water gleaming with the reflection of a star here and there; there was the black mass where the rocks rose up, and that was all. They could not distinctly make out so much as a bush, and quite in despair at last, Norman was about to whisper a proposal that one of them should fire in the direction they fancied to be the most likely, while the others took their chance of a snap shot, when there was a noise straight before them, just at the edge of the water. Norman levelled his piece, took careful aim, and was about to draw trigger, when he distinctly caught sight of a moving figure a little beyond where he had heard the noise, and a voice grumbled out: "What gone along big boomer?"

"Shanter!" shouted Norman, excitedly. "Oh, I nearly fired."

"Marmi," said the black as the boys ran up trembling with the thought of the mistake they had nearly made, "Baal find big boomer."

"No, no, it's gone; but what are you doing here?"

"Mine have big drink. Go back sleep now."

"But are you better?" said Rifle.

"Mine all sore along. Boomer fellow squeezeum."

He spoke rather faintly, and walked slowly as they went back to the blanket-gunyah, where the black lay down directly, uttering a deep groan, as he moved himself painfully.

"There was plenty of water here, Shanter," said Norman.

"Piggi (the sun) gone sleep. Mine can't see."

They spoke to him again, but there was no reply, his breathing told, however, that he had dropped off, and Norman elected to keep watch till morning, and the others went to the tent.

It was just after daybreak when Norman heard a rustling, and looking round there was Tam creeping out from his shelter.

"Make big fire—make damper," he said quietly, and to the lad's delight the black went slowly about the task of blowing the embers, and getting a few leaves and twigs to burn before heaping up the abundant supply of wood close at hand.

Breakfast was soon ready, the boys being in the highest of glee, and Shanter sat and ate and smiled broadly at the friendly demonstrations which kept greeting him.

"Mine been along big sleep, get well," he said in reply to the congratulations showered upon him, and then proved quite willing to sit still while the packhorse was loaded—lightly now—and the others caught, saddled, and bridled, and a glance round given before they made a start to follow the trail back home.

Then followed a little discussion as to the order of starting, but Shanter settled it by tucking his nulla-nulla and boomerang into his waistband, shouldering his spear, and starting off at the head of the packhorse which followed him like a dog.

"All right," said Norman.

"Yes. What a rum fellow he is!" whispered Rifle. "But I wouldn't go very far to-day."

The boys mounted, and gave a cheer as they said farewell to the water-hole.

"It almost seems as if all this had been a dream," said Tim, as they rode on behind the black. "You wouldn't think he

had been so bad.”

“Yes, you would,” cried Norman, urging his horse forward, as he saw Shanter make a snatch at the packhorse’s load, and then reel.

But Norman saved him, and the poor fellow looked at him piteously. “Big boomer squeeze mine,” he whispered hoarsely. “Legs baal walk along.”

That was very evident, for he was streaming with perspiration, and gladly drank some water from their tubs.

Then the difficulty was solved by Norman making Shanter mount the horse he had himself ridden, and the journey was continued with the black striding the saddle and holding on by the sides of the stirrup-irons with his toes, for he could not be induced to place his foot flat on the bar, which he declared to be plenty “prickenum,” and always placing his first and second toes on either side of the outer edge of the upright part of the stirrup.

The pleasure had gone out of the trip now. It had been full of hard work before, but it was labour mingled with excitement; now it was full of anxiety as the little party noted Shanter’s weakness, and felt how entirely they depended upon him to follow the track they had made, one often so slight that they could not trace a sign on the short grass or hard ground. And as Norman said, if the black broke down again they might never be able to find their way home.

But the black kept his seat on one or other of the horses very well for two days, and then they had to halt for a whole day, when it seemed as if they were going to have a repetition of the former anxiety. The morning after, though, he expressed a desire to go on, and as the boys packed up the half-dried canvas and blankets which had formed their cover during a night of heavy rain, they looked anxiously at each other, the same thought being in each breast, though neither of them could find it in his heart to speak.

That thought was—suppose all our horses’ footprints are washed away?

And now began a wonderful display of the black’s power of vision. As a rule he sat perfectly upright on horseback, took the lead, and rode on over tracts of land, where to the boys not a vestige of their trail was visible; though, when now and then they saw the black guide lean forward, grasp the horse’s neck with his arms, and place his head as low down as was possible, they felt that he too was evidently rather at fault.

But no: by his wonderful perception he kept on picking up some tiny trace of a footprint, losing the trail altogether at times, finding it again when all seemed at an end and they had heard him muttering to himself. And so the journey went slowly on, till about noon on the fifth day, as Shanter was intently scanning the ground, he suddenly said:

“Baal can’t go. Mine no see no more. Stop eat damper.”

The horses were turned loose to graze, a fire lit, and as usual the water boiled for tea, just a sufficiency having been brought from the last spring in the tub slung to the packhorse’s side. But there was very little appetite for the cold kangaroo tail and cakebread, as they saw that the black did not eat, but began to beat the ground in all directions like a spaniel, till too weak to do more, when he came and threw himself down on the grass, and said: “Mine can’t find way back no more.”

Chapter Fifteen.

“We shall run against them.”

What did it mean?

Lost in the great uninhabited plains, where by aid of their compass they might go on day after day travelling in the direction they believed to be homeward, but it would only be as the result of a guess. Certainly, they knew that the sea lay somewhere due east, but even if they could reach the sea, where would they be—north or south of a settlement?

Norman felt that their case was hopeless; and in obedience to the mute prayer he read in brother and cousin’s eyes, he went and sat by the black.

“Can’t mine find the track, Shanter?”

“Baal find um,” he replied coolly. “Plenty all gone way.”

“But come and try again.”

The black shook his head.

“Baal go no more,” he said; “mine sore. Plenty hurt all over. Go sleep, piggi jump up.”

The black turned away, and Norman returned disconsolately to the others.

“What does he say?” whispered Tim, as if afraid that his voice would be heard out there in the great wild.

“Says we are to go to sleep till the sun rises to-morrow.”

There was a dead silence.

"Shall we go and try ourselves?" said Rifle, at last.

"If he can't find it, we can't," said Norman, despondently.

"Never mind, boys," cried Tim. "Never say die. When the provision's done, we'll eat one of the horses, if we can't shoot anything. Surely we shall come across settlers some time during the next ten years; and if we don't, I say that if black fellows can live, we who know so much better can, till we reach a settlement once more."

"But we don't know so much better," said Norman, sadly. "Shanter can beat us hollow at tracking. I wouldn't care, boys, only I seem to have poor mother's face always before me; and it will kill her if we don't get back."

Another deep silence followed, for neither could trust himself to speak, till all at once from where he lay, sounding incongruous at so solemn a time, there came from the black a succession of heavy snores; and so near is laughter to tears, mirth to sadness, that the boys burst into a hearty fit of laughter, and Rifle exclaimed: "There, what's the good of our being in the dumps. It can't be so very bad when old Tam o' Shanter can go to sleep like that."

"No," said Tim, taking his pitch from his cousin.

"Let's have a good long rest, and then see what to-morrow brings; eh! Man?"

Norman smiled and nodded, joining in the preparations for their evening meal, and that night they all lay down as if to sleep, nothing being heard but Shanter's deep breathing in the great solitude beneath the glittering stars, till a deep sigh escaped from Norman's breast; and rising from his blanket couch, he stole softly out to go and kneel down beneath the great, violet, gold-spangled arch of heaven to pray for help, and that there might not come that terrible sorrow in his home—the tale to be told to future generations of how three happy, contented lads went forth into the great wilderness and left their bones there beneath some tree, or by some water-hole, bleaching in the sun.

He was picturing it all in that solemn silence; the very scene rose before him, but it was swept away directly, and he was gazing in the agony-drawn face of his mother, when he heard a faint sob, and turned as Rifle dropped upon his knees by his side, laid his clasped hands upon his brother's shoulder, and bent down his head.

But poor orphan Tim, who looked upon his cousins more as brothers than aught else, had been as wakeful as they. It had been a mutual deception; each had pretended that he was asleep, so as not to let the others know how he suffered, and many seconds had not elapsed before he too was kneeling by Norman's side.

And there they knelt for a long space, before Norman began repeating aloud the old, old prayer, followed by the others, till he came to the words, "And deliver us from—"

There he broke down, and the prayer was finished in a husky voice by Tim alone.

A few minutes after they were lying once more in the shelter of the sheet of canvas, and the next thing that happened was their starting up into wakefulness with the sky one glow of gold and orange, and the black face of Tam o' Shanter peering in at them with a grin upon his countenance, as he cried:

"Now, Marmi boys, piggi go jump up. Mine baal sore now. Go along fine way back."

For a marvellous change seemed to have come over the black. He had been sleeping heavily for sixteen hours, and the breakfast he ate was something like that to which they had been accustomed, in spite of the fact that the flour was getting excessively low.

But it was as if a black cloud had rolled away from them during the night, and the bright sun of hope was shining warmly into their hearts.

All at once, to their great astonishment, Tam leaped up, flourished his nulla-nulla, and shouted:

"Mine want big boomer here. Makum sore along plenty like Tam o' Shanter."

"But he has gone bong," cried Rifle.

"Yohi. Gone bong. Marmi Tim mumkull big boomer. Now, come along, mine fine back big white Mary."

"Yes: let's start," cried Norman; but with a pang at his heart as he wondered whether they would ever reach home again, home which seemed now the most lovely place on earth.

Tam refused to mount when they started.

"Mine want see close along," he said; and after a few casts here and there, to the astonishment of all, they saw him suddenly point down, and they all ran to his side.

"Why, there's nothing there," cried Tim.

"Yohi. Horse fellow tick um toe along."

"Yes; there is a faint mark of a hoof," said Norman in delight; and with rising spirits they went on again, to sight the Wallaby Range and strike Dingo Station just at dusk on the following night, after missing the track again and again on the previous day; while on this, the last of their return journey, Shanter marked down hills and mountains which were familiar, so that they made extra speed, and it was necessary, for they reached home nearly starved.

It is needless to tell of the joy at the wanderers' return, save that Mrs Bedford's face showed the agony she must

have suffered, while Aunt Georgie had a severe scolding in store.

But all that was soon over. Shanter had gone off to a favourite nook of his to digest damper, and the boys had about wearied themselves out telling of their adventures, and of how wonderfully Shanter had recovered during the last few days.

"Yes, it is wonderful," said the captain. "I suppose the way in which they get over dangerous wounds is more wonderful still. Poor fellow! he must have had a horrible squeeze, and the drowning, no doubt, acted like a shock. I wish, though, you had thought to bring home the old man's skin."

"Yes, we ought to have done that," said Norman, "for Tim's sake."

"But we had enough to do to bring home Shanter."

"Ay, that they had," cried Uncle Jack. "I don't know what Sam German would have done without him."

"Why, he always grumbles at him for a lazy nigger," said the captain.

"Yes, but he likes him all the same."

"So we all do," chorused the boys.

"He can't help being black," said Tim.

"No," said the captain; "but you have said nothing about the camps of black fellows you struck."

"Because we did not find any, father," cried Rifle.

"Humph!" said the captain. "Strange! There must be very few in these parts, but I always feel that we shall run against them some day."

Chapter Sixteen.

"We'll find 'em."

The troubles of the expedition had died out to such an extent that there was some talk of another, the captain saying that for exploring reasons he should head this himself.

Just then Uncle Jack kicked his foot under the table, and the captain looked up to see such a look of agony in his wife's face that the subject dropped.

All was going on admirably, oxen and sheep were increasing, the garden was flourishing, and Dingo Station was daily growing more and more the home of peace and plenty.

"Ah, Jack," said the captain to his brother, as they sat one evening smoking tobacco of their own growing, "if it were not for the thoughts of the black fellows, what a paradise this would be!"

"Perhaps the blacks say something of the kind respecting the whites."

"Why, we don't interfere with them."

"No; but I'm afraid others do."

But just at this time Aunt Georgie was a good deal exercised in her mind, and she confided her trouble and suspicions to the two girls, but bade them say not a word to Mrs Bedford.

"It would only worry her, and she has plenty of troubles over those wild, harum-scarum, neck-breaking, horse-riding boys."

But the next morning at breakfast she let the cat out of the bag.

"Flour? Stolen?" cried Mrs Bedford, excitedly.

"Oh, auntie!" cried the girls, reproachfully.

"Well, I didn't mean to say anything, but I'm quite sure that a quantity has been taken out of the tub three times lately," said Aunt Georgie, emphatically.

"Nonsense, aunt!" protested Hetty; "it's your fancy, or else Ida must have taken some without speaking."

"No," said Ida, quietly, "I have not touched it. If I had wanted some for cooking, I should have asked aunt for it."

"Of course you would, my dear, and I should not have spilled and wasted some on the floor."

"Had we not better tell Edward?" said Mrs Bedford. "No; don't worry him," said Aunt Georgie; "he has quite enough on his mind."

"The boys must have been at it for something," said Ida, quietly.

"Boys have been at what?" said Norman, who was with the others in the veranda as these words were said.

"Been taking the flour," said Hetty.

"What should we take the flour for?" cried Rifle, indignantly.

"No, my dears, I do not suspect you, and I am sorry to make the charge, for I have always thought Shanter lazy, but honest."

"Why, you don't mean to say you believe poor old Shanter would steal flour, do you, aunt?" said Rifle, indignantly.

"I regret it very much, my dear, but the flour has been stolen, some spilled on the floor, and there were the prints of wide-toed feet in the patch."

"Here, hi! Shanter, Tam o'!" cried Rifle. "Coo-ee!"

The black came running up with glistening face.

"Plenty mine come fast," he said.

"Here," cried Norman; "what for you come along steal flour?"

"Mine baal teal flour," cried the black, indignantly.

"Aunt says you have, two or three times."

"Baal teal flour," cried the black again.

"There, aunt," said Norman; "I told you he wouldn't."

"But I'm sure he did, my dear, for there were the marks of his black feet."

"Baal teal flour," cried Shanter again; and drawing himself up he was turning away, but Norman caught his arm.

"Look here, Shanter," he said. "You brother. Baal go in storehouse."

"Yohi," said the black, nodding. "Big white Mary pialla. Shanter carry tub."

"Then you have been in the storehouse sometimes."

"Yohi. Baal teal flour."

He wrenched himself free and walked away.

"I don't believe he took it, aunt," said Norman.

"Nor I," said the others eagerly.

"Well, I wish I was sure, my dears, as you are, for I don't like to suspect the poor fellow."

"But if he had taken it, aunt," cried Rifle, "he is such a big stupid boy of a fellow he couldn't have kept it secret. He'd have made a lot of damper at a fire in the scrub, and asked us to come and help to eat the nasty stuff all full of ashes."

"Well," said Aunt Georgie, drawing her lips tight, "we shall see. Nobody else could have stolen it but the black or German."

"What, old Sourkrout?" cried Tim, laughing. "Oh, aunt!"

"And it's oh, Artemus!" said the old lady. "For I do wish you boys would not be so fond of nicknames."

"All right, aunt."

The incident passed off and so did Shanter, for he disappeared altogether for a couple of days, and was a good deal missed.

"Never mind," said Norman, "he'll come back loaded with grubs, or bring honey or 'possums."

"I believe he is too much offended to come back," said Tim. "No fellow, whatever his colour may be, likes to be called a thief."

"No," said Rifle; "and I believe aunt used her flour in her sleep."

"Here, boys," cried the captain just then; "take the horses and go round and fetch up that lot of bullocks from the plain. I fancy they have gone right away some distance, or the dingoes have scared them; it will be a good ride for you."

"And no Shanter here," said Norman, as they went off to catch and saddle their horses.

"I wonder father hasn't made a bother about it. He doesn't seem to have missed him."

"Too busy over getting down that big gum over yonder," observed Rifle. "My word, what a time it seems to take!"

"Nice bit of amusement for Uncle Jack and old Sam. He is getting too fat."

The others laughed, and then after they had caught, saddled, and bridled their horses, they walked them up to where the captain was examining the edge of a felling-axe, Uncle Jack and German being similarly armed.

"Off you go, boys," said the captain.

"And let's see whether you'll be back before we get down the great gum-tree," said their uncle, smiling.

"We shall be back," said Rifle. "You will not get down the big gum for a week."

German chuckled, and the boys sprang into their saddles.

"You'll have a long ride, boys," said the captain. "I was up on the big rock yesterday," he continued, nodding toward the top of the precipice whence Norman had seen the black fellows, "and I could not see them with the glass."

"We'll find 'em, father," said Norman, confidently.

"Off then," said the captain; and away they went, riding now with wonderful ease and skill; while, bent on getting down the great gum-tree by the creek because it impeded part of the view from the house, and in addition its trunk being wanted for boards and its branches for fuel, the captain led his little force of axemen to the assault.

Chapter Seventeen.

"Bunyip! Bunyip!"

That same afternoon, soon after dinner, the captain and his fellow-wielders of the axe again went down to carry on their wood-cutting. The boys were not back, nor expected, and in the course of the afternoon the girls proposed that Mrs Bedford and Aunt George should go with them for a walk, and to take some refreshment to the wood-cutters.

They refused, of course, and then gave way, and soon after the little party left the house, and strolled slowly away toward the creek, all enjoying the delightfully fresh breeze which came across the plains and sent the blood dancing in the young girls' veins.

Hardly had they walked a couple of hundred yards away, when one of the cows in the fenced-in paddock raised her head from grazing, and uttered a deep-toned bellow. She ceased munching the rich grass, and whisked her tail about, as if trying to tie it in knots, for she saw a black approaching the paddock, and that black was one she did not know.

The black came cautiously on, crawling from tree to bush, and from bush to tree, and always getting nearer to the house. Finally, he reached the fence, and along by this he crept like a great black slug, till he was at the end, and within a dozen yards of the store.

Fifty yards away a couple of dozen of his fellows, all spear and club armed, lay hidden among the shrubs and trees which the captain and Uncle Jack were unwilling to cut down, and these men watched intently every movement of their companion, and in perfect silence, till they saw him raise himself very slightly, and then almost run on all fours across the space which divided him from the storehouse, the movement being upon his hands and toes.

Then a low murmur of satisfaction ran through them, and they turned to look in the other direction, where the ladies were all making their way, basket-laden, toward where the captain and Uncle Jack were continuing their attack upon the great tree.

No fear of interruption in that direction; no fear of any one coming in the other, for the boys had been seen to ride right off over the hills, as if on a long expedition.

The black fellow disappeared from his companions' sight; and as soon as he was well inside, he rose up, detached a bark bag from his 'possum-skin waistband, and grinned with satisfaction as he ran his eyes round among the casks, packages, and tins upon the rough shelves.

Then he stopped short, and stared at the cask before him, for there was something suspicious about it. That was not the cask from which he had filled his meal-bag last time, and carried off such a glorious haul. It looked wider and bigger, and he hesitated, and passing his right hand behind him, carefully drew out his club, ready for that tub if it should be dangerous.

But the tub stood there perfectly innocent-looking, and the head had evidently lately been moved by floury fingers, which had left their marks. In addition, there was a dusting of flour on the top, and a tiny sprinkle of the same on the rough boards in front.

All this reassured him, and tucking his nulla-nulla back in his band, he gave the bag a shake, took a cautious look round, and then advanced to the tub, and with one quick movement, thrust the head off, so that it fell behind upon the floor.



He stood perfectly still, as if turned to stone.

Then, bag in one hand, his other resting on the edge of the barrel, he stood perfectly still, as if turned to stone. His eyes were starting, his mouth open, and his lips drawn back in a ghastly grin, as he stood gazing at a hideous-looking face rising slowly out of the flour, red, as if covered with blood, and dashed with patches of white meal. Nearer and nearer this object approached him, till, with a yell of horror, he dragged himself away, and dashed out of the storehouse, shouting "Bunyip! bunyip!" as he ran to where his companions were waiting for his spoil.

Then a low whispering followed, and the result was that six of the party crawled in the same manner as that in which the first black had approached.

An observer would have said that they were evidently doubtful of the truth of their companion's statement, and had agreed to go together and test it.

Their advance was exactly in every respect like that of the first man; and they reached the shelter of the fence, and paused till the last man was close up, when all went through the same manoeuvre together, running on their hands and feet, with their bodies close to the ground.

At the door they paused again listening, and no doubt the slightest sound would have started them off in full retreat. But all was perfectly still, and taking courage, they gathered themselves up, and club in hand leaped into the storehouse, to stand gazing wildly round.

Nothing was there to startle them—no sign of danger. The bag their companion had dropped lay upon the floor, but the flour-barrel was covered; and after a couple of them had exchanged a whisper, all stood with their nulla-nullas ready to strike, but no one attempted to move the cask head.

At last two who appeared to be the leaders extended a hand each, gazed in each other's eyes, and at a signal gave the lid a thrust, and it fell off behind with a loud clatter, which made all bound out of the storehouse. But the last man looked back as his comrades were taking to flight, and uttered a few words loudly.

They were sufficient to arrest the flight and all stood in a stooping position, gazing wildly at the tub, which stood looking harmless enough, and after a little jabbering, they advanced once more, as if they all formed units of a large machine, so exactly were their steps taken together, till they reached and once more entered the open door of the store.

Then, as if strung up, ready to meet anything, they bounded into the place, when, as if worked by a spring, the horrible figure in the tub started upright like a monstrous jack-in-the-box.

The black fellows literally tumbled over one another in their hurry to escape from the terrible-looking object which, in their eyes—imbued as they were with superstitious notions—was a fearful demon of the most unsparing nature, and a minute later, they were back in the clump of trees and bushes, spreading news which made the whole mob of blacks take flight.

"Baal come teal flour. Mine make black fellow frightenum," said the jack-in-the-box, leaping lightly out, and then rolling the empty cask aside, he replaced it by the flour-tub.

Then, going round to the back, application was made to a bucket of water, from which a cooliman or native bark bowl

was filled, and in a few moments Shanter's good-humoured, clean, black countenance was drying in the sun. For his scheme to defeat the flour-thieves had been very successful, and that evening he related it proudly to the boys.

"You did that?" said Norman.

"Yohi. All yan. Baal black fellow now."

"What?" cried the captain, when Norman called him aside, and told him. "I don't like that, my boy."

"But they must be a poor, cowardly lot, father," said Norman, "or they would not be so easily frightened by a bogey."

"A lesson to us," said the captain, thoughtfully. "There must be a camp of the black fellows somewhere near, and while they are about, we had better keep about the place."

"But they will not come again after such a fright, will they?" said Norman.

"I don't know, my boy. It is impossible to say. Perhaps, as soon as the scare is over, they may be taking each other to task for being such cowards. We are all alone here, and far from help, so it is as well to be upon our guard. Don't let them know indoors."

The order came too late, for, as soon as they entered the house, Mrs Bedford began anxiously: "Edward, is it a fact that there have been myall blacks trying to rob the place?"

"Pooh! What have you heard?"

"Rifle has been telling us of the black's trick to frighten them."

"Oh yes, a few wandering rascals tried to steal the flour."

"And I'm very, very glad to find that I misjudged that poor fellow, Shanter," said Aunt Georgie. "I certainly thought it was he."

"Yes; and to clear himself of the suspicion," said Uncle Jack, cheerily, "he hid and frightened them away. Come, people, don't look so anxious.—Why, Hetty—Ida—surely you are not going to be scared at a little adventure like this."

"Of course they are not," said the captain, quickly. "There is nothing to be alarmed about."

"Father says there's nothing to be alarmed about," whispered Rifle that night, when the boys retired to the part of the house they called the barracks.

"Yes, I heard him," said Norman, softly. "Talk low, Tim's asleep."

"No, I'm not," said that individual. "I'm awake as you are. You're going to talk about uncles' whispering together, and then going and loading the guns and pistols."

Norman was silent for a few moments.

"Yes," he said at last. "It means that they are very uneasy about the black fellows."

"And a fight," said Rifle.

"I hope not, boys. One doesn't want to kill."

"But one doesn't want the myall blacks to kill us," said Rifle. "Well, they will not come to-night, will they?"

"If they do," replied Norman, "father will soon wake us up, if it's only to load the guns for them. They're sure to sit up and watch in turns with Sourkrout. Shall we dress again, and go and offer to help?"

"No," said Tim. "Uncle would not like us to interfere without being asked, but I shall lie and listen all night. I couldn't go to sleep fancying that black fellows were crawling up to attack us."

"No," said Rifle, softly; "one feels all of a fidget, and ready to fancy all sorts of things."

"Nonsense!" said Norman. "It's because it's so hot to-night. That's all."

"Man don't mean it," said Tim, quietly. "He's as fidgety as we are."

"Yes, of course I am, but it's only the heat."

"Call it what you like," said Rifle; "but you don't feel as if you could sleep to-night."

"Well, I don't feel sleepy yet," said Norman, carelessly.

But a long day on horseback and the quiet of their quarters, joined to the knowledge that their elders would be on guard, sufficed to nullify all their declarations, and half an hour had not elapsed before the regular, steady breathing of three healthy lads told that they were passing the night in the most satisfactory way.

“That isn’t thunder.”

“Hi! Rouse up! Black fellows!” shouted Rifle, and his brother and cousin started up in bed, ready for the moment to believe him, for there was a black face peering in at their window.

“Get out!” cried Tim, hurling a boot at his cousin, who dodged it, while as soon as Norman had grasped the fact that the face belonged to Shanter he made a rush at his brother, who laughingly avoided it, and then hurrying on their clothes, they went out to find the captain and Uncle Jack, each with a double gun in the hollow of his arm.

“Seen anything, father?” cried Norman.

“No, my boy, all peaceable, and Shanter says there are no black fellows near.”

“Baal black fellow,” said that gentleman. “See plenty mine bunyip, baal come again.”

Here he burst into a roar of laughter, and began imitating the action of a myall black creeping up to the storehouse, going close up to the flour-tub, and looking in before uttering a wild yell, darting back, tumbling, getting up, falling again, rolling over and over, and then jumping up to run away as hard as he could.

He came back panting and grinning in a minute or two, looking from one to the other as if for applause.

“I hope he is right,” said Uncle Jack; “but we shall have to be more careful.”

“Yes,” said the captain; “we have been too confident, boys, and I must now declare the station in a state of siege.”

“Won’t it be time enough when the black fellows come, father?”

“Will it be time enough to lock the stable door when the steed is stolen, sir?” replied the captain, sternly.

Rifle rubbed his right ear, as if his father’s words had buzzed in it, and said no more.

“Talk about steeds,” said the captain; “let’s go and have a look at the horses. There’ll be plenty of time before breakfast.”

For the captain had of late given a good deal of attention to one of his young horses which promised to prove of great value. The boys were already well mounted and provided most satisfactorily. There were the quiet mares, too, which the two girls rode, and Uncle Jack had a good sturdy mount; but this graceful colt had thoroughly taken the captain’s attention, and he was looking forward to the day when some wealthy settler would come up the country, see it, and purchase it, or make some valuable exchange in the shape of articles as useful to them as money.

They reached the paddock, which was always increasing in size, when they could find time to enclose more land with posts and rails, and the horses came trotting up for the titbits they were accustomed to receive from their owner’s hand; and as the pet of the little drove thrust its head over the rail, it was patted and caressed, a halter attached and passed round its lower jaw, Shanter watching eagerly the while.

“Now, Norman, up with you. I want to get him used to being backed.”

Norman hesitated for a moment naturally enough, for it was mounting a bare-backed unbroken colt; but the next minute he had accepted a leg up, and was in his place, with the result that the beautiful creature reared right up, pawing the air, and threatened to fall over backwards.

“Grip him well, boy,” shouted the captain.

The command was needless, for Norman was already gripping the horse’s soft sides with all his might; and he kept his seat as it now came down on all fours, and darted off at a rate which startled all the rest of the occupants of the paddock into a gallop. They followed their companion round till Norman seemed able to control his mount, and brought it back to where the rest had been watching him with some anxiety.

“Well done, my boy!” said the captain, as he caressed the colt. “Down with you. Now, Raphael, you give him a turn.”

Rifle sprang into the place lately occupied by his brother, had a gallop round the great enclosure; and Tim followed and cantered up.

“That will do for this morning,” said the captain. “I like his action more and more, Jack. He’ll want very little breaking in.”

“Yes,” said Uncle Jack; “a martingale will soon check that habit of throwing up his head.”

“Hullo!” cried the captain; “what’s that?”

“Oh nothing, father,” cried Rifle, laughing. “Only Shanter. He wants to have a ride round on the colt.”

“What and scare the poor animal with his black face? Besides, he can’t ride.”

“Yohi!” shouted the black, excitedly. “Plenty mine ride. Plenty mine ride bull-cow horse fellow. Plenty mine ride.”

He strode toward the colt to mount but the captain laid his hand upon his shoulder.

Shanter started round angrily.

"Mine go ride plenty mine," he cried.

"No. Don't touch the horse," said the captain, sternly.

White man and black stood gazing in each other's eyes for some moments, and then Shanter took his spear from where it leaned against the rails, and marched off toward the nearest patch of scrub, displaying such airs of offended dignity that the boys all laughed, with the result that Shanter turned upon them furiously—like a ridiculed child—threw himself into an attitude, and threatened to throw his spear. But, as the boys laughed all the more heartily, he turned and went off.

"You have offended his majesty, father," cried Norman.

"Oh, he'll forget it all in a few hours," said Rifle and they went back in to breakfast.

Soon after the captain had a ride round, ostensibly to see the more distant cattle; but, as he owed to Rifle, who accompanied him, really to see if there were any traces of blacks; but there were none.

"I'll send Shanter out scouting," said the captain, as they rode back; but there was no Shanter to send. He had evidently not forgotten, and not come back.

The next morning a visit was again paid to where the horses were enclosed every night, the captain meaning to have the colt ridden daily now, so as to break it in by degrees, when, to his annoyance, he found it looking rough and out of order, but that evening it seemed to be much better, and was grazing heartily as usual.

The next morning it was the same, and so on for several more mornings.

"I don't understand it," said the captain.

"Looks as if it had been galloped, father," said Norman.

"Yes; but the others are all right, and it would not go off and gallop alone. Flies have worried the poor beast, I suppose."

Meanwhile there had been no sign of Shanter. He had gone off in dudgeon and stayed away, his absence being severely felt in the house, for his task of fetching wood and water had to be placed in Sam German's hands; and as this was not what he called his regular work, he did it in a grumbling, unpleasant manner, which very much raised Aunt Georgie's ire.

"Shanter will come back soon, aunt," Tim kept on saying.

"But he does not come back, boy," cried Aunt Georgie; "and you boys will have to do his work, for I am not going to have that grumbling gardener to bring my wood and water. I must say, though, that it does make a good deal of difference in the consumption of bread."

And still Shanter did not come back, neither was anything seen of him by the boys in their long stock-herding rides; while to make things more annoying the colt grew worse, and the captain complained bitterly.

"But I don't think father ought to grumble," said Rifle, one night when they were going to bed. "Everything else has got on so well. Why, we shall soon be having a big farm."

"Yes," said Norman; "but the colt was a pet, and he had given so much attention to it."

They went to bed and all was quiet, but somehow Rifle could not sleep. It was a sultry, thunderous night, and at last he rose, opened the window, and stood to gaze out at the flashing lightning as it played about a ridge of clouds in the east.

"Can't you sleep?" said Norman, in a whisper.

"No; come here. It's so jolly and cool."

There was a faint rustling sound in the darkness, and the next minute Norman was by his brother's side, enjoying the soft, comparatively cool, night air.

"Lovely," he said; and then they both stood gazing at the lightning, which made the clouds look like a chain of mountains, about whose summits the electricity played.

All at once there was a dull, low, muttering sound, apparently at a distance.

"Thunder," said Norman. "We're going to have a storm."

"Good job," replied Rifle, in the same low tone as that adopted by his brother. "Things were getting precious dry."

There was a long pause, and the lightning grew nearer and the flashes more vivid. Then, all of a sudden as the same peculiar sound was heard, Rifle whispered:

"I say, Man; that isn't thunder."

"No," was the reply. "I was just thinking so. Sounds to me like a horse galloping."

"Of course it does. I say, it isn't the colt, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Our colt gone mad, and galloping about all night so as to make himself look bad to-morrow morning."

"Rubbish!"

"But it does come from the paddock."

"Yes; it does come from the paddock," said Norman, after a pause.

"And no mistake about it. Only one horse too."

"It's very strange," said Norman; "let's go and see."

"What, in the middle of the night, like this? Father would hear us and take us for black fellows."

"We could drop quietly out of the window. Why, Rifle, you're right; there is a horse galloping in the paddock. Let's dress and go."

"Shall we call father and tell him first?"

"No; because we might be wrong. Let's go and see first. A 'possum must have got on the horse's back and be scaring him into this gallop. Look sharp."

The boys soon had on their flannel shirts and trousers, generally their every-day costume, and after satisfying themselves that Tim was fast asleep, they squeezed themselves out of the window and dropped one after the other, and then hurried along in the thick darkness, across the garden, past the storehouse, and then along under the shelter of the fences till, perfectly satisfied now, they neared the corner of the paddock, just as a horse galloped by at full speed.

"No wonder he looks so bad of a morning," whispered Norman. "Here, go on a little farther and then we can look through and see."

They went down now on hands and knees, and crept along till they could look through into the great paddock, just as a flash of lightning revealed to them a group of horses in the centre of the field all pretty close together, and quietly cropping the grass.

"Strange, isn't it?" whispered Norman. "Listen! here he comes round again."

For the beat of hoofs approached from their left, and the next minute a horse thundered by at full speed.

"Why, it was!" whispered Rifle, "I saw one of those 'possums perched on its back."

"No," said Norman, excitedly. "I saw something distinctly; but it was too big to be a 'possum. I think it was one of those big things that Shanter killed. Father said it was the koala or native bear."

"Let's wait till it comes round again."

The time seemed long, but the horse came thundering past once more, evidently steadily coursing all round the paddock close to the rails, while its fellows clustered in the middle out of the way.

"It is one of those things," said Norman, triumphantly.

"It wasn't," said Rifle. "I saw it quite plain, and it was one of those kangaroos as big as a man. I say, whoever would have thought of their doing that?"

"What shall we do? Hadn't we better go and rouse up father?"

"No," said Rifle; "let's stop and see the end of it; and to-morrow night we can all come and catch or shoot the beast. If we went now and fetched him, it might be gone before we got back, and he would think we had been dreaming."

"Here it comes again; hish!" whispered Norman; and once more there was the rapid beat of the horse's feet on the dry ground, and it tore by just as there was a brighter flash of lightning; then the flying object had darted by, and Norman uttered a loud ejaculation.

"Did you see?" whispered Rifle.

"Yes; it was a myall black. I saw him quite plainly."

"Not quite plainly," said Rifle. "But I saw him. It was a black on the poor horse, but it was old Shanter."

"What?"

"It was! I saw his face as plain as possible. Don't you see? He wanted to mount the horse and father wouldn't let him, so he determined to have a ride, and he must have come and had one every night, and then gone off again into the scrub."

“But—”

“Don’t say ‘but.’ You know how fond he has been of horses, always wanting to ride when he went out with us.”

“Yes, I know; but still I can’t think he would like to do that.”

“But he *is* doing it. Here he comes again.”

This time, as the horse galloped by, they both had a perfectly plain view of the black’s excited face and position as, evidently in a high state of glee, he tore by on the well-bred horse.

“Now,” said Rifle; “was I right?”

“Oh yes,” said Norman, with a sigh. “You were quite right. But be ready to shout and stop him as he comes round again.”

They waited for the sound of the warning thunder of hoofs, but though they heard them grow more faint, and then sound softer as they paced along on the far side of the paddock, the sound did not increase, and while they were listening there came a distinct snort, followed by a loud neighing nearer to them; another snort, and then a flash of vivid lightning illumining the paddock long enough for them to see the drove of horses in the middle all gazing in one direction toward another horse walking in their direction. Then there was black darkness, another snort, an answering neigh, and silence, broken by the faintly-heard sound of grass being torn off from its roots.

“He’s gone,” said Norman, in a whisper. “Let’s run and wake father.”

“What’s the good now? Let’s go back to bed, and tell him in the morning. No: I don’t like to. Why, he’d be ready to half kill poor old Shanter.”

Norman was silent, and they tramped back to the house when, just as Norman was reaching up to get hold of the window-sill, a hand was stretched out.

“Hallo! you two. Where have you been?”

“Never mind,” said Norman. “Wait till we get in again.”

They both climbed in silently, and Tim began again.

“I say, it was shabby to go without me;” and when they explained why they had hurried off, he was no better satisfied. “I wouldn’t have served you so,” he grumbled. “But I say, won’t uncle be in a way?”

“Yes, if Norman tells him,” said Rifle. “Don’t you think we had better hold our tongues?”

A long discussion followed, with the result that Rifle found himself in the minority, and went to sleep feeling rather unhappy about the black.

Chapter Nineteen.

“Good taste for a savage.”

Rifle felt obliged in the morning to join cousin and brother in the announcement to the captain, who looked as if he could hardly believe it at first, but ended by walking straight to the paddock, to find the colt looking more distressed than ever; and on a closer inspection there plainly enough, though it had remained unnoticed before, on account of the dry time, were the marks of the nightly gallops on the hard sun-baked soil.

“That explains it all, eh, Jack?” he said to his brother.

“Yes; the black scoundrel! I had noticed for some time past how fond he was of horses.”

“Yes,” said Norman; “nothing pleased him better than petting them and giving them bits of his damper.”

“Very good taste for a savage to appreciate how noble a beast is the horse, but I’m not going to introduce the said noble animal for the delectation of black savages.”

“But you will not be very hard upon him, father?”

“No,” said the captain, tightening his lips, “not very.”

“What shall you do?” said Uncle Jack.

“Lay wait for his black lordship to-night, and give him a sound horse-whipping.”

Rifle’s face twitched a little, and the three boys exchanged glances.

“Better be careful, Ned,” said Uncle Jack. “These fellows can be very revengeful.”

“I am not afraid. He must have a severe lesson, and as I am his master—Marmi, as he calls me—I shall give it at once.”

"But you will not sit up for him alone?" said Uncle Jack.

"Oh no. I shall want you all to help me; and so as to make sure of him, there is to be no riding out to-day. He is, of course, hiding in the scrub somewhere, and I don't want him disturbed."

Rifle looked very hard at Norman, who turned to his father.

"Well, Norman?"

"We all like Shanter, father," he said. "He is not much better than a child in some things."

"Exactly; I know that."

"We want you to let him off, father—forgive him."

The captain looked more stern, and tightened his lips.

"I appreciate your generosity, my boys, but it must not be looked over. I must punish him. Words will be of no use. I am afraid it must be blows. But look here; I will be as mild as I can. Will that satisfy you?"

"I suppose it must, father," said Rifle, dolefully.

"Yes, my boy, it must; and now look here: not a word to them indoors. It would only startle mamma and the girls. Your uncle and I will be going to keep watch to-night, and you can slip out of your window as you did last night."

Hence it was that about ten o'clock that night the little party were all crouching by the palings watching, as well as the darkness would allow, and listening for the faintest sound, not a word being uttered for fear the black's abnormally sharp ears should detect their presence, and make him keep away.

Time glided by, till an hour must have passed, and then they heard a sharp neigh, followed by the trampling of feet, as if the horses had been startled. Then came the low murmur of a voice, followed by a few light pats as of some one caressing a horse; and, a minute later, in spite of the darkness, Norman made out that his father had passed through the rails into the paddock.

Then, just as he was in agony for fear the captain should be ridden over, or some other accident should befall him, he heard the approaching pace of a horse, but only at a walk.

Like the others, he was crouching down, and it seemed to him that his father was doing the same, when, all at once, the faintly-seen figures of man and horse towered up close by them, and what followed was the work of moments.

There was the loud *whisk* of a hunting-whip, the darting forward of a figure, followed by the plunge of a horse, as it galloped away, drowning the noise of a heavy thud, though the struggle which followed was quite plain.

"Hold still, you dog!" roared the captain. "I have you tight.—Here, Jack, come and help to hold him."

"Baal baal mumkull mine," cried the black, piteously. "Give in then, you scoundrel. Take hold of his hair, Jack. I have him by his loin-cloth."

It was no question of giving in, for the black made no further struggle, but stood up writhing and twisting up his right shoulder, and rubbing it with the back of his left hand passed behind him.

"Don't hit him again, father," cried Norman, quickly.

"Silence, sir!—Now you—you black fellow!"

"Baal black fellow," shouted Shanter, indignantly; "baal black fellow."

"How dare you come stealing here in the dark and meddling with my horses?" roared the captain.

"Baal steal a horse fellow, Marmi," cried the black, indignantly. "Horse fellow all along all lot."

"Sneaking there in the darkness, to ride my poor horses to death."

"Marmi no let Shanter ride when piggi jump up."

"Not let you ride in the day, sir? Of course not. Do you suppose I keep horses for you?"

"Baal plenty mine know."

"You don't understand?"

"Mine want ride horse fellow like white fellow."

"Then you are not going to learn to ride on mine. Now then, I've done with you, sir. Be off and don't show your face here again. Go!"

"Mine want damper, Marmi. Gib big soff damper."

"I'll give you the whip, sir, if you don't go."

Shanter flinched, and gave himself another rub, looking about in the darkness from one to the other.

"Let me fetch him a bit of damper, father," whispered Rifle.

"No," said the captain, sternly. "The scoundrel has nearly ruined a fine young horse, and he must be taught a lesson.—Now, sir, be off!"

"Baal gib mine big damper?" cried the black.

"No; only the whip," said the captain, giving the thong a sharp crack, and then another and another in all directions near the black's naked shoulders, with the result that at every crack Shanter winced and leaped about.

"Marmi Man gib mine damper."

"I can't," said Norman.

"Marmi Rifle, Marmi Tim, gib mine damper."

"No—no—no," shouted the captain. "Now go and never come here again."

The black gave another writhe, as if smarting from the pain of the blow he had received, and ended by snatching boomerang and club from his waistband, uttering a fiercely defiant yell as he clattered them together, leaped the fence and darted off straight across the paddock, shouting as he rushed on toward the horses, and sending them in panic to the end of the enclosure.

"The scoundrel!" shouted the captain; "those horse will cripple themselves on the posts and rails. No; they're coming back again," he cried, as he heard the little herd come galloping round. "Steady there—woho—boys! Steady, woho there—woho!" he continued; and the horses gradually ceased their headlong flight, and turned and trotted gently toward the familiar voice.

The captain was joined by the boys, who all went toward the horses, patting and caressing them for a few minutes before leaving the paddock and going back toward the house.

"Now," said the captain; "who is to say that this black fellow will not come to-morrow night, or perhaps to-night, take out a rail or two, and drive off all our horses?"

"I can," said Norman.

"So can we," cried Rifle. "I don't believe old Shanter ever could steal."

"Well done, boys, for your belief in savage nature," cried Uncle Jack.—"No, Ned, you are wrong. I believe that the poor fellow is honest as the day."

"Thank you, uncle," whispered Tim.

"Well," said the captain, "we shall see. But I think I have let the poor fellow off very easily. I came out to-night meaning to give him a tremendous horse-whipping, but out of weakness and consideration for you boys' feelings, I've let him off with one cut."

"Enough too," said Uncle Jack, "for it was big enough for a dozen."

"Well, it was a tidy one," said the captain, laughing. "There, come back to the house. But no more black pets, boys. If you want to make companions, try the horses."

"And perhaps they'd run away with one."

"Or throw us."

"Or kick us."

So cried the boys one after another, and the captain uttered a grunt.

"Look here," he said; "I'm not going to sit up and watch to-night, but if those horses are driven off by that black scoundrel, I'll hunt him down with a gun."

"Not you, Ned," said Uncle Jack, with a chuckle.

"Don't you believe him, boys."

"We don't, uncle," they chorused.

"Ah, well," said the captain, laughing; "we shall see."

Chapter Twenty.

"We shall have to trust him."

"Whatever is the matter with that cow?" cried Aunt Georgie, as they sat at their evening meal the next day. "Why is

she lowing like that? It's my poor Jersey, and—goodness gracious, what is the matter with her tail?"

"Tail!" shouted the captain, springing up as the cow came clumsily cantering up, followed by all the rest of the cattle, who added their lowing to the Jersey's mournful bellow. "Tail! Here, quick, Jack—boys, the guns; the poor creature has been speared."

It was plain enough. Speared, and badly, for the weapon stood firmly just in front of the poor animal's tail, in spite of the frantic gallop in which she had sought for relief.

"I can't leave the poor beast like this, Jack," cried the captain. "Cover me if you see any one stealing up. No; there is no need. I can see it all plainly enough."

The cow did not run away from him as he went close up, and with a sharp tug dragged out the clumsy weapon, tearing his handkerchief afterward to plug the horrible wound.

"Will she get better, father?" asked Norman.

"I hope so, boy. I don't think the point can have reached any vital part. But you see, don't you?"

"Only the wound, father. What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid this is your friend Shanter's bit of revenge for my blow."

"Oh no, father," cried Rifle, indignantly. "Poor old Tam o' Shanter would not be such a brute."

The captain smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. "Here, let's get all the beasts into the enclosure," he said. "We do not want any more to be speared;" and sending two of the boys forward to open the rails, the cow was gently driven in, the rest of the stock following patiently enough to the very last.

"Well," said Uncle Jack, emphatically, "I don't think I'm a vicious man, but I honestly wish that the vile wretch who threw that spear had been well gored by the animal in return."

"So do I, uncle," cried Rifle, warmly, "for I'm sure it wasn't Shanter.—What do you think, Tim?"

"I don't know," replied the boy. "I hope it wasn't; but as Uncle Edward says, it does look very black."

"Bah! You're black," cried Rifle, fiercely.—"You don't think it was Shanter, do you, Man?"

"I don't want to think it was," replied his brother, thoughtfully, "but it does look very bad."

This was while the captain had walked up to the house to order the ladies to stay within doors, promising in return that he would be very careful, and not run into any danger.

"Looks very bad!" cried Rifle, contemptuously. "I only wish I knew where old Shanter was. I'd go and fetch him to make him tell you that you ought all to be ashamed of yourselves."

"You need not trouble," said Uncle Jack, quietly, "for here he comes;" and as the captain's brother spoke he cocked his double gun.

"And here comes father," cried Norman, excitedly. "Don't fire, uncle, pray."

"Not if I can help it, boy, but look at the fellow; he has been painting himself, and means war."

In effect Shanter's black body was streaked with white, as if to imitate a skeleton, and as he came running toward them from the scrub below the precipice, he looked as if his spear was held threateningly in one hand, his club in the other.

As the black came running from one direction, the captain ran toward them from the other, shouting to Uncle Jack and the boys to fall back, while just then Sam German came out of the garden armed with a pitchfork, the first thing likely to act as a weapon.

But Shanter was the swiftest of foot, and he was within twenty yards, when Uncle Jack presented his piece and shouted: "Stop! Throw down that spear."

Shanter hesitated for a moment, and then dug the point of his spear into the ground, and ran up shouting: "Hi, Marmi, black fellow come along! Kimmeroi—bulla, bulla—metancoly." (One, four, ever so many.)

The captain gazed at him suspiciously.

"Where?" he said.

"Black fellow all along," cried Shanter, who seemed to have quite forgotten the past night's quarrel and the blow, and he pointed in several directions across the precipitous ridge.

"You saw them?"

"Yohi. Run tell Marmi. Black fellow come all along, spear bull-cow."

Norman saw his father's brow contract, for the last words sounded very suspicious, and the lad asked himself

whether this was a piece of cunning on the part of the black.

But just then Shanter caught sight of the spear lying upon the ground, where it had been thrown by the captain after he had drawn it from the cow's back.

The black made a dash and pounced upon it, his movement to secure the weapon putting both the captain and his brother on their guard, as they watched the fellow's movements.

As soon as he had the weapon in his hand, he examined the point, still wet with blood, looked sharply from one to the other, and then excitedly pointed to the spear end.

"How this fellow come along?" he cried.

"Some one threw it, and speared the little cow," cried Rifle.

"Where little bull-cow fellow—go bong?"

"No; in the paddock. Did you throw that spear, Shanter?"

"Mine throw? Baal!" cried the black. "Plenty mine spear," and he pointed to where his own spear stuck in the ground.

"I can't trust him, Rifle, my boy," said the captain, firmly. "I'm afraid it is his work, and this is a cunning way of throwing us off the scent."

The black listened eagerly, and partly comprehended.

"Marmi no pidney. Think mine spear bull-cow. Baal, baal throw."

He shook his head violently, and then running back and recovering the other spear—his own—he stood attentively watching the scrub, his eyes wandering along the ridge and from place to place as if in search of enemies.

"What do you say, Ned?" whispered Uncle Jack; "are you going to trust him?"

"No, I cannot yet," said the captain. "We must be thoroughly on our guard."

"The poor fellow has proved himself a faithful servant, though."

"What? That colt?"

"A boy's freak. He did not behave dishonestly."

"Well, I do not trust him yet Jack; but I may be wrong. Let's reconnoitre."

"Where all white Mary?" said Shanter, turning back suddenly.

"In the house," said Norman. "Why?"

"Black fellow metancole all plenty. Come mumkull."

At that moment Mrs Bedford appeared at the door, and stepped out, but stopped as Shanter uttered a fierce yell and gesticulated, imitating the throwing of a spear and battering of some one's head.

"Baal white Mary come along," he cried, running to the captain. "Marmi say go along."

"Run and tell your mother and the rest to keep in the house," said the captain sharply to Rifle, and the black nodded in satisfaction; but he grew furious again, and seized the captain's arm as he made a movement toward the patch of scrub and trees which had concealed the blacks, when the raid was made upon the flour.

"Baal go along," he cried. "Hah!"

He threw himself into an attitude as if about to hurl a spear, for just then, a couple of hundred yards away, a black figure was seen to dart from behind a solitary patch of bushes to run to the bigger one in front. As he reached the broader shelter another followed him, and another, and another, Shanter counting them as they ran.

"Kimmeroi—bulla-bulla, kimmeroi-bulla, bulla—bulla, bulla, kimmeroi."

"Five," said Norman, excitedly.

"Yohi," cried the black, nodding. "Marmi baal go along?"

"No," said the captain, quietly. "We had better retire to the house. I think we can give them a warm reception there."

"Shoot! Bang, bang!" cried Shanter, grinning. "Ow—ow—ow!"

He held his hands to his head after dropping his weapons as he yelled, ran round in a circle, staggered, fell, kicked a little, and lay quite still for a few moments as if dead. Then leaping up, he secured his weapons, shook them threateningly at the little grove, and urged all to go up to the house.

"We shall have to trust him," said the captain. "Come along, Jack.—Now, boys, I'm afraid this is war in earnest, and the siege has begun."

"Plenty black fellow," shouted Shanter, excitedly, as he pointed in a fresh direction, where three or four heads were seen for a minute before they disappeared among the trees.

"And no time to be lost," cried the captain.—"German, while we can, go up and begin filling what tubs you can with water in case the enemy tries to cut off our supply. We will cover you."

"Right, sir," said the gardener, and he ran up to the house with his fork over his shoulder, while the others followed more leisurely, keeping a sharp look-out.

"Come along," cried Shanter, as they reached the house. "Shut fass. Black fellow baal come along. Big white Mary gib mine damper now."

Five minutes later he was eating some bread with a contented smile on his countenance, while Tim and Norman kept watch, and the others busied themselves closing the shutters and carrying in blocks and slabs of wood, reserved for such an emergency, and now used as barricades for windows and loop-holed doors.

All worked vigorously, provisions were rolled in from the storehouse, though that was so near that its door could be commanded if a fresh supply was required. Fence gates were closed and fastened, the water-supply augmented, and at last the captain turned to the pale-faced women who had been helping with all their strength, and said:

"There, we need not fear blacks a hundred strong. All we have to do now is to come in, shut and bar the door, roll two or three of the casks against it, and laugh at them."

"But I don't feel happy about my kitchen," said Aunt Georgie.

"No: that is our weakest place," said the captain; "but I'll soon set that right.—See anything of them, boys?" he cried to the sentries.

"No, not a sign."

"Metancoly black fellow all along a trees," said Shanter, jumping up, for he had finished his damper.

"Can you see them?" cried the captain.

"Baal see black fellow. Plenty hide."

He illustrated his meaning by darting behind a barrel and peering at the captain, so that only one eye was visible.

"Yes, I see," cried the captain. "Get up.—Now, good folks, some dinner. I'm hungry. Cheer up. We can beat them off if they attack, which I hope they will not."

"So do I," said Norman in a whisper to Rifle; "but if they do come, we must fight."

"Yes," said Rifle; "but they will not come fair. I'm afraid they'll try to take us by surprise."

"Let 'em," said Tim, scornfully. "If they do, we must try and surprise them."

Chapter Twenty One.

"Think you can hit a black?"

A long anxious afternoon of watching, but the blacks made no sign, and upon Shanter being referred to, he replied coolly: "Plenty come along when piggi jump down, all no see."

Tim shuddered at the black's coolness.

"Make shoot bang. Black fellow run along holler—ow!"

"He doesn't seem to mind a bit," whispered Tim.

"Don't know the danger, I suppose," said Norman. "I say, boys, how long could we hold out?"

"Always," said Rifle. "Or till we had eaten all the cattle."

"If the blacks don't spear them and drive them away."

As the afternoon wore on the conversation grew less frequent, and all waited, wondering whether the blacks would attack them or try to drive off the cattle. Guns were laid ready; ammunition was to hand, and the captain seemed to have quite thrown aside his suspicions of the black, who, on his side, had apparently forgotten the cut across his shoulder, though a great weal was plainly to be seen.

In spite of bad appetites there had been two meals prepared.

"Men can't fight on nothing, wife," the captain said; and then seeing the frightened looks of Mrs Bedford and the girls, he added with a merry laugh: "If they have to fight. Bah! if the black scoundrels come on, it only means a few charges of swan-shot to scatter them, and give them a lesson they will never forget."

Soon after this the captain and Uncle Jack went outside with the glass to sweep the edge of the scrub and the ridge, as well as every patch of trees, leaving the boys alone in the back part of the house to keep watch there.

"I say," said Rifle, in a low tone, "it's all very well for father to talk like that to them, but he doesn't think a charge of swan-shot will scatter the blacks, or else he wouldn't have the bullets ready."

"No," replied Norman, quietly. "He looks very serious about it all."

"Enough to make him," said Tim; "after getting all this place so beautiful, to have a pack of savages coming and interfering.—I say, Shanter, think the savages are gone?"

"Mine no pidney," said Shanter, starting up from where he had been squatting in one corner.

"Are the black fellows gone?"

"Baal black fellow gone along. Wait till piggi jump down and can't see."

"Think so? Come along all dark?" said Rifle. "Yohi. Come along, get flour, numkull chicken fellow. Make big fight."

Norman frowned.

"Mine glad Marmi Rifle. Mine like plenty stop along here."

"Well, I don't," grumbled Rifle. "I don't like it at all. I say, Man, don't you wish we were all safe somewhere else?"

"Yes. No," said Norman, shortly; "we mustn't be cowards now."

"Tisn't cowardly not to want to fight like this," grumbled Rifle. "If I shoot, perhaps I shall kill a black fellow. I don't want to kill a black fellow."

Shanter nodded admiringly, for he did not quite grasp the speech.

"Kill a black fellow," he said. "Mumkull. Go bong."

"Oh, bother; I wish he wouldn't muddle what a fellow means. I say, Tim, feel frightened?"

"Horribly," replied Tim. "I say, I hope they will not come."

"Perhaps they will not," said Norman. "If they do, it may only mean to drive away some of the cattle."

"Well, father don't want his cattle driven away, does he?"

"Don't talk so," said Norman, who was standing with his face to a small square window, which he reached by standing on a case. "I say, come here, Tim."

The boy went and stood by him.

"Look straight along the garden fence, and see if that isn't something moving; there, by those bushes."

Tim looked intently for a few moments, and shook his head.

"No," he said; "it's getting too dim. What's that?"

"Only father and uncle," said Rifle, for just then their elders entered the house, and closed and fastened the door before coming into the back room.

"It's getting so dark, boys, that we'll trust to the place now to protect us. Close that window all but the narrow slit. Are the other windows fast?"

"Yes, father," said Norman; "all but the loopholes in our bedroom and the kitchen. Think they'll come?"

"Can't say, boy; but we think it is not wise to risk a spear from some fellow who has crawled up."

"Black fellow crawl up," said Shanter, as Norman secured the window.

"They had better stay away," said the captain, gravely. "Poor wretches, it is very horrible to have to fire at their unprotected bodies. If they would only keep away."

The captain cast an eye over the defences, and at the boys' weapons before going to the girls' bedroom, which stood a little higher than the other rooms of the house, and being considered the safest spot in the stronghold, the ladies were all gathered there.

Here the boys could hear him talking cheerily as the place grew darker and darker, for the fire in the kitchen had been extinguished, and lights were of course forbidden. From the front room by the door came the low murmur of voices, where Uncle Munday and Sam German sat together, the latter now armed with a gun, though his pitchfork was placed beside him, as if even now he might require it for his defence.

At last, wearied out with sitting in one position, Rifle rose and went to the door, where his uncle and Sam German were keeping watch.

"Think you can hit a black, Sam?" whispered Rifle, after a few words with his uncle.

"Dunno, Master Rifle; but I have hit sparrers afore now, and brought down a rabbit."

"Oh!" ejaculated Rifle. Then after a pause. "I say, Sam, which did you put in first, the powder or shot?"

"There, it's of no good your trying to be funny, my lad," whispered back the gardener, "because it won't do. You feel as unked as I do, I'm sewer. What I says is, I wish it was to-morrow mornin'."

"Or else that they would come, German, and let us get it over," said a voice out of the darkness, which made them start. "The suspense is painful, but keep a good heart.—Raphael, boy, you ought to be at your post. Mind and report every sound you hear."

"Yes, father," said the boy, who crept back to the room he had left, but not without going to the bedroom door, and whispering sharply, "It's all right, mother. We'll take care of you."

He did not wait for a reply, but crept into the backroom, where all was silent, and he went from thence into the long lean-to kitchen, with its big stone fireplace and chimney.

"Pist! you there, boys?"

"Yes; mind how you come. Your gun's standing up in the corner by the fireplace. We're going to sit here, and take it in turns for one to watch at the window slit."

Then after making out by touch where the others were placed, and nearly falling over Shanter, who was squatting, enjoying the warmth which came from the hearthstone to his bare feet, the boy seated himself on a rough bench by his gun, and all was silent as well as dark. From time to time the captain came round—in each case just after they had changed watches at the window loophole—but neither Norman, his cousin, nor brother had anything to report, and he went away again, after telling them the last time that all was well, and that he thought their sister and cousin had gone off to sleep.

Then there was the same oppressive darkness and silence once more, a heavy breathing by the still warm fireplace, suggesting that Shanter, well refreshed with damper, had gone to sleep, and the boys instinctively shrank from disturbing him for fear he should start into wakefulness, and lay about him with his nulla-nulla.

It must have been nearly twelve o'clock, when Norman was wishing that the Dutch clock in the corner had not been stopped on account of its striking, for the silence was growing more and more painful, and he was wondering how it would be possible to keep up for hours longer. He felt no desire for sleep; on the contrary, his nerves were strained to their greatest tension, and he could hear sounds outside as if they had been magnified—the chirp of some grasshopper-like insect, or the impatient stamp of a horse in the enclosure, being quite startling.

But there was nothing to report. He could easily find an explanation for every sound, even to the creaking noise which he felt sure was caused by one of the cows rubbing itself against the rough fence.

Rifle was watching now at the narrow slit, but there was nothing to see, "except darkness," he whispered to his brother, "and you can't see that."

And then, as he sat there for another half-hour, Norman began once more to envy the black, who seemed to be sleeping easily and well, in spite of the danger which might be lurking so near.

But he was misjudging the black: Shanter was never more wide awake in his life, and the proof soon came. All at once there was a faint rustling from near the fireplace apparently, and Rifle turned sharply, but did not speak, thinking that Norman and his cousin had changed places.

Norman heard the sound too, and gave the credit to Tim, who in turn made sure that his cousin had lain down to sleep. So no one spoke, and the rustling was heard again, followed now sharply by a quick movement, a horrible yell, a rushing sound, and then the sickening thud of a heavy blow. Before the boys could quite grasp what it meant, there was a sharp rattling, as if a big stick was being rapidly moved in the chimney, then another yell, a fresh rattling as of another great stick against the stone sides of the chimney, with a heavy thumping overhead.

Norman grasped the position now in those quick moments, and, gun in hand, dashed to the chimney, cannoning against Rifle and then against some one else, for he had tripped over a soft body. Before he could recover himself there was a deafening roar, and the sour odour of powder began to steal to his nostrils as he listened to a rustling sound as of something rolling over the split wood slabs which roofed the place, followed by a heavy fall close under the window.

"What is it, boys?" cried the captain at the door, for all had passed so rapidly that the episode was over before he reached the kitchen.

"Black fellow come along," said Shanter, quietly. "Mine mumkull."

"Through the window?" cried the captain, reproachfully, advancing into the kitchen. "Oh, boys! Ah!"—he stumbled and nearly fell—"wounded? Who is this?"

There was no reply.

"Norman—Rifle—Tim?" cried the captain in horrified tones.

"Yes, father! Yes, uncle!" cried the boys excitedly.

"Then it's the black! But I don't understand. How was it?"

"Mine hear black fellow come down along," said Shanter, quickly. "Mine make black fellow go up along. You pidney?"

"What, down the chimney?"

"Yohi. Make plenty fire, baal come along down."

"Wait a minute," said the captain quickly, and they heard him go into the other room. Then there was the sharp striking of flint and steel, a shower of sparks, and the face of the captain was faintly visible as he blew one spark in the tinder till it glowed, and a blue fluttering light on the end of a brimstone match now shone out. Then the splint burst into flame as voices were heard inquiring what it all meant.

"Back into your room!" thundered the captain.

As he spoke, *thud, thud, thud*, came three heavy knocks at the door in front, which were answered by Uncle Jack's gun rapidly thrust through the slit left for defence, out of which a long tongue of flame rushed as there was a sharp report, and then silence.

"Blows of clubs?" cried the captain, sheltering the light with his hand, as he looked toward his brother.

"Spears," said Uncle Jack, laconically; and the next moment the sound of his powder-flask was heard upon the muzzle of the gun, followed by the ramming down of a wad.

But the boys' eyes were not directed toward their uncle, whose figure could be plainly seen as he loaded again, for they were fixed upon the body of a black lying face downward on the kitchen floor, with Shanter, hideously painted, squatting beside it, showing his white teeth, and evidently supremely proud of his deed of arms.

Chapter Twenty Two.

"They're on the roof."

Coming quickly into the kitchen with the candle, the captain held it down over the prostrate black, turned him partly over, and let him fall back as he rapidly blew it out.

"Dead," he said, hoarsely.

"Yohi. Gone bong," said Shanter, quietly. "Come along mumkull Marmi and plenty white Marys. When piggi jump up, baal find dat black fellow."

There was a few moments' silence, and then the captain said sharply: "Norman—Tim, lift out the bar. Rifle, be ready with your piece, and fire at once if an attack is made. Don't lift out the shutter, Norman, till I say 'Now!'"

Norman made no reply, for much of his training had been tinged with military discipline. He lifted out the bar, and set it down, then he and Tim took hold of the shutter, while Rifle stood ready with his fowling-piece, listening intently, though, to his father, who was whispering to Shanter.

"Now!" said the captain, sharply. The shutter was lifted out, the boys felt the captain and Shanter push by them; there was a strange rustling sound, a yell from many voices close at hand, and the shutter was thrust back in its place, but would not go home.

Bang, bang! Two sharp reports from Rifle's piece, which was then dragged back and the shutter glided into the opening, but was driven right in the boys' faces by what seemed to be half a dozen heavy blows. Then it was pushed in its place again, and the bar dropped across.

"Were those club blows, father?" panted Norman.

"No, boy, spears thrown at the window. Well done, lads; you were very prompt. It was risky to open the shutter, but we could not keep that poor wretch here. Hark!"

A low muttering and groaning, then a yell or two, came from outside, chilling the boys' blood; and Rifle stood there, his face and hands wet with cold perspiration, listening in horror.

"Gun fellow plenty hurt," said Shanter, with a satisfied laugh.

"Yes," said the captain, with a sigh; "some of those swan-shot of yours, boy, have told. But load, load! And Heaven grant that this may be a lesson to them, and you will not need to fire again."

"Ned!" cried Uncle Jack, in a low voice.

"Yes."

"They're stealing round here. I can just make them out. Shall I fire?"

"Not unless they are coming on."

In an instant Uncle Jack's gun spoke out, and there was a fierce burst of yelling, followed by the familiar sound of spears striking the door or walls of the house.

"Mine plenty spear when piggi jump up," said Shanter, quietly.

"Yes," said the captain, after listening for a few moments.—"Going away, Jack?" he whispered.

"Yes; I fired while they were far off, so as to hit as many as possible. Only duck-shot."

"Look here, Shanter," said the captain. "Black fellow go now?"

"Baal go. Come along mumkull everybody."

"Cheerful, boys," said the captain; "but we shall stop that. Now then, the first thing is to close that chimney. How's it to be done?"

"I think, sir," began Sam German slowly, but he was interrupted by Uncle Jack:

"Some one coming up; better look out. Hah!" Uncle Jack shrank away from the loophole in the doorway just in time, for a spear was thrust through, grazing his cheek. Then it was withdrawn for a second thrust, but it did not pass through.

Sam German's gun-barrel did, and he fired as he held it pistol-wise.

There was a horrible yell following the report; then a fearful shriek or two, and a fresh shower of spears struck the house, while a burst of low sobbing came from the girls' room.

"Marian! Aunt Georgie!" cried the captain, sternly. "Silence there, for all our sakes. Is that how English ladies should encourage those who are fighting for their lives?"

The sobbing ceased on the instant, and a silence fell outside.

"Gone," whispered Norman, after a time.

"Baal gone," said Shanter, coolly. "Black fellow plenty come along soon."

The black's words went home and sank deeply, a chill of horror running through the boys as they felt how, after this reception, their enemies would be implacable, and that if they gained the upper hand it meant death for them all. It was in ignorance, though, for had the reception been of the kindest, the probability was that they would have run the same chance of massacre.

But the feeling of depression passed off quickly enough now, and the excitement of the last hour produced a feeling of elation. It had been horrible, that encounter with the descending enemy, and then the firing and the shrieks and yells as they had shot at these men; and then unconsciously, while he and his brothers were silently and thoughtfully dwelling on the same theme, Norman said aloud: "No, they are not men, but wolves, and must be treated the same."

Then he started, for a hand from out of the darkness gripped his shoulder, and his uncle's voice said: "Yes, boy, you are quite right; savage howling wolves, who would have no mercy upon us, I am afraid."

"You here, uncle?"

"Yes, lad; your father has just relieved me, and I'm coming to sit down and eat some bread, and have a pannikin of water. Where's Shanter?"

"Mine all along here 'top chimney," said the black.

"Yes, and that's one thing I am going to do," said Uncle Jack. "Your father, boys, and Shanter have talked it over. There is a square case here in the corner that we think will about fill the chimney a little way up."

"Yes; here it is," cried Rifle.

"Let's try."

Then, in the darkness, the chest was dragged to the front of the fire, lifted, found to go right up and block the chimney, so that when it was wedged up in its place by placing a barrel upright beneath, that way of entrance was effectually blocked, and Uncle Jack uttered a sigh of relief.

"Now for my bread and water," he said.—"Have some damper, Shanter?"

"Hey? Damper?" cried the black, eagerly. "Gib damper. Hah! Soff damper."

This last was on receiving a great piece of Aunt Georgie's freshly-made bread, which kept him busily occupied for some little time.

All were on the *qui vive*, feeling cheered and hopeful, now that their armour had had its first proving, the weak spot found and remedied; for, though others were contemplated for the future, the great kitchen chimney, built exactly on the principle of that in an old English farmhouse, was the only one in the slowly growing home.

An hour passed, and another, with several false alarms—now the crack of some dry board in the side of the house,

now a noise made by some one moving in the room, or the creaking of one of the fences outside—everything sounding strange and loud in the stillness of the night; and as the time wore on, and no fresh attack came, the boys' hopes rose higher, and they turned to the black as the best authority on the manners and customs of the natives.

"They must be gone now, Shanter," Rifle said at last, after two or three dampings from that black sage. "It's over two hours since we have heard them: all gone along, eh?"

Shanter grunted.

"I shall ask father to let me go out and reconnoitre."

"Mine no pidney," said the black.

"Get out of one of the windows and go and look round."

"What for go along? Plenty damper—plenty water."

"To see if the black fellows have gone."

"Baal go see. Marmi come back tickum full spear and go bong."

"Nonsense! the black fellows are gone."

"Black fellow all along. Come plenty soon."

"How do you know?"

"Mine know," said the black, quietly; and they waited again for quite an hour, fancying every rustle they heard was the creeping up of a stealthy enemy.

Then, all at once, there was a light, narrow, upright mark, as it seemed, on the kitchen wall. This grew plainer, and soon they were looking on each other's dimly-seen faces; and about ten minutes later Norman went to the chimney corner, took hold of the shovel there, and scraped together a quantity of the fine, grey wood ashes which lay on the great hearthstone about the cask which supported the chest in the chimney, to sprinkle them about in the middle of the kitchen.

The boys looked on, and Tim shuddered, but directly after uttered a sigh of relief, just as a hideous, chuckling laugh came apparently from the ridge of the house.

"Quick!" cried Norman, dropping the fire-shovel with a clatter, and seizing his gun; "they're on the roof."

"Baal shoot," cried Shanter, showing his teeth. "Dat laughum jackass," and he imitated the great, grotesque kingfisher's call so faithfully that the bird answered. "Say piggi jump up:" his interpretation of the curious bird's cry; and very soon after piggi, otherwise the sun, showed his rim over the trees at the edge of the eastern plain. For it was morning, and Rifle shuddered as he went to the window slit to gaze out on the horrors of the night's work.

Chapter Twenty Three.

"He has gone."

But though a curious, morbid fascination attracted the boy to the loophole, there were no horrors to see. Silently, and unknown to the defenders of the happy little English home, the blacks had carried away their dead and wounded, and all outside looked so beautiful and peaceful, that the events of the past night seemed like a dream.

On all sides of the low, wooden house, eager eyes were scanning the wooded patches, trees, and ridges, but there was no sign of an enemy. The only significant thing visible was that the rails of the great paddock had been taken down in one place, and the horses and cattle were out and about grazing.

"I can see no sign of them," said the captain, suddenly closing his glass; the others, after making their own inspection from the several loopholes left for defence, now waiting to hear the captain's announcement after using his telescope. "No, I can see no sign of them.—Here, Tam."

The black came to his side, gave himself a writhe, and said with a grin, "Baal mine ride horse fellow lass night, Marmi."

"No, no," said the captain, smiling; "but look here; black fellow gone along."

"All hide um myall scrub," said Shanter, quietly.

"No, no, gone—gone," said the captain. "Plenty run away."

"Baal plenty run away," cried the black, who understood the mutilated English of the settlers, made for native comprehension, more easily than ordinary talk. "No, baal plenty run away. Hide."

"How do you know. You pidney?"

The black nodded, and a cunning smile overspread his face as he led the captain to the loopholes at the front, side,

and back of the house, pointed out at the cattle, and then said with the quiet decision of one who has grasped a fact: "Horse fellow—bull-cow—say baal go near scrub, black fellow throw spear."

The captain uttered an ejaculation, and the boys laughed.

"Well done, Shanter!" cried Rifle. "Look, father, they are all keeping together out in the middle."

"Oh yes there's no doubt about it," said the captain. "I shall end by having quite a respect for Tam."

"Baal whip Shanter?" said the black sharply.

"No; never again."

"Marmi gib Shanter plenty horse fellow ride?"

"Yes, you shall ride and herd the cattle."

"Big white Mary gib plenty soff damper?"

"Yes, plenty."

"How coo-ee! Big white Mary gib Shanter plenty soff damper now?" cried the black.

"Yes, come along, aunt; and Marian, you and the girls come and give us some breakfast; there is no danger at present."

"Shanter make plenty big fire," cried the black. "Pull down big box fellow—big tub. Black fellow no come long time."

The boys sprang to his help, the tub and chest were removed, and a fire lit, its ashes soon removing the traces which had been hidden by the cask.

The ladies looked very pale, but their neat aspect in the dim kitchen, along with the sparkling fire, gave everything a cheerful look in spite of the gloom.

Shanter marched to the front door.

"Open," he said shortly. "Mine go eat damper. Plenty see black fellow come and shut um."

"Yes, we could keep watch, and close it again quickly," said the captain. So bars and barricades were drawn aside, and the door thrown open to admit the fresh, delicious, morning breeze, which blew full in their faces, while the light darted into the interior of the shuttered rooms.

"Hurrah!" cried the boys in chorus; and they all came out into the front.

"What's the matter, Shanter?" cried Rifle, as the black suddenly threw back his head, dilated his nostrils, and began to sniff.

"Mine smell," he cried.

"What can you smell?"

The black was silent for a few moments, standing with his eyes closely shut, and giving three or four long sniffs, twitching his face so comically, that the boys laughed.

"Muttons," said the black, decisively. "Mumkull sheep fellow. Big fire where? Hah!"

He had been staring about him now as he spoke, and suddenly fixed his eyes on the low bushes down by the waterfall, and pointed to a faint blue curl of smoke just rising above the trees, and which might have been taken for mist.

"I can smell it now," cried Tim. "It's like burning wool."

"Mumkull sheep fellow. Roace plenty mutton."

"Oh yes, one of our sheep," cried Norman, fiercely.

"Kimmeroi—bulla—metancoy—plenty mutton."

"Yes," said Rifle, "and they'll camp down there and eat all father's sheep. Oh, if we could only drive them right away."

"Shanter catch sheep fellow, eat mutton?"

"No, not yet," said the captain, quietly; and very soon after, with Shanter and Sam German watching, the defenders of the little fort obeyed a call, and went in to enjoy a wonderfully good breakfast considering the position in which they were placed.

Then began a day of careful watching, during which, at Aunt Georgie's desire, Shanter sought for eggs, drove up the two cows to the door to be milked, and assisted in bringing in more wood and water, displaying a wonderful eagerness in performing any duties connected with the preparation of food.

Many of the little things done looked risky, but the enemy made no sign, and the sun began to set with the house much strengthened as a fort, and better provisioned for a siege.

Rifle was sure, two or three times over, that the blacks must be gone, and said so, but Shanter shook his head.

"Black fellow plenty eat. Go sleep," he said, on one occasion. On another, he cried cheerfully, "Black fellow baal go along. Mumkull all a body." While lastly, he said coolly, "Black fellow ogle eye all a time."

Then night—with the place closely barricaded, and the arrangement made that half of their little party should sleep while the other half watched, but the former had their weapons by their sides ready to spring up at the first alarm, the captain having arranged where each sleeper's place was to be.

There was some opposition on the part of the ladies, but they yielded upon the captain telling them that the siege might last for days; and that not only would they be safer, but it would give their defenders confidence to know they were out of danger.

And then once more the anxious watch began, Shanter creeping now softly from loophole guard to loophole guard, for there was no need for him to watch by the chimney, which was stopped again.

But their precautions were necessary, for the first alarm they had come from the chimney, to which, spear in hand, the black ran and chuckled as he heard the chest creak, and a crashing sound upon the cask which supported it notify that one of the black fellows was trying to force his way down.

After that five different attacks were made, the blacks trying to force in door and window, till a shot was fired through the loophole. This was in each case followed by a desperate effort to spear the defenders through the hole; and being prepared now, Shanter waited for and seized the weapon, holding it while a charge of shot was poured through the slit.

Then would come yells and a savage throwing of spears, which suggested a harvest to the black, which however, as in the last case, was not fulfilled, every one being afterwards collected and carried away.

The result of all this was that very little sleep was enjoyed by anybody, and the morning broke to give the defenders an interval of rest and peace, for the blacks did not show themselves by day.

Somewhat rested, the little party prepared for the third night, hoping that the enemy would now be disgusted at his want of success and retire, and now darkness had come and hopes had grown stronger and stronger, before there was a sudden rush and several men gained the roof and began tearing off the shingles, till a shot or two fired straight upward sent the cowardly savages helter-skelter down once more.

They came no more that night, and a peaceful day followed, with the cattle indicating that the black fellows were still hiding about in the scrub; while a fire showed that they were providing themselves with food at the captain's expense.

The ladies looked more calm and hopeful, for they were beginning to believe in the strength of their little fortress and the bravery of their defenders; but there was an anxious look in the captain's eyes, and the boys talked over the position together.

"I expected that they would have given up before now," Norman said.

"So did I," cried Rifle. "A lot of them must have been wounded and some killed, though we don't see them."

"Shanter says *metancoley*," cried Tim. "I suppose that's what makes them so fierce. Do you think they will stay till they've killed us all?"

"Hope not," replied Rifle; "I'm getting tired of it. I wish father hadn't come out so far away from all neighbours. We might have had some help if he hadn't."

"Hush! the girls," whispered Norman, as, pale and anxious looking, the sister and cousin went to the front door where the captain was watching, Shanter being on duty at the back.

It was soon agreed that it was of no use to wish, and the long irksome day came to an end, with the door once more barricaded, and keen eyes watching for the next approach of the enemy.

But the blacks were too cunning to advance while there was the slightest chance of their being observed; and when they did come it was with a sudden rush from somewhere close at hand, when retaliatory shots again and again forced them to retreat. It was just such a night as the others which they had passed, and the coming of day was once more gladly hailed with its peace and opportunities for rest and sleep.

That afternoon the captain looked more haggard and wistful than ever. As far as he could make out, a couple of his choicest oxen were missing, and it soon became a conviction that they had been speared by the black fellows for their feast about the fire they had established in a grove a mile away.

So far there was no fear of the garrison, as Rifle called them, being starved out; but at any time a nearer approach of the enemy would put a stop to the successful little forays made by Shanter in search of eggs and chickens; and the task of milking the cows, which marched up slowly morning and evening, might easily have been made too difficult or terminated by the throwing of spears.

"Don't let's halloa before we are hurt," Tim had said to this; and all went on as before, the next day and the next.

Again the sun rose after a more anxious night, for the attacks had been exceedingly pertinacious and harassing, while the mischief done amongst the attacking party must have been terrible.

"They're getting more savage," Norman said gloomily in the course of the day, after returning from the room where Mrs Bedford was lying down; "and it's wearing mamma out."

"Yes," said Tim; "and the girls can't keep their tears back. I say, couldn't we all make an attack upon them in their camp?"

"And be speared," cried Rifle. "No; there are too many of 'em. They'd drive us back and get into the house, and then—Ugh!"

The shudder he gave was echoed by his companions.

"I was thinking whether it would be possible on horseback," said Norman.

"No, my boy," said the captain, who had overheard their remarks; "it would be too risky, I dare not. What is the matter with the black?"

"I have not seen anything," replied Norman.

"Nor you, boys?"

Rifle and Tim were silent.

"Speak!" said the captain, sternly.

"I thought as Rifle does, uncle, that Shanter seems to be getting tired of fighting. He always wants to be asleep in the day now, and is sulky and cross if he is woke up."

"You have noted that, Rifle?"

"Yes, father."

"I had similar thoughts. The man wants to get into the fresh air, and be free once more."

The object of their conversation was sitting listlessly upon his heels gazing at the smoke of the fire rising in the scrub, but did not appear to notice that he was being made the object of the conversation, and soon after they saw his head droop down as if he had gone fast asleep.

The captain made a movement as if to go and rouse him up, but refrained, and taking the glass, he focussed it, and proceeded to count the horses and cattle still scattered about grazing. For though they seemed to be scared away by the yelling and firing at night, they came slowly back toward the house in the course of the day, so that by night they were for the most part in their old quarters, the horses even going back into their paddock.

The day wore on, with turns being taken in the watching, the two girls and Aunt Georgie insisting upon aiding, their sight being sharp enough they declared, so that the defenders of the little fort were able to get more sleep, and prepare for the night attacks which were sure to come.

The sun was nearly ready to dip when the sleepers rose and prepared for the evening meal. The cows had been milked and gone quietly away; and, trying hard to look cheerful, Mrs Bedford summoned all but German and Rifle to the table, where there was no sign of diminution of the supply as yet.

This was the one pleasant hour of the day, for experience had taught them that the blacks would run no risk of coming within range of the deadly guns till after dark, and the heat was giving place to the coolness of eve, while soon after the door would have to be closed.

As they gathered round, after the captain had said a few words to the sentries, Aunt Georgie, who had filled a tin with milk, cut a large piece of damper baked that day on the wood ashes, and went to the door.

"Here, Shanter," she said.

Then they heard her call again, but there was no reply. "Where's Shanter, Rifle?" she cried.

"I don't know, aunt. I've not seen him since I had my sleep. He was squatting just here before I went to lie down."

German had not seen him since. Nobody had seen him since. The last every one had seen of him was when he was seated on his heels with his spear across his knees.

"Asleep somewhere," said Uncle Jack. "Go on with your suppers, good folks. I'll soon find him."

"Don't go away from round the house, Jack," cried the captain, anxiously.

"No. Trust me," was the reply; and the meal went on till Uncle Jack came back to say that Shanter was nowhere in sight.

The announcement sent a chill through all, and the question was discussed in whispers whether he had crept away to reconnoitre, and been surprised by the enemy and speared.

There was no more appetite that evening, and the remains of the meal were cleared away, with the captain and Uncle Jack standing outside reconnoitring in turns with the glass, sweeping the edge of grove and scrub, and seeing no danger, only that the cattle were quietly grazing a little, and then, after a few mouthfuls, edging farther away.

"Seen anything of him, father?" said Rifle, eagerly.

"No," was the sharp reply.

Norman came out with Tim, each a gun in hand, to ask the same question, and look wonderingly at the captain when his reply was abrupt and stern.

The sun sank; evening was coming on, with its dark shadows, and those which were human of a far darker dye; and after a final look round at the shutters, indented and pitted with spear holes, the captain said sternly, "In every one: it is time this door was closed."

"But Shanter, father; he is not here," cried Rifle, while his brother and cousin looked at the captain excitedly.

"And will not be," said the latter, in a deep stern voice. "Now, German, ready with the bars? It's getting dark enough for them to make a rush."

"Father, you don't think he is killed?" whispered Norman, in an awe-stricken voice.

"No; but I am sure that he has forsaken us."

"What?" cried Rifle. "Oh no!"

"Yes, boy; his manner the last two days had taught me what to expect. He has done wonders, but the apparent hopelessness of the struggle was too much for a savage, and he has gone."

"Not to the enemy, father, I'm sure," cried Norman.

"Well then, to provide for his own safety."

"I fancied I saw a black making signs to him yesterday, sir," said German.

"Then why did you not speak?" cried the captain, angrily.

"Wasn't sure, sir," replied German, sulkily.

"Ugh! you stupid old Sourkrout!" muttered Tim.

The door was closed with a sharp bang, bars and barriers put up, chests pushed against it, and with sinking hearts the boys prepared for the night's hard toil, feeling that one of the bravest among them had gone.

Chapter Twenty Four.

"How many did you bring down?"

"I won't believe it," whispered Rifle, angrily. "Father always doubted him. Poor old Shanter has been speared."

There was a sob in his throat as he uttered those last words, and then a terrible silence fell upon them.

"Have you boys placed the cask and chest in the fireplace?" said the captain out of the darkness.

There was a rush to the chimney, and the dangerous spot was blocked up, each working hard to make up for what seemed to be a dangerous neglect on his part.

"But suppose poor old Shanter comes back," whispered Tim, "and tries to get in that way when he finds the door fastened."

"He wouldn't come near in the dark," said Norman with a sigh; and then to himself, "even if he was alive."

Once more silence where the three boys were guarding the back of the premises, and then there was a faint rustling noise, followed by the sharp *click, click* of guns being cocked.

"Who's that?" whispered Rifle.

"Only I, my boys," said Mrs Bedford in a low voice, and she kissed each in turn, and clung to the sturdy lads for a few moments. "Your father wishes me to go now and leave you. God bless and protect you!"

She stole away again, and the two girls came in turn to say good-night, and then go away again to watch or sleep as they could.

"I don't care," muttered Tim, rebelliously. "I say Shanter wouldn't go and sneak away like that."

"And so do I, my dear," said Aunt Georgie. "He was only a savage, but he had grown as faithful as a dog, and so we told your father, but he's as stubborn as—"

"Aunt," cried the captain, "what are you doing here?"

"To your room, please. You are hindering the boys from keeping proper watch."

"Good-night; God bless you, my dears!" whispered Aunt Georgie, in a husky whisper. "It's very dreadful, but I'm sure he is killed."

"Look out!" whispered Norman, a short time after. "It isn't quite so dark, and I can see some one moving. Shall I fire?"

"No. It may be Shanter."

It was not. A few minutes later Norman had a narrow escape from death, for a spear was thrust through the loophole, and a shot being fired in reply, half a dozen spears came rattling at the thick shutter; and this time the boys distinctly heard the black fellows come softly up and drag their weapons out of the wood, just as they were alarmed by a fresh attempt to enter by the chimney, and some one on the roof was trying to tear up the shingles.

"Fire, boys, fire!" cried the captain; while shots rang out from the front. The boys fired, Tim directing his two charges through the ceiling, where he imagined enemies to be lying, the others firing through the loophole.

There was the customary rush overhead, the sound of falls, fierce yelling, as a pair of spears struck the house, and Norman uttered a sharp cry.

"Any one hurt?" cried the captain, excitedly. "Marian, aunt, go and see. I can't leave here."

"No: not hurt," shouted Norman. "Spear came through the loophole, passed through my shirt and under my arm."

"Thrust or thrown?" cried Uncle Jack.

"Thrown," was the reply, as the hissing of wads driving out confined air, and the thudding of ramrods were heard.

"They know Shanter isn't here," whispered Rifle, as he finished his loading. "They've killed him, and that's what makes them so fierce."

He seemed to be right, for the defenders passed a cruel night; but morning dawned, and the enemy had not gained a single advantage more than before.

That morning was devoted to nailing planks all over the roof, for fortunately they were plentiful. Others were nailed across the doors, back and front, just leaving room for people to creep in and out; and this being done, the captain took the glass once more to scour their surroundings; while Sam German and the boys fetched water and wood, fulfilling Shanter's duties, till an ejaculation from the captain made them look up.

"The wretches! They have speared or driven off all the horses, boys; we must get a sheep killed for provender, or we may not have another chance. There, work and get done. You must all have some rest before night."

Norman was just going into the house as the captain spoke these words, and the boy turned away from the door to get round to the side, where he could be alone. He had been about to join his mother and the girls, but his father's words brought a despairing feeling upon him, and he dared not meet them for fear they should read his thoughts.

"What's the matter, Man?" said a voice behind him. "Ill?"

It was Rifle who spoke, and Norman turned so ghastly a face to him that the boy was shocked.

"Here, let me fetch father," he said.

"No, no; stop! I shall be better directly."

"But what was it?"

"The horses—the horses!"

"Oh, don't make a fuss about them. We've got to think of ourselves. We can get some more horses, I daresay."

"Yes, but not when we want them," said Norman, angrily. "Can't you see: they were our last chance."

Rifle stared.

"What—you mean?" he faltered.

"Of course. Father would have stayed here to the last to try to protect the home he has made, but when things came to the worst, we should have had to mount some morning and gallop off."

In spite of the peril they were in, Rifle laughed.

"Get out!" he cried. "You would never have got Aunt Georgie upon a horse."

"Can't you be serious for a minute," cried Norman, angrily. "Don't you see that our last chance has gone?"

"No," said Rifle, sturdily. "Not a bit of it. We've only been firing duck and swan shot so far. Now, I'm going to ask

father if we hadn't better fire ball. Come on. Don't grump over a few horses. We don't want to ride away and be hunted for days by black fellows."

"Where are you going?"

"To get in that sheep while we can. Perhaps to-morrow they'll be driven farther away."

Norman nodded, and looked hard at his brother, for he could not help admiring his sturdy courage.

"We're going now, father," cried Rifle.

"Well, take care. Creep along by the fence, keeping it between you and the scrub there. Get round the sheep, and drive all before you till they are close in here. Then pounce upon two and hold on. We'll come and help you."

The task looked risky, for the sheep were a couple of hundred yards away, and it was felt that the blacks were in the scrub. But they had not shown themselves, and might be a sleep, or so far away that the bold dash made by the boys would be unseen. But all the same the captain and Uncle Jack covered their advance, ready with loaded guns to protect the boys should the blacks make any sign.

The arrangement seemed to be unnecessary, for the two lads, carrying their pieces at the trail, reached the fence, under whose cover they went out quite a hundred yards. Then halting and carefully scanning the nearest patch of scrub, they rose and walked fast, partly away from the sheep, so as to be well beyond them before they turned to their left, got behind, and drove them gently toward the house.

All this had to be done slowly and deliberately so as not to startle the flock, but, as Rifle said, it was ticklish work.

"Yes. I expect to see black heads starting up every moment," whispered Norman. "Now then, we're far enough. Quickly and steadily. Come along."

The boys bore round to their left so as to be between the sheep and the open country, and the outsiders of the flock began to move before them without taking alarm, stopping to munch a bit of grass now and then, and causing others to move in turn; till, as the boys walked on, they at last had their backs to the scrub and the sheep going steadily toward the house.

"Wasn't so difficult after all," said Rifle, quietly. "Couldn't we pen three or four? Why is father signalling?"

"Hi! look out!" shouted Norman, for he had seen his father waving one hand excitedly; and casting an eye back there were twenty or thirty spear-armed savages just darting out of the scrub, and running swiftly in pursuit.

The sight of the enemy made the boys start forward at once; the sheep began to trot, then increased their pace as the boys ran faster, and, dividing into two little flocks, tore past north and south of the house and enclosures, in front of which stood the captain and Uncle Jack, with Sam German running out to their support.

"Quick, boys!" shouted the captain. "Run on and get under cover."

At that moment Rifle saw Tim at the door of the house waving his hands, and to the boys' horror there was the reason: another crowd of black figures were racing up from the trees and bushes down by the river.

But they, like the other party, had a good distance to come, and the issue was never for a moment doubtful.

One incident, though, made the captain shout angrily.

Just in those exciting moments Mrs Bedford ran out of the house, and would have gone on in her dread and horror toward where her husband and sons seemed to her to be in deadly peril; but Tim flung his arms about her, and held her in spite of her struggles.

It was a matter of very few moments.

As the one part of the sheep ran by the front, and seeing the blacks advancing, galloped off to avoid them, Norman and Rifle reached the fences, turned, and stood ready to cover the captain and Uncle Jack, shouting the while to Tim to get Mrs Bedford in.

At the cry from Norman, Sam German too had turned, run back past the house door, and stood facing the blacks advancing from the other direction.

"In with you all: run!" roared the captain, as he and his brother now fell back rapidly, guarding the front as Mrs Bedford was dragged in through the narrow opening; the boys followed, and, thanks to their military training, each as he got through the partly nailed up doorway, took a place at the side with gun levelled to protect the next comer.

It was close work.

Uncle Jack was the next in; then Sam German; and four guns were protruding over his head as the captain dashed up with the rapid beat of the blacks' feet very close on either side.

"Back!" he panted as he forced himself through, and shut to the door, which resounded with the impact of spears as the bars were thrust into their places. Then a tall black with wide eyes and gleaming teeth moved up to thrust his spear through the loophole, but a flash came from the narrow opening, and he dropped, rose, turned to flee, and dropped again.

Another ran up, and the captain's second barrel flashed out its contents, with the result that the black turned, ran back a dozen yards or so, and fell upon his face.

"Load that," said the captain hoarsely, passing back his gun, and seizing that nearest to him—the one Sam German held. For he kept to his place at the loophole in the thick door, and thrusting out the barrel, drew trigger twice at a party of six who dashed now to the door.

Click.

A pause.

Click.

In each case a tiny shower of sparks followed the fall of the hammer, and the captain uttered an angry roar like that of some stricken beast.

"Back!" he cried; and all fell away from the door, to right and left.

It was time, for three spears were thrust through the narrow slit as the gun was withdrawn, and kept on darting about as far in every direction as their holders could reach.

"German!" cried the captain, tossing the gun to the man, "and after all I have said!"

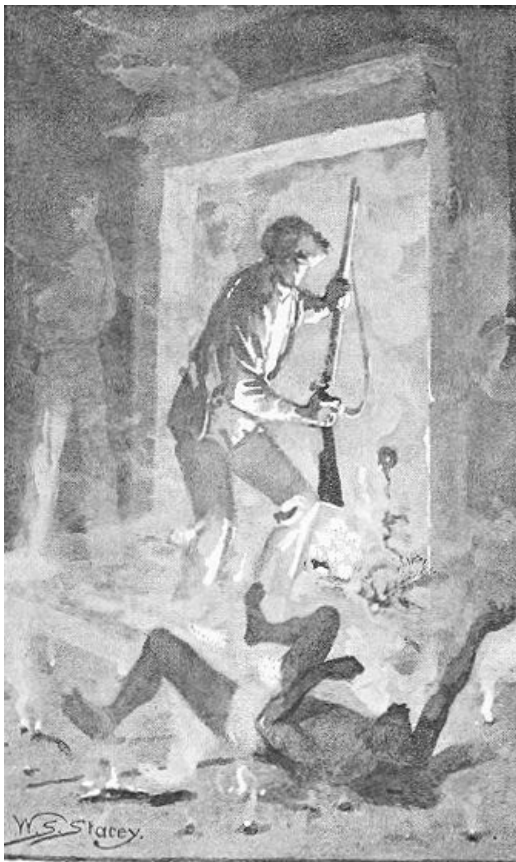
Norman stepped forward to fire, but his father checked him.

"Give me your piece," he said; and taking it and cocking both locks, he dropped a bullet in each of the barrels, felt with the ramrod that they were well home, and then going down on one knee, took careful aim through the darkened loophole and fired.

There was a roar and a crash; the spears were withdrawn, and the captain rose and stepped forward, firing the second barrel from the loophole itself.

"Another," he said quietly; and taking Tim's gun as the sound of loading went on, he suddenly cried, "Who's at the back?"

For there was a curious noise in the direction of the kitchen, followed by a shot, a yell, the sound of some one struggling, and they dashed into the place to see, as well as the darkness and smoke would allow, the embers from the hearth scattered and burning all about the kitchen, and a black figure writhing on the floor.



Uncle Jack was in the act of passing his gun up the wide chimney.

As he entered, Uncle Jack was in the act of passing his gun up the wide chimney—once more temporarily opened; there was a report, a yell, and another figure fell right on the burning fragments left on the hearth, rolled over, and lay motionless.

"Nearly surprised me," said Uncle Jack, coolly loading just as Rifle fired twice from the loophole of the back door, when there was a rush overhead and then silence.

"They've drawn back about thirty yards," said Rifle, loading as his father trampled out the burning embers, which were filling the place with a stifling smoke.

"Better pour water on the fire and put it quite out," said the captain to his brother.

"No: water may be scarce soon," was the reply. "We'll tread it out."

"Coming on again!" shouted Rifle; and as there was the customary sound of spears sticking into the woodwork, the boy fired twice, his charges of big shot scattering and wounding far more than he ever knew.

Just then four shots were fired quickly from the front, there was a savage yelling, and as the captain ran forward, Sam German could be dimly-seen beginning to recharge his piece.

"She were loaded this time, master," he said fiercely, "and some on 'em knowed it.—How many did you bring down, Master 'Temus?"

"Don't know," said the boy huskily, as he hurriedly reloaded.

"Yer needn't be ashamed to say, my lad," cried the old gardener. "We're fighting for ladies, and agen savage wretches as won't let honest folk alone. There, I'm ready for another now."

"Don't fire till they attack," said the captain. "Do you hear, Norman: no waste."

"I hear, father," said the boy quietly, as he stood with his piece resting in the opening, and his bronzed face on the watch.

"Hurray!" came from the back, and at the same moment Norman shouted: "They're retiring, father;" and then a low sobbing came from the inner room.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Twenty-Four Hours' Peace.

Victory was won for the time being; and as the two groups drew back toward the shelter of the scrub, they could be seen carrying the wounded and those who had fallen. Ten minutes later they were close up to the trees, when a thought struck the captain.

"Quick, Norman, unbar that door. Marian, every one there, keep close. No one is to come out." He then called to German, who followed him into the kitchen, and together they bore out the bodies of the two blacks who had obtained an entrance, one of them still showing signs of life.

They carried one at a time some distance out into the open, having the satisfaction of seeing that the enemy had halted and were watching them, while by the time the second body was lowered on to the grass, the blacks were returning at a swift run.

But long before they were near the besieged were back in shelter, and the enemy, as they came up, contented themselves by yelling and making threatening gestures with their spears before retiring, once more bearing off their two companions.

"And now for preparations for the night attack," said the captain, quietly. "Why, boys, it was like regular warfare. Your advance compelled the enemy to develop his strength and forced on a general engagement.—Come girls, all of you, and have a little fresh air before dark."

And as the door was opened and the fresh evening breeze floated in to waft away the horrible dank odour of burnt gunpowder, it seemed hardly possible to believe that so deadly an encounter could have occurred lately, and no one on their side been even scratched.

"But I should have liked to save some of that mutton," said Rifle, thoughtfully. "It is quite time we had a change."

The hour came for barricading the door only too soon, and once more the watch commenced, half of the tiny garrison lying down, while Aunt Georgie and one of the girls pressed for leave to share the watch, urging that they were not weary, and would perhaps be able to detect by eye or ear the approach of danger.

The captain, who was nearly exhausted by his efforts, reluctantly consented, and lay down for a few minutes, giving orders that he should be called at the slightest alarm, and a few minutes after—as he believed—he sprang up looking puzzled and confused.

For the door was wide open, the morning sun shining in, and there was the sharp crackling of a fire, and the smell of baking bread.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said.

"Only that you've slept all night, father, and never moved," cried Rifle, merrily.

"But I gave orders to be called at the slightest alarm."

"And there never was the slightest alarm," cried the boy, joyfully.—"Hi! Man—Tim—father's awake."

Norman and his cousin came to the door gun in hand.

"See anything?" cried Rifle.

"No.—Morning, father.—I believe they've gone."

"Impossible! But you have not heard them all night?"

"Not once."

"But you should not have let me sleep."

"I ordered them to," said Mrs Bedford, quietly. "Who needed rest more?"

At that moment Uncle Jack and Sam came round from the back, where they had been reconnoitring.

"Ah, Ned," said the former, "heard the news? Too good, I'm afraid, to be true."

"Yes, yes; don't let's put any faith in it," said the captain, and he went out, glass in hand, to scan every patch of scrub.

"Not a sign of them; no fire. But—" He looked round again before finishing his sentence:

"No sheep—no cattle."

"Not a hoof left," said Uncle Munday, grimly. "But that is the most hopeful sign."

"What do you mean?" said his brother.

"They seem to have driven everything away, and gone off with them into the bush."

The captain did not speak, nor relax the watchfulness kept up, but as the day wore on various little things were done to increase the strength of the place, and one of these was to saw off a portion of a spiked harrow which Sam German had made, and force this up into the chimney some six feet above the fire, and secure it there with big nails driven between the stones of the chimney, thus guarding against danger in that direction.

Cows, sheep, pigs, all were gone; but the fowls and ducks were about the place and not likely to be driven away, so that there was no fear of a failure in the supply of food; in fact, they felt that they could hold out in that way for months. For if a fowl could not be caught from its night perch, it could be shot by day and caught up. The danger was the want of water.

So far there was plenty in the tubs, but they dare not use it for washing purposes. It was too valuable, and the captain's brow grew dark as he thought of how they were to fetch more from the river or falls.

"We shall have to go away from here, boys," Tim said, towards evening. "This place will never seem safe again."

"Father won't go," said Rifle. "He never gives up. I wouldn't, after getting such an estate as this. Why, it would be worth thousands upon thousands in England."

"And it's worth nothing here if the blacks spear us."

"They'd better!" cried Rifle, defiantly. "They've had enough of us. You see, they will not trouble us again."

"There!" he cried, the next morning, triumphantly, for they had passed a perfectly peaceful night; "the beggars are all gone."

The captain, who was using his glass, heard the boys' words and looked round.

"Don't be too sure, my lad," he said, sadly. "But thank Heaven for this respite."

"Oh, we'll beat them off again, father, if they do come," said the boy, boastfully; and then he coloured beneath his father's steadfast gaze.

"Don't act in that spirit for all our sakes, my lad," said the captain. "All of you mind this: the watchfulness must not be relaxed even, for a moment. Ah! I'd give something if that fellow Shanter had been staunch. He could have relieved our anxiety in a very short time."

"Let me go and see if I can discover any signs of them, father," said Norman.

"What would you say if I tell you I am going?" replied the captain, quietly.

"No, no," cried the boys in chorus. "You might be speared."

"Exactly," said the captain. "No, boys, we are no match for the blacks in trying to track them down."

"They are adepts at hiding, and we might pass through a patch of scrub without seeing a soul, when perhaps a dozen might be in hiding."

"I wish poor old Shanter was here," sighed Rifle.

"Yes: he would be invaluable," said Uncle Jack. That night passed in peace, and the next, giving them all such a feeling of security that even the captain began to think that the lesson read to the enemy had been sufficient to make them drive off their plunder and go; while, when the next day came, plans were made for a feint to prove whether the blacks were still anywhere near; and if it was without result, an attempt was to be made to refill the tubs. The next day some of the vigilance was to be relaxed, and avoiding his wife's eyes as he spoke, the captain said, aloud:

"And then we must see if it is not possible to renew our stock, for none of the poor creatures are likely to stray back home. Not even a horse.—Boys," he said, suddenly, "I'm afraid your friend has to answer for this attack. The love of the horses was too strong for him."

Another twenty-four hours of peace followed, but at the last minute the captain had shrunk from sending down to the nearest point of the river for water, which could only be dragged up by hand after the water-tub had been filled.

Then night came on once more.

Chapter Twenty Six.

"It was poor old Shanter."

As was their custom now, the boys were outside passing the telescope from one to the other for a final look round, while the ladies clustered by the open door, loth to leave it for the closeness of their room, when the captain came round from the back and gave orders for closing.

"I think we will try to run down a tub to the water in the morning, boys," he said. "There surely cannot be any danger now. I have been on the roof trying to make out a fire anywhere in the bush, and there is not a sign."

He went in after the ladies, and, as Tim put it, the drawbridge was pulled up and the portcullis lowered; but just as the door was half-way to, Norman caught hold.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely; "what's that?"

The others craned their necks over the stout plank which crossed the door, and gazed at something dark away in the lower pasture toward the river.

Then they drew back, Norman closed the door, and began securing it, while Tim ran to the inner room.

"Come and help to fasten this, uncle," he said quietly.

"Eh? Yes, my boy," said the captain, following him, and Tim seized his arm.

"Quick!" he whispered, "they're coming on again in front."

The captain seized gun and ammunition; Uncle Jack and Sam German were roused from sleep, which was to last till they came on duty to watch; a few imperative words were uttered to the ladies; and once more everyone was at his post, waiting with beating heart for the attack. But it did not come.

An hour had passed, then another, and when the captain whisperingly asked whether the boys were sure, and whether they might not have been deceived, and taken the black shadows of evening or a depression of the ground for an enemy, they began to think that they must have been mistaken. So the captain went to the back to speak to Uncle Jack and Sam German, who were there that night, the latter solacing himself with a pipe of tobacco, which he was smoking while his companion watched.

"A false alarm, I think, Jack," said the captain. "So much the better."

"But I don't mind. It shows how thoroughly the boys are on the Alert," he was going to whisper, but he did not speak, for at that moment there was a faint rustling overhead; the brothers pressed each other's hands, and Sam German laid his pipe softly in the chimney, took up his gun, and listened.

The next minute the soft rustle continued, and a noise as of someone in pain was heard, while the listeners in the darkness knew perfectly that a black had lowered himself and stood barefooted upon the sharp spikes.

Another attempt was made and another. The blacks, being emboldened by the perfect silence within, tried a fresh plan, which consisted in lowering down a heavy piece of wood, and began to batter the new protection. But a couple of shots fired up the chimney had the customary result, and there was silence once more.

This was the most painful part of the attack, for every nerve was on the strain to make out where the next attempt at entrance would be made, and after the respite of the past peaceful days this fresh alarm seemed more depressing than even the first coming of the enemy. For the defenders could only feel how hopeless their case was, and as the captain thought of his wife's look that evening, he was fain to confess that he would have to give up and settle where the help of neighbours was at his command.

All at once there were a couple of shots from the front, followed by a tremendous yelling, and then silence again for a full hour, when it was plain that the enemy were preparing for a rush at the back, where at least a dozen shots were fired before they drew back.

Their tactics had been the same as of old, the blacks savagely rushing up to the doors and making furious thrusts with their spears, which were met now by large pieces of wood used as shutters and held across the loopholes, and as soon as they could be drawn aside, by the delivery of a charge or two of swan-shot.

This went on at intervals, hour after hour, till a feeling of despair began to take possession of the defenders. Hot, weak, parched with thirst, and worn by the terrible anxiety that came upon them like a black cloud, their efforts were growing more feeble, when, in spite of a stern prohibition on the part of the captain, the girls brought them bread and water just as one of the most desperate attacks had lulled. One minute there had been the sound of spears striking window and door, while a breaking and rending went on as the blacks tried to tear away the wooden sides of the house, and climbed upon the roof; the defenders not daring to fire for fear of making holes through which spears might be thrust, and the next all was silent, and the tears started to the boys' eyes as the voice of mother or sister was heard pressing them to eat or drink.

It was the same in every case: they could not eat, but drank with avidity, the cool water seeming to act as a stimulant, and thrill them with new life.

"Back, quick, girls!" said the captain, suddenly; "they're coming on again;" and then he uttered a groan, for he had seen something which destroyed his last hope, and filled him the next moment with a maddening desire to destroy.

If he could only hurl one of the little powder kegs he had brought so carefully right out into the wilderness—hurl it with a fuse amongst the yelling savages who sought their lives; and then he uttered a low laugh.

"No need," he said to himself softly. "No need. We shall die avenged."

"What's that, father—lightning?" said Norman, sharply; but there was no reply.

It was Rifle who spoke next, but only to utter the ejaculation: "Oh!"

But what a world of meaning there was in the word, as with a hiss of rage the boy thrust his piece from the loophole and sent two heavy charges of shot right into the midst of a crowd of blacks who were coming up to the house carrying fire-sticks and brushwood, with which they ran round and piled it up against the angle formed by the kitchen where it projected at the back. There was a tremendous yelling as the boy fired, and two men fell, while others ran about shrieking; but the mischief was done, and in a few minutes there was a burst of flame, and a peculiar pungent odour of burning wood began to find its way in and threaten suffocation.

"What's to be done, father?" whispered Norman, as light began to show through the thin cracks or chinks of the wooden wall.

"I'd say go out and die fighting like men, boys," said the captain, with a groan; "but there are women. Come, we must not give up," he added, and going to the loophole nearest to him he set the example of firing with unerring aim, whenever he had the chance, at an enemy.

Uncle Jack followed suit, and in obedience to orders, the boys went on steadily reloading.

But the side of the house was growing hot; the kitchen had caught, the crackling of the dry wood began to increase to a roar, and that side of the house was rapidly growing light as day, when Uncle Jack said in a whisper, which the boys heard: "Ned, lad, it's very hard for us, but we've had our day. Can nothing be done?"

A tremendous triumphant yelling drowned any attempt at speaking on the captain's part, but as it lulled for a few moments, he said, "Nothing. We have done all we could."

"Rifle, Tim," whispered Norman, in horror, "couldn't we get out by the front and take them down to the scrub? The wretches are all on this side."

"Impossible, boys," said the captain, sternly. "Can't you hear? they are piling wood by the other door."

Rifle uttered a sobbing groan, and just then there was a flash of light in the front, and a furious burst of shouts as a tongue of flame shot up past the loophole, accompanied by a crackling roar.

"Your hands, boys," said a deep low voice, that was wonderfully soft and musical just then; "destroy no more life. God bless you all, and forgive me!"

At that moment there was a burst of sobs; then it seemed as if all emotion was at end, and the little group gathered together, feeling that all was over, for already the smoke was forcing its way in by crack and chink, a feeling of difficulty of breathing was rapidly coming on, and the yelling of the blacks was growing strange and unreal, when Rifle sprang up from his knees.

"Yes, yes," he shouted; and again with all his might, "yes!"

For there was a wild shout close at hand.

"Marmi! Marmi!"

The yelling ceased, and all now started to their feet, for there was the beating of hoofs, and in rapid succession shot after shot, with good old English shouts of rage, as a party of mounted men galloped by, tearing on in full pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

"Quick!" roared the captain. "Guns, boys, quick!"

As he spoke he dashed to the front, tore down bar and board, and banged the door back.

A burst of flame rushed in, but the brushwood touching the woodwork was being torn away, and through the flames they saw a fierce black face and two bare arms tossing the burning wood aside.

"Marmi! Marmi! Rifle—'Temus! Coo-ee, coo-ee!"

"Coo-ee!" yelled Rifle; and he tried to cry again, but the word stuck in his throat as he forced his way out over the burning twigs, his father next.

"Sam! Jack!" yelled the captain, "your fork—anything. Boys—water."

He rushed round to the back, closely followed by the black figure, on which the firelight glistened, and began tearing away the burning brushwood. This was being tossed aside by Sam the next moment, and then buckets of water were brought, and none too soon, for the angle of the house was now blazing furiously.

But the water made little impression, and the captain shouted:

"Quicker, boys! More, more!"

"There ain't no more," growled Sam, sourly.

"What!"

"Stand back, all of you," cried the captain in a stern voice. "Jack! the women! get them to a distance. The place must go, and you know—"

"Look out!" shouted Norman, and he ran forward and threw something at the bottom of the blazing wall.

There was one sharp flash, a puff of hot flame, a great cloud of smoke, and then darkness, with the side of house and kitchen covered with dull sparks.

"Hurrah!" rose from the boys; and the captain drew a deep breath, full of thankfulness.

"All the powder from the big flask, father," cried Norman. "There must have been a pound."

At that moment there were shouts, as a dozen mounted men cantered up, cheering with all their might, and the task of extinguishing the still burning wood was soon at an end.

Amidst the congratulations that followed little was said about the blacks.

"Come back?" cried a familiar voice, fiercely. "I only wish they would, eh, Henley?"

"My dear Freeston," was the reply, "I never felt such a strong desire to commit murder before."

"God bless you all, gentlemen," cried the captain in a broken voice. "You have saved our lives."

There was a low murmur here from the rescuers.

"But how—how was it?" asked the captain; "how did you know?"

"Don't you see, father?" cried Rifle, indignantly; "it was poor old Shanter."

"What? You went for help, Tam?"

"Yohi," said the black simply. "Baal budgery stop along. All go bong."

"My good brave fellow," cried the captain, seizing the black's hand in a true English grip.

"Wow! wow! yow!" yelled Shanter, struggling to get free, and then blowing his fingers. "Marmi hurt mine. Burn hands, burn all down front, put out fire."

"Tam, I shall never forgive myself," cried the captain.

"Forgib mine," cried the black eagerly; "forgib plenty soff damper—forgib mine horse fellow to ride?"

"Yes, yes, anything," cried the captain, "and never doubt you again."

"Yohi," cried Shanter. "Where big white Mary? Mine want damper."

He hurried off to where the ladies were seated, trying to recover their calmness after the terrible shock to which they had been exposed, while the captain turned to the leaders of the rescue party.

"And the black came to you for help?"

"Yes," said Dr Freeston. "He came galloping up with a drove of horses, I don't know how many days ago, for it has been like an excited dream ever since. I ran to Henley, and we got ten stout fellows together, and rode on as fast as we could, but I'm afraid that we have punished your horses terribly as well as our own."

"Oh, never mind the horses," cried Henley, "they'll come round. But we came in time, and that's enough for us."

The captain could not speak for a few moments. Then he was himself again, and after all were satisfied that there was not the slightest danger of the fire breaking out again, proper precautions were taken to secure the horses, watch was set, and the rescue party had quite a little banquet in the kitchen, one which Rifle declared to be a supper at breakfast time, for morning was upon them before some of the most weary had lain down to sleep, and slept in peace.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

“Can’t you see?”

For the blacks made no further sign, and when, headed by the captain, the little party boldly took up the trail that morning, it was to find that the enemy had fled in haste, and not until it was felt to be utterly useless to follow farther was the pursuit given up. But that attempt to hunt them down was not without result. Shanter was with the party, riding in high delight with the three boys, and every now and then, in his eager scouting on his “horse fellow”—as he called the rough colt he rode—he was able to show how terribly the myall blacks had been punished, and not to dwell upon horrors brought by the wretched savages upon themselves, the punishment they had received was terrible.

To Shanter was due the discovery of the cattle, somewhat diminished in numbers, but safe, where they had been driven into the bush; and so excited was the black all through that he almost forgot the terrible burns he had received on hands, arms, and chest.

The only sign of discontent he displayed was when it was decided to turn back, the captain having halted at the end of the second day, the provisions growing scarce. It was after due consultation and the decision that the blacks were certainly not likely to rally for some time to come, and the captain had said that he did not want to slaughter the poor wretches, only keep them away.

Then the horses’ heads were turned, and Shanter rode up to the boys in a great state of excitement.

“Baal go back,” he cried; “plenty come along. Mumkull black fellow.”

“No, no,” said Norman. “Black fellow gone along. Come back and take care of white Marys.”

“Yohi,” said Shanter, thoughtfully, and he looked at his burned arms. “Big white Mary gib mine soff rag an’ goosum greasum make well. Soff damper. Come along.”

It was not without some feeling of dread that the party returned toward the station, lest another party of blacks should have visited the place in their absence; and when they reached the open place in the scrub where they had left the cattle grazing, the captain reluctantly said that another expedition must be made to bring them in. But unasked, Shanter in his quality of mounted herdsman, announced that he was going to “top along” and bring the cattle home, so he was left, and the party rode on, the boys leaving Shanter unwillingly.

“Black fellows come again,” said Rifle at parting.

Shanter grinned.

“No come no more. Plenty too much frighten.”

All was well when the party rode over Wallaby Range and up to Dingo Station, and saving the blackened boards and shingles, and the marks of spears, it was surprising how very little the worse the place looked. For Uncle Jack, Sam German, Mr Henley, and the doctor—both the latter having elected to remain behind—had worked hard to restore damaged portions; and once more the place looked wonderfully beautiful and peaceful in the evening light.

Three days later, after being most hospitably entertained, ten of the rescue party took their leave to go back to Port Haven; the other two had hinted that they should like to stay a few days longer, to have a thorough rest; and the captain had warmly begged that they would, while Aunt Georgie laughed to herself and said in her grim way, “I smell a rat.”

For the two who stayed were Mr Henley the sugar-planter, and Dr Freeston.

The captain was in the highest of spirits soon after, for Shanter, looking exceedingly important on his rough colt with his spear across his knees, rode slowly up, driving the whole of the sheep, pigs, and cattle, which made for their old quarters as quietly as if they had never been away, even another speared cow being among them, very little the worse for her wound in spite of the flies.

“Hah!” cried the captain, rubbing his hands as the party all sat at the evening meal; “and now, please Heaven, we can begin again and forget the past.”

A dead silence fell, and as the captain looked round he saw that the eyes of wife, daughter, and niece were fixed upon him sadly, and that Aunt Georgie’s countenance was very grim.

“Shall I speak, Henley?” said the doctor.

“If you please,” said that gentleman, with a glance at Ida.

“Then I will.—Captain Bedford,” said the doctor, “you will forgive me, sir, I know; but I must beg of you for the sake of the ladies to give up this out-of-the-way place, and come close, up to the settlement. We feel that we cannot leave

you out here unprotected. Think of what would have happened if we had not arrived in the nick of time."

There was a terrible silence, and Sam German, who was having his meal in the kitchen with Shanter, came to the door, every word having been audible.

At last the captain spoke in a low hoarse voice.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have thought of it all, till drawn both ways as I am, my brain seems almost on fire. I love my people as an Englishman should, and all my work has been for their sake. I would do anything to save them pain, but I ask you how can I give up this lovely home I have won from the wilderness—a place where Heaven smiles on a man's labour, and I can see, with plenty of hard work, a happy contented life and prosperity for us all. I will not appeal to my dear wife and the girls, because I know they will say, 'Do what you think best,' but I do appeal to you, aunt. It is not fair to expose you to such risks. Shall I give up? Shall I, after putting my hand to the plough, want faith and go back?"

"I *do* wish you wouldn't ask me such things, Ned, my boy," cried Aunt Georgie, taking out her handkerchief to wipe her glasses. "Give up, now we are all so settled and comfortable and happy, all for the sake of a pack of savages? I'll learn how to shoot first. I say, no! boy, no!"

"Brother Jack," continued the captain, "I have dragged you from your club fireside, from your London friends, and made you little better than a labourer here, tell me what shall I do?"

"Your duty, Ned," said Uncle Jack, warmly. "The nip has been terrible, but I was never better nor happier in my life.—Don't look at me reproachfully, Marian, dear; don't turn away, girls.—Ned, lad, when I took the other handle of the plough, I said I wouldn't look back, and I will not. If you ask me, I say fight it out as an Englishman should, and as Englishmen have for hundreds of years."

"Hurrah!" shouted the three boys together. "Three cheers for Uncle Jack!"

"Then I need not ask you, boys?"

"No, father," said Norman. "You've taught us how to fight, and we shall be better able to meet the niggers if they come again."

"Hear, hear!" cried Rifle and Tim, emphatically; and they went behind Mrs Bedford's chair, as if to show how they would defend her.

"One more," said the captain. "Sam German, you have shared our sufferings; and it is due to you, our faithful servant of many years, that I should not leave you out. What do you say?"

"What do I say, sir?" cried the gardener, fiercely; as he strode forward and brought his fist down heavily on the table. "I say, go and leave that there garden, with all them young trees and plants just a-beginning to laugh at us and say what they're a-going to do? No, sir; no: not for all the black fellows in the world."

Sam scowled round at everybody, and went back to the kitchen door.

"That settles it, gentlemen," said the captain, quietly. "After a life of disappointment and loss, I seem to have come into the promised land. I am here, and with God's help, and the help of my brother, my servant, and my three brave boys, I'll stay."

"And Shanter, father," shouted Rifle.

"Yes, and the trusty black whom I so unjustly doubted."

"Marmi want Shanter?" said the black, thrusting in his head.

"Yes: that settles it, captain," said the doctor. "I don't wonder at it. I wouldn't give up in your place.—Will you speak now, Henley?"

"No, no, go on. I can't talk," said the young planter, colouring.

"Very well then, I will.—Then the fact is, Captain Bedford, my friend Henley here is not satisfied with his land at Port Haven. He can sell it advantageously to a new settler, and he has seen that tract next to yours, one which, I agree with him, looks as if it was made for sugar. Miss Henley, his sister, is on her way out to keep house for him, so he will get one up as quickly as possible."

"Yes," said Henley, "that's right. Now tell 'em about yourself."

"Of course," said the doctor, quietly. "My sister is coming out with Miss Henley, and I have elected to take up the tract yonder across the river, adjoining yours."

"You?" said the captain. "Where will you get your patients?"

"Oh, I am sure to have some. Here's one already," he said, laughingly. "I mean to dress that poor fellow's burns."

"Baal—no—baal," shouted Shanter, fiercely. "Big white Mary—soff rag, plenty goosum greasum."

"Be quiet, Shanter," said Aunt Georgie, grimly.

"But," cried the captain. "Oh, it is absurd. You are throwing away your chances."

"Not at all, sir. I don't see why a doctor should not have a farm."

"But really—" began the captain.

"One moment, sir," cried the doctor, interrupting; "will you come and settle near your fellow-creatures?"

"You have heard my arguments, gentlemen. It is my duty to stay."

"Yes," said the doctor; "and in reply, Henley here and I say that it is our duty as Englishmen to come and help to protect you and yours."

Uncle Jack and the captain rose together, and took the young men's hands, and then the party left the table to stroll out into the garden, upon as lovely an evening as ever shone upon this beautiful earth.

Every one looked happy, even Shanter, who was fast asleep; and as Norman, who was alone with his brother and cousin, looked round at the scene of peace and beauty, he could not help thinking that his father had done well. But his thoughts were rudely interrupted by Rifle, who threw himself on the grass, kicked up his heels, burst into a smothered fit of laughter, and then sat up to wipe his eyes.

"Oh, what a game!" he cried.

"What's a game?" said Tim. "What's the matter, Man? Is there some black on my nose?"

"No!" cried Rifle. "Why, you blind old mole, can't you see?"

"See what?"

"Why Mr Henley and the doctor want to come and live out here. Look."

"Well, what at? They're talking to Ida and Hetty. That's all."

"That's all!" cried Rifle, scornfully. "But it isn't all. They want to marry 'em, and then we shall all live happily afterwards. That's it. Isn't it, Man?"

Norman nodded.

"Yes, I think he's right, Tim. I am glad, for I think they are two good fellows as any I ever met."

Rifle was right. For in the future all came about as he had said, saving that all was not happiness.

Still Dingo Station became one of the most prosperous in our great north-east colony, and as fresh tracts of the rich land were taken up, the troubles with the blacks grew fewer and died away.

One word in conclusion. Sam German declared pettishly one day that there never was such a hopeless savage as Shanter.

"You couldn't teach him nought, and a lazier beggar never lived."

It was unjust: Shanter could learn in his way, and he worked hard for Marmi (the captain), harder still for "Big white Mary," to whom he was a most faithful servant, but only in work that took his fancy.

"Oh," said Norman, one day, "I am glad father wouldn't give up."

"Give up?" cried Rifle, scornfully. "Why, he would have been mad!"

And Tim cried, "Why, we shouldn't have been called 'The Dingo Boys' if he had."

"Who calls us 'Dingo Boys?'" cried Rifle, sharply.

"The people at Port Haven and all about when they speak of Wallaby Range," replied Tim.

"Like their impudence," said Rifle importantly.

"Don't be so cocky, Rifle," said Norman quietly. "Let them if they like. What's in a name?"

The End.

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