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Title: Colonial Born: A Tale of the Queensland bush

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Release date: June 10, 2008 [eBook #25750]

Most recently updated: January 3, 2021

Language: English

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COLONIAL BORN



THE HORSE AND ITS RIDER DASHED OUT OF THE SMOKE.

COLONIAL BORN

A TALE OF THE QUEENSLAND BUSH

BY

G. FIRTH SCOTT

AUTHOR OF

**"THE TRACK OF MIDNIGHT," "THE ROMANCE OF AUSTRALIAN
EXPLORING,"
"AT FRIENDLY POINT," ETC.**

WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY PERCY F. S. SPENCE

LONDON

**SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON AND COMPANY
*LIMITED***

TO

THE ORIGINAL AILLEN

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COLONIAL BORN

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I.

THE ROMANCE OF TAYLOR'S FLAT.

Where the road to the west from Birralong dips down to the valley of Boulder Creek, a selection stretches out on the left-hand side, well cleared and fenced, and with the selector's homestead standing back a couple of hundred yards from the main road. Slip-rails in the fence, serving as a gateway, open on to the half-worn track which runs from the roadway to the house; and on either side of it there are cultivation paddocks, the one verdant with lucerne, and the other picturesque with the grey sheen of iron-bark pumpkins showing from among the broad leaves of the still growing vines.

The house, unpretentious and substantial, has long since taken to itself the nondescript hue to which the Australian sun soon reduces the unpainted surface of hard-wood slabs and shingles. A square, heavy chimney, smoke-stained and clumsy at the base, rises above the sloping roof at one end, and a roughly fashioned verandah runs along the front of the house, the opposite end to where the chimney is situated being occupied by an odd collection of water-tanks. By the side of the door, and under shelter of the verandah, a saddle is standing on end, while a bridle hangs from a peg in the wall overhead. A heap of two-foot logs is near the water-tanks, with a short-handled axe stuck in an upturned stump which does duty for a chopping-block.

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Behind the house a few gum trees in the paddocks lead the eye to where the untouched bush grows thick and sombre in the strength of crowded timber, the bleached trunks of the dead ring-barked trees, where the sunlight plays upon them, gleaming white against the dark purple-blue of the distant foliage. Towards the valley of the creek the land slopes away, and over the course of the stream a faint, blue, vapoury haze hangs in the hot air, beyond which the high table-land on the other side rises like a ridge, the deep tones of its shadows so strongly impressed against the clear transparency of the sky that it seems to be wonderfully near, until the stretch of vapoury haze below corrects the trick of vision. The roadway, as it passes the boundary fence of the selection, gleams yellow under the strong glare of the sun, until, winding behind the clustering trees and bushes, it disappears.

It is a scene fair to look upon, either to one in search of change and contrast, or to one whose perceptions are softened by the glamour and charm of Australian association; but especially to the man whose energy and toil made the bush yield at that one point to the needs of civilization. He, stolid, hard-working bushman, with no ambition for anything beyond what he termed "bush graft and square meals," leaned over his slip-rails and looked up and down the road, wondering what else a man wants for contentment beyond work, food, and sleep.

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For years he had been a lonely man, living by himself in solitary bachelor simplicity, but withal contentedly, peacefully, happily. Fifteen miles down the creek there was a cattle station, but none of the station hands ever came round by the selection; and Taylor was never disposed, for the sake of a brief yarn, to ride the score of miles he would have to cover to get to the men's huts. A dozen miles to the east, over a stretch of timbered table-land, the nucleus of a bush township was struggling to assert itself, and thrive, in spite of the weighty handicap of the name of Birralong, and the fact that, after five years' existence, it had not succeeded in passing the preliminary stage of bush township life—the stage when a "pub," a store, a constable's cottage, and a post-office make up the official directory, the constable combining with his own the offices of postmaster, and another individual representing both the branches of distributing industry, or, in bush parlance, "running both the shanty and the store." There were other residents in the township besides these two; men who came along the road from the east to the west, some with business and some in search for it; some with a record they wanted to leave behind, and some with an empty past they hoped to turn into a well-filled future in the mighty plains of the rolling lands of the virgin western country; men of all qualities and shades of vice and virtue; stockmen, mailmen, and drovers; stray gold-seekers, fossickers, or prospectors; swagsmen who were *bonâ-fide* bushmen, and swagsmen who, as sundowners, only arrived at a station or a township too late in the day to be given work, but not too late to participate in the open hospitality of the bush; shepherds, selectors seeking land, and timber-getters moving on to the scrubs of the table-land beyond the creek; but men, always men, who brought the population of the township up to tens, but never yet to hundreds, and who in a few days had gone further west—mostly—and whose places were taken by others.

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But to that township in the early days of its existence Taylor rarely went, for even amidst a floating population there are floating jests, and the man at whose expense they are made does not learn to appreciate them any the more by reason of new arrivals learning them and keeping them alive. To the men of the township his selection, which he had proudly named Taylor's Flat, was known as Taylor's Folly; and the owner of it, dull-witted and slow of speech, was loth to face the railery his presence always called forth.

Away to the south, forty miles from the Flat, was another township, whither Taylor, when he first took up the land, was compelled to go to pay the instalments of the purchase money to the local Government official. On the occasion of the visit when the last instalment was paid, Taylor saw at the hotel, where he stayed the night, a fresh-faced immigrant girl. She had not been long enough in the country to lose the fresh, ruddy hue from her plump cheeks, but long enough to be wearied by the heat and the worry, of which, experience taught, the ideal life she had dreamed about was really composed.

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Perhaps it was the colour on her cheeks; perhaps it was the winsome look which came into her eyes as he told her, in an unprecedented burst of confidence, of the quiet contentment of his life on the selection; but until he returned to it, in all the natural pride of actual proprietorship, Taylor was unaware that anything had occurred to interfere with the even tenor of his existence. As it was, everything seemed to have suddenly lost its charm; the steadily increasing bulk of the largest pumpkins no longer brought enthusiasm to him; the satisfaction of sitting, when the sun was nearing the horizon, with his pipe between his lips, and his legs stretched out in front of him, in well-earned rest, under the shelter of his verandah, was no longer manifest; his own society and the companionship of his stock brought no comfort into his life, now strangely restless and uneasy. It was not in the nature of the man to reason it out, but dimly into his mind there came a connection between the state of affairs and his visit to the southern township. There had been a light spring-cart in the place which had attracted his fancy and roused as much covetousness as his nature was capable of feeling, and to that he attributed his dissatisfaction, persuading himself

that the possession of that spring-cart would bring back all the old lethargic content of his life.

He returned to the township, and peace came to his mind as he sat at the long, bare table which occupied the centre of the living-room of the hotel, munching the beef and damper the red-cheeked girl brought to him. Vaguely the idea came to him that the presence of such a girl at his homestead would be a decided improvement to the loneliness he had for the first time experienced on his return from his former visit to the township, and with characteristic brevity he made the suggestion to her that if she were in want of another place, he was prepared to offer her one at his selection, where she would have no mistress but herself, and none to attend to but him. She jumped at the chance of peace and quiet in the bush, and closed upon his offer there and then.

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Two days later, Taylor, peaceful and contented, was returning to the selection, driving the spring-cart which had roused his fancy, and in which there also travelled his wife—the red-cheeked girl—and her few belongings.

For a time everything went well, and both yielded to the conviction that they had obtained all that was necessary to insure their earthly happiness. Then the life began to pall.

She was the first to feel it. Brisk and energetic, she was through with her house-work before the day was many hours old, and the time hung terribly on her hands, for the peace and calm she had so longed for at the bush hotel began to grow very monotonous and trying.

Taylor had enough to keep him going all the day out on his land, but she had nothing when the work round the house was done. He, moreover, had the chance of an occasional chat with a passing traveller along the road; but she never saw a woman's face during her first year at the Flat, and however much a woman may scorn the companionship of her sisters when she is surrounded by them, she finds her days unduly long when she is cut off from their society altogether.

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As the months passed on into the year, and his wife commenced to develop undreamed-of resources of temper, Taylor began to wonder to himself whether he had not been "got at over the marriage business."

At the end of the first year, on his visit to the southern township for his stores, he took his wife with him in the spring-cart, and they spent a few days at the hotel where she had previously been employed. It had changed hands in the mean time, and the newcomer had with him a family of children. During the stay, and on the return journey, there was no sign of the acrid temper his wife had displayed at the selection; but as soon as they were home again it broke out. When he was in the house she railed at him, and if he stayed away among his fences and his stock, she grumbled, as soon as he returned, at his absence.

He left the house before a furious outburst which he was quite unable to understand, and, passing down the track to the slip-rails, leaned upon them in the hopes of solving the riddle. An old sundowner, chancing to pass along the road, stopped in the hopes of a yarn. But Taylor was in no mood to talk on any other subject than that which was worrying him. He accordingly poured out his tale to the old man, who, having heard it, suggested that perhaps the cause of it all lay in the worry and trouble of the children, or, as he termed them, kids. "There ain't no kids," Taylor retorted in irritation; and the old man, looking at him quizzically, observed, "Oh, there ain't no kids, ain't there? Well, then, there y'are."

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This new factor in the problem worried Taylor still more when the old man, with an uncomplimentary allusion to the sagacity of the owner of Taylor's Folly, continued his way. But time was kind, and he grew more learned when premonitory symptoms of the approach of a light from another world were manifest, and peace lay on his wife's tongue and sweetness ruled her temper.

Then there came the light which made the mother glad and the father bewildered, for, as he explained to the neighbour who came from forty miles away to lend her aid, he knew "nothin' about the rearin' of that sort of stock."

He left his fences alone that day and spent the hours hanging round the house, taking periodical trips into the room where the mother and the child lay, and retiring with a serious shake of the head and a muttered explanation of his want of knowledge on the subject. Then he was startled by being suddenly called into the room, where he stood, strangely abashed and helpless, while the light flickered and went back to its own world. The mother wailed and sorrowed, and Taylor moped and wondered, until, between them, the neighbour was severely taxed to keep things going.

The next night he wandered away from the house to the little railed-in mound in a corner of the paddock where he had put all that remained of the stock he did not know how to rear. He stood with his arms resting on the slim fence and his eyes looking away into the evening's mists, trying, with the aid of a pipe, to drive away the disquietening effect the expression in his wife's eyes had upon him, and to understand something of the emptiness that had somehow come into his life since he had lain, as tenderly as his rough hands could, the fragile little form in its simple grave.

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As he stood, as nearly dreaming as it was possible for him to be, he became conscious of the figure of a man running hastily towards him from the direction of the roadway.

"Mate! For the love of God! Is there any women about?" the man exclaimed as he came near.

"Women?" Taylor repeated vacantly.

"Yes, women," the man replied. "My missus's been took bad down there by the dray, and if

there ain't—"

"Here! Come on!" Taylor shouted, his own recent experience sharpening his wits. "Follow me, quick."

A few seconds later and the neighbour was speeding away through the bush, and Taylor was sitting by his wife's side, ill at ease and silent as he tried to decide whether it would do any harm to any one if he re-lit the pipe he had allowed to go out in the excitement of the moment. His wife, catching something of the message so hastily delivered, lay still with wide-open eyes and straining ears.

"Bill! I 'eard it cry, I 'eard it cry," she exclaimed suddenly. "There 'tis again, only louder," she added, as she essayed to sit up in bed just as the neighbour hurried into the room.

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"He said she'd gone, poor thing, before I got there; but we must try to save this," she said, as she placed in the lonely mother's arms the tiny morsel of humanity.

"I will, I will," the other cried as she clutched at the babe, clasping it to her breast as she rocked to and fro and crooned over it.

Taylor looked at her vaguely for a moment, and into his mind there stole a new and strange impulse. The emptiness that had been manifest to him as he stood leaning over the slim rail across the paddock seemed to fill up until his throat grew tight and his eyes moist, and for the first time in his life he experienced a satisfaction that had to do with neither eating nor working. He put one hand for a moment on his wife's shoulder, and with the extended forefinger of the other touched the small chubby hand that lay against her breast. Withdrawing it, he stood for a moment undecided whether to repeat the experiment, when the neighbour bustled up, and Taylor shuffled out of the room and into the cool air of the night. There he remembered the man who was in a worse plight than he had been, and he went to seek him.

He found him standing by a horse on the roadside, just beyond the boundary fence.

"You had better camp at the house for to-night," Taylor began, as he leaned over the fence and strained his eyes in an endeavour to make out where the dray the man had mentioned was standing.

"No; thanks all the same," the man answered. "I've fixed up everything, and can shove along."

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"But there's the little 'un; and what about the—the other?" Taylor asked, as he put his foot on one rail and made as though to climb over the fence.

The man came up to him from the shadow.

"I've fixed all that up. She'll come along with me, while I leave the little 'un here, if you don't mind, till I've time to come back for it. This is Taylor's Flat, ain't it?"

"Yes," Taylor answered. "And I am Taylor."

"I guessed as much," the other replied; "they told me back along the road I should reach here about dark."

"Which way did you come?" Taylor asked.

"West," the other answered briefly.

"Far back?" Taylor inquired, somewhat puzzled at the arrival of a woman from the lonely wilderness of the west.

"Fairish," the other replied evasively; and Taylor grew suspicious.

"What were you doing, coming from the west with a woman like that in the dray?" he asked. "Seems to me it's a bit queer."

"Does it, mate? Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help that. I've enough to do without going into private matters. Do you mind keeping the youngster for a time? He wouldn't have much of a chance if I take him with me."

Taylor's mind, never very active, reverted to the scene he had witnessed before he left his wife and the orphan babe.

"You couldn't take him if you wanted to," he exclaimed. "My missus only lost hers yesterday, and she'd never give this one up now."

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"Then you've had a bit of bad luck yourself?" the stranger said quickly. "Well, you know what it is, just as I do, and you'll know why I want to shove along. Good-bye, mate. You've done a real kind act to me. And see, if I don't get back in time, call him Tony, will you?"

"Tony?" Taylor repeated.

"That's it; after me, that is. But I hope I'm back. Anyhow, so long," the man said, as he turned away and proceeded to mount his horse.

"Here, hold on," Taylor exclaimed.

But the man did not seem to hear, and Taylor was halfway over the fence when the sound of a woman's voice, calling him, came from the direction of the hut. He paused and listened. It was the neighbour calling him.

The man had started his horse, and in a few minutes would be well on his way. He could soon overtake the man now and learn something more definite as to the parentage of the child he was practically adopting. He felt that more was due to him than the scant information that had been

supplied; that the man who had called for his help, and received it, ought to be more explicit than he had been, and ought to show more confidence in him than to go off, as soon as the child was disposed of, in silence and mystery.

"Here, hold on," he repeated, as he climbed over the fence; but as he reached the ground on the other side he heard the cry repeated from the direction of the hut, and he paused, irresolute.

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There might be a repetition of the scene that had occurred when he was called the previous day; the life of this second little creature might be going out like that of the other, and Taylor felt uneasy when he remembered the anguish in the mother's eyes and the wailing sorrow of her voice. If he ran after the man he would escape all that, for it would be over by the time that he returned; but even as the thought passed through his brain he resented it. Something of the feeling he had experienced when he saw his wife clutch at the child came to him, and without further heed for the stranger, he scrambled back over his fence and ran to the hut.

At the door he met the neighbour.

"She wouldn't rest till I called you," she said, jerking her head towards the interior. "Where's the other chap?"

"He's gone on," Taylor answered, as he went into the room and over to the bed where his wife lay.

She looked at him with a soft smile on her face.

"Look at him, Bill," she said, as she lifted the rough coverlet sufficiently to show where the little head was nestled on her arm. "He's come back to me from the other world."

For days Taylor waited, expecting that the man would come back or send word; but as nothing was seen or heard of him, he took counsel with his wife and the neighbour.

"Seems queer, that chap not doing anything," he said one evening, shortly before the neighbour left for her own home. "How will we name him?" he went on, glancing over at the sleeping infant his wife was holding in her arms. "He ain't ours really."

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"He is ours. He is mine, *mine*," his wife answered quickly, as she held the baby tighter to her, and looked at her husband with a savage jealousy in her eyes.

"But there was that chap——" Taylor began.

"I don't care. I won't give him up. He's mine," she interrupted. "No one's going to have him; no one—never," she continued, as she rose to her feet and walked up and down the room, with her face bent over the child she held so closely to her.

The neighbour caught Taylor's eye and signed him to be quiet.

"Of course no one will have him but you," she said quietly. "I'd like to see who'd take him when Taylor's here. Why, he hasn't been round his boundary fences even, he's so took up with him."

Mrs. Taylor stopped in her walk, and turned to her husband with the jealous gleam still flickering in her eyes.

"Would you give him up, Bill?" she asked.

"Not me," he answered.

"Then we'll talk about his name," she interposed, before he could say more. "He's going to be called Richard Taylor."

"But that chap asked me—he said, 'Call him Tony, after me.' That's what he said, and I said——"

"I don't care what you said or what he said," she interrupted. "He should have stayed and looked after him, and not sneaked off in the dark, if he wanted to name him. Mrs. Garry says so too; don't you, Mrs. Garry?"

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Mrs. Garry, directly appealed to, had to sustain the opinion she had already expressed in private.

"But I said I would," Taylor asserted. "I said I'd call him Tony."

"Well, call him Tony. Name him as Richard Taylor, and call him Tony for short," Mrs. Garry suggested.

"Tony!" Mrs. Taylor exclaimed scornfully. "What sort of a name do you call that? Why, it's only fit for a black-fellow."

"It'll do for short," Taylor said. "We'll name him Richard Taylor, and call him Tony for short."

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CHAPTER II.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

Marmot's store stood at the end of Birralong, at the top of the township road, which was, in reality, the main road, along the sides of which Birralong had sprung up. It stood on the summit of a rise which sloped upwards through the town, so that it occupied a commanding position such as became the local post-office—for Marmot had the distinction of being postmaster as well as monopolist storekeeper of the district. One advantage of the site was that from the verandah which graced the front of the building a view could be obtained from end to end of the township to the east, and away along the road to the west—the road which went, *viâ* Taylor's Flat, over Boulder Creek, away to the great expanse of the West.

The store was a long, weather-board structure of four walls, and a sloping roof of corrugated iron, unadorned save by an array of cylindrical tanks—also of corrugated iron—at each corner, for being on the top of a rise, there was no chance of possessing a well or a waterhole; and upon the contents of the tanks, saved from the rain, the residents depended for their water supply. The interior of the structure was as simple as the exterior. A passage-way ran down the centre between two counters, which extended the entire length of the building, and upon which Marmot displayed some of the varied assortment of articles he stocked for the benefit of his customers. Their range being somewhat wide, the counters could not hold all the samples, and upon shelves running along the walls behind the counters, upon the floor on the passage in front of the counters, round the doorway and out on the verandah, as well as from the cross-beams of the roof, other articles were displayed. A man might not be able to buy anything from a tin-tack to a sheet anchor on demand, but Marmot was quite prepared to furnish him with tin ware and lamp-glasses, saddlery or axe heads and handles, wool bales, sacking, pipes and tobacco, wax vestas and dress materials, flannel, hardware and soft goods, canned provisions and patent medicines, cotton for tents, boots, hats, flour, galvanized iron for roofs and water-tanks, barbed wire, kerosene oil, "reach-me-downers" or ready-made tweed suits, moleskins and Crimean shirts, sheath knives, cartridges and firearms, fire and life assurance proposals, postal notes, postage stamps, and money orders, as well as a few other minor details which might from time to time be called for. Behind the main building was another, which served as a store for the produce obtained either by purchase or in payment for outstanding "tallies" of goods supplied, a small annexe to the main building giving sleeping accommodation to Marmot, who, being a man of frugal habits and simple mind, "ran the store on his own," as they said in Birralong. His customers, as a general rule, were neither too proud nor too busy to mind lending him a hand at making up their orders, for when a man went to the store at Birralong, he went in a spring-cart or dray, if he were going to buy, and as often as not accompanied by any female attachment he might have about his selection, so that he was never pushed for time.

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Facing the store, and along the side of the road, a row of posts fitted with ring-bolts stood for the convenience of customers who came in riding or driving, and chose to hitch up their horses. A verandah, ten feet wide, and with a roof resting on square, hard-wood posts, ornamented the front of the building, and formed, to the majority of the Birralong folk, its chief attraction—for it was here that men gathered to smoke a friendly pipe with one another, and discuss such items of news as are likely to be met with in a bush township. As a general rule, these related to the domestic and private affairs of neighbours, and it was said that if any one had a doubt as to the course which events and circumstances were taking with him, he had only to ascertain what was said on Marmot's verandah; every one's business was known better there than to the persons whom it mostly concerned.

The number of houses which made up the township was not large. A hundred yards back from the roadway the local saw-mill made the air melodious, all the working hours of the day, with the ringing song and whirr of the buzz-saws—a pleasant sound to listen to from the cool shade of a verandah on the hot, drowsy days of summer, when the clear, dry air was redolent with the scent from the neighbouring gums. Farther down the township stood the local smithy, where, bush horses rarely being shod, the work of the smith was combined with that of wheelwright and the making of galvanized iron water-tanks. An occasional job of repairing some farming implement necessitated the blowing up of the forge and the swinging of the anvil hammers, the sounds of which, mingling with those of the buzz-saws, would have led a chance visitor to regard Birralong as a thriving, busy centre.

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Beyond the smithy were the school-house and the local constable's cottage, a few more cottages occupied by the schoolmaster, the smith, the saw-miller, and some unofficial residents, and, at the end of all, the Carrier's Rest, the township hotel. The roadway through the town was very dusty, and the dust, in the long, hot, dry seasons, lay upon the iron roofs of the houses—tin, it was locally called—and clung to the verandah posts and walls. A passing traveller on horseback, or in a dray, raised clouds of it, which drifted over everything and covered everything with a light film, but yet did not drive the inhabitants into the Carrier's Rest, for the Birralong people were sober, as they usually are in bush townships—sober, that is, as things are understood in the Southern Land of sunshine and freedom. Occasionally a man would come down the road who perhaps had not seen so much civilization for years before; who had, perhaps for years, been away in some outlying portion of the outlying West, boundary riding round a paddock or stock riding on a station; or, perchance, fossicking up and down the gullies of broken country under the mistaken idea that the specks and grains of gold he found, and which just kept him in "tucker," would lead him some day to a mighty reef which would make him a millionaire in a night; but who, in all those years, had drunk nothing but tea or water, and eaten nothing but beef

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and damper, living a glorious, free, untrammelled life, with the scent of the eucalypt ever in his nostrils and the pure, clear air of the bush ever in his lungs. And such a man, entering upon a new world, as it were, in his return to civilization, would greet that civilization—with a nip.

In an hour he would be "on a bender;" in three he would be "on the bust;" in six the "town would be red;" and soon afterwards the man himself would be stretched out across the door of the Carrier's Rest, senseless, helpless, "blind." Any one entering or leaving the bar stepped over him as he lay, so as not to disturb him while he was "sleeping it off" in the cool; and possibly some looked down on him with pity, and some with contempt, while yet others were moved to envy and exultant admiration. But generally the township went to Marmot's rather than to the Rest—generally.

There were occasions—such as when a Queensland horse won the Melbourne Cup, or when a drought broke up, or produce values took a leap, or the resident constable was transferred—when the township, speaking figuratively, migrated from one end of the town to the other, and Marmot's was deserted for the good of the Rest. There was a breezy freshness in the neighbourhood then, a wave of primitive goodfellowship, as it were, with a period of hazy indistinctness separating it from the time when the rising sun brought with it a succeeding wave of virtuous antagonism and a distressing dryness of the throat.

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But such occasions were rare—too rare, some thought—and, as a general thing, Birralong had a reputation for sobriety, and maintained it with dignity.

A few days before, there had arrived at the Carrier's Rest a party of three men, who were on their way to the West, where, according to the story they told, they had found a wonderfully rich gold-field. Many a story of that kind had already been told in Birralong, both at the Rest and on Marmot's verandah, and the Birralong folk were sceptical, especially those who on former occasions had been induced, on the strength of the story, to furnish stores on credit, or take a contributing interest in the newly found claim; in either case receiving in return only the knowledge that, even in matters connected with gold-mining, humanity is sometimes frail. They had not been averse, however, to pay visits to the Rest and give their support to the proposals the strangers had made, with the characteristic open-handedness of miners, to toast success and thumping returns from the new field. But beyond that their enthusiasm had not gone, except in one instance, and he had thrown in his lot with the three and had journeyed away in their company.

It was that which was puzzling Birralong. The last man in the district whom they expected to be carried away by the glib tales of nuggets by the bucketful and gravel running two ounces to the dish, was Tony Taylor; still less did they expect that he would leave his selection home, to say nothing of the charms of Birralong and Marmot's verandah, for a wild-cat yarn of travelling fossickers. He was one of the brightest lights in the district, handsome, dare-devil Tony. There was not a horse he could not ride, and his rivals had brought some pretty tough buckjumpers to test him at different times—"fair holy terrors," they called them—but Tony sat them, even when girth and crupper had carried away. He was the only individual who had been able to solve the mysteries of the form of the balls and the bumps in the cushions of the alleged billiard table which the owner of the Rest had bought many years before in a coastal town, and which had not been improved by a five-weeks' journey inland on a bullock-dray. He had always held the proud position of "ringer" in the shearing-sheds of the stations round Birralong, beating all comers by never having a tally of less than a hundred sheep shorn a day, and that with the old-fashioned hand-shears. The winner of the local races had always been ridden by Tony, and he had been known to lose the whole of his shearing earnings at euchre and win them back, together with all the money on the board, by wagering his next year's cheque. The feminine portion of the population for miles round had a bright eye for Tony whenever he appeared; but only one did he seriously fancy, according to the authority of Marmot's verandah, and she, by the same token, fully reciprocated his feelings, and was, moreover, the admitted beauty of the district. And yet Tony, not apparently on the spur of the moment, but calmly and with his eyes open, had thrown in his lot with the three fossickers, and had gone off without scarcely a word to any one. Why, Birralong collectively did not know, for there had not been time as yet for an assemblage to take place on the verandah of Marmot's store. The riddle would not long remain unsolved when it had.

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The hour of the evening meal had come and gone; the buzz-saws had ceased to whirr and sing and the anvil hammers to ring through the still, hot air. The sun had left his perch overhead, and was sinking slowly towards the horizon, making the trees and houses throw long streaks and patches of shadow of soft purple-blue, which is so peculiarly Australian, across the yellow dust of the roadway. The mosquitoes were beginning to leave their shelters, and occasionally, within the shadows, the ping-zing of their high-toned note could be heard as one drifted by the ear. The wood-fire smoke rose straight and steadily from kitchen chimneys, as the sticks, set alight to boil the billy for tea, gradually went out, and the aromatic scent of it floated through the air, seeming to fit in with the chromatic whistle of the magpies from the gum trees in the paddocks. But the men who were gathered round Marmot's verandah noted nothing of these things. Marmot himself, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, sat on a box of Barret twist tobacco in the doorway, where he had the benefit of any draught there might be, and the majority of the adult male members of the population were sitting or standing around.

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"It gets me. That's what it does, gets me clean," Marmot exclaimed. "Why Tony—well, there, he's the one lad I'd have taken into the store here to lend me a hand."

The immensity of the admiration and confidence implied by the remark for the moment silenced every one. No higher compliment could be paid by Marmot.

"It's a darned rum go," Smart, the saw-miller, observed solemnly. "He, who came as a kid and wanted to see if my band-saw 'ud take his head off in one swish—he, Tony Taylor, who knew enough at ten to spot the winner of the Cup, to go and get landed by a fossicker's yarn. There's a darned rum go."

"Yes; and where's the cause of it all?" Marmot asked. "There must be a cause. We'd all be black-fellows and earth-worms if it wasn't for a cause. There must be a cause, if we could only find it. Look for the cause, says I, in a case that's a bit mixed. But there ain't no cause in this, as I can see."

"Ain't there?" a man leaning against the end post of the verandah exclaimed. "Ain't there no cause? That's just your blooming error."

"Well, I'm no bush lawyer," Marmot replied, with a glance round the gathering. "It's more nor I can reason out."

"Look here," exclaimed the man, a selector who lived a couple of miles out from the township in solitary grandeur, and had an opinion, which might be right or wrong but was always strong, on every conceivable subject under the sun, especially the opposite sex, whom he cordially detested; "I'll tell you what's up. You believe me, a woman's to blame in this."

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"Good iron, Slaughter," some one replied. "They're always the trouble."

"Yes, they are," Slaughter went on. "Anywhere they're the trouble, but in the bush——well, they're real daisies in the bush; that's what they are, real daisies."

"But you don't mean——hullo, here's Cullen coming. He'll know what's in the wind," Marmot exclaimed, as he caught sight of the blacksmith coming along the road.

As Cullen reached them a cloud of dust appeared on the road to the west, and he had stepped on to the verandah and exchanged greetings, and had been asked to explain the problem which was occupying their minds, before the cause of the dust-cloud went by at a hand-gallop in the form of two saddle-horses, one ridden by a long-legged, wiry, sandy-haired youth, and the other by a girl. She turned in her saddle as she rode past, and waved her hand to those on the verandah, and even on Slaughter's face there came the suspicion of a smile.

"That's it," Cullen said, as he jerked his head in the direction of the two riders.

"Wha—at?" every one but Slaughter exclaimed; and he, with the smile growing grim on his face, remarked—

"I told yer."

"It's so," Cullen went on. "Sam Nuggan was in to-day with a chipped cog off his reaper, and he says, 'Cullen,' he says, 'I've got it.' 'No!' says I. 'Yes!' says he. 'It's all along of that yaller head and young Dickson of Barellan.'"

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The smith paused to push the glowing tobacco farther into the bowl of his pipe; and his audience, listening intently, almost started at the resounding smack Slaughter gave his thigh as he exclaimed—

"I told yer! Bli'me! I told yer."

"Go on, Bill," Marmot said impatiently. "Never mind the pipe. Let's have the yarn."

"You've got it," Cullen answered, as he squatted down with his back against one of the verandah posts, and puffed with almost aggressive deliberation at his strong, coarse tobacco.

"Go on, go on," Marmot repeated. "That ain't no cause, the yaller head and that cornstalk from the station. Tony ain't the lad to be put off with that. Don't you believe it. There's more about the yarn. Give us what Nuggan said."

The remainder of the expectant townsmen repeated the request loudly, volubly, and picturesquely.

"Well, it's like this," Cullen at last went on. "Nuggan told me as man to man, and now I tell you as man to man, too, and that's square."

"Oh, that's square," Marmot chimed in; and the others repeated the formula.

"Well, you see, there's something that shouldn't be but is somehow about Tony which no one quite knows what it is though they knows it shouldn't be, and that's what Nuggan said," Cullen observed fluently but obscurely.

"But what's that?" Marmot began as Cullen paused.

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He held up his hand, with his pipe between the finger and thumb, impressively, and Marmot stopped.

"You mean to say you ain't noticed it?" he asked, pointing his pipe-stem at Marmot. "Nor you? Nor you? Nor you?" he continued slowly, as he swept his arm round and covered each man in turn.

Slaughter was the only man who answered. He said—

"Yes; her yaller head's made all of you fools. I told 'em it was a woman."

"It ain't that," Cullen went on seriously. "It's the likeness, the likeness that ain't there. You understand?"

No one pleaded ignorance, and the smith pulled at his pipe to make sure it had not gone out

before resuming.

"Taylor—the old chap, I mean—has sort of ginger hair. His misses—well, she runs mousey. The young 'uns is mostly ginger, and them that ain't is mousey. Tony—you know same as I do, Tony's as black in the hair as a black-fellow, and blacker."

"That's so," Smart observed from the corner post where he was leaning.

"Now, I'll allow there's not much of old Taylor about the look of Tony. There's a bit of the misses—about the eyes somehow, that makes him like her."

"That's so," Smart repeated; and every one else was silent, being interested, for Cullen generally had information, albeit he did sometimes tie it up in words that neither his hearers nor himself could understand.

"Then there's the cause," he exclaimed impressively. "There's the fust cause."

"Where?" Marmot inquired wonderingly. A cause was too great an attraction for him to permit his missing one voluntarily.

"Why, there," Cullen responded. "Tony's not a bit like Taylor; he *is* a bit like the misses, and he's different to all the rest."

"That's it. The woman," Slaughter snarled. "They're always the trouble in this world. I'd yard 'em up like——"

"Dry up," Marmot exclaimed sharply. He was too involved over the cause to want to hear Slaughter's well-worn theories on the management of the other sex. "Where's the cause?" he asked.

"Well, put it plainer. Tony's like his mother, but how d'ye know he ain't *more* like his——"

"Smoke!" Marmot cried. "I get it. And yaller head found it out?"

"I don't go after for to say that," Cullen said ponderously. "And Sam Nuggan, he don't go after for to say that. But he heard him and her one night as they were riding in, him bringing her back from some moonlight ride they was always getting up—he heard her say to him, 'But who do you take after, Tony?' And next day, so Sam Nuggan says, Taylor and his misses was talkin' a lot and Tony was watchin' a lot, and then he ups and comes into the township, and the next he hears he'd gone off with them gully-rakers."

"But it do seem to me——" Smart began.

"That's as clear as I can put it," Cullen interrupted quickly. "There it is, all in front of you. Tony said he'd come back and report what the field was in a week or so, and when he comes back, watch him and yaller head. The yaller head's the cause of it, you take my tip."

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CHAPTER III.

THE BELLE OF BIRRALONG.

The two riders who had passed Marmot's store amid a cloud of dust, drew rein at the school-house gate, the girl turning her horse off the road and alongside the gate so that she could lean down and pull back the catch. As the gate swung open, she looked over her shoulder to where her long, thin-limbed companion sat still in the saddle.

"Thank you," she said. "You have come a long distance out of your way, but it is your own fault."

"That's nothing," he replied. "Only—I say—mayn't I come in?"

She walked her horse through the gateway as he spoke, and, wheeling it, swung to the gate before she looked up and answered him.

"You said as far as the gate—and you are as far as the gate," she said, with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Yes; but——here, hold on," he exclaimed as, with a wave of her hand, just as she had waved it to the group on Marmot's verandah, the girl started her horse up the narrow pathway that led past the school-house into the paddock behind the cottage where she and her father, the schoolmaster, lived.



"THANK YOU," SHE SAID.

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ToList

The youth looked after her, with something of a glitter in his watery blue eyes. As her horse entered the narrow space between the school-house wall and the yard fence, the girl looked back again and laughed, and the youth dug his spurs unnecessarily hard into his horse's sides as he resumed his ride down the road. He felt that he ought to have followed her through the gate—and he dared not.

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The girl meanwhile rode past the cottage, which stood back from the school-house, and into the paddock beyond, giving a soft coo-ee as she passed. The horse found its own way to the shed where the bridle and saddle were kept, and the girl lightly slipped from its back and took off both. Having put them inside the shed, she roughly groomed the horse—which stood so still, it seemed to be proud of the attention—before returning to the cottage, the horse following her as far as it could, with its nose rubbing against her shoulder.

Inside the cottage a pale, delicate-looking man sat in a chair in front of a wood fire, on which a kettle was boiling and steaming. He put down the book he was reading as she came in.

"I wasn't long, Dad, was I?" she asked, as she came across the room to his side and bent down with her hand on his.

"No, child," he answered softly. "What news had the Murrays?"

"Oh, it was all the same old tune," she answered, as she stood up and took off the mushroom straw hat she was wearing, revealing as she did so the wealth of golden hair, twined round the top of her head in a heavy coiled plait, to which she owed the name of "yaller head" among the frequenters of Marmot's verandah. "It was all Tony Taylor, Tony Taylor, Tony Taylor. Heavens! why can't the man go gold-digging if he wants to? The way people talk——"

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"Who came with you down the road?" her father interrupted to ask.

"Oh, that fool of a Dickson," she replied, with a short laugh. "He was hanging around the place, so I told Nellie Murray to go out and see what he wanted; and she, big fool that she is, brought him in, and then nothing would do him but he must ride home with me."

"Well, *he* didn't talk Tony Taylor all the time," her father said, laughing.

"That's just what he did," she retorted. "It was Tony Taylor all the way, until I told him to shut up. They make me tired. Now, what are you laughing at?" she broke off to ask, as she looked up and caught her father's glance.

"Oh, nothing," he answered. "I was only wondering what Dickson had to say about him."

"About Tony? Well, he said—you remember what I told you he said the other night about his mother? Now he says that she would like to see some of us, or have some of us go over to the station some day. How can the poor thing see us when she is as blind as a flying fox?"

"But that's not what Dickson said about Tony. I asked——"

"Oh, chut, chut, chut!" the girl exclaimed, as she waved her hands quickly to and fro in front of his face. "Do please let the dear man rest while I get tea ready. Don't I tell you it makes me tired?"

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Willy Dickson was bad enough all the way home, without having more of it here. People would think I care what happens to Tony Taylor;" and she stood looking down at her father with wide-opened blue eyes that were as innocent of deception as a babe's.

"I wish you did," her father said quickly. "He's one of the——"

"Now, you're not going to begin again?" she asked; and, without waiting for an answer, she turned away and began preparing the table for the evening meal.

Her father sat watching her as she moved about, not speaking again, for in turning away and busying herself with something, she had shown as much temper as ever she showed over anything, and her father understood the symptom. It was one of her peculiarities that she only evinced the fact that she had a temper when she was reminded that certain of the young men in the district had lost their hearts to her, and had left the neighbourhood because of their inability to repair that loss. Not that she objected to the first part of the indictment; it was rather pleasant, from her point of view, to have the command of the entire youth of the district. What she objected to was the going away of individual units from Birralong, just because she did not see fit to deny herself the pleasure of the society of all the other youths in exchange for that of just one. It always happened in that manner; always the departure of some youth for the western stations, the northern gold-fields, the coastal towns, or the droving routes, had been preceded by one, sometimes two, and sometimes more, interviews with her, in which, as she usually told them, they made her "feel tired." Always except once. Tony Taylor had gone off and had hardly wished her good-bye, and Tony and she had been as brother and sister, only more so, since the day when they first met and began to climb through all the standards of the State-school education, beginning at the very lowest of the grades, together.

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Tony used to ride in to the school in those days, for Birralong was in its infancy and the school was only just opened. Taylor's Flat, the selection where he lived, was a dozen miles away, and Tony used to come and have dinner with her and her mother and father. He used to ride in bare-back on a big old splodgy dray-horse named Tom, which had been worked in the dray and at the plough until there was only jog-trot servility left in him. But Tony—clad in a pair of knickerbockers cut down from a pair of Taylor's moleskins, a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the neck innocent of a button, with neither shoes nor stockings on his brown little feet and legs, and with an old soft felt hat, discarded by the elder Taylor, and consequently as many sizes too big for Tony as his knickerbockers were—was a proud boy as he rode through the township every day to and from school, his little legs barely reaching across the broad back of the old dray-horse. He was the only one who rode in, and that, together with his eight years and quick wits, made him a hero in the mind of the Irish-named, Saxon-haired daughter of the schoolmaster.

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There had been a community of interests between them from those days of irresponsible childhood; and when, in later days, Aileen lost her mother, and her father developed the state of health which made him more and more delicate every year, the community of interests grew, for whatever her troubles were, Tony was always ready to share them; and he was the only boy who made no protests about her being friends with all the others, and treating them all on a level when circumstances were kind enough to put some entertainment in her way. He had always seemed to understand her, for he had never talked as some of the others had, particularly those who had suddenly made up their minds to leave Birralong, and for that reason alone she was satisfied with him.

But there came a time when this sense of satisfaction was disturbed. Very slight indeed was the first indication of the disturbance—so slight, in fact, that it had not been apparent to Aileen herself until it had gained considerable strength; enough, at all events, to make itself distinctly and unpleasantly manifest.

She had, one day, been amused at the remarks Dickson had passed on Tony's appearance. There was a touch of malice in the remarks, for Tony, in the old school-days they all had shared together, had thrashed Dickson with a bridle, and she had laughed at the one and smiled upon the other. Dickson had never forgotten the chastisement he received from a boy younger and a head shorter than himself; and as the years passed he still nursed his enmity, giving vent to it in vindictive and malicious remarks about the absent Tony, for he remembered the boyish thrashing too well to speak his opinions in his rival's presence. So it was that when Aileen heard Dickson denouncing Tony's appearance, she had been amused, until a chance remark struck her and set her thinking; and as she thought, the conviction grew upon her that the very subject of the remark which had struck her so forcibly had been in her mind, unconsciously, for years. Now that she had had it brought face to face with her, as it were, its significance was so pronounced she wondered how it had escaped her all the years she had known Tony and the rest of the Taylor family.

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The fact was that Tony was absolutely different, in manner, face, and figure, from every member of the family of Taylor's Flat.

The next time she met him she had teased him about it, asking who it was he took after, and such-like questions; and Tony had replied with an abruptness which was so unusual in him that she had at first felt amused, until it began to rankle. Then she resented it, and when they met again, she was equally abrupt to him as he had been to her, and had, moreover, given a great deal of attention to what Dickson, who was present, said and did, while ignoring, as far as she could, the very existence of Tony. Then the three lucky diggers had come to the Carrier's Rest, and every one was talking of gold-mining to such an extent that she saddled her horse and rode out to see and chat with her bosom friend, Nellie Murray.

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When she returned, her father told her that Tony had been in during the day to bid him good-bye, as he was off in the morning for the new field. And from that moment it seemed to her that every one she met could talk or think of nothing but Tony going gold-mining. It was getting monotonous, and, to relieve her feelings, she put down the plate she had in her hands with unnecessary force.

Her father looked up from his book.

"Is it necessary to break it?" he asked quietly.

She laughed lightly.

"I was doing the very thing I blame in the others," she answered. "But there, tea's ready now, so we'll say no more about it—or him," she added.

Throughout the meal Godson watched his daughter, and after it was over, and she sat near the lamp sewing with deft fingers, he kept his eyes on her. She was a handsome girl, and there was plenty of excuse for the male youth of Birralong losing their hearts to her. She was both tall and well formed, with a figure that made her look like a Venus posing as a bush-bred girl. The wealth of glorious hair surmounted a shapely head, and although her features were not of classical regularity, there was character in every one, and character that was pleasing to the masculine eye, albeit it savoured strongly of independence and self-reliance.

It would have been a satisfaction to her father to know that her future was in some measure provided for by the plighted affection of such a man as Tony, for he shared the general admiration for the boy he had educated, and who, dare-devil as he was in many ways, had in him the makings of a sturdy, useful member of society. Taylor's Flat was a good selection, and even if it did not descend to Tony, there was plenty more good land in the colony, and Aileen was versed enough in the methods of the bush to prove a useful helpmate to a hard-working selector.

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But a man is not much use as a matchmaker, and whenever he did try to suggest anything of the kind to Aileen, she had nothing but laughter and raillery for him in reply. And yet, the pay he received from the Education Department was not very much, and would die with him, and Aileen had no relative in the world but himself, while there were very few ways for a girl to earn her living in the bush, save that of domestic service, and that meant drudgery. He knew the frailness of the bond which kept his body and soul together. At any moment almost it might snap, and then—he always turned with a shudder away from the thought.

"What are you thinking of, Dad?" Aileen asked suddenly.

"I was thinking——" Godson began.

"So was I," she interrupted, with a laugh. "I was thinking of—Mrs. Dickson."

"What about her?"

"Well," she said, as she put the article she had been sewing on the table in front of her, and pushed it away to the full length of her arms, looking at it with her head on one side and her eyebrows raised, "I was thinking what a lonely thing it must be to be blind. Fancy the poor creature all alone all day in the dark—because it must be dark to her. Nellie Murray says there are some funny things said about her, but she doesn't believe they are true. That's why I should like to see her, just to see what she is like. Willy says she's awful scotty."

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"I should not be surprised at it—with him," Godson answered.

"Oh, he's——" she gathered up her work instead of finishing the sentence. "But I would like to go over to the station and see Mrs. Dickson," she added brightly. "It's the first time she has agreed even to let us go near the house, so Willy says, and both Nellie and I want to go. Do you think we ought?"

"Would it keep you away if I said no?" Godson asked, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Of course it would," she replied, looking at him quickly.

"Umph," he said. "Wait till Tony comes back, and ask his opinion."

"Oh, bother Tony!" she exclaimed sharply. "Nellie and I said we would go over on Thursday. Nellie said she would make Bobby come as well. Do you see the idea? He and I can ride together, and that leaves——"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Godson asked, with a smile.

Aileen nodded, and the smile grew on Godson's face. It pleased him better than if it had been the other way about.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE ROUT OF BOULDER CREEK.

Cudlip's Rest originally owed its existence to a small rush that set in on Boulder Creek in the early sixties, that period in Australian history when the gold fever was badly abroad, and men were leaving everything—hearth, home, kith, kin, and often life as well—to join in the mad scurry after the will-o'-the-wisp which they were pleased to call fortune. Boulder Creek, a small stream—when rain fell—full of big stones, and with here and there a patch of yellow sandy gravel lying in corners and crevices, wound its way through country which was equally rocky, but with just enough soil above the rock to sparsely nourish the gnarled, scraggy gums which waged with the spear-grass a constant struggle for existence.

The road to the west from Birralong crossed Boulder Creek, running along the summit of a dwarfed ridge, parallel with the valley of the stream, until it took a sudden turn downwards towards a spot where the stones were less numerous, and which was locally known as the Ford. Halfway down from the top of the ridge to the level of the creek, about an acre spread out flat on the left-hand side, and here Cudlip's Rest was built.

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There was gold in the creek at the time, tradition said, and men trooped down to it from all parts, camping along the ridge, and climbing down with the dawn to the bed of the creek and digging where they could in the sandy gravel, or picking at the boulders and dollying the fragments in the hopes of discovering some of the gold which report said was to be found in the creek. As the sun went down at the end of each day, the men climbed back to their tents on the ridge, cursing their luck—or the want of it—to satisfy their hunger. Then they wandered with one accord to the flat where Cudlip's Rest was situated, and assisted in making the only "pile" which was ever amassed on the diggings of Boulder Creek.

Most of the men who first came out from civilization to make their piles on Boulder Creek wandered back again, their piles still to make—with that one exception; but the reputation of his success, though he never rocked a cradle nor bumped a dolly in the whole course of his stay on the field, hung about the place, growing in magnitude as the years passed on, and inspiring many a simple heart with that blind faith and patience necessary to spend one's life chipping at rocks well nigh innocent of pyrites, and sluicing gravel which sometimes carries a grain to the dish—for, after the first-comers had gone back to civilization, there were many who came to take their places.

With the departure of its founder, the Rest lost a good deal of its glory. The men who were camped along the ridge had no more money to spend, and only an occasional traveller, passing along the road from the east to the west, kept the place going as a solvent concern. Now and again some prospectors, who had heard tales round distant camp-fires of the hidden riches of Boulder Creek, journeyed down its course, scrambling over the rough, tumbled boulders, and venting their opinions in hot, scorching words as they remembered the tellers of the tales, till they saw on the flat, halfway up the ridge, the symbol of civilization in the form of Cudlip's Rest. Then the occupier for the time being had some chance of making a profit on the year's occupation; but otherwise, no one but a new chum would grant credit for drinks against such payment in kind as cut timber and split rails for a whole settlement of fossickers.

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So the years went on, the men along the ridge dreaming of the leads and pockets they one day might discover, and the owner of Cudlip's Rest trying to persuade himself that there was a future in the field—until one day a whisper went abroad. It ran from tent to tent and from shaft to shaft, travelling up and down the gullies and the ridges by the creek; bringing men to the surface from the bottom of the holes they had been digging for months, and drawing them out of the drives and cross-cuts they had been developing for years, and making them stand with wide-open eyes gleaming in the sunlight, as they tried to reach back through the profitless years for the mislaid energy of youth. It travelled far and wide, wherever a man lived and toiled; and wherever it sounded, men's eyes grew bright, and hope came again to faces that had long since lost it, and to hearts that had long since grown numb.

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No one knew who had spread it; no man heard another tell him that it was true; but in the air it quivered, and every man heard it, and left his work and his tent and his tools where they lay, whilst he hastened to Cudlip's Rest for further news of the rumour that had reached him as he laboured in his loneliness—that gold had been found; gold in payable, ay, in richly payable, quantities.

Like the remnants of a routed army they came upon the old hotel, some up the road, some down it, and others through the bush. A few had stopped to get their coats, but most of them wore nothing over their soil-and toil-stained shirts and moleskins. But as they came up to the house, and stamped on to the verandah and through into the long, bare room that once had been festive with many a merry gathering, they all had one expression on their faces and one inquiry on their tongues.

Round the bar, which stretched across the end of the room, they found four men standing, with pipes in their mouths and filled glasses in front of them, and only a glance was needed to reveal to every one as he entered that not one of the four was a new chum or a sundowner. They stood smoking in silence, like men who have known one another's society for many days, and had no need for words to express the enjoyment they felt in a smoke and a nip. Occasionally one would glance towards the door as man after man trudged into the room, toil-stained and unkempt, and stood covertly watching the four with hungry eyes.

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Cudlip—all the keepers of the Rest took the name with the house—was behind the bar, glancing suspiciously from the new arrivals to the incoming residents.

"And you say it's payable?" he said at length; and every ear in the room was strained and every eye turned upon the silent four.

"You take your colonial," one of the four answered.

"And a poor man's field? Good alluvial?" Cudlip added.

The man who had answered before looked round at him.

"Ain't we going there?" he said.

The crowd round the door and along the walls of the room surged forward. Good alluvial and a poor man's field? And four men going there? The questions were in every mind and the answer as well. For years the gully-rakers round Boulder Creek had been living and longing to hear such things, and the hungry eyes grew more hungry and the faces more alert. If four, why not forty? Why not—

"Where's the lay?" one of the Creekers asked sharply and shortly; and the room was silent till the answer came.

"Over the ridge," the man answered, nodding towards the west.

"How far?" some one inquired.

"Twenty mile or so."

"And you've been there?"

"That's so."

"You and your mates?"

"Not the four of us."

"How do you know it's a boomer?"

The man looked round slowly on the still gathering crowd.

"I found it," he said.

For a moment every man in the room held his breath. They had had faith in the creek for years without seeing more than specks of gold—faith so great that they would all have scorned to leave their shafts and drives for the sake of fossicking neighbouring streams and gullies. But—payable alluvial and plenty of it only twenty miles away! They needed time to take that in all at once.

"I found it a month ago—I and some mates. I left them working on it while I went and proclaimed it and got our reward claims registered. Now we're safe we don't care who knows of it. There's men in hundreds coming out along the road behind us, though we have got two days' start. But what is that to us? There will be thousands soon—thousands all seeking our gold-field, for there's gold across the ridge, boys—gold for the lot of us."

The sun-dried walls and roof of the room shivered and cracked at the reverberation of the mighty shout that went up from the throats of the assembled men. The wild fever that had sent them roaming years and years before in search of the fortune of yellow metal they had never yet found, broke out in all its former vigour in their blood. There was gold only twenty miles away! Gold to be had for the digging; gold in sand and gravel that only needed washing and sluicing; gold that would give them all their youth back again, and enable them once more to journey to the homes they had left so long ago—it dazzled and maddened them, wiping out their disappointments and blotting out their miseries. All the furies of unmeasured imagination that had swept them off their mental balance when first they had sought the bubble fortune came again upon them anew, and in their shouting, capering frenzy they surged round the four strangers and round and over Cudlip's bar. What liquor there was to be seized was taken and swallowed before its owner could raise a protest; but a dozen promises to pay ten times over for every nobbler was made on all sides, and, like a wise man, Cudlip hesitated before he opposed overwhelming odds.

The shout with which the news was greeted spread far beyond the Rest—as far as the barren rocks and spear-grass covered patches of sandy soil over which the outlying fossickers were hurrying for corroboration of the news—and the sound of the mighty shout made their pulses tingle and their blood run free.

Only one thing could make the men of the Boulder Creek dirt-holes shout like that. Gold, more than specks and grains, had been found somewhere, and the outlying stragglers quickened their pace in their haste to reach the place before all the good fortune had gone round. When they reached the house there was a babel of sounds in the bar-room, for round the four strangers the entire population of the field was crowding, every man firing off his questions as fast as he could utter them, with no one answering him, and no one heeding him in the general noise and excitement. The four were trying to reach the door so as to get on the way to their El Dorado, but a solid wall of perspiring humanity surrounded them, through which they were helpless to make their escape.

The late arrivals, gathering a word here and there, managed to understand that there was a great field of alluvial discovered just over the ridge, and seeing that every one in the room was fairly well occupied for the time being, the idea found favour among them that it would be a useful application of the knowledge to start out at once and peg out a few claims ahead of the others. The man to whom the idea came whispered it to his neighbour, who happened to be the owner of the next hole to his on the Creek, and from whom he had, at times, borrowed some flour

for his damper, when his stores had run out.

"Jim," he said, leaning his head forward and executing a portentous wink, "git."

Jim looked at him for a moment before he realized the significance of the tip.

"Good for you," he answered. "We'll best these——" and he used a mining term which signified the others.

The men nearest to him, all striving to catch something of what was going on, grasped the proposal by the tenor of his reply, and as the two left the room, so did the half-dozen who were nearest. Then the men who were nearest the half-dozen saw and understood and also moved, and the motion, once set going, spread and continued until the four were only attended by an equal number. The rest of the population of the field were disappearing through the bush.

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"Here there, hold on," one of the remaining four exclaimed, as he started at a run for the door.

"Hell for leather," cried a second, as he set after the first.

"My——" the third began, but left the sentence unfinished as he also started.

The fourth said nothing. He had too much handicap to make up.

When they had all gone, the four strangers stood and looked at one another in silence.

"Better have another nip and then move on," the man who had had the conversation with Cudlip remarked.

The host, who had gone to the door to watch the last of the residents disappear, turned back at the mention of business.

"They've swallowed everything bar the bottles," he exclaimed.

"Then we'll move on without the nip," the man said quietly.

As they started towards the door Cudlip interposed before them.

"Say, Mist'ers, before you go," he said. "It's all square about that there alloovial, I take it?"

"Square?" one of the men replied. "Well, you needn't believe it. It's twenty miles over the ridge to the west, the place I mean, but don't you go there. You'll make your pile here, if you stop."

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Cudlip vouchsafed no reply, and the four passed out and round to the back of the house where they had left their horses. When they were out of earshot of the bar, two of them exchanged glances and grim smiles.

"What did I tell you?" one said. "There's no bigger fools in creation than a mob of gully-rakers."

"Keep your tongue quiet, Gleeson," the other replied. "They haven't all started yet. Besides——" he glanced towards their two companions, who were loosening the horses from the fence where they had been hitched.

"Oh, Peters is fly, and the youngster has grit," Gleeson said, adding in a louder tone to the others, "We'll walk all the way till we camp. You needn't tighten the girths for that."

They rode slowly until within an hour of sunset, when, after climbing a long steep ridge, they drew rein at a spot where a small, clear stream rippled across the track, and the timber, growing thick elsewhere, left an open space sloping down to the creek.

"This will do for the night; and I reckon the bush is thick enough round here to prevent our fire being seen by any of the mob behind," Gleeson observed, glancing round as his horse strained at the bridle to sniff the cool water at its feet.

"It's good enough," Peters replied, as, urging his horse across the creek and on to the open space, he swung himself from the saddle. "Now then, Tony, my lad," he added, turning to his nearest companion, "shake yourself up. You're off for the diggings now; no more cattle-duffing or wool-pressing for you. In a month's time you'll be going back with a pack-horse team loaded with nuggets to buy a station of your own, if you want one."

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"Or going to Melbourne for a fly round," Tony answered with a laugh, as he followed the example, and swung from the saddle.

"Don't you do that, my lad," Peters observed seriously. "Never you leave the bush. A township is not bad once in a way, but a place like Melbourne—for a young chap like you, it's perdition, so far as your money goes," he continued.

"Stow your yarning till the pipes are lit," Gleeson called out; and Peters winked at Tony as, having hobbled his horse, he took off the saddle and bridle, and smacked it on the flank, exclaiming—

"Now, my beauty, don't spare the grass because it's Government property, and don't go far away."

The horses being unsaddled, the four men placed their swags and saddles together, and while one started a fire, another filled the smoke-begrimed billy at the stream, and set it to boil by the blazing twigs, another unrolled the "tucker-bags," and spread the contents of beef and damper on a blanket, and the fourth, Gleeson, sat on a log and filled his pipe.

"It isn't every one who finds a payable rush," Peters remarked solemnly, as he stood by the fire after his share of the work was done. "Tony, my lad, you will observe that; and consequently the man who finds the payable rush don't do no cooking at the camp."

"There's three for one man's work. What's the need of crowding?" Gleeson asked, as he came over to the fire to get a light for his pipe.

"None. Nor jawing either. He's all jaw," the fourth man, who was overhauling the tucker-bag, exclaimed, with a snarl in his voice.

"Now then, Samuel Walker, don't you make the sugar sour," Peters rejoined. "Your taste in—hullo!" he broke off, as the sound of a coo-ee away down the track came to his ears. "They're right on our heels. The whole mob will be here an hour after sunset."

"Of course they will. We ought to have stayed at the pub, or kept the find dark," Walker said.

"There's no pleasing you," Peters replied. "Our claims are pegged out by Government, so why should we grumble at others having a look in on their own."

"The billy's boiling," Tony interrupted.

"Then make the tea," Peters retorted, adding, as he watched the operation being carried out, "You've the makings of a digger about you, Tony, if you stick at it long enough."

As soon as the tea was ready, the four men gathered round the blanket on which Walker had spread the eatables, and set to on the meal with healthy appetites. As they sat eating, the sun went down, and fresh logs were thrown on the fire, lighting up the open space with a warm, bright light. They had finished, and were starting their pipes, when, on the other side of the creek where the firelight streamed across the track, the figures of two men with swags on their backs and diggers' picks and shovels over their shoulders, came in sight.

They greeted the camp with a shout, and splashed through the creek and up to the fire, where they threw down their swags and sat on them, like men who had tramped a long, wearying journey, and at the end of it preferred rest to either food or converse.

"Done a record, haven't you?" Gleeson asked, looking round at them.

"Don't know about a record, mate; but it's been a teaser coming up the ridge," one of the men answered.

"Many more behind?" Peters asked.

The men laughed.

"The whole of Boulder Creek," one answered.

"Don't you want a feed?" Gleeson asked.

"Don't mind if I do," each man answered, as he rose from his swag, and moved over to the place where the "tucker" was.

They were busily engaged—too busy to talk—in two minutes, and they kept at it steadily till the billy was empty and the beef and damper low.

"You can keep the billy going all night, if you're going to ask all them that's coming up the track if they want a feed," one of the two at length managed to say.

"That's why we shoved along," observed the other, meditatively, as he pulled an empty pipe out of his pocket, and pushed a finger in and out of the bowl.

"Tucker a bit scarce along the creek, eh?" Peters asked.

"Scarce?" the man replied, "Scarce ain't in it. It's as scarce as gold—or 'baccy;" and he put the stem of his pipe between his lips, and made a sound through it to indicate its emptiness.

"Do you smoke?" Peters asked innocently.

The man grinned. He would have replied freely and forcibly to the self-evident attempt to take a rise out of him but for the fact that he had just had one good meal, and breakfast-time was coming.

"Why don't you give him a fill?" Walker snapped out.

"My mate asks if you want a fill—of his plug," Peters said quietly.

"Oh, tea-leaves is good enough for me, if you ain't going to use them. I haven't had a smoke of tea-leaves for weeks; stores wouldn't run to it, and gum-leaves don't smoke cool. Thanks, young fellow, don't mind if I do," he broke off, as Tony reached out half a plug of tobacco towards him.

When he had filled his own pipe, he passed the plug to his mate, who helped himself before passing back to Tony the little that remained. Meanwhile the others were stowing away the remnants of the meal in the "tucker-bag," and they and the two new arrivals were only comfortably settled round the fire with their pipes going when another shout from beyond the creek announced the arrival of more travellers.

This time a dozen men straggled into the camp, but it was evident by the size of their swags that they were not quite so down on their luck as the first-comers.

They straggled up to the fire, each man with a brief crisp remark, and swung their swags from their shoulders, loosening their billy-cans, which they filled at the creek before setting them beside the fire to boil. Every man had his own store of provisions with him, and as they prepared their meal there was a constant buzz of conversation. Question after question was asked as to the quality of the gold at the new find; whether there was plenty of timber on the field; how about the supply of water, and the depth of the payable dirt. Gleeson, as the discoverer, was the man to whom most of the inquiries were addressed, and if he had not done much work in preparing

camp, he had to do more than his share now, a fact upon which Peters was not slow to remark.

The cross-fire of questions would probably have lasted as long as Gleeson cared to furnish answers, but another delight was suddenly introduced by one of the new arrivals producing an accordion from his swag, and sounding a couple of chords. At once the attention of the men was taken off the topic of the new field; there was a want of alcohol in the camp wherewith to rouse their spirits to the full enjoyment of their new good fortune, but the melody of accordion and song made an excellent substitute.

"Good boy, Palmer Billy," one of the men cried as soon as he heard the sound. "Give us the good old Palmer stave."

There was a burst of approval from all the men as they came nearer the fire, forming themselves into a ring round the blazing pile, some sitting, some standing, some stretched out on the ground, but all smoking. Palmer Billy, a middle-aged man with a face lined and tanned by many a summer's sun, and without a spare ounce of flesh on his sinewy frame, stood a bit apart with the accordion in his hands, his hat pushed back, and his head on one side as he looked round the assembly. Palmer Billy was the musician and vocalist of Boulder Creek, without a rival, equal, or superior, albeit his musical prowess was limited to the five chords which the key arrangement of the accordion automatically provided for, and his vocal *répertoire* to one song, sung to the American melody of "Marching through Georgia," and celebrating the glories of the great Palmer Goldfield—whence came Palmer Billy's pseudonym. His voice was neither cultivated nor melodious—from a musical point of view; but it was loud, and of the peculiar penetrating timbre which is invaluable for the use of that language which alone serves in inducing a bullock team to pull well, or for sending the stanzas of a bush song hurtling round a camp fire.

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As he raised his accordion to strike the preliminary canter of the five automatic chords, every voice was silenced, and all eyes were turned upon him, for Palmer Billy was always ready to oblige a camp with his vocal entertainment, though in return he demanded, on the part of his audience, silence (except when the chorus-time came) and attention. Failing either, or both, Palmer Billy yielded to the sense of outraged artistic sensibility and lapsed into silence himself, and when men are living a more or less lonely life a hundred miles from anywhere, they are inclined to look leniently upon the eccentricities of such genius as fate casts in their way.

Palmer Billy, casting his eye round the firelit circle of bearded and bronzed faces, and seeing every mouth closed and every eye fixed on his, was satisfied, and completed the five automatic chords. Then he lifted up his raucous, stridulating voice and sang, with the accentuation of an artistic drawl which no one but himself ever knew where it was likely to come, the opening verse of his song—

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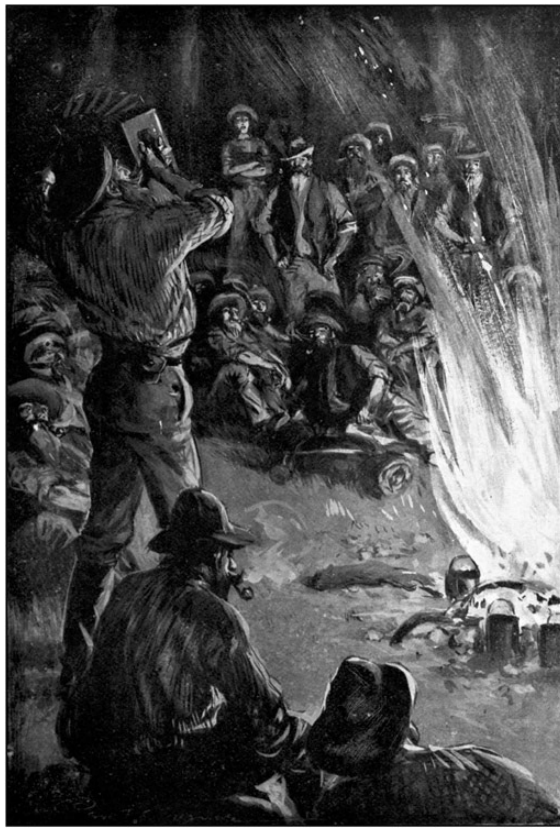
"Then roll the swag and blanket up,
And let us haste away
To the Golden Palmer, boys,
Where every one, they say,
Can get his ounce of gold, or
It may be more, a day,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

At the conclusion of the last word, which the vocalist sang as "Par-her-mur," with a graceful little flourish on the "her," he swept his eye round his audience, swung the accordion up to the full extent of his arms over his left shoulder, and shouting, "Chorus, boys," opened his mouth and his chest in the full glory of his stridulating notes as he yelled, the others lustily joining—

"Hurrah! Hurrah! We'll sound the jubilee.
Hurrah! Hurrah! And we will merry be,
When we reach the diggings, boys,
There the nuggets see,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

The force of the chorus pleased him, and his eyes twinkled; for even if every one of his audience had not caught the exact rhythm of the melody, there could be no question as to their endeavours being in earnest, and good soul-stirring noise, Palmer Billy, as a musician, maintained, was miles ahead of a mere ordinary tune.

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"THEN ROLL THE SWAG AND BLANKET UP, AND LET US HASTE AWAY."

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ToList

The second verse afforded the opportunity, in Palmer Billy's mind, for the exercise of expressive pathos; and when the chorus after the first verse was given with a will, and the audience thus testified its capacity for appreciation, he was as generous with his expression as he was with his force. Two portentous sniffs and a whine were blended with the word he considered the most appropriate for pathetic accentuation, the word following being bawled in full vigour with a prolonged quiver in the voice by way of contrast. Thus with alternate sniffs, whines, and bawls, he sang—

"Kick at troubles when they come, boys,
The motto be for all;
And if you've missed the ladder
In climbing Fortune's wall,
Depend upon it, boys,
You'll recover from the fall,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

The chorus was again taken up with an energy amounting to enthusiasm, and at the third verse, delivered with a declamatory power that carried moral conviction in every syllable, Palmer Billy introduced his special accomplishment by reversing the order in which he played the accompaniment of the five automatic chords. The declamation and the accompaniment always made the third verse a triumph.

"Then work with willing hands, boys,
Be steady, and be wise;
For no one need despair there,
If honestly he tries,
Perhaps to make a fortune,
At all events a rise,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

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The chorus was so lustily given that the soloist called for the audience to join him in the last verse, a most unusual compliment, and so well did they respond that the sound of their voices travelled far through the silent bush, farther than they intended, farther than they knew, as they yelled—

"Then sound the chorus once again
And give it with a roar,
And let its echoes ring, boys,
Upon the sea and shore,
Until it reach the mountains,
Where gold is in galore,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! We'll sound the jubilee.
Hurrah! Hurrah! And we will merry be,
When we reach the diggings, boys,
There the nuggets see,
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer."

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CHAPTER V.

THE SWAY OF GOLD.

The sounds of the eighteen voices, joined in the Palmer song, travelled through the silent bush, back towards Boulder Creek, along the route where many a camp-fire twinkled in the darkness as the marching army of miners formed their bivouacs in twos and threes. And where it echoed, men turned their heads to listen, and ceased even to smoke for the moment, as they strove to gauge the distance the main camp was ahead, and wondered if it were "good enough to shove along" in the dark. On either side of the main camp, and all around, the sounds reverberated amidst the tall, gaunt, scanty-leaved gums, till the 'possums scratched and chattered as they danced along the boughs, and the slow-witted bears sniffed the cool-scented air of the night to find some reason for the unusual flood of melody. Farther ahead still it travelled, till the lonely dingo heard it as he prowled, and, sitting on his haunches, raised his throat towards the skies and poured forth a melancholy howl in unison, rousing the suspicions of the night curlew that everything was not as it should be, and inducing him in turn to give utterance to his cry, mournful and weird as the wail of an outcast soul, to warn his fellows to be on the alert, and to add to the unspeakably awe-inspiring solemnity of the bush at night.

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Farther still it travelled, until, little more than a faint echo, it reached another camp-fire far ahead of the main camp, a fire beside which two men sat. A blanket was spread between them, and upon it lay a pile of small nuggets of gold, and, on a tin plate, a heap of gold-dust.

One of the two, a man whose eyebrows formed a black heavy band across the forehead, held up his hand as the sound came to him. Then he laughed.

"Hear that?" he asked, looking at his companion. "If we'd waited till to-morrow where would our chance have been? They're barely two miles away, and there's a mob of them, by the sound. The news of the great find is out, Tap, my son, and the rush has begun. They'll be swarming over the place to-morrow, swarming—and swearing," he added, as he again laughed loudly.

His companion, a slim, long-limbed man, with a sharp-featured face and shifty eyes, sat listening intently to the faint echo of the refrain of Palmer Billy's song.

"They're less than two miles, less than one mile away," he said, with a fleeting glance at the dark, heavy face of the other. "Look here—what if some of them push on in the dark?"

"Well, what if they do? Do you think the first-comers will know where to look? You're as weak in the nerves as ever, Tap, my son."

"The new-comers might not, but what about Gleeson and Walker? Are they such new chums as to let the others get in ahead, do you think?" Tap answered.

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"I don't know either of them, and don't want to."

"Well, you'll find they're a bit too tough to handle——"

"See here, Tap," the other interrupted. "Ten years down yonder ain't changed me for the better, and don't you forget it. I don't give a damn for you nor your mates. See? I don't care if it's five or fifty, I'll face the lot of you. Two words and your interest in this is——" he pointed to the gold, and then snapped his fingers in the other man's face. The black brows were lower over the eyes and the eyes flashed brighter in the firelight, and Tap did what most men of his type do before danger, real or imagined—shifted his ground and cringed.

"I didn't mean to say anything——"

"Then dry up," the other retorted quickly. "We'll finish dividing this first, and then make the next move."

"But—some of them are bound to have horses—Gleeson will, if he's there—and then they'll be on the ground before we are ten miles away, and he'll track us as easy as a black-fellow."

"Will he? And you think——here," the man broke off impatiently, "what's the use of talking to a soft-brain like you? If it weren't that I wanted a mate, I'd have no shift with you. I've said we're square for old times, and square it is—you take the dust and I take the nuggets."

"The dust ain't——"

"You'll take it or leave it," the other exclaimed in a bullying tone; and Tap quietly reached for

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the tin plate, and proceeded to push the dust into a small bag he produced from his pocket. The other man stripped a coarse canvas belt from his waist, and stuffed the nuggets into it through a small opening at the end.

"Now, Tap, my son," he said, when the last nugget was out of sight and the belt was again round his waist, "we're ready for the next move. Pick up the swags. We're going down to the next camp to look after their horses, if they've got any."

He started as soon as the other man had the two swags slung over his shoulder, walking away from the fire and into the bush in the direction from whence the sound of the song had come. There was just light enough from the stars to make the pale bark of the gums show against the sombre shade of distance, and to reveal the presence of shrubs by a darker loom on the black shadow. The heavy, brutal-shaped head turned from side to side as the man walked, as though he were noting the lay of the land as he passed; but in reality the eyes always looked back to see that Tap, with the two swags on his shoulder, was still following. Neither exchanged a word as they walked on, carefully and quietly, through the gloomy mystery of the silent bush. The howl of a dingo in the distance, the wail of a curlew, or the hum of a mosquito, were the only sounds beyond the occasional crackle of a twig trodden under foot, or the swish of a bent shrub swinging back to its original position.

A faint, ruddy gleam, which was reflected on the pale, smooth surface of a white gum on his right, made the leader stop in his stride, with arms held out like a semaphore—a danger-signal his follower saw just in time to avoid colliding with him.

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"There's the glow of their fire," he whispered, as Tap came beside him. "Their camp's just to the left. If I haven't forgotten the country, there's a creek runs that way through a belt of wattle, and beyond it the ridge slopes down."

"That's right," Tap answered. "You didn't lose your memory in——"

"Dry up," the other exclaimed.

Then he stood silent for a few moments before he turned and laid his hand on Tap's shoulder.

"There's the sound of a horse—hobbled—there," he whispered, pointing. "We'll get round beyond that white gum and plant the swags. Then we'll round up their horses and clear."

"But look here—hold on, Barber," Tap exclaimed, as the leader turned away.

"What?" he said, as he came back.

"Walker's a man we'll want. He's just after your own heart. He's as fly as they make 'em. It's better than trusting to luck to pick one up after. Why not wake him?—he won't say a word, and he's an edge on Gleeson. I know he's a lay of his own somewhere, and it might suit us to chip in."

The leader thought for a moment.

"No; it ain't worth it," he replied. "We'll carry this through first as we are. Bring the swags along."

He walked off, and Tap followed. Moving cautiously and noiselessly, they crept from bush to bush, until they stood directly behind the gum which caught some of the gleam of the fire, and peering over a low-growing shrub, they looked across the level patch where the men had made their camp.

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The fire had burned down to a heap of glowing ashes, with a small tongue of flame flickering and dancing here and there over the red mass, from the edges of which, where some half-burned sticks lay, thin wisps of light blue smoke floated lazily upwards. Round the fire the men lay in slumber. Four had inverted saddles as pillows, and one or two had a rolled-up coat for the same purpose; but the majority lay flat on the ground, wrapped loosely in their blankets, some face downwards with their heads on their folded arms, some on their backs with their hats pulled over the face, and others on their sides facing the red glow of the fire which lit up their features. Scattered around lay the impedimenta of their swags, their billy-cans and mining tools, in the unconcerned confusion that showed how little each one suspected his neighbour's honesty. On a sapling near the creek hung the bridles which Gleeson and his companions had taken from their horses, and Barber pointed to them.

"Come on," he whispered, and led the way through the bush, skirting the range of the glow, till they came to the open track, on the other side of which was the sapling and the bridles.

Telling his companion to wait where he was, Barber crept over to the sapling and removed the bridles noiselessly, returning with them to Tap.

"The tracks of the horses lead up the creek," he said. "There are four bridles. Hurry along with the swags after me."

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He turned away in the direction he had indicated, and walked quickly into the shadow of the bush, while Tap, hampered by his double load, moved more slowly along the course of the creek. In about a quarter of an hour he came upon Barber standing with the four horses, bridled and without hobbles. The swags were swung over the back of one, which Barber, mounted on another, led, while Tap took charge of the other two. They then made their way slowly through the bush until the grey dawn appeared, when they turned in the direction of the track along which the miners of Boulder Creek were marching to the newly found El Dorado. They came upon it at a point where no one was in sight, but had not ridden half a mile before they saw a straggling mob of men, with swags and mining tools, toiling along. As the parties met, the miners crowded round the two with questions as to whether they had come from the field, whether many

men were there, and what the prospects were. For answer Barber slapped the canvas belt he wore round his waist.

"Nuggets, none less than four ounces," he cried. "There's men in hundreds along the track, but the field will hold 'em all and hundreds more. We're riding down for stores. Shove along, lads; we'll see you when we get back, and good luck to you."

It was quite enough to spur on the energies of the hungry gully-rakers, and with brief good wishes they went on their way, hastening as much as their burdens and the steepness of the track would allow.

Other mobs, some small, some large, were encountered as the two rode on, and always Barber gave the same answer to the questions, and with the same result. The men were too anxious to overtake those who were ahead, and get their claims pegged out, to think of anything else.

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They were in sight of Boulder Creek, and could see Cudlip's Rest showing out on the slope the other side of the creek, when they met the last two of the army, one of whom was Cudlip himself, who, having weighed the chances, had decided to leave the hotel to run itself while he went and had a look round the field. He and a brother, who had a small selection near the Rest, had discussed it, and, deciding to start in the morning, had gone to get their horses from the paddock, only to find that some one else had secured them in advance. The appearance of Barber and Tap and two spare horses altered the complexion of affairs considerably to the brothers, for they had money with them, and the sooner they were on the field the better the chance of their recovering their own stolen mounts. They opened negotiations at once, and Barber, rousing their enthusiasm by the nuggets he displayed, and working on their naturally ruffled feelings (after hearing of the missing horses) by describing just where the borrowers of them would be, managed to secure all the money they had and an order from Cudlip for more on the manager of Barellan Downs. Then they resumed their way, and while the two brothers hastened up the track after fortune and their stolen horses, Barber and his companion rode on to the deserted hotel, where they took possession of a couple of saddles and such other articles as they fancied they required.

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In the camp by the creek there was turmoil when Gleeson and his three companions awakened to find they had been robbed of both horses and bridles, but left with the now useless saddles. Two of the men—the two who had been the first of the pedestrians to arrive the evening before, and who had enjoyed the hospitality of the four—had also disappeared, and in no man's mind was there a question by whom the horses had been taken. Samuel Walker, sitting disconsolately by his saddle, expressed himself volubly to Gleeson upon the follies of generosity.

"First you gave the whole show away, then you gave half the tucker, and now, here, you've given the horses and bridles. Why didn't you chuck in the saddles? What's the good of them now? Why didn't you ask them if they wouldn't be tired riding bare-backed all the way?" he grumbled to Gleeson.

"It was all that smoke you gave them when they came up," Peters said, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, what if they do get ahead of us? Tap is on the claim, and——" Gleeson began.

"Tap? Yes. Will he collar my horse?" Walker snarled.

"He'll keep your claim, and that's better. Anyhow, *they* can't find the field till we're there; so hurry along with breakfast. There's the last of the mob on the move."

While they had been bemoaning the robbery, of which they were satisfied as soon as they saw the bridles were gone, Tony had wandered up the creek watching the tracks the horses had made the night before. They were still some miles from the field, and he had all the native objection to walking while there was a chance of having a horse to ride. He followed the track until he found the hobbles lying on the bank of the creek, and the hoof-marks, with the footprints of a man beside them, going from the stream and from the direction of the field. He saw where another man's footprints joined them, and then only the marks of the horses, going down the hill, were visible.

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Hastening back to the camp, he reached there just as the last of the fossickers, moving away from the fire, gave rise to Gleeson's remark.

"Some one's lifted the horses in the night and ridden them down the hill," he explained, as he came up. "Here's the hobbles, and the tracks are quite plain. There were two men, and they led two of the horses. I followed their track a quarter of a mile down the slope, and it was still showing clear."

Gleeson looked up quickly.

"They're old tracks you saw," he said.

"They're fresh tracks; the ground is still moist where it's turned up," Tony retorted.

"What did they want to go down the hill for? That ain't the way to the field, and we told every one where it was," Walker put in.

"Anyway, that's where they're gone," Tony replied. "If you don't believe it, go and look for yourself. I'm ready for breakfast."

Further news came to them as they were finishing the meal, for the advance guard of the detachment Barber and Tap had met on the road arrived at the camp. The pace at which they had been travelling for the last few miles made a brief rest welcome, and they trooped up to the fire.

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"It's good enough, lads; it's good enough. There's whips of it there for all of us. Two mates passed down the road this morning for stores with a couple of horses loaded with gold," one of the new arrivals cried.

"How many?" Peters asked.

"Two, mate—two, with four horses."

"Saddled?" Tony asked.

"No, mate, save for the swags of nuggets."

"Were the horses three bays and a grey?" Gleeson asked quickly.

"That's so. Thanks; I'll set her here," the man went on, as Tony moved on one side for him to put his billy by the fire.

"We'll shove along," Walker said, as he and Gleeson exchanged looks.

The saddles having already been "planted" under a hollow log, the four swung their swags over their shoulders and set off through the bush, Gleeson and Walker keeping together in front, and Peters and Tony a few yards behind.

They had not gone half a mile when ahead they saw two of the men who had hastened on earlier in the day coming towards them.

"Them two chaps ain't got your horses," one of them called out as he came near. "We found them having their breakfast sitting by a fire, the ashes of which they said was hot when they got there, and alongside of which they picked up a nugget, a good half-ounce. The boys are waiting anxious like for you to come up and show where the dirt lies, so as to have a go at it right off the reel, and to see if more half-ouncers are to be picked up. Half an ounce! Why, it's more than a man could make in a month in the holes on Boulder Creek."

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Again Gleeson and Walker exchanged looks.

"Oh, there's heaps of half-ounce lumps about," Gleeson answered. "We'll soon show you where."

They pushed on till they came to a fire, burning where it had burned when, the night before, Barber and Tap had heard the sound of the Palmer chorus steal through the quiet, dark bush. Round about the men were resting, waiting for those to come up who knew the country; and as Gleeson and his companions arrived, every one rose and picked up swags and tools ready to march.

"Who was it found the nugget?" Gleeson asked; and one of the men stepped forward, holding it out in his hand.

"Here it is—half an ounce—good enough for stores for a month as we did it on Boulder Creek, salt horse once a day and flap-jack on Sundays," he said, with a laugh.

Gleeson and Walker looked at it critically and gave it back. Without a word they resumed the march through the bush. The ground sloped down in front of them, sparsely timbered and well grassed, and in the distance they could see where it rose into a long rolling ridge. They were close at the foot of the rise before they noticed a small creek running over a gravelly bed and, beyond it, the framework of a tent and a lean-to covered with boughs.

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Gleeson and Walker both uttered exclamations as they saw the bare forks and ridge-pole of the tent-frame, but the men behind did not pay any heed. They wanted no telling the creek was where the gold was to be found, and they scattered right and left as they rushed as fast as they could to the banks of the stream, each man, directly he came to the water, driving his pick into the ground and sitting on it. Two of them had met just by the ruins of the tent, and while one stuck his pick into the ground on one side of the stream, the other splashed through the water and performed the same operation on the other side, so close to where a hole had been dug that when he sat on his pick-handle, he dangled his legs over the edge of the hole.

"Here, that's our claim. You'll have to clear out of that," Gleeson shouted as he rushed up.

"That's our shaft," Walker yelled as he rushed up to the man sitting over the hole.

A shout of derision came from the two men, and was echoed up and down the creek as each fossicker turned round to enjoy the spectacle of a "jump" at the outset of the field. Most of the men having stuck their picks in their claims, sat on them, and adorned them with various bits of rag to serve as banners of occupation. Being all neighbours from Boulder Creek, they could trust one another, and were satisfied to leave their patches under the protection of their "pegs," more especially as things were becoming decidedly lively round what was already referred to as the "reward" claim.

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From shouting at one another, one side threatening and the other defying, Walker had made a feint at the man by the hole. He, having lived for many a year in the hope of one day pegging out his own patch of alluvial on a new rush, would have defied dynamite to move him now that he had his pick in the ground, now that he had performed all that the unwritten but eternal laws of the mining fraternity needed to give him sole and absolute rights over the few square yards of earth and all the precious mineral he could win from it. He took the feint seriously, and, being at a disadvantage in his sitting position, he threw up one leg to guard himself and equalize matters. The heavy boot he was wearing carried his foot farther than he intended, or Walker was nearer than *he* intended, for the boot came into violent contact with the pit of his stomach, and he rolled over on the other man's ground, gurgling and gasping.

Gleeson, only seeing him fall, thought an attack was imminent, and flashed out a revolver from his pocket. In a moment the attack was imminent, and in full swing. The Boulder Creekers had had many a quarrel and many a row amongst themselves, but never had a man drawn a revolver or a knife. Gleeson's action decided his chances.

"A darned dirty I-talyan," Palmer Billy shouted; "and on a white man's claim. Roll in, diggers."

A dozen outraged and indignant diggers responded. The revolver was knocked up and out of Gleeson's hand, and went spinning high into the air through a well-aimed blow from a spare pick-handle. It went off as it struck the ground, and the bullet whizzed over the heads of the men in the *mélée*; but they were too busy to notice it. A couple of fists hit one another in their haste to reach Gleeson's eyes; several more went home on different parts of his body at the same moment; and thereafter, for the space of a few minutes, the first arrivals on the new field, with the exception of Walker, who was knocked out, were a perspiring, swearing, struggling pile of humanity.

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When they managed to extricate themselves, Palmer Billy was the last to rise from the ground. He had suffered somewhat in the scrimmage, and his nose was bleeding freely, but he looked round without malice upon his panting comrades as he said, slowly and savagely—

"A darned dirty I-talyan; and on a white man's claim."

Then it was that they had time to observe what had escaped their notice in the rough-and-tumble of the *mélée*. As the men crowded round Gleeson, like bees round a sugar-bag, thirsting to wreak their vengeance upon him for introducing into the community weapons which were not possessed by all, they forgot the prostrate Walker, as well as Peters and Tony. That there were neither revolvers nor knives among the Creekers was more due to lack of means to purchase them than to moral superiority, or any religious qualms as to the shedding of another man's blood. Revolvers were useless without ammunition, and ammunition cost money; knives which were useful in a fight, were also eligible for trading purposes as a medium of exchange for flour and tobacco: consequently both were absent from the movable property of the average fossicker of Boulder Creek. That they were in the possession of the men who had stumbled on payable gold within a day's march of the creek was a further incentive to envy on the part of the Creekers; hence the haste of each man to vent his anger on Gleeson.

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It was their very haste which defeated their object. Peters and Tony, standing back from the others, saw how it was going with Gleeson the moment he showed his revolver. As the mob closed in on him and bore him down by sheer force of numbers, Peters darted for the revolver when it struck the earth, and Tony, rushing to the rescue of Gleeson, saw how the crowd, in their hurry to reach their victim, were hitting and pushing one another, while he was struggling to escape between their legs. There were more on one side than the other, and to the weakest side Tony ran, succeeding, with Peters's help, in extricating the struggling Gleeson while yet the mob meted out severe punishment on one another. By the time that they had separated and Palmer Billy had picked himself up, the four were grouped round the ruins of the deserted camp, each with a revolver in his hand. The picks that had been driven in the ground were lying on the other side of the creek.

The Creekers, convinced individually that they had effectually disposed of Gleeson, stood for a few moments, forgetful of the blows and bruises they had received in the scuffle, as they saw their victim standing unharmed before them. Palmer Billy moved a few steps towards the four, and the others, formed into an irregular line behind him, advanced at the same time.

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"Stop where you are, or——" Gleeson cried, as he raised the revolver and covered Palmer Billy.

There was silence amongst the Creekers, for the situation had changed since the moment when they yelled for revenge in unison with Palmer Billy. "The darned dirty I-talyan" was alone and practically unprepared then—he was back with his mates now; and while they were armed, the Creekers were not. Palmer Billy sized up the situation quickly and shrewdly. He turned slowly to his comrades, with one arm extended and pointing to the four.

"What sort!" he exclaimed hilariously. "They've jumped the jumpers! We're bluffed at our own game, boys; bluffed at our own game. They've chucked the pegs out, and there was no one there to stop 'em. It's their claim."

A murmur, half-assenting, passed through the crowd, till it was checked by the man who had stuck his pick in the ground by the deserted hole.

"My pegs was in," he exclaimed, "and if any one's took them out——"

"When you wasn't there," Palmer Billy interrupted, "why, them as shifted the pegs jumps the claim."

He looked round for applause and support, and, receiving it, was satisfied, until laughter mingled with the sounds of approval. The man had profited by the judgment pronounced, and had dashed away to the claim which Palmer Billy had pegged out for himself. He was in the act of flinging away the pick which had been planted there when Palmer Billy looked towards him. It was out of his hands and another one stuck in its place by the time the indignant jurist and vocalist had reached the spot. The remainder of the fossickers, also profiting by the judgment and also by the example, scurried right and left to their respective claims, and from the safety of their own ground proffered advice, picturesque and soothing, to Palmer Billy, who was arguing and gesticulating violently to the man who had jumped his claim.

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Walker, still suffering from the kick he had received, took advantage of the lull to sit down and

abuse Gleeson.

"Call yourself a leader!" he grumbled. "Here's a pretty state of things! If we ain't all killed in half an hour it won't be *your* fault. I'm full of your tricks, first losing our horses, then our——"

"If you don't like it, clear," Gleeson exclaimed, wheeling round sharply. The treatment he had received at the hands of the fossickers had not improved his temper, and there was trouble enough ahead from the others without having it in his own camp.

"Clear?" Walker retorted. "Do you think I'm a jackeroo, or what? I'm on my own claim. You and your mates can get off it as soon as you like."

"It's our claim; it belongs to the four of us," Gleeson answered angrily.

"I pegged it out, and I was on it before you, and I'm not going any more shares with you and your mates," Walker shouted; and the men on the claims nearest caught the words, and withdrew their attention from the wrangle between Palmer Billy and the jumper of his ground, in favour of the squabble between the four discoverers of the field.

A wealth of suggestions came from every side, first to one set of disputants, and then to the other, until the arrival of another party added to the confusion.

Gathering the nature of the babel, the new-comers quietly passed up and down the creek, pegging out their claims on either side of those already occupied before they turned their attention to the disputes, yelling out their views and opinions until the noise of the shouting reached other approaching parties and hastened their advance.

"It seems to me it's no use fooling round like this," Peters exclaimed, when for a moment there was silence between Gleeson and Walker. "If he wants the claim, let him have it, and we'll shove along up the creek. Come on, Tony, my lad; there's no points in this game."

He slung his swag over his shoulder, and Tony did the same. Their action was greeted with derisive cheers from the men scattered along the banks of the creek. Palmer Billy, beaten in the matter of words, came to meet them as they started up the rise beyond the creek.

"There's no luck where there ain't no 'armony," he said, with aggressive earnestness in his voice. "If me and my accordion gets the shove-along, we takes it; and as for them hungry gully-scrappers—darned dirty I-talyans, *I* call them—why, let 'em rake the creek by themselves; there's water in it, and some of that won't hurt some of them, either outside or in. Misters, if you likes 'armony, I'm with you; if you don't——"

Gleeson, seeing the other two set out up the rise, hurried after them, his departure also being greeted with a burst of derisive cheers. He came up with them in time to interrupt Palmer Billy's sentence. Recognizing the leader of the recent attack on himself, Gleeson looked at him angrily.

"Darned dirty I-talyans, *I* call 'em," Palmer Billy said, as his eyes met those of Gleeson. "It's no white man's field, no place for us to stay—only fit for I-talyans and such-like coloured labour."

Gleeson turned away to Peters.

"Which route are you taking?" he asked.

"Over the rise," Peters answered.

"It's good enough," Gleeson replied.

"Oh, good enough? You bet, mister; this is a miner or I'm a rouse-about," Palmer Billy put in, with a nod towards Peters. "A white man, mister, if I make no error, and, as such, a mate of mine."

"See here," Gleeson exclaimed angrily, facing him.

"That's all right, mister," Palmer Billy interrupted quickly. "I understand how it was. You never meant to lose me my claim, seeing you're a white man and me another, and these here, too. But you didn't know them darned dirty I-talyans as I did, mister; so, as the song has it, 'kick at troubles when they come, boys,' and we'll set up a four-handed camp of our own, and take the shine out of everywhere. You've got the tucker and I've got the 'armony, and we've all got the savee of white men and the grit of miners. Come along, boys; there's no malice on my side."

He set off as he spoke, and Peters looked round at Gleeson.

"It's an improvement on Walker," he said. "What do you say, Tony?"

"I'm on," Tony answered.

"Then it's good enough," Gleeson replied; and the three followed after Palmer Billy up the rise.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE LADY OF BARELLAN.

It was a ride of ten miles from Birralong township to Barellan, and from the Murray's selection another two miles had to be added. So it was arranged that Aileen should ride out to a certain point and wait there for the Murrays to come (if she did not find them waiting for her), and then the three could ride on until they met Dickson, who was to come out to meet them.

Aileen had her horse saddled, and was away immediately after the early breakfast, and the schoolmaster, being in the enjoyment of the holidays, watched her as she rode down the road and away into the bush. It was quite possible that Nellie Murray and her brother might be already at the trysting-place, and Aileen rode at a full canter so as not to waste time on the way. She had covered more than half the distance when she heard a shout behind her, and, reining in her horse, there came to her the sounds of another horse galloping and a man's voice calling her name. She faced round and saw Dickson approaching her.

"Why, how did you get as far as this?" she asked as he rode up. "The Murrays were to be by Price's Waterhole, or I was to wait for them there, and we were to meet you later."

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He looked at her with an uneasy grin on his face and a shifty look in his watery eyes.

"I didn't think Nellie would care to come. I don't think she will, so I rode on for you. We can go right on together," he answered.

"You didn't think?" she asked. "What did Nellie say? It was her suggestion that——"

"Yes, I know; but—we don't want her. You come on alone. I'd rather you did. Mother won't want to have a crowd about the place. It's only you she wants to see," he said, interrupting her, and speaking quickly.

"And let them wait all day for me when I said I would meet them? What next?" Aileen exclaimed; and as there was a suspicion of ruffled temper at his proposal, she sought her usual cure by moving her horse forwards, as she could not move about herself.

As the horse started, Dickson brought his round in front of it.

"Here, I say," he said, "it's no good playing the fool like that. We don't want the others. You come by yourself."

For answer Aileen turned her horse round from him, and he strove to keep his in front of it, but failing, he leaned forward and caught hold of the bridle.

"I'm not going to be——" he began.

"Leave go," Aileen exclaimed sharply, looking him full in the face with eyes that were dangerously angry.

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"I don't want, and I won't have, the others," he retorted, retaining his hold of the bridle.

The thin switch Aileen carried fell across the back of his hand sufficiently hard to induce him to let go.

"If I tell Nellie what you said?" she remarked.

"I was only in fun," he answered, the uneasy grin still on his face and his eyes shifting. "I only wanted to see if you would let them wait."

The girl looked at him steadily.

"Willy Dickson, don't tell me lies," she said severely; and he evaded her look. "If I had not promised to meet Nellie, I'd go straight back again."

She set her horse at a canter without waiting for him to reply, and rode steadily on, he after her, till Price's Waterhole was reached. It was a small lagoon surrounded by sturdy ti-trees, and with its surface almost covered by the blooms and leaves of pink water-lilies, over which a myriad of blue dragon-flies and other winged insects were skimming. Under the shade of the trees two horses were standing, and on the bank of the lagoon, watching the dragon-flies as they flashed to and fro, Nellie and her brother were sitting.

Fashions do not change with the month in bush communities, and Nellie's hat was one of a pair with Aileen's—they both came out of the same lot from Marmot's store. Mushroom was the appropriate name given to them, for they were wide of brim and small of crown, and the brims had the extra recommendation of being bendable, up or down, forming an excellent frame for the long, thin veil the dust and mosquitoes sometimes made a necessity. They might not be especially beautiful of themselves, but many a manly Australian heart has beaten more quickly at the sight of one, with the fresh face of a bush maiden under it. As the two girls' hats were alike, so were their costumes. Marmot kept more brands of tobacco than varieties of dress material, and beyond the resources of Marmot's, the Birralong maidens knew not. But a plain grey dress has many a charm when the wearer has a figure of native worth and a carriage as free and graceful as that of a bush-bred girl. The likeness between the two, however, did not extend beyond the clothes they wore, and beyond the fact that both were attractive. Where Aileen was fair as a Saxon, Nellie was dark brown of hair and eyes, slight in build, and quick in temper.

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There was more than a suspicion of the latter in her eyes as she turned her head at the sound of the approaching horses and saw who was Aileen's companion. Her greeting was brief, and she at once mounted her horse, saying that there was no time to lose now that the others had managed to arrive. As the four rode off towards Barellan, Aileen, with more loyalty than her friend gave her credit for, tried to keep behind with Bobby; but Dickson was in no way anxious to

fall in with the arrangement, and instead of following Nellie as she cantered ahead, hung back till the others caught him up.

"Go on with Nellie; what are you dawdling for?" Aileen called out as they came up.

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"Why can't we all keep together? What's the good of splitting up?" Dickson answered, as he came alongside Aileen on the opposite side to young Murray.

The latter looked over at him with an expression that showed he at least had a considerable objection to keeping all together. He was only a youngster of sixteen, but he was one among the many of Aileen's admirers, and the price of his accompanying his sister was that he should have the enjoyment of Aileen's company all the way to Barellan and back. There was little sympathy between him and Dickson; but the absent Tony was his ideal of all that a man should be, so that if there was any truth in the rumour that Tony and Dickson were rivals, he would not miss an opportunity of praising the one at the expense of the other, being satisfied that with Tony already a claimant, he could have no hope of ever enjoying Aileen's undivided affections.

"It was the arrangement, anyway. If you don't like it, why did you hurry out? We didn't ask you," he said.

Nellie, finding herself alone, had turned back and rejoined the others.

"Heavens! are you all going to camp, or what?" she exclaimed. "Don't you want us to go to the station, Willy? Or perhaps Bobby and I can go back home—is that it? *We* don't mind."

"Don't we? Well, we do," Bobby retorted. "It's Dickson who keeps loafing round. Here, go on," he added, as, turning his horse round, he hit Dickson's with a switch across the flank.

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The horse plunged forward, and by the time its rider had it checked he was well ahead, with Nellie close at his heels.

"I'm not going to stand much of this, I can tell you," she exclaimed, as she came beside him. "If you think you're going to play with me as you like, you're mistaken. You treat me properly or I'll tell your mother all about—"

"You're always grumbling. I never saw such a girl," he interrupted.

"I'm not grumbling. I suppose you thought you'd trick me, and let Aileen think I'd never been on the station before. Well, you see, you made a mistake. I shall tell her all about it. You know what you said and promised. If I tell Bobby he'll kill you, see if he won't."

The watery eyes were shifting rapidly from one side to the other, for there were many things which had occurred between him and Nellie about which he was by no means anxious Aileen, least of any one, should know. But Nellie had a temper, and was somewhat prone to spiteful retaliations, and, without counting the cost to herself, might say enough to make the immediate future rather unsettled, if not actually painful, to him.

"You *are* jealous," he mumbled. "I never saw such a girl. You think every other girl can cut you out by looking at me. You don't seem to think I've got eyes. I couldn't help it if I met her when I hurried to meet you. Why didn't you say you were going straight to the lagoon? You always came by the township road before. I didn't know."

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It was a tone and a line of argument that had served him well on previous occasions when Nellie's temper had become ruffled; and if one dose were not enough, he was prepared to administer a second, and even a third, so long as his latest chance were not jeopardized by a disclosure which he knew would be fatal to him.

"I don't believe you," she replied, with an upward glance at him.

He met her glance and smiled, just as he did when Aileen's switch fell across his hand. Nellie only looked up at him when she was mollified, and he was satisfied that the storm was over for the time being. But he did not attempt to fall back or wait for the others till the slip-rails leading into the home paddock were reached.

The station homestead was in view from the slip-rails, a long building, all on a floor, with a roof stretching from the ridge-pole down to the rones of the verandah, bungalow fashion. It stood some feet above the ground on a number of tarred and tin-capped piles, a necessary precaution in the land of the white ant. Some distance away from the station-house the outbuildings stood—the store, the men's quarters, and the like—for Barellan was worth having when fully stocked and properly worked. But now it was languishing for want of an energetic head.

Rumours floated about among the drifting comers and goers who formed the working staff from time to time; rumours which told of the thriving condition in which once it had been—when the lady who now reigned over it in sad and sightless solitude had been in the heyday of her youth and beauty. But that was nearly thirty years ago, and thirty years back reaches into the dark mists of the prehistoric age in many parts of Australia. The tales of that period were necessarily so vague, or hopelessly contradictory, as various travelling swagsmen tried to embellish them for the benefit of the listeners in the men's hut, that scant courtesy was paid to them. More recent stories were evasive enough as far as substantiation was concerned; all save one, and that was a gruesome tale—a tale of a fallen tree stretching out long, jagged branches, sharp at the ends and pointing up a by-track used by the station hands, years ago, as a short cut to the branding yards. A high wind had brought that tree down one night, and a new bend had been made in the track so as to avoid it where it lay with its jagged branches reaching out like the hungry prongs of a bundle of gigantic toasting-forks. Years afterwards a stranger, making for the men's hut at sunset, had passed that way, and, with a ghastly face and quaking limbs, had dashed into the hut

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as the men sat at supper, and had told a tale which was scoffed at, till later, one by one, the men learned to ride five miles round rather than pass that by-track alone at night.

Another tale there was of a coach stuck up on the old main road beyond the boundary fence, when the mail was burned, and one of the passengers, being shot, fell with his head in the fire, and lay there till the Lady of Barellan, riding down the road in the morning, found him, and the remainder of the company bound to the trees and gagged. She had ridden back for help, and had fallen on the verandah of the station-house as she gave her news, and the men had ridden off to help those of whom she told, and left her unnoticed, lying where the sun poured down on her in the full force of summer, scorching the sight out of her eyes. From that day she had been sightless, and soon after she was alone, save for the boy she idolized, for her husband had gone to the north to buy store cattle, and had disappeared from the ken of man, till a skeleton, with two broken spears through the ribs, and the remains of a swag and clothes, identified by some friends as Dickson's, were found in the neighbourhood whither he had intended to journey.

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So the station had languished for the want of a guiding hand and head, while the owner passed her days sitting on the verandah, with her sightless eyes fixed where a clump of trees grew thickly on the spot where the coach had been stuck up so many years before. A slim hand-rail ran from a corner of the verandah to the clump three hundred yards away, and round the trees a high three-rail fence was built, with a gate where the hand-rail met it, and no one of the station ever went there save the Lady of Barellan; for it was a strange fancy, born of the fever that had followed the loss of her sight, some said, that she had of going there, feeling her way by the hand-rail, and staying there alone and silent, musing.

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She was sitting on the verandah as the four rode up, with her eyes, which, save for a fixity of gaze, showed nothing of their affliction, staring away into the distance where the clump of trees stood out, purple-blue in their shade above the buff of the sun-dried grass and against the pure, transparent azure of the sky overhead.

Dickson mounted the steps leading on to the verandah, with Nellie close upon him and Aileen further behind; while Bobby, not having outgrown the uneasiness of youth, remained in the saddle holding the bridles of the other three horses as well as his own.

"Here's Nellie," Dickson said abruptly, as he reached the chair where the sightless woman sat.

"How do you do, Nellie?" she said simply, as she held out her hand.

"And this is the other—Aileen," he added, before Nellie could answer.

Aileen, looking into the clear, open eyes which looked so steadily into hers, and were so different from what she had pictured to herself, took the extended hand.

"I am so glad to be able to see you. Oh, I forgot—I'm so sorry," she added quickly.

"Dearie, dearie," the blind woman said, in a gentle, caressing tone, placing her other hand over Aileen's, "it's very kind of you to say that, very kind of you. There's many a one said far worse and never given a thought whether it hurt me or not. Come, sit ye down, dearie, and tell me all about yourself. Willy, bring a chair."

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But Willy, convoyed by Nellie, had passed out of sight and hearing.

"I will sit here," Aileen exclaimed, as she sat on the top of the steps leading to the ground from the verandah.

"Ay, ay," the other woman said. "He's no sooner here than he's away. Tell me, dearie, all about yourself. Never mind him; maybe he's gone to get some tea or some fruit for you—he's an unselfish boy, a good, unselfish boy."

Aileen looked into the open eyes, sightless and expressionless, and felt a twinge of pity for the lonely heart who spoke so fondly of her boy—the boy who had spoken of her to Aileen, and said that she was ill-tempered, fretful, and worrying. She, guileless herself, had sympathized with him, never doubting that some truth existed in his words. Now she had seen the two together, had heard the abrupt manner of the son to the mother and the almost pleading gentleness of the mother to the son, and in a trice there had come a dual sense—attraction to the mother; repulsion from the son.

As she sat talking to her, looking out across the level, sun-scorched paddocks to the fringe of standing bush, with the purple loom of the distant ranges showing over the irregular tops of the gums as a bank of purplish cloud against the blue of the sky, and with the chromatic whistle of the magpies coming faint but clear through the still air—just a glimpse of the Australian scenery that grows so dear in its simplicity and colour—she was more and more attracted to the woman who had known so much of human suffering, and waited so long and so patiently in darkness which was more than solitude. The simple story of her life Aileen told—saving any reference to the absent Tony—and the blind woman caught with swift sympathy at the fact that she was motherless, and might at any moment be fatherless also.

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"And you have no relatives—no friends?" she asked gently.

"Oh, heaps of friends, but no relatives," the girl answered.

"And if—supposing you were left alone——"

"Well, I can work," Aileen added, as the other paused.

"Ay, dearie; but you'd be lonely, and it's bad to be lonely when you're young."

"Then I'll come and take care of you," the girl answered, as she laughed lightly.

The woman turned her head quickly and held out her hand, as a smile, soft and gentle, rippled over her face, and almost overcame the fixed stare in the sightless eyes.

"You will, dearie? Ay, and you shall. Come to me, dearie, when you are alone. Make Barellan your home whenever you need one."

As she spoke Dickson and Nellie came round the corner of the verandah. The shifty eyes of the one twinkled for a moment with a glee which was not beautiful to see; the dark eyes of the other glittered.

"She never said that to me," Nellie said under her breath. "You'll have to tell her—or I shall." [Pg 92]

"She's only cranky," Dickson answered in the same tone. "She's dotty half her time and scotty the other."

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CHAPTER VII.

THE EVOLUTION OF SLAUGHTER.

The Three-mile, where Slaughter lived—Cold-blood Slaughter, as they termed him, from his pessimistic, cynical manner of thought and speech—was an out-of-the-way spot even for the district of Birralong. A track, which was little more than what would result were a dray driven off the road at right angles, branched off the main road, and meandered for a couple of miles, always indistinct and never straight, until a small patch of cultivation, a few acres square, showed green and picturesque amid the prevailing sombre hues of the untamed bush. On the far side of it, as one approached from the direction of the main road, was a small hut, built of roughly split slabs of timber, and roofed with sheets of bark, standing in almost aggressive solitude away from the trees which, farther behind it, formed an unbroken background of subdued colour. There was a waterhole some thirty yards from the hut, and a fork-and-sapling fence cut it into two portions, one of which, the smaller, was included in the small paddock where Slaughter kept his horse, the only living creature besides himself which resided at the Three-mile.

Viewed from the point on the track where first it came into sight, there was a certain pictorial attractiveness about the place which roused curiosity and interest—the contrast of the green of the cultivation patch with the prevailing neutral greys and yellowy-browns of the gum-tree forest; the simple form of the hut standing distinct and clear against the darker line of shade caused by the solid growth of bush beyond; and the quiet and apparently peaceful solitude of the whole scene appealing to the imagination. Nearer inspection left the solitude untouched, but robbed the picture of all else. Once, tradition averred, a hardy, daring denizen of Birralong had ventured out to the Three-mile for a yarn and a smoke with Slaughter. It was in the days when he had lately taken up the land, and when the glammers of proprietorship should have been still thick upon him, and when the neighbourly act of a brother settler ought to have been greeted with a friendly warmth. But the adventurer rode back to Birralong distressed and distraught, refusing, or failing, to put into words for the benefit of others his experience at the lonely Three-mile. All that he could express was conveyed by the pursing up of his lips, the nodding of his head in the direction of Slaughter's residence, and the exclaiming, solemnly and sadly, "Him? A melancholy bandicoot ain't in it." That, and the influence of Slaughter's bearing and conversation, when he was in the township, had upon the community effectually prevented any one else making the attempt to penetrate into the solitude of the Three-mile; and Slaughter lived his own life, in his own way, and no one knew more of it than had been learned in the first year of his residence in the district. [Pg 94]

He was a customer of Marmot's, and that gave him the right to sit and smoke and yarn on the verandah of the store when he was in the township. He never passed his tobacco round, and rarely took an active part in the yarning, save to put in a few curt, cutting sentences that at first roused a sense of anger in his hearers, till they fell back under the protection of the phrase that "it was only Cold-blood Slaughter," and ignored the words that grated. He ran a "tally" at the store for the few necessaries of his life, and every six months cleared it with money which came in a letter for him from a city in a southern colony. It was the one link which existed between Slaughter and the outside world, that half-yearly letter, and its contents the one unsolved riddle in the annals of Birralong. With the regularity of the date itself the letter appeared, bearing the Sydney postmark on the cover, and as regularly Slaughter allowed it to rest a few days at the store, as though he knew both the mental anxiety it caused the *habitués* of the verandah as they tried to worry out some feasible explanation of its appearance, and the moral struggle its presence caused Marmot, who, as postmaster, felt bound by every tie of duty to hold it inviolate for the addressee, while, as the centre of Birralong gossip, he yearned to fathom the secret of its source, even at the cost of opening it. During all the years which had elapsed since Slaughter first came upon the scene the struggle had gone on, and still the mystery was unsolved and the riddle unread. Never had an occasion offered itself when anything could be learned from an outside source, and Slaughter himself was too cold and isolated an individual to be melted into confidence. [Pg 96]

To those who gave any thought to the matter it was evident that, save for the unexpected appearance of outside information, the mystery of Slaughter's existence prior to his arrival at the Three-mile would remain unsolved, just as the chilling demeanour with which he surrounded himself would remain unpenetrated. But in Birralong, as in other parts of the world, it was the unexpected that happened.

The township one day was profoundly moved by the information, which passed with the rapidity which is only possible for gossip in a small community, that the schoolmaster had been struck down and lay dying. No one was especially surprised at that, for every one knew that he was suffering from a lung complaint which had not yielded to the influence of the pure, dry air of the district, and so was bound to carry him off sooner or later; for, as a travelling medical man had once observed, the consumptive who did not get well in the eucalyptus-scented air of inland Australia deserved to die, if only for the perversity of refusing Nature's kindest aid! A ruptured blood-vessel certainly assisted in the collapse of Godson, but it was not even that which so astounded Birralong.

The sick man, knowing himself to be at death's door, had called for one thing, pleaded for one thing, prayed for one thing, and that the presence of Cold-blood Slaughter.

For some time the combined population of Birralong wondered, until, indeed, Aileen rushed down from the cottage, where her father lay, to the roadway in front of the school, where the inhabitants of the township stood, and taunted them with being heartless cowards and listless fools to ignore the pleadings of a dying man.

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"If you're not man enough to do what he asks," she said fiercely to Marmot, "you're postmaster, so do your duty and deliver that;" and she flung at the abashed storekeeper a letter addressed to Slaughter.

Without waiting for his answer, she swung round and ran back to the cottage, and the men of Birralong, looking sheepishly at one another, fidgeted uneasily as Marmot took up the letter.

A selector's boy, riding into sight at the moment, was hailed.

"Take that out to Cold-blood Slaughter at the Three-mile, and I'll give you a shilling when you come back," Marmot said; and the boy rode off.

Then they sat, wherever there was shade, and waited, uneasy lest the quick-tongued Aileen should again swoop down upon them with anger which they knew was just, and yet unable to do otherwise than wait, if only to see whether Slaughter would come, and what he would do when he did come.

A cloud of dust rapidly advancing along the road was the first intimation of his approach, and as it came nearer they caught the sound of the galloping horse. He rode right up to the school-house gate and jumped out of the saddle. Marmot and his companions gathered round the gate as though to intercept him, till they saw his face. Then they fell back, and made way for him as he strode up the path towards the cottage, following him with their eyes, silent before the fascination of the terrible expression on his face. They were men whose minds worked slowly and in stolid grooves; men who pondered heavily over the prosaic occurrences which made up the monotonous routine of their lives; men who had no grasp of more subtle phenomena than those which formed the ordinary sequence of events in the restricted limits of their commonplace experiences. How, then, could they grasp in a moment, let alone comprehend, the sudden transformation of Slaughter from a soured and indifferent man to one of keen, quick, resolute character, whose tightly closed lips and lowering brow only emphasized the flash and glitter of his eyes?

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They watched him as he passed up the pathway, with a stride and a swing so different from his ordinary listless dawdle. They heard the sound of his heavy tread on the boards of the cottage verandah. Then there was a silence, and the heavy wits of each of the waiting men strove to grasp sufficient of the spectacle to put his thoughts into words and ask for his comrades' help to understand. But before that could be done Slaughter again appeared coming down the pathway. He walked towards them, the frown gone from his face, and his eyes wide open and staring. A yard from them he stopped.

"He's dead," he exclaimed, in a hard, strained voice. "Dead—and I was too late."

The first words roused their interest, the last touched such sensibilities as they had. The figure of the man before them, strangely altered and moved, with the scornful bitterness they had learned to regard as his characteristic gone from his face, struck into their dull minds as something akin to a rebuke for their indifference to Aileen's repeated requests for them to carry out a dying man's wish. The man was dead now, and Slaughter's words "too late" made them wince.

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"It's a bad business," some one mumbled. "It's a bad business—for Yaller-head," he added, by way of diverting the suspicion of personal shortcomings.

"We'll see her through," Marmot said. "We'll—"

He stopped abruptly as he met Slaughter's glance; and the others looked from one to the other—from Marmot, disconcerted and uneasy, to Slaughter, whose face was set and hard in an expression that conveyed even to the men of Birralong the fact that they were in the presence of something which over-ruled them and subjugated them into a state of mental inferiority. The verbose Marmot, wordless; the listless Slaughter, dominant. It was a psychological crisis that humbled and abashed them.

They could only stand silent and expectant for the new development. The return of Slaughter to the cottage, this time with slow steps and bowed head, did not appeal to them as a development, and with that obtuse folly which is the birthright of the stolid, they straggled up the path after him. They were able to see into the room without going on to the verandah, and as each one glanced into it, he saw enough to rebuke him and make him turn back and walk sedately and quietly to the roadway.

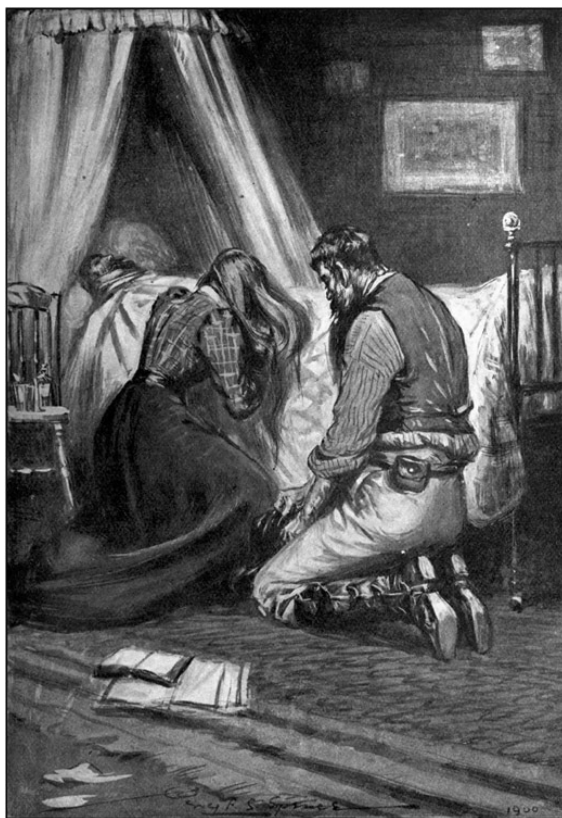
When Slaughter reached the cottage the second time and looked into the room, Aileen was on her knees crouched down beside the low bed on which lay the still form of her dead father. She held in both her hands one of his, and her head was resting on them, the wealth of golden hair, broken loose from its restraint, welling round and over them. Slaughter, as he came to the doorway, took the old felt hat from his head, and tried to walk on tip-toe lest his heavy boots should make too much noise.

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With bowed head and averted glance he slowly walked from the door across the room, and round to the side of the bed where the girl was kneeling. She, hearing his footsteps, looked up for a moment, and then hid her face again. But he did not notice it. He walked on, with his eyes cast down, till he was beside her, when he sank on to his knees also, and gently touched her arm with his hard, rough hand.

"I ain't no stranger, miss—I ain't no stranger," he began, in a voice which was a curious blend of his ordinary harsh tones with a soft and quivering sympathy. "We're none of us strangers to you, miss, leastways me."

He paused uneasily, half hoping she would move or speak; but only the sound of a choked sob came to him, and he shivered. It was the moment when the curious crowd outside glanced into the silent room.



"I AIN'T NO STRANGER, MISS."

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ToList

"Cold-blood Slaughter they calls me, miss," he went on presently, "for they say I ain't a feeling man; but it's only a name, miss. I've come here now, miss—*here*—to tell you, first from all of us, second from—me. We ain't no strangers, miss. We're all your friends, and—we—we'll see you through."

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Again he paused, looking up timidly at the mass of golden hair which was gently trembling as the girl's emotions chased one another through her heart and being; he saw that, and beyond it, just over it, the still, white features of the dead man's face—and he lowered his glance again.

"Maybe my story'll help you, miss, for no one's ever heard it yet. I could only tell it—to you, and—*here*—now. They didn't call me Cold-blood Slaughter once; I was a soft chap then, and I loved a woman who loved me, till another came and lied, and I—I was Cold-blood Slaughter then. It was all a lie—God forgive the teller, for I can't—but the woman I loved believed it, and I went away—came here and took up the Three-mile, and kept it to myself, till—till *she* came here—she—the woman I loved—and she came as another man's wife."

His voice was growing hard in spite of the quiver that was in it; but the quiver was due to another emotion than that which had caused it at first, and he, realizing it, checked his utterance till the growing anger was subdued.

"She saw me once, miss, and turned from me, and I—I never saw her again. I kept away. Then she died, miss, and left a daughter behind, *her* daughter, just like her, more like her the more she grew, and then—then—the father died. I thought he never knew till he—told me—told me she'd told him she knew it was a lie, and asked me to be good to her daughter, for her sake, and—and—I've come."

He ceased, but did not dare to look up, lest he should meet her eyes as she raised her head to answer him. He was kneeling, stiffly, sitting back on his heels with his back straight, his arms hanging down at his sides, and his hands clasping the old grey felt hat. His head was leaning forward, and two tears ran down his sunburned cheeks to the tangled thickness of his grizzled beard. In the room no sound broke the stillness.

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"I never knew till to-day she'd found it was a lie—I never knew she'd turned away because she was—she'd found out it wasn't true; and I've been a hard man all the time because I didn't know. Now, I'd like to put things straight, just tidy up a bit. I'm no sort of a hand at making things smooth, but maybe you won't feel us strangers now, and we'll do the best we can."

It was all he had to tell, all he could say; but it seemed so small and useless to him when the girl neither spoke nor moved. He waited in silence for her to give some sign that she heard and understood, and receiving none, looked up. She was kneeling as she had been when first he came into the room, as still as the other figure on the bed. He reached out his hand and touched her arm.

"Miss," he said, as he touched her; but there was neither sound nor movement in response. "Miss," he repeated, as he put his hand round her arm lest his touch had not been apparent to her, "we're none of us strangers, leastways——"

The grip on her arm might have been firmer than he meant; he might unconsciously have pushed her; but as he began to repeat again the formula of his sympathy, the only phrase which came to him through the mists of his sorrow and perplexity, Aileen moved from her kneeling position as she slipped, pale and insensible, to the floor.

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For a moment Slaughter looked at her. Then he sprang to his feet, and rushed, wild-eyed and panic-stricken, out of the room, across the verandah, and down the pathway to the road. The news of Godson's death having spread through the township, almost the entire population, men and women, were gathered round the gate. Marmot, anxious in some way to relieve the uncomfortable feeling he experienced since Slaughter had, as he thought, complained of being sent for too late, had kept them all back from going up to the cottage to proffer their help—a restraint the women members of the community especially resented.

As Slaughter appeared, running bareheaded down the pathway, they turned towards him; but he only pointed back to the cottage, and mumbled something they could not understand. The women hastened up, and, finding Aileen lying in a dead faint on the floor, carried her between them into her own room. While they revived her, others of the community undertook the remaining responsibilities, for tropical heat leaves brief time for mourning ceremonies.

Slaughter, left to himself, loosened his horse from where some one had hitched him to the fence, and led him, walking slowly, down the township road and away in the direction of the Three-mile. He walked on, with the reins loosely looped over his shoulder, the horse, as though it knew his mood, measuring its steps to his, and keeping its head just level with him. The warm, dry air, scarcely more than a breath of wind, caught the dust as it rose from their footsteps, and drifted it, in a filmy, moving cloud, all around and over them. The horse snorted now and again as it felt the irritation in its nostrils, and blinked its eyes, until they were almost closed, to escape it; but Slaughter walked on oblivious to the dust, to the heat, to the time, to everything, save the growing consciousness of a dull mental pain that was beginning to gnaw and goad him into a state of mind very different to that which had held him while he was offering his sympathy to Aileen. The years of bitter solitude, the years of cynical brooding over the wrongs that had come into his life, had built up an influence over him that was not to be dissipated by a momentary wave of sympathetic impulse. More than that, the sympathetic impulse had not been allowed to expend itself; as it developed it had been checked by the apparent unresponsiveness of its object, until, at the moment of its greatest vitality, it was abruptly arrested by the shock of Aileen's collapse. And in that it was in keeping with all the other experiences Slaughter had known whenever the softer side of his nature, the love impulses of his being, were called into activity; always there had been a check put upon him which made the exercise restrained and restricted up to the time when a final shock had effectually arrested it, and turned his love and kindness back, turned them away from their natural outlet to force them in upon themselves, until, in the succeeding turmoil and confusion, only bitterness and lonely brooding resulted.

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Over the whole distance between the school-house and the solitary Three-mile he walked on, brooding and bitter. The action of the woman who turned from him when she first saw him after her arrival at Birralong, came to be viewed in a less charitable light than it was when he spoke of it to Aileen. Then he said she turned away because she had learned she had wronged him; now in his thoughts he galled himself by attributing her action to fear and shame, and aggravated his sense of injury by recalling, again and again, that the man who had married her had kept for years the message she had sent on her deathbed. Disjointedly and incoherently, but always bitterly, he brooded and piled item on item, until there came to him the memory of the other, the memory of the woman who had first set his life awry.

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A few kind sentences; a touch of human sympathy; a token of kindly impulse and generous open-heartedness at that moment when his better nature was stirred, and Slaughter might have

forgotten in the warmth of the present the chill gloom of the past. But there was no one near him to give the necessary trend to the direction of his thoughts and emotions; nothing came to him save the recollection of the one whose jealous fancy had let loose all the hard cruelty of his nature; and Slaughter finished his walk with his mind seething in revengeful malice against the memory of the woman who had wrought his ruin.

He turned his horse into the paddock, force of habit impelling him to remove the saddle and bridle, the storm of his memory preventing him from even realizing that he did so. With the bridle on his arm, and the saddle under it, he walked to the hut and kicked the door open. On the threshold he stopped. Two men sat at the rough table in the middle of the room, and, as the door opened, the man with his back to the doorway turned in his seat and rose to his feet.

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The saddle fell from Slaughter's arm, unnoticed; the presence of the second man was unrealized; for only could Slaughter stand and stare at the man who faced him—a man with a brutal head and black, heavy brows.

"You don't seem too pleased to see an old mate," he said, with something of a snarl in his voice.

"You!" Slaughter exclaimed.

"Yes, me; and why not?" replied the other, quickly and hotly.

"There's nothing between you and me—nothing," Slaughter said slowly.

"Is that so?" the man replied. "Well, I fancy I'm wrong, then, for I thought that the work Kate Blair had done was enough to make both of us learn——"

Slaughter started at the name, started forward, and then checked himself, though his face went hard and his hands clenched, and his eyes gleamed brighter than they did when he faced Marmot a few hours earlier. The man saw—and stopped.

"Go on," Slaughter cried, with a savage energy.

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"I only talk to a mate I can trust," the man answered. "I didn't come here because it's your hut. We struck it on the road, and called in for a boil of the billy, and finding no one in, borrowed what we wanted. Seeing it's yours, and we ain't welcome, we'll move along. If the taint of Kate Blair in both our lives don't make us mates, why, it's so long to you and——"

He saw the lips press closer together and the frown grow deeper as Slaughter heard the name again, and he went on—

"But maybe you're friends with her now, friends with the"—he laughed, not too musically—"the woman who well-nigh hanged you."

The taunt let loose the rage and fury that had been gradually growing in Slaughter's mind; let loose from his restraint all the passionate emotions stirred and re-stirred by the events of the day; and before the storm of fierce denunciation to which he gave vent, one of the two men quailed, and strove to edge nearer the door. The black-browed man stood still, watching Slaughter as he raved, with an evil smile lurking round the corners of his thin lips.

When, from sheer exhaustion, the enraged Slaughter paused for a moment, he had his words ready.

"Good," he said. "You've not forgotten. More have I. Now that I know you, I'll tell you. I'm going back to make things square. Will you join me?"

Slaughter looked at him, his rage still rankling and burning.

"Going back?" he said. "Back? What! back to Sydney?"

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The man laughed.

"Sydney!" he exclaimed. "Why, you fool, she's not in Sydney. She left there nearly thirty years ago. She's here—or hereabouts."

Slaughter, quivering, staggering, trembling, clutched at his throat as he heard the words.

"Here!" he shouted. "Here, within reach of me, when I——"

"Hereabouts, I said," the other exclaimed roughly. "Keep your wits, and listen."

The interruption checked his words, but could not check the red fury that was surging through Slaughter's overstrung brain. The man who, in the presence of Aileen's sorrow, had been gentle and soft-hearted, was now, in the presence of the full force of embittered memory, swayed only by one impulse, conscious only of one thing. Hate, an unreasoning madness of hate, was upon him, and to soothe that hate, to satisfy the craving it engendered, the object of it, sacrificed as a victim, was alone capable.

The power of the other man's voice checked his words; the power of the other man's eyes, staring steadily into his from beneath the black band of the heavy brows, checked his wandering glance. He essayed to speak; the words choked in his throat. He strove to leap forward and rush from the hut into the sunlight beyond; but the place seemed to spin round him. A red film spread before his eyes; a roaring crash of sound filled his ears; his lungs gasped for the air they could not breathe; and it seemed as though his brain burst his skull asunder as he reeled and fell like a log to the floor.

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Looking down at him where he lay, the man with the brutal head said to his companion, in a tone of callous indifference—

"There was a streak of luck in it, Tap, my son, for we've struck a better man than your mate

CHAPTER VIII.

SKINNING THE WILD CAT.

The hum of the men's voices and the clatter of their picks and shovels, as they worked along the banks of the creek with the vigour and energy of men who thirst for gold and believe it is in the ground under their feet only waiting to be taken out, were the last sounds that came to Tony and his companions as they passed over the crest of the rise. Beyond it the land was level for a distance, but between the trees they could see where it was densely wooded, as though a creek flowed in the vicinity.

"There's broken country ahead, if I'm not mistaken," Peters said. "It'll be as well to push on beyond the scrub, or up to it, before we camp."

Palmer Billy looked round at Peters.

"There's a creek through the scrub, or I ain't no singer," he remarked. "And if there's a creek through the scrub, there's gold in the creek, and it's good enough to have a look at it before going on."

"There's no gold in it," Gleeson exclaimed.

"You say you've been there?" Peters asked.

"No, I don't; but I say there's no gold in it. No more than there is in the creek way-back. There's no gold in the country. Let the others find it out for themselves; but now Walker's turned up no good, and we're all mates in the swim, I'll tell you straight. The whole game was a bit of bluff." [Pg 111]

"Here, steady, young feller," Palmer Billy said, as he swung his swag to the ground and faced Gleeson. "Let's have a plain talk about this. What's *your* game, anyhow?"

"You told me——" Peters began, when Gleeson interrupted him.

"You want the yarn, and I'll tell you," he said.

"What's the good of waiting here?" Tony exclaimed. "It's nearly time for dinner, and you can yarn then. Let's push on to the creek, if there is one, and have a feed and yarn then."

"Young feller, my lad," Palmer Billy observed, turning towards Tony, "you've the head of a jayneus. In course. Who wants to yarn with a full tucker-bag outside and none under the waistbelt? Shove along."

He swung his swag on to his shoulder again and resumed the walk, the others following, Gleeson silent and morose.

The view of Palmer Billy was correct. A creek, full of clear water running over a sandy bed, flowed through the scrub; and while a fire was being lit to boil the billy, Peters went a short distance along the banks of the creek. When he came back he looked at Gleeson.

"You say you've been here?" he asked.

"No," Gleeson answered. "I say there's no gold in this creek or the other. It was all bluff—only the game's gone wrong."

"Don't be too sure," Peters said. "We had no chance of prospecting the other creek, with the mob jumping every one's claims, but I'm on to wager this is no bluff. There's gold in that creek; not in tons, maybe, but enough to give us wages, and good wages, for more than a week or two." [Pg 112]

"You don't say!" exclaimed Palmer Billy, standing up beside the fire over which he had been stooping, as he watched for the water in the billy to come to the boil.

"You're wrong," Gleeson retorted. "I tell you the whole thing was bluff. The hole we dug was salted, and the creek was to be salted for a bit; and then, when the rush set in, the news was to have been published and our claim offered for sale, and bought, and offered again, just as the big find was made, the find that was planted in the hole. Only Walker's turned wrong, and Tap, the chap we left to do the salting, has cleared with the gold; and if you hadn't stood by me in the row, I should have cleared too, and left you to get out of the way of the mob as best you could. Only you stood by me and Walker shied, so he can face the mob and the music, and we'll clear. But there's no gold in this creek. There may be a bit in the other; Tap may have dropped some of the stuff we were fools enough to trust with him; but I'll swear he never came here, so how could any gold get here?"

The three stood looking at him, Palmer Billy open-mouthed and open-eyed.

"And you calls yourself a miner?" he said, with scornful emphasis.

"No, I don't," Gleeson retorted. "I'm a mining expert—that's my business. There's money in that; there's none in mining; and I'm after money, if you want to know."

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The outspoken frankness of the man momentarily checked the feeling of anger or antagonism that was rising in the minds of the other three. Tony, with the memory of what he had heard in Birralong of the engineers of wild-cat schemes, winced at the discovery that his leader was only a specimen of the tribe after all.

"What's the use of talking? You're after the same lay yourselves," Gleeson went on. "It's money you want, only you haven't got the savvy to see the quickest way to get it."

Palmer Billy, his hat at the back of his head and his face working, moved a couple of steps nearer Gleeson.

"See here, young feller," he began. "I'm more than fifty by a long chalk, and I've been mining since I was fifteen; mining, I say—earning every slab of damper and pannikin of tea I've swallerd, not to mention 'bacca and sometimes a bender on rum, by as tough a share of graft as a man wants whose muscles ain't flabby. Fifty times I've struck a duffer on one field or another; twenty times I've struck a good show that petered out in a week; three times I struck it rich—rich enough to set me up if I'd stuck to the find, but always I've been had—had by darned dirty I-talyans from the towns on the coast, who've come up with their glib tongues and doctored tangle-foot and bested me, me and my mates, and shunted us to yacker and graft while they fattened on our find. And for years I've waited for the chance of meeting one of those scabs, just to get a bit even on one of them. There's three of you here, and there's one of me, but——"

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"Don't make no error," Peters exclaimed quickly. "I'm a miner myself. I joined this show as a fair deal, and so did the lad there."

"Good for you," Palmer Billy replied. "The lad maybe don't know, but you and I don't want telling what's the pay for mining sharks. Here, put up your dooks," he added, as he sparred up to Gleeson.

"We're mates, don't I tell you?" Gleeson said. "I'm on for a square deal. I'm full of the others. I'll stand in——"

Palmer Billy, sparring round him in the approved methods of Boulder Creek, came within reach and hit. Behind the blow there was a lifetime of outraged humanity, as well as the strength of a toil-trained, toughened frame, and Gleeson fell like an ox under the pole-axe. He lay where he fell, and Palmer Billy, far from satisfied at such a brief exercise of his pugilistic talents, stirred him with his foot.

"Here, no sleepy 'possum tricks, if *you* please," he said, with what he considered appropriate politeness demanded by the occasion. "There's two more waitin' after me, and I ain't through yet. I don't want to keep you waiting. Get up and have yer smile out."

But Gleeson made no response, and Peters came over and looked at him. Palmer Billy's bony fist had left an unmistakable mark on the bridge of his nose, and the closed eyelids were already thickened and discoloured.

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"You've punished him for the three of us," Peters said.

"Punished him? Don't you believe it," Palmer Billy answered. "I've only begun. He's going to learn what mining means before I've done with him, and then you two can take him on, and after that the boys over the rise. He's going to enjoy himself, I tell you, now we know who he is."

"It's no good hammering a chap like that; he wouldn't stand up to a black-fellow," Tony, who had been watching the proceedings, observed. "If there's gold in the creek, why——"

"That's just it," Palmer Billy interrupted. "If there's gold in the creek, he'll get it out while we take charge of it. He's used to all pay and no work. This journey he'll have all work and no pay. Oh, you're waking up, are you?" he added, as Gleeson recovered his senses sufficiently to make an ineffectual effort to rise. "Let *me* give you a hand," he went on, as he grabbed Gleeson by the back of his collar and jerked him on to his feet, where he stood, swaying to and fro and holding his head with both hands. "Now, maybe, you'll go on with this little affair," Palmer Billy continued. "Not that I want to hurry yer. Take your own time, only just say when you're ready to go on."

Gleeson, still dazed, looked round at the three standing in front of him. His head was throbbing with the knock-down blow he had received, and he had not yet had time to gather the exact meaning of his sensations. The words Palmer Billy used suggested journeying, and somewhere in the muddled confusion of his mind there was a decided impulse to journey.

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"I'm ready now," he said indistinctly, as he dropped his hands. "I'm only waiting for you."

Palmer Billy, watchful, suspicious, and wroth, heard the words and saw the movement. He cut both short by getting his blow in before the ruse he believed Gleeson was trying to use could develop. The second smashing blow in his face, for which he was totally unprepared, sent Gleeson again to the ground, and also brought home to him the fact that he was very much at a disadvantage, and to a man who was by no means loth to profit by it.

He was not a fighter, either by instinct or training. In the matter of words he might hold his own, and, to any one who believed him, appear a man of great strength and courage. But when, by any mischance, he stumbled across an opponent who knew enough to correctly estimate the value of his professions, and who was self-reliant and sturdy enough to face him and challenge a proof of his assertions, Gleeson retired, or, failing escape, subsided rapidly. Usually his tact, as

he called it, was successful in extricating him from positions where an exercise of brute force was imminent against him; he had never before been called on to cope with such a situation as he now realized he was in.

The second blow, directed more at his mouth, had not had the stupefying effect of the first, though it brought him to the ground with what Palmer Billy regarded as expert thoroughness. As he lay there, he understood the turn matters had taken; he was in the middle of what he had always managed to avoid, a rough-and-tumble bout of fisticuffs, and with a man stronger and more expert than himself. He partly raised his head from the ground in order to ascertain the disposition of the other two members of the party. He saw them behind Palmer Billy, looking on with apparent indifference to what was transpiring, and realized that they were certainly not on his side.

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Palmer Billy, as he saw Gleeson raise his head, stepped over to him.

"You'd like to get up, I take it," he said, and reached down to catch him by the collar.

"Don't hit me. I never did you any harm," Gleeson whined, shrinking from the extending hand which he expected was about to administer another blow, and hiding his face on his arms.

Palmer Billy, standing up, glanced round at the other two with a look of scorn on his face.

"What price *that*?" he asked, with a mixture of savagery and contempt in his voice. "Here, get up," he went on before they could answer him, as he stirred Gleeson roughly with his foot. "Get up on to yer bended knees, or I'll sink a shaft through you as you lay."

Gleeson, fearful and subdued, scrambled up as he was told.

"Now," said Palmer Billy, with a fine tone of indignant authority, "we'll go on to the second portion of this 'ere drama. Pass me over them straps, my lad," he added, turning to Tony, and pointing to the weather-worn thongs he had bound round his swag.

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As soon as he had them, he placed one in a noose round Gleeson's neck, and drew it tight enough to be uncomfortable, but not enough to check breathing.

"You hold this, lad," he said to Tony, who took the loose end of the strap and, just to see that it was all secure, jerked it slightly.

"I haven't done you harm," Gleeson began to whine; "I haven't done you harm. I'll do anything ___"

"Dry up," Palmer Billy snarled. "We'll tell you when to talk."

Taking up one of the picks, he stepped in front of Gleeson, and held the pick so that the point of it rested on the crown of his head. Peters, following a hint, took up another, and stood by the side, holding it over his shoulder as though ready to strike.

"Now then, you scab of a mining shark," Palmer Billy said, in the full force of his raucous voice, "you'll say what I bid you, or we'll sink a shaft through your skull and see where your brains lie. D'ye hear?"

Gleeson, muddled, dazed, and terrified, mumbled out that he had never done them any harm.

"We ain't talking about that, because there ain't no talk in it. We ain't sharks, but you are, and we're just going to teach you something of what work is like. First you'll tell us just what your game was and who were in it. Then we'll tell you what we'll do."

"You're choking me," Gleeson whined. "I can't breathe, and you're breaking my head. I never did—"

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"What was your game?" Peters interrupted to ask.

"I told you. I never meant to harm you. It was a fair deal. The claim was to be sold between ourselves, and then the big find was to be made and the claim sold again, only to some one else, and then—well, that's all. There's nothing wrong in that. It's done every day in mining. It's the only thing that pays in mining. Grubbing for nuggets is no good. Not one in ten thousand makes anything out of that; any fool can make a pile out of the other, if he only does it properly. I know the ropes. I'll put you all into a good thing later on, you see; something with more money in it than you'll make in a lifetime at grubbing after nuggets. You trust me. I'm square. I don't want to harm you. We're all mates, and—"

"Who were standing in over this swindle with you?" Peters asked.

"It wasn't a swindle. It was a fair speculation—a good open deal, and it would have made the fortune of every one who had the savee to see through it. Where's the swindle to sell what others want to buy and at their own valuation? We don't ask them to buy. We don't put up the price. We only tell people what a good thing we've got, and let it get known that so much gold has been found on our claim. If they come in and offer us big sums for our chance, and we take the offer, where's the swindle?"

Palmer Billy, moved to intense indignation, dropped the pick he was holding, and walked away for ten yards, swinging round and coming back with an angry stride.

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"Swear, you slippery-tongued shark, you; swear by all the bones in your body that if you—"

The oath, whatever it might have been, was never completed nor administered, for his emotions becoming too much for him to hold in check, Palmer Billy sprang upon Gleeson, and gave vent to his feelings in a manner which was more satisfying to him than a mere oratorical

outburst. Had he been allowed to complete his intention, the future career of Gleeson would not have been connected with mining swindles. For a time Peters and Tony, neither being predisposed in favour of Gleeson, stood by watching the chastisement Palmer Billy meted out, undisturbed by the cries for mercy and the yells of pain which the resounding blows of the raging digger called forth from his victim. It was only when both cries and yells ceased, and Gleeson lay senseless and inert, that they interfered.

"You're only wasting it," Peters said quietly, as he took hold of Palmer Billy's arm. "He can't feel it now."

Tony caught the other arm in time to prevent it delivering a blow at the man who had interrupted Palmer Billy's pleasant entertainment of thrashing one of a tribe who had so often lured him to destruction.

"Darned dirty I-talyan," he gasped, as he struggled to break away and re-open the campaign on the prostrate Gleeson.

"Give him a chance," Peters said. "Let him get his wind. There'll be none left for us to go for if you don't ease up a bit."

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"That's fair, boys; that's fair," Palmer Billy exclaimed. "It's your go next; I'll stand by while you have your go."

"But what have you left for us?" Tony asked, as he let go Palmer Billy's arm.

Gleeson, very much bruised and dishevelled, lay on the broad of his back, breathing heavily.

"Put him in the shade, with a bucket of water on his head. He'll understand what honest mining means when he wakes up," Palmer Billy remarked, as he looked down at the prostrate figure.

They carried him into the shadow of the scrub and poured some water from the creek over his head. Then they left him to recover, while they gave their attention to the meal which had been so unceremoniously postponed.

When they had finished, they turned their attention again to Gleeson. But they had not hurried over their meal, having little care or consideration for him; and he, recovering consciousness while yet they were engaged, felt no qualms about making his retreat as quickly and as quietly as possible. Aching in every bone, and with every muscle bruised, he crept away through the shelter of the scrub, not daring to look for the swag he had thrown down, or the hat which had been knocked from his head. There was only one instinct or desire in his being—the instinct which drives the wounded rat back to its hole to die, the instinct of self-preservation working in its meanest range. His swagger and bluster had been hopelessly crushed out of him by the vigour of Palmer Billy's attack; and to have been, as he considered, twice deserted by his own comrades, rendered his subjugation even more complete.

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By the time that his flight was discovered he had over half an hour's start. The opinion as to the direction he had taken was unanimous—he must have gone back to the other creek to join his mate Walker.

"You slip over and pass the word along the creek," Palmer Billy said to Tony. "Tell the boys we were keeping him for them to deal with when they found how they'd been sold. They'll be about fit to boil him when they find out they're all sold."

"If a few of them come along," Peters said, "we can run him down in a few hours, and then we can——"

"Roast him," Palmer Billy interrupted savagely.

"Better let him get bushed. It's a hundred chances to one if he'll travel far after the hammering you gave him," Tony said.

"No, that would be cruel," Palmer Billy exclaimed. "He's only a mining shark, but still, white men ain't cruel."

So Tony left them, and returned to the creek in full expectation of finding Gleeson there before him. But as he approached the slope which extended down from the level track to the creek, he was astonished to see his own horse and Gleeson's quietly feeding, with their bridles, broken, trailing from their heads. To catch and mount his own was soon accomplished, and he rode on to the creek.

His approach was entirely ignored by the men along the banks, and he sat still on the bare back of his horse for a time looking with amazement before him.

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Up the creek and down the creek men were stooping over the water, and many of them standing in it, as they washed, in every description of utensil, from a billy-lid to a soft felt hat, the gravel they obtained from immediately beneath the scanty turf on the banks. There was no talking, no shouting, no quarrelling. Behind each man there was a small patch where the turf had been turned back so as to enable the gravel to be scooped up, and the energies of every one seemed to be wholly devoted to the washing of the gravel, handful by handful, while the eyes were strained to catch a sight of the smallest particle of gold in the muddy swirl the gravel and water made in the article used for a dish. The intentness with which the work was done; the feverish movements of the men; the quick gestures and the grasping care exercised by them over the gravel,—all suggested that their anticipations had been realized, and they were really obtaining gold from the dirt.

Tony rode nearer the line of men. One had a small square of flannel open on the ground beside

him, with a stone at each corner to prevent its being blown away, and in the centre Tony saw a small but steadily growing pile of yellow metal. Another man was using the lid of his billy as a dish to wash the gravel, while into the billy itself he was putting what he picked out of the slush. Yet another, as low down on his luck, perhaps, as it was possible even for a Boulder Creeker to be, was washing the gravel in his old felt hat, and had stripped the shirt from his back to lay on the ground as a receptacle for the gold he found; and the pile on the shirt showed he had struck a promising patch.

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Everywhere it was the same; everywhere the men were silent and busy, and everywhere they were finding gold. The discovery drove all idea of Gleeson out of Tony's head, and he turned his horse back towards the rise, and rode rapidly up it and across to the scrub where he had left Peters and Palmer Billy.

"They're on gold; there's gold all along the creek," he shouted out, as he galloped up to where the two were standing.

For answer Peters held out the lid of the billy-can, and Tony saw in it four large nuggets and a quantity of coarse gold dust.

"That came out of the first two dishes," he said.

"We've struck it rich since you've been away, lad, struck it rich, which is all through killing that damned shark," Palmer Billy cried, capering up to him. "But—what price?" he exclaimed, as he stopped and stared at the horse. "Where did you raise this?"

"Down by the creek. Gleeson's was there as well," Tony answered.

"It's your own horse?" Peters said. "The one that was stolen?"

"That's so," Tony replied. "But there were only the two, and I left Gleeson's where it was."

"It's right into our hands," Peters went on. "We were just yarning about it as soon as we saw there was gold in the creek."

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"Tucker, lad, tucker," Palmer Billy interrupted. "We're going to work along the creek while the stores last, but there's only enough for a few days, and we were wondering. Now it's all straight. You can ride off for enough to keep us going for a month if needs be."

While the stores lasted they worked in the creek; when the stock became so low as to threaten a famine, Tony, with the gold already won in his possession, started off, riding bare-backed for the spot where the saddles had been "planted," and carefully avoiding the men along the other creek. Finding the saddles where they had been left, he took his own and rode away towards Birralong, anticipating the entertainment he would have at the expense of the wise men who had prophesied so freely about the results of following up a wild-cat scheme.

The sun was nearing the horizon when he came out on the Birralong road, after a short cut across country, a little above the township. He made direct for Marmot's store, on the verandah of which he saw that several men were gathered. As he rode up, they looked round at him with apparent indifference, not even replying to the wave of the hand he gave when they turned their heads towards him. It did not occur to him that, as he was coming from the direction of Taylor's Flat, each of the men believed that he had returned to the selection after discovering that the gold-field yarn was all a wild-cat scheme, as they had prophesied, and had been lying low at the selection ever since, keeping out of the way until something else should have transpired so as to prevent them dwelling on the folly he had shown. The coolness the men displayed nettled him, and he rode up to the store in a free, careless fashion, while Marmot and his companions sat still looking at him, resenting the fact that he should not have come in at once and given them the opportunity of reminding him, constantly and plainly, that they had "told him so" before he set out on the trip with gully-raking dead-beats.

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"How are you?" he called out to them, as he reined in his horse by the row of posts, but made no move to alight. "I'll be round in the morning with a pack-horse for some stores and tools we want," he added, addressing Marmot, who had not moved from the tobacco-box by the door. The indifference displayed towards him was irritating.

"Well, aren't you coming in?" Marmot said after a moment's silence.

"No; I'm just riding over first to see—to see how Godson's been all the time," Tony replied, as he pulled his horse's head round towards the road.

"Godson? Why, here—Tony, hold on," Marmot called out, as he jumped up and, stepping off the verandah, caught hold of a stirrup-leather just as Tony was moving his horse forward.

All the other men had also risen, and were standing staring at Tony in a manner that was as unintelligible to him as their previous indifference.

"Get off and come in," Marmot was saying. "We ain't quite clear on things, it seems to me. Where have you come from?"

Tony jerked his head towards the west.

"Away down the creek—I can't say nearer," he answered.

"Not from the Flat?"

"No; I'm going on there later. I——"

"Here, you come inside," Marmot said quickly. "You come inside, and hold yourself together."

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"Why, what's wrong?"

"Come up here, lad; there's news for you to hear," some one called from the verandah; and Tony, undecided and uneasy, got out of the saddle and walked on to the verandah where the men were still standing.

Marmot waved him to the tobacco-box.

"Godson's dead," he said.

"*And* buried," Smart added, with pardonable pride, for he was the local undertaker as well as saw-miller.

Tony, sitting on the tobacco-box, gazed at them open-mouthed.

"It was sudden—it's curled Cold-blood Slaughter clean up," Cullen put in as further explanation.

"And Yaller-head—she's gone to Barellan," another man, wishing to have some share in the proceedings, put in.

It was the last remark which brought Tony to his feet.

"Sit down, lad; sit down," Marmot explained. "We had to break it gently lest it scared you. Sit down and have a smoke. We're all with you."

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CHAPTER IX.

CHORDS AND DISCORDS.

On the verandah of Barellan Mrs. Dickson was sitting, with the eyes that saw not staring away into the blue distance, with the soft, warm breeze blowing gently on to her face, and with a smile playing round her mouth. She was contented, more contented than she had been for many years; for since Aileen had come to the station to live, there had not been a day when Willy had been entirely absent from the house, and so long as he was somewhere near her Mrs. Dickson was contented. The love, the unreasoning, unrequited love, she lavished on the boy was the one mainspring of her existence, the one gleam of happiness left to her since the terrible day when she had chanced upon the wreck of the stuck-up coach, and had returned to the station with the alarm, only to fall, when no one was near to help her, and lie with the fierce sunlight burning her eyes into blindness, and the weight of a knowledge upon her mind which would have killed her had not the needs of another life, dependent upon hers, maintained her.

There was a grim story behind it all—a grim story such as hovers over the life of a woman who plays with Fate, and is overtaken in the game. Vanity; love of admiration; thirst for notoriety; the love of men, easily won and lightly held, till the fascination of one came after gratified ambition had raised a barrier to its acceptance; the recoil of jealousy until the barrier was swept away; flight with the one whose influence had changed the current of life; discovery, and then disaster—it was a whirl of emotion, a flood of passion, an unkempt stream of mischief, till the compensating balance swung, and through the long, black years of blindness the chief character in the drama marked time while the outlying skeins of the tangle were unravelled, and Fate resumed control.

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In the long, dark, lonely years it grew upon her how terrible a thing it would be if the one link which connected the happiness of the past with the present should snap; if the boy, who was the one gleam of light shining through the gloom of her life, should fail her. As the years rolled on, and the boy—always a boy to her—had passed from childhood into youth, his bearing towards her had been constantly in keeping with the opinion he usually expressed to any of his companions about her: "She's dotty half the time, and when she ain't, she's scotty." She was "dotty" when she tried to induce him to talk to her and tell her all he was doing out in the world of sunlight and sight, the world she could no longer know; she was "scotty" when she upbraided him, gently and lovingly, for needing so much questioning and inducing to talk. He gave her no love: she felt that, though she would never have admitted it by word of mouth; for even if he turned away from her, with brusqueness and hard words, she could not but love the boy her eyes had never seen. The memories he brought back to her, the associations of the years which had preceded the time of affliction, and the play of emotions and passions which she had known before the side-wash of life's stream caught her and drifted her, a dismantled derelict, on to the dreary salt-marsh of blind solitude, were enough to shed a glamour over him, however selfish and shallow-minded he might be.

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And yet all the memories he brought back to her were not peaceful. There were some which broke the sunlight of the past by broad black bands of shadow, some which of late had been forcing themselves into her mind with an assertiveness that made her long for the companionship of some one with sympathy; such a one, indeed, as she realized Aileen to be the moment the

warm, big-hearted girl clasped her hand when she thought a stray word had given pain.

Shut out from the world by her blindness, she was still further isolated by the circumstances under which she was situated at Barellan. An up-country station has not a very large visiting list at the best of times; in the early days of a district there are the gum-trees and the 'possums, the scenery and the stock, and that is about all wherewith a woman can interest herself beyond those with whom she is immediately associated. With all these eliminated, the world of a white woman on a station is not likely to be particularly large nor especially attractive; and so the advent of Aileen at Barellan put a fresh interest, and a kindly interest, into the blind woman's life. It was sorrow which had driven Aileen away from Birralong—a sorrow and grief which the girl had bravely striven to keep in subjection by care and attention to the woman whose hospitality she was enjoying. But there was little heed of that in the mind of the Lady of Barellan. She was contented, and the cause of her content, or the price, so long as another paid it, was nothing to her now, any more than it had been in the far-off days before the curtain came down upon her vision.

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The thoughts in her mind were pleasant, for she was thinking how the present attraction for Willy at the station might be made a permanent attraction, and then there would never be a risk of his being taken away from her. The chance idea for a moment troubled her—it suggested the black line of shadow which had marred the sunshine in the olden days.

"It is ten years since," she said to herself, as the smile died from her lips. "Ten years without a sign or a sound. Surely it will not come again now; surely I may have some peace, some rest. Twenty years in darkness, twenty years in lonely sorrow—surely that should pay the penalty of one mistake."

As she thought she sat upright in her chair, with her hands clasped suddenly together, her cheeks growing pale and her head leaning forward as she listened intently.

From the distance, in the direction of the clump of trees which marked the coaching disaster of years before, there came through the still, hot air the sound of a dingo's howl. The woman shuddered as she heard it—shuddered and lay back in her chair with tightly closed lips, and breath that was short and hard. Again the howl sounded across the paddock, and again she shuddered. Then, sitting upright, she twisted a light shawl she had with her over her head, and rising to her feet, slowly felt her way along the verandah, down the steps, and on until her hand touched the rail which ran from the verandah to the trees across the paddock.

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She was following it, and was nearly halfway across, when Aileen, coming on to the verandah, saw her, and at once ran after her. She turned as she heard the girl's voice calling, and waited where she stood.

"Why, where are you going? And alone, too," Aileen exclaimed, as she came up; "and with only that rag on your head, and the sun scorching. Why——"

The elder woman turned a pale, careworn face towards her, and held up her hand.

"I ought to have told you—I forgot—but this—I always come alone. A long time ago something happened, and—I come to think and—and pray—here. You go back to the house. This rail is—to guide me, as I always go—alone."

There was something in the words, something in the voice, something in the face, which appealed to the girl.

"Just as you wish," she answered quietly. "Only let me get you a hat."

"I always come—like this," the other said. "I will wait till you go back."

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She stood still with her face towards the house as Aileen returned, and then, as she heard the girl's footsteps on the verandah, she turned and walked to the clump of trees, disappearing under their shade through the little gate in the fence. Closing the gate after her, she stepped forward, holding out a hand slightly in front of her.

"Well?"

At the sound of the word she stood rigid, the pallor deepening on her face. She knew where he was standing though she could not see; she knew that barely a yard away the man who spoke was standing, his heavy black brows forming a band across his forehead, drawn down in a scowl over eyes that glared at her in all the cruelty of unredeemed hate.

"How's the boy?"

"He is well," she answered, "very well. He is——"

"I've come for him."

The woman gasped and caught her breath.

"No, no," she said in a strained tone. "I cannot part with him. It would kill me."

"It's ten years and more since I was here, and now I've come back to see you, perhaps at the risk of my neck, you—you shrink from me," the man said, with cruelty in every line of his face and malice in his voice.

The woman stood still and silent. The last time, and every time, he had come he had said such things, but only when he threatened to take from her the one thing she cherished did she wince.

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"Who was the girl?" he asked, watching her colourless face and staring eyes from under his black, heavy brows.

"She is a friend staying with me."

He laughed, not unmusically.

"Staying with you? A plaything for the boy, eh?"

"No," she said quickly. "No; he is not like that."

Again the man laughed.

"There are different tales in the district," he said. "I've been back long enough to learn that. If he were different, I'd have him out of this soon enough to learn him what to do—only he don't want teaching."

She shrank back a step, and the man noticed it and understood.

"Do you think I have forgotten?" he said, with a return of the vindictive cruelty in his voice. "Do you think I'd leave him here if it weren't to make things square? I've been away ten years—where, it's nothing to you; but it hasn't made me softer. I thought I'd come and see how the old place looked, and see whether you still were enjoying the affection of your son and keeping my hiding-place free."

"No one has touched it," she answered quietly.

"No; because you hadn't the pluck to destroy it. Don't tell me you kept it because you promised. I know how much your promises are worth. I've not forgotten."

She did not answer as he paused, and he went on:

"The boy's got to come here; I've got something for him to do. Then he and I——"

"No," she said quickly; "he shall not come."

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He took a step forward, and seized her arms between the shoulder and the elbow in his strong, powerful grip, grasping them until his muscular fingers seemed to sink into the flesh. Then, in a sudden access of rage, he shook her to and fro, her slight form being as a lath in his hands.

"You tell me so?" he said. "You attempt to disobey me?"

He let go of her, and she sank to the ground.

"I'd kill you if I didn't hate you too much," he went on. "Get up and go back to the house. When I am ready, I shall come again; and when I come, I take him with me."

She heard his footsteps retreating through the clump of trees, and waited as she was, half kneeling, half sitting, on the ground, where he had left her. She felt her arms throbbing as the bruises formed where his hands had gripped; her head was swimming and giddy from the shaking he had given her; her heart was palpitating with fear and emotion; and as she crouched to the ground, there came back to her the words she had said to Aileen. She had come to the place to think—and to pray!

The irony of it came to her in her helplessness and misery. Only a short while before she had been flattering herself that, after an absence of ten years, she might believe that the dark shadow which had so marred her life had passed away for ever; that, after a period of ten years' silence, she was never to hear again the voice of the man which held her helpless and unresisting to do his bidding, to suffer whatever his merciless hatred might dictate, to submit, silently and bitterly, to anything that he should command. And even as the shattering of all those hopes went on, leaving her trembling and unnerved, there came to her the knowledge that with one effort she could snap the influence that he had over her, could end for ever her thralldom to him. It looked so easy, so simple, from her present position, and so awful. To speak, to tell the world the great secret of her life, the maintenance of which had lain between her and the chasm she, in her timidity, dare not look towards, was to end this hold of terror, and, so it seemed to her, to shatter at the same moment that to which she clung with all the instinct of her very existence—the affection of her son.

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That always appeared to her to be the price of her emancipation. Through all the dark years of her blindness the solace had been in the love she gave to him, and in the ideal sympathy with which she persuaded herself he regarded her. Sometimes she thought what the effect would be if he ever learned the truth, and was half inclined to speak and end her misery, trusting to his generous instincts, which were so manifest to her when he was absent; but when he came to her and spoke, there was something in his voice and manner which she would not own, even to herself, as being a contradiction to her faith, and yet which chilled her and made her seek a refuge in the haven of the cowardly—procrastination.

Now another element had come into her life—her liking for Aileen. The simple courage the girl had displayed in the trial which had fallen upon her, the unselfish putting aside of her own grief to soothe and make happier the life of her blind friend, all weighed against the uttering of the story which would destroy the overpowering demon of terror to which she was subjected; for the uttering of the story would shatter, at one word, she thought, the confidence, the affection, and the kindness of Aileen.

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Of the threat the man had made she thought nothing; he had made similar threats too often before, until she felt he only used them to goad her into deeper misery. He was merciless and, to all save himself, treacherous—how much she dared not think—but she would not believe that his threat to take her boy from her was genuine. All she could think of, as she sat huddled up on the ground, was to cling to the belief that her boy would not be taken away, and that somehow the mental torture the man's existence caused her, and the physical pain he never hesitated to inflict,

might some day cease.

While she was under the protecting shade of the trees another little drama was being enacted on the verandah of the station-house.

Scarcely had Ailleen, obedient to the elder woman's wish, reached it, when she saw a horseman come through the gate from beside which she had first seen Barellan. He rode rapidly towards the house, and as he approached her heart gave a leap, for she recognized first the grey horse, and then its rider. He saw her as she came up, and waved his hand. Springing from the saddle a few moments later, he fastened the bridle round the hand-rail which served as the blind woman's guide to and from the house and the trees, and hastened to where Ailleen was standing at the top of the steps.

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"I only heard last night, Ailleen," he said simply, as he came and took both her hands in his. "I—I don't know what to say; but you know, don't you?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak to the only one whose sympathy she really wanted, but whom she did not want to know it.

"I hardly knew what to do when they told me," he went on, looking at her with eyes that she glanced into once and then avoided—sympathy, love, and tenderness were too manifest in them for her to look again without revealing what she, in the perversity of her feminine way, still wanted to hide. "I didn't know what to make of it when they told me you were here, till Nellie Murray said I should ride over to see."

It came to her, with a jealous little twinge, that after all the haste he had shown in riding had been prompted by another girl; and in the midst of her battle with feelings realized and feelings unrealized, the struggle between the important and the unimportant, Ailleen, as a woman, naturally jumped at the unimportant, and clung to it.

"That was very good of her. I'm glad you had her advice. Won't you sit down?"

The words were as foreign as they well could be to what was in her heart, but they relieved the situation for the moment, and saved her from showing what she really meant.

"Why didn't you go to the Flat?" he asked, not heeding her words; "mother would do anything for you, and father too—or to the Murrays, or anywhere but here? Won't you come now? Mother wants you to come to the Flat, and every one in Birralong—"

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"I promised before——" and her lip quivered for a moment—"to come to Mrs. Dickson. She asked me. I don't want to—offend any one, but—she is so kind to me, and she's blind too, poor creature, and all alone."

"But, Ailleen——" he began, and stopped, looking hard at her face, turned half away from him in her anxiety to avoid meeting his glance. "We've found gold," he went on presently, after a few moments' silence. "Not much, but still enough to—enough for us. When I've got enough—when I come back—after this trip—if—I——"

He was floundering along, struggling vainly to put just one simple little sentiment into a simple little sentence, and drifting more and more into confusion and away from what he wanted to say. What that was she was quite well aware, and also was aware what reply she would make to it when once it was said; but for the present, with eternal feminine perversity, she did not want it said, so she saw an imagined rider across the paddock, and exclaimed—

"Is that Willy Dickson over there?"

Tony looked, half angrily.

"It isn't anybody," he said.

"Oh, I thought—yes, it's a shadow," she said, as she walked to the end of the verandah and, leaning her hands on the rail, looked away into the distance.

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He turned and followed her, and had one of his hands over hers and his arm ready to put round her.

"Ailleen, you're all alone now. Let me be your——"

"You are always my friend," she answered softly, but without raising her eyes, and with a barely perceptible movement away from him.

The arm that was ready was around and restrained her, and her hand he was clasping was pressed to his breast.

"More than that, Ailleen."

She turned her head quickly, and looked at him with a flash in her eyes as she disengaged her hand and stepped away.

"It will be less than that," she retorted quickly; and he, shamefaced and repulsed, stood hesitating what to do—and so failed. "I am perfectly comfortable here," she went on rapidly, lest he should recover his wits and renew an attack she knew she could not withstand. "Mrs. Dickson is very kind, and I've got my horse and all that I want; and besides, I can do a lot for her, and I'm not like I should be if I stayed with any one at Birralong."

He stood awkwardly, looking at her now that her eyes were no longer turned upon him, and wondering, in a dim, uncertain way, whether she was angered at the overtures he had made, or annoyed because he stopped when he did. She, half regretting her brusqueness, feared she had

offended him, as he made no apparent effort to speak.

"And you have found gold," she went on, anxious that silence should not come between them at that moment. "Tell me all about it. Was it in the creek where they said it was—Boulder Creek, wasn't it?"

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"Boulder Creek's down the gully beyond the Flat," he answered mechanically; for the mistake in locality was one she ought not to have made, and a young bushman is jealous of the landmarks that he knows.

"Oh, of course. How silly of me! It was Boulder Creek where——"

She stopped in time to avoid a reference to a bygone episode which would not be too pleasant at that moment.

"Where Dickson threw my stirrup-irons and I made him go in after them," he said, finishing the sentence for her, and in a tone of voice which showed that resentment was slowly taking the place of the uneasiness at his discomfiture.

"Poor Willy! You always were quarrelling, you two. Why can't you be friends? I'm sure he is good-natured enough."

Resentment was quickly re-inforced by another sentiment as he heard her speaking of Dickson in a manner which suggested that in her eyes he was the least offender of the two. The words which rose to his lips were angry words, and he checked them because, for a moment, she looked up and met his glance. The angry words died down, but no others took their place, and he was once more awkward and ill at ease.

"What else did Nellie Murray say?" she asked, still anxious to avoid the embarrassment of silence, and unfortunately striking again a line of thought in his mind which did not make for peace.

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Nellie Murray, as a matter of fact, had thrown out hints, not by any means too obscure, to the effect that if he hastened to Barellan he might find Aileen enjoying the society of Dickson to the exclusion of all else. That had been the reason of his haste; that had been the reason of his precipitate action when he found she was alone—fearing that at any moment Dickson might appear. In the confusion of his mind subsequent on her repelling his advances, he had lost sight, temporarily, of the suspicions Nellie's words had roused in his mind. Aileen's reference brought them again to his memory. What else did Nellie say? It was not so much what she said as what she implied. Before he had gone away from Birralong—before the commencement of the tiff which had come between Aileen and himself, and which was so steadily increasing in influence and importance, though its origin was impossible to indicate—Nellie's opinion of Aileen was the same as Aileen's opinion of Nellie, the opinion of one girl friend for her bosom companion—enthusiastic, unmeasured, and, above all things, loyal. There had certainly not been an excess of loyalty in Nellie's manner, or in her words, when she urged him to go to Barellan; and he, remembering it, was about to say something to that effect, when Aileen cut him short by exclaiming—

"Oh, look! There's Mrs. Dickson coming over to the house."

He looked where she pointed and saw the form of a woman walking slowly along by the hand-rail. The sound of a horse galloping made him turn round, when he saw Willy Dickson going straight for the hand-rail near the house, and near where his grey was hitched. As Dickson came up he tried to make his horse jump; instead, it balked, and blundered into the rail, carrying away some distance of it and liberating Tony's horse.

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In the confusion of recovering the startled grey neither of the three observed how Mrs. Dickson had walked to where the rail was broken, and stood just beyond it, feeling from side to side, unable to realize where it had gone. Aileen noticed her, and ran to her assistance.

"Tony, look!" she exclaimed; and he, seeing what was the matter, also hastened to her side.

Dickson, resenting Tony's appearance at the station, as well as the way Aileen behaved towards him, also hurried over.

"A horse has knocked the rail over," Aileen exclaimed, as she took Mrs. Dickson's arm.

"Let me help you," Tony said, as he took the other.

The blind woman stood motionless, with closely compressed lips and eyes that stared in their sightless fixity.

"Here, I'll take her back," Dickson said abruptly, as he pushed Aileen aside. "Come on. What do you want mooning out here for?" he added roughly to Mrs. Dickson, as he caught hold of her arm.

She half shuddered as he spoke and touched her, but moved forward, leaning the more on Tony. At the steps her foot caught against the lowest.

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"Why aren't you careful?" Dickson exclaimed.

She freed her arm from his.

"Show me," she said to Tony, holding his arm tightly; and he gently led her on to the verandah and up to the chair Aileen moved forward for her.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "Thank you;" and then, speaking as though with an effort, she asked, "Who are you?"

"This is Tony Taylor—my—my friend," Aileen said quickly.

The blind woman nodded slowly in answer, clasping her hands together in her lap and closing her lips tightly.

"You should not have gone out in the sun with only that thin rag over your head," Aileen said gently to her. "You look knocked up. Shall I—"

"No," Mrs. Dickson interrupted quickly and abruptly. "Where's Willy?"

"He's looking at that rail that is broken," Aileen answered; and Tony, standing by the steps, caught her eye, and forgot the anger he had felt.

"Shall I call him?" he said softly.

The blind woman's hands clutched one another convulsively, and she sat up in her chair, rigid, with compressed lips and pale cheeks, the staring eyes fixed in the direction whence she had heard Tony's voice.

"Tell him to go away. Tell him to go away," she said hurriedly to Aileen. "I want Willy. I want my boy. Where is my boy?"

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Aileen, meaning only to sign to Tony not to speak again, waved her hand towards him as she bent over Mrs. Dickson. He, hearing the blind woman's words, accepted the sign as a request to go, and, with anger again rising in his breast, he turned away, caught and mounted his horse, and, without a word or a glance, galloped from the station.

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CHAPTER X.

THE RACE FOR GOLD.

A land may be bare and barren, uninhabitable and desolate; the cold winds of the snow-borne North may blow across it, and freeze it into ice-bound sterility; or the blazing fury of the tropic sun may pour down upon it, and scorch it into a dreary waste of glaring, burning sand; but if there is gold in it, and if man comes to know that the gold is in it, desolation, frozen sterility, or scorching waste, are alike doomed for conquest. The gold may lie in the sand; the gold may be held under the ice, or be hidden away in massive tiers of rock hard enough and big enough to defy the wear and tear of time through countless ages; but when man comes—man who knows and understands the needs and uses of humanity—the gold will be wrested from whatever holds it, and carried away in pride and glory to the greatest centres of population to grace still further the triumphs of mankind over the grim tyrannies of Nature.

A good many men may suffer in the process. The cold, or the heat, or the lurking fever germ, will own many a victim before they own defeat, and even amongst the men themselves—the men who should be united as in the face of a common enemy—there will be the wherewithal and the impulse to swell the price paid for the hard-won fruits of victory. And so it was at Birralong.

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The find of gold on Ripple Creek (as the stream was named where Gleeson unconsciously led the Boulder Creekers to wealth) brought many a change among the men who found it.

For the first few weeks after the discovery each man was too busy winning as much as he could in the least possible time to notice very much what was going on around him. The banks of the creek were pretty well lined with men, and all the men were working wherever the layer of sandy gravel was found under the scanty topping of turf. Higher up the stream the turf lay upon rock, and lower down the stream there was no gravel at all to be found. Only was there the one area, fortunately large enough to give all the men from Boulder Creek working room, over which the sandy gravel occurred, as though at some time in the remote, bygone days a small lake had been formed in the course of the stream, into which the water from higher up had carried down and spread out the gold-bearing drift, until the basin was filled up, and the lake disappeared, as the stream flowed on its way uninterrupted and undetained. As it was, the drift was very evenly enriched by the gold, and each man, as he worked, was happy in his own surroundings, and so did not bother about those of his neighbours. Only when each one began to reach the limits of his claim, and away down the creek the water was re-depositing the rejected sand and gravel from which the gold had been washed, did any one have time to look around him. Then it was seen that the population along the creek was the population of the dirt-holes of Boulder Creek—the teeming thousands whom each one expected had arrived long since, as foretold by Gleeson, were not to be seen. It was curious, for every one had gold enough to keep them for a year with care, and they had no doubt that the drift they had been working in, and had worked out, was to be found anywhere for the looking. But they did not look. Each man had his own fancy to follow, and with money, or its equivalent, the following was easy.

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A few, whose faith in the possibilities of the alleged reefs on Boulder Creek was not to be shaken by mere alluvial success, went back with their winnings, and used them to keep the mill

going, while they drove and tunnelled and sank in search of the phantom reefs. A few—a very few—thought again of bygone dreams they had had about selections of their own, and set out, bursting with good intentions of taking up land somewhere. But the majority had no such thoughts and no such cares. They had struck a patch; they had money in hand, the result of their toil on the patch; and now they were free to spend it, without a thought or care—spend it as freely as they had made it, spend it in the search of a similarly engrossing delight to that which they had experienced in the finding of it; and when it was gone—if any gave a moment's consideration to the question, it was answered by mentally jerking the head towards the creek—when it was gone, they would come back and get some more. What comes easy, goes easy; and who cares for the morrow when to-day overflows with content?

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In search of the delights they needed, their energies were quickened by the fact that Christmas and the New Year were approaching. A twelvemonth before there had been a dearth of entertainment, more than usually pronounced, in the neighbourhood of Boulder Creek, and not even the combined persuasiveness of the inhabitants could induce the landlord of Cudlip's Rest to "set 'em up" for luck in an all-round shout. Just to stimulate the spirit of good fellowship, one man had dexterously annexed a couple of bottles of Pain-killer from a hawker's waggon he stumbled across, and those who were in his vicinity toasted one another and the general run of the diggings in nobblers of it; but it was not a success, and the festive season was even less exhilarating to the revellers than it was to those who had not participated in the "find."

Now the situation was different. There was money in the land, and with the memory still acute how, the year before, the landlord of Cudlip's Rest had been deaf to their blandishments, and proof against their numbers (for he had abstained even from replenishing his stock lest a wave of communistic instinct might sweep up Boulder Creek), they turned with one accord towards the town of Birralong. As they toiled and slaved along Boulder Creek, when they thought of Birralong at all it was to heap upon it and its inhabitants the scorn they considered was justly earned by a settlement which looked at a miner askance, and from whence stores, for years past, had been unobtainable save on a cash basis. The name of Marmot did not rank high with the fossickers when funds were low, and the joys of the Carrier's Rest were only known to the man who had "struck it" from time to time in the creek; but the aloofness of Cudlip's Rest the previous Christmas still rankled, and, not for any special admiration or respect for it, Birralong was chosen as the scene of the coming festivities.

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Marmot, having completed on the day before the last order he was expecting for the season, was taking it easy on the verandah, sitting, as was his wont, in his shirt-sleeves and with a pipe in his mouth, on the tobacco-box in front of the open doorway, just where he received the full benefit of any draught which might be set up by the heated iron roof over his head and the cool of the shade in the store. There was not much danger of taking cold; rather would a chill have been enjoyable as a change from the sweltering heat of the summer's day. The steady swing of the grasshopper's song—like the wavering hum of a telegraph pole pitched in a high, shrill key—came through the hot air on all sides, until it seemed to spring from the ground in answer to the heat-rays that beat upon it—a response from the great dusty parched crust to the ceaseless throb of the heat-waves pulsing and splashing upon it, like the ripple and rattle of shingle stones at the rush of retreating tides. There was no wind, not even a breeze; and yet the heat came in wafts and currents, as it comes from an open furnace-door as the up-draught ebbs and flows. The tough, tanned skin of old Marmot glistened with a faint moisture one moment as an extra hot wave rolled by, drying hard and rough a second later as the parched air sucked up the moisture like a greedy flame licks oil.

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The life of the bush was silent, save for the grasshoppers and an occasional stridulation from an energetic cicada (locust, as the bush-term has it, and which, like many another bush-name, seems to have been given because it was inappropriate, for the cicada is anything but a locust, while the "grasshopper" is nothing else). The leaves of the gums hung motionless, with their sharp edge turned to the sun-glare, so as to let the fierce heat strike on the stems and curl the shed-bark into long festoons—and puzzle the minds of the new chums why broad leaves cast no shade. Under the folds of the shed-bark the lizards cuddled asleep, and occasionally a tree-snake shared their shelter; while far down, squeezing into the farthest corner, away from the heat and glare, and away from their unwelcome neighbours, the green tree-frogs spread their ball-pointed toes and turned their golden eyes up to the light to watch the coiled mystery as they slept.

The iron of the store-roof popped and crackled now and then as a sheet of "galvanized," expanding, strained on a nail and buckled. And yet from further down the township road there came the whirr and shriek of Smart's buzz-saw rending its way through hard-wood logs; the clang and jangle of Cullen's hammers as they fell on iron and anvil; and more sleepily, more drowsily, more in keeping with the hot languor of the day, the hum of the children's voices as they chanted their task in unison on the open verandah of the school-house. Marmot, listening and heeding, thought, and the thoughts grew in importance in his mind and in impressiveness, until, forgetful that the court was not sitting and that he was alone, he took the pipe from his lips, and, pointing the stem down the dusty, sun-scorched track, exclaimed—

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"The cause—the fust cause—the great cause—the cause of our being a nation—the nation; yes, bust me, *the* nation—is—what?"

He waited for an answer from the silence of the verandah, and, receiving none, save the crackle of the sheets of iron in the roof, pointed with his pipe-stem in the direction of the sounds from the township.

"That!" he exclaimed. "There it is—energy—go—good Anglo-Saxon go. That's what makes us

what we are. Here's the bush asleep. If there's any niggers in it, they're asleep. Even the lizards are asleep. The trees stop growing, and won't even make a shade; but us—do we stop? No! There ain't nothin' that'll stop us. We didn't make the world altogether maybe, but, by smoke, we're making it fit for our needs. Who'd work this hot spell except us? Who'd run this country except us? Here's Australia; there's Africa; there's America; there's India; and there's "home;" and who runs the lot if it ain't us? And what's the world outside of that lot? A few paddocks full of dargoes and black-fellows ready to cut each other's throats if it wasn't for us."

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He put his pipe once more between his lips, and sat thinking in silence. The buzz-saw whirred and jarred; the hammers clanged and jangled; the school-children droned and hummed; and beyond Marmot saw in his fancy the selections whence they came to school. Always the same picture, inasmuch that in each there was work. Here a man was working with his hoe in his pumpkin patch; there another cared for his maize; a third was splitting shingles for the roof of a shed he was building; a fourth was splitting logs with a heavy maul and wedge for fencing rails; a fifth was fixing water-tanks to be ready when the rain came; while a sixth was digging a waterhole in the hard, baked earth also to be ready for the rain. On every selection, as it came into Marmot's mind, there was work going on—work that made the tanned skins of the workers glisten with the beads of sweat; work that made moving pictures against a background of nature at rest. Inside the selection houses the women did their share, and sometimes outside as well. Beyond the houses and the selections, in the gullies of the ranges, men worked as they sought for mineral wealth when the sun was high, as well as when it was low; on the big paddocks of the station the bush slept, and the flocks and herds huddled wherever shelter could be found, but the men were never still, not even in the station homesteads. Everywhere that the mind of Marmot wandered, every scene that came to him as he sat and mused, showed white men, the men of the Anglo-Saxon blood, tireless, restless, working. Only when men of other races, dark-skinned, dark-haired, and dark-eyed, passed his mental vision, was there the stillness of lazy rest; and Marmot was pleased, for he loved to prate of the Anglo-Saxon and the work they had done, and would do, for the world that gave them birth.

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His meditations were interrupted by the sound of many voices, and he rose from his seat and went to the edge of the verandah, so as to command a better view up the road. A wide column of dust, or a cloud made up of columns, moved down the centre, the sunlight gleaming on the dust-cloud, making it nearly opaque, and rendering the figures of the men within it almost invisible. It approached rapidly, and part of it rolled along as an advance guard, filling the air that Marmot breathed till he coughed and swore. When the main body arrived, he felt it in his eyes and nostrils, and the men who tramped on to the verandah and into the store were covered with it, so that, as they moved, it came in small puffs from their clothes and boots.

The men trooped past him and into the store, talking and chaffing, their clothes toil-stained and ragged, their faces tanned nearly black by the sun.

"Now, then, old brusher, where's your reach-me-downers?" one asked.

"Sling out a pound of twist as a start," another demanded.

"Two revolvers and a bag of shot," a third wanted; while others clamoured for tent-calico, blankets, sheath-knives, and such like necessaries, and, growing impatient at not being attended to at once, tramped out on to the verandah, where they sat on their swags as they filled their pipes.

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"There's no rum in the show, boys," a man exclaimed, as he appeared in the doorway. "It's all up at the pub."

"Come on, then," the last man to arrive, and who had just slung his swag to the ground by the horse-posts, cried, as he swung his swag on to his shoulder again.

Like a body of ants swarming on to a victim they had come from the road to the store. Now they streamed out again and gathered in the roadway, calling to one another, chaffing one another, and worrying those who still lingered inside to hasten along and bring the storekeeper with them.

Then, with Marmot in the lead, they passed slowly down the township road, and as they passed the various centres of industry which had so roused Marmot's admiration earlier in the day, a hush fell upon the machinery and the workers ceased their labours, while the procession in the direction of the Rest grew larger. It was just such an occasion as justified the expansion of bush hospitality, and Birralong, recognizing the fact, went out as a man to meet it. The school-children, as they trooped away home, carried the message with them to their fathers and their brothers that the prospectors had come in from the ranges with a team-load of nuggets, and that there was a pile of them on the bar table at the Rest being melted. The news travelled, as such news will, and many a man on a neighbouring selection was moved to thought. Half the farming implements in the district were damaged or out of order, and flooring-boards were at a premium, to judge by the numbers of clients who, during the early evening—school only broke up at four—rode or drove up to the smithy and the saw-mill, and had perforce to seek the proprietors farther afield.

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Since the arrival of the trio who led Tony away the Rest had not known such an entertainment. There was drought in the land, and water was so scarce on many a selection that washing was a luxury which stood adjourned till the rain came, and so the Rest had been allowed to slumber. But a good store of necessaries, as so regarded at a bush hotel, was in the house, for a drought is usually followed, sooner or later, by a flood; and in a country where rain is rare and sunshine frequent, that which in more humid countries is regarded with displeasure, is hailed in droughty lands as an occasion for festivity and mirth; hence the Rest was well stocked, so as to be ready

for the rain.

The accommodation for housing an unlimited number of visitors, however, was not quite so apparent, but when those visitors were men who had for years past known no other roof than a tent, and often none other than the sky, sleeping quarters were not difficult to obtain, especially as each man had his blankets—or what passed for such—with him. There were paddocks round the Rest and calico enough for a hundred tents in Marmot's store, and with gold in their pockets, the fossickers of Boulder Creek asked for nothing more—in the way of shelter.

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The diggers shared their good fortune royally with their comrades and friends, and song and jest circulated, as well as the encourager of both, and the atmosphere in the big, lumbering room which served the purpose of a bar, was filled with laughter and tobacco-smoke on the first night of the arrival.

Subsequently other elements supervened—elements which had their origin in the influence of potent libations acting on natures by no means warped by conventional thought, but which, under that influence, were stripped of the scanty robes they wore, and stood before the world naked in all the simplicity and crudity of first principles.

There was a guest already staying at the Rest when the crowd of diggers arrived—a guest whose suave manner and smooth tongue had been used to ingratiate himself with the proprietor of the Rest, but which had only tended to induce a lurking suspicion against him. Men used to the blunt methods of unadulterated human nature are prone to be sceptical of the motives which underlie what they tersely define as "chin-oil."

He, a slim, long-limbed man, with a sharp-featured face and shifty eyes, who said his name was Tap, lingered round the bar as the diggers trooped in, and smiled and cringed as he heard the order given to "Fill 'em up, fill 'em all up." When his glass was charged, he sidled up to a group, and asked, in his smooth voice, whether any one had found a nugget.

The man nearest, a burly, sunburned specimen, with a voice like a bull's and a vocabulary limited in everything save profanity, turned and looked at him.

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"Nuggets?" he said, with a large embellishment of adjective, as he produced a canvas bag from inside his shirt and opened the mouth of it, revealing a store of gold. "We've all got 'em—enough to buy"—and he indicated Birralong.

"Oh, I am glad," the smooth-tongued Tap rejoined. "You must have worked hard; and in the hot weather too."

The man swallowed the contents of his glass, and set it down with a bang on the table as he fixed his eyes on Tap's face, and from the succeeding observations Tap realized that his sympathy and would-be friendly overture had been as gall in the mouth of his companion, who, unused to anything save the rugged bluntness of a wild, free life, took the mealy-mouthed sentence as a slight on his intelligence. The storm was averted by Tap inviting him to "have another," and, with delicate humility, taking the burly man's glass up to the bar in order to have it replenished—and also charged against the score of the burly man. Then he discreetly moved away, and mingled with other groups, always reaching one as the order was being given, and moving on to another before the time came for the "shout" to get round to his turn, until he had learned conclusively that every one of the men had a fair-sized bag of gold somewhere in his possession, and felt satisfied that he had imbibed as much as he could conveniently carry at their expense.

Slipping out of the room quietly and unostentatiously, he went round to the paddock where his horse was, saddled it, and rode away. The sounds of uproarious mirth came to him from the direction of the Rest, and he smiled furtively.

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"It's right into our hands," he said to himself, as he rode along in the direction of the Three-mile.

He followed the track, dimly defined in the evening gloom, with the certainty of one who traverses a well-known route. The red flicker of firelight showed through the simple window as he approached the hut, and he went up to the door, after turning his horse loose in the paddock, and pushed it open. Inside, the firelight showed two men sitting on rough-made stools in front of the fireplace, while a third lay on a stretcher at the far end of the room.

One of the two men turned round quickly.

"Hullo, Barber, I didn't know you were back," Tap said in a subdued voice. "But I'm so glad, because—"

"Shut the door," the man interrupted abruptly.

"All right," Tap answered, as he turned and did the man's bidding. "Walker hasn't turned up, but there's a lot of them come in, and they've all got gold," he went on, as he came over to the fire.

The man lying on the stretcher half raised himself, and the firelight fell on his face.

"Oh, you're there," Tap said, as he saw and recognized Gleeson. "I was going to say—"

Barber turned round again and fixed his eyes on Tap's face.

"What about Gleeson's men?" he asked.

"I didn't hear if they were there or not, but Gleeson can go in himself to-morrow. They won't know him now, after the night they're having."

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"If Walker's not there he's waiting for them somewhere," Gleeson said.

"Then it's good enough for you to get in and start the game before they come," Barber said; adding, "And maybe you'll have sense enough to hold your tongue after the last experience you had. And you too, Tap, d'ye hear? I'm boss of this show, and don't you forget it."

The two men addressed did not answer; and Slaughter, sitting in front of the fire and looking into the red mass with eyes that were dazed and lustreless, wondered what all the comings and goings and muttered conversation, which had so inexplicably supplanted the still solitude of the Three-mile, had to do with him and his selection.

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CHAPTER XI.

BILLIARDS MADE EASY.

There was a lurid atmosphere at Birralong during the days that the diggers held high revel at the Rest. The sun blazed down pitilessly on the land, stricken sore by the drought; for it was the season of the year when the rain should have come in copious downfalls to moisten the parched soil, and when thunderstorms, accompanied by the vivid gleam of tropical lightning, should have come to cool and clear the air. But no rain came; not even a cloud obscured the blue of the sky for a moment, and not a suspicion of dew fell during the hours of darkness. Only the lightning came, as soon as the sun was down, blazing, flaring, and flashing round the horizon and high overhead; disturbing the darkness as the patter of a tattoo disturbs silence; punctuating the night into periods of sombre, awful blackness by moments of dazzling, blinding white fury, that made the eyes tingle through the succeeding moments of dark, and the ears shrink and tremble, anticipating the rending thunder-crash which never came. And always was the air hot and dry, and the wind, when it blew, was as a breath from the mouth of a volcano. The grass, withered and brown, fell away into dust; the leaves hung limp and flaccid on the trees; the cultivation areas of the selections were parched and dismal; and to add to the tribulation of the selectors, swarms of grasshoppers were abroad, swooping down in clouds, made up of myriads, upon everything that was green or bore the semblance of green, and never moving on until only the bare earth and the stripped tree branches were left.

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It was such a season when some excuse was to be made for congregating at the Rest, and the advent of the diggers, with money to spend and a desire to entertain everybody who came within coo-ee of them, gave any excuse needed, not only to the selectors, but also to the men of Birralong.

Great things were going to be done as soon as the period of festivity was over, and the miners returned to the field and settled down steadily once more to toil and industry. Many a hard-working selector, who remembered his parched paddocks and bony stock, thought of throwing in his lot with the men he had formerly referred to as gully-rakers, when he saw the lavish expenditure, not only at the Rest, but at Marmot's, made possible by the gold they had won. Nor were the establishments at either end of the township alone in profiting. There would be a great demand for tools when the claims were started again, and Cullen had orders for picks by the ton; while the possibility of reefs being discovered, and tunnels and shafts being necessary to work them, filled Smart with enthusiasm at the amount of sawn timber which would be required in the early months of the coming year. It was evidently a period of boom in the history of the town, and to pass the time until the festive season was over, many a form of entertainment was suggested. A race meeting was absolutely necessary, everybody urged, the diggers for the fun of the thing, the selectors with an eye to business, for the diggers had no horses, and as they might like to run their own, sales were not improbable.

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In the mean time some one suggested a euchre tournament and a billiard handicap, and, in a day, what attention every one of the miners could spare from the other attractions of the Rest, was absorbed in the double struggle. In a couple of days, as far as they were able to understand clearly, the majority of the men had lost a considerable portion of the gold they had brought in; but no one seemed to have won it. Tap, who had returned to the Rest, usually had a hand in the games that were going; and Gleeson, who mingled with the crowd as a stranger to the other, also joined in the fun, though mostly on the billiard-table. They were the only two who never lost.

There was a certain element of mystery about the billiard-table at the Rest, such as might reasonably be expected from cushions which had been subjected to ten years of the Birralong climate, and from balls which had been played with by such visitors as came to the Rest. A kerosene lamp with a tin reflector, standing over each corner pocket, is not the best light a billiard-table can have, more especially in a country where flies and other winged insects are numerous, and possessed of a habit of assembling largely round the lamps, and falling, more or less singed, on the cloth of the table. To these drawbacks Gleeson earnestly attributed the bad luck which usually attended the play of his opponents, and the extraordinary strokes with which he was able to win the hardest fought games; but not even these extenuating circumstances

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could quite reconcile the miners to the constant loss they suffered at his hands, and so it came about that he was the first one at whom they shied.

In this he was personally responsible to a very large extent, for being a man of exalted opinions as to his own importance, he could not long maintain the attitude of reserve and self-effacement which Barber had imposed as a condition of service under the scheme he had formulated. As soon as the miners began to fight shy of him as an opponent at the billiard-table, he forgot the necessity for caution, and ignored the gentle persuasive influence of an occasional defeat. Instead of the tact which animated the smooth-tongued Tap, he developed swagger and "side," and talked largely of his powers as a billiardist, and patronizingly to the men who made matches between themselves and declined even his bets. When the table was disengaged and there were onlookers in the room, he performed what they termed "flash" strokes, and challenged promiscuously any one and every one to play for large and larger stakes, until the souls of the miners were wroth within them, and the men of Birralong yearned in silence for the return of Tony, who alone of all the township had succeeded in mastering the intricacies of the table to anything like the degree Gleeson had.

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But Tony had not yet returned from the diggings. He and his two companions, working more scientifically along the creek in the scrub than the others had done on Ripple Creek, had located the extent over which gold was to be found in the wash-dirt, and had then carefully and systematically worked through it, the division of labour enabling them to get over the ground quickly and effectively. As none of the men from the other creek visited them as they worked, they judged that their find was purely their personal concern and that no one else knew of its existence. Under the spell of excitement engendered by the find, Gleeson passed entirely out of memory, and the winning of all the gold in the creek before any one else could come and share the spoil was the one idea in their minds.

But if Gleeson was forgotten, he had not forgot. When he sneaked away after the thrashing that Palmer Billy had administered, he had no idea in his mind beyond getting out of reach of the vengeance of the men he believed he had fooled. He did not know exactly in what direction he journeyed, save that it was away from the scene of his humiliation, the thoroughness of which made him ache in every bone, joint, and muscle of his body. He kept moving, as fast as he could, away from the point of danger; and in accordance with that unexplained law which induces two bubbles on a tea-cup to run together, or two ships on the face of the boundless ocean to collide, or two buggies on a plain to run into one another, or a single horseman to get into difficulties through the one rabbit burrow in an area of twenty square miles of country, Gleeson, following his nose in the single-hearted desire to escape from honest associations, ran upon the temporary camp of Barber, and so became re-united with Tap. A rogue admires the rogue who can cheat him, and Gleeson fraternized with his old comrade and Barber at once.

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Subsequent investigation revealed the fact that there really was gold in Ripple Creek, and with that resource which, more than necessity, is the mother of invention, communications were opened up with Walker, and the plan laid for the relieving of the successful miners of their stores of gold during the season of holiday and festivity. Learning the way Peters and his companions had gone, Barber had tracked them over the creek to the scrub, and had watched them, from a safe cover, as they worked the payable dirt. In order to include their winnings in the general haul it was intended to make, Walker was deputed to proceed to their camp, after the men had left Ripple Creek, and stay with them until, by fair means or foul, he had either induced them to proceed to Birralong and into the trap, or had succeeded in carrying off their gold single-handed. The latter was more than he could accomplish, so he had to stay with them and induce them to join in the festivities at the Rest, a proceeding which gave Gleeson time to use his skill in transferring a good deal of the gold from the miners to himself before the arrival of Palmer Billy and his mates—an incident he had neither the desire nor the intention to witness.

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With that perversity which sometimes afflicts the issues of deep-laid schemes, the end of the drift on the creek by the scrub was reached several days sooner than was expected, and when the labour of an entire morning resulted in nothing, Palmer Billy grew impatient, and said it was a visitation upon them for working in the holiday season. He told the others they could stay, if they liked, but he was off to give the festivities at Birralong the benefit of his vocal art. Peters and Tony fell in with the proposal, and started off without giving Walker time to get ahead of them and warn Gleeson to keep out of sight.

They happened to come out about sunset upon the Birralong road near Marmot's store at a moment when some of the residents were mutually encouraging one another to lose their tempers over Gleeson's swagger in the billiard-room. The appearance of Tony was hailed as a god-send. The story of how the "flashy," as they termed Gleeson, was swelling his chest up at the expense of the township, was poured into the ears of the new-comers, and Tony was adjured, by all the ties of patriotism and loyalty, to "sail in and knock him cold," as one of the crowd expressed it.

It came to some one that a surprise party would be an excellent idea—a surprise party which would enter the billiard-room at a moment when the "flashy," flushed with victory, would be uttering his loud-mouthed challenge; a surprise party which would quietly "take him on and paralyze him stony," as another of the crowd explained.

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Walker demurred. He thought the trick would be unfair and mean, and lacking the sporting instinct which is the hall-mark of Australians; but the others were rather taken with it, and Palmer Billy, with more force than wit—and more good luck than either—insisted that Walker, as he had conscientious scruples, should come into the room behind them, an arrangement which

effectually prevented a warning word being sent to Gleeson.

A game was just over when the new-comers reached the Rest, and as no one seemed to be in a hurry to take the table, and the room was exceptionally full, Gleeson knocked the balls about with a good deal of swagger as he offered swamping odds to any one, and every one, for a game. Tony was in the lead, with Palmer Billy and Peters close after him, as they entered the room by a door to which Gleeson's back at the moment was turned.

"Now, then, what's wrong with you all? Haven't you the cash or the pluck, or what's in the wind? I'll give any one seventy-five in a hundred and play him for twenty notes. Now, then, who's on?"

"Well, I am," Tony exclaimed; and Gleeson turned at the voice.

He saw Tony; he saw Peters; he saw Palmer Billy; and behind them he saw Walker; and for the minute he stood, still and staring, as a quick suspicion flashed through his mind whether he had been sold by the man.

"Oh, we're sports all square, you bet yer bloochers," Palmer Billy's raucous voice said, as his eyes, sparkling with a curious gleam, met Gleeson's. [Pg 169]

A hubbub, meant for a cheer, broke out among the men round the room; and Gleeson, guessing there was no fighting for the time being, made an effort to pull himself together.

"I'll play you level," he jerked out, facing Tony.

A roar of dissent came from the audience. Only Palmer Billy's voice penetrated it as he yelled—

"On yer own terms. We ain't no sharks."

The sentiment struck a responsive note among the onlookers, and the roar of dissent changed to a cheer of approval, so loud that it brought every man within earshot to the room to see what was going.

Recovering his composure and his swagger as quickly as he could, Gleeson offered to back himself—and had his answer from the roomful. Tap, discriminating and crafty, had exchanged glances with Walker, and guessed what was in the air.

"I think I'll take those that you don't," he said smoothly; and Gleeson, glad of the hint that his friends were sticking to him, accepted the partnership.

"Perhaps some of these gentlemen——" Tap began, looking at the group by the doorway.

"Our money's on him," Palmer Billy shouted, slapping Tony on the back.

"And mine's on the other man," Walker said quickly; and a moment later a babel of confusion reigned as each man sought to make the other one put up the stakes.

Marmot, bursting with importance as the patron-in-chief to Tony, hammered on the wall in his efforts to make his voice heard in a proposition. Palmer Billy, looking round the room with a smile on his face as he thought how well the chorus of his great song would sound sung by such a mob, caught sight of the local constable, somewhat overcome by profuse hospitality, sitting in a far corner. [Pg 170]

"What sort," he yelled, and his voice went through the babel of sound like the shriek of a siren through mist. "What sort," he repeated, as men paused in their clamour, startled by the voice. "Let the trap hold the dibs."

Any proposal was bound to be greeted with favour at the moment, for the men were in the highest elation at the prospective defeat of "flashy." The constable, with official dignity, undertook the responsibility of stakeholder. Gleeson, Walker, and Tap laid down all the wealth they had, and from all parts of the room contributions came to cover it, until the money on Tony was heavily over-subscribed; and men were crying out that they could get no bet. The excitement brought back some of Gleeson's swagger.

"If our word's good enough, we'll take every wager," he shouted; and the audacity pleased the crowd.

The constable, the proprietor of the Rest, and Marmot, mounted guard over the stakes, placed for convenience in two empty gin cases—one for the solid gold of the miners, and the other for the gold, notes, and paper of the trio.

Then the game began, and the men crowded round the walls of the room, silent, stern, and scowling, as they saw Gleeson run away from their champion like a racehorse from a bullock-team. He went out the points he had boastfully offered ahead of the Birralong champion, and a gleam and a flash went round the room as the men realized what it meant—the combined wealth of the crowd belonged to the three. [Pg 171]

"Double or quits," Gleeson cried, as he faced round on Tony.

"Done," he answered; and Gleeson glanced round the room.

"Are you on?" he asked.

A growl of assent was the answer, and the second game began.

Tony, unsteadied in the first game by the day's travelling, set his teeth hard, and nerved himself to avoid a repetition of the defeat. The bumps in the cushions favoured him, and he held his own from the start, and came in just ahead of his opponent amidst howls of approval from the diggers.

As the noise lulled before the growing desire to toast success, long life, and various other pleasant prospects to the winner of the second game, an artistic piece of by-play was introduced by a violent altercation between Walker, Tap, and Gleeson, the first two savagely attacking the latter for having thrown away their money by playing double or quits. Walker repudiated the matter, and claimed that as he had not agreed to the stake on the second game, he was entitled to payment for the wagers he had made on the first.

Palmer Billy advanced to the table.

"If a man ain't satisfied with the whackin' we give him," he said, in a tone that penetrated to every corner of the room, and with his eyes fixed on Gleeson in what, to the latter, was a peculiarly disconcerting glance, "why, we're on to whack him again—or his mates."

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"Good iron, Billy," some one yelled. "Set 'em up again."

"*When* we've irrigated, if you please," Palmer Billy retorted; adding, to the host, "Rum—straight."

In order that there might be no misunderstanding about the third game, it was decided in advance that the stakes were to be the same as before, and that in the morning another game would be played, by daylight, for double or quits, whoever the loser might be, the stakes remaining where they were, in the gin cases, in charge of the constable and the proprietor of the Rest. The interval between the second and third games being somewhat prolonged, the interest taken in the game by the audience was less discriminating than in the earlier ones, while the applause was more promiscuous, due to the fact that many of the onlookers had not quite such a clear grasp of passing events as usual. Only at the finish, when Tony was beaten by a single point, did the audience realize that the situation was serious; and then, lest the danger should cause them anxiety and the result of the return match leave them stranded, they made the most of the opportunity and the resources of the Rest.

The township "hung-up" the following morning to watch the great match, for with the morning came the realization of the fact that Tony had already lost two out of three games with Gleeson, and that on the result of the fourth the prosperity of Birralong, and of the visitors within its gates, speaking figuratively, for at least a twelvemonth actually depended. The men gathered round the Rest, the shaky indistinctness inevitable from the previous evening's hilarity adding to the expression of gravity which was upon every face. What conversation there was they carried on in subdued tones, and, except in the case of a few, the anxiety they felt even kept them away from the bar.

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The room in which was the billiard-table was densely packed by the time the game began, the men standing three deep round the walls, grim, silent, sombre. The morning was intensely hot, and every door, window, and fanlight was as wide open as it could be. The men were too engrossed to notice that Gleeson turned up without his two mates, while the recollections of the condition of the constable when he was conveyed to his own cottage the night before prevented any one from wondering why he did not attend.

From the moment the game began there was dead silence in the room—a silence so oppressive that the click of the balls sounded sharp and clear, and the whizzing hum of the grasshoppers, moving in swarms, came in rolling crescendoes and quavering diminuendoes from the parched and barren paddocks all around, as distinctly as if the table had been set out in the open bush. From the start it was evident both players were doing their best to win, and while the local confidence was not shaken in Tony, it was noticed with more than anxiety that he never got far ahead, and often dropped behind. As the finish drew near, the men composing the audience scarcely breathed as Tony played his strokes, until their nerves were strained and their muscles quivered as he stood with an unfinished break at two points from home, and his opponent ten behind.

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It was an easy shot, so easy that Birralong almost cheered, but caught its breath in a gasp, lest it should put the champion off his stroke. He, feeling something of the excitement, miscalculated a bump, or forgot a hard patch on the cushion, and broke down, just two from home.

Gleeson, cool, collected, and unmoved, said "Pity" under his breath, and a shiver passed through the audience. Then he played his strokes, carefully and quietly, and the room, save for the click of the balls as they cannoned, the rustle of the player as he moved, and the ceaseless buzz from the starving grasshoppers outside, was silent. But it had no effect on Gleeson. He was quite unmoved and unconcerned as he made his strokes, steadily and well, till he was level with Tony, and only needed two to win.

A hum, half curse, half gasp, travelled round the crowded room and out of the open doors to the swarms buzzing and chirping in the paddocks and the trees, and Gleeson, with obtrusive calm, paused to chalk his cue.

Leisurely and tantalizingly he put back the chalk and studied the easy shot which was all that stood between him and victory, between Birralong and bankruptcy; and another hum, half curse, half gasp, travelled round the room and out of the open doors and windows, out to where the countless myriads of hungry, stridulating insects sung and chirped and buzzed, careless of the human anguish pent up so near them, careless of everything, as they strained their senses in search of something green.

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Gleeson took his aim, and gently touched his ball, playing to pot the red. The red, rolling slowly, was halfway to the pocket, when there came into the silent room a sound of rushing, rustling, throbbing wings, as through the open doors and windows and fanlights a cloud of

grasshoppers swarmed down upon the something green their eyes had seen when attracted by the weird, inhuman hum. The red ball ran against three and stopped, an inch from the drop of the pocket, and the mighty shout that came from the throats of the Birralong men shook even the foundations of the Rest, and put to flight, out on to the dusty paddocks again, most of the grasshopper swarm.

Those that remained were stamped to death, as, a moment later, Tony put the red ball down, and the audience, mad with the glee of victory, danced, shouting, everywhere, even on the billiard-table.

In the turmoil of rejoicing that ensued, even the shadows cast by the glow of happiness on the previous evening were forgotten, though it was, after all, only their own money which Tony had won back for them. Everybody wished to toast everybody, and in their anxiety to carry out the wish, they failed to notice that Gleeson quietly withdrew. Only when other facts were forced upon their attention, and they learned that the game won had been really lost, did they notice his departure, and then it was too late.

In the midst of their rejoicing some one called for the stakeholders to share in the festivity. The proprietor of the Rest was present, but he misunderstood the suggestion, and thought the men wanted the stakes handed over.

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"Leary has them," he exclaimed. "He took them away last night, quiet like."

Some of the men remembered accompanying Leary, the constable, to his cottage late on the previous night. He certainly did not have the stakes with him then; but they did not stop to argue the matter, for others, jealous that so important a personage as the local constable, who was also the stakeholder in the great match, should be absent from the rejoicing over the Birralong victory, had already started for the constable's cottage.

They found him lying on the floor with his hands tied behind him, his legs securely bound together, and a rough but effective gag in his mouth. Suspicious at first only of a practical joke on the part of some of their number, they liberated him to the running accompaniment of jest and chaff. As soon as he was free, he struggled to his feet and, facing them, shouted—

"I arrest the lot of you for assault and robbery."

It appealed to them as an excellent example of spontaneous humour, and they burst into loud laughter.

"I know the man who took it. I'd swear to him in a thousand. If it means hanging them, I'll——"

One of the men, clear enough to miss the point of the joke at which his companions were laughing so heartily, interrupted to ask—

"Took what?"

"Took what? Why, the gold," Leary answered fiercely.

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The words killed the laughter as water kills fire, and where a moment before the faces of the men were wrinkled with their amusement, the lines disappeared as the mouths went stern, and the flush of gaiety gave way to the pallor of fear.

"The gold?" they gasped.

"Yes, the gold," Leary shouted. "We brought it here for safety while the last game was on, and it was here they came for it, tying me up the same as you found me, and——"

"Who were they?" a man called out.

"The three who took the bets and another I've never seen."

With a shout of rage and a storm of words the men rushed from the cottage, back to the Rest, spreading the story as they went, that there had been thieves in the camp—thieves who had tried to fleece them, and, having failed in that, had robbed them instead.

One or two remained with the constable.

"When was it done?" one asked Leary.

"How should I know?" he answered. "I reckon I was sleeping when I wakened here all tied up, and there were the four of them parcelling out the gold and talking among themselves quiet and easy. I let out a yell, and one of them—the stranger—came over and jammed something into my mouth—and there I was till you chaps came."

At the Rest the men were raging and storming, for they had now discovered that Gleeson was gone; while round the proprietor of the Rest, Marmot, Smart, and Cullen were gathered—the disappearance of the gold entirely altered the character of the miners in their eyes. Palmer Billy, his face working with passion, strode up and down.

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"The sharks! And we didn't kill one of them when we had him," he was yelling in a voice that sounded even above the babel.

Marmot, shrewdly scenting trouble if the miners were refused supplies at the present juncture—and they would be refused if they asked now that their money was gone—began to urge the men to start in chase of the thieves. Fortunately his words caught Palmer Billy's ears, and at once the stentorian voice shouted—

"Come on, boys, we'll run 'em down and hang 'em. They can't be far away."

Most of the men saw red in the fury of the moment. With their winnings gone, their festivity cut

short, their credit exhausted, and their self-control, never very strong, further weakened by the frolic of the night before, there would have been a short shrift for any of the four men had they been captured. But four mounted men, with their wits about them, and with several hours' start, were more than a match for a mob of men without organization, or even a knowledge as to the direction in which the others had gone. A few moments' thought would have shown that to them, only they had neither the time nor the inclination for thought. They were off, anywhere and everywhere, as soon as they could get their swags together; and Marmot's fellow-townsmen lavished praise upon him for his astuteness, as they saw the last of the angry crowd depart.

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Some few stayed. Tony stopped Peters, and Palmer Billy stayed too, arguing vigorously against their tardiness in starting, till he calmed down and understood.

"This makes six times I've been bluffed by sharks, and I've only half killed one," he said savagely. "We'll strike it again before we've done, boys, and if a shark gets at me then—well, he can have it, that's all."

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CHAPTER XII.

RIVAL ISSUES.

A mile from Barellan homestead, and running through a patch of scrub, there was a long, level stretch of land, so smooth of surface and so free from timber that it was almost as if it had been purposely cleared and levelled to afford a track for a gallop. The scrub was dense on either side, the undergrowth of shrubs and bushes reaching up to the lower branches of the big trees, and forming a thick wall of vegetation, which made the track a closed-in avenue, silent, save for the scream of cockatoos and parrots as they flew from side to side, and shady. Aileen had chanced upon it during the first few weeks of her residence at Barellan, and since she had discovered it she had gone there daily for a ride through the quiet, still coolness of the bush. At first it had been an outlet for the grief she felt, and which did not diminish by being kept to herself. Her horse, the companion of many an hour while she lived at the school cottage, was doubly a companion on such an occasion; and, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, he carried her through the bush till the rush of the wind past her ears, the scent of the eucalypt in her nostrils, and the bright gleam of the sunshine all around, drove from her mind the gloomy memories which weighed upon it. Always had she gone alone, persistently declining Dickson's offers to accompany her until he had ceased to make them, and always riding to that one long stretch of level land, a gallop over which was as a tonic to her mind and body. It was there she sought consolation for the hurt which had come to her by the continued absence of Tony. Without suspecting that he had taken offence at her action when she had waved him to keep quiet, she was surprised to see him ride off, but expected that he would come out to the station again the next day. As the days went by and there was no sign of him, she began to wonder. Then Dickson told her that he had heard Tony had gone back to the diggings, and she attributed his not returning to the station to that cause.

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Later there came words of the gathering of the diggers at Birralong, and Dickson, who was often away, at the township, he said, brought word of Tony's return. Then Aileen expected and hoped to see him again, but she only heard of him through Dickson, only heard of him under conditions which made her resentful. Not only had Tony apparently forgotten her, but Nellie Murray also had done so. She happened to remark to Dickson on one occasion how curious it was that Nellie had not been over to the station.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, with what struck her as uneasiness in his voice and manner. "Why should she come?"

"Why?" she repeated. "Why, to see me, of course. I have not seen her since—since——"

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"Oh, she's all right," he put in, as she hesitated. "At least, I suppose so. How should I know? Tony could tell you more about that than I can."

"Tony?" she asked quickly.

He stood looking at her with the uneasy grin which usually came to his face when he was uncertain.

"What do you mean? Tony could tell me more——"

"Oh, I don't know," he interrupted. "I thought you'd have known—it's all over the place, and the township's full of it—how Tony and Nellie have fixed things up. Whenever he comes in from the diggings he goes straight to the Murrays first."

It had been in his mind for some time that before he could prosecute his own suit with Aileen he would have to do something to overthrow—and make certain that he had overthrown—the supremacy of Tony. Here was the chance to do so, and as she listened he was taking full advantage of the opportunity to say as much as he could which was likely to rankle in Aileen's

memory against Tony. It was his very anxiety to do as much as possible which defeated him. The uneasy grin, the gleam in the watery, shifty eyes, and the haste he made to blurt out what he had previously kept so secret, roused the anger of the girl against him instead of against his absent rival.

"That's a lie!" she exclaimed, as she looked at him with eyes that were dangerously bright.

"I only told you—you need not believe it. Go and ask in the township," he replied lamely, his eyes avoiding hers.

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She turned away from him at the moment, full of resentment and anger. An hour later, when her indignation had had time to calm somewhat, she came back to where she had left him on the verandah, and found that he had ridden away towards the township road soon after she had left him. It occurred to her then that if she were also to ride into Birralong she would be able to hear what was said about Tony and Nellie, for now that the first flush of anger had passed away, Aileen was beginning to feel something akin to jealousy. She had her horse saddled and bridled, and was away, with the intention of riding direct to the Murrays and learning the real state of affairs. Less than a quarter of a mile from the station she reined in her horse. Why should she bother about it? she asked herself angrily. Was she going to make herself the laughing-stock of the place? Was she going to show to all Birralong the truth of her feelings for Tony? Before she could even answer her own questions, she wheeled her horse round, and set him at a gallop for the long, open stretch of land between the belts of scrub.

The track turned suddenly as it came into the long, straight lane, and the horse gathered itself in its stride as it swung round the bend, leaping forward again into its full stride as it faced the clear run. And as it came round, Aileen saw, half hidden by the scrub, Willy Dickson standing beside his horse, and the figure of a girl disappearing behind the bushes. She had ridden past the spot before she could pull in her horse, but as soon as she could check him, she rode back to where Dickson was standing. As she approached, he stepped out into the open and came to meet her.

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"Where has Nellie gone?" Aileen exclaimed, as she came up.

"Nellie?" he repeated, his watery eyes blinking and shifting. "Nellie who?"

She looked at him for a moment, and then sprang from the saddle. Leaving her horse with the bridle hanging loose on his neck, she stepped towards the belt of scrub behind which she had seen the figure of the girl disappearing. Dickson, his face changing colour and his eyes flickering and quivering, interposed before her.

"There are snakes in the scrub. You get back. They might hurt you," he said abruptly. "And besides——" he added, and paused.

Aileen stood in front of him, straight and erect, and with a glance fixed upon him which made him keep his eyes looking anywhere rather than into hers.

"Willy Dickson, that's a lie!" she exclaimed. "It's not the first you've told me, though you're mistaken if you think I have believed them. Was that Nellie Murray or was it not?"

He blinked uneasily, but neither answered nor moved.

"Then I'll see for myself," she said, as she tried to push past him.

He put out his arm to stop her, and she brushed against it. With the other hand he caught hold of her arm. A slight switch was in her hand, and as she felt his clasp, she swung her arm round and cut at him. At the same moment from among the bushes behind him she saw Nellie Murray come out.

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"We don't interfere with you, Aileen, and I don't see what you want interfering with us," she said, as she came nearer, Dickson as rapidly slinking to one side.

"Nellie!" the other girl exclaimed.

"Oh yes, I know," Nellie retorted. "I know. It's me, I suppose, who is interfering with you, now I've found out where you're always coming for rides? But you just understand this. Willy Dickson is going to marry me, or I'll know why, and so will Bobby and father. The sooner you get out of Barellan and leave other girls' fellows alone the better."

Aileen, staring in astonishment at Nellie's face, could only again exclaim—

"Nellie!"

"Don't 'Nellie' me," the other retorted. "I know all about it. I made him tell me what it all meant. You fancy you can do what you like with him, but I'm boss in this act. He's got to do as I tell him, or else I go and tell his mother something that'll make him sit up. If you fancy you're going to cut me out, you've got to learn something. I've had about enough of this, I can tell you. Don't stand staring at me like a bandicoot; he's told me the way you've been trying to make mischief, and I tell you this, if you think——"

Aileen, losing her surprise at the girl's manner under the flash of anger which came to her when she understood Nellie's reference, swung round to where Dickson was standing.

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"Willy Dickson, what other lies have you been telling?" she cried.

"Oh, don't think you're going to get out of it that way," Nellie exclaimed. "You'll——"

The look Aileen turned upon her silenced her.

"I don't know what you mean, Nellie," she said quietly. "I wondered why you never came out to see me—I understand now. I don't think I need say any more."

She turned away and went to where her horse was standing, and, mounting it, rode away back to Barellan without looking again where Nellie and Dickson stood.

As she went out of sight round the bend in the track, Dickson turned savagely on his companion.

"You fool!" he said. "You've done a fine thing now."

"I don't care," the girl answered sullenly.

"Don't you? Well, I'll make you."

"No, you won't," she said. "I'd have told her everything if she'd waited another minute. Then ___"

"Then you'll say good-bye to your chance," he interrupted.

"I don't care," she repeated, in the same sullen tone. "I can tell Bobby and father, and—and Bobby'll kill you. He hates you enough."

He had no answer ready, and she went on.

"I know it's lies you told. You always told me lies—always. Only when I saw her come here it made me mad, and I wanted to hurt her first and you afterwards. I didn't care for hurting you so much so long as I hurt her. Now I know it was all lies you told me. She isn't after you; she wouldn't look at you. But you're after her, wanting to tell her all the lies you told me, and make her believe all the lies you did me, and she won't—she won't—and that's why I hate her. I believed them, and she won't. I believed you, and now—now you think you'll throw me over to take her on—and she won't—and I hate her for it, for she'll never be like me."

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The girl stood with her mouth drawn and hard and her gleaming eyes staring at the ground.

"Don't be a fool," he mumbled, and the sound of his voice roused her.

"You remember what I told you," she said, as she looked at him quickly. "You told me lies, and I believed them; but if she does the same, I'll kill you before she gets you. It would hurt her more to kill you then, and I'll do it."

"Don't be a fool," he repeated.

"I'm not a fool; I was one, but I'm not now," she went on. "I'm going to tell your mother, and Bobby, and father, and—and her; and then, if you don't do what you promised—"

"What's the use of talking like that?" he interrupted, in a half-whining voice. "Don't I tell you I will as soon as ever I get this other business off? It's bound to come right in six months or so—Barber said so before he went away—and then I can buy my own station, because the old woman's bound to get shirty if I won't have the other girl—she's been on it already, don't I tell you? You just wait. It'll only be six months more."

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"That'll be too late," the girl answered, with all the sullenness in her voice again and her mouth growing hard once more.

"No, it won't; and besides, Barber may have it fixed up before then. He said not more than six months, and that it was a sure pile for me if no one knew anything about it. You heard him that night by Slaughter's."

"I don't believe him," Nellie replied. "He's fooling you just as he is the others."

"Well, Bobby was pleased enough to go when he suggested it, anyhow," Dickson said.

"Yes; and if Bobby was here now—"

"But, look here, they'll be wondering where you are," Dickson interrupted. "You'll have to ride right round by the boundary now—"

"I shan't come any more," the girl exclaimed. "Not till—till after. I know you told lies, and if you don't come to me before then, I'll know sure; and then"—she looked him straight in the face, with an ugly gleam and flash in her dark eyes that held his like a snake's holds a bird's—"then I'll come, and—and—then I'll come for you. I came here to tell you that. It's your last chance. You men don't know what women are. There are some things you can't understand."

"Don't be a fool," he said once more, as he held out his arms and touched her.

She stepped back with her mouth hardening and the gleam still in her eyes.

"No, that's finished," she said. "I know you now—I hate you now—and I'm going to hurt you just where I can—most."

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He laughed uneasily, and looked away for a moment from the fascination of the gleaming eyes, and as though it was he who had broken the spell, the girl's face changed. With the exception of the eyes all her features had been passive up to that moment, but then it was as though a reservoir of passion had suddenly broken out and flooded over her face. He gave one scared look at it and stepped back from her.

"Where I can hurt you—most," she repeated in a voice that quivered.

He edged away towards his horse and heard her push through the bushes to hers. Then he heard the bushes crash as the horse charged through them, and, turning, he saw her riding at a

full gallop away down the straight stretch of the open.

He mounted his own horse and rode slowly back to the station, striving to form some plan in his mind by which he could explain matters to Ailleen, or at least prevent her from telling his mother of what had transpired. When he arrived at the house, he found Ailleen sitting alone on the verandah.

"Funny how Nellie rode over to-day, just as you were talking about her, wasn't it?" he asked, as he came up beside her.

Ailleen looked at him without answering, and, with his glance averted, he went on—

"I think she's a bit gone, don't you? Fancy her talking like she did. I thought you——"

"Look here," Ailleen exclaimed quickly, "Nellie and I have been friends since we were children, and I'm not going to hear you run her down. The less you say the better."

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He was taken aback at her words and manner, and stood, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other and with his eyes moving restlessly from side to side. He had made up his mind on his ride home that Ailleen had ridden away in anger, and that the first thing she would wish for would be an opportunity to abuse Nellie. It was quite inexplicable to him that she should defend instead of attack her.

Ailleen looked at him steadily for a while, watching his confusion and discomfiture, and feeling more and more angry with herself for having, earlier in the day, allowed his words to have even a passing effect upon her.

"Look here," she repeated, yielding to a sudden impulse which came upon her to talk seriously to him, "I heard quite enough from Nellie to understand. Are you going to tell your mother what you have done?"

She waited until he answered, in an indistinct mumble, that he did not know.

"Very well, then, I do," she retorted. "If you don't, I shall."

"But I say——" he began, and hesitated. He had always had a certain amount of fear for her when he was near her—a fear which changed into a covetous admiration when he was away from her; but the present attitude she adopted towards him accentuated that fear until he knew no other sentiment.

"Well?" she said, as he stopped.

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"It'll be all right," he said in a cringing tone. "You'll only make things worse by interfering. It's not your business. If Nellie and I like to have a quarrel, we can make it up our own way. We don't ——"

"If you think you can make me believe a story like that, you are very much mistaken," she interrupted quickly. "I heard quite enough——"

"You didn't hear everything," he interposed quickly; for an idea came to him—if Mrs. Dickson had to hear the tale she should hear it from him, with certain little embellishments and figurative allusions, which would effectually destroy any chance Ailleen might have of making capital out of the episode.

"I heard quite enough," she answered.

"No, you didn't," he retorted, growing desperate lest his mother, hearing their voices, should suddenly come out on to the verandah and learn what they were talking about before he had time to put his side of the story to her. "If you had you would have known I tried and tried to get Nellie to come in so that I could tell the old woman about it, only she wouldn't, and that's why we quarrelled. Now I don't care, so I'll tell the old woman all about it. There'll be a bigger row with Nellie when she comes to know, but I don't care. It'll be your doing, not mine."

He didn't give her time to answer, but turned away and left her, proceeding at once to Mrs. Dickson and telling her—his story.

When, some time afterwards, the blind woman came out to the verandah, Ailleen began to carry out her intention.

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"Mrs. Dickson, I'm going to tell you something," she began. "I hope it won't seem——"

"Is it about Nellie Murray?" the blind woman asked, with a smile on her face.

"Yes," Ailleen answered. "About Nellie Murray and——"

"I know. Willy has told me already. Don't worry about that, my dear. I understand, and I'll just tell you this, and then we'll say no more about it for the present—I am very pleased to hear it."

Ailleen looked at her in surprise.

"Pleased, Mrs. Dickson?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear, very, very pleased, and I quite understand how you look at it; and now let us say no more about it, till—well, till the proper time comes."

The girl sat still, looking at the staring, sightless eyes and the smiling, happy face of her companion, unable to understand; while round a convenient corner, Dickson stood with the crafty grin on his face as he overheard the conversation.

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CHAPTER XIII.

TONY VISITS THE FLAT.

Palmer Billy, never very averse to free comment on passing events, was the personification of eloquence on the day that the robbery of the digger's gold was discovered. Restrained by Tony and Peters from joining in the senseless hue and cry after the robbers, he had, as he expressed it, been sitting on dynamite up to the time when there was a chance of letting off superfluous energy in the form of speech on the verandah of Marmot's store. Tony had wanted him and Peters to ride out to the Flat and stay there until the New Year, but they (and especially Palmer Billy) would have none of it. A holiday spoiled was no holiday at all, Palmer Billy averred. He had urged that to work right through Christmas was a tempting of Providence, but, as he explained, that was before Providence played it low down on them in permitting them to be robbed of their gold. As it was, there was only one course to pursue. They would get as much stores as their credit would permit, and they would be off again to the creek they had worked out, to test a little theory he had formed about a possible lode which, if found, would make a millionaire of each of them. The next day, at the latest, they were to start, and Tony rode away by himself to the Flat to explain the situation to Taylor and his wife.

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With the characteristic freedom of bush-life, which gives to every unit the right to come and go as he pleases, and the typical independence of the Australian spirit, home-ties, as understood in more closely populated or more conventional countries, are not conspicuous. As soon as the fledgling finds his wings, the parent-nest ceases to be the centre of his universe; the forbears are no longer the dictators of his actions. He is an individual, free and self-reliant; a member of the race which has subdued the vast territories of the island continent—territories which in Europe would hold a dozen states and kingdoms—and as he has the birthright of freedom to empower him, so has he also the birthright of territory to enable him to live his own life, expanding as his instincts dictate, broadening as experience teaches, deepening as his sympathies are touched. He may lose somewhat of the softer sensibilities which gather round the home memories of older generations; the clinging affection which lingers through life for the places where the earliest years of childhood and youth were passed, can scarcely have existence amongst a people to whom the word "home" only suggests the motherland, the parent country, or, as often as not, the country of the parents. But instead he becomes the possessor of an open, self-reliant independence; quick to see and understand; cringing to no man; satisfied with the right and the chance to work for his wants; and with the part of his nature which would otherwise be absorbed in the gentle bonds of home-ties, free to act in accordance with the dictates of humanity, with the world for his home and all mankind for his relatives. Hence Tony, in returning for a visit to the Flat, was merely paying a visit, and by no means yielding to the demands of home or family affection.

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His point of view in that respect was the point of view of the remainder of the Taylor offspring, but it was the only trait which they had in common with him. As had been said on Marmot's verandah, Tony was alone among them; not one of them had the black hair and dark eyes nor the quick, alert spirit which characterized Tony. They rather followed the example of Taylor, and were stolid, hard-working fellows, content with enough of eating, working, and sleeping, and neither needing nor heeding aught else. The only one at the Flat with whom he had any close sympathy was Mrs. Taylor, and even with her he felt a restraint occasionally which perplexed him, for she gave him of her matronly love to a greater degree than she gave to the others. She had never lost the influence of her old-country up-bringing, and to Tony, her own and yet not her own, she was bound by more than the ties of maternity.

His return at the present juncture was fraught with keen interest to her, for she, in her remnant of old-world romance, had watched with kindly sympathy the growing companionship of Tony and Aileen from the time when they were school-children together; and in between the busy but withal prosaic hours of her life, she had stolen enough time to weave daydreams round the union, some day, of her handsome, dark-eyed, daring boy, and the fair-haired Saxon Aileen. She had watched the companionship ripen into something more—into something which the two did not even realize themselves, but which was only too evident to her jealously sharpened eyes; for she was jealous of the boy, although far from spitefully.

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Most of his daring escapades had been performed under the influence, unrecognized by him, of Aileen's passing disregard, and the elder woman had often inveighed in her mind against the waywardness of the younger, who, having such a treasure within her grasp, ignored it, and ran the risk, however slight, of losing it. Unfortunately, both Tony and Aileen possessed the free-born Australian spirit to a degree which made it more than difficult to guide or counsel them—only could one stand idly by and, apparently without noticing anything, chafe and worry lest the break away should come.

And the break away had come. The starting away with the gold-diggers was an unmistakable token of Tony's revolt; the moving out to Barellan immediately after her father's death was the

unquestionable reply of Aileen. But it did not necessarily follow that the result was foregone, and Mrs. Taylor, in her efforts to grasp the movements of the modern development of youth, had argued with herself that perhaps, after all, this double split might only be the later form of the old-fashioned lover's quarrel. The return of Tony, on the first occasion, was an evidence that she was right, and she watched him as he hastened away to Barellan. But he came back and never mentioned Aileen's name, and set out again for the gold-fields still without mentioning her name; and then, while he was away, there came to her brief shreds and echoes of gossip, all circling round Aileen, and all tending to prove that she was striving to wed young Dickson—and Barellan, as Mrs. Taylor added with scorn—and to forget the comrade of her childhood.

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Tony had now come back again, and Mrs. Taylor wondered, as she saw him, whether he had heard any of the stories she had heard about Aileen's change. He told her all about the rich patch of gold-bearing gravel they had struck in the creek, and the way they had worked it out so as to be able to get to Birralong for Christmas, but only to find themselves stranded almost before their holidays began, and with all the work to do over again, to say nothing of the finding of a new claim.

"And you are starting out again to-morrow?" she said.

"Yes; and we shall stay out till we find another patch. Palmer Billy swears he can trace out the mother-reef of the alluvial, and that it will be rich enough to make us all station-owners and able to run horses for the Melbourne Cup."

"And if you don't find it?" she asked.

"Then—well, I reckon we'll try the northern fields. Palmer Billy and Peters have both been up there, and they say there are tons of gold to be had if one only has the capital to go on. But I don't fancy we shall go there. Palmer Billy is too fly to talk about a reef if there is none. We'll strike it, you see, and come home with a team-load of nuggets."

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"You'll be rich then, Tony," she said.

"Yes," he answered, with a laugh.

"Richer than young Dickson of Barellan," she added, watching him closely.

"I dare say," he answered, half impatiently.

"And then—I suppose you'll get married?" she said softly, but with her eyes still fixed on his face.

"Oh, *my* troubles," he exclaimed.

"I suppose it will be Aileen?" she went on.

He got up from where he was sitting.

"Reckon I'll have a smoke," he said. "I brought the old man a plug of new stuff Marmot was cracking up. I'll just try it and see how it goes."

He walked away to get the tobacco, and Mrs. Taylor sat where she was, under the verandah just in sight of the corner of the paddock where a small patch was railed off from the rest, with a white-flowering passion-vine growing luxuriantly over the slim fence which surrounded it. She looked across at it with eyes that were dim and moist; but it was not the memory it recalled that made her emotion come welling up. The look that had been in Tony's eyes as he turned away, the change that had come over his face as she asked her purposely pointed questions, and the recollection of the fair face of Aileen and the crafty meanness of Dickson's, all combined to stir her feelings.

"The wretched selfish creature!" she muttered to herself. "The—the—beast!"

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But she carefully refrained from making any further comment on the matter to Tony during the remainder of the time he was at the Flat; and when he rode away the following morning, full of enthusiasm for the discovery he and his digger companions were going to make, and promising general happiness to everybody as soon as he returned with his team-load of nuggets, as he expressed it, he had no idea that she attributed his gaiety and light-heartedness to a spirit of bravado which sought to hide the real state of his feelings. But her intuitions had struck the truth. When the thought of it forced his attention, or when a reference such as she had made to Aileen revealed it to him in spite of himself, Tony winced under the sting of the girl's bearing towards him. Ordinarily he flung himself into his work with the more ardour; he had gone into the reckless gamble with Gleeson because as he neared Birralong it came to him that the gold he had found was useless to him in the face of Aileen's coldness—useless, that is, for the purpose he had at first desired it, for the purchase of a home to offer to her.

The question Mrs. Taylor had asked him, and the introduction of Dickson's name before the mention of Aileen, re-awakened not only the smart he was suffering from, but also a suspicion which had come into his mind—a suspicion that Dickson and his wealth were not entirely dissociated from Aileen's change of manner. As he rode away from the Flat, setting out on a journey which might lead him to riches greater than those of his rival, Tony for the first time in his life wished for closer sympathy between some of his brothers and himself, so that he might have made a confidant of one, and enlisted his help in ascertaining whether matters between Aileen and Dickson really were as he feared. But there was neither bond nor sympathy between him and the home-staying members of the Taylor family. He was vainly trying to recall any one of whom he could make use in that respect when there rode out upon the track in front of him young Bobby Murray. Here was the one person in the district he would care to use, for he had

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ample assurance of Bobby's admiration for him, and had, on his part, done many a good turn for the youngster one way and another. He coo-eed and waved his hand, and Bobby, looking round, turned his horse and rode to meet him.

"I was just riding in to have a yarn with you," he called out as he came near. "I was hurrying to catch you before you started, for they said you were off to the diggings before midday. I want to join your party, if you'll have me."

"Want to join us, do you? Why, what's in the wind now?" Tony asked in surprise.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm full of the selection, and they all say you're going to strike it rich again, so I thought it was a good business to join in with you, if you want another in the party."

"Well, we don't," Tony replied. "You see, we're broke as it is, and we have to get even our stores on credit, and if we don't strike anything, it will be enough for us to do to clear our own score. But if we have another to help to eat the stores, they won't last us any longer, and there'll be a bigger tally to settle."

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"I'll pay my own share, and a bit over if need be," Bobby said quietly.

"You will?"

"Certainly. Why not? I don't want you to take me on as a loafer. I'll do my share at the graft and bring in my share of the tucker and tools. That's fair, isn't it?"

"It's fair enough for me," Tony answered. "And if the others don't object, why, I suppose you can join the camp."

"They won't object," Bobby said quickly. "I told them last night, and they said if I was a mate of yours, and you said so, I could join, tucker or no tucker."

It put an end to the chance of having a friend in the enemy's camp to report progress when he returned, and tell him whether his suspicions were well or ill founded; for even if he did not agree to Bobby's joining the camp, that would not prevent his leaving the district and following them, while it would certainly put an end to any claims on Bobby's kindly services. On the other hand, if Bobby came with them, he might learn a lot about what was said around Birralong on the subject of Ailleen and Dickson, and with that in his mind Tony gave his consent. When they reached the township, they found that the others had everything ready for a start, Bobby's share in the tools and the tucker being made up with the others, as though his joining had been settled long before he met Tony.

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When they had all set out and had disappeared over the hill, riding away to the west, Marmot stood at the door of his store with Smart, watching the dust that floated where their horses moved.

"I would have told him, only I couldn't get him by himself; for it seems a bit queer to me, what with Yaller-head going out to Barellan and young Dickson going bail for Bob Murray's stores," the storekeeper said. "It ain't no business of ours, Smart—it ain't no business of ours; but I'd as lief have seen him and Yaller-head in double harness as any."

"And why not?" Smart asked.

"Well, there's a cause in it all—a fust cause, maybe. Tony ain't the chap to put off so easy, and what gets me is why does she go out there while he goes off here, and never a word to either, and both of them thick as twins since they were kids? And now here's Dickson puts up the dibs for young Murray to get away; Dickson—a chap that wouldn't give away the bones of a dead sheep. It may be best for Tony in the end, mind you. Never was a married man myself, but I've seen those as was, and—well, you're an experienced hand yourself," Marmot said, waving his hand to Smart, whose domestic differences contributed many an item of discussion to the *habitués* of the verandah.

The reference was not pleasing to Smart, and he did not reply.

"We've got to watch it," Marmot went on, failing to notice that Smart had not replied—"we've got to watch it. There's a drama in all this, if we only knew it, a panorama of human play-acting. Maybe it's as well I held my tongue, but all the same, young Dickson ain't running straight if he's getting open-handed, that I will swear."

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE FINDING OF PETERS'S REEF.

For a couple of weeks the four who had set out from Birralong full of enthusiasm for the proving of the theory Palmer Billy had formed, wandered along the course of the creek where they had previously found gold. Palmer Billy insisted that as the gold must have come from a reef before it became embedded in the loose gravel of the stream, the proper way to seek for the reef

was to follow up the stream, prospecting wherever there was a sign of sand or gravel in the bed, and keeping a sharp look-out for any outcrop of rock which might contain quartz. The mother-reef whence the gold had been washed must be higher up the stream, he argued, and if once they found that, they would be in possession of more wealth than any of them had ever dreamed of possessing. In the mean time, as they ascended the creek, and consequently approached the site of the reef, it was only reasonable to suppose that more pockets and patches of gold-bearing sand would be discovered. Some might be as rich as that upon which they had chanced at first; and then, even if they did not locate the mysterious mother-reef, they would be able to make good wages, and be able to return to the township and clear off their score with Marmot before setting out to more recognized auriferous areas.

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For two weeks they followed up the creek, tracing its course even when it looped back upon itself so as to leave a tongue of land barely twenty yards across between the bends. The bed, as they progressed, was rocky, but free from quartz, and very little sand was found in the crevices of the rock, while only a few specks of gold now and again rewarded their perseverance and their toil.

As soon as the sun was up they were at work, and, except when they stopped for meals, they worked incessantly till sundown, the fascination of chance, the prospect of striking at any moment a patch of alluvial which would, by its richness, wipe away all memory of earlier disappointment, keeping them steadily going. At sunset they made their camp for the night, and slept, rolled in their blankets, lulled to sleep by the rippling stream flowing only a few yards away. As the first sign of dawn was heralded by the melodious twitters of the bush birds they were astir; the ashes of the fire, still smouldering, were raked together, and the billy set to boil, while they spread their blankets out to catch the first rays of the sun, and performed their simple toilets in the running stream. Day after day they worked along the creek, never finding anything more than specks of gold, and never seeing any token of the reef Palmer Billy was so sure must be somewhere near the higher reaches.

The stream had led them into more hilly and rugged country, sometimes flowing between high and steep banks, but more frequently through open country gradually ascending to higher levels. The size of the stream was steadily maintained, and no tributary rills were found to run into it, the long season of drought having apparently dried them all up. The fact that the volume of water did not diminish suggested that the stream had its origin in a series of springs higher up. Instead of this, however, they emerged one day on to a small patch of level land, from one side of which a steep, thickly wooded hill rose, and towards the centre of which a shallow, reed-grown pool formed the commencement of the stream. It was entirely different to what any one had expected, and as they traversed the area of land, covered with rank vegetation, they saw how in a rainy season it would be a peaty swamp formed by the drainage from the hills around.

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A more complete overthrow of Palmer Billy's theory could not have occurred. The miles of country they had patiently journeyed over at the slow pace necessitated by the constant fossicking and prospecting, had been practically barren of gold, and the head of the stream, which the leader had always maintained would be found in a series of springs bubbling up in stony country, and surrounded by rocks, streaked and veined by quartz, had been found to be a small pool in the middle of a partially dried-up swamp.

Palmer Billy for once was silent as the camp was made.

"It's no good," he grumbled, when, with pipes alight, they lounged round the fire after the evening meal. "It's no good. We've struck a duffer. It's the old yarn. When we had a pile we didn't know how to keep it from the sharks, and now—well, we've struck a duffer."

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"We're not through yet," Peters remarked, after a moment's silence.

"Not through?" Palmer Billy exclaimed, his raucous voice taking to itself a touch of scorn. "What do you call this? Are you going to take this up as a selection and grow pumpkins? Do you think there's any gold in this mud-pan? Did you ever see nuggets in a swamp of reeds? There's not an ounce of sand or gravel to the acre. How are you going to work it? Mine? Sink a shaft and drive tunnels? Not through, you call it, and never more than a colour to the dish after fourteen days and more of graft. I'm full of it. There was more of a show on Boulder Creek."

"Kick at troubles when they come, boys," Tony chanted from the other side of the fire.

"Wot price that?" Palmer Billy interrupted. "Singing a digger's song on a darned dirty mud-heap. It's a blasphemy."

"Why?" Peters asked quietly.

"Why? Because there's no gold in it, that's why," Palmer Billy retorted.

"No; but there may be under it," Peters answered.

Palmer Billy rose to his feet, and stood with the firelight playing on his rugged face and figure as he turned towards Peters.

"Oh, there may be some under it! Oh! Very good. Then I suppose you're going to mine, and sink a shaft and tunnel, and——" the humour of it was too much for him, and he broke off in a loud laugh, which ended in a set of expressions not quite relevant, but calculated to relieve his feelings.

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"I'm going to prospect in the morning all the same," Peters said, as quietly as before.

"Yes; why not? Let's try the hill," Tony exclaimed.

"Young fellow, you're a boy in most things, not forgetting age," Palmer Billy began; "but in mining you are a baby in a cradle; you—"

"I'm not so sure," Peters interrupted. "It's up the hill I'm going to prospect in the morning."

"All right," Palmer Billy answered, with a fierce energy. "Then I'll mind camp and go fishing in the lagoon. Maybe I'll catch a dinner, anyhow."

But in the morning he had recovered somewhat from the bitterness of the disappointment he felt at having his theory, elaborated in many a yarn around the camp-fire on the way up the creek, shattered by the discovery of the swamp.

"What's the move?" he asked Peters, as soon as breakfast was over.

"You're the boss of the show," Peters answered.

"No, my lad. I'm through. I'm an old hand, but when it comes to striking a swamp where I said there'd be a reef, it's time to shift. You're the boss now. I'll be cook and bring along the accordion. A bit of a stave may change the luck."

"Then we'll go for the hill," Peters said. "We'll prospect any likely looking stone, and if there are no signs of payable quartz, then maybe the country will change on the other side of the rise." [Pg 209]

"And so will the tucker," Tony added. "There's more than half the stores gone now, and we're a good three days' journey from Birralong, the nearest township I know to this range."

"There's time enough for tucker," Peters replied. "When we've got to the top of the hill we can talk about that; we may have struck the reef by then, and be able to buy up the township if we want to."

They left the waterhole to face the steep, thickly timbered slope of the hill. The climbing was awkward and trying work for the horses, and the men had to lead them the greater part of the day, ever striving to get through the thick undergrowth nearer the summit of the ridge. Whenever any rock was seen to crop out, either Palmer Billy or Peters examined it for any sign of quartz or pyrites, but nothing rewarded their efforts.

For three days they clambered and toiled before they reached the summit. Wherever the dry bed of a stream was found the four spread along it, minutely examining the sand which had lodged in the crevices; but still with the same want of success, until, towards the evening of the third day from leaving the flat, they reached the top. The timber was slight and scraggy and the undergrowth ceased there, leaving an open space, rock-strewn and rugged, but from whence a view could be obtained over a wide expanse of country. They had had a particularly rough day's journey from the previous night's camp. A small pool of water, stagnant and stained with soil and dead leaves, had been discovered on a scrub-covered ledge, and there the camp had been made. On starting in the morning the water-bags had been filled and the horses had been allowed to drink all they cared for; now that they had reached the top the water in the bags was all they had, for there was none to be seen on the rough, uneven surface. Neither was there any vegetation for the horses to eat. There was evidently only one thing to be done. It was too late to think of attempting to descend the hill that night, so a fire was lit, a camp was made, and the horses secured. Wearied by the heavy climb, the four men had few words for one another, and as soon as each had had his meal, he rolled himself in his blanket and was asleep without even waiting for a smoke. [Pg 210]

At dawn they awakened to find themselves chill and damp. During the night rain-clouds had gathered, and a steady, fine shower had fallen, making them wet through. The fatigue from the previous day had caused them to sleep too soundly to be awakened by anything until daylight, but now that they were roused it was to discomfort. The fire was out, and only after a prolonged search did they obtain enough dry wood to light another and boil their billy.

As they were discussing their breakfast the rain increased, coming down steadily and heavily.

"Two hours of this and the swamp below will be flooded," Peters said.

"And the track will be in a fine state too," Tony added. [Pg 211]

"This comes of new chums prospecting and looking for a reef here, when the whole countryside hadn't a trace of quartz," Palmer Billy put in savagely.

He had discovered that the rain had somehow got to his accordion, and as the instrument was not made to stand the wet, it had suffered seriously, much to the disgust and indignation of its owner.

"And now we are here, nobody's even chipped a boulder," Murray said. "If this is what you call mining, I'm full of it."

"It's no use grumbling, anyway," Peters said quietly. "We haven't seen what's on the other side of the slope. There's no saying. If the creek starts running we may yet strike Palmer Billy's reef."

"Call it after yourself; I ain't boss now. I've had my shot and failed; but it seems to me I might as well have had another, seeing the result's the same."

"Well, anyhow, let's move along out of this and see if we can strike something. I've not done yet," Peters, still unruffled, replied.

The way up from the previous day's camp had been difficult; the way down was doubly so. The parched, dry soil absorbed the rain as quickly as it fell, with the result that the steep surface became loose and slippery, and the horses could scarcely keep their feet. They slipped and

staggered along in a zigzag fashion, the men leading them, and as the rain continued to fall, there were shreds and patches of mist sweeping round the hill, which made it more awkward to pick a safe road and at the same time keep the direction they desired. With their attention mostly given to their horses—for if one fell it would be almost impossible to save it from serious if not fatal injury—and with their tempers still ruffled by the combined discomfort of the wet, the fatigue, and disappointment, no one noticed particularly which way they were going, save that each followed the other, the first man being Peters. Sometimes they had to ascend and sometimes to descend, as the lay of the land demanded; and so they struggled along, until suddenly a sharp cry from the leader roused the others to look up. Then they also uttered exclamations, for they found that instead of descending they had only succeeded in travelling round the top of the hill, to emerge again on to the bare, rugged summit.

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The rain was driving in their faces; they were cold and uncomfortable, and their horses as well as themselves were tired by the useless scramble they had just accomplished. Peters, with a short-headed miner's pick-axe, which he had used to steady himself, in his hand, was standing beside a small boulder, which loomed as a dark, purple shade under the cold, grey rain-clouds. It was the first sign of anger or irritation he had displayed, but the expressions of opinion of the other three were not soothing on top of his own feelings, and, with vindictive malice, he struck at the boulder with the blunt head of the pick-axe. A sentiment accompanied the blow, but it was incomplete when Peters dropped the pick-axe and went down on his knees on the wet ground to gather up the fragments he had broken off the boulder. Then, with a yell, he leaped to his feet.

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"We've struck it, boys; we've struck it!" he shouted. "It's gold!"

Rain, fatigue, the horses, hunger, bad temper, and disappointment alike vanished from the minds of the three as they heard the words. They crowded over to where Peters, laughing in his delight, was hugging the broken fragments of rock to his breast and capering round the boulder. Palmer Billy, silent as yet, bent down and examined the spot where Peters had struck. The fresh-broken face, already moistened by the rain, showed small heads and points of orange-coloured metal.

"Darned new-chum fool!" he muttered, as he stood up. "Here, you moonstruck jackeroo, stop that damned corroborree!" he shouted to the capering Peters. "If you want to know, it's native copper. I've seen tons of it. On the Cloncurry you can get it by the square mile."

"It's gold," Peters yelled in answer—"gold, you old wind-bag! There's a fortune in that boulder. Come on, boys. Out with the tools, and let us dolly a lump and test it."

It might be only native copper, but for the moment neither Tony nor Murray doubted the opinion of Peters. There was a scurry and a confused bungle as each tried to get what was wanted, while Palmer Billy stood by, trying to light his pipe, and muttering uncomplimentary sentences against all of them.

Peters had with him a rough-and-ready apparatus for testing any mineral encountered. A blowpipe, a bit of candle, a small bottle of powdered borax, another of mercury, and a bent platinum wire, packed away in an empty jam-tin, formed his assayer's kit—a paraphernalia which induced as much mirth and scoffing contempt from Palmer Billy as it would have done from a skilled and cultured scientist, who, without hair-balances, acids, retorts, and a dozen other appliances, would have scorned the idea of an analysis or anything approaching it. But in the annals of mining discovery, how often has the resources of a great mine been made known and available to human enterprise by the crude, simple apparatus of a travelling prospector, and how many hopeless and worthless "properties" have swallowed the contributions of a gullible public through the ornamental reports of the skilled and cultured proprietor of an elaborate laboratory!

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By the time the jam-tin and its contents had been obtained from the confusion of Peters's swag, he had crushed on the blade of a shovel, with the blunt head of the miner's pick, a fragment of the mineral-bearing stone. Tony lit the stump of candle, taking the hat from his head and holding it over the flame to protect it from the rain, while Murray held the jam-tin of implements. With a pinch of the powdered stone in the palm of his hand, Peters took the blowpipe, and blew the candle-flame on to the end of the bent platinum wire until it became red-hot. Then he plunged it into the borax, and again placed it in the flame, until the borax hung at the end of the wire in a white, transparent bead. Touching it on the powdered stone, he again placed it in the flame, and watched it until he saw creep into it the rich, ripe colour which denoted gold.

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"Native copper!" he cried in scorn, as he held out the ruddy bead to Palmer Billy. "Did you ever see copper go that colour? It's gold, boys—gold!"

Palmer Billy came nearer, and looked at the bead with a fine scepticism.

"Is it?" he said. "Well, dolly a lump of the stone, and let's see you wash the gold out."

"I'll do it with mercury," Peters exclaimed, as he seized the small bottle from the tin and shook it triumphantly towards the three.

"We don't want no fakes," Palmer Billy retorted. "If it's gold it'll wash out when the stone's crushed. You crush a bit of the rock; I'll look after the water."

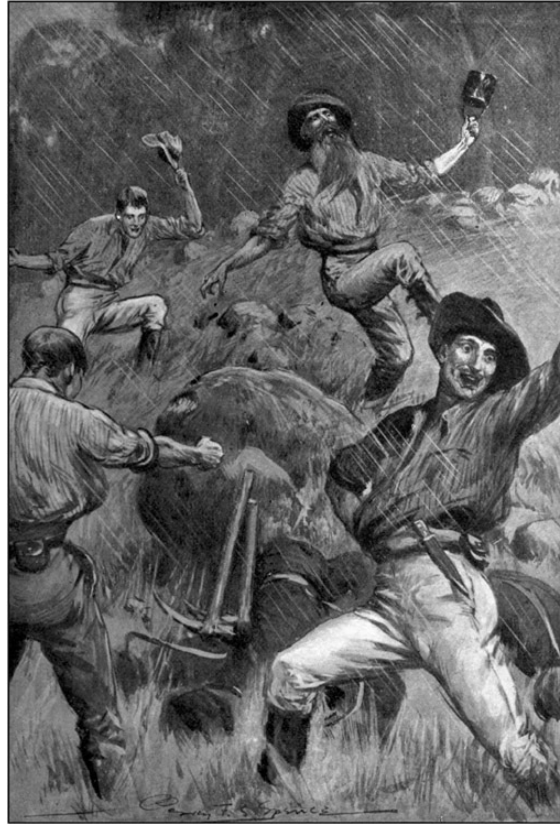
He took up a dish from the disorder of Peters's kit, and started off to collect water in it from the little pools formed by the rain; while the others, forgetful of the rain and of everything save the prospect of proving the find, set to work to crush pieces of the boulder into a fine powder. By the time Palmer Billy returned with the dish half-full of water, they had a handful of the powdered stone ready, and he, with much solemnity, as became a sceptic, emptied it into the water, and slowly swished it to and fro, gradually spilling the water, and with it the finer dust of the stone,

until only a little wet sand remained in the bottom of the dish. With his head on one side he lifted the dish, tilted over until the sand caught the light at the proper angle; then he slowly revolved the dish in his hands, the three others closely watching the expression of his face.

Without a word he put the dish on the ground, and, walking over to Peters, slapped him vigorously on the back.

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"I'm an old hand," he exclaimed—"old enough in years and mining to be grandfather to the lot of you, and I don't give a shearer's curse for your fakes and your fiddlements; and I struck a swamp where I said there'd be a reef—but, as I'm a singer, it's gold."



CAPERED ROUND THE BOULDER.

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The conversion of the sceptic completed the triumph of Peters, and, giving way once more to the enthusiasm of the moment, he capered round the boulder, yelling and shouting, the others joining in, despite their weariness and their saturated clothes. What were a few temporary inconveniences compared with the significance of Palmer Billy's admission? A night's sound sleep, a few hours' sunshine, a couple of good meals, and their discomforts were at an end; while there in the boulder they had tapped, and probably in others that they saw around them, and perchance in the hill up which they had clambered so tediously, there was gold, and gold which was theirs by right of discovery, by the right of the mining laws, written and unwritten, and the right of their future toil. The tucker might be getting scarce; but what of that? A few hours' work and one of them could ride away back to Birralong to clear off the score they had left and bring more stores, more horses, more anything they wanted—whatever it was, in a week it would be paid for. The gold was at their feet; the strength to win it in their muscles; the craving for possession in their minds. What wonder, then, that they knew nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing, as they yelled and danced, but the delight that was upon them—the wild, untrammelled, ravenous delight which only comes to those who know success in the midst of desolation and despair.

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When they had relieved somewhat the fury of delight, they bethought themselves of their creature comforts and the needs of their horses. The latter, profiting by their freedom, had found a way for themselves down the hillside to a spot where there was something they could eat; and when the men found them, they found also that the spot was very much more suitable for a camping-ground than the summit of the hill. A shelter of branches was constructed, under which they placed their stores, and a fire, after some difficulty, was lit. Then, primeval instincts being strong, they removed the wet clothes they wore, and hung them in the shelter where the heat of the fire could reach and dry them, the while they busied themselves with the preparation of the meal of which they were in so much need. A break in the clouds, as they partook of it, added to the contentment they felt, for by the cessation of the rain an undisturbed night's rest seemed assured to them, and they needed that to fit them for their attack on the morrow upon the treasures they had found.

They were in calmer mind on the following morning, which was fortunately fine, and set out to systematically examine the extent of the gold-bearing stone they had stumbled across. It was all on the side of the hill which was farthest from the swamp, and it seemed as though the whole side of the hill was composed of it.

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"What's to be done now?" Palmer Billy asked, when they met at the midday meal.

"We'll get as much of the gold as we can in a couple of days, and then send Murray back with two horses for stores enough to last another two months. By that time we'll know how much the reef is good for, and maybe have enough on hand to carry off and bank."

"Ah, that's the talk," Palmer Billy said admiringly. "No more flying round for the sharks to bite at you. Plank the stuff in the bank, and sit smiling at them. That's the talk."

"There is no bank at Birralong," Murray said.

"Isn't Marmot's good enough?" Palmer Billy asked. "Didn't he put up stores on a tally, and don't we owe him a turn now we're in luck? Marmot's good enough for me till the Government wants to build a railway and comes to me for a loan."

"That's a bit premature, isn't it?" Peters asked.

"Marmot's as good as a bank, and better; he stood us a shout and stores when we were stony. Where's the bank that'll do that?" Palmer Billy retorted. "You tell him, when you ride in for fresh stores, to shift some of them pumpkins out into the back-yard, because we're coming in soon with a dray-load of nuggets," he added to Murray.

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CHAPTER XV.

BLACK AND WHITE.

In an isolated part of barren country, where the grass was sparse and coarse, the soil poor and stony, and the timber stunted and scraggy; where, in fact, everything for which the white man had neither use nor need was to be found, and where nothing existed that he or his stock could utilize—a black-fellow's camp was situated.

It was a primitive affair, as black-fellow's camps always are. A few long, thin sticks, looped and stuck in the ground, and with a miscellaneous collection of bark and branches laid over them, formed the huts, or gunyahs, which gave a temporary shelter against wind or rain, and could be left standing, or thrown down, when the tribe moved, without loss. Small fires smouldered near each, and, round about, half a dozen chocolate-coloured piccaninnies, innocent of clothes, ran and played, laughing and chattering to one another. In the shade the men were lounging, indolent and indifferent, wearing such cast-off clothes as they had been able to beg or steal from station hands, and smoking tobacco obtained by a similar process. In the heat and sunshine the women worked at such tasks which need demanded—the search for edible roots and grubs and the gathering of wood for the fires—or lounged, as their lords and masters did, indolent and indifferent. An old man, whose hair and beard were grizzled, and whose flesh was shrunk and withered, sat in the shade of his gunyah, gazing dreamily and wearily at the glowing ends of the sticks and the thin column of blue smoke which rose so steadily in the still air from them.

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He was the last of his generation; the last of the tribe who remembered the days when first the white man came; the last to feel and sorrow for the days when tribal law and tribal rite ruled the destinies of the race. Very far back, when he was little more than a piccaninny, and long before he was ripe for the ceremony which made him a "young man," he recalled how his tribe had been perplexed by a story which had come to them, by a tale of strange happenings brought from other tribes somewhere away in the far distance. Later, when he was grown and had been made a young man and a warrior, he learned the story in full, and wonderful it seemed to him, as wonderful as it seemed to all his tribe, old men and young men alike. For it meant the coming of that which would explain and render clear all the mysteries treasured up by the wise men and the old men, and shown, still in mystery and only in part, to the young men as they passed through the stages of their initiation. In short, it meant to him, and to his, the fulfilment of their religion, the vindication of their faith, the perfecting of their creed.

In the matters of creeds and abstract faiths many men make many methods. Some are fitted for the daily use of men counting into millions; some touch only a minute few, and shrink from the common gaze; some, again, serve the needs and lives of men having simple ways, and some sustain a despot's power and hold the race as slaves: but in every case they are false and wrong save the one that a man may hold. The religious faith of the tribe to which the old black-fellow belonged formed a pitiful mass of crudities, oddities, and absurdities to the white men when they came, or to such white men as stopped for a moment to think on the matter at all. But it was very real to the old black-fellow, as it was to his comrades and tribesmen, when it came to be unfolded to them in all the impressive solemnity of fast, vigil, and ceremony. How could it be otherwise when the ordeal of bodily pain accompanied every step in the knowledge of the mysteries?

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Overhead, by the Southern Cross, a black patch shows in the sky. The white man calls it the coal-sack, and explains how it comes about. The black-fellow looked at it in wonder, and worked his brains for the reason of its existence and the use that it might serve, and gradually,

unconsciously, inexplicably, there crept into the lore of the nomad tribes the story of its origin and the use it had to serve.

The stars of night were camp-fires, alight on a mighty plain; the Milky-way was a she-oak grove; and the gentle winds that blew at night waved the trees and shook the boughs, and so made the fires gleam from beneath their shadow, fitful and subdued. By every fire a black-fellow camped on his journey over the plain—the journey that every man must take when the days of his life were done; for in the long ago a man had strained till he found what the black patch was. It was an opening through to the mighty plain; but when he had reached it, he longed for his brother to join him and wander over it with him. Looking down he saw his brother, and called to him, and, to help him up, threw down a rope, up which the brother climbed. But when he also reached the plain, he wanted to turn back and go down again, and lowered the rope to do so; but before he could start, he saw that another black-fellow had caught hold of the rope and was climbing up. And when he came up, he also threw down the rope again to one of his tribe; and the two brothers, becoming impatient, set out to march across the plain to where it touched the earth, where they could get down without the help of the rope.

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A falling star, the white men said, was the rope the black-fellows saw; and they laughed as the blacks crouched down in fear by the camp-fire when they caught the flash of a shooting star. But that was afterwards—after the time when the things had happened which made the old black-fellow sad and weary.

The journey was long over the mighty plain—so long that as a black-fellow wandered he wore out the colour of his skin and became white. Somewhere in the dim, unknown past, a legend told how some of the black-fellows had really come back from the plain, reaching the earth where the end of the plain touched it; but when they rejoined their tribes they had not been recognized, and so had gone away again in anger. None had come since then, but the tribes treasured up the hope that some day the mistake their ancestors had made would be forgotten, and those who found their way across the plain would come back and tell them of the land above. The hope, fostered on legend and ceremony, grew at length into a creed, and from a creed into a faith, and the time was looked forward to when the wandering black-fellows, grown white in the journey, should come back; for then it would be no longer necessary to climb through the black patch, nor to fear the falling rope. Then would drought or flood cease to trouble, for plenty of food and plenty of water would be every man's share when the people of the great plain came back.

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When the old man was a piccaninny the story travelled from the south that the white men had reached the earth again, and had come in tribes and in tribes of tribes, more than the black-fellow could count, more than the black-fellow could understand. When he was made a "young man," he was told of it, and told how men of his own tribe, who had gone up through the coal-sack by the blazing rope, were coming back; and how, when they came back, the black-fellow's life would be never-ending, with food enough every day to satisfy his appetite, and no flood, no drought, no sickness, nothing but life—free, happy, and enjoyable.

And the old man had seen the white men come.

He had seen them come with their flocks and herds—the food the black-fellow knew was coming. He had seen them come with shouts and rage when the black-fellow ate the food they brought him. He had seen them swoop on a tribe at peace, without a sign that they sought for war, till the warriors lay on the red earth, dead, slain by the power the white men had. He had seen them ride where the children played; he had seen them charge where the women stood; he had seen the gunyahs set on fire, the war-spears burned, the tokens scorned, till his race had fled from their tribal lands to the barren ridges and sandy plains, where they starved and died off one by one, till he was alone—and his faith was gone.

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The creed and the faith he had learned and loved; the tribal lore and the ordered rite; the lesson, the trial, and the test of strength—they had all been wrong when the white man came. And now he was old and worn and sad, there was one idea, one hope, he had—that before he died he might wet his hands with the blood of the men who had spoiled his life.

As he sat blinking at the glow of his fire, just as he had sat for days past, he heard a sudden commotion amongst the men who were lounging in the shade, and, looking up, he saw four horsemen approaching through the bush. The men had also seen them, and were going towards them to beg tobacco. Some young gins stood by a gunyah, and he saw one of the horsemen point to them, and turn and say something to his companions. The sound of their voices came to him—and then he saw two of them ride at the men till they scattered and fled, while the other two rode at the gins.

The old man sat without a move or a sound through all the turmoil and confusion; but when the men wandered back, hours afterwards, when the sounds of the horses' hoofs were growing faint in the distance and the sky was ruddy with the setting sun, they found him sitting by his fire, with the clothes of the white race flung away, his old withered body daubed with splodges of white clay, and with a mass of white clay plastered on his head. He was slowly rocking himself to and fro, and chanting, in a quavering voice, a weird and mournful song. Everywhere else there was silence; no fires glowed by the gunyahs or anywhere, save near where the old man sat, and neither woman nor child could be seen.

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The ways of their fathers were little to the men, for the time that should have been spent in teaching them the customs and the creed had been spent in fleeing from the bullets of the white men and seeking out-of-the-way barren spots where neither white men nor the white men's stock were likely to penetrate; but they knew enough to understand the signs of deep mourning the old

man had assumed, and to recognize the dirge as the wail for those who had fallen while defending their women.

As the men came nearer they came slower, till they crept up to the fire where it smouldered, and sat round it, silent and uneasy, as the sun sank out of sight and the moon came up, while the old man crooned his dirge. The white light of the moon showed over the trees, throwing into profound shade all else, save where the glow of the fire showed red. The air grew chill now the sun had gone, and it was long since the men had fed; but they still sat silent round the smouldering fire.

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Suddenly one arose with a gesture of impatience, and, stepping back behind the old man, flung off the ragged shirt and trousers that he wore, and shook out the tangled mass of his hair free from the compression the slouch hat he had been wearing left on it. A lump of white clay lay on either side of the old man, and the younger, yielding to some impulse which was upon him, stooped and daubed himself over with it in streaks and splashes, and then went back to the fire and sat down again.

The old man sang neither louder nor faster, nor gave any sign that he saw or understood; but another of the men got up and flung away the clothes he was wearing, and daubed the white clay on his naked skin, and came back to the fire again. Then another did the same; then another, and another, until all were naked, and all were daubed with clay, and all were sitting round the fire, silent, as the old man crooned.

As the last one came back he looked up. Presently he ceased his dirge and spoke, telling in an apparently unimpassioned way of the doings of the warriors when he was a young man. He spoke of the pride the tribe felt when one of their men faced and fought, single-handed, the band of another tribe; and told how once one man had followed the enemy day and night, while the moon grew old and died, and grew again before he caught them—caught and slew them. Tales of daring, tales of vengeance, of wrongs redressed, of vows redeemed; tales of the tribal might in the days when their fathers ruled, he told them; and as they heard, something of the old spirit came again to them as the inherited instincts of countless generations stirred their blood and warmed their hearts. The sloth they put on with the cast-off clothes of the white invader fell away from their natures as the voice of the old man droned in their ears. Half-forgotten memories of the war corroborated, danced in the far-off days when the tribe was ever moving and ever fighting against the white men; recollections of blood-stained figures of warriors, left on the camping-ground when the rest of the tribe fled before the storm of the white men's bullets, flitted through their brains; stray shreds of tribal wails and dirges, melancholy and depressing, which had terrified them in their childhood, seemed to blend with the voice of the old man, and the eyes which had been dull and heavy began to grow bright and to glitter. Soon the breasts began to heave as the men breathed faster; the white of a man's teeth gleamed as he opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again in anger as he realized that the words which came to his lips were words in the white man's tongue. Quickly a man sprang to his feet, and stood with the red glow of the embers playing over his swarthy skin and the spots and streaks of the wet white clay. Another sprang up and leaped away into the darkness, but returned a moment later with a bundle of long, thin, pointed sticks, which he flung to the ground by the fire. They were the spears the men had made, rough, crude implements compared with the balanced and decorated weapons their fathers had known, but such as would serve to satisfy the hereditary impulse of a decadent race for the weapons of their sires. With one accord the men reached out and seized them, springing to their feet, and standing, with quivering muscles and tremulous hands, as the struggle between inherited instinct and acquired fear went on for the mastery of their beings.

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The man who had brought the spears, and in whom the old spirit lingered more powerfully than in the others, took a spear in either hand, and pranced round the fire, stooping down over the points of the weapons, and chanting, in a subdued voice, a fragment of a war-song. The old man caught the rhythm and the words and took them up, beating time with his withered hands; and as he did so, the others joined in the dance, the instincts of the black-fellow only in their beings—the instincts which brought back to them the impulses which moved their forbears, the instincts which made them fling aside the methods and the fear of the white man, as they had flung away the clothes of which they had learned the need from him.

The self-constituted leader, alive with the spirit of revenge, moved, still chanting, away from the fire—away in the direction the white men took when they rode off from the raid. Upon his heels the others followed, stepping as he stepped, moving as he moved; and the old man, glancing after them as they crossed a patch of moonlight and disappeared into the shadow beyond, hugged his arms together and laughed within himself—the untrained, slothful decadents had gone out upon the war-path, naked, painted, armed, as their forbears used to be; moving as their forbears used; hating as their forbears used; and, in his ignorance of instincts, it was to him a miracle wrought by the spirits of his race illumined once more by the flicker of his dying creed.

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The clear, nerveless moonlight lay over the bush like a flood of white transparency, revealing everything it touched with the distinctness of day, and hiding everything that escaped it in a veil of impenetrable shadow. From amid such a shadow there gleamed, red and angry, the smouldering embers of a big camp-fire—such a fire as white men make, with large logs piled up. All flame had long since fled from the fuel, now reduced to a heap of red embers, glowing the brighter now and again as a faint breeze fanned it. Without throwing enough light to illuminate the scene, the ruddy gleam extended far enough to reveal, dimly, the figures of four men lying round the fire, rolled in blankets, and sleeping the heavy slumber of weariness.

Beyond the reach of the fire-gleam, and moving well within the shadow away from the bright

moonlight, a dozen figures moved stealthily towards the sleeping men. They approached in single file, stooping down till their chins touched their knees, and moving so warily that each one stepped in the footprints of the others, and so silently that, while the sounds of the sleepers' breathing came on the air, no sound followed the movements of the approaching figures. Steadily, stealthily, they crept onwards, until the leader was within a few feet of the nearest sleeper. With a gesture, visible only to those close behind him, he raised his arms, and the men following him divided into two lines, one passing to his right, the other to his left, until they had formed a complete circle round the four sleepers.

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A faint whisper of a breeze seemed to pass through the air, and the men stood upright, each with the right arm thrown back to its full extent, and with a long, thin spear quivering in the hand. Again the breeze seemed to whisper, and the outstretched arms swung forward, and the quivering spears were thrown, and mingled with the loud, harsh shout which came from each warrior's throat, was the cry of pain to which each wakening victim gave vent as he recovered consciousness and agony at the same moment.

Three of the four struggled fiercely to wrest out the spears that pinned them down, and the watching warriors made ready to throw again. One of the four lay still, and the warriors paid no heed to him; but under the shelter of his blanket, ignoring the anguish of the two spear-wounds he had, he was feeling for his revolver.

A streak of flame, the echo of the shot, and the death-shriek of one of the black-fellows were almost simultaneous. To the wounded white men the sound of the shot was a signal of hope; to the unwounded blacks it was a terror and dismay, and without more than a glance at their comrade where he lay, they turned and fled into the shadows of the bush.

"My God! they're burning out my entrails," one of the white men groaned.

"Lie still, you fools; lie still. You're only doing harm by struggling," the man who had shot called out.

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Another of the four had ceased to move, though three spears were stuck in him. The man nearest to him managed to wriggle over and up on to his hands and knees.

"Gleeson's dead," he cried.

"Hold on, Tap, you fool!" the first man said. "I've a spear through my thigh and another in my left arm, but I'll have them out in a moment, and then see what's wrong with you."

"Give me water—water," the man on the other side of the fire groaned.

Tap, least wounded of the four, took heart as he saw Barber wrest out the spears that were sticking in his leg and arm and bind up the wounds. But he shuddered when Barber came over to him and jerked out the spear which had passed through the muscle under his shoulder.

"You're not hurt. What are you howling about?" Barber said roughly, and passed over to Walker, who was just breathing. "Speared through the stomach," he said in a whisper to Tap; "he'll be finished in two minutes. What are you doing now, you fool?" he asked quickly, as Tap, having neither the nerve nor the courage of his companion, reeled and fell fainting to the ground.

Barber stood for a moment looking down at him, and then glanced at the others. Walker no longer breathed, Gleeson had not moved, and the black-fellow lay where he fell, on his back, with a red stain spreading from a spot on his chest over the smudges and smears of the wet white clay.

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"It's saved me a lot of trouble," he remarked callously, as he went to the fire and threw more wood on to it.

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CHAPTER XVI.

TWO SIDES OF A STORY.

A scandal had come to Birralong; a scandal that ate its way into the peace and contentment of the township; a scandal which introduced into the simple existence of the district a discordant, jarring note, common enough in more crowded centres of population, but absent up to that moment from the annals of the sober, clean-living inhabitants of the bush township. And the men who gathered on Marmot's verandah to settle all the problems and the squabbles of the locality, met to marvel and to wonder; for they who, in their wisdom, had anticipated all things; they who had solved all questions affecting the welfare of the district; they who had laid bare the skeleton of every secret for miles around—had met and heard, in painful and perplexed silence, the story of a greater secret than they had yet encountered, and a secret beside which, as it were, they had been living for months past without even dreaming of its existence.

When first it came to them through the medium of a floating shred of gossip that had filtered

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through to the Carrier's Rest, they were too much affected for words. Only could they sit and smoke in silence, each man turning the story over and over in his mind until his pipe went out, and under cover of the smokeless silence he slipped away into the darkness and went home, mournful and abashed; until at last Marmot awakened from the reverie into which he had fallen, and discovered that he was alone as well as silent.

By the next evening they had recovered somewhat, and discussed the story in all its detail, grown the richer and more comprehensive by the silence of the night before. Each one had some little touch, some poignant item, to add to the general outline; and when they separated that night, the shred of gossip had become the completed romance which lived ever afterwards in the traditions of the township.

The hero was Slaughter; the heroine Nellie Murray; and the theme, the shattering of idyllic bliss by the deceit of a faithless lover.

From the day of the schoolmaster's death Slaughter had been a greater conundrum than ever to the men of Birralong. His visits to the store had become less and less frequent, and his bearing, when he did come, more and more distant and reserved. Not even the story of the diggers' arrival and dispersing interested him; not even the audacity of the robbery of the miner's gold from the constable's cottage, and the fruitlessness of the subsequent chase after the robbers, moved him. He listened silently and listlessly to the account of Tony's departure with his mates to seek for a fresh fortune in the place of the one they had lost. Only twice had he manifested any attention to what was said on the verandah when he was present. He had become animated and attentive when the conversation turned on the fact that while Tony had ridden out to Barellan to see Aileen on his first return from the diggings, he had neither gone out nor mentioned her name on his second return to the township—the occasion of the great billiard contest. It was recalled by some one how quickly he had come back from the one visit he had made, and how short his answers had been to all questions put to him, and the opinion which had been formed and was generally expressed was that the cause of it all was young Dickson and the precedence he had taken over Tony in the affections of Aileen. When Slaughter heard that he had sniffed, as he usually did before delivering himself of a sweeping condemnation of all womankind, and looked round on his companions with eyes that were peculiarly bright—but he said nothing.

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The other occasion when he showed any interest in the conversation was when it was said that Tony and his two mates on setting out for the second time to the gold-fields had taken young Murray with them as well, Dickson having paid for his share in the stores and tools of the party. That piece of information had apparently affected Slaughter almost more than the other, and although he had not spoken—as Smart put it, he seemed to have swallowed his tongue—there had been a light in his eye and an expression on his face that had escaped no one.

And yet none of them had had wit enough to understand the significance of it all—until the bald fact of the revealed secret came to them. Each one claimed then that he had seen, noted, and understood the peculiarity of Slaughter's behaviour on the two occasions, but he had held his peace lest he should be doing an injustice to a fellow-townsmen. Never before had Birralong been so unanimous in forming an opinion nor so generous in respecting another's fair name. But lost time was made up in the fulness of opportunity that was now offered.

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The beginning of the story was vague and uncertain, and, as no particular interest attached to it, it was practically left alone. The interest of Birralong commenced with the alarm Murray and Murray's wife experienced with regard to Nellie. With a big family and a small selection, there was neither time nor inclination on their part to mince matters, and Nellie had been questioned severely and pointedly. An obstinate silence was the only result, and her parents losing patience, she had been left in a room with a locked door in order to acquire the necessary sense to answer what she was asked. Instead, however, of learning the folly of obstruction, she found that the window was open; and when her parents returned, many hours afterwards, to renew their inquiries, they found that Nellie had vanished.

Disliking the idea of publicity—a mistake for which Birralong soundly condemned them—they had kept their own counsel for days—days when, as Marmot impressively pointed out, Slaughter had visited the store and displayed that taciturn manner which was so easily understood under the light of subsequent revelations.

As the days passed and no sign was given by the missing Nellie, and anxiety began to be manifest in the Murray household, a message was brought by a boy, who said he had received it from a man on the road, that Mrs. Murray would do well to hurry to Slaughter's at the Three-mile. Disbelieving, yet alarmed, Murray, his wife, and a neighbour who happened to be at the selection at the time, set off in a spring-cart to the Three-mile.

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They found Nellie there and brought her back; and then the news leaked out, and Murray came to the township, with blazing hate in his eyes, asking to be shown where Slaughter was, and calling for his son to come home and help him exact retribution for the betrayal of his child.

But no one knew where Slaughter was; no one had seen him in the township for days; and, as far as could be learned, there were no signs of his having been at the Three-mile for days; while Nellie held her peace, even when her baby came and died, and she almost followed it.

That was the story Birralong heard, and nightly was the gathering on Marmot's verandah entranced with the discussion of it, and the considering of all the *pros* and *cons* concerned in it. Aggravation was given to their interest by the arrival of the periodical letter for Slaughter; and, having discussed the matter for some evenings, it was at length determined to send out word to

Murray, so that he should be ready to start whenever warning was sent that Slaughter had come in for his mail. There was a possibility that the meeting between the two would be picturesque, and Marmot and his friends had an eye to the picturesque in that respect. They were almost outraged when the messenger returned with Murray's reply, for it dispelled immediately any prospect of entertainment; Murray replied that they could mind their own business. And the next evening Slaughter came in.

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They had only just gathered together when he rode up on his old scraggy horse. He threw the reins over one of the posts as he got down from the saddle, and walked on to the verandah with an air of unconcern that made every man look at him open-mouthed.

"Got any letters for me?" he said to Marmot, ignoring the rest.

"Post-office's shut," Marmot replied curtly, as he stood up. "You can come to-morrow."

He forgot for the moment the unfriendly answer Murray had sent in to his message, and the murmur of approbation that passed round the assembly at his words pleased him.

"It was never shut before," Slaughter said, looking him straight in the face.

"Well, it is now," Marmot retorted; and sat down again.

On a small rack above the counter, just in a line behind Marmot's head when he was standing, was displayed the letter Slaughter had come for, and as Marmot sat down he saw it. He pushed past into the store and took it from the rack. As he turned to the door, he faced the men standing round Marmot.

"Put that back, or——" Marmot began loudly.

"Get out of my way," Slaughter shouted, as he advanced towards them with angry eyes and closed fists.

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They had seen such an expression on his face once before; and as they did then, so did they now, as they fell apart and allowed him to pass out. As he reached his horse, he faced them again.

"You mind your own affairs," he said, with a snarl in his voice; and before they could find an answer for him, he mounted his horse and rode away.

"Well!" Marmot exclaimed, when at length he found words. "What game's this, I'd ask?"

Smart, from the end of the verandah where he had been watching Slaughter ride through the township, laughed as he answered—

"Old Cold-blood's waking up. As the missus says, them freezers is always the worst when they thaws."

"Seems to me," Cullen observed solemnly—"seems to me the drought ain't the only trouble in the district; and old Cold-blood, coming here listening to all we've got to say, has got in ahead of us somehow, and is playing a lone hand for all he's worth. He's bluffed Murray."

"Wha-at?" Marmot exclaimed.

"For why not?" Cullen went on. "He came from over by Murray's;" and he pointed away in the direction whence Slaughter had come, and which was also the direction of the Murray selection. "Old Cold-blood's a man of eddication, and eddication, you take my tip, is the joker in a hand like this. The old man's right. This ain't our game. We've got our hands full watching how things go. There's a breeze coming up from somewhere, and we're best under shelter. Leave them as wants it to take up the running. Old Cold-blood and the Three-mile ain't our dart."

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Ignorant of the commotion his reappearance had created at the store, Slaughter rode on his way to his selection, from which he had been absent for a couple of weeks. Barber, before leaving (for the West, as he told Slaughter at the time, but in reality to lead the raid on the miner's gold at the constable's cottage), had promised to send a message to Slaughter to a small township on the north of Birralong, giving him full particulars as to the whereabouts of the woman whose wrong-doing was the foundation of their mutual hate. Slaughter had set out for the northern township at the appointed time, and found a letter awaiting him from Barber; but instead of containing the information promised, it told how Barber and his three companions had been attacked at night by wild blacks, how two of the party were killed, and the others so badly wounded that they were returning by slow stages to the Three-mile for rest. The letter concluded by asking Slaughter to ride out to meet them, as should either break down, the other would not be able to render him any assistance. This Slaughter had done, meeting Barber and Tap on the road from the West. They were not travelling quite so slowly as the letter might have led Slaughter to believe, neither was the condition of their wounds so serious as the letter implied; but Slaughter neither expressed nor manifested surprise. It may have been that the presence of the black-browed Barber awakened memories of a bygone period before his life was scarred by transverse currents of bitterness; it may have been that his appearance roused the latent hatred he entertained for the woman who had crossed and marred his path after those happier years; it may have been some evil influence the man exhaled, and which affected his companions;—but immediately he was thrown in contact with Barber, there came to Slaughter's eyes a dull glow unpleasant to see and as forbidding as it was foreboding. Matters of everyday note escaped him or were unheeded; inaccuracies of fact, contradictions of statement, were alike ignored; only did Slaughter seem to realize and hope for the prospect of learning how he might attain to the summit of his ambition by settling that unhappy account of the bygone years.

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There were not many words lost in the greeting. Barber said that he and Tap were coming back

to the Three-mile for some more business they had heard of, and that they wanted to be as quiet and free from interruption as they had been before. Leave was neither asked nor given; but the three travelled on together until a day's ride from Birralong, when Tap and Barber branched off to the right and left, leaving Slaughter to go on through the township to the selection by himself.

When he arrived at the slip-rails across the end of the track leading from the road to the selection, he saw by the gleam of firelight from the open doorway that some one was in the hut. As he entered he saw in the dim light the figures of Barber and Tap, while nearer the door a third was standing.

"Well, I'm off," the latter said, as Slaughter went into the hut. "Hullo," he added, as he met Slaughter face to face. "You back again?" [Pg 242]

"Well, what then?" Slaughter answered, with a surly tone and manner. "This is my own place, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, it's your own place, only I didn't see you here when I last came over, and they do say in the township——"

"Look here, young fellow," Slaughter exclaimed savagely, "if you come here as often as I come to Barellan, I'll be satisfied. The less I see——"

"Dry up," Barber called out. "Dickson came with a message for me. What's it to you if the boy has doings with me?"

Slaughter said nothing, and Dickson, with an uneasy laugh, looked round at Barber.

"Of course if the girl comes out, why, we're off," Tap observed.

"What girl?" Slaughter exclaimed quickly.

"Why, the girl Birralong's talking about—the girl—well, you ought to know," Dickson said.

"I suppose you think you're going to cut the youngster out as well with the other one, and play up with her," Barber added.

Slaughter, standing by the doorway, looked round from one to the other slowly.

"You'd best talk plain, I take it," he said. "You'll say straight what you've got to say, or some one will shift out of this camp. What's your yarn, anyhow?" he added, facing to Dickson.

"That's all right," he answered, grinning uneasily, and shifting his feet as he made as though to get nearer the door. "It's only borak. It's a yarn, that's all." [Pg 243]

"A yarn put about while you were away—the boy's only chaffing you," Tap put in.

Slaughter stood by the doorway, looking from one to the other.

"I'll know more than that," he said. "If any man says aught of me combined with a woman's name, he's got me to deal with, and smart too."

"Well, go to the township, you fool, and ask what's said," Barber exclaimed.

Dickson, scenting trouble for himself if Slaughter did anything of the kind, tried to remedy the unexpected development of his remarks.

"It's only borak," he repeated. "I was chaffing. I didn't mean anything. I thought you liked a joke. It's all right."

Barber laughed at this sudden change of front, for prior to Slaughter's appearance Dickson had been telling, with great glee, how he had put on to Slaughter's shoulders the reputation of his own iniquity. He had told the story with the air of one who knew that he had done something which would earn the admiration of his listeners; with the air of one who, mean and cowardly himself, regarded his companions as being similarly constituted. It was the suggestion of implied meanness that rankled with Barber, and made him interpose upon Dickson's efforts to beat a hasty retreat.

"It's a girl at the station, you fool," he said. "The youngster said——"

"Silence!" Slaughter shouted, as he advanced a step into the hut and faced the black-browed man, with the gleam in his eyes which had held the men of Birralong back, and his fists clenched. "You bandy her name, and——" [Pg 244]

"Well, what then?" Barber interrupted.

"You'll deal with me," Slaughter added, facing the other, and meeting his eyes in as steady and as hard a glance as was given.

The other two occupants of the hut stood silent, watching—Tap from under his eyebrows, askance; Dickson, with a face that was growing pale and eyes that were shifty and timid. Barber and Slaughter faced each other, the one with a heavy, sullen look, the other with a gleam of fierce anger in his eyes—just as he had looked at Marmot and his comrades when they essayed to follow him into the schoolmaster's cottage. Barber, through his growing rage, realized that he had a different man to deal with than the ordinary run; he remembered also that to quarrel with Slaughter at the moment would be dangerous to the scheme he was working. He allowed his eyes to go down before the steady stare that faced him.

"No one wants to harm her," he said sullenly; and both Tap and Dickson looked up at Slaughter with a momentary feeling akin to awe—it was the first time they had seen or heard of Barber wavering.

"No one *shall* harm her," Slaughter cried. "If any man harms her by word or deed, he'll have me to answer. Do you hear?" he shouted, flinging round on Dickson, who started and cowered.

"The boy said nothing," Barber exclaimed. "Come, get out of it," he added to Dickson, as he went up to him and, taking him by the arm, roughly, pushed him out of the hut.

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Slaughter stood where he was, and Tap slunk out after the others.

"You young fool," Barber said, as he pushed Dickson along towards the paddock where his horse was, gripping his arm so fiercely that the boy writhed with the pain of it, and yet was too frightened to cry out, "if our game goes wrong through your tricks, we'll flay you. You keep out of sight till I send for you; do you hear?"

Tap came up behind them as Barber was speaking.

"We had best meet somewhere else, and——"

Barber glanced round. If he had given way to Slaughter he was not going to allow any one else to override him.

"Are you boss of this game or am I?" he said quickly; and Tap held back. "You ride straight back to Barellan," he added to Dickson. "When I want you I'll send for you, so you'll be on hand any time; and if you play up any more tricks till my game's through, look out."

He pushed him away as he spoke, and Dickson hastily caught his horse and rode off without a word. As he disappeared, Tap said in a cringing voice—

"He's like his mother—only good for a sneak thief."

"He's the dead spit of his father, if you want to know," Barber answered savagely; and Tap again slunk back.

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CHAPTER XVII.

A BUSHMAN'S BANKER.

When Bobby Murray rode from Birralong with a couple of months' supply of stores for the mining camp, he found that during his brief absence the others had made great progress in their work. The boulder which had first revealed the secrets of Peters's reef, had been entirely broken up and crushed, with such crude appliances as the three were able to construct, the result, a heap of coarse gold, testifying that, even if crude, the appliances were effective. Other boulders had also been disposed of and the free, coarse gold extracted; while the tailings, or residue from the crushings, were carefully piled up by Palmer Billy, the blowpipe of Peters, now almost a fetish with the former sceptic, having shown that gold in considerable quantity still remained to be extracted.

They had also sunk a shallow trial shaft near the site of the original boulder, and though the hole was only a few feet deep, it showed on all sides the same class of stone. Lower down the slope of the hill there were also outcrops of the stone, and, as Palmer Billy said, it seemed as though, now they had struck it, there was no getting away from the payable ore.

The two more experienced miners of the party debated as to the best methods of working their find, and had decided that they should all work as they had commenced, until they had won enough gold to set them on their feet, financially, whatever might occur. With it, three should journey to Birralong, and place it in the keeping of Marmot, while one—Palmer Billy bespoke the post—should remain on the ground, and "hold" it in case other prospectors came along. Then, when their first earnings were in the safe keeping of Marmot, Tony and Murray were to return, while Peters journeyed to the nearest mining official, declared the find, and had the reward claims of the four, as pegged out, proclaimed and secured.

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"Peters's reef will run to a township then, boys, and my swamp will be a fortune in corner lots," Palmer Billy exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Or a tank for the sharks when they come along," Tony said.

"Sharks? If a darned shark comes around now we'll roast him. It's the last chance I'll ever have of striking it rich, and this time I'm going to be fly," Palmer Billy retorted.

For nearly six weeks they worked on, always with success, until the gold they had won filled several canvas bags they made for it, and amounted to as heavy a load as the four horses could carry, in addition to the three men and their swags and stores.

Leaving Palmer Billy comfortable in camp, Peters, Tony, and Murray started for Birralong. By following the route Murray had taken when he returned with the stores, they managed to reach the scene of Gleeson's rush on the second evening; and while camping there, Murray pointed out that as no one was expecting them in the township for at least another month, it might be as well

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if one of them rode in and told the township they were coming. He volunteered to ride in as soon as it was daylight, and tell Marmot that the others were bringing a pack-horse laden with gold, which they wanted to leave in his charge. It was a good idea, Peters said; and with the morning Murray started, the other two following leisurely and some hours after.

When they arrived at Marmot's, early in the afternoon, they found him on the verandah with Murray, while the latter's horse, still sweating, was hitched up to one of the posts in front.

"My word! you've come along at a pace," Marmot exclaimed, as they rode up. "Murray here was saying——"

"Where's the use of wasting time when you've struck it?" Tony interrupted to ask; adding, as he looked at Murray's horse, "Been raising the district?"

"I just told one or two," Murray replied. "I reckoned there'd be a sing-song to-night at the Rest."

"But what's this about a team-load of nuggets coming in?" Marmot said, advancing to the top of the verandah steps and looking at Tony and Peters as they dismounted. "You'll want an escort. We'll have to send Leary back to the coast for a sergeant and a squad of troopers; and then the bank'll have to be told. It won't be safe to plank all that gold in a bank at once without telling them it's coming."

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Peters laughed.

"There's no team-load," he said. "The boy has been pulling your leg. We've got it on the pack-horse here, and the bank where it's going, for the present, anyway, is in there;" and he nodded towards the store.

Marmot braced himself up, and then, fearing lest they should see how proud he was at the flattery of their trust, attempted to demur.

"But, boys, this is a big contract," he said seriously. "I'm on to run a tally for most things; but—how much do you make it?"

"Say about a couple of thousand ounces and you overshoot it," Peters answered.

"And good gold—four notes an ounce gold?"

"Ah, now you're getting into expert talk," Peters replied. "It looks all right, but it hasn't been assayed, and it hasn't been weighed yet. We've got it; that's our point."

He and Tony were loosening the bags from where they were fastened to the pack, and as he spoke, he removed one, and came up to the verandah with it in his hands.

"Where will you have it?" he asked.

"Put it in the post-office safe," Marmot replied, with dignity, as he led the way into the store and round behind one of the counters, where a yellow-japanned tin box, with a broken brass lock and a dented lid, rested in peaceful indifference to the title given to it since the half-crown's worth of postage stamps Marmot kept on hand were placed in it with other post-office valuables.

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He stood by the box as five bags, all similar to the one Peters first produced, were placed in it. Then he closed the lid carefully, passed a piece of string round it, and sealed it with the Birralong date-stamp.

"That's as safe as the Queensland National," he exclaimed, as he stood up with pride on his face and faced the three lucky diggers.

"It ought to be, unless Birralong has changed," Tony answered, with a short laugh. "Now, suppose we give the Rest a chance?"

Marmot looked round and smiled. Then he went to the back door, closed and bolted it, and came on to the verandah where they were, closing and locking the door after him, and suspending on a nail a notice-board, always ready, and bearing the legend, "Gone to Rest."

"Looks well," Peters said, eyeing the notice.

"Ah, that's his work," Marmot answered, looking at Tony. "He cut the 'the' out, and I've never had time to write another."

He came down from the verandah, mounted the pack-horse, sitting far back behind the pack like an Arab on a donkey, and once more headed the procession from the store to the Rest—a procession which grew in size as it passed down the township road, and collected the units of the male population from their various habitations.

"How's old Slaughter getting on?" Tony asked Marmot, after greeting Smart and Cullen.

"Oh, *him*?" Marmot answered evasively, as he glanced over at Murray, who, however, did not manifest any interest in the matter.

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"I didn't see him last time I was in," Tony went on. "How is the old chap keeping? Still a whale on——"

"It's risky," Marmot whispered excitedly, interrupting him. "Ain't you heard? Ain't young Murray heard? Don't you know?"

"Know what?" Tony asked.

"Why, about—about Slaughter and the girl."

"Slaughter and the girl? What girl? You don't mean——" Tony, filled with admiration for Aileen,

the greater because it was suppressed, immediately became alert and suspicious.

"His sister," Marmot answered under his breath, jerking his head towards Murray.

Tony looked at him for a moment too surprised to speak. Then he burst out laughing.

"You have found out something this time," he said, in a bantering tone. "Who made up that fairy tale?"

"It's no fairy tale. It's true," Marmot answered. "There's Tommy Nuggan coming. Ask him about it, if you won't believe me."

Tony, as soon as the reasons for the procession and the direction of its route had been duly explained to and accepted by Nuggan, reined in his horse beside him, and, dismounting, walked with him.

"Marmot said you'd tell me all about the latest yarn from the verandah—about Slaughter," Tony said.

"Ah," Nuggan exclaimed, "you were a bit surprised to hear it, I take it? Any one would be who didn't know the man as I did. It didn't surprise me. No; not much. I've seen it coming for years, bless you. I didn't talk about it up yonder," he went on, nodding towards Marmot's store, "because a word up there is as good as fifty next day, and spread all over the district at that. No; that ain't my style. I saw it, and I said, 'Nuggan, my boy,' I said, 'this ain't your game. If the girl goes to the old man, it's his and her game, not yours.'"

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"Only she didn't go," Tony said.

"Didn't she? Then perhaps you know more than I do, and can tell me——"

"I can tell you if you put that yarn about you've started as good a fairy tale as was ever told," Tony interrupted. "Why, Nellie Murray and Dickson have been thick for——"

"Have they?" Nuggan, in his turn, interrupted. "And you think Dickson has time for any one now since Yaller-head went out to Barellan? I know, I do. I don't tell no fairy tales. No more than when I said it was strange you being the only one at the Flat who wasn't sandy or mousey in the hair. I don't make no error. I've got eyes, and I uses them."

It was Nuggan's pride to think that Birralong had never been in want of any information on any subject after reference had been made to him. It was therefore bitter to hear his latest version of the last local problem airily dismissed as a fairy tale.

"You've got no call to criticize," he went on, as Tony did not answer. "If you want to know, I can tell you; and there's a heap of things you'd give your head to know now, I take it. I've heard many a tale I don't repeat, and I could make most people look rather foolish if I wanted to. When you go out to the Flat next time just ask who Mrs. Garry was. Talk about *my* fairy tales! Take care you ain't one yourself. Maybe Yaller-head could give you news about it if she wanted to. Only she don't, now she's got young Dickson. There ain't no mystery about where *he* came from."

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He was indignant at the calling in question of his word, and as he smarted himself, so did he try to make Tony smart. It was true that he used his eyes, and little escaped them; he might have added that he also used his imagination, and that what escaped the one was secured, always, by the other. He fell back as he concluded, in case Tony should score in return; but as the procession had reached the Rest, Tony swallowed the unpleasant effect of Nuggan's words, and, having turned his horse into the paddock by the side of the hotel, entered with the others the room where, on his last visit, the great billiard-match had been played.

As on that former occasion the news spread that there was money to be spent at the Rest, so it did on this occasion, and long before sunset there was a mighty gathering to do honour to the men who, having lost one pile, had set out again and won another. The drought still lay over Birralong, the rain which had caused such fortunate unpleasantness to Tony and his mates having apparently only fallen on the heights of the range. For many miles around the township the grass was brown and withered, only waiting for a stray spark to set it ablaze and sweep the country with a greater desolation than even the drought could effect. The stock on the selections was thin and poor, the horses were weedy and weak, and the selectors, hearing that Tony and his mates had returned with more gold, hurried into the Rest to hear what they could in the hopes of sharing in the miners' luck. To profit by any good-will there might be, men who were weary with counting their debts and discounting the chances of paying them, kept the ball rolling by "setting 'em up" when they thought it came to their turn, despite the repeated assertion by Tony and his two comrades that they were providing the evening's entertainment.

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The sun went down, and the cool, dark evening reigned outside, but within the Rest the gathering was growing uproarious as the selectors gave free vent to spirits held in check for many weeks by the depressing weight of the unending drought. A commotion among the horses which were in the paddock beside the hotel, and on to which the room looked out, gave a moment's pause to the noise within. One man went out to see what had caused the stir. He dashed back into the room with a white, scared face and startled eyes.

"Marmot's store's afire!" he shouted.

Helter-skelter the men rushed out, Tony and his mates in front. On the rise at the end of the township the flames gleamed as they flared from the wooden building, which burned like matchwood. From the distance in the opposite direction came the sounds of horses, galloping away from the township.

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Peters sprang towards the paddock fence.

"Our gold!" he yelled. "They've biffed us!"

The slip-rails in the paddock fence were down, and two of the horses were missing. While most of the men rushed away up to the burning store, five stayed behind—Tony, Peters, Murray, and two young selectors who had come in to join the fun.

"It's a tough ride. Who knows the country best?" Peters asked, as he swung into the saddle.

"Teddy Morton," some one answered shortly; and the selector named, slim, active, and sunburned, wheeled his horse to the front without a word and drove his spurs home.

Out along the road he raced, sitting tight in the saddle with the reins hanging loose, catching rather than hearing on the air as it rushed past his ears the thud of the horses' hoofs galloping away ahead. Behind him the others rode, silent, the horses following the leader of their own instincts. Two miles farther on the faint sounds ahead ceased, and each one of the five knew that the fugitives had turned from the roadway into the open bush. They knew the place—there was rugged, broken country a mile from the road, deep cross gullies with treacherous banks, and patches of wattle scrub close-growing and dark, where a man might ride to his death at every stride of his horse. And down the road they raced, till they saw by the loom of the open bush where the boundary fences ceased. The leader turned his horse in his stride, and the four behind turned theirs. A fallen log; a rut; a snag; and one rider's race would be done; for the pace they were going left no escape if once a horse came down. Through the low-grown brush they crashed. A rider ducked to miss a branch that was level with his head; a horse swerved sharp to the right to dodge an old and charred tree-stump; another propped as it caught its step to clear a fancied jump—and the riders gripped their saddle-pads and rode with their hands low down. Somewhere ahead their quarry raced—and three of them thought of their gold—somewhere ahead their coming was heard, and murder might lurk in the shade. It might be a bullet; it might be a spear; it might be a shattered spine; but Morton stuck to his racing lead, and the four pressed close behind.

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Away ahead three others rode, two on stolen mounts. They had seen the gleam of the fire burst out as they galloped past the Rest; they heard the shouts of the laughter, and they laughed as they rode away, for they had robbed the store and set it on fire, and every man of the township was in at the Rest drinking to the success of the diggers whose gold was being carried off. They had no plans beyond the robbing of the store, and now, as it was necessary to divide the spoil, they made for the broken country so as to be able to carry the division through without fear of interruption. The man who was on his own horse had the gold strapped in front of him; the others were one on each side, watchful lest he should slip away with the prize. The man on the left watched his companion so carefully that he failed to see a sudden break-away of the ground. His horse stumbled, and its rider was jerked forward out of the saddle on to its neck. The noise startled the horse in the middle, and it swung on one side just at the edge of the break-away. Before it could check itself, it slipped, and the effort made to recover carried it over the edge, causing it to fall heavily on its side and on its rider. The scream of the horse and the yell of the rider echoed through the bush. The man's companions reined in their horses, and one of them dismounted.

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"Make a blaze of twigs if you can't see," the one who remained in the saddle called out, and, to help, he also alighted.

The gleam of yellow light when it sprang up revealed the horse lying with a jagged stump through it, and beyond it the rider, with one leg twisted and bent up under him. One of the two went over and stooped down, taking the man by his shoulders and pulling him along the ground till his leg was straight, when he let him fall again. The man groaned as his back came heavily against the ground.

"Listen!" the other exclaimed, as he stood up. "They're after us. Collar the gold and clear."

He sprang to where the injured horse was impaled, and tugged at the straps that held the bags. His companion came to his assistance.

"Hold the horses, you fool! Be ready to ride for it."

The straps were loose by the time the other man was in his saddle, with the reins of the second horse on his arm.

"Here!" the first exclaimed as he rushed up with the bags in his arm. "Take them quick."

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The second man took them, and let go the reins, which the other seized.

"Tap! My God, Tap, you're not—"

The man addressed turned savagely with an ugly oath.

"It's the mare. Kill the mare before you go. She's hurt, bad," the injured man groaned.

Tap scrambled into the saddle.

"Here, where's my share?" he cried to his companion.

The other spurred his horse.

"Ride for it," he called back, as he dashed into the shadow ahead; and at the same moment the sounds of the others crashing through the bush behind them came to Tap's ears.

"Don't leave the mare—think of the pain she's in," the man on the ground cried out, as he strove to rise, and fell back, writhing in agony.

The sound of Tap's horse galloping away came to him with the sounds of others approaching. The light from the little fire Tap had made was just enough to show where the five pursuers reined up in time to miss the sudden drop in the ground. The man's eyes gleamed as he saw them, and he tried to pull out a revolver.

"Morton and I'll ride on; fix him up and follow," Peters shouted, as Murray, having dismounted, rushed across and seized the man's hand.

While Murray took the revolver from the man's pocket, the young selector threw enough twigs on the fire to make it blaze up brightly. Tony, noticing the state of the impaled mare, cried out—

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"Poor brute! Here, lend me that pistol, Murray, till I put it out of misery."

The gleaming eyes of the injured man followed him as he went over to the mare and ended its agony. Murray stooped and tried to move him into a more easy position, and only then did the gleaming eyes leave Tony's face.

"Damn you!" he said, as he looked up for a moment at Murray.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

A TANGLED SKEIN.

The man with the broken thigh lay still on the rough-made stretcher the men had put up for him before starting, and Tony, sitting on the other side of the fire, smoked in silence, not moving arm or leg lest by so doing he should attract the attention of the sufferer and so disturb him. For the same reason he did not replenish the fire, now burning down to a glowing mass of embers, which threw out a dull red glare and fell upon the form of the man where he lay, wrapped in a blanket, and played weird tricks of shade with the grizzly beard and the unkempt locks that strayed across the forehead.

Viewed either by firelight or sunlight, it was not a face to hold the glance, nor to call for a second look, unless the mind were morbid and animated by a love for the grotesque and devilish. Not even the unsteady, deceptive glare of the ember light, throwing streaks and patches of shade, ever changing and ever moving, across the ragged surface of the beard, could hide the square massiveness of the jaws and the curve of the hard yet sensuous lips. There was strength in the nose, strength and cruelty, and the straight black band that formed the heavy brow added to the repellent expression. Such a face it was that, looking at it, one understood the man turning with an oath upon those who sought to aid him in his misery, much as one can understand the fury of an imprisoned snake which turns back upon itself and plunges its fangs into its own flesh until it dies, the victim of its own malicious instincts.

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As Tony sat watching, the sufferer turned his head from side to side languidly, and a moan of pain escaped his lips. Tony rose to his feet, gently, and the man, opening his eyes, looked at him. At once the expression of pain that was in them as the lids rolled up gave way to a flash of hate.

"You—damn you!" the man muttered, as he set his teeth.

Tony stepped across to the stretcher and stooped down.

"Don't touch me," the man exclaimed fiercely.

"All right, old chap, I won't hurt you; only I thought I might make you more comfortable," Tony answered.

"You want to make me comfortable?" the man asked in a scoffing tone.

"Why, yes, if I can," Tony replied.

"Then see here," the man exclaimed. "I've never feared anything yet, and I don't begin now. I'm close up a dead 'un, but that's nothing. When I'm dead, I'm gone, and that's all about it. I know, and I don't give a shearer's curse for it, so don't you fancy I care. It's your maudlin gospel-millers who get scared at the chance of kicking. You understand? That's the sort of man I am. I was never afraid and never sorry all my days, and I'm not going to begin now at the end of them."

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His eyes were wild in their gleam and his lips twitched as he spoke.

"Yes; that's all right," Tony said soothingly. "You're as plucky as they make them, and I like you for it; so go slow and rest, because there aren't too many like you, and we don't want you to go."

The keen, bright eyes looked steadily for a moment, and then a forced laugh came from the man's lips.

"*You* don't want me to go!" he said, with a sneer. "*You!* Well, see here, young fellow. There's one thing I'd be sorry for—if I went without telling you what I've got to say."

"Keep it till the morning," Tony answered.

The man laughed again.

"I shall be fit for planting hours before the morning. You listen while you may. You'll be interested. Make the fire up, and sit down where you were. Then I'll talk—and don't interrupt, because I'm pushed for time."

To humour him, Tony threw some logs on the fire, and sat down again in his old place; and the man lay with his face turned towards him, the ruddy firelight shedding a brighter glow upon the unkempt hair and beard, and making the gleam of the eyes more vivid.

"I'll tell you the yarn like a story-book," the man began. "Once upon a time, there was a woman and two men."

Tony, sitting on the other side of the fire, leaned forward to reach a burning ember with which to light his pipe, and carelessly puffed at it, while the man stopped talking, and watched him with a look that was fiendish in its expression of hate.

"There's no damned interest about this yarn for you, I suppose," he said harshly, raising his head slightly from the rolled coat, which did duty for a pillow, and letting it fall again as his mouth contracted with the pain the movement caused him. "Well, the woman's your mother. Now go on smoking," he added, with savage emphasis.

Tony looked round quickly.

"Yes; you're waking up now," the man sneered. "I reckon you'll be interested now."

"How—what do you know——"

"You'll learn what I know when I've told you. Hold your jaw and keep your ears open. I've not much time to tell you, and I'd be sorry to go without finishing."

"Go on," Tony said quietly; "I shall not interrupt you."

The gleam in the eyes satisfied him that it was only delirium in the man's mind; there was only a coincidence in the fact that he spoke of what Nuggan had hinted at, and what lay nearest to Tony's heart—the question of his parentage and the dissimilarity between himself and the other members of the Taylor family.

"I knew you in a moment, knew you by the likeness," the man went on. "She don't know where you are, but she thinks of me still—me, the man who——but that ain't part of *this* yarn. The woman—your mother—was married, but she's separated from her husband for many years. Separated, I said, sonny. Separated's good, though you don't know it;" and he laughed unmusically as he watched the set face Tony had turned towards him.

"There were two men and one woman, and the woman was married to one of them, but they both were mad with love for her and mad with hate for each other. Do you know what hate means, you white-faced boy? Do you know what it is to hate a man so that you'd go through hell to grip him by the throat and feel him choking under your hands; so that you'd tear your own heart out twenty times a day to grind his infernal life into grey damnation? Do you know what it's like to hate, waking and sleeping, drunk or sober, always having one object in front of you that you want to reach and kill? Do you? Then you know what I've felt for years and years, day and night; what I've lived for, longed for, worked for."

The eyes that had gleamed before were blazing as though some of the glowing embers had been taken from the fire and placed in the man's head, and the face glistened with sweat as the muscles worked and quivered under the paroxysm of fury that held him.

"That's enough," Tony exclaimed, jumping up.

The man held up his hand.

"You've got to hear it, all of it, and then find her out and tell her—from me who's dying. If you don't take a dying man's message to your own mother——"

He stopped and looked at Tony, his face growing calmer the while.

"If you get excited like that——" Tony began.

"Don't you be afraid," the man answered quickly. "I'll finish the yarn or there won't be time. One of the two men married the woman, and one of the two men swore for vengeance, either on the man, or the woman, or both. And he had it. How? That's what I'll tell you. The yarn don't amuse you, sonny? You want waking up again? Well, one thing he did was to steal the kid."

He stopped again, watching Tony's face closely.

"Yes; go on," Tony said quietly.

"It near broke the mother's heart when she found it out," he continued, speaking maliciously—"near broke her heart. But she never found it, for it was put right out of sight; it was left at a humpy at a place called Taylor's Flat."

He watched Tony narrowly as he spoke, and laughed harshly as he saw him swing round and leap to his feet.

"Now you're interested," he said.

Tony stood looking at him, unable for the moment to find words to express what he felt. Was the coincidence of a delirium-stricken mind still the explanation of the man's striking at the tenderest spot in his heart? If so, it was as nothing; but if not——

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"Who are you that you should know this?" Tony cried, moving towards the man where he lay with his eyes, bright as stars and cruel as a snake's, fixed upon him.

"You listen to my yarn. That's your contract," he said derisively. "You'll live till to-morrow; I shan't. Are you going to cheat a dying man? Let me talk. You can fill in the rest about the kid to suit your own taste, and I'll—"

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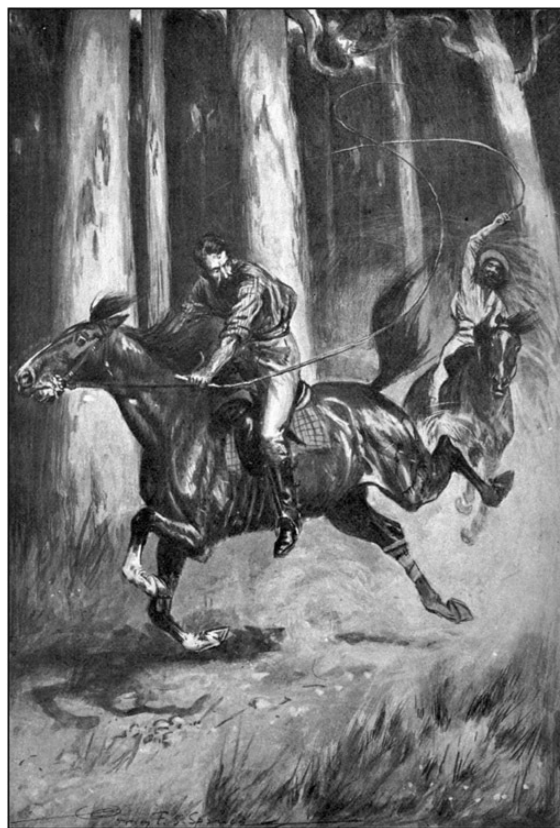
"You were the man who stole the child; you were the mean—"

"Was I?" interrupted the man. "You wait and hear. The man who stole the kid—you, if you want to be exact, damn you, now you've come to see me die—that man went back to the—the place where he stole the kid and where he met—your father."

Again he sought to raise his head as he uttered the words in short, sharp tones, his face growing wet and ghastly under the influence of his pain and his hatred. Tony, watching him, said nothing; the man was either mad or lying, and whichever it was, the best thing to do was to keep quiet and say nothing.

"He came back for fresh mischief, and I—there, you know now—I met him," he shouted; and Tony, keeping still, stood looking at him calmly. "I waited for him out on the run," he went on, beginning to speak in jerky spasms of words, as though he needed to rest every few seconds if he would keep his energy enough in hand to last him till he finished his story. "He had been rounding up some cattle, and had a stock-whip with him. I had one, too, a beauty, with a sixteen-foot green-hide thong. I knew him as soon as I saw him half a mile away. I skulked in the scrub as he came up—just behind a clump of wattle. To fool him I rode out and past him; he turned after me, and I wheeled."

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"THROUGH THE BUSH IT WENT, RACING LIKE MAD."

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ToList

The bright eyes glittered as they watched Tony's face.

"You're a fly young chap," he went on, "but you're not fly enough to guess what's coming. A couple of miles from where we were a track ran through a thickly timbered part of the run. It was a winding track, and not too wide. At one of the narrowest bits, just in the middle of a curve, an old dead gum had stood for years. I had gone over that track just an hour or so before, and I saw where that big gum had fallen—lying right up the track. It was a red gum, tough, long-limbed, and sun-dried. When it fell it had splintered lumps off the limbs, making them sharp at the ends, which were pointing up the track like the prongs of a great jagged toasting-fork. Ha, sonny, what a throw-in for me! Here was a game worth playing. I rode at the man I hated, loosening my stock-whip, and as I came near him, I turned aside and sent out the lash—so as not to touch him. The crack of it sounded in his ears and in his horse's as well, and the beast began to plunge. Here was my chance, and I took it. As the horse reared and plunged, I waited till it was facing away from me, and then sent the lash fair on to its flanks. It brought a lump out of the brute, for the green-hide was as hard as nails, and that horse set off straight for the track where the dead gum lay, and with me after it. Through the bush it went, racing like mad, with its flanks dripping red as I landed blow after blow with the good old green-hide. Soon it was on the track, racing, galloping, blindly, madly, like hell out for an airing, straight for my toasting-fork, straight—God!"

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In the fury and excitement of his story the man had forgotten his injuries, and to give emphasis to his words, and perhaps make the pale, set face that was turned towards him grow paler and more set, he had reached out his arms, and held his clutching fingers towards Tony as he sought to rise and peer with his vengeful eyes nearer and closer to his victim, till the pangs of agony cut short both his fury and his invective. He fell back, his lips pressed together till they were thin and white, and his fists clenched as he strove to battle with the jarring torture in his nerves. The sweat stood out in glistening beads on his forehead, and his brows contracted down until they almost hid the eyes in the frown of determined will.

The mute agony of the man's face sent back the disgust which was growing in Tony's heart. The tale might be a lie—it might be only delirium; but the man was in agony, in the death-agony perhaps, and Tony went to his side.

"What can I do to help you?" he asked, as gently as he could.

"Pull the damned leg down—it's shifted," the man muttered between his clenched teeth; and Tony did as he asked.

The man lay still with closed eyes for a few moments without heeding Tony's query whether he was easier. Then he raised his eyelids, and, with a short, forced laugh, turned his head on one side.

"I'm going to finish the yarn," he said in a voice that was strained, but in marked contrast to the one he had previously used.

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"Never mind the yarn; lie quiet for a bit," Tony exclaimed.

"I'll finish the yarn," the man replied, with a touch of his old fierceness in his voice. "Where was I when the damned bone moved? I remember. We were riding for the jump, riding as I never rode before or since, riding like—like—I wonder if they ride in hell? If they do they can't ride wilder, for I cut that horse's flanks to ribbons—yes, cut it till the bone showed through—and it fled down that winding track so fast that I was left behind. It went out of sight, it and its rider, round the bend where the red gum lay. Ha, sonny, I wasn't first in, but I won that race. There was a shout and a shriek from man and horse, and then a crash of shattered timber, and when I rode up at a hand-gallop, I saw on my toasting-fork, stuck with a jagged prong through him, his head hanging down and his legs flying up, just as he had pitched from his horse, the man your mother loved."

The venom had come into the voice again, the hatred into the eyes; and as he uttered the last words, Tony instinctively drew back farther away from him, his whole nature recoiling in loathing from the cruel, brutal passion of the man's face.

"That's what you're to tell her; that's my message to her when you find her—my dying message to the woman who made me mad with love and mad with hate. And you'll give it to her—you, her stolen boy, and when she hears it from you, she—"

His voice stopped in a gasp, and for a minute he battled for his breath.

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"I don't care now; I'm square at last," he muttered, as soon as he could speak again; and Tony saw by the red firelight how his face was growing pallid and drawn. "I was square with the mother years ago and square with the man she loved, and now I'm square with you; for I've put a sting in your life that'll last as long as you've breath to draw. I came back here to find you; and then—I am the man who collared the gold last time you were here, and I settled your hash with the fair-haired girl that's out at the station now. You've your father's voice and your father's face, and if your mother could see you she'd know in a moment—only she can't, she can't; and you—"

A gasping spasm seized the man, and he battled again for his breath. Tony sprang across to him, and, stooping down, put his hand under the man's head and raised it. He breathed more easily, and Tony watched the face anxiously, for the eyes were closed and the lips drawn away from the teeth. With his unoccupied hand Tony put back the shaggy mass of hair from the forehead, and, as he felt the touch, the man opened his eyes and stared vindictively at the face above him.

"You thought I'd gone—did you?" he said, in little more than a whisper. "Don't touch me—you spawn of—"

A spasm of pain contracted his features and stopped his words.

"Don't talk like that. Keep quiet. I only want to do what I can to ease you," Tony said gently.

The man, even as he struggled for breath, raised one arm and tried to push Tony away, until, fearing that his efforts to soothe him might only do more harm than good, Tony let the head lie on the pillow again and stood back. The man's chest moved as the gasping struggles for breath sounded hard and grating in his throat, and his frame trembled as it lay. Presently he opened his eyes again and looked at Tony.

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"Tell your—mother when you—find her how—"

Another spasm interrupted him, and Tony stepped nearer, for the voice was terribly low. When the worst of the spasm was over, he went on, the words scarcely audible—

"How your—father—died."

The eyes, still full of hatred though they were growing lustreless and dull, were fixed on Tony's face with a blinkless stare. The distorted lips moved twice without any sound coming from them. Then the chin fell; the glazing eyes turned up from their stare on Tony's face, up to the dark starlit vault overhead; a wavering sigh came as it were on the silent air of the night—and the

unknown was dead.

For a time Tony stood looking down at him as he lay, the face, never beautiful, growing more hideous every second with the muscles setting rigid in the last expression of savage hate. The fire softly hissed and crackled as the burning logs flaked into ashes, and beyond the range of the ruddy light the bush formed a deep, impenetrable gloom, darker and more sombre than the deep blue of the moonless sky. The faint wind of night, scarcely perceptible to the senses save by the soft whispering rustle of the foliage, brought no other sound with it. All was still and silent, and Tony, as he stood, felt as a man will sometimes feel when he stands on a silent night in the great immensity of the Australian bush—as though he were something which had no material existence save the consciousness of the moment, and even that were an intrusion on the sublime calm of untrammelled, sleeping nature.

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Then, as with the fury of a thunder-peal, there crashed in upon his half-numbed mind the significance of all that he had just seen and heard. The hate the man had shown him; the story of that ghastly revenge; the message he had scoffingly told him to take to his mother,—all returned to him in a moment, blended, as it were, with the hints Nuggan had thrown out, and the suspicion that had often been in his own mind.

The man had spoken of Aileen; he had claimed the robbery from Leary's hut; he had boasted how he had stolen the child from its mother and left it at Taylor's Flat—and Nuggan had told him to ask next time he was at the Flat who Mrs. Garry was and what she could tell. Nuggan, too, had taunted him with the change in Aileen's manner and the reason for it—the reason this man had named—the mystery surrounding his birth.

His eyes turned again upon the silent form on the stretcher, with the horribly distorted features and the face moulded in an expression of merciless hate and cruelty.

Mechanically he approached and pulled the end of the blanket over the staring face. With a shudder he turned away, and walked back to his seat by the fire. He was sitting there when, an hour later, Peters and Morton rode up with a led horse, walking lame, between them.

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"Our man was thrown and dodged us in the bush," Peters said as he came up. "But we collared the horse and the gold. Murray and his mate are after the other. Hullo!" he broke off, as he glanced over at the figure under the blanket. "Has he gone?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, I hope the others have too—the mean sneak thieves!" Peters exclaimed.

"We'd have lynched them if we'd caught them," Morton added.

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CHAPTER XIX.

STRANDS IN THE COIL.

Stripped to the waist, in the reek and grime of smoke and sweat, the men who rushed to the burning store fought with the flames till the dawn.

The country was parched with the drought, and the grass was as dry as hay; the fences would blaze in long lines of flame if once they were alight; the standing trees with their drooping leaves were full of oily sap, and if once the fire reached the open bush, it would sweep for a hundred miles. And each man knew what that would mean; each man knew how the flames would roar as they leapt from tree to tree; each man knew how the fire would glare as it caught the sun-dried grass; how overhead, and a mile in front, the whirling columns of smoke would roll, choking, smothering, blinding, till the blood-red glare showed fierce behind, and everything with life had fled, or stayed and swelled the ashes, on the desolate, blackened track.

The store was burned to a heap of cinders with all its contents, for the men let it burn, having no water to throw on it, and no time to use the water even if the tanks had all been full. It was not to save the store that they fought; it was not to put the fire out that they toiled and battled through the night. It was to keep the fire from spreading; to stamp it out as it ran, in long snake-like lines, licking up the withered grass; to beat it out as it flamed along the fences; or to hold it as it blazed out in a raging fury where a spark fell upon the inflammable foliage of the gums. Boughs stripped from saplings; sacks tied to long, thin sticks; even the coats off their backs,—were the weapons used in the fight; for unless the enemy were defeated at the outset, a smoking waste of charred desolation would be all that there was of Birralong and the district when again the sun came up.

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But the fight was won, and when dawn came it only showed the heap of wood ash and twisted sheets of galvanized iron—which was all that remained of Marmot's store—and streaks of black running out into the paddock beyond and along the fences, with now and again a tree either leafless and charred, or with the leaves brown and scorched, showing where the fire had for a

moment obtained a footing and striven to gain a hold, from whence it could spread in every direction, to reap, with its sickles of flame, the rich harvest in a wild, unrestrained orgy and blast, not only Nature's, but man's, handiwork into a dreary sadness of blackened desolation. The men, having won, went back to the Rest, with their throats parched and aching, their eyes smarting from the smoke and the dust, and their skins grimed and clammy.

"It's a bad job for me," Marmot exclaimed, when, with the trouble in their throats removed, the men reassembled at the Rest, where Peters and Tony and Morton had already returned; "it's a bad job for me, but it's nothing to what would have been if the blaze had got away. A bush fire in the district now would be ruin, black, staring ruin, to every one, and death to many."

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"Ay, that it would," a selector, from ten miles out, answered. "It's what we are all afraid of now. A bush fire with the country like it is would go over five hundred square miles, and there wouldn't be a selector nor a squatter for miles round with a yard of fence nor a blade of grass to call his own."

"That's true," Marmot said. "And it's why I feel glad we held it. Though it's bad enough for me, for it leaves me a poor man."

"Not much," Peters exclaimed. "You're all right. You set us up with stores when we were broke, and now we've the chance we'll see you through."

"Seeing that the gold we brought in was probably the cause of all the trouble," Tony said.

"I don't know, lad; I don't know," Marmot replied. "How could any one but us know it was there?"

"Yes; how could they?" Peters echoed. "Only they did. We'll find out how later on. Meanwhile, one is settled—and Leary swears he's the man that tied him up before—while of the other two, one we know had a bad tumble, because we found where he took the ground, and found his horse lamed and with the gold still on its back. I'll bet that the chap carries marks enough about him to give his game away, even if he can travel all right."

"What about the other?" some one asked.

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"He flung the gold away so as to get a lead on Murray and his mate—at least, so Murray said when he came in with the stuff," Peters answered.

Privately he had whispered to Tony an ugly suspicion he had—a suspicion which did not tend for peace of mind, for it was that Murray had in some way been in league with the men who had robbed and fired the store. That was a further irritant, for Tony remembered only too clearly the state of Murray's horse when he and Peters rode up to Marmot's, as well as the uneasiness in Murray's manner when they asked him who he had told of their return. Coming on the top of the other circumstances, it reduced Tony to a condition of suspecting every one and everything; so he took the first opportunity to ride away to the Flat—to test the greatest of the mysteries first.

Riding slowly, he reached the Flat about noon, his mind brooding over the perplexities which had crowded upon him since his return to Birralong, and his spirits depressed by the mingled doubts that had come to him since he had had time to realize something of the meaning of the story he had heard.

At first he had tried to dismiss it from his mind altogether, telling himself that it was only the ravings of a man delirious at the point of death. But the knowledge that the man had displayed as to incidents and interests in his life, and, above all, the significant hints Nuggan had uttered, all helped to keep his attention on it.

As he approached the boundary fence of the selection where it first touched the road, he caught sight of Taylor, and coo-ee'd to him. The elder man came towards him as soon as he saw who it was, and Tony dismounted and stood by the fence till he came up.

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"Why, Tony, lad, back again? And what luck this time? Did you strike——"

"I want to ask you something," Tony said seriously; and Taylor stopped and looked at him.

"Why, what's wrong with you, Tony?" he asked. "You look as though—well, I don't quite know how. You haven't had fever, or a touch of the sun, or a——"

"No," Tony said, "I haven't. But I've heard something, and I——"

"Ah!" Taylor exclaimed. His wife had been expressing her views strongly and plainly to him as the weeks went by without any signs of Tony's return, while rumour was busy with the names of Aileen and Dickson. "I understand, lad. You come along and see your mother. She's got it all off by heart, and will talk to you about it. She'll tell you all you want to know, and more besides."

"I want to hear it from you," Tony answered.

"There's mighty little I can tell you. It's all mixed up to me. It wasn't that way with your mother and me. It was straight out dealing; no side-tracks and cross-tracks. We started right off the reel. I said to her——"

"Who is my mother?"

The question, the tone, the expression of his face and the look in his eyes, made Taylor stare at Tony, speechless for the moment. The question was so unexpected; it brought such a flood of memory into the man's mind that his slow, heavy wits stood still, and he could only stand staring and gaping at the alert young face.

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"Who is my mother?" Tony repeated abruptly.

"Your mother? Why—what's come over you, lad? Your mother? Why—go on to the house and ask her," Taylor replied, the only idea which came to him being the idea to escape from the difficulty by passing it on to some one else. But he was not to escape so easily.

"Am I your son?" Tony asked.

"My son? Why—my son? Ain't your name Taylor? Ain't you always—what's up with you? Who's been—you haven't—what's put that in your head?"

Tony leaned his arms on the top rail of the fence and looked away across the paddock. It was a simple question to answer, he told himself—a simple question for this man above all others to answer; but instead of doing so, he hesitated and was confused.

"I've heard—something," he said quietly. Now that he was face to face with the mystery, he lost his irritation and impatience. It was all true, he told himself. There was something which had been kept from him; something which Aileen had learned and resented; something which—"I've heard something," he repeated, checking his thoughts. "I came straight to you to ask if it were true. If it were not, you need not—you would have said so."

"I don't know what you've heard," Taylor said slowly. "I don't know, and I don't care; for I ain't a man to catch an idea quick like. But I'll tell you this: you'd never have heard it from me—never. You'd have lived and died as you've been, just as if I'd been your father."

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"Then you are not?" Tony exclaimed, turning on the man with a fierce earnestness.

"No, Tony, I ain't; but you'd never have heard it from me save this way. And now you know—well, it don't make no difference. You're just as you always have been—no more, no less. I'd never have told you, nor would your—" he stopped as he realized that the word which was on his tongue no longer applied.

"My—my mother," Tony said, with a different ring in his voice and a different look in his eyes.

"No, lad—no! 'Tain't that way," Taylor exclaimed warmly. "She's been your mother—and more maybe."

The dull wits for once acted quickly, and into Taylor's mind there came on the moment the memory of that night a score of years ago, when he saw his wife clutch the nameless babe and clasp it to her bosom, and the same fling of memory brought back also the building of the slim rail fence round the little mound in the corner of the paddock—the fence that was never without a trailing, flowering vine growing over it—and the dull, prosaic mind tried to understand something of the beauty and the glamour of it, but only grew more confused under the spell of unfamiliar emotion.

"You should have left it as it was, lad; you should have left it as it was," he mumbled. "Where's the good of stirring it up now? It's twenty years and more ago."

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"It's *now* to me—now and always," Tony answered. "And I want to know it all—everything."

Taylor wondered. Should he tell the story in his own heavy fashion, or go and ask his wife to tell it? There was no sense in keeping it a secret any more now, but he remembered his wife's words of twenty years before, "No one shall take him from me; no one—never."

"We'll go and ask the missus," he said; and together they walked to the house, silent.

At the door Mrs. Taylor met them. Before she could speak Taylor interposed.

"He's heard something of the yarn, and wants to know the facts," he said; "so we came along to you."

Taking the remark to apply to what she herself had in her mind, Mrs. Taylor put her hand on Tony's arm and smiled.

"Why, there's nothing to fret about," she said. "It isn't your loss; it's hers, if she's that sort of girl. Let her please herself, I say; and if she's fool enough—"

"'Tain't that," Taylor exclaimed. "It's—that chap who came here years ago has been around, or the yarn has, and Tony's heard it, and wants—now then, here, hold up!" he broke off, as Mrs. Taylor, taken terribly aback, looked from one to the other with startled eyes.

"What right has he to talk—now?" she asked, with a return of the savage jealousy she had shown when, twenty years before, she thought the baby was to have been taken from her—the baby which was now the stalwart, handsome young bushman who was watching her with such winsome eyes. "Is that what's made her change, Tony?" she went on, resentment against the girl, whom she held to be responsible for Tony leaving the Flat, still uppermost in her mind.

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"I don't know," he answered. "Last night Marmot's store was burned, after we had left our gold there, and the gold was stolen. We rode the thieves down. One of them was badly thrown and died. I stayed with him while the others went on, and he told me he knew me because I was like my—my father; and then he said he stole me as a baby and left me here. I wouldn't have believed it only Nuggan said there was something wrong, and then I made up my mind to come out and ask. What is the truth?"

"That's it," Taylor said. "A chap came here one night and said—said he was left with you, and we took you and kept you and brought you up like our own."

Mrs. Taylor, touching Tony on the arm, pointed to the vine-covered rail in the corner of the paddock.

"He'd just gone," she said sadly.

"And the chap never came back and never sent a word, and it was nobody's business—so we kept you as our own," Taylor added.

"And if *that's* why the girl—"

"There's more than that," Tony said. "If one part of the man's yarn is true, all of it may be. He said he'd killed my father, and then stole me in revenge on my mother; and he jeered me, dying as he was, and swore I'd never find her, though she was seeking for me now. I only thought he was raving then; I don't know now."

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For a few moments there was silence between them.

"If he did that—" Mrs. Taylor began, and stopped.

Her memory turned back to the sorrow she had known when her firstborn went from her, when the aching void came into her life and robbed it of every joy and every zest, till the waif was brought to her, the care of whom filled her life with happiness and content. Her big motherly heart was trying to understand something of the anguish she would have known had that waif not come to her then; and she thought of the anguish that other mother must have known if the story she heard were true.

"I want to find her," Tony said simply.

Demonstrations of affection were unknown at Taylor's Flat—emotion has but slight influence in the prosaic life of the bush; but Mrs. Taylor flung her arms round Tony's neck, and held him closely to her as she kissed him. Then, as she released him and, looking up, caught her husband's glance, she exclaimed, "And you would too, Bill," as she pushed him, to hide the tears in her eyes.

The sound of a horse, furiously ridden, caused them to turn towards the road just as a rider dashed up to the slip-rails.

"There's a fire on Barellan run," he shouted. "We want all the help we can get."

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Without waiting for an answer he dashed off out of sight, riding as hard as his horse would go to carry the warning and call for help to fight the common enemy.

"On Barellan!" Taylor exclaimed. "Why, the grass is a foot high there with no stock to keep it down. It'll be over the country if they don't check it. Ride for it, lad. Every man's wanted."

Tony needed no second bidding, and was in the saddle and off, riding hard for the scene of the conflict. As he rode past selections, the old hands were already preparing to protect their holdings by firing the grass and burning it for about ten yards on either side of the boundary fences, beating the flames out with boughs when they threatened to spread too far. It was a slow process and a dangerous one, for only small patches could be burned at a time, lest the small fire escaped past control and developed in an instant into a great blaze. The heavy white smoke rolled in clouds as each patch was set alight, enveloping the figures of the beaters, half hidden by the smoke and half revealed by the line of flame which ran so rapidly through the dry grass.

When Tony reached the township he found it practically deserted. The men who had struggled to stop the spread of the flames at Marmot's the night before were already away at the big blaze, the site of which was marked by a great column of smoke, rolling, whirling, and folding against the clear blue of the cloudless sky. On the air a faint haze was already drifting over the town, and with it came the pungent, aromatic scent of the burning eucalypts.

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As he galloped through the bush the haze grew denser, the scent more pungent, the heat more intense, until he reached the fringe of the smoke, rolling along in heavy wreaths and clouds, and bearing with it a sound, inexplicable to those who have never heard it, unforgettable to those who have—a sound of a whispering roar, impressive and yet faint, sharp and yet dull, like the far-off roll of breaking surf and the rattle of rifle-shots. It told of a fire that was sweeping along through miles of grass with the rush of an incoming tide, leaping, flinging, dancing as it came, throwing up its columns of smoke, spark-laden and dense; sweeping in long lines of flame, reaching out like endless feelers from the great red demon behind; stretching out in thin streaks of glowing red, flameless till a dozen had spread in a network, laced and interlaced, in the dull buff hue of the grass, and a breath came out from the smoke and fanned them all to a blaze, and the flames sprang up with a roar, and leaping, rushed like a charging host when battle-cries rend the air, devouring everything, destroying everything, in the maddened swirl of heat. It told of standing timber bending before the wind which sprang to life in the fury of the blaze, while sheets of flame flung from tree to tree, hissing and roaring as they wrapped round the topmost boughs, and, while yet the stems were enshrouded in smoke, stripped off the leaves in a blazing shower, and tossed them far and wide, as though the game were a frolic and death were a laughing glee. It told of scorching blasts that rushed from the line of flame, shrivelling the leaves that were green to make them ripe for the havoc that was to come.

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Shouts came to him from the smoke, telling him where the men were fighting, and he hastened forward. A dozen men dashed out of the gloom ahead, smoke-stained and grimed.

"Back to the road," the first one cried. "Ride back and fire the grass. It's sweeping down for miles in front. There's twenty fires alight."

"The blacks have set it going," another yelled. "It's springing everywhere."

"It's coming round both sides. It's all over the run," another shouted.

"The station-house?" Tony cried.

"The fires are all round it," was the answer. "Nothing can save it."

For a moment Tony sat still—for a moment. Then over him there swept a wave of emotion which blotted out everything from his mind but a sense of Aileen's peril. A second thought would have suggested that she would have been warned, that she would have fled from the station long before; but he had no second thought. Only could he realize the peril she was in; only could he realize the need there was of helping her. Forgetful of what had occurred when last he was at the station; forgetful of the anger he had felt at her apparent preference of another to himself,—he remembered only that Aileen might be in danger. Without heeding whether he was not himself riding into danger from whence there was no escape, he spurred his horse forward, and galloped off in the direction of the station.

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As he rode the mirk of the smoke became denser, until his eyes were smarting and his lungs choking. His horse shied and tried to turn back, but Tony kept him going. The signs which served to show how great and widespread the fire was, only served to stimulate his anxiety to reach the station.

Suddenly the bush gave way before him as he emerged on to the Barellan road. The smoke was rolling along it in heavy volumes, but was less trying than it had been amongst the timber, and Tony again urged his horse into a gallop. The crackle and roar of the conflagration sounded on both sides, and he was marvelling that it had not yet burst out on to the road, when the sound of a horse coming towards him at break-neck speed arrested his attention. Scarcely had he heard the sound than through the haze of the smoke the horse, ridden by a girl, came into sight. Instinctively he reined up, and the thought flashed through his brain that it might be Aileen.

The horse and its rider dashed out of the smoke, the horse with its neck stretched out, its eyes starting from its head, its tongue hanging out and blood-flecked foam on its nostrils. The rider was hatless, her clothes torn in shreds, and her hair streaming out on the wind. With one arm she was flogging her horse unmercifully; the other she was waving wildly around her head. The pace of the gallop carried her past Tony in a moment, but in that moment he recognized her—Nellie Murray.

With her eyes staring in a frenzy of madness, with her face wet and ghastly, and her voice raised in an endless mocking shriek of laughter, she dashed past him. There was no time to catch the words that seemed to blend with the laughter, there was no time to learn whether she saw him as she rode past, but there was time enough for his intuitions to work and teach him the originator of the fire and the reason of its existence. Nellie was avenging her defeat by Aileen.

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Straight down the road she raced, travelling with the smoke which, as it rolled along in great clouds of density, appealed to her as something that was humorous, as something that called for the long shouts of laughter with which she greeted it. Soon her horse, staggering in its stride, but still flogged to a gallop, emerged ahead of the heavy smoke though yet within the haze. The track which led to the Three-mile showed before her, and she turned her horse on to it from off the main road. Along its winding course she fled until the hut opened out. The horse lurched and stumbled in its stride, but mercilessly she used the switch, until, ten yards from the door, it came down on its knees, and, almost before she could spring from the saddle, rolled over, ridden to death.

She scarcely glanced at it as she rushed forward to the hut and flung the door open. On the stretcher Tap lay, his face terribly bruised and cut, moaning feebly. On one of the stools by the fireplace, sitting bunched up in a heap with his head on his hands, was Dickson. As she caught sight of him, she broke out again into her wild laugh.

"I said I'd come for you, Willy—and I've come," she shouted—"come with lots of friends for you, friends who won't let you get away any more. They're all round you, dancing and singing as they come along, nearer and nearer. Don't you hear them? Listen! Can't you smell the smoke in the air? *She's* part of it by this time. I've fired the grass and the bush all round the house. She can't get away. More can you," she added quickly, as Dickson rose to his feet, and, turning a haggard face towards her, shrank away to the corner of the hut.

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"You devil!" he exclaimed. "You've fired the bush!"

"All over the place," she answered, with her head thrown back and her mocking laugh ringing through the place. "I told you—I told you, if you didn't come for me I'd come for you—and I've come. She can't touch you now; she's burned up like the grass, and the fences, and the trees, and the house. Oh, it burned so well!"

"It's coming this way," he cried, as his eye caught sight of the rolling clouds of smoke through the open door.

"Yes; it's coming this way," she answered, with a sudden calm—"it's coming this way for you—for you and me. Look! Look out there! See that big boomer there with the red tongues jumping up? Look on the top of it. Don't you see him? Just on the top he's floating—just as he's been on all the big smokes. He likes the big smokes. He laughs at me when he's up there like that. He's been asking for them—asking—asking—asking so long. Poor little man, they took him away, but I've found him, and he's found me."

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Her voice died down to a mournful monotone as she spoke—colourless, unimpassioned, melancholy. But to Dickson it was twice as terrifying as when she shouted and laughed. He looked as she directed towards the big column of smoke, which suddenly sprang up, as it were, from a bed of writhing, twisting tongues of flame.

"It's on us!" he shrieked in a sudden access of panic, and made a dash for the door.

She turned and faced him, and, as he came up to her, flung her arms around him, and held him.

"Leave go," he shouted, as he struggled; but she only raised her face to his—a calm, set face, pale to the lips, and showing the more ghastly from the dishevelled mass of dark hair that surrounded it. "Leave go," he repeated; and, as she still held, he raised his fist and brought it down on the upturned face, and tried to wrest himself free.

She buried her face against his shirt, seizing part of it in her teeth to aid her to keep her hold of him. He struck at her head, at her arms, at her body, anywhere, so long as he hit her, in his efforts to throw her off. But she held him, and at last, mad with fear, he tried to stagger out of the hut, dragging her with him.

The man on the stretcher made an effort to raise himself as the noise of the scuffle roused him. He also saw through the open door the rolling masses of smoke and the dancing line of flame.

"The bush is afire," he gasped. "Here, Willy, get me out of this. Help me to move. Willy! Willy! My God! I'm your father, boy; don't leave me." [Pg 291]

But Dickson, dragging Nellie with him, had already gained the door.

"I'm all broken up. I can't move alone. Willy! Willy!" Tap cried as loud as he could, for the fall he had had the night before had given him a mortal hurt.

Dickson had reached the door and stood for a moment helpless to move at the sight which met his glance. The fire seemed to have swept down in two wide converging curves, rushing through the bush and setting it ablaze all round before it advanced on to the cleared land of the selection. It had just attacked the vegetation in the paddocks as Dickson got outside the hut, and which ever way he looked he saw a line of leaping flames sweeping towards him. The heat was scorching; the air stifling. The voice of the man in the hut fell on unheeding ears, for only one chance of escape appeared, and that was Slaughter's waterhole. With Nellie clinging to him he staggered towards it. Every second the heat was more intense, the smoke-laden air more stifling, and at the edge of the pool he swayed, even the strength born of his fear deserting him. With a wild, hopeless cry he fell forward into the water, and floundered towards the middle of the fence which Slaughter had built across it. As he reached the middle, breathless and exhausted with fear and the strain of Nellie's weight, a line of flame darted through the grass at the side of the track, and sprang, like a snake, up the wall of the hut, writhing out over the dried sheets of bark of the roof as, with a roar, the whole burst into flame. Other flames leaped out along the line of the fence; the heat came upon him with such fierceness that he felt his skin blister and crack; the smoke entered his lungs and made him choke as though a cord were tied tight round his throat, and with a glimpse of Nellie's face, upturned as her arms relaxed and she slipped down under the water, Dickson fell senseless across the rail of the fence. [Pg 292]

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CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST LOOP.

At noon Aileen, sitting on the verandah of Barellan, caught the scent of bush-fire smoke floating on the faint breeze. She rose and walked to the end of the verandah, where she could obtain a view in the direction whence the wind was blowing. Over the tops of the trees she saw smoke rising rapidly. Even as she stood she saw fresh columns spring up as though fires were being set alight at intervals all along the sky-line to windward. At first it rose in well-defined columns, straight up in the air, with such regularity that it seemed to be floating upwards to the faultless blue of the heavens from numberless sacrificial altars—as though it were the token of sacrifice offered by the drought-stricken earth to the pitiless sky above; a token of supplication from dumb, inarticulate Nature to the gods of the thunder-cloud and the rulers of the rain-mist, in pleading that the bonds which held back the tribute of the season might be freed and the thirst of the parched earth quenched.

But soon the columns were broken, soon the order was disorganized, as the smoke, fanned by the winds set up by heat below, swirled and twisted and changed into rolling clouds without form or regularity—clouds which massed together and formed into heavy banks that marred the clearness of the skies. The fringe, formed of the lighter vapour, floated over the trees, and drifted on the breeze towards the station, like the shreds of a white sea-fog blown too far inland. Very quickly it approached, and the air became filled with a pungent scent, and grew hot and stifling. [Pg 294]

Without realizing the danger there was of the fire sweeping down on the station, Aileen walked back to the other end of the verandah and looked away over the bush, and wherever she looked she saw smoke rising. The country was on fire on every side.

A second glance in the direction she had first looked showed also that the fire was rapidly travelling down the wind towards the station. Then she understood, and hastily sought the blind woman.

"The bush is on fire," she said when she found her. "It is burning all round and nobody seems to be about. We must get ready to go away in case it comes too near."

"It will not come near here," Mrs. Dickson answered. "No fire ever has yet. The men always turn out and stop it. That must be where Willy is. I knew there was something when he did not come back. He is out fighting it and saving the run. We need not be afraid."

"I don't know," Aileen answered uneasily.

The air was becoming heavier and hotter every moment, and as she looked, she saw how much nearer the massed clouds of smoke were rolling. [Pg 295]

"You need not be afraid," Mrs. Dickson went on. "You may be sure Willy is out with all the men he can muster, and they are keeping it back from the paddocks. Willy is such a brave boy; and besides, he would do anything rather than that harm should come to you."

"All the same I think I'll saddle——"

"Why do you never listen to what I say about Willy?" the blind woman interrupted. "You know how anxious he is, and how he is always seeking to please you. He is such a good boy, too. He would make——"

"I'd rather not talk about it, Mrs. Dickson," Aileen interrupted.

She was growing impatient of the constant reference which the blind woman made to Willy and his excellent qualities, and his sadness at her distant bearing towards him.

"I cannot bear to have him unhappy," the elder woman said, sticking loyally to the task the crafty youth had set her of softening the obdurate girl to an appreciation of him and a recognition of his possibilities as a suitor for her affections.

Aileen, glancing round the smoke-bedimmed horizon, caught sight of the figure of a man riding hastily across the paddock towards the house.

"There is some one coming," she said. "He seems to be riding to the back of the house. I'll go round and see who he is."

"Why, of course it's Willy," Mrs. Dickson answered. "Who else could it be?" [Pg 296]

Aileen walked round the verandah to the other side, and as the man approached, she was surprised to recognize Slaughter.

"Miss," he exclaimed, as he rode up, "the bush is afire all round. I've come through to see if you were safe. You must come at once, for the fire's coming down fast, and if you're not burned you'll be choked."

"But we're safe here," she replied.

"Safe here? You're right in the line of it. The wind's blowing it down quicker than a horse can gallop, and when the grass catches it'll have the house and everything in its track in no time. Come at once. If you've——"

"Mrs. Dickson is here. She's blind. Come and tell her. She would not believe me," Aileen exclaimed, as she turned to hurry back to where the blind woman was sitting.

Slaughter jumped off his horse and came close under the verandah.

"Miss," he exclaimed; and Aileen turned back. "Begging your pardon, miss," he went on, watching her face with anxious eyes, "but I've come for you, not for them. It's you I want to see safe. I started before the fire came up. I heard something, and I came out to see if you knew it, for I promised I'd see you safe when—I said I'd do my best. There's a bad lot about. It wasn't for me to do anything till now, but with the fire coming down you've a reason to get away, and you can have my horse."

She looked at him, with a smile on her face—a smile which came at his anxiety, in spite of the memories his presence stirred. [Pg 297]

"I have my own horse," she said quietly.

"You *had*, miss; you haven't now. It was a part of what I heard. They've driven your horse away and all the others."

"Oh, nonsense!" she exclaimed.

"It's true," he answered earnestly. "I wouldn't tell you what isn't true. It was young Dickson said it. Do you know where he is now? He's at my place, he, and a mate of his, badly knocked about. There's another one somewhere—and he's the one I've got out ahead of, it seems. But there, look at the smoke rolling in! Come on, or we'll never get through," he added excitedly, pointing up to the smoke which was drifting rapidly over the house.

Aileen glanced up and saw it. The fire was evidently coming down rapidly.

"I must tell Mrs. Dickson," she exclaimed, and turned away, running quickly along the verandah from the corner.

Slaughter climbed on to the verandah and followed her. As he turned the corner where Mrs. Dickson was sitting he started back with a cry.

"Kate Blair, by the living God!" he shouted, his face turning livid under the fury of rage that swept over him as he saw and recognized the woman who had ruined his life.

The sound of his voice and the name that was uttered made Mrs. Dickson start to her feet, her sightless eyes staring straight at the face of the man before her, her face pale to the lips, and her hands, quivering with excitement, held out in front of her.

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"Who are you?" she gasped. "Who are you to speak like that?"

"Who am I?" Slaughter answered, speaking in a low, strained tone that was even more penetrating than his former shout. "Who am I?"

"Yes, yes," she exclaimed nervously. "Who are you? What right have you here? I don't know you, man."

A laugh, mirthless, cold, and full of devilish satire, came from his lips.

"You look me in the face and ask that question?" he said. "You——"

Aileen, looking from one to the other in wondering surprise, caught at Slaughter's words.

"She's blind," she said hurriedly. "You must be mistaken. Mrs. Dickson is quite blind."

"Begging your pardon, miss," he said, as he turned towards her, "I forgot you were there for the moment; but maybe it's as well that you are. There's no mistake on my part."

He spoke with a calm self-possession that was in great contrast to the fury of his first exclamation, and in great contrast to the agitation of the blind woman.

"I don't know you—I don't know you," she went on repeating. "Go away. You have no right here."

"Then if you don't know me, maybe it'll be as well if I just say who you are to this young lady here," he said, with unmoved demeanour. "It may interest her to know, and you'll maybe place me when you hear all I know."

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"It is nothing but a pack of lies—a lot of wretched lies. It is all untrue; everything is untrue," Mrs. Dickson exclaimed.

"Even before it is said," Slaughter remarked dryly. "Miss," he added, with a return of the angry vigour to his voice, "I told you my story once, the story of what made me a lonely man, the story of a lie a woman told to the woman I loved and who loved me. That woman—the woman I loved—was your mother. The other is there."

His tone had grown harder with every word, his eyes brighter, and his face more pale and set. As he spoke the last words there was an energy in voice and manner which seemed to make them almost a blow, and a blow before which the blind woman shrank.

"It's a lie!" she muttered. "It's a lie!"

"It *was* a lie," he thundered. "It *was* a lie that ruined one life and nearly blasted another, and now—now I've found you, after years of longing and waiting, found you as the mother of a scoundrel who sought to ruin the daughter of the woman you wronged."

"It's a lie!" she repeated. "My boy is brave; he would wrong no one."

"Where is he now?" Slaughter went on, in a voice that was loud and angry. "Where was he last night?"

"He is out at the fire," she said. "He is a brave boy and a good boy. Blame me as you like, but you shall not blame him."

Aileen, watching the two, fascinated by the development which was as inexplicable to her as it was unexpected, felt a touch of pity as she saw the expression of pride come over the blind woman's face—pride for the absent Willy!

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"The close companion of Barber," Slaughter said; and Mrs. Dickson, clasping her hands together, sank into her chair again.

"No," she said, "no. He promised me he would not touch the boy. He promised he would not lead him astray."

"Then Barber has been here?" Slaughter cried.

The blind woman nodded.

"When?" Slaughter demanded.

"More than a month ago," she said in a subdued voice, as she shuddered. "Ask Aileen. She will tell you when. It was the day the rail broke."

"Why, that was Tony—Tony Taylor," Aileen exclaimed, glad of any chance of interposing between the two.

Slaughter looked at her wonderingly, and as he looked there came a curious expression into his eyes.

"I must have been blind, I take it," he said, more as though he were speaking to himself. "I must have been blind—up to now."

"And Willy was with Tony last night?" Aileen asked.

Slaughter started as he heard her voice.

"With Tony? No; he was with Barber, the most evil scoundrel, the—the—well, that woman's husband;" and he broke off as he swung round again towards Mrs. Dickson. "The man she

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married and left for another fool, who——"

"Don't!" the blind woman exclaimed. "Don't speak of him. Blame me—blame even Willy, but not him. *I loved him.*"

Slaughter laughed in his mirthless, satirical manner again.

"Till yet another came," he said. "Till you met Dickson, and——"

"He *was* Dickson," she interrupted. "It was the name he took. It was——"

"And you profane his memory by saying that he was the father of that cowardly slab?" Slaughter broke in angrily.

"He was the father of my boy. It was why I named him Willy. It is why he is all my world, ever since his father was taken from me."

"Miss," Slaughter exclaimed, turning to Aileen again, "it makes me mad to hear her. She lied of me as she now lies of him, who was my dearest friend in the old days, the man she led to ruin with the witchery of her face. It makes me mad, I say," he went on, his voice rising under the growing fury of his anger. "She wronged me bad enough, but——"

With a sudden access of the frenzy which had seized him when he met Barber at the Three-mile, he swung round upon the blind woman as she sat trembling in her chair, with his fists clenched and the evil light of mania in his eyes. Aileen, seeing the look and the gesture, sprang at him and seized his arm.

"Stop!" she cried. "Would you strike a helpless woman like that?"

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He looked at her with his blazing eyes.

"A woman?" he said hoarsely. "She's a fiend—a lying fiend. I have waited to kill her. Now the time has come. Now I can——"

The girl was in front of him, holding both his arms, and looking into his eyes with a fearless glance.

"You shall not," she said, as she struggled to push him back. "You shall not harm her. You are mistaken."

"Let me go. She nigh broke your mother's heart," he answered. "I've waited years. She's not fit to live. She even betrayed McMillan."

"No, no," the blind woman cried; "I did not—I did not! I gave up everything for him. I loved him."

Unnoticed in the excitement they were labouring under, the air had grown thicker with the smoke coming from the line of fires which almost surrounded them to windward. Unnoticed, also, was the figure of a horseman riding furiously up from the opposite direction. He sprang off his horse as he caught sight of them through the rapidly deepening haze of smoke, and, leaping from the ground, he clutched the verandah rail and pulled himself up.

"Quick for the horses! The fire is on you!" he shouted.

The blind woman started to her feet with a piercing shriek.

"His voice!" she cried. "It is him come back from the dead to save me. Willy, Willy, my love, oh, come to me!"

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She turned to where he was, with outstretched arms, feeling in the air, helpless in her blindness to do more. Slaughter, with his arms dropped to his sides, stared vacantly at them. Only Aileen understood.

"Thank God you've come, Tony!" she exclaimed.

"Where are your horses?" he shouted. "The fire has reached the grass. Slaughter, quick; it's life or death."

He sprang over the rail as he spoke, and pushed against Slaughter as he dashed over to Aileen and seized her by the arm. The impact brought Slaughter out of his stupor.

"The horses are gone," he cried. Then, as his awakened sense showed him the peril they were in, he rushed along the verandah, shouting, "Fire the grass. It's our only chance."

"Go to the back of the house," Tony exclaimed to Aileen, as he sped after him.

From the windward side of the verandah he and Slaughter leaped to the ground. The smoke was rolling towards them in great opaque billows and the air scorched their faces, for through the dense mass they saw the lurid gleam of the flames leaping and springing like living things thrown out in a skirmishing line across the grass-covered stretch of country. They dashed forward towards it, their eyes half blinded, their lungs choking, and their skin blistering.

"Light it there," Slaughter gasped; and Tony paused to get his match-box.

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He flung a lighted match on the grass, and in a moment, with a roar and a glare that sent him reeling to the ground, the flames sprang up, dancing, skipping, rushing hither and thither as they licked up the fuel of the grass. In a moment they had passed from him, travelling in a widening circle, the curve to windward moving slowly, the curve to leeward looping as it ran over the ground. Through the line of flame and smoke he saw the station loom. A moment later it stood clear on the blackened earth, and on either side of it the broken line of flame sped on. Scrambling to his feet, he ran over the still smoking ashes towards the house, with one thought in

his mind, one hope in his heart—that the woodwork had not caught.

He reached the verandah, which was reeking with the smell of scorched wood, and rushed round to the other side. The line of flame was already far beyond it, passing over the open grass country at the back with towering masses of dead white smoke rolling along overhead. On the verandah the blind woman sat, huddled up against the wall, and beside her Aileen was standing.

She turned as she heard him, and took a step towards him with outstretched hands.

"Thank God you came," she said, as he caught her in his arms and held her.

"Darling, darling!" he whispered. "Aileen, you are mine now."

"I always was," she answered, as she clung to him. "Oh, why have you been so long in coming? I thought you had forgotten." [Pg 305]

"You sent me away the day I came, and they said——"

"Tony!"

She raised her head as she spoke, and looked at him with eyes full of deep reproach.

"I hardly cared for anything then," he said.

"Tony, I never meant that," she answered. "You rode off, and I thought——I'm so sorry, Tony."

The voice of the blind woman interrupted them.

"Where is he? Where is he? Why doesn't he come?" she said plaintively.

"Oh, Tony, I forgot," Aileen exclaimed, as she loosened her arms. "Let me go to her."

"And where's Slaughter?" Tony cried, coming back from the clouds of happiness to the reality of their situation to discover that he only had returned to the station.

He hurried round to the other side of the house. The ground was black, with small wisps of smoke rising here and there for a considerable distance away, while a hundred yards off he saw an undefined heap lying. The sight of it made him shudder, and he rushed over to it, fearing what he dared not think.

It was Slaughter, senseless, with blackened face and singed hair, lying where he fell when the flames swept up around him and the smoke rolled over him, shutting him off from escape and filling his lungs till he was overcome.

Tony seized him by the shoulders, and, half carrying, half dragging him, succeeded in getting him to the house. Aileen, seeing him coming, met him with some water, and between them they bathed his head and hands until there was some sign of returning vitality. But consciousness was longer in reviving, and Slaughter still lay insensible when a rescue party from the men who were fighting the fires pressed through the lines and reached Barellan. [Pg 306]

For many days after Slaughter lay ill, almost at death's door, to the sorrow and anxiety of Birralong; for the nightly gatherings at Marmot's temporary store had much food for reflection in the knowledge which came to them after the days of the great bush fire.

The charred ruins of the Three-mile, and the shallow waterhole beside the hut, revealed enough to put to shame the scandal that had been laid on Slaughter's shoulders, and for that alone Birralong, collectively, acknowledged the blame of a grievous fault. But there was more than mere acknowledgment of error needed to balance accounts. The fire that Tony lit in the grass at Barellan would have been of no value in saving the station had not another been lit farther away and nearer the onward rushing line of raging fury. The heat and smoke where Tony stopped nearly overpowered him, but Slaughter had dashed almost up to the oncoming line before *he* fired the grass; and the men of Birralong, who knew what bush fires mean, had no words to express what they thought of Slaughter's act.

"Cold-blood Slaughter, eh?" Cullen said, when he heard it; and then he stood up and took off his hat, and remained standing, with bowed head, till the others caught his meaning and followed his example; and so, while Slaughter lay nearly dying at Barellan, the men of Birralong nightly greeted the mention of his name. [Pg 307]

But that was not all the news which came to the gossips of the town. The story that Tony had heard from the dying Barber, and which he had re-told at the Flat, was known to every one; Nuggan, anxious to cover his retreat from an awkward position, being assiduous in spreading it. Later, when rumour had it that the Lady of Barellan had claimed that Tony and not Dickson must be her son, Birralong was prepared to support her, more especially when it was known that Aileen had never wavered in her allegiance to the champion of the district. But there was no proof of her right to make the claim till Slaughter had recovered, and even then, in a legal sense, there was not much of a case to go on. Only was there the statement that the dead McMillan lived again in the features and figure of Tony; but it satisfied Birralong, and no one came forward to dispute it. Even if the question had been raised no interest would have been served, for Mrs. Dickson willed that if Barellan could not be his, it should be Aileen's, and with Peters's Reef a "boomer," as Palmer Billy averred, their future was assured when Tony and Aileen were wed.

Birralong took it soberly till the last event occurred. Then festivity reigned supreme, and the resources of the Rest were strained to meet the calls, made by a thirsty district, to do honour to the occasion. And always was there another cheer and another excuse for a toast when the raucous voice of Palmer Billy proclaimed the fact—which it did till the coming of dawn—that they were "both to be ranked with the real McKay, and both were colonial born." [Pg 308]

THE END

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Transcriber's Note

Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 178 proprietor changed to proprietor
Page 227 corroborrees changed to corroborrees
Page 275 orgie changed to orgy
Page 304 gound changed to ground

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