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Unexpected spelling, punctuation, and inconsistent hyphenation have been retained as they appeared in the original, except as listed at the end of the book. The gobbledegook "while the use nht psoe hwi cfirt h tth em" on Page 321 has also been retained as it appears in the original.

The Table of Contents in this HTML edition has been added for ease of navigation and was not present in the original.

FERN VALE

OR THE

QUEENSLAND SQUATTER.

A NOVEL.

BY COLIN MUNRO.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL I.

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PREFACE.

Some fifteen years ago, when the first mention was made in the Imperial Parliament of the intention of Her Majesty to dismember the Northern districts of New South Wales, for the purpose of establishing a refuge for the expatriated felons of Great Britain, a certain noble lord rose to enquire where New South Wales was, and whether it was anywhere in the vicinity of Botany Bay.

[iv] Since the time of this sapient patrician much has been said, and more has been written, respecting our antipodean empire; though I believe the mass of the English people are still as unacquainted with the characteristics of the colony, and the manners of colonial life, as if the vast continent of Australia remained in its primitive inanition. Poor as is the knowledge of our friends "at home" respecting their periecian brethren, I grieve to say, with regard to, or rather of, the Australian colonists, that knowledge is too frequently tinged with prejudice and erroneous impressions, formed from the writings of discontented colonists, who, without a sufficiently lengthened residence in the country, or opportunities to form correct opinions, have not only disregarded facts, but have presumed to pass judgment upon what they have never appreciated or understood, and have written statements decidedly false and scandalous. [v]

It is notorious that in some circles of society, the bare mention of Australia in connexion with any one's name is sufficient to create a feeling of distrust and contempt, and the colonists are at once stamped as being, at least, something mean, with antecedents involved in a suspicious obscurity. Unfortunately there have been writers, too, who have come before the public professing an intimate acquaintance with, and an impartial judgment of, colonial life, who have not failed to heap aspersions on the very name of the country and everything connected with it, and to envenom their writings with the rankest untruths. I have read accounts of colonial society where it has been characterized as the vilest that can be imagined in a civilized state; where the men [vi] are spoken of as habitual debauchees, and the women as universally shameless, immoral, and dissipated; where life and property are insecure; and bushrangers are the terror of the inhabitants.

I don't say such productions are numerous. I rejoice that they are not; but many people are inclined to receive such a description as a truthful one, and to consider a true narration of facts as merely an over-drawn and flattering panegyric of an interested author. People have been long accustomed to look upon Australia as only a place for convicts, and the population, if not prisoners themselves or those who have served their allotted term, at least as the descendants of those who have done so. I have frequently had the question gravely put to me whether or not such is the case; and have experienced great difficulty in inducing people to believe otherwise. [vii] They forget, if indeed they ever knew, that many leading men in this country owe their position in society to a prosperous career in the Australian colonies, and that more than half the colonial settlers are men of good family connexions who have emigrated to improve their position in occupations which are at the same time remunerative and honourable.

When this is remembered, in conjunction with the fact that transportation has been discontinued for many years, and that, after the expiration of a convict's term of expatriation, if of an incorrigible nature, he invariably returned to the "old country," where he had a wider field for the exercise of his genius, it can't but be seen that, generally, there must be a healthier tone of [viii] society in the colony than is credited "at home;" while morality is quite on a par, if not above the ordinary level of British ethics. At the same time it is only but just to state that the greater proportion of what vice does exist is chargeable to that wild and uncontrollable mass, which, generally attracted to gold-producing countries, necessarily forms there the substratum of the

working population; while the native born portion of the people is entitled to all praise for its strict propriety. To remove this stigma of *mauvais ton*, and establish our fair name in opposition to the mal-impressions which have gained currency respecting the Australian colonists, I have been induced to add another to the tales of Australian life, and to lay "Fern Vale" before the public.

I don't enter the arena so much to defend the colonies collectively, as to present a fair face for [ix]
the young one of Queensland, and to draw attention to it as a field for British labour, industry, and capital. And being disposed to think this description of work will find more favour in the eyes of that class I would especially desire to attract, than a topographical and statistical treatise, I have blended facts with fiction to present my volume to the public in such a form as to afford amusement with information. I have endeavoured to depict life and manners as they exist in Queensland, and to describe the country, its climate, and capabilities. The leading political topics of the day I have also lightly touched upon; but, while craving the indulgence of the public in these interpolations, I may remark I have only treated them to a very cursory glance; considering [x]
that, in the present mutable state of legislation in Queensland, to enter more fully into detail would be inadvisable. The colony is young, but the government is infantine; though, notwithstanding that it is little more than two years old, it has proved itself indefatigable, concise, and beneficial in its workings; and many a local incubus has been removed, and many a long felt desideratum been supplied, during its short period of existence.

To illustrate what the district was, and what it had to labour under, I have drawn all my characters as existing under the *regime* prior to the felicitous epoch of "separation." But to prevent my readers from forming an erroneous impression of our model colony, I will succinctly furnish a synopsis of our march of improvement.

The old iniquitous land system has been abolished; and in its place one substituted similar to [xi]
what I have mentioned in this work as being the scheme of Dr. Lang. One of the first acts of the new government was to sweep away the trite and cumbersome machinery of the old system, by making nugatory the existing law of the parent colony, and to pass an act which, for liberality, perhaps stands unequalled. Its main features are—for pastoral purposes—occupation and settlement, with right of tenure, subject to a rental of one farthing per acre per annum; and for agricultural lands—free selection for purchase at the fixed rate of one pound per acre, with a right to rent in contiguity thrice the quantity purchased for a period of five years at a yearly rental of sixpence per acre, with the option of purchase at the expiration of the lease, at the [xii]
residue of the purchase money, viz., 17s. 6d. per acre. To all immigrants paying their own passage, a remission of their passage money is granted in an equivalent of land. This, with the activity of the government in throwing large tracts of land into the market, has done away with a good many of the abuses detailed in our narrative; more especially the "station jobbing," attributed to Bob Smithers, and the vexatious detentions to small capitalists desirous of becoming farmers. Another of its features is the inducement held out to the agriculturalist to cultivate cotton in the shape of bounties almost amounting to the value of the staple. The towns have also been benefited by the establishment of municipalities which have removed many long standing nuisances. The old forensic injustice, and judicial burlesques, have been annihilated by [xiii]
the appointment of district police magistrates; and, in fact, the whole country and people have "gone a head."

With regard to the incidents of my story I may say that, almost without an exception, they are facts well known to Moreton Bay people; and, though I have used some discrimination in their collocation, so as to a certain extent to shield the actual actors from the public gaze, I have in no way exceeded the margin of truth. The scene at the "Bullock's Head," I must guard against any charge of plagiarism by stating, is the description of an actual occurrence which took place not many years ago in the town of Brisbane, and, if I mistake not, the principal actor in which is still living, and in this country. Captain Jones' marriage, its results, the poisoning, murder, and [xiv]
protection society, are all drawn from life; though, as I've said before, varied in their arrangement. Neither have I indulged in any flights of the imagination in depicting the horrible, but rather subdued the poignancy of the original; particularly in the case of the murder, which in my hands has received considerable detrition. Though the proceedings of "the society" may be said to be the "coinage of my brain," I have not hazarded such an accusation, as is contained in their narration, without being possessed of sufficiently authentic information to warrant me in doing so. After the melancholy event, from which I borrowed the idea of the Strawberry Hill massacre, it is known for a fact that the blacks mysteriously disappeared from the country; while the squatters were out in arms for weeks scouring the bush, and made no secret of their [xv]
enrollment for a mutual protection. At the same time I have heard a settler of the district, and one of considerable means and standing, when alcohol had stimulated his nerves and courage, boast that he had shot *hundreds* of blacks; and have also heard others speak of such an action as merely an unpleasant necessity. I must caution my readers, however, from imagining that, because the tragical event which immediately precedes the *denoument* of my plot occupies so conspicuous a place in the narrative, such dangers are incidental to a residence in the bush. Far from it. Security reigns supreme; and I merely engrafted the too well known catastrophe to my compilation to add interest to the tale. Such visitations are, happily, not to be heard of once in a generation, and then only on the extreme borders of civilisation. Convicts are no longer [xvi]
noticeable, and bushrangers are only known as myths or scourges of historical notoriety.

The peculiar idiom of the blacks, in their conversation with the settler, I have introduced to give some idea of the unintelligible and periphrastic jargon the whites have to adopt to make

themselves understood. And so accustomed do the squatters, and their men, become in its use that they naturally fall into it whenever they experience any difficulty in making themselves understood by any one not acquainted with their language. Hence all foreigners, of whom, especially Germans and Chinese, there are a great many in the colony, who have not a thorough knowledge of the English tongue when they come to the country, acquire this peculiar phraseology.

I fear I must crave the pardon of many of my friends for having introduced into my book some little episodes in their personal history which they may not have desired to have had laid before the world. But, though such may be recognisable to themselves, I feel safe in expressing my confidence that to the public they will remain hid by the veil of fiction. [xvii]

London, *1st May 1862*.

CHAPTER I.

"Sister, farewell: I must to Coventry;
As much good stay with thee, as go with me."
Richard ii., *Act* 1, *Sc.* 2.

"Good-bye, Kate, I can't help leaving you at least for a time; and if we can make any settlement with Smithers for any of his country, you know I'll soon be back for you: so don't make me disheartened by seeing you so melancholy. John has started some time since with the pack-horses, and seeing you had run away from the parlour while the governor was talking to me, I have followed you to see you look cheerful, and get another kiss before we part. My mother thinks me already on the road, and Joey is only strapping on my valise to the saddle." [Pg 2]

"I shall be so lonely, Will, when you are gone; I'll have no one to ride with, and as for kangaroos, I am sure I shall not see one until you return, for you know Papa never cares about going out with the dogs. You may as well take the poor things with you, for they will be of no use here; they will be company and afford amusement to you."

"Oh, never mind them, Kitty, I'm for work not sport; but come now dry up your tears, and while I am away be sure and make yourself a proficient in housekeeping, because you know, if we succeed in forming a station, as soon as we can get up a decent sort of a 'humpie,' and comfortably settled, I will come and fetch you; and know thou, my Kitty darling, if you do not make your brothers as contented as they in their gracious will shall desire, they will publish throughout the length and breadth of the land the short-comings of their pert little sister; and the decree once gone forth that our Kitty is a useless little baggage, and not fit to be a squatter's wife, what will she do then?" [Pg 3]

"She will tell her brothers' friends that she is the persecuted victim of a pair of ungrateful fellows, who are never satisfied with anything that is done for them, and I know which of us they will believe. But, Willie, Mr. Wigton tells us the blacks are very troublesome down where you are going: will there be any danger in living there?"

"Not the slightest, my dear: it is all nonsense the way in which croakers talk about the blacks. Some of our imperious settlers, by their own conduct, encourage them to commit depredations and to revenge wrongs; but, for my part, I never knew a black fellow make an unprovoked aggression, whereas Mr. Wigton merely speaks from what he has been told by the squatters."

"Well, but, Willie, you say the country is quite unoccupied: will not the natives be dreadfully wild, and easily provoked to commit some horrible act? Would it not be better to avoid any risk, by getting a station in some more settled part of the country?" [Pg 4]

"Believe me, my pet, your fears are perfectly groundless; I have had more experience with the blacks than most people, and I have no unpleasant apprehensions from our squattage. However, our speculations are all in precedence of our plans, and your objections are only advanced on conjecture; it will be quite time for you to disparage our home when we have formed one, and I can assure you, my dear Kate, neither John nor I would wish you to leave the security of our parents' roof for our protection, if by so doing you would imperil your precious little self. But, even if there were any danger to us, to you, I believe, there would be none; unless indeed it were to be carried off by some bold, adventurous, and enthusiastic son of the soil to receive the homage of his illustrious countrymen as their tutelary angel. But to prevent any such predatory outrage, we will form ourselves into a body-guard and enlist the services of all the knights-errant of the neighbourhood." [Pg 5]

"You are an impudent fellow, and I have a good mind to give at once my refusal to go; but if you do settle there, I hope you will cultivate the acquaintance of some nice people, if there are any near you."

"Nice gentlemen you mean, I know. Oh, yes! I will try and oblige you on that point; but good-bye, Kate, I must be off."

With this remark concluded the colloquy of William Ferguson and his sister, Kate; and after a mutual embrace, the young man bounded from the room, and in a few minutes might have been

seen riding through the bush at a sharp canter, in company with his black boy, Joey, to overtake his brother on the road, who, as the reader has already learnt, left the house some time previously with the pack-horses, laden with the provisions and necessary articles requisite for [Pg 6] their journey. While we leave the young men to proceed on their way, and their sister sitting listlessly gazing with tearful eyes through the open window of the drawing-room, conjuring in her imagination the scenes through which her brothers were about to pass, we will cursorily glance at the family whose acquaintance we have just made.

Mr. Ferguson, the elder, the proprietor of Acacia creek, where we find ourselves for the *nonce* located, was a gentleman who had attained the meridian of life, though years sat lightly on his open brow. He was tall and handsome, robust in constitution, affable, benign, and hospitable in disposition; a fond father, and one of the most respected settlers in the district of which he was a magistrate. As his history is somewhat romantic, the reader may be disposed to pardon the digression, in our stopping here to give a brief outline of it.

John Ferguson, who was a native of Scotland, and a member of an ancient family who prided [Pg 7] itself on its blood and lineage more than on its virtues and frugality, was early left to battle with the world through the prodigality of a parent, whose greatest pleasure was to keep the most hospitable board in his county, and whose greatest dread was to be stigmatised with (what was to him the *acme* of derogation) meanness and parsimony. Though the family, through the extravagance of its head, was reduced to extreme penury, it was with the utmost difficulty the pride and prejudices of the father could be overcome, to be induced to allow his son to accept an appointment in a government office in London, which had been obtained through the intervention of a well-wisher of the family, and offered to the young man.

The course of life, which the acceptance of this situation would open to the fancy of young Ferguson, was congenial to his ardent imagination and enthusiastic spirit. He therefore joyfully accepted the post, which was kindly and delicately offered as a means of employment and [Pg 8] support to himself and of pecuniary relief to his parents, as a stepping-stone to fortune; while the romance with which his disposition was tinged, served to picture to his prophetic vision, scenes of official gradation and pre-eminence. How often do young men of similar temperament indulge in the same enticing speculations, and allow themselves to be carried away by the blissful creations of a fertile fancy; alas! only to awake from the intoxication of their delightful dream, to realize the pangs of a bitter disappointment, and a total dispersion of all their brightest hopes. Not that we deprecate the indulgence of such romantic feelings. We believe it frequently produces that emulation, by which a persevering and indomitable spirit is frequently enabled to realize the dreams of the bright imaginative fertility of youthful ardency; but, as we shall presently see it was in the case of young Ferguson, so it is too often in general life, that such [Pg 9] visions are doomed to speedy dissipation.

In due time the young man entered upon the duties of his office with a zeal commensurate to the exalted nature of his expectancy; but the ideal varnish of his mental conception speedily vanished under the hard brushing of a monotonous official routine, and his romance succumbed to the realities of a mundane experience. Though the appointment, to which our young friend had been inducted, was all that could have been desired for the scion of a noble house, whose pampered whims and vices were to be ministered to by the lavish hand of a fond parent, and where the display of mental abilities was no more necessary than in the propulsion of the mechanism of one of Her Majesty's establishments erected for the ambulating exercises of petty delinquents, yet to a young and high-spirited nature, such as John Ferguson's, the very absence of any intellectual requirements in the performance of the duties devolving upon him, caused him soon to feel a [Pg 10] distaste for the service; while the indolence and self-importance practised and assumed by his colleagues (and so much emulated by the class of candidates for such honours) were to him extremely irksome and disagreeable, and early caused his energetic disposition to be dissatisfied with his position.

He had been some little time in his office, and began to experience the feelings which we have described, when, through the instrumentality of the kind friend to whom he was indebted for his appointment, he began to circulate in that society which by his family connexions he was entitled to mix in. To say he was not fascinated with the polish, gaieties, and pleasures of a fashionable town life, would be to conceal the truth: though, at the same time, we must say their hollowness soon became apparent to his mind; and he, instead of following the example of most men in similar circumstances, and making himself the slave to the pleasures and dissipations of the [Pg 11] fashionable world, looked calmly on the allurements of society, and preserved a perfect control over his mind and morals. During the vortex of a London season, he added to the list of his friends a merchant of considerable standing, and of very large reputed wealth. In the house of this gentleman, who was pleased with the young man's sterling qualities, apparent to the quick perception of the man of business, he received a *carte blanche*; and thence commenced the intimacy which formed the romance of his life.

Mr. Williamson, the gentleman of whom we have spoken, had an only daughter, the mistress of his house, and the idol of his heart and of all who knew her. She was beautiful in the extreme. Her disposition was of the sweetest description, and fully justified the lavishment of the fond parental affection with which she was blessed; while her amiability was only equalled by her dutiful attention and consideration of the smallest wish of her kind and doating parent. That such [Pg 12] a being should arrest the notice of a young man of the temperament of John Ferguson is not to be wondered at, nor that his attention was rivetted on her the first moment his eyes were gladdened with the seraphic vision. The first feeling of admiration soon gave place to a sentiment of a

warmer kind, and it was not long ere young Ferguson was hopelessly entangled in the meshes of Cupid's net, deeply immersed in the sea of love; which, for his ardent nature, was of that turbulent kind that knew no control, nor experienced any pleasure, except in the society of his fair enslaver. This feeling was long kept a secret within his own bosom, and his time glided happily by in the sweet countenance of this charming creature, content in the privilege of loving, and fearful lest a disclosure of his sentiment should break the spell.

Love is a strange emotion; its inexplicable workings operate with an occult influence, irresistible and unaccountable; and while our hearts receive a glow and pleasure at the mere contemplation [Pg 13] of the object of our love, our selfish gratification blinds us to all but our own extatic delight, and eliminates from our minds all considerations not directly tending to a consummation of our desires. At the same time our cowardice often operates on our fancies so as to create fears, lest to the object of whom we are enamoured we prove indifferent, and we fancy ourselves almost criminal for loving. Though possibly not a common phase in the *esprit d'amour*, it was, nevertheless, the one in which burnt the lamp of our friend; for though he loved Miss Kate Williamson to distraction, he never ventured to breathe one word to her that was likely to disclose the fire that consumed his heart. 'Tis true her manner to him, though cordial in the extreme, was not such as to inspire him with the idea that his love was reciprocated. With the high sense of her filial duty, she conceived herself bound to receive the authorized attentions of a gentleman possessing the warrant of her father's friendship, and, in return for that friend's [Pg 14] civilities, to tender those little captivating mannerisms, and throw into her receptions and interviews those sweet and winning ways, so peculiar to beings of her stamp. Beyond that, however, she gave him no encouragement. It may be she soon perceived, what John Ferguson failed to conceal, the pleasure which he enjoyed while in her society; it may also be that those visits, which she at first considered a duty to her parent to receive, she afterwards welcomed with receptions as warm and cordial as possible, compatible with her own modesty; and it may be true that she began to admire their visitor for his own merits, and reciprocate pleasure in their numerous interviews, while she little dreamt, that what she considered the mere acts of hospitality, were making such havoc in the breast of John Ferguson. He, on the other hand, while admiring the bright object ever in his mind, feared venturing a disclosure, which, in his position [Pg 15] and prospects, his conscience whispered to him would be considered presumptuous. Thus matters rested, until a fortuitous circumstance broke the spell that bound these two young hearts, and disclosed to each the transitory nature of their dream.

A young physician of considerable practice, good connexions, gentlemanly manners, and prepossessing appearance, and who had long been known to and intimate with the family, in an interview with Mr. Williamson, declared his admiration for his daughter's virtues, and expressed an esteem for herself, that justified the father in sanctioning his request to be admitted as an acknowledged suitor for the young lady's hand; and his pretensions to her regards were supported by her father, who believed their congeniality of tempers would render such an alliance happy and prosperous.

Miss Williamson listened to the appeals of her admirer, we must admit, with satisfaction; and [Pg 16] though his addresses were not distasteful, she felt a pang in her heart that plainly told her it was already possessed by another. It required but this spark to kindle the flame that had long been smoldering in her breast; and at the moment when, had she not known John Ferguson, she would have been pleased and flattered with the protestations of her suitor, she felt disappointed and distressed that those proposals had not emanated from another source. The very contemplation of this disappointment increased the warmth and ardour of her affection for young Ferguson, while it annihilated all thoughts of the other; and even, respecting as she did the wishes of her father, she could offer no encouragement to his medical friend. The young son of Galen, unacquainted as he was with the real state of the lady's feelings, attributed her taciturn abstraction to the innate modesty of her nature, and therefore delicately refrained from pressing proposals which he perceived she was not prepared to entertain. Contemplating the resumption [Pg 17] of the subject at a future time, when the lady's mind would have in all probability recovered the shock, which he imagined was occasioned by the novelty of her situation, he left her, while he expressed the deepest devotion and unalterable attachment.

Shortly after this interview, the young men met at the table of their hospitable host; and there for the first time John Ferguson discovered the position in which the young physician stood to the family. He watched with a jealous eye the movements of his rival, who, though noticing a peculiarity in his young friend's manner, never dreamt of the true cause of his dejection. The contention in the breast of the lady was equally painful; for, while she divined the nature of Ferguson's melancholy, and was aware that the young doctor's attentions to her would lead her taciturn lover to imagine she was gratified with and encouraged them, she could give him no clue to her own feelings; while her devotion to parental authority deterred her from slighting her [Pg 18] more voluble admirer, and her kind and amiable disposition shrank from assuming a state of feelings foreign to her nature. John Ferguson retired from the presence of his loved one, with a heavier heart than he had ever experienced before; and, after being the prey to a series of mental convulsions, at a late hour of the night he retired, not to sleep, but to a further meditation in a horizontal position. The morning dawned without any alleviation of his miseries, and, on the impulse of his natural impetuosity, he formed those plans which entirely altered the course of his subsequent prospects and career.

The Australian colonies, at this time, were attracting public attention, and John Ferguson determined to escape from his thraldom and misery, by chalking out a home for himself at the

antipodes; his fancy lending its aid to picture the realisation of a fortune, and the oblivion of his misplaced affection. This resolution once formed, he determined to carry it out in such a way as [Pg 19] to preclude the possibility of being deterred by any undue influence; and without acquainting any of his friends of his designs, he took his departure, merely writing to his mother the cause of his sudden flight. In this letter to his parent, as may be imagined, he expatiated on the beauty, grace, accomplishments, and virtues of the unwitting instrument of his expatriation; confessed his undying love with his usual enthusiasm, and expressed his belief in her perfect indifference to his sufferings. He also stated that the lady had accepted the addresses of another; and while he deprecated his inability, through the disparity of their positions, to make any formal advances or obtain a footing of equality with his more favoured rival, he declared his decision, rather than submit to the torture he was enduring, to leave the country and constitute himself in a distant land the architect of his own fortune. He concluded by breathing the tenderest affection for his [Pg 20] parents, and entreating their forgiveness for his seeming neglect, in parting from them in so cold and unceremonious a manner.

The surprise and consternation of the young man's friends, occasioned by the receipt of this letter, may well be imagined; and if John Ferguson had not been bordering on insanity when he made his rash resolve, he would have hesitated ere he had been the cause of that anguish, which, in his calmer moments, he well knew would be felt. But the past was irrevocable; and the remorse he felt for his neglect and inconsideracy, as his native land receded from his view, still further embittered a spirit surcharged with grief.

The painful throes of his mother's heart, felt at the loss of her son, was far surpassed by the indignation of his father, who, with his consanguineous prejudices, and supercilious contempt for riches unaccompanied by birth, deemed the claims of his son by blood far superior to the pretensions of the plebeian trader. He only saw in the confessions of his son, the result of a deep- [Pg 21] laid plot for his entrapment and ruin, and could only believe his malady to be the result of a collusion on the part of Miss Williamson and her father, by whose joint wiles and chicanery the young man's peace of mind had been destroyed, and he driven from the land. In the firm belief of this, he wrote to Mr. Williamson, adverting in the strongest terms to the injury he conceived himself to have sustained at his hands, couching his epistolary invective in no very polite or considerate language, and enclosing the young man's letter to his mother as a documentary proof.

This communication had the effect, at first, of raising the merchant's ire; but, upon more deliberate consideration, his wrath gave way to pity for the father, in whom, through the haughtiness of his clannish spirit, he could detect the anguish for a son's loss, and for the young man, whose sudden disappearance had been to him inexplicable, but in whose conduct he [Pg 22] discovered the workings of an honourable nature. With this feeling in his breast, he forewent the indulgence of that animosity that was likely to be occasioned by the letter from the old laird; and he replied to it in a strain of cordiality and commiseration, disavowing, on the part of himself and his daughter, the application of any influence on the feelings of his son calculated to destroy his peace of mind; and denying, until the perusal of the young man's letter, any knowledge of his sentiments towards his daughter, and his entire ignorance of the cause of his disappearance. We may premise, that this explanation brought no further intercourse between the heads of the families, and that Mr. Williamson, though he believed that, if the intimacy between his daughter and young Ferguson had continued, the esteem which she entertained for his young friend would have developed itself into a reciprocation of those sentiments which it was evident had actuated the young man in his confession and flight; yet, at the same time, he did not conceive it possible, [Pg 23] in the absence of any confession to his daughter, that such feelings could have existed in her breast. Therefore he deemed it quite unnecessary to explain to her the information he had obtained, more especially as she had made no enquiry as to the cause of Ferguson's absence, nor even mentioned his name. Though, as we have said, Miss Williamson preserved a perfect silence on the name of the absentee, yet she was fully sensitive to the nature of his feelings, and pretty shrewdly divined the cause of his flight. In the midst of this, while the lady's mind was racked by love, pity, and disappointment, the young physician pressed for a further contemplation of his suit, and met with a repulse; which, though kind, and expressive of gratitude, was such as to smother any hope that he might have entertained of the possession of her devotion. To her father, this decision was the annihilation of a long cherished expectancy; but respecting his child's feelings, and being convinced she must have been actuated by some strong motives in her [Pg 24] refusal, he refrained from pressing the cause of his friend, or enquiring the nature of his daughter's objections. It was only then that the light flashed across his mind, that his daughter might have loved young Ferguson; and he then determined, through his correspondents in New South Wales, to which colony the young man had emigrated, to keep his eye upon him; and, if conducive to the happiness of his daughter, to further his prospects by an unforeseen agency.

Some time had elapsed from the period of which we speak; and young Ferguson, by his persevering industry, and the influence and assistance of some friends, who had sought and cultivated his acquaintance through the solicitation of his kind and generous patron, Mr. Williamson, had obtained a position of comfort and moderate competency. In the meantime, matters had gone on with the Williamsons very much as usual, until the mental anxiety, occasioned by some severe reverses in busines, had prostrated the merchant on a bed of [Pg 25] sickness, where the affectionate energies of the daughter, in her ministerial responsibilities, were displayed in their brightest effulgence.

During one of her occasions of attendance, she was requested by her father to select from papers

in his cabinet some documents to which he wished to refer; and while in the execution of this duty, her eye chanced to fall upon one, the peculiar chirography of which was strange to her, though in its body she more than once caught the repetition of her own name. She took up the paper to satisfy herself as to its authorship, and her surprise was immeasurable when she glanced at the extended sheet and noticed the autograph of John Ferguson, and throughout the whole epistle discovered the fervent breathings of a deep affection for herself. From the reverie into which she fell, she was aroused by the voice of her father, and retracing her steps slowly and noiselessly to his bedside, while giving vent to her emotions in a deep sigh, she placed the letter [Pg 26] in his hands. The sick man glanced at it, and then at the face of his daughter, who answered his enquiring look by putting the question, "and this sacrifice, then, was for me?"

"Say not sacrifice, my child," replied the parent; "the young man has prospered as he deserved. I periodically hear of his welfare; for, believing from circumstances that transpired that you sympathized with him, I felt an interest in his career. I now see that my surmises were correct, that you loved one another, though nothing on the subject was ever breathed between you; and I have no fear, if God spares me to rise from this bed, but that I shall shortly see you both happy."

He was as good as his word; for, being soon sufficiently recovered to resume his occupation, he took an early opportunity of corresponding with young Ferguson, explaining how he came into possession of the secret of his heart; how he had made himself acquainted with the course of his [Pg 27] life, relating the circumstance of his discovering his daughter's feelings; and expressing his entire concurrence in their marriage, if the young man retained his attachment. It is almost unnecessary to say, this brought a response in person, and resulted in the happy union of the young people. Mr. Williamson, whose business had not prospered very well of late years, broke up his establishment and accompanied his daughter and son-in-law to Sydney, where he settled; while the young couple proceeded to the station of the bridegroom. It is at this spot we now find them still located, happy and prosperous, and blessed with a family of whom they were justly proud.

The eldest son, John, was a fine handsome young man, of about two-and-twenty, tall and robust, with regular and pleasing features, rather florid complexion, light brown hair, beard and moustache, with a disposition kind and generous, and a manner sedate and retiring. Our friend William, whose acquaintance we have already formed, was a fine lively fellow of about twenty, [Pg 28] not quite so tall as his brother, with a cheerful and pleasant countenance, a profusion of rich curly flaxen hair, and a disposition the counterpart of his father's. Their sister, Kate, was the third. She was about eighteen years of age, in the first blush and florescence of youth; the idol of her parents, and the pet of her brother William (whom she resembled in her disposition and complexion), while she seemed to have inherited her mother's beauty and virtues. Besides these, there were three other children, two girls and a boy; but as we shall have no occasion to notice them in our narrative, we will merely mention that they were as pretty and interesting, and as well conducted and dutiful, as children usually are.

Though this family had rarely been away from their home in the bush, and seldom called upon to exercise their hospitality on others than the neighbouring settlers, or receive their father's [Pg 29] magisterial friends, they possessed all the acquirements of a polished education, and the ease, grace, and elegance of a fashionable training, more as an inherent quality of their nature than as the effect of example from their neighbours.

CHAPTER II [Pg 30]

"Then blessings all. Go, children of my care,
To practice now, from theory repair."
POPE.

When William Ferguson left the presence of his sister, he hastened with his sable attendant to overtake his brother; whom he joined a few miles on the road. As might have been gathered from his conversation with his sister, the object of the brothers in undertaking their present journey, was to visit some tracts of country, the right of tenure to which was offered them by the possessor for sale; and if the nature of the country pleased and suited their views, it was the intention of their father to purchase it, and start them in life, by giving them sufficient sheep to [Pg 31] commence stocking it. To decide upon the eligibleness of the run, they had appointed to meet the vendor at his station, and to proceed together to the ground, inspect it, and form their own opinion of its capabilities. With this intention, they had left Acacia creek early in the day, to enable them to reach the town of Warwick before night, and their place of appointment by the close of the third day.

New England, in the northern portion of which their father's station was situated, is separated from what was then known as the Moreton Bay district by a geographical boundary, formed by the peculiar face of the country; consisting of stony plains and bare ridges, and establishing a natural division in the courses of the rivers, the routes of traffic, and the intercourse of the people.

Moreton Bay, which is situated on the eastern shore of the Australian continent, about five hundred miles north of Sydney, was first settled as a penal colony in the year 1824, and retained [Pg 32]

its position, as one of the vilest hells and sinks of iniquity, until the year 1842; when, to satisfy the enterprizing demand of the settlers for new country to occupy with their herds, convicts were withdrawn, and the district thrown open to free settlement. The country to the back of this, and skirting the coast, is mostly undulating; in some parts very broken and hilly, and traversed by rivers of considerable size. Parallel to the coast line, at an average distance of from fifty to seventy miles, the land rises abruptly and almost precipitously, in what is called the "Main Range," to an altitude of some three thousand feet, and extends in rich and fertile plains for thousands of square miles. This table-land, covered with the most luxurient pasturage, and displaying an unbroken extent of splendid country, like a succession of highly cultivated parks, is known as the "Darling Downs," and at the time of Mr. Ferguson's settlement of Acacia creek was [Pg 33] conceived to be only a trackless waste, offering no inducement to squatters to risk their lives and property in its settlement or exploration. Such, however, was the rapidity, when its value became known, with which flocks after flocks poured into "the Downs," following the footsteps of the first pioneer, that in the course of a few years, what was before an unknown wilderness, became one of the most favoured and thriving of the pastoral districts of the colony. It was approaching this delectable land, then, that we left our young heroes, when making this digression.

They had journeyed some time over these dividing plains, depending more in their course upon the position of the sun, than on any visible road or track, when they determined to push on for Warwick; as, owing to the dilatory manner in which they had been riding, they had still a long distance to proceed, and the sun was fast sinking on the horizon. They accordingly urged their horses into a sharp canter; and soon emerged from the barren part through which they had been [Pg 34] journeying, into the more hospitable country approaching the town; where they purposed halting for the first night.

As the sun sank below the western hills our travellers drew near, by one of the three converging roads, the antipodean town of Warwick; which, to describe to the reader, we need only to say, seen at a short distance, bears a striking resemblance to an English village, and will sustain very creditable comparison with some of the prettiest in our blessed and favoured isle. This view, however, the young men were not at the time permitted to enjoy; as in that country, where there is little or no twilight, darkness almost instantly succeeds sunset; and the panorama that lay stretched before them was rendered indistinct by the fast approaching shades of night. Pleasing as Warwick appears at a distant view, upon a close inspection the favourable impression of a stranger is likely in a great measure to be dispelled; for there is about it, in common with all other bush towns, an air of carelessness and discomfort, calculated to destroy the interest felt by [Pg 35] its extreme freshness and novelty. One or two pretty wide streets may be noticed laid out at right angles, their lines and extent being presented to the eye, by the fences enclosing the inhabitants' properties, and residences; which are sparsely distributed over the extent of the settlement; frequently leaving entire unenclosed gaps in the lines of streets. The houses are built according to the will or caprice of the owner, without any degree of uniformity, in all imaginable positions, and of all possible architecture; some few of brick, but the majority of wood (either weather-board or slab). Here, you may see a fine brick edifice facing the main street, containing possibly a large shop and store-house, with a comfortable dwelling; and forming one line of buildings, which are faced by a deep verandah, on the part of which before the shop goods of all descriptions may be seen exposed. This is easily recognised as the establishment of the principal store-keeper of the town; while his less opulent trading brethren carry on their vocations in humbler tenements. [Pg 36] On the opposite side of the street will be perceived a long one-storied building, also with a verandah (on to which all the rooms open by means of French lights); and, even without the aid of the pendent sign, would be readily distinguished as the principal hotel. In one end of the building will be situated the bar, where the common herd congregate in their libations, and in the other the coffee-room; where the more exalted lords of the creation assemble to discuss, at the same time, the liquors and edibles of mine host, their own local politics, and bucolic topics; ever the subjects of paramount importance to the squatter.

In all probability, the next habitation will be a slab hut, roofed with sheets of bark; the whole structure standing on a spot of ground about eight feet square, not even dignified or protected by a fence, and contrasting strangely with the adjoining property. Here we will have an enclosure of about an acre of ground; displaying, in its tastefully laid out grass plots and flower beds, the [Pg 37] neatly trimmed creepers, and the air of order and comfort about the pretty little cottage which stands in the centre of this Eden, the taste for refinement, tranquillity, permanent settlement, and happiness, so rarely to be met with in the bush. The cottage is a square four-roomed one, with detached kitchen and out-houses. It is built of what are called weather boards, that is planks sawn diagonally so as to be of the thickness of about one inch at one edge, and about a quarter of an inch on the other. In the construction of such a house, the form, or skeleton, is erected first, and these boards are then affixed so as to overlap one another; each plank as it is put on being made to cover, with its thick side, the thin edge of the one preceding it: thus being alike impervious to wind and weather. The roof is shingled, or, in other words, covered with pieces of wood split into much the same shape as narrow slates, and put on in a similar manner. The cottage has a verandah on its front, enclosed by a small railing, tastefully painted, and [Pg 38] ornamented with a few running plants, which intwine its posts; and, while charming the eye, lend the delicacy of their fragrance to render to this spot the enchantment of an Arcadian bower, when the family adjourn thence from the interior of the house, to enjoy the refreshing zephyrs of the summer evenings. The windows facing this verandah are made to open in the French fashion, so that, upon opening any one of them, a person can step out at once; they are protected from the sun by venetians, which are generally folded back, and which, with the railings of the verandah, are painted green, while the house itself is scrupulously white. The door is of polished cedar, and

adorned with a bright brass knocker and plate, which may possibly have done service in London, or some other city or town in the old country. Picture such a spot as this in the imagination, kind reader; and some idea may be formed of the residence of the medical man of the place.

The feeling of admiration, occasioned by witnessing the charming domicile of the local disciple of [Pg 39]
Æsculapius, is only equalled by the disgust experienced at gazing on the apparent wreck, filth, and squallor of the next tenement. Standing contiguous is another such hut; prevented only by the support of a stout pole, which props its frail and shaken frame, from ending that miserable existence of which it seems ashamed; while it proclaims its humility by an apparent emulation of the posture of that far-famed structure of Pisa. This dwelling is probably followed by an edifice of a similar kind, though of more spacious dimensions and solid construction; and, by the sparks emitted from a low chimney, the din of the workman's hammer, and the dull heavy sound of the bellows, is distinguished as the abode of the village Vulcan; while the surrounding yard, with drays in various stages of dilapidation, wheels, poles, axles, and other dismemberments strewing the ground, presents the appearance of a perfect vehicular golgotha. With one or two wool-laden [Pg 40]
drays drawn up before a public-house, in which the guardians of the tractive animals, and who are designated bullock-drivers, are solacing themselves with a plentiful libation of the liquor which cheers and also inebriates; a similar ponderous vehicle, stationed before the door of the first described premises, undergoing the operation of lading with stores for a distant station; a few horses tied up to the posts in front of the hotels; a few equestrians; as many pedestrians; a sprinkling of the sable sons of the soil in all imaginable variety of costumes, composed of the left-off garments of their fair-skinned brethren; here, a gigantic denizen of the forest standing in the centre of a street, raising his majestic head high above the settlement, and seeming to look down with lofty contempt on the scenes enacted beneath him; there, the charred stump of another tree, with its semi-calcined trunk lying by its side, where it had fallen at some remote period, perhaps [Pg 41]
years before the settlement had been thought of; but had never been removed, on the principle that each burgess thought it no business of his, and the one most interested and affected never dreaming that a small personal outlay of money and trouble would be of considerable benefit and advantage to himself; in the wet weather, with the streets, which are nothing but the surface soil without any improvement, save the hardening of continual traffic in the dry season, transformed into a mass of mud and mire, into which drays sometimes sink to their axles, equestrians to their horse's knees, and foot passengers, unless well acquainted with their location, often plunge only to extricate themselves with the loss of a boot; and with the occasional enclosures in the neighbourhood, of paddocks more or less covered with trees, interspersed by numerous fallen and rotting trunks, half burnt logs, and gigantic stumps, the reader has a general description of bush towns, and (with some slight and insignificant modifications) of the town of Warwick. They [Pg 42]
rarely have much industry, and as little enterprise; while, there being no extensive demand for artistic or mechanical labour, and no agricultural pursuits, the inhabitants are generally dependent upon the trade arising from their intercourse with the squatters.

As we have already informed the reader, it was nearly dark when the young Fergusons rode into Warwick; and dismounting at the door of the "Bullock's Head," leaving their horses and packs to the charge of their black boy Joey, they ensconced themselves in the general apartment of the hostlery dignified by the name of coffee-room. If the room had few pretensions to elegance, it had less to cleanliness, and least of all to comfort; its furniture consisted of a long table, protected by an oil-cloth cover, on which stood a hand bell, and a jug containing water of very questionable purity. Around it were arranged a number of solid cedar chairs, in the manufacture of which the [Pg 43]
desideratum to be attained seemed to have been a capacity to withstand the rough usage they were destined to endure; and they bore unmistakable evidences of having, at various periods of their existence, taken part in some severe and desperate conflicts. On the mantelpiece stood some stoneware representations of maids and swains, who combined a pastoral occupation with the gratification of a musical talent; while they gazed with a languishing air on their protrusive neighbour, a portly individual with a highly-coloured, rubicund, and grinning physiognomy, and scalpless cranium, from which he invited the lovers of the narcotic weed to extract a supply of that universal solace. These were supported, on the background, by a mirror of ordinary size; which presented unmistakable signs of the household's reluctance to disturb the sacred dust of ages. Its sides and corners had a very dingy appearance, like an opaque coating, which left a circle in the centre of dim translucency; and from this circumstance, a visitor might have [Pg 44]
assumed that some individual, wishing to gratify his vanity by seeing a reflection of his own visage, had applied his sleeve, at the same time that he exercised his arm in a rotary motion, to remove the impediments to such vision. The lining of boards to the room had been covered, in the general ornature, with a gorgeous coloured paper; but no precaution had been taken to provide for the wood's shrinking, and the consequence was that the paper had split with the timber's contraction, and left a gap between each board it covered. Around the walls were distributed some antique prints, such as Queen Victoria in her gracious teens, considerably discoloured by the application of water, in a manner in no way advantageous to her complexion; a coloured print of the Derby in "the good old times," and the representation of a naval conflict executed in a bold and imposing style, with a studied disregard to perspective. The floor was covered with a dingy half worn oil-cloth; while half a dozen men were sitting at the table smoking, drinking, and [Pg 45]
maintaining an animated and boisterous dialogue upon the relative merits of their horses. Such then was the place and company in which our young friends found themselves, and were hardly noticed as they rang the bell to attract the attention of some one in the house. Their summons was, after a time, answered by a bare-armed, bearded, and greasy-looking biped of the genus homo, honoured by the confidence of the landlord, deigning to fill the post of waiter, and, from a deformity of his person, rejoicing in the soubriquet of "Hopping Dick."

To a request, to be shown a room which they might appropriate for the night, the brothers were ushered into a crib leading out of the coffee-room, and measuring about eight feet square; while on each side of it was stationed a bed of similar dimensions to a coffin, with appurtenances of relative magnitude. After depositing their valises and ordering a meal, they strolled out to the [Pg 46] stables to see that Joey had well looked after their horses; and, upon their recal by the limping Ganymede, turned into the house to partake of their repast. During their short absence, the company had increased by the entrance of a few of the towns-people, who had joined the circle, and added fresh impetus to the argument (if their disjointed disputation could be called such), and stimulated an increased devotion at the shrine of Bacchus. Amid this earthly pandemonium, John Ferguson and his brother sat down to discuss their meal.

The "fast" style of life, so common among the early settlers in the bush, but now happily dying out, rarely found favour in the eyes of the native youths of the colony; and the Fergusons, having been brought up to entertain an abhorence of such scenes, naturally felt a repugnance to the society into which they now found themselves thrown. Curiosity to see the termination of their companion's orgies, however, detained them in the room; and for the consummation of their [Pg 47] desire, they were not destined to wait long.

The party consisted principally of individuals called "supers," or more properly speaking, the superintendents of stations, the owners of which were not resident on their properties; and in the management of which, excepting the disposal of stock, they had entire control: a few settlers of considerable means, whose stations, being situated in the remote bush, afforded them very rare opportunities of visiting town, but, when such an occasion presented itself, it was the means of supplying an indulgence, such as the present, of the wildest and most reckless course of dissipation that could be devised: one or two settlers of minor importance, and dignified with the title of "stringy bark" or "cockatoo" squatters: and, as we have already said, one or two of the towns-people, who would run into any excess, and expose themselves to any expense and ignominy, to court the patronage, conversation, and companionship of the squatter, who in his [Pg 48] sobriety would not condescend even to recognise him, made up the group.

At one end of the table, sat a squatter of collosal size, whose features were hardly discernible from the hair that almost covered his face. He was dressed in the usual bush costume: that is, a low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, made of the platted fibre of the cabbage tree, and called after the plant from which it is named, "a cabbage tree hat;" a loose woollen frock, barely covering his hips, made so as, in putting on and taking off, to require slipping over the head, and as a garment of constant use, is elegantly designated "a jumper;" and heavy knee riding boots with spurs. The name in which he seemed to be recognised, from its frequent mention by the company, was Smith. Adding to his uncouth appearance and wild gesticulation, he had a voice decidedly unmusical; while his conversation was copiously interlarded with expletives, anathematizing some portion of his anatomy. This was the presiding spirit of the conclave. [Pg 49]

The excitement by this time ran high; great had been the exploits detailed by the company of their various steeds, and the dangers through which they had carried their several owners; while the prodigies of speed, power, patience, and endurance, enumerated of the wonderful animals, would have made even Bucephalus hang his head at the idea of his own ordinary capacity. How long this state of braggadocio would have lasted, it is impossible to say; probably until a vinous philanthropy subdued the mental faculties of the company, and acted as an opiate on their senses, by composing them to sleep under the canopy (not of heaven), but of the table. But the mere relation of deeds was speedily brought to a stand, by the challenge of Smith to bet "a shout" to the party all round, or accept the same himself from any one there, that he would ride his own horse into the room, and leap him over the table without touching or displacing anything on it. [Pg 50] No one of the boasted equestrians offered to perform the feat; though the bet was readily accepted involving Smith's performance of the exploit; but before we proceed to detail the attempt, we may be permitted to enlighten our readers upon the nature of the bet. "A shout," in the parlance of the Australian bush, is an authority or request to the party in waiting in a public-house to supply the bibulous wants of the companions of the shouter, who of course bears the expense; and when a shout is proffered as an earnest of sociality, or as an obligation in a bet, it indicates the disposition, in the one case, to increase as much as possible the cost of the shout, while it involves the necessity, in the other, to provide whatever is required by the recipients.

Smith speedily appeared with his horse saddled and ready for the leap; and to give him a better opportunity of performing his task, his friends had removed the table to a transverse position, and stationed themselves along the sides of the room, to witness the performance: carrying on [Pg 51] their conversation in as animated a spirit as ever; while varying their opinions of his chances of success with bets on the event, and arrangements for fresh trials of a similar kind.

The landlord, who from the increased din and uproar, imagined something was astir, made enquiries of his oleaginous-looking colleague, by whom he was apprised of the proceedings; but being accustomed to scenes of equal recklessness, and being, moreover, a discreet man, and anticipating, in the event of any breakages, a means of reaping a plentiful harvest, he was conveniently deaf, and found occasion for his presence at a spot far removed from the scene of action. From his retreat, however, he was speedily summoned by Hopping Dick, to witness the result of the manœuvre.

It would be difficult to describe the scene that presented itself to the landlord's vision, upon his entering the coffee-room; where, from the boisterous laughing of some of the party, the [Pg 52] interjective swearing of others, the Babel of voices advising and expostulating, and the crowding

in of the towns-people, who had been attracted to the house by a rumour of what was going on,—he could hardly discern the nature of the accident, the extent of the injury sustained, or, what concerned him most, the damage done to his furniture and premises. Upon clearing the room of strangers, and removing, as far as possible, the signs of wreck, he retired, leaving his lodgers to their meditations; while he indulged in calculations bearing a direct application on the late amphitheatre practice. He was, as we have already said, a prudent man in matters of monetary interest, and he wished not to question the acts of gentlemen residing in his house, and therefore desired no explanation; but, for the reader's enlightenment, we will briefly detail the circumstances that occasioned this untoward event.

[Pg 53] Smith brought his horse, which was a noble high-bred animal, into the room; and when the door was closed, he mounted for the leap. Intoxicated as he was, it was evident from his deportment he was a good rider; and sitting well and firmly in his saddle, was certainly a picture for admiration; though, to a thoughtful mind, the feeling would give rise to a regret, that some more dignified object had not called forth the energies of the man, than that which made a ridiculous exhibition of himself, degraded his noble steed, and risked his own neck. However, no such remorse entered the breast of the redoubtable horseman; and with a glance of conscious success directed round the room at his anticipating companions, he dashed spurs into the sides of his steed. The animal thus urged, apparently terrified with the uproar that assailed his ears, and hardly knowing, in the singularity of the situation, what was required of him, exhibited symptoms of terror and uneasiness. His rider, however, was not to be deterred from his purpose, and bringing him up to the edge of the table, again administered the spurs at the same time that he [Pg 54] raised him to the leap; while the horse, frightened by the excited throng around him, and having his metal thoroughly aroused, made one bound, more than adequate to take him clear of the table. The rider not anticipating so lofty a spring, and incautiously omitting to take due precaution in the suddenness of his exaltation, allowed his head to come in violent contact with the ceiling; which stunning him, and causing him, in his attempt to recover himself, to suddenly draw up his reins, had the effect of swerving his horse from his balance, and brought the pair down amidst the symbols of the late revel. While they lay stretched on the floor, surrounded by the ruins of the table and the fragments of glass, both bleeding and bruised, the landlord made his appearance; and after removing the astonished quadruped to more congenial quarters, the frolicsome and sportive inebriates separated for the night.

[Pg 55] The thoughts of the young men, as they retired to rest, after having been the silent spectators of the late scene, may well be imagined; such to them was entirely new, and the disgust which it gave rise to in the mind of John was fully equalled by the contempt engendered in that of William; though, it must be confessed, when the contemplation of the event passed through the latter's brain, he could not refrain from indulging in a laugh at the ridiculous appearance of the actors, and from feeling amused at the humiliating termination of the vain gasconade of the pompous and conceited principal, who became a self-immolated victim to his own vanity. The only object that excited one spark of William's pity or sympathy, was the poor deluded horse. With these reflections, and an occasional outbreak of reminiscent cachinnations on the part of the junior, the brothers dropt off to sleep, tired with the day's journey and the events of the night.

CHAPTER III.

[Pg 56]

"The fiend's alarm began; a hollow sound
Sung in the leaves; the forest rock'd around,
Air blackened,—rolled the thunder,—groan'd the ground."
DRYDEN.

Early on the following morning, John and William prepared to resume their journey; and, upon a settlement of their reckoning with their host, they were not a little surprised and annoyed to find a considerable item in their bill set down for the damage caused by the previous night's debauch. This exaction they resisted, but to no purpose. The landlord was no respecter of persons, and was inexorable in his demands; they were present during the scene, and consequently, in his eyes, implicated and liable to pay for their pleasure. Besides which, he intended to reap a rich harvest [Pg 57] from the event, and charge the same to each party staying in his house; notwithstanding that the sum apportioned to each individual was ample to indemnify him for any loss he had sustained. Not being in the habit, however, of having his demands called into question, he was not in this case inclined to relinquish his intention of enforcing the payment; and the brothers were therefore constrained to submit to the extortion.

The shortest though more intricate route to Brompton, the station of Mr. Smithers, was through the bush, following a line described to them by an old shepherd of their father's who well knew that part of the country; and, being experienced bushmen themselves, they determined upon taking that course in preference to the more circuitous, though better defined, dray road and townships. With this intention, provided with a descriptive sketch of the country, a pocket compass, and the sagacity and instinct of their black boy, they started for Barra Warra, a station [Pg 58] distant about fifty miles; which was centrally situated, and from whence there was a postman's track to Brompton. To reach this point before dark, it was necessary to push on; as, should they not complete their distance in daylight, it would necessitate the alternative of spending a night in the bush; a circumstance, which, though not likely to cause any uneasiness to a bushman, was, in

the possibility of obtaining comfortable quarters, as well to be avoided.

Nothing of any note occurred in the ride, until well on in the afternoon; when they began to detect signs of their approach to an extensive station, and expected shortly to witness symptoms of animation and habitation. The weather during the greater part of the day had been exceedingly sultry; which, with the heavy appearance of the sky, was a portentous indication of storm. In order to escape this, and reach the shelter of the station before the rending of the heavens, the young men urged their weary horses to an accelerated speed. They rode on; still [Pg 59] without coming upon any track that would guide them to the station they knew could not be far distant; when an occasional low rumbling noise of distant thunder announced the approach of the warring elements; and with the gradual extinction of the sun's rays, made them feel the unpleasantness of their situation, and a desire to be well housed. The instinct of the black here made its value apparent; for, where nothing was visible even to the practised eye of either John or William, he suddenly discerned the tracks of sheep; and naturally inferring that they must either be directed towards, or from, the head station; and also detecting the track of the shepherd, who must have accompanied the flock, easily deciding which must have been the homeward course, he took the lead of the party, and piloted them with his eyes fixed upon the ground; travelling as speedily as their horses could proceed.

Very little distance, however, had been accomplished; and the increasing gloom lent its darkness [Pg 60] to the shades of night already setting in; when a few heavy drops of moisture, accompanied by a flash of vivid light, that made the horses start and tremble; and followed by a peal of thunder that seemed to shake the very earth; announced to the travellers that they were in for an unpleasant experience, in all probability, of a miserable night. The trio, however, still held on their way; the black boy, during the momentary illuminations caused by the repeated flashes of lightning, continued to discern the, but to him, evanescent path; and with spasmodic starts; and intervals of salient progression, proceeded in his guiding course.

The appearance of the forest was fearfully sublime; the tall bare trunks of the gigantic gum-trees, with their surfaces of immaculately smooth bark of a pale bluish hue, appearing as if they had by some unaccountable agency been stripped of their natural skin, contrasted strangely with the [Pg 61] surrounding gloom. When the momentary flashes of light lit up the darkness of the woods, and revealed the naked stems, like argenteous columns supporting the black canopy of eternal shades, they displayed a scene calculated to create in an imaginative fancy the existence of a vast catacomb of departed dryads; while it inspired the mind with awe, at the presence of the dread power that moves the spirit of the storm. Still, down came the rain; flash followed upon flash; and the thunder rolled as if the whole heavens were rent by the mighty convulsions of the elements. The storm by this time had reached the culminating point; and the volume of water, pouring upon the earth, gave to the ground the appearance of one vast swamp; while it obliterated, even to the acute vision of the black, all signs of the track that had been leading them to their night's destination. Nothing now seemed to offer them any chance of an alleviation of their discomfort; no sound could be caught by the quick ear of Joey, that would tend to lead them to the desired [Pg 62] refuge; no abatement of the storm appeared probable; and in the perfect obscurity of the night, any removal from their present position would only involve them, in all probability, more in the bush, and render their extrication more tedious and difficult. To add to their misery, they were cold and drenched, had no possibility of lighting a fire, or indulging in that balm for every misfortune, a pipe; and with their horses almost knocked up, they saw no alternative but to take what little protection a tree afforded, and wait for the morning.

Their position had attained this climax of wretchedness, when it struck John Ferguson that Joey might be able to hear or see something from the top of one the trees, that would lead them to shelter; he therefore requested the black, as a forlorn hope, to try it. Joey, upon receiving his command, selected a piece of wild vine sufficiently long to give him a firm hold in each hand, while it compassed the trunk of a good-sized tree; then divesting himself of his boots, and [Pg 63] choosing one of the largest stems he could distinguish, he prepared to mount an old blue gum, whose trunk rose for fully forty feet smooth and straight, and without an impediment or excrescence. Putting his supple vine-stalk round the tree, and firmly grasping each end of the cane by his hands, he placed his feet firmly against the stalwart denizen of the woods, and rose in bounding starts with a celerity astonishing to the uninitiated. Upon reaching the fork of the tree, and ascending the highest branch, he spent some moments gazing around, in the hope of detecting a friendly light in the surrounding gloom, but without success; not a gleam was visible, and not a sound, save the rumbling of the thunder and the heavy pattering of the rain, broke the solemn monotony of the storm. Disappointed and nearly disheartened, he communicated to his master below the ungrateful intelligence that nothing was perceptible; but preparatory to his descent, he gave a loud "cooey," in the faint hope that it might attract the attention of some [Pg 64] human being. As we proceed, we may as well describe to the reader the nature of this signal. A "cooey" is, as its name implies, a call having the sound its orthography indicates; with a prolonged dwelling upon the first syllable, and a sharp determined utterance in its termination. This sound, which is peculiar to the Australian bush, uttered with the intonation and force of healthy lungs, can be heard at a surprising distance; and often, when used by one lost in the nemoral labyrinths of the country, is the means of attraction; and consequent deliverance from danger and probable death.

It was, then, one of these efficient signals of distress that was uttered by Joey, with a lustiness that would have done credit to La Blache; and great was his joy when, after a few moments of listening, his ear caught the sound of a dog's barking. The canine infection spread rapidly over

[Pg 65]

the settlement, and once started kept up an unceasing chorus from the throats of a whole pack; and guided by the friendly notice, our travellers were enabled to discern in which direction Barra Warra lay. They mounted their horses with stiff and weary limbs, though with lightened hearts, and proceeded for about a hundred yards in the direction whence echoed the barking; when, to their no little astonishment, they came upon the line of fence enclosing the paddocks attached to the house, and immediately struck the track leading to the station. By this they had the mortification to discover, that if they had been enabled to continue their course for a few minutes before the storm thickened, they would have, long ere then, been comfortably sheltered from the inclemency of the weather. However, they were not in a disposition to indulge in any vain regrets; and shortly arriving at the house, they presented themselves in their sad plight. The noise of the dogs had attracted the attention of the people of the place, who, imagining the cause, were expecting to see the approach of some traveller; so, when John and William made their [Pg 66] appearance, they were met at the door by the owner of the station.

This gentleman upon witnessing the condition of the young men, and instantly perceiving them to be of his own order, extended his hand to each; and expressing his regret at their misfortune, invited them into the house, and provided them with dry changes. A warm repast was quickly ready for them; and during its discussion they related their parentage, destination, and object of their journey, to their new friend, Mr. Dawson; who proved himself a most agreeable person. He informed them that he had heard of their father, and was delighted to make the acquaintance of his sons; he proffered the hospitality of his house for as long as they wished to stay; and pressed them to prolong their visit. This, however, would involve a breach of their engagement with Smithers; and, pleased as they were with the civility and kindness displayed in the invitation, they regretted they could not, on that occasion, accept it, and informed their entertainer that [Pg 67] their object was to reach Brompton on the following day; which would necessitate a resumption of their journey early on the morrow.

Mr. Dawson expressed sorrow that he could not induce them to remain; but trusted they would make his house their temporary home on some more convenient occasion; and informing them that he had then got a few friends stopping with him on a short visit, and who were then assembled in the drawing-room, he led the Fergusons off to introduce them.

The young men naturally thought the company, to whom they were about to be ushered, consisted of some of the neighbouring squatters, who had volunteered their company for a few days to dispel their mutual monotony. But great was their surprise, when, upon entering a very comfortably (almost elegantly) furnished room, to see assembled several ladies, dispersed about the apartment; some in conversation with gentlemen; others at work, amusing or instructing the [Pg 68] children; while one sat at a handsome cottage piano, running through some new music, brought to the station by one of her friends; and accompanying herself on the instrument, while singing in a sweet and melodious voice a new and popular song. To her, whom he addressed as his wife, the host introduced our travellers; detailing in a few words, the information respecting their movements, which they had themselves imparted to him; and then in turn went through the usual formality with the remainder of his guests.

In society such as this, where restraint is unknown, and cordiality and hospitality reign supreme, it is not to be wondered at that our friends speedily found themselves at home; nor that their own prospects were canvassed by their new friends, with a zeal and freedom that would be considered unpardonable impertinence in the more settled and formal circles of the "old country." From the information obtained from the more experienced settlers, the Fergusons [Pg 69] derived considerable benefit; and their friends' directions and opinions of the country, being, in the estimation of the young men, likely to be valuable, they determined to allow themselves, in a great measure, to be guided by them.

The evening, enlivened by an occasional dance, music, and lively conversation, was passed exceedingly pleasantly by the brothers; who were perfectly delighted with their kind reception; and sadly regretted their inability to comply with their kind host's repeated entreaties to extend their visit. Mr. Dawson informed them that those pleasing reunions, had become quite numerous in that part of the country; where the degree of familiar and friendly intercourse established among the neighbouring families was such, that, after the bustle and occupation of shearing time was over, such a party, as he then had in his house, was formed alternately at each of the surrounding stations; and their leisure existence became a prolonged life of reciprocal good- [Pg 70] feeling and friendship; which, by the means of this happy unity, were firmly cemented.

On the following morning, the sun rose with a refreshed resplendence; and our young friends, after breakfasting, and taking a cordial leave of their kind entertainers and their friends, proceeded on their way to Brompton. The previous evening's storm had had the effect of deliciously cooling the atmosphere; and the sun's clear rays obliquely striking the fragrant gum-leaves, which fluttered high over-head in the gentle morning breeze, and still bathed, as it were, in tears for the late elemental strife, made them sparkle like glittering gems in the roof of their arboreous edifice. The aromatic exudation from the dwarfish wattle, with its May-like blossom, which seemed to flourish under the protection of its gigantic compeers; and the bright acacia, decking, with its brilliant hue, the sloping sward, both lent their aid in the general pageant. The shrill cry of the parrots, which, with their rich plumage flashing in the reflection of the sun, and [Pg 71] almost dazzling the eye of the beholder, as they darted in their continued flight from tree to tree, in the exuberance of their conscious freedom and enjoyment of resuscitated nature, screeched their notes of thankfulness and admiration. The running streamlet, called into almost momentary existence, bounded and leapt its limpid volume through its tortuous and meandering course,

insinuated its translucent body into masses of fibrous *debris* and crevices of rock, to emerge in miniature cataracts, and murmur its allegiance to an all-smiling nature. The brightened face of morn greeted the young men upon their start; and with their spirits buoyant and animated by the refreshing influence of the delightful temperature, the surrounding fragrance, and the cheerful and exhilarating aspect of the bush, they rode with light and happy hearts.

Their course, however, was tedious and troublesome, and at the same time dangerous; for the [Pg 72] fury of the storm, which now showed what had been the extent of its force, in the destruction it had occasioned, had placed numerous traps on the road. Immense trees lay prostrate across their track, frequently necessitating a deviation from the path. Here a patriarch of the forest was riven to the root; with its splinters scattered in all directions; while one portion, still adhering in its connexion to the base, and supported by a branch resting on the ground, formed a triumphal arch across the road. There a similar denizen of the woods extended his humiliated form; torn up by the root, which had drawn with it masses of its congenial soil, seemingly unwilling to part with its natural element from which it had derived its sustenance. This would cause another deviation; and the treacherous nature of the ground (which was what bushmen call rotten, that is, superficially looking perfectly sound, though actually so soft that a horse would sink into it to his knees) rendered travelling insecure, and required the exercise of extreme caution. Hence the day [Pg 73] was considerably advanced ere the travellers arrived at Brompton.

As they approached this station, they were very much struck with its appearance. It was situated on a rising ground facing the Gibson river; which, with the heavy rains that had fallen, had risen considerably above its usual height, and had the appearance of a noble stream. The house itself was of the kind generally to be met with under similar circumstances; that is, a one-storied weather-boarded building of about six or eight rooms, mostly connected with one another, with a broad shady verandah, detached kitchen and stable, and other out-houses at a short distance removed from the dwelling. As a structure it had nothing about it that would attract special attention; it was simply neat, and had an appearance of comfort; but looked at in conjunction with the prettily arranged garden, with its tastefully laid out flower plots, and well stocked beds of vegetive edibles—and which was protected from the intrusion of quadrupeds by a substantial [Pg 74] "pailing fence"—it was a snug and pleasant residence. Numerous and extensive enclosed paddocks stretched far down the banks of the river; and in them might have been seen quite a herd of horses luxuriating in the rich pasturage; while at a distance of a few hundred yards stood the enclosures forming the stock-yard, and, adjacent, the large wool-shed and the huts of the men. From these, smoke with graceful curls rose in the calm evening air, and gave to the *locale* the appearance of a small though picturesque township; and, with the park-like appearance of the country, impressed our young travellers with the feeling, that Brompton was one of the most serene and delightful spots they had ever seen.

This station was of considerable magnitude; and, being in the centre of a district becoming fast occupied by settlers and their stock, it was likely, at no very distant period, to become a place of considerable importance. The government had reserved a site for a township; and had already [Pg 75] established a branch post-office for the convenience of the settlers in the neighbourhood; it might consequently be considered the *ultima thule* of civilisation. The proprietor of the station, Mr. Alfred Smithers, was a gentleman in the meridian of life, who had, in the general exodus from the southern districts of the colony, come over into the Darling Downs in search of "new country;" and continuing to push on until he passed the boundary of the existing settlements, had alighted on a tract of land situated near the head of the Gibson river, to which it appeared no venturesome squatter had as then penetrated. He took up the "run" from government, gave it its present name, brought over his flocks, and established his station; then building a comfortable little cottage, which, since the erection of the present house, had been occupied by the overseer, he removed to it Mrs. Smithers and his family. His brother shortly afterwards followed him into [Pg 76] this unknown wilderness, and not being possessed of any stock himself, assisted him in the general management of the station.

The younger brother, Mr. Robert Smithers, more generally known among his friends as Bob Smithers, and of whom we shall have to make frequent mention in the course of our narrative, was a gentleman of rather prepossessing appearance; the junior of his brother by some ten years; but, unlike him, was of an unsettled and reckless disposition, rather fond of the society of wild and dissolute companions, and at times, when absent from home, exhibited symptoms of the old colonial leaven, and indulged in courses of dissipation and debauchery. On the station, however, he was energetic and industrious; and, at its early settlement, was of considerable service to his brother, not only in the general routine of the establishment, but from his implacable enmity to the blacks, whom he inspired with a wholesome dread of his prowess; so that, while their [Pg 77] neighbours were continually suffering from the depredations of the sable marauders, their flocks and property were left intact.

Shortly after Bob's juncture with his brother, and perceiving the number of settlers that continually migrated to this new district, he provisioned himself and a few domesticated blacks (that occasionally worked on the station, and on whom he could depend) with rations for two or three months; and being well armed for his own protection, in case of a collision with any of his colleagues' countrymen, or of their treachery, he took his departure on a prospecting tour. Following the course of the river, and exploring the creeks and tributaries augmenting it, he drew a rough sketch or plan of the surface of the country, noting the different hills, creeks, and landmarks, to which he gave names; and marking the trees at various spots, to indicate to any future searcher that the country had been selected. He then divided his plan into divisions, which [Pg 78]

he roughly estimated to contain each about twenty or thirty thousand acres; and dignifying them with names, he sent into government, tenders for their lease. At the time of which we speak, in the survey department of the legislature, very little was known of the country designated "the unsettled districts," but which were fast filling up; and as little enquiries were made by the authorities, as to the accuracy of the sketches and estimations in the tenders, in the absence of any others, they were necessarily accepted at the minimum rate of ten guineas per annum each. Thus Mr. Robert Smithers became, for a small annual rental, the lessee of a tract of country equal in extent to an European principality. Although, without the present means of stocking the land thus obtained, Bob Smithers knew perfectly well that as the country became taken up and occupied, and as fresh settlers poured in, he would find many who would purchase his right to the "runs" at pretty round sums, in preference to pushing out still further; besides, having no [Pg 79] absolute necessity to sell them, he could continue to hold out, until their value sufficiently advanced to induce him to effect a sale. A prospect of a profitable realization having now presented itself, he had been offering them; and it was for one of these runs that the Fergusons were in treaty.

Their approach to the station had been noticed from the house; and upon their arrival at the door, they were welcomed by Mr. Alfred Smithers, who at once concluded who they were; so consigning their horses to the care of a man in waiting and their own black boy Joey, they entered the domicile, and were introduced to Mrs. Smithers and the family. In the absence of his brother, who was shortly expected in, John fell into conversation with Mr. Smithers, respecting the country they were about to visit, and their proposed operations, should they decide upon purchasing; while William, with his usual frankness, subsided into a friendly conversation with [Pg 80] the lady, while he playfully noticed the children, with whom he instantly became a great favourite.

The internal arrangements of the house seemed in perfect keeping with its external appearance of comfort: order, decorum, and cleanliness, seemed its characteristics; and happiness and contentment that of the inmates' existence. Mr. Smithers was evidently a man of domestic attachments; one whose greatest pleasure was in his family; while his wife was blessed with an equally happy temperament, devoted to her husband, with whom and her children she divided her entire affection. Their family consisted of three, two boys and a girl; who, notwithstanding the disadvantages under which they laboured, were exeeedingly obedient and well mannered, without any of the wayward forwardness, and rude precosity, so generally to be met with in children brought up under similar auspices. Though hospitable and kind in the extreme, from [Pg 81] their remote and secluded position, the Smitherses were rarely visited by strangers; and even their few neighbours were either located at such considerable distances that it made visiting inconvenient, or they were people of a stamp who had no relish for their society. Mr. Smithers never visited town, except when business made it absolutely necessary, and his amiable wife never entertained any desire to leave her family; consequently it was not to be wondered at, from the time of her arrival at the station, five years before the period of which we speak, she had never left it longer than for a day's ride, to return the courtesies of some of her nearest friends.

Bob Smithers, as we have already said, was inclined occasionally to exceed the bounds of temperance and decorum; but even he sincerely respected his sister-in-law, and never ventured to violate propriety by the introduction of such companions as he knew would be distasteful to her. At the same time, the influence of her presence acted as a check upon his wild and uncouth [Pg 82] habits, and prevented him from giving way so entirely to his reckless propensities as he would have done under no such restraint.

The Fergusons were well pleased with the portion of the Smithers' *menage* they had met; and during the interval that they were waiting for the return of Bob, who had, so his brother informed them, been detained somewhere on the run, probably through the swollen nature of the creeks, they enjoyed one of the most pleasant evenings they had spent for a long time. The absentee made his appearance late in the evening, and after a mutual introduction, informed his visitors that he had hardly expected them for a day or two. The rain in the neighbourhood of Brompton, they discovered, had been falling for some days, and had been considerably heavier than on the higher parts of the river; while, owing to the large body of water that had fallen, Bob stated that all the rivers were too much swollen to admit of their being crossed, and advised, for their mutual [Pg 83] comfort, that their expedition should be delayed for a few days to give the water time to subside. This advice was backed up by the rest of the family, who were unanimous in expressing the delight they would feel in their friends extending the term of their visit; while they, having no objections themselves to such a course, gladly responded to the appeal, and considered themselves stationary until the river would admit of their proceeding on their expedition. With this arrangement settled, they finally separated for the night.

CHAPTER IV. [Pg 84]

"Ye vig'rous swains! while youth ferment your blood,
And purer spirits swell the sprightly flood,
Now range the hills."

POPE.

On the third day after the Fergusons' arrival, Bob Smithers, believing the river had sufficiently subsided to admit of their travelling, organized their party preparatory to their departure; and selected from his own men one of the most useful and experienced bushmen to accompany them, and in conjunction with Joey, to take charge of the pack-horses, follow them over the runs, and guard their camp. They started; and, for the first day, followed the course of the Gibson river, which for nearly thirty miles bounded the Brompton run. At this point its waters were joined by a [Pg 85] tributary creek, and here was situated one of the out-stations. It was the intention of Bob Smithers to reach this place before dark; and, owing to the heavy nature of the ground, from its excessive saturation, it was with no little difficulty this portion of the journey was performed. However, they reached the shepherd's hut; and unburdening their horses, they hobbled them and turned them out to graze, while they camped themselves for the night.

The hut, where they made their halt, was on a par with others of the same pretensions, though in no way superior. It was built of slabs split from the log, and freely ventilated on all sides; though in the roof, which was covered with bark, it was perfectly impervious to the weather. The internal arrangements, as might be expected, were as rough as the building itself; against the wall, in each side of the hut, were roughly put up, with battens and saplings, two clumsy-looking receptacles, containing the blankets, and intended for the nocturnal tenancy of the two [Pg 86] occupants of the habitation. A box belonging to one of the men, and a rough bench built against the other unoccupied wall, and serving for a table, an iron pot for boiling meat, two tin quart pots in which to make their tea, two pint ones and dishes of the same metal, a two-gallon keg containing water, and which in an inverted position at times had to do duty as a stool, and two suspended bags containing tea and sugar, completed the furniture of the place. In front of the door a large log had been rolled, and was burning with lively force, emitting a lurid glare on the surrounding group; while on its end untouched by the fire, sat the hut-keeper, with his companion standing near him, and their visitors stretched on the ground awaiting the completion of the culinary operations of Bob Smithers' man.

The position of these guardians of the fleece is usually monotonous and dreary in the extreme; and those located here were a fair sample of the general herd. There was a shepherd and a hut- [Pg 87] keeper. The duty of the former was to lead out the flocks daily at dawn, to follow and tend them while depasturing, and protect them from the depredations of the blacks, or the molestations of the native dogs; for which purpose in very remote districts, such as this, they are provided with guns. The hut-keeper, on the other hand, remains all day at the hut, resting from his vigils and preparing the meals of himself and coadjutor, in readiness for the latter's return at dusk with his charge; which are forthwith penned and handed over to the safe keeping of the other, who watches them during the night.

These men remain in this happy state of seclusion and ignorance of the proceedings of the world, from which they are thus (by their voluntary act of expatriation) excluded, from year's end to year's end; except at shearing time, when they bring their flocks to the head station to be shorn; and the only being with whom they have any intercourse, is the man who brings them their [Pg 88] weekly supply of rations. When "old hands," they in general pass their lives in a lethargic existence; having no apparent thought of past, present, or future; but breathe on in a dreamy obliviousness, until at the expiration of perhaps one or two years, their wages having accumulated to an amount somewhat considerable, they leave their employment to proceed to the nearest public-house and plunge into a course of drinking. After the endurance of a week's delirium, madness, and unconsciousness, they generally find themselves, when robbed of the greater portion of their hard-got earnings, thrust upon the world penniless, wretched, dispirited, and sick, to seek employment and re-enact the same scenes of solitary penance and wild debauchery.

It is true the denizens of these out-stations are not always such characters; occasionally "fresh arrivals," or as they are called "new chums," may be hired by the squatter's agents in town and [Pg 89] sent up to the station, whence they are frequently removed to these outposts; but when such is the case, they are generally of a more sociable disposition, and take an early opportunity of being removed to the comfort and social intercourse of the head station. Though in this removal they entail more constant and arduous occupation, they willingly embrace the labour, and leave the indolence of their vacated posts, to be enjoyed by some "old hand" whose mind has been broken by the depressing influence of constant punishment, and whose hopes have been blighted by a constant penal servitude. As this class of men is happily disappearing from the country, and giving place to steady and persevering immigrants, the charge of an out-station, when not in the hands of one with the old leaven of improvidence unexterminated, necessarily becomes the probationary lot of a "new chum."

The two men, with whom our travellers found themselves located, were something of the first [Pg 90] mentioned class; and, to give our readers some idea of their characters, we will venture to encroach upon their patience, by recounting an epitome of the conversation that was started after the evening repast.

"Have you been long in this part of the country?" asked John of the shepherd.

"Why no, sir, I ain't been so very long," replied the man; "I've got about three months to make up my year with Mr. Smithers. I came over from New England, and agreed for twelve months, and I like this country far better than the south, it ain't so cold nor so wet."

"Then, I suppose, you will retain your place, and renew your engagement when your year is up?"

"Well, you see, sir, I don't exactly know about that 'ere; after being up in the bush a while one likes to get down the country a bit, just to see what's going on, and to spend one's money."

"But, my good man, what necessity is there for you to go away from the station? If you want to see any change, I've no doubt Mr. Smithers would find you employment at the head station; and you might allow your wages to accumulate, until you had sufficient to purchase some sheep of your own." [Pg 91]

"I don't know about that, sir; I expect it would be a precious long time before I would have enough to buy a flock of sheep: and besides, if I had any, I wouldn't know what to do with them; I shouldn't be allowed to graze 'em on other folk's runs; and, after slaving away for I don't know how long, I reckon I should just be swindled out of 'em in the end, and be as poor and 'miserable as a bandicoot' after all: besides, I'd rather not have the bother with them, but just have my spree, and 'knock down my pile,' as usual."

"But, my good fellow, if you were possessed of a flock of sheep, you could, by paying a rent, be allowed to depasture it on some squatter's run; and as to being swindled out of your property, the law of the land would protect you from that." [Pg 92]

"I don't know nothing about the law of the land, sir; but I know as how a mate of mine, who served with a master on the Barwan for five years, and was paid his wages in sheep, took his flock to a piece of country he had bought from his master and set his self up. He hadn't been at that game though for more nor two years, when a flood on the river took off half his sheep, and his old master brought him in a bill for some hundreds of pounds for stores and things my mate had got, and he wanted to be paid right off. Now, my mate couldn't pay him; so he had to give him up his sheep and go shepherding again. So you see, sir, I may just as well spend my money when I get it, as let myself be cheated out of it at the end."

"Your friend's case was certainly a hard one, but he seemed to be the victim of misfortune more than of an exacting master; but that does not show, because he did not succeed, that you or any other industrious man should fail. Take my advice and try it; refrain from taking your wages, let them accumulate in the hands of your employer, and when they have reached such a sum as to be of service to you, ask him to invest it, and I am sure you will have no cause to complain; besides, remember as you get old, if you have no friends to care for you and you are destitute as you are now, you will starve." [Pg 93]

"That's just it, you see, sir; if I go to save money now (but I know I can't, for I never could), if I dies I've got no one to give it to. I've got no friends, leastwise I don't know of none; and I am sure when I knew there was something coming to me, I would want to spend it; while as long as I live, I can always earn enough to keep me."

"But you say you've never attempted to save your wages; you cannot tell how you may be influenced until you make the attempt."

"There is no use of my trying, sir, I am sure I never could; and I may just take my money when it is due me, and have my spree." [Pg 94]

"I can't understand how it is you persist in being so prodigal. What extraordinary influence is it that induces you to spend your earnings as soon as you get them?"

"Well, I don't know, sir, unless it is we get 'em too seldom. You see, when we work for a year and don't get no money perhaps all that time, when we do have our wages all in a lump, it seems such a lot we don't think how hard it cost us to get it; and we don't know what to do with it, so we just spend it. If we got paid, you see, as people down in the towns, at the end of the week, and had to keep ourselves, we might get into the way for saving a little now and then; but as it is, we never know how to do it, and I expect we never shall. You see we ain't like those fellows who let their old women look after their money, who tell 'em it is all gone, while all the time they've got it put away in their old stocking."

"Well, why don't you get married, and have an old woman, as you call it; and by her means you may make yourself more happy, and be enabled, after a time, to become your own master?" [Pg 95]

"I've often thought I wouldn't mind that sort o' thing, sir; but where do you think I would get a young woman as'd look at the likes of me? When they comes out to this country, specially when they gets up here into the bush, they're so mighty saucy, they cocks up their noses at fellers likes us; and besides, you know masters don't care to have men with what they calls 'incumberances.'"

"No doubt there is some truth in that; but if you by your thriftiness can possess yourself of a little money, and be in a position to establish yourself, you'd have no difficulty, I should say, in inducing some industrious girl to accept you; take my advice now, and try."

"All right, sir, I will," replied the man; after which the conversation took another turn, and the party very shortly separated.

As they were leaving the fire, Bob Smithers remarked to John that all his advice to the man would be lost in five minutes. He told him it was impossible to instil prudence into the minds of such; "their whole enjoyment," he said, "is in having their spree. They perceive no pleasure in hoarding money to provide comforts in their old age; the very thought of it is distasteful to them, and as to that fellow (pointing to the man John had been conversing with), if he succeeded in passing the year without drawing his wages, some of his mates would tell him he was a fool; and thinking so [Pg 96]

himself, he would not rest until he had been paid and gone through his course of drunkenness."

"I am aware," said John, "such is his present feeling; and I have met with many like him, but have succeeded in persuading, not a few, to practise a life of frugality; and I am convinced, with a little admonition, that that man could be induced to adopt a similar course."

"Well, perhaps, he could," replied Smithers; "but, for my part, if those fellows feel inclined to [Pg 97] spend their money foolishly, I don't think it is our interest to prevent them. If we induced all the men in the country to save their wages, or take them in sheep, we would have the colony overrun with a set of "stringy bark squatters," who would be so infesting our lands that our runs would be cut up into innumerable small parts, just to serve vagabonds."

"You must admit," replied John, "that if a provident spirit were to be infused into the people, it would be the means of stocking the country by an industrious and thrifty population; and be far more beneficial to the colony than allowing the lands to remain in the hands of a few wealthy squatters."

"Oh, pooh! pooh!" cried Smithers; "but I'm not going to argue with you; we had better start in the morning soon after daylight; so, now, let's take a snooze." With this the young men entered the hut, and, rolling themselves in their blankets, settled for sleep; which they enjoyed [Pg 98] uninterruptedly until an early hour in morning. They then arose; and, after taking a matin ablution in the creek, returned to the hut to partake of their breakfast, which was being prepared by Joey; while Bob Smithers' stock-man brought in the horses.

It may, no doubt, appear strange to the reader that horses should be turned out loose in the bush, with only the simple precaution of "hobbling" their fore-feet, without the danger of the animals being lost to their owners; but such is rarely to be apprehended, except in the case of some incorrigible beasts who are not to be trusted. We certainly have known horses, so hobbled, make off in a sort of shambling gallop, by drawing up the two confined feet together, and progressing in short leaps; but, in general, a horse so turned out at night, after a day's hard ride, has a sort of tacit understanding with his master that he is to be at hand when required: or at least his natural [Pg 99] instinct prompts him to make the most use of his leisure time, and occupy the period of his release in diligently administering to his own wants, and satisfying the calls of hunger and exhausted nature; and if searched for at daybreak, before having had time to wander, he is generally found in a convenient proximity to "the camp." Such was the case in the present instance.

When the horses were saddled and ready for a start, the party mounted, and the cavalcade moved off. The country they intended to visit was situated on the main river, some considerable distance further down its course; but, owing to the numerous creeks that mingled their waters with the main stream, it was impossible for them to follow the bank of the river without meeting with many interruptions and impediments. They therefore traced up the creek; and, by means of their compass, they shaped their course so as to either head all the creeks, or so far reach their sources, as to be enabled to cross them without difficulty. This circuitous route necessarily [Pg 100] occupied more time than what would have been required under more auspicious circumstances; and the still heavy nature of the ground, from its late pluvial visitation, rendered the journey extremely tedious; while it prevented them from reaching Strawberry Hill, the only station on the river below Brompton, that night. This run had been sold to the present occupants by Bob Smithers, and had been taken possession of by them some eighteen months previously. It had been Smithers' intention to have made this place their quarters for that night; but finding it could not be reached before dark, and there being situated in the line a deep and awkward river called the Wombi, running into the Gibson, and for which he preferred daylight to cross, he determined to keep higher up the Wombi, and camp on its bank where the country was open and flat.

Arriving at the "Dingo plains," a place so named from the number of those animals which [Pg 101] frequented it, they halted for the night, intending to camp and cross the river in the morning. They would thus, by making this detour, keep high above Strawberry Hill; and Smithers therefore purposed taking his companions round the back and lower boundaries of the run they wished to see; thence through its extent to its other extreme on the Gibson river; making occasional deviations to the principal water courses and eminences, from which a good view of the country could be obtained; and thence to return. Smoking their pipes over their fire, Bob detailed these plans to the young men, who perfectly agreed with their judiciousness, and determined to put them in practice on the following day. They then fell into a desultory conversation; through which we will not trouble the reader by following; but merely remark that it was principally upon the occupants of the station on the river, the character of the blacks in the neighbourhood, and the likelihood of annoyance from the dingos. That these latter were numerous it was pretty evident; [Pg 102] for the travellers more than once had intimation, of a close proximity to their camp, of a tribe of those canine aborignals, who prefer the enjoyment of a pristine independence to the blessings of civilisation, except in so far as that civilisation can be made subservient to their comfort and sustenance.

The dingo, or as it is generally called, the native dog, occupies in the social scale, much the same position in the southern hemisphere, as the fox does in the northern; and also approaches more nearly to that animal in semblance and character than any other known. Its colour is generally of a dark sandy or reddish brown, with hair rather long, a bushy low-hanging tail, long ears, which except while being pursued he usually keeps erect, pointed snout, and sharp piercing eyes. He is stupid and cowardly; generally creeping along with a slinking gait to surprise his prey, which he usually siezes by the throat. He is easily frightened, and deterred from his purpose by the [Pg 103]

simplest contrivances; and is quite devoid of that cunning which characterizes his antipodean prototype. His course of destruction has been known to be arrested by an ordinary four-wire fence, through which he could have easily passed; though he sat on the exterior of the enclosure, moaning piteously at the flock within; while his mental obtuseness failed to percieve a means of ingress. To sheep he is most destructive; and if a flock is so carelessly tended as to admit of his insinuating himself, the havoc he makes is frightful: for not content with fastening on one, he will snap, tear, worry, and mangle possibly half the flock; and passing from one to another, with the rapidity of thought, the mortality that results from his visit is truly disastrous. He never barks like a domesticated dog, but yelps and howls; and at night when he sounds his note, it is taken up by the entire pack, and made to resound with a mournful cadence over the face of the country. As they sit on their haunches, with their noses extended in an elevation to the sky, chorusing their [Pg 104] lachrymose and supplicatory lamentations, the effect is one of the most dismal that can be conceived.

To society such as this the young men had a decided objection; and concluding, that if they did not take steps to disperse their nocturnal visitors (who treated them to numerous appeals which were anything but euphonic), they would stand a very poor chance of enjoying any rest. Besides the probability that a keen appetite might induce the dogs to extend their favours to the horses, it was also a matter of prudence to insist upon their removing themselves to some more distant location; and to support this with a forcible argument, the travellers got their guns in readiness, and moved away in silence into the darkness.

Our friends were not left long to ascertain in what direction to expect a recontre, for a fresh eructation of the metrical whine gave them sufficient notice. The black boy soon descried the [Pg 105] disturbers of their peace by the glitter of a host of canine optics, and directed his masters and their friend where to fire. This they did; and the effect of their shots was instantly apparent, from the excessive yelping that greeted their ears, and satisfied them that some, at least, of their annoyers had got something to remember; while they were gratified to listen to the fast receding sounds of these "mercurial inhabitants of the plain." The dogs quickly "made themselves scarce," nor did they afterwards attempt to reduce the distance they had placed between themselves and the travellers; who, upon the establishment of quiet, and after supplying fresh material to their fire, nestled themselves in their blankets around the cheerful blaze, and stretched themselves to sleep under the "starlit canopy of heaven."

Early on the next morning the journey was resumed; and for three days, with very little variety, they traversed the run, of which we need say nothing; except that the country answered the [Pg 106] expectations of the Fergusons, who were pleased with its appearance, and returned with Bob Smithers to complete the purchase at Brompton. Here preliminaries were soon effected. Mr. Ferguson's agents in Sydney had been instructed by him to honour any drafts drawn by his son, and to transact any business he might require; therefore John at once drew upon them for the amount of this purchase, and placed himself in communication respecting the other arrangements; forwarding the note of sale from Smithers, and an obligation from him to sign the necessary deeds of transfer when they were ready for execution. He then took his leave of the family, intending to go down to Moreton Bay, whence a steamer plied to Sydney, and on thence to superintend his business there and select the necessaries for forming the station; at the same time that his brother and Joey returned to New England, to wait there until John had so far [Pg 107] perfected his plans, as to be able to bring up his supplies and prepare the station for the reception of the sheep.

It is unnecessary to trace the peregrinations of John Ferguson, or to tire the reader with a detail of William's every day life at Acacia creek; we will simply say that in the course of about six weeks John returned to Brisbane, and wrote to his brother to muster their sheep and start with them for the station as soon as possible. He stated that he had engaged drays to take up their loading, and that he intended to precede them himself; so that he would in all probability reach the station some weeks before either the supplies or the sheep, and would engage some bush carpenters as he went up, to prepare the place for their reception. To carry out this intention, he made all speed for his destination; and arriving at Alma, the nearest township to his place, on the fourth day, he there engaged two men, to whom he gave directions to meet him at Brompton, and [Pg 108] pushed on himself for that station.

Alma and Brompton lay about equidistant from his own place; but his inability to describe sufficiently clearly to the understanding of the men the *locale* of the new station, and his rations having been left at the latter place, it was necessary for him to proceed there first. Upon his appearance at Mr. Smithers', he was welcomed with much cordiality; and every assistance was given him by the kind proprietor, though he had been quite disinterested in the arrangements between Bob and the Fergusons. Yet such was his kindly disposition, that considerations of interest weighed very little with him, and he freely and kindly tendered any aid that lay in his power. He recommended John to go over to the run, and, if he had not done so already, to select a site for his station; and for that purpose he offered him the services of one of his own men; while he promised to have the carpenters directed to the place whenever they made their [Pg 109] appearance.

The run had been originally called Fern Vale by Bob Smithers, when he tendered for it to the government; and John Ferguson, who thought he could not improve upon it, had allowed it to retain that name. The part of it which had attracted Bob's attention, and induced him to so christen it, was a gently undulating valley opening to the Gibson river, as the crow flies, a few miles below Strawberry Hill. The north side of the valley was partially covered with the fern plant

(which suggested the name); and here, it struck John, would be a good site for his station, and he consequently determined to visit it first.

On the following morning, in company with the man, whose assistance had been so kindly given him by Mr. Smithers, John rode over to the run, and reaching the valley we have mentioned camped for the night. In the morning, at the first sight of his position, he was convinced no better situation could be found; so gave up the idea of any further prospecting, and prepared for the [Pg 110] carpenters, by marking out the sites for the house, huts, and yards.

Down the valley, which we have said opened out to the river, meandered a beautiful little limpid stream; on the upper side of the vale, and receding from the banks of the river, rose a gentle acclivity, which pointed itself out as the spot on which to erect the house; while on the flat below was every convenience for the huts and yards. Above this point the river took a considerable bend, making on the other side a deep pocket, which was low and apparently subject to flooding. It was covered by a dense scrub, over which, from the elevated position John had chosen for his domicile, he could catch a glimpse of Strawberry Hill; which, though on the same side of the river as Fern Vale, and some distance round, appeared, when looking across the head of the stream, not very far off.

The carpenters shortly making their appearance, all were soon in a state of animation; and, [Pg 111] before long, the crash of falling timber, the echo of the axe in felling, and the mallet in splitting the logs for the fences, resounded through the wood, where hitherto solitude had held undisputed sway; and, long before the arrival of the flocks or the supplies, substantial stock-yards had been erected, as well as huts for the shepherds, and a commodious store-house. The construction of the dwelling-house, being a matter of a secondary consideration, it was necessarily left to the last; and the whole party set to work busily to put up a large shed for shearing, and storing the wool when ready for packing.

CHAPTER V. [Pg 112]

"How gaily is at first begun
Our life's uncertain race!
Whilst yet that sprightly morning sun,
With which we just set out to run,
Enlightens all the place."
COUNTESS OF WINCHELSEA.

When William Ferguson received his brother's letter, he immediately collected the draft of sheep with which they were to commence their station, and started with them for Fern Vale, in company with Joey and two shepherds. The route he intended to adopt, in his migration, was somewhat the same as that taken by his brother and himself on their first journey to Brompton. He was induced to make choice of this, partly to enable him to renew the acquaintance of Mr. [Pg 113] Dawson; but principally on account of its leading him through a part of the country little frequented, by which he would be enabled to prosecute his journey with less chance of molestation. He therefore communicated his intention to Mr. Dawson by post, which (though taking a more circuitous route than he) would reach Barra Warra long before he made his appearance with his flock. With a large number of sheep in charge, the travelling was necessarily slow and tedious; and some time had been consumed ere the young man approached the station of his acquaintance. No circumstance worth recording had marked the passage thus far; all things seemed propitious; and as William left his sheep in the charge of his employees, encamped within sight of Barra Warra, he felt certain of a successful termination to his journey.

Upon reaching the house of Mr. Dawson, he was disappointed to find that gentleman from home [Pg 114] (having been suddenly called away to town on business); though he left word with his good lady, to express his regrets at the circumstance that prevented his having the pleasure of meeting his young friend, and his hope that William would make Barra Warra his resting-place as long as he could conveniently do so. Mrs. Dawson expressed her happiness to see him, and also pressed her husband's invitation; while the children, who speedily remembered him, uttered their welcomes in tones of joyous gratulation.

William thanked the kind-hearted lady, and accepted the invitation with pleasure; though the visit, he said, would necessarily be short, as he required to urge on the sheep, and he did not like resigning the responsibility to either of the men. He was sorry, he said, that his visits hitherto had been such flying ones; but promised to make amends at an early opportunity, when he anticipated he would be under the necessity of craving the hospitality of Barra Warra for his sister; who purposed joining her brothers when their station was made a little comfortable. The [Pg 115] bare proposition quite delighted Mrs. Dawson, who was warm in her expressions of approval; and said she would be charmed to make the acquaintance of Miss Ferguson, and hoped she would have more sociability than her brothers, and not require so much pressing to induce a visit from her.

William assured his friend, that his sister would reciprocate the delight; for she had already, he said, expressed a desire to know Mrs. Dawson, from simply hearing him mention her name.

We need not trace the conversation through all its minutiæ, nor delay our narrative by detailing the further progress of William Ferguson; but simply mention, that on the following morning he proceeded on his journey, while we turn to view the movements of his brother.

In the meantime, John had got all his buildings so far completed, as to have them ready for the [Pg 116]
settlement of the station as soon as the flocks and the drays with the supplies should have arrived. It was not his intention to build the house until they settled themselves, and got some little leisure after shearing time; and, until then, he proposed living with his brother in one of the huts erected for the men. He now looked anxiously for the drays; and as the weather had been fine since they started, and they had been a good time on the road, he believed they could not be far distant; especially as he had received intimation from Mr. Smithers that a man had arrived at Brompton, who had passed them the day before he reached that station. He therefore thought it advisable to leave the carpenters at work on a few odds and ends that still required doing, and proceed along the road to meet the drays, and hurry them on to their destination. He did so; and some few miles past Strawberry Hill he descried the lumbering vehicles jogging on at their (or
rather the bullocks') leisure; and he turned with them, in company, until they reached the [Pg 117]
crossing-place of the Wombi. The appearance of this spot did not, by any means, favourably prepossess the minds of the bullock-drivers: the banks were of black alluvial soil, and had a steep descent to the water; which, though reduced to its ordinary level, looked black from the colour of the banks and the soil through which it passed; and had an appearance of depth, not at all inviting to drivers of heavily-laden drays.

However, cross it they were compelled to; for there was no other place where the river could be passed with any degree of safety, without going considerably farther; so, after directing John to go over with his horse, that he might see what he had to encounter, the first bullock-driver urged his team down the slope and into the water, where it splashed and floundered on until it succeeded in bringing the dray about half way across. There the bottom was so soft, and the dray
wheels had become so embedded in the mud, that only with the assistance of the second team [Pg 118]
could the passage be effected. The second dray was not even so fortunate as the first; for all efforts of the double team were unavailing to pass the rubicon; and it settled in the mud mid-way between the banks. Adding to this, the fact that the water was already above the axle, and consequently damaging the loading; and that in all probability, if not speedily extricated, the dray would become even more immovable; it was evident, to the men, some strenuous efforts were required to overcome the difficulty.

The Australian bullock dray with its bovine traction, we may remark, is without exception the most primitive means of conveyance that can either be devised or imagined. The ponderous vehicle, in perfect keeping with the heavy and drowsy quadrupeds who draw it at a snail-like pace, stands prominently forth as a reproach to the inventive genius of man; and, excepting perhaps the substitute of iron in coupling and linking the animals, and in some parts of the
vehicular construction, the whole equipage possesses not the shadow of an improvement on the [Pg 119]
popular conveyances of the age of Sesostris. But in this sunny land, settlers are content with the questionable facilities of transit offered by these primeval means; while they console themselves with the belief that no other style of vehicle would stand the wear and tear of being drawn over logs and stumps of trees, rocks and precipices, and through rivers and swamps; and that no other animal but the patient bullock, could endure the fatigue and privation of alternate heat, wet, hunger and thirst, and a constant taxation of strength and resignation. 'Tis true, at times, the obstacles to travelling are almost insuperable, and that the roads have no title to the dignity of such a name; being, in most instances, merely tracks formed by the drays following the course of a predecessor; but still, no attempt even is made to improve the means of conveyance. The settlers content themselves with the existence of things that be, and are satisfied with the
progressive rate of from fifteen to twenty miles a day; at which speed a team of ten bullocks, in [Pg 120]
fine weather, will draw a dray with thirty to forty hundred-weight; while during wet, they may not perform the same distance in a week.

The individuals who manage the guidance of these machines, and who are generally accompanied by an assistant, are too often some of the most reprobate members of the family of man. Their sole accomplishments are the management of their drays; the forcible appeals to their bullocks, made by the application of their long whips (upon the expertness in the use of which they pride themselves); the facile utterance of their blaspheming interjections; and their ability to plunder without detection. The *acme* of their human felicity is perpetual intoxication; and to gratify this propensity, they have no scruples in assisting themselves to any liquor which they may be entrusted to carry; frequently adopting ingenious plans to abstract it from the bulk, and
replace it by water in such a way as to defy detection. They are ignorant in the extreme, and [Pg 121]
though assumed to be civilised and sentient beings, their vices render them, in the scale of humanity, on a par with the aboriginal blacks; individuals of whom, frequently follow in their train, and, until debased by their vile influence, by far their superiors in an ethical point of view.

In stimulating the propulsion of his team, the bullock-driver addresses each of his beasts by name; such as, "eh, Smiler;" "come up, Strawberry;" "Cap-tain," etc.; accompanying every admonition with a profusion of oaths, and a wholesale application of the lash. If remonstrated with for his use of so ungenteel a vocabulary, he will endeavour, with considerable earnestness, to convince you that the bullocks perfectly understand what is said to them; and that they are so wayward in their disposition, that nothing short of such determined and forcible language is of
any avail. He will support his arguments with many stories of the wonderful instinct and [Pg 122]
percipiency displayed by his animals; all of which stories, though exceedingly marvellous, obtain

implicit credence in the mind of the narrator; and only come short, in point of hyperbolical marvel, of the wonderful utterance of Tom Connor's cat, in the plain Anglo-Saxon vernacular. Though we do not intend either to support or refute the sophistry of these men, it is only just to say, that considering every bullock has a name, upon the utterance of which it is made to feel an application of the whip, it is not to be wondered at that the animals are soon taught to recognise their appellations, and in the expectation of chastisement, to brighten up when they hear them.

The reader may imagine we have drawn too depraved a picture of this neglected class of men; but we solemnly affirm we have not. There are, of course, exceptions to this, as to every rule; for we have known many industrious, and even respectable well-conducted men, as bullock-drivers; but unfortunately they were only the exceptions: the general mass are as corrupt and vicious as it [Pg 123] is possible for human beings to be. Why this is so, we are at a loss rightly to understand; though we imagine the primary cause is this: Attendant on bullock-driving are many discomforts; more, possibly, than in any other occupation in the bush. Hence it is an employment which industrious or enterprising individuals generally shun; and in the successive scales of advancement, in which the steady immigrant effects his rise, it is left to members of the lowest scum; who prefer the freedom of this erratic life, to the more settled conformities of order and society.

We left John Ferguson on the bank of the river, gazing on the dray safely (or rather unsafely) fixed in the bed of the river. The bullock-drivers had lashed, frantically shouted, and swore; while they performed sundry manœuvres, and excited evolutions; to induce the bullocks to strain an extra nerve, to extricate the vehicle: but all to no purpose; the efforts of the beasts were [Pg 124] unavailing, while the delay only rendered the case more hopeless. In this state of things, the men perceived the only course open to them, was to lighten the load as much as possible, by partially unloading the dray, and carrying the goods over the river themselves. With this determination they set earnestly to work, and succeeded in removing the greater portion of the goods; when they made another attempt, happily with better success than previously; and brought the dray from its miry adherence to a position on the bank. It was then reladen with the goods; while the men, barely recovered from the chagrin caused by the misadventure, performed their work with a sullen moroseness, enlivening their gloom by animadversions on the river, the country, and everybody connected with their peregrination.

In this humour John left them to follow him, while he proceeded to the station, where we will also lead the reader. Upon his return to Fern Vale, he found, during his short absence, that the [Pg 125] blacks, attracted by the appearance of a fresh settlement, had congregated in some considerable numbers; though more out of curiosity than with any idea of aggression. At sight of John, a number of them immediately assembled round him; looking at him, and everything about the place, in a sort of inquisitive manner; jabbering amongst themselves; and handling everything portable within their reach. The group consisted of some twenty persons of both sexes and various ages; and were a family of the Nungar tribe, which usually made its home on the other side of the Gibson river, in the scrub, and the mountains and broken country receding from it.

The sight of this visitation did not altogether please the young squatter, for he thought he saw in the future considerable annoyance from similar visits. He therefore demanded of them what they required; and told them, that though he had no objection to their coming about the place so long as they behaved themselves, if he caught them committing any theft, or becoming in any way [Pg 126] troublesome, he would not allow one of them afterwards to approach the station.

They seemed to understand this communication; for one of them informed John, that a good many of their tribe had been employed by the squatters, to wash their sheep, and do work about the stations, and would be very glad to do the same for him. Thinking possibly that it might be the means of coming to some friendly understanding with the tribe, and would give him a means of acquiring some knowledge of their movements and disposition, he thought it advisable to take the services of some of them; more especially as in the then rough state of the settlement, their services could be turned to some account. Acting on this impulse, then, he selected two young athletic black boys; who seemed more intelligent than the majority, and who appeared to have a disposition to remain on the station, and to adapt themselves to the ways of the white man. He [Pg 127] then distributed some tobacco and rations amongst them, and they took their departure apparently well pleased.

By this time the drays were seen making their approach; and great was instantly the bustle in preparation for the reception of the "loading." The articles which constitute a station's "supplies" are of such a kaleidoscopic variety, that their enumeration would almost be endless; and we will merely observe that the heterogeneous mass was safely, and speedily, transferred from the dray to the ground, whence it was deposited in the store. Various edibles; and their condiments such as tea, sugar, flour, oilman's stores, etc., were successively unpacked and stowed away; and everything appeared to be sound, until it was discovered that the salt, which had been placed in the bottom of the dray, was unfortunately damaged; it had, in fact, during its submersion in the water "dissolved," and

> "Like the baseless fabric of a vision,
> Left not a rack behind."

Such events as this are of frequent occurrence; and, where the opportunities of procuring [Pg 128] supplies are very rare, severe are the straits, and numerous the inconveniences, to which residents in the interior are subjected. After long and continued wet or dry weather, when travelling is rendered difficult or impossible, from the country being impassable by floods, or impracticable from drought and absence of feed, settlers in the remote districts are often

reduced to states bordering on absolute starvation, or at least to a subsistence on meat, without any concomitant "fixins." When such cases occur, which we are happy to say is seldom, the squatters lend to one another the articles most in demand, until they either all become destitute of provisions, or are relieved by the receipt of a fresh supply. But articles that are not in every day consumption, and not considered of paramount importance, they are frequently compelled to do without for months; and so accustomed do they become to this species of self-denial, that the absence of many things is thought very little of. Salt, however, is an article indispensable on a [Pg 129] station; for the greater portion of the meat consumed is required to be salted, to preserve it in the hot weather; while it is also frequently necessary, on some stations, to supply it to the sheep and cattle. For this purpose, rock salt is usually provided; but, in its absence, the ordinary coarse salt is put into small canvas bags, and suspended from trees, that the cattle may satisfy their saline cravings by licking the moisture, which, from the nightly dews and the natural dampness of the salt, exudes through the pores of the canvas.

When John saw the nature of his loss, knowing there was no use in complaining, he made the best of his mishap by determining to ride over in the morning to Strawberry Hill, and see if he could not borrow some from his neighbour there until the receipt of his further supplies for shearing. Before going, however, on the following morning, he desired to settle with the bullock-driver for the carriage of his supplies up, and to make arrangements with him for the occupation of one of [Pg 130] his teams for the remainder of the season. For that purpose he took his bridle in his hand, and proceeded to catch his horse, which was running in one of the paddocks lately fenced in; and on the way, as he passed the camp of the draymen, he requested the fellow to go up to the hut in a few minutes, to be settled with, and receive his instructions for further employment. He then went in search of his steed, leaving the men stretched on the grass in front of a fire, near which stood their pots of tea, cooling; and in the ashes of which lay embedded their "damper," receiving its finishing heat, preparatory to being subjected to the operation of mastication; while the fellows themselves lay motionless, and careless of everything around them, in the full enjoyment of the everlasting pipe.

Oh, smoke! thou deity of thousands, and the special idol of the bush-man! thou that soothest the dull moments of a weary solitude, and the anguish of a desponding spirit; that satisfiest the [Pg 131] cravings of a consuming hunger; that alleviates the pains, brightens the intellects, and dispels illusion of the morbid fancies and diseased imaginations of thy votaries! thou anodyne for melancholy; thou disseminator of good feeling; conciliator and ratifyer of peace offerings! without thee what would mortal bush-man be?—they, to whom thou art a friend in need. All potent smoke! thine influence is supreme; thy virtues are legion; and thy capabilities are boundless as the vapour into which thou meltest as a holocaust for thy happy devotees. If the pipe could but speak, what mysteries could it reveal! the rapturous visions of the inspired lover, rising in the circular imageries of its vaporous fumes, to beguile his fancies in the absence of his loved one; or the workings of a deep despondency and bitter disappointment, carrying its victim with blind impetuosity to a melancholy contemplation of a drear destruction, until the spirit seizes with avidity the proffered consolation, and the phantasmia vanishes under thy narcotic [Pg 132] influence. The miseries of an insatiable thirst, and the sufferings of a gnawing hunger, fatigue, and indisposition, are all forgotten during the enjoyment of a smoke; while in a dilemma, or danger, in a deluging discomfort, or the anxieties consequent on being lost in the bush, the pipe is the ever ready comforter; and one which rarely fails to bring consolation to the mind. Well, therefore, may it be imagined that the pipe is "the friend of the people;" and that, not only of the canaille, the "great unwashed," but the entire nation; who in this day of general enlightenment and mental percipiency, have not failed to distinguish its claims, and to "render homage where homage is due." Many are the shifts, and crude the inventions in the bush, when emergencies call forth the application of the old proverb respecting the relationship that exists between destitution and genius; and when to be minus the support of the Virginian weed, is considered a [Pg 133] greater misfortune than to be wanting of the necessaries of life. Hence, when requested by John Ferguson to go up to the hut, the draymen had not the remotest intention of disturbing themselves, at least for a time; and they continued to puff in an inert silence, while they contemplated the flames before them, and ejected an occasional expectoration, at an imaginary pandemonium in the embers.

They had remained in this state of *statu quo* for some time, when John Ferguson, who had caught his horse, and returned to the hut, not finding the men there, came down to where they lay. He then addressed himself to the still recumbent driver, and requested that he would come up with him and be settled with, and arrange for further loading. The independent carrier did eventually condescend to rise, and he slowly bent his steps to the station, accompanied by John, who gave him by the way a sketch of his plans. He wished him to start at once with his dray for Alma, and [Pg 134] to bring back a quantity of shingles, window frames, and doors (for which, he told him, he would give him an order to a store-keeper there, who kept a supply of them); and then to return immediately, as the things were necessary for the construction of his house. The carpenters, whom he had on the station, were to employ themselves in cutting the timber and planks required in the erection; which they were to proceed with, anticipating the return of the dray; by which time John expected to be ready for shearing, and would be able to give it a load of wool to take down to the port for shipment. They walked on in this way for some little distance, Ferguson absorbed in his conversation with the bullock-driver, and paying little attention to his path; while the latter listened to his directions, seemingly without noticing his remarks, beyond an occasional grunt of acquiescence, and with his eyes fixed upon the ground.

A tributary (or rather the bed of what after heavy rains formed a tributary) of the creek, though [Pg 135]

now almost dry, here crossed their path. At some remote age a large tree had fallen across the stream, and, having buried itself in the soil on either side, formed a barrier to the current; which had in the course of years left a deposit of earth and sand, so as to bring its bed above the impediment on a level with the obstruction; while, on the lower side of the log, the bank of sand and pebbles had been hollowed out into a pool by the eddying of a miniature cataract. Though the creek was otherwise dry, in this pool there was water; and John Ferguson, walking along the course with his companion, and leading his horse after him by the bridle, made a short bound to clear the water-hole. He, however, was prevented from effecting his purpose, by the bullock-driver, who, at the moment of his leap, seized him by the arm, and caused him to alight, instead of on the bank, in the middle of the water; where he stood up to his knees, with a look at his companion of enquiring astonishment. The man, hardly able to refrain from indulging in a [Pg 136] positive fit of stentorian cachinnation, without deigning any auricular explanation, pointed to the bank, on which Ferguson felt annoyed for not being permitted to reach. He instantly directed his eyes to the spot indicated by his companion, and at once perceived the nature of the escape he had made; for there had lain a large brown snake, on which he would have inevitably trodden, the consequences of which made him shudder to contemplate. Being aroused from its torpor by the approach and close proximity of those, whom its instinct told it were enemies, the reptile raised its head and about two feet of its body in a perpendicular attitude, with the head slightly extended and swaying from side to side; while it protruded its long forked tongue in fitful starts, and expressed a combination of fear and venomous hate in loud hisses. John felt his position, as the beast in a tortuous course slowly curled its body towards him, as being anything but pleasant; [Pg 137] and being only armed with an ordinary riding-whip, considered that, if discretion was not the better part of valour, it was certainly more conducive to his safety.

With this belief, and with his eyes fixed upon the reptile, he made a retrograde movement to extricate himself from the unpleasantness of at least his damp location; but he was not a little surprised to find the snake approaching still nearer to him. This puzzled him exceedingly; he could not understand the idea of a snake attacking a man, when there was a chance open for it to escape; such a thing he had never heard of, and had hitherto believed it never to have occurred. But such in this instance was evidently (he thought) the intention of his opponent, or why should it continue to diminish the distance between him and itself. If John did not witness this diminution with alarm, he at least desired to be better supplied with defence, and shouted to his companion to procure a stout stick. Obtaining no reply, he cast a hasty glance over his shoulder, [Pg 138] to see what had become of the man; when the snake, taking advantage of the momentary withdrawal of his eyes, made a rapid movement towards him. This John instantly perceived, and believing the reptile was determined to attack him, "he joined issue" at once, and gave a furious cut at it with his whip. The brute, however, evaded the blow, and once more erected itself in front of Ferguson, hissing its malevolence almost in his very face. This movement decided its fate, for with a motion as quick as thought he gave another cut with his whip; which, with a whiz that discomposed the nerves of his horse, encircled with its supple thong the extended neck of the reptile, and terminated its existence by dislocation. He then effected another fulfilment of the prognosticated command of an inscrutable divinity, by crushing its head under his heel; when he was joined by his companion, who had been searching for a weapon to aid in the strife. The snake [Pg 139] thus destroyed was of the brown species, and deadly venomous; it measured about six feet, and, if it had been trodden upon by John Ferguson, would have in all human probability saved us from the further pursuit of this narrative. Its pertinacity in approaching to its destruction, we may state, was owing to the fact of John preventing it from reaching its hole; which they now discovered under the log, and close to where he had stood. The couple now pursued their course, and after arriving at the huts and settling with the drayman for the work he had already performed, and giving him an order to the store-keeper in Alma, with the necessary instructions, John took his departure for Strawberry Hill.

CHAPTER VI. [Pg 140]

"The mistress of the mansion came,
Mature of age, a graceful dame;
And every courteous rite was paid,
That hospitality could claim."
SIR W. SCOTT.

"I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Rainsfield," said John Ferguson, as he rode up to a gentleman at Strawberry Hill, who by his appearance indicated himself as the proprietor of the station.

"That is my name," replied he addressed; "and I presume I have the honour of meeting Mr. Ferguson?"

John acknowledging to his appellation, dismounted from his horse, and shaking hands with his [Pg 141] newly-made acquaintance, the latter remarked: "I have to apologize, Mr. Ferguson, for not making my respects to you before; but you will pardon me, when I tell you I have been away from the station for some little time, and it was only yesterday when I returned, that my people told me of your settlement. However, I am happy that you have anticipated me in this visit; and if you are not in any very particular hurry, let one of my fellows put your horse in the stable, and just step

into the house, that I may introduce you to the folks inside. They will be delighted, I am sure, that you have favoured us by introducing yourself;" saying which, he called one of the boys about the place to look after John's steed, while he led its owner to the dwelling. Of the mansion itself we need say nothing: it was simply a weather-boarded verandah cottage; the like of which is to be met with so frequently in the bush, as to give the idea of their being built to an universal plan; it was neat, and apparently comfortable.

When John Ferguson entered with Mr. Rainsfield he was ushered at once into the sitting-room; [Pg 142] where, at the table, sat two ladies busily employed on some description of needlework, whose destined use was a mystery to the uninitiated. On the table before them, and at their feet, were strewn their necessary paraphernalia; and so busily engaged were they at their occupation, that they were not aware of the presence of any one besides themselves, until Mr. Rainsfield gave them notice of the fact by remarking, "Mr. Ferguson has waived all ceremony, my dear, and called upon us to make himself known, and commence a friendship, which I trust will remain uninterrupted."

The ladies then rose, and were introduced to John, as "Mrs. Rainsfield, my wife," and "Miss Rainsfield, my cousin;" and both expressed to our hero their welcomes and delight, that they had been so fortunate as to secure friendly and companionable neighbours. Mrs. Rainsfield at once gave a *carte blanche* to the young man and his brother; and stated that she hoped she would see [Pg 143] as much of them at Strawberry Hill as their time would admit, and trusted that their society would be a mutual enjoyment.

John expressed himself highly flattered with his kind reception and invitations; and in the name of his brother and himself, promised to avail himself frequently of their hospitality, from which he anticipated much pleasure. But leaving them to continue their conversation without interruption, we will, with the indulgence of the reader, describe the several members of the Rainsfield family.

Mr. John Rainsfield, the proprietor of the station, was a gentleman of about two-and-thirty years of age; his appearance was what might be called gentlemanly; though, while being perhaps prepossesing, having nothing about it to attract any particular attention. In his disposition he was thought to be morose; though it was not indicative of a confirmed ill-temper, but arose from a reserve occasioned by a distaste for the popular practices of his neighbours. Those who knew him [Pg 144] found him anything but distant, and by his friends he was pronounced a good-hearted fellow. It is true, on his station, he was a strict disciplinarian, and had a mortal enmity to the blacks; notwithstanding which he was usually liked by his men, and rarely had so much trouble with the aborigines as his neighbours. His history was that of most of his class; an emigration to the country to better his circumstances, and a pastoral servitude in various grades, until he had accumulated sufficient to either take up or purchase country, and procure a flock of sheep; which could have been purchased at a few shillings a-head. Thus, having once procured a start, his success was almost certain; and, in fact, at the time of which we write, he had firmly established himself in a position of comfort and respectability.

Mrs. Rainsfield was a lady some few years the junior of her husband; was kind and amiable, with a pleasing expression of countenance, which, if not absolutely pretty, was certainly winning, and [Pg 145] calculated to demand attention. The attachment between herself and her husband had been a very early one; and when he had left his native land to seek his fortune in a far away home, it had been determined that as soon as he was in a position to support her, she should join him in Australia. This plan had been carried out; and after a short sojourn in the country he had been enabled to send home for her. She joyfully responded to his call, and upon her arrival was united to her faithful lover. Since their union their life had been an uninterrupted course of domestic bliss; and they were blessed, at the period of our narrative, with four pledges of their happiness.

Eleanor Rainsfield, who, as already introduced to the reader as Mr. Rainsfield's cousin, was the daughter of that gentleman's deceased uncle, who had early emigrated, with a newly-married wife, to the colony. He was by profession a medical man, and for many years during his early [Pg 146] residence in the country, pursued his avocation profitably; but in the midst of an extending practice he lost his wife, to whom he was fondly and devotedly attached. The effect of this blow he never thoroughly got over, but gradually became in every respect an altered man. From one of unflinching energy and firm determination, he degenerated into a desponding, weak, and vacillating imbecile; and lingered on in a mental aberration for some two years, when he died. During the period of his distraction it is not surprising that his practice rapidly declined, and ultimately became completely destroyed; hence, upon his demise, his family were left perfectly destitute.

From the time of her mother's death Eleanor became the director of all the family affairs, and the domestic responsibility gave her an appearance of thoughtfulness and care hardly consistent with one so young; while the effects still adhering to her, her manner seemed to retain an habitual reserve and melancholy. At the period of her introduction to John Ferguson she was about [Pg 147] sixteen; her figure, though not absolutely slender, was light and active, and of that altitude which, in women, would be considered the medium; not so short as to appear little, nor so tall but that she could look up to a man of ordinary stature. Her form was well modelled, and rounded off to perfection. Her shoulders were of that description so generally fashioned by the chisel of the sculptor, though, possibly, they were rather a shade too broad; being such as would give the beholder the idea of the owner, when more matured, of being a "fine woman." Her movements were effected with a native grace, at once denoting the lady; and her elasticity of tread, and firmness of step, were only equalled by her loftiness of carriage. Her face was of the oval form,

with a wide marble forehead (which, but for her winning modesty and gentle manner, would have been considered as bearing the stamp of coldness and hauteur); eyebrows so well defined, as [Pg 148] almost to give an idea of pencilling; deep blue lustrous eyes, protected by long lashes; a nose slightly tending to the aquiline; a mouth of enticing sweetness, and an alabaster cheek, almost imperceptibly tinged with the faintest pink. Her hair of "bonny brown," and of which she had a luxuriant crop, was worn slightly off the cheek. Her dress was neatness and elegance combined; so made as to come up to the throat, and there terminate in a neat open collar; under which was a pink ribbon, contrasting pleasingly with the otherwise pale-looking features of the wearer. Her sleeves ended in a band, which encircled her wrists, and displayed a pair of hands, rivalling in symmetry the choicest sculpture, and in whiteness the calico on which she was industriously employing herself. Her features, though not perfect, were calm and beautifully expressive, and the lustre of her complexion at once struck the beholder with admiration; while, to her, affectation being unknown, the easy confidence with which she approached and welcomed a [Pg 149] stranger, rendered her perfectly bewitching; and to this description we may add, that, though in the florescence of youth, she was in the full bloom of womanhood.

Start not, gentle reader, at the paradox we have uttered; for in Australia, that land of precocity, where both vegetable and animal nature shoots up into maturity so quickly, the transition appears almost miraculous; and those we have known yesterday as children, we are surprised, probably, after a year or two's absence, to see grown to man or woman's estate. Such cases are not the exception, but the rule. So, therefore, be not surprised when we state that at an age, when, in this staid old-fashioned going country, match-making matrons may be thinking of introducing their daughters to the world, their cognates, the fair "corn-stalks" of Australia, will not only have long since made their *debût* in society, but have settled into devoted wives and happy mothers. And, bless their little hearts! we doubt not, but that, as they are matured both in [Pg 150] person and mind at an earlier age, and have consequently less time and opportunities to acquire the deceptions of society, they are as much, if not more, calculated to fulfil their worldly destiny, with credit to themselves and happiness to their concomitants, as their more favoured sisters of our own glorious isle.

Eleanor Rainsfield, as we have hinted, retained a cast of melancholy in her features, which gave her an appearance of coldness and reserve to strangers, aided, perhaps, by a natural diffidence and desire for seclusion; which she preferred to thrusting herself forward, or mixing much with the world. When known, however, she was gentle and kind, with an amiability and candour exceedingly attractive; and when interested with the conversation of one for whom she entertained respect, a smile usually played over her placid features and made her perfectly irresistible. This smile would vanish with the cessation of the conversation, and the evanescent [Pg 151] animation pass with it; leaving the stranger in doubt, when gazing on the returning gloom, if the former sunshine had been the effect of pleasurable emotions, or a shadowing forth of a latent melancholy. She was highly accomplished, and her mind was the emblem of purity itself. Her present refuge had been offered to her by her cousin upon the death of her father, and gratefully accepted; while the remainder of the family had been dispersed amongst various relatives.

The other members of the Rainsfield family were the children, of whom we have already made mention, and Thomas Rainsfield, a junior brother of the proprietor of the station, with whom he was "acquiring experience." He was a fine, frank, open-hearted young fellow of about three-and-twenty; but as he was absent from home at the period of which we write, we will defer introducing him to the reader until we can do so in *propria personæ*. In a small cottage, a short distance from the house, resided Mr. Billing (who acted as clerk and storekeeper, and whose [Pg 152] duties were to keep the accounts of the station, and distribute the rations to the men) and his wife (who officiated as governess); with sundry olive branches, who bore unmistakeable evidences, from their facial delineations, of their Billing paternity.

John Ferguson, in a few words, explained the nature of the mishap which had occasioned his visit, and begged Mr. Rainsfield to supply his wants, until such time as he could receive a further supply. The required accommodation was willingly acceded to; and Mr. Rainsfield remarked that he would give instructions to Mr. Billing to send it over to Fern Vale, the first time that he sent out the rations; and as that would be on the following day, he had no doubt that the arrangement would suit his neighbour.

John replied to Mr. Rainsfield, that he was exceedingly obliged to him for his kind offer; but stated that as he would be returning to the station at once, he would save him the trouble by [Pg 153] taking a bag with him on his horse.

"Nonsense," cried his entertainer, "I can never think of letting you leave us in such a hurry; you have nothing that requires your immediate return, and you may as well favour us with your company for a few days, at any rate until you hear of the approach of your sheep; by which time I expect Tom will have returned, and no doubt we may manage to give you a hand to get them over the river. Besides, the ladies are always complaining of *ennui*, and will be happy of your society in the disposal of a few leisure hours. I am sure I need not appeal to my wife, to confirm my welcome; for though she now preserves a strict silence, I know she is desirous for you to remain."

"Indeed, my dear," replied the lady, "you are perfectly correct in your conjectures. I should indeed be pleased if Mr. Ferguson would remain with us for a few days; not to make a convenience of him in the manner which you describe, but to impress him with a favourable idea [Pg 154] of the neighbours amongst whom he has settled. So, if he will allow himself to be persuaded, we will arrange his domestication in as short a time as possible."

"I am exceedingly indebted to you, Mrs. Rainsfield, for your expression of kind feeling," exclaimed John; "and, if not putting you to too great inconvenience, I will accept the hospitality of your worthy husband and yourself, to await the approach of my brother."

"Inconvenience?" replied Mrs. Rainsfield; "who ever heard of inconvenience in the bush? I have long forgotten the application of the word; and at any rate, if I could call to mind its meaning, I never could think of allowing it to influence me, when the wishes of my husband are in question;" saying which, and looking archly at her spouse, she quitted the room.

"Ah! she's up to some little game now;" exclaimed that victim laughingly, as his wife left the apartment: "depend upon it she intends backing up that soft soap, with some little scheme of [Pg 155] personal aggrandizement. You can't think, my dear sir," he continued, addressing John Ferguson, "how these women manage to get round us, when they take it into their little heads to flatter our vanity. If ever you submit to the thraldom of a marital character, you must be proof against that weakness."

"I have no idea of the nature of the bondage to be borne by you self-constituted slaves," replied John; "but judging from what I have witnessed in this house, I should imagine the allegiance required from you was not exacting, nor the servitude of a crushing nature. What do you think, Miss Rainsfield," said he, turning to the young lady; "is your cousin's case a specimen of the general rule or a solitary exception?"

"Well, sir, I can hardly say," she replied; "but would think the happiness of a married life depended in a great measure upon a congeniality of temper, mutual forbearance, and reciprocity [Pg 156] of kindly feeling, existing between the parties concerned; and that if amiability is allied to impetuosity, or petulance to generosity, the result must necessarily prove disastrous."

"Well done, my little oracle," ejaculated her cousin; "there now, sir, you have a dissertation on matrimony, and a moral, the truth of which I doubt if you'll ever dispute. But my cousin has surely turned philosopher, and is moralizing in expectancy on her own engagement; but forgive me, Nell" (he continued, as the young lady cast a reproachful look at him that made him regret the allusion), "I did not intend to pain you by any reference to your *affair d'amour*; I had no idea it was an unpleasant subject with you." So, after making what he thought the *amende honorable* to his cousin; but in reality only doing, as all men do who attempt to explain away some pain-giving remark; that is, adding poignancy to the wounding shaft; he led off his visitor to accompany him round the station.

In accepting the invitation to sojourn with this family for a few days, we suspect it was something [Pg 157] more than the mere desire to wait for his brother, that influenced John Ferguson. It had been his intention, when he left his own place, to proceed on the road to meet William, and lend him his assistance in driving the sheep; and, therefore, there appears something inexplicable in his remaining inactive at Strawberry Hill. Could it be that any feeling of admiration for his entertainer's fair cousin had exercised any spell in his detention; or that he was merely pleased with the people with whom he found himself, and desired to cultivate their acquaintance? We suspect, rather, that the fascination of the young lady was the secret cause, though, perhaps, unknown even to John himself. 'Tis true, he could not divest his thoughts of her image; from passing events they continually wandered, and incessantly reverted to a contemplation of her calm and placid features. In his thoughts, Eleanor Rainsfield was ever present; and though each [Pg 158] meditation of her intruded itself without causing a thought of the nature of the feeling he was fostering, he at last found himself deeply involved in a mental enunciation of her charms; which concluded in the decision, that she was indeed a creature to be prized; and if not perfection itself, the nearest approach to it, that it is the fortune of mortals to witness.

"She really is a charming girl," he mentally exclaimed; "but why am I continually thinking of her? I have no desire to be married; besides which, her cousin taxed her with an engagement, and, by the bye, she did not relish the allusion. I wonder what it can mean; she seemed dejected too; and, now I remember, she appeared to lay particular stress upon the requisites that ensured happiness to the married state. She must already be engaged, and that engagement, if I divine rightly, cannot be congenial to her spirit; there is some slight mystery that requires solving. Dear me!" he continued, after a few moments of inert meditation, "I can't get that girl out of my head. I [Pg 159] can't think what makes me take such an interest in her affairs; it is surely no concern of mine. I must shake off the thoughts of her:" and with that amiable determination he commenced whistling a popular air to delude himself, while he turned to his companion, who had in the meantime stopped in his walk to watch his abstractedness.

After spending some time in looking over the domestic arrangements of the station, the two gentlemen bent their steps to the Wombi river. In the course of their walk John Ferguson remarked, that he thought the present crossing-place did not appear a very judicious choice, and asked his companion if a safer and more eligible spot could not be found.

"I think not," replied Mr. Rainsfield. "At the place where you crossed the river it is at its widest point; and at the time I selected it, it was the shallowest part of the stream. Then there was a sand bank right in the bed of the river, which made a crossing quite practicable; but, since the [Pg 160] last 'fresh' I find the sand bank is washed away, and nothing is now left in its place but a deposit of mud; so I fear nothing will improve it now. I have had an idea for some time of putting up a bridge, if I could get any of the settlers to join me; but you see at present there is no one besides you and I, who would be benefitted by it; and it would be rather too expensive an undertaking for us to perform by ourselves."

"As you say," replied Ferguson, "at present we are the only ones that would be convenienced by its erection; but if we can't procure any assistance from government, we might induce Mr. Robert Smithers to join us: for if he has taken up all the country down the river bank for the distance which I understand he has, it would be to his interest to afford us assistance; for a bridge over the Wombi would materially affect the sale of his runs."

"I am inclined to differ from you there," said Mr. Rainsfield. "I don't think Smithers would see the [Pg 161]
advantage in the same light which you and I do; he is perfectly aware that any one wanting the country, would be very little influenced by the existence of a river in his way. People are too well accustomed to such impediments, and, I doubt not, would make a deviation of fifty miles from the direct course, by travelling up the stream to find another crossing, rather than expend a small sum in putting up a bridge, for, what they would consider, our exclusive benefit. And as to government assistance, you might as soon expect the aid of Jupiter. Never, until the country is settled some hundreds of miles further out, and they have, after repeated importunities, established a post-office somewhere beyond this, and had half the postmen in the country drowned from swimming the river in times of flood, would they think a bridge at all necessary. If you like to accompany me to the river I will show you a spot I have often looked upon as a likely one for a bridge; where the banks are steep and the river narrow. I think a log bridge could be [Pg 162]
put over at a very moderate cost, and if we can induce Bob Smithers to fall into our views (though I doubt it), I would propose that we go about it at once. To ascertain his inclination, however, I will write him; and if I think any good can be done, I will myself ride over to Brompton and see him."

The plan met with the ready concurrence of John Ferguson; and they continued their walk, to look at the spot to which Mr. Rainsfield referred; and arriving there, they stood contemplating its advantages. As Mr. Rainsfield had remarked, the banks were very steep and lofty; and the river confined within narrow limits, ran more rapidly than elsewhere. On the sloping banks grew some gigantic gum trees, which Mr. Rainsfield proposed felling in such a way, as to fall across the stream (which he calculated they would do); and then two or three so placed, with a flooring of smaller saplings, and a coating of earth, a substantial, and economical structure could be [Pg 163]
erected; while with a little labour expended in partially levelling the approaches, it would answer the purposes of the most solid edifice. They both agreed that the site was an eligible one, and offered facilities which should not be neglected; and with this belief, and determining to use some exertions to carry out their idea, they turned to retrace their steps to the house; when Mr. Rainsfield drew John's attention to the forms of some aborigines, who were skulking behind the trees in the distance on the opposite side of the river.

"Those fellows," said he, "are all abroad; their camp is on the other side of the Gibson, in the scrub below us; and they evidently want to get over here, to cross by 'the flats' beyond our place, instead of swimming the river above. Bob Smithers must be out of the way, or they would not venture a chance of falling in with him; he always keeps them off his brother's run if he can help it; and he generally succeeds, for he has the active management of the station, and his word is [Pg 164]
law. I have been obliged to follow his example lately myself, for I have been so much troubled by their pilfering, that I have determined to keep them away from the place. Not long ago, I caught one of them walking off with one of the men's rations, which the stupid fellow left exposed; and I gave the delinquent a charge of shot, which made him speedily relinquish his booty, and impart to his tribe a healthy dread of the consequences of pilfering from Strawberry Hill. Now, unfortunately, I anticipate further trouble with them; for the blackguards have got a ruffian amongst them who is perfectly conversant with our usages and customs; and he has assumed the chiefship of the tribe."

"I had a visit from them myself yesterday," replied John, "and detained two of their boys on my station. I expect to be able to make use of them in many ways; and, if need be, I can keep them as hostages for the well behaviour of their countrymen."

"I am afraid that you are labouring under a delusion," said Rainsfield; "and you will find that you [Pg 165]
are adopting the very worst course you could. By retaining those fellows on your station you will encourage the others of the tribe to come on your run: indeed, while you detain these boys, you will not be able to keep their friends away. And if they take into their heads to rob you (which in all probability they will), the two that you have in your service will be made by their fellows to communicate regular intelligence of your movements; and you will find you have been harbouring a viper in your bosom."

"I have already," replied John, "been inclined to think that kind treatment towards the blacks is better policy than harshness; conciliation is more natural than banishment; and I cannot think any race of savages can be so morally depraved as to commit depredations on their benefactors. They are far more likely to indulge in acts of reprisal, where their evil passions are excited by cupidity, or animated by a thirst to revenge some act of aggression or cruelty. For my own part [Pg 166]
(and my brother agrees with me in the policy), I intend to cultivate their good feeling, by acting towards them in a kindly manner; of course with a certain degree of firmness; for I would resent any of their peccadillos. I am fully cognizant of their predilection for appropriation, and will take every precaution to prevent an exercise of their propensities; but, at the same time, I can't reconcile myself to the idea, of visiting petty delinquencies with the severity which you recommend."

"Well, we shall see how you succeed," returned his companion; "I found from experience it was perfectly impossible to preserve order, and retain my property, while the black villains were

permitted to overrun my place; and I had no peace until I adopted stringent measures, and got rid of their annoyance by expatriation. I don't believe your principle of leniency is practicable, and am convinced you will soon have cause to regret its trial, and will be brought to my way of [Pg 167] thinking; therefore, I should strongly advise you to relinquish the idea at once, and relieve yourself of an immensity of trouble and anxiety in the future."

"No," replied John, "my mind is fixed; I am determined to try the working of my plan, and am sanguine of success. It is true the blacks in this part of the country, are wilder than those I have been accustomed to mix with; but I've very little doubt, but that I'll be able to live on terms of amity with them, and avoid all those hostile contiguities, which we are led to expect are incidental on a residence in this district."

"Well," said Rainsfield, "I must confess myself sceptical of a favourable result, and only trust your experiment may not have a tragical termination; for I've no faith in the aborigines: they are treacherous in the extreme, and will commit any act of violence to possess themselves of a coveted article. I myself have known shepherds on out-stations murdered by them, for the sake of [Pg 168] their rations, or even a blanket, which had excited their avarice."

"It is true," said John, "we hear of such cases; but, in nine out of ten, I believe the black perpetrating the act of violence, has been one who has been domesticated with the whites; and having been brought into contact with the vilest of our race, and acquired all the vices which have been daily presented to his sight, it is not to be wondered at, that (having these constantly submitted to him for his example and emulation, and without the influence of moral obligations) he should perpetrate the very acts he has heard lightly treated of, or perhaps extolled. But, with the aboriginal in his native state, and without the degrading influence of civilised immorality, you rarely, or never, meet with such violation of the ethical and natural laws."

"The very depravity which you have described," replied the other, "is the accomplishment possessed by the chief of that tribe which is our neighbour; so you know exactly what you have to [Pg 169] expect from him and his."

"I doubt not," said John, "if the fellow is of the nature you mention, he will have sufficient cunning, and natural instinct, to perceive that a friendly intercourse with me will be more advantageous to him than a constant warfare; for, after all, these fellows must be gifted with reasoning faculties. They must know, that where their visits are permitted so long as they maintain their integrity, and their wants to a certain extent supplied, it is far better for them to continue that state of peacefulness, than by an act of aggression to forfeit the privilege for ever."

"I see," said Rainsfield, "you are enthusiastically intent upon pursuing this plan of ingratiating yourself with your sable neighbours; and I sincerely trust your good intentions may not be misdirected."

By this time the peripatetic disquisition was terminated by the friends reaching the house; and, entering the sitting-room, they found the ladies had for some time been waiting their return. [Pg 170] Upon an enquiry from Mrs. Rainsfield, what had detained them so long, her husband replied,

"Nothing very particular, my dear; we strolled down to the Wombi to look at a spot where a bridge could be thrown across, and Mr. Ferguson and I got into a discussion about the blacks; and he defended them in such an able and spirited manner that the time slipped by unconsciously. You must know, my dear, our friend here is going to establish himself on a friendly footing with the black fellows; and I shouldn't be surprised to see a model black settlement as the result of his moral training."

"I commend Mr. Ferguson for his justice," replied the lady; and turning to John, she continued, "I only wish, sir, you could induce my husband to be of the same way of thinking; for he persists in keeping the poor creatures aloof from the place, and I am confident they are perfectly harmless. Before the sentence of banishment was pronounced against them, we found them exceedingly [Pg 171] useful. For some time I had a young 'gin' in the house as a servant, and she was quite as handy as any white one I ever had; besides which, she was very partial to the children, and they were very fond of her."

"I am delighted, my dear madam," exclaimed our hero, "to think that my views meet with your approval; and I have no doubt that when I prove their practicability, I shall be enabled to induce your husband to adopt them." With this remark he turned to Miss Rainsfield, and met her gaze, which was fixed upon his features with a smile of approval. She hastily removed her eyes, when she perceived John had noticed her; but not before the momentary glance had penetrated his heart, and rendered him thoughtful and abstracted for the remainder of the evening.

CHAPTER VII.

[Pg 172]

"In joyous youth, what soul hath never known,
Thought, feeling, taste, harmonious to its own?
Who hath not paused while Beauty's pensive eye
Asked from his heart the homage of a sigh?"

CAMPBELL.

Another day had passed, and a third had shed its light on Strawberry Hill, and still John Ferguson lingered there. It is true the inmates of the house pressed him to stay; but it required little pressing to induce him to continue a visit which was so grateful and congenial to his wishes. He had spent long hours in the society of the ladies, and had rambled with them through the shades of the bush. He was irresistibly spell-bound to the spot, though he professed to himself utter [Pg 173] ignorance of any retentive influence. Despite his repeated personal assurances that he had no amative object or gratification in his partiality for the society of his new-made friends, it must be admitted that the presence and companionship of Miss Rainsfield had more attractions for him than he pretended to admit; though the fact that his heart was a little interested in the matter at last began to dawn upon his mind. It was in fact almost impossible for any man, whose affections were not pre-engaged, to live in the enjoyment of a contiguity with such a creature as Eleanor Rainsfield without feeling deeply the fascination of her cultivated mind, her charming person, and graceful unaffected manner. How much more susceptible of a loving impress, then, must have been the mind of John Ferguson, who retaining nature's freshness itself, at once perceived a kindred spirit in the fair cousin of Mr. Rainsfield.

On the other hand, the charming girl herself—young and inexperienced, early deprived of the [Pg 174] guiding influence of her fond parents, and seldom mixing in society—had very rare opportunities of forming any opinion of the world or its motives; and knew not the accomplished art of dissembling her feelings, when the ice of her outward reserve had been once broken. The conversation and ingenuous manner of her companion pleased her, and she took an interest and pleasure in his society, which she had no idea of concealing. What her feelings were, at this period of her acquaintance with Ferguson, it were difficult to surmise; but, in all probability they were embraced in a friendly regard for him, whose mind and character she intuitively esteemed: a species of admiration, engendering a confidence in their friendly intercourse; and which in the breast of a young girl, actuated solely by the spontaneous actions of her own feelings, tends more than anything to beget a feeling of affection for the man who thus engrosses her attention. There is perhaps no friendship which produces so fond a recollection as this; and no feeling so likely to [Pg 175] favourably impress a youthful and ardent-minded creature as that which induces her to pour her thoughts, without restraint, into the ear of him with whom she converses; even though they be the merest platitudes. That confidence, with which she is led on to unveil her soul, carries with it a regard which is indelibly impressed on her mind; and such was the feeling with which Eleanor regarded John Ferguson, though she too was unacquainted with the presence of any sentiment other than mere friendship; but we are anticipating.

As we have said, time was not stationary at Strawberry Hill, nor on the road; for on the day our narrative continues with, Tom Rainsfield made his appearance, with the intelligence that he had only a short time previously left William Ferguson on the road with his sheep; so that he might be expected to be at the crossing-place on the Wombi, within an hour or so. Tom was instantly [Pg 176] introduced to John Ferguson; and volunteered, as soon as he had satisfied the calls of hunger, to return with him to the river, and assist in getting the sheep over.

The offer was thankfully declined by John, who assured the other, that he and his brother, with the assistance of their men, were perfectly adequate to the task; but it was generously persisted in by young Rainsfield; and, in a short time afterwards, the two were to be seen bending their steps to the crossing-place, which they reached about the same time that William and his flocks slowly wended their way to the river.

We have stated, at the first mention of his name to the reader, that Tom Rainsfield was a fine generous-minded young fellow. At the time of his arrival at Strawberry Hill, he had just finished a long equestrian journey, and was necessarily tired and fatigued; so that the readiness with which he proffered his assistance to the Fergusons was an instance of kindness, and an obliging [Pg 177] disposition, which was his general character. He was dressed in the usual bush costume, viz, jumper, breeches and belt, riding boots, spurs, and cabbage-tree hat; and in his frank open countenance could at once be read the genuineness of his friendship. He was in truth a noble fellow; high-spirited and warm-hearted; bold and daring, though, perhaps, a little thoughtless and impetuous. His figure, though not decidedly tall, was of a good height, light and elegantly formed, and altogether was such as would command the admiration of the fair sex; while the facile freedom of his speech, the easy grace of his manners, and his gentlemanly bearing, were sufficient to insure the respect of his fellows, and to establish, on a lasting footing, the esteem of his friends.

During their short walk from the house the two young men had naturally fallen into conversation, and had, even in that limited period, become mutually attached to each other.

"I overtook your brother on the road," said Tom, in the continuation of a dialogue, "and, knowing [Pg 178] it could be none other than he, I introduced myself, and we knew one another at once. He is a fine fellow, and just my style. If you don't favour us much with your company at our place I promise you you shall have enough of me at yours; for your brother and I will be sworn friends. He tells me, too, that he expects his sister is coming to place herself under your bachelor protection: is such the case? You have said nothing about it up at the Hill, or I think they would have told me."

"I made no mention of the circumstance," replied John, "to either your brother or his lady, as, as yet, it is by no means decided upon; for my own part, I hardly like the idea of bringing the poor girl out to this remote part of the country. I should prefer seeing it a little more settled first, though my brother William is madly anxious to get her out with us; she herself, I think, could be

easily influenced either the one way or the other."

"Then by all means let her join you," cried Tom; "give William his way, and us the pleasure of [Pg 179]
knowing her. If there is any hesitation on your part, I will enlist the services of our women folk; and if they don't tease you into compliance before a month is over, it is a caution. Why, they'll be madly hilarious, when they hear the bare mention of such a scheme; they surely can't be aware of the fact of your possessing such a treasure as a sister, or I am sure they would be on to you at once to induce a visit from her."

"Under any circumstances, it will require some delay," replied John; "as we could not think of getting her to join us, until we had established some comfortable home to bring her to; and I fear it will be a considerable time ere that can be accomplished."

"That's easily managed," returned Tom. "Never mind your house; she can come on a visit to us until you get your place ready. I am sure our folks will be delighted to have her company. Eleanor will be a very suitable companion for her; and I am sure she will be an acquisition to Eleanor, [Pg 180]
who sadly wants a lively companion of her own age. I am confident your sister would dispel much of our cousin's settled melancholy, and make her see the sacrifice she is contemplating."

"I have no doubt the girls would suit each other admirably," replied John; "and if I think myself justified in asking my sister, and she can be persuaded to come out here, I doubt not they will soon become friends; but may I ask to what you allude by your cousin's sacrifice?"

"Simply marriage to one to whom she considers herself engaged," said Tom, "while, in my opinion, it is perfect folly; she is absolutely throwing herself away. I cannot bring myself to think she entertains any liking for the man, for I don't believe any intellectual woman could discover anything in him worthy of esteem. You are acquainted with him, though no doubt his character is better known to me than to you, for I have had more opportunities of observing it. It is Bob [Pg 181]
Smithers; and she has consented to marry him through the importunities of his sister-in-law. It appears Mrs. Smithers was an intimate friend of Eleanor's mother, and used to joke Eleanor about Bob; who, when a younger man, and when my cousin was a mere child, used to be particularly attentive to her; so, amongst them, a match was made up between the two. Since then Eleanor has seen very little of her betrothed; but his assiduous advocate, his sister-in-law, has continued to press his suit; and obtained from Eleanor a renewal of her pledge. In fact, the poor girl has been absolutely cajoled into an acceptance, as much from an ignorance of Bob's character, and a desire to gratify her mother's friend, as from any feelings of her own. I will do Mrs. Smithers the justice to say, I believe she does not know the extent of her brother-in-law's vileness; and that what she considers his little weaknesses, will be effectually rectified by a union with our Eleanor; but I don't like to see the poor girl sacrificed, and have a good mind to save her [Pg 182]
(if she would take me) by proposing to her myself; though I believe she thinks her word irrevocable, and will submit to Bob's claim as the fulfilment of a duty. I believe Smithers intends pushing his suit shortly himself; for when he disposes of another block or two of his country, he intends stocking the remainder of his runs with the proceeds of what he has sold, and settling down for himself. However, it will take him some little time before he can complete his plans, and if I can prevent his marrying Eleanor I will do so."

Tom Rainsfield continued conversing, or audibly soliloquizing in this strain, without noticing the abstraction into which his companion had fallen; and might have prolonged, even for an hour, his declamation against Bob Smithers, had not the current of his thoughts been arrested, and John Ferguson aroused from his reverie, by their being hailed from the opposite bank by William, who had arrived with the sheep.

This was the signal for animation; and for hours all the party were busily engaged effecting a [Pg 183]
passage of the stream with the ovine mass; while the sun had just began to dip on the horizon, as the last of the animals passed the fluvial barrier.

"Now," said Tom, as he gazed upon the assembled flock on the Wombi's bank, "you had better let the men camp here with the sheep for the night, and you and William come up and spend the evening, and stop the night with us."

To this advice, however, there was one dissenting voice, and that voice was John's. He had, within the previous hour, lost the interest he had before experienced in a visit to Strawberry Hill; or rather, he now wished to avoid the place altogether. And yet his heart yearned for one of the residents; he desired to bask in the inspiring smile of his spirit's charmer; he felt a longing to gaze once more into the face of Eleanor Rainsfield, and read in her eyes, either the confirmation of his fears, or the entire repudiation of any such engagement as that mentioned by her cousin. [Pg 184]
Alas, poor John! he was hopelessly enthralled in Cupid's bondage, and he felt it; though his calmer judgment whispered to him an indulgence of such a sentiment was selfish and useless. If such an attachment, or even engagement (he thought to himself), did exist, and of that, from his friend's affirmation, he had no doubt, it must have been entered into with her consent, and evident approval; for by her cousin's account she was immovable, even to his entreaty; why, therefore, should he, almost a stranger, attempt to interpose himself between her and her evident inclination? Such were the thoughts that contended in his mind, when he wished to avoid the Hill, and take his departure at once with the sheep for his own station.

His brother, however, was differently disposed; he had travelled a long distance, and was pretty tired of his vocation; he knew that the animals could not travel much further that day, and if they [Pg 185]
proceeded another two or three miles they would have to halt just the same; while nothing would

be gained, but the probability of having to camp with them. So, bushman though he was, he preferred comfortable quarters for the night, to a stretcher beside a camp fire. He therefore raised his voice against his brother's objection; and John was thus out-voted in the conclave, and compelled to submit to the over-ruling of his companions. They, therefore, made arrangements for the halt; informing their men that they would be with them on the morning by daylight; and then joined their friend, and sauntered towards the house.

From Tom the ladies soon learnt the scheme of the brothers with regard to their sister, and were importunate in their entreaties to hurry her arrival. John Ferguson, who had not recovered the despondency the communication of Tom had thrown him into, was quite bewildered with the badinage that was directed to him from all quarters during the evening, for his reluctance in [Pg 186] bringing his sister out to the station. Mrs. Rainsfield affirmed that it was because he was such a confirmed bachelor, he could not bear the thought of being under a lady's dominion, even though it were his sister; while Tom declared his belief that Mr. Ferguson was afraid of presenting her, for fear that he, Tom, would effect a reprisal, and walk off with her. Even as it was, he said, he would not answer for himself; if Miss Ferguson was as charming as he fully anticipated she would prove, he thought he would enter into a compact with her brothers and secure her at once.

All this raillery and playfulness, was little heeded by John Ferguson, who remained particularly abstracted; so much so, that it became distinctly discernible, and the loquacity of his friends gradually subdued. As the conversation began to slacken, Miss Rainsfield raised her eyes from her work, and addressing their taciturn visitor in the sweetest possible voice, asked him if he would not allow his sister to remain on a visit with them for a short time, before she fixed her [Pg 187] abode with her brothers; so as to give her an opportunity of settling herself in her new home, making her acquaintance with her neighbours, and affording them the pleasure of her society.

John was roused to consciousness by this appeal, and replied that he would be most happy to be the means of his sister cultivating and enjoying their friendship; but that if she made up her mind to live with her brothers at Fern Vale, she would be her own mistress, and have entire control over her own actions; so that the acceptance and prolongation of any visit would in a great measure depend upon her own whim. He said, however, from what he knew of her disposition, he had no doubt she would far prefer the agreeable society of such friends as Mrs. and Miss Rainsfield, to the dull monotony of a guardianship of two bachelor brothers.

The conversation, after this episode, brightened, and was continued in a pleasing strain for the [Pg 188] remainder of the evening.

On the following morning, true to their word, the young men took their departure, and reached their station without the occurrence of an event worth recording; and for the next two or three days, they were fully occupied in the settlement of matters at Fern Vale. In the midst of a routine of business, John Ferguson had little time to think of matters relating to his feelings; but when the first bustle succeeded to leisure, his thoughts of Eleanor returned with redoubled force. He would then picture to his imagination her expressive features; he would dream of her abstractedly by day, and her form was the subject of his visions by night; and yet, though he thought her personal charms the perfection of frail humanity, his admiration was not so much for the outward fane, as the spirit that held dominion within. It is true his attention had been first arrested by her beauty; but the cause of those after feelings, which now consumed his soul, was [Pg 189] the constant contemplation of her gentleness, amiability, mental accomplishments, and pure unsullied spirit. These were they which won his love, and secured his heart in a hopeless thraldom. In its empire he had established one sovereign, who was supreme, and that sovereign was Eleanor; his soul had but one idol, and the deity of this feticism was Eleanor; his mind had raised one standard of human perfection, and the motto of that standard, the excelsior of his fate, was Eleanor. The spirit of Eleanor was in every bush; her face smiled down upon him from every tree; the very birds seemed for the time, in his presence, to forget their natural utterance, and screamed in various tones of dissonance the name of Eleanor. And yet (he would think in his musings) this prize was not to be his; she was the cherished of another, to whom she had pledged her love. What then was left for him? Why should he entertain one thought of her? It was clear the possession of this treasure was never for him; then why should he allow her to retain [Pg 190] dominion in his mind?

These mental interrogations he could not answer to his own satisfaction. He attempted to argue himself into a belief that he was mistaken in his feelings towards her; that she was not, in fact, the beacon towards which all his hopes were directed; but the sophistry failed to offer consolation to his wounded spirit, and he felt that he could not banish her from his thoughts: the task was hopeless.

Weeks passed away thus, without the occurrence of any event specially worth chronicling. Tom Rainsfield and William Ferguson had become inseparable friends, and were constantly together, either at the one station or the other; while John's visits to his neighbouring friends were short, and at remote intervals. His manner had become thoughtful and grave, and had not failed to attract the notice of his friends, from its contrast to his usual character. Shearing had commenced; and his mind, from the constant diversion of his thoughts, had partially recovered its [Pg 191] wonted elasticity. His sister had expressed her willingness to join her brothers; and the dray having arrived from Alma, with the necessary materials to complete their dwelling, John had hurried on the carpenters with their work.

It was determined by the Fergusons that the dray then on the station, should go down to town with the first load of their wool; and that William should follow it, and procure furniture and

other necessaries for it to return with. He was then to proceed to his father's house, take up his sister, bring her round to the station by way of Mr. Dawson's, and leave her at Strawberry Hill for a week or two, until the house at Fern Vale was ready for her reception. These various arrangements being completed; such as the despatch of the dray, the acquaintance of Mr. Ferguson at Acacia Creek of their plans, and the arrival of the other dray with supplies; William [Pg 192] took his departure; and John, after he had despatched a second load of wool, rode over to Strawberry Hill to make a personal delivery of the salt he had borrowed from Mr. Rainsfield.

It had been some time since John Ferguson had paid his respects at Strawberry Hill, and his visit on this occasion was hailed with no little surprise, and possibly with a good deal of pleasure by more than one member of the family. Mrs. Rainsfield was particular in her enquiries, as to the cause of his continuing to seclude himself, and anxiously inquisitive for a solution of his mysterious melancholy. Eleanor was unaltered, either in personal appearance or her manner towards him; she entertained the same admiration, and though her heart whispered to her suspicions, that she was in some way connected with his dejection, she had no idea of the extent of his feelings' ravishment. At the same time she did not deem any secresy of her admiration essential to a compatibility with modesty. She found pleasure in the society of John Ferguson; [Pg 193] liked his manner and person; and therefore threw into her reception of him, when they met, a warmth and cordiality, which, though only expressive of her own pure friendship, filled with ecstatic glow the very blood of her enraptured lover. She was, in fact, though unconsciously to herself, with the spirit she was investing in the mere exercise of common-place formalities, creating, or rather strengthening, a feeling in the breast of John Ferguson, which never could be eradicated; but which would, of a certainty, consume his life and spirits, if he were not blessed with a reciprocal attachment.

In the present interview, however, Eleanor did not join with the lady of the house in her playful badinage; indeed, it was not her usual manner; but she had eyes, and those eyes (differing from the followers of Mr. Irving) spoke in no unknown tongue, at least to John; to him they had the power of communicating in many languages, so that when she gave him a look, in which was [Pg 194] embodied all she wished to convey, its meaning was instantly and rightly interpreted by our hero. If we were called upon to describe in words the tumultuous ragings of those elements that cleave the very mountains, lay prostrate the gigantic denizens of the forest, and make the earth tremble with the power of their agitation; if we were required to depict the falling avalanche, that sweeps in its course all vestiges of vitality from the face of the earth; or to form an adequate conception of the occult ramifications of the electric fluid, which is at man's pleasure made to compass the globe with the quickness of thought, we would confess ourselves incompetent. Equally so are we to describe the glance of a woman. Some looks there are, however, which, though inexplicable to uninitiated spectators, to those who cherish even a corruscation of mental light, speak volumes of information; and such it was that Eleanor cast upon John Ferguson. What was conveyed in that look we will not pretend to fathom; but simply affirm that its effect was an entire derangement of [Pg 195] the love-sick swain's determination to forget the cause of his wretchedness, and a dispersion of every idea save the one ruling sentiment of love for her. Thus, in a moment, discretion was forgotten, and resolution cast to the wind; and he blindly satiated himself with deep draughts of love's ambrosia, without a moment's contemplation of the remote chances, or absolute impossibility of his ever possessing the fountain source.

Eve's fair daughters have always an eye for the discernment and evolution of love's mysterious workings; and often detect the existence of the tender passion, where the percipiency of their lords' mental penetralia fails to enlighten them on its presence. Hence, while Mr. Rainsfield never dreamed of John Ferguson being a rival of Smithers for the hand of Eleanor, and before she herself even thoroughly knew it, his weaker half had made the discovery with considerable delight and communicated the knowledge to her spouse. [Pg 196]

By him the news was received in a far different spirit than was expected by his wife; and he at once remarked that he would take an immediate opportunity of warning his young friend against entertaining any feeling beyond friendship for Eleanor. He reminded his wife that the girl had voluntarily engaged herself to Smithers, and would therefore marry him; consequently, there was no use torturing Ferguson, by allowing him to cherish hopes which were not destined to be fulfilled.

"But why should they not be?" replied his wife: "I am certain he loves Eleanor, and am pretty sure that Eleanor loves him. That she does not entertain any such feeling for Smithers I am confident; she has been forced, more than otherwise, into that engagement with him, and the very thought of attaching herself to him for life is making her wretched. If you took the trouble to notice her, you would perceive with what pleasure she receives the attention of Mr. Ferguson; and I am [Pg 197] convinced he has only to declare himself to receive an unqualified consent."

"Well, I beg you will not mention the subject to her," said Rainsfield; "so long as she remains engaged to Bob Smithers you surely do not intend to argue that it is proper for her to receive the attention of another admirer. If she refuses Smithers, then I can see no objection to her favouring the suit of our neighbour; but until then it were only madness to give Ferguson any encouragement. I shall warn him of his danger at once, and again request you to maintain silence to Eleanor on the subject."

"For my part," persisted the lady, "I don't think Smithers is entitled to such consideration: he rarely or never visits Eleanor; he shows her no attention; and takes it for granted his claims are indisputable, and that she is ready to accept him whenever it is his convenience to take her. If

Eleanor had the slightest spirit in her nature she would scorn such a man; and I think it is entirely a false notion of rectitude that makes her adhere to the engagement." [Pg 198]

"It may be in opposition to her happiness, my dear," replied her husband, "but it cannot be a false notion of rectitude, as you call it; it is rather rectitude in the strictest sense. She has been induced to accept Mr. Smithers, and to ratify it on more than one occasion; consequently, it is not for us to judge, whether she will be happy or not in such a connexion, but to leave her to her own free will and judgment; therefore, I say again, while this engagement exists, it is not right to allow young Ferguson to imagine he has any chance of acceptance."

"But I know he would not be refused," replied Mrs. Rainsfield.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the husband, "it is wonderful how you women will persevere in a cause that you interest yourselves in. There is no use in your reiterating that expression, however; for I tell you again, that John Ferguson must be cautioned against allowing himself to be carried away by his feelings; and I am confident, that when I point out to him the nature of his position, his good sense will enable him to see its untenableness, and cause him to desist from any pointed attentions." [Pg 199]

Mrs. Rainsfield was a dutiful wife, and, however much against her own inclinations, she submitted to her husband's wishes; though she left his presence grieved and disappointed. She well knew that a match between Eleanor and Smithers would prove unhappy; while she was as fully certain that a union with John Ferguson would be as felicitous as any human connexion could be. We will not say that the spirit of match-making, inherent in the nature of all matrons, was wounded at its defeat; although she certainly cherished the idea of bringing the two young people together, it was not so much with the mere wish to be the means of accomplishing a ceremony, as to see them happy. For she had a sincere desire for the welfare of Eleanor, for whom she felt a compassion on account of her dependent condition, and an attachment for her virtues and affectionate manner to herself; besides the esteem, we have already said, she felt for our hero. She, however, determined, without a violation of her husband's commands, to sound Eleanor upon the subject of her engagement with Smithers; and if she perceived any disposition to break off on her part, to give John a hint of the probability of his success, if he renewed his suit. [Pg 200]

In the meantime, Mr. Rainsfield took the opportunity of which he spoke to his wife, and communicated to John the utter hopelessness of his persevering in his attentions to the young lady; informing him that her affections were already engaged; and recommended him, for his own peace of mind, that he should banish all thoughts of an amative nature. Mr. Rainsfield further remarked, that he felt himself in justice bound to give his friend that caution, before he allowed any warm feeling to take a firm possession of his heart; at the same time, he assured him their conversation was unknown to the lady herself, as was also, so he had reason to believe, the state of his feelings towards her. Therefore, John need not consider the annihilation of his hopes of obtaining her hand, a decree of banishment from Strawberry Hill. [Pg 201]

Before the conclusion of this little exordium John had become perfectly unconscious; and, at its termination, mechanically shook the hand of his interlocutor, while he took his departure. All the communication that he could comprehend, was, that it was intended to dispel all the bright illusions love's fancy had conjured in his mind. All his momentary visions of prospective happiness were swept away, like the misty canopy of the mountain before the morning breeze. His ariel palaces of imaginative grandeur, lay shattered at his feet; and he stood like the last of a defeated host, viewing destruction and desolation around him. His fondest hopes were blighted; he felt as one robbed of his very soul; he was wretched and dejected, and turned from the spot with the feelings of an outcast, an alien; or as a once powerful courtier, removed from the presence of his sovereign, to a perpetual expatriation. Strawberry Hill had for ever lost its interest to him; the only treasure it contained held out no prospect of possession. In his heart there was a blank, which nothing short of his idol could fill; but it was empty, and seared; and vacant was his mind, and miserable his feelings, as he leisurely journeyed on his way to Fern Vale. They were, in fact, such as can be better imagined than described; and when he reached his station, and delivered his horse to one of his men in silence, he went about his usual vocations as one almost destitute of reason. [Pg 202]

What the feelings of the lady most concerned were, had they been consulted, we can well understand; but we must refrain from indulging in anticipations. The manner of John's leave-taking, had struck, with no little amazement, all those who saw him. Mrs. Rainsfield was the one, who, conjecturing its cause, could best appreciate his feelings; she pitied him, and secretly determined, that if he and Eleanor were to be for ever separated, it should not be for want of strategy on her part. She felt that not only his happiness, but the girl's too, depended upon their union; and she considered her husband had taken too strict a notion of the engagement with Smithers, who, she believed, thought very little of it: therefore, Mrs. Rainsfield concluded, very little manœuvring would break it off; and so determined to devote her energies to such a consummation. [Pg 203]

CHAPTER VIII. [Pg 204]

"Pray if you know
Where in the purlieus of this forest stands
A sheep cote?"
As You Like It, *Act* 4, *Sc.* 3.

That portion of the year to which we now bring our narrative is, without exception, the finest period of Australian seasons; when the temperature is the *acme* of salubrity, and the climate, generally, as delightful as can be imagined. We speak of the spring when merging into the early summer, and when the cool freshness of the morning breeze tempers the genial warmth of the mid-day sun; which had acquired just sufficient strength in his rays to impart a pleasant heat without oppressiveness. On such a morning, then, when the vast concave of the heavens, [Pg 205] expanded in a perfectly spotless azure sky (such as in our foggy isle is never seen); and with the freshness of the bush developing its verdure in the odorous exudations of floriferous plants, and the blithesome exuberance of the songless denizens of nature's nemoral aviary; William took his departure on the mission we have detailed in the last chapter.

He journeyed on for days, singly but not lonely; for his heart was inspired by the lambent fragrance of nature's smile; and he felt not the solitude of the road, as he travelled over the vast expanse of the Darling Downs. He had traversed this vast table-land, and was approaching its eastern margin, where the descent was to be made to the coast country, when he began to experience an oppressiveness in the atmosphere, which he knew portended a storm. He, however, continued his course, though, indeed, he had no option, until, as the sun was approaching the meridian, he entered the deep gorge called Cunningham's Gap, through which [Pg 206] the road passed to the low country, and looked anxiously at the lowering aspect of the sky. He felt he might make up his mind for a drenching in the approaching storm, which he perceived would soon burst over his head; and only exerted himself to get through "the Gap" into open land, before it commenced.

Cunningham's Gap, or, as for the sake of brevity it is generally called, "the Gap," is situated between fifty and sixty miles from the coast; and is, as its name would imply, a defile in the mountains, affording a convenient passage through the "main range;" or more properly speaking, a descent from the table-land of the Darling Downs to the country below. The descent effected by this pass is between two and three thousand feet; and the view obtained in the passage of the low lying country is beautiful in the extreme. The gorge itself is one of those combinations of the picturesque and sublime with the useful; and viewed as a specimen of scenery, it is surpassingly [Pg 207] grand. Looking at it in its ascent, where its two stupendous sides raise their gigantic masses in rocky precipices, upwards of two thousand feet high; which seem to frown upon the bold traveller who ventures within their cavernous precincts; one cannot contemplate the vast fissure other than as the work of a beneficent providence, as a gateway in the otherwise insurmountable "range."

William Ferguson had entered the "Gap," and was riding down the declivity at a rapid rate, when the sky became still more overcast, and the clouds gathered in quick succession; while the low fulminating of the distant thunder, and the death-like stillness of the defile, indicated the speedy approach of the storm, and imparted a solemnity to the scene. The thunder became more distinct. The lightning flashed in vivid darts, which seemed to play along the sides of the pass, until the attractive adamant deviated the refrangible fluid; which then buried itself in some deep crevice [Pg 208] of the pendent rocks. A few heavy drops of rain then fell to the earth, and were speedily succeeded by a deluge, which was driven on the face of a tempest almost irresistible. Still on sped the rider almost carried on the wings of the storm; until he was relieved from any pressing anxiety by emerging on the plain; while the elemental warfare raged with unabated fury.

William, now relieved from apprehension, proceeded leisurely on the road, which he had to travel for some miles until he reached an inn; but, as he began to feel extremely uncomfortable, to sooner reach the shelter of a roof, he determined to accelerate his speed. With this intention, he clapped spurs to his horse and went off at a sharp pace, until he came to a track that emerged at an acute angle from the road. At this spot he hesitated for a moment; but, believing it to be the road leading to Rosehall, the station of a gentleman with whom he was distantly acquainted; and as night would be shortly closing in, while he had a long distance to go before he reached the inn; [Pg 209] he decided upon intruding on the hospitality of his friend. He therefore turned his horse's head into the path, and rode off again at a brisk pace. As he proceeded, however, the road became somewhat indistinct; and at last all appearance of a track vanished; leaving our friend involved in the bush without the semblance of a path, or appearance of any habitation in the vicinity. By this time William discovered his mistake in taking this path (which appeared only to be a bullock track) for the road to Rosehall; and his only alternative was to find his way back again to the road he had left. To do this, however, he did not fancy retracing his steps; and, there being very little time for speculation, he determined to make a short cut through the bush in the direction he knew the main road must run.

His resolution was soon formed, and as speedily acted upon; for the idea no sooner entered his mind than he plunged into the bush without any further consideration; and continued his course [Pg 210] until his progress was stopped by the intervention of a seemingly impenetrable scrub. The sight of this impediment by no means tended to animate him with pleasant or amiable feelings; for he knew, if he was compelled to deviate from his course, his chance of reaching the road before night would be very remote; and, if he did not succeed in doing that, he saw no option but to make a nocturnal sojourn in the bush; the idea of which, all things considered, he did not much like. To extricate himself from this difficulty, he skirted the scrub, both up and down, for an

opening through which to penetrate; until at last he perceived an aperture, into which he darted, though only to find after a short progress, a still further stoppage; and this time one of a more unpleasant nature.

At his feet ran a creek, swollen by the rains into a deep and rapid stream. To skirt its banks, to ascertain the direction in which it flowed, was impossible; for, with the exception of the spot on [Pg 211] which he stood (and where it seemed broader and shallower than elsewhere), it was lined by the scrub. Beyond the stream was the direction he wished to go to reach the road, but this fluvial barrier stopped his progress; and he saw no other course, if he wished to attain his goal, than to swim the flood. For a few moments he gazed upon the dark waters of the creek, as they hurried on their turbid volume sullenly and quietly; and knew that to cross them, he had to swim a current that might prove too strong for him to stem; besides the numerous eddies and hidden dangers that they might contain. His heart had some misgivings at the venture; nevertheless, he was aware, if he was to reach shelter that night, the passage of the creek had to be effected. The momentary sensation of fear gave place to the excitement of braving hazard; and its danger was speedily forgotten in the contemplation of a night's bivouac under a tree; and with the consciousness of being a good swimmer, and a familiarity with such predicaments, he rode his [Pg 212] horse to the edge of the stream, and urged him into it.

Often do the instincts of the lower animals prompt them to an avoidance of danger, where the rasher nature of man impels him towards his doom. For some time the animal which William rode —standing on the margin of the water, with his nose close to it, seemingly to ascertain the nature of the element into which his master wished him to plunge—snorted and paced the ground with a degree of impatience, that plainly showed he did not like the task required of him. He was not long, however, permitted to hesitate; there was no escape from the passage; the creek had to be crossed, while no other way presented itself but to swim; so, upon a fresh admonition from his rider, the animal entered the water, and gallantly breasted the stream.

As the horse took the flood, William quietly slid off the saddle into the water, and keeping a hold of one of the stirrups, easily swam by his side. The noble animal, in a case like this, required no [Pg 213] guiding hand to direct him; his instinct told him, his master's object was to reach the other bank; and he, therefore, swam direct for the point desired. For a few seconds the quadruped and his owner kept on "the even tenor of their way," and William congratulated himself on the favourable prospect of his crossing; until they got more into the force of the current, when he found it almost overwhelming. He, however, struggled hard; while, alternately, he was almost swept from his hold by the force of the stream, and nearly separated from his trusty steed by the vortex of an eddy. But these difficulties were trifling compared to the one that awaited him.

He had reached about the middle of the creek, when he perceived, with consternation, the immense trunk of a tree floating down the stream, with all the fearful velocity of the current; and in an instant his mind comprehended the danger of his perilous position. The tree was one, [Pg 214] evidently, which had been long lying on the bank of the creek; and had been dislodged, and carried off, as the water had risen in the present flood. From its long recubation, it had become divested of its bark, foliage, and smaller branches; leaving only its knarled trunk and concomitant adjuncts, its crural like limbs. As it approached the swimmers, it presented nothing to view, but the long surface of its trunk, which floated supinely in the water; at the same time rushing on with irresistible force, and having its branches concealed beneath the surface of the flood. The stout heart of young Ferguson almost sickened at the sight; however, he braced his nerves for a struggle, and urged his faithful horse to its utmost, to escape the proximity of their dangerous neighbour.

On it came, closer and closer, still watched by the anxious eye of William; until he thought (as it almost reached him, angrily muttering, with the subdued murmur of the flood, its disappointed expectations of a victim) that he was safe. But his self-gratulation, at this moment, was very [Pg 215] inopportune; for, just as he uttered an exclamation of thankfulness at his supposed escape, the tree approached the broad and shallower part of the creek; when, suddenly throwing its upper end into the air with a convulsive leap, it threatened utter destruction to the two devoted and struggling objects in the water. For a moment it seemed poised; but, losing its equilibrium, it fell obliquely into the stream, covering William and his horse with the blinding spray; and before they could regain their sight, the huge mass swang round with the current, and entirely submerging them, swept them off with the flood, as they were almost reaching the bank.

The cause of this grotesque manœuvre on the part of the tree, we will here explain. In approaching the broader and, consequently, shallower part of the stream, its course had been arrested, by one of its sunken branches coming in contact, and burying itself, in the soft bed of [Pg 216] the creek. The log, therefore, with the impetus it had gained in its transit, thus suddenly brought to a stand, momentarily reared its head; but almost instantly losing its equipoise, fell again sideways into the stream; while the branch being still imbedded in the soft mud of the bottom, the trunk naturally described a circle; and to all appearances annihilated William and his horse.

Some time after this, how long he had not a remote idea, William, upon returning to consciousness, found himself stretched upon the bank of the creek; while the shades of night were fast closing in around him. What he had experienced he shuddered to think of; though every circumstance attending his late danger, and providential escape, segregated itself from the chaotic mass in his brain, and laid before him a panorama of his ordeal. In his mind, he had distinct visions, of having been, as it were, grasped with a rough hand by the watery element, and drawn by the demon of the flood to the depths of his cavernous home; while the hissing of [Pg 217]

the water, which seemed to him at the time to rush into his very soul, still sounded in his ears. To the fearful sensation of oppression and smothering that first weighed in his heart, succeeded a calm and tranquil sleep; from which he was aroused, by a repetition of the noises of rushing waters in his ears; and the sensation of the horrors of a mundane dissolution filled his mind. At that moment, his head came in violent contact with some object; which, on the impulse of the moment, he clutched with a drowning grasp; while with the friendly aid of the pendent branch of a tree, he had an indistinct recollection of drawing himself from the water, and alighting on the ground; where he sank in a state of utter insensibility. How long he remained in that state, he was unable to conjecture; but he awoke with a feeling of sickness, which weighed heavily on his heart; and with his limbs perfectly benumbed and almost paralysed (thankful for the manifest interposition of providence), with a painful effort he arose. He then went to search for his horse, [Pg 218] to see if the faithful animal had been as fortunate as himself; and had not proceeded far ere he espied him, still standing trembling from the fear, from which he had hardly recovered.

To reach the inn that night was hopeless; in fact, to proceed at all, William felt was almost impossible, for both he and his horse were perfectly knocked up; while he was so unnerved and dispirited, that he hardly knew which way to turn. To remain where he was, however, was not to be thought of; for setting aside the discomfort of his position, the danger was imminent. The rain continued to fall in a deluge, and the land on which he stood being low, if the creek rose much more (which was very probable), the flat would be soon covered with water. He had no alternative, then, but to drag on his weary limbs, and lead his worn-out horse, to either some hospitable shelter, or a more auspicious locality to camp in. Before resuming his journey, he gave [Pg 219] two or three vociferous "cooeys," but without hearing any answering sound, save the echo of his own voice. He then crawled along, in the direction which he imagined the road must be in, in the hope of falling in with some cheering prospect; but after toiling for about half an hour, the consternation with which he witnessed the effectual stoppage of his further progress, by another stream, fairly overcame him; and he sank exhausted to the ground.

The sagacious animal, that had borne the young man through many a difficulty, and who stood over the prostrate body of his master, showed his concern for him by many little signs of emotion, and at last brought William to an application of his energies, by causing him to notice his movements. William then raised his languid frame; and with drooping spirits, gazed on the fresh obstacle before him. He perceived it had a current, running opposite to that which he had lately crossed; and then the truth flashed across his mind, that it must be another bend of the same [Pg 220] creek, forming a pocket of the land on which he was standing. He now perceived that, by a slight deviation from his course, he might have avoided the crossing which had nearly cost him his life; though now it was evident, to reach his destination, he would have to cross it again. Not wishing, however, to risk his life a second time in so short an interval; and feeling himself perfectly inadequate to the task, even if he desired it; he determined to follow the creek up its course, in the hope of meeting with shelter of some sort. He therefore resumed his weary travelling, skirting the bank of the stream; and occasionally "cooeying," to ascertain if any human being was within hearing.

Thus he had proceeded for some time, perfectly disheartened and almost desponding, when he espied on a little knoll, a short distance from the creek, a small slab hut. Humble and untenable as the refuge appeared, no shipwrecked mariner, with the prospect of being rescued from a [Pg 221] watery grave, by the opportune assistance of some life-boat, did ever hail his deliverance with greater joy and gratitude, than did William the sight of this "humpie." It looked uninhabited and perfectly deserted; but still, wretched as it appeared, it promised shelter for himself and his beast; and would enable him in all probability to make a fire and refresh his weary limbs. At the same time he knew that, even if the place were deserted, there would be sure to be some signs of settlement near, and possibly a track to the head station of the run on which it was situated.

CHAPTER IX. [Pg 222]

"Methinks it were a happy life,
To be no better than a homely swain;
* * * *
See how the morning opes her golden gates,
And takes her farewell of the glorious sun."
HENRY VI., *Act* 2 *of Part* 3.

It was then with a gladdened heart that William approached the hut, which was of dimensions little larger than a good-sized dog kennel; and when he reached the aperture that served for an entrance, and gazed at the interior, he was not a little surprised to find that it was habited, though the inhabitant was not visible. The interior was as miserable looking as could be imagined; the floor, or rather the ground on which it stood, was covered with as much water as [Pg 223] the earth outside; and the slabs, which formed its walls, had shrunk with their exposure to the sun and weather since they had been first put together, and left long and narrow interstices between each, through which the rain driven by the wind, and the water on the ground in perfect streams, were permitted, *ad libitum*, to make their ingress. In the centre of the domicile, and seemingly firmly fixed into the ground, were four sticks, so placed as to form the four corners of a parallelogram; their ends were forked, and held two other sticks about six feet long, resting

longitudinally in their supports. To each of these side poles were affixed, with small skewer-like twigs, the sides of a sack which had been cut open lengthways; and formed in all, an impromptu bedstead or stretcher, on which, by a bundle of blankets that there appeared, it was evident the occupier of the establisment was wont to court repose, free from the moisture of his mother earth. Under this rural bed, was a box of that description generally brought to the country by [Pg 224] emigrants, and at once proclaimed its owner, to the practised eye of William, to be a "new chum;" for he well knew that after a very short residence in the country such cumbrous attendants were usually dispensed with—shepherds who had gained much experience usually carrying their extensive wardrobes on their backs, and their blankets and pots rolled up in their "swags."

As we have said, William at once knew the rural swain, whose habitation this was, to be one new to the colony; and he readily conjectured his absence from his abode was occasioned by some detention incidental to the storm, and which his experience had not taught him to avoid. Before the door of the hut lay a few sticks and logs charred by fire, the relics of a conflagration; ignited, probably, for culinary purposes, as well as to impart caloric to the person of the shepherd. Knowing these to be less pervious to the wet than unburnt wood, William laid them in order for [Pg 225] burning, in a position as free from water as he could find; and after stripping the flakey bark off some tea trees (the inner part of which is generally dry and exceedingly inflammable), he speedily managed, as only bushmen can, to ignite a fire; and had it in a cheerful blaze, as the rain subsided and the occupant of the hut made his appearance. Somewhat refreshed by the genial warmth of the fire, and the prospect of having some tea and something to eat, William soon forgot his fatigue and late dangers; and when the man reached his place, rather surprised at the appearance of a stranger, our friend had taken the bridle and saddle from his horse, hobbled him, and turned him out too feed; and was comfortably seated at the fire, watching the water boil in the shepherd's tin pot, preparatory to infusing his tea.

The circumstances of the intrusion were soon explained by young Ferguson; and in a few minutes he and the shepherd were socially seated at the fire, discussing their evening meal of salt meat, [Pg 226] tea, and "damper;" and were pleasantly conversing together, as if they had been boon companions from their youth. From this man William learnt that he had entirely gone out of his way; and that in the morning his best plan would be not to attempt to regain the road in the way he had lost it, but to take the track that led from the stock-yard in the vicinity to the head station; whence he would find a well-beaten line to the main road. His informant said he believed the road lay not far off; but he could not say how far, nor in what precise direction; and should, therefore, recommend him, for greater certainty and security, to go by the more circuitous way of the head station. William admired this cautionary advice, and determined on the following morning to act upon it in preference to submitting himself to the ordeal of another swimming; more especially as the station on which he then was, was Rosehall, the place he had desired to find.

In the course of their conversation, William had elicited from the shepherd some little [Pg 227] information respecting himself; which we may be pardoned, for the sake of information, for inserting here. He had only been in the colony about six months; and had been hired by his present employer direct from the ship in which he had emigrated, and brought at once up to the station; where for some time he felt acutely the hardships of his situation; though he had gradually become inured to them, and was then perfectly contented. When he arrived on the station the weather was fearfully wet; and he had been put into the hut he then occupied, and given the charge of a flock of sheep, which he was left to tend in perfect solitude. Added to this, the discomfort of his home (if he could have called it by such a term), perfectly sickened him of the country, and he heartily wished himself back again in England; regretting the day he had ever been induced to leave it. Rolled in his blankets, he used at night to lay down on the damp [Pg 228] ground, to contract rheumatisms and numerous other ailments; while his rations and everything about him were continually saturated; and to make up the catalogue of his troubles, he, on more than one occasion, lost himself in the bush. Now, however, he said, he had got used to all these inconveniences; which, after all (from the rarity of their occurrence), he considered slight; and as to the wet, since he had been put up to the dodge of keeping his bed dry, it did not concern him in the least. He liked the independence of his life, though it was a little dull; and his wages being good, he was enabled to save plenty of money; while he intended to be removed to the head station, when, he said, he would be perfectly contented with his lot.

The morning following the storm broke calm and beautiful; the air was clear and fresh, and a serenity was diffused abroad, perfectly enchanting; while the exhilarating buoyancy of the atmosphere, and its refreshing temperature, fully compensated for the previous visitation. [Pg 229] William, as we would say here, rose with the lark; and having brought in his horse, saddled and mounted him, and after bidding adieu to his rustic entertainer, from whom he received directions about the road to the station, "he went him on his winding way."

After following the directions of the shepherd, in about an hour or so he approached Rosehall, and presented himself to the inmates as they were about sitting down to breakfast. Upon the relation to them of his adventure, he had the satisfaction to learn, that if he had skirted the scrub for a short distance, until he came to the bend of the creek that formed the pocket, in which he found himself after swimming it, he would have been able to have struck the road in a few minutes. However, by the time he received this information, it was of little use to him; and having entirely lost all thought of his past danger, he could laugh with his friends at the absurdity of losing himself in the bush. He remained at Rosehall a few hours longer than he intended, at the [Pg 230] solicitation of his friend Mr Lauray; who was deeply interested in a question that was then

agitating the whole population of Moreton Bay; and which we will take the liberty of explaining.

Some few years previous to the date of this incident, a small party, feeling the injustice and neglect under which the district had so long suffered, introduced the idea of applying to the Crown for the separation of the northern portion of New South Wales from the parent colony; and its erection into a separate state, with the free exercise of its own legislation. The movement at first gained little favour; as in the infant state of the district, it was thought premature, if not preposterous. But that immortal colonial agitator, the Rev. Dr. Lang, declaring himself an advocate for separation; and forcibly aiding the scheme with his pen, and indefatigable exertions, the party continued to gather strength until it had assumed a bold attitude, reiterating its demands to the throne. To give the reader some notion of the subject, we will endeavour to [Pg 231] transcribe such of the conversation at Rosehall as will serve to enlighten him.

"I shall want you, Mr. Ferguson, now you are here," said the proprietor of the place, "to affix your signature to a petition to the Queen, praying for the separation of these districts from New South Wales."

"I am not yet convinced," replied William, "that the district will be benefited by being separated."

"I don't think," replied the other, "it will take much argument to convince you, or any other rational being, that separation would not only be beneficial, but is absolutely necessary for the welfare of Moreton Bay. In the first place, we are not adequately represented in the Assembly; and, in the next, five to six hundred miles is too great a distance to be removed from the seat of government. Even if the ministry had the desire to do us justice, their unacquaintance with our wants would prevent their inclinations from being of any service to us; though I am not disposed [Pg 232] to think, from our past experience, that any Sydney batch of legislators, would be at all inclined to give us any consideration. The revenue derivable from the districts, is annually swept into the Sydney treasury; and I would ask, with what return? Why absolutely nothing! They amount in this district alone, I have no hesitation in saying, to considerably over £150,000; while, with the exception of a few salaries, paid to some almost useless officials, and a few hundreds voted occasionally for our roads, just to remind us that we are not entirely forgotten, we get no return. Look at our towns in the country; whenever the exchequer is in need of a little ready money, they put up sufficient land in our district to replenish their coffers, and to make the inhabitants feel the desire and necessity for more. It has always been the policy of our rulers to keep the demand for land in excess of the supply, by which means they create a spirited competition, and establish [Pg 233] a fictitious value. Hence, these towns are each drained of some thousands of pounds annually; while the streets are permitted, by the powers that be, to remain in their primeval state, either to become impassable, or dangerous to the limbs and lives of the inhabitants."

"There certainly may be some little neglect on the part of the government," replied William; "but surely a district, with so limited a population as this, will with difficulty bear the expense of a separate executive?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Lauray, "our income is perfectly adequate; in fact it exceeds that of many an older state: besides we should have the satisfaction of expending it ourselves, and should not require to be continually demanding (but rarely receiving) money from the government for such necessary works as bridges and roads. The present state of our main lines of traffic is perfectly scandalous; and if we should remain a portion of New South Wales until doomsday, I believe they wouldn't be put into an efficient state."

"Well, but," replied William, "I imagine we can only expect the expenditure of our share of public [Pg 234] money; and if all the districts get their proportions, what more can we desire?"

"But I deny," replied the other, "that we are getting anything like our proportion, or any proportion at all. The public revenue is mainly swallowed up in works that do not at all affect the country districts; such as the public buildings in Sydney, and the harbour improvements there. Notice the colonial debt of between two and three millions, and say how was it contracted? Was it not in the construction of Sydney sewers, Sydney water-works, and the Sydney railway? And for these, from which we shall never receive the slightest benefit, we have not only had our revenue appropriated for years, but have to sustain the impost of higher duties, to provide for the interest of this fund."

"Still," replied William, "I think it is only just, we should contribute our share of the public expenditure in the machinery of government."

"Granted!" said Lauray, "but city improvements do not in any way come under that head. The [Pg 235] improvement of the district is much, if not altogether retarded, by the continual neglect at head quarters. There are certain public works, the necessity for which is severely felt, and even acknowledged by the government itself to be highly desirable; but to every application of ours for the necessary money, we are met by the cool assertion, that they have none to give us. Can you imagine anything more unjust than this; after the application of our own funds to purposes foreign to our interests, when we demand the expenditure of a small sum upon our own districts, to be informed that the money has been expended? We do not desire separation for the mere pleasure of being our own masters; but for the purpose of having, more effectually, a voice in the distribution of our revenue. If we had received more attention and justice from the government in past years, we should never have agitated separation; but now we feel it essentially [Pg 236] indispensable, and separation we must have. You are no doubt aware the Queen in council has reserved to herself the right of dismemberment of these districts, whenever the wishes of the

inhabitants should render it necessary; and now we do not intend letting the question rest, until we have attained our object. We have already forwarded many prayers to the throne; and at this moment petitions are travelling the length and breadth of the country to obtain signatures. The opposition we shall receive from New South Wales, I believe, will be strenuous; but the present size of that colony, nearly half that of Europe, is perfectly preposterous, and renders the equitable administration of the laws, in so vast a territory and with the seat of government so isolated, perfectly impossible. I am aware, that the revenue of the parent colony will be very much crippled by the separate erection of her offshoot; and her burdens will be consequently heavier on her inhabitants. But because her legislators have, through a reckless system of [Pg 237] extravagance, impoverished and run their country into debt, that is no reason why we should also be bound down to her in her depression. I know many condemn the desire of the Moreton Bay people to relieve themselves from the embarrassment of New South Wales; and state it is selfish and derogatory in us attempting to repudiate our share of the debt, and after being benefited by her prosperity in past years, to desire separation now, when her resources are more circumscribed. But I believe the obligation is the other way: Sydney has been drawing her prosperity in a great measure from these districts; for the trade that has existed between us has been of greater benefit and more advantageous to her people than to us; and as for their debt, we are in no way liable for any portion of it."

It is needless for us to trace this conversation any further; as doubtless, by this time, our reader will have formed some conception of the "separation question." Suffice it to say, that though [Pg 238] William, owing to his having been living on the New South Wales side of the proposed boundary, had heard very little of it, and that only to its prejudice, it was a subject which absorbed the general attention of the Moreton Bay community; and he, becoming impregnated with the same feeling, left Rosehall a convert to the popular cry.

Soon after his arrival in town, he selected the furniture and other things required on the station; and making arrangement with his agent for their despatch by the return of the dray which was bringing down the wool, he turned his face to his father's house, and in due time reached New England, without the occurrence of any fresh adventure.

"I am so pleased that you have come, dear Willie," cried the blooming and cheerful Kate, as she threw herself into William's arms when he alighted from his horse at the door; "we have been expecting you for some days, and began to think you had taken flight in some other direction. I [Pg 239] am so anxious to hear all about your doings, and to know all those kind people, whose acquaintance you have made; particularly those near you, whom John says I am to stay with. Are they nice people, Willie? but I am sure they must be, or you wouldn't like them; but do tell me what sort of a girl Miss Rainsfield is? John says so many fine things about her; that she is a perfect angel, and all that sort of thing; and that he has no doubt that, if I only have sufficient good sense as to take her as my pattern, I will derive much benefit from my visit. The impudent fellow, what does he mean by that, Will?"

"I don't know his precise motives, my little seraph," replied William; "probably he thinks her quiet and serious manner would well accord with his own little sister's nature; in preference to her volatile and spirited character; and that her calm and dignified manner, would suit you well in your new capacity of housekeeper. But I can support his opinion that she is an amiable and [Pg 240] charming creature; and I strongly suspect that he is somewhat smitten with her."

"Well, then, I'll tease him dreadfully for giving me such a horrid lesson," exclaimed Kate; "I can't be always serious like his Dulciana; besides I don't think it so nice, do you, Will?"

"I don't indeed, my dear, in your case at least," replied he; "for I think it would spoil you to try and check your spirits; but there is one thing I must entreat of you to remember, you foolish little thing. Although John has said nothing to me about his feelings towards Miss Rainsfield; as I have already told you, I strongly suspect he is over head and ears in love with her; but for his sake you must not lightly mention her name, or the subject of his feelings; for, if he is enamoured of her, I fear he is doomed to disappointment. I understand she is already engaged; though her cousin tells me, he does not think she cares much for her betrothed; and that he intends attempting to [Pg 241] prevent her from throwing herself away in the manner she contemplates. Still, I fancy any mention of the subject to John would pain him, so we must be silent. Now tell me, my pet, what I have done to be left standing outside my father's house? may I not be permitted to walk in."

"Oh, dear me," exclaimed the girl, "I never thought I was keeping you on the verandah; but, come along, mamma will be so glad to see you; I don't think she knows you've come, for I was the only one who caught sight of you. But, Willie, do you know Mr. Wigton is stopping with us just now, and he has been kind enough to promise to accompany us?" saying which, without waiting for any further remark from her brother, she tripped lightly into the house; followed by William, after he had delivered his horse to one of the men.

As we have already, in our opening chapter, introduced the reader to the Ferguson family at Acacia Creek, we may be pardoned for omitting a similar ceremony now; but of Mr. Wigton, who [Pg 242] was at the time a visitor in the house, it may be necessary to say a few words.

He was a clergyman of the Wesleyan persuasion; one of the old Methodist leaven; an earnest and devout man, and a conscientious Christian: one who was kind and benevolent in his disposition, and without that bigotry and uncharitableness so prevalent among some of the rigid bodies of religionists. His piety was such, as to induce him, in the work of his Master, to forget all private interests, endure privation and fatigue, and to carry the consolations of religion into the remotest

corner of the bush. He fulfilled, to the extent of his power, the injunctions of his Saviour, when He said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature;" and while he received disappointments and misfortunes with exemplary patience and unflinching courage, he persevered in his course, with an energy worthy of the cause. In his corporeal capacity, to judge from his appearance, he was ill calculated to sustain the continual exertions incumbent on his [Pg 243] vocation; and yet he performed them with an alacrity truly surprising. He was of the middle height; rather slim in figure, apparently delicate in his constitution, fair complexioned; and a bachelor of about thirty-five years of age. He had refused various solicitations from congregations, to accept of a residentiary charge, and had devoted himself to the missionary's work, where the presence of a spiritual teacher was much wanted.

He had perceived that hundreds upon hundreds of square miles in the bush, in fact almost all the country districts, were destitute of a ministry of any creed or denomination; and he had, with an earnest zeal and devoted piety, undertaken the task of administering to the spiritual wants of the bushmen. Never since the days of the old apostles, had a work of such magnitude been attempted by a single-handed man; and any heart less stout, or enthusiasm less genuine, than that of the Rev. Mr. Wigton, would have speedily sank under a load of mortification, at the difficulties that [Pg 244] beset his path. In a country where the Sabbath is almost entirely forgotten; where on that sacred day the country stores exhibit their wares for sale, and the public-houses resound with the shouts of drunken revelry; where the servant is frequently punished, for refusing to obey his master's commands to its desecration; where blasphemy and sacrilege, in which master vies with man, is constantly heard; and where ignorance and vice stalk triumphant through the land,—some conception may be formed of the stupendous nature of the reform to be effected.

Thanks to such as this messenger of peace, much good has now been accomplished. Bad as it is, the Sabbath is better observed than formerly, not only in the townships but on the stations; and depravity is on the wane. But, at the time of which we write, the state of moral darkness was as great as any heathenism extant. To the work of enlightenment, had Mr. Wigton sanctified [Pg 245] himself; and his name had already become revered, in many places in the solitude of the bush, where he had been the instrument of bringing grace to his benighted countrymen. At the same time, he had not neglected the case of the black. He had with considerable difficulty, acquired a pretty accurate knowledge of their language and customs; and he preached the glad tidings to them, whenever an opportunity presented itself. His present intention was to accompany William with his sister, on their journey to Fern Vale; and, while spending some little time with them there, endeavour to do some good with the aborigines in that neighbourhood.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 246]

"Ah, what is love? It is a pretty thing,
As sweet unto a shepherd as a king."
GREENE.

"Cease, cease these jars, and rest your mind in peace."
HENRY VI., *Part* 1, *Act* 1, *Sc.* 1.

When we left John Ferguson after his departure from Strawberry Hill, we attempted to depict his feelings; as well as the motives which influenced the minds of the Rainsfield ladies. In the resumption of our narrative, we will follow our hero in the continuance of his mental aberration. His misery and dejection were intense; and such were his sufferings, that he moved about his station a mere shadow of his former self, and kept himself exclusively to his own place; [Pg 247] attempting to relieve his feelings by engrossing his mind on his avocation. Tom Rainsfield, in the meantime, had learnt from his sister-in-law the cause of John's estrangement; and deeply sympathising with his friend, he made his visits to Fern Vale as frequent as possible, to cheer and enliven him in his dullness. Tom imagined if he could but induce him to banish his despondency, he would be enabled to make him feel there was a chance of his succeeding in overcoming Eleanor's scruples in breaking faith with Smithers; by inducing her to look favourably upon his addresses. At the same time, he felt the delicacy of his task; for he had no warrant, on which to ground his assumption of his friend's attachment; though (notwithstanding that John Ferguson had not breathed to a creature his love for Eleanor) he was perfectly convinced, he was irretrievably lost in the passion. Whether or not Tom had been enlisted into the services of his sister-in-law, we will not stop to consider; or in fact can we pretend to say; though, from the [Pg 248] earnestness with which he proceeded with his scheme, we are led to imagine that, possibly stimulated by his own inclinations, he was, nevertheless, acting under the guidance of that astute and pertinent directress. He had laid down certain plans for operation; and had so far succeeded in their execution, as to induce John Ferguson to lend the aid he had on a former occasion promised to Mr. Rainsfield, in the erection of a bridge over the Wombi; and to proceed himself to the river, and assist in its construction.

The house at Fern Vale was by this time finished, and the carpenters who had been employed in its erection were consequently disengaged. This was considered a good opportunity by Tom Rainsfield; and the men were forthwith despatched to the Wombi, to assist in the construction of the bridge. On the appointed day, John met Mr. Rainsfield and Tom at the scene of action, and

work was at once commenced.

They first selected the two largest trees on the bank of the river; and after attaching strong ropes [Pg 249]
to their trunks, to guard against their falling into the stream, and thus elude their destiny, they felled them. Their next arrangement, after clearing the stems of their branches, was to make them span the creek; which being accomplished they left the carpenters to do the rest. This was to strengthen and support the beams, by erecting upright pieces as buttresses at the edge of the stream, so as, not only to keep the fallen trees firmly fixed, but to give them additional power to sustain weight. After this the men were to make a flooring, by firmly fixing across the main trunks some stout saplings, and cover it with earth, which would complete, what our friends considered would be, a very serviceable structure.

The young men, after they had accomplished the task of getting the logs to span the creek, as we
have said, left the carpenters to complete the work; while they took their departure from the [Pg 250]
spot, and turned home. Here John Ferguson essayed to leave his friends; but that they would not hear of. Tom, especially, was loud in declaiming against such a course; declaring that the ladies would be justly offended when they knew that he had been at Strawberry Hill without calling upon them. "You may just as well drop in," he said, "and dine with us, and I will ride over to Fern Vale with you in the evening."

To this invitation John could offer no reasonable objection; and not wishing it to be imagined that he entertained any disrespect for Mrs. Rainsfield, he wavered in his rigid determination to absent himself; while his friends were the more pressing for him to accompany them; and at last all further parley was ended by Tom turning the heads of the horses towards the house, and constraining his companion to follow him.

When the party rode up to the station, they left their horses at the stable, and walked into the
house, at the entrance of which they were met by Mrs. Rainsfield. John she at once attacked for [Pg 251]
his past coolness and unneighbourly conduct in abstaining from ever calling upon her; and he, when he had entered the parlour, and was met by Eleanor with just sufficient confusion and reserve to make her more than ever interesting, and with a warmth that quite overcame him, felt the old fire in his heart burning with redoubled fury. But when she exclaimed, "Really, Mr. Ferguson we had quite relinquished the idea of ever seeing you again, you have so long estranged yourself from our society;" and continued, "I can't think you could have taken any offence at anything we may have done or said; but if so, upon your mentioning it, we will endeavour to make the *amende honorable*,"—he was perfectly reclaimed from his "slough of despond." At the same time he knew he could make no explanation, and therefore kept silent. What was he to do? he was again enslaved as hopelessly as ever; for the charm of Eleanor's
presence he could not resist. How could he act a part of coldness or indifference, when she [Pg 252]
enchanted him with her kindest manner, and gladdened his heart with her sweetest smile? At that moment he made a determination which seemed to alter his whole manner, and infuse new life into his spirits; what that determination was, gentle reader, thou shalt shortly know by his actions. The thought passed through his mind, as the transient cloud flits across the face of the sun; it thawed the ice-bound ligaments of his heart, and gave him utterance in the following remark:

"I am afraid I am indeed a truant, Miss Rainsfield, and ought therefore to make my apologies due on my neglect; but it would be useless in my attempting to exonerate, or even excuse myself; so I will throw myself on your clemency, and crave your interpretation of my abandonment, in the most charitable light."

This speech of John's, if it were uttered designedly, was a masterpiece. To Mr. Rainsfield it had
an air of flippancy that indicated to him a total suppression of any tender feeling; and he [Pg 253]
congratulated himself that his young friend had had sufficient good sense to see the justice of his remarks to him with respect to Eleanor. To Mrs. Rainsfield it appeared in a different light; she detected in it a warmth that sprung spontaneously from the heart; and from it she argued favourably of the success of her schemes, and the happiness of her friends. To Eleanor it was mysterious; whether it was that it was the first time John had attempted anything in the shape of flattery to her, and that she felt surprised; or that her vanity was pleased with the flattery, we cannot say. Bear with us, gentle reader, when we make the allusion, for how perfect soever a woman may be, she is not completely devoid of vanity; and chaste and innocent as was our Eleanor, it was possible for her to receive a thrill of pleasure, at hearing a well-directed
compliment from one whom she respected; believing it to be uttered with an expression of [Pg 254]
something more than mere idle coquetry. Or, it may be, a certain truth flashed across her mind; but certain it is that, when she heard it, the blush mantled her fair cheek, and she turned away her head. To Tom it was the source of rejoicing; for he did not consider whether the speech was expressive of genuine or assumed sentiment, but simply noticed in it a return of his friend to his former self.

Such, then, were the mutual feelings of the party assembled at the Rainsfield's table, as they sat down, with all restraint and formality dissipated from their circle. Mrs. Rainsfield, who was bent upon a *coup de main*, now proposed to John Ferguson, that he should stop the night at Strawberry Hill; and she would make up a little pic-nic, for the following day, to the falls of the Wombi; which she had heard the people talk a good deal about, and had often desired to see. She said she had contemplated the party for some time, and wished to have had it organized while
William was at home; but John had kept himself so much aloof from them, that she had not had [Pg 255]
the opportunity. She appealed to her husband to head the party, but he excused himself on the

grounds of employment, and proposed that Tom should act as their guide instead; while he stated, if they wanted any of the men to carry their things out in the morning, he would spare them two. This arrangement they all seemed delighted with; and it was finally settled that Mrs. Rainsfield, Eleanor, Tom, and John Ferguson, should start about eleven o'clock on the following morning, and that the ladies should prepare a cold collation, which was to precede them.

The falls of the Wombi were insignificant, compared with what we are used to witness in the romantic scenery of Scotland, or the lake district of England; though in themselves, and for the Australian bush, they were at times anything but contemptible. After heavy rains, when the river was swollen into a large body of water, they were certainly grand. During the early part of the summer, when the stream was lower, they might be designated pretty; but towards the close of [Pg 256] the dry season, when the rivers ceased to flow, and their courses become divided into endless chains of pools, preserving in their concatenation an independent existence, the "falls" were either extremely mean, or entirely evanescent. For the present, however, we will refrain from making any further description, until we visit them with our friends on the morrow; merely premising that the summer was about half spent, that it was in fact about Christmas time, and the water in the creek rather low.

On the following day, as had been previously arranged, the party, having been preceded by the provender carriers, mounted their horses and moved off from the house under the guidance of Tom Rainsfield. The shortest route to the falls lay through the bush, in a direct line of about seven miles; but the equestrians preferred following up the course of the river; as, though longer by some three miles, it was pleasanter and more picturesque. At the same time they had no [Pg 257] desire to hurry themselves; but determined to spend the greater portion of the day in the excursion, and therefore rode on at their leisure, in couples; how arranged, we need not say.

After nearly two hours riding, upon their arrival at the desired goal, the scene that presented itself to their view, was pleasing and charmingly picturesque. Facing the party, and extending in either direction for a considerable distance, was a ridge or range forming a natural terrace, rising from eighty to a hundred feet almost perpendicularly. It was literally covered with bush of various descriptions, from the dwarfish wattle to the lofty gum, and iron bark; presenting to each other, in their various tints of foliage, a relieving contrast of colour. From the very midst of this, the fall emerged; and after tumbling over a few impediments in its way, through which it seemed vainly endeavouring to force a passage, it made a leap of about sixty feet; and formed as pretty a [Pg 258] little cascade as could be imagined.

The party stopped at the head of the creek, where they obtained a good view of the falls; and were perfectly enraptured with the scene, which, though in itself was but ordinary, had an influence, in the circumstances under which they were assembled, in directing their minds into a pleased and contented channel. Besides, there was a novelty in such scenery in Australia; and humble as the pretensions of the falls might have been to the picturesque, in the eyes of an English tourist, John Ferguson, who had rarely, and Eleanor Rainsfield, who had never seen anything like it, could not help admiring the beauty of the landscape. Our friends soon selected a spot for their camp; in fact, the spot had already been chosen by their harbingers, who had fixed upon a little rising knoll on the bank of the creek, a short distance below the falls; of which they commanded an excellent view. Here the party dismounted, and leaving the horses to the care of [Pg 259] the men, they discussed the nature of their further proceedings; while the ladies arranged their equestrian habiliments, so as not to incommode them in their walking. Then putting all things in order for their luncheon, and requesting the men to boil some water (on a fire the fellows had kindled), for the purpose of making that universal beverage in the bush, without which no meal would be considered complete; Mrs. Rainsfield proposed to the gentlemen that they should take a walk up to the falls, and see if the ascent of the range was practicable, and if so, what sort of a prospect there was from the summit.

The suggestion was instantly acted upon; and after thoroughly surveying the falls, from every point of view at its foot, Tom was despatched to attempt the ascent; while the rest in the meantime sat down on the grass, to await his return. This, however, was not until some time had elapsed; and when he did make his appearance, he stated that the range could be mounted; but [Pg 260] he would not advise them to try it, as the hill abounded with snakes. He then hurriedly informed them, that he had come down for a gun, which he had noticed one of the men had brought with him; and was going to return to shoot a reptile that had impeded his progress. Mrs. Rainsfield desired him to stay, saying she was sure the snake would not have waited for his return; but he only laughed and assured her that he would certainly find it upon his return, and bring it to her as a trophy. He then dashed away, and was seen in a few minutes, posting up the acclivity with the gun in his hand ready for execution.

"What a stupid fellow that is," remarked Mrs. Rainsfield, "to be running away from us to kill a snake, and perhaps incur the risk of getting bitten by another. While he was here, and it was not safe for us to go up, he might as well have remained."

We will not follow the conversation that ensued; but merely state that after some minutes had [Pg 261] elapsed, as the party began to expect the return of Tom disappointed of his game, a shot was heard, and after a few moments another; upon which Mrs. Rainsfield remarked, "I suppose we shall soon see our snake-hunter now, and see what sport he has had. If he does not produce some trophy, we must give him no peace; but here he comes." At which moment Tom Rainsfield presented himself, and threw down before his friends the bodies of two green snakes; which we may here remark are a kind extremely dangerous, from the difficulty of detecting them, owing to

their colour so much resembling that of the foliage of the trees or grass. The ladies instantly jumped up from their sitting posture with a scream; but perceiving that the snakes were no longer dangerous, they were speedily reassured, and demanded to hear the adventure which had resulted in their destruction. This Tom promised to tell them, after he had submitted his hands to a slight ablution in the creek; and accordingly did so as they retraced their steps to the camp; [Pg 262] and we, to enlighten the reader on the subject, will follow him succinctly in his own words.

"I managed," said he, "to get up the face of the range with some difficulty, for it was awfully steep; but though I succeeded in reaching the top, I had little or nothing for my trouble; for beyond an expanse of bush, there was absolutely no view. It is true I could just obtain a glimpse of 'the hill,' and the windings of the river at various bends, but that was all; and the prospect was certainly not worth the trouble of reaching the elevation to obtain. I was soon satisfied with its contemplation; and turned to come down, which, if not convenient or safe, was certainly easy and expeditious; for I had continually to hold on by one of the overhanging branches of the smaller trees, and either slide, jump, or precipitate myself down steeps and over perpendicular rocks. In making one of these little exploits, I lost my footing by dislodging a large stone; which, but for the [Pg 263] grasp I had of the stout bough of a tree, I should certainly have followed. However, I saved myself; and watching the stone in its downward progress, as it went bounding along, taking others with it in its descent, and crushing the small bushes in its passage; I saw, or fancied I saw, a large green snake suddenly dart out of its way, and up into a tree. I kept my eye on the tree until I got down to it; and then minutely inspected every branch, as well as I could with my simple vision, but could see nothing. I then thought I might have been mistaken, but at the same time, could hardly believe my eyes had been deceived. The tree was only a young sapling, and could be bent with ease; so to satisfy myself, I determined to try if my friend was a myth, or a genuine snake, which had really taken up his quarters in the sheltering boughs above my head. With this intent I took its stem in my double grasp, and gave it a shake, the like of which I am [Pg 264] certain it never had since it became a tree; it was enough to shake the very ghost out of it, and had the effect of displacing my verdant friend, who dropt at my very feet. He did not exactly know what to make of it, though he did not wait long to consider, for he soon twisted off, and darted into another tree rather larger than the first."

"I then looked out for a good-sized-stick, to touch him up with when he next visited *terra firma*; and for the purpose of discovering his position, and compelling his immediate capitulation, I besieged the tree with stones. He was not long in giving me indication of his *locale*, for I soon distinguished him, coiled round a branch almost at its extreme end; with his head and about a foot of his body protruding. I continued to pelt him; and he to dart his head at me, thrusting out his tongue and hissing fearfully, as much as to say, 'If I only could, wouldn't I, hat's all.' I twice or thrice shook him in his position, but could not dislodge him; for he had got himself too firmly [Pg 265] coiled round the bough: then I thought of our fellow's gun. I knew the snake was too frightened to leave his place for some time; so I discontinued the discharge of my missiles, took my note of the tree, came down for the fowling-piece, returned to the scene of battle; and then commenced another pelting, to ascertain if the reptile had retained his post. Sure enough it was there, for the head soon made itself visible; but strange to say from quite a different part of the tree. I imagined from this, that the beast must have removed in my absence; but I was mistaken, for I soon detected my friend in his old place, and perceived that I had got a pair of beauties to deal with. I was aware that the snakes usually go in pairs; but having seen the first one mount the tree alone, I never dreamt of his having a mate, which I suppose must have joined him while I was away. However, I soon made short work of the two; for I shot them one after the other, and they dropt [Pg 266] down as quietly as possible; while I gave them each a crack on the head, to knock out any sense that might have remained, and then laid them, like a dutiful gallant, at your feet."

"You were certainly very gracious, but we could have well dispensed with that piece of gallantry," replied his sister-in-law; "however, we forgive you: and now for our repast."

The repast was soon spread on a cloth on the grass; and the party sat down to its discussion in the highest glee, which was maintained during the meal's continuance. Theirs was the cup "which cheers, but not inebriates;" and they indulged in their merriments and pleasantries, without the aid of those stimulants which create an excitement at the expense of health, both corporeal and mental. After the conclusion of their tiffin, Mrs. Rainsfield proposed a walk down the bank of the creek, to collect a few of the wild flowers she had noticed when coming up; and [Pg 267] leaving the man in attendance to pack up the things, and have their horses ready for them in about half an hour or so, they sauntered along the stream.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 268]

"My genius whispers me
Go on and win her,—for there's nought
That's more unsteadfast than a woman's thought."
COOKE.

"There lies the sore point, which will brook no handling."
SIR WALTER SCOTT.

John and Eleanor, followed by Mrs. Rainsfield and Tom, commenced their gathering of the forest's blossoms, and sauntered on without any seeming interest in their occupation; for their thoughts were otherwise centred. Eleanor would walk by the side of her companion, supporting her part for some minutes at a stretch, in a spirited and lively conversation; ever and anon directing her lovely eyes to the features of John; while he, in ecstasies with the warmth of her [Pg 269] manner, returned the glance with redoubled tenderness; and with the force of his ardent and inspiring conversation communicated the blush of pleasure to her cheek.

Thus they walked on for some time quite absorbed in themselves, until they found they had got considerably in advance of their companions; so much so, that they could not even see them. Upon this discovery, John suggested that their friends might have slightly deviated from the track; allured, perhaps, into the bush by something that might have attracted their attention, and were possibly not far off. He therefore proposed that Eleanor and himself should sit down and wait until they overtook them; but to this his companion was unwilling to agree. He however combatted her opinion that they had returned, and that it would be better for herself and him to retrace their steps also, by saying that Mrs. Rainsfield would never turn back without first giving [Pg 270] them intimation; and that by retracing their steps then, they would possibly miss, and give one another a good deal of trouble and uneasiness, in a mutual search. Whether this advice was agreeable or not to Eleanor, we cannot say, but she silently complied; and sat down by his side, as he threw himself on the grass.

John, at this moment, became absorbed with thoughts that entirely subverted his former cheerfulness. The circumstances of his situation presented themselves to his mind's eye in full force; and suggested, as their solitude had very opportunely afforded him the means of declaring to Eleanor the feelings uppermost in his thoughts, and which he had so long burned to disclose, that he should not allow it to slip. But his heart failed within him, as he was on the point of giving utterance to his love; and though it spoke volumes, his tongue failed to articulate a sound. Thus they sat for some minutes, when Eleanor broke the silence by remarking, "What can have become [Pg 271] of those truants?" and recieving no reply from her companion, directed an enquiring gaze to his face.

In that countenance, where she used to witness animation and spirit, she now only detected profound abstraction, and a vision directed fixedly into space. She contemplated the features for some few moments; and then, while she laid her hand upon John's shoulder, addressed him with the enquiry, "May I participate in the pleasure of your thoughts, Mr. Ferguson? they must be deeply interesting, for they seem to have engrossed your entire attention."

John started at the sound of Eleanor's voice, and awaking from his reverie, while he siezed in his fevered grasp the hand of his companion, replied: "Indeed you may, my dear Eleanor (pardon my familiarity); your sweet voice has broken the spell; and if you experience pleasure from a recital of my thoughts, I shall indeed be the happiest mortal on earth. When I say I love you, Eleanor, I [Pg 272] convey but a shadow of what I inwardly feel; it has long been my one consuming fire; you, and you alone, are the object of my warmest and tenderest affections. Your kind and sweet excellence first won my regard, and I early learnt to cherish your image as my soul's talisman and idol; but ere I had an opportunity of breathing in your ear the nature of the fire that consumed me, my hopes were blighted. I learnt from your cousin the existence of an engagement that has stamped my spirit with despair; and though I have striven to forget you, save as a dear friend, and have almost driven myself frantic in the struggle, yet it is without success. At a time, when I had almost banished from my memory the existence of my passion, some passing object would reflect your image in the mirror of my mind, and would render me almost demented with the thought that your charms were destined to bless some other one. Oh, say my angel! can that be? Is it possible your troth is plighted to another? Pray, speak; my destiny hangs upon your answer. Say [Pg 273] but that you bid me hope; that you will not reject me; anything rather than discard or banish me from your presence, without the chance of catching one ray of the sunshine of your smile."

John then paused, and gently removing the hand that attempted to conceal her face, in a more subdued tone he continued, "You weep; I have been wild, I have agitated you. Oh, hear me, Eleanor! be but mine, and I need not tell you I will cherish you above all earthly prizes. I already love you to distraction; I would thenceforth live but for thee. You are silent; you do not reciprocate my feeling. Oh, this torture! Utter my doom, for I can bear it. I see it is as I feared; you are engaged to another. Oh! speak, Eleanor, is it not so?"

"It is, sir," uttered a voice that made both parties start, and that put an end to John's declaration. "She is engaged to me, and if she will not say it herself, I will for her; and at the same time I have [Pg 274] to intimate to you, that since I have discovered your pretensions, I do not intend to permit them to go unpunished, unless you instantly quit the lady's side;" and the speaker, Bob Smithers, flourished his whip in a menacing attitude, as he stalked up to the couple, who had now risen.

"As to you and your threats," replied John Ferguson, "I both equally scorn to notice. Since you have chosen to act the part of eavesdropper, you have certainly overheard our conversation; but my question was directed to Miss Rainsfield, not to you; therefore, I decline recognising your interference. If Miss Rainsfield desires me to leave her presence, I will do so instantly, and—

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Ferguson," sobbed Eleanor, "don't leave me with that—with Mr. Smithers."

"I would not leave you, but in the care of your friends," replied John; and then continuing his remark to Smithers, he said, "and if I hear, from her own lips, that she acknowledges her [Pg 275] engagement to you, from the respect which I entertain for her, I will at once withdraw my

pretensions."

"Ask her," exclaimed Smithers; "let her answer for herself."

"Is it so, Miss Rainsfield?" asked our dejected hero; "make no scruple of answering, for fear of giving *me* pain, I am perfectly inured to its trials."

Poor Eleanor essayed to speak, but she could not; her heart was too full for utterance, and she covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

"Speak, Eleanor," cried Smithers, "and tell him, whether or not you are engaged to me."

Eleanor took her hands from her face, and with an effort, which cost her her consciousness, exclaimed, "I am;" and immediately sank to the ground insensible. John stooped to raise her prostrate form, but was rudely pushed on one side by his opponent; who exclaimed, with an oath, that "he would knock him down if he dared to lay a finger on the lady." [Pg 276]

"At any other time," cried John, "and under any other circumstances, I would have resented your insult in a manner that would have given you cause to remember me; at present, however, I shall consider you beneath even my contempt. This young lady was entrusted to my protection by her own family, who are not far distant; so touch me again at your peril;" saying which he advanced, and lifted the inanimate form of his beloved Eleanor.

"What is the meaning of this?" cried Mrs. Rainsfield, as she burst upon the scene. "What, Eleanor fainted?" and she flew to the assistance of her cousin, who under her sympathetic administration speedily exhibited signs of returning consciousness. Then having time to address herself to the parties about her, Mrs. Rainsfield at once turned to Smithers, and in a voice, and with a look of scorn, said: "I perceive you, sir, are the cause of this, which is in perfect keeping with your usual [Pg 277] barbarity. I request you will instantly remove from our presence; as I have no desire, that my cousin's nerves should be again shocked, by either the recollection of the past, or the recurrence of future attrocities; both of which are entailed by your presence."

"For that speech, madam," exclaimed Smithers, "you may thank yourself you wear the female garb, or, by heaven! I would give you good cause to repent it."

"I am well aware of it, sir," replied the lady, "if your courage permitted, you would attempt it; and even woman as I am, I doubt not, you would not hesitate the application of your whip, were it not for the restraining influence of these gentlemen present. But go, sir; we wish no parley."

"The advisableness of that motion, madam," said Smithers, "I will reserve to myself the right to decide. I am the most interested in the young lady, who seems so much affected; resulting, I presume, from my having detected her in a position with that gentleman (scowling at John) which [Pg 278] not only reflects impropriety on her, but discredit to you."

"That, sir," almost shrieked the now exasperated lady, "you have no right to affirm. We, as her relations, are the best judges of her conduct, as well as our own; and if Miss Rainsfield is objectionable to you, I have no doubt she will at once exonerate you from your engagement. But I have to request that you leave us; for the instant Miss Rainsfield sufficiently recovers to walk, we will remove from the spot; and you need not flatter yourself you'll be permitted to follow us."

"You considerably over-estimate your own attractions, madam," replied Smithers; "and the merits of your friends, if you imagine they are sufficiently seductive to induce me to deviate from my path by following your steps. But I am neither disposed to forgo my claim on Miss Rainsfield, nor to permit the pretensions of any other suitor."

How long this controversy would have lasted, it is difficult to say, had not Tom attempted to [Pg 279] persuade Smithers to leave them; and Eleanor, who at the same time opened her eyes, begged him, in a voice and look of entreaty to depart, promising to explain the circumstances to him at some other time. He then turned away into the bush, and joined a man who appeared to be his companion, but whom they had not before noticed; while the party retraced their steps to the camp, and were soon on their way home. The feelings that agitated their various breasts, we will leave the reader to conjecture; merely stating that they so operated, as to cause the journey to be performed almost in silence. When they reached Strawberry Hill, Eleanor at once proceeded to her chamber, and in her privacy gave vent to the feelings that overpowered her in a flood of tears; while John, very much subdued in spirit, almost immediately took his departure, accompanied by Tom Rainsfield.

We may now explain the sudden appearance of Bob Smithers, when he so unceremoniously [Pg 280] interrupted the *tete-a-tete* of John and Eleanor. He had been accompanied by a man (to whom he was attempting to sell a run on the Gibson, below Fern Vale) to show him the country; and in returning, having taken the route by which he would cross the Wombi at the upper flat on the Dingo plains a little below the falls, he accidentally caught the sound of voices as he approached the river, and being curious to know from whence they emanated, he rode with his companion towards the spot. When he came sufficiently close to see what we have already described, he could hardly believe his eyes; for he instantly recognised John Ferguson, though the lady who was listening to his appeal, he could not so readily detect. That it must be Eleanor Rainsfield he did not doubt, though how she came in such company, and in such a place, he could not imagine, and could hardly reconcile to his belief. He, however, listened, and when he caught her name [Pg 281] uttered by her prostrate suitor, his rage at the discovery was unbounded. Yet his inquisitiveness to hear more, and know how she received the addresses, overcame for the moment, the first

impulse of his malevolence; and kept him silent until the moment, when he dismounted from his horse, we have seen him appear on the scene.

After parting from the Rainsfields, he altered his determination of going home direct; and arranging with his companion to meet him at Brompton on the following day, he dashed his spurs into his horse's flanks; and being impelled by the excitement of a jealous frenzy and malice, he pulled up at Strawberry Hill a full hour before the pic-nic party made their appearance; and instantly sought an interview with Mr. Rainsfield.

Not finding him in the house, Bob Smithers commenced a search; and soon distinguished his voice in high altercation with some one, as he approached the door of the store, where he [Pg 282] overheard the following dialogue.

"I tell you again, you are an old fool; you knew perfectly well that I never permit these villainous black scoundrels to come near my premises; and yet you encourage this fellow to the place, and allow him to purloin my property through your want of attention. I would not care a snuff, were it not that I have taken considerable pains to keep them aloof: and I know very well that if they are allowed to return, I shall never be safe from their depredations; and this from your infernal idiotcy and madness."

"You will pardon me, Mr. Rainsfield," replied a voice, which distinguished its owner as Mr. Billing, "it grieves me to be under the necessity of contradicting you; but, sir, I really must be permitted to differ from you, in your expressed opinion of an aberration of my intellect. I am proud to state, sir, that I have been ordained by the Almighty with the full and unimpaired use of my faculties; I can readily, sir, however, make allowance for the ebullition of your feelings; but [Pg 283] must most distinctly beg to inform you, sir, that you labour under a misapprehension with regard to my sanity; for I may say in the language of the immortal bard,

"My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time."

"Bosh!" ejaculated the other, "a truce to your trash; you sicken me with your fastidiousness; and if you are not mad yourself, you are likely to drive me so. No one unless afflicted with sheer insanity, would allow that black fellow into the store; and then above all things leave him in it. There isn't the slightest use in your attempting to excuse yourself, for you can't improve matters: you are a perfect nuisance in the place; and I declare if it were not for your family, I would not be bothered with your continual absurdities."

"I really conceive myself flattered, sir, by your good opinion of my valuable services; but doubt not, if they were as insignificant as you profess my manner of performing them is distasteful to [Pg 284] you, you would ere this have dispensed with them. But, Mr. Rainsfield, you will excuse my freedom, in defending myself against your imputations on my capacity; you must know, sir, that I have been connected with one of the first houses in London, the firm of Billing, Barlow, & Co., of Thames Street; and but for the unfortunate circumstance, of my having allowed myself to be allured to this country, by the glowing accounts of designing men, I should, sir, have still been in the enjoyment of comfortable means, if not of opulence. My experience therefore, sir, has been such as to warrant my assertion; and I utter it, I assure you, sir, without egotism, but merely as the result of a practical mercantile life; that I am sufficiently conversant with business, to undertake the management of any establishment; even, I may add, sir, without disparagement to you, one of greater magnitude than Strawberry Hill; and also—

"For goodness sake, stop that trash; what on earth has all that got to do with your permitting the [Pg 285] black to enter the store, which is supposed to be under your charge, and for the contents of which you are responsible?"

"I was about to explain that point, sir, when you interrupted me; but my first consideration was to establish my good fame, from the imputation cast upon it by you; which imputation, I am fain to believe, was uttered in a moment of hastiness; and which, after I have explained the circumstances of the case, you will be happy to retract. However, sir, permit me to continue. The black, I have every reason to believe, is in the service of Mr. Ferguson at Fern Vale; for he came over this morning, while you were absent at the bridge, with a message for that gentleman from his overseer; and knowing him to be on an excursion with the ladies, and thinking he would be back about mid-day, I advised him, sir, to delay his return to the station, until he had seen his master. Hence, you see, sir, his presence on the station was perfectly justifiable. With regard to [Pg 286] his peccancy I will not attempt, sir, to offer any palliation beyond the expression of my belief, that the tobacco was taken without any notion of the offence he was committing; in proof of which, I may mention, sir, the absence of any concealment on his part, when you came to the store. It was natural, sir, he should follow me about the place, from my having advised him to stay until the arrival of his master; and I, having occasion to go to the store, he accompanied me there; and being suddenly called away, sir, I inadvertently perhaps, left the door open and him inside. Then, it appears, he appropriated the tobacco you found in his hand, and had I returned before you came up, I should have as readily perceived, and as soon induced him to deliver it. If I might venture, sir, to express an opinion, I would say, at most, the offence is a paltry one, and could well be left unnoticed; more especially as he is, as I have premised, a servant of Mr. Ferguson."

"Do you think that is any reason why the scoundrel should escape?" exclaimed Rainsfield. "When [Pg 287] Mr. Ferguson knows as much about them as I do, he will likewise exclude them from his place. I have been at considerable pains at keeping them at a distance, and do not intend to let them be emboldened by the success of this scoundrel; which would necessarily be the case were he to

escape scathless. He shall be punished, and that speedily and effectually."

At this point of the discussion Bob Smithers joined the disputants, and having been an unseen listener to these objurgations; and, having a natural antipathy to the blacks, and a vindictive desire to annoy his lately discovered rival, had a corresponding inclination to support Mr. Rainsfield's determination to punish the captive.

"Your arrival, Smithers," said the other, as Bob entered the store, "is very opportune. I have just discovered a blackguardly black fellow stealing tobacco, and it appears from my storekeeper's [Pg 288] account, he is a servant of Mr. Ferguson. What would you propose we should do with him?"

"I would say flog him," replied Smithers; "take him into the bush, so that his voice cannot be heard at the house, and tie him up to a tree; give him a taste of the stock-whip, and send him home to his master, with a request that if he takes a fancy to the brutes, he either keeps them on his run, or teaches them to exhibit better propensities when they visit his neighbours."

"A capital idea, by Jove! Smithers," exclaimed Rainsfield; "we will certainly give him a tickling. I have got a fellow on the station that would cut a piece clean out of the hide of a bullock with his stock-whip. I will get him to manipulate; and I calculate, our darkie here will not trouble us with his presence again." As he said this he joined his companion in a burst of merriment at the wonder depicted in the countenance of their almost unconscious victim, who evidently [Pg 289] anticipated rough usage, though perfectly ignorant of the nature of the sentence passed upon him. Rainsfield then called one of the men, and directed him to get Smith, the stock-man, to take the black fellow into the bush for a few hundred yards, and tie him up to a tree with his back bared, and take a stock-whip with him, and await the coming of himself and Mr. Smithers.

"You surely, gentlemen, do not intend putting your threat into execution," cried Billing, who was standing amazed at the coolness of their preparations. "I appeal, sir, to your sense of honour, to your love of justice, to your charitableness, to induce you to desist from the perpetration of so vile an outrage on humanity. How can you punish, sirs, with such severity a poor, ignorant black, whose offence has been so trifling, that no honourable man would notice it? Besides, gentlemen, I maintain it is unjust to punish a poor aboriginal for an action in which he perceives or knows no wrong. If you persist in the fulfilment of this barbarity, and violation of your charge as Justices of [Pg 290] the Peace, let your own consciences be your accusers."

The result of this harangue was only the production of an inordinate burst of laughter from both Rainsfield and Smithers; who, without any further notice of the philanthropic storekeeper, than a forcible request from the latter to visit certain regions, the utterance of which would be unpleasant to ears polite, they followed the men to the place of punishment.

We will not accompany them to witness this scene, the disgusting and unfeeling nature of which we cannot sufficiently condemn, but merely state that for some minutes the air was rent by the shrieks of the victim; while the two gentlemen and J.P. watched the process, and then returned arm in arm to the house in high glee. Upon reaching the domicile, and discovering that the pic-nic party had come back, Smithers drew his companion away, and told him he wished to have a [Pg 291] few minutes conversation with him privately; whereupon Rainsfield, first ascertaining that Eleanor had retired to bed, that his wife was with her, and that his brother and Ferguson had gone to Fern Vale, returned with his companion to the store: in which they locked themselves. What was the nature of their conversation we can pretty correctly conjecture; as also, no doubt, can our readers. It will, therefore, be unnecessary for us to trespass on their privacy; to the full enjoyment of which we will leave them.

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 292]

"Then come, my sister! come, I pray,
With speed put on your woodland dress."
WORDSWORTH.

Before William had been long at Acacia Creek he began to experience the impatience of his sister in her incessant promptings to commence his journey; and, notwithstanding that he knew their house could not be ready for her reception for some time, he was constrained to submit to Kate's desire to enter at once upon her probationary visit. Their arrangements were soon made, and the young lady was not the last who was ready for the start; her mind was not troubled with a superfluity of apparel, or an infinity of boxes. We cannot say if she was peculiar to her sex in this [Pg 293] respect, but certain it is she did not hesitate to make the journey without the legion of packages which are usually the concomitants of travelling ladies. All her paraphernalia was comfortably settled on the back of a pack-horse, while her general effects were left to be forwarded to her brother's station as opportunity offered.

That Kate Ferguson left her father's house without regret we do not believe; but her mind was so taken up with the thoughts of her domestic importance, and she was so absorbed with the arrangements in perspective, that she entirely forgot the fact that she was leaving, perhaps for ever, her parent's roof; and was about to commence a life subjected to dangers and inconveniences, which she, even native born though she was, was totally unacquainted with. With her parents, however, it was far different; for they had been fully informed by John what sort of a

place it was their daughter was going to. Her father, to say nothing of the regret which he felt in [Pg 294]
parting with his child, experienced some remorse in consigning her to the discomfort of a wild and unsettled country. At the same time he was convinced she would be under good protection, and reconciled himself to the separation by the thought that probably the responsibility of managing the domestic establishment of her brothers would, in a great measure, prepare her for a more permanent station in life; and, in fact, rub off the lingering signs of childhood, and perfect her in a womanly capacity.

The feelings which agitated the breast of her mother, when she parted with her darling daughter, we cannot pretend to describe. We know that maternals usually give indications of unbounded grief at parting from their tender offspring, even upon the consummation of their earthly happiness. It may possibly arise from grief at the segregation of one not only made dear by the ties of parental and filial affection, but from the mutual companionship, reliance, and confidence [Pg 295]
that exist between mother and daughter; possibly it may be for the trials and dangers that beset the young creatures' paths in the commencement of their independent career; or, there may be an alloy of selfishness in the feeling. But certain it is, it is one of the mysteries of the female character; which, though to us inexplicable, we revere; and, consequently, we sympathize with, and respect the ebullition of Mrs. Ferguson's grief, as she wept over her charming daughter, when the young and inexperienced girl was about leaving her protection. Many were her parental admonitions to Kate for her guidance and good, and numerous her injunctions to William for her care and preservation. Never was there a kinder-hearted affectionate parent than this, and never were brother and sister more fondly attached. The mother knowing this, and confident that her son William would, if necessary, offer himself a self-immolated victim, sooner than any evil should [Pg 296]
happen to his charge, felt little apprehension for her daughter's safety.

The travelling party, consisting of Kate, her brother, and Mr. Wigton, were shortly on the road, and journeyed till night without the occurrence of any event worth recording; until, as darkness closed o'er the landscape, they entered the town of Warwick, and put up at the "Bullock's Head." Here William renewed the acquaintance of his old friend the Warwick Ganymede, "Hopping Dick;" and after recommending to the especial attention of Mr. Wigton and his sister the artistic display on the coffee-room walls, the rural combination of beauty and innocence on the mantelpiece, with their rotund neighbour, the guardian of the "spills," he gave instructions to the landlord's representative about their accommodation, and proceeded to the stable to satisfy himself that his horses were being well looked after; knowing that, unless he did so, the attention and provender they would receive would be scanty in the extreme.

On the present occasion, fortunately for our friends, the bovine cranium was empty, and William [Pg 297]
was in high spirits. He had had serious misgivings at the outset of his journey in taking his sister to such a place, from the scene he had on his previous visit seen enacted in it. But the domiciliary selection having a contingency attached to it similar to that which stultified the choice of that immortal, though, we fear, mythical individual, yclept Hobson, he had no alternative but to run the risk of annoyance in this favourite hostel. William, therefore, was happy at the thought that there would be no fear of molestation; and, Warwick being the only stage where they would have to quarter at an inn, he felt no apprehension for his sister's comfort during their further progress.

Hopping Dick speedily made his appearance to arrange the table for their repast, while William amused himself by eliciting information from him of a various nature, by questions put to the fellow as he continued to hover between the coffee-room and the pantry. [Pg 298]

"Have you had any exploits lately, Dick," said he, "similar to that which I witnessed on the first night I stopped here? You remember when I mean," continued William, as he remarked the man's abstraction, as if in thought to what or which exploit he had referred; "I mean when you had the table smashed."

"By the gent as tried to take his horse over it?" enquired the salient-gaited waiter.

"Exactly," replied his interlocutor.

"No, sir; we ain't had no more just like that 'un lately, not sich roarers. I s'pose ye know, sir, that 'ere gent, Mr. Smith, what the 'orse belonged to, is dead?"

"No," replied William, "I do not. Pray, how might that have happened?"

"Why, you see, sir, he stopped here for about a week, for he was uncommon fond of a spree, and he never reached home after that. His 'orse comed on to the station one day without him, and [Pg 299]
with the saddle twisted right round, and hanging under his belly. So ye see, sir, his people fancied he had got a 'buster' somehow, and went a-search of him, but couldn't find him nohow. They comed in here then, and found out what way he took; and, with some black fellows, they, after a while, found his track, and run it down till they found him as quiet as you please on the broad of his back, with his head cracked. He was a bit fresh when he left here, so they thought he might a' been going home, some'ut mad like, and got a 'spill,' which cook'd him. Howsomdever, he spent his money like a real gent, and I'm precious sorry he's dead; for he was uncom'n good to me, and a good 'un for custom to the master; the likes of him ain't seen every day."

Even grieved as William was to hear of the melancholy and untimely end of such a man; cut off in the prime of life while in the mad pursuit of a delirious career, he could not help indulging in a smile at the strange sophistry of his companion, who imagined that a lavish waste of substance [Pg 300]
was the constituted act of a gentleman; and at the selfishness of the fellow who regretted the death of the man only in so far as it affected the pocket of himself and his employer. But he

reflected it was the way of the world; clothe the feeling how he would; and he felt no doubt that perhaps with the solitary exception of a doating parent who might mourn his death in a far distant land, the man would pass from this earth without the regret of a mortal; and without leaving the remembrance of a virtue, or good action, to perpetuate his memory.

"Then, I suppose, Dick," continued William, "you have been quieter lately, since Mr. Smith was killed."

"Yes, sir, we've been somewhat quieter of late," replied the man; "but we expect to get a turn again soon. The shearers round the stations will be done their work shortly, and they'll be in with their cheques. Some on 'em a' done already; for we had a party in last week of about eight, and [Pg 301] they only went away yesterday."

"And I suppose spent their money too, like real gentleman, eh, Dick?" said William laughing.

"Why, sir," replied the man, "some on 'em did knock down their pile, and when they left here they was regularly cleared out."

"And how much had they spent individually do you think?" enquired the young squatter.

"That I couldn't exactly say," replied the other; "some on 'em knocked down twenty pounds or so, but some on 'em stuck to their tin, as they was a going down the country."

"Probably it was the intention of the whole party to go down the country until they came here; don't you think so, Dick?" asked William.

"Praps it was, sir, but some on 'em had to go back agin to work," naively replied the Ganymede.

"But how on earth could one man spend twenty pounds in a week, by merely drinking?" enquired [Pg 302] William.

"Easy enough, sir," replied the fellow; "some of those chaps, when they get the drink in 'em, will 'shout' for the whole town; and you know it ain't our buisness to stop 'em; we only sells the grog, and they buy it."

William had often heard of such practices as these where poor deluded wretches, after toiling hard to obtain their wages, had no sooner received a cheque or draft from their employers in settlement of what was due them, than they would rush to the first public-house; and, placing their cheque in the hands of the publican, would commence a course of mad dissipation; merely requesting to be informed when the money was expended. This had been told him, and also that the victims, after being kept in a state of delirium for a week or so, had it intimated to them that their funds were exhausted; that they had been "shouting" to all the town, or in other words, that they had been providing drink to all who chose to partake; in which belief they were compelled to [Pg 303] be satisfied and take their departure. Not only twenty, but often fifty, and even a hundred pounds, he had heard had been embezzled from men under such circumstances; and though he had never before seen instances to warrant his belief in such statements, he was now convinced of the existence of the iniquitous system; for this satellite of the demon had admitted the fact, and spoken of it as the mere course of business. William felt disgusted with the cool infamy of the fellow, and at the magnitude and effrontery of the publican's dishonesty. It was melancholy for him, as for any sentient creature, to contemplate the blind infatuation with which bushmen generally squander their money; or, more properly speaking, allow themselves to be robbed of it. Yet they are willing victims, while there is neither protection for them, nor punishment for the men whose criminality is so glaring.

Such were William's thoughts as Mr. Wigton entered the room. To the clergyman our young [Pg 304] friend communicated the conversation he had had with the waiter; and for sometime, until they were joined by Kate, the two gentlemen discussed the nature of that evil, which they both lamented; without being able to clearly define a means for the extrication of the unfortunate class.

"I can very well see," remarked Mr. Wigton, "the impulse under which these persons act. They are placed suddenly in possession of money; in the control of which they have previously had no experience; and, carried away by the advice, and influenced by the example of associates, they first learn that extravagance which ends in an improvidence that leaves them continually without a shilling. If they have any idea of being saving they are at a loss how to invest their savings; for no means present themselves; their opportunities of purchasing lands, on which to settle, are so rare that they hardly believe its possession within the range of possibility; and they consequently [Pg 305] submit to the decrees of evil. Being without the benefit of good advice, and the application of sound precepts, they see no other course open to them, but a reckless expenditure of their hard-earned gains."

"But do you not think, my dear sir," said William, "that some means could be devised to cultivate a feeling of prudence in these men? can they not be induced to abandon their suicidal extravagance?"

"Yes, certainly," replied his companion, "means could be adopted; but unless the matter is taken up by the employers, or our legislators, I fear nothing will ever be done to ransom the men. Besides, I believe the squatters consider it to their interest to nourish the practice, as it keeps the men more dependent upon them. If the employers could be persuaded to interest themselves on the subject I would hope for better things. Many plans would be useful, such as the establishment [Pg 306]

of savings banks for instance; but the principal, the desideratum in fact, is the facile procuration of cheap land. A man should be able at any moment to go to the survey office, or some local agent, and select a piece of land that would be suitable for agriculture; and be at liberty at once to take possession, and commence cultivation. Such would be the best means of ensuring thriftiness; and, until we obtain some such system, I fear we may labour in vain to induce economy. Not that the difficulty is insuperable. I have fortunately been the humble instrument of arresting many poor men from such headlong folly; by first inducing them to feel a disgust for the filthy and degrading dissipation which they indulge in. But I have never been able to give any advice in the disposal of their means, from the fact that I know of no channels into which to divert them."

At this point, the discussion ceased by the entrance of Kate, and the trio sat down to their meal, [Pg 307] undisturbed by the presence of strangers; and as the topics of the conversation which ensued, though exceedingly animated and interesting to the parties engaged in it, are not at all pertinent to our story, nor would be interesting to our readers, we may be permitted to draw a veil over the scene, until the conclusion of the repast.

William had a strong desire to question the strange character who waited at table; firmly believing him to be an infamous scoundrel, though gifted in a vicious lore, out of which our young friend had a wish to extract information. For this purpose, soon after the clearance of the cloth, he rose from the table, and leaving his sister in the society of Mr. Wigton, followed Dick into his own regions. Having lit his pipe at the kitchen fire, he took his seat to wait until Hopping Dick was sufficiently disengaged to admit of his answering his interrogations. The fellow himself seemed to like being drawn into conversation, and William had therefore little difficulty in [Pg 308] inducing him to be communicative; for by the aid of a stiff glass of grog, or as we would say, in the parlance of the country, "a ball," Dick's heart was softened; and he smiled his satisfaction in a sardonic grin, which had anything but amiability in its expression. Having finished the satisfying of his own inward man; and commenced the indulgence of adding his contribution to the general nicotian pregnated atmosphere, while proceeding about his vocation, he replied to William's various questions with a wonderful alacrity and volubility, strangely contrasting with the taciturn moroseness which had appeared to be his usual manner. Warmed with the genial influence of the spirituous unction, his bosom, if he was possessed of such a divison of anatomy, was opened to his young companion; and he not only gave him a perfect outline of his own history, but a synopsis of that of his master, together with other particulars, various and heterogeneous. As the reader may desire some little acquaintance of Dick's career, we will detail it; and, to save the [Pg 309] infliction of that individual's verbosity and jargon, render his narrative into a more comprehensive vernacular; prefacing it with the remark, that the adventures of the narrator must not be considered as a rule, or a characteristic of the inhabitants of the colony. Hopping Dick was an exception; he was in fact one of the last specimens of a class, now happily nearly extinct.

Hopping Dick was a "lag" and a "lifer;" or to be more explicit, he was one of those gentlemen who "leave their country for their country's good," and whose period of expatriation is for the term of their natural lives. What was the nature of the offence that caused his transportation we are unable to say positively, though we can form a pretty shrewd opinion. By his own account, all the justiciary of England conspired in unholy league to effect his ruin, and did not rest until they had accomplished their dread designs. Though we have no doubt he was very hardly dealt with in the [Pg 310] deprivation of his liberty, we strongly suspect our friend had a predilection for visiting the domiciles of his fellow citizens, slightly in opposition to their wishes; and dropping in at most unseasonable hours, by means of some instrumental application of his own, detrimental to the locks and fastenings of such dwellings. In addition to this, he sometimes had a playful manner of titulating the craniums of his friends, so visited, with a toyish sort of article he was induced to carry on his person for his own vital preservation.

It was on one occasion when he was going to see "his gal" (he said), who lived in a fashionable locality of London, he had been kept pretty late with some of his friends (or "pals," as he vulgarly designated them), and when he got to her house he discovered she had forgotten to leave the door open for him; but being pretty well acquainted with that accomplishment of the "force," area scaling, and being supplied with his own latch-key, he did not think much of her neglect. But, strange to say, and considerably to the astonishment of Dick, the head of the family had a strong [Pg 311] objection to that individual's visiting his ladye love; and absolutely mistaking him for a common burglar, seized him, with *malice prepensé*, to hand him over to "the perlice." Dick, under these circumstances, had no alternative but to knock his assailant down; but the screaming that was made in the house caused the appearance of those metropolitan enemies of freedom, the "peelers," who marched him off in custody. He was tried by a jury of his countrymen, who were so far biassed by his arch-enemy the judge, as to convict him of burglary, which resulted in the provision of a free passage for him to the rising settlement of Botany Bay. Upon his arrival at his destination our unfortunate friend was drafted to the penal settlement on the Hunter river; where he remained some time, until he was made over as an "assigned servant" to a settler in that district.

The master to whom Dick was assigned, like many more in the country, was one who had [Pg 312] received a large grant of land from the government, and was clearing and putting under cultivation a considerable portion by the labour of the convicts; who were at that time assigned by the government to any settler who would undertake to clothe and feed them. Under such a system, as might be imagined, the convict's apparel was of the meanest texture, and their food of the coarsest description; and while they were made to work under the terror of the lash, and the

eye of an overseer (often excelling in barbarous cruelty the vaunted atrocities of the American slave-drivers), flagellation was the ordeal they were almost constantly permeating.

Dick had not been long with his new master before he discovered the nature of the tyranny to which he would be subjected. His first taste of his penal life was on an occasion when he complained to the overseer of the nature of the tools with which he was working. Such flagrant [Pg 313] presumption could not, of course, be tolerated; the overseer reported him to the master; the master laid a charge of insubordination against him before the magistrate, and he was forthwith visited with the due punishment of the law, in the shape of fifty lashes; after which, with his body bleeding and lacerated, he was sent back to his work.

It is impossible to picture, with sufficient force, the horrors and atrocities of the penal times. We do not consider ourselves adequate to the task of exposure and condemnation; but, though we do not approve a life of ease and comfort accorded to condemned felons, we unhesitatingly affirm, that in most, if not all cases, the cruel treatment which the convicts underwent, instead of having a penitential influence, only served to harden them in their iniquities; and while they frequently became perfectly callous to the infliction of punishment, they were debased to the incarnation of fiends, merely wanting in the opportunity to perpetrate the most atrocious villanies in [Pg 314] retribution.

If Dick had ever entertained any disposition of a reformatory nature, it was entirely dissipated by his early experience. He only waited the auspicious moment when he could follow the steps of hundreds of others who had been similarly situated, but had escaped to become "bush-rangers," and the terror of the country. An opportunity was not long in presenting itself; and he, with a party of six as desperate ruffians as himself, contrived to elude the vigilance of their masters, and get into the bush. Their sufferings and privations were extreme; little short of the hateful servitude from which they fled; but they preferred anything, even death itself, rather than return to a repetition of their bondage. Their escape, however, was soon detected, and they were pursued by a small company of military; who succeeded in surprising them in the mountains, and upon their attempting to escape, fired upon them. In this recontre two of the convicts were killed, [Pg 315] and three others were wounded. Of these, Dick was one, for he received a shot in the knee from which he never thoroughly recovered; while the muscular contraction that ensued, from the want of surgical treatment, caused the deformity which gave rise to his appellation.

When he was retaken and brought back to the settlement, he was thrown back again upon the government, and put into the "chain-gang," where he worked in irons with the other incorrigibles. From this, after a while, he was transferred to a quarry party, and again made over to a settler as an assigned servant. His treatment from this master was even more tyrannical than he had experienced before; for the most imaginary offence, and frequently for no offence at all, but just at the caprice of the master, he was treated to various applications of the lash, and restricted allowances of his miserable rations. His slavery was the most abject, his misery the most consummate, and his degradation the most venal and depraved: he was the image of the [Pg 316] man without the mental spark; the human being in semblance, but the brute in reality.

The character of Dick's employer was well known; and hardened as all were by the repetition of scenes that would have made the heart of a novice sicken, most, even of the officials, looked upon him as too harsh and cruel, though none attempted to check his insatiable inhumanity. A circumstance, however, transpired, which speedily brought this state of things to a crisis. Dick had only returned one day from the "triangle," with his body lacerated by the punishment he had been undergoing, when he was ordered by his master to instantly resume his labour, while he taunted him and laughed at his emaciated appearance. The heat of the sun was oppressive, and Dick, though he had borne unflinchingly the infliction of the lash, was sick at heart, and debilitated by the loss of blood. All his evil passions were aroused within him; and it was only [Pg 317] with an unwilling hand and suppressed oath of threatened vengeance that he resumed his work; while his tormentor continued to goad him with a recollection of his past and present misery, and a prospect of fresh torture. The unfeeling wretch continued his banter until human nature could bear it no longer, and with the spade which he held in his hand, Dick clove the skull of his inordinate persecutor. He never attempted to escape from the fate which he knew awaited him; but permitted himself to be led quietly to that confinement which he was aware would only terminate with the close of his life. He remained in durance for some months or so, during which his master hovered between life and death; who, when he was sufficiently recovered to be enabled to move about, was gratified by having the unfortunate criminal brought to justice.

In those days the laws against the convicts were very summary; short work was made of those with whom the rulers experienced much trouble; and in a case like this, where a prisoner [Pg 318] attempted the life of a free settler, his doom was fixed before he was placed at the bar; nothing but his life could expiate for such a crime. Dick well knew this, and also that if there were any mitigating circumstances, his master would spare no trouble in securing his execution; he was not therefore at all surprised that he was sentenced to the extreme rigour of the law. However, death appeared to the miserable culprit only a release from his bodily suffering; and he hailed its consummation with more delight than he had experienced in any of his earthly pursuits; but his sufferings were not yet at an end. His execution was fixed; notwithstanding that some slight effort was made to save him by some persons more humane than their compeers, and who knew the character of the victim's persecutor; and he was led away to the final scene of his drama. Before the adjustment of the hempen order he was enlivened by the brutal taunts and lampoons [Pg 319] of his master; who, forgetful of his own narrow escape from the grave, jested, with an unparalleled coarseness, on the fate awaiting the condemned wretch before him.

The signal was given; the bolt was withdrawn; and Dick, with the hoarse laugh of his master ringing in his ears, was launched into the air, if not into eternity. But by some gross mismanagement the culprit's feet came in contact with the ground; while his ears continued to be assailed with the blaspheming raillery of the man, who was equally deserving of such a fate. In this position the unfortunate wretch remained, until a hole was dug to make his suspension complete; and he was again launched forth; though with no better success. The authorities were by this time felt to be in a fix; but the victim was not to escape, at least, so said the master; who with an oath, volunteered to finish the work himself. Carrying his offer into execution, he mounted the rope that suspended the criminal, and added his weight by standing on the man's [Pg 320] shoulders, to effect a dislocation, or strangulation. But he was again frustrated; for the rope, which had done service on many similar occasions, gave way under the additional weight; and both were precipitated into the pit, amidst the oaths and imprecations of the one, and the groans and lamentations of the other.

The body of the half strangled man was then removed; while fresh exertions were made to obtain his reprieve; this time with a better result; and, notwithstanding the strenuous opposition of the master, Dick's life was spared; though it was only to undergo the horrors of a stricter servitude. This he bore for some three years; and if by that time, he was not reformed, he was certainly subdued; while his apparent docility, being construed into reformation, had the effect of causing a relaxation of the rigid discipline under which he had been placed. He was relieved from the irons in which he worked, and was permitted the use of his limbs with more freedom; while the [Pg 321] use nht psoe hwi cfirt h tth em (after he was transferred to the new settlement of Moreton Bay), was to escape into the bush. For years nothing further was heard of him; and, by those who troubled themselves to bestow a thought upon him, he was supposed to have perished. But, after the abandonment of the settlement as a penal depot, when it was thrown open to the public, a report was brought in that, in a distant part of the country, a white man was living with the blacks in perfect nudity; and, from his long exposure to the sun, almost of a colour with his companions. He was said to be robust looking, but with a malformation by which one of his legs was longer than the other. The description answered to the escaped convict, Dick; and, the circumstances having been communicated to the government, a party was sent in quest of him. After some trouble he was discovered, and brought into the settlement; but the results of his past life with the blacks were, that he had entirely forgotten his mother tongue, and had acquired new [Pg 322] ways and sympathies that long deterred him from assimilating to those of the whites. Considering his many and peculiar vicissitudes, a remission of the penalty to which he was liable was obtained from the Crown; and a perpetual ticket-of-leave was granted him, provided that he remained in the district of Moreton Bay.

Such then was the career of this character related by himself to William, as the latter sat listening to him; and though his sufferings had been fearful, and his escapes miraculous, the catalogue of his trials was only a counterpart of hundreds or thousands of his fellows who had either died under their servitude, or become scourges to the country. Numerous are the instances of the atrocious barbarities of a system, which for iniquity had no parallel; but it is not our object to enlarge on the dismal subject; and, as we may have occasion to revert to it again, for the present we will dismiss it from our thoughts.

CHAPTER XIII. [Pg 323]

"Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales a portion with judicious care;
And 'let us worship God' he says with solemn air."

BURNS.

The party at the "Bullock's Head" retired early to rest in order to proceed on their journey at a corresponding hour on the following morning. They slept and rose, breakfasted and resumed their travel; and the same afternoon arrived at Barra Warra, where they were welcomed by their kind-hearted friends, the Dawsons. It is needless for us here to detail the circumstances of the visit; suffice it to say, that the lady of the house and Kate Ferguson at once established their friendship on a firm basis; and the gentlemen passed their time pleasantly, and in a manner [Pg 324] congenial to their respective tastes. The only event during the period of their sojourn, which we deem necessary to narrate, is that of preaching in the bush.

A day or two after their arrival—on a Sunday morning—Mr. Dawson placed his large wool-shed, which at the time was nearly empty, at the disposal of Mr. Wigton, for the purpose of there holding Divine service; and he gave intimation on the station that such would take place. Though Mr. Dawson was a conscientious adherent of the Anglican church, he was not one of those who, in the absence of a place of worship where the adoration is conducted not strictly in accordance with the prescribed formulæ of his church, would abstain from attendance on any other denominational service. He was devoid of such bigotry; and considered it a duty, when an opportunity of public worship presented itself (even though the minister officiating was not [Pg 325] deemed perfectly orthodox by the tenets of the Episcopalian creed), to avail himself of it. Where means of ministration were rare, he considered sectarian distinctions prejudicial to the cause of the gospel, and deemed the only essential to be an earnest truthfulness and piety on the part of the clergyman. He always encouraged the ordinances of religion on his station, and the

inculcation of moral principles among his men.

The Sabbath was one of those lovely days so peculiar to the sunny regions of favoured Australia. The sky was without a cloud to vary its unbroken and immaculate azure, and the sun shone with a voluptuous lustre, which rendered the atmosphere warm, though not oppressive, and the face of the country smiling and cheerful. The people around the place—men, women, and children, clean and neatly clad—assembled in an orderly manner; while the sombre stillness of the bush tended to impress the beholders with an earnestness, a feeling of devotion, and a confirmed belief, that, [Pg 326] verily, "the Spirit of the Lord moved upon the face of the earth." There are, we venture to say, few more inspiring scenes than the performance of Divine service, or "a preaching," in the wilds of the woods; and we believe the spiritual influence was felt that day by not a few of the number who listened to the exposition of the Word, which was delivered from the lips of the preacher with a truth and pathos characteristic of a sincere and devout mind. The same orderly and sober manner marked the dispersion of the people, as did their gathering; and if no spiritual good arose from it (though we sincerely trust and believe there did), in a moral point of view the people reaped a reward; and by the same means, indirectly, the squatter was benefited.

These preachings contrast pleasingly with the general thoughtless and frivolous manner of some of the congregations in our large towns, and it is only to be regretted that they are not of more frequent occurrence. Nothing would more greatly tend to advance the morals of those people of [Pg 327] Australia who too frequently live in a state of vitiated depravity and mental degradation, and who are perfectly destitute of religion, and ignorant and neglectful of its observances.

When William and his party had remained at Barra Warra for about a week he thought it time to push forward to his home; and, after some little persuasion with Mrs. Dawson, induced her to part with his sister, and the young lady to consent to go. They took their leave amidst a general expression of cordiality, and an entreaty from their kind friends to find their way back again as soon as possible. They then proceeded on their way, Kate more than ever delighted with her prospect. In the spontaneous ebullition of her youthful and innocent feelings, and charmed beyond measure at the kind reception she had met with from the amiable people she had just left, she was in the highest spirits, and gave frequent vent to her joy. Her merry peals of laughter [Pg 328] rang through the woods with an echo that sounded as if all the trees had taken up the chorus, and supported her in bursts of silvery-toned cachinnations. She talked and chatted away the time, asking questions of her brother respecting the Smitherses and the Rainsfields, and requesting him to draw comparisons between the two families and that which they had lately left. This task William professed himself unable to accomplish, and unwilling to attempt; remarking that "comparisons were odious," and that his sister would be able to judge for herself if she would exercise a little patience.

The road was quickly travelled over; and our friends comfortably completed that day's stage, and found themselves at Brompton before dark. They were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Smithers in as friendly a manner as William had anticipated; but upon Kate and Mr. Wigton being introduced as strangers to Bob, he muttered some unintelligible sentence, turned on his heel, and left the room. [Pg 329] Such extraordinary conduct rather surprised the Fergusons, especially William; who, when last he had seen him, parted from him in perfect good feeling. The proprietor of the station and his wife were not only astonished, but exceedingly chagrined to think that their visitors should have received so gross an insult from a member of their family. Without entering into any vituperations on Bob's conduct, they apologised to their friends for his inexplicable behaviour, stating their inability to assign any reason for it beyond his extraordinary temper, and expressing many regrets for its occurrence.

The Fergusons professed to think nothing of it, and begged their friends to take no heed of the circumstance, as it gave them, personally, no concern; being convinced that it could not have been the intention of Mr. Smithers' brother to have meditated any insult. Notwithstanding all their assurances that they in no way felt annoyed, they could not remove from the minds of their [Pg 330] hosts the impression that they had received an unwarrantable insult; and the culprit not "entering an appearance" again, and no explanation being forthcoming, the evening passed very heavily, and a general relief was experienced by the party when they separated for the night.

On the following morning the Fergusons and Mr. Wigton resumed their journey, and the spirit of their travelling contrasted greatly with that of the previous day. They had parted from the Smitherses on very good terms; but Bob had continued to absent himself, and there was a gloom thrown over the parting in consequence.

"What a horrid bear that man is," exclaimed Kate, as she rode between the other two equestrians. "What could have induced him to be so rude? Have you any idea, Will?"

William certainly had an idea, and it grieved him much to contemplate it, for he thought he read in the occurrence a rupture between his brother and Bob Smithers. But he was deep in thought [Pg 331] when his sister addressed him, and not until she had repeated her question did he make any reply; and that reply, if not strictly the truth, was, he thought, the best he could make, rather than by uttering his convictions, to excite the fears of his sister for her brother John.

"No, my Kate, I do not," replied William, "but what does it signify? We have no occasion to trouble ourselves about the circumstance. Bob Smithers was exceedingly ungentlemanly in his behaviour; but I believe he is proverbial for that sort of conduct, so I think we need not give the matter any further thought. Do you, Mr. Wigton?"

"You are quite right, William," replied the minister, "the folly or frivolity of the man, for at most it is only such, should not be allowed to give us any uneasiness. If it was intended to convey any insult, we can best show our appreciation of it by allowing it at once to sink into oblivion; but I have no doubt it may be attributable to his extraordinary manner, which, you say, is customary." [Pg 332]

"Well," said Kate, "I'll tell Miss Rainsfield of the manner in which he treated us; it is only right that she should know what a ruffian he is."

"Now, my thoughtless little sister, you must do no such thing," said her brother; "rather studiously avoid mentioning anything at Strawberry Hill disparaging of Bob Smithers. Miss Rainsfield must be better acquainted with the gentleman's character and manner than either you or I; and the relation of any such affront as we have received might cause her considerable and unnecessary pain."

"Nonsense, William," cried the girl. "Miss Rainsfield ought to know how he acts to strangers, because, I am sure, he'll always behave himself before her; and I am convinced if she only knew what a bear he is, she would not have anything to say to him."

"Kate," remarked Mr. Wigton, "William is quite right; it would be better to say nothing about the affair, if, as I imagine from your conversation, this young lady entertains any regard for Mr. Smithers. She must be better acquainted with his feelings than we; consequently, we should avoid the possibility of creating any contentions between the families; while, after all, there might have been nothing in his manner deserving animadversion." [Pg 333]

"I think I can see the drift of my fair sister's plan," said William to Mr. Wigton; "she has taken a fancy to Bob Smithers herself, and she thinks by telling this dreadful tragedy to Miss Rainsfield, that young lady will be induced to discard him, and leave the coast open to our Kate."

"You are a most impertinent fellow," exclaimed Kate, as she attempted to lay her whip across the shoulders of her brother. "I detest the man; and if he were to make himself as pleasant and agreeable as it is possible for any man to be, I could not endure him."

"Never mind, my pretty Flora," said her brother, "we will not submit you to the infliction; but promise to say nothing to the Rainsfields of the affair at Brompton." [Pg 334]

"If you particularly wish it," replied Kate, "I will hold my tongue; but I cannot imagine for why. But tell me," said she, as her usual smile returned to its wonted place, "how long shall we be before we arrive at Strawberry Hill?"

"Not until late," said William, "unless we mend our pace, so we had better push on;" with which remark he put spurs to his horse, and rode at a brisk rate followed hard by his companions.

Well on in the afternoon they arrived at Strawberry Hill; and the first inmate of the house who presented himself was Tom Rainsfield, who grasped the hand of William, and was introduced by him to Kate and Mr. Wigton. The former he expressed much delight in seeing, and stated he had been looking out anxiously for her arrival, and would at once constitute himself her protector and [Pg 335] most obedient servant. With such little blandishments he led the arrivals into the house; and presented with due solemnity the treasure, that he said had been consigned to his keeping, to his sister-in-law and his cousin. The ladies at once received Kate with that affectionate welcome inherent in women; and, relieving Tom of his self-imposed responsibility, disappeared with her to one of those secret conferences, the mysteries of which we masculine mortals are destined always to remain in profound ignorance.

The gentlemen then issued through the French light, and passed from the room to the verandah that encompassed the house. Tom brought out chairs, and desired his visitors to be seated for a few minutes, until the ladies returned, while he went in search of his brother to acquaint him of their arrival.

In a short time Mrs. Rainsfield and her companions made their appearance all radiant with smiles, and their faces beaming with expressions of good feeling; shortly after which Tom joined [Pg 336] them with Mr. Rainsfield, who received the travellers with a politeness that struck William as having some degree of formality in it. However, a repast was speedily prepared and set upon the table, to which all sat down; when everything was cordiality; and after spending a very pleasant and agreeable evening, the party broke up at an hour rather late for weary wayfarers. But the gentlemen expressed themselves free from fatigue; and Kate, who was really a good equestrian, so enjoyed the society of Mrs. Rainsfield, and had become so attached to Eleanor, that the moments seemed to fly by with an almost incredible velocity. Not till Mr. Rainsfield had more than once reminded his wife that it was approaching midnight, did the ladies take the hint to separate. Then the matron followed by the two girls, with their arms encircling each others waists, made their exit; while Tom's eyes followed them with looks of admiration.

In the morning they all assembled at the table; and without tiring the reader with the [Pg 337] conversation that was carried on, or the entire detail of their plans, which were discussed over the morning meal, we will give a synopsis of the whole in a few words. It was arranged that William, his sister, and Mr. Wigton, accompanied by Tom and Mrs. Rainsfield, should ride over to Fern Vale. William and Mr. Wigton were to remain there with John, while the rest of the party returned to Strawberry Hill. Mr. Wigton had declined the invitation of the Rainsfields to remain with them for a short time on the ground that he would not have long to remain in their quarter, and he wished to devote as much as possible of his time to his young friends. Kate was to fulfil

her promised visit until her brother's house was ready for her reception.

The arrangements for the passage over to Fern Vale pleased all parties but Kate, who had been industriously persevering to induce Eleanor to accompany them. But her friend had excused [Pg 338] herself on the plea that she very rarely rode, was not at all a good horsewoman, and almost invariably felt ill after a ride. So Kate, finding entreaty useless, was constrained to do without the companionship of her friend. The party took their departure early in the forenoon, without seeing Mr. Rainsfield; who, they understood, was engaged with some person, Mr. Billing had sent word to say, had been waiting to see him.

CHAPTER XIV. [Pg 339]

"Nature, indeed, denies them sense,
But gives them legs and impudence,
That beats all understanding."
WILLIAMS.

When the black boy, whom John Ferguson had named Billy, was released by his captors, after the castigation we have seen him subjected to by Rainsfield and Smithers, he made the best of his way to Fern Vale; and there, with his bleeding back substantiating his statement, told his tale of woe. John and his friend Tom Rainsfield could hardly credit their sight; the latter especially, who could not think but that if his brother had any hand in the barbarity it must have been as a [Pg 340] passive instrument at the disposal of Smithers. The young men felt for the poor aboriginal, and in their sympathy tended his wounds and gave him what assistance they could. With the black the injury sank deep into his heart; savage as he was he felt the ignominy of his treatment; and he cherished that feeling of deep revenge which is innate in the natures of all God's creatures, but especially in those, who like the savage, have never had an ethic inculcation to restrain their passions. He gave vent to his agony, as he lay prostrate on his pallet, in wails of anguish and vituperative mutterings; uttered in the unintelligibleness of his own language.

After the subsiding of the first surprise and indignation the agitation of his own thoughts too much occupied John's mind to admit of his being much diverted by the sorrows of his black boy; and Tom was too much affected by the dejectedness of his friend to entertain any lasting concern for the sable sufferer. As he sat ruminating on the incidents of the day, until he fell into a reverie [Pg 341] almost as deep as one of those indulged in by his companion, he roused himself by uttering the following exordium: "Cheer up, John, my dear fellow; don't permit yourself to feel disappointed, for I am sure from the glimpse Eleanor has had to-day of Smithers' real nature she cannot entertain any respect for him; and, as for her ridiculous persistence in binding herself to a foolish engagement, I have no doubt she will now see the necessity of abandoning it."

"My dear Tom," replied the other, "I cannot consent to oppose the claims of Bob Smithers so long as Eleanor herself holds them sacred. She admitted her engagement to him in his and my presence, and at the same time abstained from giving me any direct answer to my proposal; I imagine, as she thought, to avoid paining my feelings; so I must not dare to hope."

"That's all moonshine," cried Tom, "banish the idea of Bob Smithers from your head altogether. [Pg 342] You say Eleanor gave you no direct answer to your entreaties; I don't profess to be a judge in such matters, but it appears to me her hesitation was not disadvantageous to you. If that ruffian had not appeared I am sure you would have overcome all her scruples. Persevere John! you know the adage, 'faint heart never won fair lady;' rouse yourself, and act upon it, and I will stake my existence on the result."

"I cannot, Tom," replied his friend. "I assure you, I cannot; I have a higher opinion of Eleanor's integrity than to think she would be influenced by my entreaties to reject Smithers merely from our little fracas yesterday. She distinctly informed me she was engaged to him, and I am bound in honour to respect her judgment. If I ever had reason to believe her determination would alter I might hope; but no, I see no prospect."

"You are too nice," exclaimed Tom, "upon the point of honour, as you call it. Her engagement I look upon as a mere phantasy, which she will be convinced of ere long. All you have to consider [Pg 343] is, whether or not she will accept you. You have had no answer from her you say; then take an early opportunity of seeing her, and pressing for a reply. If you will not plead for yourself I will for you; and shall point out to her the absurdity and absolute sinfulness of discarding you for that object of conceited inanition, Bob Smithers."

"Much as I would desire the reversion of the decree that forbids me hope that Eleanor will be mine," replied John, "I would much rather that you did not agitate her by adverting to the subject in her hearing, as it cannot fail to renew unpleasant reminiscences."

"Well, perhaps it would be better," said Tom, "to let it remain as it is for a short time; and if you promise me to keep up your spirits, and hope for a better state of things, I will engage not to disturb her unnecessarily. Why, I'll stake anything you like on it, she is thinking of you at this very moment; and will no more marry Bob Smithers than I will the ghostly Meg Merillies." [Pg 344]

With a sickly smile from the forlorn lover the conversation ceased for the time; and the friends

shortly afterwards retired to seek the rest they respectively stood in need of. On the following morning Tom returned to Strawberry Hill; while John, upon busying himself on the station, learnt that the black boy Billy had disappeared in the night; and that Jemmy, his companion, professed to know nothing about him. Calling in the aid of Joey he was enabled to trace the track of the fugitive to the river; from which circumstance he conjectured that Billy had waited for the dawn of morning; when he had taken his departure with the intention of joining his tribe. Upon making this discovery he felt considerable annoyance, as the black had began to be useful, and would in all probability be followed by his companion. He could not help feeling disgusted at the treatment the poor fellow had received; and so far as he was personally concerned, he felt himself justified [Pg 345] in resenting the conduct of his neighbour; which he determined to take the earliest opportunity of stigmatizing, and condemning in the strongest possible terms. As he had anticipated, the other black soon followed his fellow, and he was consequently put to considerable inconvenience by the deprivation of their labour.

Nearly a week had elapsed after this, and Tom Rainsfield had ridden over to Fern Vale to spend a little spare time with his friend, and cheer him in his solitude. "My brother," said he, "has been again annoyed by the blacks. They have paid him another visit, and seem determined to cultivate his acquaintance more closely than hitherto. I expect that fellow of yours has given his relatives a feeling account of his reception at our place, and also as to the exact position of the store. In their late visit, they were in considerable numbers (I presume to protect themselves against a general flogging), and they have vented their displeasure in a manner most conducive to their [Pg 346] happiness, by appropriating what of our stores they could conveniently remove. I believe my brother meditates some desperate onslaught; for he is swearing to exterminate the whole tribe if they continue their depredations much longer."

"I think," replied John Ferguson, "that he is suicidal to his own interests by perpetuating his quarrel with the blacks. An unceasing warfare with them will only be conducive of misfortune, loss, and uneasiness to both himself and his neighbours; for the blacks will not have the sense to discriminate between those that are friendly disposed towards them, and those that are the reverse. All whites to them will be the same, and will become objects of their hatred."

"I agree with you to a certain extent," replied Tom; "and I believe the aborigines can not only be conciliated, but be made certainly useful, if not industrious. I don't like the idea of driving the poor wretches away from the country: at the same time you must admit our property must not be [Pg 347] despoiled without an effort on our part to protect it."

"Certainly," replied John; "but I believe the very violation of which you speak is merely the result of the harsh treatment persevered in by your brother. Their visits to you are only their retribution for injuries received at his hands. You see they respect my property, simply because I treat them with some degree of lenity; at the same time I give them to understand that I would not permit any appropriation on their part; and I have no doubt if your brother would adopt the same course he would experience a similar result."

"Very likely," said Tom; "but he does not seem to think so, and I imagine it would be hard to convince him. The hostility which he now experiences from the blacks, I believe, as you say, is the result of his austerity; but he imagines it arises from their own natural predilection for stealing, [Pg 348] while his severity is his only safeguard. I am quite of opinion that the blackguards are naturally disposed to pilfer; but at the same time I have no doubt our property could be preserved by the exercise of a moral firmness, without any of that unnecessary harshness and cruelty which my brother displays. But see, here they are, paying you a visit apparently, and in open day too; see now, if they don't upset your theory."

The appearance that caused this expression of Tom's was of a party of blacks who were approaching the station in a slow though by no means silent manner; for, in fact, the incessant din of their jabber heralded them before they were actually visible. The party consisted of about thirty men, who were armed with their usual weapons of spears, boomerangs and waddies; and clad in nature's own habiliments. They were headed by two fellows of commanding stature and appearance; though little differing from the others, except that one wore a necklace of small [Pg 349] bones; and the other, suspended from his neck by a cord and resting on his breast, a small brass-plate of a crescent shape, on which his name was engraved. This individual, who was the chief of the tribe, was named Dugingi; while his companion enjoyed the more euphonious sobriquet of Jemmy Davis. The latter had undertaken to introduce himself and his friend to the whites with much form; and during the ceremony we will take the opportunity of giving the reader a slight outline of his and his comrade's history.

Dugingi was a semi-civilized black of about the middle age, powerfully made, and decidedly unprepossessing in his appearance. He had been at one time a trooper in the native police force of the colony; in which corps he had been discreet enough to acquire all the vices and depravities of the whites, while their virtues remained to him that arcana of life which held out no allurements for emulation. When this effective force was greatly reduced, and in some parts [Pg 350] entirely disbanded, by the sapient government of the time, Dugingi, with numerous others of his countrymen similarly instructed, were let loose to join their tribes, to contaminate the hitherto inoffensive blacks with their vile inoculations. We will not stop to review the evils that have arisen from the system of imbuing the natures of the blacks with a taste for sin, acquired in scenes of crime and iniquity, and then sending them back to their former haunts to spread amongst their fraternity the virus of civilized corruption. Such itself might be made the subject of especial exposition, and would require more space than we in this tome can afford it.

Upon his juncture with his tribe the effects of Dugingi's education soon displayed themselves; and having been caught and convicted of theft, and after a series of successful depredatory exploits, he was sentenced to two years' penal servitude at the convict establishment in Cockatoo Island. Here, again, is another instance of the judicial short-sighted policy against which we [Pg 351] might declaim: for, setting aside the absence of punishment to a black, where confinement is accompanied with ease and regular dietary; to which he has not hitherto been accustomed (to say nothing of his incapacity to understand the nature of his crime, or the cause of his incarceration); the contamination he receives during his sojourn in those fearful sinks of infamy, complete his immoral training; and when he again breathes the fresh air of freedom, he is as accomplished a villain as ever graced the bar of the Old Bailey. So it was with Dugingi. Cockatoo Island finished what the native police commenced; and but for his arrant cowardice, and the dread of the settler's fire-arms, he would have been as great a ruffian as ever traversed the bush. But though he was at heart a thorough scoundrel, and pretty generally known to be so, he was kept in check by a wholesome dread, not of the visitation of the law (which, in the remote parts, never could be [Pg 352] sufficiently powerful to protect the settlers from the depredations or assaults of the blacks), but of a retribution from the whites; which they took it upon themselves to inflict, when they conceived it necessary. Thus, though Dugingi was peaceable, it was only the quiet of the subdued tiger, which merely required time and opportunity to develope its real nature. The plate, which he wore round his neck, was given to him upon the disbandment of the force; and on the strength of it and his civilized acquirements, he arrogated to himself the chiefship of his tribe; thus proving, that in his case at least, "knowledge was power."

Jemmy Davis, on the other hand, was a very different character. He had been taken from his tribe, when young, by a settler, who called him after himself, and kept him almost constantly about his person and premises. He taught him reading and writing, both of which Jemmy acquired admirably; and he spoke English as fluently, and even more so, than many Englishmen. [Pg 353] Some years after his domestication, and some little time before the date of our narrative, Mr. Davis visited England, and took with him his Australian namesake; keeping him constantly by his side during the whole of a tour through the greater part of Europe. The effects of this would be imagined to have been the entire eradication of his aboriginal nature, and a perfect conversion to civilisation. So thought his master, but he was deceived; and so have been all those who have attempted to naturalize the blacks to an industrial mode of life. Jemmy Davis, as soon as he returned with his master to Australia and the station, took his departure from the comforts of the whites; denuding himself of his clothes, which he had so long accustomed himself to wear; and joined his tribe in the state we have seen him.

The case of Jemmy Davis is by no means a singular one in the aborigines of Australia. The attempt has frequently been made to induce them to assimilate their ways to those of the whites, [Pg 354] but, with very rare exceptions, with the same result; nor, when we analyze the feelings that actuate their return to savage life, need we feel surprised. The endearments of home, wretched as that home may be; the ties of kindred; the love of country; the force of early training, and old associations; all imbue the breast of the savage in an equal degree that similar sentiments do the bosoms of his civilized neighbours.

Let a man of humble birth, and parentage so mean that they have been considered, by their fellow mortals, as cumberances on the earth; we say, let him, through his own industry and fortuitous circumstances, raise himself to a post of eminence and power; and amidst all the engrossing excitement of his life of pomp and pedantry, the promptings of his natural affection will cause his heart to yearn after the authors of his being, and the humble tenement that sheltered his infant head. If, then, such feelings exist in the mind of a man subject to all the [Pg 355] caprices of the world, and made callous to the feelings of humanity by the usages of that society that would hold up to scorn and ridicule the exhibition of affection for anything so mean; how much more would the child of nature, unencumbered with such conventionalities, and unfettered by the prejudices of civilized life, yearn after the ties of kindred and the associations of his early training. Hence all attempts to draw the savage races into a settled civilisation, and wean them from their inherent customs, have signally failed. Blacks may have been partially induced to adopt the customs of the whites, in individual cases, such as Jemmy Davis; but their continuance is not to be depended upon, for they soon tire of their new life when they find that labour is its natural adjunct, and they relapse into their former state, preferring the indolence it ensures.

The mode of living of the blacks in their wild state is primitive in the extreme; and the sources of [Pg 356] their sustenance equally precarious. Their diet consists of roots, berries, fish, small animals, and reptiles (such as snakes and lizards); and as the country never abounds with either, they are necessarily often perfectly destitute; and the water as frequently failing, coupled with the entire absence of any degree of pre-thought or providence on their part, and their imperfect means of procuration, they are almost constantly in an abject state of wretchedness. Their weapons are primitive, singular, and even, as savage specimens, ineffective. Their natural characteristics are cowardice, indolence, deceit, cunning, and treachery (particularly to and amongst themselves); prevented only, as we have already said, in their intercourse with the whites, from exercising the latter by the predominance of the first. Their physical formation is decidedly of the inferior order; with very few exceptions, they are by no means muscular or well formed. Their bodies are covered with long, raised wales, which are caused by incisions made with a sharp instrument [Pg 357] (such as a shell or a flint), when the patient is young; the wounds are for some time kept open with earth, and made to assume their embossment in the operation of healing. In their movements they are sluggish, though agile when stimulated to action. Their limbs are of surprising tenuity. In their communications with one another they are volatile; verbose in

conversation, and puerile in manner: continually embroiled in some quarrel, which either ends in words, or terminates in the act of the secret assassin; rarely coming to an open rupture while the adversaries are on their guard.

Their women, or "gins," are even inferior to the men, both physically and mentally. In appearance they are perfectly hideous, almost to deformity, and are the drudges of their lords; whom they repay for their contumely, by keeping in continual broils, during which their feminine voices are ever heard over the din of their verbal contentions.

We have said Jemmy Davis was the ambassador of his tribe, and that he had introduced himself and Dugingi to John Ferguson. We will therefore, now, after our epic digression, resume our narrative, by repeating the conversation that followed. [Pg 358]

"Well, Jemmy," said John Ferguson, "and what may be your pleasure? to what may we attribute the honour of your visit?"

"We came to tell you, sir," replied the plenipo, "that we have a great 'corroboree' to-night, and we want some rations."

"And what is your corroboree for, Jemmy?" enquired John.

"It's a 'kipper corroboree,' sir," replied Jemmy.

"Well," replied John, "I'll not give you a mouthful of anything until you send back my black boys. What made them leave me? I treated them well; gave them plenty of rations, and blankets on cold nights; so why did they run away? Will you tell me?"

Dugingi replied, "Billy been tell'um me how Misser Rainsfield and Misser Smithers been beat 'em; and bael budgery (not good) that fellow; budgery (good) fellow you; bael (not) you beat 'em black fellow; and black fellow been wooller (say) you corbon budgery (very good); but bael black fellow sit down (stay) where white fellow beat 'em." [Pg 359]

"That's all right, Dugingi," said John. "I never beat the black boys, and if I knew it, would never allow any one else to do so; but because Mr. Rainsfield flogged Billy is that any reason why he should run away from me? Let him and the other boy come back, and I'll give you some rations for your corroboree; but if they don't come back, I'll not give you anything."

An altercation then ensued between Dugingi and the fugitives, who appeared to be of the visiting party; and it was ultimately arranged that they should return after their feast.

"I suppose we can come and see your corroboree, if we like, Dugingi?" asked John.

"Yuoi (yes), Masser," said Dugingi, "you come along in three-fellow hours after sun go down, and me be see 'um you. Misser Tom he come along too, he budgery fellow to black fellow; but bael budgery fellow brother belong to him, he corbon (big) —— rogue." [Pg 360]

This defamatory expression of opinion of Dugingi's on the merits of Mr. Rainsfield was uttered in no tone, and with no expression of amiability; and Tom attempted to smother his ire as he replied, "You are highly flattering, Dugingi, not only to me but to my brother; but, never mind, I'll go and see you. Me be brother belonging to you; you go ask my brother for rations like it corroboree."

"He been give it," replied Dugingi, "plenty plour (flour), tea, sugar, bacca; corbon plenty."

"Gammon!" exclaimed Tom, "I know better than that."

"Bael gammon," replied the black; "he been give it I tell you, plenty;" whereupon Dugingi whispered a few words to his companions in his own dialect, and the whole sable conclave burst out into a loud laugh, and commenced an almost deafening jabbering amongst themselves. After which Dugingi and Jemmy Davis, promising faithfully to send the black boys over to the station after the corroboree, got their promised provender, and decamped. [Pg 361]

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The following changes have been made to the original:

Page 2 open single quotation mark added before humpie in "decent sort of a 'humpie,'"

Page 13 our on extatic changed to our own extatic

Page 101 lower boundaries fo changed to lower boundaries of

Page 153 on his horse, changed to on his horse.

Page 163 expended n partially levelling changed to expended in partially levelling

Page 166 I in- end to cultivate changed to I intend to cultivate

Page 171 turned to to Miss Rainsfield changed to turned to Miss Rainsfield

Page 190 failed toat tract changed to failed to attract

Page 266 the meal's continnauce changed to the meal's continuance

Page 270 that the should not changed to that he should not

Page 351 he again reathes the changed to he again breathes the

Page 367 incisions made with a a sharp changed to incisions made with a sharp

In the book promotions, a closing single quotation mark was added after 'Constance Dale'

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