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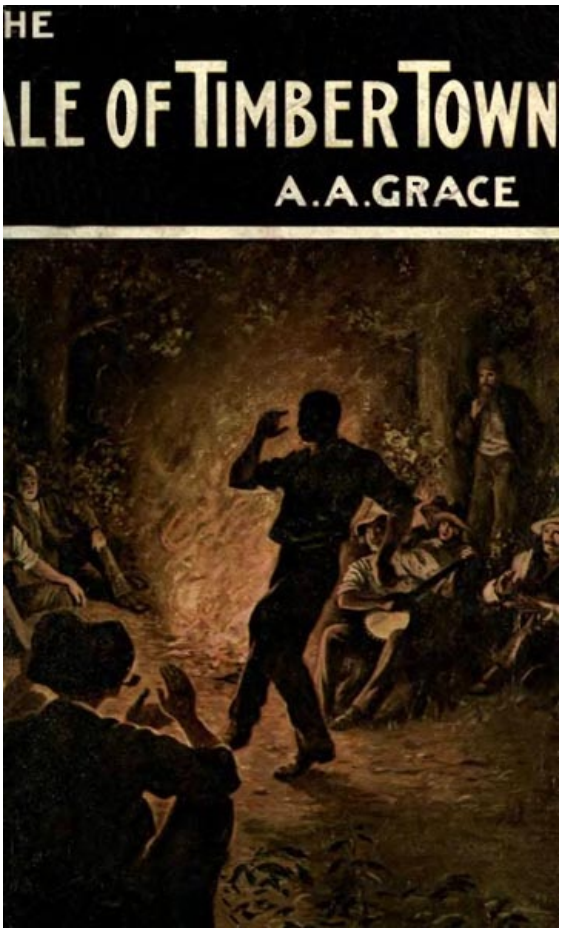

THE TALE OF TIMBER TOWN.

THE TALE
OF TIMBER TOWN

BY

A. A. GRACE

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AUTHOR’S NOTE.

Carlyle Smythe, in his interesting reminiscences of Mark Twain, printed in *Life*, says that, of all the stories which interested the great American writer while travelling with him through Australasia, the tragical story which is the basis of “The Tale of Timber Town” fascinated the celebrated author more than any other. The version which Mark Twain read was the re-print of the verbatim report of the most remarkable trial ever held in New Zealand, and perhaps south of the Line, and there is no cause for wonder in his interest. I, too, have studied and re-studied that narrative, with its absorbing psychological and sociological problems; I have interrogated persons who knew the chief characters in the story; I have studied the locality, and know intimately the scene of the tragedy: and even though “The Tale of Timber Town” has in the writing taxed my energies for many a month, I have by no means exhausted the theme which so enthralled Mark Twain.

I have tried to reproduce the characters and atmosphere of those stirring days, when £1,000,000 worth of gold was brought into Timber Town in nine months; and I have sought to reproduce the characters and atmosphere of Timber Town, rather than to resuscitate the harrowing details of a dreadful crime. I have tried to show how it was possible for such a tragedy to take place, as was that which so absorbed Mark Twain, and why it was that the tale stirred in him an interest which somewhat surprised Carlyle Smythe.

Here in Timber Town I met them—the unassuming celebrity, and the young *entrepreneur*. The great humorist, alack! will never read the tale as I have told it, but I am hopeful, that in “The Tale of Timber Town,” his erstwhile companion and the public will perceive the literary value of the theme which arrested the attention of so great a writer as Mark Twain.

“The Tale of Timber Town” first appeared in the pages of *The Otago Witness*, whose proprietors I desire to thank for introducing the story to the public, and for the courtesy of permitting me to reserve the right of reproduction of the work in book-form.

Timber Town. A.A.G.

PROEM.

Timber Town lay like a toy city at the bottom of a basin. Its wooden houses, each placed neatly in the middle of a little garden-plot, had been painted brightly for the delight of the children. There were whole streets of wooden shops, with verandahs in front of them to shade the real imported goods in their windows; and three wooden churches, freshly painted to suit the tastes of their respective—and respectable—congregations; there was a wooden Town Hall, painted grey; a wooden Post Office, painted brown; a red college, where boys in white disported upon a green field; a fawn-coloured school, with a playground full of pinafored little girls; and a Red Tape Office—designed in true Elizabethan style, with cupolas, vanes, fantastic chimney-tops, embayed windows, wondrous parapets—built entirely of wood and painted the colour of Devonshire cream, with grit in the paint to make it look like stone.

Along the streets ran a toy tram, pulled by a single horse, which was driven by a man who moved his arms just as if they were real, and who puffed genuine clouds of smoke from his tobacco-pipe. Ladies dressed in bright colours walked up and down the trim side-paths, with gaudy sunshades in their hands; knocked at doors, went calling, and looked into the shop windows, just like actual people.

It was the game of playing at living. The sky shone brightly overhead; around the town stood hills which no romantic scene-painter could have bettered; the air of the man with water-cart, of the auctioneer’s man with bell, and of the people popping in and out of the shops, was the air of those who did these things for love of play-acting on a stage.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing to worry about, in Timber Town; no ragged beggars, no yelling hawkers, no sad-eyed, care-worn people, no thought for to-morrow. The chimneys smoked for breakfast regularly at eight o’clock every morning; the play of living began at nine, when the smiling folk met in the streets and turned, the men into their offices to play at business, the women into the shops where meat and good things to eat were to be had for little more than love. Between twelve and two o’clock everybody went home to dinner, and the cabs which stood in front of the wooden Post Office, and dogs which slept on the pavement beneath the verandahs, held possession of the streets.

But if anyone would see the beauty and fashion of Timber Town, from four to five in the afternoon

was the hour. Then wives and daughters, having finished playing at house-keeping for the day, put on their gayest costumes, and visited the milliners. Southern Cross Street buzzed with gaudy life; pretty women bowed, and polite men raised their hats—just as people do in real cities—but, as everybody knew everybody else, the bowing and hat-raising were general, just as they are when the leading lady comes into the presence of the chorus on the stage. Then the vision of gossiping, smiling humanity would pass away—the shops put up their shutters at six o'clock; the game was over for the day, and all the chimneys smoked for tea.

Timber Town by night, except when the full moon shone, was sombre, with nothing doing. The street lamps burnt but indifferent gas; people stayed indoors, and read the piquant paragraphs of *The Pioneer Bushman*, Timber Town's evening journal, or fashioned those gay dresses which by day helped to make the town so bright, and went to bed early and slept with a soundness and tranquillity, well-earned by the labour of playing so quaintly at the game of life.

The hills which surrounded the little town pressed so closely upon it, that by sheer weight they seemed likely to crush its frail houses into matchwood. On one side mountains, some bare and rugged, some clothed with forest, rose behind the foot-hills, and behind them more mountains, which seemed to rise like the great green billows of an angry sea. On one side stretched the blue of the distant forest-covered ranges, upon the other the azure of the encroaching ocean, which, finding a way between the encircling hills, insinuated its creeping tides into the town itself. And overhead spread the blue sky, for the sky above Timber Town was blue nine days out of ten, and the clouds, when they came, performed their gloomy mission quickly and dispersed with despatch, that the sun might smile again and the playing of the people continue.

No nest in the forest was ever more securely hid than was Timber Town from the outside world. Secreted at the end of a deep bay, that bay was itself screened from the ocean outside by an extensive island and a sandspit which stretched for many a mile.

Inaccessible by land, the little town was reached only by water, and there, in that quiet eddy of the great ocean, lived its quiet, quaint, unique existence.

In such a place men's characters develop along their own lines, and, lacking that process of mental trituration which goes on in large cities where many minds meet, they frequently attain an interesting if strange maturity. In such a community there is opportunity for the contemplation of mankind ignorant of poverty; and such a happy state, begotten of plenty and nurtured by freedom, has its natural expression in the demeanour of the people. It was not characteristic of Timber Town to hoard, but rather to spend. In a climate bright through the whole year, it was not natural that the sorrows of life, where life was one long game, should press heavily upon the players.

But we come upon the little timber town at a time of transition from sequestered peace to the roar and rush of a mining boom, and if the stirring events of that time seem to change the tranquil aspect of the scene, it is only that a breeze of life from outside sweeps over its surface, as when a gust of wind, rushing from high mountains upon some quiet lake nestling at their feet, stirs the placid waters into foam.

So through the wild scene, when the villain comes upon the stage and the hidden treasure is brought to light, though the play may seem to lose its pastoral character, it is to be remembered that if tragedy may endure for the night, comedy comes surely enough in the morning.

THE TALE OF TIMBER TOWN.

CHAPTER I.

The Master-Goldsmith.

Jake Ruggles leant over the goldsmith's bench, put the end of his blow-pipe into the gas-flame, and impinged a little oxygenized jet upon the silver buckle he was soldering. He was a thin, undersized, rabbit-faced youth, whose head was thatched with a shock of coarse black hair. He possessed a pair of spreading black eyebrows upon a forehead which was white when well washed, for Nature had done honestly by the top of his head, but had realised, when his chin was reached, the fatuity of spending more time upon the moulding and adornment of the person of Jake Ruggles.

The master-goldsmith was a rubicund man, with a face which Jake, in a rage, had once described as that of "a pig with the measles." But this was, without doubt, a gross perversion of the truth. Benjamin Tresco's countenance was as benign as that of Bacchus, and as open as the day. Its chief peculiarity was that the brow and lashes of one eye were white, while piebald patches adorned his otherwise red head.

In his own eyes, the most important person in Timber Town was Benjamin Tresco. But it was natural for him to think so, for he was the only man of his trade in a town of six thousand people. He was a portly person who took a broad view of life, and it was his habit to remark, when folk commented on his rotundity, "I *am* big. I don't deny it. But I can't help myself—God A'mighty

made me big, big in body, big in brain, big in appetite, big in desire to break every established law and accepted custom; but I am prevented from giving rein to my impulses by the expansiveness of my soul. That I developed myself. I could go up the street and rob the Kangaroo Bank; I could go to Mr. Crewe, the millionaire, and compel him at the pistol's mouth to transfer me the hoards of his life-time; I could get blazing drunk three nights a week; I could kidnap Varnhagen's pretty daughter, and carry her off to the mountains; but my soul prevents me—I am the battle-ground of contending passions. One half of me says, 'Benjamin, do these things'; the other half says, 'Tresco, abstain. Be magnanimous: spare them!' My appetites—and they are enormous—say, 'Benjamin Tresco, have a real good time while you can; sail in, an' catch a-holt of pleasure with both hands.' But my better part says, 'Take your pleasure in mutual enjoyments, Benjamin; fix your mind on book-learning and the elevating Arts of peace.' I am a bone of contention between Virtue and License, an' the Devil only knows which will get me in the end."

But at the time of introduction he was quietly engraving a little plate of gold, which was destined to adorn the watch-chain of the Mayor, who, after Mr. Crewe, was Timber Town's most opulent citizen.

When the craftsman engraves, he fastens his plate of gold to the end of a piece of wood, long enough to be held conveniently in the hand, and as thick as the width of the precious metal. This he holds in his left hand, and in his right the graver with which he nicks out little pieces of gold according to design, which pieces fall into the apron of the bench—and, behold! he is engraving. The work needs contemplation, concentration, and attention; for every good goldsmith carries the details of the design in his head. But, that morning, there seemed to be none of these qualities in Benjamin Tresco. He dropped his work with a suddenness that endangered its fastenings of pitch, rapped the bench with the round butt of his graver, and glared ferociously at Jake Ruggles.

"What ha' you got there?" he asked fiercely of his apprentice, who sat with him at the bench and was now working industriously with a blow-pipe upon the hoop of a gold ring. "Who told you to stop soldering the buckles?"

Jake turned his head sideways and looked at his master, like a ferret examining an angry terrier; alert, deliberate, and full of resource.

"It's a bit of a ring I was give to mend," he replied, "up at The Lucky Digger."

Tresco stretched out a long arm, and took the gem. Then he drew a deep breath.

"You've begun early, young man," he exclaimed. "Would you poach on my preserves? The young lady whose finger that ring adorns I am wont to regard as my especial property, an' a half-fledged young *pukeko*, like you, presumes to cut me out! *You* mend that lady's trinkets? *You* lean over a bar, an' court beauty adorned in the latest fashion? *You* make love to my 'piece' by fixing up her jewels? Young man, you've begun too early. Now, look-a-here, I shall do this job myself—for love—I shall deliver this ring with my own hand." Tresco chuckled softly, and Jake laughed out loud.

The scene had been a piece of play-acting. The apprentice, who knew his master's weakness for the pretty bar-maid at The Lucky Digger was, as he expressed himself, "taking a rise out of the boss," and Tresco's simulated wrath was the crisis for which he had schemed. Between the two there existed a queer comradeship, which had been growing for more than two years, so that the bald, rotund, red-faced goldsmith had come to regard the shock-headed, rat-faced apprentice more as a son than as an assistant; whilst Jake would say to the youth of his "push," "Huh! none o' yer bashin' an' knockin' about fer me—the boss an' me's chums. Huh! you should be in *my* boots—we have our pint between us reg'lar at eleven, just like pals."

Picking up the ring with a pair of tweezers, the master-jeweller first examined its stone—a diamond—through a powerful lens. Next, with a small feather he took up some little bits of chopped gold from where they lay mixed with borax and water upon a piece of slate; these he placed deftly where the gold hoop was weak; over the top of them he laid a delicate slip of gold, and bound the whole together with wire as thin as thread. This done, he put the jewel upon a piece of charred wood, thrust the end of his blow-pipe into the flame of the gas-burner, which he pulled towards him, and with three or four gentle puffs through the pipe the mend was made. The goldsmith threw the ring in the "pickle," a green, deadly-looking chemical in an earthenware pot upon the floor.

Tresco was what the doctors call "a man of full habit." He ate largely, drank deeply, slept heavily, but, alas! he was a bachelor. There was no comfortable woman in the room at the back of his workshop to call in sweet falsetto, "Benjamin, come to dinner! Come at once: the steak's getting cold!" As he used to say, "This my domicile lacks the female touch—there's too much tobacco-ashes an' cobwebs about it: the women seem kind o' scared to come near, as if I might turn out to be a dog that bites."

The ring being pickled, Benjamin fished it out of the green liquid and washed it in a bowl of clean water. A little filing and scraping, a little rubbing with emery-paper, and the goldsmith burnished the yellow circlet till it shone bright and new.

"Who knows?" he exclaimed, holding up the glistening gem, "who knows but it is the ring of the future Mrs. T.? Lord love her, I have forty-eight pairs of socks full of holes, all washed and put away, waiting for her to darn. Think of the domestic comfort of nearly fifty pairs of newly-darned

socks; with her sitting, stitching, on one side of the fire, and saying, 'Benjamin, these ready-made socks are no good: *I* must knit them for you in future,' and me, on the other side, smiling like a Cheshire cat with pure delight, and saying: 'Annie, my dear, you're an angel compacted of comfort and kindness: my love, would you pass me a paper-light, *if* you please?' But in the meantime the bird must be caught. I go to catch it."

He slipped his dirty apron over his head, put on his coat and weather-beaten hat of strange outlandish shape, placed the ring in a dainty, silk-lined case, and sallied forth into the street.

Timber Town burst on his benignant gaze. Over against him stood a great wooden shop, painted brilliant blue; along the street was another, of bright red; but most of the buildings were a sober stone-colour or some shade of modest grey or brown. One side of the street was verandah'd along its whole length, and the walks on either side of the macadamised road were asphalted. Benjamin, wearing the air of Bacchus courting the morning, walked a hundred yards or so, till he came to the centre of the town, where four streets met. At one corner stood the Kangaroo Bank; at another a big clothing-shop; at the two others Timber Town's rival hostelries—The Bushman's Tavern and The Lucky Digger. The Bank and hotels, conspicuous amid the other buildings, had no verandahs in front of them, but each was freshly painted; the Bushman's Tavern a slate-blue, The Lucky Digger a duck-egg green.

The sun was hot; the iron on the roofs ticked in the heat and reflected the rays of heaven. Benjamin paused on the edge of the pavement, mopped his perspiring brow, and contemplated the garish scene. Opposite the wooden Post Office, which flanked the "clothing emporium," stretched a rank of the most outlandish vehicles that ever came within the category of cabs licensed to carry passengers. Some were barouches which must have been ancient when Victoria was crowned, and concerning which there was a legend that they came out to the settlement in the first ships, in 1842; others were landaus, constructed on lines substantial enough to resist collision with an armoured train; but the majority were built on a strange American plan, with a canopy of dingy leather and a step behind, so that the fare, after progressing sideways like a crab, descended, at his journey's end, as does a burglar from "Black Maria."

Along the footpaths walked, in a leisurely manner, a goodly sprinkling of Timber Town's citizens, with never a ragged figure among them.

Perhaps the seediest-looking citizen "on the block" was Tresco himself, but what he lacked in tailoring he made good in serene benignity of countenance. His features, which beamed like the sun shining above him, were recognised by all who passed by. It was, "How do, Benjamin; bobbin' up, old party?" "Mornin', Tresco. You remind me of the rooster that found the jewel—you look so bloomin' contented with yourself." "Ah! good day, Mr. Tresco. I hope I see you well. Remember, I still have that nice little bit of property for sale. Take you to see it any time you like."

With Benjamin it was, "How do, Ginger? In a hurry? Go it—you'll race the hands round the clock yet." "Good morning, Mr. Flint. Lovely weather, yes, but hot. Now, half-a-pint is refreshing, but you lawyers have no time—too many mortgages, conveyances, bills of sale to think about. I understand. Good morning." "Why, certainly, Boscoe, my beloved pal. Did you say 'half'?—I care not if it's a pint. Let us to the blushing Hebe of the bar."

Tresco and his friend, Boscoe, entered the portals of The Lucky Digger. Behind the bar stood a majestic figure arrayed in purple and fine linen. She had the development of an Amazon and the fresh face of a girl from the shires of England. Through the down on her cheek "red as a rose was she."

Tresco advanced as to the shrine of a goddess, and leant deferentially over the bar. Never a word spoke he till the resplendent deity had finished speaking to two commercial travellers who smoked cigars, and then, as her eyes met his, he said simply, "Two pints, if you please, miss."

The liquor fell frothing into two tankards; Boscoe put down the money, and the goddess withdrew to the society of the bagmen, who talked to her confidentially, as to their own familiar friend.

Tresco eyed the group, smilingly, and said, "The toffs are in the cheese, Boscoe. You'd think they'd a monopoly of Gentle Annie. But wait till I get on the job."

Boscoe, a wizened little tinsmith, with the grime of his trade upon him, looked vacuously to his front, and buried his nose in his pot of beer.

"Flash wimmen an't in my line," said he, as he smacked his lips, "not but this yer an't a fine 'piece.' But she'd cost a gold mine in clo'es alone, let alone brooches and fallals. I couldn't never run it." Here one of the gaudy bagmen stretched out his hand, and fingered the bar-maid's rings. The girl seemed nothing annoyed at this awkward attention, but when her admirer's fingers stole to her creamy chin, she stepped back, drew herself up with infinite dignity, and said with perfect enunciation, "Well, you *have* got an impudence. I must go and wash my face."

She was about to leave the bar, when Tresco called after her, "My dear, one minute." From his pocket he drew the dainty ring-case, and held it out to the girl, who took it eagerly. In a moment the gem was on her finger. "You dear old bag of tricks!" she exclaimed. "Is it for me?"

"Most certainly," said Benjamin. "One moment." He took the ring between his forefinger and thumb, as if he were a conjurer about to perform, glanced triumphantly round the bar-room, held the girl's hand gallantly in his, deliberately replaced the ring on her finger, and said, "With this

ring I thee wed; with my body I thee worship; with all my worldly goods I thee endow."

"Thanks, I'll take the ring," retorted the bar-maid, with mock annoyance and a toss of her head, "but, really, I can't be bothered with your old carcase."

"Pleasing delusion," said Tresco, unruffled. "It's your own ring!"

A close, quick scrutiny, and the girl had recognised her refurbished jewel.

"You bald-headed rogue!" she exclaimed. But Tresco had vanished, and nothing but his laugh came back through the swinging glass-door.

The bagmen laughed too. But Gentle Annie regarded them indignantly, and in scornful silence, which she broke to say, "And *now* I shall go and wash my face."

CHAPTER II.

The Wreck of the Mersey Witch.

The Maori is a brown man. His hair is straight, coarse, black, and bright as jet. His eyes are brown, his teeth are pearly white; and, when he smiles, those brown eyes sparkle and those white teeth gleam. A Maori's smile is one of Nature's most complete creations.

But as Enoko poked his head out of the door of the hut, his face did not display merriment. Day was breaking; yet he could see nothing but the flying scud and the dim outline of the shore; he could hear nothing but the roar of the breakers, battering the boulders of the beach.

He came out of the hut, his teeth chattering with the rawness of the morning; and made a general survey of the scene.

"It's too cold," he muttered in his own language. "There's too much wind, too much sea."

With another look at the angry breakers, he went back into the hut. "Tahuna," he cried, "there's no fishing to-day—the weather's bad."

Tahuna stirred under his blankets, sat up, and said in Maori, "I'll come and look for myself."

The two men went out into the cold morning air.

"No," said Tahuna, "it's no good—there's a north-east gale. We had better go back to the *pa* when the day has well dawned."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when a sudden veering of the wind drew the scud from the sea and confined it to the crest of the rocky, wooded cliff under which the Maoris stood. The sea lay exposed, grey and foaming; but it was not on the sea that the men's eyes were riveted. There, in the roaring, rushing tide, a ship lay helpless on the rocks.

Enoko peered, as though he mistrusted the sight of his eye—he had but one. Tahuna ran to the hut, and called, "Come out, both of you. There's a ship on the rocks!"

From the hut issued two sleepy female forms, the one that of the chief's wife, the other that of a pretty girl. The former was a typical Maori *wahine* of the better class, with regular features and an abundance of long black hair; the latter was not more than eighteen years old, of a lighter complexion, full-figured, and with a good-natured face which expressed grief and anxiety in every feature. "Oh!" she exclaimed, as a great wave broke over the helpless ship, "the sailors will be drowned. What can we do?"

"Amiria," said the chief to her, "go back to the *pa*, and tell the people to come and help. We three,"—he pointed to his wife, Enoko and himself—"will see what we can do."

"No," replied the girl, "I can swim as well as any of you. I shall stay, and help." She ran along the beach to the point nearest the wreck, and the others followed her.

Tahuna, standing in the wash of the sea, cried out, "A rope! A rope! A rope!" But his voice did not penetrate ten yards into the face of the gale.

Then all four, drenched with spray, shouted together, and with a similar result.

"If they could float a rope ashore," said the chief, "we would make it fast, and so save them."

The vessel lay outside a big reef which stretched between her and the shore; her hull was almost hidden by the surf which broke over her, the only dry place on her being the fore-top, which was crowded with sailors; and it was evident that she must soon break up under the battering seas which swept over her continually.

"They can't swim," said the chief, with a gesture of disgust. "The *pakeha* is a sheep, in the water. *We* must go to *them*. Now, remember: when you get near the ship, call out for a rope. We can drift back easily enough."

He walked seawards till the surf was up to his knees. The others followed his example; the girl

standing with the other woman between the men.

“Now,” cried Tahuna, as a great breaker retired; and the four Maoris rushed forward, and plunged into the surf. But the force of the next wave dashed them back upon the beach. Three times they tried to strike out from the shore, but each time they were washed back. Tahuna’s face was bleeding, Enoko limped as he rose to make the fourth attempt, but the women had so far escaped unscathed.

“When the wave goes out,” cried the chief, “rush forward, and grasp the rocks at the bottom. Then when the big wave passes, swim a few strokes, dive when the next comes, and take hold of the rocks again.”

“That’s a good plan,” said Enoko. “Let us try it.”

A great sea broke on the shore; they all rushed forward, and disappeared as the next wave came. Almost immediately their black heads were bobbing on the water. There came another great breaker, the four heads disappeared; the wave swept over the spot where they had dived, but bore no struggling brown bodies with it. Then again, but further out to sea, the black heads appeared, to sink again before the next great wave. Strong in nerve, powerful in limb were those amphibious Maoris, accustomed to the water from the year of their birth.

They were now fifty yards from the shore, and swam independently of one another; diving but seldom, and bravely breasting the waves.

The perishing sailors, who eagerly watched the swimmers, raised a shout, which gave the Maoris new courage.

Between the Natives and the ship stretched a white line of foam, hissing, roaring, boiling over a black reef which it was impossible to cross. The tired swimmers, therefore, had to make a painful detour. Slowly Tahuna and Enoko, who were in front, directed their course towards a channel at one end of the reef, and the women followed in their wake. They were swimming on their sides, but all their strength and skill seemed of little avail in bringing them any nearer to their goal. But suddenly Amiria dived beneath the great billows, and when her tangled, wet mane reappeared, she was in front of the men. They and the chief’s wife followed her example, and soon all four swimmers had passed through the channel. Outside another reef lay parallel to the first, and on it lay the stranded ship, fixed and fast, with the green seas pounding her to pieces.

When the Maoris were some fifty yards from the wreck, they spread themselves out in a line parallel to the reef on which lay the ship, her copper plates exposed half-way to the keel. “Rope! Rope! Rope!” shouted the Maoris. Their voices barely reached the ship, but the sailors well knew for what the swimmers risked their lives. Already a man had unrove the fore-signal-halyards, the sailors raised a shout and the coiled rope was thrown. It fell midway between Tahuna and Enoko, where Amiria was swimming. Quickly the brave girl grasped the life-line, and it was not long before her companions were beside her.

They now swam towards the channel. Once in the middle of that, they turned on their backs and floated, each holding tight to the rope, and the waves bearing them towards the shore.

The return passage took only a few minutes, but to get through the breakers which whitened the beach with foam was a matter of life or death to the swimmers. They were grasped by the great seas and were hurled upon the grinding boulders; they were sucked back by the receding tide, to be again thrown upon the shore.

Tahuna was the first to scramble out of the surf, though he limped as he walked above high-water-mark. Amiria lay exhausted on the very margin, the shallow surge sweeping over her; but the rope was still in her hand. The chief first carried the girl up the beach, and laid her, panting, on the stones; then he went back to look for the others. His wife, with wonderful fortune, was carried uninjured to his very feet, but Enoko was struggling in the back-wash which was drawing him into a great oncoming sea. Forgetting his maimed foot, the chief sprang towards his friend, seized hold of him and a boulder simultaneously, and let the coming wave pass over him and break upon the beach. Just as it retired, he picked up Enoko, and staggered ashore with his helpless burden.

For five minutes they all lay, panting and still. Then Amiria got up and hauled on the life-line. Behind her a strange piece of rock, shaped like a roughly-squared pillar, stood upright from the beach. To this she made fast the line, on which she pulled hard and strong. Tahuna rose, and helped her, and soon out of the surf there came a two-inch rope which had been tied to the signal-halyards.

When the chief and the girl had fixed the thicker rope round the rock, Tahuna tied the end of the life-line about his waist, walked to the edge of the sea, and held up his hand.

That was a signal for the first man to leave the ship. He would have to come hand-over-hand along the rope, through the waters that boiled over the deadly rocks, and through the thundering seas that beat the shore. And hand-over-hand he came, past the reef on which the ship lay, across the wild stretch of deep water, over the second and more perilous reef, and into the middle of the breakers of the beach. There he lost his hold, but Tahuna dashed into the surf, and seized him. The chief could now give no attention to his own safety, but his wife and Amiria hauled on the life-line, and prevented him and his burden from being carried seawards by the back-wash. And so the first man was saved from the wreck of *The Mersey Witch*.

Others soon followed; Tahuna became exhausted; his wife took his place, and tied the life-line round her waist. After she had rescued four men, Enoko came to himself and relieved her; and Amiria, not to be outdone in daring, tied the other end of the line about her waist, and took her stand beside the half-blind man.

As the captain, who was the last man to leave the ship, was dragged out of the raging sea, a troop of Maoris arrived from the *pa* with blankets, food, and drink. Soon the newcomers had lighted a fire in a sheltered niche of the cliff, and round the cheerful blaze they placed the chilled and exhausted sailors.

The captain, when he could speak, said to Tahuna, “Weren’t you one of those who swam out to the ship?”

“Yeh, boss, that me,” replied the chief in broken English. “You feel all right now, eh?”

“Where are the women we saw in the water?”

“T’e *wahine*?” said Tahuna. “They all right, boss.”

“Where are they? I should like to see them. I should like to thank them.”

The chief’s wife, her back against the cliff, was resting after her exertions. Amiria was attending to one of the men she had dragged out of the surf, a tall, fair man, whose limbs she was chafing beside the fire. When the chief called to his wife and the girl, Amiria rose, and placing her Englishman in the charge of a big Maori woman, she flung over her shoulders an old *korowai* cloak which she had picked up from the beach, and pushing through the throng, was presented to the captain.

He was a short, thick-set man, weather-beaten by two score voyages. “So you’re the girl we saw in the water,” said he. “Pleased to meet you, miss, pleased to meet you,” and then after a pause, “Your daughter, chief?”

Amiria’s face broke into a smile, and from her pretty mouth bubbled the sweetest laughter a man could hear.

“Not my taughter,” replied Tahuna, as his wife approached, “but this my *wahine*, what you call wife.”

The Maori woman was smiling the generous smile of her race.

“You’re a brave crowd,” said the captain. “My crew and I owe you our lives. My prejudice against colour is shaken—I’m not sure that it’ll ever recover the shock you’ve given it. A man may sail round the world a dozen times, an’ there’s still something he’s got to learn. I never would ha’ believed a man, let alone a woman, could ha’ swum in such a sea. An’ you’re Natives of the country?—a fine race, a fine race.” As they stood, talking, rain had commenced to drive in from the sea. The captain surveyed the miserable scene for a moment or two; then he said, “I think, chief, that if you’re ready we’ll get these men under shelter.” And so, some supported by their dusky friends, and some carried in blankets, the crew of *The Mersey Witch*, drenched and cold, but saved from the sea, were conveyed to the huts of the *pa*.

CHAPTER III.

The Pilot’s Daughter.

She came out of the creeper-covered house into a garden of roses, and stood with her hand on a green garden-seat; herself a rosebud bursting into perfection.

Below her were gravelled walks and terraced flower-beds, cut out of the hill-side on which the quaint, gabled house stood; her fragrant, small domain carefully secreted behind a tall, clipped hedge, over the top of which she could see from where she stood the long sweep of the road which led down to the port of Timber Town.

She was dressed in a plain, blue, cotton blouse and skirt; her not over-tall figure swelling plumply beneath their starched folds. Her hair was of a nondescript brown, beautified by a glint of gold, so that her uncovered head looked bright in the sunlight. Her face was such as may be seen any day in the villages which nestle beneath the Sussex Downs, under whose shadow she was born; her forehead was broad and white; her eyes blue; her cheeks the colour of the blush roses in her garden; her mouth small, with lips coloured pink like a shell on the beach. As she stood, gazing down the road, shading her eyes with her little hand, and displaying the roundness and whiteness of her arm to the inquisitive eyes of nothing more lascivious than the flowers, a girl on horseback drew up at the gate, and called, “Cooee!”

She was tall and brown, dressed in a blue riding-habit, and in her hand she carried a light, silver-mounted whip. She jumped lightly from the saddle, opened the gate, and led her horse up the drive.

The fair girl ran down the path, and met her near the tethering-post which stood under a tall bank.

“Amiria, I *am* glad to see you!”

“But think of all I have to tell you.” The brown girl’s intonation was deep, and she pronounced every syllable richly. “We don’t have a wreck every day to talk about.”

“Come inside, and have some lunch. You must be famishing after your long ride.”

“Oh, no, I’m not hungry. *Taihoa*, by-and-by.”

The horse was tied up securely, and the girls, a contrast of blonde and brunette, walked up the garden-path arm-in-arm.

“I have heard *such* things about you,” said the fair girl.

“But you should see him, my dear,” said the brown. “You would have risked a good deal to save him if you had been there—tall, strong, struggling in the sea, and *so* helpless.”

“You *are* brave, Amiria. It’s nonsense to pretend you don’t know it. All the town is talking about you.” The white face looked at the brown, mischievously. “And now that you have got him, my dear, keep him.”

Amiria’s laugh rang through the garden. “There is no hope for me, if *you* are about, Miss Rose Summerhayes,” she said.

“But wasn’t it perfectly awful? We heard you were drowned yourself.”

“Nonsense! I got wet, but that was all. Of course, if I was weak or a bad swimmer, then there would have been no hope. But I know every rock, every channel, where the sea breaks its force, and where it is strongest. There was no danger.”

“How many men?”

“Twenty-nine; and the one drowned makes thirty.”

“And which is *the* particular one, your treasure trove? Of course, he will marry you as soon as the water is out of his ears, and make you happy ever afterwards.”

Amiria laughed again. “First, he is handsome; next, he is a *rangatira*, well-born, as my husband ought to be. I really don’t know his name. Can’t you guess that is what I have come to find out?”

“You goose. You’ve come to unburden yourself. You were just dying to tell me the story.”

They had paused on the verandah, where they sat on a wooden seat in the shade.

“Anyway, the wreck is better for the Maori than a sitting of the Land Court—there! The shore is covered with boxes and bales and all manner of things. There are ready-made clothes for everyone in the *pa*, boots, tea, tobacco, sugar, everything that the people want—all brought ashore from the wreck and strewn along the beach. The Customs’ Officers get some, but the Maori gets most. I’ve brought you a memento.”

She put her hand into the pocket of her riding-habit, and drew out a little packet. “That is for you —a souvenir of the wreck.”

“Isn’t it rather like stealing, to take what really belongs to other people?”

“Rubbish! Open it, and see for yourself,” said Amiria, smiling.

Rose undid the packet’s covering, and disclosed a black leather-covered case, much the worse for wear.

“It isn’t injured by the water—it was in a tin-lined box,” said the Maori girl. “It opens like a card-case.”

Rose opened the little receptacle, which divided in the middle, and there lay exposed a miniature portrait framed in oxidized silver.

The portrait represented a beautiful woman, yellow-haired, with blue eyes and a bright colour on her cheeks, lips which showed indulgence in every curve, and a snow-white neck around which was clasped a string of red coral beads.

Rose fixed her eyes on the picture.

“Why do you give me this?” she asked. “Who is it?”

Amiria turned the miniature over. On its back was written “Annabel Summerhayes.”

Rose turned slightly pale as she read the name, and her breath caught in her throat. “This must be my mother,” she said quietly. “When she died, I was too young to remember her.”

Both girls looked at the portrait; the brown face close to the fair, the black hair touching the brown.

“She must have been very good,” said Amiria, “—— look how kind she is.”

Rose was silent.

“Isn’t that a nice memento of the wreck,” continued the Maori girl. “But anyhow you would have received it, for the Collector of Customs has the packing-case in which it was found. However, I thought you would like to get it as soon as possible.”

“How kind you are,” said Rose, as she kissed Amiria. “This is the only picture of my mother I have seen. I never knew what she was like. This is a perfect revelation to me.”

The tears were in her voice as well as in her eyes, and her lip trembled. Softly one brown hand stole into her white one, and another brown hand stole round her waist, and she felt Amiria’s warm lips on her cheek. The two girls had been playmates as children, they had been at school together, and had always shared each other’s confidences, but this matter of Annabel Summerhayes was one which her father had forbidden Rose to mention; and around the memory of her mother there had grown a mystery which the girl was unable to fathom.

“Now that this has occurred, there is no harm in disobeying my father,” she said. “He told me never to speak of my mother to him or anyone else, but when you give me her picture, it would be stupid to keep silence. She looks good, doesn’t she, Amiria? I think she was good, but my father destroyed everything belonging to her: he even took the trouble to change my name from Annabel to Rose—that was after we arrived here and I was three years old. I do not possess a single thing that was hers except this picture; and even that I must hide, for fear my father should destroy it. Come, we will go in.”

They passed along the shady verandah, and entered the house. Its rooms were dark and cool, and prettily if humbly furnished. Rose took Amiria along a winding passage, up a somewhat narrow flight of stairs, and into a bedroom which was in one of the many gables of the wooden house. The Maori girl took off her hat and gloves, and Rose, drawing a bunch of keys from her pocket, opened a work-box which stood on the dressing-table, and in it she hid the miniature of her mother. Then she turned, and confronted Amiria.

The dark girl’s black hair, loosened by riding, had escaped from its fastenings, and now fell rippling down her back.

“It’s a great trouble,” she said. “Nothing will hold it—it is like wire. The pins drop out, and down it all comes.”

Rose was combing and brushing the glossy, black tresses. “I’ll try *my* hand,” said she. “The secret is plenty of pins; you don’t use enough of them. Pins, I expect, are scarce in the *pa*.” She had fastened up one long coil, and was holding another in place with her white fingers, when a gruff voice roared through the house:—

“Rosebud, my gal! Rosebud, I say! What’s taken the child?”

Whilst the two girls had been in the bedroom, three figures had come into sight round the bend of the beach-road. They walked slowly, with heavy steps and swaying gait, after the manner of sailor-men. As they ascended the winding pathway leading to the house, they argued loudly.

“Jes’ so, Cap’n Summerhayes,” said the short, thick-set man, with a blanket wrapped round him in lieu of a coat, to the big burly man on his left, “I stood off and on, West-Nor’-West and East-Sou’-East, waiting for the gale to wear down and let me get into your tuppeny little port. Now *you* are pilot, I reckon. What would *you* ha’ done?”

“What would I ha’ done, Sartoris?” asked the bulky man gruffly. “Why, damme, I’d ha’ beat behind Guardian Point, and took shelter.”

“In the dark?”

“In the dark, I tell you.”

“Then most likely, Pilot, you’d ha’ run *The Witch* on the Three Sisters’ reefs, or Frenchman’s Island. I stood off an’ on, back’ard an’ forrard.”

“An’ shot yourself on to the rocks.”

The third man said nothing. He was looking at the Pilot’s house and the flowers while the two captains paused to argue, and fidgeted with the blanket he wore over his shoulders.

“Well, come in, come in,” said the Pilot. “We’ll finish the argyment over a glass an’ a snack.” And then it was that he had roared for his daughter, who, leaving Amiria to finish her toilet, tripped downstairs to meet her father.

“Why, Rosebud, my gal, I’ve been calling this half-hour,” exclaimed the gruff old Pilot. “An’ here’s two gentlemen I’ve brought you, two shipwrecked sailors—Cap’n Sartoris, of *The Mersey Witch*, and Mr. Scarlett.” His voice sounded like the rattling of nails in a keg, and his manner was as rough as his voice.

Each blanketed man stepped awkwardly forward and shook hands with the girl, first the captain, and then the tall, uncomfortable-looking, younger man, who turned the colour indicated by his name.

“What they want is a rig-out,” rumbled the Pilot of Timber Town; “some coats, Rosebud; some shirts, and a good feed.” The grizzled old mariner’s face broke into a grim smile. “I’m Cap’n Summerhayes, an’t I? I’m Pilot o’ this port, an’t I?—an’ Harbour Master, in a manner o’ speaking?

Very good, my gal. In all those capacities—regardless that I'm your dad—I tell you to make these gen'lemen comfortable, as if they were at home; for you never know, Rosebud, when you may be entertaining a husband unawares. You never know." And, chuckling, the old fellow led the shipwrecked men into his bedroom.

When they had been provided with suits belonging to the Pilot, they were shown into the parlour, where they sat with their host upon oak chairs round a battered, polished table, with no cloth upon it.

Captain Sartoris was a moderately good-looking man, if a trifle weather-beaten, but dressed in the Pilot's clothes he was in danger of being lost and smothered; and Scarlett bore himself like one who laboured under a load of misery almost too great to be borne, but he had wisely rejected the voluminous coat proffered by his benefactor, and appeared in waistcoat and trousers which gave him the appearance of a growing boy dressed in his father's cast-off apparel.

Such was the guise of the shipwrecked men as they sat hiding as much of themselves as possible under the Pilot's table, whilst Rose Summerhayes bustled about the room. She took glasses from the sideboard and a decanter from a dumb-waiter which stood against the wall, and placed them on the table.

"And Rosebud, my gal," said the Pilot, "as it's quite two hours to dinner, we'll have a morsel of bread and cheese."

The French window stood open, and from the garden was blown the scent of flowers.

Rose brought the bread and cheese, and stood with her hands folded upon her snowy apron, alert to supply any further wants of the guests.

"And whose horse is that on the drive?" asked the Pilot.

"Amiria's," replied his daughter.

"Good: that's a gal after my heart. I'm glad she's come."

"Take a chair, miss," said Captain Sartoris from the depths of the vast garments that encumbered him.

"Thank you," replied Rose, "but I've the dinner to cook."

"Most domestic, I'm sure," continued Sartoris, trying hard to say the correct thing. "Most right an' proper. Personally, I like to see young ladies attend to home dooties."

Rose laughed. "Which is to say the comfort of you men."

"My gal," said her father sternly, "we have all we want. Me an' these gen'lemen will be quite happy till dinner-time."

Rose stooped to pick up the boots which her father had discarded for a pair of carpet-slippers, and rustled out of the room.

"Gen'lemen," said the Pilot of Timber Town, "we'll drink to better luck next time."

The three men carefully filled their glasses, emptied them in solemn silence, and put them almost simultaneously with a rattle on the polished table.

"Ah!" exclaimed the Pilot, after a long-drawn breath. "Four over proof. Soft as milk, an't it? Goes down like oil, don't it?"

"Most superior tipple," replied the skipper, "but you had your losses in *The Witch*, same as me and the owners. I had aboard six cases of the finest port as ever you tasted, sent out for you by your brother; senior partner of the firm, Mr. Scarlett. 'Cap'n Sartoris,' he says, 'I wish you good luck and a prosperous voyage, but take care o' that port wine for my brother. There's dukes couldn't buy it.' 'No, sir,' I says to him, 'but shipowners an' dukes are different. Shipowners usually get the pick of a cargo.' He laughed, an' I laughed: which we wouldn't ha' done had we known *The Witch* was going to be piled up on this confounded coast."

The Pilot had risen to his feet. His face was crimson with excitement, and his brow dark with passion.

"Cap'n Sartoris!" he exclaimed, as he brought his fist with a bang upon the table, so that the decanter and tumblers rattled, "every sea-faring man hates to see a good ship wrecked, whoever the owner may be. None's more sorry than me to see the bones of your ship piled on that reef. But when you talk about bringing me a present o' wine from my brother, you make my blood boil. To Hell with him and all his ships!" With another bang upon the table, he paced up and down, breathing deeply, and trembling with passion still unvented.

Sartoris and Scarlett looked with astonishment at the suddenly infuriated man.

"As for his cursed port wine," continued the Pilot, "let him keep it. *I* wouldn't drink it."

"In which case," said the skipper, "if I'd ha' got into port, I'd ha' been most happy to have drank it myself."

"I'd have lent you a hand, Captain," said Scarlett.

“Most happy,” replied Sartoris. “We’d ha’ drank the firm’s health, and the reconciliation o’ these two brothers. But, Pilot, let me ask a question. What on this earth could your brother, Mr. Summerhayes, ha’ done to make you reject six cases o’ port—reject ’em with scorn: six cases o’ the best port as was ever shipped to this or any other country? Now, that’s what puzzles me.”

“Then, Cap’n Sartoris—without any ill-feeling to you, though I do disagree with your handling o’ that ship—I say you’ll have to puzzle it out. But I ask this: If *you* had a brother who was the greatest blackguard unhung, would *you* drink his port wine?”

“It would largely depend on the quality,” said the skipper—“the quality of the wine, not o’ the man.”

“The senior partner of your firm is my brother.”

“That’s right. I don’t deny it.”

“If he hadn’t been my brother I’d ha’ killed him as sure as God made little apples. He’d a’ bin dead this twenty year. It was the temptation to do it that drove me out of England; and I vowed I’d never set foot there while he lived. And he sends me presents of port wine. I wish it may choke him! I wish he may drink himself to death with it! Look you here, Sartoris: you bring back the anger I thought was buried this long while; you open the wound that twelve thousand miles of sea and this new country were healing. But—but I thank God I never touched him. I thank God I never proved as big a blackguard as he. But don’t mention his name to me. If you think so much of him that you must be talking, talk to my gal, Rosebud. Tell her what a fine man she’s got for an uncle, how rich he is, how generous—but *I* shall never mention his name. I’m a straight-spoken man. If I was to tell my gal what I thought of him, I should fill her with shame that such a man should be kindred flesh and blood.”

The Pilot had stood still to deliver this harangue, and he now sat down, and buried his face in his hands. When he again raised his head, the skipper without a ship was helping himself sorrowfully to more of the whisky that was four over proof.

Slowly the rugged Pilot rose, and passed out of the French window into the garden of roses and the sunlight.

“I think,” said Sartoris, passing the decanter to Scarlett, “that another drop o’ this will p’raps straighten us up a bit, and help us to see what we’ve gone an’ done. For myself, I own I’ve lost my bearings and run into a fog-bank. I’d be glad if some one would help me out.”

“The old man’s a powder-magazine, to which you managed to put a match. That’s how it is, Captain. These many years he’s been a sleeping volcano, which has broken suddenly into violent eruption.”

Both men, figures comical enough for a pantomime, looked seriously at each other; but not so Amiria, whose face appeared in the doorway.

“It’s a mystery, a blessed puzzle; but I’d give half-a-crown for a smoke,” said Sartoris, looking wistfully at the Pilot’s tobacco-pipes on the mantelpiece. “I wonder if the young lady would object if I had a draw.”

There was an audible titter in the passage.

“A man doesn’t realise how poor he can be till he gets shipwrecked,” said Scarlett: “then he knows what the loss of his pipe and ’baccy means.”

There was a scuffling outside the door, and the young lady with the brown eyes was forcibly pushed into the room.

“Oh, Rose, I’m ashamed,” exclaimed the Maori girl, as the Pilot’s daughter pushed her forward. “But you two men are so funny and miserable, that I can’t help myself,”—she laughed good-naturedly—“and there’s Captain Summerhayes, fretting and fuming in the garden, as if he’d lost a thousand pounds.”

The scarecrows had risen respectfully to their feet, when suddenly the humour of the situation struck them, and they laughed in unison; and Amiria, shaking with merriment, collapsed upon the sofa, and hid her mirth in its cushions.

“Never mind,” said the skipper, “it’s not the clo’es that make the man. Thank God for that, Scarlett. Clo’es can’t make a man a bigger rogue than he is.”

“Thank God for this.” Scarlett tapped his waist. “I’ve got here what will rig you out to look less like a Guy Fawkes. You had your money in your cabin when the ship struck; mine is in my belt.”

“I wondered, when I pulled you ashore,” said the Maori girl, “what it was you had round your waist.”

Scarlett looked intently at the girl on the sofa.

“Do you mean *you* are the girl that saved me? You have metamorphosed yourself. Do you dress for a new character every day? Does she make a practice of this sort of thing, Miss Summerhayes —one day, a girl in the *pa*; the next, a young lady of Timber Town?”

“Amiria is two people in one,” replied Rose, “and I have not found out which of them I like most,

and I have known them both for ten years."

"Most interesting," said Captain Sartoris, shambling forward in his marvellous garb, and taking hold of the Maori girl's hand. "The privilege of a man old enough to be your father, my dear. I was glad to meet you on the beach—no one could ha' been gladder—but I'm proud to meet you in the house of my old friend, Cap'n Summerhayes, and in the company of this young lady." There could be no doubt that the over-proof spirit was going to the skipper's head. "But how did you get here, my dear?"

"I rode," replied Amiria, rising from the sofa. "My horse is on the drive. Come and see him."

She led the way through the French-window, and linked arms with Rose, whilst the two strange figures followed like a couple of characters in a comic opera.

On the drive stood the Pilot, who held Amiria's big bay horse as if it were some wild animal that might bite. He had passed round the creature's neck a piece of tarred rope, which he was making fast to the tethering-post, while he exclaimed, "Whoa, my beauty. Stand still, stand still. Who's going to hurt you?"

The Maori girl, holding her skirt in one hand, tripped merrily forward and took the rope from the old seaman's grasp.

"Really, Captain," she said, laughing, "why didn't you tie his legs together, and then lash him to the post? There, there, Robin." She patted the horse's neck. "You don't care about eating pilots, or salt fish, do you, Robin?"

"We'll turn him into the paddock up the hill," said Rose. "Dinner's ready, and I'm sure the horse is not more hungry than some of us."

"None more so than Mr. Scarlett an' myself," said Sartoris, "—— we've not had a sit-down meal since we were wrecked."

CHAPTER IV.

Rachel Varnhagen.

He sat on a wool-bale in his "store," amid bags of sugar, chests of tea, boxes of tobacco, octaves of spirits, coils of fencing-wire, bales of hops, rolls of carpets and floor-cloth, piles of factory-made clothes, and a miscellaneous collection of merchandise.

Old Varnhagen was a general merchant who, with equal complacency, would sell a cask of whisky, or purchase the entire wool-clip of a "run" as big as an English county. Raising his eyes from a keg of nails, he glanced lovingly round upon his abundant stock in trade; rubbed his fat hands together; chuckled; placed one great hand on his capacious stomach to support himself as his laughter vibrated through his ponderous body, and then he said, "'Tear me, 'tear me, it all com' to this. 'Tear, 'tear, how it make me laff. It jus' com' to this: the Maoris have got his cargo. All Mr. Cookenden's scheming to beat me gifs me the pull over him. 'Tear me, it make me ill with laffing. If I believed in a God, I should say Jehovah haf after all turn his face from the Gentile, and fight for his Chosen People. The cargo is outside the port: a breath of wind, and it is strewn along the shore. Now, that's what I call an intervention of Providence."

He got off the wool-bale much in the manner in which a big seal clumsily takes the water, and walked up and down his store; hands in pockets, hat on the back of his head, and a complacent smile overspreading his face. As he paused at the end of the long alleyway, formed by his piles of merchandise, and turned again to traverse the length of the warehouse, he struck an attitude of contemplation.

"Ah! but the insurance?" he exclaimed. As he stood, with bent head and grave looks, he was the typical Jew of the Ghetto; crafty, timid, watchful, cynical, cruel; his grizzled hair, close-clipped, crisp, and curly; his face pensive, and yellow as a lemon.

"But he will haf seen to that: I gif him that much credit. But in the meantime he is without his goods, and the money won't be paid for months. That gif me a six-months' pull over him."

The old smile came back, and he began to pace the store once more.

There was a rippling laugh at the further end of the building where Varnhagen's private office, partitioned off with glass and boards from the rest of the store, opened on the street. It was a laugh the old man knew well, for he hopped behind a big pile of bales like a boy playing hide-and-seek, and held his breath in expectation.

Presently, there bustled into the warehouse a vision of muslin and ribbons. Her face was the face of an angel. It did not contain a feature that might not have been a Madonna's. She had a lemon-yellow complexion, brightened by a flush of carmine in the cheeks; her eyes were like two large, lustrous, black pearls; her hair, parted in the middle, was glossy and waving; her eyebrows were pencilled and black; her lips were as red as the petals of the geranium. But though this galaxy of beauties attracted, it was the exquisite moulding of the face that riveted the attention of Packett,

the Jew's storeman, who had conducted the dream of loveliness to the scene.

She tapped the floor impatiently with her parasol.

"Fa-ther!"

She stamped her dainty foot in pretty anger.

"The aggravating old bird! I expect he's hiding somewhere."

There came a gurgling chuckle from amid the piled-up bales.

The girl stood, listening. "Come out of that!" she cried. But there was never another sound—the chuckling had ceased.

She skirmished down a by-alley, and stormed a kopje of rugs and linoleums; but found nothing except the store tom-cat in hiding on the top. Having climbed down the further side, she found herself in a difficult country of enamelled ware and wooden buckets, but successfully extricating herself from this entanglement she ascended a spur of carpet-rolls, and triumphantly crowned the summit of the lofty mountain of wool-bales. The country round lay at her feet, and half-concealed behind a barrel of Portland cement she saw the crouching form of the enemy.

Her head was up among the timbers of the roof, and hanging to nails in the cross-beams were countless twisted lengths of clothesline, and with these dangerous projectiles she began to harass the foe. Amid the hail of hempen missiles the white flag was hoisted, and the enemy surrendered.

"Rachel! Rachel! Come down, my girl. You'll break your peautiful neck. Packett, what you stand there for like a wooden verandah-post? Go up, and help Miss Varnhagen down. Take care!—my 'tear Rachel!—look out for that bucket!—mind that coil of rubber-belting! Pe careful! That bale of hops is ofer! My 'tear child, stand still, I tell you; wait till I get the ladder."

With Packett in a position to cut off retreat, and the precipice of wool-bales in front, Rachel sat down and shook with laughter.

Varnhagen naturally argued that his pretty daughter's foot, now that the tables were so suddenly turned upon her, would with the storeman's assistance be quickly set upon the top rung of the ladder which was now in position. But he had not yet learned all Rachel's stratagems.

"No!" she cried. "I think I'll stay here."

"My child, my Rachel, you will fall!"

"Oh, dear, no: it's as firm as a rock. No, Packett, you can go down. I shall stay here."

"But, my 'tear Rachel, you'll be killed! Come down, I beg."

"Will you promise to do what I want?"

"My 'tear daughter, let us talk afterwards. I can think of nothing while you are in danger of being killed in a moment!"

"I want that gold watch in Tresco's window. I sha'n't come down till you say I can have it."

"My peautiful Rachel, it is too expensive. I will import you one for half the price. Come down before it is too late."

"What's the good of watches in London? I want that watch at Tresco's, to wear going calling. Consent, father, before it is too late."

"My loafly, how much was the watch?"

"Twenty-five pounds."

"Oh, that is too much. First, you will ruin me, and kill yourself afterwards to spite my poverty. Rachel, you make your poor old father quite ill."

"Then I am to have the watch?"

"Nefer mind the watch. Some other time talk to me of the watch. Come down safe to your old father, before you get killed."

"But I *do* mind the watch. It's what I came for. I shall stay here till you consent."

"Oh, Rachel, you haf no heart. You don't loaf your father."

"You don't love your daughter, else you'd give me what I want."

"I not loaf you, Rachel! Didn't I gif you that ring last week, and the red silk dress the week pefore? Come down, my child, and next birthday you shall have a better watch than in all Tresco's shop. My 'tear Rachel, my 'tear child, you'll be killed; and what good will be your father's money to him then? Oh! that bale moved. Rachel! sit still."

"Then you'll give me the watch?"

"Yes, yes. You shall have the watch. Come down now, while Packett holds your hand."

“Can I have it to-day?”

“Be careful, Packett. Oh! that bale is almost ofer.”

“Will you give it me this morning, father?”

“Yes, yes, this morning.”

“Before I go home to dinner?”

“Yes, pefore dinner.”

“Then, Packett, give me your hand. I will come down.”

The dainty victress placed her little foot firmly on the uppermost rung; and while Packett held the top, and the merchant the bottom, of the ladder, the dream of muslin and ribbons descended to the floor.

Old Varnhagen gave a sigh of relief.

“You’ll nefer do that again, Rachel?”

“I hope I shall never need to.”

“You shouldn’t upset your poor old father like that, Rachel.”

“You shouldn’t drive me to use such means to make you do your duty.”

“My duty!”

“Yes, to give me that watch.”

“Ah, the watch. I forgot it.”

“I shall go now, and get it.”

“Yes, my child, get it.”

“I’ll say you will pay at the end of the month.”

“Yes, I will pay—perhaps at the end of the month, perhaps it will go towards a contra account for watches I shall supply to Tresco. We shall see.”

“Good-bye, father.”

“Good-bye, Rachel; but won’t you gif your old father a kiss pefore you go?”

The vision of muslin and ribbons laid her parasol upon an upturned barrel, and came towards the portly Jew. Her soft dress was crumpled by his fat hand, and her pretty head was nestled on his shoulder.

“Ah! my ’tear Rachel. Ah! my peautiful. You loaf your old father. My liddle taughter, I gif you everything; and you loaf me very moch, eh?”

“Of course, I do. And won’t it look well with a brand-new gold chain to match?”

“Next time my child wants something, she won’t climb on the wool-bales and nearly kill herself?”

“Of course not. I shall wear it this afternoon when I go out calling.”

“Now kiss me, and run away while I make some more money for my liddle Rachel.”

The saintly face raised itself, and looked with a smile into the face of the old Jew; and then the bright red lips fixed themselves upon his wrinkled cheek.

“You are a good girl; you are my own child; you shall have everything you ask; you shall have all I’ve got to give.”

“Good-bye, father. Thanks awfully much.”

“Good-bye, Rachel.”

The girl turned; the little heels tapped regularly on the floor; the pigeon-like walk was resumed; and Rachel Varnhagen, watched by the loving eyes of her father, passed into the street.

The gold-buying clerk at the Kangaroo Bank was an immaculately dressed young man with a taste for jewelry. In his tie he wore a pearl, in a gold setting shaped like a diminutive human hand; his watch-chain was of gold, wrought in a wonderful and extravagant design. As he stepped through the swinging, glazed doors of the Bank, and stood on the broad step without, at the witching hour of twelve, he twirled his small black moustache so as to display to advantage the sparkling diamond ring which encircled the little finger of his left hand. His Semitic features wore an expression of great self-satisfaction, and his knowing air betokened intimate knowledge of the world and all that therein is. He nodded familiarly to a couple of young men who passed by, and glanced with the appreciative eye of a connoisseur at the shop-girls who were walking briskly to their dinners.

Loitering across the pavement he stood upon the curbing, and looked wistfully up and down the

street. Presently there hove in sight a figure that riveted his attention: it was Rachel Varnhagen, with muslins blowing in the breeze and ribbons which streamed behind, approaching like a ship in full sail.

The gold-clerk crossed over the street to meet her, and raised his hat.

“You’re in an awful hurry. Where bound, Rachel?”

“If *your* old Dad told *you* to go and buy a gold watch and chain, *you’d* be in a hurry, lest he might change his mind.”

“My soul hankers after something dearer than watches and chains. If your Dad would give me leave, I’d annex his most precious jewel before he could say, ‘Knife!’ He’d never get a chance to change his mind. But he always says, ‘My boy, you wait till you’re a manager, and can give me a big overdraft.’ At that rate we shall have to wait till Doomsday.”

“The watch is at Tresco’s. Come along: help me turn the shop upside down to find the dandiest.”

“How d’you manage to get round the Governor, Rachel? I’d like to know the dodge.”

“He wouldn’t mind if *you* fell off a stack of bales and broke your neck. He’d say, ‘Thank God! that solves that liddle difficulty.’”

“Wool bales? Has wool gone up? I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, stupid. If you were on the top of a pile of swaying bales, old Podge would say, ‘Packett, take away the ladder: that nice young man must stay there. It’s better for him to die than marry Rachel—she’d drive him mad with bills in a month.’”

“Oh, that wouldn’t trouble me—I’d draw on *him*.”

“Oh, would you?” Rachel laughed sceptically. “You don’t know the Gov. if you think that. You couldn’t bluff him into paying a shilling. But *I* manage him all right. *I* can get what I want, from a trip to Sydney to a gold watch, dear boy.”

“Then why don’t you squeeze a honeymoon out of him?—that would be something new, Rachel.”

She actually paused in her haste.

“Wouldn’t it be splendid!” she exclaimed, putting her parasol well back behind her head, so that the glow of its crimson silk formed a telling background to her face. “Wouldn’t it be gorgeous? But as soon as I’m married he will say, ‘No, Rachel, my dear child, your poor old father is supplanted—your husband now has the sole privilege of satisfying your expensive tastes. Depend on him for everything you want.’ What a magnificent time I should have on your twelve notes a month!”

The spruce bank-clerk was subdued in a moment, in the twinkling of one of Rachel’s beautiful black eyes—his matrimonial intentions had been rudely reduced to a basis of pounds, shillings and pence.

But just at this embarrassing point of the conversation they turned into Tresco’s doorway, and confronted the rubicund goldsmith, whose beaming smile seemed to fill the whole shop.

“I saw an awf’ly jolly watch in your window,” said Rachel.

“Probably. Nothing more likely, Miss Varnhagen,” replied Benjamin. “Gold or silver?”

“Gold, of course! Let me see what you’ve got.”

“Why, certainly.” Tresco took gold watches from the window, from the glass case on the counter, from the glass cupboard that stood against the wall, from the depths of the great iron safe, from everywhere, and placed them in front of the pretty Jewess. Then he glanced with self-approval at the bank-clerk, and said: “I guarantee them to keep perfect time. And, after all, there’s nothing like a good watch—a young lady cannot keep her appointments, or a young man be on time, without a watch. Most important: no one should be without it.”

Rachel was examining the chronometers, one by one; opening and shutting their cases, examining their dials, peering into their mysterious works. She had taken off her gloves, and her pretty hands, ornamented with dainty rings, were displayed in all their shapeliness and delicacy.

“What’s the price?” she asked.

“Prices to suit all buyers,” said Tresco. “They go from ten pounds upwards. This is the one I recommend—it carries a guarantee for five years—jewelled throughout, in good, strong case—duplex escapement—compensation balance. Price £25.” He held up a gold chronometer in a case which was flat and square, with rounded corners, and engraved elaborately—a watch which would catch the eye and induce comment.

The jeweller had gauged the taste of his fair customer.

“Oh! the duck.”

“The identical article, the ideal lady’s watch,” said Tresco, unctuously.

“And now the chain,” said Rachel.

Benjamin took a dozen lady's watch-guards from a blue velvet pad, and handed them to the girl.

The gold clerk of the Kangaroo Bank stood by, and watched, as Rachel held the dainty chains, one by one, across her bust.

"Quite right, sir, quite right," remarked the goldsmith. "When a gentleman makes a present to a lady, let him do the thing handsome. Them's my sentiments."

The girl looked at Tresco, and laughed.

"This is to be booked to my father," she said. "There, that's the one I like best." She held out an elaborate chain, with a round bauble hanging from it. "If you had to depend on Mr. Zahn, here, you'd have to wait till the cows came home."

Benjamin was wrapping up the watch in a quantity of tissue paper.

"No, no. I'll wear it," exclaimed Rachel. One dainty hand stretched forward and took the watch, while the other held the chain. "There," she said, as she handed the precious purchase to her sweetheart, "fix it on."

She threw her head back, laid her hand lightly on the young man's arm, and allowed him to tuck the watch into her bodice and fasten the chain around her neck.

He lingered long over the process.

"Yes, I would," said the voice from behind the counter. "I most certainly should give her one on the cheek, as a reward. Don't mind me; I've done it myself when I was young, before I lost my looks."

The young man stepped back, and Rachel, after the manner of a pouter pigeon, nestled her chin on her breast, in her endeavour to see how the watch looked in wearing. Then she tapped the floor with the toe of her shoe indignantly, and said, looking straight at the goldsmith: "You lost your looks? What a find they must have been for the man who picked them up. If I were you, I'd advertise for them, and offer a handsome a reward—they must be valuable."

"Most certainly, they were," replied Benjamin, his smile spreading across his broad countenance, "they were the talk of all my lady friends and the envy of my rivals."

"I expect it was the rivals that spoilt them. But don't cry over spilt milk, old gentleman."

"Certainly not, most decidedly not—there are compensations. The price of the watch and chain is £33."

"Never mind the price. *I* don't want to know the price—that'll interest my Dad. Send the account to him, and make yourself happy."

And, touching her sweetheart's arm as a signal for departure, the dazzling vision of muslins and ribbons vanished from the shop.

CHAPTER V.

Bill the Prospector.

He came down the street like a dog that has strayed into church during sermon-time; a masterless man without a domicile. He was unkempt and travel-stained; his moleskin trousers, held up by a strap buckled round his waist, were trodden down at the heels; under the hem of his coat, a thing of rents and patches, protruded the brass end of a knife-sheath. His back was bent under the weight of his neat, compact swag, which contained his six-by-eight tent and the blankets and gear necessary to a bushman. He helped his weary steps with a long *manuka* stick, to which still clung the rough red bark, and looking neither to left nor right, he steadfastly trudged along the middle of the road. What with his ragged black beard which grew almost to his eyes, and the brim of his slouch hat, which had once been black, but was now green with age and weather, only the point of his rather characterless nose and his two bright black eyes were visible. But though to all appearances he was a desperate ruffian, capable of robbery and cold-blooded murder, his was a welcome figure in Timber Town. Men turned to look at him as he tramped past in his heavy, mud-stained blucher boots. One man, standing outside The Lucky Digger, asked him if he had "struck it rich." But the "swagger" looked at the man, without replying.

"Come and have a drink, mate," said another.

"Ain't thirsty," replied the "swagger."

"Let 'im alone," said a third. "Can't you see he's bin working a 'duffer'?"

Benjamin Tresco, standing on the curb of the pavement, watched the advent of the prospector with an altogether remarkable interest, which rose to positive restlessness when he saw the digger pause before the entrance of the Kangaroo Bank.

The ill-clad, dirty stranger pushed through the swinging, glass door, stood with his hobnailed boots on the tesselated pavement inside the bank, and contemplated the Semitic face of the spruce clerk who, with the glittering gold-scales by his side, stood behind the polished mahogany counter.

But either the place looked too grand and expensive, or else the clerk's appearance offended, but the "swagger" backed out of the building, and stood once more upon the asphalt, wearing the air of a stray dog with no home or friends.

Tresco crossed the street. With extended hand, portly mien, and benign countenance, he approached the digger, after the manner of a benevolent sidesman in a church.

"Selling gold, mate?" He spoke in his most confidential manner. "Come this way. *I* will help you."

Down the street he took the derelict, like a ship in full sail towing a battered, mastless craft into a haven of safety.

Having brought the "swagger" to a safe anchorage inside his shop, Tresco shut the door, to the exclusion of all intruders; took his gold-scales from a shelf where they had stood, unused and dusty, for many a month; stepped behind the counter, and said, in his best business manner: "Now, sir."

The digger unhitched his swag and dropped it unceremoniously on the floor, stood his long *manuka* stick against the wall, thrust his hand inside his "jumper," looked at the goldsmith's rubicund face, drew out a long canvas bag which was tied at the neck with a leather boot-lace, and said, in a hoarse whisper, "There, mister, that's my pile."

Tresco balanced the bag in his hand.

"You've kind o' struck it," he said, as he looked at the digger with a blandness which could not have been equalled.

The digger may have grinned, or he may have scowled—Tresco could not tell—but, to all intents and purposes, he remained imperturbable, for his wilderness of hair and beard, aided by his hat, covered the landscape of his face.

"Ja-ake!" roared the goldsmith, in his rasping, raucous voice, as though the apprentice were quarter of a mile away. "Come here, you young limb!"

The shock-headed, rat-faced youth shot like a shrapnel shell from the workshop, and burst upon the astonished digger's gaze.

"Take this bob and a jug," said the goldsmith, "and fetch a quart. We'll drink your health," he added, turning to the man with the gold, "and a continual run of good luck."

The digger for the first time found his full voice. It was as though the silent company of the wood-hens in the "bush" had caused the hinges of his speech to become rusty. His words jerked themselves spasmodically from behind his beard, and his sentences halted, half-finished.

"Yes. That's so. If you ask me. Nice pile? Oh, yes. Good streak o' luck. Good streak, as you say. Yes. Ha, ha! Ho, ho!" He actually broke into a laugh.

Tresco polished the brass dish of his scales, which had grown dim and dirty with disuse; then he untied the bag of gold, and poured the rich contents into the dish. The gold lay in a lovely, dull yellow heap.

"Clean, rough gold," said Tresco, peering closely at the precious mound, and stirring it with his grimy forefinger. "It'll go £3 15s. You're in luck, mister. You've struck it rich, and"—he assumed his most benignant expression—"there's plenty more where this came from, eh?"

"You bet," said the digger. "Oh, yes, any Gawd's quantity." He laughed again. "You must think me pretty green, mister." He continued to laugh. "How much for the lot?"

Tresco spread the gold over the surface of the dish in a layer, and, puffing gently but adroitly, he winnowed it with his nicotine-ladened breath till no particle of sand remained with the gold. Then he put the dish on the scales, and weighed the digger's "find."

"Eighty-two ounces ten pennyweights six grains," he said, with infinite deliberation, and began to figure on a piece of paper. Seemingly, the goldsmith's arithmetic was as rusty as the digger's speech, for the sum took so long to work out that the owner of the gold had time to cut a "fill" of tobacco from a black plug, charge his pipe, and smoke for fully five minutes, before Tresco proclaimed the total. This he did with a triumphant wave of the pen.

"Three hundred and nine pounds seven shillings and elevenpence farthing. That's as near as I can get it. Nice clean gold, mister."

He looked at the digger; the digger looked at him.

"What name?" asked Tresco. "To whom shall I draw the cheque?"

"That's good! My name?" laughed the digger. "I s'pose it's usual, eh?"

"De-cidedly."

“Sometimes they call me Bill the Prospector, sometimes Bill the Hatter. I ain’t particular. I’ve got no choice. Take which you like.”

“‘Pay Bill the Prospector, or Order, three hundred and nine pounds.’ No, sir, that will hardlee do. I want your real name, your proper legal title.”

“Sounds grand, don’t it? ‘Legal title,’ eh? But if you must have it—though it ar’n’t hardly ever used—put me down Bill Wurcott. That suit, eh?—Bill Wurcott?”

Tresco began to draw the cheque.

“Never mind the silver,” said the digger. “Make it three hundred an’ nine quid.” And just then Jake entered with the quart jug, tripped over the digger’s swag, spilt half-a-pint of beer on the floor, recovered himself in time to save the balance, and exclaimed, “Holee smoke!”

“Tell yer what,” said the digger. “Let the young feller have the change. Good idea, eh?”

Jake grinned—he grasped the situation in a split second.

The digger took the cheque from Tresco, looked at it upside-down, and said, “That’s all right,” folded it up, put it in his breeches’ pocket just as if it had been a common one-pound note, and remarked, “Well, I must make a git. So-long.”

“No, sir,” said the goldsmith. “There is the beer: here are the men. No, sir; not thus must you depart. Refresh the inner man. Follow me. We must drink your health and continued good fortune.”

Carefully carrying the beer, Tresco led the way to his workshop, placed the jug on his bench, and soon the amber-coloured liquor foamed in two long glasses.

The digger put his pint to his hairy lips, said, “*Kia ora.* Here’s fun,” drank deep and gasped—the froth ornamenting his moustache. “The first drop I’ve tasted this three months.”

“You must ha’ come from way back, where there’re no shanties,” risked Tresco.

“From way back,” acknowledged the digger.

“Twelve solid weeks? You *must* have a thirst.”

“Pretty fair, you bet.” The digger groped about in the depth of his pocket, and drew forth a fine nugget. “Look at that,” he said, with his usual chuckle.

Tresco balanced the lump of gold in his deft hand.

“Three ounces?”

“Three, six.”

“’Nother little cheque. Turn out your pockets, mister. I’ll buy all you’ve got.”

“That’s the lot,” said the digger, taking back the nugget and fingering it lovingly. “I don’t sell that—it’s my lucky bit; the first I found.” Another chuckle. “Tell you what. Some day you can make me something outer this, something to wear for a charm. No alloy, you understand; all pure gold. And use the whole nugget.”

Tresco pursed his lips, and looked contemplative.

“A three-ounce charm, worn round the neck, might strangle a digger in a swollen creek. Where’d his luck be then? But how about your missis? Can’t you divide it?”

The digger laughed his loudest.

“Give it the missis! That’s good. The missis’d want more’n an ounce and a half for her share. Mister, wimmen’s expensive.”

“Ain’t you got no kid to share the charm with?”

“Now you’re gettin’ at me”—the chuckle again—“worse ’an ever. You’re gettin’ at me fine. Look ’ere, I’m goin’ to quit: I’m off.”

“But, in the meantime, what am I to do with this nice piece of gold? I could make a ring for each of your fingers, and some for your toes. I could pretty near make you a collarette, to wear when you go to evening parties in a low-necked dress, or a watch chain more massive than the bloomin’ Mayor’s. There’s twelve pounds’ worth of gold in that piece.”

The digger looked perplexed. The problem puzzled him.

“How’d an amulet suit you?” suggested the goldsmith.

“A what?”

“A circle for the arm, with a charm device chased on it.”

“A bit like a woman, that—eh, mister?”

“Not at all. The Prince o’ Wales, an’ the Dook o’ York, an’ all the *elite* wears ’em. It’d be quite the

fashion."

The digger returned the nugget to his pocket. "I call you a dam' amusin' cuss, I do that. You're a goer. There ain't no keepin' up with the likes o' *you*. You shall make what you blame well please—we'll talk about it by-and-by. But for the present, where's the best pub?"

"The Lucky Digger," said Jake, without hesitation.

"Certainly," reiterated Tresco. "You'll pass it on your way to the Bank."

"Well, so-long," said the digger. "See you later." And, shouldering his swag, he held out his horny hand.

"I reckon," said the goldsmith. "Eight o'clock this evening. So-long." And the digger went out.

Tresco stood on his doorstep, and with half-shut eyes watched the prospector to the door of The Lucky Digger.

"Can't locate it," he mused, "and I know where all the gold, sold in this town, comes from. Nor I can't locate *him*. But he's struck it, and struck it rich."

There were birch twigs caught in the straps of the digger's "swag," and he had a bit of *rata* flower stuck in the band of his hat. "That's where he's come from!" Tresco pointed in the direction of the great range of mountains which could be seen distinctly through the window of his workshop.

"What's it worth?" asked Jake, who stood beside his master.

"The gold? Not a penny less than £3/17/-an ounce, my son."

"An' you give £3/15/-. Good business, boss."

"I drew him a cheque for three hundred pounds, and I haven't credit at the bank for three hundred shillings. So I must go and sell this gold before he has time to present my cheque. Pretty close sailing, Jake.

"But mark me, young shaver. There's better times to come. If the discovery of this galoot don't mean a gold boom in Timber Town, you may send the crier round and call me a flathead. Things is goin' to hum."

CHAPTER VI.

The Father of Timber Town.

"I never heard the like of it!" exclaimed Mr. Crewe. "You say, eighty-two ounces of gold? You say it came from within fifty miles of Timber Town? Why, sir, the matter must be looked into." The old gentleman's voice rose to a shrill treble. "Yes, indeed, it *must*."

They were sitting in the Timber Town Club: the ancient Mr. Crewe, Scarlett, and Cathro, a little man who rejoiced in the company of the rich octogenarian.

"I'm new at this sort of thing," said Scarlett: "I've just come off the sea. But when the digger took a big bit of gold from his pocket, I looked at it, open-eyed—I can tell you that. I called the landlord, and ordered drinks—I thought that the right thing to do. And, by George! it was. The ruffianly-looking digger drank his beer, insisted on calling for more, and then locked the door."

Mr. Crewe was watching the speaker closely, and hung on every word he uttered. Glancing at the lean and wizened Cathro, he said, "You hear that, Cathro? He locked the door, sir. Did you ever hear the like?"

"From inside his shirt," Scarlett continued, "he drew a fat bundle of bank notes, which he placed upon the table. Taking a crisp one-pound note from the pile, he folded it into a paper-light, and said, 'I could light my pipe with this an' never feel it.'

"'Don't think of such a thing,' I said, and placed a sovereign on the table, 'I'll toss you for it.'

"'Right!' said my hairy friend. 'Sudden death?'

"'Sudden death,' I said.

"'Heads,' said he."

"Think of that, now!" exclaimed Mr. Crewe. "The true digger, Cathro, the true digger, I know the *genus*—there's no mistaking it. Most interesting. Go on, sir."

"The coin came down tails, and I pocketed the bank-note.

"'Lookyer here, mate,' said my affluent friend. 'That don't matter. We'll see if I can't get it back,' and he put another note on the table. I won that, too. He doubled the stakes, and still I won.

"'You had luck on the gold-fields,' I said, 'but when you come to town things go dead against you.'

“‘Luck!’ he cried. ‘Now watch me. If I lost the whole of thisyer bloomin’ pile, I could start off to-morrer mornin’ an, before nightfall, I’d be on ground where a week’s work would give me back all I’d lost. An’ never a soul in this blank, blank town knows where the claim is.’”

“Well, well,” gasped old Mr. Crewe; his body bent forward, and his eyes peering into Scarlett’s face. “I’ve lived here since the settlement was founded. I got here when the people lived in nothing better than Maori *whares* and tents, when the ground on which this very club stands was a flax-swamp. I have seen this town grow, sir, from a camp to the principal town of a province. I know every man and boy living in it, do I not, Cathro? I know every hill and creek within fifty miles of it; I’ve explored every part of the bush, and I tell you I never saw payable gold in any stream nearer than Maori Gully, to reach which you must go by sea.”

“What about the man’s mates?” asked Cathro.

“I asked him about them,” replied Scarlett. “I said, ‘You have partners in this thing, I suppose.’ ‘You mean pals,’ he said. ‘No, sir. I’m a hatter—no one knows the place but me. I’m sole possessor of hundreds of thousands of ounces of gold. There’s my Miner’s Right.’ He threw a dirty parchment document on the table, drawn out in the name of William Wurcott.”

“Wurcott? Wurcott?” repeated Mr. Crewe, contemplatively. “I don’t know the name. The man doesn’t belong to Timber Town.”

“You speak as though you thought no one but a Timber Town man should get these good things.” Cathro smiled as he spoke.

“No, sir,” retorted the old gentleman, testily. “I said no such thing, sir. I simply said he did not belong to this town. But you must agree with me, it’s a precious strange thing that we men of this place have for years been searching the country round here for gold, and, by Jupiter! a stranger, an outsider, a mere interloper, a miserable ‘hatter’ from God knows where, discovers gold two days’ journey from the town, and brings in over eighty ounces?” The old man’s voice ran up to a falsetto, he stroked his nose with his forefinger and thumb, he broke into the shrill laugh of an octogenarian. “And the rascal boasts he can get a hundred ounces more in a week or two! We must look into the matter—we must see what it means.”

The three men smoked silently and solemnly.

“Scarlett, here, owns the man’s personal acquaintance,” said Cathro. “The game is to go mates with him—Scarlett, the ‘hatter,’ and myself.”

All three of them sat silent, and thought hard.

“But what if your ‘hatter’ won’t fraternize?” asked Mr. Crewe. “You young men are naturally sanguine, but I know these diggers. They may be communicative enough over a glass, but next day the rack and thumbscrews wouldn’t extract a syllable from them.”

“All the more reason why we should go, and see the digger what time Scarlett deems him to be happy in his cups.” This was Cathro’s suggestion, and he added, “If he won’t take us as mates, we may at least learn the locality of his discovery. With your knowledge of the country, Mr. Crewe, the rest should be easy.”

“It all sounds very simple,” replied the venerable gentleman, “but experience has taught me that big stakes are not won quite so easily. However, we shall see. When our friend, Scarlett, is ready, *we* are ready; and when I say I take up a matter of this kind, you know I mean to go through with it, even if I have to visit the spot myself and prospect on my own account. For believe me, gentlemen, this may be the biggest event in the history of Timber Town.” Mr. Crewe had risen to his feet, and was walking to and fro in front of the younger men. “If payable gold were found in these hills, this town would double its population in three months, business would flourish, and everybody would have his pockets lined with gold. I don’t talk apocryphally. I have seen such things repeatedly, upon the Coast. I have seen small townships literally flooded with gold, and yet a pair of boots, a tweed coat, and the commonest necessaries of life, could not be procured there for love or money.”

CHAPTER VII.

Cut-throat Euchre.

“Give the stranger time to sort his cards,” said the thin American, with the close-cropped head.

“Why, certainly, certainly,” replied the big and bloated Englishman, who sat opposite. “Well, my noble, what will you do?”

The Prospector, who was the third player, looked up from his “hand” and drummed the table with the ends of his dirty fingers.

“What do I make it? Why, I turn it down.”

“Pass again,” said the American.

“Ditto,” said the Englishman.

“Then this time I make it ‘Spades,’” said the digger, bearded to the eyes; his tangled thatch of black hair hiding his forehead, and his clothes such as would have hardly tempted a rag-picker.

“You make it ‘next,’ eh?” It was the Englishman who spoke.

“We’ll put you through, siree,” said the American, who was a small man, without an atom of superfluous flesh on his bones. His hair stood upright on his head, his dough-coloured face wore a perpetual smile, and he was the happy possessor of a gold eye-tooth with which he constantly bit his moustache. The player who had come to aid him in plucking the pigeon was a big man with a florid complexion and heavy, sensuous features, which, however, wore a good-natured expression.

The game was cut-throat euchre; one pound points. So that each of the three players contributed five pounds to the pool, which lay, gold, silver and bank-notes, in a tempting pile in the middle of the table.

“Left Bower, gen’lemen,” said the digger, placing the Knave of Clubs on the table.

“The deuce!” exclaimed the florid man.

“Can’t help you, partner,” said the man with the gold tooth, playing a low card.

“One trick,” said the digger, and he put down the Knave of Spades. “There’s his mate.”

“Right Bower, egad!” exclaimed the big man, who was evidently minus trumps.

The pasty-faced American played the Ace of Spades without saying a word.

“A blanky march!” cried the digger. “Look-a-here. How’s that for high?” and he placed on the table his three remaining cards—the King, Queen, and ten of trumps.

The other players showed their hands, which were full of red cards.

“Up, and one to spare,” exclaimed the digger, and took the pool.

About fifty pounds, divided into three unequal piles, lay on the table, and beside each player’s money stood a glass.

The florid man was shuffling the pack, and the other two were arranging their marking cards, when the door opened slowly, and the Father of Timber Town, followed by Cathro and Scarlett, entered the room.

“Well, well. Hard at it, eh, Garsett?” said the genial old gentleman, addressing himself to the Englishman. “Cut-throat euchre, by Jupiter! A ruinous game, Mr. Lichfield,”—to the man with the gold tooth—“but your opponent”—pointing with his stick to the digger—“seems to have all the luck. Look at his pile, Cathro. Your digger friend, eh, Scarlett? Look at his pile—the man’s winning.”

Scarlett nodded.

“He’s in luck again,” said Mr. Crewe; “in luck again, by all that’s mighty.”

The pool was made up, the cards were dealt, and the game continued. The nine of Hearts was the “turn-up” card.

“Pass,” said Lichfield.

“Then I order you up,” said the digger.

The burly Garsett drew a card from his “hand,” placed it under the pack, and said, “Go ahead. Hearts are trumps.”

The gentleman with the gold tooth played the King of Hearts, the digger a small trump, and Garsett his turn-up card.

“Ace of Spades,” said Lichfield, playing that card.

“Trump,” said the digger, as he put down the Queen of Hearts.

“Ace of trumps!” exclaimed Garsett, and took the trick.

“’Strewth!” cried the man from the “bush.” “But let’s see your next.”

“You haven’t a hope,” said the big gambler. “Two to one in notes we euchre you.”

“Done,” replied the digger, and he took a dirty one-pound bank-note from his heap of money.

“Most exciting,” exclaimed Mr. Crewe. “Quite spirited. The trumps must all be out, Cathro. Let us see what all this betting means.”

“Right Bower,” said the Englishman.

“Ho-ho! stranger,” the American cried. “I guess that pound belongs to Mr. Garsett.”

The digger put the Knave of Diamonds on the table, and handed the money to his florid

antagonist.

“Your friend is set back two points, Scarlett.” It was Mr. Crewe that spoke. “England and America divide the pool.”

The digger looked up at the Father of Timber Town.

“If you gen’l’men wish to bet on the game, well and good,” he said, somewhat heatedly. “But if you’re not game to back your opinion, then keep your blanky mouths shut!”

Old Mr. Crewe was as nettled at this unlooked-for attack as if a battery of artillery had suddenly opened upon him.

“Heh! What?” he exclaimed. “You hear that, Cathro? Scarlett, you hear what your friend says? He wants to bet on the game, and that after being euchred and losing his pound to Mr. Garsett. Why, certainly, sir. I’ll back my opinion with the greatest pleasure. I’ll stake a five-pound note on it. You’ll lose this game, sir.”

“Done,” said the digger, and he counted out five sovereigns and placed them in a little heap by themselves.

Mr. Crewe had not come prepared for a “night out with the boys.” He found some silver in his pocket and two pounds in his sovereign-case.

“Hah! no matter,” he said. “Cathro, call the landlord. I take your bet, sir”—to the digger—“most certainly I take it, but one minute, give me one minute.”

“If there’s any difficulty in raising the cash,” said the digger, fingering his pile of money, “I won’t press the matter. *I* don’t want your blanky coin. I can easy do without it.”

The portly, rubicund landlord of the Lucky Digger entered the room.

“Ah, Townson,” said old Mr. Crewe, “good evening. We have a little bet on, Townson, a little bet between this gentleman from away back and myself, and I find I’m without the necessary cash. I want five pounds. I’ll give you my IOU.”

“Not at all,” replied the landlord, in a small high voice, totally surprising as issuing from such a portly person, “no IOU. I’ll gladly let you have twenty.”

“Five is all I want, Townson; and I expect to double it immediately, and then I shall be quite in funds.”

The landlord disappeared and came back with a small tray, on which was a bundle of bank-notes, some dirty, some clean and crisp. The Father of Timber Town counted the money. “Twenty pounds, Townson. Very well. You shall have it in the morning. Remind me, Cathro, that I owe Mr. Townson twenty pounds.”

The digger looked with surprise at the man who could conjure money from a publican.

“Who in Hades are *you*?” he asked, as Mr. Crewe placed his £5 beside the digger’s. “D’you own the blanky pub?”

“No, he owns the town,” interposed Garsett.

The digger was upon his feet in a moment.

“Proud to meet you, mister,” he cried. “Glad to have this bet with you. I like to bet with a gen’l’man. Make it ten, sir, and I shall be happier still.”

“No, no,” replied the ancient Mr. Crewe. “You said five, and five it shall be. That’s quite enough for you to lose on one game.”

“You think so? That’s your blanky opinion? See that?” The digger pointed to his heap of money. “Where that come from there’s enough to buy your tin-pot town three times over.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Crewe. “I’m glad to hear it. Bring your money, and you shall have the town.”

“Order, gentlemen, order,” cried the dough-faced man. “I guess we’re here to play cards, and cards we’re going to play. If you three gentlemen cann’t watch the game peaceably, it’ll be my disagreeable duty to fire you out—and that right smart.”

And just at this interesting moment entered Gentle Annie. She walked with little steps; propelling her plenitude silently but for the rustle of her silk skirt. In her hand she held a scented handkerchief, like any lady in a drawing-room; her hair, black at the roots and auburn at the ends, was wreathed, coil on coil, upon the top of her head; her face, which gave away all her secrets, was saucy, expressive of self-satisfaction, petulance, and vanity. And yet it was a handsome face; but it lacked mobility, the chin was too strong, the grey eyes wanted expression, though they were ever on the watch for an admiring glance.

“The angel has come to pour oil upon the troubled waters,” said the flabby, florid man, looking up from his cards at the splendid bar-maid.

Gentle Annie regarded the speaker boldly, smiled, and coloured with pleasure.

“To pour whisky down your throats,” she said, laughing—“that would be nearer the mark.”

“And produce a more pleasing effect,” said Garsett.

“Attend to the game,” said the American. “Spades are trumps.”

“Pass,” said the digger.

“Then down she goes,” said the Englishman.

“Pass again,” said the American.

“I make it Diamonds, and cross the blanky suit,” said the digger.

Gentle Annie turned to the Father of Timber Town.

“There’s a gentleman wants to see you, Mr. Crewe,” she said.

“Very good, very good; bring him in—he has as much right here as I.”

“He said he’d wait for you in the bar-parlour.”

“But, my girl, I must watch the game: I have a five-pound note on it. Yes, a five-pound note!”

“Think of that, now,” said Gentle Annie, running her bejewelled hand over her face. “You’ll be bankrupt before morning. But never mind, old gentleman,”—she deftly corrected the set of Mr. Crewe’s coat, and fastened its top button—“you’ll always find a friend and protector in *me*.”

“My good girl, what a future! The tender mercies of bar-maids are cruel. ‘The daughter of the horse-leech’—he! he!—where did you get all those rings from?—I don’t often quote Scripture, but I find it knows all about women. Cathro, you must watch the game for me: I have to see a party in the bar. Watch the game, Cathro, watch the game.”

The old gentleman, leaning heavily upon his stick, walked slowly to the door, and Gentle Annie, humming a tune, walked briskly before, in all the glory of exuberant health and youth.

When Mr. Crewe entered the bar-parlour he was confronted by the bulky figure of Benjamin Tresco, who was enjoying a glass of beer and the last issue of *The Pioneer Bushman*. Between the goldsmith’s lips was the amber mouthpiece of a straight-stemmed briar pipe, a smile of contentment played over the breadth of his ruddy countenance, and his ejaculations were made under some deep and pleasurable excitement.

“By the living hokey! What times, eh?” He slapped his thigh with his heavy hand. “The town won’t know itself! We’ll all be bloomin’ millionaires. Ah! good evening, Mr. Crewe. Auspicious occasion. Happy to meet you, sir.” Benjamin had risen, and was motioning the Father of Timber Town to a seat upon the couch, where he himself had been sitting. “You will perceive that I am enjoying a light refresher. Have something yourself at my expense, I beg.”

Mr. Crewe’s manner was very stiff. He knew Tresco well. It was not so much that he resented the goldsmith’s familiar manner, as that, with the instinct of his *genus*, he suspected the unfolding of some money-making scheme for which he was to find the capital. Therefore he fairly bristled with caution.

“Thank you, nothing.” He spoke with great dignity. “You sent for me. What do you wish to say, sir?”

Benjamin looked at the rich man through his spectacles, without which he found it impossible to read the masterpieces of the editor of *The Pioneer Bushman*; pursed his lips, to indicate that he hardly relished the old gentleman’s manner; scrutinised the columns of the newspaper for a desired paragraph, on which, when found, he placed a substantial forefinger; and then, glancing at Mr. Crewe, he said abruptly, “Read that, boss,” and puffed furiously at his pipe, while he watched the old man’s face through a thick cloud of tobacco smoke.

Mr. Crewe read the paragraph; folded up the paper, and placed it on the couch beside him; looked at the ceiling; glanced round the room; turned his keen eyes on Tresco, and said:—

“Well, what of that? I saw that an hour ago. It’s very fine, if true; very fine, indeed.”

“True, mister? *I* bought the gold *myself*! *I* gave the information to the ‘buster’! Now, here is my plan. I know this gold is *new* gold—it’s no relation to any gold I ever bought before. It comes from a virgin field. By the special knowledge I possess as a gold-buyer, I am able to say that; and you know when a virgin field yields readily as much as eighty-two ounces, the odds are in favour of it yielding thousands. Look at the Golden Bar. You remember that?—eight thousand ounces in two days, and the field’s been worked ever since. Then there was Greenstone Gully—a man came into town with fifty ounces, and the party that tracked him made two thousand ounces within a month. Those finds were at a distance, but this one is a local affair. How do I know?—my special knowledge, mister; my intuitive reading of signs which prognosticate coming events; my knowledge of the characters and ways of diggers. All this I am willing to place at your disposal, on one condition, Mr. Crewe; and that condition is that we are partners in the speculation. I find the field—otherwise the partnership lapses—and you find me £200 and the little capital required. I engage to do my part within a week.”

Mr. Crewe stroked his nose with his forefinger and thumb, as was his habit when in deep contemplation.

“But—ah—what if I were to tell you that I can find the field entirely by my own exertions? What do you say to that, Mr. Tresco? What do you say to that?”

“I say, sir, without the least hesitation, that you *never* will find it. I say that you will spend money and valuable time in a wild-goose chase, whereas *I* shall be entirely successful.”

“We shall see,” said Mr. Crewe, rising from his seat, “we shall see. Don’t try to coerce me, sir; don’t try to coerce *me*!”

“I haven’t the least desire in that direction.” Benjamin’s face assumed the expression of a cherub. “Nothing is further from my thoughts. I know of a good thing—my special knowledge qualifies me to make the most of it; I offer you the refusal of ‘chipping in’ with me, and you, I understand, refuse. Very well, Mr. Crewe, *I* am satisfied; *you* are satisfied; all is amicably settled. I go to place my offer where it will be accepted. Good evening, sir.”

Benjamin put his nondescript, weather-worn hat on his semi-bald head, and departed with as much dignity as his ponderous person could assume.

“And now,” said Mr. Crewe to himself, as the departing figure of the goldsmith disappeared, “we will go and see the result of our little bet; we will see whether we have lost or gained the sum of five pounds.”

The old man, taking his stick firmly in his hand, stumped down the passage to the door of the room where the gamblers played, and, as he turned the handle, he was greeted with a torrent of shouts, high words, and the noise of a falling table.

There, on the floor, lay gold and bank notes, scattered in every direction amid broken chairs, playing cards, and struggling men.

Mr. Crewe paused on the threshold. In the whirl and dust of the tumult he could discern the digger’s wilderness of hair, the bulky form of Garsett, and the thin American, in a tangled, writhing mass. His friend Cathro was looking on with open mouth and trembling hands, ineffectual, inactive. But Scarlett, making a sudden rush into the melee, seized the lucky digger, and dragged him, infuriated, struggling, swearing, from the unwieldy Garsett, on whose throat his grimy fingers were tightly fixed.

“Well, well,” exclaimed Mr. Crewe. “Landlord! landlord! Scarlett, be careful—you’ll strangle that man!”

Scarlett pinioned the digger’s arms from behind, and rendered him harmless; Garsett sat on the floor fingering his throat, and gasping; while Lichfield lay unconscious, with his head under the broken table.

“Fair play!” shouted the digger. “I’ve bin robbed. Le’me get at him. I’ll break his blanky neck. Cheat a gen’leman at cards, will you? Le’me get at him. Le’go, I tell yer—who’s quarrelling with *you*?” But he struggled in vain, for Scarlett’s hold on him was tighter than a vice’s.

“Stand quiet, man,” he expostulated. “There was no cheating.”

“The fat bloke fudged a card. I was pickin’ up a quid from the floor—he fudged a card. Le’go o’ me, an’ I’ll fight you fair.”

“Stand quiet, I tell you, or you’ll be handed over to the police.”

The digger turned his hairy visage round, and glanced angrily into Jack’s eyes.

“You’ll call in the traps?—you long-legged swine!” With a mighty back-kick, the Prospector lodged the heel of his heavy boot fairly on Scarlett’s shin. In a moment he had struggled free, and faced round.

“Put up your fists!” he cried. “I fight fair, I fight fair.”

There was a whirlwind of blows, and then a figure fell to the floor with a thud like that of a felled tree. It was the lucky digger, and he lay still and quiet amid the wreckage of the fight.

“Here,” said Cathro, handing Mr. Crewe ten pounds. “Take your money—our friend the digger lost the game.”

“This is most unfortunate, Cathro.” But as he spoke, the Father of Timber Town pocketed the gold. “Did I not see Scarlett knock that man down? This is extremely unfortunate. I have just refused the offer of a man who avers—who avers, mind you—that he can put us on this new gold-field in a week, but I trusted to Scarlett’s diplomacy with the digger: I come back, and what do I see? I see my friend Scarlett knock the man down! There he lies as insensible as a log.”

“It looks,” said Cathro, “as if our little plan had fallen through.”

“Fallen through? We have made the unhappy error of interfering in a game of cards. We should have stood off, sir, and when a quarrel arose—I know these diggers; I have been one of them myself, and I understand them, Cathro—when a quarrel arose we should have interposed on behalf of the digger, and he would have been our friend for ever. Now all the gold in the country wouldn’t bribe him to have dealings with us.”

The noise of the fight had brought upon the scene all the occupants of the bar. They stood in a

group, silent and expectant, just inside the room. The landlord, who was with them, came forward, and bent over the inanimate form of the Prospector. “I think this is likely to be a case for the police,” said he, as he rose, and stood erect. “The man may be alive, or he may be dead—I’m not a doctor: I can’t tell—but there’s likely to be trouble in store for the gentlemen in the room at the time of the fight.”

Suddenly an energetic figure pushed its way through the group of spectators, and Benjamin Tresco, wearing an air of supreme wisdom, and with a manner which would not have disgraced a medico celebrated for his “good bedside manner,” commenced to examine the prostrate man. First, he unbuttoned the insensible digger’s waistcoat, and placed his hand over his heart; next, he felt his pulse. “This man,” he said deliberately, like an oracle, “has been grossly manhandled; he is seriously injured, but with care we shall pull him round. My dear”—to Gentle Annie, who stood at his elbow, in her silks and jewels, the personification of Folly at a funeral—“a drop of your very best brandy—real cognac, mind you, and be as quick as you possibly can.”

With the help of Scarlett, Tresco placed the digger upon the couch. In the midst of this operation the big card-player and his attenuated accomplice, whose unconsciousness had been more feigned than actual, were about to slip from the room, when Mr. Crewe’s voice was heard loudly above the chatter, “Stop! stop those men, there!” The old gentleman’s stick was pointed dramatically towards the retreating figures. “They know more about this affair than is good for them.”

Four or five men immediately seized Garsett and Lichfield, led them back to the centre of the room, and stood guard over them.

At this moment, Gentle Annie re-entered with the *eau de vie*; and Tresco, who was bustling importantly about his patient, administrated the restorative dexterously to the unconscious digger, and then awaited results. He stood, with one hand on the man’s forehead and the other he held free to gesticulate with, in emphasis of his speech:—

“This gentleman is going to recover—with proper care, and in skilled hands. He has received a severe contusion on the cranium, but apart from that he is not much the worse for his ‘scrap.’ See, he opens his eyes. Ah! they are closed again. There!—they open again. He is coming round. In a few minutes he will be his old, breathing, pulsating self. The least that can be expected in the circumstances, is that the gentlemen implicated, who have thus been saved most disagreeable consequences by the timely interference of skilled hands, the least they can do is to shout drinks for the crowd.”

He paused, and a seraphic smile lighted his broad face.

“Hear, hear!” cried a voice from behind the spectators by the door.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” said another.

“There’s enough money on the floor,” remarked a third, “for the whole lot of us to swim in champagne.”

“My eye’s on it,” said Tresco. “It’s what gave me my inspiration. The lady will pick it up while you name your drinks to the landlord. Mine’s this liqueur brandy, neat. Let the lady pick up those notes there: a lady has a soul above suspicion—let her collect the money, and we’ll hold a court of enquiry when this gentleman here is able to give his evidence.”

The digger was now gazing in a befogged manner at the faces around him; and Gentle Annie, having collected all the money of the gamblers in a tray, placed it on the small table which stood against the wall.

“Now, doctor,” said a tall man with a tawny beard, “take your fee; it’s you restored the gent. Take your fee: is it two guineas, or do you make it five?”

“‘Doctor,’ did you say? No, Moonlight, my respected friend, I scorn the title. Doctors are a brood that batten on the ills of others. First day: ‘A pain internally, madam? Very serious. I will send you some medicine. Two guineas. Yes, the sum of two guineas.’ Next day: ‘Ah, the pain is no better, madam? Go on taking the medicine. Fee? Two guineas, *if* you please.’ And so on till the pain cures itself. If not, the patient grows worse, dies, is buried, and the doctor’s fees accrue proportionately. But we will suppose that the patient has some incurable tumour. The doctor comes, examines, looks wise, shakes his head, says the only chance is to operate; but it will be touch and go, just a toss up. He gets his knives, opens up the patient, and by good luck touches no vital part. Then the patient is saved, and it’s ‘My work, gentlemen, entirely my work. That’s what skill will do. My fee is forty-five guineas.’ That’s how he makes up for the folks that don’t pay. Doctor, *me*? No, Moonlight, my friend, I am a practitioner who treats for love. No fee; no fee at all. But, Annie, my dear, I’ll trouble you for that glass of brandy.”

The digger was contemplating Tresco’s face with a look of bewildered astonishment. “An’ who the blanky blank are *you*?” he exclaimed, with all his native uncouthness. “What the blank do you want to take my clo’es off of me for? Who the blue infernal——” All eyes were fixed on his contused countenance and the enormous bump on his temple. “Ah! there’s the gent that shook me of five quid. I’ll remember you, old party. An’ as for you two spielers—you thought to fleece me. I’ll give you what for! An’ there’s the other toff, ’im that biffed me. Fancy bein’ flattened out by a toney remittance man! Wonderful. I call it British pluck, real bull-dog courage—three to one, an’ me the littlest of the lot, bar one. Oh, it’s grand. It pays a man to keep his mouth shut, when

he comes to Timber Town with money in his pocket."

The eyes of the spectators began to turn angrily upon Lichfield and Garsett, who, looking guilty as thieves, stood uneasy and apart; but Scarlett stepped forward, and was about to speak in self-defence, when Mr. Crewe offered to explain the situation.

"I ask you to listen to me for one moment," he said; "I ask you to take my explanation as that of a disinterested party, a mere looker on. These three gentlemen"—he pointed to the three euchre players—"were having a game of cards, quite a friendly game of cards, in which a considerable sum of money was changing hands. My friend Scarlett, here, was looking on with me, when for some cause a quarrel arose. Next thing, the gentleman here on the sofa was attacking his opponents in the game with an empty bottle—you can see the pieces of broken glass amongst the cards upon the floor. Now, a bottle is a very dangerous weapon, a very dangerous weapon indeed; I might say a deadly weapon. Then it was that Mr. Scarlett interfered. He pulled off our friend, and was attacked—I saw this with my own eyes—attacked violently, and in self-defence he struck this gentleman, and inadvertently stunned him. That, I assure you, is exactly how the case stands. No great damage is done. The difference is settled, and, of course, the game is over."

"An' '*e*," said the digger, raising himself to a sitting posture, "'*e* shook me for five quid. The wily ol'e serpint. 'E never done nothin'—'e only shook me for five quid."

"Count the money into three equal parts, landlord," said the Father of Timber Town. "It's perfectly true, I *did* relieve the gentleman of five pounds; but it was the result of a bet, of a bet he himself insisted on. He would have made it even heavier, had I allowed him. But here is the money—he can have it back. I return it. I bet with no man who begrudges to pay money he fairly loses; but I have no further dealings with such a man."

"Oh, you think I want the blanky money, do you?" cried the digger. "You're the ol'e gen'leman as is said to own the crimson town, ain't you? Well, keep that five quid, an' 'elp to paint it crimsoner. *I* don't want the money. *I* can get plenty more where it came from, just for the pickin' of it up. You keep it, ol'e feller, an' by an' by I'll come and buy the town clean over your head."

"Give the patient some more brandy, my dear." Tresco's voice sounded as sonorous as a parson's. "Now he's talkin'. And what will you do with the town when you've bought it, my enterprising friend?"

"I'll turn the present crowd out—they're too mean to live. I'll sell it to a set of Chinamen, or niggers. I'd prefer 'em."

"These are the ravings of delirium," said Tresco. "I ask you to pay no attention to such expressions. We frequently hear things of this sort in the profession, but we let them pass. He'll be better in the morning."

"Is the money divided?" asked Mr. Crewe.

"Yes," said the landlord. "One hundred and twenty-five pounds and sixpence in each lot."

"Mr. Garsett," said the Father of Timber Town, the tone of command in his voice, "come and take your money. Mr. Lichfield, take yours, sir."

Still agitated and confused, the two gamblers came forward, took their shares, and pocketed notes and gold with trembling hands.

"Give your friend his, Tresco," said the venerable arbitrator.

"Here's your winnings, or your losings," said the goldsmith to the digger. "It don't matter what name you call 'em by, but tuck it safely away agin your brisket. And when next you strike it rich, take my advice: put it in the bank, an' keep it there."

The digger took the money in his open hands, placed scoopwise together, and said, "All this mine, is it? You're too kind. What do *I* want the blanky money for, eh? Didn't I tell you I could get money for the pickin' of it up? Well, you're all a pretty measly crowd, all as poor as church rats, by the manners of yer. Well, *you* pick it up." And he flung the money among the crowd, lay back on the couch, and closed his eyes.

There was a scurry, and a scrambling on the floor, in the doorway, and in the passage outside.

Amid the tumult, Garsett and the American slunk off unperceived, while Tresco and Mr. Crewe, the landlord, Gentle Annie and Scarlett remained spectators of the scene.

Soon all was hushed and still, and they were left alone with the eccentric digger; but presently the tall figure of Moonlight, the man with the tawny beard, reappeared.

"Here's fifty pound, anyway," he said, placing a quantity of notes and gold in the landlord's hands. "Some I picked up myself, some I took off a blackguard I knocked over in the passage. Take the lot, and give it back to this semi-lunatic when he suffers his recovery in the morning. Good-night, gentlemen; I wish you the pleasures of the evening." So saying, the man with the tawny beard disappeared, and it was not long before Tresco was left alone with his patient.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Yellow Flag.

The harbour of Timber Town was formed by a low-lying island shaped like a long lizard, which stretched itself across an indentation in the coast-line, and the tail of which joined the mainland at low tide, while the channel between its head and the opposing cliffs was deep, practicable, and safe.

Immediately opposite this end of the island the wharves and quays of Timber Town stretched along the shore, backed by hills which were dotted with painted wooden houses, nestling amid bowers of trees. Beyond these hills lay Timber Town itself, invisible, sheltered, at the bottom of its basin.

The day was hot, clear and still; the water lapped the shore lazily, and the refracted atmosphere shimmered with heat, wherever the sea touched the land.

A little dingey put off from the shore. It contained two men, one of whom sat in the stern while the other pulled. Silently over the surface of the calm, blue water the little craft skimmed. It passed through a small fleet of yachts and pleasure-boats moored under the lee of the protecting island, and presently touched the pebbles of a miniature beach.

Out stepped the Pilot of Timber Town and Captain Sartoris.

“An’ you call this blazin’ climate o’ yours temperate,” exclaimed the shipwrecked mariner.

“Heat?” said the Pilot, making the painter of the boat fast to some rusty bits of iron that lay on the shore; “you call this heat, with the sea-breeze risin’, and the island cooling like a bottle of champagne in an ice-chest. It’s plain to see, Sartoris, you’re a packet-rat that never sailed nowhere except across the Western Ocean, in an’ out o’ Liverpool and New York.” They had approached the end of the island, and overlooked the harbour entrance. “Now, this is where I intend to place the beacon. What do you think of it?” Sartoris assumed the manner and expression of supreme interest, but said nothing. “Them two leading lights are all very well in their way, but this beacon, with the near one, will give a line that will take you outside o’ that sunken reef which stretches a’most into the fairway; and a vessel ’ll be able to come in, scientific and safe, just like a lady into a drawing-room.”

With a seaman’s eye Sartoris took in the situation at a glance. “Very pretty,” he said, “very neat. A lovely little toy port, such as you see at the theayter. It only wants the chorus o’ fisher girls warbling on that there beach road, and the pirate brig bringing-to just opposite, an’ the thing would be complete.”

“Eh! What?” ejaculated the Pilot. “What’s this play-goin’ gammon? You talk like a schoolboy that’s fed on jam tarts and novelettes, Sartoris. Let’s talk sense. Have you ever heard of an occulting light?”

“No, certainly not; not by that name, anyhow.”

“D’you know what an apparent light is?”

“No, but I know plenty of apparent fools.”

“An apparent light is a most ingenious contraption.”

“I’ve no doubt.”

“It’s a optical delusion, and makes two lights o’ one—one on shore, which is the real one, and one here, which is the deception.” But while the Pilot went on to talk of base plates, lewis bats, and all the paraphernalia of his craft, the skipper’s eye was fixed on a string of little islands which stood off the end of the western arm of the great bay outside.

“Now, I never saw those when I was coming in,” said he. “Where did you get them islands from, Summerhayes? Are they occulting, real, or apparent? Changing your landmarks, like this, is deceiving.”

The Pilot, forgetting the technicalities of his profession, looked at the phenomenon which puzzled the skipper, and said, as gruffly as a bear, “That’s no islands: it’s but a bit of a mirage. Sometimes there’s only one island, sometimes three, sometimes more—it’s accordin’ to circumstances. But what’s this craft coming down the bay? Barque or ship, Sartoris?—I’ve forgot me glass.”

Both men stood on the seaward edge of the island, and looked long and hard at the approaching vessel.

“Barque,” said Sartoris, whose eyes were keener than the older man’s.

“There’s no barque due at this port for a month,” said the Pilot. “The consignees keep me posted up, for to encourage a sharp lookout. The *Ida Bell* should arrive from London towards the middle of next month, but *she* is a ship. This must be a stranger, putting in for water or stores; or maybe she’s short-handed.”

For a long time they watched the big craft, sailing before the breeze.

“Sartoris, she’s clewing up her courses and pulling down her head-sails.”

“Isn’t she a trifle far out, Pilot?”

“It’s good holding-ground out there—stiff clay that would hold anything. What did I tell you?—there you are—coming-to. She’s got starn-board. There goes the anchor!”

The skipper had hitherto displayed but little interest in the strange vessel, but now he was shouting and gesticulating, as a flag was run up to her fore-truck.

“Look at that, Summerhayes!” he exclaimed. “If you ain’t blind, tell me what that flag is. Sure as I’m a master without a ship, it’s the currantine flag.”

“So it is, so it is. That means the Health Officer, Sartoris.” And the gruff old Pilot hastened down to the dingey.

As the two seamen put off from the island, the skipper, who was in the stern of the little boat, could see Summerhayes’s crew standing about on the slip of the pilot-shed; and by the time the dingey had reached the shore, the Pilot’s big whale-boat lay by the landing-stage.

“Where’s the doctor?” roared Summerhayes. “Is he goin’ to make us hunt for him when he’s required for the first time this six weeks?”

“All right, all right,” called a clear voice from inside the great shed. “I’m ready before you are this time, Pilot.”

“An’ well you are,” growled the gruff old barnacle. “That furrin’-lookin’ barque outside has hoisted the yellow flag. Get aboard, lads, get aboard.”

“Your men discovered the fact half an hour ago, by the aid of your telescope.” The doctor came slowly down the slip, carrying a leather hand-bag.

“If you’ve any mercy,” said the Pilot, “you’ll spare ’em the use o’ that. Men die fast enough without physic.”

“Next time you get the sciatica, Summerhayes, I’ll give you a double dose.”

“An’ charge me a double fee. I know you. Shove her off, Johnson.”

The grim old Pilot stood with the steering-oar in his hand; the skipper and the doctor sitting on either hand of him, and the crew pulling as only a trained crew can.

“Steady, men,” said the Pilot: “it’s only half tide, and there’s plenty of water coming in at the entrance. Keep your wind for that, Hendricson.”

With one hand he unbuttoned the flap of his capacious trouser-pocket, and took out a small bunch of keys, which he handed to Sartoris.

“Examine the locker,” he said. “It’s the middle-sized key.” The captain, in a moment, had opened the padlock which fastened the locker under the Pilot’s seat.

“Is there half-a-dozen of beer—quarts?” asked Summerhayes.

“There is,” replied Sartoris.

“Two bottles of rum?”

“Yes.”

“Glasses?”

“Four.”

“An’ a corkscrew?”

“It’s here.”

“Then we’ve just what the doctor ordered: not this doctor—make no mistake o’ that. An’ them sons o’ sea cooks, forrard there, haven’t yet found a duplicate key to my locker. Wonderful! wonderful!”

The crew grinned, and put their backs into every stroke, for they knew “the old man” meant that they shouldn’t go dry.

“I’m the Pilot o’ this here port, eh?”

“Most certainly,” said the doctor.

“An’ Harbour Master, in a manner o’ speaking?”

“That’s so.”

“And captain o’ this here boat?”

They were hugging the shore of the island, where the strength of the incoming tide began to be felt in the narrow tortuous channel. The bluff old Pilot put the steering-oar to port, and brought his boat round to starboard, in order to keep her out of the strongest part of the current.

“Now, lads, shake her up!” he shouted.

The men strained every nerve, and the boat was forced slowly against the tide. With another sudden movement of the steering-oar Summerhayes brought the boat into an eddy under the island, and she shot forward.

“Very well,” he said; “it’s acknowledged that I’m all that—Pilot, Harbour Master, and skipper o’ this boat. Then let me tell you that I’m ship’s doctor as well, and in that capacity, since we’re outside and there’s easy going now under sail, I prescribe a good stiff glass all round, as a preventive against plague, Yellow Jack, small-pox, or whatever disease it is they’ve got on yonder barque.”

Sartoris uncorked a bottle, and handed a glass to the doctor.

“And a very good prescription, too,” said the tall, thin medico, who had a colourless complexion and eyes that glittered like black beads; “but where’s the water?”

“Who drinks on my boat,” growled the Pilot, “drinks his liquor neat. I drown no man and no rum with water. If a man must needs spoil his liquor, let him bring his own water: there’s none in my locker.”

The doctor took the old seaman’s medicine, but not without a wry face; Sartoris followed suit, and then the Pilot. The boat was now under sail, and the crew laid in their oars and “spliced the main brace.”

“That’s the only medicine we favour in this boat or in this service,” said the Pilot, as he returned the key of the locker to his pocket, “an’ we’ve never yet found it to fail. Before encount’ring plague, or after encount’ring dirty weather, a glass all round: at other times the locker is kept securely fastened, and I keep the key.” Saying which, he buttoned the flap of his pocket, and fixed his eyes on the strange barque, to which they were now drawing near.

It could be seen that she was a long time “out”; her sails, not yet all furled, were old and weather-worn; her sides badly needed paint; and as she rose and fell with the swell, she showed barnacles and “grass” below the water-line. At her mizzen-peak flew the American ensign, and at the fore-truck the ominous quarantine flag.

As the boat passed under the stern, the name of the vessel could be seen—“*Fred P. Lincoln*, New York”—and a sickly brown man looked over the side. Soon he was joined by more men, brown and yellow, who jabbered like monkeys, but did nothing.

“Seems they’ve got a menag’ry aboard,” commented Sartoris.

Presently a white face appeared at the side.

“Where’s the captain?” asked the Health Officer.

“With the mate, who’s dying.”

“Then who are you?”

“Cap’n’s servant.”

“But where’s the other mate?”

“He died a week ago.”

“What’s wrong on board?”

“Don’t know, sir. Ten men are dead, and three are sick.”

“Where are you from?”

“Canton.”

“Canton? Have you got plague aboard?”

“Not bubonic. The men go off quiet and gradual, after being sick a long time. I guess you’d better come aboard, and see for yourself.”

The ladder was put over the side, and soon the doctor had clambered on board.

The men in the boat sat quiet and full of contemplation.

“This is a good time for a smoke,” said the Pilot, filling his pipe and passing his tobacco tin forrard. “And I think, Sartoris, all hands ’d be none the worse for another dose o’ my medicine.” Again his capacious hand went into his more capacious pocket, and the key of the locker was handed to Sartoris.

“Some foolish people are teetotal,” continued Summerhayes, “and would make a man believe as how every blessed drop o’ grog he drinks shortens his life by a day or a week, as the case may be. But give me a glass o’ liquor an’ rob me of a month, rather than the plagues o’ China strike me dead to-morrer. Some folks have no more sense than barn-door fowls.”

A yellow man, more loquacious than his fellows, had attracted the attention of Sartoris.

“Heh! John. What’s the name of your skipper?”

The Chinaman’s reply was unintelligible. “I can make nothing of him,” said Sartoris. But, just at that moment, the man who had described himself as the captain’s servant reappeared at the side of the ship.

“My man,” said Summerhayes, “who’s your captain?”

“Cap’n Starbruck.”

“Starbruck!” exclaimed Sartoris. “I know him.” In a moment he was half-way up the ladder.

“Hi! Sartoris,” roared the Pilot. “If you go aboard that vessel, you’ll stay there till she’s got a clean bill o’ health.”

“I’m going to help my old shipmate,” answered Sartoris from the top of the ladder. “Turn and turn about, I says. He stood by me in the West Indies, when I had Yellow Jack; and I stand by him now.” As he spoke his foot was on the main-rail. He jumped into the waist of the quarantined barque, and was lost to sight.

“Whew!” said the Pilot to the vessel’s side. “Here’s a man just saved from shipwreck, and he must plunge into a fever-den in order to be happy. I wash my hands of such foolishness. Let ’im go, let ’im go.”

The thin, neat doctor appeared, standing on the main-rail. He handed his bag to one of the boat’s crew, and slowly descended the ladder.

“An’ what have you done with Sartoris?” asked the Pilot.

“He’s aboard,” replied the doctor, “and there he stops. That’s all I can say.”

“And what’s the sickness?”

“Ten men are dead, five more are down—two women, Chinese, and three men. I should call it fever, a kind of barbiers or beri-beri. But in the meanwhile, I’ll take another drop of your excellent liquor.”

The doctor drank the Pilot’s medicine in complete silence.

“Let go that rope!” roared Summerhayes. “Shove her off. Up with your sail.” The trim boat shot towards the sunny port of Timber Town, and Sartoris was left aboard the fever-ship.

CHAPTER IX.

What Looked Like Courting.

On the terrace of the Pilot’s house was a garden-seat, on which sat Rose Summerhayes and Scarlett.

Rose was looking at her dainty shoe, the point of which protruded from beneath her skirt; while Scarlett’s eyes were fixed on the magnificent panorama of mountains which stretched north and south as far as he could see.

Behind the grass-covered foot-hills, at whose base crouched the little town, there stood bolder and more rugged heights. In rear of these rose the twin forest-clad tops of an enormous mountain mass, on either side of which stretched pinnacled ranges covered with primeval “bush.”

Scarlett was counting hill and mountain summits. His enumeration had reached twenty distinct heights, when, losing count, he turned to his companion.

“It’s a lovely picture to have in front of your door,” he said, “a picture that never tires the eye.”

A break in the centre of the foot-hills suddenly attracted his attention. It was the gorge through which a rippling, sparkling river escaped from the mountain rampart and flowed through the town to the tidal waters of the harbour.

“That valley will take us into the heart of the hills,” he said. “We start to-morrow morning, soon after dawn—Moonlight and I. Do you know him?”

The girl looked up from her shoe, and smiled. “I can’t cultivate the acquaintance of every digger in the town,” she replied.

“Don’t speak disparagingly of diggers. *I* become one to-morrow.”

“Then, mind you bring me a big nugget when you come back,” said the girl.

“That’s asking me to command good luck. Give me that, and you shall have the nugget.”

“Does luck go by a girl’s favour? If it did, you would be sure to have it.”

“I never had it on the voyage out, did I?”

“Perhaps you never had the other either.”

“That’s true—I left England through lack of it.”

“I shouldn’t have guessed that. Perhaps you’ll gain it in this country.”

Scarlett looked at her, but her eyes were again fixed on the point of her shoe.

“Well, Rosebud—flirting as usual?” Captain Summerhayes, clad in blue serge, with his peaked cap on the back of his head, came labouring up the path, and sat heavily on the garden-seat. “I never see such a gal—always with the boys when she ought to be cooking the dinner.”

“Father!” exclaimed Rose, flushing red, though she well knew the form that the Pilot’s chaff usually took. “How *can* you tell such fibs? You forget that Mr. Scarlett is not one of the old cronies who understand your fun.”

“There, there, my gal.” The Pilot laid his great brown hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Don’t be ruffled. Let an old sailor have his joke: it won’t hurt, God bless us; it won’t hurt more’n the buzzing of a blue-bottle fly. But you’re that prim and proper, that staid and straight-laced, you make me tease you, just to rouse you up. Oh! them calm ones, Mr. Scarlett, beware of ’em. It takes a lot to goad ’em to it, but once their hair’s on end, it’s time a sailor went to sea, and a landsman took to the bush. It’s simply terrible. Them mild ’uns, Mr. Scarlett, beware of ’em.”

“Father, do stop!” cried Rose, slapping the Pilot’s broad back with her soft, white hand.

“All right,” said her father, shrinking from her in mock dread; “stop that hammerin’.”

“Tell us about the fever-ship, and what they’re doing with Sartoris,” said Scarlett.

“Lor’, she’s knocked the breath out of a man’s body. I’m just in dread o’ me life. Sit t’other end o’ the seat, gal; and do you, Mr. Scarlett, sit in between us, and keep the peace. It’s fearful, this livin’ alone with a dar’ter that thumps me.” The old fellow chuckled internally, and threatened to explode with suppressed merriment. “Some day I shall die o’ laffing,” he said, as he pulled himself together. “But you was asking about Sartoris.” He had now got himself well in hand. “Sartoris is like a pet monkey in a cage, along o’ Chinamen, Malays, Seedee boys, and all them sort of animals. Laff? You should ha’ seen me standing up in the boat, hollerin’ at Sartoris, and laffin’ so as I couldn’t hardly keep me feet. ‘Sartoris,’ I says, ‘when do the animals feed?’ An’ he looks over the rail, just like a stuffed owl in a glass case, and says nothing. I took a bottle from the boat’s locker, and held it up. ‘What wouldn’t you give for a drop o’ that!’ I shouts. But he shook his fist, and said something disrespectful about port wine; but I was that roused up with the humour o’ the thing, I laffed so as I had to set down. A prisoner for full four weeks, or durin’ the pleasure o’ the Health Officer, that’s Sartoris. Lord! *what* a trap to be caught in.”

“But what’s the disease they’ve on board?” asked Scarlett.

“That’s where it is,” replied the Pilot—“nobody seems to know. The Health Officer he says one thing, and then, first one medical and then another must put his oar in, and say it’s something else—dengey fever, break-bone, spirrilum fever, beri-beri, or anything you like. One doctor says the ship shouldn’t ha’ bin currantined, and another says she should, and so they go on quarrelling like a lot o’ cats in a sack.”

“But there have been deaths on board,” said Rose.

“Deaths, my dear? The first mate’s gone, and more’n half the piebald crew. This morning we buried the Chinese cook. You won’t see Sartoris, not this month or more.”

“Mr. Scarlett is going into the bush, father. He’s not likely to be back till after the ship is out of quarantine.”

“Eh? What? Goin’ bush-whacking? I thought you was town-bred. Well, well, so you’re goin’ to help chop down trees.”

Scarlett smiled. “You’ve heard of this gold that’s been found, Pilot?”

“I see it in the paper.”

“I’m going to try if I can find where it comes from.”

“Lord love ’ee, but you’ve no luck, lad. This gold-finding is just a matter o’ luck, and luck goes by streaks. You’re in a bad streak, just at present; and you won’t never find that gold till you’re out o’ that streak. You can try, but you won’t get it. You see, Sartoris is in the same streak—no sooner does he get wrecked than he is shut up aboard this fever-ship. And s’far as I can see, he’ll get on no better till he’s out o’ his streak too. You be careful how you go about for the next six months or so, for as sure as you’re born, if you put yourself in the way of it, you’ll have some worse misfortune than any you’ve yet met with. Luck’s like the tide—you can do nothing agin it; but when it turns, you’ve got everything in your favour. Wait till the tide of your luck turns, young man, before you attempt anything rash. That’s my advice, and I’ve seen proof of it in every quarter of the globe.”

“Father is full of all sorts of sailor-superstitions. He hates to take a ship out of port on a Friday, and wouldn’t kill an albatross for anything.”

“We caught three on the voyage out,” said Scarlett; “a Wandering Albatross, after sighting the

Cape of Good Hope, and two sooty ones near the Campbell Islands. I kept the wing-bones, and would have given you one for a pipe-stem, Captain, if the ship had reached port."

"But she didn't, my lad," growled the Pilot, "and that's where the point comes in. Why sailors can't leave them birds alone astonishes me: they don't hurt nobody, and they don't molest the ship, but sail along out of pure love o' company. On the strength o' that you must kill 'em, just for a few feathers and stems for tobacco-pipes. And you got wrecked. P'r'aps you'll leave 'em alone next voyage."

During the last part of the conversation, Rose had risen, and entered the house. She now returned with a small leather case in her hand.

"This, at any rate, will be proof against bad luck," she said, as she undid the case, and drew out a prismatic compass. She adjusted the eye-piece, in which was a slit and a glass prism and lifted the sight-vane, down the centre of which a horsehair stretched perpendicularly to the card of the compass. Putting the instrument to her eye, Rose took the bearing of one of the twin forest-clad heights, and said, "Eighty degrees East—is that right?"

"You've got the magnetic bearing," said Scarlett, taking the instrument from the girl's hand. "To find the real bearing, you must allow for the variation between the magnetic and true North."

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed; "that's too dreadfully technical. But take the compass: it should keep you from being lost in the bush, anyway."

"Thank you," said Jack. "It will be very useful. It's a proper mining-compass."

"I hope its needle will guide you to untold gold, and that the mine you are looking for will act on it like a loadstone."

"Practical and sentimental—that's Rosebud," said the Pilot, from the further end of the seat. "And you'll always notice, Scarlett, that it's the practical that comes first with her. Once upon a time she give me a cardigan jacket to wear under my coat. She'd knitted it herself. She said it would keep me warm on frosty nights, and prevent me gettin' cold and all that; and when I gets into the boat one night, and was feeling for a match, bless you if I didn't find a piece o' paper, folded up, in the pocket o' that there cardigan jacket. I took it out and read it by the lantern. It was from my own dar'ter, jest as if I'd ha' been her sweetheart, and in it was all manner o' lovey-dovey things just fit to turn her old dad's head. Practical first, sentimental afterwards—that's Rosebud. Very practical over the makin' of an apple-pie—very sentimental over the eatin' of it, ain't you, my gal?"

"I don't know about the sentiment," said Rose, "but I am sure about the pie. If that were missing at dinner-time I know who would grumble. So I'll go, and attend to my duties." She had risen, and was confronting Scarlett. "Good-bye," she said, "and good fortune."

Jack took her proffered hand. "Thank you," he said.

She had walked a few steps towards the house, when she looked over her shoulder. "Don't forget the nuggets," she said with a laugh.

"I sha'n't forget," he replied. "If I get them, you shall have them. I hope I may get them, for *your* sake."

"Now, ain't that a wee bit mushy, for talk?" said the old Pilot, as his daughter disappeared. "You might give a gal a few pennyweights, or even an ounce, but when you say you hope you may find gold for her sake, ain't that just a trifle flabby? But don't think you can deceive my gal with talk such as that. She may be sentimental and stoopid with her old dad, but I never yet see the man she couldn't run rings round at a bargain. And as for gettin' soft on a chap, he ain't come along yet; and when he does, like as not I'll chuck him over this here bank, and break his impident neck. When my gal Rosebud takes a fancy, that's another matter. If she *should* have a leanin' towards some partic'lar chap, why, then I'd open the door, and lug him in by the collar if he didn't come natural and responsive. I've got my own ideas about a girl marrying—I had my own experience, and I say, give a girl the choice, an' she'll make a good wife. That's my theory. So if my gal is set agin a man, I'm set agin him. If she likes a partic'lar man, I'll like him too. She won't cotton to any miserable, fish-backed beach-comber, I can promise you. So mushy, flabby talk don't count with Rose; you can make your mind clear on that point."

The young man burst into a laugh.

"Keep her tight, Pilot," he said, in a voice loud with merriment. "When you know you've got a good daughter, stick to her. Chuck every interloper over the bank. I should do so myself. But don't treat *me* so when I come with the nuggets."

"Now, look 'ee here," said the Pilot, as he rose cumbersomely, and took Scarlett by the arm. "I've said you're in a bad streak o' luck, and I believe it. But, mark me here: nothing would please me better than for you to return with a hatful of gold. All I say is, if you're bent on going, be careful; and, being in a bad streak, don't expect great things."

"Good-bye," said Scarlett. "I'm in a bad streak? All right. When I work out of that you'll be the first man I'll come to see."

"An' no one'll be gladder to see you."

Captain Summerhayes took Scarlett's hand, and shook it warmly. "Good-bye," he said. "Good luck, and damn the bad streak."

Jack laughed, and walked down the winding path.

The Pilot stood on the bank, and looked after him.

"Hearten him up: that's the way," he said to himself, as he watched the retreating figure; "but, for all that, he's like a young 'more-pork' in the bush, with all his troubles to come."

CHAPTER X.

Hocussed.

In a small inner room in The Lucky Digger sat Benjamin Tresco and the Prospector.

The goldsmith was happy. His glass was before him, between his teeth was the stem of his pipe, and in consequence his face beamed with contentment, pleasure, good humour, and indolence.

The digger, on the other hand, looked serious, not to say anxious, and his manner was full of uneasiness. His glass stood untouched, his half-finished pipe had gone out, and he could not sit still, but began to pace backwards and forwards restlessly.

"I've put my foot in it," he said, pulling nervously at his bushy beard. "I've quarrelled with the toffs of the town, and the best thing I can do is to make a git. I'll start for the bush to-morrer."

"Now you're talking bunkum," said Tresco, as the smoke from his pipe wreathed above his head. "I know those men—two bigger rogues never breathed. They simply wanted to fleece you, and instead of that you gave 'em one in the eye. More power to you: it was immense! As for old Mr. Crewe and his crowd, they were on the make too; but they are out of court—there's no chance of them trying to renew your acquaintance. Now, what you must do is to enjoy yourself quietly, and by-and-by get back to your claim. But, for to-night, we'll have a good time—a little liquor, a quiet game of cards, a bit of a talk, and perhaps a better understanding."

"To speak the blanky truth," said the digger, "you're the whitest man I've met. True, I've give myself away a bit, but you're the only man ain't tried to do the pump-handle business with me."

"I'll buy all the gold you like to bring to town."

"Right! Here's my fist: you shall 'ave all I git."

The two men solemnly shook hands.

"Drink your liquor," said Tresco. "It'll do you good."

The digger drank, and re-lit his pipe.

"Now, what I says is that there's men I like to put in the way of a good thing."

"Same here," said Benjamin.

"An' I say you've dealt honest by me, and I'll deal fair and open with you."

"What I should expect," said Benjamin.

"I've found a good thing—more than I could ever want myself, if I lived a hundred years. I intend to do the handsome to a few o' my pals."

"I'm one."

"You're one. First, I shall go back and do a bit more prospecting, and see if I can better my claim. Then I shall come to town, and let my mates into the know."

"Just so."

"By-and-by we'll slip out o' town, an' no man any the wiser. You can't track *me*—I'm too smart, by long chalks."

Tresco's glass stood empty.

"We'll drink to it," he said, and rang the little hand-bell that stood on the table.

Gentle Annie entered, with that regal air common to bar-maids who rule their soggy realms absolutely.

"Well, old gentleman, same old tipple, I suppose," said she to Tresco.

"My dear, the usual; and see that it's out of the wood, the real Mackay. And bring in some dice."

The two men sat quietly till the bar-maid returned.

Tresco rattled the dice, and threw a pair of fours. "No deception," he said. "Are these the house's dice, my dear?"

“They’re out of the bar,” replied Gentle Annie.

“Are they in common use for throwing for drinks?”

“What d’you take me for? D’you think I know how to load dice?”

“My dear, this gentleman must know everything’s square when he plays with me. When we ring again, just bring in the usual. Adieu. Au revoir. Haere ra, which is Maori. Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

As the bar-maid disappeared the digger placed a pile of bank-notes on the table, and Tresco looked at them with feigned astonishment. “If you think, mister, that I can set even money again that, you over-estimate my influence with my banker. A modest tenner or two is about my height. But who knows?—before the evening is far spent perhaps my capital may have increased. Besides, there are always plenty of matches for counters—a match for a pound.”

“What shall it be?” asked the digger.

“‘Kitty,’” answered Tresco. “A pound a throw, best of three.”

“I’m agreeable,” said the digger.

“Throw for first ‘go,’” said Tresco.

The digger nodded, took the dice, and threw “eight.”

The goldsmith followed with six, and said, “You go first.”

The Prospector put three pounds in the centre of the table beside Tresco’s stake, and began to play. His highest throw was ten. Tresco’s was nine, and the digger took the pool.

“Well, you got me there,” said the goldsmith. “We’ll have another ‘go.’”

Again the pool was made up, and this time Tresco threw first. His highest throw was “eleven,” which the digger failed to beat.

“She’s mine: come to me, my dear.” Taking the pool, the goldsmith added, “We’re quits, but should this sort of thing continue, I have a remedy—double every alternate ‘Kitty.’”

The game continued, with fluctuations of luck which were usually in the digger’s favour.

But the rattling of the dice had attracted attention in the bar, and, lured by that illusive music, four men approached the room where the gamblers sat.

“No intrusion, I hope,” said the leader of the gang, pushing open the door.

“Come in, come in,” cried Tresco, barely glancing at the newcomers, so intent was he on the game.

They entered, and stood round the table: an ugly quartette. The man who had spoken was short, thick-set, with a bullet head which was bald on the top, mutton-chop whiskers, and a big lump under his left ear. The second was a neat, handsome man, with black, glittering eyes, over which the lids drooped shrewdly. The third was a young fellow with a weak face, a long, thin neck and sloping shoulders; and the fourth, a clean-shaven man of heavy build, possessed a face that would have looked at home on the shoulders of a convict. He answered to the name of Garstang.

“Dolphin,” said he to the man with the lump, “cut in.”

“No, no; let it be Carnac,” said Dolphin, looking at the keen-eyed man, who replied, “I pass it on to young William.”

“Gor’ bli’ me, why to me?” exclaimed the stripling. “I never strike any luck. I hand the chanst back to you, Carny.”

The man with the shrewd eyes sat down at the table, on which he first placed some money. Then he said in a clear, pleasant voice:

“You’ve no objection, I suppose, to a stranger joining you?”

“Not at all, not at all,” said the genial Benjamin.

“If you’re meanin’ me”—the digger glanced at the company generally—“all I’ve got to say is: the man as increases the stakes is welcome.”

They threw, and the digger won.

“That’s the style,” said he, as he took the pool. “That’s just as it oughter be. I shout for the crowd. Name your poisons, gentlemen.” He rang the bell, and Gentle Annie appeared, radiant, and supreme. She held a small tray in one hand, whilst the other, white and shapely, hung at her side. As the men named their liquors, she carefully repeated what they had ordered. When Carnac’s turn came, and she said, “And yours?” the handsome gambler stretched out his arm, and, drawing her in a familiar manner towards him, said, “You see, boys, I know what’s better than any liquor.”

In a moment Gentle Annie had pulled herself free, and was standing off from the sinister-faced

man.

“Phaugh!” she said with disgust, “I draw the line at spielers.”

“You draw the line at nothing that’s got money,” retorted the owner of the glittering eyes, brutally.

“Gentlemen,” said Gentle Annie, with a touch of real dignity in her manner, “I have your orders.” And she withdrew modestly, without so much as another glance at Carnac.

The play continued till her return. She handed round glasses to all but the handsome gambler.

“And where’s mine?” asked he.

“You forgot to order it,” said she. “I’ll send the pot-boy to wait on *you*.” In a perfectly affable manner she took the money from the uncouth digger, and then, throwing a disdainful glance at Carnac, she tossed her head defiantly, and went out.

The game continued. Now Tresco’s pile of money was increased, now it had dwindled to a few paltry pounds. The digger looked hot and excited as he, too, lost. Carnac, wearing a fixed, inscrutable smile, won almost every throw.

The gambler’s feverish madness was beginning to seize Tresco as it had already seized his friend, but at last he was stopped by lack of funds.

“How much have you on you, Bill?” he asked of the Prospector.

“How much have I got, eh?” said Bill, emptying his pockets of a large quantity of gold and bank-notes. “I reckon I’ve enough to see this little game through and lend a mate a few pounds as well.”

“I’ll trouble you for fifty,” said Tresco, who scribbled an IOU for the amount mentioned on the back of an envelope, and handed it to the digger.

The man with the lump on his neck had seated himself at the table.

“I think, gents, I’ll stand in,” said he. “You two are pals, and me and Carnac’s pals. Makes things equal.” He placed three pounds in the pool.

“Hold on,” Carnac interrupted. “I propose a rise. Make it £5 a corner—that’ll form a Kitty worth winning—the game to be the total of three throws.”

“Consecutive?” Tresco asked.

“Consecutive,” said the digger. “It avoids a shindy, and is more straightfor’ard.”

A pool of £20 was thus made up, and the play continued.

The innocent youth who answered to the name of William stood behind Tresco’s chair and winked at Garstang, whose loosely-made mouth twitched with merriment.

“Don’t be rash, Dolly,” remarked Young William to the man with the hideous neck, who held the dice box. “Think of your wife an’ kids in Sydney before you make yer throw. You’re spoilin’ my morals.”

“Go outside, and grow virtuous in the passage.” Dolphin made his throws, which totalled twenty-six.

Tresco followed with eighteen. The digger’s and Carnac’s chances still remained.

So lucky on the diggings, so unlucky in town, Bill the Prospector took the box with a slightly trembling hand and rattled the dice. His first throw was twelve, his second eleven. “Even money I beat you,” he said to Dolphin.

“Garn,” replied that polite worthy. “What yer givin’ us? D’you take me for a flat?”

The digger threw, and his score totalled thirty.

“P’r’aps, mister,” he said, turning to Carnac, “you’d like to take me up. Quid to quid you don’t beat me.”

The glittering eyes fixed themselves on the digger. “You’re too generous, sir,” said the gentlemanly Carnac. “Your score is hard to beat. Of course, I mean to try, but the odds are in your favour.”

“I’ll make it two to one,” said the digger.

“Well, if you insist,” replied Carnac, “I’ll accommodate you.” He placed his pound upon the table, and made his first throw—ten.

“Shake ’er up, Carny,” cried Young William. “I back you. No deception, gentlemen; a game which is nothing but luck.”

The suave gambler’s next throw was eleven.

“An even pound you lose, mister,” said William to the digger.

“Done,” cried the Prospector. “Put out the money.”

Carnac threw twelve, said, “The little lady’s mine,” and took the pool.

The digger handed two pounds to the winner and a pound note to Young William who, crumpling his money in his palm, said, “Oysters for supper and a bottle of fizz—there’ll be no end of a spree.”

The monotonous round of the game continued, till Tresco’s borrowed money had dwindled to but five pounds, which was enough for but one more chance with the dice.

The Prospector had fared but little better. What with the money he had staked, and side bets on individual throws, his pile of money had been reduced to half.

“There ain’t nothin’ mean about me,” he said, “but I’d be obliged if some gen’leman would shout.”

Dolphin touched the bell, and said, “I was beginning to feel that way myself.”

A very undersized young man, who had plastered his black hair carefully and limped with one leg, appeared, and said in a very shrill voice, “Yes, gentlemen.”

“Who are you?” asked Dolphin.

“I’m the actin’-barman,” replied the young man, twirling the japanned tray in his hands, and drawing himself up to his full height.

“I should call you the blanky rouseabout,” said Dolphin. “We want the bar-maid.”

“Miss Quintal says she ain’t comin’,” said the important youth. “To tell the truth, she’s a bit huffed with the ’ole lot of yer. What’s your orders, gents?”

He had hardly got the words out of his mouth, when Young William rushed him from the room and along the passage.

Dolphin rang the bell, but no one came to the door till Young William himself reappeared.

“I guess we won’t have no more trouble with that lot,” said he. “I jammed ’im inter a cupboard under the stairs, along with the brooms an’ dustpans. ’Ere’s the key. I’ll take your orders meself, gentlemen.”

“Where’s the lovely bar-maid?” asked Dolphin.

“She’s that took up with a gent that’s got a cast in his eye and a red mustache,” replied William, “that she’s got no time fer this crowd. What’s yours, Garstang? Look slippy. Don’t keep me all night.”

The men named their liquors, and Young William, taking three shillings from Dolphin, returned to the bar.

He was rather a long time away, and when he reappeared Carnac remarked, “You’ve been deuced slow over it—you’ll have to be sharper than that, if you want to be waiter in a hotel, my Sweet William.”

“You’re all very small potatoes in this room, you’re no class—you’re not in it with wall-eyed blokes. Here’s yer drinks.”

He went round the table, and carefully placed each individual’s glass at his elbow; and the game continued.

The pool fell to Carnac, and all Tresco’s money was gone.

“Here’s luck,” said the Prospector, lifting his glass to Dolphin; and when he had drunk he put his stake in the middle of the table.

Carnac rattled the dice-box. “Hello!” he said. “Kitty is short by five pounds. Who’s the defaulter?”

“Me, I’m afraid, gentlemen,” said Tresco. “I’m cleaned out. ’Case of stone-broke.”

“What’s this?” exclaimed the digger. “You ain’t got a stiver left? Well, there ain’t nothing mean about me—here y’are.” He roughly divided his money, and pushed one-half across the table to Tresco.

“Hear, hear!” cried Carnac, clapping his hands.

“’Ere, ’ere!” echoed Sweet William. “Very ’an’some, most magnanimous.”

Benjamin reached out his hand for the money, and in so doing overturned his glass, which broke into shivers on the floor.

“Good liquor spilt,” he remarked as he counted the money and drew another IOU for the amount loaned, which was sixty-seven pounds.

The play proceeded. “Here’s to you,” said Dolphin, as he drank to Tresco. “Better luck—you deserve it.”

The digger was filled with the gambler's fever. His eyes were wild, his face was hot; he drained his glass at a draught, and drummed the table with his fingers.

"Neck or nothin', Tresco," he said. "Make it ten pound a corner, and let's blanky well bust or win. Win, I say—double the stakes, and see if that'll change our luck."

"Anything to oblige you, gentlemen," said Carnac. "Let it be ten pounds, and you can withdraw as soon as you win your money back. It's a free country: you can have one throw, two, or any number you please. But don't say you were coerced, if you lose."

Tresco answered by putting his ten pounds in the pool.

The situation seemed to amuse Young William. He stood behind the goldsmith's chair, holding his sides to suppress his laughter, and making pantomimic signs to Garstang, who looked on with stolid composure and an evil smile.

The players made their throws, and Carnac won the pool.

"Never mind," cried the Prospector, with strong expletives. "There's my stake—let me have another shy. Game to the finish." He rose to his feet, threw his money down on the table with a bang, reeled as he stood, and sat down heavily.

And so the game went on. No luck came to Tresco, and but a few pounds remained in front of him. "One more Kitty, and that finishes me," he said, as he placed his stake in the pool.

As usual, he lost.

"Here's seven pounds left," he cried. "Even money all round, and sudden death on a single throw."

The final pool was made up. The digger threw first—a paltry seven. Dolphin followed with five. It was Tresco's turn to play next, and he threw eleven.

Carnac dallied long with the dice. He was about to throw, when the Prospector rose from his seat and, swaying, caught at the suave gambler's arm for support. With a rattle the dice-box fell. Carnac uttered an oath. Before the players three dice lay upon the table.

Tresco swore deep and loud, and in a moment had fastened both his hands upon the cheat's throat. Carnac struggled, the table with all its money fell with a crash, but the sinister Garstang made a swift movement, and before Tresco's face there glittered the barrel of a revolver.

"Drop him," said Garstang hoarsely. "Loose hold, or you're dead."

The goldsmith dropped his man, but Garstang still covered him with his weapon.

"Stow the loot, William," said Dolphin, suiting the action to the word; and while the two trusty comrades filled their pockets with gold and bank-notes, Carnac slunk from the room. With a heavy lurch the digger tumbled up against the wall, and then fell heavily to the floor.

"Don't give so much as a squeak," said Garstang to the goldsmith, "or you'll lie beside your mate, only much sounder."

Dolphin and Young William, laden with booty, now retired with all speed, and Garstang, still covering his man, walked slowly backward to the door. He made a sudden step and was gone; the door shut with a bang; the key turned in the lock, and Benjamin Tresco was left alone with the insensible form of Bill the Prospector.

"Hocussed, by Heaven!" cried the goldsmith. "Fleeced and drugged in one evening."

CHAPTER XI.

The Temptation of the Devil.

The atmosphere of the little room at the back of Tresco's shop was redolent of frying chops. The goldsmith was cooking his breakfast.

As he sneezed and coughed, and watered at the eyes, he muttered, "This is the time of all others that I feel the lack of Betsy Jane or a loving wife."

There was the sound of a foot on the narrow stairs, and Jake Ruggles appeared, his hair still damp from his morning ablutions and his face as clean as his muddy complexion would permit.

"'Mornin', boss."

"Good morning, my lad."

"Chops?"

"Chops and repentance," said the goldsmith.

"Whatyer givin' us?" asked Jake, indignant. "Who's takin' any repentance this morning?—not me,

you bet."

"There's a game called Euchre, Jake—never play it. There is likewise a game called Kitty, which is worse. You can lose more money in one night at one of these games than you can earn in six months."

"Speak f'yerself," said the irreverent Jake. "I own I wasn't at a temp'rance meetin' las' night, but I was in bed long before you come home."

"I was attending a sick friend," said Benjamin, dishing up the chops. "I confess I was kept out a little late."

"Must 'a' bin the horrors—I hope 'e didn't die."

"You are mistaken, my brilliant youth. But I own it was something not unlike it. My friend was drugged while having a friendly game of chance with men he deemed to be respectable. One of them dosed his liquor, while another rooked him with loaded dice, and what with one thing and another he was fleeced of all his cash, and was hocussed into the bargain."

"An' what was *you* doin' there?"

"I? I was being rooked too, but either the drug was the wrong sort to hocuss *me*, or I overturned my glass by accident, but I escaped with the loss of a few pounds."

"Hocuss yer grandmother!" Jake's ferret-like eyes looked unutterable scorn. "Your bloomin' hocuss was brandy."

"The mind of Youth is perverse and foolish," said the goldsmith, as he poured out the tea. "When the voice of Experience and the voice of Wisdom say, 'Eschew cards, abjure dice, avoid men with lumps on their necks and revolvers in their pockets,' sapient Youth says, 'The old man's goin' dotty.' But we shall see. Youth's innings will come, and I bet a fiver—no, no, what am I thinking of?—I stake my honour that Youth's middle stump gets bowled first ball."

Three years before Tresco had arrived in Timber Town, and had started business on borrowed money. Everything had favoured him but his own improvidence, and on the eve of what he believed to be a financial boom, he found himself in what he described as "a cleft stick." The quarter's rent was a fortnight overdue, the interest on his mortgaged stock must be paid in a few days; and in addition to this he was now saddled with a debt of honour which, if paid, would leave him in a bankrupt condition.

Rising from his half-finished meal, he put on his apron, went into the workshop, and sat down at his bench.

The money which he had held for satisfying the immediate calls of his creditors was squandered, and in the course of the morning he might expect a visit from his landlord, demanding payment.

He might put the digger from his mind—a man drugged overnight would not trouble him next day. The thought gave him relief, and he took up his tool and began to engrave a monogram on a piece of silver. The outlines of the letters were marked in pencil, and the point of his graver deftly ploughed little furrows hither and thither, till the beauty of the design displayed itself.

Jake had opened the shop and taken down the shutters. The goldsmith had lighted his pipe, and the workshop had assumed its usual air of industry, when a rapping was heard on the glass case which stood on the counter of the shop.

Benjamin, glad to welcome so early a customer, rose with a beaming face, and bustled out of the workshop.

Bill the Prospector stood before him.

"*Good* morning!" Tresco's greeting was effusively delivered. "I hope I see you well."

"A bit thick in the head, mate," said the digger, "but not much the worse, 'cept I ain't got so much as a bean to get a breakfast with."

"Come in, come in," exclaimed Benjamin, as he ushered the digger into the back room, where such chops as had escaped the voracious appetite of Jake Ruggles remained upon the table.

"Sit down, my friend; eat, and be well filled," said the goldsmith. "I'll brew another pot of tea, and soon our Richard will be himself again."

The dissipated digger ate half a chop and a morsel of bread and, when the tea was ready, he drank a cupful thirstily.

"Try another," suggested Tresco, holding the teapot in his hand. "You're a marvel at making a recovery."

The digger complied readily.

"That's the style," said the goldsmith. "There's nothing like tea to counteract the effects of a little spree."

"Spree!" The digger's face expressed indignation which he did not feel equal to uttering. "The spree remained with the other parties, likewise the dollars." He emptied his cup, and drew a long

breath.

“I reckon we struck a bit of a snag,” said Benjamin, “four of ’em in a lump.”

“They properly cleaned me out, anyway,” said the digger. “I ain’t got so much as sixpence to jingle on a tombstone.”

He fumbled in his pockets, and at length drew out two pieces of crumpled paper. These he smoothed with his rough begrimed hands, and then placed them on the table. They were Tresco’s IOUs.

“I suppose you’ll fix these ’ere, mate,” said he.

Benjamin scratched his head.

“When I’ve squared up my hotel bill an’ a few odds and ends,” explained the digger, “I’ll be makin’ tracks.”

Tresco looked on this man as a veritable gold-mine, in that he had discovered one of the richest diggings in the country. To quarrel with him therefore would be calamitous: to pay him was impossible, without recourse to financial suicide.

“What does it amount to?” he asked, bending over the bits of dirty paper. “H’m, £117—pretty stiff little bill to meet between 10 p.m. and 10 a.m. Suppose I let you have fifty?”

The digger looked at the goldsmith in astonishment.

“If I didn’t want the money, I’d chuck these bits o’ paper in the fire,” he exclaimed. “S’fer as *I’m* concerned the odd seventeen pound would do *me*, but it’s the missis down in Otago. She *must* ’ave a clear hundred. Women is expensive, I own, but they mustn’t be let starve. So anty up like a white man.”

“I’ll try,” said Tresco.

“If I was you I’d try blanky hard,” said the digger. “Act honest, and I’ll peg you off a claim as good as my own. Act dishonest, an’ you can go to the devil.”

Tresco had taken off his apron, and was putting on his coat. “I’ve no intention of doing that,” he said. “How would it be to get the police to make those spielers disgorge?—you’d be square enough then.”

“Do that, and I’ll never speak to you again. I’ve no mind to be guy’d in the papers as a new chum that was bested by a set of lags.”

“But I tell you they had loaded dice and six-shooters.”

“The bigger fools we to set two minutes in their comp’ny.”

“What if I say they drugged you?”

“I own to bein’ drunk. But if you think to picture me to the public as a greenhorn that can be drugged first and robbed afterwards, you must think me a bigger fool’n I look.”

Tresco held his hat in his hand.

“I want this yer money *now*,” said the digger. “In three weeks money’ll be no object to you or me, but what I lent you last night must be paid to-day.”

Tresco went to the door.

“I’ll get it if I can,” he said. “Stay here till I come back, and make yourself at home. You may rely on my best endeavours.” He put on his hat, and went into the street.

Mr. Crookenden sat in his office. He was a tubby man, with eyes like boiled gooseberries. No one could guess from his face what manner of man he might be, whether generous or mean, hot-tempered or good-humoured, because all those marks which are supposed to delineate character were in him obliterated by adipose tissue. You had to take him as you found him. But for the rest he was a merchant who owned a lucrative business and a few small blunt-nosed steamers that traded along the coasts adjacent to Timber Town.

As he sat in his office, glancing over the invoices of the wrecked *Mersey Witch*, and trying to compute the difference between the value of the cargo and the amount of its insurance, there was a knock at the door, and Benjamin Tresco entered.

“How d’e do, Tresco? Take a chair,” said the man of business. “The little matter of your rent, eh? That’s right; pay your way, Tresco, and fortune will simply chase you. That’s been *my* experience.”

“Then I can only say, sir, it ain’t bin mine.”

“But, Tresco, the reason of that is because you’re so long-winded. Getting money from you is like drawing your eye-teeth. But, come, come; you’re improving, you’re getting accustomed to paying punctually. That’s a great thing, a very great thing.”

“To-day,” said the goldsmith, with the most deferential manner of which he was capable, “I have

not come to pay."

"Mr. Tresco!"

"But to get *you* to pay. I want a little additional loan."

"Impossible, absolutely impossible, Tresco."

"Owing to losses over an unfortunate investment, I find myself in immediate need of £150. If that amount is not forthcoming, I fear my brilliant future will become clouded and your rent will remain unpaid indefinitely."

The fat man laughed wheezily.

"That's very good," he said. "You borrow from me to pay my rent. A very original idea, Tresco; but don't you think it would be as well as to borrow from some one else—Varnhagen, for instance?"

"The Jews, Mr. Crookenden; I always try to avoid the Jews. To go to the Jews means to go to the dogs. Keep me from the hands of the Jews, I beg."

"But how would you propose to repay me?"

"By assiduous application to business, sir."

"Indeed. Then what have you been doing all this while?"

"Suffering from bad luck." The ghost of a smile flitted across Benjamin's face as he spoke.

"But Varnhagen is simply swimming in money. He would gladly oblige you."

"He did once, at something like 60 per cent. If I remember rightly, you took over the liability."

"Did I, indeed? Do you know anything of Varnhagen's business?"

"No more than I do of the Devil's."

"You don't seem to like the firm of Varnhagen and Co."

"I have no reason to, except that the head of it buys a trinket from me now and then, and makes me 'take it out' by ordering through him."

"Just so. You would like to get even with him?"

"Try me."

"Are you good in a boat, Tresco?"

The goldsmith seemed to think, and his cogitation made him smile.

"Tolerably," he said. "I'm not exactly amphibious, but I'd float, I'd float, I believe," and he looked at his portly figure.

"Are you good with an oar?"

"Pretty moderate," said Tresco, trying to think which end of the boat he would face while pulling.

"And you've got pluck, I hope?"

"I hope," said the goldsmith.

"To be plain with you, Tresco, I've need of the services of such a man as yourself, reliable, silent, staunch, and with just enough of the devil in him to make him face the music."

Benjamin scratched his head, and wondered what was coming.

"You want a hundred pounds," said the merchant.

"A hundred and fifty badly," said the goldsmith.

"We'll call it a hundred," said the merchant. "I've lost considerably over this wreck—you can understand that?"

"I can."

"Well, Varnhagen, who has long been a thorn in my side, and has been threatening to start a line of boats in opposition to me, has decided, I happen to hear, to take immediate advantage of my misfortune. But I'll checkmate him."

"You're the man to do it."

"I hold a contract for delivering mails from shore. By a curious juncture of circumstances, I have to take out the English mail to-morrow night to the *Takariwa*, and bring an English mail ashore from her. Both these mails are *via* Sydney, and I happen to know that Varnhagen's letters ordering his boats will be in the outgoing mail, and that he is expecting correspondence referring to the matter by the incoming mail. He must get neither. Do you understand?—neither."

Tresco remained silent.

“You go on board my boat—it will be dark; nobody will recognise you. Furthermore I shall give you written authority to do the work. You can find your own crew, and I will pay them, through you, what you think fit. But as to the way you effect my purpose, I am to know nothing. You make your own plans, and keep them to yourself. But bring me the correspondence, and you get your money.”

“Make it £200. A hundred down and the balance afterwards. This is an important matter. This is no child’s play.” The subtle and criminal part of Benjamin’s mind began to see that the affair would place his landlord and mortgagee in his power, and relieve him for evermore from financial pressure. To his peculiar conscience it was justifiable to overreach his grasping creditor, a right and proper thing to upset the shrewd Varnhagen’s plans: a thought of the proposed breach of the law, statutory and moral, did not occur to his mind.

“There may be some bother about the seals of the bags,” said the merchant, “but we’ll pray it may be rough, and in that case nothing is simpler—one bag at least can get lost, and the rest can have their seals damaged, and so on. You will go out at ten to-morrow night, and you will have pretty well till daylight to do the job. Do you understand?”

Benjamin had begun to reflect.

“Doesn’t it mean gaol if I’m caught?”

“Nonsense, man. How can you be caught? It’s *I* who take the risk. *I* am responsible for the delivery of the mails, and if anything goes wrong it’s *I* will have to suffer. You do your little bit, and I’ll see that you get off scot-free. Here’s my hand on it.”

The merchant held out his flabby hand, and Tresco took it.

“It’s a bargain?”

“It’s a bargain,” said Tresco.

Crookenden reached for his cheque book, and wrote out a cheque for fifty pounds.

“Take this cheque to the bank, and cash it.”

Tresco took the bit of signed paper, and looked at it.

“Fifty?” he remarked. “I said a hundred down.”

“You shall have the balance when you have done the work.”

“And I can do it how I like, where I like, and when I like between nightfall and dawn?”

“Exactly.”

“Then I think I can do it so that all the post office clerks in the country couldn’t bowl me out.”

But the merchant merely nodded in response to this braggadocio—he was already giving his mind to other matters.

Without another word the goldsmith left the office. He walked quickly along the street, regarding neither the garish shops nor the people he passed, and entered the doors of the Kangaroo Bank, where the Semitic clerk stood behind the counter.

“How will you take it?”

The words were sweet to Benjamin’s ear.

“Tens,” he said.

The bank-notes were handed to him, and he went home quickly.

The digger was sitting where Tresco had left him.

“There’s your money,” said the goldsmith, throwing the notes upon the table.

The digger counted them.

“That’s only fifty,” he said.

“You shall have the balance in two days, but not an hour sooner,” replied Tresco. “In the meanwhile, you can git. I’m busy.”

Without more ceremony, he went into his workshop.

“Jake, I give you a holiday for three days,” he said. “Go and see your Aunt Maria, or your Uncle Sam, or whoever you like, but don’t let me see your ugly face for three solid days.”

The apprentice looked at his master open-mouthed.

The goldsmith went to the safe which stood in a corner of the shop, and took out some silver.

“Here’s money,” he said. “Take it. Don’t come back till next Friday. Make yourself scarce; d’you hear?”

“Right, boss. Anythin’ else?”

“Nothing. Go instanter.”

Jake vanished as if the fiend were after him, and Tresco seated himself at the bench.

Out of a drawer immediately above the leather apron of the bench he took the wax impression of something, and a square piece of brass.

“Fortune helps those who help themselves,” he muttered. “When the Post Office sent me their seals to repair, I made this impression. Now we will see if I can reproduce a duplicate which shall be a facsimile, line for line.”

CHAPTER XII.

Rock Cod and Macaroni.

The small boat came alongside the pilot-shed with noise and fuss out of all proportion to the insignificance of the occasion.

It was full spring-tide, and the blue sea filled the whole harbour and threatened to flood the very quay which stretched along the shore of Timber Town.

In the small boat were two fishermen, the one large and fat, the other short and thick.

“Stoppa, Rocka Codda!” cried the big man, who was of a very dark complexion. “You son ’a barracouta, what I tella you? Why you not stoppa ze boat?”

“Stop ’er yourself, you dancin’, yelpin’ Dago.”

“You calla me Dago? I calla you square-’ead. I calla you Russian-Finna. I calla you mongrel dogga, Rocka Codda.”

The Pilot’s crew, standing at the top of the slip, grinned broadly, and fired at the fishermen a volley of chaff which diverted the Italian’s attention from his mate in the boat.

“Ah-ha!” His voice sounded as shrill as a dozen clarions, and it carried half-a-mile along the quay. He sprang ashore. “Hi-ya!” It was like the yell of a hundred cannibals, but the Pilot’s crew only grinned. “You ze boys. I bringa you ze flounder for tea. Heh?” In one moment the fat fisher was back in the boat, and in another he had scrambled ashore with a number of fish, strung together through the gills. Above the noise of the traffic on the quay his voice rose, piercing. “I presenta. Flounder, all aliva. I give ze fish. You giva”—with suddenness he comically lowered his voice—“tobacco, rumma—what you like.” He lay the gift of flounders on the wooden stage. “Where I get him? I catcha him. Where you get ze tobacco, rumma? You catcha him. Heh?”

Rock Cod, having made fast the boat, was now standing beside his mate.

A sailor picked up the flounders, and, turning back the gills of one of them, said, “Fresh, eh, Macaroni?”

The bulky Italian sidled up to the man. “Whata I tell you? Where I catcha him? In ze sea. Where you catcha ze tobacco? In ze sea. What you say? Heh?” He gave the sailor a dig in the ribs.

By way of answer he received a push. His foot slipped on the wet boards of the stage, and into the water he fell, amid shouts of laughter.

As buoyant as a cork, he soon came to the surface, and, scrambling upon the stage, he seized a barracouta from the boat, and rushed at his mate. “You laugha at me, Rocka Codda? I teacha you laugh.” Taking the big fish by the tail, he belaboured his partner in business with the scaly carcase, till the long spines of the fish’s back caught in the fleshy part of his victim’s neck. But Rock Cod’s screams only drew callous comment from his persecutor. “You laugha at your mate? I teacha you. Rocka Codda, I teacha you respecta Macaroni. Laugha now!”

With a sudden jerk Rock Cod obtained his freedom, though not without additional agony. He faced his partner, with revenge in his wild eyes and curses on his tongue. But just at this moment, a stoutly-built, red-faced sailor pushed his way through the Pilot’s crew, and, snatching the barracouta from the Italian, he thrust himself between the combatants.

“Of all the mad-headed Dagoes that God A’mighty sent to curse this earth you, Macaroni, are the maddest. Why, man, folks can hear your yelling half the length of the quay.”

“Looka!” cried the Italian. “Who are you? Why you come ’ere? Rocka Codda and Macaroni fighta, but ze ginger-headed son of a cooka mus’ interfere. Jesu Christo! I teacha you too. I got ze barracouta lef’.”

He turned to seize another fish from the bottom of the boat, but the sight of two men fighting on the slip with barracoutas for weapons might detract too much from the dignity of the Pilot’s crew. The Italian was seized, and forcibly prevented from causing further strife.

“D’you think I came here to save Rock Cod from spoiling your ugly face?” asked the red-haired man. “No, siree. My boss, Mr. Crookenden, sent me. He wants to see you up at his office; and I

reckon there's money in it, though you deserve six months' instead, the pair of you."

"Heh? Your boss wanta me? I got plenty fisha, flounder, barracuda, redda perch. Now then?"

"He don't want your fish: he wants you and Rock Cod," said the red-headed man.

"Georgio"—the Italian was, in a moment, nothing but politeness to the man he had termed "ginger"—"we go. Ze fisha?—I leava my boat, all my fisha, here wit' my frien's. Georgio, conducta—we follow."

Accompanied by the two fishermen, the red-headed peacemaker walked up the quay.

"What's the trouble with your boss?" asked Rock Cod. "What's 'e want?"

"How can I tell? D'you think Mr. Crookenden consults *me* about his business? I'm just sent to fetch you along, and along you come."

"I know, I understanda," said the Italian. "He have ze new wine from Italia, my countree—he senda for Macaroni to tasta, and tell ze qualitee. You too bloody about ze neck, Rocka Codda, to come alonga me. You mus' washa, or you go to sell ze fish."

"Go an' hawk the fish yourself," retorted Rock Cod. "You're full o' water as a sponge, an' there'll be a pool where you stand on the gen'leman's carpet."

Wrangling thus, they made their way towards the merchant's office.

While this scene was being performed at the port of Timber Town, Benjamin Tresco was in his workshop, making the duplicate of the chief postmaster's seal. With file and graver he worked, that the counterfeit might be perfect. Half-a-dozen impressions of the matrix lay before him, showing the progress his nefarious work was making towards completion.

"One struggle more and I am free," muttered the goldsmith. "The English seals, I happen to know, usually arrive in a melted or broken condition. To restore them too perfectly would be to court detection—a dab of sealing-wax, impressed with a key and sat upon afterwards, will answer the purpose. But this robbing business—well, it suits my temperament, if it doesn't suit my conscience. Oh, I like doing it—my instincts point that way. But the Sunday-school training I had when a boy spoils the flavour of it. Why can't folk let a lad alone to enjoy his sins? Such a boy as I was commits 'em anyway. An' if he *must* commit 'em and be damned for 'em, why spoil *both* his lives—at least they might leave him alone here. But they ain't practical, these parsonic folk." He rose, and took a white, broken-lipped jug from a shelf, and drank a deep draught. "Water," he murmured. "See? Water, air, sunshine, all here for me, in common with the parson. P'r'aps I shall lack water in limbo, but so, too, may the parson—anyway he and I are on the same footing here; therefore, why should he torment me by stirring up my conscience? He has a bad time here and—we'll grant this for the sake of argument—a good time afterwards. Now, I've *got* to have a bad time with old Safety Matches down below. Why, then, should the parson want to spoil my time here? It looks mean anyway. If I were a parson, I'd make sure I had a good time in *this* world, and chance the rest. Sometimes I'm almost persuaded to be converted, and take the boss position in a bethel, all amongst the tea and wimmen-folk. Lor', wouldn't I preach, wouldn't I just ladle it out, and wouldn't the dears adore me?"

Suddenly there was a loud knocking at the door. Instantly the spurious seals and the fraudulent matrix were swept into the drawer above the apron of the bench, and Benjamin Tresco rose, benignant, to receive his visitors.

He opened the door, and there entered the red-headed sailor, who was closely followed by Rock Cod and Macaroni.

Tresco drew himself up with dignity.

"This is quite unexpected," he said. "The honour is great. Who do I see here but Fish-ho and his amiable mate? It is sad, gentlemen, but I'm off flounders since the Chinaman, who died aboard the barque, was buried in the bay. It is a great misfortune for Fish-ho to have dead Chinamen buried on his fishing-grounds, but such is the undoubted fact."

"You need have no fear on that score, mister," said the red-headed sailor. "They've not come to sell fish. Speak up, Macaroni."

"We come to tella you we come from Mr. Crookendena. We come to you accepta ze service of Rocka Codda and Macaroni."

For one brief moment Tresco looked perplexed. Then his face assumed its usual complacence. "Are you in the know, too?" he asked of the seaman.

"All I know is that I was told to pilot these two men to your shop. That done, I say good-day."

"And the same to you," said Tresco. "Happy to have met you, sir, and I'm sorry there's nothing to offer you in the jug but water."

"There's no bones broke anyway," replied the sailor as he edged towards the door. "But if you'll say when the real old stingo is on tap, I'll show you how to use the water."

"Certainly," said Tresco. "Nothing will please me better. Good afternoon. Sorry you must go so soon. Take great care of yourself. Good men are scarce."

As the door closed behind the sailor the goldsmith turned to the fishermen.

“So you were sent to me by Mr. Crookenden?”

“That’s so.” It was Rock Cod who answered. “He give us the price of a drink, an’ says he, ‘There’ll be five pound each for you if you do as Mr. Tresco tells you.’ We’re a-waitin’ orders; ain’t that so, Macaroni?”

“Rocka Codda spik alla right—he understanda ze Inglese. I leave-a it to him.”

“You are good men in a boat, I have no doubt. Very good.” The goldsmith pursed his lips, and looked very important. “Mr. Crookenden has entrusted me with a mission. You row the boat—I carry out the mission. All you have to do is to bring your boat round to Mr. Crookenden’s wharf at ten o’clock to-night, and the rest is simple. Your money will be paid you in the morning, in full tale, up to the handle, without fail. You understand? Five pounds a piece for a few hours’ hire of your boat and services.”

“We catch your drift all right,” said Rock Cod.

“But, remember”—the goldsmith looked very serious—“mum’s the word.”

“I have ze mum,” said Macaroni. “I spik only to Rocka Codda, he spik only to me—zat alla right?”

“Quite so, but be punctual. We shall go out at ten o’clock, wet or fine. Till then, adieu.”

“Ze same to you,” said the Italian. “You ze fine fella.”

“Take this, and drink success to my mission.” Tresco handed them a silver coin.

“That part of the business is easy,” remarked Rock Cod. “But as to the job you’ve got in hand, well, the nature o’ that gets over *me*.”

“All you’re asked to do is to row,” said Tresco. “As to the rest, that lies with me and my resourcefulness. Now git.”

Benjamin opened the door, and pushed the fishermen out.

“Remember,” he said, as they departed, “if I hear a word about the matter in the bar of any hotel, our bargain is off and not a cent will you get for your pains.”

“Look ’ere, cap’n.” Rock Cod turned suddenly round. “We passed you our word: ain’t that good enough?”

“My trusty friend, it is. So-long. Go, and drink my health.”

Without another word the fishermen went, and the goldsmith returned to put the finishing touches to his fraudulent work.

CHAPTER XIII.

What the Bush Robin Saw.

The Bush Robin had a pale yellow breast, and his dominion extended from the waterfall, at the bottom of which lay a deep, dark, green pool, to the place where the *rimu* tree had fallen across the creek.

His life was made up of two things; hunting for big white grubs in the rotten barrels of dead trees, and looking at the yellow pebbles in the stream. This last was a habit that the wood-hen had taught him. She was the most inquisitive creature in the forest, and knew all that was going on beyond the great river, into which the creek fell, and as far away as the Inaccessible Mountains, which were the end of the world: not that she travelled far, but that all wood-hens live in league, and spend their time in enquiring into other people’s business.

The *tui* and the bell-bird might sing in the tops of the tall trees, but the Bush Robin hardly ever saw them, except when they came down to drink at the creek. The pigeons might coo softly, and feed on *tawa* berries till actually they were ready to burst, and could not fly from the trees where they had gorged themselves—as great gluttons as ever there were in Rome: but the Bush Robin hardly knew them, and never spoke to them. He was a bird of the undergrowth, a practical entomologist, with eyes for nothing but bugs, beetles, larvæ, stick-insects, and the queer yellow things in the river.

Being a perfectly inoffensive bird, he objected to noise, and for that reason he eschewed the company of the kakas and paroquets who ranged the forest in flocks, and spoilt all quietude by quarrelling and screeching in the tree-tops. But for the *kakapo*, the green ground-parrot who lived in a hollow *rata* tree and looked like a bunch of maiden-hair fern, he had great respect. This was a night-bird who interfered with no one, and knew all that went on in the forest between dark and dawn.

Then there was the red deer, the newest importation into those woods. The Bush Robin never quite knew the reason of his own inquisitiveness, and the roaming deer never quite knew why the

little bird took so much interest in his movements, but the fact remained that whenever the antlered autocrat came to drink at the stream, the Bush Robin would stand on a branch near by, and sing till the big buck thought the little bird's throat must crack. His thirst quenched, the red deer would be escorted by the Bush Robin to the confine of the little bird's preserve, and with a last twitter of farewell, Robin would fly back rapidly to tell the news to his mate.

I had almost forgotten her. She was slightly bigger than Robin himself, and possessed a paler breast. But no one saw them together; and though they were the most devoted pair, none of the forest folk ever guessed the fact, but rather treated their tender relationship with a certain degree of scepticism.

Therefore, these things having been set forth, it was not strange that the Bush Robin, having eaten a full meal of fat white grubs, should sit on a bough in the shade of a big *totara* tree and watch, with good-natured interest begotten of the knowledge that he had dined, the movements of the world around him. The broken ground, all banks and holes and roots, was covered with dead leaves, moss, sticks, and beds of ferns, and was overgrown with supple-jacks, birch-saplings and lance-wood. On every side rose immense trees, whose dark boughs, stretching overhead, shut out the sun from the gloomy shades below.

The Bush Robin, whose sense of hearing was keen and discriminating, heard a strange sound which was as new as it was interesting to him. He had heard the roaring of the stags and the screeching of the parrots, but this new sound was different from either, though somewhat like both. There it was again. He must go and see what it could mean. In a moment, he was flitting beneath the trees, threading his way through the leafy labyrinth, in the direction of the strange noise. As he alighted on a tall rock, which reared itself abruptly from the hurly-burly of broken ground, before him he saw two strange objects, the like of which he had never seen, and of which his friend the wood-hen, who travelled far and knew everything, had not so much as told him. They must be a new kind of stag, but they had no horns—yet perhaps those would grow in the spring. One had fallen down a mossy bank, and the other, who was dangling a supple-jack to assist his friend in climbing, was making the strange noise. The creature upon the ground grunted like the wild pigs, from whose rootings in the earth the Bush Robin was wont to derive immense profit in the shape of a full diet of worms; but these new animals walked on two feet, in a manner quite new to the little bird.

Then the strange beings picked up from the ground queer things which the Bush Robin failed to comprehend, and trudged on through the forest. The one that led the way struck the trees with a glittering thing, which left the boles marked and scarred, and both held in their mouths sticks which gave off smoke, a thing beyond the comprehension of the little bird, and more than interesting to his diminutive mind. Here were new wonders, creatures who walked on two legs, but not as birds—the one with the beard like a goat's must be the husband of the one who had none; and both breathed from their mouths the vapour of the morning mist.

The Bush Robin followed them, and when they paused to rest on the soft couch of ferns beneath a *rimu* tree, the bird alighted on the ground and hopped close to them.

"I could catch the little beggar with my hand," said one.

"Don't hurt him," said the other, "he'll bring us luck."

"Then give me a match—my pipe's gone out."

The match was lighted, and the cloud of smoke from the re-lit pipe floated up to the boughs overhead. The Bush Robin watched the miracle, but it was the yellow flame which riveted his attention. The lighted match had been thrown away, and before the smoker could put his foot on it, the little bird darted forward, seized the white stem and, with the burning match in his beak, flitted to the nearest bough.

The men laughed, and watched to see what would happen.

Pleased beyond expression with his new prize, the Bush Robin held it in his beak till a fresh sensation was added to the new things he was experiencing: there was a sudden shake of his little head, the match fell, and went out.

The men undid their swags and began to eat, and the Bush Robin feasted with them on white crumbs which looked, like the match-stick, as if they might be grubs, but tasted quite different.

"Tucker's good," said the man with the beard, "but, I reckon, what we want is a drink."

"The billy's empty," said the other—"I spilt it when I came that cropper, and nearly broke my neck."

"Then there's nothing for it but to wait till we come to a stream."

They rose, tied up their swags, and journeyed on; the bearded man continuing to blaze the track, the younger man following him, and the Bush Robin fluttering beside them.

The creek was but a little way off. Soon the noise of its waters greeted the ears of the travellers. The thirsty men hurried in the direction of the sound, which grew louder and louder, till suddenly pushing through a tangled screen of supple-jacks and the soft, green fronds of a small forest of tree-ferns, they stood on the bank of a clear stream, which rushed noisily over a bed of grey boulders.

The bearded man stooped to drink: the other dipped the billy into the water and drank, standing.

The little bird had perched himself on a big rock which stood above the surface of the swirling water.

“Good,” said he with the beard. “There’s no water like bush water.”

“There’s that little beggar again,” said the other, watching the bird upon the rock.

“He’s following us around. This shall be named Bush Robin Creek.”

“Bush Robin Creek it is,” said the other. “Now take a prospect, and see if you can get a colour.”

The older man turned over a few boulders, and exposed the sand that lay beneath them. Half a shovelful of this he placed in a tin dish, which he half-filled with water. Then squatting on his heels, he rotated the dish with a cunning movement, which splashed little laps of water over the side and carried off the lighter particles of sand and dirt. When all the water in the dish was thus disposed of, he added more and renewed the washing process, till but a tablespoonful of the heaviest particles of grit remained at the bottom. This residue he poked over with his forefinger, peering at it nearly.

Apparently he saw nothing. More water was put into the dish, and the washing process was continued till but a teaspoonful of grit remained.

“We’ve got the colour!” he exclaimed, after closely examining this residue.

His comrade knelt beside him, and looked at the “prospect.”

A little more washing, and at the bottom of the dish lay a dozen flakes of gold, with here and there a grain of sand.

“We must go higher up,” said the bearded man. “This light stuff has been carried over a bar, maybe, and the heavier gold has been left behind.”

Slowly and with difficulty they worked their way along the bank of the creek, till at last they came to a gorge whose rocky sides stood like mighty walls on either side.

The gold-seekers were wading up to their waists in water, and the Bush Robin was fluttering round them as they moved slowly up the stream. Expecting to find the water deeper in the gorge, the man in front went carefully. The rocky sides were full of crevices and little ledges, on one of which, low down upon the water, the little Robin perched.

The man reached forward and placed his hand upon the ledge on which the bird was perched; the Bush Robin fluttered overhead, and then the man gave a cry of surprise. His hand had rested on a layer of small nuggets and golden sand.

“We’ve got it, Moonlight! There’s fully a couple of ounces on this ledge alone.”

The bearded man splashed through the water, and looked eagerly at the gold lying just above the water-line.

“My boy, where there’s that much on a ledge there’ll be hundreds of ounces in the creek.”

He rapidly pushed ahead, examining the crevices of the rock, above and below the water-line.

“It’s here in stacks,” he exclaimed, “only waiting to be scraped out with the blade of a knife.”

Drawing his sheath-knife from his belt, he suited the action to the word; and standing in the water, the two men collected gold as children gather shells on the shore.

And the Bush Robin watched the gold-seekers take possession of the treasured things, which he had looked upon as his own especial property; fancying that they glittered merely for his delight.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Robbery of the Mails.

The night was pitch dark; the wind had gone to rest, and not a ripple stirred the face of the black waters.

“Ahoy! there.”

“Comin’, comin’. I’ve only bin waitin’, this ’arf hour.”

The man standing at the horse’s head ran round to the back of his “express”—a vehicle not unlike a square tray on four wheels—and, letting down the tail-board, pulled out a number of mail-bags.

With two of these under each arm, he made his way to the wooden steps which led down to the water’s edge, and the men in the boat heard the shuffling and scraping of his feet, as he felt with his boot for the topmost step; his hands being fully occupied in holding the bags.

Slowly, step by step, he stumped down to the water, where willing hands took his burden and stowed it in the bottom of the boat.

“Four,” said the carrier. “One more lot, and that lets me out.”

As he reached the top of the wharf, on his return journey, the bright lamps of his express dazzled his eyes, and somebody cannoned against him at the back of the trap.

“Now, then! Who’re yer shovin’ up agin?”

“All right, my man. I’m not stealing any of the bags.”

The express-man recognised the voice.

“Is that you, Mr. Crookenden? Beg pardon, sir.”

“Come, come, get the mail aboard. My men don’t want to be out in the boat all night.”

The man carried down his last load of bags, and returned, panting.

“There’s only the paper to be signed,” he said, “and then they can clear.”

“Give *me* the form.”

The man handed a piece of paper to the mail-contractor.

“How many bags?”

“Eight.”

By the light of the lamps Crookenden signed the paper, and handed it back to the carrier, who mounted to his seat, and drove away.

The merchant went to the edge of the wharf.

“All right, down there?”

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied a gruff voice.

“Then cast off.”

There was the noise of oars, and a dark object upon the waters vanished into the night.

“Good-night!”

“Good-night,” answered the gruff voice faintly, and Crookenden turned his steps towards home.

“That’s all serene,” said the owner of the gruff voice, whose modulations had suddenly assumed their accustomed timbre—the rather rasping articulation of the goldsmith.

“Couldn’t have fallen out better if I’d arranged it myself. Lay to! belay! you lazy lubbers, forrard—or whatever is the correct nautical expression to make her jump. Put your backs into it, and there’ll be five pounds apiece for you in the morning.”

“Alla right, boss; we ze boys to pulla. Rocka Codda, you asleep zere?—you maka Macaroni do alla ze work.”

“Pull yerself, you lazy Dago. Anyone w’d think you was rowing the bloomin’ boat by yourself. Why, man, I’m pulling you round every dozen strokes. The skipper, aft there, is steerin’ all he knows agin me.”

The truth was that Benjamin’s manipulation of the tiller was extraordinary and erratic, and it was not until the boat was well past the wharves that he mastered its mysteries.

The tide was ebbing, and when the boat was in the stream her speed doubled, and there was no need for using the oars. Swiftly and silently she drifted past the lights on the quay and the ghostly houses which stood beside the water.

The Pilot’s system of beacons was so perfect that with their aid a tyro such as Tresco found no difficulty in steering his course out of the harbour.

Outside in the bay, the lights of two vessels could be seen: those of the plague-ship and of the steamer which, unable to get into the port in the teeth of the tide, was waiting for the mails.

But Tresco pointed his boat’s nose straight for the long beach which fringed the end of the bay.

The rowers had seen the mail-bags put aboard the boat, and they now wondered why they did not go straight to the steamer.

“Hi! boss. The mail-steamer lies to starboard: that’s her lights behind the barque’s.”

“Right, my man,” replied Tresco; “but I have a little business ashore here, before we pull out to her.”

The boat was now nearing the beach. As soon as her keel touched the sand, Tresco jumped into the water and, ordering the fishermen to do the same, the boat was quickly pulled high and dry.

“Take out the bags,” commanded the pseudo-skipper.

The men demurred.

“Why you do this? Santa Maria! is alla these mail go back to town?”

“*There’s* the steamer—*out there*!” exclaimed Rock Cod. “A man’d think——”

But he was cut short.

“You saw Mr. Crookenden put the bags aboard. He’s the contractor—I’m only acting under his instructions. Do you wish to remain fishermen all your lives, or would you rather die rich?”

“We know the value of dollars, you may bet that,” answered Rock Cod.

“Then lend a hand and get these bags ashore. And you, Macaroni, collect driftwood for a fire.”

When the mail-bags were all landed, Benjamin took a lantern from the boat, lit it, and walked up the beach to where the fishermen stood, nonplussed and wondering.

“Your feet must be wet, Macaroni.”

“*Si, signor.*”

“Wet feet are bad, not to say dangerous. Go down to the boat, and you’ll find a bottle of rum and a pannikin. Bring them here, and we’ll have a dram all round.”

Tresco placed the lantern on the sand, and waited.

“You see, Rock Cod, there are some things in this world that cut both ways. To do a great good we must do a little wrong—that’s not quite my own phrase, though it expresses my sentiments—but in anything you do, never do it by halves.”

“I ain’t ’ad no schoolin’ meself,” answered the fisherman. “I don’t take much account of books; but when there’s a drop o’ rum handy, I’m with you.”

The Italian came up the beach with the liquor.

“Here’s what’ll put us all in good nick,” said Tresco, as he drew the cork of the bottle, and poured some of the spirit into the pannikin. “Here’s luck,” and he drank his dram at a draught.

He generously replenished the cup, and handed it to Rock Cod.

“Well, cap’n,” said that puzzled barnacle, “there’s things I don’t understand, but here’s fun.” He took his liquor at a gulp, and passed the pannikin to his mate.

It took the Italian no time to catch the drift that matters were taking.

“You expecta make me drunk, eh, signor? You steala ze mail an’ carry him away, eh? Alla right, you try.”

“Now, look here,” said Tresco; “it’s this way. These bags want re-sorting—and I’m going to do it. If in the sorting I come across anything of importance, that’s *my* business. If, on the other hand, you happen across anything that you require, but which seems thrown away on other folks, that’s *your* business. If you don’t like the bargain, you can both go and sit in the boat.”

Neither man moved. It was evident that Crookenden had chosen his tools circumspectly.

“Very good,” said Tresco, “you have the run of your fingers over this mail when I have re-sorted it, provided you keep your heads shut when you get back to town. Is it a bargain?”

He held out his hand.

Rock Cod was the first to take it. He said:—

“It’s a bargain, boss.”

Macaroni followed suit. “Alla right,” he said. “I reef in alonga you an’ Rocka Codda. I no spik.”

So the compact was made.

Seizing the nearest bag, Tresco cut its fastenings, and emptied its contents on the sand.

“Now, as I pass them over to you,” said he, seating himself beside the heap of letters, “you can open such as you think were meant for you, but got misdirected by mistake to persons of no account. But burn ’em afterwards.”

He put a match to the driftwood collected by the Italian. “Those that don’t interest you, gentlemen, be good enough to put back into the bag.”

His hands were quick, his eyes were quicker. He knew well what to look for. As he glanced at the letters, he threw them over to his accomplices, till in a short time there was in front of them a bigger pile of correspondence than had been delivered to them previously in the course of their conjoint lives.

The goldsmith seldom opened a letter, and then only when he was in doubt as to whether or not it was posted by the Jewish merchant. The fishermen opened at random the missives in front of

them, in the hope of finding they knew not what, but always in disappointment and disgust.

At length, however, the Italian gave a cry of joy. “I have heem. Whata zat, Rocka Codda?” He held a bank-note before his mate’s eyes. “Zat five pound, my boy. Soon I get some more, eh? Alla right.”

Tresco put a letter into the breast-pocket of his coat. It’s envelope bore on its back the printed legend, “Joseph Varnhagen, General Merchant, Timber Town.”

So the ransacking of the outgoing mail went forward. Now another bag was opened, but, as it contained nothing else but newspapers and small packages, the goldsmith desired to leave it intact. But not so his accomplices. They therein saw the chief source of their payment. Insisting on their right under the bargain, the sand in front of them was soon strewn with litter.

Tresco, in the meantime, had directed his attention to another bag, which contained nothing but correspondence, and evidently he had found what he was most earnestly in search of, for he frequently expressed his delight as he happened across some document which he thrust into his bosom.

In this way the mail was soon rummaged, and without waiting for the other two men to finish their search, the goldsmith began to reseal the bags. First, he took from his pocket the counterfeit matrix which had cost him so much labour to fashion. Next, he took some string, similar to that which he had previously cut, and with it he retied the necks of the bags he had opened. With the help of a lighted match, he covered the knotted strings, first of one bag and then of another, with melted sealing-wax, which he impressed with the counterfeit seal.

His companions watched the process with such interest that, forgetting for a time their search amongst the chattels of other people, they gave their whole attention to the process of resealing the bags.

“Very ’andy with his fingers, ain’t ’e, Macaroni?—even if ’e *is* a bit un’andy in a boat.” Confederacy in crime had bred a familiarity which brought the goldsmith down to the level of his co-operators.

All the bags were now sealed up, excepting the one which the fishermen had last ravaged, and the contents of which lay scattered on the sand.

“This one will be considerably smaller than it useter was,” remarked Tresco, as he replaced the unopened packets in the bag.

“Hi! stoppa!” cried Macaroni, “Rocka Codda an’ me wanta finish him.”

“And leave me to hand in an empty bag? Most sapient Macaroni, under your own guidance you would not keep out of gaol a fortnight: Nature did not equip you for a career in crime.”

Tresco deftly sealed up the last bag, and then said, “Chuck all the odds and ends into the fire, and be careful not to leave a scrap unburned: then we will drink to our continued success.”

The fire blazed up fiercely as the torn packages, envelopes, and letters were thrown upon its embers. The goldsmith groped about, and examined the sand for the least vestige of paper which might form a clue to their crime, but when he was satisfied that everything had been picked up, he returned to the fire, and watched the bright flames as they leapt heavenwards.

His comrades were dividing their spoil.

“I think, boss,” said Rock Cod, “the best of the catch must ha’ fell to your share: me and my mate don’t seem to have mor’n ten pound between us, not countin’ truck worth p’r’aps another five.”

“So far as *I* am concerned, my man,”—Tresco used the unction of tone and the dignity of manner that he loved so well—“I am but an agent. *I* take nothing except a few letters, some of which I have not even opened.”

The Italian burst out laughing. “You ze boss? You conducta ze holy show, eh? Alla right. But you take nuzzing. Rocka Codda an’ Macaroni get ten pound, fifteen pound; an’ you get nuzzing.”

“Information is what I get,” said Tresco. “But, then, information is the soul of business. Information is sometimes more valuable than a gold-mine. Therefore, in getting, get information: it will help you to untold wealth. My object, you see, is knowledge, for which I hunger and thirst. I search for it by night as well as by day. Therefore, gentlemen, before we quit the scene of our midnight labours, let us drink to the acquisition of knowledge.”

Rock Cod and Macaroni did not know what he meant, but they drank rum from the pannikin with the greatest good-will. After which, Benjamin scattered the embers of the fire, which quickly died out, and then the three men shoved the boat off and pulled towards the lights of the steamer.

On board the barque Captain Sartoris paced the poop-deck in solitude. Bored to death with the monotony of life in quarantine, the smallest event was to him a matter of interest. He had marked the fire on the beach, and had even noticed the figures which had moved about it. How many men there were he could not tell, but after the fire went out, and a boat passed to starboard of the barque and made for the steamer which lay outside her, he remarked to himself that it was very late at night for a boat to be pulling from the shore. But at that moment a head was put out of the companion, and a voice called him in pidgin English to go down. He went below, and stood

beside the sick captain, whose mind was wandering, and whose spirit was restless in its lodging. He watched the gasping form, and marked the nervous fingers as they clutched at the counterpane as hour after hour went by, till just as the dawn was breaking a quietness stole over the attenuated form, and with a slight tremour the spirit broke from its imprisonment, and death lay before Sartoris in the bunk. Then he went on deck, and breathed the pure air of the morning.

CHAPTER XV.

Dealing Mostly with Money.

Pilot Summerhayes stood in his garden, with that look on his face which a guilty schoolboy wears when the eye of his master is upon him.

In his hand he held a letter, at which he glanced furtively, as if he feared to be caught in the act of reading, although the only eyes that possibly could have detected him were those of two sparrows that were discussing the purple berries of the Portuguese laurel which grew near by.

"'I enclose the usual half-yearly allowance of £250.'" The Pilot was reading from the letter. "Damnation take him and his allowance!" ejaculated the irascible old sailor, which was a strange anathema to hurl at the giver of so substantial a sum of money. "I suppose he thinks to make me beholden to him: I suppose he thinks me as poor as a church-rat, and, therefore, I'm to be thankful for mercies received—*his* mercies—and say what a benefactor he is, what a generous brother. Bah! it makes me sicker than ever to think of him." He glanced at the letter, and read, "'Hoping that this small sum is sufficient for yourself and my very dear niece, to whom I ask to be most kindly remembered, I remain your affectionate brother, Silas Summerhayes.'" A most brotherly epistle, containing filial expressions, and indicating a bountiful spirit; and yet upon reading it the Pilot swore deep and dreadful oaths which cannot be recorded.

Every six months, for at least fifteen years, he had received a similar letter, expressing in the same affectionate terms the love of his brother Silas, which was accentuated by a like draft for £250, and yet the Pilot had persistently cursed the receipt of each letter.

There was a footstep on the verandah behind him. With a start the old man thrust the epistle and draft into his pocket, and stood, with a look on his face as black as thunder, confronting almost defiantly his charming daughter.

"Have you got your letters, father? I heard the postman's knock." As she spoke, Rose looked rather anxiously at her frowning parent. "Good news, I hope—the English mail arrived last night."

"I daresay it did, my gal," growled the Pilot. "But I don't see what you and me have to do with England, seeing we've quit it these fifteen years."

"But we were born there! Surely people should think affectionately of their native country."

"But we won't die there, please God—at least, *I* won't, if I can help it. You'll not need to, I hope. We're colonials: *this* is our country."

The girl turned to go indoors, but, a sudden impulse seizing her, she put her arms around the old man's neck, and kissed his weather-beaten cheek.

"What's been troubling you, father? *I'll* drive the worry away." She held his rough hand in hers, and waited for him to speak.

"You're a good gal, Rosebud; you're a great comfort. But, Lord bless me, you're as sensitive as a young fawn. There's nothing the matter with *me*, except when now and again I get a fit of the blues; but you've drove 'em away, da'rter; you've drove 'em clean away. Now, just you run in and attend to your house; and leave me to go into town, where I've a bit of business to attend to—there's a good gal." He kissed his daughter's smooth, white forehead, and she ran indoors, smiling and happy.

The Pilot resettled the peaked cap on his head, stumped down the garden-path, and passed out of his gate and along the road. His steps led him to the main street of the town, where he entered the Kangaroo Bank, the glass doors of which swung noiselessly behind him, and he stood in front of the exquisite clerk of Semitic origin, who dealt out and received over the broad counter the enormous wealth of the opulent institution.

"Good morning, Captain Summerhayes."

"'Mornin'," said the Pilot, as he fumbled in the inside pocket of his coat.

At length he drew out the draft and handed it to the clerk, who turned it over, and said, "Please endorse it."

The old sailor took a pen, and with infinite care wrote his name on the back of the document.

When the clerk was satisfied that everything was in order, he said, "Two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. How will you take it, Captain?"

"*I* don't want to take it," answered the Pilot gruffly. "I'll put it along with the other."

"You wish to deposit it?" said the clerk. "Certainly. You'll need a form."

He drew a printed slip from a box on the counter, and filled it in. "Sign here, please," he said, indicating with his finger the place of signature.

"No, no," said the old man, evidently annoyed. "You've made it out in *my* name. It should be in my da'rter's, like all the rest have been." The clerk made the necessary alteration, and the Pilot signed.

"If you call in this afternoon, I'll give you the deposit receipt," said the clerk.

"Now, really, young man, an't that a bit slow? D'you think I've got nothing better to do than to dodge up and down from the port, waitin' for your precious receipts?"

The clerk looked surprised that anyone should question his dictum for one moment, but he immediately handed the signed form to a neighbouring clerk for transmission to the manager, or to some functionary only one degree less omnipotent.

"And while we're waiting," said the Pilot, "I'd be much obliged if you'd show me the book where you keep the record of all the monies I've put into your bank."

The clerk conferred with another clerk, who went off somewhere and returned with a heavy tome, which he placed with a bang on the counter.

The Jew turned over the broad leaves with a great rustling. "This inspection of our books is purely optional with us, Captain, but with an old customer like yourself we waive our prerogative."

"Very han'some of you, very han'some indeed. How does she stand?"

The clerk ran his fingers down a long column of figures, and said, "There are a number of deposits in Miss Rose's name. Shall I read the amounts?"

"I've got the receipts in my strong-box. All I want is the total."

"Ten thousand, five hundred pounds," said the clerk.

"And there's this here new lot," said the Pilot.

"Ten thousand, seven hundred and fifty altogether."

The Pilot drew the heavy account book towards him, and verified the clerk's statements. Then he made a note of the sum total, and said, "I'll take that last receipt now, if it's ready."

The clerk reached over to a table, where the paper had been placed by a fellow clerk, and handed it to the gruff old sailor.

"Thank you," said Pilot Summerhayes. "Now I can verify the whole caboodle at my leisure, though I hate figures as the devil hates holy water." He placed the receipt in his inside pocket and buttoned up his coat. "Good-day," he said, as he turned to go.

"I wish you good morning, Captain."

The Pilot glanced back; his face wearing a look of amusement, as though he thought the clerk's effusiveness was too good to be true. Then he nodded, gave a little chuckle, and walked out through the swinging, glass doors.

The Jew watched the bulky sailor as he moved slowly, like a ship leaving port in heavy weather, with many a lurch and much tacking against an adverse wind. By the expression on the Semitic face you might have thought that Isaac Zahn was beholding some new and interesting object of natural history, instead of a ponderous and grumpy old sailor, who seemed to doubt somewhat the *bona fides* of the Kangaroo Bank. But the truth was that the young man was dazzled by the personality of one who might command such wealth; it had suddenly dawned on his calculating mind that a large sum of money was standing in the name of Rose Summerhayes; he realised with the clearness of a revelation that there were other fish than Rachel Varnhagen in the sea of matrimony.

The witching hour of lunch was near at hand. Isaac glanced at the clock, the hands of which pointed to five minutes to twelve. As soon as the clock above the Post Office sounded the hour, he left the counter, which was immediately occupied by another clerk, and going to a little room in the rear of the big building, he titivated his person before a small looking-glass that hung on the wall, and then, putting on his immaculate hat, he turned his back upon the cares of business for one hour.

His steps led him not in the direction of his victuals, but towards the warehouse of Joseph Varnhagen. There was no hurry in his gait; he sauntered down the street, his eyes observing everything, and with a look of patronising good humour on his dark face, as though he would say, "Really, you people are most amusing. Your style's awful, but I put up with it because you know no better."

He reached the door of Varnhagen's store in precisely the same frame of mind. The grimy, match-

lined walls of the merchant's untidy office, the litter of odds and ends upon the floor, the antiquated safe which stood in one corner, all aroused his pity and contempt.

The old Jew came waddling from the back of the store, his body ovoid, his bald head perspiring with the exertion he had put himself to in moving a chest of tea.

"Well, my noble, vat you want to-day?" he asked, as he waddled to his office-table, and placed upon it a packet of tea, intended for a sample.

"I just looked round to see how you were bobbing up."

"Bobbin' up, vas it? I don't bob up much better for seein' *you*. Good cracious! I vas almost dead, with Packett ill with fever or sometings from that ship outside, and me doin' all his vork and mine as well. Don't stand round in my vay, ven you see I'm pizzy!" Young Isaac leisurely took a seat by the safe, lighted a cigarette, and looked on amusedly at the merchant's flurry.

"You try to do too much," he said. "You're too anxious to save wages. What you want is a partner to keep your books, a young man with energy who will look after your interests—and his own. You're just wearing yourself to skin and bone; soon you'll go into a decline, and drop off the hooks."

"Eh? Vat? A decline you call it? Me? Do I look like it?"

The fat little man stood upright, and patted his rotund person.

"It's the wear and tear of mind that I fear will be fatal to you. You have brain-tire written large over every feature. I think you ought to see a doctor and get a nerve tonic. This fear of dying a pauper is rapidly killing you, and who then will fill your shoes?"

"My poy, there is one thing certain—*you* won't. I got too much sense. I know a smart feller when I see him, and *you're* altogetter too slow to please *me*."

"The really energetic man is the one who works with his brains, and leaves others to work with their hands."

"Oh! that's it, eh? Qvite a young Solomon! Vell, *I* do both."

"And you lose money in consequence."

"I losing money?"

"Yes, *you*. You're dropping behind fast. Crookenden and Co. are outstripping you in every line."

"Perhaps you see my books. Perhaps you see theirs."

"I see their accounts at the bank. I know what their turn-over is; I know yours. You're not in it."

"But they lose their cargo—the ship goes down."

"But they get the insurance, and send forward new orders and make arrangements with us for the consignors to draw on them. Why, they're running rings round you."

"Vell, how can I help it? My mail never come—I don't know vat my beobles are doing. But I send orders, too."

"For how much?"

"Dat's *my* pizz'ness."

"And *this* is mine." The clerk took a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"*I* don't want to know your pizz'ness."

"But you'd like to know C. and Co.'s."

"Qvite right. But *you* know it—perhaps you know the Devil's pizz'ness, too."

Young Zahn laughed.

"I wish I did," he said.

"Vell, young mans, you're getting pretty near it; you're getting on that vay."

"That's why it would be wise to take me into *your* business."

"I dare say; but all you vant is to marry my taughter Rachel."

"I want to marry her, that's true, but there are plenty of fish in the sea."

"And there are plenty other pizz'ness besides mine. You haf my answer."

The bank-clerk got up. "What I propose is for your good as well as mine. *I* don't want to ruin you; I want to see you prosper."

"*You* ruin me? How do you do that? If I change my bank, how do *you* affect me?"

"But you would have to pay off your overdraft first."

“That vill be ven the manager pleases—but as for his puppy clerk, dressed like a voman’s tailor, get out of this!”

The young man stood, smiling, by the door; but old Varnhagen, enacting again the little drama of Luther and the Devil, hurled the big office ink-pot at the scheming Isaac with full force.

The clerk ducked his head and ran, but the missile had struck him under the chin, and his immaculate person was bespattered from shirt-collar to mouse-coloured spats with violet copying-ink. In this deplorable state he was forced to pass through the streets, a spectacle for tittering shop-girls and laughing tradesmen, that he might gain the seclusion of his single room, which lay somewhere in the back premises of the Kangaroo Bank.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Wages of Sin.

As Pilot Summerhayes turned up the street, after having deposited his money, he might well have passed the goldsmith, hurrying towards the warehouse of Crookenden and Co. to receive the wages of his sin.

In Tresco’s pocket was the intercepted correspondence, upon his face was a look of happiness and self-contentment. He walked boldly into the warehouse where, in a big office, glazed, partitioned, and ramparted with a mighty counter, was a small army of clerks, who, loyal to their master, stood ready to pillage the goldsmith of every halfpenny he possessed.

But, with his blandest smile, Benjamin asked one of these formidable mercenaries whether Mr. Crookenden was within. He was ushered immediately into the presence of that great personage, before whom the conducting clerk was but as a crushed worm; and there, with a self-possession truly remarkable, the goldsmith seated himself in a comfortable chair and beamed cherubically at the merchant, though in his sinful heart he felt much as if he were a cross between a pirate and a forger.

“Ah! you have brought my papers?” said the merchant.

“I’ve brought *my* papers,” said the goldsmith, still smiling.

Crookenden chuckled. “Yes, yes,” he said, “quite right, quite right. They are yours till you are paid for them. Let me see: I gave you £50 in advance—there’s another £50 to follow, and then we are quits.”

“Another hundred-and-fifty,” said Tresco.

“Eh? What? How’s that? We said a hundred, all told.”

“Two hundred,” said Tresco.

“No, no, sir. I tell you it was a hundred.”

“All right,” said Tresco, “I shall retain possession of the letters, which I can post by the next mail or return to Mr. Varnhagen, just as I think fit.”

The merchant rose in his chair, and glared at the goldsmith.

“What!” cried Tresco. “You’ll turn dog? Complete your part of the bargain. Do you think I’ve put my head into a noose on your account for *nothing*? D’you think I went out last night because I loved you? No, sir, I want my money. I happen to need money. I’ve half a mind to make it two-hundred-and-fifty; and I would, if I hadn’t that honour which is said to exist among thieves. We’ll say one-hundred-and-fifty, and cry quits.”

“Do you think you have me in your hands?”

“I don’t *think*,” replied the cunning goldsmith. “I *know* I’ve got you. But I’ll be magnanimous—I’ll take £150. No, £160—I must pay the boatmen—and then I’ll say no more about the affair. It shall be buried in the oblivion of my breast, it shall be forgotten with the sins of my youth. I must ask you to be quick.”

“Quick?”

“Yes, as quick as you conveniently can.”

“Would you order me about, sir?”

“Not exactly that, but I would urge you on a little faster. I would persuade you with the inevitable spur of fate.”

The merchant put his hand on a bell which stood upon his table.

“That would be of no use,” said Benjamin. “If you call fifty clerks and forcibly rob me of my correspondence, you gain nothing. Listen! Every clerk in this building would turn against you the moment he knew your true character; and before morning, every man, woman and child in

Timber Town would know. And where would you be then? In gaol. D'you hear?—in gaol. Take up your pen. An insignificant difference of a paltry hundred pounds will solve the difficulty and give you all the comfort of a quiet mind."

"But what guarantee have I that after you have been paid you won't continue to blackmail me?"

"You cannot possibly have such a guarantee—it wouldn't be good for you. This business is going to chasten your soul, and make you mend your ways. It comes as a blessing in disguise. But so long as you don't refer to the matter, after you have paid me what you owe me, I shall bury the hatchet. I simply give you my word for that. If you don't care to take it, leave it: it makes no difference to me."

The fat little merchant fiddled nervously with the writing materials in front of him, and his hesitation seemed to have a most irritating effect upon the goldsmith, who rose from his chair, took his watch from his pocket, and walked to and fro.

"It's too much, too much," petulantly reiterated Mr. Crookenden. "It's not worth it, not the half of it."

"That's not *my* affair," retorted Tresco. "The bargain was for £200. I want the balance due."

"But how do I know you have the letters?" whined the merchant.

"Tut, tut! I'm surprised to hear such foolishness from an educated man. What you want will be forthcoming when you've drawn the cheque—take my word for that. But I'm tired of pottering round here." The goldsmith glanced at his watch. "I give you two minutes in which to decide. If you can't make up your mind, well, that's your funeral. At the end of that time I double the price of the letters, and if you want them at the new figure then you can come and ask for them."

He held his watch in his hand, and marked the fleeting moments.

The merchant sat, staring stonily at the table in front of him.

The brief moments soon passed; Tresco shut his watch with a click, and returned it to his pocket.

"Now," he said, taking up his hat, "I'll wish you good morning."

He was half-way to the door, when Crookenden cried, "Stop!" and reached for a pen, which he dipped in the ink.

"He, he!" he sniggered, "it's all right, Tresco—I only wanted to test you. You shall have the money. I can see you're a staunch man such as I can depend on."

He rose suddenly, and went to the big safe which stood against the wall, and from it he took a cash-box, which he placed on the table.

"Upon consideration," he said, "I have decided to pay you in cash—it's far safer for both parties."

He counted out a number of bank notes, which he handed to the goldsmith.

Tresco put down his hat, put on his spectacles, and counted the money. "Ten tens are a hundred, ten fives are fifty, ten ones are ten," he said. "Perfectly correct." He put his hand into the inner pocket of his coat, and drew out a packet, which was tied roughly with a piece of coarse string. "And here are the letters," he added, as he placed them on the table. Then he put the money into his pocket.

Crookenden opened the packet, and glanced at the letters.

Tresco had picked up his hat.

"I am satisfied," said the merchant. "Evidently you are a man of resource. But don't forget that in this matter we are dependent upon each other. I rely thoroughly on you, Tresco, thoroughly. Let us forget the little piece of play-acting of a few minutes ago. Let us be friends, I might say comrades."

"Certainly, sir. I do so with pleasure."

"But for the future," continued Crookenden, "we had better not appear too friendly in public, not for six months or so."

"Certainly not, not too friendly in public," Benjamin smiled his blandest, "not for at least six months. But any communication sent me by post will be sure to find me, unless it is intercepted by some unscrupulous person. For six months, Mr. Crookenden, I bid you adieu."

The merchant sniggered again, and Benjamin walked out of the room.

Then Crookenden rang his bell. To the clerk who answered it, he said:

"You saw that man go out of my office, Mr. Smithers?"

"Yes, sir."

"If ever he comes again to see me, tell him I'm engaged, or not in. I won't see him—he's a bad stamp of man, a most ungrateful man, a man I should be sorry to have any dealings with, a man who is likely to get into serious trouble before he is done, a man whom I advise all my young men

to steer clear of, one of the most unsatisfactory men it has been my misfortune to meet."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all, Mr. Smithers," said the head of the firm. "I like my young men to be kept from questionable associates; I like them to have the benefit of my experience. I shall do my best to preserve them from the evil influence of such persons as the man I have referred to. That will do. You may go, Mr. Smithers."

Meanwhile, Benjamin Tresco was striding down the street in the direction of his shop; his speed accelerated by a wicked feeling of triumph, and his face beaming with an acute appreciation of the ridiculous scene in which he had played so prominent a part.

"Hi-yi!" he exclaimed exultingly, as he burst into the little room at the back of his shop, where the Prospector was waiting for him, "the man with whips of money would outwit Benjamin, and the man with the money-bags was forced to shell out. Bill, my most esteemed pal, the rich man would rob the poor, but that poor man was Benjamin, your redoubtable friend Benjamin Tresco, and the man who was dripping with gold got, metaphorically speaking, biffed on the boko. Observe, my esteemed and trusty pal, observe the proceeds of my cunning."

He threw the whole of his money on the table.

"Help yourself," he cried. "Take as much as you please: all I ask is the sum of ten pounds to settle a little account which will be very pressing this evening at eight o'clock, when a gentleman named Rock Cod and his estimable mate, Macaroni Joe, are dead sure to roll up, expectant."

The digger, who, in spite of his return to the regions of civilisation, retained his wildly hirsute appearance, slowly counted the notes.

"I make it a hundred-and-sixty," he said.

"That's right," said Tresco: "there's sixty-seven for you, and the balance for me."

Bill took out the two IOUs, and placed them on the table. They totalled £117, of which Benjamin had paid £50.

"I guess," said the Prospector, "that sixty-seven'll square it." He carefully counted out that sum, and put it in his pocket.

Benjamin counted the balance, and made a mental calculation. "Ninety-three pounds," he said, "and ten of that goes to my respectable friends, Rock Cod and Macaroni. That leaves me the enormous sum of eighty-three pounds. After tearing round the town for three solid days, raising the wind for all I'm worth and almost breaking my credit, this is all I possess. That's what comes of going out to spend a quiet evening in the company of Fortunatus Bill; that's what comes of backing my luck against ruffians with loaded dice and lumps on their necks."

"Have you seen them devils since?" asked the Prospector.

"I've been far too busy scrapin' together this bit of cash to take notice of folks," said Benjamin, as he tore up the IOUs and threw them into the fireplace. "It's no good crying over spilt milk or money lost at play. The thing is for you to go back to the bush, and make good your promise."

"I'm going to-morrow mornin'. I've got the missus's money, which I'll send by draft, and then I'll go and square up my bill at the hotel."

"And then," said Benjamin, "fetch your swag, and bunk here to-night. It'll be a most convenient plan."

"We're mates," said the Prospector. "You've stood by me and done the 'an'some, an' I'll stand by you and return the compliment. An' it's my hope we'll both be rich men before many weeks are out."

"That's so," said Benjamin. "Your hand on it."

The digger held out his horny, begrimed paw, which the goldsmith grasped with a solemnity befitting the occasion.

"You'll need a miner's right," said the digger.

"I've got one," said Tresco. "Number 76032, all in order, entitling me to the richest claim in this country."

"I'll see, mate, that it's as rich as my own, and that's saying a wonderful deal."

"Damme, I'll come with you straight away!"

"Right, mate; come along."

"We'll start before dawn."

"Before dawn."

"I'll shut the shop, and prospect along with you."

"That's the way of it. You an' me'll be mates right through; and we'll paint this town red for a

week when we've made our pile."

"Jake! Drat that boy; where is he? Jake, come here."

The shock-headed youth came running from the back yard, where he was chopping wood.

"Me and this gentleman," said his master, "are going for a little excursion. We start to-morrow morning. See? I was thinking of closing the shop, but I've decided to leave you in charge till I return."

The lad stood with his hands in his pockets, and blew a long, shrill whistle. "Of all the tight corners I was ever in," he said, "this takes the cake. I'll want a rise in wages—look at the responsibility, boss."

The goldsmith laughed. "All right," he said. "You shall have ten shillings a week extra while I'm away; and if we have luck, Jake, I'll make it a pound."

"Right-oh! I'll take all the responsibility that comes along. I'll get fat on it. And when you come back, you'll find the business doubled, and the reputation of B. Tresco increased. It'll probably end in you taking me in as partner—but *I* don't care: it's all the same to *me*."

The goldsmith made an attempt to box the boy's ear, but Jake dodged his blow.

"That's your game, is it?" exclaimed the young rogue. "Bash me about, will you? All right—I'll set up in opposition!"

He didn't wait for the result of this remark, but with a sudden dart he passed like a streak of lightning through the doorway, and fled into the street.

CHAPTER XVII.

Rachel's Wiles.

Rachel Varnhagen walked down the main street of Timber Town, with the same bustling gait, the same radiant face, the same air of possessing the whole earth, as when the reader first met her. As she passed the Kangaroo Bank she paused, and peered through the glass doors; but, receiving no responsive glance from the immaculately attired Isaac, who stood at the counter counting out his money, she continued her way towards her father's place of business, where she found the rotund merchant in a most unusual state of excitement.

"Now, vat you come bothering me this morning, Rachel? Can't you see I'm pizzy?"

"I want a cheque, father."

"You get no cheque from me this morning, my child. I've got poor all of a sudden. I've got no cheques for nopody."

"But I have to get things for the house. We want a new gourmet boiler—you know you won't touch currie made in a frying-pan—a steamer for potatoes, and half-a-dozen table-knives."

"Don't we haff no credit? What goot is my name, if you can't get stew-pans without money? Here I am, with no invoices, my orders ignored as if I was a pauper, and my whole piz'ness at a standstill. Not one single letter do I get, not one. I want a hundred thousand things. I send my orders months and months ago, and I get no reply. My trade is all going to that tam feller, Crookenden! And you come, and ask me for money. Vhen I go along to the Post Master, he kvestion me like a criminal, and pring the Police Sergeant as if I vas a thief. I tell him I nefer rob mail-bags. I tell him if other peoples lose letters, I lose them too. I know nothing aboudt it. I tell him the rascal man is Crookenden and Co.—he should take *him* to prison: he contracts for mails and nefer delivers my letters. I tell him Crookenden and Co. is the criminal, not me. Then he laff, but that does not gif me my letters."

During this harangue, Rachel had stood, the mute but pretty picture of astonishment.

"But, father," she said, "I want to go to the bank. I want to speak to Isaac awfully, and how can I go in there without some excuse!"

"I'll gif you the exguse to keep out! I tell you somethings which will make you leave that young man alone. He nefer loaf you, Rachel—he loaf only my money."

"Father! this worry about the mail has turned you silly."

"Oh, yes, I'm silly when I throw the ink-pot at him. I've gone mad when I kick him out of my shop. You speak to that young man nefer again, Rachel, my tear; you nefer look at him. Then, by-and-by, I marry you to the mos' peautiful young man with the mos' loafly moustache and whiskers. You leaf it to your poor old father. He'll choose you a good husband. When I was a young man I consult with *my* father, and I marry your scharming mamma, and you, my tear Rachel, are the peautiful result. Eh? my tear."

The old man took his daughter's face between his fat hands, and kissed her on both cheeks.

“You silly old goose,” said Rachel, tenderly, “you seem to think I have no sense. I’m not going to marry Isaac *yet*—there can’t be any harm in speaking to him. I’m only engaged. Why should you be frightened if I flirt a little with him? You seem to think a girl should be made of cast-iron, and just wait till her father finds a husband for her. You’re buried up to your eyes in invoices and bills of lading and stupid, worrying things that drive you cranky, and you never give a thought to my future. What’s to become of me, if I don’t look out for myself? Goodness knows! there are few enough men in the town that I *could* marry; and because I pick out one for myself, you storm and rage as if I was thinking of marrying a convict.”

“Young Zahn is worse: he is the worst rogue I ever see. He come in here to bully me into making him my partner. He threatens to tell my piz’ness to Crookenden and Co. I tell him, ‘You do it, my poy. I schange my account, and tell your manager why.’ That young man’s too smart: soon he find himself in gaol. If my tear little Rachel marries a criminal, what would become of her poor old father? My tear, my tarling, you make me die with grief! But wait till the right young man comes along, then I gif you my blessing and two thousand pounds. But I gif you not von penny if you marry young Zahn.”

The tears were now standing in Rachel’s pretty eyes, and she looked the picture of grief.

“I never do *anything*, but you blame me,” she sobbed. “When I wish to do a thing, you always say it’s bad. You don’t love me!” And she burst into a flood of tears.

“Rachel! Rachel! I gafe you the gold watch; and that bill came to thirty-three pounds. I gif you everything, and when I tell you not to run after a bad young feller, you say I nefer loaf you. Rachel, you are cruel; you make your father’s heart bleed; you stab me here”—he pointed with his fat forefinger to the middle of his waistcoat—“you stab me here”—he placed his finger on his forehead. “You show no loaf, no consideration. You make me most unhappy. You’re a naughty girl!”

The old fellow was almost crying. Rachel put her arms about his neck, and pressed his corpulent person with affection.

“Father, I’ll be good. I know I’m very bad. But I love you, father. I’ll never cause you any sorrow again. I’ll do everything you tell me. I won’t gad about so much; I’ll stop at home more. I will, father; I really will.”

“My tear Rachel! My loafly!” The old man was holding his pretty daughter at arm’s length, and was gazing at her with parental fondness. “You are my peautiful, tear, goot, little girl.”

Again her arms were flung round his neck. Again she kissed his bristly cheeks with her ruby-red lips. “You *are* an old dear,” she exclaimed. “You’re the kindest old governor going.”

“You loaf your old father?”

“Of *course* I do. But I *do*—I *do* so want a small cheque. I must have it for the house.”

“You’ll always loaf your father, Rachel?”

“Always.” She renewed her affectionate embraces.

“You shall have a little one—not so big as when my ship comes home, not so big as I’d like, but enough to show that I loaf you, Rachel.”

He let her lead him to his desk, and there he sat and wrote a cheque which Rachel took gladly. She gave him one more kiss, and said, “You dear, good, kind old party; your little Rachel’s *awfully* pleased,” and gaily tripped from the dingy office into the sunny street.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Digging.

Moonlight and Scarlett were glad with the delight of success, for inside their tent, which was pitched beside Bush Robin Creek, lay almost as much gold as one of them could conveniently carry to Timber Town.

They had searched the rocky sides of the gorge where they had first found gold, and its ledges and crevices had proved to be exceedingly rich. Next, they had examined the upper reaches of the creek, and after selecting a place where the best “prospects” were to be found, they had determined to work the bottom of the river-bed. Their “claim” was pegged off, the water had been diverted, and the dam had been strengthened with boulders taken from the river-bed, and now, having placed their sluice-boxes in position, they were about to have their first “washing up.”

As they sat, and ate their simple fare—“damper” baked on the red-hot embers of their fire, a pigeon which Scarlett had shot that morning, and tea—their conversation was of their “claim.”

“What do you think it will go?”

“The dirt in the creek is rich enough, but what’s in the flat nobody can say. There may be richer gold in some of the higher terraces than down here. I’ve known such cases.”

At the place where they were camped, the valley had been, at some distant period, a lake which had subsided after depositing a rich layer of silt, through which the stream had cut its way subsequently. Over this rich alluvial deposit the forest had spread luxuriantly, and it was only the skill of the experienced prospector that could discover the possibilities of the enormous stretches of river silt which Nature had so carefully hidden beneath the tangled, well-nigh impenetrable forest.

“The river is rich,” continued Moonlight, “that we know. Possibly it deposited gold on these flats for ages. If that is so, this valley will be one of the biggest ‘fields’ yet developed. What we must do first is to test the bottom of the old lake; therefore, as soon as we have taken the best of the gold out of the river, I propose to ‘sink’ on the terraces till I find the rich deposit.”

“Perhaps what we are getting now has come from the terraces above,” said Jack.

“I think not.”

“Where does it come from then?”

“I can’t say, unless it is from some reef in the ranges. You must not forget that there’s the lower end of the valley to be prospected yet—we have done nothing below the gorge.”

Talking thus, they ate their “damper” and stewed pigeon, and drank their “billy” tea. Then they lit their pipes, and strolled towards the scene of their labours.

The place chosen for the workings was selected by circumstance rather than by the diggers. At this particular point of its course there had been some hesitation on the part of the river in choosing its bed, and with but a little coaxing it had been diverted into an old channel—which evident signs showed to be utilised as an overflow in time of flood—and thus by a circuitous route it found its way to the mouth of the gorge.

All was ready for the momentous operation of washing up, and the men’s minds were full of expectation.

The bottom of fine silt, which had been laid bare when the boulders had been removed, stood piled on the bank, so as to be out of harm’s way in case the river burst through the dam. Into the old bed a trickle of water ran through the sluice-boxes. These were set in the dry bed of the stream, and were connected with the creek by a water-race. They were each twelve feet in length, and consisted of a bottom and two sides, into which fitted neatly a twelve-foot board, pierced with a number of auger-holes. These boxes could be joined one to another, and the line of them could thus be prolonged indefinitely. The wash-dirt would be shovelled in at the top end, and the water, flowing down the “race,” would carry it over the boxes, till it was washed out at the lower end, leaving behind a deposit of gold, which, owing to its specific gravity, would lodge in the auger-holes.

Moonlight went to the head of the “race,” down which presently the water rushed, and rippled through the sluice-boxes. Next, he threw a shovelful of wash-dirt into the lower part of the “race,” and soon its particles were swept through the sluice, and another shovelful followed.

When Moonlight tired, Scarlett relieved him, and so, working turn and turn about, after an hour they could see in the auger-holes a small yellow deposit: in the uppermost holes an appreciable quantity, and in the lower ones but a few grains.

“It’s all right,” said Moonlight, “we’ve struck it.” He looked at the great heaps of wash-dirt on the bank, and his eyes shone with satisfaction.

“Do you think the dam will hold?” asked Scarlett of the experienced digger.

“It’s safe enough till we get a ‘fresh’,” was the reply. Moonlight glanced at the dripping rampart, composed of tree-trunks and stones. “But even if there does happen to be a flood, and the dam bursts,” he added, “we’ve still got the ‘dirt’ high and dry. But we shall have warning enough, I expect, to save the ‘race’ and sluice-boxes.”

“It meant double handling to take out the wash-dirt before we started to wash up,” said Scarlett, “but I’m glad we did it.”

“Once, on the Greenstone,” said Moonlight, “we were working from the bed of the creek. There came a real old-man flood which carried everything away, and when we cleaned out the bed again, there wasn’t so much as a barrowful of gold-bearing dirt left behind. Once bitten, twice shy.”

If the process was monotonous, it had the advantage of being simple. The men slowly shovelled the earth into the last length of the “race,” and the running water did the rest. In the evening, a big pile of “tailings” was heaped up at the foot of the sluice, and as some of the auger-holes were half-filled with gold, Moonlight gave the word for cleaning out the boxes.

The water from the dam was cut off, leaving but a trickle running through the boxes. The false bottoms were then taken out of the sluice, and upon the floors of the boxes innumerable little heaps of gold lay exposed to the miners’ delighted eyes.

The heavy gold, caught before it had reached the first sluice-box, lay at the lower end of the "race." To separate the small quantity of grit that remained with the gold, the diggers held the rich little heaps claw-wise with their fingers, while the rippling water ran through them. Thus the gold was left pure, and with the blade of a sheath-knife, it was easily transferred to the big tin dish.

"What weight?" asked Jack, as he lifted the precious load.

Moonlight solemnly took the "pan" from his mate. "One-fifty to one-sixty ounces," he said oracularly. His gaze wandered to the heap of wash-dirt which remained. "We've washed about one-sixth," he said. "Six times one-fifty is nine hundred. We'll say, roughly, £4 an ounce: that gives us something like £3600 from that heap."

As night was now approaching, they walked slowly towards their tent, carrying their richly-laden dish with them. Sitting in the tent-door, with their backs to the dark forest and their heads bent over the gold, they transferred the precious contents of the dish to a strong chamois-leather bag. Moonlight held open the mouth of the receptacle, and watched the process eagerly. About half the pleasant task was done, when suddenly a voice behind them said, "Who the blazes are *you*?"

Turning quickly, they saw standing behind them two men who had emerged from the forest.

Seizing an axe which lay beside him, Moonlight assumed an attitude of defence. Scarlett, who was weaponless, stood firm and rigid, ready for an onslaught.

"You seem to have struck it," said the newcomer who had spoken, his greedy eyes peering at the dish. "Do put down that axe, mate. We ain't bushrangers."

Moonlight lowered the head of his weapon, and said, "Yes, we've got the colour."

"Blow me if it ain't my friend Moonlight!" exclaimed the second intruder, advancing towards the diggers. "How's yerself?"

"Nicely, thank you," replied Moonlight. "Come far to-day?"

"A matter of eight hours' tramp—but not so fer; the bush is mighty thick. This is my mate. Here, Ben, shake 'ands."

It was none other than Benjamin Tresco who came forward. As he lowered his "swag" to the ground, he said, smiling urbanely, "How de do? I reckon you've jumped our claim. But we bear no malice. We'll peg out another."

"This ain't ours," said the Prospector, "not by chalks. You're above the gorge, ain't you?"

"Yes," replied Moonlight, "I should reckon we must be a mile above it."

"Where I worked," continued Bill, "was more'n a mile below the gorge. What are you makin'?"

"A few pennyweights," responded Moonlight.

"It looks like it!" exclaimed the Prospector, glancing at the richly-laden dish. "Look 'ere, Ben: a few pennyweights, that's all—just makin' tucker. Poor devils!"

Moonlight laughed, and so did Scarlett.

"Well, we might do worse than put our pegs alongside theirs, eh, Ben?"

"Oceans worse," replied Tresco.

"Did you prospect the gorge?" asked Moonlight.

"I wasn't never in the gorge," said the Prospector. "The river was too high, all the time I was working; but there's been no rain for six weeks, so she's low now."

Tresco advanced with mock trepidation, and looked closely at the gold in the chamois-leather bag, which he lifted with assumed difficulty. "About half a hundredweight," he said. "How much more of this sort have you got?"

Moonlight ignored the question, but turning to the Prospector, he said, "I shouldn't have left till I'd fossicked that gorge, if I'd been you."

"Then you've been through it?" queried Bill.

Moonlight nodded.

"How did it pan out?"

"There was gold there."

"Make tucker, eh?" the Prospector laughed. "Well this'll be good enough for us. We'll put in our pegs above yours. But how you dropped on this field just gits over me. You couldn't have come straighter, not if I'd shown you the way myself."

"Instinct," replied Moonlight. "Instinct and the natural attraction of the magnet." He desired to take no credit for his own astuteness in prospecting.

Scarlett had so far said nothing, but he now invited the newcomers to eat, before they pitched

their tent.

“No, no,” said the Prospector, “you must be on pretty short commons—you must ha’ bin out a fortnight and more. Me an’ my mate’ll provide the tucker.”

“We *are* a bit short, and that’s the truth,” said Moonlight, “but we reckon on holding out till we’ve finished this wash-up, and then one of us’ll have to fetch stores.”

While Benjamin and his mate were unpacking their swags and Scarlett was lighting the fire, Moonlight transferred the rest of the gold from the dish to the leather bag.

When the four men sat down to their frugal meal of “billy” tea, boiled bacon, and “damper,” they chatted and laughed like schoolboys.

“Ah!” exclaimed Tresco, as red flames of the fire shot toward the stars and illumined the gigantic trunks of the surrounding trees, “this is freedom and the charm of Nature. No blooming bills to meet, no bother about the orders of worrying customers, no everlasting bowing and scraping; all the charm of society, good-fellowship, confidence, and conversation, with none of the frills of so-called civilization. But that is not all. Added to this is the prospect of making a fortune in the morning. Now, that is what I call living.”

CHAPTER XIX.

A Den of Thieves.

Down a by-lane in the outskirts of Timber Town stood a dilapidated wooden cottage. Its windows lacked many panes, its walls were bare of paint, the shingles of its roof were rotten and scanty; it seemed uninhabitable and empty, and yet, as night fell, within it there burned a light. Moreover, there were other signs of life within its crazy walls, for when all without was quiet and dark, the door opened and a bare-headed man emerged.

“Carny!” he called.

A whistle sounded down the lane, and soon a figure advanced from the shadow of a hedge and stood in the light of the open door.

“We’ve only waited near an hour for you,” said the first man. “If you’ve orders to be on time, be on time. D’you expect the whole push to dance attendance on you?”

“Now, Dolphin, draw it mild. That blame pretty girl at The Lucky Digger kept me, an’ wouldn’t let me go, though I told her I had a most important engagement.”

“Petticoats an’ *our* business don’t go together,” gruffly responded Dolphin. “Best give ’em a wide berth till we’ve finished our work here and got away.”

The two men entered the house, and the door was shut.

At a bare, white-pine table sat two other men, the sour-faced Garstang and the young fellow who answered to the name of Sweet William.

“Come in, come in,” said the latter, “and stop barrackin’ like two old washerwomen. Keep yer breath to discuss the biz.”

Dolphin and Carnac drew chairs to the table, on which stood a guttering candle, glued to the wood with its own grease.

“Charming residence,” remarked Carnac, elegant in a black velvet coat, as he glanced round the bare and battered room.

“Sweet William Villa,” said the young man. “I pay no rent; and mighty comfortable it is too, when you have a umberella to keep out the rain.”

“Our business,” said the pugnacious-looking Dolphin, “is to square up, which hasn’t been done since we cleaned out the digger that William hocussed.”

He drew a handful of notes and gold from his pocket, and placed it on the table.

“Gently,” said Sweet William, who took Carnac’s hat, and placed it over the money. “Wait till I fix my blind.” Snatching a blanket from a bed made upon the bare floor, he hung it on two nails above the window, so as to effectually bar the inquisitive gaze of chance wayfarers. “Damme, a bloke would think you wanted to advertise the firm and publish our balance-sheet.” Stepping down to the floor, he replaced Carnac’s hat upon its owner’s head, and said “Fire away.”

Each man placed his money in front of him, and rendered his account. Then Dolphin took all the money, counted it, and divided it into four equal heaps, three of which he distributed, and one of which he retained.

“Fifty-seven quid,” said Sweet William, when he had counted his money. “A very nice dividend for the week. I think I’ll give up batching here, and live at The Lucky Digger and have a spree.”

“Not much, William,” broke in Dolphin. “Keep yourself in hand, my son. Wait till we’ve made our real haul and got away with the loot: then you can go on the burst till all’s blue. Each man wants his wits about him, for the present.”

“You mean the bank,” said Carnac.

The leader of the gang nodded.

“I’ve fossicked around the premises,” continued the gentleman in the velvet coat, “and I must confess that they’re the most trifling push *I* ever saw. There’s the manager, a feeble rat of a man; another fellow that’s short-sighted and wears specs.; a boy, and the teller, a swell who wears gloves on his boots and looks as if he laced himself up in stays.”

“I reckon there’s a rusty old revolver hanging on a nail somewheres,” remarked Garstang.

“Most likely,” said Dolphin, “but our plan is to walk in comfortable and easy just before closing-time. I’ll present a faked-up cheque which’ll cause a consultation between the teller and the short-sighted party. In the meantime, Carnac will interview the manager about sending a draft to his wife in England. You, Garstang, will stand ready to bar the front door, and William will attend to the office-boy and the door at the back. Just as the clerks are talking about the cheque, I’ll whip out my weapon and bail ’em up, and then the scheme will go like clock-work.”

“But suppose there’s a mob of customers in the place?” asked Garstang.

“A lot of harmless sheep!” replied Dolphin. “It’ll be your duty to bail them up. There’s a big strong-room at the back, well-ventilated, commodious, and dry. We’ll hustle everybody into that, and you and William will stand guard over them. Then Carnac will bring the manager from his room, and with the persuasion of two pistols at his head the little old gentleman will no doubt do the civil in showing us where he stows his dollars. There’ll be plenty of time: the bank will be closed just as in the ordinary course of things. We’ll do the job thoroughly, and when we’ve cleaned the place out, we’ll lock all the parties up in the strong-room, and quit by the back door as soon as it’s dusk.”

“Sounds O.K.,” remarked Sweet William, “but there’ll be a picnic before morning. I reckon we’ll need to get away pretty sudden.”

“That can be arranged in two ways,” said Dolphin. “First, we can choose a day when a steamer is leaving port early in the evening, say, eight o’clock; or we can take to the bush, and make our way across country. I’ve turned over both plans in my mind, and I rather prefer the latter. But that is a point I leave to you—I’ll fall in with the opinion of the majority.”

“Yes,” said Garstang, “it looks as if it must succeed: it looks as if it can’t go wrong. Our leader Dolphin, the brains of the gang, has apparently fixed up everything; the details are all thought out; the men are ready and available, but——”

“But what?” asked Dolphin gruffly. “Are you going to back down? Frightened of getting a bit of lead from a rusty old revolver, eh?”

“It ain’t that,” replied the ugliest member of the gang, “but supposin’ there’s no money in the bloomin’ bank, what then?”

A roar of laughter greeted his surmise.

“What d’you suppose the bank’s for,” asked Carnac, “if not to store up money?”

“Whips and whips of money,” observed Sweet William, the stem of his lighted pipe between his teeth. “You go with a legitimate cheque for, say, £550, and you’d get it cashed all right.”

“Certainly”; replied Garstang, “in notes. And that’s where we’d fall in. Every number is known, and so soon as we tried to cash the dirty paper, we’d get lagged. Even if we passed ’em at pubs, we’d be traced. What we want is gold—nothing but gold. And I’d be surprised if they have a thousand sovereigns in the bank.”

“If they have,” remarked Dolphin, “you’ll get two-fifty. Isn’t that good enough?”

“That’s it,” retorted his troublesome follower, “there’s considerable risk about the business, in spite of you fixing all the details so neat and easy. I ask, ‘Is it good enough to get about ten years for the sake of £250?’”

“Just what I thought,” exclaimed Dolphin. “You’re a cock-tail. In your old age you’ve grown white-livered. I guess, Garstang, you’d better retire, and leave those to carry out the work who don’t know what fear is.”

“That’s so,” echoed Carnac, drumming the table with his white fingers.

“You don’t ketch my meaning,” growled Garstang, angry and surly. “What I want is a big haul, and damn the risk. There’s no white liver about *me*, but I say, ‘Let’s wait till we’ve reason to know that the bank’s safe is heavily loaded.’ I say, ‘Wait till we know extra big payments have been made into it.’ Let’s get all we can for our trouble.”

“’Ere, ’ere,” said Sweet William. “I’m there. Same sentiment ’ere,” and he smote his narrow chest.

“But how are we to find out the bank’s business?” asked Dolphin. “Lor’ bless us, if the manager would tip us the wink, we’d be all right.”

“Get me took in as extry clerk,” suggested William. “Blame me, if I don’t apply for the billet to-morrow morning.”

“Go on chiacking,” said Garstang; “poke borak—it don’t hurt *me*. But if you want to do anything in a workmanlike and perfessional manner, listen to advice. Isn’t shipments of virgin gold made from the Coast? Isn’t such shipments made public by the newspapers? Very good. When we see a steamer has brought up a pile of gold, where’s it put but in the bank? There’s our chance. D’you follow? Then we’ll be sure to get something for our pains.”

“’Ere, ’ere!” cried Sweet William, smacking the now leering Garstang on the back. “Good on you. Maximum return for minimum risk.”

Carnac joined in the laugh. “You’re not so thick-headed after all,” he said to the crooked-faced man.

“Nor ’e ain’t so awful white-livered neither,” said William.

Dolphin, whose eyes were fixed on the table contemplatively, was silent for a while. When the noise made by the other three had terminated, he said, “Well, have it as you like. But how will the scheme fit in with the steamer business?”

“First rate,” answered William. “Where there’s gold there’ll be a steamer to take it away, won’t there?”

“And when the steamer doesn’t get its gold at the appointed time,” replied Dolphin, “the whole town will be roused to hunt for it. That’s no game for us. I agree to waiting for gold to be lodged in the bank, but if that does’t come off within reasonable time, I’m for taking the chance that’s offered. I’m willing to wait a fortnight. How’d that suit you, Garstang?”

“I’m agreeable,” said the sour-faced man.

“And in the meanwhile,” added the leader, “we don’t know one another. If we meet, we don’t so much as pass the time of day. D’you all understand?”

The three answered affirmatively, and Sweet William said, “Don’t never any of you chaps come near my shanty. This meetin’ stands adjourned *sine die*.”

“If there’s a notice in the newspaper of gold arriving, that means we meet here at once,” said Dolphin, “otherwise we meet this day fortnight. Is that clear?”

“Yes, that’s clear,” said Garstang.

“Certainly,” said Carnac, “perfectly clear.”

“An’, please, when you go,” said Sweet William, “don’t raise the whole neighbourhood, but make a git one by one, and disperse promiscuous, as if you’d never met in your beautiful lives.”

The four men were now standing round the table.

“Good night all,” said Dolphin, and he went out quietly by the front door.

“Remember what the boss says about the wine,” remarked William, when the leader of the gang had gone. “No boozing and giving the show away. You’re to be strictly sober for a fortnight, Garstang. And, Carny, if that girl at The Lucky Digger tries to pump you as to what your lay is, tell ’er you’ve come to buy a little property and settle down. She’ll think you mean marrying.”

Carnac smiled. “You might be my grandfather, William,” he said.

“Personally, *I’m* a shearer that’s havin’ a very mild sort of spree and knockin’ down his cheque most careful. You’ve bin aboard a ship, ain’t you, Garstang?”

“D’you suppose I swam out to this blanky country?” said the crooked-featured gentleman.

“Then you’re a sailor that’s bin paid off and taken your discharge.”

Carnac had his hand on the latch of the door through which Dolphin had disappeared.

“No, no; you go out the back way,” said William, who conducted the man in the velvet coat into the back yard, and turned him into a paddock full of cabbages, whence he might find his way as best he could to the roadway.

When the youthful William returned, Garstang was smoking; his elbows on the table, and his ugly head resting in his hands.

“You seem bloomin’ comfortable, Garstang.”

“I’d be a darn sight more comfortabler for a drop of grog, William.”

William took a bottle from beneath his bed.

“Just eleven o’clock,” said the younger man, looking at his watch. “This house closes punctual. You shall have one nip, mister, and then I chuck you out.”

He poured the contents of the bottle into the solitary mug, and added water from a jug with a broken lip. Then the two rogues drank alternately.

“What do you intend to do when you’ve made your pile, Garstang?”

“Me? I’m goin’ back to London and set up in a nice little public, missis, barmaid, and boots, complete, and live a quiet, virtuous life. That’s me. I should prefer somewheres down Woolwich way—I’m very fond of the military.”

“I’m goin’ to travel,” said William. “I’m anxious for to see things and improve me mind. First, I’ll go to America—I’m awful soft on the Yanks, and can’t help thinkin’ that ’Frisco’s the place for a chap with talent. Then I’ll work East and see New York, and by-and-by I’ll go over to Europe an’ call on the principal Crown Heads—not the little ’uns, you understand, like Portugal and Belgium, or fry of that sort: they ain’t no class—an’ then I’ll marry a real fine girl, a reg’lar top-notcher with whips of dollars, an’ go and live at Monte Carlo. How’s that for a programme, eh?”

“Nice and complete. But I raythe expect the Crown ’Eads’d be one too many for *you*. The Czar o’ Rooshia, f’r instance, I fancy he’d exile you to Siberia.”

“But that’d be agin international law an’ all rule an’ precedent—I’d tell ’im I was a British subject born in Australia, and wrap a Union Jack around me stummick, an’ dare ’im to come on. How’d that be for high?”

“You’d be ’igh enough. You’d be ’anded over to th’ British authorities—they’d see you went ’igh enough. The experience of men of our perfession is, lie very low, live very quiet, don’t attract no attention whatever—when you’ve succeeded in makin’ your pile. That’s why I say a public: you’ve a few select pals, the best of liquor, and just as much excitement as a ordinary man needs. I say that, upon retirement, for men of our perfession a public’s the thing.”

“How’d a theayter do?”

“Too noisy an’ unrestful, William. An’ then think of all the wimmen—they’d bother a man silly.”

“What d’you say to a song and dance ’all?”

“’Tain’t so bad. But them places, William, I’ve always noticed, has a tendency to grow immoral. Now, a elderly gent, who’s on the down-grade and ’as *’ad* ’is experiences, don’t exactly want *that*. No, I’m dead set on a public. I think that fills the bill completely.”

“But we can’t *all* go into the grog business.”

“I don’t see why. ’Tain’t as if we was a regiment of soldiers. There’s but four of us.”

“Oh, well, the liquor’s finished. You can make a git, Garstang. But, if you ask me what I’ll do with this pile as soon as it’s made, I say I still have a hankerin’ after the Crown Heads. They must be most interestin’ blokes to talk to: you see, they’ve had such experience. I’m dead nuts on Crown Heads.”

“And they’re dead nuts on the ’eads of the likes of you, William. Good-night.”

“So-long, Garstang. Keep good.”

And with those words terminated the gathering of the four greatest rogues who ever were in Timber Town.

CHAPTER XX.

Gold and Roses.

The Pilot’s daughter was walking in her garden.

The clematis which shaded the verandah was a rich mass of purple flowers, where bees sucked their store of honey; the rose bushes, in the glory of their second blooming, scented the air, while about their roots grew masses of mignonette.

Along the winding paths the girl walked; a pair of garden scissors in one hand and a basket in the other. She passed under a latticed arch over which climbed a luxuriant Cloth of Gold, heavy with innumerable flowers. Standing on tip-toe, with her arms above her head, she cut half-a-dozen yellow buds, which she placed in the basket. Passing on, she came to the pink glory of the garden, Maria Pare, a mass of brown shoots and clusters of opening buds whose colour surpassed in delicacy the softest tint of the pink sea-shell. Here she culled barely a dozen roses where she might have gathered thirty. “Yellow and pink,” she mused. “Now for something bright.” She walked along the path till she came to M’sieu Cordier, brilliant with the reddest of blooms. She stole but six of the best, and laid them in the basket. “We want more scent,” she said. There was La France growing close beside; its great petals, pearly white on the inside and rich cerise without, smelling deliciously. She robbed the bush of only its most perfect flowers, for though there were many buds but few were developed.

Next, she came to the type of her own innocence, The Maiden Blush, whose half-opened buds are

the perfect emblem of maidenhood, but whose full-blown flowers are, to put it bluntly, symbolical of her who, in middle life, has developed extravagantly. But here again was no perfume. The mistress passed on to the queen of the garden, La Rosiere, fragrant beyond all other roses, its reflexed, claret-coloured petals soft and velvety, its leaves—when did a rose's greenery fail to be its perfect complement?—tinged underneath with a faint blush of its own deep colour.

She looked at the yellow, red, and pink flowers in her basket, and said, "There's no white." Now white roses are often papery, but there was at least one in the garden worthy of being grouped with the beauties in the basket. It was The Bride, typical, in its snowy chastity and by reason of a pale green tint at the base of its petals, of that purity and innocence which are the bride's best dowry.

Rose cut a dozen long-stemmed flowers from this lovely bush, and then—whether it was because of the sentiment conveyed by the blooms she had gathered, or the effect of the landscape, is a mystery unsolved—her eyes wandered from the garden to the far-off hills. With the richly-laden basket on her arm, she gazed at the blue haze which hung over mountain and forest. Regardless of her pleasant occupation, forgetful that the fragrant flowers in the basket would wither in the glaring sun, she stood, looking sadly at the landscape, as though in a dream.

What were her thoughts? Perhaps of the glorious work of the Master-Builder; perhaps of the tints and shades where the blue of the forest, the brown of the fern-clad foot-hills, the buff of the sun-dried grass, mottled the panorama which lay spread before her. But if so, why did she sigh? Does the contour of a hill suffuse the eye? Not a hundred-thousand hills could in themselves cause a sob, not even the gentle sob which amounted to no more than a painful little catch in Rose's creamy throat.

She was standing on the top of the bank, which was surmounted by a white fence; her knee resting on the garden-seat upon which she had placed her basket, whilst in reverie her spirit was carried beyond the blue mountains. But there appeared behind her the bulky form of her father, who walked in carpet slippers upon the gravel of the path.

"Rosebud, my gal." The stentorian tones of the old sailor's voice woke her suddenly from her day-dream. "There's a party in the parlour waitin' the pleasure of your company, a party mighty anxious for to converse with a clean white woman by way of a change."

The girl quickly took up her flowers.

"Who can it possibly be, father?"

"Come and see, my gal; come and see."

The old fellow went before, and his daughter followed him into the house. There, in the parlour, seated at the table, was Captain Sartoris.

Rose gave way to a little exclamation of surprise and pleasure; and was advancing to greet her visitor, when he arrested her with a gesture of his hand.

"Don't come too nigh, Miss Summerhayes," he said, with mock gravity. "I might ha' got the plague or the yaller fever. A man out o' currantine is to be approached with caution. Jest stand up agin' the sideboard, my dear, and let me look at you." The girl put down her roses, and posed as desired.

"Very pretty," said Sartoris. "Pink-and-white, pure bred, English—which, after being boxed in with a menag'ry o' Chinamen and Malays, is wholesome and reassuring."

"Are you out for good, Captain?"

"They can put me aboard who can catch me, my dear. I'd run into the bush, and live like a savage. I'm not much of a mountaineer, but you would see how I could travel."

"But what was the disease?" asked the Pilot.

"Some sort of special Chinese fever; something bred o' dirt and filth and foulness; a complaint you have to live amongst for weeks, before you'll get it; a kind o' beri-beri or break-bone, which was new to the doctors here. I've been disinfected and fumigated till I couldn't hardly breathe. Races has their special diseases, just the same as they has their special foods: this war'n't an English sickness; all its characteristics were Chinee, and it killed the Captain because he'd lived that long with Chinamen that, I firmly believe, his pigtail had begun to shoot. Furrin crews, furrin crews! Give me the British sailor, an' I'll sail my ship anywhere."

"And run her on the rocks, at the end of the voyage," growled the Pilot.

"I never came ashore to argify," retorted the Captain. "But if it comes to a matter of navigation, there *are* points I could give any man, even pilots."

Seeing that the bone of contention was about to be gnawed by the sea-dogs, Rose interposed with a question.

"Have you just come ashore, Captain?"

"In a manner o' speakin' he has," answered her father, who took the words out of his friend's mouth, "and in a manner o' speakin' he hasn't. You see, my dear, we went for a little preliminary

cruise."

"The first thing your father told me was about this here robbery of mails. 'When was that?' I asked. 'On the night of the 8th or early morning of the 9th,' he says. That was when the captain of the barque died. I remembered it well. 'Summerhayes,' I said, 'I have a notion.' And this is the result, my dear."

From the capacious pocket of his thick pilot-jacket he pulled a brown and charred piece of canvas.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I haven't the least idea," replied Rose.

"Does it look as though it might be a part of a mail-bag?" asked Sartoris. "Look at the sealing-wax sticking to it. Now look at *that*." He drew from the deep of another pocket a rusty knife.

"It was found near the other," he said. "Its blade was open. And what's that engraved on the name-plate?—your eyes are younger than mine, my dear." The sailor handed the knife to Rose, who read the name, and exclaimed, "B. Tresco!"

"That's what the Pilot made it," said Sartoris. "And it's what I made it. We're all agreed that B. Tresco, whoever he may be, was the owner of that knife. Now this is evidence: that knife was found in conjunction with this here bit of brown canvas, which I take to be part of a mail-bag; and the two of 'em were beside the ashes of a fire, above high water-mark. On a certain night I saw a fire lighted at that spot: that night was the night the skipper of the barque died and the night when the mails were robbed. You see, when things are pieced together it looks bad for B. Tresco."

"I know him quite well," said Rose: "he's the goldsmith. What would he have to do with the delivery of mails?"

"Things have got this far," said the Pilot. "The postal authorities say all the bags weren't delivered on board. They don't accuse anyone of robbery as yet, but they want the names of the boat's crew. These Mr. Crookenden says he can't give, as the crew was a special one, and the man in charge of the boat is away. But from the evidence that Sartoris has brought, it looks as if Tresco could throw light on the matter."

"It's for the police to take the thing up," said Sartoris. "I'm not a detective meself; I'm just a plain sailor—I don't pretend to be good at following up clues. But if the police want this here clue, they can have it. It's the best one of its kind I ever come across: look at it from whatever side you please. It's almost as perfect a clue as you could have, if you had one made to order. A policeman that couldn't follow up that clue——'Tresco' on the knife, and, alongside of it, the bit of mail-bag—why, he ought to be turned loose in an unsympathising world, and break stones for a living. It's a beautiful clue. It's a clue a man can take a pride in; found all ready on the beach; just a-waitin' to be picked up, and along comes a chuckle-headed old salt and grabs it. Now, that clue ought to be worth a matter of a hundred pound to the Government. What reward is offered, Pilot?"

"There's none, as I'm aware of," answered Summerhayes. "But if the post-master is a charitable sort of chap, he might be inclined to recommend, say, fifty; you bein' a castaway sailor in very 'umble circumstances. I'll see what I can do. I'll see the Mayor."

"Oh, you will!" exclaimed Sartoris. "You'd better advertise: 'Poor, distressed sailor. All contributions thankfully received.' No, sir, don't think you can pauperise *me*. A man who can find a clue like that"—he brought the palm of his right hand down with a smack upon the table, where Tresco's knife lay—"a man who can find that, sir, can make his way in any community!"

Just at that moment there were heavy footsteps upon the verandah, and a knocking at the front door.

Rose, who was sitting near the window, made a step or two towards the passage, but the old Pilot, who from where he stood could see through the glass of the front door, forestalled her, and she seated herself opposite the skipper and his clues.

"So you think of visiting the police sergeant?" she asked, by way of keeping up the conversation.

But the skipper's whole attention was fixed on the voices in the next room, into which the Pilot had conducted his visitor.

"H'm," said Sartoris, "I had an idea I knew the voice, but I must have been mistaken. Who is the party, Miss Rose?"

"I haven't the slightest clue," replied the girl, smiling. "Father has such a number of strange friends in the port that I've long given up trying to keep count of them. They come at all hours, about all sorts of things."

The words were hardly out of her mouth, when the Pilot, wearing a most serious expression of face, entered the room.

"Well, well," he said, "well, well. Who'd ha' thought it? Dear, dear. Of all the extraordinary things! Now, Cap'n Sartoris, if you'd 'a' asked *me*, I'd 'a' said the thing was impossible, impossible. Such things goes in streaks, and his, to all intents and purposes, was a bad 'n; and

then it turns out like this. It's most remarkable, most extraordinary. It's beyond me. I don't fathom it."

"What the deuce an' all are you talkin' about, Summerhayes?" Sartoris spoke most deprecatingly. "A man would think you'd buried a shipmate, or even lost your ship."

"Eh? What?" the Pilot thundered. "Lost my ship? No, no. I've bin wrecked in a fruiter off the coast of Sardinia, an' I've bin cast away on the island of Curacoa, but it was always in another man's vessel. No, sir, *I* never failed to bring the owners' property safe into port. Any fool can run his ship on shore, and litter her cargo along half-a-mile of sea coast."

"We've heard that argyment before," said Sartoris. "We quite understand—you couldn't do such a thing if you tried. You're a most exceptional person, and I'm proud to know you; but what's this dreadful thing that's redooced you to such a state of bad temper, that your best friends 'd hardly know you? I ask you that, Summerhayes. Is it anything to do with these clues that's on the table?"

"Clues be ——!" It is sad to relate that the Pilot of Timber Town was about to use a strong expression, which only the presence of his daughter prevented. "Come out of that room there," he roared. "Come, an' show yourself."

There was a heavy tread in the passage, and presently there entered the room a very shabby figure of a man. A ruddy beard obscured his face; his hair badly needed cutting; his boots were dirty and much worn; his hands bore marks of hard work, but his eyes were bright, and the colour of his cheek was healthy, and for all the noise he made as he walked there was strength in his movements and elasticity in his steps.

Without a word of introduction, he held out his hand to Miss Summerhayes, who took it frankly.

Captain Sartoris had risen to his feet.

"How d'y do, sir," he said, as he shook hands. "I hope I see you well, sir. Have you come far, or do you live close handy?"

"I've come a matter of twenty miles or so to-day," said the tall stranger.

"Farming in the bush, I suppose," said Sartoris. "Very nice occupation, farming, I should think." He closely eyed the ragged man. "Or perhaps you fell down a precipice of jagged stones which tore you considerable. Anyhow, I'm glad I see you well, sir, *very* glad I see you well."

There was a rumbling noise like the echo of distant thunder reverberating through the hills. Rose and Sartoris almost simultaneously fixed their eyes upon the Pilot.

Summerhayes's huge person was heaving with suppressed merriment, his face was red, and his mouth was shut tight lest he should explode with laughter. But when he saw the two pairs of bewildered eyes staring at him, he burst into a laugh such as made the wooden walls of the house quiver.

Sartoris stood, regarding the Pilot as though he trembled for his friend's senses; and a look of alarm showed itself in Rose's face.

"You don't know him!" cried the Pilot, pulling himself together. But the Titanic laughter again took hold of him, and shook his vast frame. "You've travelled with him, you've sailed with him, you've known him, Sartoris—you've bin shipwrecked with him!" Here the paroxysm seized the Pilot anew; and when it had subsided it left him exhausted and feeble. He sank limply upon the old-fashioned sofa, and said, almost in a whisper, "It's Jack Scarlett, and you didn't know him; Jack Scarlett, back from the diggings, with his swag full of gold—and you thought him a stranger."

It was now the turn of Rose and the skipper to laugh. Jack, who up to this point had kept a straight face, joined his merriment to theirs, and rushing forward they each shook him by the hand again, but in a totally different manner from that of their former greeting.

Out of his "jumper" the fortunate digger pulled a long chamois-leather bag, tied at the neck with a boot-lace. Taking a soup-plate from the sideboard, he emptied the contents of the bag into it, and before the astonished eyes of the onlookers lay a heap of yellow gold.

They stared, and were speechless.

From about his waist Scarlett untied a long leather belt, which proved to be lined with gold. But the soup-plate would hold no more, and so the lucky digger poured the residue in a heap upon the polished table. Next, he went out to the verandah, and undoing his swag, he returned with a tin canister which had been wrapped in his blankets. This also was full of gold, and taking off its lid, he added its contents to the pile upon the table.

"And there's some left in camp," he said. "I couldn't carry it all to town."

"Well, well," said Sartoris, "while I've been boxed up in that stinking plague-ship, I might ha' been on God A'mighty's earth, picking up stuff like this. Well, well, what luck!"

"There must be a matter o' two thousand pound," said the Pilot. "Two thousand pound!"

"More," said Jack. "There should be about 800 ozs., valued at something like £3000; and this is the result of but our first washing-up."

“Good lord, what luck!” exclaimed the Pilot. “As I always have said, it comes in streaks. Now, Jack, here, has had his streak o’ bad luck, and now he’s got into a new streak, and it’s so good that it’s like to turn him crazy before he comes to the end of it. If you want to know the real truth about things, ask an old sailor—he won’t mislead you.”

But all that Rose said was, “How nice it must be to meet with such success.”

“By George, I was almost forgetting our bargain,” exclaimed Scarlett. He took from his pocket a little linen bag, which he handed to Rose. “Those are the nuggets you wanted—glad to be able to keep my promise.”

The girl untied the neck of the small bag, and three heavy pieces of gold tumbled on the table.

“I can’t take them,” she exclaimed. “They’re worth too much. I can’t make any adequate return.”

“I hope you won’t try. Pilot, she *must* take them.”

“Take ’em? Of course. Why, Rosebud, his luck would leave him to-morrer, if you was to stop him keeping his promise. You’re bound to take ’em.”

Rose weighed the bits of virgin gold in the palm of her little hand.

“Of course, I never really meant you to give me any of your gold,” she said. “I only spoke in joke.”

“Then it’s a joke I should make pretty often, if I were you,” said Sartoris. “You don’t seem to know when you’re well off.”

“I take it under compulsion; hoping that you’ll find so much more that you won’t feel the loss of this.”

“There’s no fear of that,” said Jack. “As for repayment, I hope you won’t mention it again.”

“I’ll have to give it you in good wishes.”

The basket of roses stood on the table. Jack looked at the beautifully blended colours, and stooped to smell the sweet perfume. “I’ll take one of these,” he said, “—the one you like the best.”

The girl took a bud of La Rosiere, dark, velvety, fragrant, perfect. “I’m in love with them all,” she said, “but this is my favourite.”

She handed the bud to Jack, who put it in the button-hole of his worn and shabby coat.

“Thanks,” he said, “I’m more than repaid.”

Sartoris burst out laughing.

“Don’t you feel a bit in the way, Summerhayes?” he said. “I do. When these young things exchange love-tokens, it’s time we went into the next room.”

“No,” laughed the Pilot, “we won’t budge. The gal gets twenty-pound worth of gold, and offers a rose in return. It’s a beautiful flower, no doubt; but how would a slice of mutton go, after ‘damper’ and ‘billy’ tea? Rosebud, my gal, go and get Mr. Scarlett something to eat.”

Joining in the laugh, Rose went into her kitchen, and Jack commenced to pack up his gold, in order that the table might be laid for dinner.

But if you come to think of it, there may have been a great deal in his request, and even more in the girl’s frank bestowal.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Foundation of the Gold League.

Mr. Crewe sat in the Timber Town Club with his satellite, Cathro, beside him. The old gentleman was smoking a well-seasoned briar pipe, from which he puffed clouds of smoke contemplatively, as he watched the gesticulations of a little man who was arguing with a gentleman who wore riding-breeches and leggings.

“I tell you, sir,” said the little man, “that there is not the vestige of proof that the mails were stolen, not the slightest scintilla of truth in the suspicion.”

“Then what became of them?” asked the other, as he fixed a gold horse-shoe pin more securely in his tie.

“What became of them?” exclaimed the little man. “They were washed overboard, washed overboard and lost.”

“But,” said the man of horses, “I happened to be riding home late that night, and, I assure you, there was not a breath of wind; the sea was as smooth as glass.”

“That might be,” retorted the little man, who was now pacing up and down in front of his adversary in a most excited fashion. “That might be, but there is a lot of surge and swell about a steamer, especially in the neighbourhood of the screw, and it is very possible, I may say highly probable, that the missing bags were lost as the mail was being passed up the side.”

“But how would that affect the incoming mail?” asked the other. “Did that drop over the side, too?”

“No, sir,” said the diminutive man, drawing himself up to his full height. “There is nothing to prove that the incoming mail was anything but complete. We are honest people in Timber Town, sir. I do not believe we have in the entire community men capable of perpetrating so vile a crime.” He turned to the Father of Timber Town for corroboration. “I appeal to you, Mr. Crewe; to you, sir, who have known the town from its inception.”

Mr. Crewe drew his pipe from his mouth, and said, with great deliberation, “Well, that is, ah—that is a very difficult question. I may say that though Timber Town is remarkably free from crime, still I have known rascals here, and infernal dam’ rascals, too.”

The little man fairly bristled with indignation at this remark. He was about to refute the stigma laid on his little pet town, when the door opened and in walked Scarlett, dressed still in his travel-stained clothes, and with his beard unshorn.

His appearance was so strange, that the little argumentative man believed an intruder, of low origin and objectionable occupation, had invaded the sacred precincts of his club.

“I beg your pardon, but what does this mean, sir?” he asked; immense importance in his bearing, gesture, and tone. “You have made some mistake, sir. I should like to know if your name has been duly entered in the visitors’ book, and by whom, sir?”

Taking no notice of these remarks, Jack walked straight across the room, and held out his hand to Mr. Crewe. The white-haired old gentleman was on his feet in a moment. He took the proffered hand, and said, with a politeness which was as easy as it was natural, “What is it I can do for you, sir? If you will step this way, we can talk quite comfortably in the ante-room.”

Jack laughed. “I don’t believe you know me,” he said.

“’Pon my honour, you’re right. I don’t,” said Mr. Crewe.

Jack laughed again, a thing which in a non-member almost caused the pompous little man to explode with indignation.

“I’m the fellow, you know, who went to look for the new gold-field,” said Jack, “and by the lord! I’ve found it.”

“Scarlett! Is it you?” exclaimed old Mr. Crewe. “You have got it? My dear sir, this is good news; this is excellent news! You have found the new gold-field? This is really remarkable, this is indeed most fortunate! This is the happiest day I have seen for a long while!”

“Eh? What? what?” said Cathro, who was on his feet too. “Is it rich?”

“Rich?” said Jack. Taking a bank deposit-receipt from his pocket, he handed it to Cathro.

“Good God!” cried he, eyeing the figures on the paper, “it’s a fortune.”

Mr. Crewe had his gold spectacles upon his nose and the paper in his hand in a moment. “Three thousand one hundred and eighty-seven pounds!” he exclaimed. “Well, well, that is luck! And where’s your mate, Scarlett? Where is Moonlight?”

“He’s on the claim.”

“On the claim? Then there’s still gold in sight?”

“We’ve but scratched the surface,” said Jack. “This is only the foretaste of what’s to come.”

The important little man, who had eagerly listened to all that had been said, was hovering round the group, like an excited cock sparrow.

“Really!” he exclaimed, “this is most interesting, very interesting indeed. A remarkable event, Mr. Crewe, a most remarkable event. Do me the honour, sir, to introduce me to your friend.”

“Mr. Tonks, Scarlett,” said the old gentleman. “Allow me to introduce Mr. Tonks.”

Jack greeted the little man politely, and then turning to Cathro, said, “We’ve pegged off four men’s claims; so, Cathro, you’ll have to turn digger, and go back with me to the field.”

“But my dear sir,” replied Cathro, whose shrivelled form betokened no great physical strength, “my dear Scarlett, am I to do pick-and-shovel work? Am I to trundle a barrow? Am I to work up to my waist in water, and sleep in a tent? My dear sir, I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed.”

Scarlett threw back his head, and laughed. “Oh, that’s nothing,” he said. “It’s the getting there with a 70lb. swag on your back that’s the trouble. The country is a mass of ranges; the bush is as thick as a jungle, and there’s nothing but a blazed track to go by. But your claim is waiting for you. What do you intend doing with it?”

The attenuated Cathro sank on a couch despairingly. “I think I’ll sell it,” he said. “I’ll sell it to Tonks here, I’ll sell it for £1000 down, and be content with small profits and quick returns.”

The little man, important that he should be referred to as good for so substantial an amount, strutted up and down, like a bantam on whom the eyes of the fowl-yard rested. However, the gentleman, dressed for riding, was beforehand with him.

“It’s an open offer, I suppose,” he said.

“Certainly,” replied Cathro. “I don’t care who gets my claim, so long as I get the money.”

“Then it’s concluded,” said the horsey man. “I buy the claim.”

“Done,” said Cathro. “The matter is closed. The claim is yours. Now, that’s how I like to do business; just a straight offer and a prompt acceptance. Scarlett, this is Mr. Chesterman. He takes my place. You can take him over the ranges and along the blazed track: no doubt, you’ll find him a better bushman than myself. Chesterman is accustomed to carry a 70lb. swag; he’ll make an excellent beast of burden. I wish you luck, Chesterman.”

“But don’t you think,” said Mr. Crewe, turning to the horsey man, “don’t you think you’re rather hasty in buying for such a large sum a property you have never seen?”

“I’ve been on several gold-fields,” said Chesterman, “and I have had good luck on all of them. My method has always been to act on the first information of a discovery. A field is always richest at the beginning of the rush, and I know by experience that the picked claims, on a new field that yields such results as this does on the first washing, are worth having. I start to-morrow. Is it possible to get a horse through?”

“No,” replied the pioneer, “not the slightest chance of it. Until a track is cut, it will be quite impossible; but if you’re good in the bush you can follow the blaze, when once you have struck it.”

At this moment, there entered the room a very imposing person. He was quite six feet high, and broad in proportion; his frank and open face was adorned with a crisp, gold-coloured beard. He was dressed in a rough, grey, tweed suit, and carried a newspaper in his hand. Big men are not usually excitable, but the blue eyes of this Hercules were ablaze with suppressed emotion. In a voice that sounded like a cathedral bell, he said, without preface or introduction, so that the room rang again, “Listen. ‘Gold discovery in the Eastern ranges. There has arrived in town a lucky digger who is said to have sold, this morning, some 800 ounces of gold to the Kangaroo Bank. It is understood that the precious metal came from a new gold-field on Bush Robin Creek, which lies somewhere Eastward of the Dividing Range. From accounts received, it would appear that a field of unequalled richness has been opened up, and that a phenomenal rush to the new El Dorado will shortly set in. All holders of Miners’ Rights are entitled to peg off claims.’ Gentlemen, I have been to the Kangaroo Bank,” continued the giant, “and I have seen the gold myself. It is different from any sold here hitherto, barring some 70 ounces, which were brought in a few weeks ago, from the same locality. So, you see, we have had a gold rush created at our very doors. I propose that all the men present form themselves into a committee to wait upon the local representative of the Minister for Mines—that, I take it, would be the Commissioner for Lands—and urge the construction of a graded track to the new field.”

“A very good suggestion,” said Mr. Crewe, “a very good suggestion. For if you want to get these Government people to do anything, by Jupiter, you need to commence early. We’ll go along, if you are willing, gentlemen; we’ll go in a body to the Red Tape Office, and see what can be done. But before we go, let us drink the health of Mr. Scarlett, here. He has done remarkably well in bringing this discovery to light, and I ask you to drink to his continued good luck, at my expense, gentlemen, entirely at my expense.”

The steward of the club, a thin, dark man, with black eyes which were watchful and merry, went quietly round the room, which was now filled with men, and took their orders. Then he disappeared.

“I think, gentlemen,” continued Mr. Crewe, “that, as the oldest colonist present, I may be allowed to express an opinion. I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that I have watched the development of many gold-fields in my time, and have benefited by not a few; and, gentlemen, from the description given by our friend, here, this new field is likely to prove the richest of them all. By far the best thing is for the younger men amongst us to go and prove the thing. I should recommend a party being formed under the guidance of Mr. Scarlett, and that it should start as soon as possible. I would go myself if I were a few years younger, and I *will* go so soon as the track is cut. I shall see the field myself. But I am really too old to contend with supple-jacks and ‘lawyers’ and the thick undergrowth of the bush. I should only be in your way. I should only be a nuisance.”

The quick-eyed steward, who, by a method of memory known only to himself, had retained in his mind the correct list of the strange and various liquors ordered, now appeared with a gigantic tray, on which he bore a multitude of glasses. These he deftly handed round, and then all present rose to their feet.

“Mr. Scarlett,” said the Father of Timber Town. “I ask you to drink his health and continued good luck.”

The ceremony over, Jack stood up.

“It’s awfully good of you,” he said, “to give me the credit of this new ‘find,’ but as a matter of fact I have had little to do with it. The real discoverer is the man who came in from the bush, some six weeks ago, and painted the town red. After doing him justice, you should pay your respects to my mate, Moonlight, who is more at home in the bush than he is in town. To him you owe the declaration of the new field. I shall be returning in a day or two, and I shall be glad to take with me any of you who care to come. I promise you a rough journey, but there is good gold at the end of it.”

He raised his glass to his lips, drained it, and sat down.

“We must organise,” said the giant who had read from the newspaper, “we must form ourselves into some sort of a company, for mutual strength and support.”

The notion of so big a man calling upon his fellows for help did not seem to strike anybody as peculiar, if not pathetic.

“Chair, chair,” cried the pompous Mr. Tonks. “I propose that Mr. Crewe be placed in the chair.”

“Hear, hear.”

“Unity is strength.”

“Limited liability——”

“Order! ORDER!”

“Let me have my say.”

“Sit down, old fellow; nobody wants to hear you.”

Amid this babel of voices, old Mr. Crewe rose, and waited for the attention of his audience.

When every eye was riveted on him, he said, “Though I discerned the importance of this discovery, I was not prepared, gentlemen, for the interest you have so warmly expressed. It is a fact that this is the commencement of a new era in the history of Timber Town. We are about to enter upon a new phase of our existence, and from being the centre of an agricultural district, we are to become a mining town with all the bustle and excitement attendant upon a gold rush. Under the mining laws, each of you has as much right as my friend Scarlett, here, to a digger’s claim upon this field, provided only that you each obtain a Miner’s Right and peg off the ground legitimately. But I understand that the desire is to unite for mutual benefit. That is to say, you desire to pool your interests and divide the proceeds. The first thing, then, is for each man to peg off his claim. That done, you can work the properties conjointly under the supervision of a committee, pay the gross takings into a common account, and divide the profits. In this way the owner of a duffer claim participates equally with the owner of a rich one. In other words, there is less risk of failure—I might say, no risk at all—but also much temptation. Such a scheme would be quite impossible except amongst gentlemen, but I should imagine that where men hold honour to be more precious than money, none will risk his good name for a little gold. First, it must be the association of working miners; secondly, a company of gentlemen. Unless a man feels he can comply with these two conditions, he had best stand aside.”

“It would be too late for a man to think of backing out,” interrupted the bearded Hercules, “after he had turned thief by performing the Ananias trick of keeping back part of his gains: that man would probably leave the field quicker than he went, and poorer.”

“Or possibly he might not leave it at all,” interjected Chesterman.

“However that might be,” continued Mr. Crewe, “the object of all present is, I understand, to act in unison. There will be hundreds of diggers on the field before very long, and in many cases claims will be jumped and gold will be stolen, in spite of the Warden and the constabulary. You will be wise, therefore, to co-operate for mutual protection, if for no other reason.”

“Name, title?”

“What shall the association be called?”

A dozen names were suggested by as many men. Some were offered in jest, some in earnest; but none met with approval. When the tempest of voices was past, Mr. Crewe said, “The association must have a name; certainly, it must have a name. It is not to be a company, registered under the Act. It is not to be a syndicate, or a trust. It is simply a league, composed of gentlemen who intend to stand beside each other, and divide the profits of their enterprise. If you cannot consolidate your claims, you must work them individually. I shall therefore suggest that you call yourselves The Timber Town Gold League. Your articles of agreement can be drawn up in half-an-hour, and you can all sign them before you leave this room.” Here Scarlett whispered to Mr. Crewe, who scrutinised his hearers, and then said, “To be sure; certainly. Whilst Bulstrode, here, who is a lawyer and should know his business, is drawing up the document, Scarlett asks you to drink to the prosperity of the new league.”

The suggested ceremony necessitated more speeches, but when they were finished the lawyer read the articles of association. Strangely enough, they were devoid of legal technicalities, and consisted of four clearly-worded clauses, destitute of legal fiction, to which all present readily

subscribed their names.

That done, they drank to the prosperity of The Timber Town Gold League.

CHAPTER XXII.

Women's Ways.

Scarlett had a day upon his hands while his gold-seeking *confreres* of the League made their preparations for the journey to Bush Robin Creek. To loiter about the town meant that he would be pestered with questions regarding the locality of the new "field," which, until his friends' "claims" were pegged off, it was desirous to keep secret. He decided, therefore, to re-visit the scene of the wreck of *The Mersey Witch*.

On a mount, lent him by Chesterman, he was on his way to the Maori *pa*, before the town was stirring. The road, which he had never traversed before, wound its tortuous way along the shore for some eight miles, and then struck inland across the neck of a wooded peninsula, on the further side of which the rugged and rocky shore was fringed with virgin forest. He had reached the thick and shady "bush" which covered the isthmus, where the dew of the morning still lay cool on leaf and frond, and the great black boles of the forest giants stood sentinel amid the verdant undergrowth, when he overtook a girl who was walking towards the *pa*.

Her dress was peculiar; she wore a short Maori mat over her shoulders, and a blue petticoat fell from waist to ankle, while her head and feet were bare.

Jack reined in his horse, and asked if he was on the road which led to the *pa*, when the girl turned her merry, brown face, with its red lips and laughing, brown eyes, and said in English as good as his own, "Good morning. Yes, this is the road to the *pa*. Why, you were the last person I expected to see." She held up her hand to him, to greet him in European fashion.

"Amiria!" he exclaimed. "How *are* you? It's quite appropriate to meet you here—I'm on my way to the wreck, to see how the old ship looks, if there is anything of her left. How far is it to the *pa*?"

"About two miles."

"What brings you so far, at this time of the morning?"

"You passed a settler's house, half-a-mile back."

"Yes, a house built of slabs."

"I have been there to take the woman some fish—our people made a big haul this morning."

Jack dismounted, and, hooking his arm through the bridle, he walked beside the Maori girl.

"Why didn't you ride, Amiria?"

"My horse is turned out on the hills at the back of the *pa*, and it's too much trouble to bring him in for so short a ride. Besides, the walk won't hurt me: if I don't take exercise I shall lose my figure." She burst into a merry laugh, for she knew that, as she was then dressed, her beauty depended on elasticity of limb and sweetness of face rather than upon shape and fashion.

"I'll show you the wreck," she said. "It lies between us and the *pa*. It looks a very harmless place in calm weather with the sun shining on the smooth sea. The tide is out, so we ought to be able to reach the wreck without swimming."

They had come now to the edge of the "bush," and here Scarlett tied his horse to the bough of a tree; and with Amiria he paced the soft and sparkling sands, to which the road ran parallel.

The tide was low, as the girl had said, and the jagged rocks on which the bones of the ship lay stranded, stood black and prominent above the smooth water. The inner reefs were high and dry, and upon the slippery corrugations of the rocks, covered with seaweed and encrusted with shell-fish, the two walked; the Maori girl barefooted and agile, the Englishman heavily shod and clumsy.

Seeing the difficulty of Scarlett's advance, Amiria held out her hand to him, and so linked they approached the sea. A narrow belt of water separated them from the reef on which the wreck lay, and to cross this meant immersion.

"The tide is not as low as I thought," said Amiria. "At low spring-tide you can walk, almost dry-shod, to the other side."

"I'm afraid we can't reach it without a ducking," said Scarlett.

"But you can swim?"

Scarlett laughed. "It's hardly good enough to ride home in wet clothes." He divined Amiria's meaning, but pretended otherwise.

Then she laughed, too. "But I have a plan," she said. Without a word more, she threw off her flax

cape and dropped into the water. A few strokes and she had reached the further reef. “It will be all right,” she cried, “I think I can ferry you across on a raft.”

She walked over the sharp rocks as though her feet were impervious, and clambering through a great rent in the vessel’s side, she disappeared.

When next Jack caught sight of her she was perched on the top of the battered poop, whence she called, “I’ll roll a cask over the rocks, and get you across. There’s a big chest in the saloon that belongs to you.”

She disappeared again, and when Jack next saw her, she was rolling a huge barrel with difficulty towards the channel.

“It’s a quarter-full of sand,” she cried, “and when you stand it on its end it is ballasted. You’ll be able to come over quite dry.”

Launching the cask, she pushed it before her as she swam, and soon clambered up beside Scarlett.

“It’s bunged, I see,” said he.

“I did it with a piece of wood,” said she.

Then, booted and spurred, Jack placed himself cross-legged on the cask, and so was ferried across the intervening strip of water.

The main deck of the vessel was washed away, but the forecastle and poop remained more or less intact. The ship, after settling on the rock, had broken her back, and the great timbers, where the copper sheathing and planks had been torn away, stood up like naked ribs supporting nothing.

Walking upon an accumulation of sand and debris, the Maori girl and Jack passed from the hold to what was left of the main deck, and entered the saloon. All the gilding and glory had departed. Here a cabin door lay on the floor, there the remains of the mahogany table lay broken in a corner. A great sea-chest, bearing Scarlett’s name upon its side, stood in the doorway that led to the captain’s cabin. Full of sand, the box looked devoid of worth and uninviting, but Scarlett, quickly taking a piece of board, began to scoop out the sodden contents. As he stooped, a ray of sunlight pierced the shattered poop-deck and illumined his yellow hair. Attracted by the glitter, Amiria put out her hand and stroked his head.

Jack looked up.

“Isn’t that a bit familiar?” he asked.

Amiria laughed. “Not from the girl who saved you. If I hadn’t pulled you out of the water, it might seem a great thing to touch you, but I know you so well that really it doesn’t matter.”

Jack buried his head in the chest. This relationship between preserver and preserved was new to him: he hardly knew what to make of it. But the humour of the situation dawned on him, and he laughed.

“By George, I’m at your mercy,” he said, and, standing up, with his back still towards her, he laughed again. “You’ve appropriated me, just as your people appropriated the contents of this box and the rest of the wreckage. You’ll have to be put in charge of the police for a little thief.” And again his laugh rang through the ruined saloon.

Remarking that the girl made no reply to this sally, he glanced towards her, to find that she had turned her back upon him and was sobbing in a corner. Leaving his task of clearing out the sea-chest, he went towards her, and said, “I’m awfully sorry, Amiria, if I’ve said anything that hurt your feelings. I really didn’t mean to.” He had yet to learn that a Maori can bear anything more easily than laughter which seems to be derisive.

As the girl continued to cry, he placed his hand upon her shoulder. “Really, Amiria, I meant nothing. I would be the last person on earth to hurt your feelings. I don’t forget what I owe you. I can never repay you. If I have been clumsy, I ask your pardon.” He held up her head, and looked into her tear-stained face. “You’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

The girl, her still untutored nature half-hidden beneath a deceptive covering of *Pakeha* culture, broke into a torrent of Maori quite unintelligible to the white man, but as it ended in a bright smile bursting out from behind her tears, he knew that peace was made.

“Thank you,” he said; “we’re friends again.”

In a moment, she had thrown her arms about him and had burst into a rhapsody in her native tongue, and, though he understood not one word of it, he knew intuitively that it was an expression of passionate affection.

The situation was now more awkward than before. To rebuff her a second time would be to break his word and wound her more deeply than ever. So he let this new burst of feeling spend itself, and waited for her to return to her more civilised self.

When she did, she spoke in English. “You mustn’t judge me by the *Pakeha* girls you know. My people aren’t like yours—we have different ways. White girls are cold and silent when they feel most—I know them: I went to school with them—but *we* show our feelings. Besides, I have a

claim on you which no white girl has. No white girl would have pulled you out of the surf, as I did. And if I showed I cared for you then, why shouldn't I show it now? Perhaps the *Pakeha* would blame me, but I can't always be thinking of your *ritenga*. In the town I do as the white woman does; out here I follow the Maori *ritenga*. But whichever *ritenga* it is, I love you; and if you love me in return, I am the happiest girl in the *kainga*."

Scarlett gave a gasp. "Ah—really, I wasn't thinking of marrying—yet."

Amiria smiled. "You don't understand," she said. "But never mind; if you love me, that's all right. We will talk of marrying by and by."

Scarlett stood astonished. His mind, trained in the strict code of a sternly-proper British parish, failed to grasp the fact that a Maori girl regards matters of the heart from the standpoint of a child of Nature; having her code of honour, it is true, but one which is hardly comprehended by the civilised *Pakeha*.

Jack felt he was standing upon the dizzy abyss that leads to loss of caste. There was no doubt of Amiria's beauty, there was no doubt of her passionate affection, but there was a feeling at the back of his mind that his regard for her was merely a physical attraction. He admired every curve of her supple shape, he felt his undying gratitude go out to the preserver of his life, but that was all. Yet a weakness was stealing over him, that weakness which is proportionate usually to the large-heartedness of the individual.

Suddenly relinquishing Amiria's clasp, he went to the broken port-hole of a dilapidated cabin and looked out upon the incoming sea.

"We must be quick," he cried, "or we shall be caught by the tide."

"What matter?" said the girl, lazily. "I have stayed here a whole night when the sea was not as calm as it is now."

"But I have to get back to town—I start for the gold-fields to-morrow, before daylight."

"Why do you go to the stupid gold-fields? Isn't there everything a man wants here? The *pa* is full of food—you shall want for nothing."

"I suppose it is the *Pakeha* way to want to grow rich. Come along."

He clambered down to where the broken keelson lay, and regained the rocks. Amiria followed him slowly, as though reluctant to leave the scene of her confession, but presently she stood beside him on the slippery seaweed.

He led the way to where the barrel lay floating in the rising tide. That the ignominy of being ferried by a girl might not be repeated, he had brought from the wreck a piece of board with which to propel himself.

Perceiving his intention so soon as he was sitting cross-legged on the top of his strange craft, Amiria dashed into the water, seized the improvised oar, and threatened to drag it from his grasp.

"I'll take you across myself," she almost screamed. "Why should you think I don't want to take you back?"

"All right," said Jack, dropping his piece of wood, "have it your own way. I hand myself over to you, but let us get across quickly."

Again the Englishman felt how mean are the conventions of the white man, how petty his propriety; again the Maori girl felt nothing but pleasure and pride in the part she played.

When they reached the further side, Amiria picked up her mat and threw it over her glistening shoulders, and Scarlett floundered over the slippery rocks towards the beach.

"You'll come to the *pa*?"

"You're too kind. I must get back to town."

"But you've had nothing to eat."

"I have my lunch in my wallets."

Amiria's face fell. "You're very unkind," she said.

"I'll stay all day, next time I come."

"When will that be?"

"As soon as I can. Ah, here's my horse, under this birch tree. Well, good-bye, Amiria. Thank you for taking charge of me to-day. My word, how you can swim: like a mermaid."

His hand touched hers for a brief moment; the next he was in the saddle. His spur lightly touched the horse's flank, and the springy turf yielded to the iron-shod hooves; there was a waving of a disappearing hand, and the brown girl was left alone.

"You will come back," she called through the leaves.

“I’ll come back.”

Then, slowly, sadly, she walked towards the *pa*, talking to herself in Maori, listless and sorrowful.

By the time that Scarlett had reached the outskirts of Timber Town the night had begun to close in. Leaving the main road, he passed along a by-way to a ford, where a foot-bridge spanned the river. As his horse bent its head to drink, Jack heard a woman scream upon the bridge above him. In a moment he had dismounted, and his heavy boots were resounding on the wooden planks. In the middle of the bridge he came upon a girl struggling in the grasp of a thick-set ruffian, who was dragging her towards the bank further from the town. Grappling with the brutal fellow, Jack released the girl, who ran past him in the direction of the horse.

The scoundrel cursed and kicked, but Jack, who had him by the throat, almost squeezed the life out of him, and then heaved him over the bridge into the dark and gurgling water. Returning to the girl, who was standing at the bridge-head, crying and, seemingly, deprived of power to run further, Scarlett led her to where the horse stood beside the water.

“Which way shall I take you?” he asked.

“I live at the other side of the town,” she replied. “I was going home when that brute met me on the bridge.” Again she lost control of her powers, and Jack was obliged to support her.

When she had recovered, he swung her into the saddle and led the horse across the river.

“I was just in time,” he said. “How do you feel now?”

“Better.”

“It’s lucky I didn’t kill the brute. Do you know who he is?”

“I never saw him before. But I think he’s a digger: lots of them have come into the town since this discovery of gold was made. Oh, I’m *so* frightened! Do you think he will come again?”

“It’s hardly likely. I think he must have had enough trouble for one night.”

“Suppose you have drowned him——”

“There’s no chance of that—the water is only deep enough to break his fall. He’ll be all right.”

“I think I had better get down, if you please: it would be rather an unusual thing to ride through the town in this manner. I think I can walk.”

She slid limply to the ground, and Jack supported her.

“Whom must I thank for helping me?” she asked.

“I’m a digger, too,” said Jack; and he told her his name.

“Are you the man who discovered the new field?”

“Some people give me the credit of it. I start back to-morrow. It was lucky I was crossing that stream when I did. You haven’t told me whom I have had the pleasure of rescuing.”

They were passing a street lamp, and for the first time Jack could see the girl’s face. She was pretty, with black hair, an oval face, and a dark complexion.

“I’m Miss Varnhagen,” she said. “My Dad will be awfully grateful to you.” She looked at her preserver with eyes which expressed all the gratitude that Scarlett could desire.

“I’ll see you safely home,” he said; “and when you tell your father, perhaps he will repay me by letting me see you again.”

“He’ll be only too pleased. He says the town owes you more than it can ever pay you for discovering this gold, which, he says, will mean thousands of pounds to him and the other merchants.”

They passed through the town and paused before a great wooden mansion, painted a light colour, which made it conspicuous even in the dark. Here Rachel said she lived. Between the gate and the house grew a plantation of palms, camellias, and rare shrubs, which were displayed by the lights which shone above the gate and the door.

“Won’t you come in and see my father?”

“Nothing would please me more, but I’m wet, and my horse is tired and needs a feed. Some other time I’ll call and tell your father how pleased I was to be of service to you. Good-night.”

Rachel gave his hand a tender squeeze. “Thanks awf’lly,” she said, looking up at him with seraphic eyes. “Thank you awf’lly much. I think you’re just the nicest man I ever met. Be sure you come to see us when you return. Good-night.” Another tender squeeze of the hand, another affectionate look, and she disappeared among the palms and camellias.

Jack mounted his horse, and rode it to its stables. Then he went to The Lucky Digger, where he changed his clothes and had dinner, after which he directed his steps towards the house of Pilot Summerhayes.

His knock was answered by Rose herself, who conducted him into the quaint dining-room, where, upon the polished table, lay the materials for a dress which she was making, and beside them the hundred-and-one oddments which are necessary for such a task.

“Father’s out. He has gone to fetch a steamer in.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jack. “I should like to see him before I go back to the bush.”

Rose sat silent. She was very demure, and her manner was somewhat stiff; therefore, seeing that his experiences had exhilarated him, Jack said, “I’ve had a great day. Two of the prettiest girls I ever saw almost devoured me.”

“Where have you been, Mr. John Scarlett? You want watching.”

Rose’s bashfulness had entirely disappeared, but she was blushing profusely.

“I went out to see the wreck,” said Jack, “and met your little Maori friend.”

“Your life’s preserver.”

“My life’s preserver. She ferried me across an impassable strip of water on a barrel, and almost captured my heart in the saloon.”

“Don’t play any games with Amiria’s heart, or I shall cut you dead. I tell you that plainly.”

“I assure you I have no intention whatever of playing with Amiria’s heart. It was she who played with mine, and nearly won. But I saved myself by flight. It was fortunate I had a good horse.”

Rose laughed. “One would imagine you were hardly big enough to look after yourself. That’s the kind of young man they generally send out from England. Well?”

“As I was coming home I met a digger molesting another friend of mine, a Miss Varnhagen.”

“You’d better be careful—she’s a flirt.”

“Then I rather like flirts. I threw the digger into the river, and took her home. She has the most lovely eyes I ever saw.”

“And she knows how to use them.”

“You’re jealous, I’m afraid. Wouldn’t you want to look at the man who had saved you from an ugly brute, who met you in the dark on a narrow bridge from which you couldn’t possibly escape?”

“Perhaps. But why don’t you feel a little sentimental over the girl who saved you from a watery grave? You’re callous, I’m afraid, Mr. Scarlett.”

“Not at all: I’m merely flattered. It seems a pity I can’t stop in Timber Town, and see more of such girls; but I must be off to-morrow to get more gold. Gold is good, Miss Summerhayes, but girls are better.”

“Fie, fie. Gold and a good girl—that’s perfection.”

“They always go together—I quite understand that.”

“Now you’re frivolling. You’re making yourself out to be *blasé* and all that. I shall tell my father to forbid you the house.”

“In which case I shall call on Miss Varnhagen.”

“That would be all right—you would meet with the punishment you deserve. Marry the Varnhagen girl, and you will be grey in two years, and bald in five.”

“Well, I’m going to the gold-fields to-morrow.”

“So you said. I hope you will have the same luck as before.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“What more do you want?”

“Any amount.”

“You’ve got gold: you’ve got feminine adoration. What more is there, except more gold?”

“More feminine adoration.”

“I should have thought you had to-day as much affection as is good for you.”

“You’re in high spirits to-night.”

“I am. It’s jolly to think of people succeeding. It’s jolly to know somebody is growing rich, even if my old father and I are poor, that is too poor for me to go to assembly balls and private dances and things like that. So I sit at home and sew, and make puddings, and grow roses. Heigh-ho! I’m very happy, you know.”

Jack looked at her closely. Her cheeks were pink-and-white, her crisp, brown hair formed a becoming setting to her face, and her blue eyes sparkled as they watched him.

“It seems to agree with you,” he said. “I feel inclined to recommend a course of sewing and cooking to all my plain girl-friends.”

“Mr. Scarlett!”

“I mean it.”

“Then go, and tell Rachel Varnhagen to use your recipe.”

“She’s beautiful already.”

Just at this point of the conversation, there was the sound of heavy steps somewhere in a remote part of the house, and presently the Pilot of Timber Town tramped into the room.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed. “Mr. Scarlett! Making love to my dar’ter, when I thought you was on your way to the diggings? Come, come; you’re losing your opportunities; you’re wasting time in gallivanting, when you might be growing rich. There’s great news abroad. They’ve issued a writ against that chap Tresco for the robbery of those mail-bags.”

“Tresco?” said Scarlett.

“Aye, Tresco the goldsmith. He’s wanted by the police.”

“Then I’m afraid they won’t find him,” said Jack. “He’s safe, I reckon.”

“Indeed. How do you know that?”

“He was in the bush with his prospector friend, when I left Bush Robin Creek. But he robbed no mails, bless you, Pilot. What would he want with other people’s letters?”

“I don’t pretend to know. There’s money in mail-bags, I suppose. Perhaps he was after that.”

“He’s after gold, right enough, and he’ll get it, if I’m not mistaken.”

Jack had risen to go.

“We leave early in the morning,” he said. “I must get some sleep. Good-bye, Pilot; good-bye, Miss Summerhayes.”

“Good luck, lad. Come back rich.”

Rose was silent till Jack was near the door. Then she said, “I shall remember your recipe—I shan’t neglect home duties: I shall attend to them regularly.”

Jack laughed, and the Pilot went with him to the front door.

“Eh, lad, there never was such a gal for minding a house. She can make a batter-puddin’ with anyone, and I don’t care who the next is. Good night, lad, good night. There’s never no need to tell her to look after her old father, none at all. And it’s a good test—as good as you can have, Jack, my lad. If a gal looks after her old father well, she’ll look after her husband, too, when he comes along. Good night, Jack; good night. Eh, but you’re in a lucky streak. You’ll die rich, Jack. Good night, Jack; good night.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

Forewarned, Forearmed.

Tresco and the Prospector were eating their “tucker” beneath the boughs of a spreading black-birch. In front of them burned brightly a fire of dead branches, suspended above which was the “billy,” black and battered externally, but full of fragrant tea.

“I shall go home to England,” said Benjamin; his mouth half-filled with cold bacon. “I shall visit my widowed mother, and be the comfort and support of her declining years. There must be over 200 ounces in the tent, and hundreds more in the claim.”

“I ain’t got a widowed mother,” said the Prospector. “*I* shall go into Timber Town and make The Lucky Digger open house—come when you like, have what you like, at the expense of Mr. William Wurcott. That’s my style. I like to see a man free with his dollars.”

They had pegged out their claim at a spot where the corrugations in the rocky bed of the creek stretched from bank to bank and a beach of soft sand spread itself along the water’s edge.

The first “prospect” that they had “panned off” resulted in a return of a couple of ounces. Next they had “fossicked” with sheath-knives in the crevices of the rocks, and had quickly got something more than half a cupful of gold, in shape and size like pumpkin seeds. The day following, they continued to “pan off” the sands in front of their tent; each dish yielding a handsome return. But as Benjamin found this process difficult in his unskilful hands, he directed his attention to looking for new patches. Wading about in the shallows with a dish in one hand and a shovel in the other, he overturned loose bits of rock which he found lying on the sand. Sometimes he would find an ounce or two, sometimes nothing at all; but upon turning over a flat

slab of rock, to raise which needed all his strength, he gave a whoop of delight, for a yellow mass lay glittering in the rippling waters. With a single scoop of his shovel he had won 80 ozs. of gold.

This rich spot was where the water was but two feet deep, and above it and below it gold could be seen shining amongst the sand and gravel. When the cream of the claim, so to speak, had been skimmed off with the tin dish, the men began to set up sluice boxes, by means of which they might work the whole of their ground systematically.

In constructing these boxes they received every help from Moonlight, who lent them tools, and aided them in cutting out the slabs. Left mateless during Scarlett's visit to Timber Town, the veteran miner frequently exchanged his lonely camp for the more congenial quarters of Tresco and the Prospector.

It was during one of the foregatherings round the camp-fire, when Night had spread her sable mantle over the sleeping earth, and only the wakeful wood-hen and the hoarsely-hooting owl stirred the silence of the leafy solitude, that Moonlight was "swapping" yarns with the Prospector. As the flames shot up lurid tongues which almost licked the overhanging boughs, and the men sat, smoking their black tobacco, and drinking from tin pannikins tea too strong for the urban stomach, Bill the Prospector expectorated into the flames, and said:

"The biggest streak o' luck I ever had—barring this present field, you understand—was at the Diamond Gully rush. There weren't no diamonds, but I got over 100 ounces in three days. Gold was more plentiful than flour, and in the police camp there was two safes full of gold belonging to the Bank, which was a twelve by eight tent, in charge of a young feller named Henery. A more trusting young man I never met. When I went to sell my little pile, he had over 12,000 ounces in a old leather boot-trunk in his tent, besides more in a sugar-bag. He'd even filled one of his top-boots with gold, and its feller stood waitin' to receive my contribution. 'Good morning,' I says. 'Are you the boss o' this show?' 'I'm in charge of the Bank,' he says, just as grand as if he was behind a mahog'ny counter with brass fixings. 'Then weigh my pile,' I says, handing over my gold. Then what d'you think he done? 'Just wait till I get my scales,' he says. 'I've lent 'em to the Police Sergeant. Please have the goodness to look after the business while I'm gone.' With that he leaves me in the company of close on £100,000, and never a soul'd have bin the wiser if I'd helped myself to a thousand or two. But the reel digger don't act so—it's the loafers on the diggings gets us a bad name. I've dreamed of it, I've had reg'lar nightmares about it when I've bin stone-broke and without a sixpence to buy a drink."

"What?" said Tresco. "Gold littered about like lumber, and you practically given the office to help yourself? It's wonderful, Bill, what restraint there is in an honest mind! You can't ever have been to Sunday School."

"How d'you know?" asked the Prospector.

"Because, if you'd ha' bin regular to Sunday School when you were a boy, and bin told what a perfect horrible little devil you were, till you believed it, why, you'd ha' stole thousands of pounds from that calico Bank, just to prove such theories true. Now *I* was brought up godly. I was learnt texts, strings of 'em a chain long; I had a red-headed, pimply teacher who just revelled in inbred sin and hell-fire till he made me want to fry him on the school grate. I couldn't ha' withstood your temptation. I'd most certainly have felt justified in taking a few ounces of gold, as payment for keeping the rest intact."

"You're talking nonsense, the two of you," said Moonlight. "To rob on a gold-field means to be shot or, at the very least, gaoled. And when a man's on good gold himself, he doesn't steal other people's. My best luck was on the Rifle River, at a bend called Felix Point. It had a sandy beach where the water was shallow, just like this one here. My mate and I fossicked with a knife and a pannikin, and before the day was over we had between 30 and 40 ounces. The gold lay on a bottom of black sand and gravel which looked like so many eggs. After we'd put up our sluice we got as much as 200 ounces a day, and thought the claim poor when we got no more than fifty."

"I 'xpect you had a rare ole spree when you got to town," said the Prospector. "How much did you divide?"

"Between twenty and thirty thousand," replied Moonlight. "I handed my gold over to the Police escort, and went to town as comfortable as if I was on a turnpike road. I didn't go on the wine—I'm almost a teetotaler. A little red-headed girl got most of my pile—a red-headed girl can generally twist me round her thumb. That must have been ten years ago."

"You've grown older and, perhaps, wiser," interjected Benjamin. "Wonderful thing, age."

"This time I'm going to take a draft on Timbuctoo, or Hong-kong, or some place where red-headed girls are scarce, and see if I can't get away with a little cash."

"Most probably you've got a widowed mother, like me," said Benjamin. "Go, and comfort her declining years. Do like me: wipe out the recollection of the good times you've had by acts of filial piety. A widowed mother is good, but if you can rake up a maiden aunt and keep her too, that'll be a work of supererogation."

"Of how much?" asked Bill.

"It's a word I picked up in my College days—I'm afraid I've forgotten the precise meaning." Benjamin's face lit up with a smile that stretched from ear to ear. He lifted his pannikin to his

lips, nodded to his companions, said, “Here’s luck,” and drank the black tea as though it had been nectar. “That’s the beauty of turning digger,” he continued; “the sobriety one acquires in the bush is phenomenal. If you asked me to name the most virtuous man on this planet, I should say a prospector in the bush—a bishop is nothing to him. But I own that when he goes to town the digger becomes a very devil let loose. Think of the surroundings here—innocent twittering birds, silent arboreous trees, clear pellucid streams, nothing to tempt, nothing to degrade.”

Tresco might have amplified his discourse as fully as a bishop, but that at this point there was a shouting and the noise of dry boughs cracking under advancing feet. In a moment the three men were standing, alert, astonished, in various attitudes of defence.

Moonlight had armed himself with a pick, the Prospector had grasped a shovel, Tresco drew a revolver from inside his “jumper.”

The shouting continued, though nothing could be seen. Then came out of the darkness, “What-ho there, Moonlight! Can’t you give us a hand to cross the river?”

“It’s my mate,” said Moonlight. “I know the voice. Is that you, Scarlett?”

“It’s Scarlett, all right,” called back the voice, “but how am I to cross this infernal river?”

The three men walked to the edge of the water, and peered into the darkness.

“Perfectly safe,” said the Prospector. “She’s barely up to your middle.”

There was a splashing as of some one walking in the water, and presently a dark object was seen wading toward them.

“Now, what the deuce is all this about, Scarlett?” It was Moonlight who thus expressed his wonderment. “The man who travels here at night deserves to get bushed. That you reached camp is just luck.”

“Camp?” replied the dripping Scarlett. “I’ve been waiting for you at *our* camp since nightfall with twenty other devils worse than myself. Don’t you ever sleep in your tent?“

“Of course ’e does,” the Prospector answered for Moonlight, "but mayn’t a digger be neighbourly, and go to see ’is friends?

“Come, and dry yerself by the fire, and have a bit of tucker.”

“But Great Ghost!” exclaimed Moonlight, “all the gold’s in my tent, in the spare billy.”

“Quite safe. Don’t worry,” said Scarlett. “All those twenty men of mine are mounting guard over it, and if one of them stole so much as an ounce, the rest would kill him for breach of contract. That’s the result of binding men to go share and share alike—they watch each other like ferrets.”

Jack took off his clothes, and wrapped in a blanket he sat before the fire, with a pipe in his mouth and a steaming pannikin in his hand.

“Well, happy days!” he said as he drank. “And that reminds me, Tresco—you’re wanted in Timber Town, very badly indeed—a little matter in connection with the mails. ’Seems there’s been peculation of some sort, and for reasons which are as mad as the usual police tactics, the entire force is searching for you, most worthy Benjamin. The yarn goes that you’re a forger in disguise, a counterfeiter of our sovereign’s sacred image and all that, the pilferer of Her Majesty’s mails, a dangerous criminal masquerading as a goldsmith.”

“Holee Smoke!” cried the Prospector. “Look to your gold, gen’lemen—there’s thieves abroad, and one of us may be harbourin’ a serpent unaware. Ben, my lovely pal, consider yourself arrested.”

“Do I understand there’s a writ out?” asked Moonlight, serious, judicial, intensely solemn. “This must be put a stop to instantly. Imagine our virtuous friend in gaol.”

“Anyway, joking apart, the men I have brought know all about it,” said Scarlett. “You’ve got till to-morrow morning to make tracks, Benjamin.”

The goldsmith coughed, and stood up in the full blaze of the fire-light. “I confess to nothing,” he said. “My strong point hasn’t been my piety, I own to that. I’m not much of a hot gospeller. I can’t call to mind any works of unusual virtue perpetrated by me in unthinking moments. I’ll go even so far as this: I’ll acknowledge there are times when, if I let myself off the chain, I’d astonish all Timber Town; for there lurks somewhere inside my anatomy a demon which, let loose, would turn the town into a little hell, but, gentlemen, believe me, he is bound hand and foot, he’s in durance vile. I’m no saint, but I’m no forger or counterfeiter, or animal of that sort—not yet. I have notions sometimes that I’d make a first-class burglar, if I gave my mind thoroughly to the business: I’d go to work in a scientific way; I’d do the business in a workmanlike fashion. I’ve got a strong leaning towards the trade, and yet I never burgled once, I who take a pleasure in investigating locks and latches and all the hundred-and-one contraptions used against thieves. But what is Timber Town?—a trap. The man who goes housebreaking in a little tin-pot place like that deserves to be caught. No, it is too isolated, too solitary, too difficult of egress to foreign parts, is Timber Town. The idea is preposterous, foolish, untenable—excellent word, untenable—and as for forging, the thing is so ridiculous that it isn’t worth confuting. But what’s this about robbing mails? What mails?”

“The incoming English mail,” said Scarlett. “Someone went through the bags before they were delivered.”

“Ah!” said Benjamin, “we must look for the motive in the perpetration of such a crime as that. We’ll grant that the robbery took place—we’ll make that concession. But what was the motive? The thief would expect one of two things—either to enhance his wealth, or to obtain valuable information. Who does the cap fit? Personally, I am as poor as a crow but for this gold: as regards information, all the secrets of the citizens of Timber Town do not interest me—I have no use for scandal—and as I have no rivals in my calling, mere trade secrets have no charm for me. The police are chuckle-heads.” Tresco buried his face in his pannikin, and then re-lit his pipe.

“Very good argyment,” commented the hirsute Prospector, “very clear and convincin’, but the police aren’t open to argyment—they act on instinct.”

“Armed with a writ, a policeman is like a small boy with a shotgun,” remarked Moonlight—“he must let it off. I don’t say you’re guilty, Tresco, but I say the minions of the Law will have you in their clutches if you don’t make yourself scarce.”

“An’ just as I was accumulating the one little pile of my life,” murmured Benjamin. “Sometimes I think the gods show incompetence in the execution of their duty; sometimes I think there ain’t no gods at all, but only a big, blind Influence that blunders on through Creation, trampling promiscuous on small fry like me.” He pulled at his pipe contemplatively. “Decamp, is it? Obscure my fairy-like proportions from the common gaze? But who’s to look after my interests here? What’s to become of my half of the gold yet ungot?”

“Can’t you trust a mate?” said Bill. “Ain’t I acted square so far? What are you gettin’ at? I’ll work the claim to its last ounce, and then I’ll go whacks, same as if you’d bin here all the time. Then you can leave the country. Till then I’ll put you away in a hiding-place where all the traps in the blanky country”—Bill had worked on Australian fields, and showed it in his speech—“won’t find you, not if they search for years.”

Scarlett rose. He had put on his garments, now dry and warm. “So-long, Benjamin,” he said. “You may be the biggest criminal unhung, for all I know, but you have one thing in your favour: if you robbed those mails it must have been for the benefit of another man.”

Moonlight bade good-bye, but as though to make up for his mate’s aspersion, said, “I know nothing of this business, but I know the police. If they’re not turned into a holy show when they set foot in this camp to look for you, may I never find another ounce of gold. Keep your end up, Benjamin. So-long.” And he followed his mate into the darkness.

The Prospector was wrapped in thought. He sat, gazing into the fire, for fully ten minutes. Then he said, “There’s three ways—the Forks, the Saddle, and the Long Valley. I give ’em my own names. The Saddle’s the safest. It’s a bit of a tough climb, but it’s sure. There’s no hurry, but we must leave here at dawn, before these newsters reach the claim, which Moonlight’ll see isn’t jumped. So we’ll sleep happy and comfortable, pack our swags just before daylight, take all our gold along with us, and cook our tucker when we make our first halt. All serene, my lovely Bishop; all thought out and planned, just like in a book. Never hurry in the bush, my beautiful ecclesiastic, as nothing’s ever gained by that. More haste, less speed—in the bush, my learned preacher. What a pity they didn’t catch you young and turn you into a sky-pilot, Ben. The way you jawed them two was fit for the pulpit. But now I know where you got the money to repay me that £117. I don’t want any explanation. I know where you got it.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Goldsmith Comes to Town.

Timber Town was in a state of commotion. The news of the discovery of the new gold-field had spread far and wide, and every steamer which came into the port was crowded with clammering diggers. Every boarding-house was full to overflowing, every inn was choked with men in heavy boots and corduroy trousers; the roads on the outskirts of the town were lined with rows of tents; everybody talked of the El Dorado in the mountains; there was no thought but of gold; men were buying stores in every shop; pack-horses stood with their heavy loads, in every inn-yard; and towards the bush, threading their way through the tortuous gorge that led into the heart of the mountains, a continual string of diggers, laden with heavy “swags” or leading patient over-laden horses, filed into the depths of the forest.

Jake Ruggles had lived a troubled life since his legal head and overlord, the official sponsor of his promising young life, had dropped out of his existence, as a stone drops to the bottom of a well and is no more seen. Upon his immature shoulders rested all the worry of the goldsmith’s business. He was master of Tresco’s bench; the gravers and the rat-tail files, the stock-drills and the corn-tongs were under his hand for good or for evil. With blow-pipe and burnisher, with plush-wheel and stake-anvil he wrought patiently; almost bursting with responsibility, yet with anxiety gnawing at his heart. And the lies he told on behalf of his “boss”!—lies to men with unpaid accounts in their hands, lies to constables with bits of blue paper from the Clerk of the Court, lies to customers whose orders could not be executed except by the master-goldsmith. On

all sides the world pressed heavily on Jake. His wizened face was quickly assuming the aspect of a little old man's; his furtive eyes began to wear a scared look; sleep had ceased to visit his innocent couch with regularity; his appetite, which formerly had earned him a reputation with his peers, was now easily appeased with a piece of buttered bread and a cup of milkless tea; the "duff" and rice puddings, of the goldsmith's making, had passed out of his life even as had the "boss" himself. Never was there a more badgered, woe-begone youth than Jake.

It was night time. The shutters of the shop were up, the door was bolted, the safe, with its store of gold-set gewgaws, was locked, and the key rested securely in the apprentice's pocket, but by the light of a gas-jet, his head bent over the bench, Jake was hard at work on a half-finished ring. In one hand he held a tapering steel rod, on which was threaded a circle of metal which might have been mistaken for brass; in the other he held a light hammer with which he beat the yellow zone. Tap-tap. "Jerusalem, my 'appy 'ome, oh! how I long for thee!" Tap-tap-tap went the hammer. "If the 'old man' was on'y here to lend a hand, I'd give a week's pay. The gold's full o' flaws—all along of the wrong alloy, in smeltin'—full o' cracks and crevices." He took the gold hoop off the steel rod, placed it on a piece of charred wood, pulled the gas-jet towards him, and with the blow-pipe impinged little jets of flame upon the yellow ring. "An' the galloot that come in this afternoon said, 'I always find the work turned out of this shop ah—excellent, ah—tip-top, as good as anything I ever bought in the Old Country, don'tcherknow.' Yah! Gimme silver, that's all. Gimme a butterfly buckle to make, or a monogram to saw out, an' I wouldn't call the Pope my uncle." His eye lifted from his work and rested on a broken gold brooch, beautiful with plaited hair under a glass centre. "An' that fussy old wood-hen'll be in, first thing to-morrow, askin' for 'the memento of my poor dear 'usband, my child, the one with the 'air in it'—carrotty 'air. An' those two bits of 'air-pins that want them silver bangles by ten o'clock, they'll be here punctual. I'm just fair drove silly with badgerin' wimmen. I'm goin' ratty with worry. When the boss comes back from his spree, I'll give 'im a bit o' my mind. I'll tell 'im, if he *must* go on a bend he should wait till the proper time—Christmas, Anniversary of the Settlement, Easter, or even a Gov'ment Holiday. But at a time like *this*, when the town's fair drippin' with dollars ... stupid ole buck-rabbit! An' when he can't be found, the mutton-headed bobbies suddenly become suspicious. It's no good for me to tell 'em it's his periodical spree—*they* say it's robbery. Oh, well, I back my opinion, that's all. But whether it's the one, or the other, of all the chuckle-headed old idiots that ever was born"—Tap-tap. It was not the noise of Jake's hammer, but a gentle knocking at the side-door of the workshop.

The apprentice rose quietly, and put his ear to the key-hole. Tap-tap-tap.

"Who's there?"

"Open the door," said a soft voice. "It's me. I want to come in."

"Very likely you do. There's many more'd like to come in here."

"Is that you, Jake?"

"Never you mind. Who're you?"

"You weasel-faced young imp, am I to burst open my own door?"

The mystery was at an end. In a moment, the bolt was withdrawn and Benjamin Tresco stood in his workshop.

But before he spoke, he bolted the door behind him. Then he said, "Well?"

"So you've come back?" said Jake, fiercely.

"Looks like it," said the goldsmith. "How's things?"

"Gone to the devil. How d'you expect me to keep business goin' when you go on a howling spree, for weeks?"

"Spree? Me? My dear innocent youth, I have clean forgotten the very taste of beer. At this present moment, I stand before you a total abstainer of six weeks' duration. And yet what I ask for is not beer, but bread—I'm as hungry as a wolf; I've hardly eaten anything for two days. What have you got in the house?"

"Nothin'."

"What!"

"*I* don't 'ave no time to cook. When I can find time, I go up to The Lucky Digger and get a good square feed. D'you expect me to do two men's work and cook as well?"

Tresco undid the small "swag" which he carried, and before the astonished eyes of his apprentice he disclosed fully a hundred ounces of gold.

"Jee-rusalem! Blame me if you ain't been diggin'!"

"That's so, my son."

"And the police are fair ratty because they thought you were hiding from the Law."

"So I am, my son."

“Garn!”

“Solemn fact—there’s a writ out against me.”

“Well?”

“I ain’t got a mind to be gaoled at such a glorious time in the history of Timber Town. I want to get more gold, stacks of it.”

“An’ where do *I* come in?”

“You come in as owner of this business by and by—if you’re a good boy.”

“Huh! I want to go diggin’ too.”

“All in good time, my energetic youth, all in good time. But for the present, give me some food.”

“Didn’t I tell you there isn’t any?” yelled Jake.

“Very good, very good, but don’t talk so loud. Take this half-crown, and go to The Lucky Digger. Tell the young lady in the bar that you have a friend who’s dying of hunger. Tell her to fill a jug with a quart of beer, and a basket with tucker of sorts. And hurry back; for, by my sacred aunt, if I don’t get something better presently, I shall turn cannibal and eat *you*!”

While the boy was gone, Tresco weighed the gold that lay on the bench. It came to 111 ounces, and this, valued at the current price of gold from Bush Robin Creek—the uninitiated are possibly unaware that as one star differeth from another star in glory, so the gold from one locality differs in price from that found in another—came to £430 2s. 6d.

Finding the safe locked, Tresco, whistling softly, turned down the gas, and sat at his bench in the gloom.

When Jake returned he was cautiously admitted, the door was re-bolted, and the gas was turned up sufficiently to show the goldsmith the way to his mouth.

“Where’s the key of the safe, Jake?”

“Where it ought to be.”

“You young imp, anty up.”

Jake produced the key from his pocket. “D’you suppose I label it and put it in the winder?”

“Put this gold away—there’s 111 ounces. I’ll bring some more next time I come. Now.” He lifted the jug, and drank. When he set it down again, it was half empty. “That’s what I call a moment of bliss. No one who hasn’t spent a month in the bush knows what a thirst really is; he ain’t got no conception what beer means. Now, what’s in the basket?” He lifted the white napkin that covered his supper. “Ham!” A beautific smile illumined his face. “Ham, pink and white and succulent, cut in thin slices by fair hands. Delicious! And what’s this? Oyster patties, cold certainly, but altogether lovely. New bread, cheese, apple turn-over! Couldn’t be better. The order of the menu is; first, entrees—that means oysters—next, ham, followed by sweets, and topped off with a morsel of cheese. Stand by and watch me eat—a man that has suffered semi-starvation for nearly a month.”

Jake lit a cigarette, an indulgence with which in these days of worry and stress he propitiated his overwrought nerves. He drew in the smoke with all the relish of a connoisseur, and expelled it through his nostrils.

“Is this gold the result of six weeks’ work?” he asked.

“No, barely one week’s,” answered Tresco, his mouth full of ham and new bread.

“Crikey!” Jake inhaled more cigarette smoke. “’Seems to me our potty little trade ain’t in it. I move that we both go in for the loocrative profession of diggin’.”

“Mumf—mumf—muff—muff.” The ham had conquered Tresco’s speech.

“Jes’ so. That’s what *I* think, boss.”

Benjamin gave a gulp. “I won’t take you,” he said, as plainly as possible.

“Oh, you won’t?”

“I won’t.”

“Then, suppose I go on my own hook, eh?”

“You’ve got to stop and look after this shop. You’re apprenticed to *me*.”

“Oh, indeed!”

“If a man chooses to spend a little holiday in the bush, is his apprentice to suppose his agreement’s cancelled? Not a bit of it.”

“An’ suppose a man chooses to spend a little holiday in gaol, what then?”

“That’s outside the sphere of practical politics, my son.”

“I don’t know so much about that. I think different. I think we’ll cry quits. I think I’ll go along with you, or likely there’ll be trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Yes, trouble.”

“What sort of trouble, jackanapes?”

“Why, crimson trouble.”

“Indeed.”

“I’ve got you tied hand and foot, boss. You can take that from *me*.”

“Is that so? What do you think you can do?”

“I intend to go along with you.”

“But I start to-night. If I can scrape together enough food to last a week or two. But I’ll take you along. You shall come. I’ll show you how I live. Now, then, what d’you say?” There was a twinkle in Tresco’s eye, and the corners of his mouth twitched with merriment.

“Think I don’t know when I’ve got a soft thing on?” Jake took off his apron, and hung it on a nail. “Shan’t want *that*, for a month or two anyway.” Then he faced the “boss” with, “Equal whacks, you old bandicoot. I’ll find the tucker, and we’ll share the gold.”

Tresco’s smile broke into a hearty laugh. He put his hands to his sides, threw back his head, and fairly chortled.

“I don’t see any joke.” Jake looked at his master from beneath his extravagant eyebrows.

“You’ll ... you’ll get the tucker ... see?”

“Why, yes—how’s a man to live?”

“An’ you’ll help swag it?”

“’Course.”

“You’ll implicitly obey your lawful lord and master, out on the wallaby?”

“’Spect I’ll ’ave to.”

“You won’t chiack or poke borak at his grey and honoured head when, by reason of his endowment of adipose tissue, his wind gives out?”

“Oh, talk sense. Adipose rabbits’ skins!”

“All these several and collective points being agreed upon, my youthful Adonis, I admit you into partnership.”

“Done,” said the apprentice, with emphasis. “It’s a bargain. Go and sleep, and I’ll fossick round town for tucker—I’m good for a sixty-pound swag, and you for eighty. So-long.”

He turned off the gas, took the key of the side door, which he locked after him, and disappeared, whilst Tresco groped his way to bed.

The surreptitious goldsmith had slept for two hours when the stealthy apprentice let himself quietly into the dark and cheerless house. He bore on his back a heavy bag of flour, and carried on his arm a big basket filled with minor packages gleaned from sleepy shopkeepers, who had been awakened by the lynx-eyed youth knocking at their backdoors.

In the cheerful and enlivening company of an alarum clock, Jake retired to his couch, which consisted of a flax-stuffed mattress resting on a wooden bedstead, and there he quickly buried himself in a weird tangle of dirty blankets, and went to sleep.

At the conclusion of three brief hours, which to the heavy sleeper appeared as so many minutes, the strident alarum woke the apprentice to the stress of life. By the light of a tallow candle he huddled on his clothes, and entered the goldsmith’s chamber.

“Now, then, boss, three o’clock! Up you git!”

Benjamin rubbed his eyes, sat up in bed, and yawned.

> “’’Tis the voice of the sluggard, I heard him complain:
> You’ve waked me too soon—I must slumber again.’

What’s the time, Jake?”

“Ain’t I tellin’ you?—three o’clock. If we don’t want to be followed by every digger in the town, we must get out of it before dawn.”

“Wise young Solomon, youth of golden promise. Go and boil the kettle. We’ll have a snack before we go. Then for fresh fields and pastures new.”

The goldsmith bounded out of bed, with a buoyancy which resembled that of an india-rubber ball.

"Ah-ha!

'Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweek bird's throat,
Come hither.'

You see, Jakey, mine, we were eddicated when we was young." Benjamin had jumped into his clothes as he talked. "A sup and a snack, and we flit by the light of the moon."

"There ain't no moon."

"So much the better. We'll guide our steps by the stars' pale light and the beams of the Southern Cross."

By back lanes and by-roads the goldsmith and his boy slunk out of the town. At the mouth of the gorge where diggers' tents lined the road, they walked delicately, exchanging no word till they were deep in the solitude of the hills.

As the first streak of dawn pierced the gloom of the deep valley, they were wading, knee-deep, a ford of the river, whose banks they had skirted throughout their journey. On the further side the forest, dank, green, and dripping with dew, received them into its impenetrable shades, but still the goldsmith toiled on; his heavy burden on his back, and the panting, weary, energetic, enthusiastic apprentice following his steps.

Leaving the track, Tresco led the way up a steep gully, thickly choked with underscrub, and dark with the boughs of giant trees. Forcing their way through tangled supple-jacks and clinging "lawyer" creepers which sought to stay their progress, the wayfarers climbed till, as day dawned, they paused to rest their wearied limbs before a sheer cliff of rock.

"It's not very far now," said the goldsmith, as he wiped his dripping brow. "This is the sort of work to reduce the adipose tissue, my son. D'you think you could find your way here by yourself, indomitable Jakey?"

"Huh! 'Course," replied the breathless youth, proud to be his master's companion in such a romantic situation, and glorying in his "swag". "Is this your bloomin' camp?"

"No, sir." Tresco glanced up the face of the great limestone rock which barred their path. "Not exactly. We've got to scale this cliff, and then we're pretty well there."

A few supple-jacks hung down the face of the rock. These Tresco took in his hand, and twisted them roughly into a cable. "'Look natural, don't they?" he said. "'Look as if they growed t'other end, eh? Now, watch me." With the help of his rope of lianas he climbed up the rugged cliff, and when at the summit, he called to Jake to tie the "swags" to separate creepers. These he hoisted to the top of the cliff, and shortly afterwards the eager face of the apprentice appeared over the brow.

"Here we are," exclaimed Benjamin, "safe as a church. Pull up the supple-jacks, Jake."

With an enthusiasm which plainly betokened a mind dwelling on bushrangers and hidden treasure, the apprentice did as he was told.

Out of breath through his exertions, he excitedly asked, "What's the game, boss? Where's the bloomin' plant?"

"Plant?" replied the goldsmith.

"Yes, the gold, the dollars?"

"Dollars? Gold?"

"Yes, gold! 'Think *I* don't know? Theseyer rocks are limestone. Who ever saw gold in limestone formation? Eh?"

"How do *you* know it's limestone?"

"Yah! Ain't I bin down to the lime-kiln, by Rubens' wharf, and seen the lime brought over the bay? What's the game? Tell us."

"The thing that I'm most interested in, at this present moment,"—the goldsmith took up his heavy "swag"—"is tucker."

Without further words, he led the way between perpendicular outcrops of rocks whose bare, grey sides were screened by fuchsia trees, birch saplings, lance-wood, and such scrub as could take root in the shallow soil. Turning sharply round a projecting rock, he passed beneath a tall black birch which grew close to an indentation in the face of the cliff. Beneath the great tree the heels of the goldsmith crushed the dry, brown leaves deposited during many seasons; then in an instant he disappeared from the sight of the lynx-eyed Jake, as a rabbit vanishes into its burrow.

"Hi! Here! Boss! Where the dooce has the ole red-shank got too?"

A muffled voice, coming as from the bowels of the earth, said, "Walk inside. Liberty Hall.... Free

lodging and no taxes."

Jake groped his way beneath the tree, surrounded on three sides by the limestone cliff. In one corner of the rock was a sharp depression, in which grew shrubs of various sorts. Dropping into this, the lad pushed his way through the tangled branches and stood before the entrance of a cave.

Inside Tresco held a lighted candle in his hand. In front of him stood Jake, spellbound.

Overhead, the ceiling was covered with white and glistening stalactites; underfoot, the floor was strewn with bits of carbonate and the broken bases of stalagmites, which had been shattered to make a path for the ruthless iconoclast who had made his home in this pearly-white temple, built without hands.

Tresco handed Jake another lighted candle.

"Allow me to introduce you, my admirable Jakey, to my country mansion, where I retire from the worry of business, and turn my mind to the contemplation of Nature. This is the entrance hall, the portico: observe the marble walls and the ceiling-decorations—Early English, perpendicular style."

Jake stood, open-mouthed with astonishment.

"Now we come to the drawing-room, the grand *salon*, where I give my receptions." Benjamin led the way through a low aperture, on either side of which stalactites and stalagmites had met, leaving a low doorway in the centre. Beyond this, the candles' dim light struggled for supremacy in a great hall, whose walls shone like crystal. On one side the calcareous encrustations had taken the form of a huge organ, cut as if out of marble, with pipes and key-board complete.

"Holee Christopher!" exclaimed the apprentice.

"Nature's handiwork," said the goldsmith. "Beautiful.... Been making, this thousand years, for *me* —an' you."

"Then I reckon Nature forgot the chimbley—it's as cold as the grave."

"On the contrary, there is a chimney; but Nature doesn't believe in a fireplace in each room. Proceed. I will now show you my private apartments. Mind the step."

He led the way down a dark passage, strewn with huge pieces of limestone, over which master and apprentice scrambled, into an inner chamber, where the white walls were grimed with smoke and the black embers of an extinguished fire lay in the middle of the floor.

"My *sanctum sanctorum*," said the goldsmith, as he fixed the butt of his candle to a piece of rock by means of drops of melted wax poured from the lighted end. "This is where I meditate; this is where I mature my plans for the betterment of the human species."

"Rats! You're darn well hidin' from the police."

"My son, you grieve me; your lack of the poetic shocks me."

"Oh, garn! You robbed those mails, that's about the size of it."

"Robbed?—no, sir. Examined?—yes, sir. I was the humble instrument in the hands of a great rascal, a man of unprincipled life, a man who offered bribes, heavy bribes—an' I took 'em. I had need of money."

"First comes the bender and then the bribe. I know, boss. But where d'you get the gold?"

Benjamin stooped over a mass of bedding, rolled up in a tent-fly, and brought to light a canvas bag.

"My private store," he said, "mine and Bill's. We go whacks. We're doing well, but expediency demands that for a short while I should retire into private life. And, by the hokey, I can afford it."

"Gold?" asked Jake, peering at the bag.

"Nuggets," said the goldsmith.

Jake dropped his "swag" and felt the weight of the bag.

"It gits over me," he said. "Either you stole it, or you dug it. I give it up. Any'ow, there it is."

Benjamin smiled his broadest, and began to rake together the charred sticks scattered over the floor.

"This is my only trouble," he said. "To yank my firewood in here is heart-breaking; that and swagging tucker from town."

"Where's the smoke go to?" Jake looked into the inky blackness above.

"Don't know. Never asked. I guess it finds its way somewhere, for after I've hung my blanket over the doorway and lighted the fire, I sometimes notice that the bats which live overhead buzz round and then clear out somewhere. I imagine that there's a passage which connects with the open air. Some day, perhaps, an over-earnest policeman will drop on our heads. Then there'll be a picnic,

eh?”

“What I want, just at present,” said Jake, “is a drink.”

“That’s another of my troubles,” replied the goldsmith. “I have to fetch my water from outside, but it’s lovely water when you’ve got it.”

He placed his bag of gold in a corner. “Don’t put all your eggs into one basket,” he said. “I believe in Jacob’s plan—divide your belongings. If I’m caught here, I have the plant in town. If I’m caught in town, I have the plant here. Anyhow, the police can’t get everything.”

“An’ where do I come in?” The eyes of the rabbit-faced youth peered into his master’s.

“I don’t precisely know. I don’t think you come in at all.”

“Then what about that gold in the safe, boss?”

“The key is here.” Benjamin slapped his pocket gently. “But, if you’re a good boy you shall have my business, and be the boss goldsmith of Timber Town.”

“Honest injin?”

“Perfectly honest. If I get away with my gold, all I leave behind is yours.”

“Shake hands on it.”

“Certainly,” said the goldsmith, and he held out his hand.

Jake took it in his.

“It’s a bargain,” he said.

“That’s right; a bargain.”

“I’ll help you to get away with your gold, and you’ll leave me your business, lock, stock, and barrel.”

“That’s exactly it,” said the goldsmith, taking up an empty “billy” from the ground. “Now we’ll go and get the water for our tea.”

CHAPTER XXV.

Fishing.

A case of bottling-plums, the bloom still on their purple cheeks, stood on the kitchen table. Beside it stood Rose, her arms bare to the elbows, and a snowy apron flowing from breast to ankle. Marshalled in regular array in front of the case, stood a small army of glass jars, which presently were to receive the fruit.

In a huge preserving-pan a thick syrup was simmering on the stove; and Rose had just begun to place the fruit in this saccharine mixture, when a succession of knocks, gentle but persistent, was heard coming from the front door.

“Oh, bother,” said Rose, as she paused with a double handful of plums half way between the fruit-case and the stove. “Who can that be?”

Again the knocking resounded through the house.

“I suppose I must go,” said Rose, placing the fruit carefully in the pan, and then, slipping off her flowing apron, she went hurriedly to the front door.

There stood the pretty figure of Rachel Varnhagen, dressed in billowy muslin, a picture hat which was adorned with the brightest of ribbons and artificial flowers, and the daintiest of shoes. Her sallow cheeks were tinged with a carmine flush, her pearly teeth gleamed behind a winning smile, and a tress of glossy hair, escaped from under her frail head-dress, hung bewitchingly upon her shoulder.

“Oh, how do you *do*?” she exclaimed effusively, as she closed her silk parasol. “I look an awful guy, I know; but there’s *such* a wind, that I’ve almost been blown to pieces.”

It was the first time that Rose’s humble roof had had the privilege of sheltering the daughter of the rich Jew.

“I’m afraid I hardly expected you.” The Pilot’s daughter looked frankly and with an amused smile at Rachel. “I’m in the middle of bottling fruit. Do you mind coming into the kitchen?—the fruit will spoil if I leave it.”

Leading the way, she was followed by her pretty caller, who, in all her glory, seated herself on a cane-bottomed chair in the kitchen, and commenced to gossip.

“I’ve *such* news,” she said, tapping the pine floor with the ferrule of her parasol. Rose continued

to transfer her plums to the preserving-pan. “I expect you heard of the dreadful experience I had with that horrid, drunken digger who caught me on the foot-bridge—everybody heard of it. Who do you think it was that saved me?”

She waited for Rose to risk a guess.

“I suppose,” said the domestic girl, her arms akimbo as she faced her visitor, “I should think it ought to have been Mr. Zahn.”

“Oh, him!” exclaimed Rachel, disgustedly. “I’ve jilted him—he was rude to Papa.”

“Then *who* could it be?” Rose placed more plums in the preserving-pan.

“*You* ought to know.” Just the trace of a pout disfigured Rachel’s pretty mouth. “He’s a friend of yours, I believe; a very great friend, indeed.”

“I’ve a good many friends.” The preserving-pan was now full, and Rose sat down, to wait a few minutes till the fruit should be ready for bottling.

“Papa is simply in love with him. He says he can never repay him. And how he laughed when I told him that my gallant rescuer threw the digger into the water! Can’t you guess who it is, *now*?”

Rose was silent.

“Really, I think this stupid cooking and jam-making has made you silly. Why don’t you work in the morning, and go out in the afternoon to see your friends?”

Rose turned her blue eyes on her visitor. They distinctly said, “What business is that of yours?” But her lips said, “Now, really, how can I?”

“When a girl’s engaged”—Rachel sighed as she spoke—“she doesn’t care much about society.”

Rose smiled.

“At least that was the way with me.” Rachel’s carmine lips gave a little quiver at the corners. “I suppose *you* feel like that.”

“Me? I feel just as usual.”

“But you’re so English, nothing would disturb *you*.”

Rose laughed aloud. “I should shriek if a digger touched me,” she said.

“But it was almost worth the fright, dear.” Rachel leaned forward confidentially. “First, he put me on his horse, and we forded the river together; then, he took me home and was so kind. I *do* think you’re *such* a lucky girl.”

“Me? Why?”

Suddenly Rachel’s manner altered. Bursting into a rippling laugh, she raised her parasol, and skittishly poked Rose in the ribs.

“How very close some people are,” she exclaimed. “But you might as well own the soft impeachment, and then all the girls could congratulate you.”

The thought went through Rose’s mind, that if the good wishes of her acquaintances were like this girl’s perhaps they might well be spared. She was completing her task by ladling the plums from the big pan into the array of jars, and she bent over her work in order to hide her annoyance.

“And I hear he’s *so* rich,” continued Rachel. “He’s had such wonderful luck on the diggings. Papa says he’s one of the best marks in Timber Town—barring old Mr. Crewe, of course.”

Rose gazed, open-eyed, at her visitor.

“How much do you think he is worth?” asked Rachel, unabashed.

“I really don’t know. I have no notion whom you mean.”

Again the rippling laugh rang through the kitchen.

“Really, this is too funny. Own up: wasn’t Mr. Scarlett very lucky?”

“Oh! Mr. Scarlett? I believe he got *some* gold—he showed me some.”

“Surely, he had it weighed?”

“I suppose so—I thought there was something in the paper about it.”

“Was all that gold Mr. Scarlett’s?”

“Yes, about as much as would fill this saucepan. He poured it out on the dining-room table, and Captain Sartoris and my father stared at it till their eyes almost dropped out.”

“You lucky girl! They say he gave you the dandiest ring.”

Rose mutely held out her unadorned fingers. When they had been closely inspected, she said, “You see, this is all rubbish about my being engaged. As for Mr. Scarlett, I have reason to think that he left his heart behind him in the Old Country.”

“Confidences, my dear. If he has told you that much, it won’t take you long to hook him. We giddy girls have no chance against you deep, demure stay-at-homes. The dear men dance and flirt with us, but they don’t propose. How I wish I had learned to cook, or even to bottle plums! Fancy having a man all to yourself in a kitchen like this; making a cake, with your sleeves tucked up to the elbows, and no one to interrupt—why, I guarantee, he’d propose in ten minutes.” She tapped her front teeth with her finger. “I have to go to the dentist to-morrow. I do hate it so, but I’ve got to have something done to one of my front teeth. I’m thinking of getting the man to fill it with gold, and put a small diamond in the middle. That ought to be quite fetching, don’t you think?”

“It certainly would be unique.”

“I think I’ll go along to Tresco’s shop, and get the stone.”

“But don’t you think the sight of a diamond in a tooth would pall after a while? or perhaps you might loosen it with a bit of biscuit, and swallow it. A diet of diamonds would pall, too, I fancy.”

“It’s not the expense.” Rachel pouted as she spoke. “The question is whether it’s done among smart people.”

“You could but try—your friends would soon tell you.”

“I believe it’s quite the thing over in Melbourne.”

“Then why not in Timber Town?”

“But perhaps it’s only amongst actresses that it’s ‘the thing.’”

“So that the glitter of their smiles may be intensified?”

Rachel had risen from her seat. “I must be going,” she said. “I looked in for a minute, and I’ve stopped half-an-hour.”

“Then won’t you stay just a little longer—I’m going to make some tea.”

“It’s very tempting.” Rachel took off her gloves, and displayed her begemmed fingers. “I think I *must* stop.”

Rose infused the tea in a brown earthenware pot, and filled two china cups, in the saucers of which she placed two very old ornamented silver teaspoons.

The two girls sat at opposite sides of the white-pine table, in complete contrast; the one dark, the other fair; the one arrayed in purple and fine linen, the other dressed in plain starched print and a kitchen apron; the one the spoilt pet of an infatuated father, the other accustomed to reproof and domestic toil.

But they met on common ground in their taste for tea. With lips, equally pretty, they were sipping the fragrant beverage, when a hoarse voice resounded through the house.

“Rosebud, Rosebud, my gal! Where’s my slippers? Danged if I can see them anywhere.”

Into the kitchen stumped the Pilot of Timber Town, weary from his work. Catching sight of Rachel, he paused half-way between the door and the table. “Well, well,” he said, “I beg pardon, I’m sure—bellowing like an old bull walrus at my dar’ter. But the gal knows her old Dad—don’t you, Rosebud? He don’t mean nothing at all.”

In a moment, Rose had the old man’s slippers in her hand, and the Pilot sat down and commenced to take off his boots and to put on the more comfortable footgear.

Rachel was on her feet in a moment.

“I must be going,” she said. “Which way do I get out?”

“Rosebud, show the young lady the door—she’s in a hurry.” The Pilot never so much as took his eyes off the boot that he was unlacing.

Leading the way through the intricate passages, Rose conducted Rachel to the front door, and came back, smiling.

“Now, what does *she* want?” asked the Pilot. “She’s a mighty strange craft to be sailing in these waters. There’s a queer foreign rake about her t’gallant mast that’s new to me. Where’s she owned, Rosebud?”

“That’s Miss Varnhagen.”

“What! the Jew’s dar’ter? Well, well. That accounts for the cut of her jib. Old Varnhagen’s dar’ter? ’Want to sell anything?”

Rose laughed. “Oh, no. She came, fishing.”

“Fishing?”

“Fishing for news. She’s very anxious to know how much gold Mr. Scarlett has got; in fact, she’s very anxious to know all about Mr. Scarlett.”

The old Pilot laughed, till the shingles of the roof were in danger of lifting. “The wimmen, oh! the wimmen!” he said. “They’re deep. There’s no sounding ’em. No lead’ll bottom them. You’ll have to protect that young man, my gal; protect him from scheming females. Once they can lure him on a lee shore, they’ll wreck him to pieces and loot the cargo. So she wanted to know how he was freighted? He’s down to Plimsoll, my gal; down to Plimsoll with gold. A mighty fine cargo for wreckers!”

At the very time that Rachel was walking out of the garden of roses, Scarlett was turning into The Lucky Digger. He had come in from the “bush,” weary and tired, and was met in the passage by a man who packed stores to the new gold-field. In the bar stood Isaac Zahn, who was flirting with the bar-maid. But the regal dispenser of liquors responded to the young clerk’s sallies with merely the brief politeness which she was paid to show towards all the customers of the inn. He could extort no marked encouragement, in spite of every familiarity and witticism at his command.

Turning his back on the Israelite, Scarlett gave all his attention to the packer. “The track’s clear to the field,” said Jack, “all but four miles at the further end. In a few days, you’ll be able to take your horses through easily.”

“My rate is £15 per ton,” said the man.

“The Syndicate won’t quarrel with that.” Jack’s head turned involuntarily, as an unusual sound occurred in the bar-room.

Zahn, leaning over the counter, had caught Gentle Annie roughly by the wrist. There was a struggle, the crash of falling glass, and a scream.

From the fair arm of the bar-maid blood was flowing.

In a moment, Scarlett was in the bar-room. He seized the spruce bank-clerk by the collar, and dragged him into the passage.

Zahn kicked and swore; but, setting his teeth, Scarlett pulled his struggling victim towards the front-door; and there, with a suddenness which would have done credit to a field-gun, he kicked the Jew into the street.

The trajectory was low, but Zahn, with legs and arms extended, shot across the asphalt pavement, and fell sprawling at the feet of a dainty figure dressed in muslins and ribbons of rainbow hue.

It was Rachel Varnhagen, tripping home to her tea. With a little scream of elegant surprise, she dropped her parasol, and gazed at the prostrate form of her jilted lover.

Gathering himself up stiffly, Isaac stood, whimpering, before her; his whining interspersed with unprintable invective.

Scarlett, however, heedless of the anathemas of the stricken clerk, stepped from the door of The Lucky Digger, picked up the fallen parasol, and handed it politely to Rachel.

In less than a moment she recognised him.

“Oh, thanks,” she said. “It’s really awfully good of you.”

“What? To kick this unmitigated blackguard?”

“I’ve no doubt he deserved it,” she said, glancing with disgust at the clerk. “It’s charming of you to pick up my sunshade. I hope you’re coming up to see us—Papa wants to see you awfully. It would be lovely if you would come to-night.”

“Thank you. I’ll try. I hope you are none the worse for the fright you got.”

“Thanks, I’m not dead. What a terrible man you are—I wouldn’t like to quarrel with you. Say eight o’clock.”

“Very good, eight.”

“Don’t forget. I shall expect you.”

Zahn, who heard all the conversation, ground his teeth, and slunk away. Rachel smiled her farewell and bowed to Jack, who lifted his hat, and went into the inn, to see what could be done for the bar-maid’s injured wrist.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A Small but Important Link in the Story.

The Timber Town Club was filled with ineffable calm. The hum of convivial voices was hushed, the clicking billiard-balls were still, no merry groups of congenial spirits chatted in ante-room, or dining-room. All was strangely quiet, for most of the members were at the diggings, and the times were too pregnant with business to warrant much conviviality.

Scarlett and Mr. Crewe alone sat in the reading-room, where the magazines from England lay in perfect order on little tables, and steel engravings, of which the Club was proud, hung upon the walls. Jack was enjoying the luxury of a big easy chair, and the Father of Timber Town sat upright in another.

“I was asked out to spend the evening, yesterday,” said Jack, lazily.

“Indeed, asked to spend the evening?” replied the alert old gentleman. “I can’t say that I see anything remarkable in that, Scarlett.”

Jack smiled. “By a most charming young lady, I assure you.”

“Ah, that is another matter, quite a different matter, my dear sir.”

“Ostensibly, it was to meet her father, but hang me if the old gentleman put in an appearance!”

“Ho-ho! Better, Scarlett, better still. And what did you do, you rascal?”

“I did nothing. It was the young lady who took up the running.”

“But wasn’t she provided with a judicious Mama, in the background somewhere?”

“No, a calamity seems to have befallen the Mama. She’s *non est*.”

“That’s very good. The girl depends for protection solely upon her Papa?”

“I remarked that, and said, ‘Your Father will hardly approve of my coming to see you in his absence.’ ‘Oh, you needn’t mind that,’ she said—‘he trusts me implicitly. And as for you—didn’t you save me, the other night?’ You see, I found a drunken digger molesting her, and threw him into the river. But I haven’t so much as seen the old boy yet.”

“Quite so, quite so, but I want to hear about the girl—the father will turn up in due time, and as for the digger, he at least would get a bath.”

“I waited for her loving parent to come home, as it was supposed he wanted to see me.”

“I see; I see: and what did he say when he came?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“That was very churlish conduct, don’t you think Scarlett?”

“But, you see, he didn’t come.”

“Didn’t come home? Now, look here, Scarlett; now, look here, my good fellow. You’re getting into bad ways; you’re courting temptation. By Jupiter! they’ll be marrying you next. They will, sir; they’ll be marrying you, before you know where you are; marrying you in a church. And if they can’t get you to church, they’ll marry you before the Registrar; by Jupiter! they will.”

“But she’s a pretty girl, remember that.”

“She may be the most monstrous pretty girl, for all I care. But don’t you let her hook you, my boy. Women are all fudge, sir. Girls are mostly dolls dressed in feathers and fine clothes. But I grant you that there’s some dignity in a woman who’s a mother; but by forty she becomes old, and then she must be a plaguey nuisance. No, Scarlett, I never married, thank God. Fancy being at the beck and call of a crotchety old beldame, at my time of life. No, sir; I never knew what it was to be questioned and badgered when I came home at night, no matter if it was two in the morning. I can do as I like, sir: I need not go home at all. I’m a free man. Now, take my advice, Scarlett; be a free man too.”

“But you never could have been in love, Mr. Crewe.”

“Perhaps not; very likely not.”

Mr. Crewe had stood during the latter part of the dialogue, that he might the more emphatically denounce matrimony; and Scarlett rose from his comfortable chair, and stood beside him.

“But do as I did, my dear sir”—the Father of Timber Town placed his hand on Jack’s sleeve—“and nothing disastrous will happen. Whenever a young woman became very pressing, what do you think I used to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t see how I can tell. Perhaps you told her you had an incurable disease, and had one foot in the grave.”

“No, sir; that would have made her marry me the quicker—in order to get my money. No, I used to propose solemnly and in due form—on behalf of my brother Julius. I would say, ‘My dear young lady, my brother Julius *ought* to be married, and you are the girl to suit him. He is delicate, affectionate in disposition, domesticated—quite the reverse of myself, my dear—and you are the

beau ideal companion for him.' But do you believe that Julius is married? No, sir; not a bit of it; no more married than I am—no, sir; as confirmed an old bachelor as ever you saw. Very good, wasn't it? Just the way to deal with them, eh? Adopt the plan, Jack; adopt the plan, and you'll escape as certainly as I did."

"Look here," said Scarlett, "we'll go and see the banker; we ought to have seen him this morning."

The old gentleman chuckled. He perceived that his young friend had changed the subject of conversation; but he also agreed that business should come before gossip.

It was but a brief walk from the Club to the Kangaroo Bank.

"You're a god-send to this town, Jack; a perfect god-send. Do you know that since you discovered this gold, sir, my properties in Timber Town have increased twenty-five per cent. in value? And do you know that I believe they will increase cent. per cent.? Imagine it, sir. Why, we shall all be rich men."

They passed out into the bright street, where the gaily-painted shops shone in the blazing sun and the iron roofs of the verandahs ticked with the midday heat. The door of the Bank stood open, that the outer air might circulate freely through the big building. The immaculately-attired clerk stood behind his counter, with a big piece of plaster on his forehead; but Scarlett, taking no notice of the scowl he received from the dark-featured Zahn, knocked at the door of the Manager's room.

Within the financial *sanctum*, a little shrivelled-up man sat at a large table which was placed in the middle of the room. His face was clean-shaven but for a pair of grizzled mutton-chop whiskers, and as he bent over his papers he showed a little bald patch on the top of his crown.

Scarlett and Mr. Crewe stood side by side, in front of him.

"I have come from the diggings," said Jack, "and have called to ask ..."

"Oh ... How do you do, Mr. Crewe? Be seated, sir.... Be seated, both of you.... A lovely day, Mr. Crewe; a perfectly beautiful day. Take a seat, sir, I beg."

But as the chairs stood a long way off against the wall, old Mr. Crewe and Jack only glanced at them.

"I've come to ask," continued Scarlett, "that you will establish a branch of your Bank on Bush Robin Creek."

The Manager looked first at Scarlett and then at Mr. Crewe. "You're very good," he said. "Establish a branch on the diggings? Gentlemen, *do* be seated." So saying, he journeyed to a far wall, and returned with a couple of chairs, which he dragged after him to where his visitors stood.

"It would be a great convenience to the diggers," said Jack, "to sell their gold on the field, and receive drafts on your Bank. Then, they would travel with more safety and less fear of being robbed."

"It's worth thinking of," said the Manager, when he had seen that both Scarlett and Mr. Crewe were seated.

"It should be profitable to the Bank," said Mr. Crewe, "and that, sir, is your main consideration."

"The track will be completed in a few days," Scarlett remarked, "and your agent couldn't possibly lose his way in the bush."

"Could not lose his way? Exactly. It would be very awkward if he were to get lost, with £20,000 in his possession."

"I can imagine what sort of a losing it would be considered," said Mr. Crewe, laughing.

"How far is it to the field?" asked the Manager.

"As the crow flies, about forty miles," replied Jack, "but by the track, some eight or ten miles more."

"The difficulty will be the escort," said the Manager. "There must be an escort to convey gold to town. If the police, now, would give assistance, it could be managed."

"Failing them," said Jack, "the diggers would be only too glad to provide an escort themselves."

The banker smiled. "I was imagining that the Government might undertake the transportation."

"This is a detail," said Mr. Crewe. "It could be arranged when your agent wished to come to town with all the gold he had bought on the field."

"I make the proposal to you on behalf of the syndicate which I represent," said Jack. "There is a demand for a branch of your Bank on Bush Robin Creek: communication is now easy, and the field is developing fast."

"I shall see to it, gentlemen; I shall do my best to oblige you."

“And to benefit your institution,” interjected Mr. Crewe.

The Manager smiled the sycophantic smile of one who worships Mammon. “I shall endeavour to meet the difficulty, Mr. Crewe. We shall see what can be done.” He rang his bell, and a clerk appeared. “Mr. Zahn is not at the counter to-day,” he said.

“No, sir,” said the clerk; “he is buying gold.”

“Very good; send him to me,” said the Manager, and Isaac was quickly summoned.

“I shall require you to proceed to the diggings at Bush Robin Creek,” said the Manager, addressing the gold-clerk. “These gentlemen have made representations to me which show that there is considerable business to be done there by buying gold. You will hold yourself in readiness to start in a couple of days. Does that suit you, sir?” he added, turning to Scarlett.

“Admirably,” replied Jack. “I’ll return to-morrow, and shall tell the diggers that your agent is coming.”

“But why should you not travel together?” said the Manager. “You could show Mr. Zahn the way.”

Isaac looked at Scarlett, and Scarlett looked at him.

“I think I could find my way alone,” said Zahn.

Jack smiled. “I shall be only too glad to give any assistance I can; but if Mr. Zahn prefers to travel by himself, of course there is the bare chance that he might get off the track and be lost.”

“I’ll risk it,” said the Jew. “I’d rather get lost than be thrown over a precipice.”

“Dear me, dear me,” said Mr. Crewe, his voice and gesture expressive of the utmost astonishment. “This looks bad, Jack; this is a very bad beginning.”

“You mean that you don’t quite appreciate this gentleman’s overtures?” asked the Manager.

Zahn was silent.

“We had a small difference in a hotel,” said Jack. “But for my part I am quite willing to let bygones be bygones.”

Zahn scowled. “That may be so,” he said, “but I should prefer to travel alone.”

“Dear, dear; well, well,” said the Father of Timber Town. “But, after all, this is a mere matter of detail which can be settled by and by. If you go to the diggings, sir”—he turned his benignant gaze on the clerk—“you will not only be in a most responsible position, but you will be able to do such profitable business for your Bank, sir, that you will probably earn promotion.”

“It’s settled,” said the Manager. “We shall send a representative, and I hope that the arrangement will be satisfactory to all parties. I hope you are contented, Mr. Crewe.”

“Perfectly, my dear sir, perfectly,” said the Father of Timber Town.

“Then you may consider the thing done,” said the Manager; and ushering his visitors from the room he conducted them to the garish street.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Signal-Tree.

“I jest walked in,” said Dolphin, “an’ I says, ‘About thisyer gold-escort: when does it start?’ I says. The shrivelled party with the whiskers looks at me acrost the counter, an’ e’ says, ‘What business is that of yours, my man?’ ‘None,’ I says, ‘’xcept me an’ my mate is nervous of swaggin’ our gold to town ourselves.’ ‘Don’t you bother about that,’ ’e says. ‘All you’ve got to do is to sell your gold to our agent on the field, and leave the rest to him.’ The escort will leave reg’lar, accordin’ to time-table; so we can stick it up, sure as Gawd made little apples.”

“And what about goin’ through the Bank?” asked Sweet William.

“Now I ask you,” said Dolphin, “what’s the use of messing with the Bank, when we can clean out the gold-escort, an’ no one the wiser?”

“Same here. My opinion,” said Gentleman Carnac.

“I’m slick agin letting the Bank orf,” growled Garstang. “Why not let the escort get its gold to the Bank, and then nab everything in the show. The original plan’s the best.”

“I gave you credit for more sense, Garstang.” The leader of the gang looked darkly at his subordinate. “I gave you credit for knowing more of your trade.”

“More credit, eh?” asked the man with the crooked mouth. “For why?”

The four rascals were in the cottage where they had met before, and the room reeked with the

smoke of bad tobacco.

“Why?” replied Dolphin. “Because you’re the oldest hand of the lot, an’ you’ve been in the business all your life.”

“Jes’ so,” said Garstang, with an evil smile. “’Xcept when I’ve bin the guest of the Widow.”

“Which has been pretty frequent,” interjected Sweet William.

“To clean the Bank out is easy enough,” said Dolphin: “the trouble is to get away with the stuff. You ought to see that with half an eye. To stick up the escort requires a little skill, a little pluck; but as for gettin’ away with the gold afterwards, that’s child’s play.”

“Dead men don’t tell no tales,” remarked Sweet William.

“But their carcases do,” objected Garstang.

“You beat everything!” exclaimed the leader, growing almost angry. “Ain’t there such a thing as a shovel? No wonder you were copped pretty often by the traps, Garstang.”

“You two men wrangle like old women,” said Carnac. “Drop it. Tell us what’s the first thing to do.”

“To go an’ look at the country,” answered Dolphin.

“That’s it.... Go it.... Dolphin controls the whole push.... Jest do as ’e tells.” Garstang was evidently annoyed that the leadership of the murderous gang, which had once been his, had passed out of his hands.

Dolphin took no notice of the remarks. “We shall have plenty time to get to work, ’cause the Bank can’t bring the gold to town till it’s bought it, and it can’t begin to buy it till the agent reaches the field, an’ he only started to-day.”

“Every blessed thing’s ready,” chimed in Sweet William, who was evidently backing the new leader strongly. “Carny an’ me’s bin through the guns, an’ they’re all clean an’ took to bits ready for putting in the swags. When they’re packed, not a trap in the country but wouldn’t take us for the garden variety of diggers, 2 dwts. to the dish, or even less. Quite mild, not to say harmless, gruel-fed, strictly vegetarian—a very useful an’ respectable body of men.”

Dolphin smiled at the young man’s witticism. “It doesn’t need for more than two to go,” he said. “There’s no use in making a public show of ourselves, like a bloomin’ pack-train. Two’s plenty.”

“I’ll stop at ’ome,” growled Garstang. “It’s your faik, Dolphin—you planned it. Let’s see you carry it out.”

“I’ll go,” volunteered William. “Carny can stop behind an’ help keep Garstang’s temper sweet.” In his hilarity he smacked the sinister-faced man on the back.

“Keep your hands t’ yerself,” snarled Garstang, with an oath. “You’re grown too funny, these days—a man’d think you ran the show.”

“Lord, what a mug!” Young William grimaced at Garstang’s sour face. “But it’ll sweeten up, ole man, when the gold’s divided.”

“We’re wasting time,” broke in Dolphin. “We must be getting along. Pack your swag, William: mine’s at The Bushman’s Tavern.”

“Matilda is ready,” exclaimed the youthful member of the gang, picking up his swag from the floor, and hitching it on to his shoulders. “Gimme that long-handled shovel, Carny—it’ll look honest, though it weighs half a ton. Well, so-long.”

He shook the bad-tempered Garstang, slapped Carnac on the back, and followed Dolphin from the cottage.

While this ominous meeting was being held, Jake Ruggles might have been observed to be acting in a most extraordinary manner in the back-garden of Tresco’s shop. In the middle of a patch of ill-nourished cabbages which struggled for existence amid weeds and rubbish, he had planted a kitchen chair. On the back of this he had rested a long telescope, which usually adorned the big glass case which stood against the wall behind the shop-counter. This formidable instrument he had focussed upon the pinnacle of a wooded height, which stood conspicuous behind the line of foot-hills, and, as he peered at the distant mountain-top, he gave vent to a string of ejaculations, expressive of interest and astonishment.

Upon the top of the wooded mountain a large tree, which he could distinguish with the naked eye, stood conspicuous; a tree which spread its branches high above its fellows, and silhouetted its gigantic shape against the sky-line. Directing his telescope upon this remarkable giant of the forest, by aid of its powerful lenses he could see, projecting from the topmost branch, a flag, which upon further observation proved to be nothing less than the red ensign employed on merchant ships; and it was this emblem of the mercantile marine which so amazed and interested the youthful Ruggles.

“The ole beggar’s got his pennant out,” he exclaimed, as he smacked his lean shanks and again applied his eye to the telescope. “That means a spree for Benjamin. The crafty ole rascal’ll be

comin’ in to-night. It means his tucker supply’s given out, an’ I must fly round for bacon, tea, sugar, bread, flour; an’ I think I’ll put in a tin or two of jam, by way of a treat.”

He took a long look at the signal, and then shut up the telescope.

“It’s quite plain,” he soliloquised: “the old un’s comin’ in. I must shut up shop, and forage. Then, after dark, I’ll take the tucker to the ford.”

But, as though a sudden inspiration had seized him, he readjusted his instrument and once more examined the conspicuous tree.

“Why, he’s there himself, sittin’ in a forked bough, an’ watchin’ me through his glass.” Placing the telescope gently on the ground, Jake turned himself into a human semaphore, and gesticulated frantically with his arms. “That ought to fetch ’im,” and he again placed his eye to the telescope. “Yes, he sees. He’s wavin’ his ’at. Good old Ben. It’s better than a play. Comic opera ain’t in it with this sort o’ game. He’s fair rampin’ with joy ’cause I seen ’im.” Shutting up his instrument, Jake gave a last exhibition of mad gesticulations, danced a mimic war-dance, and then, with the big telescope under his arm, he went into the house.

It was a long stretch of tangled forest from the big tree to Tresco’s cave, but the goldsmith was now an expert bushman, versed in the ways of the wilderness, active if not agile, enduring if still short of breath. His once ponderous form had lost weight, his once well-filled garments hung in creases on him, but a look of robust health shone in his eye and a wholesome tan adorned his cheek. He strode down the mountain as though he had been born on its arboreous slopes. Without pause, without so much as a false step, he traversed those wild gullies, wet where the dew still lay under the leafy screen of boughs, watered by streams which gurgled over mighty boulders—a wilderness where banks of ferns grew in the dank shade and the thick tangle of undergrowth blocked the traveller’s way.

But well on into the afternoon Tresco had reached the neighbourhood of his cave, where his recluse life dragged out its weary days. His route lay for a brief mile along the track which led to the diggings. Reaching this cleared path, where locomotion was easier, the goldsmith quickened his pace, when suddenly, as he turned a corner, he came upon two men walking towards him from Timber Town.

In a moment he had taken cover in the thick underscrub which lined each side of the track, and quickly passing a little way in the direction from which he had come, he hid himself behind a dense thicket, and waited for the wayfarers to pass by.

They came along slowly, being heavy laden.

“I tell yer I seen the bloke on the track, Dolly, just about here,” said the younger man of the two. “One moment he was here, next ’e was gone. Didn’t you see ’m?”

“I must ha’ bin lookin’ t’other way, up the track,” said the other. “I was thinkin’ o’ somethin’. I was thinkin’ that this place, just here, was made a-purpose for our business. Now, look at this rock.”

He led his companion to the inner edge of the track, where a big rock abutted upon the acute angle which the path made in circumventing the forest-clad hill-side. Placing their “swags” on the path the two men clambered up behind the rock, and Tresco could hear their conversation as he lay behind the thick scrub opposite them.

“See?” said Dolphin, as he pointed up the track in the direction of Timber Town. “From here you can command the track for a half-a-mile.”

Sweet William looked, and said, “That’s so—you can.”

“Now, look this way,” Dolphin pointed down the track in the direction of the diggings. “How far can you see, this way?”

“Near a mile,” replied William.

“Very good. We plant two men behind this rock, and two over there in the bush, on the opposite side, and we can bail up a dozen men. Eh?”

“It’s the place, the identical spot, Dolly; but I should put the other two men a little way up the track—we don’t want to shoot each other.”

“Just so. It would be like this: we have ’em in view, a long while before they arrive; they’re coming up hill, tired, and goin’ slow; we’re behind perfect cover.”

“I don’t see how we can beat it, unless it is to put a tree across the road, just round the corner on the Timber Town side.”

“No, no. That’d give the show away. That’d identify the spot. There’re a hundred reasons against it. A tree across the track might stop the diggers as well, and the first party that come along would axe it through, and where would our log be then? It would never do. But let’s get down, and have a drink. Thank Gawd, there’s a bottle or two left in my swag.”

Tresco saw them clamber down from the rock, and drink beer by the wayside. Only too quickly did he recognise these men, who looked like diggers but behaved so strangely; but the sight of

the liquor was almost more than he could bear, yet not daring to stir a finger lest he should be discovered he was forced to see them drink it.

Indeed, they made quite a meal; eating bread and cheese, which they washed down with their favourite beverage. When the bottles were empty, Dolphin flung them into the bushes opposite to him, and the missiles, shivering into hundreds of pieces, sprinkled the goldsmith with broken glass.

He stifled a wordy protest which rose to his lips, and lay still; and shortly afterwards he had the pleasure of seeing the undesirable strangers hump their “swags” and retrace their steps towards Timber Town.

When they had disappeared, Tresco came from his hiding-place. He looked up and down the track. “Just so,” he soliloquised, “half-a-mile this way, a mile that. Good cover.... Commanding position. What’s their little game? It seems to me that there are bigger rascals than Benjamin in Timber Town.” And with this salve applied to his conscience, the goldsmith pursued his way towards his dismal cavern.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Goldsmith Comes to Town the Second Time.

Tresco stood in the yellow light of the paraffin lamp, and gazed in wonderment at Gentle Annie. He was a tattered and mournful object; his boots worn out, his trousers a marvel of patchwork, his coat a thing discoloured and torn, his hair and beard unshorn, himself a being unrecognisable by his former friends.

Gentle Annie’s attitude betokened the greatest surprise. With her hands on her bosom, her lips parted, her cheeks pale, her eyes frightened, she stood, and timidly returned the gaze of the strange man before her.

“What do you want?” she asked, so soon as she could find her voice. “Why do you come here?”

“Don’t be alarmed,” said Benjamin reassuringly. “First, let me tell you that I’m your friend and protector. Do you forget Tresco the goldsmith?”

Gentle Annie gave vent to a little cry of astonishment.

“I am an outlaw,”—he spoke as if he were defending himself before his peers—“an outcast, a hunted dog. My own house is unsafe, so I came here for protection and a little comfort.” He dropped suddenly into quite a sentimental tone of voice. “I haven’t spoken to a soul, save my lad, for over six weeks. I’m a bit lonesome and miserable; and I badly need a well-cooked meal.”

“But if you stop here”—Gentle Annie’s ample bust rose and fell with agitation—“the police will catch you.”

“They’d think of looking for me in the moon before they came here, my dear; besides I have no intention of stopping. I only want rest and food.”

“I’ll do what I can for you, but you must go almost directly.”

“Why, certainly.” Tresco sat down, and drew a deep breath. “It’s good to look at a wholesome woman again—it seems years since I saw one.”

A smile passed over Gentle Annie’s face, and her eyes twinkled with merriment. “I see you’re not cured of your old weakness,” she said.

“No, my dear; and I hope I never shall be.” Benjamin had rallied from his depression. “On the contrary, it increases.”

They were a strange couple—the wild-looking man on one side of the table, and the fine figure of a woman who emitted a faint odour of patchouli, on the other.

“I suppose you know I’m my own mistress now.”

“It looks like it. I understood something of the kind from Jake.”

“I objected to be pulled about indiscriminately, so I left The Lucky Digger. A rough brute cut my arm with a broken glass.” She rolled up her sleeve, and showed the scar of the newly-healed wound.

Benjamin took the soft, white arm in his hand, and gave it just the suspicion of a squeeze.

“I wish I’d bin there, my dear: I’d ha’ chucked him through the window.”

“Mr. Scarlett—who has been so lucky on the diggings—kicked him out of the house on to the pavement.”

“Ah! but did he do the thing properly, scientifically?”

“I think so. And when he found the boss blaming me for the row, he turned on him like a tiger. But afterwards old Townson gave me the office, so I’ve retired into private life. Do you like my rooms?”

“A trifle small, don’t you think?” said Benjamin.

“Cozy.”

“My dear, where you are it can’t help being cozy.”

“After that I’ll get you something to eat. What do you say to grilled steak and onions?”

“Delicious! Couldn’t be better.”

Gentle Annie bustled out to the safe, at the back of the house, and returned with a dish of red and juicy meat.

“And to follow, you shall have stewed plums and cream.”

“Better than ever,” said Benjamin; his mouth watering behind his ragged beard.

“I believe I understand mankind,” said Gentle Annie, going to a cupboard, whence she took a big bottle, which she placed on the table.

“If all the women in the world understood men as you do, my dear, we should have Arcadia here, instead of Gehennum.”

“Instead of what?”

“Gehennum, my dear; a place where they drive men into the wilderness and cut them off from supplies, and they rot in damp caves, destitute of bread, beer, and even tobacco.”

“No; I really can’t supply that last. If I let you smoke, some old cat would come sniffing round to-morrow morning, and say, ‘Phew! a *man* has been here.’ Good food and drink you shall have, but no tobacco.”

“But you’ll let me wash?”

“Certainly. Cleanliness is next to godliness. If you can’t have the one, I wouldn’t bar you from the other.” She led him to the door of her bedroom, and said, “Walk in.”

The room was a dainty affair of muslin blinds and bed-hangings. To Benjamin it was a holy of holies dedicated to the sweet, the lovely, the inscrutable. All the feminine gear lying around, the little pots of powder and ointment, the strange medicaments for the hair, the mirrors, the row of little shoes, the bits of jewellery lying on fat pincushions, the skirts and wrappers and feminine finery hanging behind the door, these and fifty other things appealed to the softest spot in his susceptible nature. He took up the ewer, and poured water into the basin; but he was ashamed to place his dirty coat on a thing so clean as was the solitary dimity-covered chair, so he put the ragged garment on the floor. Then he took up a pink cake of soap, and commenced his ablutions.

A strong and agreeable odour tickled his olfactory nerves—the cooking had begun. Though his ears were full of lather, he could hear the meat frying in the pan, and the spluttering of the fat.

“What punishment do they give to people who harbour malefactors?” Gentle Annie called from over her cooking.

“Who’s a malefactor?” called Tresco from the middle of a towel with which he was drying his roseate face.

“What are *you* then?”

“I’m a gentleman at large, my dear. No one has charged me with anything yet, let alone convicted me.”

“But there’s a warrant out against you, old gentleman.”

“Maybe. I haven’t seen it.”

“But what’s *my* position?”

“You’re accessory after the fact, if there is a fact.”

“What am I liable for?”

“That depends on the judge, my dear. It might be two, three, or more kisses. If I was on the bench, the sentence would be as heavy as possible, and I’d insist on executing it myself.”

A laugh came from over the frying-pan.

“If you’re not careful, old party, you’ll have some of this hot fat on your head.”

Benjamin had finished his toilette, and walked into the other room.

The small, square table was spread with a white cloth, and a place was set for one.

“But, my dear, won’t you partake?” said Benjamin, eyeing the arrangement of the table.

“I’m not hungry,” the girl replied. “I’ll watch the lion feed.”

The little room was filled with the smell of cooked viands, and Tresco seated himself in readiness to eat.

The smoking steak, garnished with fried onions and potatoes, was placed before him.

“For what I am about to receive, my dear, I thank you.” Gently squeezing the ex-bar-maid’s hand, he kissed it.

“Now, that’ll do. You’re getting giddy in your old age—it must be the effect of the steak. Cupboard love, cupboard love!”

Tresco drew the cork of the big bottle, which he handed to Gentle Annie.

“What’s this for?” she asked.

“You pour it out, my dear. It’ll make it taste so much sweeter.”

“You gay old deceiver: you’re like the rest of them.”

“No, my dear: they’re imitation; I’m the genuine article.”

Gentle Annie filled his tall glass deftly, so that the froth stood in a dome over the liquor. She was about to replace the bottle on the table, when Tresco took a tumbler from the dresser, and filled it for her.

“Keep me company,” he said. “It looks more comfortable.”

“But stout’s so fattening.”

“My dear, a lean woman is a reproach to her sex.”

“Then, what’s a fat one?”

“A credit, like I am to mine, or used to be before I got thin through semi-starvation. Here’s to your very good health; may your beauty never grow less.” Benjamin raised his glass to his lips.

“More flattery.” Gentle Annie’s comfortable laugh shook her whole body. “I’m sorry I can’t return the compliment.”

“You do better: you supply the inner man—steak, done to a turn; stout; sweet stuffs. You couldn’t have treated me better, if I’d been a bishop.”

“Why a bishop?”

“I’ve looked round, and taken stock of my fellows; and I think a bishop has a rousing good time, don’t you?”

“I can’t say; I don’t often entertain bishops.”

“Bishops and licensed victuallers; I think they get the cream of life.”

“But what about lords and dukes?”

“They have to pay through the nose for all they get, but bishops and landlords get all their good things chucked in gratuitous. Of course a bishop’s more toney, but a publican sees more of life—honours, meaning good tucker and liquor, divided.”

Tresco attacked the juicy steak: his satisfaction finding expression in murmurs of approval. He finished the stout with as much relish as if it had been the richest wine; and then Gentle Annie took from the cupboard two glass dishes, the one half-filled with luscious red plums swimming in their own juice, the other containing junket.

Tresco had almost forgotten the taste of such food. While he was eating it Gentle Annie made some tea.

“Is this the way you treat the toffs, when they come to see you?”

“Toffs? You’re the greatest toff that has come to see me, so far.”

“I shall come again.”

“Do you know there’s a reward offered for you?”

“How much?”

“Twenty pounds.”

“Is that all? I’ll give it you, my dear.”

From his dirty rags he pulled out a small linen bag, from which he emptied upon a clean plate a little pile of nuggets.

Gentle Annie was lost in wonderment. Her eyes glistened, and she turned the pieces of gold over with her finger covetously.

“These should go close on £4 to the ounce,” remarked the goldsmith, as he separated with the blade of a table-knife a portion of the gold equal to what he guessed to be five ounces, and the remainder he replaced in the bag.

“That’s for you,” he said, pushing the plate towards her.

Gentle Annie gleefully took the gold in her hands.

“You generous old party!” she exclaimed. “I know when I am well off.”

They now drank tea out of dainty cups, and Benjamin took a pipe and tobacco from his pocket.

“I really must have a smoke to settle my dinner,” he said.

“Of course,” said she; “it was only my fun. I smoke myself.” Taking a packet from the mantelpiece, she lighted a cigarette, which she handed to Tresco, when a low knock was heard at the door.

In a moment she had blown out the light, and led the erring goldsmith to her inner room, where he stood, apprehensive but alert. From his belt he drew a knife, and then he furtively examined the fastenings of the muslin-draped window.

He heard his hostess open the door and speak to her visitor, who replied in a deep voice, at some length. But, presently, the door closed, the steps of the visitor were heard departing, and Gentle Annie softly entered the room.

“You’re quite safe,” she said.

“Who was it?”

“Only a friend of mine. He’s gone. He won’t call again to-night.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

Amiria Plays Her Highest Card in the Game of Love.

Scarlett was bound for the gold-fields. He bestrode a tall chestnut mare, with white “socks.” In the cool of the morning, with the dew sparkling on the hedges and the birds twittering in the orchards, he rode out of Timber Town.

He crossed the ford where he had rescued Rachel from the clutches of the digger, and had turned into the gorge which led through the foot-hills when he came suddenly upon Amiria, waiting for him, with her horse standing across the road.

She was dressed in a perfectly-fitting habit of dark blue cloth, a hard felt hat, and in her hand she carried a dainty whip; but her feet were bare, and one pretty toe protruded from the stirrup.

“I’m hanged!” exclaimed Jack. “Who ever expected to see you here, at this time of the morning?”

The Maori girl laughed. “I knew you were going to-day—Rose Summerhayes told me. So I said to myself, ‘I’ll go to the diggings too; I’ll see how they get this gold.’ Perhaps I may find some myself. Is it far?”

“About fifty miles. But I can’t take you to the field.”

“Why not? I shan’t steal anything.”

Scarlett could not forbear a smile. “I don’t mean that,” he said. “I was thinking what the fellows would say.”

Amiria’s merry laugh rang through the narrow valley. “Oh, you *Pakeha* people, how funny you are—always troubled by what others may think about you, always bothering about the day after to-morrow. Yet I think it’s all put on: you do just the same things as the Maori. I give it up. I can’t guess it. Come on; see if your horse can trot mine.”

She flicked her big bay that she was riding, and started off at a swinging pace. And so, Scarlett riding on the soft turf on one side of the road and Amiria on the other, they raced till they came to the next ford.

“I beat!” cried the Maori girl, her brown cheeks glowing with excitement.

The horses were given a mouthful of water, and then they splashed through the shallows; their iron shoes clanking on the boulders as dry land was reached.

“You are very rich, aren’t you?” Amiria asked, as they walked their horses side by side.

“What do you mean by rich?”

“Oh, you have lots of gold, money, everything you want.”

“Not by any means.”

“You must be very greedy, then. They tell me you have thousands of pounds in the bank, a big house which you are building, and a fine girl.”

“A girl?”

“Yes, Rahera Varnhagen. Isn’t she a fine girl?”

“Rachel Varnhagen!”

“Yes. I was in the old man’s store yesterday, buying things for the *pa*, and he told me he had given his girl to you.”

Jack opened his eyes in astonishment. He wondered who was the liar, the Jew or the Maori girl, but all he said was, “Well, I’m hanged!”

Amiria laughed. “You see, these things can’t be kept dark.”

“But it’s all a yarn. I’m not engaged to anybody. Can’t a man talk to a girl, without all Timber Town saying he is going to marry her?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you like her?”

“I think she’s very pretty, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I want to marry her.”

“Then you *don’t* like her?”

“I like her only as a friend.”

“Shall I tell her that?”

Jack thought for a moment. He had suddenly become rather suspicious of women-folk.

“It might hurt her feelings,” he said.

“If you don’t speak the truth, she will think you mean to marry her.”

“Then, tell her I don’t mean to do anything of the sort.”

Amiria laughed softly to herself. “That leaves two,” she said.

“Leaves two? What do you mean?”

“There are three girls in love with you. Rahera was one—she is out of it. That leaves two.”

“This is the very dickens! Who are the other two, pray?”

“Rose Summerhayes is one.”

Jack laughed. “She is too discreet, too English, to give her love, except where she is certain it will be returned.”

“You can’t tell: you don’t know.” Amiria had reined in her horse beside Jack’s. “She is always talking about you. She talks about you in her sleep—I know: I have heard her.”

“No, no; you make a mistake. She’s a great friend of mine, but that is all. Who’s the other daring girl?”

“You know,” replied Amiria, with a pout.

“How am I to presume to think of such a thing?”

“You know quite well.”

“Upon my honour, I don’t.”

“Does a girl ride with you, if she doesn’t like you?”

“Depends upon the girl.”

“Would I trouble to meet you, if I didn’t?”

“Then it’s you? Upon my word! This is overwhelming.”

“But *I* have a right to tell you—I saved your life. I know you as other girls don’t.”

“Oh, I say, this is a bit rough on a fellow. I couldn’t help getting shipwrecked, you know.”

“But I saved you. I have the right to you first. If you don’t like me, then you can marry some other girl.”

“I don’t think you understand, Amiria. Of course I’m awfully indebted to you. As you say, I owe you my life. But if I marry you, I can’t marry anybody else afterwards.”

The Maori girl had jumped from her horse, and Scarlett was standing beside her. The horses grazed on the grassy bank of the stream.

“I know all the ways of your people,” said Amiria: “I was sent to school to learn them. Some I think good; some I think bad. Your marriage is like the yoke you put on bullocks. It locks you tight together. Before you know really whether you like each other you have this yoke put on you:

you are tied up for ever. The Maori way is better. We have our marriage too—it is like the bridle on my horse, light, easy, but good. We only put it on when we know that we like each other. That's the way I wish to be married, and afterwards I would get your priest to give us his marriage, so that I might be *tika* in the eyes of the *Pakeha* people."

As she spoke, her eyes flashed and her whole attitude was masterful, if not defiant; her cheek coloured, her mouth quivered with excitement, her gestures, as well as her speech, were full of animation. Evidently, she was giving expression to the warmest feelings of her passionate nature.

Scarlett held a small *manuka* stick, plucked from a flowering bush by the wayside. With this he struck his leather legging repeatedly, as he walked to and fro in agitation. Pausing by the river's brim, he gazed into the rippling water.

"This is something like marriage by capture," he said, "but the tables are turned on the man. The thing may be all right for you, but I should lose caste. With all your tuition, Amiria, you don't understand *Pakeha* ways. I could marry you, English fashion; but I haven't the least intention of doing so."

The Maori girl had followed him, and as he gave his decision her arm was linked through his.

The tethered horses were cropping the grass, regardless of their riders. Scarlett, wrestling with the problem that confronted him, was still gazing at the water.

But a sob recalled him to his duty. His companion's whole frame was quivering with emotion, and, as he turned, his eyes were met by hers steadfastly regarding him through their tears.

"You had better go home," he said. "The best place for you is the *pa*. The best way for you to show your regard for me is to turn back."

She had shot her one bolt, and it had missed its mark. She turned her head aside, and hid her face in her hands. Slowly and disconsolately, she walked towards her horse, and unloosing him from the bush to which he was tied, she climbed into the saddle.

Her whip had dropped on the grass. Picking it up, Scarlett took it to her. She looked the picture of misery, and his heart began to melt. Her right hand hung limply at her side, and as he was putting the whip into it, he pressed her fingers gently. She did not draw her hand away, but left it in his clasp: gradually her tears dried, and a smile came into her face.

"Hullo!" said a strange voice behind them. "Spoonin'? Don't mind me, mate: I've bin there myself."

They turned their heads, to see four grinning men behind them on the track.

"Hold on, Carny; step behind the bushes, an' give the couple a chanst. Boys will be boys. Can't you see the young feller was about to enjoy a kiss?"

"Take her orf the horse, mate," said another of the men. "Go for a walk with her—we'll mind the horses. We won't take no notice."

Flushing with anger, Amiria drew herself up.

"You'd better go," said Scarlett. "I'll attend to these men."

Without another word the Maori girl turned her horse's head for home, walked him quietly past Dolphin and his gang, without taking the least notice of any of them, and then cantered away.

As she did so the four men burst into hoarse laughter and obscene remarks.

Scarlett walked menacingly towards Garstang, who had been the chief offender.

"You filthy brute," he said, "what do you mean?"

"Filthy, eh?" retorted Garstang. "D'you 'ear that, Dolly? An' I suppose my mates is filthy too, eh, mister?"

"Jab 'im in the mouth, Garstang." This advice from Sweet William.

But Dolphin settled the matter. With a revolver in his hand he stepped towards the menacing Scarlett.

"Now, hook it," he said. "If you can't take a bit of chaff without turning nasty, don't think you can get up to any of your funny business here. I give you three minutes in which to clear."

As Scarlett, following the general practice of the diggers, went unarmed, he could only reply by acting upon dictation; but before he turned to go, he looked well at the men before him. Then he mounted his horse, and rode away.

He quickly forded the stream, and, without turning his head to look again at the strange gang, he plunged into the dense forest which stretched across mountain and valley. As he climbed the slopes of the range over which the track led him, the sun shone brightly and not a cloud was in the sky. The air was so still that even at the summit of the range, 2000 feet and more above the sea, not the slightest breeze stirred. The atmosphere was oppressive, and, three parts of the way down the further slope, where a clear rivulet crossed the path, Jack was fain to rest beneath the shade of a giant tree-fern, and eat and drink. There was not a creature to harm him; no venomous

reptile, no ravenous beast dwelt in those vast sub-tropical forests; no poisonous miasma reeked from the moist valleys below; in the evergreen trees countless pigeons cooed, *kaka* parrots and green paroquets screamed, and black parson-birds sang. It was a picture of Nature in one of her most peaceful and happy moods. Forgetful of the distractions which he had left behind him, Jack's mind had turned to the contemplation of the bright prospects which lay before him, when his reverie was broken by the sound of voices and the noise of horses' hoofs; and round a bend of the track, slowly ascending the uncertain gradient, appeared the gold-escort.

Leading the cavalcade, rode a mounted constable dressed in a blue tunic, with silver buttons, dun-coloured, corded riding-breeches, top-boots, and a blue shako. His carbine was slung negligently, and he whistled as he rode.

Behind him came Isaac Zahn, sitting loosely on his horse; a revolver strapped in its case at his belt. He was followed by an unarmed mounted man who led the pack-horse which carried the gold; and an armed digger, who rode a white horse, brought up the rear.

The leading horse whinnied, and Jack's mare answered.

"Good morning," said the constable, reining up. "A beautiful day, sorr. Have ye such a thing as a match wid you?"

Jack, who was smoking, handed a box of matches to the man, who lighted his pipe. The whole cavalcade had come to a halt, and Zahn, who pretended not to recognise Jack, sat on his horse, and scowled.

Scarlett's eyes involuntarily fixed themselves on the heavily-laden pack-horse.

"I should advise you to keep your weather eye lifted, constable," he said.

"Bedad, an' we'll attend to that," replied the Irishman, with a broad smile. "The escort's as good as in Timber Town already. Thank you, sorr." He handed back the matches. "Good morning t'you." And lightly touching his horse with the spur, he passed on.

Disregarding Scarlett's nod of recognition, Zahn followed the leader, without so much as a glance at the man whom he hated as his supposed supplanter in the affections of the beautiful Jewess.

The pack-horse and its leader, a stoutly-built man, went heavily by, and the rear-guard let his horse drink at the stream, but he was a man filled with the importance of his office, and to Jack's greeting he replied merely with a mechanical nod, as though he would say, "Don't speak to me: I'm exceedingly intent upon conveying this gold to Timber Town."

"Strange crowd," mused Jack, as the last hoof disappeared round the upper bend of the track; "riding loose in the saddle, their arms slung behind them. If I'd had a gun, I could have shot the first man before he saw me. Robbing escorts can't be such a difficult matter as is supposed. If Zahn had been civil I'd have used the opportunity to warn him of the queer gang I met at the ford. They may be simple diggers—they look like it—but the man who whips out a pistol on the least provocation is to be guarded against when you're in charge of five or six thousand ounces of gold."

With these thoughts Jack mounted his horse, and rode away. The winding track at length led him into a deep valley, down which flowed a broad river whose glistening waters rippled laughingly over a shallow bed of grey boulders. Along its banks grew mighty pines, the *rimu*, the *totara*, and the broad-spreading black-birch, their trunks hidden in dense undergrowth and a tangle of creepers; while here and there beside the sparkling waters grew thick clumps of bright green tree-ferns.

But the track was now flat and straight, and putting his horse into a trot Scarlett covered the ground rapidly. After some ten miles of riding, he came to a ford where the track crossed the river, and entered rougher country. As he drew rein at the verge of the water to let his horse drink, he noticed that the heavens had suddenly become dark. Looking at the strip of sky revealed by the treeless stretch above the waters, he saw a phenomenon in the upper air. Across the tranquil blue expanse advanced a mighty thunder-cloud; its unbroken face approaching at immense speed, though not a leaf of the forest stirred, nor the frond of a fern moved. It was like the oncoming of a mighty army, sweeping across the still country, and leaving devastation in its track. Then the low rumble of the thunder, like the sound of cannon in the distant hills, heralded the commencement of the storm. A flash broke from the inky black cloud, and simultaneously a deafening thunder-clap burst upon the solitary traveller. Then followed an ominous silence, broken by the rushing of the wind among the tree-tops, and the high heads of the forest giants bent before the storm. The rain came down in a deluge, and shut from sight both hill and valley; so that instead of wandering through a leafy paradise, where birds sang and the sunshine glittered on a million leaves, Scarlett groped his way as in a maze, dark and impenetrable; his horse dejected, himself drenched and cold.

CHAPTER XXX.

In Tresco's Cave.

Tresco stood in his dark, dank cavern, and meditated upon the loneliness of life.

He was naturally a sociable man, and loved the company of his fellows, but here he was living a hermit's existence, shut up in the bowels of the earth, with no better associates than the clammy stalactites which constantly dripped water upon the white, calcareous floors.

The atmosphere was so cold that it chilled the marrow of the goldsmith's bones, and to render habitable the inner recess where he lived he was forced to keep a fire perpetually burning. To do this it was necessary for him to sally into the daylight, in order that he might collect firewood, of which there was in the neighbourhood of the cave an abundant supply.

Groping his way slowly through the winding passage, every twist and turn of which he knew in the dark, Benjamin passed into the lofty cavern which he had named the Cathedral, where the stalactites and stalagmites, meeting, had formed huge columns, which seemed to support the great domed roof overhead. This was a place which Tresco was never tired of admiring. "A temple built without hands," he said, as he held aloft his candle, and viewed the snow-white pillars which stood on either side of what he named the Nave.

"What a place to preach in." He who has no companions must needs talk to himself if he would hear the human voice. "Here, now, a man *could* expatiate on the work of the Creator, but his sermon would have to be within the fifteen minutes' limit, or his congregation would catch their death of cold. 'Dearly beloved brethren, the words of my text are illustrated by the house in which we are assembled.'" His voice filled the Nave, and reverberated down the aisles. "'Here you have the real thing, built by the Master Builder, Nature, for the use of the Cave Man, and preserved for all time. How wonderful are the works of Creation, how exquisite the details. You have heard of the Doric, the Ionic, and the Corinthian columns, and of the beauties of Greek architecture, but compare these white, symmetrical piers, raised in one solid piece, without join or crevice. Observe yonder alabaster gallery where the organ swells its harmonious tones; observe the vestry, where the preacher dons his sacerdotal garb—they are perfect. But did I hear a lady sneeze? Alas! Nature forgot the hot-air pipes; the Cathedral, I admit, strikes a little chilly. Therefore I dismiss you, my brethren, lest you should catch pleurisy, or go into galloping consumption.'"

He finished with a laugh, and then passed into the small entrance-cave, which he denominated facetiously the Church Porch. Here he blew out his candle, which he placed on a rock, and emerged from his hiding-place.

He had burst from the restful, if cold, comfort of his cave upon the warring elements. Peal after peal of thunder rolled along the wooded slopes of the rugged range; fierce flashes of lightning pierced the gloom of the dark valley below, and from the black thunder-cloud overhead there poured a torrent of rain which made the goldsmith think of the Deluge.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he stood in the entrance of his damp den, "there are worse places than my cave after all. But what I want is firewood. Lord! that flash almost blinded me. Rumble—grumble—tumble—crash—bang! Go it; never mind *me*. You aren't frightening me worth tuppence. I rather like a little electricity and *aqua pura*." In answer there was a dazzling flash, followed by a terrific clap of thunder which seemed to burst almost above Benjamin's head. "All right, if you insist—I'll go. Sorry I obtruded ... Good afternoon."

He retreated into the cave, took up his candle, which he relighted, saying to himself, "I'll go and explore that passage behind the Organ Loft, and see if it leads to the outer world. In case I get shut in here, like a rat in a hole, it's just as well for me to know my burrow thoroughly."

Groping his way up a slippery ascent where his feet continually stumbled over the uneven surface of the encrusted floor, he climbed to the Organ Loft, where, screened behind a delicate, white tracery which hung from roof to floor of the gallery and assumed the shape of an organ, pipes and panels complete, he could see his candle's flame shoot long fingers of light into the vast Nave below.

However, he spent but little time in contemplation of the weird scene, but turning sharply to the right he followed a narrow, winding passage which led into the heart of the limestone mountain. His progress was both slow and difficult, for the encrusting carbonate had, in many places, all but filled up the passage, and, in many others, the floor was so broken as to make it almost impossible for him to press onwards. Now he would squeeze himself between the converging sides of the passage, now he would crawl on hands and knees through a hole which would barely receive his shoulders; and thus, sweating, panting, bruised, and even bleeding where his hands and arms had been grazed by rasping and projecting rocks, he at length sat down to rest in a place where the tunnel broadened into a small chamber. How far he had pushed his way into the bowels of the earth he could not tell, neither was he thoughtful of the distance. What he was looking and hoping for, was a gleam of light ahead, but whenever he blew out his candle the inky blackness was so intense as to be painful to his eyes.

"My God! Supposing a man got in here, and couldn't get back? Suppose I got stuck between two rocks?—I'd have to stop here till I grew thin enough to squeeze out."

Quickly he re-lit his candle.

"That's better," he exclaimed. "There is after all some company in a lighted candle. We'll now go on; we'll press forward; we'll see whither this intricate path leadeth. 'Vorwarts' is the word: no

turning back till the goal is reached."

He crept through a low aperture, and with difficulty he rose to his feet; a few steps further on he stumbled; the candle fell from his hand, and dropped, and dropped, and dropped, in fact he never heard it reach the bottom.

Feeling in his pocket for his matches as he lay prone, he struck a light, and held the burning taper beyond him as far as he could reach. All that he saw was a dark and horrible abyss. He struck another match with the same result. He seized a piece of loose rock, rolled it over the edge, and waited for the sound of its lodgment at the bottom. He heard it bumping as it fell, but its falling seemed interminable, till at length the sound of its passage to the nether regions died away in sheer depth.

Tresco drew a long breath.

"Never," he said, "never, in the course of his two score years and ten has Benjamin been so near Hades. The best thing he can do is to 'git,' deliberately and with circumspection. And the candle has gone: happy candle to preserve the life of such a man as B.T."

Slowly and with the utmost caution he crept backwards from the horrible pit. But his supply of matches was scanty, and often he bumped his head against the ceiling, and often he tripped and fell, till before long there was not a part of his portly person that was free from pain. Yet still he struggled on, for he realised that his life depended on his extricating himself from the terrible labyrinth in which he was entangled. He struck match after match, till his stock was expended, and then, panting, weary, and sore, he clenched his teeth and battled onward. It seemed miles to the end of the passage. He imagined that he had got into some new tunnel, the opening of which he had passed unwittingly when he crept into the trap; and to the natural dread of his situation was added the horrible fear that he was lost in the bowels of the earth.

And then, when his strength and nerve had all but given out, came deliverance. Before him he saw a faint glimmer of light, which grew brighter and brighter as he pressed painfully forward, and ere he knew that he was safe he found himself in the gallery behind the organ loft.

But what was the brilliant light that filled the nave of the Cathedral? What was the sound he heard? It was the sound of men's voices.

Sitting round a fire, whose red flames illumined the white walls of the grotto, were four men, who talked loudly as they dried their wet garments before the blaze.

Tresco crept to the trellis-work of the gallery, and peered down upon the scene. In the shifting light which the unsteady flames threw across the great cave below he could hardly distinguish one man from another, except where facing the ruddy light the features of this intruder or of that reflected the fierce glow.

"I had to chiv the fat bloke, an' he squealed like a pig when I jabbed 'im." The speaker was sitting cross-legged with his back towards Tresco, and was wiping the blade of a big butcher's knife.

"My man died coughing," said another. "'E coughed as 'e sat like a trussed fowl, an' when I 'squeezed' 'im, 'e just give one larst little cough an' pegged out quite pleasant, like droppin' orf to sleep."

"It's been a bloody mess," remarked a third speaker. "There's Garstang there, a mass of blood all over his shirt, and there's the two men that was shot; any'ow you like to look at it, it's an unworkmanlike job. All four of 'em should ha' been 'squeezed'—bullets make reports and blood's messy."

"Garn! Whatyer givin' us, Dolly?" said the youngest member of the gang. "Didn't you shoot your own man—an' on the track, too? I don't see what you've got to growl at. We've got the gold—what more do you want?"

"I shot the unfortunate man, your Honour, firstly because he was a constable, and secondly because he was givin' trouble, your Honour. But I prefer to do these things professionally." Dolphin's mock seriousness tickled his hearers, and they laughed. "But, joking apart," he said, "after all the experience we've had, to go and turn that mountain-side into a butcher's shambles is nothin' short of disgraceful. They all ought to've been 'squeezed,' an' have died as quiet as mice, without a drop of blood on 'em."

"All food for worms; all lying in the howling wilderness, where they'll stop till kingdom come. What's the use of worrying? Hand over that bag of gold, Garstang, an' let's have a look. I've got an awful weakness for nuggets."

A blanket was spread on the floor of the cavern, and upon this were heaped bank-notes and sovereigns and silver that glittered in the fire-light.

The four men gathered round, and the leader of the gang divided the money into four lots.

"Here's some of the gold." The shrill-voiced young man handed a small but heavy bag to Dolphin. "There's stacks more."

"One thing at a time, William," said the leader. "First, we'll divide the money, then the gold, which won't be so easy, as we've got no scales. Here, take your cash, and count it. I make it £157 7s. apiece." From a heap of bundles which lay a few yards off he drew forward a tent-fly, and

then he carried into the light of the fire a number of small but heavy bags, one by one, and placed them on the canvas.

“My lot’s only £147 7s.,” said a deep and husky voice.

“You must ha’ made a mistake, Garstang,” said Dolphin. “Count it again.”

While the hulking, wry-faced robber bent to the task, the leader began to empty the contents of the bags upon the tent-fly.

Peering through the tracery of the Organ Gallery, Tresco looked down upon the scene with wonder and something akin to envy. There, on the white piece of folded canvas, he could see dull yellow heaps, which, even in the uncertain light of the fire, he recognised as gold.

At first, half-stunned by the presence of the strangers, he was at a loss to determine their character, but from their conversation and the display of such ill-gotten riches, he quickly grasped the fact that they were greater criminals than himself. He saw their firearms lying about; he heard their disjointed talk, interlarded with hilarious oaths; he saw them stooping over the heaps of gold, and to his astonished senses it was plain that a robbery on a gigantic scale had been committed.

On one side of the fire the wet and steaming garments of the murderers were hung on convenient stalagmites to dry; upon the other side of the red blaze the four men, dressed in strange motley, gleaned from their “swags,” wrangled over the division of the plunder.

“There’s only a hundred-an’-forty-seven quid in my lot, I tell yer!” Garstang’s rasping voice could be plainly heard above the others. “Count it yerself.”

“Count it, Dolly, an’ shut his crooked mouth.”

“I’ll take his word for it,” said the leader. “We can make it good to you, Garstang, when we get to town and sell some gold. Now listen, all of you. I’m going to divide the biggest haul we’ve ever made, or are likely to make.”

“Listen, blokes,” interrupted Sweet William, with an oath. “Give the boss your attention, *if* you please.”

Tresco glued his eye tighter to the aperture through which he peered. There lay the dull, yellow gold—if only he could but scare the robbers away, the prize would be his own. He rose on one knee to get a better view, but as he did so his toe dislodged a loose piece of stone, which tumbled noisily down the gallery steps, the sound of its falling re-echoing through the spacious cavern.

In a moment the robbers were thrown into a state of perturbation. Seizing their arms, they glanced wildly around, and stood on their defence.

But all was hushed and still.

“Go forward, Garstang, and search the cave,” ordered the leader in a voice of authority.

With a firebrand in one hand and a revolver in the other, the big, burly man crept forward; his mates alert to fire over him at any object he might discover. His search was haphazard, and his feet were naturally uncertain among the debris which had accumulated on the floor of the cavern.

Skirting the grotto’s edge, he examined the inky shadows that lay behind pillar and projection, till he came to the stairs which led to the Organ Gallery.

Tresco, filled with an unspeakable dread, contemplated a retreat down the passage he had lately explored, where he might be driven by the murderers over the abyssmal depth which he had failed to fathom, when suddenly the man with the torch tripped, fell, and the flame of his firebrand disappeared in a shower of sparks. With an oath the prostrate man gathered up his bruised limbs, and by the aid of the flickering fire-light he groped his way back to his fellows, but not before he had placed his ear to the damp floor and had listened for the sound of intruders.

“There’s nobody,” he said, when he reached his mates. “The row was only a blanky spike that fell from the roof an’ broke itself. The ground’s covered with ’em.”

“Come on, then,” said Sweet William; “let’s finish our business.”

They gathered again round the treasure.

“You see, I have arranged it in two heaps,” said Dolphin—“nuggets in one, gold-dust in the other. I propose to measure out the dust first.”

Each man had provided himself with one of the leather bags which had originally held the gold, and their leader filled a pint pannikin with gold-dust. “That’s one,” he said, lifting it heavily. “That’s for you, old crooked chops.” And he emptied the measure into Garstang’s bag.

“Two.” He emptied a pannikinful of gold into Carnac’s bag.

“Three.” Sweet William received a like measure.

“Four.” Dolphin helped himself.

“That makes four pints of gold,” he said. “What d’you say, mates, will she go round another turn?”

“No,” said Carnac, “try a half-pint all round.”

Dolphin fetched a smaller pannikin from the swags, and the division of the gold continued.

To share the nuggets equally was a difficult matter, and a good deal of wrangling took place in consequence. This, however, was quieted by the simple expedient of tossing a coin for disputed pieces of gold. The biggest nuggets being thus disposed of, the smaller ones were measured in the half-pint pot, till at length the envious eyes of the goldsmith saw the last measureful disappear into its owner’s bag.

This exceedingly delicate matter being settled, the bushrangers sat round the fire, drank tea which they brewed in a black “billy,” lit their pipes, and—as is invariably the case with a gang of thieves—enacted again the awful drama in which they had lately played their horrible parts.

Shivering on the damp floor of the dripping gallery, Tresco strained his ears to hear every diabolical detail of the conversation.

“Garstang, old man, Dolly’s right; you’d better see to that shirt of yours. It looks as if you’d killed a pig in it.”

“The chap I chiv’d was as fat as a pig, anyway,” said the crooked-mouthed murderer, as he attempted to rub out the guilty stains with a dirty piece of rag. “The blood spurted all over me as soon as I pulled out the knife.”

“Take it off, man; it looks as bad as a slaughterman’s,” said the leader of the gang. “Throw it in the fire.”

“I consider I did my man beautifully,” said Carnac. “I told him to say his prayers, and while he knelt I just shot him behind the ear. Now, I call that a very pretty method of dying—no struggling, no fuss, no argument, simply a quick departure in an odour of sanctity.” And the gentlemanly murderer laughed quietly and contentedly.

“The blanky banker went ratty when he saw my gun,” said Sweet William. “I had to fair yank ’im through the supple-jacks an’ lawyers. It was something horrid—it made my arm ache. At larst I says, ‘Look ’ere, are you goin’ to walk, or am I to shoot you?’ An’ he kept on sayin’, ‘All the gold is on the horse; don’t take it all, please,’ till I felt sick. ‘Up you git,’ I says, an’ I dragged ’im through the bush, and then bli’me if ’e didn’t sit down an’ cough an’ cry. Such dam’ foolishness made me lose patience. I just ‘squeezed’ ’im where he sat.”

“My bloke was the devil to die,” said Garstang. “First I shot him one way, then I shot him another; an’ at larst I had to chiv ’im with the knife, though it was the larst thing I wanted to do.”

“They should all have been ‘squeezed,’” said Dolphin, “and nothing’s easier if you’ve got the knack—noiseless, bloodless, traceless, the only scientific way of doin’ the work.”

“All of which you’ve said before, Dolly.” Sweet William rose and groped his way to the mouth of the cave.

“It’s the blamed horses that bother me,” said Carnac. “We left their carcases too near the track. We should have taken them a mile or more along, and have shoved them over a precipice, down which they might have fallen by accident in the storm. As it is, they’ll be putrid in a fortnight, and make the track impassable.”

“By which time,” said Dolphin, “we shall be out of reach.”

“What about the Bank?” Garstang asked the question almost insolently. “I thought you ’ad such wonderful plans of yer own.”

“The thing’s easy enough,” retorted Dolphin, “but the question is whether it’s worth while. We’ve made a haul to be proud of; never did men have a better streak o’ luck. We’ve taken hundreds of ounces from a strong escort, which we stopped at the right place, just in the right way, so that they couldn’t so much as fire a shot. It would be a crying shame to spoil such a job by bein’ trapped over a paltry wooden Bank.”

“Trapped be sugared!” said Garstang.

“The inference ’ll be”—Sweet William had returned from the cave’s mouth, and took up the conversation where he left it—“everybody with any sense’ll say the escort an’ the banker made orf with the gold—nothin’ but blood’ounds could ever find their bodies.”

“It’s bin a wonderful time,” said Dolphin, “but we can’t expect such luck to foller us around like a poodle-dog.”

“I’m for havin’ a slap at the Bank, anyway,” growled Garstang.

“Imagine the effect upon the public mind—the robbery of an escort and a bank, both in one week!” This was how the gentlemanly Carnac regarded the question. “It’d be a record. We’d make a name that wouldn’t easily be forgotten. *I’m* for trying.”

“Well, it’s stopped raining, blokes,” said Sweet William, “but outside it’s dark enough to please

an owl. If we want to get into Timber Town without bein' seen, now's the time to start." So saying, he picked up his "swag," which he hitched upon his back.

The other men rose, one by one, and shouldered their packs, in which each man carried his gold.

With much lumbering, stumbling, and swearing, the murderers slowly departed, groping their way to the mouth of the cave by the light of the fire, which they left burning.

Tresco waited till the last sound of their voices had died away, then he stretched his cramped, benumbed limbs, heaved a deep sigh of relief, and rose to his feet.

"My God, what monsters!" He spoke under his breath, for fear that even the walls should hear him. "If they had found me they'd have thought as little of cutting my throat as of killing a mosquito. If ever I thanked God in my life—well, well—every nerve of me is trembling. That's the reaction. I must warm myself, and have a bite of food."

After carefully scattering the murderers' fire, he groped his way to his inner cell, and there he made his best endeavours to restore his equanimity with warmth, food, and drink.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The Perturbations of the Bank Manager.

The windows of the Kangaroo Bank were ablaze with light, although the town clock had struck eleven. It was the dolorous hour when the landlord of The Lucky Digger, obliged by relentless law, reluctantly turned into the street the topers and diggers who filled his bar.

Bare-headed, the nails of his right hand picking nervously at the fingers of his left, the manager of the Bank emerged from a side-door. He glanced up the dark street towards the great mountains which loomed darkly in the Cimmerian gloom.

"Dear me, dear me," murmured he to himself, "he is very late. What can have kept him?" He glanced down the street, and saw the small crowd wending its way from the hostelry. "It was really a most dreadful storm, the most dreadful thunderstorm I ever remember." His eye marked where the light from the expansive windows of the Bank illumined the wet asphalt pavement. "Landslips frequently occur on newly made tracks, especially after heavy rain. It's a great risk, a grave risk, this transporting of gold from one place to another."

"'Evenin', boss. Just a little cheque for twenty quid. I'll take it in notes."

The men from The Lucky Digger had paused before the brilliantly lighted building.

"Give him a chance.... Let him explain.... Carn't you see there's a run on the Bank."

"Looks bad.... Clerks in the street.... All lighted up at this time o' night.... No money left."

"Say, boss, have they bin an' collared the big safe? Do you want assistance?"

The Manager turned to take refuge in the Bank, but his tormentors were relentless.

"Hold on, mate—you're in trouble. Confide in us. If the books won't balance, what matter? Don't let that disturb your peace of mind. Come and have a drink.... Take a hand at poker.... First tent over the bridge, right-hand side."

"It's no go, boys. He's narked because he knows we want an overdraft. Let 'im go and count his cash."

The Manager pulled himself free from the roisterers and escaped into the Bank by the side door, and the diggers continued noisily on their way.

The lights of the Bank suddenly went out, and the Manager, after carefully locking the door behind him, crossed over the street to the livery stables, where a light burned during the greater part of the night. In a little box of a room, where harness hung on all the walls, there reclined on a bare and dusty couch a red-faced man, whose hair looked as if it had been closely cropped with a pair of horse-clippers. When he caught sight of the banker, he sat up and exclaimed, "Good God, Mr. Tomkinson! Ain't you in bed?"

"It's this gold-escort, Manning—it was due at six o'clock."

"Look here." The stable-keeper rose from his seat, placed his hand lovingly on a trace which hung limply on the wall. "Don't I run the coach to Beaver Town?—and I guess a coach is a more ticklish thing to run than a gold-escort. Lord bless your soul, isn't every coach supposed to arrive before dark? But they don't. 'The road was slippy with frost—I had to come along easy,' the driver'll say. Or it'll be, 'I got stuck up by a fresh in the Brown River.' That's it. I know. But they always arrive, sometime or other. I'll bet you a fiver—one of your own, if you like—that the rivers are in flood, and your people can't get across. Same with the Beaver Town coach. She was due at six o'clock, and here've I been drowsing like a more-pork on this couch, when I might have been in bed. An' to bed I go. If she comes in to-night, the driver can darn well stable the 'orses himself. Good night."

This was a view of the question that had not occurred to Mr. Tomkinson, but he felt he must confer with the Sergeant of Police.

The lock-up was situated in a by-street not far from the centre of the town. The Sergeant was sitting at a desk, and reading the entries in a big book. His peaked shako lay in front of him, and he smoked a cigar as he pored over his book.

He said nothing, he barely moved, when the banker entered; but his frank face, in which a pair of blue eyes stood well apart, lighted up with interest and attention as Mr. Tomkinson told his tale. When the narrative was ended, he said quietly, “Yes, they may be weather-bound. Did you have a clear understanding that the gold was to be brought in to-day?”

“It was perfectly understood.”

“How much gold did you say there was?”

“From fifteen to twenty thousand pounds’ worth—it depends on how much the agent has bought.”

“A lot of money, sir; quite a nice little fortune. It must be seen to. I’ll tell you what I will do. Two mounted constables shall go out at daylight, and I guarantee that if the escort is to be found, *they* will find it.”

“Thank you,” said Tomkinson. “I think it ought to be done. You will send them out first thing in the morning? Thank you. Good night.”

As the banker turned to go, the Sergeant rose.

“Wait a moment,” he said. “I’ll come with you.”

They walked contemplatively side by side till they reached the main street, where a horseman stood, hammering at Manning’s stable-gate.

“Nobody in?” said the Sergeant. “You had better walk inside, and put the horse up yourself.”

“I happen to know that the owner has gone to bed,” said Tomkinson.

The horseman passed through the gateway, and was about to lead his sweating mount into the stables, when the Sergeant stopped him.

“Which way have you come to-day?” he asked.

“From Bush Robin Creek,” replied the traveller.

“You have ridden right through since morning?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Did you overtake some men with a pack-horse?”

“No. I passed Mr. Scarlett, after the thunderstorm came on. That was on the other side of the ranges.”

“How did you find the rivers? Fordable?”

“They were all right, except that on this side of the range they had begun to rise.”

“Perhaps the men we are expecting,” said the nervous banker, “took shelter in the bush when the storm came on. You may have passed without seeing them.”

“Who are the parties you are expecting?” asked the traveller.

“Mr. Zahn, the agent of the Kangaroo Bank, was on the road to-day with a considerable quantity of gold,” replied the Sergeant.

“You mean the gold-escort,” said the traveller. “It left about three hours before I did.”

“Do you know Mr. Zahn?” asked the Sergeant.

“I do. I’ve sold gold to him.”

“I’ll take your name, if you please,” said the Sergeant, producing his pocket-book.

“Rooker, Thomas Samuel Rooker,” said the traveller.

“Where are you to be found?”

“At The Lucky Digger.”

“Thank you,” said the Sergeant, as he closed his book with a snap and put it in his pocket. “Good night.”

“Good night,” said the traveller, as he led his horse into the stable. “If I can be of any use, send for me in the morning.”

“It’s pretty certain that this man never saw them,” said the Sergeant, “therefore they were not on the road when he passed them. They must have been, as you say, in the bush. There is plenty of

hope yet, sir, but I should advise you to get up pretty early to-morrow morning, if you want to see my mounted men start. Good night."

With a gloomy response, Mr. Tomkinson turned his steps towards the Bank, there to toss on a sleepless bed till morning.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The Quietude of Timber Town Is Disturbed.

The crowd which had gathered in front of the verandah of the Post Office of Timber Town was made up, as is not uncommon with crowds, of all sorts and conditions of men. There were diggers dressed in the rough clothes suitable to their calling and broad-brimmed felt hats; tradesmen, fat with soft living, and dressed each according to his taste; farmers, in ready-made store-clothes and straw hats; women, neatly, if plainly, dressed as suited the early hour of the day; a few gaily-dressed girls, and a multitude of boys.

Nailed to the wooden wall of the building was a poster, printed with big head-lines, upon which the interest of all present was centred.

NOTICE.

FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD!!!

WHEREAS persons of the names of ISAAC ZAHN, PETER HEAFY, WILLIAM JOHNSON, and JAMES KETTLE have mysteriously disappeared; AND WHEREAS it is supposed that they have been murdered on the road between Bush Robin Creek and Timber Town; AND WHEREAS, further, they had in their custody at the time a considerable quantity of gold, the property of the Kangaroo Bank;

THIS IS TO NOTIFY that should those persons, or any of them, have been murdered, a reward of FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS (£500) will be given to any person who shall give information that will lead to the conviction of the murderers; AND A LIKE REWARD will be given to any person who shall give such information as shall lead to the restoration of the stolen gold to its lawful owners.

(Signed) WILLIAM TOMKIN TOMKINSON,
Manager,
Kangaroo Bank,
Timber Town.

"Isaac Zahn? He was the gold-buying clerk. I knew 'im well. An' if you ask me, I think I know who put 'im away."

"You're right, John. D'you call to mind that long-legged toff at The Lucky Digger?"

"I do. 'E caught Zahn a lick under the jaw, an' kicked 'im into the street. I seen 'im do it."

"That's the bloke."

"Hi! Higgins. Here, old man. D'you want five hundred pounds?"

"I ain't partic'lar, George—I don't know the man's name."

"But you saw that bit of a scrap in The Lucky Digger, between one of these parties as is murdered and the toff from the Old Country."

"I was in the bar."

"Well, there was very bad blood between them—you see that? And I heard the toff tell Zahn that the next time 'e saw 'im he'd about stiffen 'im. I heard it, or words to that effect. Now, I want you to bear witness that what I say is true."

"Yes, yes, I remember the time. You mean Mr. Scarlett, the man who discovered the field."

"There's wheels within wheels, my boy. They were rivals for the same girl. She jilted young Zahn when this new man took up the running. Bad blood, very bad blood, indeed."

"But is he dead? Has there been a murder at all? Collusion, sir, collusion. Suppose the escort quietly appropriated the gold and effaced themselves, they'd be rich men for life, sir."

"You're right, Mr. Ferrars. Until the bodies are found, sir, there is no reason to believe there has

been murder."

At this moment the local bellman appeared on the scene, and stopped conversation with the din of his bell. Subsequently, after the manner of his kind, and in a thin nasal voice, he proclaimed as follows:—"Five hundred pound reward—Five hundred pound reward.—It being believed—that a foul murder has been committed—on the persons of—Isaac Zahn, Peter Heafy, William Johnson, James Kettle—citizens of Timber Town—a search-party will be formed—under the leadership of Mr. Charles Caxton—volunteers will be enrolled at the Town Hall—a large reward being offered—for the apprehension of the murderers—Five hundred pound—Five hundred pound!"

He then tucked his bell under his arm and walked off, just as unconcernedly as if he were advertising an auction-sale.

By this time a crowd of two or three hundred people had assembled. A chair was brought from The Lucky Digger, and upon this a stout man clambered to address the people. But what with his vehemence and gesticulations, and what with the smallness of his platform, he stepped to the ground several times in the course of his speech; therefore a lorry, a four-wheeled vehicle not unlike a tea-tray upon four wheels, was brought, and while the orator held forth effusively from his new rostrum, the patient horse stood between the shafts, with drooping head.

This pompous person was succeeded by a tall, upright man, with the bearing of a Viking and the voice of a clarion. His speech was short and to the point. If he had to go alone, he would search for the missing men; but he asked for help. "I am a surveyor," he said. "I knew none of these men who are lost or murdered, but I appeal to those of you who are diggers to come forward and help. I appeal to the townsfolk who knew young Zahn to rally round me in searching for their friend. I appeal for funds, since the work cannot be done without expense; and at the conclusion of this meeting I shall enrol volunteers in the Town Hall."

He stood down, and Mr. Crewe rose to address the crowd, which had now assumed such proportions that it stretched from pavement to pavement of the broad street. All the shops were closed, and people were flocking from far and wide to the centre of the town.

"Men of Timber Town," said Mr. Crewe, "I'm not so young as I was, or I would be the first to go in search of these missing men. My days as a bushman are over, I fear; but I shall have much pleasure in giving £20 to the expenses of the search-party. All I ask is that there be no more talking, but prompt action. These men may be tied to trees in the bush; they may be starving to death while we talk here. Therefore let us unite in helping the searchers to get away without delay."

A movement was now made towards the Town Hall, and while the volunteers of the search-party were being enrolled two committees of citizens were being formed in the Town Clerk's office—the one to finance, and the other to equip, the expedition.

While these things were going forward, there stood apart from the crowd four men, who conversed in low voices.

"It's about time, mates, we got a bend on."

"Dolly, you make me tired. I ask you, was there ever such a chance. All the traps in the town will be searching for these unfortunate missin' men. We'll have things all our own way, an' you ask us to 'git.'"

"'Strewth, Garstang, you're a glutton. S'far's I'm concerned, I've got as much as I can carry. I don't want no more."

The four comrades in crime had completely changed their appearance. They were dressed in new, ready-made suits, and wore brand-new hats, besides which they had shaved their faces in such a manner as to make them hardly recognisable.

Dolphin, who, besides parting with his luxuriant whiskers and moustache, had shaved off his eyebrows, remarked, with the air of a man in deep thought, "But there's no steamer leaving port for two days—I forgot that. It seems we'll have to stay that long, at any rate."

"And I can't bear bein' idle—it distresses me," said Sweet William.

"This'll be the last place where they'll look for us," remarked Carnac. "You take it from me, they'll search the diggings first."

"When they've found the unfortunate men, they'll be rampin' mad to catch the perpetrators." This from Dolphin.

A rough, bluff, good-natured digger pushed his way into the middle of the group. "Come on, mates," he said; "put your names down for a fiver each. It's got to be done." And seizing Garstang and Sweet William, he pulled them towards the Town Hall.

"G'arn! Let go!" snarled Garstang.

"Whatyer givin' us?" exclaimed William, as she shook himself free. "The bloke's fair ratty."

"Here! Hi!" Dolphin called to the enthusiastic stranger. "What's all this about missing men? What's all the fuss about?—as like as not the men are gone prospecting in the bush."

“A gold-buyer with 5000 oz. of gold doesn’t go prospecting,” replied the digger. “Come and read the notice, man.”

The four murderers lounged towards the Post Office, and coolly read the Bank Manager’s placard.

“They’ve got lost, that’s about the size of it,” said Garstang.

“Why all this bobbery should be made over a few missin’ men, beats me,” sneered Dolphin.

“Whenever there’s a ‘rush’ in Australia, there’s dozens of men git lost,” said Sweet William, “but nobody takes any notice—it’s the ordinary thing.”

“But there’s gold to the value of £20,000 gone too,” said the enthusiastic stranger. “Wouldn’t you take notice of *that*?”

“It’ll turn up,” said Carnac. “They must have lost their way in the thunderstorm. But you may bet they’re well supplied with tucker. Hang it all, they might come into town any minute, and what fools we’d look then.”

“P’r’aps their pack-horse got frightened at the lightning and fell over a precipice. It might, easy.” This was William’s brilliant suggestion.

“An’ the men are humpin’ the gold into town theirselves,” said Garstang. “There ain’t any occasion to worry, that I can see. None at all, none at all. Come an’ have a drink, mate. I’ll shout for the crowd.”

The five men strolled towards The Lucky Digger, through the door of which they passed into a crowded bar, where, amid excited, loud-voiced diggers who were expressing their views concerning the gold-escort’s disappearance, the four murderers were the only quiet and collected individuals.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Gold League Washes Up.

The amalgamated “claims,” worked upon an economical and extensive scale, had promised from the outset to render enormous returns to the members of the Gold League.

Throughout the canvas town which had sprung up on the diggings, the news that the “toffs” were to divide their profits had created the widest interest, and in every calico shanty and in every six-by-eight tent the organising genius of the “field,” Mr. Jack Scarlett, was the subject of conversation.

Such topsy-turvy habitations as the stores and dwellings of Canvas Town never were seen. The main street, if the thoroughfare where all the business of the mushroom township was transacted could be dignified with such a name, was a snare to the pedestrian and an impossibility to vehicles, which, however, were as yet unknown on the “field.”

The “Cafe de Paris” possessed no windows in its canvas walls, and its solitary chimney was an erection of corrugated iron, surmounted by a tin chimney-pot. “The Golden Reef,” where spirituous liquors were to be had at exorbitant prices, was of a more palatial character, as it had a front of painted wood, in which there hung a real door furnished with a lock, though the sides of the building were formed of rough logs, taken in their natural state from the “bush.” The calico structure which bore in large stencilled letters the name of The Kangaroo Bank, was evidently closed during the absence of the Manager, for, pinned to the cotton of the front wall, was a piece of paper, on which was written in pencil the following notice:—“During the temporary absence of the Manager, customers of the Bank are requested to leave their gold with Mr. Figgiss, of the Imperial Dining Rooms, whose receipts will be duly acknowledged by the Bank. Isaac Zahn, Manager.” Upon reading the notice, would-be customers of the wealthy institution had only to turn round in order to see Mr. Figgiss himself standing in the door of his place of business. He was a tall, red-bearded, pugnacious-looking man, with an expansive, hairy chest, which was visible beneath the unbuttoned front of his Crimean shirt. The Imperial Dining Rooms, if not spacious, were yet remarkable, for upon their calico sides it was announced in letters of rainbow tints that curries and stews were always ready, that grilled steaks and chops were to be had on Tuesdays and Fridays, and roast pork and “duff” on Sundays.

But further along the street, where tree-stumps still remained and the pedestrian traversed water-worn ruts which reached to his knee, the true glory of Canvas Town stood upon a small elevation, overlooking the river. This was the office of the Timber Town Gold League. It was felt by every digger on the “field” that here was a structure which should serve as a model. Its sides were made of heavy slabs of wood, which bore marks of the adze and axe; its floor, raised some four feet from the ground, was of sawn planks—unheard-of luxury—and in the cellars below were stored the goods of the affluent company. Approaching the door by a short flight of steps, admittance was gained to a set of small offices, beyond which lay a spacious room, which, at the time when the reader is ushered into it, is filled with bearded men dressed in corduroy, or blue dungaree, copper-fastened, trousers and flannel shirts; men with mud on their boots and on their

clothes, and an air of ruffianism pervading them generally. And yet this is the Timber Town Gold League, the aristocratic members of which are assembled for the purpose of dividing the proceeds of their first “wash-up.”

On an upturned whisky-case, before a big table composed of boards roughly nailed together and resting on trestles, sits the Manager of the League, Mr. Jack Scarlett, and before him lie the proceeds of the “wash-up.”

The room is full of tobacco-smoke, and the hubbub of many voices drowns the thin voice of the League’s Secretary, who sits beside the Manager and calls for silence.

But Jack is on his feet and, above the many voices, roars, “Order!”

“Quiet.”

“Sit down.”

“Stop that row.”

“Order for the boss of the League.”

Before long all is still, and the lucky owners of the gold which lies in bags upon the table, listen eagerly for the announcement of the returns.

“Gentlemen,”—Scarlett’s face wears a pleasant smile, which betokens a pleasant duty—“as some of you are aware, the result of our first wash-up is a record for the colony. It totals 18,000 oz., and this, at the current price of Bush Robin gold—which I ascertained in Timber Town during my last visit—gives us a return of £69,750.”

Here Jack is interrupted by tremendous cheering.

“Of this sum,” he continues, when he can get a hearing, “your Committee suggests the setting aside, for the payment of liabilities and current expenses, the sum of £9750, which leaves £60,000 to be divided amongst the members of the League.”

Upon this announcement being made, an uproar ensues, an uproar of unrestrained jubilation which shakes the shingle roof, and the noise of which reaches far down the street of Canvas Town and across the flats, where clay-stained diggers pause amid their dirt-heaps to remark in lurid language that the toffs are having “an almighty spree over their blanky wash-up.”

“I rise to make a propothition,” says a long, thin, young Gold Leaguer, with a yellow beard and a slight lisp. “I rise to suggest that we send down to Reiley’s for all hith bottled beer, and drink the health of our noble selves.”

The motion is seconded by every man in the room rising to his feet and cheering.

Six stalwart Leaguers immediately go to wait upon the proprietor of The Golden Reef, and whilst they are transacting their business their mates sing songs, the choruses of which float through the open windows over the adjacent country. The dirt-stained owners of the Hatters’ Folly claim hear the members of the League asking to be “wrapped up in an old stable jacket,” and those working in the Four Brothers’ claim learn the truth about “the place where the old horse died.”

At length the forage-party arrives with the liquor, and there follows the unholy sound of the drawing of corks.

By this time all Canvas Town has learnt what business is going forward in “the Toffs’ Shanty,” and from both sides of the river the diggers begin to assemble in anticipation of a “spree.” Across the scarred, disfigured valley, over the mullock-heaps, from every calico tent, from out of every shaft, from the edge of the dark forest itself, bearded men, toil-stained but smiling, bent on festivity, collect in Canvas Town’s one ramshackle street.

Between the calico shanties and along the miry, uneven ways, men stand in groups, their conversation all of the luck of “the toffs.” But around the Office of the Gold League the crowd is greatest, and the cheers of the members are echoed by the diggers outside.

Bill the Prospector and Moonlight are on guard at the door, for though they have no interest in the League’s claims, as owners of the two richest patches on the field they stand hand-in-glove with the leaders of that strong combination. Inside, Scarlett has risen to his feet, amid prolonged cheering.

“We have not decided yet, gentlemen,” he says, “whether we shall take our dividends in gold or in cheques; and this causes me to allude to a most disagreeable matter. It is well known that the agent of the Kangaroo Bank has been robbed of a considerable amount of gold and perhaps murdered, on his way between this field and Timber Town.”

Suddenly the room is filled with groans, deep and sepulchral, which are immediately repeated by the growing crowd outside.

“Evidently,” continues Jack, “it is not safe for a man to travel with gold on his person; I therefore wish to propose that payments be made by cheque, and that all members not absolutely needed on the claims form themselves into an escort to convey the gold to Timber Town. And when we adjourn, I suggest that a meeting of all diggers on the field be called for the purpose of forming a vigilance committee, for the detection and suppression of crime on the diggings.”

He sits down amid renewed cheering. This has barely subsided and the long, thin young man, who appears to be a person of importance in the League, has risen to speak, when a considerable disturbance occurs outside.

During Scarlett's speech four mounted constables have wended their way through the groups of diggers standing in the street. They dismount in front of the League's Office, and ascend the steps, at the top of which they come into violent altercation with Moonlight and the Prospector. These are immediately ordered in the Queen's name to stand aside, and the four blue-coated men walk into the meeting.

The tall, thin, young man, catching sight of the intruders, pauses in his speech, and says, "What the deyvil!" but the constables walk straight to the improvised table, and their leader, laying his hand on Scarlett's shoulder, say, "John Richard Scarlett, you are charged with the murder of Isaac Zahn. I arrest you in the Queen's name."

For half a minute there rests on the assembly a silence that can be felt. Then there bursts a roar of indignation from fifty throats. In a moment the constables have closed round their prisoner, and with drawn revolvers they stand ready to resist interference.

Not many of "the toffs" are armed, but such as are quickly draw their weapons, and it only needs a single shot to start a fight which must end disastrously for the Law, when Scarlett's voice rings out, "Stand back, you fellows! For God's sake, don't fire! This thing is a mistake which will be more quickly cleared up before a Magistrate than by bloodshed."

Expostulating, but obedient to his wish, his friends one by one lower their weapons.

"*I* know nothing of a mistake," says the Sergeant, as he takes a piece of paper from his pocket. "But here's the warrant, which any gentleman present is at liberty to see. We are but carrying out our duty."

The handcuffs are now on Scarlett's wrists, and his captors lead him slowly through the crowded room.

"Let me speak." Filled with emotion which he can hardly suppress, Jack's voice almost seems to choke him. "Let me speak before you take me away."

"Not a word," retorts the Sergeant. "You shall say all you want to the Magistrate."

"Men," cries Scarlett, as he is hustled through the door, "I am innocent, I swear." But he has no time to say more. He is hurried down the steps; he is quickly placed on a spare horse; the constables spring into their saddles, and ere the great concourse of diggers can grasp what is happening, Jack is conducted at a trot through the town of canvas, along the track which leads to Timber Town, and is soon out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The Goldsmith Comes to Town the Third Time.

The flash digger put his elbows on the table, and leered at Gentle Annie who sat, radiant, at the other side of the board.

"You must have made quite a pile."

"My dear, it's never wise to tell a woman all you know or all you've got. But I don't mind telling you this much: I had luck, or I wouldn't be able to satisfy *your* little whims."

He put his hand into his breast pocket, and drew out a plush-covered case.

"You asked for the biggest diamond in Timber Town, and here it is."

He opened the case, and took out a gold ring, in which was set a stone, fully a carat-and-a-half in weight. Gentle Annie's eyes glittered almost as brightly as the facets of the diamond.

"Dear little jewels for our dear girls." The flash digger held up the brilliant between his finger and thumb. "That bit of carbon cost me £30."

He passed the ring to the girl, who eagerly tried it, first on one finger, then on another.

"Lovely!" she exclaimed: then, as the sudden suspicion struck her, she asked, "You're sure it's real?"

"Well, I'll be——." But he restrained himself. "My dear, if it's shnein, the bargain's off."

Gentle Annie had risen, and was scratching with the stone the glass of a picture-frame which held a gaudy chromo-lithograph.

As she did so, the digger rose, and encircled her waist with his arm.

"Well, are you satisfied?"

“Quite,” she replied, with a laugh. “It bites like a glazier’s diamond.”

“Then give me a kiss.”

The girl made a pretence of trying to get away, but quickly gave in, and turned her lips to the digger’s hawk-like face, and kissed his cheek.

“That’s right,” he said; “that’s as it should be. Mind you: I’m boss here while I stay; I’m the proprietor of the bloomin’ show. All other blokes must stop outside.”

His arm still encircled her waist, and she, regarding him through half-closed, indulgent eyes, leaned her weight against him, when a low cough startled both of them.

The door slowly opened, and upon the threshold stood a dark figure which, advancing towards the light, turned into a man, big, broad, and stern.

“No, no,” said the flash digger, calm, cool, and collected, while the girl tried to assume a posture of aloofness. “You must get out, mister. I’m boss of this show. No one’s allowed here without an invite from me. So, out you go.”

But, to his astonishment, the intruder, without saying a word, quietly took a seat, and began to cut himself a pipeful of tobacco from a black plug which he drew nonchalantly from his pocket.

“Make no mistake,” said the flash digger, striking a dramatic attitude. “I’m not the man to give an order a second time. Out you get, or I’ll drill a hole clean through you.”

“One minute.” The stranger shut the blade of his knife, which he placed deliberately in his pocket. “One minute. Do me the kindness to lower that pistol, and stand where I can see your face more plainly. I’ve no intention of resisting—unfortunately I left my shooting-iron behind.”

As the digger did not move, the stranger jerked his head now forward, now back, now to this side, now to that, peering at the man who held his life in his hand.

“Yes, it’s as I thought,” he said. “I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you before, on two or three occasions. There’s no need for you an’ me to quarrel. If we’re not exactly pals, we’re something even closer.”

“You’re wasting valuable time, and risking your life for no reason whatever,” said the digger. “You’d better be quick.”

“Oh, I’m going,” said the intruder. “Set your mind at rest about that. I was only trying to think where I had met you—it was in a cave. You and your mates knew enough to come in out of the rain. You had made a nice little haul, a very nice little haul.”

A look of the utmost perplexity came over the face of the flash digger, and this was followed by a look of consternation. His arm had fallen to his side, and he was saying slowly, “Who the deuce are *you*? How the deuce d’you know where *I’ve* been?” when the man who sat before him suddenly pulled his hand from under the table and covered his aggressor with a revolver.

“One move,” said Tresco—the reader will have recognised that the goldsmith had come to town —“one move, Mr. Carnac, and you’re as dead as the murdered men on the hill.”

The tension on Gentle Annie’s nerves, which during this scene had been strung to the highest pitch, had now become too great to be borne silently.

“Don’t, don’t!” she cried. “For God’s sake, for *my* sake, stop! stop!”

“Don’t be frightened, my dear,” said the goldsmith, without taking his eye off his rival and antagonist. “If there’s to be trouble between this man and me, you can’t make or mar it. Now, mister, kindly drop your revolver on the floor.”

The man did as he was bid, and the heavy falling of iron sounded loud through the otherwise silent room.

“Right turn. Quick march.” Tresco rose slowly, still covering his man. “Open the door for him, my dear!”

“It’s a trap! I’m trapped by the woman,” cried Carnac, glaring awfully at Gentle Annie. “You slut, give me back my ring.”

“Walk straight out, mister,” said the goldsmith, quietly, “and don’t call the lady names, or you’ll repent it. She happens to be my particular friend. And let me tell you before you go, that the one thing that will save you from the hangman’s noose is that you don’t set foot inside this door again. D’you hear?”

“Yes,” said the robber.

“You understand my meaning?”

“Perfectly.”

“Then let him out, Annie.”

The door swung open, Carnac walked slowly into the night, and Tresco and Gentle Annie were alone.

The goldsmith heaved a sigh of relief. “Haaaah! Close thing, very close; but Benjamin was just one too many for him. You see, brains *will* come out on top. Kindly bolt the door, my dear.”

He picked up Carnac’s revolver, placed it on the table, sat down, wiped his brow, and again gave vent to another sigh of relief.

“My dear, it’s brought on my usual complaint—desperate thirst. Phaugh! a low-lived man, and in this house, too! In the house of my little woman, curse him!”

Gentle Annie placed a glass and a bottle before him, and the goldsmith drank.

“What’s that about a ring, my dear? Did I understand he had given you a ring?”

The girl took the precious diamond from her finger, and handed it to Tresco.

“Why, it’s my own work—I recognise the setting; I remember the stone. Thirty pounds that ring is worth; thirty pounds, if a penny. Did he steal it, or buy it, I wonder?”

“Bought it, he said.”

“If so, he’s not mean, anyway. I tell you what I’ll do—I’ll buy it back from you. It’s not right you should be defiled by wearing such a man’s ring.”

“He shall have it back—I’ll give it him.”

“No, my dear. What he has given, he has given. Thirty pounds.”

From his pocket he drew a small linen bag, from which he took eight or ten small nuggets. These he balanced in his palm.

“Seven ounces,” he said, contemplatively. “Say eight, to give you good value. That’s it, my dear.” With a bump he placed the gold on the table. “This ring is now mine. The work is of the best; never did I take more care or pride in my craft than when I set that stone. But it has been in the hands of a vile fellow; it is polluted.”

He rose from his chair, placed the jewel on the hearthstone, and fiercely ground the precious stone beneath his iron-shod heel, and flung the crushed and distorted gold setting into the fire.

“That you should have been so much as touched by such a man, is a thing not to be forgotten quickly.”

He drank the rest of his liquor at a breath.

“I must go, my dear. I must go.”

“What! won’t you stop? I want you to stay a little longer.”

“Nothing would please me better. But that man is one of a gang. If I stop here, he may bring seven other devils worse than himself, and the last end of Benjamin will be worse than the first. I should be waylaid and killed. And that would be unfortunate.”

“Do you suppose they will come here when you have gone?”

“No fear of that, after what I’ve told him. That man will shun this house as if it was his grave. Well, good night.”

He took Gentle Annie’s face between his hands. Then he held her at arms’ length, and gazed steadfastly into her face. And, the next moment, he was gone.

The girl turned the nuggets over and over with a listless finger. “Men, men,” she murmured, “how madly jealous—and when there is so little need. As if I care for one a pennyworth more than another.”

CHAPTER XXXV.

Bail.

The Pilot of Timber Town sat in his dining-room in the many-gabled house; Captain Sartoris sat opposite him, and both looked as miserable as men could possibly look.

“It’s a bad business, a terrible bad business,” said Captain Summerhayes, “to be charged with robbery and cold-blooded murder. I was in the Court. I heard the Resident Magistrate commit him to the Supreme Court. ‘Your Worship,’ says Jack, ‘on what evidence do you commit me? I own that I was on the road to Canvas Town, but there is nothing wrong in that: there is no evidence against me.’ An’ no more there is. I stake all I’ve got on his innocence; I stake my life on it.”

“Same here, same here, Summerhayes,” said Sartoris. “But I don’t see how that helps him. I don’t see it helps him worth tuppence. He’s still in the lock-up.”

“It helps ’im this much,” said the old Pilot: “he can be bailed out, can’t he?—and we’re the men to do it.”

“We’d need to be made o’ money, man. Ten thousand pound wouldn’t bail ’im.”

“We’ll see, we’ll see. Rosebud, my gal!” The Pilot’s gruff voice thundered through the house. “We’ll put it to the test, Sartoris; we’ll put it to the test.”

Rose Summerhayes hurried from the kitchen; the sleeves of her blouse tucked up, and her hands and arms covered with flour.

“What is it, father?”

“Young Scarlett’s in prison,” growled the Pilot, “and there he’s likely to stay till the sitting of the Supreme Court.”

The pink in Rose’s pretty face turned as white as the flour she had been kneading. “Have they found him guilty, father?”

“Not exactly that, my gal, but it looks black for the lad, as black as the pit.”

“But he’s *not* guilty!” cried the girl. “Nothing will persuade me to believe that.”

“We must bail him out,” said her father. “Bring me my deed-box.”

Rose rustled from the room, and presently returned with a square, japanned, tin box, which bore her father’s initials upon its lid.

The Pilot took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and quickly unlocked the box.

Upon the bare, polished table he placed a number of Bank deposit receipts.

“I can’t do it,” he said; “no more can Sartoris. But *you* can, my gal. Just add up these amounts, Cap’n, while I explain.” He handed the receipts to Sartoris.

“It isn’t often I’ve mentioned your uncle to you, Rosebud. But he’s a rich man, more than ordinary rich, my dear. Ever since you were a little dot, so high, he’s sent me money as reg’lar as the clock. I’ve never asked ’im for it, mind ye; and, what’s more, I’ve never spent a penny of it. I wouldn’t touch it, because I don’t bear him any love whatever. Before you was born, my gal, he did me a most unforgivable wrong, an’ he thinks money will wipe it out. But it won’t: no, no, it won’t. Howsomever, I banked all that money in your name, as it kept coming in; and there it’s been piling up, till I don’t really know how much there mayn’t be. What’s the total, Sartoris? Give us the total, man.”

But the Captain had forgotten his calculation, in open-mouthed astonishment.

“’Arf-a-minute, ’arf-a-minute,” he said, quickly giving his attention to the papers which lay before him. “Fifteen hundred and two thousand is three thousand, five hundred; and thirteen hundred is four thousand, eight hundred; and seven hundred and seventy-five is—— Why, there’s more money here than ever I saw in a skipper’s house before. I’ll need a pencil and a bit o’ paper, Miss Rose. There’s a mint o’ money—as much as would bail out a duke.”

Supplied with stationery, he slowly made his calculation; the Pilot watching him unconcernedly, and Rose checking the amounts one by one.

At last he found his total, and drew a line under it.

“Well, what is it?” asked the Pilot.

“I make it ten thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five pound,” he said. “Goodness, girl, here’s all this money!—and you baking and scrubbing as if you was a servant. Summerhayes,” he added, turning upon the Pilot, “I think you’ve been doing an injustice, sir; a gross injustice.”

“Personally,” replied the Pilot, “I don’t intend to receive a pennyworth o’ benefit from that money. If the gal likes to be a lady now, there’s nothing to stop her; but I don’t share in the spending o’ that money, not in a penny of it. Of that I’m determined.”

“You’re a contumacious, cantankerous old barnacle,” retorted Sartoris, “that’s what you are. It’d serve you right if your daughter was to cut the painter and cast you adrift, and leave you to sink or swim.”

“We can very well settle that point by and by, Sartoris. The present question is, Shall we bail out young Scarlett, or not? I put it to you, Rosebud. Here’s all this money—what are you going to do with it? If you go bail for Scarlett and he runs away, you’ll lose it. If he stands his trial, then you’ll get it all back and have the knowledge, I believe, that you helped an innocent man. Which will you do?”

“I couldn’t hesitate,” replied Rose. “I’m sure Mr. Scarlett wouldn’t commit such a dreadful crime as that he’s charged with. I—I—feel,” her breath caught in her throat, and she gave vent to something very like a sob, “I should be glad to do anything to get him out of prison.”

“Quite right, quite right!” thundered the old Pilot. “There speaks my gal, Sartoris; there speaks my dar’ter, Rosebud!” Rising from his chair, he kissed her heartily, and stood, regarding her with pride and pleasure.

“My dear young lady,” said Sartoris, as he took Rose’s hand in his, and warmly pressed it, “it does you great honour. Young Mr. Scarlett an’ me was shipmates; we was wrecked together. I know that lad better than I know my own brother—and, I say, you may safely back your opinion of him to any amount.”

“Get my hat, gal,” said the Pilot. “We’ll be going.”

And so, after she had hastily performed her toilet, Rose walked into town, with the two old sea-dogs as an escort.

First, they went to the Kangaroo Bank, where the Pilot placed the sheaf of deposit receipts on the manager’s table, and said, “It comes to something over ten thousand pound, sir. What we want to know is, will you allow my dar’ter to draw five or ten thousand, and no questions asked?”

“Ah—really,” said Mr. Tomkinson, “it would be most unusual. These deposits are made for a term, and the rule of the bank is that they can’t be drawn against.”

“Then what is the good of all this money to my gal, if she can’t use it?”

“She can draw it as it falls due.”

“But suppose that don’t suit? Suppose my dar’ter wants it at once, what then?”

The manager rubbed his chin: that was his only reply.

“These bits o’ paper are supposed to be as good as gold,” continued the Pilot, rustling the receipts as they lay upon the table, “ain’t they?”

“Better,” said the manager, “in some ways much better.”

“Indeed,” retorted the Pilot. “Then what’s the good o’ them, if nothing can be done with ’em?”

“For the matter o’ that, Summerhayes,” said Sartoris, “if this gen’leman don’t quite like to trust himself in the matter, there’s plenty outside will take them there bits o’ paper as security, and be glad to get ’em. I’ve seen the thing done, Summerhayes, though I can’t say I’ve done it myself, never having had enough money to deposit in a bank.”

“Ah—well,” said the banker, “of course it *can* be managed, but you would lose the interest.”

“The interests be—be—the interest be hanged!” exclaimed the Pilot.

“But the young lady must act under no compulsion, sir.” Mr. Tomkinson spoke with a dignity worthy of the great institution which he represented. “She must do it of her own free will.”

“Ask her,” said the Pilot.

The manager looked at Rose, who said, “I want to draw seven thousand pounds of this money,” but she felt as though she was speaking in a dream, so unreal did the situation seem to her.

“The best way for your daughter to act,” said the manager, turning to the Pilot, “will be for her to sign seven thousand pounds’ worth of these receipts over to the bank, and to open in her own name an account, on which she can draw to the amount specified.”

“Very good,” said the Pilot, “that would suit; but why couldn’t you say so at first, instead o’ boxing the compass?”

The business was soon concluded, and Rose, for the first time in her life, drew a cheque, which was for nothing less than £7000.

“This is a large sum,” said the manager, “a large sum to take in a lump.”

“Isn’t it her own money she’s taking?” said the Pilot. “I’m her father, and I don’t see anything wrong about it.”

“But there her credit ceases,” said the manager.

“Let it cease,” said the Pilot.

The cheque was cashed at the counter, and Rose walked out of the bank with a mighty sheaf of notes in her hand.

For safety’s sake, the Pilot relieved her of some of her wealth, and Captain Sartoris relieved her of the rest, and thus the three walked briskly towards the Red Tape Office. Here, with difficulty and much climbing up and down stairs and traversing of corridors, they found the room of the District Judge, who was, in his minor capacity, likewise the Resident Magistrate.

He was a man of benign countenance, who, after the customary greetings and explanations had been made, politely asked them to be seated. This invitation the Pilot neglected to comply with, but, advancing to the table behind which the Judge sat, he said,

“I believe you have locked up a young man of the name of Scarlett.”

“That’s so,” said the Judge.

“Well, he’s a friend o’ mine,” said the Pilot, “a partic’lar friend.”

“Indeed,” said the Judge, smiling kindly. “I’m glad that Mr. Scarlett is not without friends.”

“I’ve a great respect for the Law,” continued the Pilot. “I always had, but that don’t make me feel less anxious to help a friend o’ mine that’s got into its clutches.”

The Judge continued to smile at the Pilot from behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. “I can quite believe it,” he said.

“Cap’n Sartoris,” said the Pilot, in his gruffest manner. “Stand up, sir!”

Sartoris stood.

“Scarlett was your shipmate, Cap’n?” continued the Pilot.

“Certainly he was,” answered Sartoris.

“And he was my very good friend, sir,” added Summerhayes, turning to the Judge.

“So you have said,” said the Judge.

“Well, we’ve come to bail him out,” said the Pilot; “that’s what has brought us here. How much will it take, Judge?”

“A—really—this is very sudden,” replied the Judge. “Er—this is—ah—most unusual. In fact, I might say that this is quite an unparalleled case.”

“We’re plain, sea-faring men,” said Sartoris, who felt he was bound to back up the Pilot, and to say something; “law isn’t our strong point.”

“Would you consider a matter o’ five thousand pound might do it?” asked the Pilot.

The old Judge leaned over his table, and took up a book.

“Bail?” he said. “Page 249. Listen to this. ‘On charges of murder, it is the uniform practice of Justices not to admit the person charged to bail; although in point of law, they may have power to do so.’ That is from The Justice of the Peace—it seems perfectly plain.”

“You *may* give bail, but you make a practice of refusing it,” commented the Pilot. “Might I suggest that you set an example to the other Justices, an’ come out strong in the matter o’ bail? If you’ve got power to make the lot of a well-known citizen a little happier, why not use it? Hand over them notes, Sartoris.”

The Pilot emptied his pockets of all the money that Rose had handed him, and placed it on the Judge’s table, and Sartoris contributed his quota to the pile.

“There you are, Judge,” said the Pilot, pushing all the money towards the legal magnate, “that should be enough to bail out a Member of the Legislative Council, or even the Governor himself. That should fix it. But don’t think, Judge, that me and Cap’n Sartoris is doing this thing. No, sir, it’s my dar’ter. She supplies the motive-power that works the machinery. All this money belongs to her. She it is that wishes to bail out this young man who, we believe, has been falsely accused.”

“Ah—really,” said the good old Judge, “I must say—now listen to this: I have here the newest edition.” He took another and bulkier volume from his table. “Page 66, section 176. Allow me to read. ‘The exercise of discretion with respect to taking of bail for the appearance of an accused person, where such discretion exists—namely, in all crimes except treason, being accessory after the fact to treason’——”

“Yes,” interrupted the Pilot, “that’s the Law, an’ very good it is, very good to them as understands it; but what Sartoris, my dar’ter, and me want is for you to let this young feller out of gaol till the trial, an’ we’ll be responsible.”

A perplexed look came over the Judge’s face. He took off his glasses, and wiped them; readjusted them; gave a bewildered look at the Pilot, and said, “Yes, yes; but listen to what I am reading. The first question is whether bail ought to be taken at all; the second, what the amount should be.”

“Place it high, Judge,” said the Pilot. “We’ve come prepared for that. We’ve come prepared with seven thousand.”

“Really, this is most irregular,” complained the Judge, his finger marking the place on the page from which he was reading. “The—ah—object of bail, that is the amount of bail should be sufficient to secure the appearance of the accused to answer the charge.” He had found his place, and read on determinedly, “‘And it may be remarked here, that it is not the practice in England, under any circumstances, to take bail on charges of murder.’”

“Jus’ so, Judge,” said the Pilot. “Jus’ so. It’s not the custom in England. That’s as I should ha’ thought. But here, where murders don’t occur every day, you may grant it if you like. That’s as I thought, just as I thought. What’s your opinion, Cap’n Sartoris?”

“Same here,” said Sartoris, tapping his chest. “I’m with you, Pilot; with you on every point.”

“Theoretically, that is so,” said the Judge, “but practically, how are you going to assess bail for a man who is to be tried for his life? What amount of money will guarantee his reappearance? Why,

no sum, however great."

The Judge shut his book with a snap, and set his mouth firmly as one who had made up his mind.

"This young man," he continued, "whom I knew and respected as well as you yourselves, has been accused of most serious crimes. He is said, with the aid of other persons at present at large, to have murdered the members of a gold-escort and to have stolen gold to the value of something like twenty thousand pounds."

The two seamen stood attentively, with their eyes fixed earnestly on the Judge, whilst Rose covered her face with her hands.

"Besides which,"—the Judge had now regained his judicial composure, and his words flowed smoothly, as though he were on the bench—"we must remember that the accused is reputed to be a wealthy man. Supposing him to have augmented his means by murder and malpractice, what would ten, twenty or even thirty thousand pounds be to him in comparison with his life? That is the question. There can be no guarantee of his reappearance. Bail is impossible. But I will do this: I will extend you the privilege—seeing your affection for this man, who, for your sakes as well as his own, I hope may be acquitted—I will allow you leave to visit him on certain days, between the hours of 10 a.m. and 12 noon, and I will write an order to that effect."

He looked at Jack's sympathisers, who remained dumb. Dipping his pen in the ink, he asked them their names in full, and wrote.

Handing each of them an order, he said, "You will present those to the gaoler when you desire to visit your friend. I may say that I very much admire the strong affection which you have shown towards one who is under such a serious charge as that made against the prisoner, John Scarlett. I wish you good morning."

So saying, he rose from his chair, and, when they had gathered up their money, ushered them out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

In Durance Vile.

With a basket on her arm, Rose Summerhayes issued from the creeper-covered verandah of the many-gabled house, and stood in her garden of roses.

It was the time of the autumn blooms. With a pair of garden scissors she cut the choicest flowers, and placed them upon the snowy napkin which covered the contents of her basket. Then she tripped into the town.

She passed by Tresco's shop, where Jake Ruggles, worried by the inquiries of the police, and overwhelmed with orders which he could not execute, strove to act the absent goldsmith's part. At the door of The Lucky Digger, where stood a noisy throng of men from the gold-field, she heard the words, "It never was the work of one man. If he did it, he had accomplices. How could one man lug the four of 'em up that mountain-side," and she hurried past, knowing too well to whom the talk referred.

As she passed the Kangaroo Bank, a florid man, wearing a white waistcoat, came out through the glass doors with a digger who had been selling gold.

"So you thought you'd bring your gold to town yourself?" said the florid man.

"After that, yes," replied the digger. "I sold the nugget to Zahn for six-pound-ten, and, when next I see it, the Sergeant's got it. There never was a clearer case. It's a good thing they've got 'im safe in gaol."

Rose hurried on, feeling that all the town, watching her with unsympathetic eyes, knew well where she was going. But at last she stood before the gate of the wooden prison. After ringing for admittance, she was ushered into a room, bare of furniture save for a pine table and a couple of chairs, where a warder read the Judge's order, made some entries in a big book, and examined the contents of the basket.

She was next conducted through a species of hall which opened into a small, covered yard, on either side of which stood rows of white-washed, wooden cells.

Unlocking the second cell on the left-hand side, the warder said in a loud voice, as though he were speaking to some one who was either a long way off or very deaf, "Visitor to see you. Stand up, man. 'Tisn't every day that a pris'ner has a young lady to see him."

Rose entered the cell, and the door was closed behind her. The walls were white and bare. On a small bench at the further end sat a figure she saw but indistinctly until her eyes became accustomed to the dim light which crept through the grating in the door, against which she could observe the head of the watchful warder who stood inside the cell.

Jack rose slowly to his feet, and stood speechless, with his hand extended.

“I’ve brought you a couple of fowls and some fruit,” said Rose.

“Thank you.” Jack’s voice was very low, and his words came very slowly. “Do you know the crime I’m accused of?”

“Please don’t talk of that,” said Rose. “I know all about it.”

“I wonder you come to see me. No one else does.”

“Perhaps they’re not allowed to. But my father and Captain Sartoris will be here presently.”

“Indeed! It’s very kind of them.”

“But, you see, we don’t believe you’re guilty; we think you’ll be able to prove your innocence at the trial.”

Conversation goes but tamely when a prison warder dwells on every word. The two stood in the centre of the cell, Jack holding tightly the girl’s right hand, while with her left she held the basket. Withdrawing her hand from his ardent clasp, she placed the roses on the bench and uncovered the dainties which the basket contained. There being no table on which to place them, she spread the napkin on the bench, and laid the delicacies upon it.

“I am allowed to come every other day,” she said, “and next time I hope to bring my father with me. He’s engaged to-day with a ship.”

“I never saw the men after they passed me on the track. I never did this thing.”

Rose took his hand in hers, and gently pressed it. “If you don’t wish to hurt me, you will not speak about it. At home we agree to say nothing. We hear all sorts of things, but we keep silent—it makes it hurt less.”

“You still have faith in me?”

“Why not?”

“Do others take that view?”

“I hope so.”

“But I’m afraid the men on the diggings think hardly of me.”

“Why should they? They are all coming to town, I am told, in order to attend the trial.”

“So much the greater will be my degradation, if I am found guilty.”

“On the other hand, so much greater will be your triumph, when you prove your innocence.”

The conversation had got thus far, when voices were heard without, the door of the cell opened, and the Pilot and Captain Sartoris entered.

“Well, lad,” exclaimed old Summerhayes, as he vigorously shook Jack’s hand. “Keeping her head well to the wind, eh? That’s the style, lad. You’ll find she’ll weather the storm.”

“Aye, aye,” said Sartoris. “If she goes down with all hands it’s not the fault of the skipper, providing he’s steered his true course.”

“That’s so,” said the Pilot; “providing he’s steered his true course. We were thinking o’ bail, Jack. We thought to make you comfortable till you’d proved they’d arrested the wrong man; but that old barnacle of a Judge wouldn’t budge an inch. He consulted his log, and neither Sartoris, nor me, nor my dar’ter, could drive any sense into him. So we gave it up: we intend to do our best to make you happy here.”

“Lord bless you,” said Sartoris, “it won’t seem no time at all before you are out an’ about. Then the whole affair will be but an episode,”—he dwelt on the word, which he had been treasuring in his mind for hours past—“simply an episode, only made to be forgotten.” This speech was a great effort of oratory, and the Captain drew a long breath, looking sideways at the Pilot, as though he had given a cue.

“Luck goes in streaks, lad,” said Captain Summerhayes. “You struck a bad one when you set sail with Sartoris here. I don’t mean no offence to you, Captain; but I do not, never did, and never shall, admire the way you handled *The Mersey Witch*.”

“Go on,” remarked Sartoris; “rub it in. I can bear it.”

“Having got into a bad streak, Jack, you must expect it to stick to you for a time. I did think as how you’d lost it when you come home with all that gold. But, you see, I was right at first; you’re in it yet. There’s no cure but to bear it. An’ that you will, lad, like the man you are.”

“We’ve come to cheer you up, Jack,” said Sartoris, “an’ I hope we’ve done it. But there’s one thing that I believe is usual in these cases, an’ that’s a sky-pilot. I have heard as how a sky-pilot’s more comfortin’ to a man in gaol than anything else. What’s your special brand? What kind do you fancy? I’m ashamed to say we’ve talked so little religion, Jack, that I don’t know what religious crew you signed on with when you was young, but if there’s any special breed o’ parson you fancy, you’ve only got to give him a name, and if he lives in this town or within a radius of ten miles, he shall come an’ minister to you reg’lar, or I’ll know the reason why.”

During this remarkable speech, Rose had quietly slipped out of the cell and, with her empty basket on her arm, had turned her steps homeward.

On rounding a corner of a street in the centre of the town, she almost ran into Rachel Varnhagen.

“Well, well, well, where have you been?” was the Jewess’s greeting, as she stopped to talk to Rose.

“I’ve been to the gaol.”

“To the gaol! Goodness, what for?”

Rose did not reply.

“I do believe you’ve been to see that contemptible murderer.”

“If you mean a friend of mine, who was also a friend of yours who did you a great service, I beg you to stop.”

“I mean that man Scarlett.”

“And so do I.”

“What! you’ve been speaking to *him*? You must be mad. The man’s a murderer. It’s awful!”

“You shouldn’t judge him before he has been tried.”

“The evidence is the same now as it will be then. There was a nugget of a strange shape, which a digger sold to poor Isaac Zahn, and it was found on your precious Scarlett when he was arrested.”

Rose made no answer.

“And to think,” Rachel continued, “that I was almost engaged to him.”

“I never heard that,” said Rose, coldly.

“My dear, I’m thankful to say nobody did, but he used to come regularly to our house when he was in town, and my stupid old father used to encourage him. Such an escape I never had. Fancy being married to a murderer. Ugh!”

“There’s no need to fancy anything of the sort. You couldn’t have married him till he asked you.”

“But, dear, if he *had*, I should have accepted him. You know, he is so handsome. And he is awfully rich. My father wouldn’t have heard of my refusing him. Certainly, he’s not of our religion, but then we’re not very orthodox. I’m afraid I should have accepted him: I’m sure I should. And then, think of poor Isaac. I really *was* fond of him. I know it now; but he was *so* slow in making money—I couldn’t waste all my life in waiting.”

“You must feel his death dreadfully,” said Rose.

“But it doesn’t comfort me very much, when my friends go to see his murderer.”

“I haven’t been to see a murderer.”

“Good gracious! If that awful Scarlett didn’t murder him, who did?”

“I haven’t the least idea, but I feel sure there’s been a mistake on the part of the police.”

“There’s no mistake: they found the bodies yesterday in the bush.”

As Rachel spoke, the two girls saw a strange procession coming down the street.

“Look!” cried Rachel, seizing Rose’s arm for support. “Look what is coming.”

In single file, slowly the searchers were carrying the bodies of the murdered men, wrapped in canvas and strapped to poles cut from the forest trees. As they advanced, a crowd, bare-headed and at every step increasing, accompanied the doleful procession. They passed the spot where stood the two girls, the one supporting the other, and so disappeared out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Benjamin’s Redemption.

The Supreme Court sat in the large hall of the wooden building, ornate with all the decorations of the Elizabethan style, which has been referred to in these pages as the Red Tape Office.

The hall was divided by a barrier, on one side of which were arranged the bench, dock, jury-box, and everything else appertaining to the functions of Justice; and on the other side stood the general public. But as yet the Court was not assembled, save for half-a-dozen be-wigged barristers and a few policemen; and the public, crowded like cattle in a pen, discussed in suppressed tones such matters as seemed good.

Presently, a door beside the bench opened, and a very fat bailiff, preceding the Judge himself, who was followed by many minions of the law, advanced into the body of the court, and cried, “Silence for His Honor the Queen’s Judge!” struck the butt of his long staff upon the floor, and proceeded to deliver a long rigmarole, couched in early English, the tenor of which was that the proceedings about to take place were most solemn and dignified, and all men must keep silence in order that His Honour the Judge might hear himself speak.

Then the Judge seated himself on the bench, nodded to all the barristers, who thereupon immediately sat down likewise, and then the policemen, looking fiercely at the harmless, herded public, cried in angry tones for “Silence! Silence! Silence!” though not a man had so much as coughed since the great Judge had entered.

There seeming to be no fear of a demonstration against Law, Order, and Justice, a be-wigged gentleman who sat immediately in front of the Judge, in the manner that the clerk used to sit before the parson in the days of the three-decker pulpit, stood up, and after consulting various little bits of paper, called and empanelled the Grand Jury, a most important body of men, comprising all that was substantial and wealthy in Timber Town—short, fat men; tall, thin men; men of medium height; bullet-headed men, long-headed men, bald-headed men, and one man who was known to dye his hair; men whose stomachs rested on their knees as they sat; men who looked as though they had not had a full meal for a month; men dressed in tweeds; men dressed in black broad-cloth as if for a funeral; men with gay flowers in the button-holes of their coats; bearded men, and shorn men; as varied an assortment of men as could pronounce opinion on any case.

Each member of this queer company having been furnished with a little testament, the legal luminary administered the oath, and they kissed the book literally like one man, and sat down with a shuffling of feet that was truly disgraceful in so sedate an assembly.

They having chosen the fattest man of them all as their foreman, the Judge addressed them: “Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the Grand Jury,” he said, “give me your attention. Great crimes have been committed in your district,”—and not a man of them all but dropped his eyes and looked as if he felt himself guilty—“and great excitement has been caused in the public mind. But it is one of the highest triumphs of civilisation that we possess a wholesome system of procedure, whereby time is afforded to elapse for the abatement of popular excitement,”—here he glanced searchingly at the exemplary public on the other side of the barrier, as though he challenged one of them to move—“before such cases as those which will come before you, are heard.” Here the Judge paused, and the jurymen looked at each other, as much as to say that after all they might escape. “But,” continued His Honor, “we must take all proper precautions in such grave affairs as we are here to consider, lest the eye of reason should be jaundiced by prejudice, or become dazzled by passion, or lest the arm of Justice should smite wildly and without discrimination.” Every juryman looked at the Judge, to see if the state of his eye was clear and in keeping with this grave injunction. “The first case which will come before you is that of John Richard Scarlett, who is charged with the murder of Isaac Zahn and others. I am not sure as to what will be the form of the indictment, but I should suppose there will be four separate indictments, that is to say, the prisoner will be charged with the murder of each man killed. I now ask you to retire and consider this grave case with that perspicacity and unbiassed judgment which I feel sure you are capable of exercising in so large a degree.”

The Judge had made every juryman’s breast swell with pride, and from their box they poured in a long stream, and clattered over the floor of the Court to the jury-room, the door of which stood ajar, ready to receive them.

The public portion of the hall was now crowded to excess, and the gallery above the main entrance was quickly filling. The people maintained perfect order, but on every face was an eager look which showed the intense interest that was being taken in the proceedings. But when the Judge retired, pending the decision of the Grand Jury, there broke out a hum of conversation, subdued but incessant. On the public side of the barrier there was nothing to be seen but a sea of faces, the faces of all sorts of men, and of not a few women, all waiting for the appearance of the prisoner. Suddenly at the back of this tightly-packed throng there arose a slight commotion, caused by a wild, unkempt man pushing his way through the doorway into the middle of the crowd. His hair was long and matted, his clothes were torn and covered with clay, his face was anxious yet determined. Having wedged himself into the living mass, his identity soon became merged and lost in the multitude of men, work-stained and way-worn like himself. For almost the entire population of Canvas Town was assembled to hear the case against Scarlett; the aristocratic members of the League had come to see what fate awaited their president; solitary “hatters” had come to witness the discomfiture of “the boss of the toffs”; the female portion of the concourse had been attracted by the romance which was believed to underlie the tragedy; while the townsmen were there out of sympathy with the young banker whom they had all known. Filling all available space in the hall and overflowing into the great quadrangle outside, this motley crowd discussed the case against Scarlett in all its bearings, though there was a dense ignorance on the part of the critics as to the evidence that would be called. To everything he heard the wild, unkempt man turned a deaf ear; regarding, as he undoubtedly did, the self-appointed judges around him with silent contempt and some degree of amusement.

At length the door of the jury-room opened, and the head of a Grand Juror was thrust out. To him a constable immediately whispered. The Grand Jury had come to a decision, and the Judge was summoned from his room.

No sooner had the great man taken his seat, than amid a murmur of excitement the prisoner was placed in the dock. He looked thin and care-worn. On his legs were heavy irons, and handcuffs were upon his wrists. Otherwise he was as when first arrested; he wore the same riding-breeches and leggings, and the same tweed coat.

Then the Grand Jury filed solemnly in, and stood in a big semicircle between the barrier and the Court, the foreman standing a little in front of his fellows.

“Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the Grand Jury, how do you find in the case of John Richard Scarlett, charged with the murder of Isaac Zahn?”

“A true bill, Your Honour,” answered the foreman.

“How do you find in the case of John Richard Scarlett, charged with the murder of James Kettle?”

“A true bill, Your Honour.”

A like answer was returned in respect to the other three charges, and the Judge then discharged the Grand Jury, who promptly filed out of Court, only to reappear in the gallery above the Judge’s bench.

A Special Jury—which, the Judge was careful to tell Jack, was a great privilege extended to him by the Court—was empanelled to try the case, but not without a great deal of challenging on the part of the Crown Prosecutor and of Jack’s counsel.

“Prisoner at the bar, you are charged with the wilful murder of Isaac Zahn. How do you plead, Guilty or Not Guilty?”

“Not Guilty!”

Scarlett’s voice rang clear through the hall.

There was a shuffling amongst the barristers on the floor of the Court; papers were rustled, law-books were opened or placed neatly in rows, and a general air of business pervaded the scene.

Then the Crown Prosecutor rose and, after clearing his throat several times, declared that he would call certain witnesses to prove that the prisoner was on the road between Timber Town and Canvas Town on the day of the murder, that he was at open variance with the murdered man, Isaac Zahn, that he possessed when arrested certain property belonging to the murdered man, and certain other important facts, all of which went to prove the prisoner’s guilt.

First, he called a constable who deposed as to the finding of the bodies; next, a doctor, who gave evidence as to how Zahn met his death. Then followed a member of the search-committee, who supplied various details respecting the track, the position of the body of Zahn when found, and of the effects found upon it.

These three witnesses but fulfilled the formalities of the Law in proving that the dead man was murdered and robbed, but there was a great stir in the hall when the next witness entered the box.

This was a corn-stalk of a man who wore a long yellow beard, and seemed to consist of legs, arms, and head; his body being of such small importance in the scheme of his construction as to be hardly noticeable.

“John Rutherford,” said the Crown Prosecutor, “kindly tell the jury your trade or calling.”

“Digger,” answered the witness, as laconically as possible.

“The witness means,” said the barrister, turning to the jury, “that he mines for gold,” an explanation which nobody needed. “But be so good as to inform the Court if you know a hostelry named The Lucky Digger.”

A smile stole over the lean witness’s face. “I reckon I’ve bin there,” he said.

“Were you there on the afternoon of Saturday, the 25th of February, last?”

“I might ha’ bin.”

“You can’t be certain?”

“You’ve hit it, mister—I can’t be certain.”

“Then we’ll try to assist your memory. Do you know the prisoner at the bar?”

The witness looked at Scarlett with a grin. Then he turned, and confronted the lawyer. “I know him,” he said. “He was boss of the gentlemen diggers.”

“Did you know the deceased, Isaac Zahn, with whose murder the prisoner is charged?”

“I did—he bought gold of me.”

“Did you ever know the two men, John Scarlett and Isaac Zahn, to quarrel?”

“I did.”

“Please be so good as to describe to the jury the nature of the quarrel.”

“I was standin’ in the bar of The Lucky Digger, havin’ a pint with a friend,” said the long, thin witness, “when I heard the prisoner exchangin’ words with Zahn.”

“Ah! a very important matter,” said the counsel for the Crown. “What was the subject of their conversation?”

“Seemed to me they were both sparkin’ up to the bar-maid,” said the digger, “an’ consequently there was bad blood between ’em, specially on the part of Scarlett.”

“Did he strike the deceased?”

“Certainly. Struck ’im in the bar, in the passage, an’ kicked ’im into the street.”

“You swear to that?”

“Decidedly. I seen ’im do it.”

“Thank you. You may stand down—unless, of course, my friend the counsel for the defence would like to ask a question.”

Scarlett’s barrister, a man of jovial countenance, smiled, and shook his head.

“Call Rachel Varnhagen.”

The pretty Jewess, dressed in black, walked modestly into the Court, mounted the step or two which led to the witness-box, and bowed to the Judge and jury.

“I should be pleased to spare you the pain of appearing as a witness in this case,” said the barrister for the Crown, looking his softest at the lovely Rachel, “but the importance I attach to the evidence I believe you will give, is so great that I am forced to sacrifice my private feelings upon the altar of Justice. I believe you know the prisoner at the bar?”

“Yes, I do,” replied Rachel, in a very low voice.

“Did you know Isaac Zahn, with whose murder he is charged?”

“I did.”

“Is it a fact that you were engaged in marriage to Isaac Zahn?”

“I was, but the engagement was broken off some six weeks before his death.”

“And that you afterwards became engaged to John Scarlett?”

“I was never engaged to marry the prisoner.”

“Ah, then I have been misinformed. Were not the prisoner and the deceased rivals for your hand?”

“I believed them to be so.”

“Did you ever know them to quarrel?”

“I once saw the prisoner throw Isaac Zahn out of a house.”

“What house?”

“I was passing along the street, when through the door of a public-house I saw the prisoner throw or kick Isaac Zahn into the street, and he fell on the pavement at my feet.”

“Can you remember the name of the public-house?”

“It was The Lucky Digger.”

The barrister sat down, and looked at the ceiling of the Court—he had finished his examination—and the Judge motioned the fair Rachel to stand down.

The next witness to be sworn was Amiria.

“Do you remember the 3rd of March last?” asked the Crown Prosecutor.

The brown eyes of the Maori girl flashed, and, drawing herself up with dignity, she said, “Of course, I do. Why should I forget it?”

“What did you do on that day—where did you go?”

“I went for a ride, though I can’t see how that can interest you?”

“Did you go alone?”

“No.”

“Who accompanied you?”

“Mr. Scarlett.”

“Indeed. Where did you ride to?”

“In the direction of Canvas Town.”

“Well, well. This is most important. Did you accompany the prisoner all the way?”

“No. We parted at the last ford before you come to the mountains, and I returned alone to Timber Town.”

“What time of day was that?”

“Between nine and ten in the morning.”

“And which way did the prisoner take after leaving you?”

“He crossed over the ford, and went towards Canvas Town.”

“Thank you.” Then the counsel for the Crown turned to the Judge. “I have finished with the witness, Your Honour,” he said.

“But I have not finished,” cried Amiria, lifting her voice so that it rang through the Court. “There were others on the road that day.”

“Ah!” said the Judge. “I understand you desire to make a statement?”

“I desire to say that at the ford were four horrible-looking men.”

The Crown Prosecutor laughed. “Yes, yes,” he said. “You would tell the Court that there were others on the road besides yourself and the prisoner. What were the names of the men to whom you refer?”

“I don’t know. How should I know their names?”

Again the Crown Prosecutor laughed. But Scarlett’s counsel was on his feet in a moment.

“Would you recognise them, if you saw them again?” he asked.

“I think so,” answered the Maori girl.

“What should you say was their occupation?”

“I don’t know, but they looked much more like murderers than Mr. Scarlett did.”

“Look if you can see the men you speak of, in Court.”

The dark girl glanced at the sea of faces on the further side of the barrier.

“They may be here, but I can’t see them,” she said.

“Just so. But do you see any persons like them?”

“In dress, yes. In face, no.”

“Very good, don’t trouble yourself further. That will suffice.”

And Amiria was ushered from the Court.

“Call William Tomkin Tomkinson.”

The Bank Manager stood trembling in the box, all the timidity of his soul brought to the surface by the unusual situation in which he found himself.

“What quantity of gold do you suppose your agent, Mr. Zahn, was bringing to town when he was thus foully murdered?” asked the Crown Prosecutor.

“I really don’t know the exact amount, but I should imagine it was between £15,000 and £20,000.”

“You know the prisoner?”

“I have met him in the way of business?”

“What was the nature of his business?”

“He came to ask the Bank to send an agent to the field for the purpose of buying gold.”

“And you told him you would send one?”

“I called Mr. Zahn into my room. I told him he would be sent to the field, and I suggested that the prisoner should conduct him to Canvas Town.”

“Was that suggestion acted upon?”

“No. Scarlett was willing to comply, but Zahn refused his offer.”

“Why did he refuse?”

“He was frightened to trust himself with the prisoner.”

“This is very important, Mr. Tomkinson. I must ask you to repeat the murdered man’s exact words when he refused to accompany the prisoner to the field.”

“I do not recollect his exact words. As nearly as I can remember, he said that he would rather run

the risk of getting lost in the bush than be thrown over a precipice."

"Did you know they had quarrelled previously?"

"I learnt so, at the time to which I refer."

"Thank you, sir. Your evidence has proved to be valuable, very valuable indeed. I shall ask the witness no more questions, Your Honour."

Scarlett's counsel was contemplatively tapping his front teeth with his forefinger throughout this examination. He now rose, and informed the Judge that though he desired to ask the witness no questions at the present time, perhaps he might ask for him and the witness Amiria to be recalled at a later stage of the proceedings.

The next witness was a digger, a short man with a bushy, red beard. But even more extraordinary than the man's beard was his casual, almost insolent, bearing. He glanced at the Judge contemptuously, he looked pityingly at the jury, he regarded the barristers with dislike, and then he settled himself resignedly against the front of the witness-box, and fixed his eyes superciliously upon the Sergeant of Police.

"Are you the owner of a claim on Bush Robin Creek?"

"I am, and it's a good claim too." The witness evidently considered himself on familiar terms with the counsel for the Crown.

"Did you sell gold to Isaac Zahn?"

"I did, an' he give me £3 15s. an ounce. The result of a month's work, yer Honour."

"How much did you sell?"

"Forty-six ounces fifteen pennyweights; but, bless yer, I'd on'y begun to scratch the top of the claim."

The idea of the witness blessing the Crown Prosecutor convulsed the bar with merriment; but, looking straight at the witness, the Judge said, "I beg you to remember, sir, that you are in a Court of Law, and not in the bar of a public-house." To which admonition the digger was understood, by those nearest to him, to murmur, "I on'y wish I were."

"Was there anything unusual in the appearance of the gold that you sold to Zahn?"

"It was very 'eavy gold," replied the witness, "an' there was one nugget that 'e give me extry for, as a curio."

"Indeed," said the counsel, as though this fact was quite new to him. "What was it like?"

"It weighed close on two ounces, an' was shaped like a kaka's head."

"What is a *kaka*, my man, and what shape is it's head?"

"I thought you'd ha' known—it's a parrot, mister."

"Would you know the nugget, if you saw it again?"

"'Course, I would," replied the witness with infinite contempt. "I got eyes, ain't I, an' a mem'ry?"

"Is that it?" The barrister handed a bit of gold to the witness.

"That's the identical nugget," replied the witness: "you may make your mind easy on that. I sold it to Zahn soon after he come to the field."

"Thank you," said the Crown Prosecutor, and, turning to the jury, he added, "That nugget, gentlemen, is an exhibit in the case, and is one of the effects found on the prisoner at the bar, when he was searched after his arrest."

The witness left the box amid a murmur of excitement, and from the gestures of the jurymen it was clear that his evidence had impressed them. The case against Scarlett wore a serious aspect, and the Crown Prosecutor, smiling, as though well pleased with his work, was preparing to examine witnesses to prove the prisoner's arrival at Canvas Town on the night of the murder, when there arose a considerable commotion amongst the public, by reason of a wild, unshorn man pushing his way violently towards the barrier. The Police Sergeant and his constables cried, "Silence in the Court!" but amid noisy protestations from the crowd, the ragged, struggling figure reached the barrier, vaulted over it, and stood on the floor of the Court. The barristers rose to stare at the extraordinary figure; the Judge, open-mouthed with astonishment, glared at everybody generally; the Sergeant made three strides towards the intruder, and seized him roughly by the arm.

"I desire to give evidence!" cried the disturber of the proceedings. "I wish to be sworn."

With his clothes in tatters and earth-stained, his boots burst at the seams and almost falling to pieces, his hair long and tangled, his beard dirty and unkempt, thus, in a state of utter disreputableness, he unflinchingly faced the Court; and the crowd, forgetful of the prisoner, Judge, and jury, gave its whole attention to him.

Beckoning with his hand, the Judge said, "Bring this man forward. Place him where I can see

him.”

The Police Sergeant led the would-be witness to the space between the dock and the jury-box.

“Now, my man,” said the Judge, “I imagine that you wish to say something. Do you wish to give evidence bearing on this case?”

“I do, Your Honour.”

“Then let me warn you that if what you have to say should prove frivolous or vexatious, you will be committed for disturbing the Court.”

“If what I have to say is irrelevant, I shall be willing to go to gaol.”

The Judge looked at this ragged man who used such long words, and said sternly, “You had better be careful, sir, exceedingly careful. What is your name?”

“Benjamin Tresco.”

“Oh, indeed. Very good. T-r-e-s-c-o-e, I presume,” remarked the Judge, making a note of the name.

“No, T-r-e-s-c-o.”

“No ’e’?”

“No, Your Honour; no ’e’.”

“Benjamin Tresco, of what nature is the evidence you desire to give?”

“It tends to the furtherance of Justice, Your Honour.”

“Does it bear on this case? Does it deal with the murder of Isaac Zahn?”

“It does.”

“Would it be given on behalf of the Crown, or on behalf of the prisoner?”

“I can’t say. It has no bearing on the prisoner, except indirectly. It affects the Crown, perhaps—the Crown always desires to promote Justice.”

“Let the man be sworn.”

So Benjamin was placed in the box, and stood prominent in his rags before them all. After he had been sworn, there was a pause; neither the prosecution, nor the defence, knowing quite what to make of him.

At length the counsel for the Crown began, “Where were you on March the 3rd, the supposed day of the murder of Isaac Zahn?”

“I don’t keep a diary. Of late, I haven’t taken much account of dates. But if you refer to the date of the thunderstorm, I may state that I was in my cave.”

“Indeed. In your cave? That is most interesting. May I ask where your cave may be?”

“In the mountains, not far from the track to Canvas Town.”

“Dear me, that’s very novel. When you are at home, you live in a cave. You must be a sort of hermit. Do you know the prisoner?”

“Slightly.”

“Did you meet him in your cave?”

“No; but there I saw the men who ought to be in the dock in his stead.”

“Eh? What? Do you understand what you are saying?”

“Perfectly.”

“Perfectly? Indeed. Have you come here to give evidence for the Crown against the prisoner at the bar?”

“I have nothing to do with the prisoner. I have come to disclose the guilty parties, who, so far as I am aware, never in their lives spoke two words to the prisoner at the bar.”

“Your Honour,” said the bewildered barrister, “I have nothing further to ask the witness. I frankly own that I consider him hardly accountable for what he says—his general appearance, his manner of life, his inability to reckon time, all point to mental eccentricity, to mental eccentricity in an acute form.”

But the counsel for the defence was on his feet.

“My good sir,” he said, addressing the witness, with an urbanity of tone and manner that Benjamin in his palmiest days could not have surpassed, “putting aside all worry about dates, or the case for the Crown, or the prisoner at the bar, none of which need concern you in the slightest degree, kindly tell the jury what occurred in your cave on the day of the thunderstorm.”

“Four men entered, and from the place where I lay hid I overheard their conversation. It referred to the murder of Isaac Zahn.”

“Exactly what I should have imagined. Did you know the four men? Who were they? What were their names?”

“I knew the names they went by, and I recognised their faces as those of men I had met in Timber Town.”

“Tell the jury all that you heard them say and all that you saw them do in the cave?”

“I had returned from exploring a long passage in the limestone rock, when I heard voices and saw a bright light in the main cave. For reasons of my own, I did not desire to be discovered; therefore, I crept forward till I lay on a sort of gallery which overlooked the scene. Four men were grouped round a fire at which they were drying their clothes, and by the light of the flames they divided a large quantity of gold which, from their conversation, I learned they had stolen from men whom they had murdered. They described the method of the murders; each man boasting of the part he had played. They had stuck up a gold-escort, and had killed four men, one of whom was a constable and another a banker.”

“That was how they described them?”

“That is so. The two remaining murdered men they did not describe as to profession or calling.”

“You say that you had previously met these fiends. What were their names?”

“They called each other by what appeared to be nicknames. One, the leader, was Dolly; another Sweet William, or simply William; the third was Carny, or Carnac; the fourth Garstang. But how far these were their real names I am unable to say.”

“Where did you first meet them?”

“In The Lucky Digger. I played for money with them, and lost considerably.”

“When next did you meet them?”

“Some weeks afterwards I saw two of them—the leader, known as Dolphin, or Dolly, and the youngest member of the gang, named William.”

“Where was that?”

“On the track to Bush Robin Creek. I had come out of the bush, and saw them on the track. When I had hidden myself, they halted opposite me at a certain rock which stands beside the track. From where I lay I heard them planning some scheme, the nature of which I then scarcely understood, but which must have been the sticking-up of the gold-escort. I heard them discuss details which could have been connected with no other undertaking.”

“Would you know them if you saw them again?”

“Certainly.”

“Look round the Court, and see if they are present.”

Benjamin turned, and looked hard at the sea of faces on the further side of the barrier. There were faces, many of which he knew well, but he saw nothing of Dolphin’s gang.

“I see none of them here,” he said, “but I recognise a man who could bear me out in identifying them, as he was with me when I lost money to them at cards.”

“I would ask you to point your friend out to me,” said the Judge. “Do I understand that he was with you in the cave?”

“No, Your Honour; I knew him before I went there.”

“What is his name?”

“On the diggings, he is Bill the Prospector, but his real name is William Wurcott.”

“Call William Wurcott,” said the Judge.

William Wurcott was duly cried, and the pioneer of Bush Robin Creek pushed his way to the barrier and stood before the Court in all his hairiness and shabbiness.

Tresco stood down, and the Prospector was placed in the box. After being sworn according to ancient custom, Bill was asked all manner of questions by counsel and the Judge, but no light whatever could he throw on the murder of Isaac Zahn, though he deposed that if confronted with the visitors to Tresco’s cave, he would be able to identify them as easily as he could his own mother. He further gave it as his opinion that as the members of the gang, namely, Sweet William and his pals—he distinctly used the words “pals” before the whole Court—had drugged him and stolen his money, on the occasion to which Tresco had referred, they were quite capable, he thought, of committing murder; and that since his mate Tresco had seen them dividing stolen gold in his cave, on the day of the thunderstorm, he fully believed that they, and not the prisoner at the bar, were the real murderers.

All of which left the minds of the jury in such a confused state with regard to the indictment

against the prisoner, that, without retiring, they returned a verdict of Not Guilty, and Jack left the Court in the company of Rose, the Pilot, and Captain Sartoris.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

The Way to Manage the Law.

It may have been that the Prospector's brief appearance in Court had roused the public spirit latent in his hirsute breast, or it may have been that his taciturnity had been cast aside in order that he might assume his true position as a leader of men; however that may have been, it is a fact that, on the morning after the trial, he was to be seen and heard haranguing a crowd outside The Lucky Digger, and inciting his hearers to commit a breach of the peace, to wit, the forcible liberation of a prisoner charged with a serious crime.

"An' what did 'e come for?—'e come to see his pal had fair play," Bill was exclaiming, as he stood on the threshold of the inn and faced the crowd of diggers in the street. "'E proved the whole boilin' of 'em, Judge, law-sharks, police, an' bum-bailies, was a pack of fools. He made a reg'lar holy show of 'em. An' what does 'e git?—Jahroh."

Here the speaker was interrupted by cries, approving his ruling in the matter.

"He come to give Justice a show to git her voice 'eard, and what's 'e find?—a prison." Bill paused here for effect, which followed immediately in the form of deep and sepulchral groans.

"Now I arsk you, ain't there plenty real criminals in this part o' the world without freezin' on to the likes of *us*? But the Law's got a down on diggers. What did the police know of this Dolphin gang? Nothing. But they collared Mr. Scarlett, and was in a fair way to scrag 'im, if Justice hadn't intervened. Who have you to thank for that?—a digger, my mate Tresco. Yes, but the Law don't thank 'im, not it; it fastens on to the very bloke that stopped it from hangin' the wrong man."

Here there arose yells of derision, and one digger, more vociferous than his fellows, was heard to exclaim, "That's right, ole man. Give 'em goss!"

The crowd now stretched across the broad street and blocked all traffic, in spite of the exertions of a couple of policemen who were vainly trying to disperse Bill's audience.

"Now I want to know what you're goin' to do about it," continued the Prospector. "All this shoutin' an' hoorayin' is very fine, but I don't see how it helps my mate in the lock-up. I want to know what you're goin' to *do*!"

He paused for an answer, but there was none, because no one in the vast assembly was prepared to reply.

"Then," said the Prospector, "I'll tell you what. I want six men to go down to the port for a ship's hawser, a thick 'un, a long 'un. I want those men to bring that there hawser, and meet me in front of the Police Station; an' we'll see if I can show you the way to manage the Law."

The concourse surged wildly to and fro, as men pushed and elbowed their way to the front.

"Very good," said Bill, as he surveyed the volunteers with the eye of a general; "you'll do fine. I want about ten chain o' rope, thick enough and strong enough to hold a ship. Savee?"

The men detailed for this special duty answered affirmatively, seized upon the nearest "express," and, clambering upon it, they drove towards the sea amidst the cheering of the crowd.

The Prospector now despatched agents to beat up all the diggers in the town, and then, accompanied by hundreds of hairy and excited men, he made his way towards the lock-up, where the goldsmith, who had been arrested immediately after Scarlett's trial, lay imprisoned. This place of torment was a large, one-storied, wooden building which stood in a by-street facing a green and grassy piece of land adjacent to the Red Tape Office.

By the time that Bill, followed by an ever increasing crowd, had reached the "station," the men with the hawser arrived from the port.

No sooner were the long lengths of heavy rope unloaded from the waggon, then deft hands tied a bowline at one end of the hawser and quickly passed it round the lock-up, which was thus securely noosed, and two or three hundred diggers took hold of the slack of the rope.

Then was the Prospector's opportunity to play his part in the little drama which he had arranged for the edification of Timber Town. Watch in hand, he stepped up to the door of the Police Station, where he was immediately confronted by no less a person than the Sergeant himself.

"'Day, mister," said Bill, but the policeman failed to acknowledge the greeting. "You've got a mate of ours in here—a man of the name of Tresco. It's the wish of these gentlemen that he be liberated. I give you three minutes to decide."

The infuriated Sergeant could hardly speak, so great was his anger. But at last he ejaculated, "Be off! This is rioting. You're causing a breach of the peace."

“Very sorry, mister, but time’s nearly up,” was the only comment that the Prospector made.

“I arrest you. I shall lock you up!”

Bill quickly stepped back, and cried to his men. “Take a strain!” The hawser was pulled taut, till it ticked. “Heave!” The building creaked to its foundations.

Bill held up his hand, and the rope slackened. Turning to the Sergeant, he said, “You see, mister, this old shanty of yours will go, or I must have my mate. Which is it to be? It lies with you to say.”

But by way of answer the Sergeant rushed at him with a pair of handcuffs. Half-a-dozen diggers intervened, and held the Law’s representative as if he had been a toy-terrier.

The Prospector now gave all his attention to his work. “Take a strain!” he cried. “Heave!” The wooden building creaked and cracked; down came a chimney, rattling upon the iron roof.

“Pull, boys!” shouted the Prospector. “Take the time from me.” With arms extended above his head, he swayed his body backwards and forwards slowly, and shouted in time to his gesticulations, “Heave! Heave! Now you’ve got her! Altogether, boys! Let her ’ave it! Heave!”

The groaning building moved a foot or two forward, the windows cracked, and another chimney came down with a crash. Bill held up his hand, and the hawser slackened.

“Now, mister,” he said, addressing the helpless, struggling Sergeant, “when’s my mate a-comin’? Look sharp in saying the word, or your old shed’ll only be fit for firewood.”

At this point of the proceedings, a constable with an axe in his hand issued from the tottering building; his intention being to cut the rope. But he was immediately overpowered and disarmed.

“That fixes it,” said the Prospector. “Now, boys; take a strain—the last one. Heave, all! Give ’er all you know. Altogether. Heave! There she comes. Again. Heave!”

There was a crashing and a smashing, the whole fabric lurched forward, and was dragged half-way across the road. Bill held up his hand.

“Now, Sergeant, have you had enough, or do you want the whole caboose pulled across the paddock?”

But the answer was given by a constable leading a battered, tattered, figure from the wrecked building.

It was Benjamin Tresco.

Led by the Prospector, the great crowd of diggers roared three deafening cheers; and then the two mates shook hands.

That affecting greeting over, Benjamin held up his hand for silence.

“Gentlemen, I thank you,” he said. “This is the proudest day of my life. It’s worth while being put in limbo to be set free in this fashion. I hardly know what I’ve done to deserve such a delicate attention, but I take it as a token of good feeling, although you pretty near killed me with your kindness. The Law is strong, but public opinion is stronger; and when the two meet in conflict, the result is chaos for the Law.”

He pointed to the wrecked building, by way of proof; and the crowd roared its approval.

“But there’s been a man worse man-handled than me,” continued the goldsmith, “a man as innocent as an unborn babe. I refer to Mr. Scarlett, the boss of the Robin Creek diggings.”

The crowd shouted.

“But he has regained his liberty.” Benjamin’s face shone like the rising sun, as he said the words. “I call upon you to give three cheers for Mr. Jack Scarlett.” The response was deafening, and the roar of the multitude was heard by the sailors on the ships which lay at the wharves of Timber Town.

From the mixed crowd on the side-path, where he had been standing with Cathro and Mr. Crewe, Scarlett stepped forward to thank the man who by his intervention had delivered him from obloquy and, possibly, from death. Immediately the diggers marked the meeting, they rushed forward, seized Scarlett, Tresco, and the Prospector; lifted them shoulder high, and marched down the street, singing songs appropriate to the occasion.

At the door of The Lucky Digger the procession stopped, and there the heroes were almost forcibly refreshed; after which affecting ceremony one body-guard of diggers conducted Scarlett to the Pilot’s house, and another escorted Bill and Ben to the goldsmith’s shop. But whereas Scarlett’s friends left him at Captain Summerhayes’ gate, the men who accompanied Tresco formed themselves into a guard for the protection of his person and the safety of his deliverer.

When Scarlett walked into the Pilot’s parlour, he found the old sailor poring over a pile of letters and documents which had just arrived by the mail from England.

“Well, Pilot, good news, I hope,” said Jack.

“No,” replied the gruff old seaman; “it’s bad—and yet it’s good. See here, lad.” He pushed a letter

towards Jack, and fixed his eyes on the young man's face.

"I had better not read it," said Jack. "Let Miss Summerhayes do so."

"I've no secrets from *you*, lad. There's nothing in it you shouldn't know; but, no, no, 'tain't for my dar'ter's eyes. It's from my brother's lawyers, to say he's dead."

"What, dead?"

"Yes, died last January. They say he had summat on his mind; they refer me to this packet here—his journals." The Pilot took up two fat little books, in which a diary had been kept in a clear, clerkly hand. "I've been looking them through, and it's all as clear as if it had been printed."

Scarlett sat down, and looked at the old man earnestly.

"I've told you," continued Summerhayes, "how I hated my brother: you've heard me curse him many a time. Well, the reason's all set down in these books. It worried him as he lay sickening for his death. To put it short, it was this: He was rich—I was poor. I was married—he was single. He had ships—I had none. So he gave me command of one of his tea-clippers, and I handed over to his care all I held dear. But I believed he proved unworthy of my trust. And so he did, but not as I thought. Here in his diary he put down everything he did while I was on that voyage; writing himself down blackguard, if ever a man did. But he owns that however base was his wish, he was defeated in the fulfilment of it. And here, as he was slowly dying, he puts down how he repents. He was bad, he was grasping, he was unscrupulous, but he wasn't as bad as he wished to be, and that's all you can say for him. I bury my resentment with his body. He's dead, and my hatred's dead. To prove his repentance he made his Will, of which this is a certified copy."

The Pilot handed to Jack a lengthy legal document, which had a heavy red seal attached to it, and continued, "To my dar'ter he leaves the bulk of his money, an' to me his ships. There, that ends the whole matter."

Jack read the deed while the Pilot smoked.

"You're a rich man, Captain Summerhayes," said he, as he handed back the document to its owner.

"If I choose to take the gift," growled the Pilot.

"Which you must, or else see an immense sum of money go into the maw of Chancery."

"Chancery be smothered! Ain't there my dar'ter Rose?"

"Yes, but she couldn't take the ships except at your wish or at your death."

"Then she shall have 'em."

"Nonsense, Pilot. You know now that your brother never wronged you unpardonably. You own that in a large measure you misjudged him. Now then, place your unfounded charge against his evil intention, and you are quits. He tried to square himself by leaving you half his wealth, and you will square yourself with him by accepting his gift. If you don't do that, you will die a worse man than he."

The Pilot was silent for some time, and drummed the table with his fingers.

"I don't like it," he complained.

"You must take it. If you don't, you will drag before the public a matter that must grieve your daughter."

"All right, I'll take it; but I shall hold it in trust for my gal."

"That is as you please."

"But there's one good thing in it, Jack. Sartoris! Rosebud! Come here. There's a gentleman wants to see you."

Rose Summerhayes and the shipless Captain, when the Pilot opened his mail, had retired to the kitchen, in order that the old man, who was evidently upset by his news, might digest it quietly. They now reappeared, looking half-scared lest the heavens had fallen on the Pilot.

They were astonished to see him radiant, and laughing with Jack.

"Now, my gal and Captain Sartoris, sir, I've got a little matter to clear up. I own there was a problem in them letters as almost bamfoozled me. I confess it almost beat me. I own it got the better of me considerably. But this young man, here—stand up, Jack, and don't look as if you'd stolen the sugar out of the tea-caddy—this young man, my dear, pulled me through. He put it to me as plain as if he'd bin a lawyer an' a parson rolled into one. The difficulty's overcome: there's nothing of it left: it don't exist."

Sartoris' eyes opened wider and wider as he gazed in astonishment at the Pilot, who continued, "Yes, Sartoris, you well may look, for I'm goin' to tell you something you don't expect. You are to have another ship. I have letters here as warrant me in saying that: you shall have command of another ship, as soon as you land in England."

“D’you mean to say your brother has forgiven the wreck of *The Witch*? You must be dreaming, Summerhayes.”

“Probably I am. But as soon as you reach home, Sartoris, there’s a ship waitin’ for you. That ends the matter.”

He turned abruptly to Scarlett.

“There’s something I have to say to you, young feller. My gal, here, came to me, the night before last—when some one we know of was in a very queer street—she came to me, all of a shake, all of a tremble, unable to sleep; she came to me in the middle of the night—a thing she’d never done since she was six years old—an’ at first I thought it was the hysterics, an’ then I thought it was fever. But she spoke plain enough, an’ her touch was cool enough. An’ then she began to tell me”——

“Really, father,” Rose exclaimed, her cheeks colouring like a peony, “*do* stop, or you’ll drive me from the room.”

“Right, my dear: I say no more. But I ask you, sir,” he continued, turning to Scarlett. “I ask *you* how you diagnose a case like that. What treatment do you prescribe? What doctor’s stuff do you give?” There was a smile on the old man’s face, and his eyes sparkled with merriment. “I put it to you as a friend, I put it to you as a man who knows a quantity o’ gals. What’s the matter with my dar’ter Rose?”

For a moment, Jack looked disconcerted, but almost instantly a smile overspread his face.

“I expect it arose from a sudden outburst of affection for her father,” he said.

But here Sartoris spoilt the effect by laughing. “I suspect the trouble rose from a disturbed condition of the heart,” said he, “a complaint not infrequent in females.”

“An’ what, Cap’n, would you suggest as a cure?” asked the Pilot; his eyes twinkling, and his suppressed merriment working in him like the subterranean rumbling of an earthquake.

“Cast off the tow-rope, drop the pilot, and let her own skipper shape her course”—this was the advice that Sartoris gave—“to my mind you’ve been a-towin’ of her too long.”

“But she’s got no skipper,” said Summerhayes, “an’, dear, dear, she’s a craft with a deal too much top-hamper an’ not near enough free-board to please me, an’ her freight’s valued at over fifty thousand. Where’s the man, Sartoris, you’d guarantee would take her safely into port?”

The two old sailors were now bubbling with laughter, and there were frequent pauses between their words, that their mirth might not explode.

“There was a time,” said Sartoris, “there was a time when I’d ha’ bin game to take on the job meself.”

“What!” exclaimed Rose. “You? Why, you’re old and shaky and decrepit.”

“Yes, I don’t deny it—I’m a bit of a hulk, my dear,” but Sartoris laughed as he spoke. “I may have to pass in my cheques, any day. That’s why I stand aside; but I’ll find you the man to take my place. Here ‘e is!” The grizzled old sailor seized Scarlett by the arm, and pushed him towards the girl. “This is him. He’s got his master’s ticket all right; an’ though he’s never had command of a ship, he’s anxious to try his hand. Pilot, my advice is, let ’im have her.”

“Thank ’e, Cap’n.” Here the Pilot’s laughter, too long suppressed, burst forth with a terrific roar, in which Sartoris joined. “I mark what you say, Cap’n. I take your advice.” His words again halted to make way for his Titanic laughter. “I believe it’s about the best thing I can do.” He had now caught hold of Scarlett’s hand. “Come here, my gal.” Taking hold of Rose’s hand also, he said, “My dear, I built you—an’ I pride myself your lines are beautiful, though I’ve never told you so till now—I launched you in life, an’ now I put you in charge of the best skipper I can lay hands on. Always answer your helm quick, take care you don’t fall away to lee-ward in making your course, an’ I’ll go bail he’ll treat you fair an’ safely carry you into port.”

He put his daughter’s hand into Jack’s.

“There,” he said. “A long voyage an’ a happy one. May you weather every storm.” And, walking to the window, the Pilot made pretence of looking out on the roses in the garden, in order to hide the moisture which clouded his eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Tresco Makes the Ring.

The goldsmith sat at his bench; his spectacles on his nose, his apron round the place where his waist should have been, and in his hands the implements of his craft. Nobody had told him, he had hardly told himself, that it was for the last time that he was sitting within the four boarded walls where he had spent so many hours during the last four years, at the bench which bore on

every square inch of its surface the marks of his labour. But Tresco knew, as did also Jake Ruggles and the Prospector who watched him, that the end of his labours had come.

The goldsmith's thoughts were in keeping with his work: he was about to make a wedding-ring, and his speech was of Love.

First, he took a little ingot of pure gold, and, laying it on the smooth surface of what looked like an upturned, handleless flat-iron, he wrought upon the precious, yellow metal with a hammer, till it was shaped like a badly-made rod.

This he handed over to Jake, who put it on the wire "devil" and strove with blow-pipe and flame to bring it to a red heat.

"Woman," said Benjamin, "Woman is like a beautiful scene, or the perfume of a delicate rose—every man loves her, be he prince or pauper, priest or murderer. To labour for Woman is the sweetest work of Man—that's why a goldsmith is in love with his craft. Think of all the pretty creatures I have made happy with my taste and skill. While there are women there must be goldsmiths, Jake!"

"What?" asked the apprentice, taking his lips from the stem of the blow-pipe, and looking at his master.

"You're sure this is the correct size?" Tresco held an old-fashioned ring between his forefinger and thumb, and tested with the point of a burnisher the setting of the rubies in it.

"Yes," replied the shock-headed youth. "I seen her take it orf her finger, when the toff bought her engagement-ring. I was 'all there,' don't you make no mistake. 'Leave this,' I said, looking at the rubies; 'the settin' is a bit shaky,' I says. 'Allow me to fix it,' I says. An' there you are with a pattern. Savee?"

Benjamin laughed.

"Mind you make it real good," said the Prospector, who stood, watching the operation. "Person'lly, I'd say put a good big diamond in the centre."

"'Twouldn't do," replied the goldsmith. "Unfortunately, Custom says wedding-rings must be plain, so plain it must be."

"Then let it be pure," said the Prospector. "Anyway it'll bring good luck."

He had divided his lucky nugget, the same that he had refused to sell when he made the goldsmith's acquaintance and sold the first gold from Bush Robin Creek, and while he had retained one half of this talisman, out of the other half Tresco was fashioning a wedding-ring for Scarlett.

The red-hot piece of gold had been cooled suddenly by being cast into the "pickle," and was now subjected to another severe hammering, after which it was drawn, by means of a gigantic pair of tongs fixed to the windlass of a bench by a long leather strap through graduated holes in a strong steel plate. Next, it was branded, by means of certain steel punches, with the goldsmith's private marks, and afterwards it was bent with pliers into a circle, and its clear-cut ends were soldered together under the blow-pipe.

Benjamin peered over the tops of his glasses at the Prospector. "I owe you luck, fortune, and freedom," he said, "and yet, Bill, your power to create happiness is distinctly limited."

"I dessay," replied the Prospector. "But what'd you have me do? Would you ask me to make you into a gold-plated angel with a pair o' patent wings, twelve foot in the spread? It'd save me a deal o' trouble if you could fly away from the police an' Timber Town."

"I wasn't thinking of the police. I was thinking of adorable, elusive Woman. I ought to be making my own wedding-ring: instead of that I must roll my bluey and be footing it over the mountains before to-morrow morning. I'm turned into a perfect Wandering Jew."

"You should be darn glad I give you the opportunity."

"I leave behind the loveliest fallen angel you ever set eyes on."

"You'll find plenty more o' that sort where you're goin'."

"Perhaps: but not one of 'em the prospective Mrs. T. Ah, well, all through life my hopes of domestic bliss have invariably been blighted; but the golden key of wealth will unlock the hardest woman's heart. When I have leisure and freedom from worry, I'll see what can be done. In the meanwhile, Jake, go and fetch some beer." He took a shilling from his pocket, and gave it to the apprentice. "Make tracks," he said, "or my sorrow will have fled before I've had time to drown it."

Jake disappeared, as if shot from a cannon, and his master placed the roughly-formed ring on a steel mandril.

"But this," said the goldsmith, tapping the ring skilfully with a diminutive hammer, "this is for the finger of an angel. Just think, Bill, what it would be to be spliced to a creature so good that it'd be like being chained to a scripture saint for the rest of your life."

“I guess I’d be on the wallaby in a fortnight,” said the Prospector. “Personally, I prefer a flesh-and-blood angel, with a touch of the devil in her. But at best marriage is on’y a lottery. A wife’s like a claim—she may prove rich, or she may turn out to be a duffer.”

The goldsmith was now working upon the ring with a file. Next, he rubbed it with emery paper, and finished it with a burnisher.

“Yes,” said he, as he filled his pipe, and lighted it at the pilot-flame of the gas-jet which stretched its long, movable arm over the bench, “men, like flies, are of two kinds—those that fall into the soup, an’ those that don’t. I have borne a charmed life: you have fallen into the tureen. Here comes the beer!”

There was a scuffling on the side-path, and Jake’s voice was heard in shrill altercation. Up to that point, Benjamin’s body-guard had attended rigidly to its self-imposed duty, but now, following close on the heels of the apprentice, its members burst into the workshop.

Shaking with laughter, Tresco addressed the thirsty influx.

“I’m sorry, mates,” he said, “but I can’t see my way to make that quart of beer into two gallons. But I give largess to my vassals—that, I believe, is real, toff, Court dialect. Drink this.”

He took a crumpled one-pound bank-note from his pocket, and handed it to the self-appointed captain of his guard, who immediately withdrew his fire-eaters, and the goldsmith was left to complete his work in peace.

“Here’s health to the bride that’s to wear it,” said Benjamin, as he raised his glass to his thirsty lips.

“I’m not much at sentiment,” said the Prospector, “but may she always ring as true as the metal it’s made of, for she’s got a Man for a husband.”

“May Luck go with them.”

To the Prospector the ring now seemed perfect, but the goldsmith placed a jeweller’s magnifier in his eye, and scrutinised the shining marriage-token lest it might contain the slightest flaw. But his work stood the test and, placing the ring in a dainty velvet case, he rose and put on his hat.

“That finishes my career as a goldsmith,” he said. “I don’t suppose I shall sit at a bench again. To you, Bill, I owe my fortune, to you I owe my liberty. No words of my misshapen tongue can express what I feel; but you, mate, can guess it.”

The two men looked silently at each other, and solemnly shook hands.

The Prospector might have said a great deal: he might have expatiated in lurid language on his admiration of Tresco’s self-sacrifice, but he said nothing. He silently held the goldsmith’s hand, till a tell-tale moisture dimmed the craftsman’s eyes, so that they could not see through their spectacles.

Pulling himself together with a sudden effort, Benjamin said firmly, if a little loudly, “Is my swag packed, Jake?”

“Bill done it himself,” answered the apprentice. “I seen him do it when he packed his own.”

“That’s one more little kindness. Thanks, mate.” Tresco placed the ring-case in his pocket, and led the way to the kitchen. There the “swags” lay on the table, and each man took his own and hitched it on his shoulders.

“Two such valuable swags,” said the Prospector, “it’s never been my fortune to see. Twenty thousand couldn’t buy ’em.”

With these words, he passed into the street; Tresco following.

The body-guard of diggers closed round them, and escorted them to the house of Pilot Summerhayes.

Inside the garden-gate, the party of rough, ill-clad, warm-hearted men paused, and one of their number went forward, and knocked at the front door. Rose opened it.

“We want to see Mr. Scarlett,” said the digger.

The girl vanished, and Jack, followed by the Pilot, appeared.

“Hullo! hullo!” exclaimed the gruff old sailor, as he caught sight of the gold-miners in the garden. “We’re invaded, Jack: it’s another warrant. How now, my man; what have we been doing? Are there more murderers to be lodged in gaol?—I thought they’d caught the lot.”

“There’s four of ’em in quod, boss,” replied the digger; “I guess that’s the whole gang, s’far’s Tresco’s evidence goes to prove.”

“Ah! there’s the goldsmith himself,” exclaimed the Pilot, pressing through the throng in the garden. “How d’you do, sir? I have to thank you, on behalf of my dar’ter and myself.” He gripped the goldsmith’s hand, and almost wrung it off.

“That’s all right,” said Tresco. “Yes, that’s all right. I couldn’t stand by and see an innocent man

murdered. Certainly not." Here he got his hand free, and proffered it to Scarlett, who grasped it with a warmth which quite equalled the Pilot's.

"Tresco," said Jack, looking straight into the goldsmith's face, "you have accumulated against me a debt I can never pay."

"I don't know," replied the goldsmith, laughing; "I'm not so sure of that. Sometimes Justice miscarries. How about that *kaka* nugget? When you've explained that, I shall feel I was justified in saving you from the hand of the Law."

Jack laughed too. "You dog! You know the facts as well as I do. Moonlight took a fancy to the piece of gold and offered a good price, which the Jew took. I bought it from my mate. That point is perfectly clear. But I see you've got your swag on your back: your days in Timber Town are numbered."

"That's so," said Tresco.

"I can only say this," continued Jack: "if ever you are in a tight place, which God forbid, I hope I shall be near to help you out of it; if I am not, wire to me—though I am at the end of the earth I will come to your help."

Tresco smiled. "Yes," he said, "you're going to be married—you look on everything through coloured glasses: you are prepared to promise anything. You are going to the altar. And that's why we've come here." He had taken the little velvet case from his pocket. "As you'll be wanting something in this line"—he opened the case and displayed the wedding-ring—"I have made this out of a piece of Bush-Robin gold, and on behalf of Bill and myself I present it to you with our best wishes for a long and happy life."

Jack took the gift, and drew a feigned sigh. He knew the meaning of such a present from such givers. He looked at the ring: he looked at the assembled diggers.

"After this, I guess, I shall *have* to get married," he said. "I don't see any way out of it. Do you, Pilot?"

"I reckon he's hooked, gen'lemen," replied the old sailor. "There's many a smart man on the 'field'—I'm aware of that—but never a one so smart but a woman won't sooner or later take him in her net. I give my dar'ter credit for having landed the smartest of the whole crowd of you."

"Well," said Jack, as he turned the glittering ring between his fingers, "I've got to go through with it; but such tokens of sympathy as this ring"—he placed it on the first joint of his forefinger, and held it up that all might see—"will pull me through."

"And when is the happy day?" asked Tresco.

"The choice of that lies with the lady," replied Jack; "but as the Pilot has just received news of his brother's death, I expect my freedom will extend for a little while yet."

"My mate and me'll be far away by then," said the Prospector, and he looked at Benjamin as he spoke. "But you may bet we'll often think of you and your wife, and wish you health an' happiness."

"Hear, hear." The crowd was beginning to feel that the occasion was assuming its proper aspect.

"We hope," continued Bill, "that your wife will prove a valuable find, as valuable a find as your claim at Robin Creek, an' that she'll pan out rich in virtue an' all womanly qualities. H'm." The Prospector turned for sympathy to his friends. "I think that's pretty fair, eh, mates?" But they only grinned. So Bill addressed himself once more to the subject in hand, though his ideas had run out with his last rhetorical effort. "I don't think I can beat that," he said; "I think I'll leave it at that. I hope she'll pan out rich in virtue, an' prove a valuable claim. Me an' Tresco's got a long way to go before night. I hope you'll excuse us if we start to make a git." He held out his hand to Jack, and said, "Health an' prosperity to you an' the missis, mate. So-long." Then he hitched up his swag, and walked down the gravelled path regardless of Tresco or anyone else.

The goldsmith tarried a moment or two.

"It's hardly possible we shall meet again," he said. "If we don't, I wish you a long good-bye. It is said that men value most those to whom they have been of service; but whether that is so or not, I shall always like to think of the days we spent together on Bush Robin Creek."

"When this little bit of a breeze has blown over," said Jack, "I hope you'll come back."

"Not much." The reply was straight and unequivocal. "I may have retrieved my character in the eyes of the people of Timber Town, but in the eyes of the Law never, even if I satisfy its requirements in its prescribed manner. I shall go to some other country and there live, happy in the knowledge that I expiated my wrong-doing by saving my innocent friend from the danger of death, at the price of my own liberty. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Jack's hand clasped the craftsman's, each man took a long, straight look at the other's kindly face, and then they parted.

The body-guard closed round the goldsmith and the Prospector, and escorted them through the

Town to The Lucky Digger, where they saw their charges fed and refreshed for the journey. Then they conducted them out of the town to the top of the dividing range, and there bade them a long adieu.

EPILOGUE.

When the play is over, it is customary for the curtain to be raised for a few moments, that the audience may take a last look at the players; and though the action of our piece is ended and the story is told, the reader is asked to give a final glance at the stage, on which have been acted the varied scenes of the tale of Timber Town.

In the inner recess of Tresco's cave, where he had made his comfortless bed, the dim light of a candle is burning. As its small flame lights up the cold walls, stained black with the smoke of the goldsmith's dead fire, a weeping woman is seen crouching on the damp floor.

It is Gentle Annie.

Between the sobs which rack her, she is speaking.

"While he lived for weeks in this dripping hole, I lodged comfortably and entertained murderers! Vile woman, defiled by hands stained with blood! despised, loathed, shunned by every man, woman, or child that knows me. Yet *he* did not despise me, though I shall despise myself for ever, and for ever, and for ever. And he is gone—the only one who could have raised me to my better self."

Rising from the ground, she takes the candle, and gropes her way out of the cave into the pure light of the Sun.

In a common Maori *whare*, built of *raupo* leaves and rushes, sits a dusky maiden, filled with bitterness and grief. Outside the low doorway, stand Scarlett and his wife.

Forbidden to enter, they beg the surly occupant to come out to them. But the only answer is a sentence of Maori, growled from an angry mouth.

"But, Amiria, we have ridden all the way from Timber Town to see you," pleads the silvery voice of Rose Scarlett.

"Then you can ride back to Timber Town. I didn't ask you to come."

"Amiria," says Jack; his voice stern and hard, "if you insult my wife, you insult me. Have not you and she been friends since you were children?"

Amiria emerges from her hut. On her head is a man's hat, and round her body is wrapped a gaudy but dirty blanket.

"Listen to what I say." The same well-moulded, dusky face is there, the same upright bearing, the same musical voice, but the tone is hard, and the look forbidding. "I learnt all the *Pakeha* ways; I went to their school; I can speak their tongue; I have learnt their *ritenga*: and I say these *Pakeha* things are good for the *Pakeha*, but for the Maori they are bad. The white man is one, the Maori is one. Let the white man keep to his customs, and let the Maori keep to his. Let the white marry white, and let the brown marry brown. That is all. Take your wife with you, and think of me no more. I am a Maori *wahine*, I have become a woman of the tribe. My life is in the *pa*, yours is in the town. Now go. I want to see you no more." So saying she disappears inside the hut.

Scarlett draws himself to his full height, and stands, contemplating the sea. Then his eye catches a fleck of white at his side; and he turns, to see his wife drying the tears which cannot be restrained.

He takes her by the hand, and leads her through the little crowd of natives standing round.

"Come away, little woman," he says; "we can do no good here. It's time we got back to Timber Town."

So mounting their horses, they ride away.

It so happens that as they reach their journey's end, and pass the big "emporium" of Varnhagen and Co., they catch sight of the gay figure of a girl, dressed in fluttering muslin and bright ribbons, beside whom walks a smart young man.

"Wasn't that Miss Varnhagen?" asks Jack after they have passed by at a trot.

"Yes," replies Rose.

“Who was the fellow with her?”

“He’s the new gold-clerk at the Kangaroo Bank. She’s engaged to him.”

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