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Volume 3, by Colin Munro**

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FERN VALE
OR THE
QUEENSLAND SQUATTER.
A NOVEL.
BY COLIN MUNRO.
IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL III.

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FERN VALE.

[1]

CHAPTER I.

"What sport shall we devise, here in
this garden,
To drive away the heavy thought of
care?"

RICHARD II., *Act 3, Sc. 4.*

Three days after that to which we brought down our narrative in the last chapter the morning broke calmly and serenely over the wooded wastes of the bush; and while the pleasant zephyr of the morning tempered the rays of the sun, as he sped his course to the zenith, a happy party of equestrians might have been seen cantering by the bridle path between Strawberry Hill and Brompton. That party consisted of our friends, Mrs., Miss, and Tom Rainsfield, and the Fergusons, accompanied by their black boy Joey. The van was led by the first named lady, accompanied by William Ferguson, while the others followed riding two abreast, having paired off in a manner most congenial to themselves. The rear was brought up by Joey and William's dogs, who coursed through the bush in seeming delight at the prospect of wearing off a little of the rust that had grown on them from their late inertness.

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They had ridden for nearly four hours when they slackened their speed a little as the noon-day sun became more powerful; while, at that moment, they came to a beautiful little spot where a grassy slope terminated in a lagoon, whose waters appeared to the travellers clear and refreshingly cool. Here Mrs. Rainsfield drew up her horse, and proposed a halt for tiffin; which being generally assented to, the party dismounted. The bridles of their horses being each fastened round a tree, some refreshments were produced by Tom from his valise; and the friends sat down in a shady spot on the green sward, and partook with that hearty zest that can only be appreciated by those who have been similarly situated.

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When perfectly refreshed they proceeded on their way, and arrived at Brompton before the close of the evening. There they were hospitably received by Mr. and Mrs. Smithers, and very graciously by Bob, who was all urbanity for the occasion. They found several of the guests had also arrived, those, who like themselves had arrived from a long distance; and the house then was as much a scene of gaiety as if it had been the grand reunion itself. The evening passed pleasantly enough; but, our object being more particularly to picture to the reader the *fêtes* of the following day, we will draw a veil over the company for the night, and introduce them again on the morning.

The morning in due time came; and was simply a repetition of those common to a Queensland summer. A cloudless sky spanned the horizon, in which the sun had a tropical brilliancy, without the scorching power incidental to most sunny climes. The air was genial and salubrious, and the balmy breeze bore on its placid wings the aroma of the surrounding acacia and mimosa. It was such a day as poets love to picture, but which, to the incredulous matter of fact denizens of "foggy England," a description only generates a confirmed and unqualified pyrrhonism. With all the exercise, however, of the scepticism of our friends in the "old country," it, nevertheless, does not diminish the lustre of such glorious sunshine as, we again repeat, is to be found nowhere in such tolerant perfection as in Queensland, and which marked the morning to which we allude. Perhaps the weather was a little warmer than usual, and the atmosphere drier; rather more so, in

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fact, than the settlers desired, for their rivers and creeks were getting low, and many were desiring rain to refresh their grass, and refill their water-holes and courses. However, such desideratum had no consideration with the party assembled at Brompton, whose sport at the time they seemed determined nothing should mar.

[5]

The great *fête* of the day was to be the races; and it was then that the agrarian beauties of Brompton showed to advantage. It may be remembered in an early chapter of our story we gave a cursory sketch of the station, but in the event of its topography having escaped the memory of the reader, we will again partially repeat the description. For some considerable distance down the bank of the Gibson river the land was almost perfectly level, and unusually free from timber. It was fenced off into paddocks of considerable size. Towards the centre of one of these was a swamp, from which the surrounding ground had just sufficient rise to constitute it the reservoir for the drainage of the land; while towards the river, and immediately on the bank, the land rose in a little knoll. Here then was a naturally formed race course; and, by the erection of a few posts, a course was marked out that for amenity, level, turf, and convenience of sight, it would be difficult to surpass.

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Towards eleven o'clock nearly all the expected guests having arrived, and the ground became a lively scene as the gay and well-mounted equestrians cantered in laughing and merry groups backwards and forwards; some few, more exhilarated or pedantic than the rest, trying the course and the mettle of their steeds. The guests of the Smitherses were not the only ones who had congregated to witness the sport. Other visitors of a more plebeian character, and self-invited, were there; all those within a circuit of some thirty miles, who by any possibility could obtain release from their work, had camped themselves in the neighbourhood to be spectators. The company had ridden over the ground, and had dispersed in all directions; when the horses "entered to run," decorated with their party-coloured rosettes, and led by their respective riders carrying their saddles, were descried coming on to the course; and speedily the scattered parties converged to the knoll we have mentioned, and which now served for a grand stand.

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The horses approached the post; and the necessary preliminaries having been gone through, they assumed their places; when the few of the spectative portion of the company, who still remained in the way, speedily retired, responsive to the call of "clear the course;" and, after the usual amount of "false starts," the signal was given that was unanimously acted upon, and away went the horses.

Horse-racing is the same all the world over, at least in all parts of the globe where the Anglo-Saxon race holds sway. Therefore we need not tire our readers by giving a prolix account of this one in particular. We will merely say that the usual excitement prevailed at the start, when the horses and their riders received respectively their due amount of praise from their various admirers, whose bets were interchanged on the result of the struggle. That the exciting anxiousness in watching the progress round the course was there equally apparent. That the various hopes and fears of the betters as they witnessed the pulling up or the falling away of their respective favourites; the intensity of excitement; the uttered remarks; and the increasing watchfulness, as some slight rise on the plain or piece of heavy ground tried the mettle of the high-blooded animals, were all to be seen and heard there; and that the other excitements of such a scene were equally noticeable. That breathless interest as the horses approach the straight run to the winning-post; the last exciting struggle of man and beast, when the impatience of the former is administered to the latter in whip and spur; the shouts of the jockeys mingled with the snorting of the steed, when both are blended in the thunder of the latter's hoofs, which shakes the very turf; while the straining animals pass the post with the seeming velocity of steam.

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As the panting and foam-covered horses, and exhausted-looking riders, returned to the scales, the tongues of the assemblage were loosened; the groups reunited; and, in the interval between that and the next race, cantered about; while some of the younger equestrians emulated among themselves the previous competitors. A small tent had been erected on the bank of the river for the dispensation of refreshments, and for a shady retreat for the ladies; and thither many resorted.

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At this period of the amusements our friends had formed themselves into a group with Mr. and Mrs. Smithers; but without Bob, who had been a rider, and was the winner of the late race. They had leisurely ridden round the course, and had returned to the stand, when Eleanor expressed to John Ferguson (in whose company she had been riding) a desire to dismount, and take a seat in the tent. He was instantly out of his saddle assisting her to the ground, and (after giving their horses in charge of a black boy) handed her to a seat in the shade. Bob Smithers, who had divested himself of his riding costume for his ordinary habiliments, then entered; and rudely brushing past John, advanced to the girl and took her hand, while he exclaimed:

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"Come along with me, Eleanor, I want you."

The abrupt manner of his entrance, his forcible abduction of the lady, and his uncouth behaviour to himself, rather annoyed John. But the look of patient endurance, mingled with entreaty, which Eleanor cast upon her rough protector, struck our hero as containing more melancholy and suffering than was to be expected in a young affianced bride, whose nuptials were speedily approaching. It more than convinced him that his friend Tom was right when he said that Eleanor Rainsfield could never be happy with Bob Smithers. With a mind strangely agitated between fears and hopes John emerged from the tent to see the being he loved leaning on the arm of his rival, and going through the ceremony of several introductions.

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She freely entered into conversation with her new-made friends; but the party being augmented by some others, to whom we presume Bob Smithers did not condescend to introduce her, he led her away; and they walked arm in arm to another part of the ground, apparently in earnest discourse. She was laying her hand upon his arm, while she looked in his face, and seemed anxious to impress something upon him; while he appeared to listen attentively to her remarks, though he ever and anon burst out into a loud laugh and ejaculated a few monosyllables, which on each occasion created a faint smile on the features of his lovely companion.

John Ferguson witnessed all this, and his heart sank within him. Never, thought he, would woman hang on and talk thus with man, if she did not love him. "Ah!" he mentally exclaimed, "she loves him devotedly; fool that I was not to believe this before. Strange infatuation that led me on to hope, when she herself told me as plainly as she could there was no hope. I am doomed to disappointment I see; she never can be mine, for she loves Bob Smithers." And with that melancholy solace John left the spot of his soliloquy. [12]

What was the nature of the conversation that so disturbed his peace of mind we do not deem it necessary to reveal, but we are disposed to think that our love-sick friend came to a too hasty conclusion upon the nature of the communicant's symptoms. John Ferguson was not sufficiently versed in women's little natures to be able to construe aright their motives in their actions, or the impulses that actuate them in their deportment. His dejection was, consequently, the more acute from the construction he had put upon Eleanor's conduct. It was true she was engaged to the man with whom he saw her converse, but he never dreamt to ask himself the question, if that circumstance was not, in a great measure, owing to his own dilatoriness; not to classify his supineness under a more sheepish head. [13]

He was sauntering away in his usual despondent mood when Tom Rainsfield approached him from behind, administering, as he did so, a smart slap on the shoulder, with the exclamation: "Why, John, what is the matter with you? have you been visited by a myth? for you are as white as a sheet. Come along with me, and I will give you some fun; William and I have been looking for you all over the ground;" and, without waiting for an answer or an objection, he led him off to where a party of gentlemen had assembled to witness the next race. Amongst them were Dr. Graham, Mr. Brown, and some others, which it is needless for us in our history to trouble the reader by bringing forward.

When the race was finished they speedily made their arrangements for the proposed sport Tom had alluded to, which was none other than a Kangaroo hunt. Mounting their horses, accompanied by some powerful kangaroo dogs (of which William's figured not the least conspicuously), and, with as many guns as could be mustered on the station, they started into the bush in a direction where they anticipated finding game. [14]

These dogs, of which we have made mention, we may be forgiven for a short digression to describe. They are a breed of the gaze-hound species, though in many respects they are peculiar to themselves. The stock was originally obtained from a cross of the Scotch staghound and the English greyhound, and has made a race which combine in their character the strength and courage of the former with the fleetness of the latter, of whom, in colour and form, they have the greatest resemblance. At the same time they are possessed of a muscular developement which is essential to enable them to endure the severe conflicts to which they are frequently subjected.

The party had not ridden far before they descried a herd of kangaroos, though not within range of shot; the guns, therefore, were instantly slung, and the dogs and riders gave chase. [15]

The kangaroo as, doubtless, our readers are perfectly aware, is anything but a graceful animal in its movements. Its fore legs are very short, and, one would think, of little use, either for ambulation or defence; but the paws are armed with strong and sharp claws, and in the diminutive limb to which they are attached, are possessed of considerable strength, and can be used defensively with immense effect. In their propulsion, however, these crural appendages are perfectly unavailable; for the animals propel their unwieldy looking bodies by long bounding leaps on their hind legs (which are long and powerful), springing not from their feet, but by an impulsion from the whole leg, from the hock joint to the toe, the whole of which length meets the ground at every leap. In this motion, unsightly as it appears, they are very fleet, frequently distancing the hardest rider, and only being brought to bay by the dogs after a tedious chase. [16]

The kangaroos were no sooner sighted by our party than they were away, the dogs with the lead, down hills across gullies, and up slopes; through thick underwood, where the exercise of the greatest care was necessary for the rider to preserve his seat; over fallen logs, and under pendent branches; dangers frequently occurring simultaneously, overhead and under foot, and requiring the firmest seat, and the quickest eye, to avert. All these, which would make the heart of many a bold steeplechaser quail, but which are incidental to a kangaroo hunt, were successively gone through by each member of the present party; and after an hour's hard riding, the foremost horseman, who had with difficulty kept the dogs within sight, halted when they came to a stand; and the whole of the sportsmen collected to witness the fight.

An "old man" kangaroo sat on his haunches in a swamp, with his back to a tree, dealing blows right and left with his epitomized limbs to those of his assailants who ventured within his reach. The kangaroo had got into water of sufficient depth to enable him to sit up in it, and guard himself in the manner we have mentioned, while the dogs were raised off their feet, and had to attack him at considerable disadvantage. They, however, were in point of number superior to the [17]

game, and the entire pack (six in number) boldly rushed to the charge. Though they were successfully beaten off on each attack, and nearly all receiving wounds that would, probably, produce scars of no mean magnitude, they as frequently rallied, and returned to the fight.

After looking on for some time, and perceiving that the "old man" was too knowing for the dogs, one of the party despatched him with a shot, when he was dragged from his entrenchments, his body deprived of its tail (which was carried off as a trophy), and left for the dogs to do the work of further demolition. The hunting party then returned to the station, but, not being so hasty in their homeward progress as they were in their outward, it was late in the afternoon before they reached the scene of festivities. The company at the time was breaking up from the race-course to return to the house to dine, which important business of the day having been got over, the guests amused themselves in various ways until the hour of the *coup de main*, the grand finale—the ball.

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We have already explained that a short distance from the house stood the wool-shed of the station; and at the time of which we write was comparatively empty, so much so that the bales of wool waiting for transmission down the country occupied only a small space in the building, to which we will, with the kind permission of our readers, in imagination, transport them. The external appearance of "the shed" was not such as to give the beholder any very exalted idea of internal splendour; consequently, upon an entrance the eye was instantly struck with the taste and skill displayed in the ornate arrangements. The bareness of the slab walls was relieved, if not entirely concealed, by the tasteful manipulations of the foliate decorator. At the head of the room, in the midst of a collection of variously tinted green foliage of numerous forms and leaf, were displayed in letters, some with the yellow blossoms of the acacia, the magic word "love," under which was entwined, with the wild vine and the flower of the sarsaparilla, that emblem of mutual affection, a true lover's knot. Above it was a star of palm leaves and fern, radiating from a centre, which was concealed by an immense stag's horn fungus. The side walls were similarly, though not so elaborately, decorated, and on them shone forth "mirth," and "concord," accompanied by various other devices; while at the head of the room, at the feet of love, stood a piano, which had been removed from the house, to provide the "spirit of the ball."

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The room was illuminated by a bunch of lights, hanging from a rafter in the centre. Though simply an extemporized chandelier from the hand of a bush carpenter, it had its material so tastefully hid, by the same genius that had decorated the walls, that it answered the purpose admirably for which it was intended. If it did not surpass in effect the most brilliant crystals, it was at least pretty and unique, and, with the emerald tints in its reflection, imparted a pleasing and subdued light, which favourably contrasted its sombre illumination with the trying glare of the sumptuous city ball-room. The seats were arranged round the sides of the room, and had their rough nature concealed in the bush fashion, by being overspread with scarlet blankets, which gave them the appearance of comfortable ottomans, and afforded a pleasing relief, both visual and corporeal. The opposite end of the building was partitioned off by a suspended carpet, which, by being gathered up a little in one corner, afforded a means of entrance to what appeared to be the sanctum, but which, in fact, contained the supper and refreshment tables, duly caparisoned and loaded with the good things of this life.

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The guests congregated in the ball-room at an hour that would have shocked the sensibilities of English ladies of *haut-ton*. But ceremony was a thing not worth studying by the lady-guests at Brompton; they had no occasion to retire to their boudoir and spend hours in getting themselves up for the evening, or, when their personal adornments had been completed, to sit waiting until the arrival of a genteel hour, in an agony of mind lest they should mar the perfection of their soubrettes' art. Enjoyment was the order of the day at Brompton, and when it was proposed, shortly after coffee was handed round in the drawing-room, that the company should adjourn to the ball-room, the guests made the necessary transition; and in a few minutes the house was entirely vacated.

The ladies of the company were for the most part married; hence we may not be accused of partiality in declaring that our two friends, Eleanor and Kate, far surpassed in beauty all their compeers, and shared between them the adulation of the sterner animals. It could not be satisfactorily determined which was the belle of the evening; for the admiration of the gentlemen was about equally apportioned, and it was difficult to decide between two such blooming beauties.

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We think we hear some of our readers enquire, "how were the ladies dressed?" On that point, fair mesdames, we would crave your especial indulgence. We know that is a theme on which you love to dilate; but we (though delighted to gaze upon your charming forms, graced by the alluring symmetry of your well-fitting and becoming attire) confess ourselves as ignorant as babes in the technicalities of habilimentary detail. However, thus much our observations befriended us. We can affirm that the chief characteristics of the costumes of the gentler sex were becoming neatness and chaste simplicity, without that unblushing display which we have so frequently noticed in gay circles; and which, we must confess, does not accord with our exalted idea of female modesty, innocence, and virtue. The manner of *our* heroines was frank, candid, and gay; without frivolity, affectedness, or coquetry; and their costumes neat and ladylike.

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The hand of Eleanor Rainsfield was so much desired in the mazy dance that John sought in vain for an opportunity of soliciting a participation with her in the pleasures of the evening, or even of entering into conversation with her, until she had danced with nearly all the gentlemen in the room. Then, she having been led to a seat near where our despondent hero sat, he seized the

occasion to ask her to dance, which she promised to do after obtaining a short rest. During the interval they fell into a sort of desultory conversation; but they were not destined long to enjoy even this intercourse; for Bob Smithers espying the occupation of his "lady-love," hastened to remove her from an influence he in no way relished.

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"Eleanor," said he, "I want you to dance with me."

"I am engaged for the next dance, Robert," she replied.

"To whom?" he asked.

"To Mr. Ferguson," she answered.

"Oh, never mind, you'll dance with me," said her lord. "Your engagement with me always ranks in precedence of others; and I am sure Mr. Ferguson will not mind looking for another partner."

"Mr. Ferguson has been waiting until I was disengaged, Robert," said Eleanor, "on purpose to dance with me; so I must keep myself engaged to him for the next dance, but will devote the following one to you."

"Well, as you like," exclaimed Bob Smithers, in none of the most amiable moods; "if you want to dance with Mr. Ferguson you can, but I wanted to dance with you myself;" and, casting a look of intense malignity on the object of his detestation, and one of equal rancour on his affianced, he strode to another part of the room.

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Neither look had been lost on the parties to whom they had been directed; in John they caused emotions of no pleasurable nature, whereas Eleanor treated the truculence of Smithers with a calm benignity. The moistened dewdrop, however, that gathered in the corner of her eye, discovered to the anxious and watchful perception of John Ferguson the hidden sorrow that rankled in her breast, and which she strove to smother, dreading its discovery to the world.

As might be imagined, under such circumstances, the dance was gone through with mere mechanical action, and with an undisturbed silence; for the thoughts of both parties were too much occupied on matters having no immediate connexion with the operation of dancing to indulge in much conversational intercourse. Besides which they both, or at least John, was conscious of the jealous eye of Smithers following them in every movement; and therefore felt the more uncomfortable. It was a relief to both when the music ceased, and John led his partner (who expressed fatigue) to a seat; but she had hardly relinquished his arm before she was pounced upon by Bob, who, as he carried her off, scowled fiercely on his unfortunate rival.

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John Ferguson was of an easy temper, but no man likes being grossly insulted, and supplanted in the service of the one he loves, therefore he felt the contumely to which he was subjected; and to calm his ruffled temper, and to seek refreshment to his aching head, and an emollient to his fevered brain, he walked out into the cool of the evening atmosphere. He continued to wander, with his gaze fixed in a thoughtful abstraction on the star-lit firmament, contemplating apparently the argenteous brilliancy of the lunar orb travelling its ethereal course, when his meditations were unceremoniously interrupted by the approach of Smithers, who hastily confronted him with the following expression:

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"I would like to have a few words with you, sir, and if you'll step into the bush, out of hearing of our visitors, I will speak."

John replied, if he desired to say anything to him, he might have no hesitation in saying it where he was; but that if he particularly wished him to step a little on one side, he had no objection to do so.

Upon gaining a retreat from the possibility of being overheard Bob Smithers began: "I have to request one thing of you, sir, and that is that you discontinue your attentions to the lady to whom I am engaged. On a previous occasion I made a similar request, as also did Mr. Rainsfield; but both you seem to disregard; therefore, I have to make it to you again, and to accompany it with a peremptory order that it be complied with."

"I can't see, Mr. Smithers," said John, "that because I am called upon by Mr. Rainsfield and yourself to break off my friendship with the lady, that I am of a necessity compelled to comply; so long as I am honoured by the friendship of Miss Rainsfield I shall make all your demands subservient to the dictates of my own heart. While she holds out the hand of cordiality to me I consider the privilege and pleasure accruing too great to refuse to grasp it; but if Miss Rainsfield desires our intercourse to cease, then, of course (however painful such an estrangement would be), my courtesies would be discontinued."

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"Well, sir," said Smithers, "I have only to repeat that they shall be discontinued at once, or I will take steps to prevent their recurrence. The lady is engaged to be married to me, and I have a right to dictate whom she shall recognize as her friends."

"When you are married to the lady I shall not dispute your right," said John; "though even then, if your wife should so far honour me as to rank me among her list of friends, all your monitory language and manner would not induce me to behave cavalierly to her whenever we should chance to meet. But at present I heed not your request, unless it be reiterated by the lady herself."

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"That, sir," said Smithers, "you shall not have the satisfaction of hearing, and you will instantly

renounce all pretensions to the lady's favours or leave the station."

"The first portion of your request I have already informed you I cannot comply with; and the other, notwithstanding your gross insolence to me, I could not offer such an affront to your worthy brother and his inestimable lady, as to obey it."

"Then, by heavens! you shall fight me," exclaimed the exasperated Smithers. "I'll be on this spot with pistols in ten minutes; so you may make the most of your time, and obtain a friend."

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CHAPTER II.

"Are honour, virtue, conscience, all
exiled;
Is there no pity, no relenting
Ruth?"

BURNS

"But I remember now
I'm in this earthly world; where to
do harm
Is often laudable."

MACBETH, *Act 4, Sc. 2.*

The suddenness and hostile nature of Smithers' challenge so took John Ferguson by surprise that for some few minutes he could not utter a sound; and, when he had sufficiently recovered himself to speak, his adversary was out of hearing, on his mission to prepare the instruments of death. Left to a calm consideration of his position all its unpleasantnesses in a moment flashed across his mind. Here he was involved in a broil the result of which might prove fatal if persevered in, and with the brother of his kind entertainer. The successful suitor of the girl he adored, he was called upon to meet in deadly strife. John felt he could not leave the place to compromise his honour, and insult his host; at the same time he looked upon a hostile meeting with Bob Smithers with great repugnance. Much as he had been contemned by Bob, and many as were the indignities offered to him, John bore him no animosity; and he could not reconcile to his conscience the idea of steeping his hands in the blood of a fellow mortal; even in the act of self-defence, when that defence became culpable by his voluntary exposure. Yet he feared not death; no, he could stare the grim tyrant in the face, and unflinchingly meet his shafts. He even felt he could court his embrace now that he was to lose the only being he deemed life worth living for.

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"Oh! Eleanor! Eleanor!" he exclaimed. "Oh! that I had not known thee! cruel fate, that I should be drawn into the vortex of thy charms only to be suffered to estimate thy worth, and then have my hopes crushed on the rocks of despair. With thee life would be an Elysium; without thee 'tis a perpetual blank; a dismal future looms in the distance like the shades of stygian darkness. Oh, cruel fates! would that thou had'st bereft me of life while yet I breathed in the delicious dream. But yet a door of hope is left me to escape this bondage. I will meet the fire of your favourite, and let him, if he so desires it, release my wearied spirit." Thus John soliloquized as he walked back to the ball-room in a state of mind bordering on insanity, and reduced to the lowest depths of love-sick despair. But a "still, small voice" faintly prompted reason, as his agitated feelings somewhat subsided, and he ceased to apostrophize his idol, as he approached the building.

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He entered the room, and casually casting his eyes round the company rested them on his brother; whom, upon his obtaining an opportunity, he called out unobserved by the mass of the guests, and in a few words explained to him the incident we have just described.

"But, surely, John, you do not intend to accept the challenge?" said William.

"I have already done so," replied his brother.

"Why, you must be demented! my dear John," exclaimed the other. "Because a coarse, blustering fellow like that chooses to insult you, and then call upon you to present your body as a mark for him to shoot at, surely you are not going to forget all respect for yourself, and commit an open violation of the laws both of God and man."

"With regard to dyeing my hands in his blood you need have no fear, William," said John.

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"Then why sacrifice your own life?" asked his brother.

"I could with very few regrets submit now to that dissolution which sooner or later must take place; but I am convinced Bob Smithers is too much a coward to attempt my life. The laws of his

country will stare him in the face, and will prevent him pulling the trigger of a weapon with its muzzle directed to my body. His object is simply to frighten me away from the station, or induce me to act a coldness towards Eleanor; neither of which desires I intend to gratify, so will stand his fire."

"But, dear John," exclaimed his brother, "only consider, if he should be malicious enough to attempt your life, or even to wound you, what a dreadful misfortune it would be; and what would be the anguish of our dear parents. Believe me, John, it is wiser to avoid the possibility of any such catastrophe; no dishonour can be attached to you for a refusal to comply with a barbarous custom. Pray allow yourself to be dissuaded from this meeting."

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"No, Will, I have no fear of the consequences. Bob Smithers will never have the courage to fire at me; and I will shame him by showing my contempt for his threats."

"Well, I am grieved at your obduracy, John, for my heart has misgivings on the result."

"Don't be agitated, William, but be convinced there is nothing to apprehend; and now come I have been absent some time, and he appointed ten minutes from the time of the challenge for the meeting."

William, perceiving it was useless to attempt dissuading his brother from his purpose, accompanied him in silence to the spot where Bob Smithers and two friends already waited. Upon the approach of the Fergusons one of the opposite party stepped forward to John, and offered to enter into the arrangement of preliminaries with his brother, whom he presumed would act as his second.

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Upon John stating his brother was on the ground in that capacity William allowed himself to be led away by his co-adjutor, and followed him mechanically through his various manœuvres; acquiescing in the arrangements, the nature of which he hardly contemplated. His mind was intent upon the iniquity of the proceedings, and he was cogitating on a scheme whereby he could obviate the necessity of having his brother's life placed in jeopardy. With this thought uppermost in his imagination he addressed himself to his companion:

"It occurs to me, Mr. Brown (for it was he), that this meeting is perfectly unnecessary. My brother has consented to it without having offered any provocation to Mr. Smithers. I think the challenge was given in a moment when that gentleman was heated by his controversy, while I have no doubt he would far prefer letting the matter drop, if no stigma would be attached to him on account of retraction. If so I can answer for both my brother and myself that the affair will not travel beyond our two selves."

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"I fear, my dear sir," replied Brown, "it is useless making any such proposition to my principal, for he considers himself aggrieved by the pertinacity of your brother in his aspiring to the hand of Miss Rainsfield after he has repeatedly informed him that that young lady was affianced to himself. He is so considerably offended and chagrined at your brother's contumacious conduct, and his decided refusal to accede to any of the terms my principal has proposed, that he will not be disposed now to accept any other mode of satisfaction than this. If your brother thought of any amicable settlement he should have done so before; now there is only this course open."

"Pray don't imagine that I am making any overture with the concurrence of my brother," said William. "He, I am sorry to say, is as determined upon this course as your principal can be; but it is that very obstinacy I lament, for I look upon the whole of this affair not only as extremely heathenish and barbarous, but incompatible with the character of gentlemen."

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"Your language," replied Brown, "is calculated to cast opprobrium on all those gentlemen engaged in this little matter, and requires some explanation and apology; for which, I will be glad to have a few words with you after the termination of this meeting."

"Now then," shouted the unoccupied colleague of Mr. Brown, "it surely does not require all that time and talk for you two to pace out the ground. I could have settled a dozen pairs in the time you are taking there in arranging the preliminaries of one."

"All right, Graham," said Brown, "we have settled it now;" and turning to William he continued: "We will draw for positions and you can place your man, while I do mine. Dr. Graham attends professionally in the event of either party falling; now then, sir, draw if you please. Oh! blank; your man takes the right:" saying which he hastened to put Smithers in position, while he left William standing seemingly rooted to the ground.

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John, seeing his brother's indecision, came up to him, and led him away, saying, "I suppose as Smithers has taken up that position, I am to take this. They are particularly obliging; his second has arranged me so that I shall have the moon directly in my face. Very kind of him, though he does it with a mistaken object. It will enable his principal to see to miss me; for that is what he will most desire."

"Pray, John, do not let yourself be deceived," exclaimed his brother; "they mean death I am convinced, and it is not too late to come to an amicable settlement."

"Nonsense, William, exhibit some degree of fortitude," said John. "I tell you again Smithers is too much a poltroon to meditate my death; though I believe if he could effect it without making himself amenable to the laws he is not wanting in the disposition."

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"Then, even if he does not," said William, "think how the matter will be talked about. The reports of the pistols are sure to be heard, and the occurrence will be known almost instantly; think also how it will wound Eleanor's feelings."

"Tell her, William! that I was irrevocably drawn into it by Smithers contrary to my own wishes, and that I met his fire without returning it."

"That is poor satisfaction for either you or her," said William "(her especially), if you come off scatheless as you anticipate, and as I hope and trust you may, having her name bandied about all over the country on the evil tongue of scandal."

"There, Will! there's a good fellow! leave me now," said John, "you see they are impatient; his second is waiting for you to bring me my weapon. I had almost forgotten that, and they did not seem disposed to refresh my memory."

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William slowly walked across the ground, and took a pistol from the hands of Mr. Brown; and placing it within those of his brother retired to his position to await the issue of the firing.

Upon the enquiry being asked if both were ready, and an affirmative being returned, the signal was given, and a report of a double discharge reverberated in the stillness of the bush. William instantly rushed to his brother, and found him standing with his right arm still extended in the air, in the position in which he had fired, while his left hand covered his eyes and features which were suffused in the purple dye.

"Merciful heaven!" cried William, "my dear brother, where are you hit?"

His question to John was answered in a burst of boisterous merriment from the opponents, and he hastily turned upon them to enquire the cause of their unseemly hilarity; while Smithers advanced towards his late antagonist, and replied: "See to him, he must be severely hit, for he bleeds apparently profusely."

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"There is a trick in this, William," said his brother. "'Tis true I am hit, but not with lead; I am blinded with what appears to me to be red currant jam."

Another roar of laughter from Smithers and his friends succeeded this confession, and the perpetrators of the practical joke indulged their risibilities to the full; evidently congratulating themselves upon the success of their plans. Their self-complacency, however (at least of one of them), was brought to an abrupt termination; for as the truth of the plot flashed across the mind of William, as the instigator of the proceedings approached to witness the effects of his scurrile trick, the high-spirited youth sprang towards him, and avenged his brother's ignominy by felling the coward to the ground.

Graham and Brown instantly rushed to the spot, and interposed; the former seizing William, while the latter confronted him, and stated that if there was any cause of quarrel, it could be settled in a manner befitting gentlemen; "and unless," said he, "I am mistaken in Mr. Smithers he will instantly require satisfaction for your outrageous assault."

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"Unhand me, sir," said William, as he shook himself from the iron grasp of the pugnacious doctor, and turning to Brown he exclaimed: "You speak, forsooth, of requiring the satisfaction of a gentleman; you and your compeers, who debase yourselves by not only countenancing an insult from your friend and patron to my brother, but by making yourselves parties to a trick which no gentleman would be guilty of. As for your prototype he has not only proved himself a blackguard by having recourse to the subterfuge of a plea of wounded honour to perform a despicable action; but a coward in taking a mean advantage of a gentleman under the hospitable roof of his brother. See, the viper actually slinks away! The derogation he intended for another reflects opprobrium on his own infamous character; and the consciousness of his venality deprives him even of the power of defence." Excited as William was, and inflammatory as was his language, they failed to stir the blood of Smithers, whose baseness was exemplified in his cowardice; for he actually left the spot (as William's remarks would infer) in the midst of the young man's vituperations.

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John Ferguson took his brother's arm, and led him also away from the scene, saying as he did so: "Calm yourself, William, and never mind me, I am not hurt, though still almost blind by that stuff in my eyes. The disgrace of this proceeding will reflect more to his dishonour than to mine. The report of our pistols has given alarm for I see people coming this way, so I will get my horse saddled and take my departure."

"Do not depart yet, John," said his brother. Remain till morning at any rate, and take leave of Mr. and Mrs. Smithers; they will think very strangely of your sudden departure.

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"They are sure to hear of the affair," replied John, "and my departure will save the unpleasantness of a meeting. I will leave it to you to make what explanation you like to them; as also to account to Eleanor for it in what way you think best. She will no doubt have a version of the matter from Bob Smithers; but I have a better opinion of her than to imagine she will credit the exaggerated pseudology of malicious gossips."

For John to wash himself, change his attire, segregate Joey from the dependent's festivities, get his horse in and saddle him, was the work only of about half an hour; and the whole of it was performed without notice from any one belonging to the establishment. John Ferguson and Joey then started, and as the retreating sound of their horses feet were lost in the stillness of the night, William retraced his steps to the scene of gaiety; not to join again in the mirth, but to take

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an opportunity of detailing the particulars of the late proceedings to Tom Rainsfield; judging that he would be the best channel through whom they could reach the ears of Eleanor. With that intention he sought out his friend, and was astonished to find that Bob Smithers had already communicated the fun, as he called it, to some of his choice companions; though he had studiously avoided any mention of his rencontre with himself.

It was at an hour close on the heels of morn that the guests broke up the ball; and consequently it was far advanced in the forenoon before the assemblage in the breakfast-parlour was by any means numerous. It is true some of the bachelors had taken their departure; but those in the bondage of matrimony, and swains who were to act as convoys to the ladies, of course had to wait the time and pleasure of the fair ones; and, we must confess it, many were not loath to be detained by their tender charges. [47]

Our friends were about the first to leave, as having a longer journey to perform than most of the guests, and neither of them desiring to prolong a stay where the occurrences had been so painful to one of their party, they bade a kind adieu to their entertainers; and took the road at a sharp trot, which they kept up for some hours, notwithstanding their fatigues of the previous day and night.

We think we informed the reader, in an early chapter of our history, that Eleanor was (unlike most native girls) not a good horse-woman; and that it was therefore an exercise she did not frequently indulge in. It will not be wondered at then that the long ride to Brompton, and the constant exercise there, had fatigued her. Her horse showing symptoms of restlessness at starting it was proposed by William that he should affix a leading rein to the bit ring of her horse's bridle, and ride by her side with it in his hand. The idea was commended by the party, and was adopted. They started, William and Eleanor leading the way, Mrs. Rainsfield following, and Tom and Kate bringing up the rear, and continued, as we have said, at a brisk pace for some hours. [48]

They had accomplished about half the distance to Strawberry Hill when they approached rather an abrupt turn in the bush; which, in its acuteness, prevented them from seeing, until they came immediately upon it, a large tree which stood right in the centre of the road; or rather a path had been beaten on either side of it. The main track led by the right side of the trunk, and William guided his own horse and that of his companion to take it; but Eleanor's animal became suddenly refractory, and made a sudden deviation to pass the tree on the other side. This movement was so unexpected that neither equestrian was prepared for it; and the two horses, each taking opposite sides of the tree, were brought to a check in their rapid course by the leading rein we have mentioned. At the time William had got it firmly fixed round his left wrist, and could not (when he saw the accident that would inevitably occur) disengage it; for so instantaneously did it happen that he had hardly time for meditation before the shock took place, and both riders were hurled from their saddles with considerable force. William, though prostrate, still kept his hold of his own bridle and the rein of Eleanor's horse; and rose with considerable pain, though (with the exception of numerous bruises) uninjured, to lead the horses free of the tree. [49]

With Eleanor, however, the accident had resulted far differently. When the check was felt by her horse the leading rein made him wheel his head suddenly against the trunk; and, his fore feet tripping him as he did so, he fell forward to the ground. Eleanor was thrown from her saddle; and, but for one of those inauspicious events which so frequently occur to mar our well-being, would have come off more lightly than her companion. As it was, in her precipitation, her habit in some way became entangled in her horse's caparisons; and, instead of being thrown clear of danger, she was hurled with some force to the ground at the animal's feet. The horse also fell; and with the whole weight of his body across her legs. [50]

It was the work of a moment for the rest of the party to pull up their steeds, and for Kate to leap from her saddle to the side of her friend; and another for Tom and William to extricate her from her dangerous position.

"Oh, dearest Eleanor," passionately exclaimed Kate, "tell me that you are not seriously hurt. Oh, that horrid, horrid horse!"

"I fear I am, Kate dear," replied the poor girl, "I am very much bruised, and my leg now I try to move it gives me great pain: I am afraid it is broken."

"Oh, gracious goodness! what shall we do?" cried Kate; "lean on me, Eleanor love, and see if you can rise." [51]

The poor girl did so; but the pain was more than even her wonted heroism could endure. With a faint cry of agony she sank fainting into the arms of Tom, who was standing at her side ready to support her in case of need, and there unfortunately proved to be need; for Eleanor, as she herself had anticipated, had broken her leg.

The unconscious form of the suffering creature was carried into the adjoining shade, and gently placed on the turf in a reclining position; while the ladies speedily had recourse to those gentle restoratives, with which they are happily at all times so ready, in cases where the sympathies of their kindly natures are brought into play.

We masculine mortals plume ourselves on our knowledge of the female character; which we profess to read as the astrologers of old did "the gems that deck eve's lustrous mantle;" and to divine their secret wishes, fancies, and inclinations, as the professors of clairvoyance do their [52]

susceptible pupils. But we are inclined to think woman's heart is the true arcana of life; at least of this fact we are certain, woman's troubles can only be appreciated by woman; and woman in sorrow can only be soothed, or woman in pain can only be alleviated by those whose anodynes are the effects of intuitive impulsions, arising from the reciprocal communings of kindred spirits. Oh, woman! bless'd woman! Favoured daughters of Eve! thou never shinest in such perfection as when thy ministering hand assuages the pain of a sick couch. Happy is the man, with all his flaunted superiority, who, in the time of indisposition, when his spirit wavers indecisively between this life and the other, is blessed with the possession of thy tender solicitude, to smooth the passage to the mysterious bourne, or nourish the reviving spirit with thy calm, patient, and may be, vigil-dimm'd orbs, ever watching for returning convalescence. But we are digressing; our feelings of gratitude to the sex are carrying us away from the subject of our narrative, and we must apologize to our fair readers for our abstractedness.

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Through the tender care of her friends Eleanor speedily recovered her consciousness, though only to be made aware, by contemplation, of the dreadfulfulness of her situation. She was suffering the most excruciating agony, and was more than twenty miles from any assistance. The thought would have subdued the stout heart of many a man, but with her evoked not a murmur. She bore her sufferings, both bodily and mental, with her characteristic heroism,—a heroism that admitted of no complaint,—a perfect subjugation of the feelings, passively enduring pain with an annihilation of all querulousness,—one that in a man would have distinguished the bold spirit; but in a woman denoted the sublimity of that nature, which, in its gentle texture, shines out in bold relief and claims the laurels for an endurance which extinguishes, in its sublimated lustre, the baser material of the stern "lords of the creation."

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A hasty council was now formed in debate as to the best means that could be adopted to procure assistance for their wounded friend. It was proposed first that she should attempt to get back to Brompton; then that one of the gentleman should ride back at once, and procure some conveyance; then that the ladies should return to Brompton, and obtain the requisite assistance, while the gentlemen constructed a litter and carried the invalid as far on the road as they could, or until they were met by assistance. To all of these propositions Eleanor, however, gave her emphatic veto, and declared that she would not consent to return; but affirmed her willingness and ability to proceed to Strawberry Hill.

This desire again was energetically combatted by her friends, who argued that such a course would endanger, not only her limb, but possibly her life; and that it would be far better for her to waive her scruples, and consent to return to the Smithers'. But to all entreaties on that head she turned a deaf ear. "I will mount my horse," she said, "with your assistance, and by going quietly I will be perfectly able to reach home. So do not, my dear friends, make yourselves uneasy on my account."

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At this juncture when all was indecision, Kate started up and exclaimed: "Now I'll tell you what to do. Dear Eleanor says she will not return to Brompton, and that she would prefer going home; a thought has just come into my head and I will act upon it. There was a doctor at the party yesterday, and I heard Mr. Robert Smithers ask him to stop until this afternoon; so I will ride back, and catch him before he leaves, and bring him on here; but, in the meantime, you must assist Eleanor into her saddle, and while William leads the horse, Mr. Rainsfield ought to walk at her side and protect her from falling; and, if Mrs. Rainsfield would only ride on before and send out the spring cart to meet you, the arrangements would be complete."

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The boldness of the scheme so astonished her friends that Kate was on her legs and ready to mount before they could think of objecting to it. Eleanor was the first and most earnest in dissuading her from so rash a step; but all opposition was cut short by the spirited girl herself, who said she would not be dissuaded; and addressing her brother said: "Come, Will, assist me into the saddle and don't detain me; for I will go, and there is no use of either of you accompanying me; your assistance will be required by dear Eleanor. Do as I propose, and you will find I will be at Strawberry Hill with the doctor very shortly after you."

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CHAPTER III

"Gallop apace, you fiery footed
steeds,
Towards Phœbus' mansion."

ROMEO AND JULIET, *Act 3.*

Great was the astonishment at Brompton when Kate Ferguson made her appearance, galloping up to the station, and drew up before the house. At the same time she gathered up the folds of her habit; and, leaving her panting steed to the care of some of the assembled attendants,

disdaining any assistance, she leaped to the ground and ran into the house.

At the door of the parlour she was met by Mrs. Smithers who exclaimed, with apprehension depicted in her countenance: "For mercy's sake! tell me, dear Kate, what has happened to cause your return alone?" [58]

"Eleanor has met with an accident," she hurriedly replied, "and I want the doctor; is he here?"

"Unfortunately he went only about a quarter of an hour since," said Mrs. Smithers. "I will send after him though; but tell me what was the nature of poor Eleanor's accident."

"She was thrown from her horse, and has broken her leg," exclaimed Kate; "but do let me urge you to send after the doctor at once; or if you direct me to the road he took, I will follow him myself."

"I could not hear of such a thing," replied the lady of the place, "as to permit you, my dear, to go. Sit down for a moment, or go to my room and put off your habit, while I despatch a messenger."

Mrs. Smithers left the room on her mission, and shortly returned and informed her impatient visitor, that a man had been sent after the doctor, with injunctions to lose no time in bringing him back. "Doctor Graham has ceased to practise," she said, "but under such circumstances he can have no objection to lend us his professional skill; and as Robert is with him, and will consequently urge him to speed, we may confidently expect him here in a very short time. Come now, my dear, put off your things, and tell me how the unfortunate occurrence took place." [59]

The whole circumstances of the accident were then related, after which an animated discussion was carried on between the ladies; the married one contending that it was impossible for the younger one to return home before the following morning, while Kate stoutly declared her intention to proceed at once, when the doctor arrived.

"Such a course, my dear Kate," urged her friend, "would be unnecessarily exposing yourself to a fatigue which I am convinced you could not endure. You had far better remain with me until the morning, and then Mr. Smithers will either drive you over in his gig, or accompany you on horseback. The doctor and Robert shall be sent off immediately they arrive, but as to you travelling the road by night is a thing quite out of the question." [60]

Still all arguments were unavailing; Kate persisted in returning at once to be in attendance on her friend; affirming that she did not fear the journey, nor anticipate any fatigue. So, Mrs. Smithers finding it useless to attempt persuading the determined girl, proposed that, so as to ease her journey as much as possible, Mr. Smithers should still drive her over, and lead her own horse behind the vehicle. Mr. Smithers was then sought for, and the melancholy intelligence was communicated to him by his spouse; who desired him to place himself and his vehicle at the disposal of Miss Ferguson.

He regretted the sad event most feelingly; at the same time he expressed himself only too happy to be of service to Kate, and would hear of no objection from her; saying, "Why! if you could stand the journey yourself, Miss Ferguson, your horse could not carry you." So that the little messenger was perforce obliged to relinquish her opposition to the proffered assistance. [61]

It was late in the afternoon before the sound of approaching horsemen heralded the arrival of Bob Smithers and his friend, the brusque and generally not over-courteous son of Æsculapius. They were not long permitted to remain inactive, for the impatient anxiety of Kate for the safety of her friend stimulated them to use despatch; and very soon after their arrival they were tearing away again in the direction of Strawberry Hill, in concert with Mr. Alfred Smithers and his charge. The horsemen took the lead, and were followed closely by the vehicle; which, by the speed that they maintained, required a skillful hand to guide through the mazy difficulties of the bush track. The night, however, was beautiful, and the moon bright and clear distinctly illumined their path; so that the occasional diminution of the speed was not owing so much to impediments and difficulties of a vehicular nature, as to a desire on the part of the horsemen to take it easier. But these little delays, insignificant as they were, did not accord with Kate's ideas of the urgency of the case; and the flagging equestrians were constantly prompted by her to an acceleration of their pace. [62]

Towards the latter part of the journey the bush was more dense, and the travelling of the gig consequently became more difficult. The frequent, though only momentary detentions, so harassed Kate that she exchanged her seat in the gig for the back of her own jaded horse; and she led the way at a rate that gave her less fatigued followers something to do to keep even within sight of her. All their remonstrances against the velocity of her pace had no further effect than a raillery from Kate at their complaining of a speed that she was enabled to keep up; and she told them that if they were tired out she would go on and report their approach. However much they disliked the toil of such riding they were, for their own credit, obliged to keep pace with her, as neither of them relished the idea of being outstripped by a girl; and that girl one who had ridden a far greater distance in the previous twelve hours than they. [63]

In the meantime Mrs. Rainsfield had acted upon Kate's suggestion, and had ridden home with all speed. She prepared a couch, and had it placed in a light cart; which was then despatched to meet the invalid, with strict injunctions to the driver to go as fast as he could, until he met the party. Neither had Tom and William been idle, for they had placed poor Eleanor on her saddle, where Tom held her while William led the horse. But the pain, which the motion caused to her

wounded limb, was such that she could not with all her fortitude endure it. The young men, therefore, constructed a sort of impromptu sedan, in which they carried her for some distance; in fact, until they were met by the conveyance despatched from Strawberry Hill. They then transferred their burden to the vehicle, and continued the journey more easily for the poor girl; though their rate of travelling was necessarily very slow. It was midnight ere they delivered their charge into the hands of Mrs. Rainsfield, and barely an hour afterwards Kate and her companions galloped up to the house.

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The doctor was instantly shown into the invalid's room, when the broken leg was soon set, and the patient placed in as easy a position as possible; when, after giving directions to her cousin for her further treatment, he left the room to partake of some refreshment with his friends before they parted for the night. Tom and William waited for the report of Kate, who was assiduously attending on Eleanor, and would not hear of rest for herself until she had first satisfied her mind of the safety of her friend.

The following day the invalid was considered by her medical attendant to be sufficiently out of danger, and progressing so favourably as to warrant his departure. He therefore left, accompanied by his boon companion, Bob Smithers, who preferred his society to that of the residents of Strawberry Hill, and was followed by Mr. Alfred Smithers in the gig.

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We have so frequently, and we think so fully, dwelt upon the character of Eleanor Rainsfield that we are convinced she is by this time perfectly understood by our readers. We need therefore only say that it was quite possible for her to suffer the deepest mental agony without the slightest semblance of its being discernible in any display in her facial muscles. We say that it was quite possible that the existence of sorrow could have been working deleteriously at the heart's core of the invalid, and not be visible by any outward signs; and it was more than probable, after the events that had lately occurred, that some such sorrow did exist. We have already said that Eleanor was habitually of a taciturn and uncomplaining nature; and, whatever were her griefs, she rarely allowed their utterance to pass her lips; so it was not to be deemed strange that her friends were unacquainted with her state of mind. What that was we dare not violate our trust by divulging, beyond the fact that there *was* something that preyed upon her mind which caused her to remain feverish and restless on her sick couch, and which retarded her return to convalescence. She progressed but slowly; and it was nearly two months before she was enabled to leave her room, and expose her emaciated frame to the summer breeze in a seat in a shady part of the verandah.

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During all this lengthened illness, her friends at Fern Vale had been constant in their attentions, and hardly a day passed without some enquiries being made or some intelligence being conveyed. Visits of William and Kate were interchanged with Tom, who had delayed his journey to town until Eleanor was what he considered sufficiently recovered to spare him. When that time had arrived, and he saw his cousin at last enabled to move about, he took his departure; not, however, without making a special purpose of visiting Fern Vale to bid adieu to his friends there.

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Why such particular consideration as this was required prior to his departure on a journey that would not occupy more than a month, or why it was necessary to take such a formal leave of friends he was in the habit of seeing so frequently, and whom he could and did inform of his intended departure upon the last occasion on which they met, we are at a loss to conjecture. We do not, however, consider ourselves justified in making any surmises, but intend simply to content ourselves by chronicling the event; deeming in so doing we perform our duty, and avoid the probability of misleading our readers, by indulging in speculations that might lead to erroneous assumptions respecting the motives of our friend. Therefore it is only known to Tom himself, or rather was best known to him, what took him to Fern Vale, and what kept him for hours in company with Kate Ferguson. But there he remained looking over her sketches, and turning over her music, as he listened rapturously; while her pliable fingers fluttered over the keys of her piano, and exorcised the very spirit of the muse in the exquisite diapason that she produced to enchant him. If it was simply to bid adieu to the young lady he might have done that, we should have thought, in a much shorter time, and taken his departure. It could not have been to visit her brother, for as yet he had not seen him, and neither made any effort nor expressed any desire to do so. He had, in fact, arrived at Fern Vale early in the forenoon, and finding Kate alone in the sitting-room, his gallantry (or rather his inclination) suggested that he should endeavour to relieve the *ennui* of the young lady. Thus he had occupied, for nearly the whole of the morning, her and his own time, in which occupation he seemed perfectly contented; so much so that we strongly suspect that he—But we were about doing what we repudiated our intention of, viz., speculating on Tom's motives. So, dear reader! with your kind permission, so far as we are concerned, we will leave him to enjoy uninterruptedly the pleasure of Kate's society.

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We must now beg the courteous reader to follow us over a period of about a fortnight, during which time Eleanor had improved very little in her health; when Kate and William one morning left Fern Vale to ride over to see her. The weather had continued very dry for months past, and a large portion of the bush had been slightly fired, so as just to burn off the long dry withered grass, and leave on the ground a thick coating of soot. Through this our friends were riding at a pretty sharp canter (as, being like most of their birth and character, no less speed satisfying them), when Kate's horse tripped and came down, precipitating his rider over his head, and sending her sprawling amongst the ashes.

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Her brother alighted to assist her to rise; but she was in no way hurt, and regained her feet with little difficulty or hesitation. But she had no sooner faced William than he lost all control over his

gravity, and burst into an immoderate fit of laughter; while to his sister's enquiry as to the cause of his merriment, he replied only by laughing the louder; and she became annoyed at what she called his silly behaviour.

"Tell me," said she, "what are you laughing at; is my face dirty?"

"Oh, dear no!" replied he, "it is not dirty."

Now in this reply of William's we would endeavour to exonerate him from any duplicity or pseudology. If he meant to use the words ironically, or to imply that his sister's face was not dirty, on the principle we have sophistically heard enunciated that soot is clean dirt, not dirtying where it comes in contact, but merely soiling; then it must be admitted he spoke the truth. But we suspect rather that he meant to say her face was not only dirty, but a shade worse; for it was absolutely black. And much as we respect etiquette, and would be loath to commit such an impropriety as to laugh at a lady, we question very much our ability, had we looked on Kate's face on this occasion, to have preserved a stoical equanimity of countenance.

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"No but, Will, dear," persisted Kate, "do tell me; is my face really dirty? I am sure it must be or you wouldn't laugh so. It is unkind of you to tease me;" and the little orbs in the darkened firmament, and the little mouth that had escaped disfigurement in the sudden metamorphosis, exhibited symptoms of a lachrymose tendency.

Nothing so soon softens the obdurate heart of a man as seeing a woman in tears; especially when she is a handsome young girl, and is beloved by her masculine tormentor. Therefore we may safely surmise, that William's laughing soon ceased; for he instantly changed his manner to his sister, and said:

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"Yes, Kitty, darling; your face is as black as a crow; and would enable you to make a splendid personation of an Ethiopian vocalist, if that sable people ever exhibit their ladies. But forgive me, poppet, for laughing at you; I would defy the goddess of grief herself to refrain from smiling if she had perchance cast her eyes upon you as you rose from the ground."

"Oh, dear me! what shall I do?" said Kate, in a most piteous way. "What shall I do? You know, Will, I can't go on in this figure, we must go back."

"Nonsense, my dear," said William, "you can go on very well. A slight application of water at Strawberry Hill will very soon remove all traces of your cloudiness."

"But, Will," replied his sister, "all the people will be laughing at me if I go on as I am, presenting such an odd appearance."

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"Not in the least, my pet," said William; "besides if you turned back home our people would laugh at you quite as much, not for the soot on your face, but for your foolishness in returning. At Strawberry Hill, however, no one will laugh at you, for they will have too much good breeding; and if you put your veil down over your face it will be invisible; while at the same time you can present yourself to Eleanor, and test her affection by seeing if she will kiss you in that plight. I'll engage she'll laugh, for she'll think it is a little stratagem of yours to take her by surprise and excite her merriment. She will therefore think herself called upon to reward you with a smile."

"I don't like to go in this figure, Will," said Kate; "do you think we shall be able to find any water-hole on the road where I could wash my face?"

"Not one, Kitty," said William, "nor a drop of water nearer than Strawberry Hill, unless you like to go to the river; and it would be quite unnecessary, for if you went there you wouldn't be able to thoroughly remove the black. The washing would only make you appear worse, inasmuch as, instead of being black, you would be dirty. But come, my little queen of Artimesia! let me put you on your horse, and we'll go ahead. I have often heard of a sable beauty, and declare you are one in perfection; if you were not my sister I would do the romantic and fall in love with you. There now! up you get, and let us be off; for the sooner you get to 'the Hill' the sooner you'll have your visage restored to its natural colour. But before you touch your face, Kitty, just have a look at yourself in the glass; though I need not have told you to do that, for I know it is the first thing you are sure to do."

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"Don't be cruel, Will! and tease me so," said Kate, "or I'll go back home."

"Very well, my dear," said William, "I'll grant a truce, and spare you."

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The brother and sister then turned their conversation into some other channel, and rode on until they came within sight of Strawberry Hill; when Kate pulled down her veil to conceal her darkened countenance from the gaze of the curious. As they approached the station, and got sufficiently near to distinguish the people about the place, Kate was startled to see some gentleman on the verandah, whom she knew (by his appearance) was not Mr. Rainsfield, and she remarked to her brother: "Oh, William! I can't go up to the house in this figure. See, who is that on the verandah? he is a stranger I know and I shall never be able to meet his gaze. Can't you take me somewhere, where I can get my face clean before I show myself?"

"Don't be frightened Kitty," said William, "no one will be able to distinguish the colour of your face through your veil; and, if I mistake not, the individual you see, and whose appearance seems to cause you such uneasiness, is none other than Bob Smithers, who will make himself scarce when he sees me. Put on a bold face under your blackness, and try a *coup de main*, though it is

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not likely under your present eclipse to be a *coup de soleil*. If Eleanor is on the verandah when you alight run into the house and carry her off at once; and if any of the family should see you in your flight I will make some explanation for you."

This seemed partially to satisfy Kate, and they rode together up to the house. As William had conjectured the party they saw was Bob Smithers; who, as soon as he had been able to distinguish who were the approaching visitors, had left the spot where he had been seen by them, while Eleanor, who had been sitting just inside one of the French lights, came out to greet her friends as they made their appearance. William assisted Kate off her saddle, when she ran up to the girl who stood with open arms to embrace her. But instead of falling into that loving lock, which was intended to unite the beatings of their young hearts, and which she was generally so ready, with her usual ardour, to reciprocate, she partially lifted her veil and discovered to her astonished friend her beaming countenance. Instead of being radiant with glowing smiles it was of course more gloomy than thunder; but her merry laugh rang as a silvery note from the shades of Hades, while her bright eyes and pearly teeth, in such deep contrast, shone with a more marked resplendence.

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Eleanor for some moments gazed at Kate with silent wonder, and then asked in the faint voice of a valetudinarian: "Why, dearest Kate, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"I will answer for her," replied William. "You see our little Hebe has gone into mourning; and, considering that the mere outward habilimentary display was an empty conventionality, she chose to mark her grief in her countenance; so that she might indulge uninterruptedly to any extent of sorrow. As to her motive I am inclined to think she has done it to court notice, and notoriety; for I am convinced she never looked so handsome before."

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"That is a poor compliment William pays you, Kate," said Eleanor; "but I appeal to you for a correct version of the phenomenon, for I am afraid to question your brother, as I see he is in a facetious mood. Come to my room, my dear, and we can have a talk to ourselves."

"That is the very thing I desire, Eleanor dear," said Kate, "for I am quite anxious to see what a fright I am, and wash off all the dreadful smut. I saw Mr. Smithers here as I came up, and I would not for the world that he should have seen me thus."

"He was here a few minutes ago," said Eleanor, "but has disappeared somewhere."

"Well, Will," said Kate, "why are you still standing staring at us? why don't you take the horses away?"

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"Oh, I am really very sorry for keeping him," said Eleanor, "it quite escaped my memory; you go to my room, Kate dear, and I'll send some one to see to the horses."

"Not for worlds, Miss Eleanor, would I permit you to do such a thing," exclaimed William. "I can myself take the horses to the stable; but I was waiting to take a last fond look of Kate. I am, in fact, enchained to the spot; if ever she was a beauty she is one now, and a shining one that would be a fortune to a London advertising blacking manufacturer."

"Be off, you impudent fellow!" replied his sister, "and don't show *your* face here until you can cease to be offensive;" saying which, she turned into the house with Eleanor, while William took the horses to the stable to remain for such time as he stopped at Strawberry Hill. This business he accomplished; and, knowing that the girls would be sometime engaged together with their own little secrets, and having no desire to come into contact with Bob Smithers, he thought he would fill up half an hour by paying a visit to Mr. Billing, and enjoying the refreshment of that little individual's conversation.

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CHAPTER IV.

"The wondering stranger round
him gazed,
All spoke neglect and disrepair."

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

William sought the capricious storekeeper in the proper sphere of his labour, viz. the store-room, and, as he had anticipated, found him deeply engaged in some imaginarily abstruse piece of figurative collocation, from the study of which he relieved his brain and raised his eyes at the sound of intrusive steps. William advanced with outstretched hand, which was humbly and respectfully taken by Mr. Billing; who, as he removed his spectacles from his nose, and shifted, we will not say rose from his desk, answered to his visitor's sanitary enquiry in his blandest

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manner: "I thank you, Mr. Ferguson; it affords me great satisfaction to say I am in the enjoyment of excellent health, and trust, my dear sir, a similar blessing is dispensed to yourself."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Billing," replied William, "I am pretty well. But don't let me disturb you if you are busy, I have just called in to see and have a chat with you; but if you are engaged I will not interrupt you; for I thoroughly agree to the principle that business must be attended to."

"I assure you, sir," said Mr. Billing, "I appreciate your kindness in thinking me worthy of your consideration. I feel favoured, sir, beyond measure; and if you will still further honour me by gracing our humble dwelling, I can say, sir, with confidence Mrs. Billing will be equally as delighted as myself."

"But I hope, Mr. Billing, I am not taking you away from your business," said William. [83]

"By no means, my dear sir," exclaimed that urbane individual, "however engrossed I might be in my mental or corporeal occupations, the respite, sir, from those labours, when it is occasioned by the honour of a visit from a young gentleman of your talent and abilities, is of too valuable a nature, sir, not to be gratefully seized by your humble servant. Pray accept my best thanks, sir, for your attention, and permit me to invite you, sir, to our unpretending abode; for lowly it is, and not of those pretensions I could desire, sir, nor of such as it has been my lot at a former period of my life to possess, yet, sir, to it I can offer an Englishman's adjunct, a hearty welcome."

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Billing," replied William, "and will be happy to accept of your hospitality."

"This way then, Mr. Ferguson," said Mr. Billing. "Allow me to close the door of the store. I always lock it in my absence to prevent, sir, any unpleasant affairs, such as have occurred here, you know. If you will be good enough to step this way, sir? I must apologize beforehand, for the litter which I expect you will find, sir, in our domicile by explaining that Mrs. Billing does not anticipate the pleasure of visitors." [84]

Considering the sight that greeted the eyes of William as he entered the cottage, such an apology was certainly necessary, or rather unnecessary, to prepare him for what he was to witness. We said necessary, to excuse the lady of the house for the chaotic arrangements of her household, seeing that one couldn't enter the dwelling without being painfully aware that slovenliness and disorder reigned supreme. Therefore we corrected ourselves in the expression, and stated the absence of such necessity; as no one could be so blind as to imagine that the litter which Mr. Billing alluded to was merely the result of an occasion; for it was too palpably evident that the spirit of disorganization was the presiding genius of the Billing mansion, and, moreover, the visitor would be strengthened in the conviction the very moment he cast his eyes upon the wife of Mr. Billing's bosom. We will repeat then that Mr. Billing made numerous apologies for the disorder to which he was about to usher William Ferguson; and we may safely conjecture that William was not a little surprised when all the internal arrangements of the home burst upon his vision. [85]

"Let me show you to my domicile, Mr. Ferguson," said the little man in rather a pompous way; "as usual, sir, the house is turned topsey-turvey, Mrs. Billing is such a woman for cleanliness. You have no doubt, Mr. Ferguson (though you have not yet become entangled in the meshes of matrimony), heard of the nuisance of a musical wife; let me equally warn you, sir, against choosing the partner of your connubial bliss, from those of too cleanly a predilection. My spouse, sir, for instance, has periodical fits for cleansing (and I regret to say, sir, they are of too frequent occurrence for my especial comfort); then nothing but dust, soap and water, and disquietude pervades the house for a full twelve or twenty-four hours. You are aware, sir, 'at home' (I mean of course in Old England) we paterfamilias are taught, sir, to look upon washing-days as the very superlative of domestic misery; but my wife always had a propensity for having something like a washing-day very nearly six times a week, sir; and she has brought her customs and prejudices with her to this barbarous country. But come in, my dear sir, and take a seat, while I inform Mrs. Billing of your presence; and if I may be so bold, sir, as to add, I will entreat you to make yourself quite at home." [86]

This introductory prologue of Mr. Billing's was delivered as he stood with the door slightly ajar, and holding it by the handle while he addressed William, no doubt to fully prepare him to a proper appreciation of the merits of the lady to whom he was about to be introduced. When we say introduced we do not mean that formal ceremony in which strangers are brought to a mutual acquaintance (for William had frequently before met Mrs. Billing), but the mere act of being ushered to her presence in a house into which he, as yet, had never entered. Mr. Billing had stood, door in hand, while he uttered about half of his last sentence, when William saw, or fancied he saw, a female hand suddenly draw back the cover of a muslin blind that screened the lower part of a window situated in close proximity to the door at which he stood. Instantly thereafter a female head was substituted in its place, but as instantly withdrawn; while the noise of some falling object was distinctly heard, and was as speedily followed by that of a hastily closed door; all of them unmistakable signs of a surprisal and retreat. [87]

At this moment Mr. Billing pushed open the door and entered the evacuated room, in which he concluded his lugubrious notice of his lesser half's peculiarities, and desired his visitor to take a seat; which his visitor, picking up a chair that lay prostrate on the floor, accordingly did; and Mr. Billing went in search of his lady. Judging from the seeming confidence with which he walked into an apartment entering from the one which William sat in, forming the only other one in the [88]

front of the cottage, the operation was one of more certitude than the verb he made use of would imply; and also judging from the subdued whispers that William could overhear through the thin wooden partition that constituted the wall of the room, the search was also attended with wonderful success. But during Mr. Billing's absence to look for his spouse, let us join our young friend in his general inspection of the furnishing and upholstery department of the establishment.

In the first place we must say, distinctly and candidly, that the room was furnished badly. Not that there was any paucity in the collection; but the articles, though numerous, taken in the abstract, with the greatest regard to symmetry, contrast, and beauty, and the best possible display of talent in their collocation, any one with the slightest pretensions to comfort, we are certain would eliminate the entire mass; and any appraiser, if such an individual existed, within the boundaries of New South Wales, if called in to take an inventory, would elevate both his nose and his shoulders.

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But we will, with the reader's kind permission, give a short description, for the benefit of young couples about to furnish; and out of respect for the feelings and the patience of those of our readers, who have no desire or necessity for such detail, we will epitomize the catalogue as much as possible.

First then we must state that there was no semblance of order in the arrangements. Far from it; in fact, quite the reverse. All things seemed to have been placed with a predetermination on the part of some one to create as much confusion as possible, and to put each individual article into as awkward a position as imaginable. It is true William had rescued a chair from a lowly position, and had placed it on an unoccupied spot on the floor, and used it for the purpose for which in its construction it was intended. But it was well our young friend was not of an erratic disposition, for if he had been bent upon voyages of discovery, other than could be effected by his eyes, he would have found himself in as great a labyrinth as ever impeded the progress of the polar explorers. The fact was William was perfectly hemmed in; so that, with the exception of a small spot that was partially occupied by his chair, there was no room to stir, or at least very little; and he did not consider it wise, or politic, to risk his knees and shins in an attempt to penetrate into the thickly timbered recesses of the apartment. As he sat in the midst of this mass, which seemed to have been collected as the entire furniture of a dwelling, deposited in a room for the convenience of the van that officiates at flittings, he almost looked like an anxious emigrant keeping guard over his effects when landed in a strange country, or as "Caius Marius mourning over the ruins of Carthage."

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But we have wandered from our task, our self-imposed descriptive task, which we confess ourselves at a loss to perform with satisfaction; for having no cabinet-making knowledge, and never having before been called upon to take an inventory of such chattels, we feel ourselves, to make use of a vulgar idiom, "all abroad." We fear we have assumed the title and privileges of the author without considering whether or not we are possessed of the attributes pertaining to one; and, in our insensate conceit, we are afraid we have forgotten the absence of that recondite perspicuity and facile elucidation which are imperatively essential to the character we have arrogated. But we fancy we hear some of our impatient readers exclaim, "We wish you would tell us, without 'beating about the bush,' what the room contains; it is all nonsense your making excuses now, you should have thought of your incapacity before you commenced your history, and must go on with it; all we can do is to pity and smile at your ignorance;" and we exclaim, "A thousand thanks, kind readers! That is the very lenience we wished to evoke; we now can proceed with confidence, if not in our powers of depiction, at least in your charity and forbearance."

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Well then, in the centre of the room stood a table, which we venture to say had not been displaced in the general disorganization, notwithstanding that its satellites had. There was nothing extraordinary about this table, and yet there was a something which inspired awe, or at least curiosity, and that would lead to the enquiry, Whence came it? and this was precisely William's thought. Ah! that was a rare old table, and struck William with a desire to know its history; but unfortunately it had not the power to satisfy his enquiring mind; and he, having no one at the time with him from whom he could glean the information, was not likely to be the wiser. With the reader, however, we will not be so harsh or uncommunicative, but will make use of our knowledge, and impart the secret of its life; at least from the time whence it boasted of Mr. Billing as its owner. First, however, we will give a sketch of its general appearance.

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When we called it a table, we should have in greater justice said two tables, for, though one, it was also two. This seeming paradox may be explained by stating that, as it stood, it was one, but in its integral parts it could be spoken of in the plural number; in fact, to descend to the common vernacular mode of expression, we will say they were two side leaf-tables that had graced the parlour windows of the little box at Brixton. The leaves were, and had been for many years (in fact, rarely otherwise), quiescent, and were each made to hide its diminished head in a close contiguity to the object's crural appendages. The two tables, thus reduced to their natural bounds, were arranged with an affectionate concomitance so as to act the part of a table of family pretensions. It was of mahogany; and we will assume the postulation, that it was of solid mahogany, to which assumption we are led from its antique appearance, presuming that in the good old days of our ancestors, that refined species of humbug and deception, yclept veneering, was not in vogue, as our forefathers, so we are told, could not tolerate anything but what was substantial. But how sadly have we degenerated in these latter days! We now no longer perpetuate their creed, or retain any of their material predilections, except those for beef, beer, "bacca," and bills.

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But to return to the table. We said it was mahogany, but we must correct ourselves; we mean it was so originally, when it stood in the parlour at Brixton, but now no longer could it be said to be of that wood. If it but spoke, what "tales it could unfold" of voyages, journeys, mishaps, and accidents, that would put the whole fraternity of aristocratic loos far into the shade. Mr. Billing was wont to say he loved that old table as much as hundreds of individuals are in the habit of affirming a similar affection for a certain "old arm chair." He would also inform his friends, when in a communicative mood, that that table had belonged to his friend Lord Tom Noddy, whom he knew very well; but, unfortunately for our poor little friend's aristocratic reputation, on one occasion when he was a little "farther gone" than was usually his habit to go, the truth of *in vino veritas* was exemplified. On that occasion he innocently informed his friends, that, of course, the Lord Tom Noddy did not know him; that he, Mr. B., had bought the table at a sale of that nobleman's effects, when the inconvenient demands of low tradespeople rendered a sojourn in London exceedingly annoying to his lordship, and induced him to fancy his health demanded attention and his person relaxation and continental air. But still Mr. Billing could boast of what very few, if any, men in Australia could, that is, that he was possessed of a table that had belonged to a real, live lord; and many were those who were made aware of the fact.

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We fear we are not confining ourselves to a succinct account of minutiae, but are again running too much into detail of no moment; and we will, therefore, continue more briefly the history and description of this wonderful piece of furniture. It had been considered too great a treasure to be sacrificed in the break-up of the Brixton "box;" consequently it was carried off to gladden the eyes and astonish the nerves of the natives of Australia. As we have already said, many were the misfortunes it had gone through in its various peregrinations, and vast the trouble it had been to its present owner, who, notwithstanding, through all his vicissitudes, stuck to it as long as it stuck to him. Lord Tom Noddy's table was in much the same predicament as Jack's knife, which had had five new blades and three new handles; for his lordship's table had had innumerable splicings, nailings, screwings, patchings, and new leggings, composed of a variety of fibrous material, and of numerous colours and artistic designs. Yet there it stood, with its legs of an unequal longitude, some with castors and some without (the latter being supplied with a stone or a piece of wood, to preserve as nearly as possible the equilibrium); and, with more than one bandage to conceal a fractured limb, this relic of the past, this trophy of Mr. Billing's palmy days, and proof of his intercourse with aristocracy, preserved a dignified composure, like a veteran surveying the scene of a triumph. We said that the table stood in the centre of the room, and bore no evidences of having been moved in the general disorder; of this we were morally certain, for, judging by its paralytic appearance, it threatened a speedy dissolution if touched.

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The other members of this conglomerate fraternity were some dozen chairs, more or less, also in various stages of dilapidation, and of them we can say much in a few words. They were American, machine-made, cane-bottomed, painted, and patent varnished ladies' and gent's body supporters, and bore the same relation to civilized furniture as Dutch clocks used to do to the old-cased patriarchs, that in our halls marked the phases of fleeting time.

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They were "machine-made," we say, that is, the legs, bars, etc., were cut and turned by machinery; they were possessed of cane bottoms, whether also arranged by machinery or not, we can't say, though they were painted and varnished by its aid. But why such ordinary articles of domestic use should be patent we are at a loss to comprehend, unless it were for the design, or in the operation of painting the decorating portion, which consisted of an application of gilt varnish on the front of each leg and prominent part of the seat, and the representation on the back, in high colours and gilt, of some flowers and fruit, which it would be difficult to match with originals, from all the varieties that have been produced, from the Eden apple downwards.

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The next article was a sort of chiffonnier, a piece of furniture that made a great display; with crystal and china arranged with precision on the top, and a protecting covering of chintz, no doubt the uninitiated would imagine, to keep the polish from sustaining any injury. But must we discover the truth? Oh! deceitfulness of man, and, we may add, of woman too. This elegant and costly piece of furniture was nothing but a large deal box placed up on end, with rough shelves fixed into it to add to its utility, and with a gaudy cover put over it to hide its nakedness. There was another article of a similar construction, a luxuriant-looking ottoman, and a sofa which had originally, no doubt, been of polished cedar (of which wood, we may remark, all the best colonial furniture is made, and found to equal, if not excel, Honduras mahogany), and with horse-hair cushions, etc. But now it presented a doleful appearance of weather-beaten features and limbs, and where a horse-hair covering had existed, now only canvas was visible. A mirror of the dull and heavy school rested on the mantel-piece, along with sundry portraits, no doubt of a family importance, executed in an art of stern profile blackness, which art, we believe, is extinct, and happily so. The floor had no covering, neither had the walls, which showed the wood in its crude state, or rather in the serrated condition in which it had left the sawyer's pit. A few children's stockings and shoes scattered about; a woman's dress, mantle, and bonnet lying on the table, with some calico in the process of conversion to an article of apparel; a piano of ancient make which, we must say though, belonged to Mrs. Rainsfield, and was placed there for the use of the children while under the tuition of Mrs. Billing, completed the furniture; and, with other scraps, such as towels, dusters, and odds and ends, all heaped together, as we have said before, in interminable confusion, the reader has an idea of what William was surveying.

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We have already confessed our lack of the author's talent of succinct expression; and what we might have been able, had we been possessed of such a gift, to have detailed in a few pithy words, and what was noticed by William in a few minutes, it has taken us so long to describe. We

must therefore beg to assure the reader that Mr. Billing was not so rude as to leave his guest waiting alone so long as we have kept him, but shortly re-entered the sitting-room and informed William that Mrs. Billing was that moment engaged with the children, but if he would excuse her for a few minutes she would be obliged to him.

Now it happened that William had heard certain sounds that indicated arrangements of no possible connexion with children's attiring and ornature; such as the washing of an adult's hands, the operation of adjusting that corporeal appertinence, which is made to enclose the forms and symmetrize the figures of Eve's fair daughters of the present age, the rustling of silk, and other prognostics of a personal embellishment. But still conveniently deaf as a visitor should be to such sounds he begged that Mrs. Billing would not allow herself to be drawn from her attention to the children on his account, for he would be sorry to inconvenience her by his call. [102]

Mr. Billing thanked him for his politeness and consideration, and entreated him not to mention anything about inconvenience; and at that very moment Mrs. Billing sailed into the room, or at least as much of it as she could get into; and, while shaking hands with William, said: "I am delighted beyond measure, Mr. Ferguson, at your kindness in calling upon us. It is so affable of you, and I can only express my regrets that you should have happened to have chosen a day when you see we are all topsy-turvey. You must know, Mr. Ferguson, I always like to keep my house clean and in order, although Mr. Billing will persist in grumbling at what he calls unnecessary cleanliness; but still I am glad you have honoured us with a visit." "Go away, Johnny, and Bobby! Mary, don't be rude!" [103]

These latter expressions were addressed to various olive branches of the Billing tree, who showed their heads at the door whence had emerged the parent stem, and to which, we presume, the juveniles had come to satisfy their curiosity as to the nature of the intrusion on their domestic privacy. But they did not seem disposed to obey the injunctions of their maternal parent; who therefore rose and put them inside the room and shut the door, while they continued to amuse themselves by keeping up a perpetual kicking.

Possibly the reader may desire to know something about Mrs. Billing, her genealogy, etc. If so, we will endeavour to prevent disappointment by giving a brief sketch of her. She was a lady, "a perfect lady," as her husband used to say, and we should imagine, nearly twenty years the junior of her lord. She was not absolutely plain; she might once have been good-looking. In fact, Mr. Billing used to assure his friends, when first he married her she was a beauty, one, he affirmed, of the Grecian mould. We will not flatter her, however, by saying she was handsome; though we will state that her looks were capable of great improvement by the study of a little judicious display and effective costuming. But these virtues or follies, as our readers may consider them, obtained very little regard from Mrs. Billing; notwithstanding that on sundry occasions, such as the present, she made an effort to appear as in former years. [104]

She had taken some little pains, we say little pains because of the insignificance of the result, to present a genteel appearance to our friend William, and had made a hasty toilet. If it had effected any improvement in her appearance it argued badly for her presentableness before the operations of ablution and ornature had taken place. Her hair, in keeping with her eyes, was black, and parted not scrupulously in the centre; a stray lock on the forehead segregated from its rightful position was brought immediately across the line of demarcation and incorporated in the opposition. However, its lamination was lost in the plastering the whole had undergone in the toilet operations; and, as Mrs. Billing was not a vain woman, such a mishap was not deemed worthy of notice, or at least the trouble of rectification. Her features, if not good, were certainly far from bad. There was a vivacity and expression in them, but there was also an unctuousness that was a necessary concomitant on her perpetual bustle, which incessantly displayed itself in her pale face. She wore a black silk dress, that made a rustling like dry leaves in winter, and was modelled in a fashion so as to confine both the wrists and the throat of the wearer; at which points it terminated without the muslin adjuncts we usually look for. As for the dress itself nothing need be said, except that it might have, and had been a good one, but was then rather seedy. It gave us, however, the idea that it was worn in much the same manner, and for much the same purpose, as the closely buttoned up frock-coat of the "shabby genteel gentleman," who is unable to make any display of spotless linen. But we will make no ambiguous allusion to a lady's under garments, though we cannot shut our eyes to noticeable facts. Neither could William, for he perceived that her boots, though they had once been of a fashionable make, were not what they had been, for their glory had long since departed. He also noticed that her hands and facial contour were of a different shade to her neck and throat. It might have been an optical illusion, the effect of a deceptive light, the contrast of complexion, or the exposure to sun; but he thought that where the tints blended the contrast was too perceptible to be natural, and therefore concluded that the phenomenon arose from the dirt not being thoroughly removed, or the omission of an ablutionary application to the dark tinted part. [105] [106] [107]

William also noticed,—but we must again crave the indulgence of our fair readers, whose pardon we implore for adverting to such a subject,—when Mrs. Billing turned herself to eject and inject the juvenile representatives of the Billing family; he saw her back! yes, reader! her back! Now no lady should turn her back on a gentleman any more than a gentleman should perform so derogatory an act upon a lady, either literally or figuratively. More especially if that lady be not a good figure, or if her dress does not fit immaculately. We do not insinuate that Mrs. Billing had not a good figure, she was *once* graceful; but it was to be presumed, that considering the ample proofs she had given of a proclivity to gestation, the symmetry of that figure had to some extent been impaired. Be that as it may, the dress of Mrs. Billing did not meet behind by some three or

four hooks; and the consequence was that a sight was revealed to the bashful gaze of our young friend which caused him to blush; while the remembrance of the cleanly characteristics, enunciated by her lord as pertaining to her, made him wonder. For there! immediately underneath the habilimentary cuticle, William saw garments of so suspicious a colour as to make it questionable whether they had attained their peculiar hues by the process of dyeing, or by their contact with this world's filth.

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But there is one thing that we must explain before we leave Mrs. Billing. We have already told the reader that cleanliness was Mrs. Billing's peculiar and predominant idiosyncrasy, and we must reconcile this statement to our portraiture of unbecoming slovenliness. It is easily said in a few words. Mrs. Billing was one of those women who are always in a fuss about their domestic affairs; who are for ever fidgeting about the dirt in the house; and always attempting to remove, or remedy it, though in the attempt they only succeed in adding to the filth. Making "confusion worse confounded;" leaving things worse than they were before; adding to the discomfort of their husbands, their children, and themselves; whom they keep in a perpetual state of slovenliness and untidiness. Such was Mrs. Billing's failing; and if her husband was blessed with perspicuity sufficient to notice it, for his own peace of mind, he abstained from any dictation that might have embroiled him in family dissensions; and he was right: for on the whole she was undeniably a good wife to him notwithstanding her little peculiarities.

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Mrs. Billing had managed to squeeze herself into a seat, as her husband had previously done, without necessitating any extraordinarily unpleasant contiguity to her visitor; though any extension of prerogative on the part of the upper or nether limbs of either of the party would have been detrimental to the visages, or shins, of the others. So they were all perforce compelled to adhere to a strict propriety of deportment.

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The lady was particularly charmed, or at least she continued to say so, at what she designated the condescension of Mr. Ferguson in visiting her humble abode.

"I am truly delighted to see you," she said again, for at least the twentieth time; "and only regret I can offer you no inducement to prolong your visit. I suppose there would be no use in my asking you to stay and take pot-luck with us in the friendly way, Mr. Ferguson? Not that it would be any change of fare to you, for we are necessarily humble people now; and, if we even desired it, we could not have anything out of the common. It is not here like 'at home,' where you can, even with the most moderate means, procure anything nice. In this horrid country neither love nor money can buy tasty things. One has to be contented with what we can get, and we live so incessantly upon mutton that I wonder we're not all ashamed to look a sheep in the face. But, as I was saying, can we persuade you to stop and take pot-luck with us, Mr. Ferguson?"

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"I really thank you, Mrs. Billing," said William; "but my friends will expect me to make my appearance at the house shortly. I have brought my sister over to see Miss Eleanor, and have just dropped in to see you as I passed."

"Yes! it is very kind of you," said Mrs. Billing; "and of course Mrs. Rainsfield will be expecting you. However, if at any time you shall be disposed to honour us with a visit, let us have the pleasure of your company sufficiently long to enable us fully to enjoy it. Devote some evening to us, and we will endeavour to amuse you. We would be most happy to see your sister too, if she would condescend to honour our roof by her presence; she is a gentle, amiable young lady. I need not ask if she is well as that I am sure of?"

"Thank you," said William, "she is quite well, and I have no doubt will be happy to join me in paying you a visit; especially when I tell her of your kind enquiries."

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"Will you try a little spirits, Mr. Ferguson?" asked the master of the mansion. "I am sorry I have no wine to offer you, and neither any choice of spirits; but I shall be delighted if you will join me in a glass of rum."

"I am obliged to you; not any," replied William.

The conversation continued for some short time longer, chiefly though on the part of the Billing couple; who took upon themselves the initiatory to enlighten their visitor upon all their family affairs and departed greatness. William soon began to feel a distaste for this kind of conversation and society, and had made one or two attempts to break the spell. But as the pair kept up an alternate and incessant dialogue he could not find an opportunity of taking his leave; and neither did he effect his retreat until he had risen from his seat, stood hat in hand for nearly ten minutes, and repeated more than once that he feared his sister would be wondering what had become of him.

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He at last succeeded in escaping, and cordially shaking hands with the quondam commercial man and his lady, he took his departure and walked back to the house. Mr. Billing returned to, and was speedily lost in the abstruse calculation from which his attention had been diverted by William's visit; while Mrs. Billing retired to the precincts of her sanctum, to divest herself of her outer covering for one of more humble pretensions, in which she had been habited at the time of her surprisal.

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CHAPTER V.

"Your words have took such pains, as if
they labour'd
To bring manslaughter into form, and set
quarrelling
Upon the head of valour."

TIMON OF ATHENS, *Act 3, Sc. 5.*

When William made his appearance at the house he found Eleanor, Mrs. Rainsfield, and his sister together in the sitting-room; and, after receiving a severe rating for his cruelty in teasing Kate about her accident, he was asked by Mrs. Rainsfield what had detained him so long at the stables. Upon his replying that he had visited the Billings nothing would satisfy the girls but that he had an object in making such a visit, and they insisted upon having a detailed account of all his proceedings, and what he saw and heard at the storekeeper's cottage. During his narration of the circumstance we will leave him for a few minutes while we glance at another part of the station. [115]

Over the rails of the stockyard fence leaned a man, we might have said a gentleman, smoking a short pipe, and carrying or rather holding in his hand a heavy riding-whip, which we wish the reader particularly to notice for the reason which shall shortly be seen. At his side leant another gentleman with his back to the fence, and his eyes bent on the ground. The first was Bob Smithers, and the other, Mr. Rainsfield; and, at the moment of our discovering them, they were, or had been, in close conclave. Before we proceed to listen to the conversation we will premise by stating one fact, which we have no doubt the reader has conjectured, viz., that the marriage between Bob Smithers and Eleanor had been postponed *sine die*, or until such time as her health should be thoroughly restored. [116]

"Yes, I say again, it is a confounded nuisance that the girl is so slow in getting well; she might have broken half a dozen legs, and got right again by this time. I want to get her away from that infernal fellow Ferguson, and all his set; and I shall never do that until I have married Eleanor. Then, by G—! if any of them cross my path, they may expect to meet a tiger." So spoke the puissant Bob Smithers, that had grossly insulted the senior brother of "the set," and submitted ignobly to a blow from the younger; from whom he slunk away like an intimidated cur who had rushed yelping at some wayfarer, and received a warm reception.

"I don't think you need make yourself at all uneasy, Bob," said his companion. "Though John Ferguson has made overtures to Eleanor, which you know were rejected, it is not very probable that his brother or sister will at all interfere; in fact, I hardly think the young girl, his sister, knows anything about her brother's feelings on that point. Eleanor is exceedingly attached to them, and well she might be, for their behaviour to her has been kind and affectionate in the extreme." [117]

"Well, that may be," said Smithers; "but still I hate them, especially that young cub that is here now. He had the audacity to strike me on the night when we paid out his brother; and, but for the intervention of some of the people, I would have killed the young wretch on the spot."

"As to striking you," said Mr. Rainsfield, "I am not at all surprised at that. I wouldn't have thought much of the young fellow if he had stood passively by, and seen a practical joke perpetrated on his brother. But why didn't you retaliate, or wait for him till after the ball, and then have given him a good sound horse-whipping?"

"I couldn't get an opportunity of being at him then," said Smithers, "but I'm d——d if I don't carry out your suggestion now. I'll get an opportunity before he goes away." [118]

"If you do I only hope you'll manage it so as not to implicate me," said Mr. Rainsfield. "I don't wish to interfere with your private quarrels; but I would not like the young fellow attacked in my house or in my presence. Though I have quarrelled with his brother I haven't done so with him; and I must say he has been so attentive to Eleanor during her illness that I would consider any countenanced outrage on him would be the offering of an insult to her. Nevertheless, if you have any little settlement to make with him, let it be out of my sight and hearing, and I won't interfere with you."

"All right, old fellow," Smithers replied, "you need not fear me, I'll manage it comfortably enough you'll see. I'll get him quietly away from the house, and let him feel the weight of this." Saying which he laid his whip about some imaginary object with a force that made the missile whiz in the air, and with a determination that plainly portrayed the satisfaction with which he would operate upon his victim. [119]

"Very well," said Rainsfield, "do as you like. Only, as I said before, don't implicate me, and though I rather like the young man I shall have no objection to hear of the whole matter after it's done."

These two worthies then separated, Bob Smithers to seek the opportunity of which he spoke, and

the other either to go about some business of the station, or to keep as much out of the way of the coming event as possible. The reader will no doubt wonder how a man of Mr. Rainsfield's generally reputed integrity could reconcile his conscience to such behaviour; and also that he should willingly, and, we may add, collusively aid the suit of a man, of whose mental and moral turpitude he could have had no doubt, in preference to the honourable addresses of a gentleman in every way a more eligible match for his cousin. "But thereby hangs a tale," and it is our painful task in the office in which we stand, to see that that tale be not suppressed.

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At an early date after Eleanor's settled sojourn with Mr. Rainsfield he became aware of the existence of an engagement between her and Bob Smithers, from whom we may safely conjecture the knowledge was obtained. When Rainsfield, feeling for the dependent and forlorn condition of his relative, took her to the bosom of his family he did so out of pure sympathy and kindness towards her, and had no wish or desire to interfere in the disposal of her affections. Consequently he paid very little attention to the matter. But Smithers made a proposal to him which, if it did not excite his cupidity, induced him to think more of the affair as one in which he as a relative, and a protecting relative, had an interest. It had the effect of suborning his countenance to the match, and enlisting his strenuous exertions, to induce Eleanor to accede to the wishes of the Smithers family, and plight herself anew to the man who had already received her youthful acquiescence.

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The offer that Smithers had made to Rainsfield was this. That they should enter into partnership, and throw their respective properties into one concern, and work together on equal terms. Smithers was to embark all the country he was then possessed of, or the proceeds arising from the sale of any portion, and what capital he could command; and the other was to bring in the stock and station of Strawberry Hill. In making this offer Smithers conceived that he would be benefited by such an arrangement, in so far as he would be able to more effectually stock the immense tracts of country he had taken up. He considered this more advantageous than disposing of the runs; as, he argued by lightly stocking them in the first place, and allowing them to become by gradation fully stocked, through augmentation and the natural increase, he would eventually be possessed of larger property than if he with his own means only stocked an integral part of his holdings. On the other hand Rainsfield considered the offer as equally worthy of attention to himself, possibly looking at it in the same light. However, he had agreed to it; and this was the *douceur* that had made him a warm partizan of the Smithers' cause; and that had influenced the collusion that worked for the consummation of Bob's, or we might say Mrs. Smithers', matrimonial scheme.

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With regard to Eleanor, her feelings, we fear, were little dreamt of in the matter. Rainsfield deemed Smithers a good match for her, and possibly believing that she entertained at least some respect for the man, he never imagined for a moment that she could have had any objection. While she, on the other hand, from the continual promptings of her cousin, in the absence in her mind of any other imaginative cause for her cousin's warmth, attributed it to the desire on his part to be relieved of an irksome burden; and she had given her consent.

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We must admit that women are as equally (it is even affirmed they are more) susceptible than men to the warm affections of the heart; and that as they are inspired by love so are they influenced by aversion. And as a man, we mean of course with honour and conscience, would go to any extremity rather than ally himself to a woman whom he contemned, so would a woman feel as great a repugnance in accepting a man for whom she could not entertain any respect. We do not say that Eleanor actually abhorred Bob Smithers; but we can affirm that she felt no enjoyment in his society, but rather the reverse; and though she had accepted him to avoid the unpleasantness of her situation, the match was positively distasteful to her. Smithers' nature was diametrically opposed to hers. They had no one feeling in common; his tastes were not as her tastes; nor hers as his. Besides, she had an exalted, and perhaps romantic, idea of matrimony. She didn't think it proper to marry for convenience, but imagined it was a compact that was only justly and favourably formed on true love. Not that at the time of her engagement with Smithers she had experienced the sentiment; but she was aware she had entertained the proposal of a man in the absence of it, and therefore had sacrificed a moral principle. But her trial was to come.

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She then met John Ferguson; and their mutual companionship, if it had had its effects on John, had surely had no less so on her. It is true she had thought no more of him, at first, than as a friend, a kind attentive friend. But then she admired him, his precepts, his manners, his conversation, and his general ingenuousness; she liked him, and found pleasure in his society. Did she think she loved him? It may be she never gave herself a thought on the subject. She was content to live in the pleasing delusion, that John Ferguson was nothing more to her than a friend; but there was her danger. She might have mistaken his manner; misconstrued his feelings; and been blind to the more than ordinary warmth of his greeting. But the pleasure in his company, the delight at his approach, the longing for his presence between the intervals of his visits; and the heart's palpitations, as she felt the welcome touch of his hand in the grasp of friendship, must and did have their own warning voices, to which Eleanor could not shut the ears of her understanding. She suspected he loved her; she read it in his eyes; but she feared to ask herself the question, Was the feeling reciprocated?

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Next came the explanation. He declared the existence of that lasting affection which never dies. But could she give him hope? could she encourage him in his love? No! she felt she could not. She had voluntarily given herself to another, yet felt she had by her manner incited this one; had probably by her demeanour given him cause to hope, while she was not justified in holding out any. She might have, nay, she even feared she had, destroyed his peace of mind, and all through

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her own selfishness. Why had she not warned him in time? why not forsworn the pleasure to which she had no claim? These were questions she asked herself, but could give no reply, except the sigh her heart chose to offer. Her relationship to Smithers reverted to her mind. That she did not love him, nor he her, she was convinced; then why not accept the love of John Ferguson? She meditated; but in that meditation her principle got the better of her inclinations, and she sacrificed her interest, her happiness, and her comfort, for the inviolable preservation of truth.

These scruples were known to Mrs. Rainsfield and Tom, who, we have seen, considered them unnecessarily severe, and combated against them unceasingly, though without making any impression on the mind of Eleanor. They deprecated what they considered her folly, and attempted by all the arts of persuasion to move her from her purpose; but she had been inculcated with a perception of high morality, and an appreciation of strict integrity. Truth had been always represented to her mind as the fundamental basis of all virtue. Her desires and her passions had been regulated to a subserviency to the Christian character, and her nature had been moulded in a religious education. Consequently, upon the dictates of her conscience she acted, and felt she would be guilty of an unpardonable moral offence to refuse her hand where her word had been pledged. [127]

In this light, then, the parties stood to one another. Rainsfield was anxious to get his cousin married to Smithers, who was equally uneasy to have the event consummated, as he had serious misgivings on the eventual possession of his prize. Eleanor, though she was by no means anxious to hasten the marriage, had no desire to unnecessarily postpone an occurrence which she could not prevent, but of which latterly, more than ever, she had had cause to dread. However, she knew regrets were vain, and therefore attempted to attune her thoughts and feelings to a strict sense of duty, to forget her own personal likings, and to enter calmly upon the obligations expected of her. Notwithstanding all her fortitude poor Eleanor was but mortal, and she could not sustain the gigantic contest she had undertaken. She strove long and bravely, but her love would at times overcome her, and leave her the constant prey of her feelings, and to a melancholy contemplation of the sacrifice she was making; hence her protracted illness and tardy recovery. [128]

But we must return to our narrative. We left William and the ladies in the parlour at Strawberry Hill house, and Bob Smithers walking from the stockyard in that direction, breathing heavy threats of vengeance against the gentleman who had so grievously offended him, and who had escaped his just punishment upon the occasion when the offence was committed. It is needless for us to comment on Bob's version of his affray with William Ferguson, as the correct one is already known to the reader; but the tale he told Rainsfield was the one related by him wherever the circumstance of the blow became known. [129]

William, as we have said, was sitting in company with the ladies, and was submitting with the greatest docility to be made use of, by lending his hands for the extension of a skein of silk while it was being wound off by Eleanor, when a little boy bearing the Billing impress on his features appeared at the open window, and said he had something to say to Mr. Ferguson.

"Say it out, my boy," said William, who imagined it might be some formal invitation from the Billing paterfamilias.

"Please, sir, father told me to tell you a gentleman was waiting down at our house to see you," said the boy.

"And who is the gentleman, my lad?" asked William.

"Please, sir, I don't know," he replied; "father only told me a gentleman wanted to speak with you directly." [130]

"Is Mr. Rainsfield down at your father's house?" asked William.

"No, sir," was the reply.

"Very well; tell the gentleman, or your father, that I will be down there in a few minutes," said William; "and that if the gentleman is in any very particular hurry, it would have been a great saving of his time if he had come up here."

Now, the circumstance struck all present (though no one said so) as being rather remarkable, that Smithers, for they knew it could be no other than he, should desire to meet William Ferguson alone, and away from the house. William knowing or suspecting the nature of the coming interview, fearing that his friends would have a similar suspicion, and having no desire to excite their fears, tried to show his coolness and indifference by whistling an air as he left the room. But this oft-repeated stratagem had not the desired effect of allaying the fears of one, at least, who was cognizant of the quarrel at Brompton and the whole attendant circumstances. This was Eleanor, and she was convinced, from the manner of Smithers, that he meditated some action which he was ashamed to perform within sight of the house. She therefore hastily put on her hat, and prepared to follow William, and being joined by Kate, she stepped out through the window to the green sward in front. [131]

Hardly a dozen steps were necessary, to bring them clear of the angle of some outhouses that intercepted the view of the stables and Billing's premises; and as she cleared that angle, it was to this point Eleanor directed her gaze. The sight that she then witnessed showed that she was only too correct in her surmise as to the intentions of Smithers; for there she saw him in high

altercation with William, who stood perfectly at ease taking the matter as coolly as possible. His arms were folded across his breast, and a pleasant smile played on his features, while his antagonist had worked his wrath up to the culminating point, ready for a mighty explosion; and raved about the ground while he brandished his whip.

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We will not trouble our readers, or shock their ears or senses, by a recapitulation of the dialogue; suffice it to say, that if warm it was short. So that when Eleanor discovered the disputants she witnessed the exacerbation of Smithers' ire, and the descent of his whip across William's shoulders. The fate of Smithers on this occasion might have been similar to what it was on a former one had not the attention of William been drawn off from his purpose by hearing a loud shriek at his rear. He turned to see whence it came, while his castigator, taking no further heed of the circumstance than to look round to see from whom it emanated, continued to belabour at his victim with redoubled energy.

It was Eleanor who had uttered the shriek when she saw the blow struck by Smithers; and instantly flying between the belligerents, throwing her arms around the neck of her intended husband, she exclaimed: "Robert! Robert! for mercy's sake, what are you—" But she was not permitted to finish the sentence for the ruffian whom she had clasped in an embrace that should have melted a heart of stone shouted in her ear, coupled with an expression not fit to be repeated: "What business have you here?" while he flung her from him with a force that hurled her insensibly to the ground, where she lay without a murmur. This was more than the honour and chivalry of William could bear. To be attacked himself he cared little as he was well able to defend himself, and also to retaliate when he thought fit; but to see a brute, without one spark of manly feeling, not only lift his hand to a lady, and that lady a gentle amiable girl who was about to bless him with more earthly happiness than was meet for him to enjoy, but to prostrate her with such force as to momentarily deprive her of vitality, was more than his spirit could placidly endure. The lion was roused in his nature; and, while Kate attended to her fallen friend, he sprung like an infuriated animal on the cowardly villain; wrenched his whip from his hand and let him feel not only the weight of *it*, but also of the avenger's athletic arm, in such a way as would cause him to remember it for many a day.

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When William had thrashed the wretch until he had driven him to seek shelter in the stables, he returned to where still lay the form of Eleanor, who showed no signs of returning consciousness. Feeling alarmed at the lengthened duration of the swoon Kate and her brother thought they had best remove her to the house at once; with which intention William took her in his arms, and carried her in to Mrs. Rainsfield.

The good lady was quite alarmed at the appearance of poor Eleanor's features, when her still inanimate form was brought to her. An ashy paleness pervaded her face; her eyes were closed; and, with the exception of an occasional faint sigh, no signs of life were visible. We say, Mrs. Rainsfield was justly frightened at the appearance of the poor girl, and she asked in an agitated manner: "What is this? what is the matter? Eleanor swooned? Good gracious! what does it mean?"

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"My dear Mrs. Rainsfield," said William, "if you will allow me to tender my advice I would suggest that you instantly put Miss Eleanor to bed. I sadly fear her injuries are severe, and that it is more than a mere swoon under which she is now labouring. Pray, don't delay, but remove her at once; and Kate can tell you all the circumstances. If you will lead the way I will carry her into her room."

"Poor Eleanor! and is this too the work of that viper, Smithers?" said Mrs. Rainsfield.

"It is, indeed!" replied Kate.

"Oh, the vile wretch!" exclaimed the lady. "It is as I thought, he cares not a straw for her life. A man that would treat a tender, loving girl in this way, would be guilty of any enormity; and yet she is so infatuated as to court her own misery by persisting in accepting this monster. Oh! what would I not give to see her safe out of his clutches? But he surely can't have the effrontery to look her in the face after this; nor she so silly as to receive him if he does. Certainly not, if I can dissuade her, and I think I have some good ground to work upon now."

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By this time William had deposited his burden on the little snow-white bed of the motionless girl, and left the room and the patient to the guardianship of Mrs. Rainsfield and his sister; while he strolled out for a few minutes to calm his agitation, and weigh the circumstances in his mind. He had walked backwards and forwards for about a quarter of an hour when he turned again into the house just as his sister was looking for him.

"Oh, Will!" she said, "Eleanor is in a dreadful state. She is fearfully ill, and we think it is a fever. Mrs. Rainsfield says there is a doctor who has lately settled at Alma, and she was going to send one of the men over for him; but I thought it would be better, to prevent the possibility of any mistake, for you to go. Will you go, and at once, Will?"

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The answer William gave to his sister's question was to dart off to the stables for his horse; and in a few minutes afterwards he might have been seen galloping through the bush to procure the services of the son of Galen located at the nearest township.

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CHAPTER VI.

"Oh! wretch without a tear—without a thought,
Save joy above the ruin thou hast wrought—
The time shalt come, nor long remote,
when thou
Shalt feel far more than thou inflictest now."

BYRON.

When Smithers had partially recovered from the wholesome chastisement administered by William Ferguson, and had witnessed, from his concealment, the hasty departure of his foe, the nature of his journey, and the cause of his precipitance, flashed instantly across his mind; and, we would fain believe, his conscience was visited by compunctions for his unpardonable brutality. He cogitated for some time on the course he was to pursue, and thought of how he could explain away the circumstances; for even to her whom he knew would forgive much he hardly dared venturing an explanation; knowing too well that his conduct was not to any extent defensible. He, however, determined to make the attempt to see Eleanor, and endeavour to remove from her mind any impression that might be injurious to his cause; and with that idea he approached the house.

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Oh, Smithers, you ignorant inflated fool! How little you know the nature of woman, and how less you can estimate their worth, and appreciate the value of such an one as her who has surrendered her heart to thy keeping! Thinkest thou that it is woman's only province to forgive? That thy perpetual contumely should be continually pardoned, and thou, without any innate goodness or recommendatory virtue, should ever claim the devotion of a spirit the personification of purity, while thy conduct is such as would make that spirit, were not its adjuncts truth and compassion, shrink with loathing from the vile contamination of your very breath, and a fear of the consequences of your truculence and inhumanity! It is true, some women blinded by the infatuation of love, would sacrifice their happiness, peace, and liberty, even life, on the unworthy object of their ardent affection; but if thou believest this, buoy not thyself up with the idea that all thy sins will be forgiven thee! Eleanor has had much to deprecate in thee! many have been the wounds thy churlishness has inflicted on her gentle nature, and though she was willing to sacrifice all her earthly happiness to maintain intact her truth and honour, yet remember she is not actuated by love, but by an exalted sense of duty. Let her once be convinced that she is exonerated from a performance of that, and thy bird has flown. Duty has a strong tractive influence on a mind attuned to a high appreciation of integrity; but love is a still more powerful incentive, and dost thou know thou art not the happy possessor of that love? Yes, thou not only knowest that no such sentiment is felt for you by that being whose purity thou contemnest, but thou fearest, nay, even art certain, that the object of that being's love is another; and that other he whom thou hast striven to make thine enemy! Yet, knowing all this, thinkest thou that woman, frail confiding woman, could trust thee as her mundane protector? Because Eleanor has forgiven much, thou thinkest thyself secure; but if this last is not the *coup de grâce* in thy catalogue of contumacious infamies we shall be inclined to deprecate Eleanor's leniency. But to return.

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One of Bob Smithers' characteristics was a conceited self-complacency that distended his very soul with its blinding virus; and, speaking in the figurative of a popular apothegm, he estimated his commendable qualities as equivalent to no insignificant quantity of that mean maltine beverage which we thirsty members of the great Anglo-Saxon family call small-beer. He therefore thought he had but to go to his betrothed with a penitential cast of countenance, and claim as a right, and receive as a matter of course, that forgiveness which he was entitled to expect.

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"I was only", (he said apologetically to himself), "in a bit of 'a scot' at the time, and when she came in my way I pushed her off when she fell. It was her own fault, and she must know I did nothing to her but what any other man similarly situated would have done."

At the conclusion of his meditations he stepped on to the verandah of the house, and seeing a servant passing out of the sitting-room, into which he had entered by the window, he called her and asked, "Where was her mistress, or Miss Eleanor?"

"Miss Eleanor is ill, and missus is with her," replied the girl who looked awkward and rather sheepish at her questioner.

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"Is Miss Eleanor very bad, Mary?" asked Smithers.

"I think she is, sir," replied she.

"Mary! Mary!" called a voice that was almost instantly followed by the utterer, Kate, who ran into the room, saying: "Do run out, and try and find Mr. Rainsfield." But she had hardly got the words

out of her mouth, as she stood in the doorway of the room, than, catching sight of Smithers, she uttered a faint scream, and fled hastily from his presence. She was instantly followed by the girl, who had partly heard the cause of her young mistress' illness, and was desirous to escape the questioning of one whose character she could also despise.

Smithers stood musing for some minutes, not altogether pleased with these evidences of repulsion on the part of Eleanor's friends; but his fears of their influence over her mind were only momentary. He must see her, he said to himself; have an interview with her, and the little difficulty will soon be arranged. Then he would hurry his marriage, he thought, and take Eleanor away from the hated influence. "Those Fergusons," he continued in his soliloquy, "are a pragmatic, hateful lot, and I can't understand why Rainsfield does not keep them away from his place." Smithers firmly believed they had been created for the express purpose of causing him annoyance; and their present especial object in settling in that district was to frustrate his marriage, and rob him of his bride elect. "But he would defeat them," he said to himself, "or he'd be—;" but here his mental reservations were interrupted by Mrs. Rainsfield, who exclaimed as she entered the room: "So, sir! you dare to show yourself again in my house after the vile atrocity you have been guilty of. As to your infamy I do not wonder at it, for it is only the fructification of a nature equally depraved, brutal, and worthless. But after your insulting attack upon a guest of mine, and your cruelty to a gentle and amiable girl that you should have ventured within the precincts of this house I am truly astonished. I know you to be too great a coward to do so did you think there was any possibility of your meeting with the one who so lately gave you your deserts; and I can only attribute your presence now as a further proof of your arrogance, and to an endeavour to insult the female inmates of this dwelling."

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"I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Rainsfield," replied the object of that lady's invectives; "I never offered any insult to you or any other lady in this house; so your strictures on me are quite uncalled for."

"What, sir! can you stand before me with such barefaced effrontery, and tell me such an unequivocal falsehood?" cried the lady. "Have you not insulted me by cajoling from my presence a gentleman, who is my friend and visitor, to basely assault him? and then what do you say of your dastardly behaviour to that girl who was contemplating her own misery and destruction by throwing herself away on such a wretch as you?"

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"I decline to answer you, madam," said Smithers, "for your language is most offensive."

"Then even you are susceptible on the point of feeling," replied Mrs. Rainsfield, "and yet you think I can't feel an insult. I tell you, sir, that if you had subjected me to the treatment that you did Eleanor I should have considered it an offence of the most unpardonable nature. But I love Eleanor even better than I do myself, and you may therefore expect no mercy at my hands. For your offence to myself I shall expect an expiation by your totally absenting yourself from this house; and if I have any influence over the mind of that ill-used girl (which I hope and trust I have), you may rest assured it will be exercised to your disadvantage. So, sir, without any further parley, I have to request that you instantly leave the house."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, madam," replied Smithers, "your husband I presume is the master of this house?"

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"Well, sir, I expect him here every moment," exclaimed the lady, "and if you do not obey my injunctions you shall be forcibly expelled from the premises."

"And situated as I am," continued Smithers not heeding the last threat of his irate companion, "with regard to Eleanor, I think I am entitled to see her."

"You shall not be admitted to her presence, sir," replied the lady.

"I wish to see her," said Smithers, "to explain the circumstances under which the accident occurred."

"Accident indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Rainsfield. "It requires no explanation, sir, it speaks for itself. I have already had your brutality recounted by an eyewitness."

"By her friend I presume and one that is therefore not mine," sneered Smithers, "the sister of that villain who first poisoned Eleanor's mind towards me."

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"Cease, sir! your invectives against one with whom you are not worthy to be mentioned in the same breath," cried Mrs. Rainsfield. "It was Miss Ferguson who related to me the unmanly and ruffianly manner in which you hurled Eleanor to the ground. She now lies with her life in imminent peril, and yet you have the audacity to stand before me and call it an accident which you will be able to explain."

"Yes, madam! I am confident I shall be able to satisfy Eleanor that it was not intentional on my part. I am exceedingly grieved that she should be so extremely ill, but believe me, Mrs. Rainsfield, this once, that if you will permit me to see her only for a few minutes I will be quite contented, and will certainly relieve her mind from any impression of my having wilfully harmed her."

"No, sir! it is useless your attempting to alter my determination. I tell you emphatically, that you shall not see her. She is now in a raging fever, and the sight of you at this moment might extinguish the flickering flame of her existence. To save me from any painful necessity, I trust,

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sir, you will see the expediency of ceasing your importunities and at once taking your departure."

"I much regret that you will not permit me to see Eleanor," exclaimed Smithers, "because I am sure you are acting under a misapprehension of my motives and actions. If you would but permit me to explain, I—"

"It is useless, sir."

"But I am confident you must have been misinformed of the circumstances. Your informant is no friend of mine, and would have consequently given the affair a colouring detrimental to my interests."

Mrs. Rainsfield could stand no more of this colloquy, and with difficulty suppressed her rage. It had twice or thrice been just on the point of overflowing; but now it was beyond her power to restrain it. To have her young friend Kate branded as a liar by the infamous viper before her struck her dumb with indignation; and it was some moments before she regained the power of utterance, when she exclaimed:

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"You mean grovelling, despicable villain! You must of necessity add to your opprobriousness by including Miss Ferguson among those whom you choose to insult, and attack her with your scurrility. Because you generate lies yourself do you think she is capable of uttering falsehoods? I will endure you no longer. Instantly leave this house, sir, do you hear me? or I'll—"

"Pray, what is the matter, my dear?" enquired Mr. Rainsfield, who entered at this moment.

"Oh, John! cause that man to leave the house, and I'll tell you," replied his wife.

"My dear Rainsfield," commenced Smithers, but was cut short by the infuriated lady, who exclaimed:

"Not a word in my presence, sir. I have already ordered you to leave the house; do you intend to obey me?" Then, turning to her husband, Mrs. Rainsfield said in a voice almost choking with passion: "John, will you not assist and support me? I have been grossly insulted by that man, who persists in defying me. Is he to continue doing so?" and she sank into a chair, and gave vent to her excited feelings in a flood of tears.

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Rainsfield was not one of those unfortunates, belonging to that class of marital bipeds known as "hen-pecked husbands," though he was certainly of an uxorious disposition. It cannot therefore be supposed that he could have calmly witnessed the distress of mind his spouse evidently appeared to be in without feeling some sympathy; and she being in that state in which philosophers tell us woman soonest touches the heart of inexorable man, viz., in tears, that sympathy was heightened. Rainsfield's connubial heart was softened at the evidence of his wife's woes; he therefore turned to Smithers, and said: "Leave us together just now, Bob; I'll see you before you go."

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It must be distinctly understood that though Rainsfield, as he was in duty bound, sided with his wife on this occasion, he had no desire to quarrel with Smithers, even if his wife had; far from it. It is true he had heard something of the little fracas of flogging and fainting; but that was nothing to him. If the young men chose to quarrel, he considered, let them do so! and if his cousin chose to interfere, and get hard knocks for so doing, he could not help it. If the girl had fainted it was a pity, but what influence had he over her syncope? Women always made a great deal, he thought, about those things, but generally cool down after a while and forget such little grievances. So when he communicated to Smithers his wish that he should leave the house, he did so with an expression in his look that plainly said: "Never mind, old fellow, you will lose nothing by leaving your case in my hands." The delinquent, we have no doubt, fully understood it, for he instantly obeyed the behest. Let it be said, however, to the credit of Mr. Rainsfield, that as he took this view of the case he was only aware that Eleanor had fainted and was ill; but had no idea that William Ferguson had gone off to Alma for a doctor, and that Eleanor's case was so dangerous. He therefore imagined that his wife had magnified her danger, and the heinousness of Smithers' crime; and consequently thought more lightly of the whole affair than did his partner. But he was shortly to be undeceived.

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As Smithers left the room Rainsfield took a seat beside his wife and said: "Well, my dear, what is the cause of all this? you seem agitated. I have heard something of what has happened, but surely that is not sufficient cause for your angry altercation with Bob Smithers, and making yourself miserable."

"Do you not think so, John?" she replied; "first to have Eleanor nearly brought to death's door (for she is in such a raging fever that I have been compelled to get William Ferguson to go to Alma for a doctor), and then to be insulted and openly defied in my own house by the villain who is the cause of it all; do you not think that is sufficient to make me agitated?"

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"Certainly, my dear," replied her husband, "the matter appears to me in a new light. I was not aware it was of so serious a nature; pray tell me all about it."

Mrs. Rainsfield was not long in replying to this mandate, and speedily gave her husband a detailed account of the horrors of Smithers' proceedings, permitting them in nowise to lose in her narrative any of their force and piquancy. She then wound up her recapitulation of atrocities by demanding to know if her husband could think of permitting so vile a man to darken his door again. "Understand me, John," she said, "I shall expect you to protect me against him and his

insults: and that can't be done while his presence here is tolerated. If ever he enters this house I shall most assuredly consider that you are conniving at his insolence, and shall certainly confine myself to my own room during his stay."

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We have seen that Mr. Rainsfield was mindful of his wife's wishes, but at the same time had no desire to make a breach with Smithers; consequently he found himself in a dilemma, from which he saw no extrication without giving offence to one or other of the parties. He therefore made no promise to his wife.

"You don't answer me, John," said she, "what am I to consider you think of his conduct?"

"Well, my dear," replied her husband, "I really can't tell. It is certainly reprehensible, but there is no use quarrelling with Smithers. If it is any satisfaction to you that he should not visit us I dare say he will not trouble you; but for my own part I can't see how you can expect him to forego his right to see Eleanor."

"Eleanor herself, when she recovers, if she ever does, will relieve him from that obligation," replied Mrs. Rainsfield.

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"How can you say that?" said her husband. "She has expressed no intention of doing so."

"No, certainly; the poor girl is not in a state to express any determination," replied the wife; "but do you think she will suffer herself to be led to the altar by a brute like him, a man who has shown himself on more than one occasion quite unworthy of her? If she has got the spirit I think she has she will treat him with that contempt which he deserves."

"I see how it is," exclaimed Rainsfield, "you are prejudiced against Smithers."

"Prejudiced against Smithers, John?" replied his wife; "yes, I may be, but not in the sense you mean. You fancy I dislike the man because I would prefer Eleanor to accept another but you are mistaken. Hitherto I never disliked Smithers as a man, but as a suitor of Eleanor I certainly abhor him; and for this reason that I saw her inevitable fate would be misery and wretchedness if she were ever mated to him. Now though I have more than ever cause not only to detest him for his insolence to me but to fear him for Eleanor's life."

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"You are infatuated against him," replied the husband. "And for this quarrel of yours you would wish to destroy his happiness irrespective of the feelings of Eleanor herself. You say she is really ill and cannot be spoken to on the subject; then at present let the matter rest until her recovery."

"On one condition only," replied Mrs. Rainsfield, "and that is that Smithers in the interval be banished from the house. If you agree to that I am content to leave his further expatriation to her good judgment."

"So let it be," replied her husband. "I'll see Bob, and try to persuade him to let the settlement of the affair remain in *statu quo*."

With that the couple parted, the wife to return to the sick room, and the husband to seek Smithers. We will not trace their steps on their respective missions but merely state that Mrs. Rainsfield and Kate passed an anxious night with their invalid. At an early hour on the following morning, hearing a horseman's step passing the house, while they were anxiously expecting the doctor, Mrs. Rainsfield looked from the window of the room where she was keeping her vigils and detected the retreating outline of Bob Smithers' form as he departed for his home. Her husband she had not seen since their interview in the parlour, but as she had not since that time left Eleanor's bedside it gave her no concern; or at least she never thought of an absence of which she was not cognizant. However he had been absent all night, and while the doctor, who had arrived with William shortly after the departure of Smithers, was administering his febrifuges to poor Eleanor he was enacting the scene which we will detail to the reader.

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Rainsfield had had a long conversation with Smithers on the subject that had been communicated to him by his wife; and had, after a good deal of persuasion, induced him to agree to absent himself from Strawberry Hill until Eleanor's recovery.

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Smithers, when he found his companion disposed to favour him, was the louder in his asseverations of guiltlessness; demanding an instant opportunity of explanation, and vowing vengeance against everybody concerned, and John Rainsfield in particular, for not being master in his own house. However Rainsfield, though he was inclined to forget his dignity by stooping to entreaty with him, was nevertheless firm to his purpose, and not to be intimidated by his blustering; and at last succeeded in inducing him to promise to take his departure by daylight the following morning, so as to avoid the possibility of any further unpleasantness. With that he left him to his own meditations, and walked away.

Mr. Rainsfield had not taken many steps beyond the out-buildings belonging to the house before he heard his own name called in a cautious manner from behind a tree; and, glancing his eye in the direction whence came the voice, he was startled to see the stalwart figure of a black, half concealed behind the trunk, beckoning him with his finger. The suddenness of the apparition for some moments unnerved him, and deprived him of the power of utterance. He, however, mastered his fears; and, as his self-control returned, he demanded to know what the black wanted with him.

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"You know me, Mr. Rainsfield?" replied the black, "I'm Jemmy Davies."

"Oh, yes, I know you," replied Mr. Rainsfield, "but I thought you and the whole of your tribe had left the country."

"So we did, sir, but we've all come back again, and a great many more of the tribe too, and they are determined to kill you. Barwang and all Dugingi's friends will kill you, and I can't prevent them though I've tried; for they are too strong for me. So I've come to give you warning."

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"They intend to kill me, do they? then, by G—! they shall repent their rash resolve. But how am I to believe this?" asked Mr. Rainsfield of the black. "You! you wretch, have you got some vile scheme in your head. Think yourself fortunate that I've no gun with me or I'd shoot you on the spot."

"You wouldn't shoot me," replied Jemmy Davies; "didn't Mr. Tom tell you that I'm always a good friend to you, how I tried to stop Dugingi from stealing your rations when you killed so many of our tribe; and now I come to tell you that they want to kill you and you think me no good. But what for do you think, Mr. Rainsfield, I want to do you harm? If I want to see you die I wouldn't tell you of this; but let the black fellows kill you. If you will not believe me I can't help it; but if you like to come down to the crossing-place to-night at dark I'll meet you and show you our camp in the scrub; when you will see if I tell you a lie. I will stop Barwang and his friends as long as I can, but I can't prevent them altogether from coming to you; so you had better look out and be ready."

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This warning sounded as an avenging declaration in the ear of Rainsfield. He had for sometime flattered himself on his security and tranquillity; and hoped, nay even believed, that he had effectually ridden himself of a hitherto incessant annoyance. But now that the surviving friends of his foes had returned, with the avowed object of seeking vengeance, he was troubled in his mind. He, however, determined to further question his informant, and, rousing himself from a reverie into which he had fallen, perceived that the black had departed. Mr. Rainsfield dragged through the remainder of the day with a heavy heart, and never more than then regretted the absence of his brother. Should he accept the black's invitation? he asked himself. It would be a satisfaction to know in what force they were collected; but then (he thought) the messenger might mean treachery. However, he would go; he could detect it if it existed, and if it was attempted he could shoot the wretch before he had time or opportunity to betray him. Yes (he thought) he would arm himself well, and meet Jemmy Davies at the time and place he appointed.

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"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Rainsfield," exclaimed the black, emerging from the obscurity of the bush, as the squatter rode down to the bank of the river some few hours after the last interview.

"Yes I've come," said Rainsfield, "and at your bidding; but see I am well armed," as he pointed to a brace of revolvers in his belt, "and, if you are attempting to play me false, the first shot I'll fire shall be through your body."

"Never fear me, Mr. Rainsfield," replied Jemmy Davies, "I'm not going to betray you. My greatest fear is not from your pistols but from the tomahawks of my tribe; for if they find me with you they will be sure to kill me."

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"Very well," said Rainsfield, "I'll follow you, lead the way;" and the two crossed the stream in silence.

"You had better leave your horse here, sir," said the guide, "in case he should be heard by the tribe."

Rainsfield acted on this hint and dismounted; and fastening the animal to a tree, he said to the black: "Now you can go on, but remember if this is a trap for me you had better think twice before you proceed; for I shall keep my hand ready to lodge a ball in your heart the moment I perceive any treachery."

"Never be afraid, sir," replied the black, who continued to thread the scrub in silence with his companion close to his heels. When they had proceeded thus for some little time Rainsfield perceived by the appearance of lights, and the noise of the blacks' voices, that they were nearing "the camp." Jemmy Davies desired him to keep close to him, and make no noise, as they were nearer the camp than appeared through the thick scrub, and then led him a few steps further forward, when the whole tribe became plainly discernible. They then dropt on their hands and knees and crept close up to what we may call the circumvallation of the gunyahs; and the crouching white man surveyed intently the scene before him. Then would have been the time to have profited by his position if treachery had been meditated; but not a leaf stirred around them, while Rainsfield was lost in a reverie none of the most pleasant. He was, however, aroused from this by Jemmy Davies, who pointed to a group apart from the body of the tribe consisting of about fifteen men, who were all armed with their spears, nullanullas, and boomerangs, and were painted for a corroboree. One black, taller than the rest, was haranguing them at the moment, and his hearers were apparently acquiescing in his directions, from the yells and other marks of approbation with which they from time to time greeted his diatribe.

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"That's Barwang and his friends," whispered Jemmy as he drew away his companion from the spot. "They will have a great corroboree to-morrow, and then you look out. To-morrow night they will come up to the station to watch, very likely they will be somewhere about where you saw me this morning; so if you keep some one on the look-out, and fire some shots into the bush, they will think you see them and keep away. They won't do anything to-morrow night, but watch. When they come up to kill you there will come a great many, so keep looking out."

CHAPTER VII.

"Till taught by pain,
Men really know not what good
water's worth."

BYRON.

The reader will remember Tom Rainsfield's journey to town had been delayed for some time beyond when he had originally intended to start owing to the precarious state of Eleanor's health; consequently, when he took his departure, it was necessary for him to use speed in his travelling.

The summer had by that time considerably advanced, and the country had suffered much from the continued drought that had prevailed for months. Rain was anxiously and hopefully looked for, and a pluvial visitation would have been hailed by the entire population with satisfaction. Tom, as he journeyed, saw this desideratum more plainly than before leaving home; for, as he mounted on to the extensive plains contiguous to the source of the Gibson river, the parched bare soil became perfectly uncomfortable to travel on.

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These plains were of fine black alluvial soil, so thinly timbered as to have hardly a tree visible within range of the eye. They were covered with grass, which, when the earth contained any moisture, flourished luxuriantly, and would at times stand waving like an agrarian picture of cereal plenty, so abundant as to impede the progress of the equestrian traveller. But now a "change had come o'er the spirit of the dream," and the herbous mass lay scorched and dry on the arid ground, offering no nutriment to the browsing kine, and only requiring a single spark to generate a grand combustion.

Much has been said and written of the burning prairies of America, and of the bush-fires of Australia; and we may remark, it is in such places as these plains where they originate. Though not so extensive and destructive in their course of devastation as those fearful conflagrations in the western hemisphere, the bush-fires are still frequently of sufficient magnitude to be perfectly irresistible; and occurring as they usually do in the heart of a settled country, they are rendered more dangerous to human life and property. How they originate often remains a mystery. Of course carelessness frequently gives rise to them; though at the same time they have been known to occur in parts where neither whites nor blacks ever tread; and too often, when the destroying element rages over and sweeps away a homestead or a farm, the work is attributed to the incendiarism of some inoffensive blacks, who are made to suffer at the hands of the whites.

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Tom Rainsfield journeyed on his course over these plains that looked like a vast neglected hay-field; except in parts where water had lodged and formed temporary ponds or "water-holes." There it presented an area of black mud, baked hard by the power of the sun, and had absorbed so much of its heat as to render it even painful for a horse to stand upon. Tom rode under vertical rays, keeping as much as possible on the withered grass (as being more comfortable than the sun-absorbing and reflecting road), without the companionship of a fellow traveller to relieve the monotony and solitude of the way; and not daring to indulge in the consolation of a pipe, lest a stray spark should ignite the inflammable material at his feet. Miles and miles of this weary and trying travelling were passed, and Tom was not sorry when the track entered a country less open, and he once more rode through bush land.

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Here, too, the ground, though partially sheltered from the sun's rays, was equally devoid of feed and moisture. Not a blade of grass was to be seen, nor a drop of water in the creeks and water-holes. For himself, notwithstanding that his thirst was insatiable, Tom cared little; he could manage to do without a drink until he reached the end of his day's stage; but it was for the faithful animal that carried him that he anxiously scrutinized every spot likely to contain the smallest reservoir of the much coveted liquid. But his researches were all unavailing; as yet no water could he find; until at one point on the road, when he had almost given up the search as hopeless, he spied a large swamp filled with reeds, in which a herd of cattle lay almost concealed, apparently cooling themselves in the water. Here then he had no doubt he should find what he and his horse had so much desired; and hastening on to the black adamantine margin of what had formerly been a large lagoon, he witnessed a sight that struck him with dismay. Not one drop of water was visible in the extensive basin, and the cattle which he had imagined were luxuriating in a natural refrigerator, were dead and immovable.

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Such scenes are common under similar circumstances; and at times, while the country is

suffering from the effects of a drought, to see cattle "bogged" in a water-hole is only thought of as a necessary consequence fully expected, and therefore hardly to be deplored. Still when witnessed by one who may be seeking that which is essential to life, to allay a thirst which may be consuming, it is enough to make the heart of such sink within him; and, though Tom was hardly in so reduced a predicament, yet he could not gaze on the unfortunate animals without some unpleasant admixture of perturbation and concern.

In the swamp as many as fifty cattle had sought shelter from the heat and moisture for their thirsty tongues. But having waded through the mud, into which they had sank to their middles, they had possibly satisfied themselves for the moment with a concoction of glutinous soil and vapid lukewarm water; but, from their exhausted strength, had not been able to extricate themselves from their miry bondage, and had consequently died in their captivity. The mud at the time of Tom's visit had perfectly hardened, and he traversed the whole bed of the swamp, in the vain hope of finding some friendly hole in which a few welcome drops might be found for his worn-out steed. But his search was fruitless, and he was at last reluctantly compelled to relinquish it, from the attacks of myriads of flies, who were disturbed at their bovine repast. He at length continued his journey with a worn-out horse and a fagged and jaded spirit, and was not a little grateful, as evening gathered its shades around, to espy the glimmer of a light from the station which was his night's destination. [173]

Tom's further progress was equally tedious and trying. The whole country seemed parched up, and it was with the greatest difficulty he could push on at all; and as the fatigue to himself and his horse necessitated him to make his day's stages much shorter than he desired, it was the sixth day from his leaving Strawberry Hill that he entered the village of Waverley on the Brisbane river. [174]

When we call this a village it is only out of courtesy that we are guilty of such a misnomer. For though, by the government plan of the township, it looks a well-arranged and thriving place, we must state, notwithstanding that building allotments had from time to time been put up at auction by the government, and we may add found purchasers, and that the existence of a public-house, rejoicing in the high-sounding title of the Royal Hotel, lent an imposing air to the place,—the gracefully tinted Queen Street, Albert Street, Prince of Wales Street, etc. etc., of the elaborate survey office map, only existed in the mind of the surveyor, and the imagination of the land-jobber. The said thriving thoroughfares remained in a state of primeval grandeur; having their boundaries marked, for the convenience of inquisitive seekers after information, by small pegs driven into the ground, and whose sole object seemed to be to lie concealed and bewilder those who might desire to find them. [175]

By the foresaid plan this town or village (or, as the Americans would say, this city) of Waverley was laid out with considerable taste. The streets were all broad and at right angles; with a market reserve; grants for church sites to various denominations of Christians; and a broad quay facing the river, either for commercial purposes or for a promenade for the inhabitants. But in reality the whole of the architecture of the place was comprised in the sole habitation, the Royal Hotel; which was built near the bank of the river, with a rough fence enclosing three sides of a piece of ground that ran down to the water's edge. This constituted the paddock for the horses of weary travellers; and, judging from the dilapidated and generally insecure state of the fence, argued the rare occurrence of a quadrupedal occupancy. However, the sight of these little imperfections gave Tom no concern, as he was confident his animal would not attempt, in the state of fatigue to which he was reduced, to go roaming; and what gladdened his heart more than anything was the sight of what he had long been unacquainted with, fresh water. It was therefore with a considerable amount of mental relief that he rode up to the unpretending hostelry. He alighted at a door before which stood a post suspending a nondescript lamp of antideluvian construction, and bearing from its appearance questionable evidence of its ever having been submitted to the ordeal of beaconing the path of the weary traveller. On the same post was affixed a board on which the sign of the house was very plainly executed in Roman character; informing, and we think very necessarily so, the occasional visitor there was to be had accommodation for man and beast. [176]

The road leading to the Royal Hotel was not the one usually taken by travellers from the interior to Brisbane. But Tom had chosen it to avoid the more frequented track; knowing that in the present state of the country travelling on the latter would be much more difficult and troublesome. Therefore he had come by this secluded spot; intending to cross the river, and travel down by the northern bank to Brisbane, while the usual route was through the thriving and populous town of Ipswich, and down the southern side of the Brisbane river. [177]

Tom Rainsfield entered the inn; and having his horse taken round by the landlord to a bark shed designated a stable, where he preferred tending the animal himself, rather than leaving him to the tender mercies of a stranger, he gave him a drink of water and a feed of corn; and then placing some bush hay at his disposal, left him to practise his mastication, and make the most of his time. Having thus arranged for the comforts of his steed Tom next thought of himself; so strolling into the house, while something was preparing to satisfy the cravings of his inward man, he walked into "the bar," to indulge in a pipe with something cheering, and amuse himself by a little conversation with the landlord. He entered the precincts of that *quarterre* devoted to the worship of the rosy god, and where the ministering spirit presided, stationed behind a primitive sort of counter or bench, and at whose back stood two kegs with taps and sundry bottles arranged on a shelf. These (whatever their contents) appeared to be the stock-in-trade of the establishment; excepting a large cask which stood in a corner, and which by its appearance [178]

indicated spirituous contents, from whose bulk probably the smaller kegs were from time to time replenished. Into this sanctum then walked our friend Tom Rainsfield, and after calling for a drink, and desiring the landlord in bush fashion to join him, he lit his pipe; and taking his seat on the counter entered into the following dialogue.

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"I shouldn't think you did much business here?"

"Oh, pretty fair, sir."

"Why, there doesn't appear to be many who frequent this room. I should have thought it would have hardly been worth your while to have kept a house in this place."

"Nor more it would if I lived by gents a-stopping at my house; for I don't get one of 'em a month. But you see them as pays me is the sawyers; there are lots of 'em about these parts, cutting timber on the hills and in the scrubs; and when they get their logs down into the river they mostly stop here a while drinking before they raft the timber over the flats on their way down to the mills. Then when they come back they generally stop a while on the spree before they go to work. So, you see, I makes a pretty good thing out of 'em; besides you see I keeps rations here as well as grog, and sell them to the fellers when they run short and ain't got no money."

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"But don't you often lose your money? I suppose they have none when they go to town with their rafts, and very little when they come back; that is even if they ever do come back; then I suppose you lose your score."

"Oh, I manage to get it; precious few ever 'bilk' me, for I know my marks pretty well, and them as I fancy won't come back I get to pay me in timber; and I brand the logs with my own brand, and give some of the fellers I can trust so much a hundred feet to raft them down for me. But mostly the chaps come back before they have spree'd away all their money. So I gets my share, as they pay me then what they owe me, and have another go in until they 'knock down their pile.'"

"And how much do their 'piles' consist of?"

"Well, I couldn't say anything regular. I have had as much as a hundred pounds 'knocked down' by one man at a time." And as the man said this he smiled and heaved a sigh that seemed to say those were prosperous times for him. True enough it was that he had had as large a sum of money paid to him by one man; but as to the amount being actually spent, or an equivalent even in liquor supplied, is extremely doubtful; but to follow them in their conversation, Tom remarked:

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"And then they return to their work, I suppose, quite penniless?"

"Oh, yes, it is very few of them ever have any money when they get back to the scrubs; they have no use for it there, so they spend it like men."

"Like fools you mean."

"No I don't. What is the use of the poor man saving his money? he can't do anything with it; he can't buy any land to settle on; and he doesn't care to save up his money to be robbed of it or lose it; he works hard enough to get it, and so likes to spend it himself."

"That is certainly one idea why working men should spend their hard-got earnings. I should have imagined that men who had laboured hard, and were living in the bush and scrubs in all sorts of discomfort, would have had some desire to better their condition, and would have accumulated means accordingly."

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"Not a bit of it, sir! they couldn't do anything with their money when they got it."

"Could they not buy a piece of land and commence farming? Here, for instance, the land seems excellently adapted for agricultural purposes."

"They can't get none, sir. The government folks won't sell any to the poor man, leastwise the poor man can't buy none, and if he wants any he is forced to buy it off the 'jobbers,' who generally screw him so much that it doesn't pay. So the fellers prefer keeping to the scrubs cutting timber; 'cos then they are not bound to work for sharpers, and can just please themselves."

It was evident the landlord of the Royal Hotel did not classify himself in the category of those astute blades whom he designated by so cutting an epithet; though Tom's opinion on that head somewhat differed from "mine host's." He considered him a swindler of no ordinary magnitude, though merely a type of his class. He was one of those locusts who fattened on the hard working and reckless classes of colonial labourers; who when they are plundering their victims, even under the guise of friendship, dissuade them from frugality; expatiating on the numerous sources of fraud (excepting of course their own) to which "the poor men" would be exposed; and by their vile persuasions and chicanery too often succeeding in eliminating from the minds of those with whom they come in contact all notions of providence; and confirming them in their reckless and dissipated lives. These bush publicans are the cause of immense misery and depravity, and cannot be too harshly stigmatized for the enormity of their infamies.

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Tom being informed that the edibles prepared for him were awaiting his operations discontinued his dialogue, and adjourned to his epicurean repast; at which satisfactory occupation we may leave him uninterrupted. As his next day's stage would only be some five and twenty miles he determined to delay his departure until the afternoon so as to give his weary horse some additional rest; and it was therefore past noon on the following day when he mounted his nag and

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left the village of Waverley.

In leaving the inn he traversed the bank of the river for some few hundred yards on his way to the flats where he was to cross when he overtook a man that apparently had preceded him from the inn, and they both went on together. The flats at this time were almost dry; for the water in the river had long ceased to run, and at the particular spot to which we allude, which was in ordinary times used as a ford, it could have been crossed dry-shod, while above and below it the river remained simply currentless pools. As Tom rode down to the bed of the river he was struck with the immense number of logs that laid scattered about, some on the banks, some in the river above, and some below, where a small boat was moored, and a party of sawyers and raftmen camped. To this party Tom's companion evidently belonged, and had apparently been despatched to the public-house by his mates, as he was returning with two suspicious-looking protuberances on each side of his bosom. These, to outward appearance, very much resembled the outlines of bottles that had been thrust into the ample folds of his blue shirt for convenience and security of carriage. While trudging on the road alongside of Tom Rainsfield the fellow gave evidence of a loquacious turn of mind by commencing a conversation and inquiring if Tom was travelling to Brisbane. Upon being informed by our friend that that was his destination, and that he had come by way of Waverley to avoid the main road on account of its desolate, dry, and feedless state, he remarked with a whimsical smile: "I suppose you think that 'ere Waverley a fine town?"

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"It seems a very good site for a township," replied Tom. "There is good land in the vicinity, and abundance of water. I daresay in the course of a few years it will be a flourishing place."

"Not a bit of it, sir," said the man; "it never will be nothing. That 'ere house of Tom Brown's, 'The Royal,' as he calls it, will be the only house in it for many a day, unless there be another public. Lor' bless you, sir, that place of his even wouldn't be nothing if it wasn't for us sawyers; we keeps old Brown alive, and he knows it."

"Well, my good friend," asked Tom, "what is to prevent others settling in the town besides Tom Brown?"

"Why, what would be the good of it?" asked the other; "there would be nothing for them to live upon. All the trade that's done is with us sawyers, and there isn't more than Old Brown can do himself. Besides, you see, most of the land that has been sold in the village has been bought by the swells, who keep it to make money of it when some one should want to buy."

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"I have no doubt," said Tom, "the land in the vicinity will eventually be sold for farming, and then the growth of the village arising from the trade that will ensue will be rapid."

"Ah! there it is, sir. You see the squatters have got all the land now for their sheep to feed on, and a poor man as has got a pound or two, and wants a few acres, can't get 'em no how."

"But the government is continually putting up land for sale," said Tom; "and if any man desired to avail himself of the opportunity surely he could attend the sales and effect a purchase."

"No, sir, they couldn't," said the man; "for, you see, suppose I'm working here in the bush and want to buy a bit of ground, how am I to know when there is any for sale? They will perhaps mark out a few farms near Brisbane, or Ipswich, and put 'em for sale, and they are sold off, or leastwise the best of 'em, before I or any of my mates know anything about it; or if so be as how I should get to hear of it and go to the sale, there's so many people wanting 'em, perhaps gents who maybe live in town, and want paddocks for their horses, that they will give better prices than I can give; so, you see, I don't get half a chance. If I want a bit of land to farm I think I ought to be able to get it anywhere I like just as easy as the squatter can get his country. Axing your pardon, sir, I suppose you're a squatter?"

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"That's true, my good man," replied Tom; "but I think myself that the restrictions on the land are vastly injurious to the country, though I doubt, even if every facility was given to the working man to procure land if he would avail himself of the opportunity; and, instead of being of benefit to him in the way intended, I question if the land would not fall into the hands of 'jobbers.' Such a state of things is equally, if not more, to be deprecated than the present system of permitting it to remain in the possession of the squatters; for now it is made available for pasturage; whereas then it would be allowed to lie unproductive until such a time as the speculator could see an opportunity of a profitable realization."

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"There would be plenty of us would buy lands and settle on them," said the man, "if we only had the chance. Now if you like, sir, I'll just tell you a case."

Tom, though he knew all the man said was perfectly true, offered no objection to the narrative, being desirous of eliciting from him his notions on the subject, which was a much vexed one in the whole colony, and purposely encouraged him to launch as deeply into it as he thought fit.

"It is about my brother, sir," said the man, "so I know it is quite true, and you may believe it. We both came to this country together about seven years ago, and took to cutting timber and rafting because it paid well those times; and we made plenty of money, though we spent it as fast as we got it. But somehow my brother didn't join much with the other fellows, for he always was a steady chap, but took to saving his money, and 'you may believe me,' it wasn't long before he had got 'a pile,' of more than two hundred pounds. Now, sir, you see, when Bill (that was his name) had saved all that money nothing would do him but he must have a bit of ground and commence farming. There was a talk then of some land being marked out somewhere near this 'ere town of

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Waverley; so Bill thought he would like to have a few acres hereabouts better than anywhere else. He asked some one who knew all about that sort of thing how he should go about it to buy some, and the chap told him that he ought to go to Brisbane and ask of the surveyors. So off he went to what they call the survey office, and told the big-wig there that he wanted to buy some land. Now this card showed him a lot of plans of where, he said, they had land for sale; and Bill looks at 'em and took directions, and went into the bush to have a look at 'em. But he found 'em to be no good; they was only lots that had been left at the government sales, when all the best pieces had been sold, and the ironbark ranges and quartzzy or barren gravelly country left; so he wouldn't buy any of 'em, and told the chap in the office that he wanted some at Waverley; but he told him he couldn't have none there as it wasn't surveyed.

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"Now the party Bill stopped with put him up to a wrinkle how he would get the land he wanted to be surveyed 'cos he knew how to manage it. He got up a requisition, or made an application, to have some lands on the Brisbane river at Waverley surveyed and put up for sale, and sent it to the government, as he said that was the sure way to get it. But it was no go; the survey chaps told him that all the land thereabouts was leased to squatters, and they couldn't touch it; but, says they, if you want a nice piece of country there is some out here on the river, about five miles away, that we are going to measure off into farms directly, and they will just suit you; so, says they to my brother, just you go out and have a look at them. Well, Bill went to look at 'em, and, sure enough, they was first-rate land, so he said to himself I'll have a farm there, and that's settled. But he was all wrong; for he didn't get a farm there an' nowhere else as I shall tell you.

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"When he came back, after having see'd the land, he went to the office and told the people that that place would just suit him, and he would take a farm and buy it right off. But they laughed at him, and told him that he couldn't buy it before it was surveyed, but that in a short time, a week or so at most, they would have it all right and ready for sale; so Bill thought he might make the best of it and wait. A couple of weeks passed and he went to them, but it was not done; so he waited another week or two, and went back again, when they told him that they had had no time to see to it, but were going to do so very shortly. So he waited another month, and then enquired, when they had the cheek to tell him that they were obliged to put it off for they could not attend to it at all, having so much work to do at other places; but that if he would come back to town in about three months it would be all ready for sale.

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"Now Bill was bent upon having one of them farms, so, instead of letting the surveyor chaps, and the farms too, go to—where-ever they liked for their humbugging, he came back to the bush to work for the three months, and then went to town again to look after the land. But when he went to the office even then the fellers hadn't surveyed it; and instead of telling him like men that they were only humbugging him, and never intended to do it at all, they commenced their little games again, and told him that the surveyors were then at work on a particular job, but that as soon as they were done there they would go to the land he was waiting for. Well, sir, it's no good my telling you all the ins and outs of it; but the long and the short of it is they kept Bill in a string for six months, and then they didn't do the work, and I don't know if it is done now; so, you see, that's how us poor men can't get any land."

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"I believe what you complain of is perfectly true," said Tom. "The system is much to be deplored, but I hope it will shortly be improved. Unless a man is on the spot, and can wait for an opportunity, such as when a sale occurs, there is certainly very little chance for him; and men that are employed in the bush very rarely if ever have that chance."

"Just so, sir," said the man.

"And what did your brother do with his money after having so much of it and his time wasted in looking after this land?"

"Ah, sir! there is what makes me curse the land, and the surveyors, and all the lot, for it killed Bill, and there never was a better feller breathing. I'll tell you how it was, sir. I told you Bill was a steady chap; he never used to drink, anyhow not to spree, you know; but, you'll guess, no man could stop at a public-house for six months doing nothing without getting on the spree. Bill used to walk up and down on the verandah at the public where he stopped, and smoke his pipe, while he thought how them fellers at the survey office were a-treating of him, and he got miserable like in his spirits. So when fellows got to know him, and used to come into the house, they'd ask him to take a nobbler with them; and somehow, you see, though he didn't do nothing of the sort at first, he was soon glad to get some one to join him in a drink, and being at it all day, you know, he used to get very drunk at times; so he went on until at last he was always drunk. Now Bill all this time had been keeping his money by him, so that he would be ready, when he wanted it, to buy his farm. So, what with always having plenty of money 'to shout' for other fellers (for you know, sir, he was a stunning feller to shout when he got a little bit screwed), and the lots of fellers as always stuck to him when they knew he got 'tin,' he very soon got 'cleared out;' and one day, after a tremendous spree, when he had been drunk for more than a week, he got 'the horrors,' and started to come home to the scrub. I never saw him after that, sir; for he got drowned in one of the creeks on the road, and was found by some shingle splitters soon afterwards without a shilling in his pocket; so that's what he got, poor fellow, for trying to turn farmer. Now you see, sir, we don't see the good of doing like that; so we never trouble ourselves about saving any money, and we are a deal better off, and a happier, than them as do."

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Tom did not attempt to refute the sophistry of this argument as he was aware that it would be useless. He knew that the case of this man's brother was by no means a solitary one; for not only had the suicidal policy of the colonial government with regard to the disposal of the waste lands

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been instrumental in the destruction of numerous victims similar to this unsophisticated sawyer; but it was absolutely driving that entire class of men into reckless extravagance and dissipation. Whereas a liberal land policy would not only have engendered a spirit of providence, but have offered an inducement, and have proved a stimulus, to the country's settlement by a thriving rural population.

But the ministerial Solons of the country could not be induced to view the subject in that light; hence this deplorable state of morality and improvidence, which unfortunately pervades the great bulk of the country population. In urban localities the evil is not so severely felt, as a steady and industrious mechanic, with his accumulated savings, is enabled to purchase a town allotment (which allotments are just frequently enough thrust into the market by the government as to keep the demand in excess of the supply), and to build on it a house, which he erects by degrees, as his means admit. Thereby, in course of a short time, he gathers round him in the land of his adoption a comfortable little freehold property. Thus it is, nearly all the town workmen who are possessed of any savings convert them into something substantial; but for the bushmen no such opportunity exists; and hence it follows, that the towns-people are generally industrious, steady, and frugal, while those of the bush are too frequently the reverse.

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"That certainly was a melancholy end for your brother," said Tom to his companion, resuming the conversation that had lapsed for a few minutes.

"Yes, sir, it was; and if Bill, poor fellow, had just been content to stick to the scrub like us he would most likely have been 'still to the fore.' You see, sir, we live a jolly life; are quite contented, and spend our money while we've got it. Now those fellows over there," continued the man as he pointed to the sawyer's camp, in sight of which they had just arrived, "not one of 'em would give up his life to go and work in town if you paid him ever so high wages."

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"I've no doubt their mode of life is fascinating; but still I should think the heavy drinking in which they indulge sometimes impairs their health and constitution."

"Not a bit, sir! We never feel anything the worse for a spree, nor in anyways sick; 'cos you see we work hard, and most always live in the bush; so we are always healthy."

"I've no doubt that will preserve you in a great measure; but still you must be perfectly aware that, even if you never experience any deleterious effects, you continually leave yourself destitute; and if anything in the way of sickness should happen to you, so as to incapacitate you for work, you would not only starve, but die from neglect and want of proper treatment."

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"Don't you believe it, sir! There would be no fear of my wanting anything. Do you think if one of my mates was sick now that I wouldn't share with him what money I'd got, or that I wouldn't look after him as if he was my brother? In course I would, and if I got sick my mates would do the same for me."

By this time Tom and his companion had half crossed the bed of the river; and noticing the plans the men had adopted to get their timber over the flats, Tom commenced a fresh interrogation to elicit from his travelling concomitant some information on the usual mode of procedure. As the subject may have some degree of interest to a few of our readers we will give in our own words the substance of the dialogue, craving permission to premise it by a remark or two on the general life and movements of sawyers.

They are a class of men who exist during the greater portion of the year in the bush and scrubs bordering on the rivers and creeks, where they unceasingly and uninterruptedly practise their vocations. They generally work in gangs, either on equal shares or on wages to one of their number, who may be more thoughtful than the rest; and one who, notwithstanding a fair share of dissipation, may have accumulated, possibly through the influence of a thrifty wife, some considerable means. The classes of timber most in demand, and therefore most sought for by these men, are cedar and pine; which are procured separately, in certain localities, in great abundance. This local segregation of the woods is a characteristic of the Australian bush, and more than anything else tends to create that monotony which is everywhere perceptible. It causes the eye of the traveller to weary as he looks continually on the leafless bare-looking trunks of the blue gum (which without intermission meets his gaze for miles and miles on the lonely road) or the sombre-looking ironbark that with equal pertinacity monopolizes the ranges. Rarely, if ever, will an admixture of timbers be found to any extent; and, consequently, those sawyers who cut pine leave the cedar scrubs to be visited by the others; and *vice versa*.

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The timber is usually cut in the dry season; and the trees after being cleared of their limbs and foliate appendages, and denuded of their bark, are drawn by the means of a bullock team to the nearest creek or river, where they are deposited until such time as the rains sufficiently swell the streams to float them from their resting-places. With an iron brand in the shape of a punch, and a hammer, each cutter on the end of every log indelibly marks his own property; and as the logs are removed from their beds by the rising current, a staple is driven into each. Through this a chain is passed, when the whole are collected into one raft, and securely moored to wait, in their transit down the stream, the pleasure of the proprietor. The time usually chosen to raft the timber is when the rivers are moderately high after rains; or, in the parlance of the upper part of the country, when there is "a flood," and in the lower, when there is "a fresh" in the river. They are then started in their downward course either by the directing aid of a small boat (if the ascent of the stream is practicable for it) or under the guidance of some of the party; who make a firm footing for themselves on their floating platform, by sheets of bark and foliage. They then

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trust themselves to the current, while they guide the course of the raft with poles until they come to flats. When the rivers are to any extent swollen, or (as it is said in the country) "running," the rafts usually pass over without difficulty; but if the water is low, and the flats barely covered, the passage is necessarily not so easily effected, and frequently impossible. Such then was the case at the Waverley flats at the time of which we write. And it was with the water almost at the lowest ebb that the party Tom saw had been endeavouring to float over their raft; the process for which they had adopted we now propose to explain.

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It is necessary at some point to have a boat to assist the raftmen in their guidance of the unwieldy mass, and one is usually kept by them for that purpose at the highest point to which it can be conveniently brought. After escaping all impediments the boat takes the raft in tow; and, as it progresses on the stream and comes within the action of tides, on the occasion of each flowing, the party have to draw their raft into the bank, and camp until the return of the ebb. In their journey to the mills rarely more than three or four of the party, including the proprietor if not a joint stock affair, accompany the timber; while the remainder pursue their occupation of cutting.

The party that was camped at the Waverley flats consisted of five individuals in all. They had been working in shares for some months collecting the raft they then had with them, and were all accompanying it to the mills to sell it and have the proceeds equally distributed. But the season having been an unusually dry one they had here met with an effectual check, and had no alternative but to wait for rain.

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When they first reached the flats the water was just running over them, but not sufficiently deep to admit of the passage of their property; so the fellows had recourse to the expedient of forming "a race" to effect their purpose, and this they had accomplished in the following way: A few of the logs were drawn up and arranged longitudinally from either bank of the river in an oblique direction to a focus in the centre of the flat; from this point the logs were arranged parallel to one another right across the bank to the deep water below. They were then all firmly staked into the soil, and the interstices between and below them were packed so as to perfect a dam or barrier to the water. The result of this plan as is evident was that the water flowing over the flat was confined to the narrow channel between the parallel logs, and thereby attained a higher elevation and a swifter current. To the mouth of this impromptu canal, then, the sawyers brought the logs one by one, and they were made, with very little guiding, to shoot through the passage with speed and precision. After getting nearly a hundred of the logs in this manner over the impediment, the water continuing to fall, eventually left them with not even sufficient to make their sluice available; so, with fully half their raft fixed above the flat, the men were compelled to be idle until they had sufficient water to float the remainder over.

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Tom had expressed surprise to his companion that he and his mates did not proceed with the timber that had passed the flat, and leave some of their companions behind to watch for the flood in the river, and secure the others as they should descend. He pointed out that by that means they would, in all probability, have got their first raft down to the mills, and had time to return before the rains came on. But this, his companion told him, the sawyers were afraid to risk, because, he said, if the river rose rapidly, which they fully expected, they would want all their number on the spot, otherwise they might lose half the timber. Besides, in the absence of their boat, it would be an impossibility to secure any of the logs if they should be washed over. "And then," he continued, "we have been expecting the rain to commence every day for weeks past." So it was deemed advisable by the whole party to await the rising of the river; and, even watchful as they were, they fully expected that if the flood came upon them at all suddenly, they would lose a considerable number of the logs.

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After crossing the river (or rather the bed of it), and leaving the sawyers' party, Tom Rainsfield leisurely pursued his journey; and, after riding for about twenty miles or so, he could perceive, by the nature of the country and the occasional appearance of "improvements," that he was approaching the town of Brisbane. Towards dark the road led him through lines of fences, and past a few cottages and cultivated fields, and thence by detached buildings, until he finally entered the town and put up at his hotel not at all dissatisfied at the completion of his journey. The country, even to town, had equally suffered by the drought. Hardly a vestige of herbage was to be seen on the whole surface of the ground, and the mortality amongst the beasts was fearful, and painfully perceptible from the fulsome malaria in the atmosphere. Tom's horse was reduced to a perfect shadow, and was so weak that when he reached the inn he could hardly drag one foot after another, and certainly could not have existed another day with a continuation of his privations. Hence Tom was additionally delighted when he drew rein at the Crown Hotel, and permitted his weary and faithful animal to be led away to the stables, while he proceeded to refresh himself in a manner most pleasant after his own fatigues.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"Ye glittering towns, with wealth and splendour crown'd,
Ye fields, where summer spreads profusion round,
Ye lakes, whose vessels catch the busy gale,
Ye bending swains, that dress the flow'ry vale."

GOLDSMITH.

When Tom Rainsfield arrived in Brisbane he found it entirely absorbed in politics, and the public attention so engaged in the all-important question of separation that even the deplorable state in which the country then was in was for the time forgotten. Business for the nonce was entirely relinquished, and the good citizens were in a perfect ferment of exultation, consequent on the receipt of joyous news. As a few remarks respecting the topography of the place, and the nature of the people's agitation, may not be here amiss we will endeavour to describe and trace their progress through their various phases to the date of our narrative. [210]

The town of Brisbane is pleasantly situated on a picturesque and meandering river of the same name, about twenty miles from the point where it disembogues into Moreton Bay. Passing its first establishment it was not until the year 1840 that it was resorted to for the purposes of trade. In that year drays first crossed "the range" by Cunningham's Gap; and the squatters, who were then pushing on in the settlement of the interior, discovered that this place could be made a convenient port for the shipment of their produce to Sydney. The place, however, being only a convict settlement free settlers were prohibited from approaching it; and it was only by a special application to the government that on the following year the land on the south bank of the river was surveyed and laid out for a township, and a residence for the purposes of trade permitted. [211] The following year the convicts were wholly withdrawn from the district, and the land that had been blighted by their occupancy was thrown open to the public. From this period then, viz., 1842, is to be dated the settlement of Moreton Bay, when the whole free population of the district might have been numbered by dozens, and when the first regular communication with Sydney was established.

The town of Brisbane at that time, and even for years afterwards, consisted only of a few wooden huts; and, with the exception of the government buildings which had been erected during the penal era for the housing and confinement of the convicts stationed there, not a decent or substantial edifice existed. A few acres of ground had been cleared by the prisoners for cultivation immediately round the settlement, and at two places situated on the river below the town, respectively two and seven miles distant; but otherwise the wilderness remained in its primeval condition. [212]

The town on the northern bank of the river, which was much better situated (both in a commercial and residentiary point of view) than that on the southern, rapidly attracted the attention of speculators and settlers. It was situated in a spacious pocket, caused by a bend in the river, and flanked by gently undulating ridges. It was judiciously laid out; with wide rectangular streets, commodious reserves for public purposes, and was possessed of almost unbounded water frontage, which could afford accommodation for a large commercial intercourse. One of the boons left to the public upon the withdrawal of the convicts and military, besides the court-house, hospital, and barracks, was a botanical garden. It had been constructed for the especial pleasure and accommodation of the officers and other officials of the settlement, and became after their departure a very acceptable legacy to the people. [213]

The young settlement prospered amazingly as it became more peopled by the streams of immigration from the southern parts of the colony. The squatters who had advanced with their flocks and herds from the occupied districts in the southern interior speedily formed stations in actual contiguity to the township; which was daily increasing its trade, as its intercourse with the interior became more settled and developed. The architectural appearance of the town for years showed no improvement; and the comfort of the inhabitants was little thought of in its commercial prosperity. Large sums were annually gathered into the government coffers from the sale of the lands in the township, but nothing was ever done by the ruling powers to improve its condition; and it was allowed to remain in that state in which it had left the hands of the surveyors. The lines of the streets were certainly marked, but no levels were fixed; and the idea of drainage never entered the minds of the people's rulers. In fact, though the government, as we have said, continued from year to year to derive large revenues from the sale of these town lands, they never deemed it necessary to expend a fraction in even the formation of the streets; and hence, after twelve years from its occupation by a free population, it was, like all other bush towns in the country, in a wretched and deplorable condition. After rains the so-called streets became perfectly impassable, even to foot passengers; and the principal thoroughfare was frequently the course of a swollen torrent, that had in successive years worn for itself a bed, interspersed with deep holes, which rendered it absolutely dangerous to venture amongst its snares after dark. The extorting policy of the government had always been to sacrifice the interests of the distant settlers for a centralized aggrandizement; or, in other words, the revenues derived from this or any other country district were applied, not solely to the defraying of the expense of legislative machinery, but to the improvement and embellishment of Sydney, and other works that had no local importance to the out-lying districts. This was one of the main [214] [215]

grievances that induced the settlers in later years to petition for separation from the parent colony. But we are anticipating.

The advance of the district after its settlement continued with rapid strides; and the labour requirements of the settlers kept continually in advance of the supply. So that much inconvenience was felt by the employers at the paucity of industrial bone and muscle procurable in the district. For years the squatters were compelled to draw their supply of labour from the Sydney market, an exceedingly expensive and by no means satisfactory expedient, until the year 1848, when the influx of direct immigration commenced. From this date ships at repeated intervals have discharged their living freight on the shores of Moreton Bay, where they have speedily met engagements at high rates of wages, and become absorbed in the increasing population. [216]

The first labourers introduced into the district were by private intervention, and though extraneous to our tale, we may be pardoned for mentioning it here. The prime mover of this scheme was the Rev. Dr. Lang, who was at the time a member of the Colonial legislature, and than whom no greater benefactor to the colonies, and no sterner advocate for the rights and privileges of the colonists existed or exists. He was foremost in all works of reform and public utility. He seemed to be gifted with a prescience of the colonist's requirements, and was indefatigable in his exertions for their advancement and amelioration. He is the antipodean agitator, and the acknowledged benefactor of his fellow colonists in their land of adoption. Many of the privileges of the Australian constitution owe their existence to Dr. Lang's indomitable perseverance and skill, and many of the most sapient enactments bear the impress of his mental perspicuity. He is the father of Australia, and his name will long remain to the people "as familiar as household words." [217]

Perceiving the great want of labour in the new settlement he was the first who took any active part in the procuration of the desideratum. In pursuit of this object in the year 1846 or 1847 he introduced a bill into the legislature of New South Wales, having for its object the introduction of an industrial class of immigrants into Moreton Bay. His proposed plan was to induce the government to offer a small grant of land to every immigrant arriving in the colony at his own expense, equivalent to the amount of money actually paid for the passage. But the project met with some opposition from the ministry of the day, and not until after considerable perseverance did he receive assurances of their assent. Being suddenly called to England on private affairs Dr. Lang left his pet scheme in the hands of a colleague to procure for it the formal sanction of the country; and he commenced to act upon the assurance given him in the colonies by organizing a system of emigration during his stay in England. This was in the years 1847 and 1848, when, after continually drawing the attention of the middle classes of Great Britain to the eligibility of Moreton Bay as a place for emigration, and holding out the inducement of remission of the passage-money emigrants would pay in an equivalent grant of land in the colonies, he succeeded in the latter year in despatching three ships freighted with intending settlers. Their arrival in the colony, though of considerable benefit to the community there established, was fraught with many inconveniences and privations to themselves. The Colonial government ignored their title to grants of land; and the newly arrived immigrants found themselves, upon landing in the country, disappointed in their expectations, many of them destitute, and all in a place hardly reclaimed from the wilderness of the bush, where no preparation had been made for their reception. They were, therefore, disgusted with what they considered the fraud that had been practised upon them, and were loud in their declamation of those who had enticed them from their comfortable homes to be subjected to the misery and discomforts they had then to endure. Under these circumstances piteous were the communications made to friends in the "fatherland," and dreadful the detail of their distress in the far distant land of promise. [218]

Their case, however, attracted some little notice from the local authorities, and a piece of land adjoining the town was allotted them, on which to erect dwellings. On this they settled, calling it Fortitude Valley, from the name of one of the vessels that had conveyed them thither; and when they got over their mortification, and gave their minds to industry, they speedily transformed the almost impenetrable bush into a scene of life and animation. The first privations of settlement very soon succumbed to comfort and independence, and "the valley" shortly became a populous suburb of the town of Brisbane, and, at the period of our story, closely approximated to, if not equalled it, in population. The settlers themselves, introduced under so unfavourable auspices, were not long in immensely improving their condition, and many of them, in the course of a few years, rose to positions of comfort, eminence, and opulence; and if they ever reverted to the period of their immigration, must have done so with feelings of thankfulness and satisfaction. [220]

From this period the influx of population continued, and the condition in which the district flourished may be gathered from the following tables:—

The entire district			
In 1846,	contained	2,257	souls
1851,	"	10,296	"
1856	"	22,232	"
And was estimated,			
In 1861,	to contain	30,000	souls.

The town of Brisbane, of which we wish more particularly to allude, [221]

In 1846,	contained about	500	souls
1851,	the population was	2,500	"
1856,	" " "	4,400	"
And in 1861	was calculated to contain	8,000	"

Brisbane presents now a far different aspect to what it did some few years back. As we have said, it is pleasantly and, both in a sanitary and commercial point of view, admirably situated. From an obscure settlement in the bush it has become a thriving town, with some good streets, substantial stone and brick houses, stores, warehouses, and wharves, and with shops that would not disgrace many a fashionable thoroughfare in the British metropolis. It is possessed of spacious and commodious government buildings, a gaol, mechanics' school of arts, an hospital, several banking establishments, and fully a dozen churches and other places of worship. The surrounding country, that was only a few years before a wild waste, has mostly been cleared and put under cultivation; and the banks of the river far above, and considerably below the town, are studded with farms and gentlemen's seats, some elegantly and tastefully constructed with a view both to comfort and the exigencies of the climate. The town is further possessed of two steam saw-mills; one daily, and another bi-weekly newspaper; weekly steam and continual sailing communication with Sydney, and a dawning direct trade with England. Five steamers ply on the river, and a daily coach runs by land to Ipswich, and an export trade is done to the extent of considerably over half a million sterling annually. The climate is salubrious—the heat ranging, in the shade, between the means of 80° in summer, and 50° in winter; and the soil of the neighbourhood has been proved to be productive of a greater variety of plants than any other country in the world. Coupled with wheat, oats, barley, potatoes, peas, and a variety of other English edibles, its products comprise many of a tropical nature, the practicability of the growth of which has been fully demonstrated. Bananas, pine-apples, pumpkins, melons, figs, grapes, peaches, maize, and sweet potatoes, are common articles of culture; while indigo, arrow-root, sugar-cane, and cotton, flourish as in their native climes.

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Of the latter product we would fain say a few words *en passant*, as its production of late has been a question that has been much agitated in Great Britain, and received some attention in the colonies. We believe the experiment of its growth was first tried upon the joint suggestion of an influential settler of New South Wales, Mr. T. S. Mort of Sydney, and the Rev. Dr. Lang. The former gentleman procured a supply of the best sea-island American seed, and also an instrument called "a gin" for cleaning the seed from the cotton, and placed them at the disposal of the settlers of Moreton Bay. The seeds were planted, germinated, and yielded cotton of the first description; but difficulties arose which cultivators were unable to surmount. The first was the impracticable nature of the instrument they were possessed of for cleaning. It was found to be useless, and all similar apparatuses that were subsequently introduced, and constructed on ideas suggested to the minds of local mechanical geniuses, equally failed to perform the requisite work with cleanliness and precision. Though this was in itself almost insurmountable, the greatest drawback to the culture of the cotton was the rainy weather, which usually set in just as the cotton was ripening; destroying the crop, and inflicting serious loss on the cultivator. It was, however, discovered that in the Moreton Bay climate the plant became a perennial; and that, after the first year's growth, the pods ripened considerably earlier and avoided the wet weather; while the staple of the cotton improved with the age of the plant. Satisfactory as was this discovery, the first failure militated against its general cultivation; for most of the farmers in the district, being dependent for their subsistence on their yearly crops, could not afford to experimentalize, notwithstanding that they were certain of an ultimately remunerative crop. A subsequent attempt to cultivate the cotton was tried with no better success. Though the staple was produced none of the cleaning machines to be had were efficacious; and no means being procurable to extract the seed from the cotton, it was sent to England in its raw state to be separated there. The cotton was cleaned by hand-labour in some of the penitentiaries of the "old country;" and when submitted to judges of the article, was pronounced to be the finest specimen ever introduced into the country. But these repeated failures damped the cotton-growing ardour of the people; and, being able otherwise more profitably to employ their labour and capital, they permitted its culture to be abandoned.

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That cotton will eventually become a large export from this district we have no hesitation in affirming, and we believe that the time is not far distant when capitalists in England, interested in the cotton trade, will take up the matter and embark in it. It is an undertaking which we are confident, from the reasons we have expressed, would be found remunerative even with the application of free European labour, and be of considerable benefit to the manufacturers and consumers of the staple. It has been frequently argued in the colony where it was grown that the expense of labour would eat up the whole proceeds of the cotton. But this we are disposed to dispute for many cogent reasons. In the first place, notwithstanding the many assertions to the contrary, Europeans can work at all times in the open air, even under the scorching rays of a mid-summer sun; while the value of the cotton produced, by the peculiar adaptation of the soil, has been found to be of a superior character to even the finest American or Egyptian productions; and, from the fact of the necessity of annual planting being avoided, the expense of production after the first year is reduced by more than one half. These facts at once disarm of its force the statement that cotton cultivators in Queensland could not compete with slave-grown produce without the aid of cheap coolie or lascar labour.

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The postulation that without Asiatic skill and economy the cotton cultivation is a chimera, has been assumed by a few interested parties in the colonies, and reverberated by them from mouth

to mouth among their own party, without a solitary echo from the mass of the people. It has been advanced in ignorance, and persevered in in dogmatical obstinacy, to the entire subversion of reason and the results of experience. The theory has arisen in a desire of personal aggrandizement by its advocates, who have never dreamt of the consequences that would accrue from an influx of heathenism and depravity, or the detraction from the honour of the colony, and the degradation of our labouring fellow-countrymen and colonists. It is happily only a party cry, and that only of so meagre a nature, that it is almost an inaudible squeak. But though insignificant as it is in the country where it originated, by its propagation and circulation in the press, its virus has been made to travel through the entire arterial system of the commonwealth; which is thus made to believe in the moral gangrene of this distant member of the empire. But to return.

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Before we allowed ourselves to be led into the foregoing digression we spoke of the land and water communication to the town of Ipswich; which reminds us of the existence of that important town; and of which we also crave permission, while on our topographical subject, to say a few words.

Ipswich, or as it was originally called, Limestone, from the quantity of that mineral which pervaded the neighbourhood, is situated on the Bremer river, which falls into the Brisbane. It is distant from the town of Brisbane about twenty-five miles by land, and sixty by water, and is stationed at the highest navigable point on either stream. It was formerly used by the government as a station for the sheep and cattle of the settlement during the penal times; and, upon the withdrawal of the prisoners, it was, like its sister settlement, declared a township, surveyed, and thrown open to the public. The first land in it was sold in Brisbane in the year 1843; but for three years afterwards the town made little progress. With the exception of a brick cottage that had been erected for the overseer in charge of the military and prisoners stationed there while it was a government establishment, and which, after the break up, was converted into a public-house to afford accommodation and allay the thirst of wayfarers to and fro between Brisbane and the interior, few buildings, even of the most makeshift description, were erected. The place had as then attracted little or no attention; for the traffic passed it on its way without any further stoppage than what a bush public-house is expected to effect among the bullock-drivers and draymen, while the drays came right down to Brisbane without any interruption to their loads.

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During the time of its attachment to the penal settlement at Brisbane the communication between the two places had been maintained by the means of boats and punts, in which the supplies of the station were brought up, and live stock for consumption, and lime requisite for the works at the township, returned. No doubt, acting on this knowledge, the idea occurred to an enterprising settler of the district that the traffic could be diverted from the road to the river, and would be advantageous in the saving of time and trouble consequent on the primitive style of land carriage in vogue. He therefore started a small steamer in the year last mentioned, viz., 1846, to ply between the two places; and though not successful in his project, so far as his own pocket was concerned, the soundness of his conjectures was patent in the benefits that resulted. The advancement of Ipswich may be dated from that period, since which its progress has been extraordinarily rapid, and even bids fair to maintain the race with the sister town with some degree of success.

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Though Ipswich is admirably situated for the purposes of trade with the interior, it is by no means so eligible a site for a town, nor so well planned out as Brisbane. Its streets are narrow, and have been lined by the surveyors without any regard to levels or the "lay" of the country. It is situated in a hollow, so that the drainage falls into the centre of the town, while the surrounding hills preclude the possibility of approach of any of those breezes which are so deliciously refreshing during sultry summer weather. The buildings, on the whole, are creditable, and even fine for so young a place, though by no means equal to those of Brisbane; and its peculiar characteristics are, bullock-drays, dirty streets, and public-houses. It is, however, a busy, thriving town; and if in the selection of its site a little more judicious forethought had been exercised, and more consideration for comfort, health, and amenity displayed in its surveying, it might have been made, with its beautiful surrounding scenery, as pretty a spot as could have been desired. But in this, as in every other case in the colonies since their foundation, the only thing that has been exhibited is the cupidity of the government, whose only desire has ever been to realise as much as possible from the sales of land, with as little outlay as practicable. Hence the inhabitants are doomed to live in a place that, upon the minutest visitation of rain, becomes a perfect "slough of despond;" and from its concave situation, when under a vertical sun, is at least ten degrees warmer than any other place in the district.

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This, then, is the point to which all the traffic now converges in its passage to Brisbane, and diverges in its transit to the interior—the highway between the two points being the river, while the road is merely used for the lighter traffic of a few equestrians and light vehicles. Such is the alteration, and we may of course add improvement, in the appearance of the country by the influence of civilisation consequent on the settlement of the district; and so rapidly has it taken place that if any of the old official residents, who only knew it in its infancy of freedom, were again to visit it, we have no hesitation in saying they would not credit their senses. We are aware that in all new colonies, where capital, industry, and perseverance are brought to bear upon the barren wastes, the speedy transition to a smiling scene of plenty is the inevitable result. But in most there is an air of freshness about everything, which proclaims it a new place; while in those towns of Moreton Bay the case is very different. They seem almost to have sprung into maturity

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at once; and, especially in Brisbane, there is a something about it so thoroughly English, that were it not for the luxuriant growth of exotics, the heavy timber on the adjacent hills, and the tropical appearance in the architecture of some of the suburban dwellings which instantly strike the eye, a stranger could hardly bring himself to believe this was the last formed of Britain's colonies; while we can affirm it is already far from the meanest.

Before taking leave of this local subject we beg permission here to introduce a little episode that is characteristic of the relationship that existed between the two towns, or rather the settlement and the station, before the advent that proclaimed the country open to free settlers. Towards the latter end of the penal, or military, administration, the district was visited by a fearful flood that swept over the face of the country and rendered all travelling, either by land or water, perfectly impracticable. The intercourse, therefore, between Brisbane and Limestone was entirely severed, and for weeks no communication could be attempted. At the station, during this stoppage, the supplies began to run short (it never having been deemed necessary to anticipate such an emergency), and the residents were soon suffering serious privations from the want of their necessary rations. No boats or horses were at the station at the time, so that they were unable to intimate to the authorities below the state in which they were situated. The officials at Limestone waited from day to day in the vain hope of seeing the waters recede, and the means of communication re-established, but they were disappointed. The flood continued at its height, and starvation was almost staring them in the face. In this emergency the officer in charge of the prisoners offered a free pardon to any who would accomplish the voyage to the settlement, and report there the distress the people at Limestone were suffering.

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The passage was undertaken by two of the men, who knew that success was freedom, and that failure's concomitant was death. One took the track through the bush and perished, possibly by being washed away while attempting the crossing of some swollen creek, but the other was more successful, and succeeded in reaching the township in safety, where he communicated the intelligence of the destitution at Limestone, and had the gratification of relieving his former companions, and securing his freedom. Supplies were immediately forwarded to the famished station on pack-horses, which, only after surmounting considerable difficulties and dangers, succeeded in reaching their destination. This passage was one of the boldest and most extraordinary feats on colonial record, and, considering the manner in which it was effected, freedom was certainly not too great a reward. It was accomplished by the man tracing the course of the river, travelling by land where such was practicable, and taking to the river and swimming where it was not. When it is remembered that all the low and flat parts of the country were under water, and that it was computed half the distance of the journey, or nearly thirty miles, was traversed in the swollen stream, with a flying current and eddying pools, and amidst trees and other *debris*, swarming with reptiles and insects brought down from the mountains and clustered on the floating masses, some conception may be formed of what the intrepid courier had gone through. But to return again to our narrative.

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The period of which we write is the summer of 1857, when the cry of "separation" resounded through the country. Some time previous to this the colonists had received intimation of the intention of her Majesty's government to erect Moreton Bay into a separate state amongst the group of Australian colonies. But at this period, as we have already stated, fresh despatches had been received, in which the boundaries and a sketch of its constitution were defined, and the inhabitants were deep in the contemplation of these topics. We fear that this disquisition on history and politics may be considered an interpolation foreign to the nature of our work, and uninteresting to the majority of our readers; but we must excuse ourselves for an encroachment upon the prerogative of the historian, on the ground that we wish the indulgent public to have a correct idea of the historical, as well as the physical and social, nature of Queensland. We would, therefore, throw ourselves again on the leniency of our readers, while we trace, as succinctly as possible, the origin and growth of the separation movement.

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For some years previous to the year 1851 the colonists of Port Philip had agitated the question of separation from the colony of New South Wales, and in that year their efforts were crowned with success, their district being, by imperial decree, erected into a separate colony under the name of Victoria. The instigator and prime mover in this matter had been the Rev. Dr. Lang; and at the commencement of the same year he organized an agitation for a similar dismemberment of the Moreton Bay or northern districts.

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The inhabitants of those districts, groaning under the habitual neglect of a distantly removed and selfish government, were not slow to respond to the call of the agitator. The first meeting to consider the subject, which was held in January 1851, resulted in the despatch of petitions to the throne, praying for an immediate separation from New South Wales, and an establishment as an independent state. They enumerated among the general grievances, the remoteness of the district from the seat of government, the inadequate representation in the legislature, the confirmed neglect and inattention of their rulers to their requirements, the total absorption of their revenues for the improvement of the capital, and the impossibility to procure the outlay of any money on absolutely necessary works; in fact the total subversion of the rights of the inhabitants, and the general inconvenience experienced by a connexion with New South Wales.

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Much as the consummation was desiderated by all parties in the district the people were divided into two bodies in the views which they took of the subject; and each party drew up its own petition, and forwarded it to England. One faction, and by far the most numerous and intelligent, demanded a "free" separation, with the untrammelled administration of their own affairs; while the other, principally composed of the squatters in the interior, were contented with petitioning

for separation, with a reversion to the old penal system. Their object being to have convicts sent to the new colony, and to procure their labour by the old iniquitous "assigning" system.

The struggle continued apace between the contending factions on the one hand, and with the governments of Great Britain and New South Wales on the other. The pro-convict party, who had established a weekly newspaper to advocate their cause, gradually diminished, until eventually their zeal expired, and they succumbed to popular feeling, leaving the body of free separationists united and energetic. Petition after petition continued to be poured at the feet of Her most gracious Majesty, who at last condescended to listen to the prayer of her loyal though distant subjects. In the year 1855, by an act passed in the Imperial Parliament, entitled, "The Constitution Act of New South Wales," right was reserved to her Majesty to separate from that colony any portion of its northern territory she, by her ministers, might deem expedient. It was then made manifest to the colonists that some hope existed of the desired event taking place, and their importunities consequently increased. In July 1856, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies (Mr. Labouchere) intimated, in a despatch to the Governor of New South Wales, that her Majesty's ministers considered that the time had arrived when the dismemberment should be effected, and suggested that the 30th parallel of south latitude should be fixed upon as the boundary of the two colonies. About this parallel a natural line of demarcation exists in the form of a mountain range, and at no other part of the coast could so eligible a division be made.

The magnates in Sydney perceiving that, notwithstanding all their strenuous opposition, separation was determined upon considered it useless to further attempt its prevention; but they were, nevertheless, sanguine of their ability to mar the fair prospects of the new colony. The thought of losing the revenue of so large a district rankled in their bosoms, and the idea of procuring an alteration in the boundary line, by a removal farther away from them, suggested itself to their minds. Confident in their success and the time for an execution of their machinations, that would be afforded them by the usual circumlocutions of government, they forthwith entered upon their work.

One of the districts embraced in the proposed new colony was the Clarence river, which was only second in importance to that of Moreton Bay itself, and which comprised a coast-line of upwards of 120 miles, and a country that extended nearly double that distance inland. This, then, they set to work to retain; and, though the inhabitants themselves of the debateable ground were strongly averse to a continued connexion with the parent colony, and desired annexation to the new one, a petition was presented to the legislature, purporting to be from the residents of that district, and praying for the maintenance of their existing relationship with New South Wales. The opprobrium attached to the concoction of this petition is due to the then member of the legislature for the New England district; for through his chicanery the signatures were obtained and the people deceived. It was represented to them as for a local assize court, and their signatures obtained on blank sheets of paper, which were afterwards attached to the genuine anti-separation petition and laid before the government of the colony, by whom it was forwarded to the British secretary.

This fraud was shortly afterwards detected by the parties cajoled, who exposed the deception practised upon them, and eventually petitioned the crown with a similar view. But, too late: the first had reached the home government as a genuine document, and the result may be imagined; for, combining such a strong demonstration of public feeling as the petition appeared to do with the biassed representations of the Sydney government, the crown had no other alternative but to alter the boundary originally intended. Mr. Labouchere (dated just one year after his former despatch) then informed the Governor of New South Wales that her Majesty's ministers had determined to separate the northern colony at the 28th (instead of the 30th) parallel of south latitude. There the matter rested until the year 1860, when the proclamation calling into existence the colony of Queensland was read in the capital city of Brisbane by the first governor, Sir George Ferguson Bowen.

We would not have pursued this theme had it not been to explain the ferment in which Tom Rainsfield found the good people of Brisbane when he visited their town, as we have said, in the summer of 1857; and, amidst the agitation of the public mind which absorbed all thought and attention, we will leave him for the present to pursue his business.

CHAPTER IX.

"Hark! there be murmurs heard in
Lara's hall,
A sound—a voice—a shriek—a fearful
call!
A long loud shriek—and silence—did
they hear

That frantic echo burst the sleeping ear?"

BYRON.

At a certain spot on the Darling Downs approaching towards their northern extremity, and where the country divides the eastern from the western water-sheds, a party was encamped for the night round their fire; on which preparations were being made by a civilized black for the evening meal of white men, who lay stretched on the ground in the full enjoyment of their "doodeens." The culinary operator was Joey, and the recumbent beings were his master and the shepherds, who had progressed thus far with a flock of sheep, on their way from New England to Fern Vale. [247]

The weather that had spread devastation over the face of the country, was equally fatal in its effects to the flock of our hero. He had attempted to force their march so as to reach his destination before their entire destruction, but was at last constrained to halt in a state, both to man and beast, of perfect exhaustion. He had been the more anxious to reach his own station as he was aware that, after the long and severe drought the district had been visited with, a flood might be expected as the inevitable consequence; and that if he were caught in it the strong probability was that he would lose the remaining half of his flock. Further progression, however, for his exhausted sheep, he saw was, at least for a time, perfectly hopeless; and he felt his only alternative was to wait for the rain, which from the portensions of the sky, was not far distant. Therefore a rude hut, or arborous shelter of boughs and saplings, was erected to shield him and his companions from the rays of the sun, and they waited with what patience they could assume for the pluvial blessing so much prayed for all over the country. [248]

Here then the party was located, anxiously waiting for the advent of the propitious event that would admit of their progression; and, on the evening we have discovered them to the reader, they were dragging out in listless idleness the remainder of an intolerably hot day, too much enervated to indulge in any exertion or conversation. While John Ferguson, who was possibly even more taciturn than his companions, was absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, occasioned by the inauspicious result of his journey, he with his colleagues was suddenly aroused from his lethargy by a most unearthly sound in the close proximity of their camp. He instantly started to his feet, and was greeted with a burst of demoniacal laughter that made his very blood curdle in his veins. [249]

Before him stood a being evidently human, but no more like his first prototype than Gabriel to Lucifer; a man wild and dishevelled in appearance; his eyes like balls of fire; and his face and other parts of his body, perceptible from his all but state of nudity, cut and bleeding. In the fitful light of the camp fire he had more the appearance of one of the eliminated shades of Hades than an habitant of this world. The startled and affrighted quartette, who had been interrupted by his unexpected appearance, gazed on the object with wonder, commiseration, and alarm; for his condition was speedily made palpable by his wild gesticulations and incoherent utterance. He was mad, and in that most to be deplored state of madness—delirium tremens.

John Ferguson advanced a few steps towards the man with the object of leading him to their temporary abode; but the maniac warned him off by a wave of the hand, and darted off again into the settling obscurity with the fleetness of an arrow. No human creature in such a condition could be permitted thus to rush to inevitable death by observers with any spark of Christian charity. John Ferguson and his companions felt this, and notwithstanding the darkness of the night, and the interminable nature of the bush around them, they instantly pursued the fugitive, being guided in his track by his fearful cries and yells. [250]

The chase was tedious, and but for an accident might have been fruitless. The unnatural stimulus of madness lends powerful aid to the cartilaginous anatomy of its victims; so that, notwithstanding the evident fatigue that this wretched inebriate had sustained, his crural muscles performed their functions with even more force and facility than those of his athletic pursuers; and he continued to keep considerably in advance of them. But his course was providentially checked by a fall, that not only stopped him in his headlong career of destruction, but extinguished the treacherous spark that had stimulated his system, and then left him prostrate and perfectly paralysed. When his pursuers came up, and by the light of a "firestick" gazed upon him, they found him writhing in agony on the ground, foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, and actually biting the very dust in the intensity of his suffering. Nature could not long stand so fearful a tax as this without speedily succumbing. Reason had already been hurled from her throne by the arrogated sway of the incensed devils of debauch, and strength and consciousness had been expatriated by the usurpation; while life was all but extinguished. In this state he was borne by his rescuers back to their camp, and tended with every care they could devise; but when he awoke to consciousness, it was only to add the horrors of a raging fever to those of dementia; the more fearful on account of the inability of his attendants to afford him any assistance. [251]

To truthfully describe his appearance, or his sufferings, as he lay rending the air with his fearful and impious imprecations, would not only be beyond our powers of portrayal, but would have none other effect than to sicken and disgust our readers. Nevertheless we feel constrained, fain as we would draw a veil over the scene, to continue our description for the furtherance of [252]

temperance and morality. The man remained for fully twenty-four hours in the state we have mentioned; when the exacerbation of his malady threatened to terminate his existence. No hope of relief could be entertained, for none was procurable in such a situation; even had the exhausted travellers been capable of seeking it. So that the wretched being's doom seemed inevitably sealed.

At this moment the Fern Vale party were startled by the sudden appearance of two others, who came seeking their comrade, and bore in their countenances almost as indelible a stamp of dissipation as that on the visage of the dying madman. From these new comers John learnt that the three had been travelling in company of a bullock dray, and being unable to proceed on their journey, through the loss of the greater portion of the team, they had all been engaged in a social wassail on some grog they had had in charge; and for a considerable period had all been more or less drunk. Their companion had been in a fit of delirium tremens for days; and while in a state of madness had suddenly gone, they knew not, nor at the time cared not, whither. But finding he did not return as they had anticipated even their besotted natures began to take alarm for his safety, and had induced them to go in search of him. [253]

The two men now stood by the prostrate and paralysed form of their late robust companion, on whom, blunted and debased as were their own feelings, they could not gaze without emotions; and as they witnessed the glaring blood-shot eyes, rotating in their sunken and discoloured sockets, the pendent jaw which left the parched tongue protruding from the open mouth, the colourless emaciated cheeks which contrasted fearfully with the sore and livid lips, the generally wasted frame, the shaking though powerless hands imploring with the looks of distracted vision, and the ineffectual attempts to articulate the cravings for that very poison which was fast hastening a commingling of his putrid carcass with its native dust, their hearts sickened within them. They, however, knew the purport of his signs; and subdued as they were by the presence of the destroying angel, and chastened by the momentary visitations of compunction, their devotion to their idol, and their belief in its efficacies were such, that, even in the face of death, they exorcised their destroying spirit. Before their motion could be anticipated, or prevented by John Ferguson, one of the dying man's companions drew a bottle from his bosom, and applied it to the lips of the sufferer. [254]

The taste of the exhilarating poison effected a transitory release of the bonds of death's victim. His hands clasped with a convulsive grasp the endeared destroyer of his life; and as the spirit flowed into the celiac channel of his wasted system, its consuming fire mantled his cheek with an unnatural erubescence, shot from his lustrous eyes, and imparted vigour to his inert frame. If the men's action had been noticed in time John would have no doubt prevented the drink being given, though it would have signified little; for no power on earth could have saved the victim, while possibly the draught of spirits which he had taken ameliorated his departing agonies. Be that as it may he had hardly swallowed it than fresh strength seemed to have been imparted to his frame. He then started to his feet, waved the bottle above his head with a fiendish laugh, and fell to the ground a corpse. [255]

Can mortals ever be rescued from the fearful infatuation of drink? Can rational and sentient beings ever be brought to an abhorrence of that vile and bestial vice that equally destroys the intellect and degrades the body? or will reason ever inculcate in the mind of man the virtue of temperance, so as to use without abusing the gifts of a bountiful providence? Let an incorrigible drunkard stand before such a scene as we have attempted to describe, and for five minutes witness the agonies and death of a fellow inebriate; let his soul commune with the tortured spirit of the wretched victim of intemperance; let him witness the horrors of delirium tremens, that tear to pieces both body and life, and consigns them to the lowest depths of perdition; let him not only witness but feel the hell that burns up the very soul of the blind votaries of Bacchus; and let him witness the last struggle, the tortuous departure of the spirit, accompanied with the blasphemous ribaldry of the vile worm that, while insinuating its eliminated spirit before the judgment-seat of its Maker, dares to utter its arrogant defiance to the august and omnipotent Creator. Let him see this; tell him this is the consequence of intemperance possibly only indulged in moderately at an early stage, but growing by degrees as evil does grow, like the gathering avalanche accumulating in its downward progress until it reaches its final descent amidst universal destruction. Tell him also that a similar fate awaits every drunkard, and tell him, if he turns not away from his course of vileness, such will be his; then, if his conscience does not lead him to penitence through such a lesson, no human effort can save him. [256]

The state of the weather, the mortification of the body, and its consequent immediate decomposition, made it imperative that no time should be lost in the interment of the corpse. The funeral obsequies were speedily performed, with little more ceremony than what would attend the burying of an animal, while nothing marked the spot where lay the bones that would in all probability be soon forgotten. The two men then took their departure, and we doubt not would soon return to their carouse; such is the quickness with which man forgets the visitations of the warning hand of God. [257]

A few days after the event we have just narrated the rain that had been so long threatening at last appeared with one of those terrific thunder-storms which the colonies are in the summer visited with; and speedily the whole surface of the country became deluged. The arid and thirsty soil drank in the moisture, and almost spontaneously shot forth its herbage. The flock was then enabled to luxuriate on the tender grasses and, notwithstanding the deluging rains, to pursue its journey with more comfort than it had experienced for some considerable time previously. [258]

For a week the rain continued with unabating violence when John Ferguson and his flock struck the course of the Gibson river near Brompton. The river was "bank high" at the time, rolling its swollen volume on in sullen impetuosity; while the ground around was so saturated and swampy that the travelling of the sheep was exceedingly tedious; and their owner began to feel anxious lest their course should be altogether impeded. He, however, managed to push on past Brompton, when the weather happily moderated; and though still overcast, and rainy-looking, the actual fall of water ceased. The respite was made good use of by John Ferguson, who pushed on as rapidly as he could, and he arrived at the Wombi without any interruption; but there he met with a check he had little anticipated. He fully expected the bridge would be level with the water or even covered, and thought that he might have to wait for the river to fall; but the volume of water had considerably subsided and left no trace of the structure he and his neighbours had erected. It had in fact been washed away by the flood, and he was made painfully aware that the only course open to him was to wait until the swollen current became sufficiently reduced to make it practicable to swim over his sheep. With that object he camped his party and flock on the bank of the Wombi.

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For some days they waited in this position; but the river, notwithstanding that the rain had ceased, fell very slowly; while the surrounding gloominess plainly indicated an additional visitation of wet as not far distant. In conjunction with this the sheep began to show signs of foot-rot; and John, becoming anxious to get them home, considered it better under the circumstances to attempt a passage of the river at once. Acting on this decision he removed the flock to the old crossing-place and attempted the transit.

Two of his men had, by the aid of a horse, swam the river, and a large number of the sheep had either crossed or were struggling in the current, when a noise was heard that struck our hero with dismay. The distant roll of thunder, combined with the roar of battle, would convey but an imperfect idea of its nature. Distinct and more distinctly came the sound and, while the darkened atmosphere lent its gloom to the mighty convulsion that seemed to rend the earth, the cause of the noise seemed to approach nearer and nearer. Though John had never seen the sudden rising of a river he had heard of such phenomena, and guessed that the sound that he then heard was the harbinger of such an event. He therefore used all his exertions, with those of Joey and the white man that had remained with him on the upper bank of the Wombi, to prevent the remainder of the sheep from following their fellows into the water. They were with difficulty diverted from the stream; and those that had already crossed, being driven by the men as far as possible from the influence of the tide, John waited with an intense anxiety to watch the fate of those that would of a certainty be overtaken by the current.

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The flood was in the Gibson river, and its cause can be easily explained in a few words. Towards its source the rain had been continuous, and the water-holes and surcharged swamps being filled to repletion, had burst their bounds and added their immense volumes to the already swollen stream. This imparted a force and impetuosity even greater than the current had previously possessed, and forced the water in one immense body down its course. On and on it swept like the monstrous rolling surge of the ocean, carrying to inevitable ruin everything that it overtook in its passage. John stood on an elevation sufficiently high to enable him to watch the progress of the destructive fluid; and, with his gaze alternately directed to it and his sheep still swimming in the stream at his feet, he calculated their chances of reaching the bank in safety. For this, however, he had little time, for the progress of the flood was quicker than that of his thoughts; and the sudden rise in the Gibson, as the deluge approached, caused a similar one in the Wombi. As the main body in the river swept past, it flooded the minor stream with its back current, sending the reversed tide, seething and swelling, up its narrow channel, and carrying with it some hundreds of the swimming sheep, most of which were drowned in their vain struggles with the element.

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Unfortunate as this was John gave vent to no vain regrets, but at once decided how he would act. He knew that the brunt of the flood was over, and that the water would speedily fall in the river. He therefore determined to camp where he was for the night, and in the morning to send on the portion of his flock on the opposite side of the river, while he waited with the remainder until the flood should have so far receded as to permit his crossing them with safety. He communicated his plans to both sections of his party, while Joey lit a fire and prepared a camp.

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Towards midnight, when everything was hushed in the nocturnal stillness, Joey came softly to his master, who was stretched in his blanket before the fire on the damp ground, and awoke him from his sleep. John, when he was aroused, instantly started up in the full expectation of some fresh misfortune, and hastily demanded of Joey what was the matter.

"You no hear, massa?" replied Joey; "you listen. The black fellows come back again and make great noise."

John listened attentively for some moments, and unmistakably distinguished the sounds of blacks' voices, though what was the purport of the noise he could not conjecture. It was evident to him they had returned to the neighbourhood and, from the sounds he heard, in considerable numbers. But where could they be camped? he asked himself; surely not at their old ground in the scrub, he thought; for the noise plainly indicated a closer proximity. In fact, it sounded to him as if it emanated from somewhere about Strawberry Hill, if not from that very place. Then John's thoughts led him to make the enquiry what could bring them across the Gibson; if they had any object in visiting Strawberry Hill; and if so, what that object could be? His thoughts, once led into such a channel, were not long in picturing a gloomy catalogue of probable causes. A

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remembrance of Rainsfield's cruelties was too indelibly impressed upon his mind to be forgotten, and the scene he had witnessed at the blacks' camp on the night previous to their departure was instantly conjured up in all its horrors. Though the disappearance of the blacks for months had momentarily dimmed his memory to the pangs he then witnessed and felt, they were instantly remembered when his mind reverted to the subject; and he vividly recollected the ebullition of evil passions that had been kindled in the breasts of some of the survivors and relatives of the victims. In his fancy he heard anew the threat of revenge that was uttered against Rainsfield; and he began to entertain the belief that the blacks were at the station of Strawberry Hill, and had come there for the purpose of wreaking vengeance on their destroyer and his family at a time when they would imagine their visitation least expected.

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At the same time, however, he could not bring his mind to imagine that the blacks would be bold enough to attack the whole station, being confident the knowledge of the superior prowess of the whites would deter them, besides their dread of fire-arms, which, they would know at least all the men on the station would possess. He had no doubt, either, but that Rainsfield, having incurred the enmity of the aborigines, would take every precaution against surprisal, and believed that he could, with the assistance of one or two of his men, preserve himself against the assaults of a hundred of the blacks. But still John Ferguson could not divest his mind of some degree of apprehension, which (notwithstanding his endeavours to calm the perturbation his train of thoughts had led him to experience) still lingered there, and dark forebodings disturbed his brain.

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"Where are they, do you think, Joey?" he enquired, as if he wanted corroboration of his own senses.

"Strawberry Hill, I believe, massa," was the reply.

"I am afraid so, too," said John; "and I fear they are up to no good. If they were only going to rob the store they would never make so much noise over it."

"No, massa, they not go to rob the store," said Joey; "they be frighted to do that again, I believe; taltoe (food) kill too many black fellow that time when they steal 'em ration; they be going to kill now, I believe."

"That's what I've been thinking too, Joey," replied his master; "but they wouldn't have any chance if the white fellows had guns."

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"I don't know, massa," replied the black boy; "p'rhaps no, p'rhaps yes—black fellows be very frightened of guns; but the Nungar black fellows, you pidner (know), very wild and budgery belonging to fight (good at fighting), and bael they lik'em (hate) Mr. Rainsfield; so I believe they will try very hard to kill him."

"I've no doubt they will," replied his master, "if they can get a mark at him; but if he keeps himself and his men within the house they will be able to fire away at the blacks without giving them a chance at themselves."

"White fellows all sit down liket huts," said Joey, by which he meant to imply that the men in all probability would be in their own huts, removed from the house of the station; "and," he continued, "bael Misser Rainsfield fight 'em all round big fellow humpie; and black fellow, when he find 'em bael come out, he gett'um firestick, and mak'em humpie one fellow-carbon fire;" which may be rendered into our vernacular by saying, that Rainsfield would be unable of himself to protect all parts of the dwelling; while the blacks would unhouse him by setting on fire the building, which it must be remembered was of wood.

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John mused a few minutes in a reverie, in which his feelings sustained a violent convulsion. That love preserved a prominent position we have no doubt; and, also, that apprehension for the safety of the object of that love maintained a lively agitation in his mind. We fear we must not attribute his sympathy and anxiety for the family to a general friendship alone, but to the additional stimulus of a more inspiring feeling. However, we will not arrogate to ourselves the censorship of his motives, but simply confine ourselves to a recordance of events.

"Joey, get my horse and saddle him," said John, turning to the boy, who was standing with his body bent in an attitude to catch the floating sound of the blacks' voices.

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Joey turned his eyes, looking surprised at his master; and though he did not actually ask him the nature of the work he intended to require of his horse, his manner and hesitation made that inquiry; and his master devising its meaning voluntarily made the explanation.

"I will go over at once to Strawberry Hill, Joey," he said, "and see what the blacks are doing; for I cannot bear this suspense, and I fear the morrow will disclose some fearful work."

"Bael you cross the river, masser," cried the boy; "too much water sit down. Bael you swim, masser? More liket be drowned."

"Don't make yourself uneasy, Joey," replied his master, "my horse has taken me over worse floods than that; it is only back water from the Gibson, and there is very little current."

"But oh! massa, bael you go! supposing you cross river, and supposing black fellows fight with Misser Rainsfield, what you can do? bael you got 'um gun or pistol, and black fellow have plenty spear; so you do nothing, and black fellow only kill you."

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"No fear, Joey," said John. "The blacks would have no object in killing me; and if they are congregated at Strawberry Hill, to commit some outrage as I suspect, I may be enabled to effect some good by inducing them to abandon their scheme; or, at least, I can afford some assistance to the family they are attacking."

"Oh no, massa! I tell you no," exclaimed the poor faithful attendant. "These black fellows kill any white fellow now; bael they care for you now; they come to kill Misser Rainsfield; and Misser Rainsfield's friends liket help him they kill them too. Bael you go! Budgery massa!" exclaimed the attached creature, as he threw himself down on the ground before his master, and clung to his feet.

The expression and evidence of so much attachment in the poor boy sensibly affected the kind nature of John Ferguson; and he was moved to see so much genuine warmth and affection in one of a race which was looked upon as incapable of such emotions—a race which is deemed by professed judges of their nature to be destitute of all human virtue; to be the lowest in the social scale; incapable of the inculcation of civilisation, morality, and religion; to be only a stage above the brute creation, and to be segregated by an insuperable barrier from all sentient creatures. Could you, oh, self-sufficient philosopher (who enunciate these doctrines), only present yourself before these two, and penetrate with a visual percipiency the heart that beats in the breast of that poor, prostrate black, thou wouldst surely be brought to acknowledge the existence of that germ that was implanted in our first parents by the omnipotent Creator. Thou wouldst also be brought to acknowledge, unless prejudice blinded thine intellect, that, degraded as that race which thou contemnest undoubtedly is, much of the weight of that degradation has been the burdening of thine own countrymen. Say not that, by the immutable decrees of Providence, the black races are destined to disappear before the white, and to succumb their savage natures and existence to advancing civilisation. Such may, or may not, be so; but in either case how can you relieve yourself of the obligation imposed upon you by the Supreme Being to ameliorate the condition of that unfortunate people of whom you first rob their inheritance and then sweep from the face of the earth, by instilling into their unsophisticated natures all the vices incidental to yours; without attempting their regeneration, or even an ethic inculcation.

John looked upon his faithful attendant as he implored him not to venture either near the blacks or across the swollen river before him; and he felt a pleasurable sensation, akin to gratitude, towards the poor creature. It is true he had himself almost reared the poor boy, who had been always near him; but the idea of so much attachment being in the nature of the black had never occurred to him; and its discovery therefore caused him astonishment.

"I must go, Joey," he said, "I have no fear for danger to myself; and if anything should happen this night to the family at Strawberry Hill, and I remained here, I shall ever accuse myself as being, by my selfish neglect, accessory to their fate."

"Will massa let me go with him?" enquired the boy.

"No, Joey," replied his master; "I wish you to stop here with the shepherd and sheep, until the water falls sufficiently to enable you to cross with them; but get me my horse, I must lose no time;" saying which he turned away to seek the shepherd, who was watching the flock, to give him directions, while Joey performed the necessary services for the horse.

The black boy went down with his master to the edge of the river, in vain entreating to be permitted to accompany him, and stood on the brink of the water as John plunged his horse into the dark rolling stream. The night was black and cloudy and the opposite bank was hardly discernible in the gloom; while the opaque waters rolled their disturbed body in their sullen course. As John had said the river was not swift, but it was deep and treacherous. Its tide, though swollen by the immense volume in the Gibson, ran only slowly; but it was filled with eddies caused by the stoppage of its own natural current. Its passage was therefore more dangerous than perhaps it would have been had it been running with the velocity of its parent stream.

As John entered the water the noble animal that carried him, guessing the nature of the work that was expected of him, courageously breasted the current, and swam for the opposite bank. For some minutes he could have been seen speeding his course, with precision for his desired goal; when anon he would be drawn into the vortex of one of those whirlpools in which the stream then abounded, and from which his persevering beast would extricate himself, and again struggle on his course. The horse and rider had nearly reached the other side, and were almost lost to Joey's sight in the obscurity, when suddenly both man and beast were entirely submerged; and the next instant the animal's feet were plainly discernible above water, in a state of violent agitation.

With one bound the black boy sprang into the water, and swam vigorously for the spot where his master had disappeared; but his anxieties were relieved by John's reappearance, and seeing him strike out for the bank in company with his horse. Joey did not return when he perceived that his master was safe, but pursued his course. Long and arduous was his struggle, and he had enough to do to preserve himself from the eddies and floating masses that were rotating in the pools, or that were descending the stream. But he succeeded in crossing it without any mishap, and he presented himself to his master as the latter was about to mount his horse after his own dangerous passage.

"What, Joey!" exclaimed John as he witnessed the boy before him, "what on earth has possessed you to risk your life in crossing the river by yourself, and after my telling you I wanted you to stay

with the sheep?"

"Oh! massa," replied the boy, "me thinkum you be drowned, when me been seeum you capsized; bael me help coming after you to see you all right."

"Well, I suppose I must not be angry with you Joey," said his master.

"Oh no, massa!" replied the black, "but that very ugly capsized, how 'em happen?"

"A log that was floating in one of the pools," said John, "turned the horse over and me with him; but I kept hold of the bridle and reached the shore safe enough, with only the addition of a little extra wetting. But I can't stop now, Joey, I must not lose any more time, and you will have to get back again as soon as you can; for that man you have left on the other side will not be able to watch and 'shepherd' the sheep all by himself. You can get your own horse that the two fellows crossed with yesterday to take you back."

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"But, massa, you let me come now with you? and I be over the river all right liket morning."

"Well, come if you will," said his master, "you can follow me;" and he dashed spurs into his horse and rode off.

Joey thus obtaining the permission he sought wasn't long in getting his horse saddled, and he galloping after his master whom he overtook on the road; as, notwithstanding his impatient haste, John was unable, owing to the fatigue his horse had already endured in the water, to keep in advance of the fresher steed of his black boy.

The two horsemen for some minutes rode rapidly side by side; and, as they approached Strawberry Hill, they every moment became more conscious, not only of the proximity of the blacks, but of their either meditating, or actually perpetrating some diabolical work. These kept up a chorus of voices which formed a perfect Babel of discord, resounding through the still night, and reverberating among the vaulted and umbrageous canopy of the bush like the conclaves of assembled pandemonium. Anon this was succeeded by frantic yells that curdled the very blood in John Ferguson's veins; and then shriek after shriek pierced the air, telling too plainly the nature of the savages' work.

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What further stimulus could John have had for his fears? Here was a realization of his most direful dread. The very echo of the woods proclaimed the fate of his friends; and possibly that being whom he loved most on earth was by that wail numbered among the dead; her lovely features defaced by the brutality of fiendish savages; and her fair form mutilated and possibly dishonoured. The thought was too harrowing; it deprived him of all consideration for his own person; the idea of his own safety never entered his mind, and unarmed and defenceless as he was, he dashed the spurs again and again into the side of his steed, and galloped madly until he reached the scene of horror. He sprang from his horse, as the panting animal halted before the house, which was now still and apparently desolate; while the retreating forms of the blacks might have been seen by other eyes than John Ferguson's.

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CHAPTER X.

"Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his
babes,
His mansion, and his titles in a place
From whence himself does fly?"

MACBETH, *Act 4, Sc. 2.*

When Rainsfield parted from Jemmy Davies he retraced his steps to his own house, which he reached as the first rays of the morning sun irradiated the eastern sky; and, flinging himself upon a sofa in the sitting-room, he sought a few hours' rest. Sleep we cannot call it for it was more of the nature of a waking dream than refreshing slumbers; and, after enduring two or three hours of increasing restlessness, he sprang from his couch, and, while it was yet early morn, strolled forth to refresh his fevered brain.

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His reflections were of no enviable kind. That the object the blacks had in returning to the neighbourhood was, as Jemmy Davies had warned him, he had no doubt; for, however much he was disinclined to credit the disinterestedness of Jemmy, and his good feeling towards himself, he could not imagine any motive that could influence the black in acquainting him of a plot if no plot existed. Rainsfield had no faith in one of their colour, believing sincerity a virtue incompatible with their nature; but at the same time he fully credited the information of Jemmy, especially after the evidently hostile preparations he had witnessed. He was also perfectly aware that he might expect the animosity of the blacks while they remained in the neighbourhood; and though

he had flattered himself upon their former disappearance that he had been for ever relieved from the annoyance of their proximity, he now found he had exorcised the demon which threatened his destruction.

What their mode of procedure would be he could hardly conjecture, though he had doubted not, from what he had witnessed at the camp, that they had not only concerted measures, but that their plans would be on somewhat an extensive scale. Their primary object, he believed, would be his life; but personally he had a supreme contempt for the whole race, and flattered himself that, with a little caution, he was a match, numerically speaking, against extreme odds. He believed, as in fact experience had demonstrated, their cowardice was one of their inherent characteristics, and that, with decision on his part, and a chastisement by a few examples, he would avert the threatened danger. He imagined that their tactics would be a perpetual ambushade, never dreaming that they would so far venture on the offensive as to assume the aggressive overtly, but would rather attempt a surprisal; in which case he determined, as soon as his opponents showed themselves, to take upon himself the offensive. As the harass, however, of a perpetual watch would not only inconvenience him, but weaken his already too small force, he bethought him to acquaint his neighbours of his position, and beg their assistance. His first care, then, was to apprise all his men on the station of the intention of the blacks, and to provide them with fire-arms, so far as his stock admitted, charging them to use every vigilance to prevent the approach of any of the aborigines, and to shoot them if they came within range of their guns.

On the evening of that day, acting under the advice of Jemmy Davies, Mr. Rainsfield posted himself, and two of his men, in the bush near the house, where he expected the blacks would be lurking if they visited the station at all; and not long after night-fall he became sensible of the stealthy approach of some of the natives. Rainsfield and his men had secreted themselves so as to elude even the keen vision of the aborigines, at the same time that they themselves could discern, as plainly as was practicable in the darkness, the crouching forms of the reconnoiterers. The party in espionage watched their victims until they approached sufficiently near to enable them to distinguish their dusky outlines, and then they simultaneously discharged the contents of their three pieces into their very midst.

The report was instantly followed by more than one yell, and at least one body was heard to fall heavily to the ground, when the next moment a shower of spears rattled amongst the trees and bushes where the party lay concealed. Rainsfield and his men remained perfectly motionless, not daring to venture another shot; for they knew well that every native had already shielded himself behind some tree, and was watching for a repetition of the fire to guide them whence to aim their own missiles. By remaining in his quiescence Rainsfield was aware he was safe; for he knew the blacks would not trust themselves to a closer investigation of the quarter from whence emanated their destruction. Of the two watching parties the blacks were the first to withdraw, after discharging another random volley of spears, and taking with them their dead or wounded. When Rainsfield was convinced of their departure he came out from his hiding-place, and returned to the station much pleased with his adventure, and, arguing from the nature of the reception the blacks had met with, that they would considerably cool in their ardour for any further visitation of his premises.

The other inmates of Strawberry Hill were too much occupied with their attention to Eleanor, and too much engrossed by their anxieties for her welfare to be conscious of the occurrence we have lately described; for when the doctor arrived with William from Alma she was in an exceedingly dangerous state, and it was not until the day following the encounter that the son of Galen considered himself warranted in taking his departure, and leaving his patient to the care of her own friends. Eleanor's state was still precarious, and though the fever was sufficiently subdued to relieve her friends of alarm, her nervous system had received a tremendous shock. Added to her corporeal sufferings she had to endure mental agonies of a far more acute description, which kept her prostrate, dispirited, and almost unconscious, while her friends ministered with affectionate hands to her every want. Days thus passed over with only shadows of improvement; and William, who at first returned home leaving his sister at Strawberry Hill, came back and brought her away from the bedside of her friend.

As Mr. Rainsfield had anticipated, the blacks entered no further appearance after their first night of reconnoitering; and, though the watchfulness of himself and his men was unabated, he began to entertain less fears of their carrying out or even attempting their premeditated design. All the men on the station were now well armed, and were quite capable, acting in unison, of repelling the attack of a whole host of natives should they make the attempt. At least so thought Rainsfield and his *employés*; for their first success, and the subsequent respectful distance that the blacks had maintained, engendered a sense of security in their minds.

How many has this very feeling ruined, and will continue to ruin for succeeding ages, who can tell? "A sea of troubles" is incidental to our existence, and the dark prognostic that rises on our mental horizon, heralding the approach of some destructive blast, is too often unheeded by us until it has swept over our devoted heads. While the necessary precautions to avert the coming danger have been either neglected or postponed under the impression of false security we have fallen victims to our own procrastination; and as the withering blast howls in its fury as it settles its incubus form upon our spirits, we mourn our own inertness, when timely exertion would have saved us from the calamity. We will not say this was exactly the case with Mr. Rainsfield, though after a few days of unceasing watchfulness without any other molestation taking place, he began to relax in his vigilance, and was imitated by his servants. He already looked upon the blacks as cowed and vanquished, and entertained very little apprehension of another visitation, though at

the same time he was not altogether at ease considering that they still remained in his vicinity with the avowed purpose of attacking the station.

The idea had struck him that he could report to the authorities the attack already made by construing what might have been an intention into an act itself, as also the determination of the blacks to renew it, and their location in his neighbourhood in a hostile and warlike spirit. He would then be enabled to claim the protection of the police; but, what would be more to his purpose, he would be enabled to obtain a warrant for the apprehension of the ringleaders of the perpetrated and intended breach of the peace. Armed with such a document he could make use of it to visit their camp; while he was aware, from his knowledge of the blacks, that the only result of the farce would be a rupture with them, but by its means he would gain the opportunity he desired, viz., of driving them from the country. [290]

That such a farce as the administration of justice, or rather the enforcement of the law, in one proscribed form on the savage should be permitted to exist is deeply to be deplored. To punish the ignorant aboriginal for the sins we have either taught or compelled him to commit, without his having any knowledge of their nature, is sufficiently iniquitous to require no comment; and to expect him to conform to laws of which he has no conception, and which are contrary to his natural instincts, is equally absurd and unjust. But such is the case: the aboriginal is supposed to be a British subject in all but the privileges pertaining to those favoured individuals; and if he commits any act contrary to the code of our justiciary he is made amenable to our laws and judged accordingly. Mr. Rainsfield was as well aware of this as any one, but it mattered not to him. All he desired was to possess some recognised authority for his molestation of the natives, while he was nominally in the performance of a duty, though in reality shielding himself under the protection of the law in the committal of an unjustifiable aggression. That he would receive an order to obtain the assistance of the native police he had no doubt, though he did have misgivings as to their services being forthcoming. He little cared, however, if they were so; in fact, it would suit his views better than if they accompanied him, as he would prefer not to be annoyed with the supervision of police, even though troopers, and they only blacks. He could obtain sympathy, he thought, from his friends, and collect a small body of volunteers that would aid him in his operations far more effectually than police. Thus he hatched a scheme that had for its object a trap in which to catch the unwary blacks; so that, by some show of resistance, he would be warranted in taking the law into his own hands in self-defence for himself and his friends and to enter upon their crusade of extermination. Such was the offspring of Rainsfield's mind: a laudable undertaking worthy of the cool-blooded monsters of antiquity. [291]

The rains, of which we spoke in the last chapter, had by this time set in, and Rainsfield watched the rising of the Gibson river with some degree of satisfaction. Knowing the blacks to be encamped on the other side, he looked upon a flood as an insuperable barrier to their advance, and an impregnable circumvallation to his own station; therefore he had no fears of an attack while the water maintained its height, and he determined to choose that opportunity for carrying out the preliminaries of his plot. [292]

He explained so much of his plans as he thought necessary to his wife, including, of course, his object in leaving her, and attempted to allay her fears, if she had had any, by assuring her that it was impossible for the blacks to cross the river in its then state, while long before the flood settled he would collect such assistance as would not only protect them from any attack but enable him to drive their annoyance to a safe distance. Mrs. Rainsfield, however, entertained no fears, notwithstanding the monitory aspect of affairs around her. She had long accustomed herself to look upon her husband's operations against the unfortunate natives as not only harsh but cruel and unjust; and she lamented his proneness to seize upon every opportunity of treating them with severity. Believing them to be ill-used, and at the same time inoffensive, she saw no cause for fear, and therefore did not participate in her husband's alarm and felt no uneasiness in his meditated absence. [293]

Mr. Rainsfield, though he thought very little, if any, danger was to be apprehended, deemed it expedient for his wife and family's safety to use some precaution, and therefore for their protection requested Mr. Billing to take up his abode in the house. He gave him strict injunctions to keep the place well secured against the possibility of any ingress, and himself always in possession of a relay of arms, which he was to use without any hesitation if a black presented himself within range of his fire. Giving similar instruction to the remainder of his men he took his departure. [294]

His first step was to proceed to Alma and make a declaration before a bench of magistrates to the effect that the blacks had already made an attack upon his premises, and were still in considerable force in his neighbourhood, to the imminent peril of his life and property; and that the said party was headed by a half-civilized black named Barwang. Upon making this affidavit he at once obtained what he desired, viz., a warrant for the apprehension of the ringleader, Barwang, and all others who might either commit or incite other of Her Majesty's subjects to commit a breach of the peace. He also procured the promise of assistance from what portion of the native police could be collected, who would be stationed at Strawberry Hill for his protection, until such time as the blacks should be quieted. Succeeding thus far he then proceeded to Brompton to enlist the services of Bob Smithers, knowing well that few arguments would suffice to induce him to engage in a work which was exactly to his tastes. He found him at home, and, after the ordinary greetings had been passed, and Bob's asking him what brought him from home, he entered upon the subject of his mission by replying: "I want your aid, Smithers, to chastise those infernal blacks, for they are at me again. I have beaten them off once, but I believe [295]

they are only now prevented from attacking me in full force by their inability to cross the Gibson from their camp. See here I have got a warrant for the apprehension of their chief, so that will be sufficient authority for us to carry out our own plans."

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"All right, old boy," exclaimed Bob, as he gave his friend a proof of his exuberance and readiness to join him by administering a playful poke in the ribs; "I'm your man. I am fully convinced we shall never live in peace until those d—d blacks are exterminated. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to shoot every mother's son of the dogs; so, by Jove! you may depend upon my lending you a hand."

"I do not believe, either," said Rainsfield, "that we shall ever enjoy any degree of quietude until we have suppressed the wretches. It is no use our looking to government for protection; we must take the administration of the law into our own hands and punish them ourselves. But to effect this we ought to make it a common cause, and all work in unison for our mutual protection."

"Just so!" said Smithers; "I perfectly agree with you."

"I've long thought of the plan," continued Rainsfield, "to form ourselves into a confederation for that purpose; but owing to the absence of the blacks for some months past I have allowed it to escape my memory. Now, however, I think, is a time that some such measure should be adopted, for if these depredations are not speedily checked the blacks may be going to such extremes that our position in the country will become untenable."

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"I am quite of your way of thinking," said Smithers, "and so I know are many others. I am confident Graham would assist you in a minute, and so would Brown, and many others round us. I'll tell you what; if you like I'll just go round to a few of them and bring them over to your place, so that if you return home now, and keep the black scoundrels in check for a day or two, until I get my forces collected, we will give them a lesson which they will not forget in a hurry; that is, if any of them survive to have any recollection."

Diabolical as was the intention implied in this threat it fully accorded with Rainsfield's own desire and determination, and he readily fell into the views of his colleague, who at once started on his recruiting expedition, while Rainsfield, in high fettle, the following morning took his ride home. On this journey we will leave him for the present while we glance at the events in progress at another scene of our narrative.

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CHAPTER XI.

"Friend of the brave! in peril's
darkest hour,
Intrepid virtue looks to thee for
power."

CAMPBELL.

"She only left of all the harmless
train,
The sad historian of the pensive
plain."

GOLDSMITH.

Everything went smoothly at Strawberry Hill for two days after the departure of Mr. Rainsfield; but the night of the third was that which was destined to bring with it a scene of horror, which happily has never had its equal in the Australian colonies since the first settler penetrated into its unknown wilds. The blacks had now remained some time dormant; for since their first visit, owing to the warm reception they had then met with, they had not ventured to repeat it. Towards the evening in question, however, they might have been seen swimming, one by one, the swollen current of the Gibson, until a considerable body had congregated on the bank opposite to their camp.

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We will not presume to judge their motives, or profess conversance with the impulses that influenced their movements. Possibly their instincts might have taught them that the time for a most successful attack was when the difficulties of approach rendered their coming least expected; or it might have been that they were possessed of the knowledge of their enemy's absence from home, and were determined to wreak their vengeance on those belonging to him when they had not to fear his presence. That Rainsfield was feared by them there was no doubt; his very name struck terror into their souls, and none but the very boldest of them would

confront him, even in the consciousness of vastly superior force. It was therefore quite possible they were acquainted with his absence, and intended to take advantage of the occurrence to pay their premeditated visit to the station; or their choice of this period might have been the result of a fortuitous circumstance. Nevertheless be either as it may the flooded river did not prove the barrier Rainsfield had calculated it would, for the blacks crossed it with apparent ease and, as we have said, collected themselves on the bank on the Strawberry Hill side. Their evident intention being to proceed direct to the station when they thought the inmates would have retired to rest.

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A little before midnight the murderous crew spread themselves over the station; and simultaneously commenced their work of destruction by entering the huts, and butchering all they could surprise in their sleep. The first of their victims was a woman, the wife of a shepherd. Hearing the unusual barking of the dogs she incautiously rose to ascertain the cause without disturbing her husband, whose period of sleep she considered valuable. The poor woman appeared at the door of her hut with a child in her arms, too good a mark for the spears of the savages; for in their thirst for blood they had no respect for either sex or age but buried more than one of their weapons in the poor creature's bosom. She fell across the threshold pierced to the heart and in the agonies of death, with merely a sufficiency of the vital spark remaining to utter a faint cry and clasp instinctively her babe to her breast. As the infant's eyes turned in wonder on the ruthless savages one of them seized the little innocent by the legs, tore it from its mother's embrace and dashed out its brains; while his compeers rushed into the interior of the hut, and, almost before the sleeping man could sufficiently collect his senses to comprehend the nature of his position, his spirit had joined those of his wife and child. The other huts were in likewise visited, and those of the inmates who were not successful in effecting an escape were similarly massacred.

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These proceedings had been gone about by no means noiselessly, so that the family at the house had become aware of the presence of the savages, though they could not conjecture the extent or the nature of the outrages they had committed. Those of the men who had escaped from the murderous hands of the aborigines deemed it safer to seek shelter in the bush than to venture to the house, or even remain near the station. So that, beyond the painful evidence of her ears, Mrs. Rainsfield could ascertain no knowledge of what was going on. When she first heard the noise that had heralded the visitation she hastily threw on some clothing and emerged from her room; and, speedily becoming alive to the imminence of the danger, she for the first time deplored the absence of her husband. Mrs. Billing had removed with her youngest child to be near her better half while he remained at the house, but the rest of her family she had left at her own cottage; and having also been disturbed by the uproar she wrought herself into a perfect fever of anxiety for their safety. She fancied she heard every moment their dying screams as they were being seized by the ruthless hand of some infernal savage; and in her agony she fancied she could distinguish above the noise of the now unrestrained articulation of the blacks their little voices calling upon her for help, and she entreated to be allowed to rush at once to their rescue.

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Her husband, however, was more rational, and pointed out to her that that would, in all probability, only incur instant death to herself and afford no relief to her children. He suggested that they should wait, and see what the blacks proposed doing next; and as in all probability it would be to attack the house, he remarked that their suspense would be of short duration. He then bethought him of his fire-arms, which he got in readiness for instant use, while he provided pistols to the females. His next care was to barricade all the apertures through which the blacks could effect an entrance, while Mrs. Rainsfield crept softly to the bedside of Eleanor to ascertain if she had been disturbed by the noise. By the time these arrangements were completed, and the family assembled in conclave in the sitting-room, the blacks had collected before the house and became clamorous for admittance.

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Mr. Billing, though not blessed with too great a share of physical courage, had, nevertheless, in the moment of danger, a sufficient perception of the line of conduct necessary for the defence of himself and those under his protection. Notwithstanding that the gun he then held in his hand was in all probability the first that he ever had in his possession with the intent of putting it to use, he handled it as if it were an old and friendly companion, and proposed that he and his two female colleagues should fire simultaneously on the savages, so as to give them the idea that the house was well defended. His suggestion, however, was overruled by Mrs. Rainsfield, who at once expressed her disapprobation of such a course; being convinced, as she said, that the blacks could not force the building, and even if they did that they would have no cause to commit any violence to any of the inmates. While if they found that they could not gain admittance they would depart at most, perhaps, with robbing the store. This belief was far from according with Mr. Billing's opinion, but he was constrained to assent to the will of the lady; and they all, with a breathless silence, continued to watch the movements of their assailants.

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The blacks finding they were unmolested, and seeing no opposition offered to them, and no signs of life about the house, became bolder and attempted to force some of the doors and windows; while the affrighted party sat in a state of fearful anxiety, and, though unseen themselves, they could plainly distinguish the forms of the aborigines trying the window of the room in which they were. Mr. Billing at this moment placed the muzzle of his gun close to the glass of the window, that was left visible through a crevice in the barricade, and had he fired would have assuredly sent one savage to his account in the other world. Would that he had; for in all probability it would have driven the blacks to a distance from the house, and possibly saved us from the task of narrating this fearful tragedy. But his eagerness to fire was restrained by Mrs. Rainsfield, and the moment was lost; for the blacks, finding their efforts to gain an ingress unavailing, gave up the

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fruitless attempt, and withdrew to some short distance to hold converse on their proceedings.

Mrs. Rainsfield at once began to congratulate herself and her friends that they had retired as she had anticipated, leaving them nothing more to fear; and at that moment hearing the faint voice of Eleanor calling to her she hastened to account for the disturbance about the house and appease her alarm. Eleanor was in a state of considerable agitation, having been aroused from her fitful slumbers by the noise of the blacks, and being still very low in strength and spirits, and excessively nervous, her alarm and agitation threatened to bring on fever again. It was only with considerable difficulty that Mrs. Rainsfield could persuade her she had no cause to fear. She told her that the blacks had already taken their departure from the house, and would in all probability by that time have left the station; and she entreated her not to give herself any uneasiness, but to be still for a few minutes, and then she would return to her bedside and sit with her for the remainder of the night.

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With these assurances, Eleanor was constrained to be pacified, and so Mrs. Rainsfield returned to the sitting-room, where she found Mrs. Billing wringing her hands and crying in an agony of grief. Mr. Billing was more calm, but not less apprehensive of danger or death. He drew the lady of the house to the crevice of the window to gaze upon the scene without, while she uttered a cry of surprise and terror, as her startled vision took in the tableau there displayed. Before the house stood a group of the assailants in all the hideousness of barbarity, paint, and savage nudity. They had possessed themselves of "fire sticks," which acted as torches, at the same time that they served to exhibit their bodies in all their diabolical repulsiveness; and their intentions were too plainly indicated in their jestures. To say that they looked like a band of incarnate fiends would be to convey but a poor impression of the horrors of their appearance, as the fitful light reflected their hideous forms; exhibiting them in, if possible, a more fearful aspect than their stern realities; and giving them the appearance as the beholders thought (and as was, alas! but too true) of being besmeared with blood. It is not to be wondered at that at such a sight the hearts of two frail women, and even that of a man, should have quailed; and if not before despair certainly did then seize upon the spirits of those present.

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The object of the villains had by this time become perfectly apparent, and though neither of the trio dared to breathe their individual suspicions they were unanimous in the one belief that the lighted torches were intended to fire the premises; and thus either drive them from their shelter or bury them in the ruins. They therefore saw that only two courses were open to them; either to arm themselves and defend the house until the last, or to throw it open to the savages and try and pacify them with any *douceur* the wretches might covet. That there was extreme danger in thus throwing themselves upon the mercy of fiends they were perfectly aware; and any one better acquainted with the black's character would have considered it absolute madness and voluntarily seeking for a death more horrible than that which would await them in a defensive perseverance. But the exercise of calm judgment and reason could hardly be expected from two agitated and terrified women, and one man whose nature was made of very little sterner stuff than theirs.

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Mrs. Rainsfield was the first that broke the painful silence that ensued, and addressing Mr. Billing, said: "I think we had better open the door at once, or they will set fire to the house, and we will be burnt alive. If they determine to kill us we can but meet our death with firmness; while there is a possibility of their sparing us if we satisfy their cupidity by allowing them to plunder the place. Will you open the door, Mr. Billing, and attempt the work of conciliation?"

Mr. Billing silently obeyed this behest, and addressed himself to the blacks, who were at this time standing immediately before the house preparing to apply the fire. They instantly desisted from their incendiary work when they saw signs of capitulation, and directed their gaze to the doorway. By the light of their own "fire sticks" they could distinguish Mr. Billing, who stood there with the women at his back perfectly unarmed; having left his gun by Mrs. Rainsfield's desire in the room they had vacated so as to give the savages, as she imagined, no cause for offence by appearing to offer any resistance. When the blacks satisfied themselves that they had nothing to fear they burst out into a loud laugh of derision, and crowded towards the defenceless garrison in a menacing and mocking attitude. What were the feelings of the trio at this moment it would be difficult even to conjecture. With Mrs. Billing, however, those of the mother overcame all personal and selfish considerations, and she darted from the house to ascertain the fate of her children. That action may be said to have decided the doom of the whole party; for though possibly even under other circumstances the blacks might not have spared those whom they had got into their power, and the strong probability is that they would not, yet the sudden movement of Mrs. Billing cost her her life, and gave the savages the stimulus to commence the further shedding of blood.

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Mrs. Billing had not proceeded many steps before she uttered a loud shriek and fell prostrate to the earth with a spear piercing her back and protruding its point from her breast. Her husband witnessing the deed, eliminated from his bosom all feelings save those of devotion and sympathy for his wife, rushed to clasp her in his arms and met a similar fate. The climax of this fearful tragedy was nearly attained. Mrs. Rainsfield fled from the open doorway, where she had been the spectator of this connubial sacrifice, and sought momentary refuge with her children in her room. Just as the blacks entered the house the servants, who had by this time been aroused to a sense of their danger, opened a door which led from the kitchen into the hall. But perceiving the murderous assailants pouring in they left the door wide open as they had flung it and made a hasty exit by another passage into the obscurity of the night, and beat a precipitate retreat to the bush. In their flight they were followed by a few of the savages who had perceived them; but who

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shortly tired of a chase in which fear lent wings to the pursued. They returned to aid their colleagues in forcing an entrance into the room of Mrs. Rainsfield and commenced their work there of insatiable cruelty with hideous and diabolical evidences of satisfaction.

The atrocities of these fiends were more like the evil machinations of devils than the actions of human beings. But to enumerate all the horrors, and to paint the scene with sufficiently forcible life-like delineation, would be beyond the capabilities of our pen, and would only sicken our readers by the perusal. Therefore we will merely say that they first murdered the children before the eyes of their mother, while they sported with the agonising despair of their victim, and then despatched the lady; brutally mangling her body in their inordinate lust for blood.

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Eleanor had remained spell-bound during the perpetration of those horrors, which she had animation sufficient to discern were being enacted in the house; but without either enough strength to move, or power of utterance to give vent to the fearful sensations that preyed upon her mind. Alarm we cannot call it: such a feeling sinks into insignificance compared with the mental anguish she then endured; being conscious, from the heart-rending cries that struck her ear, that her dearest earthly friends were meeting with a death too horrible to contemplate, and not knowing how speedily a similar fate awaited herself. She lay thus in a sort of trance, or tremulous expectancy, for some considerable time, while she could hear the work of destruction going on all around; to which work the savages had taken when they had completed their murders. But still they had not visited her, and she continued to lie, the prey to the most fearful mental agonies.

Sounds of rapidly approaching horsemen were then heard, and the blacks began to leave the scene of their bloody desolation for fear of the retribution which they expected from the approaching rescue. To Eleanor, though she was nigher to death than a sublinary existence, the sound was joyous; and she began to entertain hope that the relief would prove opportune for the saving of her friends, as she felt it already was for the rescue of herself. But oh! how unaccountable are the decrees of Providence. At the very moment when she imagined the house was vacated by the murderers the door of her room opened, and a hideous black monster literally besmeared with blood burst in, and with uplifted arm and bloody weapon, rushed to extinguish in her soul the flickering spark of life. The black was followed by another, also with a hand elevated and grasping a tomahawk. But the sight was more than Eleanor's shattered nerves could bear; and starting into a sitting posture on her bed, her tongue was loosened; she gave one piercing shriek, and sank back senseless half leaning over the edge of her couch. The fate, however, she had expected she did not meet with; for, instead of the glancing steel of the second black being imbrued with her blood, it was buried in the brain of the first, who sank to the floor a corpse.

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The cause of Eleanor's escape we may here explain to the reader. The frame of the door to her room was placed in immediate contiguity to that of the one which opened into the kitchen; and by some strange design of the builder this latter was made to open out into the hall. Thus when the servants opened it, and left it so, the fortuitous circumstance of its irregularity proved Eleanor's preservation; for when thrown back it entirely concealed the entrance to her room, and eluded almost completely the vigilance of the murderers. It was, as we have seen, just as they were retreating from the place that one of the stragglers accidentally discovered it; and, thinking that the spot had not been visited by either himself or his compeers, he entered to satisfy his curiosity by a hasty visit; which would assuredly have terminated the existence of Eleanor but for the timely blow dealt him by his fellow.

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This extraordinary internecine action may also require some elucidation; and we will dispel the mystery by an explanation. Barwang and his party upon their first visit to Strawberry Hill, when they met with their repulse, became convinced that their movements had been betrayed by one of their tribe, and they doubted not but that the betrayal emanated from Jemmy Davies. They therefore kept a watch upon him lest he should again carry information to Mr. Rainsfield, and preserved their own councils from his knowledge; so that, until they had actually started on their expedition, he was quite ignorant of their plans. When an opportunity offered, however, he followed them on their track up to the house; and, though he did not venture into the building, he kept hovering about in the hope that he might be able to render some assistance to the family. But not until the approaching sounds of horses' feet drew off the masses of the tribe did he deem it safe for his own security to enter. He did so; and, as he passed into the hall, he saw one of his countrymen opening the door of a room and stand for a moment in the aperture gazing fixedly in one direction. The glance of this savage's eye, as his own keen vision caught the momentary flash, told Jemmy Davies that vengeance gleamed from the other's orb, and in an instant he sprang after him, and saved an innocent life by the sacrifice of one worse than worthless and infamous. When he was convinced the house was empty of his countrymen, and being aware that if he were caught in the place by any white man the colour of his skin would be the warrant for his instant death, he took a hasty survey of the fearful scene of blood that was visible even in the partial darkness, and left the house by the back as two horsemen, riding rapidly up to the front, leapt from their saddles and rushed in. These two, as may be conjectured, were John Ferguson and Joey.

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Fearful as John had been of the nature of events he believed were transpiring the sight that met his gaze as he entered the dwelling struck him dumb with horror, and perfectly sick at heart, and paralysed at the bloody disclosure. The whole floor of the house was slippery with the gore of the murdered victims as it had been carried about by the feet of the murderers. He hastily struck a light from the materials he had about him; and, with the pulsations of his heart almost audible, made a survey of the habitation. The first things that he noticed were the bodies of Mr. and Mrs.

Billing, which had been dragged by the savages into the hall, possibly with the intention of consuming the whole in flames after they had finished their work; and then in the sitting-room he saw the signs of the barricade that had been hastily thrown up before the window. From that he hastened to the one which had in life been occupied by the amiable lady that had been mistress of the place, and there he witnessed the mangled remains of herself and her family. As he gazed upon the hardly to be recognised features of that friend who had so often greeted him with the cordial grasp of friendship he could not restrain the tears that in a flood coursed their way down his cheeks. Continuing his melancholy search he next entered the room of Eleanor, and almost stumbled over the carcass of the black who lay in the middle of the floor weltering in his blood. This sight caused him no little surprise; especially, when with a sad foreboding he approached the couch of that being he adored above all mundane objects, to find her pendent form though insensible was scathless. But it was not a moment to indulge in conjectures; he had discovered his idol in the midst of death still living. So placing the unconscious creature on the bed, and enveloping her in the clothes, he snatched her in his arms; and pressing her to his breast bore off the precious load.

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With the assistance of his attendant he mounted his horse; and despatching Joey instantly with injunctions to fly, if possible, to Alma for the doctor and bring him to Fern Vale, he turned his own horse's head homewards, and proceeded as fast as the animal with his additional burden could travel.

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Bright and beautiful the morning dawned as he rode towards his home; but serene as were the sublimities of nature their contemplation had no place in his mind. All his thoughts were centred in the inanimate form encircled by his arms. Thus he rode unconscious to all around, and would have so ridden to the end of his journey had not a faint sigh struck his ear; and he instantly stopped his horse to enable him to enjoy the sight of returning vitality to his much loved Eleanor. He gently removed the covering that he had placed over her face, when her melancholy eyes for a moment rested upon his. It was only for a moment, however, for they were instantly secluded from the light by the closing lids; and, considering it better not to agitate her with conversation, and satisfied for the time with the assurance of his hearing and vision, he impressed one rapturous kiss on her fair forehead, again covered her face from the morning air, and proceeded on his way.

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CHAPTER XII.

"All those rivers
That fed her veins with warm and crimson
streams
Frozen and dried up; if these be signs of
death,
Then is she dead.... But I will be true
E'en to her dust and ashes."

DECKER.

Mr. Rainsfield pursued his way homewards little anticipating the sight that awaited him on his arrival; but, owing to the heavy state of the roads from the saturation of the ground, he was only enabled to travel slowly. Consequently he perceived the flood coming down the Gibson long before he reached the crossing-place of the Wombi; and, knowing that there would be no use attempting a passage there, since the bridge had been swept away, he at once struck off for the Dingo Plains to get over by the upper crossing-place. By making this detour it was near morning before he approached the station.

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Upon his reaching home he at once went to the stable and attended to his horse, the first consideration of a bushman, and then bent his steps to the house, feeling an unaccountable sensation of awe, which the pervading solitude and death-like stillness inspired him with. This feeling he was ashamed to indulge in, and tried to banish it from his mind and deceive his conscience by attempting to whistle a lively air, while he submitted his right boot to a playful castigation with his riding-whip. All these stratagems, however, proved futile: a gloom had settled upon him which he could not shake off, and he hastened his steps to his dwelling with his heart in a perturbation that gave place to the most fearful apprehensions as he perceived the house open to free ingress. The truth at once burst upon him with overwhelming force, and he rushed like one demented into the room where he had expected to meet the embrace of his wife, but only to witness her mutilated remains surrounded by those of her children. He gazed upon their forms for some minutes in the uncertain light with a sad, though calm and almost stoical cast of countenance; and then, kneeling by the side of his wife's body, he parted her clotted hair from off

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her brow, which he stooped down and kissed, and, while dashing a scalding tear from his eye, thus apostrophised the fane of the departed spirit:

"And was it for this I left you, my darling Mary, to seek for you protection, and obtain assistance to drive the disturbers of our happiness from the land? Oh! that I could but have foreseen this, to have either preserved you and our poor little innocents, or perished while I shielded your heart with my breast. Curses on my cruel fate, and the blinding fancies of security which led me away from your side. Oh, Mary, Mary! more dear to me than life, to have lost you thus, butchered! by a set of ruthless savages, consumes my very heart. But you shall be revenged. By heaven! you shall." And, springing to his feet with clenched fists, and gazing into space as the whole expression of his countenance changed, he continued:

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"What is life to me now, deprived of all the ties that bound me to this earth? It shall be devoted to the cause of vengeance; and here, Mary! in the presence of your spirit, and in the sight of my Maker, I swear to be revenged upon all the blacks in this country; never shall one cross my path alive. I'll spare neither their old nor their young. I'll hunt them from their dens, like the vermin that they are. They shall be made to bite the dust. Their bodies shall rot, and their bones bleach in the sun. Never shall they rest until they are wholly exterminated, or my strength and life fail me; and I swear that so long as one black remains of all their race my vengeance shall not be satisfied. Hear me, Mary! while I pray to God for the strength of Hercules, and the age of Methuselah, that I may be a terror to their species, and they may learn to curse the day when first they tasted the blood of mine. And oh, Mary! if thou seest me from the portals of that abode where the eternal dwell, look down upon me and commend my work, help my weak arm; encourage my drooping spirit; be a light to beacon my path in the remainder of my gloomy passage through this world; and let not the cup of vengeance be removed from the lips of thy foul murderers until they have tasted of the very dregs. So now, my angel wife! my once fond and loving but now lost wife! sacrificed through thy husband's folly and neglect, if vengeance is sweet to thee thy spirit shall be appeased; for henceforth my name shall be one to strike dismay into the souls of blacks throughout the land. So help me God!"

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Having uttered this fearful oath, and calling down the aid of his Maker to assist him in its performance, Rainsfield left the room and the house a broken-hearted man; re-saddled his horse, which he mounted, and went he knew not whither. His state was truly piteous; his better and softer nature was in perpetual warfare with his fiendish feelings, which prompted nothing but a thirst for vengeance. The memory of his wife, and the sudden shock occasioned by her loss and fearful death, had at first subdued the evil passions of the mortal; and he had gazed upon the placid features of the corpse with a calm and settled grief. But as he awoke to a plainer perception of the horrors of the event, and what must have been the sufferings of his defenceless family, with the brutality of their hellish assailants, all softer feelings evanished before the sterner one revenge; which in the one moment of decision he determined should be the sole object of his future life. In this frame of mind he left his home, that had so lately been smiling and happy but now gloomy, bloody, and to be shunned; for he felt to dwell under that roof again was impossible. His home for the future would be under the canopy of heaven, and his life that of the avenger. Thus he left the house, misfortune having so overcome his reason that he had no idea of further inspection of the building, possibly believing that all had met with the same fate, not even to glance into the room of Eleanor; and he wandered forth absorbed in grief, without any definite notion of where he was to go, or how he was to dispose of the bodies.

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Towards noon of the following day he entered the township of Alma, and his horse stopping instinctively before the door of the "Woolpack" inn, he alighted; and allowed the animal to be taken from him while he mechanically entered the house. The news of the massacre had already spread through the country, while the thousand tongues of mercurial gossip had imparted to the original tragedy as many phases of horror as imagination could possibly invent. The fearful occurrence had arrested the attention, and absorbed all the interest of the residents of Alma; and they were in several knots in deep and earnest conclave, discussing the bloody event, as they saw the chief sufferer approaching their town.

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The loudest declamation, and the deepest uttered anathemas against the natives, were in an instant checked. The earnestly asseverated opinion, that the lives of the settlers would be perpetually in danger, unless the blacks were speedily exterminated,—the noisy declaration of some bold patriot, as he expressed his determination to declare eternal warfare against the savages, and even to enter upon the crusade single-handed if no one would lend him aid; with the faint voice of some more philanthropic polemic, who attempted to check the stream of exuberant passion, by palliating without defending (on the plea of retribution) the horrible murder,—were all hushed, and gave place to a heartfelt though silent sympathy as Mr. Rainsfield rode into the town. And even after he was lost to their vision, by ensconce in the "Woolpack," their conversations were resumed in a lower cadence, lest (even at a distance at which their most stentorian utterances could hardly have been distinguishable) the nature of their conversation should strike his ear and recall the subject of his grief.

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The news had reached them that morning by Joey when he arrived post-haste for the doctor. He had been fortunate in finding the resident son of Galen at home; and, obeying the injunctions of his master, had delivered his message, and returned with him immediately. Short as had been his stay it was quite long enough to enable the inhabitants to elicit from him the facts of which the reader is acquainted. They learnt with some degree of satisfaction that one of the family still retained life, and would possibly be able, at some time, to recount the circumstances of the massacre. Thus, in the presence of so much to engender the feeling of compassion, a morbid

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curiosity to learn all the details of horror seized upon the minds of the good people of Alma. But such is the nature of man; selfishness reigns supreme, and shines forth in all his motions and actions.

When Joey returned with the doctor he deviated from the beaten track, to cross the Wombi by the upper fords; thinking that his companion might object to the more dangerous one of the lower. Rainsfield, on the contrary, in his journey, never dreaming of dangers or difficulties, had taken the lower; hence the parties had missed one another. This caused the gossips of Alma to wonder greatly what had brought him away from his house; especially as they had heard that he had been absent at the time of the outrage, and must have since visited the scene, and met the doctor and messenger on the road. But they were unacquainted with the circumstance that had prevented the meeting, and they were destined, at least at that time, to remain in ignorance; for the landlord of the inn to whom they had recourse, rough and unfeeling as he appeared, had too much respect for the grief of his visitor to attempt obtaining any information from him. [334]

The landlord, without enquiring from him if he would take any meal, prepared the table for a repast, and placed on it some edibles, with a bottle of brandy and some water. Then, without uttering a syllable, he left the room and the sorrow-stricken man to an uninterrupted solitude. Rainsfield sat for some time gazing fixedly on the viands before him without attempting or desiring to partake of them; retaining an unaltered position on each occasion that he was surveyed by the sympathising host through the key-hole of the door. In this state he might have remained, until exhausted nature had induced a return to consciousness, had not his attention been attracted by the arrival of an extensive cavalcade at the door of the inn. Glancing his eye languidly over the features of the riders as they were dismounting he instantly recognised amongst the group the person and voice of Bob Smithers; and the object of the party was at once made apparent. [335]

New life was at once infused into his veins; the blood once more mantled his cheek, and fire was imparted to his eye, as he, with compressed lip and determined visage, leapt from his seat and strode to the doorway.

"Show those gentlemen in here, landlord," he said, addressing that individual, as he was ushering the newly-arrived travellers into a separate room.

"I thought, sir, you would prefer to be alone," replied the landlord, "so I was going to let you have the parlour to yourself."

"Never mind, let them come in here," replied Rainsfield.

The party by this time had entered the room they were shown to, so the landlord turned to them, and said:

"If you would like to step into the other room, gents, you will find it more comfortable; there is only one other gent there, perhaps you know him," he continued in an under tone, "it is Mr. Rainsfield." [336]

A low murmur ran through the party at the mention of the name, though it was unheard by Rainsfield himself, he having turned again into the parlour. The name of Rainsfield was repeated by them all in a tone of voice that unmistakeably indicated a sorrowful compassion. They were all squatters in the district and friends of Smithers, who had collected them to go to the assistance of their neighbour for his protection against the aborigines. They had heard as they came along the fearful news of the massacre, and had accelerated their speed to arrive on the scene of action as soon as possible, in the hope of finding some of the family living, or being in time to afford some assistance, either in the preservation of their lives, the protection of their property, or the chastisement of their murderers.

Smithers instantly proposed to join Mr. Rainsfield, and at once adjourned to the other room, followed by his companions; and, as he entered and advanced with extended hand, but without venturing to speak, Rainsfield grasped the proffered token of friendship, while he said: "Too late, Smithers! too late! except for revenge, and that is all I hope to live for." [337]

"And in which we can now only serve you," replied his companion. "But we will organize some plan of operation; we count fifteen now, and are sufficient to be irresistible to the whole tribe of blacks. In the meantime let the landlord prepare dinner, and then we will discuss matters quietly. I think you know all our friends here?"

The form of introduction being gone through where the parties were not acquainted, and the shaking of hands where they were, the necessary instructions were given to the landlord to prepare something for the company, and they fell into a desultory conversation previous to entering upon their plans. It is not our intention to weary the reader with a verbose report of the initiatory proceedings of the party, and will therefore merely state that they formed themselves into a mutual protection society, with the professed object of combining to repel the encroachments of the blacks, though in reality to hunt them down like dogs. For the furtherance of this scheme they bound themselves by stringent oaths to let none escape them, but to kill all they should come across. Each individual swore to take active part in the process of destruction so as to make all equally implicated. They vowed, by the most solemn obligations, never to make any disclosure that would criminate any of the society; while, before any neophyte could be admitted within the periphery of their mysterious bonds, it was determined he should be subjected to an ordeal that would protect the members from the possibility of any disclosure that [338]

would cause their amenability to the law.

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In the course of conversation with the landlord Smithers learnt that one of the family (which his informant could not tell him) was still living, and that a messenger, supposed from Fern Vale, had come over that morning for the doctor. Smithers communicated this to Rainsfield, who then remembered for the first time that he had not visited the room of Eleanor, and therefore inferred that it must be she, he having had too clear a demonstration of the total absence of life in the bodies of his wife and children. This he mentioned to Smithers, and they both agreed that Eleanor must have been discovered by some of the Fergusons, who had removed her to their own house, and sent for the doctor. They therefore determined to adhere to their original plan of starting early on the following morning, after taking a night's rest where they were, it being needed by most of the party as well as by their horses.

On the following morning they were early on the road, so that few saw them leave the township. But though nothing had been said by any of the Society respecting the object of their journey it was pretty shrewdly guessed at, if not positively known, by most of the inhabitants; and it was evident to them no body of men, armed with rifles and revolvers, could be travelling to the scene of a murderous outrage with any peaceable intent. The sympathies, however, of most went with them; and even though some of their number had been disposed in simple argument to feel for the blacks, none dared to incur public opprobrium by making any representations of the supposed hostilities to official quarters. The Society itself proceeded on its way very quietly, its members being mostly absorbed in sketching out, mentally, plans of the campaign on which they were entering, so that the journey was almost entirely performed in silence.

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When they reached the station its appearance was quite desolate; no signs of life were perceptible, and the stillness of death spread around its influence, which was sensibly felt by all. The house was closed to all ingress, and on the door was nailed a card bearing the words: "Let Mr. Rainsfield proceed to Fern Vale the instant on his arrival." Rainsfield read the sentence, and at once guessed the import; he perceived that when the murder had been discovered by the Fergusons they had removed the bodies thither, if possible, to await his arrival before interment; and he determined to go on at once, though, before departing, he desired once more to gaze upon the rooms through which the steps of his wife and the merry voices of his children had so lately resounded, but which were now tenantless, desolate, and bloody. An entrance was effected by a back window, and the party admitted; when great was the surprise of Mr. Rainsfield to find no sign or vestige of the fearful crime that had there so lately been committed. He read in all this the kind hand of his neighbours, and his heart smote him in the midst of his grief for the manner in which he had behaved to young Ferguson. To his friends he pointed out with a melancholy precision the spots where he had found the various bodies, described their position and their mutilated condition, and then wandered through the rooms with an abstracted air conjuring in his imagination the scenes that were passed, never more to return, and peopling them in his fancy with those loved forms whose spirits had fled to the source from whence they sprang.

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His friends did not attempt to interrupt the gratification of this melancholy pleasure, but allowed him to be the first to propose a retreat, which, when he did, they were ready to agree to. The whole party then left the house to proceed to Fern Vale; and while they are on the road we will precede them and take a momentary glance at the doings there, both at the exact period of our narrative and also retrospectively for a few hours.

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John Ferguson, when he bore the all but lifeless body of Eleanor into his own house, arrested the volatile reception of his sister with an expression of countenance that betokened deep sorrow. To the poor girl the look was unaccountable; she had only risen the instant her brother had arrived, and had heard nothing of his approach; consequently she was a little surprised at his presence. But when she was about to rush into his embrace his manner appalled her, while she was equally surprised at the singular burden he carried in his arms, for in the manner in which he had enveloped the body of Eleanor the form was undefinable. John, however, saved his sister the necessity of any questioning, by saying:

"Don't ask me any questions at present that will require any explanation of the cause of my unexpected appearance with this almost lifeless form. Lead the way to your room, Kate, for I must place it under your charge; and I can assure you it requires your tenderest care. I have already sent for a doctor, and expect him here in the course of the day."

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The astonished girl preceded her brother to her room, and, as John laid his burden gently on his sister's bed, he uncovered the face and disclosed to the vision of Kate the pallid features of the unconscious Eleanor.

"Oh, John! dear John! tell me what is the meaning of this! what fearful thing has happened?" Kate passionately exclaimed.

"A dreadful event, Kate, as you may imagine," replied her brother, "by my bearing that dear creature in such a state, and bringing her here to be ministered to by you. She is now destitute of friends; but I cannot tell you more at present, your nerves could not sustain the recital of the horrors of the tale. I know that I need not ask you to bestow upon Eleanor your utmost attention and most affectionate sympathy; but I must caution you, should she return to consciousness, to make no allusion to the circumstances of her misfortune; nor do you attempt to elicit anything from her; rather try to soothe and calm her troubled spirit."

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"Oh, poor dear Eleanor! what cruel fate has put you in this awful predicament?" cried Kate, when

she burst into tears and buried her face in the clothes by the side of her friend.

In the meantime John left the room, and, proceeding to the kitchen, he requested their female servant to go to the assistance of her mistress. Here he found the servants who had escaped from the massacre at Strawberry Hill relating to the astonished and horrified listeners as much of the fearful outrage as they had witnessed, and what they imagined to be the conclusion. But their narrative, though dreadful, was not a tithe of the reality. He next sought his brother, to whom he related the sad events, and commissioned him to break the tale to Kate in as mild a way as possible. Then he informed him that he had left the sheep at the Wombi and suggested that he and some of the men should go over and assist the fellows that were with them, as they would necessarily be short-handed, especially for the portion of the flock that had not crossed the river. He then hastily partook of some refreshment, and taking a few of his own men, and the servants and those who had escaped from Strawberry Hill, he returned to that station to remove, if possible, the signs of the outrage, and bring the bodies of the victims to his own place; so that if Rainsfield should have heard of the circumstance before his arrival he would not be maddened by a sight of the murderous destruction.

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The house was speedily cleansed of all vestiges of blood. Similar stains were removed from the corpses. The house was arranged in order, and closed up, and the party left it as John affixed to the door the card we have already noticed. The cavalcade moved slowly from the deserted mansion, and, as it proceeded on its way with its load of inert mortality, it was overtaken by the doctor and Joey from Alma. To the latter, in a few words, he gave directions, and left him to follow with the bodies, while he and the doctor pushed on.

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In the meantime Eleanor had at frequent intervals opened her eyes and gazed vacantly on all the objects around her, including even the face of her friend, whom she never for an instant appeared to recognise. To Kate's tender soothing attempts she took no heed; but on each occasion, with a faint sigh and shudder, relapsed into her former torpor. This state continued until the arrival of the doctor, who, though he did not express his fears, entertained serious apprehensions for her life; and afterwards communicated to John his alarm, that, though her corporeal system might recover, the shock to her nerves had been so great that he feared her mind might give way and either become impaired or totally demented. He recommended her room to be kept dark, and as cool and as quiet as possible; and during her waking intervals, her mind to be as much diverted as could be. He then prescribed certain medicines, amongst them powerful soporifics, and Joey was instantly despatched, upon his arrival, to Alma to get them compounded, while the doctor remained by the patient to watch her malady.

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On the following day Rainsfield presented himself at Fern Vale. Smithers could not be persuaded to approach the house; therefore he and his friends encamped themselves on the creek to wait until their companion's return. As Rainsfield approached the house he was met at the door by John Ferguson; and, as he felt the warm pressure of the young man's hand, it was only with an effort he prevented the tears from oozing from his eyes. John led him to the room where lay his family; and, leaving him for a few moments to his own silent meditations over their lifeless forms, walked out on the verandah, from whence he saw the party that had accompanied the bereaved man. He was for a minute wondering who they could be, and why they did not come up to the house, when he felt the touch of Mr. Rainsfield on his arm, who said to him:

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"How much I owe you for this kindness my heart is too full to explain even if my words could utter it. But believe me so long as I live it shall be gratefully remembered. I had seen them a few hours before in all the horrors of their death. It was a sight to dry up the fountains of a kindly nature in any heart, and made me swear to live a life of perpetual vengeance."

"Ah, my dear sir," exclaimed John, "it is ever difficult to meet with resignation the chastisements of an all-wise Providence; but we should learn to look upon all His dispensations as tending to a beneficial end."

"I'll not pretend to argue with you," replied the other; "but my nature and feelings will not admit the embrace of such an immaculate creed. I must be avenged!"

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John, in the then state of his companion's mind, did not attempt to impress the precept as he believed the thirst for vengeance would slacken as the poignancy of his grief wore off.

"And Eleanor," said Rainsfield; "what is her fate?"

A shade came over John's brow as he replied: "It is not yet decided. She is in a most dangerous state, and the doctor is now here attending her. He considers her case so precarious that he is remaining for some days to be constantly near in his watch for the turning-point which shall decide between life and death. I will ascertain if she can be seen;" and John left the spot.

Upon his return he led the way to her room; and, as Rainsfield followed him, he asked, "Why didn't you bring your friends up with you to the house?"

"They preferred stopping at a distance and awaiting my return," he replied.

"But you are not going to leave us immediately," exclaimed John; "and they cannot think of camping out there while we can make some sort of a shake-down here."

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"I fear the presence of some of them at least would be objectionable to you," replied Rainsfield; "and I have no doubt they would prefer to remain where they are."

"Nonsense," cried John; "I could not think of permitting such a thing. May I ask who are those who would not accept of what hospitality I can offer them?"

"Smithers, Graham, and Brown," replied Rainsfield.

John ushered Rainsfield into the room where Eleanor lay still and motionless in a bed, at the side of which sat her watchful friend and nurse, who rose and left her seat as Rainsfield approached. He stood silently looking on the placid features of his cousin, which, but for the gentle heaving of the snowy linen that covered her breast, would have appeared as if inexorable death had already left the impress of his hand.

In the meantime John walked down to where the party of gentlemen lay stretched on the ground; and, addressing those whom he knew in a manner as if nothing had ever happened to mar the good feeling and fellowship that should have existed between them, invited the party up to the house. He prevented any refusal from Smithers (who could not dissemble his shame and mortification) by taking him cordially by the hand, and requesting that he would not give him the pain of a refusal, and of seeing him encamped with his friends within sight of his windows. He stated the accommodation he could afford them was not very commodious, but he would consider it unsocial if they did not accept it. The consequence of this appeal was that within a few minutes their horses were running in an adjoining paddock and they were all walking up together to the Fergusons' domicile. [352]

The next day was devoted to the interment of the earthly remains of the victims of the Strawberry Hill massacre; and, as that beautifully sublime and solemn ritual of the Anglican Church was read by one of the party over the bodies they were lowering respectively in their rough and hastily-constructed encasements into that lodgment where the grim tyrant retains his grasp until the last trumpet shall summon the dead from the caverns of the earth; and, as the heavy clod resounded with a hollow dullness on the lids of the coffins, more than one eye was moistened, and more than one tear rolled its course down the cheek of some of the strongest minded of the manly group. The grave was speedily filled in, and the party returned to the house to partake of a repast; after which they took their departure. [353]

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CHAPTER XIII.

"O! pardon me thou bleeding piece of
Earth
That I am meek and gentle with these
butchers."

JULIUS CÆSAR, *Act 3, Sc. 1.*

When "the Society" left Fern Vale they jaunted leisurely on for a short distance, when they were overtaken by Sawyer and his son-in-law, the notable Captain Jones, who made up to Mr. Rainsfield and told him they had come out to join his party against the blacks. Though these volunteers were not exactly the sort of men "the Society" would have desired to enroll they were determined looking characters, and had the appearance of those, who, if they could be trusted, could be made serviceable in any desperate act. Therefore their aid was accepted, and they were forthwith admitted into the confidence of the brethren. Such is the influence of either perpetrated or contemplated crime that it breaks down all social demarcation and collects in the bonds of unity and friendship the most heterogeneous natures of man. [355]

The cavalcade had proceeded about half-way towards Strawberry Hill when some distance in advance of them a bullock crossed the road followed by a black on horseback at a hard gallop. Both animals Rainsfield at once recognised as his own; and, dashing spurs into his horse, he joined in the chase, followed by the remainder of the party, with the intention of sending one of his family's destroyers to a last account. The bullock ran with his head carried low and his tail erect at a speed which for some time kept him considerably in advance of his pursuer; but after a while his pace relaxed and the superior mettle of the horse soon brought him alongside the bovine fugitive. As the animals ran side by side the rider seized the uplifted tail of the bullock in a firm grasp, while he stimulated his horse to additional exertion, and with the application of very little force he tilted the beast over its own head, and it fell with its own velocity, breaking its neck. [356]

The black was quite conscious all this time that he was the object of pursuit; so giving a glance at his fallen prey to ascertain if his work had been effectual, and another behind him to see if his pursuers were in an unpleasant proximity, he continued his career through the bush until he arrived at the banks of the river Gibson. Into it he plunged without hesitation, and slipping from

his saddle, as the horse entered the water, he held on by the bridle and stirrup, and swam by the animal's side. The black kept his eye upon the bank he had just left until he saw approaching through the bush a number of horsemen; who, as they reached the edge of river, presented their guns and fired. The next moment the horse rolled over in the stream, dyeing the water with his blood, and floated lifeless down the current.

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Nothing was visible, however, of the black. He had sunk ere their pieces were discharged; and the party knowing that he was untouched for some minutes watched vigilantly for his reappearance, but in vain. Barwang (for they had discovered it was he) did not show himself above the surface of the water; and they thinking that he was floating down concealed in some way with the carcass of the horse, followed it to watch. It at the same time occurred to them that he might have dived and was swimming for the other bank, assisting himself in eluding them by first floating some distance down the river. They had thus gone down the bank some two or three hundred yards, when they heard a loud hoarse laugh from behind them; and, turning to the direction whence the sound proceeded, they saw on the opposite side, some distance above where they stood, him for whose reappearance they were watching. Barwang had escaped them by swimming against the current and not with it as they had anticipated he would; and once safely on the margin of the stream he felt he was secure, and stood pointing at his pursuers in derision and defiance. A dozen pieces were instantly pointed at him by the disappointed party; but he with another loud laugh darted into the scrub and, before the report of their guns was heard, was evanescent.

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The chagrined company then proceeded to Strawberry Hill, where Rainsfield proposed to lodge them; and where they would fix upon their future plans of action.

That night the Society sat in grave debate, and various were the schemes proposed to effect visitation on the blacks of an exterminating retribution. The members at length became weary of making propositions that met with no support from the body, and were beginning to be silent when Dr. Graham renewed the energies of the meeting by remarking:

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"I'll tell you what it is all you fellows! you'd better 'keep your eyes on the picture.'"

All the eyes of the assemblage if not kept on the imaginary picture that haunted the brain of this disciple of Æsculapius were at least kept attentively fixed on the features of the speaker, who continued. "See here! what is the good of the whole of us sitting here and looking at one another? There won't be a black in that scrub to-morrow; so if we don't go at them at once, they'll escape us as that scoundrel did to-day. They will be sure to know what we are here for, and will make themselves scarce at once; and if we once let them slip us we need never expect to get at them again for they are sure to take up their abode among the hills, gullies, or scrubs, where we could not follow them."

"But is the river crossable?" asked one.

"Rainsfield will tell you," replied the Doctor.

"I have not been at the ford for some time," said Rainsfield, "and do not remember the usual depth of water. But the river has now gone down considerably, and I have no doubt it can be crossed; at any rate it shall soon be ascertained for I will do it myself this night in your presence so that you can judge by my success or failure."

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"Right," said Graham. "Then we all try it together, and that too as you say this very night. At once! say I. I go; so let who likes follow me:" and he started from his seat.

The movement then became general, and in a short time the whole cavalcade were again on the move in the direction of the crossing-place near which Barwang had escaped them. About an hour afterwards the party were mustering in a state of saturation upon the edge of the scrub, after having passed through the still swollen stream, which they had had to swim. They noiselessly dismounted from their horses, arranged themselves on the bank of the river, fastened their steeds to adjacent trees, and then threaded the scrub under the guidance of Rainsfield, to the camp of the blacks; which they speedily distinguished by the glare of the fires. The party then halted and arranged to divide themselves into two companies, one to advance from the spot where they then stood, while the other made a detour so as to encompass the camp. Then upon a given signal, they were to fire alternately into the midst of the blacks, and so long as any of the unfortunate wretches remained stationary to continue reloading and firing; but to close in upon them with revolvers if the victims showed any disposition to break through the compass of their rifles.

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They then advanced, and as quickly as possible encircled the unconscious aborigines, who lay, some in their gunyahs, and some stretched round the fires. All were in a deep sleep, into which they appeared to have fallen in a state of inert satiety, as was evident from the scattered remains of roasted meat that strewed the ground around them. Not a sound was to be heard in the whole camp except the sonorous breathing of the supine gorgers; for even those watchful monitors, the dogs, had benefited by this rare occasion, by indulging in a glut that inoculated them with the same somnolent ineptitude.

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In a few moments after the Society had spread itself in the array of attack a low whistle was heard; when, almost simultaneously, eight flashes describing a semicircle on one side of the camp momentarily lit the dark avenues of the bush. They were instantly followed by a report, whose echoes mingled with the shrieks and dying groans of the wounded, and in an instant the

unscathed portion of the prostrate forms stood erect; while the gunyahs disgorged their living inmates, called forth in their consternation and half unconscious lethargy, to offer marks for their concealed executioners. Other eight shots then told their murdering effects upon the huddled mass of the blacks, who remained in a perfect state of bewilderment hardly knowing which way to turn. Many rushed in the direction opposite to that whence the last fire had emanated, but only to fall by the shots of the first division of the Society, who, having thrown themselves down to avoid the chance of their colleagues' fire, had reloaded, and were ready for action. Again and again was this manœuvre repeated, and discharge followed discharge. The carnage had commenced, and many of the blacks sought a temporary shelter in their gunyahs, while the majority, not knowing what to do, remained in the open area, to be shot down by the rifles of the whites; who, when they tired of reloading their pieces, closed in upon the camp, and setting fire to their bark gunyahs drove the poor wretches from their retreat, and butchered them indiscriminately with their revolvers.

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One of the assailants, however, while dealing destruction around him, was active in searching for one above all others of the blacks he prayed to find. That searcher was Rainsfield, and the object of his concern we need hardly say, was Barwang. Rainsfield had scanned the features of every black, as he buried a ball in each victim's heart; but without recognising the monster for whose blood he thirsted, and without which he would never be appeased. He searched long, but in vain. The fiendish leader of the tribe he could not discover; and he began to entertain fears that the wretch's cunning had enabled him to elude his grasp. Almost worn out with his work of death he was about relinquishing the search in despair when he spied a dark form creeping from a heap of bodies, and crawling away in the direction of the adjacent scrub. The fitful glare of a fire fell upon the features of the crouching form and disclosed the furtive glance of Barwang to the eyes of him who longed in his very soul for the meeting.

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The recognition was instantaneous on both sides, and at the same moment that Rainsfield sprang forward and fired at the black the other leaped from the ground and in an instant, poising a spear in his hand, buried it in the body of his antagonist. Rainsfield tore the weapon from his breast, and seeing that the black was not killed by the shot he had fired at him, and it being the last he had, without time to reload, he drew his knife and sprang upon his enemy. The struggle was fierce, though short, for both the athletes were powerful men, and were determined upon each other's death, even if they perished themselves while effecting it. The black caught the right arm of his opponent as it descended with the weapon that was intended to terminate his existence, and with the other hand he seized the throat of Rainsfield, into which he buried his fingers like the talons of an eagle.

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Rainsfield taxed his strength to the utmost to disengage the hand from his throat, and save himself from strangulation while he effected the death of the black. Each strained and struggled as they, locked in each other's grasp, panted to eliminate the spirit from each other's bodies. After some time they stopped to gain breath, while they for a few moments silently eyed one another with looks of vengeance and rage. The conflict, however, was speedily renewed with fearful energy. Every nerve was strained to the utmost tension in both frames; when, in a moment, the black made several rapid lunges, battering with his hard cranium the breast of his foe; at the same time that Rainsfield managed to bury the knife up to its handle in the neck of Barwang. The loss of blood arising from the previous wounds, and these excessive strainings and shocks, soon produced their effects. Exhaustion speedily ensued; and the two belligerents, still firmly knitted in a death grasp, sank to the ground never again to rise in life.

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In the meantime the work of destruction progressed all around with unabated activity until no living black remained on whom to wreak a vengeance. Nearly the whole tribe had been sacrificed, for few escaped into the bush among the general slaughter. When the members of the Society contemplated the result of their labours they felt perfectly satisfied with the extent of their reparation, and surveyed the scene with a complacency ill befitting the work. How little did they remember that a work similar to this in result had been the cause of the reprisal that had brought desolation to the Rainsfield family! and less did they consider that they were incurring the displeasure of an indignant Maker. No! they thought not of the judgments of Divine wrath: the victims, in their imaginations, were only blacks, whose extermination was an ordination of Providence, and an advantage to civilisation. Besides which they looked upon the slaughter they had been engaged in as a just punishment to the savages for their perfidious treachery in the murder which they, the Society, were unable to prevent, but which they could, and did avenge. By this sort of reasoning they quieted their consciences, if any had been disturbed, and attempted to justify themselves in the eyes of their God.

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The forensic vision was that which most troubled them, for they knew, in the eye of the law of their country, they were guilty of an act which, if discovered, would cost them an atonement by the surrender of their lives. But they were aware that, with the exception of their own members, none could criminate them; while the probability of such an event occurring was very remote, for all were equally implicated. While, at the same time, the distance they were removed from the seat of government, and the ineffectual means supplied for the protection of the settlers in the border districts, would partly justify them in being armed in the present affray; and the magistrates of the territory being all of their own body, and consequently sympathising with their movements, they experienced very little apprehension of danger.

We may here remark that this is not the only case in the land where similar influences have actuated the settlers to take summary vengeance on the blacks, for reprisals and peccadillos in themselves insignificant. Hundreds, ah! we may say thousands, have been shot with perfect

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impunity; and we hesitate not to say thousands more will continue to meet the same sad fate, until the last of the race shall have vanished from this terrestrial sphere. Yet we firmly believe their blood will sink into the soil, and at a future age, when the people have long since become extinct, will it cry aloud for vengeance; and woe to the land if the great Governor of the universe should listen to that cry.

The party when about to leave the ground suddenly missed their companion Rainsfield, and, thinking that he might still be engaged on some operations of retribution in another part of the camp, called him aloud by name; but without meeting with any response. They waited impatiently for his return but after a time finding he did not return they commenced a search in the neighbourhood of the camp, at the same time that they made the bush resound with their cooeys to attract him if he had strayed. Still to no purpose were their calls, for no responsive cry echoed to them; and not until they returned to the camp weary and dispirited as the first coruscations from the solar rays darted their luminous salutations over the eastern horizon did they discover his body with that of his last antagonist. His position, and the spear wound in his body, sufficiently explained his fate; and silently and sorrowfully he was removed, and carried by them to where their horses were secured. They then recrossed the river on their way back to Strawberry Hill, which had now become destitute of an owner.

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Shortly after their passage of the stream the cavalcade was met by John Ferguson, who had heard the firing, and guessing its import had ridden over for the purpose of inspecting the scene and satisfying himself upon the nature and extent of the slaughter he knew must have taken place. But when he saw the returning party he rode up to them and addressing himself to Doctor Graham, who happened to be riding a little in advance, he said:

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"May I be permitted to enquire the nature of the firing which was carried on in the scrub last night?"

"Oh, certainly, sir," replied the Doctor, "you are permitted to ask whatever you like, for this is a free country. If you want to know the cause of the reports you heard last night I may inform you for your satisfaction that our friend Rainsfield had a warrant for the apprehension of Barwang, and that he attempted to put it in force, while we volunteered to assist and protect him. As might have been imagined we were attacked by the villains, and had to fire upon them for our own defence. In the affray we lost our friend Rainsfield, for he was killed by the wretch he was attempting to secure, and who at the same time met with his deserts."

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"Rainsfield is dead, did you say?" enquired John in hurried tones; "is life perfectly extinct?"

"Yes, dead!" replied the other, "as any herring. Go look at him yourself;" and he pointed behind him to where followed a horse with the body thrown across the saddle. "You can see there for yourself, where you may keep your eye on the picture."

John silently surveyed the pale, discoloured, and distorted features which he had seen only a few hours before in life and perfect health, and with a deep drawn sigh, as he turned away, he muttered: "Poor fellow! such a terrible doom."

The company then proceeded to the house of the Fergusons, when the melancholy obsequies of the previous day were repeated; after which the Society broke up, having ensured themselves against further interruptions from the blacks by the success of their first onslaught; and, although they arranged to be ready upon any emergency, they had no anticipation of any future necessity.

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We must now in the course of our narrative precipitate our readers over a period of some six months after the events we have just related, which interval was passed with the occurrence of few circumstances worth detailing. Tom Rainsfield had been hastily recalled from town, but had not arrived until after the final scene of the tragedy had been enacted. The horrors of the events came upon him with such a shock, and so subdued his spirit, that it was some time before he could school himself to comprehend their full extent; and not until some weeks had elapsed could he bring his mind to the level of mundane matters, and then only with a melancholy feeling did he set to work to put the station in order.

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CHAPTER XIV.

"In smoothest terms his speech he
wove,
Of endless friendship, faith, and
love;
She listened with a blush and sigh,
His suit was warm, his hopes were
high."

On a beautifully mild afternoon in that loveliest of Australian seasons, the transition between winter and summer, there reclined in an easy chair, on the verandah of the Fern Vale cottage, a young girl whose pale though handsome features seemed to be invested with an angelic air as they were contrasted with the deep mourning in which she was attired. We need hardly explain to the reader that this was Eleanor Rainsfield. At one side of her sat our hero, attempting to relieve the weary hours of the invalid by some light and amusing reading, and on the other side sat his sister, who, while she was listening to her brother, was engaged in some of that description of work which constitutes at the same time young ladies' toil and amusement.

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During Eleanor's gradual return to convalescence John Ferguson had been assiduous in his endeavours to keep her mind diverted from the contemplation of her grief; and, forgetful of all his past resolutions to think of her only as a seraph exalted above his possession, their constant contiguity, if possible, more than ever made havoc in his heart, immersed him more than ever deeper in the sea of love, and made him yield a willing sacrifice to the ecstatic delirium of his dream.

The attention of the trio, at the moment we have visited them, was suddenly attracted by the sounds of an approaching horseman, and looking up they perceived Bob Smithers riding wildly towards the house. Eleanor instantly rose from her chair; and, leaning upon Kate, entered the sitting-room, while she said to John: "I expect the object of Mr. Smithers' visit is an interview with me, and if he desires it I will see him." Then addressing her friend, she said: "Leave me, dearest Kate, for the few minutes he is here. I don't expect he will stay long."

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In another instant Smithers pulled up before the house; and, throwing his bridle over the fence, he strode up to John, who was waiting for him with a welcome and an extended hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Smithers?" he said. "It is some time since you honoured us with a visit. I hope you're well."

"I wish to see Miss Rainsfield," replied Smithers, without heeding the proffered hand or the inquiry after his health.

John felt rather chagrined at the want of civility on the part of his guest; and, pointing to the half-opened window of the room in which Smithers could find the lady he desired to see, he turned upon his heel and walked out of hearing.

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What was the nature of John's thoughts that this visit of Smithers gave rise to we will not attempt to divine, though we may safely assume they were of no pleasing nature from the cloud that came over his countenance as he left the house. And yet a gleam of hope would at intervals attempt to break through the gloom. As he stood leaning over the fence in front of the house, thus ruminating over the circumstance and its contingencies, he was startled by the precipitate approach of Smithers, who, clenching his fist and shaking it at him in a menacing attitude, exclaimed: "This is your work; but, by G—, you shall repent of ever having interfered in my private affairs." After the delivery of this minatory declaration the infuriated individual mounted his horse and galloped from the station.

John remained for a few minutes musing upon the strange address he had just heard until a faint appreciation of the cause flashed across his mind, and, his heart beating with salient palpitations, he entered the house to solve the mystery. With this intent he walked into the sitting-room, but found it empty. Eleanor had retired, and he was about to leave it again in search of his sister when his eye rested on an open note lying on the floor. The superscription, he perceived, was—"To Mr. Robert Smithers;" and in its caligraphy he at once detected the tracing of Eleanor's hand, and saw a solution of the mystery even before he glanced at the epistle's contents. If his heart beat quickly with pleasing apprehensions before his curiosity prompted him to pick up and read the note its proper functions were almost destroyed by the violent palpitations as his eyes devoured the following lines:—

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DEAR SIR,—I hardly know how to break to you the subject on which I wish to address you. When I say it is with regard to our engagement you will understand what I mean, more especially when I tell you that I think, for both of our sakes, it were wise to annul it. To recount to you all the causes that have actuated me in the establishment of this desire would only be to reiterate all your various acts of contumely to myself and friends, and to relate all my daily sufferings. I will not say that I never loved you. When I was induced to consent to become your wife I would have endeavoured to have placed my whole heart at your disposal; but your conduct has not only been such as to estrange from you the most forgiving nature, but towards me it has been absolutely cruel.

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I say this not to stigmatize you for your ill-treatment of me, but to endeavour to show you that you can entertain no regard for me; and, in the absence of all mutual affection, such an union as ours would only entail misery on both of us. You will therefore perceive that it will be better for us to forget the relationship that has existed, and remain independent of one another.

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I bear you no ill-will, and desire to maintain a friendship for yourself and your kind relatives; but beyond the light of a friend I never can consent to regard you. So there will be no use of your attempting to alter my determination; it is already fixed.—Yours truly,

ELEANOR RAINSFIELD.

John's astonishment when he read this was only equalled by his raptures; and it was not until he had twice re-read the note that he could withdraw his eyes from feasting on the blissful lines. "She has then discarded Smithers," he said to himself, "and there is hope for me." If there needed but one rivet to clench the fetters that bound the captive heart of our hero it was now fastened. He gave himself up like a voluptuary to the indulgence of his greatest earthly pleasure, the dissipation of love's charm, and the realization of his fondest hopes and wildest dreams; and, in the delirium of delight, his spirit ascended in imagination into the seventh heaven. He was, however, speedily brought to a recollection of his existence in this terraqueous globe by his sister shaking his arm while she exclaimed:

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"Why, what is making you so absent, John? I have spoken to you four times, and you have taken no notice of me."

"Have you, Kate?" replied John. "Well, I did not hear you, for I was thinking when you addressed me."

"That was evident," replied the girl. "But tell me, John, what could have brought that man Smithers here? He has terribly upset poor Eleanor, and she has been obliged to go and lie down. I quite hate that horrid fellow, and wish he would never show his face here again."

"I don't think it is very probable he ever will again, Kate," replied her brother.

"Well, I hope not. But what letter is that you have got in your hand?" said the girl as she glanced over the epistle that hung listlessly in the hand of her musing brother, who had attempted to conceal it, but not before Kate had spied the address. "Oh, show me the letter, John, dear John!" she continued. "I see it is addressed to that man, and from Eleanor I am sure; so it will explain all about it. Do show it to me."

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Her brother put it into her hands, and she read it with unqualified delight. Then looking up into his face, she exclaimed: "I am so delighted, John;" and, throwing her arms around her brother's neck, she kissed him in the exuberance of her joy, after which she bounded from the room, retaining possession of the cherished note.

For the remainder of that day Eleanor confined herself to her room, but on the following forenoon she came out, with her pale, marble features, looking in John's eyes more lovely than ever. They were presently seated together, as was their wont, in the shade of the verandah; but somehow, on this occasion, the reading was not prosecuted with such spirit as usual, nor listened to with the accustomed interest, while the conversation was equally vapid. Eleanor and John thus sat for some time alone, Kate being absent on her household duties, and William out on the station, without hardly uttering a word, until John, mustering sufficient courage to enter upon the subject that wholly engrossed his mind, without any preface, said:

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"I picked up a letter of yours in the room yesterday, Eleanor, after Mr. Smithers' departure."

A deep crimson mantled the cheek of his pale companion as she replied: "I know it John; Kate has told me all."

John gazed upon the features of the dear girl at his side, and met her eyes as they were raised from her lap to rest upon his face. He rapturously exclaimed: "Dear Eleanor if I could but tell you how dearly I love you I—" But he proceeded no further; a glance from the lustrous orbs of his companion had penetrated his heart, and he was silenced. Was it in fear? No! he had understood the glance, and comprehended its hidden secret. He was silenced, but it was to impress a virgin kiss upon the lips of his fair enslaver; and there for a little let us leave them in the full enjoyment of innamoratos' bliss.

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We have said that John interpreted by a look the secret of Eleanor's heart; and let not loves' sceptics think such is only a figure of our imagination. Such glances have been read from the earliest eras of the world, and will continue to be so to the latest. Lovers' eyes are to each other like telegraph-dials, and reflect in their own mysterious characters the messages from the heart as the electric needle indicates the wishes of some unforeseen communicant. Their flashes are instantaneous, and they impress upon the hearts' tablets of their correspondents, with unmistakable accuracy, the sentiments of the inoculated spirits. Theirs is a language secret and unknown but to the souls communicating, and unmeaning and unnoticeable to mortals, until made neophytes to the creed of Cupid.

John and Eleanor for some time enjoyed uninterruptedly the commune of their plighted hearts, each discovering in the other a reciprocity which heightened the ardour and enhanced the raptures of their own loves. Their tongues were no longer tied. John was all volubility and animation; while the colour that the excitement of her affection called forth irradiated the cheeks of Eleanor, and imparted to her features a loveliness that John gazed upon with ecstasy. Their privacy, however, was at length broken in upon by William, who bounded into their presence in a state of high glee, while he exclaimed:

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"I've got some news to astonish you. Our friend Captain Jones has bolted, and has swindled his much-respected father-in-law to the tune of about five hundred pounds."

"Bolted, has he!" exclaimed John; "what is that for?"

"Simply because it has pleased the gentleman on two previous occasions to enter the matrimonial state, and that both better halves, and sundry little pledges, are all living to attest to his identity. One of his former helpmates," continued William, "traced him to his late retreat, and claimed him as her lawful spouse; and he, thinking, I suppose, a *dénoûment* would be rather unpleasant, has deemed it expedient to abscond."

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"And will the poor girl he last married have no redress?" asked Eleanor.

"Very little, I fear," replied John.

"I expect from what I have heard," continued William, "that old Sawyer intends to keep it as dark as possible. From Jones' bigamy the quondam Mrs. Jones becomes again Miss Mary Ann Sawyer, and he purposes looking out for another match for her."

"But she surely," said Eleanor, "would not lend herself to so base a deception and gross impropriety."

"I am not so sure of that," said William.

"I suppose," remarked John, "if they can't punish the *soi disant* Captain Jones they think the wisest thing they can do is to make the best of it by keeping it as quiet as possible; and I have no doubt they will find many a swain who will not scruple to offer the lady a name."

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"Well that is dreadful!" exclaimed Eleanor.

"So it is," replied John, "but it is partly their own fault. They were so blinded by the notion of getting a gentleman to marry their daughter that they took no trouble to investigate the man's character, or even to ascertain anything about him; consequently they fell into the trap of a base scoundrel."

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CONCLUSION.

"I have done: pray be not angry
That shall I wish you well: may heaven
divert,
All harms that threaten you; full
blessings crown
Your marriage."

SHIRLEY.

We must again hurry our readers over another period of some three months, and request them to accompany us for a few minutes up the bank of the creek flowing through Fern Vale. At a pretty little secluded spot overhung by the bright acacia two grassy mounds, encompassed by a neat white fence and adorned with two white slabs of wood, pointed themselves out as the graves of the sufferers in the Strawberry Hill massacre.

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Leaning over the railing of one of these enclosures was a young man, who might have been recognised as Tom Rainsfield, and at his side, encircled by his arm, our friend Kate Ferguson. After some few moments of silence Tom pressed to his heart the willing form of the lovely girl that graced his side, and said:

"Dearest Kate, why not let us be married at the same time as John and Eleanor? Strawberry Hill is all ready for a mistress, and I am sure the very trees about the place are impatient to have domesticated amongst them the sweet successor of that good and amiable creature who lies beneath that sod. We could not have a better opportunity than John's marriage, for we could all go to New England together, and the double ceremony could be performed at the same time."

"But that is so soon, Tom," replied Kate.

"It cannot be too soon, my dear," exclaimed the advocate for despatch; "why postpone our happiness?"

"Poor Will will be so lonely with John and Eleanor going away," said Kate, "if I leave him too. We ought to delay it until they return."

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"What for twelve months, Kate!" cried Tom. "It would drive me wild. I could not wait more than one at the very outside, and if you say another word of opposition I will run away with you. So now, dearest, let it be settled; we must be married next month altogether."

No further objection was urged by the fair polemic, and a mutual inosculation sealed the compact.

About a month from this date a traveller approaching Acacia creek might, from the joyous appearance of every face he saw, have been sensible of the existence of some happy occasion; and, if he had but stepped into the house and seen those who sat around the breakfast table, he would have been aware that the festivities were occasioned by a matrimonial ceremony; and, upon the slightest scrutiny, he would have discovered that two young couples had been bound by the Gordian knot. [391]

The first move that was made after the despatch of the formal meal was the departure of John Ferguson and his now blooming bride. He led her to the arms of his mother; and, as the good lady embraced her sweet daughter-in-law, tears of joy coursed down her benign and matronly cheeks, and, imprinting another kiss on the lips of her son's choice, she bestowed her parting blessing. The rest of the leave-taking was soon effected and the young couple mounted their horses and rode away.

We may remark for the information of our readers that it was John's intention to proceed to Brisbane and Sydney, there to spend the honeymoon, and afterwards to take a trip "home;" by which term he knew old England though he had never seen it, nor had any ties of consanguinity to bind him to it. They were to return to the colony in about twelve months; after which Tom Rainsfield had promised a similar journey to Kate. In the meantime, however, Tom and his wife intended to take up their abode at Strawberry Hill, and thither they started almost immediately after John and Eleanor. As they left the paternal roof of the Fergusons a similar commingling of tears was effected between Kate and her mother as was witnessed upon the previous departure. Mr. Ferguson warmly grasped the hand of his son-in-law, while Mr. Wigton informed Tom that he had made up his mind to spend a short time with his friend William, to relieve his solitude and endeavour to persuade him to follow the example of his brother, and afford him, Mr. Wigton, the pleasure of tying another knot in the family. He would also, he said, while he was in the neighbourhood, avail himself of the opportunity of visiting his friends at Strawberry Hill. [392]

William promised to confer the happiness on Mr. Wigton of being fettered by his medium whenever it was his determination to be so foolish as to enter the married state: but affirmed for the present he had no intention of following in the steps of his brother and friend, and had not the most remote idea of assuming a marital character. [393]

Tom laughed at William's little sally, and gave him one of those jocose applications of the extended thumb to his ribs which in concomitant natures are thought so amiably vivacious and funny; and then turning to Mr. Wigton, expressed the delight he would feel at his making Strawberry Hill his home. Amidst the congratulations of his friends, Tom now led his bride to the door, and safely depositing her in her saddle, waved the last adieu as they cantered off.

THE END.

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