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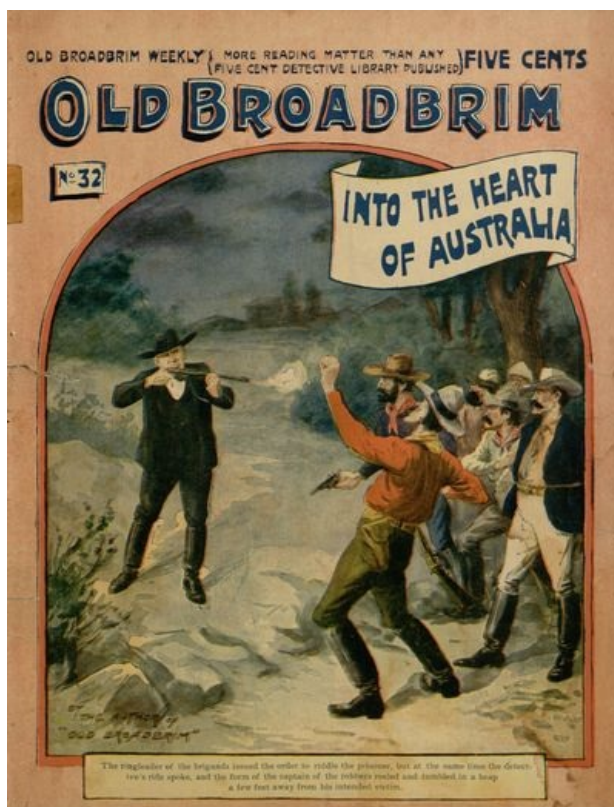
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HEART
OF AUSTRALIA



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Old Broadbrim Into the Heart of Australia;

OR,

A STRANGE BARGAIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

By the author of "OLD BROADBRIM."

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CHAPTER I.

OLD BROADBRIM'S STRANGE BARGAIN.

The 12th of April, 189—, as Old Broadbrim, the famous Quaker detective, will ever remember, fell on a Thursday.

Just after the noon hour on that day he received a letter asking him to come to one of the most elegant private residences on Fifth Avenue.

He was sure no crime had been committed, and he was puzzled to guess just what the invitation meant.

The owner of the mansion was Custer Kipp, one of the richest and best-known dwellers on the avenue, a man who counted his wealth almost by the tens of millions, so it was said at least, and the detective had seen him often on the street and in his elegant turnout in the parks.

Old Broadbrim answered the letter in person, as was his wont.

He reached the door of the mansion, and his ring was answered immediately, as if he was expected, and a servant conducted him into the library.

In an armchair at the mahogany desk sat the millionaire.

Custer Kipp was a man of sixty-three, a tall, slim, but handsome, person, and withal a person who

was approachable to a fault.

He was a widower at the time, and his only child was a son named Foster.

This young man was not in at the time of the detective's call, and the only other person in the house who belonged to the household was the nabob's ward, Miss Nora Doon, a young lady just quitting her teens and the pet of the mansion.

Custer Kipp smiled drearily when the figure of the Quaker crossed the threshold, and invited him to a seat near the desk.

"I am glad you came," said he. "I sent word to my friend, the inspector, to send me one of his best men, and I am rejoiced that he saw fit to send you, of whom I have heard."

Old Broadbrim bowed and waited.

"My case is a peculiar one, and, perhaps, a little out of the line of your business. Do you ever play the part of Cerberus, Mr. Broadbrim?"

"Not very often."

"I thought not," smiled the millionaire. "I have no crime for you to unravel, but if things are permitted to drift as they are going just now, you will have a first-class mystery on your hands ere long."

"You do not want me to wait, I see," said Old Broadbrim.

"That is it exactly. I don't care to wait to be foully murdered."

"I would think not. It isn't a very pleasant prospect, but perhaps it is not as bad as you suppose."

"It is very bad. I am in the shadow of death, but I don't care to go into details just now. I want you to guard my person for one year, and if at the end of that time I am still in the land of the living, why, your work ceases."

"It's a strange commission," replied the detective.

"I thought you would call it such. I am to be guarded against an enemy insidious and merciless. I am on the 'black list.'"

"On the black list, eh?"

"Exactly," and the rich man turned a shade paler. "I will give you twenty-five thousand dollars if you guard me for one year. You will not be required to make your home under my roof—I could not ask that—but you will be asked to take care of my foe if he should prove too aggressive."

"But, sir, to be able to do that I shall have to know something about this enemy."

"Just so. You don't know him now—have never seen him, perhaps, although you may have passed him fifty times on the street within the last six months since he landed in this city."

"Oh, he's a foreigner, is he?"

"I can't say that he is, though he has passed some years under a foreign sky. This man is not alone in his dark work; he has a confederate, a person whose beauty years ago nearly proved my ruin."

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Old Broadbrim did not speak.

Already the traditional woman had entered the case.

"For one year, Mr. Broadbrim," continued Custer Kipp, coming back to the original proposition. "Is it a bargain?"

The detective sat silent and rigid for a few seconds.

Never before had a proposition of that sort been made to him.

It would take him from cases that might spring up to demand his attention.

After all, the man before him might have no enemy at all, and the time spent in watching him might prove lost time, though twenty-five thousand dollars would be his at the end of the year.

"If you accept, remember that for one year you belong to me, will be subject to my commands, will have to go whither I send you, and you will not be permitted to follow your calling beyond them."

"It binds one rather close," said Old Broadbrim.

"I want a man who will belong to me. He must devote his whole time to keeping the hand of death away from me, and——"

Custer Kipp leaned forward and opened the desk.

Running his hand into it, he pulled out a package and untied it before the detective's eyes.

"This is a picture of the man as he looked twenty years ago," he said, throwing a photograph on the desk. "He has changed some, of course, but he is the same cool-headed demon he was then."

"And the other—the woman?"

The nabob started.

"I have no picture of her save the one I carry in my memory. I haven't seen her since a fatal night at Monaco."

He laid the picture down and looked squarely at the detective.

"No more now. Will you accept?"

It was a novel and romantic engagement and appealed strongly to the detective's curiosity.

He thought rapidly for ten seconds, after which he looked into Custer Kipp's eyes and said:

"I accept."

"A thousand thanks! I feel younger already—I feel that I will yet escape this vendetta, that I have years of useful life ahead and that I will die in my house when my time comes. But one word. Not a whisper of this bargain beyond the walls of my house. Not a word to my children, for I call Nora my child the same as Foster. It must be our secret, Mr. Broadbrim."

"It shall be ours."

"That's right. Now, sir, if you will come back to-morrow I will give you the commission in detail. I will study up all the points you should know, and then you will see into your task and will know just what you will be expected to do."

Old Broadbrim, a man of brevity, picked up his hat.

"I will be here," he said. "Thee can trust me," using, as he did at times, the Quaker formula.

In another moment he had turned his back on the millionaire and was walking toward the hall.

At the door he glanced over his shoulder and saw the figure of Custer Kipp bent over the desk, and the face was buried in the arms.

Old Broadbrim closed the door and went away.

Down in his office, in the room in which he had thought out more than one tangle of crime, he threw himself into his armchair and took up a cigar.

"What have I done?" he asked himself. "Is the man mad? What is this invisible fear which almost paralyzes him? Why does he send for me to watch him for a year when he could fly to the ends of the world, for he has money to take him anywhere, and thus escape the enemy? But I'll do my part."

The day deepened, and the shadows of night fell over the city.

Old Broadbrim came forth, and walked a few squares after which he turned suddenly and rapped at a door belonging to a small house in a quiet district.

The portal was opened by a man not very young, but wiry and keen-eyed.

"Come in. I've been waiting for you," said this person. "I have a case for you—one which the police have not yet discovered. It will produce rich results."

The detective's countenance seemed to drop.

Here it was already.

He began to see how foolish he had been to make a bargain with Custer Kipp.

"What is it, Clippers?" he asked.

"It's just the sort o' case you've been looking for," was the reply. "On the next street is a dead man—a man whose life must have gone out violently yesterday or last night. You don't know him, but I do. Jason Marrow has been a study and a puzzle to me for three years. We have met occasionally, but never got on familiar terms. Now he's dead and is there yet, in his little room, with marks of violence on his throat and the agony in his glassy eyes. Won't you come with me? I have been holding the matter for you."

Old Broadbrim said he would at once take a look at the mystery, and Clippers, his friend, offered to conduct him to the scene of the tragedy.

The two entered a little house near the mouth of an alley, and Clippers led the way to a room to the left of the hall.

"He's a mystery—got papers of importance hid in the house, but we'll find them in course of time," he chattered. "It's going to be a deep case, just to your liking, Mr. Broadbrim, but you'll untangle it, for you never fail."

At this moment the pair entered the room and the hand of Clippers pointed to a couch against the wall.

Old Broadbrim stepped nimbly forward and bent over the bed.

A rigid figure lay upon it, and the first glance told him that death had been busy there.

"Who is he?" asked the detective.

"It's Jason Marrow. You didn't know him. Precious few people did. The papers which he has hidden will tell us more and we'll find them. It's your case, Mr. Broadbrim."

"I can't take it, Clippers."

The other fell back with a cry of amazement.

"You can't take it?" he gasped. "In the name of Heaven, are you mad, Mr. Broadbrim?"

"I hope not."

"But it's just the sort o' case you like. There's mystery in it. Killed by some one as yet unknown. Strangled by a hand unseen and dead in his little den."

"Yes, I know, Clippers, but it's not for me."

"Why not?"

"I'm engaged."

"On something better? On a deeper mystery than the death of Jason Marrow?"

"I don't know. I only know that I can't take this matter into my hands."

"Well, I'm stumped!" cried Clippers.

"And I'm sorry," answered the great detective. "I'll tell the police. I'll see that Hargraves or Irwin get the job. That's all I can do. For one year I belong to—to another master."

There was no reply to this; Clippers showed that he was "stumped."

CHAPTER II.

THE MIDNIGHT MURDER.

"Come!" said Clippers, when he got second wind, "maybe you can get the other one to release you."

"He won't do that. The bargain's been sealed."

"You're not going to retire?"

"Well, hardly."

"That's good, anyhow. If the other fellows, Hargraves or Irwin, get at fault you won't refuse to join in the hunt for the murderer of poor Marrow?"

"I will be free at the end of a year under certain contingencies—perhaps a good deal sooner."

"Well, I wish it was to-morrow," cried Clippers. "I want you to take this case; but we'll have to see the others and let Tom or Pappy reap new fame."

Half an hour later the two detectives named Hargraves and Irwin knew all there was to know at the time of the death of Jason Marrow.

It was not much, for the slayer had done his work with great secrecy and had left no clues behind.

The matter was destined to become a mystery to the department, a deep puzzle to the best men on the force for months.

Old Broadbrim went back to his room after the find in the house near the mouth of the alley.

"Confound it all! why did I bind myself for a year to play Cerberus for Custer Kipp?" he mused.

"Here's the very sort of case I've been looking for, but my hands are tied, and I can't get out of the matter unless I go to his house and absolutely back out of the bargain. In that case I would lose the twenty-five thousand dollars and— No, I'll stick!"

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For long into the night there was a light in the detective's room, and he might have been found at the table at work.

It was near midnight when a footstep came to the door and stopped there.

Old Broadbrim heard the noise and waited for the rap.

When it sounded he crossed the room and opened the door.

A young man with a very white face and a figure that trembled a little stepped forward.

"You're the gentleman, I guess? You're Josiah Broadbrim?"

"I am."

"You are wanted at once at Custer Kipp's home on Fifth Avenue. Miss Nora sent me and I didn't go in to look at him."

"To look at whom?" asked the detective.

"Why, at Mr. Kipp. He was found dead in the library an hour ago."

The detective started violently and looked at the man in his chair.

"Is it murder?" he asked.

"I can't say. Miss Nora didn't tell me, but from the aspects of the case I think it's serious."

"I'll come."

The young man arose and hastened from the room.

"Not so soon, I hope?" said the detective to himself. "Can it be that my espionage ends almost before the bargain is cold? Dead in the library? It's marvelous."

Old Broadbrim soon appeared at the Kipp door and was admitted.

He found the parlor well filled with strange people, for the most part neighbors in the upper circles of city life, but here and there was a representative of the lower classes who had edged their way into the mansion.

The moment the detective crossed the threshold he was approached by a young girl, with clear blue eyes and a good carriage, who instantly addressed him.

"You are Josiah Broadbrim?" she said questioningly. "Yes, you are the detective whom I sent for?"

Old Broadbrim nodded.

"Then, come with me. He is in the library and I have locked the door."

The detective was conducted from the parlor and the nabob's ward opened the door of the library.

In another instant she had closed it and they stood in the large chamber, elegantly furnished, and containing rows of books magnificently bound, for Custer Kipp had spared no pains with his tastes.

"There he is," said the girl with lowered voice, as she pointed toward a figure in the armchair. "No one has touched him, for I forbade it, and you are the first person to see him dead beside myself and the person who did the deed."

The detective stepped forward, and the hand of Nora Doon turned the gas a little higher.

Custer Kipp was leaning back in the chair with his white face turned toward the ceiling.

The arms hung downward as if they had slipped over the sides of the seat, and the face showed traces of the death agony.

"I heard but little," said Nora, while the detective looked at the dead. "I go upstairs early when I am not at the opera or elsewhere. I remained at home to-night for I had letters to write, and he came home from a ride about seven.

"I heard him in the library bustling about for an hour while I read in my room, and then everywhere silence seemed to come down over the house. When I arose to retire I thought I would look downstairs, as is my wont, and see if all was snug. As I came down the stairs I peeped over the transom of the library, as one can do from the head of the flight, and to my horror I saw him in the position you see him now.

"There was something so unnatural in the pose, something suggestive of sickness if not death—for I must own that the thought of sudden death interposed itself—that I bounded to the foot of the stair and opened the door, which was not locked.

"In another moment I knew all. I saw that he was dead, and, what is more, I saw that he had been killed. You will notice the dark marks which linger still at the throat, as if he had been strangled like the thugs serve their victims. Isn't it terrible? To have him taken away in this manner, and tomorrow was to be his birthday."

She ceased and glanced at the man in the chair, while a shadow of fear and inward dread seemed to take possession of her soul.

"I don't know just where Foster is," she went on. "He went away nearly a week ago, and I never heard papa say where he is. However, he will see the news in the papers, and will be here in a short time. I told Simpson, the servant, as soon as I recovered, for I lost all control of myself under the terrible discovery, and there's no telling how long I lay in a swoon on the carpet here. As soon as I could I sent him after you."

"But," smiled Old Broadbrim, "how did you know where to find me?"

"I found your card in the desk. I remember seeing you in the house to-day, though I knew nothing of the nature of your mission. He has been in fear of something for some time. I have noticed this, and think it has not escaped Foster's eye. But we'll know about this when he returns."

"My card was all you found, miss?"

"Yes; but I'll admit that I did not look thoroughly. The front door was unlocked when I went thither after the discovery in this room, but— What is it, Simpson?"

The servant had entered the room and stood near the door with his eyes riveted upon the young girl.

When she spoke his name he came forward and extended his hand.

"I picked this up in the hall just now. It's a curious bit of paper, part of a letter."

Nora took the find and glanced at it, then handed it to the Quaker man-hunter.

Old Broadbrim looked at it, going over to the desk where the droplight swung.

"Tell the people in the parlor that they can go now, Simpson," said Nora. "The police will be here in a little while. The detective is already here."

Old Broadbrim looked up at Nora as Simpson left the room, and his look drew her toward him.

"Is it anything?" she asked.

The detective still held the bit of paper in his hand.

"It may not be of any use," said he, slightly elevating the paper. "Some one of the people out there may have dropped it."

The gaze of the young girl fell upon the paper, and Old Broadbrim continued:

"Did Mr. Kipp ever have any correspondents in Australia?" he asked.

Nora shook her head, but the next instant she lost some color.

"Stay!" she cried. "I remember now that he received a letter some months ago, which seemed to trouble him a great deal. That letter was from Australia."

"Do you remember from what particular part, Miss Nora?"

"I do not."

"Could we find it among his effects, think you?"

"I am sure we cannot. Of that I say I am very positive. He destroyed it."

"That is bad."

"Is that message from that part of the world?"

And the hand of Nora Doon pointed at the paper in the detective's hand.

"It is merely the fragment of a letter. It is little better than an address. It is—— But you shall see it for yourself."

Old Broadbrim extended the paper, and the girl took it eagerly, but with some show of fear.

He watched her as she leaned forward and looked at the writing in the light of the dropjet.

Suddenly the young lady uttered a cry, and then turned upon the man-hunter with a frightened face absolutely colorless.

"It's from the same part of the world; I remember now!" she exclaimed. "The postmark on that letter was Perth. The whole thing comes back to me. The postman brought the letter to the house, and I carried it to his desk to await his coming home. It the same name—Perth. Where is it?"

"You mean in what part of Australia, miss?"

"Yes, yes."

"It is in West Australia, and beyond it lie the barren and death lands of the great island. But what is the name?"

"Merle Macray," spoke Nora, in a whisper. "What a strange name it is, and don't you see that the handwriting is that of one of my sex? And the line above the address—just look at it in the light of this murderous deed. 'Don't let him see sixty-four!' That means that the command to kill Custer Kipp comes from that far part of the globe. It makes it all the more terrible."

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Old Broadbrim took the paper and put it away.

"Not a word about this, please," he said to the girl.

"I am your secret keeper," she answered. "This matter is in your hands. When Foster comes home you can tell him about the torn letter if you wish, but I will not without your authority. The slayer of my benefactor must be found."

"He shall be."

"Even if the trail leads across the sea?"

"Yes, even if it leads around the world and into the heart of the wild Australian bush."

In after days Old Broadbrim, the tracker, was to recall his words with many a thrill.

CHAPTER III.

THE CLEW AND THE TALISMAN.

The death of Custer Kipp, the nabob, startled the whole city.

For some time New York had been in the midst of a carnival of crime, but this murder capped the climax.

No one thought of the other case, that got into the newspapers at the same time.

The death of Jason Marrow in his little den near the mouth of the alley did not take up half the space, and the reporters did not care to discuss it.

But the life of the millionaire was published; his past was ventilated so far as the reporters knew it, and they made out that he was one of the pillars of the metropolis, and there were loud calls for swift and certain vengeance.

Old Broadbrim was not to be found.

The inspector probably knew what had become of him, for he put Hargraves and Irwin on the case, and intimated that for once the Quaker detective would not stand between the pair, nor wrest from them the laurels to be gained in the Fifth Avenue mystery.

Custer Kipp did not go to the morgue, but Jason Marrow did.

The surgeons went at him in the most approved style, and decided, after more cutting than was necessary, that the man had died from strangulation.

The forenoon of the day after the discovery of the murder on the avenue, Old Broadbrim went back to Clippers' house.

The wiry little man received him with a good deal of excitement, and immediately took a package of papers from his bosom.

"I found them—the papers which I knew Jason had hid somewhere in the house," he exclaimed. "It took a long hunt, and I ransacked the whole place, but here they are."

Old Broadbrim took a seat at the table and began to open the jumbled papers.

"Where did Jason come from, Clippers?" he asked while he worked.

"I don't know. He would never tell me much about his past, but he had traveled some. He had been around the world, and at one time lived in Australia."

Just then something fell out of the package, and Old Broadbrim picked it up.

It was the counterpart of the photograph Custer Kipp had shown him in the library—the face of his deadly foe.

How had it come into Jason Marrow's possession?

Where did the occupant of the alley den get hold of it, and what did he know of the man it represented?

Clippers stood over his friend, the detective, and folded his arms while Old Broadbrim read the written papers found in the little house.

"It's strange, very strange," muttered the detective. "These may give me a clew to the other mystery."

"Those documents, eh?"

"The documents and the photograph."

"It's an old affair, the picture, I mean."

"Yes, taken years ago, but the man may wear the same features to some extent, and by this picture I may know him."

"Who do you think he is, Mr. Broadbrim?"

Old Broadbrim looked up into the face of Clippers.

"Perhaps the man who killed Jason Marrow," he said.

"Then, you are going to take the trail and beat Hargraves and Irwin to the end of it?"

"I am on another trail," quietly spoke the detective. "I am not going to bother the boys unless my trail crosses theirs—then I will play out my hand boldly."

After reading over the papers left behind by Jason Marrow, Old Broadbrim arose and thrust them into an inner pocket.

His face was as serene as ever, and nothing told that he had found what might prove a clew.

From Clippers' house he went direct to the offices of the Cunard Line.

It was the day for the sailing of one of that line's boats for Liverpool, and the detective was soon looking over the list of passengers.

Suddenly his eye stopped at a name and rested there.

It was a name he had just seen in the papers he had read in Clippers' house.

"Too late!" said the detective, as he turned away. "A few hours too late. The murderer is gone. Ere this he is fairly at sea on the deck of the *Campania* and I—I am in New York!"

Old Broadbrim quitted the office and got once more into the sunlight.

Taking a cab, he hastened to the offices of the White Star Line, and entered coolly but anxious.

He inquired at the proper desk when the next steamer of the line sailed for Liverpool.

"The *Oceanic* will leave her dock this afternoon."

The face of the detective seemed to flush with rising joy.

On the instant he engaged a cabin and walked out.

"We will see how the chase ends," said he, in undertones. "It may prove a long one, but, thanks to Jason Marrow's story, I may not be altogether on the wrong trail."

An hour later he stood once more beneath the roof of the murdered millionaire.

This time he was met by Foster Kipp, the dead man's son, a young man of twenty-five, with an open countenance, but eager and determined.

"I heard of this terrible affair in Albany, whither I went on some business for father. It came sooner than he expected."

"He expected it, then?"

"Yes; once he confided to me that he had an enemy, and said he was 'blacklisted.' I never pressed him for particulars, for he was reticent, but I firmly believe that the blow which fell last night was the one he dreaded."

"It was," said the detective. "Your father was killed by a hand in whose shadow he must have been for at least six months."

"Yes; nearly that long ago I found him in a faint on the carpet of the library, for he had received a warning of some kind and I failed to get the secret from him. It must be the old enemy—the one he made in Europe."

"He traveled through the Continent, then?"

"I believe he made a tour of the world. I recall some of his descriptions of places which are very far apart. But the most terrible thing connected with this is that he should be killed in his own house, deliberately strangled, while Nora was quietly reading in her *boudoir* upstairs."

"It makes it the more mysterious. The murderer entered by the front door and made his exit that way. He knew the mansion; he knew that your father was at home and unprotected."

"It must have been thus. Had I been at home the blow would not have fallen. He was killed on the eve of his sixty-fourth birthday. Why didn't the monster permit him to round out the year?"

"Perhaps that was in the scheme."

"Heavens! I never thought of that!" cried Foster Kipp. "It must have been a part of the diabolical game—to kill him before he became sixty-four. I remember last year he received a letter which threw him into a white rage, and tearing it up in this room he declared that he would pass this day safely and live many years yet. But it was not to be; the foe found him."

For half an hour longer the detective talked with the son and drew from him all he knew about his father's past.

"I nominate you his avenger," said Foster, looking calmly into Old Broadbrim's face, while they occupied armchairs near the desk in the fatal library. "I send you out on this trail asking you to follow it wherever it leads, through thick and thin, never losing sight of it till you close in upon the murderer. Drag him from his hiding place; stand him under the noose and then come to me for your reward. It will not be small. Father left millions behind, and they are mine now—mine and Nora's, and she joins me in this hunt for the murderer."

Old Broadbrim stood before the young man and looked into his white face, earnest with anxiety and seamed with eagerness that seemed to be devouring him.

"I believe, after talking with Nora, that the enemies are foreign ones," continued Foster Kipp. "Father has within the last five years received letters at intervals which came from some remote corners of the world. One of them, I saw by a fragment of the envelope, came from London, another from Paris and a third from Melbourne. This would seem to indicate the restless nature of the enemy. But the trail leads across the water, Mr. Broadbrim. I am sure of this. It may be a long one, but you are equal to it." [Pg 5]

Old Broadbrim stood at the door of the mansion and was looking into Foster's face when he heard a sound in another room, and Miss Nora bounded forward.

"What do you think?" she cried, stopping before the detective. "Is it to be a trail across the water?"

"It looks that way, miss," was the answer.

"Then take this for luck—take it with the prayers of Nora Doon," and she pressed into the detective's hand a little packet quite flat and much smaller than his hand.

Old Broadbrim looked at it, but did not open it.

Placing it in his pocket he shook hands with Foster Kipp and Nora and turned away.

Many a month was to pass ere they looked upon his face again.

Many a dark danger was to be met and surmounted, many a wild scene passed through before he could look upon the sunlight of success, and the path he had selected to tread within the last few hours was a path of death.

In his little office the detective made hasty preparations for departure.

He went in light marching order, but provided in many ways for the long journey.

Booked for London, he packed his little grip, and on the street below looked around upon familiar scenes perhaps for the last time.

He hastened to the White Star offices and went on board the vessel in which he had taken passage.

In the little stateroom he made ready for the voyage, and sat down to think a moment.

All at once the little packet which Nora Doon had placed in his hands came to his mind, and he fished it from the depths of the inner pocket.

With a half smile at his lips the detective opened it slowly and then the smile broadened.

He held in his hand a four-leaved clover, and on the paper upon which it rested were "The best wishes of Nora Doon."

The detective tore the paper into bits, but carefully preserved the little talisman.

Ten minutes later the steamer was moving from her dock and the famous detective went up on deck.

He was on the longest and most exciting trail of his life; the chase across the ocean had begun, and Old Broadbrim, as he looked out over the water, wondered what the end would be.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LONDON TRAIL.

Before stepping upon the deck of the *Oceanic* Old Broadbrim did two things that have not been recorded.

In the first place, he went back to the office of the Cunard Line and obtained a fair description of the man who had taken passage in the *Campania* under the name of Rufus Redmond.

This man he had every reason for believing was Merle Macray, the person he wanted.

Having done this, the detective cabled to his friend, Tom Owens, the well-known Scotland Yarder, in London, the description of the passenger, with a request that he watch for him and shadow him till he (Old Broadbrim) could reach England.

He knew that his wishes would be carried out to the letter, and that Tom Owens would spot his man the moment the steamer arrived in Liverpool, so on this score Old Broadbrim rested easy.

No one on board the *Oceanic* suspected that the plain-looking business man with the agile step and the glossy gray beard was the famous Quaker.

He did not confine himself to his stateroom, but came up on deck to chat with his fellow-travelers, and almost before the vessel had passed Sandy Hook he knew them all.

He could not expect to overtake the Cunarder, therefore he could only hope to reach London and find his man, who, in the meantime, would be shadowed by Tom Owens.

The detective had the promise of a fine voyage and the steamer plowed her way through the deep in magnificent style.

Old Broadbrim was found on deck every day, and as the *Oceanic* neared the English shore he became a little anxious.

The moment he stepped upon the dock in Liverpool, after a short run, in which the record was nearly broken, he hastened to a little house not far from the pier which was a rendezvous for detectives.

If Tom Owens had been in Liverpool there would be a message for him, and he was not disappointed.

Old Broadbrim found in a secret box in the house this brief note:

"I have found him. He leaves for London to-night, and so do I.

Tom"

With this encouraging message from the Scotland Yarder, Old Broadbrim went leisurely to his breakfast, and soon after finishing it started for London.

Nothing happened to mar the progress of the chase, and at last he stepped from the cars in the great station.

He secured a hansom and drove to the lodgings of Tom Owens and sprang up the steps.

Everything seemed to depend on what the suspected man had done.

Was Rufus Redmond still in London, or had he eluded Tom?

A few moments would tell.

Old Broadbrim rapped at the detective's door and heard his well-known step as he sprang across the floor.

In another second he stood face to face with his friend.

"Just in time," said Tom, pointing to a bottle of porter on the table. "I was about to indulge in a little happiness and you can take part."

But Old Broadbrim had other things on his mind, and as he took the proffered seat he looked anxiously at the Scotland Yard ferret.

"Oh, I've got him located," smiled Tom. "It's all right. I guess he's good for some days in London; you can take your time to him. He's a slick fellow, by the way, and gave me a little chase from Liverpool, but I've landed my fish."

"I'm glad to hear it!" cried Old Broadbrim. "That will keep me from beating the Australian bush for him, as he seemed to be heading for that part of the world."

The porter was "downed," and the two detectives talked on other matters for an hour.

Old Broadbrim detailed the crime on Fifth Avenue, and did not forget to mention the murder of Jason Marrow in the little house near the mouth of the alley.

Tom Owens was of the opinion that both crimes were the work of the same hand, and that the tenant of the alley was killed to keep him silent regarding a secret which he undoubtedly possessed.

"You're on the right trail, Broadbrim," said the Englishman. "This Rufus Redmond, alias Merle Macray, is the very person you want, and we'll see that your trail ends right here in London."

In a short time the two detectives sauntered from the room, and Tom Owens guided the American to a certain part of the city, where he had located Rufus Redmond.

"When does the next steamer depart for Melbourne, or for that part of the globe?" anxiously inquired the American detective.

"One leaves to-day," was the reply. "I happen to know, because one of my friends is going out in her and he gave me good-bye this morning."

"Why not see if our friend, the murderer, is to be a passenger?"

Tom Owens looked a little astonished by this suggestion.

"It's all right. He will be in London after the *Intrepid* has sailed," said he. "He is installed in the little red house yonder, and we can lay hands on him whenever we care to."

But Old Broadbrim persisted until the Scotland Yarder yielded.

"I'm afraid it's too late to see the *Intrepid*," said Tom, glancing at his watch. "Her time is up, and ere this she is off."

"But we can see the books of the company."

It did not take them long to find the office of the Australian Steamship Company, and Old Broadbrim ran over the list of passengers, with Owens looking over his shoulder.

Suddenly Old Broadbrim uttered a cry.

His finger had stopped at a certain name on the list.

Tom Owens looked again and echoed the exclamation.

"Too late!" he said. "Well, it stumps me!"

Old Broadbrim did not reply, but merely smiled as he turned away.

[Pg 6]

The *Intrepid* was gone.

Once more the prey had slipped through his fingers by a few hours, and the long trail stretched before him.

Silently the detective walked from the steamer office.

Owens was chagrined.

For some minutes he did not speak, and his silence showed his deep disappointment.

"To think that the rascal should take Tom Owens in so cleverly!" suddenly cried the Scotland Yarder. "It makes me feel sick. I tracked him from Liverpool so nicely, and had everything snug for you, Mr. Broadbrim; but here he slips through my fingers like a Thames eel; it's too bad. I'll go with you and help you find him in Australia."

"No," said the Quaker, laying his hand on the other's arm. "This is my trail from now on, and this scoundrel will be hunted to his doom if I have to track him all over the world!"

"You can't get another steamer out of London port for Melbourne inside of a week," said Owens.

"Will I have to lie here in agony that long?" was the reply.

"It seems so, but you'll find plenty here to interest you, and we'll see that time doesn't hang heavily on your hands. Redmond has got clean off, and neatly, too, but we'll find out if he left anything behind."

The two detectives crossed the street to the little red house and Owens knocked.

The woman who came to the door held it open for them to enter and in they went.

"We are looking for an empty front room," said the Scotland Yarder.

"I've just had one vacated," was the reply. "It's on the second floor, and the young man who held it went off to-day and will not be back."

"Might we look at the room, madam?"

The woman led the way to the stairs and said to Owens:

"First room front up there. You can find it easily. I have to look after the kitchen just now, but will be up in a little while."

This was just the opportunity the detectives wanted, and in a few seconds they stood in the room overhead.

It was a plainly furnished apartment with a few chairs, and several coarse prints on the walls.

"Not a very fine nest for our bird," smiled the American detective. "He was not very choice, for he knew he would not keep the room very long, but that he would soon be the occupant of a ship's

cabin."

"Exactly. He made a fire in the grate and left some ashes of paper, I see."

Old Broadbrim stepped across the room and bent over the ashes on the little hearth.

Scooping up a handful of fragments, he came back to the table and sat down.

Tom Owens bent over his shoulder and saw Old Broadbrim separate the bits of charred paper with fingers as delicate as a woman's.

All at once the detective stopped and pointed at two pieces which lay side by side.

"What is it?" eagerly asked Owens.

"A letter in the same handwriting that we found in the house on Fifth Avenue."

"That settles the matter. You are surely on the right trail."

The face of the New York detective seemed to light up with a gleam of triumph, and then he swept the papers together and put them into his inner pocket.

"The right trail?" he cried. "Of course, Tom. It remains only to find this man. I'll attend to the rest. We'll fix the crime upon him and there'll be a broken neck under the sheriff's noose."

"But you'll find him cool and desperate."

"I know that."

"If he turns on you your life won't be worth the flare of a candle."

"I've counted every cost, as I always do, Tom," was the answer. "I know the trail and the quarry. I am ready for the game."

By this time the landlady appeared at the door of the room and the two men turned to interview her.

She did not know much about her late roomer.

All she did know was in his favor, for he paid promptly and ahead for a week.

He was "a nice gentleman," and the detectives did not tell her that he was a suspected murderer.

Once more on the street below the Scotland Yarder proposed to escort Old Broadbrim to a lounging place for the English detectives when not officially engaged, but the Quaker did not want his presence known in London and declined.

By this time the shades of twilight had deepened over the city.

The night came on suddenly, as it does in London, and Old Broadbrim separated from Owens for the purpose of calling on a friend whom he had not seen for some years.

Promising to meet Owens the next day, Old Broadbrim walked off and turned the nearest corner.

He was in the act of taking a hansom, when his arm was touched by a hand, and he turned to look into the face of a young woman whose eyes were deeply sunken and staring.

"You're watched, sir," said she, with a hurried glance to the right. "Be careful."

"Thanks. Here's a guinea," said the detective, and springing into the hansom he was driven off.

Watched? he thought. By whom?

If Rufus Redmond was on the sea, who would play spy for him now?

CHAPTER V.

IN THE WAKE OF A MYSTERY.

Old Broadbrim did not let the woman's warning deprive him of the society of his friend, and some hours later he emerged from the house with the thousand-and-one lights of London before him.

Drawing his collar up, for the night was cool and a brisk wind was coming in over the waters of the Thames, he started back, intending to walk to a cab station in the immediate neighborhood and from there take a cab.

London was well filled, from what the detective could see, and some of its inhabitants were in the same condition.

Every now and then he was jostled by a drunken man or woman, and in some instances almost crowded off the narrow sidewalk.

Presently he was clutched by a hand and forced into the mouth of an alley.

"Don't talk, for it's all right," said a voice which he thought he recognized. "I followed you and I hope I've done no wrong, sir. The man is still watching you, sir. I hung onto the back of the cab, sir, and got a good jolting over the stones. But I'm here, sir, to tell you that you're still in peril."

It was the same warning woman, and her face was the very picture of starvation.

"Where is he?" asked Old Broadbrim.

"You can't see him from here, sir; but he's across the way near the Star and Garter over there. If you look very sharp you may see a man in the shadow of the place. That's him."

"What is he like?"

"He's a tall, slim fellow with the keenest eyes you ever saw in a human head; but those eyes mean mischief and death."

"And you?"

"Oh, sir, I'm Mag of the Dusthole. I'm out for wictims; but I saw him watching you, and I couldn't help wanting to spoil his game."

"You don't know him, then?"

"I know him, and that's why I want to bring his schemes to naught. It's Jem—Jem, the Sydneyite."

"I have no such enemy by that name."

"Mebbe not; but he's watching you, all the same. He used to live in Sydney, Australia, and——"

The detective started.

"In Australia?" broke in Old Broadbrim.

"Yes, yes. He came back from there a year ago, and has been lording it over some people in London ever since. He's cool-headed, and has the softest fingers you ever saw. Jem's a bad one."

"I don't doubt it. I'll see to him."

The detective pushed toward the mouth of the alley, and with a cry the woman fled.

It was a strange proceeding on her part, but the detective did not think anything of it.

Almost directly across the street stood a small, old-fashioned tap-house, called the Star and Garter.

It was like many others of its class in London, disreputable from the ground up, and he looked at it trying to make out the figure of his enemy. [Pg 7]

Half screened himself by the shadows of the building at the opening of the alley, Old Broadbrim used his eyes to advantage, and presently made out a form across the street.

It moved.

Standing still, he watched it saunter off, and at last it came toward the alley on the same side.

The spy was coming to investigate, and the detective made ready for the meeting.

The figure of the spy was tall and agile.

It came along the sidewalk and seemed about to pounce down upon the American tracker with the greatest ease.

Old Broadbrim held his breath.

At the very mouth of the alley the spy stopped and looked into the darkness.

He did not stir for ten seconds.

"Gone, I guess," Old Broadbrim heard him say. "It's too bad. I wonder if the cat warned him. If she did, I'll throttle her and leave her in the cellar."

With an oath the man withdrew, and in another moment the detective heard his receding footsteps.

He was saved!

Old Broadbrim waited a while, and then slipped down the street.

He had eluded the spy, and now, perhaps, could get a better look at him.

But in this he was doomed to disappointment, for the fellow vanished too quickly for him and he turned at last and went to the lodging he had selected.

He thought of Rufus Redmond, or Merle Macray, who was on the high seas bound for Australia.

He recalled every incident in the crime in New York, and thought of his work so far.

The trail was growing longer.

It stretched across the great deep to a land still unknown, in part, to the world.

He recalled the letter from Perth, and knew that beyond that faraway town lay the deserts of West Australia and the wild tribes and wilder animals.

But he slept at last, and in the morning awoke refreshed.

He was at breakfast in a little chop-house near the inn when some one came in, and took a seat beside him.

He looked and saw that it was Owens, the Scotland Yarder.

"I have news for you," cried Owens. "There's a steamer going to sail for Sydney this afternoon."

Old Broadbrim gave utterance to an exclamation of joy.

"I don't think they really want any passengers, for it is a private expedition conducted by Lord Harway, but you might see him."

"I'll do that, and if money or *finesse* will get me a berth on the vessel I am off to-day."

Old Broadbrim finished his breakfast in a jiffy, and before the hour ended he stood in Lord Harway's private office.

The story he told, one not connected with a chase after a murderer, enlisted his lordship's sympathies, and at the close of it the detective was told that he could have a berth on board the yacht *Maybloom*, one of the fastest vessels of the kind afloat.

Once more he was in luck, and there was some hope of beating Merle Macray to Melbourne.

Old Broadbrim had few preparations to make, and by the time he was through the yacht was ready to sail.

As he stepped aboard he glanced toward the dock, and caught sight of a figure that startled him.

It was the man of the previous night—the spy who had tracked him to the mouth of the alley.

He had not abandoned the chase, but had tracked him to the yacht, and knew that he was bound for Australia.

Old Broadbrim, however, did not hesitate.

He went quietly to the little room assigned him and shut himself in.

He had taken passage under the name of Logan Lane, and as such was known to Lord Harway.

In a little while he heard his name called in the corridor beyond his door, and upon going out he found his lordship there.

"We are off," said the Englishman, with delight. "The *Maybloom* is cutting the water like a knife, and I want you to come up on deck and look at her."

Old Broadbrim ascended to the main deck and looked at the receding city.

Lord Harway handed him his glass, and the detective put it to his eager eyes.

He scanned the crowds on the pier, and suddenly found the man he had seen on two occasions within the past twenty-four hours.

He was looking at the yacht with expressions of chagrin, and the detective could see that he was bitterly disappointed.

He had escaped him, and when he thought of the threat he had breathed against Mag of the Dusthole, he feared for her safety.

As long as he held the glass to his eyes he could see the man watching the *Maybloom*, and at last he turned away confident that he had outwitted Merle Macray's spy.

Now the ocean lay before him and in a few days he would be in Sydney, ready for the task before him.

Old Broadbrim found the occupants of the yacht the best of companions, and at times his conscience rebelled against the deception he was playing, but he promised himself that some day he would explain all to Lord Harway and beg his pardon.

The *Maybloom* proved to be a splendid sailer, and day after day was passed on deck.

It was a long voyage and one without incident to our old friend the detective.

When at last the headland of Australia hove in sight, there was some stir on board and the *Maybloom* came to anchor in the spacious harbor.

They had passed several vessels bound different ways on the high seas, but, so far as the detective could make out, none of these was the *Intrepid*.

Merle Macray was ahead of him and he did not expect to beat him to Melbourne.

In Sydney Old Broadbrim went at once to the hotel and put up.

He changed his garments and washed, and then came out on the street to find out when he could get a vessel to Melbourne.

Luck favored him again, and he learned that early the following morning he could take passage in a coaster for the capital of Victoria.

The day was spent in looking around Sydney and passing the time as best he could.

Old Broadbrim was soon up the next day and went on board the coaster in which he had secured passage.

In Melbourne he went direct to the house of the chief of police, but that official was not in the city.

Old Broadbrim went back to the wharf and stood watching a splendid vessel just coming in.

Something seemed to thrill him while he watched the craft which majestically rode the waves, and all at once he uttered a little exclamation of joy.

It was the *Intrepid*!

After all he had beaten his quarry to Melbourne.

Merle Macray, thanks to an accident to the vessel in mid-ocean, as Old Broadbrim afterward learned, was delayed, and he now came in a little behind time, but in time for him to spot his

man.

Well concealed, he watched the passengers as they came over the planks to the pier, and every one was closely scrutinized.

"What's become of him?" cried Old Broadbrim, as the last one stepped upon the quay. "Did the ocean get him? Have I lost my man and justice her prey?"

He was nonplused, for no one answering the description of the *Cunarder's* passenger had landed from the *Intrepid* in Melbourne.

"But he's there. I'll bet my head on it!" said Old Broadbrim, as he turned away.

CHAPTER VI.

SPOTTED IN AUSTRALIA.

If Merle Macray had landed from the *Intrepid* on the quays of Melbourne he had done so under a disguise that had deceived the detective of two continents.

Old Broadbrim for once seemingly had used his eyes in vain, and after a while he went back, walking up the quay, and turned into Collins Street in a deep study.

If he had watched a certain little old man who walked from the vessel he might have changed his mind.

This person, who carried a valise, had been among the first to disembark, and had hastened to get beyond the piers.

Half an hour later he might have been seen to enter one of the offices of the cable company and to ask for a message for "Ira Black." [Pg 8]

The person in charge at the time lifted a message from a hook and handed it across the counter.

It was promptly paid for in gold, and the receiver, placing it in his pocket, walked out.

There was a smile on his face, and it lingered there some time, or until he entered a hotel and went up to a room on the third floor.

There, with the door locked behind him, he pulled forth the telegraph envelope and tore it open.

The message was from London and was very short, but it startled him.

In the soft Australian sunlight that entered the chamber he read at a glance, as follows:

"The Wolf follows. He is off on the *Maybloom*, bound for Sydney.

JEM."

The recipient of the cablegram looked up with a snarl of defiance on his face, now no longer old-looking, but with the mask removed, and young and handsome.

"So he is on the trail," he cried; "so this ferret from afar is on the hunt? Well, I am ready to meet him, but there's many a trap he never dreams of!"

He tore the message into tatters and threw them out the back window, to see the wind carry them in very many directions.

"You're a good one, Jem, but it would have been best if you had silenced the wolf and not put me to this trouble," he said in undertones. "It's all one, though. I guess we're equal to the task. If we are not no man can be."

Meantime, Old Broadbrim had gone back to the hotel near Collins Street for a little rest.

He waited till night deepened and then stepped into the street again.

The sights that encountered his gaze were new to him.

He was in one of the most wonderful cities in the world.

Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, and the haunt of the cattle king, the sheep prince, the gold nabob and the miner, presented scenes to be duplicated nowhere under the sun.

In the glare of the electric lights, the hurry and bustle of business, the revelry of saloon and dance hall, in the haunts of the tough and the palaces of the money kings, there is always something exciting and new.

Old Broadbrim had been to strange places in his career, but never in one just like Melbourne.

He jostled the gold hunter who had come to the city to spend his dust, and perhaps get a knife in his heart before he left it; he was pushed aside by the cattle boy in his jacket and sombrero, and the air was laden with the slang of mine and camp till it disgusted the detective.

As he turned into one street Broadbrim saw ahead a brilliant sign which told him that beyond the door nearby one could see one of the sights of Melbourne, the great Paradise Dance Hall.

Unhesitatingly Old Broadbrim walked in.

It was a sight worth coming miles to see.

The vast place was brilliantly lighted up and the fun was at its height.

Music filled the air and the forms of dancers of both sexes went hither and thither under the chandeliers.

Broadbrim selected a spot from which he could witness the revel and not be in any one's way.

Hundreds were constantly coming and going.

For some time he watched the exciting scene, and he was in the act of moving out when he saw enter a man at whom he looked the second time.

This person with American ways came forward and stood near the detective while he cast his eye over the revelers.

He was tall and well built.

His garments were faultless and his face had lately felt the keen edge of the razor.

All at once a man sprang from the crowd and came up to the newcomer.

"Back, are you, Merle?" this man said, as he grasped the other's hand and wrung it. "I haven't seen you for months. How's the Queen and Round Robin Ranch?"

The other appeared a little chagrined over this profuse greeting, but it was impossible to avoid the man.

Old Broadbrim saw the keen, black eyes sweep the crowd as if in search of him, but they soon came back to the other one.

"Things are all right at the ranch," he said. "Belle is as pretty as ever, and——"

"I'm glad of that. I've been thinking of going out and taking a look at the place. You've been at home all spring, eh?"

"Yes, all the time."

"Wish I had gone then. You didn't take that trip to the States, then?"

"I hadn't time."

"Too much to do on Round Robin Ranch? That's it. Where there's money and lots of it one would better stay. But you're looking well, Merle——"

"There, don't call me Merle," the voice of the speaker dropped almost to a whisper, but the old detective heard. "I'm in Melbourne on a bit of secret business and I don't care to be 'Merle' here."

"That's all right, but why didn't you say so at the start? I am always ready to do you a favor, Me—Jack. There, that's one of the old names, you know. It'll do, won't it?"

"Yes, 'Jack.' That name is all O. K."

The other slipped away and left Merle to himself covertly watched by the detective who was secretly rejoicing over this bit of good luck.

He knew his man now.

Once more he had found Rufus Redmond, the *Cunarder's* passenger, but in a distant part of the world, and there he had blossomed out again as Merle Macray.

Merle did not remain long at the dance.

With a last look around the hall he slipped out, and immediately after the detective's corner was deserted and the old sleuth was on the trail outside.

Now he must not lose his man.

Perhaps Merle Macray thought that in Melbourne he was safe.

He did not appear the least frightened, but walked erect and led the detective a long chase.

All at once he turned into a little street, very narrow and rather dark, but Broadbrim did not hesitate.

He caught sight of the quarry down the street and plunged after him.

Merle stopped at a door and rapped.

In another moment it opened and he went in.

Old Broadbrim came up and looked at the house.

Beyond that door lay a mystery which he wanted to fathom.

Merle Macray, traced across the sea, had entered the house and was out of sight.

Old Broadbrim stood near the door and listened.

Perhaps it was a risky thing to do, but he took risks.

There were voices beyond the walls of the house, and he heard some one say:

"Chased from London, eh? What have you been up to now?"

It was the voice of an old man.

There was a laugh in reply, and then Broadbrim heard the voice of Merle Macray:

"What do you think I've done, Danny Minks? Do I look like an assassin? Do I have the appearance

of a housebreaker or a ticket-of-leave man, that I should be tracked from London?"

"No, no, Merle, my boy, but why have you been tracked?"

"Go out there and ask the tracker."

"But he's not in Melbourne, I hope?"

"I can't say. I know he's on the road."

"On the water, you mean?"

"Put it as you please, Danny."

"Well?"

"I want you to tell me where the girl is now."

"Stareyes?"

"Yes, Stareyes. Is she in the city?"

"I don't know."

"Come, no lies, old man," and an oath followed the words. "I am not to be fooled again. If she's here I want to know it."

A moment's silence followed.

"She hasn't been here for three months."

"She was here, then, was she? The witch!"

"I saw her but half an hour then, and she slipped away before I could talk with her."

"You should have fixed her. That was the bargain, you know."

"I know, but——"

"I'll forgive you this time, but there must be no failure the next time she comes. You know the tenth step?"

"I know it."

"See that she finds it. No blood, no money, Danny."

"I'll obey."

[Pg 9]

Old Broadbrim heard this conversation while he leaned against the door of the house, and then he withdrew.

He believed that Merle would soon come out again, but he waited in vain.

He waited till nearly midnight, but no one came from the place, and then he went back.

Hastily changing his face by supplying a new set of whiskers, he went up to the door and knocked.

There was a shuffling of feet on the inside, and then the portal opened.

Old Danny stood before him with a light in his hand.

The detective slipped past the little man and turned on him in the hallway.

"What is it?" cried Danny, falling against the wall and nearly dropping his light.

"Merle is in danger. I want to warn him."

Old Danny gave Old Broadbrim a look that seemed to pierce him like an arrow.

"In danger? Merle?" he cried. "By the officers of the home government? I'll show you where he is. This way."

He crossed the room and opened a narrow door.

Old Broadbrim followed. He saw the shadow of a flight of steps leading downward, and Danny, with the light, entered the place and cried:

"Come!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE TERRIBLE DEATH-TRAP.

The detective found himself in a dark place with the ghostly steps under his feet.

A step in advance was the little ogreish figure of Old Danny, his shoulders humped like an imp's and his face twisted awry as if at some time the flames had licked it.

"I'm glad you've come to warn Merle," said the little man, looking over his shoulder. "You're very good."

"Something had to be done," said Old Broadbrim. "Merle's in danger and he must know."

"Yes, yes."

A chuckle followed the last word, and Danny's face grew white and ghastly.

The stairs seemed to creak beneath the detective's feet.

He did not know whither he was going, but he thought that Old Danny had taken the bait and was lighting him to the man he had tracked across the sea.

He intended to end the chase there and then.

He would drag Merle Macray before the authorities of Melbourne, and would not relinquish his hold till he had the murderer of Custer Kipp back in New York.

But suddenly he thought of the conversation he had overheard between Old Danny and Merle concerning the person called Stareyes.

What did Merle mean about the tenth step?

It came to Old Broadbrim's mind like a flash of light in darkness.

It thrilled him.

He had gone down six steps of the stairs, and Old Danny's light did not show him the bottom.

Suddenly a wisp of wind extinguished the light, and they stood in total darkness.

"My light's out!" cried Old Danny. "But it's all one. We're almost at the bottom anyhow, and there I'll strike a match."

Broadbrim made no reply, but hugged the nearest wall, for the stairs cracked beneath his weight.

"Come on," said the old man's voice.

Broadbrim put out his hand, but he could not touch Danny.

The little fellow had got beyond his reach, and now he could not hear him.

The tenth step!

Perhaps the stairs was a death-trap and there was no tenth step at all.

The thought startled the detective.

He stopped, and then, in a shiver of excitement which he could not suppress, he started back.

"This way!" said a voice which he recognized as Old Danny's.

Broadbrim did not move.

He was lying along the stairs in the gloom waiting for something to show him the true situation.

"I'm down," repeated Danny, far below. "It's all right, sir. This way to Merle."

Broadbrim started up again.

If Danny had reached the floor beneath then why not he, too?

He was more than a match for this old man with the ape-like shoulders and scarred face.

And he had crossed the sea to find Merle Macray, and now he would not let him escape.

Once more, pistol in hand, the detective of New York started down the stairs.

He counted three more steps, and put his foot forward again.

But this time it touched nothing.

He fell back with a half-expressed cry of horror, and then tried to save himself from falling.

But he had retreated too late.

In another moment the flight of steps seemed to tilt deeper, deeper, into the abyss, and Broadbrim hung from the last one over the dark death.

It was a terrible situation, and he felt the strain of it all through him.

He knew all now.

Old Danny had been too sharp for him.

He had recognized him as an enemy of Merle Macray, and had taken him to the death stairs.

Broadbrim saw that his strength was leaving him.

He could not hold on much longer, and when he let go his trail would end forever.

Darkness was everywhere.

The figure of Old Danny had vanished, and he did not know what had become of the old villain.

The American detective clung for life to the step.

He tried to pull his body up, but the flight seemed to recede whenever he did so, and he taxed his powers in vain.

Somewhere in the darkness, he did not doubt, stood Danny, waiting for his doom.

The old scoundrel knew how to reach the safety point, but he (Old Broadbrim) had been trapped.

Why had he undertaken to hunt a man like Merle Macray all over the world?

To die in a trap like that?

At last he hung by the very tips of his fingers, as it were.

His body was already over the abyss, and he would in a few seconds be compelled to let go and drop.

Suddenly the stairs shook violently and a door opened overhead.

A light was seen and it streamed over his face.

Broadbrim saw a man above him, and a glance told him that it was Old Danny.

The hump-backed demon was looking down to see if his scheme had succeeded.

There was a wolfish gleam in the little eyes and a demonic grin on the thin lips.

Danny held the light over his head and saw Broadbrim as he clung to the last step.

"You want Merle, eh?" he cried. "Well, you'll never see him. You will lie in the pit forever. It is bottomless!"

With that the light was swung over Danny's head, and he laughed derisively.

"Down you go!" he went on. "So you're the wolf on the scent, and it's a pretty game you're playing. Crossed the sea to play it, eh? Well, now it's all up with you, Scotland Yarder."

Something, till then unseen, was lifted above Old Danny's head, and came toward the detective like a weapon from a catapult.

Broadbrim could not dodge.

The billet struck him in the face, and with a cry he dropped out of sight while the face of Old Danny was the last object he saw in the light of the lantern.

Broadbrim struck ground far below the stairs, and after hitting what appeared to be the sides of a narrow shaft.

But for this he would have fallen like a stone to the bottom of the well, and been killed at once.

As it was, he was stunned and for some time lay on his back unable to move.

Darkness surrounded him, and he could not see a bit of light from the lantern overhead.

How long he lay there he did not know when a light shot out of the gloom above him.

He saw the light swing back and forth, and then caught the impish grin of Old Danny's face.

The demon of Melbourne was leaning over the abyss, trying to inquire into his fate.

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For some time the light remained there, and then it vanished.

In darkness again the detective arose and felt the stone walls of the shaft.

These were nearly smooth.

He tried to pull out a stone, but found that he was too weak for the task, and desisted.

At last he caught a sound from beyond the pit that seemed to startle him.

Some time had elapsed since his fall, and the thought that some infernal agency was flooding the pit flashed across his mind.

Broadbrim waited a while, and then felt the water at his feet.

He was to be drowned, and with water Old Danny would complete the work of crime.

Broadbrim leaned against the wall of the pit and felt the water about his feet.

In his desperation he reached up and caught hold of a stone that projected a few inches from the wall.

He tugged at it with herculean strength and forced it out of the wall.

He must work his way upward out of the reach of the water.

It was that or death!

Never before had the detective found himself in just such a place.

Traps had held him, but never a terrible trap like that one.

The first stone out, the next one yielded without so much trouble, and the third easier than the others.

It was upward now toward the fatal stairs.

Old Broadbrim stopped in his terrible climb, but not to rest long.

No doubt the water was several feet deep in the bottom of the pit.

Suddenly he heard a noise overhead.

He looked up, but held his breath.

"You're sure he went down, Danny?" asked some one.

"Sure? Of course! Didn't I see him lying in the bottom of the pit with my own eyes?"

"That's good evidence. And you've flooded it?"

"Yes, turned the water in, and it's knee-deep by this time."

"You're a trump, old man—a regular full hand!"

"I'm glad you acknowledge it."

"Now if the girl comes back, play the tenth step game on her, too, and I'll make you a nabob of Melbourne."

"I'll do it. Ha, ha, ha! Won't she make a good companion for him? Too good almost. Why, he hung to the ninth step till he couldn't hang any longer, and down he went headlong."

There was a double chuckle of delight at these words and then the voices ceased.

Old Broadbrim grated his teeth.

Merle Macray had come back, and it was fortunate that Old Danny's positiveness had prevented him from looking down into the pit, else he would have been discovered hugging the wall above the dark flood at the bottom of the well.

The detective breathed freer when the two vanished, but he took a startling oath in his prison.

He would triumph or die in the attempt to reach victory.

He would catch Merle Macray despite all his traps and schemes, he would show this cunning, red-handed murderer that he had not crossed the sea in vain.

But he was still in the toils—a death stairs overhead and underneath the waters of death.

"I didn't come here to die like a rat!" he cried. "I came for vengeance, and I'll be content with nothing else."

CHAPTER VIII.

DEMONA, THE RANCH QUEEN.

Three weeks after the events we have just chronicled there might have been seen in the town of Perth, the largest place in West Australia, a young girl who stood on the principal street, with a pair of coal-black eyes riveted upon a man who had just emerged from one of the rich gaming resorts of the colonial capital.

Her figure was perfect and her face was white and handsome.

She may have passed her teens, for she showed a few marks of having reached and passed the twentieth mile-stone, but for all this she was striking, with her dark skin and her lustrous eyes.

Her prey stood in the light of a lamp that swung in a glass case over the door of the El Dorado, as the place was called, and now and then she seemed to start while she regarded him.

Those who knew the man would have called him Merle Macray, and his well-rounded figure, dressed in a rich ranch costume, was shown off to advantage.

"Wait!" said the girl through her clinched teeth. "My time will come, and then you will feel the vengeance of Stareyes. I never forget, monster, and by and by the hand of fate will fall and smite you. It can't always last thus. You can reign on the ranch as its king, but here and elsewhere you can't play out your hands and chuckle your satisfaction.

"I've waited for you to come back," she went on, her eyes flashing again. "I could have entered the nest and killed the bird there, but I thought I would wait till your return, and now you're back. It won't be long, Merle, the ranchman. It won't be long, I say," and she laughed as she turned away and left the man to himself.

Around the corner she darted into a small place and went upstairs to where an old woman sat in a dim light, sewing.

"I've seen him, Hester," cried the girl, standing in front of the woman and looking down upon her with passion.

"I've watched him for an hour and yet didn't touch the rascal."

"It was your chance, girl."

"I know it, and I had the weapon in my hand at the time, but I spared him. Am I not merciful?"

And she laughed.

"Merciful! You should have a crown for your mercy."

"The time will come. Yes, I have taken the oath that will not be forgotten. He is back from the far-off land. He has been out to Round Robin Ranch, but he is in Perth to-night."

"You missed him in Melbourne——"

"I did," broke in the girl. "But that wasn't my fault. I didn't know just what vessel he was coming out on, and when the *Intrepid* came in I must have overlooked him, for I watched her passengers."

"He must have been disguised."

"Yes, yes, that's it—disguised! He will need the best of masks to escape me."

"Of course," said the old woman. "This man must feel our hand, girl."

"He shall!"

"He must die."

"Nothing less than death!"

"That's it. His crime must meet with the proper punishment. But what, think you, took him to America?"

"Time will tell, but I believe she sent him."

"Belle Demona?"

"Yes, Demon Bella," and the face of Stareyes seemed to lose every vestige of color. "I could have strangled her on the ranch despite her dogs and her agility. She is on the watch all the time, but I had her for half an hour at my mercy, though she knew it not. I could have thrown a snake from the bush into her bed, and they would have found her a bloated corpse in the morning, but I did not. I could have shot Merle to-night, but I withheld my hand."

"Don't do it again, girl. We may be too lenient."

"Just so. I will strike soon."

Stareyes went over to a corner and sat down.

The light falling upon her face showed traces of her excitement, and she fell to watching her companion, who went back to her work, and seemed to forget all that had passed between them.

"If he did anything for her—if he committed any crimes while he was away—they may come after him and take him from us," suddenly said the old woman, looking up.

"They shall not!" cried Stareyes. "I'll kill the hunters first!"

"That's it. He's not to escape us."

"Mother, never."

Meanwhile Merle Macray had departed from Perth.

The night was a beautiful one, and he had mounted a horse in the principal square, and, with a young man for company, was riding in a northeasterly direction from the Australian town.

His companion was younger than he, and not so good-looking.

Both were well mounted, and the horses, being fresh, bore them rapidly over the gently-undulating country, with a light breeze at their back and a good highway before them.

It was a long ride for the pair, for in a short time they passed beyond the line of human habitation and found themselves in an open country under the broad expanse of the starlit heavens.

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Midnight overtook them in the same desolate land, but all at once the scene changed.

The country began to grow diversified with grass and timber, and pasture lands appeared on either side.

They had reached a grazing district, and the long wire fences met them as they rode along.

Presently the barking of dogs was heard, and in a few moments the riders threw their lines over the steeds' necks and dismounted.

A light appeared in the courtyard of a large ranch house in front of them, and the voice of a woman was heard.

"Back again!" exclaimed the woman, who stood in the court with a light in her hand.

"Yes," cried Merle Macray, as he sprang forward and pressed something into her hand.

She looked at it and smiled.

She was a person of five-and-twenty, regal in appearance and splendidly handsome.

Her figure was commanding, and her face, a little dark like the face of Stareyes, was strikingly beautiful.

Merle left his companion to take care of the horses and entered the house with the woman.

Inside everything was in keeping with wealth.

On every side was to be seen rich hangings and articles of *virtu*.

Rich carpets that yielded to the feet covered the floors and the walls were adorned with the costliest pictures.

It was a typical sheep king's home in West Australia, the palace of wealth in that quarter of the globe.

Beyond it lay the bush.

Not far away began the Desert of Death, and among its sand valleys lurked the lizard and the sun snake, whose bite is certain destruction.

Merle Macray strode into the house and stopped in the large parlor to the right of the hall.

His companion took a seat on a sofa and regarded him with eyes which seemed capable of devouring him.

"Tell me. Did you make sure of the tracker?" she asked.

"Didn't I?"

He laughed.

"Of course you did not see him."

"No. How can I see a man who is at the bottom of Old Danny's pit?"

"But you did not see him there."

"I know he's there, for Old Danny never lies, and he saw him in the pit and then flooded it with water. But I've assured you of this before."

"I know that, but you know how we women are. We get our spells of doubt sometimes, and——"

"Don't let them spoil your sleep now. It's all right. The man who played shadower is dead, and sleeps to-night where he should sleep—at the bottom of the pit!"

She crossed the room and opened a sideboard ingeniously set in the wall.

In another moment she came back with bottle and goblets and filled the latter with red wine.

"Drink with me, then. I feel like a new woman. It is accomplished! I told him that he should feel my hand, no matter where he went, and my threat has been fulfilled. You did it well, Merle. I am proud of you."

Merle Macray, looking over the brim of his goblet, saw her eyes get a merry, triumphant light, and then he downed his wine and set the glass on the onyx-topped table.

"I have secured the additional hands you need," said he. "I had some little trouble in picking them up in Perth and they will be here in a day or two."

"You got good men?"

"Yes. I left it to Jot and he will send those I did not get to see. How are the natives?"

"A little troublesome, but with the force I sent for we'll meet them triumphantly. It's not to be that I have to succumb to a lot of brigands and I will not pay tribute to their chief."

"That's right—not a pound!" cried Merle. "We will take the initiative as soon as the men arrive, and we'll show them that they can't levy tribute on Round Robin Ranch."

"Indeed we will. I am Belle Demona, or Belle, the Demon, as they shall learn, and when our men come we will show these scoundrels that we are not to be bled."

Merle drank off another glass of wine, and the woman left him alone.

Round Robin Ranch was the largest and richest sheep ranch in the district.

It belonged to the woman who was known as Belle Demona and whose wealth was said to be almost marvelous.

She had come out some years before the opening of our story and had made money hand-over-fist in the new lands of Australia, and her sheep were to be seen by thousands on the grazing lands of Round Robin Ranch.

Her overseer and general agent was Merle Macray, who had come out with her and who had just come back after an absence of over six months.

No one knew where he had been, though it was said that he was in London investing some of the ranch queen's savings and attending to other business for his mistress.

There were rumors that at one time the ranch queen had led a wild life in the capitals of Europe, and even in far-off America, but no one cared to make a public declaration of this sort.

The woman would not have submitted to such reports, and she was known everywhere as a perfect shot and a creature who feared nothing, not even the plundering bands that now and then raided the rich ranches and levied tribute on their owners.

But there was one person who knew where Merle Macray had been.

Old Broadbrim carried the true secret of his long absence in his bosom, and he had followed him to the island, tracking him from the scene of crime in New York to cling for life in the pit trap of Old Danny in Melbourne.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD BROADBRIM ONCE MORE.

Two days later a little party consisting of ten men came to the gate of the ranch home, and were received by Merle Macray and the Ranch Queen herself.

They were, for the most part, desperate, sunbrowned-looking fellows who sat their horses like Centaurs, and were received with demonstrations of delight at the ranch.

They were led by a youthful-looking man named Jot, who introduced them severally to both Merle and Belle Demona, saying that they had accepted her terms, and had come out from Perth to take

service under her, and were ready to stand by her against all the brigands of the country.

They dismounted and were invited into the house, where they were regaled with a splendid repast interspersed with wine and toasts.

The beautiful woman of Round Robin Ranch was in her element, and the glow of pleasure came to her cheeks while she talked and laughed with her new adherents.

After the meal, Merle, well mounted and with Belle Demona at his side, took the men over the ranch, showing them the sheep and other stock, and telling them how they were expected to serve their new mistress.

The ranch was to be guarded at night, and certain signals had been studied out which would warn the people in the house at the first breath of danger.

The shades of this eventful day were deepening, when there galloped to the door of the ranch a single horseman, who dismounted and who was received with an exclamation of surprise by Merle, who came out to greet him.

"Jem!" he cried. "The last man I was looking for, but you're none the less welcome."

The newcomer was escorted into the house where the lights were lit, and where Belle Demona awaited him in the parlor.

"You came in a little behind him?" said Merle, looking at Jem.

"Yes, curse it all!" was the answer. "I did the best I could, but I didn't think of the *Maybloom* till it was too late. I never thought of Lord Harway coming to this part of the world——"

Here a swift glance from Merle to Belle stopped him, but the ranch queen bade him proceed.

"You have kept something back from me!" she cried sternly, giving Merle a hard look. "You were followed. And all the way from England, too!"

"Yes; I told you about the man who fell into Danny's trap."

"I know it; but not that he started from London so soon after you."

Merle frowned a little but said nothing.

"Go on," said the woman, turning again to Jem. "Tell me all about this person who seems to have come out in Lord Harway's yacht." [Pg 12]

Jem detailed his work in London in trying to check Old Broadbrim, and Belle Demona listened attentively.

"It was a slip between cup and lip, but I don't blame you. There's the man who should have watched him," and she pointed toward Merle whose face lost color.

"I thought I was safe when I left it to Jem," was the answer.

"I'll take the blame," said the man just from London. "I've missed him in Sydney, for which place the yacht sailed, and I have failed to find him in Melbourne."

"He's there," said Merle, with a smile.

"Looking for you?"

"No, but he's there, I say."

"Then he may come on here. We should look out."

"Never fear that," laughed the other. "Dead men tell no tales, you know, Jem."

"Is it that good?"

"Of course."

"Did it take place in Melbourne?"

"Yes."

"At Old Danny's, Merle says," put in the woman. "You know him, Jem?"

The newcomer nodded, and then said:

"I once was there, and the old man showed me the fatal stairs with the missing step——"

"The detective saw it, too!" laughed Merle.

"To his everlasting sorrow?"

"Of course."

"Then it's all right. No fears on that score. But I was on nettles during the whole voyage lest, after my telegram, you should fall into his trap. But if he's at the bottom of Old Danny's pit, why, he's safe for Gabriel."

There was an all-around laugh at this, and the trio adjourned to another part of the house.

All at once Jem felt a hand fall lightly upon his arm, and he looked into the face of Belle Demona.

She leaned toward him, and her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Did you see the girl?" asked the woman, and her eyes flashed with the greenish light of jealousy.

"What girl?"

"She—there is but the one!" hissed Belle. "I mean Stareyes."

Jem uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What, does she bother you yet?" he asked.

"A good deal. She was here not long ago. I saw her in the bush on the east side of the ranch—got a glimpse of her and that was all. You did not see her in Melbourne or Perth?"

Jem shook his head.

"I wasn't looking for her," he said. "But if I had run across her I would have remembered it."

"Yes—yes. Could you go back to Melbourne to-morrow?"

He looked at her astonished, but her face was calm.

"To Melbourne?" he repeated.

"Yes. I want you to go. I don't want to send Merle."

"I'll go."

She held out her hand, and he kissed it.

"You will go to Old Danny's. You will look into the pit, no casual glance, but a good long look. You will see if there is a man at the bottom of it."

"I understand. You doubt——"

"I can't say that I do, but I want certainty. Men sometimes escape from the very jaws of death, and if this shadow from the other continent has come back to life, why, I want to know it."

Jem walked from the room and stood underneath the canopy of the heavens alone.

"What did she say to you, Jem?" suddenly asked a voice at his back.

He stood face to face with Merle Macray.

"She asked you to do her a favor, didn't she?" he went on.

There was no reply, and the hand of Merle fell upon the other's arm.

"Tell me," and his grip tightened. "She wouldn't believe me. She is sending you back to Melbourne."

"She is, Merle; but for God's sake don't give it away!"

"I shall not; but it's all right, there. The detective is in the pit."

"I believe you. Her fears are groundless, and he will stay there till doomsday."

"Then, don't investigate. Hover near, and let Melbourne go. In a few days you can come back with the proper story."

"But if she should find it out?"

"She shall not. I'll see to that. You will go away to-morrow, ostensibly to Melbourne. You can stop in Perth. There are many places where you can be entertained for a week there. I'll let you have all the money you want to fight the tiger there. We've got it here by the thousand, and she won't miss a few guineas. You do this for me, won't you, Jem?"

"Certainly."

Merle and Jem went back into the ranch house, and in a little while the sounds of song and music came out of it and floated away on the night air.

Far away across the ranch foxes barked and the hares played in the soft moonlight which had fallen on the grass.

The sheep had been housed for the night and the ranch guard set.

The statue-like figures of men stood here and there, and the new ranch guard was taking its first night on the reservation.

Merle Macray and Jem listened to the ranch queen's playing and now and then exchanged glances of satisfaction.

A few yards from the main building stood the house in which the new guards hired by Jot in Perth were quartered.

Their voices were heard as the men played cards or sung in the house, waiting to go on duty when the relief came in from outside.

All at once one of the party arose and stepped outside.

He was a well-built man of perhaps fifty and his face was covered with a curly beard almost black.

Dressed in the coarse jacket of the rancher and wearing the long boots of the Australian, he looked a typical sheep guard of the island, and with his face turned toward the large house from which came strains of music, he appeared to be transfixed by the scene.

He leaned against the out-house with folded arms and in an attitude of peace.

Overhead he saw the stars that shone so brilliantly on the sheeplands, and from the distant bush came the long hoot of the black owl, dismal and lone.

When he moved it was toward the large house, and stopping among a network of vines near the porch he listened anew to the music and caught a glimpse of the party in the parlor.

His keen eyes watched Merle Macray with more than passing interest.

He seemed to see no one but him and for some time he stood where he had stopped and watched the ranch queen's right bower.

He said nothing did this man who had given his name as Roland Riggs.

He merely looked, and when he had looked his fill he went back to the others and watched the game in progress there.

At last the tramp of horses was heard and the relief came in.

There was a different scene in the out-house now, and the name of Roland Riggs was called out.

The man stepped to the front and threw himself into the saddle.

In another moment he was riding to his post, and after a while he stood alongside his horse not far from a little copse which looked dark and ghostly.

He was alone in the wild Australian bush.

The stars twinkled on, but he stood there like a statue, with his eyes seeing everything and his senses on the alert.

Far away he caught the glimmer of light in the ranch-house but it only made him smile.

"Not yet," said he, under his breath. "It's a cool game all around, and the man who watched me out of sight when I left London in Lord Harway's yacht has come upon the scene. But he won't know me. I'll risk that. Merle Macray, the old pit in Danny's den didn't hold the Yankee tracker very long."

He ceased and looked toward the bush again.

Old Broadbrim was still on his trail.

CHAPTER X.

A TERRIBLE MOMENT.

"Remember, you are to come back with the truth," said Belle Demona the next day, when she bade Jem good-by on the edge of the ranch, prior to his departure for Melbourne.

Jem was serving two masters, or, to be a little more correct, one master and one mistress.

He was expected by the ranch queen to proceed to Melbourne and there look into the trap-pit underneath Old Danny's house, while Merle Macray had his promise that he would go no further than Perth, where he would sojourn a few days and then come back with a well-coined story.

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Whom would he obey—master or mistress?

Merle chuckled to himself when he saw the man from London ride away, and for some time he watched him with inward satisfaction.

During the remainder of the week nothing very exciting occurred at Ranch Robin.

Belle Demona thought that the secret of Jem's mission was her own, and she was as gay as a lark.

Roland Riggs, the new guard, became quite a man about the place.

No one suspected his identity.

Old Broadbrim in that character was a man to be praised, for he did his work well and became the best and most painstaking of the new guards.

It was the third night after Jem's departure, and Old Broadbrim was patrolling his beat some distance from the little copse from which the bandits of the ranches generally made their appearance, when he discovered something dark moving along the lighter ground.

In another moment he made out the figure of Merle Macray, and saw that he was approaching him.

The detective looked closely and started.

Had he been suspected and was the old enemy about to unmask him?

Suddenly Merle, in the little moonlight that fell upon the region, stopped and turned his face toward the copse.

"Hands up!" cried a stern voice from the belt of trees.

Merle looked toward Roland Riggs and seemed to appeal for help.

"Hands up, there! We've come, Sir Nabob."

Out of the copse rushed twenty men and the next minute Merle, with half-drawn revolver, stood at the mercy of the bandits.

They had come to surprise Ranch Robin at last.

Merle stood at bay till the band came, and Old Broadbrim, crouching behind a tuft of grass, held his breath, but clutched his repeating rifle with firm hands.

Merle was seized at once.

His hands were tied behind his back, and then the bandits consulted.

Suddenly one of them turned to their prisoner.

"Where's the money?" he demanded.

Merle's answer was a defiant oath.

"Come! we can't stand to be cursed. Where's the money? In the big house or in the little one? You'll be a dead man in ten seconds if you don't spit out the truth."

Merle did not reply.

"Stand him out there, Billy," cried the leader of the plunderers. "There, that will do. Stand him with his face toward us; so. Now, Merle of Ranch Robin, your life won't be worth the wick of a candle if you don't disclose the hiding place of Belle Demona's gold within three seconds. Time him by the watch, Peter."

One of the bandits, who was a tall, well-dressed fellow, but whose desperateness showed in every lineament, took a large watch from his trousers pocket and looked at it.

"He won't betray her. He'll die first," said Old Broadbrim, who breathlessly watched the scene. "In that case I will lose my map, and the chase across the sea will end in failure."

The voice of the bandit captain was heard again.

"One!" he said sternly.

Merle did not utter a word.

"Two!"

The figure of Old Broadbrim moved in the grass and the rifle came up against his shoulder.

He covered the group a few yards away, and then advanced upon it.

"Set him free!" came over the gleaming barrel of the leveled weapon.

The bandits looked up and then exchanged glances.

They saw but one man, and he stood in the moonlight with a rifle to his shoulder.

"Release Captain Merle!" repeated Old Broadbrim.

"Shoot the prisoner, that will be release enough," cried one of the robbers of the ranches.

"If you dare!" cried the detective. "It will be worth your leader's life to issue a command of that kind."

Nearer and nearer came the determined detective.

"Quick, we can kill the guard afterward," said one of the band in undertones. "It won't take a minute to riddle him."

The ringleader of the brigands issued the order, but at the same time the detective's rifle spoke and the form of the captain of the robbers reeled away and tumbled in a heap a few feet from his intended victim.

At the crack of the guard's weapon the brigands scattered, for the Australian bandit is not overbrave under some circumstances, but Old Broadbrim did not stop there.

In another second he was emptying the repeating rifle into the horde with some effect, but the unhurt ones dragged off their comrades and left Merle alone on the scene of battle.

"By Jove! it was well done!" he cried, springing forward and holding out his hand to his disguised hunter. "I never saw anything like it, Riggs."

"I thought you needed help and so I let loose upon the rascals."

"And scattered them like chaff! Why, you shoot like an old hand from the States."

"I've hunted in the States, as I've told you," smiled Old Broadbrim. "They won't return again to-night."

"Not they! You've killed their captain, I think, for when they dragged him away he did not seem to have a spark of life in him. But we'll hear from them again. They'll want revenge now, but we're too much for them."

The two men walked over to the place where Merle had been captured.

"I was making a quiet inspection of the lines by moonlight," explained Merle to the guard. "It is necessary at times, for you don't know what sort of guards you get. But men of your stamp, Riggs, are worth their weight in gold."

"They're gone, sir. Over the ridge yonder you can hear the last sounds of their horses."

"Yes. When you get off to-night come into the house," said Merle, and with this he left Old Broadbrim and went toward the ranch dwelling.

Two hours later the relief came around and Old Broadbrim marched back to the house.

Already he was a hero.

His comrades received him with demonstrations of delight and he was overwhelmed with words of praise.

But it was when he entered the presence of Belle Demona and stood before her, that he feared for his safety.

Her lustrous eyes looked him over from head to foot, and he heard her questions about the fight with the bandits.

He answered all with coolness, and all the while was watched by Merle, who stood near and confirmed his story.

"It's all right so far," thought Old Broadbrim. "I'm the hero of the hour, but let them find me out, or even suspect me, and my life won't be worth the snuffing of a tallow dip. I am in the lion's den and I must play out my hand coolly. It is no time for fear—I must lose no nerve in this new death-trap."

Merle Macray was about to quit the room when a horse stopped in front of the ranch house and the next moment footsteps sounded on the porch.

As he reached the door it was opened in his face, and a young man, who showed signs of hard riding, came in and caught Merle's eye.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Tom?" cried the villain.

"Yes. I've a letter from Logan. He told me to spare no time, but to get it to you at once. It came to the post office this afternoon, and he gave it to me for prompt delivery."

Merle, with a face full of eagerness, took the letter which the youth extended and withdrew with a hurried glance at Belle.

"You fight like a prince," said she, looking at Old Broadbrim, who had taken in the messenger and the letter. "It's a pleasure to know that one's fortunes are in such good hands at Round Robin Ranch. Some time you will tell me about your career, for Merle says you have traveled a great deal."

Old Broadbrim bowed.

"At any time you care to hear my story it is at your disposal," he answered. "Mine has not been a very exciting life. I learned to shoot in the States when we used to have brushes with both bear and Indian."

"Accept the thanks of Belle Demona," said the ranch queen. "Consider yourself engaged for life here. Round Robin Ranch is proud to have such a protector."

The detective looked out of the window at that moment and caught a glimpse of a face on the porch among the vines. [Pg 14]

He could not help starting at it, for it was the face of a woman with two glittering basilisk eyes.

Belle Demona did not see it, for she was looking at the new guard.

As for Merle, who had withdrawn to another room, he stood at a little table with the recently-arrived letter in his hand.

"It's from Danny. I know his writing," he said. "I wonder what the old man has to say?"

In another second he had torn open the letter, and one glance sufficed.

In that glance he had read these terrible lines:

"Be on your guard! I have just looked into the pit and it is empty. The man who fell into it the other night is not there, and I have thrown a light to the bottom of it. So look for him near you by this time, if he is a Scotland Yarder.

"OLD DANNY."

Out of the pit?

No wonder all semblance of color left Merle's face.

No wonder he looked up with white lips that quivered like the leaves of the aspen.

Look out for him near Ranch Robin?

Where should he look?

Whom should he suspect?

He read the letter again and then crushed it in his hand.

"I'll find him if he comes here!" he hissed. "I have crossed the ocean to live again and not to fall into the hands of the shadower. I'll be ready for him. I'll find this man if he is to be found; but how did he get out? Perhaps he never fell into the place. That must be it. Why didn't I look for myself before quitting Melbourne? But never mind. I'm safe here."

A moment later he came back into the room with the calmest of faces, and his gaze caught Old Broadbrim's countenance, which stood the ordeal like a stoic's.

It was a terrible moment.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FACE IN THE HAY.

Five minutes later the detective walked from the house with Belle Demona's words of thanks and her good-night ringing in his ears, and sought the little corner where his bunk was.

This was in a small house not far from the main dwelling, but separate from it.

The other guards were his companions, but when he entered the place he found them all sound asleep, and their snores told him that he would have plenty of music through the night.

But it was not to sleep that the menaced detective sought the hard grass pillow of his couch.

He believed that the message received by Merle concerned his escape from the pit in Melbourne.

He felt assured that it told the hunted man that it was empty, and perhaps the letter was from Old Danny himself.

Broadbrim thought the whole matter over as the night wore on.

He recalled the face on the porch in the vines, and wondered what it meant.

Whose face was it and from whence had it come?

Midnight passed and he was not asleep.

Outside all was still, and the moon had gone down, taking with her the light which had silvered all that it touched.

Old Broadbrim suddenly heard a noise at the door.

It was a very slight one, but it was enough to tell him that something was afoot.

In a few moments the door of the sleeping quarters was pushed open, and some one came in.

Old Broadbrim heard the step as it cleared the threshold, and then feigned slumber.

Presently the rays of a dark lantern penetrated the place, and disclosed the figure of the person who carried it.

It was Merle Macray!

On came the hunted man with a lantern in one hand, and a long knife lying along the right arm.

He stepped like the Indian, and his light fell here and there upon the forms of the sleeping men.

Old Broadbrim knew what the visit meant.

Merle was looking for the detective; he was investigating in person to see if the hunter who had escaped the pit in Melbourne had yet found his way to Round Robin Ranch.

Over each sleeper the man bent and threw the light of the little bull's-eye upon him.

Old Broadbrim saw all this, while Merle searched those in the other beds, knowing well that in time he would reach him.

The crisis of his man hunt seemed to have come, but he did not lose his nerve.

At last Merle stepped to where he lay, and the detective, with closed eyes, felt that he was being subjected to a terrible examination.

Merle lingered longer over him than usual.

He held the light in various positions, so as to see all of the hunter's face, and at last he stepped back.

It was a ruse to deceive the detective, but Old Broadbrim did not open his eyes.

Not for five minutes did he stir.

He heard the little door open and shut, and then he looked and found himself in darkness.

It was over, but what had Merle discovered?

Time would tell.

Old Broadbrim slept but little the rest of the night.

He longed for day, and when the first streaks flushed the eastern skies he came forth and looked abroad.

The ordeal had been passed without a break, but the worst had to come.

All at once the front door of the ranch opened, and Merle came out.

Old Broadbrim touched his hat to him.

"You're up early, Riggs," said the hunted man. "Don't you sleep good?"

"Good enough, I guess; but I'm an early bird."

Merle came up and lowered his voice.

"Walk down the paddock road with me to the bridge," said he.

"Certainly. The morning's cool, and a little walk will help a fellow stretch his limbs."

The bridge was but a few hundred yards from the ranch dwelling, and spanned an almost waterless ravine, which was one of the wildest spots on the ranch.

The banks on either side were rocky and steep, and the bottom of the ravine was some hundreds of feet below the timber of the little bridge.

Merle talked but little during the walk to the spot, but the moment they touched the bridge he turned suddenly upon Old Broadbrim and said:

"I want you to do me a little favor. I want some help just now, and a cool man like you is just the one I want."

The detective looked at the speaker, but did not answer him.

"You don't mind a little by-play, eh Riggs?" continued Merle. "You didn't come out here just to guard a few sheep and a ranch house? You're ready for anything that promises to pay well, aren't you?"

"Certainly. Who is not?"

"That's what I thought. I took you for a free lance the moment you leaped from the saddle in front of the ranch house. I'm glad I'm not mistaken."

The detective waited for him to go on, which he did after taking breath.

"I'm in a little trouble, and there's a woman in the case," he said. "It's this way: I once met a young girl who would not listen to me. I believe I promised to marry her, but I never thought of doing that. It's the way all over the world. She is pure yet, but she's a vengeance hunter. She gives me a good bit of trouble, shadows me and all that. I don't want to be bothered with her. You understand, Riggs?"

Old Broadbrim smiled.

Of course he understood the cool-hearted villain.

"She's here again," Merle went on. "I found a footprint in the sand last night which I know was not made by Belle. Stareyes is back to Round Robin."

"Stareyes? Is that her name?"

"Yes, that's what we call her. She lives in Perth, but she wanders off to Melbourne and is ready at all times to make war between me and Belle, whom she hates with all an Australian's nature."

"But you can meet her without help, can't you?"

"Hang it, no. I have a good many things to look after here, and she's liable to turn up at any time."

"I see."

"Of course you do. Now, if she's here, as I believe she is, I want her looked after."

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"And taken care of?"

"That's it, Riggs, that's it exactly. Belle is ready to pistol her at a moment's notice, but Stareyes may get her work in too soon for her, and give me a world of trouble. I want it well done."

"I can watch for her, and, if she turns up, I will take her from the ranch, and warn her not to come back again."

Merle's look at this juncture was a study.

"I don't want her to go away. I want her to remain on Ranch Robin."

"Oh!" ejaculated the detective.

"I want her to rest here forever."

"Not alive, Captain Merle?"

"As dead as Potipher's wife!" was the answer, and the eyes of the handsome speaker flashed. "I don't want this girl to bother me any longer. A little grip like the sort you've got and a little twist of her pretty neck and it will be well done."

Roland Riggs drew back and looked at Merle with pretended horror.

"You can't mean that I am expected to silence the girl?" he exclaimed.

"I mean nothing else," was the answer. "I want her out of the way. She will prove nothing in your hands, Riggs. You're one of those agile men, and one little twist will get her out of my way. I'll make you rich for the job."

It was the coolest proposition he had ever heard, and Old Broadbrim felt a thrill sweep to his heart.

He looked at the man before him and saw that he was terribly in earnest.

"She won't be hard to find," said Merle. "She's bound to show up somewhere, and I'll get you relieved from guard duty if you will undertake the work."

Merle was looking Old Broadbrim squarely in the eye and his gaze seemed to transfix him like a lance.

"It's a bargain, eh?" he cried.

"I'll try," said Old Broadbrim.

"That's all I ask. I know if you 'try' we'll get rid of this pest in skirts. Don't mince matters, Riggs. Let her have the full benefit of your grip and that will be sufficient."

Old Broadbrim cast his eyes down the ravine and seemed to measure the distance to the bottom mentally.

"Stareyes is cunning and cool. I have stood before her and seen her orbs flash like twin stars. She has one parent living, an old mother, who is either in Perth or Melbourne. She is as much a viper as her child, but never let her sting you. Take time by the forelock, Riggs."

"I'll do it, sir."

They walked back over the dusty road and separated near the ranch house.

"A hired murderer," smiled the detective when he thought of the walk to the bridge. "I must see Stareyes. I must find this girl who is doomed by Merle Macray, and she can tell me something of his past. When I kill her for him the moon will fall from the skies."

At that moment the detective happened to look across a little patch of meadow land and caught sight of a figure that flitted out of sight even as he gazed.

The girl had been found already.

Down where he saw the slight figure a few empty houses stood and he walked toward them.

They were tumble-down traps, hardly fit to house sheep in, and Old Broadbrim entered one.

His head touched the rafters of the place and he looked up to avoid them.

The next moment he started back, for overhead, half concealed by a lot of hay, lay a young girl, and her white face was turned toward his own.

Their eyes met.

He found Stareyes already, and she watched him with a strange smile at the corners of her mouth.

"How do you like it?" she asked, the smile broadening as she spoke. "It's a nice place, isn't it, but it's inhabited by demons. They call you Roland Riggs here, but you're not that person. You're a beagle, but I'll keep the secret. Ha, ha, ha! sir, you don't know Stareyes yet. You play fair with her and you're safe. Fail, and it's death—death!"

CHAPTER XII.

OLD BROADBRIM AND THE FAIR AVENGER.

Old Broadbrim looked again at the face in the hay, and caught a gleam of friendship in the eyes, despite the words Stareyes had just spoken.

She knew his secret.

In some manner the girl whom he had promised to remove for Merle Macray had penetrated his disguise, and the secret he had guarded so well, carrying it across the ocean, was in the hands of a creature whose whole thought was revenge.

"We can be friends, Roland Riggs," continued Stareyes. "You have just seen him—I saw both of you at the bridge—and you have given him a promise."

"You know him?"

"Who has cause to know him better?" cried Stareyes. "I've known him ever since he came out to Australia; and with her whom he serves he plays a bold hand for money."

"Tell me about him."

The face came nearer, and the next moment the girl dropped deftly from the hay and stood before the detective.

"They call me Stareyes," she went on. "I am an Australian. My father died on a ranch years ago, and my mother—about her anon, perhaps. But first tell me what fetches you out here? What made you quit your own country? What did Merle Macray do there?"

Old Broadbrim hesitated.

Should he tell this girl of the crime on Fifth Avenue?

Would it be altogether wise to acquaint her with the real secret of his mission?

"He committed a crime, didn't he, sir?" she exclaimed, laying her hand on Old Broadbrim's arm. "And you have come out to take him away from me. Why, sir, if I chose I could turn you in a moment over to death, and you would never drag him from Round Robin Ranch. You saved his life last night, and he does not dream that you did so in order to bring him some day under the halter. What if he should discover this? Why, as cool as you are and as brave, your life wouldn't be worth the sunbeams on the grass."

"Let that go, girl. It is something I know already and I fear it not."

"I like brave men. But you have not answered me. What did he do in America? She sent him away."

"Belle Demona?"

"Bella, the Demon," cried Stareyes. "She sent him off on the dark mission across the sea. But for her he would not have gone and committed the crime. I heard the bargain."

"You heard it, girl? When?"

"More than six months ago."

"Here?"

"In yonder house. I was a shadow on the porch underneath the window, and but little of the bargain escaped me. He was to avenge her."

"Who had wronged her?"

"A nabob in New York."

"How?"

"He had dashed her hopes to earth at Monaco. Ah! this woman is hatred personified. She swore revenge in the moonlit garden there. She treasured her vengeance all this time in her heart. It was years ago, when she was but a little chit with money and little reputation—the prettiest adventuress in the swim.

"He was traveling on the Continent then, and her face charmed him. But he was suddenly undeceived. He discovered that she was not the angel he deemed her, and when he found it out he turned hater and spurned her at Monaco.

"That is what made her hate him. Did she keep track of him all this time? Partly so. He eluded her and kept out of her sight, but somehow he turned up on her trail and the oath was renewed."

"And she sent Merle across the sea to kill him?"

"Did he do it?" cried Stareyes. "Did he find the doomed nabob in New York, and did he carry out his promise to Belle Demona? That's why you are here, is it? You've tracked him to the bush. You have entered the lion's den, and now you are in my hands—in mine, sir!"

Once more the face before the detective assumed a mad look, but the voice was as gentle as ever.

"Yes, sir," resumed Stareyes. "It must have been six months ago, though, from what I have learned by playing spy here, the man who crossed her path knew long ago that he was doomed. Perhaps he treated it lightly, believing that he was safe from the hands of the adventuress he had spurned, but he fell at last by her command."

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"Then," said Old Broadbrim, looking down into the girl's eyes, "why don't you let me take him?"

"What would I do for vengeance?" she cried.

"The same noose will avenge the murdered millionaire and you, too."

"No! I want to avenge myself."

"And cheat me?"

There was a smile on the detective's face, and for a moment it lingered there while Stareyes watched it intently.

"Do you know what came in the letter last night?" she suddenly asked.

"In the one the boy brought from Perth?"

"Yes."

"I do not."

"He read it alone in the room. I heard him mutter its contents, for I was his shadow even then. It told about the man who escaped from Old Danny's pit."

"Indeed?"

"It was from Danny himself. He sent the letter post-haste here to inform Merle that the detective—you, sir—was not in the well, but had eluded the old wretch of Melbourne."

"And he will look for me here, eh?"

"That's it! What made him take the lantern last night and enter the guardhouse? Why with his keen eyes did he look over the sleeping men there? He was already on the hunt!"

"I saw him."

"And escaped? What if he should discover that you are not Roland Riggs, but the hunter from across the sea? It would be death."

"I know that, girl, but I am ready to face the worst."

"Then play fair with me. If I avenge myself you need not be troubled with taking a man across the sea. Stand back, sir, and let Stareyes take care of the inmates of Ranch Robin."

Old Broadbrim was not inclined to do this.

The girl should not baffle him nor throw him for a moment off the bush trail.

"I understand. You don't intend to do it!" she cried. "You have made up your mind that I am to be brushed aside, and treated like a viper which one finds in one's path. You intend to dare me to do my worst. Beware, sir!"

Her hand fell away from Old Broadbrim's arm, and she stepped back.

"I could betray you," ventured the detective. "They want to find you and for them to discover you in the sheepsheds would be the beginning of your end."

"Go out there and betray me!" cried Stareyes. "Go out and tell the pair in this bush Eden that I am Stareyes, and that the old sheds shelter me. I am here, but I am not defenseless."

She drew from her bosom a long-bladed knife with a black ebony hilt which she gripped, and raised suddenly over her head.

"Stareyes did not come here unarmed. She is ready for the enemy. She has taken an oath that the man who spurned her, and even heaped insults upon her mother, shall die the death. All your cunning cannot save him from Stareyes' blade. We are in the play, and a human life is the stake. Go out and betray me if you care to, but remember that the lips of Stareyes can utter truths which may seal the doom of the American detective!"

It was a critical situation for the Quaker.

Stareyes was determined, and her bosom rose and fell like the ocean tide while the threat passed her lips.

Her hands seemed to lose blood, and her eyes emitted sparks of light akin to fire.

Old Broadbrim looked down into her face, and stepped back.

"You're safe," said he.

Her face did not change, but her knife was put away.

"I will not betray you, but you must not step between me and my quarry."

"I make no promises," haughtily said the girl.

The detective went to the door and looked over the landscape toward the ranch house.

Her gaze followed his and she said suddenly:

"They're in a glass house, which is liable to be shattered. Captain Blacklocks, the man who led the robbers last night, will have revenge. You didn't kill the man, though his friends dragged him away. He will come again, and some night, unless we strike soon, the ranch will crumble before the flames, and Merle and Belle Demona will end their careers in the light of the burning bush palace. These bandits of the desert are men of purpose and demons without mercy. They will avenge the battle of last night, and if they ever get hold of you as Roland Riggs, the guardsman, you will never see the flag of your land again."

Old Broadbrim held out his hand, which the girl took.

"Keep out of sight," he said. "Don't play spy too often while you're here. There are eyes about the ranch as keen as yours and you know that Demon Belle hates you like a viper."

"On that score there's no love lost," laughed the girl from Perth. "Wait till we stand face to face, as we will some day. Then you shall see this proud woman, this adventuress, cower before me and beg for mercy."

"The ranch queen? I don't know about that," smiled Old Broadbrim.

"Wait and see."

And with this the girl looked away, her face paling in the light and her lips compressed.

In another moment the detective was walking from the scene of his encounter with Stareyes.

He was known to her.

She was a strange creature and her revenge had turned her head.

He knew that he was in more danger than ever, for the girl in her eagerness to get the best of Merle and Belle Demona would be likely to precipitate matters and unmask him.

If she were out of the way all would be well, but she was now in his path and the storm was on the eve of breaking out.

Back to the ranch house went the detective.

He came face to face with the ranch queen on the porch of vines and her voice greeted him.

He entered the house at her suggestion and was waved to a seat.

"You're a brave fellow, Riggs," said she, looking at him. "I am glad you came out to us, for we are in the shadow of a great event. But I want to show you something. It will strengthen your loyalty to us."

She touched a button set in the wall, and a door opened slowly.

This disclosed a flight of steps, and the woman descended with the detective at her heels.

At the bottom of the flight she struck a match and lit a lamp.

"Look!" she said, pointing away. "Behold something worth fighting for. I feel that we can trust you, Riggs."

Old Broadbrim looked and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

CHAPTER XIII.

BLACK GEORGE'S WARNING.

The Yankee spotter was in the treasure house of Ranch Robin.

There were shelves in the little room, the walls of which seemed to be made of iron, and the detective leaned forward and looked with all his vision.

He saw wealth everywhere.

There were sacks of coin and bars of gold.

Belle Demona stood by his side and held the light so as to let him take in all this scene.

For some time not a word was spoken.

Old Broadbrim looked around the chamber and saw that it was well guarded against attack from without.

The robbers of the desert might burn the buildings overhead, and miss the treasure which would be safe despite the flames.

"Isn't it worth fighting for?" asked Belle Demona.

The detective nodded and continued to gaze at the alluring sight.

"Would you know how much is here? I scarcely know. None of us can tell. The wealth is almost fabulous, for sheep raising in Australia is profitable, and here one turns one's money fast. But it is worth fighting for against all the ranch plunderers in the land. A part of it is yours, Riggs, if you stand by us."

Her words were in the nature of an appeal, and the detective heard her through without answering.

"You're not afraid to swear loyalty to the bitter end?" she went on. "We are one here. Our interests are the same, and we must defend the ranch to the last."

Old Broadbrim looked into her face and caught the light that filled it with eagerness.

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"Merle may be in danger from another point," she resumed, coming close to him and suddenly dropping her voice. "In the first place, he has incurred the hatred of a young girl who carries a knife. Then, he recently crossed the sea to do me a service, and made enemies there. He is in danger. You must stand by Merle, Riggs."

"I understand, but if Merle made enemies across the sea they would hardly follow him to the bush."

"Ah, you don't know these trackers. You have heard, perhaps, of them, but you don't know the ferrets of London and America. They may follow him even to Ranch Robin and may make it warm for him. But we will be on the alert, and the first detective to step upon my land, dies like a dog!"

Her beautiful face came very close to Old Broadbrim's, and the detective retreated a step.

"I'll kill him on sight!" she went on, her voice becoming a hiss. "No shadower comes to Ranch Robin to pursue his calling and lives! We must stand together, Riggs. I like you for your bravery and spirit. You saved Merle's life last night, and Merle will pay you back one of these days."

"I've been paid back already; I don't want his gold. I am but a guardsman, and I'll see that he is guarded against all his foes as long as I remain here."

"That's it. No oath is needed by you, Riggs. You're worth all the gold in this chamber, and I'll see that you're rewarded. But woe to the tracker! Woe to the ferret who comes to Ranch Robin to play out his hand!"

Five minutes later the detective stood in the upper room and looked beyond the porch.

He was thinking fast.

At the first opportunity he quitted the house, and mounting his horse, rode off over the fields.

Across the bridge he rode and on beyond the sheep lands.

He wanted to be alone.

At last he sat on his steed with the landscape stretching beyond him in marvelous beauty.

A light wind, laden with the scent of flowers, came to his nostrils, and he admired the scene for some time in utter silence.

Presently there appeared in the high grass, some distance from the spot where he had stopped, a figure that looked like a creeping Indian.

He watched it till it vanished, and then kept his gaze riveted upon the place of its disappearance.

He knew that the natives of Australia were dangerous people, that sometimes they play highwaymen with deadly effect, and now and then leave their victims lying in the sun with an arrow in their hearts.

Old Broadbrim looked keenly at the spot he had selected, and at last saw a bit of white rag floating over the grass.

It looked like a signal, and he regarded it some time in deep reflection.

What did it mean, and was it a decoy?

By and by he rode toward the object, and at last drew rein just out of arrow shot.

The little flag dropped as suddenly as it had come into view, and then a man, half-naked, zigzagged through the grass toward him.

Old Broadbrim waited, with his hand on his revolver.

In a little time the man arose and stood erect—a tall, wiry, dark-skinned native, with great black eyes and a shock of raven hair.

He sprang to where the detective was and rested his large hand on his knee.

"They come to-night, captain," he said.

"Who—the bandits?"

"Captain Blacklocks and his robbers."

"You have seen them, then? Where are they?"

"Over the hills there," was the answer. "They are getting ready for the swoop. They will burn the houses and strip the woman's treasury. You must fight for your lives."

"It is to be 'no quarter,' is it?"

"No quarter," cried the native. "That is what they say. Blacklocks was shot last night by one of the guards of the ranch, and he will have revenge. They intend to murder all on the ranch, whom they outnumber ten to one."

Old Broadbrim looked down into the man's face and asked his name.

"I am Black George," was the reply. "I overheard the robbers this morning, and I want to save the lady of the ranch. For Captain Merle I don't care so much, but for Belle Demona I would fight if I had the opportunity."

"Then come back with me and enlist with us."

"No! You will probably find me in the fight when it comes off; but I can't take service under Captain Merle."

"Why can't you?"

"I—don't—like—the man."

"Very well. We will hold the ranch to the last," said Old Broadbrim. "If Blacklocks knew this perhaps he would postpone his swoop."

"Not he! You don't know him," cried Black George. "He has sworn a great oath that by to-morrow not one of you shall be alive, and that the gold in the treasure house shall be in the pockets of his bandits."

The native cast a hasty glance over the landscape behind him and drew back.

"Get ready for the storm. It will come to-night," he finished; and in another second Old Broadbrim saw him withdraw.

Slowly the detective rode back to the ranch.

He dismounted in front of the dwelling house and stood face to face with both Merle and Belle Demona.

He delivered his information, and saw the face of Merle lose a little color, and the woman's eyes suddenly flash.

"Let them come!" she cried. "We will defend the ranch to the bitter end. With you, Riggs, and the rest of the new recruits, we will meet these nighthawks and clip their wings. But who warned us?"

"Black George."

"That rascal?" cried Merle. "Why, that's the man I caught stealing sheep last summer and had whipped on the scene of his rascality. I don't like him."

"There's no love lost between you, then," smiled Old Broadbrim. "But the bandits will attack us."

"Yes, they will come. We must prepare, and if the worst comes we will spring the mine," said the ranch queen.

As she finished she beckoned to Old Broadbrim and led him into her boudoir.

Opening a little door in the wall, she pointed to what looked like a bit of string hanging from above.

"That is the fuse," said she. "It is to be fired at the last extremity. It means death and destruction

to all inside Ranch Robin at the time."

"Where is the mine?"

"Directly under us. There is powder enough to deal death to every living thing within a radius of half a mile; it will be involving friend and foe in a terrible burial. You see what chances we took when we came to this place? It was a desperate throw of the dice, but we wanted a home where we would be safe against the keen men of the trails of two worlds, and but for the robbers of the deserts we would be happy. I have had my revenge. Merle carried out my commands, and the enemy who insulted me felt the hand of the avenger."

She shut the little door in the wall and turned away.

Old Broadbrim took particular note of the situation of the secret door, and walked with Belle Demona from the room.

Merle Macray turned from the front window and caught the detective's eye.

"This way, Riggs," said he, and they stepped out upon the porch.

"Did you find her?" he asked eagerly.

Old Broadbrim kept cool and shook his head.

"I have found foot tracks near the old sheep sheds. I even entered them a while ago and looked around. She has been there, and I found a man's footprints in the dust under the old roofs."

"Oh, I went over there in hopes of finding her, and——"

"Then you must have missed her, for her tracks are strangely mixed with yours. If you had watched a little longer, Riggs, you might have got the twist on her neck. I'm going to fire the sheds at sundown. They will burn like tinder boxes, and that will deprive this fair viper of a shelter, and perhaps the coming foe of an ambush."

A shudder passed over the detective's frame at this, and he thought of the girl in the hay.

She must be warned; but how?

He knew that a match would start the old sheds like a wisp of flax, and that before Stareyes could escape she would be caught by the flames and destroyed. [Pg 18]

"Riggs, the more I look at you the more familiar grows your face," suddenly resumed the hunted man. "I once saw a man like you, but it was not in Australia. It is strange how these resemblances overtake and puzzle us. I can't account for it."

"Whom do I look like? Can't you make out, Captain Merle?"

Merle fell back a step and gazed at the detective.

He slowly shook his head.

"I can't quite make out," said he. "But if you were the man I don't want to see just now, I'd kill you in your tracks. Never mind, Riggs. You're all right, but still you look like some one I don't like. It's the way of the world, and we find it so even in the bush."

Merle laughed, and the detective, without a change of countenance, kept his nerve and looked straight into the face before him.

It seemed the shadow of death all the time.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TEST UNDER THE STARS.

The shades of evening deepened.

Merle Macray and Belle Demona made preparations to meet the threatened attack, and watches were placed under their own supervision.

Old Broadbrim, as Roland Riggs, the trusted man of the new recruits, was stationed in the vicinity of the sheep sheds, and this just suited him.

He could see if Merle would carry out his threat to fire them, and thus deprive Stareyes of a hiding place, and, at the same time, prevent the robbers of the ranches from using them to cover their advance.

The night that settled down over the scene was a bright starlit one.

The sheep had been corralled to prevent them from being killed by Blacklocks and his men, and the cattle had been driven to pens and secured there.

Within the walls of the ranch house stood Merle and the ranch queen.

They were alone.

"Now tell me your suspicions," said Merle, looking at the beautiful creature near the table.

"I suspect Riggs."

As the answer fell from her lips the man started, and then smiled.

"This morning you trusted him!" he cried.

"That is true, but one can change one's opinion."

"Yes, but——"

"Listen to me. Riggs is playing a double hand. I feel it. Didn't you notice while he talked last night that he avoided references to his life in America?"

"I did not."

"I showed him the treasure in order to stimulate him to stand by us, and he drank in the sight with eyes of greed."

"Which proves nothing," laughed Merle. "That treasure is enough to move the best of them."

"Besides this, he has been to the sheep sheds, and I watched him from the house to-day with the glass."

"Suspicious, eh?"

"Like all my sex!" cried Belle Demona. "I trained the glass on the sheds, and am sure I saw some one in there with him."

"Can it be?" exclaimed Merle. "I did see footprints in the dust there."

"They were his."

"Wait!" cried he, and he left the room to come back in a moment. "I remember now that he seemed to start a little when I told him about the marks in the dust. But if he is a spy he is a cool one."

"It behooves him to be cool here," was the reply. "If this man is a spy or a detective he dies to-night."

The queen of Ranch Robin stamped the floor and her eyes took on a burning light.

"It shall be found out. The test shall be made."

"How?"

"Leave that to me," said Merle. "He is near the sheep sheds. I threatened to fire them before daylight."

"Why?"

"To keep them from screening Blacklocks and his toughs. I know how to surprise Riggs."

"Don't make a mistake."

"I never do," and Merle looked away.

Down by the sheds stood the detective, acting as guard over the very man he had tracked across the sea.

The night was still.

He looked toward the sheds, and wondered if Stareyes was still there.

He wanted to tell the girl of the rancher's threat to fire her retreat, but he did not dare to quit his post.

Perhaps she had seen them station him there, and if so she might slip over to him in the darkness and give him the chance he wanted.

His back was turned toward the ranch and he did not see the figure that glided through the grass toward him.

It had the movements of a serpent and the noiselessness of a jungle tiger.

There was a belt of high grass just behind the guard and there the creeper dropped.

For half a minute all was still as before and then a name was distinctly spoken.

"Roger Reef!"

It was the name under which Old Broadbrim had crossed the sea after the murderer of Custer Kipp, the millionaire.

It fell upon the ear of the detective, but he did not start.

He merely looked toward the grass and then seemed to bend toward the spot as if to inspect it more closely.

The name was uttered again.

In another instant the detective threw his repeating rifle to his shoulder and covered the clump of grass.

"Come out!" he commanded.

Silence was the answer and the barrel seemed to reflect the light of the few stars that shone in the vault of heaven.

"Come out or die!" he said again, and the next moment a figure arose before him.

It was Merle Macray!

"What did you call me?" asked Old Broadbrim, coolly.

The other laughed.

"I called you Roger Reef just to try you," was the answer. "But you're not the man. Pardon me, Riggs, no harm done, I hope."

The stern face of the detective did not soften.

"Who is Roger Reef?" he asked.

"A man who used to look like you, but I see now that you're Riggs and no one else. All's well out here, I suppose?"

"Yes, but, Captain Merle, if I am suspected of sailing under an alias here, let me mount my horse and turn my face at once toward Perth."

Old Broadbrim handed his rifle to the rancher and started toward the house, but the hand of Merle stopped him.

"Not for the world!" cried Merle. "We can't spare a man like you just now. It's all right, Riggs. I call you by your true name, you see. It was just a little whim of mine, for I knew that if you were Roger Reef you would not stand like a post when the name was flashed behind you."

At that moment over by the sheds just a few yards away Old Broadbrim caught sight of a figure that fell back beyond the door as he looked, and the following moment Merle started toward them.

"I'll carry out my threat now," said he. "I'll fire the old sheds."

"Wait a little while," said Old Broadbrim. "Time enough yet. The robbers won't come till after midnight, if they come at all, and there's plenty of time for the fire."

"Better now than then," came back over Merle Macray's shoulder, and he sprang toward the sheds.

Old Broadbrim was powerless to detain him, and in a short time he lost sight of Merle.

Suddenly there rang out on the night air the agonized cry of some person, and as it came from the sheds, the detective sprang thither and passed the portal of the largest one.

As he entered he stumbled over a body in the doorway, and the next moment he held his little lantern over the face of Merle.

"The viper stung me!" cried Merle, looking up into the detective's face. "She was in the old nest here waiting for me and gave me the dagger. Don't let her get away, Riggs. Catch and take her to Belle Demona. Let the tigress of Ranch Robin finish her career."

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The detective threw a hasty glance around but did not see Stareyes.

He picked Merle up and carried him from the sheepshed.

"Where have you been cut?" he asked.

"In the back—to death," came from the white lips. "Now, if they want me, they will have to hunt me under the sod of Australia."

"If who want you, Merle?"

"Old Broadbrim, the American ferret. But I've escaped him anyhow!"

"You're not dead yet. You'll live to help us drive off Blacklocks and his horde."

The detective now examined Merle's wound by lantern light, and said that it was not dangerous.

The blade had been turned aside by a bit of steel beneath the man's garments, and Merle was still worth a dozen dead men.

The detective helped his prey back to the house where Belle Demona's face grew white when the story of the attack became known.

"Go back to the spot, Riggs," she commanded. "Find the girl—Stareyes, and bring her to me."

Old Broadbrim turned away to obey, and at the door looked across the room at her.

"Don't hurt her—I'll do that!" roared Belle Demona. "I am mistress here and my hands can kill. Go, go, Riggs. She's of more importance to me just now than Blacklocks and his band of midnight demons. Don't let her escape."

Then, as the door closed upon Old Broadbrim she bounded to where Merle sat in an armchair, and clutched his arm.

"Did you make the test?" she asked eagerly.

"I did, and it failed."

"What did you do?"

"I called him Roger Reef when he was not prepared for the name. He never stirred."

"It was the right test. A spy would have started at his true name or the one he has sailed under. It is marvelous what nerve that man has, if he is a spy or a ferret."

"He must be plain Roland Riggs after all."

"We'll see. I'll find out for myself," and with this Belle Demona turned away.

The eyes of Merle followed her, and rested for a while on her well-formed person.

"If he is an American detective he will know something about Jason Marrow, won't he?" she suddenly asked.

"He may."

"You didn't let Jason escape with the secret, I hope?"

"Why should I?" and the face of Merle flushed. "I didn't forget for one moment why I was sent across the sea."

"There, don't go back to the commission and put everything on my shoulders," cried Belle Demona. "I'll acknowledge to you that you were sent to America by me, but you must not throw it into my teeth at every opportunity."

"You made me your tool—you sent me across the ocean to carry out your revenge."

"Of course I did. See here! if you don't like this place with the protection it affords you you can go."

Merle sprang upon his feet and looked at her with the gleam of a thug in his dark eyes.

"Beware, woman!" he cried. "Don't tempt me too far."

The hand of Belle Demona came up and paused only when it covered the door leading upon the porch.

"Don't threaten me!" she thundered. "Remember, Merle Macray, that you live only by my sufferance, and if you show your teeth in a snarl I'll send you to Perth under guard."

Her voice died away and the man in the chair was silent.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD BROADBRIM MAKES A BARGAIN AGAIN.

The night passed away without the expected attack on the ranch.

The secret of the attempt on Merle's life belonged to Old Broadbrim, Belle Demona and the girl who had wielded the dagger.

Stareyes had vanished, perhaps under the belief that she had finished her work and she might be well on the way to Perth ere this.

When day came the ranch looked as beautiful as ever, and the men joked with each other about the attack which did not materialize.

Old Broadbrim's brain was busy.

He knew that he was under suspicion despite the assurances to the contrary both from Merle and the ranch queen.

The test in the night had told him this and he felt that he was to be put to other tests ere long.

Perhaps Jem would come back with a report for Belle Demona, and the fact that the pit in Melbourne had been found empty, would tell Merle that he had escaped the tenth step.

Among the men who came out from Perth with him, Old Broadbrim had formed the acquaintance of one who impressed him favorably.

This was a young fellow of five-and-twenty who had served a year in the country police of England and who wanted to get back and resume his old station.

Old Broadbrim had carefully sounded him.

Dick Waters was just the man he seemed to need.

Still the detective hesitated about breaking his carefully-guarded secret to any one.

It was the day after the night of vigilance, and Old Broadbrim found Waters smoking in the little house where the recruits slept.

He was alone.

"This is beastly work!" exclaimed Waters, as the detective came in.

"You don't like it, Dick?"

"I'd sooner run poachers," cried he. "It's better work and just as good pay. As for me, I never expected to become a ranch guard when I came out and now I'm ready to throw up my commission and put off back to Perth."

Old Broadbrim came closer to the young man and looked him fairly in the eye.

"Let's go together," he said.

"Oh, you're all right here. They think the world of you since you saved Merle from the bandits; and Belle Demona is stuck on you, Riggs."

"I can't help that. It's not my style of life, anyhow."

"You know the way back to Perth, and beyond that lies Melbourne and Sydney. I am going to-night."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I haven't said a word to any of the others, and I don't intend to."

Old Broadbrim was silent.

"What do you think of Merle?" he ventured.

"He is a living secret."

"How so, Waters?"

"He's a puzzle. That man has been in some devilment across the water."

"What makes you think so?"

"He is afraid of his own shadow, and he watches the road to Perth so much."

"That proves nothing, Waters. You must have better proof than that."

"I've got it."

"In what shape?"

Waters leaned toward Old Broadbrim and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"See here, Riggs," said he, "Merle Macray has been to America. I know by some little trinkets he has lately given Belle Demona. If you could get into her private rooms——"

"You haven't been bold enough to try to get there, Waters?"

"I'm always on the adventure, and yesterday I went into the house to ask her a question, and found the door of her boudoir open. I was fool enough to cross the threshold, and there lay her jewels on the dresser."

"Well?"

"And they bore the marks of the jewelers in New York. Their name was on the jewel box—'Tiffany & Co.,' isn't it?"

"I think there is a large jewelry house in New York of that name," guardedly answered Old Broadbrim. "Well, what else, Waters? Your story is getting interesting."

"I thought I would be able to catch your ear by and by. There were jewels galore, Riggs, and all were first-class stones. They were new, the box new, and the collection nearly made my head swim. Think of a poor country constable looking at diamonds that would have ransomed the Queen of Sheba! Never saw anything like it in all my life, and for a time I didn't know where I was."

"Belle Demona probably got the stones in London."

"I don't know; but another little thing struck me in that room."

"Well?"

"On the dresser lay a New York newspaper printed within the last month. There was a marked column, and with pardonable curiosity I leaned forward and read the article. It was startling, and sent my memory back to the recent murders in Whitechapel, though it was nothing like them."

"What was it, Waters?"

"It was an account of a murder in New York; some rich man strangled in his own house by an unknown assassin."

"Was that marked paper in Belle Demona's room?"

"There's where I saw it, sir. It went through me like a dagger, for you can imagine what I thought. There may be a reward for the arrest of that red-handed murderer, and if I could only take him I wouldn't have to play guard here."

Young Waters arose and walked the floor with some excitement.

Old Broadbrim scrutinized him carefully, and his brain seemed on fire.

Here was just the ally he needed.

But perhaps Waters was acting under instructions for the purpose of setting another death trap for him.

He knew that Waters was brave and feared nothing.

Moreover, he was active and fertile in imagination, and, if he was true, he was just the man he wanted.

"Hang it all!" suddenly cried Waters, coming back to the detective and knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Why can't I pick up this man who is wanted in New York? Look here, Riggs, why was that paper in that room? And why was it marked?"

The eyes of the two men met.

"Waters," said Old Broadbrim, slowly, "what would you do if you had a chance to take that man?"

"I'd take him or die in the attempt!"

"He might be among friends."

"That wouldn't stop me for a moment."

"Waters, there is a reward for that assassin."

The youth started and almost betrayed his eagerness.

But he checked himself and bent over the old detective's face.

"Don't fool me," he said.

"I am not fooling you. The man is still unhung."

"Where is he?"

"Listen to me, Waters."

"Go on, for God's sake!"

"First, see that we are alone."

Waters stepped to the door and, opening it carefully, looked out and came back.

"It's all right out there. No one in sight," said he. "Now go on."

"I say," resumed Old Broadbrim, "the man who killed Custer Kipp—that's the name, isn't it?—that man, I say, is still uncaught."

"Good! And we'll catch him."

"Don't be so fast. Cool down."

"I will control my nerves. Only don't keep me in suspense."

"Not for long, Waters. We can get twenty thousand dollars for the delivery of that man in New York."

It nearly took away Waters' breath, but he remained cool.

"We'll go together," he said. "We will play our hand against the accomplished rascal, and we'll go back to Perth as soon as possible, and begin the hunt for him."

"Why not begin it here?" said Old Broadbrim.

"Here—on the ranch?"

"Yes."

"You don't suspect——"

Waters stopped, for footsteps came toward the door, and his sentence was not finished.

In another moment one of the men belonging to the guard came in and looked upon a shelf for his pipe.

"It's Natty Burke, the one-armed ticket-of-leave man," whispered Waters. "He is always sneaking around when there's anything to overhear. Wait till he goes out."

Natty filled his pipe and leaned against the wall smoking in long draughts for ten minutes.

He did not appear to see Old Broadbrim and Waters, but his keen eyes had singled them out from the first.

By and by, however, Natty moved away and shut the door behind him.

"A spy!" said Waters. "That man came in here to see who was in the house, and he is a cool one. But, never mind, Riggs; go on with your story. Where is this suspected man?"

"Within reach of our hands."

"Then let's take him. Twenty thousand for his safe arrival in New York? We won't let him out of our sight a minute, Riggs. It's starting you and I in business. It'll be the making of us, and some day, perhaps, we'll be detectives."

Old Broadbrim stood up and clutched the hand of Waters, drawing him forward.

"It's a bargain, Waters," said he. "We will catch this man; we will land him in New York, eh?"

"That we will."

"Then we'll put our heads together and play out the hand right here on the ranch."

"Against whom?"

"Can't you guess, Waters?"

"My God! there is only one man I would suspect, and that is Merle Macray."

"That is the man."

Waters' eyes seemed to bulge from his head, and he fell back a step and looked at Riggs.

"If this be true, in Heaven's name who are you?" he cried.

"I am Roland Riggs."

"But you're more than just a pick-up. You've been on this man's trail."

"Never mind that. Are we united in this affair?"

Waters held out his hand.

"To the death, Riggs! But if they suspect us—if she or Merle have suspicions—we must fight for our lives."

"That's it, Waters. It is death in Australia or final success in America!"

And the hands of the two men met in a hearty grasp.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DOOM OF WATERS.

The compact between Old Broadbrim and Dick Waters was a secret one, and if they were not suspected they might carry out their plans against Macray and his beautiful friend.

But they were in a wild land, and also in the very shadow of discovery and death.

Belle Demona was suspicious, as the detective knew, for she was a keen, cool-headed creature, vengeful to a degree, and, with Merle to stand by her, the future did not look very promising.

Old Broadbrim recalled the pledge he had made to Nora Doon and Foster Kipp in America.

He did not forget the young girl's last present, the four-leaved clover, which he carried in his bosom.

Now and then when on guard he would take it from its hiding place and look at it.

More than once, under the stars of Australia, he had inspected the little keepsake to smile in secret over the gift and to recall the giver.

For several days after the making of the compact in the little house on the ranch, nothing occurred to break the monotony of wild life in the bush.

Blacklocks and his raiders kept aloof for some cause, and Stareyes was not apprehended.

Merle recovered rapidly from his wound, which was not a bad one, and at the end of the week he was as well as ever.

Old Broadbrim and Waters matured their plans.

They intended to abduct Merle some night and take him to Perth, where they felt the authorities would give them escort to Melbourne, in which city they would be able to fasten their grip on the murderer.

They got together and talked over their plans, Waters being fertile in imagination, and shrewd and cool.

The night for the attempt was selected.

The day destined, as they thought, to be their last one on the ranch came and found the two men ready.

Old Broadbrim stood in the rich parlor of Belle Demona, who was showing him her jewels, which she had brought from her boudoir.

The detective recalled Waters' story of the sight he had seen on the dresser when he invaded the room, and he looked at them closely. [Pg 21]

"Merle brought them from London," said the woman. "I gave him the commission, which he executed faithfully, and he could not have made a better selection."

As she set the jewel box aside, she continued:

"You promised to tell me about your life in the States. Now is a good time for the story, Mr. Riggs."

Old Broadbrim had been expecting this, and the request did not take him by surprise.

He had made up his story, and had conned it over more than once in the silent hours of the night, in the hut and on guard.

It was well plotted and well told.

Belle Demona listened closely, and did not lose a word.

Old Broadbrim told of life in the far West, of living in Omaha and beyond, but said nothing of the Eastern cities.

"It is strange to me, Mr. Riggs, that you never visited the great cities on the eastern seaboard of the United States," said she.

"I liked the West and its free life too well."

"But there is excitement in New York; there is real life in any large city, and the free-and-easy career one can run there is equal to the one the plains afford."

"You must know something of the cities, Miss Belle?" said the detective.

"I do," was the quick confession. "I have not always lived in Australia."

"I thought you had not."

"I came out here for a change and to make money. One tires of the cities. London is full of life, and Paris and——"

She stopped as if she was treading on forbidden ground, and looked away.

The keen eyes of the detective were watching her.

"It's better out here," he said. "Here one is free and owns no master."

"But one has annoyances here. There's the girl who gives me a good deal of trouble. You didn't find her, Riggs?"

"Not yet."

"She lurks somewhere on the ranch."

"She is very cunning."

"Yes; but I'll find her. Let me find this creature, and she will have cause to remember me to the day of her death!"

As she spoke her eyes flashed and her breath seemed to come in gasps.

"Riggs, will you go to Perth for me?" she suddenly asked, lowering her voice.

"When?"

"Now! You can start at a moment's notice. The horse can be had at the door inside of five minutes, and you know the way."

Old Broadbrim hesitated.

To refuse to carry out her wishes would be to throw him under the shadow of suspicion and to go would disarrange the plans he and Waters had formed.

"It is very urgent business, and I feel that you are the man of all our guards to be trusted," continued the ranch queen. "You can ride Black Duke and he will take you safely to Perth."

"I will go."

Old Broadbrim arose and left the house.

Belle Demona said she would prepare the message to be carried, and requested him to come back within five minutes.

Five minutes!

He would have to warn Waters.

He found the young man smoking as usual in the guards' house, and broached the subject at once.

"It means something, this ride," said Waters at once. "She is playing a game."

"I believe it. I can't be back before to-morrow. We must put off the blow."

"I see no other way, but be careful. There may be underneath this mission the fatal stroke of death. She may suspect, and if she does, our plans fail."

Old Broadbrim went back to the main house and was handed a package addressed to one Thomas Sang, in Perth, the woman saying that it contained some of her jewels which were to be reset, the man addressed being a jeweler.

Old Broadbrim hid the packet in his bosom and bade Belle Demona good-by.

She followed him to the door and saw him vault into the saddle upon the black steed's back.

She stood on the porch and watched him out of sight.

The moment the horse and rider vanished she sent for Waters.

The young man put out his pipe and entered her presence.

Belle Demona, who reclined on the sofa when he came into the room, sprang up and cried:

"Now, sir, tell me all. Who is he?"

She stood there before the astonished Waters like an angel of destruction, and her eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

In one hand she gripped a silver-mounted revolver and the other covered Waters, whose face had turned livid.

"Tell me truth! You know him. He is not Roland Riggs. That is but a false name to hide his purpose. He is here for some terrible cause. You have talked with him. You have become as thick as two birds in the same nest. Not only this, but you have formed a compact. The truth, Waters."

She talked so fast that the young man could not catch his breath.

He looked into the depths of her eyes and saw danger, if not death, there.

Her regal figure seemed to have increased an inch in stature, and in all his life poor Waters had never seen such a picture of a fair fiend as she was.

Belle Demona took a mad step toward him.

"Silence is guilt!" she cried. "Tell me all. He is not Riggs. You must tell me or die."

"He is Riggs."

"It is false! You have seen him in secret; you have met in the guards' house and on the range; you have been seen in secret caucus under the stars and in dark places. I want all, Waters."

The young man raised his hand, and met her look calmly now.

"To me he is Riggs. That is what he told me," he said.

At once the woman caught up a bell on the table and rang it suddenly.

A door across the room opened, and three of the old guards made their appearance.

"That's the man!" cried the woman, pointing at Waters. "Seize him and take him—you know whither, men."

The trio sprang toward Waters, and his arm was beaten down and he was borne back.

"It is death to lie to me!" cried the ranch queen, stamping her foot on the carpet. "You can't do it and live. I am mistress here. I am a woman of death."

In another moment Waters had been hustled from the room and into the one beyond.

It was almost dark, but he caught sight of a flight of steps when a door was opened.

Down he was forced by his captors, and presently he stood on the ground in a place, the dimensions he could not make out on account of the gloom.

There he was flung from the men, and fell against a stone wall at the foot of which he sank half stunned.

He rallied a moment later to hear a door shut, and he knew that he was Belle Demona's prisoner.

When Old Broadbrim came back he would be entrapped, and the game would end.

Waters saw through the whole diabolical plan of the cool-headed woman of the ranch.

He arose and felt his way around the dungeon with his hands.

The door was shut and locked on the outside.

His one match which he struck on the stones, showed him a small dungeon and one strong enough to hold a dozen giants.

When "Riggs" came back, perhaps he would have a companion in the dense gloom, but he dared not think of this.

Perhaps Riggs would never come back.

For some time Waters stood against the wall, and thought with a burning brain.

Suddenly the wall behind him seemed to recede.

He felt it moving back, and all at once he seemed to fall headlong into lightless space.

Waters threw up his hands and tried to check his fall, but without success.

He landed in what appeared to be a lower cell than the first one, and when he regained his feet he heard an outburst of demon laughter.

"The liar dies! The fool finds his end in darkness!" said a mocking voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

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OLD BROADBRIM'S CATCH IN PERTH.

Meantime Old Broadbrim was riding toward Perth.

Totally oblivious to what was then taking place on Round Robin Ranch, the detective thought of his strange mission, and wondered why Belle Demona should send him to Perth with her jewels just at that time.

Once beyond the ranch he gave Black Duke the spur, for he was anxious to reach Perth and deliver the packet.

Besides this, he could consult the authorities and discover when he and Waters could get away with their man after taking him, and with such thoughts for his companions he galloped on.

It was a long ride, and not until after night had fallen and reigned supreme did the detective enter the capital of the western province.

The streets of Perth were dark enough, but he heard the sounds of revel which emanated from more than one den of sin and crime, but he kept on.

Suddenly he was startled to discover that he was followed, that a silent figure crept after him on the narrow sidewalk.

Old Broadbrim watched the shadower for some time and came to the conclusion that he was really watched.

In front of the main hotel he dismounted and turned to the door.

The spy had stopped and stood over against the building across the street statue-like in his pose and keen-eyed.

Belle Demona had a spy in Perth!

Old Broadbrim entered the hotel and had Black Duke cared for.

All at once as he turned a corner he came face to face with a man who started back.

There was something familiar in the shape, and the next moment the detective seized the arm before him.

He dragged the resisting figure into the light and laughed as he looked down into the face.

"You?" he cried. "I thought you were up to something mean and startling. Come with me!"

He fell back with the prisoner in his grip, for he had looked into the scarred face of Old Danny of Melbourne.

The detective dragged his man back to the hotel and forced him up to the room to which he had been assigned.

There he thrust the old man into a chair and looked triumphantly at him.

Old Danny showed a pair of blazing eyes and growled like a maddened beast.

"You've left Melbourne, I see?" said Old Broadbrim.

No answer.

"Who pays you to watch people on the street?"

"No one. I was watching no one."

Old Broadbrim laughed derisively.

"You are very innocent. You were not watching me, not keeping track of me? Whom do you serve in this part of the island?"

"I serve myself!" cried Danny, his little eyes blazing like stars. "I'm an old man who does no wrong, but I come from Melbourne, now and then, on business."

"The business of a spy!"

The next minute Old Danny sprang up with the agility of a cat and his face seemed transformed.

In one of his bony hands he gripped a dagger, which he threw above his head with all the fiendishness of a thug, and in another instant he made at Old Broadbrim like a panther.

But the detective threw up one hand and caught the descending arm in a grip of steel.

He looked down into the old man's face and laughed at the expression of baffled rage that seamed it.

"So you are the innocent old man of Melbourne!" he cried. "You carry a knife all the same."

Danny showed his teeth and batted his eyes.

Suddenly Old Broadbrim forced him back into a chair and then stood over him.

"Now, sir, why did you shadow me?" he asked.

"I didn't."

"No lies, sir.

"You were on the sidewalk watching me like a hawk; I am Roland Riggs, yet you shadow me."

"Roland Riggs?" grinned Danny of Melbourne. "When did you get that name?"

"It has always belonged to me—the name my parents gave me."

It was evident from his glance that the old man did not believe this, for he grinned again and looked into Old Broadbrim's face.

"Come! You must tell me the truth. I'll hand you over to the authorities if you keep it back."

Danny winced.

"Out with it!" and the hand of the New York spotter caught the old man's arm and pulled him suddenly forward. "They know this scarred face of yours beyond Melbourne, and if they once have you in their hands they won't give you up very readily."

"I'll tell if you'll let me go."

"The truth, then."

"It's a bargain, eh?"

"Yes."

"I came here to help Merle."

"I don't know Merle."

"You don't, eh? You are not Roland Riggs; you have eyes like——"

The old man paused.

"Eyes like who?" queried the detective.

"I don't like to tell you that. But I've seen your eyes before to-night."

"Where?"

"In Melbourne."

"In your house?"

"Yes—yes!"—eagerly.

"Why should I visit you?"

Old Danny looked away for a second, and then his eyes slowly came back to Old Broadbrim.

"You can't deceive me," he cried. "You are the government's spotter."

"How the government's spotter?"

"You are the man who followed Merle across the sea!"

"That's only a dream of yours, Danny. Did Merle tell you to come to Perth to watch me?"

"No."

"But you came, all the same. Didn't you send him a letter?"

"I did."

"And in it you told him that I needed watching."

"Did you see my letter?"

"Never mind that. I know something about it, you see."

"That's true. You've robbed Merle!"

Old Broadbrim did not reply to this assertion, but continued to look into the eyes before him.

"How's the pit?" he suddenly queried.

There was a start on the old man's part, and he would have leaped from the chair, if Old Broadbrim had not held him down.

"I knew it. You're the man!" he cried.

"There was no tenth step, Danny."

"You found that out, did you?"

"There are loose stones in the wall of the round dungeon."

"I found that out when I looked with the light."

"And didn't find the victim there, eh?"

"That's it. You were gone."

"Now, Danny, tell me why you serve Merle."

"I am under his thumb."

"I thought so. If you refuse to do his bidding he hands you over to the authorities?"

"He has threatened to do that."

"Yet you serve him and all the time have a deathtrap in your den."

"It takes a good trap to catch Merle. He is as shrewd as a fox, and that's saying a good deal."

"But you hadn't the courage to try to spring a trap on Merle. You served him on, and it was to warn him that you came to Perth. When Merle went to America——"

"That's right. He went to America!" cried Danny. "I wished the sea would engulf him."

"But it didn't. It brought him back to you and to Belle Demona, the queen of Round Robin Ranch."

"You've seen her, have you?"

"Perhaps."

"She is pretty as was her mother."

"You knew the mother, did you?"

The little eyes sparkled like twin carbuncles.

"I knew her mother," slowly said Old Danny, as if recalling the past. "Belle Demona is well named. She has her mother's traits and her temper, but she is cool and cunning."

"She is cool, as you say, Danny. She has seen a good deal of the world."

"That is true—she has seen life."

"She has been in London?"

"And Paris!"

"She has traveled in Italy."

"She nearly broke the bank at Monaco."

"I have heard of this."

"But for an American whom she had netted with her beauty, she would have struck it very rich there. She had him in the toils, but all at once at a public ball he spurned her and got her hatred."

"What was that man's name?"

Danny of Melbourne shook his head.

"I don't know. Belle told me once, and swore that she would have his life for the insult."

Old Broadbrim dropped his voice to a solemn whisper.

"Look here, Danny," he said, "the man is dead."

"What, the person who incurred Belle's vengeance at Monaco?"

"Yes."

"Does she know it?" cried the old man. "Did you tell her?"

"She knows it. Not only this, but Merle went to America months ago charged with a commission from her."

"To kill him?" exclaimed Danny of Melbourne, his face losing every particle of color and his eyes seeming to leap from his head.

"Do you think Merle would cross the sea to serve Belle Demona?" quietly asked the detective.

"He would raze the gates of hades for her," was the prompt reply. "He is her slave and is under her thumb, as I have been under his for years."

"Then you shall soon escape," said Old Broadbrim. "He will soon cease to lord it over you. Keep a still tongue in your head and you are safe. But you must go with me."

"Whither?"

"You must go to the high sheriff and remain with him till I see you again."

"I see. You are not Riggs. You are the man-hunter from across the sea."

Old Broadbrim merely smiled.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BELLE DEMONA'S MATCH.

"I have caged him!"

"You?"

"Yes, I have trapped him, but he refused to talk."

"Where is he now?"

"In the second pit."

Merle Macray, who listened to these words from the lips of Belle Demona of Round Robin Ranch, turned a trifle pale, and then said:

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know, but I trust he is."

"I'll see."

He darted from the parlor and went to the door leading into the first dungeon, into which Dick Waters had been thrust by the woman's command, and crossed it to the wall.

There he found a secret door which he opened and held his dark lantern above his head.

For a little while he saw nothing, and then he made out a human figure on the ground.

"Waters?" he called, but the man did not stir.

Merle went over to the man and threw the bull's-eye light upon his face.

"What means this?" cried Waters, springing up. "She did it, and you know why."

They stood face to face and looked at one another like wild beasts.

"And so do you, man," cried Merle. "He is in league with you, I mean Riggs."

"Prove it."

"You have been seen together. You have held secret consultations on the range and in the hut."

"That proves nothing. Riggs and I are friends."

Merle seemed baffled.

Was this man to beat him and come out of the affair victor after all?

"You are to perish here like a rat in a trap unless you make a full confession," cried the hunted man. "The traps of Robin Ranch are as deadly as the dungeons of Venice. There is no escaping

from them, and your doom is sealed."

Waters, who was a young athlete, looked the other over from head to foot, and seemed to measure strength with him.

Merle retreated a step and laid his hand on his hip.

His eyes flashed with an angry light.

"I see. You are in league with Riggs, so called. Tell me the truth, Waters. Who is he?"

But Waters was no traitor.

"You refuse, do you?"

There was no reply.

"Then rot where you are! When he comes back you will have a companion in your misery."

"When who comes back?"

"Riggs; he will return to die with you. The fool has crossed the sea to fall to pieces in the dungeons of the ranch."

Merle, a minute later, stood once more face to face with Belle Demona.

"You found him?" she said.

"Yes; it is true. There was a plot, and when Riggs comes back we spring the trap on him."

"It shall be done! We must be entirely safe here."

"We shall be."

The shades of night had deepened over the landscape and the songs of the birds in the bush had ceased.

Far across the pasture lands of the Australian ranch moved a line of men and horses that gradually approached the ranch like robbers.

Their movements were almost noiseless, and their leader addressed his followers in low tones.

Nothing told of the approach of the enemy, and the night winds did not waft to the doomed ranch tidings of the swoop.

On a little rise not far from the sheep sheds the band halted, and Blacklocks addressed his men.

He told them of the marvelous treasure in the secret vaults of the ranch, and of the vengeance they would take.

When he concluded he gave the command to march on, and the column moved again.

It neared the ranch.

The guards did not stop its march; indeed there were no guards in sight, and everything seemed in readiness for the attack.

Suddenly the air rang with fierce shouts, and the rapid gallop of horses was heard.

"The bandits! the bandits!" cried half a dozen voices, and then all was confusion about the ranch buildings.

Down upon the houses swept the bandits, secure in their saddles, all dark-faced ruffians, who had plundered more than one good ranch, and left but misery and death in their train.

But this time there was to be a stubborn defense.

The bandits were suddenly checked by a sheet of flame that seemed to burst from every window of the ranch-house.

Blacklocks and his demons fell back—recoiled with cries of fright and agony.

The defenders of Round Robin Ranch had determined to fight to the last extremity, and were firing accordingly.

Their bullets told; men reeled from the light saddles, and horses pitched in every direction in the throes of death.

Volley after volley poured from the ranch, and whichever way the bandits turned they met the same sheet of fire.

Blacklocks himself was unhorsed and struck down, but he led his men on again.

At last the scoundrels gave way.

The defense was too much for them, and they had to fall back, carrying with them nearly one-half of their men.

The repulse had been disastrous for the few defenders, for six lay on the bloody floor of Ranch Robin, and of these four were dead.

The windows were shattered, and bullet marks scarred the house from eaves to foundation.

Merle, with a bloody bandage around his forehead, stood in the middle of the room looking like a demon of battle, and Belle Demona, holding a carbine in her jeweled hands, stood near him triumphantly and happy.

The bandits rode back over the hills with threats of future attack and vengeance, and the last shots had died away on the night air.

An hour later silence had come down over the old ranch, and all traces of blood on the floor had vanished. [Pg 24]

"If Riggs would only come back now," said Belle Demona, "I would finish the work."

"He will come," answered Merle. "The trap is now set for the detective, and we will soon be safe."

At this moment there crouched on the porch outside the slender figure of a young girl.

Her eyes seemed ablaze with passion, and in her hand she clutched a revolver.

Her figure was not seen for the vines, but she could see the couple in the room beyond.

Stareyes had come back!

She watched Merle and Belle Demona with eager eyes, and felt her blood course like molten lava through her veins.

"I failed before and he still lives," she hissed. "I see him with her, and they have saved the ranch. But where is the detective? What has become of Roland Riggs?"

In another moment Merle came toward the porch, and Belle Demona caught his arm.

"Do you think the girl is here?" she cried. "Is Stareyes that witch in the country?"

"Ask me not."

"But she has been here. There have been tracks in the sheep sheds. She lurks there. Fire them!"

"Wait till morning."

Belle Demona released him, and Stareyes saw him pass within a few feet of her.

She could have struck him again, but she did not.

"Perhaps Riggs wants him more than I do," she muttered. "He is the agent of justice, and has crossed the sea for this man. Truly he belongs to him. You shall have him, Riggs, but, if you fail, he shall die by Stareyes' hand!"

Stareyes slipped back over the path which led to the sheep sheds, and entered one of these.

She crept up to her hidden bed in the hay, and lay down.

Presently she started and listened with her ear glued to the crevice nearest her.

"They have come for me," she said, grasping the revolver and looking down into the darkness.

Some one was beneath her.

She heard a stealthy step and then the labored breathing of a person she could not see.

All at once there flashed up the tiny light of a match, and the girl in the hay could hardly suppress the cry that bubbled to her lips.

It was not Merle, the rancher, but Belle Demona, who stood in the sheep shed.

The burning match in her hand told her purpose.

She had come to fire the sheds and to burn her—Stareyes—out.

Madness and intense jealousy blazed in the ranch queen's eyes, and for a moment she looked around upon the interior of the little shed as she held the blazing match aloft.

"This will scorch the sleeping viper," Stareyes heard her hiss. "A match and a little hay will avenge me."

Belle Demona threw some of the hay upon the floor, and then struck another match.

Gloating over her demon work, she withdrew toward the door and looked back.

In another second she had thrown the second match upon the hay, and it caught immediately.

"That's it! She will burn now, and Stareyes will no longer prove the curse of my life."

Larger and larger grew the flame, and Belle Demona turned away.

She did not see the lithe form that dropped from the hayloft to the ground.

She did not note the nimble-footed girl who avoided the fire and sprang from the hut.

Belle Demona went back to the house, with the flames of the burning shed seeking the vault of heaven.

She looked back once from the porch, and saw the roof fall in with a shower of sparks.

"It is over and the nest is destroyed! Pray Heaven the viper was in it!"

"What have you done?" said a voice behind her.

She turned and saw Merle.

"I've fired the sheds and killed the viper of Melbourne!" was the reply. "Now no one remains but Riggs, the detective. Finish him, and the secret is forever safe."

She went over to the piano and began to play a wild and merry tune.

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD BROADBRIM TIGHTENS THE COIL.

Old Broadbrim, after his interview with Danny of Melbourne, escorted the old man to the residence of the high sheriff, with whom he had a brief conversation.

The sheriff promised to detain the old fellow till the detective had secured Merle, and with this promise ringing in his ears, he went back.

Jem, the Sydneyite, was a man to be looked for now.

The reader will remember that he left Round Robin Ranch on a mission for Belle Demona.

Merle, however, had enacted from Jem a promise that he would go no farther than Perth, where he would find plenty to amuse him, for this purpose Merle had supplied him with ample funds.

What had become of Jem?

Had he gone to Melbourne for the purpose of looking into the pit-trap in Old Danny's den, or had he stopped in Perth?

If the American detective, still sailing under the name of Roland Riggs, could have looked into a well-known gaming den on the main street of the provincial town he would have got a peep at Jem.

The young man had obeyed Merle and disobeyed Belle Demona.

Fond of gambling, he had sat nearly all day in front of his pile of chips and played fiercely.

His success was varying, and now and then the pile would grow very small to mount again and bring a gleam of triumph to his eyes.

Jem knew Riggs only since his coming to Round Robin Ranch.

He had seen the disguised detective and knew that he stood high in the favor of the couple there.

Therefore when the door of the gaming den opened and he saw Riggs standing before him, he threw down his cards and greeted him with a smile.

But the next instant Jem's face paled.

What if Riggs should tell Belle Demona that he had broken his promise?

Half a minute later Jem threw up his hand and walked over to Old Broadbrim.

"Hello Riggs! I didn't expect you here," he said, forcing another smile to his lips. "I came down here for a little time, and will throw up the cards now."

They stood beyond the house in one of the little parks that dot Perth and were alone.

"How's the ranch?" said Jem.

"It's coming on fine; but you've been away nearly as long as I have."

"When did you come in?"

"A few hours ago."

"But you were there when I left?"

"And you, Jem, were not to have stopped here."

The young man started.

"Who told you so?"

"I know it. You were to go to Melbourne."

"For her? Yes, that's right; but hang it all, Riggs, when a fellow is better paid to stop here, why shouldn't he?"

"Who paid you best?"

"My friend Merle," said Jem. "He's a cool one, and when he wants a thing done to his liking it is done that way, that's all."

They stood under one of the trees in the park, and Old Broadbrim saw that his companion's face was still pale.

"Look here, that was a cool game, Jem," said he.

"What was?"

"Why, your little play in London."

"Did he tell you?"

"Who, Merle?"

"Yes. Well, never mind. I did let the fox get away from me, but I came on after him as soon as I could."

"It's no blame on your part, Jem. You were deceived so cleverly and so well that Merle doesn't

blame you. Then who would have thought that the tracker would come out in Lord Harway's yacht?"

"No one. He must have pulled the wool over his lordship's eyes in a masterly manner," laughed Jem. "You see, Riggs, for I see Merle has told you about all—it was a little my fault in London. I could have silenced the man once, but I let the opportunity slip."

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"You took the trail as soon as Merle sailed from London."

"Yes, I took his place. The man wasn't to get off, but he did. Then I cabled Merle to Melbourne and put him on his guard, for when I knew the *Maybloom* was bound for Sydney, I felt that he wouldn't stop this side of Melbourne. In that I was right, I guess Merle stopped him there."

"I think so—in Old Danny's den."

"The very spot I am to investigate for Belle Demona! But I don't care about the trip. I don't like Melbourne and, besides, it's not the place for cards that Perth is. I've been thinking, Riggs, since seeing you, that I might let you carry out the rest of my plan and investigate the old pit for me."

"You're kind, Jem, just as if I care about the job."

"I'll pay you, Riggs. I'm the lucky man to-night," and he pulled from his pocket a lot of ten-pound notes. "Help yourself, but only go to Old Danny's and look into the pit. If any one's at the bottom Belle Demona will pay well for the news, and if it's empty—why, by Jove! we can trump up a story for the occasion. Will you go, Riggs?"

Old Broadbrim pushed the bills away.

"Why not make up the story here, Jem?" he said.

"I never thought of that, only a letter from Old Danny to Merle might give us away."

"We can fix the old man," said the detective. "But Merle must have had great cause to wish that tracker out of the way."

"He has cause. That was a dangerous man."

"Was he an Englishman?"

"No. No Scotland Yarder would have made Merle so eager to get away from him. He was one of these Yankee sleuths. He followed Merle all the way from New York."

"What for?"

"Just exactly what for I can't tell. You see that is one of the secrets Merle never confided to me."

"You're not his confidant, then?"

"Not in all things. He keeps some secrets from Belle Demona even."

"When did you go to London, Jem?"

"More than six months ago. I went that far with Merle."

"When he went to the United States?"

"Yes, when Belle sent him over there on a mission of some kind. It must have been a startling mission to have fetched this Yankee detective back in his wake."

"Exactly. Now if you only had stopped the detective in London you would have done Merle a favor, but I say you're not to be blamed, Jem, boy."

"I hope not. It wasn't altogether my fault. I never thought of Lord Harway's yacht till it was too late."

The detective, who had pumped Jem so effectually, proposed to adjourn to an alehouse just beyond the park, and the young Briton consented.

They proceeded to a back room, where ale was brought them and where Old Broadbrim played the remainder of his hand.

"So you went up to London with Merle when he set out on the mission across the sea?" he asked.

"I stayed with him till he sailed."

"But he kept the secret, did he? Come, now, Jem, you're a good fellow, and you and I are going to become famous friends, for I don't intend to give you away to Belle Demona, who thinks that you are on the road to Melbourne. I don't care why Merle went to America, for I'm only Roland Riggs, ranch herder and plainsman, and it doesn't matter to me if he went out on a mission of blood."

Jem fell back and his lower jaw dropped as he looked Old Broadbrim in the face.

"I happen to know that Belle Demona hated an old man who years ago spurned her love in Monaco, and, as he was a rich old cove in the States, he was a fat pigeon to be plucked or killed."

"That's it!" and the hand of Jem came down upon the table with emphasis. "He was a rich old cove, sure enough. I heard Merle say that he went out to pay off an old debt."

"One of his own?"

"No; one of hers."

"I hope he paid it. These old rascals who spurn woman's love must sooner or later reap the reward of their acts."

"Yes. Belle would have gone herself but for a little attack of the bush fever," continued Jem. "That's the way Merle came to go."

"Did he go willingly?"

"Yes; he wanted to serve her."

"And did, no doubt. When he came back, of course he acquainted you with the result of his mission?"

"I met him in London. I was on hand when he came back, but he didn't say much. Only he showed me a newspaper containing an account of the violent death of a rich man in New York, and when he pointed to the article he gave me a knowing look—that was all."

"But you inferred, Jem, that the old cove was the enemy of our mistress, Belle Demona?"

"I hardly remember what I inferred just then," answered Jem, draining his glass. "But let's quit this subject, Riggs; it's not a pleasant one."

"Agreed, Jem. We'll make up the story for Belle about your supposed visit to Melbourne."

Jem laughed at this, and the two talked half an hour longer, when they left the tap-room.

There was an eager and triumphant look in the Quaker's eyes.

He had all the clews in his hands; he had picked up many a thread since setting foot on Australian soil, and the coils of guilt had tightened around Merle Macray.

He parted with Jem in the street, and saw the young man wend his way toward the gambling den.

"Good-by, Jem," said Old Broadbrim under his breath. "If thee knew to whom thee has talked to-night perhaps thy nerves wouldn't be quite as steady as they are. But never mind, Jem. Thee is not in the shadow of the noose."

In a little while the detective stood on the porch of his hotel and was watching the many figures that flitted past underneath the lamps.

He was entirely at his ease.

As cool in Perth as if he stood on Broadway, he watched the crowds with a smile at his lips.

Thousands of miles from home, the Quaker, who was daunted by nothing, felt as secure of victory as if he had not an enemy in the world.

When at last he turned in it was with a feeling of coming victory which nothing could dim.

Had he not left Waters on guard at the ranch?

He was serving Belle Demona, and Stareyes would not betray him.

But Old Broadbrim did not know that the trial of his life was yet to come, and that he was on the eve of the most perilous adventure of his memorable career.

But if he had known this would he have shrunk?

No; he would not have been Old Broadbrim, the Ferret, if he had done so.

He was a man who never fled from danger when duty called.

CHAPTER XX.

BACK TO THE DEATH-TRAP.

Old Broadbrim rode back to Ranch Robin.

As he dismounted at the door he caught sight of Belle Demona on the porch, and the queen of the ranch greeted him with a smile.

He had carried out her mission to Perth; he had delivered the jewels to the lapidary and was back with his answer.

In the house the detective was served with wine, and Belle Demona stood near while he feasted and told the story of the bandits' repulse.

Old Broadbrim went out at last to look for Waters.

Could he have looked beneath the foundations of the ranch at that very moment he might have seen a man toiling for life between four walls.

He would have seen the slender figure of Dick Waters, in the demi-gloom of the lower dungeon, working as his hands had never worked before.

But the Yankee spotter did not witness this sight, for others came before his eyes in a short time.

The long hot day drew to a close, and yet Old Broadbrim had not caught a glimpse of Waters.

There was a vacant spot where the sheep sheds had been and he turned to one of the men for an explanation.

"She fired them," said the guard.

Old Broadbrim's look was a mute question which the man understood.

"Mistress Belle came back with a gleam of murder in her eyes, and I never saw her look that way before. She must have thought the sheds sheltered an enemy."

The detective started.

Had she finished the career of Stareyes, the fair avenger? and was the girl a charred heap of bones under the ruins of the old sheds?

Old Broadbrim did not care to ask openly for Waters, still his whole soul seemed interested in the mystery that hung over the young man's disappearance, and at last he sought out one of the guards whom he thought he could trust.

Waters had been missing for some time.

Old Broadbrim put this and that of the guard's story together, and concluded that the pair had pounced upon him soon after his (Old Broadbrim's) departure for Perth.

Had they wormed the truth out of Dick Waters?

He would not believe it, for Waters was a fearless man and would stand by his sworn promise.

All at once a hand was laid on Old Broadbrim's shoulder, and he turned to look into the face of Merle Macray.

"Back once more, eh, Riggs?" cried the man. "I'm glad you're here, for the bandits may give us something more to do, and, with several graves over there on the hill, we will need a hand and an aim like yours. You're ready, of course, for the battle?"

"Yes, always ready."

Merle twisted his mustache and looked toward the burned sheds.

Within the next half hour the captain of the guards came, and Old Broadbrim mounted his horse to take his station on the range.

This time he was placed in the darkest and wildest place on the ranch.

Far away stretched the landscape of bush and hills, and he could barely see his hand before his face.

As he stood beneath the darkened heavens, with his senses on the alert, he believed that some piece of devilry was afoot and that it behooved him to be watchful.

For an hour he stood beside the horse like a statue and listened to the calls of the night birds across the country.

He could not see the lights in the ranch house, and this only served to make his position the more dangerous.

Suddenly, however, he heard a slight noise, and then a figure appeared almost at his feet, as if it had risen from the ground.

"Hush! not a sound," said a low voice, as a hand fell upon his arm. "It is I—Stareyes."

Old Broadbrim, with a start, looked down into the face of the avenging girl, which was pressed close to his, and for a moment he did not reply.

"You are in danger here," continued Stareyes. "The knife has been sharpened and the blade is about to fall."

"I thought as much when they placed me here."

"They have trapped Waters. He is in the underground dungeon now and cannot escape."

"So they've caught him? Did he confess?"

"Not he! He would tell them nothing, and to the dungeon he went, there to perish unless sooner rescued."

"It is the chamber under the house, eh?"

"The one next to the walls of the treasure house. I know the way to it, but the house is watched to-night, and Waters may work on the walls in vain."

For a moment the detective looked away, but his gaze came back to the stern face of the girl.

"Belle Demona fired the sheds and thinks I am there yet," she went on with a derisive laugh.

"I thought so."

"I could have killed her had I wished to, but her time is to end in a bitterness worse than death. Wait, Riggs. She is to see the end of all her hopes, and the revenge she took across the sea is to mock her at last."

Old Broadbrim heard at this moment a slight sound overhead, and they looked up.

"I know their plans," said Stareyes. "I have not been idle since you rode away on Black Duke. You are to be shot from ambush to-night. The hour has about arrived. Your grave has already been made over there in the bush and— Hush! they are here."

Stareyes pushed the detective back, and listened with her face turned toward the little hills.

"They are to come from yon point," she whispered. "Who is to do it? Belle and Merle!"

In another instant the detective led his horse around a clump of bushes, and thus screened his body.

"Wait, I'll draw them off. You must have a breathing spell," cried the girl. "Stand where you are. I'll draw them back."

The figure of the girl vanished, and Old Broadbrim stood alone in the night.

Five minutes later he saw a jet of flame shoot heavenward where the ranch houses were.

He stood transfixed with astonishment as he looked, and for a moment did not speak.

All at once the fire bells of Ranch Robin rang out on the air, and their clanging startled all.

The ranch house was in flames!

"It is the girl's work," thought the detective. "She plays a desperate hand, but the right one just now."

Already he saw the moving forms of men in the rapidly increasing light, and the following moment he was in the saddle riding like the wind toward the scene.

The men of the ranch were fighting the flames with all their might, and Old Broadbrim threw himself into the work with his accustomed agility.

For half an hour it was a battle for existence, and then the victory was but half secured.

The ranch house had been saved, but at terrible cost; the fine interior had been gutted, and the appointments almost ruined.

Belle Demona, with a strange pallor on her face, stood off and looked on.

Merle Macray, not far off, watched the last efforts of the men, and smiled when he saw Old Broadbrim at the head of the workers.

Beneath the midnight stars stood Ranch Robin, deplorable sight, almost uninhabitable and forlorn.

Old Broadbrim thought of Waters in his dungeon.

What had he done?

Was he safe, or had the fire found its way to him and put an end to his career?

"Riggs?" said a voice behind the detective, and he looked into the face of his prey, Merle Macray.

Without another word Merle led the way to the ranch queen's private rooms and turned upon him.

He shut the door behind him and pointed to a pair of revolvers that lay on the table.

"You are not Riggs," said Merle. "The time for the unmasking has come. You are the American detective, Josiah Broadbrim."

Not a muscle of the detective's face quivered.

Merle stood over against the table, and as he spoke one of his hands picked up the nearest weapon.

"These weapons are loaded alike," he went on. "We are alone in this room, and here like men we fight to the death!"

"Who loaded the revolvers?"

"I saw them loaded. I watched the loading with keen eyes, and they are charged alike. I snuff out the light, and in the darkness we fight it out forever."

"Why not in the light?" asked Old Broadbrim.

"Let it be in the dark," was the answer.

"But thee had light when thee struck Custer Kipp down in the library of his own house!"

There was a slight start on the murderer's part, and his eyes for an instant sought the floor.

"Never mind that. You are an indefatigable tracker; never heard of your like. Trailed from New York, I have been in the shadow of your hand long enough. But it must end now—in this house!"

Old Broadbrim took one step toward the table, and at the same time Merle's hand went up, and the room became enveloped in darkness.

Silence fell over the scene, and the detective heard not the slightest sound.

What had become of Belle Demona?

Perhaps she was keeping watch outside, waiting for the result of the duel in the dark, or she might be elsewhere, lying in wait for the girl who had fired the ranch.

Somewhere in the apartment stood Merle, but Old Broadbrim could not see him.

"There is a button set in the wall where I stand," suddenly said the unseen Merle; "I press it, and a match is ignited which lights the lamp. I will touch it, and we fire at first sight of each other. Does that suit you, Mr. Broadbrim?"

"It suits me," said the detective.

As he spoke he moved toward that part of the room from whence the voice had come and

stopped.

The minutest space of time seemed an hour, but all at once the whole room seemed on fire, for Merle Macray had pressed the secret button in the wall.

The next instant the figure of the detective cleared the carpet before him, and his hand closed on the arm which came up with a cocked revolver at the end of it.

Merle recoiled, but the grip of the trailer was not to be broken.

The men stood face to face and looked into each other's eyes.

"It was unfair!" hissed the hunted man.

"With me, when there is a murderer to catch, everything is fair," was the answer.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ESCAPE OF THE DOOMED.

Stareyes was right when she told Old Broadbrim on the range that Dick Waters was doomed to perish in the lower dungeon.

The young Briton, after his interview with Merle, had been shut up again in darkness, and with death staring him in the face.

The place seemed strong enough to hold a dozen men like him, and he had crept around the walls again and again in a vain attempt to find an outlet.

He was still on the hunt for one, when he heard a sound that thrilled him.

It was the cry of "Fire!" which penetrated to his prison, and caused him to hold his breath in anxiety and fear.

For some time he could not imagine what had caused the alarm, nor just where it was; but all at once the terrible truth flashed across his mind.

It was the ranch!

At the same time an awful thought took possession of Waters' brain, and he stood as one paralyzed in the darkness.

Shut up like a rat in a trap, with fire overhead and strong walls on each side, Dick Waters thought his temples would burst.

He pounded the walls of the prison, but the sound was drowned by the shouts above and the efforts put forth by the fire-fighters to save the house.

He listened against the stones, and tried to mark the progress of the grim destroyer, but in vain.

The wall which had receded to let him into the lower dungeon had gone back to its place, and he was cooped up with death before him and without hope.

He wondered if Old Broadbrim had come back.

If he had, had he thought of him, and would he look for the man who had become his ally?

At last a drop of water touched Waters' forehead.

He knew that it had soaked through the ceiling from the buckets of the ranchmen, and for a moment he took hope.

Perhaps, after all, he would be saved.

Now, with renewed desperation. Waters went to work on the wall already sounded fifty times.

He would not die where he was without an effort, a last one, for liberty.

Against the door by which Merle had entered the place he hurled himself, only to fall back exhausted.

But this did not check him.

Dick Waters, in the underground trap, intended to perish fighting; for, fire-chased, he would not let the demon get the best of him.

Seconds to a man in peril seem hours of torture.

It was thus with Waters.

But all at once there came to his ears a cry that tingled them with joy.

He heard voices now and knew that the fire fiend had been checked.

Saved! but only to perish where he was.

Waters drew back against the wall and clinched his bleeding hands.

Presently he heard nearer sounds, and a key turned in the door.

As he sprang forward he was stopped, for the door shut, and he stood again in darkness.

"Where are you, Waters?" cried some one.

"Here!"

A hand found the young man's arm and closed there.

"Thank Heaven! They did not finish you."

"Is it you, Tom?"

"Briggs! I am one of the three who seized you at her command; but, by heavens, I can't see a human being, and a pard at that, die in a trap like this."

Waters uttered a responsive thanksgiving.

"The coast is clear. The way to the south is open for you, but you must hasten. In a minute the avenue of escape may be closed."

"I am ready!"

Guided by the man who had come in the nick of time, Waters went up the steps into the starlight.

"This way," whispered Briggs.

Three minutes later the rescued man stood some distance from the blackened ranch house, and Briggs' hand pointed toward the south.

"You know the way to Perth," said he. "To be found here means death."

"But Riggs," said Waters, "is he back?"

"He is over there; but don't stop for him; Riggs can't help you at Robin Ranch. He has all he can do to care for himself. You must go or die here, Dick."

The young man hesitated.

Behind him stood the old house, and before the long trail to the provincial capital.

"I am going," he said as he held out his hand to his deliverer.

"That's right. It's life over there, but death for you here."

The two men separated.

"Should I leave Riggs here alone?" thought Waters, when he had reached the hills. "It is treachery. It would be called cowardice. He may need my help back there."

He looked in the direction of the ranch, and then turned his face deliberately toward it.

"I'll stand by Riggs! Together we play out our hand, or fall together."

Once more he tramped back with the courage of a lion.

He managed to flit past the house and caught sight of the varied groups of ranchmen in the light of lanterns and torches.

Suddenly the figure of Belle Demona loomed up before him as she directed the men still at work on the remnants of fire.

"A deadlier viper than that never lived in the bush," said Waters, as he watched her. "But for her Riggs would not be here looking for Merle, and she would slay on the spur of the moment. Her sting is death."

He slipped around the place hoping to catch sight of Riggs, but in this he failed.

Old Broadbrim was not to be seen.

Waters hid himself nearby and watched and waited.

He knew nothing of the two men standing in darkness in the ranch house.

He wondered what had become of Merle, but he did not dream that at that very moment he and Old Broadbrim faced each other in the little room, locked in, with revolvers in their hands.

Had Waters known this there might have been a change, but ignorant of the scene, he stood aloof from the ranch house and watched for the detective.

He was in the act of moving on when a footstep greeted him, and he turned quickly with his hand on the weapon Briggs had handed him.

"I nearly destroyed the nest," he heard a voice say in tones of triumph. "I gave it the match, but the men saved it. And Riggs fought the flames the best of all. It was calling off the hounds of death from him, for he was in the shadow when I lit the moss."

Waters made out the speaker standing in the narrow path within arm's length, and the next moment he had captured her.

Stareyes uttered a cry as she flashed a knife in his face, but he did not relinquish his hold.

"You fired the ranch—you!" said Waters, pulling the fair Australian forward. "You must hate Belle Demona."

"Does the bird hate the hawk that robs the nest?" she exclaimed. "Do I hate the beautiful serpent over there, and the man who does her bidding? Stand her before me and arm me with a keen blade, then ask me if I hate her."

"You say you saved Riggs?"

"I did. He was doomed on the guard line and stood in the shadow of death when my match [Pg 28]

created the diversion in his favor. It was a lucky thought, and I would not have cared if the feathers of the fine bird in yon blackened cage had shriveled in the flames my match made. It is only vengeance. But I've left him for Riggs, the detective. I only want to teach Belle Demona that one woman cannot rule all hearts with a rod of iron in this part of the world."

Waters, who had dropped Stareyes' arm, stepped back, but the girl eagerly followed him.

"The game is up," she went on. "Riggs is unmasked, and they know that he came out after Merle Macray. By their shrewdness he is in the jaws of death, and unless he closes in on Merle now he will end his trail in darkness."

"Where is he?"

"Ask me not."

"You saw him fighting the fire?"

"I did, but suddenly he vanished as if the hands of fate had shut upon him."

"Still he cannot be far away."

Waters looked toward the ranch and the gaze of Stareyes followed him.

"Wait! I'll go back and spy out the land," said the girl.

"You? Why, they'll see you and then your career will end."

"When they catch Stareyes there will be a sting in her hand," she hissed. "Merle is for Riggs, Belle Demona for me!"

She started off, and in a second Waters lost sight of her.

He heard her steps in the path after she had vanished, and then he looked toward the ranch house in vain to hear something of Old Broadbrim.

Let us follow the Australian girl.

She went back to the house like a bat in the night.

When near the half-burned structure she stopped and listened.

The fire had been totally extinguished and the voices of the guard came from the little house nearby which had escaped destruction.

Stareyes drew nearer and stood in the shadow of Ranch Robin.

The beautiful porch no longer had its network of vines, and burned wood lay everywhere.

She stepped upon the porch and leaned toward the door of the main dwelling.

A strange silence rested beyond it.

The avenger listened and heard at last the opening and shutting of a door.

A light gleamed for a moment in the house and Stareyes drew back.

Belle Demona stood before her.

The striking figure of the mistress of the ranch stood before her deadly foe.

The Australian breathed hard.

Her bosom rose and fell like the waves of the sea and she could hardly keep her eager hands off the creature before her.

What a chance it was.

Suddenly Belle Demona stepped toward the end of the porch and cast a glance toward the guard house.

A call issued from her throat, and Stareyes started.

In another instant a man appeared leading a magnificent black horse.

"Thanks, Burke. Keep them in ignorance of my departure," she said. "I'll pay you with your weight in gold. Good-night!"

She sprang into the saddle, gathered up the reins, and in another moment was riding toward Perth.

CHAPTER XXII.

OLD BROADBRIM'S DESPERATE HAND.

"With me, when there is a murderer to catch, everything is fair!"

Such were the words that fell upon Merle Macray's ears when he looked into the eyes of the tireless tracker in the little room to which he had led him after the fire at the ranch.

The chamber had been flooded with light by the hand of the hunted man, but Old Broadbrim had arrested his hand in mid-air, and the revolver with which he hoped to clear his path had been rendered useless.

Yes, the man who had crossed the ocean on the trail, knew nothing but success.

With him, as he had said, everything was "fair" when it came to taking the guilty.

Merle could only look into the calm face of Roland Riggs, so-called, and curse himself for not putting an end to his career sooner.

A hundred opportunities had presented themselves, but he had let them slip.

He and Belle Demona had talked over the matter, but had failed in execution.

Old Danny's trap had failed to hold the man-hunter, and he now knew that the end of his own career was near at hand.

But he did not despair.

Belle Demona was still between him and the noose, and their guards, with the exception of Waters, were true.

Old Broadbrim could not take him to Perth, that would be folly, for one man cannot successfully fight against twenty stalwart Australian ranchers.

Old Broadbrim continued to clutch Merle's wrist and to look into his eye defiantly.

He suddenly twisted the weapon from the murderer's hand and thrust him into a chair.

"Silence, as thee value thy life, man!" he said, bending over his prey.

Merle gave him a look of braggadocia, but did not speak.

"I know what thee is thinking about," continued the Quaker detective. "This is Ranch Robin; thee thinks thyself safe here."

"You cannot take me away."

"We'll see. In the first place, thee will obey me."

"Proceed. Issue your first command."

Merle was getting back his old courage.

Old Broadbrim did not hesitate.

"Thee will follow me without a single word," said he. "The men are in the guard house. Thee will proceed with me to the stables spared by the fire."

"Come! You see how eager I am to obey you," answered Merle. "To the stables, did you say?"

"Yes."

The Quaker detective, with a cocked revolver in his hand and his keen eye fastened upon Merle, walked him to the door.

"One break for liberty—one signal to her or any of your men, and the murder of Custer Kipp will be avenged on Ranch Robin!" said a voice at Merle's back.

He did not look around to see who had spoken—he knew without that—and the door was opened.

They stepped into the starlight.

Nothing was seen of Belle Demona, and the sounds of noisy men in the guard house had died away.

The scene was strangely quiet after the fire, and the total absence of a living soul save themselves seemed to startle Merle.

"To the stables," whispered Old Broadbrim.

Merle turned in that direction, when all at once a figure stepped from the path.

Quick as thought the detective turned upon the intruder, but a hand was thrown up and a voice spoke:

"You have him, I see, Riggs."

"Waters!" cried Old Broadbrim, and Merle lost color.

"You have but little time to lose," continued the young Briton. "The steeds are in the stable and ready."

A minute later the party gained the stables of the ranch, and Waters opened the doors.

"Which horse will you ride?" asked Old Broadbrim, turning upon Merle.

There was no reply.

The whole thing seemed a dream to the man who had been tracked from America.

"Quick! Which horse?" said the detective.

"Whirlwind."

"I'll get him," said Waters, disappearing in the stable, but the next instant he came back to the door.

"Whirlwind is not here."

Merle seemed to start.

It was a mystery.

"Whirlwind is Belle Demona's horse, and she left the ranch some time ago."

"Left—Ranch Robin?" cried Merle.

"She rode away like the wind," answered Waters.

The rascal seemed to smile, but selected another horse, which in a little while was let forth, and he mounted under cover of Old Broadbrim's pistol.

In the saddle, as he settled himself as if for a dash, he turned to his captor and said:

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"Do you hope to take me out of Australia?"

"What did I track you across the sea for, if I don't intend to hand you over to American justice?"

The lips of the doomed man met, and his eyes glanced over the long stretch of starlit barren that lay ahead.

It did not take Old Broadbrim and Waters long to secure their captive in the saddle, and then, with a last look at the dark structure a few feet away, they gathered up the reins.

"You got out, I see," observed Merle, for the first time addressing Dick.

"Yes; the dungeon, strong as it was, did not hold me long. The fire gave me a good fright, and for a time I thought all was lost, but help came."

"Help? I thought so. You could not have escaped without it."

There was no reply.

"Who was the traitor?" asked Merle.

"There was no traitor."

"But some one must have betrayed us—you know that, Waters."

The young man looked at Merle and caught the flash that lit up his eyes.

"There is one person whom you seem to have forgotten," was all he said, and then looked away.

Merle fell into a deep study, during which he was silent.

"I see it now. She helped you," he suddenly cried. "There comes a day of vengeance. When I am out of your hands, gentlemen, I will show this sand viper that there is a hand that kills."

Old Broadbrim and Waters exchanged glances.

When he was out of their hands?

That day, if they were not outwitted, would never come; and when Merle would think of paying Stareyes back for helping Waters to his freedom, he would be powerless to strike.

With Merle Macray between them, the two man-hunters rode swiftly over the open.

The stars had come out with unwonted brilliancy, and the whole surface of the heavens seemed studded with them, like a vast diamond field.

The road to Perth was well defined, and the steeds, which had traveled it often, knew the way without being guided.

Not for a moment did the captors of the hunted man remove their eyes from him.

Once Old Broadbrim ventured to break the reverie into which Merle had fallen, but the glance he got was enough.

"It's been a long trail, sir," said Old Broadbrim.

"You're not at the end of it yet," was the flashed response.

"You took the steamer ahead of me—the *Campania*. I found the clew in the papers left behind by Jason Marrow, the man killed the same night of the Fifth Avenue murder."

"His papers?"

"Yes; I know who that man was, and that makes your crime all the darker."

Merle's face clouded, but he did not speak.

"Jason Marrow was your half-brother, Merle," continued Old Broadbrim. "He held the secret of your life in Australia; he knew that you had leagued yourself with Belle Demona, the woman who planned the death of Custer Kipp, and he wrote out the story of your life and hers, in order that justice should find your trail if you slew him to render the dread secret safe. You searched the house near the little alley, after the second deed. You went from Custer Kipp's house to your brother Jason's. You found him alone, and the same hand that throttled the millionaire killed the other."

Merle looked into the detective's face, and for a moment it seemed that he would deny the charge, but he did not reply.

"It's been a long chase," pursued Old Broadbrim. "Thee might have checked pursuit in New York."

Merle's look said: "How?" in language not to be misconstrued.

"Thee forgot that the dead might speak and tell the very name under which thee embarked in the

Campania. That name fastened the crime upon thee. I crossed the sea after 'Rufus Redmond,' but all the time I was looking for Merle Macray."

Once more the fine face above the saddle grew troubled and a baleful light came into the eyes, but it died away and Merle's countenance resumed its old appearance.

On, still on, under the stars of the far-off island rode the three men.

Hours passed.

Neither Old Broadbrim nor Waters had relaxed their vigilance.

All the time their ears were strained to catch the sounds of hoofs behind them.

If they could greet daylight without pursuit they would be safe.

All at once there came over the barren land the very sound they dreaded to hear.

Merle's face suddenly lighted up with secret joy and his figure seemed to turn in the saddle.

He knew what it meant.

The men of Round Robin Ranch had discovered the abduction, and were in pursuit.

Old Broadbrim, cool at all times, was never cooler than now.

He looked at Waters and saw that the young Briton was calm and collected.

In Waters' hand rested a cocked revolver and his clear, black eye was watching the prisoner's every quiver.

The three gave their steeds the spur, and the animals, rested a little, started off like a trio of arrows.

Merle listened with flushed cheeks to the sounds behind, and caught at last the first streaks of dawn in the eastern sky.

Twenty against three!

He knew how that would go.

"Don't build thy hopes on what's behind us," suddenly said Old Broadbrim. "It's a sea voyage or death for thee in the saddle. In case we are overtaken and my papers are not respected by the men of Ranch Robin, I will leave thee here dead with a bullet in thy brain."

Merle did not reply; but his face grew pale, for he knew the nerve of the man who had just spoken.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WOMAN WITH THE REVOLVER.

Let us go back a step in our story of crime and its detection, and keep track of another character—Belle Demona.

We saw her at last on her way toward Perth, well mounted and eager.

She was leaving Merle behind, and she knew it.

Somewhere in the house almost tenantless, thanks to Stareyes' avenging hand, he was facing Riggs, the guard, now known to both as the trailer from beyond the sea; but, for all this, she was deserting him, leaving him to fight his battles alone.

Belle Demona put the endurance of the horse to its utmost, and, as she careered over the barren, she glanced up now and then as if to mark the flight of time by the stars.

Nothing occurred to give her ride an eventful turn.

Day broke over her and lit up the way, and in due course of time she pulled into Perth, her black steed foamy at the bit and streaked with white at the flanks.

She looked romantically picturesque as she galloped down the main street of the provincial capital, looking on both sides and singling out certain people here and there.

Almost at the end of the street she drew rein and dismounted.

"He said the traitor was here," she muttered. "If so I'll face him and show him that I brook no disobedience."

She walked to the door of a small two-story house and knocked.

Her heated horse stood in the middle of the street.

The door was opened at last by an old woman who looked at Belle Demona, and then let her in.

As she crossed the threshold she clutched the old woman's arm and almost hissed:

"Where is he?"

There was a start and a recoil, for the speaker's eyes were dangerous in their light and quite enough to frighten one.

"You know me, Meg?" Belle Demona went on. "I came over on business. Jem is here?"

There was a hasty glance toward the ceiling, and the other said:

"Yes, I see. Is he asleep?"

"Yes, he came in but half an hour ago."

"Sober?"

"Reasonably so," was the answer, and then Belle Demona moved toward the door.

"How's Round Robin?" queried the old woman.

"Gone, but my vengeance remains!"

"Your vengeance?"

"Yes."

Before the older one could reply there were hasty footsteps on the stairs in the dingy hall and the figure of Belle Demona vanished.

Overhead a little door met her roving vision and she pushed it open.

Stretched on a sofa with his clothes on lay Jem, the Sydneyite, the man whom she had sent to Melbourne to discover the truth about Old Danny's trap.

He did not hear her.

For a moment Belle Demona, pistol in hand, looked at the sleeper, and a smile of vengeance came to her finely-chiseled lips.

After a while she went over to the sofa and let her gloved hand fall upon his shoulder.

It took a little shaking to open Jem's eyes, and the first look did not reveal the truth.

But when he looked again and saw the tensely-drawn face, and perhaps the cocked six-shooter in the woman's hand, he sat bolt upright and lost color.

She had unmasked him.

Belle Demona had come to prove that he had deceived her, that he had never gone to Melbourne, and perhaps she knew that his time had been passed in the gilded gambling hells and dance halls of Perth.

"I am here, traitor!" sternly spoke Belle Demona.

Jem shook off the last semblance of sleep and got up.

"You have played me false. You let another make you his slave. You have rested here in Perth."

What could he say?

There were marks of dissipation on his face, and he wondered if Riggs had gone back to the ranch and betrayed him.

"Stand over there against the wall!" commanded the queen of the ranch.

Jem hesitated.

"I'll kill you if you don't!"

He moved away and she continued:

"Merle told you to stop in Perth?" She looked at him as she spoke. "He gave you money—my money—with which to fight the tiger here."

Jem was ready for any confession now, for he saw the determined mien of his mistress, and knew that she came from Ranch Robin merciless and cool.

"Like a fool I listened to Merle," he said.

"Like a fool? Rather like a traitor!" cried the woman. "You must have met the man called Riggs?"

"He threw himself across my path."

"Why didn't you kill him?"

"I didn't suspect that he was the detective."

"Fool! you might have known that he would not seek you if not for a terrible purpose."

"Let me meet him again."

"That is never to take place."

The last words seemed to come through clinched teeth, and the hand of Belle Demona got a tighter grip on the revolver.

"My death would do you no good, woman," he said, seeing her determination as expressed in deep-set and glowing eyes.

"It would put a traitor out of the way. It would stop treason among those I have trusted. I will have no traitors in my way."

Jem, the Sydneyite, seemed to measure the distance between him and the woman, but a few steps away, and he knew that she would carry out the purposes of her heart to the letter.

"I have come to kill you!" deliberately spoke Belle Demona.

He did not plead for time or mercy.

Once more he looked across the space and tried to detect a quivering of her muscles, but failed.

Belle Demona fell back a step, and the deadly weapon looked Jem fairly in the face.

"When I pass from this room to fight to the bitter end the battle of life against the minions of the law, you will not be a witness against me," she said. "Your time is up, Jem!"

The finger against the trigger moved a little.

A jet of fire leaped into the man's face, and he reeled against the walls, throwing up his hands with a cry.

She appeared riveted to the floor while she watched the sinking body that finally reached the carpet with a white face turned toward hers.

Jem, the Sydneyite, did not move after striking the floor, and Belle Demona remained in her tracks a full minute.

Presently, with a last look at her victim, she moved toward the door, which she locked behind her.

With steady step she descended the stairs and looked in upon Meg in the lower room.

The face of the old woman was as white as that of the dead overhead and she greeted Belle Demona with a look which told that she knew all.

"Don't open the room for an hour," said the queen of Ranch Robin.

"Not for a day if you give the command."

"Well, say not for three hours. Jem, your lodger, was a traitor, Meg——"

"Death to all such, I say!" cried the old woman, and the woman with the revolver threw a lot of bills upon the clothless table.

Half a minute later Belle Demona stood once more in the street of Perth.

Her horse had waited for her and she mounted with the grace of a finished rider.

She cast a glance up the street as she did so and then moved away.

Suddenly at the second glance she changed color a trifle.

Three horsemen were just entering Perth in the early light of morning.

The figures, blended for some time, opened as they came on, and the face of the queen of the ranch became a study while she watched them.

Did she guess who they were?

Belle Demona turned aside at the first corner and rode into another thoroughfare.

"I'll wait and see," she said.

Riding down a narrow alley, still dark, she reined in her steed and turned his face toward the street. [Pg 31]

There, with the revolver in her hand, she sat upright in the silken saddle and watched the mouth of the alley.

Not a muscle moved.

Like a hunted creature, this magnificent woman, beautiful despite her wild and reckless life, awaited the appearance of the three men.

Presently she caught the sound of hoofs and leaned forward.

"They will soon be here, and then——"

She did not complete the sentence, but broke it of her own accord and held her breath.

Nearer and nearer came the steeds as yet unseen, and the gloved finger of Belle Demona rested against the shining trigger of the six-shooter.

"He will never take him across the sea!" she hissed. "Here ends the trail of the Yankee spotter, and here finishes as well the story of Belle Demona's hate."

The next moment the horsemen came opposite the mouth of the alley, and the fair foe in ambush pressed the trigger, and a loud report rang out on the crisp air.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE QUAKER'S TRUMPS WIN.

Sharp and clear was the report of Belle Demona's revolver.

The three horses in the street stopped, and one of the riders pitched forward, but did not fall to the ground.

With a cry that welled from the depths of her heart, the woman in the alley stood as one transfixed with horror.

"The wrong man!" she exclaimed.

In another moment a horseman dashed into the alley, and the queen of the ranch, with smoking revolver in her hand, stood undecided.

"You? I thought so," said a voice as a man leaned over the saddle and clutched her arm.

There was no answer, but with a quick recoil Belle Demona broke from the hand and started back.

"Not yet," she said, and then a figure flew down the alley and distanced the horseman, to escape in a small doorway some distance from the scene.

Old Broadbrim, who was the horseman, turned back and looked into the white face of Merle.

For once in her life, at least, her hand had trembled, and Belle Demona, instead of finishing the career of the Yankee, had sent a bullet through Merle's shoulder.

Old Broadbrim and Dick Waters, whom we left with their captive on the way from Round Robin Ranch, had been overtaken by the men of the bush, eager to capture their master.

The Quaker detective had met them with his accustomed coolness, and he and Dick had heroically faced the band.

Broadbrim was not to be baffled even in Australia, and, with a pistol at Merle's head, he coolly informed the guardsmen that if they attempted to enforce their demand he would send a bullet to the murderer's brain.

It was a parley with ready weapons in the open, and the ashen face of Merle looked pitiful while it lasted.

In the early flush of dawn his fate trembled in the balance, and when the detective rode on, he (Merle) cast a longing look at the horsemen moving back.

Old Broadbrim conducted his prisoner to the headquarters of the Perth police and there presented the papers he had brought from America.

Merle looked coolly on.

His wound had been dressed and he was silent while he listened to the detective.

But suddenly his eye caught the old-time fire and he thought of Belle Demona.

She did not intend to shoot him.

No, it was a mistake, and he felt that while she lived and was on the alert in the little town the detective and his new-found friend stood a good chance of failing.

It was found that on the next day a vessel would leave the port for Melbourne, and Old Broadbrim determined to take his prisoner on board and await the sailing.

Meantime the authorities of Perth scoured the town for the ranch queen.

She was not to be found, and no one thought of searching Meg's domicile.

Some thought she had gone back to the ranch, but Broadbrim was equally certain that he had not seen the last of the cool-headed creature.

Nor had he.

The little vessel rocking lightly in the bay of Perth was ready for the voyage of the morrow, and Old Broadbrim stood on the deck with the lights of the town before him.

The night was a beautiful one, and he knew that the arrest of Merle Macray had stirred up the rough populace and that it was the talk in saloon and dance hall all over the port.

Suddenly there came into view a dark, straggling object, which grew larger as it approached, and the detective leaned over the vessel's side and waited.

The *Swallow* was moored close to the dock, and as she was a vessel of a few tons burden, for she was a coaster, she was at the mercy of almost any mob, however small.

The Quaker detective's face grew sterner as he looked, and watched the crowd of Australians as it came on silently, but with determined mien.

It did not take him long to know what had happened.

The Yankee spotter was not to be permitted to get away with his prey, if the men of Perth could prevent.

Old Broadbrim doubted not that the police of the town stood in with Merle's friends, and they hated the American detective most cordially.

Behind it all stood Belle Demona and her almost unlimited wealth.

Presently the mob made a rush for the dock, and the detective, as yet the only one on the deck,

[Transcriber's Note: the final words of this sentence are illegible due to a printing error which affects both copies of the book consulted for this project] .

The greater part of the coaster's crew were in town, and the hour was most opportune for an attack.

At sound of his voice the crowd halted, and for a moment seemed on the eve of a retreat.

But the following minute a voice, which the detective had heard before, sang out and urged them on.

Belle Demona was at the head of the party.

The mob rushed to the very edge of the pier, but by this time several figures had reached Old Broadbrim's side, and the captain of the little coaster, with his mates, all determined men who had faced mobs before, stood on deck with repeating rifles in their hands.

It was a moment of suspense, and more than one life hung in the balance.

"Are you cowards, men?" cried the ranch queen. "Shall a Yankee spotter kidnap from under your very eyes the captain of Ranch Robin? Shall the man called Riggs, but who is a New York shadow, take from among us, to be hanged for an imaginary crime, Merle Macray—the open-hearted, brave Merle, my friend and yours?"

A chorus of "No's!" was the answer, but the men on the *Swallow's* deck only looked at each other and smiled defiance. [Pg 32]

The menace of rifle and revolver was too much for the mob.

It was not quite drunk enough to rush to death, and at the suggestion of one of its number the rest adjourned to the wine shops once more.

The woman's figure remained on the dock.

Belle Demona's form was seen in the starlight as she faced the detective.

"I missed you this morning," she exclaimed, her voice having the old-time, silvery ring. "I fired at your heart, Josiah Broadbrim, but your horse saved it. Now I have you at my mercy!"

She finished by throwing up her hand, and the detective looked again into the muzzle of the deadly revolver.

This time her hand did not quiver.

The men of the vessel seemed to lose nerve at the danger that threatened the man from across the sea.

"It is my time, ferret!" said Belle Demona. "This is the end of your trail, and the sun of Australia will shine on your defeat!"

There followed a flash and a report, but not from the six-shooter in the hand of Belle Demona.

The fair-faced witch of two worlds threw up her hands and reeled away as the pistol dropped from her grasp.

"Shot! Retribution!" said the captain of the coaster.

"But look! the avenger is one of her own sex," was the response, as all saw a figure run to Belle Demona's side and stoop over her.

"Stareyes!"

And with the word on his lips Old Broadbrim bounded over the ship's side and dashed forward.

"I have found her. I told you I would some day settle with the queen of the ranch," said the young girl who encountered the detective's gaze from the side of the prostrate woman. "Don't say that Stareyes forgets. Merle is yours, but this woman—this creature who sent him across the sea, and who would have seen me starve, who would have burned me in the sheepsheds—she belongs to Stareyes."

Belle Demona was not dead, nor was she likely to cross the bar from Stareyes' weapon.

The girl was led away, and the queen of the ranch was afterward found by Meg, her friend, who took her home.

Long before daylight, and before the mob could again muster its motley spirits, the little *Swallow* spread her wings and once more stood out to sea.

And when Merle looked out upon the water he realized that the first stages of the journey back to doom had begun.

As for Belle Demona, that same day she rode homeward, but in her wake was the same implacable shadow destined in time to settle the old score forever.

There was a wait of a week in Melbourne, but at the end of that time Old Broadbrim and his prisoner, accompanied by Dick Waters, stepped on board a United States man-of-war, and the sea trail stretched once more toward the New World.

One bright morning while Clippers was in the act of opening his little house near the famous alley in New York, a footfall greeted his ear, and the next moment he fell back with a cry of astonishment.

Old Broadbrim stood before him.

"Back!" cried Clippers. "I'd given you up, and Hargraves and Irwin are still at fault. They declare

that the mystery of Fifth Avenue is as dark as ever, and no one can throw any light upon the death of Jason Marrow."

"Wait, Clippers," smiled the detective. "Wait till you see Merle, the murderer——"

"What, did you find him?"

"What did I start out to do, Clippers, my boy?"

"I see—I see! You are back with the man who killed the two that night—the strangler of the millionaire and the recluse. Mr. Broadbrim, you are invincible!"

That same day the Quaker stood face to face with a young girl whose eyes sparkled with delight, and when he placed his hand on a four-leaved clover she could not keep back her enthusiasm.

"It brought you luck, Mr. Broadbrim!" cried Nora Doon. "I knew when I placed it in your keeping that it would make certain your triumph, and at the same time become your protector. You kept it through thick and thin."

"Through the perils of land and sea, Miss Nora. In the midst of London it was my talisman, in the heart of the Atlantic, and even in the shadow of death in the Australian bush."

The law dealt terribly, but justly with Merle Macray.

Weeks and even months had elapsed since the double murder of the night of the 12th of April; but from across the ocean, whither he had tracked his man with the persistence of the bloodhound, Old Broadbrim handed him over to the mercies of the noose.

Both the detective and Dick Waters were rewarded by Foster Kipp, who soon afterward became Nora's husband, and the young Briton remained in America.

As for Belle Demona, she found her ranch plundered when she returned, and, rather than remain in the shadow of desolation, she fled from the avenging hand of Stareyes, and never again set foot within the boundaries of Ranch Robin.

A year later she was found dead in one of the darkest districts of London, and the young girl who was seen in her shadow a few moments before was arrested and discharged.

No one followed her, and no one saw Stareyes step from a vessel in the Bay of Perth a few weeks later, with the secret of the end of the ranch queen's life known only to her and Deity.

Danny, of Melbourne, was discharged, after the arrest of Merle, and he went back to his den with the broken stairs.

Old Broadbrim was received in New York with profuse congratulations, but he took all with his usual modesty, feeling that he had kept his promise with Nora to find the murderer of Custer Kipp, even though he were compelled to track him around the world.

He had virtually done so, for he caught him in the bush, and, under guard, had brought him back across the ocean to expiate his terrible crimes within a few blocks of the spot where he had perpetrated them.

"It's just like Josiah Broadbrim," said Clippers, in an outburst of enthusiasm. "He always gets his game, no matter where it hides, nor how long the trail is. Old Broadbrim is as certain as death and taxes. You can bank on that."

THE END.

Think what it must be to have a hidden hand ever ready to do you injury, never to know when or where it is about to strike! This was the ordeal which the great Quaker detective had to undergo, when he was called into the famous Stark case, a case which created an unparalleled sensation at the time. What it was and how Broadbrim worked it up, in the face of extraordinary difficulties and dangers, will be found splendidly told in the next issue, No. 33, entitled "Old Broadbrim Doomed by an Invisible Hand; or, The Victims of the Vial of Death."

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Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

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Retained some inconsistent hyphenation (e.g. "deathtrap" vs. "death-trap").

Page 1, changed "commissison" to "commission" ("a strange commission") and changed "Hargreaves" to "Hargraves" ("Hargraves and Irwin on the case").

Page 3, there appears to be an error in the phrase "It the same name," but this is reproduced here as printed since it is impossible to know whether the original intent was "it is" or "it's."

Page 5, changed "Tow" to "Tom" in "Tom Owens looked again."

Page 6, changed "day" to "way" in "woman led the way."

Page 11, added missing quote after "in a day or two."

Page 12, changed "placed" to "place" in "for which place the yacht sailed" and changed "statute" to "statue" in "statue-like figures."

Page 13, changed "quite" to "quit" in "quit the room."

Page 16, changed "leter" to "letter" ("letter post-haste") and "sudenly" to "suddenly" ("raised suddenly over her head"). Added missing quote before "Don't play spy too often."

Page 22, changed "sudenly" to "suddenly" ("pulled him suddenly").

Page 24, changed "faced" to "face" in "Jem's face paled." Changed "minutes" to "minute" in "Half a minute later." Changed "it" to "is" in "fellow is better paid."

Page 25, added missing "he" to "if he went out on a mission."

Page 26, changed "nawspaper" to "newspaper" ("newspaper containing").

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