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Volume 2, by Colin Munro**

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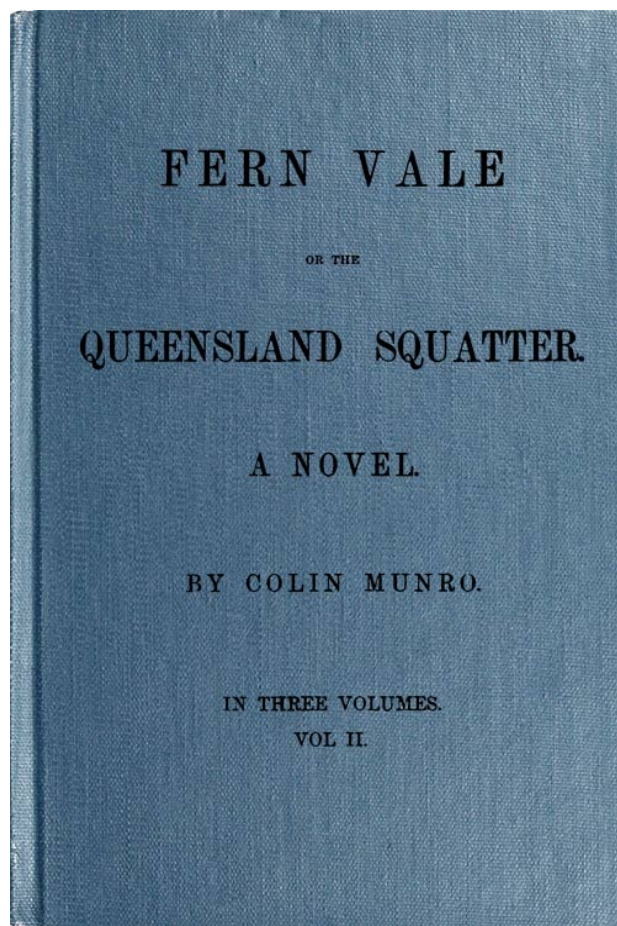
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**FERN VALE
OR THE
QUEENSLAND SQUATTER.**

A NOVEL.

BY COLIN MUNRO.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL II.

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FERN VALE.

CHAPTER I.

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"What are these,
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't?"

MACBETH, *Act 1, Sc. 3.*

"Those fellows have been up to some mischief I am certain," said Tom when the blacks departed, as described in the last chapter. "I am confident my brother has not given them anything; and if they have got any rations at Strawberry Hill, they must have stolen them. However, if you intend going over to their corroboree, I'll accompany you."

"I do intend going," said John, "for I have never seen them in such force as they'll be to-night, and I am curious to see the effect. Do you know what is the nature of the ceremony of their kipper corroboree?"

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"I can't exactly say," replied Tom, "their ordinary corroborees are simply feasts to commemorate some event; but the kipper corroboree has some mystery attached to it, which they do not permit strangers to witness. I believe it is held once a year, to admit their boys into the communion of men; and to give 'gins' to the neophytes, if they desire to add to their importance by assuming a marital character. I believe it is simply a ceremony, in which they recognise the transition of their

youths from infancy to manhood; though they keep the proceedings veiled from vulgar eyes."

"When, then," continued John, "the kippers are constituted men, and get their gins, are their marriage engagements of a permanent nature; I mean does their nuptial ceremony, whatever it may be, effectually couple them; and is it considered by them inviolable?"

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"I believe," replied Tom, "the ceremony is binding on the gins, but their lords are permitted to exercise a supreme power over the liberty and destiny of their spouses. The gins are merely looked upon as so many transferable animals, and they are frequently stolen and carried off by adventurous lovers from their lawful lords and masters; and as frequently made over with the free consent of their husbands, the same as we should do with flocks and herds. Most of the quarrels among the tribes arise from such thefts; and the wills and inclinations of the gins are never for a moment considered."

After this remark the conversation of the young men turned into other channels. About sundown they prepared themselves for their visit, and mounting their horses started off to the Gibson river; which, owing to the darkness of the night, and the difficulty they experienced in threading the bush, and avoiding the fallen logs, they did not reach so quickly as they had anticipated. They, however, crossed by the flats, and guided by the noise of the blacks, and the light from their fires in the scrub, they soon came upon the "camp;" where they found Dugingi, true to his promise, waiting for them.

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The camp was composed of about fifty "gunyas" or huts, formed in a circle; in the midst of which were several of the natives, talking and gesticulating most vociferously and wildly. The gunyas were small conical structures of about five or six feet in diameter; formed by pieces of cane being fixed into the ground in an arched shape, so as to make ribs, which were covered with the flakey sheets of the tea tree bark, and laid perfectly close and compact, in which position they were fixed by an outer net-work of reedy fibre; making, though primitive and meagre in accommodation, a dwelling perfectly impervious to the weather. Into these burrow-like domiciles, crowd, sometimes, as many as five or six human beings, who coil themselves into a mass to economize space, and generate caloric in cold nights; when they have a fire in front of the opening which serves for a door. In warmer weather, however, they generally stretch themselves under heaven, with only a blanket to cover them; and, with their feet towards the fire, a party may frequently be seen radiating in a circle from the centre of heat.

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When the camp was approached by the young men, the host of dogs, which are the usual concomitants of a black's tribe, gave warning of the visitors' presence; and Dugingi, who was by that means attracted, first removing their horses to a place of safety, led them within the mysterious periphery. As they emerged suddenly from the obscurity of the scrub into the open space where the corroboree was in full progress, they were not a little startled at the scene before them. In the centre was an immense fire; and around it, about one hundred and fifty men were assembled in a circle, except at a gap at the side from which the visitors approached. Here sat, or rather squatted, the gins, the piccaninies, and the males incapacitated from senescence or infirmities. The blacks having ceased their exertions as our friends arrived, the latter had a good opportunity of surveying the picture at their leisure.

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In the spot where the blacks had made their camp the ground was naturally clear, and was covered with a smooth sward; while immediately beyond the circumscribed limits of the natural clearance, the thick scrub was, to any but a black fellow, perfectly impenetrable; thus presenting to the eye of the beholder, the appearance of an umbrageous amphitheatre especially created for those savage orgies. The men were all more or less bedecked and besmeared; and, at the moment of our friends' contemplation of them, stood taking breath preparatory to the repetition of fresh exertions. The immense fire was being continually replenished by the gins, and threw a fitful glance over the whole scene that struck the mind with an indescribable sensation of mingled awe, dread, and disgust. While those sensations were traversing the minds of John and Tom Rainsfield Jemmy Davis stepped forward from amidst the group, and saluted them with the greatest urbanity. But such was his metamorphosis that our friends did not, until he had declared himself by speech, recognise in the painted savage before them an educated and civilized black.

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His hair was drawn up to a tuft on the top of his head, and into it had been thrust numerous of the most gaudy parrot and cockatoo feathers. When he walked this top knot acquired an eccentric oscillation, which gave his head the appearance of a burlesque on the plumed cranium of a dignified hearse horse; and was the only part of his ornature that was of a ludicrous character. His forehead was painted a deep yellow; from his eyes to a line parallel to his nose his skin shone with a bright red; while the rest of his face showed its natural dirty brown colour. His body was fancifully marked in white, delineating his ribs; with grotesque devices on his breast and back. His legs and arms were as black as charcoal could make them; and with a necklace of bones and shells, his toilet was complete. It has been facetiously stated that the New Zealander's full dress consists of a shirt collar and a pair of spurs; but Jemmy Davis had no such useless appendages; and, as he stood before his guests in the conviction of his costume being complete, and in the pride of conscious adornment, he never dreamt but that his own self-gratulation was also shadowing their admiration and delight.

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In a few minutes John and his companion were left alone; and the corroboree commenced afresh by the resumption of the musical accompaniments, which, as they were peculiar, we may as well describe. We have already said, the gins were squatted on the ground near the circle; and, we may now add, they had composed their ungraceful forms in the oriental fashion. Some of them had their hands half open, or rather their fingers were kept close together, while the palms were made to assume a concave shape, as if for the purpose of holding water. With them in this form

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they struck them simultaneously on their supine thighs, with a metrical regularity, which made an unearthly hollow noise, and formed the base of their orchestral display. Others of them beat a similar measure on their waddies, or sticks; while the whole burst into a discordant vocal accompaniment, in which they were joined by the men and piccaninies in a dull and monotonous cadence. This was their song; which, to adequately describe, would be impossible. Some idea, however, may possibly be formed of it, when we say that they all commenced in a high mournful key, in which they unintelligibly mumbled their bucolic. On this first note they dwelt for about half a minute; and descended the gamut in the same metre, resting only on the flats, and expending their breath in a prolongation of the last, and deepest, note they could utter; terminating in one eructation something between a grunt and a sigh, or a concentration of the idiosyncratic articulation of the London paviors. And as they dwelt upon this note for about a minute, the combined effects of their mutterings, and the noise of their feet, were not unlike the distant fulmination of thunder.

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Their dance too, was conducted totally different to the wild gestures of other savages. The participators in the ceremony, as we have already explained, stood in a semi-circular line. Slightly stooping, they swung their arms backwards and forwards before their bodies, and with their feet beat a measured tread on the ground; while they continued to contract their frames, almost into a sitting posture, and to accelerate their pendulous and stamping motions; until, with an universal convulsion, the last sigh or grunt was expatriated from their carcasses. After a dead stop of some few seconds, with a recommencement of their femoral accompaniment, they erected their bodies with their voices, and proceeded *de capo*; presenting a scene more like a festival in pandemonium than a congregation of human beings in "this huge rotundity on which we tread."

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The feelings of the young men, as they stood and watched this performance, were varied; neither of them had seen a corroboree on so grand a scale before; and they were for a time lost in wonder at an exhibition, which no description can truthfully depict. John was dreaming of the emancipation and improvement of a race, which he believed, could be made to ameliorate their condition; and felt sorrowful that, in the midst of civilisation (with its examples before their eyes, and the inculcations which had been instilled into the nature of one of their number), the blacks should be still perpetuating the emblems of their barbarity and degradation. Tom's meditations were of a different nature; though he advocated kind treatment to them in the intercourses of life, he still believed them an inferior race of sentient beings; if not altogether devoid of the mental attributes of man. He, moreover, thought he read in their manner, despite all the suavity of Jemmy Davis and Dugingi, something that portended evil; and fancied he heard more than once, his own name uttered by them in their song. It might have been only fancy, he thought; but an idea of something premeditated had seized upon his mind, and he could not divest himself of it.

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Our young friends by this time, having seen quite enough to satisfy them, and being unnoticed in their position, quietly left the spot; and, having procured their horses, retraced their steps to the river. They there mounted, and having crossed the stream, returned almost silently to Fern Vale, and retired to rest. On the following morning Tom took his leave of his friend; while, almost contemporary with his departure, John's black boys, Billy and Jemmy, presented themselves to resume their former life on the station. We may remark that Billy had by this time perfectly recovered from his castigation, though he, and also his companion, did not fail to stigmatize in very strong, if not in very elegant, or pure English, phraseology, the conduct of Mr. Rainsfield; and as much as insinuated that the tribe were in no very friendly way disposed towards him.

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This, John Ferguson was seriously grieved to learn; for he dreaded the consequence of an open rupture between the aborigines and his neighbour. He knew, if the blacks became more than ordinarily troublesome, that Rainsfield would enlist the sympathies of his friends, and his class generally; when blood would inevitably be shed, and the poor natives hunted from the face of the earth. He therefore determined, if he should not see Tom in a day or two, to ride over and call upon Mr. Rainsfield; and while adverting to the treatment received by his black boy from him, warn him of the danger, not only to himself, but to all the settlers in his neighbourhood, by his persisting in his stringent course. With this intention, a few days after the corroboree, not having seen his friend in the interval, he rode over to Strawberry Hill.

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As he approached the residence of the Rainsfields, despite his struggles to suppress it, he felt his heart beat high with the anticipation of seeing Eleanor, for the first time since his meeting with Bob Smithers. John had, of late, striven hard to wean himself from what he attempted to believe was his wild infatuation; and thought that he had sufficiently schooled his mind, so as to meet her without the slightest perturbation. But he had deceived himself; and as he approached the house, and felt a consciousness of her proximity, he experienced that strange agitation over which mortals have no control. He, however, determined to avoid giving any outward indication of his mental disquietude, so as not to cause any uneasiness to Eleanor from his visit; and for that purpose he stopped his horse in the bush, before he came within sight, and collected himself into a settled calmness. Having performed this little piece of training he proceeded, and was passing the huts on his way to the house, when he was accosted by Mr. Billing; who informed him that Mr. Rainsfield had desired him to intimate, that if he, Mr. Ferguson, desired to see that gentleman, he would meet him at Mr. Billing's cottage in a few minutes. This request John thought rather singular; but he turned his horse's head to the direction of the cottage, at the door of which he alighted; and, after fastening his horse to the fence, he entered.

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"You will no doubt think it exceedingly rude in me, Mr. Ferguson," exclaimed the little man, "to intercept you in your road to the house. Though you perceive me, sir, in a menial capacity, I am perfectly conversant with, as I am also possessed of the feelings of a gentleman; therefore I feel a

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repugnance, sir, in wounding those feelings in another. You are doubtless aware, sir, we have had another marauding visitation from those insolent savages; and Mr. Rainsfield is not only greatly enraged at them, but has become, sir, extremely irascible and truculent towards myself; and has conceived a notion that you are in some way influencing and encouraging them in their depredations. The pertinacity with which they annoy him, sir, is certainly marvellous; and he is confirmed in the belief that it is in a great measure owing to your instigations; therefore he gave instructions that, in the event of your calling, I should request you to step under my humble roof, while I sent him notice of your presence. This, sir, I have done, so you may expect to see him in a few minutes. I merely mention these circumstances, sir, not in disparagement of my employer; but to account to you for my rudeness, and exonerate myself from the imputation of any voluntary violation of good breeding."

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"Pray, don't mention it, Mr. Billing," replied John; "I don't imagine for a moment that you would intentionally commit any breach of decorum, even if the interruption of my passage could be termed such; but I must confess, I can't understand why Mr. Rainsfield should wish to prevent me from calling upon him in his own house." Though John said this, his heart whispered a motive for such interruption.

"I am flattered, sir, by your good opinion," said Mr. Billing, "and I thank you. I believe, sir, you're a native of the colony, and have not visited Europe; but you are a man of the world, sir, I can perceive, and will readily understand the anomalies of my position. I, who have been bred, sir, in the mercantile community of the cosmopolitan metropolis, being subjected to the petty tyrannies of a man, whom I consider mentally my inferior. I am disgusted, sir, with the incongruities of my situation, and harassed by the thought of my trials being shared by Mrs. Billing (who, I assure you, sir, is an ornament to her sex); and the total absence, sir, of all those comforts, which a man who has been in the position I have been in, sir, and who has come to my years, naturally expects, tends to make this occupation distasteful to me."

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John, we are ashamed to say (at the moment forgetful of his own) felt amused at the sorrows of the little man; though he smilingly assured him that he thought a man of his evident abilities was thrown away in the bush, and that he believed it would be considerably more to his advantage, if he forsook so inhospitable a pursuit, as that in which he was engaged, for something more congenial to his nature and compatible with his education.

"My dear sir," replied the enthusiastic storekeeper, "I again thank you. I perceive, sir, by your judicious remarks, you are a gentleman of no ordinary discernment. The same idea has often struck me, sir; in fact, I may say the 'wish is father to the thought;' but, unfortunately, 'thereby hangs a tale.' If you have no objection to listen to me, sir, for a few minutes, I will explain the peculiarities of my position."

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John having expressed himself desirous of hearing the explanation, Mr. Billing proceeded. "You must know, sir, that after finishing a sound general education at one of the public schools of London (you will forgive me, sir, for commencing at the normal period of my career), my father, who was a medical man of good practice but large family, sent me, sir, to the desk. I, in fact, entered the counting-house of my relatives, Messrs. Billing, Barlow, & Co., of Upper Thames Street, in the city of London, a firm extensively engaged in the comb and brush line, and enjoying a wide celebrity, sir, in the city and provinces. I continued at my post, sir, for years, until I obtained the situation of provincial traveller, which place I continued to fill for a lengthy period. I need hardly say, sir, that in my peregrinations my name was sufficient to command respect from our friends and constituents, who naturally imagined that I must have been a partner in the firm I represented; consequently, sir, my vicissitudes were almost imaginary, and my comfort superior to the generality of commercial travellers. I did not, of course, sir, enlighten the minds of our constituents on their error, the effects of which I every day enjoyed; more especially as the firm, from my long services, had solemnly pledged themselves to receive me into their corporate body as a partner. The mutations of even our nearest relatives, sir, are not to be depended upon; for I found in my experience, that the word of a principal is not always a guarantee. Upon urging the recognition of my claims, I found a spirit of equivocation to exist in my friends; and such conduct not agreeing, sir, with my views of integrity, I uttered some severe strictures on their scandalous behaviour, and withdrew, sir, from the connexion."

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"I must remark, sir, that about three years before this event (ah, sir! that was a soft period of my life), I took unto myself an accomplished lady as the wife of my bosom. I had been at great pains and expense, sir, to consolidate our comfort in a nice little box at Brixton; and had been blessed, sir, with two of our dear children. About this time the fame of the Australian *El Dorado* had spread far and wide; and, after my rupture with my relatives, I was easily allured, sir, from my peaceful hearth to seek my fortune in this land of promise; I say a land of promise, sir, but I impugn not its fair name when I add that if it ever was one to me, it failed to fulfil its obligations. I fear, sir, I am tedious," said Mr. Billing, breaking off in his discourse, "for this is a theme I feel I can dilate on;" but being assured by his companion that he was by no means tiresome, he continued: "I told you, sir, that I had taken great pains and expense to furnish my house at Brixton; and I felt a reluctance to submit it to the hammer, and to sever myself and family from the blissful fireside of our English home. However, sir, avarice is strong in the minds of mortals; and visions of antipodean wealth decided my fate, and caused the sacrifice of my contented home on the altar of Plutus. I had heard that the difficulties of the diggings were insuperable to genteel aspirants after gold; and I, therefore, determined, sir, to be wise in my own generation, and, instead of digging for the precious metal, to open an establishment where I could procure it, sir, by vending articles of every-day use. For this purpose, sir, I invested my capital in stock of which I had had practical experience, that is, in combs and brushes; conjecturing, sir, that they would

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be articles which most speculators would overlook, and, consequently, be in great demand. In due time, sir, I arrived in the colony with my goods, and lost not a moment unnecessarily in repairing to the diggings. I need not recount, sir, the many difficulties which beset my path; I believe they were common to all in similar circumstances; and you, are no doubt, sir, sufficiently acquainted with such scenes yourself. Suffice it to say, sir, that eventually I reached my destination, and discovered, as we would say in mercantile parlance, that my goods had arrived to a bad market. I assure, you, sir, the horrid creatures who congregated at those diggings, notwithstanding that their heads were perfect masses of hair, disdained, yes, absolutely disdained, sir, the use of my wares.

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"I then asked myself what was to be done; and while meditating on a reply, sir, a viper was at hand to tempt me to my ruin. A plausible, well-spoken gentleman, sir, introduced himself to me as a Mr. Black; and proposed that as my goods were of no value on the diggings, but were very saleable in Melbourne, I should take them back and commence business there. He at the same time remarked, sir, that to commence business it would be essential for me to have 'colonial experience;' and doubting if I possessed such an acquirement, he, therefore, begged, sir, to offer his services. He, in fact proposed that he should join me in the undertaking; stating, sir, that through his general knowledge of business, he was convinced that the speculation would succeed; and suggested that we should at once proceed to Melbourne, sir, with my goods. He would embark, he said, his capital in the concern, and purchase an assortment of goods for a general business, which we were to carry on under the name and style of 'Black and Billing.' This he facetiously made the subject of a witticism, by remarking that it would be rendered into 'Black Billy'^[A] by the diggers when they visited town; and would of a certainty ensure our success. I must confess, sir, I was taken in by the scoundrel's wiles, and readily entered into his scheme; the result of which is easily related. With the expense of carrying my goods and myself backwards and forwards from the diggings, my spare cash was all but expended; and when, sir, I rejoined Mrs. Billing, whom I had left behind me, sir, in Melbourne, until I should have become settled, I found myself almost penniless. However, sir, although I'm a man of small stature, I am possessed of considerable energy and, therefore, sir, set myself earnestly to work. I soon procured a shop, though with miserable accommodation, and at an enormous rental; but my partner assured me it was no matter, as we would soon reap our harvest. I got my goods, sir, into the place, and shortly afterwards my partner procured an extensive assortment also; when we commenced our business, as I thought, under very favourable auspices. But I soon discovered my mistake; for one fine morning I found Mr. Black had decamped with all the money of the concern, after converting as many of the goods into gold as he could. I then discovered, sir, that the stock he had procured was upon credit, on the strength of that which I had in the place at the time; and finding his defalcations were greater than I could possibly meet, and my creditors being fearful that I would follow his example, I was compelled to relinquish my property to liquidate their claims. I then, sir, found myself not only destitute, but homeless; with my wife and children dependent upon me for their subsistence.

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[A] A name applied by the diggers to the tin pot in which they boil their water, as also to black hats.

"I managed, sir, however, to procure employment by driving a cart; and, after saving sufficient money, succeeded in getting round to Sydney, where my wife, sir, had relations. They, sir, promised me assistance, and after a short interval fulfilled their promise by establishing me in a store at Armidale; where I got on, sir, pretty well, and would have succeeded, but for the chicanery of some scoundrels, sir, by whom I lost considerably, and was a second time reduced to labour for a support. Through various vicissitudes, sir, I have come to this, and, you may well imagine, that a man of my sensitive feeling and appreciation of honour, in this menial capacity meets with nothing but disgust and mortification. But, sir, I do not repine; however dark is the horizon of my fate, despair does not enter my mind; the clouds of depression must necessarily some day be removed; and then, sir, the sun of my future will burst forth with a refulgence, the more resplendent from its previous concealment. I desire, sir, in fact it is the fondest wish of my heart, to return to Old England; but at present that cannot be, for means, sir, are wanting; the all potent needful is required; money, sir. But things must improve, they cannot last for ever thus; to think that I, a gentleman, and Mrs. Billing a gentlewoman, should waste our very existence, sir, in this wilderness; banished, sir, from the very intercourse of man; expatriated, sir, from all we hold most dear, and, forsaken, sir, by the society whence we are ostracized. The thought, sir, is harrowing; yes, sir, harrowing beyond measure."

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Mr. Billing was now getting pathetic and rather lachrymose; and his confessions might have become of a confidential, and a painful nature, had they not, very much to the relief of our hero, been cut short by the opportune entrance of Mr. Rainsfield, who, when Mr. Billing had left the room, addressed himself to John:

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"I must apologize for keeping you waiting, Mr. Ferguson, but I was engaged at the moment I heard of your call; and I thought by your meeting me here it would save you from that pain which, otherwise, your visit might have occasioned you, after the circumstances which transpired when you last favoured us with your company."

"I am particularly indebted to you for your solicitation," replied John; "but I may remark, I had sufficient confidence in myself to feel assured that I would have neither received, nor given any pain in the manner in which I presume you mean. And I may also state that, but for the desire I had to give you some information that may be of vital importance to you, I would have disdained your bidding."

"Then, may I beg to know the object of your call," enquired Rainsfield.

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"I have two," replied John, "first I have been informed by one of my black boys that you severely maltreated him; and considering myself aggrieved by the act, as it was the means of depriving me of his services, I beg you to explain the cause for so unwarrantable a procedure."

"I justify my acts to no man," exclaimed Rainsfield, "and recognise no blacks as others than members of their general community; who take upon themselves to perform various acts of aggression. The laws of our country not being potent enough to protect us from their marauding, we do it ourselves; and if you think fit to gainsay our right, you know what course to pursue; and now, sir, for your second object."

"I might with equal justice," said John, "decline to afford you the information I by accident obtained, but I have no desire to show such churlishness, and I believe that by judiciously acting upon it, you may save yourself from some calamity; which I have good cause to believe is impending. My two black boys who left me after your assault on one of them, and who were only persuaded to return after their great corroborree by my conciliating their chief, have informed me, in an imperfect manner, that some overt act of aggression, on the part of the tribe, is meditated; and it is to put you on your guard against this that I have ventured to trouble you with my presence."

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"Then it was at that corroborree on the spoliation of my property that you heard this?" exclaimed Rainsfield. "My goods were purloined to feast those imps of darkness, and you lent your presence to grace their proceedings? I always thought you encouraged the villains in their infamies, and I now perceive my suspicions were well founded. However, sir, I am perfectly independent of you, and your so called information. I have decided upon my course of action, and will not therefore trouble you further to interest yourself in my behalf. You will no doubt readily perceive that your presence here at any time would be extremely unpleasant; and I must therefore request that you absent yourself from my house as much as possible. I shall now wish you good day;" saying which Rainsfield quitted the room.

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John Ferguson was so taken by surprise at the violent tirade he had just listened to, that he had had no idea of defending himself from an accusation, the manifest absurdity of which merely struck him as contemptuous. But he felt a source of grief at being summarily estranged from the other members of the family; and whatever his feelings had been when he came to the station, he left it with a heavy heart, and returned home to meet the cavalcade, which we have seen in a previous chapter had gone over.

CHAPTER II.

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"I have it, it is engender'd: hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

OTHELLO, *Act 1, Sc. 3.*

"Then should I know you by description;
Such garments and such years."

AS YOU LIKE IT, *Act 5, Sc. 3.*

Despite his professed contempt for John Ferguson's information Mr. Rainsfield felt an uneasy apprehension at the growing confidence, and contumacious freedom of the blacks. He even began to doubt if he would be able to maintain his position single-handed against them, and thought seriously of the advisableness of calling a meeting of the surrounding settlers, to organize a league for their mutual protection. But then he remembered the blacks directed all their *animus* against himself, and it was therefore questionable, he imagined, if he could induce more than two or three of his neighbours to join him; besides which, even they could not constantly be on the alert; while he must, consequently, be frequently open to surprisal. A thought, however, struck him, or rather we should have said, a diabolical idea suggested itself to his mind; and, after cogitating and arguing with himself for some time, he determined to act upon it.

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The pestilence, so he mentally soliloquized, had now reached its height, and something must be done; for he was not only robbed of his station supplies, but he was frequently losing even cattle; while, instead of seeing any prospect of amendment, he only perceived that the successes of his despoilers were emboldening them to fresh adventures. He knew that an application to the government for protection was absolutely useless; for they hadn't it to give. It is true he might stir the district to agitate the settlement of a native police detachment in that quarter; but he also knew, even if he succeeded in obtaining such a location, that the force would be necessarily so miserably small as to be perfectly inadequate to the contingencies. (Possibly three or four men stationed in the centre of fifty square miles to protect the scattered population against as many hundred savages.) The idea was preposterous, and he scouted it. No, he thought, he must depend upon himself for protection, and would therefore adopt a line of policy that would check, if not annihilate, the nuisance; while the exigencies of the case would justify him in his measures. Such, then, were the thoughts that passed through the mind of Mr. Rainsfield after his interview with our hero.

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He returned to Mr. Billing's cottage after John Ferguson's departure, and accosted his *employé* in his blandest and most suasive manner. "Mr. Billing," said he, "I am about to enter upon a crusade

against the native dogs, which I find are becoming very troublesome to the sheep in the upper part of the run; and, to effectually destroy them, I intend to poison some carcasses to be left for them to make a meal of. I would therefore like you to ride over to Alma, and explain the matter to Mr. Gilbert, the storekeeper there; and procure for me a supply of strychnine and arsenic. I would not trouble you, but you are aware that he would not give it to a shepherd without a request from me; and it is hardly safe to send any of the men. I would be particularly obliged to you if you would undertake the task, as I can confidently depend upon your judgment to prevent any mistake."

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This little piece of what the Yankees would designate "soft sawder" on the part of Rainsfield, had the effect, not only of removing any objections his diminutive confidential might have had to such a journey, but of inducing him to acknowledge the compliment in a series of corporeal oscillations; while he replied to the blandishment, in the following strain: "It would afford me, sir, the greatest earthly pleasure to comply with your wishes; even to the considerable personal inconvenience, sir, and bodily suffering of your humble servant; but you must be aware equestrianism sir, is an accomplishment I never deemed it necessary to acquire. During my mercantile career, sir, I was reputed, and I think I may add justly too, sir, one of the best amateur whips in the city of London; and had my transit, sir, to be effected by a vehicular means, I flatter myself, sir, none could accomplish the mission better."

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"That I am convinced of," replied Mr. Rainsfield; "but I fear, Mr. Billing, I shall have to defer the pleasure of witnessing your skill in handling the ribbons until I am induced, by the existence of roads, to treat myself and my family to the luxury of a carriage. But, with regard to the journey I have mentioned, I can provide you with a quiet horse; and I have no doubt a man of your various accomplishments will find no difficulty in adding to them the art of riding. In fact, unless you had mentioned it, I would never have imagined but that you were a perfect equestrian; your stature and figure are just such as would show to best advantage on horseback; and, with the constant opportunities which present themselves here, I really am surprised that you don't ride. You know 'it is never too late to mend;' so you must really permit me to persuade you (irrespective of this journey) to commence at once practising the art, and take a regular course of riding. I am convinced you will not only find it pleasant, but beneficial to your health."

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"I appreciate your kindness, sir," replied the little man. "As you say, it is never too late to mend, and I really think, sir, it is ridiculous that I should not be able to ride; but the fact is, to be candid, sir, I have always dreaded the first lesson."

"There is really nothing to fear, Mr. Billing," said Rainsfield. "You will find, once on your horse, riding will come natural to you; the only inconvenience you will experience is being at first a little stiff after it."

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"When would you desire me to start, if I took this journey?" enquired the would be equestrian.

"Well, I should prefer it at once," replied his tempter. "If you were to start within half an hour you would have at least six hours of daylight; and the distance is only about twenty-five miles, so you could reach the town at your leisure before dark, and return to-morrow."

"I have decided then, sir," exclaimed Mr. Billing; "you may command my services, and I will be at your disposal before the expiration of half an hour."

"That's right, Mr. Billing," replied his superior; "and I'll get a horse in from the paddock for you; and by the way, will you just leave the keys of the store with Mrs. Billing. When you are away I purpose removing all the stores into the house, and have prepared a room for their reception; so if our black visitors should favour us with a call during your absence they will find themselves disappointed."

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"Most assuredly, sir, as you desire," replied the quondam commercial; "I will hand the badges of my office into your hands myself, to prevent, sir, the possibility of any mistake:" saying which the two separated; Mr. Billing filed with the importance of his mission, to communicate it to his wife, and obtain her aid in a speedy preparation for his hazardous journey; and his employer, with a complaisant smile of satisfaction on his features, to give instructions for the immediate capture of a steed.

Within the specified time an animal was brought by Mr. Rainsfield up to the door of Mr. Billing's abode duly caparisoned for the journey, and with an old valise strapped upon the saddle. At the same time the adventurous storekeeper also made his appearance; having undergone by the careful assiduity of his wife a perfect transmutation. On his head stood erect a black cylindrical deformity, designated in the vulgar parlance of the colony "a Billy," but which he, while he smiled benignly at the ignorance of the *canaille* (as he gave it the extra rotary flourish of the brush, while he read "Christy's best London make" in the crown), called a hat; and the only proper head-dress for a gentleman. He was encompassed in a coat of the gigantic order, possessed of many pockets; a garment truly noble to look upon, and one that had done service to its owner in days of yore; when on cold and wet mornings Mr. Billing nestled himself in his wonted position in the Brixton 'bus, to be conveyed to his diurnal bustle in the city. In this habiliment evidences of an affectionate wife's forethought were visible in the protrusion from the pockets of sundry pieces of paper, denoting the occupation of those receptacles by certain parcels; the contents of which, should the reader be anxious to know, we are in a position to disclose.

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In the lower pocket on the right hand side, we are enabled from our information (which is from the most reliable source) to inform the curious, was a parcel (thrust by Mrs. Billing with her own hands) enclosing two garments, of a spotless purity, essential for a gentleman's nocturnal comfort. In the contemporary pouch was a package of humbler pretensions, containing sundries

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to appease a traveller's appetite; while in another was deposited that necessary paraphernalia for a morning's toilet, embraced in the apparatus known as a "gentleman's travelling companion." His legs were encased in trousers that had been brought specially to the light. They were of a questionable colour, something between that of kippered salmon and hard bake; and were strapped down to his feet with such powerful tension that he was threatened every moment with a mishap most awkward in its consequences. When he walked he effected the exercise with a sprightliness that appeared as if galvanic agency was that which had set his nether limbs in motion; and his feet started from the ground at every step with a spring that promised at each evolution the protrusion of some part of his crural members.

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In this perfect costume Mr. Billing considered himself adjusted for the road; and construing the smile of amusement that played on the features of Mr. Rainsfield as a mark of affability returned it in his most winning style.

The horse provided for this Gilpin excursion was an animal of no mean pretensions. He boasted of having in his veins some of the best blood of the country, though, now perhaps, that blood was somewhat vapid, and he rather patriarchal. He had served many masters, and performed various duties; from racing to filling the equivocal position of a station and stockman's hack. Though once possessed of a spirit that required a strong arm and determined will to maintain a mastery over, he was now as quiet and subdued as a lamb; although he was as sagacious as most of his riders, and as knowing as any "old hoss" in the country. He had settled into an easy-going stager, that neither persuasion nor force could induce to deviate from the "even tenor of his way;" while his general appearance, at this stage of his life, was long-legged, raw-boned, lean and screwed, with the additional embellishment of being minus his near eye.

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Mr. Billing surveyed the beast that was to carry him to Alma with about the same comprehension as a ploughman would contemplate a steam engine; while the horse returned the gaze from the corner of his sound eye, and winked in a manner that might have been interpreted into a request "to wait until he got him on his back." Mr. Billing, however, was perfectly unacquainted with the significance of his horse's looks, and perhaps well for him that he was; for we are convinced, had he known what was in store for him, he would never have risked his valuable person and life on the back of so perverse a dispositioned animal. We have heard that an inclination of the head is equivalent to the closing of one eye to a quadruped whose ocular organs are in a state of total derangement; and we therefore presume that the momentary stultification of our quadruped's vision had the same effect upon our Cockney-born viator as the craniological recognition mentioned in the aphorism would have had on his horse. Consequently, he was in blissful ignorance of the trials that awaited him; and, under the directions of Mr. Rainsfield, he prepared to mount with an alacrity which he prided himself as pertaining to a "city man of business," and which he still retained in his animated anatomy.

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For some time he experienced considerable difficulty, in fact he found it absolutely impossible, to so far stretch his limbs as to get one leg high enough from the ground to reach the stirrup; and not until, at the suggestion of his highly-amused employer, his loving spouse produced a chair from the cottage, had he any prospect of reaching the saddle. However, being elevated by the chair, he made a bound on to the back of the steed, but unfortunately with too great an impetus; for he lost his equilibrium in attempting to gain his seat, and measured his length on the ground. This mishap tended to cast a gloom upon his spirits, but he was soon rallied by Mr. Rainsfield, who told him he would be all right when once in his saddle and on the road. Upon a second attempt he exercised more caution, with better success; and, as he seated himself in his saddle bolt upright, he gazed about him, and below him, with a proud consciousness of the elegant symmetry of himself and horse; and doubted not he would, as he then stood, be a prize study for any sculptor. His following remark will not therefore be wondered at.

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"As you a few minutes ago affirmed, sir, now that I am possessed of my seat, I do feel myself all right. I experience, sir, a confidence in myself that, if called upon, I could do any equestrian prodigy, even to eclipse the stupendous leap of Martius Curtius; or to perform, sir, any other feat that my destiny may decree."

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"I am equally confident in your abilities, Mr. Billing," replied his master; "but I trust they will never be put to so severe a test. I will walk with you to where the roads to Alma and Brompton diverge. It is not more than a mile beyond the Wombi, so, though I can tell you yours is the left hand road, I may as well accompany you to the junction. From that you will have no difficulty in keeping to the track, if you just give the horse his head; for he has been so used to the road that he will know perfectly well where he has to go. You will perceive I have strapped a valise on your saddle; it is for you, when you procure the poisons, to put them into it, and keep them out of harm's way; while it will save you the annoyance and trouble of carrying them."

When they arrived at the spot where the tracks separated Mr. Rainsfield parted from his colleague; and looking after him for a few minutes, until he was lost from view by a turn in the road, he burst into an inordinate fit of laughter, and turned on his heel to retrace his steps. After walking for some time in abstracted silence, apparently absorbed in deep meditation, he suddenly started with the ejaculation, "Yes! by Jupiter, that'll stop them. I expect they won't trouble me much after that."

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But while we leave him to his cogitations and silent walk, we will pursue Mr. Billing and accompany him on his ride.

"His horse which never in that sort
Had handled been before,
What thing upon his back had got,
Did wonder more and more."

COWPER

When he departed from his master, as we have described in the last chapter, Mr. Billing went on his way with a joyful heart. But, thinking the slow walking pace of his steed might safely be improved upon; and also considering, that if he could only prevail upon the horse to walk a little faster, it would facilitate his journey amazingly; he commenced a series of exhortations that were excellent adjuncts to the theory which advocates the superiority of persuasion to the application of force, but extremely ineffective in practice, when the subject is a quadruped of rather a stubborn nature, and perfectly ignorant of the vernacular in which he is addressed. Thus, when Mr. Billing endeavoured to accelerate the speed of his animal, by the utterance of such pathetic and endearing appeals, as "now, come along, poor old horsey;" "there's a good old horse;" "ge up;" "now, don't be angry" (as the beast showed signs of uneasiness); "walk a little faster, like a good old horse;" we say we would not have been surprised, had the horse paid no more heed to Mr. Billing's entreaties than we should be likely to do, were we addressed in a lively asinine interpellation, by one of those animals, whose peculiar idiosyncrasies are proverbial. But, strange to say in this case, the horse did notice the requests of his rider. Whether he was an animal of superior discernment, and detected the wishes of Mr. Billing in the tone of that gentleman's appeals; or, whether the intonation sounded to his ears strange and novel, and stimulated him with a desire to accommodate the applicant; or, whether he himself became anxious to reach his destination, to realize his visions of a stable and a feed, we cannot venture to say. But we simply record the fact, that Mr. Billing's request to the "old horse" was complied with; and the quadruped went off in a step, which was an incongruous mixture of a shambling walk, a canter, and a trot.

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That fable of the frogs, who in answer to their prayer for a king, obtained a carnivorous monarch of the aves genus, has no doubt been forcibly impressed on the memories of our readers during their scholastic probation. They will readily, then, understand the feelings of Mr. Billing, when he imprecated his rashness for disturbing the equanimity of his horse's pace; and we are convinced that the animals in the apologue never prayed more fervently for a discontinuance of their visitation than he did for an alleviation of his misery. All his "woa's," and "stop old horse's," were perfectly unavailing; the quadruped proceeded without the slightest notice, and with the greatest unconcern. But the torment to the biped was dreadful. What was he to do? He had uttered the talismanic syllable, that had called up the spirit; while he was not possessed of the power to exorcise it. His agony of body, was only equalled by that of his mind. He remembered Mr. Rainsfield had said the animal never went out of one step; and if that in which he then was should be the step, which he would of a necessity continue during the whole of the journey, what would become of him? The thought was horrible and insuperable; but he, Mr. Billing, the quondam pride of Thames Street, could not answer it; and in a stoical distress of mind he gave vent to a sigh, which seemed to jolt out by inches the centre of his little fastidious anatomy. He a thousand times wished himself back again, safe alongside the partner of his bosom; when no power on earth should persuade him to submit again to so ignoble a position and spectacle, as a ride on horseback. But something must be done, he thought; for as the horse proceeded in his jogging step, so did Mr. Billing continue to be battered by his jolting.

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The unfortunate equestrian was a perfect picture of distress. At every step of the animal, he was almost bounded from his seat. He could not speak, for the breath was almost shaken out of his body; while he dared not look around for fear of losing his equilibrium. He had also lost his hold of the bridle, which he dropt on the horse's neck; while he seized the pommel of the saddle for his further security, with the air and grasp of a resolute man who preferred even torture to the indignity of being unseated.

What Mr. Billing's appearance was, when he was undergoing this ordeal, our readers who have witnessed a first riding lesson can easily imagine; and would, no doubt, were they witnesses of the scene, be ready to laugh at the victim's sufferings as we penitently confess ourselves to have done. Our friend's torture, however, continued as he turned over in his mind the best means of obtaining relief. If he should be so far fortunate as to meet any one in the road who would kindly stop the refractory animal, he thought, how grateful he would be; but of that he feared there was little chance. A thought, however, struck him and suddenly illumined his perturbed spirit. Why could he not stop him himself? It never occurred to him before, but now he experienced a gleam of hope; he thought, if he could but pull the bridle, the animal would cease his torturing career. But then how was he to effect this? If he relinquished his hold, he might lose his seat; however, he determined to try, and, summoning all his energies to his aid, he suddenly relaxed his grasp of the saddle, seized the bridle, and gave it as violent a tug as his strength would permit. His object, however, was not gained; for in his avidity to stop the horse he had pulled on the one side of the bridle, and his Rosinante, instead of slackening his speed to the desired pace, turned his head and looked Cyclops-like at his rider, in a way that said as plainly as looks could: "What is it you want?" But we have already stated that Mr. Billing was not versed in the significance of horse's looks, so he understood it not; but continued to tug with a violence that threatened his own downfall, and the dislocation of the quadruped's jaw.

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Servants, however industrious and painstaking, may sometimes find it difficult with petulant employers to ascertain the precise wishes of their superiors; and not unfrequently have we witnessed some truculent master abusing his menials for an act, the very nadir of which had previously met with his disapprobation; leaving the abusees in a state of doubt as to what really were the desires of "the master." In the same way was the horse in our narrative. He turned his head in the direction indicated by Mr. Billing's tug; and finding it still continued, he followed with his whole body; and, possibly under the impression that he was required to return home in the same leisure trot, he commenced a retrogression. That was not, however, what his rider required, at least while his journey was unaccomplished; for though, for his personal comfort, he devoutly desired it, such a course of action could not be thought of. Mr. Billing was a man of honour, and volunteered to perform the duty; had even pledged his word; while his respected master had told him that he relied upon his good judgment; therefore, was such a confidence to be misplaced, and his integrity to be called into question? "Never!" Mr. Billing mentally ejaculated; even if his life were to be sacrificed in an expenditure of sighs. An imputation of such a dereliction had never been cast upon the name of Billing, and should he be the first to disgrace the family? He mentally replied with an emphatic and forcible negative, and tugged away with increased energy at the bridle he continued to hold in his hand.

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It is needless to say the horse became bewildered at the manœvering of his rider. He had never experienced such treatment before, and could not comprehend its meaning. He stopped; the tugging continued. He turned again, and the tugging ceased. He thus discovered the desire of his director; and being at the time somewhat accommodatingly disposed, he proceeded at a snail-paced ambulation. Our readers will have by this time discovered that Mr. Billing's Rosinante was an animal of rather a peculiar temperament; and will therefore be prepared to hear that, having gained some experience of the style of individual on his back, he gave evidences of a disposition which caused no little uneasiness to the sensitive mind of the Strawberry Hill Mercury. This highly to be deprecated perversity, displayed itself in various "little games" of his own, which were performed with a degree of *nonchalance* highly edifying to an admirer of coolness, though extremely alarming to our friend. Some of the most salient we may mention, were, grazing in the bush at the side of the track; rubbing himself against the trees; taking erratic turns in search of water-holes; and finally stopping altogether.

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This trial was worse than all, and brought Mr. Billing's patience to a culminating point. That the poor animal should desire a drink he thought in no way extravagant; but to coolly stand still, and decline any further progression, was the height of assumption; which even he could not tolerate. He therefore grew importunate in his demands for locomotion; and vibrated his legs like pendulums, while he shouted in a voice that betrayed anger. He again seized the bridle, and tugged away with equal violence as before, only varying the operation by pulling alternately, one side, and the other. Under this, or some unaccountable influence, the horse regained his amiability, and returned to the road; and, moreover, took the right direction for Alma; which, though at a pace by no means so fast as Mr. Billing could desire, yet in one which he thought preferable to that, the inconveniences of which he had had such tangible proof. However, he now jogged on at his leisure, and would doubtless have continued to have done so without any further adventure, had he not been disturbed from his equanimity by the unmistakeable sounds of an approaching bullock dray. The idea of meeting this threw him into a perfect state of perplexity, and he therefore thought of getting off the track to allow it to pass; but how to guide his perverse animal he knew not. The sounds came nearer, but his horse paid no attention to his admonitions; so, with visions of being gored to death by bullocks, he relinquished the contest with his animal, and gave himself up for lost.

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The dray slowly dragged its course along, and approached within sight of our adventurous friend; when its companions, amused at the figure before them, halted their team to have a little conversation with one whose appearance was truly enough to excite their risibility. Mr. Billing's horse, in like manner, aware that it was expected of him to halt, also did so; and the individual, who officiated as driver to the team, addressed the equestrian in the following easy style of familiarity:

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"I say, mate, don't you think you'd better get inside?"

The force of this coarse joke was duly appreciated by the utterer's travelling companions; though it was entirely lost upon our friend, who gazed in mute astonishment at his questioner. While he indulges in this visual inspection, we will crave permission to make a slight digression, for the purpose of describing the parties thus unceremoniously introduced to the reader's notice.

The driver of the dray, and the individual who had addressed Mr. Billing, was a man of ordinary stature; slight in make, and past the meridian of life. His features were sharp; his hair was tinged with gray; his eyes were of the same colour, and somewhat sunken in his head; on his chin and lip was hair of about a week's growth, having very much the appearance of a worn-out scrubbing brush, and of quite as coarse a texture. He was clad in the usual bushman's style, and carried the long whip of his order. At his side walked a young man, in appearance and manner a considerable improvement on the old one; and high upon the laden dray were perched two females. One was an old dame with features of the nut-cracker cast, and apparelled with an evident desire to combine in her person all the prismatic hues. Her more juvenile companion, while emulating the same laudable disposition, was certainly superior in looks to her, in the same proportion as the young man was to the old. The appearance of the whole party was such as proclaimed them at once, to the practised eye of Mr. Billing, to be of a class having no pretensions to gentility; though there was an air about them of careless freedom and easy comfort that, to him, ill accorded with their position. He had satisfied himself on this point, by his scrutiny, when he

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ventured to reply to the before mentioned remark of the old man by making the following observation:

"May I be permitted, my good sir, to enquire the nature of the expression you just made use of? I presume you must have spoken in metaphor."

"Not a bit, old cock," replied the man, "I guess I spoke in English. You didn't seem to enjoy travelling that ere way, so I just axed you if you'd get inside."

"And pray, sir, what did you mean by that?" asked Mr. Billing, whose choler began to rise at what he considered the rude insolence of his interrogator.

"Oh! nothing," replied the young man, who saw that their new acquaintance was likely to be a little irascible, "my father was only joking."

"And pray, young man," said Mr. Billing, "is not your father aware that it is a gross breach of decorum his attempting to pass his jokes off on a gentleman? eh, sir?" [Pg 62]

"Certainly," replied the young fellow, "he is quite aware of it, but he has got such a way of joking with people that he does it all the same with friends and strangers; and I have no doubt he could not resist the temptation of having a slap at you, when he saw so elegant a rider and gentleman."

This attempt of the young witling, while it highly amused the various members of the travelling menage, pacified Mr. Billing; who failed to perceive any irony in it; and, addressing the elder of the party with his usual suavity, he said, "May I be so bold as to enquire sir, the point of your destination? As I am not aware of the expectation of any one at our place, I presume you are bound for our neighbours at Fern Vale?"

"No, we ain't, old fellow," replied the party addressed, "we are going to our own place, t'other side of Fern Vale. I 'spose you don't know us? My name's Sawyer, and this 'ere chap's my son: that there's my old woman on the dray; and our gal alongside on her. I've bought a run on the Gibson river, and am going to settle on it now. So, as you know all about us, take a 'ball,' and tell us who you are." With which he handed to Mr. Billing a bottle, containing some alcoholic fluid; and took out his pipe which he inserted between his teeth, and made to give forth a whistling sound, to satisfy himself upon the non-obstruction of the passage, preparatory to replenishing it with the weed. [Pg 63]

Mr. Billing having smelt the contents of the bottle, which had rather a rummy odour, returned it to old Sawyer with the remark: "You really must excuse me, sir, for I invariably make it a rule to abstain from spirits in the middle of the day, and never at any time drink them raw."

"We can give you water old 'bacca' breeches, if you like it best that way," replied Sawyer, sen.

"Not any, I thank you," said Billing, "I would prefer, I assure you, sir, to be excused; at the same time I value your kind attention." [Pg 64]

"Well, here's luck to you, old feller," said the other, as he took a pull at the bottle. "I don't believe in watering grog, it spoils good liquor. But I say, old cock, who are you?"

"I, sir," said Mr. Billing, not exactly relishing this unceremonious style of questioning, and with difficulty suppressing his indignant ire, at being so vulgarly addressed by a low-minded besotted man. "I, sir," he repeated, "am Mr. James Billing of Strawberry Hill, and late of the firm of Billing, Barlow, & Co., of the city of London." He said this with the air of a man who would strike his interrogator with a sense of that forwardness that could prompt so rude a query as that which had been made by the head of the Sawyer family; and as one resolved to maintain the honour of his position, and claim that respect which was due to him as the representative of that class which is the acknowledged source of England's greatness; viz., the mercantile community. [Pg 65]

"I 'spect Strawberry Hill ain't yourn?" said Sawyer, unmindful of the reproof conveyed in the tone and language of Mr. Billing. "I believe it belongs to a chap of the name of Rainsfield, don't it?"

"Mr. Rainsfield is the proprietor of the station, sir," replied Billing, "and I am his confidential assistant."

"Oh, the 'Super?' I suppose," exclaimed the other.

"No, sir," replied our friend, "his accountant."

"Oh, I see," cried the old man, as the nature of his interlocutor's position flashed across his mind, "the storekeeper, that's all, eh? and where are you going now, mate?"

"I can't see, sir," replied Mr. Billing, "how that can interest you in the slightest degree. I am not called upon to submit to your catechising; you must be perfectly aware that your questions are bordering on the impertinent; and but that I am a man of peace, I would resent your inquisitiveness, sir, as an insult." [Pg 66]

"My father meant no offence, sir," said the young man, while his parent gave vent to his amusement in a prolonged whistle, "it is only his way."

"And a most unwarrantable way too, sir," said the now irate commercial man.

"You need not get your rag out, old fellow," said the senior Sawyer, "if you can't take a bit of chaff you oughtn't to live in the bush."

"Of that, sir, I'm the best judge," replied the indignant Billing. "No man is justified in offering chaff, as you call it, to a gentleman; more especially when the parties are perfect strangers. I made no rude and inquisitive remarks to you; and am surprised that you should have ventured to utter them to me."

"Well, old fellow," said the other, "I ain't agoing to quarrel with you no how, so if you don't mean to tell us where you're going, why, you can just please yourself." [Pg 67]

"That, sir, I intend to do," replied Mr. Billing; "so, if you have no further enquiries to make, we may just as well part company."

"All right, old chap," said Mr. Sawyer, "we'll go;" and while he put his team in motion, with his whip, he imparted a slight titillation to the flanks of Mr. Billing's horse, which caused that eccentric animal to go off in the step most torturing to his rider, amidst the united cachinnations of the Sawyer family.

Mr. Billing experienced a return of all his former horrors; but his efforts this time to reduce his horse to a tractable obedience were fruitless; the animal persisted in keeping to his own pace, notwithstanding the various tugs, bridle sawings, admonitions, and solicitations of our disconsolate equestrian. He was fain at last to give up the contention, and submit to his fate; and, be it mentioned to his commendation, he bore his torture to the end of his journey with a degree of fortitude perfectly astounding. [Pg 68]

It was night when the horse stopped in front of the "Woolpack" inn, at Alma, and well was it for Mr. Billing's sensitiveness that it was so; for it saved him from the cruel jeers and laughter of the unsympathising ignoramuses who would have been sure to have made his misfortunes a subject for merriment. He was aroused from the abstraction of his calm resignation by the cessation of motion; and he perceived, with a lively joy, that his troubles were for the time at an end. How he got down from his saddle we are as ignorant as he was himself; though we can affirm that he scrambled off in such a manner as to bring himself to the ground in a prostrate position. Upon recovering from his surprise, after carefully brushing the dust from his apparel, he noticed that his horse, who was apparently well acquainted with the *locale* of the place, had entered the yard, and was standing at the stable door, waiting with an exemplary patience to be admitted. Leaving him there, to be attended to by the proper authority, our friend entered the house with a step somewhat resembling the progression which, is to be assumed, would be that of an animated pair of compasses. He was met in the passage of the hostel by an individual of the masculine gender, who, with a sardonic grin, asked him "if that 'ere 'oss what was in the yard belonged to him;" and being answered in the affirmative, and that the repliant desired to be shown to the coffee-room, and required supper and a bed, he remarked, "I suppose you come from Mr. Rainsfield's? I know'd his old 'oss the moment I seed him, and he knows us as well as he does his master." [Pg 69]

"Indeed!" replied Mr. Billing, "it's very probable, my good fellow; but I have no desire to enter into a discussion with you respecting the merits or acquaintances of the animal. I would be exceedingly obliged to you if you would show me to my bed-room, and let me have some supper as soon as possible." [Pg 70]

"I don't think you've been much used to a riding of 'orses, sir," said the cool stable functionary, as he eyed our travel-worn friend from apex to base. But Mr. Billing was too indignant to answer him. He really thought that all the vagabonds in the country had conspired to insult him, and he determined to submit to their contumelies no longer; so, turning round upon his questioner, with a look of indignant scorn, he said:

"I'll suffer no impertinence from you, sir, and I have to request you'll refrain from indulging in any further offensive remarks and queries, sir. If you are the landlord of this hostlery, sir, you are evidently unacquainted with your business; and if you are a servant in the establishment be good enough to inform your master that I desire to speak to him."

"All right, sir," replied the man, "if you want to see the gov'ner I'll tell him." Saying which, the facetious servant took his departure with an evident risible excitement. [Pg 71]

In a few minutes the landlord himself made his appearance; and received Mr. Billing's order, and complaint against the domestic, with as much indifference as if they were matters not worth noticing; and without deigning any acknowledgment or reply beyond that which he put to his visitor in the following words.

"Do you want anything to drink?"

"Not at present, I thank you," replied the urbane son of commerce; "I desire first to have something to eat."

"Oh! then you'll have to wait," replied the landlord, "for we don't cook meals at this time of night."

"Well, my good friend," replied Mr. Billing, "I don't wish to inconvenience you, and your household; but I am perfectly voracious, and desire something solid. I am not fastidious and would be content with something cold, if your larder contains such."

"No, we ain't got nothing cold," replied the master of the "Woolpack;" "we never keep it:" and with a grunt this specimen of politeness left the room. [Pg 72]

The unfortunate Mr. Billing was now subject to another species of annoyance; and we verily believe, had he not been the personification of patience, he would have been perfectly driven to distraction. Though shouts of revelry, and indications of drinking, emanated from the bar, he was not surprised or disturbed, for he expected it; but he heard sounds in the passage as of suppressed laughter, accompanied by stifled expressions in a strong Hibernian dialect. Whether the utterance was by male or female, it was difficult to conjecture; but Mr. Billing's doubts (if he had had any on the subject) were soon put to rest, for he plainly discerned the frontispiece of a biped; which, by the manner of arranging its natural scarlet covering, plainly proclaimed itself as

belonging to the order of feminine. The features displayed a broad grin; and an inquisitive glance met that of our friend, as he stood facing the door. The head was hastily withdrawn when its owner perceived it had been noticed; but a laugh succeeded its withdrawal, and another cranium was protruded into the aperture, and retired in its turn with a laugh, to make way for another.

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Mr. Billing submitted to this scrutiny with the assumed fortitude of a stoic; and attempted to allay his rising ire, and deceive his perturbed spirit, by whistling one of the favourite airs from Norma. Now, Mr. Billing prided himself upon the accomplishment of whistling; for he did consider it an accomplishment, notwithstanding that some people call it vulgar. He had given it his study; and when in the height of conviviality, when he was at any time induced to favour his friends with a specimen of his art, he would throw his whole soul into the performance, and remain an unconscious spectator of passing events until the last note of his Æolian melody died away amid the vociferous plaudits of his friends. He therefore, on this occasion, resolved to indulge in a little music to save himself from a knowledge of the annoyance of the menials' gaze, and to show them his utter contempt both for them and their unparalleled rudeness. With his eyes, then, firmly fixed upon a cleanly-dispositioned fly on the canvas ceiling of the room, as it was going through various crural manipulations on its cranium, he warbled forth a stanza in his most enchanting strain; so exquisitely sweet as to have softened the hearts of heathens had they been present. At least so says Congreve, in his oft-used sentiment, such is the opiate influence of phrygian chords on unsophisticated natures; but in the auditory of Mr. Billing it was otherwise. They possessed no taste for music, and only greeted his performance with screams of laughter.

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Human nature could not quietly submit to this fresh indignity, and Mr. Billing advanced with undisguised chagrin, and banged the door upon the sounds of retreating merriment. He was annoyed, disgusted, and ill at ease; and mentally made a resolution to get out of the place as speedily as possible, and never to darken the door again. It was fully an hour before his expected repast was put upon the table; and with a disturbed spirit, and body racked with pains of unutterable puissance, he partook of his meal and early sought the consolation of his pillow.

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On the following morning he habited and arranged himself with punctilious neatness; and waited upon Mr. Gilbert, the principal or rather the only storekeeper in the town, for the purpose of obtaining the articles required by Mr. Rainsfield. Upon his procuring these he arranged them in the valise prepared for them, and settled his reckoning at the inn previous to taking his departure. At his desire the horse was brought to the door; and, being provided with a chair, he effected a mounting with less difficulty than on the previous day. But his trials were not yet at an end; for not only the whole inmates of the Woolpack inn, but almost the entire population of the township (some hundred people), assembled *en masse* to witness the start of the potent personage. The horse was set in motion by an admonitory application of a stick by one of the bystanders, which started him off in the step which was the dread of our friend; while he was hailed on all sides with a deafening cheer and shouts of laughter, which rung in his ears for some distance on his journey.

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CHAPTER IV.

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"What dire offence from amorous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things."

POPE.

We last left John Ferguson returning to Fern Vale after his interview with Mr. Rainsfield; and he had reached his home, and had actually dismounted from his horse, before the merry laugh of his sister roused him from his reverie. When Kate and the rest of the party had reached the house, they were surprised to find John absent; the more so as they were informed he had ridden over in the morning to Strawberry Hill. They certainly had not passed him on the road, and they thought there was no probability of his having been diverted from his purpose; they therefore could not understand where he had got to, though they agreed the best thing they could do was to await his return.

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William had taken them all over the place, and through the house that was only waiting the arrival of the furniture, to claim its pretty little visitor as its mistress; and the party were just emerging from the building, when Kate spied her brother John approaching, apparently absorbed in deep thought, and perfectly deaf to the sound of the voices of herself and her friends. When she, however, saw him alight from his horse, at the huts a short distance off, and perceived that he was perfectly abstracted, she could restrain her spirits no longer, and ran laughingly to throw herself in his arms. It was at this moment, that John Ferguson was made alive to the fact that his home had been honoured by the visit of his friends; and he advanced to meet his sister, and greeted her with a fond inosculation, as a token of fraternal affection.

We do not approve of the constant eduction of scenes of affectionate union, where the thoughts, contemplations, and utterances, the spontaneous ebullitions of love, are dragged before the gaze of all. We deem them at all times too sacred to be made subject to the comments and criticism of uninterested parties; and therefore, in the case of Kate's meeting with her brother, would beg to draw a veil over the scene, and wait, in the resumption of our apologue, until they join their friends.

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The various greetings and congratulations were soon ended; and Tom Rainsfield commenced the

general conversation by asking of his friend:

"What on earth became of you, John? When we arrived here we were told you had gone over to our place; but you had not been there before we left, and if you had gone by the track we should have met. I suppose you were emulated with a desire for discovery, and attempted to find a short cut through the bush, eh?"

"No indeed," replied John, "I kept to the road; but, I imagine, I must have been at Strawberry Hill just before you started, for, as I was coming up to the house, I saw saddled horses at the door. I was called in by Mr. Billing as I was passing his cottage, as he said he desired a little conversation with me; so I presume that, owing to that circumstance, I missed you."

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"What could have induced that inordinate old humbug," continued Tom, "to have drawn you into his den? I suppose to tell you all about his family affairs."

"Yes," replied John, "he certainly did treat me to a long dissertation on his misfortunes in life; the greatest of which was his coming to the colony, and which appears, *prima facie*, to be the head and front of his offending."

"But didn't you ask for us?" enquired Tom; "or did you see my brother? and did he not tell you that we had gone over to your place?"

"I did see Mr. Rainsfield," said John, "but to tell you the truth, I did not go up to the house."

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"And you didn't even ask for me?" enquired Mrs. Rainsfield. "I could hardly have believed in such thoughtlessness in any of my friends, and especially in you. Pray, sir, will you make some explanation? I am almost inclined to be angry with you. But, as we intend to retain possession of your sister for some time, we shall demand of you, as penance; a constant attendance upon us at 'The Hill.'"

"I fear, my dear Mrs. Rainsfield," replied John, "I must decline to enlighten you on my remissness; and I am afraid also I shall prove a refractory penitent; for, in the first place, I think it highly improbable that I shall have the pleasure of visiting Strawberry Hill again; at least for a time. And I must take an early opportunity of relieving you of the protection of Kate."

"What does the man mean?" exclaimed his good-natured lady visitor, in mock astonishment. "Am I to understand that you not only refuse to come and see us, but that you are churlish enough to desire to seclude your sister with yourself in mutual confinement? You are really becoming perfectly mysterious, John Ferguson. I do not understand all this, and must insist upon a solution. Tell me, now," continued she, as she went smilingly up to him, "what is it that makes you estrange yourself from us, and studiously avoid our society? I think I can read you better than to ascribe it to that little fracas at our pic-nic."

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"I do not wish to pain you, my dear madam," replied Ferguson, "by making an explanation that I am confident will be extremely disagreeable to you; rather let me remain as I am, and retain your esteemed friendship, and believe me I have good cause for absenting myself from your house."

"Nay, I will not be satisfied with that," replied Mrs. Rainsfield, "you are only intensifying my curiosity by endeavouring to evade my demand; something has occurred, I am sure, to make you so determined in your avoidance of us; and I must know what it is. If you decline enlightening me on the subject I must seek information from Mr. Rainsfield, or Eleanor; so you had better make a virtue of necessity, and tell me at once."

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"I had much rather the subject had not been broached," said John; "but, as you are determined to know the cause of my elimination, I suppose I must communicate what I would sooner have buried in oblivion. It appears that your husband has formed some prejudice against me, the cause of which I am unable to account for. I accidentally learnt from my black boys that some espionage, in connexion with your station, was meditated by the Nungar tribe; and I took an early opportunity of going over to Strawberry Hill to apprise Mr. Rainsfield of the fact. He received me with marked coolness, for what reason I am at a loss to conjecture; and actually accused me of exercising an incentive influence over the tribe to his detriment. I would willingly believe that he has formed some misconception of my actions; but to impute such a motive to me is simply ridiculous. He loaded me with invective, and wound up his inflammatory tirade by requesting that I would discontinue my visits to his house; and before I recovered from my surprise I found myself alone; though, even if he had remained, I question if I should have succeeded in disabusing his mind, for he seemed in no disposition to listen to reason. I have no doubt but that he will very soon discover his error; but until then, you will perceive, Mrs. Rainsfield, it is utterly impossible that I can pay my respects to you at 'The Hill;' and it would also, under the circumstances, be highly inconsistent in Kate stopping longer with you than can be helped."

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"I am truly grieved," replied the lady, "to hear of your rupture with my husband, Mr. Ferguson; it gives me great pain, I can assure you. I can't think he can be prejudiced against you, for he always entertained the highest esteem for you. It is possible he may have formed some erroneous impression with regard to those horrid blacks; but, whatever is the cause of the ill feeling, I will endeavour to dispel it; and have your friendship reestablished upon the old footing. But, in the meantime, it is impossible that you can take Kate away from us; you can't put her into an empty house, and you certainly would not have the cruelty to lodge her in those huts of yours. You must leave her with us, at least until you have made a comfortable home for her; and even then, I don't think the poor girl will have a very enviable life, living in seclusion, without a female near her."

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"I have already thought of that," replied John, "and have hired a man and his wife; the latter, who is a professed cook, will be entirely under Kate's direction. Besides, our little black fellow, Joey, whom we brought from New England with us, is as useful, if not more so, as half the female

servants in the country. So I think, on that score, we will be able to make our sister perfectly comfortable."

"At all events," said Mrs. Rainsfield, "it is understood you leave her with us until your furniture arrives." [Pg 86]

"Very well," replied John, "I suppose it must be so. I need not beg of you to refrain from mentioning to any one in your house, not even to Kate, that any unpleasantness exists between our families; your own good judgment will convince you of the non-necessity. But suppose we join our friends, for we appear to have wandered quite away from them during our conversation;" and John Ferguson, and Mrs. Rainsfield, returned to the spot where the rest of the party stood.

"Well, it is to be hoped you two are satisfied with your 'confidential,'" remarked Tom, as the parties thus addressed joined the *menage*. "We were beginning to think you were meditating an elopement, and were just proposing giving you chase. We are agitating the question of return. Miss Ferguson says she does not like this dreadful wilderness of yours, John, and is anxious to get back to Strawberry Hill, and within the bounds of civilisation." [Pg 87]

"Oh, what a dreadful falsehood!" cried Kate, "you know I never said such a thing; for that I am half disposed to stop here at once, and if I thought it would be any punishment to you, I would. I am sure my brother would make room for me if I desired it."

"I offer an abject apology, my dear Miss Ferguson," exclaimed the culprit; "we could not dream of losing you now; so I will make any reparation necessary to appease you."

"Well, then behave yourself, sir, and adhere to the truth," said Kate.

"I think, my dear," said Mrs. Rainsfield, "we really had better return, or it will be dark before we get home; so if Tom did not read your thoughts, his fib suggested an expediency." Kate now took leave of her brother; and Mrs. Rainsfield, she, and Tom mounted their horses, and departed; the latter turning in his saddle as he left the station, called out to John, "I'll be over in the morning;" and the party were speedily lost to sight. [Pg 88]

Mr. Wigton and the brothers turned into the hut, and were soon engaged in a conversation, which, though interesting to themselves, it is unnecessary for us to follow. Towards the close of the evening as they sat before their hut, the brothers enjoying their pipes over the fire that was boiling the water for the infusion of the temperate beverage that graced their board at the evening meal; and while Joey, who officiated in the culinary department, was preparing the repast in the interior of the domicile, the dray that we have met already on the road from Alma, was seen to wind slowly off the face of the ridge and down the vale to the creek that ran through it. Here it stopped, while the driver seemed to hold an altercation with his companions, and appeared to be undecided as to some course they were meditating.

"Who are those people, William?" said his brother. "Where on earth can they be going? Just step down and see; for they must surely have gone out of their way, and find themselves now at a stand still." [Pg 89]

William walked down to the spot where the dray had halted; and returned in a few minutes with the information, that the travellers were on their way to take possession of a "run" one of the party had bought, on the river below their own place, from Bob Smithers; and stated that he had told the fellow that he might camp where he was, and go over and form his station on the following day; he had also invited him to come up to the hut in the evening and smoke his pipe, which the man had promised to do. His name, William said, was Sawyer; and he appeared to be an individual who had not been blessed with either much cultivation or education. "He is," said William, "a regular specimen of an old hand, and I expect has seen much service."

In the course of the evening Mr. Sawyer made his appearance with his "old woman," as he familiarly designated his wife, and daughter. The family was unaltered in appearance since we last introduced it to the reader; and while the females took their seats on two stools, provided for them by the Fergusons, in a stiff and formal manner which they intended for a distinguishing mark of good breeding, the old man threw himself down on the grass before the fire. After collecting a few sticks, and throwing them on himself, he lit his pipe with a "fire stick," and commenced the following conversation; which he continued between the intervals of his smoky eructations. [Pg 90]

"I suppose you ain't been here long, mate," said he, addressing John; "you look as if you had newly settled, and the country here can't have been long taken up."

"It is true," replied John, "we have not been resident here very long, not yet twelve months. My brother tells me you have purchased the block of country below us; may I ask if you are about to stock it?" [Pg 91]

"Well, I ain't agoing to do nothing else. You see I have got my dray down there with my rations, and traps; and I am now going over to fix upon a place for my station, and put up some huts and yards. We have bought our stock on the 'Downs,' and my other son is there now, waiting for me to go back, to be there while the sheep are drafted. We must get a place up first to put the old woman and the girl in, and then we will look after the stock."

"But," said William, "you surely are not going to leave your wife and daughter alone, while you go back to the Downs for your flocks? It can't be your intention to leave them unprotected, in this part of the bush? Are you aware of the freedom of the blacks here?"

"No," replied Sawyer, "I don't know much about the blacks in these parts; 'cos I ain't seen much of them yet; but I know just exactly what they were on the Hunter twenty years ago; and I be [Pg 92]

sure they arn't worse here than they were there; and my old woman has had as much to do with them as me. Do you think I am afraid to leave her by herself? Lord bless you, sir; my word! she is 'all there' to take care of herself; and in her own house I'll back her against any dozen white men and any fifty blacks."

"You are quite at liberty," said John, "if you like, after you have built your huts, to leave your wife and daughter and your stores and things here to await your own return."

"I am obliged to you, young man," exclaimed old Sawyer; "but I'd rather leave them at our own station, and I reckon they would rather stop there themselves; besides if I built my huts, and then left them, the blackguardly blacks would most likely burn them."

"Well, Mr. Sawyer, you can please yourself," replied John, "but you are quite welcome to make use of our place if you like."

"All right, sir," replied he addressed, "I've no doubt; but you see I've no fear of my old woman being alone, so I shall just leave her to bide until I come back. Howsomdever we shan't be long away, and I don't think I shall be so lucky as to find, when I do come back, that anybody has run away with her."

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"I trust, Mr. Sawyer," continued John, "you may have no cause to reprehend yourself for your confidence in your wife's ability to protect herself and her daughter; and, if we can be of any service to them, I trust you will make no scruple in commanding us; for we desire to live on terms of amity with our neighbours, and it is essential to be mutually obliging at times."

"In course, young fellow; you are a brick, so give me your hand," cried the head of the Sawyer family, as he started to his feet, "we must have a nobbler on the strength of that;" saying which he abstracted a bottle from the breastine recesses of his garments, and handed it to John, who called to Joey to bring some pannikins and water.

"I must apologize," said he, "for not offering you a glass of grog myself before this; but, to tell you the truth, we have not got any on the station, and here we don't usually drink it; but to keep you company, I don't mind taking a small drop."

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The bottle was handed to Mr. Wigton, William, and the women in succession; the two former of whom declined, and the latter partook; while the dispenser himself filled out a jorum for his personal libation, and drank success to himself, and the world generally, in that comprehensive aphorism which seemed to him to answer for all occasions; viz., "here's luck." He felt disappointed, however, when, upon a second presentation of the "homiletical stimulator," he found no one to join him, and he remarked with an apparent degree of truth:

"Why, I never did see fellers like you refuse good liquor. I can't think how you can do it; for my part, I'm blow'd if I ever do: it's a sin."

"Don't you think, my good man," said Mr. Wigton, "it's rather a sin to indulge too freely in its use? If you do not think so, I can assure you that it is; to say nothing of the moral degradation of the drunkard, the lavish squandering of your means, and the injury to your health."

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"Lor' bless you, sir," replied Sawyer, "I never felt the worse of my liquor. I might ha' been a bit drunk now and then, but what's the odds of that? I get all right again in a giffey; I wouldn't give a snuff for a fellow that couldn't take his grog, and get drunk now and then like other men. When I was an overseer on the Hunter some years ago, a mate of mine and me got two gallons of rum up to my hut, to have a spree one night. One of my fellows, who was an assigned 'un, was a decent cove, though he never spoke to the other men, 'cos he thought hissself a real gent. Well I pitied this coon; and seeing him that evening, I asked him if he'd come up to my hut, and have 'a ball' or two with us; but bless you, he flew into a pelter, and called us all sorts of names, because, he said, we wanted to make beasts of ourselves; just as if having a bit of a spree, was making of beasts of ourselves, and as if we hadn't a right to drink our own grog. Well, thinks I, you are a chicken; but I lets him 'ave his own way; and what do you think, sir? He took to bush-ranging and was hanged. Now, do you think he was better than me, for not getting drunk that time?"

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"In his refusal, he certainly showed an appreciation of right, whatever his previous or after career may have been," replied Mr. Wigton. "But, Mr. Sawyer, you must really permit me to impress upon you the absolute uselessness of drinking to excess; its sinfulness I will be able to convince you of afterwards. In the outset of your spree, as you call it, you provide a stock of spirits, which you lay yourself out to drink, uninterruptedly, until it is finished. After the first hour you become quite unconscious of everything around you, while you continue to drink mechanically, without actually knowing you are doing so, and certainly without your palate experiencing any gratification. So that the greater portion of the spirits you have drank has been consumed without affording you any satisfaction; in fact, wasted; and your money thrown away. Now, consider, what are the effects of this spree? If you are of a good constitution, and escape *delirium tremens*, are not your sufferings still very acute? far more so than to be commensurate to the wild excitement of the debauch? You are sick, your head seems every moment ready to split; you are for days absolutely wretched and ill; and not until your constitution works off the ill effects of your dissipation do you recover your wonted health; whereas, if you had confined yourself to drinking your grog in moderation, you would have enjoyed it for a lengthened period, escaped all the unpleasant symptoms I have mentioned, and not injured your health; so you will perceive that drunkenness is useless. I am well aware that it is difficult to convince men such as you, who like their grog, to such a belief; but if you could only be induced to try abstinence I have no doubt you would readily agree with me, with regard to its sinfulness."

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"Oh, never mind that," cried Sawyer, "I don't want to have no sermon; if I like to buy grog, and

drink it all at once, it don't hurt nobody but me; and if I choose to do it, why, it is my look out, and don't matter to anybody else. But come along, old woman," he continued, addressing his wife, "we must be going down to our camp;" and turning round to John, he said, "we left our boy down with the dray, and he will be thinking the time long without us."

"I'll come over to you in the morning," said William, "I may be of some assistance to you, as I have no doubt you will want to get up a covering for the females as soon as possible."

"All right, young man, we will be glad to see you," replied Sawyer; saying which, and uttering a general "good night," that was echoed by his accompanying helpmate and progeny, he bent his steps towards the light of his own fire; and was speedily lost in the gloom.

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"I could have desired," said Mr. Wigton, as the Sawyers departed, "more eligible neighbours for you than those people, and should recommend you, at the outset, not to permit too much familiarity from them; nor to cultivate a very close degree of acquaintanceship. It is as well to preserve a good feeling as neighbours; but for Kate's and your own sakes I would recommend that you let them understand at once, by your manner, that you do not intend to admit them on an equality. The example they would set to you all, especially to your sister, I consider highly reprehensible; and it is better to avoid at once the possibility of contamination than discard it when once the infection is made palpable."

"I think with you," said John, "that they are by no means desirable neighbours; and I will certainly follow your advice. I did not like the appearance of the people from the first; and the offer I made them to remain here I could not in common civility avoid; however, I am happy they did not accept it, and only regret that William should have promised to go over to them."

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"Oh," said William, "I only want to learn something of that man's history. I know his life must have been an eventful one from the few remarks he made while here. You may believe me, otherwise I have no desire to devote much of my time to his or his family's society."

"You are quite right William," said Mr. Wigton; "but tell me," said he, turning to John, "what arrangements have you made for the reception of your sister? I see you have got a very nice little cottage, but it will surely take you some time to put things in perfect order for her."

"I expect," said John, "a dray up every day with furniture, and the necessity utensils for the commencement of our housekeeping. If anything is amiss we must fall back on William, for he selected them. When they arrive they shall be put in as good order as possible; I have engaged a man and his wife, and with the assistance of the latter, I think Kate will get on swimmingly. She will have very kind neighbours at Strawberry Hill, who are extremely anxious to keep her with them; and I am sure will be very attentive to her when she settles herself with us. So I think, so far, everything appears auspicious; though I would considerably have preferred having the house ready for her at once. To-day I came to an open rupture with Rainsfield, and he forbade me his house for the future; under which circumstance I think it is hardly right for one member of our family to be partaking of his hospitality."

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"I am grieved to hear of your quarrel," remarked Mr. Wigton; "how did it occur? is it possible to heal the breach?"

"Why, for my own part," said John, "it were easy; but, judging from the animus displayed by my opponent, I do not think it would be readily accomplished. Mr. Rainsfield is under the strange hallucination that I am influencing the blacks in their depredations on him; and when I called upon him, to put him upon his guard against impending danger, he attacked me with surprising virulence. I fear the quarrel is irremediable, and I only now desire to get Kate away; I have got every thing here comfortably arranged for her, and am only waiting for the furniture to complete her home."

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"I think you are perfectly right," replied the clergyman, "in your desire to bring your sister under your own roof; though, I have no doubt, she would desire to remain a short time longer with the kind ladies whose friendship she has been fortunate enough to secure. But it is only proper that she should join you when you complete your arrangements, in which, I think you have certainly shown some judicious management. I am sure Kate will reward you by settling into a first-rate little house-wife. She is a good, kind-hearted, affectionate girl; and, from what I have witnessed, I only think you will be speedily called upon to part with her; for, you may depend, such a treasure as she is will soon be discovered, even in this remote spot."

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"I expect that will be the result of our training," said John, laughingly; "but, if our sister's happiness will be furthered by the severance, I will be truly happy to make the sacrifice; though I don't think we have much fear of losing her for some time to come. But tell us, my dear friend, about your own movements. I trust you intend favouring us with your company for some lengthened period."

"I can remain with you for some little time," replied Mr. Wigton, "perhaps a fortnight or more; but next month I am expected to be in Brisbane, and will, therefore, have to leave you in time to reach town before the middle of next month. I am particularly desirous of having some interviews with the blacks of your neighbouring tribe, to endeavour, if possible, to ameliorate their wretched condition; and, if you have no objection, I will get you to pilot me to their camp."

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"With all my heart," said John, "I am quite at your service whenever you desire to go, and I am sure William will join us too; what do you say, Will?"

"By all means," replied he, "I'll go over with you, if you like, to-morrow afternoon, when I return from those people below us. You will have a good opportunity of speaking to them, Mr. Wigton, as the greater part of the tribe is assembled in the scrub just now."

After making the best arrangements they could for their visitor in their limited accommodation, the brothers and their friend retired for the night; and, on the following forenoon, William mounted his horse and rode over to the Sawyers' run, to satisfy his curiosity with regard to the Sawyer paterfamilias.

CHAPTER V.

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"I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul."

HAMLET, *Act 1. Sc. 5.*

William leisurely followed the track of the Sawyers' dray for about an hour, when he came up to their encampment, where they had apparently fixed upon a spot for their station. They must have been early in their departure from Fern Vale, and industrious in the interval; for, at the moment of William's arrival, they had got up a tent, under which they had placed the loading from their dray; while, amongst the various packages, the fair Hebe of the previous night was to be seen busily plunging, tugging, and sorting. Already pegs were placed at various distances in the ground to point out the boundaries for their respective enclosures and establishments; and a large tree lay stretched on the sward, in the spot on which it had fallen when succumbing to the axe of the younger Sawyer. The paternal couple were engaged dissecting the monster in sections of about nine longitudinal feet, and were plying the cross-cut saw with a will; while the son was driving an iron wedge into one of the lengths, thus dissected, to split it up into slabs for the erection of their hut.

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William had approached close to this industrious family, before their attention was diverted from their work by a knowledge of his presence; and the old man raising his head from his stooping posture, as the saw cut through the log, greeted him with a "good morning," that was echoed by the group.

"There, old woman," said her husband, "you can go help Mary Ann in the tent, and I'll go on splitting with Reuben. Well, young un," said he, turning to William, "yon chap at your place, last night, I guess was a parson; he wanted to give me a sermon, but I didn't see it, so I cut it short; what does he do there with you?"

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"Nothing," replied William, "he is merely a friend of ours, and only came to the station with me yesterday; he is a kind-hearted excellent man, and I am sure whatever he would have said to you would have been sound advice."

"Oh, I never doubt him," said the other, "only I don't like those parsons, and never get into any arguments with them; whatever you say they twist so to suit their own ways and sayings. Who would ever have thought that he would have said that fellow, as I was a talking of, was any better for a blackguarding of me for offering him of my grog."

"What were the particulars of that story?" enquired William, "you did not tell us last night."

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"Well, if you wants to hear it," replied Sawyer, "I don't mind having a pull at my pipe for a few minutes while I tell you."

"I would like exceedingly to hear," replied William. Whereupon the old man took his seat upon the log he had been splitting; filled his pipe and lit it; while Rueben was resting on his maul, and William, who had affixed the bridle of his horse to the stirrup, and allowed him to graze about the spot, took his seat at the old man's side. After ejecting from his mouth a volume of smoke he commenced the following narrative; which, for the sake of perspicuity, we will take the liberty of clothing in our own words.

Old Sawyer was "an old lag," and had been a long time in servitude (and afterwards in freedom) on the Hunter river. During the latter part of his career in that district he had been pretty successful as a farmer, and had accumulated some little means; but agriculture, in his opinion, ceasing to be a profitable occupation he had determined to turn to squatting; and had consequently sold his farm, and taken up the run on which he was then settling. It is of his early career, however, that we have at present to speak.

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At a primary era of his penal servitude he was, in common with most of his class, assigned to a master in the district in which he was located; and, after a time, was made by his master an overseer over the other servants. Amongst those under his supervision, were two young men who had held some posts of trust in England, and either from some fraudulent delinquencies, or culpable dereliction of duty, had made themselves amenable to the then stringent laws of their country, and were transported to the penal colony. They were both men of education and gentlemanly bearing; and, from a life in a clerical appointment, they were both totally unused to manual labour, and unfit to grapple with the trials of the convict discipline. They were, consequently, awkward and clumsy in the performance of their allotted tasks; while their inability was construed, by their truculent master, into perversity and stubbornness; and he swore, by increased toil and exactions, to break their gentlemanly pride, as he termed their unskillfulness.

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The two young men were put on one occasion, by the direction of the master, to fell some large trees, and they were given a cross-cut saw for the purpose; but on the first tree, on which they tried their hands, they broke their saw. As soon as the circumstance became known to their

employer, he sent them to the magistrate; and had them sentenced to fifty lashes each for insubordination; and, after the execution of the sentence, to be sent back to work. They returned to their work, but from that moment they were altered men. The crushing influence of the convict system had done its work; they had undergone the demoniacal transition; and two more victims were added to that mass who breathed only for vengeance on their tyrants. It was during the period between this punishment, and the accomplishment of their vengeance, that Sawyer, who really pitied the poor fellows, had given the bibulous invitation, and met with the rebuff.

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Not long after this, the two convicts made their escape, and took to the bush; which was scoured for months, over an immense extent, for their recovery, but ineffectually. Nothing was heard of them for nearly two years, when one, famished and emaciated, gave himself up at the settlement; reported the death of his companion; and confessed to the participation in one of the most horrible crimes on record; that which we are about to relate.

About six months after the escape of himself and his companion, when it was supposed they had perished in the wilds of the bush, the man whom we have mentioned as their master was suddenly missed. Upon instituting a search his body was found; but in such a state of putrefaction, and presenting such a hideous spectacle, that it was not removed; but a hole dug at the spot where it was discovered, and the remains, like any other vile carcass, shovelled into its last resting-place. The event at the time was thought of little moment, as the man was generally detested, and had no friends to agitate the matter; so it was hardly conjectured who were the perpetrators of his murder, and not until the criminal himself had confessed to the crime, were the authorities at all acquainted with the matter.

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It appeared that the young men, when they effected their escape, secreted themselves in gullies and crevices of the rocks; only venturing out in search of food during the darkness of night. In this way they existed; enduring the greatest privations, and living only for the hope of revenge. They waited for the opportunity that was to throw their victim into their hands, with a patience worthy of a better cause; and watched with an eagerness and vigilance, almost perpetual, until the happy moment arrived, and they possessed themselves of the person of their late detested master.

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He had been returning over-land from Sydney, and was leisurely approaching the settlements of the Hunter, when he was espied by the convicts. Great was their joy at this moment; though they knew, that even now that he was within their reach, they would experience great difficulty in securing him; more especially, as they were convinced he would be armed, while they were not. However, they determined to risk their lives in the attempt, for his death to them was sweeter than the preservation of their own lives.

They secreted themselves, one on either side of the road along which he had to go; and, at the moment when he was just about passing them, they simultaneously rushed from their ambush; and, before he was hardly aware of their presence, they had seized him by the arms, dragged him from his horse, and deprived him of the fire-arms he had had no time to use. They then bound him, and led him away into the bush, leaving his horse to find its way home at pleasure.

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The captors, after pinioning the arms of their victim, took him through the country, over ranges and across gullies, into the recesses of the bush, where they had taken up their abode; not deigning to enter into any conversation with him by the way. He, however, treated his captivity lightly, imagining that they were merely removing him from the road, to give themselves a surer opportunity of escape when they released him. He had no doubt but that their object was simply to rob him; and, by withdrawing him from the chance of assistance, they were only securing their retreat, in the event of his returning to arrest them after regaining his liberty. He was therefore consoling himself that he had very little on him to lose; and would experience very little difficulty in finding his way to the settlement. Very different ideas traversed the brains of his captors; though they preserved a uniform taciturnity to his jocular sallies; and, except that they well guarded against the possibility of his escape, they took not the slightest notice of him, and treated him with the most marked contempt.

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After walking thus for about two hours, they came to a deep gully, through which rippled a small limpid creek; on the sides of which, and extending up the faces of the gorge, were masses of rock piled in endless confusion. Here they halted, and having secured their prisoner to a tree, while one lit a fire, the other disappeared among the rocks, and returned with some edibles, scanty in quantity, and mean in quality. Having with these appeased their hunger, and quenched their thirst at the stream; they sat down by the fire, and conversed together in a low tone; protracting their conclave until darkness enclosed the scene.

The fears of the wretched victim were at length aroused by these mysterious proceedings. A horrible sensation crept over his mind; he felt no doubt that the convicts were holding a consultation as to how they would dispose of him; and he entertained a secret suspicion, that their object was not plunder, but murder. He still, however, argued with himself, that they could have no object in taking his life, by which they would gain nothing; whereas they might enrich themselves by robbing or ransoming him. He therefore attempted a parley to induce terms.

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"I say, young fellows," he shouted, "how long are you going to keep me here? you may as well take what I have got and let me go; or if you demand a ransom, let me know the amount, and provide me with pen and ink, and I will give you a cheque on the bank in Sydney."

"Silence, wretched man!" replied one of the convicts, advancing to him and presenting one of his own pistols at his head, "or I'll blow out your brains; we scorn to appropriate an article belonging to you. Even these instruments of death shall be left with you when we leave you; we do not

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desire booty. Your time has come, when you are called upon to atone to man for your many iniquities: and to-morrow you will have to account to your God."

"What! you surely do not mean to kill me?" screamed the terrified captive, in a voice that echoed in a thousand keys through the cavernous glen: "what have I done to deserve death from you? I have never wronged you to my knowledge; if I have, I will make all the reparation in my power; but spare my life, and I will give you whatever you demand."

"'Tis useless, you dog," replied his inquisitors. "If we desired plunder, we know you too well to believe in promises, extracted from you under such circumstances as these; and we are also aware of the impossibility of our procuring the ransom you may offer, or, even if we got it, of enjoying it."

"No, by heaven!" exclaimed the frantic wretch, "I swear to you on my soul, spare me my life, and I will give you whatever you ask, one hundred, five hundred, or a thousand pounds." [Pg 118]

"Your prayers to us," replied his captors, "are of no avail, to-morrow you die; so in the meantime, make your peace with your Maker, if such be possible."

"But why kill me?" screamed the agonized man, "what have I done to deserve death?"

"Wretch! do you want a recital of your sins?" replied his quondam servant; "have they been so insignificant that you cannot call any to present recollection? Are they not rather as numerous as the hairs on your head? does not the black and heinous catalogue rise before you, and darken your very soul? You have asked us why you are to die; I will tell you, and let God judge between us whether your fate is not your just reward; while you, vile reptile that you are, answer if you can, if we have not just cause to require your death to expiate your crimes."

"How have you fulfilled the government requisitions to your assigned servants? How have you fed them and clothed them? Have not their coverings been such, as to be as bad or worse than none? insufficient for any season; causing paralysis in winter, and sun-strokes in summer? Has not their food been unfit for pigs? Have you not tyrannized over them, and submitted them to unheard-of cruelties; simply to gratify your insatiable thirst for witnessing torture? Have you not, when you had a willing servant, who was anxious to conduct himself orderly and give satisfaction, made some paltry excuse to have the man punished; because you feared you would lose his services, by his obtaining his 'ticket of leave,' for good conduct? Have you not done all this? Yes! and more." [Pg 119]

You have even compelled your men to intoxicate themselves; and then accused them before a magistrate of stealing the spirits, to obtain the cancelling of their tickets. You have by your cruelty driven men mad, to the bush, or to a lingering death; you have crushed the germ of contrition in the breasts of hundreds, and degraded them to the level of beasts; while the only sounds grateful to your ears, have been the yells of anguish of your victims; and the only spectacle pleasing to your sight, the application of the lash. You have done all this, and even more in hundreds or thousands of cases. You have done so to us; you have heaped ignominy upon our heads; and with starvation, exposure, and accumulated toil, you have caused unjustly our backs to be lacerated by the lash, and our spirits to be broken by your barbarity. Life to us has lost its charm; we thirst only for your blood; vengeance is now in our hands, and you shall die."

The yells of the wretched man, that followed this denouncement, sounded through the glen as the shrieks of a demon or a maniac; and his cries might have been heard far into the bush, had there been any one near to help him. But they were lost on the wilderness' air; and he at last sank exhausted in his bonds, while his captors watched alternately at his feet, with his own loaded pistols ready for use in case of emergency. [Pg 121]

The morning dawned as brightly as ever; though the stillness of the bush cast a gloom upon everything within its umbrageous influence. The convicts were up and stirring by daylight, and their first task was to arouse their unconscious victim (who seemed to doze in a lethargic indifference), and prepare him for his approaching fate.

He was speedily denuded of his attire, and bound hand and foot; in which condition he was laid over the bed of an ant's nest, and tied by his extremities, in a state of tension, to opposite trees; in such a manner as to keep his body immoveable over the nest. The wretched man soon awoke to the horrors of his situation, and implored, with the earnestness of a dying man, of his murderers to save his life. But he appealed to feelings and sympathies that were dead; that had, in fact, been strangled by himself: it was in vain. After the most desperate resistance he was secured in his place of torture, while the very skies rang with his cries of anguish and despair. [Pg 122]

His body was no sooner prostrate on the heap, than the ants in myriads attacked it vigorously; in a few minutes making its surface black with their swarms; penetrating into his very flesh, and making use of the natural channels to affect ingress to his inner system; and travelling in continuous streams in and out of his nostrils, ears, and mouth. The horrors of the picture it is impossible to describe; and the expression of his features it is equally difficult to conceive. The colour of his skin speedily changed to deep blue; the veins and muscles stood out in bold relief; his eyes projected from his head, and rolled, bleared as they were, in sockets of livid flesh; he gnashed his teeth in his unutterable agony, and rent the air with horrible and impious imprecations; while the utterance was almost diabolical by the vermin that choked the passages of his system. [Pg 123]

No human being could long bear this excruciating torture; and at last the body perceptibly swelled, the coeliac or cavernous parts becoming horribly distended, and the spirit fled to its heavenly judgment. Not till then, did the two calm spectators leave the spot, where they had witnessed the death of their victim, and where they now left "nature's scavengers" to finish the

work they had commenced.

The sufferings of the two convicts from this time must have been fearful; for one shortly succumbed to them, while the other bearing it for some months longer, gave himself up to the authorities, and met his fate on the gallows.

After the relation of the above tale of woe the elder Sawyer and his son resumed their work, and the conversation took a general turn; while William, who found he could not be of any service to the settlers, caught his horse and took his leave.

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When he returned to his own place he found that, during his absence, the expected dray had arrived from town with their furniture, which lay strewn on the ground, in front of the cottage, where it had been discharged. And he at once became busy in unpacking and sorting the things; while his brother superintended the refreighting of the vehicle with what return loading they had for it. The man and wife who had been hired for them, and who had accompanied the dray, busied themselves in arranging the things in the cottage.

The proposed visit to the blacks, by this opportune arrival, was necessarily postponed; and it was determined that William should, that very afternoon, ride over to Strawberry Hill; inform Kate of the orders of things; and desire her to join them as soon as possible. John impressed upon his brother the necessity of urging Kate to lose no time, as the place would be quite ready for her by the following day; and he did not think, under the existing circumstances, it was consistent for her to remain longer with the Rainsfields than was absolutely necessary. "Of course," he said, "Kate would be perfectly ignorant of the rupture between myself and Mr. Rainsfield, and might therefore battle against so speedy and abrupt a termination to her visit." But he left the matter, he told William, to himself to manage, without entering into any explanations to their sister, which would necessarily be painful to all parties; besides which, he had no doubt, when Mrs. Rainsfield perceived it was his desire to have Kate home with them, she would offer no objection to her departure, as she would understand his motive for desiring it.

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William was accordingly dispatched on the errand; and returning in the evening, in company with Tom Rainsfield, gave an account of his diplomacy. As was anticipated by the brothers, Kate could with difficulty be persuaded to break off her engagement with the Rainsfields; but that when she saw that both her brothers desired it, and that she was not pressed to prolong her visit, she reluctantly acceded to her brother's request; and promised to be ready to come over to Fern Vale on the following morning. So William had engaged to return for her the next day.

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"It is lucky for you, my fine friend," said Tom, "that I was not at home, when you persuaded your sister to such an ungracious determination; for I, most assuredly, would have annihilated you, and kept her in captivity. It is really cruel just to leave her with us sufficiently long to cause us all to adore her; and then snatch her away from us in such an unceremonious manner. What on earth can you mean by carrying her off in this way?"

"Why," said John, "we are afraid of losing sight of you altogether, Tom; you would have forgotten us entirely while you retained possession of our Kate; and besides we want to make some use of our idle little sister. But tell us now, if you were not at home when William was at your house, pray, where did you spring from?"

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"I have been over to the black's camp, to try and conciliate the rascals," replied Tom, "but I am sorry to find they are death on my brother for his treatment of them."

"You seem to have agitated them by your visit," said John, "for they have made a fearful disturbance all the afternoon."

"They were holding some discussion when I arrived there," said Tom, "but they were quieted upon my presenting myself."

"They appear then only to have been 'called to order' by you," said John, "and maintained it simply during your stay; for did you ever hear such a Babel of voices as are screaming now; it is enough to deafen us even at this distance."

CHAPTER VI.

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"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly."

MACBETH, *Act I, Sc. 6.*

When Mr. Rainsfield parted from Mr. Billing, after escorting him to the junction of the Alma and Brompton roads, he returned home to carry out his contemplated arrangements; in the concatenation of which, his first step was to remove the stores from the building used as a store to an apartment in the house; and he had barely effected this, before Tom, his wife, and Kate returned. When the ladies retired in the evening Tom asked his brother if John Ferguson had been at Strawberry Hill in the morning; and how it was that he had not been seen by any other inmate of the house.

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Rainsfield replied that John Ferguson had certainly been there in the morning; and that the cause of his not having been seen by the family was an interview that had taken place between himself and Ferguson by which he, Mr. Rainsfield, had learnt that the blacks were meditating some fresh

outrage; and he would therefore be glad if Tom would undertake a mission to them to mediate a pacification.

Rainsfield was playing a deep and hazardous game, and he felt it himself. Even to his brother he had recourse to dissimulation to blind or divert him from a perception of a stratagem in which he was aware he could not procure Tom's concurrence. He therefore wished to get him out of the way while he worked his diabolical machinations. He knew that whatever the purpose of the blacks might be, they would not be diverted by the persuasion of Tom; and, as he naturally conceived their object to be pilfering, he intended to be perfectly prepared for them. At the same time he wished none of his own family to witness the preparations he was making.

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"Very well," said Tom, "I will go to-morrow; for, to tell you the truth, I have myself thought for some time that they were hatching some mischief; and my suspicions were the more aroused when I witnessed, along with John Ferguson, their last corroboree. It struck me then, more than once, that I heard your name uttered by them in their song."

"Were you then at the corroboree?" enquired Rainsfield.

"Yes," replied Tom. "But tell me what information John Ferguson imparted to you, and how he obtained it."

"Well, I can hardly tell you now," said Rainsfield, "for I was so agitated at the time that much of it was lost to me; but I believe he said his blacks boys, who had returned from the camp after the corroboree, had informed him that the tribe intended something; though what the exact nature of the meditated aggression was, they were unable or unwilling to explain."

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On the following day Rainsfield was anxious to get Tom off before the arrival of Billing, whose absence he had not perceived. And he wished, if possible, to prevent the necessity of accounting for the storekeeper's journey to Alma; the very circumstance of which, unusual as it was, he knew would excite the wonder of Tom. While, if not perfectly satisfied with his explanation, he feared his brother might be induced to seek further information from Mrs. Billing; whom Rainsfield felt no doubt was a confidant of her husband, and acquainted with the object of the journey, at least such object as was assigned to it by himself. So he urged upon Tom the advisableness of dispatch, to prevent the blacks from carrying out their plans, if they meditated anything that night.

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Tom promised to go about mid-day, or early in the afternoon, and to stop with them until late in the evening, so as to detain them, if they meditated any outrage on the station, from its execution; and about one o'clock he took his departure, much to the relief of his brother. Not long afterwards the horse that was supposed to be carrying the burden of Mr. Billing's body presented himself at the door of the house, though minus his rider. The valise was instantly removed by Mr. Rainsfield, who perceived that the desired articles were therein; and he then dispatched one of his men, with the horse, to go back and look for the missing equestrian; without allowing the sensitive nerves of that doating creature, the sharer of all his earthly troubles, to be unnecessarily agitated by a knowledge of her husband's abasement.

The rider was not long in returning with the lost representative of commerce, who had in the agony of his motion, and in a futile effort to stop the career of his carrier, lost his balance in his saddle, and described what in skating counties is designated a "spread eagle." He, however, found himself less hurt than he at first anticipated, and he speedily adopted a sensible resolution to make the best progress he could on foot. While the horse, after relieving himself of his encumbrance, and getting beyond the reach of capture, must have taken his leisure, for Mr. Billing was no very great distance behind him.

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"Well, Mr. Billing," said his master, as that individual addressed made his appearance in a sorry plight, "how did you enjoy your excursion to Alma? I am sorry to see you have got thrown; I trust you have not hurt yourself."

"I am happy, sir, to assure you," replied Mr. Billing, "that, through the gracious dispensation of Providence, I have sustained no osseous fractures; though, sir, I may add, my mental agony, and bodily sufferings, have been such as I never wish again to experience."

"You must expect to have some inconvenience in your first ride, Mr. Billing," said his master; "but you will find, upon your second attempt, that the unpleasantness will be diminished."

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"That second attempt, sir," replied the little man, "will never be made by me. I have a positive abhorrence for a horse, sir, and no power on earth, sir, would induce me to become a chevalier."

"Very well, Mr. Billing," replied the other, "I'll not attempt to persuade you against your own inclinations; I can only thank you for your services on this occasion, and if you will meet me in the store, when you have recovered yourself a little, we will proceed to business;" saying which, the couple parted.

In the store where Rainsfield entered were, besides sundry articles that were not strictly alimentary, the carcass of a sheep, suspended from one of the beams, and a bag of flour; or rather a bag that had contained flour, for the bag was suspended supinely by two ropes, with its mouth open; and on a sheet on the floor was heaped the flour it had contained. To this heap, after closing and locking the door, Rainsfield advanced; and, first taking a furtive glance around, to satisfy himself that he was unnoticed, he stooped down and deliberately mixed with it the arsenic that had been brought by Mr. Billing. He had performed this operation, and had just rebagged the flour, when Billing turned the handle of the door, at the sound of which Rainsfield started like a detected thief.

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At no time are the words of the immortal bard, "thus conscience doth make cowards of us all," more forcibly displayed than when an honourable or upright man steps from the straight path of honour and integrity to perform a despicable or criminal action. Thus Mr. Rainsfield could not quiet the chidings of his conscience, which did not disguise from him the enormity of the crime he was committing; and when he heard the step of his storekeeper at the door he felt the weight of contemplated guilt, and for some moments had not the power of articulation.

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Mr. Billing was just turning away, thinking his master was not in the building, when Mr. Rainsfield opened the door with a blush on his cheek, and a lie in his mouth, to support his first deception and subsequent interruption.

"I hardly heard you, Mr. Billing," said he, "when you tried the door, as I was busy, and I had locked it to prevent being disturbed. You see," he continued, as his confidential entered, "I have had a sheep killed for our purpose. This we will now inoculate with the strychnine you have procured; and we will send it out to the plains for the dogs to consume to-morrow; and we can continue the operation at frequent intervals until the animals disappear. The arsenic, I think, we may keep for the present, and see first how this acts. You will perceive I have removed all the stores into the house with the exception of this one bag of flour, which I discovered to be slightly damaged, so had it sifted. I was just packing it again as you came to the door, and being so much occupied I did not hear you. By the way," he repeated to himself, "I may as well close it up;" and turning to Billing, he resumed: "will you be good enough to step into the house and get me a needle and string?"

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Mr. Billing went for the required articles, and during his absence, Rainsfield removed the sheet on which the flour had been spread, and destroyed all traces of his labour; so that, upon Billing's return, the work, or that portion of it, was accomplished, and the bag was placed in an upright position against the wall.

The sheep was then removed from the beam, and the inside was well rubbed and besmeared with the poison; after which it was placed in its former position, and the outside submitted to a similar manipulation. This completed the pair left the store; the door was locked by the master, and the key taken away by him to prevent, as he said, the possibility of accidents.

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"Do you not think," suggested Mr. Billing, "we had better have the flour removed into the house?"

"Oh, no, it does not signify to-day," replied Rainsfield, "it will take no harm there until the morning, and we can have it removed then when we send the fellows up to the plains with the meat."

In the meantime Tom took his way to the blacks' camp, where he found a large number of the tribe collected; and all in apparent agitation. He at once perceived that some event was about to take place, and he conjectured that what was intended was a sortie on his brother's station. The men were mostly standing before the entrances to their "gunyahs," facing one another in the circular enclosure; and carrying on a united disputation at the highest pitch of their voices, all at one and the same time. They were supported occasionally by the opinions of the gins, which, though volunteered by those soft, if not fair creatures, were, as is usually the case even with their civilized contemporaries, totally unheeded by their lords; who continued their ratiocination with unabated ardour. Whatever was the nature of the discussion in progress, it ceased as Tom rode into the midst of the disputants; and to the sound of the human hubbub succeeded that of the canine, which, but for the reverence the blacks had for their dogs, Tom would have silenced by knocking the brains out of a score of the brutes. He, however, resisted the temptation, and made his way straight up to the abode of the chief, dismounted, fastened his horse to a tree, and advanced to the sable scoundrel with a smile; which was returned by a malignant scowl. This was not lost upon Tom, though he pretended not to have seen it; and, as he sat down upon a log in front of Dugingi, and lit his pipe from a fire-stick, he said:

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"Well, Dugingi, what are you up to now? I see you have got something in the wind."

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A grunt was the only answer he got to this query; but he pushed his enquiries and demanded: "Are you going to pay us another visit at Strawberry Hill, Dugingi?" Still he elicited no information, and began to be rather disgusted.

"Do you mean to answer me at all, you black thief?" he exclaimed; "see here! if you won't be civil and open your mouth beyond those grunts, I'll break your head." And he raised the heavy riding-whip he carried, as he spoke, in an attitude of menace that made the black shrink to the entrance of his gunyah.

"What's the matter, Mister Tom?" said Jemmy Davies, who came up at this juncture, "why are you 'riled?' Has Dugingi been saying anything to you?"

"No, Jemmy, it is because the wretch won't speak that I am put out. I have asked him what is the cause of this uproar; and what he is up to with the tribe; and the brute won't utter a word, but only answers me with grunts. I am of a good mind to treat him to a sound thrashing for his insolence; but you tell me, Jemmy, what you are after here?"

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"Nothing particular, sir," replied the black; "some of our fellows are kicking up a row, and they won't be quiet."

"Well, what are they kicking up the row about, Jemmy?"

"One feller said, that another feller hit the other feller's gin, because the gin beat the other feller's gin's piccanini."

"Well," said Tom, "that is a very lucid explanation of the subject of discussion in your conclave,

Jemmy; but I strongly suspect it is not strictly true. Now, tell me, were you not hatching some mischief against us?"

"No, sir, 'pon my honour," exclaimed Jemmy Davies, "we never thought of such a thing."

"Now, it's no use telling that to me," cried Tom, "I am confident you were; and I know you have been thinking of it for some time. Were you not talking about it in your last corroborree; and was not this talk to-day the continuation of the plot? You may as well confess it to me, for I know it all; you intend my brother some injury." [Pg 142]

"Well, sir," replied the black, "suppose we were talking about Mr. Rainsfield we would not hurt you."

"I am not at all afraid of your hurting me," exclaimed Tom; "for it's short work I'd make of a score of you, if you were to try any violence to me; but why annoy my brother?"

"You see, sir," replied Jemmy, "we all like you, because you are good to the black fellows; but your brother is bad to us, and the tribe hate him. They would not kill him because he never killed any of them; but they still hate him and take his rations."

"That's it!" said Tom; "it is just because you steal his rations that he is so severe on you; if you had not molested us, he would not have molested you; but we are obliged to keep you away, because you have made yourselves dangerous. Why don't you behave yourselves to us, the same as you do to the Fergusons? and we wouldn't prevent you coming to the station; but if you persist in stealing I am afraid my brother will some day be disposed to shoot some of you." [Pg 143]

"We don't interfere with Mr. Ferguson," replied Jemmy Davies, "because he is good to us; and I have told you the reason why we hate Mr. Rainsfield is because he is bad to us. I don't believe the tribe would ever like him now however good he would be."

"Will you just try and persuade them, Jemmy, to be a little more civil," said Tom, "and depend upon me to get you justice. It is of no use our always living like this; and you may be sure my brother will shoot some of you if you continue to steal. Tell me now the truth; are you thinking of robbing us again?"

"No, sir," replied the black, "don't you believe it. Some of them want to, and some do not; I don't; I will try and keep the others back." [Pg 144]

"That's right, Jemmy," exclaimed Tom, "exert yourself, for depend upon it it will be better for you, and the tribe too, to remain friendly to us."

Tom Rainsfield had some confidence in, not only the word of Jemmy Davies, but also in his influence with the tribe; and therefore believed the ingenuous story the black told of the animated discussion; his refusal to acquiesce in the meditated theft; and his desire to deter the others from its committal. He therefore felt relieved in his mind for the time being; and determined to impress upon his brother the necessity, for his own security, of adopting some lenient measures towards the blacks. In this train of thought, and accompanied by Jemmy Davies, he left the camp, and returned to the crossing-place of the river, where he parted with his companion, after obtaining a re-assurance from him that no outrage would be committed with his concurrence. [Pg 145]

Tom, after crossing the Gibson, and directing his steps homewards, fell in with William Ferguson, returning from Strawberry Hill, and was easily persuaded to accompany him and remain the night at Fern Vale; where, in the meantime, we will leave him to revert to Mr. Rainsfield and his expected visitors.

CHAPTER VII.

"Of darkness visible so much he lent,
As half to show, half veil the deep intent."

POPE.

"Man's inhumanity to man,
Makes countless thousands mourn."

BURNS.

After he left the store with Billing Mr. Rainsfield gave particular instructions that the flocks should be well watched; and he anxiously waited for the approach of night. When the family retired to rest he found some excuse to detain him in the sitting-room; and, wondering at the protracted stay of his brother, he paced the room with a disordered step and agitated mind. He desired to see Tom back, to hear his report, and see him retire to his bed; but he waited in vain; while the idea never occurred to him of the probability of his going over to the Fergusons. He, however, as the night grew on, extinguished the light in the room; and, the night being pitch dark, sat with the French light open, with his eyes and ears strained to their fullest distention to catch the appearance of any moving object, or any sound in the direction of the store. [Pg 147]

He had remained thus until past midnight when he thought he detected the sound of voices uttered in a low cadence; and he strained his auricular organs so as to endeavour to catch some convincing proof of the proximity of his victims. Again the same sound struck him. It must be the

voices of the blacks, thought he. "It is, by heaven! they are here," he mentally exclaimed, as their subdued conversation (which could plainly be distinguished in the still night air) was again heard. He was not long either before he had ocular demonstration of their approach; for round the corner of the store, he could discern, through the obscurity, the dusky form of a black stealthily and cautiously creeping.

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The vision, however, was only transitory, for in a moment Rainsfield lost sight of the figure, and believing that the fellow's mission might have been to steal up to the house, and reconnoitre while his confederates were effecting an entrance to the store, he all but closed the window; though he still kept his eyes and ears on the alert through the aperture. Again his ears caught a sound: "ah! the fellow's trying the door," he muttered; "perhaps you would like the key, my friends? However, I suppose you won't allow yourselves to be disappointed by a trifle of a lock; burst it open," he continued, "no one will hear you. Ah! there you are again! back to your companions, practised burglar! I suppose your confederates keep in the background, while you try the premises. You are quite safe; I'll guarantee you shan't be disturbed this time. Get in any way you like, but don't burn the place."

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Such were the mental ejaculations of the proprietor of Strawberry Hill, as he continued at the window of his sitting-room, holding open a leaf in each hand, and gazing with breathless attention at the quarter where the late apparition momentarily disappeared; and with intense anxiety did he continue to pierce the darkness, in the hope of witnessing a reappearance of the nocturnal visitant. Nor had he to wait long to be gratified; for presently a similar object showed itself at the point which was the focus of Rainsfield's gaze; and almost immediately after another, and another; and then the obscurely luminous passage was perfectly darkened with human forms.

This incident was not lost on Rainsfield; he saw at once that the blacks were determined to effect their purpose; and he secretly indulged in a fiendish gratulation at the pertinacity with which they were throwing themselves into his trap. "Ah!" said he, continuing his meditations, "you are in force are you? why, you must have your whole tribe with you. Well now, how are you going to manage your business? hark! surely that must be the door unlocked; yes! there the hinges creak! Well, you beauties, you have done that cleverly." So he continued to cogitate, and watch the progress of his scheme's effect, till the dark forms of the sable thieves could be discerned evidently treading on each other's heels, while they bore off their purloined prize. Desirous as he was to satisfy himself whether or not they had decamped with the poisoned meat and flour, he dared not venture out for fear that some of their number lurked about the station to cover the retreat of their friends; and not until he heard from the distance the call of the blacks vibrating in the bush did he consider himself safe to examine his own premises.

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He crept from his ambush with as much stealth as the thieves had approached his own property; his heart beating almost audibly, and his eyes glancing furtively around him, attempting to pierce the darkness; while he started at the sighing of the faintest breath; shrinking at the sound of his own footsteps, and conjuring the wildest phantasies in the midnight air. Conscience was at its work, and he felt already the hot blast of guilt searing his very soul.

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He approached the store; the door was open; he entered; the darkness seemed doubly dark, and nothing could be distinguished in the internal gloom. He mechanically went to the spot where he had left the bag of flour; groped with his hands about the wall and on the floor, and found it gone. He walked across the room, with his arms extended in such a manner as to come in contact with the suspended carcass if it had been there; but he found it gone also; and when he had satisfied himself upon that point, his arms dropt to his side, while he stood musing in the middle of the building.

"So they have robbed me again, have they?" he muttered; "well, they will have to answer for their own deaths; it is their own voluntary action." Conscience, however, refused to be silenced by such sophistry, and, as the homicide wrapt himself in his self-justification, startled him from his quietude by uttering in the still small voice, "Thou shalt not kill." The effect of the rebuke was but momentary, for the man argues: "I do not kill them, they kill themselves. Surely I may poison meat for the extermination of vermin; and how more securely can I keep it than under lock and key? Then if they steal it and eat it, and meet their death in consequence, surely no blame can be attached to me."

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"Thou shalt not kill," still urged the silent monitor; "thou knewest well the poisoned food would be stolen by the ignorant savages, and thou didst poison it for that purpose."

"But if the villains persisted in stealing what was poisoned," urged the guilty man, "they commit the crime of theft; and thereby evoke the punishment in the death which follows. The fact of its being poisoned involves no criminality on the part of the owner, because the property is surreptitiously acquired; thereby relieving him of any participation in their death by the fact of its means being obtained, not only without his sanction, but in violation of his precautions to preserve it. If," continued the mental disputant, "I had given them the meat intentionally to destroy them, then would I have been guilty; but having placed it in what I believed a perfect security, the blacks having voluntarily rushed upon their doom, am I to be blamed? Did not Achan, when he appropriated of the spoils of Jericho, meet with the just reward of his disobedience in his death?"

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"Thou shalt not kill," repeated conscience; "and God hateth false lips, 'he that speaketh lies shall perish.' Thou knewest the blacks would steal the meat, notwithstanding your boasted security of it; and, moreover, thou didst desire that they should. Their death will not be upon their own heads, notwithstanding that they meet it through the committal of a sin. Their sin they commit in

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ignorance, and God only shall judge them of it; thou takest their life knowingly, meanly, and cowardly, and God shall judge you for it. Achan met his death by the command of the omnipotent Judge, for the disobedience of the divine command; while your victims have no conception of their infringement of any law. Dost thou remember the judgments that fell upon David for the murder of Uriah? Your act is far more atrocious than his; for with him, the victim was one, and might have been said to have been through the fortunes of war; while your victims are many, and are murdered in a cold-blooded way, to screen you from the laws of your country, and the opinions of men. Heavy is the curse on him who sheddeth man's blood, and verily the curse of the Lord will smite thee, thou worker of iniquity. If thou desirest not their death hasten now after them, and prevent them from eating of the food."

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"They would not believe me if I told them it was poisoned," argued conscience's opponent, "but would simply imagine that I was endeavouring to recover my property."

"Offer them other for it, or tell them to try it first on their dogs," suggested conscience.

"I dare not show myself to them at all," replied the man; "I believe they would kill me if I did; besides, if they choose to poison themselves let them. It is no business of mine to prevent them; they have long been a source of annoyance to me, and no one can blame me for their death. No jury in the world would convict me of murder; then why should I fear? Is not self-preservation the first law of nature? and is not a man perfectly justified in adopting any measure to preserve his life and his property. If I am to be taxed with the death of these wretches, whose riddance from the earth will be an inestimable blessing to the district and civilisation, no one would be justified in killing an attempted assassin or a burglar; and a landowner, who sets spring-guns for the protection of his preserves, becomes a murderer if his instruments of destruction take effect. In fact the law itself has no right to exercise its jurisdiction in the disposal of life; and the execution of a condemned criminal is nothing more than a forensic murder. But why need I allow my morbid fancies or sympathetic feelings to overcome justice and my own judgment, or frighten me into a belief that I am committing a sin? No! if it be necessary, I will blazon the matter to the world, and let my fellow-men judge me; and I am convinced I will be exonerated from all criminality."

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Conscience was stifled for the time; and Rainsfield left the store, taking care to leave the place precisely as it was vacated by the blacks; and as the first gray streaks rose above the horizon, heralding Aurora's approach, he returned to the house as cautiously as he left it; entering by the open window of the sitting-room, and seeking his bed to sleep the troubled sleep of a disquieted mind.

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At an early hour of the morning, as Mr. Billing resumed his daily vocations, the robbery on the store was discovered; and the intelligence was speedily communicated by that individual to his master, who affected the utmost surprise at the theft, and the deepest concern at the inevitable fate of the wretched aborigines. "Poor creatures," he exclaimed, "I would not have cared for the loss of the rations; but to think that the poor deluded beings are unconsciously the instruments of their own deaths, through the gratification of their own cupidity, is truly melancholy. I am vexed at myself for leaving the meat in the store, for now I see it was the most likely place where it would be molested. I would give anything to save them; what can be done, Mr. Billing? can they be warned of their danger before it is too late? I would not for worlds that the poor wretches should be poisoned, even though it were through the consumption of stolen food, and, notwithstanding the thorn they have been in my side; I wish Tom were here. Speak, Mr. Billing, what can be done?"

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Shall we say that this philanthropic consideration for the poor ignorant blacks was the spontaneous ebullition of a genuine contrition; or a mere verbose eruption of assumed sympathy, studied and expressed with the view of disarming suspicion of the sheep being intentionally poisoned and placed in the store as a trap? Without wishing to be harsh or uncharitable, we must conscientiously express our fears that the latter was the case; and that Rainsfield's apparent sorrow for the fate of his victims was a predetermined link of his scheme.

"I fear nothing can be done, sir," replied Mr. Billing to the query of his master; "they have evidently been possessed of their booty, sir, some hours; and, doubtless, by this time it is consumed. I cannot venture, sir, to suggest any remedy; and would merely recommend that until we are aware, sir, of the extent of the evil, you would not allow, sir, the circumstance to prey too much on your mind."

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"Do you not think, my dear sir," said Rainsfield, "some good might be done by sending some one over to warn them of their danger?"

Instant visions of his late journey occurred to the mind of Mr. Billing; and when he hastily replied, "no, sir, I really think it can be of no service," he might have been under the impression that it was the intention of his master to send him as the warning messenger he alluded to. "I assure you, sir," he repeated, "it can be of no use; for as I have already stated, sir, I believe that ere this the whole of the provisions have been consumed."

"But tell me, Billing," enquired the suddenly created philanthropist, "how was the store entered? because I imagined, that having locked it, it was perfectly secure."

"It appeared, sir," replied Mr. Billing, "that the cunning scoundrels, when they discovered the door to be secure, managed, sir, to wrench one of the slabs out of the back; and from the inside, after effecting an entrance by that means, they opened the door, sir, for their greater convenience, and decamped; performing the whole so noiselessly, sir, that even I who was in their vicinity was not disturbed. And, sir, both Mrs. Billing and myself are extremely uneasy in

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our rest. I can assure you, sir, the slightest noise is likely to arouse either of us. I remember on one occasion, sir (if you will permit me to make an observation on my private experience?), before my evil genius prompted me to break up, sir, my pleasant and comfortable little home in the mother country, to seek my fortunes, sir, in this inhospitable land, I resided, as I believe I have already informed you, sir, in the genteel suburban neighbourhood of Brixton. My means then, sir, enabled me to possess some of the luxuries of life, of which a cheerful and comfortable home, sir, I believe to be not the least. However, upon one occasion, sir, when Mrs. Billing and I had retired to rest; for we were early people, Mr. Rainsfield, very early people and had a strong objection to late hours; believing, sir, that they destroy the constitution, without imparting any satisfaction commensurate to the loss. Well, sir, as I observed, we had retired early to rest one evening; and the reigning stillness of the house, sir, was hardly broken by the musical voice of my wife. I will do her the justice to remark, sir, that she is a sensible woman, a very sensible woman, sir; notwithstanding that she was treating me on that occasion, to a little dissertation on her system of housekeeping; though I would have you distinctly to understand, sir, not in a style of eloquence peculiar to that good lady, Mrs. Caudle. That, Mr. Rainsfield, is not one of my wife's idiosyncrasies; but she prided herself upon her domestic economy, and she was making a voluntary explanation of her expenditure; while I was dozing under the influence of her soporific lullaby. My spirit would have speedily fled to the land of dreams had not my sense of hearing, sir, detected a sound that was inimical to our peace, and I started erect in my bed, sir, with my forefinger raised to Mrs. B. to enjoin silence; while I listened with an ardent attention.

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"What on earth is the matter, James?" exclaimed my wife, sir, 'you quite frightened me; what made you start in such an extraordinary manner.'

"Don't you hear anything, my love?" replied I; 'can't your quick ear detect sounds that portend to an unpleasant visitation?'

"No,' she replied, sir, 'what do you mean, James? what sounds?'

"The sounds of the housebreaker,' I replied, 'attempting to violate the sanctity of our dwelling. Are you so deaf, my love,' I said, 'that you cannot hear the regular grating of a saw at work on some of our doors or shutters?'

"I can certainly hear some sound,' she replied, 'but it is only the gnawing of a rat, or a mouse in the wainscot of the room; rest your mind easy, James,' she continued, 'no thieves would think it worth their while to molest us.'

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"I am not so sure of that, my dear,' I replied; 'but, even if I were, do you imagine that I would lie dormantly in my bed (while I was convinced some nocturnal villain was attempting to enter my premises), perhaps to see the wife of my bosom murdered in cold blood before my very eyes, and possibly have my own throat cut afterwards to complete the tragedy?'

"My apprehensions were not entertained by my wife, sir, for she urged me to lie down. 'Do not frighten yourself at nothing,' she exclaimed, 'and alarm me so at your dreadful imageries; allow me to convince you it is all fancy; besides if thieves tried to get in, all the places are too well secured for them to gain an entrance.'

"Ah, my wife!' said I, 'there you show your inexperience; a practised housebreaker would not be deterred by the presence of bars, bolts, or locks; the greater the supposed security, the greater are the chances of his success; besides while my suspicions are aroused, I could not rest until I had satisfied myself that they are groundless, and that is speedily done. So I am determined to see;' with which I got out of bed, and with many cautions from my wife, in the event of my discovering any thieves, not to venture into danger or to allow myself, sir, in my indignation, or courage, to be exposed to either the ruffians or the night air, I hastily threw some clothes over me to guard against the risk of catching cold; for I was always susceptible to cold, sir. I quietly crept down stairs, sir, and the sound that greeted my ears distinctly proclaimed the fact that the thieves, sir, were at their nefarious work. When I reached the passage I perceived, sir, they were not at the front door; so, hastily entering the parlour and convincing myself, sir, that they were not there, I seized a poker for my personal protection, and descended, sir, towards the basement of the house. As I turned for this purpose, sir, the sound which had momentarily ceased, now recommenced, and I could detect it, sir, almost in my very presence. It was at a door leading into our garden and back premises, and in the indistinct light of the spot, I had almost said total darkness, sir, I perceived a saw at work cutting through the panel of the door. It was being industriously plied, sir, by some one on the outside, and at the time of my arrival, sir, had almost completed its work of extracting a piece sufficiently large to allow a man's arm to be thrust through, by which means I imagine, sir, the operator intended to unfasten the door. However, sir, the instrument, which I discovered was of a tender description, I snapped asunder with one blow, sir, of the weapon I held in my hand; and, with as truculent a voice as I could assume, informed my visitors, sir, that unless they instantly decamped, I would fire on them. My interruption to their proceedings, sir, was hailed with a volley of combined expletives; after the utterance of which, sir, I had the satisfaction of distinctly hearing the sounds of their retreating footsteps, and could see from one of my back windows, to which I had removed to prospect, two ill-favoured looking rascals clambering over the garden wall. So, sir, if it had not been for my quickness of hearing on that occasion, I should of a certainty have been robbed, and most probably murdered."

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"You certainly made a happy escape, Mr. Billing," said Rainsfield, after listening, or appearing to listen, to this episode in the history of his storekeeper; "but I regret your hearing did not render you much service on this occasion, and surely the blacks, to have taken out one of the slabs in the store, must have made some considerable noise."

"No, Mr. Rainsfield," replied the bland *employé*, "I assure you, sir, there could have been no noise; otherwise, sir, with my keen hearing, I would of a certainty have been disturbed; but their movements, sir, are like cats, and I defy any one, I say, sir, any one, to hear them, even were an individual awake, and as close to them as I was when sleeping."

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Rainsfield smiled, possibly at the conceit of the little man, but at the same time, probably, at his knowledge to the contrary; however, it was not his object, either to quarrel with Billing, or to enlighten him, so he remarked:

"I think you had better go over to the Fergusons, Mr. Billing, and see if Tom is there; I imagine he is; and explain the circumstances to him, and tell him I would like him to see what effect the unhappy event has had at the camp. I think it is better that you should go in preference to any of the men, as the circumstances are better known to you. You can either ride over, or if you prefer it, which possibly you may, you can take the ration cart; and I have only to entreat you to use as much speed as possible. I am desirous of disabusing the minds of the blacks (if any, indeed, survive) of any intentional harm to them being meditated by me; and I am aware no one could better undertake such a mission than my brother."

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Mr. Billing readily agreed to visit Fern Vale, the more so, perhaps, as he imagined by offering any objection he might be required to perform a less agreeable journey. So as he was not to undergo another edition of the punishment of the Alma trip, he readily agreed, and was, therefore, speedily on his way to Fern Vale, to look for Tom Rainsfield.

After Billing's departure, Mr. Rainsfield again visited the store, to witness in daylight the success of his trap; and he contemplated the gap in the wall, and the absence of the flour and meat with a degree of complacency and satisfaction that would almost have impressed a beholder with a belief that he was inwardly comforting himself with the meditation of a recently performed charitable action.

"Well, I begin to think," said he to himself, "that my plans have been executed pretty cleverly. Everybody will believe that the blackguards have been poisoned by mistake; and their own mistake too. So that no blame can be attached to me; and I shall have the immense advantage of having effectually stopped their depredations. I wonder what my friend John Ferguson will do for his *protégés*? will he pine for them? Perhaps he may recriminate me for my treatment of him, and try to accuse me of their murder; but he can't, and he dare not. The law will protect me; and if he dares to breathe one word against my name he shall rue the day he uttered it. I hate that young viper as intensely as formerly I liked him. He has thwarted me in more ways than one; he dares to oppose Smithers in his suit with Eleanor, and to show his contempt for me by carrying on his intrigue under my very eyes, and in my own house too. But he shall not have her; so long as there is breath in my body I will not permit it, in fact I cannot; she must be Smithers', and, by heaven! she shall. He has dared to show fight after I cautioned him; the villain! and then to inflame those infernal blacks against me; the vile dog! he shall smart for it. His lively blacks have already got their deserts; and, I have no doubt, by this time are rotting on their own ground."

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"Thou shalt not kill," suggested conscience.

"Oh, bah!" exclaimed the culprit, "what a fool I am, to be continually chiding myself for the fate of these wretches. They die by their own act, so let their death be answered for by themselves;" saying, or rather thinking which, the conscience-stricken man turned on his heel and left the store.

In the meantime let us retrospect for a few hours, and trace the movements and proceedings at the camp. When Jemmy Davis left Tom Rainsfield at the crossing-place, he returned to the camp, where the discussion, interrupted by Tom's arrival, was renewed with increased force. The excitement of the disputants ran so high that any one unacquainted with the verbose inanition of such argumentary proceedings, and the natural antipathy of the blacks to bellicosity, would have imagined that the termination of the meeting would have been of a tragical character. However, it ended, as all such meetings usually do with them, viz., in words; and, towards midnight, the animated disputants sank under the fatigue of their disquisition, and in a short time all was hushed.

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As the embers of the fires gave a fitful glare on the now silenced camp a head might have been seen protruding from the aperture of one of the gunyahs; and, after surveying the scene for some time, and putting its ear to the ground to catch, if possible, any sound that would denote watchfulness on the part of the tribe, it, or rather the body to which it belonged, crept from the habitation in that posture designated in nursery parlance "all fours." With spear in hand it passed round to the back; where the individual assumed a more upright position, though he still crept under the shade of the gunyahs. Then lightly striking in succession the bark structures with his spear as he went along he was joined by about twenty men; whose appearance was so sudden that they almost appeared to have been called into instantaneous existence by the potent wand of the conjurer.

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This was Dugingi and a select band of confederates, his supporters in the late discussion; and they moved away from the camp, to carry out their predetermined plot of robbing the store of the Strawberry Hill station. The opposition to the scheme had been strenuous; and the disapproving blacks, headed by Jemmy Davies, being the most numerous and loud in their condemnation of the project, had retired, fully convinced that the idea had been abandoned by Dugingi and his party. But they had been deceived, for Dugingi was only quieted, not dissuaded; and the present secret expedition was the result of the defeat on his motion for a general movement. He was determined, in his own mind, to rob the premises of Mr. Rainsfield; and, if he could not obtain the

concurrence of his tribe, he was resolved to perform it simply with the assistance of some of his own party. [Pg 173]

We have already seen how he affected an entrance to the store; so we need not trouble our readers by tracing his movements while perpetrating the theft. Suffice it to say, that at an early hour in the morning, the party returned to the camp with all the rations they could lay their hands upon in the store; and which, we have already noticed, consisted of the carcass of a sheep and a bag of flour.

Their first proceeding, then, was to heap up their fires; on which they threw their meat to roast, and then set the gins to work with the flour to make "damper." These preparations soon aroused the entire camp, who were in a moment alive and stirring. At the first glance Jemmy Davies detected the state of affairs; and saw that he had been outwitted by Dugingi; who, while he (Jemmy) and his party slept, had committed the theft, and were now preparing to feast on the spoil. He was grieved at the sight; because he had given his word to Tom Rainsfield that he would prevent any outrage if possible, and he had a sincere desire to pacify his countrymen in their animosity towards Mr. Rainsfield. He therefore cautioned his partizans against tasting the food; and, in the language of his tribe, addressed them in the following words: [Pg 174]

"My brothers—our brother Dugingi has behaved bad to us; and bad to the white fellow. Bad to us, because he went away to the white fellows' 'humpey,' when we wanted him not to go, and when, if we had known him going, we would have prevented him; and bad to the white fellows because he steals his 'rations.' The white fellow is very strong, and very brave; and has plenty of horses and guns; and he will take revenge on the black fellow. Dugingi steals the white fellow's rations, and the white fellow thinks all the Nungar tribe steals it, and he will hate all the Nungar tribe. I have been to the great country where the white fellows 'sit down.' Our fathers thought once that when the black fellow dies he afterwards 'jump up white fellow;' but white fellows come a 'long way more farther' than big waters, and have gunyahs higher than the tall bunya tree; and with very many humpies in them. Some of them would hold all the Nungar tribe. Now, my brothers, do you think we can fight against the white fellows? The white fellows will fight us, if we steal their rations; and we cannot fight them, for they must kill us if we do. Now, the white fellow *will* fight us, for Dugingi has stolen his rations; he has brought upon us this trouble; for he did it when we wished him not to; and the white fellow will think all the Nungar black fellows did it. [Pg 175]

"Now this is what I say. I have been telling the white fellow Tom Rainsfield, that we would not steal from his brother; and I've been telling him that we want to live, and we want to be friends with him and his brother, as we are friends with the white fellow Ferguson and his brother. And the white fellow Tom Rainsfield says he is friends with us. Now what do you think he will say when he finds the black fellow has been stealing his rations? He will say all black fellows are rogues, and all black fellows liars; and he will no longer be our friend. But, my brothers, you take not the food from Dugingi that he has stolen from the white fellow. Touch it not; but let him and his friends eat it if they will, and let them give it to their gins if they will; and may it choke them, and may they die. But I will go to the white fellows, and will tell them myself, that Dugingi and his friends did steal the rations, and not the Nungar tribe; so we, my brothers, will be friends with the white fellows." [Pg 176]

At the conclusion of this address Jemmy Davies left the thieves in possession of their prize, and was followed by the majority of his supporters; notwithstanding that the savoury smell of the roasting meat was particularly grateful to their olfactory nerves, and they were sadly tempted to remain and partake.

Dugingi little heeded the harangue of his opponent, which was greeted with a shout of derision from the whole of the foraging party; who continued with their culinary operations in the highest possible state of hilarious loquacity; rending the air with their shouts, and making the bush reverberate with their laughter. [Pg 177]

The sheep was speedily so far cooked as to serve their purposes, and tearing it to pieces amongst them they were soon busily engaged in the process of mastication. The "damper" was devoured with equal avidity; and when they had all eaten to satiety, as the sun rose resplendent to walk his diurnal course, they stretched themselves to sleep with the complacency of satisfied gormands.

No such comfort, however, was allowed them. First one, and then another, became restless; a gnawing pain devoured their stomachs; an insatiable thirst consumed them; and then the first painful wail was heard that proclaimed the poison at its work. The wail increased; the agonies of the victims became insufferable; and, in their anguish and suffering, many rushed to the river to drink their last draught; while others threw themselves into the fires or on the ground, gnashing their teeth and biting the earth in the intensity of their torments. All now bemoaned their fate, and cursed their participation in what they plainly saw was their funeral feast. [Pg 178]

Jemmy Davies calmly, though sorrowfully, gazed upon the scene. He imagined the cause of his countrymen's sufferings, for he had, in the days of his civilisation, seen his master poison meat for the native dogs, and he had seen them die from the effects of the poison. He therefore understood its mysterious workings, and at once detected its operations in the suffering beings before him. Not so his countrymen; they imagined their fate was produced by his curse; believing that he possessed the secret power of working their death by some spells or occult influence he had acquired from the whites; and they therefore crouched before him and implored his relief. But he, poor semi-savage, could do nothing for them, and he knew they must die. The melancholy scene before him overcame his fortitude, and he burst into tears as he exclaimed: [Pg 179]

"I can't help you, my brothers; I do not kill you, it is the white fellow that kills you for stealing his

rations. He has made his meat to kill you because you eat it; if you had not eaten it you would have lived."

CHAPTER VIII.

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"In Lybian groves, where damned rites are done,
That bathe the rocks in blood, and veil the sun."

CAMPBELL.

As the residents of Fern Vale early bestirred themselves on this eventful morning their astonishment was great at the continued altercations which seemed to agitate the black's camp. None of the party had ever heard them continue their discussions so unceasingly; and the Fergusons and their friends were disposed to think that it presaged some evil. They therefore proposed, that their intended visit for that day should be made at once, so that they might learn the cause of the strange agitation; and acting on this decision the four horsemen were speedily mounted and on their way to the "flats."

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They had reached the bank of the river, and were about entering the water to cross, when they were stopped by hearing a voice in their rear calling upon Tom Rainsfield. He instantly turned towards the new comer, whose appearance greatly surprised him, and anxiously demanded of him the nature of his message. This was given in as few words as Mr. Billing's habitual sinuosity of expression could devise utterance; and hastily desiring the storekeeper to remain where he was with the cart until his (Tom's) return from the camp, he joined his friends and rode through the ford.

"What is the matter with you, Tom?" said William as they passed through the water, "you seem quite nervous and agitated? Has Billing brought you any news that has annoyed you?"

"He has indeed, my dear fellow," replied Tom, "brought me news that overwhelms me. How my brother will be able to reconcile the act to his conscience I do not know; when I, who, as God knows, had no participation in it, feel the weight of murder on my soul."

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"Murder!" exclaimed his friends. "What on earth do you mean Tom? you're surely raving! How murder? explain yourself," said John.

"I wish to God I was raving," replied he; "that my fears were only a fantasy of the mind; or that that prating idiot Billing had merely dreamed the story he has just now told me. But it seems too substantial; all the circumstances that have transpired, and those that are at this very time transpiring, lead to prove it. There! hear you that wail? that is the death-cry of scores of those wretched blacks. Hark! there it is again; does not that cry rise up to heaven? and will not our family there be judged for this? If I could but think it were accidental I would be satisfied; though I fear, I fear, oh, horrid thought! murdered by my brother."

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"Calm yourself, my dear sir," said the minister, who had with deep sorrow been witnessing the outpourings of his companion's grief. "Though you have not mentioned to us the nature of the communication received through the messenger from your home, we would infer from your remarks that some dreadful calamity has come upon this tribe through the agency of your brother; whom, God forbid that you should condemn, without being thoroughly convinced of his guilt. It affords us consolation to hear you express only a fear that your brother has not acted up to the precepts of his Maker, and the dictates of his conscience. I sincerely trust, as I believe, that your fears are groundless, and that you over-estimate the criminality, if any criminality exist. I pray you dispel any such belief from your mind, until at least you have indubitable proof of your brother's crime; and, in the meantime, be charitably disposed towards him, for you may be doing him an injustice by your harsh suspicions. It is true we are unacquainted with the circumstances which arouse them, but we sincerely trust you will find you have been deceived."

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"I would readily, oh! I long to believe," exclaimed Tom Rainsfield, "that it was unintentional; but my heart tells me there has been duplicity. I feel a portion of the mental load, consequent on crime, attached to me; for only the night before I pledged my word to those who may be now in the convulsive agonies of death that I would befriend them and bring about a reconciliation with my brother. I know his nature well; he is hasty and impetuous; and, though kind-hearted and generous, he is severe and even cruel where his passions are aroused; so I fear the worst. But I will tell you the cause of these people's wails. It appears that my brother, after I had left the station yesterday, poisoned a sheep for the purpose, he said, of destroying the native dogs on the station. That sheep was left in the store during the night, when it was stolen by the blacks, who have, no doubt ere this, feasted on it, and are meeting their fate in a violent death. Now, the circumstances which I am surprised at, and deprecate, are these:—Leaving the poisoned meat in a place above all others where, if the blacks intended to visit us, they would go first; sending Billing clandestinely into Alma for the poison; and having all the stores removed into the house during his absence, leaving nothing in it but the poisoned meat, and a bag of flour, in the full expectation, I am afraid, that the blacks were going to rob us. But the most extraordinary part of my brother's conduct is, that he kept me in entire ignorance of Billing's journey, which in itself was unusual, for he never before left the station on any pretence; and the next incongruity was this crusade against the dingos, which have given us no annoyance for some time past. Many smaller events now flash across my mind, which tend to stimulate my fears; however, as you

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kindly remark, I ought not to judge too harshly of my brother; and I will try, until I see more definite cause for my alarms, to believe him innocent of any intentional murder. But listen to those poor wretches; are not their cries piteous?"

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Truly they were; and as the shrieks and howls of the victims pierced the ears of the quartette, as they crossed the river and entered the scrub, all their feelings of compassion were aroused; and they accelerated their speed, hoping to be of assistance, where no human efforts could avail.

The picture that presented itself to their astonished vision, as they emerged from the mazy labyrinths of the scrub into the area of the camp, was fearfully sickening and revolting. Scattered on the ground, in indescribable postures and contortions, were writhing bodies of men women and children, giving vent to cries that would have melted a heart of stone; anon starting from their recumbent position, to stand erect in the freshness of the morning breeze, only to enjoy a momentary respite; and then flinging their arms wildly in the air with an agonizing shout, to fall again prostrate to the earth, and yield, with a convulsive shudder, their spirits to their Maker.

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Our party had gazed upon this scene for some minutes ere the miserable objects before them noticed their presence; the extent of their sufferings absorbing all their faculties, and our friends remained unnoticed or unheeded spectators of the dire destruction working around them. However, they were at last perceived; and, before they could devise the meaning, many of the suffering objects crawled to their feet, and with imploring looks and gestures, sought relief from that death which they imagined was the result of some mysterious agency caused by the will of the white man. The malady had reached its exacerbation; and the miserable sufferers, as they prostrated themselves at the feet of their white-skinned brethren, sank in groups to rise no more. The picture was more than affecting (even if such existed) to natures possessed of no spark of human feeling; while to Tom its contemplation was fearful, and he turned from the spot to conceal his emotion.

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Mr. Wigton, recovering from a momentary abstraction into which he had been cast by sorrows of the event, addressed to the sufferers in their own language words of commiseration and comfort. He did not, however, disguise from them their condition; but told them they would not live, for that they had eaten of that which destroyed life, even the white man's life; and that no white man could help them.

"Then why did the white man kill us?" they piteously asked.

"My brothers," replied the messenger of peace, "the white man made the food for the dingos which kill his sheep, and your brothers did steal the food, and did eat it, and will die; but the white man is sorry that you eat it, and is sorry that you die. We would all save you if we could, but we can't; and, my poor brothers, we can only ask the great Spirit in the skies to look down upon you and save you if He will. He is a good and great Spirit and could save you, if you would be His children and His brothers; He loves even the black fellow, if the black fellow will love Him; and He knows all about the black fellow, what the black fellow likes, and does, and thinks. He lived a long time ago down on the ground with us, and told us all these things, and He now lives in the skies, and sees all that the black fellows do. He saw the black fellows last night steal the food, and He was very angry with them; but He would forgive, even as the white man forgives them, if they would be sorry for doing bad things, and would do them no more, but love the great Spirit. But the great Spirit says some of you have been very bad, and that you will not love Him; and so you must die. But if you will love him, He will save some of you, even some of you that have eaten the white man's food."

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The wail that followed this *petite* sermon of Mr. Wigton was the death knell of many; while the preacher himself was so overcome by the horrors of the scene that he had not perceived the approach of a ferocious black, who, leaping over the bodies of the dead and dying, advanced to within a few feet of him. This being confronted him in a menacing attitude almost face to face, and held a spear poised in his uplifted hand ready to bury it in the heart of the clergyman whenever he should so determine.

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He was a tall athletic black, of good make, and, for an aboriginal, considerable muscular development; he had a determined and ferocious aspect; his eyes were blood-shot and swollen; his nostrils were dilated, while they exuded a fetid secretion horribly offensive. He foamed at his mouth, and the sinews and muscles of his face contracting spasmodically under the influence of the agonies caused by the poison he had taken, he presented a most hideous spectacle. Instantly upon confronting the clergyman, he accosted him thus:

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"You not know me, white man? I am Barwang; brother belonging to Dugingi, and he is dead. The white fellow kill him, and kill plenty of black fellow: but I live. I not die, though very sick. I live to kill all white fellows. You like to see black fellow die: you think black fellow cannot kill white fellow, you shall see." He stretched his arm with the poised weapon to pierce the heart of Mr. Wigton; but just at that moment, when the spear was leaving the fingers of Barwang, it was suddenly snatched from his grasp by a black, who sprang from some covert, and, passing behind his countryman with a bound, deprived him of the offensive weapon; and stood in his turn with it balanced towards the frustrated homicide. At the same moment Tom Rainsfield, who had witnessed the danger of Mr. Wigton, leapt forward to protect him with his person, though the opportune act of the friendly black rendered such unnecessary; while Barwang, thus seeing himself assailed on both sides, made good his retreat.

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"Thank you, Jemmy Davies," said Tom, "that was nobly done, and an act I will not forget. I have been looking out for you ever since I have been in the camp, but have never seen you until this moment. At last I began to fear that you had fallen a victim to this dreadful malady, but am

pleased to see that you at least have escaped. This has been a fearful business, Jemmy, and it has given me much sorrow; from what I told you last night, and from what you told me, I thought we would have been able to have established a friendship between your tribe and ourselves, and I felt perfectly satisfied that our hostilities were at an end. I did not go home last night, Jemmy (perhaps if I had I might have prevented the robbery, and averted the fate of so many of your tribe); and this morning my brother sent over to tell me that the black fellows had robbed his store, and taken away a sheep that he had poisoned for the native dogs. So you see, Jemmy, your tribe came by their death by persisting in stealing our goods. Many would say that they merit their fate, but I, Jemmy, am very very sorry, and would have given anything I am possessed of to have prevented it."

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"I believe you, Mr. Tom," replied the black. "I know you are a good friend to the black fellow, and would not do him any hurt; but Dugingi and his friends behaved bad to us, and to you, and have died, and it is well. They left the camp in the night, after promising me and my friends that they would not steal any more from your brother; and we went to sleep, believing them that they would not go. But they did go, and stole the meat and the flour, and the first that I knew of it was, in the morning, hearing them make a noise as they were roasting it. I saw at once what they had done, and spoke to all the tribe. I told them they would never live in their country if they stole from the white fellow, because the white fellow was strong and would kill them; and that it was better to be friends with the white fellow and live. But the friends of Dugingi would not hear me, and they did eat; but all my friends, that wished to be friends with the white fellow, would not eat it, and I told them they were right, for the food would do them no good. But Dugingi laughed at me, and roasted the meat and made damper with the flour; and he and his brothers and friends eat the meat, and they gave the damper to their gins and piccaninies. They all died, except Barwang and two or three more, who quarrelled over their shares, and had it eaten by the others. So they have not died because they did not get enough to kill them. If they had seen you alone they would have tried to kill you; and it was because I saw Barwang coming to you that I watched him and took his spear. He won't stop with us now, he will be too frightened, and will go with his friends to the tribe in the mountains."

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"Did you say," asked Tom, "that the gins and piccaninies only eat the damper? did they not get any of the meat? Surely they did not die by only eating the damper?"

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"Yes, Mr. Tom," replied the black, "only damper, and they died too. The damper and meat were both poison together; the black fellows eat the meat and they died, and the gins and piccaninies eat the damper and they died."

A cloud came over the brow of Tom Rainsfield as he heard this. "As I dreaded!" he muttered to himself. "I would almost have given my life, Jemmy, to have prevented this; but it is done, and it cannot be remedied. The only satisfaction I feel is that you were wise, Jemmy, and would not let yourself or your friends taste the poison, thus saving yourself and them. I will stop with you now a little while, and see what I can do for you; but wait;" and turning to his friends he said to them: "I will remain here with Jemmy Davies for some hours, but I need not detain you. Leave me here, and return home; and if you will merely mention to Billing what you have seen, that will be sufficient for him to communicate to his master."

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"William was going over to your place this morning," replied John, "and he may as well depart at once; but for ourselves, I will remain with you, and I have no doubt it is the intention of Mr. Wigton to do the same."

The latter gentleman having expressed his determination to wait at the camp William was dispatched to join Mr. Billing, to whom he was to communicate the tidings of death, and then proceed to Strawberry Hill to take home his sister.

The three whites, accompanied by their black friend, now walked through the camp; and for the first time saw the extent of the devastation. It was now stilled. Bodies lay scattered in every direction, while no strife or contention now agitated their minds. It appeared as if the destroying angel had spread his arm over the devoted tribe, and hushed their voices for ever; for death had done his work with an effectual hand; and though only a portion had suffered, the rest, from a fear to face the grim tyrant in the majesty of his presence, lay concealed within the precincts of their own habitations.

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When we stand by the couch that supports the frame of some dear friend or relative, while the spirit wafts itself from its earthly shrine to that ethereal haven of its rest where it "beacon's from the abode where the eternal are;" and when the slightest utterance of grief is suppressed in the solemn silence that we maintain to catch the last breath of the departing loved one: and when that soul is fled, and we gaze on the placid features, and fear ourselves to breathe lest we should disturb the sleep of the quiescent and unconscious clay, and recall its spirit to a renewal of its earthly trials: when we visit the scene of some mighty conflict (sombred and silenced by the shades of night), where the powers militant have exhausted their strength, and left their best blood and blossom of their countries to bleach upon the battle plain: when we walk through the desolate streets of an infected city, where pestilence has cut off the first-born in every family, and where no sound is heard save the faint cries of the dying, or the distant rumbling of mortals' last mundane vehicle: wherever, in fact, and whenever we gaze upon scenes where the grave reigns paramount, then we feel the true force of the expression "the stillness of death prevailed." And as Tom Rainsfield and his party threaded the corpses of young and old, men, women, and children, they felt the awfulness of the scene, and were too much absorbed with their own thoughts, to break a silence that was a mutual comfort and respite.

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"Here is some of the damper, sir," said Jemmy Davies, as he pointed to the lifeless form of a gin,

with a large piece in her hand, clutched as in the agony of death. "You see, sir, she has been eating that, and it has killed her; for the black fellows themselves eat all the meat."

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What the feelings of Tom were, when he stooped to release the pernicious food from the grasp of the woman, we cannot describe; but sorrow was depicted in his countenance, and his strong manly features were disturbed by the force of his mental sufferings. He silently broke off a small piece from the lump; and, kindling a flame from the embers of one of the fast dying fires, burnt it to endeavour to detect the presence of arsenic by its exhalation of a garlic odour. Not satisfying himself by this test, he put the remains into his pocket while he said to the black, "I will take this with me, Jemmy, and see if it contains any poison; but I trust to God you are mistaken, and that these poor deluded wretches have at least in this eaten wholesome food. "Oh, harrowing thought!" he exclaimed, "to think that my brother should have been the witting instrument of this people's destruction."

"By this," said Mr. Wigton, "it would certainly appear strange; but we must not deprecate your brother's conduct on mere suspicion. You know the Scriptures tell us that we are to 'judge not lest we also be judged;' and also that vengeance rests with the Almighty. If your brother has committed this great wickedness and sinned against his God, let his Maker be his judge, and his own conscience his scourge; for 'cursed are they who worketh iniquity,' and 'the judgment of the Lord overtaketh the evil-doers,' even in this life; while in the next, 'the wages of sin is death.' He may escape the punishment of a human judicature, but he can never wholly satisfy the still small voice of conscience, nor at all escape the high tribunal of his Maker. When the last trump of the archangel shall summon him before the 'great white throne,' to give an account of the deeds done in the body, then shall the true nature of this action be known, whether it was the result of a mere inadvertency, or the premeditated plan of murder. In the meantime, with all sincerity, I pray God that it may be the former; and that the soul of your brother may not be inscribed with the guilt of so diabolical a crime as the destruction of so many of his fellow-creatures. It is but right that all justice should be given him; and therefore, in the first place, I think you are correct in determining whether or not the flour contains poison, as surmised by Jemmy Davies. If it does, submit the fact to your brother for explanation, and afford him an opportunity (if it be possible) of exculpating himself."

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"I agree with you perfectly, Mr. Wigton," replied Tom; "let the Almighty and my brother's conscience be his judges, if he has committed this crime. But I feel for these poor blacks, the more that I have endeavoured to bring about a reconciliation, and only last night pledged myself to befriend them."

"I know and all my friends know, Mister Tom," exclaimed Jemmy Davies, "that you would not do us any harm, and we all like you; yet most of our tribe hate your brother for this, though Dugingi did steal the meat, and they did not want him to. I am not angry with your brother, but my friends are; and I am afraid they never will like him. You will not be troubled any more with us, for my friends will never steal from your brother; but they will always be frightened to take anything from him as friends."

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"I am exceedingly sorry to hear you say that," said Tom, "as I had hoped, even out of this catastrophe, some good might have resulted. I had thought that since the removal of our implacable opponent we could have lived on terms of amity with your tribe; and I yet hope to accomplish that aim. However, in the meantime, let us see what can be done with the bodies."

"If you will permit me to make a suggestion," said John Ferguson, "you will let me go home, and get one or two of our men with spades, that we may dig one grave for the whole of the bodies."

"No, Mr. Ferguson," replied Jemmy Davies. "My tribe would not like them buried that way; they would rather do it their own way, thank you. We will bury them here in the camp, and then leave it for ever. We will bury them all to-day, and then good-bye. You had better not stop Mr. Ferguson and Mr. Tom; leave us now, and we'll say good-bye."

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"My friend! permit us to stay," said Mr. Wigton; "we wish to befriend you if it be in our power. Let us help you to bury your dead, and when you have finished let me say a few words to your tribe."

"You can all stay if you like," said Jemmy; "but we are many and we don't want you to help us, it is not work for white fellows. I will tell my tribe you want to stay, and they won't heed you; and I will tell them you want to speak to them, and they will hear you." With this Jemmy Davies shouted some words in his own vernacular, at which the survivors of the tribe emerged from their concealment; and he continued to his visitors: "They say that if the white fellows wish they can stop, and if the budgery (good) white fellow who woollers (talk) belonging to great Spirit, wishes to talk to them, they will listen."

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CHAPTER IX.

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"And say supernal powers! who deeply scan
Heaven's dark decrees, unfathomed yet by man,
When shall the world call down, to cleanse her shame,
That embry spirit, yet without a name."

The blacks commenced their obsequies with a lugubrious mien; and after collecting the bodies, which numbered nearly a hundred, prepared to entomb them according to their own peculiar custom. Usually, upon the death of a black, the surviving relatives bemoan their loss by besmearing themselves with coloured clay or mud, and venting their grief for days in fasting, frantic gestures, and wails; while the gin (if the deceased be a man possessed of one) covers her head with white feathers, which species of mourning she wears for a "moon," *i.e.*, a month. On this occasion, however, the deceased were nearly all the members of separate families, and the survivors had little sympathy for them, except in common; consequently, the last rites were performed in uniform silence.

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For each body was erected four forked posts (standing about four feet high), on which were formed a platform of boughs, so as to make a sort of foliate table to support the lifeless clay. The bodies, when duly placed, were then over-spread with long dry grass, and, afterwards, with an outer covering of boughs, which, to be prevented being removed by the weather, were tied together at each end as a bundle of sticks. These impromptu sepulchres were elevated from the ground just sufficiently to prevent the access of the native dogs, and protected overhead from the molestation of carnivorous birds by the covering we have described. They are, however, no more defended, than a subterranean tenement would be, from the depredations of insects and vermin; the most numerous of which, who attack this, or any other carrion in the Australian bush, being ants; which have rightly been designated "nature's scavengers."

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In such encasements it is not to be wondered at that the flesh is speedily removed from the bones; and, after a short time, they stand inoffensive monuments to the memory of departed friends. They remain intact for years; until, either consumed by some bush fire, washed away by some gigantic flood, or the supports give way under the decay of successive seasons, the sepulchre and its enshrined contents fall together to the earth to reunite with their parent dust.

When the blacks finished their toil, the cemetery had a most extraordinary appearance. With nearly a hundred four-legged tombs, of various size placed side by side, and their heads set facing the rising sun, they almost filled the centre space of the camp; and, with the conical gunyahs around them in a wide circle, they presented, at the cessation of the buryer's work, one of the most novel and picturesque scenes that could be imagined.

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Upon being informed by Jemmy Davies that he could now speak to the blacks Mr. Wigton called them together, and addressing them in their own language, said: "My friends! you say I am the white man who speaks of the great Spirit; I would speak of him to you now. I know that you say there is no good Spirit, only an evil one; but you are wrong, for there are both; and of the good one I will now tell you. A very long time ago he made all the big hills, and large rivers, the plains, and the great sea; and he made man, and all the beasts, birds, and fishes; he made white men, and black men; he made everything. When he made the first man, he told him he would love him, and teach him great wisdom, if he would do what the great Spirit wished. He gave him a wife and put them both in a large country, where was plenty fruit that possums and parrots like, and which was very good for man. But one tree was there that they were not to touch; because it belonged to the evil spirit. The good Spirit told man, that if he eat the fruit that grew on that tree he would be wicked, and the good Spirit wouldn't love him. But when the good Spirit left him, and the man and his wife 'walked all about,' and saw a very fine country with plenty of fruit to eat, and plenty of animals who would not do him any harm, but come to him when he called them, he was very much pleased. But the evil spirit presently came to the woman and said to her, 'Now, you take that fruit that the good Spirit says belongs to me, and that is not good; you will find it very good, the best in the country; it belongs to me and you may take as much of it as you like.' Now the woman did not care what the good Spirit had told her, so she took it, and gave some of it to the man, after telling him what the evil spirit had said to her, and they both eat it. But when the good Spirit knew it, he was very angry; and told the man and the woman, that as they had done what he had told them not to do, and had stolen the fruit off the tree which he told them not to touch, he would turn them out of the country into another country where there was no fruit growing, and where the beasts were all wild and where they would have to work for their food, and always be in danger and trouble. So you see the first trouble that there was in the world, was from stealing and disobeying the good Spirit; and the man and woman were punished, though they did not die like your friends this morning.

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"Well, my friends, the man and woman lived a long time together, and they died; and others grew up, and they died; and so on, until by and bye a great many people lived on the earth, who forgot all about the good Spirit; just as you have done. Then the good Spirit was very sorry for them, because they did as the evil spirit told them; and when they died, they all went to the evil spirit, and lived with him in fire. But the good Spirit wished them to live with Him in a beautiful country, where they would never want to eat and drink, but would always be happy. So He sent them His Son to tell them what to do to please Him, and make themselves happy, when they 'jump up' again in the sky, after they die on the earth. He told them what to do, but very few of the people did it; for the evil spirit always persuaded them not to notice Him, or believe Him. But the good Spirit did many good things for them. He brought to life again some of their friends after they had died; and He made food 'jump up' when they were hungry, their clothes never to wear out, and plenty such things. And He told them that if they did as he said they would go to His Father's country in the sky, and live there with Him in happiness and never die; but that if they would not do as He told them, they would have to go to the evil spirit, where they would be always burning, and never die either; while their sufferings would always continue. To escape this, and procure happiness, He told them what they must do. The good Spirit loved them; so they must love the good Spirit. The good Spirit hated murder, theft, lies, and cruelty; so they must hate them too.

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They must be peaceable and kind to one another, and, next to the good Spirit Himself, they must love one another, especially the poor; and He told them if they would do all this, the good Spirit would be very pleased, and would take care of them; but if they would not do so, then He would be very angry and punish them. Now, a good many people believed what the Son of the good Spirit said, and did as he told them; and when they died they all went to the good Spirit. But the evil spirit persuaded a great many more not to believe Him; and they didn't, but killed Him; but He 'jumped up' again and went back to his Father, the good Spirit, and the people that killed Him, when they died, all went to the bad spirit to be punished. Now, the bad spirit is always telling people to do bad things, to vex the good Spirit, and get the people himself. They are very foolish, and do what the evil spirit tells them, and therefore get sent to his place of fire, and are very wretched. And I must tell you, my friends, both the Good and evil spirit still live, and are always walking about. They are both here just now, and were here last night; the good Spirit told you not to steal the white man's food, and you were good and did not steal it; but the evil spirit told Dugingi and his friends to go and steal it, and they did, and died.

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"Now, my friends, which of these would you like for your master? The good Spirit? then do as he tells you. Love him and give up killing one another, and stealing, and telling lies, and hating the white man. I will stop with you, and teach you how to love the good Spirit; so that when you die you will go to the good Spirit in the sky. But if you will not love the good Spirit, and will not do as He tells you, then you will be the friends of the evil spirit, and be burnt up with him in his fire. The evil spirit is a very bad spirit, and will tell you all sorts of things to make you not to love the good Spirit. He will tell you it is of no use; that the good Spirit does not care for you, and will not trouble about you, and that he only cares for the white man; but do not believe him, for he wants to get you for himself. You try to live as the good Spirit tells you, and you will not only enjoy the happiness with the good Spirit when you die, but you will be happy while you live here; and now, my friends, I will pray to the good Spirit for you."

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Mr. Wigton then lifted his voice in earnest supplication to his Master, to beseech in His unbounded beneficence, that He would dispel the darkness from the minds of the poor benighted heathen before Him, and reflect on them the light of His gospel. He concluded his exhortation and prayer, and found Jemmy Davies still standing by his side, where he had remained during the whole time of the short discourse, deeply interested with the truths that flowed from the preacher's mouth. Not so, however, the rest of the tribe; for Mr. Wigton had noticed with pain, that after the first few minutes of his addressing them, they lost all interest in his gospel story, and showed evident signs of impatience and uneasiness; even indulging in frivolities, and taking no notice of his speaking at all. Though grieved at this, he yet did not despair of bringing them to a knowledge of the truth. He had frequently on former occasions preached to the blacks with similar success; but his heart was undaunted; he persevered in his work; and, in the tribe to whom he was then appealing, he had hopes (with the blessing and assistance of God) of planting the seed in their sterile souls and, by the aid of heaven's grace, of seeing it germinate and "bring forth fruit meet for repentance." That such a hope was visionary, all his friends were in the habit of telling him; they repudiated the idea of the possibility of infusing the truth of the gospel into the natures of the blacks; but he had a more exalted faith, and believed the omnipotence, as well as the mercy of the Almighty, would still work the regeneration of this outcast race. He was, therefore, stimulated to pursue his course in the instruction of these rude children of nature, to endeavour to impress upon them an application of things divine; and he determined to remain in their neighbourhood as long as possible, and devote to the work as much of his time as he could command.

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The party now took their leave of Jemmy Davies and his tribe, and left the scene of the late distress for the home of the Fergusons; where they found the news of the massacre had preceded them, and their two black boys, Billy and Jemmy, decamped to join the remnant of the tribe. But in the meantime we will trace the steps of William Ferguson, after he left the camp to join Mr. Billing.

William found the storekeeper waiting very patiently for Tom Rainsfield's return; and he rather sententiously communicated to him what he had witnessed, leaving him to conjecture much of the detail. As he felt in no humour to be bored by Billing's loquacity, he excused himself from accompanying him on the road, on the plea that he was anxious to get to Strawberry Hill, his sister being there waiting him; and he left his companion, and rode on.

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When he arrived at the Rainsfields' house he met Mrs. Billing and the children going out for a walk; and, upon enquiring for the ladies, he was told they had been expecting him for some time, and were at that moment taking a stroll towards the bridge. After leaving his horse, thither he followed them; and found that his sister was ready habited for her ride, and her friends had stepped out for a short walk with her before she took her departure. When they saw William, they all rallied him on his dilatoriness and want of punctuality; but he, finding that they knew nothing of the tragedy amongst the blacks, refrained from making any explanation; simply pleading guilty to the indictment of his fair friends, and begging leniency at their hands.

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His sister replied that she had intended, if he had not made his appearance before their return from their walk, to have taken off her habit and stopped at Strawberry Hill, just to teach him punctuality. But stepping up to him, and laughingly patting his cheek, she said that, as he had acknowledged his negligence, she would not disappoint him, but start whenever he pleased.

William and his convoy returned to the house, where they found the table spread with a light repast ready waiting them; after partaking which, the girls took an affectionate leave of one another; and, with repeated mutual regrets at parting, promises from Kate to speedily revisit them, and many extorted pledges and solemn obligations from William, to frequently bring his

sister over, they parted; and Kate and William left Strawberry Hill at a canter, at which pace they continued until they reached Fern Vale. [Pg 219]

Upon their arrival there, the little house-keeper was received with all honours, and duly installed in possession of her domicile and in the importance of her office, with a gaiety which even Kate's unpractised eye could detect to be assumed. There was a gloom upon the whole party, particularly Tom Rainsfield, that ill accorded with their usual manner; and it did not fail to strike her. She saw there was some mystery; and, looking from one to the other in a state of perplexity, at last requested an explanation. Tom excused himself from the task, possibly from a feeling of delicacy in shocking her young and innocent mind with a recital of the horrible events of the past twelve hours; but her brother John, thinking it better that a knowledge of the circumstances should be imparted to her by themselves, in preference to their reaching her ears through some other channel, communicated to her as much as he deemed necessary in the meantime for her to know. [Pg 220]

To say that the story horrified her would but inadequately describe the sensations with which she heard the dreadful narrative. She wept! though not at the usual standard of young ladies' tears that are shed upon the most trivial occasions when effect is deemed by them desirable; such tears are easily conjured into existence, and have no impression on the beholder other than as the sparkling dew on the morning flower excites the admiration or pleases the fancy of the florist. Her's were tears of true sympathy, gushing forth from a warm and affectionate heart; and the burst of feeling grief of one who was always joy and sunshine touched the hearts of her assembled friends; and more than one strong man, that had calmly looked on the misery of the poor victims in the very presence of death, now turned away their heads to conceal their moistened eyelids.

As soon as Tom Rainsfield could sufficiently muster his courage to speak, he took the two hands of Kate in his, and said in a voice tremulous with emotion: "My dear Miss Ferguson, your kind sympathy for these poor blacks does you infinite honour and credit; but pray calm yourself. Much as the circumstances are to be regretted, it is more than probable they will be found to result to our benefit, as the greatest ruffians of the whole tribe have been removed; and we may now hope to live without fear of any molestation." [Pg 221]

The rest of the day passed ordinarily enough. The Fergusons were fully occupied in putting their house in order; and Tom took his leave to see his brother and communicate to him details that he could not expect from Mr. Billing. He promised, before he went, to return the following morning and join Mr. Wigton in revisiting the camp and sepulchres of the blacks. True to his engagement, the next day Tom presented himself at Fern Vale; when he, Mr. Wigton, and John, took their departure on their meditated errand; leaving William at the station, to superintend some work which required the presence of either him or his brother. [Pg 222]

As the trio rode on their way, Tom was the first to break the general silence, by remarking, "I am sorry to say Jemmy Davies was only too correct, when he surmised that the flour had been poisoned as well as the meat. I have tested it on some animals, with a fatal result; which leaves it beyond doubt that it contained poison; while my brother's explanation of the fact is very equivocal. He may be, and I trust he is, sincere in his asseverations; but I must confess that the whole matter appears to me inexplicable. He denies the possibility of the flour being poisoned, unless it were from contact with the meat, or by their own inadvertent use of the arsenic; which he says they must have taken from the store with the other things, under the impression of its being sugar. Now, though it is possible that the blacks might have made use of the fat of the meat in making their damper, in the other supposition I don't think there is a shadow of probability. However, let it rest between his conscience and his God. I only trust he will enlighten his wife on the subject, for I would not like that duty to devolve upon me, as I could not so far dissemble as to disguise from her my suspicions; and I know the knowledge of her husband's criminality would break her heart." [Pg 223]

"You need not doubt, my dear sir," said Mr. Wigton, "but what she will hear of it from your brother. He will be sure to tell her, if it is only to prevent her crediting any other version that she may hear; so you need have no apprehension on that head. But let us consider now, that we are about to revisit these wretched blacks, what we can do to ameliorate their condition."

"I share with you, Mr. Wigton, your sympathy for these poor creatures," said Tom, "and would gladly render you all assistance that lies in my power; though that assistance will necessarily be limited. But I fear their regeneration is a task of far greater magnitude than you conceive; and I am afraid you are too sanguine." [Pg 224]

"Why so? my dear, sir," asked the clergyman; "nothing is impossible with God! and with his blessing I have no fear, but that I shall be able to work great changes in them."

"True," replied Tom, "you may with the blessing of Providence; but you must excuse me, my dear sir, if I remind you, that we must not expect the Almighty to deviate from his prescribed laws of nature, and work miracles in the conversion of these savages."

"I don't quite understand you," replied the minister.

"I will explain," said Tom. "You are aware that these people's habits and customs, are totally different from ours, and their peculiar prejudices are deeply rooted. Now, I don't deny for a moment the possibility of the application of the gospel to them, or the probability of a few of their number accepting it (though of that I must confess I have little hope); but I certainly do think that no great progress will be made until you can get them to assimilate their ways to those of civilisation; and that is the point where you will find the difficulty." [Pg 225]

"For the sake of argument," said Mr. Wigton, "and to hear your views, I will grant your theory that civilisation must precede the preaching of the gospel; as I take it, that is what you mean. Then I would ask; what is to prevent their being induced to domesticate themselves, and live as we?"

"Nothing," replied Tom, "that I see, except their inherent antipathy to a settled life, and an existence where they require to labour to gain a subsistence. Numerous attempts have been made to wean the blacks from their wandering, lazy, and unsettled habits, but without success. You could not have a better instance than Jemmy Davies; one perfectly civilized you may say, yet living a savage life. But for the influence of his tribe, and his home associations (which he could not be induced to renounce), he might have been made a respectable member of society; and may yet become one, for he has had the rough edge of his savage nature worn off. You may have another instance in John Ferguson's black boys, who are better specimens than the general class. You see they, at the slightest breath of excitement, leave their work and join the camp. Any attempts to cultivate their intellects like Jemmy Davies would be useless, unless like him they were removed from the influence of their people. Again, you have another instance in little Joey; he has been taught to accommodate himself to the ways of the whites, and never desires to change his condition. But that is owing to the fact that he has known no other, by his having been taken from his home when quite young, educated with whites, and never having imbibed the prejudices of his race.

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"To christianize the blacks I believe they must be civilized; and to be civilized they must be removed from the influence of their natural predilections and superstitions; for if they are not thoroughly and effectually eliminated from all domestic influence they will never retain their civilisation, but return to their tribes upon the earliest opportunity. On the other hand if they are segregated, and kept beyond the contamination of their kindred, they become, from the absence of their natural habits, alienated from them; and of necessity they assimilate their ways to civilisation. I could mention examples of these, but need only advert to the native police; who, possibly you are aware, when they are drafted from their tribes, are instantly removed to a distance for active service. The consequence of this is that they remain in the force because they have no opportunity of leaving it without coming into contact with other tribes; the natural animosities of whom against one another are such as to render a passage through them to their own tribe extremely perilous. There is no propinquity or friendly intercourse between them; and the native police are therefore retained in service, if not from choice, at least from a knowledge of security.

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"Do not imagine, Mr. Wigton, that I argue the impracticability of your scheme from any spirit of opposition; nothing is further from my intention. I am far rather desirous to accomplish their disenfranchisement, though I fear it cannot be effected without alienating them first from their own peculiar habits."

"I will not attempt to argue with you on the subject," replied Mr. Wigton, "because I cannot but deny the theory that questions the attributes of the Almighty. I will rather hope to prove to you the fallacy of your sophistry by results. You say that Jemmy Davies is educated; I can see that he is civilized; and can also perceive, from his attention to me yesterday, that he is willing to be instructed, and susceptible of the Christian impress. And I ask, why cannot the others of his tribe be made the same? His training has been purely of a secular kind; whereas it would have been as easy, while he was being taught the rudiments of the English language, to have had the truths of the gospel inculcated; and he would now have been in all probability, if not a Christian, at least a moral man, and less prone to return to his former barbarous nature. I would propose, while instructing the mature, to have a school for the young, so as to put them under a regular course of training; and I have no doubt whatever that the result would be a speedy regeneration."

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"Then, my dear sir," replied Tom Rainsfield, "to effect it you would have to remove the children entirely from the influence of their parents; as otherwise you would never be able to retain them under your care. The parents would soon begin to feel the restraint of your tuition, and would remove to escape it; while the children, nothing loath to resume their freedom, would gladly accompany them. To make such a system effective I believe you would require to detain the children, even against the wishes of their parents; and, when their education was complete, remove them elsewhere to learn some handicraft so as to accustom them to labour. Then having been brought up in the comforts of the whites, and having learnt to earn a livelihood by the use of their own hands, they would have lost all yearnings after the life of their kindred; especially as their parents, by that time, would have been taught to look upon them as lost. In a word, to accomplish their amelioration, you must carry out a system of domestic expatriation, continuing to separate the young from the old until the former will all have been reclaimed, and the latter in the course of time (as a new generation grows up) will have totally disappeared."

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"I think there is some feasibility in your separation scheme," said Mr. Wigton, "but I think it would be a cruel alternative to dismember families in that way; and I do not despair of effecting the desired object without such stringent measures, which I question if the government and society would sanction. However, here we are at the camp; we will see the result of our present interview, and then have an opportunity of further speculation on this theme."

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But as the party rode into the area of the camp they were surprised to see that it was empty. Not a black was visible; and to our friend's repeated "cooeys" not a return sound was to be heard, not even the distant bark of the aborigines' dogs. So they concluded that the camp had been broken up, and Jemmy Davies and his tribe retired to another part of the scrub; and as they turned, disappointed to retrace their steps, Tom said to Mr. Wigton, "I think you have in this conclusive evidence of there being no guarantee that without restriction the blacks will ever receive

CHAPTER X.

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"Come let us fill the flowing bowl
 Until it doth run over;
 For to-night we'll merry be,
 To-morrow we'll get sober."

OLD SONG.

Some time had elapsed since the events mentioned in the foregoing chapter had transpired; but few changes had come over the scene of our narrative. Kate Ferguson had settled down into the circle of her domestic duties with a spirit that charmed her brothers and enchanted every one about her. Mr. Wigton had, at an early date, left Fern Vale for Brisbane. The blacks had entirely disappeared from the country, and Mr. Rainsfield had almost, if not entirely, forgotten their existence and the dreadful means he had adopted for their expatriation; while Tom Rainsfield, if he continued to remember it, never allowed any mention of the circumstances to pass his lips. The whole of the events were of course, by "the thousand tongues of scandal," speedily noised about the country; but the general feeling exculpated Rainsfield from any blame, and the judicial enquiries were extremely superficial. The government being perfectly satisfied with the report of the magistrates of the neighbourhood; who in their turn were content with the unsubstantiated version of their colleague Mr. Rainsfield. Tom Rainsfield was a constant visitor to his friends at Fern Vale; while William Ferguson and his sister made repeated visits to "the Hill," though their brother John rarely moved off his own run.

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The spring had set in with its calm salubrious atmosphere, and plenty and contentment pervaded all nature. At nearly every station shearing had been completed; and, except at some of the remote localities where labour was only with difficulty obtained, the excitement and bustle incidental to that time had subsided, and the squatters had settled down into the monotony of their usual routine.

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At a pretty little spot on a tributary creek of the Gibson river, about ten miles from Brompton, was situated the station of Clintown, the residence and property of a retired medical man of the name of Graham. This gentleman was rather a portly individual of stupendous dimensions; with a body rather obese, and limbs of great power. His face was decidedly rubicund, and, kept scrupulously free from hairy excrescence, displayed a pair of pendent cheeks. His nose was not much out of the common, except that it was possessed of a certain erubescence, which, increasing in intensity towards the extremity, gave some indication of the owner's predilection for spirituous comforts. His cranium on the summit had a decided tendency to sterility, notwithstanding the continual exudation of an unctuous nourishment; and, but for the stamp of the voluptuary which was unmistakably impressed upon his visage, and other slight defects, would have been considered by phrenologists a fine head.

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If not respected in the district Dr. Graham was at least tolerated; perhaps more from dread than any other feeling his presence or society was likely to create. Among the lower orders he was generally detested; he was abhorred by the shepherds whom he employed, and who never could be induced to stay with him longer than they were absolutely compelled; while many were the charges of rapacity brought against him, by those who had been in his service, and had been defrauded of their wages on some unjust pretext. His bellicosity was well known; and bold indeed was the man who would dare to risk an encounter with the self-dubbed "champion of the Downs." He was reputed wealthy; or rather his means were supposed to be considerable, though there was a story attached to their acquisition, which, if true, reflected lasting opprobrium on this worldly medicus.

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He was said to have been located at one time as a practitioner in a distant part of the colony, and to have conceived the idea of establishing an hospital in a certain town, centrally situated in the bush. To accomplish this end he travelled the country soliciting subscriptions; and such was the confidence reposed in the individual, whose disinterestedness and zeal were generally admired, and the desideratum that such an edifice was considered, that he was eminently successful in his canvass. The squatters readily and munificently subscribed to the project, and Dr. Graham soon found himself in possession of a considerable sum of money.

That this money was applied to the purposes for which it was contributed is more than doubtful; for the hospital was never erected, while Dr. Graham shortly afterwards became possessed of the station of Clintown. It was said that some of the subscribers, not relishing the manner in which they were taken in, insisted upon a return of their money, or its legitimate application; and in some few instances, to quiet the importunities of those who were disposed to be turbulent, the money was returned. But in the majority of the cases the parties were too timorous or indifferent to make any demands; and the subscriptions and hospital scheme remained in *statu quo*, the one in the pocket, or rather represented in the sheep of Dr. Graham, and the other in the fond expectation of the deluded subscribers. Whether this tale be true or false we are not in a position to say; but it was darkly brooded about, no one daring to venture an open assertion, in consideration of the pugilistic accomplishment of the party most concerned. One thing, however, is certain that the Doctor, prior to the scheme, was always supposed to be in debt, from the

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difficulty "those little accounts" could be extorted from him, while after the successful ruse, he suddenly became possessed, to a remarkable extent, of a laudable desire for honourable liquidation.

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The general characteristics of Dr. Graham's nature were as peculiar as his personal appearance. He was parsimonious and exacting in his intercourse with his neighbours, and inhospitable to those not his boon companions; to whom again, he was lavish and profuse. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than the society of a companion who could join him in copious libations; and upon one occasion he carried out his principle in a remarkable manner. He was detained on business for a short time in Sydney, and was disposed to enjoy himself in "a little bit of a spree;" though, unfortunately for his happiness, he could not fall in with a concomitant spirit to join him in the way of friendship. None who knew him were disposed to submit to his imperiousness; so he was driven to the necessity of procuring, by engagement, the companionship of some congenial nature. He, therefore, hired a man who was recommended to him for the purpose; an individual who was famous in his generation for his bibulous capabilities, and willing to submit to any indignity for a gratuitous supply of the inebriate's nectar. The debauch commenced and was conducted with considerable spirit so long as it lasted; but the principal and his co-adjutor soon parted, owing, as the former used to say, to the fellow's incapacity to take his liquor. His contentment in loneliness was another feature in his character; which was also exemplified by another tale often told about him. He was an enthusiastic lover of whist, and when he could make up a rubber with three of his choice spirits he was content; though still without them he was equally partial to his hand, and was actually discovered on one occasion sitting with his usual solace, his grog and his pipe, silently going through the formula of playing with three dummies.

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In the sitting-room pertaining to the dwelling of this worthy individual, who, we may mention, had never thought it advisable "to settle in life," sat three specimens of the genus homo—the proprietor of the station, a neighbouring squatter of the name of Brown, and our old acquaintance, Bob Smithers. At the moment of our intrusion upon this triumvirate, they were assiduously attentive to a dark-coloured opaque receptacle, containing a brown stimulating fluid, and which was circulated (to use an antithesis) in a triangle from one to the other of this trio, and followed by its usual concomitant, an earthenware vessel of a porous nature (containing a more translucent liquid), and vulgarly denominated "a monkey." In fact these gentlemen were what steady, sober, and sedate people would call drinking; but what they, choice sons of Bacchus, simply designated "taking a nobbler." They were also emulating the example of the first potent initiator, and "blowing a cloud," from three diminutive and jetty instruments, that were retained in their dental position, irrespective of any inconvenience to expectoration or without any hindrance to the conversation, which was carried on in an animated manner; the only proceeding that called for a removal from their ivory fetters being that which was necessary to alleviate thirst.

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At the moment which we have chosen to introduce this company to our readers a head was thrust into the room, and a voice called the master of the establishment, who instantly left the apartment, after telling his visitors not to mind his absence. This was an injunction which was perfectly needless, for, in the presence of the before mentioned stimulator, the parties addressed seemed in nowise disconsolate at his leaving them.

The Doctor's absence was only of short duration, for in a few minutes he returned with a bottle in his hand, which he set down upon the table with the following aphorism: "May we never want a friend, and a bottle to give him;" while he continued addressing Smithers: "Here, Bob, old fellow, here is a spiritual visitant in the shape of as good brandy as ever you drank. I have plenty more, so don't be frightened of the liquor. I am obliged to keep it in my bed-room, or I would not have a drop in the house in twelve hours; those confounded rascals of mine would rob a church if they could get any drink out of it;" and then turning to his other friend he said: "How are you getting on, Brown? take another 'nip,' and don't shirk your grog;" at which little pleasantry of his own he burst into a laugh.

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Brown did as he was desired with very little show of reluctance, and asked of his host what had occurred to make him so merry.

"Why," said the Doctor, "I have had a little adventure with one of my fellows, who wanted to be master; but I soon taught him submission. My overseer came to tell me that one of the scoundrels had refused to work, so I quietly went out to him and knocked him down. I hate to have words with the fellows; that's meeting them on their own ground. I like to deal with them pointedly; so when the blackguard got upon his legs again I told him the next remedy I would try would be a stock-whip, and if that failed I would summon him before the bench. That sent him to work, for my fellows know it is a bad game to come before the magistrates with me; so telling him to 'keep his eye on the picture' I left him, and I'll vow he won't trouble me again in a hurry."

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"But," said Brown, "how have you managed to establish such a wholesome dread of the bench in the minds of your men? For my part, if ever I have any of my fellows up, I not only rarely obtain any satisfaction, but am put to a great deal of trouble and inconvenience."

"Oh, I suppose you don't know how to manage it," replied the Doctor. "I never let any of my fellows have a case against me. If they have at any time the impertinence to serve me with a summons, or lodge a complaint, I always prevent them getting any of their own witnesses, by finding them something to do to keep them out of the way of a subpœna; whereas that overseer of mine is an uncommonly useful fellow, he always sees things in the same light that I do."

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"But still I can't see," said Brown, "if the fellows are determined to be troublesome, how you are to punish them unless they commit a breach of their agreement; and they are generally wide

awake enough to keep all right there."

"Nothing easier in the world," replied the Doctor. "I'll just tell you how I served one fellow that gave me a great deal of trouble. He was a 'new chum,' just out from home. My agent in Brisbane hired him from the ship when he arrived, and he was an infernally saucy fellow, as all those new chums are; for they not only demand higher wages, but are always more difficult to satisfy, readier with their objections, and lazier and less handy with their work, than men with 'colonial experience.' Now, this fellow gave me some cheek one day, and I thrashed him; but what do you think of his impertinence? he actually summoned me for assault. Well, Bill, my overseer, very conveniently saw him raise his hand to strike me, so I was forced, you perceive, to knock him down in self-defence, and the case was dismissed. But I was determined to break my fine fellow's pride, and let him see that he had got into the wrong box when he fancied he could ride roughshod over me; and I wasn't long in giving him the lesson. I had him engaged as a shepherd, in the usual way, 'and to make himself generally useful;' so one fine Sunday morning, when he had dressed himself in his 'Sunday go-to-meeting clothes,' I found a nice little job for him that I knew he wouldn't relish. I had a couple of horses in a paddock at the other side of the creek; which had been flooded just previously, so that the paddock was nearly half covered with mud and water; and to get over to it there was no other way than to ford the creek, which I give you my word was none of the cleanest to cross. I ordered the fellow to fetch me one of the horses, knowing perfectly well that, as there was not another on the station, he would have to accomplish it on foot. I was sure this would try his metal, and guessed he wouldn't half like the idea of soiling his clean clothes; and I was right. He didn't like it; and positively refused to go, saying that he was not obliged to work on a Sunday beyond what was absolutely necessary, such as tending his flock, for which he was engaged. I, however, put a boy to mind his sheep, and then ordered him again to bring in the horse for me; but he still refused. So I just had him up, under 'the Masters and Servants Act,' for refusing to obey my lawful orders, and he was fined forty shillings and ordered to go back to his work. But he declined to do that, and was then committed to gaol for a month, at the expiration of which he was sent back to his work, whether he liked it or not. Well, sir, he was always civil after that; but I determined that he should remember the lesson. So when his term expired, and I settled with him for his wages, I charged him with twenty sheep that had been missing out of his flock while he had refused to work. He was fool enough to decline receiving the balance of his wages, and actually sued me; but I produced my stock-book before the bench, when the loss was shown, and my overseer swore to the deficiency, so my gentleman had to submit; and, being rather abusive upon his defeat, I quieted him by threatening another thrashing, and told him to 'keep his eye on the picture,' unless he wished to be still farther treated to a drilling."

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"Well," said Brown, "but suppose a fellow like that should persist in giving you trouble, his services would not at any wages be worth having, considering the nuisance of continually dragging him before the bench; and he might get a lot of your men as witnesses against you; and even if he did no good for himself, he would do you considerable injury, by drawing the men away from their work."

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"I never have any bother in that way," replied Dr. Graham. "I told you I never allow any of my fellows to have witnesses, if I can help it, and I generally can; so you see I don't lose their time in that way; and as to their being of any service to the fellow who wants to complain, I don't believe it, for I get it all arranged before their case is heard. You know, I am generally on the bench myself; and before we commence business, I, and whoever may be sitting with me, have a talk over the cases on the sheet; and, of course, there being one in my name, I just explain the matter to the other fellows, and we easily settle between us what the chap shall have. So that when my case is called, I sink the magistrate for the time, and leave the bench for the witness box, where I give my evidence and obtain the sentence I require. Only the last case I had was one brought against me by a bullock-driver I had employed, and who, not having done his work as he ought to have done, I gave a thrashing to, and he summoned me for assault. Now it happened, the day my case came on, I was on the bench with Ned Telford, who had a case against one of his men; and we arranged between ourselves, that while he sat to hear and dismiss my case, I would hear his, and give his fellow a fortnight in the lock-up. The thing was done as easily and quietly as possible, without any trouble or annoyance to either of us. What is the use of 'the Master and Servants Act' if we can't make the fellows obedient? It is high time that the blackguards were brought to their senses, for they have had their own way far too long, and I don't half so much trouble myself with them now as I used to do; they begin to know me, and understand that I will not put up with any of their nonsense."

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"You certainly," said Brown, "manage to keep them pretty subordinate so long as they stay with you, which, I imagine, is not longer than they can help; but, for my own part, I am not so fortunate, for I am continually having trouble with my men. They are principally 'fresh emigrants,' and are always grumbling and growling, notwithstanding that they get higher wages than other men, and have less to do than usually falls to the lot of older hands. I begin to find that 'new chums' are the worst class of men that can be had; I would sooner have black fellows if they could be got to stick to their work."

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"So would I," replied the Doctor, "if we could only make the black devils work, but that no one on earth can do. You see we are obliged to get new chums, at least I am, for the old ones disappear somehow; as soon as ever they get paid off, they bolt off down the country, and we see no more of them."

"Just so, Graham," said the other, "I find it equally as difficult to get men that have colonial experience as you do. The fact of the matter is simply this, some fools particularly busy

themselves in spreading reports down the country that the blacks are fearfully troublesome in this district, and that no man's life is safe; the consequence of which is, that no one will engage to come out here but 'new chums,' who have not had time to hear the idle stories. I hear that emigration from home is likely to cease from the representations of a set of scoundrels in Sydney and Melbourne that the destitution there is great. If emigration is stopped, I don't know what we, in the outlying district, are to do for labour; what do you think Smithers?"

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"I think," replied that individual, "that if the people in the large towns complain of the scarcity of work it is only because they won't go into the country to look for it. The fools won't stir out of the town, notwithstanding that there are too many of them there, and that their labour is wanted in the country. If the blackguards will not come into the bush when work is offered to them I would send them to work on the government roads."

"Yes, by Jove! you are right," said Brown; "but then that can't be done without some stringent enactment of government; which I am certain would be afraid to go in so heavily. One thing is very certain, labour we must have of some sort or another; for at present we are not only at the mercy of our men, but we have to pay them ruinously high wages, to be treated with contumely, have our work neglected, and our property sacrificed."

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"For my part," said the Doctor, "I would sooner have the old convict times back again; then we could compel the fellows to do their work, and keep very civil too, unless they wanted a little buttering with the lash. Besides, it was far more satisfactory to have the scoundrels under our control, and not so expensive as paying the men, as now, forty and fifty pounds a year and their rations; but, halloo! who have we got here?"

CHAPTER XI.

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"I am his Highness' dog at Kew,
Pray, tell me, sir, whose dog are you?"

POPE.

The last remark in the preceding chapter was elicited by the appearance of a stranger, who, at the moment of its utterance, rode up to the station, and knocked at the open door of the house. Upon being desired in the stentorian voice of the owner of the place, from the room in which he sat, to "come in," a rather gentlemanly-looking man of about the middle height and relative age, presented himself before the conclave; and said: "I have to apologize, gentlemen, for intruding upon your privacy; have I the pleasure of addressing Dr. Graham?"

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"That is my appellation," replied the individual in question.

"And mine, sir, is Moffatt, of the Sydney firm of that name, wool-buyers; possibly it may be known to you. I am purchasing wool, and if you have not already disposed of your clip, will be happy to make you an offer. I have come over-land, right through the New England district, and having consumed more time on the road than I intended, I find I am rather late for the stations in these northern parts; they having got most of their clips away."

"Well, sir, I have got mine off too; all but a few bales," replied the proprietor of Clintown.

"If you have not already made any arrangements relative to its disposal," remarked the buyer, "I can judge of your clip by what you have remaining, and make you an offer for the whole; and, if we come to terms, you can intimate the sale to your agents before its arrival at port, and instruct them to deliver it to my order."

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"All right," exclaimed the squatter, "we'll talk about business presently; join us in a nobbler, there is the bottle. You will find a glass over there," and he pointed to an hermaphrodite piece of furniture, standing at one side of the room.

The stranger thanked his host, and taking his seat, while he assisted himself to a "stiff ball," said, "Pray, don't let me disturb the conversation that you were engaged in at the moment of my abrupt entrance."

"Well," said Brown, "to resume our topic, I differ from you Doctor. I don't think we, even as a class, would be benefited by a return of the old penal system, and I will tell you why. In the first place, I don't believe that their labour was cheaper than that of free men, for never could the convicts be made to do a proper amount of work; they had no will to do so. What they did was only what the compulsory system had the power of enforcing; just so much as not to be actual idleness, which they were only too ready to indulge in when they momentarily escaped the strict surveillance of the overseers; who frequently were necessarily men of their own class, and connived with them in their derelictions. Besides, then we were never free from bush-rangers, and, with all practicable vigilance, sometimes the convicts would escape to the bush, and continually place our lives and properties in danger; so all things considered, bad as our straits now are, I would not wish to see a return of the penal times."

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"You have forgotten to mention another drawback to the system," suggested the stranger, "and that is the immoral influence such a class of men have upon the community, and the contamination to which your family is liable."

"Hang the immoral influence, as you call it," exclaimed the Doctor; "whose morals are they going

to effect, I should like to know? Ours? my word! if we can't take care of them, I would ask you, who can?" [Pg 257]

"By Jove! Graham," exclaimed Smithers, laughing, "it would be hard for any fellow to vitiate yours."

At this sally of Bob's, the man of physic laughed too, and replied: "Well, I mean the prisoners have only got themselves to mix with, so what signifies any consideration for their morals; they can't make themselves worse than they were when they are first convicted."

"There, sir, you are mistaken," said Moffatt. "You will admit that there were many who were serving their time as convicted felons who had come to that position by some false step in life, of which they deeply repented; but that, being mixed up with the vilest ruffians indiscriminately, they were subjected to this immoral influence of which I speak. We are perfectly aware that many (but for their one offence) honourable and exemplary men, who would scorn to do even a mean action, as derogatory to their natures, have been so subjected; and what has been the result of their contact with these vilest of the vile—villains whose hearts and souls were devoted to the practice of infamy—wretches, whose hearts, as Tom Hood said, were "inscribed with double guilt?" Has it not been a general debasement, and a levelling in most instances of the would be virtuous, to the standard of the despicable criminals themselves? I know it has been argued by many that an honourable man would shun the influence of such; and that the ruffians themselves, having no kindred feelings with their conscientious companions, would not trouble them, but afford the penitent every opportunity of avoiding a contact. But it was not so. What escape had a man of feeling, education, and penitential desire, from society such as was general among the convicts? None! He was compelled to endure it; and, upon a perpetual exhibition of vice and infamy before his eyes, hearing it highly spoken of, joked upon, and even lauded, he too frequently ceased to abhor it; began by degrees to look upon it with a callous indifference, and then to acquire, and practise, what before the very contemplation of would have been revolting to his nature; and ultimately he became as hardened a wretch as any of the rest. I say this was too frequently the case; and only shows that there was an immoral influence at work, even amongst the prisoners themselves. The employers of the men were sufferers by it likewise; for, by the cultivation of penitence in a willing subject, the employer secured the services of a valuable servant; whereas if the moral dispositioned man became as debased as the vile ones he was as unprofitable as they. But the evils of the system, in a moral point of view, were more particularly felt by the employers in the fearful example made to their families. Just picture to yourself rearing a young family subject to the dreadful contamination of such a school; the influences of which tuition all the academies of punctilio in the universe would be unable to eradicate. Happily for us, and for posterity, those times are past and never can nor will return, however much individuals in certain classes may desire. The mass of the population would never permit the re-introduction of such an incubus on civilisation, Christianity, and morality; but pardon me, sir, I am warming on the subject; it is one I have always abhorred, for I have constantly witnessed its fearful iniquities." [Pg 258]

"What you say," replied Dr. Graham, "may be all very well with regard to people that have families and live in towns; but you must remember that squatters are the stay of the colony, and must be supported. What would the colonies be but for their exports of wool? and how, I would like to know, is that staple commodity to be obtained if the squatters are not enabled to procure labour? At present we pay higher wages than any other country in the world, notwithstanding which we cannot get sufficient labour to do our work. It is a question that affects the entire country; for if we do not get labour our staples will decrease, and that, you will admit, will be a public calamity. The long and the short of the matter is simply this, we must have labour, and the government must exert itself to procure it. If it does not, we ought to advocate a return of convicts." [Pg 259]

"Well, sir," replied Moffatt, "I don't pretend to dictate to you personally, presuming that you are the best judge of your own affairs. Wages in the colonies are certainly high, but then the employers can well afford to pay the high rates; and, but in these remote parts, I have heard few complaints of the scarcity of labour. Until your district becomes more settled you will have to expect it, for it is one of the inconveniences of an unsettled country; but as soon as it becomes better known and more occupied, I think you will find that labour, as in everything else where there is a supply and demand, will find its own level." [Pg 260]

"That's very true," said Brown, "but, remember in the meantime, we are sufferers; what are we to do?" [Pg 261]

"I can scarcely tell you," said the other, "but fear you will have to put up with it. It is, as I have said, a contingent incidental on your remote location. You can't force labourers to settle in a country, of which they know little, and that little disparaging. You must offer some inducements to tempt men out into these wilds other than high wages. What militates considerably against you, I imagine, is the current belief that the blacks are rather dangerous neighbours."

"It is all very well for people that are not affected as we are, to tell us we must put up with it," said Brown; "but, assuming that labour would find its own level as you state; that is, I imagine, by offering security against the blacks, if we admitted that the blacks were dangerous (though we deny it); does it not follow, that we, in these districts, are entitled to some consideration on the part of our rulers? We contribute to the support of the state, and are therefore entitled to protection from the government; but are we likely to get that? I don't believe it. We are just allowed to struggle on as best we can. But it will result in this; we will have to take the remedy into our own hands; labour we must have, and if our own countrymen will not accept our [Pg 262]

employment, even at exorbitant wages, we will have to procure it from some foreign source."

"May I enquire," said Mr. Moffatt, "the source you would propose?"

"It is immaterial which," replied Brown; "whatever would be found the most advantageous, the people that would be most industrious, and whose labour could be obtained at the cheapest rate of wage. I have often been at a loss to understand why the Victorian government has adopted such stringent laws to endeavour to keep the Chinese out of Melbourne. They are essentially an industrious class of people, and just the very sort of men we want; they make excellent shepherds, more attentive to their work than Europeans, less difficult to please in their rations, and can be obtained at far less wages."

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"I can enlighten you," said the wool-buyer, "if you are ignorant as to the reason of the Victorian people desiring a restriction on the immense influx of Chinese immigrants. They have been landed in that colony in thousands, and may be said, though forming an integral part of our population, to be a distinct people and nation. They speak their own language only, have their own religion, are proverbially the laziest, filthiest, and most immoral people contained in the state, and come without their females. So that they do not settle amongst us; but those that are sufficiently fortunate to make money return with their gains to their own country to excite the avarice of their countrymen; while those that are not successful are left to starve and die, or commit depredations on our settlers. They swarm together in large numbers in small tenements in our large towns; and, by their vice and filth, generate noisome diseases amongst themselves, and pestilence in the neighbourhood in which they live; and their abodes and their persons are alike mephitic. They are in fact the scum of our population, and far more degraded even than the denizens of the vilest purlieu of Britain's metropolis. They, as doubtless you are aware, live and migrate in large bodies, from one to other of the diggings, blighting each locality in their transient passage, as swarms of locusts. They stab one another, and commit murder amongst themselves, of which the authorities never hear. They commit depredations on the whites, for which they are never punished from the difficulty in detecting the delinquent; and, as I said before, they spread disease wherever they go. They are therefore no benefit to the country; for, with the exception of rice and opium, they consume no mercantile commodities, but annually drain a considerable quantity of gold from it. It is considering these facts, and that they are filling places that could be advantageously occupied by our own countrymen, that the colonists of Victoria have attempted to restrict their entrance into the country, by the exaction of a ten pound poll-tax. I am only sorry to see that the example is not followed by the other colonies, for while Victoria stands alone, she will never succeed in keeping the evil away."

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"And I am very glad to think the other colonies are liberal-minded enough not to do so," said Brown. "You will please to bear in mind that this is a free country, and it is a lasting disgrace to Victoria that she refuses admission to any foreigner. The government of Great Britain might as well attempt to exclude certain people or classes from the asylum of her shores."

"No, sir," replied Moffatt, "there it does not signify. Her own population would more than counterbalance any influx; but here it is different. The news of our gold fields, spread by rumour, and the return of successful diggers to China, have generated a spirit of adventure in that country which shows itself in the emigration of swarms of her people to our shores. Already as many as sixty thousand Chinamen are in Victoria; and they being acknowledged an inferior and by no means desirable class of settlers, even if they remained, it was deemed expedient to stop or at least check their immigration. As the complaint was desperate, so, necessarily, was the remedy. As you say their entrance into the country could not be prohibited, so the tax was levied on them to discourage their coming."

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"And I think it was a most iniquitous tax," said Brown. "It has been urged against the Chinamen that they consume nothing but rice, and that on the diggings they are in the way of British colonization. Now it is a proverbial fact that they are ousted from all good 'claims;' which, if of any value, are instantly 'jumped' by the diggers, while the poor Chinamen are forced to take up the abandoned and worked out 'claims,' where Europeans have found a continuation of labour unprofitable. On the yield from these holes they manage to live, so it is evident that instead of their being a curse to the country, as has been affirmed, they are positively a benefit; for the gold, if they do take any out of the country, is only that which, but for them, would never have been extracted from the earth."

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"That is a perfect fallacy," replied the other; "Chinamen will no more work on bad ground than white men; and as to their working abandoned 'claims' that is a thing that is done every day now; for formerly, when the diggings were in their glory, claims yielding what would now be considered 'paying quantities,' were thrown up by their holders for some more promising ground. But in these times diggers are content to try over all the old ground; so the assertion that the practice is confined to the Chinese is fallacious."

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"However, be it as it may," said Brown, "the Chinese have a perfect right to come here if they please; and I should like to see them landing in Moreton Bay in as many thousands as they do in Melbourne. Then we should have an opportunity of getting shepherds, whereas now we experience considerable difficulty. Some of the settlers on the northern part of the coast have for sometime agitated the question of the introduction of coolie or Chinese labour into those parts; arguing that the climate is admirably adapted for the growth of cotton and sugar, though too tropical for the European to labour at agriculture in the sun. It would, however suit those accustomed to such a temperature; and without them the resources of the country will never be developed. I perfectly agree with them, and think the introduction of some cheap labour, such as that, would be of immense advantage to the country."

"I must again differ from you, sir," said the stranger; "their introduction would be of incalculable mischief to the entire colony." [Pg 270]

"How so?" asked the other, "will you explain?"

"Certainly," replied Mr Moffatt; "it would little matter to you, perhaps, who only want to realise your fortune, and return with it to your native land. But how different is it with the labouring man who settles here with the intention of making this his home for the remainder of his days? Let us consider the prospect it offers to the colony in this light. It is argued that the northern parts of this island are possessed of a climate that will not admit of the manual labour of Europeans; and that without the introduction of tropical labour the country must remain unproductive. Now, admitting this theory, it naturally follows that, with the exception of owners of property and capitalists, the population would be a mixed and foreign one; and would form a state peculiar in itself, and different in its language and manners from the other colonies. This, be it remembered, in the midst of a British colony, inhabited by the Anglo-Saxon race. Now, it must be manifest that this people, forming no inconsiderable part of our population, must be either admitted to the privileges of British subjects, or governed as a conquered race or an inferior people. Assuming, then, that they are to be recognised as a class of free immigrants, which is in accordance with your own opinion, they at once become colonists, over whose actions we have no undue control. They would be entitled to all the privileges of our constitution, and, consequently, could not be debarred the exercise of the franchise. To say nothing of the absurdity of having a Chinaman or coolie returned to a seat in our legislature, and other incongruities; what would be the effect of their introduction upon our own working population? we will see. This desirable class of labourers with whom you desire to inundate us, we will assume, are introduced into the country in swarms, ostensibly for the cultivation of tropical produce in the northern latitudes of this colony. They are engaged at wages commensurate to the exigencies of competition, so as, as you say, to enable the cultivator to develop the resources of the country by raising a marketable commodity to compete with the slave-grown produce of the western hemisphere. What is the result? Is it to our advantage? Certainly not! The value of our exports are increased, you say, but at what a fearful sacrifice? Granted that these coolies are engaged, and for a period of years say, and that they are bound stringently by penalties to the terms of their agreement. To enforce this, or even to carry on your work, you must have the services of some interpreter; at whose mercy you must ever be, even if you are so fortunate as to obtain one. I would ask you, then, what security have you for the due performance of your labourers' contract? None but their agreement. And how can you in a court of law prove its legality, or the liability of the contracting party, when that party is totally unacquainted with your language and you with his; and he does not admit its validity? But even granting that one or two refractory coolies could be subdued, where would be your remedy if scores or hundreds repudiated their contracts, and refused to work for you at the wages offered to them? That they would so refuse I am firmly convinced, for we are all aware that two differently remunerated classes of labour of the same description co-existent is incompatible with the laws that govern commerce; and men would be found, as you yourself have admitted, who would be ready to obtain their services in other capacities by the offer of higher wages; while the coolies, in their turn, would readily accept an improvement in their positions, without considering the violation of their contract, the nature of which they would doubtless have but an imperfect idea, if not be entirely ignorant. Thus they would be continually drawn off from their intended occupation to fill positions to the exclusion of the white man; and the cotton and sugar cultivator would require to give an equivalent to the European's wages, or supply the places of those who abscond by a fresh importation. In such an emergency it is more than probable that the latter would be the course adopted. Hence we would have a perpetual influx of these undesirable immigrants, who would merely serve a probationary term with their importers, and then mix with our white population on terms of equality. Is it not evident then that Asiatic labour would be brought into direct competition with European? and who can deny that the result would not be disastrous to the latter? Some strait-laced philosophers and fireside philanthropists, who see the miseries of their fellow-creatures through the beeswing of their after-dinner potations, dictate the means for the amelioration of the sufferings of their race with the same self-sufficient spirit that they rule the destinies of their own household. These argue that the introduction of the heathen immigrants to our shores would be an inestimable blessing to humanity, and add an additional lustre to the cause of Christianity, by the intercourse of the two races, and a consequent enlightenment and christianizing of the disciples of feticism. But this I deny, for to debase the European labourer by reducing his means to that of the Asiatic (which I affirm would be the consequence of this influx), and instead of the latter being elevated to the level of the former, the former would be rather dragged down to that of the latter. Without going so far as to question the omnipotence of the Almighty I firmly believe that the moral condition of the Asiatic would not be ameliorated in the slightest degree by the contact; while humanity and Christianity would receive a blow in the demoralization of our countrymen. Depend upon it, sir, the expediency of the introduction of cheap labour is a fallacy; whereas the very existence of our religion, and the realization of our future greatness, depend upon the settlement of the wastes of our colony by a thorough British population." [Pg 271]

"But, my good sir," said Brown, "how do you reconcile to your objection the thesis that, as the European cannot labour in field service in the tropical heat of the northern part of our colony, without the assistance of Asiatic labour the productions of our land will lay dormant?" [Pg 272]

"That," replied the other, "I also deny. I believe European labour is practicable in our climate, even in the remote north; and in support of my belief I could name numerous precedents. Was it not a Spanish population that peopled South America? an European that later settled Texas? and is even now (I allude more particularly to the Germans) growing cotton in that province to [Pg 273]

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compete with the slave-grown produce of the States? Have not the French settled Algiers, and cultivated its soil, even producing that desired staple, cotton? But to come nearer home; have not our own brave countrymen in India incontestably proved, in the trials of the last fearful campaign, without having been inured to the climate, the capability of the Englishman to withstand its heat?"

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"But still," said Brown, "the price at which we purchase our labour would never enable us to cultivate either sugar or cotton profitably. We must have cheap labour to perform the work; and, for my own part, I can't see but that, if coolies be introduced into the country as labourers for a specific purpose, they could be compelled by the law of the land to continue at that labour. If the introduction for that purpose is found desirable, the practice of their immigration could be legalized by an enactment that at the same time would bind them to the species of work for which they were engaged, and make their hire or employment for any other purpose, or in any other part of the country beyond the tropical boundary, a felony punishable by a heavy penalty."

"That was just the point I was coming to," replied Mr. Moffatt; "but first I will answer your previous objection. It is practicable for Europeans to cultivate the soil to the northward, though they will do so in the manner most advantageous to themselves. If they find the cultivation of cotton and sugar unprofitable they will turn their attention to other products; but I am inclined to believe that cotton could be profitably cultivated even by our own expensive labour. I have a friend, resident in the vicinity of Brisbane, who has grown some cotton as an experiment, and the result, even in this temperate climate, has been most satisfactory. The cotton he sent home was submitted to some of the first judges in Manchester and Liverpool, who pronounced it of the finest sea-island description, and superior to any obtained from the United States. Now this cotton was cultivated from the ordinary American sea-island seed; so that its fineness arose, not from any excellence in its germ, but the peculiar adaptation and efficiency of the soil in which it was grown; and which does not differ from the land on our entire coast line. This shows that our cotton would be of superior quality, and consequently of greater value. Another fact to be remembered is this, that in 'the States,' owing to the frost and severity of the winter, the plant is only an annual; while with us, as my friend has discovered, from the absence of frost the cotton tree becomes a perennial, and increases its yield each season; while the staple does not deteriorate in quality. Thus, it will be seen, we should have considerable advantage in the cost of production over the American planter; notwithstanding his slave labour. But to return to the coolies; with regard to their forced compliance with the terms of their agreements,—to effect which, you say, certain enactments would have to be passed to meet the exigencies of the case,—I believe the first step would be the dismemberment of those districts from the parent colony, and their erection into a separate state; so as to preserve the stringencies necessary in its government from infringing the constitution of the other colonies. Now in this new state the preponderance of the population would be black, who would in fact comprise all the working part of it; and it would necessarily follow that the government of the state would be comprised of the employers of this very labour, their servants, or sycophants, or at least those whose interests would be intimately connected with theirs. So that they might be necessarily expected to legislate so as to entirely meet their own views, and subvert the rights and freedom of their foreign labourers. The system would then descend into a compulsory labour; and, but for its name, would in nowise differ from slavery; worse in fact than actual slavery, from the fact of the stimulus of protection to one's own property being wanting in this case, that would in the other act as a preventive against unusual tyranny and oppression. So that the right of disposal by death, might reasonably be expected, would be exercised almost with impunity. Depend upon it, sir, such a system would give rise to a state of things, not only deplorable, but derogatory to a Christian nation. But I am convinced it never would gain the countenance or consent of the home government, who, for its own honour, could not tolerate the introduction of coolie labour on such terms; and our own population would never suffer its introduction on terms of equality."

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"Well, sir," replied Brown, "though I don't admit myself a convert to your way of thinking, I still believe there is some truth in your arguments; but the thing we can't get over is the want of a labouring population here in the bush; and if we can't induce our own countrymen to emigrate we must try others."

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"Believe me, sir," said Mr. Moffatt, "it is not a want of inclination that deters thousands of Britain's redundant population from flocking to our shores; it is the supineness of our short-sighted government, who, instead of creating a fund for the introduction of an agricultural population by the sale of the waste lands of the colony, or by the grant to every immigrant of a piece of land equivalent in value to the amount he has paid for his passage, lock up the lands from agricultural settlers in the fear lest their interests should clash with the pastoral. This suicidal policy has long been manifest; in no way more so than by the fact that we are obliged to depend upon a foreign supply for our very articles of common consumption; whereas nowhere could they be produced with greater advantage than within our own territory. By all accounts you are likely, in this district, to be separated from New South Wales; and one of your first acts in your legislative independence should be to facilitate the settlement of your agricultural lands. The two interests, that and the pastoral, may be separately maintained without detriment to either, and with immense advantage to the state."

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"Oh, hang these politics!" cried Graham; "sink all dry arguments just now, you have made me quite thirsty with merely hearing your clatter. Never mind the agricultural lands, coolies, or Chinamen, though I would be very happy to see them and hope we will be able to get a supply of them soon. We will just polish off another bottle of grog, while we screw a spree out of Smithers here." With this little prologue he left the room for a few minutes, returning with a bottle which

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he placed on the table, and took his seat while he continued: "Bob tells me he is going to 'put his foot into it.' You know he has long been engaged to that niece of Rainsfield's (a deuced fine girl, by Jove!), and he states he is to be married in about a month. Now I say, if he does not give us a spree before he throws us overboard, we will cut him as dead as a herring after he is 'spliced.' What do you say, Brown?"

"Most assuredly," replied that individual, "Smithers ought to entertain his bachelor friends before he withdraws himself from their clique; and I have no doubt he will." [Pg 284]

"He tells me too," said the Doctor, "that those young fellows at Fern Vale have behaved scurvily to him, that one of them has tried to cut him out, and striven hard to set the girl against him. Now I would propose that Smithers give a spree at Brompton, and get his brother to invite the guests for him; then he would be able to have his girl and her friends there, and these young Fergusons too. We could have some glorious fun, get up some races or something of that sort, to please the women and amuse ourselves; besides, it would answer the purpose of showing off his girl and introducing her to his friends, at the same time that it would annoy his rival. And for the matter of that we might oblige him by picking a quarrel with young Ferguson, and giving the fellow a good drubbing, just for the satisfaction of the thing. Eh, gad! Bob must promise to give us a spree, or we won't let him out of this house. It is not often one of our fellows gets spliced; and we can't lose one without a jollification. You had better promise at once, Bob." [Pg 285]

"Well, for my part," replied Bob, "I would give you a spree in a minute, but how am I to get it up? I would not know who to ask; and, besides, no one would come to my invitation except such fellows as you, who would drink all day, or until you had drained the house dry of liquor."

"Get your brother to do it," replied the Doctor, "and work round to the blind side of his wife. I'll be bound she's woman enough to join in it heartily; the mere prospect of the thing will be sufficient inducement to make her fall into your views; and depend upon it she will not only undertake the whole affair, but get together a good company for you."

"But there is another thing," urged Bob, "if we are to invite fifty or a hundred people to our place we will have to find quarters for most of them, and how shall we manage that?" [Pg 286]

"Nothing easier in the world," replied the contumacious Doctor; "give up all your spare room to the women folks, and we fellows can shake down anywhere, camp under a tree if you like; or those that don't like that, let them take the wool-shed."

"Well, I'll see if the thing can be managed," replied Bob, "and let you know in good time."

CHAPTER XII.

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"Yes! loath indeed: my soul is nerved to all,
Or fall'n too low to fear a farther fall."

BYRON.

"Well, be it as thou wilt."

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

Some few days after the meeting of Doctor Graham's friends at Clintown the monotony of the little circle at Fern Vale was disturbed by the arrival of a horseman with a letter for Miss Ferguson; who received into her hand one of those intricately folded missives which at once proclaim the correspondent to be of the fair sex, and proceeded to read the following epistle:

"DEAREST KATE.—I'm having a few friends at Brompton on Friday week to spend the day, and of course expect to see you and your brothers of the number. I will take no excuse, you must come; and, if you can possibly manage it, I would be delighted by your prolonging your visit for a week or as long as you like. However, that I will leave to yourself. Eleanor and Mrs. Rainsfield I expect with Tom, so that you will have company on the road. We will do what we can to amuse you all day, and you need not make yourself uneasy about the journey, for I will have plenty of room in the house for you, as well as all my friends, and Mr. Smithers will provide for the accommodation of the gentlemen. You had better ride over on the Thursday, and the party will break up comfortably on the Saturday morning. Tell your brothers that part of the programme of the day's pleasures is a race, and as I know that William at least is fond of racing, he might like to join in it. The man that carries this

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will be able to tell him more about it than I can, so I will leave him to gain all that information from him. With warmest love, believe me, dearest Kate, your affectionate friend,
ELIZA SMITHERS.

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"Tuesday morning.

"P. S.—Write me a reply by the bearer, and mind as you value my friendship make no excuses."

The delighted girl had no intention of declining the invitation; for when did a young and joyous creature in the zenith of youthful spirits ever desire seclusion from the innocent enjoyments of

life? She ran with the open letter in her hand to her brother William (who was at the time a short distance from the house giving instructions to some of his men), and cried: "See, Will, here is an invitation from Mrs. Smithers to a party at Brompton; you'll go, won't you, Will? I know you will; I'll go and write an answer to say we will accept it."

"Don't be in such a violent hurry my little Diana; give me time to read the letter," said her brother, "before you act as sponsor for me. There is no necessity, my dear, to be so impatient; I dare say the messenger will wait for a few minutes;" and then, after perusing it, he continued: "For my part I will be delighted to go, though I'll first see what John says. But, my Kitty! you should not run out in the sun with your head uncovered; you will be spoiling your beautiful complexion and getting a *coup de soleil*. Then your invitations to parties would be at an end; be off now and put on a hat, and we will go look for John, and get his decision on the question."

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The affectionate mandate of her brother, was soon obeyed by Kate; and the two went in search of John, to submit the note to his perusal. After reading it, he expressed a disinclination to accept the invitation, excusing himself that as they had determined to shortly start for New England he had no wish to join the festivities; but to enable his brother and sister to go to Brompton, he said he would delay his departure until after their return.

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Kate and William endeavoured in vain to dissuade him from this, but he was inexorable; so it was at last arranged that they should join the party without him, and Kate hastened to communicate the intelligence to her friend, while William took the opportunity of eliciting from the Brompton messenger all the information he could obtain respecting the arrangements.

The reader may conjecture the motives that actuated John Ferguson in his desire to keep aloof from Brompton. He was aware the marriage of Bob Smithers and Eleanor Rainsfield was fixed for a period not very remote; and, perceiving the object of the meet was to exhibit the young lady to the admiring gaze, and introduce her to the notice of the friends of the family as the affianced bride of Bob Smithers, he wished to avoid a meeting which, he doubted not, would be irksome to the lady and painful to himself, especially as he would be compelled to witness the triumph of his rival, who, he believed, would take a malicious pleasure in making him feel his defeat. He therefore resolved to absent himself from a society where he was calculated to experience disappointment, rather than pleasure; where for him there would be no enjoyment, except the melancholy satisfaction of gazing on the features of the one he dearly loved, but who so shortly was to be the bride of another. As his brother and sister left him he resumed the occupation at which he had been disturbed on their approach, and continued wrapt in his own gloomy meditations, until he was aroused from his reverie by the cheerful voice of Tom Rainsfield calling him by his name; when turning round he perceived his friend standing at his side.

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"Why, what on earth is the matter with you, John?" said Tom, as he gazed upon the sorrowful features of the young man; "you look ill, wretchedly ill; what ails you, man?"

"Nothing," replied John. "I never felt better in my life; I am not ailing." But his looks belied his speech, for his pallid cheek bore the stamp of a mental depression, and his haggard features the evidence of sufferings other than corporeal; for, let the truth be told, the consciousness that Eleanor was lost to him for ever, preyed upon his mind; and, notwithstanding his repeated efforts to rally his drooping spirits, a melancholy gloom had settled upon his brow, there giving indication of the tumult of thought and feeling that had and still was agitating his brain.

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His passion for Eleanor Rainsfield, since the fire of love had first entered his soul, had ever been the material of his dreams both by day and night; she was the star of his destiny, the cynosure to which the magnetic needle of his hopes always pointed, and to which his fondest affections continually looked for guidance. He loved her madly, and had half fancied, notwithstanding her avowment of a pre-engagement, that some fortuitous circumstance might have transpired to break off that connexion, and lead her to join her destinies with his. He believed he was not altogether an indifferent object in her eyes, and the fates, even though hitherto unpropitious, he had believed would have ultimately favoured his cause. Thus he continued, even with his heart under a prohibitory decree, to cherish the tender feeling for the lovely girl, although his calmer nature told him there was no hope. He offered up his mind a willing sacrifice to the pleasing though deadly poison, and permitted his soul to be ravished by the wild delirium of his infatuated love. He had, in fact, hoped against hope; but now, that he discovered the creature he adored was irrevocably passing from him to become the wife of another, life appeared to him a blank, and he felt no desire to prolong an existence expatriated from the society of the only one who made it dear to him. These were the feelings that had consumed the spirits of the young man between the interval of his separation from his sister and his meeting with Tom Rainsfield, and which had left such indubitable marks of distress on his countenance that his friend had not failed to detect them.

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We say that John Ferguson was aware that the marriage of Bob Smithers and Eleanor was settled. This he had heard some time previously, and the tenor of Mrs. Smithers' note had confirmed it; while in his susceptible imagination he pictured to himself the whole plan, needing no better prompter than his fears. While there had been a shadow of hope, John had borne with commendable fortitude the disappointment of unrequited affection, and sustained the devastation of the consuming fire that was burning within him without the possibility of egress. But now that the barrier of his expectancy had been rudely broken down; that the circumvallation of his breastine citadel had been razed to the ground, and the delicate fabric of his heart exposed to the rough greeting of the unfriendly blast, and the piercing shafts of despair, his spirit sank under the assault, and left him crushed and almost demented.

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"Why, man," said Tom, "you look the perfect picture of misery. I know, or can guess, the cause of

your grief; but never mind, cheer up, old fellow! You know the old adage: 'The battle is never lost till it's won;' so do not despair. Eleanor is not married yet, and, by Jove! she won't be either; at least to Smithers; you mark my words."

"My dear fellow," said John, "do not destroy her happiness or peace of mind by attempting to separate her from her betrothed. He is her choice, and it is her pleasure to accept him; then what have I to complain of? Pray, don't frustrate her marriage with Smithers out of any regard for me; for I feel convinced any intrigue you may enter into to further such an object would be distasteful to her."

"Not at all," replied his friend; "you mistake her, John, and me too, and I may add yourself as well. Though Eleanor has given her consent to this arrangement I know her heart is not with it. Do you think I would be disappointing her, or making her miserable, by destroying a bond that would only bind her in a state of abject misery for the entire period of her life? Would I not rather be justified in rescuing her from such a condition? Of course I would. Then that is the reason I object to her marriage with Smithers; for I am certain she would never know a day's happiness from the hour of her union with him. Two natures never were more diametrically opposed to one another; the dove and the hawk might as well be allied as she to him. She all purity, virtue, and innocence; he all licentiousness, vice, and depravity, without the capacity to appreciate so priceless a gem, and I believe without one feeling of regard for her. No, by—I was going to swear; but, never mind, it cannot be, and I say it shall not be; I'll prevent it yet, for I am sworn to it."

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"I fear, Tom," said John Ferguson, "you are disposed to judge too harshly of Smithers; Eleanor evidently sees something in him that she admires, or I imagine she would not accept him; so I would beg of you again to leave her to the dictates of her own feelings. Much as I should desire to be blessed by the possession of her hand, I would not attempt it by an opposition to her own inclinations."

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"Well, John," replied the other, "I am really surprised to hear you talk so if you love Eleanor, as I am convinced you do. For her sake, as well as for your own, you will save her from the misery of so unnatural an alliance as this she meditates. It cannot but terminate unhappily, for I am sure Smithers' treatment of her will be on a par with his general conduct, selfish and brutal."

"Pray, don't imagine, my dear Tom," continued John Ferguson, "that I am advocating his cause out of opposition to you, or of perverseness to my own interests. I would consider it the *acme* of human felicity to be possessed of so inestimable a treasure as Eleanor Rainsfield; but, next to the happiness of that possession, my desire is to see her happy. Bearish as Smithers may be, and I believe is, it will be impossible for him to witness the devotion of such a gentle heart as hers without being warmed in the sunshine of her affection. He cannot but treat her with love and respect, for her nature would command them even from the breast of a savage."

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"No doubt it would," said Tom, "but I believe that Bob Smithers has not got the feelings of a savage except in his barbarity. But, come John, this won't do; I can't see you perseveringly standing in your own light, and, instead of arousing yourself to exertion, indulging in melancholy reflections. You must be stimulated to work the release of that girl. Why, man, you have lost her through your own supineness. Do you think if I had loved a girl as you have Eleanor, that I would have cared about all the Bob Smithers' in the colony. I would never have ceased my importunities, until I had induced her to look favourably upon me, and condemn her other suitor. You know the saying that the constant dropping of water will wear away the stone; and if I had not worn a hole into her heart, it is a wonder; especially if my rival was such a careless wooer as Smithers; and when once I had got her to prefer me to him, Bob Smithers, or Bob anybody else, might have gone to Jericho for me. I'll bet I'd have soon choked him off; but, my dear fellow, let me see you put a bright face upon the matter, and thrust your foot through 'Bob's affair'; for I am convinced it does not require much to turn the scale in your favour even now, notwithstanding all Eleanor's scruples. The girl must be yours, so take heart."

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A sickly smile was the only response Tom got from his friend for this attempt to rally him, but he continued: "Well, look here, John, if you don't exert yourself to avert what I consider a domestic calamity I shall cease to consider you my friend. I never saw one who so pertinaciously adhered to a despondency, without attempting to extricate himself, as you. William tells me you have declined the invitation to Brompton. Now, I must insist upon your going; I'll take you under my especial care, and will engage to bring about something to your advantage."

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"I am extremely indebted to you for your sympathy, Tom," said his friend; "but I regret I have a pre-engagement to start for New England before that time; and I fear to delay my journey much longer as the weather threatens to break."

"Now, you know that is all nonsense," said Tom; "I am going down to town myself in a few days, and a day or two will make no more difference to you than to me. I know the object of your refusal, so that excuse won't serve. Why should you desire to avoid the Smitherses or ourselves? It is true Bob has behaved to you in a most ungentlemanly manner, but you need not notice him; the invitation comes from his brother and lady, and you may be sure he will be compelled to treat you with civility. With regard to our party, you need not be under any apprehension; Mrs. Rainsfield, Eleanor, and myself will form our cavalcade, so you may anticipate no unpleasantness by the chance of meeting my brother. While, if I judge rightly, our going ought to be an inducement to you, for of course we shall join to make one party on the road."

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"I really can't go," said John.

"I'll hear of no objection," replied Tom; "you must go, unless you wish to displease all of us by your moroseness. Besides, bear in mind that your absence will give Bob Smithers an opportunity

of glorying over your defeat. If it is only to oppose him I would urge you to come; and make yourself as agreeable to Eleanor as you can."

"I have already declined the invitation," said John, "and I doubt not ere this the messenger has returned with Kate's reply; so it would be unbecoming of me to go after my refusal."

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"Moonshine!" exclaimed Tom. "Who would ever think of studying etiquette with our friends in the bush? Besides your apology is a difficulty easily remedied, for the man is going to stop at our place all night; so we can get your sister to write another note, and I will take it over to him, and exchange it for the one he has; we may therefore consider that arranged, and that you go."

"I will go to please you," said John; "but I can assure you I have little pleasure in the prospect."

"Well, you are a stubborn and ungrateful fellow," exclaimed Tom Rainsfield. "I have a good mind to repeat that remark to Eleanor, unless you promise me to make amends by being assiduously attentive to her, despite all frowns of another."

"I fear," replied John, "that is a difficult task; however, I'll attempt that also to please you."

"That's right, my dear fellow," cried Tom, "that's the first sensible thing I have heard you utter for some time, and inclines me to entertain some hopes of you yet. But come let us join your sister and William; we will talk over our plans, and set the young lady to work on her letter."

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The two young men then sauntered quietly up to the house, and Tom Rainsfield taking the lead entered first, and addressed Kate Ferguson in his lively manner as he did so.

"I have been successful, my dear Miss Ferguson," he said, "in making a convert of John. I have overruled all his objections to join us, and he has promised to accompany our party to Brompton. So we have to beg of you to concoct another epistle for Mrs. Smithers, which I will be the bearer of to the Brompton messenger, who is to remain at our place all night."

Kate instantly sprang from her seat, and clapped her hands with delight; then running to her brother threw her arms round his neck and kissed him, gazing in his eyes as she said: "I am so delighted, dear John, that you are coming with us. You have been looking so melancholy of late that I have felt quite wretched to see you; but you will be pleased with the visit, I know you will, and happy too; will you not, John?"

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"Yes, my dear," he replied, "but am I not always happy?"

"I don't know," replied the affectionate girl; "but I hardly think you are always so. Are you really happy now, John? You do not look so."

"But I am, my love," said he; "how could I be otherwise?"

"Of course not," said Tom; "I should like to know what fellow would not be happy when he had a pair of delicate little arms affectionately flung round his neck, a brace of luscious little ruby lips pouting to his, and warbling the sweet music of affection, and with two lovely eyes peering into his dull orbs. By Jove! the very thought of it ought to make him happy; and it is my firm conviction that he has been showing all this opposition just to be tempted in that way. I only wish I could induce any little charmer to try the same experiment on me. I would be incessantly wanting an application of the persuasive influence. Do you desire me to join the party, Miss Ferguson?"

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"Of course, we do," replied the young lady; "we couldn't well do without you."

"Then I've determined not to go," replied Tom. "Neither Mrs. Rainsfield nor Eleanor care much about my company, so I think I'll absent myself."

This palpable hit of Tom's was rewarded by a hearty laugh from John, and a blush and an ejaculation of "you horrid man," from the damsel; who pouted her lips, and attempted to frown, while she went to her little writing-desk to pen a revised edition of her note of the morning. Her anger, however, as Tom well knew, was only assumed and of short duration, and after a few moments of attempted frigidity she said smilingly: "You are really incorrigibly rude, Mr. Rainsfield, and you may depend upon it I will tell Eleanor of your impertinence."

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"My dear young lady," replied the delinquent, "that would be nothing new to her; she is already fully acquainted with my peculiarities, and would probably recommend you to try the effect of your balm."

"Why, you are getting worse than ever, you insolent fellow," cried Kate. "I'll really get angry with you, and forbid you accompanying us, which I am sure, notwithstanding your statement of indifference, would be a severe punishment. But leave me alone a few minutes pray, until I write my letter; and then I will expect you to apologize to me for your bad behaviour."

"I will be as dumb as a dormouse," exclaimed Tom, "until you have completed your task, so proceed; or, perhaps, you would like to employ me as your amanuensis. I will be happy to be of service to you."

"Then be good enough to hold your tongue," said Kate, "you are not fulfilling your promise of silence."

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"No; but I am merely making a suggestion for your benefit," said Tom.

"You are positively dreadful," cried Kate; "you men, insolent fellows! are continually talking of women's tongues; but, I declare, no woman could have one that is kept so unceasingly occupied as yours, for you give it no rest; even when you are requested to do so, and when you actually make the attempt."

"You shall have no further cause to complain," said Tom; "I will be silent until you finish your letter; that is, if you do not occupy as much time as is necessary to pen a government dispatch. Ladies' specimens of chirography are proverbially voluminous, are as vague as an electioneering address, and require as much attention and time in their composition and execution, as if each individual epistle was of the greatest moment of their lives."

"Hush! for goodness sake," exclaimed Kate; "when will you stop? pray be silent for a few minutes, and then you may talk as much as you like." [Pg 309]

The desired truce was at length obtained, and the letter written and handed to Tom for delivery.

"Now," said he, "where has William gone? we ought to have him here to discuss plans; however, I daresay, you, Miss Ferguson, John, and I, can manage. What I would propose is this; that you all come over to Strawberry Hill the night before, and start thence the first thing in the morning; for I fear that you, Miss Ferguson, will find that fifty miles will be quite far enough to ride in one day, and Brompton is very nearly that from our place."

"That proposition I should decidedly object to," said John; "it would not be consistent to intrude ourselves upon your brother. The extra distance between this and your place will be of little consequence, especially as Kate is a good horsewoman, and I am sure will think nothing of the distance." [Pg 310]

"Very likely not," replied Tom; "but consider a young lady cannot be expected to be ready for a journey so early as you would, and to do it comfortably you should start from here at daybreak. Be reasonable now for once, John, and if you won't come yourself let William bring your sister over the day before, and leave her that night with Eleanor. You can pick her up as you pass on Thursday morning, while we will join company, and all proceed together. What do you say to that arrangement, Miss Ferguson?"

"I should like it very much," replied Kate; "but I will do whatever John wishes. If he does not desire me to stop at your house I will endeavour to ride the whole distance in the day, though I must confess it is rather a long ride."

"Of course it is," said Tom, "far too long for you, excellent equestrian though you be; and, besides, I can't see what objection John can have to your visiting us. You come as a guest to my sister-in-law; therefore, my brother's quarrel with John should in no way prevent you from sojourning with us. Waive all unpleasant feelings, John, and let your sister stop with us for that night." [Pg 311]

"I don't wish to detain her," replied John, "out of any ill-feeling towards any member of your family; I am sure you are perfectly aware of that; but from a feeling that it would be hardly proper under the circumstances."

"There can be no impropriety in it," said Tom; "my sister-in-law would be delighted with the arrangement; in fact, she herself proposed the scheme to me this morning, when she received her invitation and heard that you were expected to go too. To settle the matter, I'll bring her over here on Thursday, and she will take Miss Ferguson back with her; for I know very well you'll not attempt to dispute the question with her. What do you say to *that* arrangement, Miss Ferguson?"

"Oh, I should be so happy to join Eleanor," she exclaimed, "and stop with her that night if John will let me." [Pg 312]

"Of course, he'll let you," replied Tom; "he has no serious objection I know, but is only opposing me because you are desirous of the adoption of my scheme. He wants a little more of your lip salve, when I'll guarantee he'll be softened."

"Now, you are mocking me," said Kate; "it is cruel of you to make fun of my affection for my brother. I am almost determined not to have anything farther to say to you; you are a hard-hearted unfeeling fellow."

"Pardon me, my dear young lady," cried Tom, "I was only attempting to do faint justice to your insuperable power of fascination. One soft embrace, similar to that I witnessed a short time ago, I am sure will melt your inexorable brother, who is even worse to deal with, and requires more coaxing than any 'stern parent' I ever saw."

"I'll be softened without that this time," said John, "as it is Mrs. Rainsfield's desire that you should break your journey by starting from her house, Kate, I have no desire to oppose your own wish; you may go if you like, and William and I will join your party on Thursday morning." [Pg 313]

The delighted girl again ran over to her brother, and sitting on his knee, with her arms encircling his neck in an amatory embrace, leant her head on his breast, and looked roguishly pleased from her dark blue eyes at Tom, who sat in perfect raptures, gazing at the lovely seraph.

"Upon my life, Miss Ferguson, you'll be the death of me," he exclaimed; "how do you imagine any mortal man can withstand such temptation? If I witness another scene like that to-day, I'll lose my senses. I must be off home, unless you wish to have the weight on your mind of being the cause of rendering me a raving maniac."

"I think you are that already, sir," replied Kate; "for you are always strange in your manner, and invariably accompany, in your addresses to me, insults in your flattery." But the kind-hearted girl, thinking, even in her playfulness, she had said something too harsh, came over and stood by Tom's chair, and continued in a sweet and kindly voice and with a smile beaming on her charming features: "But I will give you full permission during our visit to Brompton, to say as many cruel things to me as you like and I won't be angry. You may flatter me as much as you [Pg 314]

please, and I'll pledge you my word I'll not believe you. So there will be no occasion for you to take leave of your senses just at present."

"To live under the smile of your countenance," exclaimed Tom, "would be a sufficient talisman against any evil spirit; so I fear none of their machinations, and feel sufficiently armed against that demon lunacy; towards whom, since I have known you, I have always had an irresistible tendency."

"Then I should advise you," said Kate, "to instantly fly my presence."

"That, Miss Ferguson, would only have the effect of hastening an exacerbation of my malady; my only hope for relief is in a continuance of your smiles." [Pg 315]

"Your case is certainly a most extraordinary one," said Kate; "you say your only relief is from me, and yet I am the cause of your mental subversion."

"It is not at all extraordinary, my dear young lady," said Tom; "but perfectly consistent with the doctrines of pharmacology, both allopathic and homeopathic, by the principle embodied in the doctrine of the latter, viz., '*similia similibus curantur*.' If your smiles wound my heart, they are the sweetest as well as the surest remedy to heal it; and, if an exhibition of your specious favours almost drives me to distraction, the balm whose curative powers is the most effective is a permission to continue in the thralldom of your mellifluent bondage."

"Well, now, I declare you are a dreadful fellow," said Kate, "I did not give you permission to flatter me until Thursday week, but you commence now in spite of me." [Pg 316]

"What! is he flirting again, my Kitty?" said William, as he burst into the room. "Tom, we will have to send you, like your renowned namesake, to Coventry. You will be spoiling our sister, cramming her poor little head with your love speeches. She will be thinking of nothing else but those little chubby-faced winged archers, whose destined occupation is to traverse the globe with flambeau in hand, to ignite the inflammable material of mortals' hearts. And instead of our finding substantial meals, to satisfy the cravings of our hunger, we will some day be expected to feed on the ambrosia of that little mischief-making deity. Is John superintending your flirting, my turtle doves?"

A hearty laugh was the response of Tom Rainsfield to this sally; while John replied that he had been too much amused at the farce to interrupt it. Kate, however, took a different mode of explanation. She advanced nimbly to her brother and saluted him; not in the way she had done to John, but with an inoffensive titillation on his cheek with her downy little hand; which she intended, as she said, for a slap for his impertinence. "But tell me, Will," said she, "what made you rush in in such a hurry; was it to frighten us?" [Pg 317]

"Frighten you, my pet?" he replied. "No! I have got some fun to tell you. A few minutes ago while I was down at the stock-yard I had a letter put into my hands by young Sawyer; but as the missive is an epistolary production somewhat unique I will read it to you for your benefit. The orthography is not at all in harmony with any of the lexicographers to whom it has been my fortune at any time to refer; but in open violation of Dr. Johnson and all his colleagues. However, that is a minor curiosity, and can be digested in detail."

"Well, read us the letter," replied his auditory, "or let us look at it."

"Here it is," said William, as he commenced to read it; while we, to give the reader a better conception of the production, crave pardon for inserting it verbatim. The superscription is "Mr. Wm. Fuggishon, Esq. Farn Vail per barer," and the contents are: [Pg 318]

"Weddingsday, Dare Sir, Exkuse the libety i take for to rite yer but Capting Jones and me presints our comblemint and 'ave to say as how weir agoing to 'ave a partey on nixt munday and wood be glad if you'd cum as theril be golley sprej and lots of gents. be shuer and cum and also yer syster cos we shal 'ave ladeys to at hour ouse, and theril be no fears on her getting 'ome agin, cos I thinks you dosent drink so of corse you'd not git drunk I am Mr. Fuggishon sir yours truly Mrs. Capting Jones wat is to be or Mary ann Sawyer now.

"P.S.—If you now any other frends as wood like to cum, bring em."

When the laughter that had followed the reading of this epistle had somewhat subsided William said to his sister: "Now, Kitty, what do you think of that invitation? my word! but we are going to have a gay time of it up here; parties will be going the round of the country after this. Of course, you will go to the Sawyers rejoicings, Kitty, and put on your pretty, and good behaviour?" [Pg 319]

"If I had not known you were joking, Will, I would be angry with you," exclaimed the indignant girl. "The impertinence of the horrid creatures indeed!"

"But you know, Kate, 'I dosent drink,' as the prospective Mrs. Jones affirms; consequently there is no fear of you, unless you too often drink to the health of the happy couple."

"Don't talk nonsense, Will, but tell us how this affair has come about; it is the first I have heard of a marriage in their family being contemplated?" said Kate.

"Well, my little poppet," said William, "I will impart to you all the information I have been able to glean, and which has been obtained from Mr. Reuben Sawyer, the brother of the bride, and the bearer of the note of invitation. It appears that a certain gentleman rejoicing in the name of Jones, and honoured by the prefixed title of Captain (though from whence, or in what service I know not), has by some means introduced himself to the family of Sawyer, and made a conquest of the heart of the younger female member. They are to be married at Alma on Sunday, thence to return to the hall of the bride's father, and entertain their friends on Monday. What the pecuniary [Pg 320]

arrangements are, I don't know; but I strongly suspect they are to the advantage of the *soi-disant* Captain, of whom, by the bye, I imagine the Sawyer family know very little. It strikes me it will turn out a sell for the girl, for I fully expect the bridegroom will be discovered to be an impostor. I am convinced he has assumed a title and garb to palm himself off on them as a gentleman, while they have snatched at the bait."

"What a dreadful man he must be then," said Kate.

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"Even so, Miss Kate," said Tom; "but there are numbers of such 'dreadful men' prowling about in the colony; who appropriate and abandon as many aliases and personate as many characters as would people a small town. They have a convenient knack of falling in love with such girls as Miss Mary Ann Sawyer, to whom they give a glowing account of all their wealthy friends and genteel relations. Then before the effect dies out they propose, are accepted, recommend a speedy marriage to prevent, as they say, their relations from hearing and stopping the intended match, and induce, too frequently, not only the girl, but her friends to fall into their views; while they do not discover their error until the gay Lothario takes leg-bail upon the first symptoms of an enquiry being made after him by the victim of some previous matrimonial swindle."

"Well," said William, "I am inclined to accept the invitation for myself. I would like to witness the fun, for fun I am sure there will be; and I am authorised to invite any friends, so will make use of my *carte blanche* and ask you, Tom. What do you say, will you go? If you will, we will go together. I would like to see their spread, and attempts at doing the genteel thing; but, at the same time, I should like to have some one to accompany me."

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"Oh, I don't mind it at all," said Tom, "I'll join you with pleasure to witness the feast. I expect it will be a rich sight, if not a rich feed. Will you make one of us, John?"

"No," replied John, "I could not endure their disgusting affectation; and I would find no pleasure in witnessing their gross fooleries. I will remain at home, and take care of Kate; she will want some one to keep her company, while you two roisterers are absent; and I am sure it will be more congenial to both of us."

"Yes, it will indeed," said Kate; "I am glad you don't think of leaving me all alone, John, and going to visit those horrid people."

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"Well, we will make amends by giving you a graphic description of it when we return," said William; "and, unless I am very much mistaken, it will be of such a nature as will excite your risibility."

"Very well then," replied Kate, "I hope it will be funny; but whatever you do, Will, pray don't give any of the creatures any encouragement to come here, for I am sure I could not bear the sight of them in our house."

"Never fear, *ma cher*," replied William, "our little tutelary angel shall never be contaminated by the intercourse of our plebeian neighbours; who must learn to consider, notwithstanding an officer has married into their family, that they are only entitled to gaze at our bright star, and that it is too much felicity to expect permission to be graced by an admission within the circle of its rays."

"Don't talk any more nonsense, Will," replied his sister, "but be sure, if any of those people make any proposition to come here, that you will use all your endeavours to prevent them."

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CHAPTER XIII.

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"Tam saw an unco sight!
Nae cotillon brent new frae France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,
Put life and mettle in their heels."

BURNS.

On the following Monday, towards the evening, Tom Rainsfield and William mounted their horses at Fern Vale, to ride over to the domicile of the Sawyers. They had delayed their visit until the close of the day, presuming, though their invitation specified no time of meeting, that they would be quite early enough at the hour they were going. They therefore rode leisurely along, and approached "Industry" (as the Sawyers had christened their place) just as the sun was sinking in the west. The scene that then presented itself to their vision was truly of a novel character, and one that rather amused them.

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A short distance from the cottage had been erected a bowery hall for the reception and feasting of the guests; and at the time when it first burst upon their view the shouts that arose from its umbrageous walls plainly indicated the nature of the proceedings within. But as the reader is not supposed to be possessed of the same ubiquitous faculties as the author, we may be permitted, for the purpose of enlightenment, to describe the nature of those proceedings.

In the interior of this retreat, and stretching its entire length, was a bench or impromptu table, with seats on each side of it of a similar construction; in the whole of which the rough material was plentifully and principally called into use. On the board stood the remains of sundry viands, proclaiming the conclusion of a feast; and bottles, and drinking utensils of various shapes, sizes,

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and material, were kept in constant activity by numerous grim-visaged masculine beings who sat round the table. The variety of costumes was particularly striking, from the perfect black, donned for the nonce by the head of the Sawyer family, to that of one of his choicest friends, who sat in resplendent vest, and shirt sleeves; having divested himself of his outer garment on the principle of preference to ease over elegance. In the rear of what we may call the saloon, in the shade of the bush, another party was assembled; and from the shrieks of the women, and the boisterous mirth of the men, it was evident their amusement was something other than that of a passive nature.

As our friends approached this group a fleet-footed female darted from the human labyrinth like a startled fawn closely pursued by one of the merry-making lords of the creation. The chase was continued amidst the repetition of a perfect Babel of shouts and laughter, until the panting and exhausted roe sank into the arms of the pursuing hart, and yielded to the requiting inoculation. Blush not, gentle reader; these matured specimens of the family of man, for the time forgot the dignity of their years, and were amusing themselves by a renewal of their youthful pristine enjoyments. They were in fact playing at "kiss in the ring."

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In the rear of the house the young men detected another foliate shed, in which were, secured to some rough stalls, numerous specimens of horse-flesh; while in the vicinity were scattered drays, light spring carts, and even shakey gigs, evidently the conveyances of the various guests. Here our friends left their horses; and judging the best place to present themselves to their host, and where they were most likely to see him, would be the leafy hall, they bent thither their steps. Upon reaching the entrance they perceived the company was being enlivened by the performance of some disciple of Apollo, who was venting forth in a stentorian voice a rendering of "The Maniac;" and when he uttered (as the young men arrested their steps so as not to "disturb the harmony"): "No, by heavens! I am not mad," they really thought he was under the same strange hallucination as the subject of the song, and labouring to deceive himself upon a reality. If he was not mad, they imagined, he was at least bordering on that state; while the whole of his hearers were not far removed from the same, when they tolerated such uproar unworthily dignified by the name of music.

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However, when the song ceased, in the midst of the deafening shouts, and clatter of tumblers etc. that followed, William and his companion entered; and at once distinguished the late singer as the individual who sat at the head of the board. This personage was a coarse-looking, red-faced, thick-set fellow; with lowering eyebrows, bushy moustache (though otherwise cleanly shaved face), and hair of an objectionable, though undefinable colour. He was dressed, as far as was perceptible, in a black coat, white waistcoat, and neckerchief, and with an immense frill front to his shirt. He seemed to be exceedingly heated with the exertion of his song; and was drying his face and forehead with a white handkerchief, in which action he was displaying more than one massive ring; adorning fingers, that, to the eyes of our friends, proved experience in more active and manual employment than military discipline would be likely to require. He sat smiling complacently at his friends, as one who was conscious of having displayed the possession of a valuable talent; and, though gratified by the adulation of his hearers, he took it as a just homage, and as a proof that they were not destitute of a phrygian taste; or at least could appreciate music, when they heard it in perfection, as when he himself sang.

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This individual, our friends rightly judged, was Captain Jones. On his right sat his lady, the quondam Miss Sawyer, and on his left her worthy papa. Whether the young lady was enchanted by the lyric strains of her lord, or not, we are at a loss to say; notwithstanding that we know she was possessed of what she called a "pihanner," and had a soul for music, having on various occasions accompanied herself on that instrument to the immense delight of her admiring friends. She might have been actuated in her lengthened sitting by motives of a protective character, to preserve her husband from a too free libation; or, it might have been, that she felt happy in no other society but his. Either of which reasons were sufficiently cogent, though we are unable to conjecture which might have influenced her. But, be it as it may, there she sat; and, with the exception of her mother, who occupied the foot of the table, she was the only representative of her sex in the assembly.

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William and Tom had made their way very nearly up to the head of the table before they were noticed by the host; who, when he perceived them, jumped from his seat, and seizing them each by the hand, expressed all sorts of pleasure at their presence, and formally introduced them to the bold Captain Jones and his lady. The latter having received their congratulations with the most perfect nonchalance, proposed, as the evening was drawing on, that the company should all adjourn to the house; and suiting her motion to her word she sallied from the bower, escorted by our friends, and followed by the bridegroom, and the other "beings of sterner stuff."

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In the cottage they were joined by those who had been amusing themselves on the green; and all then sat down to another substantial meal that went by the name of tea. This being despatched, while the rooms were being cleared, the men adjourned to the verandah and grass to smoke, and were joined by some of the women; while the rest assisted in the domestic arrangements inside. These being completed, and the smokers satisfied with "blowing their cloud," they reentered the dwelling, which had in the short space of time they had occupied in the enjoyment of the narcotic weed, become perfectly metamorphosed. The principal room had been converted from *la salle à manger* to *la salle de danse*; and its transition had been so speedily effected that the company were quite delighted, and loud in their praises of the effective adornment. We are inclined to think, however, more was to be attributed to the spirit that pervaded the company to be pleased with everything than that there was any display of wonderful taste. A few boughs of green foliage were stuck about the walls; and the benches of planks were arranged all round the room, and

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covered with scarlet blankets; while, by way of chandeliers, and in lieu of candlesticks, bottles, containing "Belmont sperms," were dispersed and stationed on every available stand, by which simple means the lighting and decorating of the hall was completed.

The superior guests (we mean our young friends William and Tom) were led away by "the Captain," who acted as major domo M.C., etc., to a back room; which on ordinary occasions served as the dormitory of Mr. Reuben Sawyer, but on the present was set apart for the especial refreshment of "the gents;" while the bridal apartment in the front was made to endure a similar profanation for the benefit of "the ladies." The Captain, after enjoying another shake of the hand from his visitors, gave vent to his feelings in a rapturous expression of delight at the honour of their patronage; declaring the moment to be the happiest of his life; trusting he should long enjoy the pleasure of their friendship; regretting that their friends had not found it convenient to accompany them; and finally requested them to join him in a drink. Upon receiving an acquiescence to this request, he exclaimed: "What shall it be? Brandy? gin? wine? claret? champagne? Ah, champagne; yes! we will have a bottle of champagne for good fellowship sake." Upon which he took up a bottle and cut the string, when away flew the cork, while he poured the wine into three tumblers. Two of these he pushed over to his guests, while the third he raised to his own lips, with the trite though universal toast of "here's luck," and drained his glass at a draught; while he smacked his lips with the air of a connoisseur, and said: "You'll find that an excellent wine, for I selected it myself. The fellow I bought it from tried to palm some inferior stuff on to me, but it wouldn't do; he did not know I was a judge of wine until I convinced him I was not to be humbugged by any of his rubbish. But to tell you the truth wine is all stuff; it does not do a man any good; it may suit a Frenchman (who has got no blood in him) to drink it; but give me beer or brandy they are the drinks for an Englishman. What'll keep life in a fellow like brandy? the only right thing the French ever did was to make brandy; it's the real stuff to cheer you after all. Try a 'ball,' will you?"

Both William and Tom thanked the enthusiastic Captain, but declined the proffered ball; while he assisted himself to a pretty stiff jorum of the *eau de vie*, and quaffed it as if it was a really necessary concomitant to his life; after which he said: "Well, suppose then we go into the room to the women; they will be wanting me to start them off in a dance. But have a smoke? here's some cigars if you like them. You know we don't object to smoking in our drawing-room, ah! ah! ah! This is Liberty Hall! for you can do as you like. But excuse me, I must be off; make yourselves perfectly at home." Saying which, and puffing vigorously at a cigar, he left them, while they leisurely sauntered into the verandah in front; from which they could witness the terpsichorean arrangements.

Elevated in a remote corner of the room, was a professional gentleman of the Paganini school; but, unlike that great performer, he was not content to manipulate upon one chord, but continued with strenuous efforts to raise discord on four. His music, if not exactly metrical, was at least spirited, and that was sufficient for the lovers of the "light fantastic," who danced "their allotted hour" with no small degree of delight. As all human happiness must have an end so had the enjoyment of these merry-makers; and the jig was terminated in a long drawn sigh, and "Oh! dear me," from the women, and an explosion of the remaining pent-up steam of the men. These forthwith adjourned "to liquor," leaving the softer sex to do the same if they felt so disposed, which many of them appeared to be. After about half an hour had elapsed, when the guests returned by degrees to the saloon, Captain Jones volunteered a song; and, upon obtaining the greatest degree of silence practicable, gave the "Ship on Fire." It was in much the same style as the former specimen of his vocalic talent; except that he was a little more boisterous, and sang with a less distinct utterance. But still he was in keeping with the character of the epic; for, unless his face very much belied his internal state, he was in one intestine blaze. There is an oft repeated story of Sir Walter Raleigh that while he was one day smoking his wonted pipe his servant brought him in his beer; but when the domestic, uninitiated to the consolation of the weed, beheld a volume of smoke emitted from the mouth of his master he imagined him to be inflicted by a celiac conflagration, and cast the contents of the flagon into Sir Walter's face. If the ingenious servitor had only lived in our day, and been called upon to wait on our friend the Captain as he appeared on this occasion, he would assuredly have made the same waste of malt liquor on the illuminated visage of that individual. However, the "Ship on Fire" was got through, and elicited great applause; after which, the *artiste*, perceiving his genteel guests rather apart from the rest of the company, and not joining in the festivities, came over and addressed them in the following words:

"Why don't you make yourself at home? you haven't had anything to drink to-night; some refreshments will be round in a minute or so, and then we will have a dance; but you've never heard my wife sing, have you?" Upon receiving a reply in the negative, he continued: "Then, my word, she's a stunner! I'll go and tell her you want her to sing. You know she sings, 'I should like to marry.' I composed a song for her to that tune, and you shall hear it;" saying which he left them to induce his fair bride to oblige her friends; at the same time that Mr. Sawyer, junior, made his appearance with a large jug and a number of tumblers, and asked our friends if they would take a drink. They thought it strange to bring water round to imbibe, considering that most of the guests ignored that beverage without its being plentifully diluted with spirits (as the Captain said). But thinking it was possibly on their account, seeing that they did not indulge alcoholically as the others did, our young friends gladly accepted a glass, and held it to be filled from the jug. To their astonishment, however, what they had imagined was water gave evidence, by its appearance, of more inebriating qualities.

"Why, what on earth is that you're giving us, Reuben?" asked William.

"Champagne," replied the youth.

"Champagne!" they both uttered at once; "that is a novel way of serving champagne."

"Oh, father said it was humbug to open a bottle and hand it round in mouthfuls to the people," replied the youth; "so, you see we opened a lot, and turned them into this jug, so that everybody can take a drink of it."

This idea considerably amused our friends, and they laughed heartily at the champagne service, as they called it; but were checked suddenly in their mirth by the "charming and accomplished" Mrs. Jones warbling forth her desires for a suitable match in the matrimonial way. We need not repeat her song but merely state that her desiderata were centred in a young digger with plenty of gold, and a good hut, which was to be possessed of a brick chimney; and not a slab "humpie" with a hole in the bark roof, containing a tub or other cylindrical vessel to carry off the smoke. And the desired one, should he present himself, was to go down on his knees, and conscientiously swear that he "had left no wife at home." When the lady had finished her song the plaudits of her enraptured hearers rang through the house, and the woods outside. The company were enchanted, and no doubt imagined she had far surpassed even the efforts of a Grisi (did they but know such a being existed). The fair creature herself was equally satisfied with her performance, which she considered exquisite; though our friends were rude enough to think otherwise, notwithstanding that they were profuse in their praise to the lady and her husband. Dancing was then resumed, and the young men, having seen enough to afford a fund of amusement to themselves and their respective family circles, waited for an opportunity to slip away unmolested. The fortuitous event was not long in presenting itself; and at a moment when the majority of the men were engaged "fast and furious" at their wassail, the two young men saddled their horses, mounted, and returned to Fern Vale.

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