

“The Last of Six”

Tales of the Austral Tropics

Favenc, Ernest (1846-1908)

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"The Last of Six"
Tales of the Austral Tropics
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Preface.

Rolf Boldrewood

IN these "Tales of the Austral Tropics" will be found the strange romances which write themselves, often in letters of blood, amid the half-unknown, mysterious regions of tropical Australia. That they are not less true than terrible, I take it upon myself to affirm. That such is far from being the case with the larger proportion of literary manufacture professing to describe Australian life and character, I most distinctly assert. "Those who know seldom write, and those who write don't know," remarks the veteran colonist with accentuated emphasis. But this author's name is a household word among bushmen and bookmen from Albany to Thursday Island, from "The Gulf" to the Snowy River —

"Alike to him the sea, the shore,
The pen, the bridle and the oar."

To him, familiar as highways are the endless solitudes of the "Never Never Country" — he has tempted the Desert Sphinx, gazed upon gold matrix and opal hoards which gleamed in mockery of the exhausted wanderer. Trusted for dear life in forest glades to a steady eye and a true rifle. Listened in a canoe on the Coral Sea to the moaning of the approaching tempest.

Long a leading actor upon Dame Nature's stage, he has turned scene-painter for the nonce, and limned with lifelike effect the drama of the Waste.

"ROLF BOLDREWOOD."

Albury, N.S. Wales,
Nov. 10, 1892.

“The Last of Six”: Tales of the Austral
Tropics.

The Last of Six.

PERHAPS no more desolate, depressing scenery can be found anywhere in the world than on the mangrove-flats of Northern Queensland. As you row slowly up some saltwater creek, nothing is visible on either side but low banks of oozy mud, awash at high tide, covered with writhing and distorted trees. Now and then a branch creek breaks the monotony of the scrub, for the shore is here a perfect labyrinth and network of watercourses, whilst the only living denizens visible are armies of hideous crabs, and an occasional evil-looking alligator, which glides noiselessly off the mud into deep water as your boat approaches.

By day it is dismal enough; by night it is worse. The venomous mosquitoes buzz about you in myriads, strange cries resound through the twisted roots of the trees left bare by the receding tide; and, as the night wears on, a white mist, cold and dank, breathes deadly clamminess over all.

It was just sunrise in this delectable region. The rays had even gilded the sombre upper branches of the mangroves with a sparkle of golden colour, although as yet the sullen mist was still rising in white wreaths from the bosom of the sluggish tide. Anchored in mid-stream was a small boat, apparently without occupants, but presently the sail, that in a tumbled heap had been lying on the bottom, was disturbed and a sleepy man emerged from beneath its shelter; as he stood up, another threw the sail back and got up too. They were both towzled, dirty, and looking about as cross-grained as men might be expected to do who had passed the night cramped up in the bottom of a boat, with millions of mosquitoes thirsting for their blood — and getting it.

“No wind!” said the first; “pull again, I suppose, until ten o'clock!” And he stepped forward and commenced to haul up the heavy stone that served as anchor.

“I suppose so;” returned the other; “tide against us too, but I think it's just on the turn” — and he settled himself down on the after-thwart and prepared to put out an oar.

“My God! he's coming back!” cried the first and elder man, dropping into the bottom of the boat the stone he had just hauled up. The other sprang up and gazed stupidly at the object indicated, that, carried down by the still-receding tide, passed slowly within an oar's length of the boat.

It was the dead body of a man; the shoulders and the back of the head

were alone visible, but the horror of it was unmistakable — it needed no second glance to tell its character.

“Pull,” suddenly cried the younger, dropping on his seat, his voice rising to a shriek; “he's coming aboard!” Released from her anchorage the boat had started to voyage down stream in company with the dead man. A few desperate strokes took them away from the corpse, and then they rested on their oars and gazed at each other with the sweat of fear upon their faces.

“The very alligators won't touch him!” murmured the younger man at last; “let's get out of this. I'm not fit for anything after yesterday.”

They pulled a few strokes in silence, then the elder spoke. “Let's get back to camp before we do anything. I'm like you, done up altogether. We'll turn down this creek and then we shan't have to pass him again.” And he indicated the direction of the corpse.

The boat was headed down a branch creek, and now went with the tide aided by a few lazy strokes from the men, who silently kept on their course. In about an hour's time the creek widened and the sound of surf was audible; then suddenly they shot out from the gloomy, reeking mangrove swamp into sight of the ocean, and a fresh sea breeze came with a puff in their faces, as if to welcome their return.

“We're close to the camp,” said the elder man as they rested on their oars; “we might have got here last night instead of catching fever and ague in that accursed place.”

“There's so many of these creeks,” returned the other; “we could not have made sure in the dark. However, let's land and go across the spit.” Pulling the boat well up the sand and making her fast with a long painter to a straggling mangrove-tree, they stepped ashore; then, having taken the sail out and spread it to dry on the sand they shouldered their oars and ascended the low spit. Before them, within a short half-mile, lay a semicircular bay protected by a sand-bank, on which the long surf rollers were breaking white. Within shelter of the bank lay a small lugger, and on the beach, above high water-mark, were rough sheds, and frame erections indicating that it was a *béche-de-mer* station.

As the two men approached the camp, a woman came out to meet them; a few aborigines and a Kanaka or two were also visible. The woman who advanced was dark in complexion, with wild black eyes and hair. She was rudely dressed and barefooted; there was an air of semi-madness about her that was startling, yet fascinating — such awful horror shone in her eyes.

“Well,” she said in fairly good English, “you found them?”

“One of them,” said the elder man, “and when we've had a feed we'll go and look for the other.”

“One of them!” cried the woman; “which? — which?”

“The one you call Alphonse — the big one.”

“Oh!” shrieked the woman, “where is he? Why is he not here?”

“Why! he's in that creek out there, and there he can stop for me; after what you told us he's not fit to be buried.”

“Dead!” she returned in an awestruck whisper. “But no! the devil cannot die.”

“Devil or not, he's dead; dead enough, and nearly turned our stomachs this morning, for his ugly carcass came drifting right on top of us after we thought he went out to sea yesterday.”

“Now, missus,” said the other, “suppose you let us get something to eat, for it was nigh this time yesterday when we started.”

“You have brought good news,” said the woman, “the devil is dead, I will wait on you” — and she hastened to the rude cooking-place and soon returned with food and tea.

The meal finished, the two men lit their pipes, the women watching them anxiously.

“You will go again?” she said at last, timidly. One man looked at the other, and then the elder spoke —

“Well, we'll have another hunt, but I warn you, there's little hope.”

“No matter,” she said, “but let me go with you.”

“I suppose it's not much odds,” returned the man. “Come, Jim, the tide's turning now.” They shouldered the oars and, followed by the woman, walked back to the boat. The tide was about the same height as when they landed, only now it was flowing. Stepping in they pushed off, and were soon once more amongst the mangroves.

* * * * *

The two trepang-fishers had picked up a leaky boat with a starving crew, a strange crew — two men and a woman — escapees from New Caledonia, whom they brought to the station and fed. The fishers had no intention of handing them over to justice — or, let us say, to the law; the affair was no business of theirs; but if they took them in to Cooktown the capture of their guests would be certain. Then the refugees organised a plan. The two men would take their boat and pull up one of the salt-water creeks to the open country; here they would sink the boat, and make their way, as best they could, through the bush till they happened upon some of the outlying stations. The woman, who spoke good English, could go with the fishermen to Cooktown and take her chance; it was impossible she could stand the hardship of a bush tramp. To this plan the woman vehemently objected, and begged the man she called her husband not to go. Apparently he consented, but during the night the two men slipped away, and in the morning the woman found herself deserted. Then followed a scene of wild lamentation, during which the horrified Englishmen learned some of the ghastly details of the voyage from New

Caledonia — horrors that made them shudder and vow that if one of the men ever turned up he should be delivered over to justice. With frantic passion the woman appealed to them to go after the two fugitives and persuade her husband to return; for, she said, the other man had an old and bitter grudge against him, and had only lured him away to his death. Overcome by her entreaties, the two men started and found the body of one man floating in the mangrove creek; of the other they could see nothing, and, returning, were benighted.

* * * * *

Arrived at the spot where the two creeks joined, the boat, with the woman in the stern, was headed up stream with the tide, and they pulled quietly between the dreary groves of trees.

“Have you been up there?” she said suddenly, pointing to an opening on the right.

“No,” said one of them, and they turned up the branch.

“There it is!” she exclaimed quickly. “I knew it, I felt it!”

Sure enough there was the Frenchmen's boat just ahead of them, ashore on a small open space, a chance patch of clear ground. They pulled up to her, but the dead body of the second man was visible before they got there. The woman was quite calm, and stood by while her companions examined the corpse. The man had been stabbed in the side and had bled to death; a hideous stain was in the old boat.

“How did Pierre kill him?” she muttered to herself in French. “Ah, I know, he was stabbed from behind, then he turned and knocked the devil overboard. Then he fell and died.”

“You will take him back and bury him,” she said, in a sad, almost sweet voice. “See, it will be no trouble; just tow the boat;” and she indicated her meaning with a wave of the hand. Then she took her seat in the boat with her dead, the men having thrown the sail over the body, and so they started back.

Arrived at the junction she spoke again. “You will wait, will you not? He will come back, perhaps — I must see myself that the devil is dead.”

The men looked at each other, and then, with a few strokes of their oars kept the boat motionless in the tideway.

“He comes!” said the awfully quiet voice of the woman, and with indescribable horror the men saw the now bloated corpse come up the stream once more.

As if influenced by some terrible attraction in the glaring eyes of the woman, the ghastly thing approached the side of the boat where she sat. She rose to her feet, in her hand one of the oars. “Dog! devil!” she cried, dashing it into the face of the corpse. “O you, who ate my child before my eyes. You! who lived on man's flesh to save your life — you who

have assassinated my husband! Wolf! what are you now? Dead, dead! And you who ate others shall be eaten by the foul things of this place!” At every epithet she spurned the corpse with the oar until with a hideous, life-like action it slowly turned over and disappeared.

The spell-bound men, who had not understood a word of what she said, for she spoke in French, now started into action, and called to her to sit down. She obeyed; and, hastening to leave the scene the two men, their hearts in their throats, were soon back at the mouth of the creek.

They buried the murdered man, and next morning the lugger hoisted sail for Cooktown having on board the woman, the last survivor of the party of six who had escaped from New Caledonia.

A Cup of Cold Water.

A SILENT and gloomy man. For a man of wealth, who, at one time, had been noted for his social qualities and his hospitality, Marten was looked upon with some little wonder by those who lived in his neighbourhood. People spoke of his solitary habits and the frightened, hunted look he always had in his eyes. Rumour even said that that stalwart and attentive man servant of his was, in reality, a keeper.

Marten was a man whom vengeance had overtaken in this world and he could never forget it.

* * * * *

Dull, dark scrub all around, a sandy, barren soil underfoot, a cloudless sky and a hot, relentless sun overhead. Even more desolate than the usual dreary-looking scrub of the interior of Australia is this lonely thicket. The trunks of the low, stunted trees are gnarled and hideously distorted, the foliage is scant and almost shadeless, the ground absolutely free from all undergrowth, and a deep, life-less quiet reigns throughout. Footsteps and laboured breathing; and the repose of the scene is broken by the appearance of a human figure, a worn and wearied man slowly and painfully dragging himself along some horse-tracks forming a trail through the scrub. The unfortunate traveller is a pitiable sight, his sun-scorched face is thin and haggard with starvation, and his bloodshot eyes gleam with the delirium of thirst, his boots are absolutely ragged, and he leaves a bloody track on the baked ground. At times he sinks beneath the mockery of shade thrown by one of the scrub-trees, then, after a brief rest, renews his toilsome way.

Presently a break is visible ahead, and with restored hope the exhausted man pushes on, and ere long, with a hoarse, inarticulate cry of joy, emerges from the scrub on to the bank of a river. A river such as had haunted his dreams — clear, bright, sparkling, splashing in tiny rivulets amongst granite boulders, and rippling from one wide pool to another.

But the river has a strange appearance — no trees line its banks, no rushes fringe its shore, the bed is like a broad channel cut through the sandy waste around: down the centre runs the stream of water, the sight of which has brought fresh life to the worn-out wanderer. Slowly he toils across the hot and heavy sand to one of the shallow pools that sparkle in

the sunlight, flings himself down and plunges his burning face and cracked lips into the crystal stream, then raises his head quickly with a bitter cry of pain — for this delusive, mocking river is saltier than the sea.

The first moments of despair passed, the traveller gathers himself together again for a struggle to the last, retraces his steps to the bank and searches for the continuation of the horse-tracks he has been following. Finding these, he once more plunges into the sea of scrub that lines either bank of the river, and slowly staggers on. Three hours have passed and the sun is getting low when there is again a break in the weary, monotonous thicket — a small, comparatively clear, patch of country, in the centre of which rises a conical hill of bare granite rock, lifting its bald crest and smooth, glistening sides nearly a hundred feet above the expanse of sombre tree-tops. The open space encircling the foot of the rock is covered with short grass, there are several clumps of cork-trees scattered about, and in a deep depression at the base of the hill is one of the rockholes peculiar to Western Australia, nearly half full of rain-water — a deep hole almost like a tank hollowed out by human hands.

Refreshed by a long drink, the man eagerly surveys the signs of a late encampment. He thrusts his hand in the ashes of the fire, but they are cold. He searches anxiously for any scraps of food that may have been left behind, but without avail. Then another hope comes to him, and with his last remaining strength he climbs the side of the naked rock and stands upright on the summit gazing around.

A terribly depressing panorama meets his view, lit up by the last rays of the declining sun. North, south and east is a grim, black expanse of scrub without opening, save that here and there he can recognise the sheen of the treacherous salt-water river. As far as eye can see stretches this lonely, lifeless waste, that owns no boundary save the blue haze of the horizon. He then turns to the west. The same stern uniformity, the only difference being that a dark-blue, square-topped range is visible far off. No smoke arises anywhere, neither break nor clearing is visible; all is silent, hopeless and dead. With one last, despairing look he recognises that the great wilderness has pronounced his doom, and, with hopeless step, descends to the rocky hole and throws himself down to await the coming of his last and only friend.

Darkness sets in; the clear stars shine bright in a moonless sky, one by one the southern constellations sink lower and lower until they are swallowed up in the black shadow of the gloomy scrub. The distant whoop of an owl, or the melancholy wail of some other night-bird alone break the oppressive stillness, but the sleeper heeds them not. Nature has been kind to him at last and brought him painless slumber. In pleasant dreams his mind wanders far away from the foot of the giant rock where his body rests. The grey dawn finds him still alive, but the bitterness of death has passed, he neither cares nor thinks of rescue or relief; the

encircling desert has lost its terrors, he is half-way to another world. Still there is something to be done, and he takes a loose bit of stone, and drags himself alongside a flat rock which is covered with rude markings, the work of the aborigines: imitations of the tracks of kangaroos and emus, the trails of serpents and lizards, and, keeping guard over all, a gigantic human track with six toes, the mystic footprint of the aboriginal devil.

Amongst these savage emblems the dying man scrawls his name and the date; that done, he feels that his earthly cares are over. He thrusts his hand inside his shirt as though to grasp some object there with loving care, and with a sigh of relief his head falls back and he thinks no more of heat or thirst or hunger, for Death, the comforter, has brought him full release.

* * * * *

Four months have passed, the weather has been unchanged. Day after day a cloudless sun has looked down on the lonely body, gradually shrivelling up into a withered mummy: day after day has seen it untouched by bird or beast; even the scavenger crows have shunned the spot, and the dead white man has lain in solitude all the time. Two men are now standing by the remains, horses are feeding around on the dry grass, and two black boys are kindling a fire a short distance away. One of the men, a young fellow of about three-and-twenty, kneels down and reverently takes from the fleshless hand the object it has held so long in the clutch of death — a worn and weather-stained note-book. Rising, he calls to one of the blacks to bring a blanket, which he throws over the body, and the two go silently to their camp.

“Tom,” says the young man, “we have found what we started to look for sooner than I expected. God help Marten when I meet him!”

“The black boy's yarn must have been right,” returned Tom.

“True as gospel. Over a hundred and fifty miles he must have come in on foot, starving, and for every mile my father trod to meet his death here on this rock, the murdering cur who left him out there to die shall suffer bitterly in return, or my name's not Manning. Now, let us see what he has written.”

The message of the dead man to his son was short, but pregnant. It ran: —

While I was away from camp Marten packed up, and taking all the horses and the two boys, started home. I came back with my horse knocked up and sore-footed and found the camp deserted. We discovered some splendid country on the heads of the G——and the L——, and I think he means to go down and take it up for himself, trusting to my never turning up again. I must follow on foot as best I can, for my horse

is dead lame. ... I have been walking now for two days and my feet are cut to pieces on the ranges; perhaps when I get down on the level country I may get along better. ... Quite knocked up; I have done my best but can hold out no longer; if anyone finds this let them take it and the note to my son, John Manning, Ballarat, Victoria.

Between the leaves was one, torn out and folded note-shape. It ran: —

Dear Jack, — Marten left me to die of starvation at the head of the L——River. I have struggled along so far, but must lie down and die here. God bless you, my boy.

There was silence after reading this. Tom broke it first.

“Martin sold the country well, didn't he?”

“Yes, almost immediately he got back, there was a bit of a craze for country just then.”

“But for that nigger we'd never have dropped on the rights of it.”

“No, Marten supposed that the two boys would go back to their country, and never dreamt that I would come over here on a forlorn hope of finding my father and run across one of them. He said, too, that he found the good country after my father was lost, so that I had no share in the proceeds of the sale.”

“Shall we bury him now?” said Tom at last, after a pause.

Young Manning nodded, and they proceeded with their task. By sundown the long-neglected body, that had lain on the desolate rock, unwatched and unmourned, was consigned to the earth, and, next morning, the son set himself the labour of carving out in more permanent characters the name of the man who rested there.

“Tom,” said Manning, when his work was done, “I have made up my mind how to act, and I want you to keep quiet about my father's death. I intend giving that fellow rope enough and coming down on him when he least expects it. It would be impossible to sheet this home to him by law, so I shall use other means. I can trust you, I know.”

“About the boys?” returned Tom.

“We'll discharge them before we get back to town, and it's not likely Marten will ever run against any of them again.”

In an hour's time the rock mound and the new-made grave were as lonely as before.

* * * * *

James H. Marten, Esq., was a rich man, the few thousands he had made out of pastoral country in the western colony had been well invested in mining shares, and he had been one of the few who had made money by a mining-boom. He still dabbled in it, although there was no necessity for

him doing so, but the fever was yet in his veins, and the fascination of a new reef had all its old attraction for him. At the present time he had, as he thought, "a big thing on" in Kimberley — he had just had a satisfactory interview with a man who showed him specimens "rich enough to boom any company along until the bottom dropped out of it." Marten had half a mind to go up north and look at it himself; he was getting too stout, he thought, and a good rough trip would set him up again — why, he'd been leading a sedentary life ever since that trip with Manning. And as the thought came back to him he picked up his hat and went out hastily, for he felt as though there was something strange locked up in the office with him.

Thus affected by nervous fears, due, as he thought, to inertia, Marten, after some hesitation, finally decided on the Kimberley trip, and, in company with the prospector who had brought him the specimens, whose name was Tom Howard, started for the North. The camp where the reef was situated was one of the furthest outlying ones, and by the time they reached it Marten felt that he was rapidly getting back to hard condition again. Nearly a week passed, and the mining magnate was quite satisfied that he had a most profitable speculation, whatever the public might find it in the end, when there was a new arrival in the camp — a friend of the prospector's, who had been on a long trip southward. After some mysterious conferences, Marten was taken into confidence and shown specimens that made his mouth water. The man who brought them into camp had found them nearly one hundred and fifty miles to the south west; there was a patch of desert country to cross, but that was nothing with such a lure ahead. Marten, who now felt in his old bush form, consented to go with the stranger and look at the new find so that he could make a personal report in Melbourne, and they started.

Marten found his new companion taciturn and reserved; he would take his meals apart in solitary fashion and sleep some distance off. Marten had seen the same moodiness before in men who had long lived an outside life, and he thought nothing of it, the more stupid the man, the better for him. Strange schemes intruded themselves into his brain of playing him the trick he had played Manning, if the reef turned out anything like the specimens that had been produced. If Fortune dealt trumps in his hand why should he not take advantage of them? Their way was a weary one, some of it across sandy spinifex plains, and part of it through mulga — only twice did they come to any water, in each instance a brackish native well. On the fourth day they reached rough, broken country, and his companion pointed to a range and said that the reef was there. That night they camped at a small rock-hole which just sufficed for their wants and those of their horses. Next morning the prospector said they had better leave their spare horses and ride on, look at the reef, and come back, as there was no water beyond the little rock-

hole.

After about three hours' ride they halted at the foot of a frowning range from which some deep ravines ran down into the lower country, Here the prospector pulled up. "We had better," he said, "tie our horses to this tree and go up the gully on foot — it is too rough for horses." So they dismounted. "I am not quite sure which of the two gullies it is — they are both so much alike; you go up this one and I'll go up the other. If you see anything of my old tracks fire your revolver, if not, come back here and wait for me.

They parted, and Marten made an unsuccessful ascent of the gully. There were no tracks nor any signs of auriferous country, and tired, thirsty, and disgusted, he returned to the rendezvous.

The horses were gone. Was it possible he had made a mistake? No; there were the tracks. Had they broken their bridles and made off? A distant noise drew his attention to a ridge about half-a-mile away. There was the prospector riding homewards, leading Marten's horse. Marten yelled and cooeed, without attracting any attention; then he drew his revolver to fire a shot, but an empty click was the only response. He looked at it; the cartridges had been removed. There was no doubt he was being purposely left behind. As this thought flashed through his mind, the man pulled up on the crest of the ridge and looked back. Taking off his hat, he waved a mocking salute, and then vanished down the far side.

With all the terror that now crowded into Marten's brain there was one predominant question — what was the motive for deserting him? Then a cold shiver ran through him. Had Manning come to life after all and paid someone to play him this trick? He rallied himself and started to follow the track of the horses. It was evident no one would come back for him; he must help himself. It was dark when he got to the rock-hole where they had camped the night before, and, although he knew that it could not be otherwise, yet it was with horror he noticed that the place was deserted, packs, horses, everything gone. There was a little muddy water at the bottom of the hole, and he drank it greedily. He passed an awful night, the mysterious suddenness of the blow overwhelmed him. If he had had a chance to argue or explain it would have been different, but all around him was silence and the desert. "Plead to that!" a mocking voice seemed to say.

Next morning at grey-dawn he was off along the back track, and doggedly pursued his way until the loose sand and spinifex compelled him to seek rest. He had no waterbag, so he had thrown his useless revolver away and filled the pouch with some of the muddy water, perhaps he could struggle through to the second native well — but 60 miles! — it was a long way. That night was passed in the slumber of exhaustion; next morning, with stiffened limbs, he recommenced his march, and now his water-supply was exhausted. Noontide found him

lying under a mulga-bush, praying for death. The sound of an approaching horse aroused him; the prospector had repented and turned back. He halted near the exhausted man, and, leaning on his horse's neck looked calmly at him. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am Jack Manning, the son of the man you murdered. I have brought you out here to die the same death you condemned him to. I know everything, I found his dead body, his note-book, and a letter to me, I also found one of the boys you had with you. My father followed you nearly one hundred and fifty miles, then he died of hunger and exhaustion; I intend you to do the same, and also to have the pleasure of watching you do it. I have no intention of letting you die just yet, so I will give you a quart of water and you must make that do until you reach the second well." Manning dismounted, filled his quart-pot from the water-bag he was carrying and placed it on the ground, when, just as he was riding off, the wretched man broke the spell of shameful silence that held him and begged and implored mercy. It was useless. As though stone-deaf, Manning rode away and left him to plead to the sand, the mulga and the spinifex; once more the silence and horror of the desert were around him.

On the fourth day, in a state of delirium, he staggered to the native well and buried his face in the tepid, brackish water. His enemy was not visible. Should he wait here for death? He fell unconscious while thinking.

When he awoke it was morning, and he thought he would make the attempt to reach the other well; perhaps his foe would relent. He staggered wearily on, and when the day grew hot sank down to die at the foot of a sandridge.

"Do you repent?" said a voice. Manning was standing over him. His swollen tongue refused to answer, but he feebly raised his hand. "Drink," said his enemy: "I cannot see even *you* die of thirst."

With all the fierce longing burning within him for the sweet, cool draught, he yet thought that it were better to die now than live to undergo it all once more, and, with a last effort, he put the proffered bag aside. "Let me die," he groaned in a scarcely audible voice. "Drink," said the other, "I will spare your life, though I cannot forgive; drink, and repent."

He held the mouth of the bag to his enemy's lips and moistened them. The touch of the cool water was too much; with a feverish grasp the half-dead man seized the bag and drank greedily. Then, with a wild laugh, he fell back insensible.

"Is it too late, I wonder?" thought Manning, looking at him.

It was not too late for his life; but his reason never quite recovered. Ever since he has been haunted by the nightmare of that dreadful tramp through the waterless desert, with the avenger ever dogging his footsteps.

A Haunt of the Jinkarras.

(A Story of Central Australia).

In May, 1889, the dead body of a man was found on one of the tributaries of the Finke River, in the extreme North of South Australia. The body, by all appearances, had been lying there some months and was accidentally discovered by some surveyors making a flying survey with camels. Amongst the few effects was a Lett's Diary containing the following narrative, which, although in many places almost illegible and much weather-stained, has been since, with some trouble, deciphered and transcribed by the surveyor in charge of the party.

Transcribed from the Dead Man's Dairy.

March 10, 1888. — Started out this morning with Jackson, who is the only survivor of a party of three who lost their horses on a dry stage when looking for country; he was found and cared for by the blacks, and finally made his way into the telegraph-line, where I picked him up when out with a repairing-party. Since then I got him a job on the station, and in return he has told me about the ruby-field of which we are now in search; thanks to the late thunder-storms we have as yet met with no obstacles to our progress. I have great faith in him as a bushman, but being a man without any education and naturally taciturn, he is not very lively company, and I find myself thrown on to the resource of a diary for amusement.

March 17. — Seven days since we left Charlotte Waters, and we are now approaching the country familiar to Jackson during his sojourn with the natives two years ago. He is confident that we shall gain the gorge in the M'Donnell Ranges to-morrow, early.

March 18. — Amongst the ranges, plenty of water, and Jackson has recognised several peaks in the near neighbourhood of the gorge, where he saw the rubies.

March 19. — Camped in Ruby Gorge, as I have named this pass, for we have come straight to the place and found the rubies without any

hindrance at all. I have about twenty magnificent stones and hundreds of small ones; one of the stones in particular is almost living fire, and must be of great value. Jackson had no idea of the value of the find, except that it may be worth a few pounds, with which he will be quite satisfied. As there is good feed and water, and we have plenty of rations, will camp here for a day or two and spell the horses before returning.

March 20. — Been inspecting some caves in the ranges. One of them seems to penetrate a great distance — will go to-morrow with Jackson and take candles and examine it.

March 25. — Had a terrible experience the last four days. Why on earth did I not go back at once with the rubies? Now I may never get back. Jackson and I started to explore the cave early in the morning. We found nothing extraordinary about it for some time. As usual, there were numbers of bats, and here and there were marks of fire on the rocks, as though the natives had camped in it at times. After some search, Jackson discovered a passage which we followed down a steep incline for a long distance. As we got on we encountered a strong draught of air and had to be very careful of our candles. Suddenly the passage opened and we found ourselves in a low chamber in which we could scarcely stand upright. I looked hastily around, and saw a dark figure like a large monkey suddenly spring from a rock and disappear with what sounded like a splash. "What on earth was that?" I said to Jackson. "A jinkarra," he replied, in his slow, stolid way. "I heard about them from the blacks; they live underground." "What are they?" I asked. "I couldn't make out," he replied; "the blacks talked about jinkarras, and made signs that they were underground, so I suppose that was one."

We went over to the place where I had seen the figure and, as the air was now comparatively still and fresh, our candles burnt well and we could see plainly. The splash was no illusion, for an underground stream of some size ran through the chamber, and, on looking closer, in the sand on the floor of the cavern we could see tracks like those of human feet.

We sat down and had something to eat. The water was beautifully fresh and icily cold, and I tried to obtain from Jackson all he knew about the jinkarras. It was very little beyond what he had already told me. The natives spoke of them as something, animals or men, he could not make out which, living in the ranges underground. They used to frighten the children by crying out "jinkarra!" to them at night.

The stream that flowed through the cavern was very sluggish and apparently not deep, as I could see the white sand at a distance under the rays of the candle; it disappeared beneath a rocky arch about two feet above its surface. Strange to say, when near this place I could detect a peculiar smell as of something burning, and this odour appeared to come through the arch. I drew Jackson's attention to it, and proposed wading down the channel of the stream if not too deep, but he suggested going

back to camp first and getting more rations, which, being very reasonable, I agreed to.

It took us too long returning to camp to think of starting that day, but next morning we got away early and were soon beside the subterranean stream. The water was bitterly cold but not very deep, and we had provided ourselves with stout saplings as poles and had our revolvers and some rations strapped on our shoulders. It was an awful wade through the chilly water, our heads nearly touching the slimy top of the arch, our candles throwing a faint, flickering gleam on the surface of the stream. Fortunately the bottom was splendid — hard, smooth sand — and, after wading for about twenty minutes, we suddenly emerged into another cavern, but its extent we could not discern at first for our attention was taken up with other matters.

The air was laden with pungent smoke, the place illuminated with a score of smouldering fires, and tenanted by a crowd of the most hideous beings I ever saw. They espied us in an instant, and flew wildly about, jabbering frantically, until we were nearly deafened. Recovering ourselves, we waded out of the water, and tried to approach some of these creatures, but they hid away in the dark corners, and we could not lay hands on any of them. As well as we could make out in the murky light, they were human beings, but savages of the most degraded type, far below that of the common Australian blackfellow. They had long arms, shaggy heads of hair, small twinkling eyes, and were very low of stature. They kept up a confused jabber, half whistling, half chattering, and were utterly without clothes, paint, or any ornaments. I approached one of their fires, and found it to consist of a kind of peat or turf; some small bones of vermin were lying around, and a rude club or two. While gazing at these things I suddenly heard a piercing shriek, and, looking up, found that Jackson, by a sudden spring, had succeeded in capturing one of these creatures, who was struggling and uttering terrible yells. I went to his assistance, and together we succeeded in holding him still while we examined him by the light of our candles. The others, meanwhile, ceased their clamour and watched us curiously.

Never had I seen so repulsive a wretch as our prisoner. Apparently he was a young man about two or three and twenty, hardly five feet high at the outside, lean, with thin legs and long arms. He was trembling all over, and the perspiration dripped from him. He had scarcely any forehead, and a shaggy mass of hair crowned his head, and grew a long way down his spine. His eyes were small, red and bloodshot; I have often experienced the strong odour emitted by aborigines when heated or excited, but never did I meet with anything so offensive as the rank smell emanating from this being. Suddenly Jackson exclaimed: "Look! look! he's got a tail!" I looked and nearly relaxed my grasp of the brute in surprise. There was no doubt about it, this strange being had about three

inches of a monkey-like tail.

“Let's catch another,” I said to Jackson after the first emotion of surprise had passed. We looked around after sticking our candles upright in the sand. “There's one in the corner,” muttered Jackson to me, and as soon as I saw the one he meant we released our prisoner and made a simultaneous rush at the cowering form. We were successful, and when we dragged our captive to the light we found it to be a woman. Our curiosity was soon satisfied — the tail was the badge of the whole tribe, and we let our second captive go.

My first impulse was to go and rinse my hands in the stream, the contact had been so repulsive to me. It was the same with Jackson. I pondered what I should do. I had a great desire to take one of these singular beings back with me, and I thought with pride of the reputation I should gain as their discoverer. Then I reflected that I could always find them again, and it would be better to come back with a larger party after safely disposing of the rubies and securing the ground.

“There's no way out of this place,” I said to Jackson.

“Think not?” he replied.

“No,” I said, “or these things would have cleared out; they must know every nook and cranny.”

“Umph!” he said, as though satisfied; “shall we go back now?”

I was on the point of saying “yes,” and had I done so all would have been well; but, unfortunately, some motive of infernal curiosity prompted me to say — “No! let us have a look round first.” Lighting another candle each, so that we had plenty of light, we wandered round the cave, which was of considerable extent, the unclean inhabitants flitting before us with beast-like cries. Presently we had made a half-circuit of the cave and were approaching the stream, for we could hear a rushing sound as though it plunged over a fall. This noise grew louder, and now I noticed that all the natives had disappeared, and it struck me that they had retreated through the passage we had penetrated, which was now unguarded. Suddenly Jackson, who was ahead, exclaimed that there was a large opening. As he spoke he turned to enter it; I called out to him to be careful, but my voice was lost in a cry of alarm as he slipped, stumbled, and with a shriek of horror disappeared from my view. So sudden was the shock, and so awful my surroundings, that I sank down utterly unnerved, comprehending but one thing: that I was alone in this gruesome cavern inhabited by strange, unnatural creations.

After a while I braced myself up, and began to look about. Holding my candle aloft I crawled on my stomach to the spot whence my companion had disappeared. My hand touched a slippery decline: peering cautiously ahead I saw that the rocks sloped abruptly downwards, and were covered with slime, as though under water at times. One step on the treacherous surface and a man's doom was sealed — headlong into the unknown

abyss he was bound to go, and this had been the fate of the unhappy Jackson. As I lay trembling on the edge of this fatal chasm, listening for the faintest sound from below, it struck me that the noise of the rushing water was both louder and nearer. I lay and listened. There was no doubt about it — the waters were rising. With a thrill of deadly horror it flashed across me that if the stream rose it would prevent my return, as I could not thread the subterranean passage under water. Rising hastily I hurried back to the upper end of the cavern, following the edge of the water. A glance assured me I was a prisoner — the flood was up to the top of the arch, and the stream much broader than when we entered. The rations and candles we had left carelessly on the sand had disappeared, covered by the rising water. I was alone, with nothing but about a candle and a-half between me and darkness and death.

I blew out the candle, threw myself on the sand and thought. I brought all my courage to bear on the prospect before me, so as not to let it daunt me. First, the natives had evidently retreated before the water rose too high, their fires were all out, and a dead silence reigned. I had the cavern to myself, which was better than their horrid company. Next, the rising was periodical, and evidently was the cause of the slimy, slippery rock which had robbed me of my only companion. I remembered instances in the interior where lagoons rose and fell at certain times without any visible cause. Then came the thought — for how long would the overflow continue? I had fresh air and plenty of water, and so I could live for days; probably the flood only lasted twelve or twenty-four hours. But an awful fear seized on me. Could I maintain my reason in this worse than Egyptian darkness — a darkness so thick, definite and overpowering that I cannot describe it, truly a darkness that could be felt? I had heard of men who could not endure twenty-four hours in a dark cell, but had clamoured to be taken out. Supposing my reason deserted me, and during some delirious interlude the stream rose and fell again!

These thoughts were too agonising. I rose and paced a step or two on the sand. I made a resolution during that short walk. I had matches — fortunately, with a bushman's instinct, I had put a box in my pouch when we started to investigate the cavern. I had a candle and a-half, and, thank Heaven! my watch. I would calculate four hours as nearly as possible, and every four hours I would strike a match and enjoy the luxury of a little light. I pursued this plan, and by doing so left that devilish pit with reason. It was sixty hours before the stream fell, and what I suffered during that time no tongue can tell, no brain imagine.

That awful darkness was at times peopled by forms that, for hideousness, no nightmare could surpass. Invisible, but still palpably present, they surrounded and sought to drive me down the chasm wherein my companion had fallen. The loathsome inhabitants of that

cavern came back in fancy and gibbered and whistled around me. I could smell them — feel their sickening touch. If I slept I awoke from, perhaps, a pleasant dream to the stern fact that I was alone in darkness in the depth of the earth. When first I found that the water was receding was perhaps the hardest time of all, for my anxiety to leave the chamber tenanted by such phantoms was overpowering. But I resisted. I held to my will until I knew I could safely venture, and then waded slowly and determinedly up the stream; up the sloping passage, through the outer cave, and emerged in the light of day — the blessed, glorious light, with a wild shout of joy.

I must have fainted; when I came to myself I was still at the mouth of the cave, but now it was night, the bright, starlit, lonely, silent night of the Australian desert. I felt no hunger nor fear of the future; one delicious sense of rest and relief thrilled my whole being. I lay there watching the dearly-loved Austral constellations in simple, peaceful ecstasy. And then I slept, slept till the sun aroused me, and I arose and took my way to our deserted camp. A few crows arose and cawed defiantly at me, and the leather straps bore the marks of a dingo's teeth, otherwise the camp was untouched. I lit a fire, cooked a meal, ate, and rested once more. The reaction had set in after the intense strain I had endured, and I felt myself incapable of thinking or purposing anything. This state lasted for four-and-twenty hours — then I awoke to the fact that I had to find the horses, and make my way home alone — for, alas, as I bitterly thought, I was now, through my curiosity, alone, and, worst of all, the cause of my companion's death. Had I come away when he proposed, he would be alive, and I should have escaped the awful experience I have endured.

I have written this down while it is fresh in my memory; to-morrow I start to look for the horses. If I reach the telegraph-line safely I will come back and follow up the discovery of this unknown race, the connecting and long-sought-for link; if not, somebody else may find this and follow up the clue. I have plotted out the course from Charlotte Waters here by dead-reckoning.

March 26th: No sign of the horses. They have evidently made back. I will make up a light pack and follow them. If I do not overtake them I may be able to get on to the line on foot. The stages between the water-holes, on our way out were not very long, and I ought to manage it safely.

END OF THE DIARY.

NOTE. — The surveyor, who is well-known in South Australia, adds the following postscript : —

“The unfortunate man was identified as an operator on the overland line. He had been in the service a long time, and was very much liked. The facts about picking up Jackson when out with a repairing party have also been verified. The dead man had obtained six months' leave of

absence, and it was supposed he had gone down to Adelaide. The tradition of the jinkarras is common among the natives of the M'Donnell Range. I have often heard it. No rubies or anything of value were found on the body."

The Rumford Plains Tragedy.

I. Statement Made by Gilbert Vaughan, Manager of the L.S.D. Bank, Wattleville.

IT was a serious difficulty, and had occurred so suddenly that my presence of mind entirely forsook me — I saw no way out of it save instant flight. There was the dead body, slain by my hand, and in a few moments I should be confronted with the girl whom I had intended to make my wife. How was I to face her, knowing how fondly she had loved the poor victim?

The act had been quite unintentional. Although there had never been much love lost between us, I had not meant his death. It had been simply the fault of hasty temper on my side and unfortunate curiosity on his. I had ridden out that day, my heart filled with the gentlest feelings; the bright morning and sunny landscape seemed to whisper naught but peace, and now, by an inconsiderate blow, I had dispelled all-my hopes, and saw no escape but in prompt and immediate disappearance from the scene. To continue standing by the poor corpse would be the act of an idiot. By a strange chance no one was about; I had ridden up quite unperceived. So I mounted my horse and hastened back to the township which I had left that morning with such different feelings.

My duties at the bank that day (I was the manager of a small country branch) were, fortunately for me, of the slightest, for my mind was constantly running on the morning's tragedy, and I was ceaselessly wondering if my deed had been discovered, and picturing the sorrow of the innocent girl whom I so fondly loved. At three o'clock I heard a voice in the bank asking the teller if I was in, and soon afterwards, to my amazement, Ah Foo, the Chinese cook at Rumford Plains, walked into the small apartment that served as manager's room.

As he glanced at me with his cunning almond eyes I saw in a moment that my secret was known, and it did not need that he should take out two small objects and place them on the table to confirm this suspicion. For an instant I had wild thoughts of shooting him down with the bank revolver and swearing that he had tried to stick up the place, but I restrained myself in order to hear what he had to say.

“I saw you kill him, Misser Vawn, and I welly glad. No fear I say anyting. Evelybody ask. I no savee. Evelybody say Misser Muspius; I no

savee, only laugh. Missee Lawrence she cly, cly, all day. Think it Misser Muspius doee.”

“Ah Foo,” I said, “you're a brick; here's a sovereign for you.”

“Allight, Misser Vawn. I no savee who kill him, only, when evelybody say, Misser Muspius, I laugh — ” and he laughed himself out of the room, only to reappear for an instant. “You go, see Missee Lawrence to-night?” he whispered in a stage aside, and vanished.

Of course I would. I would make the most of the golden opportunity. Muspius, my hated rival, was evidently suspected, and Ah Foo had slyly confirmed these suspicions. I was safe, so long as I could bribe Ah Foo; at any rate, I would take his advice and go to Rumford Plains at once; it was only five miles, and I would arrange that the suspicions thrown on Muspius should be confirmed. I had taken the first step in crime; the second was easy.

II. Statement Made by John Muspius, Superintendent of Merridale Station.

It was a pure accident, but a most unfortunate one, to happen on the very morning when I rode over to Rumford Plains to propose to Miss Lawrence. Just as I was going to hang my horse up I saw Tommy standing at the low fence, with his head over the second rail, watching me. Now, I had had more than one bridle broken through his tricks, and after ineffectually telling him several times to clear out, I gave him a tap with the double of my whip. It caught him on the back of the neck, and, to my astonishment, he dropped down dead. It struck me at once that no one would believe it was an accident, for only the other evening I had got into a dispute with Lawrence about shooting blacks in North Queensland; and he had said that he would not trust anyone's life in my hands. Of course he was in a temper because I had the best of the argument, but this accident happening just after such a remark would look altogether too suspicious; and besides, I dared not face Miss Lawrence, for I knew how fond she was of Tommy. There was no one about, so I just rode quietly off into Wattleville to think it over.

About half-past two that afternoon old Jennings, landlord of the Royal, told me that Ah Foo, the cook at Rumford Plains, wanted to see me. “Well, Ah Foo,” I said, when the old scoundrel came in, “What do you want?” I had no suspicion at the time that he had witnessed the unhappy affair. He grinned and made a motion with his arm like striking a blow, which at once told me that he knew all. “Welly unlucky, Misser Muspius,” he said, “poor Tommy — dead.”

“Ah!” I said: “it can't be helped. You know I never meant to kill him.”

“I savee,” he replied, “I saw you. Evelyone say Miser Vawn kill

Tommy. I no savee, only laugh. Missee Lawrence cly, cly, cly.” So that confounded bank jackeroo, Vaughan, was suspected, was he? Well, the best thing that could happen. I gave Ah Foo a sovereign, and he winked and said, “You go see Missee Lawrence, I tink welly good.” Then he vanished. Under the circumstances this was excellent advice, and I determined to follow it. Of course I would not go out of my way to shift the blame on Vaughan, but if anything were said about the matter I would not hide my opinion of him. All's fair in love and war. Besides, he had no business to be out there at that time in the morning; serve him right if it proved the means of getting him into trouble.

III Extract from the Diary of Miss Selina Lawrence.

May 1st. — Such an unhappy commencement to the day; I never thought I should feel so glad afterwards as I do now. About 11 o'clock papa came to me to say that poor Tommy was dead — killed, seemingly, by a blow on the back of the neck! I almost fainted when I heard it. The men were all away at the yards, and no stranger had been seen about the place. Poor Tommy! I cried bitterly all the morning. His body was laid out and I put some flowers on it, he was such a good-hearted, faithful fellow. Papa is very indignant, and says he will never rest until the guilty party is found out; I never saw him so roused before. He says it is a most abominable crime to be committed in broad day. While I was still sorrowing over poor Tommy's fate the mail arrived. Such glorious news! A letter from Fred, saying that his uncle has retired and handed his practice over to him: so now there's no reason why we can't get married at once and bring our long engagement to an end — so he writes. Papa's very pleased, too; he said that the practice is worth nearly two thousand a year, and we are actually going to start for Sydney tomorrow morning, so I'm tired out packing up.

Mr. Vaughan and Mr. Muspius came over this evening. They both seemed very absent-minded and jealous of each other. I suppose Papa told them what had happened when they went out on the verandah to smoke, for they both, I am glad to say, went away early.

Poor Tommy! this good news put his death right out of my head for the moment.

IV. Statement of Ah Foo, Cook at Rumford Plains.

(Translated into ordinary English.)

I remember May 1st. I was looking out of the kitchen window when I saw Mr. Vaughan ride up. Just as he approached the house, Tommy, Miss Lawrence's pet emu, went up and pecked at the buckles on his saddle-pouch, and his horse started back and broke the bridle. Mr.

Vaughan turned back and caught his horse, and when Tommy came up again, he hit him with the butt-end of his whip on the back of the neck, and knocked him down. After looking at him for a moment, he got on his horse again and rode back to town. I went out to see if Tommy was dead, and as he still moved, I finished him, for he was always in mischief. Just then I saw Mr. Muspius coming, so I put Tommy up against the fence with his head through, to hold him up, and returned to the kitchen. Mr. Muspius looked round when he got off and saw Tommy, so he gave him a flick with the double of the stock-whip he was carrying, and Tommy tumbled down. He thought he'd killed him, for he got on his horse again and rode away just the same as Mr. Vaughan. I put poor Tommy up again with his head through the fence, and then Mr. Lawrence come along. "There's that d——emu," he said, trying to get into the garden;" and he picked up a stick and threw it at him, and down went Tommy. I came out and looked at him and he looked at me. "My word," I said, "Missee Lawrence make a fuss." "Hush," he said, "you no savee anything;" and he gave me a pound — and he went in and tell Missee some "bomniable wretch" killed Tommy.

That afternoon I went into Wattleville, and Mr. Muspius gave me a pound not to tell, and Mr. Vaughan gave me another. Then, in the evening, Missee Lawrence came into the kitchen and said: "Ah Foo, I'm going to Sydney to-morrow morning to get married. Here's a pound to bury poor Tommy properly."

Next morning young Wilson, the new-chum, from the next station, came over, and he said, when he saw Tommy: "Ah Foo, I want an emu-skin to send home to England, to say I shot him. You skin me this nicely and I'll give you a pound."

That welly good emu, that makee me flive pounds.

Spirit-Led.

Chapter I.

IT was the hottest day the Gulf* had seen for years. Burning, scorching and blistering heat, beating down directly from the vertical sun, in the open; radiating from the iron roof which provided what was mistakenly called shade. In the whole township there was not a corner to be found where a man could escape the suffocating sense of being in the stoke-hole of a steamer.

The surroundings were not of a nature to be grateful to eyes wearied with the monotony of plain and forest. The few stunted trees that had been spared seemed to sadly regret not having spared the fate of their comrades, and the barren ironstone ridge on which the township was built gave back with interest all the sun's heat it had absorbed.

Two men were seated on canvas chairs in the verandah of one of the principal "hotels," both lightly attired in shirt and trousers only, busily engaged in mopping the perspiration from their streaming faces, and swearing at the flies.

"Deuced sight hotter lounging about here than travelling," said Davis, the elder of the two; "I vote we make a start."

"I'm agreeable," replied his companion; "the horses must be starving in the paddock. But we shall have a job to get Delaine away, he's bent on seeing his cheque through."

"That won't take long at the rate he's going. He's got every loafer in the town hanging about him."

"Hullo! what's that?" said the other, as the shrill whistle of a steam-launch was heard. "Oh! of course, the steamer arrived at the mouth of the river last night: that's the launch coming up. Shall we go down and see who is on board?"

The two men got up and joined the stragglers who were wending their way across the bare flat to the bank of the river. Some of the passengers were strangers to the place; one of them, a man with white hair and beard, though otherwise young-looking, immediately attracted Davis' attention.

"See that chap, Bennett?" he said.

"Yes, Dick, who is he?"

"Some years ago he was with me on a droving trip; when we started he

was a fine fellow with dark hair. It's a true bill about a man's hair going white in one night. His did."

"What from? Fright?"

"Yes. We nearly buried him alive by mistake.

"The deuce you did!"

"He had a cataleptic fit on watch one night. The other man — we were double-banking the watch at the time — found him as stiff as a poker, and we all thought he was dead, there were no signs of life in him. It was hot weather — as bad as this — and we couldn't keep him, so we dug a grave, and started to bury him at sundown. He came to when we were filling in the grave, yelled blue murder, and frightened the life out of us. His hair that night turned as you see it now, although he vows it was not the fright of being buried alive that did it."

"What then?"

"Something that happened when he was in the fit, or trance. He has never said more than that he was perfectly conscious all the time, and had a very strange experience."

"Ever ask him anything?"

"No, he didn't like talking about it. Wonder what he's doing up here?"

By this time the river bank was deserted. Davis and Bennett strolled up after the others and on arrival at the hotel found the hero of the yarn there before them.

"Hullo, Maxwell," said Davis, "what brought you up this way?"

Maxwell started slightly when he saw his quondam sexton, but he met him frankly enough, although, at first, he disregarded the question that had been asked.

In the course of the conversation that followed, Maxwell stated that he was on his way out to the Nicholson, but with what object did not transpire.

"Bennett and I were just talking of making a start tomorrow, or the next day. Our cattle are spelling on some country just this side of the river. You had better come with us."

"I shall be very glad," replied the other, and the thing was settled.

Bennett had been looking curiously at this man who had had so narrow an escape, but beyond the strange whiteness of his hair (which contrasted oddly with the swarthy hue of his sunburnt face) and a nervous look in his eyes, he showed no trace of his strange adventure. On the contrary, he promised, upon nearer acquaintance, to be a pleasant travelling companion.

The next morning broke hot and sullen as before. Davis had risen early to send a man out to the paddock after the horses, and was in the bar talking to the landlord.

"You'll have to knock off his grog or there'll be trouble," he said, "he was up all last night wandering about with his belt and revolver on,

muttering to himself, and when a fellow does that he's 'got 'em' pretty bad."

"I'll do what I can, but if he doesn't get drink here he will somewhere else," replied the publican, reluctantly.

"Then I'll see the magistrate and ask him to prohibit his being served. It's the only way to get him straight."

At this moment the subject of their remarks entered the bar — a young fellow about five or six and twenty — who evidently had not been in bed all night. The whites of his eyes were not blood-shot, but blood-red throughout, and the pupils so dilated that they imparted a look of unnatural horror to his face.

"Hullo, Davis!" he shouted; "glad to see a white man at last. That old nigger with the white hair has been after me all night — the old buck who was potted in the head. He comes along every night now with his flour-bag cobra* all over blood. Can't get a wink of sleep for him. Have a drink?"

His speech was quite distinct, he was past the stage when strong waters thicken the voice; his walk was steady, and but for the wild eyes, he might have passed for a man who was simply tired out with a night's riding or watching.

The landlord glanced enquiringly at Davis, as if to put on him the responsibility of serving the liquor.

"Too early, Delaine, and too hot already; besides, I'm going to start to-day and mustn't get tight before breakfast," said the latter soothingly.

"O, be hanged! Here, give us something," and the young fellow turned towards the bar, and as he did so caught sight of Maxwell, who had just come to the door and was looking in.

The effect on his excited brain of seeing the dark face and snow-white hair was awful to witness. His eyes, blazing before, seemed now simply orbs of fire. Davis and the landlord turned to see what the madman was looking at, and that moment was nearly fatal to the newcomer. Muttering: "By ——, he's taken to following me by day-light as well, has he? But I'll soon stop him!" he drew his revolver and, only that Davis turned his head again and was just in time to knock his hand up, Maxwell would have been past praying for. The landlord ran round the bar, and with some trouble the three men got the pistol from the maniac, who raved, bit, and fought like a wild beast. The doctor, who slept in the house, was called, and injected some morphia into the patient's arm, which soon sent him into a stupor.

"By Jove, Davis, you saved my life," said Maxwell; "that blessed lunatic would have shot me sure enough only for you. Whom did he take me for?"

"He's got the horrors, his name is Delaine, and he's from a station on the tableland. They had some trouble with the blacks up there lately, and,

I suppose, it was the first dispersing-match* he had ever seen. There was one white-haired old man got a bullet through his head, and he says he felt as though his own father had been shot when he saw it done. He's a clergyman's son, so, of course, he drinks like a fish, and is superstitious as well."

"I trust they'll lock him up until I get out of the town; but I'll remember your share of this. Wait until we get away and I will tell you what brought me up here, but don't ask me any questions now. Is your friend Bennett to be trusted?"

"In what way? Wine, women or gold? I don't know about the first two, but the last I can answer for."

"It's a secret. Possibly connected with the last."

"I hope so, I want some badly enough. I think I know where to put you on to a couple of good horses, and then we'll make a start."

Chapter II.

The stove-like township is three days' journey away; four men, Davis, Bennett, Maxwell, and a blackfellow are camped for the night by the side of a small lagoon covered with the broad leaves of the purple water-lily. In the distance the cheery sound of horse-bells can be heard, and round the fire the travellers are grouped listening to Maxwell, who is telling the tale he has never yet told.

"When I fell down on watch that night and became to all appearance a corpse, I never, for one instant, lost either consciousness or memory. My soul, spirit, or whatever you like to call it, parted company with my body, but I retained all former powers of observation. I gazed at myself lying there motionless, waited until my fellow-watcher came around and awakened the sleeping camp with the tidings of my death; then, without any impulse of my own, I left the spot and found myself in a shadowy realm where all was vague and confused. Strange, indistinct shapes flitted constantly before me, I heard voices and sounds like sobbing and weeping.

"Now, before I go any further, let me tell you that I have never been subject to these fits. I never studied any occult arts, nor troubled myself about what I called 'such rubbish.' Why this experience should have befallen me I cannot say. I found I was travelling along swiftly, carried on by some unknown motive power, or, rather, drifting aimlessly with a current of misty forms in which all seemed confusion. Suddenly, to my surprise, I found my self on the earth once more, in a place quite unknown to me.

"I was in Australia — that much I recognised at a glance — but whereabouts?"

"I was standing on the bank of a river — a northern river, evidently, for

I could see the foliage of the drooping ti-trees and Leichhardt trees further down its course. The surrounding country was open, but barren; immediately in front of me was a rugged range through which the river found its way by means of an apparently impenetrable gorge. The black rocks rose abruptly on either side of a deep pool of water, and all progress, except by swimming, was barred. On both sides the ranges were precipitous, cleft by deep ravines; all the growth to be seen was spinifex, save a few stunted bloodwood trees.

“What struck me most forcibly was, that in the centre of the waterhole, at the entrance of the gorge, there arose two rocks, like pillars, some twelve or fifteen feet above the surface of the water.

“Below the gorge the river-bed was sandy, and the usual timber grew on the banks. At first I thought I was alone, but, looking round, I found that a man was standing a short distance away from me. Apparently he was a European, but so tanned and burnt by the sun as to be almost copper-coloured. He was partially clothed in skins, and held some hunting weapons in his hand. He was gazing absently into the gorge when I first noticed him, but presently turned, and, without evincing any surprise or curiosity, beckoned to me. Immediately, in obedience to some strange impulse, I found myself threading the gloomy gorge with him, although, apparently, we exercised no motion. It was more as though we stood still and the rocks glided past us and the water beneath us. We soon reached a small open space or pocket; here there was a rude hut, and we halted.

“My strange companion looked around and, without speaking, drew my attention to a huge boulder close to the hut, on which letters and figures were carved. I made out the principal inscription: —

‘Hendrik Heermans, her vangecommen, 1670.’

There were also an anchor, a ship and a heart, all neatly cut. I turned from these records to the man. He beckoned me again: I followed him across the small open space and up a ravine. The man pointed to a reef cropping out and crossing the gully. I looked at it and saw that the cap had been broken and that gold was showing freely in the stone. The man waved his hand up the gully as though intimating that there were more reefs there.

“Suddenly, sweeping up the gorge came a gust of ice-cold wind, and with it a dash of mist or spray. Looming out of this I saw for a moment a young girl's face looking at me. Her lips moved. ‘Go back. Go back!’ she seemed to whisper.

“When I heard this I felt an irresistible longing to return to my discarded body, and, in an instant, gorge, mountains and all my

surroundings disappeared, and I found myself in the twilight space battling despairingly on, for I felt that I had lost my way and should never find it again.

“How was I to reach my forsaken body through such a vague, misty and indeterminate land? Impalpable forms threw themselves in my path. Strange cries and wailings led me astray, and all the while there was a smell as of death in my nostrils, and I knew that I must return or die.

“O, the unutterable anguish of that time! Ages seemed to pass during which I was fighting with shadows, until at last, I saw a sinking sun, an open grave, and men whose faces I knew, commencing to shovel earth on a senseless body.

“Mine!

“I had felt no pain when my soul left, but the reentrance of it into its tenement was such infinite agony, that it forced from me terrible cries that caused my rescue from suffocation.”

Maxwell paused, and the other two were silent.

“You will wonder,” he resumed, “what all this has to do with my present journey. I will tell you. You remember Milford, a surveyor up here — at one time he was running the boundary-line between Queensland and South Australia for the Queensland Government? A year ago I met him, and we were talking about the country up this way. In running the line he had to follow the Nicholson a good way, until finally he was completely blocked. He described to me the place where he had to turn back. It was the waterhole in the gorge with the two rock-like pillars rising out of the water.”

Again there was silence for a while. Then Davis said, musingly —

“It's impossible to pronounce any opinion at present; the coincidence of Milford's report is certainly startling. But why should this sign have been vouchsafed to you? Apparently this being you saw was the ghost of some old Dutch sailor wrecked or marooned here in the days of the early discovery of Australia. Had you any ancestors among those gentry?”

“Not that I am aware of.” returned Maxwell, “but if we find the place we shall certainly make some interesting discovery, apart from any gold.”

“And the girl's face?” enquired Bennett.

Maxwell did not answer for a minute or two.

“I may as well tell you all,” he said then; “I was in Melbourne, after I saw Milford, and I met a girl with that same face, in the street. Strange, too, we could not help looking at each other as though we knew we had met before. That meeting decided me on taking the trip up here. Now, that is really all. Are you ready for the adventure?”

“I should think so,” said Davis, “we have fresh horses at the camp, and nothing to do with ourselves for three months or more. Please God, we'll soon be on Tom Tiddler's ground picking up gold in chunks.”

“One question more,” put in Bennett. “Have you ever had any return of these trances or cataleptic fits?”

“Never since, not the slightest sign of one.”

Chapter III.

There was no doubt about the strange proof or coincidence, whichever it should turn out to be. The three men stood on the bank of the Nicholson gazing at the gorge and the waterhole, from the bosom of which rose the two upright pillars of rock. A fortnight had elapsed since they were camped at the lagoon.

“It's the same place,” muttered Maxwell — and, as the overwhelming horror of his fight through shadowland came back to him, he leant on his horse's shoulder and bowed his head down on the mane.

Bennett made a sign to Davis, and both were silent for a while. Then Davis spoke —

“Well, old man, as we aren't possessed of the supernatural power you had when you were last here, we'll have to get over that range somehow.”

Maxwell lifted his head. “We must tackle the range, but I expect we shall have a job to get the horses over. How about leaving them here in hobbles and going up on foot?”

“Not to be thought of,” replied Davis; “why, the niggers' tracks just back there in the bed of the river are as thick as sheep-tracks. The horses would be speared before we got five miles away. I know these beggars.”

“That's true,” said Bennett.

Davis eyed the range curiously for some time. “There's a spur there that we can work our way up, I think,” he said at last, indicating with his hand the spot he meant. The other two, after a short inspection, agreed with him. It was then nearly noon, so the horses were turned out for a couple of hours' spell, a fire lit and the billy boiled.

“What could have led your Dutch sailor up this way?” said Davis as, the meal over, they were enjoying a pipe.

“That is what has puzzled me. I have read up everything I could get hold of on the subject of Dutch discovery and can find no record of any ship visiting the Gulf about that date,” replied Maxwell.

“There may have been plenty of ships here, of which neither captain nor crew wanted a record kept. Those were the days of the buccaneers,” said Bennett.

“Yes, but with the exception of the ship which had Dampier on board, they did not come out of their way to New Holland,” returned Maxwell.

“The Bachelor's Delight and the Cygnet were on the West Coast, as you say; why not others which had not the luck to be associated with Dampier?”

“True: but the Dutch were not noted as buccaneers. However, plenty of ships may have been lost in the Gulf of which all record has disappeared. The question is, what brought the man up into this region?” said Davis.

“I firmly believe we shall get the clue to that secret, when we find the ravine. It seems incredible that a shipwrecked or marooned man should have left the sea-coast, whereon was his only hope of salvation, and have made south into an unknown land, through such a range as this.”

“Well, boys, we'll make a start for it,” said Davis, jumping up; and the party were soon in their saddles.

The range proved stiff climbing, and they were so often baulked, and forced to retrace their steps, that it was sundown ere they reached the top

* * * * *

It was a desolate outlook for a camp. A rough tableland of spinifex — evidently extending too far for them to cross and descend the other side before darkness set in — lay before them.

“Nothing for it but to go on and tie the horses up all night,” said Bennett. Fortune, however, favoured them; in about a mile they came to a small patch of grass, sufficient for the horses, and as their water-bags were full, they gladly turned out.

* * * * *

“Well, Maxwell,” said Davis, as they were discussing breakfast, “hear anything from your old Dutch navigator last night?”

“No, but I had some confused sort of dream about this place: I thought I heard that voice once more telling me to ‘go back.’ But that, of course, is only natural.”

“I think we are close to the spot,” remarked Bennett. “When I was after the horses this morning I could see down into the river, and there appeared to be a pocket there.”

Bennett proved right. In half-an-hour's time they were scrambling down the range, and soon stood in an open space which Maxwell at once identified.

Naturally everyone was somewhat excited. Although at first inclined to put the story down to hallucination, the subsequent events had certainly shaken this belief in the minds of the two friends. Maxwell silently pointed to the boulder; there was something carved on it, but it was worn and indistinct. Two centuries of weather had almost obliterated whatever marks had been there.

“They were fresh and clear when I saw them,” said Maxwell, in an awed voice.

By diligent scrutiny they made out the inscription that he had formerly

repeated, but had they not known it the task would have been most difficult. The words had not been very deeply marked, and as the face of the boulder fronted north-west, the full force of two hundred years monsoons had been experienced by the inscription.

“This is a wonderful thing,” said Davis. “There can be no doubt as to its age.”

“Let's go up the ravine and look for the reef and then get back as soon as possible. I don't like this place. I wish I had not come,” returned Maxwell.

They left the pack-horses feeding about and rode up the gully, taking with them the pick and shovel they had brought. “It was here, I think,” said Maxwell, looking round, “but the place seems altered.”

“Very likely the creek would change its course slightly in a couple of hundred years, but not much. That looks like an outcrop there.”

“This is the place,” replied Maxwell, eagerly, “I know it now, but it is a little different.”

The three dismounted, and Davis, taking the pick, struck the cap of the reef, breaking off some lumps of stone. As he did so a wild “Holloa!” rang up the gully. All started and looked at each other with faces suddenly white and hearts quickly beating. There was something grisly in such a cry arising out of the surrounding solitude.

“Blacks?” said Bennett, doubtfully. Davis shook his head. Once more the loud shout was raised, apparently coming from the direction of the inscribed rock.

“Let's go and see what it is, anyhow,” said Davis — and they mounted and rode down the gully again, Bennett, who had picked up a piece of the quartz, putting it into his saddle-pouch as they went along.

Maxwell had not spoken since the cry had been heard, his face was pale, and occasionally he muttered to himself, “Go back, go back!” The pack-horses were industriously cropping what scanty grass there was; all seemed peaceful and quiet.

“I believe it was a bird, after all; there's a kind of toucan makes a devil of a row — have a look round,” said Davis to Bennett, and they both rode up and down the bank of the river, leaving Maxwell standing near the rock where he had dismounted. Nothing could be seen, and the two returned and proposed going up the gully again.

“You fellows go and come back quickly, I want to get out of this — I'm upset,” said Maxwell in a constrained voice, speaking for the first time.

Davis glanced at his friend. “Right you are, old man, no wonder you don't feel well; we'll just make sure of the reef and come back. If you want us, fire your pistol; we shan't be far off.”

The two rode back to their interrupted work, and hastily commenced their examination of the stone. There was no doubt about the richness of

the find, and the reef could be traced a good distance without much trouble. They had collected a small heap of specimens to take back, when suddenly the loud "Holloa!" came pealing once more up the gully, followed instantly by a fainter cry and two revolver-shots.

Hastily mounting, the two galloped back.

The pack-horses, as if startled, were walking along their tracks towards home, followed by Maxwell's horse with the bridle trailing. Its rider was stretched on the ground; nothing else was visible.

Jumping from their horses they approached the prostrate man. Both started and stared at each other with terror-stricken eyes. Before them lay a skeleton clad in Maxwell's clothes.

"Are we mad!" cried Davis, aghast with horror.

The fierce sun was above them, the bare mountains around, they could hear the horses clattering up the range as if anxious to leave the accursed place, and before them lay a skeleton with the shrunken skin still adhering to it in places — a corpse that had been rotting for years, that had relapsed into the state in which it would have been had the former trance been death. Blind terror seized them both, and they mounted to follow the horses, when an awful voice came from the fleshless lips: "Stay with me, stop! I may come back; I may" —

Bennett could bear no more, he stuck spurs in his horse and galloped off. Davis would have followed, but he was transfixed with terror at what he saw. The awful object was moving, the outcast spirit was striving desperately to reanimate the body that had suddenly fallen into decay. The watcher was chained to the spot. Once it seemed that the horrible thing was really going to rise, but the struggle was unavailing; with a loud moan of keenest agony and despair that thrilled the listener's brain with terror, it fell back silent and motionless. Davis remembered nothing more till he found himself urging his horse up the range.

* * * * *

In an asylum for the insane in a Queensland town there is a patient named Bennett, who is always talking about the wonderful reef he knows of up North. He has a specimen of very rich quartz, which he never parts with day or night. He is often visited by a man named Davis, who nursed him through a severe attack of fever out on the Nicholson. The doctors think he may yet recover.

* Gulf of Carpentaria.

* White head.

* Nigger raid.

Tranter's Shot.

"I SHOT him like a dog!" said Tranter, as he got off his horse and proceeded to unsaddle.

"Whom did you shoot?" asked the new superintendent, who was standing by.

"Never mind," returned Tranter. "I'm not going to give myself away, but I shot him like a dog."

There was bad blood between Tranter and the new super., and, as Tranter was about to leave, he was far from respectful in his manner.

The new super. was a young man from the South, and Tranter was an old Gulf hand. The new super. was a black-protector and temperance-advocate, and objected to swearing. Tranter, to sustain his character as an old Gulf hand, swore the most blood-curdling oaths in his presence, and told the most awful lies he could invent about black atrocities. Consequently, they fell out, and Tranter was leaving the station.

"Now, look here," said the super., "I'll get to the bottom of this — I'll just follow your tracks and find out what you have been up to."

"You'll find him safe enough," said Tranter, "*he* won't get away."

The wrathful superintendent had his horse brought up, and started back on Tranter's track, taking another man with him. The trail was not hard to follow, as Tranter had been after horses and they had come home along a cattle-track.

The two had gone about five miles when a loud, wailing cry suddenly startled them. They were in scrubby country at the foot of a low conglomerate rise, with many boulders strewn about.

Following the direction of the cry, they came to an old gin seated on the ground cutting herself, or endeavouring to do so, with a piece of broken glass, and occasionally uttering the wail that had first attracted their notice. Green, the super., knew that this was a sign of mourning, and guessed that he was on the right track.

"There's been murder here," he said, dismounting and approaching the gin. She took no notice of them, but kept on moaning and scraping at her breast.

"Let's look about," said the man, "they always go on like this, and we can't stop her."

They searched awhile without result, the gin still maintaining her lamentation. Then Green, having made up his mind that a vile outrage

had been committed, remounted, and they cantered back to the station.

“I will get F——,” he said, naming the native-police inspector, “to bring a trooper and search.”

The “barracks” were only some three miles from the station, and F—— was soon up there with his smartest tracker.

Meantime, Green had been trying to extract from Tranter what he had done with the body of his victim.

“I shot him like a dog, and I buried him like a dog,” was all he could obtain in answer. “Go and find him, *he* won't run away.”

Green was infuriated, but he knew he could do nothing until evidence of the murder was established.

With one delay and another it was late in the afternoon ere Green, F——, and the black trooper arrived at the scene of the tragedy. The old gin was still sitting there raising her requiem song, but the black boy could obtain no information from her.

“Some fellow bin go bung,” was all he was assured of.

They searched without avail until dusk, and then had to depart unsatisfied, the most astonishing thing being that they could find no tracks of blacks other than those of the gin. Green took counsel with F——, but the latter could say nothing, except that the fact of the presence of the gin sounding the death-wail and Tranter's boasting were not sufficient evidence to obtain a warrant on. For himself he thought, from what he had seen, that Tranter had shot a blackfellow there, but his mere belief would go for nothing. However, he slept at the station and promised to renew the search as early as possible.

Green passed a sleepless night. Here was a chance right into his hands of vindicating his opinions as to the murderous treatment of the natives, and he seemed most unaccountably baffled. He vowed that he would leave no stone unturned on the morrow, and at daylight fell asleep and slept so long that it was late when they got away.

Arrived at the fatal spot they at once set to work and began to examine the ground. The old gin had gone back to camp, and they were undisturbed by her outcries. Green had brought two men with him, so they were a strong party.

Suddenly the black trooper stopped and stamped his foot. “What for me——fool?” he exclaimed. “Me know what that fellow shoot!”

“What?” cried the others, crowding round.

“You know, can't find em track — only old gin's track.”

“Yes.”

“Of course, that one shoot 'em piccaniny. Gin bin carry it.

This probable solution, so much more horrible than they had expected, struck them all as the true one, and they hastened to the spot where the old native woman had been squatting. The trooper set to work and rolled away the boulder she had been leaning against, then he threw out some

of the smaller stones, and, putting down his hand, drew forth by one leg the ghastly object of their search — the corpse of a fine fat dog, evidently the late property of the lamenting lubra.

Tranter was even with the super., who never got over the chaff, but returned south.

The Spell of the Mas-Hantoo.

PONTIANAK, at the mouth of the Kapoeas River, is not a place much visited by Europeans, but one can obtain an exceptional experience there.

Pontianak is the headquarters of the Dutch in Borneo, and the Resident-General has a small joke of his own, which he plays off on the unsuspecting new-chum. As is customary in those torrid settlements, business is generally transacted during the comparatively cool hours immediately succeeding daylight. As you discuss it with the courteous old Resident, he inveigles you into a stroll up and down the verandah, and after a little of this exercise, he informs you that the equatorial line passes right through the centre of his bungalow, and that during the morning walk you have crossed and re-crossed the equator several times.

I have other cause to remember Pontianak. It was my starting-point on an expedition destined to be a very memorable one. I had long contemplated a trip into the interior of Borneo, allured partly by the reports of the half-worked diamond mines, and partly by natural curiosity to see a place so little known. I had accidentally met with a young travelling Englishman, an enthusiastic sportsman, who eagerly jumped at the notion, and the result was that we soon found ourselves at Pontianak, where, after the necessary official permission had been obtained, we made our arrangements for departure.

Travelling there is far more luxurious than in the Australian back-blocks. Our destination was the Sintang district, and our highway the river Kapoeas. A large roofed-in native boat, known as a *gobang*, a native crew under a *mandor*, or headman, and a good outfit of stores were obtained, and we started for the land of the Dyaks.

For days our journey was most auspicious. The dense jungle on either hand afforded a good supply of game for my sporting companion, and the native tribes we met were friendly and interesting.

As time went on we found ourselves amongst Dyaks, permission to pass through whose country cost some diplomacy, but patience and a friendly demeanour overcame all objections, and we soon got well into the mountainous districts on the upper reaches of the river. As yet I had not met the object of my search — the abandoned diamond mines, legends of which were often repeated by the coastal Malays. Once or twice I was shown places where gold-mining on a most primitive fashion had undoubtedly been pursued in some long-forgotten age. Circular holes

had been sunk in three places in the form of a triangle, and drives had then been made from one to another, but by whom it had been done the Dyaks could not tell. Certainly not by their forefathers. Some told me that it was the work of slaves long ago, when the sultans from India had swept down on the archipelago and enthroned themselves in Java and Sumatra, thence enforcing tribute over Borneo, Celebes, and the smaller islands.

No ruins or inscriptions were to be found indicating that the country had ever been permanently settled by the men of that time. Sometimes I heard mysterious reports of a wild race whose descent was more ancient than that of the Dyaks: they were known as the *Orangpooenan*, or forest men, and were marked with a white spot in the middle of the forehead, an indication, at any rate, of their Hindu origin.

One afternoon about 4 o'clock the *mandor* came to me and pointed to a rope of twisted rattan stretched across the river — a sign that we were to go no further. Some Dyaks were assembled on the bank, and we went ashore to parley with them.

They were apparently as friendly as usual, and accepted small presents of tobacco, but declined to give us any reason for refusing the required permission to proceed. We visited the village and partook of fruit there, and after dark returned to our boat. Morton was very hurt at our sudden detention, and wished to go on in spite of the natives. I pointed out to him the folly of such a course, and he consented to take things quietly and wait for a day or two. During those two days I made every effort to conciliate our neighbours, and with perfect success excepting in the one one direction. We were not to go up the river. I could obtain no reason for this refusal, and concluded that we must perforce return.

My enquiries as to the ancient gold and diamond mines seemed to amuse the old men mightily. One of them told me that I had seen the *Kambing-Mas*. This is a golden sheep which appears to certain doomed men. So infatuated does the victim become at sight of it, that he follows it on through jungles and mountains day after day until he dies of fatigue.

Of legends and traditions I got my fill, but permission to go ahead was not to be had. My old friend who told me of the *Kambing-Mas* asked me if I desired to try for the great diamond which was supposed to be in a lake at the head of a river. This star-like gem, described as of enormous size and unspeakable lustre, can be plainly seen at the bottom, but woe to the rash man who dives down after it! The infuriated spirit-guardians seize and strangle him, and his dead body floats on the surface as a warning to others.

“Perhaps,” went on my loquacious host, “you would go to the land of the *Mas-hantoo*, the spirit-gold?” This district, rich in the precious metal, was cursed by a sultan of old, on account of the death of his son, and although you may go there and fill your pockets with gold-dust and

nuggets, they all turn to sand and pebbles when you cross the boundary on your return.

Meanwhile Morton chafed greatly at our delay, and I had to exercise much tact to pacify him. The third evening I saw him in close talk with the *mandor*; he then left the boat and went to the village, returning about dark with the information that we now had permission to proceed.

It seemed strange to me that I had heard nothing about it, but at the time I had no suspicions. It was a bright moonlight night. Taking the *mandor's* kris, Morton went ashore and severed the rattan rope where it was tied round the butt of a tree. The men took their places and the boat was once more under way.

I dropped off to sleep about ten o'clock. I awoke amidst the crash of boughs and branches, bringing ruin and destruction on us and our craft. Although half-stunned, I managed to struggle from beneath the crushed-in roof, and, as the boat sank, struck out feebly for the shore, which I had no sooner reached than I fainted.

What had happened to us was the result of Morton's rashness. Poor fellow, he paid for it with his life. The villagers had not given him permission to go on, but he had bribed the *mandor* to do so nevertheless. Along the bank of the river the Dyaks had selected certain leaning trees under which we would pass. These had been cut through to breaking point, and temporarily secured from falling outright by twisted rattans. As we passed, these guys were cut, and we were swamped by the falling trees. Morton was killed instantly, but I strangely escaped, and most of the crew were more or less hurt. All this I learned afterwards.

When I came to my senses I was lying by a fire in a small clearing in the jungle, with two or three Dyaks sleeping around. One man was awake, apparently watching. When he saw me looking about he came over to me and brought me a drink. He was very light-coloured, dressed in the ordinary *chawat* or apron with a jacket, called a "*bagu*," on his body. He smiled pleasantly, and, addressing me in the native dialect, said, "Saki" (a name they had given me at the village), you were ill-advised to seek the Tapat-Mas (gold-mine) here. Why did you not watch the flight of the fish-hawk first?" I asked after Morton, and he told me of his death.

I was well treated, and the fate of Morton, whom they knew to be guilty of the offence, had apparently atoned for our trespass.

On the second day I was much recovered, and Abiasi, the Dyak who had just spoken to me, was sitting by my side showing me how to use the blow-pipe, when a strange old man came from the jungle and advanced in the clearing

He was tall, white-haired and white-bearded, and on his forehead was a round mark made with a white pigment of some sort. Abiasi rose and said something to him of which I could only catch the word "*Saghie*,"

another name for the forest men. Presently the old man, who had only a ragged *chawat* on, came over and regarded me earnestly, then he and Abiasi renewed their conversation.

“Saki,” said the latter at last, addressing me directly, “if you still wish to see the Tampat-Mas where the Mas-hantoo is, this old saghie will take you there.” He then further told me that the old saghie, or *Orang-pooenan*, lived in the mountains where there were many old mines, but it was all spirit-gold, that turned into sand and gravel after it was taken away. The saghie thought that the presence of a white man might break the charm. I eagerly agreed to go, and Abiasi gave me many instructions as to my return, lent me a *parang*, or heavy knife, and bade me farewell.

It was evening when we started, and the old man led me through the jungle by a well-beaten path. Although the moon was bright, the shadows were dense where it did not penetrate, and I confess to having felt very nervous as we pushed on in silence, starting at intervals some sleeping bird or a troop of monkeys.

Presently we came to a small opening and halted in front of a low-thatched hut. In answer to his call a young woman, evidently just aroused from sleep, came out; she brought some living embers and made a fire. Like the old man, she was very fair in colour, good-looking, with wellshaped limbs, which, as her only attire was the *chawat*, or apron, were fully displayed. After eating some rice and fruit, I lay down by the fire and slept for the remainder of the night.

I was not sorry to see a fine large fish cooking on the coals for breakfast, as my returning health brought with it a good appetite. When we had finished the meal the old man and the girl, whom I guessed to be his granddaughter, took a large rush-woven basket between them and started along a narrow path leading through the forest, motioning me to follow.

In about two miles we reached an open space, and before us rose the rugged side of a hill. We followed the base of this round for some time until the face of the hill grew steep and precipitous, and I noticed we were amongst some ancient workings.

At the mouth of what seemed a drive in the cliff the old saghie stopped, and they set down the basket. He then spoke rapidly to the girl, whom he called Suara, and she collected dry wood and built a fire, the old man lighting some tinder with a flint and steel. Suara then broke down the branches of a resinous kind of pine common to the hilly country, and with the assistance of my *parang* dressed them into rude torches. I now understood what these preparations meant, and when we had lit the torches the two picked up the basket and led the way into the tunnel or drive.

As seen by the dim, flaring light, it presented far more finished work than any of the ancient workings I had yet seen. We must have gone at

least a hundred yards before the old man stopped, and I then saw that somebody had recently been at work, for there was loose dirt lying about, and some native tools.

The old saghie put down the basket, and motioned to me to come and fill it with the shovel. I did so, and naturally took the opportunity of examining the dirt. I sifted some in my hands, and blew part of the finer dirt away, and am satisfied, even now, that there was a large quantity of coarse gold through it and several specimens, as they are generally called by diggers. Of this I am quite sure, despite what afterwards occurred.

The old saghie was peering over my shoulder while I blew the dust away, and grinned hideously as he saw the gold exposed here and there. I remember wondering at the time what possible ambition could be his for the yellow dross. Perhaps he thought the same of me.

Anyhow, we were both satisfied with our inspection, and I went on filling up the bag until it could hold no more. The old man and the girl picked it up and carried it out of the tunnel. Instead of taking the homeward track as I anticipated, they turned down another one, and in a short time we were beside a small stream which descended from the range. Here there were rude appliances for washing, and I selected, as the most convenient, a shallow baked-clay dish, and commenced washing out a prospect.

Not a speck, not a trace of gold was there. I did not look at my two companions, for it struck me that possibly the dirt at the top of the basket was different from what I had examined in the tunnel. I therefore took another prospect from the very bottom and proceeded to wash it.

It was a strange scene. The narrow path leading down to the small stream, just cutting a thin gap in the dense forest. The shrill chattering and screaming of parrots overhead, and the noises made by the troops of monkeys, which swung from bough to bough, and from one long hanging vine to another. Behind me, as I squatted by the water's edge, the two yellow, semi-nude figures of the old man and the girl, bending over my shoulders in rapt attention.

The dirt was rapidly reduced as I swirled the water round in the dish, and when I tilted it to and fro, there, at either end of the grit and gravel, appeared the yellow sheen of gold. I heard the two behind me heave a sigh of satisfaction as this sight appeared. Surely the spell of the Mas-hantoo was broken at last?

Suddenly, without a sound of warning, a glistening, flashing object dropped from overhead and struck me and the girl into the water. Blinded and frightened, I staggered to my feet, for the stream was but shallow, and in an instant saw what had happened. A huge boa had dropped from one of the trees above, where it is their custom to hang, watching the paths by which the deer go to water, and snatched its victim from our midst. The old man was crushed against the trunk by three or

four folds of the creature, whose tail was still in the branches above, and he was already in the pangs of death.

Suara, who, like myself, had been knocked forward by a blow from a coil of the reptile as it dropped on its prey, was standing near me gazing with horror-stricken eyes on the death-scene. The crunching of the unhappy man's bones was quite audible, but his collapsed body showed that life was over.

The dish had floated on the surface, and was held from going down the stream by a tussock of reeds. Suara picked it up and handed it to me with a look of despair. Instinctively, despite the near presence of the monster, now gloating over its meal. I finished washing the prospect. The spell of the Mas-hantoo held good. Nothing but gravel and sand was in the earthen dish, which I dashed to pieces on a rock.

Together, Suara and I left the spot and made our way to the hut, which we reached that evening and there rested for the night. Next morning she conducted me through jungle paths to within sight of the village where Abiasi lived.

Here she stopped and pointed in another direction, nor would she accompany me a step towards the village; and so, neither able to say farewell to the other in language both could understand, we parted. Abiasi told me afterwards that more of her people lived in the direction in which she had pointed.

Most of our goods had been recovered, and the crew were now nearly all well. A fresh gobang was provided, and I parted from the Dyak villagers with strangely mixed feelings, although it was with some sense of satisfaction that I saw mile after mile increase the distance between me and the mines of the Mas-hantoo.

The Track of the Dead.

“WHAT'S the matter with you? Why the deuce can't you sleep?”

“I don't know,” returned Alf., “got a touch of insomnia. If I do go off I have the most awful dreams, all about men I used to know — men who are dead now.”

“Bah! don't start such talk at this time of night. Sit by the fire and smoke your pipe,” I answered, wearily, as I turned my back to the blaze and drew my blanket around me.

“Right you are, old man,” he replied, good-naturedly, and I fell into unconsciousness.

I awoke with a start. The fire was out, or nearly so, and the camp was silent. Just above the horizon the spectral last quarter of the moon was hanging, throwing ghostly long shadows around. It was the hour before dawn, the uncanny time when the vital forces are at their lowest ebb. “The only courage worth talking about,” said some great general, “is three o'clock in the morning courage.”

I roused myself a little and looked around. Alf. was sleeping on the other side of the fire; where he had made his bed was now in deep shadow, and I could see nothing. I tried to go to sleep again, but it was useless. Perhaps a smoke might send me off; so, seeing a spark still smouldering, I arose, blew the end of a glowing firestick into a blaze, lit my pipe, and then, holding up the lighted stick, looked over to where my companion should have been lying. His blankets were tenantless.

May I never again experience such a thrill as went through me when I made this discovery! I put my hand on the blankets where they had been thrown aside. They were cold, and the dew had gathered on them: he must have been gone some hours. I listened long and intently, but the night was silent. For a man to wander from camp in the middle of the night, out in the Never-Never country, and remain away for hours, is a most unusual thing. If he had heard the horses making off he would have called me ere leaving; if — but I exhausted all conjectures before daylight dawned. I could do nothing until then.

The light came very slowly, or so it appeared to me. We were camped at the foot of a spinifex rise, on a narrow flat bordering a creek. When the light grew strong I could see the horses feeding quietly a short distance away, and, picking up my bridle, I soon had one caught and saddled. Firing off my rifle two or three times without eliciting an answering shot,

I started to look for my missing mate. After much trouble I found his track leading straight up the ridge, which, near the crest, was sandy, the prints of his footsteps being there very clearly defined. The spinifex was scantier, and as I gazed intently down I saw something that made me pull up and hastily dismount to scan the tracks more closely. Alf. was not alone — somebody had walked ahead of him.

Step by step I followed, leading my horse, but I could make nothing of the foremost track, for Alf.'s almost covered it every time. At last they diverged, and the two ran side by side. It was a bright morning and the sun just glinted under the stunted trees. What little live nature there was in that lonely spot was awake and joyously greeting the day; but I arose from my examination of that awful footmark with the dew of superstitious terror on my forehead. No living man had made that track.

I had to follow on, scarce knowing what to think or expect. I tried to persuade myself that the footprint was that of some attenuated old gin. lean and shrunken as a mummy, but that was against reason. The track was that of the skeleton of a man; and Alf. was not following *it*, but following whatever was making it.

With varying fortune, now finding, now losing the trail, I kept on for about two hours; then, halfway down a slight incline, I came upon the object of my search. He was sitting on the ground talking to himself, I thought at first, but when I got closer I saw he was addressing some object on his lap. He was nursing the head and shoulders of the remains of a human being. It lay at full length amidst a patch of rank green grass fertilised by the decayed body, a skeleton with fragments of rotten clothing still clinging to it. Alf. had his arm under the skull as one would support a sick man, and was murmuring words of affection. He raised his head as I approached, but evinced no surprise.

“This is my brother Jack,” he said. “Fancy his coming to the camp last night to show me where he was! We must take him into the nearest station and bury him, for he can't rest here, it's too lonely.”

I did not answer. My mate's mind had evidently given way, and I could not reason with him. He carried the body back to our camp, and I commenced a ghastly ride to the nearest station, over seventy miles away, with a madman and a corpse for companions. The third day after starting we arrived at Ulmalong, then the outside station, and here I learnt the story of Alf.'s twin brother.

He had been a stockman on the place when it was first settled, and had ridden out on his rounds one day and never returned. There was little doubt that the skeleton we brought in was his, but what had led the living twin to its resting-place? I held my tongue about the track, for they would only think I was as mad as my companion.

After we buried the remains Alf. relapsed into almost constant silence. He was quite harmless and they found him some light work to do about

the place, but he died, prematurely aged, in about a year's time. He was buried with his brother.

The Mystery of Baines' Dog.

Prologue.

'THE trouble was first caused by the Malingerites, and, needless to say, it was a case of *cherchez la femme*. One of the youthful members of that tribe had forcibly abducted a maiden of the clan of Layovah, and red war ensued. The worst of it was that they selected as convincing ground a spot close to a much-frequented cattle-camp, on the boundary of two large runs where the herds met. This greatly extended the circle of commotion. The noise and tumult of battle, "the thunder of the captains and their shouting," coupled with the shrill yells of the gins, were enough to unsettle the temper of any well-regulated beast, and at the end of the engagement, the casualties were — one blackfellow seriously injured by falling over a stump during the heat of combat, two slightly scratched, and one gin very hoarse through screeching. The cattle scattered to the four winds. Most of the Seldon Downs beasts fled on to Inverloch, and most of the Inverloch ones to Seldon Downs — all vowing in their bovine hearts never again to set foot on that camp.

So two stations, whereon the owners had dwelt for years in peace and amity, fell out on account of an obscure aboriginal quarrel. Jack Bell, of Seldon Downs, said it was the fault of Tom Devine, who should have kept *his* niggers in better order: and Devine said that Bell knew as much about managing blacks as he did about squaring the circle. The cattle were soon mustered and put right; but the remarks were repeated and remembered.

The two erst while friends were in this embittered state when Baines, the hawker, was murdered at the old boundary hut. Then the smouldering feud broke out. Devine maintained that it was evident the man had been killed by the natives on Bell's station: and Bell held as his salvation that the unfortunate fellow met his death at the hands of whites, probably some men lately discharged from Devine's. So the matter stood when our story opens, and the ends of justice were finally defeated because the Malingerites quarrelled with the Layovahs. It is as well to trace things back to their first cause.

I.

Dick Baines, the hawker, had been murdered; of that there was no manner of doubt. He had camped at the boundary-hut, an old, deserted sheep-station, and a traveller passing the next day found him lying alongside his dray with his head cut open. His own axe, with a blood-stained blade, lay beside the body. Evidently he could not have done it himself. On that point everyone agreed.

His horses were safe, and his goods apparently untouched, and herein lay the mystery of the crime. He had only just started on his round with a full load, and what little money he had taken was found on his body. There seemed no motive for a white man to commit the deed, and if any of the blacks had done it, why had they not sacked the dray? It was an enigma worthy of a first-class detective-story. Meantime, during its elucidation, there was nothing to do but hold an inquest over what was once Baines, bury it, and let the law do the rest.

The deceased had been some time in the district, and was noted for his reserved manner. He always travelled and camped alone, and seldom drank. He was not extremely popular, and most people suspected that he had "a past." One singular feature of the tragedy was that his dog a smart little fox-terrier, had disappeared. The matter had almost run the orthodox nine days, when interest in it was suddenly revived by the arrest of a man in the small township of Boolah, a short distance from the scene of the murder, who was formally charged with the crime. He had Baines dog with him.

McFarlane, the man accused, was well known in the district and bore an excellent character. He had been working at Devine's on a fencing contract and had been paid off and left the morning before the hawker was killed. He had started for Seldon Downs, the road to which led past the boundary-hut. Thence he had gone round by two other stations to Boolah. He stated that he found the dog astray in the township, recognised it as the missing animal, called it by name, and the dog followed him. He was about to inform the police when he was arrested by the sergeant.

Scarcely had the surprise occasioned by this been well digested, before a more astonishing one turned up. Baines' dog was also found in a blacks' camp on Seldon Downs.

One of the men riding by the camp noticed a gin scuttling away with something in her arms that yelped and struggled. Rounding her up, he found she was vainly trying to conceal Baines' well-known and apparently ubiquitous dog. Further search revealed nothing more, and the gin made the astounding assertion that the dog had been given to her by a white woman. Beyond that no intelligible information could be elicited from her. The blacks were well watched and the dog taken down to Boolah, where McFarlane was to appear before the magistrates' court.

It now transpired that there were two dogs marked exactly the same,

identical in size and appearance, and both answering to the name of "Rattler." But the question was, which of the pair was Baines' dog? Never since the judgment of Solomon had law-court a more knotty problem. The animals on being introduced promptly fell on each other tooth and claw and were with difficulty separated. Bell and Devine, both J's.P., were sitting on the bench with the police-magistrate. They differed in opinion. Bell declared that the dog found with McFarlane was the dead hawker's; Devine was equally confident that the dog found on Seldon Downs was the one wanted. After much heated discussion Bell left the bench and desired to give evidence.

He stated that the last time he saw Baines, the hawker showed him a trick he had been teaching his dog. It was an old and well-known performance. The dog sat up on his hind legs with a piece of meat or biscuit balanced on the tip of his nose; at the words "ready, present, *fire!*" he tossed it up, caught and swallowed it, and dropped on all-fours again. Bell selected the dog he thought was the hawker's, and put him through the performance amidst the hushed attention of a crowded courtroom. It was a complete success and he looked up with an air of triumph.

"Yes. That's the dog found on Seldon Downs," said Devine from the bench.

"Nothing of the sort," returned Bell hotly, forgetting his position as witness. "It's the dog found with McFarlane."

Devine was indignantly replying, when the P.M. interfered and asked the sergeant which dog it was. The sergeant looked at the dogs, then at the two policeman, and they looked blankly back at the sergeant. Then the truth burst upon everybody with such suddenness that a roar of laughter convulsed the court.

The two dogs had got so irretrievably mixed up in the fight that now no one could tell one from the other.

When order was restored (Bell and Devine had nearly come to blows) the P.M. decided to remand the case for a week. Bail was allowed McFarlane, which Devine readily found. One of the dogs, the one which could perform the trick, was ordered to have a collar put on for distinction, and both were given in charge of the lock-up keeper. The enquiry had simply complicated matters. Baines' dog was identified, but nobody could say for certain at which place it had been found. Bell and Devine were, of course, equally positive, but that was mere party feeling. Most people believed in McFarlane's innocence, but Bell vowed that he would bring the murder home to him.

"Can you recall anything suspicious the night you passed Baines?" said Devine to McFarlane, as they went out after signing the bail bonds.

"No, sir. He had hobbled his horses out and was lighting a fire. I got off, lit my pipe, and stopped yarning for about twenty minutes. Then I went on to Seldon Downs."

“And from there?”

“I came to Boolah by Thirglemere and Bingledoon. I had been here about two hours when I recognised the dog, and directly after I had coaxed him to follow me I was arrested.”

“From the boundary-hut, going round by Seldon Downs, Thirglemere, and Bingledoon, you made it about eighty miles to here and took your time?”

“I stopped two days at Thirglemere and two at Bingledoon. I was a week coming here altogether.”

“But anyone could ride from the boundary-hut straight in to here in about thirty-five miles.”

“Yes, by the old track, but you have fenced that across now.”

“The wires could be easily strapped down, or cut for that matter. Let's see, I don't suppose it's been used for years, and there has been no rain since Baines was killed. I'm going to run the old track.”

“Will they let me go with you?”

“I'll fix that,” said Devine — and the next morning the two departed for the old track to the boundary-hut.

During their absence, however, Bell was not idle. He returned to the station, and, after much ado, he had the old gin, from whom the dog had been taken, brought into Boolah. As they arrived Devine and McFarlane rode in, returning from their trip to the old hut.

On being shown the two dogs, the gin immediately claimed the one without the collar as being her property. This was satisfactory, to Bell, at any rate, but at this moment Devine came upon the scene. Disdaining to do more than civilly sneer at the test just gone through, he drew the sergeant on one side and held a short conference with him. The sergeant disappeared with the two dogs; the others waited, Bell scornfully impatient. Presently the two dogs reappeared. On being told to pick out her dog, the gin at once again selected the collarless one.

“That's the other one this time, is it not, Sergeant?” said Devine.

“Yes, sir, I shifted the collar just now.”

“It's not fair!” broke in Bell. “The poor devil's frightened out of her wits; she picked right the first time, but you've bothered her;” and he marched out of the yard in deep disgust.

When Devine and McFarlane left the township they did not trouble to look for tracks until they were well clear of all the stray animals. When about ten miles away the old bridle-path was quite plain. Both men rode on in silence, scanning the ground carefully; at times, with a low whistle, one would call the other's attention to something he saw. Just as they got within sight of the fence, they pulled up.

“It's plain enough, McFarlane,” said Devine; “a horse has been ridden along here about the time of the murder.”

McFarlane nodded. “We shall make sure at the fence,” he answered,

and they rode on. It was a wire fence, and where it crossed the track the wires were taut and evidently untampered with. The two turned and rode along the fence in opposite directions. A shout from McFarlane brought Devine back to him. He had come to a panel that bore marks of rough usage, from the way the upper wires sagged. "The top wires have been strapped down and then brushed across," said the fencer, pointing to the withered boughs lying about.

"And the horse did not fancy tackling it," added Devine; "look how he has been hanging back." Inside the fence the ground was much more bare and dusty, and the tracks of a horse's stamping hoofs deeply indented were plainly visible.

"Whew!" said McFarlane, getting through the fence, "look here!" Devine followed him. On a particularly dry and dusty bit of ground was the plain imprint of a boot. There should have been nothing strange in this to make the men stare so intently at it; it was only what they might have expected to find.

Placing his hand on McFarlane's shoulder to steady himself, Devine put his foot down close to the track without actually touching the ground. The difference in size was at once apparent.

"Either a boy or a woman," said McFarlane. "And the gin said a woman gave her the dog," returned the other.

Carefully getting back so as not to deface the tracks the two men mounted and rode a short distance down the fence to where they knew was a small gate. Making for the old bridle-path again, they followed it on towards the hut, McFarlane drawing Devine's attention to the track of a small dog now plainly visible on that of the horse.

They stayed that night at the old sheep-station, but no further evidence rewarded their careful search, beyond the fact that some blacks had camped in the neighbourhood, apparently about the date of the murder. They returned to Boolah in time for Devine to be present at the dog-test, as already narrated. McFarlane met him as he was coming out.

"It has just struck me to whom that second dog belongs," he said.

"Whose is it?"

"Mrs. Brown's; you know, at Boomerang Creek."

"By Jove, you're right," said Devine. "It must have been stolen from there."

Devine was doubtful whether to communicate the discovery of the suspicious track to the police or not. Against his better judgment he did so, thinking it his duty. They went out, accompanied by Bell, who volunteered his services, examined the track, and reported that it had been made some time since the hawker's death, and so had nothing to do with that occurrence. In this they were partly prompted by Bell, and partly by the fact that as they had searched for tracks, without success, at the time of the murder, it would never do for them to go back on

themselves. Devine cursed himself for a fool, and that was all he could do. When McFarlane's case came on again he was, of course, discharged. The evidence was altogether too slight, and several people came forward and testified to having seen the dog in Boolah before McFarlane's arrival. "I'll find out about that other dog," said Devine to himself.

II.

Nearly forty miles from Boolah, on the way to the seaport, in the opposite direction to the scene of the tragedy, stood a wayside publichouse, on the bank of a large creek, crossed by the road. Mrs. Brown's, on Boomerang Creek, was noted east and west for its neatness, cleanliness and good accommodation. People travelling stretched a point to make the place for the night's stay. The coach-passengers who grumbled at the meagre fare of the other accommodation-houses were told to wait till they came to Mrs. Brown's. Brown, for there was a Mr. Brown, was devoted to out-door work, but Mrs. Brown was the presiding genius of comfort indoors, and, therefore, the place was generally known as "Mrs. Brown's."

When the Judge was on circuit, he always carefully fell ill for a day or two at Mrs. Brown's. Men from the hot western plains, who had lived for weary months upon pigweed and "salt-horse," rested at Mrs. Brown's with calm contentment. Freshest of vegetables, of butter, of eggs, and best of cooking, what could a man with a salt-junk-saturated liver want more?

As cheery as her well-kept table was the appearance of the hostess herself, a plump little woman, who perennially had a smile upon her pretty face, and a kindly greeting for everybody. She was devoted to her quiet, easy-going husband, who warmly reciprocated the feeling. A word from Mrs. Brown would steady the most drunken fellow, and when she was in the bar the language of all hands was painfully discreet.

It was at this calm haven of rest that Tom Devine dismounted one evening in his character of amateur detective. He was, of course, well known, and Mrs. Brown, as she flitted in and out of the room seeing after his comfort, kept up a lively flow of chatter.

"I suppose you miss something, Mr. Devine?" she said as she invited him to table.

"Well, no! Everything seems as comfortable as usual, Mrs. Brown."

"I've lost my dog since you were here last. You remember little Rattler?"

"Of course. Why, that must be your little terrier the police have in Boolah," said Devine, with infinite hypocrisy.

Mrs. Brown nodded and smiled brightly. "Yes, I only heard of it the other day. I must send up and claim him."

“How did you lose him?”

“I am not sure. He was stolen, I believe; but we had so many travellers staying here at the time that I don't know whom to suspect.”

“Any women amongst them?” asked Devine, quickly.

“Yes, one. I don't know who she was; she was going with her husband to some station out west.”

“Would you know her again if you saw her?”

Mrs. Brown was positive that she would, and in her turn asked what made Mr. Devine so curious.

“I will tell you,” he said, after a pause. “You have heard all about the murder of Baines, the hawker? Well, one of the dogs was found in a blacks' camp, and the gin who had it asserts that it was given her by a white woman.”

Mrs. Brown looked down on the table upon which her hand rested. “I should be sorry to hear that she was mixed up in it, for she seemed to be a very nice person,” she replied.

“But if the gin has told the truth she must have stolen your dog.”

“That is true,” she remarked.

Devine was up at sunrise next morning, after restless dreams about a strange woman who went about stealing dogs and killing hawkers. He strolled out and commenced yarning with Brown, who, bucket in hand, was standing at the milking-yard waiting for the cows.

“The missus has gone down the paddock for them this morning,” he confided to Devine; “got up very early — she couldn't sleep at all last night.”

At this moment the first of the lowing herd made its appearance. Mrs. Brown was behind on foot, driving them up and leading her horse. One after the other they blundered over the rails that had been carelessly let down at one end only. Mrs. Brown followed, but the horse she was leading suddenly stopped and refused to step over the rails.

“Confound that horse!” said Brown, “he wouldn't lift his legs over a pack-thread if he could help it.”

Devine did not answer. His thoughts were engrossed in a sudden flash of memory. The horse that obstinately hung back on being required to step over anything! The tracks at the wire fence!

Brown went into the yard and commenced milking. Mrs. Brown having succeeded in getting her horse over the rails, went on to the stable, Devine walking by her side.

“Mrs. Brown,” he said, quietly. “I know who killed Baines, the hawker.”

She started, stopped, and looked him for one moment in the eyes, read there that he knew the truth, and turned so deadly white that he was afraid she would faint. She recovered herself, however, and walked steadily on to the stable. Stopping at the door she glanced around to see

if anybody was within hearing, then said firmly: "Had I better tell you everything, or go and give myself up to the police?"

"Perhaps you had better tell me," he replied, after a pause.

"Very well. I will, presently."

Mrs. Brown went about her work that morning apparently unmoved by any unusual emotion. It was not until nearly noon that she found time and opportunity to see Devine.

Her story, which, for the most part is unfortunately a common one, need not be given in full. She was an orphan brought up on a farm by some distant and not over-kind relatives. When only an ignorant girl of eighteen, Baines, who then travelled that district, persuaded her to elope with him under a promise of marriage that he never kept. For two years she lived with him as his wife, until, tired of ill-usage and broken vows, she ran away and took service as a barmaid in a country town, where her husband met and married her.

Fate, unfortunately, brought them to settle close to the district where Baines was now plying his trade. The township of Boolah, however, was his limit, and he had never been to their house until about a week before his death. Then, on recognising his former victim, he revengefully threatened to expose her past life to her husband.

"He was one of those evil-minded men," she went on, "who must have something to torture. It was only out of sheer love of cruelty that he threatened me, because he saw I was happy with Brown. He vowed that when he came back from his trip he would do it, and showed me some old letters and photographs of mine which would prove his words. You can fancy my feelings when he left me with this hanging over my head. My home to be broken up, and my husband turned against me! At times I was tempted to confess it all to my husband, but then I should have to admit that I only did it under fear of exposure. I made up my mind that if I could succeed in getting the letters and things from Baines, I would dare him to do his worst, and some days after he left, I started under the pretence of paying a visit to a friend in Boolah, with a mad idea of somehow stealing the letters.

"I overtook him at the old hut, and intended to wait in the scrub until he was asleep, but my little dog, which had followed me, betrayed me when he caught sight of the other one. They were twin puppies, and were called 'Rattler the First' and 'Rattler the Second,' and when I ran away from that wretch, I took one with me. I had nothing for it but to come forward when he recognised the dog.

"You may guess what brutal taunts he used towards me, and when, in despair of getting what I wanted, I was going away, he tried to stop me by force. His axe was leaning against the wheel, and I picked it up and dared him to touch me. He laughed, and the next moment I struck him down. I scarcely knew I had done it until I saw him lying there." She

stopped, and, after a pause, went on.

“My first thought, of course, was to get away; then I remembered my letters. The deed was done, I might as well get what I came for. I soon found the letters and things, and left the spot.”

“And what about the dogs?”

“They both followed me. About a mile from the hut some blacks were camped. One gin was squatting at the fire, and I called her over and gave her what I thought was Baines' dog, thinking it would get away from them and go back to the dray in the morning. It was dark, and in my flurry I made a mistake and gave her mine. When daylight came I found it out, but I could not drive the dog away, and it followed me home, for it remembered me. After hanging about, however, for a few days it disappeared, and, I suppose, made back to Boolah, where it was found. Everybody, of course, took it for my dog while it was here.”

“How did you come to know of the old track?”

“I did not know of it. I came on it by chance in the dark, and my horse followed it. As it was leading in the right direction I kept on until I came to the country I knew near Boolah.”

“And had some difficulty in getting your horse over the fence?” said Devine. “Did it not strike you that giving the dog to the blacks would throw suspicion on them? I hope it was not done with that motive.”

“It was not,” she said, eagerly; “I made sure that the dog would get away, and I scarcely gave myself time to think. Afterwards, when it was too late. What you say occurred to me. Now I have told you everything. What I did was done almost in self-defence, and it was only what a father or a brother would have done for me had I had one.”

She ceased and Devine was silent for a while. At last he spoke.

“Nobody has any suspicion of this but I. McFarlane saw the tracks, but I can easily put him off. The best thing to do is for Brown to ride back with me to Boolah and get your dog. For my part I shall hold my tongue and advise you to do the same.”

Now if the Malingerites had not quarrelled with the Layovahs, Devine and Bell would not have taken opposite sides in the affair. Devine would not have constituted himself an amateur detective, and the matter would have been left to the proper authorities, who might, possibly, have blundered on to the real culprit. As it is, the death of Baines, the hawker, has remained a mystery to all save one woman and one man.

Pompey.

MORE than five-and-twenty years ago, on a newly-formed station on a north-western Queensland river, a young fellow named Hewett was left in charge, the managing partner having been hastily called down to Sydney. It was a cattle-station on wide-spreading plains, backed up by patches of scrubby forest. You could ride for miles and miles without seeing an elevation of any sort, or anything livelier than a soaring kite. Naturally, time hung rather heavily on the hands of Hewett and his men, the loose morality of the day and district was adopted, and although the blacks were not "let in," as it is termed, several native women found quarters at the station. However, that was thought no more of then than at present in some parts of Western Australia.

As things turned out, it was nearly three years ere Hewett was relieved from duty. Then the station passed into the hands of the bank mortgagees, and one of their own men came up and took charge.

Amongst the half-caste children about the place was one bright little fellow who was a great pet with them all, especially with his father, Hewett. He had a strange white tuft of hair on his head, which the men used to call "Pompey's brand," he having been named Pompey. Hewett left and Pompey continued to grow up on the station.

Twelve or thirteen years passed, and by a common freak of fortune, Hewett returned to take charge of the station in the interests of a different owner, it having changed hands once more.

Of course there were now many alterations. The cattle had increased, the improvements were more extensive, and everything more civilised. One thing, however, was unchanged — the old racial feud with the blacks, and there was now a native-police barracks established on the river. Hewett's successor, it seems, had tried the experiment of allowing the blacks to come in and camp without interference, and although for a time this gave the men some trouble with the cattle, it answered well, apparently.

However, the usual outbreak at length took place. The natives took to killing cattle once more. Then they were hunted out, and with them went all the "quiet" gins and piccaninies who had been camped at the station. When Hewett again took charge he found he had much trouble in keeping the natives away from the herd. Just before he came back, one of the hands of his former time, an old fellow named Ben. Walker, had been

re-engaged.

Going out on the run to look at a camp of fat cattle intended for immediate sale, the stockmen were encountered by a panting lot of bullocks with hanging tongues and heaving sides. Little need to guess what had happened: the blacks had been amongst them, and the cattle would be fit for nothing for months. Sending the others to collect and steady what they could find, Hewett and old Ben. rode on to the police-camp.

The officer in charge was at home, and with a couple of native troopers they were soon on their way to the camp. The fresh tracks were picked up and the pursuit commenced. It was easy tracking, and by dusk they had settled the site of the natives' camp, and arranged to "disperse" it at day-light.

Day broke and the camp was surrounded before the blacks, who are always late sleepers, had time to fly. Hewett was after a couple who were dodging him in the scrub. Suddenly one, a youngster, who had in his hand a spear which he had picked up in his flight, turned and faced him, out of breath. Hewett raised his revolver and took aim, when the sheen of the early morning sun fell straight on the nigger. It acted like a flash of memory. He saw by the yellowish-brown nude figure that the boy was a half-caste, and recognised by the white forelock, "Pompey's brand," that it was his own son he was going to kill. The young fellow saw him hesitate, took courage, and sent the spear straight through Hewett's body. The clutching finger pulled the trigger, and Pompey went to the happy hunting-ground with his father's bullet in his brain.

The officer and Ben. Walker rode up soon afterwards, dismounted hastily and examined Hewett, but he was on the point of death. They did all they could to ease him, and then Ben went to look at the black. "By God!" he said, as he looked at the white tuft, now partly blood-stained, "if it isn't Pompey!"

"Who's Pompey?" asked the officer.

"*His* son," said Ben. shortly, pointing at the dead body of the white man.

Malhook's Doom: A Nicholson River Story.

IT was Malhook who told the beginning of this story, and Malhook was supposed to be the biggest liar on the Gulf of Carpentaria. However, it was on record that he told the truth sometimes, when he was in a blue funk, for instance, and on this occasion his state of funk was a dazzling purple — blue was no name for it.

We were camped on the Nicholson for the wet season. The cattle had been turned out and we had hard work to keep them together, for, after the rain set in and the country became boggy, the niggers commenced playing up and we had to keep going. It was raining cats and dogs that night, and we were all huddled together round the fire under a bit of a bark lean-to which we had put up. Malhook was not there — his horses were absent that morning and he had been away all day after them. It was about eight o'clock when we heard him coming; he had found his horses and was driving them right up to the camp. Then, instead of hobbling them, he got a bridle and a halter, caught his steeds and tied them to a tree.

Some of the fellows sang out to him to know what he was doing, but he took no notice, and, after turning out the horse he had been riding, came up to the fire and told Reeve (the boss) that he wanted a word with him. Reeve got up, and the two walked over to his tent. Presently Malhook emerged, went to where his belongings were under the tarpaulin that had been rigged up over the rations, and commenced to roll them up. Reeve came back to the fire.

“What's up?” asked Thomas, Reeve's cousin.

“Only that fellow wants to leave to-night straight off, so I gave him his cheque and told him to slide as soon as he liked; he's no great loss, anyway.”

“What does he want to leave for?”

“Says the camp is doomed, and he is going to put as many miles as possible between himself and us before our fate overtakes us.”

There was a general laugh, and just then Malhook came out with his swag and commenced to saddle up in the pouring rain. There was a good moon, nearly full, although, of course, it was not visible.

The fellows commenced chaffing him, for he was not a favourite; too reckless a liar. He stood it without a word until he was ready to mount; then he got on his horse, and, turning round, said — “Laugh away, this

time tomorrow I'll have the laugh of you; this camp is doomed!" He dug his heels into his horse and disappeared — swish, swish, swish, through the bog down the bank of the river, and we heard him swearing at his pack-horse as he crossed the sand.

There was much laughter and wonderment at what had sent Malhook "off his chump," but eccentricity was common in those days, from various causes, and presently we all turned in.

I was sleeping under the tarpaulin where the rations were stored, and about two o'clock in the morning I suddenly awoke. It was brilliant moonlight, the wind had changed, the rain had ceased, and the moon, by reason of the scud which flitted across the sky, seemed to travel at express rate through an archipelago of cloudlets. Some impulse made me leave the shelter of the mosquito-net, go to the opening at the end of the tarpaulin and look out.

Everything was still and quiet; all the horses were camped, for not a bell could be heard, and I stood some time aimlessly listening and looking at the glistening pools of water upon the flat between our camp and the bank, when suddenly I distinctly heard a human voice in the bed of the river. I waited for a moment to make sure, then I got my Martini and a couple of cartridges and sneaked towards the bank. Last full-moon the niggers had nearly clubbed the cook in his mosquito-net when he was sleeping outside the tent one night; this time, I thought, it would be a case of the biters bitten.

About a hundred yards from the camp I stopped and listened. The voice was now much nearer. It was a white man's, it was Malhook's, and he was kicking his knocked up horse along and dragging the pack-horse after him. I waited behind a tree until he came up, and then I stepped out. I was only in my shirt, with the carbine in my hand.

"Great God!" he cried, with a kind of choke, "he's here again!"

"What the deuce is up with you?" I said; "why didn't you stop away when you went? Got bushed, I suppose, and the horses brought you back?"

He sat on his horse and panted for a few minutes without speaking. Then he said: "That infernal old nigger won't let me go. He hunted me back. I've got to share your fate, so let's get it over."

He jabbed his heels in his horse's ribs, but I stopped him. "Don't wake the camp up," I said. "What nigger do you mean?"

"The nigger that Jacky the Span and I roasted in the spinifex. He's headed me back every road I've tried, and I give it up. Let me turn the horses out, and get a wink of sleep."

Jacky the Span was an old blackguard of a Mexican who had been knocked on the head about six months previously. Everybody said he richly deserved it, and everybody was right.

"When were you up here with Jacky Span?" I asked.

“About two years ago, the time Bratten was killed; but let me turn out the horses and I'll tell you all about it.”

We went quietly back to camp, and let the tired horses go, and then Malhook sat down on his blankets beside me. The tarpaulin was rigged some distance from the other tents, and the boys were done up and sleeping soundly, so nobody awoke. This is what Malhook told me.

Two years before, he and the old Mexican had come up to join Bratten in mustering some horses that had got away from the lower part of the river and were supposed to be knocking about below the first gorge. Like most half-breeds, Jacky the Span (short for Spaniard) was a most inhuman brute towards the natives whenever he got a chance, and Malhook, being a blowhard and a bully, was of the same cowardly disposition — most liars are. One day they spotted an old man and a young gin at the foot of a spinifex ridge that runs in on the Upper Nicholson. I knew the place — real old man spinifex that would go through a leather legging. They rounded the old black up on the top of the ridge, but missed the gin, and Jacky Span said he would make the man find her or he should suffer, and Malhook, in order to keep up his reputation as a flash man and a real old Gulf-hand, aided and abetted him.

I suppose the poor devil was too frightened to understand what they really wanted, but, anyhow, all the halfcaste devilry, which is the worst devilry in the world, was aroused in the Mexican, and Malhook followed suit.

They selected a bank of spinifex, and rolled the naked nigger in it “for sport.” Now, spinifex is beastly poisonous stuff; get your shins well pricked, and it is worse than any number of mosquito-bites for irritating you and making you itch. Horses will not face it after a day or two in really bad country, and if you run your hand down their shins you will soon see the reason why. Every little prick festers, and their legs are covered with tiny boils and ulcers. The blacks always burn it ahead of them before they travel through it. Out in the “Never-Never” they have regular tracks which they keep burnt down.

By the time they had rolled this nigger in the spinifex for some minutes, he must have been in a raging hell of torment; and he knew no more what they wanted with him than at the start. Then, according to Malhook, Jacky rolled him into a big bank of dry stuff — they had tied his feet together — and set fire to it. Spinifex is rare stuff to blaze; being full of turpentine, it burns with a fierce heat and a black smoke, so the old nigger was well roasted, and when it burnt out they rolled him into another bank and set that alight. A gust of wind sprang up and started the whole ridge ablaze, and the gin, who had been hidden close by, watching it all, rushed out and ran; Jacky Span picked up the old man's club and took after her. He was away about half-an-hour; meanwhile the old

fellow died, groaning awfully, and Malhook began to feel as if things had been better left alone.

Presently, Jacky Span came back with the club in his hand — big two-handed clubs they use on the Nicholson — and showed Malhook some blood and hair on it, and laughed like a devil. No need to repeat here all he said.

Now, if Malhook had there and then blown a Government road through the brute, there might have been some chance of repentance left for him, but he didn't. He sniggered and let Jacky Span tell him all about it, and camped with him for weeks afterwards. Jacky Span was killed, as I said before, and Malhook assured me, in a sweating blue funk when he spoke, that just at dark he had met his horses coming back, with the old roasted nigger behind driving them. He went on to say that this thing had followed him right up to the river, and shrieked at him that he would die in the camp. Then he went on to tell that when he tried to get away from the camp that night the old nigger had met him at every point of the compass, so that at last he gave it up and returned.

Now, I knew that there had been an importation of brandy lately into the Gulf country, generally known as the "possum brand," each bottle of which was calculated to make a man see more devils than six bottles of any other brand. It was very popular, for it would eat holes in a saddle-cloth, so I concluded that Malhook had got some of it, for one of the fellows had returned from Burketown that day. This would account for the ghost of the blackfellow, but the rest of the yarn about Jacky Span I felt to be true, so I told Malhook to clear out and sleep somewhere else — I wouldn't have him under the same tarpaulin with me. He begged and prayed to be allowed to remain, but I told him I would wake the camp and tell everything if he didn't go, so he went, sobbing bitterly I explained to him that the best thing he could do was to shoot himself, that a man who could follow the lead of a miserable half-caste out of pure flashness was too contemptible to live; but he didn't appreciate my kindness, and slouched off to a bit of a sand-hump, about 150 yards from the camp, and I saw him throw his blankets down and then lie down on them. I got into my bunk again and went fast asleep in two minutes.

Reeve woke me up. It was broad daylight. "The niggers were here last night," he said. "Did you hear anything?"

"No." I replied: "but Malhook came back; I saw him."

"Yes. They knocked him on the head — bashed his skull in. He was sleeping out under that tree — I suppose he was ashamed to wake us up."

"Nobody heard anything?" I asked.

"Not a sound. There are the traces of about six niggers coming out of the river towards the camp, and they must have stumbled right on top of Malhook. Poor devil! Polished him off and cleared out. The camp *was* doomed for him, after all."

I concluded to tell nothing, beyond having seen Malhook come back and speaking to him. Sometimes I wonder whether I was not responsible for his death by hunting him away from the camp, but I always console myself with the reflection that he only got what he deserved.

The Cook and the Cattle-Stealer.

SOME few years ago, ere the picturesque, grey, box-bark roofs on bush huts had given place to hard, ugly, angular galvanised iron; when real living shepherds were still in existence, and the stockmen who wore cabbage-tree hats, and made their own stockwhips instead of buying them from a store, had not all gone to the main camp, the following curious incident took place.

Alexander Macpherson, to give him his full name, was hut-keeping at a small out-station where, just at the period this story opens, he had only a couple of stockmen for companions. It was summer time; an iron drought had set in, and there was nothing to do but wait for rain and put off the mustering until more favourable weather. Under the circumstances, Sandy's two mates had got a few weeks holiday and gone to the nearest town to spend it, that is, if they had succeeded in passing the first grog-shanty — a matter of much doubt.

Sandy was noted as a careful soul who did not surrender himself to unrestrained joviality. He was reputed to have "a stocking" somewhere, and was respected accordingly.

"Blessed if I'd stop here by myself for a week or two," remarked Jim, the younger of the two, as he said good-bye on mounting.

"I don't see much in it," returned Sandy; "it's bound to be lonely, but I'll have my cheque in my pouch after all, and the publican will have yours."

"But I'll have some fun, as well, old man; and you won't be lonely at this time of the year, if all they say's true," was the reply.

"How's that? Who comes here?" demanded the hut keeper.

"Some queer coves, according to all accounts, especially when they find a man alone" — and Jim waved his hand and cantered after his companion, leaving Sandy rather perplexed.

The out-station was twenty miles from the head station. No other road led to it. To the West and North lay an unoccupied waste, and Sandy pondered over Jim's parting words without finding any clue to their meaning. In past days the blacks had been troublesome, but now they were all gone, so there was no harm to be apprehended from *them*.

Sandy turned into the hut and prepared for a fortnight's laziness. He had laid in a couple of bottles of whisky which, as he was a temperate man, would last him through the two weeks; he had the usual station

luxuries, if he liked thus to enlarge his account, and the super. had sent him out a big bundle of old newspapers, so he felt equal to the occasion and dismissed his companion's words as idle.

Nothing happened in any way to disturb his serenity for ten days, and Sandy had by that time to acknowledge that solitude was a trifle monotonous. The summer night was moonless and dark, the mosquitoes were aggressive, and Sandy pricked up his slush-lamp, covered his fire over, and retired under the mosquito-net he had rigged round his bunk, taking with him a paper to read himself to sleep.

His eyelids were just commencing to grow heavy when he was aroused by the tramp of a horse. Then came the noise of a man dismounting, and before Sandy could get outside his carefully-tucked-in net, the door was opened and a stranger entered.

Sandy was a slow-going fellow who took things coolly, so he returned the stranger's greeting as a matter of course, and in the usual bush style made up the fire and put the billy on.

The new-comer was a silent man with a large red beard, and as he turned his head Sandy saw a livid weal or bruise encircling his neck.

After a few remarks intimating that he was a traveller wanting a night's shelter, he went out again, and Sandy heard him unsaddling and hobbling his horse; then he returned. He ate like a hungry man, but seemed to have an unaccountable difficulty in swallowing, and spoke little during his meal. Twice Sandy asked him where he came from without getting any reply, until on a third repetition, the new-comer told him curtly that that was no business of his, and a somewhat irksome silence ensued.

"You can take that bunk, mate," said Sandy, stiffly, to break the spell, indicating the one belonging to the absent Jim.

"Thanks," said the stranger; "if you don't mind my keeping the fire going I'll sit up a bit — I don't feel sleepy."

"Must be warm where you came from," returned Sandy, "when you want a fire such a night as this."

"It *is* hot down there," said the traveller, grimly.

Under cover of the mosquito-net Sandy lay and watched his taciturn guest. The man sat upon the rude slab bench with his chin in his hands, gazing into the fire with an unwinking stare that made the watcher in the bunk feel that he should like very much to get up and seek some Dutch courage in a moderate dram. This could not be thought of, for he could scarcely infringe the laws of Australian hospitality so far as to drink without offering the other man anything.

So Sandy lay quiet, and was dropping off into a doze when a movement of the stranger aroused him.

The man had turned slightly, and the cook saw distinctly that little drops of blood were oozing from the discoloured bruise on his neck and running on to the collar of his shirt, where they merged into another and

a deeper stain.

Sandy was horrified, and when the man presently rose, he almost gave a nervous start and a cry, but he restrained himself. The stranger looked toward the darker portion of the hut, which was of some length, and shook his list at a shadowy tie-beam just visible. Sandy's horror-stricken gaze followed in the same direction and — could he believe his eyes? — a rope with a noose at the end of it dangled from the beam!

“Get up, Sandy McPherson!” cried the visitor in a terrific voice, “and don't lie shaking there any longer. I'm the man who hung himself here four years ago this night. Get up — I've got work for you!”

He made a stride as though to second his injunction, and Sandy with a quaking heart slipped out on to the earthen floor.

“Now, look here. To-morrow morning, sharp, you get a horse up and ride to Murderer's Camp — you know it — where all the niggers were shot, as you've heard tell of. I did most of that, and their black ghosts worried me till, at last, I up and hung myself. You go and watch on that camp all to-morrow until daylight next morning, and say a bit of a prayer for me, and mayhap I'll get some rest. If not — if you don't obey me — I'll haunt you, and hunt you, until you follow my example.” And he pointed with threatening finger to the shadowy beam and dangling noose.

The red-bearded man did not wait for any answer — in fact, Sandy could not have made one, his teeth chattered so. He watched his awful visitor open the door and close it after him; then he thought of the whisky. He got the bottle, took a deep draught without using a pannikin, and sank down on to his bunk half stupid and half asleep.

The sun was shining when he awoke, and he sprang up and looked about him. The rope and noose resolved itself into an ordinary halter thrown over the tie-beam, though Sandy could not for the life of him remember having seen it there before. There was certainly low tide in the whisky bottle, but he could not determine whether the bread and beef were in the same condition as before the stranger's visit.

His spirits fell, however, when he found the unmistakably fresh tracks of a horse outside the verandah. But if his visitor was a ghost, how did he come to ride a horse that made tracks? There could be no error, as he had swept all around the hut since the two men left. This thought struck Sandy very hard, and he sat down to work it out.

As a Highlander, Sandy was rather superstitious, but he had plenty of sense notwithstanding, and felt very sore at being caught unprepared and having shown the white feather. “It's some lark of the fellows at the station,” he muttered to himself; “going to make me spend a day out on Murderer's Camp and then ‘chiack’ me about it. Not if I know it.”

Then a new thought struck him. The red-bearded man was certainly not one of the station men, nor from anywhere about. He was a stranger, and not anybody he knew in disguise; he had looked at him too well for

that — no man can disguise his eyes. He knew the yarn of Murderer's Camp, and how men, gins, and piccaninies had been ruthlessly slaughtered there; but he never heard of anyone committing suicide in the hut, and he began to doubt that there had been such an occurrence.

After referring for advice to the sadly-diminished whisky-bottle he made up his mind. He would go to Murderer's Camp — it was eight miles up the river. He would wait there until dark; then he would come back quietly and try to turn the tables.

Sandy had a horse of his own in the paddock. As a hutkeeper's horse should be, it was fat and fresh, and, with a supply of food, mental and otherwise, and an allowance of the second bottle of whisky — broached, alas! before its time — Sandy was soon on his way up the river.

Arrived at the Camp, he tied his horse up, for it was too fresh to trust in hobbles so near home. He then passed the day reading his newspapers and smoking. He kept his eyes about him, but could not say for certain that anyone was watching him, although at times his horse cocked its ears and whinnied suspiciously.

Night came on, and Sandy cautiously stole away, leading his horse and listening intently every now and then. But he heard nothing, and soon mounted and turned his willing steed homeward.

When within a mile or two of the hut, the familiar sound of cattle came to him on the faint wind. To a trained ear the noise made by cattle when freshly yarded is as distinct as possible from any sound they make when at large. "Cattle in the yard," thought Sandy; "what's the matter?"

The stockyard was on his way, and he rode up to it. Although only hut-keeping, he had been too long on cattle-stations not to know the routine of the work.

The continued drought had deferred mustering so long that many of the unbranded calves were between six and twelve months old. At least two hundred cows with calves of the age mentioned had been yarded and drafted apart into different yards. The mothers were bewailing their lot at one end of the stockyard, and their children gnashing their teeth at the other.

Sandy grasped the situation at once; there was no room for doubt left. A raid had been made by a gang of cattle-duffers, and his absence had been desired in order that they might utilise the yard for drafting purposes; for, in spite of the tall "blowing" of some bush hands, no one has ever yet, in a satisfactory manner, succeeded in drafting weaners from their mothers on a camp.

The men at the head station were idle, and he was supposed to be keeping watch on Murderer's Camp. He rode round the yard, thinking of these matters, amidst the furious bellowings going on, and then his attention was arrested by two things.

On the "killing-gallows" hung a freshly-slaughtered beast, and in the

yard immediately alongside were some ten or twelve horses.

More than that. As he ranged up alongside the rails in the clear moonlight, a head familiar to him was thrust through and exchanged friendly equine greetings with the horse he was riding.

He at once recognised the familiar front of Boomerang, the well-known racehorse belonging to the head station. Probably the others were also station horses, but it was too late to determine.

His first impulse was to throw down the slip-rails, let horses and cattle go, and then ride for his life, and had he done so he would have been saved a bitter experience. But his heart was full of rage at the manner in which he had been fooled, and he made up his mind to identify, at whatever personal risk, the men who had played the trick upon him.

He rode towards the hut, and, dismounting some distance off, crept cautiously up at the back and peered through the ill-fitting slabs.

A strong smell of fried steak proved that somebody had usurped his position. A party of five men were seated at the table, eating and drinking from the iron plates and tin pannikins he had so often cleaned. Listening, he heard their talk was of him. Redbeard was at the head of the table, and with much humour was describing his ghostly experience with Sandy the night before.

“I give you my word, boys, he's out at Murderer's Camp now, shaking in his shoes and praying that all hands and the cook up above will take pity on the soul of yours truly.”

“How did you fix him?” said one.

“With a painted mark round my neck and my own devil's humour. It was the greatest fun out.”

Sandy listened with ears acock to the fullest extent, but shortly his attention was engaged by a man sitting opposite to the crack through which he was taking observation. The man's face was familiar to him. He had just served a sentence of ten years for cattle-stealing accompanied by armed violence. Sandy knew him before he was sentenced; knew him for the best rider in the district, and the most dreaded scoundrel. As he watched the lowering eyes and dogged, sullen manner, the man spoke.

“Now, boys! Time flies, and we must shape. That —— fool may be safe at Murderer's Camp or he may not; we don't know. Meantime, we must make sure. Two of you get up to the yard and let the weaners out, and steady them there as well as you can until we come, and catch our horses.

Sandy's nerve betrayed him; he might have crept quietly off in the darkness under cover of the noisy bellowing going on at the yard, but he felt that the murderous eye of the black-muzzled ruffian opposite was on him, and that discovery meant death. In an instant the reins were over his horse's neck, his foot in the stirrup, and the next he was galloping for dear life over the flat.

Shouts, and a couple of shots, told him he had betrayed himself. The two men, whose horses were saddled, started in pursuit. Fortunately for Sandy, both he and his horse knew the bridle-track to the station, and his pursuers did not. One of them came to grief against a tree, and the other soon dropped behind, for the cook's horse was fresh, and, thanks to being tied up all day on the flat, in good fettle for a run.

Sandy galloped on three or four miles, and then pulled up to listen. Silence? No! the distant noise of a horse. A sudden conviction shot through Macpherson's mind, that it was the man he dreaded, mounted on Boomerang. He was lost! The horse was the fastest in the district, and the man who rode it a demon with cat's eyes which could see on the darkest night, a man who could stick to anything that was ever foaled. The cook stuck the spurs in his nag and the race commenced. A deep sandy creek intervened about half way, and as he eased his horse over the shingle, under the gloomy sheoaks, it seemed to him that his enemy must be right on top of him, despite the long start he had got.

On, for another mile or two, and then Sandy thought his only chance was to turn and fight, for his game little horse showed signs of exhaustion, and took the spur without flinching. Suddenly he remembered that about six miles from the station there was a short cut across a rocky boulder-strewn hill. If he could turn off there, his pursuer might keep on the main track and miss him, so with eyes strained and heart beating he pushed on, while the clatter of Boomerang's hoofs drew nearer and nearer.

At last there was a turn in the road, and a dead tree that he knew; the short cut was close at hand, none too soon, for now the other horse was within two hundred yards. His horse knew the short cut as well as he did, and turned off of his own accord. Up the stony hill and down the other side, and then he pulled up and listened anxiously. His pursuer must have kept on. No! here he was close to him, and, with a mad, excited whinny, Boomerang dashed up to him — riderless.

Sandy felt like fainting for a moment, the tension had been so sharp, but he recovered himself and listened eagerly; save the hurried panting of the two horses the night was still as death. Boomerang had a saddle on, so he must have been ridden, but Sandy had no intention of enquiring after the fate of the rider at present, and leading the racehorse he made his way on to the station.

“For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow!” was the mocking chorus he heard as he approached the head station.

Some fun was evidently on the board, but his appearance and the tale he told soon stopped the festivity. There were fresh horses in the paddock, and a party was quickly on the way back.

“Hullo! what's up?” cried one, as the leader's horse shied suddenly near the junction of the short cut.

“There's a man on the road.”

Sandy's pursuer was lying there — with his neck broken. It had been a very near thing, after all. Boomerang had turned instinctively to follow the other horse along the short cut, his rider had pulled him off, and the racer had blundered and rolled over on the unfortunate man, who was the one Sandy had dreaded.

The cattle had been left in the yard, and only three station horses of not much value were missing. Suspicion lit on the owners of a small place, some seventy miles away, but nothing could be proved, and the red-bearded man had disappeared.

Years passed, and Macpherson had thriven. He was at W—— once when a murder case was being tried, and made his way into the court just before the judge pronounced sentence. During the silence which followed the awful words Sandy, who was close up to the dock, turned to look at the prisoner. It was the ghost of the old hut! The hardened criminal recognised him too, and, with a grim and significant wink, put his hand to his neck, where the painted scar had been.

The Parson's Blackboy.

THE Rev. Joseph Simmondsen had been appointed by his bishop to a cure of souls in the Far North, in the days when Queensland was an ungodly and unsanctified place. Naturally, the Rev. J., who was young, green, and zealous, saw a direct mission in front of him. His predecessor had never gone twenty miles outside the little seaport that formed the commercial outlet of the district; but this did not suit Joseph's eager temperament. Once he felt his footing and gained a little experience, he determined on a lengthened tour that should embrace the uttermost limits of his fold.

Now, although beset with the conceit and priggishness inseparable from the early stages of parsonhood, Simmondsen was not a bad fellow, and glimpses of his manly nature would at times peep out in spite of himself. This, without his knowledge, ensured him a decent welcome, and he got a good distance inland under most favourable auspices, for, the weather being fine, everybody was willing to lend him a horse or drive him on to the next station upon his route. The Rev. Joseph began to think that the roughness of the back country had been much exaggerated.

In due course he arrived at a station which we will call Upton Downs; beyond it there were only a few newly-taken-up runs. On Upton Downs they were busy mustering, and when the parson enquired about his way for the next day the manager looked rather puzzled. You see," he said, "we are rather short-handed, and I can't spare a man to send with you; at the same time the track from here to Gundewarra is not very plain, and I am afraid you might not be able to follow it. However, I will see what I can do."

Mr. Simmondsen was retiring to rest that night when a whispered conversation made itself audible in the next room. No words were distinguishable, but from the sounds of smothered laughter a good joke seemed to be in progress.

"I think I can manage for you," said the superintendent at breakfast next morning. "When you leave here you will go to Gundewarra, 25 miles. From there it is 35 miles to Bilton's Camp and 10 on to Blue Grass. From Blue Grass you can come straight back here across the bush, about 40 miles. I will lend you a blackboy who knows the country well and will see you round safely."

The young clergyman thanked his host, and, after breakfast, prepared

to leave. The blackboy, a good-looking little fellow arrayed in clean moles and twill shirt, was in attendance with a led pack-horse, and the two departed.

For some miles the reverend Joseph improved the occasion by a little pious talk to the boy, who spoke fairly good English, and showed a white set of teeth when he laughed, as he constantly did at everything the parson said. At midday they camped for an hour on the bank of a lagoon, in which Mr. Simmondsen had a refreshing swim. In the evening they arrived at their destination, and received the usual welcome.

"I see you adapt yourself to the customs of the country," said his host at mealtime, and a slight titter went round the table. The reverend Joseph joined in, taking it for granted that his somewhat unclerical garb was alluded to. In reply to enquiries he was informed that Bilton's Camp was a rough place, and Blue Grass even worse; and he was pleased to hear it, for up to now his path had been too pleasant altogether; he hadn't had a chance to reprove anybody.

Bilton's Camp proved to be indeed a rough place. The men were civil, however, and as the parson had had another exhilarating bath at the midday camp he appreciated the rude fare set before him, although here, as at the other place, there seemed to be a joke floating about that made everybody snigger.

The next day's journey, to Blue Grass, was but a short stage, and as the reverend gentleman had by this time become very friendly with Charley, the blackboy, the two rode along chatting pleasantly until they came somewhat unexpectedly on the new camp.

A very greasy cook and two or three gins in dilapidated shirts were the only people at home, and they stood open-eyed to greet the stranger.

Although Mr. Simmondsen had suited his attire to his surroundings, he still retained enough of the clerical garb to signify his profession. The cook, therefore, at once took in the situation, and invited the parson under the tarpaulin which did temporary duty as a hut.

He informed his visitor, at whom he looked rather curiously, that "everyone" was away, camped out, and that no one would return for a couple of days; that he was alone, excepting for two men who were at work in a yard a short distance off, and who would be in to dinner; in fact, they came up while he was speaking. Mr. Simmondsen took great interest in this, the first real "outside" camp he had seen, and as the two bushmen had gone down to the creek for a wash, and the cook was busy preparing a meal, he called Charley to ask him a few questions.

"What are these black women doing about the place, Charley?"

"O! all about missus belongah whitefellow," was the astonishing reply.

It was some moments before Joseph could grasp the full sense of this communication; then he considered it his duty to read these sinners a severe lecture, and prepared one accordingly.

“Do you not understand,” he said, when the three men were together, “the trespass you are committing against both social and Divine laws? If you do not respect one, perhaps you will the other.”

The cook stared at the bushmen in blank amazement, and the bushmen at the cook.

“I allude to these unfortunate and misled beings,” said the parson, waving his hand towards the half-clad gins.

A roar of laughter was the reply. “Blessed if that doesn't come well from *you!*” said the cook, when he could speak. The others chuckled in acquiescence.

“What do you mean?” said the indignant Joseph; “I speak by right of my office.”

“Sit down and have some tucker,” said the cook, “you're not a bad sort, I can see, but don't come the blooming innercent.”

The indignant pastor refused. He saw that his words were treated lightly, that no one would listen to him, and he left in high dudgeon. Charley had told him that there was a good lagoon about twelve miles on the road back to Upton Downs; he would go on there and camp — they had plenty of provisions on the pack-horse — and taking his bridle and calling the boy he went to catch his horse.

As he came back he overheard the fag-end of a remark the cook was making to the others. “They came round the end of the scrub chatting as thick as thieves, and when I seed who it was — Lord! you could have wiped me out with one hand.”

This was worse than Greek to the Reverend. Greek he might have understood. In spite of a clumsy apology from the delinquent, he departed, and near sundown arrived at the lagoon Charley had spoken of. It was a lovely spot. One end was thick with broad-leaved water-lilies, but there was a clear patch at the other end promising the swim the good parson enjoyed so much.

When the tent was pitched he stood in Nature's garb about to enter the water, when Charley called to him. Pointing towards the lilies he told Mr. Simmondsen that he would get him some seed-pods which the blacks thought splendid eating. The clergyman had only got up to his waist before he heard a plunge behind him and saw Charley's dark form half splashing, half swimming towards the lilies. Presently his head emerged from a dive, and he beckoned towards the clergyman to come over and taste the aboriginal luxury. The reverend paddled lazily over and investigated. The seed-pods proved of very pleasant flavour, and as the sun was nearly down, Mr. Simmondsen wended his way to the bank and emerged in the shallow water, with Charley a few paces behind him. For some reason he looked back. Shocking predicament! There was no shirking the fact; all the quiet laughter about “the customs of the country,” the unexplained allusions, the ribald manner of the cook, were

evident at a flash. Charley was a woman!

The wicked superintendent of Upton Downs had started him on his travels with (“after the custom of the country”) a black gin dressed in boy's clothes as a valet, and that gin had evidently been recognised by everyone on the road. Mr. Simmondsen thought of the past and blushed. That night was spent in fervent prayer.

* * * * *

“My dear sir,” said Davis, the super of Upton Downs, “I did the best I could for you. Charlotte is as good as any blackboy and knows all the country round here. Now, own up, did not she look after you well?”

“You forget the scandal that ma arise,” said the Reverend Mr. Simmondsen.

“Lord, man! who cares about what is done out here? Nobody will ever hear of it.”

* * * * *

Davis was wrong. Everybody did hear of it. The Reverend Mr. Simmondsen received indignant letters from his Bishop, his churchwardens, the Reverend Mr. Wriggle, the West Australian missionary, several missionary societies, and, last and worst, a letter of eternal farewell from the young lady to whom he was engaged. Fortunately he inherited some money at the time, so he did the best thing possible — threw up the church, went into squatting, and is now one of the most popular men in the district.

A Lucky Meeting.

“WHAT do you make of it, Jim?”

“Looks remarkably like an E, but what can be the meaning of the extraordinary triangular thing that follows?”

“That's the puzzle. The first mark one could swear had been made by a white man; but the other is apparently one of those queer carvings which the blacks make. There, however, is the scar plain enough, where the bark was stripped, and from the shape of the piece removed I think it's like a white man's work.”

“Moreover,” added Jim, “it has been done with a steel tomahawk.”

The two men were standing in front of a dead coolibah tree of some size, on which the marks they were trying to decipher had been deeply cut. It was the shore of a broad, shallow lake surrounded by a forest of similar dead trees — white skeletons, lifting heavenwards their writhing, bare limbs. A stranger, set down there suddenly, would say that the axe of the ring-barker had been at work, but the locality was away in the far interior, where the white man had only just intruded on the solitude. Round the lake, which at its deepest only averaged a few feet, was a border of green, luscious grass; back from that ring of verdure reigned desolation and sterility.

Loose, puffy soil, broken into mounds and hollows, seamed with gaping cracks. On these dusty mounds were heaped thousands of tiny shells: in the hollows drooped a few withered stalks of nardoo. On all sides the gaunt, lifeless trees. Two exceptionally wet years had, in some remote time, deluged the plain, and the long-standing, stagnant water destroyed the timber.

This state of things is not uncommon in many parts of the North Australian interior. In the deepest hollows of these dry lake-beds lie the bones of fish, which have escaped their feathered enemies, to perish slowly as their native element evaporated. On the broader expanse, bleached skeletons are mouldering; the grotesque-headed pelican and the dingo, with a wild-dog snarl on his fleshless jaws. Bird and beast have made for the lake after long, long flight and hot, dusty tramp, only to find there drought, disappointment and death. To the north-west, where a bank has been formed by the action of the steady south-east monsoon, layer after layer of dead shells has been deposited by the constantly-lapping wavelets, weak forms of life that have lived and died in the

waters of the ephemeral lake. Beyond and around these depressions wherein the overflow of a rarely heavy rainfall accumulates, are the great plains whose treeless edges meet the sky in an unbroken straight line. Where the tall columns of dust revolve in a wild waltz; where, in summer-time, the air is so aglow with heat that it throbs like a living thing, and in this fierce atmosphere is born the treacherous mirage: a bush becomes a tree, a stone a rock, and the hard, baked clay-pan a blue lakelet. This is riverless Australia, the sun-god's realm, the region of short-lived creeks, lost for ever in these dead, dry lake-beds.

The elder of the brothers who had been regarding the tree copied the inscription in his note-book, and the two strolled back to their camp where a black-boy was watching the boiling of a piece of dried beef. They sat down and commenced smoking.

“How long do you suppose these trees have been dead?” said Sam Gilmore, the elder of the two.

“Impossible to say, for certain, but about ten or fifteen years.”

“Yes,” returned Sam, after some silent puffs, “that would be about it. There was a devil of a wet season all over the north in '72 and '73. That mark was made before then, when the tree was alive.”

“Certainly it was, and if you remember the Herbert was settled in the sixties. Some fellow from the tableland has been out here, that's about all it is.”

Sam looked at his note-book. “I've got it!” he exclaimed. “‘E. triangle.’ It's a station-brand. Many fellows have a trick of cutting their brand on a tree instead of their initials.”

“That will be it,” replied his brother, “there were no registered brands, all of one pattern, in those days.”

The two thought little more about the matter, but were busily employed the next two days in examining the surrounding country, it being part of a large block they had taken up in the Northern Territory. One evening the black boy, who had been left in camp to look after the spare horses and see that they did not get bogged, remarked with the laconic suddenness of the aboriginals: “Old man horse sit down,” indicating by a motion of his hand the far side of the lake.

“Which one horse?” said Sam, thinking he meant that one of their own had got bogged.

“Baal mine know. Long time that fellow sit down. Old man bone.”

“A skeleton of a horse?” queried Jim looking at his brother.

Sam nodded. “We will have a look at it to-morrow — too late to go all round there this evening.”

Next morning, guided by the black-boy, they were soon beside the bones of the animal, which lay in a patch of grass, almost concealed from view. Evidently the moist border of the lake had saved them from destruction by the bush fires that annually swept the surrounding

country.

“A horse, but how the deceased came here, there is no evidence to show,” said Jim.

The black-boy was poking about with a stick. “That fellow bin carry saddle,” and from the mouldering rubbish he dragged out the corroded iron-work.

Inspired by this discovery a closer search was made. The plated buckles of a saddle-pouch were found, a plated sandwich-case, such as hunting-men carry in England, and the blade of a large pocket-knife. Everything in the shape of leather had long vanished.

They devoted all the morning to examining the vicinity, but no further relics were forthcoming, and, taking what they had found with them, the brothers returned to camp.

During the afternoon Sam set to work cleaning the old sandwich-case. By dint of hard rubbing he succeeded in restoring it to something like cleanliness, and although time and exposure had dealt hardly with the metal, a monogram became faintly visible on one side, and on the other was roughly scratched the mark they had found on the tree, “E and a triangle.”

“Now,” said Jim, after the examination, “let's have a look at the inside.” He inserted the point of his knife beneath the half-cover and, after some trouble, raised it. Inside were some papers, loose sheets, torn from a note-book, on which the pencil-writing was faint and illegible; but there was a larger sheet of blue letter-paper, on which the writing was in ink and, although slightly yellow, plain and distinct. The battered old case had been true to its trust and, despite all, had preserved the message confided to it.

The brothers perused their strange find and, at the conclusion, looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

“This is a strange document to drop across in such a howling wilderness,” said Sam at length.

Jim whistled in sympathy. “I suppose,” he remarked, “the writer came to grief, and his horse made back to the water, got bogged and died. Is that how you read it?”

“I think so. At any rate, it's too long ago for us to bother looking up tracks. The date on this — December 4th, 1870 — coincides with the time we surmised.

“I suppose you'll keep it?” queried Jim.

“Most carefully. It belongs to the man's children, and may be valuable, or, perhaps, only waste paper. Possibly we shall find out when we get back to civilization; meanwhile I vote we make a start for home to-morrow. We are satisfied, I suppose, that this country is good enough.”

“All right,” said the younger; and for the rest of the day they devoted themselves to preparations for an early departure on the morrow,

dismissing the subject of their strange discovery from their minds.

II.

Young Simpson propped himself up against the slabs and gazed disconsolately down the sunny road. He was suffering a bad recovery, his pockets were empty, and his credit exhausted. He had lately finished a job of horse-breaking, and had knocked his cheque down in orthodox style. Now, life was all dust and ashes, and everything a mockery and a delusion. He was only thirty-six, and had already managed to break every breakable bone in his body, and pull through several bad attacks of *delirium tremens*. He was the son of a well-to-do squatter, but ere he was twenty had managed to incense his father so bitterly that he had been cast forth without even the proverbial shilling, and a younger brother, a good and well-behaved youth, reigned in his stead. Since his expulsion from home he had steadily gone to the dogs, and it was a pity, for, however weak, he was a good-hearted young fellow. A strong, helping hand would have saved him, but he never got it, and now it was too late. At least so everybody thought and said.

Simpson had been dozing on a rude bench in the verandah, and had just got on to his feet, under the impression that somebody had ridden up and aroused him. Presumably this impression was correct, for a horse was hitched up to the rail outside, and voices could be heard in the bar. Possibly there was a drink on hand. He licked his dry lips with a still dryer tongue, and lurched inside.

A deeply sun-tanned man, with bright eyes, was talking to the landlord.

"Here, Joe," said the latter to Simpson, "come and have a wet, you look sleepy."

This was most astonishing; only that morning his credit had been peremptorily stopped, and now he was invited to refresh himself. The landlord shifted down the bar a bit and Simpson followed him.

"This gent," said the publican in a subdued tone, "has got a mob of cattle going north, and wants another hand badly. I'll put in a good word for you, and, perhaps, he'll be right for a bit of an advance, so that you can square up with me before you go."

Simpson "dropped" to the situation at once. He immediately poured out a drink so "long" that it made the landlord eager to clutch the bottle again. Refreshed by this, he accosted the stranger, and with few words a bargain was struck, and Joe Simpson went off to roll up his scanty belongings in his blanket.

"As good a man as ever crossed a horse," said the effusive publican; "only keep him off the booze. Born a gentleman, too."

Jim Gilmore, for it was he, on his way out with cattle to stock the country he and his brother had lately examined, looked curiously after

the retreating form. He was warm-hearted, and something in the ne'er-do-well had appealed to him.

* * * * *

The long trip drew to an end, and tired men, leg-weary horses, and listless cattle all desired the arrival of that morning when they should mutually take leave of each other. Dry stages had been successfully crossed, wet, blustering nights experienced, and death in many forms had taken toll of the herd before Jim, with a sigh of relief, dismounted on the bank of a long serpentine lagoon, some twenty miles from the shallow lake where they had formerly camped. Leaning on his horse he watched the long string of cattle troop in to the water.

“Poor Joe!” he thought, as he caught sight of Simpson steadying the leaders, “he's got a bad touch of this northern fever. Glad we are here so that he can get a spell.”

The blatant publican's recommendation had turned out true. A better man than Joe Simpson had proved himself could scarce be found. Ever ready when the weather was bad and the cattle rowdy on camp; always alert during the long sleepless nights across the dry plains, and alas! never neglecting the opportunity of a short spree in the few town-ships they had passed, Joe had been young Gilmore's right hand throughout the tedious journey. Now, the malarial fever that the cattle seem to turn up with their hoofs from the virgin soil in new country had recognised his ill-used constitution and seized on him. The day after the herd was turned out Joe lay delirious under a bough shade.

Jim devoted all his spare time to him, and at last had the satisfaction of witnessing his return to reason. But Simpson was very weak — he had played too many tricks with his physique to be able to stand a severe attack of fever with impunity, and lay, almost apathetic as regarded his chances of final recovery.

One morning Jim noticed that the patient had been idly tracing letters and signs on the dusty earth alongside his rude bed of dry grass. Amongst them he recognised with a start the E followed by a triangle.

“What are you up to, Joe?” he said, quietly.

“Just trying to remember a lot of brands,” returned Simpson, in his weak voice.

“Whose brand is that?” asked Gilmore, indicating the one he was interested in.

Simpson's wasted face flushed hotly. “When a fellow gets down in the world,” he said, after a pause, “he does not always stick to his right name. That brand was our old station brand on my father's place. There were three partners at first, Emerson, Unthorpe, and Charters, and, as their initials made the first syllable of Euclid, they took the triangle as a

brand with my father's initial before it. Finally he bought them out, and my brother has the place now."

"Then," said Jim, staring hard at him, "your name is—— — ?"

"Emerson."

"Good God!"

"What is the matter? What do you know about me?" cried the invalid, anxiously.

"Nothing, nothing, go on. Tell me, where did your father die? How is it you were left so badly off?"

Joe Emerson looked at his questioner with some surprise, but answered quietly enough. "My father died in his bed on Bellbrook station, where I was born. He and I had quarrelled some years before and finally he disowned me. I was a bad lot, there's no denying."

"Was your father ever up this way?"

"Yes. He had a share in a station in the north of Queensland and took a trip out west. I know. In fact, it was through some terrible hardship he endured that he afterwards died. He was too old to stand it. I never heard the rights of it, but I believe through some stupid blunder of one of the men some of their horses got away from them on a dry stage with packs and saddles on. My father and the others managed to get into water, but the horses made back and probably perished."

"Your brother then took your place in your father's will, and you were left out in the cold. Do you know the date of that will?"

"It was the time of our final row, in the beginning of '69."

Jim strode outside and thought for a moment, then he returned. "This is the strangest thing I ever came across outside of a novel. I have good news for you. Your father must have been in a tight place before the horses were lost, and when he anticipated death he repented of his harshness to you, and wrote out another will. It commences: 'I, George Henry Emerson, now expecting death, and being desirous of making amends to my dear son Joseph for my stern conduct.' I do not remember any more, but it was duly witnessed by Isaac Wright and Thomas Peberdy. Do you know anything about them?"

Young Emerson was looking at Jim as though bewildered by what he heard, and answered slowly. "Peberdy was an old servant of my father's and went north with him; he has a selection now, down south. Wright I don't know. But surely you remember the purport of this will?"

"Certainly. It left the whole of his property to you, subject to certain charges on it for your brother and sister."

"But — but, Mr. Gilmore!" cried the sick man, impatiently, "how did you find it? Who has it now?"

"My brother has it now. We found it with the remains of your father's horse, preserved in an old-fashioned sandwich case. Do you remember it?"

“Yes, with his monogram on it; he brought it from England.”

“If the two witnesses are alive, it seems to me that the will cannot be disputed. My brother may be here at any time; he knows when we are due, and is bringing up supplies from Burketown, and will probably push ahead.”

There was silence for a short time; then Emerson reached out and felt for Gilmore's hand. He grasped it and sat upright. “Look here,” he said, “I'm going to do three things.”

“Don't be in a hurry,” murmured Jim.

“I'm going to get well.”

“Hear, hear!”

“I'm going to knock off liquor.”

“Hear, hear, hear!” from Gilmore.

“And I'm going to get the skeleton of that old horse set up and mounted on a pedestal.”

“When the will is proved, I presume,” said his companion.

No need to tell much more. One witness was alive and able to swear to the signatures. Joe kept to his three resolutions. The skeleton of the old horse adorns the hall of Bell-brook station, and Jim Gilmore's wife was once Miss Emerson.

The Story of a Big Pearl.

LAZILY riding at anchor, in company with some half-dozen others, is a small lugger, one of a pearling fleet. It is almost a dead calm, and on the northern horizon there is a hazy suspicion of land, the coast of New Guinea. The midday spell is drawing to a close, and the coloured crew are rousing themselves from their short nap under the awning stretched amidships. In the cabin, permeated, as is all the rest of the vessel, by an ancient and fish-like smell, a couple of Malays are in earnest conference: Abdrahim, the diver, and Syed, his tender. In the bronzed hand of the former lies a lustrous and beautiful pearl, a globe of soft moonlight, such a pearl as is found but twice in a century. Both men know that it is of priceless value, and are eagerly gloating over it, discussing, meanwhile, the best way of disposing of their find to the greatest possible advantage. Presently Abdrahim wraps up the treasure in a piece of rag and places it in his box, which he locks; then, followed by Syed, goes on deck, and proceeds to array himself in his diving-gear. This completed, he is helped over the side and stands on the wooden rung of the short ladder, with his head and shoulders above the surface of the water waiting while Syed and a Kanaka put on the helmet and screw in the mouthpiece. Take your last look at the bright sunlight, and inhale your last breath of the fresh sea-breeze, Abdrahim, for that pure, flawless gem has done its work.

The helmeted head disappears beneath the unruffled surface of the sea, and Syed takes his place at the pump. The nondescript crew pay little heed to his actions; again and again the life-line quivers, but Syed is lost in a pleasant dream of the future in which he wonders at the surpassing folly of his countryman in trusting his life in his hands just after showing him the glorious pearl hidden away in the cabin. Abdrahim, he knows well, is suffocating below the lugger's keel, but the Malay's swarthy features are calm and emotionless until he suddenly calls loudly to the others, and they drag to the surface the now lifeless form of the diver. An accident, of course — something must have gone wrong with the pump, he rapidly explains to the men as they divest the corpse of the dress, and laying it on the deck cover it with a spare sail. Towards evening a breeze springs up and the lugger, with the dead Malay on board, steers for Thursday Island.

* * * * *

The little township on the island is fast asleep, eight bells have been struck on board the E. and A. steamer at anchor in the stream, and the last sound of revelry has died away. Near an old boatshed, in whispered conversation, stand Syed and a Chinaman. The Malay is excited and eager, the Chinaman apathetic, with a cunning assumption of indifference. The big pearl is being extolled on one side and depreciated on the other. Subtle Hi Long is assuring Syed that he has quite over-estimated the worth of his find, and the Malay is vehemently asserting its wonderful value. They part, after long dispute, Hi Long calm and confident, Syed angry and upset. He coils up in his blankets under the old boatshed, and after an hour or two of troubled tossing falls into a deep slumber that lasts until long after sunrise. When he awakes he sits up, fumbles underneath the bundle that serves him for a pillow, and draws out a common red silk handkerchief with a knot tied in one corner; glancing apprehensively around he unties the knot to feast his gaze upon his treasure. With a yell he springs up, his eyes ablaze with fury and despair, for the big pearl is gone. He has been robbed during his late sleep. A mist of blood swims before his eyes and blots out all his dreams of wealth. Blood — that is what he wants, and he draws his knife and rushes through the door out on to the beach, no longer a man but a beast of prey, a Malay running amok, seeking to glut his raging thirst for vengeance on the first object crossing his path. A group of coloured men are right in his way, and almost before they are aware of it, he is amongst them striking and stabbing right and left, seeing before him nothing but a crowd of grinning Chinese, taunting him with the loss of his fortune. Two are knifed before they can recover from their surprise — one of the remainder, has, fortunately, an axe in his hand, and before the madman can stab again he is cut down. He rises once more with the blood streaming down his face and rushes out on the boat-jetty, leaving a ruby track on the rough stones. With one last wild stab at the phantom fleeing before him he plunges into the sea, and Syed has gone to reckon with the ghost of the murdered Abdrahim.

The E. and A. steamer going south that morning has an additional steerage passenger in the person of Hi Long, who finds he has urgent business which compels him to leave Thursday Island immediately.

* * * * *

Through the still waters, guarded by the great barrier of coral, the steamer pursues her southern course. For two nights she has had to anchor amongst the then little known dangers of the treacherous northern coast, and now, on the third, the steady pulsation of the engines tells that she is running at half-speed through a comparatively open sea. The

officer on the bridge is talking to the coast pilot, as they pass backwards and forwards. Unobserved a figure rises from amongst those recumbent on the fore-hatch and approaches the side. The coloured man on watch on forward happens to turn round — “Hoy, Chinaman!” he yells. Too late, there is a splash, and the two men on the bridge are just in time to see a white face gleam past the bar of light.

The telegraph rings and the steamer comes quickly round.

“One of the Chinese passengers just jumped overboard, sir,” says the officer to the captain when he comes on the bridge.

A boat is lowered, uselessly of course. Hi Long, after gambling away all his gains, including the big pearl stolen from Syed, has gone to the bottom.

“Why the deuce couldn't he have done it quietly?” says the captain, as the boat is being run up to the davits; “we've lost half-an-hour through him.”

The Missing Super.

“IT'S a bad plan, and generally breeds trouble,” said Hervey.

“Well, at any rate, I gave him a pretty severe hiding, and I bet he'll be all the better for it,” replied Ross.

Hervey shook his head. “You can knock a nigger about the head as much as you like and he thinks nothing of it, but use a whip to him and he never forgets it. Powlang will have it in for you and wait his chance.”

Ross was a fresh hand in outside country where he had lately taken charge of a station. Like most new-comers, he had a theory of his own how to treat niggers, and like most new-comers he went to extremes. His idea was to rule with a hand of iron, and as the blacks had but lately been allowed to come in to the frontage unmolested, they were constantly infringing the petty rules he had formulated for their benefit; generally through ignorance Powlang was a fine young native, nearly six feet high, with a rather intelligent face. For some reason Ross had an especial “down” upon him. Catching him one day out hunting near a cattle-camp the blacks had been told to avoid, he bestowed a flogging on him with his stock-whip. This was the little affair about which Ross had been telling his neighbour, Hervey.

Apparently Powlang forgot all about his whipping, despite what Hervey had said, for he came into the station and was made useful in many ways, Ross having also seemingly buried the hatchet.

Gradually Powlang learned to ride and became one of the regular station staff. Matters went very smoothly for nearly a year, Ross, meanwhile, exercising his whip now and then on some of the refractory natives, and asking Hervey, whenever they met, “when his fate was to come off?”

Fifteen miles from the head station was an out-station with a small stockyard attached. Here a good deal of the mustering and branding was done to avoid the long drive into the head station. The place simply consisted of a slab hut and a yard, but a small patch of scrub intervened between the two, and the yard was not visible from the hut. There had been a spell of dry weather, then rain fell, and in a week or two mustering commenced. Nearly all hands were camped at the out-station for five or six days, and many of the niggers had found their way there and earned a little tobacco by helping at the branding-yard. Work was finished at dusk one evening and next morning all started for the head

station. Ross did not leave at the same time as the others, for he and Powlang were going home by a different route, and when the men left the other blacks were still in camp.

Ross did not return that day, and next morning all the natives about the place had left. This was ominous. Hervey came over and a search-party started. The tracks of the two horses were discovered at the out-station hut and followed to the river, up which they turned; a few miles further on they were intermixed with numerous tracks of natives. This continued, the tracks of the blacks keeping steadily up the river, the footprints of the two horses being occasionally detected amongst them. At last a point was reached where the river emerged from the coast-range through a broken gorge, and the party soon came to a clean-swept bed of sand with a water-hole at the upper end. This spot, as most of them knew, was as far as the horses could go up the course of the stream; but there was plenty to attract the search-party's attention. The natives had camped there, and the remains of the two horses were scattered on the sand amongst the ovens of blackened stones where their flesh had been cooked.

"Twenty-four hours too late!" said Hervey. "But what have they done with Ross?"

On searching about it was soon found that the blacks had split up. One party had made for the mountains on the north side, and one for the southern range. The whites divided in pursuit, and two days afterwards turned up at the head station tired and hungry, with footsore horses, both parties unsuccessful.

The fate of Ross could only be conjectured. Nothing belonging to him had been found in the blacks' camp, and most people believed in the ghastly story that was circulated, that he had been cooked and eaten as well as the horses.

A couple of months after this episode two of the men had occasion to camp at the out-station hut. They reached the place at dusk, turned out their horses, lit a fire, and, while their quart-pots were boiling, amused themselves by taking down the greenhide ropes kept there for branding, and unwinding them to see if they had been damaged by weevils.

"What's come of the long catching-rope, Bill?" said one at last.

"Blessed if I know," was the reply, and they searched the hut without success.

"Must have been left up the yard," said Bill. "The dingoes have got it by this time, I'll be bound. I'll have a look in the morning."

"Wonder what became of Ross, after all?" said one, as they sat before the fire discussing the evening meal.

"Hang it! I was just thinking of him, too. Suppose it's because he was the last man here — hope he doesn't haunt the place."

After a few more words they lit their pipes, and soon retired to the

blankets.

“Blowed if I can sleep, and you don't seem much better,” said Bill about midnight, getting up from his bunk, and poking together the smouldering sticks in the fireplace.

“No, never was so restless in my life,” returned his companion.

Both men started their pipes, and, between smoking and dozing, wore away the hours till break of day, when one went after the horses, and the other filled the quarts and stood them by the fire.

The sun had just risen when the horses jogged past the hut on their way to the yard, rattling their hobble chains. Bill heard his companion walk after them, whistling as he went, then he threw the tea into the pots and took them off the fire. Just as he did so, his mate rushed wildly in.

“Bill! Come up to the yard! Ross is there!”

The men stared at each other aghast. One with the horror he had seen; the other at the horror in his friend's face. Then they both hastened to the yard.

The horses were standing with their ears cocked, staring with distended eyes at an awful object in the branding-yard.

A shrunken, eyeless corpse stood erect, in the centre of the yard, with lolling head and drooping arms.

The two men clutched each other's hands.

“There's the rope!” said Bill, breaking the awed silence.

The commonplace words restored their courage, and they approached the remains of the murdered man. It was Ross, the missing super.

A loop in the middle of the catching-rope had been twisted round his neck, the ends passed through the rails on the opposite sides of the little yard, and then hauled taut, and made fast. Suspended thus by the neck, the body had the appearance of standing almost upright in the middle of the yard. Subsequent investigation went to show that, in all probability, he was senseless when tied up, as the skull bore the mark of a blow; and one of the gins subsequently confessed that he was first knocked on the head by Powlang.

The yard was at the back of the hut, with the patch of scrub between, and the search-party, picking up the tracks at once, had never thought of looking at the yard. For two months the dead man had swung there, a gruesome caretaker of the lonely out-station.

* * * * *

Powlang and the other blacks who were known to have camped at the hut at the time of that fatal muster, were, on different occasions during the ensuing twelvemonths, “dispersed in the Queen's name.”

That Other Fellow.

A Tale of the Seventies.

DUNCAN MCINTYRE sat on the cap of the stock-yard fence, smoking quietly, contemplating a colt which, in his capacity of horse-breaker, he was about to mount for the first time. The colt was also contemplating Duncan, and wondering what fresh devilry he meditated. Only a week ago and he was as free as air; now, he was penned in by posts and rails, his mouth sore with a breaking-bit, a roller had been buckled around him, in which he felt as comfortable as a girl in her first corset, his mane and tail had been pulled, and to-day a saddle had been girthed on him — all these indignities he justly attributed to the man “cockatooing” on the fence. He had been violently taking it out of himself bucking round the yard, and now stood breathlessly gazing at his enemy.

Duncan knocked the ashes out of his pipe, replaced it in his pouch, and sprang lightly down into the enclosure. A blackfellow, who had been sunning himself in a corner, arose also on noticing the movement. Between fear and exertion the colt was sweating profusely, the perspiration dropped from his body on to the dusty ground, and ran in dirty streams down his legs. After a smart display of equine temper, Duncan got his hand on the youngster's mane and spoke soothingly to him.

“Steady, old boy, you've had your fling like the rest of us, and now work begins.”

The pair looked in each other's eyes like two duellists. Neither man nor horse could foresee the future: there they were on an equality of ignorance. No instinct could tell the animal that a time would come when he would appeal to his hated foe with piteous whinnies for relief, and die with that hand caressing him, and those eyes full of unshed tears for his fate.

The blackboy approached the horse's head while Duncan made the usual preparations to mount. “My word!” said the boy as he got hold of the colt's ear, “this the fellow Sherman Jarley say, kick out mid his front feet that time we brand him.”

“Yes, Billy,” returned Duncan, flipping the stirrup-leather once or twice against the flap of the saddle; and if you don't let go quick he'll

shake hands with you as he did with German Charley. Now!"

With a quick, easy movement he was in the saddle, and the boy stepped back. For a moment the colt stood motionless, then started pawing and rearing, and again stood doggedly still.

"Now don't sulk," said McIntyre, but the words were no sooner uttered than the colt started bucking in a vicious and roundabout fashion, which called upon all the rider's powers of horsemanship. The struggle lasted a short time only, and then the horse gave in, defeated.

"Get your horse, Billy," says McIntyre, and the boy, after letting down the rails, mounts an old horse which has been standing indifferent and half-asleep in an adjacent yard; then the colt, after a little coaxing, goes off quietly down the paddock alongside the old stager.

Duncan McIntyre was a gentleman who had gone down in the world. He was one of the curst victims of heredity; only, unfortunately for himself, he had not succeeded to the whisky-proof head of his Scottish ancestors. Liquor ever turned him from a generous, easy-going, mild-tempered fellow into a mad rowdy, ready to ride a wild race through the main street of a bush township, fight with his best friend, or drink with his worst enemy. Fortunately, his manly, adventurous character had prevented him sinking into the ranks of the sponger and the loafer. He had fallen from his own set to an ordinary bush hand, and could always earn a good cheque at any kind of work, but this was surely followed by the fatal and inevitable "spree:" some morning he would awake possessed of nothing but the clothes he had slept in, "a liver," a blue-blanket and a bottle of sudden-death kindly given him by the publican to stave off the impending "horrors."

One day Fate led him to Darromine, a medium-sized cattle-station. Mitford, the managing partner, was a man gifted with an exceptionally good and kindly heart. He knew McIntyre's story, soon recognised the worth dormant beneath the assumed roughness of the fallen nature, and, after some trouble, induced him to come and live with him, and endeavour to assume once more the habits of his better days. Naturally, the besetting sin betrayed itself from time to time, but Mitford set himself to banish the unclean spirit, and by untiring vigilance, unaccompanied by any ostentatious display of solicitude, he partly succeeded. Needless to say that Duncan had conceived a strong and lasting friendship for the other.

II.

Some fifteen miles from Darromine there was a small township, and in that township lived the fair and only daughter of the police-magistrate thereof, a widower. She was nineteen and the belle of the district. Not that she prided herself on that distinguished position, for there were only

five girls in the district, all told, and the other four were so uncommonly hard-featured that to be the acknowledged belle in such company was, after all, but a doubtful distinction. Doubtless Miss Jennie Webster cherished a hidden conviction, in which she was quite justified, that, had she to compete with more favoured rivals she would have held her own; but this notion she kept to herself, and did not assume any undue airs as the belle of Corraville. Needless to say that all the youth of the district were madly in love with her, even those who professed engagements with absent fair ones in Sydney or Melbourne. Jennie smiled upon all alike, but favoured no one in particular.

Now it happened that the very day on which Duncan gave the colt his first lesson had been selected by Mr. Webster to drive his daughter to Darromine on a visit. McIntyre and Billy were walking the horses quietly homeward along the Corraville road, which led through the paddock, when at a turn amongst some scrub they were suddenly overtaken by the buggy. The colt shied violently and commenced to buck. It was rather awkward in the scrub, and Duncan was nearly getting into trouble two or three times ere he brought his green mount under control. After offering his apologies for unintentionally frightening the colt, which the young lady accepted with a frank smile of admiration, for most women like to see good horsemanship, the police-magistrate and his daughter drove on.

"What a quiet man that Mr. McIntyre is," said Jennie, "I can never get half-a-dozen words out of him; but he *can* ride."

Her father smiled somewhat grimly; McIntyre's past was known to him, and he was glad to see the change that was being worked.

"It's a case of still waters, my girl," he replied, "but he is a good fellow, I believe."

Mitford was one of Jennie's victims. For a long time he had been ready to lay himself and his share of Darromine at her feet; the present visit, therefore, translated him to the seventh heaven.

"How well you ride, Mr. McIntyre," said Miss Webster in the course of the dinner; "I must confess I like to see a bit of good buckjumping."

Duncan smiled. "I nearly came to grief under that low brigalow though," he said.

"I saw it," she returned; "and I can assure you my heart was in my mouth, for it was all our fault."

"How does he shape?" asked Mitford, alluding to the colt.

"Very well indeed. I have taken a great fancy to him, he has no vice — it's only nervousness. In a week he'll get confidence, and in a month I'll make a lady's hack of him."

"There! Miss Webster," said Mitford; "may I send him in for you to ride this day month if McIntyre guarantees that he is fit?"

"Certainly, I accept the challenge," she returned, for she was a good horsewoman. "I will rely upon Mr. McIntyre's skill and judgment."

Duncan bowed and the subject dropped; but thenceforth the colt, christened Challenger, became the object of special care and attention.

The month passed, and Miss Webster, arrayed in a workmanlike habit of dark blue serge, was seated in the verandah reading a book, and occasionally glancing along the road which led to Darromine. A rider with a led horse presently made his appearance, but, sooth to say, the young lady looked slightly disappointed. "He might have come too, to see how the colt went," she thought.

"Are you ready, dad?" she called out; "here comes Mr. Mitford with the horse."

Mitford rode into the stable yard, and the magistrate and his daughter came out to inspect the colt. What a difference to the sullen, fierce-eyed rebel who had snorted defiance at his enemy only thirty days before!

"Oh, dad, isn't he a beauty!" cried the little lady in her delight.

"McIntyre has handled him so that a child could ride him, but he is full of pluck all the same," said Mitford, delighted at her pleasure.

Challenger was soon saddled, and the three set out; the trim-figured Jennie forgetting her annoyance at the non-appearance of McIntyre in the pleasure of her mount. The ride was a success, and thenceforth Challenger was entirely at Miss Webster's disposal.

It is impossible for a man and a girl to be on the verge of a violent passion for each other without both knowing it, although never a word may have been interchanged on the subject. Jennie had not quite suffered herself to fall in love with the interesting Duncan, but she was perilously near it. McIntyre himself was lost. He had fought against the feeling tooth and nail; had told himself over and over again that the curse which shadowed his life made it a heinous crime for him to think of marriage; and had almost won the fight. Suddenly the fatal knowledge came to him that it needed but a word from him to obtain the confession of her affection. The flower was unfolding for him to pluck. He almost threw caution to the winds. Almost — not quite.

Mitford came back from Corraville one evening with his sunny face clouded: he had ventured all, and lost.

"I am sure she would have had me, old man," he innocently confided to his friend, "but there's another fellow in the way: she as good as admitted it."

Duncan was silent for some time; then he rallied his companion, and somewhat roused him from his despondency.

"Look here, McIntyre," said Mitford, "I have a plan in my head about which I have already consulted my partner and obtained his consent. You have heard of the country out west beyond the Queensland border? We are thinking of taking a bit up, and sending out some of our spare stock to form a station. Will you go out and manage for us for a third share and a salary?"

Duncan rose and shook the other's hand. "Your offer is too generous. You could get a man anywhere for a couple or three hundred a year."

"No, we couldn't, not such an all-round man as you. Besides, it's not all beer and skittles living out there. What with fever and blacks and short commons, you'll earn your third share."

"When do you propose to start?"

"You and I and a blackboy will go as soon as possible and inspect the country. When we come back we will start the cattle, provided we find anything good enough. We have three years' grace to stock."

"There is nothing much to do here," returned McIntyre, "we can start in a fortnight." After a few more words they parted for the night. McIntyre lay sleepless, thinking of what the day had brought forth. She might have accepted Mitford, but for that other fellow. He, Duncan McIntyre, the ne'er-do-well, was "that other fellow." His way was clear: before him lay escape from the temptation of love, and perhaps a drunkard's death — he must go, and go quickly without speaking.

Of a sudden he asked himself would she forget him? Would not his exile in the wilderness arouse the very flame he sought to extinguish, by adding the touch of absence and romance? No, that other fellow must go under in a way that would conclude the matter. Mitford on his return would probably get a favourable answer. That other fellow went under that night, although Mitford on his restless bed little thought so.

McIntyre had broken out again. That was the last news in the little township where news was so scarce. Everybody said they had expected it all along, and everybody, saving the local publicans, said they were very sorry. It had been "an old man spree." Duncan had damaged the sergeant of police, who was good-naturedly trying to induce him to leave town. Mitford had to come in and bail him out of the lock-up. Jennie had heard of it, and shed some bitter tears, but, with all a woman's faith in the reforming power of love, still believed that had she the right she could exorcise the evil spirit. Alas for Jennie, the worst was yet to come.

McIntyre went "on the tear" again, and this time capped all his former delinquencies. One of the publicans had imported a new barmaid, a young damsel with goldwashed hair, who rejoiced in the name of Flossie. Duncan rode Challenger into town, and an hour or two afterwards Flossie might have been seen steering the colt down the main street in the sight of all people. Jennie saw her, saw this garish young party mounted on the horse that had been kept sacred to her use, that McIntyre had devoted weeks to breaking in for her. Challenger, her pet who ate sugar from her hand!

From that moment poor Duncan was to her a thing of the most bitter scorn and contempt. He might have damaged the whole of the police-force and painted the town scarlet, and been forgiven; but this insult was too much. That other fellow went under for good and all.

One small bit of triumph was afforded her. The vainglorious Flossie, flushed with the pride that precedes a fall, took opportunity, when parading before the P.M.'s house, to give Challenger a cruel and undeserved cut across the ears. This for a horse of spirit, accustomed to be treated as a gentleman, was unendurable. Already irritated by the antics of his strange rider, he gave a sidebound that seated Flossie, to her sudden astonishment, in the middle of the dusty road. Challenger trotted off, and the forlorn damsel, holding up her skirt, had to follow on foot, amidst much chaff from the spectators.

Mitford got McIntyre out of town, somehow. Hurt as he was he refrained from reproach, and he was rewarded. Ere they started, he asked once more, and this time he was told, "When you come back I may say yes." What more would he have?

Once only did Jennie allude to the disgraceful episode. "I hope you are taking that horse with you, I never want to see him again." Mitford assured her that the innocent animal which had done its best to protest against indignity, would never more be seen by her, little dreaming of a time to come when life and hope would be bound up in Challenger's endurance and his rider's faith.

They parted, and Jennie, watching, saw another horseman join him in the main street, and she turned into the house with a bright sparkle in her eye and a flush upon her cheek.

III

A wide stretch of grey plain, bounded by a shimmering haze, a haze that grotesquely magnifies what few objects are visible; turning a stone into a rock, a bush into a tree. A shallow depression, bordered by dry polygonum bushes, with here and there a crooked, distorted coolibah tree, threads this plain. At one point in this apology for a creek, there is a pool of milky-looking water. From the edge of this pool a short growth of green grass extends for a little distance up the bank, and on this patch of sward, the only green thing visible, some horses are feeding. Under a scanty shade of boughs, erected near one of the largest coolibah trees, Mitford and McIntyre are sitting; blackened by sun and wind, thin with semi-starvation, and cursed with "the infinite torment of flies." The blackboy is curled up under the trunk of the tree. He lets the flies cluster around his eyes, infest his mouth and nostrils, and makes no effort, like the white men, to drive them away. The others are less patient, and a hasty exclamation continually escapes them. "When shall we get out of this purgatory?" says Mitford.

They were in a trap. They had penetrated far into the unknown country west of the Queensland border. From one scanty water-hole to another they had made their way to their present position, and now they could

neither advance nor retreat. Before them there was an illimitable expanse of dry country; behind them the water-holes had dried up, and their return was cut off. Sturt, at the Depôt Camp, was in the same fix, and scores of men since have been caught in a similar way. A hundred and twenty miles of dry, cracked, gaping plains lay between them and a large permanent lagoon they had found on their outward journey. No horse could travel that distance without water under the vertical summer sun. No horse could traverse half the distance over the soft, spongy soil full of holes and deep cracks and live. Their only hope was a kindly thunderstorm, for the water-hole where they were camped was fast shrinking, and when that was gone it meant death.

Day after day they watched the clouds gather, dark and threatening, only to break in wind and dust, and a few fierce flashes of lightning.

At last, an ominous cloud gathered in the east. As night drew on, the heavens darkened and the setting sun was reflected from the opposite hemisphere in a quickly-fading flush of angry scarlet. A black night closed in. The air was heavy, oppressive and sultry; the two men and the boy stood silently watching. Their fate was hidden in that sullen bank of vapour. Quick, bright flashes of lightning soon commenced to blaze, followed, after a long interval, by a low, distant mutter of thunder. Presently even this ceased, and, with a sigh of bitter disappointment, the men stretched themselves on their blankets and sought forgetfulness in sleep.

“How far off was that storm?” said Mitford, breaking the silence.

“Any distance over seventy miles,” returned Duncan. “Did you not notice the long interval between the flash and the thunder?”

Mitford replied wearily, and both men soon slept.

In an hour or two McIntyre awoke, and instantly noticed a change in the atmosphere. The wind was blowing faintly from the direction of the late storm, and with it came the unmistakable smell of wet earth. Rain had fallen to the eastward at last. The wind had brought the message, but from how far had it come?

Duncan aroused Mitford, and together they stood and sniffed the cool, damp air.

“We must get out of here somehow,” said McIntyre at last. “Now, listen. I am going to take Challenger and a pack-horse with water, and ride in the direction that wind comes from; I have the bearing, a little south of east. I will let the pack-horse go in about twenty miles, after I have given Challenger a drink from the bags; the pack-horse will come back here. I shall go on until I find where that storm fell. If I don't come back you will know it is too far, and that I am done for; then you must shift for yourself. If I find water I shall come back.”

“But, Duncan, what nonsense! Why can't we all go and chance it?”

“Because I might get a little puddle of water that would serve me and

the horse and would not be enough for all of us. Man, don't you understand! I owe you a debt and must pay you in my own way. For God's sake, don't thwart me."

Mitford could say no more. McIntyre roused up Billy, and they strode into the darkness after the horses, which were soon caught, and, under the now starlit sky, the two men said good-bye.

About three hours after daylight, McIntyre pulled up, watered Challenger by means of a tin dish he had on the pack, then released the pack-horse to find its own way back to camp, and proceeded on his lonely way. Hour after hour of monotonous progress over the dead, dry plain, the only break an occasional shallow depression bordered with brown polygonum. Hour after hour through the great stillness of the night, save for a short occasional rest for his gallant horse.

Daylight again, and the outlook unchanged — no sign of rainfall visible. As the sun got hotter Challenger began to show signs of distress, so Duncan started to walk, and together man and horse stumbled over the treacherous plain. He had a small canvas bag of water on his saddle, but only a scanty remnant of the former contents was now left. Death was walking beside them, step for step.

At last Challenger began to give in, his flanks were pinched and the hollows over his eyes deep sunken; he rubbed his nose against Duncan's arm, whinnied, and looked pleadingly at him. These are the things to break a man's heart in the wilderness. Still there was nothing in sight but the heat-haze and the tall columns of dust raised by the wandering whirlwinds that crossed their track. A false step and the horse went down. McIntyre tried to get him up, but Challenger was too far gone — he must proceed alone. Wetting his lips with a few drops of the water fast evaporating from the bag, he went forward on the course he had been keeping.

Suddenly, right in front of him, rose a small flock of birds. They wheeled and chattered and settled down again! It could only mean water, for since leaving camp he had seen no living thing, and now he recognised the birds as spur-winged plover.

With perspiration nearly blinding him, he staggered on, and then he must have crossed the crest of an almost imperceptible rise, for before him the plain was covered with sheets of shallow water. He had reached the extreme edge of the thunderstorm.

When Duncan lifted his face from the tepid pool after slaking his thirst, his first thought was of the dying horse on the plain. He filled his felt hat and the bag, and dragged himself back to his dumb companion. Challenger lifted his head when he saw him, and whinnied piteously. Four times more he made the journey backwards and forwards, and then the plucky horse managed to get on its legs and follow him down to the water. There was a solitary coolibah tree not far off, and in the miserable

shade that it afforded Duncan sat down and tried to eat some of the dried horse-flesh he had brought with him. He was conscious of a fearful headache, for he had been bareheaded when carrying the water to Challenger. He must get back as soon as possible, for the water on the plain was but a few inches deep and fast disappearing. Still he must spell his horse, for after such an ordeal the colt would not carry him half-way without rest. At last he felt too stupid to think, and sank into a sleep that lasted until sundown. His head was still throbbing painfully when he awoke, and he arose and bathed it in one of the pools, but the water was warm and afforded him no relief. Challenger seemed greatly recovered, and was feeding on the dry Mitchell grass.

One thought haunted Duncan during the ensuing night of pain — the scorching ride back over the drought-smitten country. Suddenly a whisper seemed to come from the darkness, “Why go back?” To the eastward the country was well watered, and a few easy stages would take him to the Queensland border and safety. Mitford would wait, and at last give him up, start back on some other course, and probably perish. It was one or other of them. The colt would not carry him more than half-way back to camp then he must walk, and the sun would soon make an end of him. All through the dark hours of semi-delirium the voices from the surrounding solitude kept up the refrain, “Why go back?”

On the fifth day after McIntyre's departure Mitford started on Duncan's tracks with a pack-horse laden with water, hoping to encounter him. The pool was falling rapidly and in a few days would be dry. Fifteen miles from camp he thought he saw a figure moving towards him. It could only be McIntyre, for in that solitude there was no living soul but themselves. He hastily dismounted and, waterbag in hand, hurried to meet him. Duncan did not know him; he was blindly, instinctively following his tracks back to the camp, and it was not until Mitford had poured the water over his head and breast and down his baked throat that his bloodshot eyes lost some of their wildness. His friend had dragged him out of the sun into the only shade there was on that bare plain — beneath the belly of the pack-horse. Here he lay a while with his eyes half closed. At last he began to speak coherently.

“I've got back, old man. Follow my tracks out and you will get to the water, but be quick, for it's drying up fast. Poor old Challenger! I shot him — it was all I could do for him; he never gave in until he was dying.” His head fell back on his friend's knee, and he was silent for a time. “I must go on,” he muttered presently. “Blast that sun! it has done for me; but I will get back” — and he struggled to rise. Mitford kept him down, and he sank into unconsciousness once more.

An hour passed during which Mitford kept pouring water over the burning head; then Duncan opened his eyes and his friend saw that his senses had returned. “Mitford, old man, I tell you that you must go back

to camp and start at once, or it will be too late, too late. The water is so shallow it will dry up in a day or two. Poor old Challenger, you'll see his body as you go; but start now and you'll get home safe. That other fellow is going another road. Goodbye."

And soon that other fellow was gone.
