

Dave's Sweetheart

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Dave's Sweetheart

**Melbourne
Melville, Mullen and Slade
1894**

Book I

Chapter I

Jenny Carter.

*'She will not hear my music? So!
Break the string; fold music's wing;
Suppose Pauline had bade me sing!'*
'One Way of Love.' Robert Browning.

JENNY CARTER leaned over the bar-counter, her elbows on the rough planks among the glasses and tin pannikins, and her chin in her hands. Her face was tanned and freckled by the strong winds and fierce sun of Northern Victoria, and her yellow hair had a bleached look as if that sun had stolen some of the colour from it. Still, she was not counted pretty without reason, for her big brown eyes looked out wistfully from under their long lashes, and the rare smile that parted her red lips showed a row of milk-white teeth.

But Jenny Carter had not yet learned her own value in a land where women of any sort were scarce, and a pretty unmarried one a valuable commodity, and very evidently no thought of her personal appearance had ever come either to trouble or to gratify her. Her yellow curls had been tossed and tumbled by the wind all day long, and her lilac cotton gown was buttoned all awry. It had seen service, too, that gown, and was faded in some parts to a dull and dingy white, and the rents and tears that were pretty numerous had been mended in a fashion that could only be called slipshod. It was open at the neck a little for coolness, for the January day had been a sweltering one, and the line where the sun-tan ended showed as a dark ring round her white neck; the sleeves, too, were rolled up to the elbows, but that was evidently their normal condition, for the round young arms were all one golden brown, like her face.

The Lucky Digger hotel and store was a poor enough place, half canvas tent, half bark and corrugated iron shanty, and the counter, which ran the whole length of the room, merely consisted of rough boards laid along the tops of casks, some empty and some full. The floor was bare earth beaten hard by the passage of countless feet. The stock-in-trade was stored in numerous bottles on the shelves nailed up against the walls, wherever the walls would bear shelves; and, for the rest, bags of flour, cases of gin and brandy, boxes of tobacco, kerosene, matches — in fact,

all the necessaries of a digger's life — were piled up in the corners and on the floor in seemingly hopeless confusion.

It was early yet, and the place was comparatively empty. One or two idlers and loafers stood about, trying to cadge a drink or win a smile from the proprietor's pretty daughter, but in a desultory, half-hearted fashion. The business of the day would not fairly begin till the sun had set over the ranges in the west and the diggers came trooping in for a song and a chat, and, maybe, if Sailor Joe were there, and was not too drunk to play his fiddle, a bull dance would be attempted. Then, indeed, the competition for Jenny's hand would be keen.

There were no other women besides Jenny and her stepmother within many miles, and the men who did not succeed in getting them must needs console themselves with each other; but there was no hurry — that was three or four hours off yet. It was hopeless to think of securing Jenny beforehand, for though she might promise readily enough — but, again, she might not — it would all come to the same thing if Black Anderson happened to be there. The sergeant from the police camp on the plateau overlooking the diggings was bad enough — he always regarded Jenny as his own property — but when Black Anderson was there it was hopeless.

Not that the girl made any show of liking one way or another. It was patent that she did care for Black Anderson, infinitely preferred him to any of the many who nightly visited that shanty, though no man could have told exactly how he knew it any more than he could have said why he knew she hated the sergeant. She neither sought the one nor avoided the other, but it was common talk on Deadman's that Buck Carter's Jenny was 'dead nuts' on Black Dave Anderson, and that she feared the police sergeant.

Neither of them was there at the moment. Buck Carter himself lay along a pile of flour-sacks, his head a little lower than his heels, sleeping heavily. He sampled his own liquor a little too often, though in all probability he got it somewhat purer than he deemed wholesome for his customers, taken as a body; still, it had its effect on him, and, as a rule on hot afternoons his wife or daughter looked after things while he slept the sleep, if not of the just, at least of the full. His daughter glanced at him carelessly. It was always the same every afternoon, and so long as he was right for the evening she did not much care.

Outside was the busy hum of many voices, for there were two thousand men on the new field, and their claims were pegged out as close together as might be. Even the silence of two thousand men is audible.

From the open tent-door the girl could see away down the gully to the jutting shoulder of the hill, whereon stood the police camp, in marked contrast, with its white tents and neat fence, to the rough unkempt diggers' camp that lay below, and was the reason of its existence. The

hills opened out here into a little flat, and the creek (Deadman's Creek) cut a way for itself, with many windings, through the soft alluvium.

Such a pretty creek it had been six months ago, in spite of its sinister name — ferns and mosses and flowering creepers clothed its banks, and tall trees and tree-ferns and undergrowth grew on the surrounding hills. Now the clear sparkling water had become of the consistency of pea-soup; the trees — at least, for some distance round the camp — were represented by blackened stumps; ferns, grasses, and flowers were hidden under upturned heaps of yellow earth. Cradles and tubs stood in double lines along the banks of the creek, and the ramshackle dwellings of the diggers — sometimes tent, sometimes slab hut, bark-roofed, sometimes only a miserable lean-to made out of scraps of corrugated iron and old kerosene-tins — were dotted about as close as possible to the windlass that stood over every man's own particular claim.

Hot and ugly and uninviting the whole scene looked this January day. Away over the hills yonder there might be cool and shaded nooks where the hot sun did not penetrate, and where the graceful tree-ferns dipped their long fronds in clear and sparkling water. But here in the centre of the camp the garish sun held undisputed sway. It was hot, hot everywhere. In the bar of the Lucky Digger, with multifarious odours of the various stores and the reek of stale liquor in the air, it was hottest of all.

The sunbeams grew longer and longer, and crept in through the tent-door and up along the earthen floor till they touched the edge of the counter. The girl watched them idly. She watched the motes dancing in the doorway, watched the little swirl of dust that the faintest breath of wind raised on the track outside, and hardly heard the desultory conversation which the idlers who leaned over the bar kept up with each other. It was a monosyllabic conversation with many pauses, for the day was hot, and the long silences were filled in by the deep snores of the sleeping man and the chatter of children which came from behind the canvas screen dividing the living rooms from the bar and store.

Presently the curtain was thrust aside, and a tall dark young woman stood in the doorway. Handsome in a coarse sort of way, but as untidy as Jenny herself, she swayed herself slowly backwards and forwards, half mechanically, hushing to sleep the baby she held in her arms.

'You, Jenny!' she said sharply; 'ain't you ashamed of yourself, a-loafin' there all the afternoon, an' me just worn out with this child?'

Jenny crossed the room slowly and took the baby from the woman's arms, then, drawing out a three-legged stool from beneath the counter, she sat down thereon, and bent over the little morsel of humanity with a world of tenderness in her attitude. Mrs. Carter stretched out her arms as if glad to be rid of their load, and, stepping into the centre of the room, looked round her with a frown; then shook her sleeping husband to his

feet with no gentle hand.

‘You lazy, good-for-nothing, drunken — — ’

But here some man in the crowd ventured on an approving snigger, and Sal Carter turned on him sharply.

‘And what business is it of yours, I'd like to know?’ she asked viciously. ‘Out you go, every man jack of you! I know you, sittin' there waitin' till some fool 'll come along as 'll shout drinks for the crowd. Out you go, I say!’

‘Well, missus,’ said one, bolder than the rest, ‘ain't that good for trade?’

‘Mind your own business! I'm goin' to have the place to myself a bit. Clear now!’

The man in the corner swore a good round swinging oath that even commanded the respect of men who had graduated in the gaols of Sydney and Van Diemen's Land, and, lifting up the edge of the tent, peered out.

‘There's that trap comin' along.’

The gentlemen who favoured the Lucky Digger with their company, though ostensibly honest as the day, evidently had a rooted objection to meeting the police if it could be avoided. No drinks being forth-coming, a bad-tempered woman to entertain them, and a sergeant of police riding straight along the dusty track with the evident intention of making this house his destination — the meeting silently and unanimously concluded to adjourn till a more favourable opportunity for continuing business presented itself, and one by one the idlers slunk quietly away.

Mrs. Carter laughed grimly.

Then she turned to her husband.

He was sitting on a flour-sack, holding his head with both hands, as if he feared it might break up into fragmentary pieces if he let go for a moment. He was a little uncertain of his own identity too, and gazed at his wife as if he rather thought he was one of the loafers she had so unceremoniously dismissed.

‘There's a bucket of water outside for you,’ she said, ‘and you'd better get along quick — here's the sergeant a-comin'.’

The landlord stumbled away behind the curtain, and his wife turned to her stepdaughter with the air of one who has thoroughly done her duty.

‘Trounced 'em well, didn't I? Give us over that kid, Jenny; here comes the sergeant.’

Jenny looked out at the open door away down the track. A trooper was riding slowly along it, and the dust that rose to his horse's knees stained its four white feet red. A smart-looking man was Sergeant Sells, who had been a non-commissioned officer in a cavalry regiment once, and still retained the soldierly air which only years of drill can give. The sun gleamed on his silvered shoulder-straps and on the mountings of his

cartouche-box, and, as he dismounted at the door, showed up a gray hair or two in his neatly-trimmed whiskers and the deep-red scar which ran right across his left cheek. It was somewhat of a vexation to the sergeant when he reflected that he was a middle-aged man in a community where most men were young, for he was older, indeed, than Buck Carter; albeit, that gentleman had somewhat undermined his constitution by the too careful sampling of his own liquors, and the sergeant's figure was still trim and youthful. But there was no doubt about it, crow's feet were beginning to creep about the corners of his cold, steely-gray eyes, and more than one or two gray hairs had grown in his coal-black hair and whiskers.

Cold, stern, suspicious, a man who himself was the soul of neatness, and who, up in the camp, succeeded in keeping things to the very high standard Commissioner Jocelyn Ruthven set up for himself, he was the last man in the world one would have expected to meet in a low grog shanty; and seeing him there, not one in a thousand could have suspected that the untidy, pretty girl so lovingly bending over her stepmother's baby was the magnet that drew him thither. He hardly acknowledged to himself that the attraction existed; and when he did, it was only to make solemn vows that never again, save in the pursuit of duty, would he enter the place — a vow he made as often as he left the Lucky Digger, only to break it next day, or at most the day after.

What was this girl to him, he asked himself angrily, that she should take possession of his very soul? He did not want her for a wife, this slattern who stood all day long tending the bar, serving with her own hands, listening to the conversation of men whose very presence was an insult to a woman. He had dreamt his dreams; he had had his hopes, and his ideal woman had been so different, so very different. Besides, what need to think of this girl? She never gave him a second thought.

And then he rode slowly down in the direction of the Lucky Digger, and found that his heart beat high as he noted that, for once, the only occupants of the place were Jenny and her stepmother; and Jenny was bending over the child in her arms as tenderly and fondly as even the spotless woman of his dreams might have done! She raised her eyes as he entered, and he caught the glance — pathetic, wistful, appealing, it seemed to him for the moment; the next, the cruel thought came to him that it was dislike and fear he read in those brown eyes. What matter? She was nothing to him; never should be — never — never!

‘Well, Mrs. Carter,’ he said awkwardly, ‘is the mail in yet?’

‘The mail! Lord bless the man! the mail ain't due till to-morrow, and then like as not it won't be here till Saturday. What'll you take, sergeant?’

It was a sorry enough excuse he had felt as he asked the question; but the sergeant was one of those men who are not ready with an excuse, and he felt bitterly that this woman must know, as indeed she did, that he had

come here for no other purpose than to look once more at her stepdaughter.

‘Give me a nobbler, then,’ he said, and he leaned over the counter, cudgelling his brains for some remark that might make Jenny lift her eyes to him again.

Mrs. Carter divined his wishes.

‘Where's the brandy, Jen?’ she asked. ‘Here, give us over that kid, and get it for the sergeant yourself.’

‘It's on the shelf there,’ said Jenny sullenly. ‘You can get it easy enough. I'll keep baby; he's goin' off at last.’

The sergeant drank his nobbler slowly, and Mrs. Carter, her arms folded in luxurious idleness, leaned up against the wall and tried to make conversation for the trio; but she had to do it all herself, for neither of the others helped her in the least.

‘Drat it all, sergeant!’ she said at last, ‘ain't you got a tongue in your head?’

‘Have you seen Black Anderson lately?’ he asked. ‘I saw a man who said he was a brother of his last time I was down in Melbourne with the escort.’

He noticed the flush mount slowly through the sun-tan to Jenny's forehead — noticed, too, that she was all attention now, though she never raised her head; and his blood boiled within him to think that he was placing himself in the position of rival, and unsuccessful rival at that, to Black Anderson — a man whose very reputation should have forbidden him the society of any decent woman.

‘Did you, now?’ said Mrs. Carter, by way of taking a polite interest in the conversation; ‘well, I'm thinkin' now that it's not the likes of Black Dave 'll be mindin' much about his kith an' kin. It's all he can do to — —

‘What?’ asked the trooper suspiciously.

‘Oh, nothen — only men can't be botherin' about their brothers with the colony in between them. It's hard livin' these times.’

‘Oh, gammon! you and the old man are making your fortune. You'll be flitting one of these fine days, and going to Sydney to live like a fine lady.’

‘Mebbe,’ she said indifferently; ‘but there ain't much o' the fine lady about me; as long as trade's brisk the bar 'll suit me. There's Jen, now; she's got the makin' of a gran' lady in her. Sit an' do nothin' but moon around all day long she will. An' she's pretty, too, an' silks an' velvets 'll set her off.’

The sergeant looked at Jenny. A future in which Black Anderson had no part held no interest for her, and she had bent over the baby again. Assuredly, a career in which she had no part looked blank and forbidding to him, and yet a future which she controlled — might it not hold

possibilities still more terrible?

No fear of that! She would not even look at him.

'Good-evening, Mrs. Carter,' he said, tossing off the last drops in the bottom of his glass.

He would not trouble to speak to Jenny, he told himself. It was time this foolish fancy was crushed right out, and it should die here and at once. Then, by way of putting a finishing touch to his wise resolutions, he crossed the room and stood looking down at the girl as she swayed slowly to and fro with the child in her arms.

'Miss Jenny,' he said, and in spite of himself his voice, usually somewhat harsh and dry, took a softer tone; 'aren't you going to say "good-night" to me?'

She raised her eyes — beautiful eyes in which there lingered a soft tenderness born of her love for the baby in her arms, or for the man they had been speaking of, and the trooper knew what without her his life might just as well end there and then. But the softness died as she read the love in his face, and he turned without another word, his spurred heels ringing as he walked away and mounted his horse.

Chapter II

A Bitter Schooling.

‘What is [a girl of eighteen] to believe in, if not in this vision woven from within?’ — George Eliot.

‘WELL, Jen,’ said her stepmother, in a tone in which amusement and vexation struggled for the mastery.

‘Well,’ repeated the girl.

She never had many words at her command.

‘Are you goin' to marry him, Jen?’

‘Who?’

‘Who? Why, the sergeant, to be sure. You didn't think I meant Black Dave, did you? No gal as calls herself respectable 'd so much as look at Black Dave;’ and she put on an air of mock modesty that for a moment deceived the younger woman.

‘You've no call — — ’ she began hotly.

‘There, there!’ said Mrs. Carter soothingly; ‘there, don' you an' me row! Jen, though, it'd be a mighty fine thing for us if you'd marry the sergeant.’

‘He never asked me,’ said the girl, taking refuge in the stereotyped answer that comes first to all women's lips.

‘Never asked you? Oh no. He's swearing to hisself now that he'll never come here no more, but he ain't gone farther than Pard Derrick's claim. Give him a cooey, an' he'll be back an' do the job!’

‘I hate him! I hate him!’

‘Lawks! what's that matter? You'd get used to him. Men is all pretty much alike once they's spliced. Black Dave 'll beat you black an' blue once he's got the drink in him.’

Jenny looked up with a shrinking terror in her eyes. Her whole thoughts and her whole heart were given almost unconsciously to Dave Anderson, and yet here was the only woman whose opinion she could ask prophesying sorrow and woe to her. She believed in Sal Carter, too, believed in her thoroughly; and indeed, according to her lights, Sal Carter had been good to her husband's lonely daughter.

‘He won't,’ she protested; ‘he wouldn't never hurt me. He's quite different to me to other folks.’

‘Oh, bless your sweet innocence! When you're his missus, you'll be a bit worse nor any other woman. He'll beat you, sure enough. You take my advice an' marry the sergeant. It's just the ways of men.’

‘Everybody don't.’

The sun was right across the counter now, and the row of tin pannikins thereon caught and reflected his rays like silver; and without the hum of busy life was louder than ever, as each man made preparations to end the day. Mrs. Carter evidently bethought herself that her brief spell of idleness was rapidly drawing to a close, and stretched herself along the flour-sacks her husband had vacated, to make the most of it.

‘Every man doesn't?’ she repeated. ‘Lord, yes! they do, if they can.’

‘Dad don't beat you.’

The other woman settled her arms comfortably behind her head as a support, and surveyed with complacency her feet shod with good substantial carpet-slippers somewhat down at heel.

‘No,’ she said dryly; ‘I rather reckon he don't. But he beat *your* mother, I'll bet. Come, didn't he, now?’

When her father found this wife too much for him, as not infrequently happened, he was wont to enlarge on the many virtues of his late helpmate — virtues which Jenny remembered had not been so present to his mind when she was with him. Whether she was a good wife to him or not, there was no doubt about it he had found occasion to beat her very often; and she hung her head as the remembrance of her mother's tired, tear-stained face rose up before her.

‘There, there!’ said her stepmother, not unkindly, ‘I didn't mean to vex you, Jen. Lord! in course he beat her. Like you she was, I guess; thought a sight o' him, an' he took it out o' her. Men is all alike if you let 'em. You take my advice, Jen; marry the sergeant, an' keep a tight hand over him.’

‘But — but — I hate him!’ repeated the girl helplessly.

‘Hate, pooh! 'tis next door to lovin' him, an' it's a mistake any way.’

‘How do you know?’ asked the girl timidly.

The subject interested her, as when did it not interest a woman?

‘Know — know! Well, I ain't lived in this world nigh on twenty-seven year without knowin' somethin' about it.’

‘Oh! but you don't — love dad.’

‘Sweet on him? Lord! no, never was. He'd a-led me a nice life if I'd a-been. He was mighty sweet on me when we got married; but I — Lord, no! I wasn't set on him no ways. What sort o' time 'd I ha' had if I had been?’

Thinking of her own mother, whom her childish recollections pictured as being ‘mighty set’ on the brute she called husband, Jenny acknowledged to herself that her stepmother was right. She certainly managed her husband better than her predecessor; but dumbly in the girl's untutored mind there struggled for utterance the thought that comes

to all good women once in their lives. Surely, surely there was something higher and better in this world than to take a husband she did not love, and *manage* him. But she was so ignorant she hardly knew how to put her feelings into words; she hardly understood the feelings herself.

'But — but,' she asked, and though Jenny bent low over the child in her arms, the woman who had tasted of life's bitterness to the very dregs read in the hot flush that mounted to her forehead of whom and what she was thinking, and pitied her from the bottom of her heart, 'ain't it no good ever to be set on a man? Not when he's mighty bad on you?' There was a wistful ring in her voice. For one man she would have given all she possessed, her very life; and was it to be of no avail? 'Ain't it no good?'

'Well, Jen,' and there was a gentleness in Sal Carter's voice none would have given her credit for, 'honour bright, I don't think it is. When a man's set on a gal, he jest lays right down and she tramps over him; and when a woman's set on a man, well, 'tis t'other way about. 'Tain't right, somehow, but so it is.'

'But sometimes,' hazarded the girl, 'they're set on each other.'

'Never more'n a week — no, a day at most. Then one gets the upper hand, and t'other goes to the wall. Don't you go to the wall, Jen; you marry the sergeant.'

The girl looked down at the sleeping child in her arms, and passed her hand tenderly over its little face. Tears gathered slowly in her eyes, hung for a moment on her long lashes, and fell on to her sunburned cheeks. Was the world so hard a place to live in as all this? Was this woman right? It had been her mother's experience; it was this woman's experience. Must it be hers, too?

'I'd work my fingers to the bone to make him happy,' she sighed.

'You bet you would, an' then he wouldn't be happy, if you mean Black Dave. Give over thinkin' about him, Jen; he ain't worth it.'

Sal Carter dropped her head back on the flour-sacks, and let her arms fall limply down beside her. A softened look crept over the bold handsome face, and the dark eyes looked sadly out of the doorway. Somewhere in her life, too, there was a tender memory. She, too, had been a girl like this one; not always had she thought to be Buck Carter's wife, content to rule her husband and keep a grog shanty on a diggings camp. A cricket hidden under the earthen floor called shrilly to his mate, and another answered from a few feet distant; the whole place was filled with the sound, and Mrs. Carter listened intently. Her eyes wandered to the row of tin pannikins, and their brightness, as the sunlight fell on them, dazzled her eyes. A row of pannikins in a low public-house; she had been accustomed to them all her life; but she, too, had hoped for better things.

'Hark to the crickets, Jen. My father used to say if you listened and listened, an' they both stopped at once, you'd have your wish, maybe.'

‘There, they’ve stopped, an’ I wished. Will I get it?’

‘Maybe, specially if you wished for Black Dave. Oh, Jenny, Jenny! give over thinkin’ about him. He ain’t no good, deed an’ deed he ain’t.’ Jenny raised her head angrily. ‘There, there!’ said her stepmother soothingly, ‘you an’ me mustn’t quarrel, must we? Look here’ — she rose up, and, crossing over, put her hand kindly on the girl’s shoulder — ‘Jenny, you won’t mind telling me — are you mighty set on that chap?’

The girl raised her face for a moment, and the other woman saw that her eyes were swimming with tears; then she caught at her skirts with one hand, and hiding her face in them, burst out sobbing.

‘I can’t help it, I can’t help it! an’, Sal, Sal, he ain’t so bad, ‘deed he ain’t; an’ he says I’m all he’s got.’

Her stepmother stroked her hair with no ungentle hand.

‘Poor lass! I’m main sorry for you; but, Jenny, it’s truth I’m telling you. Don’t ye be trustin’ him too far. ‘Tain’t good for any man, least of all Black Dave. I’m frightened for you sometimes out on the hills at night. Don’t you trust him, Jenny.’

But the girl sobbed on; what for she could hardly have told herself. Black Dave filled all her heart, Black Dave was all the world to her; but the greatness of her love did not prevent misgivings from arising, and this well-meant advice did not tend to calm her. If this man was not all her fancy painted him, then indeed was the world a blank to her.

‘So — so it’s as bad as that. Will he marry you, Jenny?’

‘I — I don’t know,’ sobbed the girl. ‘He didn’t never say. He ain’t got no place to take me to, on’y a bit of a bark hut in the gully there.’

‘And when a man wants a girl he makes shift to get some sort o’ a place to take her to,’ said the other woman thoughtfully, winding a lock of the yellow hair round her fingers. ‘Tisn’t as if you’d been kept so mighty fine you couldn’t stand roughin’ it a bit;’ and she looked round at their rough surroundings. ‘Take my advice, Jenny, he’s foolin’ ye, an’ if I was you I’d have naught to do with him.’

‘If you was me, Sal’ — and Jenny in her agitation pressed the baby so close to her breast that he stirred uneasily in his sleep, and she had to rock herself backwards and forwards till he was quiet again — ‘if you was me, you’d just love him ever so, an’ long an’ long fit to break your heart. Sal, Sal, don’t a man *never* want a woman like that?’

‘Oh, whiles, if he can’t get her; once he gets her, it sorter wears off. That’s why I’m wantin’ you to have the trooper; he wants you bad, Jenny. And — and, Jenny, he’s respectable, mighty respectable. I dunno how ‘tis, but in the end I’m thinking it pays to be respectable.’

‘An’ on’y yesterday,’ sobbed Jenny, ‘you was tellin’ me of your sister Nan, the one as married a trooper down Deep Creek way on Murderer’s Flat. She runned away with Bullocky Charlie, an’ — an’ you said she was

a long sight happier for all she never went to church with him.'

'I clean forgot her,' said Mrs. Carter dubiously; 'but then, she didn't go much on Charlie, neither. She was drove to it, she was, and Charlie was main set on her. An' she ain't over-happy, neither, though he is good to her. Don't you ever go with a man, Jen, as ain't pretty nigh mad after you; if he ain't that before he won't be afterwards, you can bet.'

The girl drew a long sobbing breath.

'Sometimes Dave's mad for me.'

'Oh, whiles, when you're by. But, Jenny, you mark my words: you're too fond o' him to get any good out of him if he was the best man in the world, and we know he ain't that.'

Jenny hid her face in her stepmother's skirt again. The world's ways were cruelly hard as expounded by this teacher, and, worst of all, she had not lived with this woman for the last five years without knowing that she wished her well. So, like many another who can find more words to express her pain, Jenny put her face down and sobbed on helplessly. The ways of the world were too much for her. Was there no comfort anywhere? was it of no avail to be honest and true?

Mrs. Carter answered her unspoken question.

'Jest about your age I was when Ben Higgins — Fly-away Ben they called him — came makin' up to me. Handsome! there was a handsome man for you, if you like, with hair the colour of that rope in the corner there, and eyes as blue as them new chiny plates in the kitchen. But he didn't take my fancy at first, the other girls thought too much of him, an', when he saw that, nothin' would do but he must have me, an', for all I held my head so high, I gave in after a little. Lord, Lord, I was that happy, never thinkin' I'd end up nursin' Buck Carter's brats for him away out here in the ranges! An' then the minit I began to look for his comin' it seemed he began to cool off.'

The girl moaned a little.

'One day hot an' mad after me, the next just as cool as you please. Oh, Lord, Jen, it pretty nigh broke my heart! And then he got sick, an' me slavin' to look after him, though there was but the shadow of a promise between us. They hunched their shoulders an' laughed, the men did, those days, when they see me goin' by, thinkin' of nought but that my boy might die. If he had — oh, if he had' (the woman's voice rose almost to a wail), 'I'd ha' been a better woman this day, mebbe; but he didn't. He got well, an' swore there warn't nobody in this world like his Sal, an' he wouldn't never forget it. But the days went on, an' one day he was hot — for all the men wanted me, but not as much as at first, because they counted I sorter belonged to Fly-away Ben — and then, again, he was cold; I couldn't ha' told how, but he raised up a kinder wall between us. And then I heard as he was after another girl; an' I asked him, an' he said Mag Smith wasn't nothin' to him. An' I was that happy till I seed 'em

down by the creek that very night. I was off my head with the shame of it, I think. An' I took a knife to him next time I came across him; but he was stronger nor me. Besides, hadn't I nursed him when I thought he was dyin', an' how could I hurt him? But he just laughed at what I said. He wasn't worth thinkin' about, says he, which was true enough, and I went out heart broke, Jenny. It was like kickin' agin a brick wall. An' your father come along, an' I took him, an' — an' — — There's the baby wakin', Jenny. Give him to his mammy. Well, there's always the childer, thank God, though whiles I'm thinkin' they're a plague!

The girl gave the baby to his mother, and drew her hand across her aching eyes.

She was fond of her stepmother, and, not thinking much of her father, she had often wondered how so good-looking a woman had come to marry him.

So that was the story. And would a like fate be hers? No, no, a thousand times no!

Yet deep down in her heart she knew there was some truth in what her stepmother was saying — some truth, deny it as she would, in the lesson she tried to teach. Her simple language held no words in which she could show her love for this man they called Black Dave, no words to show why it seemed to her that love must needs be all-embracing, must demand nothing in return. Before her the lives of the only two women she had known intimately stretched out in their dreary hopeless length, and dumbly, with all her strength, her soul protested against a like fate for herself. In all the busy, teeming life around her, was there no man would make the woman who loved him truly happy? Surely all the world was not bad.

She drooped her head drearily again, for in all the world there was but one face for her, and already doubt was creeping in on her first bliss.

The woman beside her put the baby to her breast, and found comfort in the little helpless hands that wandered aimlessly across her bosom.

'Jenny,' she began, 'you think I'm that hard, but — —'

A man in a red shirt and moleskin trousers all stained with yellow clay rushed in.

'Give us a drink, missus, quick! Lord sakes! you don't mean to say you haven't heard? Someone's shot German Max over there on the track just on the rise of the hill! His bullocks are strayin' round there still.'

Jenny started to her feet.

'Who?' asked Mrs. Carter, 'who?'

'Who? Well,' with a half-glance at Jenny's scared face, 'they do say Black Anderson had a hand in it, and I'll take my colonial oath they ain't far out.'

Chapter III

The Murder of German Max.

*'Heart of man — oh heart of putty! Had I gone by Kakahutti,
On the old Hill-road and rutty, I had 'scaped that fatal car;
But his fortune each must bide by, so I watched the milestones glide by.
To 'You call on her to-morrow!'" — fugue with cymbals by the bar —
"You must call on her to-morrow" — post-horn gallop by the bar.'*

'Departmental Ditties.' Rudyard Kipling.

WHEN he left the Lucky Digger, the sergeant rode slowly along the rough track that wound its way among the claims and diggers' huts, and did duty for main road to Melbourne. It was, in fact, the main road to Melbourne, for in those days shire councils were not, and the roads were marked out only by the passing of the mail-coach and the bullock-drays that took stores up country. The sun was sinking behind the ranges. Already the tents and huts were throwing long shadows across the track, whilst at the doors sat the inmates, some enjoying a pipe, but most engaged in preparing their evening meal. The open-air fires, with the tin billy hung over them, added to the heat of the day; but the men tending them paid no attention to the trooper as he passed.

In those days there was a good deal of friction between the police and the diggers, and in any case Sergeant Sells was not the sort of man to have been popular; he passed on among them in silence, and for greeting received only silent scowls. They were men of all nations under the sun, and it was a very babel of tongues that rose on the evening air. Here was a swarthy undersized little Spaniard; there a tall fair-haired Swede, and beside him a Shetlander, in speech and face almost his brother; French and Italians and Germans, and men from the British Isles; nor were there wanting men from Africa and Asia, slight and slender Hindoos and burly negroes; but here on Deadman's the Chinaman had not as yet found a footing, perhaps because the neighbouring field of the Packhorse just across the ranges was peculiarly his own property. About six months previously the roughs and bad lots of the camp had made a desperate endeavour to oust the aliens, but Commissioner Ruthven had ridden over them with a high hand, and the Chinamen were confirmed in their rights, and consequently had thought it not worth while to cross the range.

Indeed, any attempts to immigrate were viewed with disfavour by those already established at Deadman's.

At first, undoubtedly, their absence was a loss to the community, for the Chinaman, as a rule, when he found that digging did not bring fortune, turned his attention to other and surer, if slower, means of gaining a livelihood. Wherever there was a little water to be got, the Chinamen started a vegetable garden, and in camps where men lived from week's end to week's end on mutton and damper, this was an untold boon. The diggers abused the Chinamen, but bought their cabbages all the same, and 'John' accumulated a competency far more quickly, as a rule, than the men among whom he lived a despised alien.

But at Deadman's there were no Chinamen, and the track across the ranges from the Packhorse bore so evil a reputation that, though it was only five miles as the crow flies, no Chinaman would venture along it. So for the first few weeks of its existence the camp went without vegetables. Then an old German settler, living a few miles off, at the foot of a ridge of hills by the Wooragee Creek, dug up some acres of his fertile pastureland, turned the course of the creek aside to irrigate it, and found in his cabbage-garden a veritable gold-mine. Twice a week his bullock-dray, laden with cabbages, cauliflowers, beans, potatoes, and all sorts of garden produce, creaked slowly down the dusty track to the diggers' camp, where cabbages were worth in those days nearly three shillings apiece and a cauliflower twice as much. Only a lucky digger could afford to buy; but money come by lightly went lightly, and the digger was not ungenerous: he that could afford such luxuries gave to his neighbour who could not.

Anyhow, German Max's dray came down the track regularly every Monday and Thursday well laden, and returned in the evening empty. Everybody knew that the old man trudging along beside his bullocks, swearing at them in broken English — for it is a well-known fact that a well-regulated Australian bullock understands only English, and then only when it is interlarded with curse-words of the warmest description — had the chamois leather bag at his belt full to overflowing with gold dust and small nuggets. Always he followed the same routine, cleared his dray about three o'clock, went down to the Lucky Digger for a drink, and started homewards about four. Sergeant Sells thought about him as he noted the marks of his wheels on the track in front of him. Wheeled vehicles were scarce in those days, and the deep ruts reminded him of old Max.

How pleasant it must be to live among the hills, far away from the contamination and filth of the camp! If — if he could take Jenny to a place like that — so his thoughts wandered — what greater happiness? They two alone, just they two! If he could teach those soft brown eyes to look tenderly at him, could teach her and train her and show her all that

she lacked; if he could only have her all to himself! The longing grew and grew as he rode slowly along. The very hopelessness of it all made him drive his long spurs savagely into the mare till she reared with pain.

‘So, good mare, so, so!’

He bent forward in his saddle to pat her neck and soothe her, and his eye caught sight of a ripe red cherry lying in the dust of the roadway. A nugget would have astonished him less, and muttering to himself that it must have fallen from the old German's dray, he slipped from his horse and picked it up.

The sergeant stood there for a moment looking at the fruit as it lay in his hand. All around him men were firing off rifles and pistols, to clean and reload them for the coming night; the heat and dust and noise of the rough camp were near at hand. Yet the touch of the fruit took him back to his old home in the quiet English village, to the days before he went for a soldier, when he wooed Farmer Goodchap's pretty daughter in her father's orchard. How pretty she was — Jenny Goodchap — something like this Jenny, and, like this Jenny, too, she would have nothing to say to him! He wondered, would his life have been different if she had? How was it, how was it? He was fairly good-looking, he had borne a good character always, and yet twice in his life had he set his heart on women who would have naught to do with him. He had seen other men sought by women, not once or twice, but twenty times, whilst he — whilst — Once in his youth, and now again in his middle age, he had longed for a woman with all his soul, and the result had been the same.

He mounted his horse again with a heavy sigh, in which once more he renounced Jenny Carter for ever, and even as he did so the thought came to him that he would ride after the old German and see if he could get him to bring a small basket of ripe red cherries next Monday. They would cost him something, he knew; but his pay was good and his expenses light, and they would make a dainty present for Jenny. He pictured to himself the pleasure in her dark eyes when he should give her the fruit, and surely — surely there would be one kindly gleam in those brown eyes for him? So he quickened the mare's pace till a turn in the track took him quite beyond the camp.

The tents and huts and claims and windlasses were left behind him now, and the bracken and messmate grew right to the edge of the track. On the opposite hillside he could see the police camp quite plainly, and though the diggers' camp itself was hidden from view, the snapping of the firearms, the shouts and songs of the men, even their voices in conversation, were plainly to be heard on the still evening air. Then the creak, creak of the springless bullock-dray broke in, and he listened to hear the old man's voice swearing at his bullocks. He would order his cherries now, and the close-fisted old chap might charge what he pleased so long as he brought them sweet and fresh for Monday.

The sergeant was quite in love with the idea of buying the cherries, and he hardly noticed the man who came out of the scrub and stood for a moment in the middle of the track right ahead of him. He was holding in his hand a small leathern bag such as miners put their gold-dust and small nuggets in, and was just drawing a string tight round the top as the trooper rode up.

‘Good-evening,’ said the sergeant civilly enough.

The other started as if taken by surprise, and answered the greeting sullenly. He was a big black-bearded man, with a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes, and the sergeant saw it was his successful rival, Black Anderson.

Anderson's presence there hardly surprised him, for he knew that the man had a claim a little beyond the camp, out among the ranges here — a poor enough claim, too, report said, and, indeed, since he was more than two miles from the creek, the washing of his stuff was always a work of considerable difficulty.

But Black Anderson went his way unquestioned by any man. Whether or not his claim was poor, the bag he held in his hand was fairly well filled, although the face above it was scowling. The trooper sighed heavily as he rode on. What could she see in this man, what could she see in him?

And, like many another man who tries vainly to fathom the depths of a woman's heart, he found no answer to his question. Ahead of him he still heard the creak of the bullock-dray at irregular intervals, as if every now and then the bullocks had stopped altogether.

The trooper knew what that meant.

‘Drunk!’ he said to himself contemptuously. ‘Well, old Max is a careful old beggar; but he'll be robbed some fine day, if he takes to that sort of thing.’

And then the remembrance of the chamois leather bag he had seen in the hands of the man he had just passed flashed across his mind, and, with the suspiciousness natural not only to his calling, but to the man himself, he at once decided that the old German had been already robbed by Black Anderson, and began turning over in his own mind ways and means of bringing home to him the crime. He thought the task was a hopeless one, for of bags like German Max's there were hundreds on the gold-field, and gold-dust and nuggets are pretty much alike all the colonies over. It was not very likely the German had received payment in coin, and even if he had, that did not lessen the difficulty. There was no doubt about it, old Max would have to put up with his loss this time. It would probably be a lesson to him for the future, thought the trooper grimly.

Then he caught sight of the bullock-team off the track among the messmate, and quickened his horse's pace to a sharp trot. In a moment he

was up with the dray, and shouting to the bullocks. He saw at a glance it was as he had suspected; the bullocks were feeding along the track on such dried-up grass as remained after the hot summer days, and old Max was nowhere to be seen. Certainly he was not on the dray. There was nothing there, only some empty cases in which the vegetables had been packed; and two of those, he noticed, had fallen off and lay in the dust. The long bullock-whip was sticking straight up against a sapling, but nowhere could he see any signs of the dray's owner.

The bullocks had their heads towards home, but there were traces as if they had turned back in their tracks; and the sergeant rode on, looking to the right and left. About a hundred yards further on he found what he sought — just a little old man in moleskin trousers and grimy blue shirt, lying face downwards in the dusty track.

‘Come, old man,’ said the sergeant, dismounting and laying no gentle hand on his shoulder; ‘the evening's pretty hot, but I wouldn't waste time here if I was you.’

There was no response, and the trooper stirred him contemptuously with his foot. Then something in the stillness of the old man struck him, and he bent down hastily and turned him over on his back. The last rays of the setting sun fell on his face and on his clasped hands. It did not want the ghastly wound on the temple and the blood-stained gray hair to tell him the old German settler was dead.

‘So!’ He was accustomed to violent deaths, for brawls and fights were frequent on the gold-fields, and men were but too apt to count a man's life as of but little value; but there was something specially cruel and mean about this murder. Murdered the trooper could not doubt for a moment the German had been — murdered for the sake of the little chamois bag that hung at his belt. The bag was gone; but the old fellow's pistol, a past-fashioned thing of foreign make, was in its accustomed place. The poor old driver had been taken unawares; evidently not a thought of danger had troubled him a moment before, and even now, save for the ghastly wound in his right temple, he seemed to be sleeping calmly.

In Sergeant Sells' mind there was not a shadow of a doubt as to who had done this thing. It was a mean, low, cruel crime, and Black Anderson was generally counted a dare-devil sort of fellow who would stick at nothing, but not, indeed, as one who would shoot a fellow-creature down for the sake of a handful of gold-dust. Yet he had met Anderson there, on the track, with a bag such as the old German possessed in his hand, not a quarter of a mile away. They were quite close to the camp; no one else was about. His was the hand that must have fired the shot. It was an easy thing to do — quite easy; no one would notice a single isolated shot when pistols were popping off all round, and the man had been killed at once; there could have been no outcry. The murderer had simply stooped

and taken the little bag, and walked quietly away. What was there to prevent him? and what was there to prevent him getting clean away with his booty?

The trooper rapidly turned things over in his mind, as he hitched his horse to a sapling and went after the bullocks. Black Anderson, of course, had done it; but could he convict him of the crime?

And, then, the thought again returned, Black Anderson was not worthy of Jenny. Even the merest outsider would be justified in stepping in and putting a stop to all intercourse between an innocent girl — for innocent she was, he was convinced, in spite of her dubious surroundings — and such a man. Round and round in a circle he reasoned, as he tried to get the refractory bullocks back into the track again. He cooeied loudly for assistance, but no one took any notice, though his shouts must have been plainly heard down in the camp below.

He would save the girl at any cost. It was not of himself he was thinking — not of himself for one moment, but of the helpless girl. He would do the same for any woman, no matter whether she were anything to him or not.

The bullocks did not know his voice, but at length he got them back into the track by dint of much shouting. Half dragging, half carrying, the dead body, he put it on the dray; and, walking beside the team, his own horse fastened behind the dray, he turned to Deadman's Creek.

Once on the ridge where the road turned towards the creek, they were plainly visible to the whole camp. The two big blue bullocks in front were as well known as the old German himself, and curiosity would have been excited had he come back in any case at that hour; but when it was seen that the sergeant of police was driving the team — driving very badly, for that matter — a crowd collected in a moment, and the news ran through the camp like wildfire. More expert hands, for it requires a long apprenticeship to drive a bullock team properly, took charge of the team, the new driver merely remarking, as the sergeant remounted his horse:

‘Where to, boss?’

‘The Lucky Digger,’ said he laconically.

Then he beckoned to a trooper he saw dismounted among the crowd.

‘Simpson,’ he said, ‘have you seen Black Anderson about? I want you to keep an eye on him if you can. Mind you, I don't say he did it; but I came across him with a little leather bag in his hand just before I hit on this poor old beggar there. It looks mighty queer; he never answered my cooeys, though he hadn't been gone out of my sight five minutes, and must have heard them.’

‘Looks mighty queer, sergeant,’ said the man reflectively. ‘No; I haven't seen him, though I did hear tell he was over at the Packhorse this day; but likely as not 'tain't true. I didn't think, though, as he was that

sort, somehow. What are you going to do now?’

‘Isn't the Commissioner back yet?’

‘No. He won't be back till eleven.’

‘Oh, well, it can't be helped. Take the body to the pub, and he can hold an inquest to-morrow; but there won't be much to tell, any way.’

The troopers spoke aside; but it may be that the sergeant was not over-anxious to hide his views, and in a moment it spread through the crowd like wildfire that Black Anderson had shot and robbed the old German; and it was then that a man ran ahead, and, bursting in on the two women in the bar of the Lucky Digger, told them the news.

Jenny started to her feet with a half-suppressed cry.

‘No, no,’ she cried, ‘ 'tain't true! You think I don't know!’

Chapter IV

At the Lucky Digger.

'Hostess! clap to the doors: watch to-night, pray to-morrow.'

King Henry IV., 11. 4.

THE bar was full in a second.

Then the creaking dray stopped right opposite, and the crowd made a lane, up which the sergeant walked. He would not look, but even though it was dark he was painfully conscious of Jenny's eyes being fixed on him with an imploring, shrinking gaze, as if she thought her lover's fate lay in his hands. There was a very babel of tongues around, but he seemed only to hear the long sobbing breath she drew as he went up to her stepmother.

'Old German Max has been shot, missus,' he said quietly. 'The inquest must be held here.'

'All right.' Mrs. Carter spoke as if it were an everyday occurrence hardly worthy of note, perhaps because she saw the look of dread and terror deepening on her stepdaughter's face. 'You'll have to put the poor old chap in the shed at the back though, sergeant. We're chock full here.'

Then she turned to Jenny.

'Come, bustle up there, Jen! Don't look as scart as if all your belongin's had been killed. The old German weren't nothin' to you.'

'He warn't up to much, anyhow, miss,' said Pard Derrick confidentially. 'There's lots as good as him about, though, mind you, I'm not sayin' as the poor old beggar ever done any harm, even though he were a no-account man. And somebody 'll swing for it, let's hope.'

Jenny seemed to be listening with all her ears, as through the thin walls of the bar they could plainly hear the sergeant giving directions for the disposal of the body. Then he came into the bar again, the diggers parting to let him pass, although they resented the calm air of authority which he assumed. He spoke a few words quietly to Mrs. Carter, while Pard Derrick expressed his views in an aside intended to reach the ears only of a chosen few.

'Says it was Black Anderson, does he? Much he knows about it! Who's the sergeant? Thinks a mighty lot of himself, he do; but I've seen better men than him swapped for sore-eyed dogs up where I come from!' and the men next him laughed.

Not for one moment had Jenny believed her lover guilty, but she had an exalted idea of the power of the police, and she feared for him. If they had a down on a man, she knew well enough his career in a mining camp was apt to be brief, and she never stopped to consider that frequently this was decidedly for the public good. Dimly — for hardly could she shape her own thoughts — the fear was growing on her that in some indefinable way, guilty or not guilty (and most firmly did she believe in his innocence), Black Anderson would suffer for this. The sergeant loved her: she would have been less than woman had she not known that; and — and would he not be likely to take every advantage that he could over a rival? Her code of honour was not high — how, indeed, should it be? — and now she felt that the sergeant would take advantage of this accusation to drive Dave out of the camp. Whether or not he believed the charge himself she did not stop to question, but that he would take advantage of it she did not for a moment doubt. She was as certain as if he had told her so that he would hound Dave Anderson down to the very gallows. He would see but one side of the case, and it would be her fault — hers — hers.

Jenny set no value upon herself; she knew nothing of her own charms, even as the only girl on the field; but she did know — she could not help knowing — that out of all the camp two men had singled her out in a manner different from the others who haunted the bar, and the fear she had always felt of the sergeant was intensified tenfold as she thought of Black Dave in his power.

The jeering remarks of the men did not tend to reassure her, for often enough had she seen the bar cleared by the police, and she saw plainly that, though they scowled openly, they only grumbled and jeered under their breath.

She could have wrung her hands and cried aloud in her fear and terror, which was all the worse to bear that as yet it had hardly taken definite form. If she could only see Black Anderson, and warn him! If she might hear from his own lips a confirmation of his innocence! Her head was aching, throbbing, and there was her stepmother nodding and beckoning to her to pour out a nobbler for the sergeant, and to attend to the other men waiting round.

‘Upon my word!’ said Mrs. Carter, bustling round, ‘it’s enough to wear my life out! Look sharp, Jenny, there! Put the kid down on the flour-sack. He’ll be good; if he won’t, he mun just cry. Carter! Carter! Where the dickens *have* that man got to?’

Very reluctantly the girl laid down her charge, who raised a shrill protest on the spot, and was promptly picked up by Pard Derrick, to whom a baby was an agreeable novelty.

‘Lord!’ said he, ‘makes me feel kinder young again’ — he certainly wasn’t nearly thirty — ‘to hear a babby cry. A man sorter gets a kinder

craving to see a woman when he ain't seen one for a long while, and I think mysel' it does a fellow good to see a kiddie now and again — eh, missus?'

'I dunno. Seems to me I see a deal too much on 'em. Here, Jenny, Jenny, what are you at? You might give the sergeant a clean tumbler, any way; the pannikins aren't for the likes of him!'

Very sullenly she poured out a nobbler of brandy, and the trooper looked at her attentively with an air of proprietorship, it seemed to her, though she could not raise her eyes, and only saw him through her long yellow lashes. And in very truth the sergeant did feel more sure of her, and with the surety again rose the doubts. She stood there before him — he in his spick-and-span neatness, she untidy, unkempt — just what she was, a girl behind a low public-house bar. The men around were making use of foul language, such as made him shudder with a shame she did not feel. And this was the woman he would make his wife? No, no, a thousand times no! Then she raised her soft eyes and smiled at the baby crowing in its rough nurse's arms — soft, sweet, tender eyes, worth a prince's ransom, and he swore an oath — and meant to keep it — that if she could be no wife of his, to no other man should she belong while he stood by. Black Anderson was in his power; he had no compunctions now, no doubts whatever, and he would take care to keep those two apart. He feared no other man; he knew they counted for nothing in Jenny Carter's eyes. They never entered her thoughts. Like her stepmother, he was inclined to think that if hate was not love, it was, at least, nearer akin to it than utter indifference. And he would make her care for him.

Mrs. Carter joined in the talk and laughter that went on in spite of the dead man lying so close; his presence did not lower one voice nor hush one single laugh.

Only Jenny was silent; her habitual quiet was deepened by fear and anxiety for the man she cared for, not by any awe of the man cut off so suddenly in the midst of life. Sergeant Sells sipped slowly at his nobbler, and there grew a longing in him to hear Jenny's voice, to make her speak. He was not a man to whom conversation came easily at any time, and in the presence of this girl he was tongue-tied. The men around the bar heartily wished him gone: his presence put a restraint upon them; and the girl he never took his eyes off wished him gone: it seemed to her excited imagination he was reading her very thoughts.

Still he lingered there, leaning over the counter just in front of her, slowly shaking round and round the few drops that remained at the bottom of his tumbler. What would he not have given for a ready tongue — the power to make a remark lightly, to say something casually that should make her raise those wonderful eyes of hers once again! But no words would come, and he could not make up his mind to leave her.

He began to grow angry with himself, and to include Jenny in his anger. He was making a fool of himself, and it was her fault. What was he to say? The longer he kept silence, the more difficult it grew to break it, and he felt that the men around him were laughing in their sleeves. He made a desperate attempt.

‘Miss Jenny!’ and his own voice sounded strange in his ears, and he wished he had kept silence. Jenny turned her face silently towards him, and even then did not raise her eyes. ‘Miss Jenny, I — I — do you like cherries?’

There was a suppressed murmur that to the trooper's sensitive ears sounded suspiciously like laughter; but, having begun, he went doggedly on. Why should these men laugh because he addressed a simple query like that to a girl?

She did not answer, only stared stupidly at the leather strap of his cartouche-box.

Somebody had lighted a small oil-lamp; it burned dimly in the heated atmosphere, making, with its reek of oil, the place ten times as stifling as before, as the tin pannikins and the trooper's accoutrements caught and reflected the bright spot of light.

‘Do you like cherries?’ asked the sergeant again, as if it were a matter of life and death to which he must have an answer — ‘do you?’ And, in spite of himself, his thoughts went back to Farmer Goodchap's orchard and the long-forgotten days of his youth, when once before he had asked that question.

The soft, sweet wind of an English summer had rustled the leaves overhead, had touched his forehead with its cool breath, had tossed the fair hair of the girl beside him till it fell over his shoulder. He had felt himself a fool then, and now nearly a quarter of a century had gone by and he was asking the self-same question, with the same — the same — — Pooh! that was a boy's love. This — this was something stronger, better — a thousand times more foolish. It was simple madness to think of this girl, and yet he felt he could not go without making her look at him just once more.

‘Jen!’ her stepmother spoke sharply, ‘can't you answer a civil question?’

‘Yes’ — the girl spoke with a slow drawl, which, whatever it might sound in other ears, had a charm for the sergeant; ‘I like 'em well enough.’

‘Because I'm going over to Wooragee to-morrow, and — and I'd like to bring you a basket.’

It seemed churlish even to the girl to refuse his offering; but the other men were listening, and it seemed to her that, if she accepted this present, she would bring herself a step nearer to the man she feared and hated.

He was looking at her, devouring her with his eyes.

‘Don't,’ she said sullenly; ‘I don't want none of your cherries.’

There was a jeering laugh from someone behind him, someone who was well pleased to see the trooper snubbed, and he turned with an oath and flung his tumbler down on the counter with such force it broke into pieces, and the few remaining drops of the brandy were spilt on the floor. Then, without another word, he pushed aside the crowd, made his way outside, and was lost in the gathering darkness.

In the bar Pard Derrick tossed the baby high over his head.

‘The old cuss!’ he remarked; ‘but I guess that's rather up his shirt, ain't it, youngster? Now, which of you chaps is going to stand Sam to celebrate this great occasion?’

Chapter V

A Message from Dave.

‘For a woman, love is the supreme authority — that which judges the rest and decides what is good or evil.’
— Amiel's Journal.

THE languid young man of to-day who leans wearily against the wall of the ball-room, as if the last thing in the world he contemplated was dancing, would be surprised at the energy put into a dance at a public-house on the gold-fields forty years ago. True, many of the dancers belonged to a different rank of society to the frequenters of a ball-room; but there was a sprinkling of all sorts, and the spirit was worthy of note with which men danced with each other for partners, for Jenny and her stepmother were the only women available. The landlord stood behind the counter serving out drinks (at a price) to all who had the wherewithal to pay for them; Sailor Joe, mounted on a cask, fiddled with all his might; and Jenny and her stepmother were much sought after. Mrs. Carter tossed her head and danced with a will. If she were not a very happy woman, she, at least, had reached that stage when a woman has learned to take the good things that come in her way, looking neither backwards nor forwards. And Sal Carter liked admiration, loved the rude compliments her beauty drew forth, enjoyed the excitement of the dancing. Her past was behind her; her future — what could the future hold of good or ill for her? Her present — there was nothing in her present life that she should hesitate for a moment to forget. Therefore she cast care to the winds, and took the good that offered itself, and danced with a will.

Jenny danced too. Her father saw to that. Was she not one of the great attractions? for though only one man might have her at a time as a partner, still, all might hope for her, and those hopes, whether fulfilled or not, required a good deal of liquid sustenance.

The counter, with its shining array of pannikins and glasses, was drawn as much to one side as possible; the stores were piled up against the walls, and in the centre was a wide enough space for any who desired to jog to the music of Sailor Joe's fiddle.

Jenny was probably the only unwilling dancer there. The diggers, with

their hands on each other's shoulders, twirled each other round, shouting and singing in time to the music, till the dim light of two reeking oil-lamps showed the perspiration standing in beads on their hot faces; but Jenny found no pleasure in her enforced participation. None of the troopers from the police camp were there, and neither was Black Anderson. And she tormented herself fruitlessly with the fear that there might be some connection between this double void. Always silent, she was more silent than usual. No rude compliment brought the colour to her cheek; nothing any man could say to her would induce her to give more than monosyllabic replies to a direct question, and even direct questions she oftener than not left unanswered. How could she even pretend an interest in trivial matters when so much, it seemed to her, was at stake? If Dave Anderson would only come! An hour passed, and the fun grew fast and furious. Hotter and hotter and more stifling grew the atmosphere, till even Sal Carter herself suggested to a select circle of admirers that it would be as well to go outside for a brief space. Sailor Joe, too, had refreshed so often and so copiously there seemed some prospect of the music becoming disabled altogether; indeed, towards the end of the evening, Joe always became piously inclined, and hymn-tunes began to mingle with waltz and polka, until it was somewhat difficult to distinguish 'Sun of my Soul' from 'Pop goes the Weasel.'

'Come on, Jenny,' said her stepmother as she passed, 'come on outside a bit. You look that white and washed out, like a bit of paper. Come on. The moon's gettin' up.'

The man beside her caught her by the arm.

'Come on,' he said. 'I guess it will be sorter less crowded outside. I likes to get my gal alone once in a way — eh, partner?'

But there was not much satisfaction for him when he did get her alone, for though he, chuckling at his own good luck, led her right away to the back of the building, she merely leaned up against the rough slab wall, and, with unheeding eyes, watched the fiery red moon rise up over the hills. Pard Derrick swore aloud in his vexation. It was one thing to have the girl whom all wanted in your arms, whirling her round in the bar before the envious eyes of all men; it was quite another to be here alone with her, a silent statue, who had thrown off all semblance of interest. He felt he was less than a stick or stone to this girl beside him. She did not even care whether he went or stayed; she was utterly indifferent.

The sound of the music came to them fitfully and in gusts, as if Sailor Joe, waking from a doze suddenly, had remembered his duties and had drawn his bow across the fiddle, only to be again overcome. But the men inside were hilariously jolly. The murder had lent a fillip to things generally; it gave them something to think about and talk about, and the bar of the Lucky Digger was doing a big trade. Personally Pard Derrick thought he would infinitely prefer to rejoin his mates, but there was some

amount of credit to be gained by being alone in the evening with the only girl on the field; therefore, seeing she would neither speak nor respond in any way to his advances, he slipped down on to the ground at her feet, prepared to await the issue of events.

At least it was not so hot as inside — a faint breeze had sprung up in the east — and the girl above him, with her absorbed, wistful face, was good to look at in the moonlight. He filled his pipe, and began to feel a certain satisfaction with things as they were. There was not another man in camp, he would swear, had gone so far with Buck Carter's daughter. Then, to his infinite surprise, when he had given up all hopes of such a thing, she looked him straight in the face and addressed him.

'Who done it?' she asked.

'Done what?'

He had for the moment quite forgotten the murder that was occupying all her thoughts.

'That — that!' She jerked her hand impatiently towards the shed wherein lay all that remained of the poor old German.

'Oh! potted old Max, you mean. I'm sure I don't know.'

'But — but — —'

'The sergeant says,' he said slowly, noting her anxious face the while, 'it was Black Dave Anderson, and he swears he'll swing for it.'

'It's a lie!'

Pard Derrick laughed. He would have something to tell the boys after all. No need to draw upon his imagination, and he repeated her statement with a few affirmatory adjectives calculated to strengthen it.

'It's a — — lie,' he said, and the girl stooped down and held out her hand to him. So startled and surprised was he at this unwonted display of feeling on Jenny Carter's part that the pipe dropped from between his teeth, and he rose to his feet and shook the outstretched hand warmly. 'It's a — — lie,' he repeated more warmly, for he was holding her hand now in both his own, 'and the camp's agoin' to stand by Dave, you can bet your life on that.'

'An', an' — she felt she could stand the anxiety no longer — 'where is Dave?'

Derrick dropped her hand. He wasn't over-particular, and holding a pretty girl's hand was rather pleasant than otherwise, but to be used so much as a means to an end was more than even he could stand, and he sat down on the ground again.

'Where *is* Dave?' she asked piteously.

'Wal,' said Derrick with a short laugh, 'if *you* can't tell us that — —'

He paused, and his silence was more expressive than any words could have been. It seemed to the girl's excited imagination to confirm her worst fears. If he should think Black Dave guilty — if the camp should think him guilty! It might not have a high standard of morality, it might

not count human life very valuable — they would have no dealings with the police as a rule; but for its own sake it would see that a foul, cold-blooded murder like this did not go unpunished. If only the camp thought Black Dave had done it, then for once in their lives the diggers and the police would be at one, and he would swing for it. Dimly Jenny realized this — realized that by her very anxiety she might be putting the first strands of the rope around his neck; and she tried, after a bungling fashion, to undo what she had already done.

‘He was sayin’ — she hesitated — ‘was sayin’ he might be goin’ over to the Packhorse to-night; but I thought — I thought — maybe — — ’

‘Don’t you be makin’ excuses to me, Jenny,’ said Pard Derrick roughly. ‘If you thought an’ thought he was over at the Packhorse, what the — — ‘s he a-doin’ skulkin’ agin’ the wall over there?’

‘Where? Where?’

Jenny started forward and saw a figure of a man, hardly *skulking*, as the other in his sudden anger had described him, but coming cautiously out of the shadow of the buildings.

In a moment Jenny forgot her partner’s presence. The man she had been waiting for all the evening had come at last, and she started forward.

‘Oh, Dave, Dave!’

Pard Derrick rose up and shook himself solemnly. Somehow he didn’t feel quite so pleased with himself as he had done a very short while ago, nor quite so certain of Black Anderson’s innocence. As for his companion, she had forgotten Derrick’s very existence, and was standing in the brilliant moonlight with her hands half stretched out to the man before her. The gladness and love in her face made him turn away and swear under his breath.

Black Anderson was a tall man with a heavy black beard, but his face, with a slouch hat drawn down over it, was completely in shadow. He was a powerfully built man, and Derrick had no doubt of his identity, even if the girl’s face had not told him who he was. He thoroughly realized that two was company, three none; but as he turned his back, the newcomer, utterly ignoring the woman who had been longing for him all the evening, called to him gruffly:

‘Hullo, Pard, old boy! Where are you off to? What’s the news?’

The girl dropped her hands and turned wearily back to the wall again, while Derrick paused and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He had been angry a moment ago because he thought Anderson would find him one too many; now he was unreasonably angry because he had quietly rejected the girl’s advances, and was appealing to him for news.

He swore an oath that may not be repeated here, and said anything but graciously:

‘News? Well, I guess you’ve made all the news about these parts. They’re talkin’ about it still inside there.’

'Me!' And he called down blessings in no measured terms on Pard Derrick's eyes and various other organs. 'What have I been. doing?'

'Oh, nothin'; been a little too free with that blanky revolver of yours, that's all. Gammon you don't know about old Max, when the camp's just ringin' with it!'

'I don't, then,' said the other shortly. 'Ain't you going to enlighten me?'

'I'll see you d — — d first,' said his late defender irately. 'Ask your gal, there;' and he turned away and went back to the bar more than half convinced that Black Anderson's hand, and no other, had fired the fatal shot.

How much Jenny's attitude had had to do with his belief, he did not stop to ask himself, but much as he hated Sergeant Sells, as he entered the bar he felt himself far more in sympathy with him than with his late companion and friend, Dave Anderson.

Chapter VI

Down by the Creek.

*'That is to say, in a casual way,
I slipped my arm around her;
With a kiss or two (which is nothing to you),
And ready to kiss I found her.'*
'Departmental Ditties.'

Rudyard Kipling.

LEFT alone, Anderson turned to the girl before him.

'Well, Jenny,' he said, in an aggrieved tone, 'ain't you got anything to say to a fellow?'

She came towards him, and put both her hands on his arms and looked up at him. The moonlight fell full on her, and showed him her face wet with tears. It was a sweet face, too, and full of love for him. He softened for a moment, and, stooping, drew her towards him and kissed her. She put one arm round his neck, and with the other tenderly stroked his face — so tenderly and fondly, as she might have touched the baby she had been nursing in the afternoon, but with a world more of love and pity in her touch. They said he had done murder; they might — what might they not do with him? She had no words to express her love, and her pity, and her anxiety; she could only dumbly touch his face as she would that of the helpless baby.

'What is it, dear?' he asked more gently. 'You've been crying!'

'Old Max is shot, an', an' — —'

'Well, what if he is? Old Max warn't much account, any way. Plenty more as good as him knocking around.'

'Yes; but — but they're sayin' — —'

'What?'

'That you done it. An' I'm afeard, oh, I'm afeard!'

'I ain't had no hand in the darned business,' said Anderson savagely, 'though I ain't had no cause to love old Max. *You* don't think that of me, Jen?'

'No, no, never — not never! But I'm afeard, I'm afeard the sergeant — —'

He pushed her from him roughly.

‘That's your doing,’ he said with an oath. ‘Why in the devil's name did I have any truck with a woman?’

‘Oh, Dave, Dave!’ she moaned; ‘oh, Dave, it ain't my fault, it ain't indeed! I never had naught to do with the sergeant. I — I hate him, 'deed I do!’

‘He's for ever hanging round you — leaning over the bar there looking at you. A man don't do that for naught, surely.’

‘I ain't done nothin’,’ she said — ‘I ain't. I never speak to him. Lots of others come to the bar.’

‘Not like him. You know that yourself, Jen. A man like that don't hang round a woman for nothing.’

Poor Jenny! The world had gone wrong with the man she loved, and he selfishly visited his grievances on the woman who loved him, sure that no other would feel it as she did. Not that Dave did not love her after his own fashion, but, as her stepmother had warned Jenny, his love was a selfish love, and no consideration for her entered into his thoughts.

It was pleasant to have this girl, the only girl for miles, too, looking into his face adoringly, hanging on his words, ready, he felt, to lay down her life for him. He liked to hold her in his arms, to feel that she was his alone; but he felt, too, that he must be a fine fellow to inspire this devotion. There were two thousand men on the field, and yet he had won this girl. Clearly the thought passed though his mind occasionally, and gave him a feeling of intense pleasure — he must be better than the rest of them.

But Anderson was a man who had had some little education, and the disquieting idea *would* cross his mind now and again that the girl was a fool; he himself had won her so easily, he was so convinced he could do what he liked with her, that he often thought she was not worth it all; the other men could surely not have tried to win her. He would have wearied of her long ago, had it not been that it was common talk on the camp that the sergeant of police was as keen on winning the girl as he himself was indifferent. He made Jenny suffer for that admiration; he never saw her without railing at Sergeant Sells, without taunting her and blaming her as if she were doing him a great wrong; but, nevertheless, deep down in his heart he knew that it was the unlucky trooper's barely disguised admiration that kept him by Jenny's side at all.

Anderson had always taken the lead among his comrades, had been first without much effort, had been counted a jolly, careless, daredevil sort of a fellow, whom men and women alike combined to spoil and make much of; and, deny it who will, it is not men such as these who make devoted lovers or are generous in their love. He counted the girl's love too much as a matter of course.

In the old country many a woman had loved Dave Anderson's handsome face, many bright eyes had been dim when he went away. It

was an old story to him. Much as Jenny loved him, he did not appreciate her love at its true worth. Love was his due; he had been accustomed to it all his life. In his heart he knew he had no cause for jealousy, but whenever he was out of temper he made Jenny's life a burden by railing at Sergeant Sells. All that a woman could do she did to convince him she never encouraged the trooper, never guessing, poor child — how could she? — that this was almost the only hold she had over the man she adored.

Now she hid her face on his shoulder and cried helplessly.

'I done all I could,' she sobbed. 'Don't be angered wi' me, Dave. I ha' been lookin' for you all the evenin'.'

'And you expect me to go in there, along with that God-forsaken lot, to swell the score in your drunken father's bar, Is'pose,' he said contemptuously.

She had not expected anything of the sort, and he knew it quite well; but a sudden disgust of his surroundings had taken possession of him, and he made the girl suffer for his fit of virtue. The arm he had round her was so limp and cold she could hardly have told it was there; her yellow hair was mingled with his dark beard, but he never stooped to touch the fair face that was so close to his own. She could not but feel his coldness; her stepmother's words of the afternoon were coming bitterly home to her.

Never had she flouted him, never spoken one unkind word to him, never — as far as in her power lay — given him cause for complaint; but to-night she had waited for him so long, yearned for him so hungrily, been so tender and pitiful over the accusation they had brought against him, that this cold reception was more than she could bear. Better be away, away, miles away, than in his arms, if he were like this! She drew herself away very slowly, for she hoped against hope that his arm would tighten with its old warmth and tenderness; but he let her go, and she stood for a moment and looked at him mournfully in the moonlight. She would have spoken, would have asked him why this was, but her heart was too full for words. She touched his arm lightly with her hand, then turned away towards the creek.

He looked at her in amazement. Never in all the course of their acquaintance had she left him of her own accord before, and his first thought was anger. She had brought him here, and now she was leaving him alone.

'Jenny!' he called, sure that she would come back at the sound of his voice; but there was no tenderness in it, only sharp anger.

She never turned her head. She said to herself that she could not stand being scolded any more, and she kept steadily on. He watched her for a moment. She was going along the creek; in a very few minutes she would be beyond the camp, out in the bush. Well, let her go. But if she

went, what was he to do with his evening?

He had come here expressly to see her. If he went into the bar, where the men were singing and shouting, they would jeer, and ask him if he had been flouted; besides — — Well, he would go after her! She was right out of sight now beyond the diggers' huts, and he heard sounds as if some of the hilarious party inside were coming round. They would find him alone. That decided him.

He made his way among the claims that lay at the back of the Lucky Digger, among the huts and windlasses, without difficulty, for in the clear white light everything was plainly visible. Making a short-cut along the narrow paths that wound among the holes, and were used for wheeling the barrow-loads of stuff down to the stream, there to be washed, Anderson reached the creek just as Jenny was disappearing into the bush on the other side. Here the hill rose up sharply from the water's edge; it was still virgin forest undisturbed by the hand of man. The creek came down out of the hills fresh and pure, and trickled over the rocks that served as stepping-stones, and also as the barrier beyond which no man, as yet, had searched for gold. Jenny had crossed the creek, and he just caught a glimpse of her dress moving among the tree-ferns in the gully down which it flowed. That gully was like fairyland on a night like this. Through the fronds of the tall tree-ferns and the clinging creepers came the brilliant moonlight, making deep dark shadows and patches of brilliant white light. It would have been possible to read print by the light of that midsummer moon.

Dave Anderson crossed the stepping-stones and plunged into the gully. He felt a better man away from the sights and sounds of the camp — tenderer, kinder, more thoughtful. Ahead of him he could see the girl pushing her way with down-bent head among the ferns and creepers, and he followed in her track. The sound of the trickling waters fell soothingly on his ears; the earthy smell of the plants, the rushes, and tall flowering plants, with gorgeous flowers, purple and pink, growing at the water's edge, was refreshingly cool on this hot still night; there was another scent in the air, too, a heavy indescribable perfume from some shrub or creeper that he could not identify, but it added to the charm. There was a little rustling underfoot as of small animals slipping away quietly, and overhead a little gray bear was crying plaintively. Then the figure on before him flung herself down on a log half covered with mosses and creepers, and, hiding her face in her hands, rocked herself backwards and forwards as if in pain. He was not exactly sorry for her, nor was he exactly flattered — too many women had loved him for that — but he felt softened and tender towards her, and he went quietly up to her and laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

'Jenny!'

She started with a cry of affright, and he saw the tears hanging on her

lashes.

‘Oh, Dave, Dave!’

She stretched out her hands, and he caught them in both his own. Then he drew her into his arms, and there was no coldness about him now.

‘How cruel you are, Jenny! How could you be so cruel!’

He meant to be tender and kind; but that was his way of relenting, to throw all the blame on her, and she saw nothing wrong in it. No matter what his words, his hand was stroking her hair, his arm was round her, and his bearded face was close against hers. What more did she want? He might rail as long as he pleased so long as he held her in his arms.

She made a little murmur of contentment, and he went on:

‘I come all the way over to see you, and you go straight away! Wasn't it cruel?’

She might have answered that the distance was not so very great — under two miles — and that most of the men on the field would have done more for her than that, but she did not. She was too thankful to feel his arms round her again to care what price she paid for it. She only nestled closer to him, and drew her hand tenderly down his face.

‘You don't love me a bit, I do believe.’

‘I do! I do!’

He kissed the ripe red lips so close to his own, and as she murmured softly and contentedly he kissed them again.

‘You don't like my kisses, Jen?’

For all answer she kissed his beard softly.

‘Do you, do you?’

She pushed him away from her for a moment, and stood apart, wringing her hands together, as one who vainly strives to give expression to a thought too deep for words, and he saw in the brilliant moonlight the traces of tears still on her cheeks and in her pretty eyes.

‘I do,’ she said — ‘I do; you know I do. If I was dead and you was to kiss me I should come back again.’

There was a sob in her voice that carried conviction of her earnestness had he needed it; but he needed none. He was sure as man could be of her love, and he made a step forward and took her in his arms again.

‘An' yet — an' yet,’ he said, ‘you thought I'd a hand in the shooting of the old German?’

‘No, no, never — not never!’

‘An' if I had, Jen — just s'posing I had?’

‘I'd love you all the same,’ she said, hiding her face on his shoulder.

‘I b'lieve you would. 'Pon my word,’ he said, with some wonder in his tone, ‘I b'lieve you would! They'd hang me then, Jen,’ he went on, harping on the same theme. ‘An' what 'd you do, then? Marry the sergeant?’

She shuddered, and made a movement of dissent.

‘What! Not the sergeant, who'd keep you like a lady up on the police camp there? Would you rather marry a poor devil like me, with only a miserable bark hut alongside his claim that don't hardly pay the license fee?’

He knew what her answer would be, but he put his hand beneath her chin and turned her face to his own.

‘Say “No,” Jen, if you want to. I'm only a poor devil of a beggar who they're all against. If you leave me — — ’

‘I love you,’ she said softly, but with some distress in her tone — why would he seem to doubt her love? — ‘there isn't nothin' I wouldn't do for you.’

‘I'm poor,’ he said — ‘poor as a bandicoot. Here's all I've got in the world!’ and he pulled out a small chamois leather bag full of gold-dust and small nuggets.

These little bags all bore a strong family resemblance to one another, but this one struck Jenny as specially familiar.

‘Why,’ she said on the spur of the moment, ‘it's just like old Max's bag!’

Black Anderson swore an angry oath.

‘You'll be saying I did it next!’ he said angrily; ‘ain't there hundreds of bags like this on the camp?’

‘Yes, yes. I didn't mean that, you know, you know’ — she was distressed as he was angry — ‘only it minded me of Max's. His had a join up the middle just like that.’

‘An' if it minds you it'll mind other folks,’ he said dubiously, twisting it round and round in his hand.

‘That don't matter,’ she said, conscious of his innocence.

‘How can you tell? A man's swung for less.’ Then, with sudden irritation, he added, ‘You're that thick with the sergeant, and yet I'll bet if a fellow wanted anything done you couldn't get it done for him.’

‘I — I — — ’ She hesitated. What could he mean? ‘What — what?’

He read fear and what he took to be the first dawnings of doubt in her true eyes, and he laughed as if he would reassure her, for he found he preferred to be a god in her estimation.

‘Look here, Jen, s'posing — just s'posing I did it, as they're all saying.’

‘I just told you,’ she said solemnly, ‘I'd love you all the same. 'Twouldn't make no difference to me.’

‘You'd have to marry the sergeant, then,’ he said lightly, ‘just to stop him from hanging me.’

‘That wouldn't do it,’ she said, her woman's intuition truer than his.

‘Oh yes, 'twould,’ he said. ‘I know more about these things than you do. How'd a girl know? Don't you remember Conky Jim, up Yackandandah way?’

She made a movement of assent. Her arm was round his neck again

now, and her face hidden in his beard.

‘Well,’ he went on, ‘Conky was a deal too free with his barkers; and one day he had a difference with a man about some gold-dust Conky swore was his, and t’other swore was *his*. The end of it was t’other was left for dead, and, as a matter of fact, did die that very night, but not until these darned traps had found him and taken his dying depositions, and ‘twould have gone hard with Conky but that the police-sergeant was sweet on his missus. She was a mighty fine gal, and there warn’t many round. Well, he took up with her, that sergeant did, and the consequence was Conky got clean away across the Border. She was a mighty fine gal that. You’ll have to do that for me, Jen, when they’re after me for potting old Max. Will you?’

‘ ‘Twouldn’t be no manner of good,’ she moaned; ‘I know ‘twouldn’t. An’ you never done it — say you never done it!’

‘Of course not. I’m only joking, you silly little thing!’ he said, for she was trembling. ‘But would you take up with the sergeant to save me?’

‘Oh, I would, I would! there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to save you; but don’t tell me you done it, for ‘twouldn’t be any good — I know ‘twouldn’t.’

Then his mood changed.

‘You’re mighty keen on taking up with the sergeant, I notice,’ he said, in grumbling tones.

She felt it a little hard. He had almost forced her to say it, and then when she did he grumbled; but she was accustomed to treatment of this sort, and having him there with no one to interrupt, and the soft warm moonlight night all around them, she set herself with all the poor little arts at her command to coax him back into good temper again.

Then she had her reward, what she had waited for impatiently all the evening. He forgot his fears and his ill-temper, forgot everything save that she was a sweet, pretty woman, who loved him better than her own soul; and she forgot her doubts and all else beside.

The moon was high in the heavens before Jenny could bring herself to remind her lover that she must go back home to-night, and when she did, he walked part of the way back with her. When they came within sight of the Lucky Digger again, he paused a moment, and drew out once more the little chamois leather bag full of gold-dust.

‘Will you keep it for me, Jenny?’ he said. ‘I’m main sure to spend it if you don’t, and it’ll be something towards our getting spliced. Don’t tell anyone you’ve got it, but just keep it till I get a little more to add to it. We’ll have our shanty up in the gully there, won’t we — eh, my girl?’ he said, looking tenderly down into her eyes with a long, lingering glance, as if — as in truth he could not — he could not make up his mind to let her go.

It was moments like these that bound her to him with bands of iron.

She took the bag, and hiding it in her bosom, stooped and kissed his hand; then ran away to her home, the very happiest woman in all the broad colony of Victoria.

Chapter VII

A Woman's Counsel.

'It is when our budding hopes are nipped beyond recovery by some rough wind, that we are the most disposed to picture to ourselves what flowers they might have borne if they had flourished.' — Charles Dickens.

'WELL, sergeant?'

'Well, sir, that's all.'

'You've got the man, of course?'

'No, sir. We scoured the country, but he's vanished.'

'Are *you* vanished? You tell me you saw him last night five minutes before you found the body, and you come to me this morning with a cock-and-bull story that you can't find him. You must find him. Why didn't you take him there and then?'

'I didn't know murder 'd been done, sir. As soon as I'd got the body down to the Lucky Digger, I went after him down to his place, but he was gone. Will you make out the warrant, sir?'

'Warrant be hanged! There isn't much need of a warrant in a case like this. You've made a pretty mess of it among you. The man's slipped through your fingers, I'll be bound. Confound your stupidity!' and Commissioner Jocelyn Ruthven brought his clenched hand down on the table in front of him with all his force.

The tents of the police officers were certainly much more comfortable places of abode than the tents and huts of the diggers. The office tent was neatly floored with hard wood, and lined with green baize, and well furnished with chairs and a writing-table, at which was seated the Commissioner himself, a good-looking little blue-eyed man, who at the present moment had a heavy frown on his usually good-humoured countenance. He was very lame still, for it was hardly a month since he had been attacked and well-nigh killed by men who considered they owed him a grudge on account of the high hand with which he had put down the riot at the Packhorse over six months ago. And now here was another outrage. Free fights and broken heads were all in the day's work, but this was quite another thing, and it was no wonder he looked grave, and was inclined, for once, to lose his temper with his careful sergeant.

Sergeant Sells stood before him, his eyes on the ground, and his hands restlessly twisting a whip round and round.

‘When you were at the Packhorse last night, sir — — ’ began the sergeant respectfully.

‘But I was not at the Packhorse last night,’ said the Commissioner angrily. ‘I was over at Karouda, as you know very well, Mr. Anderson,’ he said, turning to the clerk; ‘and as this murder took place before sundown, I really fail to see why I shouldn't have been told of it last night. Karouda is only three miles as the crow flies.’

Mr. Anderson, a tall, fair, somewhat callow young man, shuffled his hands about among the papers on the table, looked across at the diggers' camp, and finally muttered something incoherent about not liking to disturb him. There was a dawning grin as of knowledge on his face, for it was not unknown to him that his superior officer had just become engaged to Miss Winifred Langdon, of Karouda, and he was minded to say something on the subject. Another glance, however, warned him that the moment was not propitious, so he hazarded another remark to the effect that probably some of the diggers could say where the man was.

‘Your astuteness really does you credit, Mr. Anderson,’ said the Commissioner sarcastically, ‘Probably they could, but the diggers, perhaps you may not be aware, are not sufficiently imbued with respect and admiration for this highly efficient force which I have the honour to command, to volunteer information of any kind.’

‘If you please, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘some of them think a lot of Black Anderson, as they call him, and I don't think they believe he did it. If they did, in this case I think they'd speak up fast enough. Most folks had a friendly feeling towards the old German.’

‘And you — what do you think, sergeant?’

‘I — I'd stake my life he did it,’ said the sergeant with unwonted earnestness; ‘what's he cleared out for else?’

‘That's certainly a strong argument against him,’ said the Commissioner thoughtfully; ‘but it's also a poser for us, for, guilty or not guilty, if he only keeps up among the hills to the north-east, we'll have no chance of getting at him. You ought to have taken him last night.’

‘I heard,’ said young Anderson, ‘that he was at the Lucky Digger last night.’

‘What the — — ’

Mr. Ruthven turned angrily on his sergeant, who said hastily:

‘No, sir; I was there, sir, and I had a man on the look-out all the evening. It didn't seem likely he'd go there, but I thought it best to be on the safe side; but, of course, that would be the last place he'd go to, sir. Why, the men 'd lynch him if they thought he did it.’

‘But, you see, according to you, they don't believe he did do it.’

‘No, sir, they don't.’

Sergeant Sells looked dubiously on the ground. He was at the end of his resources, and had no further suggestions to make; but young Anderson took it up again:

‘Well, I heard he'd been spoken to by a man they call Pard Derrick, who's got that claim where you see that red shirt hung out. Pard Derrick, I believe, says he spoke to him just behind the pub, and he went off and left him alone with Jenny Carter — you know, Buck Carter's pretty daughter.’

‘*You* seem to know a good deal about it,’ remarked the Commissioner severely. ‘It's a pity you did not make this communication about twelve hours earlier.’

‘Didn't know myself, sir,’ said the young man serenely. ‘But it's common talk that Jenny Carter's Black Anderson's sweetheart. It was most natural, anyhow, he should go to her to say good-bye. But you know more about these things than I do, sir,’ he added slyly.

But the Commissioner was in no mood for pleasantry.

‘I wish to Heaven — — ’ he began. Then the sergeant interrupted him.

‘Begging your pardon, sir,’ he said, ‘I think Mr. Anderson's quite wrong about Jenny Carter.’

‘Oh, gammon, sergeant! you don't know anything about these sort of things. Why, it's common talk that the girl is Black Anderson's sweetheart. And a mighty pretty girl, too!’ added Mr. Anderson thoughtfully.

The sergeant moved uneasily from one foot to another. It was torture to him to hear Jenny so lightly discussed. He would have given anything to have kept her name out of it; but as he could not do that, he strenuously denied all connection between her and the man he hated.

‘I know it's common talk, sir,’ he said respectfully, trying to keep down the anger that was boiling up in his heart; ‘but you know as well as I do what common talk's worth. Of course the girl is civil to him; how can she help it? I expect her father 'd have something to say to it if she wasn't, and he's a masterful sort of fellow, always going on about having his own way in everything; and, of course, as she's the only girl on the field, the men talk; but there's nothing in it. I'll go bail she knows no more where he's hiding than I do.’

‘Really, sergeant,’ said young Anderson, ‘you seem to have given your mind to the matter. I presume we shall be invited to the wedding soon.’

‘Mr. Anderson,’ said the Commissioner sharply, ‘this is not the — ’

‘Certainly, sir, I understand; but in spite of the sergeant, I still think that my friend Pard Derrick is right, and that pretty Jenny Carter knows a deal more about my namesake than she chooses to tell.’

‘I assure you, sir,’ said the sergeant earnestly, ‘you are quite wrong. She is a thoroughly good girl. It's not her fault her father keeps a

disreputable shanty; she keeps herself as much to herself as possible.'

The Commissioner tapped his fingers impatiently on the table in front of him.

'We didn't come here to discuss a girl,' he said; 'what I want to arrive at is, where is this man?'

'And I know,' said Anderson confidently, 'that that girl saw him last, and, as that was some time last night, he can't be very far off.'

'I'm sure, sir — — ' began the sergeant again earnestly. He, too, was almost convinced of the truth of Pard Derrick's story, but not for worlds would he have owned it — he was more bent than ever on keeping Jenny's name out of the business; but now the Commissioner interrupted him.

'This is simple waste of time,' he said angrily. 'There's nothing to prevent the girl speaking for herself, I suppose. Go down, sergeant, or send a trooper, and fetch her here.'

The sergeant saluted and turned away. He hardly knew whether to be pleased or not at the turn affairs had taken. If Jenny denied she had seen anything of Black Anderson, well and good — even he could ask no more. But if she owned to having met him, well — he set his foot down firmly — the girl was nothing to him, nothing in the wide world — he did not care one way or the other. If with her own lips she spoke her condemnation — and if she owned to having spoken to Black Anderson, that's what she would be doing — what did it matter to him? He had given up all thought of her last night, and this would just be another reason to strengthen his resolution. Nevertheless, he did not send a trooper to fetch her, as the Commissioner had suggested, but went himself, and was surprised and angry to find that his heart was beating disagreeably fast as he neared the Lucky Digger.

Meanwhile, if he had but known it, he had reached a pinnacle of happiness compared to the feelings of the girl he was going to see. And only last night she had been so happy, so blissfully happy, so free from care, and now it seemed to her that she could not even look forward to death itself as a relief. There was someone else to be thought of, someone to be cared for, and she, so far as she read her duty, must sacrifice her life for him.

When Jenny left her lover beside the creek, she ran as fast as she could home, and quietly slipped into the bare little room which was her bedroom. It was very bare indeed, with an earthen floor, and for all furniture a couple of boxes and a low stretcher, which she shared with a little half-brother. The moonlight streamed in through the unglazed window, and showed her the little curly head on the pillow sound asleep, and she stooped and kissed him fondly. He was very dear to her, the little chap, but to-night she was specially tender; was she not the very happiest woman in all the world? She sat on the end of the bed, and put the

chamois leather bag against her cheek and kissed it for the sake of the dear hands that had held it. The gold was dear to her, not for its own sake, not for the sake of what it would bring, but for the sake of the hands that had worked for it, for the man who had thought only of her, had worked for it for her. Could there possibly be a happier woman in the world than she was? She would not change, not she, with the great Queen in her palace; she wanted nothing more than Black Dave, and he had promised to marry her so soon as he had a little more money, and as an earnest of his love had given her all his gold to keep. She would tell Sal to-morrow — would tell her and triumph over her. She looked across at the canvas screen that separated her room from Sal's and her father's, then very softly, for fear lest they might hear, she opened the bag and emptied the contents on to her lap.

There were about a dozen small nuggets, and quite a little heap of gold-dust. Some of the corners caught the light and glittered in the bright moonlight as she dreamily ran her fingers through them. Such bright gold, such dear, bright gold; and it was buying her happiness! Only she did not think in those words, because she had no words at her command; she only thought that that gold represented to her Dave Anderson's love, and accordingly she liked to touch it. She turned it over again. How could she go to bed and to sleep on this night, the whitest night of her life? Perhaps it was not wise to be looking at so much gold so near the window. Someone might see, and be tempted. Was it not only this very night the old German had been murdered for the sake of a little bag, the very counterpart of this which she held in her hand?

Jenny glanced out of the window — no one there — and then down in her lap again, and her happy dream, the fair promise of her life, vanished for ever.

For there, in the middle of the pile of gold-dust, lay a curiously-shaped nugget she had herself paid over to the old German only yesterday afternoon. There was not the very faintest doubt about it. She knew it only too well. Pard Derrick had paid the nugget over the counter in payment of his score, and he had remarked upon it, and said he would not have parted with it if he had not been hard up, for it ought to bring its owner good luck, seeing it was in the shape of a cross with one arm missing. Sal Carter had seen it too, and had opined it meant ill-luck, for, if it was the other way round, wouldn't the blessed cross be perfect and not broken at all? Then Pard Derrick had laughed, and said she need not take it, but might give him tick if she liked. But Mrs. Carter had taken the nugget, and then, when old Max came round with his vegetables and fruit, had told Jenny to pay him with the little nugget.

‘For it'll bring no luck,’ said she, ‘the blessed cross broke like that.’

Apparently it had brought no luck, for old Max was dead, and — and she shivered drearily as if it had been the depth of winter. What did it all

mean? This was not old Max's bag; it was Dave Anderson's, her Dave's. And how had the fatal nugget got here? There was only one answer to that question, only one answer; in her simplicity she only thought of one. There was no possible explanation save the one, no other interpretation save that the police themselves would put upon it.

This was old Max's bag; she herself had noticed the resemblance. This was old Max's bag, and it was her lover's hand that had fired the fatal shot. She hastily shook back the gold into the bag, and then, standing on tiptoe, concealed it in the layers of bark that made the roof of her wretched little room. She could not bear to have the thing that was the price of blood close to her. Then she sat down on the end of the bed again, where she had dreamed her dreams so long ago — oh! so long ago — and tried to think it out.

Dave had done it — Dave! He had shot the poor old man who had never harmed him, had shot him for the sake of that little bag, and then — why had he given it to her to keep for him? She asked herself the question again and again, but the answer was there already. That was no argument for his innocence. He knew she would show no one his gold, would tell no one she had it, and he knew he could trust her. Had she not said herself she would love him just the same whether he had done it or not? Had he not made her say that over and over again? And she did — she did. She had not believed that of him; but now that it was forced upon her, she loved him just the same.

Jenny wondered if the police would be after him. Dully she remembered something Pard Derrick had said — what, she was not very certain; Black Dave's presence had made her forget all else — but she did remember Pard Derrick had said the sergeant suspected Dave, and if he did, then — then — — She remembered her lover's story of Conky Bill's missus, and took it both as an added sign of guilt and as a personal direction to herself. If the police were after Black Anderson, then she was to marry the sergeant. She never thought of disputing the fact. She would have to marry him. Dave expected it of her, and never of her own free will, since she had known him, had she crossed Dave.

It was as she had said it would be; no thought of her lover's unworthiness had entered her simple soul, only the conviction that he had done this thing, and that he must be saved at any cost, even at the sacrifice of herself. No thought of the sergeant's interest in the business entered her mind. Dave had as good as said she must marry the sergeant if the police came after him, and she fully intended to do so. She wished she were dead; but she was not dead nor likely to die. Besides, Dave must be saved at any cost.

She sat there on the end of the bed the livelong night, trying vainly to find some comfort where no comfort was. She was so dull, so ignorant, so helpless. She could only repeat over and over again, 'Oh, Dave, Dave!

I will help you, I will!' And the only way she saw was the way he himself had insisted on. She never railed against *him*, never thought bitterly of him for one moment. It is not in the nature of women like her. He was her god, no matter what he might be to the rest of the world, and she was prepared to do sacrifice.

The bright moonlight paled before the coming day; the sun rose up in all his splendour. Another long hot day had begun. But still she sat on, slowly rocking herself backwards and forwards like one in pain. The baby in the adjoining room raised a pitiful wail, low at first, then louder and louder, till its sleepy mother turned and put it to her breast. Then the little boy in her own bed wakened and sat up, rubbing his eyes and wondering to see his sister already dressed, for the Lucky Digger kept things up so late at night, it was impossible any of its inmates could be very early risers. She hastily dressed him and sent him outside to play, and lay down dressed as she was, and thought wearily of the things that had happened since she had done the same thing yesterday morning. She felt as if a whole lifetime had intervened; and she stared at the roof, at the spot where the bag was hidden, till from very weariness her eyes closed, and she slept and dreamed troubled dreams in which she, Black Anderson, old Max, and the sergeant were inextricably mingled. She awakened with a start to find her stepmother bending over her.

'Well, upon my word, a nice lazy thing you are! To go to sleep again after you'd got your clothes on.' It never occurred to her that the girl had been sitting up all night. 'Ain't you goin' to help me with the breakfast this mornin'? There's that botherin' Pard Derrick says he's goin' to have some here, and the childer are well-nigh famished.'

Jenny sat up rubbing her eyes. At first the events of the night before were quite forgotten; only a dull feeling of some impending misery, that we are all familiar with, was present in her mind. She held out her arms mechanically for the baby, and, as she took him in them, the whole thing came back to her.

'A nice hour you were in, madam!' went on her stepmother. 'I tell you, Jen, it's just foolish you are! He's only foolin' you, he is. Besides, what do you think? That Pard Derrick was along here just now, an' he was sayin' the police are after him in real earnest on account of old Max. Isn't it just what I'm tellin' you? He's a real bad lot, an' I wouldn't have no truck with him if I was you.'

It was not all the reason Mrs. Carter had given yesterday; but Jenny was in no mood to dispute with her. Indeed, the only thing she heard clearly was that the worst had happened: the police were after Black Dave, and she would have to marry the police sergeant. And even then, to do her justice, all her anxiety was not for herself, but for the man who today would be a hunted outlaw, with every man's hand against him. His life, somehow, she felt, depended on her, so she looked Mrs. Carter in

the face, and moistened her dry lips in a vain effort to speak.

But Mrs. Carter was well accustomed to her silence.

'My!' she went on, 'the boss was pretty mad last night! He'd have trounced you well if he'd laid hands on you! I had that work to get him to bed quiet! Where was you? Out with Black Dave?'

Jenny nodded. She had hardly made up her mind what it would be best to say; she was too simple, too ignorant, to invent a likely story, and it seemed to her assent could do her lover no harm.

'Well, is he goin' to marry you?'

Jenny shook her head. She would have to marry the sergeant, she kept saying to herself — she would have to marry the sergeant.

'Poor old girl!' said her stepmother pityingly, 'he ain't worth botherin' about; take my word for it, Jen, he ain't. Give him up, an' take on wi' the sergeant. My word! wouldn't the boss be pleased!'

'Why?' Jenny found voice to ask.

'Oh, 'cos the place is gettin' a bad name, an he's took it into his head 'tis all along of you being so thick wi' Black Anderson, an' now there comes this murder. Once you take up with the sergeant, Jen, it'll be all right.'

'But s'posin' the sergeant don't want me?'

'S'posin' pigs could fly! Course he wants you! Get along with you! you know it as well as I do.'

'What'll I do then?' asked Jenny, and the other woman was so pleased at her sudden complaisance she forgot to notice the dreary hopelessness in the girl's voice, or, if she did, set it down to the fact of her having found out the utter worthlessness of Black Anderson.

'She'll get over it,' she thought to herself. 'Lord! girls don't die of this sort of thing.' Then aloud she said: 'Do! why, just like you always do; only be a little sweeter. I'll tell him you're shy like. Come on, now; there's the boss callin', an' it's as much as my life is worth to cross him this morning. Oh, my fine gentleman, I'll make you pay for this by-and-by, or my name ain't Sal Carter! Fry the chops, Jen, there's a dear.'

Jenny could hardly have told how the morning passed. She was dimly aware that her father was out of temper, not only with her (that was a thing of common occurrence), but with his wife, who was apparently serenely unconscious of the fact, and was full of importance at the knowledge that Jenny was going to take up with the sergeant. It seemed to give her great pleasure, and whenever she approached the girl she nudged her, and laughed confidentially.

'You'll like him right well, Jenny,' she said more than once, as the girl's white face told her this was no matter of rejoicing to her. 'Bless you, you'll be a right happy woman compared to me, and t'other ain't worth thinkin' about! I'm certain sure o' that, or I wouldn't ask you to do it.'

Then, about ten o'clock, there was the ringing of spurred heels in the

bar, and Sergeant Sells had come by Commissioner Ruthven's orders to fetch Jenny up to the police camp. The girl grew whiter than ever when she heard his errand, but her stepmother patted her encouragingly on the shoulder.

'She's a bit shy, sergeant, you see. Jenny, put on your sun-bonnet, dear, and smooth out your dress. Lord! sergeant, 'tis nothing, is it? What's the Commissioner wantin' of her, now?'

Now, Sergeant Sells was perfectly aware that in the execution of his duty strict silence was the proper course, but Jenny's tired white face went to his heart, and he was only too anxious on his own account to prove that she knew nothing of Black Anderson to do that duty thoroughly.

'Only to hear what she has to say about Black Anderson. I suppose you know there's a warrant out against him for murder?'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs. Carter, smoothing back Jenny's hair, and preparing to put her bonnet on for her. 'I don't go much on Black Anderson myself — I'm always sayin' that to you, ain't I, Jen? — but I misdoubt the Commissioner's wrong there. He ain't done murder.'

Jenny shivered. Only too well she knew she had the proofs in her possession.

'Well, but was he here last night?' asked the policeman eagerly, his eyes on the girl's face.

Jenny opened her mouth to reply, but no words would come; in very truth, she hardly knew whether to deny it or not. If she were to deny it, there was Pard Derrick to witness to her falsehood; but while she hesitated Mrs. Carter saved her the trouble.

'Here! Of course he was here, hangin' round our Jen like the rest of them, and that mad because she don't keep her smiles for him alone. The conceit of the man!' said Sal Carter, tossing her head. 'But Jenny gave him as good as he gave, I'll warrant! She ain't a-goin' to have any more truck with Black Dave Anderson, she ain't, till this affair's cleared up. Honest women can't afford to have their names messed about;' and Mrs. Carter looked to Jenny for confirmation.

The girl only hung her head. It was true enough. She had given up Dave Anderson for his own sake.

'But,' said the sergeant doubtfully, 'what was Miss Jenny doing talking to him last night?'

'Oh, get along with you, do!' said Mrs. Carter playfully. 'How'd she help talkin' to him, an' Black Dave more free wi' the coin than any chap here? I guess her father 'd have somethin' to say if she didn't do the civil! Not,' she added, with a remembrance of the stony silence Jenny always maintained towards the sergeant himself, who certainly, according to the ideas of the times, was well worth propitiating, 'that Jen's ever given to much words, even with me an' the childer; but she's been just bound to

speaking civil to Black Anderson.'

The words were balm to his ears. He had more than half a suspicion that the landlady of the Lucky Digger was fooling him to the top of his bent, but he thought it was for her own ends, and he was only too thankful to hear that Jenny cared nothing for Black Anderson to question very closely the authority whence he received the information.

'Jenny's but poorly this mornin',' said Mrs. Carter; 'don't you be hard on her, now.'

'Indeed I won't!' he said fervently. Her white tired face gave him a distinct pain to look at. 'And, indeed, she needn't be in the least afraid. She's only got to say "Yes" or "No" to the Commissioner's questions. He won't be hard on her.'

'Well, Jenny told me all about it, and she don't know nothing about Black Anderson. She sat out there to cool by the creek with him last night; but, Lord! that's nothin'. Anybody who'd danced with Pard Derrick 'd a' done the same.'

There was no gainsaying that. Not that Sergeant Sells was desirous of so doing. He was as anxious as even her stepmother could have been to find an innocent reason for the hours Jenny had spent with Black Anderson, and here was one ready to his hand.

'Yes,' he said thoughtfully — 'yes. That's likely enough.'

'Likely, of course it's likely; ain't I just tellin' you? Lord sakes, what an awfu' fuss! an' all because a girl talks to a chap, or sits still an' lets him talk to her. That's more Jen's style, I bet.'

'And what did he say?' asked the sergeant eagerly.

Jenny raised her tired, frightened eyes to his face, but she never uttered a word, and her voluble stepmother came to her rescue again.

'Say? Well, now, I wonder at you, sergeant, asking a question like that. What does a chap say when he sits out alone with a girl in the moonlight? You're not goin' to tell me you haven't done it yourself, a handsome man like you. You've left many an achin' heart behind you, I'll warrant.'

The flattery was coarse, but he was unaccustomed to flattery of any sort, especially from a woman; and, as far as he knew, no woman's heart had ever beaten the faster for his presence, or ached for his absence. He was thankful, too, to think that it might have been mere admiration for her beauty that brought Black Anderson to see Jenny. It made him wince to think of her listening to the coarse compliments of such a man, but from her coldness to him he argued she would not be too free with another man, and the thought gave him comfort. Now this man was out of the way he would win her for himself, he would take her away from these uncongenial surroundings, he would teach her how a woman should bear herself; she would only want a little teaching, she was so young — so young, almost a child — and he would be so tender with

her. There was nothing between her and Black Anderson, he was convinced of that; any girlish fancy she might have had for him would be crushed out before this terrible accusation; he had a fair field, and now indeed he would win her. Happier than he had felt for many a long day did the sergeant feel at this moment; he could hardly have analyzed his own feelings, only in some indefinite manner he felt that he might hope, and every prudent consideration was swept away in a rush of uncontrolled passion. She looked so tired and weary, the poor little girl! He would have spared her if he could, and yet in his heart he was glad enough to take her before the Commissioner and let her prove out of her own lips her innocence.

‘The Commissioner will be waiting,’ he said as a reason for hurrying the women.

‘And the Commissioner don't like to be kept waiting, do he, now?’ said Sal Carter. ‘Now, don't you be rough wi' poor Jenny; she's that poorly this mornin' she can hardly hold up her head.’

‘It seems she could dance well enough last night,’ said the sergeant, his doubts for the moment getting the upper hand again.

‘Her! dance!’ cried Mrs. Carter in well-feigned astonishment. ‘Lawks, sergeant, any fool 'd tell you Jenny was ready for her bed at eight o'clock, just dyin' to go there. You might have seen for yourself if you'd only used your eyes; she was mighty short with the chaps, but, bless you! it's as much as her life's worth to ask the boss to let her off, specially on a night like last night. The boss is mighty hard on poor Jenny. There, go along with you, now, and don't you be hard on her, too.’

‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

Jenny raised her eyes, and nodded her head, and they set off together up the hot and dusty track that led to the police camp, where the Commissioner was impatiently awaiting their arrival.

Chapter VIII

In the Commissioner's Office.

'Some men must love my lady, and some Joan.'

'Love's Labour's Lost.'

THEY walked along side by side in silence. The trooper was cudgelling his brains for something to say, something to encourage the tired girl beside him, something that should sound kind, and which would assure her there was nothing to fear, for that she was afraid he was convinced; but by nature he was a reserved, silent man, and now that he desired them so earnestly the words would not come. As for Jenny, she never even tried to speak; one thought only was filling her mind, that she must marry the man beside her to save her lover. He had said so, and his word was not to be gainsaid. Her stepmother had smoothed the way for her; she had put into her mouth the words she should say; she had given a reason for her companionship with Dave Anderson, and all she had to do was to remember that she knew nothing.

The hill was steep and the dust on the track ankle-deep; the diggers bending over their cradles and tubs on the banks of the creek looked in wonder at the two strange companions. The sergeant was a man who cared little what his fellows thought of him, but the girl felt instinctively that all eyes were upon her, and knew that if Dave Anderson had a friend among those onlookers, and she did not doubt for a moment that he had many friends, he would know she had been sent for to the police camp. There was a certain amount of comfort in that, too, for if he knew that much, he would know that she was doing her best to save him; he would hear she was with the sergeant, he would understand.

'Are you very tired?' asked Sergeant Sells at last in despair.

'No.'

'You look so, I'm sure,' he said, but it did not seem to Jenny that that remark required an answer.

They reached the camp, and every trooper, it seemed to her companion, looked curiously at Jenny. It annoyed him, this publicity, while she never noticed it. She was accustomed to being stared at by men, and whether they were diggers or troopers mattered little to her.

At the door of his tent sat the Commissioner, lolling back in an easy-chair, with his hands behind his head, while young Anderson leaned

against the tent-pole smoking furiously.

‘Here you are at last, sergeant,’ said the Commissioner; ‘you’ve been a nice time about it! Do you think I’ve all day to waste over this blessed thing?’

The sergeant felt he had nothing to say in excuse for his delay, so wisely held his tongue, and the Commissioner went on:

‘So this is the young woman? And what’s she got to say for herself?’

This question also seemed not to require an answer, so the sergeant stood at attention, and Jenny looked down and wondered that they did not hear the beating of her heart.

The Commissioner looked at her curiously. He knew her, of course, but he had never noticed her much before. She looked to him an untidy little girl, in a shabby lilac frock, with a frightened pair of dark eyes, a face that some might call pretty, and quantities of yellow hair bunched up under a white sun-bonnet. Rather wistful-looking, certainly, but a little simple, not at all the dark and dangerous conspirator he had been led by his clerk to expect. In his own mind he was convinced there and then she knew nothing about the murder — very little, he thought, about the murderer.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ he said kindly; ‘we’re only going to ask you a question or two. We’re not going to hurt you.’

Then he felt vexed that his manner did not reassure her more. Personally he had a contempt for a weak woman, but he went on kindly:

‘Are you the daughter of the man they call Buck Carter, the landlord of the Lucky Digger?’

‘Yes, sir.’ And the sergeant and the Commissioner both noticed how she trembled as she spoke.

‘I’m told you were at the dance held there last night; is that so?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Who were present?’

Jenny pleated her dress between her fingers, and looked helplessly at the sergeant.

He hailed this proof of confidence with delight, and ventured to nod encouragingly and say, ‘Tell the Commissioner, Jenny.’

But Jenny could find no words, and her restless fingers folded the skirt of her dress backwards and forwards as the Commissioner repeated his question.

Then he altered it.

‘Was there anybody there?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Who?’

‘Diggers, sir.’

‘Good Lord!’ said the Commissioner irritably; ‘was a man they call Pard Derrick there?’

Jenny trembled again, and her voice, as she answered 'Yes, sir,' was hardly audible.

'Come, now, we're getting on. Did you dance with this Pard Derrick?'

'Yes, sir,' again in a whisper.

'Don't be afraid. There's nothing wrong in that. Do you know a man named David Anderson?'

Jenny looked down and said nothing. She had never heard Black Dave called David Anderson before, and it seemed to her that she would not own to knowing him till she was obliged, and she did not know David Anderson.

Commissioner Ruthven drummed his fingers on the table in front of him. The girl was manifestly frightened out of her wits, and anything she knew would have to be dragged out of her. He was not astonished at that. He knew the reputation the police and all connected with them had in the diggers' camp, and she was evidently ignorant and prejudiced.

'Try her with Black Dave, sir,' suggested his clerk, coming to the rescue.

'Do you know Black Dave, Jenny?' repeated the Commissioner.

'Yes, sir,' she answered in a whisper.

'Oh, you do. Come, that's satisfactory. And was he at the dance?'

Jenny hesitated a moment, then she said:

'No, sir.'

'But he comes to the Lucky Digger?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Often?'

'Whiles.'

'Lucid, certainly,' commented the Commissioner. 'Well, did he come there last night?'

Again Jenny hesitated. He had certainly not come to the bar, she had met him outside, so she answered.

'No, sir.'

'But you saw him last night?' went on the Commissioner, who was getting impatient.

'Yes, sir.'

'Where?'

'Outside.'

'You went outside to meet him?'

'No, sir.' She could answer that truthfully enough, for she remembered she had gone out reluctantly, dragged by Pard Derrick.

'What did you go outside for, then?'

'It was hot,' said Jenny in a whisper, 'an' Pard Derrick made me.'

'But isn't Black Anderson your sweetheart?'

The sergeant looked at the girl narrowly, and saw her crimson through the sun-tan on her face; then she drooped her eyes again, and, much to

his relief, said in a whisper so faint as hardly to be audible:

‘No, sir.’

‘For Heaven's sake, girl, speak up! What in the world is there to be afraid of? Didn't you leave Pard Derrick and talk to Dave Anderson?’

‘Pard Derrick went inside.’

‘Clearly the boot was on the other foot, then. And why didn't you go in with Pard Derrick?’

Jenny looked down again, and was heard to murmur something about its being ‘too hot.’

‘Then I'm to understand you stopped outside with the other gentleman?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you know he was suspected of the murder of German Max?’

‘Pard Derrick told him so.’

‘Oh! And so you stopped outside with a man who, you had been told, was accused of murder?’

‘Please, sir,’ there was a sob in Jenny's voice as the thought of last night came back to her — last night, so rich in promise of happiness for her — ‘please, sir, I thought Pard Derrick was fooling.’

‘And what did you two do when Pard Derrick was gone?’

‘Come, sir,’ put in young Anderson, ‘I call that a really cruel question. You, of all people, might be sympathetic.’

The Commissioner silenced him with a contemptuous glance, and repeated his question: ‘Well, come now, what did you do?’

Jenny paused a long time, then said slowly: ‘Sat down by the creek.’

It was the strict truth. No one had seen her go up the gully, and she did not mention it, so the Commissioner naturally thought it was the creek opposite the store.

‘And after that?’

Again a long pause, and the girl's fingers restlessly twisting themselves in and out of her dress.

‘Well, what next?’

‘I went home to bed, sir.’

‘And Anderson, what became of him?’

‘I don't know, sir.’

‘But surely you made some arrangement for meeting again?’

Sergeant Sells looked at her narrowly.

‘N-o-o, sir,’ she said, with a pitiful quaver in her voice, for though it was the strict truth, she had thought when they parted he would come to the bar next evening like the rest of the diggers, and now she had no hope of ever seeing him again.

‘Didn't you ever think to see him again?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘How?’

'I — I thought he'd come to the bar if he wanted;' and her voice had sunk to a whisper again.

'Evidently not so very keen, after all,' thought the Commissioner to himself, 'or, maybe, somewhat ashamed of taking up with a murderer,' while the undemonstrative sergeant could have flung his cap in the air with delight.

'And Anderson didn't mention German Max?'

'Said he'd never done it,' whispered Jenny, 'an' that Pard Derrick was foolin'.'

It seemed to her she had done all she could now, and that another question must reveal the fact that she had the old German's bag of gold in her keeping at that very moment. In her eyes the Commissioner was all-powerful. She put up her hands to her face, and began helplessly twisting the strings of her sun-bonnet.

'And that's all you know?' said the Commissioner.

'Yes, sir,' and her hands went up to her face and she burst into a passion of tears.

Perhaps it was the best thing she could have done. Commissioner Ruthven had decided in his own mind that she was a simple girl, very ignorant and frightened, and he thought that thought Black Anderson, in common with the rest of the diggers, might admire such beauty as she had, she was the last person he would trust with a knowledge of his movements or of his crime.

'Tut, tut, tut!' he said; 'what the dickens are you doing that for? There, that's all, sergeant. You can take her away. Tell her not to make such a fool of herself,' for, once the tears had come, Jenny could not control herself, and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

'She's but poorly, sir,' said the sergeant, taking upon himself to excuse her; 'Mrs. Carter was telling me so just now, asking me not to be hard on her.'

'H'm! it seems she was equal to shaking a leg with a will last night. That doesn't look very like being poorly.'

'It's all her father's fault, sir,' said the sergeant eagerly. 'Buck Carter's a hard man, and she can't call her soul her own.'

Young Anderson stepped back into the dining-tent and returned with a glass of wine.

'Here, drink this,' he said, 'and for mercy's sake don't cry so! You make a man feel a brute to look at you.'

The sergeant looked at him gratefully, but Jenny, with her face in her hands, utterly refused the proffered refreshment.

'Don't be a fool!' said the Commissioner sharply, and, accustomed to obey, she drank it between her sobs.

It steadied her shaken nerves, and she lifted her tear-stained face and looked questioningly at the Commissioner.

‘She can go, sergeant,’ he said; ‘I’ve done with her.’

Without a word he touched her arm and led her down the hill again.

The Commissioner watched them out of sight.

‘H’m!’ he said, ‘not much to be got out of her. She’s a little simple, I think.’

‘Well, it’s pretty evident our man was there last night, after all, and openly, too. But those blessed troopers failed to find him!’

‘Who was the man on the look-out at the pub?’

‘Simpson, sir.’

‘Good Lord! No wonder he slipped through our fingers. The man’s next door to a fool!’

‘Well, sir,’ said the clerk apologetically, ‘no one thought he’d put so bold a face on it as to go to the pub. Besides, he didn’t go inside, and out in the moonlight one man’s very like another, with their red shirts and heavy beards.’

‘The bird’s flown now, any way,’ said the Commissioner, preparing to light his pipe. ‘And as for that girl, I don’t believe she knows a thing about it. A simple little thing!’

‘It’s common talk, all the same, sir,’ repeated Anderson, ‘that she’s Black Anderson’s sweetheart.’

‘Pooh! As the sergeant says, you know what common talk’s worth.’

‘The sergeant? By Jingo, sir, I do believe your immaculate sergeant’s gone the way of all flesh! If he ain’t badly hit with that little girl, I’m a duffer!’

‘It wouldn’t take that to prove you a duffer, Mr. Anderson!’ said the Commissioner severely, for the escape of Black Anderson was still rankling. ‘The sergeant’s a man of sense.’

‘A man of sense or not, sir, I’ll bet you anything you like before the month’s out the sergeant comes to you for permission to bring a wife to live on the camp!’

‘Pooh! he’s old enough to be her father. He knows better. An untidy little drab of a girl like that!’

‘She’s sweetly pretty — she is indeed, sir! You won’t see it, because you’ve got another face in your eye. And, after all, there’s no fool like an old fool. Take up my bet, sir. I’ll stand a champagne dinner if the sergeant hasn’t come to you before the month’s out.’

‘Done with you! But if I only catch Black Anderson, I’ll stand champagne whether the sergeant makes a fool of himself or not.’

Chapter IX

A Weighty Warning.

*'An syne he laughed, an' syne he sang,
An' syne we thocht him fou,
An' syne he trumped his partner's trick,
An' garred his partner rue.*

*'Then up and spake an elder mon,
That held the Spade its Ace —
"God save the lad! Whence comes the licht
That wimples on his face?"'
'Departmental Ditties.'*

Rudyard Kipling.

IT was hardly part of Sergeant Sells' duty to accompany Jenny Carter back again to the Lucky Digger, but he made it so. He could not let her go down by herself, exposed as she would be to the rude curiosity of the rough diggers, so he walked down stern and solemn beside her. As for the girl herself, she hardly realized his kindness. She spoke not a word, indeed, never answered, unless an inarticulate sound when he addressed her could be called an answer. It contented him, however, and when they reached the store her voluble stepmother amply made up for her silence.

'Lord! now, this is good of you, sergeant, to bring Jen back again! Why, poor old girl, how you have been cryin'! Go in an' lie down now, there's a dear! Now, sergeant,' she added reproachfully, 'didn't I ask you not to be hard on her, a soft little thing like her?'

'I'm sure,' he said apologetically, 'I don't know what's the matter. I never did understand women, and the Commissioner was as kind as he could be. I wonder at that, too, for he hasn't the sweetest temper in the world, and he's very vexed about Black Anderson.'

'Lord! men are fools. You just go on makin' an innocent girl bring a man to the gallows, and then you wonder that she should cry her heart out at havin' blood on her hands.'

'Good heavens! is that what's the matter? I'm sure, then, Jenny needn't cry about that. All she did, as far as I can see, was to make out that vagabond as innocent as the babe unborn.'

'Well, well, I'm glad o' that. He may be a jolly bad lot, but a girl don't

want to have his death at her door, whatever she may think of him. Come, Jen, run away now, and lie down a bit. I'll mind the childer, an' the sergeant 'll be likely comin' in in the evenin' — won't you, sergeant?'

Jenny turned away without a word, and the sergeant stroked his whiskers doubtfully. He did not choose to look upon himself as a common *habitué* of the pub, and he did not like to think Mrs. Carter did so either, and yet there was Jenny. If he did not see her till to-morrow or the day after, what might not happen meanwhile? He had advanced farther in her good graces than he had ever gone before, and he felt he ought to follow up the advantage; still, he did not by any means approve of Sal Carter, so he said doubtfully:

'H'm! I don't know. There's a good deal to be done, you see, about this affair. It'll never do to let this man get clean off.'

'You can't be huntin' him day and night, sure; but do as you please. There's plenty glad enough to come here;' and Mrs. Carter poured water into a tin basin and began washing up tumblers and pannikins with the cheerful conviction that she was a very important person, whatever opinion the sergeant of police might hold upon the subject.

He went back to the camp then, but he knew as well as possible that the evening would see him down in the bar shoulder to shoulder with the bearded, red-shirted diggers, anxious as they — nay, he was not the man to mince matters to himself, a thousand times more anxious than they — for a kind word, or even a smile, from Jenny Carter. But he was happier now than he had been for many a long day. Jenny had nothing in common with Black Anderson; he was sure of that. The camp might talk as it pleased, but he knew there was nothing between them, and what was more, he was not the only man who held that opinion. The Commissioner himself agreed with him. The usually stern sergeant unbent that day, and the troopers, wondering at his unwonted geniality, were not long in setting it down to its right cause. It was soon whispered round that since Jenny Carter had found out Black Anderson had shot the German, she had decided to throw him over and take up with the police sergeant instead.

This report gained credence all over the field that evening when, after the briefest of struggles with himself, the sergeant went down to the bar of the Lucky Digger, and was treated by Jenny, if not with cordiality, at least with toleration.

No one would have said she hated him now, though a keen observer, perhaps, might have thought she feared him. But there were no keen observers among the diggers, and as the days went on the sergeant's wooing progressed apace, and only Sal Carter, perhaps, guessed how distasteful it was to the girl. Indeed, if it had not been for her, the thing would have come to an abrupt ending, or, rather, would never have had any beginning at all, for Jenny, though she said to herself she would

marry the sergeant for Dave's sake, had no idea of bringing about such a thing. If he had asked her, she would have said 'Yes,' but any further preliminaries she did not understand. She did not openly snub him as she had been wont to do occasionally, but of her own free will she never sought him, of her own free will she never addressed him. This, however, was the less noticeable as she had grown more silent than ever; and certainly, if she did not encourage him, he could not complain of her friendliness to other men. To the outside world it seemed she favoured the trooper, and only Sal Carter knew, and she kept her own counsel, that this was due to her judicious management.

At first Jenny used to look anxiously for news of Black Anderson, but he seemed completely to have vanished. She knew the police were still hunting for him; knew that they still believed he was in hiding in the ranges, helped probably by some friendly hand among the diggers; knew that they daily hoped to lay their hands, if not on the man himself, at least on the man who helped him; but she herself had lost touch of him. Not once or twice, but many a time, in the course of the month that followed, had she stolen out at dead of night, when all the camp was quiet, and gone away up the gully, where last she had seen him, in the vain hope of seeing him, or at least finding some trace of him, but there was never a sign. Once, indeed, in her midnight wanderings she had come across a man moving softly through the scrub, and her heart had beat high with hope; but on coming closer it had turned out to be only Pard Derrick in a very bad temper.

'What the — — are you doin' here?' he asked gruffly.

And Jenny told him the truth, first because she could think of nothing else to say, and next because she counted him Dave's friend, and thought he might bring her news of him.

'I was lookin' for Dave,' she said simply.

'Oh! was you? What was you agoin' to do with him? Hand him over to your friend the trap?'

Jenny made a little inarticulate moan.

'I dunno what's to do for the best,' she sobbed — 'I dunno. I'm sorter hungerin' for Dave.'

The waning moon was just rising in the east, and sent a faint white light through the tangled scrub and ferns that fell full on the girl's tired face. These many hopeless vigils were beginning to tell on her, and she looked worn and thin: the great strong man looking down on her felt a sort of pity for her stirring at his heart; but he had no faith in any woman, and certainly was not minded to share his secret with her. Possibly, too, there was a slight feeling of jealousy in the business. He was friendly enough with Black Anderson; he took him food, he supplied him with all the news of the camp, but he was not going to bring this girl to him. It might be dangerous. And again, he, Pard Derrick, had to do without a

woman's society, why not Black Anderson? Black Anderson had been first favourite for so long; let someone else have a turn now.

'Hungerin' for Dave, are you? Don't you know where he is?'

She shook her head.

'Don't you?' she asked piteously.

'Me! How'd I know? If you don't know, I guess no one does. They do say he's hid in the ranges somewhere about. But if he takes my advice, he'll make tracks across the border soon as possible. The sergeant's mighty keen after him, an' he'll nab him sure as fate if someone don't put a stopper on him. Say, Jenny, you're mighty thick with the sergeant now, ain't you?'

The girl nodded her head. She only saw in the man's careless speech another injunction to marry the sergeant.

'Well, likely he'll let drop at times suthin' o' what he's doin' an' where he's goin' to hunt next, an' if he does, you might just tip us the wink, eh?'

'But he don't,' she said, 'not never.'

'Get you home to bed, Jenny. 'Tain't good for a gal to be wanderin' about this way nights. You'll come to harm, you will. Go home now like a good girl; you just let Dave Anderson be, or I'll tell the boss, sure as my name's Pard Derrick.'

She was more careful after that. She still stole out, still made her way up the lonely gully, but she was afraid of being caught, and the merest breaking of a twig, or a slipping stone, made her crouch trembling on the ground. If she met Pard Derrick there she might meet others, and it never occurred to her to ask why Pard Derrick had taken to midnight rambles. She only felt she must be careful, and not let him see her again. She could not give up going entirely, though, once she had seen his mate, all hope of seeing Anderson himself died within her. She only crept away up the gully where she had spent the one happy evening of her life, and, kneeling down among the stones and ferns, shut her eyes and listened once again to the soft sound of the falling water, smelt once again the damp fresh earthy scent of the water-plants, listened to the weird sounds of the night all around her, and tried to fancy, as many a wiser woman than she has done, that her lover was by her side once more.

'You're gettin' just worn out, Jen,' said her stepmother to her one day when they had the store to themselves, and Jenny had flung herself wearily down on a pile of flour-sacks. 'You're frettin', you know, frettin' after that chap, an' you that promised me to take up with the sergeant.'

'Well, ain't I done it?'

'Lord no! call that takin' up? If it warn't for me you'd be as far off as ever.'

'What'll I do, then?' asked the girl wearily.

'Do! Smile at him once in a way. Go outside with him once in a way, an' he'll do the rest.'

'I — I can't help it. I'm sorter hungerin' after Dave.'

'Poor old girl!' Mrs. Carter spoke kindly enough, but she had no remedy to offer. 'An' you ain't seen nothin' of him since the night of the murder?'

'No.'

'Nary a sign?'

'No.'

'Men is brutes,' said Sal with conviction, putting the baby down on the floor to make his way among the picks and shovels and the varied appurtenances of a digging store, and coming over to touch the girl's hair kindly; 'best not to think of him, dear.'

'I can't help it.'

'Why not take up wi' the sergeant? Anyhow, it'll give you something to think of. I know how 'tis myself. Soon as you begin to think of something else, it don't matter much what, you'll feel better.'

'If they was to take him, what'd they do to him?'

'Oh, hang him, certain sure! You bet your life on that.'

'But — but — there's a many as say he never done it.'

Her voice sunk to a whisper, for she firmly believed she herself held the proofs of his guilt.

'Oh, they'll hang him safe enough. The sergeant's mighty keen on catchin' him — keener, so they was sayin' in the bar last night, than the Commissioner himself. When the sergeant ain't lookin' at you, he's thinkin' out new schemes for takin' Black Dave. So if you want to help him you oughter be sweet to the sergeant. Maybe while he's lookin' in your eyes he'll forget everything else for a bit.'

'I'll marry the sergeant if you like,' said Jenny hopelessly, 'only he hasn't asked me.'

'I'll settle that,' said Sal Carter quickly, 'only mind you're naught but sweet to him if he speaks to you to-night.'

'But I'd rather be dead; 'deed, Sal, I'd rather be dead.'

'Eh, well,' sighed the older woman, 'but we can't choose. Maybe it's just as well. An' you know, Jen, you'd be a long sight better married to the sergeant than goin' on like this. Wouldn't you, now?'

Jenny shook her head.

To eighteen, however ignorant, philosophy of this sort does not recommend itself highly, and Sal Carter saw she would have to bring stronger arguments than this to bear if she was to attain the end which she honestly thought was best for her husband's daughter.

'An' 'tis the best you can do for Black Dave, if you think about him still. Once the sergeant's married, or thinkin' about gettin' married, well, he won't be pokin' about the ranges an' gullies quite so much.'

'All right,' said Jenny, turning her face to the wall; 'I told you I'd marry him.'

‘An’ I’ll — — Good Lord! there’s that kid at the kerosene! Was ever such a child for mischief! Come on here, you brat! you’ll be the death of your poor old mammy before you’ve done, you will. An’, after all’s said an’ done, you see, Jenny, a woman gets a deal o’ comfort out of her childer.’

The comfort might have seemed a doubtful quantity to an outsider as Mrs. Carter picked up her offspring, hands and face and pinafore smeared with kerosene, and shook him well for getting himself in such a mess, to say nothing of wasting the oil; and then, when he raised a loud, protesting wail, kissed him, in spite of the dirt he had accumulated.

‘He smells fine now,’ said Jenny.

Even in the midst of her own troubles, she was always interested in the children, which probably accounted for her friendship with the children’s mother.

‘He’s just as dear to his mammy, just as dear, ain’t he, bless ‘im!’ and Mrs. Carter carried him off to wash him, reflecting the while how she was to bring about the marriage she had set her heart on.

‘I think he’s mighty gone,’ she said to herself; ‘but Jen’s got no more life in her than a stone. Can’t expect the man to go all ways. I’ll just send her out in the evenin’ an’ give ‘em a chance o’ meetin’ outside. Maybe she’ll liven up a bit when they’re alone.’

Accordingly that night, in pursuance of her newly-laid plan, when the bar was full of men, and the sergeant, as was now his regular custom, had installed himself close beside Jenny, Sal Carter tapped her gently on the shoulder.

‘Jen dear, you’re lookin’ that white,’ she said, in a low tone, ‘wouldn’t you like to go out an’ sit down by the creek a bit to cool?’

Jenny hesitated a moment.

‘Dad,’ she said, looking across to where Buck Carter was dispensing liquors and telling his experiences out on the plains of New South Wales to a select crowd of listeners.

‘Oh, get along with you; I’ll settle him. Run on now, Jen, an’ don’t stop too late.’

Sergeant Sells was the only man who heard, and he took advantage of it, as Mrs. Carter had more than half hoped he would.

‘You oughtn’t to send her alone,’ he said, watching her, as she stepped behind the canvas screen which divided the bar from the rest of the house, with the evident intention of going out quietly by the back way.

‘What’ll I do? She looks pretty sick on it. You wouldn’t have me send one of you chaps to look after her, I suppose? — an’ I ain’t got anybody else.’

‘Let me go,’ said the sergeant boldly.

Sal Carter looked at him a moment as if she were weighing in her own mind the wisdom of such a course; then she apparently relented.

‘You — you'd — oh, well, get along wi' you, then. But be gentle wi' her. She's a soft little thing. The boss bounced her mother a mighty lot, I reckon, and Jen's never got over it. Sorter shrinks up if you so much as speaks loud to her.’

Sergeant Sells required no second bidding. He went out and made his way quickly round to the back of the house, just as Jenny had started on her way to her favourite resort. She did not intend to go far, only to the mouth of the gully, where she would still be within sight and sound of the camp. She did not want any companionship, and was not pleased when the sergeant came up with her.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked.

She nodded in the direction of the creek.

‘May I go with you?’

She would rather have said ‘No,’ but she had promised her stepmother to encourage this man, and she was firmly imbued with the idea that by so doing she was shielding, in some measure, the man she loved; so she merely nodded her head again, and they walked on together side by side in silence. When they came to the stepping-stones across the creek, the sergeant put out his hand and quietly helped her across.

It was four weeks all but two days since the night she had gone there with Black Dave, and it had been just such another night as this. There was the same old moon looking down on them, the same clear, dark velvety sky, the same tangle of scrub and fern and rippling water. Such a still, hot night, so calm and quiet; and out of the bush, mingling with the damp, earthy smell of the water-plants, came a rich, subtle perfume. Who could describe it? Who has not noticed it? They walked along the gully a little way, partly because the girl was too shy to stop, and the man followed where she led. At last she sat down on a flat stone by the water-side, and leaned back against the steep hillside, and the sergeant flung himself on the ground at her feet.

Never before in all the five-and-forty years that went to make up his life had he gone out into the moonlight alone with a woman, and lain at her feet. The situation had all the charm of novelty for him, and the night had a softening, sensuous influence; and, as he looked up at her, the kindly moonlight, that must surely have been created for lovers, softened out all harsh outlines, and showed him a sweet, wistful face, with big dark eyes framed in quantities of yellow hair. What did it matter that that hair was untidy, that her dress was torn and ragged, that there was something — he could hardly have told what — wanting in her face? The moonlight softened all that, and showed him only the girl he desired more than his life.

It was so new to him to lie there and watch her that at first he could not make up his mind to break the silence. She did not look at him, but away down the gully; but surely she must care for him, or she would never

have come here with him? No woman had ever done so much for him, not one. Then, as he looked again at her face, its youth forced itself upon him — so young she looked, so young and fair. For all that his figure was young and lithe still, for all that he knew he was an efficient man in a force where a life of activity was an absolute necessity, there passed across his mind like a sharp pang the thought of his five-and-forty years, the knowledge that would not be argued away, that he was old enough to be her father. Well, he would be all the more tender for that, he told himself, all the more careful, and she needed care. All the fond, foolish dreams he had indulged in for the last six months surged up, and would not be crushed down. She must be his, she must — she must, but she was so cold and far-away. If he looked any longer he would forget all else, and take her in his arms whether she would or no; and he put his head on his folded arms, and groaned aloud.

Jenny looked down, for her thoughts, too, had been of him. She was wondering what it would feel like to be always with this man, to know that never in this life would she see Black Dave again. He wanted her. She would have been blind indeed if the last month had not showed her that; but her thoughts had been so full of another man, she never for a moment gave a thought to his pain. She looked on him with fear and hate, and when hate gave place to toleration, the fear still remained; for might he not at any moment compass her lover's death? For herself she did not hate him — does ever any woman really hate the man she is assured loves her even to his own hurt? — but she hated him for the power he held.

Then she softened; she was sorry for him for a brief moment.

‘Are you sick?’ she asked.

‘Sick, child!’ he rose up and laid a trembling hand on her shoulder.

‘No, I'm not sick. Jenny, Jenny, won't you ever understand? How long are you going to keep me hanging on like this?’

She took one swift glance at the face bending over her, then she looked down again, and with restless fingers began pleating her skirt into folds, as she had done on the day the Commissioner had questioned her. It disagreeably reminded the man beside her of that day, and he dropped on his knees beside her and took both her hands in his own.

‘Jenny, Jenny!’

Still she was silent. She was hardly the woman to speak.

‘Jenny, can't I make you understand?’

‘What?’

‘That I love you, child — that I want you! That I love you, and want you more than anything in the world!’

He put his head down on her lap now and put her cool hands — her little toil-hardened hands — against his burning face; but though she did not resist, she sat silent and said nothing.

‘Jenny, won't you even be sorry for me?’

‘No one ain't ever happy,’ she said, out of the depth of wisdom she had learned the last few weeks.

‘Oh, child, you could make me the happiest man on earth! I should have nothing to wish for if you were my wife.’

‘You're wrong,’ she said, speaking a truth almost unconsciously — ‘you're wrong. I couldn't make no man happy;’ and she sighed, for she knew that with all her passionate love Dave Anderson had never been content for long in her society. ‘I couldn't make no man happy, least of all you;’ and she thought of the only reason she had for marrying him, and for a moment with all her heart she pitied the man who loved her so well, and for all his love received but a stone.

‘You would, you would! Oh, Jenny, no woman has ever cared for me. Oh, Jenny, if you would but try! I don't want you to love me, dear, but just let me take you away and take care of you. I would be so good to you, my darling, so good; only let me try.’

He raised his face in the moonlight, and she saw how haggard and worn it looked. Ignorant as she was, she could have cried aloud at the contrast. This man loved her with his whole soul, and the other — the other — allowed her to love him sometimes; and yet — and yet — for the sake of this other man she was prepared to lay down her life, was fully prepared — if need were — to sacrifice for him the man who loved her. A great pity for him filled her soul; she would save him in spite of himself if she could. Instinctively she felt he was worth something better than this.

She touched his face gently with her hand, and pushed back his hair from his forehead.

‘Don't,’ she said, and for the first time in his ears her voice sounded infinitely kind and tender, ‘don't you be makin' a fool o' yourself lovin' me. I ain't worth it. Go away an' leave me.’

If she had deliberately set herself to win him, she could not have done better, could not have made herself more dear. This thought for him was more than he had ever expected, more than he had hoped for.

‘Hush, hush! I won't have you speak of yourself like that. Only be my wife, dear, only be my wife, and I will show you how I care.’

Still she shook her head.

‘Don't have no truck wi' me,’ she said, and there was distress in her tones; ‘I won't never bring you no good.’

Was ever man warned in this fashion?

He rose from his knees then, and caught her in his arms as he had been longing to do all the evening.

‘My sweetheart — my wife!’

She lay quiet there, only saying one more word of warning, but he closed her mouth with kisses — kisses such as he had given to no other

woman; and the girl shut her eyes and wondered for a brief space if here she should find peace.

Then she thought again of Black Dave, and for his sake lay still and unresisting in this man's arms. He sat her down on the stone again, and looked down at her proudly.

'You belong to me now.'

'Yes,' she said sadly; 'but you'd be wiser to let me go.'

'Leave me to judge that, my little sweetheart' — he put a caressing hand on her hair — 'you'll say different when we are married.'

He thought of her wretched home — thought how he would surround her with comforts, how he would teach her to appreciate better things. And she — she knew nothing of these things, wanted them not, wanted only to be with Black Dave again or to die.

'It mun be nigh on time to go home,' she said.

'Yes, yes, to be sure. It would never do to keep you out here late.'

She had never thought of that, did not understand the thought and care for her which made him let her go. He put his arm round her as they walked, and she had to put a restraint upon herself and crush down a longing to shake it off. She had to remind herself that she belonged to him, that he had a right to put his arm round her. It was the price she was paying for Black Dave's freedom. When they came to the creek he helped her across the stones, laughing like a boy in his new-found happiness.

'Must take care of you,' he said; 'you belong to me now, you know.'

On the other side she stood still a moment, and tried once again to make him see what he was doing.

'Don't, don't, don't!' she pleaded; 'I ain't the sort for you — I ain't indeed!'

'But, my little girl, can't you let me be the best judge of that? I'll be so good, dear; don't be afraid of that.'

'I ain't afraid. 'Tisn't of myself I'm thinkin'. I'm all right; but I won't never make you the wife you think for.'

'Jenny, Jenny' — no words of his could have told how good he thought her, could have possibly measured his happiness; that she should think for him, his tender little girl — 'dear, I want you, if you'll only take me; and, before God, I don't care what price I pay for you!'

She dropped her hands helplessly down beside her.

'Tain't my fault,' she whispered; 'deed 'tain't my fault — remember that!'

He did not understand her, he hardly thought she understood herself; he saw she was desperately in earnest, but he was so intoxicated with success he cared little what she said, so long as she submitted to his caresses, so long as she agreed to be his wife.

'I'll not forget,' he made answer, as solemnly as she had spoken;

‘never, never!’ and he stooped and sealed it with a kiss on her lips.

In silence they walked back to the bar again, where a bull-dance was in full swing, and at the door, panting and hot, they met Sal Carter coming out to cool herself after a wild romp round with Pard Derrick for a partner.

‘Mrs. Carter,’ said the sergeant gravely, ‘your daughter's going to be my wife.’

Sal stopped short and flung her hands up above her head. She had hardly expected her plans to be so successful all at once.

‘My! Sakes alive! Who'd a' thought it? Well, Jen, you do surprise me! What 're you goin' to do now?’

‘Going to bed,’ said the sergeant with newborn authority. ‘Mrs. Carter, I can't have Jenny dancing here any more.’

‘Lawks-a-daisy me, ain't we gettin' stuck up! All right, sergeant; I'll see that she don't.’

Jenny went in, and the trooper, feeling as if he were walking on air, made his way back to the police camp.

Next morning, when he interviewed the Commissioner to receive the orders for the day, he had a request of his own to prefer.

‘Please, sir, the hut where we used to store the gold?’

‘Yes, sergeant.’

The Commissioner and his clerk were just sitting down to breakfast, and he was very intent on the well-cooked mutton-chop before him.

‘I — sir — would there be any objections to my building another room to it and living in it?’

‘You, sergeant! Why, aren't you comfortable enough where you are?’

‘Yes, sir; but the fact is, sir — — ’

The sergeant paused. He really was not equal to putting his happiness into words.

‘Well, sergeant?’

‘Fact is, sir,’ he blurted it out hurriedly, ‘I was thinking of getting married, sir, if there's no objection.’

Mr. Anderson, who was young, and apt to express his feelings occasionally in an unseemly manner, gave vent to a long, low whistle, and the Commissioner laid down his knife and fork and looked his sergeant straight in the face.

‘It's a little unusual, certainly,’ he said gravely; ‘but no — really I can see no objection to your having the hut if you like. Who is the lady, may I ask?’

‘Thank you, sir. Jenny Carter, sir.’

‘I wish you luck, sergeant.’

‘Thank you, sir;’ and the sergeant saluted and turned on his heel.

‘Won, by all that's holy!’ cried young Anderson. ‘I never thought she'd have him. I suppose you'll stand the champagne, sir? My word! won't he

be doing a big repentance before this time next year!

Chapter X

His Wife.

‘ There was a man, and his wife, and a tertium quid. ’

Rudyard Kipling

‘WELL, sergeant, and what do you think of matrimony now you've had a month of it?’

The Commissioner stopped his horse at the door of Sergeant Sells' hut, and looked down at the untidy girl sitting on the doorstep slowly peeling potatoes. It was Jenny's morning's work, and she was taking her time about it. There was nothing to hurry for that she knew of. Her husband stood beside her, and put his hand to his cap in salute.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said, with a grave smile; ‘I find it very pleasant, sir.’

He could have wished that Jenny had not chosen her front doorstep on which to peel her potatoes, that she had done her hair that morning, and that she would rise when the Commissioner spoke to her. But she took no notice of him, and the trooper felt it incumbent on him to make up for her want of manners by being more respectful himself.

‘Well, well, you're a lucky beggar! The only man on the camp who's got a wife to look after him. Good-morning, Mrs. Sells.’

Then he rode off, and the sergeant said a little sharply:

‘Jenny, why didn't you stand up when the Commissioner came along?’

‘Did I oughter?’ she asked submissively. ‘Next time I will.’

Her husband muttered something inaudible, and went off to the stables in anything but an amiable frame of mind.

It was a month now since he and Jenny had been married, fully two since that memorable night when he had gone up the gully with her. There had been nothing to wait for — nothing. Once it was settled they were to be married, he had been anxious to get it over. He was keen on getting the girl he loved, and taking her away from the surroundings of a public-house, and such a one as the Lucky Digger. Sal Carter was as eager as he. The girl was tired and weary, out of health and out of spirits, fretting, as she knew right well, for Black Anderson, and she honestly believed that marriage was the best thing for her.

As for Jenny herself, she was indifferent. If she was to marry the sergeant to-morrow, or a year hence, the marriage would be equally

distasteful to her, and she was only reconciled to it by the thought that the preparations for the event kept the sergeant so busy he had not nearly so much time to give to the hunting down of Black Anderson, who, she thought, occupied as much of his thoughts as he did of hers. That she might help this man just as effectually by not marrying the sergeant never occurred to her. Her mind was only capable of holding one idea at a time, and this was firmly fixed there. She must marry the sergeant, and when her stepmother hastened on the marriage she neither hindered nor aided.

Sergeant Sells was very busy. He employed a rough Bush carpenter to add another room to the hut, and a sort of lean-to, which was to serve as a kitchen. He sent to Beechworth, and even to Melbourne itself, to get furniture that should be both good and comfortable; indeed, so many preparations did he make that both the Commissioner and his clerk were wont to smile at the thought of his considering so much necessary for a girl accustomed only to the rough living and rougher accommodation of the Lucky Digger. But he was very much in earnest about it, very determined that his wife should be comfortable and happy and lack for nothing. Possibly, too, this steady hard work might keep down any misgivings that might arise as to the wisdom of the step he was taking. Once the matter was settled, he did not have many opportunities of seeing Jenny alone. Sal Carter saw to that. She saw plainly enough that the marriage was distasteful to Jenny, but, like many another woman, she held the faith that she would be happy enough once she was married, and so she took care that the sergeant should have no opportunity of making that discovery for himself. It chafed him to find Jenny always busy whenever he wanted her to himself, to find that she was called away after she had been in his society for ten minutes, when he did manage to get her, and it made him all the more determined to push on the marriage.

And yet misgivings would arise — misgivings he stifled as soon as they were born. Why was she so apathetic and silent in his company? She had nothing to say to him — nothing. She submitted to his caresses; was it not his right? But she never returned them. She answered his questions, but she never made a remark; only when he got on the subject of Black Anderson and the murder of German Max did she ever show any interest at all, and then if his capture were spoken of as at all probable, she would get excited and declare with hot tears that she had brought him to the gallows. Sergeant Sells soon found there was only one way to soothe her — to pretend that he had all but abandoned the search. He did not wonder at her agitation. He thought, as her stepmother said, she was an innocent little thing, who could not bear the thought of being instrumental, even in the smallest degree, in bringing a murderer to justice. She was infinitely dear to him — infinitely dear; just to call her his own seemed to him all he would want. And so he stifled all

misgivings, and told himself that once they were married it would be quite different.

And so they had been married quietly one morning in March, and he had brought his wife home to the little house he had spent so much time and trouble and money over for her sake, and now this bright sunny morning in April, as he walked slowly towards the stables, he asked himself over again the question the Commissioner had put to him. What did he think of matrimony? Had it brought him all the happiness he hoped for? The men grooming their horses behind the gold-tent noted the frown on the sergeant's face, and put extra vigour into their arms, and drew long sibilant hisses between their teeth to show their zeal and ardour. But they might have spared themselves the trouble; it was not on them he was sitting in judgment, but upon himself and his wife. And the frown deepened, as he admitted to himself that his dreams were but as the false mirage, and that he had made a mistake. Yes, he had made a mistake, and there was no undoing it. Not that Jenny was not dear to him; he had fallen in love with her against his better judgment, and she was passionately dear to him still. But — and the knowledge was very bitter to him — though she was his wife, she was absolutely apart from him. He was no nearer to her, nay, he was farther away from her than he had been that night down in the gully when she had agreed to be his.

She had told him then, with a burst of passion he sometimes thought he would give the rest of his life to see again, that she was not the wife for him, and he had insisted on having her in spite of her warning. He had thought to make her so happy, and she shrank away from him as if she were afraid. He had thought to make her comfortable, and she gave no thought to comfort, but let her three little rooms get into a state of untidiness that tried his neat soul sorely. It brought him into bad repute with the men, too. If he reproved a man — as he not infrequently did — for not keeping his tent in order, or his accoutrements in the high state of perfection the sergeant and the Commissioner thought proper, even if the man did not say anything, he read in his grin, as he looked up, that he was thinking that the sergeant's wife had thrown all her potato-parings and beef-bones out at her front-door, and that all his shirts were hanging out of the parlour window. He would go home then and look reproach at his wife.

He was never harsh to her, whatever he might be to others — he dreaded so to see her shrink away from him; he only prayed her to amend, and she would promise dully, stupidly, and next day things would be as bad as ever. He had dreamt they might hold sweet communion together: he would teach her to care for the things he cared for; what delights had he not dreamt of? And behold, before a week had gone over his head, he had learned that his dreams were vain.

She was only eighteen, but she went about like a woman who was tired

of her life. He could not interest her in anything that interested him. It seemed hopeless to try. She persisted in regarding herself as his drudge, the woman who cooked for him, washed for him, mended for him. He had bought her at a price, though he did not know it, and she shrank away from his society as much as possible. That she should keep him company was not in the bargain at all, and as long as she served his meals regularly she felt she had done all that was required of a wife. It was the whole duty of a wife, as she had learned it from personal observation, and her father had always seemed satisfied enough. Her husband, a lonely man always, a lonelier man now than ever he had been before, used to come and stand over her as she worked, would offer to help her wash up the dishes, would carry in the wood for her fire. He watched her till she grew uneasy under his gaze; he would gladly have made her talk: he would have given all he was possessed of to hear her laugh happily; but he could do no more. If he spoke — and the effort it was to find conversation none but himself knew — she answered him in monosyllables, if possible just by a movement of her hand or head, and he would puzzle his brains for something more to say.

She was not at her ease; she was longing always, it seemed to him, to slip away down to the Lucky Digger, there to lie down on the flour-sacks and talk to her stepmother, or, rather, listen to her stepmother talking. She looked happier then — not very happy, but at least much happier, for he, searching for her, had come upon them once or twice, and had seen her face cloud when he appeared on the scene. He grew jealous of Mrs. Carter. No man could have felt more bitterly against his mother-in-law than did this man who was at least eighteen years older than she. He laid all his dissatisfaction and unhappiness at her door. He thought she prejudiced his wife against him, whereas poor Sal Carter grieved in her heart for Jenny's unhappiness, and in her own rough way pointed out his good qualities, and preached patience to his wife. But he did not know this, and it was always with a deep frown that he entered the place and harshly ordered his wife off home. Jenny hated him then, and Mrs. Carter was apt, as she put it herself, to feel 'wrathy.'

'If he only knowed it, I'm the best friend he's got,' she said to Jenny.

'I'm afeard o' him,' said the girl wearily. 'He sets there o' nights an' looks an' looks at me till I'm fair mazed.'

'Don't he talk, then?'

'Oh, whiles. But what'll I do, Sal, if it's allus goin' to be like this? He just sets there glarin' at me, an' no matter what I'm about I can feel he's lookin'.'

'Lord!' sighed the other, 'what'd some women give to have a man as was that set on them! I'd jump up if I was you, an' put my arms round him and give him a soundin' smack. He'd like it a lot, mebbe, an' it sorter rouses things up a bit.'

But Jenny would not follow Sal Carter's well-meant advice, and her husband, never knowing she gave it, hated her cordially, and ended up by telling his wife he couldn't have her going down to her father's place so often, which made her hate him, and even caused his champion to opine that 'he was a bit harder than she thought for.'

And all Jenny's sacrifice, it seemed to her, had been for nothing, for the very day after her wedding she heard from her husband's own lips that Black Dave Anderson, as far as he knew, had got away across the border nearly a month before, soon after the murder, in fact, and was heard of as having shipped in a barque bound from Sydney to San Francisco.

'And we worked ourselves to death all through the hot weather scouring the ranges, and all the while he was safe on the high seas. It's enough to make a man swear. Of course, it mayn't be him; but I think it's very likely.'

And Jenny made no answer. She never did answer if she could help, but that random speech of the trooper's spoilt the last feeble chance of happiness he had had in his married life. It had all been in vain, the sacrifice she had made — all in vain. She had married the man she feared; the thing was done, and could not be undone; and — and — she supposed she'd got to live through her life somehow. She never thought of her husband — never thought it was hard on him, never thought that his love and care for her deserved at least some gratitude. He was a cold, reserved man, who inspired her with awe and fear; his very love for her made her afraid, and though she listened patiently to her stepmother's remonstrances, they had no effect upon her. Always in her mind there was the thought that he had wanted her, and he had got her, and if he was not satisfied, that was not her fault.

Jenny was a gentle, tenderhearted little thing, and if she had only guessed the agony of longing in the weary man's heart, her own would surely have gone out to him in pity, if not in love; but she did not understand, she could not see, and every day they drifted farther and farther apart. There were lines in the trooper's face that had not been there a month ago; there were more gray hairs in the black hair, and he was sterner than ever. The general opinion of the police camp was that he was too hard on his wife, she was such a quiet, crushed little thing; while down among the diggers all sorts of absurd stories of his cruelties were rife. Probably the only person on Deadman's who thoroughly understood and sympathized with him was Sal Carter, and if she had only had a free hand she might possibly have brought about an understanding in the very first fortnight. But she was sorely handicapped. Once married, the sergeant would have nothing to do with her, hardly even could he bring himself to speak civilly to her; and Jenny, though she listened to her good advice, never even attempted to put it into practice. And so the days went on, crawled on, it seemed sometimes to him, and here they were

half-way through April; there was a pleasant sharpness in the air sometimes — a herald of the coming winter; and the heat of the summer was past and gone. Jenny sat on her doorstep and peeled potatoes in the sunshine. It was the very perfection of a day, with a warm sun and a cool, gentle breeze; and the girl sitting there could not but feel the young blood stirring in her veins. Surely it was good to be alive on a day like this, good to be just alive. Why should she be unhappy? She listened to the noise and bustle of life all round her; the men were singing cheerily enough at their work — why should she alone, among all these people, be unhappy? She rebelled against her destiny for a moment, and, once her husband was out of sight, began humming a little tune to herself.

‘ “Hard times” ’ — she sang cheerfully — ‘ “hard times, come again no more.” ’

She wished she could go down and see Sal and have a game of romps with the children. She *would* go down that very evening when she had got her husband's tea ready; he shouldn't stop her, why should he? She watched ten or twelve red-shirted men going up to the Commissioner's tent with leathern bags in their hands. They were lucky diggers, she knew — men who had found gold over and above what sufficed to keep them straight at the store, and were coming to deposit it in the gold-tent for safe keeping, for, jeer as they might at the ‘beak’ and the ‘traps,’ there was not a man among them did not feel more comfortable with his superfluous gold-dust safe in the gold-tent and the Commissioner's receipt in his pocket. She watched them with interest, for they were all personally known to her, mostly by some ridiculous nickname. There was Chinky Jack, Sailor Joe, Chunky Smith, and Bull Parkins, and last of all her old friend Pard Derrick. The others looked at her, nodded to her, and gave her ‘Good-day’ as they passed; but none ventured to approach the sacred precincts of the sergeant's hut except Pard Derrick. He strolled away from the others, and came towards her with his hands in his pocket.

‘Good-day, missus,’ he said.

Jenny smiled up in his face, and Pard was emboldened to settle himself comfortably up against her door-post.

‘Where's the boss?’ he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the interior of the hut.

‘Gone out,’ she said.

‘Certain sure?’

‘Lor, yes! I saw him over there by the gold-tent. He won't be back till dinner-time.’

‘Anybody else in the house?’

‘No.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yes, in course.’

‘No one listenin'?’

'No, in course not,' she said again, a little impatiently this time; 'ain't I just looked? Besides, whoever should there be?'

'I dunno. But I'm wantin' to speak to you about a matter of life and death.'

'Go ahead,' she said indifferently.

'Look inside first.'

Obediently she rose from her lowly position and went through the little house. Then she came back and sat down again.

'I told you so. There ain't nobody.'

'You won't be scart, mind. You won't holler out an' bring the whole boilin' about our ears?'

She looked up at him through her thick yellow lashes, and a look of fear crept into her brown eyes.

'No, I won't,' she said determinedly. 'Only be quick, now.'

'Black Dave wants to see you.'

'What?'

Her face was white as ashes now, and Derrick went on hurriedly:

'He said he guessed you wouldn't go back on him, if you had married a trap, and he wants to see you real bad. I don't hold with it all mysel'. It's playin' it a bit low down on the sergeant, an' I wouldn't a' come anigh you only the blanky cards was agin me. The joker an' the two bowers twice runnin', and then the right bower, ace, king, queen, and another ace, and me wi' nothin' better nor a king an' sevens an' eights. What was a feller to do?'

Jenny pushed away the tin basin in which were her potatoes, and folded her hands tight in her lap. Pard Derrick might have doubts as to the fairness of his conduct, she had no doubts about her own. Her whole soul was filled with a great gladness — she would see Black Dave again; he wanted to see her 'real bad.' He was not gone away into unknown countries, where she should never see him again; he was here close at hand in the ranges.

For the moment, in her gladness, she never even thought of the danger for both of them. She certainly never thought of her husband, save as a difficulty to be got out of the way, as she had thought of her father two or three months ago, when he was in a bad temper, and threw difficulties in the way of her meeting her lover. She never thought what a wrong she was doing him. She had always felt, ever since she had known him, that she belonged to Black Anderson, and his lightest wish was law to her. She had not seen him, had not even heard of him, for two long months, and the thought of stopping away, the thought that it would be right to stop away, never occurred to her.

Pard Derrick went on, since she did not speak:

'I ain't sayin' you oughter go. I'm thinkin' you'd much best not. There ain't no need for it any way. He was sayin' you had gold o' his, not much,

but a little, an' you was to bring that. But you can give it to me. I'll take my Bible oath, if you like, I'll give it 'im safe!

'I'll go,' she said quietly. 'Where is he?'

'He'll be waitin' for you in the old place any time to-night. He ain't in any hurry now the trap has taken to lettin' him alone; but now I've told you, missus, you'd much better not go. I'll be there an' tell 'im you couldn't come. You give me his bag an' I'll see he gets it safe enough.'

'You don't know what you're talkin' about, Pard Derrick,' said the girl; 'I'm goin', you just tell him that. If I can't get to-night, it'll be to-morrow night, or the night after; but I'll come sure as fate. Tell him that.'

'You won't let on to the traps?' he said, a new thought striking him.

She looked him up and down scornfully.

'He knows me better'n that,' she said. 'You tell 'im I'll be at the old place by the creek to-night, an' he must jest look out for me. The p'lice ain't lookin' for him now. They sorter think he's clean off to Frisco.'

'It's playin' it mighty low down on your man, missus,' ventured this messenger of love; but Jenny took no notice, only the thought passed through her mind that she would warn Black Dave not to trust Pard Derrick; it seemed to her he took too much interest in the police.

'I wish I hadn't promised to do the blanky thing,' he muttered remorsefully; 'but two bowers an' the joker! Lordy! what could a feller do?'

Chapter XI

To This Last.

'The loftiest and purest love too often does but inflame the cloud of life with endless fire of pain. — 'Sesame and Lilies.' Ruskin.

JENNY'S face looked innocently happy, as he had not seen it look since the day the German was murdered, and he saw that any remonstrance of his would be thrown away. She would go to her lover if a dragon stood in the way, and he turned away with a muttered 'Good-bye.'

'Won't you have a nobbler?' she asked, with ready hospitality, for women in little things are meaner than men, and it never occurred to her that he would refuse.

'No,' he said, and with a muttered curse, whether for the falseness or the faithfulness of women he could not himself have told, he turned away and went back to his claim again; and when on the road he saw Sergeant Sells advancing towards him, he moved out of his path as a man who had done him a great wrong.

The sergeant certainly never gave a second thought to Pard Derrick. He was wondering if they two would get on better if they were not so much alone. Suppose he asked a comrade in to tea occasionally; perhaps, under cover of his presence, he would find himself able to speak more easily to his wife, possibly she might get to address him as a matter of course. It was rather a forlorn hope, and he laughed a little cynically to himself as he thought how it would sound that a man who had been married just a month should ask a comrade in in order that he might the more easily get acquainted with his own wife. No, he would, not like his mates to know that. Still, there was nothing else to be done, and when he dismounted at his own door, he had quite made up his mind as to his future course.

'Jenny!' he called, 'Jenny!'

'Yes.'

'Have something nice for tea, will you? I'm going to ask Tom Clark in.'

'All right.'

It would be a good thing, she thought, if he had a friend to keep him company; he could not watch her so closely. She would be able to slip away so much the more easily; and she set the mid-day meal so

cheerfully, moved so differently from her usual listless manner, that her husband would have been blind if he had not noticed it. He set it down to pleasure at the prospect of company other than his, and the reflection gave him so much pain he had half a mind not to ask Tom Clark, and to abandon his project altogether.

But he did not like to go back on his word, so that night Trooper Clark sat down to tea with his sergeant and his wife.

And the experiment was not a success. Hardly had they sat down before he saw that for himself. If he could not speak to his wife alone, he could find no words at all with the big, shy trooper sitting alongside him. His wife was evidently not interested in Clark, though she looked brighter than he had seen her for many a long day. He addressed a remark to her now and then shyly, and she smiled back in reply, but did not speak, and it was always some time before he could summon up courage to try again. As for the host, he racked his brains for some trivial remark to make in vain, and relapsed into stony silence with an uncomfortable feeling that his guest must see how the land lay, and must be reading him through. As a matter of fact, Trooper Clark did no such thing. He was so much in awe of the sergeant himself that he did not wonder at the silence of his wife. He only wished her husband would go out and let him have 'a go in' with her alone. She had never taken any notice of him down at the Lucky Digger, but he felt sure that, after having lived alone with Sergeant Sells for one whole month, she would be only too glad to vary the monotony. But Sergeant Sells did not express the least intention of going away.

Jenny cleared the table when they had finished, and he called to his guest to fill his pipe and come and sit by the open window. The evening was fresh and cool, the sky cloudless, and the rising moon made the whole of the camp visible. From where they sat they could plainly see the Commissioner and his clerk at dinner in their dining-tent, and knew that the lamp Jenny had lighted and put on the table before she went out into the kitchen must make them also plainly visible to any looking on. They had nothing to say to each other, those two, and they listened to the sounds of the washing-up coming through the thin wall from the kitchen beyond.

Trooper Clark wished he was there helping to wash those plates and dishes instead of smoking his pipe in state in the parlour, and Sergeant Sells wished he was there too. He was not going to take Tom Clark there. He wished he would go; he wished he had never asked him. And the washing-up went on apace, and Jenny even crooned a little song to herself, a song her husband had heard her sing when first he had made her acquaintance, nearly eight months ago now. She had never sung since she had been his wife. He wished his guest would go, that he might take advantage of this unwonted cheerfulness. Perhaps she would have

talked to him to-night, if there had not been a stranger present.

But Trooper Clark could not possibly know how ardently his absence was wished for; so he smoked stolidly on, deriving a certain amount of pleasure from watching the progress of the Commissioner's dinner, and listening to the soft singing in the next room. Presently a young lady rode up to the Commissioner's tent, a young lady and another man; and Trooper Clark chuckled as he pointed out to his host that they were Miss Winifred Langdon and her brother Bob, a fact which the sergeant knew as well as he did. Then the curtain of the tent was suddenly drawn, as if to keep out prying eyes, and there was nothing left for Tom Clark to do but listen to the singing and watch for stray troopers to cross the moonlit square among the white tents, and the sentry pacing slowly up and down in front of the gold-tent. Then the singing stopped, the last plate was put away, and Jenny entered the room where the two silent men were sitting. She did not sit down; she did not even look at them. She only entered the bedroom, and came out with a shawl over her head. Trooper Clark felt a twinge of disappointment, for he had thought she had smiled pleasantly on him; but her husband was fairly astonished.

'Why, Jenny!' he said.

She felt some sort of explanation was due. She knew he would not be pleased, but she hardly thought he would stop her with the trooper sitting opposite.

'I'm goin' down to father's,' she said.

Sergeant Sells looked at her. He could hardly forbid her before a stranger, and she had reckoned on that.

'But — but,' he began clumsily enough, 'you wouldn't be so rude as to leave Tom Clark here all alone?'

'Oh, he's got you! I ain't goin' to be long. Peter's that sick, an' I promised 'im a bit of puddin'. Sal ain't got much time for cookin'; she's got her two hands pretty full now I'm gone.'

It was true enough, he knew, that the child was ill. Might she not mean to be back soon? Should he not be making matters worse by making a fuss before a stranger, making himself out a thorough tyrant, who would not even let his wife go and see her little brother? So he said nothing, and his guest watched his hostess out of the room, puffed away resignedly at his pipe, and turned his attention once more to the sentry in front of the gold-tent. The sergeant pushed his tobacco-pouch towards him, and he filled another pipe and calmly smoked on; after all, it did not make much difference whether he smoked here or in his own tent: he was getting accustomed to the sergeant's silence, and he began to wonder how long it would be before Mrs. Sells came in, and whether he should stop till then or not. He rather thought he'd stop; the tobacco was uncommonly good, and it was a good thing to be on such friendly terms with his sergeant. It would look well before the other fellows.

Then Sergeant Sells got up, and began to walk restlessly about the room, and he wondered again if he'd better go. There was a frown on his face, too, and he kept looking at the clock. His wife had not been gone half an hour yet; he surely could not be expecting her back already. Then another thought struck him.

'I s'pose you'll be goin' down to meet the missus, an' bring her eh, sergeant?' he said.

Sergeant Sells looked relieved.

'Yes, yes, of course; I must do that, if you don't mind, Clark,' he said. 'She won't like coming up by herself. The child was sick,' he added, vainly trying to make excuses for what he felt was her unpardonable rudeness, 'and of course she had to go. If you'll excuse me, I'll go down and fetch her home.' How he wished with all his heart he could have said she would be expecting him, she would be disappointed if he did not come! 'But you stop here, I won't be long.'

'All right,' said Trooper Clark, settling himself back comfortably in his chair.

One of the other chaps would come across and talk to him, he thought, when the sergeant was gone, and it wouldn't be bad, and he watched him out of his own front-door with an easy mind. As a guest he felt more comfortable in his absence than in his presence.

Once outside, it did not take Sergeant Sells long to make his way down to the Lucky Digger. It was crowded with diggers, as usual, but only Buck Carter and a barman (engaged since Jenny's marriage) were serving out drinks. Neither Jenny nor her stepmother was there. He was glad of that. It gave him a comfortable sensation all over. He had forbidden her ever to go into the bar again, but he had not been at all sure that his wishes or commands would have any effect. So he was a happier man than he had thought, and he crossed the bar and spoke quite pleasantly to Buck Carter.

'Where's the missus?'

'Inside o' there, a-nursin' the kid,' growled his father-in-law. 'You kin go in if you want.'

He needed no second invitation, but, lifting the canvas screen, entered the living-room of the Carters. Sal was sitting by the window softly crooning to the child on her knee, but there was no one else in the room. He looked around anxiously as Mrs. Carter looked up.

'Eh, sergeant,' she said, 'is that you? Why, Jen's been gone this quarter o' an hour. In a mighty hurry she seemed, an' lookin' quite perky, she was.'

The sergeant's stern face lighted up with pleasure. So she had only gone for a few minutes, just to take the child the pudding she had promised him. What on earth had he feared? He snapped his fingers for the benefit of the tired, white-looking little chap on his mother's knee,

and said pleasantly:

'I've come straight down, and I didn't see her. It's bright moonlight, too. Wherever can she have got to?'

'Oh, likely as not you passed her on the road! If you was lookin' the other way she wouldn't say nothin'. She's home before you, I guess.'

He rose up hurriedly. What a fool he should look in Clark's eyes if his wife got home before him!

'Good-night, Mrs. Carter;' and he went outside again.

Then, as he stood on the dusty track that led up to the police camp, misgivings once more took possession of his soul. It was bright as day; his eyesight was clear as ever; he could not possibly have passed her. A man was leaning idly against the wall of the store, with an empty pipe between his teeth. His luck was bad, his tobacco-pouch was empty, and there was no more credit for him at the store.

'Say, partner,' he said, addressing the sergeant, as he paused and looked around him, 'was you lookin' for your old woman?'

The trooper nodded. He shrunk from discussing Jenny with a stranger; but, at least, there could be little enough harm in hearing from this man where she had gone.

'Because I seen her,' said the man — 'I seen her a-makin' for the creek. Gone to set down by them steppin'-stones, I guess. It's mighty purty down there, I've heard; but I ain't had no time for such luxuries myself'. But women likes 'em, bless you! I guess that's where you'll find her, partner; but don't you go for to tell her 'twas I set you on. It may be she's got a little game o' her own on, an' I'd be spoilin' sport.'

The sergeant recognised the man now; he was a digger the others called the Bandicoot, from his persistent ill-luck; but he was not going to listen to remarks on his wife, even in chaff, and with muttered thanks he turned away in the direction of the creek.

His pleasure had all gone. He was hardly uneasy as yet. She had been accustomed to cross the creek for quiet and coolness before she was married. Had he not found her there more than once? There was surely nothing to be alarmed about, nothing even to be vexed about, and yet, vaguely, he felt both alarmed and vexed. He made his way among the windlasses by the long line of cradles and tubs that lined the muddy creek — it was bright as day in the moonlight — and reached the stepping-stones. There was no sign of her there; but she might already have crossed, and if so, the thick scrub would hide her from view. He crossed the creek and entered the gully, and — he could hardly have told why himself — made his way very quietly along the narrow track that someone's feet had worn among the scrub and undergrowth.

He set down each foot very carefully, and moved aside the branches with his hands, so that not a snapping twig nor a rolling stone should betray his presence. Then he had qualms. Was it not mean so to spy on

his own wife? And he answered himself at once, it was not. Why had she said she was going down to see her little brother, and, instead of coming home, come here? With every precaution he took, his fear that something was wrong grew apace, and with it arose jealousy and anger. If there were anything wrong, and he found it out now, here, where he had wooed and won her, he would kill her, he knew he would, and prudence called on him to turn back, to turn back and rest content with questioning her in the morning. There was nothing wrong, he told himself again and again: what should there be? She was little more than a child, an unhappy child, whom he had married, and whose love he had failed to gain; what more likely than that she, feeling no companionship in him — he acknowledged it to himself bitterly — had stolen away to the place she had always chosen when she wished to be alone? Why should he doubt — why? He asked himself the question as he went on, and tried to answer it; but he failed utterly. He only felt that he must find out what had brought his wife here, and if it were only just to be alone in the quiet moonlit night, then would he beg her pardon with all his heart. Then another thought arose and comforted him.

If he found her here alone, as he had found her once before, might he not come to a better understanding? Perhaps here in the open he could beg her not to fear him and shrink from him, could tell her of his boundless love, could try to bring her a little closer to himself. The new hope took firm possession of him, and he found himself wildly longing for the moment when he should come up with her.

There was a slight sound in front of him, and he paused and peeped through the ti-tree scrub and overhanging creepers. It was a little more open just in front, and the moonlight showed him a break in the scrub where the soft grass grew free from all undergrowth. The creek ran down one side, and beside it cropped out a huge granite boulder, and stooping down beside this boulder, not ten feet away from him, was Jenny, his wife.

The shawl had fallen from her head, and lay in dark folds on the ground behind her, and with a small stick she was digging at the base of the rock. There was no mistaking her; the moonlight showed him every outline quite plainly, her yellow hair, with the stray curls falling over her shoulders, making her look younger and more childish than ever, and the pink frock, the first frock he himself had given her. It was getting untidy now, but it was not yet as ragged and torn as the lilac he had wooed her in. She looked a trim little figure stooping there, and not unhappy either, only somewhat anxious.

But what could she be doing — what could she be doing? The unhappy man watching her leaned back against the steep hillside, and covered his face with his hands. Something was wrong, but what — what? He put up a passionate prayer to his God that he might find her out in no wrong,

and then he looked again. So great was his love for her he was almost tempted to call aloud to her and warn her of his presence; but he restrained himself. He would never be happy now till he knew what it was she had come here for; it was hopeless to think of any such thing — he must find out the very worst; and he sank on his knees in the brushwood, and watched with all his eyes.

He had not to watch very long. She stood upright in a moment, and carefully looked all round her. Apparently she was satisfied that she was all alone, for she bent down again, and from the hole she had dug took out a little bag.

One glance showed him it was a bag, a leather gold-bag, such as every digger on the field used. It was full, too, and he wondered with a pain at his heart what his girlish wife was doing with a hidden store of gold, and where she could possibly have got it from. She did not look as if it had brought her any happiness; in truth, she handled it as if the very touch were repugnant to her, as indeed it was. It brought back to her all the shame and the sorrow she had well-nigh forgotten. It told her that in very truth her lover had been guilty of a cruel crime, for which she with all her tenderness could find no excuse. She had almost forgotten this in his absence. She had felt so tender and pitiful towards the hunted man, she had been so anxious for his safety, she had forgotten how richly he had deserved his punishment; but now the sight of the chamois leather bag brought it all back to her. She had hidden that bag out of sight as soon as she had the chance; she had felt she could not keep it near her, and she had stolen away and hidden it down beside the big granite boulder in the lonely gully, and there it had lain for the past two months, and now Dave wanted it. She sat down on a low stone, and turned the bag over and over in her lap, totally unconscious, poor child! of the eyes that watched her. Dave was to meet her here, but she supposed she must be too early; anyhow, he was not here, and she must wait a little for him.

All day long her soul had been full of the thoughts of seeing him once again. He was so much to her — so much; and she never gave a single thought to her husband. She had married him against her will, she had married him for Dave's sake; not all in vain might be her sacrifice, since he was still hiding in the ranges; and she never thought for a moment of the wrong she was doing, never thought that he might suffer. He was cold, stern, impassive; he was miles away from her; what did it matter about him so long as Dave was all right? She did not understand that her husband might suffer, she did not comprehend that he felt at all; if she had, she would have been pitiful, as she had been the day she warned him she was not the wife for him, down in this very gully. He had come out of his shell that day; even her half-developed mind had seen a little behind the screen of cold reserve, and she had done her best for him.

But that was two months ago, and she had forgotten all about it, or if

she remembered at all, remembered only she herself had been too excited, too overcome, to understand rightly what had happened to her. No, there had never been room in her heart for anyone but Black Dave, and there was none still. She owed no duty to anyone in the world but him, her marriage was nothing to her, and now at the very first opportunity she came to him again.

She had not much fear of being followed. She would be supposed to be down with Sal, and the sergeant would be sitting with his friend. That he would leave him to come after her she never for a moment supposed. The minute she had heard Trooper Clark was coming to tea she had felt her difficulties were ended. Her husband would suppose she was at the Lucky Digger, and her stepmother would suppose she was back at the police camp. If she were late, she would say she had gone and sat by the creek because the night was so fine; and if he were angry — well, she did not care for that. One way or another, it did not make much difference to her what he thought. She would have seen Black Dave again, and that was all her soul longed for.

Chapter XII

A Dead Love.

*'Ah! you that have lived so soft, what should you know of the night,
The blast and the burning shame, and the bitter frost and the fright?'*

'Rizpah.' Tennyson.

AND now she sat here waiting for Dave, turning over the gold-bag in her lap. She hated that gold-bag. She would gladly have thrown it into the deepest waterhole and forgotten its existence; but Dave wanted it, and that was enough for her. His word was law. She asked no questions; she took the gold from its hiding-place and waited for him; and her husband — close beside her, so close he could hear her very breathing, he could see every line, every curve of her figure, the dimples on her cheeks, the curling rings of her yellow hair, her restless sunburned hand, turning over the bag in her lap — watched and waited too. The time was long enough to her, Heaven knows, but to him it was an eternity. He had lost hope now; how could he dare hope? She was waiting — waiting patiently — for someone else!

All he had hoped for but a few minutes before stood out in his mind clear and bright; there had been a chance of happiness then, however faint, but now was there the ghost of such a thing? His wife, this innocent child as he had thought her, in spite of her evil surroundings, was false — false! It kept ringing in his ears: false — false — and without excuse — utterly false! His life had not been a happy one. He had been unloved and alone always, but at least no whisper of dishonour or disgrace had come nigh him. This woman, whom he had loved with all his strength, was dragging that good name in the dust.

She stood up in the moonlight and stretched out her arms, as if weary with long waiting. What a winsome thing she was! what a tender, lovable thing! The thought flashed through his mind that he would be content to die there and then only to know that so she was waiting for him. Should he step out and take her in his arms? Would it do the least good? If he went to her while she had that soft, tender, dreamy look on her face, if he told her again how he loved her, if he begged and prayed her to come back to him!

He cursed himself for a fool, for was she not waiting for another man?

That tender look on her face was called into being by her love for him; he, her husband, was but as a cipher in her life. But a month since her wedding-day, and she was waiting here alone at night for another man. It was not ignorance, it was not innocence; any woman, however ignorant, any girl-child not twelve years of age, would know better than that. Should he wait and see the play played out, or should he take her home there and then? Either way, there was no more hope of happiness for him — or for her, either.

He thought of that pitifully all through his anger and his sorrow as he watched the lithe, slender young figure pace up and down, slowly at first, then faster and faster, as if the waiting were becoming unbearable. Only eighteen, and she had spoiled her life, or a man had done it for her! The seven-and-twenty years that stretched away between them made him think pitifully of that; and he could do nothing — nothing; all his love and tenderness was powerless now!

Up and down she walked — up and down; then she stood still and stretched out her arms again.

‘Oh, Dave! Dave!’ she cried, with a cry that was almost a wail; ‘ain’t you never comin’?’

And the man kneeling, hidden by the screen of ti-tree and scented creeper, heard and comprehended, saw as by a flash of lightning the whole story laid bare before him. He had forgotten now the necessity of being quiet or lying hid. Still he knelt on there, trying to put together what he had just learned. It was true, then, what the camp had all said — it was true.

‘Dave! Dave!’ There was only one Dave — there could be only one Dave!

A lizard scuttled out into the open, right across her shawl, by the accursed gold-bag, right under her very feet, and into the creek on the other side. He heard the splash, or perhaps it might have been a water-rat; but he was sure he heard the splash. There was an owl hooting somewhere overhead — it had been hooting at intervals all the evening, but he had not noticed it before — and an owl hooting always meant trouble. The curlews, too, were crying, wailing mournfully like creatures in pain, and the wail came plainly over the hills.

Yes; it was Dave Anderson — Black Anderson — it must be he! there was no other Dave that he knew of; and so he had been tricked — tricked all through. He tried to arrange his thoughts, to remember the day when he himself had brought her to be questioned by the Commissioner, and had gone away glad and happy at the result. What had she said that day?

He tried to remember, but his brain was on fire; he could think of nothing but that Mr. Anderson had maintained she was Black Dave's sweetheart, and the Commissioner had pooh-poohed the very idea, and he had agreed with the Commissioner; and what had she said? What *had*

she said? He could not think; he could only remember how happy he had felt as he took her down to her father's home again. And Mr. Anderson had been right. He had scorned him in his heart as a mere boy, who knew nothing of women, nothing of life. And he had been right, after all. He had seen through her more clearly than the Commissioner, more clearly than he himself had done.

And now the owl was prophesying disaster, the curlews' wailing cry was in his ears, and they cried that the girl he had believed in had tricked him cruelly; had given not one thought to him; had tricked him for her own ends, or, worse still, for the ends of another man. He understood her cold, frightened indifference now — understood it only too well. Then she turned in her quick walk and faced him again. Standing there in the bright moonlight, her hands behind her head as if for support, he saw again how fair she was — this false wife of his; the brown eyes were wide open, gazing straight at him, love and tenderness in her face that were not for him; and she parted her red lips once more in a long sobbing sigh, 'Oh, Dave! Dave!'

He parted the brushwood then, crushed down the stiff ti-tree and the scented creeper, and in a second was beside her, with both his strong hands on her shoulders — cruel hands that held her hard, and bruised her soft flesh — and her gentle brown eyes were looking straight into his dark ones.

'Jenny!' his voice was so hoarse with passion she did not know it — 'Jenny! Jenny!'

It seemed at first he could do nothing but repeat her name, and slowly sway her backwards and forwards with the pressure of his sinewy hands. And she was too terrified to speak. She feared him for herself — she feared him still more for Dave. The very worst that could happen had happened, and she was dumb and paralyzed before it.

She had no excuse to offer, none; she felt, looking into those dark eyes, no excuse would avail her; they read her through. His hands were bruising her shoulders, but she did not cry out; she only looked straight into his face, and wondered what would happen next. She should never see Black Dave again — never, never — and she cared little what became of her. One gleam of comfort she had: Dave had not come. He would not come now; the sergeant should never take him, whatever he did to her. He should never know she had come here to meet Black Dave; he should never know, and then he would be as safe as ever, free to go where he would. Not a grain of pity was there in her heart for the stern man bending over her, not one grain. That he suffered she never thought. She knew she would suffer, and was prepared for it. Was not Black Dave's welfare dearer than aught else to her? She cared for nothing in all the world beside. She set her lips firmly together, and looked her husband straight in the face with the calmness of despair.

‘So,’ he said, ‘so,’ and it seemed he spoke with difficulty, ‘I have caught you. And who is he?’

She dropped her eyes and looked at the ground.

‘Tell me, who is he?’

Still there was no answer. She could not frame any excuse; she could think of nothing but the exact truth, and that she would not tell. She simply stood like a statue, dumb and powerless in his hands.

‘That — that’ — he stirred the chamois leather bag of gold lying on her shawl with his foot as if it had been some noisome, pestilent thing — ‘that — where did you get it? It is old Max's bag.’

A shudder ran through her frame, a shudder not caused by the strong hands that held her so tight; but she gave no other sign, and he wanted no other. He had known it all along. He thought her worse than she was. He counted her an accomplice; he thought she was sharing the spoils with her partner in guilt. And she was so dear to him, so very dear, all his life. Everything he possessed he would have given to prove her innocent, and he had just proved her guilty; and yet he loved her, with all his soul he loved her, even as she loved this other man.

‘Oh, Jenny!’ and the cry of pain went to her heart; ‘and I loved you so!’

She raised her eyes to his then.

‘I told you I weren't no wife for you,’ she said drearily, in half-protest.

He hardened again.

‘Where is Black Anderson?’ he asked, and he might as well have spoken to empty space. ‘Where? where? Jenny, I will kill you if you don't tell me!’

But she gave no sign.

Kill her! He could kill her; he had a right to kill her. Would not any other man do so under the circumstances? And he took his hand from her shoulder and put it to his belt. She saw the movement, but she did not shrink; perhaps she hardly noticed it. Something else had caught her eye, and he saw the face in front of him light up as it had never lighted up for him.

She opened her mouth then.

‘Run for your life, Dave! run, run! Never mind me.’

Sergeant Sells glanced over his shoulder then, and just caught a glimpse of a man's head and shoulders among the ferns and scrub; and then he raised Jenny up in his arms a moment, flung her from him with all his force, and the next she was lying white and still at his feet.

He dropped down on his knees beside her, and took one quiet hand in his. She was dead — dead; and he had killed her, the woman he loved! He forgot all else — the man he had seen in the scrub, her perfidy, everything but that she was the one creature in the world he cared for, and he had killed her: he had struck her head against the rock, and she

was dead. He had said a moment ago he would kill her, and he had done it; and now, looking down at the white face, he fully realized what he had done. He chafed the small hand gently, and noted the marks of toil upon it.

‘Oh, my poor little girl! my poor little girl! What a hard life it has been for you, and to end this way!’

He put his face down beside her quiet one, and kissed her again and again. Then he rose up quietly, took up the bag of gold which had brought such disaster on all who touched it, and went away back to the camp, straight across the creek, up the dusty track, and on to the Commissioner's tent. The lights shone through the closed curtains, and sounds of laughter smote on his ear, but he took no note of them. He pushed aside the curtains, and, without a word, stepped into the midst of the four people assembled there round the table.

‘Sir,’ he said, and they started to their feet as he came in hatless and with wild, bloodshot eyes, ‘sir, I have killed my wife!’

‘What!’

Young Bob Langdon put his hand on his shoulder, and the sergeant without being bidden dropped into a chair, and bowed his head on his clasped hands.

‘Oh, my God! I have killed my wife!’

Book II

Chapter I

Disappearance.

*'The day goeth down red darkling,
The moaning waves dash out the light,
And there is not a star of hope sparkling
On the threshold of my night.*

*'The waves of a mighty sorrow
Have whelmed the pearl of my life;
And there cometh to me no morrow
Shall solace this desolate strife.*

*'Gone are the last faint flashes,
Set is the sun of my years;
And over a few poor ashes
I sit in my darkness and tears.'*

Gerald Massey.

THE little company assembled in the Commissioner's tent looked at one another in astonished silence. Miss Langdon was just on the point of saying 'Good-night,' when the sergeant startled them with his intelligence, and now she stood there, tall, dark, and handsome, her habit gathered up in one hand, looking down at him pitifully.

'Oh, Jocelyn, there must be something awfully wrong!'

'Wrong!' interposed young Anderson — 'I should just think there must be! Never saw the sergeant knocked so completely off his chump before! The only thing is, what the dickens can it be? He can't have murdered his wife, you know. He ain't been married a month.'

'Sergeant!' said the Commissioner.

At the sound of his voice the habits of a lifetime came to his aid, and the sergeant rose to his feet.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said in a low, monotonous voice, out of which all life and passion seemed to have gone; and the four onlookers saw that his face was of a gray, ashy pallor, and his shoulders were bowed like those of an old man.

'What is this, sergeant?' asked the Commissioner kindly.

'I' — it seemed he had to moisten his dry lips before the words would

come — 'I have killed my wife, sir!'

'Nonsense, man! — you're dreaming!'

The girl standing by the table laid down her whip, and took up the chamois leather bag the sergeant had flung there on his entrance, and turned it slowly round. He watched her with fascinated eyes. Then young Langdon, who had his own ideas of what was the best thing to be done in an emergency, poured out a nobbler, filled it up with water, and pushed it across the table to him.

'Drink it, sergeant; it'll steady your nerves. And then tell us what's the meaning of all this.'

He took the proffered glass with a hand he vainly strove to keep still, and drank its contents.

'Now, sergeant?'

'I've killed my wife, sir.'

His voice sounded monotonous, hopeless. Evidently that was the only fact that had impressed itself upon him. All else would have to be dragged out of him by cross-examination.

'How, sergeant?'

The other three stood there listening, and the Commissioner motioned them with his hand to be silent.

'I — I — —'

He looked helplessly in his questioner's face, and then his eyes wandered off to the gold-bag Miss Langdon was fingering again.

'Come, sergeant, did you kill her on purpose?'

'No, no; I said I'd kill her, but, before God, I didn't think to do it!'

'I said he'd repent before the year was out,' muttered Anderson in Bob Langdon's ear; 'but, by heaven, I never thought it 'd come to this!'

'Where's your pistol?' asked the Commissioner, going on asking questions with what seemed to the woman beside him cruel persistency.

His hand wandered aimlessly to his belt. The pistols were there right enough.

'No, I didn't shoot her.'

'What did you do, then? Come, sergeant, this is waste of time!'

'I — I took her up in my arms. I — I don't know how it happened — her head must have hit against the rock, I think — I saw her lying there white and dead. I saw her — I saw her, sir — my little girl, that I — that I — —'

The four listeners could say nothing for a moment. Whatever it was, there had been a desperate tragedy in this man's life. But it was necessary to come to the bottom of this, and the Commissioner asked again:

'Where were you, sergeant?'

'Up in the gully at the head of the creek, sir.'

'At this hour of the night? What the devil were you doing there?'

'I — —' The sergeant paused; but the whole shameful truth had to

come out sooner or later, there was no hope of saving her good name, and he went on with a visible effort: 'I followed my wife, sir.'

'Your wife?' The Commissioner hesitated. Officers of the law are but men, after all, and it seemed a cruel thing to ask this crushed and broken man what his wife had done that he should have felt it necessary to follow her. 'I am sorry for you, sergeant; but what did your wife go up the creek for?'

'I don't know for certain,' hesitated the sergeant, and his eyes were still on the gold-bag.

'You had some idea, though?'

'I thought — I mean — I think — — '

'Take your time, sergeant. Yes, well, you followed her up the gully? And what do you think she went there for?'

'I think — I think she went for that bag of gold.'

'Oh!' The Commissioner took up the bag as if its touch would elucidate the mystery. 'And where was the bag?'

'Buried by a big granite boulder, sir. I watched her dig it up.'

'Did she know you were watching?'

'No, sir.'

'You were hidden in the scrub, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir.'

It seemed to the wretched man only yesterday that he had stood by and listened to the Commissioner questioning his wife — who was not his wife then, and never ought to have been his wife — and heard her monosyllabic replies. And now she was dead, lying there at the foot of that great boulder, white and still in the bright moonlight, with her pretty yellow hair spread out across the soft, cool grass. And he had killed her — he, who loved her better than his life, had laid her there. The owl overhead was hooting the shameful truth; he heard it in the mournful wail of the curlews that came fitfully over the ranges. Then he started, for he was in the Commissioner's tent. In front of him was the dining-table, with a disorderly array of tumblers and glasses and decanters on it; the Commissioner was speaking to him with a ring of pity in his voice, and a woman was looking at him with pitiful dark eyes.

'What did she want the gold for?'

'I — I don't know, sir.'

'But you must have some idea, else why — — '

'I thought,' his voice was sunk to a hoarse whisper hardly under his own control — 'I thought she was going to give it to Black Anderson.'

The Commissioner started, and dropped the gold-bag, and his clerk gave vent to a long, low whistle, his favourite method of expressing astonishment.

'Black Anderson's got clean away to Frisco, man!' he said.

'I saw him to-night, though,' said the sergeant, like a man for whom

the worst has passed. It mattered not now what he said or did. He had told the very worst. 'I saw him to-night for a minute standing up among the fern, and I heard her say, "Run, Dave, run!" Then I — I — then I — —'

He put one hand on the table, and leaned heavily on it. Then he put his two hands together and wrung them like a woman in unspeakable pain.

'So it was true, after all, what they said about her and Black Anderson!' said Anderson impetuously.

'Oh, hush, hush!' cried Winifred Langdon pitifully.

She felt that the boy standing there could not realize this man's sorrow.

Then the Commissioner asked one more question:

'Do you think she went there to meet Black Anderson, sergeant?'

'Yes, sir.'

His head drooped on his breast. He stood there before them, those happy young people, a shamed and disgraced man. The Commissioner's future wife stood beside him, a tall, handsome, happy woman. His wife, younger by several years than she, lay out there in the gully, dead; and he had killed her, and worse still, oh, worst of all! he read in the eyes of these people, even in the pitiful eyes of the girl opposite, that they thought he had had a perfect right to kill her.

'Whose was this bag of gold?' asked the Commissioner sharply; and he opened it and poured out a little heap of yellow gold-dust and shining nuggets on to a newspaper in front of him.

'I don't know, sir.'

He ran his fingers through it as Jenny had done one fatal night, and turned up the little nugget in the shape of the cross with one arm.

'Now, that's peculiar,' said the Commissioner; 'any man who found that nugget would remember it.'

But no man there had seen it before.

'I remember,' said young Anderson, 'Pard Derrick telling me some time ago he ought to have the devil's own luck, for he'd found the Holy Cross with but a wee bit broke off. Could he have meant that, do you think?'

'We'll see about that in the morning. Winny, it's getting late, and I must — —'

'And I must go home,' she said.

Their horses were being walked up and down outside by an impatient and curious trooper, who had seen Sergeant Sells go in, and wondered what on earth he could have to say to the Commissioner at that hour of the night, that he should have dashed in so unceremoniously.

Bob Langdon mounted, and the Commissioner helped his sweetheart into her saddle in dead silence. Then she put her hand on to his shoulder.

'Jocelyn, what are you going to do? What will be done with that poor man?'

'I'm off at once to see if his story's true. He's so shaken and off his head that as likely as not he's exaggerating. I don't suppose she's dead. He knocked her down. I expect that's about the long and the short of it.'

'But, Jocelyn — that girl — and that other man?'

'Yes. I'm afraid there's not the shadow of a doubt she's been playing a double game. She's played the sergeant false, and — and — — Well, what is there to be said?'

'He looked like a man who had broken his heart,' mused the woman.

'Poor beggar!' said the man. Then, under pretence of seeing to her stirrup-leather, he stooped and managed to impress a lover-like kiss on her hand. Her brother called to her, and they rode off together.

The Commissioner went back to his tent again, where his clerk and Sergeant Sells were still standing.

'Now, sergeant,' he said, 'do you think you can take me and one or two troopers up the gully to where this occurred?'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right. We'll start at once. Anderson, you'll see to the safety of that gold? Wynne' — he called his orderly — 'get Jackson, will you, and be ready to start up the gully at the head of the creek with the sergeant and me in five minutes.'

Outside the tent again, the sergeant felt it cruelly strange that all things should be so unaltered. There was the round full moon sailing up in the sky, the white tents, the deep dark shadows. He looked behind him at his own house, the only wooden building on the camp. The light was still burning in the little parlour, and silhouetted in the open window he still saw his guest. What a lifetime he had lived through since he had sat opposite Tom Clark at tea!

Then they went down through the diggers' camp, passed the Lucky Digger, where the men were still shouting and singing in the bar, and crossed the creek. They were in the gully now, and the sergeant led the way without a word. Over rocks and logs, crushing the fern and water-plants and creepers, straight on in silence he led them, till at last they came to the opening, the little break where he had enacted the tragedy of his life. Then he drew back. He could not, he would not, look at her dead face.

'There!' he said hoarsely, and he pointed ahead with his finger.

The Commissioner pushed aside the ti-tree and creeper as he himself had done an hour before.

'Why, man — God bless my soul, sergeant! there's nothing here!'

In a moment the sergeant stood beside him, and the other two men quickly followed. It was light as day, but no sign was there of the girl he had left there dead.

'Sergeant, you've been dreaming. It was only a bad nightmare after all.'

He leaned up against the granite boulder for support. There — there he

had seen her lying dead. The men were looking at him curiously. They did not understand what they had been brought here for, and the Commissioner was searching round the little break in the scrub for some confirmation of his sergeant's extraordinary story.

'You see, sergeant, there is nothing.'

He silently pointed to the little heap of up-turned earth close at his feet.

'Any animal might have done that — a wombat, a bandicoot.'

'I wish to God, sir. I thought so! I saw her myself turning up the earth with that stick.'

It was lying there, a small stick broken off the ti-tree. Yes, looking again, the Commissioner thought that little hole was the work of human hands. But where was the girl? There was certainly no sign of her. One of the men picked up a uniform-cap on the edge of the scrub.

'Hallo, sergeant! Here's your cap.'

Evidently he had been here, thought the Commissioner, looking at him as he sat there on a ledge of rock, his arms resting listlessly on his knees, and his head drooped forward on his breast. He took the cap mechanically from the man, and dropped it on the ground beside him. The evening was cool, and the wind which came up the gully was quite chilly, but his head was too hot to bear a cap.

The Commissioner was at fault. He was thoroughly sorry for the sergeant, but he hardly knew what else to do. He certainly could not stop there much longer, and yet a certain delicacy made him hesitate before exposing his non-commissioned officer's private affairs to the two troopers standing by. He crossed over and stood beside him, and the sergeant rose to his feet wearily.

'It's true, sergeant, what you have been telling me? You don't think you could have imagined it? You haven't been drinking?'

The other shook his head.

'No, sir.'

'And where did you last see your wife?'

'Here, sir. Lying at my feet here, sir.'

'For Heaven's sake, man, let's get a clear understanding of the thing. Now, tell me, how did it all happen? Where did she hit her head?'

'I — she — — ' He hesitated, then went on more calmly: 'I was standing just here, and with my hand on her shoulder, when she called to the man behind me among the fern there! My God! I didn't care much what I did, and I lifted her up, and I flung her against the rock there. I think so. I can't say rightly what happened. I know I saw her lying white and still there. And I'd done it.'

'And the man?'

'I don't know. I don't rightly remember. I never thought of him.'

Commissioner Ruthven took a puzzled turn or two up and down the small clearing; then he turned to his orderly.

‘Wynne,’ he said, ‘you don't see any traces of anybody having been about here, do you? The sergeant swears he saw Black Anderson here among that clump of fern not an hour ago, and he declares he left his wife here. Where the dickens have they got to?’

Trooper Wynne's countenance was a study. To express all he felt would, he thought, hardly be consistent with the respect due to his superior officer; and with the sergeant within earshot — though, to be sure, he did not look as if he were paying much attention — it hardly seemed to him decent to give his true opinion of the sergeant's wife.

‘No, sir. We haven't seen any sign, sir. But if he left those two together — well, sir, it isn't for me to give an opinion, but all the camp knows she was always Black Anderson's girl. It's hard luck on the sergeant, but everyone knew how it would be!’

‘But the sergeant says she was dead when he left her — lying there dead on the ground by the rock there!’

‘Says he killed her, does he, sir?’ Trooper Wynne grasped the situation at once. ‘I thought there was something very wrong with the sergeant. Well, if he killed her, she'd be there; and if he didn't, perhaps the other man took her away with him. The sergeant's so off his head, he doesn't look as if he knew much about it.’

‘Possibly she might have gone back to her father's,’ said the Commissioner thoughtfully, but Wynne shook his head.

‘Not she, sir, if it was Black Anderson. She was always “dead nuts,” as they used to say, on Black Anderson. The sergeant oughtn't to have married her; but he was just mad after her; and they do say Sal Carter made the match. She was a good enough girl, to my thinking, was Jenny Carter — a little simple, perhaps, and wild about Black Anderson. If he was up here in the ranges — and likely as not he is — and she got wind of it, he'd but to hold up a finger and I'll bet the sergeant might go to pot, for all she'd care!’

‘The sergeant swears he killed her.’

‘It's a curious fact, sir,’ went on Trooper Wynne, emboldened by the puzzled Commissioner's thus discussing the matter with him, ‘how mighty fond some men are of saying that sort of thing. Now, I'll bet she was up the minute his back was turned, and off after the other man. It's hard luck on the sergeant, anyhow. He looks pretty well broken by it, doesn't he, sir?’

He did indeed look a broken man, thought the Commissioner, as he glanced at him; but much as he pitied him, this man's sorrow was not his sorrow, and if Black Anderson was anywhere about he must be followed up immediately.

‘I believe you're right, Wynne,’ he said. ‘I'm pretty nearly sure you're right. But now, the next thing is to take Black Anderson. He can't be far off, and a woman 'll hamper him.’

‘No woman's going to hamper Black Anderson, sir. He'll stick to her just so long as she's useful to him, and it must be deadly work all alone in the mountains. Then, when he's tired of her, he'll drop her like a hot potato. They count him a jolly sort of fellow, Black Anderson, but he's got no works. Don't you believe it, sir; no woman's going to hamper him!’

‘Poor girl!’ said the Commissioner pitifully. ‘Well, he can't have got far in an hour, anyhow. Do you know this place at all, Wynne?’

‘No, sir.’

Wynne glanced round. The steep, high hills shut them in on every side. The gully up which they had come was narrow enough, and it seemed to end in an impassable barrier of rocks which formed a wall right across. A little to the left, however, the steep rocks split into a narrow gorge, down which trickled the creek, but it was impossible any man could have come down that.

‘Seems a pretty stiff sort of place, sir, doesn't it?’ said Wynne, after his survey. ‘Easy as rolling off a log for the man that knows it, but a hard nut to crack for anyone else. He'll be miles away — miles away — while we're fooling round for a track.’

‘That's true enough,’ said the Commissioner. ‘Still, we must just look round for that track. If we can't find it, we'll get the trackers from Yackandandah to-morrow. Look alive now, you and Jackson, and see if you can't find a way they might have gone.’

Then he walked over to where the sergeant was standing.

‘Look here, sergeant, it's no use your distressing yourself like this. I don't think you killed her. Knocked her insensible, maybe; but you were too excited to notice the difference. Come, now, don't you think that's likely?’

The wretched man raised his face, and a gleam of hope shot athwart it.

‘My God, sir! If — if — — But where is she?’

The Commissioner looked away. Why was the moon so cruelly bright? It would have been easier to tell a thing like this in the dark.

‘She — I'm afraid, sergeant, she must have followed Black Anderson, if you're sure it was he you saw. Of course, she may have made her way down to the Lucky Digger; but from what the men say, I would not buoy myself up with any false hopes, if I were you.’

It seemed brutal thus to show him, thought the Commissioner, that he had been discussing his wife with the troopers; but put it as gently as he could, it would come to the same thing in the end, and, looking at his face, he did not think the misery could deepen there.

‘I would rather she was dead!’ he whispered to himself. ‘My God! even if I killed her myself!’

Chapter II

Foiled.

*'But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snowfall in the river,
A moment white — then melts for ever.'*

Robert Burns.

SELLS dropped down on the ledge of rock again, his arms hanging listlessly over his knees. Physically and mentally he was done, and the Commissioner, recognising that fact, turned away and went searching along the gully with the two troopers for some place where the two fugitives might possibly have passed or hidden. There was no getting further up the creek, that was soon seen, and a careful hunt along the hillside having failed to show a path of any sort, there was nothing for it but to scramble through the scrub where it seemed thinnest. But it was everywhere close and dense, and having reached the top of the hill the Gold Commissioner and his two troopers paused breathless.

'A mighty good place this for hide and go seek, sir, especially for those who hide. We couldn't see them if they were within a yard of us.'

'You're about right, Wynne, I think.' The Commissioner had just got his face badly scratched by a bough of the stiff ti-tree springing back and hitting him in his headlong career, and he saw plainly they might hunt there for a week without finding anyone who was desirous of keeping his whereabouts hidden. 'We'll go back, men.'

They scrambled back into the gully again, and picked up the sergeant, still sitting as they had left him on the ledge of rock, with his weary eyes fixed on the ground.

'Come, sergeant. We'll call in at the Lucky Digger on our way back.'

He rose up, and stood there looking as if he did not understand. His clothes hung on him as if he had shrunk somehow, and the bright moonlight, shining on his bared head, showed up the gray streaks in the black hair. Was it only the Commissioner's fancy, that there were so many more gray hairs to-night? Wynne picked up his uniform-cap and handed it to him.

'Come on, sergeant. It must be getting on for twelve o'clock.'

‘Only twelve o'clock. I thought — — ’

He stopped. Years and years had passed for him since he had entered that gully first that evening, but it would do no good talking about it. Some of the reserve he had always wrapped himself up in was coming back to him, and he followed quietly behind the others. At the Lucky Digger they stopped. But the Lucky Digger had got a virtuous fit on it for once, and every light was out, and the place shut up.

Trooper Wynne, at the Commissioner's order, shouted for the landlord, and a sleepy voice much muffled by bedclothes replied.

‘Here, I say!’ went on the trooper, ‘look alive there! The Commissioner wants to know if your daughter's come home.’

‘Who? What? Here, missus, I say! Missus — Sal!’

But Sal was up and at the bar-door, a ragged gown thrown round her, and a guttering candle in her hand.

‘Lord sakes, sir! what's this about Jenny?’

‘Isn't she here?’

‘No, sir.’

‘But she was here.’

‘Early in the evening, sir — only for a minute or two, sir. She said as her husband wouldn't let her stop.’

‘And she went straight back to the police camp, as far as you know?’

‘Yes, sir. Ain't she there, sir?’

‘No. Have you any idea where she would be?’

‘Lord no, sir! There's her husband. Don't he know?’

‘Is there anyone she'd go to if she was in trouble?’

‘Her, sir? There ain't a soul Jenny cared a straw about 'cept me an' the childer, an' — an' — — ’

‘Well, who else?’

‘Her husband, of course — the sergeant. Ain't he standin' alongside you?’

‘Now, Mrs. Carter, do you mean to tell me Jenny cared for her husband?’

‘Why, in course she did. Who else 'd she care for?’

The Commissioner looked at the woman. It was not much good questioning her; she was not going to own to anything.

‘Now, Mrs. Carter, look here! Whether Jenny cared for her husband or not, she's run away from him, and we want to get some clear idea of where she has gone to. Believe me, it's only for her good I'm asking.’

Sal Carter pondered, and with her disengaged hand made an effort to twist up her rough dark hair.

‘I allus done the best I could for Jen,’ she said; ‘if she'd been my own sister I couldn't ha' done different, I was that fond o' her, I was. A bit simple little thing, wantin' someone to look after her, an' I thought when she married the sergeant it 'd be all right.’

‘What's this talk I hear about Black Anderson?’ said the Commissioner, going straight to the point.

‘Get along with you!’ said Sal Carter, who was no respecter of persons; ‘as if the whole camp didn't know Black Anderson was away over the seas to California, an' a mighty good thing, too, for Jen. She done a sight better marryin' the sergeant.’

There did not seem much use prolonging the conversation, and the Commissioner turned away. The sergeant paused a moment, however.

‘If she comes to you, Mrs. Carter,’ he said hoarsely, ‘do what you can for her, for God's sake! It's true enough what you say: she's a simple little thing, and she doesn't understand what she's doing. She may want a woman's help. She's left me.’

Sal Carter raised her guttering candle; the grease was running down her fingers, and the light fell full on the man's white face.

‘Eh, but the world's a hard place, sergeant,’ she said. ‘She's left you, has she? And she'll rue the day bitter, I'll warrant. Eh! eh! it's the women like her an' the men like you's just made to suffer. Hard luck on you, ain't it? You was worth somethin' better nor that. And me thinkin' she'd be quite safe once Black Dave was away! I'd a' took my Bible oath she'd a' gone wi' no man but him.’

‘If she comes to you,’ repeated the sergeant, in a dull, monotonous voice, ‘do what you can for her. She's only a child.’

He turned away then; he had nothing more to say. And the Commissioner, looking back, saw the woman still standing in the doorway, shading the guttering candle from the wind with her hand.

‘I'm afraid your eyes did not deceive you, sergeant. It must be Black Anderson,’ he said in a low tone.

‘I *know* they did not, sir,’ said the other.

‘We'll have the black trackers out to-morrow. It won't be long before we lay hands on them now we know whereabouts they are.’

But the other man said nothing. What comfort would there be for him if they did bring his wife back!

Next morning the story flew through the camp with all sorts of absurd exaggerations. Only on one point was everybody agreed. Black Anderson had not got away to Frisco at all, and now the sergeant's wife had taken up with her old lover, and joined him in the ranges. The sergeant himself said nothing whatever about it. Next morning he had set about his work as usual, and none dared question the silent, stern man on his domestic affairs. The men who had seen him the night before wondered that he had pulled himself together so well; the others merely thought, as Wynne had said of Black Anderson, that he had ‘no works,’ and therefore he did not feel it.

The Commissioner gave his mind to finding out who had originally possessed the nugget in shape like a cross with one arm missing, and had

little difficulty in tracing it to Pard Derrick. That gentleman came up himself to identify it, and give his views on things generally.

‘Yes, that's the very identical piecy,’ he said. ‘Kep' the blanky thing a long time, I did, thinkin' the Holy Cross 'd sure an' bring me luck. Maybe I couldn't hold on long enough. Anyhow, Buck Carter he wouldn't trust any longer, an' the blanky thing it had to go.’

‘How long ago was that?’ asked the Commissioner.

‘It was just afore Snaky Bill struck pay gravel, I know. Snaky he was about travellin' on his uppers, and his luck come afore mine.’

Snaky Bill's luck did not fix the time very determinately for the Commissioner, though Pard Derrick felt he had been most accurate, and scratched his head with the calm air of a thoroughly businesslike man.

‘How long ago was that?’

Pard Derrick took both hands to his head now, and scratched with all his might. This probably stimulated his intelligence and his memory, for he added, after a moment's deep thought:

‘Lemme see. It was the very day as poor old German Max was shot upon the hill there. No, it wasn't; it was the night afore, for Sal Carter she says, “Guess I ain't agoin' to keep the thing in the house. Guess it'll bring us bad luck,” says she. An' next day, sure enough, she paid it away to old Max, an' sure enough bad luck it did bring him.’

‘Are you sure old Max had it?’

‘Oh, sure enough. Because that night Sal Carter she was saying — — ’

‘There, that'll do. Wynne, go and fetch Mrs. Carter here.’

And Sal Carter had the same story to tell. She was certain she had passed that little nugget to the old German in payment of her account, which had been running on for some time. She had sent Jenny to the till specially to get it, lest it should bring ill-luck. She sorter thought it might bring ill-luck, it was kinder uncanny. If it 'd been a whole cross, now, there might a' been somethin' in it; but broke — and she held up her hands and called on them all to witness that Pard Derrick had done much better since he parted with it, and the old German hadn't had it in his possession above half an hour before he was shot dead, and the thing itself stolen from him.

‘You're quite sure, Mrs. Carter, Jenny did give the old German the cross?’

‘Oh, certain sure! I seed her myself. An' she said, too — Jenny allus was a bit simple — as I thought it'd bring bad luck, an' she was partin' wi' it for that reason; but he didn't seem to mind. And, Lord! see what it brought him to!’

Mrs. Carter's evidence was not to be shaken, and it proved beyond a doubt that the old German had had the little nugget very shortly before his death. The man who had shot him and stolen his gold-bag had taken the nugget in it, and the probabilities were that that man was Black

Anderson. But how had it come into the possession of the sergeant's wife?

The Commissioner questioned Sergeant Sells on the subject.

'I can't tell you any more, sir — I really can't,' he said wearily. 'I saw her dig up the bag from beside the rock, that's all I can tell you.'

'Clearly the bag must have been in Black Anderson's possession if he did the murder,' mused the Commissioner. 'The question is, What was the girl doing with it?'

Sergeant Sells had lain awake all the live-long night trying to solve that problem, but it had refused to be solved. There had been some sort of communication, some connection, between his wife and this outlaw, but what or when he could not tell. The Commissioner knew as much as he.

'Are you sure, sergeant,' he asked somewhat reluctantly, looking away so that he might not see the look of pain on the other man's face, 'your wife held no communication with this man before?'

There was a pause.

'I am sure of nothing, sir,' said the sergeant quietly. 'Till last night I thought her innocent as — as — —'

'Well, I suppose the trackers will be here before mid-day. But, confound the weather! who'd have expected it to rain like this?'

It certainly was raining with a will, as if it never intended to leave off again, and the bright skies of yesterday were clouded over and dull and gray. Sergeant Sells hardly noticed it, or, if he did, it was to feel that this foretaste of winter was but in keeping with his mood.

It troubled the Commissioner, however. Good trackers as the Australian blacks undoubtedly are, it was not likely that even they could follow up a track after six hours of steady rain had turned the whole gully into one big mud-puddle. He swore at his ill-luck in no measured terms. The trackers were very seldom away from the camp, and, if he had only had them, he might have followed by moonlight; but they had been lent to his brother Commissioner at Yackandandah, and were not yet returned. It was four o'clock when they did come, and still raining heavily.

'Confound it!' said the Commissioner, looking up at the gloomy sky; 'they wouldn't follow now if it was a track as broad as a main road.'

Jimmy Crow and Bill Bunting fully justified his anticipations. They rode into camp huddled on their horses' necks, wet and dispirited.

'Too much big fellow rain,' muttered Jim Crow. 'How can make 'em light along a track?' and his mate was quite of his opinion.

But the Commissioner was obdurate; they were his last resource, and go to the gully they should; and go they accordingly did. But the old proverb about taking a horse to water stood good. He might take the blackfellows there, but he could not make them 'make a light a track.' It was very probable the rain had washed away all traces of last night's

work; but the blacks gave up the task after what the Commissioner chose to consider a very perfunctory search, and squatted down on their haunches shivering and whining in the rain.

‘Blackfellow no make a light,’ they said. ‘White-fellow sit down along a humpy. Blackfellow sit down along a humpy. Big fellow rain;’ and with this very ambiguous explanation he had to be content, for an Australian black at the best of times is never more than half civilized, and these men were all but savages.

When they had decided not to do a thing, not even the all-powerful Commissioner himself could compel them to try.

‘After all, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘I don't think they could possibly do any good on a day like this. They are quite right; even the tracks we know we made are all washed away.’

‘You take it very coolly, sergeant.’

The sergeant winced.

‘Nothing can make any difference to me now, sir.’

Young Anderson watched him cross the square in the pouring rain to his own hut.

‘By Jove!’ he said, ‘I believe the men are right. The sergeant ain't got no works.’

Commissioner Ruthven looked at him a little scornfully. He had no very high opinion of his clerk at any time.

‘Possibly, Mr. Anderson — — ’ he began, and then left off abruptly.

Why should he discuss his non-commissioned officer with his clerk? Anderson calmly filled his pipe, and thought what a nuisance it was that the day should be wet and his superior officer permanently out of temper for the rest of the evening.

Chapter III

Dave's Girl.

*'By the brand upon my shoulder, by the gall of clinging steel,
By the welt the whips have left me, by the scars that never heal,
By eyes grown old with staring through the sun-wash on the brine,
I am paid in full for service — would that service still were mine!'*

'Departmental Ditties.' Rudyard Kipling.

THE disappearance of the sergeant's wife was but a nine days' wonder in the camp. The following week the Bandicoot, whose ill-luck had become proverbial, found a nugget in an abandoned claim weighing over four hundred ounces, and the diggers talked of nothing else. It touched them far more nearly than the disappearance of a girl who had been known to the majority by sight alone. On the police camp, of course, the remembrance of her was kept alive by the necessity the whole force was under of keeping a bright look-out for Black Anderson; but no man dared mention her name to the cold, silent man who was her husband. They patrolled between the various camps, they scoured the ranges, daily the black trackers were on the look-out, but there was no sign of the fugitives. And yet they were not so very far away.

Any day, had she so pleased, half an hour's walk would have brought Jenny to her old home; another ten minutes would have taken her to the police camp. By mounting the hill which rose steeply up from the lonely little gully wherein Black Anderson had built himself a rough shelter, she could see the white tents of the police camp and look down on the collection of shanties that made up the mining camp on the banks of the creek. She did not often do it, though. She was morbidly afraid of being seen — afraid not only of betraying her lover, but that Sergeant Sells would insist on taking her back to live with him, so little did she understand his character or the position in which she had placed herself. Jenny's last remembrance of her husband was of the passionate anger in his eyes as he lifted her up in his arms. There was love in those eyes, too, could she but have seen it; but she could not, and when she awakened from her unconsciousness another pair of black eyes were looking straight into her own, and somebody was tenderly bathing her face with cool water.

The sergeant's eyes had not deceived him. It was Black Anderson he had seen for a moment among the fern. He had come down the hill, as he had told Pard Derrick he would, and before going straight to the meeting-place he had himself appointed, he thought fit to reconnoitre. First he had seen only the girl alone, and his impulse was to rush out to her, for he had been alone for the last two months; he loved her after his own fashion, and he was very sure she loved him. Then prudence stepped in. She was married to the police-sergeant; who could tell what changes that might have wrought in her? He had too high an opinion of himself and his power with women to fear much, but, still, he would lose nothing by being careful; and when the sergeant stepped out of the scrub, he was thankful for his own forethought.

For one moment Dave's self-confidence received a shock. Had Jenny betrayed him, after all? But it was only for a moment. It was plainly to be seen what sort of terms husband and wife were on; besides, he could hear every word that was said.

Then, when the sergeant's back was towards him, he rose up among the fern with some vague notion of signalling to Jenny. It never occurred to him that she would be so foolish as to betray his presence to her husband, and when she called his name he sank down slowly among the tangled scrub and fern again, undecided whether to make himself scarce as promptly as possible, or whether to stay and see it out. He was no coward, and he resolved in a moment to stay where he was. There were only the sergeant and Jenny, and Jenny would be on his side. The situation recommended itself to him. There was a certain amount of sensation in it, and his life for the last two months had been unbearably dull. Besides, he wanted the gold, and, after all, if it came to a fight, he had little doubt which was the better man. So he stooped down low and, with one hand on the revolver in his belt, he parted the ferns and made a peep-hole for himself. He was surprised at what he saw. He had pictured to himself the sergeant keenly on the alert, looking for him; instead, he seemed to have forgotten his very existence; his wife was on the ground, and he was kneeling beside her, chafing her hands, and covering her face with kisses.

'A rum go!' muttered Black Anderson to himself, and in his astonishment he stood upright in full view of any who might come along. But no one else was there to see, and as for the sergeant, Black Anderson might have stood right in his very path without his noticing him! Anderson watched Sells get up slowly, take a lingering look at the girl at his feet, and then go back through the scrub in the direction of the camp.

Dave Anderson waited a few moments; then he came out from among the fern and made his way to the side of the unconscious girl. The moonlight fell full on her fair face, and she looked pathetic in her helplessness, lying there with her long yellow hair spread out over the

soft green grass. Dead! yes, he too for the moment thought she was dead!

He had loved her after his own fashion, and he felt a righteous anger against the man who had done this thing. She was so fair, so dainty a thing, lying there in the moonlight, and she had loved him; this had befallen her for his sake. The thought softened him. He knelt down beside her as her husband had done — the man who had killed her, and the man who had surely done her to death. How pretty she looked — how pretty! And she had loved him! Lower and lower he stooped over her till his face touched hers, and then he started back.

Surely the moonlight had deceived him: she was not dead, surely not dead; he had felt her breath on his cheek. He started to his feet, uncertain what to do. Then he stooped down again, and, gathering her up in his arms, carried her down to the water's edge. He looked over his shoulder every minute, half fearful he would be interrupted; but he felt he could not leave her. She was his now, and he would not give her up. Only how long dared he wait? how long before the police would be here? for he never doubted that they would come, never for one moment. The sergeant would want his wife again, and, he swore an oath to himself, he should not have her. Then Jenny's eyes opened and looked straight into his own.

'Why, Jen!' he said tenderly.

'Oh, Dave, Dave! Where am I, Dave?'

'All right, Jen. Lie still a bit.'

She closed her eyes again, content to feel his arms round her. She was too dazed and confused to ask any questions, and, after all, what did she care? The man for whom she had been longing for the last three months was beside her, and what more could she ask? The cold water felt cool and refreshing against her temples, and she was content to lie and await the course of events; if it were only a dream, it was too happy a dream to awaken from.

But the man had no time to spare. He waited a few moments, looking over his shoulder at every sound; then he spoke again.

'Jen, where 're you goin'? What's to become of you?'

She opened her eyes then wearily.

'Oh, Dave! I — I — — What'll I do? Run, Dave, run! Don't let me hamper you.'

He drew her a little closer.

'I can't leave you, Jen. He'll be back soon.'

She put her hand up to his face.

'Dave, Dave, you're but poorly.'

He laughed.

'Poorly! It's the life that's killing me. Alone in the ranges here, hunted from morning to night. You don't know what it's like.'

Still she said nothing. What had she to say? Only her hand stole softly

across his face as if she would help him if she could.

‘Oh, Jen, Jen, and you played me false!’

‘Me!’

Tired as she was, she half raised herself from his arms.

‘You! Ay, you that was promised to me, and the minute there's so much as a whisper against me, you go off and marry that trap.’

‘Me!’ she repeated reproachfully — ‘me! An' you tellin' me yourself to marry him!’

‘Tell you that! I'll be hanged — — ’

A slight stirring in the scrub behind made him look round quickly, and roused in her a sense of his danger.

‘You — you!’ she sobbed in affright. ‘If they come back they'll — they'll — — ’

‘They will come back,’ he said, rising to his feet, and pulling himself together grimly. ‘I must be making tracks inside of two minutes. Come with me, Jen. I'm that lonely!’

She looked up at him with love and tenderness in her eyes. To be always with him, had it not been her dream ever since she knew him? There was not a thought in her mind of the duty she owed to another man. Her simple soul was capable of but one idea of duty, and her very marriage had been for love of this man. She struggled to her feet, and, leaning against him, put her hand to her head. She smiled up faintly in his face, but the exertion was too much for her, and but for his protecting arm she would have fallen.

He looked down doubtfully for a moment at the fair face resting against his arm. Should he lay her back on the grass again, or should he take her with him? So much simpler it would be to leave her here, so much easier to get away without her. But she was so dainty and fair and pretty, he was so terribly lonely, she loved him with a mighty love, and he, if he did not love her as she did him, at least wanted her for the time being, and he was not the man to let any small thing stand in the way of his desires. Besides, there was the gold, the bag she was to have given him — if he left her now, he would lose sight of it altogether. Which thought it was that decided him he could hardly have told himself as he stooped down and took her up in his arms. He looked over his shoulder anxiously once more, but there was no sign of any pursuers as yet, and he turned into the scrub on the hillside on the left. The way was steep, and the inanimate girl was no light weight. He was obliged to stop and rest more than once on his upward course, but the ti-tree and fern were thick; he had set the police at defiance for the last three months, and he had little fear that they would find him now.

Once on the brow of the hill, he turned to the right, pushed his way through the scrub, and descended into another narrow gully on the other side, which trended away to the north-east, almost at right angles to the

one they had just left. Indeed, in the moonlight it seemed an exact reproduction; nothing could have been more alike than the tall ferns and the everlasting ti-tree; even the creek down at the bottom was not wanting to complete the illusion. There were hundreds of similar gullies up among those ranges; it was no wonder that the police had failed to find a man hidden among them, and Anderson smiled grimly to himself as he began the steep descent with the girl still in his arms.

‘Now, if it don't rain,’ he said to himself, ‘and they get out those black devils, I'm a gone coon, or else I'll have to leave Jenny here for a dead certainty. But it's agoin' to rain hard, I think;’ and he looked away to where a faint white cloud was beginning to gather in the west, and was gradually creeping over the moonlit sky. It was such a faint cloud another man would hardly have noticed it, but this one had lived alone among the hills for the last three months, a hunted man, and he was beginning to know their signs.

So it was with a quiet mind he scrambled slowly down to the bottom of the gully, and made his way to what, in the moonlight, looked like a heap of dead branches and scrub piled against the hillside. One might have passed close beside it, even in broad daylight, and failed to recognise it for anything else, but Anderson went straight up and, pushing aside a heavy branch, lifted a strip of sacking that did duty as door, and made his way into a tiny hut beyond.

It was quite dark there, for the moonlight did not come beyond the threshold; but he knew his way, and he stepped across the hard mud floor and laid his burden on the strip of sacking stretched on four pointed sticks which formed his bed.

Jenny was more than half conscious — she had been all the time — but it was sweet and new to her to have Black Dave caring for her, and she simply lay still in his arms, contented to let him do what he would with her. She heard him fumbling about for a light, and when he had lighted a candle-end she sat up and looked about her with wondering eyes. It was a very humble abode indeed the candle-light showed. Part of the hillside had been cut away to make one wall, and already the grass was sprouting on it, and the stumps of the ti-tree that had been left were beginning to put forth tiny green shoots. The man saw Jenny's eyes wander towards it, and he laughed.

‘Got your garden handy, you see;’ and he held the candle high above his head, that she might the better take in all her surroundings.

Truly there was little enough to see. The other three walls were of logs laid together so roughly that there were great gaps in between them, and over everything had been piled up branches and brushwood to hide all semblance of human habitation from prying eyes, if such there should be in this lonely gully. And the furniture matched the hut. There were two rough three-legged stools and a table made of two planks, roughly hewn

with an axe; that was all, unless a sort of shelf cut out of the earth along the hillside, and the bed already described, could be counted as furniture. Jenny took it all in, smiled up in her companion's face with a look of happiness that could not have been greater had he shown her a palace, and then, with a sigh of utter content, sank back on the bed.

‘It's a hole, Jen,’ only he said something stronger than that; ‘will you stop?’

‘Will I?’ She put out her hand and took his as he stood beside her. ‘Will I? Why didn't you bring me here long ago, Dave? I told you it 'd be no good to marry the sergeant, an' you see it weren't. Why didn't you bring me here afore?’

He knelt down beside her then, murmuring incoherent words of tenderness — and he could be tender when he pleased; the emotions that sealed Sergeant Sells' tongue loosened his, and he did feel tender at this moment. He had been so alone for the last three months, so utterly cut off from human companionship, and now this girl was looking up in his face adoringly, was content, and more than content, with what little he had to give, was only wondering why he had not brought her long ago. Her husband was nothing to her — less than nothing; she had married only to please him, only to save him; so much he gathered from her incoherent murmurs. She loved him above all things, and he would have been less than human had he not been tender to her in his turn.

And for a week that wretched little hut was simply heaven on earth to Jenny. She was a new toy, and no one could have been more tender and loving than Black Dave. What if the rain did come down steadily for three days without stopping, if their floor became a mud-puddle, and the wind whistled chill and cool through the interstices of the logs, and in the hut they could not possibly make a fire? These things were trifles to Jenny so long as Black Dave was beside her, so long as he cared for her, so long as their pursuers did not find them. Not that she feared that much. The police had failed to catch Black Anderson before; why should they take him now that she was with him? And, oh! she would be so careful. So it came about that she seldom left the narrow gully, seldom walked to the top of the hill that overlooked the camp.

Chapter IV

An Innocent Traitress.

'The dear small Known amongst the Unknown Vast.'

Jubal.

THE weeks passed on, and to any other woman it would have been an utterly dreary, hopeless life. The sun rose up over the ranges in the east in the morning and set behind the ranges in the west at night, and nothing happened all the livelong day. It was deadly dull, and the man found it so. The diversion created by Jenny's presence made him happy for at least three days, kept him content for a whole week; then he wearied of her, and at times showed Jenny he wearied of her.

After the first flush of possession died out, it was but natural he should find out what a simple little girl his companion was. And Black Dave did not like simple, innocent women under any circumstances: he would have wearied of Jenny's love under the most favourable circumstances in a month. It was his way; no woman, not the cleverest, could have kept him for six months. The girl's tender adoration counted for less than nothing in his eyes now that there was no one to envy him his conquest.

She was his drudge and his slave — she gathered wood for their fire, she carried water, she washed and cooked and mended for him, glad and thankful if as a reward he would lie with his head in her lap or lavish on her a caress now and then. She mourned a little in her own silent way over the loss of the tender lover who had brought her to this gully; day by day she hoped by her patience and her willing drudgery to bring him back again (as if man in this world were ever won back by slavish love), and she was content and happy when he spoke one kind word to her. Still he kept her love; partly it had grown to be a fixed habit to love him, and partly because he did choose sometimes to exert himself to exercise his old fascination over her.

She did not expect to be always dealt tenderly with; all her life she had been accustomed to rough, rude men, who counted a woman as of little moment in their lives. She herself had never been of much account except to her husband, and him she did not understand; so that now, when Black Dave was good to her by fits and starts, she was content — it

was all she asked.

He was a moody man, who, when the sun shone, spent his days lying in the sunshine; and when the cold weather came, huddled over a small fire built close against the hut door, and as near to the hillside as possible, lest its smoke should betray their presence to prying eyes. Often as not Jenny went out into the pouring rain in her thin cotton gown — the only one she possessed — to gather sticks for it, while he sat warming himself and meditating ways and means of escape; but it seldom occurred to him to thank her — it certainly never occurred to him to be grateful to the love which made her, as far as in her lay, take the burden of life upon her own shoulders.

Often he was away all night, and she lay awake in an agony of terror lest he should have fallen into the hands of the police; but he never told her where he had been, only, as he always brought back provisions of some sort (generally flour and mutton), she concluded he had gone for them. Even then she never knew whether a friend had supplied him, or whether he had stolen them from one of the diggers' huts round about. Generally, she thought, from the regularity of the supplies, some friend in the diggers' camp who still believed in him probably planted them in a place where he could get them; but he never enlightened her.

One day he brought home a bundle of woman's clothes, of which she was sorely in need — a warm petticoat, and stout boots, and other things that the cold damp weather now upon them made imperatively necessary for her comfort; and then, though he said no word, she was more than ever convinced that he held regular communication with the camp, for who could have put up those things — her own things, as she saw at a glance — but Sal Carter's self?

At first he would not enlighten her; he did not believe in taking women into his confidence, in trusting a woman, as he said, farther than you could see her. But she was unfeignedly thankful for the clothes, so grateful for the thoughtfulness (which was all someone else's). At last he was graciously pleased to unbend, and in a moment of unwonted confidence he told her that Pard Derrick brought him the supplies, and hid them in a neighbouring gully, for not even to him would he confide the exact secret of his whereabouts. Sometimes he met him there, but more often he fetched the things after he had gone, for it was dangerous, he thought, to make the links of the chain quite unbroken. Next day he repented him of his weakness, and she suffered for his repentance; but she looked at the bundle of clothes, and thinking that they were the outcome of his thoughtful love for her, she was happy.

April was sunny and bright, and only the nights began to get a little chilly; but in May they had a week or two of bitter cold, wintry rain. The weather cleared, and they had bright sunshiny days again, for no one can complain of the winter in the north-eastern district; but that pinch of cold

weather laid the foundation of a bad cold that Jenny could not shake off. She grew thin and weary-looking, and a cough she could not control racked her night and day. That cough irritated her companion. She could not help seeing that.

There are people, selfish folk, whom the sight of another's pain fills with a certain sense of discomfort, and tends to make them visit with their severe displeasure those who have been so inconsiderate as to discommode them. And Jenny's cough irritated and worried Black Dave. She saw it, and it added another trouble to her life to try and hide her sickness from him. If he were good-tempered and smiling for a change, she suffered agonies trying to suppress the cough, and often and often, when the paroxysm would be suppressed no longer, went out into the cold outside air rather than disturb him; but he generally guessed why she had gone, and the knowledge only made him angry.

'It's your own fault, Jen,' he said sullenly one day as she leaned up against the earthen wall, pressing her hand to her side, and exhausted after a fit of coughing she had been utterly unable to suppress — 'it's your own fault. If we'd got that gold I gave you, we'd be away over the border long before this.'

'I — I dunno what become of it,' she gasped. 'It'll be better when it's a bit warmer. It's this cold weather done it.'

'Warmer!' he repeated, with an oath. 'If you think I'm goin' to fool round here in this God-forsaken dog-hole listening to a woman bark, bark, bark, you're mightily mistaken!' and he got up and flung himself out of the hut into the pouring rain and gathering dusk with an injured air.

'Oh, Dave, Dave!' she called after him, 'come back, come back! You'll get wet;' but though he heard her he went straight on, and was soon lost in the scrub.

She drew a long sobbing sigh. What could she do now? Nothing seemed to please him, and he was so dear to her. The fire was built of little sticks and small logs right in the doorway, so as much as possible to warm the interior of the wretched hut and yet let the smoke escape; and now that Black Dave was gone, Jenny sat down on the hard earthen floor, and with the door-post for some sort of support and the sacking that served as a door fixed as a screen from the wind, she crouched over the fire for warmth like a blackfellow. She shivered even then, for the wind found its way from all corners; but it was not the cold that sent the tear-drops down her pale cheeks; They were thin and hollow now, those cheeks; her face had lost all its girlish freshness, though she was not nineteen. She knew that, though she had no mirror, for Black Dave was not sparing in his comments on her altered appearance, and as she sat there she wondered if that were the reason of his changed demeanour towards her.

She was ugly and sick, and he did not love her any longer; that was the tenor of her thoughts as she sat there shivering over the little fire. He had loved her when he brought her there, nearly two months ago now, but she was beginning to think he did not care for her any longer; and he was so dear to her that she, like all women of her kind, never thought of blaming him — it was her fault, entirely her fault, and what was she to do to bring him back again? She firmly believed he could be brought back, he was so tender sometimes; she judged him by herself. She was content to live this life from year's end to year's end, if only he were good to her, and he would be the same if only she were like she was when first he had brought her here. But how was that to be accomplished — how, how?

She was ill — she knew she was ill; try and hide it from him as she would, she could not hide it from herself, and there seemed no chance of getting better. She remembered when first she had come there, how easy it seemed to gather sticks for the fire, to bring up water from the creek, even though she had to go many times in the course of the day, for all her household utensils were comprised in two tin billies and a frying-pan. Now, she sighed, how different it was! She ached in every limb, and the walk down to the creek was only accomplished with many stoppages, and the walk back was more formidable still, while her task of gathering wood — for which daily she had to go farther and farther afield — became such a heavy burden that she would wake at night with the fear strong upon her that next day she would not be able to accomplish it, and what would the tyrant she had chosen for her lord and master do then? She feared him, yes, she feared him; but not in her inmost heart did she blame him. If he had been kind and sympathetic she would have been grateful, but as he counted her sickness her own fault, and let her see that he so counted it, she more than half agreed with him, and as much as possible hid her suffering from him.

And now he had gone away angry with her, and she blamed herself that she felt relieved at his absence. She might cough without fear of angering him; she was thankful to be able to let the fire down low, and so save her scanty store of wood for the time when he should be home. The rain came down steadily, the darkness was closing round, and the whole landscape was hidden in a misty rain, which hissed and frizzled on the hot logs; but crouching close over the fire there, a warmth was diffused through her chilled frame, and she grew drowsy in spite of tormenting thoughts, and the cough which every now and then shook her wide awake again with the fear strong upon her — a fear born of love — that she was disturbing her tyrant's rest. She dozed and woke, and dozed and waked again.

Still he did not come back, and the fire died down so low she was obliged to put another log on from her rapidly diminishing store. The

wood was dry, for she kept it in a little stack in a corner of the hut; but there was very little left now, and how was she to replenish it when the very exertion of crossing the hut and carrying it to the fire exhausted her? She lay back panting against the door-post, and the flames leaped up cheerfully round the log, and lighted up the little hut. It was not much, but it was her all; and she could have been very happy there if only — if only Dave was always like he was that first week, and if she were only well again. She felt faint with the effort of carrying the log, though she did not recognise the feeling, and when that passed off, she dozed and woke with a sudden start to find a man standing over her. He was dressed in the usual digger costume, but his butcher boots were covered in mud, his heavy blue flannel shirt was soaking wet, and the rain was running in little streams off his long beard. But that did not discommode him at all.

He leaned against the opposite door-post with a nonchalant air, his arms folded on his breast, and regarded her steadily from under the brim of his sopping slouch hat. At first she rubbed her eyes; she had seen no one since the middle of April, and it was now the first week in June. Was she dreaming; could someone have betrayed them; was this man the advance-guard of the police who would presently rush in and drag her Dave away? She gave a little cry, and rubbed her eyes, and the man stepped forward, and, pushing back his hat, she saw it was her old friend Pard Derrick.

He kicked the fire with his foot, so that the brightening flames might throw a little more light on the scene, for it was quite dark now. He swore a good round string of oaths by way of relieving his feelings.

‘Holy Moses, Jenny! Is it really you? Well, you have brought your pigs to a pretty market, you have.’

‘Oh, Pard!’

But a gust of bitter wind dashed round the wet canvas screen, and she was speechless till the paroxysm of coughing it brought on had passed.

Pard Derrick stepped over and patted her on the back by way of helping her, and repeated: ‘A fine market, a d — — d fine market!’ So strongly did he feel on the subject of that market, that he added several more adjectives by way of giving weight to his opinion of it; but he patted her back as gently as if she had been a child. The unwonted kindness brought the tears to her eyes.

‘You won’t — you won’t,’ she panted between sobbing and coughing, ‘hurt Dave. You won’t — promise you won’t.’

‘I’ve a mind,’ he began — ‘there, there! I ain’t agoin’ to hurt him. Ain’t I been totin’ him tucker across them blanky ranges the last five months now, an’ is it likely I’d let up on him to the traps after that?’

‘I — I — — You never came before.’

‘Dave’s that pertikler — never would let on where he was. If he can’t trust a mate — — Well, last time I up and followed him, and I come

along as soon as I'd time. It's a almighty cheerful spot,' he said, kicking the fire again in order to show off its beauties; 'and I don't wonder he was so anxious to keep it to himself.'

She took it as a reproach to herself.

'I done the best I could,' she said humbly; 'but I know it's a poor place for Dave. It'll be nicer in the warm weather.'

Derrick gave a low whistle.

'Calkilate on stopping till the warm weather, do you? Seems to me the claim's about worked out. Are you reckonin' on your humble servant, may I ask, for the totin' of that there tucker into the ranges here all the winter?'

She had been reckoning on it, evidently, for she only moaned, 'Oh, Pard, Pard!' reproachfully.

'Well, I'm gettin' a bit tired of the blanky game,' he said, turning his head away from her sad, tired eyes; 'and you have played it mighty low down on the sergeant.'

'I belonged to Dave allus,' she said, not as if defending herself, merely making a statement of which he must recognise the justness.

'Then, why in the devil's name did you marry the sergeant?'

'Dave told me to,' she said simply.

'Then, by all that's holy, why didn't you stick to him?'

She looked at him with wonder in her eyes. How could he ask such a question — he of all men?

'You told me yourself,' she said, 'Dave wanted me.'

The kick that he administered to the fire was a vicious one this time, and sent the sparks flying in all directions.

'Oh,' she sighed, 'don't waste the wood! I dunno how I'm goin' to get more when that's gone.'

He looked down at the frail worn-out woman, half sitting, half lying on the hard, cold ground; he noted her panting breath and her sunken cheeks, and he swore another good long string of oaths.

'An' what's that hulkin', good-for-nothin' — — ' He hesitated for a word, and she divined his thought, and hastened to clear away all blame from the man she loved.

'Dave, you mean; but Dave helps all he can. I come here to help him. I don't want him to do nothin'.'

'She's mad,' said Derrick, apostrophizing the drenched and dripping hillside; 'she's clean gone off her head. Now, here's a decent handy sort of fellow like me, with nothin' agin me, an' no woman intermates she'd like to work her life out for me. There's the sergeant, a decent sort o' chap for a trap, pervides a palatial residence for her, an' she comes *here*;' and he swept his hand round as if showing off the advantages and beauties of the hut to an imaginary audience.

But Jenny was loyal.

'Dave done all he could,' she said. 'If I hadn't a' lost his bag o' gold, we'd a' been away acrost the ranges long ago.'

'Look here, Jenny,' Pard Derrick was desperately in earnest now, 'that bag o' gold the sergeant picked up in the gully the night you run away, how did you come by it?'

Subsequent events had driven the former history of that bag completely out of her head. In her pity for Black Dave, she had lost sight of the fact that he was but suffering for a crime which richly deserved punishment; and as for the gold, he had reviled her so often for its loss, that she had come to look upon it as a calamity for which she alone was to blame. Now, when Pard Derrick asked her about it, she answered without hesitation:

'Dave gave it me to take care of for him.'

'Oh, he did, did he? By the 'Tarnal! That bag was old Max's.'

'No, no, no!'

She saw in a flash what she had done. But even then she did not fully recognise the extent of the mischief. Dave was so dear to her, she had been so accustomed to putting him before all else, she hardly realized that his mate would be his mate no longer now this foul crime was, as it were, sheeted home to him.

'Yes, yes, yes!' said Pard Derrick, and his language for the next few minutes can only be expressed by a series of dashes, so strong and resonant was it. 'And to think,' he added, going back to his former place by the doorpost, 'I've been such an almighty fool as to tote tucker across them ranges for — for a — —'

'But, Pard, you'll — you'll — —'

'Will I? I'll see him hanged first, an' you can tell him so. Jenny, you come back with me to-night.'

'No, no. I couldn't leave Dave. He's only got me.'

'Don't be a blanky fool. How long 'll he stick to you when he ain't got no tucker, an' the traps are after him?'

'Dave 'll never slip me up,' she managed to gasp out, for another fit of coughing took her breath away.

The man was silent a moment, gently stirring the fire with his foot. The little flames, as they leaped into life, fell full on the girl's white, worn face; and even he, a careless, dare-devil fellow not given to noticing anything much, saw that a very little more of life like this would finish her life-story. Another week of weather like this up among the ranges, and no one need trouble his head about pretty Jenny Sells. He wondered almost she did not know it herself.

Black Dave must have seen it, and then he seemed to realize all at once what an utterly selfish brute this whilom mate of his was. He had taken the girl away for his own selfish pleasure; he had had no thought even for her physical comfort. He had begged a warm shirt for himself when the

weather grew chilly. He had begged fresh blankets; but it was he, Pard Derrick, who, knowing the girl was with Black Anderson, had managed to persuade Sal Carter to put her up a few necessary clothes — he, an outsider. What sort of a life could the girl be leading with this man? Cruelly hard, to judge by her face, and yet she seemed never to blame him; her every thought was for him. Sergeant Sells had surrounded her with every comfort, and yet — and yet — — Pard Derrick threw up his chin into the air. He gave it up, as many a wiser man than he had done before him.

‘Why do you sit shiverin' there?’ he asked roughly. ‘There's a blanket on the blanky stretcher there. Why don't you wrap it round you?’

She looked up at him wearily.

‘Dave — — ’ she began.

‘D — — n Dave!’ he swore through his teeth.

Then he marched into the hut, and came back with all the blankets from the stretcher in his arms. He stooped down and wrapped them round her with no ungentle hand. Passively she suffered him to do it; she even felt grateful for the kindness which thought for her comfort. Even to herself it was evident she was very ill, and growing worse every moment. Still she hoped, as she had hoped before, that the morning would see her better.

‘You are good, Pard,’ she said gently, touching his arm as he bent over her — ‘too good.’

He made up his mind rapidly to tell her the exact truth. He thought she was dying, and he was not going to have her death on his conscience if he could help it.

‘See here, Jenny, you're mighty sick. Much better come back with me, an' get Sal to look after you.’

‘Dave — — ’

He cut her short.

‘You'll just kick the bucket if you stop here a week longer, I'll take my colonial on that. An' what good 'll you be to Dave then, I'd like to know?’

‘I couldn't slip up Dave,’ she said.

‘Dave 'll slip you up like a shot when you ain't any more good to him. Dave ain't agoin' to hang round here a-nursin' of a sick woman. The sergeant might a' done it, but it ain't in Dave.’

‘Dave won't never slip me up,’ she said monotonously, ‘not never. He said so over an' over again. Dave won't. I know Dave.’

‘An' so do I now,’ said the man grimly. ‘Well, then, Jenny, if you won't look out for yourself I'm agoin' to do it for you. Your husband the sergeant 'll be here afore this time to-morrow. A husband's the proper person to look after a woman when she's sick;’ and he laughed at his own humour.

‘No!’ she struggled to her feet, and flung off the blankets he had so

carefully wrapped round her; but the exertion and the excitement combined brought on another violent fit of coughing, and though she leaned against the doorpost for support, she could only speak in gasps; 'you wouldn't — be — so — mean. You wouldn't — go back — on a mate.'

'Mate!' he spat in the fire as if to show his disgust — 'mate! He ain't no mate o' mine. I toted tucker acrost the ranges to my old mate as the traps had a down on and were after; but I ain't agoin' to tote no tucker for a man as shot old Max down in his tracks like a bullock, an' I'm going to send your husband to look after *you*.'

She could only shake her head and clutch his arm in protest, for she was speechless from coughing, and when he wrapped the blankets round her again she was too helpless to resist. He laid her down by the fire, and pushed it together with his feet.

'There,' he said, 'I reckon you can hold out till mornin'. I'll be back then along with the sergeant, so you can tell your friend Dave to make himself scarce.'

He marched out into the darkness, and in a minute returned bearing a log which lay close by, but which had been too heavy for her slender strength. It was drenched with wet, and hissed as he piled the fire up round it; but she knew its heart was dry, and it would keep the fire in till morning. Still, she could not be grateful. Was he not going to put the police on Dave? She was to blame. She had betrayed him, and Dave would hate her for ever.

The one idea was uppermost in her mind. She kept repeating it over and over to herself; she said it aloud, as Pard Derrick came and bent over her before going away.

'Dave'll hate me.'

'By the 'Tarnal! I don't think it'll be much worse than 'tis now. So long, Jenny!' and he stepped across the fire, and was swallowed up in the misty darkness.

Chapter V

Slipped Up.

*'The worldly hope men set their hearts upon
Turns ashes, — or it prospers, and anon,
Like snow upon the desert's dusty face,
Lighting a little hour or two, is gone.'*

Omar Khayam.

WHETHER she lost consciousness or not she could not tell, but it seemed to her his place was immediately taken by Black Dave, with a heavy scowl on his face.

She made an effort, and sat up, and then, remembering she was wrapped up in all the blankets the hut contained — his blankets — began hastily to take them off.

'Pard — — ' she began, and her voice trembled, and the cough came and choked her. How was she to tell him such terrible news? Of the urgent necessity for flight she was convinced, but how was she to tell this man? how tell him, too, she had brought it upon him?

But he seemed to divine it for himself without her aid, and, stooping down, took her by the shoulders and shook her hard.

'So Pard was here, was he?' he said between his clenched teeth. 'What 'd he come here for?'

'He says — he says,' she gasped, 'he's going to put the police on the track to-morrow.'

He asked no questions — it seemed as if he had guessed the unfriendly nature of his old mate's feelings towards himself; only his grip tightened on her shoulders.

'You did it!' he said. 'You did it! Curse me for a fool for ever trusting a woman!'

'Oh, Dave, Dave!' She struggled to turn round, and laid her face tenderly against the strong hands that were holding her so cruelly hard. 'Oh, Dave, Dave!'

He let her go with a movement that sent her reeling against the doorpost, and when she recovered sufficiently from the shock she saw that he was hastily gathering together such few things as he might be able to carry with him. She folded the blankets into a swag, but when she

would have tied a cord round them, her strength gave way, and he pushed her aside and did it himself. There was so little to be done it hardly took him five minutes, and he never spoke a word. Then, when his preparations were complete, he kicked the fire to pieces and trampled with his heavy boots on the embers till not a spark remained. If anyone were to try and find that hut again in the darkness, he certainly would not be able to do so now that the guiding fire was out.

Jenny huddled her shawl about her shoulders and stood in the doorway waiting.

She wondered dimly how she was to bear up in a night tramp across those ranges; but the worst was over when she had told him of his mate's treachery, and he had not been nearly so hard as she feared. She felt she deserved all she had got, and her only anxiety now was that she should be able to keep up with him and not hamper him. It would only be to another gully, only a little way among this maze of gullies, and ranges, and gullies; they could make as good a shelter again as this they were leaving in a very short time, and the rain would destroy their track. The cleverest black tracker could not follow them up, given a few hours' start, in weather like this. If only she could keep up and not trouble him, not be a burden on him!

It never occurred to her that he intended to leave her behind. Had he not sworn to her a thousand times that he would never desert her, that she was all in all to him? and in spite of everything she had hugged that belief to her breast. His misfortunes had bound them together, and even if he did not care for her, he would not leave her. Besides, he did care — he would never have brought her there if he had not cared; and she prepared to follow him.

He saw her standing there dimly through the darkness, and even in his anger — his righteous anger as he thought — her faithfulness was a reproach to him. Why will not women see when a man has had enough of them?

He started off at a brisk pace without a word, and felt her hand on his arm, heard her panting breath beside him.

'Where — where? Which way, Dave?'

He shook her off angrily.

'I play a lone hand this game,' he said with an oath.

'But, but — — Oh, Dave! you ain't goin' to leave me! Dave, Dave!'

Where was the use of words? And he had no time to waste. He shook her off, or would have done, but she clung with both hands round his arm. He quickened his pace to a run, and she tripped and fell to her knees, dragging him down with her. The rain was coming down steadily; the earth was sodden, and the grass and bracken were drenched. Jenny's shawl had fallen off in the struggle, and her thin cotton gown was wet through and through. He felt her icy cold hands put up to clasp him

round the neck in one last despairing prayer, and her voice, choked by the cruel cough, rang in his ears.

‘Oh, Dave, Dave! you said you'd never leave me!’

Without a word he scrambled to his feet again, and she clung so tight that she, too, stood beside him. But he was tired of her — he had tired of her in the first week of possession; he had wearied of her utterly in the second. She had been his patient drudge ever since, but now she would simply be a drag on him. He was sick to death of this life; he must get away from it at any cost; and for her — — Well, she could not travel; she could stop behind, and to-morrow the police would find her, for he never doubted that Pard Derrick would keep his word. Pard Derrick had suspected him for some time; he had known this could not go on long, and now he had come to the hut and got the truth out of Jenny. It did not require any explanation on her part to tell him that little story. She had betrayed him, and she must suffer for it.

And, after all, what did his desertion mean? Only a night alone in the hut. To-morrow the police would find her. And he would be free — free to go where he pleased. Perhaps the last thought was uppermost in his mind as he stood there in the darkness and pouring rain, feeling her icy cold hands creeping round his neck, listening to her panting breath; the other thoughts came afterwards, when he was striding through the bush alone. He stood silent one instant, and a glad glow came to her heart, for she thought her prayer was answered.

‘Oh, Dave! my Dave!’ she gasped; ‘I knew — —’

Then he caught her wrists in both his hands and forced her back into the thick ti-tree scrub. The heavy branches, laden with moisture, sprang back, and hit her on the face and shoulders; the dripping points of a long fern frond swept her hair almost pitifully, it seemed; she could not see his face through the gloom, but she could hear him breathing hard. What was he going to do? Was he going to kill her because she had betrayed him?

‘Oh! but Dave, Dave — —’

With a sudden jerk he let go her wrists and she fell backwards amid the thick wet scrub, and when she struggled to her feet again she could hear his heavy footsteps crushing through the ti-tree scrub, and knew that he had left her for ever; that she could not possibly overtake him; that even if she could, he would have none of her; that all her devotion and love counted for nothing in his eyes.

‘Don't you trust him, Jenny, don't you trust him!’ she seemed to hear her stepmother's warning — a warning that even now, when he had left her, angered her. ‘One gets the upper hand, and t'other goes to the wall.’

She had gone to the wall. But surely it was her own fault. She had betrayed him to Paul Derrick, and — and — one thing she was sure of, he would miss her to-morrow, he would want her to-morrow.

It was cold, cold, bitter cold, and the rain had soaked her to the skin.

She could not draw a breath now without coughing, and there was a pain in her side and across her chest which every moment grew more unendurable. She leaned against a tree-trunk for a little in the half-hope that the momentary rest would give her power to go on. Go where? It was useless to think of following in Black Anderson's track. But shelter she must have somewhere, and the wretched hut close against the damp hillside rose up before her eyes as a vision of comfort and rest. How cheerily the fire danced and crackled in the doorway! How the hot logs hissed and steamed when the rain-drops fell on them! Yes, she must get back there. The blankets wrapped round her so carefully were cosy and warm. Who wrapped them round her? Pard Derrick? Who said it was Pard Derrick? It was Dave, of course. Who but Dave would do that for her? She must get back — she must, she must!

But first she must find her shawl. It would be spoilt lying out here in the pouring rain, and then what should she do without her shawl when it rained and she had to go out and gather wood? She fumbled about a little in the dark, but she could not find it, and the hut with its cheerful fire was before her eyes, beckoning her back with friendly hands. She was cold, so cold, and she could hardly breathe for her cough; besides, might not Dave be there before her? If she coughed and disturbed him! The thought troubled her as she stumbled on mechanically, taking the right path in the darkness and pouring rain. It was such a short distance — such a very short distance, not two hundred yards — but it seemed to the weary woman she could never reach it. There was a tiny rent in the thick clouds. They broke for a moment and showed her a bright star right overhead, a brilliant point of light amidst the surrounding gloom. Then the clouds closed over it again, and it was gone, and she found herself leaning against the doorpost of the wretched shanty she had called 'home' for the last two months.

There was no bright fire, no dancing firelight, no warm blankets. Everything was desolate and deserted. Among the scattered ashes there was not a live coal; the fire was dead and cold, through the gaps between the logs the wind was whistling mournfully, and the cold winter rain was beating, the water was trickling down the hillside across the earthen floor, and was falling from the roof in great heavy drops. She could hardly draw a breath now, but she crept across to the stretcher and sank down wearily on it, drawing her wet things close round her in a half-mechanical effort to get warm again. She was worse than ever now — worse than ever — and how was she to get wood for Dave's fire in the morning? It was her last conscious thought, if it could be called conscious, when she had entirely forgotten that he had left her, that she need take thought for his comfort no longer; then she drifted off into delirium and unconsciousness.

And outside the wind blew dismally down the gully, and the rain fell

heavily, and the creek that had been but a chain of waterholes when she came there rose and rose, till it was a rushing river within a few feet of her door. Even she would have found no difficulty in getting water now. But it made no difference to Jenny Sells; nothing in this world would ever make any difference to her again.

Chapter VI

Pard Derrick's Ghosts.

*'The wine of life is oozing drop by drop,
The leaves of life are falling one by one.'*

Omar Khayam.

WHEN Pard Derrick left Jenny he walked very slowly through the pouring rain back to camp again. Not that he at all desired to get wet, quite the contrary; he had lived long enough in sunny Australia to avoid a wetting as if he had been a cat; but to-night he was seriously disturbed in his mind.

Gradually a conviction of his mate's unworthiness had been forcing itself upon his unwilling understanding, and to-night he was sure of it — sure as a man could be of anything — that Black Anderson had murdered old Max, cruelly shot him down in his tracks for the sake of the gold he carried, and he was determined that he should suffer for his crime in some way or another. He had threatened to inform the police in his first righteous anger, but now he remembered he was not on very good terms with the police. Like most of the diggers in the fifties, he had a grudge against them; and then, too, he would have to explain his own connection with the criminal — explain that for the last five months he had kept him supplied with food, and so enabled him to elude his pursuers. Yet it was 'blanky awkward,' as he described it to himself. Wouldn't it be better to confide in the boys in the morning and go down in a body and take Black Anderson, and then either hand him over to the police, or, well — he thought to himself — they could take it out of him as well as any blamed judge in the colony.

This last scheme greatly recommended itself to him. It did away with all necessity for explanation; he had come from California, where such summary justice was of not infrequent occurrence, and with forty men concerned in it, he was inclined to think not much harm could come to any single individual. He was so pleased with the idea that, instead of going straight to the police camp, as he had at first intended, he went to his own tent, where his mate was already snoring, and turned in.

Next morning the weather had in no way cleared, and by the rushing and roaring of water he guessed that the creek was coming down a

banker. A good sort of day to send a man to his long account; but somehow his great scheme did not look so well in broad daylight. He began to think that the boys would not join, and they must have at least forty, or the thing would not do at all. After all, he ought to have informed the police last night. It would be more difficult to do it now. Then the thought came to him he would not do it at all: he would let them find out for themselves. Having arrived at which sage conclusion he turned over in his blankets and called to his mate:

‘Hallo, Bill! I say, you lazy lubber, show a leg there! You won't earn no tucker at this rate.’

‘Lazy yourself,’ muttered the other man between his teeth, adding an appropriate adjective which made his mate laugh.

‘But rouse out, Bill — do rouse out! I say, you horse-faced old fossil, I seen a ghost last night.’

Bill, thus apostrophized, sat up lazily, stretched out his arms to their fullest extent, and indulged in a loud, long, luxurious yawn.

‘You seen what?’

‘A ghost. An' hearn him, too.’

‘Mixed your drinks, I guess! That was powerful strong brandy of Buck's last night. Friar's balsam with a dash of painkiller an' just a touch o' kerosene to give it a bite. I guess there were forty d — — d ghosties in it;’ and he lay back again with the air of one who has disposed of a simple matter satisfactorily.

But Pard Derrick was not going to have his just and lawful schemes so easily disposed of as all that. He wanted Black Anderson caught; he began to feel now as if he had wanted him caught all along; he wanted help to go to the girl, and he did not want to appear in the matter, so, spite of his mate's openly expressed scorn, he launched out into a description of the ghost he had seen ‘way out on a ridge at the headwaters of the creek more'n a mile an' a half from here.’ The ‘blanky thing,’ it seemed, was perfectly orthodox, had appeared before him as a great white thing, had waved its long arms, and then, when he tried to approach it, had turned and fled down the gully wailing and crying ‘fit to make the marrow in your bones freeze up.’

‘Rats!’ said Bill, when the story had reached its thrilling conclusion.

‘Rats yourself!’ said the discomfited story-teller indignantly. ‘I'll bet I seen old Max's ghost.’

‘Old Max's ghost knows a sight better'n to be cavortin' around on them ranges in the pourin' rain. Say, what was you doin' there yoursel’?’

But to that question Pard Derrick did not feel it incumbent on him to reply.

He kicked off his blankets slowly, and, crossing the hut, took from its hiding-place beside the hearth the small store of gold-dust he and his mate had accumulated during the past week.

'I'm agoin' to hand this over to the Commissioner,' he said, turning his back on his mate.

'Jumping Moses! there ain't more'n enough to pay Buck Carter's score!'

'I'm agoin' to hand it over to the Commissioner,' said Pard Derrick stolidly. 'I seed a ghost last night, an' I was a-dreamin' I seen you a-lyin' with your blanky throat cut. It's a sure sign o' evil — a sure sign; an' I'm agoin' to hand over the gold to the Commissioner.'

Bill, who was distinguished from Snaky Bill by the epithet 'Horse-faced,' appeared in no wise disconcerted by his unpleasant end, and merely grunted in assent. If his mate liked to make a fool of himself, it was no business of his. The gold would be safe enough with the Commissioner, and, any way, there was so little of it it wasn't worth while making a fuss about.

'But you ain't agoin' now?' was all he said. 'Why, the Commissioner 'll be abed, and he ain't agoin' to rouse out for a handful of gold like that, you can bet!'

This last argument was unanswerable. There was no doubt about it: the Commissioner would not turn out at so early an hour, and Pard Derrick set to work to prepare the morning meal, glancing every now and then at the driving rain, and thinking uneasily of the poor girl dying up there among the ranges.

Jenny was very bad, he was sure of that; she ought to have help as soon as posible; but, after all, he consoled himself, he had had no hand in bringing her there. She had brought it on herself. He intended to do the best he could for her, but there was no sense in putting himself in an awkward hole for a girl who would never so much as say 'Thank you' for his pains. Besides, after all, he had left her pretty comfortable, and even Black Dave, bad as he knew him to be, could not be cold-blooded enough to disturb a sick woman. After all, if he did wait an hour or two, it could not make much difference. So he reasoned, not unnaturally, and with a quiet mind set about the preparation of their breakfast.

Nevertheless, he made haste to finish, and then, in spite of another remonstrance from his mate, set off for the police camp. It looked wet and dreary in the pouring rain, and the curtains of the Commissioner's tents were closely drawn; but he felt he was in luck all the same, for the sergeant was standing fully dressed at the door of his hut contemplating the weather.

Pard Derrick noted how white his hair had got of late, how stern and solemn he looked; he remembered the great wrong he had helped to do him two months ago, and he hesitated for a moment to address him. Only for a moment, though — the need was pressing; then he stepped up to him.

'Good-morning, sergeant.'

‘Good-morning,’ replied the trooper, without even looking at him.

‘Sergeant, I’ve got some gold for the Commissioner. When can I hand it over?’

The sergeant glanced carelessly at the Commissioner’s tent.

‘He isn’t up yet.’

‘Darn it all! I s’pose I’ll have to wait,’ and, feeling that he had broken the ice, he leaned up against the sergeant’s doorpost and prepared to lead up gently to the subject nearest his heart.

‘D’ you b’lieve in ghosts, sergeant?’

‘Ghosts? Who? I? No!’

The sergeant was evidently meditating a retreat into his hut, but Derrick plunged into his subject there and then.

‘I seen a ghost last night.’ And he began to describe the vision as he had to Horse-faced Bill, and was about to add a few more dramatic touches, when his hearer cut him short.

‘Where did you see this?’ he asked, and the tone satisfied Pard that he had succeeded in rousing all the interest he desired, and whether to be pleased or not he hardly knew.

‘Atop o’ the hill — the spur there, as they used to call Digger’s Point. Just by that almighty big gum I was a-standin’, when I seed the blanky thing, an’ pretty nigh scart the life outer me!’

‘Last night was it? And what were you doing up there on a night like that?’

That was a most inconvenient question, and Pard Derrick passed it over in silence.

‘I was thinkin’,’ he said meditatively, ‘it’ll maybe be old Max’s, as can’t rest quiet in his grave; or maybe ’tis Black Anderson has up an’ died.’

‘But what were you doing up there last night?’

‘Or maybe, you know, sergeant, ’twas your own wife — little Jenny. ’Tis a blanky hard life for her, an’ she may have died. Now I come to think of it, ’twas more like a female ghost — — ’

The sergeant cut him short and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

‘Look here, Derrick,’ he said hoarsely, ‘what’s your little game? You don’t go much on traps, I know; but I’ve always found you a decent, honest sort of chap, and never thought any evil of you; but there’s something behind this. Come, isn’t there, now?’

‘I tell you I seen a ghostie,’ said Derrick sullenly. He was wondering whether it wouldn’t, after all, be better and safer to take the sergeant of police into his confidence. Wouldn’t it save trouble by-and-by?

‘Don’t be a fool, Derrick. Come, tell me fairly what you mean. I won’t use it against you.’

‘I ain’t the sort o’ chap as goes back on a pal,’ said Derrick, working out his own thoughts aloud rather than addressing the sergeant.

‘No one ever thought that of you,’ said the sergeant. ‘I know you’re all

on the square; but if you're screening a murderer like Black Anderson, you won't be long.'

'I allus said as he knew naught o' that,' said Derrick.

'The man that had old Max's bag is likely the man that murdered him, don't you think so?' said the sergeant quietly.

'D — — n it all, in course!' said Derrick with fervour; 'but — but how's I to know Black Dave had the blanky thing?'

'Not till last night. You found it out last night,' said the sergeant quickly, a sudden idea striking him.

'Sergeant,' said Pard Derrick, turning his honest face full on the trooper, 'it's playin' it mighty low down on a man to let on you know where he's hid when the traps is after him; but I'm bein' reg'lar druv to it. I never thought he'd done it — s'help me God I didn't! I guessed you'd a down on him, 'cos — well, 'cos o' Jenny. And then little by little I thought maybe you was right, an' — well, last night I was sure of it.'

The sergeant put his hand to his face and restlessly fingered his moustache.

'I — Derrick, where is he?'

'I can't, sergeant — 'deed I can't! It's playin' it too mighty low down — an' what 'd the boys think?'

'Black Anderson isn't worth considering. They'd think as I do. There's a reward, you know.'

'I don't want none o' your d — — d blood-money,' he said sullenly. 'If 'twasn't for the gal I wouldn't a' troubled my head. But I done the best I could for her, an' Lord knows that warn't much.'

Angry as he was at the suggestion of blood-money, he, with a delicacy one would hardly have given him credit for, turned his eyes away when he spoke of the sergeant's wife, though he felt instinctively he winced and quivered at the mention of her name. The wound was still raw.

'Look here, sergeant, will you hold your tongue and not drag me into the plaguey business? I don't want the whole camp about my ears.'

'Of course I'll hold my tongue. Not a soul shall know from me you've been near me.'

'Not the Commissioner?'

'Not the Commissioner himself.'

'Well,' said Pard, still somewhat reluctant, 'if you an' a mate was to ride to the top o' Digger's Point, an' stand under that almighty big gum-tree an' look away down the gully on t'other side — the little narrer gully, I mean; sorter wedged in it is between the two others — I'm thinkin' you never took much note o' that there gully — well, if you was to look away down that there gully, I'm thinkin' you might come acrost the self-same ghostie as I seen last night.'

'And you'll — — '

'I'm off,' said Derrick, with a sigh of relief. 'I guess I won't trouble the

Commissioner this mornin'. Give him my compliments, an' say he's so mighty late I couldn't wait. An' look here, old man, if you was real keen on seeing' that ghostie, I'd be off at once if I was you. So long;' and before the sergeant could ask him another question, Pard Derrick had started for the diggers' camp again.

It did not take Sergeant Sells long to draw his conclusions. Derrick, he thought, had at last become convinced of his friend's guilt, and was ready to hand him over to the law; but at the same time, not unnaturally, was anxious not to appear in the affair. He thoroughly sympathized with him, and if he could make the capture look the result of accident, or of the unceasing vigilance of the police — well, so much the better for all concerned.

He called two of the men, and had the horses saddled. It still wanted half an hour to the Commissioner's breakfast-hour, and there was no sign of life about his tent. Time enough to tell him all about it when the capture was made; or, at least, when the capture was made, there would be no need to assign reasons.

The three set out through the driving rain, and the sergeant, as his horse slowly climbed the hillside, sticky and slippery now, thought again, as he often did, of his spoiled life and the woman who had done it.

If he found Anderson would she be with him? and if she were, what should he say to her — what should he do with her? He shrank from seeing her unspeakably, and yet he felt it would be worse to let another go on this errand, and then to have to hear all that happened second-hand. Whatever came of it, he must see it through himself.

The day was in keeping with his mood. What had he to do with blue skies and bright sunshine? His life had been dull and dreary always, and this was a fitting climax. Such a day, such a day! The driving cold rain shut them in on every side, and once on top of the hill beside the 'almighty big gum-tree' Pard Derrick had made such a point of, looking down into the narrow gully, nothing was visible save scrub and fern, looming large close to and beyond the thick gray mist of rain. There was a sound of rushing water not far below, but it was impossible to distinguish anything.

'The creek below's a banker,' said one of the troopers. He was wet and cold; he had been hurried away without his breakfast, and the raw cold morning made him hungry, and he was anxious to find some excuse to turn back again. 'Are you going on, sergeant? We can't ride down there. It's too slippy.'

'We'll leave the horses here. You can stop with them. Ottaway 'll come along with me. I'm going to search this gully thoroughly.'

The discomfited one swore under his breath. It was bad enough to ride breakfastless through the bitter cold rain. It was worse still to stand here on top of the hill holding three horses, while that lunatic — he called his

superior officer a lunatic in his own mind — was making an exhaustive survey of that wretched gully. He almost envied them as they went slipping and sliding down the steep hillside.

The sergeant was more explicit with his companion than he had been to the grumbler he had left above.

‘I was hearing a cock-and-bull ghost-story about this gully,’ he said; ‘and it occurs to me the ghost may very likely be the man we’re after, though what the dickens he can be playing ghost for I don’t know! Possibly it was only the other man’s fancy. Anyhow, I’m going through this gully carefully; so just see that your pistols are all right, Ottaway. I don’t suppose Black Anderson ’ll hesitate a moment if he gets the chance of making a ghost of one of us.’

‘All right, sergeant.’

The creek had risen so high it was a mass of tumbling brown water roaring among the scrub and trees, but apparently finding an outlet to the north, for it rose no higher; still, it formed an effectual barrier that prevented them crossing to the other side of the gully.

‘Wouldn’t he most likely hide at the head of the gully?’ asked Ottaway, after they had skirted along the water’s edge for about ten minutes, carefully examining the scrub.

‘I think so, too,’ said the sergeant. ‘We’ll have to work back that way, and get round to the other side of the creek. There’s no crossing hereabouts.’

Then they went on again in silence for a little. Suddenly Ottaway stopped, and laid his hand on the sergeant’s arm.

‘What’s that?’

That was a woman’s shawl, sodden and soaking, lying there on the ground to their left. Soaked with the wet though it was, the sergeant recognised it at a glance. That Rob Roy plaid — had he not himself given it to his wife? He knew it, and he felt with a pang that the man beside him knew it too. A woman’s shawl was not such a common thing on Deadman’s in those days as to be unrecognisable.

‘They must be somewhere hereabouts,’ said Ottaway, picking up the shawl and noting its condition; ‘this thing ain’t been here long;’ and the sergeant noticed with pain the ‘they.’

A little farther on and they came upon the charred and blackened logs of a trampled-out fire.

‘Warm!’ said Ottaway; and then laughed aloud at his own grim humour, for anything more dreary and cold than that trampled-out fire alongside a heap of rotting wet branches it would be difficult to picture.

The sergeant caught him by the shoulder.

‘Look out!’ he said, and he wondered if the man could hear the beating of his heart; ‘it’s a hut, I think.’

‘By the Lord!’ said Ottaway, and stood stock still.

From the hut came a murmuring sound as of someone talking hoarsely, and both men dropped at once to their knees.

‘Gently now,’ said the sergeant, drawing his revolver; and the other man noticed that his hand was trembling, and that even his voice shook.

They crept along softly on hands and knees through the pouring rain, until they were close against the branches; and the sound of a voice inside — talking so loud it almost rose to a scream — was plainly to be heard, interrupted frequently by violent fits of coughing. They lay still a moment listening. Then the sergeant, impatient of delay, rose to his feet, and prepared to push back the strip of sacking and enter boldly at the door.

‘You're mad!’ whispered the other man, holding him back; ‘he'll shoot on sight.’

‘I'm sick of this!’ said the sergeant bitterly. ‘What's my life worth?’

And, indeed, at that moment he would have thrown it away without a murmur, for it seemed to him it was his wife's voice he heard, and she was calling on another man in accents of tenderest love. What did it matter if a chance shot ended his life there and then? He would have an equal chance, and if he shot Black Anderson down in his tracks — well, it would be well. He drew his revolver and threw aside the curtain, and his companion, not to be outdone, stood beside him.

‘Now for it!’ he muttered between his teeth, for it seemed to him this was a very rash proceeding on the sergeant's part, and he fully expected one of them would pay the penalty.

‘Throw up your hands!’ said the sergeant mechanically, as they entered the hut.

There was no rush, no commotion, no singing bullet, no man standing with raised hands in token of surrender — only a cold, desolate, empty hut, with the wind and rain beating through it, and a stretcher on which lay a woman tossing her arms about, and moaning incoherently in delirium.

The sergeant stood stock still, and Ottaway stamped his feet on the muddy floor.

‘Jumping Jehosaphat,’ he said, ‘the bird's flown! And he's left behind your — your — — And he's deserted the girl,’ he added, as an after-thought.

Chapter VII

Better So.

*'At the Door of Life, at the Gate of Breath,
There are worse things waiting for men than Death.'*

Swinburne.

THE sergeant said nothing. What could he say? He went slowly up to the wretched stretcher whereon the girl lay, and stood looking down on her — the girl who was his wife, the fair-haired, soft-eyed woman who had been all in all to him, whom he had loved so intensely, and who had cared for him so little, she had dragged his good name in the dust, and had made him the laughing-stock of the diggers' camp. And all for what? For a man who left her to die like this!

With the quick eye of a man accustomed to notice everything, he took in all the surroundings, saw the marks of the clayey soil and the green grass on her damp wet clothes, and mentally calculated how long she must have been lying there. A violent paroxysm of coughing shook her, and after a momentary hesitation he dropped his revolver, put his arms round her, and held her till it had passed, the other man meanwhile looking on in silence.

'I think I'll light a fire, eh, sergeant?' he asked. 'Is she very bad? Will she get over it?' and his tone was as matter-of-fact as if it were an everyday occurrence.

'Light a fire if you can,' said the sergeant. 'The man's cleared out some time last night, I suppose; the blankets are all gone. I don't know, I should think she was dying.'

'He was a d — — d skunk to leave her like that,' ventured the trooper; but the look on the sergeant's face did not encourage him to continue the conversation, and he went outside and began searching round for a dry stick or two to kindle the fire.

It took some time, but at last a tiny flame sprang up, and he tended it carefully, building his fire close to the doorway, where it had evidently been built before. Soon it was crackling and glowing in spite of the damp wood, and the dancing flames lit up the interior of the hut. The trooper went out and fetched in the wringing wet shawl, and, fastening it on two sticks, hung it before the fire to dry.

'Is it any good looking round for the man?' asked Ottaway, coming and standing on the other side of the stretcher, and looking down on the girl.

'No, he's got clean away, I think.'

'What'll I do? You ought to have a doctor,' as a fresh paroxysm of coughing seemed to wrench the last spark of life from the girl's frail body.

'Go back to camp,' said the sergeant with an effort. 'Tell the Commissioner how it is, and get blankets and anything else you can from my place. She can't last long, I think.'

'Won't you have a doctor? Snaky Bill's new mate, Chunky Smith they call him, was a full-blown doctor in the old country; he's got all the papers quite right, they say.'

'All right. Fetch him along if you can. But it's too late to do any good.'

'And you — what'll you do?'

'Stop here.'

'Black Anderson might come back.'

The fire was crackling and dancing cheerfully now. The sergeant felt as if his hearing were become on a sudden preternaturally acute, as if he must perforce listen to every dropping coal and breaking twig, to the sound of the wind and rain outside, to the restless footsteps of the trooper, to the panting, sobbing breath and incoherent murmurs, broken perpetually by the cruel cough, of the girl he looked down on. He would gladly have put up his hands and shut out these disturbing sounds, but it seemed to him he must be unmoved before the other man.

'And if he does?'

'He might shoot you down like he did the old German.'

'Well,' said the sergeant bitterly, 'after all, wouldn't that be the best thing that could happen? Go on, Ottaway; make haste, like a good fellow. Anderson won't come here again. It's the last place he'd come to.'

Ottaway turned away, and the sergeant felt himself compelled again to listen intently to his retreating footsteps. When he was gone he lifted the girl — how light a weight she was now, like a child in his arms! — and carried her to the fire. She was icy cold, and he took off his long dragoon cloak, warmed it at the fire, and, taking off her damp wet dress, wrapped her in it. The shawl was soon dry, and he chafed her cold feet and put it over them. Then he bethought himself of the brandy in his flask, and though it made her cough terribly, it seemed to put a little life into her.

'Dave, Dave!' she panted, 'I knew you'd come back.'

The man bending over her drew back a moment. Then he steeled himself. What did it matter? He had known all along how it would be, and she was dying.

He stooped down again, and she seemed to recognise him, and put up her hands out of the enfolding wraps to push him away.

'Run for your life, Dave, run, run! Never mind me.'

He had not minded her; he had never given her a thought; but she was past knowing that now.

She was so frightened, so frantic, so desperately anxious, and so near to death, he could not but try to soothe her last moments.

‘Hush, hush! He’s right safe away. I’ll not hurt him. Jenny, Jenny, don’t you know me?’

‘The fire! the fire!’ she moaned, ‘the fire! Pard, you’re usin’ up all the wood, an’ what’ll I do to-morrow? Oh, it’s that heavy, an’ what’ll I do to-morrow?’ The cough choked her then, but she struggled to make herself heard. ‘Dave, Dave, I mustn’t let him — — ’

‘Jenny, Jenny, my poor little child!’

‘It’s you,’ she said, ‘you,’ looking at him for the first time with some gleam of reason in her eyes. ‘You didn’t ought to come here.’

He chafed her hands gently. They were burning hot now, and the terrible cough was worse than ever. It seemed as if she could not bear it, and, reluctant as he was, he felt he must hold her in his arms; how could he leave her lying there on the cold ground?

Consciousness was coming back to her for a brief space, and certainly she had some brief respite from the cough. Was it because he held her in his arms, or was it the last flicker before death?

Her eyes were closed, and he noted the long sweep of the thick eyelashes on her cheek, the blue veins in her eyelids and on her temples. The sun-tan was gone, and the sunken cheeks were white as marble; her yellow hair had fallen all across his arm. And this was his wife — the girl he had loved so madly, the girl he had married only three months ago! He had longed often to hold her like this, had hoped in time she would understand his love. But she had always moved away from him, had shaken off his hand; she had — what had she not done? and now, surely, it was the irony of fate that he should hold her in his arms to die.

She opened her eyes, her soft brown eyes, and looked up in his face, and he remembered in the old days, when first he knew her, how he had tried to make her look at him like that, and she never had — no, never, not once.

She seemed to understand a little what he was doing for her: that he was brushing away her damp hair from her face, that he was pillowing her head on his arm, and a look of gratitude crept into her tired eyes. Dimly at last she seemed to understand.

‘I’m dreamin’,’ she gasped — ‘I’m dreamin’ all along.’

But the theory of dreams did not satisfy her, and she put up her hand and touched his beard.

‘You’ — and the wonder deepened in her eyes — ‘you are good!’

‘Good! oh, my child, my child! I wanted always to be good to you, but you wouldn’t let me. Oh, Jenny, Jenny!’

Even in his own ears the words sounded feeble and useless — only a

confession of helplessness; it was somehow a fitting conclusion to the whole story.

'I — I,' she said, as if at last she had thoroughly grasped the situation, 'I'm main sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I told you — I told you — not to have no truck with me. I warn't the wife for you. I was Black Dave's girl — always — always.'

'And now,' he could not resist the taunt, 'he's left you.'

'Twas my fault,' she said with a sob; 'twas my fault. I let on to Pard about the gold. I — I — — ' The cough came again, and when it had passed she lay back in his arms utterly exhausted. He began to be cramped and dizzy from the awkward position in which he knelt, and though he sheltered her from the wind and rain, it beat pitilessly on his shoulders.

She opened her eyes and looked straight into his, as if she had been a child. Did she understand? Or was she delirious again? There was perplexity and trouble in her eyes.

'He swore he'd never leave me — he swore he wouldn't slip me up! Isn't a man never set on a woman that way? Isn't it never no good to be set on a man?'

'Oh, Jenny, Jenny! my poor little girl!'

'Isn't it? Isn't it?' she asked persistently, and he saw that she was drifting off into unconsciousness again.

'Yes, child — yes,' he answered, and the answer seemed to soothe her.

Her restless fingers plucked feebly at the cloak in which she was wrapped. It was the last sign, he thought; would she last till the doctor came? He began to doubt it. And she was not nineteen. Poor little girl — oh, poor little girl! A great pity swept over him. Such a child as she was, and she had never had a chance! Even he himself, when he had loved her most, when he had had her welfare most at heart, had but given a helping hand to destroy her.

He saw it all now so plainly — now that it was too late. How clearly the warm moonlight night came back to him — the night when he had asked her to be his wife! She had warned him — yes, plainly as she could; he saw it now; she had warned him, and he had paid no heed to her warning. She had dishonoured and disgraced his name; but if he had suffered, she was paying the penalty too. Dying — dying, and not yet nineteen!

With his handkerchief he wiped her damp forehead gently. Oh, the pity of it! the pity of it! And they might have been so happy. It seemed to him that never till now had he realized how he loved her. And yet surely it was best she should die. Could he who had loved her so wish her to live?

She opened her eyes again and looked straight up in his face, and there was such a world of love in those dying eyes he was startled. Never in all his loveless life had a woman looked at him like that. Had this love he

craved so passionately come to him at last — at last — when it was too late?

But no, she did not recognise him; she was thinking of another man.

‘Oh, Dave!’ she sighed; ‘oh, Dave, Dave! I love you, Dave, I love you; an’ I had a bad dream. I dreamt you left me, Dave. An’ I knew all along you wouldn’t never do that;’ and her restless fingers stole up and gently touched his beard — so gently, oh, so gently! crept up and softly stroked his face. So had he seen her touch Sal Carter’s baby in the days that seemed so far away now. And now she took him for another man, and he did not dare disturb her last moments by putting her away from him. It seemed somehow a fitting climax to the whole story.

‘Dave’ — she went on in gasps, for she was almost past speech ‘Dave, I love you so! I’m main sorry if I hampered — you. I’m so tired — I’m — so — tired. Won’t — you — kiss me — Dave?’

He could not, he could not. Much for her he would have done, but this was asking too much. Insensibly his hold on her loosened, and almost gone as she was, she noticed it.

‘Oh, Dave, Dave!’ Such a pitiful wail as it was, it went to his heart. ‘Kiss me, Dave. I wouldn’t — hamper — you — Dave. Kiss me — kiss me!’

There was no one to see. It was a matter between himself and her, and she took him for another man. Her life was over. What could it matter if he did soothe her last moments?

He drew her close to his breast again and stooped and kissed her gently, and she put up her lips to meet his. She had never done so before — never, never. And that was the way women loved! She nestled closer to him, and tried to put a feeble arm round his neck.

‘Hold me tight. Hold — me — tight. What is it? Oh, what is — it?’

He tried to pour some more brandy down her throat, but she had lost the power to swallow. The cough came again, and he thought, as she lay back after it had gone, that she was dead; but no, she rallied again.

Her hands stole to his face again, and rested on the deep scar which seamed his left cheek. It was something new to her, and pity and perplexity came into the dying eyes.

‘Oh, Dave, Dave! does — it — hurt?’

‘Hurt! Oh, child! My God! my God!’

‘Poor Dave — my — poor — boy!’

She tried to put her arms up again, but her strength was all gone, and he could but put his face down to hers and try and soothe her. Then there was a brief struggle for breath, and he held her up so that the cold wind blew right on her face; but it was the last struggle. She was going, going fast. One more look of infinite love from the dying eyes, one more incoherent tender murmur of ‘Dave, Dave!’ and it was all over.

The brief sad life was done — the tragedy had been played out to its

bitter end.

He carried her back to the stretcher, drew his cloak close round her, and spread the bright Rob Roy plaid over all. Then he went outside into the pouring rain, and leaned against the doorpost of the hut, looking down into the crackling flames.

* * * * *

So it was all over — all over — he kept repeating to himself. It was better so — better so; there could be no other ending; he would not have had it different; but — but — she was dead, and it was best, best, best. Not nineteen, and it was best she should be dead! The words were whirling through his brain, they were written in letters of fire before his eyes. His wife lay dead in the wretched hut alone there — his wife, his wife, he repeated the words again; and every man would speak of her with contemptuous pity.

Chapter VIII

Weeds upon the Grave.

*'I have set my life upon a cast,
And I will stand the hazard of the die.'*

'Macbeth.'

How long he stood there he never knew, but he was roused at length by a hand on his arm, and, raising his eyes, saw the Commissioner standing before him, and behind him one or two troopers, and a man he dimly recognised as the doctor spoken of by Ottaway.

'Hallo, sergeant!' The Commissioner's voice had a ring of pity in it. 'Why, you're wet through! Where's your flask?'

He looked about him vaguely, dimly remembering he had dropped it on the ground when the girl died. The Commissioner picked it up, but the brandy had all been spilt.

'Here's mine!' He took it mechanically, and it seemed to put a little life into him. 'Come, tell me, what's the meaning of this?'

'He's got clean away.' He heard his own voice as if someone else were speaking. 'He's got clean away, and' — that other man seemed to have great difficulty in speaking at all — 'and — —'

'And Ottaway says you found your — — He deserted the girl.'

'Yes, sir.'

He moved aside as if to let them pass.

'Come, let me look at the girl,' said the man they called Chunky Smith.

He turned round then, and led the way into the hut, the Commissioner and the doctor following; for he was a doctor, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, London; but when the troopers would have come too, Commissioner Ruthven waved them back. It would be quite hard enough if they two strangers looked on the end of this man's story.

'The trooper told me she was very ill,' said the doctor.

'She's dead, sir,' said the sergeant quietly, and he turned back the shawl and opened his heavy cloak. So gently he did it. The Commissioner, looking down at the still, white, peaceful face, could not but remember the frantic man who had rushed into his tent two months ago, accusing himself of the murder of his wife.

'You did not, sergeant, you — —'

‘No, sir; I did what I could. I — I — — My God! she was dying when I got here.’

The doctor bent down and examined her, and the two men stood quietly looking on.

‘H'm,’ he said at last, ‘inflammation of the lungs, failure of the heart's action — call it what you will. It was exposure, really — it all comes to the same thing in the end. She was ill before, and last night without any shelter — you can't call this humpy shelter — finished her. Only a shawl like that between her and the weather! It must have been a cruel hard night.’

‘Ottaway found the shawl this morning out by the creek,’ said the sergeant monotonously.

‘You wrapped her up, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘It was too late. Nothing could have saved her. After all, it was best. Such a child as she was;’ and he drew the covering over the fair dead face again.

There was nothing for it but to go back to camp again.

‘I'll send down four men with a stretcher for the body,’ said the Commissioner.

‘Couldn't we bury her here, sir?’ said the sergeant. ‘What need — — ’

‘Well, yes, if you like. I'll send down a burying party this evening. Come along, sergeant.’

The sergeant hesitated.

‘If you please, sir,’ he said with an evident effort, ‘if you have no objection, I'd rather stay. I can't leave — I mean, I — — ’

‘As you please, sergeant.’

Then they left him with his dead, which was all his now, and went back up the slippery steep hillside in the wintry rain.

‘Good Lord!’ said the Commissioner, ‘to think of his stopping, after all! I'll send that burying party along pretty smartly. I can't have my sergeant knocked up. And the pity of it is, she wasn't worth a second thought from any man.’

‘He looked fit to cut his throat when he turned down that shawl,’ said the young fellow beside him pitifully; ‘that's always the way, isn't it? A man always comes a cropper over a woman who ain't worth a tuppenny cuss. It's the way of the world, I suppose. Will you catch the man?’

‘Who can tell?’ said the Commissioner. ‘It's evident he don't allow much to stand in his way. The brute made off with the blankets on a night like last night. I'm afraid he may be trusted to save his own skin.’

That was much the opinion at the Lucky Digger.

Buck Carter said he could not afford to close the place simply because his daughter, who wasn't any daughter of his since she'd run off with a man like Black Anderson, had up and died, and so things were even

more lively than usual. There was so much to be discussed, and everybody required so much liquid sustenance to aid in that discussion. Of the poor girl lying out in her grave in the gully, very few thought, any more than they thought of the solitary man up in the police camp sitting over his lonely fire reviewing bitterly his life. What they talked of was the probability of Black Anderson's capture, and the possibility of his guilt.

Pard Derrick sat silently by the fire. He was not keen on his share of the business being made known, and he was bitterly repentant that he had not gone to the sergeant the night before. He might have saved the girl's life, though, indeed, she was better dead. Careless fellow as he was, he felt she was better sleeping quietly down in that lonely gully, with the earth piled up above her face; but, still, what a night she must have passed, what a cruel, hard night before it ended! And the talk went on all around him; no one thought of her, only Sal Carter's eyes were red, and she was extra snappy, and was very sure that lynching was too good for Black Anderson.

'Never fear, missus,' said Snaky Bill soothingly; 'we'll lynch 'im sure as fate, if the sergeant don't shoot him on sight, which I reckon he will. He ain't goin' to get away. If he didn't get clear of those ranges an' gullies in the hot weather, I reckon he ain't agoin' to do it now.'

'Tell you what it is, mates,' said Pard Derrick, speaking for the first time, 'the man as took that poor sick gal's blankets a night like last night is just the sort of mean skunk as 'd shoot a man down in his tracks, ain't he, now?'

There was a general chorus of assent.

Chunky Smith had told of the scene down in the gully. Public sympathy was with the sergeant, for all he was a 'trap,' and public opinion was very much against Black Anderson. He had taken away the only girl on the camp, the girl they had most of them never dared to lift their eyes to, and if he had not murdered her, he had certainly left her to die; had taken away the blankets — he, a strong powerful man — and had left her sick, dying, without so much as a shawl to cover her.

Yes, public opinion was very much against Black Anderson. The police need fear no obstacles in their way now, and even had Pard Derrick proclaimed there and then his share in the betrayal, not much harm would have been done. But he kept his own counsel, and went on:

'But he ain't agoin' to be took; bless you! he knows a sight more'n that. Bet you what you like, the man as murdered old Max ain't never taken.'

'I'll bet you what you like,' said Chunky Smith, 'if there's a rope in the colony that 'll hang him, the sergeant is going to find it. What else has he got to live for? I reckon he'll track him down, if he's anywhere in the colony. Lord! if I were Black Anderson, I wouldn't reckon myself safe as long as Sergeant Sells was above-ground.'

‘My colonial, Chunky,’ said Pard Derrick, turning round, ‘you seem to be pretty cock-sure. Now, to my mind, the sergeant was that broke when he came back to camp, he was just about fit to turn up his toes.’

‘It’ll make an old man of him, maybe,’ said the doctor thoughtfully. ‘But there’s a lot of go in him yet, and he’s not like you young fellows who can afford to forgive and forget. I saw his face when he turned down the shawl and showed me the dead girl’s face, and I knew he was going to remember it, and to remember it to some purpose, though I dare say he doesn’t think so yet.’

The sergeant sat in his house, and thought the self-same thoughts. His fire had died down to the tiniest spark, the wind howled round the chimney and whistled through the crack beneath the door, and the rain beat drearily against the window-panes. Such a night, just such a night it had been last night, and that frail girl had battled through it all alone. And now she was dead — dead before she was nineteen; and he — an old man — was left. Such a brief life hers had been, so brief and so unhappy. She had spoiled his life for him — oh yes, she had spoiled his life; but he had not met her till that life had more than run half its course, and he — he had stepped in and helped to spoil hers at the very threshold. It was no excuse to say he had meant well; he judged himself by the result. And the wind, that beat in stormy gusts against the window and shook the door, said to him plainly that his very love had sacrificed her. He should have known, he should have seen that a child like that was no fit wife for him, that the seven-and-twenty years that lay between them was too great a gulf even for his mighty love to bridge.

And so she had fallen, as he might have known she would — poor little ignorant, loving girl! — and she had paid the penalty.

Out there she lay, out in the cold wet gully, the girl he would have surrounded with every comfort; and he laid his head down on the table as he thought of what she must have suffered first, of how he had found her deserted and dying. He blamed himself — blamed himself bitterly; but he was not alone to blame — there was that other man. If it had not been for him — if it had not been for him, would she not have been in time a happy wife, might he not have sat his children upon his knee? No, no — a thousand times no! — wailed the wind round the roof; but the thought would come that it might have been, and *now* he could only wish that he, too, were lying in that gully at rest. Life held nothing for him — no hope, not the faintest chance of happiness. He had staked all, and he had lost — miserably lost.

There was one thing only he had to do, and then — and then — — He drew out his revolver and looked at it longingly. Why not? What use to go on living?

But no, not yet. One thing more he had to do before he had done with life, and he pushed back the chair and walked up and down the hut. He

would track down the man who had done him this foul wrong; he would have vengeance! No vengeance — nothing, he felt — could ever right the wrong, could ever bring back to life the girl he had laid down in her grave that afternoon, could make her his stainless wife again. Nothing could do that — nothing could undo what had been done; but there only remained to him vengeance, and he would have it. Up and down he marched half the livelong night, listening to the howling wind and the pitiless rain, thinking of it all, till he flung himself on his bed and, worn out with very weariness, slept.

Chapter IX

On the Track.

*'Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will.'*

Browning.

AND the next day the spell of wet weather had passed, and it was fine again. Overhead was a cloudless blue sky, the earth looked fresh and green, and the air was light and fresh, like champagne. It was a beautiful world. So thought Commissioner Ruthven. His promotion was sure; the woman he loved loved him with all her heart, and her love was well worth having. His wedding-day was close at hand, and he was pretty sure now of taking the Wooragee murderer. The man had baffled all his vigilance for the last five months; but now — now this last sin had raised the country against him. There would be none to help him, and he must be taken.

He thought of the girl — well, well, poor little soul! such women as she were better dead — and of the sergeant. The man's face haunted him. It was cruel — cruel! He was not a man to make any moan. He would wrap himself in his reserve, and they would respect it; but 'he looked fit to cut his throat,' the doctor had said, and the Commissioner wondered if he had done so. Many a man would; he couldn't have much to live for. But at least he would be interested in the tracking down of his enemy. It would be kindness to interest him so, if it were possible; and he thought, with a shudder, of the long day the man had spent down in the gully alone with his dead, of the dreary night alone in his desolate home. It was not as if he had not cared — oh, he had cared enough! Commissioner Ruthven never doubted that for a moment.

Then he called his orderly, and sent him for the sergeant, wondering a little to himself whether he would be fit for duty. And he lighted his pipe, and, drawing aside the tent-curtain, sat in the sunshine drinking in the fresh, clear air. Such a beautiful day — such a bright, clear day! It hardly seemed possible that anyone could be unhappy such a day as this.

Sergeant Flynn came along and saluted.

'Was yer honour askin' for me?'

'No, Flynn; it was Sells I sent for.'

'Oh, the crathur!' Sure it's broke up he is, I'm thinkin', intirely.'

'Nonsense! Hold your tongue! Here he comes.'

Sergeant Sells came very quietly across from his hut to the Commissioner's tent. The ground was sloppy and muddy, and he picked his way from force of habit, so as not to dirty his clean riding-boots. For very nearly thirty years he had been accustomed to keep his boots spotless, and now, even though it seemed to him he had almost done with life, that it held nothing for him, he still thought of keeping his boots clean.

'Good-morning, sergeant.'

'Good-morning, sir.'

He spoke very quietly, but the Commissioner saw a great change had come over the man. He was upright and soldierly as ever, but his face was drawn and lined, and the black hair was nearly white now; his eyes seemed sunken with long watching, and there was a gray look on his face, while the livid scar stood out on his cheek more marked than formerly. This was an old man who stood before him, a strong man still, but one who had lived his life. And a woman had done this, a little slatternly girl, whom half the camp counted simple.

Commissioner Ruthven racked his brains to know what to say next. It was only kindness to ignore the past where it was possible, and yet to expect this man to go on with the every-day duties of life seemed hardly considerate; but what else could he do? And while he was silent and disturbed, the man he was thinking of came to his aid.

'There was a free fight last night, sir, I hear, down at the Lucky Digger, and a man was rather badly hurt.'

'Oh! does he accuse anybody?'

'I hear it was only a drunken brawl, but he's like to die. Will you take his deposition?'

'Yes,' said Ruthven indifferently.

If these men would drink and fight, well, they must take the consequences.

Then there was a pause, and it seemed to the Commissioner that the sergeant was fearing, dreading the moment when his own particular sorrow should be touched on; but it had to come. The name of Black Anderson could not well be ignored in the camp when it was in everybody's thoughts, on everybody's lips.

'Sergeant!'

'Yes, sir.'

'We must make it our business to take old Max's murderer now. The creeks are all up, they'll be worse in a day or two, and it'll be a slur on the camp if we don't get him now. If he didn't get away before, he can't possibly do it now that the country side's against him.'

'Against him, sir?'

‘Against him! Good Lord, yes! They were with him before, or someone must have helped him from Deadman’s; but I don’t think he’s got any friends left now. This last — well, anyhow, it was a brutal murder, just as cold-blooded as they make ‘em, and we’re bound to have him.’

The Commissioner would not look, but he felt rather than saw that the sergeant was flinching as one who had been touched on the raw.

He said ‘Yes, sir,’ mechanically, and Ruthven went on:

‘Have you any idea which way he went when he left the hut the night before last?’

‘No, sir.’

He thought of the wet and sodden shawl Ottaway had found by the creek. Had she been trying to follow him and dropped it, or had he carried it away with him and dropped it? Anyhow, either he or she must have passed that way, and the gray look deepened on his face. He knew his officer was trying to spare him, but what matter whether he spoke of it or not? that rain-soaked gully, that cold and dreary hut, were ever in his mind, ever before his eyes.

‘He’s probably,’ said the Commissioner thoughtfully, ‘made his way to the gullies over between Karouda and the Packhorse; they’re the loneliest;’ and he thought of a certain terrible night, six months ago now, he had spent up among those hills.

But the sergeant thought of that sodden Rob Roy plaid, and the footsteps that had passed that way had been going northwards.

‘I think, sir, he’s making for the Murray. He wants to cross the border. He won’t be so well known on the Sydney side.’

‘Well, but he’d never be such a fool as that! Why, we’d nab him the minute he got clear of the gullies; they’re his only safeguard.’

‘He’ll starve in them now — that — that’ — the sergeant remembered he had promised not to betray Pard Derrick — ‘he can’t get — he won’t expect any help from the creek.’

‘No, but to go north! He’d have a much better chance of losing his identity among the station-hands and making his way to the diggings to the south. I think we must keep the main look-out that way.’

‘Well, sir,’ said the sergeant reluctantly, ‘Ottaway picked up the shawl, and — and the person who dropped that was making in the other direction.’

‘That — that was the girl’s;’ and the Commissioner looked away over the camp and watched intently the men who were pulling goods and chattels out of the way of the swollen waters of the creek.

‘He might have taken it,’ said Sells monotonously, ‘or — or — she might have followed him — and — —’

‘Any way, you think someone passed that way. Thank you, sergeant; I agree with you. We’ll keep a good look-out, and we’ll catch him and hang him as high as Haman. You are not ill?’ and the Commissioner

scrutinized him carefully.

‘No, sir.’

‘Feel fit for duty?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Because — — Oh, well, perhaps you're right. Take a couple of men and ride down towards Mitalagong. There's a shepherd's hut along that way, and one or two hatters in the gullies there where he might get rations.’

So the sergeant called his men, and had the horses saddled, and they set off in the direction of Mitalagong, which was away past Wooragee and by the garden of old Max. Some Chinamen had got it now, and as he rode slowly along the road with down-bent head he thought of the dusty day when he had ridden that way six months before — the day he had thought to give Jenny Carter a basket of cherries; the day old Max was murdered; the day his sorrows had begun.

It was winter now, a bright, clear, sparkling winter's day; the cold air fanned his cheek, but the sunshine was warm and bright — a perfect day. If he had not done with life, he might have found enjoyment in it; but as it was, he rode on, wrapped in his own thoughts, and heard dimly the voices of the two men as they rode behind him, talking quietly to each other. They were discussing his affairs, probably — it was the camp talk; but it did not seem to him to matter much. They would not address him. He had one thing to do, and then he would quit the mounted police.

At Wooragee the Chinamen had heard nothing and seen no one, and the troopers crossed the ridge and went down into the gully beyond. Here were some abandoned claims, and among them worked that lonely being known as a hatter, just making his living on the little that more grasping men had left behind. Opposite his cradle, which he was slowly and discontentedly rocking beside a dam, for there was no creek here, the troopers drew rein.

‘Hallo, mate!’ said the sergeant.

‘Hallo, yourself,’ said the man sullenly, with the regular digger suspicion of ‘traps’ and all connected with them.

‘Has anyone passed this way to-day?’

‘Lord, yes!’ said the digger, scratching his head; ‘mighty sociable place this is! There was a bandicoot, and two crows, and I seen a flight of rosellas, and I heard no end of dingoes in the ranges.’

The sergeant took his cap off impatiently and let the cold wind blow through his hair. How could the man fool after this manner?

‘We are looking,’ he said gravely, ‘for the murderer of German Max, and we have reason to believe he passed this way.’

‘That's a mighty old story,’ said the digger, letting go the cradle-handle and sitting down on a mound of earth. ‘Take your time, gentlemen. You've been at that little game to my certain knowledge for the last six

months. I'll have no hand in the business. Hounding down an innocent man!

'Go into the camp at Deadman's,' said the sergeant quietly, 'and ask the boys there if we're hounding down an innocent man.'

'Well, I'm out of flour, and I'm agoing this very night,' said the digger. 'Now, just you look here: Black Dave ain't passed this way, and if he had, Peter Grimes ain't the man as 'd go back on a pal as the traps have a down on. But he ain't passed this way.'

'Go down into the camp,' repeated the sergeant monotonously, 'and ask them there what they think of Black Anderson, and then see if you'll help him.'

'You're getting an old man, sergeant,' scoffed the digger, who had nothing to lose, and so feared no man. 'Your beard's got white since last I seen you. They'll be running you out of the force right smart, if you don't look out.'

'See to yourself,' said the sergeant. 'If you help him, you're harbouring a criminal, and are liable to imprisonment. Come, men! If he hasn't passed this way, and I don't think he has,' he went on, speaking over his shoulder as they rode away, 'he must be still somewhere between here and the gully over under Digger's Point. We'll camp over on the ridge there, and keep a sharp look-out.'

So they camped out in the open to get the benefit of the sunshine, and the troopers built a fire and cooked the mid-day meal, while their superior officer sat on a log with his hands before him and pondered how he could best lay hands on this man. Steadily, steadily the little ants at his feet took advantage of the fine day to repair the damage the rain had done to their home, and to bring in fresh provisions against another rainy day, and he watched them intently. As they worked, so he would work till he had accomplished his object, and then — and then — well, then he would be old and broken — the mounted police force would want him no more.

And if he had only known it, close within pistol-shot lay hidden the very man he wanted, watching eagerly the troopers' dinner.

Chapter X

The Flight of Black Anderson.

*'Ah, hark! the fatal followers do pursue;
And I am faint and cannot fly their fury;
The sands are number'd, that make up my life;
Here must I stay, and here my life must end.'*

'Henry VI.' Shakespeare.

WHEN Dave had flung off Jenny down in the gully as a useless encumbrance, it had been, as Sergeant Sells was right in thinking, with the intention of crossing the border into New South Wales. And for the first hour he made his way steadily up the hill in the pouring rain, a fierce anger boiling in his heart against the man who would betray him, and the woman who had put the means into his hands. Had he not loved her and trusted her, had he not taken her to share his home with him, given her half of all he himself possessed? And the first moment she is tempted she has betrayed him. Never trust a woman — never, never! It is a good old adage, whose worth has been proved a thousand times: she'll betray you because she hates you, she'll betray you because she loves you, she'll betray you for no reason, or for a thousand reasons. The man who has any truck with a woman is bound to come to grief.

The hillside was slippery with the pouring rain, and as his feet slid from under him, he laid that to her score too. But for her, he would not have been out in this rain; but for her, he would have been sleeping comfortably between the blankets in his hut, with a comfortable fire in the doorway; but for her, Pard Derrick would have gone on supplying him with provisions till the hue and cry should be forgotten, and he could have slipped away down south to the fields of Ballarat or Bendigo; but for her — — And as his foot slipped again, and he came down on his face, he swore an oath to be revenged on her.

She would go back to her husband; let him take her back. She was enough to weary any man; it was better to be out here in the rain, a hunted man, than alone in the hut with her, with nothing to do but listen to her trying to suppress that cough, or watching the patient smile upon her face that wore out his patience. These last few weeks had been enough to kill any man; he was glad they were over. She would be cold,

too, without a fire and without any blankets. Well, let her; she would realize then something of what he was suffering now.

The ground was so slippery it was with difficulty he kept a foothold, and at each slip that he made he swore an oath, for he felt that he was making a path it would not take a black tracker to follow. But, still, there was safety in the rain. They would never get the trackers to work in the rain, and if it only held on another day and night they would be useless.

At the top of the hill he sat down to rest, panting. The hill was covered with close-growing scrub and timber, so light it hardly formed any shelter; but at last, when he was drenched to the skin, and more than certain that the rain had got under the oil cloth that covered his blankets, he found a hollow tree, and getting inside, built a small fire outside at which to warm and dry himself. He did it in fear and trembling, for he knew well enough how far the light of a fire will carry even on a night like this; but it was so wet and wintry, and he was so done with the unaccustomed exertion, that he felt he must risk something. Then, cosy and warm, he dozed for two or three hours, though even in his dreams the thought haunted him that Pard Derrick knew he was a murderer, and would put the police on his track, and that even now they might be hunting up the gully.

He woke wide awake more than once, and listened intently, but there was nothing to be heard but the fizzing of the fire as the rain-drops fell upon it, and the sound the rain made trickling down the tree which sheltered him. Occasionally, too, there came out of the depths of the bush strange and weird sounds that struck on his ear fearsomely as he listened intently. A branch broke, weighed down by a weight of water; some night-bird cried; a stone dislodged by the rain went crashing down through the brushwood. Pooh! he had heard these same sounds a thousand times, only to-night — to-night, with the thought that the police would have more knowledge of his whereabouts and his habits than they had yet had — they struck on him dismally.

About three o'clock in the morning he could stay no longer, but, gathering up his blankets, started out into the rain again. He was on the top of the ridge now; he fully intended to make north. Once across the border he thought he would be safe. He ought to have gone long ago, when he had Pard Derrick to help him, and he cursed his folly in bringing the girl to be a plaything who proved a weight round his neck. Well, he was rid of her now — now, when his old mate would raise the country against him!

He could not make south; he could not dream of such a thing. He could only go northward by Wooragee and Mitalagong; in the lonely gullies there the stray diggers would likely know nothing about him, or if they did they would not recognise him, or, again, even if they did, it would be a fair fight — a man against a man — and it would go hard with him if

he could not get his tucker. He was a desperate man, and nothing should stand in his way.

That was his difficulty — food; he had none — none at all. In his hasty flight he had omitted to take so much as an ounce of tea or a pannikin of flour, and to-morrow morning he must try for some food. He might stick up the Chinamen at Wooragee; but no, that was too risky — too near Deadman's. Far better to go into the gully beyond, where he knew Peter Grimes hung out — Surly Pete, as they had called him at Deadman's — and beg, borrow, or steal from him enough tucker to carry him across the Murray.

The idea pleased him. Surly Pete, though he might not give graciously, would give, especially when he knew the 'traps' were pressing him hard, and there was no need to tell him Pard Derrick had gone back on him and slipped him up. Once beyond Mitalagong, it seemed to him his difficulties would be almost over. Why, oh why, when it was so easy, had he not made a bid for freedom before? Bitterly he blamed himself. He might have done the same thing almost any time the last five months; but he had feared, he had feared, and he had trusted Pard Derrick's judgment. Well, at any rate he had been driven to it now, and he felt it was a good thing.

His spirits rose as he walked on and felt that every step was so much gained. Once away from Mitalagong, it would be hard if he could not steal a horse somewhere to carry him across the border. If that — — girl had not lost the gold-bag, he would have had gold in plenty, and would not have needed to steal, but she had driven him to this; it was her sin, not his; it was an added grievance against her.

And the rain came down as steadily as ever; the wind blew in stormy gusts, and more than once he had to turn aside because of the water-courses the rain was wearing in the hillside. He must have a horse, certainly; the creeks would be almost impassable in many places, and without a horse he would never get away, though certainly a horse would not be much good in a place like this. It was almost worse coming down hill than going up. There was only one consolation: it was going down; there was the high ridge he had just crossed between him and his enemies. But it was pitch dark and bitterly cold; it was midwinter, and the day would not break much before seven, and he had ten long miles through scrub and brushwood before he reached Surly Pete's hut in the gully below there.

The present prospect was not invigorating. He shook his fist angrily as he slipped again; then in the darkness his foot caught in a root which was above-ground, and in a moment he was thrown forcibly on his face, twisting his ankle so, in the endeavour to keep his balance, that he could not repress a cry of pain. For a moment he lay there head downwards on the hillside, his hands grasping at the clayey soil — at the shrubs and

brushwood that grew so close around him. Then he scrambled to his knees, and found to his horror and dismay, when he tried to put his right foot to the ground, that not only was he unable to walk, but that every movement gave him such exquisite pain he could only sit down and rock himself backwards and forwards, moaning, and groaning, and cursing the man, and above all the woman, who had driven him to this.

Again he tried, and again, for if he failed to reach Pete's, then he was indeed lost; and if he stayed here, even if he were not found, he must perish miserably of hunger and cold. Again and again the pain made him sit down with a moan, and the rain beat pitilessly down on him. He was wet before; sitting now on the damp clayey soil, he was soaked through and through, and yet in an hour's time he had not gone ten yards. He gave up at last, and, crawling about painfully on his hands and knees, managed in the darkness to rake together enough brushwood to give himself a little shelter from the rain. Sitting down, he took out his knife and cut off his boot. It gave him too much pain to try and pull it off, and his ankle was all swollen, and his foot was swelling rapidly. He thought he must have broken a bone somewhere, and a cold fear came over him as he thought how impossible it would be to elude the police with a broken leg.

Even if he managed to crawl as far as Surly Pete's, what then? He could not hope to lie hidden there for long; the police must find him eventually; and in any case he could not reach there before the day broke; now he would not have a chance before the next night, and he had not a scrap of food. Already he was hungry almost beyond bearing, he was starved with the cold, and his box of matches was soaked with the rain; everything he possessed had got wet through in that last fall. There was no prospect of its clearing; it rained as hard as ever. He could *not* stop here another twenty-four hours, and he started up and struggled on down the hill, sometimes hopping on one leg, sometimes scrambling along on hands and knees.

But his progress was painfully slow. After he had been at it it seemed the livelong night, Dave had got but a very little farther down the hill: his hands were torn and scratched, his bones were aching with the unaccustomed exertion, and, above all, the scrub seemed to shut him in and close down on him on every side. He endeavoured to keep a downward direction, but every now and then he found himself turning upwards, and at last, utterly worn out, he lay down under the lee of a log where there was some little protection from the rain, and from very weariness he slept. It was a disturbed and troubled sleep, for again and again the pain in his foot awoke him, and again he dreamed that the police were upon him, and once, for the first time since he had done the murder, the gory face of old German Max came to him through the misty rain threatening him. It seemed to him that the old man had tied his gold-

bag — that bag which had cost him his life — to his leg, and the pain of it was weighing him down, while the mounted police were coming over the hill with the sergeant he had wronged at their head. Nothing, nothing could save him, and he started up in wild affright, crying aloud, only to find that dull gray day was breaking through the rainclouds, that the rain was coming down as steadily as ever, and, though the police were not upon him, his foot was cruelly painful, and here he must stay for another twelve hours at the very least.

He felt about in his pocket for tobacco, and found a little; but his pipe was useless, for his matches would not light, and he could only cut off a piece and chew it to keep off hunger, and lie there feeling the cold water trickle under his shelter, and watching the light grow broader and broader. And it rained on pitilessly, and the wind every now and then came up in great gusts that tore off branches from the forest trees and pierced through his very bones. Not much fear of his being found so long as he lay still, but he would die of cold and exposure if he lay here long, and even if he had had the means, he would hardly have dared light a fire.

Colder and colder he grew, till he rose to his knees with the intention of at least making an effort to get on a little way, when a crashing in the scrub above made him sink down in his lair again, and then through the brushwood he saw two troopers scrambling, swearing to each other as they shook the rain off their heavy cloaks and pushed the dripping branches away from their faces. Between them was a black tracker, his head sunk between his shoulders, looking as miserable as only a blackfellow can in the cold and wet. The other two were pushing him before them, but it was evident to the quarry, who saw it with no little satisfaction, that the blackfellow was most unwilling, and was certainly not making the faintest effort to help. Even in this rain he might have seen the track had he so pleased; but he did not please; he whined like a child, and wrung his hands because it was cold and wet.

Quite close they came, closer a great deal than the listening man liked, and he could hear every word they said.

Chapter XI

At Fault.

*'There is no creature loves me,
And, if I die, no soul shall pity me.'*

'Richard III.'

'IT'S no go, Ottaway,' said one of the troopers, shaking the wet out of his beard; 'this beggar's worse than useless. And I don't see any sign, do you?'

'Well, no,' said Ottaway, looking around; 'the Commissioner never thought it was much good coming this way. But I can't help thinking of that there shawl I found. That was on the road.'

'The gal was foolin' around looking for the skunk in the dark, and she dropped it, and being pretty nigh gone then, didn't take much notice, poor little beggar!'

'That's about it, I guess,' said Ottaway reluctantly. 'Well, it's not much good foolin' about here. Besides, likely as not we wouldn't see him if he were close handy drawing a bead on us.'

The other man laughed.

'Pleasant suggestion that for a rainy day! However, he wouldn't be such a fool as that. He'd have to reckon with the other man, even if this son of a sea-cook here didn't come up to scratch;' and the trooper hit Bill Bunting a heavy smack in the back that made him groan again.

Closer they came — closer, closer — till the man crouching beneath the log felt they *must* see him if they were only in earnest and used their eyes. The sergeant would have seen him, he felt that; but the sergeant was a man with a bitter wrong to avenge; these men were cold and wet, and sure they had been sent on a fool's errand.

'It's no go,' said Ottaway, coming to a standstill within twenty feet of where the fugitive crouched. 'We'll lay it into that beggar's hide, Jackson, for skulking so, and go back. It ain't no go.'

'It's jolly cold, I know that,' said Jackson, enjoying Bill Bunting's terror, 'and a good hiding 'd warm Bill, wouldn't it? Oh, d — — the sergeant, say I, and the sergeant's wife, and the sergeant's wife's lover. Come on, old man!'

Then they turned up the hill again, and Black Anderson hugged himself

on his narrow escape. And then he burst out into loud curses against Pard Derrick. He had betrayed him, then, he had; he would get away; he would get well; he would come back some day and take vengeance to the uttermost out of his false friend. All that he was suffering now — and he was suffering — Pard Derrick should suffer tenfold.

And the day wore on, and the cold grew worse, and the hunger was almost more than he could bear. The time seemed to pass so slowly, and after the experience of the morning he did not dare to move. Of course, it was hardly likely any more troopers would come that way, but, still, there was no knowing. He knew there were plenty in camp, he knew the Commissioner was vigilant, he knew he would leave no stone unturned to capture him, and the least thing might send them back to search this gully again; they might find the ashes of his last night's fire; they could see for themselves how new it was, even if Bill Bunting had not sufficient energy to point it out.

And if they found that — he shivered in his impotent helplessness — they would have no difficulty in following up the track he had made; it was as easily to be distinguished as a main road. Then he strained his ears and listened, till he could hear his own heart beating, till every little dropping leaf or breaking twig was magnified a thousand-fold. A crash, as of some breaking branch, sent him scrambling down hill regardless of the foot which he could not put to the ground. Then, ten yards further on he changed his mind: his safety lay in stillness, they might pass him by as they had done before; and he listened again and all was silent, save for the tapping of some bird or insect in the tree overhead.

He saw a hollow tree, and painfully made his way to it; at least, inside it was fairly dry, and he spread his damp blankets and tried to instil a little warmth into his frozen body. Worse and worse grew his foot — he thought he must have given it another wrench, for even to touch it gave him pain — and he groaned and moaned as he crouched in the hollow tree there and looked out on the pouring rain.

He had no idea of the time, and there was no sun to guide him; it might equally easily be ten o'clock in the morning or five in the evening, only he was so hungry. He had had nothing since yesterday afternoon, and then not much — Jenny, d — — her! had cooked it so badly. He had done better without her. Then he thought of what the troopers had said, 'Pretty nigh gone then, poor little beggar!' Was she dead, then? Looked like it. But why should she die, when he had done everything he could for her, too? And he took it as a personal insult to himself that she should even think about dying. Dead? Not she — not she!

Still the thought haunted him; the pain in his foot seemed to make him think of it. And when he dozed — as he did doze in spite of the fear, and the pain, and the cold — her face rose up before him, hers and that other gory face which he could only see dimly through the mist, and they

watched beside him, and he could not drive them away. It seemed to him the day would never end — it seemed to him he had been lying here years; then the rain grew worse, and the darkness, driven before a howling wind, closed down upon him suddenly.

It was night again, nearly four-and-twenty hours since he had left the hut down under Digger's Point, and they had not searched the gully again; or if they had, they had not found him. And now was his chance to get away to Mitalagong, now or never. He must do it to-night.

He set about the business in a systematic way. With infinite difficulty he succeeded in breaking off a small sapling which might serve as a stick to support him, and he tore a strip from his blanket and made a sort of sling to rest his lame foot in, and slowly and painfully hobbled off. It was steep and rough, and he could only go very slowly — very slowly; every now and then he had to pause and rest; every now and then he went down on his hands and knees and tried that mode of progression. And it was ten miles to Surly Pete's — a good ten miles — over rough country. Should he ever accomplish it?

He was very soon wet to the skin, and soon he was obliged to abandon his blankets as an intolerable burden, and as the night wore on he lost consciousness from very weariness. His only care was to keep in the general direction; he managed that, and then sometimes it seemed to him, as he hobbled along painfully, that someone came and walked along beside him, mocking him, calling attention to his helplessness, and jeering him. Was it Jenny? Or the sergeant? Or, worst of all, German Max, with his face all covered with blood? He shut his eyes to bar out the vision; he shouted to drive it away. But it was there — it was there; it clutched at him in the darkness, as Jenny had clutched the night before, and he could not undo the clinging hands. Then he knelt down, he grovelled on the ground, and made the gully ring with his shouts. What did he care if it brought the police down on him? He would be glad, thankful; anything would be better than this loneliness — anything that would take away those clinging hands.

Again he would rouse himself, tell himself it was all fancy, born of the cold night, of his hunger, of the pelting rain and bitter wind, and he would be quiet, and crawl on again a little way, fearing only lest he should be going in the wrong direction, lest he should be losing himself amongst this maze of hill and gully. And then a new fear grew upon him, lest as he groped along he might put his hand on German Max's dead face. What was the good of his lying out there, so long after, too? It had done him no good, that gold; Jenny had lost it for him, curse her! and Max was dead; and — and she was dead — they said she was dead! and they both came crying to him — to him — who could hardly move with the pain in his foot.

He could hardly have told how he reached the foot of the hill, only he

knew he did so at last, and then slowly and painfully made his way along the gully. Once over the next ridge he would be able to see Surly Pete's hut — would be within reach of succour. And Pete would not refuse him; even if old Max insisted on coming with him, his old mate would not refuse him. Would he, though? Would he take him in if old Max insisted on coming too? He shuddered and sobbed and moaned to himself; surely he would help him, surely he would, when he found how cold and wet and hungry and ill he was — surely, surely, he would help him! He would drive away these haunting faces, he would remove these clinging hands. He would — — And then another day was born.

A winter's day, truly, but a bright, fresh winter's day. The wretched fugitive, crouching down among the scrub and bracken, could not but feel the genial influence of the sunshine. Hungry, weary, worn as he was, it put fresh life into him, it drove away the shadows that had haunted him the livelong night, it gave him fresh strength and courage to struggle up the opposite hillside, and then, as he fell faint and weary among the bracken, he could just see the abandoned claims in the gully beyond, and the hut where dwelt the man on whom all his hopes were staked — Surly Pete. There was the hut, there was the dam, there was the man himself slowly rocking his cradle, and — an oath broke from his lips as he saw it — there were three mounted troopers coming slowly up the hill in his direction.

For a moment it seemed to Dave that the troopers must have seen him and were making straight for him, and in a panic he turned to flee: then a moment's reflection convinced him he had no chance in flight.

They could not possibly have seen him yet, crouching down among the bracken, and if he lay still they might pass along the track, and he would be all the safer because they had been there. But no, they came right on, right up the hill, and he saw quite plainly that the man who rode ahead was Sergeant Sells. Straight on they came — could they possibly have seen? — and on the top of the ridge they dismounted, hitched their horses to a tree, and the two men proceeded to light a fire, while the sergeant moved a little apart and sat down on a log within a stone's-throw of him.

So the clutching hands and the bloody face had led him to this, and here was his enemy, and there was no escaping him. The bright day had dawned so full of promise, but the promise mocked him, and now there was no escape.

Chapter XII

A Post of Observation.

*'The spirits I have raised abandon me —
The spells which I have studied baffle me —
The remedy I recked of tortures me.'*

'Manfred.' *Byron.*

WHEN the billy was boiling, one of the men made the tea, and called:
'Dinner's ready, sergeant.'

Sergeant Sells raised his head. He had forgotten all about his dinner, had forgotten everything, save that he must find Black Anderson, and that his next move must be to search the gully which Ottaway and Jackson swore they had thoroughly searched the day before. And Ottaway was a good man, though Jackson was not so brilliant. Still, Ottaway could not be trusted to search as he would.

The fragrant smell of the warm tea came to his nostrils and he paid no attention, though it made the cold, hungry man lying so close to him wild with longing.

'Ain't you going to have no dinner, sergeant?'

'All right, Jackson, I'm coming.'

He stood up and looked around him. Down by his claim Surly Pete, too, had built a fire, but he had left it and was coming up the hill towards them. Why? wondered Sergeant Sells. Then he saw he had an axe in his hand, and concluded he wanted more wood for his fire, and from a sort of bravado, a certain desire to show he cared nothing for the 'traps' he hated, was coming up to cut it close to where they had camped. The sergeant came a little closer to the fire, and drank his tea and ate the damper and cold mutton the men offered him in silence, watching mechanically Surly Pete's movements. The men watched him too, as they lay along the ground by the fire. They couldn't possibly talk with that silent man sitting between them; he put an effectual stopper on all conversation, and it was so still they could hear the crackling and splitting of the damp wood and the ashes as they dropped down in the fire. There was nothing to do but watch Peter Grimes move about among the bracken, giving a chop here and there in an aimless sort of fashion that convinced the sergeant more than ever it was all bravado on his part.

Why should he come to the top of the hill for his wood, when he might just as easily have got it at the foot?

And, in truth, Peter Grimes could hardly have told himself why he had come. He saw the smoke of their fire, and the idea came to him that he would go and see what the 'traps' were doing and why they had camped there. Why not? He had as good a right on the ridge as they had, an honest man like him; and maybe he might pick up some information that would be useful to Black Dave, whom he knew but slightly, but whom he fully intended to help should he come that way. So he shouldered his axe and marched bravely up the hillside till he came abreast of the fire with the three silent men around it. They all three looked at him; they followed his every movement simply because there was absolutely nothing else to watch, and without any sinister intention whatever. The sergeant, indeed, hardly thought what he was doing, but the scrutiny troubled Pete. He slashed wildly at the poor little messmate saplings, he chopped at old logs that were hard as iron, he turned the edge of his axe, and then he swore to himself, for he remembered he could not carry very much wood down the hill, and that his actions must look suspicious to those watching troopers.

He found a log he might lift, and he laid it down not far from them; that was the beginning of his stack, and he looked round for another. A small messmate among the bracken attracted his attention; he would have that, and he shuffled across — he was a little lame — and raised his axe to strike.

Then he saw something that made him drop it with a loud grunt that the troopers heard quite plainly, for down there, crouching among the bracken, with only that messmate as shelter between him and the men from whom he was so evidently hiding, was a man lying perfectly flat, lifting up wild, bloodshot, appealing eyes to him. His lips moved, but dared make no sound, and he shrank down with a shudder as Pete, with ready presence of mind, raised his axe again and struck lightly at the sapling, as he had done at half a dozen other trees on the hillside. Pete knew very well who it was, sodden with the rain, covered with the light clayey soil, his hat gone, his black hair and beard matted and tangled with grass and pieces of brushwood, his face and his hands torn and scratched, his terrified eyes all bloodshot. There was little doubt who it was, and the troopers had all but run him to earth.

Surly Pete knew him quite well, and pitied him from the bottom of his heart. There was a faint sense of triumph, too, for Peter was not young, had never been handsome, and before he had turned hatter was a man of no account on the camp, where Black Anderson, with his flash ways, and his handsome face, and the gold-dust he slapped about so freely, was first favourite. And he had come to this, and was mutely asking a man he would never have noticed in his palmy days not to betray him to the

enemies that were so close — only to hold his tongue, to go away quietly, and not draw attention to him.

Pete made another chop at the sapling, that made it bend visibly; then he stooped forward and put his hand to his belt. He saw the eyes that were watching him dilate with a new fear as he drew out his old horse-pistol. So he thought he was going to shoot him, and he chuckled grimly to himself at the thought that Black Anderson had come to this; then he gave a reassuring grunt, and dropped the pistol just within reach of the crouching man. It was hardly likely he would be unarmed, and yet he looked so wet and forlorn it seemed not improbable that the priming of his pistols should be damp.

Then with another grunt of infinite satisfaction Peter passed on, left that tree as he had left the others, and making for one on the opposite side of the camp, cut it down, and added that to his other log with the air of a man who had made up his mind on a weighty matter at last, and intended to see things through. He chopped down about half a dozen saplings, and then began stripping them of leaves and branches. That was best, he decided — the troopers would think he needed them for his claim — and so he steadily worked on, expecting every moment to hear a scuffling and a shouting, and a snapping of pistol-shots. But nothing happened; the three men sat silent still by the fire, and turning their backs on the man they were seeking, watched the hatter at work as if it were a matter of great importance; and when at last Pete shouldered his half-dozen props and shuffled down the hill to his hut again, he heard the sergeant give the order to mount and go down the hill into the gully on the other side.

Anderson heard it too, and drew towards him the pistol that had so opportunely come into his hands, with some dim idea of making a fight for it; but the sergeant was thinking of the gully beyond: it was there he expected to find his enemy, and he never thought of looking on the hill-top.

At the foot of the hill he paused. Up the opposite hill no horse could possibly go.

‘You stop here with the horses, Cook,’ he said, ‘and Jackson and I’ll search on the hill there. Now mind you keep a sharp look-out. A horse ’ll likely be mighty useful to him, and if he comes along he’ll stick at nothing to get it.’

Then the two men plunged into the thick scrub and bracken with their revolvers in their hands. But the rain and blustering wind of the night before had stood the fugitive in good stead. He had made a track, it is true, and the troopers crossed it, but did not recognise it. The scrub was torn and broken in so many places; and the rain had made the ground so slippery, washing it into holes and hollows; the wind had broken off branches. The shambling track that Anderson had made in his helpless

lameness was hardly recognisable as having been made by man's agency. The rain had come and washed it away, had drawn obliterating fingers over it. A black man might have known better, but certainly not a white man.

Still, the sergeant was loath to give up his faith, and by-and-by his search was rewarded by the discovery of last night's fire. It might have been made by Black Anderson, again it might not; he was strongly of opinion it had, and the feeling came over him he had all but accomplished his object, he had run his enemy to earth, and, much to the disgust of Jackson, who was getting tired of this sort of work, he retraced his footsteps down the hill again. Very carefully he went; it seemed to him he was following a track of some sort; but when the bushes began to get more broken, and there was only a mark on the clayey soil as if a log had fallen downhill, slipping over the ground and making heavy dents in it, he was again at fault.

The short winter's day was drawing to a close, the wind grew cold and keen, and the flecked sunshine that came through the leaves had no warmth in it. It was no good; another day was gone, and he had not found him, and he came down the hill again, followed by Jackson, who was ready to swear he had searched every inch of the hillside, and knew every hollow tree, and stump, and log, and branching tree-fern by heart.

It was dark by the time they returned to the horses, and Cook was beating his arms against his sides to keep himself warm, very ready indeed to lend a sympathetic ear to Jackson's complaints.

'We'll go round the shoulder of this hill,' said the sergeant quietly, for all the world, grumbled Jackson under his breath, as if it was nine o'clock in the morning and they were just setting out. 'I'm going to look up that hatter again. He must have been signalling on the hill this morning.'

But though there was a bright little fire burning in Surly Pete's hut, a fire they could see gleaming through the panes of the small window, the door was fast and the inmate was not there. They searched round a little, but they failed to find him, and then Jackson, who was cold and hungry, remonstrated:

'He said this morning he was out of flour, sergeant. He'll be gone into Buck Carter's to get it.'

Without a word the sergeant turned, and they rode back to Deadman's.

Chapter XIII

The Last of It.

'Here burns my candle out, ay, here it dies.'

'Henry IV.'

BUT as the sergeant sat that night over his solitary meal, he thought of Peter Grimes and his unaccountable behaviour on the hill-top. There certainly was no sense in it; even as bravado, it hardly explained itself, and at length he got up and went down to the Lucky Digger, where Buck Carter, as usual, was serving out drinks behind the bar, and his wife was helping him. He had been to the store very little of late, and as he marched in, stern and grave, the buzz of conversation hushed as if he was, as indeed he had been, the subject of it.

'Carter,' he said, 'has that hatter — Surly Pete they call him, from Mitalagong — been in here this evening?'

Buck Carter spat on his hands as if he were about to lift a heavy weight; he was afraid of his son-in-law, and always had to brace himself to meet him. Then he swore a good round oath, and declared he had not set eyes on him for a month past.

'He told me he was coming over this evening,' said the sergeant, doubtfully looking round.

'Well, he ain't been here, sergeant,' put in Sal; 'he ain't been here. You can take your Bible oath of that.'

The sergeant walked slowly outside again. It was a frosty night, and in the dark sky the stars looked cold and bright, and he looked up at them and wondered what should be his next move. He did not seem to have done very much, and, after all, it was more than probable that his enemy would escape him. He went slowly back to his own hut, and then suddenly decided to go back to Mitalagong, and investigate further the mysterious carryings-on of the old hatter there. It was a long ride, and he had been hard at it all day long; but that did not matter, almost anything was better than sitting alone thinking. So he called a trooper, and, heedless of his surprised remonstrance, had his horse saddled and rode slowly away up the hill towards Wooragee.

He did not ride fast, there was no necessity for it. He hardly hoped to get anything out of Surly Pete, only the remembrance of last night was strong upon him; he could not risk such another. He must do something

to drive away thought. So he rode on quietly. In the starlight he could only see things dimly — the trees by the wayside, the fallen logs, the hut where Black Anderson had once lived; there was his claim close by the roadside, and the windlass was still standing. Farther on came the Chinamen's garden; their hut stood out dark against the sky, and old Max's neat fence was getting untidy now. He could see that even by this light. But they were thrifty folk. They did not burn candles or even slush-lamps; there was not a spark in their windows; the whole place was wrapped in slumber. Well, it was no good rousing them, they would not be likely to know anything about it; and he rode on.

It was very lonely; the cold seemed somehow to intensify the loneliness. There was not a hut, not a living creature, apparently, stirring abroad. Now and then a night-bird cried, now and then he heard the croaking of frogs loudly proclaiming their gladness at the return to fine weather, and every now and then from the ranges came the mournful whimper of the dingoes. He speculated idly about them. He wondered that the near presence of the diggers' camp had not driven them further into the mountains. Their day must be nearly over, as nearly over as his own. No one seemed afraid of them, and yet they must be dangerous sometimes to a solitary or a wounded man, and their whimper was very mournful. It died right away sometimes, till there was only his horse's hoof-beats to listen to on the hard, rough track. Then at last he breasted the hill, and down below in the gully saw a twinkling light. That was Surly Pete's hut. There was no one else here, and the door must be open.

Sells turned a little aside from the track, and hitched his horse to a tree. Better to go on foot; he could get closer without being observed. And yet he took very little precaution to hide his presence. In the clear dry air his footsteps might easily be heard; and the thought came to him that if Black Anderson were there, it would be two to one — two armed men, and one of them in the very prime of life.

But, then, possibly Black Anderson might not be there. Sells had very little reason to suppose he was there, and if he was — well, what matter? He had been reckless enough the other night when he had approached the hut; he cared less now — far less. He was an older man by many years. What did it matter what happened to a man who had lived his life?

Sells walked quietly down the hill. He skirted round the claim and dam; the cradle and windlass loomed large in the uncertain light, and at last he found himself right opposite the uncurtained little window. It was only a tiny pane of glass, but the firelight from the wooden chimney danced on it cheerily. It had such a pleasant, homelike look against the dark background.

He paused a moment, debating whether or not he should look in and ascertain whether his enemy was there. It seemed to him he could hear people talking; but so it had seemed the other night, and it had only been

the sick girl raving. The firelight beckoned so cheerily; it looked so homelike; it spoke of so many things; it was almost sacred to him, that firelight.

Why should he spy on this man, who was an honest man according to his lights, and very probably knew as little as he himself of the doings of Black Anderson, and even if he did help him, was helping him out of the kindness of his heart, as one always feels inclined to help a hunted creature? No, he would not look through the window, he would enter by the door; and he walked round quietly and stopped opposite it. It was fast closed now; but through the cracks streamed the cheerful light, as if it would not be shut out. Sergeant Sells laid his hand on the door and knocked loudly, and the murmur of voices that came from inside ceased immediately. Truly, he thought to himself, it was a lonely place, and an uncanny hour to come knocking. He would not open lightly if he were Surly Pete.

There was no answer to his knock, save a faint sound of shuffling feet and the crackling of the fire; then he knocked again and demanded:

‘Open the door!’

‘And who the blazes are you?’ came back the answer.

‘Mounted police! Open the door!’

‘Mounted police be d — — d!’

He put his shoulder to the frail boards; he was a strong man yet, and they were very lightly put together. One push — it seemed to shake the whole hut; another! The door had given way, and he was standing looking into the hut, facing the blazing fire and two men who were opposite him with drawn pistols.

Right — after all he was right. His judgment had not misled him. Here was Black Anderson, and he and his enemy were face to face at last!

There was a whizz and a whir and a puff of blinding smoke — a bullet had gone through his uniform cap. Then the smoke cleared, and he saw Pete standing a little aside, his pistol in his hand, as if a little uncertain what to do. In truth, Peter hardly bargained for shooting a man down in cold blood, even though he were a ‘trap’; while, leaning against the rough table, his smoking pistol still in his hand, was Black Anderson. He dropped the pistol hastily, and tugged at the other in his belt; but the sergeant had him covered with his revolver, and said sternly:

‘Throw up your hands!’

Anderson hesitated.

‘Throw up your hands, or I’ll shoot, by God!’

He raised his revolver, and Anderson cast one hasty appealing glance at Pete; then, without one word, dropped forward, with his arms extended over the table, as if he could not possibly stand upright any longer, and Sergeant Sells very quietly, almost reluctantly, walked forward and took the remaining pistol from him.

'He's most broke,' said Surly Pete. 'He's had an awful time in the gullies there. You're a-houndin' him to death! A innercent man, too; an', he added threateningly, for the sound of his own voice gave him courage, 'we're two to one, sergeant.'

'You're a decent man, I've always heard, Peter Grimes,' said the sergeant, and his own voice sounded strange in his ears; 'you won't gain anything by going against the law. If that man's innocent, he'll have every chance to prove it. Anyhow, he shot at me just now, and it wasn't his fault the shot didn't go home.'

'Well, what are you going to do?' asked Peter Grimes, somewhat mollified. 'You're here by yourself. What's to prevent me, I'd like to know, agoin' straight away to Deadman's an' raisin' the boys? They'll be along in two shakes of a fly's leg, an' they'll raise Cain, I can tell you!'

'That's just what you will do,' said the sergeant quietly. 'You'll find my horse hitched to a tree on the hill just behind there. You'll take him and ride straight into Deadman's. You ought to ride straight to the police camp and inform the Commissioner that Sergeant Sells has taken the man that's wanted for German Max's murder; but if you don't like to do that, just go to the Lucky Digger and tell your own mates; they'll settle the rest for you.'

Peter looked surprised. He certainly had not expected to be free to bring his mates to the rescue, but he hesitated doubtfully. What was the sergeant up to?

'You'm took his girl,' he said.

Sergeant Sells winced.

'Go!' he said, 'go! go! You're getting off easily. I'm not asking you to betray a mate. Just tell the diggers at Deadman's. They don't love me, but I guess they'll know this man'll have fair play.'

'Will that do you, mate?' asked Surly Pete, bringing his hand down heavily on the table, and knocking a pannikin of tea on to the floor.

Anderson's shoulders shook, and Pete saw he had heard him, but the man gave no other sign. He was run to earth at last. Then Pete took a ragged old coat from a peg, spit thoughtfully into the fire, went outside, and then came back to the broken door again.

'Behind the hut, sergeant, is the moke?'

'Behind the hut on the hill there.'

'Couldn't show me, I reckon?'

But the sergeant vouchsafed no answer, and he heard the shuffling footsteps going round by the side of the hut, and wondered to himself whether Peter would take his mate's part and shoot him through the window. It would be very easy, very simple — it would end everything. He held his revolver and glanced up at the window, only to see Peter Grimes' face disappearing. So he, too, had thought of it; but, after all, he was a decent old chap, and would not like to have blood on his hands. He

would bring his mates — that would be justice according to his lights. They would see fair play. Then he listened to the footsteps till they went out of hearing, he listened to the heavy breathing of the man before him, to the crackling of the logs, to the dropping ashes.

Now he and his enemy were face to face — face to face; and if he slew him, as he had a mind to do, as he had sworn to do, there would be none found to blame him.

There was no other light in the hut save that of the blazing fire, but it lighted up every cranny with its ruddy light. There was a stretcher in the corner — a rude stretcher made of sacking and forked sticks; there was a shelf or two against the wall, a tin plate and two or three pannikins, a frying-pan, two deal boxes to sit upon, and nothing else — unless one counted the pictured almanacs that were hung against the wall by way of ornament. One was right in the firelight — the head of a woman, of a young girl, rather, with her hair blowing about her face. It was torn and soiled, but it fascinated him, and he kept taking his eyes from his prisoner and looking at it. It reminded him so of the girl who for one brief month had been his wife. And this man — this man — —

He was seated on an upturned box, and half his body was laid along the table in an attitude of utter abandonment, and one foot and leg his captor saw had been injured. It was bare up to the knee, and he could not fail to see how swollen and red was the leg. So that was the reason of it — at last he had only run to earth a wounded beast. He set his teeth together in his anger and disappointment. He had counted on this, he had lived for this; man to man it should be, and a fair fight, and now he was balked of his revenge. The man had tried to shoot him, but that was nothing, nothing; he lay there before him like a helpless log, and he, whose dearest hopes he had blighted, looked on in helpless impotence. Anything rather than this — anything; he wished with all his heart that bullet had found its billet. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes; a sudden weariness of life had come upon him. He wanted nothing, he had done with life; then a stirring made him open them again, and he saw that Black Anderson had raised his head on his hand and was looking at him, shiftily avoiding meeting his eye. He stretched out his hand and caught at a pannikin.

‘Drop it,’ said the sergeant sternly.

‘Let me get a drop of water,’ begged the prisoner.

‘No.’

‘I’m parched with thirst, and my leg’s that bad ‘t isn’t bearable.’

‘Sit still.’

‘A drop, for God’s sake!’

‘If you were in hell,’ said the sergeant through his clenched teeth, ‘it’s nothing to me.’

The man dropped down his head on the table again with a moan. He

had been no coward, for all his careless cruelty, or he had not been the admired of Deadman's; but his leg was very bad, and the day and night's exposure seemed to have brought on a fever which was consuming him. Water, water, it seemed to him the only thing that would relieve his pain, and he did not need to look at the relentless man opposite to know that he would be shot if he so much as moved. If only he would move, thought the sergeant; if he would only do something — something that would call for action!

It was killing work standing here with his back to the wall watching him, listening to his moans, thinking thinking, thinking of all that lay between this man and him. The pensive face on the wall, with the wind-blown hair, seemed appealing to him, reminding him, as if he were ever for one moment likely to forget, of all that lay between them. Taken together, they two — he ground his teeth as he thought of it — had spoiled her life, the little innocent girl. He had not spared himself, he would not spare this man. No; she had died only two nights ago, wet and cold and lonely. Let him suffer — let him! She had died loving him, and calling on him, thinking only of him for such love Sergeant Sells would cheerfully have borne untold agony. Let him suffer; it was his due.

The fire died down, and he pushed it together with his foot; he laid on another log, and it blazed up again; the room looked so cheerful and bright he felt as if it must be all a dream. He could not have lived and suffered; he was not standing over his enemy, a man maimed and broken; he was not waiting to hand him over to justice; it was all a dream, it must be all a dream. Oh, God! the things men suffer and believe are real! The girl was dead, and this man should die; but he — he, what was there for him?

Outside an owl hooted softly and monotonously, and inside the fire crackled cheerfully. How long it was before they came — how long, how long! Would the night never end? And he could not kill a maimed man, he could not. He could only wait there and hand him over to the Commissioner because it was his duty, and after — well, after, he had done with life.

Again the fire died down, and again he pushed it together. He wanted the fire; he wanted to guard his prisoner; he wanted the light; but the night was so long it seemed to him it must be close on the dawn, and yet through the open door he could see the stars bright as ever. His prisoner moved a little uneasily, but he did not ask again for water; he, too, was wondering if the night would never pass; he, too, knew how relentless was this enemy who had tracked him down at last.

Then there came a faint sound — the sound of men's voices, and they came nearer and nearer. The sergeant heard them, and the prisoner heard, but neither took any notice; what difference could their coming make to either of them? Only each was thankful that the long watch was ended.

Nearer they came, nearer, and three bearded miners stood in the open doorway, peering in like children who had no business to be there. They had heard the news, and had come the short cut across the hills.

Black Anderson raised his head for a last effort. Perhaps his heart held still a faint hope that these, his whilom mates, would help him.

‘Boys,’ he said huskily — ‘boys, ain't you going to help a poor beggar against the traps?’

But there was no response; they were content to look on like children. Apparently they counted it no business of theirs, and the sergeant said not a word.

If they had overpowered and killed him, the sergeant would not have cared. This man had ruined his life, and now he was balked of his revenge.

There was a sound of trotting horses: the troopers had come.
