

The Golden Lake

**The Marvellous History of a Journey Through the Great Lonely
Land of Australia**

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The Golden Lake or the Marvellous
History of a Journey Through the Great
Lone Land of Australia

Chapter I

In Which I Hear of the Golden Lake for the First Time.

MANY marvellous stories were set afloat concerning the great Colony of Western Australia, and not the least marvellous of the many I had heard during my stay in the Queen City of the Southern Hemisphere (as the Victorians delight in calling Melbourne) was one which was related to me by my cousin, Richard Hardwicke, with whom I was at that time staying in the Victorian capital.

We were seated at dinner one night — Dick, his two sisters, his mother, and myself. The weather being extremely close, all the large windows were thrown wide open, and we could hear the monotonous moan of the sea as it flung itself languidly on the beach below, for the home of the Hardwicks was in the charming suburb of St. Kilda. A solitary servant administered to our wants — an individual who appeared to me to be older in experience than years, for though his shoulders stooped and his hair was snow-white, there was an indelible impression of something stronger than years upon him. Intelligent was his face and almost handsome, and yet withal so strange and dejected that I seemed to guess, as if by intuition, that his had been a “strange, eventful history.”

Our conversation wandered on many topics during the progress of the meal — the theatre, the race for the Cup — which I, unfortunately, had missed — the latest marriage, and that ever-recurring subject, the weather, the heat during a part of that day having been exceptionally intense.

“It was nothing to what I have experienced in the northern parts of South Australia,” said my cousin. “There the thermometer registered for ten days in succession 130 degrees in the shade, and it was even said that the beard of one of our party had been set on fire by the sun. You see, it was a red one.”

“That was warm, Dick,” said his eldest sister, Kate, while peals of laughter went round the table.

“Which do you mean, the story or the beard?”

“Both.”

“Well,” continued Dick, “I didn't see it while it was actually burning, but I saw it shortly after, and I'll swear that it had been burnt. The boss vowed the lazy beggar had gone to sleep with his pipe in his mouth,

though, the fellow, who by the way was an Irishman, swore by all the holy popes right back to Peter that if it wasn't the sun that did it, it was something a mighty sight hotter."

"I suppose these are the usual tales with which you tingle the ears of the 'new chum'?" I remarked. "It was not bad, old fellow, but you ought to produce something better in such a marvellous country as this. Take West Australia, for instance." And as I spoke these words I looked towards my cousin, and caught the eyes of the old servant scanning me curiously.

"Almost a myth," said Mrs. Hardwicke.

"A cipher," remarked Miss Kate.

"Not altogether," Dick answered coolly. "I have heard some wonderful yarns about that place, old chap" — he was now riding one of his pet hobbies, "and shall be mightily disappointed if I do not find that my imaginary castles have been built upon substantial foundations."

"Then why don't you go exploring, Dick." It was still the eldest sister who spoke. "You know, you might make a reputation even as great as Burke's, besides discovering some of those mountains of gold of which you are eternally dreaming,"

But Dick paid no attention to this young lady's sarcasms. He turned to me with a smile. "They say there is never smoke without fire."

"A truism which, metaphorically, does not always hold good."

"No matter. We'll presume there is not."

"And what then?"

"I'll tell you a queer yarn I once heard about that 'mythical' colony." And here, chancing to look towards the old servant, I saw him tremble violently as he gazed with intensity upon my cousin. But Dick, utterly oblivious of the interest he was creating in the breast of at least one of the assembly, continued, "It was told to me when I was in South Australia, and you shall have it just as I did."

We sat all attention, though I thought I perceived an almost imperceptible smile play round the corners of his eldest sister's mouth. She evidently knew what was coming. The old servant moved softly about the room. Dick took a sip of wine and began.

"I heard the story from a fellow who was one of the party, and as I knew him well I have no cause to disbelieve him, for I was not a 'new chum,' and there was nothing to be gained by getting at me. It was this: He said that while he was working with a party of surveyors away up in the North West of South Australia, some fifteen or sixteen years ago, they one day picked up a nigger, more dead than alive, whom they found crawling towards their camp on his hands and knees. He had followed their tracks for days over a most sterile region, but on account of the rapidity with which they travelled to the Springs, he had not been able to come up with them, consequently when discovered he was almost in his

last gasp.

“When spoken to he could make no answer, his tongue and throat being most fearfully parched and swollen. They, however, attended the poor wretch carefully, with the result that he was speedily brought round, and when the chief of the party leant over him to see how he looked, the fellow's bloodshot eyes rested with the utmost curiosity on the surveyor's watch-chain, which was gold and of a considerable size. He stretched out his hand to feel it, and then cried in his own language, which one of the black boys luckily understood —

“ ‘What you call it?’

“ ‘Gold,’ he was answered.

“ ‘Good?’ he asked next.

“ ‘The best thing in the world,’ he was told, which reply he seemed scarcely to understand, though he immediately pointed to a roughly-shaped ring of dirty metal, which he wore on his ankle, and which they, examining, found to be gold.

“ ‘Plenty o' that stuff,’ he cried.

“ ‘Where?’

“With a quick movement he jerked his hand towards the face of the setting sun.

“ ‘Behind the mountains — by the lake.’ ”

At the mention of the word “lake” the old servant, who was then engaged removing some glasses to the other end of the room, upset the tray, and crash upon the floor they went. No one spoke, but Mrs. Hardwicke arose at that moment, and with her daughters left the room. Then both Dick and I swung round and surveyed the delinquent. His face was ashy pale, and his hands trembled violently, but his eyes met ours with a steady searching gaze which was almost awful in its intensity.

“I ask your pardon, sir,” he stammered.

“Oh, it's nothing, Morton,” replied my cousin, “though I'm afraid you startled the ladies.”

No more was said at that moment, but, strange as it may seem, this apparently unimportant incident was but the beginning of a series of remarkable revelations which culminated in the undertaking of one of the most surprising journeys ever attempted by man.

Chapter II

Containing the Death and History of One Joseph Morton, of Yarmouth, England.

NOTHING of any consequence occurred for the next two months. I had tested Australian hospitality, both in town and country, to its utmost, and had not found it wanting. Existence appeared to be quite as uneventful in the new land as the old. All the wild life of former days had vanished, leaving behind it flourishing cities inhabited by sober, hardworking citizens.

It was shortly after my return from a visit to the famous goldfields of Ballarat that my cousin Hardwicke informed me of the serious illness of their old servant Morton, which, I must confess, seemed not of much consequence to me. But when he told of the extraordinary things the man had said and done, I began to understand the reason of his great interest, though at that moment I little foresaw how much the strange old fellow was to influence our future lives.

It seemed at one time the patient had become quite delirious, and for hours together he did nothing but rave of mountains, deserts, savages, dried-up water-holes, golden lakes, precious stones, and many other things equally mixed and curious. Once he awoke as if to reason, and peevishly demanded the key of his box, saying they should not rob him of his secret, nor would he rest satisfied till they had found it, and made it fast about his neck.

These things being reported to my cousin Dick, he evinced an anxious curiosity which, to my thinking, was perfectly absurd. Was he, after all, nothing but a dreamer, a visionary? I was at a loss to tell. It seemed strange that so apparently practical a man should dwell unceasingly upon the ravings of a fever-stricken brain. Yet so it was, and on one occasion when it had again been reported to us that the old fellow had repeated his talk of savages, deserts, and golden lakes, my cousin whispered to me —

“The lake again, you hear. He spoke of a golden lake.”

“Nonsense,” said I. “What does he know of a lake beyond the story he heard you tell that night? He has dreamt it, as all poor devils dream of gold. Besides, the blackfellow in your story never mentioned a golden one.”

But when a man has once made up his mind to believe a thing, it is a

task of no little difficulty to dissuade him from it. He answered quite seriously —

“But do you remember he let the glasses fall — a thing I never recollect him doing before?”

I could scarcely help smiling at the analogy between broken glasses and golden lakes.

“An accident, my boy; nothing more.”

“Perhaps,” said he, and there the conversation ended.

The next day the patient was worse, but in the evening the high pulsation had ceased, and he was much better. About nine o'clock that night his attendant came to us with the information that she thought the old fellow was dying.

“He is quite calm now,” she said to my cousin, “and is anxiously inquiring for you, sir.”

I accompanied Dick to the sick man's room, and, as we entered, the old fellow slowly turned his head.

“Is that you, sir? Is that you, Mr. Dick?”

“Yes, Morton. You want to speak to me?”

He first waved the nurse from the room, then turned to Hardwicke.

“Take this key from my neck, sir. Thanks. It belongs to my trunk. When I am dead — don't shake your head, Mr. Dick, I know I'm going; when I am dead a — a fortnight, open it, and you will find a packet addressed to yourself.”

“Yes,” said Hardwicke.

“You promise not to open it before a fortnight, sir? I shall be well dead then, and you will be able to forgive my long deception.”

“I promise.”

“You and my dear mistress, God bless her, have been good to me, very good, and I'll make your fortunes. Yes, old Morton 'll make all your fortunes.”

Dick looked sadly on the white, withered face of the old man. Both he and I believed his reason had fled again, for he continued to rave on —

“Yes, Mr. Dick, your fortune, and a big fortune, too; as much gold as a ship could carry, ay, twenty ships. You spoke of a golden lake; you thought there wasn't one, well, there is — there is!”

He worked himself into a high pitch of excitement which Hardwicke in vain attempted to allay. Nature would brook no interference. She carried the old man to the very verge of frenzy, and then, swiftly stealing away, left him a livid corpse.

The old fellow was buried two days after, amidst the general regret of the Hardwicke family, for he had been a true and trusted servant to them for the last ten years.

I was about to start for Sydney, some few days after, to continue the tour of the world which I had mapped out for myself; but Dick, on whom

the revelations of the dying man had a most pronounced effect, begged me to wait for the fortnight to expire, so that I might see what secret the old fellow had left behind. At this I was very much inclined to laugh, but as a week more or less made little or no difference to me, I decided to stay and see what the mysterious trunk contained.

The evening of the fourteenth day at last arrived, and as the hand of the clock pointed to ten, that being about the time the old man expired, Dick looked at me, rose from his seat, left the room, and I followed. We wended our way to his bedroom, neither speaking. He seemed quite unlike his usual self, and, expectation being contagious, I suffered from the same complaint. To tell the truth, the words of the dying man had filled me with a strange impression. What it all meant I could not say, but fancy, ever willing to roam, sees far into the depths of its self-created future, and I was one of those individuals to whom imagination is allotted in no meagre extent, though whether it was of the first quality or not is another matter.

In the centre of the floor stood the trunk — old, iron-bound, and dilapidated. Dick took the key from his pocket, while I looked on from my seat on the edge of his bed.

“Now for the great secret,” he cried, and with a click the lock flew back.

He lifted the lid, but nothing in the shape of a packet of papers met his sight. He found some old shirts and a pair or two of trousers, with various other kinds of wearing apparel, which he threw out on the floor, but discovered no letter or packet. He seemed to grow more anxious, and peered with keener intensity into the trunk. Some books lay in one corner, and these he began to hand out, rather excitedly, I thought, for if he found no packet now, all Morton's talk was truly but the ravings of a delirious brain.

“Ah, here it is at last,” he suddenly cried, and turned to me with a parcel of papers in his hand.

His face was a perfect study, being a strange mixture of hope and fear. He held the envelope, or wrapper, up to me. It bore this inscription: —

“FOR MR. RICHARD HARDWICKE.”

I was now participating in his strange excitement. I looked at the frail paper wrapper with as much interest as though it contained a recipe for the elixir of life. Hardwicke also surveyed it curiously, and held it as gently as though it were some precious sensitive plant.

“Open it, Dick.”

He inserted his finger behind the wrapper, and gently tore it apart. A sheet of paper, with writing upon it, was exposed to view. This was carefully wrapped round another bundle of papers, which bore the same inscription, “For Mr. Richard Hardwicke.” But it was this particular piece of paper that riveted Dick's attention. His breath came quickly as

he read. Then he handed it to me.

“Read,” he said.

I took it from his hand, and read as follows: —

“There is a Golden Lake, Mr. Dick. I have seen it. I have stood within the secret chamber of the Great Cave, amid tons upon tons of the precious metal. Gold enough was there to ransom the whole world. *It lies in the mountains over the great desert.* If you can reach it and return in safety, your fortune is made, for there are thousands of fortunes there. I intended to revisit the place, but could never raise money enough for the expedition. People have thought me mad, but I dared not disclose my secret, and how I knew of the lake's whereabouts. If you should entertain the thought of seeking this treasure, these few directions, which I should have followed myself, will be of use to you. Remember, I only speak from memory, but as sure as there's a God above, there is a Golden Lake.

DIRECTIONS

“Follow the main road from Port Augusta as far as Mount Arden; then strike a north-westerly course across the Great Salt Lakes till you come up with a long, low range of hills, which should be immediately in your path; climb them, and you will discover a big mountain lying to the south. If so far you have not seen all as herein written, tempt that wild country no farther, for the desert now opens with desolation upon desolation; but should you see these things, and be determined to push on, still steer the same north-westerly course, and you will strike more dry salt lakes. To the north of them I found water. From there you enter the Great Desert, but still steer the same course, and you will fetch the Great White City in the mountains. Climb the principal street, and then follow the river that loses itself in the sands at the foot of the Three Brothers. From there steer due west. I found water half way across the desert. In the next range of mountains that looms up you will find the One Tree Hill. Climb the south side of it, and you will see the Golden Lake.”

I read this aloud in an amazed and tremulous tone, scarcely believing that I could have deciphered the words correctly.

Dick looked on with wonder. “What do you think of it?” he said.

“I hardly know,” I replied. “It's a wonderful story, if true, and he seems sincere enough about it. But how did he cross?”

“How did the blackfellow?”

“Then you believe the yarn?”

“I think so. There is no reason why the story of this untold wealth should not be true. As for the journey, unparalleled as it seems, it is not impossible, though I grant you it, it appears so. But is not some one always doing something that no one ever did before?”

It is little or no use arguing with a man who is convinced. You might as well tell a Papist that his form of worship is false, or a Protestant that the

Pope is infallible.

“Perhaps that other packet will throw more light on the subject,” said I. “Open it.”

He did so, and answered, “Yes; I believe it's a history of his life.”

“Then read it, old fellow,” and, lighting a cigar, I threw myself back on the bed, while he, unfolding the manuscript, commenced —

“FOR MR. RICHARD HARDWICKE.”

“Being an old man now, and feeling that the hand of death is upon me, and no longer dreading the *law*, I, Joseph Morton, of Yarmouth, England, swear that what I am about to write is as true as the Gospel, and call the Almighty to witness.

“My father was a prosperous man in his own rank of life. He owned several of the finest fishing boats that sailed out of the port of Yarmouth, and, as a consequence, we were in pretty easy circumstances, and I was the recipient of an education considerably above that which falls to the lot of most young men of my own class. Unfortunately the tide of our happiness ebbed slowly out. First one boat was lost, then another, and as calamities usually crowd quickly upon the heels of each other, we soon found ourselves fallen from simple affluence to comparative poverty.

“When the horizon of our fortunes was darkened with its blackest clouds, my father died, and I, to maintain my mother, entered a merchant's office as a clerk. I got on so well, and became such a favourite with my employer, that I was soon upon the high road to an honourable career. Fate seemed at last to have grown weary of persecuting us, and I looked forward with pleasure to a happy, though uneventful, existence. Alas! how little I foresaw my destiny. Four years after my entrance into the confidence of my master, my dear mother took ill and, in great agony, died.

“I owe my fall to her untimely death. While she lived I had some one to love, to work for, to live for. After she was gone I became as the others about me. Perhaps I was naturally bad, perhaps my evil inclinations would have shown themselves sooner or later. I drank, gambled, and committed all sorts of extravagant excesses — for all the world like a gentleman!

“But why need I enter into these particulars? I owed some money on a horse race. I was pressed by my creditors. All who know anything of gambling know full well the sanctity of so-called debts of honour. I forged my master's name. I had hoped to save up, to pay the money back, and then throw myself on his mercy. But before these good intentions could be accomplished, the forgery was discovered and I arrested. I was tried two months after and sentenced to transportation to the Swan River settlement for twelve years.

“The misery I endured in that court, which was full of my former friends, all come as it were, to gloat over my misfortunes; the horror of

the voyage out in the convict ship; the forced labour on the public roads, chained like a wild beast, to the leg of another man, are things too overwhelming with horror for me to dwell on even now.

“After serving full five years of my sentence, and in the meanwhile, bearing a good character, I was allotted by the government to a Mr. Williams, a rich squatter. This gentleman was more than good to me, and I should have been content to have lived with him for the remainder of my life, had heaven been pleased to spare him. But he died, and another bought his land, a brutal bully, named Carson.

“The overseer of this station on which we lived was also a convict, but one of the most thorough gentlemen that ever walked in two shoes. Mr. Williams treated him as a friend, and I was always pleased to do his slightest bidding, so agreeable was his manner of speaking. He was a fine-looking man, with yellow hair and beard, an open, honest face, and physical development that did credit to the country of his birth. He, unlike most of the convicts, was married, and dwelt in a neat little cottage, which he himself had built, with his wife — a poor, delicate creature, and one child, a pretty little fairy-like thing with her father's blue eyes and golden hair.

“Harold Mayne was his name, and he — as I learnt shortly after my arrival on the station — had been transported for appropriating large sums of money. He was the manager of a bank in London, and many thousands of pounds being missed, suspicion fell on him. He was arrested and accused, and though he pleaded innocent, as only an innocent man could plead, he was found guilty, principally through the evidence of the chief cashier of the same bank, and convicted. He never spoke of his misfortunes, never tried to right himself. Every convict says he is an injured man. The officials only laugh. But a settled melancholy pervaded all Mayne's actions, and I could see that his great sorrow was slowly killing the noble spirit with which nature had endowed him.

“With the arrival of our new master, things underwent a disagreeable change. No one seemed to please him. We could do nothing right, and one day while Mr. Mayne was having his after-dinner smoke under the cool shade of a tree, Carson came along, and seeing him sitting there, he blurted out that he would have no lazy convicts skulking about his land. I saw Mayne's fair face flush to a vivid crimson, but he said nothing. That very quietness which all men admired in him, but angered Carson the more.

“From that day he never addressed Mayne with a civil word, and shortly after caused him to be removed from the post of overseer to that of labourer.

“ ‘You're no good,’ he said. ‘You dont suit me; you don't know your work.’

“ ‘I'm very sorry, sir,’ answered Mayne respectfully, though I could see

his blood was boiling, 'that such should be your opinion, for Mr. Williams thought me competent, and I don't think I ever betrayed his trust.'

" 'Williams was a fool, then!' he coarsely replied. "I don't think you competent, and I don't trust you; d'ye see? And that's enough for you.'

" 'I'm sorry, sir.'

" 'No back answers, — — you! Go about your work, and don't let me catch you idle; don't, if you value your skin.' He turned to go but stopped suddenly, 'And get that wife and brat of yours out of the house; I want it for the new overseer.'

" 'But, sir, it's mine,' said Mayne; 'I built it with my own hands.'

" 'Yours, — — you, is it? We'll see about that, my fine fellow. A pretty state the country would come to if we allowed the filth and scum of England to live as gentlemen.'

" 'You dog!' said Mayne advancing threateningly towards him, as though about to administer a thrashing. But luckily he remembered himself. 'I dare not touch you, Carson,' he continued, 'but I can tell you, to your face, that you are a contemptible cur, and if it were not for the cursed bonds that weigh me down, I would thrash you within an inch of your life.' And he turned on his heel and departed. Carson smiled diabolically, for he knew that Mayne, being a convict, dared not lay a finger upon him for fear of severe punishment at the hands of the government.

"Mayne was forced to quit his house, and for some time he lived with his wife and child in a poor, mean hut. How they managed to exist at all, God only knows, for the winter was now upon us, and the cold in the evenings bitterly intense. But, as I foresaw, the change was too great for his delicate wife; she sickened and died. From that time a mighty change took place in him. He was another, an entirely different man. The genial smile of old was seen no more upon his face. He nodded 'good morning,' but never spoke it.

"This life continued for about eighteen months. His daughter was now nine or ten years of age, and as beautiful as a piece of new gold, quick and strong in limb, and active in intellect. I being the only one with whom he ever associated, he would now and again ask me strange questions of her. Did I not think she was exceptionally strong for her years? or if I thought she would be capable of enduring great fatigue? To all these questions I answered, as in duty, Yes. Though having not the least conception at what he was driving, I had marked the strange, anxious, almost nervous spirit which had come over him of late, and one day, while we were working together sawing timber, he revealed the cause to me by inquiring if I had ever thought of escape. In truth I scarcely had, for I knew not to what place we could escape. Then, after a little fencing with the subject, and after I had vowed secrecy, he unfolded

his plan. If I would go with him, we were to take some of the station horses, well provision them, and start right across the Continent to the Eastern Colonies. Had I then known the dangers incident to such a journey, I doubt if I should ever have undertaken it; but, not knowing, and hating with all my soul the life I was then leading, I consented. He swore that he was determined to risk it, even if I would not, for his life had now become a torture to him, and he would die rather than live on so.

“Well, we easily completed all arrangements, being allowed, as we were, so much freedom, and one April night we stole away, we three — Mayne, his little daughter, Ada, and myself. We were well armed, and otherwise well equipped, and pushed on at a rapid pace, for we knew the police would be after us, and that, should we be taken, our escapade would end upon the gallows. Mayne vowed, with clenched teeth, that he would never return to suffer such degradation, that he would kill himself first; and there was a look in his eyes which boded no good to himself or his would-be captor.

“We travelled for days, weeks, months, till at last our horses sank exhausted, and we were forced to walk. No fear had we of the police now, but in their place two still more cruel enemies assailed us — hunger and thirst. Even food we might have done without, but the want of water caused us indescribable anguish, and the possibility of discovering it was so remote, the country through which we journeyed being nothing better than a sandy waste, that I could have laid down and died with very grief.

“At last we struck a long, low range of mountains, and here, worn out and almost dead, with the little girl like a small skeleton child between us, we threw ourselves down upon the rocks to die.

“We had not lain long thus before the poor child aroused me from my semi-slumber by gently pulling my sleeve.

“ ‘Mr. Morton,’ she murmured in a voice so feeble that I could scarcely catch her words, ‘I can hear such sweet music. It is so pleasant, so cool.’

“I thought she was dying, and took her hand in mine, and pressed it gently. I could not speak a word in answer to her plaintive tones. My heart was bursting. This brave child had been my only comfort throughout our dreary march; and now she was dying — was going from me for ever.

“ ‘Go over there and see who it is,’ said she, ‘and tell them, if they please, to come a little nearer, for I love their music, oh, so much!’

“I could not tell her it was the angels who were waiting to bear her sweet soul away to a bright land far beyond the regions of the great wilderness, so I staggered to my feet and tottered in the direction to which she had pointed. I had not proceeded many yards before I saw the cause of the music. It was a small, silver waterfall that rushed sparkling over a ledge of rock, and dashed itself at my feet. Though I had fully

believed the music she heard was heavenly, I hope it is not profane to say that I was glad it was of the earth. I filled the bottle I had round my shoulders, and hastened back to them. First, I put it to the dear child's lips. She drank greedily of it, smiled sweetly upon me, and then fell into a peaceful sleep. I immediately turned to my companion.

“ ‘Come, sir,’ said I, ‘here's water at last.’ ”

“He neither moved nor made answer to my words, but stared up into my face with fixed, glazed eyes. I put the bottle to his open mouth, and yet he gave no signs of life. I passed my hand across his face. *It was as cold as a stone.* ”

“And then I knew that he was dead, dead! and that I was alone, alone in the centre of the great unknown desert, far, it seemed to me, beyond the reach of God or man. The burning tears rushed to my eyes, and I prayed that the Almighty would strike me dead as well. And even as I prayed my eyes fell upon the sleeping child — poor, wee, helpless thing — and a new spirit entered my despondent breast, and I knew that I would go on — go on till I died, if only for her sake. My natural energy returned in the moment, and, for fear that her sweet eyes should witness her dear father's corpse, I moved the body of my unfortunate companion a little on one side, and, for the lack of implements and better material, covered it with stones.

“After the child had completely rested her worn-out, wasted frame, we continued our journey up the mountains, but had not proceeded far before we were suddenly surrounded by some half a hundred blacks. Fully armed were they, and carried, in addition to the boomerang, spear and waddy, great stone axes which possessed a most formidable appearance. I fully expected to be murdered on the spot, but instead of offering any violence, they evinced nothing but a profound curiosity. This was so exceedingly strange that I immediately began to improve the shining hour by making tokens of amity and good-will, to which they responded by gestures equally as friendly. During this time several of them held a confab among themselves, and then he who seemed to be the leader of the party advanced to me, and saying something, pointed up the mountain, and the whole party immediately set out, Ada being carried on a rude stretcher which had been hastily manufactured by the blacks.

“When we reached the top of the mountain a most curious sight presented itself. Right at the foot of the great valley down which we travelled, sparkled the waters of a considerable lake; and upon its bosom floated many canoes, while a good-sized native village nestled cosily on its margin. The nearer we drew to the water the greener became the country, trees and shrubs of many descriptions being abundant. As the news of our coming had spread with rapidity through the village, we were met, upon our arrival, with its almost entire population. The people showed unbounded astonishment at my presence, I being the first white

man they had ever seen. But that astonishment was changed to absolute wonder and amazement when they beheld Ada's beautiful golden hair. One woman took it in her hand, felt it carefully to see if it was real, then held her own arm beside it, upon which sparkled a gold bracelet, and made some remark to her companions, at which several of the women followed her example, and I saw, to my surprise, that nearly all the women wore either a bracelet or anklet of roughly beaten gold; while many of both sexes wore pretty red stone ornaments, which might be rubies. These I afterwards discovered were the principal personages of the place. The women, however, offered her no violence, but on the contrary surveyed her with enthusiastic reverence. I was delighted at this unexpected turn to our fortunes, and so that I might impress them the more with the wonder of her being, I knelt before her and devoutly kissed the hem of her dress, which afterwards caused her no inconsiderable annoyance, for she had no peace until every man, woman, and child in the village had done the same. I own that my action was a piece of irreverence, and, perhaps, cowardly in the bargain, but when men are placed in desperate straits they are not usually fastidious as to their manner of getting out of them. Anyhow, my action was not without its effect. The primitive souls really believed she was of some superior origin, and our safety from that moment was assured.

“I stayed for more than twelve moons with these curious people, and could tell many strange stories had I the time and inclination; but these being useless and discoverable of themselves, I will hasten to what most men would think the most important point of all.

“I had observed, as I have said, that nearly all the women wore anklets or bracelets of gold. This was the cause of much speculation to me, and I wondered from what source the metal was procured. But all my attempts to know were nevertheless in vain till I had broached the subject with the chief of the tribe, an old, good-hearted fellow, who, with the chief priest, equally as good a man, had taken Ada and myself under their special protection. He informed me that it came from the secret chamber of the god; that none but he and the chief priest knew of its whereabouts, and that none but they were allowed to behold it. At this I appeared, and was, much concerned, and entreated, ay, implored him to show me the wonderful chamber, and at length prevailed upon him so with my arguments, that he consented to lead me to the chamber on the condition that I went there blindfolded.

“And I did go, and I remember crossing water, and entering some cavern, through which the wind rushed like a hurricane; and when the bandage was removed from my eyes, I stood in the golden chamber and saw more of the wonderful metal than man has ever dreamt of. The chief knew not its value, neither did I tell him, but he informed me that it was taken from the mountains ages before, and that the chief priest and he

were its sacred guardians. My eyes were then bandaged once more, and when the covering was again removed I was back in the village.

“At last I made up my mind to continue my journey eastward, for though the people were kind enough, in all conscience, I could not settle down to such an existence. Therefore I made known my determination to the chief, who expressed considerable sorrow at my departure, but told me that I was free to do as I pleased. But when I asked him if he would allow me to have some bearers to carry Laughing Hair (for so they had named Ada), his dark face assumed a blacker aspect, and he peremptorily informed me that she should not leave the village. She was the good spirit of it, he said, and the warriors would never sanction her departure.

“Of this I spoke to Ada later on, when, to my astonishment, she absolutely refused to accompany me, saying that she would never live to cross the dreadful desert again. What was I to do? To leave her there seemed cruel; yet had I attempted to force her into going, the natives would have slaughtered me without compunction. I told her that I would go alone, and if I reached the other side in safety I would get relief for her; if not, she was to know that I died in crossing.

“We parted with many tears, for she had got to love me dearly. As for myself, had she been ten times my own child, she could not have been more beloved. I waited till the rainy season began, and luckily for me it was a good one, or I should have left my bones to whiten amid the sands of the Great Desert. The natives paddled me across to the eastern side of the lake, and taking with me the one man who had decided to accompany me, I launched out upon my awful journey.

“I will not attempt to narrate it here. Suffice it that I speak the truth when I say that it is one long way of indescribable desolation. I took mental notes of the principal landmarks as I journeyed on, for I was determined to re-visit that lake, should fortune so ordain. Those notes I have already marked down. If you find them false — should you attempt the journey — turn back, for who can say that chance will lead you aright? and the land of the setting sun is the white man's tomb. I have only this to add, the black fellow whom the surveyors you, Mr. Dick, mentioned picked up, must have been the companion of my dreadful journey, the person whom I lost in the desert between the great White City and the Salt Lakes. We separated to look for water and I never saw him again.

“It is now fifteen years since I left the lake. If Ada is living, she is a woman. I would have helped her, I would have gone back; God knows I meant to! but when I mentioned my belief of great wealth in such and such a place, every one laughed, and I had no money to organise an expedition of my own. I was afraid to tell my story outright, to tell them what I had seen with my own eyes, for fear of being sent back to the Swan River — to chains — to the lash — perhaps to death. I have been a

coward. God forgive me! But now that death is drawing around me its cold shroud, for the first time in my life I am not afraid. God rest my soul.

“JOSEPH MORTON.”

Chapter III

In Which is Related a Conversation Between My Cousin Hardwicke and Myself.

AT the conclusion of this most remarkable narrative, Dick dropped the manuscript upon his dressing-table and significantly inquired, "Well?"

A fitting reply to so ambiguous a remark being entirely beyond my powers, I answered interrogatively —

"What is your opinion, Dick?"

"I scarcely have one," he answered candidly. "The yarn has knocked me silly. Who would have dreamt that quiet, inoffensive old man had been the hero of such an unparalleled adventure?"

"Unparalleled, truly," I rejoined with something very like a touch of sarcasm. "It sounds like one of those marvellous romances in which impossible heroes perform incredible feats."

"No doubt, no doubt. But what object would he have in lying?"

"A weakness of the brain," I ventured. "You know how people's minds have run riot over that wonderful, unknown interior."

"I think not," said he, answering the first portion of my speech, and entirely ignoring the second. "Morton was a very quiet, sensible old fellow. And, with this exception, I have never yet had reason to suppose him mad. His horror at being sent back to the Swan River Settlement may seem exaggerated, but the convicts were often treated with unnecessary harshness, and the crime he and his companion had been guilty of meant hanging. I have both read and heard of many desperate attempts to escape from the penal settlements in the old days; how the men sought the inhospitable regions of the bush in preference to the abject, brutish life led in those seething hells, but never have I heard the like of this before."

"I should think not," I replied. "But tell me, Dick — Do you honestly believe he performed that journey?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"But think. How could it be possible for him to do it without an escort or provisions? The country is as dry as a bone."

"I cannot tell you how he did it, Archie; but that it has been done by him I do not doubt for a moment. Who can say what providence watched over him?"

“Then you believe it might be done?”

“With the help of God,” said he devoutly.

This was coming it pretty strong, and I looked on him in wonder; but so entirely engrossed was he with his own thoughts that he appeared not to notice the ardour of my gaze.

“Then,” said I, “you think that providence — or whatever you may call it — taking pity on this man, would offer him its special protection?”

“Who knows?” he answered. “He had a great duty to perform.”

There was a pause in the conversation, each being busy with his own thoughts. Here then was a strange tale, and the opening for an adventure equalling in its intensity the wild search for Manoa, the Golden City of South America. But would not this Golden Lake prove as great a myth as the fabled city? Might not the wonderful story we had just heard be but the ravings of a madman? A delusion, a dream of wealth in which beggars so often indulge? And yet I had no reason to suppose the man was mad, though for the matter of that madness is so prevalent as to attract little or no attention. At the same time I must candidly confess that there was a certain flavour of romance about the narrative not altogether repugnant to my tastes. Being young, and particularly fond of excitement, I saw something supremely fascinating in this strange story of the great unknown interior; and my mind immediately bore me off across the great deserts, and I was arduously climbing the Principal Street of the Great White City in the Mountains, when Dick abruptly terminated my imaginary journey by suddenly exclaiming, “Well?”

“Well, Dick?” I replied.

“I’ll tell you what, Archie,” said he turning his serious eyes upon me; “if I had the money I would get two or three people to go along with me and try and discover that lake. If I did not find the landmarks old Morton speaks of I would know he either lied or was mad; but until I prove it one way or the other, I must, I do believe him.”

“And do you mean to say you seriously entertain the thought of such a journey?”

“Why not? It will be easy enough to turn back if we discover none of the marks he gives us. I am serious, and shall never rest satisfied till I have proved the truth or falsehood of his story. If he has spoken the truth, we who know his secret owe a sacred duty to that poor child he left behind him fifteen years ago; and if we cannot undertake to rescue her, it is imperative that we let the authorities know the whole history.”

“You are right, old fellow,” I replied; “the story may be true, and it is our duty to do all that is within our power for the succour of that unfortunate girl. But the directions to this lake are so horribly vague. How can we possibly strike the places he mentions, knowing neither their latitude nor longitude?”

“But he has given us a course; vague I grant, but still a course, and with

one exception the principal marks are all hills or mountains — things not very easily missed in a desert.”

“Well, then,” said I, “supposing all this explained satisfactorily enough, I want your opinion on the ‘Great White City in the Mountains.’ Do you for one moment believe there is such a thing?”

“I don't know,” he answered. “It seems incredible, and yet I do not disbelieve it. I have convinced myself into belief, you will say. Perhaps so. But this riddle of the mountain city need trouble us but little, for if we did not discover the landmarks previous to it, we could turn back and abandon the expedition.”

I was silent for a long time, turning and twisting the matter over in my head. After all, the story might be true, and, as he truly said, if we found not the landmarks Morton mentioned, there was nothing to prevent us from returning.

“And so money is the only bar, Dick?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Then I will undertake to equip the expedition; and, what is more, will make one of the party.”

“Archie, you are a brick,” said he, and wrung my hand, by way of expressing thanks; “and if we do not strike the Golden Lake, and make all our fortunes, I will repay you for your outlay if it takes me years to do it.”

With that he deposited the old servant's narrative in the trunk again and carefully locked it, putting the directions to the lake in his pocket-book.

“We must not tell the mother or the girls what we really intend doing,” said he. “I'll say we are going on a hunting expedition — so we are, you know, and such game, too — and that the Lord only knows when we'll be back.”

“If we ever come back at all.”

“Yes, even that's on the cards. But we'll wait till our doom threatens before we indulge in gloomy forebodings.”

With that the conversation ceased; and thus it was that I, Archibald Martesque, of Mintington, in the county of Somerset, became one of the small band of adventurers that plunged into the unknown depths of the great interior in search of the Golden Lake.

Chapter IV

Containing an Account of Our Setting Out, Also a Complete Description of the Battle Royal Between Hardwicke and the Bullock Driver.

PREPARATIONS for our journey went on apace. We were to leave Port Augusta by the beginning of April, so as to have the whole of the winter months for our great march across the desert. Hardwicke's sister Kate poked a good deal of fun at him for what she was pleased to call our great expedition in search of kangaroo rats; but as neither she nor the others guessed our real intentions, we bore her pleasantries good-naturedly.

Our party was to comprise four, all told. Hardwicke as leader, myself as second in command, while our retinue was to consist of my servant, Tim Murphy, whom I had brought out from England, and an Australian black who rejoiced in the magnificent title of King Jimmy. This worthy, who was now reduced to the plebeian occupation of station hand, boasted descent from a long line of dusky kings somewhere on the Murrumbidgee river. What had become of the dynasty I never knew, but I suppose rum and the white man could tell a sorrowful tale. Now, like Othello, his occupation was gone; but he was nevertheless an excellent personage, and one whom we knew would prove invaluable on such a journey. He had been Hardwicke's companion on many an expedition, and Dick gave me glowing accounts of his valour and sagacity. He was a splendid bushman and tracker, and could follow the trail of man or beast with a less erring instinct than the bloodhound. He was working, at the time of our proposed journey, on an up-country station, but he no sooner received Hardwicke's message than he started for Melbourne immediately.

Soon after my last conversation with my cousin I had drawn my man Murphy aside, and told him of our intention of piercing the interior of the Great Lone Land, where hardships and danger most surely awaited us, and perhaps in the end, death — for I was determined to let him know what he had to expect, should he agree to accompany us. On the other hand, if he did not wish to risk so much, I offered to pay his passage back to England or give him its value in hard cash. The brave fellow answered with tears in his eyes that he would go with us if it was only for the

pleasure of dying in my company. I knew such would be his answer, though I gave him the chance to refuse. As for the journey, he wound up by declaring that he cared not two straws for all the journeys in the world so that he had the honour to be in my society. And herein was an instance of that ignorance which is bliss.

We left Melbourne in the beginning of March and arrived at Adelaide some three days later. We stayed but a night and a day in that city, and then took boat for Port Augusta, which place we reached safely in due time. As we had brought most of the necessaries for the expedition with us we were ready for the road by the 31st of the month.

Our train consisted of four pack horses, laden with every conceivable thing in the way of provisions, &c., that Hardwicke had heard of explorers taking, or that King Jimmy could suggest, while four powerful saddle horses for ourselves completed the cavalcade. Dick himself had personally superintended the purchase of these animals, and a very fine lot they were, deep in the chest and muscular, and likely to bear well the great fatigue that lay before them.

"Start to-morrow, Mass'r?" said King Jimmy coming up to me as I sat smoking my pipe under the verandah of our "hotel."

"Everything ready, Jimmy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then."

Jimmy turned on his heel, but before he had gone half a dozen yards, Dick, who at that moment came from the inside of the house, cried in a loud voice, "No, no!" and the black looked round to know the reason.

"This is the 31st, isn't it?" said Hardwicke to me.

"Certainly."

"Then what's to-morrow?"

"The first of the month."

"Of what month?"

"Why, of April."

"Yes. All Fools' Day. I wouldn't set out to-morrow for the world."

"We will go the day after to-morrow," said I to the aborigine, who stood surveying his master with a surprised and inquisitive look.

"Yes, the day after to-morrow, Jimmy," repeated Hardwicke.

"Right, Mass'r Dick," growled that worthy as he went off, shaking his ugly head and mumbling something about wasting a whole day.

As soon as he was gone Dick burst into a roar of laughter.

"Fancy, All Fools' Day. Good heavens! I never thought of that. We cannot possibly think of going to-morrow."

"Well," I answered, "I don't suppose it matters much. What more appropriate day could we have for the beginning of such an expedition?"

He seemed rather nettled at this, but replied: "I own it does seem a silly weakness to delay our setting-out, but it struck me that to start on that

particular day out of the three hundred and sixty-five would be a coincidence better avoided. I think a bushman has something of the superstition of a sailor; he is apt to put things down to fate or providence that merely happen because they must in the natural course of events. I have seen much in my short life, and the solemnity of this vast interior is a thing I never trifle with."

I know not if he was really serious. I only know the weird and mystic charm of his strange country seemed to impress him so strongly that he lounged into the bar and called for a Scotch whisky.

The 1st of April duly passed, and on the morning of the 2nd our little cavalcade set out on its great journey. We followed the main road to the north, in a very leisurely manner, and camped a little to the right of it, that evening, before sundown. It now became exceedingly heavy, rain having fallen in great quantities previously, so that had we taken a cart, as we at first intended doing, we should have found great difficulty in getting it along.

All the next morning we plodded slowly onward, and just before dinner-time we came up with three bullock teams, one of which was apparently stuck fast in the mud, for we could hear the lash of the great whip cracking, and the coarse shouts of the drivers, long before we had approached close enough to take in the true position of affairs; but on drawing near, our ears were assailed with volleys of the most hideous oaths, interspersed with sickening, dull thuds, caused by the angry teamsters' thick soled boots on the unoffending stomachs of the unfortunate bullocks.

As we came up to the scene of this brutal exhibition, we instantly perceived that all the kicks and blows from the whole of humanity would not better the case one jot, for the waggon, heavily laden, had sunk deep in a rut almost up to its axle, and every strain on the wheels but pressed them farther into the soft ground.

Three sinister-looking blackguards, of a most objectionable type, went about cursing and swearing in a truly shocking manner, administering, by way of variation, sundry cruel kicks and blows upon those portions of the oxen which they knew to be the tenderest.

"What brutes!" I said to Dick. "It's lucky for them they are a bit beyond the bounds of civilisation. Why, that leading bullock has a terribly sore shoulder which his collar is but goading the more."

"You are right," he replied; "those drivers are nothing but brutes." Then turning to them he cried out, "I say, you fellows, what's the use of licking into those bulls like that? They can't possibly get out of the hole they're in."

They ceased their execrations and surveyed us contemptuously.

"Who the devil are you?" said a burly, bearded fellow, addressing Hardwicke. "Mind your own bloomin' business; the bullocks ain't yours,

are they?"

Dick flushed angrily at this uncourteous rejoinder, and answered, "It's lucky for you they're not."

At this the fellow laughed aloud, as did his two companions; and, by way of showing his supreme contempt for my cousin, he began to blaspheme more horribly than ever, and kicked the unlucky animal with increased vehemence.

The poor beast bellowed with the pain, and turned its big brown eyes round as if appealing for mercy.

The blood rushed furiously to Hardwicke's face, and he cried out to the man in a short, sharp tone — a peculiarity of his when getting angry — "Don't do that again."

"I'll do it as often as I like," replied the fellow.

"But it's not necessary," said Hardwicke, suppressing, as I saw, an inclination to ride his horse over the man. "If you want to get out of this, why don't you level the road before the wheels?"

"Look here," said the fellow, flaring up and getting exceedingly nasty, "you go and learn your grandmother how to suck eggs. You're a pretty smart chap, I don't think. Where was you dragged up, I wonder, that you got so damned cockey? Take my advice and mind your own bloomin' business. I'll get them bullocks out in whatever way I please; and I'll kick them as much as I bloomin' well please, and you too if you give me any more lip, you half-bred son of a *lubra!*" (blackwoman) and suiting the action to the word, he administered another unmerciful kick upon the already bleeding stomach of the animal.

Dick was off his horse with the rapidity of a flash of lightning, and, almost before the fellow was aware of it, he had struck him a sounding blow on the side of the head which knocked him into the mud beneath the bullock's feet. Here was a chance of revenge; but, luckily for the teamster, the animal had not the power of reflection, else it might have gone extremely ill with him. He, however, arose quickly, not relishing such adjacency to his victim's heels, and wiping the mud from his face, rushed madly upon Hardwicke, who, stepping quickly aside, allowed him to pass harmlessly by dealing desperate blows upon the air.

All was now excitement, the partisans of both sides casting defiant looks upon each other.

"Go for him, Joe!" shouted one of the teamster's companions. "Knock his damned head off!"

"Why don't you fight?" shouted the other, who, because he had seen Dick dodge his adversary, imagined that he did not want to do battle. "Stand up to Joe, for five minutes, if you can. He'll eat a dozen like you."

"Will he, by God?" shouted King Jimmy. "Go for him, Mass'r Dick; go for him. Remember Black Pete, on the Limestone Creek!" And his dark face positively beamed with the recollection of that auspicious occasion.

“Hold your row, you black devil, or I'll wring your cursed neck,” cried one of the fellows to Jimmy.

“If you do,” said my man Murphy, whose Irish blood was rising at the thought of a shindy, “bedad, but there'll be two necks wrung, and yours will be one of the same.”

“Enough or this jaw,” growled he who had been called Joe. Then, turning to Hardwicke, he said: “Look here, my bird, you hit me when I wasn't looking.”

“I did no such thing,” replied my cousin.

“Then I'm a liar,” said the man.

“You are.” Dick was now as cool as a frosty night.

“Oh, I am, am I?” he replied. Then with a leer at his companions, which spoke volumes for his own cleverness, he said, “You'll have to fight me, sonny. A man never calls another a liar in these parts for nothing.”

“I'll — — ” Dick was beginning, but I cut him short.

“He'll do nothing of the kind,” said I, for I did not like the look of the man, and I was totally ignorant of Hardwicke's powers.

“Then he's a cur,” replied the man called Joe, “and shall lie down in the mud and let me kick him.”

At this Dick smiled grimly, whilst Jimmy, in the midst of a piercing shriek of laughter, screamed out, “Oh, lord, that am good! that am rich! Mass'r Dick, lie down — — ” and he almost suffocated with the force of his own exertions.

“Look here,” said Dick, stepping towards the man, “I'll fight you with pleasure.”

He then came over to me.

“You are not going to fight him, Dick? Consider.”

“I know it's low, Archie, but I must. You keep your eye on those other fellows, and see that we get fair play. This is a queer country we are travelling through, and unless a man upholds his honour by his fists, he is not reckoned worth the ground he walks on.”

“Be careful, then; he is a strong, savage-looking fellow.”

One of the teamsters here came over to us, and addressing Dick, said, “Look here, you; Joe's willin' enough to let you off on his conditions.”

“What are they?” said Hardwicke.

“Don't you know?” replied the fellow, bursting into a coarse laugh, evidently imagining my cousin glad to come to any terms.

“Indeed I do not.”

“Joe must kick you till he's tired.” And the man grinned and giggled immoderately.

“It's very kind of Joe,” answered Dick, “but I'm afraid I can't accommodate him. As for you, my friend, I suppose you think this a very funny message? A little more of your impudence will put me under the

painful necessity of giving you a dose that won't agree with you."

The fellow scowled frightfully, and looked as though he would like to have eaten Hardwicke.

"You blow too much," he said. "Jaw never won a battle yet"

"Indade, and didn't it," cried Murphy. "Then what about Samson, you haythen?"

"Samson be — — ," growled the man. "He ain't no Samson."

"Him Samson enough for dam thief like you," rejoined Jimmy, grinning from ear to ear.

But the ambassador utterly ignored the coloured gentleman's remark, and turned to Dick with an evil smile. "I only wanted to make things comfortable like. Joe is a pretty stiff cuss, I can tell you; at least, he's reckoned so about this part of the country," saying which he turned and rejoined his companions.

We now adjourned to a green spot a little to the right of the waggons, and here the combatants, throwing off their superfluous clothes, stood up to one another. They were both excellently made men, tall and strong, Dick having the advantage in height, but the teamster that in breadth. Yet when I saw my cousin's magnificent chest and muscles I knew that he would prove no ordinary opponent, and the fears I before entertained of his ability as a boxer were partially allayed. I forgot the repugnance of such an encounter; my blood grew warmer, and I foresaw that unless a fair fight was allowed, there was going to be a rare old quarrel. I believe I even went so far as to wish that one of the other fellows would create a disturbance. But it was not to be. They were so certain of their man thrashing Dick that they looked upon the encounter as a little pleasant diversion, the result of which was a foregone conclusion.

At first began some cautious sparring, and here, at a glance, I saw that Dick's agility stood so many points to his favour, though I was dreadfully afraid of the enormous strength of the other man, should they come to close quarters. Hardwicke was the first to begin the music, which consisted of a sound not unlike the rattling of bones on a piece of wood. As the result of this playful attention, the teamster's mouth began to bleed, and spitting the blood upon his adversary, he rushed at him and caught Dick a mighty thump on the chest, which changed the colour of his skin considerably, and caused him to stagger back several feet; but before Joe could follow up his success, Dick had regained his equilibrium, and stepping quickly aside, escaped the savage onslaught of his opponent, but dealt the teamster a terrific blow on the neck, which, coupled with the impetus of his rush, sent him with dreadful violence to the earth.

The man was quickly on his feet again, and rushed with renewed fury upon the cause of his downfall. Dick met him boldly, and the shock of those two meeting fairly shook the earth, as it used to shake beneath the

feet of Homer's heroes. They wrestled for a time, and then fell heavily, Dick underneath; and here it must be remarked, to the honour of the bushman, that he took no advantage of my hero's discomfiture, but loosening himself from the arms of his adversary, allowed him to rise.

Again they faced each other, and this time it was clearly seen that they meant business, for they trod the ground with a quick, impatient step, their breath coming fast, and their eyes flashing. The teamster seemed not inclined to waste time in fancy sparring, but continued to make desperate lunges in the direction of Dick's mouth. But that worthy was wide-awake, and either dodged the blows or countered with unerring accuracy. The man, Joe, began to show signs of distress, not on account of the punishment he had received, but through the exertion of slogging the air, which he had done to an unmerciful extent. This being not at all to his liking, he made a tremendous rush at Dick, and, breaking through his guard, dealt my cousin such a dreadful blow in the eye as to lay him out on the flat of his back.

“Well done, Joe! Well done, my lad! Another like that, and his blessed mother won't know him. Upon my sivey, I do believe he's crying!” This remark was caused by Dick, who had arisen with sundry ounces of mud upon him, violently rubbing his eye.

“It's too bad on you, Joe,” his two friends continued. “One would think you was licking into a blessed gum-tree. If you go on like that, you'll end by spoiling his lovely features.” And, tickled with their own fanciful conceits, they laughed aloud.

A broad grin overspread Joe's ugly face. “I didn't want to lick the kid, boys,” he said. “I promised to let him orf with a kickin', but he's so bloomin' particular.”

Things now began to look awkward for our side. Dick had received a very ugly blow, and was busily rubbing his eye, for though he had but lately seen stars, at the present moment he could see nothing with that particular orb.

“Don't hit him in the other eye, Joe; you might spoil the both on ruin his blessed eyesight,” said one of the fellows in a mock piteous tone.

“You got too much dam jabber-jabber,” cried King Jimmy, whose face was almost white with excitement. “Wait till Mass'r Dick finish. He knock him dam head clean off.”

Dick turned to his enthusiastic follower and smiled.

Jimmy broke out once more. “Remember Black Pete, Mass'r Dick; Black Pete on the Limestone Creek.”

Once more the combatants faced each other, and Dick for the first time began to force the fighting; and so fierce was his onslaught that the bullock-driver receded with alarming rapidity before him. He delivered blow after blow upon the man's iron-like body, but without apparently making any impression, though the self-sufficient air had left the

teamster's face, and his companions began to look alarmingly serious. At last Dick got one home, and, as a result of the gentle ministration, the blood oozed in a perfect torrent from the driver's nose, covering his beard and completely saturating his body.

"That's the style, Mass'r Dick," shouted Jimmy, in a perfect frenzy of delight. "Another like that, and you shut him ugly mouth up for certain," and he roared and danced about like a mad thing.

In the meantime the teamsters were endeavouring to stop the flow of blood from the nasal organ of their hero, and sundry oaths of a ruby colour, suggested, no doubt, by the ruby stream, fell glibly from their lips. Indeed, the ease with which they poured out great floods of blasphemies was a marvellous exposition of the popular art of swearing, and proved them rare adepts. Imagination and construction of sentences were alike wonderful. The laws of syntax were spurned, but the sense was always apparent.

Joe called for the whisky, and took a long pull, while Dick, on the contrary, only rinsed his mouth out.

"How do you feel, old fellow?" I said to him.

"Right so far, Archie. I think I shall lick him."

"For goodness sake watch him well. He has been drinking whisky."

"He won't get home again like this," replied Dick, pointing to his left eye, which was already swollen, and disclosed several marks of a bluish-black hue. "It was a warm one, I can tell you, but I'll be even with him."

Once more they faced each other, and, without a moment's hesitation, immediately fell to knocking one another about. Blow for blow was given and taken with as good grace as possible till, in making a savage rush at Dick, the teamster overshot the mark, and stumbled forward. He might have fallen on his face had not Hardwicke come to his rescue by planting two lightning-like blows on his defenceless features, which pulled him up sharply, straightened him for a moment, and then forced him rather savagely to the ground on the broad of his back.

Jimmy fairly shrieked with delight, and I could not suppress an exclamation of joy as I felt my face burn with a pleasant tingling sensation, while my man, Murphy, swore that anything nater he had never seen in the ould country. We were winning now, and it is pleasant to win, no matter what the stake.

The man, however, arose from his recumbent attitude a mass of blood and dirt, and spitting a couple of teeth out, which Dick had so unceremoniously loosened, he rushed, bellowing like a wild bull, at my hero, who, skipping aside, escaped the savage charge with but a slight brush; but in return for the teamster's attentions caught him, as he shot by, a ringing blow on the cheek, which made the man's jaw rattle like dice in a box, and was the cause of hurrying him unmercifully to the earth. But he was quickly up again, furious and raving; his face

presenting a hideous picture of blood and dirt. He seemed more like an animal than a man, and I feared him now more than ever, for one of his terrific blows sent well home would end the battle there and then. Dick, I was glad to see, was as cool as a man could possibly be under such circumstances, and I knew that this would prove an advantage to him over his maddened adversary.

Like a wild beast he rushed at Hardwicke, his huge fists flying through the air with the rapidity of a couple of steam hammers; but Dick's agility stood him in good stead, and the blows were more than half spent whenever they reached their mark. Once Dick slightly tripped, and the teamster, lunging out, caught him on the side of the head, and over he went like a nine-pin. In a second he was on his feet again, his eyes flashing with anger, for to be so treated is not pleasing to the most cold-blooded individual, and rushing at his adversary, he broke through his guard, and dealt him a terrific smack in the eye, which he followed up by one in the mouth, and over went the great bushman like a log.

When he arose again, and rushed at my cousin, it was truly the charge of an infuriated animal. He bellowed more dreadfully than one of his own oxen, and whether in his madness he knew not what he was doing, or if the thrashing he had received had somewhat dazed his brain, I cannot say; I only know he rushed at Dick with increased vehemence, and *kicked* him in the side.

A cry, partly of pain but more of anger, rushed from Hardwicke's lips. "You cur! You damned cur!" and with the bound of a tiger, and almost with the fury of that animal, he sprang upon his adversary, and rained such a shower of blows upon his head and face as quickly felled him to the ground. Then, with superhuman strength, he lifted the man by the hair, and delivered a succession of terrific blows full on his opponent's face. His fury was so great that I was afraid he would kill the fellow.

I rushed between them, and seized him. "For God's sake, Dick, don't kill him!"

He flung the man savagely from him. "No, no; the dog's not worth it."

The fight was now over, for the teamster made no show of resuming the contest; indeed, I doubt if he would be able to move for some time to come, and on the strength of one of the fellows declaring Joe had had enough, I led Hardwicke to a small pool of water which lay some few yards away, and washed the blood and dirt from him, Murphy in the meantime getting out some ointment, with which I anointed his injured parts. I then gave the rest to the teamsters for the benefit of the vanquished.

"How do you feel now, old fellow?" said I, after his dressing was completed, and he had taken a stiff "nobbler" of brandy.

"A little sore," he replied; "but there's no damage done." And, indeed, with the exception of his black eye, he seemed none the worse for the

encounter.

We then went over to the fallen teamster, who had just regained consciousness, and a horrible picture he made in his bruised and bloody state.

“Look here, mate,” said Dick; “you forced the fight on me. Our little difference of opinion wasn't worth it all. I'm sorry enough it happened.”

“Bedad, but I know some one else who's sorry as well. It'll tach him to keep a civil tongue in his head for the future when he's talking to gintlemen,” I heard my man Murphy remark to King Jimmy, to which that worthy answered, in a tone of suppressed merriment, “Mass'r Dick can slog, no gammon. I see him polish off Black Pete on the Limestone. It was fine thing.”

“You're a better man than I thought,” said the fallen teamster, surveying Hardwicke through his bloodshot eyes; “I'm sorry I kicked you — there! What more do you want? Go to the devil. You've broke me up. I hope you're satisfied.”

As we had no reason for prolonging this disagreeable interview, we mounted our horses, and once more pursued our way.

Shortly after this we sighted Mount Arden, the first landmark on our journey; and at the foot of a piece of rising ground, about a mile to the west of the road, we pitched our camp for the night.

Chapter V

In Which is Related Our Farther Progress Westward, and Our Flight from the Mountain of Fire.

Two days after we struck the southern end of the salt lakes spoken of in the Directions, our party being in excellent health and spirits, for as yet we had met no serious opposition, though the road at times had been extremely rough. A few miles farther on we crossed the bed of a dry lake, the salt of which, in the glaring sun, shone like burnished silver, and we had great difficulty in preventing our horses from eating it. The next day we came up with another large lake (Gairdner), which we were forced to skirt to the north.

So far, then, Morton's tale was true, and Dick, who, with the exception of his discoloured eye and swollen cheek, had quite recovered from the effects of his late encounter, was exceedingly joyous thereat. He jokingly made light of our journey, built wonderful palaces with imaginary riches, and vowed that our explorations would be the wonder of generations to come. I doubt he meant half the things he said, but was always under the impression that he had so little faith in the whole of Morton's story, that he was trying to force himself into a belief of it; yet be that as it may, he was merry enough in all conscience, and infused a life into the little party which the great solitude was apt to banish. Had the country presented a more charitable appearance we should have been more content, but as yet no accident had befallen us, and our leader was not of that temperament which delights in creating difficulties.

We pushed on rapidly in the direction of the range of mountains, from the summit of which we were to see the "big hill to the south." and truly, as night was drawing near, we sighted the range lying low down on the blue horizon, and at eight o'clock that same evening drew rein at its base. It being too late to ascend it that day, we determined to wait patiently for the morning. And long into the night Dick and I sat smoking and talking, and wondering if we really should see the "big hill" looming in the south.

On the following morning Hardwicke, Jimmy and I, leaving my man Murphy behind to prepare breakfast, began the ascent to the south, for there we saw the highest peak, and from there we reckoned the "big hill," which of course could be no other than Mount Finke, would be most easily discerned. The hillside was composed of rough, uneven rocks, set

in a loose gravelly soil, which crumbled away beneath our feet. Here and there were patches of shrub and yellow grass, as dry as the dust they seemed to live on; all else was as completely withered as the face of an old man.

We reached the peak in due course of time, but the sun not having yet arisen we could discover no semblance of the hill to the south. Like a thin gauze veil lay the morning shadows over the limitless stretch of country. North, south, east, west, always the same unvarying sweep of land; always the same vast, rugged ocean of rock and sand, which, like its liquid brother, seemed leading away into the mystic shadows of eternity. I often wonder if the desert through which the Israelites marched was half so weird and solemn, half so beautiful in its magnificent desolation. For there is a weird and terrific beauty in these vast stretches of loneliness; they seem to bring you nearer to Him, and the fate of all earthly things.

We sat upon a long, bare rock, and eagerly awaited the first glimpse of the sun above the horizon. The air, laden with the scent of forests far away, was beautifully mild and delicious to inhale. I took off my hat and let the cool, soft breeze blow through my hair.

“What a delightful morning!” said I to Hardwicke, a remark not exceedingly wise in itself, or unconventional, but still a remark forced from me, as it were, by the beauty of nature — a trite offering at her ethereal shrine.

“I was thinking the same,” said he. “I don't know what your English mornings are like, Archie; but is not this beautiful? Was there ever a purer or more delicious air, I wonder?” And, as if to more thoroughly enjoy it, he opened his mouth and drew in a long breath, while he loosened the collar of his shirt and laid his hat beside him. “They say this is not a poetic country,” he went on, “and yet I doubt much if the old Greeks ever breathed a more inspiring or invigorating air. Not that I know what Greek air, is like, but they were fine old fellows in those days, full of fire and go, for which I should think the climate was partly answerable. But look, look!” cried he suddenly, breaking off and pointing to the east. “Did you ever see such a sight as that before?”

Away in the east the pale blue sky was slowly changing to a delicate pink, as sweet and warm as the colour on a young girl's cheek. Then it turned to a deeper red, and one-half of heaven's vault shone with a beautiful roseate hue, lighting the dull, dead rocks around us into glowing life. Like a blood-red sea the desert lay before us, weirdly, horribly solemn; a sea over which the ghosts of ships and the ghosts of men might revel for eternity. A stagnant world of dull, red fire it seemed, save where here and there the great red light from the sky caught the trembling sheets of dew, and converted them into gems of living beautiful jewels that added a supernatural loveliness to the desolate

bosom of their mistress. Then the heavens grew from red to yellow, and the whole eastern world shook its mighty curtains of glistening gold aside, and from the depths of the unknown the sun rushed forth — and it was day.

For several minutes we sat watching its golden flight to the north, sat in a state of delighted wonderment, when Hardwicke arose with the very commonplace remark that it was “going to be a hot day.” The dream of a moment was gone, and the old time-worn, though never-wearied reality, was back once more. The power of the sun had already banished the haze, and on looking to the south we saw, looming up through a cloak of misty blue, the ponderous form of the “big hill.”

“There it is, Archie,” shouted Hardwicke. “Hurrah for the Golden Lake!”

Ay, there it was plain enough, with its long, round peak lifting itself above its massive body — as rears the spire of a church above the church itself. Every moment it loomed up clearer, till I thought I saw the indentations on its sides. Hardwicke turned to me.

“Old Morton must have climbed this hill,” he said. “Poor devil! what an unhappy look-out was his. The spirit that man possessed would have made a hero of a more fortunate individual. But instead of gaining the approbation of the world, he was forced to hide his heroism from the light of day. Poor devil!”

We then, fully satisfied with our morning's work, began our return to the camp, Jimmy advancing some steps before us. We had descended the peak, and were passing along a short valley formed by two smaller hills, when the aborigine of a sudden came to a standstill, and motioned with his uplifted hand for us to remain quiet. His gaze was riveted upon a hole in the ground, to which he approached with the stealth and softness of a cat.

“Watch him,” whispered Dick to me.

I saw the black's body bend slowly, slowly, as with out-stretched hand and face all aglow with eagerness, he stooped lower and lower over the slight excavation in the earth, into which a moment later he dived his hand with indescribable swiftness, and as quickly withdrew it, holding a long, dark object. This he whirled round his head as one would the lash of a whip. Crack! He had thrown it from him, and on advancing we beheld, writhing in all the agonies of death, a long, black snake. He had broken its back.

“Dangerous work, Jimmy,” said Dick.

“Plenty use this sort of thing,” replied the aborigine, laughing and showing the full extent of his by no means dainty mouth. “Not much danger to black fellow. White man no good. This fellow plenty poison. Make 'um bite — plenty glory,” and he turned his eyes to heaven, meaning that a bite from the object he had just despatched meant a sure

and rapid journey into the land of spirits.

He then whipped out his clasp-knife, and, after severing the head from the body, took the latter part of the snake up and dropped it carelessly in his pocket.

“What's he going to do with that beast?” I asked.

“What are you going to do with it, Jimmy?” inquired Hardwicke, with a knowing smile.

The black smiled similarly, I thought, and answered, “Him make plenty good breakfast,” and he positively smacked his lips in anticipation of such dainty fare.

“Do they eat these things, Dick?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied, “and very fair eating they are. I have heard of old bushmen absolutely longing for them as a delicacy after being surfeited with kangaroo. It was a very common thing for the old explorers, when hard up for food, to eat snakes. Warburton found them excellent eating, but as I am not very partial to them myself, I hope we shall not come down to need a closer acquaintance.”

“Indeed, I hope not,” I answered, and felt a loathing rise within me at the bare idea.

We arrived at our camp without encountering anything more remarkable than a few green and golden lizards which had come out to warm their scales in the sun. Murphy was anxiously awaiting our arrival, and as breakfast was ready, we fell-to and made a hearty meal. Jimmy, true to his word, after broiling the snake on the glowing embers of our camp fire, despatched it with great relish. And here, lest this should seem strange, I may remark that there is nothing *animal* an Australian black will not eat. Jimmy certainly had come under civilising influences, but the old saw says something about things being bred in the bone, and I doubt not that Jimmy possessed some of the hereditary traits of his illustrious ancestors.

We struck our camp and proceeded on our journey round the northern base of the range, the southern being too far and the hills too worn and rough for our horses. Soon we entered upon what seemed to me a stony desert. The earth was dry and crumbling, and covered with huge loose boulders, round and over which our horses stumbled in a most shocking manner. No rain seemed to have fallen here for years; the ground was like a huge sponge which it would have taken the sea to fill. Our horses continually sank into it past their knees, so that our progress was both laborious and terrible. The sweat ran off them in cataracts, and they panted so frightfully that after a little over an hour's journey we were forced to dismount and give them a rest. We then tried to walk, but found the labour, after a little experience, so great that we had to confess ourselves beaten. We therefore remounted our half-dead steeds and forced them slowly over the dreadful ground. The sun all this time had

beaten down with unprecedented vigour, scorching us like the flame of a furnace. Above in the hazy, smoky blue it sped its course, seeming to grow with every step we took more fierce, more fiery. I could not help contrasting it now with the delicate warmth of its rise. Dick's prognostication was correct. It was a hot day.

Presently we emerged upon a somewhat firmer footing and I heaved a sigh of relief, for long dense patches of scrub appeared before us, and I thought we had come to the end of things objectionable for a while. But I was doomed to disappointment.

"This is getting from bad to worse," shouted Hardwicke.

"This is a plain of spinifex, the curse of all who travel in the interior. Keep your horse clear of it as well as you can."

This spinifex of which he spoke is a sort of long, tussocky grass, as sharp as a knife and very dangerous to horses, cutting their legs literally to pieces. I had much difficulty in avoiding it, and was not always successful. My horse, as a consequence, was punished very severely. This was bad, for in so hot a region any little cut is aggravated a thousandfold.

A dreary journey was this over the desolate wilderness. No blade of green grass was there, no sign of water, nothing but the dull, melancholy waste before and behind, to the right and to the left. As the sun mounted higher in the steely air above it seemed to glow and glare with an intenser heat, till I felt my brain bursting and my skin scorching as with fire. My tongue was swollen and dry, and I lifted my water-bottle to my lips. Pah! it was warm, almost boiling. How I longed then for a cool breeze, just one cool touch of our wintry weather, the weather I used to abuse and detest so much at home. And I tried to dream of the cold and snow and bitter east winds as one would wish to dream of paradise. After all, how weak is man, and how dreadful is pain! You pinch us and we cry; you tickle us and we laugh. Children of the senses are we, after all. We eat, sleep, laugh, cry, love, hate, till the Great Prompter rings down the curtain, and the play of life is over.

We continued our march across the dreadful wilderness — on, on, horses and riders equally prostrate; yet on, on, ever on. No complaints came from the lips of our small band. Complaint was useless — then why complain? And yet it is no easy task to refrain from so doing when you have good grounds to go upon. My man Murphy bore fatigue badly. He gasped and panted and stared with listless, vacant eyes into space. The veins stood out like cords on his forehead, and I was afraid that he would fall from his horse. A few kangaroo rats, startled at our approach, would bound from the thick cover, and scud away with their peculiar hopping motion; but so utterly prostrated did we all feel that not one of us had energy enough to unsling a gun and shoot. At length the spinifex grew less, and guessing that we were well out of it now, we dismounted

from our horses and gave the poor beasts a good drink and half-an-hour's rest. At the end of that time we remounted once more and pursued our way with comparative ease. The country upon which we now entered was firm and well grassed and fairly well wooded, though all the trees were stunted in growth, and the numerous shrubs that grew around appeared more dead than alive. Had this been a country of even moderate rains I could have conceived no more fertile spot on earth, but as it was, the grass was tall and rank and as dry as the earth from the surrounding desert.

We caused a halt to be made about four o'clock, wiped our horses down with the dry grass, and gave them the regulation quantity of water, which they greedily drank, turning upon us beseeching eyes for more. Food their was none, and the dry grass was such as even they, in their half-famished condition, could not swallow. It turned to dust at the touch as does the Dead Sea-fruit upon the lips. Poor beasts! the last two days' journey had told dreadfully upon them. They showed such extreme signs of distress that I began to have horrible fears of their suddenly caving in, which calamity would necessitate an abrupt termination to the expedition.

Murphy lit a fire, and soon our tea was ready, and like the sweetest nectar it seemed after the lukewarm water we had sipped for so many hours. Tea has been found the most useful beverage for the Australian bush. Spirits would kill one, and the impure water, which bushmen too frequently have to drink, is apt to bring on various diseases.

Hardwicke proposed a start as soon as the horses had sufficiently rested, for there was no water thereabouts, and we could not feel absolutely safe until we had found some. Therefore, when we thought them able to continue the journey till camp-time, we remounted once more and started off with the best possible despatch we could command. We all four filled our pipes and crept silently along, like so many spectres, through the tall, yellow grass, which shone in the dazzling sunshine like a great sea of gold. Beautiful, unending it seemed, and yet how terrible! How one's soul could have gone out to such magnificence had there been no terrors for self. But this golden, gleaming world of grass was as a grave to us, containing neither joy nor hope. Better the barren desert a thousand times, for here life seemed a mockery, a gilded skeleton, a golden shroud enveloping the grinning jaws of death.

It was a long, trying journey; but towards sundown a breeze sprang up from the S.E., which made the atmosphere agreeably cool, though, like a vast furnace, the sinking sun still streamed upon our faces. At last it went down, fierce and red, as if angry at being forced to set, and we, following our custom, pitched our camp for the night in the middle of the great plain of grass. When we came to water our horses we were made acquainted with the unwelcome fact that we had much less of that

precious fluid — owing greatly, no doubt, to evaporation — than we imagined. Hardwicke looked serious, and sometime after sent Jimmy off to see if he could discover more.

The sun no sooner disappeared than darkness began to settle over the great melancholy plain. We were now in the winter months (it being the 5th of May by my pocket-book), and as there is little or no twilight in Australia in summer, there is consequently less in winter. Winter! what a mockery of words it seemed. What an appalling misnomer to the sense that associates winter with ice and snow, frost, sleet, and bitter winds — winds that, guard against them as you will, somehow steal in between the warm clothes and the body enclosing the latter in a shroud of ice. Here, on the contrary, the sun seemed to burn with the force of twenty suns, the air was charged with oppression, and the dust whirled in great clouds about us. Truly a mad world, my masters.

As the night flew on the wind increased in vehemence. Above, the stars came out in millions and lit the face of the far-off blue with a magnificence surpassing aught that I had ever conceived. How they beamed! how cool, beautiful, and smiling they looked away up there; and, stretched out on my rug with my head resting against my saddle, I gazed into the blue, strange, far-off space, and wondered what it all meant, and if all those stars were worlds, and the one great God ruled over all. Strange, wonderful world, shall your sons ever know you?

How long I remained thus I scarcely know, but I was just dosing off into a tired sleep when I was suddenly awakened by a distant “coo-ee” — the cry of the Australian blacks. Hardwicke also heard it and coo-eed back, and the next moment Jimmy bounded into the camp, breathless and excited.

“Quick, Mass'r Dick! Quick, Mass'r Archie!” he shouted. “*The bush is on fire!*”

“Great God, no!” cried Hardwicke.

“Fact, Mass'r Dick — no dam jabber — Look!” and the black fellow seized Hardwicke by the arm and pointed towards the south-east, where a soft rosy light illuminated the horizon as though the sun were rising.

“What time is it, Archie?”

“Half-past-eight.”

“Then, my God, the grass is burning, and *the wind is blowing the fire straight down upon us!* We must run for it. Jimmy, the horses! Murphy, pack up; and, as you value your soul, be quick!” And we three worked as men never worked before.

The wind rose higher and higher, and moaned above our heads like some drear harbinger of the doom to come. Under the clear, bright stars we worked, under the beautiful blue vault of heaven which smiled as sweetly upon us as though no seething hell came rushing over the great yellow waste so eager to devour.

We had packed up before Jimmy returned, and so Murphy and I went to help him with the horses, the tinkle of whose bells we could distinctly hear afar off. They had wandered to some distance, but we quickly caught them, and, unfastening their hobbles, drove them with all possible speed to the camp. Then, with the quickness of despairing men — and what alacrity will despair not give? — we saddled and mounted them, and were away. I cast one hurried look behind ere starting, and found that in the few minutes we had taken to get ready, the soft rosy light so faintly seen at first was now a huge and ugly glare, covering the whole of the eastern sky.

We urged our jaded horses on with whip and voice. Poor things! they struggled bravely, but could emerge into nothing better than a canter. The last two days had done their work. Around us grew the grass and shrubs in such profusion as to partly bar the way of escape. We slipped and stumbled along in a truly appalling manner, and what added an intenser anguish to our already troubled faculties was the knowledge that the dense growth grew no less, and our ignorance of what distance the desert or sandy plain might be from us. To reach it was our only hope, and though that hope was reduced to the vaguest shadow, yet we pressed on and on as is the manner of man in the face of the direst calamities.

“My God, look at it!” shouted Hardwicke, who rode beside me, and I turned and saw what appeared to be the whole world burning. Like a gigantic range of mountains it swept the whole horizon to the S.E., completely barring out the world beyond. The pale, blue sky had turned to a ruddy tinge, through which the stars shone like great balls of fire. The moon had grown blood-red and the earth partook of its redness, and all the world glared melancholy in the lurid night. No sign was there of the desert, no sign of the growth diminishing, and as I felt my horse panting and stumbling beneath me, the hope that had thus far borne me along began to abandon me. I saw no escape. Like rats in a trap we were caught and would as miserably perish. Every moment the fierce mountain of flame drew nearer and nearer, and we were enveloped in the very substance that gave it life.

On, on, on! and still no sight of the wished-for desert. The horses were reeking with sweat; the foam flew in large flakes from their mouths, and I saw that a little more of the same pace would irrevocably knock them up. Hardwicke was evidently of my opinion, for he made a sign to stop, and we all drew rein.

“Water them,” he cried, “or they'll drop.”

In a moment one of our big cans was unslung, and each horse was allowed to taste the precious fluid, whilst its rider wiped it down with handfuls of dried grass.

This spell had not cost us more than a minute or two of our time, yet even in so short a space the fire had drawn so terribly near that we could

now *smell* it, while ever and anon thin clouds of smoke passed flying over our heads. But though short the time had been our horses had regained to a considerable extent their wind, and, as if sniffing danger from afar, they bounded onward. On, on, as if fear gave them strength; on, on, from the great fiery death that reared its awful form behind.

We were now rushing along at a splendid rate, and something like a glow of exhilaration flew through my veins at the mad speed and our immediately brightened prospects; but of a sudden Hardwicke's horse stumbled and fell, and I saw him shot with dreadful velocity from his saddle. I drew my horse up in a moment, and led it back to where my unfortunate cousin lay, doubly unfortunate, indeed, to have such an accident befall him at such a time. As we were riding behind our two servants they did not perceive the mishap, and, consequently, kept on their way driving the pack-horses before them.

Dick, I was glad to see, was none the worse for his sudden tumble. He was on his feet examining the condition of his horse almost as soon as I had reached him.

"You are not hurt, old fellow?"

"Not the least; but I'm afraid my horse is. He put his foot into a hole, and I think he's broken his leg," which thought, a close but rapid examination proved to be correct.

"I can't let the poor beast burn," said he. "He did his best, but luck was against us," and, drawing his revolver from his belt, he went up to the agonised animal and fired a bullet in its ear. One convulsive kick, followed by a gasping cry, and the poor thing was dead.

"Now, what will you do?"

"Run," he answered. "I used to be considered a smart fellow on my feet. I must try and overtake the others and mount a packhorse."

He then handed me his rifle and water-bottle.

"If this is the last of it," he said, seizing my hand and shaking it most warmly, "good-bye, old fellow, and may God bless you!" and before I could make answer of any kind to this brave man, he had bounded from my side and was lost in the darkness.

I immediately remounted my horse, and urged him on at the top of his speed in the direction Dick had taken, hoping that I might come up with him, so that we could take turn and turn about. But I was not thus favoured by fortune. I beheld no vestige of him. He had vanished into the night with the speed of the wind.

On, on we flew, if flying might be called the speed at which my crippled horse moved. The sky above my head was now clouded with smoke, and every moment the heat grew more intense, while the glare of the mountain of flame lit the great, wide stretch of land with a weird and ghastly radiance. I dared not look behind lest gazing I should see the horror of my position and yield up my life without further struggle.

Birds, driven onward by the smoke and approaching flame, filled the air with a tumultuous rush of wings and multitudinous strange cries. Where they came from Heaven alone knows, for we had seen none of them during the day. Kangaroos hopped past me with immense bounds, things that in the now dull light appeared like strange, huge spectres. Now was I racing neck and neck with an emu till with his mighty strides he left me far behind; and now with the kangaroo I tried to hold my own. But what availed it? Everything passed me with consummate ease. I was like one in a nightmare watching others flee from the danger that held me as in chains. Doomed, doomed! The word kept ringing in my ear, till my brain surged wildly and I gasped and panted for breath. Yet on I pushed my tottering horse; on, on, for every moment now the glare grew stronger and stronger and the heat from the great furnace more fierce and fierce.

At last I thought the grass grew less, though now I could scarcely see, the smoke from the great fire having advanced with rapid strides, blotting out the moon and stars and rendering the surrounding country black and indescribable. More hot and burning grew the atmosphere till I felt as one would feel who stood in the very jaws of a volcano. My horse, as terrified as myself, bounded screaming through the thick air. Its cries were horrible as the heat grew more intense, and with that energy which despair alone can give, it fairly flew along. On, on it rushed through the thick, black smoke which now surrounded us, blinding our eyes and choking our lungs. I urged with voice, I even lashed it on, for he rides brutally who rides for his life. The brave beast answered nobly to my repeated calls, and bounded on, still on, till, like a drunken man, it gave one long lurch forward and fell heavily.

I was thrown with great violence to the earth, but happily received no injury beyond a severe shaking, for the ground whereon I lay was soft and yielding to the touch and I knew that it was sand, and like a quick gleam of hope the thought shot through me — *was it the desert?* If so, far more welcome to me that dreary waste than the most lovely groves of the famed gardens of the Hesperides. I had noted previously that the grass had grown less, but how far I had journeyed on to the barren plain was now the thought that racked me. What distance had I put between me and the grass? and would that distance be sufficient for me to escape the great wall of fire? These were some of the thoughts which rushed with the speed of the thunderbolt through my brain, and like that engine of destruction left nothing but desolation behind. My horse lay gasping beside me and I knew that it was dying. It had done nobly, poor beast, but there are limits to endurance.

In the meantime the great mountain of flame drew closer and closer. Like a lurid world I saw it piercing the vast banks of smoke-clouds which rose before it. Like the great dark wings of a hideous death they unfolded themselves over the air, casting the deadly shadow of the grave

over the wide world. My eyeballs were bursting beneath the unnatural strain, and the ashes of the burnt grass, borne on the wings of the black clouds, entered my mouth and nostrils in such quantities as to almost choke me. I thought of flight, and then the insignificance of my efforts matched with those of the giant flames, forbade the attempt. What was I in the face of the inevitable?

And now I knew my end was come, and with the near approach of death my nerves grew more composed. It is a strange experience to stand upon the brink of the grave with all your faculties in full play; it is a sad one, too, when the life is young, and earth possesses so many pleasures. And yet when all hope is gone, and no loop-hole of escape is left, it is marvellous with what fortitude a man can look into the face of the great avenger.

I saw the denser smoke-clouds pass, and then there rushed towards me the great flaming mountain — the gigantic monster that had pursued us so many awful miles. Like some huge demon from out the world of cursed spirits it leapt and bounded on, on, till it seemed to dance up to the stars and set the sky on fire. On with the roar of thunder it came, lighting up the surrounding desolation with a wild and awful splendour, and illuminating the long stretching barren plains with all the glory and fierceness of a thousand suns. I felt the flesh scorching on my hands and face; my clothes burned as though they had been made of heated iron; my eyes throbbled with intense agony, and my brain surged so fiercely that I felt I was going mad. My throat was dry and parched, and my tongue swollen. Then, then I felt the agony of such a death, and I tried to cry aloud, but speech failed me. With one long look into the fiery mountain that now seemed to rear its dreadful crest above me, I commended my soul to Him, and then sank senseless upon the sand behind the protecting body of my dead horse.

Chapter VI

In Which is Related Our Still Farther Progress
Westward, with an Account of the Misfortunes That
Befell Us on Our Way.

WHEN consciousness returned I found myself stretched upon the broad of my back, gazing languidly at the moon and stars. It was some time before I could bring myself to fully comprehend my unparalleled situation; but by degrees the past returned to me. I saw again our sudden departure from the camp, the wild flight from the great mountain of flame, Dick's rapid good-bye, the fall of my horse, and my own expected doom. Each scene flashed rapidly before my half-dazed brain. Mechanically I arose, feeling as though I had been thoroughly beaten. My face and hands stung as though they had been scorched, while the hair upon my head and face had positively curled with the heat. I felt but the wreck of my former self. Still was I alive, and the thought of Heaven's mercy filled my heart with thankfulness.

Yet, what availed my life cut off from friends, assistance? What availed this seemingly gracious boon of fate? Had my companions fallen victims to the fire? And was I saved from one terrible fate merely to suffer a worse, a still more cruel — to die by slow degrees of hunger and thirst, that most hideous of all deaths? At the thought my brain grew mad, and I arose to my feet and shouted wildly to my companions; but only the echo of my own voice stole ghost-like back as an answer. I was alone, alone in the dreadful desert with nothing but the recollection of the past to cheer; nothing but the memory of happy days to torment.

By degrees I resigned myself to my desolate position, and tried to look on death as a thing not of woe, but joy, since woe fled at its approach. And I gazed dreamily into the stars, and a thousand strange thoughts throbbled through my brain, and feeling I no longer feared the coming of the King of Terrors, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the sun was beginning to mount the eastern world. His first beams had awakened me, and on what a ghastly scene of desolation they fell. Around, the black, barren desert lay as gloomy and forbidding as the plains of the infernal regions. The face of the sand was covered with the ashes of the great fire, adding a more shocking barrenness to the melancholy waste. No blade of grass, no single shrub was visible; and

though for the moment I deplored the dreary outlook, I saw as quickly again that the wretched state of the country was the cause of my deliverance. Had there been even the scantiest herbage, I should have been burnt to a cinder.

With the advent of day I seemed to regain more cheerfulness, though my prospects were not one whit the better; but night magnifies danger, whereas day seems to dispel it. What had become of Hardwicke, Jimmy, and Murphy, poor fellows? Poor, and yet I envied them that poverty which allowed them to die in each other's company. I was not afraid of death — though I meant to fight for the life providence had so marvellously protected — but I hated the lonesomeness of my fate. And for the first time I knew what a hero Morton had been.

I now began to feel the pangs of hunger, but had nothing wherewith to allay them, and I sought the earth and sky in vain till my eyes rested on the poor old horse. Though not the most delicate of luxuries, horseflesh is a boon to a starving man, and I at once set to work abstracting a steak, which I knew not how I should cook, there being no signs of wood or any inflammable material about. Happily, I was not forced to the extremity of eating sun-dried horse-flesh, for while leaning over the animal, intent upon my work, I heard a sound, I think the loveliest sound that ever fell upon my ears. Like the sweet ripple of water to the dying desert traveller it seemed; it seemed as a voice from heaven calling back some spirit from the damned. And yet it was merely the wild, strange coo-ee falling from the parched-up lips of King Jimmy.

Ay, there he came bounding towards me with arms flying, face aglow with excitement, and shouting at the top of his voice. A moment after we were shaking each other's hand as though we had no intention of leaving off till we had dislocated, at least, a couple of shoulders.

“The Lord be praised, Mass'r Archie,” he cried, “the Lord be praised.”

“And — Mr. Dick?” I felt my heart beat violently as I spoke.

“Safe, Mass'r Archie, quite safe — and paddy-man too.” (His name for Irishman.) “Dam near thing though. Mass'r Dick came flying along more quick than emu — soon catch us — cut Milky's pack adrift — mount him — fly away! Fire come dam close, but no harm.”

“And Mr. Dick — where is he now?”

“He go look for you — paddy-man look too. Mass'r Dick no sleep last night. Think all the time 'bout you.”

Poor Dick — God bless him!

After Jimmy had given me a little food — which his master made him take before setting out — and a good drink of water, we started off in the direction of the camp, which lay a little to the north of my position, and shortly afterwards I had the great pleasure of seeing Hardwicke's figure in the distance. He was just returning from an unsuccessful search for me, and his astonishment on beholding me walking alongside of Jimmy

may well be imagined. I shall never forget the way he seized and shook my hand, or the devout manner in which he thanked God for my deliverance, as though he had passed through no dangers of his own. There were tears in his eyes as he looked in mine, and I saw such a depth of love and gladness in his gaze, that I fervently blessed the Almighty for granting me the affection of this brave soul.

God bless thee, Dick — God bless thee!

“I thought you were done for, Archie.”

“Touch-and-go, old fellow.”

“Ay. What a marvellous escape! It's played the deuce with our horses though. Yours is dead, I presume? Two gone and the others dreadfully knocked up. If we don't find feed and water for them soon, we shall be in a pretty dilemma.”

Jimmy was then sent in the direction Murphy had taken, to acquaint him with the news of my discovery; and while he was gone Dick took the opportunity of telling me, in a few simple sentences, how he had escaped.

After leaving me, he, to use his own words, put on full speed for about a mile, at the end of which he distinctly heard the harness bells of the horses, and, redoubling his exertions, quickly came up with the flying party. To disencumber one of the horses of its pack, was the work of a moment — the next he was on its back and away. Thus they flew till their weary animals could go no farther; and, like myself, they out of sheer necessity were forced to stand and watch the great mountain of fire sweep down upon them. And they were saved in precisely the same manner as I, though being two or three miles farther in the desert, they did not suffer from the anger of the flames.

On looking at the pack-horse Dick had ridden, I found it was the very one that carried, amid some of our provisions, all my scientific instruments, for I knew how to take the altitude of the sun, and could find our position by the stars; and I had meant, if the Golden Lake did not turn out a myth, to mark its proper position on the chart for the future benefit of mankind — or myself. Now, supposing such a place did really exist, we should have no more guide to it than our own experience and our present directions, which were as vague as they could well be, and which, I often thought, none but fools would follow.

I mentioned this to Hardwicke, thinking he had done it by accident, but he had not. Scientific instruments, he said, would not direct us to the Golden Lake. If we reached it, it would be by luck alone. As for our return, he was not afraid of that. The instruments would prove of undoubted value then, but in the meantime our stores were the things we had to consider first and foremost, and so he had sacrificed science to the stomach. Luckily I had my pocket compass upon me, and by this we steered the rest of the journey.

Shortly after he had finished his tale, Jimmy returned with my man Murphy. The poor fellow was so overjoyed at seeing me safe again, that he fell at my feet, kissed my hands, and called on all his pet saints to shower their blessings on my darling head. I was much affected at this show of devotion, and with a few cheering words begged him to arise.

“Ah, sor,” he said, “to think that I should nearly have been the death of you. It goes straight to my heart like a dagger; and if it wasn't that I may be of use to you yet, sor, I'd blow my brains out wid my own gun.”

“Why, Murphy, what are you talking about?” I inquired. “I fail to see that you were in any way to blame for the narrow escape we have all had.”

“But I was, sor,” he replied, coming closer to me and dropping his voice to a whisper so that the others might not hear him. “Don't tell them — I wouldn't have them think me such a fool — especially that black, but I was the cause, the only cause. I must tell you, sor, because if I didn't, I should never be able to slape again; but, God forgive me, *I forgot to put the fire out*. You remember, sor, you remember the wind rose soon after we left the camp. It must have blown some of the sparks among the dried grass; d'ye see, sor, d'ye see?”

“Yes, yes,” I answered. Truth to tell, I was very angry at such gross carelessness on his part, carelessness which might have resulted so fatally, and I think he saw it on my face, for he cried, “Ah, sor, don't be angry wid a poor boy who'd lay down his life for you; who'd give the last drop of his blood to save you one moment's pain. Forgive me, sor, forgive me!”

I made a slight pretence of thinking seriously of the matter, and then with seeming reluctance forgave him, though not before I had cautioned him about his behaviour in the future.

“If I ever do the like agin, sor,” he said, with a face as grave and serious as the proverbial judge's, “may I be burnt to a cinder on the very spot, and may the divil himself minister to my soul for all etarnity — and well would I deserve it for a blackguardly fool.”

With this demonstrative outburst our conversation ceased, and we went and partook of the food which Hardwicke and Jimmy had laid out. And here I may say that Jimmy never knew what really caused the fire — I don't think he ever gave it a second thought — while Hardwicke, who had puzzled himself considerably over it, put it down to one of those accidents which will happen where fires are made and people smoke.

After breakfast we set out once more, steering the same north-westerly course. Our supply of water was now so low that, with care, we reckoned we had not more than enough to last us for the next two days, but in that time we hoped to strike the great salt lake of which Morton had spoken, and on the north side of which he found water. In the meantime there was every chance of our discovering a native well (holes dug in the sand

by the blacks). Many of these had been found in the barren parts of the south and east, and we prayed that fortune would likewise favour us in these arid regions.

The first day passed with little of note. There was the same scorching sun above; the same hazy glare before the eyes, and the same long, desolate stretch of sand around. No sign of vegetation, no sign of water. Even the dreaded spinnifex seemed unable to exist here, and it, as far as I could see, lived on nothing but stones and dust.

That evening we struck a bit of scrubby country, which we thought gave promise of better things ahead; but in which, I am sorry to say, we were going to be disappointed.

During the afternoon the wind changed to the north, which made the temperature extremely hot and disagreeable; and to add to our discomfiture, our camp became infested that very night, with millions of ants. I awoke as from an unpleasant dream, and found myself fairly swarming with the little brutes. Hands, neck, hair, and all my body was literally covered with the pests, and I felt myself in various places to see if any of me was missing. I arose and leant over Hardwicke and my man Murphy, and found them in much the same state. Jimmy was sleeping peacefully with his mouth wide open, round which many ants strolled gazing into the great cavity. But instinct must have warned them not to tempt its depth, for though within all looked no doubt enticing, that inner sagacity cried, "beware of the trap."

I awoke the sleepers, and much annoyance the little animals caused us before we could get rid of them, which we succeeded only in doing after stripping; Dick remarking, by the way, that we were in for a picnic, as the little brutes were nothing less than a species of the bull-dog ant, and that unless he was mightily mistaken, they were poisonous. Then he begged that we would feel if we had not several small bumps on several portions of our bodies, and when we made answer that such was the case, he sagely remarked —

"I thought so."

Our packs were also covered with multitudes of the atrocious little creatures; but, thanks to the stout canvas casings and the manner in which Murphy had tied them up, the little pests had not been able to penetrate into our eatables.

"By Jove!" cried Dick, "what a blessing they did not get at the stores. What a mess they would have made of them." And all who know the ravages ants can make with food will heartily concur with him.

We extracted a pot of ointment from our medicine chest and well rubbed our bodies with it, thereby hoping to alleviate the consequences incident to such a disagreeable adventure.

Dick, who in the meantime had been hunting round to discover the cause of our annoyance, here returned with the news that we had pitched

our camp about thirty yards from a huge ant-hill, and that the indefatigable pests, smelling our food, had attacked us in true military fashion.

We then proposed a shift of quarters as it still wanted about four hours to daybreak. We did not care to travel before the sun was up, for fear that we should pass a native well in the dark, which in our present predicament would have been almost suicidal. Therefore, we got together our things and moved off to a considerable distance, where, though it was insufferably hot, we managed to pass the few hours before daylight free from the assaults of our puny though dreaded assailants.

I, however, slept but little during the remainder of the night, and on one occasion when I had awakened from an unquiet doze, I thought I heard a suppressed chuckle, and on sitting up I beheld King Jimmy a short distance off dancing and behaving generally in a very undignified and unkingly manner.

On seeing me awake he shouted, "Come here, Mass'r Archie, come here and look. Dam funny. See same on Murrumbidgee side once. Horse drop down sick — ants come to gobble him — horse get wild, get up and run half a mile — ants follow — gobble him after all."

Much more he jabbered in the same strain, to which I paid no attention, for my eyes were riveted upon the spot at which he pointed. There, coming along at what might be called a rattling pace, if they speak in ant-land, was a whole colony of the ferocious creatures, and what was more, they were following our tracks.

"Why, these are the same ants?" I queried.

"No doubt o' that," answered Jimmy. "White man, plenty sweet," and he laughed immoderately.

I looked at the little beasts toiling manfully over the rough sand with wonder and loathing, wonder at their marvellous instinct and loathing at the thought of being at their mercy.

Jimmy, who had been studying them intently, took a piece of damper from his pocket and threw it in their midst. In a moment there was a most extraordinary scene, a truly Homeric battle. They rushed for the bit of bread with all the savage fury of an army of starving tigers at the body of a dead buffalo. They bit, tore, and lashed each other with all their pigmy powers, creating a terrific tumult in their swarming ranks. How the desert would ring, thought I, if they had the power of utterance of any kind; and though I had never seen a battle between the armies of two great countries, I could well imagine its dreadful confusion.

Jimmy, who still intently surveyed the proceedings, here sagely remarked —

"Dam hungry."

"I should think so," I replied.

"I wonder," said he, with a puzzled look on his face, as though trying

to master some intellectual conundrum, "I wonder if the Lord made this country?"

I was rather taken aback at this sudden and unexpected query, for I had no idea Jimmy thought of anything but his stomach (Hardwicke told me afterwards that some travelling revivalists had once visited his station, and that Jimmy was for a time an excellent convert), and so unknowing his theological opinions I answered —

"Undoubtedly God made this country, Jimmy."

"Preacher fellow plenty jabber jabber about God make everything, but I no believe he make this country," he answered.

"Ah, but he did," I replied.

"Then Mass'r Archie, what make him so mighty wild that he go make dam country like this? No grass, water, gum-tree, nothing. Suppose I take the trouble to make 'um country, I no do this sort of thing. Can't see the use of a place like this, Mass'r Archie; can't, for the life of me." And, as if thoroughly disgusted with the order of creation, he turned on his heel and marched back to the camp, I following in his footsteps a few minutes later.

After awaking the others, and acquainting them with the situation, we moved our goods and chattels a little farther on, which gave us plenty of time to eat our breakfast without fearing more annoyance from our Lilliputian enemies.

After our meal, the word to march was given; and so that we might rest our horses, which now began to look poor things of skin and bone, we walked, leading them, for a considerable time. But as the sun grew hotter, our ant-bites began to sting so dreadfully that we were forced to mount our dilapidated Rozinantes, and urge them over the burning plain.

The heat of the sun was fearful as the day flew on, and the wind, which as I said before had gone to the north, burnt like what the poet must have imagined a "blast from hell" to be. Dry and hot, it carried the burning sand along with it, creating a shower of fire, which, flung with the impetuosity of a hurricane upon us, was an experience of the most distressing description. Our faces, which as you may be sure, had already become hardened with exposure, literally cracked in the burning wind. The ant-bites grew more acute, and the dust thicker, so that between being suffocated with sand, and driven to desperation by the tingling sensation of the bites on various portions of our anatomy, I was beside myself with anger, and thought that the being who sits up aloft keeping watch over poor Jack might give that worthy a rest and me a turn.

The dust at last grew so thick as to partially blind us; and therefore finding progress almost impossible, we were forced to rest awhile and let the storm blow over. And what a storm it was! Away to the N. and N.W. the whole of the horizon was shrouded in a yellow, dusty fog, which every moment drew nearer and nearer with terrific speed. We quickly got

the horses down upon the sand, and then, with them as a shield, sat and awaited the attack of the dust-fiend.

Along it came with a roar and shriek, as though it bore on its dusky wings millions of infernal spirits who took delight in the mad fury they created. Like a thick shroud it passed over the sun and hid it, and in a moment the darkness of night fell upon the howling waste.

Thud! It struck the sides of our poor animals with such violence that they shrieked aloud with terror, and in a moment we were enveloped in a whirlwind of burning sand, which hurled itself with such outrageous fury upon us as to tear the skin from our faces. The wind was like the breath of a furnace, and the sand the red-hot ashes of a volcano. How it stung! I scarcely dared to open my mouth to breathe, for whenever I did so, the sand forced itself in such quantities down my throat as to go close upon choking me. Had the storm lasted long, I am sure it would have destroyed both horses and men; for when the worst of the desert hurricane had passed over, and the sun enabled us to view each other, four more pitiable-looking adventurers I feel sure were never seen. The sand had indeed played sad havoc with us, changing our natural colour to a dull sandstone — face, clothes, and hair, all alike, so that the colour of Jimmy's face was scarcely distinguishable from that of my own. It was a dismal look-out, and I thought if ever there was a fool in the world, it was I, Archibald Martesque.

But like all woes that do not kill, the storm passed away, and the sun shone out more fierce than ever, as though intent upon making up for the time he had been forced to hide himself. The wind still blew small clouds of dust from the north, but they were a comparative luxury when put beside the fury that had just howled over us. It is almost needless to say that our ant-bites became more irritated through being brought in contact with the burning sand, and a shockingly bad time of it we had until we disencumbered ourselves of our clothing, shook the sand from it, and once more applied the ointment to our bodies. Our horses were also in a dreadful state; their lungs were so full of the fiery dust that when we began again to march, they wheezed and carried on as dreadfully as if they had been suddenly afflicted with acute asthma. We therefore had to give them an extra drink, which, though appreciated by them, was not exactly the thing for us, water being so appallingly scarce that we began to look upon every drop of it with much the same eyes as a woman regards a diamond necklace not her own.

For the next two days we struggled on without mishap, and on the evening of the second — the day on which we reckoned to strike the lake, if lake there was — we drank our last drop of water. It was certain now that if we did not soon discover more of that precious liquid, our adventures would be brought to a speedy and horrible termination. We sank several holes in the sand, in what we thought were likely spots, but

our efforts were always crowned with failure. Not a drop of water had one of them given forth. It seemed as though the plain was as dry beneath as above the surface.

We managed to pass a few hours of semi-slumber that night, but as soon as there was light enough for us to see, we were up and away. Our lives were now at stake, and we redoubled our assiduity and exertions in our search for the life-giving liquid. We spread out over the plain, Hardwicke and Jimmy taking the extreme wings, Murphy and I the centre. Thus we covered fully half a mile of the ground, and hoped by so doing that should any water lay in our path it would not escape us. But we might have spared ourselves the trouble, for not a drop was seen all that day.

About noon we closed up and tried to eat some food, but with the exception of Jimmy, none of us could swallow a morsel. My throat refused to allow it to pass, seeming as thoroughly blocked up as though a network of tissues had been twisted across the cavity.

Hardwicke looked long at me, but spoke not. Yet I could see within his eyes that he was marvellously affected at our situation, and I knew he imagined himself the cause of all our miseries, so I went to him and took him by the hand and said, "Let us on, Dick. If there is water ahead we will find it; if not — we can die game."

"And you don't blame me, old fellow?" he said.

"Blame you, Dick; why should I?"

"I don't care a rap for myself," he answered, "because I'm the cause of it all. But to think that through me, you — —"

"My dear old fellow," I cut him short, "I was well aware of the dangers that beset this undertaking before I undertook it, so please say no more about it. Let us on, my friend, on. Courage, we'll find the water yet."

"God bless you! old man," he said, as he wrung my hand again and again. He then turned from me, and shortly after we were once more pursuing our way, amid a deathly silence, across the great burning plain.

The night came on and found us in the same dilemma. The wind still blew from the burnt-up north lands, and while it continued in that quarter there was small hope of rain. Rain! what would we not have given for one good shower, only one. Not a drop had fallen since the day we left Port Augusta, and yet we were in what was called the rainy season. Rainy season, forsooth! It seemed as though for centuries no shower had fallen in these barren regions. No sign was there of man, of beast, or of bird. All life seemed banished from the face of this terrible land. The gloomy shadow of death hung over the wilderness daring life to plunge within its depths, and gloating over the trackless wastes of misery it had created. A horrid, desolate country, fit home for the scorching wind and the fiery dust-storm.

That night I saw the moon rise in a cloudless sky, beautiful and clear as

a great globe of polished silver. I watched it rise higher and higher in the blue, and I wondered where we all should be when next it rose.

Next morning, as soon as there was light enough for us to see, we again began our journey, well-knowing that should we now fail to discover water, the morrow's sun would show the day the distorted features of four corpses. Scarcely a word was spoken; but there was a look on the face of each that told its own tale. No murmur arose; each was brave and calm, and prepared to meet the worst. I was proud of the heroism of our little band, and was glad to see how brave a brave man can be in the face of a dreadful calamity.

It must have been three or four hours after starting, and just when the sun was beginning to give us an extra taste of his quality, that we called a halt in a small, sandy gully, and extracting the spade from one of the packs, began to dig for water, for this gully had every indication of once being the bed of a stream. Hope stimulated our energies, and though we were nearly dead with thirst, we succeeded, after about half an hour's hard work, at which we took turn and turn about, in sinking our well some five or six feet. Still no sign was there of the moisture for which we panted.

"No go, Archie," said Dick, as he threw the spade out of the hole; "we must try further on."

His voice was dry and husky, for he, like the rest of us, could only speak in a hoarse whisper.

"Hard luck, old boy," he continued, as he clambered out of the hole, and sat on the edge of it. "Things seem going all against us. Ever since that cursed fire, we have had nothing but misfortune."

"Still, Dick, we've pulled through, you know, and we've sworn to go on."

"Yes, till we drop." And he prepared to spring to his feet to hurry away, when of a sudden he stopped, and seized me violently by the arm. "Look!"

I followed his gaze, and saw distinctly in the bottom of the hole we had dug the sparkle of water. What new life, what joy flew through me at that moment. Salvation had come at last!

"Water, water!" I shouted as loudly as my swollen throat would permit; and in a moment Jimmy and Murphy were by my side laughing with very joy. Water was found at last.

What ecstasies we might not have been guilty of, I cannot say, had not Hardwicke — who had been kneeling in the well — here arisen with a look of unutterable dismay upon his face, while he scarcely more than whispered in his husky, deathly voice, "*My God, it's salt!*"

A sickening dread came over me. I tried to speak, to ask him a question; but my tongue refused me utterance. I was dazed, struck down as if by a terrific blow. I felt the life — that but a moment before had

coursed so swiftly through my veins bringing hope on hope — pass quickly out of me, and I became conscious of a sudden, icy chill against my heart.

I leapt into the well. A wild, soul-sickening hope swept over me. He might be mistaken! Alas! no, it was too true. The water was as bitter as gall.

Only he who has suffered likewise can imagine my feelings. My pen fails utterly to convey one single fraction of the agony I endured; to picture the dull despair which, like a gloomy mountain, settled upon me, crushing out hope and faith.

I was awakened from the dull, lethargic reverie into which I had fallen by Hardwicke, who shook me violently, saying —

“We must start, Archie, before our remaining strength is gone. I think we may yet hope; only, for God's sake, pull yourself together. I believe we are near the lake of which old Morton spoke. That water is salt — what more likely than it came from the lake?”

With an effort I threw off the dulness that seemed to stupefy me, and we once more struck out across the burning sand. How I got over the weary miles of desert I hardly know. I was conscious of a blazing sun above, a giddy motion before my eyes, and a dull, tired feeling in my body. I felt no pain, I was only tired, and I staggered several times as though about to fall. Then I felt Hardwicke pass his arm through mine, and I remember him speaking words of comfort; and I can still see, as through a mist, his bent, determined brow beside me, and his clear, brave eyes searching the wide horizon. And then I felt my strength ebb slowly away, and the strong arm tighten on mine, and in the one brief second of consciousness that was left me, I thought I heard some one cry: “Water! water!”

Chapter VII

Containing an Account of Our Experiences at the Oasis.

WHEN sense once more returned and my eyes slowly opened, I beheld the strained, anxious face of Hardwicke bending over me, and heard his voice uttering words of gratitude.

“Thank God! old man,” he said, and I felt his strong hand tighten on mine. Then, seeing my puzzled countenance, he added quickly, “We're safe now, quite safe. Jimmy has discovered a well and we have plenty of water.”

“And you, Dick?”

“As right as ever,” he answered cheerfully. “But it was a close touch with you, old chap. How do you feel now?”

“A little giddy and sore,” I replied. “I'm afraid that I have been a great burden to you, old fellow.”

“Don't talk like that, Archie,” he said; “you see this sort of thing is all so new to you. Wait till you get used to it, and you'll do as well as any of us.”

“And the lake?” I asked.

“We have as yet discovered no signs of it,” he replied, “and at present are too knocked up to even attempt a search. Jimmy and Murphy are now sleeping, poor fellows, tired out with their awful exertions.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I shall sleep presently.”

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“About three hours.”

“And you have watched me?”

“Certainly. There was nothing else for me to do.”

I pressed his hand warmly, and I felt a lump rise in my throat. “God bless you, Dick, God bless you.”

He pressed my hand in return, but uttered no word. Shortly after, when I rose on my elbow to see what had become of him, I saw him lying fast asleep beside me with the great white moon streaming full upon his upturned face. Poor fellow! he had battled with fatigue until it finally overcame him, and he had literally fallen to the earth.

The next morning found a wonderful improvement in our physical

abilities, and we managed to demolish a fairly good breakfast, though little remained now of the immense quantity of provisions with which we had provided ourselves on setting out from Port Augusta. Our horses benefited greatly by having an almost unlimited supply of water at their disposal, but they suffered much from hunger, there being absolutely nothing for them to eat.

As we were all too weak to start at once in search of the great salt lake, we determined to pass the day beside the well, nor tempt fortune further in our crippled condition. Therefore, as soon as we had finished our meal, we proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as our unfortunate position would admit.

The sun rose like a ball of fire, the angry harbinger of another frightful day, and as we saw neither scrub nor rock which would afford a moment's shelter from its rays, we dug a sort of trench large enough for the four of us, piling up the sand to the north so as to make a wall against which the full force of the sun would strike. This we improved upon later on by raising another mound of sand to the south, and stretching one of our big pack casings across the space between. Though rather a primitive method of baffling the sun's rays, it yet answered its purpose not indifferently, and glad enough were we when the fiery god rose higher and higher in the heavens, growing hotter and hotter as he rose, that we had even taken such primitive precautions.

The day passed slowly away, little talk being indulged in, for none of us had heart or energy enough to supply conversation. Pipe after pipe of tobacco was consumed in silence. Each man was filled with his own unpleasant thoughts. I say unpleasant, for though I questioned not the motives that kept my companions silent, I guessed their feelings from my own. Go back we could not. Advance we must! Where? What misery lay before us, we knew not — therefore we should go on. What lay behind? — Death. Therefore we must not go back — it being far better to face the ills we did not know, than fly to those which we most certainly did.

It was a dreadful experience to lie stretched out in that trench, with never a breath of wind to cool us, and a blazing sun above. Yet by degrees the fiery monster ran its course, and we watched it descend the steel-blue sky with feelings of the utmost relief. And when at last its awful power grew feeble, we crawled from our grave-like retreat with the glad feelings of boys let loose from some horrid confinement.

We had scarcely done more than stretch ourselves when Jimmy called our attention to one of the pack-horses. It had refused the water he offered, and all our coaxing to make it drink proved utterly futile. As the evening stole on, the animal grew worse; it snorted and panted frightfully, and was ultimately taken with a severe shivering which in a few minutes left it lifeless.

This was a terrible blow to us, especially as we thought that on our horses depended our salvation. Three were now gone out of the eight, and we were in deadly terror lest we should likewise lose the others. It was not a cheerful look-out. No wonder gloom reigned universally throughout the little camp that night.

The same evening I reckoned up my note-book, and found that it was the 11th of May, or forty days from the date of our departure. And during that period we could not have travelled above 400 miles. This was slow progress, but it was no use railing at fate, and so I kept my opinions to myself. Though I little knew it then, our progress was destined to be slower before we attained the end of our great journey.

We all slept well that night, though the next morning I was so far from strong that I was forced to inform Hardwicke of my miserable condition; but added that though I felt unwell, I was yet quite able to push on. He would not hear of it.

“You must stay here at least another day or so,” he said. “Jimmy and I will take a couple of horses, a little grub, and some water, and push on in the direction of this lake, which I am certain must be somewhere hereabouts. Old Morton cannot have lied. He spoke the Gospel truth, I'd swear to it. If we find another well, so much the better; Jimmy shall return and bring you along. But for you to start in your present plight would be little short of madness. Murphy will stay with you — —”

“But, Dick,” I said cutting him short.

“My dear Archie,” he answered quite as quickly; “to tell you the plain truth, it is better that you should stay. You might only hamper our searches.”

I felt the truth of this remark, although I did not care for its abruptness, and so said nothing.

Hardwicke was a man of action, and had no sooner made up his mind to do a thing than he began to do it. The horses were quickly ready, and ere the sun had risen out of the great desert, the two adventurers moved slowly away. I watched them for a long time, waving my hat to Dick, who answered by waving his, till I lost sight of them amid some distant sand ridges.

Murphy looked at me and I at him, neither of us speaking. The vast waste seemed to grow more desolate, and when at last the sun rose, like a great dull red lamp, it seemed to flood the dreary plain with a weirder melancholy.

“Bedad, sor,” said Murphy, breaking the ominous silence between us, “but Mister Dick is a moighty fine gintleman. He's got a heart as big as a mountain and as brave as it is big.”

“You are right, Murphy,” I answered; “he is indeed all you say.”

“Only to see him helping you along, sor, the day you nearly died for the want of the blessed water. It was a sight that I shall niver forget to the

day of my death. Poor man! though he was nearly dead himself, yet no thought had he of letting you go, sor. 'Jimmy' he says, and his voice was as dry as a gate that wants oiling, 'this can't last much longer. Go ahead, it's our only chance.' And that same black, and the Lord bless him, sor, for taking a leaf out of his master's book, for he's a brave boy, black as he is, rushed ahead; and Mister Dick put his arm about you and struggled on; ah, how he did struggle. May the Holy Mother guard him. The horses followed us at a distance; poor bastes, they were almost entirely killed. I don't believe they could have carried you had Mister Dick and I strength enough to put you on the top of one. Then I don't know how long it was, for I was like one in a drame; the brave black bhoy came back with his bottle full of water, which Mister Dick, shouting, seized and put to your lips, and gave you a good, long drink. And then, may the saints presarve him! before he had tasted a blessed drop himself, what should he do but actually offer the bottle to me. But may I have died on the spot if I'd been mane enough to take it," and here Murphy, who had accompanied this narrative with sundry strange gesticulations, stopped suddenly.

"God speed them, Tim; they are a brave pair," I answered.

He replied volubly once more, and evidently wished to talk, but my thoughts were too wretched for expression, and so I paced gloomily up and down within a few yards of the camp, which, even with Hardwicke's companionship, was bad enough, but which now seemed like a tomb.

That day passed without the return of the adventurers, as did also that night; and the next day and night also flew by without bringing their wished-for presence, and I began to grow more than anxious. The sun dawned on the third day, and pursued its course through the steely sky, and yet they came not. What had happened to them? Had they lost their way? or had they, overcome with the fatigue of their journey, sunk dying upon the sand? Might they not at that very moment be dead? I scarcely dared to think, for thought occasioned me intense agony. The day flew on, and the stars came out once more. My God! would they never return?

The fourth day was ushered in like the others with a blood-red sun, and like its predecessors sped on and on, and yet it brought them not. What was to be done? I thought of setting out in their tracks, but that would have been both futile and foolish, as neither Murphy nor I had the least knowledge of tracking; we should have lost their trail, and wandered on and on until death ended all. Plunged in a world of horrible thoughts, I threw myself upon the sand, and tried to think, but thought came not. My brain was in a whirl, the confusion of which utterly debarred me from forming a definite plan of action, or following a definite thought.

Suddenly I was aroused from my painful reverie by a wild "hurro," and the next moment Murphy was shouting over me.

"They've come, they've come!"

I was instantly on my feet, and my eyes fell upon the welcome forms of

Dick and Jimmy just emerging from the sand ridges, among which I had lost them four days before. I ran towards them, and soon had Hardwicke's hand in a strong, warm clasp.

"How glad I am to see you, Dick."

"The feeling is reciprocated, Archie. But I have good news," he continued, smiling, "the best we have had for many a day."

"You have found the lake?"

"No; better than that."

"Better — surely there is nothing good in this place?"

"My boy, our troubles are ended — at least for a time," he added in an altered voice. And then: "I have discovered what is of more value to us than a thousand lakes. I have found an oasis."

"An oasis?"

"Yes; plenty of grass for the horses, and plenty of water for ourselves." And he and Jimmy here produced a large bundle of grass each. "You see we did not forget them," for which I was indeed thankful, as the poor beasts had eaten nothing but dried grass for many days. He continued: "It's a regular flower garden, a garden in the wilderness. So let us away, for I'm sure you must be heartily sick of this dreary spot."

He was right. I was sick unto death of it and needed no urging to be gone. In a very little time we had everything ready and were soon on our way; this time with a cheerful heart, for we knew there was certain safety ahead. We walked, leading our horses, for they were reduced to such a degree of poorness that they were absolutely unfit to carry us.

I learnt from Dick the particulars of his journey, which he gave in his usual rapid fashion, as we travelled along.

After leaving the camp he and Jimmy had steered in a north-westerly direction till noon without finding water or any sign of life. After a short spell they were away again, but for the remainder of that day saw nothing of what they had come in search. Wearied out and almost broken down in spirit they flung themselves upon the sand that night, and slept a troubled sleep till morning, when with the first gleam of daylight they were away again. Only a little water was left them, and of it they drank, and let their horses drink, but sparingly. They were now beginning to feel the bad effects of the journey. The horses could no longer bear them, so they were forced to dismount and lead the poor animals along. At last they began the ascent of a sand ridge, much larger than any of the others about, to have a last look round before they finally abandoned their expedition and returned to the camp; when Jimmy — who, cat-like — had got some few yards ahead of Hardwicke, no sooner reached the top than he turned to my cousin with a cry of joy, for right before them, not more than three or four miles away, lay a great thick clump of trees. To tell the truth, Dick was rather disappointed at not seeing the lake, but when he remembered that those trees possibly shaded water and food, he

knew how preferable they were to any salt lake the world might show.

It is almost needless to say they hurried on to the shady haven with increased swiftness, and about two hours before the sun went down, on the second day of their journey, they entered what appeared to them, after the frightful wilderness they had crossed, an earthly paradise. There they found plenty of water and game, as the clump of trees proved to be several miles in extent. They also saw many blacks, but so shy were the aborigines that they could not get near them. They rested all the next day, and on the following morning, long before the sun had risen, they had mounted and were on their way back to the camp, the horses travelling remarkably well after their good day's rest.

Such was the story I listened to, as narrated by Hardwicke, with rapt attention, for the prospect of such a place after what we had gone through sounded like the acme of all earthly bliss.

We camped that night at sunset, Dick saying that about a dozen miles farther would see us at Martesque Springs, for so he had named the oasis, after your very humble servant.

The next morning we were away at the first glimpse of day, and though we found progress trying in the extreme, we managed to drag ourselves and our horses into the clump of trees two or three hours before the sun went down. It was like entering a different world. How sweet and cool and beautiful it seemed. I shall never forget the feeling of gratitude that came over me as I stepped beneath the shade of the long red gum-trees, and inhaled their pleasant odour, or the joy with which I beheld the great pool of clear water which Dick had christened the Martesque Springs.

We pitched our camp upon a green, grassy plot of land that ran down to the very edge of it. It was a strange and wonderful thing to see so much verdure. I could scarcely believe that it was real, for I had almost forgotten what fresh grass was like. The horses, however, fell to devouring it with avidity, and I was glad that they at last had found something fit to eat. To the left of our camp were piles of huge boulders precipitously walling in the water, but to the right it traced its way through a small gully, till it lost itself in the sand, a quarter of a mile off. Its width from the foot of our camp to the opposite side could not have been less than fifty feet; this, coupled with its great length, made it a magnificent reservoir. Numerous birds whirled over our heads, and just before the sun sank we saw several kangaroos come down to the water's edge to drink. We also caught sight of some natives, but though we called and beckoned to them, they heeded us not. Getting what water they required, they, on the slightest sign of our approach, hastily fled. However, we molested them not, and consequently felt no danger from their presence, though, had we known how treacherous the villains were going to prove, we should not have sat down to our evening meal with such light hearts.

That night was passed in comparative luxury, for with the exception of a few mosquitoes, attracted no doubt by the water, we slept without annoyance — an exceedingly rare thing. In the morning we were awake betimes, and while Murphy and Jimmy began to build our hut (for we had determined to remain here at least a week or ten days to recruit our strength and that of our horses), Dick and I shouldered our guns, and set off to find some game with which to stock our larder. As the area over which we were to shoot was thickly wooded, we had not proceeded more than a hundred yards before I saw Dick's gun go up. There was a flash, and the next thing I beheld was a small kangaroo hopping rapidly away. Another shot, however, toppled it over.

“An excellent breakfast,” said he, as he took out his knife and severed the jugular vein of the struggling animal. Then he coo-eed aloud. The cry was immediately answered from our camp, and the next moment Jimmy came bounding into view, and to him was given the custody of the animal, with instructions to cook certain portions of it for breakfast.

The sun was now beginning to rise, and with it the birds awoke and filled the air with their strange music. We had plenty of shooting here, and in half-an-hour had a dozen brace of *beaccoos* (slate-coloured parrots), and several brace of bronze-winged pigeons, which we saw flying to and from the water in hundreds.

“No fear of starving here,” said Dick. “Ah, what a country this would be if it only had more water.”

We proceeded as far as what might be called the outer edge of the oasis, and being by this time rather peckish, we determined to return to the camp. We saw several blacks on this journey; but beckon as we might, they would neither come near us nor allow us to come near them. They were as entirely destitute of clothing as the babe new-born, a fact not much to be wondered at, considering the excessive heat of the weather. We threw a couple of brace of parrots on the ground, and then walked some distance away, still watching them. Presently we saw one of their number stealthily advance, as though doing a very clever thing, hurriedly pick up the birds, and then retire in double-quick time, without even so much as a friendly sign.

“The gratitude of man,” growled Hardwicke.

We again walked on, and emerged into an open space, which ran, much like the spot upon which we had pitched our camp, down to the water's edge. Presently Dick, who was some few yards before me, stood suddenly still, and pointed to a large gum-tree which reared itself in our path.

“Look!”

And in another moment he had thrown down his birds and was standing against the tree, eagerly scanning some figures which had been traced upon it, but which time had somewhat effaced. I also advanced

closer and with ease deciphered them.

They were as follows:

L. — 1849.

“What does this mean, Dick?”

“Why, that the last explorer, Leichhardt, must have been on this very spot in the year 1849. It was the custom of explorers to initial trees, and this must have been Leichhardt's work, or some one attached to his party. Poor fellow! I wonder if he got farther than this. He was last heard of in '48, and he then hoped to accomplish his darling project, as he called it, which was to cross from east to west Australia. After once plunging into the interior he was never heard of again. Poor devil!”

It seemed strange that I, who had heard so much of the lost explorer Leichhardt during my stay in Melbourne, should be one of the first to find any tangible trace of him. Expeditions had been sent out with the fate of Leichhardt as their special object — notably the one under that intrepid explorer, Forrest — but all without avail. The fate of the “lost explorer” was destined to be shrouded in mystery.

Dick took out his long knife and began to carve upon the tree, just under what we had no doubt was Leichhardt's work, and soon he had shaped the figures: —

H. — 1878.

We left the spot with much the same feeling that one leaves the grave of an old friend. It is true the “lost explorer” was no friend in the strict meaning of the word, but there is that fellow-feeling in misfortune which makes the whole world kin.

On returning to the camp we found a savoury breakfast awaiting us, to which we did full justice. The hut had not advanced very rapidly, owing to the sudden indisposition of my man Murphy. Poor fellow! he was but the ghost of his former self, the privations through which he had gone rendering him almost too weak to stand. It was indeed a lucky thing for him that we had reached so comfortable a camping ground, for a little more excessive fatigue would have irrevocably sealed his fate.

After breakfast my cousin and I took our short axes and soon had a goodly quantity of timber felled, and with it and the branches of the trees, we quickly had a fairly decent hut constructed. Very primitive it was to be sure, but we considered it equal to our requirements in so strangely dry a country. During this time Jimmy was preparing the birds for our larder, and as we beheld them spread out we anticipated some very fine eating. Our flour had gone, a cask of it being left behind with the scientific instruments on the memorable occasion of the fire, but we had yet one large box of rough ships' biscuits, and while there is a shot in the locker the good adventurer ought never to despair.

“And what about that lake?” I said, as we sat smoking in the shade after dinner.

“We have evidently missed it,” answered my cousin.

“But what does it matter? We have kept the north-westerly route and we are bound to strike the Great White City in the mountains. We can't very well miss mountains in a desert, you know.”

“I don't know so much about that,” I answered. “As we have missed the salt lake, so might we miss the mountains, which may not be mountains at all, but merely hills. Therefore, Richard (I invariably called him Richard when I was extra serious), we must first find the lake. To speak freely, I do not care to push farther inland without first knowing that we are on the proper track.”

“You are right,” he replied. “If there is no lake, there is likely to be no White City.”

“Now tell me honestly, Dick,” I said. “You surely don't imagine for one moment that there is such a thing as a Great White City in these regions, do you?”

“To tell you the truth, Archie, that question is too much for me. That city is the cause of the only uneasiness I feel. Remember, this is an unknown country, and Heaven only knows what great secrets are shut up within it. Morton was a steady-going, sensible old fellow, and I am perfectly convinced that he would not lie to me. We shall see by-and-by. In the meantime we must find this lake.”

“You mean we must try.”

“Certainly. If we don't go to the lake, you may be sure the lake won't come to us.”

“And suppose we fail?”

“The devil take it, Archie; if you go on like that, you'll knock all the go out of me. It's no use worrying now. We are here for better or for worse. Let us make the best of it.”

It is no use crying over spilt milk, however much we may deplore the incident. I knew, or I thought I knew what the privations of such a journey would be before I undertook it, and I had no right now to show that I was heartily sick of the whole business. Therefore, I was determined that I would not be a millstone round my cousin's neck. If I failed to catch the glory of his wonderful enthusiasm, so much the worse for me. I must not dull his spirit like my own. Yet look at our position as I might I could see no escape from it except by death. I also think the history of Leichhardt and his untoward fate added not a little to the general gloom of my spirits. There was something ghostly in the knowledge that he had trodden that very spot so many years before, and that the sole relic of him was the half-obliterated carving on the tree.

“It is evident,” said Hardwicke to me, later on, “that we have not the ghost of an idea in which direction this lake lies, so we may have to explore all the points of the compass before we find it. Therefore, we must catch one of those niggers and learn its whereabouts from him.”

It was a good idea, and we quickly set about devising some plan whereby we might get one of the blacks into our camp. But though we coaxed the sullen brutes as men have never coaxed before; though we offered them birds and well-cooked bits of kangaroo, they remained with exasperating persistence on their side of the water. Jimmy advised Hardwicke to shoot a couple of them — that is, wound them — but Dick wisely refrained from such a course, and notified to the dusky king from the Murrumbidgee, that he expected him to get one of the fellows in our power.

This hint was quite enough for the royal Jimmy. He immediately darted behind the hut, and a moment or two after we heard him crying, “Mind the clothes, paddy-man,” and on turning round we beheld him stripped stark naked. He waved his hand to us, and with a broad grin upon his ugly face, rushed off amid the bushes.

We laughed loudly, and cracked several jokes at his expense, which, being ended, we lit our pipes and sat down to watch the unfolding of events.

We had not been seated more than a quarter of an hour before we heard a great shouting and rushing of feet on the other side of the water, and presently there emerged to view, on the opposite bank, two naked struggling figures. They had hold of each other by the hair, and were belabouring the respective parts of one another with terrible effect. The blood streamed from their faces in such quantities as to make them scarcely recognisable at first; but my cousin, who had been watching them intently, suddenly cried out, “It's Jimmy” — and started off with a rush to gain the other side. But before he had gone many yards there was a terrific splash and yell, and both combatants fell from a height of eight or ten feet into the water. Being excellent swimmers their fall affected them but little, and Jimmy, who seemed instantly at home, at once appeared most eager to resume the fray. Not so his opponent. He saw his chance and immediately grasped it. Before Jimmy, who had struck out towards him, could get at all close, the black disappeared beneath the water with the rapidity of a fish.

King Jimmy stood treading water and vainly staring about him for the appearance of his adversary. That individual, after remaining under for a great length of time, at last made his appearance, puffing and gasping like a porpoise. He was fully thirty feet away from our dusky friend, who, thinking he was going to escape, shouted, “Stop him, Mass'r Dick! stop him, Mass'r Archie!”

The bewildered black fellow redoubled his efforts, but like a madman came towards our side of the pool. Presently he felt the bottom and sprawled rapidly landwards. He rushed straight into the arms of Hardwicke, whom he did not see, but who, once he got his hands on him, held him as in a vice. The fellow struggled and roared like a very demon,

but it was of no avail. Dick's legs were round him in a moment, and while he was yet wondering what had got hold of him, he was on the broad of his back.

By this time I had arrived upon the scene of action, and in a very little while we had our prisoner securely bound. Jimmy next emerged from the water, and we had no little difficulty in restraining that worthy from dancing a *corroboree* upon his adversary's head. Our royal companion was extremely annoyed at being so worsted, and he made use of many words in his own language which I am sure were very unseemly in a king, not to say indelicate.

We placed our captive on his feet, and mostly dragged him towards the camp, for he was too sullen and obstinate to go without force. When there, we offered him various meats, all of which he at first refused, but when Jimmy passed them under his nose, the fragrant smell ascended his nostrils, and he made such a sudden grab at the stuff with his open mouth that had the redoubtable James not been particularly smart a portion of his finger would for a surety have disappeared with a portion of the meat.

"Yah, you dam savage," cried our royal friend with indignation; and he caught the unhappy captive a ringing smack on the nose, which made that individual blink curiously.

Hardwicke saw this action, and suddenly applied his foot to a certain portion of his henchman's exterior, which made that worthy jump, while at the same time he threatened that should he ever do the like again he would knock his (Jimmy's) head off. The kingly dignity was wounded, and the ex-monarch retired crestfallen. He, however, shortly reappeared, and Dick, calling him to us, told him to speak to the prisoner, and try and find out if there was a big salt lake in that part of the country.

At first the captive preserved a sullen silence to the questions of his interrogator, notwithstanding all the delicate compliments showered upon him.

"Do you think he understands you?" asked my cousin.

"Him understood plenty, Mass'r Dick; only him savage brute." And then he went for the prisoner again with a perfect volley of the choicest epithets. "So help my bob, Mass'r Dick," said he, turning to us after expending his torrent of abuse in vain; "suppose him no speak, I cut him dam ears clean off."

The constant repetition of the word "dam," in King Jimmy's conversation, was not used with any idea of profanity. He had learnt the three great accomplishments of the white man — smoking, drinking, and swearing — and those accomplishments, in his eagerness to become an adept at, he overdid. He used his oaths indiscriminately, which, though it made them amusing, gave them no disgusting value. The bush school is a rough one to learn a language in, and the English that first fell upon his ears had an oath after every second word. Thus, his constant repetition of

the distinguishing adjective above-mentioned, was not so much with an idea of profanity, as it was to show how cleverly he spoke the white man's language.

But to continue.

"Tell him," said Dick, "that if he doesn't speak, I'll blow his brains out," and he waved his revolver before the eyes of the aborigine who, however, gazed with consummate indifference upon him and his pistol. Then, from my cousin, his eyes sought the remains of a broiled duck, upon which they fastened as though riveted with steel.

"Try him with that bird, Jimmy. Will that make him speak, I wonder?"

"The very thing, Mass'r Dick," replied that worthy. "Black fellow all belly," and he held the bird within an inch of the prisoner's mouth while he addressed him in language plain and strong, of which the following is a fair equivalent.

"Listen to me, you son of a dingo — you lizard — you snake — you bloodsucker — listen to me!" and he tore off a leg of the duck and rammed it into the capacious mouth of the captive, who made no objection to such unceremonious treatment.

"Listen to me," continued King Jimmy, working or seeming to work himself into a furious passion. "These are the mighty chiefs of the white men who dwell on the borders of the great sea — you son of a pig, you filthy savage. They have journeyed many miles to find the great lake, the waters of which are bitter to the taste, so bitter, that even a dog like thee, dare not drink of them. Speak then the truth, and answer, for the great white chiefs play with fire, and the fire slays — — " Here he motioned to Dick to discharge his revolver, which action made the captive's eyes open wide. "And if you answer not the truth, you shall die like a wombat in his hole, you filthy beast, you bloodsucking savage," &c., &c.

It was thus indelicately Jimmy railed at our prisoner, stuffing him continually with duck, till by dint of threats and cajolings he elicited the information that there was a sheet of water to the south-west, about one day's journey.

We were naturally delighted at such good news, Dick in particular cutting a caper and swearing that he knew Morton did not lie to him, and that we should find the Golden Lake after all.

"You see," he said, "we have borne too much to the north. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we are right at the very head of the great lake, and consequently some miles farther on our journey than we anticipated. Morton said nothing of this oasis, which proves that he must have passed to the south of it. He found water to the north of the salt lakes. A well, no doubt, fed by this very pool. We should find several of them to-morrow; for to-morrow, Archie, we must do this day's journey and see the lakes for ourselves — not that I for a moment doubt their existence, but it will be so much more satisfactory to behold them with our own eyes."

Later on we loosened the hands of our prisoner, though not before we had bound him securely to a tree, for we had determined to take him with us as a guide on the morrow. We then gave him a couple of pigeons, which he demolished with evident relish. Jimmy warned him that if he led us not direct to the waters, or the dried salt beds, or whatever they were, that we would tie him down to an ant-bed, and do many other things equally atrocious. But I am afraid he paid little or no attention to these diabolical threats, for so low in the scale of humanity are these people that they seem to value life not one jot.

That night my man Murphy was taken with violent shiverings. Poor fellow! he now began to look a truly sorrowful object, having lost flesh in the most unprecedented fashion. Quinine was the only safe medicine we carried, but it failed to effect him in any way for the better. I was at a loss what to do, when Dick suggested that cure for all ailments — brandy. I got it and gave him the last drop we possessed. It seemed to do him a great deal of good, for very shortly afterwards he fell asleep.

Chapter VIII

In Which is Related Our Discovery of the Salt Lakes, Also an Account of the Death and Burial of Murphy.

THE next morning we were up at daybreak, a course of early rising being necessary in such warm latitudes, for as the day runs on the heat becomes intense while the morning is usually delightful.

We had agreed the preceding night that Hardwicke and I should set out in the direction of the lake, forcing our captive to accompany us, while Jimmy was to remain behind to take charge of the camp and of Murphy, who throughout the night had manifested such alarming symptoms as to make us positively tremble for his safety.

I was awake with the first beams of day, and after shaking my cousin I arose to make my morning ablutions, when to my amazement I discovered that our captive had, during the long hours of the night, made good his escape. The rope that had bound him was lying at the foot of the tree not untied, but absolutely *gnawed* through. How he had wriggled and twisted sufficiently to get his teeth into it was a mystery to me, but that he had done so we had ocular proof.

"It's a pity," said Hardwicke, as he surveyed the rope, with one of his curious expressions which always meant a great deal more than he allowed his tongue to utter, "because he might have led us direct. Now we shall have to go ourselves and trust to luck. This is indeed a case of mistaken kindness," he continued sadly. "If I had only guessed what sort of bird we had I should have made a very different cage. Behold the consequences of humanity. If we had studied his comfort less and bound him standing instead of sitting, he would not have escaped with such impunity. However, it can't be helped. Jimmy, Jimmy," he cried as that worthy started up, "get breakfast as quickly as you can, for we must be off at once."

"Yes, sir," answered that individual as he arose with a sleepy yawn; but when he saw that the aborigine was no longer bound to the tree he was wide-awake in an instant. "Where's that dam black fellow?" he exclaimed.

"Gone, Jimmy," said Dick; "gone, bolted, given us the slip." And he held up the rope.

For a moment the fellow looked at it in astonishment, and then burst

into a hilarious roar of laughter. "Well, I never! Who think that savage have so much sabbee?" And he went about the kindling of the fire with the sweetest of sweet smiles upon his face. Though he was more than fond of calling all blacks by the most insulting names, I am quite convinced that he was pleased at heart that one of his colour should have had the cunning to outwit us. Yet he protested that, should he lay hands on the filthy savage again, he would beat his brains out for his impudence.

We stewed a pigeon for Murphy that morning, and though the brave fellow did his best to eat, it was a great ordeal for him to swallow a couple of mouthfuls, and an equally difficult task to retain them. We spoke kind words to him and tried to cheer him up to the best of our ability; but what seemed to occasion him untold misery was the thought that he might prove an obstacle to our advancement. We did our best to dissuade him of such ideas, telling him that a long spell would be as beneficial to us and the horses as to himself; and I added that if he did not try his hardest to get rid of such absurd imaginings, I should be very angry with him. The poor fellow protested, with tears in his eyes, that he loved me better than life, and added that if he was going to be a burden to me, he hoped the Lord would at once deprive him of existence. We were all deeply affected by his sad, brave words, and I was forced to turn aside to hide my emotion.

Our horses had picked up marvellously. The rich grass and fresh water had worked such wonders in them that we felt the journey on which we were bent was a matter of little moment. We enjoined Jimmy to stick close to the camp and take good care of Murphy, and having caught and saddled the horses, we mounted and rode away.

The travelling was not difficult, and as the animals we bestrode were in first-rate form, we got along at a fairly good pace. Once only, when we had to cross some sand ridges, did any difficulties present themselves, but luckily for us they soon came to an end and we pursued our journey with comparative ease.

By sundown we reckoned we could not have travelled less than thirty or thirty-five miles, but as we saw no signs of the "dry salt lakes," we came to a standstill for the night. It was not a bad day's work, and I was coming to the conclusion that our sullen prisoner had lied to us. Yet Jimmy, who possessed considerable cunning, vowed that he had spoken the truth, and I was fain to believe him before my own inclinations.

In the early morning we were away again, and before the sun had attained any great height we had traversed another ten miles. Then the sand became softer and progress more difficult, and as if to make things still more objectionable, the dreaded sand ridges rose before us about a mile away. We drew rein at their base, and while I set about preparing a slight meal, Dick began to mount the great hill at whose foot we had

camped.

I had not paid particular attention to his doings, being otherwise busily engaged. I knew that he had mounted the big sand hill from which to obtain a good view of the surrounding country, but beyond that my thoughts were many thousands of miles away. Suddenly I was forced to heed him, for he was coo-eeing with all his might and gesticulating in a most excited manner.

“The lake, the lake!” he cried.

I instantly dropped the dinner and hastened to his side. There, not more than a mile off, stretching straight before us and shining like a huge sheet of silver in the glare of the burning sun, lay the object of our journey, attesting to the truth of old Morton's story.

“What think you now, Archie?” said he, turning with a glow of triumph upon his face. “Does this not augur well for the truth of the narrative? and can you doubt now that we are on the road to the Golden Lake?”

“My dear Dick,” I replied, “that's the dry salt lake for certain, and I own I am inclined to place more credence in the story, but that we are any nearer the Golden Lake is another matter.”

“Well, you are a dreadful fellow,” he said. “What will convince you?”

“I will tell you. When we find the Great White City in the Mountains and enter its Principal Street.”

“Then we shall find it if we live.”

“That I don't doubt.”

He, however, was undaunted by my coldness, of which to tell the truth, I was heartily ashamed. Yet I could not help it, for something seemed to be continually telling me that I was engaged on one of the wildest fool's errands that had ever fallen to the lot of mortal man. But Hardwicke was so sure of being on the right track, and his enthusiasm was so catching that I, notwithstanding my half-belief of the whole story, found myself glowing as he spoke.

“I'll tell you what it is, old chap,” he said; “we're bound to strike that lake, we can't help it. Morton did not lie, he could not — to me. The finding of the gold apparently concerns you but little, but it means a lot to me. I am poor, as you know, but if fate treats us kindly, I shall be one of the richest men on earth.”

Now the finding of the gold did not concern me but little; on the contrary, it concerned me very much, for I had seen enough of life to know that however comforting birth may be to a man's dignity, that same dignity is ever so much better carried off with a long purse at the back of it. For a young man to see his few hundreds a year swelling into so many thousands was a very beautiful sight, and I made it known to Dick that I was just as anxious to handle the gold as he, though I assured him that I was not quite so certain of acquiring it. And I warned him not to dwell too much upon it, for it was possible that the adventure might fail; and I

spoke of the Golden City of South America, which despite the apparently truthful stories that had been told of it, adventurers had proved to be a phantasy.

“But we are following no phantasy, no chimera,” he said. “The Golden Lake exists, and we shall find it, Archie; we shall find it. I'd stake my life on the truth of the story, and you shall see that I am right, if we do not blunder.”

“And that we are very likely to do with such vague directions as to its whereabouts.”

“I own the directions do seem vague at first, but in reality they are not so. It is true we missed the lake, but by how little? We can scarcely do so again. Mountains are not so easily missed in a barren wilderness. They must stand out, even at unprecedented distances, in such a pure air as this. This lake we see is much below the level of the land. I think for us to have come so close is a wonderful bit of instinctive steering, take it how you will. Had it not been for the fire, which threw us off our course, we might have marched straight into it. Herein see the wonders of providence. Had we discovered the lake first, we should never have found the oasis. Then what would have become of our horses and ourselves? Depend upon it, we shall strike the mountains.”

“I hope so!”

“There is only one danger.

“And that is?”

“Water. I don't like the look of the land beyond. But there, faint heart never won fair lady, and the timid adventurer never yet made his fortune. Farewell,” he cried, turning to the wide expanse of glittering salt; “you have given me new life, new hope,” and waving his hat to the far-off shining bed of gleaming crystal, he turned, and we began our descent of the sandhill.

We ate our slight meal with keen relish, especially my companion, who was in excellent spirits. Then we packed up our few things and, mounting once more, retraced our steps towards the camp. The horses seemed to know that they were going back to fresh grass and water, for they cocked up their ears and travelled at a remarkably good pace across the soft sand. We spared them but little during this journey, well knowing the good things that were awaiting them at the end of it, so that we did not draw rein till close on ten o'clock that night.

With the first glimpse of day we were away again, and but for an hour's rest at noon, stayed not till the welcome sight of the oasis met our eyes. We felt glad at returning home, for home it seemed to us, and urged our horses at a faster rate. Alas! that joy was destined soon to be turned to sorrow, for when about five or six hundred yards from the first copse which marked the utmost boundary of the oasis we were surprised to see a man running towards us at the top of his speed. In a moment we

recognised Jimmy, and instinctively drew rein. He reached us puffing and blowing with terrific force, and with a fixed, scared look upon his face.

“Good God! what's the matter?” cried Hardwicke.

It was a moment or two before Jimmy could gain his breath, and then he gasped out —

“Black fellow — he come — mob the camp — steal horse — think he kill 'em!”

“And Murphy?”

“All the same — kill him too.”

“Where were you, you villain?”

“Me go shoot wallaby — come back minute — find black fellow in camp — twenty — thirty — — ”

“You wretch!” cried Hardwicke, drawing his revolver, “I'll kill you.” And I really thought he would have done so, for his face had grown as hard as iron.

Jimmy evidently shared my opinion, for he fell on his knees, crying: “Don't shoot, Mass'r Dick; don't shoot. I belong dam black fellow; all the same, don't shoot, for the Lord's sake, don't shoot.”

“Listen to me, Jimmy,” said Hardwicke, dropping his revolver. “I let you off this time, but, so help my God! if you ever disobey me again, I'll shoot you as dead as a door-nail.”

Jimmy seized his stirrup and began to kiss his boot.

“Suppose I do, Mass'r Dick,” said he; “you all the same shoot me like one dam 'possum.”

“Now lead the way,” replied his master. “We must surprise them before they do any further damage.”

Unfortunately we had left our rifles in the camp; but as we each had a revolver, and the culprit Jimmy a shot-gun as well, we felt that we should drive our enemies from the field without much difficulty.

We hastily made for the clump of trees, and dismounting, hitched our horses to a couple of saplings, and while we were superintending the order of our arms, we formed our plan. It was simplicity itself. Jimmy was to advance a few yards ahead of us as scout till we came up to the camp, then if the enemy presented itself, we were to discharge our revolvers *ad libitum*, and trust to noise and fright to give us the day.

Jimmy led the way with all the agility and softness of the native race. He bounded, leaped and twisted in the most remarkable manner, and yet so quietly were all these strange evolutions gone through, that there was scarcely the rustle of a leaf beneath his feet. We followed in a less artistic manner, but with an almost equal softness. Yet, notwithstanding the carefulness and rapidity of our approach, we had in some manner become observed, for when about three hundred yards from the camp we were greeted with a most outrageous shriek. The shriek was followed by

the whiz of a boomerang above my head, and the next moment a twig, which that strange instrument had cut from the tree under which I stood, fell at my feet.

“Get behind the tree,” shouted my cousin. “The devils will be on us in a minute.”

He was right, for presently we beheld some sixteen or seventeen blacks advancing towards us in a body. They were all armed, that is, they carried spears and clubs, or as they call them “waddies,” while half-a-dozen of them poised boomerangs in their hands. This instrument, shaped somewhat similar to a bow, is an exceedingly destructive weapon in the hands of an experienced thrower. Many strange tales have been told of this wonderful weapon which, if thrown properly, sails out to a tremendous distance and then returns by a circuitous route to the thrower. But the story that caused me the most uneasiness was one in which it was said that a really good thrower could so hurl it as to make it twist behind a tree and brain his adversary hiding there. But on that point I had my doubts. Nevertheless, the feeling was not one of absolute comfort, for in fighting savages one never knows what one is to expect.

In the meantime the savages came boldly towards us, waving their spears and shouting, and evidently not the least concerned as to the reception they were likely to receive. I saw Dick dart rapidly from one tree to another, and immediately a shower of spears followed his flying form. The next moment he cried out —

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then fire.”

Bang, bang, bang! Such an uproar had never assailed the ears of the natives before. They stood for a moment thunderstruck, making no attempt to use the weapons in their hands. Then, as if suddenly realising the danger they were in, they turned, and with hideous howls of terror fled for their lives, leaving four of their comrades dead or dying on the field, Jimmy, with a wild shout of victory, and quite unheeding our cries to him, gave them chase, loading his revolver as he ran, and for some minutes after we heard the distant popping of his pistol.

We advanced to where the fallen savages lay, and found three of them were shot through the body, two of whom were already dead, while a bullet had scattered the brains of the fourth. The third black lay upon his face, writhing in great agony, and on turning him round we discovered to our surprise that it was the same fellow whom we had taken captive, and who so unceremoniously had given us the slip. He scowled frightfully as his eyes met ours, and made convulsive efforts to seize his spear, which lay beside him. The blood was streaming from a wound in his breast, and as I stooped down to examine it to see if I could not alleviate his sufferings, he rose of a sudden and, taking me unawares, pushed me with

violence to the earth, and grasping his spear, he whirled it triumphantly round his head preparatory to plunging it into me. But that triumphant whirl was the cause of my salvation, for Hardwicke, who was some few yards off, had heard me fall, and on looking round had taken in the situation at a glance.

Bang!

With a wild cry the savage fell dead upon me. Dick had shot him not a moment too soon.

I disencumbered myself of the objectionable carcase.

"I am once more your debtor, Dick."

"A close shave, old chap; but where was your revolver?"

I told him that I had laid it on the grass previous to my kneeling beside the wounded savage.

"Moral," he muttered, "always keep your revolver in your belt."

"I shall," I answered. "But who would have thought a dying man equal to such a piece of mischief?"

"Ah, that's it," said he. "Always think anybody capable of anything. Even a dead man is not safe. He'll breed a plague if he can't do anything else. But let us on to the camp."

Away we hurried and soon came upon a scene of unutterable confusion. The camp was completely wrecked. Our provisions were scattered all over the place, the hut was demolished, and what to us was a thousand times more appalling, was the discovery of poor Murphy's body beaten almost to a jelly. I verily believe the wretches had not left one sound bone in it. I was completely overcome with the shock, and when I gazed upon his unrecognisable features, I felt like one half guilty. Poor Murphy! he had been a true servant to me — noble, brave-hearted and generous, and to lose him in such a brutal manner cut me to the heart. The merry tongue with its charming brogue was still for ever, and the bright, laughing face would never smile again. I could now understand the reason of my cousin's fierce resentment when King Jimmy first told him the unwelcome news. Had that individual obeyed orders and kept guard over the camp, this catastrophe would have been averted.

Presently that worthy returned, glowing with the excitement of his chase, and had Hardwicke not ordered him off to bring in the horses, I feel positive that I should have visited him with a rigorous chastisement.

We collected the scattered stores with great care, and were glad to find that though the savages had destroyed much, much still remained. Among other things our rifles and ammunition were uninjured. Nothing had been removed; and this fact we put down to our sudden return, the blacks not having had time to carry anything away. Had we been an hour later the consequences might have been awful. We found the bodies of the two horses they had slain, but where the third had got to we were at a loss to conjecture. This was a great piece of misfortune, so great, indeed,

that a shadow fell upon the usually cheerful face of my cousin Dick. Murphy was gone to his last home, our horses were killed, and our provisions partly destroyed. What was to be the next move of the great regulator of fate? I, for one, shuddered to think. But thanks to that providence which seems in some unaccountable way to minister to the wants of men, our gloomy feelings were somewhat brightened later on by seeing the missing horse hobble quietly into camp.

As night came on we made preparations for the burial of poor Murphy. Sad and small preparations were they, merely consisting of wrapping him in his blanket and making it fast about his head and feet. Then as the moon came out we carried him to the tree on which the ill-fated Leichhardt had engraved his initial, for at its foot had I determined to dig his grave. The spot seemed not so desolate as another, for there the white man had stood, that fact alone making the earth more sacred.

I seized the spade and began to shovel out the earth, which, considering the firmness of the surrounding ground, or the appearance of firmness it possessed, proved to be remarkably soft. After I had excavated to the depth of a foot, I handed over the spade to Hardwicke, who, after taking a long spell at it, surrendered it in turn to Jimmy. That worthy had not been shovelling long before he stooped down and picked up something which he held towards us.

“What's this, Mass'r Dick?” he said.

Hardwicke took it from his outstretched hand.

“Good God, it's a *human skull!*” he cried.

“A human skull, say you?”

“Yes, and what is more, it's a *white man's!*”

I felt a cold, creepy shiver rush through me.

“Leichhardt's party?” I queried.

“Yes; perhaps this is Leichhardt's skull.” He was now more than serious, and I knew the full reality of our unfortunate position had at last forced itself upon him. Then he turned with an exclamation of annoyance and threw the skull back into the grave. “Faugh! Let us to work.”

No more was spoken, and amid a deep, oppressive silence we laid poor Murphy in his last home beside his ghastly companion. Then gently we piled the earth upon him, and on the top of that again laid the turf which we had cut carefully in squares, so that when we had finished and strewed some dried leaves over all, one would scarcely have known that the earth had been molested.

The moon now shone out brightly and illumined the great white gum with a weird glory. It looked like some strange, ghostly figure grimly watching over the forms of the departed. I felt an indescribable loneliness possess me, a terror which I could not control. The great carven letters stood out like hideous gashes on the white, gleaming trunk of the tree.

H. 1878.

Hardwicke saw them too, and he cried out with a strange laugh: "If I were a superstitious fellow, I should believe I had carved my own tombstone."

I did not like to tell him that I thought he had, but nevertheless such was my firm conviction.

The rest of the night was passed in quiet, though for fear of an attack from the savages we kept watch and watch throughout the whole of it, a precaution quite unnecessary, our opponents evidently having had enough of us and our shooting irons. When the morning broke, Jimmy and I undertook a reconnoitre. We saw several natives in the distance, but they would never allow us to come within range of them. We therefore returned to the camp, feeling perfectly secure from further attack.

It was agreed that we should remain a week longer in the oasis, and thus enable the horses to regain that strength which was necessary to carry them over the next stage of the journey. They were carefully watched and never allowed to stray far from the camp lest they should fall into the murderous hands of the savages. We also continued our watches through the night, but for the whole week no black molested us or attempted a raid on our little settlement.

As we only possessed three horses now, and as there was yet a goodly quantity of provisions left, it was painfully evident that one of us would have to walk; one of the three horses being required to convey the remaining stores. That, however, was easily arranged. We were to walk in turns, each of us declaring that he minded not that a rap, so long as the water and provisions held out. With an assembly so small and unanimous as ours, preparations sped cheerfully along, and on the morning of the seventh day from poor Murphy's sudden end, we were both eager and ready for the journey.

Our larder was well stocked with kangaroo flesh and several species of birds, all done up in true bush fashion, that is, smoked, sun-dried, &c., so as to withstand the severe heat which we knew we were to experience. And that we might not take more things than were necessary, we undid a package that contained some new clothes and rigged ourselves out from head to foot. Two small water-casks, each containing about four gallons, were slung on either side of the pack-horse, and these, with the half gallon each horseman carried in his waterbottle, completed our store of that invaluable liquid. Thus equipped, and with the distinct chance of falling in with some native wells on our way, we felt certain of accomplishing our march, which we reckoned a fortnight at the most, at twelve or fifteen miles a day.

I was more than glad when the time came for leaving, for I had taken an indescribable dislike to the place, notwithstanding the fact that it had

been our salvation. I could not help but think of Murphy's terrible end, and try how I would, I could not get the idea out of my mind that we should never leave it alive. Therefore it was with feelings bordering closely upon the domains of pleasure that I beheld our little cavalcade step boldly forth into the Great Lone Land.

Chapter IX

In Which are Related the Further Misfortunes That Befell Us as We Journeyed into the Great Lone Land.

HARDWICKE undertook the first walk despite the objections both Jimmy and I raised.

“No mutiny,” he cried. “I am the leader of this expedition, and I walk first.” And all who have the pleasure of my cousin's acquaintance must know that he is a man of his word. Therefore we demolished a hearty breakfast, and after we had filled and lit our pipes, he gave the word “forward,” and with a long and swinging stride stepped out. The black and I followed on horseback, the former driving the pack-horse before him.

We steered a more westerly course, thereby making due allowance for the northern position we had attained. Meagre in the extreme was our conversation, each adventurer being entirely engrossed with his own thoughts. Now and again King Jimmy's voice was heard as he shouted and swore at the pack-horse, but beyond those ebullitions of feeling on his part, it was a very silent procession, broken only by remarks on the nature of the country we were travelling, and what it was likely to be farther on. About mid-day we passed on the northern side of some gigantic sand ridges, but as they lay not within our course, they affected us but slightly, though they foreboded difficulties in the future.

For the first five days the travelling, though heavy, was not too laborious, nothing of any consequence impeding our progress. The horses continued to go well, and the little party remained in good health. We unfortunately discovered no water. A few shrubs seemed to spring as if by enchantment out of the dry sand, but beyond that there was no sign of life, animal or vegetable. The land lay before us a dreary wilderness, over which we passed silently as spectres.

On the sixth day we sank a well in what appeared to be a likely spot, and were lucky enough to get about two gallons and a half of fresh water from it, which, it is scarcely necessary to say, was a more than welcome addition to our scanty store. The next day we were away again at sunrise, but after traversing another five miles, our good fortune suddenly deserted us. We had struck a region of mountainous sand ridges.

These sand ridges, which are exactly similar to huge waves, were about

eighty or ninety feet in height, and on an average between four and five hundred yards long. They stretched from east to west, and at the bottom of the great valleys formed by them we pursued our way. The heat was more than intense. Hitherto we had the breeze as well as the sun, but in these mighty hollows it was all sun, all heat; stifling, choking heat. The heavens seemed not to possess a tiny breath of wind. My brain whirled giddily. I felt like undergoing an eternal suffocation. The poor horses foamed at the mouth, and gasped and sweated so exceedingly that I expected every moment to see them drop. When the evening came about, we three would climb to the top of the highest ridge to pass the dreadful night, being forced to leave our wretched horses gasping on the sands below.

This horrible experience lasted for three days, days that seemed like an eternity. It appeared as though we were never to emerge from that hideous world of hills. Had the road been a very difficult one we should never have survived so exhaustive and terrible an ordeal. As it was, we were in a most wretched plight, even our finger-nails becoming as brittle as glass and breaking in little pieces at the slightest provocation.

On emerging from our prison we were astonished to find ourselves standing upon the margin of a great dry salt lake, or swamp. Morton had said nothing of such a place, and I began to have horrible fears that we had strayed far out of our proper track. Dick could not account for it either, though, like myself, he believed we had gone astray during our wanderings among the sandhills. We, however, pitched our camp upon its shores that night, thankful for what we had escaped and wondering what was stretched before.

The next morning we finished the last drop of water, and then pushed on with all haste. Small comfort gained we from the prospect that opened to our view. Before us stretched the glittering swamp as far as the eye could reach, while to the south rose the sandhills to an apparently greater height than any we as yet had seen.

At first the way was firm, but by degrees it grew softer and softer, until further advancement was an utter impossibility. Then a council of war was held, and it was decided to make a *détour* to the south, since we were unable to steer due west. "For," added Dick by way of convincing me that such was our better plan, and perhaps to convince himself as well, "Morton must have passed to the south of this swamp, to the south of those big sandhills yonder, which completely hid this marsh from sight, or he would have mentioned it in his directions."

We then retraced our steps, steering a southerly course, and by degrees got on much firmer footing, which enabled us to push forward at a much better pace.

All that day we jogged along with the fixed determination of men who know that on their own strenuous exertions depend their lives. The heat

of the sun was terrible, and the blinding glare of the glittering salt bed so awful as to make the eyes ache till they ran with water. We also experienced great difficulty in preventing our horses from licking the gleaming crystal. It seemed cruel to deprive them of that for which their mouths literally watered, but the salt would have had the same effect on them as sea water on a shipwrecked mariner.

About ten o'clock that night our laborious journey came to an end, and tired out and half dead with thirst, we threw ourselves upon the soft sand and slept a dull, heavy sleep till morning. Then began a feverish search for water, and notwithstanding the unlikely look of the country, we were fortunate enough to discover some amid a great mass of red sandstone rocks. It was in a large basin, sheltered from the sun by a projecting ledge, and beside it we stayed all that day, the rest being both necessary for ourselves and our horses. The next morning, after filling our kegs and waterbottles and taking a long farewell drink ourselves, we were away once more. By six that night we must have covered a good twenty-five miles, a performance on which we greatly prided ourselves.

The next day we were again unfortunate enough to encounter the dreadful sandhills, and this time an exceedingly difficult task was set us, for instead of running east and west, as the former ones, they bore north and south, so that we had to cross them at right angles. Two whole days were we kept ascending and descending those barren hills, and during that time I am sure we could not have gone more than five miles. How we were enabled to survive the ordeal I cannot imagine; how the poor, half-starved, broken-down horses lived through it, is even a greater puzzle. We almost dragged them up the soft sides of the ridges, and even had to push them to make them begin the descent.

At length the horrible task came to an end, and we emerged once more upon the level plain, or what appeared to be level, after the awful country we had crossed. Here a sort of shrub grew, of which the horses ate plentifully, and glad were we to see them find something palatable at last. Alas! we little foresaw the consequences. Next day they refused to drink, while to make their symptoms more alarming, they had visibly swollen through the night. About four o'clock that afternoon the horse Jimmy rode caved in. It rushed along like a drunken man, then staggered and fell heavily to the earth, and five minutes after lay dead.

Here was an appalling situation indeed, and one to make a man's heart quail within him; and, as if to add an intenser gloom to our already dreary prospects, the pack-horse gave up the ghost in a similar manner two hours later, and was quickly followed by the third.

For the first time in all our troubles Hardwicke fairly broke down.

"My God, this is awful!" he said, looking at me in blank dismay. "While we had those animals to carry our stores I did not, would not harbour a thought of despair. But now — my God — what now?"

“Cheer up,” said I, assuming a cheerful tone, though I felt in no gay mood. “We are worth a thousand dead men yet.”

“But do you know where we are?”

“No — that is, I guess. But I know where we are going.”

“Ah!”

“To the Golden Lake; so cheer up, Dick, and onward.”

“Yes, onward,” said he, his face growing more fixed and determined. “And we’ll fight for it yet, Archie; we’ll fight for it yet.” And I knew that nothing less than downright exhaustion would quell that indomitable spirit.

“There is no time to lose,” he continued. “We must go forward while we have the strength, for Heaven only knows what lies before us in this cursed country.”

We then proceeded to unpack our provisions, to see how we best might carry them.

“I have never done any slave-driving,” said he, in the midst of his work; “but if I came across any natives now. I should be sorely tempted to press them into my service.”

But as there were no natives to press, we were forced to depend upon our own skill and stamina.

We had altogether about three gallons of water when this great misfortune befell us; but as it was impossible for us to carry anything like that quantity, we could do no more than fill our bottles, each bottle, as I have said before, holding about half a gallon. We boiled a gallon of that which remained, and made tea with our last packet of that precious leaf. The fire-arms and ammunition were next served out, Dick and I each having a rifle, besides our revolvers, while Jimmy undertook to carry the shot gun with a box of one hundred cartridges; for on this gun we depended chiefly for subsistence when we came into the regions of birds or game. We could carry sufficient meat to last for six days, supposing that we ate but sparingly. But in those latitudes water is the chief necessity of existence, and Dick determined to carry the spade, as without it, to sink a well would have been an impossibility.

These things we wrapped in our rugs, making what is known in bush parlance as a “swag.” These swags are slung over the shoulders by the aid of straps, and answer the purpose of a soldier's knapsack, everything being carried in them, thus rendering progress, even with a good weight, more easy than any other method. Thus equipped we set out across the dreary plain, knowing not what country lay before, knowing not at what moment death would strike us down.

Early the next morning, having partaken of a good breakfast and drunk deeply of the fragrant tea (ambrosial nectar it seemed), we started on our journey to pierce farther and farther into the great unknown. Dick led the way with the same long, swinging stride; I followed, and then came

Jimmy, who, by the way, seemed concerned but little at our misfortunes. So long as that worthy had plenty to eat and drink, he could not conceive the existence of calamity. Indeed, he had feasted so royally during the last twelve hours on our spare provisions, that his face positively beamed with gladness. I envied him his savage state, his contented lot. Truly civilisation and learning create a world of woe for their possessor. This fellow would have died with a smile on his face as contentedly as if he were going to sleep. He knew not the mind's disease — the longing, sickening hope. I was almost tempted to say — lucky is he who is born a savage.

We walked a good twenty miles before sundown — at least Dick and Jimmy reckoned it at that, while I, if my state of exhaustion counted anything, felt that we had gone twice or three times that distance. Hardwicke, who led the way throughout, never once diminished his speed, except to now and again point out some object, or else slow down to smoke a pipe for half-an-hour. All the rest of the time he kept well to the fore, with the one dogged, determined look on his face, a look which meant to conquer, or at least to die game. It was a great comfort to me to see him so defiantly scornful of the many obstacles Fate seemed to wilfully throw in our way. He was a true descendant of the old British adventurer, knowing neither fear nor defeat. He was one who inspired confidence, and one whom, had he been a soldier, his men would have followed to the very gates of the infernal regions.

That night a heavy dew fell which completely saturated our clothes, for, little thinking of such a mishap, we had thrown ourselves down upon the sand without first wrapping our rugs about us. We consequently awoke stiff with the cold, that is, my cousin and I did, Jimmy absolutely refusing to stir, saying that no dew could harm him, which I verily believe was true, his constitution being like iron. To keep ourselves warm and our joints loose till our old friend the sun came out, Dick and I decided to dig a well, especially as the spot on which we had camped had the appearance of once being a creek or gully. We were fortunate enough to find a plentiful supply of fresh water at a depth of about eight feet, and, as a consequence, there was great rejoicing, Dick declaring that some kind providence was watching us after all.

When the sun came out, our clothes speedily dried upon us. Jimmy was awakened from his damp couch, but his wet clothes seemed to trouble him but little. He shook himself much after the style of a dog, and then went on with his work in his usual stoical manner.

We pushed on rapidly that day beneath a sweltering sun. Luckily we suffered no inconvenience from our previous soaking — a fact we put down to the exercise we had undertaken — for in our present state, with constitutions naturally weakened by exhaustion, we were very liable to be seized by one of the numerous complaints that fall to the lot of the

unhappy explorer; fever, ague, scurvy, and various other bodily ailments being prevalent in this desert country.

At mid-day we were much surprised to see before us what appeared to be a forest. We could scarcely believe our eyes, yet there it rose weirdly strange, but withal most pleasing to the sight that had rested upon nothing but sand and the coarsest vegetation for so many days. Dick was loud in his delight.

“This is the promised land of which people have dreamed,” he said, “and we shall be the first to give the good news to the world.”

But as we drew nearer, his sudden burst of pleasure was turned to unutterable dismay, for we found the great trees gradually decrease in size till they proved to be no more than mere shrubs of three or four feet in height. At first we could scarcely credit our senses, and felt as though we were the sport of some monstrous hallucination, but it was all too true. The forest had dwindled to a scrub, and that of the poorest and most beggarly description.

“Well,” said Dick, “this beats everything in the way of optical illusions I have ever seen. Had I alone observed it I should have sworn my brain was turning. What a remarkable thing! I wonder what is the cause of it.”

It now struck me that I had read somewhere of similar illusions caused by the extreme expansion of the atmosphere which forced all objects, that rose to any height out of the level plain, to wear an unreasonably distorted aspect. This we found to be the true solvent of the puzzle, for as we went farther on and left the patch of scrub behind, we saw many objects which appeared to be high ranges of hills, but which in reality were nothing more than big lumps of rock and clay.

We got a few kangaroo rats in the above-mentioned scrub, which, as our larder was running low, were a welcome addition to it. Such food was perhaps not the most dainty one could wish to eat, but when properly grilled on the live embers, as only a native knows how to grill them, they make not indifferent eating. Later on we saw a flock of pigeons a little to the north which, though we were not near enough to shoot, we regarded as a favourable sign, for where one sees game of any sort it is a sure sign that water of some description is not far off.

We now began to look ahead for that range of mountains which hid in its recesses the Great White City. I could not bring myself to entirely believe that we should behold so wonderful a phenomenon in the midst of this barren land, and was quite convinced within myself that the only city Morton saw was in the regions of his own imagination; yet what had passed had been so true that I hovered in a perpetual state of uncertainty between doubting and believing. I, however, kept my thoughts to myself, well knowing that their expression could do no good, whereas the disappointment attending failure would be for my companion keen enough misery in itself. We were already several days over our estimate,

but as that estimate was simply a chance shot, we had no cause to be angry with it on that account. Water and provisions were rapidly becoming scarce, and fatigue began to tell upon us, but yet the mythical city loomed not to our eager gaze. That it would never appear I felt sure, yet on I trudged in moody silence after my companion, who never once slackened his rapid pace or let one sigh of dissatisfaction escape him. Yet I could see as the day flew on, and no sign of the wished-for goal arose to our view, that his face became more pinched and determined, while his restless spirit scarcely allowed him a moment's repose. On, on he went, and if anything, walked faster and faster in his excitement till his speed almost amounted to what is commonly called a "jog trot." He continually shaded his eyes with his hand so as to protect them from the rays of the sun and obtain a clearer view, but the wished-for sight never met his vision, and the sun had begun to sink fiercely in the west, flooding the great dreary plain with a world of rosy fire.

At last he stood stock-still and beckoned me towards him.

"What do you see, Archie?" he said in a suppressed and tremulous tone, pointing straight before him.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Nothing?" he almost screamed. "Look again."

I did as I was bidden, and this time, taking a longer and more intense gaze, I distinctly saw the faint blue outline of a range of hills.

"Well," said he, anxiously, "Can you see nothing, now?"

"Yes," I answered, "unless it is another illusion, I can see a range of mountains."

"It is no illusion, Archie," he cried, "that is the range of mountains Morton mentioned, and yonder is the Great White City."

Chapter X

Describing Our Arrival At the Great White City and Our Battle With its Fierce Inhabitants.

WE resumed our journey with redoubled energy, and in half-an-hour had the extreme pleasure of beholding the dim, blue outline gradually transform itself into the bold and rugged peaks of a long, high range of hills. That we were the sport of no optical illusion was now proved beyond a doubt, for at each step we took, the range loomed up clearer and clearer. By the time we had approached within five or six miles of it, the sun had sunk, and we decided to camp on the plain that night, and resume our march again at day-break. Our object was, of course, to climb the hills *through the Principal Street of the city*, but as we had not yet even discovered that city, we were forced to wait the advent of the day.

Most of that night Dick and I passed in the wildest of wild talk, the most absurd and marvellous conjectures. We could not sleep. Even when stretched out for that purpose, so completely exhausted as we were, we found the sweet soother as coy as a wilful maiden who is dying to be kissed, but who for some unaccountable reason refuses the dear consolation. Now we had reached that point of our journey second only in interest to the lake itself, expectation rose to such a feverish pitch as to make the suspense almost unendurable. It grew beyond our control, and I felt myself trembling with the burden of my own thoughts. What after all if we failed to discover this city, this phantom city? — for my brain was haunted with the one horrible idea that it was nothing but a phantasy, a dream, brought on by misery and want and the thousand horrors which must have befallen that unfortunate fugitive. My heart grew sick at the thought. Was it not the most absurd story that ever emanated from man's brain? A city in this vast, unknown, unpopulated interior. Who but a madman could have told so wild, so improbable a story? and who but madmen would believe it? I tried to close my eyes, to dream that it was all real, but away up above the bright stars were mocking me, while the great white moon seemed to smile in derision as it sailed on and on through the misty blue.

Hardwicke was evidently as ill at ease as myself. Whenever I chanced to look towards him, he was either sitting up or wriggling and twisting beneath his rug. I pitied him, poor fellow, if on the morrow we failed to

discover the object of our search. I dreaded to think how keen his anguish would be, how terrible his disappointment. I all along had been a disbeliever, or had only accepted the story with a half belief, but he placed implicit faith in Morton and his tale, and I knew that should he fail to discover the city, it would prove a blow almost as keen as death itself. Jimmy, as usual, slept as soundly as though cushioned on a bed of down with the happy prospect of a magnificent breakfast awaiting him when he awoke. He had heard us talk of the city we expected to find, but so little interested was he in the matter that he never took the trouble to ask a single question concerning it. It was quite enough for him that he had to carry his share of the burden and march on till he was told to stop.

When I awoke out of a dull, uneasy doze into which I had fallen, I beheld my cousin sitting up puffing vigorously at his pipe, and as there was apparently no chance of any more sleep for me that night, I got mine, and we sat and talked till the day began to break.

“To-day,” said he solemnly, “is a day so fraught with significance to us that I am almost afraid to see it dawn. How it will end God alone can tell. We are now, by the roughest calculation, many hundreds of miles from civilisation. Before us stretches the great unknown; behind, a road so long and difficult that to attempt to repass it means, in our present state, utter annihilation.”

“We must onward, Dick; we must onward. In a few hours we shall know our fate,” for I could see he was in doubt lest the city after all should prove a myth; “so let us not plague ourselves with vain imaginings. If we are to find it, so it is; if not, we are not beaten yet, and I am not going to cave in while there's a shot in the locker.”

I must confess my words were much bolder than my spirits, but I could not tolerate the idea of my companion being despondent. Once let him, the head and heart of our expedition, give way to uneasy fears, and the ultimate failure of the whole journey would be the result.

The first pale gleam of day had no sooner begun to whiten the eastern horizon, than we were up once more and away. We journeyed on for half-an-hour by the indistinct glow of the dying stars and the far-off morning light. But in these latitudes day comes with the rush of a whirlwind. Suddenly the sun shot forth like a blood-red ball of fire, flooding the dreary plains behind, and bathing the rugged hills in front with one great sheet of wonderful light.

An exclamation arose to our lips at the self-same moment:

“The City!”

It was no optical illusion, no phantasy. There, lying before us, with its towers actually glistening in the bright red sunshine, was the City of the Mountains. I could scarcely believe my eyes, and for a moment hardly knew if I were awake or dreaming. But it was no dream, unless life is a dream, and we live in imagination only.

Hardwicke laid his hand on my shoulder. "Look, look! How wonderful!"

And I looked and saw what appeared to be a marble city, over which was thrown a blood-red mantle of sunshine. It stretched from the base of the hill to the very top, and there huge spires and towers arose, many hundreds of feet in the air. These spires the great light flooded till they shone and sparkled like huge pillars of crystal. I could easily discern the streets, which seemed to run at right angles to one another, thereby giving the city an appearance of being built in great white blocks; while to add the more confusion to our already bewildered senses, *we were actually walking straight into the Principal Street.*

We stood utterly dumbfounded, gazing on one another in wonder. Dick's face was wreathed with a strange smile of gladness and awe. Though he had advocated so strenuously reliance upon Morton's story, he seemed scarcely to understand that the wild, strange tale was realised at last.

"Well," said he, at length waking from his long reverie; "who would have guessed it? Who would have dreamt of such a place as this? A city, a veritable city, and perhaps inhabited too. By whom?"

"Onward, and we shall see," I answered.

"Yes, yes."

By this time the sun had mounted to a considerable height in the heavens, and had dispelled all the morning shadows, consequently the hills now loomed up clearly, and I thought there was something unnatural-looking about the place, especially those great squares I had taken for blocks of buildings. True, the whole scene most strongly resembled an eastern hillside city, and yet its massive grandeur was so unlike anything I had ever seen that doubts of its reality began to assail me.

"By golly," cried Jimmy, who had been watching it intently, with wonder depicted upon his ebony countenance, "this a mighty fine place, Mass'r Dick. Knock spots out of Melbourne. Nebber see anything like this before. Nebber can think how black fellow build 'em such a place." And he continued to jabber thus for a considerable time, till he suddenly burst forth with, "Good Lord, Mass'r Dick, that no belong township," and he laughed convulsively.

The same idea had already dawned upon us. A closer inspection, for we had rapidly drawn near, disclosed the fact that our supposed city was nothing more than the curious groupings of a huge mass of whitish granite, while what we had taken to be crystal pinnacles or spires proved to be but vast boulders of pure white stone. Thus rudely was our dream of discovering an inhabited city dispelled, but so like a city was it, viewed from a distance, that we blamed Morton but little for thus definitely naming it, though we were sorry he had not given us a little

more information on the subject.

We camped at the foot of what I shall call, for want of a better name, the Principal Street, for so the broad white way that stretched above us had been designated. Here we discovered a clear, fresh spring of water, and as there were plenty of shrubs and small trees about, we roasted two ducks we had brought down previously from a flock that was flying over our heads. We saw two dingoes (wild dogs), allured no doubt by the fragrant smell of the baked meat. They were gaunt, wild, half-starved looking brutes, and advanced within an impertinent distance of us, whining and uttering their short, sharp yelp. Unable to bark like an ordinary dog, their strange, weird howl, when heard in the lonely bush at night, sounds like the ghostly wail of some inhuman spirit. A dog baying the moon creates "sweet discords" by comparison. So closely had these particular savages encroached upon what we rightly or wrongly deemed our preserves, and so indifferently did they treat our presence, that my feelings, like Alexander Selkirk's, were exceedingly shocked. It was, therefore, necessary to drive them off, which I only succeeded in doing after wounding one with a shot from my revolver.

After our meal, Dick and I began an exploration of the city, the streets of which we found, in most cases, to be nothing but great yawning chasms, the bottoms of which it was impossible to see. And yet it seemed as though the hand of man had been here too, for as we pursued our course along a very uneven way of great loose stones, we were struck by the fact that excavations in the shape of caves had been made in the solid granite walls at regular intervals, and we felt sure that such remarkable regularity could not have been a freak of nature. We penetrated into several of these apertures, but as nothing worthy of remark met our eyes, we were at a loss to even conjecture their uses. At last, at the extreme end of the street we trod, a somewhat broader opening appeared, and as it seemed to lead up instead of down, as was the case of the others, we both entered, Dick leading the way. A sharp hiss welcomed our approach, but as neither of us had been bitten, it troubled us but little.

Dick then lit a match and we found ourselves in a broad passage, the walls of which shone like crystal in the dim light and reflected the power of the tiny flame in a most marvellous manner. We could not see the roof, that apparently being of great height, but the floor was covered with a strong-smelling shrub, the same as we had found in the other apertures. A handful of this we tore up and lit, and it answered sufficiently well the purpose of a torch, though its flame was a sickly blue in colour and its odour far from pleasing.

Along this crystal-like passage we wandered for nearly a hundred yards, and were beginning to imagine it endless, when all of a sudden we entered into a spacious room or vault. We spoke and our voices echoed above and around us strangely. We were at a loss which way to turn, for

our torch gave but a feeble light, and we were afraid to advance lest we should come to a sudden and undesirable end. What place we had discovered we knew no more than the man in the moon, and though our surmises were many I am afraid they were not over ingenious.

After we had debated some time the possibilities and impossibilities of the place, I suggested that we should move round by the wall, feeling carefully with our feet at every step. This we did, and found both wall and floor so extremely smooth, with the exception of an undergrowth on the latter, as to set us both fast thinking no end of improbable things.

“Good God! What's that?”

I was rudely awakened from my reflections by this exclamation of my cousin. His voice rang again and again throughout the strange chamber. Then, holding the light above his head to examine the cause of his sudden shock, he answered his own interrogation. “An idol. What a start it gave me,” and he laughed, and his laugh echoed and re-echoed in a thoroughly displeasing manner.

He had spoken truly. There, standing out in the mystic gloom, was as huge and hideous a piece of sculpture as it has been the lot of civilised man to gaze on. No wonder Dick received a shock. Seen suddenly in the strange gloom of the chamber, it was the embodiment of all one's grotesque fancies of the truly horrible. It was about twelve feet high, and had scaly legs, much like the tail of a fish, the breasts and body of a woman, and a head half-human and half beast with the jaws and teeth of a shark or some horrible marine monster. But what was most dreadful of all, was the fixed and horrid grin upon the awful face. It was a grin so outrageous, so disgusting, and so truly appalling as to almost make one's flesh creep. I dare say that such a figure would but create derision in the broad daylight, but in the weird gloom of that mystical chamber the hideously distorted thing seemed to make its influence felt.

“Well, you are a beauty,” said Hardwicke, apostrophising the image, “a perfect beauty.” Then he began to interrogate it. “Who stuck you up there, I wonder? Whose was the brain that conceived, the hand that made you? Who and what were the people that knelt before you, you grinning fiend, you misbegotten imp? If the thing could only speak, Archie,” he turned to me, “what could it not tell?”

But though speech was denied the awful thing, it actually appeared to grin the more. Its jaws positively seemed to expand, whilst its huge discoloured teeth shone with shocking brilliancy.

“Look, look,” he went on, “here are more of them;” and he held the light close to the left side of the great idol, and I saw more hideous forms, but on a smaller scale. On the right it was the same, six on each side, making twelve of the most outrageous pictures that ever emanated from the human brain. Above their heads hung, or seemed to hang (for all these things were cut from the solid rock), a whole host of beasts and

reptiles of the most appalling description. No pains had been taken to copy nature as she was. On the contrary, to distort and outrage her seemed the only wish of the artist, and that he had succeeded well my own emotions told me.

“Well,” said Hardwicke at last, “this beats cock-fighting.”

This remark was not so elegant as expressive, but was appropriate enough for all purposes, and so I added —

“Indeed it does,” which shows that I was just as much at a loss for words to express my astonishment as he was.

“What do you think of it all?” he queried.

“There can only be one answer,” I replied. “These mountains must have been peopled in the long ago by a race of beings infinitely superior to the present denizens of the country. Not alone must they have had a religion, but a knowledge of the fine arts as well.”

“I don't know much about fine art,” said my cousin, “but if this is a specimen of theirs, I can quite believe them equal to anything. But on the score of religion, I dare say you are right. This must have been the temple and that the god. Wonderful! And yet who knows what the people of this island might not have been? Their past is dead. The world shall never know their history, therefore it doubts they ever had one, forgetting that if events repeat themselves, as they say they do, what is to-day might have been thousands of years ago. Yet how people would laugh if they heard me argue so.”

“No doubt. Ignorance invariably laughs at a thing it cannot comprehend. The wise men of England called Harvey a fool, but he wasn't. What after all is oriental art but a mass of fantastic absurdities, almost as grotesque as these very images we think so little of? What is beautiful in China is barbarous in Europe. I believe the people who carved these images lived in what are commonly called the pre-historic days, the days when the whole of that sandy plain we have crossed was covered by the sea. And I will tell you why. Without the sea and its accompanying monsters as models, these fish devils could never have been executed.”

“You speak like a book, old chap,” said Dick as he stooped down to gather some more shrubs, which he no sooner lit than he began examining a small object that he held in his hand.

“By Jove!” said he, “what a strange little weapon. Look at it,” and he handed it to me.

It had a red glistening head, shaped not unlike that of an axe, with a point as sharp as a needle. It was let into a handle of some dark substance rather weighty and about nine inches in length.

“Put it in your pocket,” said I, “and we'll examine it closer when we get out.”

“Which I propose our doing at once,” he replied. “I have had enough of

this uncanny chamber for a while.”

Being similarly disposed I accordingly acquiesced.

When we emerged into the sunlight once more, and had shaken the dust of the cave off our shoes, we examined with leisure the little axe, when, to our great surprise, we discovered that the head of the instrument, which we had taken for an ordinary red stone, was nothing less than a great ruby crowned with, to give it weight, a thick plate of gold, which when rubbed a little, shone brilliantly in the sunshine. The handle was also of solid gold with another large ruby let in at the extreme end of it. Strange signs and figures, partly obliterated by time, were wrought upon both the gold plate and the handle, but what they signified was of course a mystery to us. The workmanship was most excellent, and might have been executed by some first-class artist.

“By Jove! Dick, you have something valuable there if you never find the Golden Lake,” said I to my cousin, who was intently examining the pretty little weapon.

“It looks valuable,” he replied. “This metal is certainly gold, but the rubies — I wonder if they are real rubies?”

“Not a doubt of it, my boy. I flatter myself I know a ruby when I see it, and you may depend upon it those stones are good. And what is more marvellous still, they are actually *cut*. Wonder upon wonder. What relics might we not discover in a month's earnest search among these hills. What a strange tale we should have to tell to the quidnuncs of the world. Keep the axe, Dick; you will find it worth the trouble of portage, and if we don't strike the Golden Lake we shall have the queerest story to tell of the interior that mortal ears have ever listened to.”

On our return to the camp we showed Jimmy the axe, and also pointed out the the strange inscription on the gold plate and handle, but that intelligent savage evinced neither curiosity nor surprise, nor could he read the characters, nor had he ever heard — knew not even a legend of the people who at one time must have dwelt upon the shores of the great inland sea.

We shot half-a-dozen pigeons that afternoon as they flew westward in huge flocks above us. It was a welcome sight, for where game was, water would surely be found; besides, it fitted into the tale that Morton had told of the river on the other side of these very mountains that *lost itself in the sand*.

Jimmy was sent trudging up the Principal Street to see if he could obtain more water farther on, for we did not wish to resume our journey till the next day, and to camp anywhere but where we had a goodly supply of the precious liquid was not to be thought of for a moment. He returned an hour later with the news that he had discovered a good spring about a mile up the mountain, and we immediately hoisted our swags and set off to reach it.

On arriving at our destination we discovered half-a-dozen dingoes drinking at the spring, and immediately dispersed them, upon which they sneaked off, snarling ominously. During the cooking of our evening meal we were also much annoyed by them, the brutes appearing in every conceivable place, and growing more bold as though contact with our presence created impudent familiarity. On either side of the rocks above our heads (for we were camped in a sort of gully) they stood, and, yelping dolefully, sniffed in the air that carried the incense of the broiled pigeons. We were very glad at that moment the dingo was not a thinking animal; for had he been, he might have made our position extremely uncomfortable by rolling big stones down upon us. Dick thought they looked nasty, and even Jimmy mumbled something about their queer behaviour, so we unstrapped our shooting irons, deciding to be prepared in case Mr. Dingo should think it worth his while to attack.

It was a beautiful night. The great white moon flooding with rays of silver this city of the dead, created a solemn and magnificent sight. I stood on a lofty eminence of rock, and let my eyes wander over the strange, dead, ghostly scene. Like a city of the Titans it seemed, huge, petrified in the eternal sleep of death. No sound broke the stillness of the night, save now and then the wild howl of the dingo on the adjacent rocks, or the weird cry of the curlew as it rushed through the air above. Fit inhabitant, fit songster.

We held some conversation later on as to the advisability of keeping watch that night for fear of an attack from the wild dogs, but as both Dick and Jimmy declared the dingo to be a most arrant coward, we decided that such a course would be unnecessary. Therefore, feeling perfectly secure in the protection our camp fire afforded us, we, being utterly exhausted, soon fell into a profound slumber.

How long it lasted I know not, but I was awakened by the low growl of an animal close to my head, and on looking up I saw the wild blazing eyes of a huge dog almost directly over me. His teeth glistened brightly in the moonlight, and his great hot tongue lolled so far out of his mouth that I seemed to feel it upon me. I riveted my eyes upon his, feeling at the same time for my revolver, but not daring to turn round and look lest the moment my eyes were withdrawn, the brute would spring upon me. I luckily felt my hand touch the weapon, and, drawing it slowly and deliberately back, I raised it quickly and fired full in the animal's open mouth. Nor was I a moment too soon. He had perceived the movement of my arm and was in the very act of springing. As it was, the body rose in the air and then, carried by its own impetus, fell full upon me.

My shot aroused my companions, who were on their feet in a moment, and soon shot after shot rang out upon the night air, mingled with the yells of the frightened and infuriated animals. One glance was enough to take in the situation. We were attacked by the dingoes — a fierce, wild

pack of gaunt and famished brutes. They had defied the fire (usually a perfect safeguard) and that instinctive dread of man which seems implanted in every beast, and, driven on by hunger, had attacked us in this unprecedented manner.

“This is a pretty go,” roared my cousin Hardwicke between the flashes of his revolver; “keep your back to the wall, old fellow, and don't let them get behind you.” A good piece of advice which I am afraid was not carried out to the letter by any of us.

Shot now succeeded shot in quick succession, and by the indifferent light of the moon we beheld many of our savage adversaries writhing upon the ground, but those that were not seriously wounded, becoming maddened with the pain, threw themselves upon us with terrific fury, snapping and snarling in so dreadful a manner that we were all severely bitten before we could beat them off. So many of them were there that no sooner was one given his quietus than another sprang, as if by magic, in his place.

I had, with a dexterity I would not have given myself credit for, managed to reload my revolver, but to attempt such a feat again would have been the acme of supreme folly; so, with it in one hand and my knife in the other, I stood at bay and slashed and hit whenever the opportunity occurred. The ferocity of the great dogs seemed to increase with the increasing quantity of blood. They literally screamed with anger as they rushed upon us, utterly regardless of the destructive blows that we were raining upon them. Their numbers seemed endless; the horror of their discord was deafening, and I already began to see visions of the dreadful end. One huge fellow sprang upon me while I was engaged giving a final blow to another, and so close did he get to my throat that his hot bloody nostril grazed my chin as I ran my knife into him, and he fell dead.

The fighting now grew more fast and furious, if such a thing were possible, and I became so distressed that I foresaw an awful termination to the battle, unless the unforeseen should suddenly turn up in our favour. Things seemed to be going dead against us, and I thought then that, situated as we were, our defensive tactics would be the undoing of us. Hardwicke must have thought similarly, for suddenly, with the agility of a cat, he seized a rifle that was lying on the ground a few yards from him, and after discharging its contents into the howling mass, he charged them with such fury as to scatter them before him. Crash, crash, crash! went the instrument, as with mighty strokes he brought it down on the head or body of the brutes, beating to a jelly whatever part of the animal it struck. They gave way before his giant strokes, snapping and snarling all the time, and I doubt not but that he would gradually have driven them off, had he not in stepping forward quickly to administer the death-blow to one gigantic brute, slipped in some unaccountable manner, and fallen heavily

to the earth. In a moment the great dog he had sought to demolish was upon him, while the others, emboldened by the accident which had befallen their opponent, leapt furiously forward.

I happened to see Hardwicke fall, and also beheld the great dog rush upon him, and then another follow suit; but unfortunately I could render him no assistance, for we, Jimmy and I, were so beset by the animals that to turn from them for a moment would have been to court instant defeat. I, however, shouted to him words of encouragement, and then seizing the rifle which had flown from his grasp as he tripped, I laid about me with such good will, and was so well backed up by Jimmy, who, with a long knife in his hand, fought like a veritable demon, that in a few moments we had the extreme felicity of knowing that the battle was over. I retraced my steps hurriedly, calling the good news to Dick; but to my exceeding astonishment I received no answer. I felt a deadly, sickening dread creep over me, and could scarcely stagger to where I saw his still form in the moonlight. One of the great dogs was lying across his breast, and the other by his side. Both were dead. He had strangled them, and even in his unconscious state, his hands still held their vice-like grip upon the brutes' throats, while on his face was the fixed, hard look that always came there when he had something difficult to do, and when he meant to do it. He was breathing, though, and with the exception of a cut on the side of the head, which he must have inflicted upon himself when he fell, seemed to be little the worse for his encounter. I held his head and poured some water down his throat, and in a few minutes his eyes slowly opened, and, seeing my face above him, he recognised me with a smile.

"It's all over, Archie?" he queried.

"Yes," I replied, "we've driven the enemy off. Jimmy is at the present moment giving several of them the finishing touch. How do you feel, old man?"

"A bit sore about the head."

"You cut it when you fell."

"Then that accounts for my fainting," he said, sitting up. "And you, old fellow?"

"A few scratches — nothing serious."

"That's well. And Jimmy?"

"Oh, nothing affects him."

"Did he fight well?"

"Like a Spartan."

"I am glad of that. I, it seems, was the only lady this time. I don't know how I slipped, I'm sure. I heard you shout to me and then I pulled myself together a bit and seized both dogs by the throat. Then I have an indistinct recollection of their blood-shot eyes and big teeth, and I felt myself put forth all my strength for a final effort — and then I remember

no more.”

“Thank heaven it is all over now,” said I. “Though it was pretty tough while it lasted.”

“It was indeed,” he answered. “If I had been told the dingo would have shown such fight I should have laughed at the yarn.”

“There were so many of them,” I ventured. “Besides, they were mad with hunger.”

“That's it,” said Dick. “And hunger and companionship made them defiant.”

We kept watch all through the rest of the night, and though we were not molested we discharged our rifles at any too adventurous dingo, for we were in deadly terror lest they should again assail us. They, however, refrained from so doing, though they howled dolefully round all through the long night, attracted to the camp, despite their fear, by the smell of blood.

In the morning the field of battle presented a ghastly spectacle. Fully a score of our canine opponents lay dead, exhibiting strange distortions of nature. Above soared several birds of prey, only awaiting our departure, while from the rocks around the wild, sharp yelp of the dingoes told the sophisticated ear how anxiously they were waiting to dine off their brothers.

We were not long in packing up our traps and departing, the sun having no sooner risen out of the great desert beyond than we were away with thrice our ordinary speed, and I do not believe we could have gone more than twenty yards before the birds were down upon their victims, while the sharp growls of the dingoes told us that the feast of blood had begun.

“We are well out of that, Dick.”

“We are indeed. It is positive proof that fate intends us to accomplish our journey. So onward, Archie, onward.”

“Yes, onward!” And we pursued a rapid course along the broad white street, glad enough to get far beyond the wild inhabitants of the City in the Mountains.

Chapter XI

Containing an Account of Our March across the Great Desert.

THE mountain path along which we strode ran, for about a mile, sheer up the valley of the hills, at a width of from a hundred and sixty to a hundred and seventy feet. It was a rough, uneven way, composed for the most part of big, loose stones, over which we found progress neither easy nor pleasant. This proved extremely provoking, for, at a distance, the road appeared as smooth as though it had been paved with white asphalt. However, the end came at last, and a curious one it was, consisting, as it did, of an immense white wall, fully a hundred feet high, which presented so abrupt a termination that at the first glance we imagined it an impassable barrier. Fortunately we were wrong in our surmises, for to the right of us we discovered a narrow opening into which Dick immediately plunged, Jimmy and I following. Burdened as we were with things, we found the ascent arduous in the extreme, for it was no less an undertaking than that of mounting the precipitous sides of the great wall. But as it was imperative that we should mount it, we took things in the most workman-like fashion, and after half-an-hour's severe straining found ourselves arrived at the wished-for height in safety. Then we threw ourselves upon the ground with a sigh of relief and partook of some breakfast, of which we were much in need, and after devoting half-an-hour to a smoke, we hoisted our swags and once more pushed forward.

This new road was almost as difficult to travel as its predecessor, and swift progress was consequently an impossibility. Nevertheless we advanced at a fairly decent rate, still passing up the valley of the hills, for by this way alone we felt sure old Morton had intended us to journey. The only difficulty we had of choosing our road on this occasion was when we suddenly emerged upon the base of a hill and stood not knowing whether to steer to the right or left, but the right being the larger valley of the two, we entered it after a few moments' consideration. And well it was we did so; for not alone did it turn out to be the proper one, but after going a short distance we struck a very easy pathway, at the bottom of which a small clear stream flowed merrily along. Yet much vexation of spirit was caused us as we discovered alps rising upon alps, as the poet puts it. But, thank heaven, there is an end to all things, even to

the height and breadth of mountains, and just before sundown we had the extreme felicity of finding ourselves at the very top, for to the westward, or right before us, the hills began to slope.

We decided to camp there that night and begin the descent in the morning. In the meantime the sky appeared so heavy and threatening that we began to look about us for shelter. Both Jimmy and Dick declared it was going to rain in torrents, and that unless we discovered some refuge we should have a very disagreeable time of it. This salutary warning stimulated our energies, and a great hole being perceived some twenty feet up the side of a jagged wall, Jimmy was relegated aloft to explore. Upon his shouting that it was the very place, Dick and I ascended, and found ourselves in a kind of cave about twelve feet in width and as many in depth — just large enough for us to stretch ourselves at ease.

We had not been ensconced in this airy retreat many minutes before a most terrific clap of thunder shook the mountain to its very foundation. It was followed by peal after peal in rapid succession, till the whole place trembled and swayed like a ship at sea. Then the lightning flashed in huge vivid flames, illuminating the sudden darkness with a weird and terrible splendour, bathing the far-off mountain peaks with blinding clouds of fire, and playing before the entrance of our cave in a sort of ghostly glee as though delighted at the inconvenience it was creating. Such a wild world of fire it had never been my lot to see before. One could easily imagine that the gates of the infernal regions had been thrown open, and all the hideous fire contained therein let loose upon the world.

Then the rain splashed down, big, solitary drops at first, as it falls in tropical regions. But the drops soon grew to a deluge, and fell in such vast quantities as to make one quite believe that the Supreme Being had repented of his promise. How it roared and hissed! The noise was so deafening that it was impossible to hear each other speak. Stones, torn by the force of the rain from their resting-place on the side of the mountain, rattled unceasingly before the entrance of our cave, till, with a noise like the crack of doom, a huge mass of the mountain gave way, and precipitated itself so violently before us that, for several seconds, we thought our end had come. Our rocky retreat shook so fiercely that we instinctively clutched the wall for support, expecting every moment some dire calamity.

But the storm was too violent to last long, and, as is the case in these regions, a couple of hours afterwards the moon came out and there was not a vestige of the wild hurricane seen in the sky. Had it not been for the sudden coolness of the air, and the roar of the flood water as it rushed foaming down the rocky valleys, no soul would ever have guessed that so short a time ago the wildest elements of nature had raged so furiously.

Next morning, after passing a most comfortable night, we descended

from our airy perch and proceeded on our way. The storm water had already run itself dry in the gully beds, and above, the sun was shining as though nothing unusual had occurred during his visit to the people in the northern world. The rocks and soil were slippery, but that, merely causing a little more precaution, interfered not with the swiftness of our descent.

All that day we pushed rapidly on till night-fall, when we camped. We suffered so extremely with the cold that night — our clothes being entirely unsuited for anything in the way of chilly weather — that we were glad to see day-break and feel the first rays of the warm sun.

About noon on the same day we came into a world of vegetation, which was so unusual a sight that I could scarcely credit my senses. The farther we proceeded the thicker grew the trees and grass. Down the centre of the valley we were now treading flowed a small stream, and we wondered if this was one we were to follow till it led us to the river that “lost itself in the sand.”

Later on the descent became more steep and the ground more slippery and damp, causing us to be extremely cautious in our movements. Around us grew numerous small ferns, which, the farther we descended, grew gradually larger till we were in the midst of a true gully of ferns, a veritable fairy picture. Above us, a mass of gold and green, stretched the beautiful broad fronds, creating a canopy that almost excluded the light of the sun. Down, down, by the side of musical waterfalls, deeper and deeper we got, the ferns becoming larger and larger and the light from the blinding sun less and less. The change was so great from what we were accustomed to that had I awakened in this spot I should have had no difficulty in convincing myself that I had shuffled off this earthly coil and had left a world of misery for one of marvellous beauty. At our feet whirled the small bright stream which, like a streak of silver, shot over the dark rocks or darted from beneath a bridge of leaves, singing as merrily as the Brook of Tennyson.

I was enraptured with the beauty of the fairy-like spot and imagined many things which were both foolish and fanciful. We, however, had no time to dwell on its romantic beauties. Our duty was to get out of it before the night came on, for the place, to say the least of it, was shockingly damp, and thoughts of rheumatism and ague fretted our ignoble souls. At last, after many slips and falls, all of which were of no consequence, we emerged once more upon open ground and saw before us a huge valley, at the bottom of which rushed a considerable stream of water.

“That's the river,” said Dick. “Our duty is to follow it to the end. We need fear nothing now.”

“Wonderful,” I replied. “The ways of Providence are truly inscrutable. We could not have come more direct had we known every inch of the

way.”

“Then you have no more doubts of the existence of the Golden Lake?” queried he, significantly.

“I own you have the laugh of me, Dick; but I always flattered myself that I was a very practical sort of fellow.”

“And yet you came on such a journey as this?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I never thought it would resolve itself into anything but a hunting expedition. I own up to being wrong and am now converted.”

We descended to the bed of the valley and continued our march along the side of the river. Dick whistled and sang in evident glee, while I smoked more complacently than had been my wont for many a day. We shot a couple of wild ducks that evening, and on arriving at a fit place camped, and Jimmy prepared for us an admirable supper. We three were now in excellent health and spirits and fully confident of reaching the Golden Lake, which I may at once say I was no longer a misbeliever in. I had seen too many real proofs to doubt its existence. To have remained callous under such circumstances would have been absurd, and I now entered as heartily into our undertaking as I before had indifferently.

The next eight days were of the most enjoyable description, that is, by comparison with our former joyless existence. We had followed the river for about twenty miles and had at last come into a country magnificently wooded, grassed, and literally stocked with game. Not more welcome to the Israelites of old was their promised land than this splendid stretch of country to us. Here we pitched our camp, and as our larder required replenishing, Dick and I passed the time in easy explorations and bagging game. Jimmy rarely went with us on our shooting expeditions, taking more delight in remaining in camp preparing the provisions and stuffing to his heart's content. His cooking was truly wonderful, and his ingenuity quite enough to make a professional cook eat his nails with envy. No lack of articles balked his good intentions. One day he gave us a sort of bread made from roots he had collected and pounded between two granite stones, which, though it tasted a trifle earthy, was such excellent eating that we ordered him to prepare two or three pounds of it for use on the journey. Another day he served up a dish of boiled rushes, which he also collected on the bank of the river, and which, though not quite possessing the flavour of asparagus, made a capital substitute for that vegetable, and added a decided flavour to the wild turkey we were then eating. Countless other dishes, which it is not necessary to enumerate, but which he seemed to manufacture from absolutely nothing, adorned our primitive board. He was a perfect jewel of a companion, a priceless black pearl.

At length the time came for us to resume our way once more, and we pursued the course of the river for the best part of two days, at the end of

which period the country again presented a desolate face, nothing but a few scanty shrubs and some black bare rocks meeting the view. But we were all in excellent health, thanks to the good food and long rest, and nothing daunted with the prospect before us, we pushed rapidly on.

By degrees the river dwindled down and down till it came to a sudden stop in a sheet of water not more than twenty yards long and as many wide, and so extremely shallow that we could see the bottom quite distinctly. To the west, or on the desert side of this pool, which was so insignificant an ending to the great mountain torrent we had followed so long, rose three black, spire-shaped rocks, looking for all the world like so many solemn sentinels guarding the sacred waters of the vanquished river.

“These must be the Three Brothers,” said Dick, looking towards the great rocks, “but where old Morton saw the resemblance is beyond me.”

“He evidently gave them that name,” I replied; “not for their resemblance to each other, but because they are the only rocks hereabout. I own I should have preferred a likeness — not that brothers necessarily resemble each other — though it would have seemed more within the consistency of things if there had been the ghost of a similarity. But after the Great White City, we cannot speak too highly of Morton's nomenclature.”

We camped that night at the foot of the Middle Brother, and before the sun had risen next morning over the great grey hills, in our rear, we had once more begun our mighty march. We steered due west, for Morton had said that he had steered east from the waterhole in the desert, and that such a course had brought him straight up to the Three Brothers. Each man had sufficient food to last him about six days, but of that we thought but little, well knowing that the scarcity of water would be our one great trouble. With care, we could count on three, or perhaps four days' supply, and in that time we hoped to cover ninety miles at least. I doubt if we ever should have gone forth so badly equipped had we not known that Morton had crossed before, and what he had done we most decidedly felt capable of accomplishing. Besides, it was too late to think now. We had got ourselves into an unenviable predicament and there were only ourselves to get us out. Hardwicke kept on asserting that the farther west we got the more would the country improve, and I thought he might be right, well knowing that he could not be very far wrong.

The ground over which we went, though barren of the tiniest blade of grass, was firm beneath the feet, so that we strode along at a good swinging pace. All that day the sun beat fiercely down upon us, scorching the very flesh beneath our clothes, causing unspeakable inconvenience, but preventing not our excellent progress.

Soon after we had left the Three Brothers we saw the reason of their name. Looking at them from the desert they were as like each other as

though they had been sculptured with an especial object. Beyond a little irregularity in their size — the centre one being much the taller of the three — they were as like as so many peas, and brothers they must have seemed to poor old Morton who found at their base such a quantity of precious water. We waved the three great silent stones a last good-bye and set our faces once more towards the regions of the setting sun.

We walked full thirty-five miles that day, and ceased only when the red sun had sunk some three hours in the desert. The break of day saw us again journeying onwards, and we had accomplished many miles before the god of light had attained his intensest heat. Then, being thoroughly done up, we called a halt and did not attempt to push on till the blazing ball of fire had begun to rush down the western slopes of the sky, when, shouldering our swags once more, we walked far into the middle of the night. We pursued the same tactics on the following day, and as a consequence got on extremely well, for so great was the heat during five or six hours of mid-day that we should have exhausted ourselves had we attempted to continue the march during that time.

On the evening of the fourth day we finished our supply of water, and mine were not enviable feelings at that moment. Around us, as far as the eye could see by the fast dying light, stretched the great, brown, dreary desert, as uninviting and forbidding as the jaws of the grave. No hill, shrub, tree, or stone rose out of the great, flat, melancholy waste to break its dreadful monotony. It was the one sombre, barren prospect; a sea of sand, cheerless and terrible, without an end or beginning.

That night we resumed our march, Dick first, I following, and Jimmy bringing up the rear. Like three spectres we glided on beneath the bright moonlight and the millions of stars that hung like glittering jewels in the air. We spoke little, and that little was not comforting. What consolation can speech give to men in such an extremity? We talked of our unfortunate position, of the dreadful sameness of the country, of our chances of discovering the water Morton had so miraculously found, till at last the conversation broke down completely, and we marched on in moody silence. Once we stopped and sank a well in what seemed to be a likely place, but we had not the good fortune to discover water, Dick remarking that if there was any thereabouts, it was far too deep for us to hope to reach it.

We tramped on till three o'clock the following morning, when, being thoroughly dead-beat, we flung ourselves upon the sand, utterly wretched, and almost dying of thirst. Indeed, the thought flashed through my mind, as I threw myself log-like to the earth, that it would matter but little if I never rose again.

We slept but a short time, the rays of the sun and the burning thirst within forbidding the luxury of such sweet forgetfulness. With difficulty I managed to force two or three mouthfuls of food down my throat, but

to eat was impossible. I wanted to drink, drink, nothing but drink. Like people fleeing from some evil, we once more shouldered our swags, and struck out across the burning sand. No sign was there of mountains, no cloud in the sky, no blade of grass that we might even chew. It was one vast, deadly desolation, over which the spirit of woe had sown the seeds of despair.

The day crept on, slowly it seemed, dreadfully, horribly slowly. The sun mounted its meridian, pouring on our devoted heads the concentrated rays of all his power. Then he began to sink, sink, lower and lower, flooding the ghastly plain with a sea of blood-red fire, lighting its hideousness as with the flames of hell. The whole wide world seemed ablaze. Earth and air met in one magnificent conflagration, almost overpowering with its intenseness the soul that gazed upon it. Then the fierce light gradually died away, changing from red to pink, and pink to yellow, and yellow to green with incredible swiftness, till the east had grown to glimmering pearl, and in the west the cloud of fire was gradually losing itself in the bosom of the air. Then of a sudden it broke as if by magic, and away up in the sky we saw pleasant mountains, and cool-looking valleys, and broad, blue lakes, fringed with edges of gold. Spellbound and fascinated we stood surveying the wonderful scene, and while yet we gazed the picture passed away, and the cold, unpitying stars came out, and night, with the swoop of an eagle, spread her dark pinions over the earth.

We had now been more than twenty-four hours without water, and felt so acutely our thirst, and the great exertions we had undergone, that our walk was little better than an ungainly shuffle. Yet on we pushed, how I scarcely know, the same grim silence prevailing. We had not the heart to talk, even if there had been an interesting subject at hand. Even the weird and beautiful sunset, though it had stamped itself ineffaceably on my mind, called up no exclamation. I gazed upon it in silence, I passed on in silence, following like a spectre in the tracts of my cousin Hardwicke. No word he spoke, but ever and anon he would turn his head to see if we were following, and wave his hand, and then swing on again. It was an awful journey. My throat became so sore that on attempting to force some food down it, I inflicted upon myself such misery that I inwardly vowed I would endeavour to eat no more, and I thought then of the rich man in hell crying for a drop of water, and I wondered how the angels could refuse to give it.

We walked, as on the preceding night, till our strength gave out completely, and then, weary, despairing, and hopeless, with more of death than life in our bodies, we flung ourselves upon the sand, and tried to read our future in the stars. Our future — that, alas, was plain enough; and it was a dreadful thing to contemplate that we should die in the very prime of our manhood, die for a drop of water. But what else was there

to look forward to? Hope there was none. Even God's influence on this spot seemed as barren as the barren sand. I had made up my mind that we would die that night, and I tried to gaze upon death with philosophical indifference; asked myself what mattered a few years more or less on earth. Death was the certain goal of life, and in the grave, perhaps, was the end of all. And then visions of youth, and life and love flew, as it were, before the eyes of my brain, and I grew furious with my direful fate, and arose in my agony, shouting incoherently, but the stars shone on unchanged, and the cold, placid moon looked down, freezing me with her stare.

Sleep came not near us that night. The long dreary hours were passed in fitful dozes. Whenever my eyes shut and slumber dazed my senses, the vision of a crystal stream of water would present itself before me, flowing along so cool and merrily as to turn the great brown desert through which it passed into a more than heavenly paradise. Yet when I knelt to drink I could not force the water through my lips into the burning throat that literally gasped for its cool touch, and in the struggles incident to the attempt I would awake and wish that I were dead. Dick spoke little of his sufferings, but his cheeks had grown thinner, his eyes more sunken, and his general aspect gaunt and wild. Jimmy, brave little man, was the least affected, through being, I suppose, more used to privations than either my cousin or I, and troubling himself not one whit with the curse of thought. He was nevertheless in a most wretched plight. His tongue, almost hanging from his mouth, had become swollen and black as his face, while his bloodshot eyes resembled two round balls of fire. Yet he never complained, and when he was aroused from slumber (for he seemed to sleep well enough) sprang up with avidity.

A slight dew fell that night which somewhat damped our clothes, so we took them off and wrung them over the billy-can, thereby hoping to accumulate a few drops of water, but in that we were doomed once more to disappointment, and were forced to press our swollen tongues upon the damp clothes to gain a moment's relief.

Once more we trudged upon our weary way, but this time all vitality was gone from the springing step and, like drunken men, we staggered along. Then out came the blazing sun scorching our flesh and confusing our brains, and still no break in the endless plain, no sign of a rain-cloud in the misty, burning blue. But from the far-off north-lands the fiery breeze tore down upon upon us, burning the skin till it cracked and peeled from our faces, and whirling into our eyes and parched-up throats clouds upon clouds of red-hot sand. I could have given up the journey without a pang, could have contentedly laid down, like a tired child, and passed into the great unknown; but Dick, who now walked beside me, seeing the look upon my face, wound his arm round mine, and gazing entreatingly into my eyes, pointed westward with his other hand.

Finding it impossible to proceed in our horrible condition, under so fierce a sun, we were forced to rest for many hours during the middle of that day. We rigged up a sort of triangular tent with the two rifles and gun as supports and a rug for the roof, while a second one we transformed to a curtain, which hung down on the sunny side. It offered, in a kind of primitive way, a very fair protection, but the wind arising shortly after, blew the whole construction down, and as other attempts to fix it failed, we were constrained to sit baking in the sun, enduring all the agonies of the damned, till Hardwicke motioned us to once more journey on.

I obeyed, as did Jimmy, though every spark of hope and interest in life had died out of my breast, leaving nought behind but a dead, dull langour. We staggered on, and on for it was not walking, and the sun went down in a sea of fire as before, and the stars came out, and the moon sailed on, and the wind came roaring over the great black desert, yet on we staggered, we three; on, on, till Nature refused her aid, and I fell senseless to the earth.

When I awoke, the east was beginning to lighten with the coming day. I felt frightfully cold and ill, and on stretching out my hand found that my clothes were completely saturated, and on dropping my hands again to my sides I felt, to my great astonishment, the touch of wet grass. In a moment I had turned on my face and buried it in the yellow herbage, which was covered with a thick dew. I tore it up in handfuls and pressed it into my cracked and parched-up mouth. Poor as it may appear it was a foretaste of heaven, and I felt new life and hope come back. Then I remembered my companions, and found them stretched a few yards distant, apparently dead. But dead they were not, though how any of us remained alive was a miracle, and I awoke them by pressing some of the dew from the grass between their swollen lips. At first Hardwicke gazed dreamily upon me, then at the grass in my hand, and then around him, and a new light beamed from his bloodshot eyes, and he sprang quickly to his feet.

He then collected a large handful of the spongy yellow grass, motioning Jimmy and I to do the same. This he rubbed carefully over the dew-laden earth and then squeezed it, as you would a sponge, over the billy-can, and to my surprise it actually yielded several drops of water. I now saw the drift in an instant, and set to work in good earnest, as did Jimmy, and in a little over an hour we had the can, which held about three pints, full of water. By that time the sun had arisen, and every glistening drop had evaporated under its rays.

Who can imagine the pleasures of that drink — ah, who? Only he who like ourselves has been dying of thirst. The first mouthful hissed on my burning tongue as water hisses when thrown against some heated metal. I felt that I could drink a gallon, but as our allowance (about a pint each)

had been served out, I dared not consume more than half of it, though a desperate temptation seized me to do so.

“Well,” said Dick huskily, for though the liquid had loosened his throat he could not yet speak distinctly, “Fate does not throw much in our way, but when she does she can't say that we refuse to take advantage of it.”

“No,” I answered in a similar tone. “But that was a rare idea of yours, Dick. I should never have thought of it.”

“The idea was not exactly mine, old fellow,” he answered. “It is said that Eyre once saved his life by a somewhat similar process. He was the first explorer, you know, who ever crossed from east to west. As soon as I saw the damp grass in your hand, the story I had heard came back to me, and I beheld a way of escape.”

“True, we have warded off the inevitable, but for how long?”

“Who can say? — perhaps till we die, like decent old people, in our beds. You shake your head. I shook mine last night, because I began to doubt Providence, but you see how little I knew. We have water enough here for another day. Who can tell what the next twenty-four hours may not bring forth? Before the sun sets to-morrow night we may have reached the Golden Lake.”

It was no use prolonging the topic, for Dick, when he pleased, was as argumentative as any fellow I ever knew, so I asked him abruptly what he thought of our position as regards the well old Morton had found.

“We have passed it, wherever it is,” he answered; “so we must expect nothing in that quarter. Chance led him to it and led us by, which reminds me that we had better push on before the sun becomes too oppressive.”

He evidently wished to talk as little as possible of our painful position, and as I was in no mood to prolong so spiritless a subject, I readily acquiesced with his suggestion, and, shouldering our swags, once more we turned our faces westward and trudged rapidly off.

Most strange and wonderful is the inner man, and most astonishing is the effect a little refreshment has upon it. Our spirits rose a hundred per cent., and a new activity seemed to have taken lodgment in our heels. We swung along with something of the old vigour, for the black cloud of despair was fringed with a tiny silver rim, and hope, faint, but still hope, was once more in the ascendant. We halted about noon, the sun being too hot to travel under, nor did we begin our journey again till he had lost all his power and was beginning to sink beyond the distant horizon. Then we walked on and on through the calm bright night, munching the food as we went, and washing it down with sips of water. We journeyed far into the best part of that night, then flung ourselves once more upon the sand and slept feverishly on till daybreak, when we arose with weary spirits and continued our dreary march. The privations and suffering we had undergone were now beginning to play sad havoc with my

constitution. I trembled so violently that I feared I was going to be seized with the ague or some other formidable form of disease, though I breathed no word of suspicion to my cousin, knowing that if such should be the case what extra worlds of pain it would cause him. The thought was too horrible to contemplate. Had I really fallen ill, I think I should have blown my brains out.

That morning the last drop of precious water was consumed, and yet no mountains loomed up to meet the view. We were all unfitted for another severe struggle with fate, our previous privations being so great as to totally debar us from attempting to combat fiercely with adverse fortune. Fate seemed to take a hideous delight in thwarting us. Our misery had been extreme enough, God knows! and yet the black cloud of evil destiny seemed as though it gloated in the intense gloom it had spread over the landscape of our lives. The hot sun poured its fierce rays upon us with redoubled vigour, as though glad of the opportunity it possessed of tormenting the hearts that had been bold enough to pierce the regions over which it had held unchallenged sway since the world began.

How we lived through that day I cannot tell. I was conscious of staggering on and on, how I knew not. Before my eyes swam many strange sights, while in my ears a thousand bells seemed clanging a hideous discord. The hot sun scorched me through and through. My tongue grew too big for my mouth. I tried to speak but was conscious only of uttering some unintelligible sound. And to add horror to horror, away up above us, circling round and round in the terrible burning blue, were two great vultures. Ever and anon would they scream loudly as though impatient of our respite from death, yet kept they straight above our heads and always the same great distance. Dick eyed them, but spoke no word. He took the shotgun from Jimmy and loaded it, but the great things gave him no opportunity to shoot, and we were forced to march on, on, greeted every now and again with a hoarse caw from the vampire birds above.

By degrees the sun went down. I watched it sink lower and lower into the far-off west, leaving a great wide cloud of fire in its wake, but I no longer gazed upon it with interest. I only wished to lie down and sleep. Then Dick seized my arm and pressed his flask to my lips, and I remember I drained it mechanically. It was only a mouthful, but, like some wondrous elixir, it brought me back to life, and I read his action in his eyes. *He had given me his last drop.*

Brave heart, brave Dick! Eternity shall never blot from my soul the love and gratitude that your great heartedness has engraven there.

It was long into the night before we fell utterly exhausted upon the yielding sand — to die. We had battled hard against fate, but fate had conquered. I commended my soul to God as I closed my eyes that night, for I felt certain they would never open again on earth. And yet they did,

and I looked up and saw that the sun had arisen, and felt that my sleep had actually refreshed me. Above still soared the two great vultures, though they were closer, if anything, than they had ever been before. For a time I lay watching their wonderful, horrible movements, fascinated by their inimitable grace on the wing, and the dreadful ideas that associated them with ourselves. And as I pictured a fate too horrible to even write, the great birds uttered a hoarse caw. It sounded like a diabolical laugh, a laugh that told of victory secured. I shut my eyes to hide their dreadful forms, and all my nerves palpitated violently. Then, like one dazed, I sat up and tried to think, and as my brain wandered listlessly over many things, lacking the concentrated power of deep thought, I happened to turn to the westward and almost fell back with sudden astonishment, for straight before me I perceived *a long, low chain of mountains*.

I looked again and saw it, then rubbed my eyes and saw it again; and lest I was yet dreaming, I shut my eyes for a little space and then opened them, and still the hills were there. It was no dream, no illusion. We had come up with them during the night. The Golden Lake was close at hand, and the great journey was over at last.

I awoke my companions.

“The mountains — the mountains!” I shouted hoarsely, excitement lending me the power of utterance. “We are saved — we are saved!”

Dick and Jimmy bounded to their feet, the former trembling like a boy with excitement, and the latter looking with open-mouthed wonder at the scene. Intense was the gaze my cousin fixed on the blue outline of the hills. His breath came quickly, and all his frame denoted an eagerness I had never seen before. Then he turned to me.

“Yes, yes,” he gasped; “it is the mountains, Archie; it is the mountains. Thank God we are saved, we are saved!” And I thought he would have broken down with very joy. His hollow eyes shone with the brilliancy of diamonds, while the red blood rushed in torrents to his haggard cheek. No other word was spoken, but with the frenzy of madmen we seized our swags, utterly regardless of the devil-birds above, the burning thirst within, and rushed staggering on towards the goal that had loomed at last.

Excitement lent us such great energy that we bounded madly along; for had we not come to the mountains — the mountains that held everything, even life itself?

Suddenly Hardwicke seized me by the arm, and pointing away to the southward whispered hoarsely in my ear —

“Look, Archie, look! *The One Tree Hill!*”

Yes, there it was, the great bare mount standing out in bold relief from among its fellows, and upon its massive brow there stood a solitary tree.

A feeling of infinite joy rushed through me, and I thanked that power which had so miraculously guided our footsteps over the dreary waste.

Towards the great hill we now steered. How we got over the ground I cannot attempt to tell. On, on we went, swaying, staggering, and at times almost falling; yet on, on, moved by some vital impulse, some power which is beyond me to analyse. And then I have but dim remembrances of what passed, till we rested and a handful of water was thrown in my face, and a flask put to my lips.

We had reached the goal and were saved.

Chapter XII

The Golden Lake.

IT took me some little time to recover what I might call my proper senses, but, under the genial influence of my cousin Hardwicke, return they most assuredly did. Then was I able with ease to look about me, and for our merciful deliverance thank God with all my heart. We had accomplished a terrific journey, during which we had waged unceasing war with fate, and now the end was nearly come, and we should soon know all.

“Well,” said Dick, who sat beside me, a glad light illumining his hollow eyes, “we are here at last, old man, here at last. It seems incredible, I know, but it is as true as day. Look, there is the One Tree Hill, the thing you thought had no existence except in Morton's disordered imagination. Many a time have I dreamt of this sight, Archie,” he continued, his voice becoming grave in a moment, “dreamt of it when I scarcely even dared to hope that such dreams would ever be realised. But the day is come at last; the dreams are realised, the gold is almost within our grasp. Our fortunes are made. I thank Heaven, not so much for the gold, but for what I shall be able to do with it for those who are dearer to me than life.”

I neither interrupted nor questioned his enthusiasm, but contented myself with remarking that such indeed seemed the case, and that I hoped we should get as safely out of the country as we had got into it.

The water which we so opportunely discovered, and beside which we camped, was a small clear stream that flew sparkling over a rocky bed till it lost itself in the sand below. Dick vowed that the stream was an overflow of the lake itself, which argument I, having no reason to doubt, accepted. We both felt sure that it was the very water Morton had mentioned, and that surety was made positive a little while after by our discovering a big M built of stones. It was partly overgrown by grasses, but when these were cleared away, the great letter stood out in bold relief. It was here, then, the natives had parted with him, and to while away an idle hour he had left his mark, a guide to future travellers. Dick upbraided himself greatly that he had not examined our other resting places more closely, “For,” said he, “there can be little doubt that Morton left a regular trail behind him, which we, but for our carelessness, would

have found with little trouble.”

The rest of that day we spent luxuriously — eating, drinking, smoking, and sleeping whenever we felt inclined. We were too thoroughly exhausted to attempt the ascent of the mountains then, so decided to wait till the following day; and in the meantime we made ourselves as lazily comfortable as our limited luxuries would allow. But even had we determined to move, I do not think I could have done so had my life depended upon it, for I was thoroughly prostrate in body, and moved my limbs with great difficulty.

During the night I suffered terribly from the cold, or what I at that time thought was the cold, and when I finally awoke in the morning, I knew I had contracted some kind of illness. Icy shivers ran down my back, and I trembled as I have seen people tremble with creeping paralysis. Glad was I to see the sun come out. Its hot rays were thrice welcome, for they pleasantly warmed my chilly blood. My companions, on the contrary, had benefited to a remarkable degree, and Hardwicke assured me that another good night's rest would set him up as well as he had ever been.

Jimmy then parcelled out the breakfast in equal shares as usual, and my companions fell with avidity upon their portions, declaring they were as hungry as the proverbial hunter. But I could not eat. To swallow a mouthful was a superhuman task, and quite beyond me.

Dick looked at me in consternation. “You are not ill, Archie?”

“A little knocked up, old chap, that's all. I shall be well again in a day or two. You see, I'm not used to this work, and to put it mildly, that last stretch was a teaser.”

“It was, indeed,” he answered. “But we did it, Archie, and no thanks to any one.” Then, as if he dreaded anything but an affirmative reply, he said, “But you can walk?”

“Certainly,” I replied, rising to my feet. “If I am going to be laid up, Dick, it must be *after* we have found the Lake — do you understand?”

“Right,” he said, his eyes beaming. “Jimmy,” he then called out to that worthy, “see that everything is ready, you rascal. We are on the last stage of our journey.”

“Well, Mass'r Dick,” said Jimmy thoughtfully, “it's about time. This am the longest wallaby track (tramp) I ever followed. Never seen such a journey. Think for certain, Mass'r Dick, we never come to end. Wonder what for you do all this dam fool's work.”

Dick roared with laughter.

“So it's dawned upon you at last, has it, James? Now can't you guess what has brought us here?”

“Never thought of it, Mass'r Dick, till I see them dam crows. Then me think what for you want to come here and let them fellows gobble you up.”

“Well then, Jimmy, we have come for gold.”

“For gold, Mass'r Dick? Ah!” and in that exclamation the worthy black spoke volumes. “But, Mass'r Dick,” said he, scratching his head and looking as though he was oppressed by some mighty problem, “suppose you find 'um gold, how you take 'um back to Melbourne?”

“We will come again,” answered his master. “Plenty of horses, plenty of men, and plenty of grub — you sabbee?”

“Plenty sabbee grub, Mass'r Dick,” and he opened his mouth and smiled insinuatingly at the portion I could not eat, which I handed over to him, and which he demolished with great gusto.

We cleaned and loaded our fire-arms, that is, Dick cleaned and loaded them, and with him by my side, and Jimmy bringing up the rear, we began the final stage of our great journey.

For a time we followed the small stream of which I have spoken till we found it branching off to the north side of the One Tree Hill, the south side of which our directions bade us climb, so we were accordingly forced to abandon it. Our way was exceedingly disagreeable, being for the most part over rough, loose boulders, which so distressed me that to take my cousin's arm became a necessity. I felt so indignant with myself that I could have cried aloud with anger, and would have implored him to leave me behind, only I knew such a request would have been useless. In this manner we struggled on, with occasional rests, for about three hours, at the end of which time we had reached the base of One Tree Hill. Here our way was slightly better, being up the centre of a valley that wound, as it were, round the southern side of that curious mount. Up this valley, which was mostly composed of volcanic rocks, we struggled to an exceedingly great height till we found ourselves at the head of it on the western side of the aforementioned hill. Here we rested awhile, I needing it especially, for by this time I could scarcely walk. However, the rest refreshed me greatly and we resumed our journey as before, Dick passing his arm through mine and helping me carefully over the rough way. Jimmy was sent on ahead with instructions to return immediately the lake came in view, for that it was hereabouts we had not now the ghost of a doubt.

In the meantime Dick and I trudged slowly along a small plateau that stretched westward from the head of the valley, and along which Jimmy had directed his course. At the northern end of this wide space the ground gradually rose till it ended in a steep hill, and to the base or southern side of this elevation we steered, hoping that from there the lake might open up. But we were once more doomed to disappointment, for the valley stretched for quite half a mile farther on and then swept the northern base of another big hill, which looked like an extinct volcano. Along this valley we stumbled, the loose stones giving way beneath our feet, rendering our progress anything but pleasant or easy. Yet on approaching the foot of the hill just mentioned, our eyes were suddenly

gladdened by the welcome vision of Jimmy, who came rapidly towards us.

“Did you see the lake?” shouted Hardwicke, long before the worthy black had reached us.

“Me see plenty of water, Mass'r Dick. Suppose 'um lake?”

“Yes, yes!” and I felt his arm tremble in mine with excitement, and he, quite unknowingly I am sure, moved forward at a more rapid pace.

We passed the hill above-mentioned and then found the valley slope downwards, which, as it was more even, made walking comparatively easy, so that we fairly bowled along, excitement giving us renewed vigour. The cry of many birds filled the air, while grass grew here and there in small patches, and even the sun seemed to lose some of his horrible power.

Presently a great cry of astonishment arose from Hardwicke's lips.

“My God! look, look!”

We had at that moment rounded a huge mass of fallen stones, and the lake — the veritable lake we had suffered so much to reach — lay not more than a hundred feet below us. We stepped out of the path that evidently wound down to its shores, and sitting on a ledge of a rock that overlooked it, let our eyes wander across the bright, blue stretch of water till they rested on the mountains a couple of miles away. What our feelings were it would be difficult to describe. Dick was animated with the keenest joy. It sparkled in his eyes and spread itself in smiles over his face. He looked as happy as though he had accomplished the greatest task ever set to man. He had reached the lake, the Golden Lake at last, and henceforth he could snap his fingers in the face of the genius of poverty. Jimmy was quite unmoved at our success, while I looked upon the water with feelings of joy and awe. We had done what no party of human beings had ever accomplished before. We had penetrated to the very centre of the great desert, the desolation and misery of which had hitherto been insurpassable bars to all mankind. And yet my gratification at our success was accompanied by the paingiving thought that the desolation and misery which had barred so many out, might bar us *in*.

Luckily for the spirits of the party these gloomy thoughts were all my own. Dick was in ecstasies of delight.

“So we are here at last, old man,” said he. “We have had a tough pull, but now comes the reward. And such a reward. Is not the gold we shall get worth the trouble of attaining it? What new prospects life already opens. What a change from genteel poverty to unbounded wealth. I imagined I was more of a stoic, Archie, and believed that nothing on earth could affect me so much as the thought of this gold does. I know my words sound sordid; but, after all, what is life without money but an everlasting affliction? You think I am premature, that I might at least wait till we have found the gold? You surely do not doubt that we shall

find it?"

"Not for an instant," I answered; "not for an instant."

"But," he continued, "you have a 'but' there, you would say more. You would tell me that we are not yet out of the wood. No, but please God we shall be. Sufficient for the day. Get well and strong, old chap, and you will see things with a brighter eye. I have not been without my despairing moments, though I have not broached them to you, because I would not. But that night before the dew fell I thought was going to be our last on earth. Then we were miraculously saved. Later on the dreadful companionship of the two vultures forced our heart-breaking situation with keener intensity upon me, but even then was fate's merciful hand stretched out and we were drawn from a death too hideous even to think of. And does all this mean nothing, think you? Death has claimed one of our number, and is satisfied. We have reached the Golden Lake, we shall find the gold, and what is perhaps more to you, you shall see England again."

"I wonder," said I, changing the conversation, for I did not like my secret thoughts being read so easily by my grave-faced, earnest-voiced companion, "if we shall find the little girl, Mayne's daughter, you know — safe and sound?"

I must confess, with shame, that this same daughter of the gentleman convict's had held but a secondary standing in our thoughts. I will not attempt to deny that gold was *the* motive of our journey. Should the girl be living, we said, and willing to go with us, we would exert our utmost power to see her safely through the journey, but should she refuse us, as she did Morton, we should not attempt to force her. How little is it possible for a man to predict what a day will bring forth.

"Perhaps," replied Dick to my query. "Though you must remember that same little girl, if alive, is now a woman of twenty-three or twenty-four, and may be married to a chief and the mother of a family of savages — horrid, black, dirty savages.

"What a horrible idea, Dick."

"It's not pleasant, is it he replied. "But what is a girl to do?"

As this question exceeded my bounds of comprehension I made no reply, while he fingered his rifle dexterously preparatory to testing his skill as a marksman upon some black swans which floated on the lake about four hundred yards away.

"What do you bet I don't knock that leader over," he said.

"A thousand pounds to a horseshoe."

"Done," and he was about to fire, when there arose a fluttering in the camp of the swans, and they immediately took to wing.

"Well, that is strange," he ejaculated. "One might almost swear they knew one was going to fire. The birds must be pretty sharp about here. Look!" He broke off suddenly and uttered this exclamation in a loud key.

From behind a rocky promontory that jutted out into the lake on the northern side of our position, and not more than three hundred yards from where the swans had been swimming, there suddenly shot forth to our view a small canoe containing one person who appeared to be straining every muscle to force the little craft along. Almost immediately there followed in its wake another canoe propelled with much more swiftness, for we saw it gain rapidly on the first-comer. This second boat contained also a solitary individual who worked with such tremendous will that the small craft seemed impelled forward by more than human agency. It literally bounded over the blue water, flinging the white foam from its bows with all the dignity of a little ship.

As both boats came nearer, Dick cried out that he believed the person in the first one was a woman, and that a man was after her — very likely on a kidnapping expedition — and that for two pins he'd pot him. Jimmy, who was watching the race with glistening eyes and a joyous, deep-meaning smile upon his lips, was of the same opinion as his master. At that moment the two canoes got more in the open, and the leader turned her boat's prow towards a rocky headland that rose a little to the south of us. This brought their outlines more distinctly in view, and we saw beyond a doubt that the first craft contained a woman, and the second a man, and that she was most certainly fleeing from him.

They were now close upon the spot on which the swans had been swimming a moment or two before, and whether it was a stronger puff of wind, or an extra bit of exertion on the woman's part I do not know, but her hair suddenly streamed out behind, and the sun falling upon it, caught it, and lit it with a thousand gleams.

“Good heavens!” cried Dick. “*She has golden hair!*”

“Mayne's daughter?” I queried.

“Yes, yes,” added he excitedly, “it must, it can only be she.”

I was now thoroughly alive and glowing with the excitement of the scene, even though I guessed not how sensational the business was to be. But I was soon to know. The big savage having come up alongside of the woman, ceased paddling, and seizing a spear which was lying in the bottom of his canoe, shook it threateningly towards her. She, apparently terrified, also let her paddle fall and held her hands before her face as though to shield herself from the dreaded thrust. He was kneeling in his canoe gesticulating, talking (taunting her we found out afterwards), but all the time continuing to flourish the dreadful spear as though each moment he intended to hurl it through her.

All this, though it takes some time to describe, was enacted in a few seconds.

“Do you think you can hit him, Dick?”

“I'll try.”

“Then shoot, for the love of God, shoot!”

He leant upon one knee, and carried his rifle to his shoulder. I was trembling with excitement, but he was as steady as the rocks around. No muscle moved. He might have been carved of stone. I knew he would shoot well, this man with the iron nerves; I could see it in his clear grey eyes, and I followed the barrel of his rifle to the lake below; and I saw the savage partly rise with a violent gesture poising his spear, saw the poor woman crouch, as it were, lower and lower in the boat as though she hoped that by so doing, she would avoid the missile. Then, just as I thought her last moment was come — the savage having drawn himself back for a final lunge — I involuntarily closed my eyes.

Bang!

The report of a rifle broke the stillness of the air, and my eyes opened instinctively. I saw the great savage rise to his full height in his frail canoe, still grasping the spear in his outstretched hand, which he poised for a final effort, but ere he found the requisite strength to hurl it, he tumbled headlong into the water.

Dick's bullet had found its mark.

“A good shot, Dick.”

“Not bad,” he answered coolly, though I could see he was as proud of it as I.

The report of the rifle, and the sudden disappearance of her assailant beneath the water, was evidently the cause of no little wonder and alarm to the girl, for she looked most anxiously around on all sides of her. Then seeing us, for we had all three arisen by this time and were frantically waving our hats, she pointed her boat's head towards us and came almost under the cliff, when we were subject, by her, to a minute examination. She was apparently well satisfied with her keen scrutiny, for she pointed with her hand to the shore, as much as to say “come down.” We required no second invitation, but hurriedly scrambled back to the path and descended.

The girl sat in her canoe about fifty yards from the shore and eyed us with intense curiosity. We shouted to her to come closer, that we were only peaceful travellers, and that we meant her no harm. She, however, made no reply nor seemed inclined to trust us nearer, but sat motionless, still surveying us with minute attention. It was evident she understood not a word we said, and was in consequence doubtful of our integrity. Then we told Jimmy to speak to her in his own language and tell her who we were and what we had said. This he did, she making some reply and at the same time approaching a little closer.

“She all the same jabber my lingo, Mass'r Dick, only another one,” said Jimmy by way of explanation, meaning that she spoke his language though with a different dialect or accent.

“Then impress upon her,” said Hardwicke “that we are friends. That we have travelled far and endured much to reach this lake; that it was we

who destroyed the savage a little while ago, and that thus suddenly shall all perish who would seek to harm a hair of her head.”

This Jimmy repeated with many grand flourishes of his head and arms, to which she listened very intently, still scrutinising us most keenly. Then, as if still more satisfied, she gave her paddle a couple of gentle strokes which brought her quite within close quarters, and we saw that she was a most beautiful creature, with two great blue eyes as clear and limpid as the waters of the lake, a fair face tanned to a delightful brown with exposure to the sun, and a cloud of wonderful golden hair which like an aureole framed her head with mystic splendour.

We naturally put on our very sweetest of smiles, beckoning her all the while to approach and telling her, at least in effect, that we were quite incapable of harm.

At last she ventured a query —

“Who are you?”

This was excellent. Once get her curiosity aroused and we knew, or guessed, it would overcome every scruple, for a woman dearly loves to know who's who and what's what.

We told her that we had come from far beyond the great desert to find this particular lake, and to take back to her own people the golden-haired maiden called Ada.

At the sound of that name she visibly started and gazed upon us with an intenser eagerness. Then her woman's curiosity got the better of her discretion, and she immediately drove her canoe upon the sand and leaped ashore. If we admired her in the boat at a distance, that admiration changed to positive worship as she came half-boldly and half-tremblingly towards us with gratitude beaming in her big blue eyes, and a face full of the most intense, bewildered earnestness. Quickly kneeling upon the sand she declaimed most passionately, pointing alternately to us and to the lake with gestures representing both despair and joy.

Jimmy then made it known that she was giving a history of her adventures with the savage Hardwicke had shot. He was a Wyhuma warrior, and the Wyhumas were constantly at war with her people, who were the tribe of the Mandanyah. She, it seems, had been gathering herbs which only grew by a certain portion of the lake, when she was surprised by the Wyhuma who, giving chase, caught her up with such fatal consequences to himself.

This story she went through with much impressive fervour, and when she came to the part we had played in the little drama the tears welled in her eyes, and it was as much as we could do to prevent her kissing our hands. We said a thousand pleasant things to her in return, and Dick showed her the rifle, and, through Jimmy, told her how he had shot the Wyhuma. She looked upon him with admiration and awe, and asked him if he was a spirit or a man that he could do such things, and when he

laughingly told her that he was only a man, she laughed too and said she supposed men with white faces were different from those with black.

“I am white too,” she added, and as if to prove the truth of her words she rolled up her sleeve and showed a beautiful milk-white arm. “My father lived by the shore of the great sea — many moons away — and was a beautiful white man, as beautiful as you,” she said, turning suddenly to me, at which direct address I became conscious of growing red.

“Don't blush, Archie,” said Hardwicke, and Jimmy grinned from ear to ear. But the girl seemed to heed us not. She continued —

“Not that I remember him too well. but the old chief who died twelve moons ago, told me many things, and I know my father was like a star.”

“But not so like as you,” said Hardwicke, which Jimmy translated before he could be stopped.

She looked at Dick and smiled.

“I am very different from the other women of the village,” she said. “Their faces are black, as black as the sky when there is no moon, when there is no star. I used sometimes to wish I was like them,” she continued; “but now I have seen you two I am glad my face is white.”

“And so are we,” we added simultaneously.

“But tell me,” said Hardwicke, “Is your name Ada?” She negatively shook her head.

“Laughing Hair?” he went on.

She smiled. “Yes, yes. I am Laughing Hair.”

“Mayne's daughter. Wonderful! And what a beauty, Archie. Whoever would have thought of seeing such a flower in this — — ”

But she suddenly cut short his burst of eloquence by asking us if we would not like to journey to the village. That being the thing of things we were most anxious to do, we readily assented; but how were we to reach it? At our right and left, at a distance of not more than a hundred yards, the rocks rose sheer from the lake, making a journey to the village by water a necessity. This being pointed out to her she spoke a few words to Jimmy, at which that worthy leapt into her canoe and paddled off to bring back the defunct savage's, which was floating upside down a little distance off.

Her dress beggars any description of mine. It was composed of feathers, skins, and grasses, the latter plaited with such marvellous neatness as to make them resemble a piece of coarse tweed. Her feet were encased in skin boots or moccasins, the sides of which were ornamented with bright red stones, which acted as substitutes for buttons. These I guessed were rubies, remembering that Morton had spoken of the chief people wearing them. On one arm was a roughly shaped gold bangle, but with the exception of a large ruby in her skin cap which kept a bright feather in its place, she displayed no signs of undreamt-of

wealth. Though not altogether beauty unadorned, she was just adorned enough to make a lovely picture of timid savagery, a picture that any young man not austere inclined might well be expected to rave about. And if her face was perfect, and in my opinion the tan enhanced its effect, her figure was none the less fascinating, while her hair was truly the most superb I have ever seen on woman. It reached to the bottom of her waist and looked like a great glowing mass of silky sunbeams. Morton said the natives called her Laughing Hair. I should have called her the Genius of Day — the Sun Queen.

The excitement that had borne me up thus far, gradually cooled down, the old sick feeling came upon me, and I reeled giddily and was forced to sit for fear of falling. She saw the action, and knowing that something ailed me, approached to my side and spoke in a tender voice. Of course I knew not what she said, but her manner was so gentle that I felt my heart go out to her. There is something so exquisitely tender in a woman's sympathy, something so utterly angelic that I often wonder why any of them should want to change the nature God bequeathed them.

The return of Jimmy cut short my ruminations, and we prepared to embark. As it was evident the canoes would not hold more than two each we were in a dilemma, which she however righted by motioning me to get in with her, in invitation which had not to be repeated a second time. Dick and Jimmy entered the other. No sooner was I aboard than she stepped lightly in, seized the paddle, refusing to allow me to even touch it, and signifying by a motion of her head that I should sit still, shot the boat out upon the lake, the other two following, Jimmy being perfectly at home in the canoe, and using the paddle with unerring dexterity.

We rounded the headland to the south, of which I spoke before, when another one opened up about half a mile away. a high, cone-shaped, volcanic-looking hill, and towards it she directed our course. The breeze upon the water revived me somewhat, and I began to talk to my fair boat-woman, and she to me, neither understanding a word the other said, though both were as serious as though holding a sober conversation. She paid the strictest attention to what I said and tried her hardest to comprehend my meaning, but she was fain to shake her head as signifying failure. Then I used the word Ada, and pointed to her, and I believe the name sounded familiar, for she smiled on me and looked as though she partly understood, while she racked her brains to their utmost; then a look of despair would rush over her face, and she would shake her head sadly and bend again more fiercely over her work.

We were now approaching the great cone-shaped hill with rapidity, for her long, strong sweeps made the canoe fairly bound over the blue water, and when at last we came up with it and rounded its utmost point, I saw that on the other side the lake was not more than half a mile wide, and that straight across, or on the western margin of the water, a good-sized

village nestled snugly at the foot of a great hill, and that towards this village my fair canoeist steered her little craft. There were a great number of huts, with one exceedingly large one in the centre, which we afterwards discovered was the head man's or chief's. All, or nearly all, were conical in shape and built of bark, no mean substitute for wood. As we drew near the shore, I saw many people thronging the water's edge, the crowd every minute increasing, till by the time we reached the landing-place quite a big assembly had congregated. I thought my fair companion surveyed the large gathering somewhat disdainfully. Anyway, she gave her paddle an extra strong pull and drove the canoe far on the sand, and leaping out with wonderful agility, steadied it for me to step ashore, which I did with some difficulty.

By this time Dick and Jimmy had come up and made their landing in a similar manner, and we were immediately surrounded by an immense throng of gaping blacks, whom Ada, however, waved haughtily aside, and, beckoning us to follow, passed on.

We walked towards the big hut I have spoken of the people following. Dick assured me, as we went along, that they were a much more powerful and muscular lot than the ordinary Australian native. They were wild enough looking in all conscience, and were entirely naked with the exception of a skin slung round their loins. The women were dressed, or undressed, similarly, though several of the village belles, we found out later on, imitated Ada's style; but beyond that, men and women went unclothed alike.

At the entrance to the large hut we found four huge savage-looking fellows standing leaning on their spears, formidable looking weapons with sharpened stone heads, and to one of them Ada spoke several words, whereat the fellow, raising his spear by way of salute, disappeared behind a sort of barricade that answered the purpose of a door. He was absent but a few minutes, and on returning, motioned us to enter. She led the way, we following, and after passing through the barricade and pushing some skins aside which did duty for curtains, we entered a long, dark chamber, in which we remained for several minutes, neither speaking nor moving. Then some more skin curtains at the farther end of this chamber were pulled aside and we were told to advance.

Chapter XIII

In Which is Related Our Interview with Kalua the King.

THE room into which we now entered was a long oval in shape, one half of which was flooded in sunshine from a large aperture in the roof, the other half reposing in a sort of semi-darkness. The walls of this strange place (doubly strange through being in the possession of an Australian chief) were decorated with the skins and feathers of many beasts and birds, while spears, boomerangs, waddies, stoneaxes and other warlike implements were hung artistically among the skins, or gaudily ornamented with bright feathers.

What the decorations in the darker portions of the chamber were like we could not tell, nor did we know, till Ada stepped out of the brilliant stream of sunshine and began to talk, that four eager eyes had been intently scanning us. But on advancing from the glare of the sunlight into the shade beyond, we perceived two persons, one of whom was half-lounging and half-sitting in a sumptuous, indolent fashion on a great pile of skins. There was no mistaking the airs of this individual. If he were not the chief he ought to be, for he tried to look as imposing and superior as any prince of Christendom.

“By Jove!” whispered Dick to me, “the fellow's not black at all. He's a half-caste. What an awful face!”

I could scarcely believe my eyes at first, thinking that the sudden change from dazzling light to partial gloom might have affected them. But a further scrutiny proved the truth of Dick's words and my own anticipations. The man was certainly a half-breed and an ugly one to boot. His face was of a dark, sickly yellow in colour, and was ornamented by a thin, straggling black beard; his eyes were small, sunken, and bloodshot, glossy and gleaming like a snake's. His mouth, which was large and cruel, was filled with gleaming white teeth, but as he unfortunately had lost an upper front one, whenever he spoke or smiled his mouth presented a spectacle so curious as to quite fascinate one's sight. And yet about him there was an easy languor which did not ill become this marvellous mixture of white and black vice. He was apparently thirty-five or forty years of age, and, by what we could see of his stature, as he reclined luxuriously upon his skins, of good build and

great strength. Round his neck he wore two great necklaces of red stones, which we truly guessed were rubies, and on his left arm a finely wrought gold bracelet with a great ruby set in the centre of it. This was his badge of office, the kings of the Mandanyah wearing it instead of a crown as most kings do.

Behind him stood an individual as black as night with a scrubby black beard and a huge shock of woolly hair. His face was so thin that his cheek bones almost protruded through the skin that covered them. His eyes were small and dazzling as diamonds, his figure slight but wiry, indicating the swiftness and elasticity of a cat. He also wore two necklaces, one of rubies and the other of gold, and was the chief priest or medicine man, Wanjula.

But while I had been taking in all these particulars, Ada had fallen on her knees before the chief and had gone through the story of her pursuit by the Wyhuma warrior and her rescue by ourselves, upon whom she dwelt in the most glowing terms, and wound up by imploring the king to grant us his protection. He narrowly examined us during her narration, and looked upon Hardwicke with an almost horror-stricken gaze when it came to that portion of her story in which my cousin had so marvellously killed the savage. He, however, made no answer to her, but held some conversation with his wily-looking adviser. What they said was too indistinct for Jimmy to catch, but they were evidently conscious that we possessed some mighty agency over death, the priest in particular looking on Dick with absolute terror.

Kalua, for so the chief was called, then asked if the black man (Jimmy) could speak the language, and on her answering in the affirmative, he bade our dusky companion step forward, and there followed a string of questions which Jimmy in turn repeated to us and to which we gave the necessary answers.

It was noticeable from the very beginning that Kalua had a profound contempt for one of Jimmy's colour, for he opened his interrogations by inquiring of that worthy to what tribe of dogs he belonged. At this Jimmy's royal blood flared up, and being an irascible little man, he told Kalua in pretty plain language that he was the lawful king of a tribe somewhere on the Murrumbidgee, a tribe that had fought the great white men and many a time, and who would demolish such a wombat village as his (Kalua's) in the remarkably quick time of two minutes.

The king's sallow face flushed hotly at this and he seized the spear that was lying beside him with the intention of burying it in the haughty Jimmy's body, but the priest Wanjula luckily interposed in time, for both Dick and I had drawn our revolvers and a moment later would have hurried the king into eternity. He, however, being totally ignorant of what our actions foreboded, continued to rail at Jimmy in a most unkingly manner, pouring on his head such mountains of filthy abuse

that I saw Ada close her eyes with pain and clap her hands to her ears. At last the great monarchical rage subsided, no doubt for the want of more expletives (though Jimmy told me after that the king's abusive vocabulary was the choicest he had ever heard), and curiosity getting the better of his not inborn dignity, the conversation was resumed on a somewhat milder principle.

I warned Jimmy to be more civil, and pointed out to him that our lives would not be worth an hour's purchase if we made an enemy of the chief, and as Dick backed me up and hinted at the same time that it would not be good for his hide if he disobeyed us, Jimmy's demeanour became lamblike in the extreme, and when he again addressed Kalua it was with the most humble, crawling-in-the dust voice that I am certain had ever passed his lips. This sudden change in front had a most palpable effect on his majesty and evidently flattered his vanity greatly, for was it not an open admission of his power? It, like music, soothed the savage beast, while obstinacy in us but raised his evil passions to our detriment.

"So ye are white men?" he asked through the medium of Jimmy, through whom again we answered.

"Ay, great chief."

We thought it as well to flatter him, for there are few creatures alive callous to that seductive thing, and they you are never likely to meet. As it happened, we struck the right chord. Kalua's weakness was flattery, which, like most kings, he was equal to digesting mountains of.

He continued —

"Ye are of the same race as Laughing Hair — the Daughter of the Sun?"

"We are, oh chief."

"What seek ye?"

"We are travellers from the borders of the great sea. Our people are mighty."

"Why left ye then your people to come into the land which knows not the face of the white man?"

"We came, oh chief, to explore the great wild lands of the interior, so that we might tell to men the wonders we have seen."

"Is the white man sure he came for nothing else?"

This question was launched directly at Dick, who had done all the talking, but that worthy evinced no surprise at the remark and answered quite unconcernedly —

"Surely the white man could come for nothing else?"

"Then the white man knows not the value of this metal?" continued the king, toying with the bracelet on his arm. "But I think the white man does," and he showed his teeth unpleasantly and laughed in a most peculiar manner, the wind hissing through the space made by the departure of his front tooth.

“Who the devil can he be?” said Dick; but we were not allowed time to speculate on his being, for he continued, with a horrible leer —

“The white man answers not.”

“What can the white man say?” replied Hardwicke.

“Kalua is too great a chief to be deceived by the tales of boys and old women. When the great cloud blackens the face of the sun, even like to night itself, who is not so wise but that he looks for rain?”

“The white man speaks strangely,” said Kalua.

“I should think he did,” replied Dick.

That the chief was not altogether satisfied with Dick's replies could be easily seen; yet he cloaked as best he could his doubts beneath another dreadful smile, and continued —

“How crossed ye the great plains of sand? There is no water, no grass; the kangaroo is gone, and the birds fall dead in the heat.”

“Yonder,” said Dick, pointing through the aperture up to the sky, “the God of the white man lives. It was he who helped us.”

Kalua seemed scarcely to understand this reply, and sought accordingly an explanation from his priest, but that individual was as much at sea as his royal master.

He turned again to us.

“And is the land by the borders of the great sea well grassed and wooded? Is it as fair as this?”

“Ay, chief, a thousand times more fair.”

“Why roams the white man then through all these dreary lands, since he comes not even for the yellow metal which all his people worship? Surely he thinks not with his head.” And he smiled most diabolically, his mouth hissing all the time like a miniature steam-engine.

“Who the devil can he be?” queried Dick for the second time. “It is the fate of the white man,” he continued, gazing at Kalua, and totally ignoring all reference to the yellow metal, “to roam over all lands, and over all seas. He is as mighty as a god, and can compel even the winds to aid him.”

He must have thought we were jesting with him, for he replied quickly, “Surely the white man does not lie?”

“The white man never lies,” said my cousin, with not so much as the ghost of a smile upon his face.

“Then is the white man great beyond my people, or the people of the scattered tribes of the country,” said Kalua. “But I think you lie!” and he stood suddenly up and shook his clenched hand before us. His whole being underwent the most miraculous change in a moment. From the cool, cynical potentate he became a blustering, roaring savage. He shook with excitement. The words nissed through his teeth snake-like and furious. His sickly face grew positively green with rage. He foamed at the mouth like a mad dog, and snapped the words between his teeth as

though they were lumps of flesh. We instinctively drew our revolvers, prepared for any emergency. Ada shrank back, overwhelmed with terror. The priest's diamond eyes glittered with the excitement of the scene. The monarch raved on, "I know you lie; I know the white man cannot speak the truth. Listen! I have heard of your people by the great sea, a lying, cheating, wonderful people. A people who murder, lie, cheat, and rob for the yellow metal, whose value ye pretend not to know. Liars that ye are, sons of liars! He who brought Laughing Hair here hath divulged the secret of the Great Cave. Ye have journeyed as only the white man will journey for the precious metal; but the desert is wide, and the vultures caw loudly. I know ye, for I am partly of your race, and have some of the poison of your blood within me. My mother loved the white man; but he was a beast who thrashed her till her spirit was broken, and then drove her from him with threats to kill if she should return. Then was she forced to fly to the wilderness. She journeyed on many days, till, falling sick with exhaustion, I was born. And the white man's blood was in my veins, and I was hated by my people. And they made a law that I should die, because they also hated the white man. One night I stole from the camp and took to the desert, I, a boy. And why? Because the poison of your blood was in me." He paused, gasping for a minute, but quickly continued, "From that day to this have I not seen my mother; but the stories she told me of the white man's greed and cruelty have never left my mind. 'Hate the white man,' she said; 'always hate him, as thou wouldst the poison of the death adder!' "

We were so startled by this furious outburst of passion that we knew not what to do or say. They, quickly perceiving our uncertainty, construed it naturally to timidity, and a shade of contempt swept the distorted features of the chief. He clapped his hands, and in a moment was surrounded by a dozen stalwart ruffians. Ada looked uneasy. The cold, diamond eyes of the priest glittered with triumph. We were getting into a serious dilemma. Dick, however, was equal to the occasion, and metaphorically took the bull by the horns. He advanced a step towards the king and spoke, holding his rifle in readiness. Jimmy, of course, translated.

"It is a lie, chief, to say all white men are liars. He who said so lies, he who repeats it lies! Some are good, some bad, even as it is with your own people. We seek ye no harm; we are travellers, and claim your hospitality. Refuse it, and we go elsewhere." And he pointed across the lake to where the village of the Wyhumas lay.

Kalua was startled in turn, for Dick made a fierce figure in his assumed anger. The reference to their ancient enemy, the Wyhumas, brought a look of fury to the face of the king and of his followers.

Dick, however, gave them no chance to speak, but continued with a fiercer air than ever. "Though we be harmless people, oh, Kalua, yet

know we how to protect ourselves; and woe betide the man or men who would attempt to lay a finger upon us, for he shall die like a dog, and on his carcase shall the vultures feed.”

A slight change swept over the angry features of the chief. “The white man talks,” he snarled.

“The white man can do more than talk,” retorted Dick. Then, holding up his rifle, “I hold in my hand a mighty engine of death — death swift and sudden as the fiery thunderbolt. I have but to wish thee dead, oh, Kalua, and lo! the cloud that tries to hide the face of the sun is not more weak than you to me. And to show your warriors that the white man does not lie, let the king but wish it, and I will kill him now, even as he sits,” and he raised the rifle as though to take aim.

Though Kalua looked alarmed, he seemed not yet to fully comprehend the situation, for he replied with seeming indifference, “I doubt not but that the white man speaks the truth; yet it seems strange to me that so small a tube can conceal a thunderbolt.”

“Chief, thou art still a disbeliever in the power and truth of the white man. Yet point me out some object and behold how I shall shatter it; or, bring me forth some animal, and at a distance which to thee may seem incredible, I will slay it, even as the thunderbolt fells the great trees upon the mountains.” Then turning to me he said in a stage aside, “How does that sound?”

“Most excellent,” I answered. “The idea is good.”

“Yes,” he replied, “But I must not work that thunderbolt to death. They are evidently discussing my proposal,” he went on. “If they accept it, so much the better. It will give them an idea of what we can do, though I wish I'd mentioned nothing about shattering objects.”

The curiosity of Kalua and his warriors was indeed aroused. After a very short debate they made it known to us that they would like to see an exhibition of our powers, and though sceptical as they tried to appear, they eyed our weapons with something akin to reverence, and took exceptional care not to come within reach of them.

We passed from the room, Kalua and his priest going first, Ada, Dick, Jimmy and I following, and the warriors bringing up the rear. On the other side of the curtains of skin we ascended some steps and presently found ourselves upon a sort of flat roof or platform which commanded both an extensive view of the lake and village.

“What would you have me kill?” asked Dick.

Kalua looked around him, but perceiving no animal at which my cousin could fire, pointed towards an old white-haired woman who stood on the sands of the lake, about two hundred yards away.

“The white man is brave, chief,” exclaimed Hardwicke with a look of horror and disgust, “and never kills a woman. It is a written law with our people that man shall not even destroy man, unless in self-defence. Then

is the white man as fierce and wild as the mountain torrent. He knows no mercy, no pity, but sweeps his opponent from his path with the fury of the whirlwind.”

Kalua smiled unprepossessingly but made no reply. Had it not been the custom of the Mandanyah to speak in an inflated manner I could easily have believed that he was laughing in his sleeve (only he had no sleeve to laugh in) at Dick's “high falutin” nonsense. He, however, proceeded to question his medicine man, Wanjula, as to the requisite target they should supply, when Hardwicke, who had been watching the lake, suddenly seized the shot-gun from Jimmy, and speaking to the chief said —

“Behold, oh, Kalua, those birds.” And he pointed to a flock of ducks that had just arisen from the water and was flying towards us. “In a moment shall my death-engine speak aloud, and from among their cloud-like ranks shall many fall dying to the earth.”

The king and his followers were so utterly ignorant of what Hardwicke was about to do, and so full of his doing something miraculous, that they fairly shivered with excitement, while the crowd which had collected below, seeing us upon the platform, stood gaping with open mouths, wondering what was in the wind.

On came the birds, forty or fifty yards above the water, in a flock of thirty at least, making a little white cloud in the blue air. Dick smiled at me, and I, ill as I was, could scarcely refrain from laughing outright. To use his own expression, he couldn't have missed them with his eyes shut.

In a couple of seconds they were almost above us, and Dick, letting fly both barrels, brought six of them to the earth, one falling plump at the feet of the king. At first the sound appeared to startle the onlookers, but they no sooner knew that they were uninjured than their natural indifference broke down, and they gave vent to their feelings in loud cries of admiration.

The king tried, with the usual courtesy of kings, to treat the exhibition with that indifference it really deserved, but he hid his feelings badly, and I could see that he was strongly moved. As for his priest, Wanjula, he fairly shivered as he turned his eyes upon the redoubtable Dick, and I am certain he would not at that moment have laid his hands upon the “thunder tube,” as they afterwards called it, for all the blessings the Mandanyahs could grant him. Kalua picked up the bird that had fallen at his feet and examined it. There was one tiny red spot of blood on the breast.

“It is wonderful,” he said. “My brothers, the white men, are great chiefs, and possess a power unequalled by the people of the Mandanyah. The prayer of Laughing Hair is granted. Ye need not seek the hospitality of the Wyhumas. I have spoken.”

“We thank you, chief,” Hardwicke replied; “and to prove that our

words are not mere empty sound, we beg you to accept this engine of destruction,” and he held out the gun as though to present it to the half-breed. “But,” he continued, “beware of it, oh chief, lest the thunderbolt it contains fly forth of its own accord and smite thee to the death.”

The king drew back shuddering, while Dick gave me a significant look. His warning was thoroughly effective. Kalua would not have touched that gun for the world. But, thought I, if we can make him some useful present it will please him just as well, and mayhap get us into his good graces, so I got out my knife and presented it to him. He seized it instantly with every sign of satisfaction, and made known to us that he was delighted with the gift. In fact, he eyed the great sharp blade so keenly as to make me almost wish I had not parted with it.

Our next duty was to express our thanks to Laughing Hair for the great favour she had rendered us, which Dick did in the most courtly and flattering style. She blushed vividly as she inclined her head, and looked, I thought, more beautiful than anything in the shape of woman I had ever seen. I noticed the chief also regarded her with no little admiration, and I wondered, for the moment, if she might be his wife, and positively hated his ugly yellow and green face. But no, thought I, the innate dignity of so charming a creature would never suffer such humiliation.

We at last took our departure from Kalua and his men, leaving them wondering over the fallen bird; and, following Ada, retraced our steps through the king's “palace.” Outside, a crowd of eager, excited people pressed round us with shouts of wonder, which they kept up till we reached the hut which was destined to be our residence. I was now so utterly exhausted that I no sooner got within than I flung myself full upon a couch of skins that lay in one corner. I am also afraid that something like a groan of pain escaped me at that moment, for Dick was instantly by my side, while Ada held to my lips a gourd of some refreshing liquid, which it is needless to say I greedily drank.

I remember very little after that, for I was there and then struck down with fever, and must have been laid up for about five weeks. Dick, unfortunately, kept no account of dates, so that from that time forward we knew not one day from the other.

When I had regained sufficient consciousness to talk and know my cousin, I was informed of the severe attack I had undergone, and also that Ada, like a guardian angel, had tended me night and day. Dick had done his best (a statement not necessary for him to make), but he vowed that had it not been for her unswerving devotion, I should have given up the ghost. I remember sending for her to receive my thanks, and I can see her now as she came and leant over me; her great eyes full of tears, her lips quivering with emotion, and yet a bright and happy light illuminating all. I thanked her a thousand, thousand times for all that she had done for me, and you may judge of my great astonishment and joy when I heard

her answer in our own language. True, it was with a slight baby accent, but it was nevertheless English, and it seemed to me the sweetest English I had ever heard. Dick, it seems, had talked with her during my long hours of quiet slumber, and little by little her native tongue had come back, till she spoke with scarcely any inconvenience.

Favoured by a strong constitution, I rapidly recovered, and great was the excitement in our little camp when I one day intimated a wish to arise, and go out and take the air. As it was summer and the weather very warm, there was little chance of taking a chill, so they led me out and sat me down on the sands of the lake, and there Dick and I talked for more than an hour of the strange adventures which had befallen us, of the beautiful Laughing Hair, and her ultimate fate, and of the difficulties that would be thrown in our way of discovering the Secret Cave now that the ugly half-blood had guessed the true reason of our journey.

“Kalua has certainly taken a most pronounced dislike to us,” said Dick; “but, notwithstanding his dislike or the dislike of fifty such as he, we must discover that gold. I have come all this way to find that Secret Cave, Archie, and I am going to find it before I return.”

“Then you have considered our return?”

“Oh, yes; but we must not think of attempting it yet. We are now in the hot season, and, consequently, all thoughts of journeying for some time will be impracticable.”

“And do you still hold the idea of journeying westward when we do start?”

“Yes; because I am sure we shall find both civilisation and good country sooner by going that way. We cannot be many hundreds of miles from the coast, and may happen to strike some station at half the distance. If we can arrange with Kalua to let us have some carriers for the first part of the journey, our arrival on the outskirts of the settlement is reduced to a certainty.”

“By the way, how is Kalua?”

“I have not seen him since that day. He is a surly, morose devil at best.”

“That's unfortunate. And when you get to the settlement, Dick, what then?”

“I shall go back to Melbourne and organise a secret expedition; return here, and load up with gold, my boy.”

“I am one with you, old fellow; but we must first find the gold.”

“That we shall do, never fear. Believe me, it will be a queer thing if I don't worm the secret out of somebody. I am sorry to say Ada knows absolutely nothing about it, though she has heard rumours of some secret being kept in the Great Caves. In the meantime we shall live quietly enough here till the winter comes round. The people are civil and harmless enough, and so far have not been guilty of anything greater than

curiosity. I don't care much for that half-bred chief; and Wanjula, the priest, medicine man, and general humbug, is as snaky looking an individual as it has ever been my lot to see, but I don't think they mean us harm; at least Jimmy, who mixes promiscuously with the people, has heard nothing — have you, Jimmy?"

"No, Mass'r Dick; I've heard nothen'," replied that worthy. "All the same, black fellow too civil. Jabber too dam much soft soap for me. Jimmy no understand one black fellow who give another black fellow all him grub."

"Why, Jimmy," said Dick, "you surely don't object to such delicate attentions? Who ever heard of a black fellow grumbling because he was given too much to eat? You grow epicurean, James. But make the most of it, for we shall soon be on the 'wallaby track' (tramp) again."

"The wallaby, Mass'r Dick," he replied, his face brightening. "The sooner the better. No like this dam country, gold or no gold. No can understand how one black fellow give another black fellow all him grub," and with a brain bowed down by that weighty problem, he departed along the sand, puffing vigorously at his pipe.

"What's the matter with him, Dick?"

"The fool's in one of his sulky moods, I suppose."

"Perhaps," I answered. "But do you think there might not be something in the wind? Something he guesses at, but is not certain of."

"There may be. Anyhow, we can keep our eyes open. I don't trust that sallow-faced devil, Kalua. I am sure he hates us, and what is more, he's jealous."

"Jealous! Of whom?"

"Ada."

"What?"

"It's a fact. He has the audacity to aspire for her hand."

"And she?" I could not help feeling greatly interested. Indeed, I would have been less than flesh and blood could I have remained indifferent as to the fate of one so beautiful, and to crown all, one who had nursed me back from the grave.

"Hates him like poison. I believe she would sooner take a lizard to her bosom than that mongrel."

An inexpressible feeling of relief shot through me, and I turned my eyes to where she stood, some fifty yards away, talking to a native girl, and I thought her the sweetest thing in existence.

This native girl, Lusota by name, was Ada's constant companion. She affected Laughing Hair's style of dress, that is, she covered all those portions of her anatomy which her less delicate sisters had no scruples in showing, owned a most dazzling pair of black eyes, a figure full of life and grace, and a face, albeit its darkness, possessing few of the objectionable traits of her people. She was a true native belle, and had

been courted by most of the young men of the village, but so far none of them had pleased her fastidious taste. At this I was rather surprised, for some of the young men were exceedingly wellbuilt, and quite handsome, as blacks go. Still her heart remained unconquered, and after she and Ada had advanced, and stood talking to us for a few moments, I saw that no young man of the tribe of the Mandanyahs would ever be able to say that he had won the heart of Lusota.

Chapter XIV

Describing the Religious Ceremonies of the Mandanyah, Also a Sanguinary Naval Engagement.

AND the reason? She was madly in love with Hardwicke. She watched his every movement with a tenderness inexpressible, and whenever he chanced to address a stray word to her she trembled, grew confused, and made a most elaborate attempt to blush violently; and that she failed in her endeavour I would not swear, for to my eyes her dusky face changed to a warm red. Her eyes never left him, no matter where he moved. It was a most pitiable case of devotion; fawning, and as humble as the love of a dog. What the young maiden's inner thoughts were is beyond me to define; but I suppose the heart of a savage beats, especially when love is the motive power, much like the heart of any other woman.

To say that Hardwicke was unconscious of the passion he had awakened in Lusota's bosom would be equivalent to writing him down an ass, which he was not. On the contrary, he was as shrewd as he was brave, and saw that the native woman was "dying for him," as the saying is; but being unsmitten by her charms, he gave her no encouragement whatever, which, as is the manner of these things, increased her passion but the more. A kind look from him was construed into something totally different from what he meant, and if a few words accompanied the look, the acme of Lusota's happiness was reached.

Dick was a man whom any woman might have loved. Not more than twenty-nine, he was the ideal model of manly strength. Tall, so close to six feet that he was not certain of being under or above it; he had a splendid face, and a head so gracefully set upon his shoulders as to remind one of the cut of a thorough-bred greyhound. Indeed, he told me once that the boys at school used to call him by that name, but he thought it was on account of his swiftness of foot. Perhaps it was both. Some people would have thought his face hard, and so it was, but only in anger, then it could grow as rigid as iron; but in his lighter moods it was as open and lovable as a child's. As I close my eyes and let my mind wander back to the old times, I see him in all the glow of youthful strength; I look into his clear, truthful eyes again; I hear his kind old voice; I feel the warm clasp of his hand in mine, and I think that had I been a woman I should, like Desdemona, have prayed heaven to send me

such a man. I could not wonder at the great love the native woman bore him.

I sat out on the sand as long as I dared, and then, for fear of taking cold, retraced my steps to the hut, leaning as before on Dick and Ada. The touch of her sweet figure against my own acted electrically upon my nerves, and I felt my weakened form tingle with a strange new life. The walk from the beach to the hut was all too short, and I selfishly wished the few yards could have been transformed into so many miles.

By degrees my strength came back; slowly at first, but when once the returning vitality got the upper hand, it drove the remaining weakness away with astonishing velocity. It was splendid to feel strong and well once more, to inhale the life-giving breeze, to bathe every morning in the clear blue waters of the lake, and then return to the hut and eat a hearty breakfast. I verily believe I was a much better man after my illness than I had ever been before. And my delight at my recovery was intensified by the great pleasure I derived from beholding the joy which was depicted upon every lineament of Ada's face. How good, how tender she was! Dick, old friend, I loved you none the less, but life was different now. Many and many a time had she paddled me over the lake, because it would do me good, she said; and when I grew stronger she taught me how to use the paddle, and her delight at my success was of childlike intensity. They were happy times, more happy than dreams of dreams; and I grew to love my fair companion, love her as I thought only an angel could be loved. She was the very essence of my being, this bright wild, baby thing; my purer soul against which my other nature stood out dark and defiled. So guilty a creature I seemed in her presence, so unworthy her trusting, pure affection, that I shrank from whispering to her my passion as one would shrink from doing a sinful thing.

We passed the long, bright days together paddling, shooting (I tried to teach her the use of the revolver, but she had no love for such uncouth weapons), fishing, and in short excursions about the mountains, Dick sometimes with us, but oftener away with Jimmy "fossicking." It was during one of these rambles that she pointed out to me the path which led over the mountains to the desert on the other side; the path we were destined so soon to take amid such incidents as none of us are likely ever to forget.

One day we told her of our project to take her with us if she would consent to trust her welfare in our hands. She was overjoyed at the proposition. She had lately begun to think of the time that was coming when we should leave the village, and her thoughts of our departure had been the bitterest. Great tears welled up in her eyes as she declared she would go with us if it were to certain death. The journey had no terrors for her, and the probability of fatigue, always fatigue, was as nothing, she declared, to what her life would be should we depart without her. I quite

believed her when she said that we should find her as good a traveller as any of us, for her figure was most strongly and beautifully made — as I think I said before — while her step was wonderfully agile and elastic. We impressed upon her the necessity for keeping the project a secret, as we foresaw no little difficulty in getting her away.

The winter was now approaching, it being the sixth moon of the summer months, and the village showed unusual signs of activity. One of their great feast days was drawing near. These days, or more properly “times,” for they often lasted a week, were two in number, and were celebrated at intervals of six months, their division of winter and summer. When the sixth moon reached its zenith the festivities began, and lasted on for days, according to the inclination of the people. General dissoluteness prevailed. The villagers danced, sang, and literally stuffed themselves with fine things. The chief priest was general master of the ceremonies, and by his outrageous example so demoralised the people that neither life nor property was sacred for a month after.

These things I learnt from Ada, who seemed to dread the approaching festival, so many horrors and excesses had it to answer for. What those horrors and excesses were she did not say, so I was left to my own conjectures. Nevertheless, I was anxious to behold the revels, anticipating no harm. Jimmy was stolidly indifferent, or if he showed feeling at all, it was more of nervousness than anything else. This was so strange that I was forced to question him, but he only answered he wished we were going away before the riot began. He preferred the desert, even in drought, to the people about him; and wound up by repeating again that he did not understand one black fellow who gave another black fellow all his grub. For him to be the least concerned at anything, was so new a feature in his composition, that both Dick and I were inclined to laugh him out of it, but we restrained our merriment, for though we failed to comprehend the reason of his taciturn manner, we came to the conclusion that there might be some effect for the cause.

We were suddenly awakened one morning shortly after this by hearing a dreadful hum of discordant noises, and on arising and stepping out we found that the whole of the village was astir and evidently ripe for the approaching festival. Such a babel and din I had not thought the quiet place capable of producing. The people laughed and sang, beat rude tom-toms, and blew shrill music from reed pipes, ear-splitting to a superlative degree. Each person was dressed in what might be called his Sunday clothes. He had some extra hideous daubs of paint on face and body; while a few gaudy feathers, stuck here and there promiscuously, gave tone to the animal and displayed the variety of its costume. Some, however, had cloaks of a very gorgeous description, being entirely composed of many varieties of beautiful feathers worked together in most artistic patterns. These were the “aristocrats” of the place, and wore

round their necks ruby ornaments, denoting their proud position. On the lake were many canoes, all gaily decorated, one in particular being of great size and having a platform in one end with an awning of woven grasses above it. This we eyed with no little curiosity, for we knew it was the king's, and in it Ada, accompanied by Kalua and Wanjula, would make the journey to the Great Cave. She was to ask permission for us to go with them, and we awaited anxiously her approach, for be it remembered, Morton had spoken of a water journey when he was led blindfolded into the Golden Chamber, and we imagined this visit might offer a substantial clue as to the whereabouts of the treasure. The journey to the cave was the religious portion of the festival, and Ada being a kind of priestess, would naturally be one of the chief personages of the carnival.

We spent fully two hours upon the beach, awaiting the arrival of the royal party before it showed any appearance of turning up. The people had become less boisterous, and a gradual abandonment of interest ensued, when, just as their spirits were at a very low ebb, there was a great beating of tom-toms in the chief's palatial hut, the barricade swung slowly back, and forth stepped twenty or thirty armed warriors looking dreadfully savage and wild in their outlandish rig and daubs of red, white, and blue paint. A buzz of admiration arose from the populace at the brave show the men presented, though each man and woman who composed that populace knew that at a signal from their tyrannical king those well-armed warriors would sweep them from their path like reeds. And yet they applauded. But I have seen the same thing done in civilised countries. After the warriors came the medicine man, Wanjula, swinging a vessel which contained some smoking substance, and as he walked slowly along he repeated some uncanny incantation. He was also received well by the crowd, though in their heart of hearts he was detested; but he was a great power in the little place and the people bowed low before him. Ada next appeared, very pale and very lovely, and yet withal a heartsick look in her face. Her dress was savage but beautiful, being much like the other feathered cloaks I have mentioned, but of much greater beauty and length. A collar of gold was made fast round her throat, in which there were rubies of inestimable value, whilst on her head she wore a cap of white feathers ornamented with more of the bright red stones. A suppressed murmur of admiration greeted her appearance; but when Kalua, who came next, appeared, dressed to death and literally blazing with jewels, he was greeted by the crowd, which hated him even more than the priest, with a great burst of loyal enthusiasm. He distorted his face into a smile of acknowledgment and then marched on with all the dignity of a true monarch.

Slowly the procession made its way down to the canoes, we accompanying. A glance from Ada assured us that we might visit the

Temple of the Great Spirit, the name by which the cave was known, so we jumped into the great canoe without awaiting the ceremony of an invitation. Kalua appeared to be greatly annoyed at our intrusion, and though he had not seen me since the day of our arrival, he showed no signs of recognition. My nod and pleasant smile were entirely wasted on the rascal, and I felt as though I could have kicked him for his incivility. The priest, on the contrary, welcomed us with a smile, than which a more cunning and unsavoury one the world has never known. However, we pretended to notice these things but little. The paddles gave way, and keeping time to a strange, soft song the rowers sang, we shot out on to the bright waters, the rest of the people following in a long procession.

We steered straight across the lake to the great coneshaped hill I had observed on my arrival. The dozens of gaily dressed canoes and the people in their grandest attire must have created quite an attractive scene. Above the great sun shone in a cloudless blue sky, which seemed to reflect itself in the listless waters, so still and blue were they. All was laughter and gaiety, the sound of many voices coming across the waters — an incessant hum. The tom-toms were heartily slapped, and the shrill reed pipes fiercely blown, making as merry a discord as one could wish to hear.

Ada alone seemed melancholy. She was pale and nervous, her timidity increasing as we neared the big hill. I begged her to tell me what ailed her, so that I might do something to alleviate the pain I knew she was suffering. But she only whispered that she suffered no pain, and that I could not help her.

“You do not like this business?” asked Dick.

“I hate it! It is so dreadfully cruel.”

“Then why do it?”

“I must.”

“Must!” We both spoke this time.

“Yes, yes. If I did not they would kill me.”

“The devils!” I muttered.

“Ah! you do not know all. The people are bad, heartless. They hate me truly, but are afraid of the king.”

“But why should they hate you?” I asked.

“It grew with the women first. They envied me my white skin and yellow hair; my power over the old king and the men of the village. Now they hate me because Kalua seeks me for his wife.” She shuddered as she spoke the word. “Nor will they believe I hate him, for that dog Wanjula has told many lies about me.”

“I know I shall wring his neck before I have finished with him,” said Dick.

“And has Kalua been good to you then?” I asked.

“He has not harmed me,” she replied ambiguously, “because he knows

the consequence.”

“And the consequence?”

“Many people sleep soundly at the bottom of the lake. Rather than be defiled by the touch of such a beast — — ” and she broke suddenly off, shivering with excitement. I had never seen her agitated before and had no conception of such fire in her nature. Her eyes blazed, and she put her teeth fast together.

“Do not agitate yourself,” said Hardwicke softly. “We are with you now, and will protect you with the last breath of our bodies. Never forget that we have weapons here that kill instantaneously. If Kalua, or the priest, or people offer to harm you, they shall reckon first with us. In the mean-time, try and do as you have always done, so that you shall arouse no suspicion of our intentions. In a few days now we shall have left this cursed village far behind and all its barbarous nonsense.”

“Ay, nonsense you may well say,” she replied, “but such nonsense as will freeze the blood with its very horror.”

“What is the ceremony, then?” I asked.

“I dare not tell you,” and she cast a furtive glance towards the chief and his priest. “But,” and her voice dropped to a whisper, “on no account let the face of the god affect you.”

This communication we received with all soberness, though of its meaning we were entirely in the dark.

Kalua, who had watched us all through this conversation with evil eyes, beckoned Jimmy and spoke to us through him.

“The Laughing Hair has soon acquired the tongue of the white man?” he said.

“Is she not of the white race, oh, Kalua?” Dick answered. “It is but natural that the language of her infancy should come back to her again.”

“But I comprehend not one word of your strange tongue, and yet I, too, am of your race.”

“God forbid!” ejaculated Hardwicke. “But,” he said in answer to the chief, “your infancy was not passed with the white men. Had it been, oh king, thou couldst have spoken with the most mighty. As the king is great above all men in rank, so is his intellect starlike as compared with the camp fire intellects of other men; his language is the essence of the beautiful.”

Hardwicke was now coming it so strongly that I was afraid he would overstep the bounds of modesty. I even thought Kalua had doubts of his genuineness, for he watched him from out the corners of his bloodshot eyes with a deep, searching gaze. But Dick's face lost not its imperturbability. He looked so unconscious of the effect he had produced, that a more cultivated physiognomist than Kalua might easily have been deceived.

“Speaks the Laughing Hair much?” the chief asked abruptly.

“No, chief.”

“Strange,” he replied. “A woman who speaks not much.”

It was curious to see him. I know he did not believe a word Dick said, and yet my cousin lied so gravely to him that he was forced to doubt his own sharp senses. Look, and look again he would, but never by a flutter of the eyelid did Dick betray himself.

“Laughing Hair is the daughter of a great race,” replied Hardwicke. “None but words of wisdom fall from her lips. He who speaks much, speaks to little purpose.”

Kalua might have told Dick it was a pity he did not keep that precept in mind, but his thoughts were running in another channel.

“Spoke she not of the Temple of the Great Spirit?” he asked.

“No, chief. Many were the questions we put to her, but she refused an answer.”

“Then you sought to know the reason of this gathering?”

“Yes.”

“And she told you not?”

“No.”

“It is well.” And he looked towards where she sat, with an expression upon his face of the most extraordinary cunning. But she saw him not, for her face was buried in her hands, and she appeared in absolute dejection. I have often wondered since what would have happened had not Dick lied so consistently.

The canoe had in the meantime reached the foot of the big mountain, where we disembarked, following the king and his medicine man, the rabble bringing up the rear. Our way lay along a narrow valley, which we gradually mounted by the aid of rough steps cut deeply in the rock, till we came to the entrance of a cave. Here the procession stopped for a moment while Wanjula uttered a short speech; then half-a-dozen fellows advanced and lit some torches, and the cavalcade entered the gloomy jaws of the cavern. There was nothing exceptional in the structure of this passage beyond the fact that it seemed both natural and artificial; natural, inasmuch as some mighty force must have driven the great aperture through the rock which the art of man had carved to suit man's purpose.

We travelled at little better than a snail's pace for about two hundred yards, when the passage suddenly opened, and by the way the torchbearers stood still I guessed we had reached the end of our journey. Then Wanjula spoke some words, the echo of which lingered long above our heads, and I knew that we had entered some vast subterranean chamber. Nor was I left long doubting. His order had been for more light, and in a moment the whole of the great cavern was flooded with the glare of many torches.

This cavern seemed to be fully a hundred feet broad, and nearly twice as long. There could be no doubt that the same agency which had forced

the passage had also formed this chamber, for beside and above me the rock was torn away in great masses, which nothing but powder, or some agency far more powerful, could have accomplished. I could well see the roof, though it was of great height, which later on surprised me much, for I saw no opening there, and I wondered how the smoke of the torches escaped from the chamber. As you may be sure, Dick and I were all eyes, but nothing in the shape of treasure or a secret cavern met our vision.

In the meantime Ada and her two evil deities, as I knew Kalua and the priest to be, had traversed to the far end of the cavern. I kept my eyes fixed on her and followed with Dick, wondering what was coming next. And just then I thought of her warning, "On no account let the face of the god affect you," and I whispered it to my two companions.

I had scarcely finished speaking the words when Dick seized me violently by the arm.

"Good heavens, look!" he whispered hoarsely.

And I looked and saw the fac-simile of the monstrously hideous idol we had seen in the cave of the White Mountains.

I could scarcely believe my senses. It was so very strange, so unaccountable. Yet there the idol was, complete in all its horror, that horror intensified by the intense glare of so many torches. There were the same scaly legs, the breast and body of a woman, and the head half human and half beast with its jaws distended in a horrible blood-curdling grin. I could not repress the shudder that crept over me as I looked up into the great red glaring eyes of the brute. It seemed so instinct with life, so like the living emblem of a hideous nightmare. The dreadful grin almost fascinated me, and I ceased to wonder why the benighted savages approached it with such humility and awe. Upon their faces, distinctly defined by the uncanny glare of the torches, was stamped their horror of the strange god they worshipped. They stood quite still, scarcely daring to breathe, and the silence of death reigned in the gloomy chamber. With eyes fascinated, riveted to the hideous face of the image, which the more it was stared at seemed to grin the more, they stood, till some of them, overcome by the terror of their emotions, fell shrieking to the earth. They were at once pounced upon by the bodyguard of the king and immediately secured with thongs. There were six altogether, five women and one man.

Kalua, the priest, and Ada now mounted a platform right in front of the great statue and beneath its outstretched arm. This arm was raised as though in the act of striking, but I paid little or no attention to it then, for Wanjula had arisen and spoken some words to the people, at which they all fell flat on their faces muttering and moaning in a most deplorable manner. After a good ten minutes' groaning they were bidden to arise, and the priest once more addressed them, although not before he had paid homage to the idol in the following strain, as translated to me

afterwards by Ada, who knew his speeches by heart.

“O Great Spirit! King of the people who dwell by the shores of the Blue Lake, of the tribe of the great Mandanyah, of the children of the mighty Wanjula, the priest of the sun; he who traversed the burning sands of the fierce desert with the chosen of his glorious people, the people who dwelt in the sacred White Mountains ever since the birth of Time, hail! Thy voice shakes the earth as does the wind the breast of the water; thy anger is as the fire that lights the face of the great sky when the trees upon the mountains are aglow with flame; thy frown is black and angry as the smoke thereof; thou art the one great Spirit of the Universe, mighty and everlasting — hail!”

And the people flung themselves upon the earth and shouted, “Hail!”

He continued to harangue the assemblage in the same far-fetched vein, exhorting the people to glorify the Great Spirit who watched over their welfare with such unceasing devotion, and that he would intercede with the same Great Spirit on their behalf, so that all their doings might be prosperous and general blessings fall on them like the rain from heaven. And the ignorant crowd murmured words of approbation. He also exhorted them not to forget their allegiance to the king, for in the king was the perfect ideal, or himself, for through himself alone could their petitions reach the ears of the spirit.

Then followed that which rather puzzled me at the time, but which I saw through shortly after. He spoke as follows: —

“It had been the hope of the Priest of the Great Spirit, that they who entered here with the white skin upon their faces would have acknowledged the power of the Supreme Master. But their heart is as white as their face; the blood stands still in their bodies! they are under the care of the Evil One. So be it till the time shall come.”

All eyes were turned upon Dick and me, but no one made a move. The same mocking smile overspread Kalua's features as he watched us from beneath his brows. But he looked in vain for the qualm of terror. We listened to Jimmy's translation with the most apparent indifference. Ada sat pale and trembling. Wanjula continued —

“But there be many who acknowledge the power of the Deity. Great and glorious are the blessings that shall be conferred upon them. Their names shall be handed down from generation to generation, and men and women unborn shall sing the praises of the brave who gave their all to glorify the god. Let them approach.”

In a moment there was a hideous din set up, the five women and the man shrieking with terror. Poor things! what could it mean? I saw the warriors drag them one by one over to the platform, I saw Ada's face grow terribly scared and white, and then, as at a given signal, every torch was extinguished, and we were in utter and complete darkness.

The shrieking continued. The piteous accents of despair were truly

heartrending. They filled the cavern with a thousand dreadful echoes, turning one's blood to ice. I shall never forget it. The gloom seemed to heighten the horror a thousandfold. Shriek followed shriek, and groan followed groan, till I felt my brain surge to and fro. I could conceive no hell more dreadful. I held my revolver tightly and tried to keep my brain clear, for I fully expected we should all be assaulted under this cover of darkness. The suspense was awful, the horror unendurable. My blood now burned like fire, and I felt a mad desire to rush forward, to do something. Then I thought I heard a thud, then another and another, till the noise grew less and less and then ceased. And while the stillness of most dreadful death hung in the air it was startled by a heavy groan, a gurgling, dying groan. Then everything was still again, and a moment after Wanjula spoke; the torches were relit, and I saw a sight that made me gasp for breath.

The six people who but a moment before had stood up in all the flush of life, were now stretched dead upon the platform, with a stream of blood traced over the face of each. Being so close to the bodies, to look was to examine them, and I found that the left temple of each had been pierced by some sharp-pointed instrument. That Wanjula was the executioner I had no doubt, but with what he had wrought the terrible outrage I could not guess.

Just then I felt something wet fall upon the hand I had placed on Hardwicke's shoulder. It was warm, quite warm, and on closely examining it, I discovered it was red in colour, while a still closer inspection told me it was blood. I started like one suddenly smitten an undreamt-of blow. Instinctively my eyes wandered aloft. We were standing right under the outstretched arm of the idol. I pulled Dick back with an expression of horror; the thing looked so like preparing to strike us down. The malignant grin upon its horrid face became intensified, and I thought a more keen expression of hate shone from its blood-red eyes.

Dick seized a torch from an attendant bearer, and held it close up to the arm of the image. A partly-suppressed cry of astonishment escaped him. "By heaven, Archie, look at that axe!"

It was a wonderful thing, but the hand of the idol held a small axe, similar in all respects to the one he had found in the cave in the White Mountains. Blood was dripping from it, and as we watched we saw drop after drop fall. It, then, had been the weapon employed in the killing of the unfortunates. But how came the people to allow such unwilling sacrifices?

Wanjula spoke. "Behold, O worshippers of the Great Spirit, the bodies of them that owned the power of the God with the Terrific Face. The great hand was loosened, and the Sacred Axe descended; the sacrifice is made, and the god appeased."

I guessed the situation in a moment. They who had shrieked aloud at

the terrifying appearance of the monster had owned his power, thereby proving, according to their awful form of worship, that they were the people the god wished to take unto himself. I was horror-stricken at the thought. If by any chance we had been led into a display of feeling, neither Ada nor Kalua could have saved us from the clutches of the priest and the people. It was a law as unalterable as those of the Medes and Persians that whoever owned the influence of the god should be rendered as a sacrifice to him. Luckily, it took more than an idol to frighten us, though how great our astonishment would have been at the sudden appearance of such a similar form it would have been hard to say, had we not remembered Ada's warning, "On no account let the face of the god affect you." I understood the priest's utterance now of not "acknowledging the power of the Supreme Master." Had we done so, we too should have swelled the list of those who have been "lost in the bush."

"What a couple of cold-blooded scoundrels!" said Dick to me. "For two pins I'd put a ball into each of them, and end their hideous business. That devil, Wanjula, has done all this, the fiend incarnate," and he worked himself into such a passion that I was in mortal terror lest he should spring forward and wreak instantaneous vengeance on the two villains.

"For God's sake, keep quiet!"

I was all anxiety to see what part Ada would be called upon to play in this grim farce, and my curiosity was about to be satisfied, for at a word from Wanjula she uncovered her hands from her face, and arose, pale as a lily, and broken-hearted with woe, and in a sweet, musical voice, chanted the following strange words, standing with arms stretched over the dead: —

"They are gone, and the fire of life is burnt low within them,
Cold and white is its ash; they are senseless and void of all motion.
They are gone, for ever gone, in the realms of the great unknown;
The realms of the unreturnable, wonderful realms of the mystic.
They are gone in the flush of their youth, in the glory and pride of their
life,

Gone to the kingdoms of him who is greater and vaster than all things;
Whose voice is more loud than the voice of a thousand great thunders,
And whose words are as keen as the flame of the prongs of wild
lightning.

Called he to them, and they cried aloud in their agony,
Thick and more fast fell their tears than the fierce rains in summer.
But their cries and their wails shall be changed into songs of rejoicing,
And their salt tears transformed to the cool, sparkling drops of the
morning,

Which gild with the dazzle of crystal the shrubs and the grass on the

mountain.”

Hers was then the task to deliver what might be called the funeral oration. Sometimes it was of great length; it depended entirely on her mood. On this occasion she was far from at her best; indeed, she told me after that she could not have said more, even had her life depended upon it.

But her portion of the ceremony was not yet accomplished. She was to place her finger on the wound of each corpse, and with the blood that adhered to it moisten the great lips of the idol. How she would have gone through such a dreadful ceremony I know not. Luckily, the whole proceedings came to a sudden and wild conclusion. A voice rang with startling effect throughout the great, weird chamber —

“The Wyhumas! The Wyhumas!”

At that cry the women set up a horrible shrieking, one half of the torches were extinguished, while the men rushed wildly about, groping here and there for their arms, or for any weapons they could lay their hands on. All was consternation and confusion. At a sign from Wanjula, the warriors who had protected the platform rushed to the entrance of the cave, with most ear-splitting yells, and spears and axes uplifted. Their advance seemed to inspire many of the others with bravery. They laid hold of the first object that came to their hand, and, shouting in a most barbarous fashion, rushed pell-mell in the tracks of their fellows.

We were attacked by the Wyhumas, the great enemies of the Mandanyah tribe. As a consequence, terror reigned supreme. Men and women wailed in a most shocking manner. Kalua crouched trembling on his seat. His sickly, yellow face had turned to a livid blue; his limbs shook like an aspen. All the supercilious bounce and swagger had flown; he looked mean enough to be pitied. Wanjula, on the contrary, was all ablaze with excitement and fury. He exhorted the people with burning words to fight, fight till not a single Wyhuma was left to pollute the face of the earth. Then would he curse the men for dogs and cowards; then implore them, with cajoling accents, to rush forth, like the great warriors they were, and annihilate the enemy.

But from him my attention was riveted to Ada. The women crowded round her, clinging to whatever portion of her clothing they could touch, and crying in piteous accents for her to save them. She, poor thing, looked as bewildered and terrified as the rest. Her eyes met mine, straining, anxious, and full of entreaty.

I was by her side in a moment. “What is it, Ada?”

She answered rapidly, “These people think I have more than human power; that I can make the Great Spirit do my will; that I, in fact, am a sorceress, and can destroy the Wyhumas if I choose. Wanjula first told them the lie, and he has just again repeated it, and urged them to use force if I refuse. He has told them that I would betray the tribe — the

tribe that has protected me all these years — and go over to the camp of the Wyhumas with the white men. He hates me, and would like to see them tear me to pieces; and they have grown so fierce at my seeming ingratitude that I fear them.”

“The devil!” and I shook my fist at his ugly face.

“Listen,” she continued in the same hurried manner. “The Wyhumas think I am a witch, that I have wrought their race all the misery it knows, and that I have caused a plague to carry off many of their people. They demanded me of the old king — he who died twelve moons before you came, who was more kind than a father — and of the old white-haired priest who was slain by Wanjula when Kalua came to be chief; but they loved me, and would not give me up.”

“Why did they demand you?”

“I was to suffer death to save their race.”

“Horrible!”

“When Kalua was made king, they sent once more, but he would not surrender me either. He wanted me for his wife. Now the Wyhumas have attacked us, and unless I prove my loyalty to the tribe by saving it, they will kill me.”

“Tell them, then,” said I, “that you will save them. You hear her, Dick? Pray God we may be able to drive them off,” and, giving her a look of encouragement, I flew towards the entrance of the cave, my two companions following hard in my tracks.

I guessed our rifles would cause a mighty dread in the ranks of the besiegers, for they could never have seen or heard the like before. This was the thought that bade me tell Ada to let the people know that she would save them, for I felt sure that the unknown agency of gunpowder would have a most surprising effect upon the uncivilised denizens of these wild places. I had never read of it failing to terrify those who knew it not; and if our brush with the natives, recorded in a preceding chapter, was an indicator of triumphs to come, I felt that victory would be as sudden to us as surprising to them.

On reaching the entrance of the cave a curious sight presented itself. The water was alive with canoes, all jumbled together in the most perplexing manner. The wild cries that filled the air were like the shrieks of a legion of maddened demons. Spears were hurled, axes and waddies used indiscriminately. Boats were driven into one another, which, sinking, left their wretched occupants struggling in the water, when they were immediately speared, or had their brains knocked out by the great clubs which some of the more powerful savages wielded like straws.

It was difficult to determine who was getting the best of the engagement, for the combatants were so hopelessly mixed that at first I scarcely knew one from the other. But I was not left long in wonder, for I saw that, whereas our canoes were all black, the hulls of those belonging

to the enemy had a broad white border round them from stem to stern, if such nautical designation will answer the description of a boat whose ends are similar.

We three stood watching the battle, the fury of which, becoming contagious, entered our veins, and made us long to have a hand in the slaughter. Jimmy was like a madman. He danced up and down the sands, waving his hands, and shouting at the top of his voice. At one time I thought he would have plunged into the water, and swum over to the combatants; but, if he for a moment entertained such an intention, he did not attempt to put it into practice. His master was not much cooler.

“Oh, Lord,” he cried, “if we only had a boat.”

But we had not. The look-out had warned our people in time, and they were able to get afloat before the enemy could do any damage to their ships.

It was a dreadful engagement while it lasted. The combatants stabbed and cut without intermission till that portion of the lake on which the canoes floated seemed to be literally covered with bodies, broken canoes, spears, waddies, and all other instruments of savage warfare. The din grew louder, the yells more fierce, and I saw to my horror that our men were getting gradually driven back upon the coast.

At last things reached a climax. Two of our biggest boats, well filled with men, suddenly turned tail, and made for that part of the shore on which we were standing.

“What are they doing, the curs?” yelled Hardwicke. “If they don't show fight, the battle's lost.”

It was too true; but the fellows had no intention of showing fight. They bent over their paddles with the determination of men who are going to get out of a hot corner if they can. But what added to their consternation, and also caused us considerable alarm, was the fact that two great canoes, crowded with Wyhuma warriors, had observed the retreat of our men, and had given chase.

“Those fellows must be checked,” said Hardwicke, pointing to the Wyhumas.

We understood his meaning. I shouldered my repeater, and Jimmy his shot-gun. We waited till the largest of the enemy's boats was within fifty yards of us and about twenty from our cowardly crowd, when Dick gave the word, “Fire!”

Such a strange, wild roar those hills had never known since the birth of Time. Before the bewildered savages had even guessed that some supernatural agency was at work, we had emptied our magazines into their first canoe, much, I could see, to the discomfort of its occupants. Crack, whiz, crack, whiz, whiz! Like dogs our rifles barked. Dismay overwhelmed the enemy; in a moment all fighting ceased. Every eye was turned to the shore, where the smoke from our guns lay like a little cloud

upon the air, while away among the distant hills the echoes pealed like the cracked whisperings of some hoarse-throated fiend.

Then a great cry of terror arose from the ranks of the Wyhumas. They became suddenly impressed with the belief that they had been attacked by a band of spirits. Some, standing bolt upright in the canoes, extended their arms to heaven, and uttering dreadful cries, flung themselves into the water and were drowned; others crouched low in their boats, and moaned and groaned over the bodies of the fallen; while those who still retained their wits, seeing two white men standing, as it were, in a cloud of smoke, cried out that we were supernatural, and called upon their companions to fly, to do which they required no second bidding. Ten minutes after, there was not a single live Wyhuma seen. The broken canoes and dead bodies were the sole mementoes of the sanguinary battle.

I fully expected that Dick and I would come in for a fair share of applause in consideration of our services, and I was not disappointed. The people crowded round us with exclamations of wonder and admiration, and I know not how far their enthusiasm would have carried them had not Kalua and the priest at that moment advanced from the cave, the former looking as large and brave as the ideal king should look, while the latter cried aloud to the people that he had invoked the god on their behalf, and that consequently victory had crowned their actions. The people studied us curiously, as though trying to think for themselves, but the effort was too much for them. They ended in believing that our great powers of annihilation had been given us by the god through Wanjula's intercession. Thus were we done out of that glory by which we had hoped to profit.

"Well," said Dick, glancing furiously at the priest, "if I am not even with you yet, I don't deserve to prosper. And look at that cur Kalua. One would think he had just won a second Waterloo. But here comes Ada."

She was very pale and more than very lovely.

"What should I have done without your aid?" she cried. "I have nearly died of fright."

"Who has dared — — ?" I was beginning.

"That man held me," she gasped, looking at Kalua, who surveyed us with the same tantalising smile upon his evil face, "while Wanjula seized the sacred axe. At the first news of defeat I should have been slain and my body handed over to the Wyhumas. My life is no longer safe, nor yours. Take care, take care."

My blood rose so hotly at this recital of her wrongs that I know I should have killed both those villains on the spot had she not restrained me by pointing out the probable consequences of such an action.

"We must escape," she said. "Several of my people will follow us. Till then, as you value your lives, be calm and watchful. Let them never take

you by surprise. They are as cunning and revengeful as serpents. Sleep with one eye open.”

We knew her advice was good, and unhesitatingly accepted it, though inwardly my cousin and I harboured up thoughts of Kalua and his priest which, if disclosed, might shock the fastidious sense.

Chapter XV

In Which is Given a Description of the Corroborree, Or Native Dance.

WE returned to the village a diminished though jubilant procession. They who had remained behind met us at the water's edge, and loud and long were the congratulations showered upon one another. They had watched the fight from the shore, and also heard the report of our rifles, and guessing we had been the means of saving them all would have given way, in their impulsive manner, to salvos of delight, had they not, as by instinct, become aware that such displays of feeling were not in request just then.

We were sickened with their want of gratitude, and marched hurriedly through the excited throngs to the seclusion of our hut. Ada accompanied us in all her regal splendour, and while Jimmy was busily occupied preparing dinner, we held a cabinet council on the situation of affairs. She was the first to speak.

"I said a while ago I was not safe," she began, as soon as we had seated ourselves, "but if I am not safe, you are in positive danger. How they intend to strike you I do not know, but that they mean you mischief I guess too well."

"Then we must be prepared for them," said Hardwicke. "The odds are against us, but they shall find we don't go down without a struggle."

"That is well said, Dick," she replied. It was delightful to hear her use the word, and I fancy, though it may be only fancy, that my cousin blushed. "And spoken like the brave man that you are; but what, after all, are two against so many?"

"Three, Missy," said Jimmy, correcting her. "Me no belong the same stuff as Mass'r Dick and Mass'r Archie, but me cut the nose off any dam black fellow in the camp."

"Yes, three, Ada. You must count Jimmy as one. He is a good one, too, an absolutely indispensable one," said Hardwicke.

"You must forgive me, Jimmy," she replied, smiling.

"It's nothen', Missy," he said. "I suppose I'm gettin' old, now, and don't count for much; but there was a time when I could brain any black on the Murrumbidgee plains, cut his dam throat and eat 'um, too, if it comes to that!" — and, muttering sundry threats against the Mandanyahs, he

continued his work, and we our conversation.

“Counting us as three armed men,” went on Dick, “and, knowing the power of our arms, do you not think they will be afraid to attack us?”

“Suppose they get those arms from you?” she answered.

“Would they dare?”

“Wanjula will dare anything,” she replied, “and Kalua, too, for the matter of that, when his own interests are at stake. The people think your guns are supernatural, and so did Wanjula at first; but Kalua, whose father was a white man, learnt from his mother all the wonderful ways of our people. Therefore is it known to him that every white man uses the gun; that it is not supernatural, or only useful to the whites, but that it is a weapon manufactured by the white man and easily destroyed. That which was long forgotten is suddenly remembered again. The old people talk of Morton and the strange, death-dealing tube he carried, and Wanjula and many of the warriors are convinced that you are but mortal like themselves. Consequently your position has weakened, for you must understand that position was only safe while they thought you something more than human.”

“Then,” said Dick, “the only thing we can do is to make a bolt for it — escape,” he added, seeing she did not comprehend him.

“Yes, that is all.”

“And your plan?” I asked, for I had implicit faith in her sagacity. Indeed, her mind was of the very brightest, the most wonderful, considering the limited opportunities which had been hers of improving it.

“You remember the path on the mountains?” She turned to me as she spoke. “The one I pointed out to you that day? It leads right over them to their base on the other side. It was by that road both Morton and I were first brought to the village. Far on the other side of it stretches a desert which many of our people have penetrated to great distances, but have then grown frightened and returned, saying that it was limitless and that no drop of water was to be found on its great wide face. Now this statement must be wrong, for have not I, Morton, my poor father, and, lastly, Kalua, have we not all crossed it? and could we accomplish such a feat without water?”

We were bound to reply that they could not.

“Then,” she continued, “there must be water somewhere, and we must find it.”

“Bravo!” said Dick, “you are a brave girl.”

She was indeed, and my heart beat rapturously as I surveyed her.

“Then,” she still continued, her face flushing at the warmth of our praise, “one day before we intend to put our design into execution, I will despatch with skins of water and provisions half-a-dozen carriers whom I well know I can trust. They at least will keep us company for many miles

in the desert, and bear the necessaries of life. After that we must depend upon ourselves.”

“And can you really do all this?” I asked.

She smiled and said she could.

“Then we are as good as saved!” I cried.

“Name but the time of starting, and I will guarantee to do all I have said,” she replied.

“Why should it not be at once?” I asked. We are not in love with the village nor its occupants. Neither are they devotedly attached to us. The Golden Lake would be an excellent place if we had twenty well-armed men at our back; but as we have not, the sooner we get out of it the better.”

“You are right, Archie,” broke in my cousin. “By Jove! it shall be at once. It touches me to the heart to think of flight before we have discovered the gold, but I shall live in expectation. A dead millionaire is no better than a dead pauper. Avarice must bend to self-preservation, though it's mighty hard, old fellow.”

“I'm afraid your chances of discovering that cave, even though it exists, are very remote,” said Ada; “particularly as the secret is one known only to Kalua and the priest.”

“But don't you think you could worm it out of Kalua?” asked Dick.

She flushed and trembled, and a pained expression came in her eyes.

“I beg your pardon, Ada,” he said, “a thousand, thousand times.”

“And you really think there will be no difficulty in getting the people to do as you wish?” I asked, foreseeing that I had better cut in with some remark.

“None whatever,” she replied with such conviction, adroitly taking up my hint, that I could no longer doubt her capable of carrying out her part of the programme. Why should I? So sweet a creature must possess unlimited sway over the hearts of civilised or uncivilised mankind.

These thoughts flashed through me as I sat looking at her beautiful face, which, with the sun's bronze upon it, only seemed to make it more wholesome and lovely, and set off to greater advantage her wonderful eyes, those eyes so earnest, bright and piercing that they seemed to penetrate your very brain, and read the thoughts you could not even whisper. As she sat there in all the flush and glory of young womanhood, her sunny hair gleaming like golden gossamer, the red blood tingeing her cheeks, and a brightness and animation about her whole being which made her irresistible, I thought her the divine embodiment of all that was most glorious in woman, and I loved her with the ardour of a giant, and I vowed a silent oath to God that I would guard her more tenderly than my own soul.

Dick spoke. “Can you get these people ready in a day?”

“I can.”

“And they will keep your secret?”

“Ah, Dick; you are afraid to trust me?”

“No, Ada; you are a brave, wise girl, a girl in a million; but I am naturally anxious.”

“And so am I. Every hour is fraught with horror to me now. I shall know no peace, no rest, till I am far away from the power of those two dreadful men. Welcome a thousand times the extreme horrors of the desert to the life of terror I am leading now.”

“Then the sooner we have said good-bye to the Golden Lake, the better,” I remarked.

“Yes, indeed, indeed! Oh, if I had only the wings of the great black swan; if we all had them,” she added quickly.

“It would be more than pleasant,” Hardwicke replied; “but as we have them not, Ada, we must do without. Now for business. Can you get your carriers away by to-morrow night?”

“Yes.” And a very decided yes it was.

“Good. Then on the night following we will make the attempt.”

Jimmy now brought in the smoking dinner, and though we begged the pleasure of her company at our primitive meal, she refused, saying that she had work to do, and that she intended to show us how well she would do it. We were loth to let her out of our sight; but saying we should see plenty of each other by-and-by, she made us a pretty little bow and departed.

“Well,” said Dick, after she had gone, “that girl is the essence of all that is brave and beautiful. I never saw, never imagined anything like her, and if we don't get her safely out of this place, old man, it won't be for the want of trying, will it?”

“It will not, Dick. Poor thing! she has little knowledge of what she is undertaking.”

“No,” he answered; “but she has a brave heart, and that is worth many a pound of muscle.”

With all of which I was inclined to agree.

“It is an awful thing,” he presently remarked, in such solemn tones that I thought something dreadful was coming, “that we shall have to leave this place so soon, especially with that secret undiscovered. But after all, our life and the life of that dear girl are of more consequence to us than the wealth of the universe. And yet if I had only myself to consider, I would find that treasure if I stayed here for years. I came here to find it, and it goes against the grain to give it up.”

“Then why do so?”

“I admit my avarice, old boy, but I'm not altogether selfish. Besides I'm not going back empty-handed. You see this has been a long, tiresome journey of ours, and if we received no compensation for the trials we have undergone, do you not think it would be very hard?”

“What are you driving at?”

“I never thought I should come to robbing a church, Archie, but that's what it resolves itself into.”

“But where is the church?”

“There is no church, my boy, but a temple — which distinction is my excuse for robbing it. A church sticks in one's throat, but a temple can be swallowed. In that temple there is an idol with a dozen little idols in attendance, and all those idols have ruby eyes.”

“And you mean to say — — ”

“I do.”

“Then heaven help us if they discover — — ”

“But they won't. You see, old fellow, rubies are of great value — ladies are very fond of them, you know — and they are so much easier to carry than gold. Think what a benefactor to the fair sex I shall be. Besides, Archie, the Temple of the Great Spirit can be the only place that holds the secret we are so anxious to gain.”

“Perhaps you are right,” I said. “And we'll have one more good hunt in there before we go.”

After dinner we had a smoke and sat talking over our prospects, thinking it best to keep within doors, or inside, to be more correct, till Jimmy, whom we had sent out to reconnoitre, as it were, should return. When he did do so he had nothing to report but that there was going to be a *corroboree* (native dance) that night, and by the preparations being made it was to be on a grand scale. This rather aroused my curiosity, as I had never seen one of these wild dances though I had heard much of them, and we were debating it when one of Kalua's bodyguard entered our tent and informed us that we were invited by the king and his priest to be present at the ceremony that night. We sent our respects back to the king and his Chief Rascal telling them that it would give us great pleasure to avail ourselves of their invitation.

Twice I saw Ada that afternoon and on one occasion I asked her if she was going to the *corroboree*, to which she gave a shuddering negative.

“I saw it once,” she added. “It was not so bad when the last Wanjula was priest, but now it is horrible.”

“The last Wanjula?” I asked.

“All priests are called Wanjula,” she replied, “after the great chief priest, the carver of the statue.”

Here then was a piece of history which interested me greatly. It was a fact after all, though few people seemed to imagine it, that the Australian black had not always been the demoralised brute he appears to us in these later times. Heaven only knows what he might not have been in the far-off ages when most of the now civilised world was a howling waste. China was civilised when Europe was overrun with savages, and who can say what these people might not have been in the days which knew

no records?

Jimmy, my cousin, and myself set out for the scene of the coming festivity about eight in the evening, though not before our dusky friend had prevailed upon his master to take with him the little jewelled axe which all this time had remained bound up in his swag. Dick was inclined not to burden himself with it, but Jimmy pleaded so earnestly that he complied with his request simply to humour him. We carried our rifles and revolvers, for ever since we had known of the enmity which was directed against us we never left them out of our sight, fearing that they might be stolen from us and destroyed. With them we knew we could command attention, for there is nothing a man respects more than that which can harm him.

At the southern end of the village, on an open space that led right down to the edge of the lake, the scene of the *corroboree* was pitched. Allured by the glare of the torches, the shouts of the people, the beating of tom-toms, and the universal shrieks of delight which fell from the lips of the swarms of dusky savages, we found that our arrival was well timed, the proceedings being about to commence, as the king and his priest had just then come.

Everything was in semi-gloom, the number of torches not being sufficient to dispel the darkness that hung in the air, but we easily perceived Kalua and his right-hand man sitting on a rude elevation about five feet from the ground. To them we went, and mounting the platform beside them, were received by the two scoundrels with apparent courtesy; with, in fact, too much effusiveness. Then Wanjula clapped his hands and spoke aloud; the torches were applied to a great pile of wood round which the savage squatted, and in a few minutes there was a roaring flame.

Then the tom-toms began to beat, and about a hundred nearly naked savages, forming a circle round the great fire, began to dance and sing in a grotesque and horrible manner. They shouted, raved, waved their spears and waddies with intense simulated fury, while to add a more startling horror to the scene, each savage was painted in streaks with some white substance, looking, as he danced about, like a hideous, living skeleton.

I see it all so plainly now; the dark sky above, the great red fire below in the glare of which danced and shrieked a hundred furious skeletons, a hundred fiends incarnate, while round about them sat hundreds more, looking, in the weird red light which fell upon them from that distance, a multitude of evil, grinning spirits. I shall never forget the brutal faces, the wild, beast-like laughter. All sense seemed to have suddenly left them. They were animals — savage, growling, laughing, fighting animals. A universal madness seemed to have seized them. All constraint, all control was gone. Like a pack of infuriated brutes they roared and kicked till

their strength left them, and they fell exhausted and foaming at the mouth like men with epilepsy.

Still the fun waxed furious, for when the men could dance no more, there uprose a body of women, painted in the same hideous fashion, and equally as naked, and the dance grew faster and faster, and the shrieks and laughter more fiendish and horrible. Their dreadful faces seemed ablaze with fury, their eyes shone like great clots of illuminated blood; they gnashed their teeth till the foam flew in great flakes from their mouth, and their tongues wagged to and fro as do the tongues of dogs when they are dying of thirst. It was a shocking, a sickening sight, enough to make one wonder if the same God made us all.

“Do you think,” said Hardwicke, “that our ancestors used to carry on in this manner?”

“Perhaps.”

“What a rare time they must have had of it. But joking apart, did you ever see such a thing? They are not human beings at all, but wild beasts. I have seen the *corroboree* three times before, but it has never been like this. What are they going to do now?”

The she-fiends had ceased their infernal gyrations only through sheer exhaustion, and were led or dragged back to the circle; more wood was heaped upon the fire, and the flames springing higher and higher, lit the surrounding scene with an unholy wildness. Then when the flame abated and the fire gleamed a mass of living embers, half-a-dozen men advanced towards it, bearing between them some long, dark objects, which they jerked unceremoniously upon the glowing mass of fire. In a few moments a strong smell of burning flesh assailed our nostrils.

“*My God, they're cannibals!*”

It was Dick's voice, and he bounded like a rocket from his seat beside Kalua, while with horror depicted upon his countenance he surveyed the unnatural sight.

“Who and what are they, I wonder?” asked he.

“Him belong Wyhuma savage,” said Jimmy, who, seeing Dick suddenly spring up, bounded to our side. “This fellow savage bring 'em ashore — now make plenty eat.”

“Come, let us go,” I said. “It is impossible that we can look on at such a scene.”

“Better not, Mass'r Archie,” said Jimmy. “Black man make 'um corroboree, finish 'um corroboree. He get dam wild.”

“What,” said I, “do you mean that if we were to leave in the midst of their ceremony, they might look upon it as an insult?”

“Don't try 'em, Mass'r Archie. Corroboree always make the black man's blood burn. This fellow belong man-eater. White man dam nice flesh. You sabbee?”

“Good heavens!”

“You are right, Jimmy,” broke in Hardwicke; “we will see it through. Stand by, my boy, in case of a row.”

“Me ready, Mass'r Dick. You sabbee now why Jimmy no like one black fellow who give another black fellow all him grub?”

“Yes, blind fool that I was,” answered his master. “But have you heard anything? Do you think they intend to attack us?”

“I've heard nothen', seen nothen'; black fellow jabber me nothen'. All the same, Mass'r Dick, watch them two,” pointing to Kalua and the priest. “That priest belong big rascal. I wring him dam neck yet.”

“We are in an awkward fix, old fellow,” said my cousin to me. “What they intend doing I have a notion, and if it comes to that it can't be helped, but we'll give them a taste of our quality before we go under. In the meantime keep a watchful eye on the priest, I'll look after Kalua. Remember, they go to glory with us.”

With the end of our conversation was also completed the burning of the bodies. The brutes in attendance jerked them all covered with red-hot coals out of the fire, and disjuncting their several parts flung them in the midst of the people as one would fling a bone to a dog.

In a moment there was a perfect uproar, the savages scrambling for the meat like so many half-starved tigers. They kicked, scratched, thumped, and howled till the night air rang with this battle of the demons. Men, women, and children all fought with terrific fury, all made “night hideous” with their shrieks and execrations.

Kalua now turned and addressed us for the first time.

“What think the white men of the corroboree?”

There was the same bitter, cynical smile upon his ugly face, and he laughed his soft, hissing, spluttering laugh through the hole in his teeth.

“We think it is in keeping with the customs of your people.” It was Dick who spoke.

“Then the customs of my people are not like those of yours?”

“No, thank God!” Dick replied.

“The white man likes not the feast?” and he laughed his hissing laugh a little louder.

“No, chief. My people would rather die than eat the flesh of one another.”

“Then your people are fools. But perhaps the white man is not sweet.”

“He is not, chief. So bitter is he that none but worms will tackle him.”

“We shall see,” and he laughed his snaky laugh again, in which Wanjula joined, much to our united horror and disgust.

“What mean you by that, oh, Kalua?” asked Hardwicke. He replied not, but smiled his own dreadful smile and looked significantly at his confederate. I saw Dick's hand go suddenly to his revolver, but he restrained himself.

“Listen, oh, Kalua,” he said. “I am not a man of many words, and

speaking for the last time. Thou hast seen our prowess, thou hast known of our endurance. The Wyhumas shall tell of one as they sit round their camp fires when the nights are cold; of the other, the burning desert, could it speak, would tell thee such marvels as thine ears could scarcely credit. Therefore listen well, and take heed of what I say, thou Kalua, and thou, too, oh, priest. The moment thou dost seek us harm, that moment thou shalt die," and he turned his head from them with a haughty flourish, which meant that he would speak no more. They scrutinised him with a most malicious scrutiny, but made no reply.

In the meantime the fire had been replenished, and the great blaze shot once more into the sky, filling the gloom with a lurid glare. Then the wild dances began again, but this time men and women joined promiscuously in the mad revels, giving a fiercer zest to the proceedings. They shouted, screamed, and laughed with redoubled fury; the women's sharp, shrill, hyaena-like voices rising clear and distinct above the general tumult. Some exhausted fell gasping upon the earth, where they lay rolling their skeleton-like bodies in the dust, and keeping time with their hands and feet to the uncanny chant of the dancers, gasping out the while their mad, wild cries in a hoarse, throat-cracking voice.

Then the dancing ceased; more wood was heaped upon the fire, and silence horrible in its stillness ensued.

Presently the quiet was broken by a low, moaning sound, and two of Kalua's warriors were seen advancing towards us, dragging between them a poor, old, white-haired woman who groaned and moaned most fearfully at every step. They released her as soon as she was before the platform, and the miserable-looking old creature immediately fell in a heap to the earth, which caused a smile to illumine the features of Kalua and his worthy priest. She, however, managed with some difficulty to get upon her knees, and raising her thin, ghastly hands, while the tears streamed in torrents from her eyes and her white hair flew wildly over her withered neck and shoulders, she pleaded in a husky, sobbing voice for them to spare her few remaining days, for by a barbarous custom in use among these people, one person of the female sex had to be sacrificed to the god every year, and she was to be the oldest and most useless. Sometimes the god demanded two females, but that was generally when some young woman had offended the Wanjula.

A mocking laugh from the priest followed her heart rending appeal. "Old woman," he said, in his savagest tones, "what would you? The god demands the sacrifice, and we dare not disobey. Evil shall fall upon her in the world of spirits who renders not cheerfully up her life at the bidding of the god."

She, poor thing, only moaned the louder, entreating with wilder accents, with more appalling wails and sobs, that they would spare her life.

“Look you,” replied the fiendish priest, “the god demands it. We could not spare you even if we would. What right hast thou to ask for life, thou who canst neither bring warriors into the world nor gather thine own food? What are thou but a burden and a blot? We would not have our young women see how hideous they may grow. Strike!”

In a moment a burly savage had plunged his spear into the withered bosom of the old woman, who, after giving one long wailing cry, fell back dead.

We were horrified at this unnatural sight, that horror increasing a moment later when we saw the same burly brute who had struck the blow, take the body in his arms and cast it in the flames, where, for a moment, it rested clearly defined against the red-hot embers, and was then consumed like a piece of old cloth.

The people sat gazing moodily into the flames. Savages though they were, and heated by the dances and other horrible excesses, they saw clearly enough the horror of the crime that had just been perpetrated, and were silent; the women cowering close to each other, thinking of the terrible fate some of them were sure to suffer.

Then Wanjula delivered an address to the god; the people set up a mournful chant as melancholy and depressing as the one before had been hideously exciting; more wood was heaped upon the fire and we most anxiously awaited the next item on the programme.

We were not kept long in suspense. The two ruffians who had brought the old woman forward now appeared again, leading no less a person between them than Lusota, the girl who had lost her heart to my cousin Hardwicke, Her hands were bound, but she walked with a defiant attitude, her eyes literally blazing with anger. As she gazed upon us those angry eyes met Dick's. In a moment they were suffused with tears, but with an effort she shook off her temporary weakness, and they only shone the brighter.

“What are you going to do with her?” asked Hardwicke of the chief.

“You will see,” was the ambiguous reply.

“Harm her, oh, Kalua,” he said, “and the consequences be upon your own head.”

The king lost his unruffled cynicism for a moment and answered hotly, “Thou talkest more than is good for thee. I have many warriors at my command. I could destroy thee as I would a fly.”

“I have no men at my command, chief,” Dick answered, showing an undaunted front, “but I have that,” tapping his rifle, “which will hurry thee to thy death long before one spear of thine shall touch me.”

Kalua hissed something disdainfully through his teeth and waved his hand as though he would speak no more, but he exchanged a look with Wanjula which spoke volumes of hate and pent-up revenge. Lusota tendered Dick a grateful, loving glance, which the two arch fiends

observing, made them scowl more furiously than ever.

“Cheer up, my girl,” he said to her. “No harm shall come to you.” Though how he intended to stave off the coming danger I was at a loss to comprehend.

Kalua then arose and addressed the people, and the plot against Lusota was unfolded. Wanjula, it seems, had been commanded by the Great Spirit to make the extra sacrifice of a female, of which I have spoken, because the god was wroth with the women on account of the laxity of their morals, and as Lusota was the worst offender (which was a lie), the god had demanded that she should suffer.

The people received the speech with silence, but the girl Lusota fairly shook with fury.

“You dog! you dog! you dog!” she screamed at the priest, and would have flown at him, bound as she was, if the guards had not held her back. Then, cooling down a little, she turned to the throng and cried aloud: “O people of the Mandanyah, listen to me and I will tell you how great a liar is Wanjula, the chief priest. Many long moons has he sought me for his wife, but I hated him, the dog, and would sooner take to my bosom the black snake. ‘Be my wife and thou shalt trample upon every woman in the village,’ said he. ‘Be my wife and the Laughing Hair shall serve thee on her hands and knees; or thou shalt hand her over to the Wyhumas; or I will slay her in the sacrifice. Thou shalt have more power than the king himself. But refuse, and thou shalt burn with the old witch, for so I will say the Great Spirit hath commanded me.’ I speak the truth, I swear I speak the truth. O people of the Mandanyah, behold this is the man ye have made your priest — nay, ye made him not, for he stabbed to death the last Wanjula as Kalua the king can tell.”

“The woman lies,” roared the chief.

“The woman lies,” shouted the people, or at least that portion of them that stood near the platform, which was mostly composed of Kalua's bodyguard.

“I do not lie” cried Lusota, her eyes flashing with fury. “It is the king who is the liar!”

“Strike her,” roared Kalua, his pale, corpse-like face appearing to turn green. “Strike her, strike her!”

The same ruffian who had smitten the old woman advanced with uplifted spear, but before he had time to strike, the report of Dick's pistol rang out, and he dropped dead with a bullet in his breast.

Then followed a death-like stillness, the people being for the moment awe-struck.

“Kill her, kill her!” shouted both Kalua and the priest as they danced and foamed like madmen.

Two warriors advanced with uplifted spears to execute the barbarous order; two reports rang out, and the two natives bit the dust.

Then the cry went up: "The white devils! the white devils! Kill them, kill them!" And the guards with spears raised, surged wildly before the platform.

"Collar Wanjula," Dick cried to me, "and blow his brains out if he resists."

In a moment I had the chief priest in a strong grasp, with my revolver in close proximity to his temple. My cousin had Kalua in a similar position.

"Listen, chief," he said, and Jimmy glibly translated, "If those warriors advance one step nearer, you are a dead man."

Kalua's face was ghastly white with fear, for he could feel the cold barrel against his forehead. He waved the men back, and for the moment we were safe, though by their threatening attitudes I knew that our safety would not be of long duration. What was to be done now? We could not keep Kalua and the priest in our clutches for ever. Once release them and a hundred furious savages would dip their spears in our blood. It was painfully evident that they would soon break through all restraint, and then their fury was too horrible to contemplate.

King Jimmy broke the ominous stillness.

"Where's the little axe, Mass'r Dick?"

"In my pocket."

"That axe belong plenty sacred," he almost screamed in his excitement. "Show 'em it and they no harm you. Black fellow jabber me plenty."

I felt a sigh of relief escape me. What fools we were not to connect the two axes before. Dick let go his hold on Kalua, and, diving into the capacious pocket of his shooting jacket, brought forth the axe. This he held on high as though about to fling it into the crowd, while Jimmy roared out in stentorian tones in their own language —

"The Sacred Axe! the Sacred Axe!"

The people looked about them in wonder. The fire sprang up into a fierce flame, illuminating the weird scene with dazzling brilliancy. It fell upon the outstretched figure of Hardwicke and the axe he held aloft, making its ruby glow like a great red star. All eyes seemed to observe it at once. The people uttered cries of terror and prostrated themselves upon the earth. Kalua looked utterly dumb-founded; but Wanjula, who glared like a devil, sprang with the bound of a tiger towards Hardwicke with the intention of wresting the axe from his grasp.

"Look out!" I shouted.

But Dick saw him, and catching him on the bound, hurled him with such force from him that the priest, touching the edge of the platform, disappeared over the side with a sickening thud.

"O people of the Mandanyah," cried Dick, through Jimmy, "we seek ye no harm. As peaceful travellers we came; as peaceful travellers we would depart. But woe betide ye should ye seek to harm us. The Sacred Axe is

uplifted, and the Great Spirit alone can tell on whom it shall descend.”

At this the people groaned the more, and perceiving a good opportunity of escape, they being stretched out on their faces, he whispered, “Let us clear,” and we descended from the platform and hurriedly left the scene.

About twenty yards from our hut we met the girl Lusota. She rushed up to Hardwicke, and falling on her knees before him, clasped and kissed his legs till I thought she would have gone mad. He being somewhat embarrassed at this overwhelming exhibition of gratitude, gently raised her to her feet, when she threw her arms around him and, hiding her head on his breast, burst into a torrent of tears. Of course he tried to soothe her — he was kinder to her. A man does not like to see a woman in tears, be she white or black. Hardwicke was no exception to the rule. She was in his arms. She poured out her love and gratitude in one long flow of passionate utterances.

“This gin too much dam jabber-jabber,” remarked the Murrumbidgee king not over-delicately.

“Hold your row, you fool,” said Dick. “If you would jabber a little less yourself, it would be better for you.”

Chapter XVI

Containing the History of the Sacred Axe and the People of the Mandanyah.

I AWOKE with the first sign of daybreak, Dick and Jimmy following suit almost immediately after. My first thoughts were naturally of the little axe which had so strangely made us masters of a terrible situation. I dwelt long and pleasurably upon the value of its possession, and thanked that providence to whose unremitting attention we owed our series of successes. The Great White City in the Mountains was, after all, not barren of good. The axe had been our safeguard in our most serious crisis, and of what untold value it might prove in future we had yet to learn.

Dick was now wide awake, stretching himself lazily upon his couch of skins. Jimmy had arisen, and was away preparing the breakfast.

“Well,” remarked my cousin, eyeing me slyly, “what do you think of the people of the Mandanyah?”

I could not conceal a shudder of disgust.

“Ay, you may well shiver,” he continued. “To be stranded as we are among a mob of man-eaters is a lookout black enough to scare the devil himself.”

“I have had enough of corroborees,” I said.

He laughed. “And I. It was the warmest corner I was ever in in my life, and that's saying something. Unfortunately we are not yet out of the wood.”

“Then you think they really intended making us a portion of the sacrifice?”

“Decidedly I do. And what's more, they have been feeding us up for the occasion.”

“By heaven, it's awful!”

“Believe me, it's a fact. Jimmy guessed it a long time ago, but we were so blinded by our own superior penetration that we refused to see it.”

“But how strange Ada should never have told us that the people were cannibals. She must have known.”

“Undoubtedly; but perhaps she forgot, or purposely omitted talking of so disagreeable a subject. You must remember this dreadful custom would not seem half so savage to her as to ourselves; and though

essentially objectionable to her own tastes, she knows not enough of our manners to be sure that we would regard it with equal abhorrence.”

“That may be so.”

“Believe me it is. And, as for warning us, she could not tell us more than she knew.”

“True.”

“Their intentions have been kept so strict a secret,” he went on, “that neither she, Jimmy, nor the girl Lusota could have heard so much as a whisper; had they, we should have known of it. The whole thing has been carried through with astonishing secrecy. Kalua and the priest hate us. The latter would not hesitate a moment in giving the order for our destruction; but the former is afraid, for, like most human beings, he has a weakness, and that weakness is Ada. However deplorable the association of their names may be, it is none the less a fact, and to that weakness — which does him credit — we owe our lives. True, the axe was our saviour last night, but who has been our saviour ever since we set foot in this cursed village?”

“The loveliest girl in the world,” I answered.

“Ay,” he repeated, looking at me in a sudden and curious manner, “the loveliest girl in the world — and the thought that by some accident we should eventually place ourselves in the power of the people in such a manner as to leave him not responsible for our destruction. The Temple of the Great Spirit was one trap; the corroboree the other. But luck was on our side. Blessed be the sacred axe for ever,” and with those words he arose and picked up his coat, which was lying three or four yards away. But he no sooner took it in his hand than he uttered an exclamation of woe and rage.

“The axe is gone, Archie! Stolen, as I am a living man.”

I was thunderstruck. “What do you say?” I cried.

“The axe is gone!” he repeated, as though he could scarcely believe his own words.

“Do you mean stolen?”

“I do. It was in my pocket when I turned in last night.”

“Then some one must have entered the hut while we were all asleep and carried it off!”

“Yes.”

“What's to be done, now?”

“Heaven only knows.”

“Then we are lost after all!”

“Bad enough for even that. We must neither expect mercy nor consideration now. And I, of all men, am the cause; my God, Archie,” said he, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, “I could blow my own stupid brains out!”

“Don't talk like that, old man,” I said, for I hated to see him take the

thing so much to heart. "It was an accident — one that might have been avoided, truly — but as an accident let us make the best of it."

"You are a good fellow, Archie," he replied, "though had you offered to kick me I should not have objected. Believe me, you are not nearly so much annoyed with me as I am with myself. Do you guess the enormity of my offence? I will tell you. It means that we are entirely at the mercy of the rascal who stole that axe. It means that I, through sheer thick-headedness, through a stupid feeling of over-security, have brought us all to such a pass that our very lives are dependent upon the whim of a cannibal's fancy."

"Well," said I, making as light of the occurrence as I could, for I knew a great disaster had befallen us, and that had he taken more care of the axe such a misfortune had never been, "let the cannibal only give us breathing space and we'll elude him yet. Come, cheer up, Dick." I could not bear to see him so dejected; good, brave fellow that he was. "We've gone through more than this together; thick and thin, foul and fair, and the time's not come for tumbling under yet."

At that moment Jimmy entered with the breakfast, which consisted of kangaroo steaks and a sort of sweet bread the natives manufactured, and we fell-to, though not with the same zest as of yore. We informed our dusky friend of our loss, and he looked really scared for, I believe, the first time.

"That's bad, Mass'r Dick," he said. "That axe make black fellow awful scared. He think you belong all the same great spirit, you sabbee? — angel man — sort of fellow preacher-man jabber so dam much about. But now axe gone, black fellow forget all he think. Me no mind plenty fight, Mass'r Dick, but me no like this dam savage gobble me up."

This speech of Jimmy's under more favourable circumstances would have provoked us to laughter, but there was no sign of it now. Dick vowed that he would there and then take instantaneous vengeance on both Kalua and the priest, and I know not to what length he might have carried his threat had not Ada at that moment entered with a pleasant "Good morning" and a bright and happy smile upon her face.

"I have heard all," she cried, "you have the axe, the Sacred Axe. What luck, what fortune!" and before we had time to inform her that it was gone, she resumed with such rapidity and in such a whirl of excitement that her eyes blazed and her cheeks shone with joy: "Keep it, Dick, guard it well, for it is liberty, life, everything. It is the most sacred emblem of the Mandanyah tribe, a gift direct from the Great Spirit. With it you may defy king, priest, ay, the whole tribe, for none of them dare harm you now."

Poor Dick! If he was overwhelmed with Jimmy's remarks, his feelings may be imagined on hearing hers. His face grew deadly pale and he bit his lips till the blood started from them. He neither spoke nor looked at

her, but kept his eyes fixed fiercely on the ground.

“What's the matter?” she said, not failing to see our distress. “Are you ill?”

“No,” I replied.

A look of relief passed over her face, but it was only momentary. It was succeeded by one of pale, anxious inquiry.

“The axe?” she scarcely more than whispered.

“Is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, stolen,” and I told her how.

“Then God help us!” and she broke down and wept bitterly.

For a time nothing was heard but her sobs, the disappointment being so keen as to utterly crush her spirit.

Suddenly Dick turned to me. “I'll tell you what,” he said. “I've brought this trouble upon us and it behoves me to remedy it. Either Wanjula or the chief stole the axe, therefore one of them must possess it, or know where it is.”

“Well?”

“I shall demand it of them as my property. If they refuse to give it up, I'll shoot them both.”

“Alas! what good will that do? Will it give you back the axe?”

It was Ada who spoke. She had dried her eyes hurriedly, as though ashamed of her weakness.

“It will at least give me my revenge,” he said.

“And perhaps bring the whole village at our heels. No, Dick,” she continued, “the axe is gone, and it will never be seen by you again. I will not attempt to deny that an overwhelming calamity has befallen us. With that axe in our possession the way was clear for us to do whatever, or go wherever, we pleased; to demand whatever we desired, and they would not have dared to disobey.”

“Is that so?” I could not help exclaiming.

“Wonderful as it may seem, it is nevertheless true,” she replied. “Both axe and people have a history, and the superstitions relating to the weapon account for the reverence bestowed upon it.

“Long ago,” she went on, plunging at once into that history, “so long that it seems to all the people like a dream, for there are no written records; nothing but disconnected stories, which have more of the supernatural than the real in them, there lived beyond the great burning desert in the midst of the White Mountains, as they were named, a people called the Mandanyah, who were the forefathers of this very tribe of Lake Dwellers. Little is known of them, but it is said they were a brave people, and as clever as they were brave, for out of the rocks did they carve all sorts of wonderful forms and made huge strange canoes which carried many men over the big water that laved the foot of the mountains.

“One day a son was born to the king, and the wise men foretold his coming greatness. When he grew up to man's estate he became renowned throughout the country for his rock-drawings, which they say were of surprising beauty and wonderful invention.

“When on the death of his father he became king he had a marvellous dream, in which he was told to go to a certain part of the mountains which was as white and clear as crystal, and there consecrate a portion of his life in glorifying the Great Spirit. This command he, being a devout man, readily obeyed, and he could think of no better way of pleasing the god than by dedicating to him a statue; in fact, the god made it known to him that such an offering would be the most acceptable. This statue he carved from the solid rock in a cave which had been specially excavated for that purpose by his own orders.

“Here the people came in throngs to worship, and to behold the handiwork of the king, and when they saw the face of the god many of them were struck insensible with terror, for it is said the face was too terrific to behold.”

“We have seen it.”

“You have seen it?” she asked in bewilderment. “Do you mean to say that you have seen the statue of the God in the mountains?” and her face was alive with incredulous wonder.

“Yes.” I replied. “We explored the Great White Mountain, discovered the temple and the statue, and there found the Sacred Axe.”

“It is wonderful,” she murmured; “wonderful, wonderful! Many of the Mandanyah have tried to reach that place, but have never yet succeeded. This was long before my time, the last pilgrimage being in the early days of the old priest whom Wanjula slew. He it was who told me the history of the people, and all that I am telling you now. And he moreover said that in the days when they inhabited the regions of the White Mountains their faces were not black but brown. Oh, that he were alive now to hear from your own lips that you have seen the sacred statue, have trodden the sacred cave! Or even now, if the people only knew, you would be more honoured than king or twenty chief priests. Ah, why did you not tell me of these things before?”

“I have often meant to,” said Hardwicke, “and also to show you the axe, though I had not the ghost of an idea of its value then, and since I saw its fac-simile yesterday we have been so busy as to make me forget.”

“It is a thousand pities,” she answered; “a thousand pities.” And after further conversation on the subject of our misfortune, she again resumed the history of the Mandanyahs.

“On each side of this figure were carved six smaller ones, as in ours, though the great red stones which answered the purpose of eyes in each of the statues were both bigger and purer than the ones we have in ours.”

“And what became of those stones?” It was Dick who spoke.

“They must be with the statues yet.”

“Good heavens!” he cried. “And to think we never saw them.”

“Covered with the dust of ages,” she replied; “that is not to be wondered at. But let me resume. The stories which relate to the sacrifices are extremely vague. The Great Wanjula (he it was who carved the statues, and from that time every chief priest has borne the name) is known to have possessed himself of two axes, the blades of which were composed of two magnificent royal stones of the Mandanyah, which you call rubies. The other portions were of pure gold, a metal which the people of those times thought greatly of, but which we see no use for here, though, as I have told you, it is rumoured that the chief priest has much of it in his possession. How the axes came into his hands were never known, though it is said they were brought to him by the god himself.

“On the golden portion of the axes were written strange characters which were a source of wonderment to all people, none being able to decipher them. They were, however, eventually proven to be ancient signs or letters as used by, to them in those days, the people of the olden times. The meaning of these was at last revealed by the Wanjula to the people, he getting the revelation direct from the god. One part of the writing told that the axe was to be the sacred weapon of the sacrifice; the other, that none but the great priests of the Spirit could touch it and live, and that whosoever should lay sacrilegious hands upon it, without the consent of the chief priest, would be struck down by the god. From that time it has been employed in the yearly sacrifice.”

“But do you mean to tell me,” said Dick, “that the people really believe it is the god who strikes them down?”

“They do, undoubtedly.”

“Dear me. And do you?”

She flushed rather painfully I thought.

“I did,” she replied; “but that was when I was young. No, it is Wanjula who kills them.”

“If they knew it.”

“They will never know it. They will never think — they are too ignorant.”

“But if they were told?” Dick continued.

“Ignorance hates its ignorance to be displayed.”

“Surely, old fellow,” I said, “you are not thinking of turning missionary?”

“No, sir,” he answered, “that is not in my line, but it seems a great pity they cannot be told what fools they are.”

“They would not thank you,” said Ada. She then continued her story.

“Much time has now to be bridged over, of which I can give no account, but it is said that by degrees the great water that washed the foot

of the White Mountains disappeared into the earth and left nothing behind but a barren waste of sand. From that time the people's greatness faded, famine fell upon the land, and a portion of the community, more brave and venturesome than the rest, resolved to leave their country and seek one more prosperous and fertile. The man who was then the Wanjula undertook to lead the travellers, and for a charm or safeguard he was given one of the sacred axes.

“They journeyed over the mountains till they came to the great burning desert across which they with much difficulty passed, losing many people by the way. At length they reached this lake, and liking well the spot, finding grass, wood, and game abundant, they pitched their camp, and settled in their new home. The cave was discovered and in it the Wanjula, who was also famous at rock-carving, as all chief priests were supposed to be, carved the statues after the manner of those in the White Mountains, and created the temple where every sixth moon the same hideous scene is enacted.”

“But don't the people get used to the sight and refrain from screaming out?” I inquired.

“The men rarely scream,” she said, “but the women always, consequently the victims are nearly all women. And it is strange, too, that custom does not familiarise them with the horror of that face. I have known women gaze upon it half-a-dozen times without flinching, and then break down and become one of the sacrifice.”

“You have told us a remarkable story, Ada,” said Hardwicke, “and one which I, in my wildest dreams, would never have imagined. True, I have thought this great country could not always have been so barren of interest as it appears to the casual observer, but that one tiny portion of it really possessed so strange a history I had not dared to hope. If I had only heard it yesterday it would have made a world of difference. But that is past. Nothing will avail us now but courage and patience. I ask your forgiveness for my blunder, I cannot do more. But if I do not make up for it in the future it will not be for the want of trying.”

Then we fell to discussing our plans. So far she had arranged things most satisfactorily. Six strong and able men, fellows who were devoted to her, had offered to undertake the part of carriers. They were to set out that night and we the night following. We thought it advisable to grant them twenty-four hours start, for, should they accompany us and we should happen to be pursued, there would be no possibility of their escaping with their heavy packs.

Ada advised us before she left, not to show ourselves that day if we could avoid doing so, as the people would take some time to cool down after their savage excesses of the previous night, and there was no telling what they might not be guilty of, especially as we had cheated them out of a greatly anticipated pleasure — the taste of the white man. Therefore

we kept well within doors that day, talking over our plan of escape and longing for the time to come when we should be free of the village and all its horrible associations, for what we had gone through and what we were likely to endure, made us utterly contemn the very thought of gold.

When the night came on I sallied forth to stretch my legs and enjoy a pipe of tobacco, for thank goodness a little of that valuable weed was left, though it was most sadly reduced in size. My walk took me to the back of the village, or up against the foot of the mountains, which was as deserted as a graveyard. The night was dark, a few stars alone being visible, while great lumps of clouds swept over the face of the sky hurled by the strong wind of the west. I was just thinking what an excellent night it was to carry out our design, when not far from me I heard a gentle footfall, so gentle that had I not been standing still I should never have heard it; then a figure, phantom-like, passed within a few yards of me and was gone in the darkness. Another immediately followed, then another, and another until I counted seven, though I thought the last one seemed somewhat different from the others. These figures I of course guessed were the carriers Ada had engaged. But who and what was the seventh? She had only spoken of six. Could it be a spy? Was our plot discovered? I shuddered as I contemplated the thought. Then the idea struck me that I ought to follow and find out for myself, and then again I thought that I would be no match for the savage at such a game. "Besides," said I to myself, "if it is a spy he is sure to come back and report, and as he scents no danger he will return the way he went. This is the only track that leads over the mountains. If I stay here I am bound to catch him as he comes along." And, unlike Macbeth, I was able to screw my determination to the "sticking place."

I could not have taken up my position for more than ten minutes when I heard a very soft footfall coming down the path, and I edged a little more into the middle of it so that I might clutch the person before he had time to get away. A minute after I saw the outline of a figure in the gloom and prepared myself to spring, when a voice addressed me in the native language.

"Ada, by all that's living!" I exclaimed.

"Is that you, Archie?"

"Yes."

It was the first time she had ever called me by my Christian name, and there was something so very charming about the hesitant way in which she spoke it that my poor nerves thrilled.

"I thought you were a spy," she said, drawing close to me.

"And I you. The surprise is therefore so much the sweeter. I was about to give you a warm reception. I would not have you guess, for all the world, the horrible things I was going to do. You would think me as great a savage as any Mandanyah warrior."

She laughed at this, a lovely little laugh, and drew, I thought, just a wee bit nearer.

“Were those the carriers?” I inquired.

“Yes,” she answered. “I could not rest till they were gone, till I had seen them safely on their way. It seems now as though part of our own trouble was over.”

“You are a brave girl, Ada.” I could have gone on calling her brave, beautiful, and all other excellent adjectives without ceasing.

“Oh, no, not brave,” she replied. “I want to save your lives.”

“And I yours, for yours is far dearer to me than my own.”

We walked slowly along through the still night. Strangely dark and quiet it was. No sound was heard but the occasional moan of the wind as it came souging over the lake below. In the village the indistinct glare of a few camp fires added a still stranger aspect to the scene, lighting as they did the thick black air with misty gleams of fire. Mystically luminous they were, enticing yet uncanny; fit sentinels for such dreadful people.

Why my mind should have reverted to the people and their horrible doings, I know not, for it was entirely engrossed with something much more beautiful than native dances, skeleton forms, and demoniacal chants. But thought invariably gives birth to thought; so the image of the lovely Laughing Hair forced into prominence her barbarous surroundings: as, perhaps the fury of the infernal shades is drawn with such harsh vigour so as to better glorify the divine effulgence of heaven.

For some time now this beautiful girl had been constantly in my thoughts. When I first saw her in her wild, half-savage garments she was a revelation of lovely womanhood to me. Indeed I thought then, nor has my mind changed since, that she was the perfection of womanly loveliness, her sun-tanned face, flushed with hot, young blood, the full and sensitive lip, the dainty nose, the dimpled chin, and last though not least, her heavenly blue eyes, made such a perfect combination of womanly charms that must prove irresistible to one who thinks there is no such beautiful thing on earth as a lovely woman. I could have loved her then for her face alone; but later on, when I was attacked with my serious illness and she nursed me day and night with the tenderness of a mother who watches the sick-bed of her child, I found her innate worth and she became the lodestar of my life.

As I walked beside her that night in the thick, warm air, the passion I had sought to suppress for fear that Dick or she should think I endeavoured to secure an advantage over her through her ignorance of the world, burst its bounds and I told her that I loved her. How it came about I scarcely know. My heart was too wild, my brain too full of the pain of such dear excitement for me to remember. I only know she took my hand to lead me round some massive boulders, and that as the spark

is to the mine so was that touch of her small warm hand to my blood.

“Do you love me, Ada?” My arm was about her waist, and she was nestling close to me. I could feel her heart beat and her form tremble.

“Love you, Archie?” she replied, her breast all the while heaving tumultuously, “I scarcely know what love you means. But if it is to be happy when you are near, to be sorry when you are away, to be ever longing to see you, to have you always near me, then I love you very dearly.” And as if to emphasise this avowal she nestled closer still.

“God bless you, my darling, my darling.” And I drew her to me and kissed her with a very frenzy of joy.

We walked slowly back to the village, very slowly indeed for my arms were about her and I stopped every few yards to feast my soul with kisses, and yet we seemed to arrive at our destination all too quickly. The huts of the village loomed up out of the darkness and I had taken her in my arms once more to bid her good-night, when the moon suddenly shot forth from behind a cloud, illuminating the surrounding scene with unusual brilliancy.

At that moment I heard a quick step, and, on looking round, saw my cousin Hardwicke not half-a-dozen yards off.

“I wondered what had become of you, Archie,” he cried out. “Why, you dog, who've you got — — ” But he stopped short on recognising Ada. “I beg your pardon.” And he was gone as suddenly as he had appeared.

“Was Dick angry?” she whispered.

“Angry, dear. No. Why should he be?”

“I don't know.” But she did, and I also was to know before long.

We lingered but a short while after this. Our talk was of the morrow and especially of the morrow's night when we were to make the bid for freedom. Her child-like faith and trust in us were beautiful. She never questioned where or to what she was going. I naturally refrained from telling her the true history of her father's life. She would not have understood me if I had. I had made up my mind that if we ever reached the Swan River Settlement I would find out all I could of Harold Mayne. If he turned out to have been a worthless fellow she should know no more of him than I had already told her — viz., that he had died through exhaustion while trying to cross the continent; but should he have been more sinned against than sinning and was the victim of a cruel wrong, as set down in Morton's story, she should weep for him as a martyr. His failings would cause no diminution of my love for her.

I bade her good night, impressing her to be ready for the morrow, and stealing one more kiss, made my way to our hut with a heart as light and joyous as though no danger darkened or would ever darken the bright horizon of my life.

Dick was not in when I entered. I called his name gently, but received

no reply. Jimmy only was complacently snoring in his corner. What had become of Dick? I asked myself time after time. One, two hours went by, and still he returned not. Then I grew alarmed. It was not his wont to prowl about in such a manner. I thought some accident must have befallen him. That perhaps Kalua or the priest, finding him alone, had seized him, and this thought suggested a thousand horrible ones, causing me no little anxiety. I dared not even attempt to guess the fate that would befall him should he be in the power of those most unscrupulous savages. I knew that his disdain had engendered hate, and that that hate would take such revenge as would make even horror creep.

I was on the point of arousing Jimmy, when I heard a footstep outside, and a moment after the wanderer entered.

“By Jove! Dick, I'm glad you've come. I was beginning to get alarmed at your absence. The ways of the savage are inscrutable, you know. In another minute I should have had Jimmy up and begun to search for you.”

He laughed, but said nothing. It was not a pleasant laugh. It seemed both forced and cold, a thing so unusual in him that I asked if anything was the matter. He replied in the negative, but in such a weary manner that I was certain he was trying to evade my queries. However, as he refused an explanation it was not my place to press the subject, so I immediately dropped it. I could not sleep. My mind was full of Ada and the love that had so newly blossomed. I thought a thousand bewildering thoughts, I invented a thousand pleasures for her. Indeed, so far did my imagination run riot that I entirely overlooked our present position and the great journey which awaited us before we saw again the face of a civilised man.

I was suddenly awakened from my dreams of rapture by hearing Dick call my name.

“Archie!”

“Well?”

There was a long pause before he answered.

“You love Ada?”

“I do indeed.”

Again he paused.

“And she — she — ” with an effort, “loves you?”

“Yes.”

No answer came, but I thought I heard the sound of a stifled sigh, and by his hard breathing I knew that he was greatly agitated. Then the truth dawned on me in a moment, and I saw why Ada had asked me if he was angry. He was in love with her himself!

Presently his voice came through the gloom again. He spoke with an effort, and yet with great firmness.

“Of course you — you love her as an honourable man?”

My first impulse was one of anger. I felt like asking him his right to question me. Then I remembered what he had been to me, of the great love I had borne him, and that he too loved her, and had a sacred right to be answered.

“Don't be angry,” he said. “You know she is a convict's daughter, and has not been brought up under the refining influences of an English life.”

“If God should spare us to once more regain civilisation,” I answered, “she shall be my wife. Is there anything more you would know?”

“No. God bless you both. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter XVII

Concerning the Adventures Which Befell Us in the Great Cave.

WHEN I awoke next morning I was not surprised to find my cousin had already arisen and was out. I knew that he had passed a wretched night, poor fellow! for, whenever I chanced to awake from my dreams of happiness, I could hear him tossing restlessly on his bed, and at times I thought I heard a partly suppressed sigh. That this melancholy state of affairs was not to my liking may easily be imagined. It was more than sad to think my joy should be his woe — he to whom I had leaned with a more than brotherly affection. It was a strange trick fate had played us, a sad one it might prove. To love her, Dick, was your destiny as mine; to win her love, old friend, was my great blessing from God. It was the sun of my universe, the breath of my existence, life, heaven itself, the hope to which I clung for peace in this world and happiness in the next.

When he entered later on he bade me good morning with what he meant should be the same old smile, and tried to talk of things in the same light-hearted fashion as of yore, but when I stole a look at his dejected face my heart bled for him. He must have suffered a world of agony throughout the night. His mouth was drawn, his eyes hollow, and about his words and listless movements there was an indifference which he in vain endeavoured to conceal. I, however, pretended not to notice these things, and talked with him of the night that was to come and bring us good or bad fortune; if he thought we should escape the village without a fight, and how far he imagined we should have to travel westward before we could once more hope to see the face of a civilised man. To all these things he answered in a manner so strange, and so little interest did he seem to evince in our plans, that for the moment I began to think such thoughts I blush for even now. I know I wronged you, Dick, but in the littleness of my own nature I saw with little eyes; yet when you read these words you must think of me as one who, with all his faults, bore for you an affection which even the grave shall not destroy.

We had despatched our breakfast and had just finished cleaning our guns when we were unpleasantly startled by the sudden appearance of Lusota. She was breathless, her eyes dull and heavy with weeping, her hair loose and flying, and her usually tidy dress draggled and torn in

many places. We gazed upon her with consternation, for that her wretched appearance foreboded evil we too easily guessed.

Her tale was soon told.

That very morning Ada and she had been surprised by Kalua and the priest, who, in company with two warriors, had entered their hut and made them both prisoners. And then she related, with a passion scarcely imaginable, how they first tied Ada's hands together and then fastened her (Lusota) to one of the corners of the hut.

When these operations were complete there ensued a furious outburst of long pent-up anger. The chief devoted all his eloquence to Ada. He upbraided her and abused her in turns, told that he knew of the preparations for our escape, and finally wound up by declaring, with a hideous laugh, that we should no longer prove an obstacle in his path as he had determined on our death that very night.

To all this she listened with cheeks aglow, defied him to do his worst, but warned him that for the indignity he had put upon her we would demand a horrible revenge: At this he grew so furious that he slapped her face again and again, mentioned something about the caves and refractory women, and then commanded the two warriors to march her off.

The priest and Lusota being then alone, Wanjula renewed the subject of his passion, but finding her deaf to all his prayers and entreaties he used her with extreme roughness, and wound up by seizing a thong that was lying by and flogging her in a most unmerciful manner. He then vilely taunted her with her love for Hardwicke, told how he had stolen the Sacred Axe, and also informed her that she should have the pleasure of seeing us burn that very night. Then, with threats of a similar beating when he returned, should she still remain obdurate, he left her. With great difficulty she managed to loosen the thongs that bound her, and her first thought being of us she made all haste to inform us of this wretched development of the situation.

Such was the story to which we listened with feelings of horror. All our bright prospects were blighted in a moment. Ada was gone, the preparations for our flight discovered, and the leaders of the tribe doubly incensed against us. It was a dull, black look-out, and one against which our other troubles seemed as nothing.

“Why should he want to take Laughing Hair to the cave?” asked Dick of the girl. “Is not his hut, surrounded by his men, strong or safe enough?”

“Ay, great chief,” she replied — she always called him chief or great chief — “but the cave is safer.”

“How safer? What do you mean?”

“It is sacred, chief, and no one is allowed to enter it, nay, not even the king himself, without the permission of the priest.”

“The dog!” The same old fire was beginning to burn his blood. The girl's eyes gleamed.

“Yes, he is a dog — a dog of dogs! I hate him, the son of a dog!” and she railed on at the memory of the priest with such a Niagara of terrific epithets that poor Jimmy, utterly bewildered, ceased attempting to translate. Then she cooled down somewhat, and looking imploringly at Hardwicke, continued: “Thou art great, chief, and strong and beautiful as a god. I am thy slave and love thee more than thou shalt ever know. At thy command I would lie down for thee to trample on.”

“Well, well,” said he impatiently, foreseeing that she meant to ask a favour.

“I hate the Wanjula chief.”

“And I.”

“And thou wilt avenge me?”

“Yes, Lusota,” he replied.

She fell before him and kissed his feet.

“Chief,” she said, and her eyes flashed ominously, “thou art great. Give this dog to me and I will die for thee.”

“It shall be as you wish.”

“Then he is mine, for thou art mighty,” and she arose to her feet with a furious expression upon her face. “I will tear his lying tongue from his throat, the dog, and beat it about his face.”

“Peace, peace,” cried Hardwicke sharply. “Art thou no better than the rest of thy tribe? I like not such ferocity, girl. No more of it, or I withdraw my promise. I tell thee thou shalt be avenged.”

“It is enough, chief. As the fire and the storm are mighty, so art thou.”

“Then listen, and forget thy anger, for it is not seemly in thee, and I like it not.”

“I listen, chief.” But I could see that she was thinking more of her revenge than anything else.

“Is there no other reason for taking the Laughing Hair to the cave but that it is sacred?”

“Should Kalua keep the Laughing Hair in his hut,” she answered, “many young men of the village might demand her of him, for she is as sweet to them as the south wind to the parched-up forests, and well both he and Wanjula, that dog of dogs, know it. And therefore he took her to the cave where none of the tribe may enter on pain of death.”

“On pain of death?”

“Ay, chief; and it is the Great Spirit himself who strikes the blow with the Sacred Axe.”

“The devils!”

Now that calamities so numerous had so suddenly befallen us, my cousin seemed instinctively to have regained his wonted activity of mind and body. There was the same bent brow, the same tightly-drawn lips,

and the general defiant look upon his face which reflected the determined soul within. Interest had taken the place of indifference, and excitement was rapidly driving the dreary languor from his blood. He no longer thought of his unrequited affection. The girl he loved was in danger — he had forgotten all else.

“Then,” he continued, “it would be no use our asking any of those young men you speak of to accompany us and save the Laughing Hair?”

“No, chief; they dare not go.”

“Then,” turning to me, “we must carry out this project alone. We have nothing to expect from them now. It is war to the knife.”

Our arms were luckily in perfect order, and while we were going through the necessary equipment for such an undertaking I asked the girl Lusota what she thought had become of Wanjula, foreseeing serious complications through him should we be unfortunate enough not to find him in the cave with Kalua. But she did not know, neither could she guess what mischief he might be brewing.

“What a pity you gave that half-breed dog your knife,” remarked Hardwicke as we prepared to set out. “You might find it useful presently.”

“Good intentions,” I quoted. “Though I might have known what a cur he was.”

Everything being now in readiness we sallied forth. Kalua had not more than an hour's start of us, if that, and we reckoned on being up with him, should we meet no serious opposition, much too soon for his liking. Quietly we stole through the village, meeting none of its inhabitants but a few old men and women, and quickly boarding a canoe in safety, we four pushed off — Lusota insisting upon making one of the party, notwithstanding the fact that it was death to enter the cave without the priest's authority. But I think she would have gone anywhere so that her vision was blest with the form of my cousin Hardwicke. Jimmy and she seized a paddle apiece and the frail craft fairly bounded across the still water towards the great coneshaped hill, from the summit of which, as we approached, I thought I saw a wreath of smoke arise, but so faint was it that when I drew Dick's attention to the circumstance it was gone.

“I dare say you are right, though,” he said, “for the summit of that hill looks exactly like the picture of a volcanic mountain. Look, there it is again!” And I saw another light blue wreath of smoke issue from the rounded top of the hill.

Lusota likewise saw it and cried out, “Ah, the god is angry. See how he frowns.”

So this was more of the mystery of the Great Spirit. Certainly a volcano is a terrific god to deal with. I ceased to wonder at the absolute submission of those uninitiated savages to their cunning priest.

“Yes,” said Hardwicke by way of answer, for she seemed to think her

determination to act irreligiously had awakened the fury of the monster, "he is vexed with Kalua and the priest."

A few minutes later we had landed at the mouth of the cave into which, after Jimmy and the girl had hidden the canoe behind a small promontory a few yards off, we plunged without a moment's hesitation. The darkness made slow progress a necessity. We stopped almost every few steps to listen if we could catch the sound of voices or any other noises, but nothing was moving. All was as still as death.

When at last we reached the end of the passage Dick whispered to Jimmy and me to stand still and let no one pass while he went forward with the girl, she having told him where the torches were kept. They passed so gently from my side and crossed the great chamber with a footstep so rapid and so light that almost before I was aware they had gone, the glare of a torch illuminated the far end of the great vault.

"Ada, Ada!" Hardwicke cried, but only the echo of the place gave back a faint response.

We each lit a torch and searched, as we thought, every corner of the great cave, but could find no trace of her. The monstrous effigy of the god grinned down upon us, mocking our despair. It looked more hideous than ever in the indifferent light shed by our few torches, more horribly, dreadfully real. Its hand no longer held the Sacred Axe. Wanjula was no fool. Lusota trembled as she gazed upon the terrific features, and drew close to Hardwicke and hung upon his arm. It seemed as though she fully expected the monster to step down from its high pedestal and incontinently brain her.

We were nonplussed, and stood looking at one another in despair.

"Lusota," said Dick to the girl, "are you sure Kalua would bring Laughing Hair here? Is there no other place to which he could bring her?"

"No, chief; no place so safe as this."

"Then perhaps he has not yet arrived?"

"Perhaps not, chief. But he will come."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"Yes." To disregard such a decisive reply was impossible.

"Then we must wait?"

"Yes."

I now remembered that on first entering the cave I had been conscious of the fact that notwithstanding the immense number of torches burning at one time, the smoke had never once offended me, but seemed to be carried off in some marvellous fashion. It struck me more forcibly now. There must be *another* outlet to the chamber.

When I made known my thoughts to Dick he almost shouted with joy. Of course there was, he said, and added that he must have been blind not to have noted the fact himself. He then inquired of Lusota if she had ever

heard of such an opening, but she answered no, telling him that no such thing existed. But of this statement we took little heed. That an outlet of some sort existed somewhere, we knew, so set ourselves the task of discovering it.

Jimmy, the girl, and I each took a portion of the cavern while Dick "fossicked" round the idols. But as we three happened to be unsuccessful in our researches it is little use recording them; therefore, we will follow my cousin who, after having peered into every conceivable nook and cranny, was about to abandon his explorations as futile when he suddenly missed his footing and fell heavily against the big image. To his surprise, for he thought it part of the rock against which it stood, it trembled violently. He knocked it again, and again it shook, and then pressing strongly against it with his shoulder he found it move a couple of inches.

"Archie, Archie, come here!" he shouted.

I was by his side immediately and he made known his find.

"Let us both push," I said.

He put his shoulder to the side of the idol and I pressed against it with my hands.

"Now then."

We both pushed with all our force and the great statue went flying from us along a groove in its pedestal. One man could have done the trick with the greatest of ease, so softly, once it was touched in the right place, did the great thing move. But if we were surprised at this singular contrivance you may judge the state of our astonished senses on beholding that the statue had concealed an aperture large enough for a man to go through with ease. I thrust my torch into it, but so strong a draught of wind rushed through that it nearly suffered extinction.

"That's the secret we want," cried Hardwicke, "though it does not account for the disappearance of the smoke."

Lusota regarded us with absolute terror. What she thought of our proceedings must ever remain a mystery, but strange it surely seemed to her to see her god thus roughly pushed about by a couple of dare-devil white men.

We closely examined the opening and found that it had been clumsily walled by the hand of man. Four or five yards from the entrance it widened out considerably, presenting the rough, uneven sides of a natural cavern. The statue, then, had been specially placed over the aperture to hide it, and whatever lay beyond, it was certain the people of the Mandanyah had no conception of the existence of such a place.

I stepped in first, Dick next, the girl and Jimmy bringing up the rear. The rush of air was so powerful that with the greatest difficulty we kept our torches alight. As it was they gave a spluttering, indistinct glare which, a moment later, was extinguished altogether by a fresher and stronger blast of wind that came from above our heads. We were

immediately thrown into total darkness, but guessed that this was the passage through which the air rushed when the statue was in its proper place. It being impossible, in such a situation, to relight our smoking torches, we groped on in the dark, hoping that the cavern would widen out, which would naturally lessen the force of the wind. As it was, it seemed as though a mighty hurricane was roaring through the funnel-like passage, which led us to suppose that either the wind had arisen outside or that there was some agency at work of whose powers we were totally ignorant.

At that moment I felt Dick slip one of his hands in mine, while with the other he drew my head towards his mouth, and shouted in my ear, the roaring of the wind necessitating such proceedings —

“This must be the cavern through which Morton passed to the secret chamber.”

I did not doubt it for a moment, but so thoroughly engrossed had I been with my thoughts of Ada that I do not believe I should have remembered Morton's story of the cavern through which the “wind rushed like a hurricane,” had not Dick so forcibly brought it to my mind. Yet as such knowledge in itself was of but little value, we pushed warily onward.

Frightfully slow was the progress made, as we had to feel with our feet and hands every inch of the way we travelled. Dick, who was at my heels, laid hold of my waistbelt for further security, for to navigate, as it were, such a passage without a gleam of light was an extremely risky, not to say dangerous, undertaking. Yet still we went on, on, foot by foot, through a darkness terrible in its intensity. The wind roared like a fiend around us, nay, like a million fiends. It screamed and beat itself upon us with the fury of a tornado. Would it never cease? would the darkness never grow less?

How far we had gone I could not even guess, but at last I thought the passage widened, and felt sure the hurricane-current of air had become less violent, though it yet blew terrifically. Another dozen of yards, however, convinced me of the truth of my imaginings. Decidedly the wind was decreasing; and when appealed to, my cousin held the same opinion. Still farther on, its force still more diminished, and eventually we were enabled to relight our torches.

The cavern we were now exploring was exceedingly wide and lofty, and had been, like all these subterraneous excavations, the work of some gigantic force. Great masses of rock had been torn bodily from the walls and roof, and were now piled, certainly by the hand of man, on either side of the cavern, making a clear path in the centre along which we strode.

“Ada, Ada!” I shouted again and again, but no welcome response came back. “My God, where can she be?”

“Here somewhere, never fear,” cried Dick. “We shall find her, Archie,

and unless I am very much mistaken, the golden chamber too. Look, look!"

These words ejaculated suddenly quite startled me. The cavern, which had been gradually narrowing, here came to an abrupt termination, and right before us we beheld a fac-simile, though on a much smaller scale, of the monstrous effigy in the great chamber.

"The guardian of the treasure, I will stake my life," cried Hardwicke. "Found at last."

"Back, back," screamed Lusota as Dick advanced towards it, "or it will strike you."

It is true one of the great arms was extended as though about to deliver a blow, but Hardwicke, laughingly telling her it was nothing but stone, rapped his rifle against its face, when of a sudden the great arm fell with a terrific crash, knocking the weapon flying from his grasp. Had he been under that awful arm and had received the blow which smote the barrel of his rifle, it would have killed him on the spot.

"A pleasant people these Mandanyahs," he coolly remarked as he picked up the weapon. "Now let us see what you're made of." And as there were no more arms to fall we approached and examined the image, and found that by a simple piece of mechanism, much after the manner in which the arms are put on a wooden doll, the great thing had thus been able to so nearly destroy my cousin.

"You have done your duty," said he, addressing it, "but it's no good. You must go," and putting his shoulder to its side, he pushed, and the thing slid along a groove, in the manner of the larger one, disclosing a similar aperture, into which he plunged, we following.

As soon as our eyes had become accustomed to the place, we knew we had entered the very chamber into which Morton had been led blindfolded. It was a room some twenty by twenty-five feet, and on every side of it great lumps of some dull-looking substance were piled, which at first seemed ordinary rocks, but which, in reality, were huge nuggets of solid gold. Neither of us could believe our senses for a while, and it was only after jaggings some dozen of the larger pieces with our knives, which disclosed the bright yellow of the metal, that I could become perfectly convinced. There were also great stone receptacles which, once the covering of dust was removed, were found to be full of pieces of gold ranging in lumps from an ounce downwards. Ten of these we saw, and many others into which had been thrown pieces of greater value, while even the soft ground upon which we walked, once turned over, was shown to be a carpet of thick gold-dust.

I stood like one stupefied, forgetting for the moment everything but this vast wealth. I took the lumps of gold in my hand and threw them about the chamber; I kicked with my old boots the wonderful carpet and made showers of gold-dust fly. It seemed a grand idea to treat money in

this fashion.

"How many millions of sovereigns do you think this lot would coin?" asked Dick from the other end of the chamber.

"About five."

"Say ten, and you'll be nearer the mark. My God! if we could only get it away!"

"That's why I think it dam fool's work to come all this way for gold you can't carry back, Mass'r Dick," observed King Jimmy.

"Yet we'll take it back, Jimmy; never fear, never fear. But look, here are the royal jewels. We can at least take them." And he held up several strings of magnificent rubies.

"They belong to Kalua and the priest," said Lusota.

"Then we'll take care of them for them," and he popped a quantity of them in his pockets, throwing Jimmy the remainder.

"And now, Dick," I said, as soon as the excitement of our stupendous find had somewhat abated, "let us continue our search for Ada."

"God forgive me, yes," he cried. "Come, there is nothing more to be done here," and, without even one backward glance, we made our exit from the golden chamber.

"We have not done so badly," said he, as he rattled the precious stones in his pockets "and if we live we'll do better still." And as we retraced our steps he cried to me, who was leading, "Keep to the right, old fellow. Unless I am much mistaken this passage is but a branch of the main one."

He was right, for soon our torches were again extinguished by the current of air, and we groped on as before in utter darkness.

Presently I saw what appeared to be a faint glow of light. Mystically dim, it was light beyond a doubt, for the others also beheld it at the same moment and uttered a cry of joy.

Towards it we now moved with more rapid steps, a most unwise proceeding as I was presently to know, for though we saw it distinctly enough, it was not yet sufficient to illumine the footway. However, the closer we approached the clearer it loomed up, and I knew that soon the mystery which enshrouded the fate of my beloved would be revealed. And while through my brain was rushing a thousand thoughts of her, thoughts charged with pain and madness at her unhappy fate, our ears were suddenly startled by a long, wild cry of agony.

It was her voice, and was so full of woe and horror that I stood for a moment like one turned to stone. Then as quickly came the reaction, and with a cry to her that I was coming, I bounded forward like one possessed. Unluckily I was too excited to pay attention to Dick's quick word of warning to be careful. I only saw the light ahead, only knew that she was in danger, and bounded on. The consequences were calamitous in the extreme. I had not gone many yards before I found myself whirling

head over heels down a long flight of roughly hewn steps. I seemed to have broken every bone in my body, but with the aid of Dick and Jimmy, who had descended carefully, I was quickly placed upon my feet and was thankful to find that, with the exception of a few cuts and bruises, no mischief had been done.

“A lucky let off — — ” began Hardwicke, but he stopped suddenly, for at that moment our ears were again startled by the same heartrending scream. This time it was so close that we could hear another voice, raised in an angry tone, accompanying it.

“Help! help!”

“Ada, Ada, we are here!” I cried.

Dick bounded forward like lightning, for being at the bottom of the passage now there was sufficient light to see the way, which at every step grew more clear.

She heard my cry, for she answered in the same wild, terror-stricken voice —

“Quick, quick, or it will be too late!”

It is needless to say I ran my fastest, but my fall had somewhat stiffened my limbs. Dick was consequently many yards in front of me. I saw him spring forward with a mighty rush — he seemed to bound in the air like the greyhound that he was; then there was a noise as of many things falling into a deep pit, and I stopped short in my headlong flight, for I was standing upon the brink of a great wide gulf down which the falling things I have mentioned roared with a noise like thunder. Upon the opposite ledge my cousin was struggling wildly. He was mounting it by his hands and knees, and I was in terror lest he should fall back into the abyss, when, like an evil spirit, I saw the hateful Kalua dart forward with the intention of hurling him over. But before he could make good his evil design, another form rushed forward and threw itself between him and my cousin.

It was Ada. She saw Dick's peril and saved him. Before Kalua could throw her off, which he did by hurling her heavily to the ground, my cousin had pulled himself over the ledge and was out of danger. This the chief no sooner observed than he fled back into the darkness of the cave and was lost to sight. It was a painfully exciting time while it lasted, and I breathed a great sigh of relief when it was all over. And yet that intense relief quickly gave place to unutterable horror when I discovered the terrible trap into which we had fallen. Before me yawned a chasm fully forty feet wide, the jaws and sides of which, for a considerable distance, were illuminated by a great broad sheet of light that descended from above. A moment's thought was all that was required to take in the situation. The chasm was the crater of a volcano, and the light came from the top of the cone-shaped hill of which I have spoken so often. Indeed, on looking up the big, craggy funnel I could see the blue sky above.

“Is she hurt, Dick?” I shouted.

“No,” came back the answer, “she is a little frightened, that is all. The villain had her hands bound — — ” and he took out his knife (a thing with a blade about seven inches long, similar to the one I had given Kalua) and cut the bonds asunder. “She is all right now.”

“Thank God! And you, old fellow?”

“Right, too,” he answered. “Yet that half-bred dog played me a nasty trick, and but for Ada I should have been a dead man by this.”

“What was it, Dick?”

“You heard that stuff falling into the chasm, did you not?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, that was a small foot-bridge which I was not more than halfway across when yonder beauty heaved it over. But I've got him here now, old chap, and I'll make him sing before I'm done with him,” saying which he turned to Ada, with whom he held a rapid conversation.

I was like one standing on the proverbial pins and needles. To see her so near me, and yet as surely parted as though an ocean rolled between us, was madness intolerable. What would I not have given to have been in Hardwicke's place, to have taken her in my arms and comforted her, and then to have vented my fury on the savage wretch who had been the cause of all our misery. But there I stood, chained like one to a pillar, incapable of movement, incapable of stretching out my hand to protect the life that was dearer to me than all the world. Look at our position in whatever way I might, I could see no chance of escape, for how they were going to recross that dreadful gulf was an enigma of which I held not the key. This awful thought caused me inexpressible anguish. I carefully examined the abyss on my side and begged Dick to do likewise on his, but no crags or rocks jutted out which would afford a passage, however dangerous.

Such a mode of crossing was impossible, he said, and I informed him that my side of the chasm dropped sheer down as though it had been cut by the hand of man.

“Have you any idea, Dick?” I cried, for this enforced inactivity was driving me to the verge of madness. “We cannot stay here for ever.”

“True,” he answered. “But till we have discovered a possible plan we can attempt nothing.”

“Forgive me, Dick, but I am almost mad. I can think of nothing. It seems impossible that you will ever recross.”

“Nothing is impossible to men who are determined,” he replied. “But in the meantime we must make ourselves secure. Watch Ada well, old fellow, and should any one but me come near her, shoot him.”

“What, then, do you intend doing?”

“I am going in yonder,” and he pointed into the black interior of the cave. “We shall never recross the chasm with that fellow's permission.”

“In Heaven's name be careful, Dick. Think, should any harm befall you.”

He answered almost coldly, “What would it matter?”

“It would break my heart,” said Ada.

He turned and looked upon her suddenly, and even at my distance I could see the intense expression of his gaze. Then he laughed lightly.

“Don't be afraid,” he said. “I value my skin too much.” Then he cried to me. “Ada tells me this cavern opens into a wide chamber, and that I need have no fear of pitfalls. Keep a good look-out,” and almost before I was aware of it he had glided from her side into the darkness.

“Come as much into the light as you can, dear,” I cried to her, “and let me know the approach of the first footstep. Be brave, my girl, we shall escape this danger yet.” And I held my rifle ready to shoot at the first sign of the enemy.

What my feelings were with regard to my cousin Hardwicke may easily be imagined. Every minute seemed an eternity. I peered into the thick blackness opposite with an intensity of vision which was painful to an extreme degree. I seemed to see the two men as they crept slowly and slowly round each other with the long knives in their hands, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of discovering to each other their whereabouts. Was Hardwicke a match for the chief in such a strange encounter? Had he the same catlike agility of movement which characterised the native races the same wonderful power of piercing the darkness? I knew he had the heart fifty Kaluas could not possess, and that few men would be a match for him in the open, but a conflict in that vast, vault-like chamber had a horror for me which was simply unendurable.

Jimmy stood by all eyes and ears. He gasped more than breathed, yet never spoke a word. Each nerve was drawn to its utmost tension and he quivered with excitement. Occasionally would he finger his knife or toy nervously with his pistol, but no sound, except his quick gaspings, escaped him. Brave little man, he would gladly have changed places with his master, and would, I am sure, have given a magnificent account of himself too. He had the cat-like tread, the keen instinct, the wonderful sight, and the bold heart. All that was necessary for such a combat in such a place he possessed in full. I wished you no harm, Jimmy, but at that moment I would you had been in your master's place. The girl Lusota stood beside him. She spoke not, but by the hard panting way in which she breathed I knew that she too suffered all the horrors of that dreadful uncertainty which is more cruel than the truth itself.

The moments moved on as slowly as though they each carried the burden of a thousand years. I strained my ears, but no movement, no sound was to be heard except the short, quick breathings of my companions, and the rustle of the wind in the dark cavern behind. I strained my eyes to pierce the horrible gloom, and in imagination saw

many hideous sights which, like one awaking from some awful nightmare, I thanked God were only dreams. The stillness was intense, the darkness frightful; and out of that darkness what might not come? I dreaded to think, I tried to change my thoughts, but each attempt was fruitless. What if he should never again emerge from that awful cavern? What if the half-breed's knife should find a resting-place in his heart, that lion heart that never knew a beat of fear? And as if to add to my feelings an intenser dreariness I pictured poor Murphy sleeping his eternal sleep in the far-off oasis. He was the first victim; was Dick to be the second? And then who was to follow?

In the meantime Ada sat upon the other side of the gulf as still and motionless as the stone around her. Her form was clearly outlined in the pale light which played about the mouth of the cavern, and upon her I fixed my eyes. Poor girl! what must have been her feelings? To sit there and know not at what moment she would hear Hardwicke's death-cry ring out, and behold the half-bred savage Kalua rush upon her with his blood-stained knife, utterly regardless of me and my rifle, and hurl her into the yawning gulf below, was enough to freeze each drop of blood in her heart. So shocking was the contemplation of this thought that I felt my own flesh quiver, and I know not what I should have done to break the still, uncanny spell had I not at that moment been startled by a long, wild shriek. It came rushing from the inmost depths of the darkness and went howling up the craggy jaws of the crater.

Whose was that wild, unnatural cry? I could not answer, so unlike anything human was it. I was beside myself with an excitement which I vainly endeavoured to control. Jimmy and the girl Lusota were breathing harder than ever, and away on the other side Ada had arisen and was peering into the darkness. No other noise was heard. That one wild cry was the only sound which told the men had closed.

Presently I saw Ada put her hand up as a sign that some one was coming, and I prepared myself to shoot should it prove to be the thrice unwelcome form of the half-blood. But her hand suddenly fell to her side and in a voice wild with joy she cried —

“Dick!”

The next moment, to our inexpressible relief, the form of my cousin Hardwicke advanced into the light of day.

Chapter XVIII

How We Accomplished the Passage of the Chasm.

IT would be a futile task to attempt to describe the joy his presence gave me. New life rushed throbbing through my veins. My heart palpitated with indescribable gladness. The wish dearest to my soul was realised. He was safe, safe!

“Are you hurt at all, Dick?” I shouted.

“No, old fellow, not in the least.”

My relief at getting this assurance from his lips may easily be imagined. He spoke not then of the narrow escape which had been his; but I learnt afterwards that so near had Kalua's knife been to his heart that the coat across his breast had been cut by the point of the blade.

“Well, Jimmy,” I said, turning to my two companions, “Kalua is dead.”

“I think Mass'r Dick finish him off once he start,” replied the worthy black. “Him dam warm member, no gammon. Eat twenty fellows like Kalua.”

I looked at Lusota. She was radiantly happy. Her eyes were sparkling like diamonds and her frame shook with excitement.

“Kalua is dead,” I repeated.

She returned my gaze with one of wonderful intensity.

“Yes, the dog!” she said. “How could he hope to battle with a chief so great? A tree may stand before the breeze, but the hurricane uproots it.”

But from her and her hate my thoughts quickly flew. Now that Kalua was gone — for though Dick had not absolutely said so much there could be no doubt that such was the case — there was no one to prevent our escape, provided we had the necessary means. Yet as they could neither go up nor down the jaws of the chasm to cross, and as the cavern on their side ended in a wide chamber which possessed no outlet, their position was one the horror of which can scarcely be conceived. And yet it was imperative that the abyss should be recrossed. But how? Where was the answer to that awful question? What method were we to employ to bridge that dreadful gulf?

“There is only one way,” Hardwicke shouted at last. “We must get ropes of some sort.”

Ropes, forsooth! Was the man going mad? Where were we likely to find ropes, and how use them when found? Ropes! Might we not just as

well ask for a bridge at once? There would be an equal chance of success. Luckily, however, the suggestion of ropes was not so dismally received by Ada as myself, for she immediately inquired if thongs would not do as well.

“The very things,” said Hardwicke, “if we can get enough of them.”

She then informed us that great bundles of thongs were brought to the temple (which Jimmy instantly verified by saying that he had seen them during his search for the secret cavern) and that it was of such thongs the people were bound who were intended for the sacrifice.

“Then,” shouted Dick to me, “send Jimmy and the girl back to the temple to bring some of those bundles along. They may be the means of our salvation. In the meantime I will explore this side, so kindly fling one of your torches over.”

Neither Jimmy nor Lusota needed a second telling. They were away almost before I had finished giving them Hardwicke's order, and I then flung Dick a torch, which he no sooner lighted than I saw both it and him gradually disappear.

Ada and I sat regarding each other from our respective sides of the chasm. We spoke but little. Our position was not one in which speech could keep pace with thought. Indeed, I doubt if speech could have given utterance, even though I wished it, to the intense imaginings which swept like the wild waves of the ocean through my brain. The destruction of the bridge had been our great misfortune. Had we approached with less noise, or had I not even answered to her cry and thus warned the king of that approach, we should have reached and crossed the structure before he had been able to injure it.

“He no sooner heard your cry,” she said, “than he began to loosen the bridge from its supports. Then it was I screamed for you to be quick or it would be too late, for I saw the bridge was moving and that in a very little time he would have it effectually destroyed. It was but a poor weak thing at best (saplings bound together with green thongs), and when Dick suddenly bounded on to it his weight completed what the chief had begun. I saw him leap into the air, leap as I thought only the kangaroo could leap, and then — — ” and she stopped with a shudder of horror.

“I know the rest. You saved him. Bound as you were you rushed between that fiend and him, between him and certain death. Dick is a brave man, Ada. He will never forget you.”

“Ah, what can we do, Archie, that will ever repay him for what he has done for us?”

“Love him, dear, love him as the noblest brother God ever gave to woman.”

“Yes, yes. I will, I will.”

We talked in this manner, with Hardwicke for our subject, for some time. It pleased us to speak of him. There was so much goodness and

nobility of spirit in the man that I for one could never tire of singing his praises. Hero-worship never had two more devout followers than Ada and myself. She said once that there was a sense of security about his person, and she spoke truly. With him all danger and difficulty was, or seemed to be, lessened. His indomitable spirit and utter disregard of unpleasant circumstances could not help inspiring the most timid with some of his own boldness.

He returned after being gone about a quarter of an hour and reported that he was unfortunate enough to discover no thongs. This was a sad blow, and I wondered if Jimmy by any chance had been mistaken when he said that he had seen bundles of them in the temple.

“I have something for you, though,” he cried. “Stand aside!”

I obeyed, wondering what that something was, while he, coming close to the brink of the abyss, hurled it across. On picking it up I found it to be my knife, the very one I had given Kalua. So then, the chief would never trouble us more. I understood Dick's silence. He would not breathe a word of him before Ada for fear of awakening unpleasant memories. But this knife of mine was a token I could not misunderstand. Kalua was dead indeed.

There was no sign or sound of Jimmy and the girl returning and I was about to set out in quest of them when I heard the worthy black coo-eeing in the distance, and a minute or two after he and Lusota appeared carrying two great bundles of thongs, which they placed at my feet with every show of satisfaction and which I may say I regarded no less satisfactorily.

“Have you plenty?” said Dick.

“I think so, though as they say there are more bundles there I will send the girl back for another.”

“A good idea,” said Hardwicke. And then he spoke to her, telling her what to do. She darted off with alacrity, a smile lighting up her dark face. Dick had spoken. That was enough. She returned with another great bundle shortly after, and was once more despatched on a similar journey, Dick telling her that it would more than please him if she did as he wished. Poor girl! I believe she would have jumped into the jaws of the chasm at his bidding.

Jimmy and I immediately began joining the thongs, while Dick made known his ideas in the following manner.

“You have read of people making their escape from a wrecked ship by means of a rope between the ship and the shore. That is the principle upon which we must work. We have no ropes, but when the thongs are knotted and plaited together in a line sufficiently long enough to reach across, and strong enough to bear my weight, we must pass over.”

This might be an easy enough task for him with his fingers of steel and muscles of iron, but for Ada! And I thought of her swinging over that

frightful abyss, of a possible accident, and I cursed the fate that had brought us to such dire extremities.

“For God's sake! Jimmy, knot them well and strong,” I almost cried to my fellow-worker.

“Never fear, Mass'r Archie,” he replied. “Me love Mass'r Dick and the lovely Missy too well. Me knot so that he no break suppose the dam mountain fall on him. How many yards you think, Mass'r Archie?”

“About eighteen or twenty. Mr. Dick thinks the hole about fifty feet wide.”

“Mass'r Dick got plenty sabbee, Mass'r Archie, but I no think this hole more'n forty feet the most.”

“So much the less work then for us,” I answered.

“Plenty work anyway.” And he set to with renewed vigour. “This green hide plenty strong, though, Mass'r Archie. Bear the weight of the devil.”

Luckily the hide had been cut in thick widths, so that when we plaited four strips together it made a good, broad band, capable of sustaining a weight much greater than we had any idea of testing. Being what is called green, it was very pliable, and offered splendid facilities for plaiting. It was nevertheless an immense task, and my fingers on several occasions gave out and I was forced to rest them a while. But the spirit of inquietude had possession of me. Every minute was of inestimable value, and Jimmy and I worked on in silence.

Lusota had returned from her second journey, and I was just thinking of despatching her on a third, when I heard a sound which made my heart stand still. It was a slow, distant rumbling, as of thunder afar off. The rocks about us positively trembled and to crown all and add horror to horror, a cloud of smoke rose slowly from the jaws of the chasm, passed before my eyes, entirely blotting out the forms of Dick and Ada, and then disappeared up the great flue of the mountain.

This was followed by another low, roaring rumble; again the rocks around us quivered perceptibly, and I felt my frame violently tremble as though undergoing an electric shock; the smoke rose once more in a dense cloud completely enshrouding every object and filling my throat with a sulphureous taste. Shock succeeded shock with such startling rapidity and overwhelming violence that I was in terror lest the great granite roof should fall and crush us. The smoke rose in huger volumes than before, carrying with it a fine ash-like sand, which burnt the face and hands and for a moment or two completely blinded us. Lusota crouched shivering, moaning something about the anger of the Great Spirit. Jimmy rolled his eyes in wonder, yet seemed not much affected by the anger of a force so mighty. Whether it was indifference or heroism I could never rightly guess. Perhaps it was a little of both.

“Well, Mass'r Archie,” he said, “that's a dam queer thing,” and then went on with his work.

But in me there was no feeling of indifference. I knew too well what those awful signs presaged. The volcano, of whose existence we had not dreamt a week ago, was in eruption, and heaven alone could tell the moment we should be overwhelmed with the seething red-hot lava, or scorched to a cinder by the furious flames which must, in the course of nature, soon make their appearance. This was an unforeseen catastrophe, and in our calculations of escape we had not reckoned on such stupendous opposition. The thought of crossing the chasm by means of the plaited leather was in itself an undertaking, than which no more dangerous had man or woman ever essayed, but now that undertaking was rendered a thousandfold more awful by the thought that the smoke, fire, or ashes might catch them midway between the two sides of the abyss, leaving them unconscious of life, or, by burning the thongs in two, precipitate them into the gulf below.

Such were some of the painful thoughts that rushed like daggers through my brain. I worked with redoubled energy and encouraged Jimmy to do the same, which, by the way, was quite unnecessary. The worthy black guessed what he did not know for certain, and guessing told him that on us depended the salvation of his master and the Missy. Therefore he told Lusota to go once more and bring a bundle of thongs, and she, poor thing! though quaking and terrified almost to death, went off into the darkness without a word.

“How are you getting on, Archie?” Dick cried across to me.

“Slowly, Dick, but surely,” I replied.

“Bravo! that's the style. We'll give Mr. Volcano the slip now if he does not look alive.” And he laughed aloud, though the laugh seemed to me less hearty than genuine laughter should be.

Dick, in fact, felt not like laughing as you may be sure, but I understood him exactly. It was a slight though ineffectual attempt to make light of our evil destiny and give some comfort to Ada. But she was not to be deceived. Too well she guessed the helplessness of our position and the horror of the fate which seemed surely awaiting us. Yet she complained not, but sat heroic and martyr-like, ready to meet whatever should befall.

We must have been four hours completing that twenty yards of line, hours which seemed like so many years. The task appeared so Herculean that I thought we should never accomplish it. Yet the end came, as it comes to all things, and it was finished. Lusota had not returned from her last errand, a fact I could not understand, though, being so busy, I am afraid I did not pay that attention to her absence which it should have demanded.

The work was finished and measured, and I examined with the utmost care every inch of that twenty yards, and found it flawless. Very uneven it was truly, and a mass of knots in the bargain, but each knot was secure

and the whole was plaited together with no small amount of skill, for I had thoroughly mastered this little art during my voyage to Australia, and I knew that it would bear well its precious burden.

The volcano had caused us no trouble for the last hour and a half; indeed, beyond a few subdued murmurings, and now and again a light whiff of smoke, it had behaved in a most exemplary manner, and I prayed to Heaven that it would continue to do so for a little while longer.

Jimmy and I tested the strength of the line as best we could by hanging on to its different ends. Then I examined it carefully once more, and finding it equal to my anticipations, I heaved one end of it over to Hardwicke, a feat I easily accomplished by attaching a big stone to it. He was delighted with the specimen of our handiwork which came within his reach, and declared that if it was as good throughout it would bear a ton with ease.

I had fastened my end of the line to a pole which had been driven into a crevice of the rock, and which formerly helped to support the bridge. This I made known to my cousin, who discovered a similar support on his side and accordingly made fast the line to it. There it stretched — a long, dark streak bridging that awful abyss and sloping horribly in the centre. Like the filmy thread of a spider it seemed, and only fit for a spider to venture upon. It was an appalling thought that valuable lives should swing on such a way. Yet there was no other manner of crossing. Hesitancy was unavailing. Rather were we to thank the fates that had provided us with such meagre means.

I had also made a sling, and in this the person had to get who was to cross. To the sling we thought of attaching two long strips of leather, so that it could be pulled along the main line one way or the other: but this we afterwards thought impracticable, there being so many knots to negotiate in the main structure as to render it impossible to pull any heavy weight along it. It; therefore, resolved itself into this, that the person to cross would have to work her or his way by means of his hands, which, though comparatively easy for a man, would, I guessed, be a superhuman undertaking for a woman. And yet that awful *had to be* was master, and we lost no time in explaining the method of crossing to Ada. It was not natural that she should like the idea, yet she declared that she was not afraid. She had not lived her wild life to be scared at the first appearance of danger, and I sincerely thanked Heaven for giving her so sweet and brave a heart.

“Jimmy,” cried Dick to that worthy, “you get into the sling and work your way across. I want Missy to see how the thing is done.”

“Right, Mass'r Dick. I suppose 'um safe?”

“Of course it is. It will bear twenty like you.”

Jimmy looked for a moment at the narrow line that swung across the great dark gulf, then, getting on his knees, seized it with both hands and

let himself over the side into the sling. Then he began very slowly to work his way along the line, raising himself with one hand to shift the sling forward, and then setting down again. This process, though slow, carried him safely and surely along, and presently he was swinging over the very centre of the abyss. The drooping curve in the line was here enormous, owing to that slackness which it was impossible to make taut, and I knew the difficulty of the journey would be in mounting the incline on the other side; and here those very knots which prevented us using lines on the sling to pull it backwards and forwards, now stood us in great stead, for by putting the sling over one of them it effectually checked it from slipping back.

All the while King Jimmy was making this passage Dick was pointing out to Ada the different things she would have to do, and when the black had come up the incline, his master made him go slowly down it again, and then come as slowly up once more, so that she should have the full benefit of his experiences. This Jimmy did, and having completed orders, raised himself out of the sling by the aid of Dick's hand and stood safe and sound amid them on the other side.

"There you are," I heard Hardwicke say to her. "You see how very easy it is. Keep your heart up, like a brave girl, don't look beneath you, and you'll be alongside of Archie in a minute."

I spoke to her words of encouragement, using the most endearing terms at my command. She answered that she was not afraid, neither was I to be, for she felt quite equal to the undertaking. And then Dick and Jimmy proceeded to put her in the sling.

This was no easy task, the mouth of the chasm sloping so abruptly as it did, and I watched them with intensest eagerness. Hardwicke first made the sling fast to the main rope with a bit of lashing I had thrown him; he then bade Jimmy twist it (the sling) round and steady the loop, and holding on himself to her hands, guided her backwards into it. As soon as she was seated, he ordered Jimmy to slowly untwist, and in a moment my dear girl was facing me, with her feet hanging over the awful gulf.

"Have you any more line there?" Hardwicke shouted.

"Yes."

"Then fling it across, old chap."

I threw a coil as desired which he, unwinding, knotted together with the other piece I had thrown him a little while before, and fastening a stone to the end, threw it back to me.

"I shall make this fast to the sling," he said. "You may find it useful in steadying us across; besides, it will do to drag the sling back with."

I seized the line and scrutinised him closely. He had cut a piece off the end of it, it being of good length, and with this he bound Ada so securely in the loop that even though she fainted it would have been impossible for her to fall unless the whole structure gave way. He then unfastened

the sling from the main line, speaking words of comfort and hope all the time, and telling her to be sure and do this, and to be careful and not to do that, with a fervent "God bless and protect you," he stood back.

"Courage, dear one, courage!" I cried. "Be brave, be brave."

Now began the journey. She did not hesitate a moment, but directly the sling was unfastened launched out on her perilous voyage. First of all she raised herself by one hand and with the other shoved the loop on about a foot, in precisely the same manner as Jimmy had done. This she repeated with clock-like regularity, amid cries of encouragement from both sides of the chasm, till she swung fair in the centre of that infernal pit. So far the journey had been accomplished with comparative ease. She had looked steadily ahead of her, had raised herself now with one hand and now with the other, and had uttered no cry of fear. How I thanked Heaven for that wild training which had given her so much muscle and courage! What would have become of an everyday young girl in such a position? She would have died of fright. Terror Ada felt, but it was not that terror which cripples both the physical and intellectual energies; but rather the fear of a brave man who, surrounded by dangers, sees but one likely way of escape, and though it be almost through the jaws of death itself, yet bravely dares it.

So was it with her. She quaked with the very horror of her position, but she knew that on her clear-headedness and strength of will depended her salvation, and she braced herself for the occasion. To see her swing there in the black jaws of that awful gulf, depending entirely upon her own exertions for her safety, almost froze my blood. I trembled and shivered as though a violent chill possessed me, and yet the perspiration was running in great drops from my forehead. The agony I endured those few minutes a life of love and joy cannot more than repay.

Having gone down the line, so to speak, to the centre, she had now to come up it on my side. This was the most difficult task, but she faced it bravely and had mounted fully half-way before her hands gave in. Then she gazed in my face, and I saw by the despondent look on hers that she could come no farther. Her face was as white as a sheet and her eyes glazed and heavy. I thought she was going to faint, and I spoke words of courage and hope, but she seemed to hear me not. Like a dead woman she sat gazing up to me, her hand clutching convulsively the line. To see her so helpless, so close to me and yet so far beyond my reach, was anguish unendurable. I felt as though I was going mad.

"Tell her," shouted Hardwicke across to me, "to raise herself by both hands, and when she does, pull you the sling."

This was an excellent suggestion, for so far she had raised herself by one hand only while I with my line had merely kept the sling from slipping back. She now grasped the rope with both hands — for she had heard Dick, and immediately perceived the value of the hint — I pulled a

little, then held the sling fast as she sat back in it again. Again and again she raised herself, I pulling and holding fast by turns, till she was right up against the ledge. Then stooping down and untying her from the loop, I stretched out first one arm and then the other, and catching both her hands in mine, I gradually drew her over the ledge in safety.

In a moment she was weeping on my breast, breaking down, like a true woman, as soon as the danger was over. It may be scarcely necessary to relate what joy her presence inspired, but so wrapped up was I in her escape that I forgot for the moment the two brave men who had brought about this happy consummation. But she did not. With a gentle whisper she brought me to my senses, and I threw the line back to Dick, who quickly hauled the sling across.

There was evidently some little difficulty between the two as to who should go first, but at last Jimmy swung himself into the sling, Dick again threw the line to me, and in a few moments the worthy aborigine had hauled himself beside me and was safe.

It was now Hardwicke's turn, and as he swung himself into the sling, the volcano, which had remained quiet for so long, uttered a low, angry growl as though annoyed at our escaping so easily from his infernal clutches; the rocks once more vibrated violently, but Dick had begun his journey and no doubt felt the movement less than we, for he came steadily along as though nothing had happened. He could not have gone above half-way when of a sudden a dense cloud of smoke and ashes arose, completely blotting him from my view, filling my eyes with the same burning sensation, and almost choking me with its sulphureous fumes. I tried to see, to speak, but found it impossible to do either.

I was besieged with the awful thought that the fumes would overpower him, for he was not made fast to the sling, and if he should become unconscious there was nothing to save him from slipping through the loop and falling down, down to the very bottom of the hideous chasm.

Luckily it was only another huge puff from the mighty pipe of the monster, and when it passed away I saw my cousin clinging like grim death to the line with his face as white as a ghost's. He seemed almost overcome with the fumes, for he still remained in the centre of the line coughing in truly shocking manner. The ashes had pervaded his lungs and the smoky fumes his brain.

Again the same low rumble was heard, the earth shook as before, and I was afraid another cloud of smoke would arise before he could get across.

“Dick, Dick, for the love of God, come on!”

He heard me, and also the low roar of the volcano, and it awoke the torpid languor of his brain, for, as if imbued with a sudden, eager life, he came up the incline of the rope with the agility of a monkey. I stretched out my hand to him, Jimmy laid hold of me, and as the first breath of the

horrid smoke-cloud came rushing up the craggy jaws of the abyss, we had hauled him over the ledge, and the passage of the chasm was accomplished.

He was breathless and seemed on the point of fainting, but after resting a few moments, his brain grew clearer and the old energy returned. The roaring noise was more incessant than ever, and he no sooner got upon his feet than he took in the situation.

“We must fly for our lives, Archie. Jimmy, go you first; Archie, take Ada, I will bring up the rear.” Then suddenly missing the girl, he cried: “Where's Lusota?”

In the keen excitement of the last hour we all seemed to have forgotten her.

“She never came back,” I said.

“Strange,” he muttered. “Surely she could not have betrayed us?”

“No, no; she would rather die.” It was Ada who spoke.

“Strange,” he said again. “But go, Archie. Quick, quick, or we shall never leave this vault alive.”

Chapter XIX

Containing an Account of Our Flight, and Describing the Violence of the Great Earthquake.

WE made our way, as rapidly as the indifferent light would allow, up the rough steps I had descended so precipitously, then onward slowly through the dark passage, for the current of air still rushed swiftly by, debarring us the use of torches. Jimmy led the way throughout, and though we could not see him we found him an invaluable guide. He shouted what to avoid and which way to turn in such a manner and so precisely that we experienced little difficulty in getting along. We soon knew by the diminished current of air that we had passed the great overhead flue, and a minute or two afterwards our worthy guide thought fit to call a halt. Then he glided from our side and presently struck a light, and we saw that we had come once more into the temple of the Great Spirit.

I helped Ada through. Above us stood the big statue with the same evil grin upon its face. Ada trembled as she gazed upon it.

“Let us go,” she said. “That hideous thing terrifies me.”

“Wait a moment and you shall see the last of it,” cried Hardwicke. “It shall claim no more victims, I assure you. Stand clear, Archie, I am going to topple it over.” And with that he placed his shoulder to it and pushed, but though it shook he could not dislodge it.

“Come up, Jimmy, and lend me a hand,” he cried. The black, grinning from ear to ear as though he appreciated the task immensely, was beside his master in a moment, and their combined efforts dislodged the great thing. With a huge lurch it fell crashing to the earth, the arms and legs smashing to pieces, and the head severing from the body. Dick immediately took up a torch and hunted for that most objectionable portion of the idol, which he no sooner found than, with his knife, he began to extract its ruby eyes, remarking by the way that it would be nothing short of a crime to leave such stones behind.

I was impatient at this delay, which, considering the immediate nearness of the volcano and its likelihood, at any moment, to burst forth into violent eruption, was most unpardonable. I knew the rubies were of inestimable value, but of what would be their worth if we should fail to escape?

“Come, Dick; come, for heaven's sake!”

“In a moment,” he answered; “you see, I have a down on this fellow. He has had things too much his own way, and wants lowering a peg or two. There you are, my beauty,” he continued, as he manipulated the left eye from the great head, “your splendour and glory are gone. Belshazzar's grave is made. Forward, Archie, forward!”

We prepared to set out, when our attention was suddenly arrested by a low groan. It proceeded from the further portion of the chamber, near the main entrance. We listened again, scarcely daring to breathe, but the sound was not repeated.

“That was a human moan, I'll swear,” Hardwicke ejaculated. “Here, Jimmy, lend me your light,” and seizing the proffered torch, he went on ahead, cautioning us to remain as we were.

He had not gone many yards before he stopped, and I saw him hold his torch low down, and then kneel beside it. We all drew near, little imagining the sight that was to meet our gaze. There, gagged and almost naked, was stretched the form of Lusota, while from her forehead flowed a small stream of blood — the trail of the Sacred Axe.

Ada trembled violently, and could not suppress a scream.

“Is she dead?” I asked.

“I think so,” Hardwicke replied, “though the body is not yet cold.”

“Who could have done this deed?”

“Wanjula,” was his fierce answer.

At the sound of that word the eyes of the unfortunate girl suddenly opened, and then as swiftly closed again. A tremor shook her frame, and she was dead.

“You see,” said Dick, “it was Wanjula. Poor thing, poor thing!” Perhaps he thought then of the great love this savage girl had borne him.

“Then the priest must have been here a short time since?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Come, let us go,” said I, beginning to scent danger with that fiend at large. “Poor girl! we can do her no good now. Peace be with her.”

He undid the cruel gag from her mouth, took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips, then crossed them reverentially upon her breast, and rising up, followed us from the oppressive chamber.

We reached the entrance without mishap, and on looking towards the village discovered a canoe rapidly approaching it, but whether it contained Wanjula or not we could not ascertain.

Thanks to the precaution we had taken of hiding our canoe the arch fiend had not tampered with it, so we all got aboard and paddled across to the village.

“Is this not going into the lion's den?” I inquired.

“True; but we must put a bold face on. Besides, if I gauge Wanjula's heroism correctly, he won't put himself within range of our bullets.”

“But that will not prevent him sending his men after us.”

“Then we shall fight them. Archie, we must go back. There is no other way of escape. See, the sun will be down in three or four hours. Who knows that we may not get clear away without a brush? Look at that mountain smoking. The people will find enough there to rivet their attention without thinking of us.”

Great clouds of smoke were now piling up into the air, and as we approached the village we found the water's edge thronged with an excited crowd. As there happened to be several canoes afloat, we landed without any special interest being evinced in our movements. Further up the sand many people were kneeling, lifting up their hands in supplication towards the mount and exhorting the Great Spirit with might and main to stay his wrath, for they were of one opinion the god had been angered, and in this terrific manner was he displaying his feelings. As we passed by an excited group many murmurs and fierce looks were directed towards us. There were half-a-dozen of Kalua's warriors among the crowd who, I am sure, were urging the people on. Ada trembled and walked still faster.

“What are they saying?” I asked.

She answered with great emotion: “Quick, quick, the people are angry with you; the god is angry with you.”

I guessed her meaning and hurried on, not liking a longer acquaintance with such scowling neighbours.

We reached our hut without opposition, though Kalua's warriors no sooner saw us go than they made off in the direction of the chief's residence, where we guessed the priest would be. Having filled our pockets with the remaining cartridges, and taking a little meat and our bottles full of water, we roiled up our swags and stood ready for the march. We then accompanied Ada to her hut, where her bundle was lying already made up, and without a glance back to see if we were perceived, or one thought of anything but relief, we turned our backs on the village and struck out for the mountains.

For about an hour we walked quickly up the great valley, at the end of which time the village appeared no larger than a clump of black spots almost immediately beneath us, for this portion of the ascent was exceedingly steep. We halted awhile to regain our breath, and as we sat we surveyed the scene with mingled feelings of relief and insecurity, relief at our departure and insecurity because we knew that Wanjula was still at large, and while he remained so there was no safety for us.

“Take your last look of the village of the Mandanyah,” said Dick to Ada. “When the sun rises to-morrow we shall be far from it.”

“I am not sorry,” she replied, as she laid her hand in mine and looked lovingly into my face.

“Nor shall you be,” I answered. “Keep up that same brave spirit, my

girl, for there is much to do before we can hope to strike the habitations of civilised men. There are many weary days ahead," I continued, drawing her a little to one side, "many privations; perhaps the very worst, who knows?"

"No matter, I shall be with you — and Dick. So long as we do not part I am content. Ah, do not be afraid of me. I have not lived among these hills for nothing. I shall bear the journey well, never fear."

"Forward," cried Hardwicke at that moment, and we slung our swags once more upon our shoulders and were preparing to depart when the attention of all four was suddenly arrested by a strange, roaring noise.

"The volcano," shouted Dick, and we stood still to listen, watching with breathless interest the smoking mountain. The noise grew louder and louder.

"That no belong volcano, Mass'r Dick," said Jimmy. "That all the same black fellow."

"What do you mean?"

But it was not necessary to wait for a reply. At that moment, distinct and awful, came the cries of the blacks up the great valley.

"We are pursued," shouted my cousin. "Run for it."

Ada and I immediately took the lead, Jimmy and Dick following. Up the uneven path we panted, scrambling, sprawling, and in a boil of perspiration, while, behind, the cries of our pursuers drew nearer and nearer. It was evident that they were fast gaining upon us, which was hardly to be wondered at considering the lightness of their equipment and the way in which we were weighted down with swags, water-bottles, guns and ammunition.

"This will never do," cried Hardwicke in the midst of his gasps, "we must turn about and face them. Get to the top of this ravine; it will give us a commanding position."

The ravine of which he spoke lay before us and was composed on either side of huge masses of rock which rose from sixty to seventy feet sheer into the air. It was a sort of natural pass, and from a military point of view was a position a captain would rather hold than storm. Dick saw this in a moment, consequently his orders to reach the top. As we raced up between the two jagged walls of rock, I looked above me for a moment at their great frowning, precipitous sides, and though they must have been fully thirty or forty feet apart they did not look half that width, so stupendous were they. Steep was this ravine and slippery, being of solid rock, but once we reached the top we were amply repaid for our toil. From that height we could literally sweep the whole of the passage.

"If we only had a Gatling gun, Dick!"

"Ah!" he exclaimed. There was a wonderful amount of meaning in that expression.

As there were heaps of loose stones about, in a very few minutes we

had built up an impromptu barricade, behind which we rested, awaiting the approach of the enemy.

We were not kept waiting long. The yells which had been drawing nearer now sounded harshly in our ears. We could hear their furious panting cries distinctly as they clambered up the steep, uneven way, and could also distinguish parts of the savage war-song they gasped or shrieked out with increasing difficulty. It was a wild, fiendish clamour for our blood, a piece of information we could have done just as well without.

Soon half-a-dozen of the foremost warriors appeared in sight, about fifty yards from the entrance to the rocky pass. They immediately beheld us and, with a fierce cry of exultation, bounded forward with uplifted spears, shrieking hideously all the time.

“Wait till they are close,” said Dick, “we must not miss them.”

On they came, shrieking more horribly than ever. Close, closer, till they could not have been more than twenty yards off.

“Fire!” cried Hardwicke, and the two rifles and gun being let off simultaneously, filled the great valley with a thousand weird echoes.

We fired again and again and had the satisfaction of beholding five of our enemies stretched out dead or seriously wounded, while the sixth, with a wild cry of terror, turned about and bounded down the pass with the rapidity of an emu, to where a dozen more of our pursuers had collected. But he was not fated to reach them. A bullet from Dick's rifle struck his great, broad back, and with a cry he flung his arms into the air and toppled headlong to the earth.

“I did that,” said Hardwicke as he began to reload his magazine, “to give them a taste of our quality.”

And he evidently succeeded in impressing them with a sense of our greatness, for they withdrew some little distance from the mouth of the pass and held a council of war.

“I do not see Wanjula,” I remarked.

“Him hide behind them rocks, Mass'r Archie. Me see him just a minute ago.”

“He'll take care of his skin, never fear,” said Dick; “he's an excellent general. But I'd give something to have a pot at him.”

“What are they up to now?” I inquired, seeing a solitary black approach us without spear or waddy, and his two arms held straight over his head.

“A parley,” Hardwicke answered. “Come to make some modest demand, I'll bet.

The fellow approached, still holding his hands aloft, thereby showing that he neither carried nor concealed a weapon, and that consequently his mission was one of peace. When he had climbed to within twenty yards of our barricade he was commanded by Dick to stop.

“What seeks the warrior of the Mandanyah?”

“Behold,” replied the man pointing across to the smoking mountain, “the God is angry with the people.”

“Well?”

“He hath demanded of the people a sacrifice.”

“Well?”

“And ere the sun goes down that sacrifice must be made.”

“Have ye no more old women in the village that ye come to me with these things?”

This retort of Dick's seemed to anger the fellow.

“I came not here to bandy words with the white man, whose tongue is like the bite of the death adder. I came to demand that you (meaning Hardwicke, who of course had carried on this conversation through Jimmy) and the girl Laughing Hair return to the village of our people. The black man and he with the hair of the night (meaning me) may pass on without molestation.”

“And who has bid thee come on this child's errand, thou fool?”

“He who is greater than the greatest — Wanjula the priest.”

“Is Wanjula with them yonder?” pointing down the defile.

“Ay”

“Then tell him to come and fetch us.”

“Is that the answer of the white man?”

“It is.”

“Think well. We have a hundred warriors. The white men are but two.”

“Enough! The white man never yields. Behold, I am he who wore the Sacred Axe, the gift of the Great Spirit, and I tell you, oh fool, so that you may carry my words to your brother warriors, for they are the words of wisdom, and the words of one who is mighty upon earth. The Wanjula is a false priest, and the Great Spirit will protect Laughing Hair till every one of your hundred warriors is dead and she walks in peace once more. Mark yonder mountain, warrior, and listen to what I say. Seek to harm the Laughing Hair, seek to cause her but one pang of pain, and the wrath of the Great Spirit shall be as the voice of thunder, and the fury of his anger burn you as the lightning the great trees on the mountains. Now go, and if ye fear not the power of the white men, come on. I have spoken. So,” he remarked to me as the messenger turned about and departed, “I thought it would be some modest request. I wish to the lord that volcano would flame out. It might carry weight with the twaddle I have talked.”

“At present it looks angry enough for anything; but suppose it should get no worse?”

“Don't suppose anything so dreadful,” he replied. “It will be a bad look-out for us if it does not.”

In the meantime the savages had clustered in a huge mass at the bottom of the defile. There seemed to be fully a hundred of them, if not more, and I knew there would be no chance of escape for us should they prove

persistent in their attacks. The victory must go to the stronger party. It was not a pleasant thing to contemplate, but when you are continually face to face with danger you lose your respect for it. And when you are driven into a corner you fight like a madman. That is the way heroes are made.

That the savages were debating excitedly we could tell by the incessant shouting that reached us, though who was leading the debate it was impossible to see, for the great rocks hid many of them. Wanjula, we doubted not. Had it been any one else there might have been some hope. Superstition could as easily have been aroused for as against us. But Wanjula was too well acquainted with those superstitions himself to let us profit by them. He had aroused the people to frenzy against us by pretending the god had demanded us as a sacrifice, and they, the quintessence of superstitious ignorance, were too ready to believe him. He had now a splendid chance of revenge, which he did not intend to let slip. And as the smoke from the burning mountain grew thicker and thicker, so their frenzy increased, till the longing to gain possession of us and appease the fury of the fiend they worshipped, amounted to the grossest form of madness. They danced and shrieked before the entrance of the defile like a detachment of infuriated devils. They screamed with such vehemence and shook their spears at us with such ungovernable fury, that I was at a loss to understand why they restrained themselves from rushing upon us pellmell.

At last there was a movement among them, and a dozen of their biggest and most able-bodied men dashed into the defile; and with continuous shrieks of the most horrible description, intended no doubt to terrify us, came bounding up the steep pass.

Crack, crack, went our rifles and two of the foremost savages threw up their arms and fell. Again we fired and two more bit the dust, yet on they came undaunted, and whether it was intense excitement on our part or the quick movement of the savages which made us miss, I do not know, but that we missed terribly was an appalling fact. To my consternation I saw that each bullet did not bring down a man as I confidently expected it would. Thus were our magazines emptied and only six of the enemy accounted for, and as we had no time to refill them, we were obliged to lay aside our rifles and draw our revolvers. By this time the remaining six savages were so close that before we could bring more than two to the ground they had breasted our little barricade. I remember seeing two of them rush for Dick; I heard a hard dull thud, and then beheld one of the two topple down the steep rocks. Then I was in turn attacked, and narrowly escaped a spear-thrust through my side, but I had my revolver ready and the rash black paid for his boldness with his life. So was it with Jimmy's assailant. That sturdy little man had closed with his opponent and in a moment had passed his knife into his side. Then, with

a disdainful laugh, he flung the body over the barricade.

I then turned my attention to the scuffle that was going on between my cousin and a big savage. The fellow was one of the two who had assaulted Dick, and he was now trying his best to seize Hardwicke by the throat. Being a powerful fellow he gave my hero some little trouble, and while they were at what might be called arm's length seemed to possess equal strength, but when, with a quick movement, Dick closed and got his arms round his adversary, the aborigine was entirely at his mercy and yelled with pain as Hardwicke's arms pressed him like a vice. I could have sworn I heard his bones crack. Then he let go his hold and the savage fell like a log to the earth. But with superhuman power Hardwicke seized him once more by the body and lifted him high above his head so that the warriors at the entrance of the pass might clearly see; then, with a great swing, he hurled the body from him, and the shriek that flew from the doomed man's lips was more horrible than words can tell. There was a dull thud as his body struck the rocks below, a wild cry of alarm from the savage on-lookers, and the second attack on our position had come to an end.

We hurriedly reloaded our rifles, during which operation I asked Hardwicke why he had not used his revolver in the late scrimmage. Stooping down he picked it up and explained.

"When those two fellows rushed me," he said, "they knocked it out of my hand."

"Do you think they will attack us again?"

"Certainly. You may bet your life Wanjula means to have us, and — " he sank his voice so that Ada, who all this time was crouched behind a rock a few yards off, might not hear, "and if they attack us *en masse* we are done for."

These were most unpleasant words to hear, and yet I wanted not this confirmation of my own suspicions. I had seen all along that we could not hope to hold out against so many. And now the end was come. We had cheated death too often. He was about to be revenged at last. I turned my face to Ada and her eyes caught mine. There were great tears in them, but she spoke no word. She knew too well the extreme peril of our position; how much the odds were against us. She knew that we would fight to the end, and then the rest is silence.

I went over to her and kissed her.

"It may be for the last time," I thought. "Who knows?"

"They're coming, Archie," cried Hardwicke, who all this time had been watching their movements. I immediately flew from her side and posted myself in my old position.

This time I saw to my horror that the savages, to the number of seventy or eighty, meant to attack us in a body. They moved in a compact mass brandishing their spears and axes and chanting their hideous war-song.

“It will go hard with us this time, old man,” and without adding another word he seized my hand and shook it warmly, and then turned to watch the enemy.

“Wanjula, look!”

Yes, it was he, his beard and hair flying confusedly about, and every action of his body denoting the keen excitement under which he laboured. He was one of the foremost of the attacking party and was, by his gesticulations, exhorting the rest of his followers to advance.

Dick followed him with his rifle, but the priest was so restless and moved about so incessantly, that it was impossible to get a shot at him. There was a look of acute disappointment on Hardwicke's face.

“If we could shoot him,” he said, “the others might not be so eager to attack. As it is, they require no end of pressing. He is the soul of the party, and by personal influence alone commands them against their will.”

As he finished speaking the priest seemed to stand still for a moment. Up went Dick's rifle in an instant and a snap-shot was the result, but instead of bringing the priest to earth, he hit a tall warrior who was standing beside him. The next moment Wanjula disappeared and we saw him no more.

The attacking force drew nearer and nearer with a steady, deadly precision. They were in earnest this time, as could be seen by the way they marched and held their heads. The leaders had advanced more than halfway through the defile and were now so close to us that I could see their eyes gleaming with the fury of wild animals.

“God help us!” I thought.

“Give it to them, Archie, give it to them!”

We both raised our rifles to fire, when of a sudden the earth gave a violent quiver and shook as shakes a sheet of water when ruffled by a squall. The savages stopped awestruck, and gazed with dumb horror upon one another.

“Look at the mountain,” cried Dick.

It was in violent eruption. A mass of fire and smoke hung over its brow, while the air was filled with ashes and small stones. Shock quickly followed shock; then a severer one was felt and a low, rumbling roar was heard which gradually grew louder and louder till it burst forth like one great peal of thunder. The earth swayed like the bosom of the sea. It seemed as though some mighty giants were beneath our feet heaving with great levers the mountains from their solid base. The air grew more dark with ashes and smoke, while immense rocks, torn with terrific force from the sides of the crater, were hurled high into the air and fell crashing on the hills around us.

“My God, look!”

Dick seized my arm and pointed down the defile. There, all cowering

together, too terrified to move, stood or crouched our would-be assailants, while on each side of them the great, precipitous rocks which went to form the pass, swayed like trees in a wind. Suddenly a great cry of horror arose from the ranks of the enemy, and before the poor wretches had time to escape or even move, one side of the pass gave way with a roar like thunder, crushing the whole of our assailants beneath its massive form.

For a moment the position on which we stood swayed horribly, but by slow degrees it grew less and then quieted altogether. The volcano still spouted smoke and fire, but the trembling of the earth had ceased. Jimmy was almost white with excitement; Dick and I were much the same, while Ada knelt clinging to a rock, her face more like a ghost's than a human being's. I flew to her and took her in my arms.

“We are saved, Ada, thank God, thank God!”

And never did man more devoutly thank his Maker for great mercies vouchsafed than did I there and then in the midst of that stupendous ruin. What had we not escaped through the merciful interposition of Providence? The savage fury both of man and nature, which but a moment before had roared alike for our lives, was now calm, one stilled for ever in the calm of death. Beneath the great granite rock, which like a tombstone marked their last home, lay stretched all that was left of that wild mass of savage hate. Below again, the path up which we had ascended was seamed with great rents and chasms, as though the earthquake had played sad havoc with the valley up to our very feet. There it ceased, and the ground above us remained as though this strange convulsion of nature had never been. For several minutes I stood surveying the wild ruin below, buried in thought too complex even to attempt defining, when my attention was arrested by Hardwicke asking me if I saw anything strange about the mountain. I answered in the negative.

“All the same,” he said “it's settling in the lake.”

A closer and more studied scrutiny convinced me of the truth of this statement. The great hill was indeed visibly sinking. The smoke and flame still issued in immense clouds from its cone-like top, but by degrees that top was most assuredly descending to the water. Gradually it sank lower and lower, till I almost seemed to see it move. Then there was a terrific roaring noise, as though the eruption was about to be repeated, denser volumes of smoke arose completely blocking out the view, and we stood gaping into the distance wondering what was coming next. The smokeclouds, however, gradually rolled away, and over the spot where but a few minutes before stood the great fiery mountain, the silvery waters of the lake now sparkled. The great hill had sunk for ever from the sight of man.

“And thus ends the temple of the Great Spirit,” said Dick.

“And all that mighty pile of gold, Mass'r Dick.”

“And all that mighty pile of gold.”

“Dam bad luck and no gammon.”

“And yet I dare say we are just as fortunate as we deserve to be,” replied his master. “But come,” he said to me, “it is time we were away. The sun will soon be down, and we must reach the top of this valley before we camp for the night.”

And we turned from the spot which had so nearly been our grave and resumed our journey with sad though thankful hearts.

Chapter XX

Conclusion.

ABOUT four o'clock the next day we reached the western base of the mountains and found the six carriers patiently awaiting our arrival. They had felt the same shock, had also seen the great cloud of smoke and ashes, but had no conception of its meaning. When we related to them a complete description of the dreadful catastrophe which had befallen our pursuers, their horror and astonishment knew no bounds, and fearing something dreadful would happen to the village now it was no longer under the protection of the great idol, we had little trouble in persuading them to journey with us. This was a piece of unlooked-for good fortune, for with such fellows to carry the water and provisions, of which Ada had put up a goodly quantity, we felt our terror of the great plain rapidly diminish. The winter was now come, and if the rain-god proved propitious, we might reckon upon surmounting this last great trial. By rough calculation we had a distance of from four to seven hundred miles to go before we could reach the sea, but we hoped that half that distance would find us striking one of the outlying posts of some great station. It was a terrible undertaking, especially with a woman, but as there was no other or better way of getting out of the difficulty, we were forced to face it with what spirits we could command.

We decided to travel by night, as the heat was still too great to journey in during the day, and about six o'clock that very evening our little band set out to cross the great desert which stretched away before us into the illimitable glory of the setting sun.

To repeat the history of this march to the West Australian seaboard would be but to narrate, with slight variation, that which has been described so fully in the preceding chapters. There were the same vast stretches of desolation, the same cheerless and dreary prospects; though the farther west we advanced the better became the country, great forests and grassy plains appearing in the place of the awful sterility of the inner regions. Luckily the winter was, unlike its predecessor, a wet one, and though we suffered much inconvenience from cold, not once were we afflicted with those dreadful pangs of thirst which rendered the first part of our journey so terrible.

On the twentieth day out we struck a native camp and reckoned that at

last we had left the great desert behind. Here our carriers took French leave, but as the country had every appearance of improvement, grass shrubs and occasional clumps of trees being met with, the loss of their companionship affected us but slightly. We attempted to discover from the natives the whereabouts of the nearest station, but they could give us no information, though when I asked in which direction the great city (Perth) lay, they unhesitatingly pointed to the S.W.

The heroic behaviour of our fair companion was beautiful to witness. No finer example of sheer downright pluck and tenacity of purpose did ever exist in man or woman. She never flinched, she never murmured, but struggled bravely on and on beneath the glaring sun, or across the dark, cold, rain-swept sands of the great solitude. We naturally husbanded her strength, for once let her break down and the horror of our situation would have been extreme. Consequently there were no forced or rapid marches and our progress was exceedingly slow. Yet on we went none the less steadily, and one day, with feet blistered, clothes torn and travel-stained, and all our physical energies thoroughly exhausted, we — Dick and I leading Ada between us — drew up at the door of a shepherd's hut through which stole the grateful odour of a meal.

The shepherd was none the less pleased than astonished at our appearance, and with true bush hospitality begged us to enter and eat. We stayed there that night, and after the meal I well remember how anxiously Dick asked the man if he had any tobacco in the hut, and with what joy he received an affirmative reply. For many a weary day we had smoked nothing but stringy bark, and to get a pipe of even bad tobacco was happiness inexpressible.

In the morning, having again partaken of a hearty meal, we set out for the home station, which was about six miles away. Before we departed, however, Dick made the shepherd a present of a ruby which would have brought him fifty pounds at least.

Walanala was the name of the station, and a Mr. James Mitchell its proprietor. He was a good-hearted man, and gave us a cordial welcome to his lonely homestead. His wife, a kind and gentle soul, no sooner heard our story than she took Ada in her arms and kissed and cried over her with all the affection of a mother. She also presented our dear companion with a complete outfit from her own wardrobe, Mr. Mitchell doing the same for us.

We stayed with those charming people a fortnight, and at the end of that time, our constitutions having regained their wonted vigour, we set out for the capital, Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell accompanying us for ten miles of the journey. We wished to buy the splendid horses we rode, but the genial squatter would not hear of such a thing. He gave us the address of a livery stable in Perth, and to it we were to send the animals when we had finished with them, when in due time they would be returned to him.

He also lent us twenty pounds in gold to help us along, our rubies not having yet been converted into that precious metal. Such great kindness in a stranger affected us deeply, and Dick before leaving pressed Mrs. Mitchell to accept one of the big rubies. Ada and she wept bitterly at parting, and as I wrung the good squatter's hand I felt a lump rise in my throat, and with difficulty I repeated my invitation to him should he ever come to England.

The journey from Wananala to Perth was soon covered, and the day after our arrival in the capital Ada and I were married, Dick and the landlord of our hotel witnessing the ceremony. Then I went to make inquiries concerning the former life of Harold Mayne. I found the commissioner of police a most agreeable gentleman, who, after I had given him my name and stated my business, at once gave the necessary orders for an investigation, telling me that he would send the report to my hotel as soon as it was ready.

That evening I received the following letter from the chief commissioner's office: —

“Sir, — Harold Mayne was the manager of S — — and M — — 's bank in the City of London, and was convicted of robbing that institution to the extent of £15,000. He was tried at the Old Bailey and sentenced to transportation to the Swan River Settlement for fifteen years. There were, we believe, many doubts of his guilt at the time, but circumstances proving against him, he was convicted as stated above. His career in the settlement was an exceptionally good one, he having spent ten years without once being reported for insubordination or any of those outbreaks so grievous to the welfare of that unfortunate class to which he belonged.

“One day he disappeared from the station to which he had been allotted, in company with another convict named Joseph Morton. It is also reported that they took with them a child of Mayne's. Nothing has been heard of them from that day to this, and it is presumed by the authorities that they either died of starvation in the bush or were attacked and killed by the natives.

“Six months after Mayne's escape we received information from England that the chief cashier of the bank to which he belonged had confessed, upon his death-bed, that he was guilty of the crime for which Mayne suffered. Accompanying the despatch was a free pardon for that unfortunate man.”

My eyes swam with tears.

“Thank God,” I murmured again and again.

Dick was equally affected. “God bless her,” said he. “I knew there was no criminal blood in her beautiful veins.”

He in the meantime had not been idle. He had sent the horses to the livery stables, sold six of the rubies, for which he only received £300

instead of so many thousands, and with the exception of half-a-dozen small ones and one eye of the great idol, which he meant for his sister Kate, he handed the rest to me to sell for him when I got to England. "Though mind," he said, "half their value belongs to Ada."

As there was no more business to detain us in the West Australian capital, we set out for King George's Sound, where we took steamer for our different destinations, I and my wife to England, Dick and the trusty Jimmy back to Melbourne.

Our parting was a dreadfully sad one. We shook hands time after time, and it was only when he promised to come and visit me in England that I could make up my mind to separate from him. Ada, poor thing, was as pale as death, and she wept bitterly.

"Good-bye, Ada," he said, his voice choked with emotion, "good-bye, and may God bless you for ever and ever!" Then, as if he could bear the torture no longer, he clasped her in his arms with sudden fervour, printed his first kiss upon her lips, and was gone.

His ship steamed close to ours as she passed out on her way to the great eastern cities, and I saw him standing amid a crowd of gaping passengers waving his hat, while over the water came the strong accents of his voice —

"God bless you, Archie, God bless you!"

Little remains to be told. On my arrival in England I had no difficulty in disposing of the rubies, which, proving to be of the very first water, brought the splendid price of forty thousand pounds. A half of this I retained as commanded, and sent the balance to my cousin.

Several years have now passed since our separation at King George's Sound, but Dick has not yet kept his promise and visited me, though he writes that he is in excellent health and quite equal to undertaking another journey to the Golden Lake. When he arrived in Melbourne he discovered that his mother and sisters had given him up for lost. "Therefore," he wrote, "you may imagine their amazement when I suddenly turned up with a history of our journey. My poor old mother was beside herself with joy, for however worthless a fellow others may think me, she *knows* me to be the very best son in the great wide world. Kate teases me no more. She says the ruby is too lovely for anything, and that I am the best brother a girl ever had. How these women do change to be sure! Jimmy, the ever worthy (I have sent you his photograph as desired), stayed with me for three months, at the end of which time he got so sick of town life that I had to pack him off to a station on his beloved Murrumbidgee. He is not a talker, but, like the illustrious parrot, he thinks a deal. Nevertheless, he has hinted that Ada is the most marvellous woman in existence, while you and I are a couple of very superior persons, &c."

My wife is as beautiful as ever, and will ever remain so to my

bewitched vision. She has presented me with a wonderful boy who is destined to bear through life the honoured name of Richard Hardwicke Martesque. That the spirit of his godfather may animate his breast and make him such a man, is the unceasing prayer of his devoted parents.

We often speak of the people of the Mandanyah, of Kalua the king and Wanjula the priest, and are longing for the time to come when dear old Dick shall sit with us round our own fireside, and talk of the old wild days we spent together while journeying to and from the Golden Lake.
